

Excerpts from *Mastery* by Robert Greene

The hand brain connection is something deeply wired within us.

In an activity such as riding a bicycle, we all know that it is easier to watch someone and follow their lead than to listen to or read instructions. The more we do it, the easier it becomes. Even with skills that are primarily mental, such as computer programming or speaking a foreign language, it remains the case that we learn best through practice and repetition – the natural learning process. We learn a foreign language by actually speaking it as much as possible, not by reading books and absorbing theories. The more we speak and practice, the more fluent we become.

People who do not practice and learn new skills never gain a proper sense of proportion or self-criticism. They think they can achieve anything without effort and have little contact with reality. Trying something over and over again grounds you in reality, making you deeply aware of your inadequacies and of what you can accomplish with more work and effort. If you take this far enough, you will naturally enter the cycle of accelerated returns: As you learn and gain skills you can begin to vary what you do, finding nuances that you can develop in the work, so that it becomes more interesting. As elements become more automatic your mind is not exhausted by the effort and you can practice harder, which in turn brings greater skill and more pleasure.

When you develop any skill you transform yourself in the process. You reveal to yourself new capabilities that were previously latent, that are exposed as you progress. You develop emotionally. Your sense of pleasure becomes redefined...Real pleasure comes from overcoming challenges, feeling confidence in your abilities, gaining fluency in skills, and experiencing the power this brings. You develop patience. Boredom no longer signals the need for distraction, but rather the need for new challenges to conquer.

When we learn something in a concentrated manner it has added value. We experience fewer distractions. What we learn is internalized more deeply because of the intensity of our focus and practice.

Understand: to create a meaningful work of art or to make a discovery or invention requires great discipline, self-control, and emotional stability.” It requires mastering the forms of your field...Do not fall for the romantic myths and clichés that abound in culture about creativity – offering us the excuse or panacea that such powers can come cheaply. When you look at the exceptionally creative work of Masters, you must not ignore the years of practice, the endless routines, the hours of doubt, and the tenacious overcoming of obstacles these people endured. Creative energy is the fruit of such efforts and nothing else.

Intuition, primitive or high level, is essentially driven by memory. When we take in information of any kind, we store it in mnemonic networks in the brain. The stability and durability of these networks depends on repetition, intensity of experience, and how deeply we pay attention.

We must do whatever we can to cultivate a greater memory capacity – one of the most important skills in our technologically oriented environment. The problem that technology presents us is that it increases the amount of information at our disposal, but slowly degrades the power of our memory to retain it. Tasks that used to exercise the brain – remembering phone numbers, doing simple calculations, navigating and remembering streets in a city – are now performed for us, and like any muscle the brain can grow flabby from disuse.

In our culture we tend to denigrate practice. We want to imagine that great feats occur naturally – that they are a sign of someone’s genius or superior talent. Getting to a high level of achievement through practice seems so banal, so uninspiring...These values of ours are oddly counterproductive – they cloak from us the fact that almost anyone can reach such heights through tenacious effort, something that should encourage us all. It is time to reverse this prejudice against conscious effort

and to see the powers we gain through practice and discipline as eminently inspiring and even miraculous. The ability to master complicated skills by building connections in the brain is the product of millions of years of evolution, and the source of all of our material and cultural powers. When we sense the possible unity of mind and body in the early stages of practice, we are being guided toward this power. It is the natural bent of our brain to want to move in this direction, to elevate its powers through repetition. To lose our connection to this natural inclination is the height of madness, and will lead to a world in which no one has the patience to master complex skills. As individuals we must resist such a trend, and venerate the transformative powers we gain through practice.