

“Mind Games”

Interview with Kaoru Watanabe

Los Angeles Taiko Institute

November 12, 2013

KB - What are you teaching in the Taiko Fundamentals workshop at LATI?

Watanabe - A technique that a lot of Kodo members utilize. The technique was taught along with the pieces, and more specifically in a workshop by a martial arts expert who visited us [on Sado]. He became famous for applying martial arts techniques to caring for the elderly. People who take care of the elderly are often not young themselves and helping someone out of bed, or up from the floor requires a lot of strength. His techniques engage larger sets of muscles – disengaging the arms and engaging the back – and use the lower back, legs, and hips do more of the work.

KB - And is the “unbendable arm” concept part of engaging the larger muscles?

Watanabe - Exactly. There needs to be some sort of resistance in the arm to engage the back muscles; less stiff than a piece of wood, but more stiff than a cloth.

KB - I spend all my time trying to get students to use more elbow bend.

Watanabe - I spend all my time getting them to bend less.

KB - Hilarious.

Watanabe - I definitely don’t think there is one way, or even a best way. In the end, we’re trying to get to the same thing. The tricky thing is being straight without being stiff.

KB - How do you teach that?

Watanabe - When someone is trying to forcibly bend your arm, for example, the natural instinct is to tense the entire arm, as if you are squeezing something as hard as you can. The biceps and the forearm muscles and all the muscles are engaged. But the function of the bicep is to bend the arm. So by tensing the whole arm, you’re now also fighting your own bicep. You’re engaging muscles

you don't need to keep the arm straight. So we use exercises, almost mind games, to convince the brain not to use those muscles that aren't needed. We also purposely tense parts of the body and then attempt to relax them.

KB - I've been trying to improve my stability when playing. Would these concepts help?

Watanabe - Definitely. Because the technique uses the back, and the larger muscles, one needs a more stable body, and that requires balance and posture. The first thing we do is try and increase stability and balance within the body.

KB - How do you know when you're doing the strike correctly?

Watanabe - I'm using the sensations in my body and the mirror and everything I can to ask, "Is the body relaxed? Is the body stable? Is there extension of the arms? Of the spine? What part of the body is being used in the strike? Is the strike coming from the core?"

KB - But how do you know when it's working?

Watanabe - Tamasaburo came to Kodo to help 10 apprentices working on odaiko. Tomohiro Mitome was teaching. Tamasaburo was just observing and said to me, "Let's take a walk." We walked around the practice hall as they were drumming and with each pass, he pointed out a different thing. "Look at the shoulders..." and we talked about how the shoulders shouldn't raise. The next time, "What is the achilles tendon doing? What's the shape? Look at the toes." As we walked, we would study these tiny points. I had never broken it down that much. Now, I don't have Tamasaburo's eye by any means, but all of those things are coming into play when I'm observing someone.

KB - I'm a big fan of your Miyake. Do these concepts apply to Miyake?

Watanabe - Indeed. Kodo breaks it down. How are the knees angled? How are the hips angled? What is moving and what is not moving? What axes are being used? Where is the stable point?

KB - Who is your ideal student for the upcoming LATI workshop?

Watanabe - Whether it's someone who has been playing a long time or not, I enjoy teaching people who are open... someone who is open to trying something different than they are used to.