

# BEYOND PRACTICING

## Lesson 5: Concentration

Mental Quiet - Tame the monkey for inspiring performances on cue

*“Concentration is why some athletes are better than others. You develop that concentration in training. You can't be lackluster in training and concentrate in a meet.”*

~Edwin Moses

# Concentration

The foundation for peak performances

Concentrate! Pay attention!

Second only to “*Eat your vegetables!*”, this is like the official mantra of parents, teachers, and Little League coaches everywhere.

They’re right of course. Our ability to concentrate serves as the foundation for peak performance. If our mind is scattered, chaotic, or otherwise occupied, those inspired, magical performances that we all live for just don’t happen.



Concentration also happens to be the key to making performances and auditions a less miserable experience than it is for many. As golfing legend Jack Nicklaus once said, “Concentration is a fine antidote to anxiety.” Indeed, when you have mastered the ability to concentrate on demand, you’ll find that the brain’s ability to make you a nervous wreck on-stage is severely compromised.

But what is concentration, exactly? And how do we do it?

## In this lesson, you will...

1. Master the ability to concentrate more effectively under pressure (and quiet that annoying voice in your head).
2. Practice getting into “flow” states on demand so your performances aren’t so dependent on luck.
3. Learn how to identify the most effective time of day to practice, so you can get maximize your practice time.
4. Learn how to ensure that you don’t walk out on stage for an important audition feeling like the only thing you want right now is a nap.
5. Implement a super-easy and super-obvious, but nevertheless effective strategy for greater concentration and productivity in the practice room.

# Flow

When peak performances happen

*“Rowers have a word for this frictionless state: swing...Recall the pure joy of riding on a backyard swing: an easy cycle of motion, the momentum coming from the swing itself. The swing carries us; we do not force it. We pump our legs to drive our arc higher, but gravity does most of the work. We are not so much swinging as being swung. The boat swings you. The shell wants to move fast: Speed sings in its lines and nature. Our job is simply to work with the shell, to stop holding it back with our thrashing struggles to go faster. Trying too hard sabotages boat speed. Trying becomes striving and striving undoes itself. Social climbers strive to be aristocrats but their efforts prove them no such thing. Aristocrats do not strive; they have already arrived. Swing is a state of arrival.”*



This is rower Craig Lambert's description of what peak performance feels like (from *Mind Over Water*). These are the magical performance experiences we all live for. Where our playing feels effortless, completely in control, and everything else fades into the background.

Wouldn't it be something if you could have such performances more often? Too bad these are just chance occurrences, outside the realm of our control...or are they? The truth is, *these states are much more accessible to us than you might think*. The key is concentration.

## Concentration and “flow”

Concentration is a gateway to these optimal performance states, which are described in the literature as “[flow](#)” (coined by researcher [Mihály Csikszentmihályi](#)).

The problem is, most of us have a concept of concentration that is quite misleading. For instance, a conventional dictionary definition would read something like: *The action or power of focusing one's attention or mental effort*. This conjures up images of a person with eyes narrowed, brows furrowed, and face all scrunched up in clear effortful mental activity. That's not concentration. That's the picture of a person *struggling* to concentrate.



## No mind

In truth, concentration is more a state of mind, than a skill. Martial artists call this state *mushin* or “no-mindedness.” It's a bit of an esoteric concept, but these terms refer to a state of mind free of judgment, analysis, internal dialogue, fear, and ego. Where our mind is quieter, more responsive, unfettered by thoughts and other baggage. [This excellent blog post](#) describes it as succinctly as anything else I've seen, [this Wikipedia entry](#) is helpful as well, and just for kicks, here is [another](#) which describes Bruce Lee's relationship with this state of mind.

As a performing artist you have probably had an experience of this kind when you were making music. Where you were so engaged by what you were doing in that moment, that the world and everyday concerns simply melted away.

## Monkey mind

Of course, knowing what concentration feels like isn't the same as knowing how to make it happen. And our mind is like a rambunctious monkey tossed into a chicken coop with a case of Red Bull. Chaotic, to say the least. This natural state of mind is often referred to as "monkey mind." Our goal is to quiet the natural entropy and chaos, so we can be fully engaged in the details that are essential to playing our best.



When there is too much irrelevant noise upstairs (*"Son of a goat. Why do I keep missing that note? I've probably blown the audition now; I wonder when they're going to stop me."*), our "flow" is disrupted, our precious attentional resources are wasted, and we make it that much harder to play up to our abilities.

Fortunately, we can become much better at getting into flow states with a bit of know-how and the right kind of practice. But first things first.

# The Essentials

Often neglected, but no less important



Just as a house needs a solid foundation on which to rest, concentration has some basic requirements as well. At the risk of sounding vaguely parental, are you **getting enough sleep**? Are you eating regularly and healthily? Are you exercising and staying physically fit?

It may sound obvious, but if you are operating on a diet of fast food and only managing to get through the day courtesy of Starbucks, you'll find concentration to be a rather elusive target.

Whether you consider music to be primarily a mental or a physical endeavor (and most would say that it's both), the mind and body don't operate as independently as one might think. Both are intimately connected, and we can give ourselves a meaningful advantage by being both physically and mentally in shape.

Consider that chess legend Garry Kasparov's **training regimen included exercise**. And for all of Tiger Wood's lauded mental toughness, it's easy to forget just how strong and physically fit he is. It's no coincidence that his ability to stay focused through the very last shot of a tournament is unparalleled.

Many great performers, concertmasters, and principals make it a point to get at least eight hours of sleep every night, eat balanced meals at regular intervals, and observe some sort of regular exercise program. They have built their careers on the basis of their ability to concentrate on demand, and understand how important physical well-being and energy is to this prized attribute.

Sleep. Diet. Exercise.

Basic perhaps, but no less important when it comes to playing your best. If you're going to spend hours upon hours practicing your butt off, position yourself to take advantage of all your hard work by making these essentials a priority.

# Energy Cycles

Go with the flow

What does your daily energy cycle look like? Are you most energized in the morning? Do you feel at your lowest at four in the afternoon?

Carry around a notebook for the next week to complete an **energy log**, paying attention to when you have energy, and when you're dragging. Take note of those things that affect your energy - a heavy meal, workout, nap, etc.

Did you notice how your ability to concentrate is greatest during those times when you have the most energy? And how your concentration suffers when you're feeling drained? Even Zen masters can't sustain their focus when they're exhausted. Fortunately, energy is something you can manipulate.

Make the most of your energy cycle by finding those periods in the day when you consistently experience higher energy. Whenever they are, schedule your practice sessions to coincide with them. Don't waste your precious high-energy phase folding laundry or waiting in line at the bank. Save this kind of low-attention work for transitional energy phases, when you're tapering off an intense period of concentration and heading into a low phase.



You can even make better use of your low-energy periods, by using them to recharge your battery. Take a guilt-free nap. Visit with friends. Read a book. Now would be the time for Facebook. Don't even bother trying to practice during these low-energy periods, because you won't be able to concentrate. It'll be a waste of time.

Once you've rested a bit, it's time to prepare for the next high-energy opportunity. Do something energizing. Splash some cold water on your face, take a walk around the block, do a few jumping jacks to get the blood circulating.

The idea is to work with your natural energy patterns instead of against them.

## Manipulating energy

Ultimately, you'll want to bring your highest energy to your performances too, and not just your practice sessions. But since your performances are not within your scheduling control, it's inevitable that you'll have to manipulate your energy pattern. Meaning, you'll have to build and conserve energy in order to have what you need on tap, no matter where the performance falls in your daily cycle.

Here's how it might work. First, see where the performance falls in your natural cycle. If it's at a low point, or a transitional point, then you'll need to reprogram your day. Let's say the performance is at 8pm. Looking at your energy log, you see that you're normally transitioning down at this point in the day. Eating a big dinner makes you especially resistant to revving up.



The first thing to adjust is probably dinner. Eat lightly, if at all. Avoid sleep-inducing carbs. You want blood circulating to your brain and muscles, not just your stomach.

Then apply your revving-up ritual to the two-hour period before the concert. Look at your energy log for ideas. If exercise reliably gets you going, then start moving - though not so strenuously that you run out of gas.

You may have to manipulate your day starting even earlier. At 3 or 4pm, for instance, take a nap in anticipation of your high-energy-demand evening. At 1 or 2pm, eat a high-carb lunch that will make it easy to take a late afternoon nap. You may spend the entire morning in the practice room, but skip the afternoon session altogether in favor of taking that nap. You cannot guarantee you'll enter "the zone" during your performance, but by making sure you have the energy, you do guarantee access.



# Take Action #1

Make concentration easier



## Captain Obvious's 1-Step Concentration Enhancer

iPhones are pretty darn awesome, but the constant distractions and interruptions they create are not conducive to strengthening our ability to concentrate. With YouTube, Facebook, and Fark just a swipe or two away, it's awfully tempting for our monkey mind to jump from one thing to another, rather than staying deeply focused on something that is probably more important.

How distracting can a phone honestly be, you ask? Well, in one British study, a researcher found that participants' IQ scores dropped by more than 10 points when interrupted by ringing phones and arriving emails.

Read this article on [the multitasking myth](#).

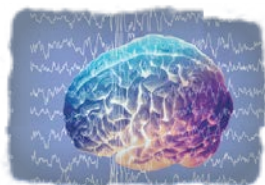
Use practice time not just as an opportunity to develop your instrumental technique, but as a time to develop your concentration abilities too. After all, if you get used to playing only half-focused in the practice room, it's only going to get worse when you get on-stage.

## 1-Step Concentration Enhancer

- 1. Turn your phone off** (or put it on airplane mode, or better yet, leave it in a different room)  
That's it. Just one step. Oh, and keep it off until you're done practicing.

# Take Action #2

Use sensory recall to quiet the mind



## Kinesthesia Exercise

When you are stressed, your brain literally speeds up, producing brain waves in the 12-30 cycles per second range (beta waves). Unfortunately, the kind of deep concentration that we are looking for requires that we produce a different, slower type of brain wave rhythm - alpha waves, which occur at 8-12 cycles per second.

You can learn to increase alpha wave activity and quiet your mind through sensory recall. The following exercise will get you reacquainted with your sensory faculties, so that you can imprint specific kinesthetic memories of how performing feels when you're at your very best. One of my mentors (a sport psychologist, pianist, and national tennis champion) calls this "anchoring."

By familiarizing yourself with the sensory experience of successful performances, you can become increasingly adept at inducing flow states on cue - even before you play the first note.

## Kinesthesia Exercise

- 1. Get comfortable**  
Relax your key muscles. Become physically still. Close your eyes.
- 2. Recall**  
Recall a key movement you make when performing. What do your lips feel like when playing with the right embouchure? What does your right hand feel like when making smooth bow changes?
- 3. Virtual reality**  
Perform the movement in your mind without doing it physically. Try to feel every nuanced detail of the movement in your imagination.
- 4. Reality**  
Now, perform the movement for real. Pay close attention to how it *actually* feels. Is it the same as you remembered in your mind? Different?
- 5. Calibrate**  
Repeat these steps until your sensory recall matches the feel of the actual movement. Try with other key movements and sections of your repertoire.

# Take Action #3

Tame your monkey mind with this sensory awareness exercise



## Sense Meditation Exercise

When I began learning about concentration, I found that many concentration-building exercises have their roots in the martial arts and meditation traditions of Eastern cultures. While most of us have favorable stereotypes of martial arts practices, meditation tends to be regarded with a bit more skepticism. I, for one, had a difficult time getting the image of robe-clad mantra-chanting monks in mountaintop monasteries out of my mind. However, the growing research literature on the benefits of meditation caught my eye, and led me to see this in a different light (here's an [example](#)).

As it turns out, the real benefit of meditation is not stress reduction (though reducing stress is [certainly a worthwhile endeavor](#)). Its true value lies in what it does to our brains with regular practice. Namely, meditation appears to produce structural changes associated with greater control of our minds - changes related to attention and increased focus. Here's a 2:45-second [video](#) that gets into some of this.

The following exercise is one type of meditation. It's a condensed version of [this sense meditation exercise](#), which is adapted from wilderness tracker [Jon Young's Sensory Awareness Exercise](#).

Aside from its usefulness as a concentration exercise, you may very well find yourself feeling a bit rejuvenated afterwards. It's not a bad way to spend a few minutes between practice sessions.

*"The mind is a wonderful servant,  
but a terrible master."*

*~Asian saying*

## Sense Meditation Exercise

- 1. Find a spot**  
 Go somewhere comfortable and relatively quiet. Preferably outside in nature. A park, perhaps. Or your backyard. Heck, even a parking lot would be better than a windowless practice room.
  
- 2. Smell**  
 Once you're seated comfortably, close your eyes and begin to pay attention to your sense of smell. What do you notice? Fresh-cut grass? Is there rain coming? Are there any flowers in your vicinity? What smells are characteristic of the season? Do you smell any food in the area? Concentrate on each scent that enters your nose.
  
- 3. Touch**  
 Now focus inwards on yourself. What sensations do you notice internally? What does the air feel like as it goes in and out of your nose and mouth. Cooler on the inhale? Warmer perhaps on the exhale? Is your mouth dry or wet? Is your stomach full, empty, or something in-between? Can you feel your heart pumping?  
  
 Begin paying attention to sensations from outside your body. What are you sitting on? What does it feel like? Hard, soft, cold, warm, wet, dry? Is there any part of your body that feels uncomfortable? What do your clothes feel like? How do your shoes feel on your feet? What does the sun or breeze feel like on your face, and rustling through your hair? Which direction is it coming from? Does it have a texture?
  
- 4. Hearing**  
 Now tune into your sense of hearing. Beginning with what is closest to you, what do you hear? Any insects? Breeze rustling the grass or leaves around your sitting area? Any birds? Can you hear the trees swaying in the wind? Do different trees make different sounds when the wind blows through them? Begin to expand your sense of hearing to sounds that might be further and further away. Do you hear any traffic? Children playing? Squirrels scrambling up trees? Pay attention also to the sound of nothingness. Just like rests between notes, see what complete silence sounds like.
  
- 5. Sight**  
 Slowly open your eyes and identify a focal point in your vicinity. Pay close attention to color, textures, and moment, working to really see the vivid detail of just those things in the immediate vicinity of your focal point. As what you see becomes increasingly vivid, feel your vision begin to expand outward into the periphery. Don't label what you see, merely be intently aware of what your eyes take in.  
  
 When you're finished, take a few deep breaths to transition out, and pay attention to how you feel. Quieter, and more focused somehow, no?

# Take Action #4

Develop concentration with the candle exercise



## Candle Exercise

I remember doing this as a child, and finding it to be a fascinating exercise.

What? Doesn't every kid spend their free time staring at candle flames with their eyes closed?

### Candle Exercise

**For this exercise you will need:**

- Candle and matches/lighter
- Comfy place to sit

**1. Get comfortable**

Sit comfortably. Relax your key muscles.

**2. Stare at candle**

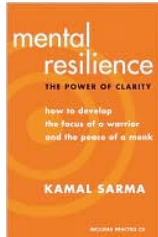
Light the candle, and stare at it for ~30 seconds.

**3. Focus on the afterimage**

Close your eyes. See the afterimage of the candle? Pay attention to this afterimage until the very last traces of it finally fade away. Let any thoughts just pass on by; just refocus your attention on the fading afterimage of the candle.

# Turn It Up To 11 \*Not sure what this means? [Click here.](#)

Take another step forward with these additional resources

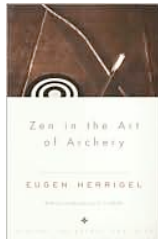


## **Mental Resilience**

by *Kamal Sarma*

The most practical, down-to-earth, non-guru-y book on meditation I've come across. If you'd like to take your ability to concentrate even further, this contains exercises and programs for learning how to meditate and quiet the mind.

Also available as: [Kindle](#)



## **Zen in the Art of Archery**

by *Eugen Herrigel*

This uses archery as a means of better understanding concentration and the concept of no-mindedness. Still an influential and popular book, despite it being over 50 years old. Short, but not necessarily a quick read. You'll have to sit and chew on some of the concepts to better understand them at times. Nevertheless an enlightening and pretty darn fascinating peek into a concept of concentration that most never take the time to explore or contemplate.

Also available as: [Kindle](#) | [MP3](#) (abridged) | [CD](#) (abridged)