

Mark Turner's Musical Middle Way

The Jazz saxophonist discusses the power of the breath, the importance of diligent practice, and his reverence for the “badass” masters of Buddhism and music.

By Jeff Goldberg | JUL 13, 2018



Mark Turner | ©John Rogers / ECM Records

Mark Turner has been hailed as one of the most influential jazz tenor saxophonists of his generation. Whether softly blowing a bluesy ballad or racing through a staccato maze of complex chord changes, Turner performs with brilliant virtuosity and surprisingly laid-back ease.

With seven albums to his credit as a band leader and over 60 more as a sideman, his unique style of playing reflects not only his musical mastery but also an important influence on his life: Buddhism. Turner, 52, has been practicing in the Kagyu and Gelug lineages of Tibetan Buddhism for over 20 years. His detailed “practice books” are crammed with musical notations and personal reflections, such as: “Wherever you are, you’re always in the middle . . . The center. Good vantage point. Can see everything.”

The center is also where Turner takes his place as a musician. Like many jazz saxophonists, he says, his style was originally modeled on the “aggressive sound” of John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and other jazz legends. But it was his discovery of the cool, classically influenced stylings of a lesser-known jazzman named Warne Marsh that led Turner to a more reflective and spacious approach—a musical middle way.

He was enjoying a few weeks at home in Brooklyn between trips to Europe when I caught up with him to talk about his music and his practice.

You say there are similarities between practicing Buddhism and playing jazz. In what ways are they similar, apart from the obvious fact that you have to practice, practice, practice?

Well, for one thing, in both Buddhism and jazz there’s a strong emphasis on reverence for the masters and trying to emulate them. Jazz is like an oral tradition. You learn by memorizing. When you’re a student you spend a lot of time transcribing the recordings of the great musicians and learning hundreds of solos by heart, playing them over and over again. You try to walk in the masters’ musical shoes.

How do you find your own style?

By being able to play exactly what the masters played. It’s an ongoing process. I still do it. The deeper I go into the music of great musicians like Lester Young, John Coltrane, and Warne Marsh, the more I sound like myself.



Mark Turner Quartet - "Along Came Betty" @ musig-im-ochsen, ...

Miles Davis once said that in jazz “there’s no such thing as a wrong note.” That always struck me as a very Buddhist thing to say. Are there wrong notes?

If you’re grounded in the fundamentals and what you’re playing is married to the masters, then there are no wrong notes. Within the realm of mastery, there are no mistakes. But if you haven’t gotten to that level and think you can just play any notes you want, then you’re deluding yourself.

Tell me about your musical practice. Do you spend time each day playing scales?

Of course. I work on the fundamentals every day. In some ways, it’s like my Buddhist practice. It’s very disciplined. You’re alone in the practice room; you spend hours and hours working on melody, scales, harmony, ear-training. Then, every few months or so I try to evaluate what’s going on. How much have I improved?

Do you have a plan for your Buddhist practice, too?

Yes, but it’s not like I’m trying to get somewhere. As a professional musician, I’m always looking for ways to play better, but that doesn’t really apply to my Buddhist practice. Instead of achieving a goal, it’s more like acknowledging what I don’t know.

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Do you evaluate your progress as a practitioner?

In a way. In Buddhist practice, you have your reflective time, and then you go out and try to manifest what you’ve learned in your life. It’s like practicing in the studio and then playing in a band. Life is the bandstand, where you see if all this practice has paid off. Am I being less selfish? Am I being authentic? Am I being weird? Am I freaking out? Am I present?

How did you become interested in Buddhism?

I started reading about different religions when I was at Berklee College of Music in Boston in the 1980s. I was most attracted to religions that put an emphasis on body, first Hinduism, then hatha yoga, and after that, Buddhism—because practice, speech, and mind are all involved, and I can feel it on a more visceral level. It’s closer to the way I feel when I play music.

What is your daily practice?

My practice is from the Gelug tradition, the Dalai Lama’s lineage. I spend time every day sitting as well as doing prostrations to the [35 confession buddhas](#) and the seven medicine buddhas.

You do that even when you’re on the road?

On the road and at home, whenever I can. Sometimes I can’t finish all of it, but I try to do something every day. Even if I just spend 10 minutes saying mantras or acknowledging that the Buddha is here with me, that can be enough. Just a little taste to keep me grounded in the dharma.

Do you have a teacher?

No, I haven’t found a teacher. Because I’m on the road so much, it would be difficult for me to attend teachings anyway. But it wasn’t a teacher that brought me in; it was the teachings of the Buddha and his disciples. They’re just so badass.

Buddha and his disciples are badass?

Yeah, man. They’re absolutely relentless in pursuit of the truth. Their determination to find out why things don’t feel right and what can be done about it, and to keep going no matter how hard the road is. That’s badass!

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Another parallel between music and Buddhism is the importance of the breath. Some meditators will concentrate on the quality of their breath—deep, shallow, long, short—to achieve different effects. Is it the same when you’re playing the saxophone?

One thing they have in common is that you have to breathe from the diaphragm. If you breathe from your chest, you’re not going to be able to blow very long. It’s interesting that in Eastern meditation practices, the diaphragm is where heart and mind are centered. In music, it’s the source of your sound. And, when you’re a horn player, your sound is the window to your soul. Your heart and mind ride on the breath. You learn to be able to make your breath very focused and very strong, as if you were blowing into a very small dot. The smaller you make the dot, the faster the speed of the air, and that’s what gives your sound volume. Blowing into a wider dot slows the air down and makes your sound rounder and wider, like when you’re playing a ballad. That’s all breath control.

How has your practice changed you?

It’s softened me. And it’s made me more joyful. There are still things that get me down, but I’ve learned that even when things are a drag they can be great. There’s nothing that isn’t useful.

Can you give me an example of something that was great even though it was a downer?

We have a fireplace in our house, and a few years ago, I was cutting some firewood with a power saw and sliced two of my fingers down to the bone.

Seriously? Two fingers! There goes your career. What’s great about that?

I’m not saying I didn’t freak out. It was terrible. But at the same time, I had to be grateful. I’d wanted to be a jazz musician, and I’d gotten a chance to do it for nearly 20 years before the accident. I’d gotten more than I ever thought I would get. If I had to find another way to make a living, I was OK with that. Fortunately, my fingers healed, and I didn’t have to change professions.

Is there a Buddhist community in the jazz world?

A fair number of musicians on the West Coast belong to Soka Gakkai and chant *Nam Myoho Renge Kyo*. Herbie Hancock, Buster Williams, and Wayne Shorter are all into it. Nobody I know is into Tibetan practice.

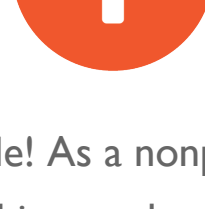
The history of jazz is filled with brilliant musicians like Charlie Parker, who bled out on drugs and died young. Do you think Buddhist practice can be an antidote to that?

Frankly, our lives today are a lot easier than, say, Charlie Parker’s life or Dizzy Gillespie’s. It was a lot more difficult being a young African American man in the 1950s than it is now. They had a lot more to deal with, and sometimes you have to take the edge off. I don’t fault them for it.

Does Buddhist practice take the edge off for you?

It probably brings it on, in the sense that it strips away delusion. On the other hand, the more I’m deluded about what’s going on, the more stressed out I feel. My practice helps me to manage my mind and to manage all the ups and downs of being in the music-slash-art world. It’s like the switch that turns the lights on in a dark room. I can see what’s going on. Maybe I can handle it, maybe I can’t, but at least I can see what’s happening.

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