Breath in on the G

When we are playing our instrument, tension is the enemy. We want to be light in our touch, smooth and flowing in our motions, graceful in our execution. However, as the demands on our concentration increase, usually our physical tension will too and often without us noticing it. It can happen because of the difficulty of what we're playing or because of the environment in which we're playing. Sometimes when I ask a student to play for me in a lesson, I will watch them lift one foot off the floor and hold it stiffly in the air - completely unaware that they're doing so - only to place it back down once they've finished. I might look at their hand and notice the thumb and fingers clenched tightly or a death grip on the pick. Shoulders can raise, necks get crooked, breathing ceases. It has happened to me. It happens to all of us. It's a natural reaction but an unhelpful one. How do we get out of the tension loop? We first need to learn what it feels like to be at ease and how to enter that state. Next we need to become aware of when we're tense. Then we can counteract the latter with the former.

Before starting to play, take a moment to decompress and remind yourself what it feels like to be free of tension. Take a few deep breaths. Breath all the way in, deep into the belly, filling the lungs from the bottom up. Then slowly exhale. Lightly shake your entire body from your toes to your head. Put some extra effort into your shoulders, forearms, wrists and hands. Rotate your head gently in circles alternating between clockwise and counterclockwise. I usually include a few gentle stretches of my fingers, wrists, forearms and anywhere else that feels like it might benefit. If you need some recommendations, ask me in an upcoming lesson and I'll share my favorites.

Once you start playing, remember to breathe. Breathe in on the G, breathe out on the D. If you notice you're holding your breath during a challenging passage, pause, and play whatever you were just playing but instead of putting your focus on the notes, put your focus on remembering to breathe while you play them, even if you don't play them perfectly.

When we first learn to fret notes, we feel like we have to press *really* hard to get a nice tone. As our hands get stronger and we learn to use the thumb on the back of the neck to support our fingers on the fretboard, we often end up fretting much harder than

needed. Our memory is of that early struggle and subconsciously, we may hold onto that for quite a long time. Not only does this result in wasted energy but it also can make notes go sharp by slightly bending the strings. Relax your fingers, see how light of a touch you need to find that pleasing tone. Remember to fret snug to the fret wire. Not on top of it but right up against it. This is the sweet spot where you can get the best sounding note with the least amount of effort. Strive for that accuracy. If you're in the middle or towards the back of the fret, you're working harder than you need to and playing music already has enough challenges.

Try to sit up straight, with your spine aligned. Avoid bending over and staring at the fretboard. Many of us do this out of habit and not only do we not need to but it may cause us to play worse. By looking at everything our hands do we end up overthinking what we're playing rather than gaining confidence in our practice and the resulting muscle memory. Even with students who have played for a very short time, they are almost always surprised by how well they do when I challenge them to play without looking for the first time. Make sure you challenge yourself this way often in the privacy of your own practice. You'll soon realize you have to look at what you're doing far less often.

And as I often say, watch your language. There are plenty of great reasons to swear but making a musical mistake isn't one of them. When you curse yourself for making a mistake, you are sending a signal that you are frustrated. Frustration is just another form of tension. Be forgiving to yourself in practice and performance. You can learn to respond to your mistakes with humor or curiosity and then eventually as creative opportunities. When I'm really in the flow, my mistakes influence my musical decisions in a wonderfully unexpected way.

Finally, stay aware. Reducing tension is always about becoming aware of the ways we are tense and then taking action to reduce that tension. The more we do this, the more it becomes a habit until the habit is to be at ease. I think this is a lifelong journey for most musicians. We will never be totally free of tension. Once we reduce one aspect, another may very well pop up. However, as long as we don't ignore it, we'll always make progress towards being more relaxed when we play and our musicality will benefit greatly as a result.