

*May, 2009*

*As you walk through Naramachi, the old section of Nara city, you really get a sense of tradition in modern life today. There are rows of beautiful old houses and shops, as well as newly restored places that have kept a traditional feel to them. Besides being a traditional area, interestingly it is also quite an international place. I have been fortunate enough to become acquainted with Youan ("Origins Cafe"), an establishment that is keen on spreading Japanese culture to both foreigners and Japanese people alike.*

*Often when things are so close to us, they go unnoticed and unappreciated. Sometimes it takes a view from afar to realize its beauty. I believe one reason for the lack of interest with traditional arts in Japan is a scarcity of public exposure. Often at my concerts Japanese people say this is the first time they have ever heard the shakuhachi live. Another problem is the negative perception held by many people that traditional arts are very closed societies, only accessible to people with money and a will to participate in a lifetime hierarchical organization. It's true, every art has such groups, and they may be important in maintaining a tradition. But there are also many schools trying to spread their art to the general community with notions not only of tradition but also of growth and creativity.*

*Being a foreigner in Japan, I am drawn to these types of establishments that recognize the beauty in tradition as well as allow space for things different, and see the merging of the two as something to be appreciated, not feared. I am fortunate to be affiliated with two such organizations: my shakuhachi school (the Yokoyama style of Kinko Ryu) and the Nara International Film Festival. Another place I have found these ideals is at Naracafe Youan, a Japanese-style cafe in the heart of Naramachi that also supplies traditional tatami rooms for artists to share their tradition with both the local and foreign community. I teach shakuhachi there twice a month and often have small, home-style concerts there, where a lot of interesting discussions also take place. Besides their delicious organic-based dishes, Youan provides a great place to enjoy the slow life in the heart of Nara city.*

*Another difficulty in spreading the popularity of shakuhachi is that it is not an easy instrument to handle at first. Unlike the piano or taiko drums, where various sounds are produced at will from the start, the initial production of sound may take some exploring. But it is not impossible—I myself came to Japan with no prior musical experience other than a rather disappointing attempt to learn the saxophone when I was in fifth grade. Actually, it is the challenge of playing the shakuhachi that makes for a very interesting journey. Like many traditional Japanese arts, it isn't really about the outcome, it's about process, learning about yourself along the way. More than just an outlet for creativity, this exploration of the self is what keeps drawing me into this musical tradition. The music itself is very deep, and at times complex, keeping it*

*outside of the realm of pop music. However, people of all ages and nationalities are drawn to it for one reason or another.*

*Without that initial exposure to the music, though, you may never even know what the shakuhachi can offer you. Music and art can change your life, if you allow it to. Thus I invite you to come for a springtime stroll and experience the history and beauty of Naramachi and Youan. Maybe things gone unnoticed will begin to slowly reveal themselves to you.*