

February, 2010

This early winter morning seemed particularly cold as we made our way up Icoma Mountain in Nara. Almost at the top of the mountain is a temple called Honzan-ji, where my teacher and I would be participating in takuhatsu, or begging for alms. Since being ordained as a Shingon Buddhist priest at Taimadera, Nakanobo temple last December, this would be my first experience of takuhatsu. Dressed in our black and assorted colored robes and takuhatsu attire, I couldn't help wonder if this was the same feeling the komuso, wandering monks, of the past experienced. About 15 monks had gathered to chant on the steps of the temple in front of the large gate. The repetition of the chants in the cold mountain air was almost trance-like.

As I am a shakuhachi player, my teacher told me to bring my flute along and offer some songs while they chanted. I was reminded of my trips to Shikoku where I offered traditional musical pieces at all of the 88 temples along the pilgrimage. A profound feeling fills the air when you can get lost in the sounds of both the flute and the chants.

Up until that time I had abstained from wearing the traditional komuso outfit when I performed. Philosophically I couldn't come to terms with the reasoning behind wearing the tengai, or basket-like hat. With many players wearing the costume like it were Halloween; I couldn't see any spiritual relationship or benefit to playing. From a practical standpoint, it also hinders many of the modern playing styles, which incorporate more aggressive or faster techniques and head movements.

But it was here at Honzan-ji where I realized that I was trying to apply modern ideas to a traditional item. I wasn't looking at it from the perspective of a komuso in the Edo period. It was largely developed by the Fuke sect from the standard wide-brimmed monk's hat, the tsugedasa or takuhatsugasa, for reasons of identity confirmation and later espionage for the government. Philosophically the tengai was to hide identity as a form of modesty to draw attention away from the player and toward the music as well as relieve the player from focusing on the ego. However, even though this is actually a recent development in the komuso's long history, it has come to represent the komuso image. The komuso who would have wandered the streets playing for alms would have played a slower type of meditational song, focusing on their breathing.

I often meet middle-aged people in Japan who say they can remember seeing komuso wandering and playing in their neighborhood when they were children. Because of a desire to carry on this tradition I would like to give this memory to younger people today. Today at Honzan-ji I would be offering songs in the spirit of the komuso. I was focusing on a traditional piece called "Sanya" ("Mountain Valley"). This is a very austere piece that comes from the Northern region of Japan, where you can feel the solitude of the region in each phrase. It is a longer 11-minute piece that is meant to be played in a reserved manner. Looking down the steps of the temple and peering out over all of Nara as I played, the condensation from the flute dripped down to the ground. I played this piece repetitiously with steam slowly rising from each slow exhale. I finally reached the point where my fingers could no longer feel the holes of shakuhachi and I returned to chanting with the other monks.

Although "Sanya" is a stoic piece, when I played it with the monk's chants I could feel a unity of sounds. Even when I play this piece alone at home or out in wild nature, it allows me to recognize our connection with everything around us.