



BEYOND

THE BASIC PRACTICE APPROACH

Strategies for Higher Levels of Achievement on Guitar

**JAMIE
ANDREAS**

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Beyond the Basic Practice Approach:
Strategies for Higher Levels of Achievement on Guitar

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The Expanded Beat: Achieving the Rhythm

Why We Use The Basic Practice Approach, Why We Need To Go Further

When we are introducing our body to new movement patterns as required for a new piece of music we are practicing, we first allow our mind and muscles to learn the movements in the completely relaxed and unhurried manner allowed by No Tempo practicing.

As we use the Basic Practice Approach, and begin to fashion the final music we desire, we progress from No Tempo to slow tempo movement. Here we convert all notes to the same length, so that all the notes have the same time duration. The reason we make all notes equal in length is so that the movements required to make those notes can likewise be done at an equal rate of speed, and we can give those movements an equal amount of attention. This allows for an easy transition from No Tempo movements (which have no rhythm to them) and the beginnings of that rhythmic smoothness needed to eventually play the music as it needs to be played: to a beat, with each note receiving its correct amount of time.

After learning to make all necessary movements so that the notes are produced with equal time values, we then need a way of developing the ability to make the notes with the actual time values indicated by the music. This means that some movements are now going to have to occur more quickly than others, as well as prepared for sooner, because now, some notes will be long, and some will be short. Another way of saying this is that we must now learn to play the music to a beat, and with the proper rhythm, where all notes are not equal in length as they are in the Basic Practice Approach.

Achieving the Rhythm with Quarters and 8ths

One of the first problems encountered as we endeavor to achieve the rhythm of the music is the fact that *any beat we may set our metronome to, no matter how slow, is usually still too fast to allow us to make the necessary movements correctly, and with minimum tension.* For example, if the music contains quarter notes and 8th notes, and I set the metronome on 60, and give the quarter note one click (which is what most people do), the quarter note will last for one second and the 8th notes will last for a half second.

This is *still too fast* to allow the mind and muscles to get comfortable with the movements. We need more time, while still retaining the correct proportionate relationship among the time values of the notes. In other words, in order to train the muscles to make the movements needed to play the

music to its correct rhythm, we need a method that gives a longer time unit for the quarter note, but still keeps the 8th notes half the length of the quarter notes. How do we do this?

Well, there is no rule saying that I have to give each quarter note one click of the metronome. *I can give each quarter note two clicks, or any number of clicks that I want.* I only have to make sure that whatever number of clicks I give the quarter, I give the 8th notes one half of that amount, because 8th notes get one half of quarter notes.

So, if I am learning something that contains whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, and 8th notes, here is how I would go about it:

- I will first use the Basic Practice Approach. I will decide on fingering for both hands and write it in.
- I will carefully walk through the movements necessary to make the notes using No Tempo and Posing, and finding Stress Points.
- I will begin to work up small sections using the BPA.
- As soon as I become comfortable, and the movements are beginning to get into muscle memory, (I prove this by practicing small sections while being able to watch my fingers, both hands, and not the music) I work the music up to *60 at one click per note*. Now, I can begin to achieve the rhythm.

Here is the important part...

I set the metronome a little lower, on 50, and I tap my foot to the beat. However, I tap **DOWN** for one click, and I bring my foot **UP** for the next click. So, *my foot goes down every other click..*

If we were working on a little melody like the one below, the procedure would go like this:



The metronome is clicking once for each 8th note, so 2 clicks for the quarter.

Your foot is constantly going up and down.

Count 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + steadily and continuously.

Only play on the arrows.

AFTER we brought the 4 measures up to 100, one click per 8th note, and 2 clicks per quarter, we are ready to “achieve the rhythm”. We have just played all the notes to the speed of 100, one click each. Now, we need to look at our smallest, and fastest, note, which is the 8th note. *If we can play the 8th notes at 100 with one click, that means we can play them at 50, and play both 8th notes in the space of one beat.* (The time between the downbeat and upbeat at 50 is the same as the time in between 2 clicks at 100.)

Make sure you are clear on this. Let’s use the speeds of 120 and 60 to clarify:

The time of 2 clicks at 120 = the time of 1 click at 60,

This means that at 120 there is a ½ second between each click, so, there is one second from the beginning of one click to the end of a second click. Then, 2 clicks at 120 equals one second.

At 60 bpm, there is 1 second between each click. 2 clicks at 120 equals 1 click at 60. This means if we can play quarter notes at 120, we can play 8th notes at 60. The rule is:

For any speed at which we can play quarter notes, we can play 8th notes at half that speed.

Using the Expanded Beat

Our new rule tells us that if we can play quarter notes at 100, then we can play 8th notes at 50. When we play 8th notes at 50, the only difference is that there is no click for the “&”. Our foot goes up, but unlike before, there is no click for it, just an empty space. This is a different feeling, and we have to get used to the different feel of it. Since there will not be a click for the second 8th note, it might throw us off a bit at first.

Now we are ready to use the Expanded Beat. We will set the metronome on 50 and take 2 clicks per quarter note, one click per 8th note. The half note will get four clicks. (You knew that, right?).

Once you have this working well, and are able to play the notes and give them the correct time value, you are playing “in rhythm”. Now, it is just a matter of moving up the speed, and then transitioning to the Basic Beat. Work the metronome up by whatever increments seem useful. Usually, it will be two notches at a time, maybe three. Keep going until you reach the performance speed.

As an example in the case of “Skip to My Lou”, that would mean working it up to 160 bpm, using the expanded beat, 2 clicks per quarter, and one click for the 8th notes.

For each down and up of the foot there is a metronome click. Your foot will be down on one click and up on the next, so the foot is down every other click. This gives us a click as the marker for the upbeat. (All D’s and U’s above are to be played the same distance apart, of course).

Transitioning to the Basic Beat

Playing our 8th notes at 160 bpm, and giving each note one click is the same as playing them at 80 and playing two notes per click. Of course, two 8th notes in the beat is what we do when we play the music to the BASIC BEAT, which is the beat indicated by the time signature.

This is how we really want to end up playing the music, so let’s do that.

Now that we have worked the music up to 160 with the expanded beat, we simply move the metronome down to half of that and play it to the Basic Beat. Now, our foot taps only once per click. *There is no click marking the upbeat of the 8th notes.* To get used to the new feeling, just play from one beat to the next. In other words, only play three notes and stop.

Working with 16th Notes

When working with 16th notes, simply use the same procedure. You will give one click to the 16th note, two clicks to the 8th notes, and 4 clicks to the quarter note. Of course, you will mostly use this technique on small sections of music, not larger sections that would have you waiting 16 clicks for a whole note!



Each dot is a metronome click. When working with 16th notes give the:

16th note = 1 click

8th note = 2 clicks

Quarter note = 4 clicks

Tap your foot once every 4 clicks.

The image shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody consists of 16 sixteenth notes. The first measure contains four sixteenth notes (B4, A4, G4, F4), and the second measure contains the remaining twelve sixteenth notes (E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2). Below the staff, there are two rows of rhythmic cues. The 'Click' row consists of 16 dots, each aligned with a sixteenth note. The 'Foot' row consists of 8 dashes, each aligned with a pair of sixteenth notes, indicating a tap every two clicks. Arrows point from the 'Foot' dashes to the staff lines.

Clicking to the 8th note

- 16th note gets 1/2 beat, or 2 16ths for each click
- 8th note gets one click
- Quarter note gets 2 clicks
- Tap your foot every 2 clicks

Click

Foot –

Clicking to the quarter note

16th note gets $\frac{1}{4}$ beat. Or 4 16ths in each click

8th note gets $\frac{1}{2}$ beat, or 2 8ths in each click

Quarter note gets 1 click

Beyond the Basic Practice Approach

The Basic Practice Approach is the most thorough way of internalizing a movement process into our mind and body. It is our first line of attack in integrating new music into our minds and fingers, as we work to achieve a powerful understanding and focus in the mind as it conceives the music, and also a deep relaxation in the body as it learns to execute the required movements. The power of No Tempo and slow tempo practice is very effective for completely conquering much of the music we wish to play.

However, there are times when we must augment the Basic Practice Approach with other approaches. Those times include:

- Working to increase our speed on scales, arpeggios and all other technical movement studies
- Learning new and very complex music, and building speed with it
- The general and long term development of a more powerful guitar technique as regarding speed in playing
- Diagnosing and fixing playing problems that are not yielding to the Basic Practice Approach

The Limitations of the Basic Practice Approach

The Basic Practice Approach is a *linear approach*, in that we go from one speed to the next, increasing the speed each time. There are two factors present in this method that act as limitations on how much benefit we can derive from its use:

- As we move from one speed to the next, we place an increasing demand upon our mental and physical resources.
- The repetitive effort to meet this increasing demand leaves a residue of tension and fatigue in the body as we move from one speed to the next with no break in between, especially as we near our limit.

We see that the linear approach, though effective in providing graduated repetition, (which is good for building coordination and muscle memory), has a built in negative characteristic: diminishing

returns. The quality of our results is adversely affected to some degree by the continuous and unabated increase of speed.

This is why it is necessary to employ a non-linear approach to practice in addition to the linear Basic Practice Approach. This means that instead of continually pushing the speed to a new level and increasing the intensity of the dynamics *as well as levels of stress and tension*, many of the new techniques you will learn will have you doing a *number of repetitions at slower speeds, or even No Tempo*, before the next new high speed in order to relax the muscles and to reinforce the correct movements done with the necessary relaxation and inner sensations of comfort.

What Is Speed?

Guitar students need to re-define the word “speed”. We tend to define speed simply as how “fast” something goes. However, from a technical point of view, “speed” *simply means “increased intensity of opposing playing dynamics needing to be reconciled”*.

What does “opposing playing dynamics” mean, and what does it mean to reconcile them?

Imagine a one year old child learning how to stand up and get his or her balance, and then take that fateful first step. The child is faced with coming to terms with a whole set of new and challenging dynamics. Keeping one’s balance while sitting on the floor is certainly much easier than keeping it while standing up! That is what is meant by “increased intensity of dynamics”. As soon as the baby stands up, we have two opposing dynamics: muscles contracting and moving bones upward, and the downward force of gravity. Balance, or a reconciliation of these forces, is needed to achieve the goal of standing up. “Skill” is the ability to do that. Skill is the ability to reconcile opposing dynamics to achieve a goal. In guitar, as in life, we will find that we are constantly called upon to develop a new and higher level of skill.

Each time we raise the speed of a passage of music we are practicing, we are increasing the intensity of the opposing playing dynamics that we must skillfully reconcile in order to execute the music properly. Hence, going faster and increasing the speed is, (as far as the mind and body are concerned), a situation where the opposing dynamics, or forces, are made more intense. One way of describing what it is that prevents students from moving beyond their present abilities is “a failure to properly meet the challenge of these increasing demands to our minds and fingers as speed increases. This increased load on the resources of the mind and body requires a higher level of performance from those resources. The process of adapting to these increased demands is called “building skill”.

For instance, from a *mental* point of view, playing a scale faster means that the notes are becoming “smaller”, and there must be a more powerful focus of awareness to certain key complex parts of that scale (string crossings, shifts, etc.). We must “fit” our awareness into a smaller space of time as the speed goes up. Just as we must focus our eyes more powerfully to see smaller print, we must focus our Awareness, our Attention and Intention, as we place the demand for more speed on our technique, which requires the ability to have Awareness of, or “see”, and hear smaller notes. This

is especially true when we are first entering into new technical territory and attempting to gain more powerful abilities. These factors are challenges of a mental nature.

Physically, as we go faster there is less time in which to get from note to note, demanding an increase of performance from the fingers. This increased performance might take the form of actually moving faster (active effort), or it may take the form of “moving smarter” as in staying closer to the strings, or perhaps varying our form for more ergonomic movement which results in a smoother, and potentially faster performance.

Although we may make things easier for ourselves by minimizing active effort, when we go faster and experience those increased playing dynamics, we are generally going to find our physical tension levels and our mental confusion levels increased at such times. We will undoubtedly experience the results of this increase in the form of both physical and mental tension and fatigue, as well as perhaps frustration and various negative emotional states (unless we have already become masters of practice, in which case negative reactions to practice experiences have been abandoned already.)

So far, the Basic Practice Approach has been the primary Tool used to accomplish this task of reconciling the increased intensity of playing dynamics (building skill). But, just as there are certainly more technical exercises needed than are found in “*The Principles*” book in order to become a fully developed guitar player, there are also many more practice approaches other than the Basic Practice Approach that are needed as well (although the BPA underlies, and is used in conjunction with them all).

The rest of this work will lay out for you what that “more” is that we need, as well as show you how and when to use these new tools, and why they work.

Coaxing Our Abilities to Expand Beyond Present Limits

We now understand that we have new dynamics to reconcile as we build speed, and that these increased dynamics will create tension, and more for us. It will be us against it, and we want to make sure we win! Fortunately, there are ways of working with these factors that allow us to handle them successfully. There are ways of “stretching” and strengthening our present abilities so that they can adapt to increased demands. The methods we will learn will enable us to avoid the clumsy and heavy handed approach that most students tend to use as they simply rush headlong into faster speeds with a “Let me try it and see if I can do it” approach.

We will learn ways of working that are like powerful microscopes through which we will “look” at our music and the increasingly “difficult” requirements of playing it faster, and we will find that we can indeed develop the necessary mental and physical control to handle increased challenges, as long as we work on them the right way.

We must understand, however, that unlike the skills we acquire during our early stages of playing the guitar, many of which develop relatively quickly (with correct practice, that is!), *the skills required to move into these more advanced areas often grow more slowly*, taking sometimes several years to become strong. So, we must have a proper working attitude toward all of this, as well as a proper working method.

Use The Basic Practice Approach First!

“*The Principles*” and the Basic Practice Approach establish relaxed form and functioning of the playing mechanism, and also a means for developing increasingly more refined levels of playing skill.

It is essential to understand that before we start to use any of the following practice approaches, *we have already thoroughly worked the material with the Basic Practice Approach*. We must bring the selected passage of music as far as we can with the BPA, and that of course includes having studied it very closely, already deciding on the fingering, hand positions, picking, and all other details of technique.

Of course, none of this is written in stone, we will change things as we go along, no doubt. But at any given point, we must have a clear idea of what playing strategy we have decided to try out and work into the fingers.

When to Leave the Basic Practice Approach: Using Diagnostic Tools

As we use the BPA, we will naturally reach a speed at which we start to notice trouble, and beyond which we continue to have trouble. This means that physical tension has increased to the point where it is actually affecting the music; notes are missing, or “damaged”. This is our limit. The tempo at which we first “Discover our Discomfort” and hear it in the music as well, is a territory we should not go beyond, but should rather study. As we study it, we will most likely discover that the trouble is actually perceptible at a slower speed as well.

This limit we have experienced in attentive practice is the speed we need to work up to as we proceed to study the trouble and implement strategies to deal with it. Also, we will be working a range of tempos below it and above it, as we work to bring our level of skill relative to the problem notes to a higher level.

The range of speeds at which it is useful and necessary for us to practice in order to increase our playing skill with a particular passage or exercise is called our *Working Speed (more on this later)*. It begins at the point where we begin to lose a feeling while playing that it is reasonably easy to produce the notes correctly, in terms of sound and rhythm. This is our battleground, so to speak, the territory

e wish to conquer. We will visit this territory regularly, study it, learn how to approach it, and work on it in an intelligent way; a way that causes change for the better.

These new practice approaches will function as *diagnostic tools* to help you do the thing you are not doing yet- seeing the trouble and its cause clearly. These new diagnostic tools will help to sharpen and “speed up” your Awareness, so that what seems to be fast now will start to slow down. It is like looking at the blades of a fan. You can’t see the individual blades when the fan is on, unless you start to spin your head in the same circle that the fan blades are spinning while looking at the fan. Then, you will catch sight of some single blades moving. If you could keep your head spinning like that (don’t try it, trust me instead!), the blades would seem stationary.

In a like manner, our awareness increases its “speed” and moving perceptible events appear slower, even frozen briefly in time, when these new practice approaches are employed. They provide a means for the mind and attention to “grab on” to moving events.

It should be understood that this is not just a mental phenomenon, it is physical as well. In order for what is fast to appear slow, we must go through a process of physical conversion. At the point where we discovered our Working Speed, there was undoubtedly physical tension present as the playing broke down. As the source of the trouble is understood and worked on properly, the body learns how to make the necessary movements, but in a new way, a way that is characterized by increased ease and relaxation.

As we start to use the approaches presented here, they may get us through our present limit very quickly. If they do, that is great. Or they may not. Either way, at some point we are going to need to examine the music at much lower tempos. We need to find out at what tempo the trouble really begins, and it will be much lower than the tempo at which we noticed it. At this lower speed, we can begin to examine our playing action and see if we can discover what is really going on and why. What notes are affected? What fingers are involved? What are they doing instead of playing the notes?

The main purpose of the following practice approaches is to enable us to actually *find* these trouble spots, and to discover what notes and what fingers are responsible for our trouble. This is what I call “finding the what”. Then, we go even further to find out the “why”. Understanding the “why” means understanding the causes and effects of the trouble. What other playing dynamics and playing moments is this problem related to?

As we discover these areas of trouble, we will then use all our new approaches on them. We will also find that we will need to incorporate, or even return to, the Basic Practice Approach.

When to Return to the Basic Practice Approach

We will often find ourselves employing the BPA along with one of our new practice strategies. For instance, if we are using “Add-A-Note” (a new technique we will learn), where we add one note at

a time to a passage, we may reach a point where it is wise to stop using “Add-A-Note”, because we have discovered a note that can be improved by changing the action of a finger, and we need to incorporate this new move into the finger on that particular note before we go and add the next note.

The best way to do that is to stop adding notes, and continue to only play up to that note that requires a new move, and do BPA work-ups only up to that note. After the new move begins to be trained in, we go back to “Add-A-Note”, adding the next note from the original passage we are working on until another such circumstance occurs.

So, with these understandings in place, let’s look at these new practice approaches that go beyond the Basic Practice Approach, and how we can use them to create Vertical Growth.

Practice Approaches Beyond the Basic Practice Approach

The Spacing Technique

The Spacing Technique is often the best choice for the first non-linear approach we use on a problem area. If I am using the Basic Practice Approach, and hit a speed where I notice some trouble, I will usually switch to the Spacing Technique first to see if it will get me through the trouble.

The Spacing Technique is a simple way of going “non-linear” for a moment, and giving the muscles time to relax. It works like this.

Suppose I am working on a scale, playing it in 16th notes to the clicking metronome, and I find that I get stuck at 104 bpm. At this speed, I become aware that some notes are suffering. They are missing or damaged (bad tone, lost volume, distorted rhythm). I will stop trying to play it at the current speed. I will isolate that spot (deciding a good beginning and ending note) and play that section again to the metronome (which is still clicking), BUT instead of playing 16th notes, I will play WHOLE notes, taking 4 clicks for each note.

I will finish the passage like this, and then I will play the passage again, but this time I will take 2 clicks for each note, shortening the time. I will do it again, taking one click. Now, I will do it in 8th notes, putting 2 notes into each click. And finally, I do it at my original trouble speed of 104 in 16th notes.

Rather than trying to force my way through the original problem area at the original problem speed, I have retreated, and slowed the tempo down considerably, which immediately helps all the muscles relax. (We must of course use Whole Body Awareness, Rotating Attention, and Following at each speed).

I have then brought the passage up, doubling the speed each time (“Spacing” out the tempos) until I reached my original tempo. In many cases, this will cause a noticeable increase in ease of playing at the original problem speed. If not, we go on to use one of the upcoming methods.

Why & How Does The Spacing Technique Work?

The Spacing Technique allows us to release accumulated tensions from an extended linear approach, reinforce the necessary elements of the movement process, and fortify them so that they can withstand the increased stress placed upon the playing mechanism at the higher speed.

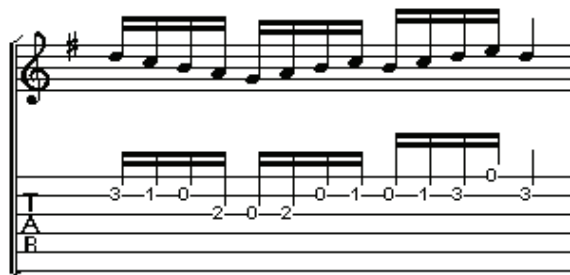
It is especially useful for reviewing and “polishing up” previously learned material, because it is a faster approach than the Basic Practice Approach, the thoroughness of which is not always required. Of course, if the Spacing Technique does not prove adequate, we must resort to the linear work up with the Basic Practice Approach.

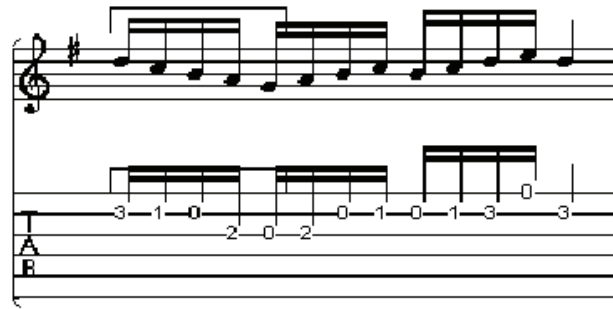
Working in Groups

If a problem area does not yield to the Spacing Technique, then “*Working in Groups*” is a good choice for the next diagnostic tool to use. It enables us to zero in more closely to the specific areas causing problems. It is a powerful way of teaching the body and mind to handle large and challenging passages of music. The basic concept can apply to passages of all types, but we will discuss specifically its application to scale passages. The concept is rather simple: when something is difficult to do, we do not try to do the whole thing, we take it in pieces.

However, since scale passages are always going to be some kind of even subdivision of the beat, such as 8ths and 16ths, we choose the “pieces” to work on according to the beat. Specifically, we play the notes from one beat to the next. This also helps us “nail” the beat exactly.

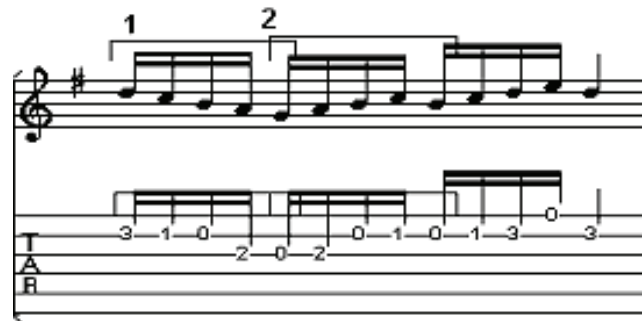
If we had a passage of 16th notes, such as this, we would first practice only the first group, in this case, the first 5 notes.





For the first group, we play from the first note of the first group to the first note of the second group. In other words, from the first beat to the second beat.

We want to make sure that we have *started* exactly on the beat, and that all the notes are evenly spaced out within the beat. If we have done this, we will end on the beat accurately. You will be surprised how easy it is to be *inaccurate*, especially with starting on the beat. You will catch yourself giving yourself a little “extra” time by starting a fraction ahead of the beat, like a runner jumping a bit before the starting bell.



Important: Use a Tape Recorder. The difficulty of being accurate (and knowing we are accurate) at our more challenging speeds is one of the reasons I consider it mandatory to use something to slow down your playing to half speed, and to listen after each attempt in order to verify accuracy. A small micro-cassette recorder works fine (they have 2 recording speeds) or you can use a piece of computer software.

After being satisfied that we have done the first group perfectly, we will focus on the next group, playing from the first note of the 2nd group, to the first note of the 3rd group.

Verify accuracy again, and either go on to the next group, or “consolidate” the two groups, playing from the beginning of the first group to the end of the second group. You will find certain groups more challenging than others, so work on those separately.

When working in groups of 8th notes, the group will consist of 3 notes. This will comprise playing one beat to the next, as in “1 & 2”.

This technique is especially useful when:

- Working on scales, or any kind of linear note sequences, and breaking into new speeds.
- When first learning 8th or 16th notes.
- Working on any difficult passage. Any problem passage will benefit from being worked on in sections.

It is often necessary to combine Working in Groups with the Spacing Technique. To do so, we would select a group and play it at the spaced out tempos of the Spacing Technique, bringing it up to the target speed. We would then do the same with the next group, and then put the two groups together, running through all the tempos of the Spacing Technique, if required.

Why & How Does “Working In Groups” Work?

When we work in groups, we will quickly notice that we are able to play single groups of the scale much faster than we can play the whole scale. This is because the accumulated tension and fatigue generated by the whole scale is not holding us back when we take a single group. The fingers are able to experience quicker movement, and that experience will be carried over to some degree into the playing of the whole scale.

Students familiar with the concept of “Stress Chains” (from “*The Deeper I Go, The Deeper It Gets*”), will realize that Working In Groups disrupts the effects of Stress Chains, which carry tension along note by note, making the tension generated by one note effect the creation of the following note.

If we are only working up the speed in a linear fashion, always practicing a scale from the first note to the last, (even if we are raising the speed gradually as in the BPA) we will always experience each group of notes the same way. So, if Group 3 contains a Stress Point that makes us carry tension into Group 4, we (and more importantly, our muscles) will never experience playing Group 4 as it is in itself, *but only as it is after being affected by the playing of Group 3*. This is certainly unfair to poor old Group 4, if nothing else!

Working in Groups allows us to experience the playing of each group under optimum conditions, as it were. But, we still must deal with the Stress Point contained in Group 3! Even though Group 4 will benefit from being practiced in isolation, if we don’t remove the disturbance that Group 3 is causing, Group 4 will always suffer to some degree, and we will wonder why we do not feel as comfortable on that section of the scale when we play the whole scale, as when we worked on that section by itself.

Even though the two methods discussed so far are extremely effective in many situations, we will often find that there are some passages that will not yield to the Spacing Technique or Working in Groups. In these cases, we need a method that will allow us to pinpoint a difficulty with even more precision. “Add-A-Note” is such a method.

Add-A-Note

This technique turns up the power of our microscope even higher, giving us an even closer look at each note and all the aspects of the movement process that go into each note. If a passage is not yielding to Working in Groups, this technique will allow you to pinpoint exactly where the problem lies.

The fact is, if we are working on a long scale-like passage, composed of perhaps twenty or thirty notes, some of those notes are going to be easy to produce, and some will be more difficult. Very often a scale breaks down because of only one note that is causing a problem. That one note is causing us extra tension, or throwing our balance or coordination off in some way. From there, we stumble through the rest of the scale, thinking all of the following notes, which now feel uncomfortable, are giving us trouble.

It is like walking down the road and tripping over a rock, and then stumbling for the next ten steps. Those ten steps are not the problem; it is that one step that lands us on that rock. We must remove the rock, or plan a new course around it. But first, we have to find it!

How to Use “Add-A-Note”

This is how we find it. We choose a good speed to start with, a speed that is right on the edge of our ability with the passage, a speed at which we *begin* to break down. With the metronome going at that speed, we play only one note at that speed, the first note (or chord). We then begin again, and play 2 notes, then 3, and so on, until we have completed the selected passage.

Eventually, we will reach a speed and a note that causes a breakdown, and that is where we stop and study. We have now found the “what” and we must find the “why”. We must discover what is making that spot difficult, and then decide what we can do about it.

Perhaps simply doing more No Tempo practice and relaxing more will fix it. Or, it may just be a fingering or playing approach that does not work for us and must be changed, and so we go into “experimental” mode. We try different things for that note, and observe the results. Add-A-Note can be used with any problem passage, and is extremely effective for discovering where our problems are really coming from, and where the Stress Points really are in the movement process, and then helping us de-stress them.

As with all the tools presented here, Add-A-Note should be combined with all the other tools. I may work up to a note, decide to work on just that note and the one that is before it, and work that up with the Spacing Technique from 60 bpm, using Spacing and the BPA. I may do that with a group, and then combine it with another group, using the BPA and Spacing.

No Tempo at the Working Speed

No Tempo is particularly effective when attempting to get the fingers comfortable at a new and higher level of speed on a particular passage.

We should select the speed at which we are completely comfortable at playing the whole passage, and then go up one notch from there and play from the beginning to a selected note (usually, one that gives us trouble). We see if we can make that note with no problem at that speed. If not, we go to a speed at which we can, and work from there.

If we make it okay with our selected note, we go back to the beginning, Play Up to the Note, and continue on in this fashion.

It is important to realize that we need to have complete conscious awareness of each component of the movement process that produces each note, and that during the process of using No Tempo at the working speed, this conscious awareness must be verified.

For instance, say we are practicing the 2nd Position G major scale, and we are having trouble with the D note on the 2nd string. We first must make a list of the necessary components of the movement process that must occur in order for that note to happen. They are:

1. 2 must stay low to the strings and close to the 2nd string while the 3 notes before it are being played on the 3rd string. (It always tends to rise and tense here.)
2. To achieve this, 1 must release pressure (at least partially) when 3 plays, and 3 when 4 plays.
3. During the exchange from 3 to 4, 2 must actually touch the 2nd string (lightly) so at a fast speed it is already there when the note must be played. It cannot still be traveling there.
4. Whatever right hand finger or pick stroke is responsible for that note, we must be aware of it being ready, relaxed, and in contact with the string a split second before the required note. (At slow speeds, we time this with the note before).

All of these components of the movement process must be able to be in our Awareness during playing (and we must make sure they actually are in our Awareness at each speed during all of our work-ups). Notice I say “able” to be in Awareness. When we are just playing, we may not choose to

put our Attention on these things, just as a ballet dancer may not choose to be aware of every step while dancing. But a dancer must be able to be aware of each step while practicing, and can be aware during actual dancing if they so choose.

When we use Add-A-Note on a trouble note at our Working Speed, we must make sure that we can actually have this Awareness, and that we are not withdrawing Awareness due to the stress of our efforts, or the increasing speed. Very often Attention is withdrawn from the rhythm itself, and even though the metronome may be clicking we are not really sure if we are on the beat or dividing the beat correctly because we have withdrawn our Attention to some degree.

Perhaps, upon listening back at half speed, I notice that one note in the scale is distinctly lower in volume than the rest. This would mean that something was preventing equal force from being applied to the string at exactly that playing moment. That “something” (which is usually some form of tension caused by yet another factor) must be consciously known and felt. Add-A-Note, along with Stop and Drop, which comes next, used along with Following and Rotating Attention are our best tools for solving these situations.

We must actually ask ourselves such things as “Do I really feel that finger touching the string”, or “Do I really hear that note landing on the beat as I play”? If we cannot do this, it is time to lower to a speed where we can use our Attention as skillfully as required and bring the speed up from there, using Following to fasten on to the missing component.

Up to the Note: Stop & Drop

Sometimes, even though we know what and where the trouble is after using Add-A-Note, we still cannot discover the “why”. This is when we use Stop & Drop. It is our best way of “catching” what we are really doing at a particular moment of the playing process that is causing our problem. As I have fully described in my book *“The Deeper I Go, The Deeper It Gets: Mediations on Life and Guitar”*, a note for a player is not just the sound, but the complete set of mental and physical processes that go into the creation of that sound as well.

When a note is missing or damaged, we can be sure that the complete set of mental and physical processes that are necessary to create that note are not actually present. Because of the withdrawal of Awareness that physical tension engenders, we may not be aware of what is missing or wrong in our approach, assuming we even know what should be done to begin with!

That is when we “Play Up to the Note and Stop & Drop”. This means we play the passage Up to the Note *before* the problem note, and STOP on that note; not moving a muscle or changing anything about our position and bodily state from the split second we have played the note. We need to catch what we are really doing!

We then “dive” into that moment of the movement process with our most powerful Awareness, examining everything, including all parts of the body for tension, especially the shoulders. We will often find them tense at the exact moment of a problem.

We also examine the location and state of all fingers, especially the ones needed for the problem note, as well as the breath, and even the contents of our mind and emotions at the time. Were we properly “intending” the note or simply getting nervous about it? Did we hold our breath? (This is very common). We use this technique to put us fully in touch with a particular playing moment. If I find that I was holding my breath, I may simply BPA that spot, following my breath. If I notice finger rise or finger squeeze, I may do the same, and combine it with other tools as necessary.

I have had problem passages that contained one particular note that was the weak point in the chain (often the first note after a shift), and it is necessary for me to practice up to that note, following the BPA speeds or a variation every day. I find it also necessary to record myself at my working speed and listen back at half speed to make sure everything is where and how it should be.

Essentially, when we “Play Up to the Note” and “Stop & Drop” we ask these questions:

1. Are all the conditions necessary for the production of this note, at this tempo, present?
2. Or, are there conditions present that are impeding or preventing the production of this note, such as a finger that has moved far from its note, and is held tense?
3. Does this note on which I’ve stopped contain all the conditions necessary to allow for the production of the next note, as well as the present note? Or, does this note make me do something that will make the next note harder?
4. Are we fully aware of this note and of ourselves making it, and even preparing to make it? Or, do we feel that our mind kind of “blanked out” on that spot? We will usually find that if the answer is yes, it is accompanied by constricted breathing and muscle tension.

The ability to find fruitful answers to these questions assumes, of course, that we have conducted a sufficiently insightful analysis of the movement process to begin with. If we have, we can use the “space” created by Stopping & Dropping to “look around” mentally to see what is going on, and decide whether it’s what is supposed to be going on.

Doing this will show us why we had trouble with the note. We may not discover the whole story the first time, but we will see something; something we can work with. We may discover that a needed finger was allowed to misbehave in some manner. We may simply discover we are asking our

fingers to do something very difficult to do at that speed, or even impossible, given the way we are doing it, and we must find an easier and more efficient way.

After we immerse ourselves in the playing moment that is that note, and we make the great effort of will and desire, of Attention and Intention, and we see something we haven't seen before; we need to reflect on "*The Principles*". And then we decide what strategy and what Tools we are going to begin to work and experiment with.

This is the most microscopic way of working, dissecting a problem one note at a time, and de-stressing notes one at a time, replacing Stress Points with Awareness Points.

After we have discovered what is actually going on at the playing moment that is giving us trouble, and we have gained insight and come to conclusions about what should be done differently, we can practice "filling in the note" after we "Stop & Drop". To do this, choose a tempo, and we Play Up to the Note that comes before the problem note, and after "Stopping & Dropping", we mentally do The Loop (from "*The Deeper I Go, The Deeper It Gets*") for just that note, creating it and playing it in our minds, intending it, seeing it, hearing it, and feeling it – and finally, playing it.

Then we would take the passage and add the next note; the one we were stumbling on. We work it into the muscle memory and the movement process. We would Stop & Drop on that note, checking it for quality, and of course, checking our body for relaxation. Did all effort get released *with* the note as it should, or are we keeping the effort of that note in our muscles? If so, we do it again, making sure we release. If we cannot, we go to a lower speed where we can.

Shifting Rhythm

Shifting the Rhythm is a technique used mostly for scalar passages. The idea here is that when we practice a scale or scale passage as written, we always experience each note as being on a very specific part of the beat. Some notes are on the downbeat, others on the upbeat, and others on the "e" or the "a" (in 16ths).

Each part of the beat has its own particular "feel". Downbeats, for instance, are naturally emphasized for the very fact that they fall on the downbeat, which is strong. When we Shift the Rhythm, we give our mind and our muscles a different experience of each note, and that is very beneficial for strengthening our control and our conception of the entire scale.

Here is an example of a scale played with a Shifting Rhythm.

Bottoms Up

“Bottoms Up” is the fastest way to deal with music aside from simply playing at tempo. It can, and should only be used when we have reached a state of competency with the music, whether we are working on small sections or large sections of a piece.

In Bottoms Up we simply play the music No Tempo, stopping and Posing as we need to on known Stress Points. We stay at the Bottom of our Practice the whole time, with our attention to mind and body at full power. We do this in order to reinforce optimum relaxation during movements, and complete release of effort between movements. After we do this, we play the music at tempo. Thus “Bottoms”-(the Bottom of Our Practice) and “Up”-(full tempo playing of the music).

This is a good way to keep music in shape that we have already mastered. It is very useful for reviewing a large amount of material in a brief time, such as when getting ready for a performance. It keeps the movement process strong in our reflexes.

It is important to understand that this return to the Bottom of Our Practice is mandatory at all times, in fact, it is part of the BPA itself. It is all a matter of how much time is spent there and how it is combined with other practice approaches.

I will frequently work on passages by going to the Bottom of my Practice on a section, then doing the Spacing Technique, with the final speed at performance tempo. So, if a passage goes at 120 bpm, I will do No Tempo (Posing on Stress Points), then 2 clicks per note (4 if I think I need it), 1 click 8ths, then finally, 16ths. This is very effective for keeping material strong.

Remember, no matter what practice approach you are using at any given time, we *must frequently, and on a regular basis, visit the Bottom of our Practice on everything we play*. If we do not, our music will degrade over time (unless it is very easy music). In addition to reinforcing the movement process, this re-visiting of the Bottom of Our Practice often allows us to see new possibilities of technical approaches to a passage, resulting in a superior command of the music.

Meandering

Similar to “Bottoms Up”, Meandering is a good technique for reviewing music that has been well learned, and has its technical problems essentially solved. Here, we walk through the music at whatever tempo feels *completely* comfortable. However, our walk is not a steady gait. Instead, it is like walking leisurely down the street, stopping at various times to pay particular attention to something we wish to examine more closely.

So, I will start fingering slowly through the piece, insisting on complete comfort. Since some parts are naturally easier to play than others, this will have me moving rather quickly through some spots, and slowing down at others (such as stretches, shifts, and other Stress Points). I will even stop completely, Pose, and practice Whole Body Awareness at certain Stress Points that I know will benefit.

Like “Bottoms Up”, this is a very quick way of keeping a large amount of material in our fingers and minds.

Practicing Backwards

This technique is often recommended as a means of avoiding the common problem students have of knowing the beginning of a piece better than the end. Obviously, this is because every time the average student sits down to practice, they start at the beginning. Naturally, this results in a consistent pattern of spending more time on the beginning than other parts of the piece, especially the end!

While this is a valuable benefit of practicing backwards, there are other important ones as well. But before we discuss them, let's be clear on what Practicing Backwards means.

First of all, it does not mean that we play the last note of the piece, and then the note before it, and continue on in this manner, although that would be the literal meaning of the phrase “backwards”! Instead, it simply means that we play selected sections of the piece in reverse order. Within the sections themselves, the notes are in the same order as when playing the piece.

So, if we have a piece that is 100 measures long, we may decide to break it into 10 sections. We would then sit down and practice section 10 instead of starting with section 1. After getting a good handle on section 10, we work on section 9. Then we practice section 9 going into section 10. We do the same procedure with other selected sections.

One of the main benefits of this procedure is its efficacy in getting to know a piece in terms other than linear muscle memory, which depends on going from note one onwards, and becomes confused when trying to start a piece in the middle, or at any selected spot. We should be able to play a piece from any chosen note.

Another important benefit is the freedom it gives the fingers in learning the necessary movements. When practicing from the beginning onward, the fingers only experience each movement while they are still affected by the effort of producing each of the previous notes. So, there will be certain notes that are always produced while the fingers are in a tense or fatigued state.

By selecting a random section as our starting point we circumvent this contingency and start this selected section with fresh fingers (the similarity with Working in Groups will be noticed here).

Practicing Backwards can be done on the macro scale, using whole sections and phrases of music, or the micro scale, going note by note, or beat by beat.

Mental Practice

Practicing “in our head” has been spoken of often, and is a proven method of gaining a very strong grasp of our music. It is usually spoken of in the sense of going over our music in our head, imagining the sound of every note and fingers used, as well as the look of the notes on the music. This is a great practice, and should be used by everyone. In fact, it is used by many professionals. It also has the advantage that it can be done anywhere, and without a guitar.

But there is another sense in which Mental Practice is a powerful technique.

When we are working to improve our speed, on scale passages or any other passage, we should, before each new attempt at a higher speed, play the music in our minds at the desired speed. Even if we have used a number of other practice tools, perhaps Spacing, Working in Groups, Add-A-Note, etc., we should play it in our heads before we play it with our fingers.

Quite remarkable results can be achieved by this method because it gives the mind (which ultimately controls what the fingers will do) a model to copy. And that is the way motor control programs work; they key in on perceived models of the goal to be achieved. So, we use the imaginative power of our minds to create the mental experience of playing the music, and this allows the mind to use its vast computational power to calculate what must be done to achieve the goal.

Looking deeper, it should be remarked that this technique works on the same principle that underlies all types of mental practice. The mind (and nervous system) *cannot tell the difference between a vividly imagined experience, and a real one*. This principle has been scientifically proven with many studies, such as the one that compared the results achieved by two groups of basketball players. One practiced foul shots for an hour a day; the other simply laid down, closed their eyes, and imagined they were sinking foul shots. The group that simply imagined successful practice actually experienced more improvement than the group that did the actual practice!

Following the Breath

Music enters the mind through a united action that is both mental and emotional in nature. It enters through the action of desire and thought. It is much like speaking. When we are talking to someone, we do not plan out ahead of time all the words we are going to use, rather, we form a wordless inner conception of the meaning we wish to convey, and the words (all of which we are familiar with and have used before) are assembled by our subconscious self. Then, the physical functions of breathing and speaking the words happens “by itself”.

Playing music works the same way. We first must desire the music (just as we desire to express our meaning in speaking) and feel an emotional need for it. We must then, either consciously (as in practice), or subconsciously (as in playing), form a mental construction of the music being played; i.e. the position of the notes on the fingerboard, patterns of finger music, sound of the music itself. We must then BREATHE in the music. This happens simultaneously with the action of desiring and thinking the music. It is at this point of breathing in the music that the music enters our body, ready to be played by the fingers. This is also the point that obstructions occur for many players. It is the point where breath is constricted or stopped.

When the breath is obstructed, excess, uncontrollable muscle tension inevitably results. Physical tension begins with the breath and radiates through the body. Realizing this, we can use our attention to “Working Backward”, and ensure the quality of this necessary three part process of desiring, thinking, and breathing by *Following the Breath during practice*.

It is very simple. Play any problem passage at any speed on the metronome and keep your attention firmly fixed on your breath. Observe what happens to your breath with each note you play. You will invariably notice moments where your breath is constricted in some way. You will then observe that these moments are also the moments when the fingers are doing something extra difficult, or are in some way uncomfortable. You will often find that you can improve these passages simply by maintaining a strong conscious connection with your breath during the playing of these passages.

Use this technique in connection with all other methods given here, as well as the Basic Practice Approach. Simply keep the mind fixed on the breath during each speed of your work-ups with the BPA. In the final analysis, the breath controls the music. So, if you control the breath during playing, you will control the music as well. A good formula to meditate on while playing and practicing is the following:

Think it. Breathe it. Play it.

Every time you are having trouble, ask yourself if you are performing these three actions with each note you play.

Summary & Categorization of Techniques

Diagnostic	Building/Strengthening	Maintenance
Work In Groups	Expanded Beat	
Add A Note	Spacing Technique	Bottoms Up
Up To The Note	Work In Groups	Meandering
	Practicing Backwards	Mental Practice
	Shifting Rhythms	
	Mental Practice	

Essential Practice Theory

Practicing One Thing is Practicing Everything

The Basic Practice Approach ties together everything in “*The Principles*” into a working method for training the fingers to do whatever we want them to do on the guitar. At a recent workshop, I was demonstrating the Basic Practice Approach to the class by sitting there and practicing something I had recently been working on, a passage about one measure long from a piece I had just written for guitar. I explained that I had to work on this for about two weeks to get it right. It was two weeks to train my fingers to do what they couldn't do before.

I began by explaining that the passage contained a major Stress Point, a spot where great tension was generated in the muscles of the playing mechanism because of a difficult stretch required by the index while other fingers were also stretched out, and delicate control was required on the right hand. I demonstrated that the first thing I did about this passage was to isolate that part, and “Pose” on it for 10 to 20 seconds at a time. (Identifying, isolating, and Posing of Stress Points is a major technique for problem solving in “*The Principles*”, and is contained in step two of the Basic Practice Approach).

Then, I demonstrated moving on to step 3, going from No Tempo to slow tempo. I played the passage, which consisted of all 1/8th notes at 60 bpm, taking a full 4 clicks for each note. I explained that if I could not do this, including playing through the Stress Point previously posed on, and then I should not allow myself to go any further; I would be fooling myself if I thought I would be able to bring the passage up to a faster, smooth tempo.

Fortunately, because I had done enough on that Stress Point, I was able to go smoothly through it. This meant I qualified for the next speed, 80 at 4 clicks per note. I explained that during the time I was waiting for the next note, my mind was extremely active, checking my entire body for relaxation by using Rotating Attention, and making sure all the details of finger placement were precise for both hands as each note was played and the next note was being prepared.

I then proceeded to work that passage right on up to 80 in 8th notes; that is, two notes per click, which is the tempo it needs to be played at. Now, it sounded like music. (In the beginning, of course, it did not sound like music.) One of the things I explained to the group was that if you are practicing correctly, like a professional, there will be many times during your practice that anyone listening would think you were just beginning to learn guitar!

In essence, I had given these students a peek into my practice room, demonstrating for them the REAL process of practice that a professional guitarist would use to solve problems. It was at this point that one of the attendees asked THE question! Actually, it was in the form of a statement, and it is probably the statement that prevents many people from using and benefiting from *The Principles*. He said "Yeah, but if I do that with everything that needs it, it will take me a hundred years to get through all my material." Now, I was tempted to answer flippantly with "So, what are you in some kind of hurry or something?" But, I decided to take mercy on his soul, and explain the situation. The answer really is in two parts: knowing how to "Compact Your Practicing", and understanding that "Practicing one thing is Practicing everything". These two concepts, when understood and used, enable us to deal with our playing problems as they need to be dealt with, and enable us to create real, Vertical Growth.

Compacting Your Practicing

It took me about ten minutes to bring that passage from No Tempo to slow tempo to "up tempo", or performance speed. It must be understood that when I first started working on it, I had to spend a few days **ONLY DOING NO TEMPO PRACTICE**, along with the Stress Points. Only after a few days of building the correct feelings and reactions into my muscles, did I test myself by trying a slow tempo.

This is the point in the practice process that the metronome comes in. The metronome is used here as a **TEST** of the efficacy and integrity of our previous practice. In other words, if I can't do it at the slow tempo of 60 at 4 clicks, **PERFECTLY**, then I have not done enough No Tempo Practice and, or I have not done it properly, (which means the Bottom of my Practice is not deep enough).

After a few days, I tried slow tempo practice, and the passage was holding up. I was getting all the notes, and I was comfortable, and everything looked and sounded good. Now, at this point, I begin a "work-up". I see how far I can push it. After about six days of practice on the passage (devoting maybe 15 minutes a day to this passage), I find I can do it comfortably at 60, one click per note. That's good; I am almost halfway there! Here is where I begin to "Compact my Practice". I begin to leave out some of the intermediate speeds during my work up. I move the metronome by larger increments. I rely on the muscle memory that I have already built in during the first phase of practice to work for me. So, here is what I do.

Every day, I follow the first two steps of the Basic Practice Approach. I think, and review what I have previously discovered about this passage, so that I can apply it to today's practice. Then, and this is **EXTREMELY IMPORTANT**, I revisit the Bottom of my Practice, and make it deeper if I can. In other words, I do powerful, No Tempo Practice on the passage.

This is key. Most people, in learning music, stop doing their slow practice on a passage after they feel they know it. They begin to only play it fast. If you only play your music fast, it will, after awhile, begin to "deteriorate". You must always clean, renew, and rebuild the reflexes and muscle

memory by visiting the Bottom of your Practice. It is the intermediate speeds that can be condensed and compacted in order to save time as the amount of material to be covered gets larger.

This particular passage I was using as an example was in a piece I had planned to play at the workshop. Since I knew I was going to perform it, I had in the last few days "Compacted my Practice" of the passage. I did No Tempo Practice on it, and then my work-up consisted simply of playing it at 60 at 4 clicks, then 2 clicks, then one click, then 8th notes. I did the same at 80, and I was good to go! All of that only took about two minutes on the passage, not a bad investment of time to make sure I didn't mess up that passage. I am happy to say the passage held up nicely when I played it.

Now, let me explain the "Practicing One Thing is Practicing Everything" concept. Many people when told what real, correct practice is, still don't do it because they feel that it would take too long; they would never learn to play all the music they want to learn, and so forth. Of course, the truth is the exact opposite. If you don't do this slow, careful, and methodical approach that you think takes so long, then, you will never learn all that music. You will just convince yourself that you have learned it. But it will be hard to convince other people if you happen to play for them!

It became clear to the workshop attendees who sat and watched me do real practice that my fingers were benefiting far beyond that particular passage. In fact, it became clear to them that my practice did not involve merely training my fingers, but rather, I was training my whole body. It became clear that this training would show itself in many other things I would attempt to play that had the same difficulties which I overcame here in this passage. It became clear that my entire "playing mechanism" was being up-graded by the practice I was doing. And that is exactly right. That is why anyone who practices like this gets better all the time.

In fact, at an earlier time in my development, I would have had to work on that passage for maybe a year in order to get it. It is only because of the level of playing ability that I presently enjoy with years of correct practice that I got it so reliably in just two weeks, working on it about fifteen minutes a day. Because of years of correct practice, it came easily and did not offer me resistance.

Please realize this. *If you can't play one scale correctly and cleanly, then, you can't play ANY scale correctly and cleanly.* So, if this is the way it is for you, there isn't much use, from the point of view of technique, to practicing a ton of scales. It would be a much better use of your time to pick one scale and examine it minutely, and practice it correctly and intensely until you begin to get it clean. Then, you will see ALL your scales improve. This is the meaning of "Practicing One Thing is Practicing Everything". Correct practice opens the door, slowly, one inch at a time, to the world of music you want to play. Please realize that the opposite is true as well. Bad practice closes the door, slowly, one inch at a time, to the world of music you want to play.

Moving in the Direction of Skill

I am fond of saying to others and to myself, that one of my guiding principles of life and guitar is "The most important thing in life is knowing what you want, and the second most important thing is knowing whether you are getting it". You may dispute with me about whether or not this is of primary importance in life, but take my word for it; it IS of primary importance in playing the guitar.

The guitar student is faced with many challenges, and plagued by many doubts. One of these challenges is how to make progress, real progress, in your abilities as a player. One of the doubts is... Are you making any progress in your abilities as a player? In other words, are you creating Vertical Growth, or only Horizontal Growth? We cannot answer this question about whether we are getting growth in our abilities as players unless we understand what it is we really want. How can we judge our progress and how can we assess our ability to create growth in our abilities, which also means assessing the quality of our practice? What is it we should be looking for?

I once saw a master violin teacher helping a student with a difficult passage. She took the student's fingers as they were on the fingerboard and said "Let's see if we can make this easier". There is much to learn from this approach. Master players know that it is very difficult to play badly, and it is very easy to play well! Of course, we are being a bit glib here. It means that when you see a bad player, you see someone putting out a lot of effort for very little result, and when you see a good player, you see someone getting a lot of results for little effort. However, it can take a lot of effort to get to the point of playing with little effort!

Real progress will always carry this sign; it will always have this characteristic. What felt difficult will feel easier, if not right away, then over time. The essential point to grasp is this. We know we are making progress if we can honestly see and feel that the things that once seemed difficult are becoming easy, and of course, sounding better. This is what we always want to see at any point in our development. I call it "Moving in the Direction of Skill". Now, let us look a bit more deeply into this concept.

What is skill?

Skill is the ability to reconcile opposing dynamics toward achievement of a purpose. Think about that very intensely, now and for a while after. "The reconciliation of opposing dynamics", what does that mean? Well, think of a baby trying to stand up for the first time. He or she stands up on little wobbly legs, encounters the force of gravity, takes a step and then falls over! With practice, the opposing forces of muscle contraction are reconciled with the force of gravity by the intention to stand upright, and when the goal of that intention is achieved, the baby can stand up! On to the next challenge! Skill has developed the ability to reconcile opposing forces, or dynamics, toward achievement of a purpose.

This is what we are looking for as guitar students. And yes, as we develop skill, as we learn to reconcile opposing dynamics and achieving our purposes (which is playing our music) not only becomes possible, it becomes easier. This is the first criteria for assessing growth: Are we becoming increasingly able to achieve our purposes as guitar players? For guitar players this simply means, "Can I make those notes I am supposed to make?"!

If we do not find ourselves over time, being able to do things we could not do before, we are not learning to reconcile the opposing dynamics and conditions which comprise the process of playing the guitar. That is because we don't even have a clue as to what those opposing forces and dynamics are anyway! Of course, that is where "*The Principles*" come in, because they make us aware of those dynamics and conditions. Even better, they tell us how to reconcile them!

Many guitar players will play for years and never Move in the Direction of Skill. They may have attained a certain level of skill, as much as their natural talent has afforded them, but they do not know how to capitalize on that talent, extend it, and keep extending it. In fact, many players do not even know there is such a thing as actually getting better. They kind of assume that everyone just picks up the guitar and does what they can, and some can do more than others, and that is that. They don't really believe that there is "mobility" in the class system of guitar players. They have a feudal mentality about it as in some people are born "peasants" and some are born "nobles". Well, to some extent that is true. The peasant WILL stay a peasant, unless he has access to education, that is.

Once the guitar peasant is able to have access to REAL education on playing guitar, they find the same thing the rising middle class discovered in medieval times: "That duke in the castle isn't really any better than me, they were just luckier; they had access to education, and leisure time to pursue it that I didn't have. Now that I have studied at the University for four years, I can read and write too. I thought you had to be a genius to do that"!

And in the world of guitar education it seems this feudal system is maintained by those "in power" just as it was in medieval times, and in the same way. I was reading something the other day by a very accomplished player and teacher. He was remarking how sad and strange it is that the great players and teachers seem to zealously guard the "secrets" of their great playing; they don't want anyone else discovering how they accomplish the "miracles" they perform on their instrument. The great Paganini, who astounded Europe with his unprecedented virtuosity on the violin, would quickly gather up all his music from the orchestra immediately after a concert, lest anyone study his music and discover any of his playing secrets! (Of course, today the "secrets" are out, and any properly trained violinist can play Paganini.)

So, the illusion that "class mobility" is not possible for everyone is carefully maintained by those who have an interest in having it believed. Well, anyone familiar with *Guitar Principles* knows that "*The Principles*" are the great equalizer. They are the educational resource that makes it possible for any guitar peasant to become a guitar King or Queen. They make it possible for anyone to Move in

the Direction of Skill, and to keep moving. Of course, that doesn't mean there is not a lot of work involved. It took a lot of work for a King to build his castle too!

No matter where you presently are located in your guitar playing abilities, it is possible for you to Move in the Direction of Skill. However, there are a few important considerations involved.

First, the exact steps for YOU to take may be unique. They may not be the same as anyone else's steps, and this is especially true if we have been playing for awhile. That is because we are all "put together" differently to begin with, and as we develop (or don't develop) we form complex conditions regarding our playing mechanism that may be very unique to ourselves. For us, it may require a unique combination of approaches, each one focusing on a particular obstacle.

In addition, we may need to focus on one obstacle, improve or eliminate it, and then focus on another, and then another, in a particular sequence. It is very much like untying a knot. Pull on the wrong thread and you make the knot tighter. Locate just the right thread, loosen it a little, and then switch to another, loosen it, then go back to the first, and Viola! We begin to unravel the knot.

I have never seen a "knot" that can't be untied, that cannot be worked on, and the loosening process begun. Anytime we become aware that we are not, anytime our "knots" are not loosening, we must conclude that there are dynamics and conditions involved in the structure and maintenance of that knot that we are not aware of, and/or that we do not know how to interact with, manipulate, and reconcile. We cannot find that next right thread to grab hold of and loosen, or, we do not know how to work with it to loosen it, to begin the process of untying the knot.

We may have a problem playing fast scales. The problem may be a combination of left hand finger tension and/or form, coupled with pick hand flaws (weakness or tension), together with an insufficient mental conception of the rhythm itself. It takes constant examination, analytical thought, and good old trial and error to unravel such a knot in our technique. But it is always possible.

A second consideration is that the initial necessary steps toward it may not be recognizable as such to anyone but the experienced and skilled teacher. They may not even feel comfortable, in fact, they may be quite uncomfortable. For instance, I will often see or sense something wrong in a student's left hand position and functioning, and I will grab their hand and elbow while it is playing, and force it to maintain a particular position while the fingers move. I will be preventing a movement of the shoulder, or arm, which I know is a less skilled, and compensatory reaction to a difficulty the hand is experiencing. This forces the fingers to make efforts they would not otherwise make. Those efforts are what is necessary in order to promote new muscle or ligament development to make it possible for a new skill to emerge.

It is not comfortable in the beginning, and it is not obvious. Students would not likely discover it on their own. Of course, the superiority of it will be evident very soon, sometimes immediately. The student will find himself with a new ability to reconcile opposing dynamics that could not be reconciled before, therefore achieving purposes that were not achievable before.

I have the constant experience of meeting students who have been spending lots of time and money sitting in front of guitar teachers with their "knots" clearly displayed, and much to the student's growing uneasiness, those knots just keep getting tighter! It is a sad fact that many guitar teachers simply do not know how to move the student in the direction of skill. Instead, when the knot will not loosen, the teacher plays the "shell game" with the student. This is common. You will be working on something, a piece or a solo, and you will obviously be unable to do it or improve some part of it. Then after awhile, the teacher will merely suggest that you begin working on something else!

So, instead of that nasty thing you are making no progress with, you find a new song to learn that suddenly appears on the music stand. Now, you can busy yourself until you hit the parts you can't handle in that piece, at which point another "switch" will take place, and the illusion of "movement" can be maintained in lessons (at least for as long as the student can stand it, or will put up with it). This is not Moving in the Direction of Skill; this is "moving in the direction of despair"!

Instead of our obstacles becoming proof of our incompetence and points of departure for new excursions into the direction of despair, we can learn to use each obstacle as a new opportunity to Move in the Direction of Skill. The way to do this is continually practice what I have described as "Discovering Your Discomfort". The most overlooked aspect of playing the guitar is also its most fundamental aspect; it is a physical process of bodily movement.

Music listeners have the luxury of relating to music on the purely sensual level, the purely artistic or even spiritual level. Music players should do this too of course, but in addition, they must pay their dues to the purely physical aspect of playing. We are the ones who interact with that purely physical thing we call "our guitar" to make the music, and we do so with our physical selves. All players must respect this fact. We must also respect the fact that during our entire playing lives we will be training and maintaining that incredibly complex physical mechanism used to create music.

The surest and earliest sign that we are moving away from the direction of skill is our perception of physical discomfort during practice and playing. Most people have the all too common and all too human response to discomfort- they block it from awareness. We must do the opposite. We must embrace our discomfort, we must "surround the situation" by increasing our Awareness and Attention. Coupled with our accumulated understanding of the dynamics of playing and correct practice approach, we can use that perception of discomfort as a starting point and springboard for a new excursion in the direction of skill.

A final consideration for those wishing to Move in the Direction of Skill most powerfully is this- improvement of fundamental skills does not occur through the process of repetition of procedures, it comes from the continual *upgrading* of procedures. Below is a finding reported in scientific studies of those individuals who have acquired "expert performance" abilities. Here is a quote from an article "Expert Performance: Its Structure and Acquisition" by Ericcson and Charness (first appearing in American Psychologist, August 1994).

"...Hence, individuals do not achieve expert performance by gradually refining and extrapolating the performance they exhibited before starting to practice but instead by restructuring the performance and acquiring new methods and skills. In the final section, we show that individuals improve their performance and attain an expert level, not as an automatic consequence of more experience with an activity but rather through structured learning and effortful adaptation."

This understanding is of primary importance. It simply means that the road to mastery or any amount of increased skill lies not in quantity of practice as a first consideration. It lies in the constant improvement of the way we go about doing things. The key phrases here are "structured learning" and "effortful adaptation". We must be fundamentally changing and improving as time goes by. This is why the *Principled Player* is always practicing with intense Attention, and always keeping Beginners Mind. There must always be a place in us that is open so that something new can enter. That "something new" is our key to improvement and the vehicle that moves us in the direction of skill.

Does everyone NEED to be Moving in the Direction of Skill? Of course not, unless you are a beginner. If you have no skill, you need some before you can even play. Every baby must learn to walk, but does not need to grow up to be an Olympic athlete. As a guitarist, you can stop at any point in your development, sit with your guitar for the rest of your life, and play your little heart out! But, many of us do seem to be obsessed with playing like "the Masters". If that is YOUR story, if that is YOUR path, then, you now know the right direction in which to point yourself. Keep "*The Principles*" in mind, and the wind will be always at your back.

Quality Control

NOTE: Even though the following essay was written with the special intention of instructing teachers, those students practicing without the benefit of a teacher should study it as well, since you are in effect, your own teacher.

Correct Practice, as all *Principled Players* know, must fulfill two conditions. They are knowing the right thing to do, and then making sure you do it. The first part provides the correct knowledge, and is every teacher's responsibility. The second part makes sure the correct things are actually being done time after time, repetition after repetition, speed after speed, when using the Basic Practice Approach. This is the job of the student when practicing alone.

However, it is very important for teachers to realize that they cannot take for granted that a student will be capable of having the intense kind of focus necessary to insure that the correct thing is actually being done time after time. This is especially true if a new and unfamiliar skill is being learned, and even more true if a new way of doing something is replacing an old way.

As I have stated in the "*Summa Principia*" on the *Principles DVD*, "Physical tension induces mental confusion". The clouds of confusion will be part of the usual climate conditions surrounding the student's head as they are constantly challenged to adapt to higher levels of physical demand in the process of developing guitar technique. The teacher must be there to dispel those clouds, and bring the light of Awareness and Understanding to the student. In "*The Principles*", I have called this "Inserting Awareness Points into Stress Points".

This means that it is critical that the teacher actually sit there with the student, metronome in hand, and conduct the Basic Practice Approach from the beginning and up to the student's present limit. Along the way, the teacher must carefully observe the student, catching every detail of incorrect action that may arise, and making sure it is corrected before the next speed is attempted. In this way, we make sure we "Bring up the Ease", not the "disease", as we make each new attempt at a higher speed (which makes a greater demand on the body/mind playing mechanism).

The teacher must also make sure that the student understands what went wrong, why it went wrong, when it went wrong, and how it went wrong. Both teacher and student must be satisfied that the ability to be aware of, and to fix wrong actions has been achieved. Then, and only then, can teacher or student, expect that correct practice can take place during the week.

This is what I mean by "Quality Control" during practice. Our ability to conduct our practice with a high degree of Quality Control is essential. It is the teacher's job at each lesson to discover what is most likely to go wrong during the process of skill building in which the student will be engaged all week.

I mention this because I believe that all too often the teacher is assuming that by merely explaining the correct action, and by going over it a few times, the student will be equipped to conduct correct and powerful practice. This is manifestly not true, and there are a few reasons why.

First, the student, almost by definition, is still developing the ability for powerful focus and awareness of the body's relative states of tension and relaxation, as well as its actual actions during playing. This means it is extremely easy for there to be things going on of which the student has no Awareness.

Secondly, we cannot assume that just because a student can perform an action correctly at a slow tempo, they will be able to maintain correct action as the tempo increases. There have been times in teaching when I was tempted to make that assumption, and found to my horror that when I asked the student to do a BPA work-up in front of me, everything went wrong! And that, I realized, is what would be happening if I had trusted the student to do the right thing at home! There is a good reason for this and it is a critical understanding- there are conditions that present themselves at higher speeds that are not present at lower speeds.

Like a car that is out of alignment and starts to shake to 60 mph, but is fine at 30 mph, the imperfection will not show itself until sufficient stress is placed on the system. The imperfection is there, no matter what the speed, but it does not create effects. One of the primary benefits of the Basic Practice Approach is that it allows us to observe the gradual emergence of the effects of imperfections in our technique and approach.

So, every error which is going to occur (and they can vary widely with different students building the same skill), must be discovered in the lesson, before the student is sent home. They must all be written down in the student's lesson notebook, and the teacher must, at the next lesson, check each one of those things to make sure they were tended to during the week of practice.

If they were not tended to, the student's Attention must be drawn to them, and the student's Intention to do the right thing during the upcoming week must be established. (In this, and in all things, the student must clearly understand what the teacher expects at the next lesson. The teacher must verify that this understanding has been established, and it must be in writing in the student's notebook, to be checked the next week.

3 Areas of Awareness

The student's ability to observe the imperfections they must correct will be fostered in three areas, visual (seeing what is wrong), aural (hearing what is wrong), and kinesthetic (feeling what is wrong). The teacher must train the student to see what is wrong, hear the effects of the wrong action in the sound itself (missing or damaged notes) and, most importantly, to feel the uncomfortable physical tension that precedes and accompanies the wrong action. (The student must be trained over time to distinguish between the appropriate and necessary effort that accompanies normal and natural

development of the playing mechanism from the pathological conditions that accompany all the effects of incorrect practice).

Special attention must be given to precision of rhythm. Distortion of rhythm is the first effect in the sound of physical tension. Constant recording and playback during lessons will be found to be an extremely powerful training tool.

As with everything else concerning our development as guitarists, our ability to conduct powerful Quality Control is an ever evolving ability; it increases in proportion to the microscopic awareness that correct practice continually engenders. This is the primary reason we practice Beginners Mind, and visit the Bottom of our Practice with a given piece of music no matter how many years we have played it. In every practice session our ability to see something new should be greater than it has ever been. In reality, we are never practicing the same music twice.

Finally, teachers should realize that even though it is their responsibility to oversee this process in each student, as they do so, they will be strengthening their own powers of observation and awareness. So, by putting out the effort of sitting there and conducting Quality Control through all the speeds of the Basic Practice Approach, two guitarists will be improving for the price of one!

The Glue of Repetition

One of the joys of knowing how to practice correctly is the feeling of confidence you have when you decide to learn a new song, piece, or exercise. When you first sit down to practice you have the same feeling that a craftsman has when he or she sits down to build a new project. There is no doubt about the final result; you know what you are doing. You have done it many times before.

You know how to plan your work, and you know how to work your plan. You know which steps to take, and you know how to take them. For whatever amount of time you have decided to sit down and work, you know you will accomplish something, and what's more, you have the wonderful certainty that what you do accomplish will be there the next day, or whenever you pick up the work again.

The work is enjoyable and you look forward to it. And, like a chef who gets to eat the meal after creating it, or a carpenter who gets to sit in the room he has built, you get (earn) the pleasure of sitting (or standing) with your instrument- playing the music, and having it be something special and something enjoyable not only for you, but for anyone else who may be around.

How different this is than what most guitar student's experience! How different this is from what many of you reading this actually go through in your attempts to learn to play. I know because I was there, in the pit of despair. I know because I have spent all my adult life pulling people out of that pit. And, believe me; it's pretty crowded down there!

Down there is more like this- every day you pick up your guitar and get in the ring with that new piece, or song, or something your teacher gave you in the lesson. You try to put on your best attitude, and you grab that piece with both your guitar playing hands, and you wrestle! You give it all you got. It's like Wrestlemania, but that big bad dude won't budge; he won't go down. Or, you get him down, but he won't stay down. You think you got him, but as soon as you turn your back, he's up and he's on your back! A lot of you will find yourselves losing your enthusiasm for getting back in the ring.

Before I knew how to do correct practice, I used to feel like a kid who was building a sand castle. Every day I'd go back to build it higher, but it had gotten washed away overnight. When I learned how to practice, I felt like I was building something day by day, and nobody and nothing was messing with it overnight. The structure was there waiting for me the next day, and I could invest more time and effort into it, feeling secure that it would, in fact, be there the next day. This was a really good thing for me because I am not a person who deals well with frustration. I get mad real easy, so I'm sure that everyone else in my world is also a lot better off thanks to the fact that I learned how to practice!

Once you understand the mechanics of correct practice, including the mental, emotional, and physical aspects of the process, the most powerful tool you can use when you sit down to practice is what I call the Glue of Repetition. This glue is applied with another tool, one that every student I have ever taught is required to get, and learn how to use properly: a metronome.

People who understand correct practice know that repetition by itself can just as easily harm you as help you. Because of muscle memory, you can practice mistakes over and over and learn them just as well as the notes you are supposed to be playing. But we will assume that you realize this already, and are well on your way to being able to practice correctly. So let me make some points that will bring you even closer.

Before you can apply the Glue of Repetition, there is something you must achieve first with the music you are playing. And achieving this often takes fully half of the entire time and energy needed to master the music. And that thing you must achieve is this: one correct playing of the notes being practiced.

I have often sat with someone working on one measure of music for twenty minutes while they made attempt after attempt to get just one correct run-through of a complex lick from a rock solo or a passage from a classical piece. They made attempt after attempt, and also mistake after mistake! This is what happens for most people, even me. Depending on the complexity of the music, it can take quite an effort to nail the notes square on the head as they should be, as they must be. And realize that this means every note, every pick stroke, every finger, all of this correct, as well as the proper form and relaxation being maintained. If all of this is not exact the results will be flawed. And when you try to build on those flawed results you will get more flawed results.

During the process of achieving that one correct run-through, every mistake must be pounced on. Our Awareness, our Attention must be so powerful that we are aware of everything we do and everything we don't do, but should. And we must fortify our Intention so that the next run-through comes out differently, either getting us what we want, or bringing us closer to it until we get it; that one correct playing of the notes. After this magnificent achievement, it is time to apply the Glue of Repetition.

Usually, that first correct playing of the music will, and should be done No Tempo. Then, there should be many repetitions done also No Tempo. This is the beginning of applying the Glue of Repetition. To make the glue set and become strong we take out our metronomes.

The Basic Practice Approach, which we find at the end of *"The Principles"*, ties everything together into an actual program of action when practicing. It tells us to begin by stripping away the rhythm from the notes. This means making all notes into equal time values. This is done so that all the movements associated with making those notes can be done consciously, and examined and experienced consciously. Having to observe the actual time values of the music, where some moves must be faster to create shorter notes, is often the thing that prevents us from becoming as aware as we need to be of certain movements, especially the ones we are having trouble with. In addition, the metronome, used so

that four clicks at 60 represents one note (our starting point in going from No Tempo to slow tempo when using the Basic Practice Approach) forces us to play much slower than most people ever would bother to do. Doing so leads to incredible discoveries by whoever does bother to.

From there the Glue of Repetition is applied until it sets into the muscle memory and we can ask our body and mind to perform the movements at a slightly higher speed. Again, the metronome allows us to do so by a much smaller increment of speed than we would otherwise use if left to ourselves. By putting the metronome on 80 and taking 4 clicks per note, the increased demand on our playing mechanism is very slight and usually easily handled. From there, it is a matter of simply working it up while maintaining full awareness and Quality Control as we go along.

When we reach a speed that taxes us, that makes us feel like we are barely making it hang together; that is called our "Working Speed". That is the speed to stay at for awhile, and apply the Glue of Repetition until the music is strong enough to bear the greater strain of a faster speed. It may take minutes, days, or months, depending on the demands of the music and our level of development.

This "Working Speed" is our limit (our temporary limit). One very important thing to realize is that this limit once achieved must be worked up to everyday.

Another important (and pleasant) thing to realize is that the speed we work for hours or years to attain with a particular piece or technique becomes very easy for us after awhile. When it does, I call this my "falling out of bed speed", the speed at which I can play something even if I have just fallen out of bed!). There are a number of things I worked for years to bring to a very high professional level, that I honestly didn't know if I ever would be able to reach, that I can now play immediately (or, give me a few seconds at the most), after falling out of bed. For those of you who don't sleep with your guitar, this means that you will be able to play it at that speed even before being warmed up!

When the music begins to be "in our fingers", when muscle memory and the other forms of memory (as ear and eye memory) are strong, it is time to let the plane leave the ground. It is time to begin to use the metronome and set it to the basic beat of the music and to observe the rhythm. (Although still at a very slow speed, one that requires our fastest movement to be equivalent to a speed we already reached when using the Basic Practice Approach.) It is also time to begin playing from memory, and developing the fullest emotional relationship to the music (as we would if we had memorized our lines for a play, and were ready for a dress rehearsal to bring the character fully to life.)

Everything I have said is a description of what is commonly referred to as "wood shedding", meaning going out to the wood shed for hours at a time to practice. However, what we are talking about is a very intelligent type of wood shedding, one where the wood shed is well stocked with a copy of *"The Principles"* and a metronome!

Measuring Your Progress

In order to make Vertical Growth as players there are some very important conditions to be met. One of these, and one very often lacking in a player/practicer's approach is a systematic and scientific method of measuring results. Of course, we all probably have some vague sense of whether or not we are actually making any progress as players. We all probably have those pieces or songs or leads we check in with from time to time to see if we are able to play them any better.

But to really kick your progress into high gear you need something a little... scratch that... a LOT more focused! You need a system. You need routines that you can apply to various situations, routines that give results and provide the feedback on measurement of results that you need to assess the effectiveness of the routines themselves. You need to know whether a particular routine you have devised to solve a problem or improve something is actually working.

Many students will be working on an arpeggio study or scale, and they will have no idea of the top speed they are able to play it, the speed at which their present level of development allows them to play that particular passage of music or exercise before beginning to "fall apart." And it is very important to know that! Otherwise, you will have no idea (or not a clear enough idea) of when you have made progress and when you have gotten results from a particular practice approach. Just as a bodybuilder must know what weight they are presently able to lift or press so that they can work out with the right amount of weight at their particular point of development, musicians must know the same thing when it comes to their technique, which is their own athletic ability to produce music on their instrument.

This means that if I am working on a scale, I must know the top speed I can play it. I must work up to that speed every day. I must then apply certain practice routines designed to get me past that top speed, so that if today I can play it at 120 beats per minute in sixteenth notes, I will be able to play it at 132 bpm next month.

And how do we do that? GET A METRONOME AND LEARN HOW TO USE IT! I swear, I should start my own metronome company, given the number of metronomes I have been responsible for having people buy over the years! It is required for all my students. I cannot produce results with students if they don't have a metronome, and know how to use it effectively in practice routines.

And once they do know how to use it, they have a powerful method and tool for learning things on their own. Then my role as teacher becomes more of showing students higher levels of playing, and introducing them to more complex situations that will be solved by using the same practice routines they have used on the ones previously mastered.

Here are some ways to apply these understandings to your immediate situation:

1. Get a metronome, and use it for all "technical" routines. Use it especially for all routines designed to increase speed, i.e., all scale and arpeggio studies.

2. Determine your top speed as soon as possible when learning a new technical exercise. This is the speed you will work up to each practice session.

3. Determine as soon as possible exactly where the exercise or musical passage breaks down as you go past your top speed.

4. Isolate those notes; analyze the movements of both hands required for producing those notes, *and figure out what is going wrong* at that speed.

5. Move the metronome to much lower speeds, and look for the BEGINNINGS of those wrong things happening, and work with them there, at the very beginning. For instance, if my top speed on a G Major second position scale is 120 bpm, and I notice that at that speed my pinky is getting so tense it is beginning to pull away from the string, *I will look for that starting to happen at a much lower speed.* Once I see it (which I never noticed before), I can work with it there, fix it at the lower speed, and then *I will see what passages start to get stronger and hold together at the higher speeds.*

The more you understand and DO these things, the more you will have the great confidence and pleasure that comes with knowing you can always make yourself a better guitarist because *YOU KNOW HOW TO PRACTICE!*

Practice Organization

If you are the type of person who is able to be organized about the things you really care about, then you possess an ability just as powerful as "Natural Talent" when it comes to being successful with learning and continually growing as a guitarist, and musician.

Organization is Power. I realized this clearly one time while cleaning out a kitchen drawer, the kind that becomes a catch-all for all kinds of stuff. I found so many things in there that were very useful, or could be, if I knew they were there. But because of a lack of organization, I didn't even know I had them, so they were useless to me. In other words, my lack of organization had decreased my power.

Organization is a Form of Attention and Awareness

In the *Guitar Principles DVD*, disc Two, "The Principle of Correct Practice #1" states "Your aware, thinking mind is your primary practice tool." Awareness is developed by the use of Attention. Lack of Awareness is caused by lack of Attention. Disorganization is caused by a lack of Attention to the "overallness" of a situation, specifically for us, our playing and practicing.

I am going through all of this, because if you do not clearly see the necessity of expending the energy to be organized, you won't make the effort. And it is an effort. It is so much easier to just rush headlong into whatever we feel like doing at the moment in our practicing, and not stop to think and analyze. Of course there is a time and place for "unorganized" practicing and playing, but there is certainly a vital need for an overall Awareness and direction to our efforts to develop and grow as guitarists and musicians.

A good analogy is that of a bodybuilder in a gym. Anyone who just goes into the weight room, picks up a few weights here and there as the spirit moves him, doesn't really keep track of what they are doing day to day, and what results they would like to achieve, simply is not going to get any results. Like the bodybuilder in a gym, if we want to see the best results from our practice, we need an intelligent approach, consistently applied, and based on an understanding of the mechanics of playing the guitar, and the musical skills and knowledge we must acquire to function as guitarists and musicians.

So I am going to lay out for you some very effective ways of organizing your practice in terms of material, and in terms of time management. The goal is to maximize the effectiveness of our efforts.

The 4 Areas of Focus

There are four areas which deserve our Attention in practice. They are broad, and the details

within those areas are constantly fine tuned, and made suitable to our level of development and needs of the moment. They are as follows:

Technique: Some time should always be devoted to pure technique; just the physical, mechanical aspect of playing. It is by working in this area that we develop the Microscopic Awareness necessary for good playing. In my technical sessions, I consider myself a scientist going into the lab to investigate that new project, problem, theory, or whatever. I put it under the microscope, I experiment, I observe, and I draw conclusions. I test them. The next day, I review and carry it further. For example, I may notice one day that my third finger always tenses in reaction to my fourth finger pulling off to my second finger. I will make up exercises to work with this, applying "*The Principles of Correct Practice*" to the situation.

How much focus needs to be put here depends on the player, the style, and the goals. The classical player needs a whole lot of focus here; the jazz player also needs a whole lot. The player who wants to be a speed demon virtuoso rock guitarist needs a lot of attention and work in this area.

If you just want to strum and sing songs, and not get too complicated, then you only need to put some attention here in the beginning. After you get the hang of some chords and maybe a few runs, you can spend the rest of your life just learning more songs and using the same technique (what I have called Horizontal Growth). I do find, however, that most people are not really satisfied staying in one place technically and musically. Personally, I believe in continual development. I like to do two hours of pure technique a day. I encourage my students to always be doing something of a purely technical nature usually at the beginning of practicing, since it also serves the function of warming up.

Music Skills: Into this category falls all the musical materials you need for your chosen style. Some of them, of course, are common to all styles; things like basic chords, reading notes, understanding rhythm, etc. Some fall into more specialized categories. The jazz player needs hundreds of chords in all their inversions, hundreds of scales in all forms, arpeggios, etc. This is simply because these are the tools he needs in his toolbox to play jazz. (Of course, it's great to have these for any style. I studied Jazz for many years to get a handle on these "musical materials". (Although I don't really play jazz, I use them for arranging purposes).

Learning music theory also falls into this category. I teach all my students music theory as time goes on. The areas for continuing education as a musician are endless, and so you should always find something to put in this category. In the beginning, it should be the basic items I mentioned previously; that is, the basic chords, basic scales and licks for the rock player, usage of basic chords, like bass runs and rhythms, and everything that gets you "up and running" as a guitar player. As you develop, it should include the study of harmony, musical form, song form, and lyric writing for songwriters.

Repertoire: This simply means learning things that you can play. It sounds obvious, but I know lots of students who always practice but can never actually play anything! This subject needs a lot of elaboration, which I will do elsewhere, but let me make the main point here. You must, as soon as possible, learn whole songs or pieces that you can sit down (or stand up) and play. It is the quickest way

to unleash your true potential, as it enables you to make the mental transition of feeling yourself to be a "guitar player", instead of a "guitar student". I have known people who play for many years and don't feel like players. And that attitude shows in their playing.

Everyone gets to join the club right away! Your membership dues are learning something to play and then playing it for someone. It grows from there. Always devote part of your practice time to maintaining and developing repertoire. It is best to keep your repertoire, that is, the list of things you can play, written down somewhere, preferably in the Practice Journal you should be keeping. Also keep a list of the things you would like to play in the future.

Review: Reviewing and increasing your understanding of past material is vital. I mean, it is absolutely essential. And understand this. Your teacher will probably NOT make sure that you do this. They are usually busy giving you new material. You must have the initiative to review things on an ongoing basis. There are many concepts you learn along the way that are impossible to grasp the first time you hear them. You should regard that first time like meeting someone for the first time. You are just getting introduced; don't think you know them completely!

An excellent example is to understand what the bottom number of the time signature means. It is usually mentioned in the beginning of learning how to read music, and it is IMPOSSIBLE to understand and appreciate its importance or what it means, because it involves abstract concepts which cannot be grasped without a good amount of experience.

The student nods their head as the teacher says "the bottom number tells which note gets one beat". The student, having no idea what that means is then told the note gets one beat, which isn't true, (note values do not have fixed absolute time values, they are relative to each other) and the confusion goes on from there. It will show up later when the student feels really uncomfortable every time they see an eight in the bottom of the time signature.

Every time you review, you strengthen your ability and understanding. Keep a list of the things you are reviewing- repertoire, exercises, studies, concepts, etc.

Organizing Practice Time

This one usually gets people. People "can't find the time". That's the first obstacle. The answer is simple. At some point in your transition from child to adulthood, you are supposed to learn that us grown up types don't "find" time, we MAKE IT. That is, we do if we want to consciously create the reality we desire, in this case becoming guitar players.

So that is the first concept that needs to be understood. "Finding time" is the language of weakness and excuse making. "Making time" is the language of strength. It takes some effort. It accomplishes. When you begin to get organized, you begin to "make the time", and you will see the results. Whether you do so or not depends, as always, on the strength of your desire.

I have to tell you that everyone who knows me considers me the most disorganized person they know. And I am, in just about everything except music and the guitar. Because that's pretty much all I really care about, at least enough to make that effort. I often think that if I could be this organized about the rest of my life, I could probably rule the earth! So maybe it's better this way.

Here are some suggestions:

Write down your schedule. Use the Practice Chart I've outlined as it is, or as a guide. Write down when you will practice, and for how long. Revise it each week, based on what is happening in your life. Be realistic. Don't feel guilty if you have to deviate from it some days, or modify it. The chart is there as a general guide and as a tool you are using to help strengthen your Intention. It is not meant to be a test or judge.

It doesn't matter how long you practice. *It only matters how well you practice.* Sometimes I practice for an hour without stopping. I often take a break from writing or some other activity, and practice for five minutes, or just play something. I always keep my guitars out and around me for this purpose.

At the beginning of each day, think about how that day is going to go for you. Where do you have any free time that could be used for some practice? Don't always be looking for that half hour block of time. You won't always find it. Grab the guitar for three minutes and work on that chord change intelligently, the best way you know how. You will accomplish something, and if you are doing Good Practice, you will feel like you have accomplished something.

Copy the chart, enlarge it if necessary, and each week, sit down, and fill it in with the specifics from each area of focus. I have put in some examples. Check off each day when you do practice a specific area.

Practice Chart

Area	Activity	Time	Mon.	Tue.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Sun
Technique	Foundation Exercises from "The Principles of Correct Practice for Guitar" G scale, 2-1 pull offs up neck	15 min							
Review	Mel bay p. 12, C scale	10 min							
Music Skills	Mel Bay p. 25-26, 5 root arpeggios	20 min							
Repertoire	Sor Etude #2, Stairway to Heaven Solo	15 min. each							

Q & A

The Working Speed

Q: I've been using your pick techniques in the "Principles. Generally when I practice, I get up to 80 at 16th notes with no tension. However, when I get to 102 at 16th notes, I feel tense and can only play it twice before losing it. Am I doing this practicing right or should I make my max speed the max I can go without feeling tense and with also being able to play it over and over for a while?

A: I don't know how many users of my book think of it this way, but the entire "Principles" is a preparation for being able to do the Basic Practice Approach correctly, and fruitfully. The ability to actually DO the BPA as it needs to be done is a major achievement, and gives you the tremendous thrust you need to get going as a guitarist. However, there are many other "practice strategies" the pros use to solve problems, and to reach new levels of ability, but they are used along with the BPA; so that is primary.

Using the BPA will usually bring quick and dramatic results. It brings the material you are working on up to its maximum level of perfection ACCORDING TO YOUR PRESENT LEVEL OF DEVELOPMENT. This is key (which is why I used CAPS! In other words, it will bring you to the top of your Vertical Growth at the present time.

You are asking about how to go beyond that, and that is always the tougher terrain to travel. You have reached your limit and are in the area I call "the Working Speed". This is the speed where a new and extremely focused kind of work must be done to train the body and mind to perform at higher levels. This is also the speed you should be working up to everyday. It is at this speed that the various strategies I mentioned are employed.

You ask a common question "Should I avoid ANY tension or feelings of loss of control when I practice?" No, you shouldn't. In fact, it is only by knowing how to gradually allow yourself to approach your limit, feel the tension begin, and know what to do about it that allows you to eventually break through that limit. But this is a very delicate process. If you do not do it with the required delicacy, you will only reinforce your troubles, or create new ones. Further, you must be a master at applying "The Principles" to do this process in the first place.

The first issue is to accurately locate your Working Speed. To understand the process of locating your

Working Speed, think of this analogy. You are building a car. You build the car, and take it out on the road to see how fast it can go. After awhile, you reach the top speed it can go, and then it starts to shake, rattle and roll! You better not drive it faster or you will be sitting in the road with a bunch of nuts and bolts and tires all over the place. Your job is to listen carefully, pay great attention as you accelerate the speed, and catch the exact beginning of trouble, the first little sounds and vibrations. Now you need to figure out exactly what parts of the car are shaking and having trouble. Then you go back to the workshop and fix it, tighten it up, and take it out again for another run, repeating the whole process.

So your Working Speed will be the speed at which trouble begins, when tension begins to accumulate throughout the playing mechanism. But, and here is the big BUT, if you apply your full Attention, Intention, and various practice approaches, you can "tighten" things up, and improve your overall functioning. Eventually, after enough time applying the Glue of Repetition, your playing mechanism will be able to perform the movements required to produce the notes without producing the "shaking". If you try to work too far past your Working Speed, you will not gain control.

Applying the analogy to practicing the guitar means intense listening, and an intense feeling of the physical body while playing. Then you must locate the exact notes that are suffering- the missing or damaged notes. Locate the notes that are damaged in time and damaged in tone. I call this finding the "what", as in, "what is wrong?" After you find the "what", you must find the "why". The "why" is really a bunch of other "whats"; other events that led up to your problem. I may discover a missing or weak note in a scale. That is my "what".

I may then discover a tense finger that is not ready beforehand to play that note. That is my "why". The tense pinky is "why" the note is missing. (In your example, it may be something going on in the pick hand or pick arm). Whatever it is, it must be located, examined, and not repeated.

All of this is what I mean in "*The Principles*" about working from effect back to cause. This kind of thinking and working leads to continuous progress and professional levels of development.

Once you have located and examined the "what" and the "why", you can begin to do something about it. Locate the exact point where tension begins. Examine your action and form, and find a way to do it, using No-Tempo Practice and every other Tool in "*The Principles*", to make the note and the movements that produce it... PERFECT. Make the note be there, and work it through the BPA with the new insights and improvements.

Then, you are ready to work up to Working Speed again, and see how the new improved "car" operates. If you successfully located the problem (or one of them) things should feel different. If there is no improvement, you either did not catch the right thing, or you didn't effectively do the right thing about it. In that case, double your focus, keep a good attitude, and launch another attack!

Our playing problems can be such blind spots that we need to employ some special tactics. I will tell you two of the most powerful. They are "Practicing in Groups", and "Playing Up to the Note".

Whenever you are having trouble, take a smaller piece of your problem. If it is scalar, take just a few notes, one beat to the next if it is, say, 16ths used in a scale. Just play that up to your Working Speed. Then examine that group, every note. Are they all there? Are they all "healthy", nice big fat notes, or limp little weakling notes that barely got born? This will help you find the "what". Missing notes always have one cause: the right fingers (or pick) were not there at the right time, doing the right thing in the right way.

Your job is to discover that, and find out why, and then do something about it. The discovery of hidden tensions will always be part of the solution. After Working in Groups, and discovering the missing or damaged notes, go further. Play Up to Each Note. Play just the first note; make it exactly correct, right on the beat, or wherever it is supposed to be. Then take the first and second note, perfect. Keep adding. This allows you to examine EVERY component movement necessary to produce each note. You will find the "what", and you must discover the "why". Then you must devise your strategy for dealing with it, which will include *"The Principles"* and the use, once again, of the Basic Practice Approach.

It is very important to remember to constantly "re-visit" the Bottom of your Practice as you work this process. That is, spend some time in this mode of practice- before each new attempt at the Working Speed, play the notes No Tempo, and with full Attention and Awareness. Then, make your new attempt. Too much time trying to ram through at your Working Speed will build too much tension. You must release the tension periodically by visiting the Bottom of Your Practice.

You might use Posing, the Gradual Pressure Technique, No Tempo Practice, Following, and Rotating Attention. You will apply all these things to every note, and you will see yourself moving through that difficult terrain you are in, through the Working Speed and past your limit. Then, you will have a new Working Speed and a new limit. And that is what keeps us guitar players so busy all the time!

Why Slow Practice Alone May Not Bring Improvement

Q: *Are you really sure that speed will come by practicing at slow tempo? I mean, is playing 16th notes at 200bpm supposed to feel free of tension?*

A: Slow practice by itself does not guarantee anything. If I practice slowly but still maintain unnecessary muscle tension, I will always be limited by that tension. It will always be present, and be my undoing as soon as I go for speed. Many teachers over the years have preached slow practice to their students. After awhile, they notice it isn't helping! That's because the part that is left out is the method for becoming aware of the SUBTLE muscle tension that is really there. For long time players, it is harder to become aware of.

Understand that the point of slow practice is simply to give us "room" for our awareness to function, and be powerful and penetrating. If we practice "slow" and "mindless", it will do us little good (although, perhaps, we might experience some improvement). But when we are "stuck", there is always unknown tension coming from a possible variety of sources at the bottom of it.

And yes, anything we have truly mastered will be free of tension. Not free of *effort*, just free of tension. Effort is simply the sensation of activity; tension is the sensation of "struggle", so great that it *prevents* the achievement of our goal (the notes). Understand that these words are clumsy. Any movement is achieved by muscular contraction; therefore, tension is *always* present and must be. When I use the word "tension" in a negative sense, it means EXCESS tension, tension that does not contribute to our effort to achieve a particular result, but rather, takes away from that effort, and makes the result unobtainable.

As I made clear in my essay "*Discover Your Discomfort*", the way to tell the difference is to become sensitive to the sensation of struggle, or discomfort. So, if you include in your practice the kind of intense awareness you *should* be practicing with, coupled with slow tempo and No Tempo Practice, and building faster and faster with the Basic Practice Approach, Then the speed you are looking for will come.

Mind Over Muscle- How To Gain Control of Your Fingers When They Have A Mind of Their Own!

Q: *My wrist keeps wanting to rest on the guitar body as an anchor. Is this wrong?*

A: That is an interesting phrase, "My wrist keeps wanting to rest on the guitar body as an anchor". And I'm sure you are quite right. I'm sure your wrist is acting as an independent agent with a mind of its own. At various times during playing, your "wrist will insist" on anchoring itself. I am also sure that this happens when the technical demands of speed arise in the music. Players talk all the time about some finger that "just does" this or that action by itself (pinky sticking up, for instance).

The short answer is, yes, it is bad for your wrist to anchor UNLESS it is done extremely lightly, merely making contact. Pressing the wrist into the guitar will create many limitations when attempting music of a certain level of technical sophistication.

This is why I say that in the beginning of developing skill as a player, you should expect your body to always tend to do the *wrong* thing. You see, the various body parts involved in playing the guitar- the wrist, fingers, etc., are quite stupid in the beginning. They WILL try to run the show if you let them. They will try to solve your technical problems. But before being made intelligent through proper instruction and correct practice, they will almost always come up with the wrong answer! It is your job to train them to be INTELLIGENT, so that they will either already KNOW the right answer, or have a better intuition about how to find that answer.

The various parts of the body will always try to do what seems best at the moment, and this usually means they will try to do what is best for them. To your wrist, it seems like a perfectly good idea to anchor itself on the guitar. Your wrist doesn't know by doing this it will severely limit the mobility of your pick, or fingers, especially as they try to span the range of all six strings, as in playing a scale from the 6th string to the 1st.

Of course, your wrist is doing this because it's reacting to all the TENSION that is building up throughout all the many muscles located in your forearm, upper arm, and even the muscles of your chest and back, all of which are connected to your upper arm bone (humerus).

So you see, given the fact that the whole limb is tied up with tension, your wrist could make a pretty good case for the wisdom of anchoring or "locking" itself down onto the face of the guitar. At least that way, you will probably still be able to squeeze a little mobility out of your hand, and force a couple of notes out of the guitar! If you were only going to play the guitar at a relatively primitive level, this whole setup might work for you!

However, if you made an attempt to create Vertical Growth in your playing ability, you would find that this whole setup, this whole foundation of your technique, simply would not support a more sophisticated technical demand. I would recommend not being satisfied with your present technique. I would recommend learning how to practice in a way where the will of your wrist, or any other body part, is not running the show. Rather, the "little brain" of your wrist is put under the command of the "big brain" in your head.

Of course, the "big brain" in your head has to fulfill the two conditions of practice. It must KNOW the right thing to do, (in whatever playing circumstance you are in) and it must make sure that the correct thing is actually BEING DONE as you practice. Once this becomes your experience, you will find that you no longer say things like "my wrist keeps wanting to do" this or that. You will instead say, "my wrist wants to rest on the guitar, but I am in the process of training it to stay relaxed, even when I play fast, by daily training using the Basic Practice Approach". Specifically, what you must do is this:

- 1) Establish relaxation in your wrist before beginning to move.
- 2) Do No Tempo Practice on whatever you are working on, and maintain the relaxation you have established during the No Tempo movement.
- 3) Continue to maintain this relaxation as you increase through slow tempos with the metronome, watching the wrist like a hawk (Following). You must catch the first indication of tension coming into the wrist, and the first indication that the wrist wants to start pressing on the guitar.
- 4) You must relax the wrist as soon as you notice this before continuing movement. If you cannot relax at the speed you are at, then it is too fast, and you must

lower the metronome speed. You should carefully work up to that speed every day, and you will find yourself gaining the control you desire at that speed after awhile.

This is what knowing how to practice is all about. It is all about having the POWER to create a change in your playing. Power means "the ability to create change". When you have this power, it won't matter so much what your wrist, or fingers, or big toe tend to do, because you will be able to CHANGE that tendency to what you WANT to happen. Good luck.

I have to go now; my right hand wants to grab my guitar!

How to Tell if You Are Practicing Something Too Far Above Your Level

Q: My problem is that I can't tell whether I am practicing a song properly or whether it really is too difficult for my level. In other words, how do I know what I should be able to do and what I should be stretching to next?

A: That is an easy one, but nonetheless your dilemma is quite common. The root of your problem is that you are missing the one most essential ingredient there is when it comes to improving in any motor skill, or in fact, any effort in life. You are not receiving what is called "knowledge of results" or feedback from your efforts.

Now, in your case, you simply want to know if you are really adequately meeting the requirements of the music you have chosen to work on. It is quite simple to receive this feedback. I will give you the steps for doing so. Whether you take the steps is another question, because taking these steps can be very emotionally upsetting, which is why most people tend not to do so. I had to force myself to take them at one time, and now I force all my students to do so. It is the only way.

Here are the steps:

1) Record yourself playing the music in question. If your goal is to master the whole song, you must record the whole song. However, you can modify these steps for individual passages.

2) Play a professional recording of the song immediately afterward. If it is an original song from your favorite band, play that. If it is just a solo from a song, play that. If it is a solo guitar piece, play a recording if you have it. If you don't have a recording, just play the piece from beginning to end and record it.

3) Compare yourself with the recording. If you don't have a recording, then make sure you did not fall apart anywhere, or hesitate.

Are all the notes there? Is the timing right? Are the tone and the feel of it good? For this step, you must have what I call "the fearless honesty". Most of us don't have it; we have to develop it. The "fearless honesty" is the ability to actually be aware of yourself and what you are doing, without avoiding the parts you don't like, or changing things around to make the picture a little rosier. All truly good musicians and artists have this.

The only way to begin to develop it is when you have begun to feel that you are **CAPABLE** of changing bad things about your playing. Until you feel that, you won't allow yourself to become aware of the bad things about your playing. That, of course, is why everyone needs to learn what practicing is.

4) If you have gotten this far, this is where your work begins. This is where, through proper practice, you close the gap between what you put on tape, and what the real deal is.

Now, if you have taken these steps, and you sound as good as the original, then the answer to your question is "Yes", you are practicing properly and this music is within your abilities. If there is a wide gap (there usually is) then, you begin to practice. If after a few weeks, you re-do these steps and there is an improvement, that means that your practicing is having an effect, and the piece is not above your level, or beyond your ability to learn and improve it with practice. This means that you are not wasting your time.

If there is no improvement, the answer is "No", you are not practicing properly, and the music may very well be beyond you at this time. But the thing I want you to realize is that if you don't know how to work on something so that it improves, then essentially, everything that is above your present level of Vertical Growth will remain out of your reach.

Also, your way of thinking by saying "What I should be able to do" is incorrect and unproductive. There is no "Should" about it. Whatever you **ARE** able to do is exactly what you **SHOULD** be able to do based on what you actually **DO** when you practice. What you **THINK** you should be able to do is based on various ideas and beliefs you have gathered along the way, usually by comparing yourself with others, and then making demands upon yourself to measure up. Forget all that, and pay attention to reality; not your beliefs about it.

Often, a student will remark after playing something badly "I should be able to play that well". I will say "No, you shouldn't, because you did not practice it well. You practiced it badly, so, the only thing that **SHOULD** happen is that you should play it badly." Or, I might say "No, you shouldn't be able to play that any better than you have, because even though you did good practice, this piece is far too complex and technically demanding for you to play it any better and faster than you have. Later on, with more experience and development, you will play it even better than you did now".

I suspect from your question that you usually feel that you are not doing the music justice. Hopefully, you are ready to take the approach I have outlined, and come to an accurate and realistic assessment of your playing. As the psychiatrists used to say in the old movies, "The very fact that you realize you have a problem is the first step in solving it". It's true!

How to Develop a Repertoire

Q: What do you prefer, to have, a repertoire of 50 scores played at 70% quality of a John Williams, or to limit your repertoire to 10 scores, with a quality of 95% of his quality?

A: First, let me clarify your question before I answer it. You are asking me whether I prefer to play a few things really well, or lots of things not so well. Well, what do you think I am going to say? How about this. Why don't we go for the whole enchilada? How about I play lots of things really well?!

You see, I think your question is coming from a certain way of looking at things that needs some comment. It isn't a matter of asking yourself whether you should devote your practice time to learning more things to play, or learning to play better. The two choices should not be in opposition to one another. It is not like doing one prevents you from doing the other.

You should be raising the quality of your playing WHILE you are learning more things to play. Every time I sit down to practice, my strong intention is to practice and play, right then, better than I ever have before. We should always be practicing with the intention of creating Vertical Growth, meaning a real improvement in our level of playing ability in all its aspects. We should always be looking to increase our understanding of why we get the results we do when we practice. Every time we do gain a new insight, we should review ALL our playing from that moment forward with this new insight in mind.

The first step of the Basic Practice Approach (contained in "*the Principles*") says "*Review and increase your understanding of what you are about to do and how you are going to do it.*" This is extremely important. It means that we are NEVER on "automatic" when we sit to practice. It means we are always reaching out to take in our hands ALL that we have done before, and we are going to USE IT as a basis for further movement forward.

Practice is a vigorous mental affair characterized by great Awareness. I must say, I feel like I get better all the time, every day. I am always seeing new things, and I try to convey to you the process by which I do that, as well as the attitudes that propel that process, so that you can do it too. When this is what practicing is for you, it cannot become a matter of deciding whether to "coast", and play a lot of things at lower "quality", or to practice in a way that raises the quality of your playing.

Let me finish by saying that you must keep in mind that I am talking about *practicing*, which means "what we do to improve our playing". I am not talking about *playing*. Our playing, at any given time, is what it is. Playing is primarily an emotional affair that takes place without the mental processes that are a part of practicing. We should always spend a good amount of time just "playing", and not feel like we have to reach some state of "perfection" before we indulge in playing. We should never condemn ourselves for what we see can be improved while playing. All of that simply becomes material

to be worked upon the next time we practice. When we do work on it correctly, our playing shows the improvement.

Often, I will sit down just to play something. I may get some old music out which was once memorized, but since I haven't played it in a long while it is no longer in my memory. So, I read it from the music. I may just play it for enjoyment, and I may find that even though I haven't played it in a long time, I play it better now at sight than I did when I last practiced it! Or, I may find that there are some technical problems for me in the piece, and I may wish to re-practice those passages with whatever new techniques and insights I have gained since I last worked on the piece. I make the piece part of my present daily practice and bring it to a higher level of "perfection" (aside from technique, a relative term) than I ever had it before.

So our process of growth with the guitar becomes one of constant playing, practicing and improving, leading to better playing.

How to Maintain Focus During Practice

Q: *I just got your book and have been excited in trying out the Foundation Exercises in them. Relaxing is NOT as easy as it sounds. I've been practicing in front of a mirror while I sit with the guitar, and have noticed the tension in various parts of my body - ankles, thighs but not so much in the shoulders since I've really been watching out for that.*

After 30 minutes of intense concentration and trying to relax, maintaining the correct right hand position, and performing an easy piece at No Tempo) and I'm bushed! Is it normal to be this tired afterwards?

A: Yes, it is normal, especially for those not used to it, which includes most people! I always explain to my students: "*I am going to require a level of focus and concentration from you that no one has required from you before; not your teachers in school or your past guitar teachers*".

I say this because I have simply found it to be true. And, as any reader of mine knows, I consider this lack of focus to be the root fundamental cause of the student's inability to overcome obstacles in their playing. People are not told WHY they must focus, they are not shown HOW to focus, and they are not told WHAT to focus on. I have often heard people talk about how exhausted they are after starting to do this. It is just like developing a muscle. You will get stronger and more used to it. Here are some pointers:

1) Take frequent breaks. Practice in 5, 10, 20 minute sessions, whatever you like. As long as the practice is intense and focused, it will do you much good. Be guided by how you feel mentally and emotionally, not by what you "think" you should be doing.

2) Often, after maybe 10 minutes of intense focus on something technical, I will take a break by playing a few pieces just to have some fun. Then, I go back to work.

3) Make sure you don't try to cover too much material at once. Most people do not do enough "detail work", or what I have called "Microscopic Practicing". Don't sit for 20 minutes doing No Tempo or slow practice on a whole piece. Work sections of 8 measures, 4 measures, one measure, or just a few notes, (think in terms of *movements*, not notes) using the Basic Practice Approach, repeating the same section over and over for 20 or 40 times. Make sure they are CORRECT REPETITIONS done with relaxation, focus, and ease. Bring that ease up through the tempos. Then, string the sections together.

Practice Organization

Q: *I would like to ask you a question about making a weekly practice routine. I have been playing a couple of years and I am only growing "horizontally" which is why I ordered your book. I concentrate on playing electric blues so my practice time has been divided into three general areas: 1) blues rhythm and lead, 2) theory and learning sight reading, 3) playing general songs I know.*

Obviously, I want to incorporate your Principles into my practice routine. I'm very serious about practicing and I do so for about 2 hours a night. How much time should I spend daily working on your exercises and how can I incorporate them into the material I already know without starting over? Any help would greatly be appreciated. I think your book is really going to be good for me. Thanks.

A: Here are my thoughts. First, make sure you read my two essays "Changing Bad Habits" and Practice Organization, both on the Guitar Principles website. The three areas you mention are good ones for you to be covering in your practice.

Second, the fact that you are making a weekly practice schedule is very good. Keep that up. As you go along, you will get better at seeing what works and what doesn't in terms of choosing the material you are working on, and how much time to allocate. In general, if you are practicing 2 hours a day, I would say make it 45 minutes of technique, 30 minutes of theory, and 45 minutes of repertoire.

Third, get rid of the idea that there is something wrong with starting over. I start over every day. I find things that need improvement in my fingers that have been there since I started playing, thirty-five years ago! I just never recognized that they were flaws, or that it was possible to change them.

Fourth, make sure that the finger action you are supposed to develop from the left hand exercises is actually incorporated into your technique, when, for instance, you are playing major scales. If

you never use the 4th finger, and stay exclusively with pentatonic scales, then this does not apply. I will assume, since you are using my book, that you desire a more comprehensive development of the left hand. Check out my demonstration of the walking exercises on the site, done at 60 bpm (16th's), and then at 120. Can you do that? If not, get to work!

Other than that, make sure that the total body "relaxation-in-action" that I always advocate is being developed in your playing. Any playing demands that cause a breakdown in playing are happening because of un-located tensions, and these must be located, and worked on using the Basic Practice Approach. Make sure you are doing that. I know many people don't. Don't be one of these people!

Mental Focus and the Bottom of Your Practice

Q: The same day that I received your last newsletter, I was trying to play a song and I kept getting really bad tension in my right shoulder, to the point that it was painful and difficult to keep my right forearm up. At that point I decided I really had to concentrate on keeping the tension down, and sat with my arm strumming, thinking about what I was doing physically. And it just came to me that I was almost meditating. Am I on the right track?

A: Yes, you are on the right track. What you have described is what I call "deepening the Bottom of Your Practice". The Bottom of Your Practice is the level of intensity and awareness that you are able to generate and sustain while practicing. For many people, the Bottom of their Practice is extremely shallow. They are hardly aware of ANYTHING they are actually doing, or anything that is actually happening in their body or mind while they are sitting there doing whatever they are doing with the guitar.

It is EXTREMELY IMPORTANT that ALL STUDENTS understand this concept. If the depth of your practice is not sufficiently deep, you CANNOT LEARN, and you certainly cannot change bad habits. When a student comes in for a lesson, and tells me they are having trouble with something, the first thing I say is "show me the Bottom of Your Practice". That means I want them to show me their most focused execution of the movements involved in that particular music. If I see signs of obvious tension, such as raised shoulders, or even worse, wrong fingering, then I point out to them that they are making no progress because the depth of their practice is about as shallow as a mud puddle! They must realize they are simply not paying attention. Then, they must begin to pay attention to everything, including paying attention to not paying attention!

Yes, meditation is what it is all about. Meditation is simply the intense focusing of your attention. The Buddhists call it "mindfulness". We must all be Buddhas when we practice. We must all be Yogis; we must all be intensely aware, in the moment, of what we are doing, and what is really going on in our minds, our emotions and our bodies.

Remember this. The deeper the **BOTTOM** of your Practice is, the higher the **TOP** of your playing, which simply means the highest level of playing ability you are capable of. If you are not happy with the "top" of your playing, then examine the "Bottom" of Your Practice!

GUITAR PRINCIPLES

The Guitar Principles System for learning guitar was launched in 1998 with "The Principles of Correct Practice for Guitar", which continues to bring the highest acclaim, and is world renowned as "The International Bible for Guitarists". Guitar Principles has been awarded the 2004/2005 Silver medal and the 2006/2007 Bronze medal for the best Instructional Category of Acoustic Guitar Magazine's People's Choice Awards.

Jamie writings are present throughout the internet on many of the major guitar websites, and may be found in its most complete form at the home of "The Principles".

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