

MEETING OURSELVES WHERE WE ARE – THE ART OF PRACTICING

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Practice is an essential part of our lives, and it comes in different shapes and contexts. We practice an instrument, we practice yoga, we practice communication, we practice listening, we practice mindfulness, we practice patience. The list is endless.

In this month's article, I would like to share some thoughts about what practicing actually means, how we can practice in a way that serves us, as well as deeper contemplations about practice as a concept for art and life.

What is practice?

The initial inspiration for this piece came about through my yoga practice. I have recently gotten very committed to it by dedicating at least 20 to 30 minutes every morning after I wake up to fully indulge in a yoga sequence, and making this a sacred ritual in which I vow to fully show up for myself, no matter where I am. I noticed that this kind of practice felt quite different from how I practice art. I noticed that the art practice used to feel more like work, like an effort I put into something in order to get better, whereas the yoga practice feels more like time I carve out for myself to feel good, and to help me grow personally, fully accepting where I am that day, physically, mentally, and emotionally. This difference might partly be caused by art actually being my job, therefore everything around it has a tendency to be associated with a “work mode”, and with a sense of competition that might be induced. However, even people who do not have to pay their rent tap dancing still manage to stress themselves out about practicing – we have probably all worried about not practicing enough, or practicing wrong, or not having the space and time to practice.

I really wanted to create my art practice as intentional and mindful as my yoga practice, so here I'd like to share some contemplations and ideas I've had during the process:

One factor that contributes to stressing out about practicing might be that most often we associate the act of practicing with actually doing the thing. Going into a studio or grabbing your board, tying up your tap shoes, breaking a sweat, and accomplishing exercises and routines with a noticeable product at the end of the practice.

Of course we need to hone our skills, otherwise we would not be able to do anything. But this is just one part of it, the obligatory foundation, a tool to facilitate growth within the practice.

There are so many people who go into the studio day after day, but they keep claiming that they “just don't get better.” On the contrary, some other people seem to rarely go into the studio, and yet they seem to continuously grow and reinvent themselves, deeply immersed in the art form. Which makes one think that the actual studio time cannot be the only factor contributing to growing as an artist.

I find that practice is not only the act of “doing the thing”. It is much more. It is a daily commitment to the thing, making space for it in your thoughts, considerations, and actions, and allowing it to be a way of life to some degree. It then becomes not only this thing that you do, apart from all the other contents

of your life, but rather a part of your daily experience that mirrors your inner being.

The way we do anything is the way we do everything.

The way we practice will translate into all the other parts of our existence. If we foster commitment, dedication, patience, creativity, joy, and integrity in our practice, chances are high that these qualities will be mirrored in other areas too, such as relationships, professional matters, or just our overall feeling about life.

If, on the other hand, we treat our practice half-heartedly, if we rush through it to get it done, if it feels like an obligation, and if we're always hard on ourselves, comparing and judging everything that we do, then this feeling is likely to be present in the other aspects of our life too.

The practice mindset

Often we go into our art practice with a mindset of lack. We need to get better because we are lacking skills. Isn't that a little disempowering? Not to say that we should stop having goals. Not at all. But is it possible to go into our practice with a focus on what is already there? Honoring all the steps on the path. Trusting and tuning into the process, not a specific result we think we have to achieve in a certain amount of time. Trusting in ourselves to be able to acquire more tools, a stronger expression, and a deeper connection to our inner being.

It is about surrendering versus pushing, and finding a healthy balance between the two. Sure, we need to push ourselves somewhere in order to grow. Excellence will be found outside of our comfort zone. In exploring and bending our boundaries. In crushing through limitations and fears.

But we also need to surrender. To the process, to our higher self, to our inner guidance, to the present moment. After all, the art just flows through us. It is not us. We are just a vessel. It is like yin and yang, feminine and masculine, earth and sky. Two opposite poles that are only strong when they are balanced and working together.

However, we might continuously find ourselves gravitating towards one side of the spectrum.

We may violently push ourselves into our practice, shedding chops after chops with a feeling of urgency and some kind of peer pressure, leaving the studio completely exhausted.

Or, on the other side of the extreme, we aimlessly noodle around, hoping that one day we will get better, but not really being aware of or believing in our own power and potential right now.

On that note, pushing does not have to occur in an aggressive way. Pushing can be very gentle, implying persistence, patience, inner strength, and a strong trust and belief in our power and potential. Pushing can be very quiet, and the intensity of pushing should not be measured in decibel or beats per minute. It's all about finding the balance, and tuning into a mindfulness about when it serves us

more to push, and when it serves us more to surrender.

This awareness actually helps us reach our goals healthier and happier – and more effective! – because because we are working with ourselves instead of against ourselves.

We won't go very far if we always judge ourselves for what is not there. If instead we develop a loving and forgiving relationship to ourselves, it will be much easier to overcome obstacles, emotionally, mentally, and technically. Be nice to yourself. Honor where you are, at any given moment. Honor your body, your mind, your emotions. This is where your strength lies. Show up for all of your thoughts, emotions, fears, inhibitions, weaknesses, and doubts. Own it.

So maybe you felt super strong yesterday, and practiced pullbacks for an hour. But today you feel kind of mellow. And that's totally okay. Accepting that you are exactly where you need to be is one of the most empowering things you can do to yourself. There are lessons to be learned everywhere we go. It's just a matter of choosing to take these lessons. Some lessons are more proactive and fiery, some are more tranquil and passive. Both combined lead to greatness.

This mindset frees you from any expectations of the past, future, other people, and yourself, and roots you into the present moment, even when that kid next to you in the jam circle just did 5-count inward wings as 32nd notes in 300bpm.

Practice is not a prescription

Often people ask me how often I practice, for how long, and what my practice method is. My answer here is: Don't worry about it. The success of your practice is not being determined by the variables of time and space. It is not about the measurable “how long”, “how often”, “how exhausting”, “how much sweat”, “how difficult”. It is about mindfulness and connection. No matter if you are a beginner or an experienced practitioner of the subject – meet yourself right where you are. If you allow yourself to spend your practice time (and in this instance I mean the time “doing the actual thing”) in a mindful, present, intentional way, then the practice is effective. If we move with integrity, it doesn't matter how fast we move. 20 minutes of focused dedication is much more effective and sustainable than eight hours of mindlessly shuffling and winging around. The practice is as effective as you make it, and if you listen and tune in to your inner guidance, you may find miraculous things that no teacher has ever told you before.

Now let's talk about the fact that practicing doesn't only refer to the time you spend in your tap shoes. It also involves watching footage, listening to music, talking to fellow artists and teachers, reading articles, and so on. If you fully dedicate yourself to these things, they are a valid and effective part of your practice. It doesn't even have to do with tap dancing! Every relationship needs a healthy balance of closeness and distance. If we spend all day, every day in our tap shoes, we will get fed up at some point. We can love something or someone as much as we do, but we still need to step away sometimes and check in with ourselves, and the other aspects of our life. To let some fresh air into our minds and prevent ourselves from mistaking dedication for closed-mindedness. To make our own experiences independently from the thing or the person, because that way, we will have new exciting

stories to tell when we come back.

I personally take it to the extreme and treat literally everything in my life as part of my practice. Because again, everything mirrors everything. The way I speak to people, the way I deal with problems, the way I dress myself, the way I walk down the street, the way I eat, the way I write notes, all the things I experience, everything will, to some degree or the other, show in my art.

I like how in yoga we often say that the way we approach things on the mat is the way we approach things off the mat. Replace the "mat" with tap shoes, a saxophone, a pencil, or a tennis racket, and the statement is still true. If you allow yourself to see how everything in your life is a mirror, chances are high you will feel a great sense of integrity, connectedness, and intention in the things you do.

Practicing is a mirror of how you apply yourself to life. In a way, the object of your practice becomes secondary. If we practice qualities such as integrity, intention, compassion, (self-)love, forgiveness, patience, and persistence in everything we do, we will not only create a joyful life for ourselves, but hopefully also make this world a little brighter. Because in the end it does not come down to how good we are at a particular skill, but how genuine and real we can be as humans.