

Mindfulness Practice with Piano Finger Exercise

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Abstract

Mindfulness practice can be done on being mindful with daily activities like walking, sitting, eating, or exercising, etc. Some people with their special interests and abilities may practice mindfulness differently, such as those who do exercises may have mindful running or mindful cycling. For those who play music, especially the piano, they can have more finger dexterity and strength than others who do not usually use each finger separately. These benefits allow pianists - whether professional, amateur, or students - to be able to control the use of each finger separately with ease as they play a lot of music pieces or practice the exercises.

This paper aims to discuss the practice of piano finger exercises as another activity to practice mindfulness. There are many piano finger exercises varying from the initial to the advanced stage. One of them is a series called Hanon exercises, which are among the all-time famous series of piano finger exercises. Usually, when pianists are familiar with the pattern of each exercise, they will play faster in order to gain finger strength and flexibility. However, if we add up the goal of practicing the Hanon exercises from getting finger dexterity into cultivating mindfulness with slower playing, we can practice to be more focused and more mindful in a new, different, and optional activity apart from our daily routines. Thus, the Hanon exercises are used in this paper as an example tool to facilitate the basic practice of mindfulness.

Keywords: *piano; piano finger exercise; Hanon exercises; mindfulness*

Introduction

Living in a modern world, people are in haste, more stressed, and less careful about what they are doing. As they have many things to do at the same time, their minds are easily scattered. Currently, more people turn their interest into a mindfulness practice. Also, we can hear the word “mindfulness” being used, practiced, and applied in many different areas, not limited to Buddhist practitioners, nor can it only be practiced in monasteries or religious institutions. According to Thich Nhat Hanh (2026), mindfulness is when we generate our energy to bring our mind back to our body and experience what is going on in the present moment. With mindfulness, we can touch our life deeply whether we are walking, cooking, eating, driving, speaking, working, playing, or lying down. Thus, mindfulness can be practiced at all times, in all kinds of activities that we are doing.

Nowadays, mindfulness is practiced and applied to many activities. More people turn to the practice of mindfulness as it yields a lot of benefits to practitioners. Some advantages of practicing mindfulness suggested by Tessa Watt (2012) are: for example, the ability to be more relaxed; to cope with stress, anxiety, depression, and pain better; to handle strong emotions effectively; and to enjoy life more. Mindfulness, then, is practiced and applied to various activities ranging from daily routines like mindful walking, breathing, or even cooking. Even so, some more fun activities are equipped with mindfulness in order to make the practice more enjoyable and accessible. Alidina (2019) has suggested ten fun activities that mindfulness can be applied to, such as dancing, singing, sipping tea or coffee, eating chocolate, painting, and swimming. These fun activities are from daily activities and from art and sports. Hence, playing music is also an activity to which mindfulness can be applied to and in this case, playing the piano is the activity to be discussed.

In this article, the slow practice of piano finger exercises will be discussed as effective and can be a useful, optional, and preliminary tool for facilitating the initial mindfulness practice through leisure activities.

Original Meaning and Merits of Mindfulness

Rooted in Buddhism 2500 years ago, mindfulness or Sati is the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, or the eight Buddhist practices for liberation from suffering. It is the state of recollection, remembering, non-fading, non-forgetting, non-carelessness, non-negligence, non-distraction, and non-confusion. Moreover, mindfulness in Buddhism is the mental quality that comprises three factors: effort, clear comprehension, and the possession of mindfulness itself. Effort prevents the mind from feeling discouraged, depressed, or retreating. It also blocks the unwholesome qualities while enhancing wholesome qualities. Clear comprehension is compared to wisdom, which enables one to comprehend the true nature of the objects being focused on. Mindfulness is the attention fixed and held on the focused object in each moment. (Payutto, 2021)

Outlined in the Mahāsatipatṭhāna Sutta (the Four Foundations of Mindfulness), the cultivation of mindfulness is the practice in four areas of body, feeling, nature of mind, and mind-objects.

1. Mindfulness of the body consists of mindfulness of breathing, posture of the body, clear comprehension in all activities, contemplation of the body as unattractive constituents, and contemplation of corpses in nine different stages of decay.

2. Mindfulness of the feeling of pleasure, pain, or neutral

3. Mindfulness of the state of the mind in any given moment, such as lust or free from lust, or angry or free from anger, etc.

4. Mindfulness of mind-objects, which includes hindrances, aggregates, sense spheres, Enlightenment factors, and Noble Truths.

Those who practice mindfulness can derive significant advantages as follows:

1. The purity of mind. When mindfulness is focused on a specific object and clear comprehension understands its true nature, unwholesome qualities have no opportunity to arise.

2. The liberation of mind. When the mind is purified as mentioned earlier, it will not be disturbed by any objects in contact with its perception. All the objects will not be interpreted subjectively, while at the same time, they are contemplated objectively. Thus, the mind is not tainted by any objects.

3. Wisdom. When the mind is purified and liberated, wisdom can function effectively.

4. Freedom from suffering. When the mind is fully aware and understands the true nature of things, desire or resentment cannot arise. The mind will be free from all anxiety and will be at peace. (Payutto, 2021)

“The world is led around by mind;
By mind it’s dragged here and there.
Mind is the one thing that has
All under its control.” (SN 1.62, Bhikkhu Bodhi, tr.)

In Citta Sutta (SN 1.62), the Buddha described how the world is depends on one's mind. The mind has the capacity to direct the world as the mind is the source of how we think, act, and interact with others. The qualities of our mind, whether good or bad, will determine our thoughts, speech, and actions, which will affect ourselves, others, society, and our world in the same way.

Sunim (2017) mentioned our mind and the world that we see the world according to our own state of mind. Whatever our mind is, the world is like that. If our mind is positive, having joy or compassion, the world is just like that. If our mind is filled with negative thoughts, the world will appear to us in a negative way too. He said, “When your mind rests, the world also rests... And when our mind is peaceful, the world is, too.” (Sunim, 2017, pp.13-14)

With mindfulness, the mind becomes peaceful, concentrated, and energetic. A person holding these qualities in his mind will be sure to view the world, circumstances, and challenges positively. What he contributes to the world or society will be a reflection of his mind, which can be in the form of wholesome qualities such as compassion, harmony, and creativity. In contrast, a mind that is stuck in negative thoughts like stress, hatred, jealousy, or selfishness, etc., will direct that person to perform undesirable behaviors, harsh speech, and negative views towards others.

As mindfulness becomes “more mainstream,” it is on the rise to be brought into “education, healthcare, and many kinds of organizations and workplaces.” (Watt, 2012, p.171) For example, children in many schools are taught with mindfulness skills such as breathing, painting, calming, and listening to their emotions. (Watt, 2012) Hence, playing the piano can be one of the various activities that can help cultivate mindfulness in the player.

Piano Finger Exercise: A Useful Tool for Pianists

Children nowadays are taken to study extracurricular activities outside their schools. Apart from their academic subjects, their parents also take them to study some kinds of sport, art, and music. Piano playing is a popular choice in starting the music lesson as it requires the use of both hands and, in upper level, feet. Children will be able to learn to control their hands, wrists, and each finger. The ability to move each finger separately and evenly when pressing the keyboard is very important. Most children, or even adult students, have problems in controlling their fingers as they lack strength and flexibility. So, in learning to play the piano, it is not about playing the music pieces you want. The study and practice of techniques and exercises are also important.

Being a piano student, it is important to have finger strength, and the practice of Hanon piano finger exercises is a useful tool. Chang (2016) gave some suggestions to piano students that before practicing any music pieces, it is better to start with some technical exercises such as Hanon exercises in order to gain more finger strength and flexibility.

Palmer (2019) explained that Hanon exercises are piano finger exercises that “train the pianist in speed, agility, strength and precision of all the fingers, as well as training wrist flexibility.” These 60 exercises are developed by Charles Louis Hanon, a French piano pedagogue and composer, into a book named *The Virtuoso Pianist*. It was first published in 1873 and has been used worldwide among pianists until now.

In the preface of the book *Hanon: the Virtuoso Pianist in Sixty Exercises for the Piano*, the benefits of these exercises are mentioned that “pianists and teachers, who cannot find time for sufficient practice to keep up their playing, need only to play the exercise a few hours in order to regain all the dexterity of their fingers.” (Hanon, 1929)

Thus, the practice of Hanon exercises, although not the most important thing in playing the piano, is also beneficial for all levels of pianists to have more finger strength and flexibility in order to be able to play the pieces with more difficult techniques more easily.

Mindful Finger Movement in Hanon Exercise

The idea of mindfulness practice can be applied when practicing the Hanon exercise by playing mindfully and slowly. In the Mahāsatipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the first Foundation of mindfulness out of four is the contemplation of the body. One practice in this section is acquiring clear awareness in every action as “he [a monk] is clearly aware of what he is doing, in walking, standing, sitting, falling asleep and waking up, in speaking or in staying silent, he is clearly aware of what he is doing.” (DN 22, in Walshe, 1995, p.337)

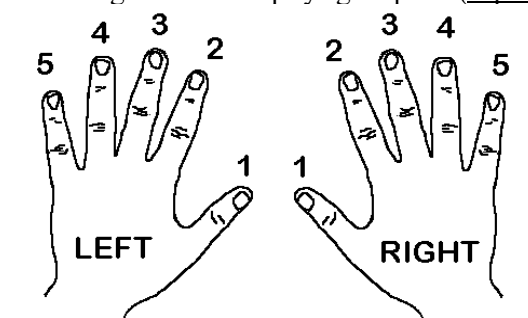
Venerable Nyanaponika Thera (2014) explained that a practitioner “may not be able at once to attend mindfully to all or even a greater part of the activities and impressions of the day. He therefore may start with the postures alone and gradually extend the scope of mindfulness to all routine activities.” He also suggested that to be mindful in daily activities, “the slowing-down would be too great.” (Nyanaponika Thera, 2014, pp. 97-98) However, the slowing-down practice can be applied only for some periods, not applicable to everyday activities. Even in some short periods of slowing down movements is also effective and useful.

As mindfulness can be practiced from all daily activities, one activity for pianists apart from practicing the pieces is giving a few times for finger exercises. The Hanon series are also a choice for the practice. Since we can start practicing mindfulness from the slowing-down movements of daily activities, it is also possible to practice mindfulness by slowing down the playing on the Hanon exercises. This preliminary mindfulness practice can be done in a short period of time before or after the routine practice of music pieces, or any other time you want.

Fingers Used and the Pattern in the Hanon Exercises

Usually, the Hanon exercises are practiced at a slow speed and then with a gradual increase to be faster. This is for the purpose of gaining finger strength and dexterity in order to be more fluent in playing. However, this can be tried vice versa. Aside from the purpose of gaining finger dexterity, the Hanon exercises can also be used to practice mindfulness by playing slowly and being mindful at every single movement of each finger.

Before taking a deeper look at how this practice can be done, it is better for non-pianists to take a look at the finger numbers that are referred to when playing the piano. The thumbs on both hands are finger number one, the index, middle, ring, and little are number two, three, four, and five, respectively. See figure 1.

Figure 1 finger numbers on the left and right hand when playing the piano (<https://tinywebs.site/PhOHGT>)

In Hanon exercises, the pattern of the first twenty exercises is the repetition of the five fingers without much extension between each finger. So, it is quite easy to remember the pattern when playing since each bar is the repetition of the same finger pattern with the ascending to the next key in the following bar. For example, the exercise No.14, as shown in figure 2, is the practice especially for finger 3 and 4 with the same finger and pattern in each bar. Both hands will move in the same direction, but the finger numbers on the left and right hands are different. From the beginning, the hands will gradually move up to the right as the pattern is ascending to the next key in the following bar. This ascending pattern continues for two octaves on the piano or around the middle of the page. Then, the pattern turns to the descending direction with one key lower in each bar, until reaching back to the beginning.

Figure 2 the number of fingers used in Hanon exercise No. 14 (<http://www.hanon-online.com>)

The Virtuoso Pianist - Part I.

Exercise N°14 in C

C. L. HANON.

**How to Practice**

With this repetition of finger used and pattern, it is not difficult to practice and finish each exercise. Now, mindfulness can be applied when practicing the Hanon exercises. The practice should be done slowly by being mindful when lifting the finger from the key, moving down to touch and pressing the key, lifting up and at the same time the next finger is moving down to touch and press the key. This process can go on and on until finishing an exercise. By being mindful at every single movement of the finger, the mind will gradually become focused at the present activity. A focused mind, then, will have more concentration and effort to work on this present activity and become awoken and far from distress.

A Deeper Mindful Practice

Venerable Sayadaw U Kundala (1992) suggested that to begin practicing mindfulness, a person should be aware of the most outstanding activity or movement only. When the mind focuses on the only one activity, it becomes more concentrated. After that, we can move on to practice mindfulness on other movements. By practicing being mindful of each movement one by one, our contemplation will be deeper and more advanced.

With more mindfulness and concentration, then a practitioner can notice the intention to move. This cannot be observed by most people who do not practice mindfulness. Venerable Mahāsi Sayadaw (2016) explained that “ordinary people do not know their intention to walk or the movement that happens in separate little movements. They can't distinguish between mind and body and do not understand that the intention causes the movement to happen. They do not understand that there is only a sequence of successive intentions and successive movements that disappear and vanish one after the other.” (Mahāsi Sayadaw, 2016, p. 183)

In order to be able to see the intention of movement and one movement in separations, the first step of being mindful on one prominent action is very crucial. From Hanon exercise No.14, the practice of mindfulness can be started in the way as mentioned earlier that the player has to be mindful with each finger on both hands when lifting up, moving down, touching the key, pressing the key, moving to the next finger, and moving to the next key. After the mind becomes more focused at each finger movement, the intention of moving each finger becomes noticeable. Those who do not have much dexterity and strength in fingers three and four may even notice the attention of careful playing whenever reaching finger three and four, and also the feeling of a little bit stress or relief before moving and after pressing their fingers on the keys correctly. In this case, the players will not only be mindful of moving their fingers, but they can start to notice their intention and other mental states before, during, and after moving and pressing the keys. This is an initial glimpse of how they can practice mindfulness of the body and mindfulness of the state of the mind, which are the first and the third components of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. Hence, being mindful while playing the finger exercise slowly and focusing on each movement of the finger will bring more concentration and mindfulness, which can be used to practice with other bodily movements later on.

Conclusion

Nowadays mindfulness is practiced and applied into various activities to enhance the skill of being present. It can also be applied to piano playing since learning or playing the piano is one activity that is widely learned among children and adults. Being a piano student, it is important to have finger strength, and the practice of Hanon piano finger exercise is a useful tool. The idea of mindfulness practice can be applied when practicing the Hanon exercise by playing mindfully and slowly in order to pay attention to every single movement of each finger without losing the focus all through the time of practice. This activity can be used as a leisurely individual playing or included in the piano class as a short session in order to gradually cultivate the players with mindfulness. Practicing piano finger exercise mindfully, even in a short time, can help establish the familiarity of being mindful. As this activity is taken more often or becomes a routine, the player will be instilled with mindfulness bit by bit each day. As mindfulness is taught widely in various activities, practicing Hanon exercises with very slow speed can be a useful, optional, preliminary tool for initial mindfulness practice among those who play the piano whether professional or amateur.

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