

THE BIG IDEAS

Practice vs. Learning

Deliberate + intentional.

Real Power

= self-control.

The Observer

Is your true self.

Instructor's Awareness

Bring that to the practice.

Meditation

The most effective practice.

Call the DOC!

Do. Observe. Correct.

#1 Desire

To stay focused on the work.

Transforming the Mundane

Into magic.

Infinite Study

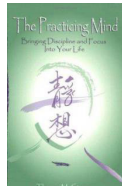
Of a lifetime.

A Flower's Perfection

Is your perfection.

"A paradox of life: The problem with patience and discipline is that it requires both of them to develop each of them."

~ Thomas Sterner



The Practicing Mind

Bringing Discipline and Focus Into Your Life

BY THOMAS M. STERNER · MOUNTAIN SAGE PUBLISHING © 2006 · 100 PAGES

"Self-discipline, focus, patience, and self-awareness are interwoven threads in the fabric of both true inner peace and contentment in life. Together, living in the present moment and being process-oriented is the path that leads us to these all-important virtues. This magical path is there for everyone. It offers its untold riches to us all. "The Practicing Mind" is about remembering what you already know at some level and bringing that memory into the present, where it will serve to both place you onto the path and empower you to partake in the journey."

~ Thomas M. Sterner from *The Practicing Mind*

The Practicing Mind.

It's the key to true inner peace and contentment in life. In a world that conditions us to obsess about goals and outcomes, it's easy to miss the importance of the process. The PRACTICE.

That's what this book helps us cultivate. [Thomas Sterner](#) brilliantly (!) helps us bring discipline and focus into our lives to experience the presence and joy that comes as a result. (Bonus: We also create a frictionless path to our goals as well!)

I can't remember how I discovered this book but I'm glad I did. If you're feelin' it, I think you'll love it as well. (Get the book and learn more about Thomas at thepRACTICINGmind.com.)

For now, let's jump in and explore what it means to practice and how to cultivate our minds!

PRACTICE VS. LEARNING

"To me, the words "practice" and "learning" are similar but not the same. The word "practice" implies the presence of awareness and will. The word learning does not. When we "practice" something we are involved in the deliberate repetition of a process with the intention of reaching a specific goal. The words deliberate and intention are key here because they define the difference between practicing something and just learning something."

Learning is wonderful. (Of course.)

Practice is a bit different though. As Sterner advises, practice involves the "deliberate repetition of a process with the intention of reaching a specific goal."

Practice = Deliberate + Intentional. Got it.

REAL POWER

"If you are not in control of your thoughts then you are not in control of yourself. Without self-control, you have no real power, regardless of whatever else you accomplish."

Want *real* power? We need to master ourselves.

Da Vinci tells us one can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself. Leading psychologists tell us the same thing. Roy Baumeister describes self-control as the "queen of all

virtues”—the strength that drives all the other strengths.

“Habits are learned. Choose them wisely.”
~ Thomas Sterner

Why is this? As we know, it’s one thing to *study* these ideas. It’s an entirely different thing to actually *live* them. And, of course, we can only do so if we have the strength of self-control.

That’s the REAL power. And, as Sterner points out, we’re not in control of ourselves unless we are in control of our thoughts. Let’s explore how to gain that type of control.

THE OBSERVER: YOUR TRUE SELF

“We must work at being more objectively aware of ourselves. We cannot refine any part of our daily thought processes if we are not separate from them. At first this seems to be a confusing concept to grasp, but with the slightest shift in perception it becomes clear. If you are aware of anything you are doing, that implies that there are two entities involved: one who is doing something and one who is aware or observing you do it. If you are talking to yourself, you probably think you are doing the talking. That seems reasonable enough, but who is listening to you talk to yourself? Who is aware that you are observing the process of an internal dialogue? Who is this second party that is aware that you are aware? The answer is your true self. The one who is talking is your ego or personality. The one who is quietly aware is who you really are, the Observer. The more you become aligned to the quiet Observer, your true self, the less you judge. Your internal dialogue begins to shut down and you become more detached about the various external stimuli that come at you all day long. You begin to actually view your internal dialogue with an unbiased and sometimes amused perspective.”

First step in cultivating our practicing mind: Gaining control of our minds.

“We waste so much of our energy by not being aware of how we are directing it.”
~ Thomas Sterner

You might have noticed there’s quite a bit of chit chat going on in our minds. (Laughing.)

Well, who is that talking incessantly? Sterner (and all great teachers) tell us that’s our ego/personality. It’s not our TRUE selves. Our true self? *That’s* who’s listening.

We want to notice how easily our little self can run away in a crazy dialog and just objectively see that. To live more consistently from the perspective of our true self.

Here’s a really cool way to apply this idea practically:

THE INSTRUCTOR’S AWARENESS

“Non-judgment is the pathway to a quiet mind!”
~ Thomas Sterner

“By now, you should realize, or shall we say be aware of, several themes running throughout this book. One of these themes is awareness itself. You cannot change what you are not aware of, and that truth is no more important than in the world of self-improvement. We need to be more aware of what we are doing, what we are thinking, and what we are intending to accomplish in order to be more in control of what we are experiencing in life. But in fact, for most of us, this is a problem because we are so disconnected from our thoughts. We just have them. The horses are running and we don’t have the reins. We need to be more of an observer of our thoughts and actions, like an instructor watching a student performing a task. The instructor is not judgmental or emotional. The instructor knows just what he or she wants the student to produce. The teacher observes the student’s actions, and when the student does something which is moving in the wrong direction, the instructor gently brings it to the student’s attention and pulls the student back on the proper path. A good instructor does not get emotional in response to the student moving off the path. That kind of negative emotion comes from expectations, and that is not the perspective we want to have if we are to be our own instructor. Expectations are tied to a result or product; once again, we are experiencing the feeling of “things should be this way right now, and until then I won’t be happy.” When you or someone else is experiencing these kinds of emotions, it is an indicator of falling out of the process, or falling out of the present moment.”

Awareness. It’s impossible to change something we are not aware of. Period. (!!!)

"All the patience you will ever need is already within you."

~ Thomas Sterner

Being able to SEE when we are on a correct path and when we are off is *the* first step to optimizing. We talk about this a lot throughout these Notes and I just love the way Sterner describes the process. Many teachers describe the importance of being mindful or cultivating the ability to observe or "witness" our thoughts and behaviors.

I really like the idea of imagining you are an instructor watching a student perform a certain task. It kinda combines the "witness" perspective (which, altho I get, always feels a little too abstract for me) with a coach's perspective. You're observing/"witnessing," but doing so in an active, engaged, deliberate, intention-filled, and goal-oriented manner.

You observe the student's actions. If you notice they're headed in the wrong direction, you encourage them to get back on the proper path—without getting all emotional about it. Just a simple little instruction/coaching to adjust their behavior a bit.

As Sterner advises, the emotion comes from expectation which is tied to a RESULT.

We're focused on *process* here. So, we simply bring the student/ourselves back to the present moment and to practicing the behavior as well as we can *right now.*

THAT's what we want to be able to cultivate. ...But how? Glad you asked!

"Simplicity in effort will conquer the most complex of tasks."

~ Thomas Sterner

MEDITATION: THE MOST EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

"How do we become aligned to the Observer? How do we free ourselves from the confines of our ego? Though there are certainly a number of ways to accomplish this, in my opinion, the most effective method for creating this awareness spontaneously and effortlessly is meditation. Through meditation, it just happens on it's own over time. As you practice meditation, you become more and more aware of this silent observer within you. Through your effort, you realize that meditation is a process of quieting the mind and your attachment to the external world by going deep within yourself."

Meditation. Yet again. :)

It's really quite simple. If we want to have strong bodies, we need to exercise our bodies. If we want to have strong minds, we need to exercise our minds.

And the best way to do that? MEDITATION.

(You have a practice yet? :)

Here's another way to rock it:

SOMEBODY CALL THE DOC!

"With or without meditation, it is necessary to consciously work at shifting your alignment to the Observer. An effective adjunct method to meditation that I use for this purpose is what I call "DOC," which stands for Do, Observe, Correct. This technique can be applied to any activity in which you are trying to engage the practicing mind..."

What we want to do is make DOC a more natural way of how we approach life. If, for example, you feel you are someone who tends to worry too much, then try to apply DOC to your actions. When you notice yourself fretting over something, you have accomplished the DO portion. OBSERVE this behavior that you want to change. In your observation of yourself worrying, you have separated yourself from the act of worry. Now realize that the emotions you are experiencing have no affect on the problem you are focusing on. Release yourself from the emotions as best as you can - that is the CORRECT portion - and try to look at the problem as an observer."

Somebody call the DOC!

"If you force your mind to stay in the present moment and to stay in the process of what you are doing, I promise you, so many of your problems will melt away."

~ Thomas Sterner

Do + Observe + Correct = Genius way to cultivate our practicing mind muscles.

Do something.

Observe it like a good instructor—objectively/without judgment/emotion/etc. Check in: Is that particular behavior working well or do you need to bring the student back on track?

Correct! Again, without emotion—other than perhaps some enthusiasm for getting back on the practice track and knowing you're cultivating the mojo of a practicing mind! :)

#1 DESIRE: TO STAY FOCUSED ON THE WORK

"When you let go of your attachment to the object you desire and make your desire the experience of staying focused on working toward your goal, you are fulfilling your desire in every minute and you are patient with the circumstance. There is no reason not to be. There is no effort or "trying to be patient" here. It is just a natural response to your perspective. This shift in perspective is very small and subtle on the one hand, but it has enormous freeing power. No task seems too large to undertake. Your confidence goes way up as does your patience with yourself. You are always achieving your goal and there are no mistakes or time limits to create stress."

Wow.

This is really the essence of the whole book: → *"let go of your attachment to the object you desire and make your desire the experience of staying focused on working toward your goal."*

(<— That's worth another re-read. :)

Sterner also tells us: "That subtle shift in perception, and that is all it was, brought about unlimited patience with myself. I became patient with my progress. I not only stopped looking at my progress, I stopped looking for my progress all together. Progress is a natural result of staying focused on the process of doing anything. When you stay on purpose, focused in the present moment, the goal comes to you with frictionless ease. However, when you constantly focus on the goal you are aiming for, you push it away instead of pulling it toward you. In every moment of your struggle, by looking at the goal and constantly referencing your position to it, you are affirming to yourself that you haven't reached it. You only need to acknowledge the goal to yourself occasionally, using it as a rudder to keep you moving in the right direction."

That's it.

We can make the outcome we desire be the focus of our attention. (And experience the attachment/stress/anxiety/lack of presence and diminished performance as a result.)

Or, we can make the experience of staying focused on working toward our goal our primary desire. (And experience presence, engagement, and increased performance as a result—which, of course, makes it much more likely we will experience the outcome we desire with "frictionless ease." :)

Subtle but HUGE shift.

Let's use our goals as rudders, occasionally checking in to make sure we're on course and focus our energy on being present in our practicing minds as we take the next baby step!

TRANSFORMING THE MUNDANE INTO MAGIC

"Try this the next time you are faced with doing something you define as not enjoyable or as work. It doesn't matter if it is mowing the lawn or cleaning up the dinner dishes. If the activity takes a long time, tell yourself you are going to just work on staying present moment and process-oriented for the first half hour. After that you can hate it as much as usual, but in that first half hour you are absolutely not going to think of anything but what you are doing. You

"The feeling of "I'll be happy when" will never bring you anything but discontentment."

~ Thomas Sterner

"With deliberate and repeated effort, progress is inevitable."

~ Thomas Sterner

are not going to go into the past and think of all the judgments you have made that define this activity as work. You are not going to go into the future anticipating when it will be completed, allowing you to go participate in an activity that you have defined as "not work." You are just going to do whatever it is you are doing right now for half an hour. Don't try to enjoy it, either, because in that effort you are bringing emotions and struggle into your effort. If you are going to mow the lawn, then accept that all you need to do is cut the grass. You are going to notice the feel of the mower as you push it, how it changes resistance with the undulations of your front yard. You will pay attention to cut as wide a path as possible, not sloppily overlap the last pass you made as you gawk at the neighbor across the street washing their car. You will smell the cut grass and notice how the grass glows with green in the sunlight. Just do this for one-half hour of the activity. You will be amazed. Once you experience how the activity as mundane as mowing the grass is transformed, you will have the motivation to press on, because the potential effect this could have on your life and how you perceive it will become apparent to you."

What a fantastic exercise.

I immediately think of Walter Russell when I read this. In [The Man Who Tapped the Secrets of the Universe](#), Walter tells us: "There should be no distasteful tasks in one's life. If you just hate to do a thing, that hatred for it develops body-destructive toxins, and you become fatigued very soon. You must love anything you must do. Do it not only cheerfully, but also lovingly and the very best way you know how. That love of the work which you must do anyhow will vitalize your body and keep you from fatigue."

Plus he tells us: "A menial task which must be mine, that shall I glorify and make an art of it." (<—Wow.)

[George Leonard](#) (see Notes on [Mastery](#)) echoes this wisdom: "Could all of us reclaim lost hours of our lives by making everything—the commonplace along with the extraordinary—a part of our practice?"

What distasteful tasks do *you* have in your life? How can you turn off your judging mind and just jump in and do it with full presence to the best of your ability? Don't even try to enjoy it. Just rock it. (And, paradoxically, watch how much you enjoy it. :)

INFINITE STUDY

"I became aware that there was no point of musical excellence out there that would free me from the feeling of "I need to get better." In that moment, I understood that there was no point I could reach where I would feel that I had finally done it, that I was as good as I needed to be, and that there was no need to improve because I had arrived at my goal. It was an epiphany. At first I felt a moment of overwhelming depression and fear, but it was immediately followed by joy and relief of the same magnitude. I knew that what I was experiencing was a realization that all true artists must go through. It was the only way to build the stamina necessary to continue in an infinite study."

"Infinite study." <— What an extraordinary phrase/epiphany.

Reminds me of [George Leonard](#)'s wisdom: "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."

Imagine: For every mile we travel, our destination is two miles farther away. And we're thrilled about that. Why? Because we're so committed to the practice and feel blessed to have discovered a path that is so wonderfully complex and profound that it can challenge us for a lifetime.

That sounds an awful like infinite study, eh?

Here's to the joy of committing ourselves to a lifetime of such goodness.

A FLOWER'S PERFECTION

“As we attempt to understand ourselves and our struggles with life's endeavors, we may find peace in the observation of a flower. Ask yourself: at what point in a flower's life, from seed to full bloom, has it reached perfection?”

Wow.

What an amazing way to capture the beauty of our unfolding and the perfection of each step of the way.

Reminds me of [Vernon Howard](#)'s wisdom from [The Power of Your Supermind](#) (see Notes) where he tells us: “Do not be impatient with your seemingly slow progress. Do not try to run faster than you presently can. If you are studying, reflecting and trying, you are making progress whether you are aware of it or not. A traveler walking the road in the darkness of night is still going forward. Someday, some way, everything will break open, like the natural unfolding of a rosebud.”

Sterner adds: “Accepting that this is a lifetime effort, and that in the beginning your progress may seem almost unnoticeable, is part of the lesson to be learned. Keep thinking of the flower. Regardless of whatever stage of growth and evolution you are in, in every moment you are perfect at being who you are.”

Let's keep thinking of that flower and embrace the perfection of being right where we are as we cultivate our practicing mind and gracefully actualize our potential.

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

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About the Author of “The Practicing Mind”

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Thomas M. Sterner spent over 25 years as a concert piano technician and rebuilder. Preparing instruments for the finest world class concert pianists and symphony musicians enabled him to witness first-hand the level of art afforded to those with a disciplined mind. An accomplished musician himself, Mr. Sterner lives in Delaware, happily engaged in composing music, writing inspirational, self-help books and publishing audio books through his company, Mountain Sage Publishing. Learn more about Thomas at thepracticemind.com.

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BRIAN JOHNSON



Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.