



## New Encounters Through *Kendama*

Hello, my name is Tario. “Dama-ken,” the club I belong to, teaches *kendama* (cup-and-ball) to local children and performs at events. We also travel to Mongolia once a year for a *kendama* exchange program. This past year, I was the club representative.

### Tario

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I didn’t start *kendama* until I entered university. Until then, I’d never even touched one. When I was in elementary school, I was a video game freak. I sometimes played outdoors, too, but as the number of parks dwindled, so did the time I spent playing outside.

A friend I made in college was good at *kendama*, and before I knew it, I had become a member of Dama-ken. I also belonged to the tennis club during my first year in university, but I quit when I realized how much more I enjoyed the activities of Dama-ken.

#### A Real Sense of Usefulness to People

At Dama-ken, we get requests from local elementary schools and children’s centers as well as senior citizens’ groups, nursing homes, and groups organizing international exchange events to teach or give performances with *kendama*. We take part in such activities about 100 times a year. Wherever we go, people seem to enjoy our activities. When children master a move they hadn’t been able to do, their eyes sparkle with excitement. When I see something like that, I feel that I’m doing something that is useful.

I met a lot of people when I visited Mongolia during spring break at the end of my first year. The experience helped me gain an even stronger sense that I am doing something worthwhile with Dama-ken. Every spring since 2002, our club collects 300 *kendama* from people we know to take to Mongolia, where we take part in a cultural exchange. In fact, *kendama* is well-known in Mongolia, and there is even a *kendama* association there. There are groups other than Dama-ken in Japan that conduct *kendama* exchange programs in Mongolia.

I have been to Mongolia twice, once last year and once two

years ago, but I don’t know the Mongolian language. But when I go there with *kendama* in hand, people come up to me and ask, “Hey, you know how to play? Show me,” and we begin interacting right away. Last March, I stayed in Ulan Bator<sup>1</sup> for about two weeks, and Khovd<sup>2</sup> for about a week. While we were based in those two cities, we visited mostly elementary and middle schools in nearby towns. We had over 2,000 visitors at our *kendama* lessons and rallies, which we held in more than 20 locations. We visit some of the same places every year, so we see a lot of familiar faces. Children we hadn’t seen in a year come up to us, and with barely a greeting, say, “Look, look, can you do this trick?” I am no match for some of the better kids. But that, too, is part of the fun.

Whenever I go to Mongolia, I know without a doubt that I want to go again. The other members of Dama-ken say the same thing. But it’s not that we want to go sightseeing. We don’t need to, because we’ll have our *kendama*. There are people we want to see, kids we want to play with. That’s why we want to go.

#### Mongolia’s Special Appeal

I also find the country of Mongolia very appealing. They have completely different landscapes, cultures, and traditions from Japan. The first time I went there, I was amazed by everything. Once you leave the center of the city, it’s all open natural landscape. In Japan, people are punctual and efficiency is of the utmost priority, but Mongolians are not so tied down by time, which I find liberating. Whenever I return from Mongolia, my friends tell me that I’ve changed. It’s probably the laid-back atmosphere of Mongolia. It costs us about 160,000 to 170,000 yen



Presenting *kendama* to friends in Mongolia.

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Teaching Mongolian children to play with *kendama*.

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The *kendama* booth at a Japanese university festival. Foreign students trying their hand for the first time.

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At an elementary school nearby. We are sometimes asked to teach *kendama* as part of regular classroom study.

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to go, so we all work hard at our part-time jobs to pay for the trip. But because we want to see everyone in Mongolia, we think little of how much work it takes to get there.

In Mongolia, many people help us out. This year, the members of Dama-ken stayed in Ulan Bator at the home of a famous player of the *matouqin*, a two-string, horse-headed fiddle-like instrument. Also, every time we go, university students studying Japanese take care of us, driving us around and interpreting for us. When I first went to Mongolia, neither I nor the other members of Dama-ken were aware of the significance of our activities. But I got to thinking after Zorigo, one of the college students who always helps us out, said, "You guys are doing good, which is why I'm helping out. I want you to know that." I became convinced that having people who will help and support us means that we must live up to their expectations, that we can't take part half-heartedly. We have to be responsible and aware of what we are doing.

### New Discoveries about Myself

Until I became a member of Dama-ken, I wasn't very good with children. Children can be hyper and when they interact with someone older than themselves they get even more excited. But I realized that it didn't bother me so much when I have my *kendama* with me. It makes it easy to work with kids. I discovered that I really enjoy playing with them.

Also, I wasn't too good under pressure and didn't have much confidence in myself, but because we've had many occasions to perform in front of people and also because I was the club representative this past year, I've gotten a bit stronger than before. In the beginning, if I made a mistake, I'd panic and mess up even more. With experience, I have stopped panicking even if I slip up. I'm also able to adapt to each particular situation by paying attention to children's expressions and behavior, inserting breaks when necessary or encouraging concentration by showing tricks. That, in turn, has given me more self-confidence.

### The Appeal of *Kendama*

When I tell my friends from high school that I'm in a *kendama* club, most of them are a bit appalled. At first, I was embarrassed to be playing with *kendama* as a university student, but I don't have any qualms anymore. If my friends say anything, I just tell them, "You should try it, too!"

The great thing about *kendama* is that anybody can do it. Age

and strength don't matter, and whether you're athletic or not doesn't, either. It's not like faster runners have an edge when it comes to *kendama*. Anyone can do it. There are people who are better at it than others, but it's a very equal-opportunity game. The more you practice, the better you become. I was a beginner when I joined Dama-ken, but now I have third *dan* rank (see Japanese Culture Now). Sometimes during practice, I suddenly become able to do tricks that I found impossible before. At times like that, I'm just simply happy. Whether you're successful or not is clear-cut with *kendama*, so it's easy to see your achievements. That's another great thing about *kendama*.

I wish kids would play with *kendama* instead of video games. Only a limited number of people can play a video game at one time, so it's not as much fun, and it doesn't have much room for improvisation or interaction with others. With *kendama*, on the other hand, you can play on your own and with other people by showing your moves or competing against each other, so it's not so narrow.

Dama-ken's goal is to spread *kendama* even further in our local communities. Because it's a game that you have to keep practicing in order to improve, we started the Dama-ken Dojo this year. Twice a month, we rent a room at the community center and hold lessons. Right now, we have about 15 or 16 students. My hope is that the popularity of *kendama*, a game that can be enjoyed by young and old, will continue to grow.

- 1 Ulan Bator: The capital of Mongolia, located approximately 1,300 meters above sea level, and has a population of approximately one million.
- 2 Khovd: Located 1,425 km west of Ulan Bator; a three-hour plane ride or two nights and three days by car. Temperatures reach a high of 38 degrees Celsius and a low of -43 degrees Celsius. Population of 90,000 people. Approximately 1.32 million livestock.

