

Inner Truth Taiko Dojo

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In old Japan, *taiko*, literally "big drum", was used as a battlefield instrument to provide imperial court music and as a part of rituals in shrines and temples. Only one or two men had the right to play *taiko* and it was possible to become a *taiko* player only if you were male and your ancestors had also played *taiko*.

The forming of *taiko* ensembles is a modern practice that began after the Second World War. In Japan, *taiko* was revived to help rebuild traditional cultures in local communities. In North America, *Taiko* master Sensei Tanaka's arrival in 1969 coincided with the emerging Asian American Movement. Japanese American activists embraced *taiko* as a means to express pride in their culture and as a symbol of coming to voice through their burgeoning political power as a community. The North American *taiko* groups that grew out of this movement were largely initiated by Japanese Americans as well as a few Chinese Americans.

Toronto's Wasabi Daiko, started by Shinobu Homma, Lucy Komori, Leslie Komori and Rick Shiomi, is where I was given my first teachings of *taiko*. Shinobu Homma didn't like to call himself our sensei or leader but he was the one who consistently taught us and took responsibility for the care and transportation of our equipment. The founding members of Wasabi Daiko all came from Katari Taiko in Vancouver and the base of our style of drumming came from Oedo Sukeroku, through Sensei Tanaka of San Francisco Taiko Dojo. In the late 1960s, Oedo Sukeroku developed the slanted drum stand and brought a style of dynamic movement to contemporary *taiko*.

I am not Japanese and would like to make clear my place within the *taiko* community. I started *taiko* over twenty years ago at a time when I was processing identity issues around race and gender. My Chinese Canadian family was working class but we lived in a white middle class suburb. As a result, working with Wasabi Daiko was my first opportunity to join with a group of Asian people. Since then, I've created a

body-centred approach to *taiko* drumming, drawing on Chinese internal martial arts, *chi gung* and *tai chi* in order to cultivate flowing energy. I also de-emphasize the goals of playing louder and faster. Instead, I draw on yoga so that the movement of sounding the drum opens and stretches the body while helping us develop greater awareness of our emotions and senses. My pedagogy combines working class values (using the practical knowledge of the body), women-centred strengths (grounded energy and open emotions), Taoist and Buddhist philosophies (mindfulness and working with flow rather than force), and the ecological principle of treading lightly on the earth. With Inner Truth Taiko Dojo, I have tried to create an accessible space which is mindful of the inequalities brought about through ideologies and practices of domination in our society. In particular, I seek to nurture cultural strengths and contributions of women, people of colour and working class people. Inner Truth Taiko Dojo has a holistic philosophy integrating: 1) spiritual practice, 2) a respect for traditions of *taiko* and Asian martial arts, 3) interconnections between generations and communities, and 4) building community, awareness and networks.

In our spiritual practice, we study *taiko* to develop mind, body, spirit and, most importantly, to develop greater awareness. In our physical practice, that is, the ritual of playing *taiko* regularly, we internalize values by learning through the movement of our bodies.

Creating a physical and spiritual space for Inner Truth *Taiko*

Physical and community structures as well as the mind space we create within them are important for our practice. Where we practice, how we practice and what we practice on is part of who we are and how we understand our role as *taiko* players.

Where do we practice?

Do Jo literally means place to learn the way. We think of the *dojo* as a sacred place that we create during our three-hour practices. We practice in a kung-fu club called, Northern Legs, Southern Fists,¹ based in Regent Park.² Sifu Ian Chow, founder of the club, has taught many children within the Regent Park area whose families could not afford to pay.

¹ “Northern Legs Southern Fists”, is a branch of Hong Luck, Toronto's first kung-fu club.

² Regent Park is a social housing complex in Toronto with a large working class and immigrant population.

Over the years he has created Toronto's most popular lion dance team. Ian has been a strong supporter of Inner Truth Taiko Dojo. The kung-fu club is a very basic space in a tough neighbourhood. We transform our practice space with our energy and intent and take this calm focus and positive energy out into the community. We commit to come regularly not only to support our own development but to support that of the *dojo*.

How do we practice?

In ancient Chinese culture, it is believed that to be educated is to be learned in the ways of nature, medicine and health, martial arts, music, and literature. At Inner Truth we try to hold onto all these aspects of learning as part of our *taiko* practice. The challenge is to balance teaching and sharing the wisdom developed from twenty years of *taiko* experience, with 'non-teaching', i.e., creating space for self discovery and sharing. As the *dojo* leader, I see my students as apprentices. I greatly respect the skills and knowledge they bring with them and value the community we create as we support each other's practice. Although I am the chief instructor, a spiritual practice is the work of a lifetime. I am working to transform myself alongside my students as we learn from each other. It is a process of giving and receiving amongst all members of the *dojo*. Each student joined the *dojo* at a different time. They may not always learn in the same order or at the same pace and there are many opportunities for students to teach each other. Rather than creating a uniform "group" identity, we retain our own identities and each take responsibility for our own learning. I see my students taking on greater responsibility within the *dojo* with each year as they develop and embody our philosophy.

My hope is that we retain a sense of gratitude for the honour of playing these sacred instruments made from trees and cows which were once alive and breathing; for the history embodied in these instruments; for the companionship we give one another as we travel upon our individual paths; and for the community we create and bring into the other communities to which we belong. My hope is that this gratitude is reflected in our playing.

What do we practice on?

We practice on drums made from barrels and cow hides. Three large drums were made by members of Wasabi Daiko over twenty years ago and I have maintained them.

Other groups replace old barrel drums because the barrels tend to fall apart when the skin is removed. With the support of drum maker Rick Monaco, we have re-built barrels and re-skinned them and also devised a method similar to the rope tying of the African djembe to extend their lives. In this way we try to tread lightly on the earth. Not needing costly "authentic Japanese" drums allows us to focus on the kind of grassroots work we want to do.

Who are we and how do we understand our role?

At present, Inner Truth Taiko Dojo is made up of women from different cultural backgrounds between the ages of twenty and sixty. All people are welcome whether or not they have experience with drumming or music. (We are all women at present but I would welcome men to join the *dojo*).

In our practice we centre and ground ourselves first. The work of the dojo is conceived of as an action which affirms everyone's freedom, rights, and ability to contribute to the cultural community by making music. Like any freedom, however, being a member of the *dojo* also entails responsibility. I remember Alanis Obomsawin³ speaking at "Full Screen," a conference in the 1990's that examined the lack of representation of aboriginal peoples and people of colour in film. Alanis spoke of the great responsibility of any artist with an audience, to speak for those in our communities who do not have such access and thus may not have the power to influence gatherings of people. As educators, artists and cultural workers we must be cognizant of our responsibilities as communicators in society. My personal pledge might sound like this:

I see taiko as a path to grow and awaken mentally, physically and spiritually. By committing to my practice, I make a conscious decision to devote time, energy, concentration and heart, to practice taiko. My taiko work is in harmony with my own life values and by honouring my own path to self liberation I hope that I can contribute to peace in the world. I commit to building and sustaining the dojo so that we can act as a community, in concert with one another's energies.

The Practice

When we enter our practice space we usually have a few minutes of greeting and touching base. Then we sit on the floor and take a few mindful breaths to allow us to

³ Alanis Obomsawin is a First Nations filmmaker and musician living in Canada.

fully arrive for practice. This is followed by about fifty minutes of stretching. With our yoga-based stretch, we emphasize the *in* breath for lengthening the spine and the *out* breath for softening the body. Rather than concerning ourselves with how far we can stretch, we simply observe. We stretch to become in touch with where our bodies may be holding tension and where our bodies are more and less flexible. We breathe into places of tension and with this breath become aware that such places are not static. With our breath and our focus, we can slowly release tension and gently open up what is tight. In *Ujjayi*⁴ breathing, we can hear each other exhale. This supports our own breathing. As we come into our bodies wholly, we become more aware of our bodies' needs. A couple of times after yoga, members have recognized their own exhaustion. They are encouraged to go and sleep on the couch or go home and get the rest they need. We learn to listen to our bodies so that they can be our allies. If we do not have compassion for ourselves and drive ourselves with unmindful aggression, how can we expect to do social justice work which is not also creating more aggression in the world? After our stretch, when we have opened our bodies and released tension, we are ready to meditate. We sit and meditate for about 10 minutes.

Please join us to sit cross-legged on the floor. You can adapt your position for your body; no pain please. When you hear the bell ring three times, you will open your eyes. First let us plant our sitting bones on the floor. Allow your hands to rest on your knees. Take a deep breath in, lengthen the spine, and put space between the vertebrae. Close your eyes, allow your mind and body to arrive at the workshop. Make your breath calm and steady. Follow the breath in, as your belly expands, and out as your belly empties. (The bell sounds three times.) Bring your hands together at your heart and take a moment to honour the light within yourself and within others. Namaste.⁵

This process of getting in touch with our bodies and calming our mind, living in the present moment, enhances our ability to be open and receptive to one another.

⁴ In yoga, Ujjayi, is a slow rhythmical breath which expands the ribcage and lungs, soothes the nerves and tones the system.

⁵ *Namaste* is a Sanskrit word that is commonly used, together with the gesture of bowing with palms together, to end Yoga and meditation sessions. In this context it means: "I honor the Spirit in you which is also in me."

Sounding the Drum

Stance is the most important aspect to sounding the drum. At workshops we introduce the horse stance and use *chi gung* to allow participants to become aware of their own *chi* energy.

We'd like to invite you to sound the drum. Different drums have different qualities. The African drum is thin skinned and makes a sharp clear sound. What is the quality of the taiko drum? The rolling thunder website says: "There are three elements of taiko sound. **Reverberation**, the most important, penetrates to our spiritual core. **Rumble**, the heart beat sound of the taiko appeals to our humanity and, **sustain**, the final element, leaves us enraptured by lingering tones. To sound the drum with these three qualities, we need to ground ourselves in our bodies and focus our energy. We will stand up now and come into a horse stance. Feet just wider than shoulder width; bend the knees; drop the tail bone; arms about shoulder height; palms open in front; breathe deeply into your belly. As you breathe out, imagine you are growing roots into the earth. As you breathe in, imagine you are drawing energy up from the earth up through your legs and body. Now I want you to find a partner. Face your partner so your hands are two to four inches away from each other. Calmly breathe and allow yourself to feel the energy between you and your partner's hands. This *chi gung* exercise is a way to develop awareness of energy within and around us. We tap into this energy when we play taiko.

Woman-centred Taiko

Taiko originally were played only by men. Many traditional cultures believe it is the men's role to play the drums. By women-centred taiko I mean Inner Truth Taiko Dojo is a space which not only allows women to drum, but works with and values qualities often considered weakness or limitations in women: openness of emotions, grounded energy, internal strength, softness or fluidity, and brings them to the centre of our practice. This is not to assume these qualities are always or only found in women. I find in general these qualities are not valued in our society and not found in most people. There are hundreds of *taiko* groups North America and, although most groups tend to have a larger membership of women than men, only a few are led by a woman. Even groups which are led by women often focus on dominating values of power, aggression, speed and elitism.

At Inner Truth Taiko Dojo, I try to foster an approach to *taiko* that is about opening the body and mind as we play. In Chinese philosophy, *yang* energy is connected to the sky, and *yin* energy connects to the earth. There is a constant flow between both, but I try to develop greater awareness of *yin* energies as they seem to be more devalued in

our society. Inner Truth Taiko Dojo works on developing "chi" so we can draw on internal energy. With an emphasis on stance and *chi*, we connect to earth-grounded energy, and nurture our own internal energy to sound the drum. When we sound the drum, we can open the heart and the chest by extending both arms. When the arms are crossed in front, I train my students to think of this as an opening across the back, to breathe into and open the back of the heart. When we break down the movements of the body in a song, I emphasize the role of the breath to open the body at certain points and also the *kiai*⁶ which can bring focus.

Taiko for me is erotic. When I play the *taiko* drum, my body expands to express itself; all my senses heighten, deeply and viscerally. As I focus my attention, my energy, my body weight, moving it through the drum, I am so *in my body* I feel my muscles, stretched, tensile and singing. (This is a lot for a 95 pound weakling with little to no muscle mass.) As Audre Lorde (1984) says in *Uses of the erotic: The erotic as power*, "[f]or having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honour and self respect we can require no less of ourselves" (p. 54). For me, and I suspect for other *taiko* drummers, *taiko* drumming and the group dynamics of *taiko* brings me to the edge of my sense of self, looking down the precipice into the chaos of my deepest emotions and awakening a passion that makes me feel truly alive.

Over the years I have found that many students are attracted to the "power" of the *taiko*. In some way, they are looking for power in their own lives. Many *taiko* groups focus on playing hard and fast on the drums. *Taiko* players get an adrenaline high from playing this way but, in the process of rushing, we lose our awareness of the present moment. In *Women's Bodies, Women's Wisdom*, Christiane Northrup (1994) says that an adrenaline high actually creates hormones that repress our emotions. A women-centred approach to *taiko* works to free the emotions. By developing a deep resonating sound that comes from openness and fluidity, by emphasizing a grounded stance and keeping the body soft and relaxed, we can connect with the power of the drum without losing awareness. I have watched some technically brilliant *taiko* groups perform and noticed how physically tense I felt afterwards. When I asked people who also attended the performances how they felt, they also became aware of the tension that was created in their bodies. As impressive as these performances might be, I feel there is an aggression

⁶ *Kiai* is a loud cry of shout that comes from the abdomen.

that is exerted on the drums and on the drummers' bodies that we also feel in the audience. I have chosen to develop a repertoire and approach at Inner Truth Taiko Dojo that aspires to sharing a feeling of openness and joy.

Learning a Taiko Song

I teach songs through singing oral notation, or *kuchi shoga*. Singing *don don don kara kara* communicates the sound and emphasis of the beat. Students do not need to be able to read music to learn *taiko* songs. We may play a song on our laps or we may also stand and do foot stamping of the rhythms. This turns into a kind of dance and raises everyone's energy and enthusiasm. Learning song compositions through singing supports collective learning and also reminds us that our first instrument is the voice. By collectively drumming we give voice to a community.

Repertoire and Creating an Audience

Most of our repertoire comes from Wasabi Daiko; however, the arrangements have been adapted to embody our philosophy. A song might be deconstructed so that it only takes form after all the members contribute a phrase. A poem about the contributions of Asian workers in Canada might be added to the beginning of a song, or a feminist poem might be sung.

New repertoire is created through our collaborations with different communities and individuals. We are also planning to bring in music and life histories of present members to create new pieces. Recently members of Inner Truth Taiko Dojo have worked with Chilean composer Nano Valverde, Riverdale Youth Singers, Turn on the Tap, African drummer Rick Monaco, and Jazz Drummer, Blake Howard to create new repertoire.

Building Community: A History of Activism

One of the founding members of Wasabi Daiko, Rick Shiomi, a playwright and community activist, was very involved in the Japanese Redress movement. He was one of a small group of Asian Canadian activists that took a bus down to San Francisco regularly in order to study *taiko* and bring it back to the community in Vancouver. These inspired activists, with little or no musical experience, transformed a traditional cultural

practice, based on having a sensei pass down the art, into a collective experience of sharing skills and learning together in community. This was the beginning of Katari Taiko in Vancouver. When four members of Katari Taiko moved to Toronto in the mid-eighties, they formed Wasabi Daiko. Rick Shiomi started me on the path of using my visual art and *taiko* practice for community building and political activism. When other members of Wasabi said no, Rick, another Chinese member and I boarded a prop plane and flew to Ottawa to drum for Japanese Redress. Since that time these particular *taiko* drums have been a political voice at community events including Revenue Rez, when First Nations activists took over the Revenue Canada building,⁷ Food for Chiapas, and multiple performances for gay pride day, International Women's Day, Mayworks Festival (Festival of Working People and the Arts) and various street festivals. Our most recent performance was in a women's shelter.

Our favourite performances tend to be free and outdoors—in parks, in the market, at rallies and also for specific groups working for social justice that find inspiration in our work. We create our audiences and build communities by the venues in which we choose to perform.

Through our school presentations, we present an experience of *taiko* grounded in a context of grassroots social justice and spirituality in the everyday lives of common people. We look at the honour shown to both the drum and the drummer in traditional farming cultures of old Japan and how the *taiko* gives expression to the bond between a group of people and their ancestors.⁸ We use mythical storytelling, such as the story of how *Uzume*, the Goddess of Joy, began the tradition of *taiko* drumming. Oral histories from the Asian American movement place *taiko* in a contemporary context of community building and social justice.

When possible, we perform at sites with historical resonance. These might be political spaces or spaces where specific communities have resisted but whose history is slowly being erased. Through our presence at these sites we hope to bring these histories back to light.

⁷ This was in 1993.

⁸ Village songs, for example, were based on the daily routines of farming life.

Taking part in academic forums, such as the *musica ficta* conference⁹ or this journal, also offers us a way to connect with institutions which tend to operate as closed systems. By doing so, we try to interrupt and possibly shift and alter ways of knowing—while unsettling presumptions about music making.

How do we *radicalize* ways in which social justice is conceived in music education?

The definition of radical is "at the root". When we are looking at social structures we want to develop social justice at the simplest, deepest level—at the root of the practice. The stretch and meditation is in many ways the root of our practice. It opens not only our minds and bodies, but supports us to move through the world with openness. Giroux (2006) states in *Theories of Reproduction and Resistance in the New Sociology of Education*, that schools are "reproductive in the cultural sense, functioning in part to distribute and legitimate forms of knowledge, values, language, and modes of being that constitute the dominant culture and its interests" (4). I believe schools, or a *dojo* in this case, can also be reproductive in the cultural sense and distribute and legitimate forms of knowledge and values that resist the dominant culture and its interests.

Thank you for this opportunity to share our work. I would like to thank Lise Vaugeois for supporting my work, and her patience and skill in editing this piece.

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⁹ *musica ficta*/Lived Realities: A Conference on Engagements and Exclusions in Music, Education, and the Arts, was held at the University of Toronto January 24-27, 2008.