

Workshop Pointers

- Always record your classes! AND take notes
- If you can, go back and listen/take MORE notes
- It can make the difference between remembering one thing and remembering 5 or 6.

MIND AND BODY ARE CONNECTED

We tend to divide the activities of playing into the physical and the mental:

- physical aspects
 - How we hold the instrument
 - Technique (finger/hand position)
 - Strength and flexibility
 - Repetition of movements of playing until they become automatic
- Mental aspects
 - Listening
 - Imagining how we want the music to sound
 - Connecting with listeners
 - Knowing how to find the notes we want to play
 - (Reading music - optional)
 - Memorizing tunes/songs

The idea of coordinating the mind and the body is not something most of us think about. We usually do one or the other: read, watch movies, study, or exercise. Playing music involves a combination of mental activity and complex physical movements. Working to coordinate mind and body can help make us practice more effectively.

Here are four concepts we use in Kokikai Aikido (a martial art) to help coordinate mind and body:

- Keep One Point
- Relax Progressively
- Positive Mind
- Correct Posture

Each of these principles coordinates mind and body in one of two ways: either by *bringing the attention of the mind to the body* or by establishing *an idea or concept*, which then changes how we move our bodies.

Here's a brief description of each of the four principles:

Keep One Point

One point is closely related to your center of balance. It's an imaginary point about two inches below your navel, within your abdomen, close to your spine. If you focus on this spot it can help you feel more calm, and make it easier to relax the rest of your body.

Relax Progressively

We all have habitual patterns of tension. Simply telling yourself to relax is not usually very effective. Instead, try relaxing a specific area of your body for a specific amount of time. Think about relaxing a little more today than yesterday. That's the idea behind "relax progressively."

Positive Mind

When we feel confident, capable and optimistic, those feelings can actually change our bodies and our minds. You can probably think of examples when your playing was strongly affected by your mood or mental outlook.

Correct Posture

Our posture affects our playing. Good posture makes it easier to move the body easily, in a relaxed manner. It reduces the likelihood of injury and makes playing itself more enjoyable.

Put It Into Practice

Try a difficult passage. Note where you have trouble.

Then do the same with coordinated mind and body: Just try focusing on one of these four principles while you play the same passage. (Don't overload your brain with trying to think about all four.)

You'll get instant feedback, even if you're moderately successful. You may find that your sound changes or that you have more ease in playing.

If you make a note of the changes and what you did, it will help you remember to keep working on coordinating your mind and body

ATTENTION and PAUSING

Attention: an aspect of practice we rarely think about:

- Attention is like a laser. A tool. Laser is made of light. But it can cut. So it is with attention: Something we make use of every day that can be **incredibly powerful when focused**.
- We want to use it really well

- We want to **practice bringing attention to bear on a challenge.**

Make a habit

- Use your attention in 5 or maybe 10 minute intervals.
- Beginning of practice is often when we're most rested and awake
- Many of us squander that mentally focused time in "warmups" - exercises that can be done mindlessly. Do you have to do warmups at that time?

Focus on a small, definieable, specific challenge:

- A difficult area of a tune, a tough rhythm, a chord progression, playing the tune in time
- Work on it using the practice pyramid:

But: **bring all your attention to bear:**

- Am I physically relaxed?
- What are my thoughts? (Are those thoughts helping me? Are they true?)
- How do my fingers feel?
- Listen deeply - what does it sound like?
- What is my rhythm? Is it even? What beats am I emphasizing and how much?
- What is my tone like? Can I make it sing?
- What changes am I in control of?

Pause after each repetition. Set yourself up. Start again

Do this for just 5 - 10 minutes. Then go on to the rest of your practice.

As you are practicing, if you come to something that is challenging or interesting, You can always use this method:

Stop. Set out a small segment of time - (even use a timer). And put ALL your ATTENTION to bear on what you're doing.

TAKING NOTES

As musicians, we make headway when we practice. It may be a lot or a little. We assume that tomorrow we'll be able to pick up right where we left off. The next day we sit down and we're a blank slate with no idea what we did yesterday. This is even more true if it wasn't actually yesterday.

A few written notes can save a lot of time, and keep us pointing toward a goal consistently enough to achieve it.

My own notes are brief. I might list a particular technical exercise, a tune name and what I was focused on, and maybe notes on my progress. It might look like this:

June 12 –

E string intonation. Tunes in F !!!

Le rêve du Québécois - string crossing B sect

I also make notes on particular tunes, often directly on sheet music or electronic PDFs. I may highlight tough passages so that when I come back to practicing the tune I can work on those sections first. I may write notes on the “fine tuning” of the tune: “Don’t speed up during B section,” or “Check transitions!”

If you know it’s for your own benefit, taking notes doesn’t have to be a burden. You can choose to take whatever type of notes appeal to you. You can change the type of notes you take or how you take them, as things change for you. You could use an app, electronic documents, or paper and pen. No matter what you choose, some form of note-taking is a powerful aid for practice.

“SLOWDOWNER” APPS

We’re used to so many apps and programs being available for free, but an app or program that can slow down music and allow you to set a loop that you can repeat is worth the price. For the cost of a set of strings or a tuner, you can have an amazing tool that can really inspire your playing.

Technology may be an impediment: most of the apps require you to have a computer, tablet or smartphone, and have the music available as a computer file or in your music/itunes library. This is a case where it’s really worth asking for some help if you need it.

Available Apps

The hands-down best program/app, highly recommended and used by countless musicians (including professionals) is **Amazing Slowdowner** from Roni Music. You can set loops, save them with names (“a section” “instrumental break”), slow them down or change keys. You can import a library of tunes and organize them in folders. The biggest downside of Amazing Slowdowner is that you can’t slow down YouTube videos - it will only slow down an audio file or (I’m pretty sure) music from a streaming audio service like itunes. It even allows you to set a space before it replays a loop, so you can reset your mental and physical “bearings.”

Music Speed Changer has the advantage of letting you slow down and loop youtube video. (from YouTube directly you can laboriously slow down $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ speed but it's very hard to loop). The down side of Music Speed Changer is that you can't save any of your music or loops, and the app version doesn't let you slow down from YouTube.

AudioStretch is an app that slows down, loops and changes pitch of tunes, giving you a waveform and even attempts to show the notes on a piano keyboard - this works much better for solo instruments. Unfortunately you can't save your loops or tunes in a library.

Some of the benefits of being able to listen to music slowed down and looped:

- Playing along with the "masters" can help you be inspired when you don't really feel like you sound as good as you wish you did. (Of course that happens every time you try something new!)
- Being able to slow down the masters lets you hear and imitate every nuance. It really helps you develop your ear as you can listen much more carefully when the music is slow.
- You can slow down **as much as you need to** until you can play beautifully and evocatively, relaxed, and confident.
- Being able to loop whatever section you want makes learning much quicker.
- Looping tunes and playing them back slowly is a great way to get better at learning by ear, at your own pace.
- You can even use a "slowdowner" app to help you with fast practice. Using the Practice Pyramid, you can loop a small enough section that you can play relaxed and in time, "fast" and "perfectly," or loop an entire section so you can practice playing along with "the whole thing" "fast" and not worry about mistakes.

Best Practice: Inspiration and Ideas for Traditional Musicians is full of ideas that will help you enjoy your practicing and help you make more progress. It's organized into 197 self-contained chapters. You can read one for inspiration whenever you sit down to play.

Available on Amazon.com or directly from the author judy.bestpractice@gmail.com

Appendix A – The Practice Pyramid*

The Practice Pyramid³⁰ is a very useful tool for efficient and effective practice. It lets you focus on key elements in your playing without becoming overwhelmed by the need to do everything at once.

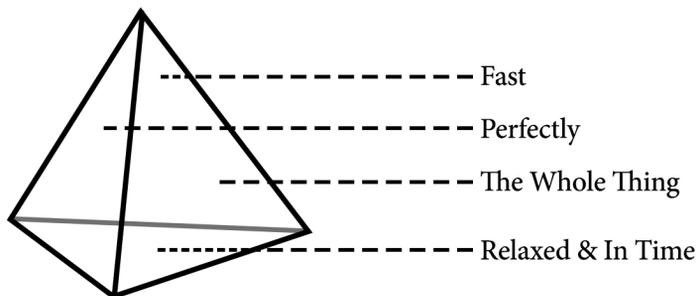
The Pyramid

Imagine a pyramid with a triangular base and three sides.

The base of the pyramid represents the foundation of your playing, the key elements that should always be present. The three sides represent variables that you can change, depending on what you want to work on.

The five key elements of the Practice Pyramid are:

- Fast
 - Perfectly
 - The Whole Thing
 - Relaxed
 - In Time
- } **Variables** – keep two, let the third go
- } **Constant** – foundation



When you play and practice, your goal should be always to play in time, and play relaxed. That's the base of the pyramid.

*The Practice Pyramid is adapted for trad from the Learning Diamond, from the book *Effortless Mastery* by Kenny Werner.

Then you can choose how to practice, depending on which of the three remaining elements you want to focus on. *You'll keep two, and let the third go.*

Definitions

Play in Time

If you don't already, make it a habit always to practice "in time" or "in rhythm." No matter whether you're playing fast or slow, keep the beat evenly, without slowing down, speeding up or hesitating – even when you make a mistake. Use a metronome.

There are times when you need to practice "out of time." Think of these as special cases or exceptions. To put it differently, when you're not playing in time make sure it is a decision, not an accident.

Play Relaxed

Whenever you practice, perform or play with others, make it your goal *always* to remain as relaxed as possible. When your body is relaxed, you're more able to pay attention, listen, move accurately and efficiently, and even think ahead. I sometimes call this *playing with relaxed attentiveness*, but "play relaxed" will do.

Play Fast

What you consider "fast" depends on your ability and your goals. If there's a particular speed you're aiming for, like a dance tempo, you might work to play at that tempo. On another day, "fast" might mean "faster than you usually play," somewhere outside your current range.

Play Perfectly

Go easy on yourself as to what constitutes "perfectly." Make a decision as to what is a reasonable challenge in terms of notes, dynamics, musicality or whatever is on your wish list. What you consider to be playing "perfectly" will change as you become more accomplished. That's OK.

Play the Whole Thing

Playing “the whole thing” means not just playing a few measures or notes. You may decide that “the whole thing” is the entire tune, the A section, an entire medley of three tunes, or something similar.

Using the Practice Pyramid

Here are your three practice scenarios:

Let Go of Playing Fast

Work on the whole thing, *as slowly as it takes* to play perfectly while staying in time and staying relaxed.

Let Go of Playing Perfectly

Play the whole thing fast. *Accept all your mess-ups*, stay in time and stay relaxed.

Let Go of Playing the Whole Thing

Play as short a section as you need to while playing perfectly and fast, staying in time and relaxed. You may only be able to play a few notes.

A Note on Playing Relaxed

We know intuitively that we play better when we’re relaxed. It’s my experience that people also learn more quickly when they are relaxed. The Practice Pyramid is an approach we can use to ***practice relaxing***, even as we work to hone our musical ability. Eventually, being relaxed while playing will become second nature, and feeling tense while playing will feel so strange that you’ll immediately notice and correct it.

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