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Body Mapping

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Meditation: An Introduction for Musicians

What is meditation?

“I’d love to try, but I just have no idea where to start!” is often the response I receive when talking with friends and colleagues about meditation. Because of the variety of different meditative traditions that have arisen around the world, each in their unique cultural contexts and with their own spiritual connotations and goals, it can be very difficult to know where and how to begin our own meditative practice. Meditation has numerous physical and psychological benefits, however, that make it a valuable thing to incorporate into our lives (as musicians and as just plain human beings!), as is evidenced by the increasing amount of scientific and clinical research into various mindfulness-based practices.

Meditation has been practiced in spiritual traditions, particularly in India, Tibet, China, and Japan, for thousands of years. Ideas related to these traditions first appeared in the United States in the writings of the transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau,¹ and are evident in many of the themes of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, but Eastern religions were not formally introduced to the Western world until the first Parliament of the World’s

¹ Eugene Taylor, “Introduction,” in *The Physical and Psychological Effects of Meditation: A Review of Contemporary Research*, Steven Donovan and Michael Murphy, 1-23 ([Petaluma, CA?]: Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1997), 2.

Religions, held in Chicago in 1893.² Swami Vivekananda, a Hindu monk and one of the most influential speakers at the conference, went on to teach meditation across the United States and found some of the first centers for meditative practice.³

Over the course of the 20th century, meditation made its way from the academic humanities to popular culture, artists, psychologists, and scientists, the latter of whom have sought to remove meditation from its cultural and spiritual contexts to better understand its physiological and psychological effects. The National Institute for Complementary and Integrative Health currently defines meditation as “a mind and body practice” which usually involves four elements: “a quiet location with as few distractions as possible; a specific, comfortable posture (sitting, lying down, walking, or in other positions); a focus of attention (a specially chosen word or set of words, an object, or the sensations of the breath); and an open attitude (letting distractions come and go naturally without judging them).”⁴ This definition encompasses Eastern traditions transmitted to the West, including Advaita Vedanta, Kundalini, Zen, and Vipassana, and practices that evolved in the United States over the last 50 years, such as Transcendental Meditation and the therapeutic Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy.

² “Chicago, 1893,” Parliament of the World’s Religions, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.parliamentofreligions.org/parliament/new-chicago-1893/new-chicago-1893>.

³ Taylor, 3.

⁴ National Institute for Complementary and Integrative Health, “Meditation: In Depth,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, last modified April 2016, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation/overview.htm>.

Why should I meditate?

Advances in technology (particularly the MRI and the fMRI) and in our understanding of the human brain and how it interacts with the body have helped scientists begin to study the effects of meditation on practitioners. Of particular interest to us as musicians are meditation's ability to improve focus and attention, stimulate empathy, and help regulate the negative physiological and emotional reactions associated with performance anxiety.

In a study published in 2006, expert and novice meditators engaged in a concentration meditation while under observation in a functional MRI (fMRI) scan. Instructions for the novice meditators defined this as “a state in which one tries to focus all one's attention on one object, keep it on that object, and bring it back to that object when one finds that one has been distracted.” The Tibetan name for this meditation, known to the experienced meditators, means “one-pointed concentration.”⁵ Participants were then presented with distracting recorded sounds, to test how meditative experience affects attention and focus. The experienced meditators demonstrated less activation in brain areas that indicate discursive thoughts than the novice meditators, and more activation in regions related to monitoring, which is “a form of metacognition that is said to evaluate the quality of the meditation, monitor and signal when attention leaves the object of meditation, and detect and signal present and future problems with concentration.”⁶ In other words, the experienced meditators were more able to maintain their concentration through distractions, and demonstrated enhanced awareness of the quality and direction of their attention, an important skill for performers who must keep a number of

⁵ J.A. Brefczynski-Lewis, et al., “Neural Correlates of Attentional Expertise in Long-Term Meditation Practitioners,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 104, no. 27 (July 2007): 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

different things in their awareness at all times and direct their attention to one object or another as the situation changes, while also allowing for possible distractions from the audience, other performers, or our own physical or emotional sensations.

One need not be an expert meditator (the above study defined an expert meditator as one with 10,000-54,000 hours of practice⁷) to experience improvements in focus and attention. In a 2009 study, participants who had no prior experience in meditation participated in four days of basic mindfulness meditation training for 20 minutes per day, which included focus on the breath and passive acknowledgement of other thoughts and sensations.⁸ After this brief training, participants showed improvement in attention-related tasks and executive processing efficiency,⁹ which includes cognitive functions “related to the inhibition of prepotent responses, shifting mental sets, monitoring and regulating performance, updating task demands, goal maintenance, planning, working memory, and cognitive flexibility.”¹⁰ For us as musicians, this means increased ability to choose how we react in stressful or high-pressure situations (rather than reacting out of evolutionary fight-or-flight instinct); to observe our own playing, singing, and mental state; and to take in and remember information about our performance and change our approach based on this information.

Meditation has also been shown to increase empathy. Researchers observed expert and novice meditators engaged in loving-kindness meditation in an fMRI. Loving-kindness meditation seeks to generate “a state in which an ‘unconditional feeling of loving-kindness and

⁷ Ibid., 2.

⁸ Fadel Zeidan, et al., “Mindfulness Meditation Improves Cognition: Evidence of Brief Mental Training,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 19, (2010): 598-599.

⁹ Ibid., 602.

¹⁰ David McCabe, et al., “The Relationship Between Working Memory Capacity and Executive Functioning: Evidence for a Common Executive Attention Construct,” U.S. National Library of Medicine, last modified March 2011, accessed December 1, 2018, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2852635/#S1title>.

compassion pervades the whole mind as a way of being, with no other consideration, or discursive thoughts.”¹¹ Meditators were then presented with emotionally-charged sounds to see if meditative experience affects empathic response. Experienced meditators demonstrated greater activation in brain regions critical for empathy,¹² indicating that practice of loving-kindness meditation can increase the strength of our empathic responses to stimuli. As musicians, our task is to generate various emotional states in ourselves and others, and the ability to voluntarily influence our own empathic responses can help us develop greater understanding and control of our ability to connect emotionally with others.

Finally, meditation can help us deal with that which plagues most musicians at some point or another: performance anxiety. Performance anxiety affects us physiologically, in triggering our evolutionary fight-or-flight response, and psychologically, in negative emotions and thoughts such as fear, anxiety, and feelings of inadequacy. In moments of stress, our sympathetic nervous system, a component of our autonomic nervous system, is activated. This raises our heart rate and releases the hormone adrenaline (among other things), and often results in shortness of breath and shaking. Our sympathetic nervous system is complemented by the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms our natural stress response, and which can be consciously activated through breathing. As many meditative practices use the breath as a point of focus, they naturally activate our body’s calming response.

Meditation has been used in therapeutic contexts to reduce negative feelings associated with stress and anxiety. Mindfulness-based stress reduction, a modern mindfulness technique combining meditation and yoga designed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and researchers at the University of

¹¹ Antoine Lutz, et al., “Regulation of the Neural Circuitry of Emotion by Compassion Meditation: Effects of Meditative Expertise,” *PLoS ONE* 3, no. 3 (March 2008): 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

Massachusetts, has been shown to regulate negative emotions in patients with social anxiety,¹³ and mindfulness meditation has proved effective in reducing generalized anxiety and depression and in reducing panic responses in patients with various anxiety disorders.¹⁴ Musicians who suffer from performance anxiety can implement similar practices using breathing and gentle, intentional motion to reduce their physical and emotional stress responses to performing.

Where do I start?

American Vipassana teacher Jack Kornfield says, “Daily meditation can become like bathing or toothbrushing. It can bring a regular cleansing and calming to your heart and mind.”¹⁵ Starting our own meditative practice does not need to be a daunting task. We can learn to meditate the same way we would develop any skill or habit: with consistent practice. Kornfield recommends designating a particular place and time to meditate each day. This place should be quiet with as few distractions as possible. Arranging your space to facilitate your meditative experience, by creating a small altar or selecting a few inspiring books to read before meditating, can help you get started. There is no need to meditate at a particular time of day. Whatever time is best for you and your schedule is perfectly appropriate; the important thing in building a meditative practice is to choose a time that is consistent from day to day.¹⁶ The period of time we set aside does not need to be long. Kornfield recommends 10-20 minutes for beginners and, as

¹³ Jordi Manuella, et al., “Mindfulness Meditation and Consciousness: An Integrative Neuroscientific Perspective,” *Consciousness and Cognition* 40, (2016): 69.

¹⁴ Jon Kabat-Zinn, et al., “Effectiveness of a Meditation-Based Stress Reduction Program in the Treatment of Anxiety Disorders,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 149, no. 7 (1992): 936-937.

¹⁵ Jack Kornfield, “Establishing a Daily Meditation Practice,” in *Breath Sweeps Mind: A First Guide to Meditation Practice*, ed. Jean Smith (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 109.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

discussed previously, we begin seeing positive effects of meditation after only a few days of brief, regular practice.

There are many different postures that we can use for meditation, including sitting (either on the floor or on a chair), lying down, and walking. The common thread between them is that we should choose a posture where we can remain in stillness for some time. The best way to do this is to sit at balance (or to move from standing balance, if you choose to practice meditation while walking). This allows our skeletal structure to deliver the weight of our bodies efficiently to the ground and/or chair, and prevents us from using excessive muscular tension, which can cause discomfort, pain, and distractions.

An open, non-judgmental attitude is a key aspect of meditation, and is important for us to cultivate as we begin our practice. Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki said,

When you are practicing zazen, do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop by itself. If something comes into your mind, let it come in, and let it go out... When you try to stop your thinking, it means you are bothered by it. Do not be bothered by anything.¹⁷

Thoughts, sensations, and the sounds of the world around us will appear in our minds as we meditate, and that is perfectly normal. The difference is, when we meditate, we do not hold on to the things that come up; we simply let them go, without being bothered by them or judging ourselves and the quality of our meditation, and return to our breath. Our breath is the easiest gateway to a meditative mind, and many practices—including yoga, vipassana, zen, and MBSR—begin with awareness of the breath. It helps to stabilize attention,¹⁸ and is a link that we can gently come back to when we find ourselves distracted.

¹⁷ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice*, edited by Trudy Dixon (Colorado: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1970), 17.

¹⁸ Joseph Goldstein, "Vipassana Meditation Instructions," in Smith, 117.

Sample Meditation

Note: This is a meditation that can be done in its entirety or in part before a performance or as part of a practice session. I use the capitalized word “Breath” in the sense of the Sanskrit word “prana”, and it can be replaced with “prana” or “energy” or variations thereof at the meditator’s discretion.

Find a balanced sitting position, close your eyes, and begin to notice your breath. Notice what the air feels like as it enters your nose. Is it warm, cold? Follow the air as it makes its way to your lungs. Feel your ribs expand, front and back, the slight raising of your shoulders as your body invites the air in. Follow the air on its way out. How does it feel as it leaves your nose? Sit for a time, noticing the sensations and the quality of your breathing.

Begin to notice how your body relates to the chair, to the floor. Feel how your weight flows into the chair and floor, and how they in turn provide you the support you need. The next time you breathe, do so through your feet. Draw the Breath up from the ground, through your feet and up into your legs. With each inhale, draw the Breath further up your legs, past the knees, into your thighs, pelvis, through the center of your torso, past the shoulders, neck, cheekbones, all the way to the top of your head. With each exhale, let the Breath you’ve drawn all the way up from the floor cascade out through the crown of your head.

When you’re ready, start to notice the space around your head (still keeping your eyes closed). Notice how your head relates to the rest of your body, balancing atop your spine, where it is in relation to your chair, the floor, the walls of the room. Breathe now through the top of your head, letting the Breath flow through your body in the opposite direction as before, from the

crown of your head down past your eyes, cheekbones, jaw, neck, shoulders, along the front of your spine, through the pelvis, into your legs, feet, dissipating into the floor with each exhale.

Bring your awareness to a point about two inches down and two inches in from your navel. This is your Center.¹⁹ Visualize its size and shape. How large is it? Does it have a color? Breathe either through the top of your head or through your feet, drawing the Breath to this point. With each inhale, draw Breath to your Center, and on each exhale let the Breath merge with, feed, and energize your Center. Notice how your Center changes as it grows in strength. Perhaps it has become larger, or the color is more vivid, or it emits a faint (or powerful!) glow. Continue breathing into your Center, channeling the energy of your Breath into that point.

Now imagine yourself holding your instrument or preparing to sing (while keeping your Center in your inclusive awareness). Breathe into your Center, and as you exhale, direct the Breath from your Center up the front of your spine and out through your voice, through your instrument, or through your arm and into your bow, and out into the room. Continue breathing into your Center—feeling the connection with the floor if you’re breathing through your feet, or the space around your head if you’re breathing through the top of your head—and on each exhale send the Breath from your Center through your instrument or voice and into the room. You can direct it to a certain point in the room, or let it simply float, diffusing into all the corners of the space.

When you’re ready, bring your awareness back to your body, feeling yourself at balance, maybe making some small motions to reawaken your body before gently opening your eyes.

¹⁹ For more ideas on centering as a tool adapted from sports psychology for musicians, see Don Greene, *Performance Success: Performing your Best Under Pressure* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40-45, 98-100.

Final Thoughts

Meditation has been practiced around the world for thousands of years. Its practice and the philosophies behind it have influenced many musicians and artists—including John Cage, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pauline Oliveros, and John Coltrane—and with advances in medical technology over the past 50 years, scientists have begun to quantify psychological and physiological effects of meditation that are also of interest to musicians. Meditation can help us improve our focus and attention, be more empathetic, and cope with performance anxiety. While building a regular meditation practice can seem like a daunting task, it doesn't need to be. Getting started can be as easy as closing your eyes and beginning to notice your breath...

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