

Mastery and grandmastery, from economy to wisdom.

For most professionals in the worlds of business, government, and education, acquiring mastery and running after degrees is a hot item at a certain moment in their careers. However, I have discovered that the concept of 'master' may shift as time goes by. Long-term perspectives or catastrophes call for a different interpretation of a master's characteristics: this way I arrived at the concept of 'grandmaster'.

Though I am still struggling with making a clear-cut distinction between the two terms, 'master' and 'grandmaster', I am satisfied with what I have found. It all adds up to me embracing the paradox of both terms. My conclusion is that in most cases grandmastery comes after mastery. However, I do not see any real hierarchic relationship between them. I must confess I often got stuck in discussions with others, but also in my own mind, and people pointed out to me that I presented my thoughts as if 'grandmaster' was better than 'master', and yet that was not at all what I meant. E.g. 'master' as it is used in certain traditional wisdom from the East reminds me more of the concept of 'grandmaster' as I use it. My aim in this text is, on the one hand, to try and develop a conceptual framework to distinguish between both concepts, and on the other hand to hold up a mirror to individual experiences or to situate them in a broader context.

For me this explanation works the best: I look at master/grandmaster as a natural succession such as mother/grandmother. First you are a child, and later, as an adult, you become a mother and grandmother, in a natural way. As a grandmother you often fall back on elements you learned and used as a mother. But you could acquire a number of mother's as well as grandmother's qualities in your life, without having been a mother *stricto sensu*. The story of pupil/master/grandmaster unfolds within a similar space. If anything, the path of master and grandmaster is a dynamic process. There is no universal way for everyone to recognize all characteristics in the same order or to the same degree. It is quite possible that some of them are totally strange to you, while you feel highly inspired by others.

I will now describe a number of characteristics of grandmasters.

Grandmastery is 'invisible', but expresses itself subtly in behavior. This behavior is what I will try to specify.

In order to be able to take and recognize the steps towards grandmastery, it is essential to be aware of one's own mastery. One needs to find a clear answer to the question: "In which discipline, in which field have I become a master? How and where is this visible in the outside world? What is my masterpiece?"

I often happen to be addressed by people who wish to finetune their answer to those questions. My research method consists of observation and dialogue. Therefore I am grateful to my disciples as well as my teachers.

This text does not discuss the ultimate grandmastery: how people such as Buddha and Jesus managed to reveal themselves to us ordinary mortals, manifesting themselves in a world they had already outgrown for a long time, is still a miracle to me.

What I want to focus on is this: how are people capable of rising above everyday reality and reach a meta level, precisely by connecting with that reality. In this very connection lies mastery; in transcending it lies grandmastery. DOING THINGS is typical of a master, NOT DOING THINGS (ANYMORE), letting happen, letting go, is typical of a grandmaster. However, this is not letting go as a result of indifference. Involvement is still possible, an involvement without the will to control things. A grandmaster may even go one step further. Sometimes you can prevent things from happening by not doing something, or you can give up something and grant it someone else. Such insights and behavior can only be reached when you experience joy; in that case you give up something, not as a victim, but simply because you accept life as it enfolds in the present moment.

A simple example:

During a very busy period in my life, when I was a stay-at-home mother with three little kids, crockery got broken every day. This made me unhappy because the tea service we used, had belonged to my grandmother, who was very dear to me. One day, in order to preserve at least part of the service, I put away four undamaged sets of cups, saucers and plates in a cupboard in the attic. Only to discover a month later that the shelf on which I had meticulously stored my beloved tea service, had broken down: everything lay shattered in the cupboard. I am still surprised that I did not burst out in tears; I smiled and realized the absurdity of my action. By taking care I was able to let go. 'Putting away the service safely' showed my mastery; letting go and clearing away all those lovely bits and pieces, without feeling awful, showed grandmastery.

Observations and reflections

1. You become a master 'in' something. Usually there are well-traced paths to acquire mastery: passing examinations, standing tests, making a masterpiece. Through dedicated effort, anyone can develop mastery in a certain field. It does not matter which field: becoming a pigeon fancier as well as a veterinarian are potential paths. Competition and rivalry ask for continuous vigorousness, and they are part of mastery. Degrees and certificates are part of mastery. Through evaluations and grades, an authority in the outside world awards them to you. In what have you become a master?

When you become a master, it is important that you mingle with other masters to compete with them, in order to enhance your mastery and become better. As a grandmaster you don't need to continually enter these fights anymore: you have proved your worth during the time you acquired mastery. You enter a kind of free space.

2. Mastery depends on explanation and initiation by other masters. Someone sets you on the path, shows you the way. Grandmastery does not need that. You recognize/know your own worth. You decide what your goal is (*of course you always aim for the very best ☺*) and then *you yourself determine when you have reached that goal*.

No one can guide you on the path to grandmastery. You are on your own, but when you look around with an open and receptive mind, you will easily find company. This company may not relate to your grandmastery at all.

3. Learning is different as well. In mastery you learn in a more hierarchical position, top down. As a grandmaster you learn mutually as equal partners; this may even lead to continuous alternation of the teacher-pupil position (poles can change like alternating electric current). You are able to learn from everyone and everything.

As a master you can train others in your own mastery, e.g. a computer expert teaching computer students. As a grandmaster you create space for others, enabling them to explore and develop their own grandmastery.

Masters can only teach things the way they know them themselves. Grandmasters can be a teacher in subjects they are not familiar with, because they are able to bring out things that are hidden inside their apprentices. In a way, they create a common space for learning.

4. Being able to switch flexibly between diverse activities without any loss of energy. Traveling with ease in and between various worlds and networks. You lose no energy when you have to switch worlds or environments. You are in a conversation, there is a phone call, you answer it, you go back to the conversation, you process the data on the spot, nothing burdens your mind, you let go of redundant things. Since you know how it feels to land in yourself, you can also feel 'at home' in various surroundings.

5. Being present without any irritation. Causing no nuisance, taking no offence. In your master's conscience irritation is often a signal indicating that something needs to be done. As a grandmaster you can quietly contemplate that signal, and you are free to enter into it or let it pass. You take no offence at 'wrong' things.

6. In the slipstream of success, a lot of fuss is often made while developing mastery, and superfluous rubbish is left behind. As a grandmaster you develop the quality of taking responsibility for your own chaos. In this way you learn to clean up the mess from the time you became a master; and as you are good at 'cleaning up rubbish', as a grandmaster you are also capable of cleaning up other people's mess, even going back several generations.

7. As a master you connect to physical time, like a clock ticking, like items written in your schedule. In grandmastery you relate to time and space differently, as if you can compress and stretch time, as if you can exert power on time.

8. Work and private life are not as strictly separated any longer; they are creatively intertwined (e.g. business relationships and friends mingle during lunch). You become aware of the connection between work and private life, even if that is not necessarily visible as a change in external circumstances.

There is also a less artificial division between work and spare time or vacation. You develop your own balance/rhythm between effort and relaxation.

9. In your time as a master you learn to initiate things. You can start new things, you are capable of converting plans and designs into matter. In grandmastery you acquire the competence to curb things, bring them to a halt (which is important in cases such as bankruptcy or divorce), in yourself as well as towards others. You are aware of the inner processes that are needed to quickly turn something in a different direction.

10. Grandmasters can consciously apply their skills, or not; they are free to choose. In your period of mastery, you have less space for choosing: on the one hand you tend to expose your abilities whenever you can (which may lead to intellectual arrogance), on the other hand you tend to hide your flaws. As a grandmaster you explicitly accept your flaws, and by dealing with them consciously and transparently, you will cause yourself and others as little harm as possible.

11. Mastery is limited to your professional discipline, as a grandmaster your power/strength exceeds your professional field. Your competence is such that the processes that led to your mastery can be applied in different fields. You probably don't have all informational content (you can easily get it from others), but you can keep track of change processes.

Masters from different professional fields often cannot talk to each other. They are stuck in their professional expertise; they can only understand each other within their own framework of concepts.

As a grandmaster you can transcend the limits of your profession and have an open mind. Then you are capable of speaking with masters from other disciplines, and it is a bliss to communicate with grandmasters. You can abstract from informational content. If you need topical data you will find them. You can more easily switch from the concrete to the abstract and back, or even do both at the same moment.

12. Mastery is developed by successes and being very good at something, grandmastery emerges independently from any external successes, sometimes during or after a crisis. Grandmastery is attained by connecting to the dynamics of life: dealing with loss, pain and death creates new possibilities; these situations are no standstill *sui generis* (think of the story of the Buddha, who was raised as a prince, Siddharta Gautama: old age, illness and death were kept away from him).

Mastery is about keeping and adhering, grandmastery is about letting go. Masters aim at winning; their energy increases in victory (their ego grows). Grandmasters, however, who are in a situation of defeat, are still able to find enough energy to keep going. Even in hopeless material circumstances, and whatever the result may be, they will continue working steadily (e.g. in case of bankruptcy), as their ego is only an external tool. Masters, focusing on succeeding and avoiding pain, tend to give up sooner and walk away.

13. In your time of mastery your focus is on results. How you achieved them, does not always matter a lot. It's only in your time as a grandmaster that you systematically pay more attention to the process of things coming into being; the path towards the result gets a different glow.

Mastery can be charged per hour or achievement, while this does not apply to grandmastery (story of giant and god).

14. Information (mastery) can be kept on your computer, you can pile up mountains of files on your desk, all that together is knowledge, but it expires, in the course of time you can throw all those files away. Whereas wisdom (grandmastery) does not expire, it deepens. You re-read certain books after ten years and you find totally new things in them. You read differently because you yourself have changed, you have a more open mind and are less frightened.

15. Mastery is visibly present in matter, while grandmastery is invisible, as it were, and not measurable. Mastery has an identity, a name, and a place. Grandmastery is rather anonymous and universal.

16. Mastery needs well-defined concepts, laws and regulations, which results in a rather closed system.

In mastery you get acquainted with those structures, laws, and regulations and if you want to score short-time results, you'd better act in accordance with them. As a grandmaster you scrutinize the limits of the regulations, you gain a deep understanding, and if the situation asks for it you venture to go beyond these limits at your own risk. Depending on your ethics and choices, this may be beneficial to the world and to others, e.g. better laws may ensue from it. Or it can turn out badly: you might trip and break a leg, or you might get entangled in your position of power and become corrupt. Paradoxically, treading on these limits may be challenging and dangerous, and at the same time comforting and fulfilling. The ethics on which masters base their acts can be limited to these very acts, whereas grandmasters think and act from a more comprehensive moral framework.

17. As a master you learn to give, as a grandmaster to receive.
For example, pupils/disciples may come to you of their own accord.

18. As a master you learn to express yourself in clear language. Your approach is analytical and you aim at exhaustiveness. As a grandmaster you learn to see the difference between idle information and sacred knowledge; your work hinges more on synthesis, you can skip things, which sometimes makes it look slightly mysterious to others. There is no need for it to be 'understandable', as long as it is effective (you don't skip anything out of carelessness).

19. The approach to possession, money and relationships often changes. In mastery you can feel you control things, you possess/have things; during the transition to grandmastery this 'having' sometimes changes into 'being'.

By developing your mastery, you usually gather property and money; you can increase the number of your goods. In grandmastery you discover the deeper meaning of money and you consider it as an instrument rather than a goal in itself.

20. In your time as a grandmaster 'happiness' develops as a quality of your inner world; when you are a master, you tend to think that this depends on external circumstances. As a master, you often only experience a partial connection with the universe, e.g. only at top moments and when you are flourishing. As a grandmaster, you have a more integrated connection with people and the world around you, even while being occupied with more simple things. As a grandmaster, you experience a spiritual connection more often (I am, God, etc.). You develop the 'breviary layer' to arrive at praying or meditating in your own way, with others or on your own. You discover your own daily and seasonal 'rituals'.

21. Masters prefer to be the best at all times, grandmasters like being surrounded by co-workers who become or are better than themselves, because they want their work to benefit the world.

22. Masters without humour do exist; grandmasters have a lot and sometimes a great lot of humour. (humour is a way to put things in to perspective). This is why it is usually a pleasure to work together with them or even be in their company.

23. In mastery you learn to deal with fear, to face it straightly, and depending on the discipline you practice, such as a martial art, you have been taught tricks to keep your fears inside. E.g. you have learned to start a fight (timing, estimating hitting power, endurance) only when you stand a great chance to win.

But in grandmastery there may be other reasons, even paradoxical ones, to start a fight: reducing other people's fears, carrying their anxieties, winning time...

You have developed a kind of awareness so that fear has become a useful signal. In grandmastery you will be able to make a distinction between your own fears (what courage do you need?), the fear of the event in itself (estimating the danger as realistically as possible), and other people's fears (the more of a chicken, the more frightened). In that sense the grandmaster is fear-reducing and courageous. It goes together with the ability to literally 'face death'. Sometimes grandmasters even go a very long way there. (example Martin Gray).

24. The individual mastery/grandmastery process can be hugely different from person to person, with respect to content as well as form. This makes it hardly recognizable, putting it in the invisible zone. It is impossible to pinpoint the moment the process starts. There can also be great variation in the names people give to it. Some characteristics appear in reverse order.

The issue of master and grandmaster is not a matter of good, better, or best. In mastery as such there is indeed a development in grades and rankings. Grandmastery, however, makes this very phenomenon disappear, and at the same time it is the pinnacle of it. The odd individual lands there for being so 'foolish'.

25. In grandmastery form may become either very important, as in the right word at the right spot on the right paper in the right font, or it does not matter at all, a message scribbled on a shabby piece of paper can just strike the right note as well...

26. Serenity is not sustained indifference.

Intelligence is not a victory over stupidity,
but a conscious choice.

Compassion is much more than refined charity.

Peace and friendliness are not weaknesses.

Power and vulnerability move together.

The masters' feelings and ambitions are subject
to psychometric tests and assessments.

The grandmasters' feelings are reflected in poems,
in fair decisions and in their eyes.

March 2023,

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