

The Challenge of Relationships

An Excerpt from *Mastery* by George Leonard

(p. 147 - 150)



On the level of personal experience, all of life is seamless, despite society's untiring efforts to break it up into compartments. The way we walk, talk to our children, and make love bears a significant relationship to the way we ski, study for a profession, or do our jobs. It's truly bizarre, when you stop to think about it, that we are sometimes quite willing to give full attention to developing our tennis game while leaving such "commonplace" things as relationships largely to chance.

The truth of the matter is that if you have to work at a sport to achieve mastery, you also have to work, and generally work even more diligently, to achieve mastery in relationships. In both, there will be ups and downs and long periods on the plateau. And you'll eventually

discover, in every significant area of your life, that the most important learning and development takes place during your time on the plateau. The same principles apply here as elsewhere. Note in the following paragraphs, for example, how the five keys to mastery can be applied to relationships.

Instruction. Some people sneer at the notion of counseling for couples, or books and tapes about better relationships. It's true that some of the counseling is vapid, and the language in some of the books and tapes can make you gag, but an intimate relationship can become insular before either partner knows it, and it's hard to solve every problem alone. If you're on the path of mastery, whether in sports or relationships or anything else, you'll invariably seek the best guidance available, whether it's a counselor, a book, or a sympathetic, unbiased friend. But shop around, choose carefully, get recommendations.

Practice. The sportsperson is willing to devote several concentrated sessions a week to a sport. Couples on the path of mastery might do at least that much, setting aside specific times just for the relationship, apart from children, friends, work, and the usual entertainments. But practice, as we've seen, goes beyond that, involving certain steadfastness, an ability to take pleasure in the endless repetition of ordinary acts.

Surrender. The ability to surrender to your art is a mark of the master, whether the art is martial or marital. Can you let go of an outworn behavior pattern without knowing exactly what will replace it? Are you willing at times to yield totally on some long-standing dispute for the sake of growth and change in your relationship? The tricky part is learning to lose your ego without losing your balance. The stronger you are the more you can give of yourself. The more you give of yourself, the stronger you can be.

Intentionality. To cultivate a positive attitude is to take a large step on the path of mastery in relationships. In addition, mental toughness (the ability to focus on a problem or a long-term goal) combined with openness and imagination (the ability to see options and visualize desired states) can be applied to relationships as well as to sports, or anything else.

The Edge. The path of mastery is built on unrelenting practice, but it's also a place of adventure. A couple on the path stays open to experience and is willing to play new games, dance new dances together. Perhaps the greatest adventure of all is intimacy: the willingness to strip away one layer of reticence after another, and on certain occasions to live entirely in the moment, revealing everything and expecting nothing in return.

The point of this chapter is that the principles of mastery can guide you, whatever skill you seek to develop, whatever path you choose to walk. In the words of Chinese Zen master Layman P'ang (c. 740-808 A.D.):

*My daily affairs are quite ordinary;
but I'm in total harmony with them.*
*I don't hold on to anything, don't reject anything;
nowhere an obstacle or conflict.*
Who cares about wealth and honor?
Even the poorest thing shines.
*My miraculous power and spiritual activity:
drawing water and carrying wood.*

Ultimately, nothing in this life is "commonplace," nothing is "in between." The threads that join your every act, your every thought, are infinite. All paths of mastery eventually merge.