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ROBERT GREENE

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE ULTIMATE POWER

*Everyone holds his fortune in his own hands, like a sculptor the raw material he will fashion into a figure. But it's the same with that type of artistic activity as with all others: We are merely born with the capability to do it. The skill to mold the material into what we want must be learned and attentively cultivated.*

—JOHANN WOLFGANG VON GOETHE

There exists a form of power and intelligence that represents the high point of human potential. It is the source of the greatest achievements and discoveries in history. It is an intelligence that is not taught in our schools nor analyzed by professors, but almost all of us, at some point, have had glimpses of it in our own experience. It often comes to us in a period of tension—facing a deadline, the urgent need to solve a problem, a crisis of sorts.

Or it can come as the result of constant work on a project. In any event, pressed by circumstances, we feel unusually energized and focused. Our minds become completely absorbed in the task before us. This intense concentration sparks all kinds of ideas—they come to us as we fall asleep, out of nowhere, as if springing from our unconscious. At these times, other people seem less resistant to our influence; perhaps we are more attentive to them, or we appear to have a special power that inspires their respect. We might normally experience life in a passive mode, constantly reacting to this or that incident, but for these days or weeks we feel like we can determine events and make things happen.

We could express this power in the following way: Most of the time we live in an interior world of dreams, desires, and obsessive thoughts. But in this period of exceptional creativity, we are impelled by the need to get something done that has a practical effect. We force ourselves to step outside our inner chamber of habitual thoughts and connect to the world. At these moments, suddenly exposed to new details and ideas, we become more inspired and creative.

Once the deadline has passed or the crisis is over, this feeling of power and heightened creativity generally fades away. We return to our distracted state and the sense of control is gone.

The problem we face is that this form of power and intelligence is either ignored as a subject of study or is surrounded by all kinds of myths and misconceptions, all of which only add to the mystery. We imagine that

creativity and brilliance just appear out of nowhere, the fruit of natural talent, or perhaps of a good mood, or an alignment of the stars. It would be an immense help to clear up the mystery—to name this feeling of power, and to understand how it can be manufactured and maintained.

Let us call this sensation *mastery*—the feeling that we have a greater command of reality, other people, and ourselves. Although it might be something we experience for only a short while, for others—Masters of their field—it becomes their way of life, their way of seeing the world. And at the root of this power is a simple process that leads to mastery—one that is accessible to all of us.

The process can be illustrated in the following manner: Let us say we are learning the piano, or entering a new job where we must acquire certain skills. In the beginning, we are outsiders. Our initial impressions of the piano or the work environment are based on prejudgments, and often contain an element of fear. When we first study the piano, the keyboard looks rather intimidating—we don't understand the relationships between the keys, the chords, the pedals, and everything else that goes into creating music. In a new job situation, we are ignorant of the power relationships between people, the psychology of our boss, the rules and procedures that are considered critical for success. We are confused—the knowledge we need in both cases is over our heads.

Although we might enter these situations with excitement about what we can learn or do with our new skills, we quickly realize how much hard work there is

ahead of us. The great danger is that we give in to feelings of boredom, impatience, fear, and confusion. We stop observing and learning. The process comes to a halt.

If, on the other hand, we manage these emotions and allow time to take its course, something remarkable begins to take shape. As we continue to observe and follow the lead of others, we gain clarity, learning the rules and seeing how things work and fit together. If we keep practicing, we gain fluency; basic skills are mastered, allowing us to take on newer and more exciting challenges.

At a certain point, we move from student to practitioner. We try out our own ideas, gaining valuable feedback in the process. We use our expanding knowledge in ways that are increasingly creative. Instead of just learning how others do things, we bring our own style and individuality into play.

As years go by and we remain faithful to this process, yet another leap takes place—to mastery. The keyboard is no longer something outside of us; it is internalized and becomes part of our nervous system, our fingertips. In our career, we now have a feel for the group dynamic, the current state of business. We can apply this feel to social situations, seeing deeper into other people and anticipating their reactions. We can make decisions that are rapid and highly creative. Ideas come to us. We have learned the rules so well that we can now be the ones to break or rewrite them.

In the process leading to this ultimate form of

power, we can identify three distinct phases or levels. The first is the *Apprenticeship*; the second is the *Creative-Active*; the third, *Mastery*. In the first phase, we stand on the outside of our field, learning as much as we can of the basic elements and rules. In the second phase, through much practice and immersion, we see into the inside of the machinery, how things connect with one another, and thus gain a more comprehensive understanding of the subject. With this comes a new power—the ability to experiment and creatively play with the elements involved. In the third phase, our degree of knowledge, experience, and focus is so deep that we can now see the whole picture with complete clarity.

We can call this power intuition, but intuition is nothing more than a sudden and immediate seizing of what is real, without the need for words or formulas.

Intuitive powers at the mastery level are a mix of the instinctive and the rational, the conscious and the unconscious, the human and the animal. It is our way of making sudden and powerful connections to the environment, to feeling or thinking inside things. As children we had some of this intuitive power and spontaneity, but it is generally drummed out of us by all of the information that overloads our minds over time. Masters return to this childlike state, their works displaying degrees of spontaneity and access to the unconscious, but at a much higher level than the child.

If we move through the process to this endpoint, we activate the intuitive power latent in every human brain, one that we may have briefly experienced when we

worked so deeply on a single problem or project. When we reach mastery, this intuition is a power at our command, the fruit of working through the lengthier process.

Think of mastery in this way: Throughout history, men and women have felt trapped by the limitations of their consciousness, by their lack of contact with reality and the power to affect the world around them. They have sought all kinds of shortcuts to this expanded consciousness and sense of control, in the form of magic rituals, trances, incantations, and drugs.

This hunger for the magical shortcut has survived to our day in the form of simple formulas for success, ancient secrets finally revealed in which a mere change of attitude will attract the right energy. All of this searching is centered on something that doesn't exist—the effortless path to practical power, the quick and easy solution, the El Dorado of the mind.

At the same time that so many people lose themselves in these endless fantasies, they ignore the one real power that they actually possess. And unlike magic or simplistic formulas, we can see the material effects of this power in history—the great discoveries and inventions, the magnificent buildings and works of art, the technological prowess we possess, all works of the masterful mind. This power brings to those who possess it the kind of connection to reality and the ability to alter the world that the mystics and magicians of the past could only dream of.

Over the centuries, people have placed a wall around such mastery. They have called it genius and

have thought of it as inaccessible. They have seen it as the product of privilege, inborn talent, or just the right alignment of the stars. They have made it seem as if it were as elusive as magic. But that wall is imaginary. This is the real secret: the brain that we possess is the work of six million years of development, and more than anything else, this evolution of the brain was designed to lead us to mastery, the latent power within us all.

## KEYS TO MASTERY

If all of us are born with an essentially similar brain, with more or less the same configuration and potential for mastery, why is it then that in history only a limited number of people seem to truly excel and realize this potential power? Certainly, in a practical sense, this is the most important question for us to answer.

The common explanations for a Mozart or a Leonardo da Vinci revolve around natural talent and brilliance. But thousands upon thousands of children display exceptional skill and talent in some field, yet relatively few of them ever amount to anything, whereas those who are less brilliant in their youth can often attain much more. Natural talent or a high IQ cannot explain future achievement.

What we find instead in the stories of all great masters is essentially the following pattern: a youthful passion or predilection, a chance encounter that allows them to discover how to apply it, an apprenticeship in

which they come alive with energy and focus. They excel by their ability to practice harder and move faster through the process, all of this stemming from the intensity of their desire to learn and from the deep connection they feel to their field of study. And at the core of this intensity of effort is, in fact, a quality that is genetic and inborn—not talent or brilliance, which is something that must be developed, but rather a deep and powerful inclination toward a particular subject.

This inclination is a reflection of a person's uniqueness. This uniqueness is not something merely poetic or philosophical—it is a scientific fact that genetically, every one of us is unique; our exact genetic makeup has never happened before and will never be repeated. This uniqueness is revealed to us through the preferences we innately feel for particular activities or subjects of study. Such inclinations can be toward music or mathematics, certain sports or games, solving puzzle-like problems, tinkering and building, or playing with words.

With those who stand out by their later mastery, they experience this inclination more deeply and clearly than others. They experience it as an inner calling. It tends to dominate their thoughts and dreams. They find their way, by accident or sheer effort, to a career path in which this inclination can flourish. This intense connection and desire allows them to withstand the pain of the process—the self-doubts, the tedious hours of practice and study, the inevitable setbacks, the endless barbs from the envious. They develop a resiliency and confidence that others lack.



In our culture we tend to equate thinking and intellectual powers with success and achievement. In many ways, however, it is an emotional quality that separates those who master a field from the many who simply work at a job. Our levels of desire, patience, persistence, and confidence end up playing a much larger role in success than sheer reasoning powers.

In the past, only elites or those with an almost superhuman amount of energy and drive could pursue a career of their choice and master it. A man was born into the military, or groomed for the government, chosen among those of the right class. If he happened to display a talent and desire for such work it was mostly a coincidence. Millions of people who were not part of the right social class, gender, and ethnic group were rigidly excluded from the possibility of pursuing their calling. Even if people wanted to follow their inclinations, access to the information and knowledge pertaining to that particular field was controlled by elites. That is why there are relatively few Masters in the past and why they stand out so much.

These social and political barriers, however, have mostly disappeared. Today we have the kind of access to information and knowledge that past Masters could only dream about. Now more than ever, we have the capacity and freedom to move toward the inclination that all of us possess.

Although we may find ourselves at a historical moment rich in possibilities for mastery, in which more and more people can move toward their inclinations, we in

fact face one last obstacle in attaining such power, one that is cultural and insidiously dangerous: The very concept of mastery has become denigrated, associated with something old-fashioned and even unpleasant. It is generally not seen as something to aspire to.

Anything that smacks of discipline or effort seems fussy and passé: “Why bother working for years to attain mastery when we can have so much power with very little effort? Technology will solve everything.” This passive attitude has even assumed a moral stance: “mastery and power are evil; they are the domain of patriarchal elites.”

If you are not careful, you will find this attitude infecting you in subtle ways. You will unconsciously lower your sights as to what you can accomplish in life. This can diminish your levels of effort and discipline below the point of effectiveness. Conforming to social norms, you will listen more to others than to your own voice. You may choose a career path based on what peers and parents tell you, or on what seems lucrative. If you lose contact with this inner calling, you can have some success in life, but eventually your lack of true desire catches up with you. Your work becomes mechanical. You come to live for leisure and immediate pleasures. In this way you become increasingly passive, and never move past the first phase. You may grow frustrated and depressed, never realizing that the source of it is your alienation from your own creative potential.

Before it is too late you must find your way to your inclination, exploiting the incredible opportunities of