

# Wherever You Move, There You Are: Zen and the Art of Dalcroze Eurhythmics

By Nicole Brockmann

To someone reading a description of the Dalcroze approach, it may seem that there is little to distinguish what we do from other methods. After all, we are certainly not the only teachers to use exercises with throwing and catching balls or walking and clapping. What makes a lesson uniquely "Dalcroze" is not the tasks the students are asked to do, but the particular approach to the learning process—one that is wholly experiential, integrating our senses, minds, bodies, voices, and musicianship. Dalcroze himself knew this well, often citing the impossibility of anyone not involved in a Eurhythmics class to judge its success. In order to get the true Dalcroze experience, we must be fully engaged during every moment we spend in the Eurhythmics classroom—an attitude that shares many qualities with the practice of mindfulness. Although Eurhythmics is not explicitly based on mindfulness techniques, the two disciplines share such commonality of vision that cultivating mindfulness can enhance the Dalcroze experience for both students and teachers.

Although mindfulness is most often associated with Eastern meditative and spiritual traditions, it is rapidly gaining a foothold in Western culture as well. Mindfulness is not a religion. It is an approach to improving quality of life through deliberate attention that can be practiced by anyone, anywhere, at any time.

Research increasingly shows that practicing mindfulness improves not just our emotional and psychological health, but our physical health as well; a Google search for "mindfulness health benefits" turns up 196,000 hits.

The fundamental concept of mindfulness is simply experiencing whatever is occurring in the present moment, just as it is. In mindfulness meditation, practitioners use the breath as a focal point for experiencing the moment, paying attention to its ebb and flow and to the physical sensations it generates. During this process, other thoughts often come up—worries, fears, replays of past or imagined future conversations, and so on. Rather than trying to suppress or ignore these thoughts, the intent of mindfulness meditation is just to notice when they arise. By observing and releasing our thoughts, we take away their power to keep us in a state of anxiety and stress. We worry less about the past and future and are able to achieve a fuller experience of the present. As the Zen saying reminds us, "wherever you go, there you are."

Music and mindfulness are a natural pairing. Because music moves through the medium of time, musical activity is experienced as an unfolding of successive moments, each of which we should be fully present for if we want to have the most meaningful experience. Mindfulness can help us achieve this goal. In the Dalcroze studio, this includes paying attention to all aspects of the Eurhythmics experience: the internal physical sensations of movement; the things you see in the room, including not just the activity of participants but also the flickering of light and shadow on the studio floor or the movement of tree branches outside the window; the interplay of energy between teacher and students and from one student to another; and all aspects of the musical sounds you hear—pitch, timbre, dynamic, duration, decay or growth, etc. Time spent in the Eurhythmics studio can be a gateway to a more mindful journey through the rest of the day.

Like the principles of music, the main ideas of mindfulness are organically interrelated. Although the principles often overlap, they share a basic attitude of allowing and acceptance. Below is a list of some of the most important principles of mindfulness, along with examples of how they apply to Dalcroze work for both students and teachers. More detailed explanations of these and other principles can be found in Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living*, an excellent starting place for anyone interested in mindfulness.

### **Suspending Judgment**

You may think of yourself as being non-judgmental about people you meet, but the fact is that most of us constantly make unconscious judgments about far more than just people. We habitually categorize everything we see (or hear, or feel, or taste) as positive or negative, pleasant or unpleasant-and these judgments prevent us from seeing the whole of our experiences. When we make a judgment about something, we enter into an unconscious contract to discount or ignore any information about that experience that doesn't fit our judgment, which limits what we may eventually gain from the experience. Instead, seek to understand the experience in its totality, from the perspective of an impartial observer, without labeling it or deciding to approve or disapprove.

*Suspending Judgment in the Dalcroze studio:*

- Don't decide ahead of time that you know what an exercise is about. Walking and clapping may be used to work on a variety of different musical experiences.
- Don't think that an exercise is "easy" or "hard" or "boring," or that you "can't do it." The exercise just is what it is, and so are you.
- Don't think that others' answers to the problem, or the way others are moving, is right or wrong.
- Don't focus on finding the "right" answer - this closes your mind to other possible answers. When you see your answer as the end of the road, you are no longer gaining anything from the process.

### **Acceptance**

Avoid wasting energy denying and resisting the facts about the way things actually are. Be receptive and open to what you feel, think, hear, and see, with a focus on the present moment. Discover what you are resisting or what is beyond your control. Acceptance does not mean passivity or resignation, but a clearer understanding of the present moment for a better response. Once you have accepted the actual nature of the reality of the moment, focus your energy on what you can change. Which is a more effective way of solving the problem turning on a light, or resenting the room for being dark?

*Acceptance in the Dalcroze studio:*

- It's okay to not do everything perfectly the first time (or the second). Some concepts take a long time to learn.
- It's okay to be more fluent in some aspects of Dalcroze than others. Accept wherever you are on the path of your musical development, without worrying about where you "should" be. This is not to say that you shouldn't seek improvement, if that's what you want but don't compare yourself with people who have entirely different performance and training histories from you, or against an imagined idea of where you think you ought to be.
- Accept that your students are not you. They may not really understand how Eurhythmics will help them develop musicianship, and they may not be as enthused

about the topic as you are. This is okay. The degree to which they ultimately succeed in developing musicianship is dependent on them, not on you. Allow them their own choices.

### **Letting Go**

As human beings, we seek for ways to understand and control our environment. This can drive us to want to be "right" all of the time. Even when our ideas are not working for us, we often cling to them because we are afraid we will lose our (illusory) sense of control without them. How often do we avoid change, sticking stubbornly to our habitual ways of being, because we are reluctant to embrace the discomfort of the unknown? If your hands are full of groceries and I ask you to hold something, you cannot hold it until you put down the grocery bags. Similarly, you cannot accept new musical ideas unless you are willing to let go of some of the old ones. Non-attachment requires courage and the willingness to feel "wrong" (another illusory concept), but delivers possibilities and new ideas.

*Letting go in the Dalcroze studio:*

- Let go of your need to be "right" and find "the answer," or your desire to gain the approval of the teacher or of your fellow students.
- Don't cling to old, comfortable ways of moving or making music. Allow yourself to try new ways, with out judgment. Let go of both your fears and your ego.
- Resist the impulse to seek control over every aspect of your experience. Be open to all of the wonderful unpredictability of life and music.

### **Patience**

Give yourself time for the experience. Be open to each moment. Let your feelings and skills evolve and unfold in their own time. Don't hurry yourself in search of an immediate answer-let go of wanting results NOW. Practice living with ambiguity-sometimes there are many simultaneous "right" answers. Know that everything is unfolding for you in its own perfect way, exactly right for where you are at that moment.

*Patience in the Dalcroze studio:*

- Practice getting into a space of stillness and focus before the class begins. When you hear the music for the first exercise, really listen to it before you react with movement. Even quick-response games involving starting and stopping benefit from the application of patience: when you begin from a calm, relaxed, confident place within yourself, your response can be quicker and more accurate than when you are flustered and are experiencing all of your emotions and impulses at the surface level.
- Accept your progress at its own rate. Again, this does not mean that you are not allowed to desire improvement, only that you do not waste energy denying where you are or berating yourself for not being more accomplished. Practicing patience and non-judgment will allow you to change the things you can change in the most efficient way possible, because you will not be wasting energy on anything else.

### **Non-Striving**

Back off from being results-driven and focus more on the quality of each passing moment, starting with seeing and accepting things as they are. Sometimes students focus so hard on *trying* to do a task that they don't ever get around to actually *doing* it. To "do" something is a commitment to bring something into being; to "try" is only a commitment to generate effort. This effort is like static distorting a clear radio signal. Release the effort, and simply act. In the words of Yoda, "Do, or do not. There is no 'try.'"

*Non-Striving in the Dalcroze studio:*

- Release any competitive habits you may have. Focus on your experience, not anyone else's. The gift of the Eurhythmics lesson is the internal experience of the exercise, not the external movements or sounds. No one else can feel what you felt, and it is useless to try to compare what you experienced to what you think someone else may have felt based on your external observation.
- Remember that the journey is more important than the outcome. There is no prize for the first student to correctly step the meter of a given piece of music. It is the quality of the learning experience that matters.
- Don't move in a particular way because you think it looks impressive. Instead, let go of the effort and choose a simple movement that is authentically expressive, in whatever way is right for you. Don't try to imitate what anyone else is doing.

### **Beginner's Mind**

When we are beginners, we come into our experiences with a clean slate, free of judgments and limitations. This freshness of mind allows us to see things more clearly as they are, in their entirety. As things become more familiar to us, we tend to experience them in a more perfunctory manner, filtered through the judgments and labels we have applied to them as well as through the highly partisan filter of our egos. Practicing beginner's mind means trying to see everything from a "first-time" perspective, adopting a fresh, new, curious attitude, and being open to new possibilities. As Shunryu Suzuki said, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities. In the expert's mind there are few."

*Beginner's Mind in the Dalcroze studio:*

- Don't try to predict what an exercise is about or where the teacher will go next. Allow yourself the discomfort of being unsure.
- Don't tune out when the exercise is a form of movement you have done before, like walking and clapping. Even the most experienced Dalcrozians can always find something new in the simplest, most familiar exercises if they are really present and mindful.

### **Trust**

Trust yourself and your inner, basic wisdom. Honor your feelings and intuition while maintaining openness to new ideas. Choose that which is the right thing for you while understanding that others' choices and opinions may not be the same as yours.

*Trust in the Dalcroze studio:*

- Be brave in expressing yourself through movement and sound.
- Trust the safe environment of the Dalcroze class to support your "mistakes" and missteps. Trust that your teachers are also being mindful and are interacting with you using these same qualities of nonjudgmental, beginner's mind, acceptance, patience, and non-striving. Allow yourself to be open and vulnerable to a beautiful experience.
- Recognize that it's okay not to immediately know how to perform the task at hand. It's also okay to be unsure. You can always make another choice. Your abilities and instincts will lead you to a solution, if you really decide to trust them and listen to them.

## **Commitment and Self-Discipline**

Once you commit to the practice of mindful learning, use self-discipline to stay on track when you run into obstacles, as you invariably will. It takes some discipline to remain focused on the material of the class when you are worried about other things. Allow distracting thoughts to pass through your experience without holding on to them or fighting them. Recognize them, accept them, and let them go. Commit to returning your focus to the class.

### ***The mindful student:***

- Accepts that the class is at 8:30 am, which is just a time, neither good nor bad. Does not waste energy wishing it were otherwise. (*acceptance, letting go*)
- Notices that the floor is cold - feels the sensation of coolness on his feet without judging it as being pleasant or unpleasant. Concentrates on experiencing this physical sensation as a means of kick-starting overall sensory and kinesthetic awareness and awareness of the present moment. (*nonjudgmental, presence in the moment*)
- When instructed to walk to the pulse approaches the exercise with a beginner's mind and looks for things to learn. Tunes into his body and becomes aware of the way he is physically moving, without judging the movement or comparing it to what others are doing. When the teacher asks for a change in the movement, is able to let go of previous way of moving and use his awareness of bodily feeling to make changes. Assesses degree of success in making changes without judgment; continues to work on task and improve his performance based on internal sensations and perceptions. Listens to music carefully, just noticing it without trying to predict or change it. Strives to move authentically and expressively to the music without being goal-oriented or trying to find the "right" way. Is aware of his process and seeks to learn from it. Greets changes in the exercise with openness and trust in his own ability to grow in musical understanding. (*beginner's mind; presence in the moment; trust; non-judgment; non-striving*)
- Is open to comments and constructive criticism of teacher; considers them carefully. Trusts that the teacher's comments are designed to give him a deeper experience of music in this particular exercise and are not a condemnation of his entire approach to music. Understands that music is often about combining seemingly contradictory ideas (forward motion and restraint, accuracy and flexibility) and searches for a comfortable balance between those ideas. (*trust; beginner's mind*)
- Notices occasional thoughts of worry over music history test; allows them to pass through his experience, then releases them and returns concentration to the present moment. Maintains focus on the Eurhythmics lesson during the Eurhythmics class. (*commitment/self-discipline; acceptance; presence in moment*)
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As teachers, we can apply the same principles to leading our classes and working with our students. Cultivating mindfulness leads to a greater connection with our students and an improved atmosphere of trust and mutual respect. It also helps us become more deeply in touch with ourselves, helping us be more authentic in both our teaching and our own music making.