



Mindfulness for Musicians: Reflections on a Workshop with Dr. Mihoko Watanabe

Written by GPFS Members Donna Maebori and BJ Nicoletti

Have you ever become frustrated during your practice and lose your focus? Do you sometimes play a bundle of notes with fly away fingers? Maybe you sometimes feel generally discouraged about your practice or playing.

Until now, the most common advice for frustration and losing focus we have heard is to stop, cool down and come back to our playing later. For the bundle of notes with fly away fingers we have had the advice to practice many times, over and over, until we have it memorized. Or, we would slow down and gradually get faster. This is all useful, but sometimes we do everything that teachers suggest, and still, we cannot get it. You feel discouraged. From this problem comes a wise solution. There is ONE thing that is missing. It is MINDFULNESS. (M. Watanabe)



WORKSHOP PURPOSE

It's easy to notice that many of the GPFS guest artists in our fall events, flute academies, and spring flute fairs have a mind-body practice they are eager to share with other flutists. Mindfulness is as integral to the musical practice as is breathing.

Thank you to our GPFS Fall Guest Artist, Dr. Watanabe, for providing us with her inspiring thoughts and practical examples of how she nurtures mindfulness in her own playing and teaching. To be able to quiet our minds, focus well, maintain a state of calm, and use ourselves effectively are skills very integral to flute learning and performance.

The goal of her session was to help us understand the overall concept of mindfulness, the benefits for ourselves in life and in our playing and teaching, and how we can nurture mindfulness for ourselves and our students.

She related that mindfulness practice has been distinctly helpful for her through times of significant personal challenge ranging from relocation, career pursuits, physical injury and, at times, experiences of racial discrimination. She is highly

motivated and greatly enjoys helping others know about and experience mindfulness.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS FOR MUSICIANS



A course which Mihoko has taken and for which she holds high regard is by [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#), a professor emeritus of medicine, who developed the program “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR). Kabat-Zinn has defined mindfulness as **“awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally.”** (mindful.org, Jan. 2017)

For Dr. Watanabe, as a flutist, **“focus is the most important thing to get right in your musical training.”** “This is about “mindLESS practice versus mindFUL practice. FULL is with the present moment. Less versus full for improving our flute playing and life using our mind. Practicing is not just about instrument in hand. We can use our mind more to decrease stress and move more to well-being in playing.”

She describes ten benefits of mindfulness:

1. Reduced stress.
2. emotional balance.
3. increased focus level.
4. reduced pain
5. reduced anxiety
6. increased creativity
7. reduced depression
8. increased memory
9. increased compassion
10. increased productivity

It is reasonable to assume we all, at least, have some or most of the above at some time and that it affects our playing and well-being as a musician. We are encouraged to identify the ways in which we can bring our own mindfulness to practicing, performing, and teaching.

Teachers are encouraged to help students learn to do the same, including the following strategies as examples: model their own mindfulness as a teacher and flutist by speaking the language of mindfulness and showing their own strategies for checking in on mindset and nurturing good mindset; share information with students about the meaning of mindfulness; engage students in a simple breathing exercise; ask students to take time before a lesson to be present with their current mindset; and, ask students to reflect on mindset at the start and end of the lesson as well as sometimes throughout the lesson.

SOME “SIMPLE” STRATEGIES FOR BRINGING MINDFULNESS

Dr. Watanabe led us through two mindfulness experiences, each lasting for no more than a few minutes, during which we sat quietly paying attention to our breathing and simply noticing ourselves. A general sketch of the exercise is included below. This kind of focusing, calming and quieting has many benefits.

Exercise 1 - A “Simple” 30 Second Challenge: She stopped talking for 30 seconds and asked us to close our eyes and try to stay fully present in the right now.

After this “simple” exercise, she asked participants to describe their experience of it - a mere 30 seconds. Participants readily described the feeling of having freed up mental space or a calmer, more focused, relaxed or energized/ready state. From here she shared the following thoughts, concluding with **“if we can be aware then 50% of the work is done.”**

Here are her follow-up thoughts to this one, brief, “simple” mindfulness exercise:

- Found versus Lost: Our natural inclination is to get lost in our thoughts. How often have you been listening to someone and you realize you missed a bit, got lost in your own thoughts somewhere in there?
- Action versus Reaction: How often have you been frustrated that your mind is spinning on a particular topic? Thinking is immensely powerful and important, of course. A mind in a whirlwind keeps us lost in our thoughts, not focused. Not staying present is a problem. It is OK to think, but a whirlwind mind can be harmful to our well-being. When the mind and emotion take off it is actually reaction not action. This is unproductive.
- Choice versus Chase: Mindful is about developing the ability to choose which thoughts we want to pursue and which we want to let go. That is the beginning of staying present. When the thought arrives, don't judge our thoughts. Let the thoughts come, but don't chase them.
- Judgement Free for Observation Rich: Not judging is important to mindful practice. Thoughts are ok, but we have breathing, image and focal point to coming back to present moment. When we practice in music, we can get stuck. That “stuck” makes us likely frustrated, judging ourself for not getting it right sooner.
- Process of Learning Over Pre-Defined Expectations, Frustrations, Fear: Why frustration!? We believe we can sightread and play perfectly. Not going to happen! No one is perfect like that. We often say to ourselves, “I have been trained for this and why can't I do it!?” Judging yourself like this is the root of depression. Our goal is for improvement. **Give the second chance a safe place.** Give ourselves the next opportunity in the present, not with fear, but

with the goal and learning process in mind. Mindfulness is to enjoy the process of learning, not the instant. It is just a process, appreciate those thoughts along the way.

- **Slowing Down the Thoughts Speeds Up Improvement:** Present moment means we need to slow down. We need to find the real problem, like taking the bandage off. Taking this time is the fastest way to move the learning process. Mindfulness is to maximize the efficiency of your practice session. No judging. Not getting into stress or frustration. Move on to the learning process... how I can get better.

Exercise 2 - Mindful Meditation Practice: Self and with Students

Sit down straight in chair, relaxed body/shoulders, body scan, with hands on lap, hands in receiving position, breathing as a focal point for getting into the present moment. Breath in and out. If chatter comes in don't judge it, just let it go, observe but let that ship pass by. Feel what you feel in the present moment. Give yourself permission to feel. Breath in and out.

Breath in and as you exhale think about the tension in your neck. Let go of tension and breath in and out again. Move through similar steps to then focus on the tension in the eyebrow. Breath in and let the tension go. Jaw, no crunching when breathing in and out. Shoulder blades... are these high, tight back... lower shoulder blades if you can by relaxing not forcing. Breath in and out. It's OK to have chatter. It's OK to feel nervous. Let's take three deep breaths. Inhale 4, hold and then exhale 3, 2, 1. Repeat 3-4 times, then pause, and slowly open your eyes.



Exercise Ideas - What are your ways of putting yourself in a more mindful state? Another suggestion, from GPFS member and co-author of this article, Donna Maebori, is to simply ground oneself going into a practice session by assuming the Yogi prayer hand position, and breathing a few rounds of breath in and out.

Another option is to consider combining any of the above with not only a practice goal, but a mindfulness "intention" as you go into practicing. One participant in the workshop acquaints this with strategies her teacher uses which include consistently: grounding oneself in a two-beat inhale before moving into practicing an element/phrase; revisiting how one's body feels (aiming for a stable and relaxed but energetic buoyant balance); and, simply not letting in negative self-talk for its uselessness and instead working to identify and try a solution or two on the issue at hand (focus loyally, patiently, productively and self-lovingly on the learning process itself).

GROWTH MINDSET GOES HAND-IN-HAND WITH MINDFULNESS

While the primary focus of the workshop with Dr. Watanabe was mindfulness, she raised the concepts of “growth mindset” versus “fixed mindset” - “if you can recognize the difference between these two then that is 50% of the process.” Be mindful, strive to practice with a growth mindset.

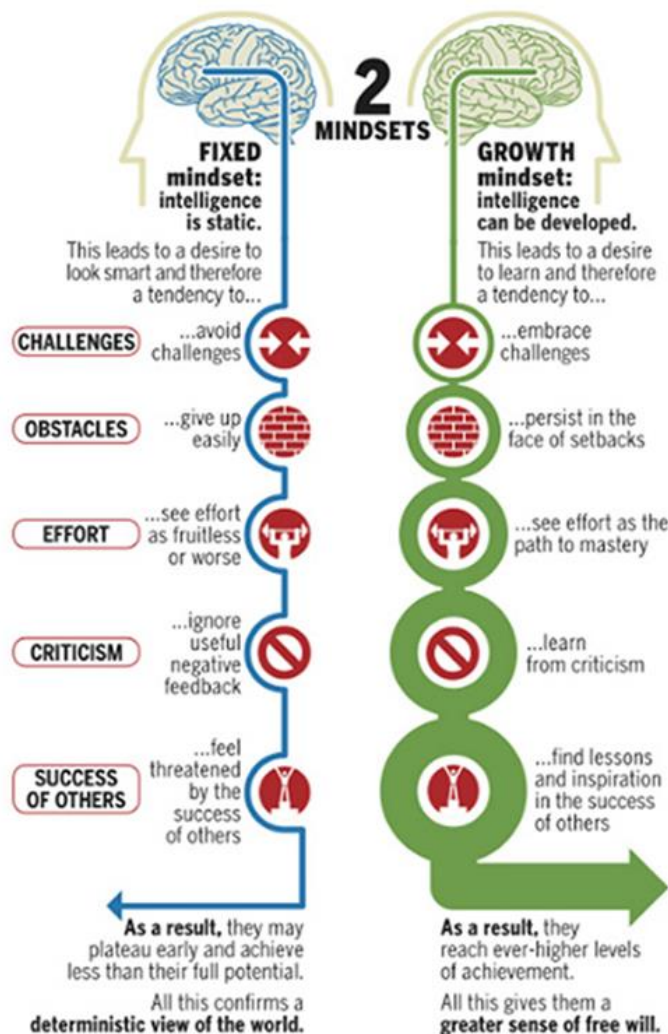
- She recommended Carol Dweck’s [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) (2007) as reading that was helpful to her. A central tenet of this research-based work is – “Through a growth mindset, we can achieve many great things.... A person's true potential is unknown (and unknowable).” (Carol Dweck) She also referenced a Ted Talk by Dweck as worth listening to: [The Power of Believing that You Can Improve](#).

In conclusion, we have taken an opportunity to identify and share with GPFS members a few worthwhile resources to learn more about growth mindset. While these were not mentioned specifically by Dr. Watanabe, we view them as consistent with the principles of her workshop.

The following rubric, from [bestlesson.com](#), provides one of the better high-level descriptions of fixed, mixed and growth mindsets.

	Fixed Mindset	Mixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Taking on Challenges	You avoid challenges.	You take on a challenge if you’ve been successful at something similar.	You look forward to the next challenge.
Learning from Mistakes	You see mistakes as failures. You may hide mistakes.	You are willing to learn from mistakes, but don’t know how to move forward.	You reflect on what you learned from the mistake and apply it to trying again.
Accepting Feedback	You feel defeated by criticism and want to quit.	You might feel OK about criticism if you really want the help.	You see criticism as supporting your learning, and you learn from it.
Practicing	You do not use strategies to complete the task, or you do not practice the skill.	You like to practice, but only if you feel like you’re “good at” it already.	You enjoy the process of getting really good at something. You may set your own practice plans.
Perseverance	You give up at the first sign of struggle.	You persevere but only when you are prompted and supported.	You “stick to it” and keep working confidently until the task is complete.

- **Introduction to Growth Mindset:** This is a simple, but excellent article explaining growth mindset from the interest of musicians. It is posted on The Musicians Way website, an overall helpful resource from Gerald Klickstein, the author of the book [The Musicians Way](#) (2009) - [The Growth Mindset](#) by Gerald Klickstein (2010)
- **Practicing Growth Mindset** - This link leads to a blog post on MindsetWorks which explains more about what growth mindset is, and, more importantly, offers some best practice strategies for moving into a growth mindset – [Having a Growth Mindset Can Change Your Life](#) by Catherine Meisner.



- **Teaching:** This graphic is from [transformingeducation.com](#), their [growth mindset “tool-kit” page](#) where you will find a link to download the tool-kit as well as **read through a very short, but powerful set of slides on encouraging a growth mindset.** While not specifically for music educators, this is a helpful resource for teachers. The goal for teachers is to model and help their students move to and live in a space of growth mindset. Teaching and learning can be actively framed and designed to move away from the blue and toward the green.

Dr. Watanabe continues her work on bringing mindfulness to her own playing and that of flutists everywhere. She wants to create a “mindful group for musicians” and a “mindful entrepreneur group.” If anyone is interested, she strongly encourages and welcomes them to connect with her - watanabe@bsu.edu.

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