

# The Practice

*Set Your Goals, Establish Your Routine and Get Out Of Your Own Way*

Budding musicians are inundated with horribly misleading aphorisms like "Practice makes perfect" or an outright lie such as "You are born with talent or you aren't". We're bombarded with videos of child "prodigies" and the mass media feeds of *American Idol*: You either live in the blaze of glory at the behest of a panel judges or you are foolish for ever daring to apply yourself towards something you love to do. So can it be any surprise the concept of *practicing* is so out of whack? Our culture can't even make up it's mind about what a musician *is* when a prominent drummer like Bill Bruford mentions still being asked by people, "What do you *really* do for work?"

This article is my perspective from experiences as a practicing drummer and teacher looking at the *how, when, why* and *to what extent* we might want to approach practicing. A practice that will allow for anyone to fit time in their schedule. I want the information here to be that extra push to help you get out of your own way and to inspire you to guiding your practices, enjoy the process and to feel the momentum of your endeavors.

Most obstacles in practicing stem from a mix of incorrect presumption, pointless judgment and general impatience. So unless you learn to recognize and disavow those factors it can be very difficult for you establish a consistent, meaningful and enjoyable practice.

For example take computer software: it's useless if the computer platform does not support it. This is similar to what good are lessons or practicing if we don't support our motivations with discipline?

## What *Is* Practice?

Practice is not an end-result, but a **process** for learning. It is a *discipline!*



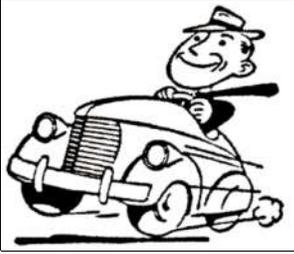
### **i. Motivation is the Fuel**

"What a man can be, he must be." - Abraham Maslow

**Motivation** (inspiration) jump-starts this whole process of wanting to practice something. Doesn't it seem the moment we hit the ground running we are bombarded with limitations of time and/or understanding? What does one do when after the initial romance of the motivation or inspiration has cooled? What happens when you feel unsure or you are demotivated?

Firstly, consider keeping tabs on the music and people who inspire you. Keep track of such things in your '**Drumming Journal**' (to be discussed). Nowadays you can make a "playlist" on your mp3 player for songs that inspire you.

**Buddy Rich said, "I never practice." But then again, he's dead.**



## ii. Discipline is the Vehicle

Practice *is* discipline. Many have this notion that discipline is an obstacle when it is just the opposite - it is the vehicle to help us to achieve desired goals. We might think we can practice with inspiration but far from it, we need to have a way to maintain consistency and methods when we're not feeling particularly inspired. In this way, discipline frees us from stagnation and can sustain us when we're feeling sub-par or unsure.

### Get out of your own way

Discipline requires a good temperament for practice.

- If we place constraints like undue **expectations** on practicing we feel let down.
- If we are **impatient** we are constantly aggravated.
- If we **judge ourselves** at every step of the way we become demoralized.

I eventually realized that when I practiced I would expect results *immediately* and was disheartened when I wasn't awesome in 40 minutes. I was expecting to notice gradual improvement at *all* times during the practice and wanted results even before committing to process the material. Can it be any surprise that the same thing happens with those who exercise or diet? We get in our own way before we even know what we are trying to do! If people took the same effort used to *avoid* discipline and put it *towards* it, the result of success would be absolutely staggering.

Do these thoughts sound familiar?: "I suck.", "Why can't I get this?", "Screw this." If you find yourself getting short-tempered, impatient or judgmental – let it go like it never existed.

### No Shortcuts

There really exists no such thing as a short-cut in the effort of discipline *but* the discipline of learning to practice efficiently will *naturally* speed up the learning process. This is why *how* you practice is as important as *what* you practice. Discipline only demands that you be present and willing to consistently follow a process.

Have you ever noticed that when you are properly focused in the moment of your practice, the dimension of time melts away? You may not even need to worry how long you practice save to make sure you don't miss other engagements or responsibilities! This is because you are in the moment of efficient and enjoyable practice.



## iii. Your Goals Determine the Journey

What is it about drums that interests you? What drummers, bands or songs inspired you? Did you discover you liked drumming from playing *Rock Band*? Did you see a band? Did a sibling or friend get you into it? You just like hitting things? Just because?

Whatever the impetus, what do you want to be able to do? Setting goals helps to direct your practice. Keep track of such things in your '**drumming journal**'\* (*still* to be discussed.)

**A well-meaning but over-zealous parent:** "Can you teach my kid the 'express version'?"  
**My response:** "Can your child learn faster?"

## I. Establishing the Practice Schedule

### ***What do I practice?*** (Set and Prioritize Goals)

Examples of what you *need* to learn in order to play what you *want* to learn:

...to play jazz you need understanding of triplets and hi-hat foot coordination

...to play double bass you need balance foot technique

...to play rudiments, you must know the four playing strokes

...to understand form you need to know how to count.

...to understand polyrhythms you have to know how to read & understand dotted notes.

...to play the *Immigrant Song* by Led Zeppelin you have to have foot technique.

You do not need to have epic goals. You can always modify the details as you go, but you'll want to establish a beginning reference point to begin *prioritizing* your course of action. You do not have to practice *everything* at once – just focus on a mix of what interests you most at the current moment and what you need to learn in order to move in that direction. *But* you have to stick with it!

Examples of fundamentals that any drummer needs to know:

**Technique** Hands: fulcrum/positioning; 4 basic playing strokes; accents/dynamics. Feet: Heel down/up; Double Bass

**\*Reading** Note/rest values; Repeat signs; Multiple endings; Dynamic markings; Transcribe grooves/fills & solos.

**Listening** Listen to music that represents what you are learning

**Rudiments** Kit applications; Applying dynamics/accents; Applying to rhythmic phrases

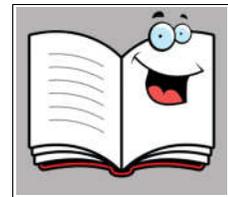
**Form** 4-measure phrases; *Verse, Chorus, Bridge*; 12-Bar Blues; ABA & ABBA form

**Styles** **Funk:** James Brown, *Cold Sweat*; **Rock:** Led Zeppelin, *Immigrant Song*; **Shuffle:** Steely Dan, *Reelin' In the Years*;  
**Jazz:** Miles Davis version of *Well You Needn't*; **Reggae:** The Police, *Walking On the Moon*

**Concepts** Groove Coordination; Soloing over ostinatos; Linear Drumming; Polyrhythms; Time Modulation

### **About this 'Drumming Journal' – organize!**

Procure a spiral notebook and declare it your **Drumming Journal!** In it you should track: (1) your goals, (2) what you practice each session and comments or questions that come up in each practice, (3) references to songs, drummers or performances that interest you. It doesn't have to be formatted *perfectly* neat though keeping track of the day/month is helpful. If you start studying with a teacher, this will help them TREMENDOUSLY to help you!



### **With whom or where you can get help with drumming**

Private instructor | Drum Clinics | DVDs/Online videos | the *Rock Band* game

local "Drum Hangs" | Online forums (e.g. *DrummerCafe.com*, *DrummerWorld.com*)

Online Resources (*DrummerCafe.com*, *JKDrumSolutions.com*) | See live bands & talk to the drummers and ask what they practice ("networking")

***"Folks...you're not curing cancer!"***- Todd Sucherman on hand technique

**How often should I practice?**

...**C-O-N-S-I-S-T-E-N-T-L-Y!**

End of story.

Time is a commodity. There will never be a time where we conveniently have *all* the time we want to practice, so make the most of the time you do fit in. There are going to be days where you feel unwell, tired; away or otherwise incapacitated. Do it when you can, and when you can't, you don't. But the days you *could* practice but might not...*do it anyway*.

Some of my students “confess” at the start of a lesson that they have not practiced that prior week as if there is a morality involved. After all, would you apologize for being hungry after missing lunch? However, if having a reason or excuse not to practice is your *default*, you might want to check your motivation. Perhaps you merely need to re-evaluate or re-prioritize goals? Do you *have* goals? You should have goals.

And where typically we worry about *how long* we should practice, I suggest you instead establish a **consistent minimum practice**: a level you won't go below, but you can always exceed if you feel inspired or otherwise have time. In this way, you will squelch the phrase, “*I don't have time.*” entirely out of your life. The reality is that even with limited time you *do* have time to practice, but you have to find *it!*

**Try 15-20 minutes per practice, every other day as a minimum!**

Practicing less than 3-4 days a week is treading murky waters. Practicing an hour or two at one full swoop in a week (particularly before a lesson) results in desperate, frustrated or forgetful meanderings which cannot possibly breed any progress. An easy way to think of it is not to go more than a day between practices. Also, limit distractions (i.e. Put away the phone.)

If you interpret the idea of a mere minimum practice of 15-20 minutes as you don't really need to practice, you are entirely missing the point. Generally, anyone who practices with a **consistent** minimum finds they more often *exceed* that allotment. When you get in your “zone”, don't be surprised if you lose track of time and practiced longer than you expected. After you develop a regular practice schedule, it is *then* that you can start to pace yourself and push parameters like 30-60 minutes a day if applicable to your availability/commitment.

**Organize/Budget** your time by writing out your daily schedule to see what pockets of time you tend to have. Over time, if t.v., video games or “social networking” continually gets priority for available time not taken up by work, school, sleep or eating, you may want to re-prioritize. If you want to practice, you *will* find the time. It's that cut and dry! **By the way**, a teacher cannot *make* you practice. They can guide your motivation, help you learn more efficiently and hopefully inspire you - but you and *only you* can do the follow-through. **It is the most manifestly uncomplicated litmus for you determining your value of your motivations!**

**“Renegade Practice”**

I call it “**Renegade Practice**” when I have unexpected pockets of spare time, maybe 5-10 minutes. On a pad, my knee or tabletop – with sticks or no.

Examples of spare time	Examples of what to do
...waiting for someone, a bus, plane or train ...before or after dinner ...between commercials ...lunch break	...focus on the upstroke in alternating Flams ...memorize a sticking pattern ...permutate accents with Flam Accents ...learn a song arrangement, groove or fill

It was during such a “renegade practice” that I figured out how to develop the infamous “blush-dah” (repeated Flam Drag) while playing with sticks on the side of my shoe. Worse things have happened!...

## II. Practice Session Strategies

Read through the following strategies and try one at a time in application to your practice. Some ideas will appeal to you more readily than others – and you should follow that lead!

In a way, you are learning to practice practicing! With a sense of **patient curiosity** enjoy the process of **trial & error**. Walk through the steps and trust your brain to click when it does. Watch for negative assumptions, judgments and unreasonable expectations that can severely lessen focus. Be aware of them and track persistent issues in your **drumming journal** so you can identify and nullify them.

### Common practice issues

It is helpful to assess the correct nature of the problem/issue holding you back so you can determine your course of action. Consider the following categories:

- **Tempo/Timing issues:** when you can't keep control of your timing – most likely because you are going too fast and not able to think it through. This is perhaps the most common issue yet it is the main issue people tend to overlook.

- **Reading/Listening issues:** when you have no idea what you're supposed to play from what you are reading or listening. *e.g. Taking the time to count what you are playing, trying to figure out how to connect your part with a song or hearing the pulse.*

- **Coordination/balance issues:** when you can't properly layer the different parts. *e.g. keeping time with hi-hat foot along with a beat, balance on your seat...*

- **Technique issues:** when you can't make the proper sound/motion required to play the part. *e.g. upstrokes, Moeller motion, allowing stick to rebound, holding fulcrum to loose...*

### (1) Counting Strategies (“If you can say it, you can play it”)

With your voice only count out loud and in time the formal count of a phrase, fill or passage. Yes, write in the counts above the rhythm you are reading! Count **out loud** - hear and feel those vocal cords resonate! Don't mumble because you'll play it with as much clarity. Count the phrase *repeatedly* and *listen*. After you're familiar with the rhythm, try to play it, but at the tempo you were able to comfortably count it.



(a) **“Sing”/Count the bass and snare:** Obviously geared towards reading drum beats, try counting only the combined bass & snare notes – leaving out the cymbal part. This will give you the main idea of how the groove will sound. Then count the bass & snare part while *playing* the cymbal rhythm. You can also substitute the formal count of the bass & snare notes with “boom” and “bop” (respectively) so you you'll be sounding out the groove and more accurately hear how the groove will sound.

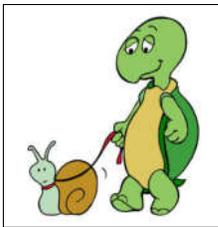
(b) **Rhythmic Groupings:** You can count in groups instead of the formal meter. For example, in 'Clocks' by Coldplay the melody and drum part clearly outline three groupings that can be more easily counted as “1-2-3 1-2-3 1-2” rather than strictly in a measure of 4/4: “1+2+3+4+”.

**(c) Words/Phrases:** A great way to retain counting rhythmic phrase is finding **words or phrases** with a syllabic division akin to the rhythms you are reading. Then when you are ready substitute with the formal counts.

1 e + a	1 e + a 2 +	1 T L 2 +
al li ga tor	pea nut but ter sand which	blue ber ry pan cakes

By the way, **metronomes** & click tracks are important – but it is suggested that you save the metronome for *after* you get control of counting a given passage on which you are working. Then you can focus more on the timing itself as opposed to reading and coordination additionally. Playing to a metronome or click track can actually be a coordination issue and not a timing one!

## (2) Tempo Strategies (Control Your Tempo)



Drumming is a coordinative process between the brain, mouth and limbs and you need time to process layers and transitions into a “feel”. Sometimes we understand the counting and coordination, but the processing is still very much in the front of our head. We need to be able to *control the rate* at which we play while allowing mistakes to occur **and** keep moving forward in time. Go **slow** and keep it *moving forward even with intermittent mistakes*, which means you are not playing at a tempo that you cannot maintain or control. Say it....“s-l-o-w”.

### Don't Stop / Control Repetition

The most prominent obstacle in an effective practice regimen is outright *stopping*. Not the intermittent pauses but the complete shut down of *intent* to move forward. Often students begin a passage without contemplating the tempo necessary to play with control and when they make a mistake merely *start over* from the beginning (play video games, much?). When we do this, we get very good at playing the part we already know and not with the problem area! I often say to students, “Stop stopping!”, and they reasonably ask, “How?”...

There's a point where you unconditionally decide, “I am going to keep going no matter what”. So, if you do stop suddenly/unexpectedly, *freeze* that moment but *continue right from that point where you stopped*. Do not go back to the beginning. Play through new or difficult passages like you are sounding out a new word - one syllable (note) at a time. Give yourself time to think it through and hear it in the correct order? If you manage to continue *only forward*, you will quickly see how an intermittent stop or pause will not actually ruin your momentum. Stopping is a really difficult habit to undo at first – but it is after all only a habit - so now you'll replace it with a new instinct!

### Two ways of not-stopping

**(a) Time as a “Rubber Band”:** Imagine your ability to control your tempo like a rubber band that can *stretch* or *contract* as needed. “As needed”: yes, you have permission to *slow down* in the middle of a passage in order to accommodate maintaining control! But if you find that after many reps you cannot play faster than the most difficult part you may want to slow the whole passage accordingly.



**(b) “Order-Of-Operations”:** Play each “vertical layer” of note(s) at the same rate. For example, recite any verbal passage you have memorized...a name, a motto, a poem, a song, a limerick and at will simply start slowing down or pulling apart words *by syllables*, emphasizing syll-a-bles in the pro-cess. *That* is what I am talking about. By doing this, you are temporarily forgoing the formal rhythm of the passage in order to avoid stopping while getting a feel for the order of “layered” coordination. This is very helpful for reading groove passages.

The idea is to play a passage, allowing for mistakes/pauses, while moving forward in time without losing control/composure. If say, you practice a groove and through repetition you have to play it 20-30 times before you can play it 4-8 passes without a mistake, so be it! That's the practice! Through counting, moderating your tempo and controlled repetition [see **(4) Repetition**], you combine the above strategies and then play a waiting game. Just don't play the next note of a sequence unless you can think it through – don't merely guess. If you hastily guess, even if you happen to play the right thing, it will defeat the purpose as you can't control luck.

*"Insanity is repeating the same mistakes over and over again expecting different results"*

### (3) Coordination/Break-Down Strategies

The following break-down strategies can help you create a starting point for working on difficult efforts of *coordination*.

**(a) Subtract** one voice/layer to lighten the load and gain perspective on how the parts work together. e.g., With a groove, take out the cymbal, snare or bass – try each option!

original groove                      removed the bass drum on "ah" of beat 2

**(b) Simplify** by omitting embellishments such as ghost notes, dynamics, hi-hat opens or snare buzzes. Then you can reapply embellishments afterward one at a time until you can play the original phrase.

A simplified rudimental snare passage:

original phrase                      removing the "ruffs" and accents

A simplified groove:

original groove                      removing HH opens and buzz

**(c) Substitute** a part of a coordination to a limb can can perform a note easier.

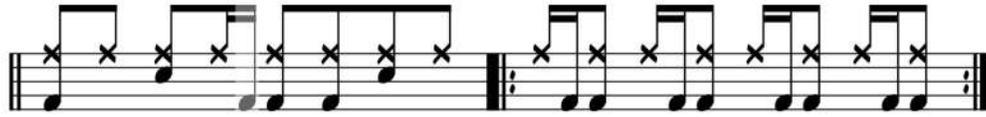
original groove                      moved the bd on "ah" of beat 2 to the snare

Steve Gadd: *"The word 'perfect'...I don't know anybody who's perfect. You go out there and do your best. And if you don't nail it, then you go out the next day and you try to get it right. That's really all you can do."*

<http://www.musicradar.com> (July 5, 2010)

(d) Identify the note that is a “**transition point**” in a passage where you become consistently stified. Excise that note with the notes on each side of it and turn it into it's own repetitive exercise.

Let's say the bd on the “ah” of 2 was a problem...



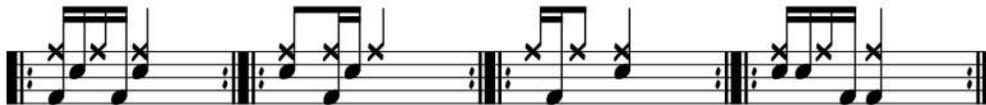
create a breakdown exercise for “+ ah 3” and repeat the notes before & after the problem note

(e) “**Beat-to-Beat**”: Connect each downbeat to the beginning of the next, e.g. “1” to “2”, “2” to “3”

If this is the main groove:



These would be your “beat-to-beat” breakdown exercises:



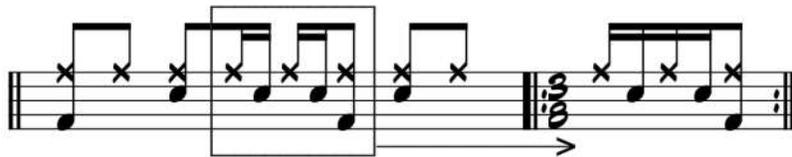
Beat “1” to “2”

Beat “2” to “3”

Beat “3” to “4”

Beat “4” to “1”

You can do the same for rhythmic groups longer than a beat!...



Even if you can't quite play the desired tempo right away, you will have gotten inside the passage!

#### (4) Understanding Repetition/Internalization

##### “How long must I practice what I am practicing?”

You need **repetition** in order to memorize or *internalize* something. Developments can take day, weeks to months to nurture into submission, but don't worry about *when* – your brain will let you know! You will find that if you use the material on occasion in your regular playing, you will not really need to “practice” it any more in order to maintain “it”.

In his books *Rhythm Knowledge* vol. I & II, author Mike Mangini poignantly suggests that through repetition, the mind and body work together like programming a computer. We are training our brain and synapses to internalize something we want to do by repeating the correct way (tempo is not important but control is!) until it becomes instinctual. You'll know something is internalized when you can play that something at different speeds or you can improvise on it without having to think much about it. Or perhaps you will *hear* or *feel* a pattern or technique before you actually execute it. Think how this must work with martial arts.

When you finally command a passage so that it can played correctly at a fair tempo, you should repeat it many times. It is not enough to get a passage *just once* or a couple passes and expect your synapses to acquiesce in the near future. Again, if you make a mistake, let it go – continue forward

and you'll try again the next pass. Many books and worksheets exhort us to play 4 or 8 times but meaning *after* you have gotten control of the passage and can repeat it *correctly* 4-8 times!

Most things we practice exist in various phases of development. Some phases will be quick and some will sit on a plateau. Not everything needs to necessarily be internalized. As long as you are focused, patiently accept where you are in each phase, you can let the process do the work; it will only be a matter of time which is much more acceptable than "I can't do it".

Let's consider the following steps in context of developing the paradiddle rudiment:

(1) **Read/ Coordinate:** At first you carefully learn the sticking until you can play it in control.

(2) **Memorize:** As a result of repeating it in control you can play it without reading the sticking.

(3) **Orchestrate** (dynamics/application)

Now you add accents and dynamics, e.g., accent the single notes and tap the doubles. Perhaps apply it on the kit playing the single notes on the toms and the doubles as bounces on the snare.

(4) **Repeat:** Even though you understand it you want to re-visit step 2 so that...

(5) **Internalize**...and live happily ever after...

...in a practice, rehearsal or gig – you can play this matter-of-factly because you can practically *hear* or *feel* your paradiddle application before you play it or perhaps can "improvise" variations of paradiddle applications without having to think about it.

### III. The Final Frontier

#### *Are You Experienced?*

Get out there and play – *this is why you practice!* Form a band, take gigs, go to open mics, jam with friends or anyone who is willing and has the same enthusiasm. Practicing is necessary, but **interacting** with others lights the fire and uncovers what *you cannot find in the comfort of your practice room!* No matter how much you practice you cannot experience the true joy of being a musician until you play music with *people*. The experience of interacting with musicians will give deeper purpose to your practices because it will make the practice relevant. Having a gig is a fabulous way for you to determine things you need to practice!



**Practice "Networking":** Networking is the *practice* of interacting with other musicians, be it in conversation or performance: Attend open mics or jams, audition for bands, go see local bands you like and chat up with band members after they play. Let family and friends know you play drums and are looking for opportunities – many people know musicians who will eventually be needing a drummer. Make business cards. If your goal is to play and you are not doing so, take whatever opportunity you can to get out there and plant those networking seeds. Soon enough you'll find more opportunities coming your way.

#### **Practicing With a Band**

If a band's rehearsal process is to merely run through tunes and hope for the best such that, if there is mishap, the band does the entire tune again and repeats the exact same mishap (see prior reference to the definition of "insanity"), that band needs to apply some of the **Practice Session Strategies** and slow down a passage or break down a particular section and repeat it as a loop. In this way, as a group you develop a *collective* muscle memory that will translate to a solid, consistent stage performances. When a band is tight in tempo, phrasing and dynamics – it generally translates to a great impression upon listeners!

## *The Practice*

You don't have to be a professional musician to practice smart! To prepare for band practices, at least know the arrangements of the songs you are playing ("intro", "verse", "chorus", "bridge", "outro") and important band accents/hits. As for the drum part, it is more important that you can get through the sections of the song than have the drum part itself down *perfectly*. The other musicians generally do not care about the ultimate detail of the drum part save for accents or stops (e.g., intro to *Back in Black* by AC/DC), or if the drum part presents a particular cue (e.g., the drum fills after the a'capella in *Black Dog* by Led Zeppelin). Make any notes about the song you need to remember.

It's **not** easy to find musicians willing to break down a band practice! So if you find such people, hang on to them for dear life!

# # #

When you develop and apply an organized, creative approach to practicing ideas or concepts and witness them become living, breathing facets of your drumming vocabulary - you have experienced the treasure of the discipline of **The Practice!**