



Reflections on
GUITAR DHARMA

Clarelynn Rose

**“Anything we do is dharma practice provided
we bring our attention to it properly.”**
- *Ven. Tenzin Palmo*

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My friends of the Penicuik Taize Vaults singers

*The front cover quote is from an interview with the
Tibetan Buddhist nun, the **Venerable Tenzin Palmo**,
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Satish Kumar is the editor of Resurgence Magazine,
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Introduction

We live in an age of increasing speed. Even the pitch of concert A has risen from 415 to 440 cycles per second in the last 250 years. In the world of guitar, some strive to be fast and technically correct. It sometimes seems as if music has become an Olympic sport, with the goal to achieve a score of a perfect 10.

But what happens if we slow down, look inwards, and instead focus on our own personal experience of playing our instrument? What happens if we shift our focus from our head to our heart? We can move away from dualistic thinking of good and bad, and instead explore the path of Guitar Dharma, a path grounded in our own awareness and as rich as it is individual in nature.

Buddhist teachings tell us that there are 84,000 dharma doors, any of which can led to a clear awareness of how things truly are. The number 84,000 is symbolic and means that anything can open to us the doors of understanding. This includes music in general, and playing the guitar in particular.

Guitar dharma shows us a heart-felt, spiritual path. While there is certainly a place for technique, the primary focus is not to master techniques, but rather to nourish our spirit and express our own truth. We do this through our individual experiences of connection, developing awareness, cultivating what is skillful, and trusting in our own abilities and creativity.

In these pages are a few insights gleaned from my own path. You may resonate with some ideas and not with others. As you read these pages, mull over and feel your responses. Your own path may begin to reveal itself.

These words are meant only as offerings and suggestions. Please take what is helpful to you and leave what is not.



Creating the landscape

Body -- Speech -- Mind

With your body, speech, and mind, you create the landscape in which you practice and refine guitar dharma. The more you develop and cultivate what is skillful, the richer and more fertile your landscape will be.

Body

Relax your body

Relaxing your body will allow you play at your best and from your heart. Conversely, tension in your body can manifest as tension in your music. Find whatever relaxes you and use it to help your body to soften. You may find it helpful to lower the lighting, light incense or candles, or perhaps simply gaze at a favorite photograph.

Be present

Take a moment to notice how your body feels and come fully into the present moment. Be nowhere else but right here, right now. Minimize distractions by unplugging the phone, turning off the computer, etc. Check the events and frustrations of the day at the door, and really leave them there. When your awareness wanders, gently bring it back to your body.

Accept your body

Each and every one of us has a unique body. Learn what yours does and does not like to do, and avoid forcing it to do what feels too unnatural. Energy you spend wishing your body were different or like someone else's leads to dissatisfaction and suffering. Accept how you are, and know that there is much you can do. Feel limited? You may find inspiration in the example of Django Reinhardt, the fingerpicking great who played with two missing fingers!

Work with your strengths

Look to your own preferences, interests, and natural abilities. Recognize and build upon your strengths, understanding that our muscles as well as our minds have natural tendencies. What you play well and easily I may struggle with, and vice-versa. Do arpeggios fly easily off your fingers? Use them. Are barre chords well nigh impossible for you? Find another way. Guitar dharma encourages investigation to find your own path. This way, you'll play twice as well in half the time with half the effort.

Speech

Right speech

In your self-talk and speech with others, are your words skillful? This means you speak with affection, with a mind of good-will, in truth, to bring benefit, and at the right time.

Patience

One of the “six perfections” in Buddhism is patience. We can become provoked by not getting it “right” when we practice the guitar. If we lose patience, we can easily fall back into using harsh words with ourselves or others. This is the time to slow down and practice patience. Calm your heart, saying nothing until you can be kind and gentle in your speech.

Use a language of compassion

Words of praise or criticism set up a dualistic way of thinking (good/bad, talented/untalented). In contrast, guitar dharma focuses on the extent to which universal human needs, such as self-expression, creativity or connection, are being met. You can choose language that supports this understanding, using your words to express universal human feelings and needs, rather than to foster dualistic thinking and competition.

*(These ideas are borrowed from the book by Marshall Rosenberg, **Nonviolent Communication**.)*

~~I'm so (un)talented!~~

Sets up dualistic thinking that some are able and good while others are not able and bad.

When I play, I feel joyful because I feel so connected to the people I wrote the song for.

Focuses on the feeling and on the universal human need being met.

Examples of needs you might be meeting through music

creativity

celebration

connection

contribution

self-expression

Mind

Intention

The intention you bring to your music matters immensely. The purer your intention, the greater your ability to create something beautiful. This means putting aside ego and desire, and instead focusing on helpful intentions such as kindness and generosity.

Researchers like Hans Jenny and Masaru Emoto have demonstrated the power of sound to physically shape matter and to form beautiful water crystals. Such images may help you to keep positive intentions in your heart as you cultivate guitar dharma.

*Beauty is the touchstone.
If the art is performed
with a pure heart,
beauty appears there.*

*--Vinoba Bhawe, in Satish
Kumar's You Are,
Therefore I Am*

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is being aware of what you are doing, both in your thoughts and in your actions. The quality is one of simply noticing. You may be aware of the intention you put into your music, of the feeling of your fingers on the strings, or the sensations in your body as the music moves through it. Ideally, you'll be mindful of all these and more.

*Don't practice too
strictly. Don't get
caught up with
what others are doing.
Watching others is bad
practice...Would you
get upset at a small
tree in the forest for
not being tall and
straight like some of
the others? This is silly.*

*--Ajahn Chah,
in Jack Kornfield's
Living Dharma*

Mindfulness also includes a quality of non-judging. Another way to look at this is to not attach to having things be a certain predetermined way. With mindfulness, you come to realize how much energy is spent in judging and wishing things were different. Instead, simply notice how things are, and find the space in your heart to be "zi-zai," or at ease with what is. From there, you may choose to strive to improve your playing, but it will be from a place of feeling calm and grounded.

Being mindful does not mean being complacent and not growing. It does mean to be aware. When learning a new lick, for example, notice the feelings in your fingers, such as any tension that arises there. You might also notice what your mind is doing, if you are maintaining patience or giving yourself over to frustration.

Concentration

Concentrate your mind fully on what is before you. Whether through deep breaths, qigong, yoga, or another way, take a moment to focus. Know that distractions will inevitably arise, so devise a method to let them go.

For example, you might imagine in your mind a river with a log slowly floating downstream. Place your distractions on the log and let them float away. Then return to the here and now, with full focus and concentration.

Right effort

There is a fine line between unskillful desire, based on greed, hatred, or delusion, and right effort, which is the desire and persistence to develop what is skillful. Right effort means striving to be aware every moment, making every activity meditation, and its results lead to well-being.

Right effort may be applied to learning a new technique or to refining some aspect of your body, speech or mind. Try your best to maintain your effort and vigor without overly attaching to a particular outcome.

Right effort also means to actively work to prevent what is unskillful from occupying your heart, mind and body. When you feel tension, frustration, or unkind words arise, make the effort to put into practice patience, loving-kindness and compassion. And if you find your motivations are rooted in self-seeking (desire for fame, money, etc.), see if you can instead find a motivation that stirs your heart and is rooted in positive human needs.



Creating the climate

Tips -- Techniques

If the landscape in which you create your music is formed by your body, speech, and mind, the climate is determined by your technique and style. Do you gravitate to soft, earthy sounds, or is yours a bright, sunny style? Be true to what works well for and resonates with you, whatever that is.

Tips

Center yourself

Before the first note begins, breathe. Take a moment to focus, bringing yourself fully into the present moment. Remember that the music is a gift to be shared by all present.

Relax

Soften your body, and in particular, relax your fingers. When practicing, try playing as softly as you can, whisper-soft. Your fingers hold much less tension when you play with a feather-light touch.

Get to know the piece

The notes and form of a piece may be enough to captivate you. But also be open to using your other senses. You may think of certain passages like poetry, or even colors. Other passages may suggest people, places, sights or smells. Anything you feel with your heart, play it into your piece. Include scent of the forest, the energy of a dog, the joy of seeing an old friend... infusing the piece with spirit adds richness to it for you and your listeners.

Play with your heart

Once you know your piece, play it with and through your heart. Play like you really mean it, like this is the only time you'll ever have to convey what you want to convey to your listeners. This is your chance to share your gift with others.

Blessed mistakes

When practicing, listen with a certain level of non-judging. Sometimes "mistakes" are quite wonderful and can provide ideas our conscious mind would not have brought forth.

Humility

There is a Chinese saying, "All the 10,000 things in the world, each and every one is my teacher." You can learn from a blade of grass, an autistic child, a guinea pig. Remain receptive and humble as you cultivate guitar dharma, keeping your heart open to all teachers.

Techniques

Use imagery and variety

- Use imagery of other instruments, plants, animals, and more.
- Match the feeling of your piece to the feeling you get from a person, a place, a color, etc.
- Use call and answer, playing at different locations (strings and fretboard), or with varying amounts of tension in the fingers.
- Play licks backwards and forwards, upside-down and inside-out.
- Try variations of harmonies as well as melodies.

Less can be more

When appropriate,

- Use rests & pauses to let the piece breathe.
- Use simple melodies & sparse harmonies.
- Choose wisely the number of musical ideas you use.
- If a short piece is enough, then let it be short.

Some Tunings to Try

E	A	C#	E	A	E
D	A	D	F#	A	D
C	G	D	G	C	D
D	G	D	G	A	D
C	G	C	G	C	D

Experiment and play

- Find a space where you can feel free, with no self-censoring.
- Experiment with different tunings. Get to know the personalities of the tunings. Try giving them names!
- Use chord shapes and variations of them in different tunings.
- Experiment with picking. Try standard patterns if you'd like, patterns you make up, and non-patterns. Try string crossing.
- Take your time, and rewrite, rewrite, rewrite.
- Keep what resonates with your heart, and discard what doesn't.

Conclusion

Guitar dharma is for everyone. You can create music that is meaningful to yourself and those around you.

Countless people over the years have told me that they *used* to play guitar. Now they have given it up and get their musical enjoyment from listening to others. Certainly listening has its place, but to silence one's own creativity is a loss for us all.

My hope is that you will walk this path of cultivating guitar dharma with an instrument in hand, reflecting and sharing the song that is your *svadharma*, your path. If not you, then who? Only you can make your music.

Art is work well done...when the person is free of attachment, ego, and desires. We are all capable of such action.

--Vinoba Bhave, in
Satish Kumar's
***You Are,
Therefore I Am.***

Glossary*

Cultivate - as to cultivate a field or garden, applied here to putting into practice on a regular basis the principles of guitar dharma: nurturing what is skillful as well as “weeding out” what is unskillful.

Dharma - law; natural law; quality; reality.

Eightfold path - Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Effort, Right Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Mindfulness, Right Understanding.

Right Effort - the effort to be aware in each moment, to overcome laziness and defilement, to make every activity meditation.

Right Speech - words spoken with affection, with a mind of good-will, in truth, to bring benefit, and at the right time. Right speech avoids what is false, slanderous, harsh, as well as idle chatter.

Six perfections - giving, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, wisdom.

Skillful - to accord with conditions without compromising true principles, with the results leading to well-being.

Svadharmā - one’s own dharma; one’s own way; personal path.

Zi-zai - at ease (Chinese, from “zi” - self, “zai” - to exist or rest with)

* Definitions adapted from accesstoinsight.org, experiencefestival.com, wikipedia.com, and personal communications with Theravadan and Mahayanan monastics.

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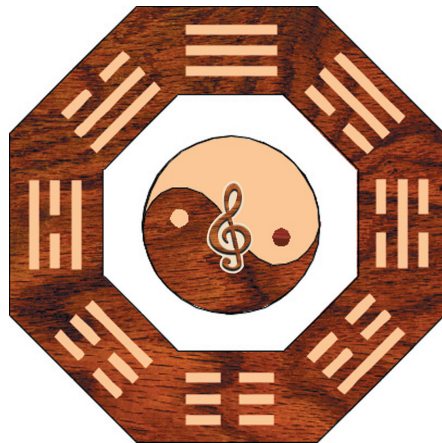
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世界万物
皆为我师



*All the 10,000 things in the world,
each and every one is my teacher.
- Chinese proverb*

*We live in an age of post-religious spirituality. The call of our time is to
be a good human being...Every one of us is capable...but to make such
a journey (we must) nourish the spirit.
- Satish Kumar, *You Are, Therefore I Am**

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