

Inside Kion & Tawoo (a groovy approach to Taiko)

Chapter One: The body and the beat

Often, when we attend Taiko performances and watch the artists play, it seems that playing Taiko is not just powerful, but also stressful - kinda exhausting. My first impression watching Taiko was: WOW, you gotta be well trained and muscular to play like this.

You can imagine that I was completely amazed, when I first met Kaoly Asano: a thin woman, about 160cm-something (65 inches) tall (1/3 of which was hair) and her beat was stronger and louder than anything I heard before.

So I asked myself: How on earth can such a small body produce such a big and energetic beat?!?

As a well-trained acupuncturist, Kaoly Asano has a broad knowledge of anatomy, body-physis, myology (science of muscles) and body-energetics.

Therefore, when she started to play Taiko she transferred all that knowledge in the way she played and systematically she developed and literally *invented* a special kind of drumming-style – some refer to it sometimes as “groovy style” or sometimes “Tribal Taiko”.

The energy and the way of drumming is fundamentally derived from our body and its flowing energies and the movements itself. To beat a drum is not so much a matter of strength and muscles, but of the energy, which is flowing through your body and the movement resulting from that energy and the way you use all this to beat a Taiko.

The vivid core and energetic centre is the so-called *TANDEN*, lying approx. in the middle of the chest. With each heartbeat and each breath, energy is flowing through our body, ready to move our legs, arms and hands.

Therefore, this natural intrinsic energy leads to similar natural movements of the *whole* body.

So as we have this amazing, huge and powerful body-reservoir of energy inside of us, why don't we use it to beat a drum, to play Taiko? – We do!

When we hold our bachi, ready to play our first DON where would you assume, the movement, the strike-off is starting?

Most of the answers I heard went like: the hand, the arm, the shoulder. But this is not quite true, when you take a closer look:

Whereas the TANDEN is producing the energy and is sending it down into the body, the actual movement is starting at your heel! Like a snowball, that is steadily growing, while rolling through the snow, the energy is increasing on its way:

from your heel through your leg, moving your pelvis, your chest and your arm, which is naturally taking off, reaching out over your head to expand your whole body, until your bachi is high above your head, impounding, storing all that entire body-energy for a second before unloading it to play a solid, huge energetic beat: DON!

I assume, that all this is pretty obvious and good to observe, when you watch Kaoly Asano play her Taiko. Her style of drumming contains not only the energy of the body and its natural movements, but in my eyes also a in some way holistic energy, which I would call soul-energy. All this echoing and sounding in the beat.

Chapter Two: How Taikos sing: when you and your inside are being heard

Looking at the body, its energy and natural movements, that are fundamentals for playing a Taiko-drum, still doesn't tell the whole story of how a Taiko really sings.

You may listen to your body and be aware of how to transform your inner energy and natural movements into a powerful beat of the drum – but does it sing?

Well, maybe. But thinking of an opera singer, let's say of Maria Callas, what was the difference that she made? She was well trained, had a beautiful voice and talent. But there was more: she sang with all of her soul. She granted insight in her deeper feelings and her soul by singing.

So, after we learned the techniques of how to use body-energy and natural movements to beat a powerful DON, there still is one more thing to add: Soul!

Our Taikos will resonate to any beat we strike, any rhythm we drum. But is this singing? I would say "No". It's more a sound that is produced. I think a Taiko can only sing when it's played with meaning, with soul. But how can we put our soul into a beat?

There are some ways to do it.

One way of giving a drum-beat meaning is to use metaphors and pictures. Do you know the story of that song your playing? Then tell it. Does the song your playing make you feel in a certain way? Then show it.

One Example for this is Kaoly Asanos song ELEVEN.

She wrote it shortly after the big catastrophe in Japan on March, 11th in 2011, when a severe earthquake lead to a tsunami and a nuclear breakdown of the Fukushima Daiichi atomic power station. This triple catastrophe claimed a hundreds of thousand victims: dead, missing, homeless, injured and evacuated. The tsunami destroyed or damaged nearly one Mio. homes.

The first half of the song ELEVEN is reflecting all the suffering, the pain and confusion, which was caused by the catastrophe. Then the chanting starts in the middle of the song. The singing is expression of both the grief of loss of the loved ones and (more and more) the hope and confidence in overcoming the disaster. One by one, the survivors come together and encourage each other to look forward into a better future. The second half then is carried by this confidence and hope, that together everything destroyed can and will be rebuilt again.

Therefore, with this story, with these pictures in mind and heart, I guess each of us can't help but playing ELEVEN with all of our souls. And this is, when our taikos sing!

Another, but more difficult, way of making your Taiko sing is, putting your heart and soul in each beat. Surely you can beat a drum and at the same time think about what shopping there is to do for the weekend. These beats – I am sure – don't have much meaning and won't make a Taiko sing.

Some say, there lives a God / a Goddess in each Taiko. Made of living wood and living skin, I am not so sure about Gods, but I am sure about her soul. Therefore, I like the thought that I communicate from soul to soul with my Taiko.

Before Kaoly Asano started playing Taiko, she was rather a weak and sickish woman. Playing Taiko made her healthy and strong. I am sure that this was only possible, because she opened herself and her soul to the Taiko. The result is a really deep and unique relationship between her and her Taiko. She opened up and dared to share what was inside of her soul – and this was, when her Taiko began to sing.

Well, my conclusion of this, which also is my invitation to you, is:
Dare to look inside of you and learn about you and your soul. Then be a daredevil and express this through playing your Taiko. Build a relationship and have trust in you AND your drum. Show your inside and she will answer – she will sing!

Chapter Three: How to play Taiko: learning by watching, learning by listening

Kaoly Asano, Tawoo Dojo and Ingmar Kikat compose most of the pieces played in Kion Dojo and Tawoo Dojo. Characteristic of nearly all of those pieces is that they have three or more voices: one is quite easy to learn, one medium and one advanced. Because of this, in Tawoo as well as in Kion the training very often takes place in one big group. Beside “classical” beginner- and advanced classes, all members train all together.

This involves some advantages: beginners get to know a bigger part of the whole group right from the start and can almost immediately get started by practicing the relatively easy voice of a piece. This supports not only the group membership, but also brings some early feelings of success. I lively remember my first classes and that I quite often had the feeling: wow! I already can play this piece together with the group. That was motivating – and fun!

Everyone, who had the pleasure of participating in a Kaoly-Workshop knows, that this is not just a very special experience, but particular, because Kaoly teaches with her body. I guess only few of us are able to understand and speak Japanese. However, it is not necessary, because body language is universal.

These are the basic-principles of taking part in or being part of Kion or Tawoo:
Often there is one group of students with different levels of experience being not just taught by our teacher but also by ourselves, being taught not just by instruction, but also by hearing and listening to each other.

So *watch* how your fellow students play and move. And *hear* how it sounds when they're playing. You'll be learning by hearing and you'll be learning by listening.

One typical and kind of standardized drill is the “partner feedback”:

The set up is two lines of vis-à-vis Taikos, so that you have two counterpart drummers. During “one side” plays a certain rhythm or a phrase of a song, the other side is actively *watching and listening*. After a while there's a break and the partners come together in the middle of the rows and the one who was watching gives feedback to the things he/she saw. This can be e.g. (bachi- and body-) movement, expression, sound or anything else. Then it changes and those who watched play and receive feedback.

Not necessary to say, that all feedback should be friendly and supportive.

The advantage of this drill is, that not only the advanced drummers give feedback to beginners, but also the other way round.

I remember when I did that drill in Tawoo Dojo and my partner was a very advanced drummer. I was really shy and unsecure to give feedback to him. But: he encouraged me and so I told him what I saw. This was the ignition spark when I learned, that we all are teachers and students at the same time. Over time, I began to appreciate especially the feedback of “beginners”.

So never, underestimate the benefit of a feedback. It's not a question of how long someone plays Taiko. It's a question of having the ability to watch and hear. There were several times, when especially a “beginner's feedback” draw my attention to things to improve.

Therefore, I am recommending this drill. Try it – you'll be surprised.

I always have to think of a little aphorism in Richard Bach's book “Illusions”. It's a nice little parable of teaching and learning and knowing. It is:

You teach best, what you most need to learn.

I hope I could give you a little insight in some aspects and correlations between body-energy and movements and their importance when playing Taiko in Tawoo and Kion.

I hope, you dare to add your soul to the way you're playing Taiko. Trust your Taiko – she's your friend and still is living. Open up and make your Taiko sing!

*Taiko hugs
Folke*