

The Fuke School of Buddhism, Shakuhachi, and Komuso

The Fuke school of Buddhism is a derivative of Zen Buddhism that incorporates playing the shakuhachi bamboo flute as a form of meditation. Practitioners of Fuke Zen include *komuso*, or “clerics of emptiness.” *Komuso* were traditionally monks and mendicant monks, many of whom undertook pilgrimages wearing reed-woven headgear and played the shakuhachi bamboo flute.

Komuso are commonly associated with the Edo period (1603–1867) and are identifiable by their headgear like an upturned basket which covered the face and head. This practice of obscuring the identity is said to symbolize the absence of ego. As pilgrims, they were permitted to move freely across the country during an era when shogunate checkpoints restricted travel. Masterless samurai and others not connected with the Fuke school may have assumed the appearance of *komuso* to benefit from the travel advantages and anonymity the costume afforded.

The Fuke school was founded in the thirteenth century by Shinchi Kakushin (1207–1298), who would later become the head monk of Kokokuji Temple. Kakushin spent several years in China studying under Chan masters such as Wumen Huikai (1183–1260), who wrote *The Gateless Gate*, a compilation of teachings central to Japanese Zen Buddhism. Kakushin brought back these and other teachings along with shakuhachi scores and founded the Fuke school on his return.

The popularity of the Fuke school has waned over time, and *komuso* remain mostly as images of Edo-era Japan. However, the shakuhachi retains an important role in Zen rituals and meditation, and the Fuke-style of shakuhachi is continued at Myoanji Temple in Kyoto. Kokokuji Temple celebrates Kakushin through festivals and events at the temple, which include shakuhachi rituals performed by *komuso*.