May 1997

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Redefining AGING

Martial artist and author George Leonard, 73, challenges our beliefs about growing older *(p. 34)*

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in person by Carol O'Sullivan

Redefining Aging

George Leonard's idea of a good time is being thrown onto a floor mat, rolling head over heels and up onto his feet again. Extraordinary activity for anyone at any age. Even more extraordinary for Leonard. He's 73 years old.

Lean and muscular, Leonard, who teaches and practices aikido at his dojo, Aikido of Tamalpais in Mill Valley, Calif., believes that society's calculation that old age equals infirmity and inactivity is bogus. "The biggest challenge facing aging people today isn't falling and breaking a hip or collecting plaque in their arteries. It's our false assumptions about growing old," says Leonard, author of numerous books including *Mastery* (Dutton/Plume), *Education and Ecstasy* and *The Ultimate Athlete* (North Atlantic Books).

"Life has one ultimate message: 'Yes!' repeated in infinite number and variety."

— George Leonard

Leonard, a founder of the human potential movement, acknowledges that statistics point to a long period of degeneration and decay in old age. These numbers tell us that we lose 10 percent of our aerobic capacity every decade, that by the time we're 70 we will have lost 30 to 50 percent of our muscle mass, and that our basal metabolism (our ability to turn food into energy and tissue) degenerates at the rate of 2 percent per decade starting at age 20.

Though he acknowledges the truth of these statistics, Leonard believes they're totally misleading. "These statistics paint a dismal picture of degeneration," he says. "But the problem is that they're based on our population that *now exists,* a population of people who've become sedentary, are overweight and who smoke." He advises that if older people would change their habits — eat a nutritious, low-fat, high-fiber diet, quit smoking and exercise regularly — they could revise these statistics regardless of the age they are when they begin to make these changes.

Exercise is especially important to health and vitality in later years, Leonard explains, citing recent studies that back his claim. Research on aging and exercise was performed by William Evans, Ph.D., now at Penn State Human Performance Lab and presented in the book he co-authored with Irwin H. Rosenberg, M.D., called *Biomarkers: The Ten Determinants of Aging You Can Control* (Simon & Schuster). In one study, a group of adults aged 87 to 96 almost tripled their thigh muscle strength and bulked up their muscle mass by 10 percent in just eight weeks. "This is comparable to what young people experience, maybe even better," says Leonard.

Evans also did a cross-sectional study comparing young endurance-trained men with 45-to-60-year-old endurance-trained men. He found that aerobic capacity and percentage of body fat is related to time spent exercising, not to age. "We found that age didn't predict anything. It's simply not a factor — exercise is," says Evans in his book.

PHOTOS: © DOUG MENUEZ/1996

Leonard doesn't deny that the body ages naturally or that death is part of life. Rather, he suggests that illness and lack of energy don't inevitably accompany old age; they often result from an unhealthy, unfulfilling lifestyle. By changing the way we live including spending our time in meaningful activity, Leonard says, we can thrive physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually in our later years.

Principles of Practice

Accompanying good nutrition and exercise on an exhilarating ride through old age is regular practice of an activity you enjoy. Activities can include painting, drawing, writing, mountaineering, yoga, body building, tennis, golf, gardening, playing a musical instrument, various forms of service to others — any practice that you love and that expresses your inner essence. In *The Life We Are Given* (Tarcher/Putman), which Leonard co-authored with Michael Murphy, co-founder of Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif., the authors say of practice:

"In the Buddhist tradition, a practice is viewed sometimes as a path, sometimes as a stream. The metaphor of the stream invites us to imagine a strong but gentle current that is already there to speed our journey. Just to consider getting started expands our vision and lifts our spirit. Just to enter such a stream makes one a different person. Taking the all-important first step with a sincere heart can be a sort of enlightenment."

Practicing activities we enjoy lifts our spirits and vitalizes us in many ways: We feel good about ourselves when we progress. We experience joy and enthusiasm when we focus our attention on an activity occurring in the present moment. And learning and practicing fulfills our life's purpose. "I believe we're put on this Earth to learn and to keep on learning," says Leonard. "Exercise is the foundation of a long, vital life, but intrinsic vitality comes from opening our minds to new knowledge. The ability to fulfill our mission on this planet by learning and mastering new skills is exhilarating."

Leonard cautions us about the plateaus — times when we seem to make no progress — that accompany learning and advises that we welcome these plateaus rather than despair over them. "People stop practicing because they reach a plateau and become disappointed at their apparent lack of progress," he says. "But the truth is, it's while we're on the plateau that we're learning. That's when our automatic response system is being programmed. After a while, the learning clicks in. One day we seem to advance all at once, but in reality we've been learning all along." ►

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Leonard himself is an example of what a person can accomplish through practice regardless of age. He has played around with jazz piano for many years. In recent years he began practicing regularly. "At 73, I'm a better piano player than ever," he says, adding that he's made tape recordings of his progress to prove it. Through practice, he's also become more adept at aikido, writing and at presenting workshops. He insists he's not a master at any of these skills, though he was senior editor for *Look* magazine for 17 years and has a fourth-degree black belt in aikido. "As long as I keep practicing, I don't see any end to the progress. And that's true of almost every aspect of my life," he says.

Plunge into Life

Any practice you undertake for the joy of it will vitalize your life. Yet, Leonard believes that integrated practices intended to nourish all aspects of your being — body, mind, heart and soul — are most effective in bringing about positive, long-term changes.

With this in mind, Leonard and Murphy devised a program called Integral Transformational Practice (ITP). ITP includes activities such as making positive affirmations, exercising the body and mind, eating a healthful diet, expressing emotions and serving others, which in tandem compose a lifestyle intended to transform us on all levels of our existence.

An essential practice of ITP is called the *Kata*, meaning "form" in Japanese, which involves sequential movements. "Each move in the Kata is designed to flow naturally into the next, balancing and warming up the body, articulating every major joint, stretching muscles and tendons, relaxing the body and quieting the mind," write Leonard and Murphy in *The Life We Are Given*. The Kata includes warm-ups, stretches, yoga, relaxation exercises, mental imaging (i.e., imagining your arteries are clear of all blockages) and meditation.

Whatever practice you choose, Leonard suggests you owe it to yourself to get on with it. "It's hard to imagine words more heart-wrenching than those of a close friend or relative who at the approach of death is heard to say 'I realize now I've wasted my life.' Against the backdrop of the billions of years it took to give us our life and the brief time we have to experience it here, the dimensions of such waste are beyond calculation," he and Murphy write in *The Life We Are Given.*

The time is right for taking the plunge into the stream of life. As the familiar adage asks, "If not now, when?" ■

For more information on ITP and how to obtain the "The Tao of Practice," a videotape in which Leonard leads you through the entire ITP Kata, write George Leonard at Box 609, Mill Valley, CA 94942.