

Watazumi Dô

Christopher Yohmei Blasdel

Watazumi Dô, who passed away in 1992, was one of the most colorful and masterful shakuhachi players of the 20th century. He was known for his approach to the shakuhachi as a *hocchiku*, an instrument of the Dharma, rather than an instrument for making music.

Watazumi studied both shakuhachi and Zen from numerous teachers and perfected a level of breath control that enabled him to do seemingly impossible tricks with the shakuhachi. For example, his sustained tones seemed to last forever and lulled the listener into a kind of reverie. Just when an ordinary shakuhachi player would run out of breath, however, Watazumi suddenly struck a furious and explosive burst of air-filled sound that startled the mind back into reality. He could play tones as soft as the minute susurrations of a delicate tea-kettle or loud, piercing sounds that went right through the heart. Few present-day shakuhachi players have that kind of control or sense of theatrics.

In spite of his technical prowess, however, he always insisted that he was, above all, a Zen priest: not a shakuhachi player. This is not unusual in Japan, as the tradition of the shakuhachi-player-as-spiritual-adept can be traced to the Edo Period, when shakuhachi-playing mendicant monks roamed the Japanese countryside seeking enlightenment instead of musical audiences. During the feudal period, this approach to the shakuhachi was normal and fit snugly into the milieu of the age. In the present day, however, it is an anomaly, and Watazumi stood out as an eccentric amongst his peers.

Nonetheless, he was a superb technician on the instrument and influenced a generation of shakuhachi players—including such greats as Yokoyama Katsuya—with the musical possibilities in the old shakuhachi meditative pieces. Watazumi made several recordings 60's and 70's, and was one of the first

shakuhachi players introduced to the west. His music was also used in the 1986 film *Sacrifice* by Andrei Tarkovski; a film which was one of the first international films to utilize shakuhachi music.

Although I had been in Japan a few decades already, our paths never crossed, and I longed to meet this legendary player for myself and ask him questions about his approach and style. In the last few years of his life, however, he recused himself from the world, didn't perform in public and received very few visitors, so my chances of meeting this remarkable man, I thought, were practically nil.

One of the people Watazumi regularly met, however, was Dan Mayers. Dan was an independently wealthy collector of Japanese Ukiyo-e prints and old shakuhachi. Although he didn't play the shakuhachi, he loved the sound and snatched up as many old and valuable shakuhachi and shakuhachi notation as he could get his hands on.

Dan could not be bothered to learn the Japanese language or customs, so he often asked me to interpret for him. This was rarely a pleasant task. Dan was an aggressive businessman who was used to getting his own way, either by insistence or, if that didn't work, through the brute power of money. His personality and modus operandi were not suited to the Japanese society, and I noticed that he often annoyed the Japanese with whom he dealt. Since the interpreter must always take an impartial middle ground, I felt awkward translating for him and usually avoided him when he was in town.

One morning, however, Dan called and asked me to come with him to visit Watazumi. Apparently, Dan periodically met and paid Watazumi several hundred dollars to write out the notation to various old shakuhachi pieces, knowing that eventually these manuscripts, written in the master's hand, would increase in value. Dan told me that Watazumi was always more than happy to oblige, since by scribbling a few pages of notation he would be paid a handsome amount.

Although I was put off by the mercantile nature of the meeting, I was eager to finally meet this much talked-about master and decided to go along and interpret for Dan.

We arrived at Watazumi's house, nestled in the warren of narrow streets near Shibuya station. The master came out, greeted us and took us upstairs while his wife brought tea. After a short exchange of pleasantries, Watazumi began talking, exclusively about himself.

It soon became apparent to me that he was over-playing the role of the recluse high-priest of the shakuhachi for his guests. He insisted, every few sentences, that he be called *rôshi* (venerable priest) rather than *sensei* (teacher). In secular Japanese society, *sensei* is an accepted form of address toward a master, even if not technically correct. I had never met someone who was so insistent on being called *rôshi*. Well, OK, I thought—it was a minor matter.

In between Watazumi's rants about how he should be addressed, I tried to get in a few questions about his style of shakuhachi compared to other prominent Japanese players.

"I am the undisputed master, all the others are 'sick.' I am the only true shakuhachi adept." He then went down the list of the most famous Japanese shakuhachi players at the time: Yokoyama, Aoki Reibo, Yamamoto Hôzan, etc. and let me know exactly what he thought of them. The only person spared his scathing was Yamaguchi Goro, though I couldn't tell if this was because he truly respected Yamaguchi's style or just knew that I was his student.

I translated best I could for Dan, who seemed to love this rich little performance and nodded with Watazumi's every utterance, perhaps feeling that such eccentricity would only increase the value of his investments in the original notation.

I soon became disillusioned with this legendary shakuhachi player. I had considered Dan to be the obnoxious oddity and someone whom I could write off as an opportunistic dealer. Watazumi was to me, on the other hand, like a

deity whom I had yearned to meet, and yet here he was sinking to an immature, childish level.

After a while, dealing with Watazumi's rantings and Dan's mercenary attitude, I realized these two men were actually quite evenly matched and playing a game with each other through me. Watazumi was purposely acting up, aiming to get as much money out of Dan as possible. Dan, for his part, played along, knowing that no matter much he paid, he could sell Watazumi's notation at a much higher price later on. It was a clash of two greedy men.

At one point in the conversation Watazumi suddenly stood up and told us to go outside where he would demonstrate for us his martial arts moves with the wooden *jô* stick. His house had no garden, so we were forced into the narrow street. He began demonstrating his attacks, defenses, various swings and thrusts. So immersed was he in his movements that he didn't, or wouldn't, notice that all the pedestrians on the street had stopped and were looking at him with worried faces, too terrified to pass by.

Finally he stopped, and we returned to his house, took our bows and began our parting words. Dan then invited us all out to lunch. Watazumi wanted to come, but he could not decide where he might like to eat, so he simply declined the invitation and instead asked Dan for the money that he would have spent on the meal instead.

The visit had ended, and at this point I could have just said the normal pleasantries and taken my leave, but something suddenly snapped in me. For the first time in the meeting, I felt a moment of pure clarity, and realizing I had absolutely nothing to lose, I decided to be blunt. I faced Watazumi squarely and told him quite frankly that I thought he was a big buffoon, full of himself and nothing but a fake.

For a moment there was a stunned silence as he took this in. Then, slowly, a huge grin spread across his face. He looked at me directly and said

"You! You are absolutely right! You have attained enlightenment!"

He was ecstatic that someone had called his bluff, and, for the first time in the visit, he actually smiled and looked relaxed. I felt as if a fog had suddenly lifted and that indeed, I was in the presence of a special being.

In the meantime, Dan stood by, waiting impatiently, totally unaware of what had just transpired between us. He handed Dan the lunch money and, content that he had just scored something very valuable, set off to the station with his new notation.

As for Watazumi, a few months later he was tragically struck and killed by a motorcycle while he was practicing his *jô* techniques in the street.