

CHAPTER TWELVE: HOW TO PRACTICE

WHAT IS PRACTICE?

Ironically, rule number one is this: There are no rules! Nobody can tell you exactly how to practice, and people will have different views on exactly what practice “is”. Having said that though, I have found certain fundamentals to be of importance to many people whom I respect for their achievements in music and their ongoing dedication to pursuit of excellence. I will outline these fundamentals below, but first I would like to define practice in the way I see it.

*Practice is the act of self-teaching, with the aim of developing oneself.
Good practice applies the sum total of your experiences
and integrates all of your faculties and aspects of your Being.*

The *riyaz* perspective of practice recognizes that it draws upon your entire experience as a musician and a person, and consequently involves your whole Being. This includes your aural, tactile/physical, visual, and mental senses and skills. The best practice is a coordinated activity involving mind, emotions, body and spirit. The self-teaching aspect means that the activation of these parts of your Being all create sensations which feedback to each other, and in monitoring these, you are able to direct the activity toward an intended, desirable result.

Music students over the centuries have always enlisted the services of a teacher to aid them in their improvement. Learning how to practice is learning how to be your own teacher, which means that a certain level of objectivity is attained whether you are in the presence of a mentor or not. The best teachers become guides as the student advances, setting up challenges, setting up discoveries on their pathway, monitoring progress, and sometimes holding a mirror up to the student in order to allow for self-realization. In this way, a good teacher is a truly remarkable mentor who may well admit that the teaching process allows them to learn almost as much as their advanced students! Practice means striving to be your own teacher.

If there were a single indispensable ingredient that made good practice or *riyaz* for me, it would have to be this: **coordination**. And the glue that holds the various faculties together in the learning process is **concentration**.

THE FOUR FACULTIES

There are four faculties that are involved in the practice and learning of music. Quality practice involves a healthy awareness and employment of each.

1. Kinesthetic faculties

Motor skills are typically the focus of most people’s practice. They are also what most people teach, simply because they are more tangible and easier to see, talk and write about. Physical coordination and dexterity is what most people call “technique”. Personally, I regard technique as a conduit, and think little of musicians who can play very fast, but have developed nothing or little in the other areas.

2. Intellectual faculties

I believe the brain processes and remembers all the information which it is fed. The brain works with patterns, and works to recognize and make sense of the new information it gathers. Conscious engagement of the analytical mind in order to understand new concepts and theories is an important practice skill. Written and verbal analysis works well in conjunction with listening. Again, the brain works with patterns, and it is patterns of coordination which ultimately form good or bad habits in music.

3. Aural faculties

This is the faculty of primary importance when it comes to learning music. This is the basic premise of the *Third Stream* pedagogy. (See Ran Blake’s article “The Primacy of the Ear” in the Bibliography.)

4. Visual faculties

The eyes are very useful and are naturally the primary receptors for most people. The success that blind people have in playing music is testament to the fact that the ears are actually more important.

