

Manual for Beginners

This is a very basic and simple course in guitar for the Sufi Dances of Universal Peace. This manual was written as a support resource for our video lessons on sufidanceguitar.weebly.com, but will also help those who cannot easily view those videos.

If you are able to view the video lessons on our web site, then use these manuals as a source of further information to help you in your study. You may start by watching the first few videos, or you may start by skimming this manual, returning to it for clarification of the video lessons. Play along with the videos; pause them when needed.

You may contact us for any further help you need. It is our pleasure and joy to serve you in your service to the Dances.

First Things First

The highest priority of a good musician for the Dances of Universal Peace is to be a true servant of the Dances, a servant of the Peace they point to and the Peace they generate. The musician's foundational step in this is to serve the Dance leader, and to be in harmony with the leader's intentions.

Rhythm and Melody

In playing guitar for the Dances, your strumming rhythm has the highest priority--it needs to be the focus as you learn. The goal is to play with a definite and confident rhythm. The #1 purpose of the guitar is to support the Dancers in their rhythm as well as in staying in tune.

If you still have doubts about your ability after these practice sessions, perhaps one or two lessons in flatpicking rhythm with a local guitarist will make up for any deficiencies. Such a teacher could probably advise you when your rhythm is strong enough to play for the Dances.

Develop your ear. If a dance leader sings a new dance tune, a new guitarist should be able to sing that melody back to the leader accurately without a lot of effort. If this is difficult for you, consider supplementing these lessons with a few visits to a music teacher early on.

YOUR MUSICAL TOOLS

1) A decent steel-string guitar

If you can't borrow one, then you might find a serviceable guitar at a dependable store such as the inexpensive Guitar Center franchise. Have a knowledgeable guitarist friend whom you really trust pick you out a decent \$150+ guitar from those listed later in this paper. (Return it if a repairman can't adjust the action to make it easy to play.)

2) A decent, inexpensive chromatic tuner

We highly recommend the Snark guitar tuner (the red one, cost approx \$13 at amazon.com). If you buy a tuner, make sure someone at the store will help you learn to use your tuner initially. It may help if you buy your first set of good light gauge strings from them.

3) A Shubb capo for steel string guitar (approx \$20)

4) Four "thin gauge" Fender guitar flat picks

A music store will probably want to sell you expensive equipment and lessons. Don't buy them! Once you have the basic equipment you need, wait on any further buying for 2 months! Consult with us first.

Guitar and Capo-Buying Tips

Lower-end beginner's guitars start in the \$150-\$250 price range, and then you will need to add the cost of a used case, an extra \$25 to \$150 on Craigslist or Ebay.

You will need a loud, large-bodied guitar for volume. Ask a local accomplished guitarist whom you *really trust* to come with you to test

used or new guitars at Guitar Center. Or you may choose to pay more at a more service-oriented local store that is highly recommended. If you buy a used guitar, return it if an independent repairman cannot make it easy to play.

Models of guitars can change yearly, but here are some thoughts. In 2014 my first choice at a Guitar Center store was the \$220 Ibanez V-70. My second choice was the \$150 Epiphany model PR15. However, if you choose this inexpensive guitar, I strongly suggest that you have an expert friend play five of them that are in stock, and then you can pick the best one of the five. (Call the store before you go to find out when they will have five in stock.) Don't be rushed in this decision. The best guitar choice of all at Guitar Center is their approximately \$420 Eastman model AC120.

An electronic tuner is a must for easy tuning. Models change. Currently you can choose the latest red Snark Chromatic Tuner for all six strings. (At amazon.com this costs about \$13.) Other tuners are not as easy for new students to use. Always clip your tuner inside the sound hole of your guitar to store it, as it is fragile.

There are specially made Open G Tuning guitar string sets that keep your guitar in tune much better. They are good for beginners, but you can never change the guitar from open tuning while using these strings.

Ask for these string gauges: .055, .055, .036, .026, .026, 014. Six numbers are given for the six different strings on your guitar. You can order these strings from Larry at Thin Man Company, 510-521-2613, info@thinmanmusic.com.

A capo clamps onto the neck of the guitar in order to change the key. Capos are sold in most guitar shops. Use only the Shubb 6-String capo, about \$25. Or if you need to watch your pennies, you could buy a "double strap elastic 12-string capo," \$4 from elderly.com. This is a less desirable option. Do not buy a different capo unless someone who really knows capos well suggests it.

See our diagrams or videos, and clamp the Shubb capo on your guitar so it is just touching the 5th fret. Then fine-tune your guitar with your electronic tuner.

Tuning Your Guitar from Standard to Open G Tuning

List of how the strings are tuned:

E string up to G;

A down to G;

D stays D;

G stays G;

B down to G;

E down to D.

So, you end up with GGDGGD.

Now you are able to just strum down across all strings with your thumb and play along with most Dances. Try to have some fun with this.

Learning How to Flatpick

Many students who didn't have access to our videos and had never touched a guitar before have quickly learned to flatpick a guitar through watching the videos and/or through the following simple exercises.

If you are going to play for a group of more than 15 or so people you will need to use a flat pick. Why? Without one, your guitar won't be loud enough to be heard when there are a number of people in the room, and your hands will get very tired quickly.

First you learn how to strum and how to give a downbeat with a flat pick. You learn how to use a flat pick as a drummer would use a drum stick. At first the pick feels like a chunk of plywood in your hand--it feels terrible--but through an attitude of selfless service it will become easy and sound beautiful.

It is important to be able to use a flat pick in a conscious, smooth manner, so please take your time in the following exercise. Hiring a

teacher is not essential if you will master these practices.

Exercise: Playing for an Angel Dervish

We urge you to concentrate as deeply as possible on mastering this exercise. It may take a number of fifteen-minute practice sessions before you feel like you have it and are ready to move on.

- I. Sit quietly with your eyes closed. Imagine an “angel dervish” turning—spinning—in front of you. She asks you to provide a smooth and flowing sound for her to spin to, as consistent as the sound of a waterfall. Open your eyes, pick up your guitar, and begin to play.
- II. Point the tip of your flat pick toward the hole in the guitar. Hold the flat pick in any manner you like, as long as it is between the thumb and index finger of your right hand.
- III. Strum *up* and *down* over all the guitar strings as evenly and as smoothly as possible. The more flowing and refined your sound is, the more you will attract the angel dervish to earth. After a while chant the sound HU gently as you continue to practice.

It's not essential, but it would be helpful if you could find a friend to imitate an angel dervish turning while you practice the following exercises.

- IV. Keep your right wrist as loose as Jello, and as elastic as a rubber band. If the pick falls out of your hand sometimes, that is a good sign--it means you're loose and relaxed in this practice. Your wrist should also, if possible, twist and turn in half circles away from and perpendicular to the top of the guitar instead of just going up and down over the strings. It's also good to allow your right forearm always to rest easily on the guitar.
- V. Once you feel comfortable and relaxed with all this, begin to

speed up. Repeat steps III and IV with the pick going up and down over the strings as fast as you can manage, without tightening up, while still keeping the sound smooth and even (without adding volume).

- VI. Now repeat step V while increasing the volume of your playing louder and louder and still keeping it as “angelic” as possible. It may take a few practice sessions for you to play angelically at high speed and high volume.

Steps IV through VI may feel clumsy and awkward for a while, but even if they do, that feeling will pass! Soon you will be making a nice sound.

These steps and the next one that follows may be the most vital yet simple practices of your career, so concentrate on them as much as you can. Just do the best you can. The dancers will appreciate whatever small amount of mastery you can bring to your playing.

- VII. Only *after* you have mastered the above steps can you go on to this next practice: strumming while you sing the *Er Rahman ,Er Rahim Introductory Bismillah Dance* that is still done at the beginning of some dance meetings. (To be posted on our website soon.)

If you do not know this simple two-note song, have your dance leader sing and record it into your recorder or voicemail, or listen to it on sufidanceguitar.weebly.com. Strongly emphasize the AH syllable by hitting the bass string nearest the ceiling harder with a single strum when you sing the AH, and then immediately go back to strumming up and down with the loose wrist strum when singing the LA syllable.

This is called *emphasizing the downbeat*, and it tells the dancers when to step on their leading foot (usually the right). It is important to remember to keep playing freely and “angelically” between the AH downbeats, because if you concentrate so much on accentuation of the AH syllable that the rhythm gets choppy, the overall rhythm of the dance can be easily lost.

Tip: Remember, the pick may well feel like a big piece of plywood in your hand for a while but you can easily grow to love it. Keep returning to the practice of the 6 steps given above until you are sure that you are over any choppiness in your rhythm.

Learning Dance Melodies

At this point we suggest you put down the guitar and hum along with some of our dances on sufidanceguitar.weebly.com until you have memorized the tunes to one or two you like. Then you can have some fun and strum the guitar rhythmically in any fashion you like while you hum or sing your favorites. As long as you keep your guitar in tune with your Snark tuner this exercise can sound just great as is! And if you will use some of the same strumming and downbeat techniques you learned in the Angel Dervish exercises above, that will advance your playing skills quickly.

Finding a Coach

It will be helpful to have another guitarist evaluate your guitar rhythm at some time early in your course of study. Any guitar-playing friend who enjoys flatpicking may be able to help you with this. But do also get together with a more experienced Sufi guitarist for support and mentoring at least once every 6 months until you've played at a Dance meeting regularly for at least two years. This will keep you humble and growing.

However... *Do not feel intimidated by a virtuoso guitarist!* Not all good guitarists make good mentors.

Remember that even if your playing feels clumsy to you, as long as you can maintain the rhythm well, most any nice sound you make will be better than the Dances having no accompaniment at all.

From this point on some students feel playing along with Dances on YouTube on a regular basis is quite helpful, as long as this practice is not intimidating to you and as long as you tune frequently

with your Snark tuner.

Sitting In With a Live Mentor

If you are part of a new Dance circle: At some point It would be great if you can get to a Dance meeting where an experienced guitarist plays. Ask this person beforehand for their help. Ask if they would consider coming early to coach you, and/or maybe let you play very softly next to them, halfway thru the dance meeting, if they feel you are ready to do that.

Second best would be to show up at the Dance early and ask if you can play very softly (with your bare thumb, if need be) in the corner, where no one can hear you.

If you can not find an experienced Sufi Dance guitarist you are welcome to have your local dance leader get in touch with us to inquire about a free video-coaching session (via Skype or similar) with one of our guitar mentors. Either way, proceed on through the steps below.

Playing at a Dance Meeting

When you have obtained some mastery of these steps we have outlined, you can start playing right away--*as long as you can follow the Dance leader.*

1) Rehearse the *Introductory Bismillah Dance* or another monotone dance melody with the Dance leader. Have the leader show you what *specific* physical and verbal signals they will give you when they want to end a Dance or get louder or softer, or speed up or slow down a Dance. Then watch the leader's feet to see what that new rhythm will be. This rehearsal need not take more than 5 minutes.

2) Remember, all changes need to come from the leader (even if you think things should be going differently). Do not let the rhythm speed up until your leader signals you. Pay close attention to keeping your rhythm steady, as many Dances want to speed up on their own.

3) After a Dance, go home and practice some of that evening's Dances for at least 15 minutes. Do this the same night, while they are fresh in your mind.

4) Meet again with the Dance leader and briefly repeat step #1. Just before the Dance meeting is a good time to meet. Practice giving an effective downbeat for some more rhythmically complicated Dances of the leader's choosing. (For example, try "The Blessings of God" and "Those Who Love" dances.)

Save the more challenging Dances (some of which are listed later in this paper) until you are more experienced and the leader is familiar with your skill level. If a Dance is too hard for you then don't play for that dance. Remember the Dancers' singing is enough music by itself; the guitar is not essential.

Use your bare thumb instead of a pick at those times when you are unsure or fumbling with new tunes.

5) Have patience and trust the leader's judgment. A few shorter practice sessions might be better than one long session in which you both burn out.

6) Follow the steps on this website and/or write us when you are ready for more of a challenge. Visit the websites for Dances of Universal Peace, International or Dances of Universal Peace, North America (or another of the regional Dance networks). And always: ask Allah if this work is yours to do right now, and listen for the answer in the silence of meditation.

More on Playing for the Dances:

1) Your focus on providing a steady rhythm with a consistent emphasis on the downbeat is by far the most important thing you can do to support the Dance. Your rhythm is providing a "heartbeat" to unify the Dancers. At all times, watch the leader's feet, which will

show you the rhythm the leader wants to create. If at some point you sense that something about the Dance is not perfect, then focus even more closely on the leader's feet. (It is always helpful to play standing up.)

Your rhythm should accentuate the natural rhythm of the sacred phrases being sung by the Dancers. Remember, the Dance will try to speed up. Again, DO NOT LET IT SPEED UP unless the leader signals for a faster rhythm.

2) Some Dance guitarists feel it is important to sing along with the Dance leader when possible. Whether it is sung out loud or held on the breath (silently), the sacred phrase or mantra must be uppermost in the musician's concentration,. This enables one to maintain an attunement with the leader, and *fana* (surrender) to the Dance. Then you will not get spaced out and will be able to resist "going off on your own trip."

Remember, you are not performing. Even if for a few minutes you are not watching the leader, you should be completely tuned in, serving the leader and the community with humility and attention.

So, feeling your heart, find a place in your voice that links up with the leader's voice. Such a practice coordinates the breath and the heart with the work of the hands, and aids immeasurably--more than hours of practice--in your ability to keep the proper rhythm. We highly recommend you practice being the humble servant at all times while playing. (The love of humble, selfless service has been the salvation of many of us).

3) Dancing can be a sacred act. The deeper the love of the One you have in your heart while you serve the Dancers, the greater the effect your music will have on helping raise the consciousness of everyone in the room. Murshid Samuel Lewis reflected this selfless devotion when he said: "If you play your instrument correctly no one will ever notice you--isn't that great?" (*Spiritual Dance and Walk*).

4) Once you have set your intention, relax and let the One do the

work. If you follow the suggestions we've offered, and really want to serve the One, then whatever you give from this attitude of love will be fine.

Confidence is 90% of the equation. Practice generates confidence. Your strong, steady rhythm is helping to create an atmosphere in which people can dance and sing in harmony with one another. If you should hit some wrong notes, know that these wrong notes will be no more than a tiny bubble in the great ocean of the whole atmosphere that is the Dance.

That said, it bears repeating once again that it is important to keep your guitar in tune during the Dance meeting, without disturbing the atmosphere.

5) Sometimes it is useful for you to practice the rhythm quietly while the leader sings through the melody with the dancers.... especially if it's a new or hard rhythm. You may wish to step outside of the circle to do this. It's even better if you can practice in this way while the leader is demonstrating the movements to the Dance. Try to play to yourself with your bare right thumb so you won't be heard or disturb the atmosphere.

It is far better, of course, to plan a practice session with the leader some days before the Dance meeting to play potential Dances. If practice time is not available, the leader could sing the tunes into your voicemail in advance of the Dance so you can practice them. Other than that, focus on practicing the Dances the leader likes that you find the most challenging.

More Tips

1) If you occasionally have to move or remove the capo because the Dancers can't sing in that key, do so carefully as you don't want to disturb the strings and then have to do whole lot of retuning. But also never be afraid to take a minute to retune. After a while you will get very fast and subtle with your retuning.

2) In the Walks, when Dancers are chanting a monotone wazifa, a lot of music can distract them from their inner experience and their own rhythm, so just give a simple open down strum on the first syllable of the wazifa to support them. It is very helpful for the guitarist to chant along with the wazifa as well.

3.) Volume: Adjust the volume of your playing to the size of the group and the room. Be sure the Dancers are able to hear the leader and each other's voices over your music. In smaller groups, try sitting down and playing more softly, or perhaps sit outside the circle.

As You Advance

Warning on Ego tripping: There is a very common tendency for the guitarist to want to rush into playing with the left hand, before having truly mastered strumming, playing with the right hand only. Ask your Dance leader for feedback to help you monitor your playing, and to let you know if they think you are getting ahead of yourself. It's a common ego trip. (Giving and receiving feedback with grace is a whole other subject that we won't cover here!) You want to grow, but you also want to stay humble. Remember to check in with a Sufi guitarist mentor at least every 6 months to keep you humble and growing. A more advanced local Dance guitarist may prove to be a good coach for you (or not).

When you have achieved some mastery of the right-handed strumming techniques, it will be time for you to move on in the video lessons in order to evolve your playing to the next level.

After you have mastered a number of the simple Dances, you will know when it is time to turn to the Dances that are more challenging to play. You may have to play softly on some of these Dances as you learn, so that the Dancers' voices will easily drown out any imperfections in your playing. You may choose to pick your spots on some of them, alternating playing a little with letting the Dancers' voices carry the tune by themselves.

A Few Common Dances for the Next Level:

Those Who Love

Hu Allah Echo Dance

May the Road Rise With You

Om Namoh Bhagavate

Blessings of God Dance

Estaferallah, La Illaha

Fill Your Cup

Ivdu Ha Shem B'Simcha

Wah Guruji Ka Khalsa

Return to Love

Oh Peace Deep and Divine

Radhe Bol