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The Journey to a More Complete Life How Everyone Possesses the Ability to Find Long-Term Fulfillment

Review by Stephen Wolter

In the mid 1980s, *Esquire* magazine began an annual series of articles about health, which it published under a special-section umbrella called “Ultimate Fitness.” Author George Leonard, whose work was featured in the series, wrote at the time that fitness had “less to do with running a 2:30 marathon than with living a good life.” In the fourth year of the series, the fitness section was dedicated to the concept of “mastery,” a process in which something difficult becomes progressively easier through practice, until it ultimately turns pleasurable.

According to Leonard, reader response to the *Esquire* articles about mastery was phenomenal, so much so that he decided the topic deserved book-length treatment. His book *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment* was originally published in 1991 and remains in print today, having gone back to the publisher for 30 printings.

One reason for the book’s continuing popularity — and not an altogether insignificant reason — may be its physical size. At 176 pages, you can read Leonard’s *Mastery* in approximately two to three hours. The book is barely larger than the palm of your hand and can be tossed into a briefcase while adding only a few ounces of extra weight. Let’s be honest here: Short books that cover some aspect of self-improvement are an ever-popular genre.

But an even more important reason that *Mastery* is still read 16 years after its publication may be that Leonard examines the topic of long-term fulfillment (something, just about everyone would agree, people want) and does so in straightforward, no-nonsense fash-

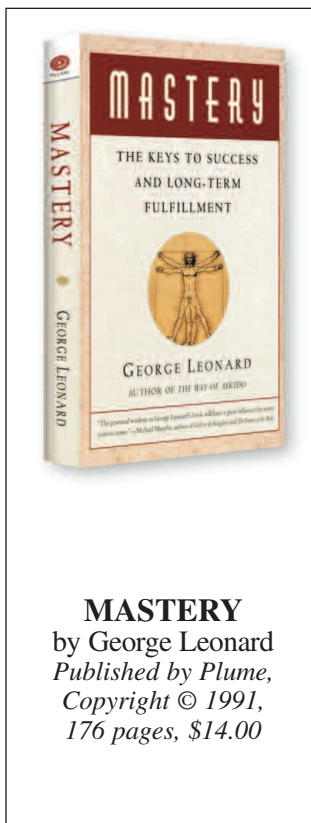
ion. In fact, much of the book is the antithesis to an idea that Leonard loathes, namely, quick-fix solutions to whatever ails us. The quick-fix, antimastery idea described in this slim book is everything Leonard stands against. “We are continually bombarded with promises of immediate gratification, instant success, and fast temporary relief,” he writes, “all of which lead in exactly the wrong direction.” For every reader out there who’s disillusioned by the notion of easy answers to difficult problems, Leonard’s book should hold immediate interest.

The path to mastery can sometimes seem like an endless road, filled with setbacks and periods when little or no progress is made. But according to Leonard, it’s the *journey* down that path that makes all the struggles worthwhile.

Getting on the Path

Leonard writes that mastery resists definition even though it is something that can be instantly recognized. And in the book’s first chapter, titled “What is Mastery?” he does a good job of dancing around a concrete definition of the term. Still, let’s go with what Leonard does provide, which is that mastery comes in many varieties, follows a number of unchanging laws and brings rich rewards.

Most importantly, mastery is neither a goal or destination, but, as he puts it, a process, a journey. According to Leonard, it doesn’t matter what you are trying to achieve, be it learning to type or learning the law, becoming a cook or becoming a doctor. Maybe it’s just trying to be a better person, or a more content one. In any case, it’s the *process* towards learning how to do or be those things that matters. That’s what mastery is all about.



MASTERY
by George Leonard
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176 pages, \$14.00

“There’s no way one can improve without practice. But the secret to mastery is when one begins to practice primarily for the sake of practice. Rather than being frustrated while on the plateau,” Leonard writes, ‘you learn to appreciate and enjoy it just as much as you do the upward surges.’ ”

The whole idea of mastering anything can be intimidating to many people, and Leonard writes that we tend to assume it is reserved for a relatively small number of individuals who possess exceptional abilities. But he believes the exact opposite is true. In his view, mastery is available to anyone who has started down the path of the learning process and is *willing to stay on it*.

Mastering the Basics

To illustrate what he means, he uses the example of someone who, while not a skilled athlete, wants to learn the game of tennis. A teacher is needed, one who starts by leading the tennis student along in a series of baby steps: how to hold a racket, the correct motion of a forehand swing, how to move the hips and shoulders together with the arm’s motion, and so on. The teacher stands in front of the student, on the same

side of the net, and tosses ball after ball for the student to hit — not very exciting, perhaps, but the student gets to practice hitting a lot of balls with the tennis racket.

The most basic elements of the game of tennis are learned, and they are learned over a period of, say, five weeks. Meanwhile the student grows frustrated. He was hoping for exercise, competition, fun on the court. None of that is happening, and while the student has improved in all of the skills that he’s practiced, he seems to have reached a plateau.

But the fact that the tennis student has learned some basics of the game, and that he has also reached a plateau during the five weeks of instruction, are two key ideas connected with mastery. At some point during the student’s initial period of instruction there was a period of learning, and most likely, it took place in a short amount time; a “spurt,” as Leonard refers to it.

That spurt of learning was followed by a longer period in which very little progress was evident to the student, just a lot of repetition, like practicing a forehand over and over and over. This is the period that Leonard

calls the plateau. “There’s really no way around it,” Leonard writes. “Learning any new skill involves relatively brief spurts of progress, each of which is followed by a slight decline to a plateau somewhat higher in most cases than that which preceded it.”

So here’s the challenge for the tennis student, or any learner, who is trying to achieve mastery: How does one stay committed to the diligent practice that is necessary for improving the required skills, when the plateaus are often boring or even disheartening? Leonard doesn’t mince words. There’s no way one can improve without practice. But the secret to mastery is when one begins to practice primarily for *the sake of practice*. “Rather than being frustrated while on the plateau,” Leonard writes, “you learn to appreciate and enjoy it just as much as you do the upward surges.”

The Enemies of Mastery: The Dabbler, the Obsessive and the Hacker

According to Leonard, the journey toward mastery is full of detours, and those detours start with the very people who are trying to make the journey. The author describes three different personality types who may be attracted to the idea of mastery, and who actually take the first steps in search of it, but who later deviate from the route that leads to achievement. He paints these personalities in broad, but distinctive strokes, and labels them the Dabbler, the Obsessive and the Hacker. Because the path to mastery is long and sometimes difficult, Leonard muses that these three personalities are drawn to other routes.

The Dabbler approaches new opportunities, pastimes or relationships with enthusiasm, and is overjoyed with the first signs of progress. But that joy quickly fades when the first plateau appears. A new job might get old very quickly, or a relationship can sour after the initial ardor cools down a bit. The Dabbler looks for a new pursuit before traveling any appreciable distance down the path towards mastery.

The Obsessive is a person who never settles for second best. Like the Dabbler, he is thrilled by the first spurt of progress because it is exactly what he expected. He worked hard to achieve that growth, but expects continued growth, even perfection, and he expects it *now*.

Because of this, he pushes himself mercilessly, ignoring the advice of friends who preach moderation. He’s not like the Dabbler who gives up easily — he is, in fact, the opposite, a person who increases his efforts when he does not succeed immediately. Because of this, he doesn’t understand the value of the plateau.

The Hacker, after learning and practicing enough to reach a plateau, finds himself content to stay there

indefinitely. He gets comfortable very fast, and then doesn't aspire to much more. As Leonard describes him, he might be a professional, a doctor or teacher perhaps, who doesn't bother with professional meetings. He's a worker who does just enough to get by. Or, back to our friend the tennis player, he develops a really solid forehand, but settles for a so-so backhand.

To Leonard, these three characters are emblematic of why so many people are not on the path to mastery. But for those individuals who conquer the negative personality traits of the Dabbler, Obsessive or Hacker, and who do find themselves pursuing mastery, an even bigger enemy awaits. This enemy is nothing less than modern American society and its rampant consumerism.

Instead of the path toward mastery, American culture — in Leonard's eyes — creates a path of endless climax, one in which each new experience is supposed to top the previous one. The path of endless climax, unfortunately, does not offer much opportunity to experience the plateau.

It's no surprise to Leonard that a culture in which the peak moment has to be *every* moment, would also find itself attracted to speed, quickness, and obtaining the next big thing *right now*. As mentioned earlier, Leonard has nothing but disdain for the concept of the quick-fix.

If anything is the polar opposite of mastery, it's the idea that great achievements can be achieved quickly and with little effort. Leonard mocks a culture that sells — even celebrates — concepts such as total fitness in 30 minutes a week, six-second abs, minute meals and speed reading as genuine substitutes for living a full and truly rewarding life. In Leonard's description of the pursuit of mastery, there is no such thing as a quick-fix solution. It simply does not exist.

A Look at the Five Master Keys

Once a person makes the decision to pursue mastery, finding a way to successfully follow through and stay committed to this pursuit requires the proper tools. Leonard lists five tools that are essential for this task, tools that he refers to as "master keys." Leonard's keys are: (1) instruction, (2) practice, (3) surrender, (4) intentionality and (5) the edge; however the strongest and most accessible of these tools seem to be instruction and practice.

Self-instruction is certainly a possibility when learning a skill, and even practical for some pursuits. But on the journey to mastery, Leonard cautions against it. "The self-taught person is on a chancy path," he writes, and then goes on to describe a method for finding a good instructor instead.

This includes looking at a teacher's credentials, personality and even his students. How a teacher interacts with his students, what are his methods for instruction,

and so on are issues that should be considered by the potential pupil.

Leonard draws on examples from his own life in this section of the book, sharing the story of when he was a young flight instructor during World War II. He is candid about both his successes and failures in the role of instructor, sharing with the reader how he had once made the mistake of separating his top-notch students from the mediocre ones.

The author writes that after the end of the war he came across one of his mediocre students, a shy man who finally got the nerve to tell Leonard exactly what he felt about his negative experience of having Leonard as a flight instructor. The author writes, "I had no adequate reply. Long before that time, I had begun to feel guilty about the way I had handled my first assignment as instructor. In fact, I never again segregated my students as I had done the first time."

The second of Leonard's five keys is practice. As described by the author, practice should be both a verb and a noun when considering mastery. As a verb, the repeated act of practicing helps a person improve a particular skill. But on the journey towards mastery, Leonard finds that practice is even more significant as a noun — practice implies something that people are. A practice in this case is a calling, a vocation, an integral part of a person's life, or something one loves. "At the heart of it, mastery is practice," Leonard writes. "Mastery is staying on the path."

More Tools for the Journey

In addition to his five keys, Leonard describes additional tools that will aid those trying to attain mastery. It's quite common for people to complain about how they lack energy when it comes to self-improvement. The desire may be there, but somehow even the simplest tasks are ignored, while precious energy is wasted on busywork.

Leonard traces this lack of energy back to childhood

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and hypothesizes that from our earliest years we are taught that curiosity and independence are bad, while conformity is good. You may or may not agree with his ideas on how some of us evolve into lethargic 40-year-olds, but his antidote for this lethargy is full of solid and applicable advice. Maintain a program of physical fitness, he writes. Acknowledge the negative aspects of your life, but also, accentuate the positive ones. And tell the truth in your daily life. He describes the positive effect the truth has on an organization, when its executives are willing to tell it like it is.

There are other suggestions for regaining and maintaining energy that Leonard includes, and, on the flip side, he lists a baker's-dozen worth of pitfalls that can negate energy, commitment and any good intentions along the path towards mastery. These include personality traits such as an obsession with goals; being too competitive; a lazy lifestyle; vanity; and an unhealthy reliance on drugs. According to the author, it's often easy stepping onto the path of mastery, but getting way-laid is unfortunately all too common.

Exercising the Body and the Mind

It should be noted that throughout the book Leonard makes frequent references to both Zen philosophy and, especially, to the martial art of aikido. He writes of the great influence aikido has had in his life, since he began studying it in 1970. As such, he includes a series of mind-body exercises from his Leonard Energy Training (LET), a discipline that was inspired by aikido, and which he feels will aid anyone in search of mastery. According to the author, "LET uses the body as a metaphor for the way you deal with the problems of daily life, and a learning facility for changing the way you deal with those problems, whether the problems are physical, mental or emotional." It is stated in the book that since 1973, LET has been introduced to approximately 50,000 people including corporate executives, couples and athletes — it's safe to say that since the book's publication that number has largely increased due to Leonard's continued popularity.

But beyond these exercises, the author sees aikido as a perfect example for illustrating mastery in action. He describes aikido as the most difficult of all martial arts, one that requires instruction from a skilled teacher, and something that takes years to learn. And with mastery, one must always be open to learning, no matter how long the journey.

The Appeal of Mastery

The philosophy described in *Mastery* has something of a timeless quality to it, and that may be its greatest strength, along with its greatest appeal. The concept of mastery, as explained by Leonard, carries with it a simplicity that stands in stark contrast to our modern consumerist culture. And keep in mind, this book was written nearly a decade before the Internet and iPods were part of the national consciousness.

If in 1991 Leonard thought we were faced with numerous distractions that tempt us from the path of mastery, imagine what he could describe should he ever wish to publish a revised edition of his book.

Leonard, however, isn't advocating that our entire culture junk our laptop computers and cell phones. He is not writing about taking a giant step backward in time to some idealistic simpler time. That's not even a realistic option. Instead, he's describing a kind of road map through our modern world that leads to meaning, in spite of all the unsatisfying distractions that face us.

Towards the end of *Mastery*, Leonard writes that regardless of age, upbringing, or education, we are made up of mostly unused potential, and that it's our evolutionary destiny to use up that potential. That's a powerful thought, and an inspiring one — that each one of us has the ability to discover an unlimited amount of potential that we all possess.

Happily, putting all that potential to work *requires* work on our part. There are no shortcuts on the road to mastery, and that, according to Leonard, is one reason mastery provides such long-term fulfillment. It's a lifetime plan that provides satisfaction found in the simple virtues of learning, and practice, practice, practice. ■

The author: George Leonard has been called "the granddaddy of the consciousness movement" by *Newsweek* and *American Health* has dubbed him "the poet-philosopher of American health in the broadest sense." Leonard has written more than 10 books, including *The Life We Are Given*

(1995) co-authored with Esalen Institute founder Michael Murphy and *The Way of Aikido* (1999) as the most recent. He is the president of the Esalen Institute and founder of Leonard Energy Training, a practice inspired by his decades-long interest in aikido.

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