

# ***The Foundations of Taiko Practice***

I've been thinking about how to describe taiko practice, especially for people who haven't tried it before. This is really my understanding of taiko so please don't see it as definitive. However, I hope it gives you some idea of what's involved when you learn taiko at our classes. Playing and performing taiko combines three types of practice; athletic practice like fitness training, music practice such as scales and improvisation, and 'energetic practice' such as tai chi, meditation or martial arts. Below, I describe each one in turn and how they connect to taiko.

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## ***Taiko as athletic practice***

- *Build fitness and stamina*
- *Learn a basic set of physical actions to develop efficient movement of your whole body*

I have a friend, Clare, whom I met at the local swimming pool. Clare is a triathlon competitor. She has competed for many years and she is very serious about it. Most days, Clare swims about one hour of crawl. Up and down, up and down she goes gliding past other swimmers with a polite graciousness. I am a reasonably competent swimmer, but Clare swims four lengths while I dawdle along completing a leisurely two. I enjoy swimming but I do not train in swimming. It is a leisure activity for me not a practice.

Sometimes she stops to catch her breath. She'll have a friendly chat but only towards the end of her swim, and only for a minute or so. Then she sets off again, up and down, up and down. Swimming, like running, is basically repeating the same action over and over again. You have to enjoy doing that same old repetitive movement. Clare has to train every day just to keep up that level of fitness. Part of taiko practice is much like Clare's routine. Up and down, up and down, the same old repetitive action again and again in order to maintain levels of fitness. The fitness itself is a practice.

Taiko drummers are known for their high levels of fitness. One legendary stunt happened when a group called Kodo ran the London marathon, and then played a full-length gig at the finishing line. Another group, Yamato, get up before breakfast (a leisurely 5am or so), run 10 kilometres, then lift weights all morning (the drums themselves) and start taiko practice after lunch till 9pm. You'll be glad to know we don't run before class but aerobic stamina and physical strength comes with the territory.

Each time Clare swims she is conscious of her body movement, the pull of her arms through the water, the kick of her legs, the grace and fluidity of the whole action, the precision of her upside turn at the end of each length. Unlike a performing artist, she is probably not consciously thinking of the visual aesthetic of her movement. She is not trying to be graceful. However, in order to get the most efficient action she needs to use her body in a very precise way. That is why all athletes, even shot putters, have a certain grace to their sport.

Since it is a performance art, a highly visual style of drumming, taiko places particular emphasis on the grace and definition of your body movement. It's for two reasons: firstly the visual effect and secondly, like all athletic practice, if you don't use your body in the most efficient way you'll get tired more easily, more likely to get injured, and you won't be able to get the best speed and precision.

In both respects, taiko practice is physically demanding. It has a distinct element of athletic training. The basic practice can be routine, the same old rhythm or movement is repeated in order to build up levels of fitness and also efficiency of posture and movement. The training is more athletic than many forms of dance, but it has the same aesthetic emphasis on how you stand and move, and precise detail of each movement down to the end of your fingers.

## ***Taiko as music practice***

- *Learn and repeat a basic set of actions to develop precision of dexterity*
- *Listening and memory skills*
- *Picking up rhythmic patterns*

You also need stamina in music practice. Just think of an opera singer or an oboe player. However, there's less emphasis on training your whole body and more emphasis on dexterity, whether in your vocal cords or your fingers. Both athletic practice and music practice involve physical skills, but dexterity implies mastering fine and small movements, which is different to overall body strength and fitness.

Most musicians practise a set of exercises called scales. In percussion they are sometimes called rudiments. Similar to Clare, you have to do the same old thing every day. Each day you are aware of the minutiae of your abilities. A pianist's left finger might need more strength, the violinist has to get the precise holding of their bow, a flautist or singer uses subtle changes of breath. Scales are partly for this reason: in and of themselves they are not difficult to remember, but their simplicity means you can concentrate on the precision of your body movement, the tone, timing, and resonance of your playing and breathing, and your instrument. It is not the scale as such you are practising but you use scales to become aware of detail.

Scales are like swimming, a basic series of repetitive exercises that you practise on a daily basis. You don't have to remember a long complex composition, because the exercises are there to help you concentrate on the technical skill of your playing. In taiko, for instance, I use these exercises to work on evenness between my left and right strokes, the relationship between my wrists and my drum sticks, or to increase speed while maintaining the same quality of strokes and sound. Even if I do the same exercises each day, I can hear and feel subtle improvements or errors.

Music has another aspect of practice which you don't find in swimming, but you do find in some sports. It's the creative side of practice. When you practise football, you might repeat a pass from mid-field again and again. However, in a match, you don't always know in advance who is where, how far you are down the pitch, or the playing conditions. You have to use your 'scales', your basic practice, in changing conditions. Music improvisation is similar. You need to have enough 'unconscious skill' (where you no longer have to think about the basic actions), so that you can respond to new or unexpected situations. For instance the taiko group, Yamato, have a practice where one person improvises a rhythm and the others have to repeat it immediately. However you need a basic vocabulary in order to improvise. You need to know a range of words in order to have a conversation. Learning the vocabulary comes partly from the scales, or the basic range of football moves, and also improvising itself will increase your vocabulary. You need both grammar and vocabulary.

There is another aspect of practice which you don't get in either football or swimming, but you do get in music, dance, and theatre; you have to remember long sequences of steps, words, or musical notes and repeat them precisely each time you do them. It's another type of brain training. The whole sequence has to be learnt consciously. You have to learn that A leads to B and C. However, before performing, that sequence has to become lodged in your lower brain so that you don't have to remember it when you perform. Your focus is then free to respond to subtle nuances of the moment like the audience's reactions or the groove of the music.

Taiko sequences are not as complicated as a Beethoven symphony. However, you still need to remember a sequence of rhythms and movements, a combination of music and choreography. You also have to train the musician's ear to hear not only your own playing but everyone else's as well. Listening skills are part of the ensemble practice of taiko. Traditionally, taiko does not usually involve reading music as the rhythms are learnt orally. However, contemporary compositions are often written as a music score. Sight reading practice is another way of building up vocabulary and developing your basic skills into more complex patterns.

## ***Taiko as energetic practice***

- *Internal and external balance of awareness*
- *Sense of flow or energy moving through you*
- *Silence and space within the activity or action*

Taiko has elements of athletic practice, music practice, and also 'energetic practice'. It's difficult to find the right word, but taiko has similarities to tai chi, yoga, martial arts and meditation. Energetic practice works on the basis that our bodies are not just made up of brains, muscles, and nerves, but these physical aspects are imbued with a force of energy which the Japanese called *ki*. *Ki* creates a link between your body and the space around you. This subtle quality is central to many Asian performing arts and practices.

In order to develop 'energetic practice', there is more emphasis on where you focus your inner attention. As your inner attention grows your body begins to develop an internal flow and lightness, and yet paradoxically you feel more substance or weight. You experience the sensation of being moved rather than doing the movement.

Energetic practice takes us back to the question of fitness. Body mind practices often work on the principle of 'less is more'. From your own life you can probably think of circumstances when you tried and tried to make something happen but you just ended up exhausted. However, when you gave up trying everything fell into place. Moving with 'ki' feels like a more passive or light approach to movement yet also increased strength and power. In physical terms you utilise a different pathway of muscle / brain connection. In my experience of bodywork you are learning to engage the more passive or under-used muscles. This has the effect of balancing out your body's energy so you move with greater ease and flow. You are less likely to get tired. With taiko that is crucial as the quality of being moved will aid your stamina levels.

Energetic practice also forms the basis for more subtle qualities that make taiko different from many other forms of drumming and sport. For instance the quality of 'ma', a Japanese concept meaning space or 'the space between', sounds like just being aware of the gaps or pauses in the music. In reality it is more subtle. It's more about a presence or atmosphere which is connected to the performers but also imbues the surrounding space. I always think that the best taiko players are not the ones who hit the drum the loudest or fastest, but rather the ones who can maintain the silence within and between the sounds. Their presence, and the intimate relationship with their instrument, imbues the silence. And that is what makes taiko so loud. Without this quality, taiko just sounds noisy.

Furthermore, it gives you a greater sense of presence as a performer. You do not have to play to the audience in order to command their attention, but rather your force of vitality just engages them. That is something else I notice with experienced taiko players. You don't exactly see a person hitting a drum. Rather you see taiko being played. It's not that the drummer and drum become one in a mystical sense, but there is such an intimate relationship that you cannot separate the performer from the instrument. I think this is true of any good practitioner whether you're a javelin thrower or a cellist, maybe even a chess player! One of the most beautiful demonstrations I saw of this quality was by a leading treble recorder player. Top musicians always have this quality, it is what makes them stand out beyond any technical prowess.

Energetic practice gives you extra subtle body strength, and also a quality of presence as a performer. It needs both concentration of your mind and precise awareness of your body. Furthermore it has that sense of continuous practice, whether playing taiko or not, what Buddhists call mindfulness. I was curious to watch Yamato's 'get out' when, after the performance they moved all the drums off stage and into their flight cases. They approached the 'get out' with exactly the same focus, enthusiasm, and team work as the previous two hours performance. Very Japanese!

## **Summary**

Taiko involves all three aspects of practice:

- Athletic practice is practising the same routines or actions regularly, both to build up and maintain fitness and stamina. It also focuses on efficiency and fine detail of your body movement. As well as the main action (e.g. running, cycling) you will probably do complementary exercises (e.g. weight lifting).
- Music practice develops technical skill and dexterity, as well as listening skills and memory skills for sequences or compositions. Creative or spontaneous skills are also important in any form of interactive practice, whether performance or sport or martial arts, anything that has a sense of dance or play about it. Fencing is a wonderful example of a creative sport which involves interaction and reading the other player's intentions.
- Energetic practice focuses your attention internally as much as externally, with an awareness of subtle qualities of posture, presence, and awareness. Internal images or unusual ways of visualising your body are sometimes used. Energetic practice supports your body fitness and stamina, finding new levels of internal energy and also the best use of your muscles and alignment. Energetic practice also helps to develop those more elusive qualities of taiko, the ones you can feel and sense but you cannot quite put your finger on them. The silence within the sound, the radiating presence of the performer, and the harmony within a group of players.

## **Regular Practice**

It takes a while to really get into taiko. For a first session you'll probably enjoy yourself. It's a lot of fun hitting such huge drums as hard as you can. Then there's a period where you find it's quite a bit harder to master than you expected and you'll feel a bit frustrated with yourself. If you stick at it, after about a year or 18 months, it starts to become so much a part of your body and your life, plus the friends you've made, that it becomes as routine as brushing your teeth. In a way, regular practice of any kind has to be habit, it has to be routine. If you only brushed your teeth when you felt like doing it, it wouldn't happen very often!

I find that long-term taiko players, whatever their actual level of talent, are all very grounded sensible people. Although you have to be a bit crazy and driven to play taiko, it will equally develop a deep layer of sanity and emotional stability. I can't really describe it any other way.

When you commit to a practice, it doesn't really matter what the practice is – it is the attitude you take towards it that matters; the ability for that practice to enter your consciousness so deeply that it is there 24/7 even if you are not doing it 24/7.

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