

Playing from the Heart

BY CLARELYNN ROSE

Put away your chord charts, method books, and notions of right and wrong. The path of guitar dharma explores the here and now, the internal, and the heart. It's a kind of meditation on your instrument and your music, focusing on awareness of what is rather than predetermined ideas of what should be.

This path is necessarily unique to each individual, yet there are a few signposts, or suggestions, that anyone—both teachers and students—may find helpful. Among these are playing what's alive for you, playing what you can and love to play, and experimenting with curiosity.

The first signpost reads *Play from the heart*. This entails first quiet-

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ing the “monkey mind” that flits from thought to thought—perhaps concentrating on fingerings or time signatures. As the mind settles, space is created for awareness to arise. This awareness is not of technique, but of a connection with what's alive for you in the music.

As a starting point, select a passage that you love to play—something that's really alive for you and that strongly evokes an image, place, person, or emotion. First, play it “flat,” without firmly establishing that connection. Then, shift your awareness from the head to the heart, really connecting with what it is that's alive for you in the piece, and then play it into the piece. When you try this with your student, remind her (and yourself) to remain focused on the heart and the

present moment. The deeper and clearer the connection, the more satisfying the music will be for both player and listener.

The second signpost reads *Play what you can and love*. Here the path leads away from mastering techniques we think we should study (head energy) and toward expressing what we can and want to communicate (heart energy). We aim to clearly see,

accept, and work with our interests, abilities, and limitations. Don't confuse this with complacency, avoiding extending beyond our comfort zone. Rather it means taking things step-by-step, not overextending to the point of frustration, discouragement, or becoming harsh in speech.

Among other things, this signpost suggests putting away one-size-fits-all exercises. Instead, use a passage that strongly resonates with your student and is a bit beyond her ability. Whether it's perfecting a three-against-two rhythm or a cross-string run, internalizing the feel of it and getting it into muscle memory become not a chore, but a labor of love that will shine whenever it's played.

The third signpost reads *Experiment with curiosity*. Rather than approaching new pieces, techniques, or the composing process with trepidation or a desire to conquer, we can invoke a spirit of curiosity. We can listen to our noodling without being overly critical, remembering that mistakes can provide wonderful ideas.

If your student composes or arranges, take a short passage she really enjoys. Ask her to try playing it backwards, then upside down, or on different places on the fretboard. Suggest that she try moving around the fingerings or chord positions both vertically and horizontally. This can inspire related yet distinct variations that add tremendous richness to a piece.

The path of guitar dharma offers many such signposts, suggestions to be interpreted and applied by the individual to her unique path. Mastering techniques or styles is much less important than finding, resting in, and nurturing a quality of heart that gives voice to what is alive in us, whatever the style or form. Being aware, open, and non-judgmental can result in subtle yet profound changes that move us from a mind-set of competition to one of kindness for ourselves, our students, and others. ■

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