

HOW TO PRACTICE

There once was a speedy hare who bragged about how fast he could run. Tired of hearing him boast, Slow and Steady, the tortoise, challenged him to a race. All the animals in the forest gathered to watch. Hare ran down the road for a while and then paused to rest. He looked back at Slow and Steady and cried out, "How do you expect to win this race when you are walking along at your slow, slow pace?" Hare stretched himself out alongside the road and fell asleep, thinking, "There is plenty of time to relax." Slow and Steady walked and walked. He never, ever stopped until he came to the finish line. The animals who were watching cheered so loudly for Tortoise, they woke up Hare. Hare stretched and yawned and began to run again, but it was too late. Tortoise was over the line. After that, Hare always reminded himself, "Don't brag about your lightning pace, for Slow and Steady won the race!"
(The Tortoise and the Hare - Aesop's Fable)

The tale of the tortoise and the hare has an obvious moral to the story as it relates to hard work and practice. The obvious application to guitar is that consistent methodical practice and perseverance pays off in the big scope of things. Those that persevere are rewarded for their hard work and dedication.

However, there is a second lesson to be learned that is not so obvious. That lesson applies to how we should practice. Something I've observed in teaching students for 30 years is they always want to play things fast now. The student will stumble 20 times over a few notes attempting to play fast and continue attempting to play fast until I convince them to slow down. Even after I tell them to slow down several times, they still insist on attempting to play fast. It is in our nature to be impatient. Also, we tend to rush when we are excited. Most people talk faster and body language moves faster when we are excited. It is a natural thing. However, when practicing guitar we need to be very aware of our tendency to rush, and strive to practice slowly.

When we practice slowly, several things occur. First, we are certain to play things correctly and pay more attention to fine details. For example, when playing eighth notes we should be using alternating pick strokes. Students that insist on playing fast almost always struggle with picking technique. Second, the time you spend stumbling and starting over is more time you would spend if you had practiced it slowly in the beginning. Third, by playing slowly you learn to be patient and not rush or get ahead of the downbeat.

To achieve this goal, the best investment you'll make will be on a metronome. Keep the metronome handy all the time. Put it on an extremely slow tempo when you practice. This will force you to wait for the beat. As you become comfortable at an extremely slow tempo, you can increase it but not until you are able to play it perfectly at a slow tempo. The ability to run comes after learning to walk. The ability to drive a car fast comes after learning to drive it slowly. The ability to play guitar fast comes after learning to play it slowly.