

# Music for life: a Japanese experience of spirituality, ageing and musical growth

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the role of musical engagement in later-life spiritual development and ageing. The nexus of music, spirituality and ageing has been relatively unexplored. Change of styles, means of expression and ways of engagement are among the transformation that older musicians often encounter. Based on an ethnographic study of Japanese music practitioners, the paper introduces a community music practice in which spiritual cultivation is a collective goal of musical pursuit. A case introduced in this paper suggests that music helps to develop a sense of purpose and enhance the meaning of life by instilling the feeling that people are still able to develop musically and spiritually. Some of the transformation identified in the study included changes of repertoire, the purpose of practice and the meaning of progress, all of which was characterised in the dictum of less-is-more. The paper highlights the process in which spiritual development and musical growth are linked and support positive ageing.

**KEY WORDS** – spirituality, music, Japan, Shakuhachi, Ikigai.

## **Introduction**

Musical participation plays an important role in adults' social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing (Bennett 2013; Hays, Bright and Minichiello 2002; Hays and Minichiello 2005a; Pitts 2005; Roulston 2010). This holds true for ageing and elderly people (Creech *et al.* 2014). Many adults are engaged in musical activities in later life while seeking positive experiences of continued growth in cognitive, physical and spiritual processes (Coffman 2009; deVries 2010; Hays and Minichiello 2005b; Minichiello and Coulson 2005; Prickett 1998; Sixsmith and Gibson 2006; Smith 1998; Southcott 2009). Artistic creativity indeed contributes to positive ageing since it fosters a perception of life as full of opportunities for growth (Fisher and Specht 1999; Johansson 2002). Musical engagement of older people needs to be explored in terms of continuous growth, rather than regression, in musical, creative and physical capacity (Creech *et al.* 2014; Minichiello and Coulson 2005; Prickett 1998).

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While ageing is a universal experience, it is important to recognise the unique condition of each culture's specific context in which people experience ageing (Antonucci, Okorodudu and Akiyama 2002; Lo 2015). To a great extent, the relationship between ageing and musical engagement is a cultural matter (Hung, Kempen and DeVries 2010). This paper explores the role of musical engagement in later-life spiritual development in a culture-specific context. Spirituality is one of the themes necessary to explore adult learners' experiences of music and ageing (Hays, Bright and Minichiello 2002). For many, the purpose of learning music in later life is to engage in self-cultivation, become fully human, and explore the meaning of life through joining a community of music practice. This study specifically introduces a case of a 70-year-old *shakuhachi* (a Japanese flute) player, Takeo, whose musical pursuit can be understood through such indigenous notions as 'spirit support' (*kokoro no sasae*) and 'purpose of living' (*ikigai*) (Keister 2005). His spiritual transformation is marked by a series of life-changing circumstances such as the loss of his wife, and this transformation coincides with his musical growth.

Takeo's narrative reveals not only his individual musical engagement and spiritual growth but also the values and practices of his community in which spiritual cultivation is a collective goal of musical pursuit among the participants. For them, music is a path for lifelong, self-cultivation. For this reason, adult practitioners, especially older practitioners, are common in this community. They start learning music late in life and engage in music practice as a means of self-development. The goal of music making for these practitioners is not necessarily the perfection of music as an end in itself, but the development of the self as a never-ending, lifelong process (Keister 2005). Within this context, then, what is the core value and belief that leads *shakuhachi* practitioners to engage in music in the later stages of their lives? How does this particular genre of music support one's positive meaning making? The transformation of artistic styles, means of expression and ways of engagement are also of particular interest in this study, as these are among the many changes that elderly artists typically face (Katz and Campbell 2005). Through the case study, the research aims to illustrate the ways in which the transformation of musical engagement corroborates that of spiritual growth, along with exploring its relationship to ageing.

## **Music and ageing**

Music plays an important role in everyday life, shaping our identity, social actions and subjectivity (DeNora 2000). The importance of music continues throughout one's lifetime, including an individual's senior years (Cohen,

Bailey and Nillsson 2002; Gembris 2006), since it supports the core dimensions of wellbeing, such as self-acceptance, life purpose, environmental mastery, positive relationships, autonomy and personal growth (Matsunobu 2015; Ryff 1995). Older adults often place value on the non-musical benefits of musical activity (Coffman 2002). A variety of benefits gained from musical participation are linked to the subjective feeling that music allows people to engage in life in creative and challenging ways (Creech *et al.* 2014), themselves key conditions for a state of happiness to occur (Csikszentmihalyi 1992).

Numerous studies have looked at the link between music and health. Music has an effect on changes in heart rate, respiration, blood pressure, skin temperature and muscle tension (Kreutz and Lotze 2008; Kreutz, Murcia and Bongard 2012). Singing, in particular, helps to increase hormones and boost the immune system (Theorell 2014). Generally, singing together in a choir has positive effects on the wellbeing of older people (Bruhn 2002). The findings of Cohen's (2009) study suggested that choral singing resulted in fewer doctor visits, the decreased use of medication and fewer instances of falls, along with better morale and less loneliness than the comparison group. Music can induce intense pleasure, a significant benefit to one's mental and physical wellbeing (Johansson 2002).

Music also helps memory retention because it is related to the recollection of non-musical information (Bruhn 2002; Theorell 2014). Musical experiences and perceptions are entwined with other sensory and emotional information (Bruhn 2002). Gabrielsson (2002, 2011) argues that music is a common trigger of 'peak' experiences and thus can be explored in relation to strong and exceptional life events. This association has also been identified in later life stages (Bruhn 2002).

The most discussed research area on musical engagement in later life is the social and emotional wellbeing of musicians. Social relationships have an impact on positive ageing (Setterson 2002). Music has the power to psychologically bind people together, thereby maintaining social cohesion (Theorell 2014). Through collective music making – either through singing or playing an instrument – group identity, friendship, a sense of belonging and social support are reinforced (Clift 2012). Music making brings social benefits in the form of building and strengthening social networks (Coffman 2002). Creech *et al.* (2014) argue that a positive link between musical participation and social-emotional wellbeing is often made by people who engage in music activities in later life. The participants in their study showed high scores in such measurement areas as sense of purpose, autonomy, control and social affirmation. Through music, people additionally develop a positive self-concept and judge themselves to be healthy and lively (Darrow, Johnson and Ollenberger 1994).

Research on musical development has tended to focus on children, especially in connection with those skills related to music performance such as giving recitals, sight-reading, playing by ear, playing from memory and improvising (McPherson, Davidson and Faulkner 2012). However, scholarly interest in music and ageing has also led to inquiries into musical development in later life (*e.g.* Gembris 2006). Manturzewska (2006) defines six stages within the lifespan of musical development. Each stage has different developmental tasks and involves qualitative changes and the acquisition of skills, knowledge, attitudes, habits and experiences. The last stage is defined as a period of withdrawal from professional life. Professional musicians may take a jury or judge role as a means of staying involved in the community. She argues that the transition from one stage to the next in the musician's life carries with it threats of increased emotional crises, and thus requires increased dialogue with others.

The qualitative changes throughout the course of one's musical life are broadly explained through the SOC (Selection, Optimisation and Compensation) model (Krampe 2006). The selection of personal goals and outcomes happens in the formative stage of musical development. The optimisation of achievements through intensive training is a requirement to become an expert musician. The compensation for weakness is needed to maintain the continuous level of performance in the face of ageing and the loss of physical means.

Research on musical development in later life has investigated age-related changes in performance and the compensatory measures taken by individuals (Bruhn 2002; Krampe 2006). While some skills, such as kinetic memory, remain largely intact, change is typically experienced and explained in terms of decay, such as a decline in hearing and vision, a decrease in motor skills (*e.g.* fingering, co-ordination, dexterity) and physical strength (*e.g.* respiratory-related conditions and limited body movement), a dropping off in vocal quality (*e.g.* narrower singing range and inflexibility), timing (*e.g.* internal tempo decrease) and a reduction in the speed of cognitive processing (*e.g.* short-term memory).

Efforts to preserve these skills have led to the investigation of compensation mechanisms. For instance, Ragot, Ferrandez and Pouthas (2002) argued that professional musicians can maintain accurate rhythmic performance and avoid age-related decline in processing speed and memory through continuous, high-quality practice. Bruhn (2002) observed that older musicians depend more on sight-reading to compensate for a decline in memory. Reducing self-imposed demands for high-quality performances is also recognised as a compensation process. For professional musicians, such steps may involve playing fewer concerts, reducing repertoires, and taking appropriate measures to adjust to their diminishing strength

and flexibility (Bruhn 2002). For amateur musicians, as Dabback (2005) observes, musical compensation often involves only mild changes without the necessity for the kind of extreme intervention related to achievement. This is part of the reason older adults continue to participate in hierarchical music ensembles rather than more democratic ensembles to maintain a familiar musical identity in familiar social relations (Dabback and Smith 2012). At the same time, a subjective feeling of ‘progression’ is important for many older musicians (Creech *et al.* 2014; Matsunobu 2015). Being challenged is seen as an essential component of their musical engagement.

In sum, musical development in the later stages of an individual’s life is characterised by unavoidable physical decay and the process of regression. Qualitative changes are needed in order to enhance wellbeing and musical satisfaction. At the same time, the aesthetic and technical dimensions of musical expression remain a concern. Very little is known about the interaction between music and spirituality in later life. Even major works in this area (*e.g.* Creech *et al.* 2014) make no mention of the spiritual dimension of older people’s music making and meaning making. This is probably due to the widespread assumption that spirituality is solitary in nature (Noddings 2003). Much of the research on music and ageing has focused instead on group music-making settings such as choral singing. This suggests that the process of changing values as it relates to musical engagement in later life – from the aesthetic to the spiritual – is a field worthy of examination.

### **Musical spirituality in Japan**

Spirituality is an essential constituent of the development of a whole person. It is an extended project of life-integration, which involves both temporal and long-term dimensions of human growth. Rodger (1996: 53) states, ‘a spiritual way of life is a transformation of the person, affecting the whole of life and all the person’s relationships’. This view is further supported by Van Ness (1996), who argues that spirituality is a series of lived experiences of self-transformation and subsequent gradual development. It transcends the separation of mind and body, self and world, process and product, manifesting itself in an integrated synthesis of growth and development. Transformation takes place within everyday occurrences, not necessarily within the religious realm.

This is certainly the case for many Japanese people. For them, spirituality is a difficult concept to make sense of (Matsunobu 2007). Although the word ‘spiritual’ has been used in Japan, it often takes on occult connotations due to its usage in the popular media. Also, there is no single word or concept in the Japanese language that matches the concept of spirituality.

It may be translated as *seishinsei* (mentality), *reisei* (spiritualness) and *kokoro* (heart–mind–spirit). Given this situation, scholars suggest that whenever spirituality is mentioned in written forms, there should be a supplemental explanation above the *katakana* characters of spirituality スピリチュアリティ in the form of *rubi* (Nishihira 2003). This is a way to indicate the exact meaning of the word in that particular context. Most people need a detailed translation to understand what spirituality means in their own terms. Among the possible terms, Tsuruwaki (2003) argues *ikigai*, or ‘purpose of living’, is the most appropriate concept to explicate the Japanese sense of spiritual wellbeing. It provides an accessible way for the Japanese to communicate their subjective feelings of what makes their lives most worthwhile.<sup>1</sup> In her review in the PBS’s *Next Avenue*, Carr (2013) argues that the Japanese concept of value and self-worth is crucial to positive ageing. It is not only the healthy diet of the Japanese, she observes, but their life purposes, summarised as *ikigai*, that help them to live longer. *Ikigai* engages them in social, physical and artistic activities with friends and family members.

Musical engagement provides a path of spirituality when it enhances a realisation and cultivation of self. Yuasa, Nagatomo and Hull (1993) explain that the Japanese sense of self-cultivation, or *shugyo*, refers to the act of enhancing one’s personality through achieving mind–body oneness. ‘Gyo’ specifically carries the sense that one can cultivate the mind through training the body. These two are considered to be inseparable in the Eastern tradition. The body–mind integration, according to Yuasa, Nagatomo and Hull, is the goal of Japanese martial arts and aesthetic practices. Similarly, Nakagawa (2000: 204) argues that art is a form of self-cultivation in the sense that it is an exploration of the self. He observes that ‘the way of art has nothing to do with creativity in problem-solving. It pays little attention to each problem. On the contrary, it solves the problem of the “self”’.

The view of music as a path of lifelong, endless self-cultivation is expressed in Keister’s (2005: 41) articulation of Japanese music. He states:

With performance being only the tip of the iceberg, what lies beneath is the individual’s experience of a physical and cognitive process that constitutes the unseen, spiritual foundation of art and is expressed verbally in terms that have spiritual overtones. A Japanese person may moderately describe their own artistic pursuit as their ‘purpose of living’ (*ikigai*) or express this more heavily as their ‘life support’ (*kokoro no sasae*). Art is commonly conceived of as a ‘path’ or ‘way’ (*do*) with the goal being to reach the ‘highest peak’ (*kiwameru*), a point that even veteran performers may be reluctant to admit they have reached, for it implies a high goal obtained only at the end of a life time of dedication.

The concepts of *ikigai* and *kokoro no sasae* are often used by adult practitioners of music to indicate the significance of music in their lives

(Matsunobu 2015). They are not necessarily professional players, nor are they committed to hard training. These words are often used by amateur practitioners of music who constitute the significant part of the ‘lesson culture’ (Moriya 1994). Indeed, Takeo is not a professional musician. Fulfilling his job as a labourer, he has been a music lover and a student of *shakuhachi* music. He still takes lessons from time to time. Truly, for him, playing the *shakuhachi* is his *ikigai* and *kokoro no sasae*.

## Methodology

This study began as an ethnography on the *shakuhachi* culture in Japan. The goal of the project was to understand *shakuhachi* practitioners’ beliefs and experiences of music and spirituality. Japanese *shakuhachi* students are generally older than those of other instruments. Although the *shakuhachi* in the modern realm is performed and appreciated by many, including people of younger generations, female practitioners and many non-Japanese practitioners (Smith 2008), and their approaches to music making are varied, it still remains a tool for self-cultivation. Not surprisingly, the main participants in this study were older practitioners and often talked about music in relation to ageing and spirituality.

Over a period of two years I met with hundreds of practitioners, both professional and amateur, and interviewed about 40 practitioners. This led me to ask for repeated interviews with eight of them. They thus became the main participants of the study. Among them, Takeo stood out. He was highly respected and idealised within his community as someone who led his life through the *shakuhachi*. As a case sample, he was an outlier in that not many people were like him: no one else experienced and elaborated the relationship between musical spirituality and ageing to the same extent. Takeo also served as a representative case as he embodied the values shared by the members of his community. Denzin (2001) argues that case-specific understanding may transfer to other cases because every case represents its kind. This argument applies to this case report. The fact that Takeo was respected and idealised by other practitioners means that he was, to a great extent, representative of other cases in the community.<sup>2</sup>

I encountered Takeo for the first time at a community music event. His reserved yet determined expression on the stage indicated that he was deeply committed to his *shakuhachi* practice. His presence, performance and short speech following his performance matched my image of a devoted *shakuhachi* practitioner. He said he had been practising *shakuhachi* for 30 years. Following my first encounter, I met with Takeo five times on

different occasions. Each time I talked with him for several hours. On one occasion he took me to a temple and demonstrated what it is like to play music as an offering. Later, we went to a restaurant and engaged in a long conversation. The interview data used in this paper were taken partly from this occasion.

In retrospect, the interviews with him were phenomenological in nature, in the sense that I tried to delve into uncovering the meaning and structure of his lived experience and inter-subjective world (Van Manen 1990). I did not ask many questions as he shared with me many stories that were important to him. Narrative data analysis for this study followed the essentialist approach that draws on in-depth interviews as a method of exploring a life-story of the other (Witz 2006; Witz *et al.* 2001). This approach is employed when the purpose of the investigation is to explore one's subjective experience, internal state of mind, types of consciousness and deeper forces. The phenomenon under study is understood in relation to one individual's identity, personal history and self-growth. While attending carefully to a range of expressed feelings, the researcher uses microanalysis of significant passages from an interview to understand the person's subjectively felt essence (Witz 2006). Interviews often proceed to focus on significant events that occurred to the person. In retrospect, this is how I understood Takeo's life experience. As I listened to his narratives, I focused on significant life events that influenced his musical and spiritual activities. Transcriptions of interview data and field notes were later coded and analysed for emergent themes (Coffey and Atkinson 1996) in relation to the spirituality framework discussed above.

### **Playing as praying**

For older people, spirituality is often related to a realisation of the transience of life brought about by encounters with death of family members and close companions. This was the case for Takeo:

I do my best with my job. I never skip my work. Because I am a craftsman, I want to see the result of my work as satisfying as it can be. Now I am over 70 years old. I've been working as a carpenter for almost 55 years. That's my breath of life. *Shakuhachi* is the same. I give my best. That's my policy in life. I give my best to everything. I didn't feel that way while my wife was still alive. She had stomach cancer, and it eventually spread to other parts of her body. She survived for four years and nine months following her first operation. She gradually lost her spirit and couldn't make it eventually. During that time, I did everything as best as I could. Now I do the same with *shakuhachi*.

During the interviews he frequently used such adverbs as *isshou kenmei* and *seiippai*, both meaning 'putting in all one's best with heart and soul'. His



wife's passing awakened him to realise the preciousness of every moment in life. Then, he learned to give his best to every encounter in his life. This attitude prevailed across his life activities including his music practice. He explained that he plays the *shakuhachi* as if he is facing the moment of his wife's death, as if this is the only opportunity to pray for her soul. He stated, 'What if this is the last time your wife can hear your voice, see your face, listen to your *shakuhachi*?'

One particular way for him to engage in his spirituality and music was to embark on a pilgrimage. In hope of his wife's salvation, he went on the *ohenro* pilgrimage, the 1,400-kilometre route of 88 temples in the spiritual island of Shikoku. The route is believed to follow the footsteps of an eighth-century Buddhist monk Kukai. Takeo explained.

I lost my wife about 20 years ago. Since then, I've experienced the pilgrimage four times. Not many people would think of trying the *ohenro* pilgrimage and praying for the salvation of deceased souls. I couldn't resist doing something for her. So I go on the pilgrimage with my *shakuhachi* and pray for my wife. The route can be very harsh if you decide not to use any public transportation but walk through the entire route. You walk every day, and it takes about 50 days to complete the route.

Considering the demanding Japanese work ethics and shorter vacation days, completing the full course of the *ohenro* pilgrimage is not easy for anyone unless he or she is fully devoted to this cause. The decision to fulfil the pilgrimage may risk one's job security. For Takeo, embarking on a pilgrimage was not an easy choice, either. He continued,

I walked through the entire route. Some temples are located on tops of mountains (as high as 900 metres in altitude). You cannot reserve accommodation when you walk on foot because often you cannot reach the destination you hoped by the end of the day. Besides, many places don't even have a *ryokan* [Japanese-style accommodation]. I often slept outdoors. One time, the wind was very strong, and I could not sleep outdoors. It was in April and still cold at night. So I found a public phone box and slept in it with my legs folded. I experienced many things like this. It's very tough to walk though. It's got to be tough. It was not as tough, though, as the hardship my wife had experienced.

During the pilgrimage, he encountered what he called deep moments. The experience of these deep moments seemed to have influenced both his spiritual and musical growth. He stated:

You play at a temple. You receive support from people. You play *shakuhachi* in return. All of these experiences greatly influenced my *shakuhachi* playing. Whenever I came back from the pilgrimage, my teacher remarked, 'Your bamboo [*shakuhachi*] sound has changed.' So I have gone through several phases of my spiritual development. As I become old, I could feel that. I add a 'growth ring' to my playing, and that manifests itself as I play.

He explained that a constellation of unforgettable moments, in which he encountered the kind spirits of other people, matured his musical expression. In response to their compassion, he played the *shakuhachi* to convey his sincere appreciation. Each pilgrimage experience provided him with a series of predicaments and significant moments. In return, these experiences seasoned his musical expression and spiritual growth.

He further explained how his perception of his playing and ageing has changed over the course of his life:

We all make our own expressions unique to each phase of our life. When you have three years of experience of playing music, that becomes your expression. You add more years, five years, ten years, 20 years, 30 years ... and you see the development of your *kokoro* [spirit–mind–heart]. So what's most important is to continue. In three years, you will see a different expression in your playing. You will see another phase. Each person has life, and each person has his or her own expression depending on how we live ... My playing has also changed. At the last student concert, I played a piece called *kyorei* with tai ch'i dancers. One of them was 88 years old. They really appreciated my slow playing. It usually takes nine to ten minutes. But I played it for 13 minutes. They found my tempo and breathing pattern very comfortable and suited to their movements. Probably, that's also the result of my ageing [which led to slow tempo].

The 'growth rings' of his musical experience were evident when I listened to him play. The depth of his spiritual maturity manifested its shade in his sound. He indicated that what matters is not necessarily how well one can play or how early one started *shakuhachi* training but how truthfully one is engaged in self-cultivation. The latter seemed to have contributed to his spiritual maturity. Given the fact that he started playing the *shakuhachi* in his forties, this statement was convincing.

Takeo's spirituality evolved around a series of sacred encounters in life. A form of seeking spirituality out of everyday life is often experienced by the Japanese through the notion of *ichigo ichie*. This concept means 'one time, one meeting'. Every encounter with a person, a moment, a life is special and precious, as it never occurs again. Thus, it suggests that we must appreciate every encounter as if it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. In *shakuhachi* playing, the idea of *ichigo ichie* means performing with one's best. One *shakuhachi* master said, 'what if the next ten minutes is your last time to play the *shakuhachi*? Would you play in the same way?' Highly respected *shakuhachi* player Katsuya Yokoyama used to say, 'You have to play as if you are offering music to God. He may listen to only one or two notes. Can your playing represent your whole spirit?'

The essence of *ichigo ichie* has much in common with Takeo's view of life described above. It suggests that life becomes meaningful when one faces each moment to the best of one's ability. For the same reason, he plays

the *shakuhachi* with his heart and soul. This is for him a way of making an offering through performing music. He gave one example of such an encounter while emphasising the bonding that his flutes have brought him:

I cherish encounters and bonding cultivated through my bamboo [*shakuhachi*]. I have several people from my pilgrimage who eventually became very close to me. We often exchange letters and phone calls. The bonding made through *shakuhachi* playing is most precious. [For example], this couple and I met during my *ohenro* pilgrimage in 1998. It was raining very hard, and they asked me if I had a place to stay. I didn't. Then, they contacted the *ryokan* where they were going to stay and asked if there was a room for me. The *ryokan* was full. But they asked me if I would mind staying with them in the same room. We were strangers, but they were very kind. Then, I played [a piece of music] to thank them. They were moved, especially the wife, because her father used to play the *shakuhachi* as a blind massager. She was reminded of those days when she took her father's hand to his customers. Since that encounter, we've been in touch with each other. They come to our student recital every year. This is what makes me feel it is very worthwhile.

Unstated above is the basis for such a bonding to develop. Like Takeo, most pilgrimage participants carry spiritual reasons for participation. This shared basis often makes them deeply connected. Victor Turner (1979) explains that sharing sacredness and collectively deepening spirituality through participating in a pilgrimage brings about a sense of bonding, or 'communitas', while fostering deep connections between participants. For Takeo, forming a sense of communitas through sharing music has been part of his spirituality.

His narrative of spirituality and music was shaped by the process of bereavement following his wife's passing and an awareness of the amount of time remaining to him. The growth ring of his spirituality was layered through his rich musical encounters and experiences through participation in pilgrimages. The latter brought about not only opportunities for solitary reflection but also allowed for collective meaning making as it related to the issues of grief and acceptance. The positive effects of social participation were evident. During his journey, playing music carried the same meaning as praying. This process continued as he faced retirement. The next section focuses on the transformation of his musical engagement in response to his spirituality.

### **Personalising musical engagement**

Takeo's musical approach was a sort of less-is-more in that it allowed him to deepen a special relationship with each tune and each flute. On one occasion, after finishing his performance, he quietly added a remark in the middle of silence:

It was around seven to eight years ago [I joined another pilgrimage route] ... This is the piece I played at each temple. So this is one of my memorable pieces, one of several pieces that is very special to me. I visited those temples on Sundays. It took me about a year to visit all the temples. So this is a very special piece to me.

Takeo turned to me, 'I encourage you to also develop a special musical piece that is part of your life'. He emphasised the importance of having a tune that is special to the practitioner, a tune that serves almost like a 'life partner'. His playing of the piece at this event was particularly strong. It was the result of his prolonged engagement with the music throughout his pilgrimage endeavour, which took him about a year to complete. His memories and experiences of playing this particular piece and talking with people at the temples were condensed and expressed in his performance of the piece. In other words, his playing of this particular piece has matured through a series of encounters during the pilgrimage.

According to Takeo, what matters in his *shakuhachi* training is making a few pieces special. He believed that the remainder of his life time was not long, and he was no longer able to seek the same value as before (*e.g.* seeking for more pieces and greater technique), given his gradual memory decline due to ageing. As such, he emphasised the importance of memorising and perfecting a few pieces rather than attempting to play many pieces. To memorise the pieces, he explained, he sleeps with a torch and sheet music by the bed. When he awakes before dawn, he would sing the piece that he is working on. As soon as he notices a memory lapse, he would switch on the torch and checks his memory against the sheet music. He does this again before he goes to sleep. When he reached his late sixties, he came to realise that the number of pieces to memorise, or the repertoire, matters least to him. He stated:

Eventually, it becomes your song. Playing too straightforwardly is not necessarily good. Details and expressions are also important. Otherwise, no matter how many pieces you study, you can only play in the same way. Three pieces are enough. You should have a few musical pieces, even just one, that you can play anywhere, anytime, with confidence. I have memorised many pieces. But I believe only a few are enough. Even if you memorise many pieces, you may forget them easily. Just a few are probably enough. When I was younger [20 years ago], I studied many pieces. I learned a lot of things through those pieces such as fingerings and tone colours. Younger people can do that. But the goal is to master a few of them and make them your songs.

He explained that the main purpose of studying many musical pieces is to discover a few special pieces. Among the many pieces, he would choose a few that are most meaningful to him. These pieces become special because they hold memories of significant events. Performing these

pieces, he tells his life history. The pieces appealed to me as they sounded his narratives.

Takeo's approach for less-is-more is aligned with the philosophy of Zen *shakuhachi* (Gutzwiller 1984). The ultimate aim of the *shakuhachi* practice is believed to lie in one's effort to strive towards spiritual maturity by sophisticating each tone, each moment and each piece. Renowned *shakuhachi* player Fuyo Hisamatsu (1791–1871) once said, '39 pieces lie within 36 pieces. 36 pieces lie within 18 pieces. 18 pieces lie within 3 pieces. 3 pieces lie within one piece. One piece lies within no piece. A breath lies within emptiness and nothingness' (Hisamatsu 1985: 44). Hisamatsu suggested that *shakuhachi* players should aim at performing a smaller number of musical pieces for spiritual training. Today, this spiritual approach is expressed through the aesthetic concept, *ichion jobutsu*, or 'the attainment of enlightenment through perfecting a single tone' (Gutzwiller 1974; Keister 2004; Shimura 2002). The chief goal of *ichion jobutsu* is not to experience aesthetic pleasure but to achieve personal and spiritual maturity through the realisation of the 'ultimate tone' (called *tettei-on*). This less-is-more view still dwells in the minds of many *shakuhachi* players. This, I believe, is part of the reason why the *shakuhachi* has become a favoured instrument for older people. It encourages the practitioners to realise and exercise the spirit of less-is-more.

### **Making the instrument special**

Takeo comes from a tradition where practitioners are often engaged in instrument making. They harvest bamboo and fashion their own flutes by making the best use of the voices of individual pieces of bamboo. Their flutes show not only the characteristics of individual bamboo pieces but also their musical tastes and preferences. For instance, in the process of flute making, some may open up the bottom hole and finger holes in order to maximise the playability of the instrument. Others may keep finger holes smaller to gain a dense tone quality. As they become used to their own flutes, they learn to accommodate themselves to the characters of the flutes, especially those that display strong characters, because such flutes compel them to play in a particular way.

Takeo has made a number of flutes. Each flute carried a specific memory. He explained,

I played *tamuke* [a *honkyoku* piece known as a requiem] countless times after my wife passed away. I studied the song very hard. I did my best to play as my offering to her. The flute that I used to practise *tamuke* is still the best for playing this piece, even though I've made many flutes throughout my life that sound good ... Each of my

flutes carries the memory and feeling of the time I devoted my spirit. They all contain my spirit. My memories are bound with my flutes.

Each of his flutes represents his significant life event. For him, what makes each flute special is not so much its physical properties (length, size, sound, *etc.*) as his memory of it. Because his flutes are the embodiment of his memories, they cannot be detached from him. Thus, he carries his flutes everywhere. Takeo reflected as follows:

Like you said, people would be drawn to your playing, and you may eventually develop a deep bonding with them. Your bamboo [flute] can explain who you are and your life experience. I visit many places, and I always carry with me my *shakuhachi*. I normally bring two flutes wherever I go. Without the bamboo [flute], you would feel that something is missing, wouldn't you? It's like a part of you is missing. It can also console you. [It is] like a medium through which my soul comes out.

The *shakuhachi* has become a significant part of his existence and filled the emptiness that he experienced following the passing of his wife. It is now his purpose in life. People who have a sense of purpose tend to live a fulfilled life. Takeo seemed to be one such person. He stated:

I have three children. They are all grown up, and I don't have to worry about them. I have seven grandchildren. The oldest one has been accepted to a university this year. So I am in perfect happiness now. Although my wife passed away, our children are independent, and our grandchildren are doing well. Despite declining memory, I am still healthy, and I can still walk. Besides, I have bamboo [flutes].

Japanese people, especially those of the older generations, do not normally express their subjective feelings such as happiness in front of others. When they do, they really mean it. When Takeo mentioned this to me, in addition to his life experiences and musical engagement with *shakuhachi* playing, I could sense how truthful his statement was. As of winter 2014 Takeo was still healthy and able to play the *shakuhachi*. He was celebrating his 77th birthday. His growth ring of *shakuhachi* playing was ever expanding.

## Discussion

Van Ness (1996) argues that spirituality is a series of lived experiences of self-transformation and subsequent gradual development. Takeo's narrative indicates that his experience of spirituality followed this process. His self-transformation began when he was taking care of his wife. The realisation that lifetime is limited, and that every opportunity is precious, transformed his attitude towards music. This realisation transformed his way of musical engagement. He began to perform music as an offering and salvation of

his wife to the best of his abilities. Music, in turn, helped him to focus on the here-and-now and appreciate every moment of his life. Music became a fundamental way of developing a sense of life purpose and enhancing the meaning of life.

As suggested by Katz and Campbell (2005), older artists often experience the transformation of artistic styles, means of expression and ways of engagement. Takeo's narrative suggests that such transformation occurred to him over the course of his musical engagements. The shifts were observed in the ways he rendered the technique, repertoire, instruments, practice habits and intentions of musical interaction. The development of musical skills began to carry less meaning than deepening the meaning of life. The choice of fewer musical pieces followed the process of condensing life narratives into each piece. His self-made instruments became an embodiment of his life history. The meaning of memorising pieces changed from expanding the repertoire to making a few pieces special and forming a significant part of his daily activities. Since these musical pieces (and instruments) represented who he was, memory loss (or the loss of his instruments) was perceived by him as if a part of him was missing. His focus in music further shifted to a more spiritual one, and he began to aim at the depth of experience. The result was the feeling that he was able to make meaningful connections in life. In other words, his spiritual development and musical growth became intertwined with one another. His musical achievement led to his spiritual development, and this spiritual development helped transform his musical engagement in the direction of less-is-more. The shift in the latter direction is probably key to understanding elderly practitioners' musical and spiritual development and ageing.

The case of Takeo's engagement with life through music may be considered to be an inevitable process resulting from disengagement theory (Gumming and Henry 1961). Takeo pursued the less-is-more approach after going through critical life stages: bereavement of the significant other, the realisation of the transient nature of life, and the loss of memory and technical decay. Specifically, the loss of ego-energy – a process of social withdrawal espoused in disengagement theory – was also identified as part of his transformation. However, this withdrawal should not be interpreted as a removal from society: his less-is-more musical decision, as a way of increasing meaning making by condensing life narratives into a few pieces, was not a compensation process but instead a musical pursuit combined with, and corroborated by, spiritual growth. In addition, those pieces allowed him to make social, spiritual connections during his participation in pilgrimages. Without an understanding of the spiritual dimension of musical engagement, the pursuit of less-is-more may be viewed as a process whereby a musician gives up his identity. In reality,

Takeo's active and intentional disengagement from the more-is-better philosophy meant that he was more actively engaged in his community by promoting new ways of performing music, such as playing slowly, and focusing on the aesthetics of one-note-enlightenment, activities which required more effort. This, in turn, captured the attention of many practitioners who had yet to face the ageing process.

One may wonder to what extent Takeo's experience applies to other *shakuhachi* practitioners. The depth of his experience and the extent of his commitment to music was exceptional. Not many people could embark on a pilgrimage and achieve the same level of spirituality as Takeo. At the same time, much of his observation and comments about musical spirituality were widely shared by other practitioners. They commonly expressed their views of musical and spiritual maturity using such terms as growth ring. They also highly appreciated an expression of one's best effort (*isshou kenmei, seiippai*) with heart and soul (*kokoro*). Viewed in this light, he represented other cases by embodying and essentialising what was considered the ideal path for spirituality through the *shakuhachi*.

More importantly, his path of value transformation from more-is-better to less-is-more was imbedded in a musical system in which the ultimate goal was encapsulated by the idea of *ichion jobutsu*: the perfecting of just a few notes rather than playing many notes. Within this framework, Takeo developed his less-is-more philosophy and discovered different ways of achieving musical engagement. Given that the system provides a fertile ground for cultural transformation, it is suggested that other practitioners operating in such an environment may take a similar path.

Furthermore, among the many culture-specific factors, the value shared by the people of Takeo's community is also worth noting. He was situated in a community in which spiritual cultivation is a collective goal of musical pursuit. As described earlier, older music students are prevalent in Japan, and starting *shakuhachi* lessons at the age of 60 is not uncommon. For these older practitioners, music is a path for lifelong, self-cultivation rather than technical development. Music helps them to feel healthy, active and still able to *develop*, if not physically, but musically and spiritually.

This is in stark contrast to the musical culture of modern society, where the emphasis is often upon training at an early age and the pursuit of technical development (Creech *et al.* 2014). The widespread assumption that in order for one to excel in music performance, training must begin in childhood, has the potential to instil in many an image that musical engagement in later life cannot be rewarding (Roulston 2010). Takeo, along with other music practitioners in his community, makes a counter case. Apart from



some notable exceptions (such as those born into *iemoto* families, in which the transmission of artistry and authority is patrimonial), the majority of *shakuhachi* students tend to start their music learning later in life. They may begin *shakuhachi* lessons in college (this is actually the case for a significant number of professional *shakuhachi* players), after getting married or once they have retired. Many older music practitioners believe that the purpose of artistic training is to engage with everyday life as part of an experience leading towards spiritual maturity.

Finally, Takeo illustrated the way in which music became one's life support, or *ikigai*. Many people develop a positive sense of *ikigai* through musical engagement in later life. This is because musical engagement provides a powerful path for the development of a positive life. It creates a place for social interactions, personal challenges and a realisation of their possibilities. Mathews (1996: 730) emphasises that *ikigai* involves not only seeking present pleasure but also dreaming about 'what the self may become in the future'. *Ikigai* for many people refers to a positive self-image of growth and development in their lives and a sense of confirmation that their lives are meaningful. Takeo suggested that meaningful art–life integration facilitates the formation of *ikigai*. For him and others, *ikigai* is realised in the nexus of spirituality, music and ageing.

The nexus of spirituality, music and ageing offers insights into older people's lived experiences and suggests a variety of ways to promote their musical participation in community settings. Since music involves whole-life engagement and development, sustainable offering of opportunities for musical participation is a crucial matter in ageing societies. This awareness should be part of our provision of music programmes and activities for both older and younger people.

## NOTES

- 1 Takahashi (2001) identifies the general characteristics of *ikigai* in the Japanese context. It often contains no religious element or reference to God. Generally, the Japanese do not use the terms for 'spirituality' and 'religion' interchangeably. The Shinto and Japanese Buddhist traditions do not subscribe to the existence of an absolute God (Nakamura 1997). Indeed, the sources of Japanese spiritual feeling are manifold, ranging from encounters with nature (Matsunobu 2007; Nakamura 1997; Nishiwaki 2004), mind–body integration (Yuasa 1987), the experience of nothingness and here-and-now awareness (Nishitani 1982), to the master–student bonding in the arts (Keister 2004).
- 2 Barone and Eisner (2006: 101) reason that 'In the particular resides the general', suggesting that one of the functions of qualitative research is 'to locate what is general in what is particular'. A single case study should be justified not as a method of focusing on the particular but as a means to explore the general through the particular.

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