

Prologue: A New Flute

*A god can do it. But will you tell me how
a man can penetrate through the lyre's strings?*

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There is an old Sanskrit word, *lila*, which means play. Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lila*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.

Lila may be the simplest thing there is—spontaneous, childish, disarming. But as we grow and experience the complexities of life, it may also be the most difficult and hard-won achievement imaginable, and its coming to fruition is a kind of homecoming to our true selves.

I want to begin with a story. Transcribed from Japanese folk sources,¹ it covers the whole sweep of the journey we will take in these pages. It gives us a taste of the attainment of free play, of the kind of creative breakthrough from which art and originality emerge. It is a tale of a young musician's journey from mere brilliance toward a more genuine artistry, one that emerges unimpeded from the very source of life:

A new flute was invented in China. A Japanese master musician discovered the subtle beauties of its tone and brought it back home, where he gave concerts all around the country. One evening he played with a community of musicians and music lovers who lived in a certain town. At the end of the concert, his name was called. He took out the new flute and played one piece. When he was

finished, there was silence in the room for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

The next day, as this master was packing to leave, the musicians approached him and asked how long it would take a skilled player to learn the new flute. "Years," he said. They asked if he would take a pupil, and he agreed. After he left, they decided among themselves to send a young man, a brilliantly talented flautist, sensitive to beauty, diligent and trustworthy. They gave him money for his living expenses and for the master's tuition, and sent him on his way to the capital, where the master lived.

The student arrived and was accepted by his teacher, who assigned him a single, simple tune. At first he received systematic instruction, but he easily mastered all the technical problems. Now he arrived for his daily lesson, sat down, and played his tune—and all the master could say was, "Something lacking." The student exerted himself in every possible way; he practiced for endless hours; yet day after day, week after week, all the master said was, "Something lacking." He begged the master to change the tune, but the master said no. The daily playing, the daily "something lacking" continued for months on end. The student's hope of success and fear of failure became ever magnified, and he swung from agitation to despondency.

Finally the frustration became too much for him. One night he packed his bag and slinked out. He continued to live in the capital city for some time longer, until his money ran dry. He began drinking. Finally, impoverished, he drifted back to his own part of the country. Ashamed to show his face to his former colleagues, he found a hut far out in the countryside. He still possessed his flutes, still played, but found no new inspiration in music. Passing farmers heard him play and sent their children to him for beginner's lessons. He lived this way for years.

One morning there was a knock at his door. It was the oldest past-master from his town, along with the youngest student. They told him that tonight they were going to have a concert, and they had

all decided it would not take place without him. With some effort they overcame his feelings of fear and shame, and almost in a trance he picked up a flute and went with them. The concert began. As he waited behind the stage, no one intruded on his inner silence. Finally, at the end of the concert, his name was called. He stepped out onto the stage in his rags. He looked down at his hands, and realized that he had chosen the new flute.

Now he realized that he had nothing to gain and nothing to lose. He sat down and played the same tune he had played so many times for his teacher in the past. When he finished, there was silence for a long moment. Then the voice of the oldest man was heard, speaking softly from the back of the room: "Like a god!"

