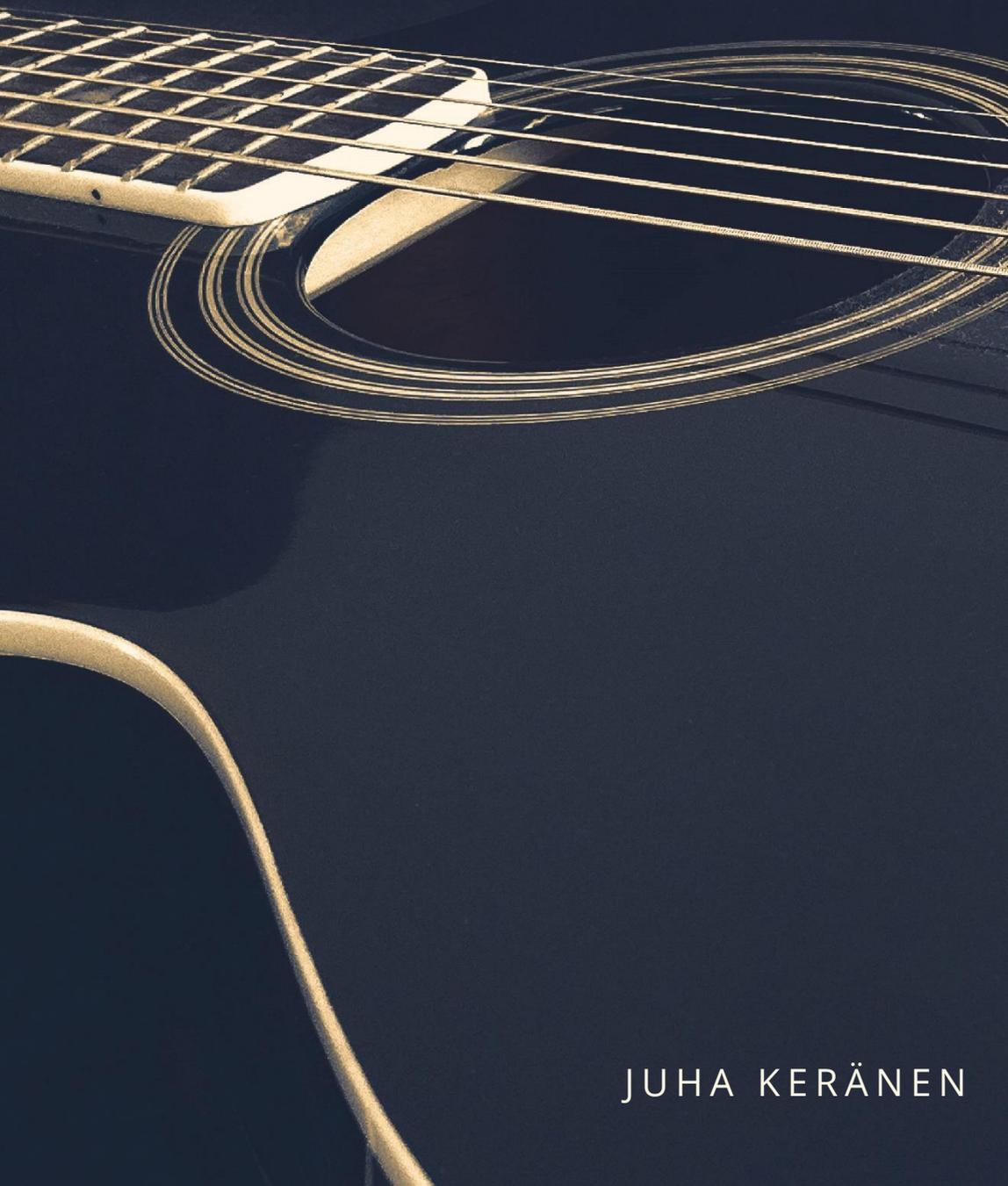


# GUITAR TECHNICALITIES

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*Past the Skill Barrier*



JUHA KERÄNEN

# GUITAR TECHNICALITIES

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*Advanced Instrument Technique*

## **Guitar Technicalities**

is an

IA Music Book

[www.IA-Music.com](http://www.IA-Music.com)

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Written and drawn in Finland.

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# Preface

Is this you?

You want to play a difficult piece of music on the guitar.

You try it and you fail.

You think, maybe there's a trick to it. You read articles, forum posts, watch videos and feel confident that you can learn it.

You try all the suggestions and you fail.

You figure that maybe you just didn't try hard enough. You start to practice two hours a day, five days a week. Eventually, the progress slows down so much that you feel like you're just wasting every day. And you're still nowhere near conquering the piece of music.

You get frustrated. You start to think that it's just you. You stop playing the guitar for a year. Eventually, you get the urge again and think that this time, you're going to give it your all and practice like never before.

You read those articles again and think that maybe you didn't fully understand them the first time. You watch those videos again and feel more confident than ever that with a new practice regimen of six hours a day, seven days a week, you're sure to learn that piece of music that kept taunting you long, long ago.

You try. You fail.

Maybe that's not exactly the experience that you've had, but it's the experience of many guitarists I've heard from. Guitarists who have played for years and never broken that barrier. It was also my experience. Until one day...

I was able to break that barrier.

The important thing to understand is that it's not you. If you can move your hands normally and learn anything at all with your brain, then there's nothing limiting your playing to only simple music.

Except for one thing.

If you've spent a lot of time reading those articles, books, magazines, watching videos, and chatting on the Internet, you could be considered somewhat of an expert. But expert on what? All those things that relate to guitar practice but don't empower you to play any of the stuff you want to play. Garbage.

But people often take pride on the things they know. Even if the things they know are wrong.

It's a tough pill to swallow. Admitting that you have wasted your time. Admitting that you were gullible enough to believe somebody when they told you what you need to do. Admitting that you are capable of making a mistake.

That's what holds people back. I can't count the amount of times I've tried to instruct guitarists only to have them go back to what they always used to do. Because they don't really want to learn. They think they already know how to play. They just need the instructor to make that knowledge work.

Well, it's not going to happen.

If you want to break through the barrier, you have to accept that you know nothing. Accept that none of the knowledge you have helps you to play the way you want. Accept that you have to learn how to play from zero. Like this is the first time you ever held a guitar.

I assume we're on the same page about this. After all, if you were happy with your playing, you probably wouldn't be reading this book.

Now for some good news. Learning is a fast process. I've often noticed teachers saying something along the lines of...

*“Don't expect this to turn you into a master immediately. Perfecting anything takes years and years.”*

Yes, *perfecting* something will take time. Naturally, if you have a really complex piece of music with multiple parts and thousands of notes, learning it all won't happen over a weekend. But you shouldn't get stuck. When you utilize the correct methods of practice, you will notice immediate, concrete improvements every time.

If you practice an hour every day and after a week still feel like you're in the same spot, you're not practicing right. I'm going to show you, not necessarily the only way, but a working way to practice. And with it, you should expect results, not in the first ten days, but the first ten minutes.

In addition, I'll be addressing other issues, physical and mental, that are holding many aspiring guitarist back.

Have you ever heard anyone tell you to practice speed by dialing in a slow tempo on the metronome and increase it slightly every time you manage to play the piece of music correctly? I sure have. And I have never learned to play a single thing by following those instructions. There's a piece missing there. A piece so important, that it makes the rest of the instructions completely pointless.

Metronomes are fun and useful, but you won't need one to follow along with this book. I'm going to teach you a different way. One that allowed me to play all the technically challenging pieces of music I always wanted to.

Now, let's get you to where you want to be.



# Motivation

Let's take two, imaginary, beginner guitarists. Anne and James. They both start the same time and always practice correctly to gain the maximum rewards out of their time.

James is really interested in playing guitar, but he also likes to draw, program, and mix music. He plays for two hours every day and then gets a strong urge to go work on that game he's been developing.

Anne fell in love with guitar the instant she picked it up. The only thing she ever thinks is playing her Stratocaster imitation. Whenever she has a spare moment, she picks the instrument up and loses all sense of time. She sometimes plays 30 hours straight because she didn't realize where the time went.

Which one of these two people makes more progress in a year? Why am I talking about this?

I don't know many people who are as passionate about anything as our example Anne. But I do have a programmer friend like that. He might go on programming for 48 hours straight and then miss a meeting because he just didn't wake up in Thursday.

If you are interested in becoming one of the technically most capable guitarists on the planet, realize that some people just naturally play a lot of guitar. If playing every day feels like a challenge to you, then don't worry about it. You can still be good, maybe even better than you ever hoped. But the people who eat and breathe guitar, really do love the instrument.

My advice is, don't force yourself to play 50 hours a week if you'll be miserable. Play as much as you want to. Find the stuff that gets you inspired and let it carry you away.

The important thing is that when you *do* play, you shouldn't be held back by not understanding the fundamentals of learning. If you have

limited time to practice, you need to make that practice pay off and deliver results that people can hear when you play.

It's not a matter of just "keep doing the same thing but more hours". If you practice wrong, you are wasting hours. The goal of this book is to also minimize waste.

Getting good always requires a lot of practice. But if you can get to where you want to be in 10,000 hours, why settle for learning the same stuff in 50,000 hours? If you can learn how to perfect something in 30 minutes, don't go repeating the same thing, that barely works, for 10 hours. It's simple math.

Make the most of the hours you practice.

# Warming Up

When talking about playing guitar, warming up has little to do with anything being warm. Playing guitar, when done right, isn't supposed to require much strength or stress you out. In something a bit more physical, getting muscles warm can prevent soft tissue injuries. But with guitar, when would you ever use them? Maybe if your guitar is solid steel, you use a set of .018-gauge strings, and you pick is a cinder block.

Warming up (with an instrument) means reminding your brain how to do different motions as relaxedly as possible. Otherwise, you might very realistically injure yourself.

Think about picking up your guitar the first time for the day. You might notice that you're not as comfortable with all the chords and passages as after an hour of play. It takes some time for your body to get used to handling the guitar again. Especially at first, your muscles will try to compensate by tensing up. Our brain interprets things like "*playing something wrong*" as a threat. You get tense and it shows in your playing.

In less demanding music, being tense isn't the end of the world, although it is still very much perceivable. This is also the reason why many beginners get lead to the wrong path. What they play sounds right so they conclude that this is the way to play. But no. Not only does this practice prevent you from playing anything more advanced, it can also be dangerous. If you tense up your muscles and try to move them around really fast for extended periods of time, you're lucky if you don't hurt yourself. It won't sound pretty, either.

The point of warming up is to remind your muscles how to do various things while keeping them relaxed. The best warm-ups go through a vast variety of different fingerings, positions, and movements. Anything you might want to play. They are done slow to ensure that

the muscles are very relaxed and that the moves are still performed as accurately as possible.

Unlike in music arrangement, tension is the enemy. Unfortunately, not many people know how to play without it. Tensing up ensures that you hit the right notes, and for the most part, you do. The downside? It makes your wrists hurt and you haven't quite figured out how to do things really fast while being tense. Here's the scoop...

You can't.

Doing warm-ups correctly is the first step in getting better. And *the* key is to banish all tension from your muscles. There are a lot of great warm-up regimens out there. Pick one that you like. Just keep the key in your mind every second of it.

If you don't know what relaxed feels like, try this. Hang your arm by your side. Just let it hang, straight down. If you were holding a pick, it would drop at this point. Take a deep, slow breath. You can even hang your head. Go absolutely limp. This is relaxed. Focus mentally on your arms. They shouldn't feel much more tense while you are playing. Just apply the minimum amount that you require to hold your plectrum. You don't hit notes by tensing up anymore.

# Strength

Playing guitar with proper technique doesn't require much hand strength. However, compared to instruments such as piano and flute, it can be fairly strength-intensive in a couple of areas. Namely chords and legato.

The mistake here isn't so much that guitarists don't develop the muscles to play guitar efficiently. In fact, it can happen quite naturally. It's more that many seem to compensate poor technique with rigorous strength exercises.

It is good to be conscious of what techniques require strength and polish up the technique in the rest. That way you don't spend hours on training muscles that you don't really need to use.

Most of the physical work on guitar can be eased simply by using the correct technique i.e. positioning the hand in a way that you can apply pressure in the most efficient way possible and in a spot where they require the minimum amount of contact with the frets to produce a clear sound. By clear I mean not muffled, muted, or buzzing.

Note: We are making a big assumption here that the guitar is built and set up in a way that allows for a buzzless experience. If you notice buzz that disappears on another guitar, chances are you might have to adjust the relief, action, frets, or all of the above.

## Chords

Chords are the most fundamental part of playing guitar and they can be a bit intensive. Once you advance past the point of using open chords, the struggle begins. Some of the more exotic fingerings can be tricky, because you're expected to apply pressure to the strings while you are stretching your fingers to different directions. But the

real challenge are the barre chords (or bar chords) where you use your index finger as a temporary capo.

Barre chords can prove to be a challenge even for advanced players, especially with an acoustic western type steel-string guitar (cheap models typically also increase the difficulty).

If there's only one thing you can practice, practice chords. It's the most universally and uniformly useful practice you'll ever get. With barre chords you just need strength, plain and simple. You gotta practice them until your hand is exhausted and then do it again after a brief break. This ensures that you can throw these monsters out there with ease no matter the circumstances.

Tip: Proper technique helps here, too, and one thing I've noticed not many beginners figure out is that you don't have to lay down your index finger so that the finger tip is perfectly on the 6th string. Poke it off the neck a little bit. The finger isn't perfectly flat, so it makes sense trying to find a position where the tough parts align perfectly with the underlying strings. This way, you'll more easily get a pure tone out of your efforts.

Remember, if your hand starts to hurt (besides the skin at your fingertips) you need a break. Playing isn't meant to hurt and that means that practicing isn't meant to hurt, either. There's a difference to pushing your muscles to the point of exhaustion and being in pain. Know the difference and be smart about it.

## Legato

Legato on guitar is a wonderful technique, but beginners typically have difficulties in performing vast amounts of it with clarity of tone. Again, this is mostly the result of improper technique, but there is also an element of strength that is missing.

Strictly speaking, legato (Italian for "tied together") means playing so that there are no pauses between notes. When you pluck a string with e.g. a plectrum, it constitutes as a small pause.

When a talk about legato, I am mostly talking about hammer-ons and pull-offs. However, there are other ways to play legato, such as slides and tapping.

Legato can be simpler to play compared to normal picked notes because you don't have to coordinate your two hands together. It is noteworthy, that it results in a smoother, more fluid sound. You wouldn't be able to get that picked sound with legato.

The reason legato requires strength, is because in order to descend to a lower tone, you're required to pluck the string by pulling it with the finger that is currently on. On single note this is rarely an issue. However, trills and other types of longer passages can prove to be very challenging if you don't have the stamina for it. Every motion requires just a little bit of strength, but it adds up.

Additionally, you might have to use different fingers, so each of them must be strengthened individually. There are 1001 exercises for this stuff out there so I'm not going to bore you with my own variations, but just be prepared for some really repetitive work.

# Posture

I'm a big fan of proper posture. I have collectible *posture* cards and *posture* posters littering my bedroom walls. I even eat *posture* morning cereal. That being said, I rarely have a good posture while I'm playing. I just know my life would be better if I did.

I've worked on my posture over the years out of necessity and there are certain compromises I only rarely ever do. As a result, my back and shoulders aren't in constant pain anymore, which is a huge bonus. But if you find me playing the guitar while I'm lying on the couch with my head hanging over the edge, you know it's just because of the inevitable angst of my everyday life.

## Strap

One thing that I ignorantly fought against forever and ever (because I had decided that it was a complete waste of time), is the use of strap. Now I use it even when I'm sitting.

The strap will always keep the guitar at the right height and lets the muscles be relaxed. It can be very straining constantly trying to hold on to the instrument lest it fell to the floor. With the strap you can just let it all hang while you read the newspaper or something.

The use of strap has been the single biggest improvement eliminating pain in my life. Now, if I have to pick up the guitar to record one chord, I throw the strap over my head. No compromises.

## Guitar Position

Some beginner guitarists try to keep the neck of the guitar completely perpendicular to where they're facing, when the easy way to play is to push the head of the neck forward. If I have trouble forming some chord on the fingerboard, I just rotate the guitar so

that I'm holding it like a machine gun. If it means that the guitar is pointing to the same way I'm facing, so be it. Give your fretting hand some room.

If that's not enough, try moving the guitar on the other leg, bringing it closer to the classical position. This gives you better reach to the higher frets (especially if you have some extra pounds around your waist like me).

A couple of caveats on the classical position

- 1) This is not absolutely necessary to be able to play anything. It's just a trick you can do if you want some room quickly.
- 2) Also, since we're talking about posture, I wouldn't recommend the classical position for long periods of time without a foot rest, because it will put some pressure on your back and shoulder. Just keep that in mind.

# Scheduling

*"Repetition is the mother of all learning."*

Scheduling, can be crucial when dealing with a busy lifestyle. I had heard the above repetition phrase hundreds of times while I was in elementary school. I thought it was just one of those die-hard phrases old people are expected to use. But some die-hard phrases hold the truth in them.

Often, I would ask my students if they had practiced during the previous week at home. And often the answer would be something like... *"Oh, I sure did! I practiced a whole hour last Thursday."* Which is fine and all, but if you're trying to learn something, it's not exactly the most efficient way.

I would argue, that practicing ten minutes every day of the week is better than practicing 70 minutes just once. Why? *Repetition is the mother of all learning.*

This is how I imagine most aspiring guitarists would understand that phrase: While you're sitting on the couch watching TV, pick up your guitar and keep repeating the same thing over and over and eventually you'll learn it. And while that can happen, it's a huge waste of time and in the worst-case scenario can teach you some bad habits that can take some real digging to get rid of later on.

Your brain is a lot like a network of roads of different sizes. When you travel to some new place, you might form a weak trail. The more you use the trail, the more defined it gets, until one day, there's a fully realized freeway. But there's the trick. You need to use the path for it to get reinforced.

If you really want to learn something that is like the second nature to you, you gotta learn it well every day for a week. Perfect it the first day, then perfect it again the second day, and so on. You won't get anywhere if you don't stick with it.

Repetition is the mother of all learning.

## Preparing a Schedule

And that is where scheduling comes in. If I just tell myself that "Great! I learned this guitar phrase today, I'm going to do it every day for a week", it's never going to happen.

Maybe I'll do it the next day but that's it. You absolutely need to schedule your free time to be able to pull this magic trick off.

- 1) Take a piece of paper.
- 2) Take a pen.
- 3) Write down something like: "Mon, Tue, Wed..." etc.
- 4) Mark next to each day a specific time when you're going to practice whatever you want to practice. If you have ten minutes after you've eaten dinner and before Miami Vice or whatever comes on, then write down "5:48 P.M."
- 5) If you didn't do any of that... I'm not kidding, go and do it now!
- 6) Tell everyone that needs to know about it and stick to your schedule. Stick it on the wall next to the guitar if it helps.

This will ensure that you get enough repetition. Ten minutes a day might not make you the next Jimi Hendrix, but at least you are learning something that you actually can use. Perfect the same piece of music every day for a week and you can pull it off whenever you need to.

## Select a Goal

Finally, before you practise, ask yourself, what do you want to achieve. If you don't know what you want the outcome of your practice to be, you'll never find out if you've achieved it or not.

Make your goal something simple, such as...

*"I want to play a C minor barre chord five times in a row without making a mistake."*

or...

*"I want to play the next two bars of this piece of music fluently at 90 bpm."*

# The Method

This part of the book describes my way of practice. It is the only way I have ever been able to truly learn anything on guitar. Unfortunately, not many guitarists I have talked to ever mention these things. If you go searching for articles or videos on how to play the technical stuff on guitar, you'll be left with a bunch of exercises you're supposed to keep repeating, but not much else.

Perhaps these things come naturally to others, but if you're at all like me, these are the furthest things of natural operation to you.

My way of practice includes three equally crucial elements...

- 1) Relaxation
- 2) Visualization
- 3) Focus

If any one of them is ignored, the progress will greatly slow down.

Here's an introduction to the concepts before we take a closer look on each of them.

*Relaxation* is a relative concept. It's not either on or off. I equate skill to how relaxed you are able to play. In other words, the less energy your muscles need to use in order to perform any given movement, the more skillful you are in that movement. I'm not talking about relaxed as in not giving a crap, smoking a joint on the sofa. I'm talking about giving two extra craps, very deliberately making sure that the muscles in your hands and arms are as loose as possible. Some of the things you're expected to play might require a bit of inventiveness, but that's not entirely a bad thing.

*Visualization* is the most impressive, very concrete technique I've probably ever used. Yet, nobody seems to utilize it. It is insane. We all know the basic gist of it, but it sounds kinda crazy, so why even bother trying it, right? Isn't it something like you imagine a perfect performance and then by some magic you can pull it off? No. The

magic part is complete nonsense. What you do with the imagined situation is that you study it. Yes, in your mind. If you can imagine a perfect way to do something, you can mimic it. And the most accurate way to mimic something is to focus on how doing it feels. I'm not talking about emotions. I'm talking about physical sensations. If you close your eyes and curl your finger, you can sense how it feels, because the different parts of the finger are sending impulses to the brain telling it how the movement feels. The trick with visualization is imagining how a perfect performance feels. And then doing it yourself.

Finally, *focus*. If you can believe it, visualization and perfect relaxation of muscles require a metric ton of focus. I can't even focus like that for extended periods of time. It's exhausting. So, I take breaks. But there is another enemy to focus: your rambling thoughts. And most importantly, your self-doubting thoughts. You start with an expectation to fail, recall all the times when you didn't make it, and then go on doing things exactly the way you always did. Because you're not focusing. Your focus is in your thoughts. What do you do? You let go. You let go of any outcomes, goals, and aspirations. Interestingly, you don't manifest the world around you with your thoughts. So, it doesn't matter if you don't hold in your head the want to master some little solo. You can still achieve it. So, again, you let go of the end result. If you succeed, fine. If you fail, fine. That's not why you are practicing. You practice because you just enjoy doing what you do. And now you're not concentrating on these completely inconsequential thoughts but rather focusing on every movement of your hand. Is it relaxed? How does it feel? There's a sense of clarity.

# Relaxation

As a guitar instructor, I met a wide spectrum of people wanting to learn the craft. For whatever reason, many of them were teenage boys wanting to play those fast Metallica solos. And that's great! You hear something that really amps you up and you want to do it yourself. I salute you.

However, playing fast isn't just a matter of doing whatever you're already doing but faster. There is a technique to it. And it can be tough to figure out by yourself.

A logical mind tries to follow the path *"I got here by doing this so how do I get further from where I already am?"*

You don't.

[image of a guy in metallica shirt being really confused next to a dead end sign]

Think back to when you started to play guitar. Learning to play a new instrument isn't a relaxed experience. You want results, so you force your way there. *"No matter what it takes, I'm going to play these 8 notes in sequence!"* And so finally you learn the intro to Paranoid. But have you really learned it?

Sure, you play it another 500 times during the next ten years and you get a bit more relaxed about it because of all the other things you've learned to do. But is your playing even then *effortless*?

Playing fast isn't the be-all-end-all of music but it is regarded as a pretty decent standard of skill. A better standard of skill is *effortlessness*. It comes from devoting your time to the practice of looseness and relaxed motion. Interestingly, it also leads straight to playing speed. The more effortless your motion, the faster you can perform it.

Going fast is hard. It's not like anything you've done before. It's a new way of approaching your playing.

Consider walking. Basic stuff, right? One foot steps up, moves forward, comes down, then the other foot steps up, and so on.

You can probably walk pretty fast, but there's a limit to it. If you try to walk super-fast, your muscles start to tense up and eventually you have to give up. Hopefully not because you injured yourself. You can repeat this exercise any number of times and you might even get a bit better at it. But at the end of the day, you're still there wondering how those other guys can move so fast on their feet.

Those other guys are doing this thing called running. A different technique for maniacs, who refuse to wait for one foot to come down before they lift the other one. Hurrying to their graves. Playing fast is very similar to this analogue.

You have to compromise: give up *control* for *ease of movement*.

Have you ever played air-guitar? Try it out now. Put on one of those songs with that really awesome guitar solo that you would like to be able to play. Then jam over it with just your hands. Really get into it, like you've played this one for 200 times already. You're just showing the audience what's what.

This is how playing guitar should feel.

Not air-guitar. Real guitar.

If you're ever in doubt, you can double-check your relaxation level by switching to air-guitar for a moment.

By *feel* and *relaxation* I'm not talking about emotions. I'm talking about your muscles. How relaxed or tense are your muscles? What kind of impulses do they send to your brain as you move them?

With real guitar, the tension comes from trying to hit the right strings and the right frets all at the right times. But with air-guitar, there's no guitar! The trying is taken out of the equation, which means that your

muscles are completely relaxed. You're not aiming for a specific fret, so you can just let your fingers fly. The lack of tension allows them to move incredibly quickly.

You might be thinking: *"That's all fine and good, but I can't play anything with my guitar like that."*

Yes. You're probably right.

*"Then, how can I make everything I've ever learned to play to be more relaxed?"*

This might sting a bit, but you can't. If you can't already play without tensing up, then in my opinion, you can't play the guitar. In my opinion you are playing wrong. And what comes to playing wrong...

Have you ever heard about this idea of never telling the kids that they did something wrong? For example, if your answer to  $2+2$  is 5, it's not wrong, it's just... different right.

How we got in to this mess is that instead of treating the cause of the problem, we're treating the symptoms. Somebody figured out that kids got really upset when they answered something wrong. In their heads, the best solution was to simply have no wrong answers. Ironically, that is the wrong answer.

Why are the kids upset? Being wrong is natural. It's the first step in learning. The problem is that they get praised based on how much they get right and shamed if they weren't good enough. It's hard not to get upset, when your self-worth is on the line.

But getting through to the person, that their result was wrong, is ab-so-lute-ly crucial. There's nothing to be ashamed of. It is the first step in learning. That's the point when you abandon your old idea and start searching for the right answer. This shift in thinking is valuable. And with that in mind...

## Allow Yourself to Suck

You need to realize a new way of playing. That means starting from the beginning. Understand, that you never learned how to play. You've just been *"faking it 'til you make it"*. But the *"making it"* part is never coming. You're trying to run by walking really fast.

Go slow.

It's going to be difficult because you're already such a veteran with the guitar. But I assume you wouldn't be reading this if you were exactly where you wanted to be with your technique. I invite you to explore the possibility that perhaps you *don't* know better. Perhaps the right course of action is to listen and go slow. In fact, imagine that this is the first day you ever touched your guitar and are eagerly beginning your journey.

The good news is that the progress is going to be a lot faster than... in your previous first time. You are only starting from zero with your technique. All those chord progressions and fingerings, song notations and solos, ideas of expression and impression are still in your head. And that's not a small data dump.

And even if you start from zero, when you practice correctly, the results are going to come a lot faster.

What you have to embrace is the fact that, right at this moment, you suck with the guitar. It's like that scene in the Matrix, where Neo goes: *"Why do my eyes hurt?"* and Morpheus replies: *"You've never used them before."*

Of course you suck with the guitar. You've never really played it before.

So, when you start to stumble your way through basic chords, just allow yourself to suck. It takes time to build muscle memory. That trail you are travelling is yet weak. You require repetition to become strong and abandon the old trails.

## Relaxed Chords / A Game of Basketball

This is how I suggest you practice your chords. It doesn't matter which chord specifically. The technique for playing all of them is the same. First check that you can take the chord properly in the current position by placing the fingers on their places on the fretboard.

[picture with fingers straight]

[picture with fingers snapped on]

- 1) Straighten all four fret hand fingers.
- 2) Snap them down as fast as you can.
- 3) (optional) Strum the appropriate strings exactly when the fingers hit the strings.
- 4) Examine.
- 5) Repeat.

By straightening your fingers, you get enough space between the strings and the fingertips to make this exercise useful. You need to be able to throw the fingers in their correct places. When you start to pause before the strings and move your fingers around, you're missing the point. All of that adds tension to the technique. You're not trying to learn that. You're trying to learn an effortless way of executing these chords.

It's like playing basketball.

- 1) You aim
- 2) You judge the requirements based on previous experience
- 3) You uncoil your body
- 4) And with a pushing motion shoot the ball towards the basket

After this point it's out of your hands... so to speak. You've done all you could. The ball either goes in the basket or it doesn't. But there's no way for you to go hold it for a moment, correct the course a bit, and then let it continue to the basket. (Hey, maybe there will be in the future?)

Of course, you could just hold the ball, run to the basket, and with the help of some sort of ladder, drop it in. It would be against the rules, but try to focus on the physical act. The fact of the matter is that throwing the ball is a lot faster and requires a lot less work than carrying it.

With a guitar chord, you straighten your fingers, you make your assessments, and you throw. When the fingers start to curl, it's out of your hands.

They may land on the right spots, they might not. That's the risk you have to take. That is the compromise to achieve real effortlessness. You have to sacrifice control. You make your judgment when you throw the fingers, not when they're about to land.

This is real skill.

The idea is to steer away from the habit where you would position the fingers right on top of the strings and then simply press them down. That is a really strained and slow way to do it. Stop playing it so safe. When you learn to "throw the chords", you can pretty much do it from anywhere. Somehow it just works that way.

You are going to get this wrong a lot. And that is fine. Be patient. Trust the process and relax your hands. You are teaching your brain to do something completely new.

If you get the chord perfectly after a couple of tries, *you're doing it wrong*. You're performing the movement too slowly or are stopping before the strings. The motion itself is supposed to be as fast as snapping your fingers. You absolutely have to get it right with the initial throw in order to get the right result.

Concentrate on how you want the throw to feel physically in your muscles. In my experience, that is the fastest way to get it right.

Here's how I would expect things to go in the very best-case-scenario, because this is what happens to me every time I practice something new. Even today.

You start to practice the open *E minor* chord. You throw the fingers on the fretboard, and none of them are in the right place. For some reason all the four fingers are on the fretboard. *For some reason* your index finger is on the *G string*. Why is this? It's because you have no idea what the motion is supposed to be like. It was a test throw to reveal what sort of corrections you should make with your throw.

This brings us to step number 4 in the practice cycle, "*Examine*". I told you this would take a lot of focus.

This is a step many guitarists seem to skip entirely. Even with this method, you will be completely lost if you don't do this. Many times, I would tell one of my pupils to practice a chord he had difficulties with, and he would just start ramming the fingers on and off the strings once per second.

Don't do that.

Go slow. If you do a ton of wrong repetition, then you are still strengthening the pathways in your brain. However, I don't think you want "*playing the chord wrong*" to be your go-to freeway. Strive for perfection. Don't do the motion, unless in your head you are certain that you want to do it exactly this way.

I'm exaggerating a little bit, because a little amount of wrong repetition is, naturally, not that dangerous. The key is focus. There's nothing wrong with going slow. I can sometimes take a full minute just sitting there, thinking how I'm going to execute the throw. This will still be a faster way to results than the more popular machine-gun-repetition-cycle.

When you finally do get it right, you need repetition to solidify the motion in your brain. You're in the right neighborhood, but you'll still get it wrong a few times. The motion is very specific. You have to hone your understanding of what you can and cannot do with it. If you didn't catch that, this isn't the time to switch to the once-a-second mode. It's the time to focus even more. You know how the throw felt in your hand, you have it in your mind. So, do it again.

[picture of wrong parts of technique]

[picture of corrected parts of technique]

When you do make an error, it doesn't mean that you were going the wrong way. It means that your brain has a basic understanding of what the chord *sort of* feels like. It doesn't know how far this way or that way you can throw your hand. You have to find those boundaries. Does this area belong in the movement or not? Now you know the move even more specifically. Before you execute it, you make sure that it doesn't feel like that one part of the throw that made it go wrong.

Once you get the chord right ten times in a row, it's very solid. Time to do it again tomorrow. Just don't rush it. Go slow. You have to pretty much learn the thing all over again the next day. And the day after that. Do it every day in a row for a week and you have conquered the chord. If you skip corners, you'll know what to expect.

Remember, when you observe how your fingers land on the fretboard, you are then required to do alterations to your throw based on those observations. Many of these alterations are quite straight forward, such as "*move the hand up and forward*", "*move the finger a bit closer*", etc. However, there are some less intuitive, yet quite typical situations, where I found a very specific approach was helpful.

Let's take something like the open *G major* chord. This variation requires that your middle finger is on the 6th string, while the ring finger is on the first string.

[picture of the G major chord]

If for an example, your throw lands all your fingers on the lower strings, you can't simply try to move the ring finger downwards with the next throw. That rationale will move the rest of the fingers with it. What you need to do is curl the ring finger more while keeping the middle finger straight. This will automatically land them closer to their correct locations.

How about a basic index-ring-pinky power chord? You might find out that the ring finger drops too low on the fretboard, maybe even in the diminished 5th position. You need to get it higher, closer to the pinky, but if you just try moving it with the next throw, the index finger moves with it. Here, you need to stretch both the ring finger and the index finger away from each other. Not in any particular direction, just a longer gap. It's things like this you need to figure out when you must keep your hand completely relaxed.

## Relaxed Note Sequences / Improvisation

Have you ever watched a live performance by your guitar hero and wondered how that solo looks just like second nature to her? The answer to this mystery is that it's the only way to play it. You have to be completely relaxed. You have to have every note coming from muscle memory. Even if it's an improvised performance, he's doing it like a rap. You can't rap without knowing the language. If you just go: "xllrfffmff hkrnn kfoo faa brrrrrr..." you're going to get booted off the stage.

With guitar, you also have to develop a vocabulary of sorts. When you improvise, the words and phrases come from muscle memory i.e. how the brain recalls the movement of the muscles should feel. Similarly to a vocabulary, the more words you learn, the easier it gets to pronounce the new ones. You're relating everything you learned previously to the new stuff.

Let's take something simple, like a basic A-B-C on the *D string* (that's frets 7-9-10). Just hit the frets in sequence (without plectrum for starter). If you're anything like every beginner I've ever met, you'll move each finger individually to press down the string. This is fine for a few notes, but your poor, tiny finger muscles get tired very easily. So, if you want to play longer passages, they tap out after a few seconds. You could train the individual finger muscles (in fact, there are some crazily inventive products for exactly this purpose), but it's still a lot of wasted energy. Additionally, moving individual fingers in

long sequences is a management nightmare. They get mixed up so easily.

Producing linear sequences like A-B-C with your fingers is quite simple. Of course, there are other types of sequences that could prove to be more difficult even with the right technique, but let's start from the beginning. What I want you to do is to learn to execute these three notes with one motion, instead of three. The finger muscles are excellent for micro control and slight adjustments, but I suggest you start using the bigger muscles for the big moves. Specifically, the wrist and the forearm.

Try throwing the fingers on the fretboard like you're picking a chord on one string. They line up very nicely. If you want to have them come down sequentially, you can just rotate your forearm. First rotate it 90 degrees counter-clockwise (for the right-handed people) and then slap the fingers on the fretboard in a revolving motion. One move, three notes. And no tension to speak of. Don't press the string down with your finger muscles, use the whole hand. And go slow.

When I say "go slow", I don't mean that keep the motion slow. The motion needs to be snappy. Snap your fingers. Or if you're too cool for that, just imagine it. That's how these three notes are played. The slow part is anything in-between every motion. See where your fingers landed. Don't be in a hurry to lift them up. Analyze. Then make a plan and try again. This is how you progress. Don't worry about playing things wrong. You need that. There's a limited number of wrong steps you need to make in order to get to the right one. Each one of them must be taken carefully, but each one of them must be taken. You're on the stairway. Don't stop just because this step looks uncannily similar to the previous one.

### Slow Motion

Once you have solidified the idea of doing singular, continuous movements, you can slow them down, if you wish. There's a very important distinction here that I need to make. Slowing down doesn't mean that just hold your hand in place or fiddle with your fingers as

you perform the motion. It still needs to be one continuous motion from start to finish. You can just do it in slow motion. And this can be very difficult to grasp. Slow motion isn't the same as playing slow. Slow motion means taking the fast motion and slowing it down, no matter what the motion happens to be like. If you've ever seen a sports broadcast of some description, you know what I'm talking about. A tense situation on the ice ends in the hockey player scoring a goal. After that the motion is displayed on the TV screen in slow motion. If the player was told to shoot a goal slowly, I doubt he would move the same way as in the instant replay. And that's the difference. You have to move the same way as in the replay. Like somebody recorded a video of you playing your lick fast and then showed it to you in slow motion.

What makes this difficult is that you still have to keep your hands as relaxed as possible. You're not imitating the way the movement looks but the way you apply energy. Let's take a simple example. You try to pick one of your strings as fast as possible. Where do you apply energy? When you start to move the pick up and when you start to move the pick down. Interestingly, very different movements. It's like controlling something at the end of a long, droopy fishing pole. The downward motion is handled partly by gravity, but you still use energy to shove it down like a shovel into the dirt. The upward motion on the other hand is a weird jerk where the pick follows the movement like on a delay. Anyway, you then start to apply these energies to your hand in slow motion. The difference to a perfect slow motion representation is that in order to really make your hand look like it's moving in slow motion is to tense it up and imitate the trajectory 100%. But that is counter-productive. Relaxation is what you want. So, just apply the upwards energy and the hand will pop upwards slightly faster than it would in an instant replay. You can still keep the overall motion quite sluggish, but it has to be tension free.

If you try the one string example above, you might discover that your picking technique changes when you switch from fast motion to slow motion. This is quite natural, because slower motion allows for more articulation i.e. better control for the force application. When you pick

the string fast, your pick might be completely perpendicular to the string the whole time. But when you switch to the slower motion, you start to rotate the pick, to make the motion a bit more wavelike. This is something you have to avoid in slow motion, because you're essentially practicing two different techniques. You have to keep the motion as close to the original as possible. This is true no matter what you're trying to practice.

### Picking Technique

Since we haven't talked too much about picking until now, let's dive in a little bit (i.e. not a full dive, just slightly). I don't know if guitarists argue about whether you should pick with your wrist or your forearm. I don't hang too much in those circles. I somehow very hazily recall there being some discussion about something like one technique leads to pain and destruction and the other is the correct one. I can't imagine there being much of a difference when your whole extremity is relaxed. Perhaps, with some technique, people can't help but getting tense. What I'm saying is that keep your muscles relaxed. If you find out that playing something is simply impossible, change your technique. But keep your muscles relaxed. There's always a way. Below are some of my preferences.

I seem to always pick mostly with my forearm. Anything above the wrist is just meat hanging on for dear life. It's like a flag. If you're holding a hand flag and you want the flag (your hand) to go down, you move the stick (forearm) down and the flag follows. And if you want the flag to go up, you move the stick up. But it's not controlled directly. You don't move the flag, you move the stick. The wrist allows for some nifty micro control while the forearm movement keeps the whole motion relaxed. Moving the hand with just the wrist feels somehow really restricted (or wristrestricted) to me. By moving the forearm, you can quite easily jump from any string to another and back again. Granted, the larger muscles aren't as easy to fine control as the smaller ones, but we'll figure it out later.

If you want to see how I move my arm, uh, here's a video I made in 2014 because someone in FAWM was requesting solos for their students.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31YUzmsMmO8>

If it seems like I'm doing most of the motion with my wrist, that's not entirely correct. I'm keeping my wrist loose, which causes it to pop up and down as I move my forearm. The forearm movement is quite clearly visible throughout the thing. However, with the upward motions it helps to get the wrist involved a little bit because of the gravity. Overall, I'd say it's a combined effort, but the addition of wrist to the motion happens pretty much automatically. If I use my practice time sticking to the forearm, then I can get to the relaxed results more easily.

Picking Technique cont.

Palm muting is one of those techniques so tightly adopted by rock/metal guitarists that you barely even notice it's not really their child (it's the jaw). Anyway, if you intend to learn one of those intense palm muting songs like Master of Puppets or something, then yes, you're going to have to build up some stamina, and yes, you need the correct technique. I mentioned in a different context earlier, that there's a difference between exhaustion and pain. Similarly, there's a difference between playing tensely and your arm getting tense because of the build-up over time. Even if you lift 1.0 lbs. weights, you're going to get tired eventually. But the less work you do with the motion, the less exhausted the muscles are going to get.

I mentioned Master of Puppets specifically, because it's a pretty intense song in the rhythm department. You're required to down stroke every single power chord to get that badass "chok! chok! chok!" sound. I'm not a huge Metallica guy, but that song takes a marathon player. When you're required to hold the palm of your hand in one spot, the technique must change a bit. Here's what I do. I rotate my forearm around its axis to do the down stroke. If you're having a hard time to imagine the rotation, try this:

Hold your hand level in front of you so that the palm is pointing downwards. Then, rotate it 90 degrees so that it's in the "handshake" position. Then rotate it back again. Now, pick up your pick and do the same thing again while holding it. This is how I do the strokes while palm-muting. You can get it pretty tension-free if you do it right. Minimize the amount of work and you minimize the stamina requirements.

Just picking one string, even really fast, is quite simple. Most everyone gets into trouble, when trying to move quickly from one string to another e.g. when ascending a scale. We can get more into this later, but one thing I found interesting, was sometimes when you're playing between two strings, it's beneficial trying to think that you're picking the space in-between the strings instead of the strings themselves. Let's have an example. Something that guitarists try to shy away from. Picking back and forth between D and G strings. But hold on, I didn't tell the good part yet. You have to pick the D string upwards and the G string downwards. For some reason this feels really unnatural. When you inverse the picking motions, it makes a lot more sense. There's more space for maneuvers and you're like patting the strings on the head. But when you're in-between the strings, it's just a disaster waiting to happen.

Not so fast. This is what I was talking about just a moment ago. When you're in-between strings, mentally concentrate on picking the empty space. Imagine that the empty space between the strings is an invisible string and you have to pick that one. For some reason, when you concentrate on the individual real strings, your brain goes into exaggeration mode and the movement falls apart. But when you concentrate on the empty space, things just start to fall in place a lot faster. This way has an additional benefit, if you enjoy fast licks. The pick has to physically move a shorter distance, so if you want to play it faster, you can. A trip from New York to Paris takes longer than a trip from New York to Philadelphia.

I think next time we're going to switch it up to my favorite topic, visualization. Possibly more about this subject later if I happen to think of something I missed.

### More About Relaxation

Grasping the idea of completely relaxed playing is a tough prospect. I can understand guitarists thinking that they are playing everything as relaxed as possible already. However, the technique is very different from how most of us learn to do with guitar. You think that your fingers are relaxed, but are they?

Think of something like a watercolor brush. Have you ever just pressed one straight down to a paper? Imagine that now. You start to lower the brush and as the individual strands of hair come to contact with the paper, they just spread all around. They are so supple and loose that they simply cannot stick straight. Now do the same thing with your hand. Hold your arm up and let the hand and fingers just hang loosely. Then lower them against a table and let the fingers spread wherever they happen to go. Now they are relaxed. This is how they should feel when you play your guitar. Naturally, you need a little bit of tension to keep the strings down, but it's way less than you'd first imagine. Start with completely relaxed and see how far you can get without any tension. If you can land the fingers on their correct places, you can then adjust the amount of pressure the chord or whatever requires.

# Visualization

Visualization is my favorite of the tools required for the complete method because it seems to make the most difference. Relaxation is a prerequisite. You can't do anything properly without it. But, it doesn't really make you learn anything faster, either. You just have to have it. Visualization on the other is like downloading information into your brain (maybe I'll skip the Matrix analogy this time). When I started to use visualization, it amazed me. I know this sounds like a lot of hype, but I'm really only describing my experiences, like promised. Could be that it comes to me very easily because I'm a very visually oriented person. But I've seen it work on others, too. You can't know unless you try.

You can pretty much conjure up anything you want with your imagination... inside your thoughts. But that's good enough! Think about that super cool solo that one guitarist plays. Can you imagine it? Can you slow it down? Can you slow it down a lot... like a slow-motion replay? Can you zoom in to the fretboard hand? Can you really focus on how the fingers are moving? You might realize, that you don't really remember how the guitarist played the thing, but you're still getting a clear image. Funny thing is, it doesn't matter. Your brain (again with the pseudo brain science) gathers up all your experiences and fills in the blanks to the best of its ability. That's one of the things brains are best at. Making connections and filling in the blanks. It doesn't always get things right, but still, it's deceptively good at it.

What's left for you to do then? Your job is to examine the image in your thoughts. Slow it down as much as you have to. Time and speed don't matter. What matters is how the movement feels in your muscles. See that guitarist playing that solo in your mind and imagine what those moves must feel like. Does he play it tensely or loosely? Is he relaxed? What are the finger trajectories like? How does the hand

turn? How much does he move the individual fingers? How is he able to pull this movement off? He's not super human.

Physically, you can play anything that any other guitarist has ever played, right now. Unless the movement somehow requires an insane amount of strength that you don't yet possess. But usually they don't. Playing fast doesn't typically require strength. It just requires coordination. Look at any guitarist playing a really fast progression. They don't look tensed up. They don't look like they're pressing really hard or using a lot of strength. They just let their fingers fly. It's the only way to do it. If you can perform the thing in air-guitar-mode, you can do it on your guitar.

You don't have to look at live videos of these people playing. That's what the idea with visualization is. You can just imagine it. And it will more than likely be right. Your brain knows how your body is able to move. You've been doing it for quite a while. When it comes to fine-tuning movement, you might have to adjust a few things your brain is telling you. But when it comes down to figuring out if some sort of movement is possible, your brain can make a plan for you in a second.

Then why haven't you succeeded yet? It's a sum of multiple things.

- 1) When you start to learn guitar, you concentrate on being able to reproduce singular movements. Later on you try to chain these individual movements together. When you try to do something fast, you need a different technique. You need to focus on the bigger picture, not on individual notes or individual moves.
- 2) You haven't tried doing things relaxed. You think you have to tense up to be able to produce individual notes. How would you then even be able to do longer runs ultra fast?
- 3) We tend to imagine things that have already been instead of things that could be. When you try to perform a fast lick, you concentrate on how you used to play and try to make it happen like

that. Instead, you should concentrate on imagining a new way. A way that is actually possible to execute.

### More About Strength

Playing fast requires coordination. If you tense up while doing fast licks, you don't have the coordination. You're forcing it to happen. But you don't get anywhere with that approach. What I often do, while learning complicated patterns etc. is that I learn them separately with both hands. When I concentrate that I can hit the right frets, I just skip the picking hand completely. Hammer-on everything. If you hit them right, you'll hear the notes, even on an unplugged electric guitar.

Hammer-ons don't require strength. They require speed. The faster you get the finger from up position to down position, the harder the impact is going to be, resulting in a louder sound. You don't need to press hard in order to get a loud sound. It really isn't about your muscle strength. Think about hitting a baseball. It really doesn't matter how much you tense up your huge muscles when you hit the ball. It might even make hitting it more difficult. Or think about swinging a real hammer. If you just place the hammer on the nail and press it with all your strength, you more than likely will not get anywhere. You need a fast and an accurate swing. That's where the real power is. If you lack the coordination, then you might hit your own finger. But with time and practice, you'll learn what kind of motion you need to make in order to hit the nail every time. Same with the guitar.

As an interesting side note (this doesn't really have anything to do with anything), when you hammer-on frets on an unplugged guitar, you're going to hear two different notes. This is because the impact results in the string vibrating. Usually, when you pick the string, that sound is going to be the loudest. But when you hit the string with just your fretboard hand, you're going to cause two equally loud vibrations. One on the body side of the hand and one on the headstock side of the hand. Usually, the headstock side of the string is going to make an off-tune sound that gets higher when you play

the lower frets and lower when you play the higher frets. It may get distracting. Just focus on the real tones.

So, as I practice the fretboard hand, I just hammer-on every note. If I have to descent on a string, I raise the upper finger and hammer-on the next. If you're accustomed to always do pull-offs with hammer-ons, don't do that. Keep it loose. Keep hammering.

Visualization cont.

Visualization is one of those things that really take time, but it's worth it. It's the most direct way I know of to teach your brain how to do something. You just have to do it right.

When you are familiar with this approach, you can just imagine yourself when you're trying to visualize some move. The danger there is that you start to think how you normally play the thing. You know what I mean? You visualize yourself playing the section very timidly, pressing hard, having this awful feeling in your stomach, and then at the end doing the whole thing wrong. There's a sense of frustration and annoyance to that. It's like your old self-image that has thrown on the viking cap and is heading for the invasion trip. It's a good idea to just visualize some great guitar player instead. Someone you know that can play this stuff with no sweat. Then you are concentrating on the ease of it all. When you play great things, it's supposed to feel easy. But it's also a bit of a crapshoot. Sometimes you get it right, sometimes you don't. Even some of the greats like Guthrie Govan sometimes play things wrong. And they're upfront about it. When you do things at that caliber, it's like 50% luck. All you can do is make sure the percentage isn't higher.

Now, you could develop a level of familiarity where you might be able to do some specific thing right every time. I don't think it would be a good use of your time, but whatever. It's theoretically possible. But the key word here is familiarity. You would have to do those things so much that it doesn't make much sense anymore. There are things in life that you can do without a fail, such as walking or running. But those things don't require precise coordination. You just need to

move one limb forward at a time. With a complex guitar passage, we're talking about relatively large muscles developing a very fine-tuned familiarity with really small movements. I would say it's maybe possible, but not really worth it. I would much rather spend my time learning new things, even if it means that I can't perform everything 100% correctly every time. How far you want to go is really up to you.

That's what defines you as a guitarist.

What is possible?

That is an interesting question. I don't think I should talk too much about what I think sounds good, because as we have witnessed in the era of YouTube, phenomenal guitar feats have their passionate audience. There are always going to be physical limits. The 100 metres world record is 9.58 seconds. Is there ever going to be a person whose muscles can work hard enough to get it below 9 seconds? 8 seconds? Who knows. But if there is a way something can be done, you can find it by visualizing it. Visualize yourself already doing the thing. And not with pain and agony. With ease. Let your brain tell you how it would do the movement. Don't hold on to your experiences. Just watch. Let your body tell you its experiences. Then examine the picture in your mind. What specifically happens in it. How does it feel? How are your muscles moving? If your limbs can humanly move that fast, then this is the way to do it. Go crazy.

Visualizing Relaxed Chords

Let's go through some of the techniques by visualizing them. You want to learn how to play some wonky chord effortlessly. You may close your eyes if you feel like it helps.

Picture your favorite guitar player playing the chord. She doesn't really have to know how to play it, you just need to believe that she could. The guitarist is waving her hand to the audience or something and then BAM, she just snaps it on the fretboard and it's the right chord just the right way. It doesn't look difficult. It doesn't look straining. It doesn't look like she's even giving it a second thought.

She just does it automatically. All the fingers fall in place as if she was just grabbing the neck with her hand. No need for wiggle, no need for adjustments, no buzzing, no muted strings -- just like a crocodile snapping its jaw and everything ringing out crystal clear.

How is that achieved? You can imagine it, right? It's totally doable. And it doesn't mean that it has to be really awkward at first and that you gradually build up the familiarity with it. Actually, it's quite the opposite. You have to start with being relaxed. If you try to do it any other way, you'll learn it wrong. You just have to concentrate on the feeling. Take as long as you have to with this. I can sometimes sit in place without playing anything for 60 seconds because I'm concentrating on that image. Funny thing is, it's still faster than trying to learn it by repeating the chord wrong over and over again.

When you've got a plan, throw the fingers on the fretboard. This is a test shot. You're seeing what happens. You won't get it right the first time. If you did, then you're not concentrating. You're tensing up the hand and forcing the outcome. This is not how you learn. You do the test shot to see what you got right and what you didn't get at all. Maybe none of the fingers are even remotely in the right place. Focus on the visualization again and compare it to your previous move. What things are different? What are you going to try next? This is all part of the process. This is it. If you want to learn, this is all you do. There is no next step. You have to concentrate on the picture, do a move, see what went wrong, and find a way to alter the move you did.

Why does it go wrong? Because every move with guitar is a very intricate process. You have to have so many muscles working in tandem in order to drop your fingers on really tiny pieces of real estate, that it is just impossible to get it all right the first time. But you concentrate on the feeling and keep all the muscles as loose as cold hot dogs. You need a little bit of pressure to keep the strings down, but don't get crazy. When you get a clear sound, that's enough.

Clear Sound

Speaking of clear sound, there's a clear best way to place fingers on the strings and this is what you should always strive for. Difficulty wise, it really doesn't make a difference, because you have to visualize the fingers on the guitar in some position anyway.

First of all, how is the sound on a guitar produced? This is fairly basic knowledge, but for the sake of thoroughness, let's go over it. When you pluck a string, it vibrates. The vibration causes changes in air pressure and our ears pick up those changes as sounds (microphones are designed to mimic this very behavior). Depending on the length of the piece of string that is vibrating, the tone of the sound alters. Longer vibrating piece of string produces a lower sound and shorter vibrating piece of string produces a higher sound. Guitar is (usually) a fretted instrument. That means that every note is very much locked into one place by the frets placed on the fingerboard. There is no ambiguity as to if you got the right tone or if it's a few cents off etc. Your finger presses the string against the metal fret and stops it from vibrating any lower to that point. You are essentially altering the vibrating string length on-the-fly by changing which fret you are pressing the string against.

What can cause buzzing or muffled sounds? If we rule out the design of the guitar and just assume that it's perfect, then the way you press your fingers on the fretboard plays a big part in the clarity of the sound. Remember, the idea is that you must press the string tightly against the metal fret. It's easy to assume that you're pressing the string against the wood, because that's where your finger is. But if you examine the string from a side view, you notice that it's actually in air under your finger.

In order to get the string as tightly against the fret as necessary, one easy fix is to just get the finger closer to the fret. This is simple physics. If you've got a pen, press it down against a table from one end and simultaneously try to lift the other end with the other hand. It's loose. This will cause buzzing. If you move the pressing hand to the other end of the pen and now try to lift it, it's not so easy.

Another thing to pay attention to is what part of the finger you use to press the string down. Fingers are not symmetrical or equal on each side. The bottom side of your finger (the one with the fingerprints) has a lot of soft meat on it. Using that part is like using one of those kids' squeaky hammers to drive in nails. The steely part is where the bone is -- the fingertips. When you use the very tips of your fingers, you don't have to use so much strength to press the strings down. It makes all the difference.

Visualizing Relaxed Chords cont.

Why can't you get the chord right the first time you visualize it? After all, you have visualized it and figured out how the move should feel, right? If you had, you would get it right. You did visualize it and that's a good starting point. But something went wrong. That means that you weren't considering everything when you were examining your visualization. Some part of the whole was missing. Which parts? This is what you have to figure out.

So, now that you have done the move once (and only once) sit back and focus on the image in your head again. Remember, the guitarist is playing the chord effortlessly. Imagine how the muscles feel when they do the move. What did you miss? You did your move differently. Your move as a whole feels different than that in the image. Don't concentrate on separate parts of the movement. You need to feel it as a whole. Come up with an alteration and try again.

I can't stress enough the importance of focusing on the move as a whole. Yes, your hand does a lot of tiny movements, but they all happen at the same time. If something little is wrong, the whole move feels completely different. Consider running. You don't think about running as you run. You just do it effortlessly. But if someone asked you to break running down to different phases, you'd maybe think something like lift one leg up, push with the other leg, straighten the other leg to compensate for the incoming impact, and so on. You can focus on each of these phases separately, but you can't run while thinking of them. Running is too fast for that stuff. You just have to do it. Same with chords. Just think through how the

whole hand feels as the guitarist in your head does the movement from start to finish. Then imitate that feeling. Make your own hand feel the same.

### More About Picking Technique And Visualization

The hardest part about picking technique is switching strings. The trick is rotating the plectrum so that it doesn't hit unwanted strings. Let's say you have to go back and forth between picking D string up and G string down. Here's how I go about it:

- 1) Pick the G string up by rotating the plectrum away from the guitar body.
- 2) When you're far enough, move the plectrum straight to the D string.
- 3) Pick the D string down by rotating the plectrum away from the guitar body.
- 4) When you're far enough, move the plectrum straight to the G string.

It is a sequence of rotations and straight moves. Like a hawk diving for its prey. It almost looks like a figure 8 loop. The idea is that after you pick the string, you have to rotate the pick up so that it doesn't get caught to the same string when you move to pick the next one. Keep rotating it until there's a clear, straight trajectory from the pick position to the next string. Then move the pick straight and pick the string by rotating the pick to the other direction.

If keep the string straight at all times, then it gets stuck into the string you're supposed to jump over. E.g. if you pick G string down and then move to pick the D string up, the plectrum is probably going to hit the G string again on its way up.

If you continuously rotate the plectrum, it leads to a similar problem. E.g. if you pick D string up by rotating the plectrum and then start to immediately rotate it down to the G string, the plectrum is probably going to hit the D string again on its way down.

You have to go rotate, straight, rotate, straight, and so on.

Visualizing this technique can make it a lot easier to grasp. If you have never done anything like this, it's going to feel unnatural at first. Don't get impatient. Imagine your favorite guitarist picking like this but doing it super fast. If you can't go straight to the image of him moving his hand like this, then just imagine how it would sound. If you can imagine the sound repeating at a fast tempo, then it's easier for the brain to imagine what it takes to get there. Concentrate on the picking hand.

Slow the image down. Speed doesn't matter. See the pick in super-slow-motion.

Remember, his hand is still moving really fast, you're just seeing it slowed down. How does the movement feel? Can you copy that feeling with your own hand? Give it a try.

When you move your picking hand, you only really need to hold on to your pick. Other than that you can keep it completely loose. Let it fall like a rock; don't hold it up. And when you have to do an upwards motion, just shoot the hand up like with a cannon. One explosive burst of energy. You don't need to continuously keep moving it up to have it move up. If you throw a ball in air, it will keep moving up even if you don't continuously move it up. And it will come down on its own, too. You just need to evaluate how high you want the ball to go before it starts falling. Same thing with your picking hand. Just throw it and let it fall. If it needs to fall faster than what the gravity offers you, then you simply need to throw it downwards, too. But it's absolutely about throws and not continuously moving your hand.

## Focus

Finally, the third piece of the puzzle (now I'm just imagining three-pieced puzzles). Some people get really emotional about playing guitar. I've witnessed anger, frustration, and tears, because things just seemed hopeless. Seemed hopeless. Those words describe a way people paint themselves into a corner. You don't know what to do, and because you think you know everything, you believe that there is no answer. Then you get invested in your suffering. It's fun to tell people how impossible your situation is and how tough your tribulations have been. And when you're invested in something, you don't want to give it up. It's like if a salesman convinces you to buy a car that turns out to be a piece of junk. When your friends shake their heads, you go on defending the car. A combination of buyer's remorse and Stockholm syndrome.

This might all sound like some hippy voodoo to you. And I would be right there with you if I hadn't tried it. As a teenager, I thought I would never be able to play the guitar solos of John Petrucci. I let go and discovered that I actually can. As a grown man, I thought I would never be able to sing notes as high as Bruce Dickinson. I let go and discovered that I actually can. Correlation isn't causation, but it's getting to a point where it's just a lot of weird coincidences. Don't believe in it. Try it. If it doesn't work, then don't worry about it.

So, here I am telling you that you actually can play everything you always wanted. If you are really frustrated, you might even get an urge to prove me wrong, do a lazy attempt at it, and then call me out as the fraud that I am. Why? Why are you so amped-up to fail? It's like he who remembers his past is doomed to repeat it. I get it, you might be angry because you tried so hard and it got you nowhere. Why would trying again be any different? Because now you have the right tools. Don't go out paving streets with a Zamboni.

Why is letting go important? Couldn't I have just as well learned to play and sing even if I didn't use all my time on this stuff? Yes and no.

There was nothing physical stopping me. I didn't use my mind powers to give my hands special powers. That's the ultimate secret: there is no secret. What you see is what you get. You don't somehow change as a person to allow yourself to become a master guitarist. It's just small things you overlooked and turned out they made all the difference. You'll be doing basically the same stuff you always did, just a little bit differently. What then? Why the letting go stuff?

The thing is that I wasn't looking for solutions. I was sitting on my ass, often times not even playing. I was feeling crappy because I was so tired of the same ol', same ol'. Nothing was changing. I spent hours and hours trying to push myself to play faster and all it did was get me angrier. I simply couldn't perform the stuff in a fast enough manner. Start slow, build up speed over time? Didn't work. At some point I just hit a wall and couldn't go any faster. I was frustrated and didn't want to do anything at all. And that's not good. If you don't even want to touch your guitar, then something is seriously wrong. I was consumed by my thoughts. When I thought about playing guitar or practicing, my thoughts always went to the same place. More than once during a ten-year-period I decided that this time I'm really going to put the time in and push the limits and practice like no tomorrow. Didn't help. I was so tired of always finding myself in the same rut. Always the same problems. Always the same results. And that's what I kept thinking. How can you even start exploring creative solutions when thinking about practicing only take your thoughts to one place?

How does letting go help? What does letting go even mean? The reason you push yourself so hard is because you have a goal in your mind. "I have to be able to do this." Is that true? You live your life like it is. When you're not achieving it, it's destroying your peace of mind. You're not focusing anymore, your mind is wandering. You're not approaching playing guitar from a rational point of view. It's a fun activity. That's all. How far you want to try to take it is up to you, but it's nothing to really get upset about. If you never become a great guitarist, it's not like you really lost anything valuable. If you are feeling defensive regarding that statement, then consider Stephen Hawking. He's a man who has achieved it all, even when he lost it all.

He can barely communicate with the outside world, and yet, he's one of the most optimistic people out there. Do you envy him? Would you trade places?

We don't know the future, so it's a little bit silly holding on to playing an instrument as if mastering it would somehow solve all your problems. Or even some of them.

Do you feel like the luck is on your side? Maybe you can achieve it all, but a lot of this stuff is not in your hands. You can be the best guitarist in the world, make the greatest songs anyone has ever heard, have the most talented band out there, and still get nowhere outside of your rehearsal space. Maybe your demo got lost in the spam folder or maybe it just wasn't what the record company was looking for at the time. There are no views on your YouTube channel and no matter how many awesome guitar videos you post, it just seems like nobody is interested. Even if you manage to release seven albums on Spotify and iTunes and do a hundred gigs a year, you might not still even be able pay new strings for your guitar. People expect music today to be free and talent doesn't translate into sales.

Is it worth even trying then? Well, do you like playing guitar? If you don't, then it really isn't. But if you're anything like me and love playing the guitar, then that is the payoff. If you love doing something, then what better way to spend your days than doing that?

How Does Letting Go Help cont.

Letting go is a decision. It's not about pushing something away. You're not trying to get rid of your negative thoughts and emotions. It just often happens anyway when you let go. Think of it like you're holding on to another person. If you let go, they might stay or they might go away. If you instead try to push them away, they might react differently. That's the thing. You're not in control of your thoughts or emotions. If you disagree, try not to think about absolutely anything for the next five minutes and see how that goes. It's just that you have an emotional response to some thoughts. When a certain

thought pops into your head, you grab it and keep holding on to it. Letting go is allowing, pushing away is clinging on to control.

Why do you have an emotional response to some thoughts? Because of your goals and values, desires and aversions, hopes and fears. You want something and some things you want to avoid. But it's all in your head. Your thoughts and emotions don't make any of it happen. You don't get to be a good guitarist because you want it more than anyone else. You get to be a good guitarist because you work hard and work smart. But you don't need your wants to do that. You can practice with a completely empty head. In fact, you can practice a lot better with an empty head. Emptiness means space for work and untapped potential. When you're not focusing on your thoughts and emotions, you are focusing completely on your playing. And focus is what you need more than anything.

How do you let go? I know you're expecting for some sort of physical ritual, but it's not that complicated. It's just something you decide

You're practicing that really difficult section of the solo and you feel an urge to push harder, to really make it happen. You're feeling frustration because you've played it a hundred times already and it just keeps going wrong. You keep playing and you get angrier. You feel like you're trapped and that it's never going to happen. Stop for a moment. Realize that your focus is on your wants, fears, and emotions. You're trying to force something to happen and desperation makes people act stupid. There's no hurry, just relax.

Can you let go of this thing you're working on?

Can you just not even worry about it anymore?

Can you accept that you might never be able to play it?

Can you let go of trying to make something happen?

Can you be ok with not getting what you want?

Can you welcome this mess happening over and over again?

Can you just let yourself play it the way you have been playing?

Can you let go of trying to resist what is?

You don't have to go through all of these questions and you might even come up with some of your own. The important thing is that you get to a place where you feel some space around the issue. You start to relax. You start to calm down. You see the thoughts and emotions but they don't matter anymore. You just let them be. You're getting your focus back.

While you have your focus, concentrate on the things that I've been talking about so far. Relaxation and visualization. Are you doing those things or are you just messing around? There's no hurry. Just concentrate, do the work, and try again.

Letting go doesn't mean that you're letting go of being able to play guitar. It's just letting go of your thoughts and emotions. Your thoughts and emotions are worthless. They don't serve any purpose. They are there just to cloud your focus. When they are out of the way, you are more able to achieve whatever you want than ever before.

# Physical Limitations Vs Technique

I've occasionally heard people saying things like: "I have really short fingers so it's impossible for me to play guitar well." To me, it sounds like an excuse. And you don't need excuses. If you don't want to be a virtuoso, there's nothing wrong with just sticking to the basic stuff. On the other hand, some professional musicians tell people things like: "Tablatures are useless. You have to learn musical notation." This sounds equally insane. It all depends on your goals. What do you want?

Jimi Hendrix didn't know musical notation and he's possibly the most renowned guitarist of all time. He also used to be a session musician. Perhaps that sort of thing wouldn't fly if you were trying to be a session musician today, but you have to ask yourself, do you even want to. If you just want to learn a few songs because you like playing guitar, then tabulators can be a quick and easy way to achieve that. Standard notation was created for the professional world and it is a huge timesaver there and a standard for a reason. It allows musicians to play a piece 100% correct the first time they see it on paper. The same can't be said about tablatures. You must have at least heard the song once beforehand.

If you want to play fast things, then short fingers aren't going to stop you. It's a little like saying that you can't run because you have short legs. Playing things fast has nothing to do with stretching your fingers. Often, I saw my students try to play a scale by stretching their fingers from one fret to another. This is counterproductive. To play effortlessly, you throw the fingers. You can try it now. Place your index finger on a fret. Then try to pick a note four frets higher with your middle finger. You can't really stretch it there, but you don't have to. Don't even try. Keep the other fingers next to the index finger. When you go for the next note, just throw the middle finger there. You'll probably get it in few tries. And you can get very good at

this. Keep your fretting fingers loose when you play. Jump them around and lift them up when you don't need them.

Something like short fingers are going to be an issue if you want to play some of the more difficult standard chords. But that's the thing with standards. No one is forcing you to obey them. Guitar is one of the most dynamic instruments out there. It's not like piano or flute where you are stuck with how the keys are positioned.

With a 24-fret neck, you can play the E5 note on all six strings. You can tune each string to be a wide variety of different ranges. You can use capo. You can figure out different fingerings for different chords. Be creative! Long fingers give you more options, but you don't really need options. You just need one thing that works. Heck, Django Reinhardt and Tony Iommi became guitar legends even after losing a few digits.

But still, not everyone can do everything. The "You can be anything" Disney slogan makes for a nice movie-going experience, but it's not really rooted in reality. You can't be anything you want. And with serious physical limitations (more serious than the ones described above), you have to get really creative. YouTube has brought us many inspiring viral videos.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m3gMgK7h-BA>

# Muscle Memory

I used to think that I don't want to rely on muscle memory. That's just repeating patterns you know from beforehand and it's not really that creative. While I still think that to a degree, I also realize that there really isn't another way. Coming up with things to play on-the-fly and then executing them is way too much work even if you play slowly. Improvisation is learning a great variety of different patterns, the feeling they create, and how they are executed. It's the same thing as with writing a novel. The bigger vocabulary you have, the more options are available to you when trying to create a very specific feel. People who learn a massive amount of different patterns can even seem to be playing whatever they come up with. But if they heard a random sequence of notes in their head and had to replicate it, they most likely would struggle. It's almost impossible to react that quickly to anything. Maybe if you're a zen master, but that's beyond the scope of this guide.

I suppose learning the "vocabulary" is all about you developing your sound. What kind of patterns move you? Hear what is playing in your head and try to replicate that as quickly as you can. Learn those patterns. Make them part of your muscle memory. Learn the things that help you become what you want to be.

## Memorizing Songs

On the other hand, if you're learning a specific song or passage, I like to break it into parts. You wouldn't memorize a speech by reading it through from beginning to end over and over. Break it down. Learn one measure at a time. Or even one beat at a time, if there are a lot of notes. Here's what I typically do with a solo or some such:

- 1) Learn each measure separately. Don't move to the next one until you can handle the current one.
- 2) Learn to play adjacent measures together. That means measures 1 and 2 together, 3 and 4 together, and so on.

- 3) Switch the pairs. Learn measures 2 and 3 together, then 4 and 5, and so on.
- 4) Maybe play three or four measures together, depending on how you feel. And keep going.

When you learn sections of a solo separately, it's hard to put them all together. You have to practice the parts that connect them. The most difficult part is to concentrate on what you are playing. Or more specifically, what's coming up. In step number 2, if I'm trying to connect measures 1 and 2 together, I'm constantly only focusing on measure 2. I'm hoping that the first one will just come out automatically, so I don't waste my focus on that. I'm trying to sense what the second measure is going to feel like when I transition into it. Then try to think the two measures as a whole. Don't think them as separate parts or even separate notes. Think of the complete passage as a one whole move that has a specific feeling. Figure out the feeling and then execute it. Obviously, all of this can apply to beats, too. I.e. instead of measures 1 and 2 you can concentrate on just beats 1 and 2 if that makes more sense to you. But learn the thing in pieces. Divide and conquer. If you find yourself just mindlessly stumbling your way through the solo or whatever, then stop and concentrate on a specific part of it. Tackle the difficult parts head on. They're the most interesting parts anyway.

# Playing After a Pause

I've often had long periods during which I didn't play at all. It can be a tough experience trying to come back to it after months or even years of not touching your guitar at all. You feel a bit lost, but some things don't go away. It's a bit like a role-playing game. The more you play, the more you get experience points. When you hit 1000 experience points, you hit level 2. 3000 experience points, level 3. 8000xp, level 4. And so on. I've discovered that while you might lose the excess experience points, you never really lose any of the levels. When you start with your guitar again, you start from a base level that you achieved previously.

When I get back to playing, I typically feel completely lost. It's a natural reaction, but it's just a thing you made yourself to believe. If you follow the three steps I've outlined in this guide, you'll find out that you catch up to your old self ridiculously quickly. Just remind your brain what it's all about and you're good to go again. The infrastructure is already there in your head. You just gotta start using it again.

After a pause you might have trouble with tension, strain, and lack of proper strength in the finger muscles. All of these will go away if you play a lot. Because your fingers aren't used to being stretched, they struggle with it, which causes strain. They'll get more nimble. And because your fingers aren't used to being utilized, they struggle with keeping the strings down, which causes more problems. Just keep playing the difficult things and it'll get easier. You need your strength, agility, and stamina.

## Other notes

As you get to know this approach more intimately, you might find a way that suits you better. Perhaps you can just keep repeating the motion while constantly focusing on how you are altering it in minor

ways. But you have to focus. I sometimes do this with some simple stuff, but with things that are more foreign to me, I still pause and take my time. You'll be able to make the judgment in time. When I say that you need to get familiar with the approach, I mean it. When in doubt, just go slow.

I'm not going to tell you what fingers to use, because ultimately it doesn't matter. However, I've found training my pinky quite useful, because it seems to open up more possibilities.

## Further Reading

E. Tolle, *The Power of Now*, New World Library, 2004. Learn how to overcome mental blocks and steel your focus.