

Book Reviews

MASTERY: THE KEYS TO SUCCESS AND LONG-TERM FULFILLMENT

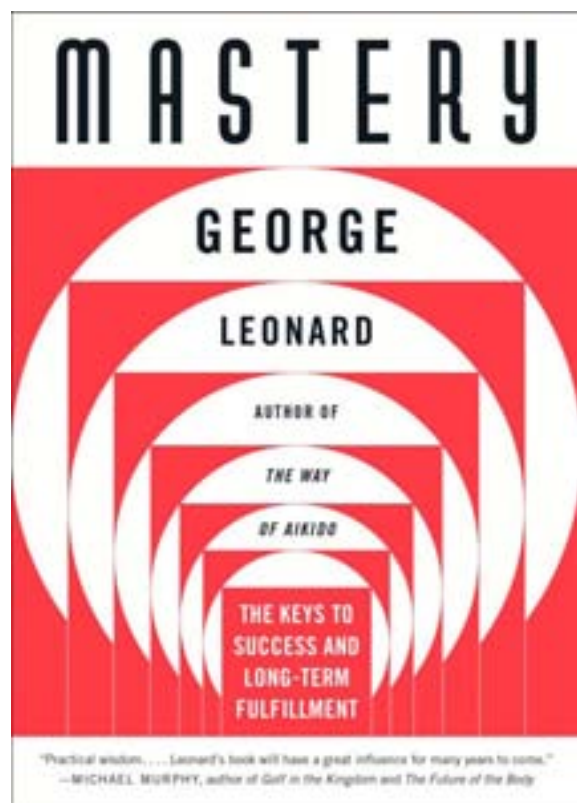
BY GEORGE LEONARD
REVIEWED BY PATRICK FOLEY

First published in 1991, you may already have read this book, but if you haven't, it is definitely one for your bookshelf. It is a small book, well written and a very satisfying read. Although the content can be generically applied to the discovery of human potential in any subject, George Leonard's background in the martial arts (he was a 5th degree black belt in Aikido) makes it especially helpful in understanding how to more fully embody your Taijiquan and Qigong practises, in order to seek 'mastery'. It certainly ticks many of the right boxes for me.

Divided into 3 sections, Leonard provides very detailed, informative and motivational ways to discover a) what the Master's Journey is; b) understand the 5 Keys required for that journey; and c) what Tools you have at your disposal along the way. What really made this approach work for me was the way this book is very much a description of a personal journey; it is simple, honest writing and it is very convincing.

The author covers a broad range of material, including some social commentary on how the American (read any solely profit-orientated) system is designed to keep us firmly off the path to mastery and continuously focused on self-obsessive behaviour and instant gratification. In my experience, this is far more of an obstacle to staying on the path of self-fulfilment than you might first think, and a difficult one to admit to. I did struggle with some of the content, for instance when Leonard introduces us to his LET (Leonard Energy Training) method and describes some techniques for cultivating Ki (or Qi), as well as some of his real-life comparisons which didn't work for me because I think they were very

personal to him.



But the real gold is to be found in the first half of the book, where Leonard defines how we typically approach learning a new skill, and introduces us to the 'dabbler', the 'obsessive' and the 'hacker'. When the author asks you if you can identify what category you might be in, I was amused to find that in my long battle with trying to come to terms with what Taijiquan really is about, I have probably been all three! Breaking out of these modes of perceived skill-attainment

means acknowledging that the path to mastery is a difficult one, with (generally speaking) small bursts of progress always followed by periods of apparent stagnation on the 'plateau'. The key to consolidating that progress and continuing to benefit from the material is 'Loving the Plateau', and this is in my view a critical chapter of the book. Leonard then goes on to describe the 5 'Keys' that can help us stay on the path.

Key 1: Instruction; get the best instruction you can by identifying the right teacher for you.

Key 2: Practise; this is the true path to mastery, learning to love your practise as much as you love your life.

Key 3: Surrender; always have the mind of a beginner they say, and this, along with accepting the demands of your teacher and the discipline itself, is essential for progress.

Key 4: Intentionality; you need to be fully conscious in your practises, and Leonard makes the additional point that focused visualisation of the skill you wish to acquire can help make it reality - I find this a challenging concept but there is plenty of evidence that it works, for instance, in

professional sport.

Key 5: The Edge; as my Sifu Sam Masich says, "Practise for mastery allows you to move beyond the constraints of form and to personalize and internalize the art." I really appreciated seeing how Leonard also recognises this distinction, where we look to explore the edges of the envelope of conventional practise and make what we do our own. It is dangerous territory, where it is easy to lose sight of principles, but all true mastery does have an edge!

The last chapters give us some tools to facilitate the journey into mastery. These include recognising pitfalls, how to increase your energy, overcome resistance to change (homeostasis) and master the commonplace moments of daily life.

Categorised as 'Psychology / Self-help', George Leonard's *Mastery* is also a very philosophical look at how we can bring mastery into ordinary life, knowledge presumably gained in his Zen and Aikido studies. It is by no means perfect in its descriptive content, but I would certainly consider it worthy of being a classic read.

