The Practicing Mind

Master Any Skill or Challenge by Learning to Love the Process

Developing Focus and Discipline in Your Life

Thomas M. Sterner
CHAPTER 1

The Learning Begins

When I was a child, I studied the guitar, though I was so young at the time (just four years old) that I don’t remember much of it. However, as I look back on the music I played, it’s fair to say that I acquired a substantial amount of skill. Yet I quit after two years and did nothing much, musically speaking, for the next several years. At the age of nine, like so many kids growing up, I began studying the piano. Once again, this lasted briefly, this time only ten months, and the reason for this was that I really didn’t enjoy practicing. If asked why, I probably would have said that it was boring and difficult, and that I felt as if I wasn’t getting any better. Though my perspective may have been accurate at the time, it stemmed from the fact that I wasn’t very good at the process of practicing music, or practicing anything else, for that matter. Unfortunately, I was far from sophisticated enough to realize this. However, because of my love for music, I eventually returned to the piano and did go on to learn to play.
During my late teens and early twenties, when I was still single, I pursued music very seriously and achieved a fair amount of success. I could compose and arrange in just about any style. I played as a professional in many settings, from the nicest country clubs to the worst taprooms. I put together a rather expensive recording studio and became acquainted with some of the better-known songwriters and artists in the worlds of pop, jazz, and country. By the time I hit my midtwenties, I was a pretty good musician by most people’s standards.

My musical development continued, and by the time I reached my midthirties, I began to realize that something had really changed in me with regard to my feelings toward practicing. I not only loved to practice and learn anything but found the total immersion of myself into an activity to be an escape from the daily pressures of life. I even felt cheated if I was deprived of an opportunity to practice something, such as a particular aspect of my golf swing. Much more important, I was beginning to understand that all of life is practice, in one form or another. Until then, like most people, I mistakenly associated the word practice only with art forms such as music, dance, and painting. I did not see dealing with a cranky child, an overburdened work schedule, or a tight monthly budget as actions that required applying the same principles as learning music did.

As my comprehension of the relationship among life, mental discipline, and practice grew, I began to direct all my effort into defining the fundamentals of the practicing
mind, and into observing when and how often I applied these fundamentals in daily living. I wanted to better understand the changes in my perspective that had created such a turnaround in my attitudes toward the process of learning something new. Had I just grown up and matured, or was something more defined, something more tangible, developing in my mind? I knew I processed life differently than I had in the past, but what were the mechanics of the new system? That was what I needed to know.

I didn’t realize at the time that it was my experience of learning music growing up that had laid the foundation that would help me understand both the mental and spiritual struggles in which I now found myself as I searched for answers. Those early experiences — of wanting to accomplish something while dealing with a personality that was not particularly well disciplined at the time — went a long way toward helping me understand why we fail at endeavors that might be very important to us. My successes and failures in music provided me with a point of reference to which I constantly compared my daily experiences. That is why you will see references to music throughout this book. It is not, however, necessary that you yourself have studied music to feel a kinship with me as I describe the aspects of music that taught me so much. Since the nature of the practicing mind exists in all activities of life, you will, no doubt, be able to relate my experiences to those that you have had in your own life.

As important as music was to my learning process, it
wasn’t the activity that first inspired change in how I approached daily life. Instead, I first became aware of the shift in my perspective toward practicing when, on my wife’s advice, I took up golf in my early thirties. I think, initially, the reason I didn’t see my early days of musical study as being a backdrop for this change in awareness was because those experiences were so far removed from the present day. Indeed, by this time in my life, music was second nature to me, and my practice regimen was so natural that I no longer had the perspective of a struggling student. Golf, on the other hand, was totally new to me. I knew almost nothing about it, and I had no preconceived ideas of how it should be played.

In the beginning, my father-in-law would take me out to play on his course, and I would rent or borrow some old clubs. I quickly experienced the frustrations of the game, but what made a bigger impression on me was that I didn’t see anybody playing who was really any good. Most of the people I observed had been playing golf for as long as I had been playing piano, and yet in their own activity they hadn’t gotten out of book one, so to speak. They played terribly and seemed clueless about how to fix their problems with the game.

What I mean is that even though they had played golf weekly for many years, they still couldn’t accomplish basic things, such as getting the ball up in the air. They couldn’t hit the ball where they were aiming, they never improved, and they had no idea why. By that time, they should have been able not only to hit the ball hundreds
of yards at their target but also to do things like make the ball go high or low and curve its flight from right to left at will. Armed with their total lack of knowledge of how they should swing the golf club, or what they actually looked like when they did, they were repeating the same lack of fundamental skills over and over again and expecting different results. To compare this to music, it would be like watching someone who had been playing the piano for twenty years get frustrated at his inability to play more than one note at a time because he didn’t realize he was supposed to play with his fingers, not his elbows.

Perhaps my biggest advantage was that, even though I was not uncoordinated, I had not excelled in any sports growing up. Therefore, I assumed I would need to find an instructor to guide my learning process, lest I end up like so many other eternally frustrated golfers. Also, because I had grown up trying to learn to play musical instruments (besides guitar and piano, I also studied the flute and saxophone), I expected that mastering the skills that would bring both consistency and joy to the game would take time and applied effort. It never occurred to me that golf would be a quick or easy study. I was undaunted by, but yet aware of, the fact that despite my ability to play the piano well, I had fallen short of many of my musical goals. I comforted myself with my knowledge that I was an adult now, armed with an adult mentality and all that I had learned from those failures. I was sure this would see me through to achieving my goals in this newfound endeavor.
What I learned from golf was that all my failures in music had stemmed from my lack of understanding the proper mechanics of practicing, of the process of picking a goal, whatever that may be, and applying a steady effort toward achieving it. Perhaps most important, I realized that I had learned how to accomplish just that without the frustration and anxiety usually associated with such an activity.

Golf provided me with my first opportunity to quantify these mechanics into something tangible to someone with my upbringing; before this point, I was like everyone who had come before me. I wanted the joy and benefits that are rewarded to the individual who perseveres at working toward a lofty personal goal. I wanted to experience the self-discovery that one attains by picking a goal and steadily working toward it, regardless of the pitfalls and frustration. This desire to learn is only the first step, though. Without an understanding of proper practice mechanics, and without an awareness of our own internal workings, we’re almost certain to use up the initial inspiration and motivation that propelled us into our endeavor, leaving us feeling we cannot reach the goal that had seemed so worth striving for just a short time earlier.

Why bother with any of this? This is a question I asked myself. I mean, really, what is the relevance of this to how we live our lives day to day? How does understanding and developing this mindset impact what we experience moment by moment, what we accomplish, and who we are? The answer is that this mindset influences everything. It is
the blank page on which we draw our lives. It determines not only what we draw but also what we are able to draw. It shapes every aspect of who we are, what we become, and how we see others. It is self-discipline and self-awareness. It gives us patience with ourselves, with others, and with life itself. It is certainly one of the most powerful and meaningful gifts we can give ourselves — and yes, only we can give this gift to ourselves.

Our culture today is one built on multitasking. Multitasking is emphasized not just to increase productivity (which never seems to be enough), but for survival. We teach it to ourselves, and we teach it to our children. We are always doing and thinking of more than one thing at a time.

Think about the simple act of driving a car. What is the first thing many of us do after we start the car? We turn on the radio. Now we are driving and listening to the radio. If someone is with us, we are carrying on a conversation on top of that. If we are alone, we might talk on a cell phone. Our minds are juggling many activities, and our energies are very dispersed. Even though this tires us completely, it has become normal for us as our world moves faster and faster. We don’t even question the levels of absurdity that multitasking reaches at times.

Years ago, I took one of my daughters to a skating party sponsored by the sixth grade of her school. I told her I would sit inconspicuously in the concession area and read while she skated. Here is what I saw and heard as I observed the scene. Six TV monitors hung from the ceiling
along the main side of the rink, where people put on their skates. Each TV played a different channel, and each one’s volume competed with those of all the other TVs. Loud music was playing throughout the rink. There was a video-game area where about a half-dozen full-size arcade machines blared out their own sound effects. There was also a seven-foot TV screen at one end of the rink playing a music video that was different than the music playing on the house PA system. Finally, there were all these eleven-year-old kids skating around the rink, and none of them were talking to one another. How could they? Just skating while absorbing all this sensory input that the mind needed to process was exhausting.

At times we must do several things at once, but the problem for us is that we are so used to always multitasking that when we decide we want to reel in our minds and focus ourselves on just one activity, we can’t. Our minds are so agitated, and that agitation has a tremendous amount of momentum. It doesn’t want to stop moving. It tires us out and stresses us out. We find we can’t sit still, and we can’t be still. However, the practicing mind is quiet. It lives in the present and has laser-like, pinpoint focus and accuracy. It obeys our precise directions, and all our energy moves through it. Because of this, we are calm and completely free of anxiety. We are where we should be at that moment, doing what we should be doing and completely aware of what we are experiencing. There is no wasted motion, physically or mentally.

Going back to the car example, how many times have
you driven somewhere and then noticed that you didn’t remember a portion of the ride? The reason you experience this is because instead of focusing on driving the car, your mind was overflowing with unrelated thoughts. So few people are really aware of their thoughts. Their minds run all over the place without their permission, and they go along for the ride unknowingly and without making a choice. Instead of observing their thoughts and using their thoughts to serve themselves, they are in their thoughts.

If this weren’t so tragic, it would be amusing. We are convinced that because our technology is evolving, we must be evolving, too. We think that because we have cell phones with cameras in them, we must be more advanced than people who lived twenty-five hundred years ago; but in fact, those people in the past were much more aware of their internal world than we are because they weren’t distracted by technology. We have all this technology, which is supposed to make our lives easier, yet it doesn’t. They had none of the technology, but they had much simpler lives and perhaps a better understanding of how their minds worked.

We think that our struggles today are known only to us, but they are timeless, and those who lived long before us faced the same internal struggles that we do. There is a story, many centuries old, that describes these struggles. The story is about a chariot rider who steps onto a Roman-style chariot drawn by four horses. In this story, the horses represent the mind. The driver, who has an undisciplined mind, steps onto the chariot but has no hold
on the reins. The four horses run wild all day, exhausting themselves and the driver as they bump along off the chosen path, constantly changing directions. They do not know where they are or where they are going at any given moment. The driver holds on to the railings and is just as helpless as the horses as they all watch the scenery go by. In contrast, a disciplined driver, who has the reins in hand, is in control and directs the horses down the focused, chosen path, wherever it might be. The horses now have no will. Their energy is directed by the refined commands of the disciplined driver. The ride is smooth, and they all reach their desired destination in the least amount of time, with the least amount of effort and fatigue. Which would you rather be?

If you are not in control of your thoughts, then you are not in control of yourself. Without self-control, you have no real power, regardless of whatever else you accomplish. If you are not aware of the thoughts that you think in each moment, then you are the rider with no reins, with no power over where you are going. You cannot control what you are not aware of. Awareness must come first.

The quest of this book is to examine how we get from here to there. How did we learn to be the chariot driver with no hold on the reins, and what types of cultural habits or teachings reinforce and perpetuate that way of thinking? What can we learn from how kids think? What can we teach them so they will have less to unlearn than we do? How do we do all this without struggling to
accomplish it? These are the questions I asked myself, and they are the ones I will, I hope, answer for you.

When I began this project, I envisioned this to be a book that would simply help readers to eliminate the struggles of learning to play a musical instrument. However, the further into the writing process I got, the more I realized that I was writing about my outlook on processing life, not just my thoughts about playing an instrument or learning a golf swing. I realized that I was using what I had learned in the very process of writing the book. I observed my perspective on how I maintained my steady writing effort day to day. I saw its presence in the effort of trying to understand exactly what it was that I had learned and how to put that into words. I saw how I was able to run a very successful business and to be there for my young daughters.

One day, I noticed that I was feeling frustrated and somewhat irritated while I was taking care of my daughters. I was having all these ideas for this book, but they were going to have to wait to be written down because my children needed my attention. I noticed that I had become the chariot driver who did not have control of the reins. I was allowing my mind to run off the path and work on the book instead of staying on the path and enjoying the time with my kids. When I realized this, I pulled in the reins and let the book go until my next scheduled writing session. The stress disappeared immediately, and I dove into the fun I had missed by not being in the present moment with my daughters.
At its inception, I would not have been able to write “this” version of *The Practicing Mind* even if someone had sat me down and said, “I will pay your bills and look after your family. You just write.” It took the writing process and observing myself going through my days to learn that.

I now realize that my approach toward moving through life began to change in my early twenties. Maybe this sounds familiar to you. Up until then, I had a long list of interests that I pursued with a lot of enthusiasm at first, and then lost steam and energy relatively quickly. First I would pick a particular activity, say exercising. Then I would really get involved in it by joining a gym, buying the proper clothes, and so forth. Next I would start the activity with a commitment to be steadfast, and I’d persevere in my effort. After a few sessions, my initial enthusiasm would start to taper off, and I would have trouble maintaining my interest and discipline. From that point, it would become harder and harder to continue with the practice of keeping up the exercising routine, and I would begin to make excuses to myself for skipping a session with promises like, “I will make it up in the next session or add one in the morning before work during the week.” This was all folly, though, because I wouldn’t follow through with these commitments either, and I would become more and more comfortable with letting things slide until I had completely gotten away from my original goals. There was also this nagging sense that I had let myself down, plus a feeling that I was not really in control of
my destiny because I wasn’t completing something that I had made a decision to do. Eventually, I would get to the point in this cycle where I lost all interest in the particular endeavor, and I would begin the search for the next thing that was going to fill the void in me, starting the whole process over again. My biggest asset was that I was aware of the fact that I followed this cycle when tackling any new endeavor. I noted this tendency, and I would quietly observe myself participating in this routine with one thing after another.

Three things were happening at this point in my life that would prove to be the beginning of a major shift in perspective and awareness for me. First, I had begun taking piano lessons again, from a teacher who not only was one of the best players in the area but was just several years older than me. Taking lessons as an adult yielded a whole new set of advantages and disadvantages over studying as a child. We will go into these in a later chapter. Second, while in college, I had begun independently studying Eastern philosophies. My study at that point was fairly broad, not focusing on any philosophy in particular, and it was part of a self-taught “religions and philosophies of the world” course. It sparked a contemplative process that, over the next twenty years, would forever change my understanding of the relationship between the mechanics of and the reasons for practicing anything.

If you have never considered it, think about how everything we learn and master in life, from walking and tying our shoes to saving money and raising a child, is
accomplished through a form of practice, something we repeat over and over again. For the most part, we are not aware of the process as such, but that is how good practice manifests itself when done properly. It carries no stress-laden anticipation, no internal question, “When will the goal be reached?” When we practice anything properly, the fact that we are engaging in a difficult learning process disappears, and, more important, the process dissolves into a period of inner calming that gives us a rest from the tension and anxiety that our “get it done yesterday” world pushes on us every day of our lives. For this reason, it is important to recognize and be in control of the process and to learn to enjoy that part of life’s activity.

The third major influence on my shift in perspective toward learning anything new came from a career decision. I had decided to become a concert piano technician and piano rebuilder. This is a very unique vocation, to put it mildly. It takes years to learn the skills necessary to be a high-level concert technician, and even longer to become proficient at the art of fine instrument restoration. My days consisted of 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. During my years in business, I worked for and met many of the world’s best conductors, concert pianists, big band leaders, and pop, jazz, and country-western singers, and I restored pianos dating back to the Civil War period.

A grand piano action (which is the entire keyboard
The Learning Begins

mechanism) consists of 8,000 to 10,000 parts. There are 88 notes, with about 34 different adjustments per note. A piano has between 225 and 235 strings, each of which has a corresponding tuning pin that needs to be individually adjusted at least once during a single tuning. My point is obvious. Working on a piano is repetitious, tedious, and monotonous, to say the least. Everything you do to the instrument, you must do at least 88 times. This forces you to let go of everything but the most practical and efficient attitude toward the daily work that faces you in the shop and on the stage. If you do not possess at least a minimal level of discipline and patience, your anxiety and frustration will soar.

My purpose in detailing the repetitive nature and monotonous of this work is to give you an appreciation of why, out of sheer survival, I began to develop an ability to get lost in the process of doing something. As difficult as the job was, its monotonous nature enabled me to spend my day alone with my thoughts. This afforded me the time to observe and evaluate what worked and what didn’t when coping with the nature of my trade.

Throughout this book, I will relate what I consider the key events and areas of my life that taught me so much about myself, why I struggled at times, why I let myself down at times, and how I moved beyond those failures simply by observing some of life’s simple truths.

And so, on to the beginning of understanding our practicing mind.