

thinkarete: An Introduction

by Brian Johnson

"What one can become, one must become."

~ [Abraham Maslow](#), 20th century humanistic psychologist

The classic Greek philosophers had a word for the process of self-actualizing and striving to reach your highest potential. They called it 'Areté.' (pronounced ar-uh-tay)

In fact, *Areté* was one of the most important values in classic Greek culture. Guys like [Socrates](#), Plato and Aristotle taught that the meaning of life was happiness and that the way to achieve happiness was to live with *areté* (aka excellence, striving to reach your highest potential).

I believe that by looking at the universal truths taught by philosophers, religions, and current psychological research, we can find the keys to self-actualizing and happiness. Hence, my mission to inspire the world to "thinkarete."

"Become what thou art!"

~ Friedrich Nietzsche, 19th century German philosopher

"I cannot teach anybody anything; I can only make him think."

~ [Socrates](#), 5th century bce Greek philosopher

I don't pretend to own the truth. Who does?

I am, however, passionate about understanding life and living what I find to be true. This introduction is simply an overview of the universal truths that I have discovered in the course of my studies.

Nothing revolutionary. But, I hope you enjoy.

"Your mind will be like its habitual thoughts; for the soul becomes dyed with the color of its thoughts. Soak it then in such trains of thoughts as, for example: Where life is possible at all, a right life is possible."

~ [Marcus Aurelius](#), 2nd century Roman emperor-(stoic) philosopher

The Attitude Principle

It all begins with accountability. Unless you're willing to take absolute responsibility for your life, there is no hope.

Seriously.

If you're going to blame a bad market or a bad relationship or bad whatever for your problems, then you won't like this program and you won't come close to reaching your potential.

Sorry to break the news. Stop. Close your browser and walk away. Best of luck. Ciao.

Having said that, if you're willing to quit being a victim and start taking control of how you think about and interact with the world, then you're on your way to doing anything you set your mind to.

Open up *The Dhammapada*, the core text of [Buddha](#)'s teachings. Flip to the first lines. The very first words are "Our life is shaped by our mind. We become what we think."

That sums it up pretty well, eh?

And, scientists have done all kinds of research on this. They talk about "locus of control"—aka, where you place control. Do you put control outside of yourself and have what they term an "external locus of control"? Or, do you take responsibility and have an "internal locus of control."

Not surprisingly, you can test rats and humans and you'll find that, to the extent you place control outside of yourself, you will be significantly less happy, less successful, less all the things you want to be, than if you internalize control.

Philosophers have commented on the subject exhaustively as well—from ancient Greek philosophers like Epictetus to [Buddha](#) to more recent guys like [James Allen](#) and contemporary gurus like Steven Covey.

Of course, we cannot always control what happens in our lives, but we can always control how we perceive what happens. And, oh, what a difference that makes.

Lesson: Quit being a victim. Be a warrior.

"Man's ideal state is realized when he has fulfilled the purpose for which he is born. And what is it that reason demands of him? Something very easy—that he live in accordance with his own nature."

~ [Seneca](#), 1st century stoic philosopher

The Vision Principle

Ok. You've assumed control. No more whining from you.

Now that you've taken that step, what are you going to create for yourself? What's your ideal life? What's the ideal you? What are you doing on a daily basis? Who are you around? How much money is in your bank account? What kind of physical shape are you in? What do you look like and feel like?

Sounds simple, eh?

Of course, it sounds simple, but in my experience, people have a pretty hard time with this because they lack clarity in terms of who they are and what really fires them up.

We're so used to doing what we think other people want us to do that we haven't taken the time to truly understand who we are and what we want.

In short, we lack self-awareness. We'll get you thinking more about what you want and create a vision of your ideal.

"Only by much searching and mining are gold and diamonds obtained, and man can find every truth connected with his being if he will dig deep into the mine of his soul."
~ [James Allen](#), 19th century philosopher

The Self-Awareness Principle

Self-awareness. Our third step. Remember [Socrates](#)? The Oracle of Delphi in ancient Greece? What did they teach us?

"Know thyself," of course.

Well, how well do you know thyself?

What are your greatest strengths? What are you most passionate about? When are you most naturally yourself? What are you most proud of? What gives you goosebumps? If you were absolutely guaranteed to succeed, what one thing would you dare to dream?!?

I can't begin to stress how important self-awareness is. Again, all kinds of scientific research has been done on this subject.

Psychologists have often wondered why IQ isn't that well correlated with success and happiness in life and several authors have explained the keys to what Robert Sternberg calls "Successful Intelligence": In its simplest form, he says that the most successful people in the world know their strengths and know their weakness; they create a life around their strengths and spend enough time on their weaknesses so that they're not liabilities.

Basically, they "know themselves."

Martin Seligman, the past President of the American Psychological Association, Professor at Penn, one of the most preeminent psychologists alive and the founder of the current positive psychology movement, recently wrote a book called [Authentic Happiness](#).

In it, he boils down Aristotle's good life to a simple formula (ridiculously simple but backed up by some impressive philosophical and scientific data).

His axiom: Know what he calls your "signature strengths" and use these strengths as often as possible throughout your daily life.

Sound simple? It is in theory.

Tragically, most people don't take the time to figure out and even fewer actually consciously build their lives around them...

So, what are your greatest strengths? Are you creating a life around them? We'll check out some more theory and walk through some assessments and exercises to get you knowing thyself more than ever before.

"The unexamined life is not worth living."
~ Plato, 5th century bce Greek philosopher

"Life is growth. If we stop growing, technically and spiritually, we are as good as dead."
~ Morihei Ueshiba, 20th century philosopher-martial artist

The Goals Principle

Alright, so you've assumed control of your life, you're creating a vision of your ideal self and you're focusing on gaining greater self-awareness. Now what?

Now, it's time to bring the theory down to reality. It's time to set goals.

Odds are you don't have absolute clarity on exactly who you are and what you want in your life. Welcome to the club. Something like less than 5% of the US population actually sets written goals.

That doesn't mean you're off the hook. It means you need to get to work. Start by setting goals.

Your goal can be as "simple" as getting out of bed tomorrow morning when your alarm goes off—and before you hit snooze three times!! (why is that so hard sometimes?!?) or it can be more complex, like getting in shape, losing 10 pounds and running a 5k in 4 months.

The bottom line is clear: you need goals. I'll tell you more about why [goals](#) are so grand and also teach you a thing or two about how to actually set goals and all that good stuff.

For now, let's assume you have goals...now it's time for action...

"Good thoughts are no better than good dreams, unless they be executed!"
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th century American philosopher

"Be not afraid of going slowly but only afraid of standing still."
~ Chinese Proverb

The Action Principle

What's the use of having absolute clarity of who you are and what you want if you lack the power to take action?

It's time to follow the advice of another prominent Greek entity, Nike, and "Just do it."

Unfortunately, it's not good enough to just do it. You have to get in the habit of just doing it impeccably. Impecc-a-what? Impeccably. The word literally means "without sin."

And, that's what you need to do. You need to do your best. Every single moment—from putting your socks in the hamper to putting a dish straight into the dishwasher.

Trust me. When you get in the habit of doing every little thing to the best of your ability, you will do some amazing things.

That's action. It's powerful. In fact, there's nothing more powerful than having the ability to do what you need to do when you need to do it. That's probably why one of my heroes, Leonardo da Vinci, said that "one can have no smaller or greater mastery than mastery of oneself."

Imagine having absolute self-mastery aligned with absolute clarity in terms of who you are and what you want. If you're willing to dream big enough, it's the stuff legend is made of.

We're going to build the self-discipline that will allow you to take consistently impeccable action.

Energy: "The capacity for work or vigorous activity; vigor; power."
~ American Heritage Dictionary

"The best way to make a fire with two sticks is to make sure one of them is a match."
~ Will Rogers, 20th century cowboy and actor

The Energy Principle

It's hard to take consistent impeccable action if you don't have that much energy.

I like to say that you're going to have a hard time reaching your potential if you have a hard time getting out of bed in the morning.

Now, optimizing our health isn't rocket science. We all know what we should be doing (at least 90% of it!) but tragically few of us actually do it.

Use your impeccability from above to master the fundamentals of nutrition and exercise. Build habits that will last you a lifetime and then put this part of your life on autopilot.

We'll go into the details of what works--sifting through the disagreements among the experts--while building one solid habit at a time. And, we all know that this whole thinkarete thing is a lot more fun when we've got a lot of energy and a sweet six-pack and/or fitting into our size x jeans, eh?

"God turns you from one feeling to another and teaches by means of opposites, so that you will have two wings to fly, not one."
~ [Rumi](#), 14th century sufi mystic

The Wisdom Principle

Alright, now you've got some momentum: you've taken control, got some more self-awareness and a game plan that you're executing.

Whatever you do, don't freak out the first time (or the hundredth time) you drop the ball. Of course you're going to screw up. If you don't, then something's wrong! Don't view every challenge as a life or death event.

View every situation as another opportunity to learn, another opportunity to grow. Success and failure are much less important than what you're learning.

We'll also talk about the fact that life is our classroom. That guy cutting you off and honking on the way to work? He's just another teacher—teaching you how to remain cool when others are freaking out. Thank him for the lesson. Move on. Don't get caught up in his issues.

And, you've gotta spend some time learning. Turn off the TV for an hour every night and open a book or open a journal. Learn. Write. Think.

We'll look at all the studies that demonstrate the fact that the most successful people read and plan the most and we'll also look at some cool, practical stuff you need to learn: from time management skills to creativity and how to maximize your brain's potential. Cool stuff.

"Everything in the universe is a pitcher brimming with wisdom and beauty."
~ [Rumi](#), 14th century sufi mystic

"Each and every master, regardless of the era or place, heard the call and attained harmony with heaven and earth. There are many paths to Mount Fuji, but there is only one summit—love."

~ Morihei Ueshiba, 20th century philosopher-martial artist

The Love Principle

Alright, so we're well on our way to thinking and living *areté*. Good work.

We've got to remember one very important thing: none of this is anything without love. It starts with loving ourselves. To the extent that we can realize that we're not perfect and we never will be, we can forgive ourselves for our faults and have a little (perhaps even a lot?) more compassion for everyone else around us who is struggling with the same challenges.

We also need to remember to look outside of ourselves and think about how we can create a life that allows us to share our gifts with the world.

Remember Seligman? The guy who wrote [Authentic Happiness](#)? Well, he told us that if we want a happy life we need to know our strengths and use them as often as possible in our daily lives. We'll be more happy if we can do that. But, if we want to have a truly meaningful life, we need to use our strengths as often as possible, and do so for something greater than ourselves.

We need to give back to the world.

We've gotta show the love.

"Anything may be betrayed, anyone may be forgiven. But not those who lack the courage of their own greatness." "It does not matter that only a few in each generation will grasp and achieve the full reality of man's proper stature—and the rest will betray it. It is those few that move the world and give life its meaning—and it is those few that I have always sought to address. The rest are no concern of mine; it is not me or "The Fountainhead" that they will betray: it is their own souls."

~ Ayn Rand, 20th century Objectivist philosopher

The Courage Principle

thinkarete starts and ends and is driven every moment by courage—by our willingness to grow, to evolve and to challenge ourselves to be who we are capable of being, moment by moment by moment.

Nothing is more important and nothing is more challenging.

Society does anything but support our growth, our individuality and our greatness. We're told from the day we're born that we need to behave a certain way, wear the right clothes, drive the right cars, live in big houses in the right neighborhood, get the right education and the impressive job and beautiful spouse and 2.2 kids and all that other nonsense. It's enough to drive anyone insane.

You have to be willing to jump from the normal and risk looking like an idiot as you grow.

As [Maslow](#) says, "You will either step forward into growth or you will step back into safety."

Which way are you headed?

"You're packing a suitcase for a place none of us has been A place that has to be believed to be seen."

U2, 21st century wrokin band