

THE BIG IDEAS

Dabble/Obsess/Hack

Which do you do when you're not in mastery?

Diligence

Diligence. Patience. Persistence. Success.

Loving the Plateau

Learn to love it.

Practice As a Noun

Build your practice.

Surrender

Be willing to look stupid.

Intentionality

What's your vision?

Homeostasis

Work it.

Pitfalls on the Path

Watch your step.

Master Commonplace

Make your life a practice.

Energy for Mastery

Let's be spent!!

Mastery

The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment

BY GEORGE LEONARD · PLUME © 1992 · 192 PAGES

“We fail to realize that mastery is not about perfection. It's about a process, a journey. The master is the one who stays on the path day after day, year after year. The master is the one who is willing to try, and fail, and try again, for as long as he or she lives.”

~ George Leonard from *Mastery*

Mastery.

If we have any desire to live at our highest potential, we **MUST** master the concept of Mastery. And George Leonard, a life-long learner, educator, teacher, author, and Aikido master is our ideal teacher.

This book is packed with simple, profound truths aimed at helping us re-orient ourselves from ineffective Dabbler, Obsessive and Hacker approaches to life to one of Mastery. Life's too short for anything other than our best, wouldn't you agree?

My vote: Let's dedicate our lives to a path of Mastery. Starting now.

DABBLER, OBSESSIVE & HACKER

“We all aspire to mastery, but the path is always long and sometimes rocky, and it promises no quick pay off. So we look for other paths, each of which attracts a different person.”

And those three other paths? The Dabbler. The Obsessive. And the Hacker.

- **The Dabbler:** Gets really into something for awhile and loves the quick results but the moment things fade, he/she's off to the next new thing—rationalizing that it just wasn't a good fit. Hence, no mastery.
- **The Obsessive:** A bottom-line type of person who wants to get the tennis stroke right on the first lesson and, when results start to slow, pushes even harder to make it work, ignoring the fact that plateaus are part of the path of mastery—pushing and pushing mercilessly to create a continuing upward curve. Then? A sharp, sharp decline. Hence, no mastery.
- **The Hacker:** After sort of getting the hang of something, the hacker is content to stay at a plateau—never really improving his skills beyond the first basic level. Hacking, hacking hacking. Hence, no mastery.

You can find these three alternatives to mastery in work, sport, and relationships. Where do *you* show up? Can you think of some examples of how you may have shown up as a Dabbler, Obsessive or Hacker? In your career? In your hobbies? In your relationships?

(In my non-mastery detours, I've mastered the Dabbler persona—in hobbies (tennis, golf, martial arts, yoga, triathlon, etc.), relationships, creative projects, etc. I'm all about it until the initial buzz wears off and the “work” begins. You? :)

DILIGENCE

“How do you best move toward mastery? To put it simply, you practice diligently, but you practice primarily for the sake of the practice itself.”

For the rest of my life, every time I hear the word “diligently” I will hear the voice of my Vipassana meditation teacher.

I don’t remember how many times during my 10 day silent (no talking, no eye contact, no computers, no journal, nothing but 10 hours of meditation a day for 10 days) meditation class. But it was a lot.

As he guided us through our arduous practice (the 10 days was easily one of the hardest thing I’ve ever done), he’d say: *“Work diligently. Diligently. Work patiently and persistently. Patiently and persistently. And you’re bound to be successful. Bound to be successful.”*

Again. And again. And again.

I experienced many deep insights during the 10 days. This idea of embracing diligence, patience and persistence was certainly one of the most powerful.

It’s amazing how impatient we can get, eh? I know I’ve certainly mastered that way of being. :)

The path of mastery, however, isn’t about the high we feel after a motivational seminar or one great meditation. It’s about showing up. Practicing. And mastering something we care about as we diligently, patiently, and persistently show up.

How are you doing on that front?

Do you get really into something for a week (or two or three) and then kinda fade? That’s not gonna get us very far. And that’s the whole point of Leonard’s brilliant little book.

“At the heart of it, mastery is practice. Mastery is staying on the path.”

~ George Leonard

ENDLESS CLIMAXES

A path of mastery involves plateaus—often long ones—where nothing appears to be improving and, in fact, can be pretty boring in a lot of ways.

Do you see a lot of that reality portrayed in sitcoms or soaps or in commercials or in movies? Hmmmm... Not so much, eh?

Leonard says: “In all of this, the specific content isn’t nearly as destructive to mastery as is the rhythm. One epiphany follows another. One fantasy is crowded out by the next. Climax is piled upon climax. There’s no plateau.”

As Leonard points out, we’re bombarded with images of “endless climaxes”—after a second and a half of work, it’s Miller time!

He advises: “If you’re planning to embark on a master’s journey, you might find yourself bucking current trends in American life. Our hyped-up consumerist society is engaged, in fact, in an all out war on mastery.”

Let’s take a closer look at how we can deal with that challenge, starting with:

LOVING THE PLATEAU

“Goals and contingencies, as I’ve said, are important. But they exist in the future and the past, beyond the pale of the sensory realm. Practice, the path of mastery, exists only in the present. You can see it, hear it, smell it, feel it. To love the plateau is to love the eternal now, to enjoy the inevitable spurts of progress and the fruits of accomplishment, then serenely to accept the new plateau that waits just beyond them. To love the plateau is to love what is most essential and enduring in your life.”

" Perhaps the best you can hope for on the master's journey, whether your art be management or marriage, badminton or ballet—is to cultivate the mind and heart from the beginning and at every stage along the way. For the master, surrender means there are no experts. There are only learners."

~ George Leonard

Ahhh...

The process.

Leonard beautifully captures his own process of discovering joy in the plateaus of his aikido practice—the moment when he found himself thinking: "Oh boy. Another plateau. Good. I can just stay on it and keep practicing. Sooner or later, there'll be another spurt." "It was one of the warmest moments on my journey."

How about you?

Have you ever experienced a time where you just felt in love with the PROCESS of becoming?

Again, goals and forward-looking gains are an important part of the process, but to achieve mastery, we MUST learn to love the plateaus—those times when we may or may not be seeing external rewards but when we can revel in the subtler joy of doing our best moment to moment to moment.

Let's love the process.

And in the long-run, to paraphrase Viktor Frankl, success will follow us precisely because we had forgotten to think about it.

PRACTICE AS A NOUN

"A practice (as a noun) can be anything you practice on a regular basis as an integral part of your life—not in order to gain something else, but for its own sake... For a master, the rewards gained along the way are fine, but they are not the main reason for the journey. Ultimately, the master and the master's path are one. And if the traveler is fortunate—that is, if the path is complex and profound enough—the destination is two miles farther away for every mile he or she travels."

Wow.

Do you (I mean, *really*) practice anything? Let alone HAVE a practice?

If we intend to be a master of our lives—in our self-development, our intimate and professional relationships, our work, our hobbies—we need to practice the skills inherent to mastering that subject AND make that practice a practice.

Practice as a noun. It's a powerful (!) concept.

Can you make your self-development a practice? Create rituals around your meditation or journaling or reading or exercising so that it's not a "when I can squeeze it in" kinda thing but a fundamental part of you? A practice you honor on your path to mastery.

How about your relationships? Are you practicing how to be a better partner to your significant other? Or consciously developing your relationship skills for a future partner if you're not currently in a relationship? Knowing how important appreciation is to the strength of a relationship, do you PRACTICE giving appreciation in your life? Have you made this a practice? ([See Notes](#) on Gay & Katie Hendricks for more on conscious living and loving practice ideas.)

How about your hobbies? Do you dabble or obsess or hack here or do you practice mastery? How can you create a true path to mastery in your golf game (or whatever hobby you love to do) by not just practicing more regularly but making the entire endeavor a practice?

What about simple things like washing the dishes or walking down the street? Can you make these mundane acts part of a bigger practice of living with grace, full breath and presence?

As they say, how you do anything is how you do everything.

How do *you* do anything?

"Consistency of practice is the mark of the master."

~ George Leonard

SURRENDER

"The courage of a master is measured by his or her willingness to surrender."

Reminds me of one of my favorite thoughts from Seneca's *Letters from a Stoic* ([see Notes](#)).

Seneca says: *"You can only acquire it successfully if you cease to feel any sense of shame."* And: *"You cannot, I repeat, successfully acquire it and preserve your modesty at the same time."*

How do we expect to learn something new if we aren't willing to look like an idiot for awhile?

One word: Impossible.

So we need to get over ourselves, surrender and have fun falling on our butts. (We shouldn't be taking ourselves so seriously anyway, right? :)

Is there something you've been holding back on out of fear of looking foolish?!?

Might now be a good time to swallow your pride and go for it?!? Perfect. I agree!

INTENTIONALITY

"It joins old words with new—character, willpower, attitude, imagining, the mental game—but what I'm calling intentionality, however you look at it, is an essential to take along on the master's journey."

Intentionality.

It's one of the Leonard's "keys" to mastery.

Do you have a clear vision of your ideal and do you appreciate the power of visualization?

Leonard shares this awesome quote from Arnold Schwarzenegger: *"All I know, is that the first step is to create the vision, because when you see the vision there—the beautiful vision—that creates the 'want power.' For example, my wanting to be Mr. Universe came about because I saw myself so clearly, being up there on stage and winning."*

HOMEOSTASIS

You know that thermostat you have in the house? Keeps the temperature within a set range? Bringing you back to the "homeostatic" point you selected?

Well, Leonard makes the point that, over a lifetime of certain habits, we've created our own little homeostatis in our lives. And when we change, even for the better, we're going to feel a natural tug back to how things were.

As they say, the bulk of the fuel used in a trip to space is in the lift-off phase when the rocket needs to escape the gravitational pull. Same thing here.

So, here are some tips from Leonard on how to deal with the inevitable tug:

1. **"Be aware of the way homeostasis works... don't panic or give up at the first sign of trouble."**
2. **"Be willing to negotiate with your resistance to change... The fine art of playing the edge in this case involves a willingness to take one step back for every two forward, sometimes vice versa."**
3. **"Develop a support system."**
4. **"Follow a regular practice."**
5. **"Dedicate yourself to lifelong learning."**

"Most people never run far enough on their first wind to find out they've got a second. Give your dreams all you've got and you'll be amazed at the energy that comes out of you."

~ William James

"But the real juice of life, whether it be sweet or bitter, is to be found not nearly so much in the products of our efforts as in the process of living itself, in how it feels to be alive."

~ George Leonard

PITFALLS ON THE PATH

"It's easy to get on the path of mastery. The real challenge lies in staying on it."

How true is THAT?!?

How many times have you started a new program and then burnt out and/or switched course? A lot? Yah. Me, too. :)

Leonard points out some pitfalls.

My personal favorite? "Obsessive goal orientation. As pointed out numerous times in this book, the desire of most people today for quick, sure, and highly visible results is perhaps the deadliest enemy of mastery."

We discussed this one before but I'm putting it here as a friendly reminder. Are you focusing too much on your goals and not enough on your consistent action!??

Don't forget Russell Simmons' wisdom ([see Notes](#) on *Do You!*): "I know some people say 'Keep your eyes on the prize,' but I disagree. When your eyes are stuck on the prize, you're going to keep stumbling and crashing into things. If you really want to get ahead, you've got to keep your eyes focused on the path."

Another pitfall?

Laziness. Leonard defines it for us as: "Disinclined to action or exertion; averse to labor, indolent; idle; slothful."

We know when we're being lazy. As Leonard says, practicing mastery is the absolute best solution to the problem.

My experience?

Just do what you say you're going to do. Again and again and again.

MASTERING THE COMMONPLACE

"Could all of us reclaim lost hours of our lives by making everything—the commonplace along with the extraordinary—a part of our practice?"

I love this practice. Why not make every moment an opportunity to express our mastery?

Whether you're driving to work or washing the dishes or doing any number of mundane tasks: why not take advantage of the opportunity to practice bringing your best to the moment?

GETTING ENERGY FOR MASTERY

"A human being is the kind of machine that wears out from lack of use. There are limits, of course, and we do need healthful rest and relaxation, but for the most part we gain energy by using energy... It might well be that all of us possess enormous stores of potential energy, more than we could ever hope to use."

That's beautiful.

How about you? Are you playing full out? How can you step it up a notch or two?

Leonard offers a variety of tips to get energy for mastery. Some of my favorites:

- *Set priorities and make decisions.* He says: "Indecision leads to inaction, which leads to low energy, depression, despair." What have you been putting off making a decision on? Make a decision. Get clear on what you're going to do. And do it.
- *Take action!* As an aikido master, he says: "It's instructive to watch the immediate surge of

clarity and energy during training that comes from the simplest act of writing one's name on a notice." Love that. What notice do YOU need to write your name on?!?

- *Get on the path of mastery and stay on it!!* This is perhaps the surest way to fuel your energy. As Leonard advises: "Much of the world's depression and discontent... can ultimately be traced to our unused energy, our untapped potential." How can you tap more of your potential today?!?

As we set off on our path of mastery and practice developing our (noun) practice, let us remember the wisdom of Fritz Perls, the founder of Gestalt therapy: "I don't want to be saved, I want to be spent."

So... How will you choose to spend your precious energy, my friend?!?

To Mastery,

B

Brian Johnson,
Heroic Philosopher CEO

"This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy. I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no 'brief candle' to me. It is sort of a splendid torch which I have a hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it over to future generations."

~ George Bernard Shaw

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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at heroic.us.