

3 Ways to Master Any New Skill

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In *The Practicing Mind: Developing Focus and Discipline in Your Life*, author Thomas M. Sterner shows readers how to live in the present moment and enjoy the process of learning a new skill or achieving a goal. In other words, it's about the journey, not the destination.

And Sterner certainly knows of what he speaks. He's an accomplished musician, avid golfer and private pilot. For over 25 years, he's also worked as a concert piano technician, doing "anything from preparing a \$100,000 concert grand piano for a major world symphony performance to painstakingly restoring a vintage grand piano to better-than-factory-new condition."

Here are a few helpful suggestions I've gleaned from his book on mastering new skills.

1. Focus on the process, not the product.

When we focus on the actual process of practicing a new skill or project, a paradox occurs, says Sterner. "When you focus on the process, the desired product takes care of itself with fluid ease. When you focus on the product, you immediately begin to fight yourself and experience boredom, restlessness, frustration and impatience with the process."

Focusing on the finished product inevitably leads to judgment, nitpicking and negativity. Suddenly every mistake becomes another barrier sabotaging your success.

What we're missing by focusing on the product is being present in the process. When you're immersed in the process, you're simply learning, doing and practicing.

According to Sterner, the practicing mind is made up of: being process-oriented; staying in the present; making the process your goal and using "the overall goal as a rudder to steer your efforts;" knowing what you want to accomplish and being aware of that intention.

2. Adjust your perspective.

Being results-driven isn't the only problem; using ideal images of perfection can hinder your practice, too. As Sterner says, "an image or ideal is frozen and stagnant." True perfection, however, he says, is "limitless, unbounded and always expanding."

He uses a flower to illustrate his point. When would you say a flower reaches perfection? Is it perfect when it's a seed, when it starts to germinate, when it pokes through the ground, when it begins to bloom, when it finally fully blooms or when it returns to the soil?

It's always perfect. As Sterner explains:

When you develop a present-minded approach to every activity you are involved in, and like the flower, realize that whatever level you are performing, you are perfect at that point, you experience a tremendous relief from fictitious, self-imposed pressures and expectations that only slow your progress. At any point in the day when you notice you are feeling bored, impatient, rushed or disappointed with your performance level, realize that you have left the present moment in your activity.

And, in general, once you reach your result, what then, anyway? We just keep reaching higher and higher, and rarely feel satisfied with our progress (and most often feel miserable during the process).

3. Practice DOC.

When learning a new skill, it's important to be objective. To access this objectivity, Sterner created the acronym DOC: "Do, Observe, Correct."

He gives an interesting example in archery. (Sterner also studies archery.) In an interview he read a while ago, Sterner learned that a coach for the U.S. Olympic archery team said that the biggest challenge in coaching Americans was that they fixated on their scores.

In contrast, the Asian teams focused on the process of making a good shot. They seemed indifferent to the result.

"For them, the desired goal was a natural result of prioritizing the proper technique of drawing the bow," Sterner writes – and that's why they're tough to beat. The Asian teams do, observe and correct. There are no judgments or emotions in their process.

In other words, "They drew the bow, they released the arrow, they observed the result, and then they made corrections for the next shot."

Once you can focus on the process, on the practice of a certain skill, you actually start enjoying yourself and excelling. Sterner captures this perfectly when describing his golf sessions:

Contrary to what the other classmates were experiencing, I found that, when given my present-moment attention, the practice sessions were very calming, not bothersome. I didn't have to be anywhere but "here," and I didn't have to accomplish anything but exactly what I was doing "right now." I found that immersing myself in the process of practicing shut off all the tensions of the day and all of the thoughts of what had to get done tomorrow. It kept my mind in the present, out of the past and future. I let go of any expectations about how long it would take me to acquire a good golf swing because I was enjoying what I was doing right now: learning a good golf swing.