

Some good initial info on this page including finger charts: <http://www.japanshakuhachi.com/gettingstarted.html>

Also, from <http://www.kotodama.net/shakuhachi/tips.html>

On Breathing

In order to breathe out into the shakuhachi, you first have to take a breath in. How you breathe in affects how you breathe out. We often hear that abdominal breathing is good, but it is more complicated than that. [Translator's note: Abdominal breathing is when you breathe such that your abdomen/stomach area expands on the in-breath, whereas chest breathing is where your lungs/chest expand on the in-breath. Try placing a hand on your tummy to see which you are doing. If your hand bulges outward when you breathe in, you are breathing abdominally; if it draws in closer to your body on the in-breath, you are chest breathing. Abdominal breathing elicits a relaxation response too, by the way.] The difference between abdominal or chest breathing is in how your lungs expand and contract. In abdominal breathing, your lungs expand vertically as your diaphragm draws them downward. In chest breathing, your lungs expand in/out--they open up like French doors when you breathe in.

The crucial difference here is how much control you have during out-breaths. The fact is that you have much more control over out-breaths in abdominal breathing because you have more muscles in that area to control the action. This means that abdominal breathing gives more control for long, soft notes, or sudden loud ones.

So, the question becomes: How do you get better at abdominal breathing? I mentioned above that more muscles are involved in abdominal breathing. That means that making it slightly more difficult to take an in-breath encourages abdominal breathing. For example, try breathing in with your mouth wide open, then through your nose. You are likely to find that you naturally do chest breathing in the first instance and abdominal breathing in the second.

There are many reasons why you should not breathe in through your mouth playing shakuhachi: losing your optimal angle or drying out your mouth are just two of these. Now we can add making it more likely to chest breathe to the list. This is why you should breathe through your nose. However, sometimes breathing in through your nose can take too much time. So, one technique I use is to begin breathing in through my nose (abdominally), then continue and finish the breath through my mouth. It is an interesting phenomenon that even if you switch mid-breath from your nose to your mouth, it will stay an abdominal breath. Try it yourself, such as in your daily Ro practice. It won't come immediately, but eventually you will find yourself breathing both abdominally and quickly if you start the in-breathe from your nose and then continue it through your mouth.

On Breathing, Pt. II

In last month's tip, I talked about abdominal breathing and the benefits of starting breaths through the nose and continuing through the mouth. However, I received many emails opposing this advice, saying that "you should breathe in through the mouth" or that "breathing through the nose takes too much time". So, I decided to do some research on the Internet.

Practically everybody for every instrument advises abdominal breathing. However, there is much less consensus on exactly where to breathe in from. I found people advising such diverse things as "breathe through your mouth, except in special circumstances", "breathe through your mouth as far as you can, then even more through your nose", "breathe through your nose as though you were smelling a flower", etc., etc. There were so many disparate opinions, it seems the only thing that is agreed upon is that it's hard to breathe through your nose if it's completely stuffed up!

However, it seems that most people use their noses for in-breaths. Even those who say they breathe in through their mouths talk about difficulty when their nose is stuffed, which to me indicates that they are actually using their nose.

However, what is important is that you be able to breathe in quickly, quietly, and in large volumes. Any method that enables this is fine. Try different ways of abdominal breathing through your nose until you hit upon the way that's most natural and efficient for you.

A Breath "Nozzle"

I have long suggested that people blow ten minutes of Otsu-no-Ro per day to develop good sound and good tone. I have also suggested that increasing the volume of the inside of your mouth can help you gain a smoother sound. Everybody possesses different images of what they are doing when they blow on the shakuhachi, so I have used many such images to describe suggestions of what to do. Here is one that I think works particularly well. Obviously, your breath must pass through your lips to get to the flute. However, you might have difficulties if you think of your lips as the place where the breath leaves your body. Instead, try thinking of the breath leaving your body from a place much further back in your mouth. Try imagining the "nozzle" where your breath leaves your body as lying somewhere farther back in your mouth. If you think this way, the extra tension you may be holding in your lips will disappear, and your tone will become smoother. Thus, my advice is to blow from further back from a "nozzle" inside your mouth rather than from your lips. Try it and see how it works.

Breath Control

In my 2/99 column, I talked about playing very quiet notes, and how there was great musical value in playing very small, quiet notes. This time, I would like to talk about something related from the point of view of breath control. I often ask beginners to play quiet notes for me. One thing that is very interesting is that the length of the notes they play is the same for small notes as for louder notes (and, since they are beginners, there is not much difference in volume between their loud and soft notes). This is because they don't have very good control of how their breath leaves their lips, and, like air leaving a balloon, it all goes out at once.

What is required is breath control. The most basic form of breath control is not letting out any breath at all. For instance, when blowing long tones of Ro, people often start blowing out immediately after they have taken an in-breath. This is one chance for exercising breath control they are wasting. Here is my advice. After you take your in-breath, pause very briefly before letting it out. And, when you do begin to breath out, begin the out-breath very slowly and gradually. Practice making the beginning of the out-breath ever more slow and ever more gradual. This will help you make great strides in controlling your breathing. Large, short bursts of breath and sound are very important, but so are long, subtle pianissimo's that seem to vanish into nothing.

Blowing High Ro

I hear from lots of players that they don't have a lot of success with blowing Ro. The fact is, it's hard to get the sound you want. I'd say there is no one at all who could get a sound they'd be satisfied with 100 times out of 100 tries. Indeed, if there were someone who did, that would simply mean that they aren't trying to improve. At any level you play at, you should always be striving to improve. This means it's natural not to be satisfied with your sound. How, then, do you get this better sound? If you can't get a good Ro until you are fully warmed up, then that's possibly a sign that you have too much tension in and around your mouth. In other words, you are using so much muscle to blow at full power that the muscles around your mouth need to warm up before they are up to the task. This way of blowing tires you out quickly.

Try to relax as much as possible, so that you will be able to play for longer stretches. To do this, increase the inner volume of your mouth. Some images you can try for this are blowing with your mouth shaped like you are taking an inbreath, or like you are trying to suppress a yawn.

Something similar can be said for those who have trouble with the higher octave. One way to produce a high octave note is to increase the speed of the air coming out of your mouth. If you do this by tightening up the muscles around your mouth to decrease the size of your lip opening (particularly the vertical space between your lips), you will end up with a lot of white noise in your sound. To get a smoother sound, try using the image of "blowing lots of air farther, just like trying to blow out a candle beyond arm's reach. It's also effective to try blowing notes as softly as you can in the high octave. One important part of the practice of blowing Ro is learning how to relax your mouth.

Blow Through The Note

The way a note ends can determine the impact of the whole note. If the note should end with a nice long, clean taper, but at the end volume, pitch, or color drops off or changes abruptly, then it can ruin the whole thing. Ending notes smoothly without ruining their beauty is one of the most important aspects of playing shakuhachi, and unquestionably one of the hardest. I once heard a karate expert talk about how he broke wooden bats on his shin. The secret, he said, was to imagine

that the bat was farther away than it actually was. The reason is that it's a fundamental human instinct to slow down right before reaching the bat, and you can only break the bat by keeping maximum speed and kicking through the bat. Professionals in sports like tennis and golf say the exact same thing: hit through the ball.

Therefore, when playing, imagine or pretend that the end of the note is beyond where you actually need it to be. This will dramatically increase the stability and effect of the end of your notes. In other words: blow through the note.

More on Blowing Ro

It has now been one year since I began this Shakuhachi Tips column. I hope it is helpful to at least some people. For this month's tip, I would like to return to the basics and talk about blowing Ro again. Is there anybody out there who has blown Ro every day for 10 minutes for this past year? It sounds easy, but is very hard in practice to accomplish over time, which is why Watazumi said that "Whoever blows Ro 10 minutes a day can become a master." I think many people find it difficult to continue this practice because they see it as merely practicing Ro, which would indeed be boring. Instead, how fruitful it will be depends on how honestly you can observe yourself and how inventive and creative you can be in your investigation of your own playing.

Here are some things to question yourself about:

- * Where is your mouth too tense?
- * How is the breath stream hitting the blowing edge?
- * Why don't your notes start out the way they should?
- * Why don't your notes end the way they should?
- * Why can't you play with enough volume?
- * What happens when you shift the flute just slightly off kilter on purpose?
- * How long can you play one extended note (softly OK)?
- * Can you use up all your breath in 3 seconds? How about 2?
- * Looking at the mirror, do your arms or hands have excess tension in them?
- * How is your posture?
- * How does your individual flute's pitch change as it gets warmed up?
- * How does this differ in summer and winter?
- * How can you get the tone color of Katsuya Yokoyama? How about Goro Yamaguchi?
- * It's easy to get a good Ro when you're warmed up, but how do you get one first time you blow through the flute?

There's way too much to do in a mere 10 minutes! By investigating your own playing relentlessly, and by using creativity and ingenuity, you can become your own best teacher. I heard that a world-famous baseball team in Cuba is forbidden from practicing when the coach isn't there, because repeating bad habits will cause them to become ingrained and incurable. Shakuhachi is the same way, but it is impossible to have someone looking over our shoulder all the time. Instead, we must become our own most stern teacher. Are we always playing our best? How can we play better? It is this attitude that blowing Ro cultivates. Never think of it as just practicing a single note.

Mouth Shape

How much thought have you given to the space between your lips when you blow, the part where the air stream comes out? Do you experience any of the following?

1. Otsu turns to kan (higher octave) in the middle of playing.
2. You still have breath, but the note dies suddenly.
3. You have a difficult time with meris.
4. You have a difficult time making good yuri (vibrato).
5. Your tone color is "hard" with no expansiveness in your tone.

The cause for these problems can be with the shape of the space between your lips, which can cause the point of sound production to be small. It's important to make this point as large as possible. When the point of sound production is too small, even a slight variation in your blowing can cause you to miss it. This can cause 1-2 above. You change the angle of blowing when playing meri or yuri, which can cause you to slide off the sound producing point if it's too small. This can cause 3-4 above. Also, overtones (notes above a perfect fifth higher than the note you're playing, or overtones of the higher octaves) can become "hard" (5 above).

Some absolute beginners are told to pull their lips strongly to the side to get a note. This can indeed help focus the air to get a note, but it results in a very small point of sound production, causing the five problems above. Remember, it's important to make the "sweet spot" of sound production as large as possible to get a good, robust sound.

This kind of instruction is always included at Shakuhachi Kenshu-Kan master classes. Since everybody blows a different way, I can't describe concrete ways to get a larger sweet spot here without leading to misunderstanding. This needs to be done by a qualified teacher.

MISC STUFF FROM THE SHAK LIST:

Embouchure tips:

1) Jaw drops down and a bit forward till teeth are in line. This changes the inner shape and helps open mouth cavity and throat.

2) Open mouth and throat cavity equally all around: top of mouth, bottom pocket behind lower teeth and back of throat. Keep the pressure equal from your lips to your diaphragm. Don't focus on one part more than the others. Think WAAAAAAH. Or AAAAH to fully open inside like when the doctor says "say AAAAAH". Tongue is also pulled down and back. Mouth cavity expands like a Tiger claw opening. Keep trying to open inside even more than you think possible. Feels like blowing from deep inside throat, not from lips.

3) Don't stretch lips too wide to the sides. Mainly let the inside shape determine how lips will form. Think of embouchure as the expanded shape of the inside not shape of lips. Many students spend years playing just from the lips and don't get a full rich sound. Play from deep inside yourself.

4) Use a very open and relaxed embouchure for note beginnings, with softer playing; use more pressure and smaller opening for power. Can also reverse this process. If embouchure is big "Blow Slow" so don't run out of air.

5) Try to get full ringing sound esp. on RO without blowing hard, but by opening fully and adjusting to get that ring, willing it to ring.

6. Firm diaphragm esp. important for strong low RO.

Blowing tips:

1) Always sing internally what you are playing, whether scales, runs or melodies.

2) Hear the sound you want and will it into being.

*This is what I'm into. If you have been experimenting along the same, or different lines let me know. Like to hear what others are doing. I feel if you don't have a good sound, what's the point. If you can't make one note sound good, why play a hundred.

<http://www.h3.dion.ne.jp/~take23/eindex.htm>

(Pasted in from the above site)

It is said that all things are made up of five elements:

Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Space.

The shakuhachi too has five holes, and each hole has a sound, making up five sounds. The sounds that the shakuhachi makes are ephemeral and hardly remain in one's memory. In order to visualize the five sounds, compare them to the five elements respectively, that is,

Earth --- (RO)

Water --- (TSU)?
Fire --- (RE)
Wind --- (DHI)
Space --- (RI) or (HA)

Though each person may have different ideas and concepts about these five elements, try to relate them to the sounds. Then come the control of breath and the tranquility of mind. Ask yourself,

Does (RO) have the sublimity of earth?
Does (TSU) have the flow of water?
Does (RE) have the warmth of fire?
Does (CHI) have the freshness of wind?
Does (RI) have the infinity of space?

Seek the sound which is evoked from within ... improved, polished and developed inside yourself. The shakuhachi demands of you your candid self~thus, put your whole being into the shakuhachi. Exhale once and expire. There is no second chance in life. Each exhalation must be pure.

Breathing: When approaching shakuhachi, one good way is to visualize a balloon expanding within the diaphragm. You should rarely blow outward to release the air. Rather, consider the lips/embouchure as a valve restricting the flow as you let the balloon deflate... the air will naturally release, and that is a type of stream the blowing edge prefers. There are exceptions, of course, but that's a good rule.

For many shakuhachi notes, "meri's" especially, visualize the air coming from the back of the throat, not the lips. That smoothes things out.

Never grip the shakuhachi tightly, with the flat part of the thumb up. Let it rest on the side of your thumb, which helps in a more gentle, relaxed resting of the bamboo in the hands. It should also just be comfortably and lightly touching the chin. You'll get to know where each flute likes to sit, vertically... i.e., how far up or down, relative to the lips. The tone and response will dictate that.

The mouth cavity should be like you are saying "Haaaaa" (and "Ho" on some notes) when releasing the air. The tongue will mostly need to be depressed to create the most hollow cavity possible. For certain breathy effects, the back of the tongue is lifted slightly.

For many lower octave (otsu) notes, and most 2nd octave (kan) notes, you will find that targeting the blowing edge a fraction to the right (or left) of center produces better response, but this is not a hard rule. Each instrument will dictate the "sweet spot" for each note.