

Podcast Episode #040

How to Live a Fully Engaged Life With Special Guest Thomas M. Sterner

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Announcer: Welcome to The LiftOff Project with Coach Pamela.

Pamela: Hi and welcome to The LiftOff Project. I'm Pamela Mitchell, your host and your coach, and this is the podcast devoted to helping you meld your professional self and your personal self into an enhanced version of your best self. My goal is to help you take control of your work and your life, feel more relaxed and confident, and experience the satisfaction and fulfillment of a sustainable, successful life.

Today's topic is How to Live a Fully Engaged Life. To help me talk about this, I spoke with Tom Sterner. Now, if you guys have been listening to this show for a while, you know that I have interviewed Tom before. He is the author of *The Practicing Mind*, which is all about developing focus and discipline in your life. It is one of my all-time favorite books. In fact, it was so great that I had to reach out and make friends with Tom. Yeah, I didn't know him before and I read the book and I was like, "I got to know this guy!"

If you haven't already listened to Episode 9, I highly recommend checking it out. He now has a new book that has just been released called *Fully Engaged*, and it is drawn from the most common questions that people had after reading *The Practicing Mind*, so you know it's really useful. It's about how to apply the concepts from *The Practicing Mind* in your life. As always, Tom has tons of wisdom and insight to share. I'm so excited to share this new interview with you, so let's dive in and get the show started!

Hi, Tom. Welcome today!

Tom: Hi, Pamela. Thanks for having me on!



Pamela: Yeah! Thanks for coming back, really, because we had a great episode about *The Practicing Mind*. You have a new book coming out, so why don't you tell us about it?

Tom: Okay. The book is called *Fully Engaged*, and it's really the answer to requests from the people that had read *The Practicing Mind*. They wanted me to talk more about, basically, the subjects that I covered in *The Practicing Mind*. Initially, *The Practicing Mind* ended up being or is continuing to be a much bigger success than I could have imagined. I was a little intimidated about writing a follow-up book because I thought, "Well, you know, I don't want to write a book where everybody says, 'Well, this is okay, but the first book was a lot better.'" I wasn't sure how much more I had to say initially.

I really had thought I'm not going to write another book, but *The Practicing Mind* has been out in its current form for about 4 years and, in that time, I've done many, many interviews, I've coached individuals, I've coached groups of people and I've done speaking engagements. And there were certain questions that always seemed to come up by people who had read *The Practicing Mind*. So I thought, "Well, now I'm starting to get an idea of what people are thinking after they read the book and what they need to hear." That was when I decided I could make a contribution in that regard by writing the second book and I also felt like it was my obligation.

I contacted New World Library, who published *Practicing Mind* and I said, "Look, I think I'm ready to write a follow-up," and they said, "Please do," and so we started it last September and it just ... the manuscript just went to the printer this week! It'll be on sale in October.

Pamela: Yeah, and probably when people are hearing this, it's going to be October! This is great! So Tom, tell me then what was the biggest question that ... or maybe the two biggest questions that people were asking after having read *The Practicing Mind* and that inspired this book?

Tom: First, people wanted to know about thought awareness, which I coined ... I just called it thought awareness training, and we're really talking about ... It's just a label. We're really talking about the concept of meditation, which is getting more and more press these days and on many more layers in our culture. It's on everybody's radar, corporate leaders, athletes, people that are under high stress. That was the first one.

The second one was being able to maintain the practice of *The Practicing Mind*, and I'll speak on that in just a second. But the meditation thing for me, you just can't go anywhere if you're not able to become what I call the "notice." The noticer is the observer of your thoughts because it's in that setting when you can notice yourself and



notice how you're feeling. You're not in your feelings. You're noticing how you're feeling. It sounds very subtle, and I guess from one perspective, it is, but it's a huge difference in terms of how much power you have when you begin to look at your feelings as being separate from you. I'm having this feeling. I'm not in this feeling.

People, they ask me, "Well, how do I become more patient?" to use an example, and my answer is, "Well, you have to know when you're being impatient." That sounds kind of ridiculous, except that, for most people, they're just impatient. They're absorbed in their impatience and they're not really noticing that they're impatient. When you notice that you're impatient, then you have the opportunity to choose a different path, and you can do that through a whole bunch of systems that we can talk about. That was the one thing.

The very first chapter in the book was really dedicated to what, in the context of what we're talking about here: what is thought awareness training? I use that word because some people don't like meditation because they always ... they think of Buddhist monks and Tibet or whatever, and that really isn't it. That's something they use, but that really isn't what meditation is about. Meditation is about learning to become aware of what your mind is doing without your permission. And it's doing it all day long. That was the first thing that I thought.

I just mentioned this concept in *The Practicing Mind*, but in every interview and in every coaching session and in the emails that people were sending to me, they asked, "Can you talk more about that?" so I just thought that I needed to write a chapter about that.

The other thing is getting people to understand that what we're talking about here is a life's work, and I think that we're not very comfortable in our culture with things that don't have closure. We want closure and everything because we have too much to do in a day. We want that report done. We want the grocery shopping done. We want the kids picked up. We want things checked off of our list, and we don't like the feeling of undertaking something that doesn't have an end, that goes on and on. That's very uncomfortable for us because of the way that we live our lives.

We can turn that around and we can see that what we're interpreting as a feeling of infinite struggle finds its core in the fact that we are never fully expanded. We can always grow. We can always expand, and that's really a blessing. As human beings, we really like that. It's part of our spiritual DNA. We want to constantly expand.

That's the reason we don't live in caves anymore. We were always looking for what more we could do and, as soon as we reach a certain level, we're always looking for the next



level. We're always looking for the next challenge. We may not notice, but that is what drives. If you can learn to immerse yourself in the process of achieving goals instead of being fixated on the moment that you have the achievement, then you get to enjoy this whole process of moving through all of that. I think that that's the second thing for people: learning that this is infinite and that's really a good thing and it's really what you crave, so learn to enjoy the process of becoming and not being so fixated on this moment when you have this particular thing.

I was watching a nature show the other day, and it was showing all these different animals. One that I particularly remember was a baby flamingo. The flamingo was trying to climb up this mound in the sand where its mother was and it was struggling. The mother was just watching as if there really wasn't anything that she could do. This baby thing just kept struggling and struggling. Eventually, it got up there.

They went through a number of animals and they showed them all struggling in different situations, and it occurred to me that this word, "struggle," is part of every living organism's existence. We can interpret that in different ways. It must be necessary for us because it's in those moments when we're up against the threshold that we're growing. I think that that's the thing that we need to realize. When something is very easy for us, then we're not growing. It's only when we're up against what we'll call our threshold, that's when we can interpret that feeling as being "struggle," and that word has all these connotations with it that we generally consider to be negative.

I tend to look at those things as, "Oh, I'm up against my threshold. I'm up against my limits, and so, now, at this point, this is an opportunity for me to move forward." And that's part of this eternal thing of constantly growing that is always going on. I think *The Practicing Mind* is something that is a lifetime effort and, the better you get, the more you will realize that you can get, and that's all part of the growth process. I think that was the other thing that people were really beginning to get a grasp on to and seeing that as their friend and not as their enemy.

Pamela: Okay, so there's a lot in what you just said. I want to circle back to the beginning. What you said about the thought awareness training: it seems to me that everything else that comes from it, the ability to recognize that struggle is a part of the whole growth process, understanding that, if we're not in a state of expansion, basically, we're in a state of decay, right? Expansion is in our DNA. All of that is predicated upon understanding our thoughts and the ability to separate from our thoughts. Without that, the rest of it doesn't flow, it seems to me. Right?



Tom: Absolutely. Absolutely. And that's my whole point. You don't have any power. You can have the conversation in your head, you can have the conversation of, "Is the way that I'm reacting to this situation serving my happiness? Is it serving me moving forward? Is it serving me accomplishing my goal, or is it just making the experience uncomfortable?" You can't have that conversation if you can't separate yourself from the actual thought. I mean, you have a thought and this thought fires off an emotional response. Usually, that's because of other experiences that you had in your life, and so you're always judging. You're comparing it to similar situations. How did I feel in that particular situation? You go into a job interview and you're really uncomfortable and it's like, "Well, because I had this other job interview and I didn't get that job and I was uncomfortable, this will be exactly the same."

There's all this dialogue that is constantly rolling in your head 24/7 that most people just go along with. They're not even aware that it's happening. That's what thought awareness training does. When you sit and just quiet your mind or work at quieting your mind, this is what happens. You always hear this when people start some sort of a practice, and it doesn't take very long. You'll end up wanting to do more because the feeling of shutting your mind down even for a very short period of time is so refreshing. But what happens is this: when you begin to do this, people are like, "Oh, my gosh, I can't, I can't believe how much thinking my mind has been doing without my permission," and they also see that, even when they try to stop it, their mind doesn't want to stop thinking.

That's what it does. It's a problem solver. It just goes into search mode and, if you don't give it a problem, then it'll go looking for one. That's what it does. That's what it likes to do. That's really its function. If you're directing it, then it's really your servant. If you're not, then it's your master. It's just firing off thoughts and visiting all of these things, and you're experiencing the emotion of everything that it's visiting.

I find that, because we have too much to do in our day, what the mind likes to do is it doesn't like to be where you're at doing what you're doing. What happens is that you start working on this task and your mind says, "Okay, well, while you do that, I'm going to go run over here and start on all of this other stuff that's got to get done." It just ping-pongs around. It visits this. It visits that. It visits that. That's all processor power that is being taken away from you. It's like asking your computer to run all these programs in the background. You're running out of RAM.

If you look at it like that, then when you start thinning your thoughts out, you have more RAM and you end up having more resources, more computational resources, more focus resources. It's easier to focus because you're not trying to process so many things



in the background, and you find that you get more done with less effort and you don't feel so tired. It really is not a difficult concept to understand. I think where people struggle with meditation is they approach it the way that they approach everything else: "Well, I need to be good at this now because I want the benefits of this," so, right away, they become attached to this goal that's out here and then the process of meditating becomes this thing that they have to do so that they can have the benefits. What they don't realize is that it's the actual moment-to-moment experience of sitting there and trying to quiet your thoughts. That's where all the juice is, that's where the growth is happening.

They also misinterpret the fact that, if they are chasing their mind a lot, they feel that that's not a good thing, that they're not very good at this. This is a skill and they don't have the skill. My response to that is you can't chase your mind if you're not noticing your mind, so that's a good thing. If you're chasing your mind a lot, it means that, instead of being absorbed in what the mind is doing, you're noticing what the mind is doing, and so you should feel good about that and also feel that it's normal. Some days, you're stressed and your mind is going to be very agitated and it's going to be very active and you're going to feel like you're constantly chasing your mind to stay on task. Other days, you'll feel more content and more relaxed, things will be in a different place in your life, and you'll find that your mind is not so active. It's important that you don't interpret those 2 different experiences to mean that you're doing good or doing bad. They're both normal experiences of going through meditation.

I've been meditating for probably 40-some years, and I still have days where, I drop right into a very deep meditation and other days I just don't, and I just accept it as, "Oh, this is a day where I'm going to chase my mind." But each time that you see your mind, you notice that, "Oh, it's over here thinking about this and I just wanted to watch my breath or just be still and listen to my 3-word mantra of 'I am quiet' or 'I'm at peace'" or whatever your mantra would be. Every time you catch that, you're growing because that means that you're aware that your mind is off-task and you pull it back every time. It's a repetition. Every time you do that, it's a repetition, and you grow in that.

The benefits of it are extremely subtle. You don't notice them at first, but then what happens after a month or so is that you begin to notice that people don't push your buttons. You start to be separate from what's going on around you and you start to make decisions of, "Oh, I see this is happening. How do I want to react to that?" or, "You know, I'm not really content with how I reacted to that," because you're watching yourself react to situations and, now, you have this opportunity to say, "How could I handle that better and what would make it a more peaceful thing?"



You start to see situations coming a few minutes ahead, and you can say, "If I could handle this situation any way that I want, how would that be?" and you make these choices in your head before you're actually in the situation. You have this opportunity to change your reaction to situations, which means that you changed your experience of the situation. It really is everything. Without that, you're just going to continue on the path that you've lived and experiencing the behaviors that you have habituated your whole life. It really is the key to the present door.

Pamela: Let me ask you a question though about meditation because, to your point, meditation is a very loaded word. I mean, it's part of the cultural conversation, but there are many people who feel like, "Oh, my gosh, meditation." Does it need to really be always in the traditional way? That question is born of a conversation that I was actually just having with someone that I work with, and we were talking about coloring and we were discussing how I had gone to a coloring event when I first started doing this because I've just picked this up as a hobby again.

As I was at this event, I was starting to color, but I was having a lot of noise in my head because I was looking at everybody else's stuff. My head was just really noisy, like, "Oh, you're not as good. You don't have any artistic talent. Look at theirs. Theirs are so good. Oh, my god, mine is bad," blah, blah, blah. Okay? I'm just listening to all this blah but I'm continuing to do it. But I did notice and I thought, "I don't remember having all this noise in my head when I was a kid coloring. This is now an adulthood going on."

Then I came home and I decided, "Well, you know, what if tried to color here at home?" and so I did. I just went online. I printed out some sheets. I pulled out some markers that I've had and have never used and colored pencils that I have and have never used, and I sat down and I just started to color and, all of a sudden, it was quiet in my mind. Like there was no conversation, no this or that. It was just quiet.

What my colleague said to me is that, when she colors, it turns her mind off. Like that's meditative for her. So I'm interested to know whether or not meditation in its traditional sense is what you're talking about or if it can be expanded to include other activities that also shut down the mind, because even in that moment where I was coloring and having a lot of noise in my head, I was still noticing the noise. Like I could actually see that my head was doing this as I'm like filling the little boxes.

Tom: I think it's an excellent point, Pamela. I think what you're really describing is mindfulness when you're coloring. When you're trying to do something, usually, when you're trying to do something for the first time, you are not thinking about other things because it does absorb your attention. I mean, I can tell you that the first time I tried to



land an airplane, I wasn't thinking about grocery shopping. It immediately sucks you right in because it takes all of your computational and physical skill.

What you're talking about there is a form, to me, it's a form of meditation. It is a form of quieting your mind. I would encourage that for people. I think it's really important if you have something like that that quiets your mind. That's the reason why, if you look at Zen, the Japanese arts where they have Zen in the Art of Archery, Zen in the Art of Flower Arranging, it's where you become completely immersed in arranging these flowers and that's all that you're thinking about and, when you do that, it is a form of meditation.

The thing that I would say is that I know that you're fairly far along in the whole meditative thing. You wouldn't have been able to have that conversation when you were at the class listening to all of this dialogue because, at that point, you were the noticer. The meditation kind of gives you the opportunity to have that conversation and then, when you came home, you also noticed, because it's still the same noticer, now, your mind is quiet. If the coloring is helpful at quieting your mind, then I guess we're talking about 2 aspects. We want a quiet mind because, when our mind is quiet, then it's focused on very little when we have all of our consciousness to work with us. But, in order to notice that, you still have to practice some period of time where you're paying attention to "what is my mind doing without my permission?"

I think that they're both very legitimate and valid ways of creating an awareness of mindfulness in yourself, but I don't think that they're completely the same. I think that when you're coloring, from my perspective, you're becoming absorbed in the coloring and your mind becomes still, and that's why it's such a joyful experience, but it's not necessarily teaching you to notice your thoughts in a stressful situation so that you can shut them off. I think that the two of those are very good practices. I think everybody should find stuff like that. I have stuff like that. For some people, it's just taking a walk where they just try to still their mind. They'd take a walk and they're just looking at the trees and everything. I think that they're both very valid. That's a good point.

Pamela: Yes! I think that's a really excellent point because it's true. I do do traditional meditation, and so there are many mornings I'm sitting there and I'm trying to focus on my breath or focus on my heart, and my mind is just off. But it is the practice of showing up for those times, to your point, that allows me to notice when my mind is noisy versus when it's quiet. It's that awareness that is the key that unlocks the power to do everything else that you're talking about, like enjoying the process versus the goal. Because that was the second half of the conversation that I was having with my colleagues, which you brought up. If we're focused on the goal, then there's less of the enjoyment of the process.



I was saying to her, "You know, I don't know about this coloring thing because what am I going to do with these things after I've colored them? You know, I'm not 12. I'm not going to be putting up my little pictures all over the wall. It's not going to happen." What's-the-point-of-coloring is the conversation she and I were having, and then I realized that with all of my hobbies like knitting, all of those things, I was very much about the endpoint. Like, "Oh, I like that item, that scarf, so I'm going to make it." Yes, there's a whole process of enjoyment that happens around that, but, at the end, what it really is about is the end-goal. I want the scarf. Right? In knitting, it's called "being a process knitter versus a project knitter." Project knitters like the end-result. Process knitters just like the process. I was always a project knitter.

Now, in coloring, I realized it's the first time that I didn't really want the end-goal. I don't want something to hang up on my wall, so it's like, "Am I willing to just step into the process of enjoying and just do it for that as opposed to looking for an end-goal?" It's really interesting what happens when we take away that piece and then start thinking about, "Well, I'm just doing this to do this." Is that for real? Right?

Tom: Yeah. It doesn't fit in the current culture power button because everything has to have a reason for being done. I think what's interesting about your analogy with coloring is it's such a good analogy in terms of the joy in the process. Because what's the first thing you do when you finish coloring the picture? You go get another picture to color, because it is the process of watching the picture come together that is where the fun is.

I think that, like I said, one of the problems in our culture is that when you look at marketing, the goals are, "Oh, everything is shown backwards." It's showing that people have the goal if you watch the commercials. They're driving the expensive cars. They head a successful business. They're on the big sail boat, whatever it is. They don't show the people working for that stuff. It's like studying and grades. We're told that studying is very important, but if you study hard and you get a C, you're not made to feel good.

Pamela: Right.

Tom: We're taught from a very young age that it's the bottom line, it's the end-thing that matters. It's the same thing if you look at sports. If you're there running your heart out every day and you have maybe a personal best or something, that's all good and well, but, if you don't win the race and you come in like 6th or 7th, then what did you accomplish by our culture's standards?

I think that that's what we need to shift away from because, ironically, when we become focused on the process of doing stuff, our performance level goes way up and our



experience of achieving the goal is completely transmuted into something that's a lot of fun and that we feel successful in all the time. And the goal is just like the example I used in *The Practicing Mind*, of the Asian archers and the American archers back in the '70s. But you don't find this anymore in sports because we're so entrenched now with all of this information that we're talking about. But back then, the Asians were completely entrenched in the process of drawing the bow and that was where all of their focus was, and then they would let the arrow fly, the bull's eye got in the way of the arrow.

The Americans were more focused on letting the arrow go so that you can see if you got a bull's eye. These were very different approaches, and nobody could compete against the Asians. It just shows the difference in performance level that's achieved by just shifting your mindset.

Pamela: There is so much that we could continue to talk about, but I am mindful of the time, so, if there were 2 takeaway tips that you could offer to our listeners, what would they be? How can people put this into immediate practice to become more fully engaged?

Tom: Obviously, one is you have to have some sort of a thought awareness training regimen in your life. You got to do that. It's just so simple. You take 10 minutes a day, and anybody can find 10 minutes in their day to sit still and to just sit in a chair, be comfortable, and try to assume a position where your body is not a distraction. You don't want your ankle throbbing or something like that. And then just sit there quietly and watch your body breathe. Don't try to control it. Just watch your body breathe or come up with a very simple phrase. It should be no more than 3 words, just because it becomes difficult to repeat over and over and over again. But come up with a very simple phrase that's meaningful to you and just say that over and over again for 10 minutes. You can set an egg timer or something if you want. If you can do 15 minutes, that's great.

Then the thing to remember is don't judge it. There is no such thing as a bad meditation. It's just, as we've discussed, it's like exercise. You never get to a point with exercise where you say, "Well, I'm good at this. I don't need to exercise anymore." It's just a part of daily life that is helpful and it's very good for you. I think particularly now as we've become just so overtaxed in our day and we're overstimulated all the time, it's very important to do this. Besides all of the benefits that we've talked about, it helps to retain our ability to focus because studies show that we're losing that. That would be the one thing.

The other tip is to embrace the idea that we have a tendency to misinterpret this feeling. We struggle with a feeling of incompleteness, I think. I think we all struggle with a feeling



of incompleteness. We feel like, "I can't really be happy right now because I don't have this. I haven't done that. This has to happen. I have to get to that point where then, at that point, everything will feel better and this feeling that I have inside will go away." I think it's important to realize that we are designed to have that feeling and, when it's making us feel bad, we're misinterpreting it. That feeling is there to make us want to grow, to make us want to expand, to make us want challenges. It's not there to make us feel like we haven't accomplished what we're supposed to accomplish and we can't be happy with that.

They're two different sides of the same coin. One is where it makes us feel wonderful and makes us feel like, "I'm right where I'm supposed to be because I'm having this feeling." I'm having this feeling of being incomplete, and that's exactly what I should be feeling because that's what makes me want to be more as a person. When you start to feel like "I am incomplete," that's when you're misusing the energy, I guess I would say. If you can just remember that. When you start to feel unhappy inside and you feel incomplete, then you're not understanding the purpose of that feeling. I think, if you could flip that, it really makes a difference in how you experience whatever it is that you're working towards.

Pamela: That is awesome. I just love that. That is like the perfect takeaway because it's transformative. It will shift how we view all of those moments of struggle and open up a whole new vista for us. So thank you, Tom!

Tom: Great! I think it's important that we realize that whenever we achieve a goal, we immediately look for another goal, and we don't always notice that. We don't notice that drive and we don't notice that we are supposed to be that way. It's a good thing, and we should be grateful for that feeling because that's the reason that we have all of the amazing art and music and all of these things with the technologies. That's where that's coming from, but it can also have a dark side if it's misinterpreted. It can make us feel miserable. It can make us feel frustrated. It can make us feel like we're struggling because we're not embracing it in the way that it's meant to be embraced.

Pamela: Awesome. All right, again, fabulous talk and interview! My gosh, I think I want to have you back a third time!

Tom: I'd love to. I always love talking with you. I'm so appreciative that you asked me to be on your show. It's just wonderful. You're a wonderful friend, and I'm very grateful that I've met you!



Pamela: I'm a huge fan, and now, a friend. I was like, "I have to be friends with this guy because his book is so amazing! I want to know him!" Thank you again, Tom, for an awesome interview.

Tom: Oh, you're so welcome, Pamela. Thank you!

Pamela: Wasn't that a great interview? As I mentioned earlier, I have already started on *Fully Engaged*, and it is just as simple, clear, profound and practical as *The Practicing Mind*, so I highly recommend you check it out. It's on sale now and, as well, whenever the audio book version of it goes out, I recommend listening to it. It's just amazing. I listen to *The Practicing Mind* even though I am a book reader. I love listening to the audio version of it because Tom's voice is like an instant shot of Zen. If you want to learn more about Tom and his work and his coaching, you can check him out at Tomsterner.com.

That's it for this segment of The LiftOff Project. Be sure to visit our website, theliftoffproject.com/podcast, where you can download a transcript of today's episode. If you have a question for an upcoming segment of Ask Coach Pamela, go to theliftoffproject.com/question and leave me a voicemail. If I answer your question in a future episode, I will send you a free deck of reinvention cards as a gift, so leave me a voicemail with a question. You can also connect with me on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram @TheCoachPamela.

If you enjoyed this episode, please leave a review for us on iTunes. Your feedback truly does make a difference.

Today's Lift Off inspiration quote comes from Maria Edgeworth, who says, "If we take care of the moments, the years will take care of themselves." Be present in the moment and your years will take care of themselves.

Thank you for listening today and remember, why settle for good when great is waiting? Take one small step this week to lift your life. Bye for now.

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