

## *Playing Your Lute*

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You probably know the story of the monk who did walking meditation so much that his feet were bleeding. Apparently he had been very delicately brought up so that his feet were very tender. When he ordained, he didn't have the solid calluses on his feet that plain old walking on the ground requires, so he got discouraged. He sat down and started thinking about how maybe he should just give up, go back home, become a lay person, make merit but otherwise give up on the practice. The Buddha read his mind, disappeared from Vulture's Peak, and appeared right in front of him. I don't know about you, but if the Buddha appeared in front of me while I was thinking something that was not very skillful, I'd be very embarrassed.

And immediately the Buddha asked him, "Were you thinking of disrobing?" The monk said, "Yes." And then the Buddha asked him, "When you were a lay person, were you skilled at playing the lute?" The monk said, "Yes." "And how did the lute sound when the strings were too tight?" "It didn't sound good." "How about when they were too loose?" "That didn't sound good either." The Buddha then said, "In the same way, you tune your level of energy to what you're capable of. And then you tune the other five faculties to that," in the same way that when you tune, say, a guitar, you tune one string and then you tune the other four strings or three strings or whatever to that first string. And then the Buddha added, "And then you pick up your theme and play."

Most accounts of the story focus just on the first part of the instructions. In other words, don't push yourself too hard, but don't be too lax—find the point of just right. But the instructions go beyond that. This is basically the Buddha's "start where you are" Dhamma talk. You start off with what you're capable of. If you have an illness, you have to take that into consideration. If your level of practice is not all that advanced, you have to take that into consideration as well. You have to look at your capabilities and adjust everything else in the practice to that. And the "everything else" here applies to your conviction, your mindfulness, your concentration, and your discernment.

In other words, when there are limitations on your capabilities, don't sit down with a thought, "I'm going to sit here and won't get up until I attain supreme awakening. If I don't attain supreme awakening, I'm going to let my blood and flesh dry out." You're not ready for that yet. Adjust your expectations for what you can expect to do in the meditation to what you're capable of, where you are.

Have a clear idea of where you are in the practice. And you don't sit around wishing you were someplace else, that you had a different lute. This is the lute you've got and this is your level of skill, so you've learned how to tune the lute—your expectations for your level of concentration, your realization of the levels of mindfulness that you're capable of.

Also exactly what your theme is: That's an important part of the instructions. The theme here, of course, means the theme of your meditation, but it also means the theme of the rest of your practice as well.

When the Buddha was giving his final instructions to the monks, he ended with the word, "attain consummation." There are many levels of consummation in the practice, starting from really basic ones like being consummate in initiative, learning how to get up and do something. If that's hard, that's what you focus on. That's the level you're prepared for. That's your theme. How do you get up? How do you give yourself pep talks? How do you motivate yourself to practice?

And then, once you've got up and you've started practicing, then the next level of consummation you want to work on is how to maintain, preserve, what you've got, to look after what you've got. Don't just throw yourself into the practice and then give up when it doesn't work right away. You've got to develop a level of steadiness. And if you find that challenging, that's the level of consummation you want to work on, or focus on to begin with. That's your theme.

Given the way your lute is tuned, and what your lute is capable of and what *you're* capable of doing, that's the theme you want to work on. Here, of course, it's good to think about Indian classical music because that's the type of theme, of course, that the Buddha had in mind. They would take a raga, which is basically a string of sounds, and then play with it, work variations on it, but it's basically the same theme again and again and again. Different ways of tuning the lute would be right for different kinds of ragas. So, given the way your lute is tuneable, look at what you're capable of taking up. Focus on that.

And if it's not the advanced sort of music you'd like to play, how are you going to get to the advanced music? You start with the simple stuff. You master that first, then you work your way up.

This is one of the reasons the Buddha talks about skills so much in his analogies for the practice. You tune your lute today in line with what you're capable of today, and tomorrow you check again. Maybe you can tune it in a new way. That provides the opportunity for different ragas and different themes.

If you've got the basic skills of initiative and maintaining or preserving under your belt, then there are other levels of consummation. Work on your views. Work on your virtue. Work on your concentration. Try to get the mind into as

still a state as you can. And even if it's not as still as you'd like, at least maintain what you've got. Don't throw away the good things you've maintained. Those basic principles of initiative and maintaining apply all the way through the practice. You want to build a practice that's solid. And all the way through, it's going to require pushing yourself a little bit more than you thought, but not so hard that you just give up. Try to find the level that you can maintain and stick with it.

So there are three parts to the Buddha's instructions. One, figure out what level of energy you've got. Two, figure out the appropriate level of conviction, concentration, mindfulness, and discernment for that level of energy. And then three, pick up whatever the theme is that you've got to work on. That way your skill as a lute player will advance in a steady way.