

# Performing With Ease, Part 4

## Rising Above Performance Anxiety

By Rob Falvo

Stage fright and performance anxiety are fears that come up when one is self-conscious. Feelings of dread, worry, apprehension, angst, nervousness, and an overall unease are commonly felt when self-consciousness is present.

"I have to be on stage now and I feel so nervous. All I want is this feeling to go away."

"I am on stage now and I feel trapped. I just want to leave but cannot. What am I going to do?"

These thoughts are common and, when believed, they will pull you into thinking that *you are* the fear. A typical response to fear is to want it gone or deny that it is there. The result is the body contracting, pulling in, and shortening. This makes movement more difficult, tight, and uncomfortable. To notice the discomfort is all that it takes to be free of it.

Suppose you are on stage ready to perform and this fear is triggered. It will cause your body to move with excess tension. Typically, your neck will come forward from your body and your chin will rise up because your back neck muscles will shorten. Your shoulders will also rise up from your torso and pull inwards; muscles in your torso will tighten, restricting your breath; and your hips will pull forward, causing your knees and ankles to lock. Everybody works the same way; it is the typical fear response.

When you see clearly that you are not these

thoughts that create fear (they are just passing through the conditioned mind), the excess tension will drop away and you will be free to perform without interference. To realize that you are more than just your thoughts, rather than be controlled by them, is freedom. Thoughts of feeling not worthy, not good enough, or small, come and go based on one's conditioning and is part of the human condition. In order to break the chain, you only need to witness the falseness that you are your thoughts. With an interest in this work, everything you do becomes a vehicle for reflection to witness this amazing human ability—to see yourself and the extraordinary miracle of life. It draws you in and carries you to want to know who you are.

When there is self-awareness, there is only direct, simple, and easy movement. We all have had this experience. Just take a minute to remember a performance that gave you such pleasure that time seemed to move extraordinarily fast or seemed to not exist at all. These are the times when you were going with the flow of life without any interference from fear or anxiety—being absorbed in the activity going on. The activity was happening through you, you were not doing it.

With this openness, clarity, understanding, and direction, stage fright (performance anxiety) has no place to live. Self-awareness happens when there is no identification with

thoughts (or there are no thoughts), and movement is pure and unconditional. It is the state of being outside of conditioned patterns, and there is spontaneity, easiness, lightness, and direct action.

Self-awareness and self-consciousness are not opposites, just as love and hate are not opposites. Self-awareness is there before self-consciousness sets in, and when self-consciousness leaves, there is self-awareness, just as love is there before hate (fear), and when hate leaves there is love. Self-consciousness comes out of conditioning—a memory from the past, a habit. Self-awareness is present-moment freshness.

### HOW TO BECOME SELF-AWARE

We all want the answers to "getting it right," to "doing the right thing," and to "being somebody different than who we think we are." We are all conditioned to *try* to do the right thing. When we think like this (which is almost all the time), we are end gaining: going for an end-result without paying attention to the process. When there is end gaining, there is excess tension in the body, and we are moving through life as if driving with the brakes on. Life is process, and there is only the moment, so if you believe that you need a certain end result in order to be happy, then you will move with more tension than is necessary.

If we are *trying* to be *right*, there is a belief



The relaxed feeling when at soundcheck.



In the spotlight in front of thousands of people at the performance two hours later.

that there is something to get *right*. Is this really true? Think about it before answering. Is there anything in life that is inherently right or wrong, or is there just conscious or unconscious action? What judgments are we bringing to any situation? Think about these questions and begin to notice what habits you bring with you when you are performing.

What can we do to become self-aware? There is nothing one needs to do, because awareness is already there. We all *try* to become the best musicians, best people, best this or that. When this is really seen for what it is (fear), all the trying disappears. This doesn't mean that we stop doing what we have a passion for, but after the pushing stops we are left with clear, direct, flowing movement. So it is possible to stop all the striving by just noticing our conditioning, our habits, and our unconscious tendencies as we are on stage. In that noticing there is a shift, and fear drops away.

This is real change, real understanding. It is so simple that we tend to overlook it. We all want the answers, so we go to what can give us answers. We find some technique that can help nerves, or a pill that can stop the shaking. This is at best a temporary fix, a gimmick that can maybe "get you through" the piece you are performing at that moment, but it will never end the suffering that exists while you are on stage.

#### WANTING APPROVAL OR ACCEPTANCE

Performance anxiety happens when the performer wants approval or acceptance. There is an agenda or a belief accompanied by expectations. Resistance occurs based on wanting a certain outcome. There cannot be freedom of expression when there is an agenda or a belief that you need to perform a certain way. Notice each time you go on stage what your expectations are. "I need to go out there and prove myself." I hear this a lot from seasoned performers as well as students. Notice what this thought does to you when you go on stage. Does it cause tension in your body, preventing you from expressing yourself clearly? Is your mind creating scenarios that can distract you from focusing on the music?

Thoughts are conditioned, and our minds create scenarios. If they come from fear (which can also be described as envy), jealousy, anger, hate, guilt, pride, or shame, a separation occurs between you and the world. Thoughts of not being good enough or less talented than others can come up, creating the illusion that these thoughts are true and they are who you are. This interferes with free and easy movement.

We all are conditioned to think this way and are pulled by these thoughts each day until it is seen clearly that we are not these thoughts. Thoughts (and the accompanying emotions) come and go, so how can you be those thoughts if they are always changing?

#### WORKING ON YOURSELF

"I am working on myself" is a phrase I hear a lot. It typically means that we are trying to get better, or trying to find a better way to be, or wanting a change. It is positive to want this in life, and most people find it desirable. However, we all are conditioned to think that *working* on yourself is the way you become better. If you are not *working* on yourself to get better, than you are not trying.

When I believed that I needed to *work* on myself, I believed that I had problems I needed to get rid of. What I found was an endless pit of past situations to analyze and understand, which sometimes created temporary relief but mostly created more tension.

When I clearly see that all I have to do is notice the interference to moving easily, I am at peace and, paradoxically, change happens. A shift of attention and perspective takes place in the mind, and I go from thinking that I need to change to just wanting to observe what is happening. Belief systems, fears, and agendas drop away, leaving free and easy movement. It is sometimes believed that change cannot be that simple, but in my experience, it is.

#### LETTING GO OF THE FRIGHT

Letting go of stage fright or performance anxiety is not so much of an achievement as it is a discovery—a realization. We are not the fear; fear is just part of us and comes up from time to time until it doesn't. When this is seen as an observation rather than an intellectual understanding, it doesn't pull us away from focusing on our performance.

Performing becomes effortless since it has no identification with fear anymore. Fear can arise, but it is not a threat. There is no more suffering fear since it is all right when it comes up. There is a saying: "Are you experiencing suffering or suffering your experiences?" The beginning of understanding or peace of mind is when you begin to see that it is all right to have anxiety or fear. At a certain point you might not mind it at all, and at that point you can see it clearly for what it is: a conditioned story that comes up in the mind when triggered by certain situations.

Everything in life is a catalyst for seeing who you are, how you react to things, and what triggers fear, discomfort, or stories in your mind. The work I am describing here is not about learning anything; it is about seeing what is going on right in front of you. This is about something very simple and basic to all of us: observation. When there is no question about what to do, how to do it, or whether you are good enough to do it, there is no fear and no stage fright. There is just easy movement.

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