

Stillness and Musical Mastery

by Dennis Winge

In the recording “Bringing Stillness to Everyday Life,” Eckhart Tolle discusses cultivating a type of thoughtless presence which he says is revolutionary for human beings to discover. It can be referred to as self-awareness, or awareness consciousness. He links this type of ‘stillness’ with creativity, and thus musicians may want to consider how it relates to their craft. Every musician would most likely say ‘yes’ to wanting to develop their own creativity further, which would mean, according to this definition of creativity, enhancing our level of thoughtless presence.

Tolle uses paying attention to the gaps between words as an example. When you are aware of the absence of sound, you are aware of no particular thing. Then you ultimately become clear with awareness itself, which you can’t really think about in the traditional sense. Creativity, he says, “arises out of a state of thoughtless presence in which you are much more aware than in a state of thinking.” He talks about Rembrandt not having to think about each brush stroke in an analytical way.

The part that Eckhart Tolle is leaving out, however, is that musical mastery does involve thinking at every turn. In any artistic field, there is a level of technical mastery that must be obtained and that requires thought. Rembrandt had achieved such a level of mastery that he had experience in knowing what to do next, and the confidence that any risk taking on his part would work out.

With a musician, in the days, months, or years before any particular performance, he must think about technique, music theory, the repertoire, notation reading, etc. During a performance, he must think about where he is in the piece, staying together with other musicians, his own sound, volume level, bringing forth the emotion, etc. So how does one get to the stage where, like Rembrandt, there is enough mastery that you need not think?

It would be absurd to propose that there is a point in time in which you go from lack of presence to presence. Malcolm Blackwell is quoted as saying that it takes 10,000 hours to become a master at something. He gives examples of it in his wonderful book called “Outliers.”

This may indeed be true on a technical level, but it would be silly to think that in the final minute of those 10,000 hours, there would be some kind of noticeable transformation, after which the artist becomes transformed. It would be absurd to think that an artist could go from average to mastery in a single moment. Seeing the absurdity in this hypothetical concept, it is easier to see now that there is no separation between awareness and mastery.

So, how do you cultivate awareness? At the risk of sounding prescriptive, you cultivate awareness in music the same way you cultivate it in the rest of your life; by slowing

down and noticing things, appreciating them, taking time to be grateful for them, and exploring simple ways of doing things. This is not to say that you have to become a Zen master in other areas of your life in order to become a great musician. There are countless examples of master musicians whose personal lives are completely chaotic from Beethoven to Charles Mingus, for example.

It simply means that by bringing mindful attention to the task at hand so that it becomes embraced by your whole being, you are a master in that moment. Mastery may take many years, but it can only come with a level of practice that goes beyond the thinking mind. The mind must be utilized during any apprentice's lengthy training, but to the master-in-training, but at the same time the subject at hand must become all-engulfing and be embraced on the level of being, rather than just thinking.

Perhaps an example is the young Padawans training to become Jedis in the Star Wars series. We all resonate deeply with this story, because we know it to be true: the future Jedis learn the technical skills of fighting with the light sabre, but are even more importantly taught to feel the force, which is another way of saying bringing conscious awareness to what they are doing.

In the scene where Yoda first meets Luke Skywalker, Yoda rebels against Obi Wan's suggestion that Skywalker should be trained. Yoda points out the fact that Luke has been restless and was not mindful of what he was doing at any moment, and thus was not eligible to be trained as a Jedi. We are all a bit like Luke.

So how can we begin on this journey of musical mastery and develop our sense of conscious awareness, or in a word, presence? Becoming a master musician may entail a certain degree of patient, calm, relaxed, long-term focus but everyone knows that the reality of learning an instrument can be frustrating at times. How can musicians maintain an internal poise that is a pre-requisite for musical mastery?

The suggestions below are only suggestions. There may be so many possibilities for you to explore that perhaps these can best be viewed as catalysts to coming up with your own list. They are separated by level and topic.

I Beginners

A Strumming chords

Enjoy the sound of each chord. Enjoy the sound of two chords juxtaposed one right after the other, or even the beauty of a well-constructed chord progression. Just listen and appreciate it.

B Picking individual notes (melodies or riffs)

Enjoy how the notes fit together. Notice how satisfying it feels to string notes together for a complete sounding melody.

C Play in time

Enjoy playing a piece of music in time with itself, even if that time is much slower than the originally intended tempo of the piece. Just focus on how cohesive it sounds at your speed.

II Intermediate

A Applied Music Theory

Appreciate how harmony, melody, and rhythm are related. Let yourself experiment with the beauty and elegance of applied music theory, as in taking a scale, harmonizing it with chords, and then making up a melody or soloing over it.

B Rhythm

There are infinite varieties of strumming patterns, even with basic chords in 4/4 you can come up with. You could vary your rhythm and hardly ever repeat yourself. Can you let your strumming arm freely flow and make rhythms on the fly?

C Improvisation

Can you begin to listen to how the notes fit over the chords? In other words, not just play scales, but notice the effect that each note has over each chord? For example, a *d* note sounds very different over a C minor than it does over a G major chord.

III Advanced

A Phrasing

Can you make each phrase congruent with the previous phrase? Really building a solo to take the listener on a journey involves deep listening.

B Rhythm

When you play rhythm are you listening to the whole band, or just to your own part? Is what you are playing truly adding to the overall piece and fitting into the overall texture of the ensemble?

C Harmony

There are so many other harmonic possibilities than those derived simply from the major scale, and some of them may fulfill certain artistic and emotional needs that you may have as a composer or improviser. When exploring other modes, do you really bask in their emotional nuances, or do you practice them simply as an intellectual exercise?

In conclusion, notice that in the suggestions above, we gradually went from the more directive to the more exploratory. In other words, by the time you got to the advanced level, there were more questions than there were statements. This is because as you advance there are more and more possibilities to explore, and way less right and wrong ways to do things. Which possibilities you choose helps define you as an artist.

Notice also that the overall trend here is toward the silence of infinite possibilities. Similarly, notice that the words I used were those such as enjoy, appreciate, experiment, feel, listen, and bask. Notice that the last three (feel, listen, and bask) imply an intimate connection with the subject. Here we are approaching silence in which the music and the musician become one.

In the end, if you can learn to enjoy the beauty of each thing you learn and not simply try and devour them as a means to an end, you already are a master.