

# On Effortless Mastery

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Nothing in music is hard, just unfamiliar.

— *Kenny Werner* —

AZ QUOTES



## Summary

1. The term "effortless mastery" is actually redundant because mastery *is* the effortless execution of music. It does not refer to how many things one can do but rather the quality with which one does anything. If something can be done perfectly, every time, without thought, it is said to be mastered. At performance time, music *plays itself* while the musician *observes*. Mastery is playing whatever you're capable of playing, every time, without thinking. That is why the great ones can do what they do every night without faltering. *It is that easy.*

## Key Takeaways

1. Mastery is comprised of two things:
  - a. Staying out of the way and letting music play itself: I accept whatever comes out. I accept it *with love*. I accept the good and the bad with *equal love*. Without the drama of needing to sound good, I play from an effortless space. This takes deprogramming and reprogramming
  - b. Being able to play the material perfectly every time without thought: I practice thoroughly and patiently until the *material plays itself*. The ego no longer terrorizes me. When the material is properly digested, it comes out in an organic way and manifests as *my voice*.
  - c. Effortless technique, effortless language, total acceptance of what comes out: these are the components of the "master space"
2. Innovation is the tradition in jazz. Jazz is more of a process of creativity, of spontaneity than a type of style
3. Effortless playing and listening (from love) is like breathing. It nourishes you without you even knowing it. What blocks listening is what blocks proper training: mental noise
4. Surrender, Fear, Ego & Consciousness
  - a. Even in European classical music and American jazz, we can witness something akin to the trance state. Artists who can enter this state are the most focused performers, the most accomplished at what they do, and they usually give us the most memorable concerts. We can remember such concerts as being an "experience." Perhaps it is such an experience that compels us to become musicians; it can be that life-changing. How does one achieve that level of musicianship – of *humanness*? How does one evolve into a riveting presence so worthy of praise? Limited goals, such as trying to impress people, find security, play "valid" jazz, and so on, block that goal. Surrender is the key, and the first thing to surrender is one of your most prized possessions: *your obsessive need to sound good!* This is a paradox that most people can prove through their own experience. Musicians who care too much, who want to sound too good and make an impression often fail to live up to their potential, they freeze with the desire to sound too good. But, there are times when we play and it doesn't really matter and you played great. You want to do it again but can't call on it every time. When I ask people in my clinics to contemplate this, 99% of them realize that they *played better when it didn't matter so much*. Think about it. What does that mean? *When you don't try as hard to be good, you play better*. It is a startling realization. Truly, your own



experience should prove to you that when you don't care, you play better.

This is the opposite of what has always been thought of as true. *By not caring, you play better.* But, how many people are willing to get up on stage, play their instruments, and sound awful? And then, after sounding awful, how many people could say, "I love myself"? It may sound like "New Age philosophy," but if a true acceptance of oneself – if not actual love – is present, the *fear of failure will be gone!*

- b. One truth for all players to contemplate is this: *learning new kinds of sophisticated jazz theory is not necessarily the key to freedom.* Once new theory is mastered, it is recited with the same dreary predictability as the old. If you are inhibited playing with the toys you have now, you will not play differently with new toys. True musical depth is not about better playing, but about more "organic" playing. It's very hard to let go in the combat of performance, but the exercises in this book will help you expand your "intuitive self." Over time, this intuition will emerge naturally without sabotaging the technical part of your performance. Assimilation into the whole is very much about "forgetting" one's self. People who meditate or do tai chi will recognize many of the principles in this text. Even to them, it may be a revelation to know that one can live in the meditative state while playing an instrument. The mind is the chief culprit in most playing problems, and so any discipline that is to control the mind is complementary to the process described here. Music can shoot through the musician like lightning through the sky if that music is unobstructed by thoughts. *Therefore, the elimination of thoughts is a very relevant issue*
- c. Too often we are conditioned to fear playing, we must have a method of study. Must practice surrendering to a larger, higher source. Scary at first but it is eventually liberating. As one moves beyond the acceptable to the inevitable, creativity flows. Personal power will increase manifold.
- d. There is an ocean. It is an ocean of consciousness, an ocean of bliss. Each one of us is a drop in that ocean. In that sense, we are all one – or as a famous American television commercial states, "we're all connected." Illusion would have us think that we are all separate entities, separate drops. But if that were true, we would all evaporate rather quickly. As we expand our limited selves into this infinite consciousness, we tap into a network of infinite possibilities, infinite creativity – great, great power. Carried by the waves of this ocean, we swirl past all limitations and maximize our God-given potential. Everything good that can possibly happen to us, from within and without, does. Our abilities expand beyond all reasonable limits, and we become a magnetic force for abundant light and all that that implies. We are all part of a universal game. Returning to our essence while living in the world is the object of the game. The earth is the game board, and we are the pieces of the board. We move around and around until we remember who we really are, and then we can be taken off the board. At that point, we are no longer the game-piece, but the player; we've won the game. As musicians/healers, it is our destiny to conduct an inward search, and to document it with our music so that others may benefit. As they listen to the music coming through us, they too are inspired to look within. Light is being transmitted and received from soul to soul. Gradually, the planet moves from darkness to light. We as musicians must surrender to the ocean of our inner selves. We must descend deep into that ocean while the sludge of the ego floats on the surface. We let go of our egos and permit the music to come through us and do its



work. We act as the instruments for that work. If we can live in this realization, we will constantly have deep motivation for what is played, never getting stuck in the ungrateful consciousness of good gigs/bad gigs, out-of-tune pianos, low fees, ungracious audiences, and so on. Instead, our minds will be consumed with what a very great privilege it is to be the one selected to deliver the message to others. We will no longer be caught in the mundane world of good music/bad music ("am I playing well?"). Instead, our hearts and minds will be focused on the task of remaining empty and alert to receiving this God-inspired information and translating it faithfully, without any coloration from us.

- i. *Hearkens back to "Finite and Infinite Games." Play for the sake of play, not to "win" or for any other reason*
- e. All search for sense pleasure is really a search for God. For oneness with self in all things
- f. Fear takes away the strength of what you are doing. Without fear of wrong notes, you would feel the body's craving for more air, and a new posture would emerge spontaneously. Players who have not been able to surrender are too serious, get stiff and move too much in order to try to show they are trying hard but masters make what they're doing look easy and simple (*note: finite players vs. infinite players*). It is the drawing of power of the inner self. It emerges when one has a true sense of oneself and one's power – at this point, the fear is gone and your true self can play effortlessly.
- g. Ultimately, musicians of the world must come to realize the potential of their calling. Like the shamans, we may serve as healers, metaphysicians, inciters, excitors, spiritual guides and sources of inspiration. If the musician is illumined from within, he becomes a lamp that lights other lamps. Then he is serving as a vehicle for the healing ocean of sound to wash over our planet and its people, healing what ails us. *Such music is truly important.* It is said that "only one who obeys can truly command." When the artist is immersed in service, giving himself up over and over again, another paradox occurs: *he is being seen by all others as a master*
- h. Buddhist teaching says there are five fears that block our liberation: fear of loss of life, livelihood, reputation, unusual states of mind, speaking before an assembly. I would also add fear of ghosts: fear by authority figures no longer present in our lives, but the echo of whose voice remains to control us (teachers, parents, so forth). Or it could literally be ghosts: the legacy of music left by the great masters. So many musicians are filled with too much awe for that legacy and never feel "worthy" of adding to it. The drive to assuage these fears derails the quest for mastery. Where does fear originate? From the mind? Yes, but not the "universal mind" or the "over mind" or the "collective unconscious." Rather, fear originates in our "little mind." One may call that little mind the ego – our limited "I" consciousness. It is the lens through which we perceive our separateness from each other. Separateness invites comparison and competition. This is where problems originate: he's younger than I, more talented, and so forth. By contrast, dissolution of the ego and union with the divine is the goal of Indian music. Oneness with the universal mind is called "sadhana" – the supreme act of ego surrender of merging individual identity into the object worshipped. The trance-dancer has the same goal



- i. One often thinks that what comes easily isn't good enough because, in your mind, *you're* not good enough! Fear of inadequacy causes you to ignore the ideas that want to come naturally. They seem too obvious or not hip enough. But they are, in fact, the right stuff. Trapped in thought, you cannot groove. "As soon as we reflect, deliberate, and conceptualize, the original unconscious is lost and a thought interferes."
  - j. Even if you successfully recreate someone else's sound, you may lack power and depth, since you are fearful of overstepping the bounds of that style (and thus appearing foolish). Without "fear of ghosts," you might make music of real depth. Without fear of sounding bad, you are free to be real. Fear lurks in the mind. If you want to be free, master your mind. You will be free of the world's turbulence as soon as you calm your inner thoughts
  - k. In fear, we expect; with love, we accept
  - l. Fear has ruined your practicing by *rushing you through the material*, rendering you unable to absorb anything. You try to cover too much ground every time you practice, barely skimming the surface of each item, and then moving on. You ignore the fact that you can barely execute the material, because you have no time to notice that. After all, there's so much to practice and so little time! It's frustrating – even though you're practicing all this stuff, your playing is not improved much. Nothing is mastered. Hearing yourself play the exercise correctly once or twice, you rationalize that you have it. The only problem is if you come back to it ten minutes later, you find that you don't! *It really doesn't pay to move on until something is mastered. A fearful mind won't allow you to concentrate and absorb. Even while focusing on one thing, the mind is exerting subtle or not-so-subtle pressure with the thought of the other things that need tending to. This creates a very anxious and insecure feeling. When you skim the surface, you acquire many bad habits with regard to tempo, fingering and other details. Repetition of these bad habits causes them to grow ingrained very more deeply into your subconscious, so that you are actually doing what I call negative practice. In this way, one hour of practicing is better than two, thirty minutes better than an hour, and no practicing at all would be preferable to that kind of negative practice. So, why do most of us move on when we haven't yet mastered anything? We are afraid that we won't become great players, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. You move on because you think there isn't enough time to learn all the things you need in order to become a great player. You move on, leaving the previous material in an unusable state. And you never become a great player. Your mind has played a great trick on you. You're caught in an energy field of angst.*
    - i. *Paradox: by slowing down, you speed up*
    - ii. *"I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times." – Bruce Lee*
  - m. Without need for self-validation, talent and acquired knowledge flow naturally. You must get to the inner space where you can practice, play, listen, compose, etc. with utter detachment
  - n. Often the fear comes from starting, not practicing. Promise just 5 minutes of practice and see where you go from there
5. Fundamentals of Mastery



- a. The taming of the mind, the dissolution of the ego and the letting go of all fears can only evolve through *patient practice*. There is nothing worth attaining on this or any other planet that doesn't take practice. As you do this, you become aware of another "space."
- b. I began to really appreciate jazz and all its great artists. For the next few years, I tried to do what most music students do: imitate the masters, not only in playing, but in mind and speech. Most of my friends were concerned with learning the language of jazz without sacrificing individuality. Unfortunately, this prevented some of them from adequately learning the language
  - i. *All must first imitate the greats, master the foundations, before being able to move beyond the foundation and innovate, developing one's own style in the process.*
- c. Looking at it this way resolves a longstanding controversy between technique and creativity. One camp says, "I don't want to absorb too much technique, too much language, because it will squelch my creativity." Some people are afraid to learn too much for fear of losing their soul. But that doesn't hold up. What could the poet or playwright write without command of language? Composer Donald Erb says that if your talent can't stand a little training, it must have been pretty fragile to begin with. The other camp states, "I play bebop well, therefore I am an artist." But that doesn't hold up either. Can you say, "I speak English well, therefore I am an artist's?" Of course not. It all depends on what you say with language.
- d. The "5-finger practice" allows you to practice all day joyfully, pressure free. Train so that you just "watch" as your body plays automatically. Observing, not doing. This simple, quick practice is so deceiving but it allows you to stretch and grow further than your limited consciousness could ever do and make you a better player. This moves you beyond your ego, your consciousness and into the spiritual. In the course of working with music students of all ages, from the amateur to the professional, I have found many sincere but ego-ridden musicians. As I was, they are defeated by self-centeredness, and lack of vision and purpose. And, most important, they don't know what music is, who they are, and what they are really doing here.
- e. Too many teachers kill their student's magic through monotony. Never filter out this magic through over training or rote repetition
- f. The original purpose of music was worship, divine intelligence, and basic communication. Music intoxicated the human soul. It was, according to ancient legend, the song of angels that induced the unwilling soul to enter the body of Adam. In every way, music is our bond between the material and the eternal.
- g. Language is the retention of rhythm without pitch. In this way, poetry was born of music. Distilling poetry of its rhythm, we have prose. So it can be said that all language is derived from music. Music can put a baby to sleep or inspire a soldier in war
- h. We are made up of vibrations. And thus, all things can be said to have music in them
- i. An effective way to practice losing consciousness is to look at someone else directly in the eyes (or your own eyes in a mirror) and play your piece. Get totally absorbed and let the instrument play itself
- j. The only thing that's really important is your next breath. We lose sight of reality very easily because of the little dictator in our heads: the mind. Our mind is always



- feeding us messages: I must sound good, this is the right music that is the wrong music, and this is valid jazz that is politically correct jazz. The mind is always supplying a steady stream of these illusions or limitations. They don't happen to be true, but they prevent you from seeing or hearing truth.
- k. Artists take all the technology, all the language, and *say something*. They express something very deep in their soul, or their deepest thoughts, political statements, love of homeland, love of self and of others, or just something that *needs to be said!* Maybe they're just having fun. Such people are not caught up in the petty issues of the day, but keep their eyes fixed on the truth as they know it. They may be visionaries, luminaries that light the way for the rest of us. They give us art from the soul, or the genitals, or from whatever drives them
  - l. True role of teachers: Nachmanovich makes a great statement: "To *educate* means to draw out or evoke that which is latent: education then means drawing out the person's latent capacities for understanding and living, not stuffing a (passive) person full of preconceived knowledge." Therein lies the reason why so many are overwhelmed, as described in the previous chapter. They're very likely to be "stuffed with preconceived knowledge" rather than having their latent capabilities drawn out
  - m. "You must be nothing but an ear that hears what the universe of the world is constantly saying within you." – Rabbi Dov Baer of Mezritch
  - n. There is a place inside each of us where perfection exists. The genius, God, lives there. All the creative possibilities of the universe are to be found there. It is the innate ability of each of us to be God, to behave with extreme dignity, to conduct our business in a righteous manner, and to channel an endless stream of life-enhancing ideas and celebratory sounds for the upliftment of mankind. This joyful noise is the sound of the Supreme Being manifesting through us. If we surrender our desires, we will hear it. At first it will seem distant, like the sound of the ocean when you put an ear to a conch shell, but with practice, one can hear the divine "unstuck sound" and become enveloped by it. The outer music is then imbued with the light of the universe and its great transforming power. A most worthy goal is to live one's life and perform all one's duties from this inner space. Out of the fullness of this presence of mind, disturbed by no ulterior motive, the artist who is released from all attachment must practice his art. From this space, there is great compassion, and great love, as well as great detachment. A person becomes the supreme enjoyer, observer, and doer. His involvement in life is total. He fully participates in the world, yet is not ensnared by it. There is no fear, because he is not attached to the results of his actions. Practice takes no patience, since there is no burning need to reach a goal. There is simply the celebration of the doing, the learning, the achieving and enjoying. To be sure, he experiences the entire range of emotions, but he is not attached. Therefore, he can live his life and make his moves in harmony with his inner self and the outer universe. He frequently receives intuition about what to do next, and he follows it fearlessly. Paradoxically, detachment causes his actions to have great purpose and result in great success. The abundance of the universe tends to rain on such a person; however, if it does not, that too is all right. Detachment is an essential quality for one to become established in this space. Expectations create agitation in the mind, and then merging with one's self is not possible. The great Siddha Yoga master, Swami Chidvilasananda has said, "expectation exists when there is fear." The fear of not



getting what we want is predominant in Western society, but the never ending quest to satisfy “needs” masks our deepest desire: oneness with the divine force. The ego refracts the pure light of One and creates the illusion of many, and we seek union in the pursuit of externals. We think that if we have enough of what we want, we will be safe. But from the inner space, one realizes that everything one needs and desires already exists within. Christ said “First seek ye the Kingdom of God and all else will be added.” He also said, “The Kingdom of Heaven lies within.” I take those statements to mean that our true fulfillment is to be found in the Kingdom, and that Kingdom lies within ourselves. The Inner Space is the place where joy, pleasure, and fulfillment – world and otherwise – are available in unlimited supply. Acceptance of these gifts allows the flow to increase. Performances given from this state are said to be greatly inspired, leaving their audiences profoundly moved. A concert given by a performer who has attained this state is regarded as an event not to be missed.

- o. As an artist, one would want to transcend the conscious mind, where all the noise resides, change the negative messages that have been stored in the subconscious mind and become attuned to the super-conscious mind. That is where inner perfection may exist. Changing the messages in the subconscious is a matter of steady self-effort and patient reprogramming. Bill Evans calls this space the [universal mind](#). I believe that all people are in possession of what might be called a universal mind. Any true music speaks with this universal mind to the universal mind in all people. Inspiration may be a form of super-consciousness, or perhaps of subconsciousness – I wouldn’t know. But I am sure that it is the antithesis of self-consciousness. The highest state a musician can be in is a *selfless state*. Just as a river bed receives the great waters, we receive inspiring ideas. For many, becoming such a channel is little more than a myth or wishful thinking. Artists often have trouble getting out of their own way, and they must therefore struggle. They are often swept away by a river of mental and emotional activity. They are drowning in feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and anxiety – the battle is mistake for a holy war and romanticized. But the struggle is simply with their ego. What would be an ecstatic act becomes as much fun as paying the monthly bills!
- p. One of the attractions of art is the possibility it affords of opening the heart, of being exposed to a level of inspiration not usually experienced. It excites and delights. People all over the world have sought this experience in many ways. Some seek it by sailing or climbing mountains, and others by shooting heroin or eating sugar. With heightened senses from drugs, John Coltrane was able to milk the ecstasy off each note. But after the effects of the drug wore off, the window always closed, making the natural state feel dry and intolerable. Eventually, for John Coltrane, the search led to no drugs. Toward the end of his life, his path had evolved into meditation, diet, and spirituality. The ultimate security one seeks can only be found within. I play music from this space. The longer I play, the deeper into the ‘space’ I go and the quieter my mind becomes. Other issues seem less important. I focus deeper and deeper in the moment. Inspiration and ideas start to flow through me. The execution of the music becomes automatic. I find myself resting more and more as the music progresses. When it reaches the point of happening by itself, I am able to play all night. In fact, I



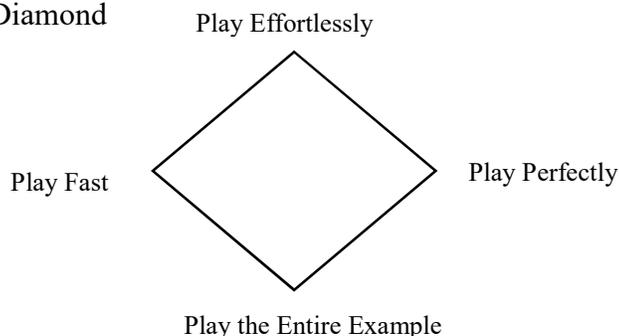
- have trouble stopping! I find that I love playing more now than when I was a kid, and the music coming out is more than I could have hoped for!
- q. God wants us to feel *that good* all the time. That power has provided a nectar within our very own Selves. I capitalize “Self” because I was taught to capitalize the name of God. That’s where I have come to believe He/She lives, in that inner space inside me. If we would just stand still and quiet ourselves long enough to sense that power, we would come to know an ecstasy that lasts. We must decide that it’s more important to surrender to the space and to love what it gives than to play well. Once that decision is made, music will open herself to us and reveal all her secrets. We will experience waves of joy. Then we will become beacons that can light the way for others, and our mission will truly become important.
  - r. How can we retain the bliss of freedom as we approach our instrument? *We must let go of all desires and focus on love.* To have the nectar flow through us, we must honor our inner being, and practice receiving what is being given. We must practice and strengthen this connection daily. We may even have to go outside of music to do it. This is really important, because playing, being so addictive, pulls us easily from the true goal and draws us back into more mundane realms.
  - s. “Do not fear mistakes, there are none.” – Miles Davis
  - t. As you improvise from an expanded consciousness, you discover that, in fact, *there are no wrong notes!* Appropriateness and correctness are products of the mind. Trying to live within those imaginary guidelines inhibits the flow. There is a Zen saying, “Truth starts as heresy, grows into fashion, and decays into superstition.”
  - u. It’s the inspiration itself we crave. When a person acts with complete confidence, even for insane purposes, it fills a void in us. Charismatic individuals make their followers do insane things by the force of their personalities. It proves the point that the force of a person’s will, of his self-acceptance, can be so strong that he can change the view of the masses
  - v. I never call myself modern or traditional, in or out, new or used, because I prefer not to be hemmed in by rigid definitions.
    - i. *Same as George Marshall – he was neither liberal nor conservative, but for what he felt was right*
  - w. Intellect has to surrender to instinct when it’s time to play
  - x. Become the master you already are...right now, in this moment. It is the truth that you are already perfect. Surrender to this truth. You are what you think
  - y. How well should the material be learned? I compare this to a tightrope walker in the circus. He has to learn to walk the rope so well that he could never make a mistake. It has to be easy for him to do it, no matter how hard it looks to the audience. If it is easy, he will perform perfectly every time without much effort. On the other hand, if he learned to walk the tight rope the way some of us have learned to play, he’d be dead by now.
    - i. *That is what many people can’t accept – the level of focus and dedication needed to truly absorb and embody the lessons, verbatim.*
  - z. Must view things through the lens of familiar/unfamiliar rather than easy/difficult. Must practice to the point that music becomes easy, familiar. That’s the secret. Stay with one exercise until mastery has been achieved.



- aa. When one masters something, practicing it becomes refreshing, nourishing, rejuvenating. Martial arts requires great concentration rather than strength. To focus the body's energy into one act, there is no *extraneous tension*. That's the key. Most musicians play while holding tension in parts of their bodies that don't need to be tense. That tension is the result of their basic relationship to playing: a pattern of struggle. In karate, to break a board, you have to be very focused and very relaxed. That doesn't seem like a contradiction. How can you be very relaxed and break a board? You have to be so focused that your movement happens by itself. There is a great tension, but it is purposeful tension focused exactly where it is needed. You must have the faith that once you start moving, *it's going to happen*. If there is any doubt, the thing that will break will not be the board. If there is fear before the act, that cracking sound by might be your bones. Focusing on that level is achieved by absolute relaxation. We're not talking about the kind of relaxation you experience slouched in a chair watching a football game. We're talking about *relaxed focus* – having the discipline to perform arduous tasks while remaining soft and supple on the inside, as muscles not needed for the task are at rest, and the mind is tranquil. This is the intent and spirit of yoga. If you center yourself before approaching the instrument, your body will discover this efficiency instinctively.
- bb. I have come to the point where I have simply decided that effortlessness would be my prime consideration, that anything not played from an effortless place *is not worth playing*. I don't get my technique from studying technique. I get it from *letting my hands and arms find their way without my interference*. In doing so, I have unwittingly connected with the wisdom of the ancients. As I now read the writings of the great sages, I realize that I am on the same path, having the experiences they describe. Effortlessness allows us to become our own teachers, paving the way to mastery. If you get nothing else from this book, hopefully you'll at least walk away with the realization that effort gets in the way of great playing. *Effort and/or lack of preparation blocks true mastery*.
- cc. Great patience and objectivity emanate from a calm, uncluttered inner space
- dd. As surely as one practices an instrument, one must practice the implementation of wisdom
- ee. Need to stay focused on the space and not on the playing
- ff. Mastery is being able to play a piece perfectly without thought
- gg. The real question is not what to practice, which can be found everywhere, but how to practice
- hh. The inability to focus leads to the same dysfunctions year after year. Most people would rather deal with old habits than change
- ii. It takes 10 years to fully absorb a good lesson
- jj. Surrender is the greatest practice. Through surrender you'll receive more than you ever dreamed of. Every spiritual teaching confirms that *it is better to give than to receive*. This is a well-known but little-followed teaching. By giving as much as you can to something, you become a channel to receive. The Christian bible also says, "I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his work." I feel the same way about my solos. Whether you believe in the Father or not, this is the principle of effortless action: *Let the higher power play the music!*



- kk. Don't let the light of your search dim. Take a course, or a workshop, or surround yourself with people who are fighting the same battle you are.
- ll. Be open to the possibility that rituals can restore your power. Rituals are the indispensable tool for nurturing our higher selves. Society has become weaker for lack of them
- mm. Learning Diamond



- i. Play effortlessly – this one consideration is more important than the others. If the example isn't practiced from the effortless space, you can't be sure you've mastered it. So no matter what you are practicing, we will agree on this consideration. However, the other three corners of the diamond are interchangeable
- nn. *Mastery will overtake you in the shortest possible fashion if your practicing is limited to only what you can do in that space!* Your next practice should be a continuation of your last. If you can't play what you did last time, start over *as if you hadn't done it the first time*. The feeling that you should be playing more should be ignored! Know that the level of concentration you are employing is changing your playing in the fastest possible way! That is why learning to work from the space is so important: you have to reach a zone where time is timeless and effort is effortless, and becoming great is not important! The practicing may lack instant gratification, but your overall progress will be undeniable.
- oo. To summarize, the way you would practice under this system is to:
  - i. Try it once, notice the glitch;
  - ii. Take your hands off the instrument;
  - iii. Take a deep breath and go back to the space;
  - iv. Approach the instrument with detachment again; and
  - v. *Try less*
- pp. The greats in our music don't totally improvise from moment to moment. They are actually playing rehearsed lines from moment to moment improvising their juxtaposition. Like any human being, a master gets in the habit of using the same phrases. This doesn't sound redundant in his hands, but identifies his voice
- qq. You can free your mind from superficial thoughts by surrendering the need to accomplish anything while practicing. Play with the thought that it is not necessary to be a great player. If you don't really feel that this is true, then just pretend that it is. I know, of course, that you care. I care, but as I'm about to practice or play, I give myself the message that nothing matters. Imposing fewer conditions on your practicing disarms the ego and brings you into the moment



- rr. The Cycle: Just when you think you understand it all, it will change again, and you will feel more bewildered than ever. You will go through this cycle many times: holding the space, losing the space, relishing the space, hating the space. The more times you go around, the more hip you become to the game. It is a game or a play, and if you understand that, you can witness all the phases you go through with more compassion.
  - ss. Understand that progress is not linear. It zig-zags, two steps forward, one step back. This happens with anything you practice. However, you can view a step backwards as an opportunity to start over. This is always a blessing in disguise. Plodding on the same path drives it deeper into the subconscious, making it more *unconscious*, like breathing
  - tt. The pinnacle of development in a human being is the full expression of his animal, intellectual, and spiritual nature
  - uu. He who gradually progress along the path of music, in the end attains the highest perfection
  - vv. Nothing changes externally but the new inroads you make in your belief structure precedes the outer changes and are absolutely responsible for everything. Begin your new programming now, have patience, and the seeds will grow into new inner and outer gifts
  - ww. In his book, *The Path of Least Resistance*, Robert Fritz writes, “Once a structure exists, energy moves through that structure by the path of least resistance. In other words, *energy moves where it is easiest to go.*” That explains the recurring failures that I have experienced in my life. Failure and despair were *the path of least resistance!* If you are building new patterns of success in your life, BE PATIENT. There is a time delay between planting new messages and their coming to fruition. A farmer does not go into his fields to tug on the shoots of his crops. He knows that growth happens in its own time. All you can learn is to continually detach from the results more and more
6. The 4 Steps to Deprogram/Reprogram Oneself:
- a. Step one introduces you to the inner self. It is a kind of meditation, a sharp contrast to the space people usually play in. *You must surrender the need to sound good.* Otherwise, you can’t really let go. Simple, but not easy! Learn a way of attaining inner balance and approach your instrument while in that space. The first two steps you observe all the thoughts and pressures connected with your instrument
  - b. Step two is the retention of that awareness while the hands explore the instrument in a free improvisation. I don’t mean the style of free jazz, but the intent. Your hands are free to wander, *without your conscious participation.* Again, this is only possible if you can release the need to sound good for a few moments. Imagine you could step out of your body and see the back of your head. Then step back again and see the back of both heads. Keep doing this until you see a row of heads in front of you. It will feel although you are sending your consciousness to the back of the room. This is an old technique for slipping into meditation. Your mind will get quiet, and you might feel a bit high. You will also find that you are not able to control your playing from that state. With your mind way behind your body, put your hands on the instrument. Your hands have no choice but to move freely and independently. You will then hear and receive the sound with the thought, “*That is the most beautiful sound.*”



- c. If steps one and two are analogous to crawling, step three is beginning to walk. In step three you will learn how to do simple things from this consciousness. The natural space you develop forms a foundation from which you relearn how to play. In this step, music begins to play through you in intelligent form. You start to experience what wants to be played, and what *you can comfortably play*. You learn to stay within yourself and not be seduced by your ego. Just as the space established by your natural connection to your instrument and sound, it now establishes what can be played effortlessly over form, time, changes, written music or whatever. It will be humbling to discover your true level of play. But it will also be the start of becoming real, and your playing will be built on more solid ground. Leaving the ego out of playing will remove the drama of trying to play what *you wish you could play*. The space itself is the teacher, and life becomes centered around learning to connect with the space. As stated before, nothing in music is hard, just unfamiliar. Once you are familiar with something, it is no longer difficult. This is where step 3 can be humbling. Remember that mastery was defined as the perfect, effortless execution of whatever you are playing. Whatever you know on that level will manifest when you play from the space. *The humbling part is finding out how little you really do know from there*. Believe it or not, this is really good news. It finally explains the difference between you and the masters. It isn't race, religion, size, shape, or even talent. It is how deeply the material is known. Step 3 exposes all the glitches and gremlins in your knowledge that have been sabotaging your playing. The technical reasons for why you don't swing or burn, for why you lack fluidity or can't create on the level of your desires are exposed to you. Consider this equation: *the effort it takes for you to perform music equals the distance between you and mastery*. This is get real time. It is a soul-searching inventory of what we have learned and what we haven't: of what we own and what we *think is ours*. This inventory should be taken as dispassionately as if checking on our supply of groceries or toilet paper. We just want to find out what works and what doesn't, and design our practice accordingly. This is why we have been cultivating detachment in the previous steps. We need to detach so that we can be honest without becoming depressed. In summary, *step 3 is about doing what you can do and no more. The most honest way to play is to stay out of the way and accepting what happens*. In doing so, you may allow deeper feelings to find a voice; or, because there are no barriers between you and the inner self, you may be able to express pure consciousness, so that we may have a look inside ourselves. Build this bridge from the finite to the infinite.
- d. In step 4 you begin a process of change and growth. Built on the solid foundation of the first three steps, with detachment and calm, and with self-love, you begin practicing things that can't be played effortlessly. Not only do you practice from this space, but you don't assume you've mastered anything until *it plays itself from that space*. Step 4 will help you acquire a taste for absorption into a subject, rather than skimming uselessly over many subjects. The discipline of patience overtakes you as you wait in a detached way for *mastery to occur* on what you are practicing. Every practice session becomes a link in a chain, a patient process that moves you toward your goal. This practicing has to be very focused, very intentional. The length of time you practice must be limited to the length of time you can remain in the space. Then you must STOP! Or you will compromise the deliberateness of the practice. In this



way, five or ten minutes of practice is preferable to two hours of rambling.

This is important: *the player must be willing to put the instrument down often*. This could mean releasing the instrument after each repetition, if necessary. He will find that if he play since or twice and releases the instrument, takes a deep breath and starts again, the very next time will be easier and more familiar, as the information “seeps in.” Though he is drawn towards effort, by stopping, he retreats into the stillness and guides his technique into effortlessness. His ego will seduce him into trying harder, but *he should actually try less the next time*. Perfection is something you surrender to. It overcomes you. When ready to resume practicing, one should go in the opposite direction mentally. Instead of wanting to do better, the musician might even think, “*I hope I play it wrong!*” As weird as that sounds, such a thought may trick the mind into letting go, resulting in surprising ease of execution. I cannot over-emphasize enough that although your practicing seems unbearably slow, your playing really takes off! That kind of concentration and infinite patience makes the act of playing feel like a release. You feel as if you were riding a bicycle with the wind at your back. It may seem as if *someone is playing for you while you’re watching!* Don’t judge your progress by daily measure, but notice improvement in your playing over time. More maneuverability, more freedom, and more creativity will result

1. *Slow down in order to speed up*

- e. You must have a “secret compartment” in your day of five, ten or twenty minutes. It could be several pockets of five minutes each. These compartments are reserved only for practicing from this effortless space. If you are working on steps one, two, or three, then these times are reserved for that. If you have decided on a step 4 exercise, then you would get into the space and consciously work on that for a small length of time. After those few minutes, you could close that secret compartment and move on through the other realities of your day. In this way, you will be effecting fundamental changes in your playing that will cause other things in your musical life to improve. Enter your secret compartment and for that time, let all deadlines and pressure cease to be. The only thing that matters is the quality of your focus and concentration. The superior concentration you build will bleed into your gigs and other practice responsibilities. You will notice, after some time, that even when you’re not practicing in the space, you are almost in it anyway. Even though you have to learn something on deadline, you are much more focused while doing it and much more successful in absorbing what you’re practicing. Eventually, there will be no difference in states of mind. To approach your instrument for any reason will inspire calm, focus, inner connection, and great concentration
- f. This absolute consciousness will pay off in a big way later on. You will eventually retain this state throughout every phase of practice and play. That is why it is extremely important to experience it fully from the beginning
- g. It is impossible to be self-conscious and totally involved in the music at the same time. Consciousness of the self is a barrier between the player and the instrument. As I forget my own presence, I attain a state of oneness with the activity and become absorbed in a way that defies the passage of time
- h. As much as possible, imagine someone else is doing the playing for you, while you are resting. This develops the ability to detach from controlled playing so that creation may manifest itself, using you as the vehicle, yet unimpeded by you. Step



two allows you to appreciate what's coming out as if you were the listener, not the player. As I've stated many times, this level of consciousness is the goal. It is the true goal of art and music disciplines. In *Zen in the Art of Archery*, the master explains to his student the value of detachment: "The right art – is purposeless, aimless! The more obstinately you try to learn how to shoot the arrow for the sake of hitting the goal, the less you will succeed in the one, and the further the other will recede. What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen."

- i. In all the steps, and in all forms of practice, one should *remove one's hands from the instrument often*. I can't stress this strongly enough. That is the only way to go back to the space, or to find out if you've left the space. You need to step back and regain a perspective. The periodic act of releasing the instrument from your grasp also sends a message of detachment. Remember: *you don't need this instrument!* Paradoxically, the more you feel as though you can walk away at any time, *the more powerful your playing becomes!* This is the essence of step 2. Moving around the instrument without trying, without caring. Your feeling for sound and touch will be revitalized. We have to reprogram the urge to control. We are so used to analyzing everything that we play in narrow, unforgiving terms. Some people think this is dedication and humility, but it is just plain inhibition. There is a very positive way to analyze what you play and that *analysis should not come during the playing, but well after the whole experience is over*. Music should occur totally devoid of thought. Nachmanovich says, "Fear of failure, and frustration; these are society's defenses against creativity." I say, "*It is better to make bad music from a liberated state than to make reasonably good music from a state of bondage.*"
- j. Play notes with the abandon of a fool

## 7. Meditation

- a. 5 thoughts to help get into the space
  - i. Thought 1: I am a master. Send that down the river. I am a master. See it on the sailboat...sailing off into the sunset. Imagine the sun is the center of your heart and the boat is sailing towards it. On the boat is the precious cargo: I am a master
  - ii. Thought 2: music is easy. Send that thought sailing peacefully down the river...toward the sunset...into the ocean. Music is easy
  - iii. Thought 3: I play music effortlessly. Send that down
  - iv. Thought 4: I play music masterfully
  - v. Thought 5: Every note I play is the most beautiful sound I've ever heard
- b. A true master is not just master of technique or language, but of himself. He can sit serenely in the center of that space while performing his actions to perfection. This is a state of selflessness and absolute concentration called *Samadhi* by Hindus and Buddhists. Meditation is the tool most often used to achieve this state. Once *Samadhi* is achieved, *one may perform all actions in that state*. In a conversation I had with Totos Thielemans on the subject, he referred to it as "ground level zero."
- c. A quiet mind allows the artist to tap into the wellspring of Divine Music within. Having experienced that state, all other goals seem insignificant. When you do the meditations in this book, notice if you feel a quieting of the mind and/or a feeling of expansiveness. It is from there that we must learn to play. The goal is to get beyond



- the mind, that noisy little stream of thoughts, and merge into the ocean of consciousness. From there, you experience an *absence of things* – an absence of effort, of caring, the absence of desire or of needs. Things become quite simple. You are making conscious contact, forming an informational highway, with the higher, or inner self. This is the spiritual connection that many artists speak of as the primary force in their art. When one is motivated by a deeper sense of purpose than just making “good music,” one reaches greater heights
- d. Affirmations are statements used for creating new, positive results. They can be valuable tools for reprogramming. Affirmations are messages given over time. They may be true, but they don’t have to be. I like to think of them as statements of truths yet unrealized. In this way, I can grow to accept the truth they contain
  - e. Mental health is restored when you stay in the moment – playing from this space is rejuvenating, healing
8. Paradoxes
- a. It is said that “only one who obeys can truly command.” When the artist is immersed in service, giving himself up over and over again, another paradox occurs: *he is being seen by all others as a master*
  - b. So, why do most of us move on when we haven’t yet mastered anything? *We are afraid that we won’t become great players, and that becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.* You move on because you think there isn’t enough time to learn all the things you need in order to become a great player. You move on, leaving the previous material in an unusable state. *And you never become a great player.* Your mind has played a great trick on you. You’re caught in an energy field of angst.
    - i. *Paradox: by slowing down, you speed up*
  - c. Nothing is so inhibiting as *needing to write something brilliant.* You always want to do well but the recurring paradox is that you have a much better chance of doing well if you let go of the anxiety and just get on with it
  - d. There is a place inside each of us where perfection exists. The genius, God, lives there. All the creative possibilities of the universe are to be found there. It is the innate ability of each of us to be God, to behave with extreme dignity, to conduct our business in a righteous manner, and to channel an endless stream of life-enhancing ideas and celebratory sounds for the upliftment of mankind. This joyful noise is the sound of the Supreme Being manifesting through us. If we surrender our desires, we will hear it. At first it will seem distant, like the sound of the ocean when you put an ear to a conch shell, but with practice, one can hear the divine “unstuck sound” and become enveloped by it. The outer music is then imbued with the light of the universe and its great transforming power. A most worthy goal is to live one’s life and perform all one’s duties from this inner space. Out of the fullness of this presence of mind, disturbed by no ulterior motive, the artist who is released from all attachment must practice his art. From this space, there is great compassion, and great love, as well as great detachment. A person becomes the supreme enjoyer, observer, and doer. His involvement in life is total. He fully participates in the world, yet is not ensnared by it. There is no fear, because he is not attached to the results of his actions. Practice takes no patience, since there is no burning need to reach a goal. There is simply the celebration of the doing, the learning, the achieving and enjoying. To be sure, he experiences the entire range of emotions, but he is not attached. Therefore, he can live



- his life and make his moves in harmony with his inner self and the outer universe. He frequently receives intuition about what to do next, and he follows it fearlessly. Paradoxically, detachment causes his actions to have great purpose and result in great success. The abundance of the universe tends to rain on such a person; however, if it does not, that too is all right.
- e. When Miles Davis approached the microphone, he focused himself into that inner space before playing the first note. There would frequently be long silences between his phrases. In that time, you could see and feel him re-centering himself. That is very rare in jazz musicians today. That practice has the paradoxical effect of heightening people's awareness and increasing the intensity of the moment. Miles Davis had the audience transfixed *before he played the first note!* Likewise, when Vladimir Horowitz played, you could see absolute stillness and concentration as he "watches his hands" play the piece. To achieve this level of focus, there is no room for a cluttered mind; no room for doubt or worry. You never sense these masters thinking, "Gee, I sure hope I sound good for the folks out there!" you know it when you see it. You know it when you hear it. The room electrifies quickly. We need this silence, because *that's* where the music is.
  - f. Paradoxically, it is when we try to sound brilliant we stumble, whereas when we stay within ourselves we sound better. There is always a schism between what the ego wants to play and what wants to come out. Although the master player may have great technical ability, you will not sense his attempt to show it; the technique manifests unconsciously. In sports, it often happens that the team with less "stars" wins it all. The players or coach will always talk about "staying within themselves," or "just doing what they can do." "In improvised music, the one who stays within himself may be perceived as a master."
    - i. *Just do your job!*
  - g. *Slow down to speed up:* We must illuminate the ego's ruses and see how it sabotages our progress. I think that everyone would agree with this concept of practicing and playing one piece until we master it. So, why don't we do it? As I said before, it is because we are in a hurry – we need to sound good today, in our quest for a good self-image. We aren't in touch with our own inner beauty and so we seek it in our level of play. Self-centeredness, which some musicians suffer from in the extreme, is the wall between us and mastery. As previously discussed, there may be emotional and spiritual barriers to effortless playing. But a lack of technical mastery in the various elements of music may be another reason why we can't let go. Stream of consciousness is stopped in its tracks because you have to ask, "Where is the next note?" Nothing puts a crimp in spontaneity more than a momentary lapse in knowledge. Most of us never get past the stage of struggling with technique. But we can never experience our deeper feelings in music if we still have to think about rhythm, phrasing, form, or the chord changes. The struggle is often attributed to a lack of talent but it is usually due to a gap – something not learned properly. Seeking new levels of technical mastery should be a lifelong pursuit – not because you want to impress, but to facilitate any direction the Great Spirit inside you wants to go.
  - h. Mastery of one form enables one to state form in an increasingly subtle manner. The more the form becomes second nature, the more it becomes a vehicle for free improvisation. That is what we call "stretching." But the desire to be "complex" often



- drives the musician to a forced attempt to stretch. The result is typically ungrooving, self-conscious music, if not losing one's place in the beat altogether! You can learn more from penetrating one form of one tune than you can by merely "memorizing" many tunes." In the latter case, all you'll do is stumble through the changes, and the level of your playing will not rise. But through deep immersion in one tune, you will *evolve to another level of playing altogether!* You will then come to expect that level in other situations. With overloaded minds, we rush through the material, through life
- i. Another quality of mastery is the absolute wisdom with which the artist expresses his notes. They may be simple, but they resonate in a profound way. This depth of tone or phrase has to do with the artist's "inner mastery" of the sounds he's playing. It reflects the character of the player as an evolved being, and the depth with which he unites himself to his notes. He contemplates the different sounds, and forms personal relationships with intervals, chords, rhythms, and so on.
  - j. Masters tend to "practice the minimum" – the minimum amount of material, not time. For me, this was a complete confirmation that focusing on a small amount of material, getting inside it, investigating all its variations, running it through different keys. In short, *mastering it* was what separated Bill Evans from so many others. It was his pathway to mastery
    - i. *Read, re-read, absorb, embody, act upon the core, influential books rather than trying to always read something new*
  - k. When you give yourself to the space, you get much in return, *so don't forget to give as much as you can!* Another paradox: *the way to get high is by giving.* It takes quite a few time around the block before you realize this. When the experience leaves you, *ask for the willingness to give yourself again*, and it will be granted. If you return with an open, willing heart, you go right back to the pot of gold. Through humility, you become teachable again. When you lose the way, go back to the practices; not just these practices, but whatever you discover for yourself, and rededicate yourself to surrender. That wonderful energy returns, convincing you that you are on the right path.

### *What I got out of it*

1. Entering into this inner space where you are "a detached observer watching yourself play" is paramount, powerful, beautiful. Being patient and self-accepting enough to take it slow to *truly* master something is so difficult but ultimately the fastest, most enjoyable and most successful path. Reframe the difficult to "unfamiliar," surrender perfectionism and detach from the outcome. Paradoxically, this gives you the best results



“The whole process of learning the facility to play jazz, is to take these problems from the outer level in, one by one, and to stay with it at a very intense conscience concentration level, until that process becomes secondary and subconscious. Now, when that becomes subconscious, then you can begin concentrating on that next problem, which will allow you to do a little bit more...”

