

Enjoying the Musical Now

Spiritual teacher and best-selling author Eckart Tolle has deep insights on the nature of goal setting as they relate to your own well-being and contentment. Setting goals is fine, he says, but one must at the same time realize that those goals, once achieved, will not make you happy. The only thing that makes you happy is the present moment.

According to Tolle, “the egoic self is always engaged in thinking. It is thinking more of this or that to add to itself, to make itself feel more complete. This explains the ego’s compulsive preoccupation with the future. Whenever you become aware of yourself living for the next moment, you have already stepped out of that egoic mind pattern, and the possibility of choosing to give your full attention to this moment arises simultaneously. By giving your full attention to this moment, an attendance far greater than the egoic mind enters your life.”

“When you live through the ego, you always reduce the present moment to a means to an end. You live for the future, and when you choose your goals, they don’t satisfy you, at least not for long. When you give more attention to the doing than to the future results that you want to achieve through it, you break the old egoic conditioning. Your doing then becomes not only a great deal more effective, but infinitely more fulfilling and joyful. If you set egoic goals for the purpose of freeing yourself, enhancing yourself or your sense of importance, even if you achieve them, they will not satisfy you. Set goals, but know that the arriving is not all that important. When anything about it out of presence, it means this moment is not a means to an end. The doing is fulfilling in itself every moment. You are no longer reducing the now to a means to an end.”

So how can you apply these concepts to playing music? How can you enjoy playing music this moment, even though you are well away from the goals you may have set? Some of these ideas I have repeated in other articles, but they are worth hearing again, even by me.

1. **Turn off the critical mind.** Writers, in order to avoid writer’s block, sometimes use a little ritual where they send their inner critic out on an errand. In other words, they promise their critic that they will have a voice, and that that voice will be heard, recognized, and appreciated, but not right now, not while writing. During the process of writing, it’s just free-flow, there is no inner critic judging. The same can be used while practicing and performing. It is useful to record your performance or your practice routine, but don’t listen to it right away. Wait a few weeks, when there is no longer an emotional connection to what you played, as much as it would have been in the immediate aftermath. That way, the critic can still have a voice, but not be sabotaging you while the creative process is happening.

2. “Every sound is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard.” This is from Kenny Warner’s *Effortless Mastery*. **Enjoy your sound.** Enjoy just playing one note. Do you like the sound of your instrument? Chances are you do, and that is what drew you to learning the instrument in the first place. Enjoy that sound. Perhaps you even want to

go further and, if you play electric guitar, get an effects pedal or two that can make the sound even more pleasing to you. When I was a kid, I put the guitar away from age 11 to age 13. The thing that got me into it again was the discovery of a distortion pedal. (See my article on guitar effects for the technically challenged.)

3. Act as if you're already great. Be like a little child playing with a toy. The reason that they can do that for hours is that they are fully engaged in their imagination. Imagine that you are playing in Madison Square Garden. I'll bet you that you'll start playing differently, and that is probably a good way to weed out bad habits. However, the purpose of this exercise is to be in the present moment and to enjoy it, and not fixing anything, at least not for right now.

4. Notice the space between notes. What kind of emotional effect are you going for while you are playing? Is it just random notes, or is there some inner story you are trying to tell? There's an old saying in jazz that while listening to good soloists, you should be able to see the color of the hair of the woman he's thinking about. This is obviously half in jest, but there's an underlying truth to it, which is you should really be able to emotionally connect to a good player, so similarly, enjoy the story you're telling. It's not just notes, it's the space between the notes.

5. When it comes to your attention to fix something, as mentioned earlier, do so with **focused attention**, and take it slowly, enjoying the process of fixing it, and limit your time to, let's say, 20 minutes per sitting. Don't try to do it all in one day. During that 20 minutes, dive deeply into that thing that needs fixing.

6. Feel, rather than think. Music is a way of putting us into the present moment, and that is why it is used in religious services around the world. So allow the rhythm to carry you into the present, really feel the groove and enjoy its own propulsion. Practical applications of this could be jamming to a drum track, or metronome, or with your friends. Just have fun.

7. Balance easy and harder stuff. Over the course of a week, balance having fun and learning new things. This can be from day to day, or from 20-minute session to 20-minute session. As I have mentioned in previous articles, I personally allow myself to just noodle and have fun, or to put it in technical terms, to just goof off, up to 50% of the time. We are not robots, and need time to be creative and explore.

Of course, all of the above is just words. The only way to really go beyond practicing or performing as a means to an end, is to forget even that you are supposed to be not using it as a means to an end(!) Whatever you are doing, do it fully, do it wholeheartedly. There is another ancient proverb that talks about a man whittling a stick. He became so engrossed in the stick that it took him several centuries to do it. When he was finished, he hadn't aged at all. Of course, the world had changed quite a bit by then, and none of the people he knew were still around, but it was because he was so engrossed in the present moment that he hadn't aged at all. So here's to your eternal musical youth.

