

Horaku

Dharma Entertainment, joy in the dharma, expressing the Dharma through the arts

CLOSING ADDRESS - North American Taiko Conference (August 9, 2009) JACCC, Little Tokyo

Artistic performances after major Buddhist holiday services in J-A Buddhist temples in America have a history of over 130 years. Called "Horaku", these were various forms of performing arts performed by the members of the temple, with only a scattering of professional teachers.

Some of the many forms Horaku took were :

Shigin & Utae – recitation and singing of poetry

Biwa, Shakuhachi, and Koto performances

Singing of folk songs and dances

Gagaku court and temple music

Piano, violin, flute and various western instruments

Nihon Buyo classical dances

Noh & Kabuki performances

Shibai – theatrical performances

Burlesque-like skits in drag – male and female

All of these were performed by adult members of the Sangha, in a tradition where every adult was expected to be able to make a performing arts contribution.

All this comes to a sudden end with the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1942. Suddenly all these cultural activities, including the Buddhist religion itself, were looked upon with suspicion by the U.S. government, culminating in our being placed in prison camps for the duration of the war.

After World War II, comes the Nisei generation of overemphasis on all things American.

Horaku is taken over by children under the direction of J-A public school teachers. Even the adults turn to choirs, organ music, the singing of hymns, etc.

It is not until the coming of age of the Sansei generation in the late 1960's and 1970's that sees a revival of the older traditions as well as new interpretations of the old traditions. Bon Odori in particular sees a new revival and also the rise of the only other uniquely J-A tradition – taiko. It is not traditional, nor is it ancient – but its early beginnings in J-A Buddhist temples drew on roots from earlier Horaku performing arts.



Photo by Marc Amba

At long last, the Sansei and Yonsei generations revived the Horaku traditions as an adult endeavor – something to be done and shared by everyone, and not just specialists. Art was something everyone did, and not the property of a few highly regarded specialists. Adults teach by doing, and children learn by watching – the view from the back. (*ushiro sugata*)

As Kinnara sees it, playing taiko in a Buddhist context is very much like pounding mochi at a temple - it is not about who makes the best mochi or who pounds, turns, or forms the mochi the best - it is about how well we learn to work together which produces a kind of joyous fun you can get no other way. Buddhist temples are or should be places where we learn to really see our own egos and how they cause all our pains - they should not be places where we can indulge our egos. Standing in front of a wildly cheering crowd makes playing taiko a two edged sword. You can opt to wow an audience with a "perfect" performance and receive immense ego-gratification - or you can opt to really pay attention to each other as you play and enjoy a group effort, which requires a reining in of one's ego - when this enjoyment happens, it is immediately shared with the audience and they join you in the performance. The latter goal I think, is the Buddhist one.

Nurturing one's ego eventually leads to letting it run rampant and the need to be perfect will very soon lead to splinter groups, cliques, etc. There is relatively no problem with egos when pounding mochi. Taiko is on the other hand, a far trickier matter. Jodoshinshu is a peasant tradition of Buddhism, not a samurai one like Zen. Our discipline is not from the top but in mutual help and working together and



laughing together. This has always been our attitude about taiko, even though it is a position in the minority in America, where the individual and winning is everything. But I ramble on too much. Our best to you and your groups - above enjoy each others company.

For us, Taiko is performance only in the way Bon Odori is performance, in the way chanting, or mochitsuki, or fundraising is performance. It is not yet another occasion to indulge the ego but rather an occasion to let go of our own ego long enough to be a part of something larger and more connected. Here, the object is not to wow the audience with a perfect performance, but rather to try to enjoy each other's performance through mutual support of each other, and to connect with an audience that can relate to this kind of connecting. It is the non-aggressive

kind of joy of being a part of everything around you, where the thought "Check me out" does not occur. Here the problem is not the person who has trouble keeping up with the rest, but rather with the good, if not great player, who wants to remove the not so good player.

Like really knowing the meaning of just dancing Bon Odori, there is a realm of just playing taiko for the sheer joy of connecting and cooperating, supporting and being supported, that no amount of proficiency can touch. If you play taiko to satisfy the insatiable needs of your ego – you will experience only momentary happiness, that fades into emptiness with the diminishing applause. Joy however, is all inclusive, it does not assert, it does not demand – it is the reality left after the ego departs – everything connective, everything supportive, non-calculating, spiced with laughter and tears. I wish you all the joy of taiko over the rush of taiko.

Gassho,

Rev. Mae

