

Thoughts on Practice

Kristofer Bergstrom, Ōn Ensemble

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Practice is profound.

I came to taiko relatively late in life, at the age of 18, with no percussion or dance experience. When I think back to playing the drums for the first time, I only remember being moved by the sound and by the other players. According to those teaching me, however, I had a rocky start. One of the Stanford Taiko members who evaluated my audition now says, “After the first day, I was sure we were going to cut you.”

In the 14 years since, I’ve thought a lot about practice, and the skills and habits required to make practice happen. I’ve had my ups and downs as a practitioner, but I’ve come to consider practice one of the most fascinating and revealing aspects of my life. For me, the art of good practice is the same as the art of good living.

The following essay records what I have learned thus far, with the hope it will be useful for others and will encourage discussion and sharing about practice. As a community, we should strive to improve our culture of practice. Taiko, as an artform, needs this. Taiko needs ways to practice that are fun, inspiring, and productive. The future of this young art-form rests in our hands, and any contributions we might make to it will undoubtedly involve practice, and a lot of it.

1 What Is Practice For?

Although playing taiko is obviously physical, I believe it is useful to think of taiko practice as primarily “brain work”. We might go jogging to improve our general fitness, but drumming (even taiko with dramatic movements) requires coordination, not strength. Playing the drums is more like juggling than weight lifting, and one never sees jugglers tossing barbells when practicing. *Mental* improvement, which includes coordination and dexterity, is the goal of practice. We should practice in ways that train the brain.

2 Practice Is A Solitary Act

Practice is intimately connected to our personal limitations and ways of learning. For this reason, in-depth practice is usually done alone, where we are free to

work on exactly what we need, at exactly the right speed. Most taiko players begin in a group setting, and the guidance and camaraderie provided by the group are extremely valuable. But group practice must be a complement to, perhaps a reward for, individual practice. On Ensemble likes to think of group practice as “rehearsal”, in which we’ll practice the aspects of our music that require togetherness. We’ll run pieces, develop drills that target problem areas, and collaborate on new ideas. The every-day, methodical, detailed practice of technique however, is largely left to individuals.

Out of necessity, and because it is the most empowering, individual practice is the norm.

3 Deciding What to Practice

Beginning taiko players are faced with a panoply of challenges — rhythm, movement, improvisation, different drums and playing styles. It is often difficult to know where to start and what to practice.

There is no simple answer, but thankfully, everything is related, and the practice of *anything* is useful to everything else. We can practice shime now and odaiko later. A particular pattern’s movement might be drilled before or after focusing on its proper timing.

For players searching for direction in their practice, the comments of a teacher provide guidance. A noble methodology is to practice and improve those deficiencies noted by our teacher, such that she needn’t say the same thing twice. Correcting a bad habit by the next lesson is often plenty to keep us busy.

In general, deciding what to practice is determined by our circumstances and our interests, and *what* is less critical than *how*.

4 Practice: Honest Benefactor and Insatiable Tyrant

There is a simple truth of practice that is at once empowering and frustrating: The more we practice, the better we become. In this sense, our path to improvement is clear and straight-forward — we will be rewarded for our work. But at the same time, we will *only* be rewarded for working. Practice is strict and stingy, doling out measured rewards for hours of trouble. And it is fiercely single-minded, with no regard for life’s other responsibilities.

For this reason, I consider the ability to make time to practice the single most important taiko skill. I have also learned a few key techniques that have made practice more effective for me personally. The following section details a number of these practical practice tips.

5 The Tips

5.1 Make Practice Enjoyable

Practice should be fun. In my experience, learning how to make practice fun has had the most dramatic impact on my abilities. Because it is fun, I do it more often, for longer periods, and the practice itself is more effective.

Practice is a long-term commitment, and a significant portion of our lives. We can grimace and force ourselves to swallow bitter medicine only because the displeasure is short and infrequent. All of our efforts should go toward making practice healthy and sustainable. If practice is burdensome, stressful, or uninteresting, and if we must make great sacrifices in order to practice, it will be a continual drain. Burdensome practice is destined to be superseded by other, more enjoyable endeavors.

The proper way to make practice enjoyable is particular to each of us, and intertwined with our daily lifestyles. We should work to expand the amount we practice, but never at the expense of the pleasure of practice.

Toward these ends:

- Be selfish

The first way to make practice enjoyable is to work on only what you want. Practice is *your* time.

- Avoid monotony

Move on to something else as soon as you get bored. Resist the inclination to “gut it out” and keep doing something. The long-term benefits of a commitment to enjoying practice greatly outweigh the value of any one drill on any one day.

Note that I am not recommending against all repetitive drills. For those drills that have great value but also an unfortunate tendency toward tedium, we should seek ways to find satisfaction in their completion that surpasses their monotony. The world’s best marathon runners, for example, have found a satisfaction that outweighs the pain of long distance running.

- Don’t measure your practice time

The amount of time we practice is far less important than the quality of our practice. When doing drills, focus on staying engaged and stop when motivation is lost. Don’t count the number of times you do a drill — do it as long as you can stay interested.

Don’t compare the length of your practice time to someone else’s. It will make you feel guilty when your time measures less, and complacent when it compares favorably. Your only measure should be the enjoyment of your practice time.

- Don't beat yourself up over *not* practicing

This recommendation might seem counter-productive in an essay about why and how to practice, but feeling okay about not practicing plays an important role in long-term success. Unquestionably, to become great taiko players we *must* practice. In fact, we would be our best if we dedicated every waking minute of every day toward improving as taiko players. But no one does this. We all take time to study other things, to accomplish other goals, and to relax. We go through cycles of heavy practice and down time. Our goal should always be to find the proper balance of taiko practice in our lives, and find ways to continue adding more time to taiko without tipping the scales out of whack. When we are busy with a family emergency, when we are exhausted, or we're engulfed in a non-taiko project to which we are deeply committed, we *shouldn't* be practicing taiko, and we should feel okay about that.

5.2 Practice Relaxed

When practicing a drill, especially with a metronome, it is useful to begin at a slow tempo and gradually increase our speed. A common mistake is to exceed our limits and practice at a tempo that encourages tension in our muscles. Tension is the enemy of practice. Tense practice can have a *negative* impact on our dexterity.

Instead, we should always push ourselves toward the upper limits of our comfort zone, where we are still able to play the drill properly and in good form. Even when the speed at which we feel in control is much slower than our absolute, fastest possible speed, this is where we should practice. Our top-speed ceiling will naturally move up, allowing us to increase our tempo and stay within our comfort zone.

5.3 Honestly, Practice Relaxed!

When I first moved to Japan, I set a number of ambitious practice goals for myself and I diligently practiced every day for two hours. After three months of this, however, I could not see much improvement in my abilities. Some things even seemed to be getting worse. I was extremely discouraged; my most scrupulous practice was proving ineffectual.

I now understand my error. I had let myself practice tense. When my arms would start to tighten up during an extended drill, I assumed I was building muscle and that this was good for me. I figured, when I go running my legs burn, why is this any different?

Remember that drumming dexterity is a function of our brain's ability to control the array of muscles in our arms. When we practice tense, we're effectively training our brains to arbitrarily tighten all the muscles at once — we have stopped practicing.

To help steer clear of tension, don't measure your top speed for a drill, or if you must, do it only very infrequently. Speed progress is very gradual and daily

measurements will almost certainly be disappointing. Frequent measurements will push us to set the metronome faster than is good for us.

5.4 Practice the Hard Stuff

Push yourself along the most challenging path. Focus on the vexing rhythms. Play phrases left-handed. Place multiple drums farther apart than they might be normally. Avoid playing only comfortable rhythms.

5.5 Treat Deficiencies Like Discoveries

When you discover a technique that is particularly challenging, consider it a valuable discovery, and be happy for its discovery. Even advanced taiko players stumble on simple rhythms. To most players, this is an unpleasant shock — “Why can’t I play this?!” When this happens, however, recognize that you have unearthed an inadequacy that has lurked beneath the surface, perhaps for years. By treating it as a discovery, you can focus on improvement in a positive manner. Rejoice! You know exactly what to work on!

5.6 Mix Practice into your Daily Life

Put a practice pad and batchi in plain view on your desk. Put drum sticks next to the couch. Take a shaker into the bathroom. Review patterns for memorization right before going to sleep. Find ways to minimize the effort required to *start* practicing.

5.7 Start Drills at a Ridiculously Slow Tempo

When trying to play something challenging, our tendency is to speed up. Though it is illogical to go faster when something is difficult, we have a compulsion to pick up the tempo. Resist this urge. Start at a tempo that is so slow that the drill seems silly. From this place of total control we can check our form and make sure we’re doing the drill properly.

5.8 Make Practice Your Procrastination

Find ways to make taiko practice the thing you do when you don’t want to do anything. I have a practice pad and a pair of batchi sitting on the center table in the living room of my small apartment. I walk past these batchi at least 20 times a day, and naturally, I pick them up throughout the day. I drum when I’m waiting for water to boil or during the commercials of a TV show.

Put batchi where you often find yourself waiting. If you always arrive places early, put a pair in your car and spend that extra five minutes grooving on your steering wheel. I have made substantial improvement in my small drum technique by leaving a practice pad and sticks in the bathroom.

6 Exaggerate Success and Failure

When practicing, I try to present my brain with vexing challenges, one after the next. I say to myself, “Now that I’m getting comfortable with doubles, can I play doubles hitting in the same spot the whole time?” I might work on that challenge for a few days, and then ask myself, “Can I now get an identical sound from every hit?” When presented with these kinds of challenges, the brain learns fastest when success and failure are made clear. If I can’t really tell if I’m hitting in the same spot, my brain isn’t really learning what works and what doesn’t. So instead of using a practice pad, which sounds the same no matter where you hit it, I might do this drill on an actual drum. Or perhaps I’d focus a video camera on the strike point, and watch my hits zoomed in on a television.

Certain sports provide a wonderfully clear delineation between success and failure; when a juggler drops a ball and a skateboarder falls, their brains know immediately to try something different. We must find ways to make taiko drills as instructional.

7 The Teacher’s Role

A great teacher will provide two things; inspiration and guidance. A teacher should have skills that are worth students’ emulation and should be able to help students achieve their goals more quickly than they could on their own.

A teacher should also play the role of gentle task master, pushing students to practice more and to push themselves. However, this position should not be confused with enforcement. It is the responsibility of the student to practice.

8 Join the Conversation!

Do you know other practice tips that have worked for you? Let me and other taiko players know your thoughts. Please share at <http://onensemble.org/2008/10/essay-thoughts-on-practice/>