

‘Mindfulness’ is a trendy word these days. As much as I tend to steer clear of ‘trends’, there is a reason we hear this term more and more these days. Our brains are busy processing and thinking about a zillion different things and we miss out on what is going on around us. And then we end up doing ‘mindless’ things—like trying to turn on the fireplace with the TV remote, putting the milk in the cupboard, or looking for our glasses on top of our head....

The more we habituate to doing something, the more we tend to put our brains on autopilot. Practicing music entails endless repetitions to ‘get something right’. Repetition is at the core of so much practice. In fact, pianos used to have a little shelf for books (not for your music, but for your novels) so that you could read a book while you played endless ‘finger exercises.’ Eventually, we learn to tune out all of our senses and don’t even hear the music or feel what is going on in our bodies. Perfect conditions for playing-related pain and robotic music.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, is all about tuning into all of our senses: Hearing, Seeing; Feeling the quality of movement (that’s the kinesthetic sense); Touching; Feeling the Emotion. Mindfulness awakens us to our senses. We learn through all of our senses. The more senses we use, the better we process information.

But the trap, especially among musicians, is that we tend to **judge** what our senses are telling us. This feels tense! That note was way too loud! I am not sounding at all like I want to sound like! The self-critic instills doubt and discouragement; our muscles tense up against the difficulty thus setting up a vicious circle of uncomfortable playing and criticism.

On the other hand, if we just notice what is happening **without** judgement, we provide our brains with information, (not criticism). As meditation teacher Tara Brach says, “noticing makes a distance...the ego dissolves and there is a sense of freedom.” The other really important thing that happens for musicians, we get out of the way and can connect to the music and our bodies to make music. That’s when the magic happens.

Michèle Wheatley-Brown

March 8, 2016