On meditation and creativity

Musician and mystic Laraaji on the creative benefits of meditation, taking a psychic break from technology, and knowing your own purpose.

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As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2919 words.

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You've recorded tons of music, but are also known for your live performances and your workshops on laughter meditation. Is there one particular creative pursuit that you happen to enjoy the most?

When I'm working at home I get to be still, quiet, in meditative mode, enjoy being in New York, and explore new worlds without having to answer to an audience. I do a lot of dancing. I try to plan for the quiet months, like January and February, to be about having more studio time because I really enjoy it. I like to be in the studio, or in the creative process mode, for at least two weeks or more at a time. Just record ideas, explore, research, and not have it broken up by a tour.

When I'm on tour, I do enjoy the traveling. Being on an airplane is a good meditation opportunity. When I'm up in the high altitudes, higher than the Himalayan mountains, I do some serious introspection. And performance is something that always feeds me. On every tour, setting up, doing load in, having the sound check—whether it's from the technicians or from other artists—I always learn new things that help me to hone my craft. So it's all an exhilarating learning experience. The music is always new because I adjust to the room and the technical situation I'm in. The experience is really a deep meditation, and the meditation is always a spiritually deepening and growing experience.

One of my favorite visions is being in the flow of continuously performing as a lifestyle. All of these things work together. I just try not to get too pooped out. I watch my diet. I try to avoid tobacco smoke situations. I make sure I have good accommodations. Beyond that, I get to be around people who are either friendly toward meditation or who are open to peaceful music. And more and more of my traveling involves a component of doing a laughter workshop somewhere in the same time period. So I get to be around a lot of laughter and enjoy my own music with groovy people.

Do you have a particular way of working when it's just you alone with all of your instruments?

One way is just working with the zither, which is a 36-stringed instrument. So I tune to find a chord or an open tuning that evokes a strong emotional response, something that has lots of inner information. I'll plug it into the recording situation, explore the tuning, and later I'll listen back to the recording, and hear the potential different ways it can go. I pick out the ones that I want to develop and share with an audience. Maybe I'll record two or three hours of it, then listen back and see what my feelings are. While I'm listening back, I might hear melodies that could suggest including synthesizer melodies or vocal work.

The second way of working out material at home involves recording with a synthesizer, a beat box, and my voice. Before going into the creative process, I usually do some quiet meditation or read some inspirational writings from some of my favorite people, either mind science or Eastern philosophy, until I get a very updated, refined sense of spiritual vision. Then I'll sit at the keyboard and just dive into spontaneity. The music that comes out

might be something that compliments some sort of spiritual insight that I've just been mulling over, or maybe I free jam for a couple of hours with the recorder going. Again, I'll listen back later to identify the parts that I want to further develop.

So much of my process is about random chance and chaotic release. And during the release, I'll come upon musical phrases or directions that I've never been in before. I just try to stay in that mode and let the recorder capture it, whether it's spoken word or music or poetry. My favorite thing is to download these recordings and then listen to them while walking around New York, down Riverside Drive or in Central Park, just listening on headphones. That's the best way to test out my own response to what I'm hearing. Sometimes I'll listen back to the recordings in a friend's car. Cars are wonderful places to play things back.

Do you ever feel creatively stuck? What do you do when that happens?

I understand the question, but because of the way I work, I don't experience that very much. The moment I sit down with the zither and look for a new tuning, my enthusiasm rises very high, and then I start feeling the worlds that want to be released into the hearing experience. The music usually suggests itself. I never feel stuck unless I'm working for somebody else who wants a specific thing. But when I just pull music out of the sky or out of the air, I never feel stuck doing that.

I often think the process of creating something new is truly about getting out of your own way or getting to a place where whatever is supposed to naturally come out of you can just come out. And that isn't happening for some reason, maybe it just means I haven't gotten into the right frame of mind yet.

Yes. I would imagine there are hours and hours of beautiful music that we never get to hear because the artists who are producing it maybe don't think that it sounds like them, and so they scratch it. The artist that knows how to get out of their own way, meaning they are able to let new music happen, music that is worth listening to, isn't so bothered by this. But if the artist is in their own way, they will criticize it or delete it under the thought that, "Hey, that's not me. That's not what people want to hear from me." I think the ability to let new music come through is what personally keeps me from getting stuck.

It's interesting that, perhaps as a result of that kind of thinking, most of your music is very upbeat. I sense very little melancholy in your work, which is actually pretty unusual.

Yes. I find that to be true in my case. As a matter of fact, if I find myself conflicted or in the blues zone, I might play with it at home, but I don't tend to think of releasing that kind of material. Sometimes I feel like I just go through the blues to get to the brights. Playing in a dark mode will eventually let me flow out into a greater lightness. And usually, in a recording at home, where I've done funky blues things, I'll find that somewhere in the midst of it, or just beyond it, I've gone into a brilliantly bright zone. And *that* is what I'll use to build upon. My choice has been to bring music that is uplifting, soothing, and positive into the world. I'm capable of doing other kinds of music, but I haven't chosen to make that part of my performing style.

I think one of the myths of creativity—at least in popular culture right now—is that it is just generally easier to talk about your pain. People are almost embarrassed to talk about their own happiness or to try and articulate joy in a way that isn't somehow ironic.

Unfortunately, that might be a natural byproduct for this culture. I've spoken with a woman who lives in Colombia, and she says Colombia is one of the countries with the happiest people in the world because they have more holidays. I wondered if perhaps here in the United States or in other countries where there aren't as many holidays, maybe the people simply aren't as happy. And therefore the music of sadness really reflects where they are.

Because I do practice a meditative lifestyle and conscious living, I think that my music reflects this. Someone who has not yet had an epiphany or a glimpse of who they are beyond all of this may feel trapped in this life, and by the conditions that they have to deal with, and they're overwhelmed by it. So it's understandable that their music—or the music they gravitate toward—would reflect this lack of a transcendental perspective.

You are famous for your laughter meditation workshops. Again, the idea of laughing in public—being vulnerable and really un-self-conscious about how you look in front of other people—must be a hard thing for a lot of people to get past.

Yes, but that's my role. My role is to get people to feel that they're in a safe space. I have to blow my cool up front to make people feel like it's okay to let go. And so we get into a playful zone, and invite our inner child to come out, right at the beginning of the workshop. The childlike spirit isn't so concerned about what they're gonna look like. Once people get into the play zone and the childlike zone at the early part of the laughter workshop, it helps people to let go of self-consciousness and to explore and really apply themselves to opening up their laughter. When you're in the play zone, it's probably like playing anything else, you sort of just let go of how you look. If you're playing baseball, you let go of how cool you look when that ball is coming at you. When you can finally let go, all of the other stuff becomes really peripheral.

You've been doing this very specific kind of musical and spiritual work for a long time. Do you get the sense that the notion of "self-care" is finally being taken seriously?

Oh yeah. Taking care of yourself, self-care, self-nurturing, self-love, it's all so important. It's important to truly invest in that, whether it's in your diet or in your behavior. Also, affection is so important. Nurturing, experiencing touch, having a community and an intimate tribe that is handling your emotional needs in a way that is uplifting rather than congesting—it's important. I think being touched or hugged, whether you do it through dancing or whether you have a massage person in your life, or an intimate partner, or whether you have pets, tactile contact is a form of self-nurturing that everyone needs. If you don't honor this area of your needs, it could show up in your work in other ways that are usually unhealthy or unhappy.

Having some sort of calm mindfulness in your life—even if you don't technically think of it as meditation, per se—seems like the key to everything.

I'm glad you mentioned that because when I first started doing serious inner meditation, I felt like the word meditation was still very intimidating. For years, I felt like true meditation was somebody else's experience, and that I would never have it myself. But when you can finally reach this deep meditative state, it's like the mind is not busy with linear thinking. It's a space that's always been there. In fact, I don't think that we meditate. I think meditation is the removal of obstructions to the mind, so that the mind can be aware of its eternal presence for you. For me, when that happens, I'm not meditating. I'm observing a meditation that has no ending or beginning. The mind without any obstructions.

That can be scary for people, though. So much of our addiction to technology is about pure distraction, a way that we never really have to be alone with our own thoughts or consider things deeply.

That is awesomely true. If you've ridden on the public transportation systems, you notice how many people are absorbed in their devices. When I get on the subway, I look around and see how many people around me are teched up. It's everywhere. In Moscow, in Japan, in Israel, in England. The world is teched up big time. And that's the information highway overload. So a meditation practice would have to work against the tide of that. That's where I see myself as a musician coming in.

My intention in my music performances and laughter workshops is to provide people with a unique and valid opportunity to escape from the gravity of that momentum of the information highway, even if it's for 15 minutes or 20 minutes or an hour. I want to take them deep into a nonlinear trance state where they experience themselves. This might be the new form of meditation for a culture that's very teched up. Artists have to ramp up, amp up their commitment to transmitting transcendental, meditative, euphoric feelings directly to the heart.

This speaks to what it is to make new-age music, to those particular artists who have taken it upon themselves to address the needs of the contemporary community through their art. Artists themselves can bring forth what it is they practice. I'd say our practice is the sun. It brings the sunlight into our life, and our practice can bring the sunlight into someone else's life as well. And with this sunlight we can experience the pure, pristine, present moment of self. Artists who are working on themselves, who are either doing yoga, or meditation, or have

their own way of going in and having introspective insights, are then able to take those moments and translate them into their art, whatever it happens to be.

For so many emerging artists, the struggle is primarily about simply being seen. What other things should young artists and musicians be thinking about? What are the kinds of questions they should be asking themselves?

That's a showstopper. Maybe just ask yourself, "Who is this for? And what are your intentions? Is it to impress mommy and daddy, or to justify having to take out a student loan to get to college? Or to impress your teachers in school?" In my case, I was smitten with an epiphany—a vision, actually—in the mid '70s. It was something that really quickened me and awakened me to the use of sound to support cosmic consciousness, a vivid vision that happened in the course of maybe five or 10 minutes that changed me around. I can't play the music I heard in that moment, but that vision still informs the kind of music I reach for on this side of reality. I think it's important to have some sort of vision for what you want to do. It should be something that informs you, at the cellular level, of what it is you really want to be doing with your life.

That's the secret, huh? Knowing what you really want to be doing. It's the uncertainty of not knowing what you're doing with your life that makes so many people unhappy. The only answer to that might be to truly follow your bliss, and to not waste time committing to something unless you really love doing it.

For sure. Yes. Because not knowing makes you feel vulnerable. There will always be people telling you what you're supposed to be doing, but you have to question that. People feel lost when there are no clear models to show them what to feel or what to experiment with. I heard once that there are three stages in an artist's search. One is imitation—imitating everything that you think is cool and groovy, and you want to identify with. Then once you imitate, you take those imitations and you experiment with blending and exploring—that's the second stage. And then the third stage is self-realization and self-discovery. Discovering your own language and your own voice out of all the experimentation and imitation you've been working at. That applies to what I do. I did a lot of imitating, and then I started experimenting with blending different things to eventually come out with my own language. Finding your own voice and your own language, even if it takes years to do it, is such a good feeling. It's the best.

Laraaji recommends:

Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan wrote a book called *The Music of Life* that I love. It's not intimidating, but still a rather intense Bible for musicians who are looking to break out of molds. It's a wonderful book to stir up and stimulate new thoughts and new visions. But it's not just about music. It's about creativity and art in general.

I've been listening to a lot of Pandora radio lately because it's easily accessible, especially when I'm traveling. I've become really accustomed to listening to very quiet music. Steve Reich's music is something that I like to tune into to remind me of how serene and still music can be. I also like listening to Japanese and Balinese gamelan music that helps remind me of the impact of music that doesn't have to be totally harmonic. Also, I really love classical Indian music, which shows me just how joyful and jubilant music can be, while stepping out of the typical Western mode of a verse-chorus-verse format.

It's raining in NYC today and I'm about to go outside, which reminds me to recommend walking in the rain without a hat. It stimulates my brain and visions and ideas can easily come that way.

Name
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Vocation
Musician, Teacher



Liam Ricketts