My Very First Taiko Lesson

As I sat there on the wooden floors at the John Wooden Center that Friday night during my sophomore year, I pondered to myself "When can I hit the drum already?!"A young man with a soft charming voice kept lecturing me on the history of Taiko as I asked myself "This is great, but can you hurry up please?"

I've been obsessed with Taiko ever since my freshman year when I saw Kyodo played outside the John Wooden Center. Towards the end of my sophomore year, I finally had the time and courage to take the Taiko class offered by Kyodo members at the John Wooden Center. I've been waiting for two years to get my hands on some drum sticks and hit the drums. That's what drums were for anyway right? They are meant to be hit on, not lectured about.

He then proceeded to take us outside John Wooden Center and told us to take a pair of bachi with the same numbers (I just found out that Taiko players call the drum sticks "bachi"). Now these weren't actually bachi per say because they were wooden dowls. The instructor went to Home Depot and bought them for the class. "If you can give me $5 for them, I would appreciate it," he told us as he was laying down the wrinkly pale-orange bag associated with Home Depot. He had a very modest voice when he told people to help him out and reimburse him for the time and money he had invested. Apparently, the class fees did not cover the bachi fees and I thought he was a very nice fellow for doing that for us students.

Unfortunately, I was too slow to get a pair of dowels from that Home Depot bag - there were no more wooden dowls left when I approached the bag. It seemed the instructor only bought enough for the people on his roster - people must have just shown up in hopes of trying to get into the class.

UCLA students often do that to any class - if the class is full, you just show up anyway and talk with the professor to give you a number to bypass the online waitlist. Apparently UCLA students used the same sly method towards recreational classes as well.

The instructor then led us out of the John Wooden Center onto the sunny concrete steps right outside the building. He then showed us how to turn those dowls into bachi by grinding the edges of the dowl on the concrete floor in order to taper it. Keep in mind that this was almost an hour into the class and I still haven't hit the drum yet. Bachi-less and clueless to what is going on in this class, I followed the rest of the class outside and helped people grind and sand down their dowls.

After we grinded our drum sticks, the instructor finally made us get up and stretch to get ready to hit Kyodo's mahogony-colored drums. He then lectured us on his belief in hitting.

At first, it was weird because I didn't understand why one would need to be lectured on how to hit a a drum. I pondered to myself, "Can't I just take the stick and simply hit it as hard as possible to make the loudest sound?" Intuitively, it makes sense because the harder I hit something, the louder the drum should sound. At this point, I was getting a little frustrated because I had not touched the drum at all. "Why is this person even allowed to teach if he's not event teaching me?" As you can tell, I was a really impatient person back then in my undergraduate career.

Apparently, the instructor believed the opposite of what I had concluded on the theory of hitting. The instructor told me that there is an efficient way to hit and by calmly relaxing one's whole body, one can use the power of gravity and the weight of the bachi to produce a good quality sound from the taiko drum. "Okay Mr. Taiko man, why can't I just use the force of my entire body then? And what do you really mean by a good quality sound? It's a drum and there's no other sound than the one I keep hearing from you and other people that hit it!", I thought to myself.

I did I get it that he had to teach me some basic theory in order to build me up, but I really just need to start hitting the drum for me to understand what he's trying to say about acceleration, relaxation, and this ”shoulder-elbow-wrist snap movement.”

So finally after his hitting demonstration and lecture, which seemed like a physics class, the students formed 5 lines taking turns hitting the drum. The instructor drilled and drilled us on the basic strike and went around fixing everyone's form and grip. When it was my turn, I asked the person that just got off for her pair and went into position, ready to hit the drum at the instructor's command. At that moment, I felt jubilation and anxiety as I was getting ready to finally hit the taiko.

I was instantly hooked and elated that I finally had the opportunity to create such power with a simple stroke of my arms. It was a feeling I've never felt before when I created my first “Don!” Now I know what it felt like to be powerful and to command such a powerful and primal instrument. Afterwards, we played faster beats and learned how to cut the timing in half. Half of the class along with me had trouble playing more beats in the same tempo without speeding up, including me. Back then, I couldn't figure out why the instructor kept telling us to don't speed up, but play more beats in the same timeframe. I totally did not get what he was saying, but I didn't care. I got to hit the drum and I like it.

Now, I kept trying to loosen my shoulders, but I couldn't figure out how. My muscles were getting tired and strained after 15 minutes of hitting the drum. I didn't get it - I was so tensed up and tired. My shoulders were on fire and I couldn't figure out why. The instructor told me I needed to relax my shoulders, but I didn't know how. "Just relax," he told me.

The instructor then called up some people to demonstrate the song "Renshu." He told us that this will be the song everyone will learn over the next 8 weeks of class. I was so enamored by the booming sound of the bass that all my doubts about this class disappeared in an instance when they started playing Renshu. The feeling was so powerful, intimidating, yet it felt like home to me. I felt drawn to the power of this drum like an infant is drawn to her first pacifier. I was immensely impressed at the sound of the taiko that the demonstrators created!

The people who played Renshu were amazing. Byron, Courtney, Joanne, and Rebecca, I still remember their names and their faces seven years later today. They made quite an impression on me and I couldn't believe how loud those three girls were! They played louder than me with one-third of the power that I played with. These petite Asian girls definitely showed me that there was more to being loud than just hitting hard – there was indeed something to what the instructor said about using gravity and relaxing your body in order to whip your arms.

We then ended class, bowed out and said "Otsukare sama deshita." As I was walking back to my apartment on Landfair that night, I knew that I had to come back for more Taiko.

Looking back, I never realized how important that night was for me. I took for granted all the wonderful people that showed up that night to help support the Taiko instructor and the whole Taiko scene at UCLA. I never realized how much time people had invested in order to teach a couple of college students the basic foundations of Taiko. Most importantly, I never realized how important it was that my instructor carefully explained to me the origins of Taiko and slowly, albeit painfully, went through the proper hitting techniques. But his greatest lesson that I realized was not hitting technique nor the history lesson. It was this one word he kept saying to me: relax.

To this date, I believe he actually told me the greatest secret to great Taiko playing right there in my first Taiko lesson: it was to relax. I did not realize it then, but those two words would turn out to be the most crucial words I could ever hear in when playing Taiko. I only realized a couple of years later when I was taking Tosha-sensei's workshop that the key to great Taiko playing was learning how to relax. I do not strictly mean learning how to relax my shoulders, my breath, and my strikes: I also mean I must learn how to relax my own heart and soul.

You, the reader is probably wondering "What does this hippy s\*\*\* mean? Relax your heart to get better in Taiko? " Yes. To me a relaxed heart means to relax my soul. I realized that the state of my heart will be reflected in the state of my Taiko. If I'm stressed, angry, frustrated, then my Taiko will be rigid and angry. If I'm calm and relaxed, then my Taiko will be calm and relaxed, yet powerful.

I truly believe how one carries herself in life is how one will play Taiko.

For me, I needed to relax my heart in order to relax my tight body and playing ability. I truly believe my first Taiko lesson was my greatest Taiko lesson. I will never forget my first instructor’s relaxed playing, heart, and soul. Thank you, Yuta Kato for being my first Taiko teacher.

Otsukare.