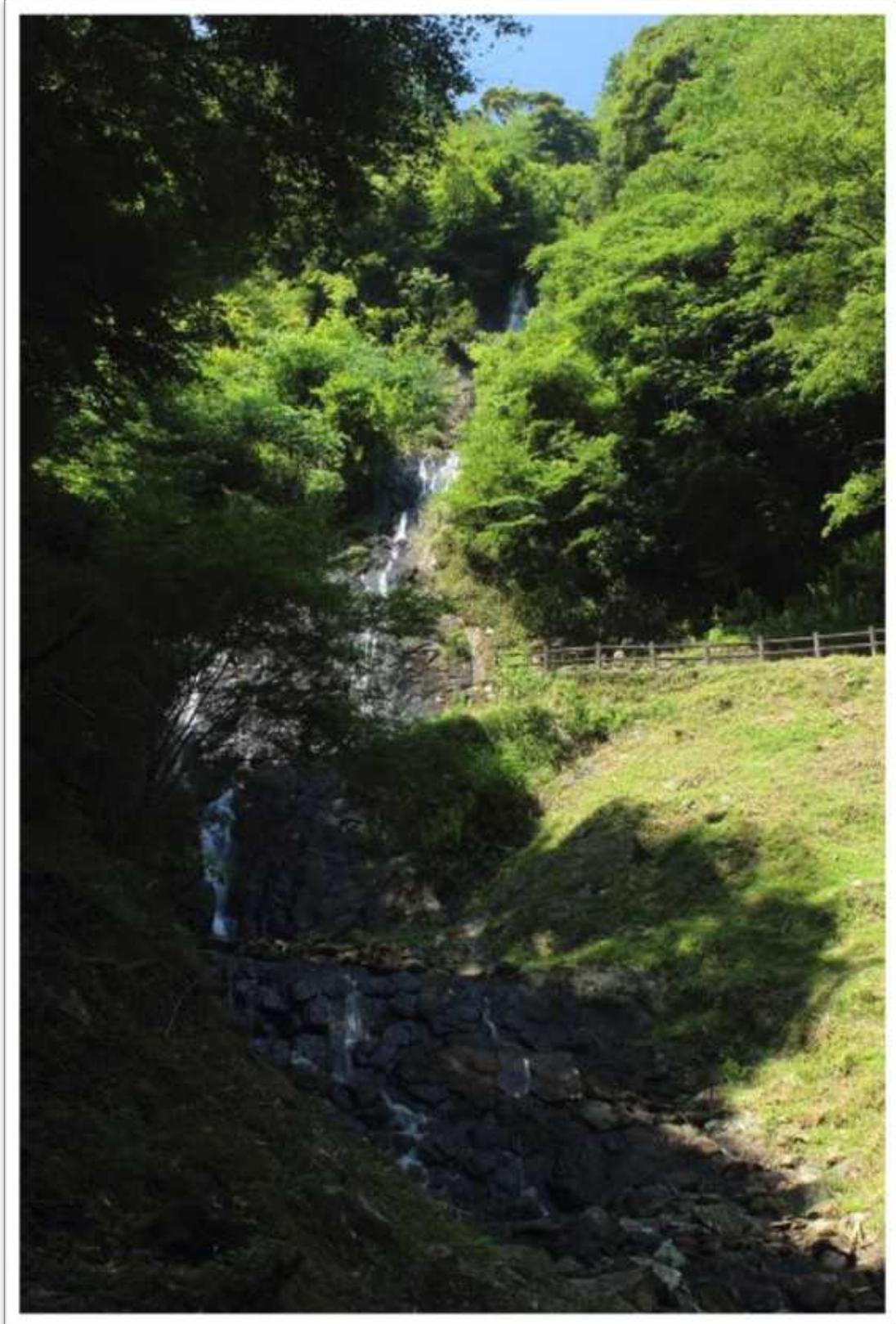


Asahi Falls  
—Mendicant Shakuhachi Monks and the Izu Peninsula—  
Christopher Yohmei Blasdel



Asahi Falls, Ōdaira, Izu. Photograph by the author.

The anfractuous road from Shūzen-ji to the Amagi Pass winds through the middle of the mountainous Izu Peninsula. It cuts across small villages, traverses deep rivers filled with fresh, running waters and traces hairpin curves that straddle exquisitely terraced rice paddies. Every turn offers a stunning vista of towering mountains and verdant slopes. These views are juxtaposed with glimpses of local daily life as village residents make their way back and forth from school, shopping or their work in the fields and forests.

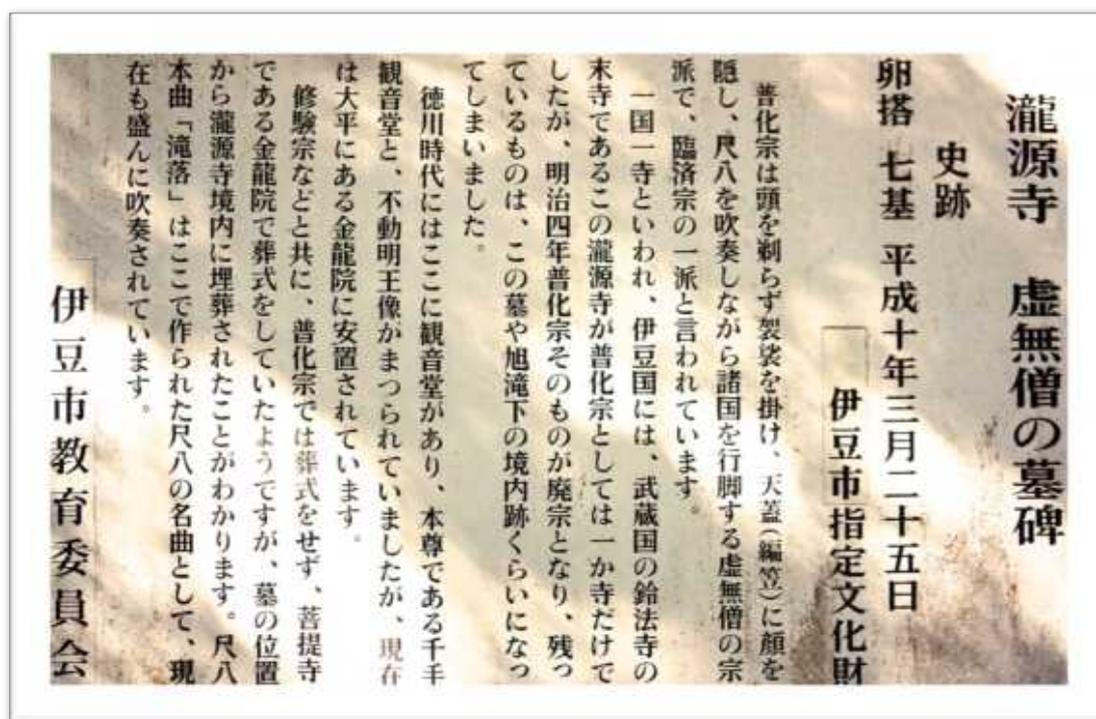
One of the small communities the road passes along the way is Ōdaira. From the center of this settlement, a small lane leaves the road and makes its way up westward to the edge of the mountain, where is situated the remains of an old temple, a shrine and a magnificent waterfall that cascades from on high out of the forested hillside. This eastward-facing waterfall is named Asahi Daki (“Morning-sun waterfall”), and the name of temple—or the empty space where it once stood—is Rōgen-ji (literally, “origin of the waterfall”).

A sign at the entrance to the area tells the visitor that Rōgen-ji was a *komusō* temple. *Komusō*, the sign informs us, were a band of itinerant monks who covered their heads with deep basket hats, called *tengai*, and wandered the Japanese countryside playing the shakuhachi bamboo flute and begging for alms. These monks belonged to the Fuke Sect, which was loosely connected to the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism, and Rōgen-ji was an affiliate temple of Reihō-ji Temple in Ōme, now a municipality of Tokyo in western mountainous region. Reihō-ji was the most important of all the *komusō* temples in the Kanto Plain.

Rōgen-ji was the only *komusō* temple in Izu. Now, the only thing remaining of the temple now are some weathered graves and the empty site itself. Closer to the road, however, is Ryūsen-ji temple that still appears to host activity. It was formerly the host temple to Rōgen-ji.<sup>1</sup>

The sign also points out that the Asahi Daki waterfall inspired the famous shakuhachi piece, *Taki Otoshi no Kyoku*; appropriately named the “Water-Falling Piece.”

As far as information signs go in Japan it is accurate, though of course it leaves a lot unsaid. According to local documents, Rōgen-ji was originally built as a temple of the Shingon sect in the late Muromachi period. It was abandoned and then, around the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, became attached to Ryūsen-ji as an in-



Historical sign, designating the Rōgen-ji ruins as Izu City cultural property, posted by the Izu City Educational Division (March 25, 1999). Photograph by the author.

dependent inner sanctuary. Its secretive location right next to the waterfall was perfect for spiritual contemplation.

The shrine, Ōdaira Jinja, was built much later, in 1860, to the side of the waterfall and has little to do with the history of Rōgen-ji.

The Fuke sect of shakuhachi playing Zen monks was officially established in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Their mission in Edo Japan was to strive for enlightenment through playing the shakuhachi and learn various set pieces known as *honkyoku*. Before the sect became officially organized, however, its members consisted mostly of a motley mob of beggars who played the shakuhachi and wandered the country. They needed a place to gather, sleep, and practice shakuhachi, so convincing local temples to become Fuke sect related temples (*fuke-dera*) was an obvious solution.

Since Rōgen-ji had been long abandoned, it was easy for the wandering *komusō* monks of the time to use it as a residence, much like a present day squatter might inhabit a derelict building. The location was ideal, as the temple was set apart from the main road by a waterfall but close enough to the surrounding villages to get support from the locals. Soon, other *komusō* monks joined in to create a small community. They were in need of leadership and direction, however, and records show that Rōgen-ji's first permanent abbot, Ippū

Oshō, came to live there sometime around 1716. After that, there was a succession of abbots, but there were also periods when Rōgen-ji had no resident priest. Even today, there are temples and shrines, especially in rural Japan, that cannot afford to support a full-time priest, and these temples lie fallow for years with just the bare minimum of upkeep.

Next to the Rōgen-ji temple ruins are a set of seven gravestones, shaped like elongated bird's eggs sticking out of the ground. From the inscription on these stones, together with records kept in the nearby affiliate temple Kinryū-ji, it seems that Rōgen-ji had a total of ten abbots over a period of 160 years. These records also indicate that the last abbot, Kaiga, had to contend with the enormous upheaval in society and the demise of the Fuke Sect occasioned by the Meiji Restoration in 1868, but more about that later.

According to one account, by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century there were supposedly over 120 Fuke Temples throughout Japan, although there are no precise records of individual names. Once the Fuke sect became organized, it tended toward exclusiveness, aimed for respectability and weeded out the riff-raff. This would have been necessary in order for the Fuke sect to be recognized as an official religion by the Tokugawa government, which it did in 1677.

Edo Period documents are not always accurate, and the early twentieth century scholar, Nakatsuka Chikuzen, compiled all the information regarding *komusō* temples which ever existed and came up with a list of 77, which he sorted according to the sects listed in the archives at Myōan-ji temple in Kyoto, which was the head Fuke Temple. Rōgen-ji is on that list.

It is difficult to know for sure what occurred in the *komusō* temples during their heyday—and Rōgen-ji did seem to be an important one—but there is some indication from historical sources. The daily life for monks in Zen temples—then and now—is very structured and revolves around a schedule of ritual: the intonation of prayers according to the time of day, meal-taking, work-related activities, sutra chanting, long sitting sessions of *zazen* and lectures or individual sessions by the head priest.

It was the same for the *komusō* temples, except instead of sitting meditation, the shakuhachi became the focus of the monks' attention. Prayers were replaced by shakuhachi meditative *honkyoku* pieces, and *zazen*, which literally means just "sitting Zen," was replaced by *suizen*, which indicates "blowing Zen,"

or the attainment of enlightenment through breath and sound. Again at night, after their daily training finished, the monks played *honkyoku* to mark the time and occasion.

Zen meditation is something one can practice through any activity, but blowing the shakuhachi, with its need to concentrate on the body, breath and posture, is particularly conducive to meditative awareness.

The *komusō* monks were required to go begging periodically. This meant going out into the community to gather alms, either food or money, from the townspeople. This is common in Buddhist countries, and although now relatively rare in Japan, the practice is still widely followed in other such Buddhist countries as Thailand or Sri Lanka. Begging is thought to be a sacred activity and provide 'merit' for both the beggar and the person giving alms.<sup>2</sup> It was also a way for the *komusō* to make a living.



Typical *komusō* costume of the late Edo Period.  
(Drawing by Abe Tomio).

The *komusō* had a very elaborate uniform that consisted of kimono, a brocade sash, arm guards and leggings and, most importantly, the deep, *tengai* straw hat that covered their whole head. The *tengai* assured anonymity, but it also provided a sense of a powerful and mysterious other-worldliness to the monks and, I suspect, exerted a kind psychological pressure on the simple country folk to force them to provide alms.

There is a phenomena in present day Japan, *kosu-purei* where men and woman wear the costume and mien of various characters: school girls, waitresses, samurai, etc. Like donning a mask, it allows the individual to subsume the identity (and hence, power or sexuality) of something other than themselves. Nowadays it is done as divertissement and distraction, but one can see the impetus of this desire in such activities as the ancient masked drama and *komusō* monks.

During their pilgrimages, the *komusō* monks obviously couldn't hold a begging bowl since they had to use their hands to play the shakuhachi. So instead of using a bowl, they hung a wooden box for alms around their neck

written with the *kanji* “Myōan” (“light-dark”). This was in reference to the head Fuke temple, Myōan-ji, in Kyoto. *Myōan* refers to a shibboleth, found in the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Kyotaku Denki Kokuji-tai*, that all *komusō* monks held dear: *Myōtō rai, myōtō da. Antō rai, Antō da.* This passage, originally from the *Annals of Rin-zai*—the teachings of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century Chinese monk Linji Yixuan (Rinzai in Japanese)—literally translates as “If light comes I will strike it. If dark comes I will strike it.” It is an admonition not to be deceived by duality or differences.

As within the temple, the monks played certain pieces outside according to the situation. Like the urban ice cream truck that plays its distinctive melody when entering a neighborhood, the *komusō* monks informed the locals of their presence in the area by performing a piece called *Tōri* as they walked along the paths or *Kadozuke* at street corners. *Hachigaeshi* (“Returning the Bowl”) was performed as a kind of thank-you piece when the monk was given alms. When two *komusō* met while begging, it was customary to play the piece *Yobi Take* (“Bamboo Call”) or *Uke Take* (“Bamboo Answer”). When on the road and wishing to stay in a *komusō* temple, they played *Hirakimon* or *Monbiraki* (“Open the Gate”) to gain entrance. Practice and etiquette probably differed from temple to

temple but were basically the same.

There was also a business aspect to their activities, and the *komusō* monks could be quite territorial. Official edicts called *tomeba seisatsu*—complete with the official seal of the head Myōan



*Seisatsu* posted edict dating from the late Edo Period, prohibiting the activity of any unauthorized *komusō* from begging in the area. (Courtesy of Hosshin-ji)

Temple in Kyoto—posted at village entrances outlawed unauthorized begging and made clear whose territory it was. Only *komusō* monks of a certain affiliation were allowed to beg there. Beware the rogue monk who might decide to butt into another’s territory. The *komusō* ranks

consisted of disenfranchised samurai who knew how to wield a shakuhachi as if it were a sword.

Not surprisingly, the *komusō* monks required a license, called *honsoku*, to beg. It was, after all, a money-making activity and the period bureaucrats needed to keep tabs on them.

There is a *honsoku* for a *komusō* monk named Yūryū who lived at Rōgen-ji, dated the 2nd year of Kyoho (1717), affixed with the seal by Bokusui, the temple's fourth Abbot (d. 1750).

Apparently the *honsoku*, like present day driver's licenses, had to be renewed periodically, especially when the abbot changed. We can also see Yūryū's renewal certificate, called *zokuin*, which was stamped by Rōgen-ji's successive abbots, ending with Tōkai Shikei around 1758. Although we have proof of his existence, whatever happened to Yūryū—where his pilgrimages led him, what pieces he learned, how he played the shakuhachi and when he died—unfortunately we will never know.



*Honsoku* license conferred to the anonymous *komusō* monk Yūryū. (Courtesy of Hosshin-ji)

We can speculate about one piece he must have learned, however. In addition to the ceremonial pieces that all *komusō* knew, each temple had their specialty piece, and monks traveled from temple to temple throughout the land to learn these pieces.

Rōgen-ji's specialty piece, purportedly composed by one of its abbots, was the aforementioned *Taki Otoshi no Kyoku*—the “Water-Falling Piece.”<sup>3</sup>

It is not known which abbot at Rōgen-ji “composed” this piece, but it is important to realize that none of the shakuhachi *honkyoku* were actually composed. Rather, they are a collection of accepted and already known melodic fragments put together in new combinations. As is true with almost all Japanese traditional music, shakuhachi *honkyoku* consist of set forms, called *kata* (or in Japanese musical parlance, *onkei*), and these pieces, regardless of lineage or style,

sound, at the molecular level, pretty much the same. It is the imagination and life experience of the player that brings life to the piece. The *honkyoku* are often inspired by natural phenomena, religious ceremony and imagery or animals.

Presently, there exist multiple versions of *Taki Otoshi no Kyoku*, from the highly refined version of the Kinko School to the plaintive, soulful renditions handed down through the Myōan Temple lineages (Shinpo, Taizan and Seian styles; where it is called *Takiochi*). In all lineages except the Shinpo style, the piece maintains basically the same structure and melody. The Shinpo version has a similar structure but a significantly different melody.

For all except dedicated scholars and performers, however, this is splitting hairs. What is important is how it the piece sounds to us today and conveys the essence of the waterfall.

The Asahi Falls pours forth from a steep, 100 meter high mountain right behind Rōgen-ji ruins. It doesn't "fall" as much as it cascades in about six clearly definable sections. The rock in these mountains consists of extremely hard columnar basalt that originated from the numerous volcanoes that form the backbone of the Izu Peninsula.

The water slowly follows the contours of the stream above. As it approaches the falls, the pitch of the slope steepens and the flow picks up speed. Flying over the nick point, the waters bounce and splash upon the descending flat surfaces of the basalt, making very distinctive sounds. Gurgling and ripping, tinkling and chiming—the water on the rock explodes into an array of natural tones as it makes its way downhill. If the tones were visible, I suspect they would appear as a very subtle but quick and lively rainbow against the lush green of the verdant mountainside.

The structure of this piece begins like the waterfall: slowly, with simple, melodic fragments. It builds in intensity and suddenly, in the second half of the piece, the melody jumps up to the higher octave. The music mirrors the rushing waters as they gain speed and force, tearing away relentlessly at the unyielding rocks. Finally, the piece fades away in a subtle silence.

I learned both the simpler Myōan version and the more complex Kinko versions of this piece. I first visited the falls in 1976 and was awed by the natural beauty of the surroundings, but I had no idea (or technique) on how to actually make the piece sound like a waterfall. My Myōan teacher, Okamoto

Chikugai, offered a very succinct and descriptive metaphor on how to interpret the piece. He told me that the piece must begin with high and powerful sounds, while pointing out that this waterfall was a “male” waterfall, and the shakuhachi must capture this masculine essence. But near the end, the tones must naturally die down, and the final notes must “gurggle” like the water itself, ending, as he put it, in a very feminine way.

Yamaguchi Goro, my Kinko teacher, on the other hand, did not usually give instructions on how to interpret pieces, but in the liner notes to a CD compilation of the Kinko *honkyoku*, he describes his interpretive approach. “The gentle flow of the water suddenly changes as it goes over the waterfall. It splashes against the rocks and sprays, flows downward through the crevices and into the pool below, foaming in whirlpools. Then the waters continue on as a gentle stream. I think of those thousands of manifestations of water as I approach this piece. I also think how this could also be a metaphor describing the life of a human.”<sup>4</sup>

These two very different approaches epitomize the stylistic differences between the Myōan and Kinko schools as well as the differences in interpretation by the individual player. I felt that with the Myōan version (*Takiochi*), I needed to become one with the waterfall and imagine myself as the waters falling, while with the Kinko version (*Takiotoshi*), it was all about executing the beautifully complex and subtle ornamentations that adorn the piece in a musical paean to the waterfall’s natural beauty.

These interpretive differences in approach became much clearer to me when I made another visit to the Asahi Falls almost four decades later in 2014. It is easy to lose oneself in the beauty of magnificent natural phenomena, like a waterfall. Standing in awe in front of it induces a kind of bliss bordering on the ecstatic and leads us into other worlds and new possibilities. But at the same time, we realize the need to discipline ourselves in order to share this experience. One interpretation of the piece leads us inward to the essence of the waterfall while the other leads us back out where we create (or attempt to create) something that can stand alone as one artist’s response to the phenomena.<sup>5</sup>

As a composition, *Takiotoshi no Kyoku* traveled westward from Izu to Hamamatsu—where there was a larger, more established Fuke temple called Futai-ken—on to Ise, Kyoto and further west to Kyushu. It also made its way to

northern Japan and became part of the repertory of the Kinpū style of shakuhachi playing in Aomori. This piece is presently one of the mainstays of traditional shakuhachi music and one of the first *honkyoku* taught to students.

Although the waterfall and the music lives on, Rōgen-ji itself is long gone. The last abbot of Rōgen-ji, Kaiga, arrived in Rōgen-ji around 1860 after a fifty-year hiatus with no head priest. The temple had fallen into disarray and its monks become unruly, but Kaiga restored order to the temple and discipline to its *komusō*. Their new abbot was young, but as the son of one of the feared Shōgun's *hatamoto* elite vassals, he commanded respect. Kaiga also was held in esteem as the abbot of the main Kantō area *komusō* temple, Reihō-ji in Ome. After arriving at Rōgen-ji around 1860, he began working to put it back in order.

Rōgen-ji's renewal was short lived, however. In 1868, the Tokugawa government fell and the Meiji Restoration began. The Meiji leaders took quick action to dismantle the old Tokugawa institutions, and Kaiga could see the writing on the wall. Without the protection of the Tokugawa *shōgun*, the Fuke sect and its mendicant *komusō* monks could no longer go about their activities. To the new Meiji reformers, they were outlaws and unwanted reminders of the feudal past.

In 1871, the new Meiji government officially outlawed the Fuke sect and the *komusō*, but before the law could be applied, Kaiga dismantled Rōgen-ji and safely stored its treasures (consisting of two Buddhist statues, Kan'on and Fudō) at the nearby Kinryū-ji temple. His work finished at Rōgen-ji, Kaiga then took off on the winding roads leading back to Tokyo, the city once known as Edo. He was never heard from again.

References:

- TOMINOMORI Kyozan, *Zuisōmanhitsu, Taki Otoshi* [Thoughts on Takiotoshi] (Tokyo Myōankyozan Bō Dōyūkai, 1975).
- TOMINOMORI Kyozan, *Myōan Shakuhachi Tsūkai* [An Explanation of Myōan Shakuhachi] (Tokyo Myōankyozan Bō Dōyūkai, 1974).
- NAKATSUKA Chikuzen, *Konki-ryū Shakuhachi Shikan* [A Personal View of the Kinko Shakuhachi] (Nihon Ongaku-sha, Tokyo, 1979).
- BLASDEL Christopher Yohmei & KAMISANGŌ Yūkoō, *The Shakuhachi—A Manual for Learning*. (Printed Matter Press, Tokyo, 2008).
- Reproduction of *komusō honsoku* license courtesy of Gekkai Bunko, Hosshin-ji Temple, Tokyo.
- YAMAGUCHI Goro, *Shakuhachi no Shinzui, Shakuhachi Honkyoku* [Honkyoku: The Soul of the Shakuhachi] (liner notes, VZCG 8066-8077, Victor Zaidan, Tokyo, 1999).

---

<sup>1</sup> Some contemporary shakuhachi scholars (Tsukitani, Kamisangō, Kojima) mention Ryūsen-ji as Izu's *komusō*

---

temple. In fact, it was Rōgen-ji. The confusion arises in part from the similarities in the *kanji* rendition of their names (Ryūsen-ji 龍泉寺 and Rōgen-ji 瀧源寺). Furthermore, these same sources mistakenly combine *kanji* from both temple names and call it Ryūgen-ji (龍源寺), further obfuscating the issue.

<sup>2</sup> Another name for Rōgen-ji is Kudoku-zan, or “Merit-making Temple.”

<sup>3</sup> There is another Izu-related piece found in the Kinko Style shakuhachi *honkyoku* repertory, *Izu Reibo*. This piece, also associated with Rōgen-ji Temple, belongs to a series of numerous *Reibo* (鈴慕, “yearning for the bell”) pieces, all associated with a specific locale (*Kyūshū Reibo*, *Kyō Reibo*, *Yoshino Reibo*, *Igusa Reibo*, etc). The yearning aspect refers to an 8<sup>th</sup> century T’ang period monk and the Fuke Sect’s namesake, Fuke, who wandered the city streets of Chang’An, ringing a bell to urge instant enlightenment. The Fuke Sect followers yearned for and tried to imitate the sound of the bell with the shakuhachi.

<sup>4</sup> YAMAGUCHI Goro, *Shakuhachi no Shinzui, Shakuhachi Honkyoku*, pg.20.

<sup>5</sup> In Japanese, there is a significant difference in the nuance of the two words *taki otoshi* and *taki ochi*. *Taki* of course refers to the waterfall, but *otoshi* is the nominative of the verb *otosu*, “to drop,” i.e. as in the active tense “to drop” something. *Ochi*, on the other hand, is from *ochiru*, denoting a passive sense in which “something falls.” Something so obscure as whether the title is in the active or passive voice would normally make no difference, but, some performers/scholars, like Tominomori Kyozan, claim that, on the contrary, it makes all the difference because it determines the method of musical interpretation: whether the performer should try to present or merely represent the experience of the waterfall.

Copyright, Christopher Yohmei Blasdel, 2015