

Meditation & Technique

“How” Mark Gibson is asking, “How would you use meditation to focus on aspects of trumpet technique?”

Okay, that's a beautiful question; and this is something that really goes all the way back to the drum corps days. Fourteen years-old and just the meditation that is going [plays trumpet], some simple exercise like that just going down the valve series like we were doing- God I'm having a flashback. Those exercises, those are a meditation, are they not? It's a meditation on self-awareness.

Self-awareness. you know; so being aware of, “how am I playing right now? What am I doing physically that's making these notes happen?”. For me, that's a meditation; being self-aware. What's going on with my posture? What's going on with my breathing? Which muscles am I flexing? Which muscles am I not flexing? That is a deep meditation. It's kind of a standing-still version of a walking meditation, where it's not like you're trying to clear your mind of any thoughts; it's just that you're being - you're present, you're in the moment and you're very observant of the action that you're undergoing, whether it's walking, whether it's chewing your food mindfully, or figuring out how to accurately go... [plays trumpet].

That is a meditation, of sorts, on the physical sensation of coordinating the movement of my tongue with the movement of my bottom lip. So it's a meditation on the sound and the physicality that is going into producing that sound. And of course it's a bit easier to at least start meditating while trumpet playing on a long tone [plays a long tone]. You know what I just did there, I was moving around my cup - it's the equivalent of listening to my tone quality change because of my syllabic pronunciation which I can't really show you guys because I've got a mute in the horn, so the closest equivalent would be change the syllabic pronunciation with a cup.

But that kind of thing just “[makes sound]; that’s a pretty good I like that one [makes sound] uh I like that one [makes sound] uh I like that one better [makes sound] I like *thaaaaat* one, that one’s my favorite.” So those are the thoughts that are happening while I’m playing the long tone [makes sound]. And then once I find that thing that I’m looking for I just stay, you know, hold it. And completely loose myself in that sound, loose myself in that *sound*, in all the shiny overtones; all that harmonic information.

And of course it’s even more beautiful now with these crazy rich bells, you know, these sounds that are coming out of my trumpet now; and these beautiful - you know, the reason why I care so much about what mute I’m playing on; this Clary wood mute (another plug, here you go Tom) - the reason why I care so much is because when I’m playing, I care - part of my meditation is listening to the overtones, listening to the harmonics. Not like notes in harmonic series, but basically what you would see while looking at your note, a one-note, on a spectral analyzer. All that information.

And you can really lose yourself in that note. I lose myself in one note so easily. And then I’ve also been able to expand that step-by-step; so that everything I’m playing, as long as I’m deeply focused and my mind is clear of any mind-chatter: ego saying "That sucked!" or "You can't do that" or "I guess you're gonna have to slow it down" you know, "Wouldn't it be nice if you weren't so fucking stupid and slow?"; all that mean stuff that can creep up in people's minds that's destructive and that is quite the antithesis of a successful, productive, meditation.

I can lose myself in my playing, and meditate no matter what I’m playing. I consider it a meditation because there is nothing *but that*, there's nothing but the urge, the impetus, the desire to make this particular sound, or paint this particular architecture, this shape; we’re gonna work with this one scale, or whatever. And there's the desire to make that sound happen, and there’s the physicality that goes into producing that sound. And then there's analyzing the sound that I’m making. And, and weighing them against each other - what I wanted to hear versus the reality of what I’m getting.

And it's that quick, very quick feedback loop, of what am I expecting and what am I getting. I call that a meditation, because there's nothing else happening. And there's no "Oh, this is gonna be so cool! They're going to be so impressed when people hear this, this thing that I'm working on"; that would make it *not* a successful meditation.

So I would just say, for integrating your meditative mind-frame and your playing, you gotta get the ego out of the picture. You just gotta simplify things down to: What are you *trying* to accomplish with your body; and what are you *actually getting*?

And it's like a walking meditation in that, you know - when you're walking it's good; I'm observing that I'm successfully putting one foot in front the other. You have the intention which is walking; smelling whatever comes up, you know listening to whatever comes up and just being present.

And it's the only way to play, man, if you're doing anything other than that - if you've got all kinds of mind-chatter and self-sabotaging thoughts or feelings coming up, I would recommend putting the horn down. Then at that point it's probably not gonna serve you; that's not gonna be time as well spent as if you were to get into whatever activity *does* bring you to a more mindful, centered, place. Whether it's a yoga practice, or just sitting there going [in-hales, makes sounds] or [makes different sounds] or [sings], whatever that might be!

Anything that's gonna bring you to a place where you can just simplify things down to the activity that you're doing. No critical observations other than "Was that yes or no? Was that, was that successful, was that what I was attempting? No, okay so I need to make a quick little change." But no, like "Oh, this just feels so fucking whack to me" or "This just doesn't umm".

When you've got any [mumbles] going on, just check yourself. Just pull the horn out of your face and bring it back to, you know maybe re-evaluating your mission statement for this moment. And then you can be more productive with that time.