On “Growth” Mindset: The Trap And Danger Of Ancient Medicine And How To Incorporate The Best Of The Old With The Best Of Modern Medicine

By Christian Nix

I recently came across a book – the Rise of Superman by Steven Kotler – that, in one reading, may already be the most significant piece of work I have read in my life. No kidding.

The theme is ultimate human performance and Kotler's book examines how extreme-sport, adventure athletes have quite literally time-warped human evolution by achieving “flow” states of altered consciousness with a "just another day at the office" regularity in their envelope Pushing, and often death-defying (and sometimes death-resulting) feats of athletic achievement – thus illuminating the science of ultimate human performance to a level unknown; and all of this in the last 25 or so years.

I realized almost immediately why this book is so significant to me.

It is both a timely treatise on the science of focus (perhaps the number one skill in our universe of electronic distraction); and also a incredibly accurate and enlightening description and explanation of my own life path – especially my past.

As a young man and competitive athlete, I regularly experienced these flow states and there was/is no doubt, then or now, that such a state is it’s own reason for living.

Turns out, adventure athletes get this at a bone-marrow level; and the whole new-age mantra of oneness (as in, “we are all one dude”) has a significant scientific basis complete with brain-chemistry explanations and deep psychological underpinnings.

The experience of deep romantic love likewise produces the same brain-chemistry cocktail that extreme athletes imbibe while in a flow state.
For whatever reason, this was an epiphany for me, explaining as it does my own manic depression and addiction to certain (legal) substances as well as my endless striving to return to the Eden of the flow state I glimpsed so often in the first half of my life, the knowledge and existence of which tortures me without let-up.

The part of Kotler's book that really shocked me though was the section about flow withdrawal – viz. when someone used to regular experiences of flow cannot achieve it (because of circumstance, injury or simply because it is part of a natural cycle of peak and recovery).

The desire to live in flow is that strong and it certainly qualifies as an addiction in my own experience of it.

I have heard numerous speakers and read 1000 different pieces about the importance of eliminating distractions. But as an entrepreneur, I find myself tempted minute-by-minute to disengage and to be led away from flow; or at least to disrupt my momentum toward a flow state.

And that brings me to the point of this article . . .

What are the conditions that create flow? And why should you care?

There are many and some are clearly tied to danger – as in the danger of skiBASE jumping or kayaking un-navigable Alaskan rivers in total isolation, with no hope of rescue, in total peril of drowning and with no place to go but forward.

Entrepreneurial endeavors likewise contain conditions for flow – nowhere to go but forward, everything on the line and no way out but to win.

These conditions produce flow because they demand, without equivocation, total focus and thus a different level of intensity. A different quality of resourcefulness is brought to bear in the do-or-die environment of extreme anything.

But there was one particular prerequisite for flow Kotler addresses that struck me as the crux and utter dividing-line for people in our profession. This dividing-line characteristic is also a trap of sorts, a danger inherent in the study of ancient medicine.

Kotler distinguishes between the "fixed" mindset wherein an individual is sold on an idea of self that all talent and ability are inherited and thus fixed and cannot unalterable.
It is not unlike the old understanding of genetic science, "You got what you were given. Sorry, but your DNA is set and there’s no chance to alter it."

Of course epigenetics debunks this and the very basis of mind-body medicine is that your thoughts and feelings are in a bidirectional relationship with your physical reality.

So, as Robert Collier points out so well in The Secret of the Ages, police your thoughts without surcease or compromise because this is the very key to your leverage in creating your reality (a very Asian, mind-is-preeminent idea).

This fixed mindset is no good for flow-hacking because it disqualifies the very real belief that you can indeed grow and alter previous memes and mindsets and even – as we know from the study of epigenetics – alter your DNA.

Kotler thus distinguishes the “fixed” mindset from a “growth” mindset – citing as a definitive source, Mindset by Carol Dweck (it just arrived on hold at my local library!)

“Growth” mindset is precisely what I have just described.

It hinges on the conviction that indeed what you are, is nothing compared to what you can become when you hack into flow and drink deeply from the brain chemistry of this state (which Kotler describes in considerable detail and which every Chinese medical professional should learn and study simply to be educated and well-rounded if for no other practical reason).

Why is this relevant?

If you are following along and enjoy thinking for yourself, you are probably outpacing my own poor ruminations on this topic. But maybe I give more credit then would be normally do in this case to most readers.

Either way, this issue of fixed mindset versus growth mindset is utterly central to our situation as students and practitioners of an ancient medical system.

In fact, if you get this one point wrong, you can utterly sink the ship of your career or simply burnout from struggling and frustration as so many practitioners do. It’s that important!

The danger of course is that everyone who has studied and committed to practicing Chinese or ancient Asian medicine has – by the very act of that decision – accepted or at least casually considered that this ancient system is not only a superior system but that ancient wisdom itself is the remedy to the ills of the modern malaise of both
our frenetic lifestyle (replete as it is with chronic disease and functional illness); but also the miasma of mind-body disconnect arising from modern, hi-tech medicine.

In other words, the reification of ancient wisdom has inherent within it a "fixed" mindset un-conducive to the flow state of ultimate human performance which is the lived reality of the extreme-sport, lab-rats examined by Kotler.

**(Note: I suppose if you have never experienced flow or simply disbelieve that it exists or perhaps disbelieve its potency, then much of this article will make no sense. Oh well.)

The unspoken belief of the fixed mindset is that ‘the best has already passed and that all we can do as modern folks, orphaned and cut off from this Shangri-La of the past is to sigh nostalgically and try to follow the understanding that was left us and – more grotesque and limiting still – to follow the rules of the past, adhering to and never straying from these rules handed down from antiquity, in our pursuit of perfection of ancient norms and ancient ideals.’

Ouch. You don’t have to be very lucid to grasp that the world may indeed – in this tumultuous and uncertain "free-fall into future" – be in need of something a little more innovative than mere idealizing of the past.

There is another label often applied to the fixed mindset of the “all the best stuff is in the past and all we can do is emulate it” nostalgia: It’s called fundamentalism.

Now contrast the fixed mindset with a growth mentality that says:

1. Small gains add up to large ones
2. Who and what I am today (even at the genetic level) can be altered – dramatically!
3. Limitations that exist at the level of "normal" reality don’t even occur to me in peak flow states where the idea of death itself has a different and even an uplifting air of exultation and where “mistakes” do not exist since in heightened awareness the connectivity with my environment and my actions within this flow state do not permit hesitation or miscalculation

The point here is that the wisdom of the ages – especially the ancient wisdom of an ancient medical system – can only find its full expression and utility of application IF it can be accessed and applied in a growth mindset and state of flow – utterly relevant to the NOW of our modern situation.

Obviously a few things have changed in the last 2400 years and while lots of good stuff remains in the canon of Chinese medical wisdom; nonetheless, the future runs apace and the contribution of modern Western scientific method – which is a
championing of retrospective analysis and revision in light of new data – must also be acknowledged and factored into the overall equation.

The trap, which holds so many in our profession, is the fundamentalist limitations imposed by the fixed mindset. No good.

The real action is in the mainstream and the best application of your action fixed wisdom is to open it out to the best of what is now available.

Do not make the career-crippling error of believing that your value and potential contribution is now what it may become. That reality will largely be a result of your willingness to adopt a growth mentality and mindset and to seek ways to hack into flow state of deep focus – uninterrupted by the distractions of modern technology, but un-intimidated by applying and sharing (viz. teaching) your knowledge and skill to those who need it most – modern patients and conventional physicians.

Such a small difference in mentality and yet such a potent and significant difference in outcomes and career trajectory.

One thing you won't have the luxury to do is ignore or deny this decision. Even if you don't know the difference, most will be coming down on one side or the other – fixed or growth.

The danger within the profession is that the study of this ancient system implies an inherent faith in the fixed mindset and that this fundamentalist view is in direct conflict with the growth mindset needed for often optimal flow performance.

This is just another of the many life-situations in which, “even if you fail to decide, you will still have made a choice.”

So, my advice to you is – as the great baseball philosopher Yogi Berra declared – “when you get to the fork in the road, take it!”

And be glad as hell that you found and are reading this article because now at least you cannot claim ignorance on this topic.

The wise among my audience will get Kotler's book – at a minimum.

But you can also get my own work on this topic: The Barefoot Guide to East West Integration in Medicine and Tao of Integration in which I deal in great detail with this fundamental issue of cultural epistemology and the two
mindsets you are privileged to access by dint of your study of ancient medicine in the modern West.

My hope is that you will join me and the other practitioners who are navigating this seeming paradox because the world of medicine has never needed leaders and *flow-hackers* of the like described by Kotler more then in this very hour and for the foreseeable future.

To Purchase your copies of *The Barefoot Guide to East West Integration in Medicine* and *Tao of Integration*,

Call: (866) 841 9139 Ext 1011