

MASTERY

What is Mastery?

George Leonard suggests it can be instantly recognised yet resists definition, a brief Internet search threw up some possibilities:

The ability to use knowledge. Differing levels of application indicate the level of mastery at which the individuals presently perform.

www.educatorsvirtualmentor.com/conceptGuide.html

The acquisition or the process of acquiring proficiency in an area of practice.

www.eoni.com/~visionquest/library/glossary.html

Self-help, NLP, Life transformation programmes, spirituality etc...The term mastery is suddenly appearing everywhere; and as a result is at risk of being devalued and diluted as a concept. Mastery, in my mind is not some spiritual esoteric throw away that sounds very eastern, mystical and impressive. Perhaps these links have come about from the often-quoted link between mastery and the martial art disciplines. Indeed perhaps the definitive text on Mastery by George Leonard uses the world of aikido for many examples and explanations.

It would seem at the moment people love to talk big about mastery or market themselves as teachers of the mastery principles. We can attend the “mastery” seminar or programme, maybe even become some kind of mastery practitioner as a result. Great teachers or performers in actual fact would likely shudder at the thought of being referred to as a master. They often describe how the more they study the more aware they become of their lack of understanding, which leads to more study and practice and so on; almost the anti-thesis of the current philosophy. Do you remember those clichéd posters of the 90’s “life’s a journey not a destination”?

Another way of considering this is that true mastery may always be elusive, perhaps unachievable because it is a target that is never stationary, it moves over time. Although not directly relating to mastery consider the following quote from Bruce Lee in the Tao of Jeet Kune Do to expand on this:

“How can there be methods and systems to arrive at something that is living? To that which is static, fixed, dead there can be a way, a definite path, but not to that which is living. Do not reduce reality to a static thing and then invent methods to reach it”

Mastery in its purest sense is neither quick fix, nor a given point in time; you must be committed to the practice of your art or discipline, to the journey you might say.

Committing to a discipline or task in this way means being prepared for the long haul, being prepared for the tough times, lack of progress, falling off the wagon, even revelling in the process. Only now do I understand that annoying TV ad from my early years

Old lady to policeman in New York: “how do I get to Carnegie Hall”?
Policeman: “lady, you gotta practice”

Mastery in Modern Times

The points made by George Leonard in the 60’s and 70’s are even more acute today. The culture in which we are living is in many ways paradoxical to the fundamentals of mastery, we want results today, we seek immediate pleasures, we want the maximum out while doing as little as we can to achieve it, everywhere we look we are told to set goals and go after them, we seek the easy way, look for the short cut if possible.

Does this mean the “true” principles of mastery are now irrelevant or have disappeared? Not at all, I believe mastery is alive and well and can still flourish in a modern society, you just have to look more closely.

For example, let’s consider the sporting world, (we even have The Masters in golf and the Masters Series in Tennis) the truly exceptional sports men and women of our time are heroes of modern culture and in almost all cases each is committed to being master of their chosen world. I would propose that for the true greats it is the commitment to mastery that sets them apart, that makes them who they are and not solely their physical, mental or tactical abilities. It is often said that many have the will to succeed but only the greats have the will to prepare to succeed.

“in every passionate pursuit, the pursuit counts more than the object pursued”

(Bruce Lee)

Sports Mastery As A Working Model

For many years undoubtedly the most successful nation in challenging the limits of performance was the Soviet Union. My first exposure to the term mastery occurred when I began to read about the sport and sport science of the ex Soviet Union. At the heart of the Soviet system was the Process of Achieving Sports Mastery (PASM).

This categorisation system identified athletes of differing levels ranging from Basic Level – Class III to Advanced-Class I to Candidate, Master & International Master of Sport. The final two categories reserved for world record holders or world champions.

The terms Sports Mastery or Mastery In Sport were used to describe the process of reaching the highest possible level of sporting prowess – hence I believe we move **“Toward Mastery In Sport”**- Dr. Mel Siff in his text “Supertraining” suggests this thinking should not be regarded as useful only in a Russian context but as a ‘fundamental principle for the scientific preparation of athletes in all countries’.

Life Mastery & Exercise

Realising our best in anything is built on basic fundamental truisms or principles and in attempting to understand or explain this we often compare sport with life. Could it perhaps be the fundamental principle for long-term success not just in sport but in any endeavour? Simply, the principles of mastery are the same no matter what the discipline be it sport or life related.

As an example, in physical training I have worked with many clients and also watched and discussed many clients being “trained” in the gym and elsewhere. Very few are prepared to pay the price either in time or energy to achieve extraordinary things. Clients want results and want them fast, but rarely want to do the hard work, commit to the journey if you will. Many trainers and coaches inadvertently support this by not facing the truth regularly enough with them. Extraordinary success in the gym or any significant physical endeavour requires a consistency and patience that remains rare in modern society. Success is built one session at a time, you need to place the goal in a drawer and close it and feel comfortable in the knowledge that each session is one session closer to where you want to go. How many people do you know who want to lose weight and spend more time checking the scales than doing the things they need to do in nutrition and exercise!

Dr. John Berardi puts it this way:

“Consistency, not novelty is the secret to uncommon results. Only those too impatient to follow simple, rational, and balanced eating and training programs will choose fringe eating and training methods. And these are the people who won't be in the gym 12 months from now.

The body will always deliver a just desert for both good and bad decisions. Sacrificing intelligent and balanced eating for more speedy results may work in the short run, but in the long run, the body will have its final say.

The only way to truly understand your physique is by years of trial and error. Appreciate the journey. There is absolutely no short cut to mastery.

This game is not only about looking good naked and straining under a big plate-loaded bar. It's about experimentation, longevity, piece of mind, confidence, and enjoyment.

Experienced trainees must learn that only the most critical and challenging individuals will push them beyond their barriers. Surrounding yourself with groupies and indiscriminating ego strokers will only lead to stagnation.”

(John Berardi 2002 – Words of Wisdom - www.johnberardi.com)

Let me just repeat and rephrase that final paragraph:

Clients of fitness trainers, strength coaches etc... must learn that only the most critical and challenging individuals will help them go beyond their barriers. Surrounding yourself with groupies and ego strokers will only lead to stagnation.

Toward Mastery

To bring this short article to an end and paradoxically as a starting point, quoting from George Leonard’s seminal book, the following have been suggested as the five basic tenets of mastery (www.the5keystomastery.com) :

- **SURRENDER TO YOUR PASSION**

“How can I describe the kind of person who is on a path to mastery? First, I don't think it should be so dead serious. I think you should understand the joy of it, the fun of it. Being willing to see just how far you can go is the self-surpassing quality that we human beings are stuck with. Evolution is a whole long story of mastery. It's being real. It's being human. It's being who we are.”

- **PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE**

“I started Aikido at age 47, got my first black belt at 52. In the process, I learned what this business of mastery is all about. For example, it once was thought that talent was absolutely important. The Greeks talk about this “divine spark.” That's why you can become great.”

- **GET A GUIDE**

“What if you're practicing wrong? Then you get very good at doing something wrong. If we don't get good instruction, then we don't notice when it's a little out of round. Surrender yourself to your teacher. That's doesn't mean you turn over your life to the teacher - you don't want a guru. You have to keep the autonomy within yourself. You are finally the ultimate authority on your own practice. ”

“ask advice of him who governs himself well” (Leonardo Da Vinci)

- **VISUALIZE THE OUTCOME**

"Now here is a key: you want to make it real and present in the realm of your consciousness. You don't say "I'm going to do such and such" - it already has happened. Now, is consciousness real? It exists and it is very powerful. The idea is to have this mesh between your consciousness - your visualization - and the so-called material world."

- **PLAY THE EDGE**

"There is a human striving for self-transcendence. It's part of what makes us human. With all of our flaws we want to go a little bit further than we've gone before and maybe even further than anyone else has gone before."

Good luck!

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