

WHAT PRACTICE REALLY IS

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I want to talk here a little bit about practice. I don't mean just dharma practice, but any kind of practice, like learning to play a musical instrument or whatever. Of course it also is true for dharma practice like sitting meditation, tonglen (exchanging yourself for others), and so on. Practice can be boring so it might help to learn a little more about what happens when we practice anything.

I first learned about the true nature of practice back in the Sixties when I was propelled out of my body by an LSD trip but never came back, or came back over a period of many years. My mind was pretty open then, actually very open. There was a little church off of South University and Forest Avenue, up near and just south of Washtenaw Avenue, which is now a little dogleg. It might have been called the "Campus Chapel." Anyway, it was open all night long, left open. No one was there, except sometimes me. I would be up late nights just as I am today up early mornings.

Anyway, I would go there at times when all else was closed or when I wanted to be alone and just play music. In that chapel they had a small grand piano in the basement and a real organ console up in the chapel. I would play those or play at those. I can't really play the piano but that was not the point those nights. I wasn't playing the piano or organ; I was playing music, music from my soul. Life was squeezing me and those late nights I was playing music like some animal calling out to myself.

I especially loved playing that church organ because the many different voices and registers would pierce my mind and set up all kinds of resonances that transported me. In fact, I owned a large Hammond B3 (jazz organ) for some time when I lived in small room. It took up almost my entire room until they came and repossessed it for lack of payment. I just ran out of money and was not willing to work at that time. It was all I could do to monitor my consciousness.

Late nights I would go to the chapel and play my heart out. It really was beautiful music (to me), but it might have sounded strange to others. I did this for years and no one else was ever there. I did have another and different experience at the U. of M. School of music. One time I wandered through the music school where there were dozens of small practice rooms, each with a piano and most of those rooms were empty of students.

As I walked through the halls, the sounds of different instruments filled my ears. Here was music. And I felt music well up within me. I was filled with emotion and feeling. Slipping into one of the empty rooms, I closed the door behind me and sat down and played as I would at the student chapel. Only this time I was not alone.

I had no real piano technique and was forced to help my fingers find their way along the keyboard. Still, I played very carefully searching for each note. I played what I was feeling. It came from deep inside. I did not stop to think how this might sound or whether this was in some acceptable music style or another. I just played and poured out my feelings.

Nor can I say that this was happy music, but how could I measure that? It was the music of me at the time. With each note and chord I built a sound image of my mind, at least my state of

mind. I am sure the sounds could appear unconventional to anyone listening in as they were from my heart and fit my feelings and mind. And sure enough, as luck would have it, there was a listener-in although I was not playing all that loud. I was jolted out of my mood by a knocking at the tiny glass window in the door and then the opening of the door itself.

It was some kind of woman official for the school. She asked me what I was doing. I said I was just playing the piano. "We have no time for music of that sort in this school. Some of us have work to do. You will have to leave now," she said. Somehow she was objecting to the 'kind' of music I was playing or the way I was playing it. Her subtext was that the music was disturbing, not because it was too loud, but because it was too unorthodox. It was as if I was not welcome there because the mental journey I was on and the music it induced was troubling to others. Perhaps it was. How she knew I was not a music student I don't know. Perhaps it was because I couldn't play the piano. But I took it that my music (and mind) was hard for others to hear. I left.

I tell this story because I am getting around to my topic of practice and practicing. There is no such thing as standard electrical voltage. That is why we have regulators, surge protectors, and all that stuff. Electricity surges. It ebbs and flows and we try to control it as best we can. In a similar way, our internal energy moves in spurts and lags - cycles. Much like electricity, life brings moments of great clarity when there is energy for all ideas and action plus also moments of drag and darkness. The energy grid upon which our being is based also ebbs and flows. It is anything but constant. In fact, change is the order of the day. We are kind of at the mercy of the energy flow, bobbing around in its ups and downs.

I explored this idea when I began to learn to play the piano on those late nights back in the 1960s. I also had an upright piano in the narrow hallway to my room at 114. N. Division. Learning to play the piano requires practice and lots of it, but how does practice really work? Is there something more to practice than the benefit of rote memory and repeated actions on the keyboard? I found there was indeed another factor.

The idea of piano (or any other kind of) practice is nothing more than a method of practicing and waiting for the will to develop confidence, for those energy surges I mentioned. What is accidental almost, we build confidence and will power about. Energy and insight come in blossoms and streams and are not regulated. I spend the long practice time and wait for the moments of forward push or opening and then cling close to the new ground that opens into me. That is how I learn. During those moments of openness I can see to do anything, piano or otherwise. The mind is open in those surge moments. I have seen into myself and perhaps learned something new. That is the true result of practice: taking advantage of open moments to dart past where we were before into new ground, our passageway to the future.

Just as the practice of waiting for the energy or spirit-surges can benefit piano playing, that same waiting-practice style can allow us to take advantage of these natural gaps or energy surges for other uses. The same kind of attention that we might pay to practice piano is worth paying to our mind-training work - just sitting there being alert. Things happen. Gaps or openings occur. That is practicing, what is more commonly called mind practice or meditation. Meditation is just this sort of mind practice we are discussing here.

In basic meditation we sit there and allow the mind to rest. When we become distracted, we gently bring the mind back to rest once more. It can be boring and it is just practicing, but we are building a habit that will benefit us in everything we do off the cushion. Once we have a habit of catching our own distractions in real life and bringing our attention back to what we want to be accomplishing, the merits of meditation become clear to us.

It takes time and it takes those moments or surges of opening during practice when resting the mind is easy or easier. The moments of real energy and clarity that come in the normal course of life is when most real progress is made. We leap through those gaps into our own future and lock it down. This is what practice is really about, waiting for those moments and confirming what we see and experience when they come. This is why and how I practice anything.

Michael

