

Out of the mud grows the lotus

by Sydney Shiroyama, Feb 2025

On January 11, the Peaceful Presence gathering was held at the Palo Alto Buddhist Temple. This event, which is organized by the Multifaith Voices for Peace and Justice, is a service that takes place on the 11th of each month at various faith communities in and around Palo Alto. The event offers an opportunity for people of all faiths to offer prayers for peace, justice, and resilience.

The theme of the January event was "Out of the mountain of despair - a stone of hope; Out of the mud grows the lotus." The phrase, "Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope," is engraved in the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington D.C., and it is a famous line in his "I Have a Dream" speech. It serves as a reminder that even during times of great difficulty, the possibility of hope still exists. Rev. Koyama suggested this theme, and he included a Buddhist metaphor with a similar meaning: "Out of the mud grows the lotus." The lotus flower's emergence from muddy waters symbolizes transformation, enlightenment, and the power of perseverance.

After an introduction by Joanne Gozawa and sutra chanting led by Rev. Igor, Rev. Dr. Eileen Altman, an associate pastor of the First Congregational Church, gave a moving reflection about the late president Jimmy Carter and how he inspired hope and resilience during dark times. Ahmed Mostafa represented the Islamic faith and reflected on his work offering pro bono legal services to survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. He offered inspiring words of encouragement and empowerment.

We then introduced PJ and Roy Hirabayashi to lead a sound meditation with taiko. Some of you might be familiar with the Hirabayashis. Roy Hirabayashi founded San Jose taiko along Dean Miyakusu, and Rev. Hiroshi Abiko, who was our resident minister at the Palo Alto Buddhist Temple from 1983-2001. PJ and Roy served as Artistic and Executive Director and performing members of San Jose Taiko from 1973-2011. After a long career as a prolific and inspiring taiko performer, leader, and mentor, PJ combined her passions for taiko and peacebuilding and created TaikoPeace. The movement, which stands for "Taiko Partnerships, Empathy And Creative Empowerment," was created as a grassroots effort to build a culture of peace, compassion, and equity by centering the healing spirit and powerful vibrations of taiko drumming.

Given the Hirabayashi's personal connection Rev. Abiko and because we have one of Rev. Abiko's drums in the corner of the hondo, I asked if PJ and Roy could lead a taiko session during the Peaceful Presence event. The following is the introduction I shared during the event:

Taiko, which means "large drum" in Japanese has existed for thousands of years in Japan, but the ensemble style of playing and performing is a relatively new art form.

At this temple, we have a Dharma School taiko group that started in 1995 by the resident minister at the time, Rev. Hiroshi Abiko, who passed away a few years ago. He also co-founded San Jose Taiko, along with Roy Hirabayashi. San Jose Taiko is the third oldest group in North America, and they just celebrated their 50th anniversary.

Taiko here in the US has a special significance for the Japanese American community. Prior to the 1970s, many Japanese American families were pressured to conceal their cultural identity. Most of the families who attend this temple have a history of incarceration during WWII. Some of our sangha members even remember their childhood in camp. After the war, many stopped speaking Japanese and tried to fit in as much as possible.

It was the third generation Japanese Americans, such as PJ and Roy Hirabayashi, who craved a cultural connection and wanted to reclaim it—loudly and proudly. It was too expensive to buy taiko from Japan, so they worked together to figure out how to build them out of wine barrels. They wanted to play songs that made them feel happy and strong, so they wrote them. Now, taiko is the soundtrack of every summer Obon festival. The booming drums and overlapping rhythms are the sound of our culture and community. It's the sound of resilience and empowerment. This beautiful artform is a lotus that grew out of the mud.

I'm a fourth generation Japanese American. My grandparents, who were born and raised in CA, spent the second half of their teen years incarcerated in Arizona and Arkansas. My mom never learned Japanese. But against all odds, my family was able to practice Jodo Shinshu Buddhism throughout their lives, and I grew up proudly playing these loud Japanese drums here as a Dharma School student.

Taiko isn't a religious practice for everyone who plays, but for me, it's always been connected to the temple and this community. Rev. Abiko taught us that the taiko represents the Buddha-Dharma, the ideal world of harmony. The drummer represents us living in this actual world of delusion. The drumsticks are the connecting link between the two worlds. The conch shell is also used in Buddhist music to help us wake up from our long sleep of ignorance and listen for the voice of Wisdom-Compassion calling us.

This taiko was built by Rev. Abiko and played by many in our community. As we strike it in this space tonight, I invite you to listen with peaceful intention. May every vibration send ripples of peace of hope into this space and connect us to a world of harmony and oneness.

Roy then opened with the sounds of the conch shell, and PJ performed a short taiko performance. Then, PJ invited each participant to strike the drum. With each hit, they were asked to think about something they wanted to release into the world. There were about 40 people in attendance. As we listened to each person's release, we let the vibrations wash over

us. PJ concluded the session with a collective powerful strike. With this final hit, she asked us to think about something in the new year that we wanted to bring into the world.

I left the event with a renewed sense of resilience, gratitude, and hope. The community consisted of people of various backgrounds and faith traditions, yet we had so much in common. As each person's drumstick connected with the drum, the vibrations of their hit rippled through each of us. Perhaps this was a peek into to the ideal world of harmony.

I am writing this piece just a few days before Day of Remembrance, which is on February 19th. The Day of Remembrance commemorates the incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII. While it's crucially important to reflect on the consequences of Executive Order 9066, it's also important to recognize the incredible resilience of generations of Japanese Americans. The art and culture that grew out of the mud and despair proves that hope and beauty prevail.

Jodo Shinshu reminds us that every life is equally valued, cherished, and embraced within Amida Buddha's Wisdom and Compassion. In the "world of harmony and oneness," our culture is one of many. Recently, when I listen to the news, I often feel that we are in a "mountain of despair." In times like these, I think it's especially important to look to, support, protect, and amplify the art, music, and faith traditions that make up the beautiful diversity of our community.

Out of the mud, grows the lotus.

Gassho,

Sydney