



THE MASTERY MINDSET: 6 KEYS TO STAY ON THE PATH

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Common advice is to find and follow your passion. But it's not so simple. You don't just magically stumble upon the feeling and enjoy everything from there. Expecting to only sets you up for repeated disappointment. Passion needs to be cultivated and nurtured. Otherwise, what was once something you loved may start to feel like a chore, and burnout looms right around the corner. But it doesn't have to be this way. There is a set of actionable principles that supports the kind of ongoing passion that yields not just peak performance but also a rich and fulfilling life.

As we report in our new book *The Passion Paradox: A Guide to Going All In, Finding Success, and Discovering the Benefits of an Unbalanced Life*, nearly every top performer to whom we spoke—from star athletes like Shalane Flanagan to creative gurus like Rich Roll—shared a few common characteristics, all of which are supported by emerging science on passion and performance. We've come to call this bundle of principles the "mastery mindset." Adopting this mindset is key to living and performing with passion—without burning out.

Before getting to the individual traits, a few words on mastery. Mastery is a mindset and also a path. It values both acute (in the moment) and chronic (over a lifetime) engagement but devalues most of the transient stuff in between (point-in-time successes or failures). Mastery is not a New Age self-help concept. It is rooted in principles that are central to psychology and biology, and it is an ever present theme in the lives of people who embody and productively channel their passion.

Individuals who are on the path of mastery not only accomplish great things, but they do so in a healthy and sustainable manner. They exude a Zen-like aura, are resistant to burnout, and produce work that is of an incredible quality. And yet perhaps their greatest accomplishment is an even more cherished one: continual growth and development, a fulfilling life. Below are the six individual components of the mastery mindset. Keep coming back to these and make them an ongoing practice.

DRIVE FROM WITHIN

Individuals on the path of mastery are driven from within. Their primary motivation isn't an external measure of success or fear, and it's certainly not satisfying others or conforming to a certain peer group or social norms. Rather, their motivation originates from an internal desire to improve and engage in an activity for its own sake. This doesn't mean that each day of their pursuit will be exciting or pleasurable. But it does mean that they will show steadfast enthusiasm about the totality of their journey.

When the majority of your motivation lies outside yourself, you become a slave to results that may not be under your control. This causes a lot of distress and is a surefire route to burning out. And yet, it's a lot easier to say "I'll be internally motivated" than to actually do it, especially if you start performing well and seeing positive results. There are two practices that help:

1. Regularly reflect on what you love about your work or activity—the reasons that you got into it in the first place.
2. After a tough loss or big win, give yourself 24 hours to grieve the defeat or celebrate the victory, but then get back to doing the work itself.

FOCUS ON THE PROCESS

Goals are like steering mechanisms, North Stars to shoot for. When used in this manner, they can be very productive. But too much focus on a specific goal, especially one that's outside your full control, almost always does more harm than good. The mastery mindset involves shifting your focus from achieving any one goal itself to executing on the process that gives you the best chance of more general improvement over time. Someone who embodies the mastery mindset judges themselves based not on whether they accomplish their specific goal but rather on how well they execute on their process. After all, it is the process—not the outcome—that is within your control. And it is also the process that makes up the vast majority of one's life. Results, good or bad, are fleeting. A goal is a direction, not a destination. Process keeps you focused and present on your journey.

DON'T WORRY ABOUT BEING THE BEST—WORRY ABOUT BEING THE BEST AT GETTING BETTER

You just learned the importance of not becoming overly attached to specific goals, but becoming attached to the ultimate goal—getting better—is an inherent part of internalizing the mastery mindset and living productively with passion. When your utmost goal is simply to get better, all failures and successes are temporary because you will forever improve, given more time and more practice. You don't define yourself by any single moment in time; you define yourself by an entire body of work in service of ongoing growth and development. Your pursuit ceases to be something you are aiming for and becomes a part of who you are. Do you write to sell books, or are you a writer? Do you run to win marathons, or are you a runner? Do you paint to sell portraits, or are you a painter?

When you make this shift—your pursuit transitioning from a verb, something you do, to a noun, someone you are—you're more apt to hold on to your passions for life. This isn't to say there won't be rough patches, disappointments, and triumphs along the way. Almost undoubtedly, there will be. But rather than serving as end points, concrete achievements and failures become more like information—markers of progress and exposures of weakness. And it is this very information that helps you improve and refine your process over the long haul.

EMBRACE ACUTE FAILURE FOR CHRONIC GAINS

A well-known principle of physical training is this: if you want a muscle to grow, you must push it beyond its normal bounds until it is hard, if not impossible, to perform additional repetitions. In exercise science, this is called training to fatigue. Training to fatigue is effective because muscle fatigue, or, in some cases, failure, serves as a critical signal, telling your body it must grow and adapt in order to withstand future challenges. When you fail, your body learns on an innate biological level what it needs to do differently. Failure sets off a cascade of changes that help you evolve so you can meet a greater challenge next time. In other words, your body can't really grow unless it fails. This principle holds true far beyond your muscles. It's true for everything. Along any lasting and meaningful journey, you are bound to fail. So long as you use those failures as informative opportunities to grow, that's fine.

BE PATIENT

The path of mastery is almost always very hard and requires lots of time and unyielding commitment. Any long-term progression contains inevitable periods of boredom. We are hardwired to seek novelty and stimulation, which is why quick fixes and hacks can be so appealing—even though they rarely, if ever, work. Advancing on the path of mastery, getting the most out of yourself and sustaining passion for a lifetime, requires patience. Ignore the hacks. Be prepared for ups and downs. Ride the waves over and over again. Be patient with yourself, and be patient with your process. Small steps taken consistently over a long period of time lead to big gains. Walking your path with others—community support—helps you navigate the ups and downs and keeps you moving forward. And remember: the goal is the path, and the path is the goal.

BE HERE NOW

When we are fully present for whatever it is we're doing, we gain a new appreciation for our respective pursuits and our own unique role in them. Yet the majority of the time, we walk around on autopilot, not deliberately choosing where or how sharply we direct our attention. To sustain passion, however, we must remove distractions that prey on our attention and break from the mundane and automatic thoughts that normally fill our minds. Practically, this means we should set aside the time, space, and energy to give our respective passions our all. It doesn't need to be all day, every day, but we do need to prioritize this time and make it sacred.

Deep-focused engagement is fuel for lasting passion. It seems simple and obvious, yet step back and think about just how little receives your full attention. Even activities that once forced us to be present—such as a walk or run in the woods, holding a newborn baby, or a physician's encounter with a patient—are now frequently hijacked by the beeping and buzzing of our digital devices. These modern inventions continuously pull our attention to the next external diversion, creating the illusion that we are busy and present but all the while keeping us on autopilot and at the whim of whatever distracts us next. Way too often, we may appear to be here, but we are really there. Keep coming back to here. Mastery requires you be here—really here—with what is in front of you.

This article was adapted from our new book The Passion Paradox: A Guide to Going All In, Finding Success, and Discovering the Benefits of an Unbalanced Life, published by Rodale Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House. It is available from Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Books-A-Million, and everywhere else books are sold.

This post first appeared in Brad's "Do It Better" column at Outside Magazine.

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