

Practise Session Advice

by Alec Jones

I'm often asked how long I practise and what I practise. I feel that what students are really asking, especially if they know more than one Form, is how to make best use of a practise session: what would be most beneficial. Although this may differ for each individual, here is some advice as a basic blueprint that you can adapt to your own needs.

Firstly, here is an outline of the **Phases of learning**

Phase 1 - Memorising

Before you have memorised what you're attempting to learn you are separate from it, it's outside of you and you begin to take it in through the mind. Usually the mind looks for similarities to something it's previously learnt and says, "Oh, that's like 'so and so'", and some parts may be similar, but if it were the same it wouldn't be new or different. So to learn something new you have to look at it from a fresh perspective.

Phase 2 - Practising what has been memorised

Taking the example of a new posture, this is where the posture is clear in your mind and, as you intend to move, you begin to recognise the familiar sensations of the movement, it becomes a feeling in the body.

Phase 3 - Owning

This is where the body has learnt the movement. As soon as the mind intends it, the body moves. Feeling and thought are one, you have become the posture which can now come from the inside and be expressed outwards. You 'own' it and have surrendered into it.

Phase 4 - Refining

Once you 'own' it, what then? There is always room for more refinement, to continue to develop you need to be very conscious of what happens when engaging with your 'skill' but not thinking it through in detail (thinking gets in the way and stops it working), instead, by conscious observation which enables you to refine through more and more subtle adjustment. This is a lifetime commitment without an end goal; the goal is the practice itself.

How long?

Better little and often rather than one big session per week. The effects of practise are cumulative; better a little food per day than a banquet once a week.

What to practise

1. Warm-ups or exercises
2. New things - latest posture or Form
3. A familiar Form

Let's take these one at a time...

Warm-ups or exercises

(Warning, this first section may appear impossible... and is impossible if you try to do it all at the same time, which can only lead to failure. Stay calm and keep reading!)

What to look/feel for during warm-ups or exercises:

- Relax the feet, keep your connection into the ground
- Body weight is centred in the foot
- Knee joints are soft even when the legs are straight (never locked)
- Hips are relaxed and free to move (float the hips)
- Tail bone is dropped downwards to open up the lower back
- The breath is encouraged to come from the lower Dantain
- Shoulder blades are released down the back which softens the chest
- Tip of the tongue lightly touching the upper palate to help the jaw to relax and improve saliva production
- Crown of the head floating up as though suspended by a thread from above

Choose warm ups or exercises by feeling into what your body and/or mind needs - does it need waking up, calming down, aligning, connecting, opening, loosening....?

New things

It is important to take home anything new that you've learnt in class. The sooner you can play it in your own practice space the sooner you will integrate it into yourself and be able to own it.

Start with the most recent movement or posture. Remind yourself of the feeling it gave you in class, feel the shape of it, the flow of it. Remember the quality of the move as your teacher played it through.

If you have trouble remembering it, close your eyes, visualise being back in class and following it through. Once you have the basic shape, open your eyes and do it again until it is familiar (even if it's not perfectly correct).

If this movement is part of a new sequence, then play the sequence to integrate the new move.

- Relax...
- Keep relaxing as you play it through again.
- Notice any tension or frustration if it doesn't go how you expect or intend.
- Relax...
- Keep relaxing as you play it through again.
- Notice the successes as well as failures - so maybe you forgot to move one of your arms... but what about the weight shift, or step, or the other arm that went well? It is so easy to focus on the negatives.

A familiar Form

Next, if you know more than one Form or sequence, choose a familiar one that will allow you to go deeper than simply going through the external movements. Drop your attention into one of the basics listed above in the Warm-ups section and use it as the focus for the whole sequence, or riding the breath, or deeper principles, depending on your level of experience.

And Finally...

It is worth repeating the new movement or posture a few times to finish your session as it will be supported by the mental and physical state you have developed through the above process.