living simply + working deeply

monk mode

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Contents

Praise for *Monk Mode*

At last, a really practical and useful book on life skills for engineers. No waffle, just actionable tips on how to focus, organise yourself, and generally get a grip on things. I love it.
—Richard W. Shepard

This book is like a gentle friend who listens to your worries, reassures you, and then takes you out for a walk through a wildflower meadow to cheer you up and gladden your heart. It's the ultimate antidote to anxiety and burnout, the bane of the tech industry.
—Natalie Morris

I loved the book—I found it easy to read and full of interesting ideas that resonated with my own worldview.
—Evgeny Lupashko

John is a very funny and wise writer! I found the book inspiring, comforting, thought-provoking, and full of good ideas.
—Ell McPhearson

I'm in love with this book!
—Rami Awar

LIZ: *Sometimes the right thing and the hard thing are the same thing. I read that on a teabag.*
—"30 Rock"

Introduction

> *Granny Weatherwax put down the cup and saucer. "Child, you've come here to learn what's true and what's not but there's little I can teach you that you don't already know. You just don't know you know it, and you'll spend the rest of your life learning what's already in your bones. And that's the truth."*
>
> —Terry Pratchett, "A Hat Full of Sky"

This is not a self-help book, for reasons that I hope will become clear. Self-help books are for people who think they're missing something, and if they could only find it, all their problems would be solved.

In fact, you already have, and are, everything you need. You just might not realise it yet. In this book, I'll explain that rather startling statement, and more.

I'll show you how to focus on what's important, how to eliminate the unimportant, and how to tell the difference. You'll learn not only how to get things done, but also the much more difficult art of *not* doing things. We'll see what you can and can't change about yourself, and outline some practical ideas for planning the right kind of changes, and making them stick.

What is the nature of craft, and why does learning a craft seem like such an essential part of a fulfilling life? How do we go about that learning, how long will it take, and when will we be done?

What you can get out of your head depends, logically enough, on what you put into it. People pay great attention to their physical diets without thinking too much about what they're feeding their *brains*. Could this make a difference to our happiness and well-being? Surely it could.

Meditation isn't necessarily the solution to everything, or indeed anything, but it can be easy and enjoyable, when you go about it the right way, and we'll talk about that too.

Anything else? Oh yes: the meaning of life. Otherwise known as the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything, or alternatively, as the philosophers put it, "Yes, But What's It *Really* All About, Then, When You Get Right Down To It, I Mean Really!"

We'll tackle that, too. So, no pressure.

Let's crack on.

1. Monks

> *A monastery is a machine through which the handling of time is transformed. A monastery works with time to change the monks. I wanted to see what that was like and thought, as an artist, I should make a film about that experience. I set out to make a monastery.*
>
> —Philip Gröning, director, "Into Great Silence"

Have you ever met a monk? Me neither. Right away, then, we have a bit of a problem.

We hear a lot about the virtues of so-called "monk mode" these days, and presumably that's something to do with a monastery, and what the inhabitants do there. So, questions: what *do* monks do, what is a monastery, why is it relevant to those of us who aren't monks, and what should we do if we want to reap the benefits of *true* monk mode?

The monastery

In fact, there isn't a single answer to that: there are lots of different kinds of monks and monasteries. But, since most of us probably haven't been inside a monastery, or even seen one on TV, we'll set the scene a little by talking about one famous example.

La Grande Chartreuse

For about a thousand years or so, with a few brief interruptions, monks have been living and working at the Grand Chartreuse monastery, in the foothills of the Alps in France near Grenoble. It's the mother house of the Carthusian order, a particularly strict and silent regime even by monastic standards.

In the early 2000s, filmmaker Philip Gröning spent six months living with the monks and shooting footage for a documentary movie called *Into Great Silence* (you can watch it online by following the link).

It's a remarkable movie, and I really recommend you watch it, even if you're not particularly interested in monasticism: it's like nothing else you've ever seen. It has no narration, no voiceover, no presenter, no plot, no conflict, and no story arc.

Instead, *Into Great Silence* simply shows the monks going about their daily business: praying, meditating, gathering firewood, making and repairing clothes, working in

the garden, and so on. It's a bit like the "slow TV" movement that's enjoyed a vogue in recent years, except that it's slow cinema instead.

Into Great Silence

At first it's hard to watch: nothing much seems to happen, and then it goes on not happening for about three hours or so. A single, static camera shot can last for several minutes. Sometimes we're treated to magnificent vistas of snow-capped mountains, at other times we see the monks kneeling in silent prayer in their cells, or doing chores.

After a while, though, the very starkness of the movie's uncompromising style starts to draw the viewer in. Movies usually want to hook our attention with fast action and frenetic dialogue, and this is exactly the opposite. The glacial pace of the film gives explicit permission for our attention to wander. But the long, contemplative, unchanging shots also give us the time and space to think about what we're seeing, and how it makes us feel.

It's actually a very soothing experience, once you ease into it. You may well find that your mind starts to drift, or that you get waylaid by ideas that pop into your head. That's okay: your brain is allowed to operate in parallel with watching this movie. As you come back to it, you may notice your breathing becoming slower and more regular, and your body becoming more relaxed. As your tense muscles gradually unwind, your cluttered mind also starts to open to what the movie is offering.

While it's a challenge to our sadly internet-addled attention spans, and most people may not be able to make it through the whole movie at one sitting the first time, watching *Into Great Silence* can be a transformative experience. It shows a way of life about as different from our own as we can possibly imagine, and it doesn't just *show* it, it actually makes us live it ourselves, for a short period.

The monks are happy

This movie about a monastery, in other words, is like a kind of monastery itself. Watching it gives a powerful sense of what it must be like to *be* a Carthusian monk, spending your life in silent contemplation, isolated from every aspect of the modern world. Meditative, austere, transcendent, and serene, it's a movie that makes us—the audience—its main character.

As moving and peaceful as it might be to watch, the monastic life depicted in *Into Great Silence* isn't one that would suit most of us, and that's okay. This isn't the "monk mode" that I want to talk about in this book, in case you're worried: I'm not going to recommend you live alone in a mountain cell, getting up three times a night to pray and chant medieval plainsong. (Unless that's your idea of a good time, of course, in which case go right to it.)

But there is something interesting about it. Even for members of such a rigorous order as the Carthusians, the monks don't seem to find their lives grim or unpleasant. It's not an *easy* life, for sure: that's partly the point. But, to judge from the monks we see in the

movie, they actually seem pretty happy. (Stay for the scene near the end where they go snowboarding on their holy posteriors.)

Maybe that's because, to them, the monastery is not a prison: it's a refuge. They've all freely chosen to be there, and to stay there—indeed, most monasteries turn away many more applicants than they can possibly accept.

Those high stone walls are not to keep the monks in. Instead, the walls are there to keep everyone else *out*, so that the monks can pursue their vocation uninterrupted.

Many people have some kind of religious faith, of course, and spend part of their time worshipping together at the mosque, church, or synagogue. Monks are just people who take this to the next level. They want to devote their entire lives to worship and prayer, and the monastery is the place where they can do that.

Focus isn't just for monks

Monastic life has a purity and clarity that most of us envy from time to time, even if we'd prefer it to be accompanied by central heating. Indeed, most people's ambition when going on vacation is to "get away from it all", and that's exactly what the monks have done. It seems many of us would like to join them, at least for a while: monastic "retreat" minibreaks are booming in popularity.

I think to some extent, though, this is missing the point. What's really different about monks, whatever their order or religion, is their singular degree of *focus*: identifying what's important, shaping their lives around it, and eliminating the rest.

> *The average human mind is in a state of constant distraction. The distracted mind cannot experience reality because it is scattered and confused… Mindfulness is the opposite of distraction.*
>
> —Rob Nairn, "Diamond Mind: A Psychology of Meditation"

When you get rid of the distractions, all that's left is the stuff that matters.

"Monk mode", as sold by TikTok

That's probably why the idea of "monk mode" is enjoying a vogue at the moment. Be like a monk, the influencers say, and you'll achieve more, earn more, get more done, and so on. More, more, more.

I'm not sure that's what I actually *want* to do, though. In some ways, it's the very "more, more, more" aspects of modern life that I find rather exhausting and dispiriting. Could it be that the answer is not "more" anything, but *less* something?

It's not about making yourself miserable

In the West, we tend to associate monks and monasteries with a particularly rigorous and ascetic way of life. You know, early rising, lots of prayer, physical labour, hard beds, and so on. If you're miserable, the reasoning goes, you must be extremely virtuous.

Well, maybe. It all depends what you think you're trying to do. And in the modern world, this self-flagellatory way of life is being increasingly sold to us again under the label of "monk mode":

> *In the relentless pursuit of productivity, a new trend has emerged, one that promises to unlock superhuman focus and efficiency: "monk mode". In stark contrast to the genuine spiritual pursuit of monastic life, it appears as an exaggerated and misguided attempt at maximizing productivity.*
>
> *This self-imposed isolation and restriction of social interactions, digital distractions, and even leisure activities is marketed as a gateway to unparalleled success. However, this obsession with productivity is not just unsustainable; it's yet another manifestation of the pervasive culture of hustle and grind.*
>
> —Anna Codrea-Rado, "Monk mode isn't a retreat, it's a personal prison"

Sounds awful. But in the Taoist tradition in ancient China, for example, a monk might instead be a cheerful, wandering poet, who likes nothing better than a drink and a laugh. That's much more the kind of monasticism that appeals to me, and perhaps to you, too. It's certainly the one I'm going to take as my model in this book.

As modern monks, why shouldn't we smile and have fun, while still living life the way we want to, rather than the way society seems to expect of us? Despite the solemn public image, monks of all persuasions seem to be pretty happy, perhaps because no one expects "monk mode" levels of hustle and grind from them. And they don't seem to have much interest in becoming TikTok influencers, either.

A place in the world

What all monks do have, though, is their commitment to a certain way of life, one that rejects ordinary concerns and worldly affairs. They understand that true freedom means liberating themselves from the prison of other people's opinions, living simply, without greed or ambition, and existing in harmony with nature rather than battling against it:

> *I have my place in the world. In winter, I wear skins. In summer, I wear hemp. In spring, I plough and plant and have enough to do. In fall, I harvest and gather and have enough to eat. When the sun rises, I get up. When it sets, I rest. I'm free to do what I want in this world, and with this I'm content. What do I want with a kingdom?*

—Huangfu Mi, "Biographies of Exemplary Gentlemen", 3rd century CE

Now that's a philosophy I can comfortably get behind. On the other hand, the weird way we live today is rather strongly ingrained, and it can be hard to shake off. Modern life is busy, noisy, stressful, hard, confusing, and relentlessly overstimulating, but, like any stimulant, withdrawing from it can trigger some unpleasant symptoms.

Going cold turkey

If you've ever tried to meditate, for example, only to find yourself assailed by intrusive thoughts, twitches, itches, cramps, worries, noises, distractions, and an overpowering urge to check your phone, you'll know exactly what I mean. Living simply and quietly, in happiness and harmony, sounds great on an advert for a yoga class, but it's not always so easy to achieve in real life.

"Retreats", where people voluntarily go cold turkey from the crack cocaine of 21st-century life, are increasingly popular these days, many of them taking place at actual monasteries. But I'm not sure how much they really help with the problems they're supposed to fix.

My friend Ash suffers badly from the stress, sleeplessness, and incipient burnout of the typical tech worker, and every few months or so he goes on one of these (rather expensive) retreats. He and a group of fellow refugees from sensory overload spend a week in remote mountain cabins, in complete silence and isolation, doing nothing but meditating, going for nature walks, and eating unsalted cabbage soup. It sounds brutal, and it is, but he enthuses about it.

The cabbage soup diet

"It's like a detox for my brain," Ash tells me. He returns from every retreat serene, refreshed, and full of Zen calm, and ready to resume the living hell of his normal routine, working 25 hours a day, neglecting his family and ruining his health, all to further inflate the profits of some Silicon Valley billionaires. Within a couple of days, he's usually miserable again.

Can you spot what Ash is doing wrong? Of course you can. It's the same mistake that people make when they go on crash diets: what's the point of losing weight for a week or two if we're just going to return to the same unsustainable lifestyle that made us fat in the first place?

Similarly, giving our brains a short, sharp annual detox may make us feel better for a while, but it's not addressing the underlying issue, which is that we simply can't go on living this way. Just like diets, retreats don't work, because using them as a quick fix only relieves the symptoms, not the disease. They just help us avoid the real problem for a little longer.

I asked Ash, "If meditating up on the mountain makes you feel so much better, have you

tried meditating when you're at home, too?" "Oh no," he said. "That's what the retreats are for."

If the binge-purge cycle of retreats and cabbage soup diets isn't a long-term solution, then what is?

I'm envisaging something more sustainable, more permanent, and ultimately more effective. It's *my* version of monk mode: one in which I build a happy, meaningful, and healthy life for myself, not on top of some mountain, but right here. It's a life of balance: between work and relaxation, between socialising and solitude, between discipline and enjoyment.

Don't retreat, move forward

The kind of productivity I want to achieve with my monk mode isn't about running faster on the treadmill of consumer capitalism, or ruthlessly strip-mining people's minds to fuel the attention economy. It's more about weaning myself off an addiction to things that don't matter, which it turns out is almost everything we take for granted today, and finding a new, gentler way of life that I won't *need* to go on a retreat from.

> *When I went on Christian retreats I began to find the silence rather thin. Perhaps this was simply the name—"retreat". I did not want to retreat from anything, but to move forward.*
>
> —Sara Maitland, "A Book of Silence"

Real monks, after all, don't go on retreats: people come to *them* for a break from the rat race. So what is it that monks do, or don't do, differently, and how do they do it?

Modern monks

What's notable about monks of all kinds is not just their radically simpler lifestyle, but also their discipline in sticking to it even when it isn't fun in the moment. Especially then, indeed. By paying the short-term price—an effort of will to overcome minor discomforts—they presumably expect to reap some long-term benefits. Like what?

Eliminating the unimportant

Well, it depends on what kind of monk we're talking about, of course. The Western religious tradition leans towards the idea that a little suffering now will earn the sufferer an afterlife of unlimited, perfect bliss. I hope that's true, but it sounds a lot like wishful thinking.

On the other hand, the secular monk looks for their reward right here on Earth. If this life is the only one we get, then it seems sensible to try to make it a happy one.

Of course, that should hardly need saying: no one plans to live an *unhappy* life. And yet, somehow, that's where a lot of us are. What's up with that? And is there anything we can do about it?

Don't worry, I'm not here to convert you to any religion. (Or, if you're religious already, I'm not here to talk you out of it.) This book takes a common-sense, results-oriented approach to figuring out how to live.

Happy?

A monk, I think, is ultimately someone who knows how to eliminate the unimportant, whatever that means to *them*. A monastery is not a building, it's a way of shaping our lives so that all our time, energy, and attention are focused on what matters, on what makes us happy.

> *This is what a monastery is. It's getting rid of all the superfluous stuff, and then things become much more transparent—time becomes transparent, objects too. There's this transparency, this inner freedom that comes, which is felt as joy, of course.*
>
> —Philip Gröning, quoted in "Voyage into Silence"

My friend Carey represents my image of a modern monk. She's a martial arts teacher, and a very good one. Her whole life revolves around teaching her art, and deepening her own practice of it. She doesn't really have any other hobbies, she doesn't spend a lot of time socialising, and she's not interested in news and current affairs.

I'm pretty sure she doesn't know who the Prime Minister is. She's not suffering from concussion, as far as I know: it's just that this isn't a piece of information she feels the need to give brain room to. This is the secret of why she's so good at what she does: she doesn't do much of anything *else*.

Don't feel bad for Carey: hers is not an impoverished life in any way. She's incredibly happy, relaxed, and successful. It's not that she's given up everything to practice her art. She hasn't "given up" anything. Like the monks of *Into Great Silence*, Carey is happy precisely because she's not wasting any of her precious time or energy on things that don't *make* her happy.

> *The moment you say "I am happy" you are no longer happy. When you are happy you know it, but you don't know it objectively. You know it somehow, but through a different channel. This channel is very important. The channel through which you know that are happy is the channel through you know yourself.*
>
> —Francis Lucille, "Eternity Now"

So what makes *you* happy? And what does that word even mean? If someone asked you right now, "Are you happy?", what would you say? It's a surprisingly tricky question.

The 84th problem

We know when we're *un*happy. That's easy. It's a feeling we're all familiar with, and we probably have it a lot more often than the feeling that we're happy. For example, we might be unhappy because we lost our car keys, or because we're feeling stressed at work, or because our kids are yelling and screaming while we're trying to do our taxes.

I hardly need go on; life is full of things that make us unhappy. So is happiness, then, just the temporary absence of any of these annoying things? Surely not. No matter who we are, where we are, or what we do, we will always have problems, setbacks, and annoyances. So by that definition, no one is ever happy, and clearly *that's* not the case either.

The Buddhists say that everybody has 83 problems, which is a curiously specific number, but nonetheless it sounds about right to me. Some problems are big, some are small, some can be solved, and some can't. Usually, if we solve one problem, another simply pops up to take its place.

The point is that everybody thinks "If only I could just solve my 83 problems, I'd be happy". That's the 84th problem.

> *The most astonishing fact of human life is that most of us think it's possible to minimise and even eliminate suffering. We actually think this, which is one reason it's so difficult for us when we're suffering. We think "This shouldn't be this way", or "I'm going to get rid of this somehow".*
>
> *I think many of us believe that suffering is so bad and so unpleasant, if we were really good and really smart, it wouldn't arise in the first place. Somehow suffering is our own fault. If it's not our fault, then it's definitely someone else's fault.*
>
> —Norman Fischer, "When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen"

Finding purpose

So, if happiness is not merely an absence of problems, what is it? I'm no expert, of course: I'm as miserable as everyone else, sitting here counting my problems. But I feel that it must be something to do with a sense of *purpose*. In other words, feeling like we're doing the right thing: not just in the moment, but in general. To be happy, we must feel that the arc of our life is tending towards something meaningful: something that matters.

I don't think it matters *what* matters: we all value different things, and that's okay. The point is, we need to feel that our lives are *about* something. Once we know what that is,

the only thing standing in the way of our happiness is actually getting on with it.

Thus, time spent fulfilling our purpose is time spent in happiness, and anything that distracts or delays us from doing that is going to create a feeling of unhappiness. The key to a good life, then, it seems, is to find our purpose, and to dedicate ourselves as much as possible to the activities that help us fulfil it—and to dispense with everything that doesn't.

Your monastery is the metaphorical space you build for yourself to do this. It's what the enthusiastic proponents of monk mode are talking about, whether they realise it or not. In this book, we're going to build a monastery together, but don't worry: there won't be any heavy lifting. This is a monastery of the mind.

The walls of this monastery are built of discipline, and they serve to keep out the things that would deflect us from our purpose, and to protect us from the endless and fascinating distractions ("ooh, shiny!") the world serves up on a daily basis.

Safe spaces

The question then is what each of us is going to *do* in our monastery. If monk mode involves "intense periods of uninterrupted focus to optimise productivity", in a typical formulation, what should we aim to produce, precisely?

That's up to you. The answer might be "nothing at all". Or it might be a bestselling novel, a lucrative tech startup, a loving family, stunning mathematical breakthroughs—whatever you feel is the right thing for you to be focusing on. And perhaps that answer will change over time, or with changing circumstances. It doesn't really matter.

What matters is that your monastery is there for you when you need it. It's your sacred space where you can rest, think, or work effectively, without being constantly interrupted, distracted, demotivated, or pulled in one direction or the other.

It's a busy, noisy world; everyone wants a piece of our attention. If we give it to them, we'll find ourselves nickel-and-dimed to death, trying to fulfil our life's purpose in occasional, hurried snatches of a few minutes at a time between the tyrannical pings of an ever-present smartphone. And we all know *that* doesn't work.

No hair shirt necessary

So how can we build a refuge from this relentless, ever-accelerating craziness? How can we protect ourselves, not just from outside distractions and diversions, but from the noises inside our own heads? It starts with discipline.

Don't confuse discipline with asceticism. Being disciplined doesn't always feel good, but just making ourselves feel *bad* doesn't necessarily mean we're being disciplined, or indeed doing anything useful at all. Calvin's satirical impersonation of his well-meaning dad captures this perfectly:

"Calvin and Hobbes", December 7th, 1990

Real monks, the religious kind, often go in for a kind of self-conscious asceticism:

> *Carthusian monks do not sleep through one full night in their lives. Three hours of sleep are followed by two to three hours of prayer, and then by three hours of sleep again. The interrupted sleep creates… constant exhaustion.*
>
> *There is no such thing as time for oneself: whenever I felt that I was finally about to have some peace, another bell started ringing, and something else had to be done.*
>
> —Philip Gröning

Cool. Personally, I like my sleep, and going without it makes me *less* able to fulfil my life's purpose, not more. Carthusian monks, presumably, feel differently, and that's okay. They deliberately make their lives hard and uncomfortable, and perhaps the very discomfort helps them stay focused on the task: in their case, prayer.

There is something curiously attractive about the idea of monasticism, though, and I think we all feel it from time to time. Like many popular romantic notions, though, it tends to remain a daydream for most people, and perhaps that's for the best. Our fantasies usually don't turn out to be as much fun as we thought they would be:

> *Is there any man who has ever gone through a whole lifetime without dressing*

> *himself up, in his fancy, in the habit of a monk and enclosing himself in a cell where he sits magnificent in heroic austerity and solitude, while all the young ladies who hitherto were cool to his affection in the world come and beat on the gates of the monastery crying, "Come out, come out!"*
>
> —Thomas Merton, "The Seven Storey Mountain"

I think it's possible, though, to incorporate some sensible, moderate degree of discipline into our lives in a way that doesn't have to be painful. Let's examine that a little in the next chapter.

2. Discipline

> *Through discipline, though not through discipline alone, we can achieve serenity, and a certain small but precious measure of freedom... through discipline we learn to preserve what is essential to our happiness in more and more adverse circumstances, and to abandon with simplicity what would else have seemed to us indispensable.*
>
> —Robert Oppenheimer, quoted in Kai Bird & Martin J. Sherwin, "American Prometheus"

Order out of chaos

We saw in the previous chapter that living a more meaningful life requires discipline. That's something most of us struggle with, so what *is* it, exactly, and how can we cultivate it?

Another brick in the wall

For many of us, our first experience of discipline is as children, when our parents try (not always very successfully, though with the best of intentions) to impose it on us:

> McB: *Hank, all you gotta do is be Bobby's friend. If not, who is he going to turn to when he's in trouble?*
> HANK: *He won't even need to turn. We'll be right there. Bam! In his face with a brick wall of rules, limitations, and discipline.*
>
> —"King of the Hill"

Kids *need* discipline, we all understand at some level, even when we're the kids in question. But it's not a very appealing notion. Which would you rather: be disciplined, or just do whatever the hell you feel like?

The funny thing about discipline is that, while it almost never feels good in the moment, it's often the best thing for us in the long run. Provided, of course, that we've chosen the right set of rules to be disciplined about following.

One meaning of the word "discipline" is "order", as in the opposite of chaos. If you have no order in your life, but just do whatever you feel like, or whatever comes to mind in

the moment, you're not being disciplined.

The homunculus fallacy

Suppose you want to get better at playing the piano, for example. If you just play the piano whenever you feel like it, or whenever you remember that it's something you want to do, it probably won't happen that often, and you'll make sluggish progress, or none at all.

The disciplined approach, in this sense, would be to play the piano even when you *don't* feel like it. I know that sounds obvious, even trite, but bear with me, because there's something interesting going on here psychologically.

I'm sure you've been in a similar situation, and you can remember what it feels like: you want to do something, but at the same time you *don't* want to do it. How is that possible? What's happening inside your head to create this weird contradiction?

I'm used to thinking of myself as a single, coherent entity that makes decisions and acts according to (fairly) rational motives. I say "I did this," or "I decided that," as though there were a little executive part of the brain that's in charge of all the others.

"The Little Guy That Lives Inside My Brain", by Robert Crumb

Indeed, this is a very old way of understanding how our minds work: to imagine that there's a little person inside your head watching things happen on a screen, and pulling levers and switches to get the body to do things in response. This is an attractive

thought, but wrong. It even has a name: the *homunculus fallacy* (from the Latin for "little person").

On reflection, the "little person in your head" idea doesn't really explain anything at all, because how does that little person's mind work? Is there an even littler person inside *them*, and so on? Is it homunculi all the way down? Surely not.

Paradox: the mind is a very complex system that tells itself a simple, but completely false story about its own workings.

Who pushes whom around?

Like the homunculus fallacy, thinking of ourselves as consistent, coherent rational decision-makers is convenient and superficially appealing. We *know* it's not true, though, or we'd never feel torn between two conflicting desires, like the lazy piano student.

It would be more accurate to say that our minds are something like a loose confederation of warring tribes, independent clusters of conflicting or overlapping desires and priorities. Of course, we only have one body, so what it ends up actually doing, in meatspace, must be a kind of compromise result of a complicated and invisible internal argument.

This is why it's often hard to answer the question of exactly *why* we did so-and-so. The truth is that our actions are often the result of a sort of averaging over multiple sub-minds, all shouting to make themselves heard in the executive part of our brains.

Explaining ourselves

Our understanding of our own behaviour, then, must be a rationalisation constructed after the fact. We're often under pressure to explain our actions, even to ourselves, and so we've got rather good at constructing logical-seeming chains of retrospective reasoning.

Douglas Adams has some fun with this idea, imagining a computer program that can produce even more convincing post-facto rationalisations for us, given only the desired conclusion as its input:

> *It was called Reason, and in its own way it was sensational… It's funny how many of the best ideas are just an old idea back-to-front. You see there have already been several programs written that help you to arrive at decisions by properly ordering and analysing all the relevant facts so that they then point naturally towards the right decision. The drawback with these is that the decision which all the properly ordered and analysed facts point to is not necessarily the one you want.*
>
> *Gordon's great insight was to design a program which allowed you to specify in advance what decision you wished it to reach, and only then to give it all the*

> *facts. The program's task, which it was able to accomplish with consummate ease, was simply to construct a plausible series of logical-sounding steps to connect the premises with the conclusion.*
>
> *And I have to say that it worked brilliantly. Gordon was able to buy himself a Porsche almost immediately despite being completely broke and a hopeless driver. Even his bank manager was unable to find fault with his reasoning.*
>
> —Douglas Adams, "Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency"

A similar process helps us maintain this inaccurate, but flattering, image of our mental activities. But it doesn't really stand close inspection. When a child commits some misdeed, an angry adult often asks "Why did you do that?"

The child replies "I don't know," and that of course only makes the adult even more angry. But the child is being completely honest: they really *don't* know why they did what they did. Nor do any of us.

I contain multitudes

Our adult "misdeeds" are just as mysterious in origin, even to ourselves. Let's look at a typical example of the kind of thing that causes many of us to feel like we're undisciplined failures.

Not going to the gym

My friend Ellie feels that she needs more exercise, so she joins a local gym and makes a firm decision that she'll go twice a week, without fail. She keeps this rigorous schedule for the first two weeks, then lapses for a week, then goes again once or twice, then stops going altogether.

During the subsequent, gym-free months, she feels a constant vague sense of background guilt, with acute spikes of shame and dismay every time she sees the recurring membership payment on her credit card statement.

I'm not dunking on Ellie here, in particular. When it comes to the gym, we are all Ellie.

What is wrong with Ellie (and the rest of us)? Why does she decide to do one thing, then do the opposite? Why, despite her self-image as a rational person, does she routinely act against her own health and finance interests? Is she lazy? Weak-willed? Undisciplined? Lacking in moral fibre?

No doubt all of these possible explanations occur to Ellie, usually at about three o'clock in the morning. But the startling truth is that Ellie doesn't act against her own best interests at all, because *Ellie* doesn't do anything. There *is* no Ellie.

Oh, there's a human body that walks around (or more frequently takes an Uber), and talks and eats and earns a living, and plenty of people are convinced that Ellie exists,

including Ellie. But they are all wrong, or rather, they're not really seeing the whole picture.

The chain of command

At a neurological level, what's happening is that various different groups of neurons are flashing on and off, creating waves of electrical pulses that propagate throughout the brain and activate other groups of neurons, and so on.

Some of these neural clusters are connected to Ellie's muscles, and cause her to breathe, speak, pick things up, move around (or not), and go to the gym (or not).

Instead of *one* little person inside our heads, it's more like there are great crowds of people in there, each with their own motives and agendas, and they don't always get along.

When you see it this way, it's no longer puzzling that we sometimes act inconsistently or do things that seem contradictory. In fact, it's amazing, under the circumstances, that we can sustain this fiction of a unified personality at all! It must be quite important for our mental well-being.

> *Do I contradict myself?*
> *Very well then I contradict myself,*
> *(I am large, I contain multitudes.)*
>
> —Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"

Whitman's well-known words remind us that, puzzling creatures as we humans are, our actions often don't really make sense even to ourselves.

A surprisingly small part of the brain, it turns out, is associated with "executive function": planning, analysing, deciding, and acting. And its authority over the rest of the brain is limited: like the boss of a company, it can *issue* orders, but sometimes they're just not carried out.

Indeed, the mind often seems like an organisation with multiple, competing chief executives, all issuing a frantic stream of often conflicting orders, some of which are obeyed and many of which are simply ignored or drowned out.

What actually ends up happening—what the body ends up doing—often depends on which clusters of neurons, or waves of electrical excitation, happen to be the "loudest" at that particular moment.

Emergent behaviour of groups

This is true of real organisations too, of course, and helps to explain why many of them aren't as effective as we perhaps feel they should be.

We all understand, at some level, that a large group of people doesn't always act in a unified, rational way that best serves its members' long-term best interests. And we also know that this is due to the group's internal disagreements, conflicts, differing opinions, persuasion, threats, inspiration, manipulation, inertia, hopes, fears, greed, ideals, and so on.

From this roiling dissension, by some kind of averaging process, behaviour emerges. We even have a word for this process: "politics".

But we often act as though we didn't know this when we talk about how groups behave in the world. We say "The United States did such-and-such," for example, or "Europe wants so-and-so", as though these vast and incomprehensibly diverse groups of people were unified entities with consistent aims and desires.

They aren't, of course, but it's just super convenient for us to *talk* about them that way. Indeed, it would be hard to say much at all about something as diverse as a whole country, unless we deliberately over-simplified the true picture.

Individual, but not indivisible

Just as we understand the behaviour of groups as emerging from the combined activities of smaller sub-units within the group, we also now understand that *individuals* are not indivisible, either.

They—that is, we—are made up of multiple clusters of neurons that represent different ideas, traditions, instincts, desires, goals, and so on, and that compete for control over the body's eventual actions (or inactions).

The resulting behaviour (usually) looks fairly rational and sensible, at least in retrospect, but it's really an emergent phenomenon arising from the incalculable interactions of all these wild waves within the brain.

No wonder we sometimes don't know why we do what we do. That must be why we've evolved a benevolent fiction as a defence mechanism: the idea that inside each of us dwells a little person called a "self".

Protons for breakfast

I'm not trying to argue that the self isn't real in the sense that it doesn't exist: of course it does. I'm just saying that it's not *fundamental*.

Protons, for example, are also real. They *exist*—I had a large quantity of them for breakfast, as I expect you did too—but they're not fundamental. We understand that they're actually made up of multiple smaller particles called quarks. It's just convenient to talk about protons at a certain level of explanation, that's all.

In the same way, the self is a convenient thing for us to talk about in relation to our actions, motivations, and so on. But don't mistake the emergent for the fundamental.

When talking about the "self" no longer seems to make sense, we need to seek understanding at a lower level. This is the level at which we see the uneasy coalition of independent mental tropes, tribes, or sub-selves bouncing around inside our heads.

The careenium

The cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter has memorably named this way of visualising our mental activity as "the careenium":

> *Imagine an elaborate frictionless pool table with not just sixteen balls on it, but myriads of extremely tiny marbles, called "sims" (an acronym for "small interacting marbles"). These sims bash into each other and also bounce off the walls, careening about rather wildly in their perfectly flat world — and since it is frictionless, they just keep on careening and careening, never stopping.*
>
> *The sims are also magnetic (so let's switch to "simms", with the extra "m" for "magnetic"), and when they hit each other at lowish velocities, they can stick together to form clusters, which I hope you will pardon me for calling "simmballs". The dynamics taking place on this pool table — hereinafter called the "careenium" — thus involves simms crashing into each other and also into simmballs. We can even posit that the configurations of simmballs reflect the history of the impinging outer-world events.*
>
> *Such internalization of the outer world in symbolic patterns in a brain is a pretty far-fetched idea, when you think about it, and yet we know it somehow came to exist, thanks to the pressures of evolution. If you wish, then, feel free to imagine that careenia, too, evolved. You can think of them as emerging as the end result of billions of more primitive systems fighting for survival in the world.*
>
> —Douglas Hofstadter, "I Am a Strange Loop"

That's why Ellie regularly wimps out on her gym commitments. The part of her that knows exercise is in her own long-term best interests, and that decided to go to the gym to get it, rattles around inside her careenium. Sometimes it gets lucky and hits the levers that get Ellie off the couch. Other times it loses out to the part of her that just wants to curl up in front of the TV.

Campaigning for change

And that's also why we feel ourselves to be fighting a constant battle between discipline and indulgence, and all the other multifarious voices arguing inside our heads.

The nice thing is that, once we understand what's going on, it's clear that "discipline" is not some kind of inborn personality trait that we either have or we don't. It's more like a muscle that we can develop with practice, effort, and willpower.

All politics is local

How do we bring about lasting change as a member of some group, like our local community, or country, or even just a team of work colleagues? Do we just *say* what should be done and expect everyone else to fall in line? Of course not. That doesn't work.

Instead, if we're sensible, we become activists for our cause. We campaign, we persuade, we converse. We listen to opponents and try to win them over to our side, not with insults or threats, but with reason and compassion. We build long-term relationships with the various constituencies and learn what they want, so that we can figure out how to combine it with what *we* want.

We accept that we won't win every battle, and that's okay. Our opponents deserve some wins, too. And even when we do win, it doesn't happen overnight. It usually takes patience, planning, and gentle persistence over long periods of time.

Starting strength

Well, it's just the same inside the careenium. Issuing orders to yourself ("You *will* go to the gym every week without fail") is just a recipe for disappointment. Instead, understand that you are complicated, you are inconsistent, you contain multitudes. To achieve lasting change, you need to learn what each of those different parts of you are, what they want, and what makes them tick.

Once we start to understand something about the diverse inhabitants of our careeniums, we have a chance to build relationships with them, exert a benign influence over them, and get them pulling together in the right direction.

"Discipline" comes from the same root as the word "disciple", and that's not a coincidence. A wise leader gets people to follow her because they want to, not because they're afraid of what will happen if they don't.

Similarly, *self*-discipline is something that has to be grown and nurtured, by the gentle application of effort and persistence over long periods, even when not much seems to be happening. Ellie won't get strong by sitting on the couch, but if she *can* successfully build the habit of exercise, she'll find that the results compound over time. It's the same with learning to discipline ourselves.

When we act only on our instinctive desires in the moment, we're not really in charge: they are. Building the mental strength to overcome them, and achieve the freedom to actually make decisions about what we do, instead of just bouncing around the careenium, is the first step to taking charge of our lives.

> *Seek freedom and become captive of your desires. Seek discipline and find your liberty.*
>
> —Frank Herbert, "Chapterhouse: Dune"

The hypnotised chicken theory

But discipline, like musclepower, isn't always the best answer to every problem. Sometimes when we're struggling to discipline ourselves to do something, it's not just because of distraction or inertia. It's because what we're trying to do fundamentally isn't the right thing for us, and our mind or body is trying to say that, but we're not listening.

We *can* exert influence over those unruly parts of our minds that are working against our best interests, especially with practice, but there are limits. In the same way, there are limits to persuasion techniques like hypnosis.

You might be able to hypnotise someone into clucking like a chicken, but you probably can't use hypnosis to get them to murder someone (unless they already, on some level, want to commit that murder). It's persuasion, suggestion, not compulsion.

What you really want

Similarly, discipline can only help us achieve things we already fundamentally want to do, but that aren't happening because of conflicts in our careeniums.

Part of the trick, of course, is to figure out what it *is* that we really want to do, so that we can intelligently apply discipline to those things, and not the things we just *think* we want to do, or that others expect us to do, or that we feel guilty, ashamed, or inadequate for not doing.

Sometimes the way to learn about ourselves and what we really want is through gentle introspection, giving ourselves the peace and space to think, and to let the muddy water of our minds stand for a while until it becomes clear. Aggressive interference, by contrast, just stirs things up further, and doesn't get us anywhere.

At other times the answer is to take ourselves almost by surprise, setting up a situation where we can act instinctively, purely, and honestly, before our true nature is intercepted and filtered by the mind's endless layers of behavioural censorship.

Heads or tails

For example, if you've been struggling with some important decision in your life that it seems you could really go either way on, try this trick. Frame the decision as a binary choice, to be settled by a coin flip: heads you'll take that job offer, tails you'll turn it down. Vow to yourself that you'll obey the decision made by the coin.

Now flip the coin. At the moment it lands, you'll instantly know what it is that you *really* want to do.

After this, you can choose to obey the coin's result, or not; that's irrelevant. You needn't bother looking at which way up the coin landed if you don't want to. The point is that now you know which result you were secretly rooting for.

By relinquishing our responsibility for choosing one option or the other, and handing it over to the coin, we can free ourselves from the paralysis of choice. This can be a

surprisingly helpful way of gaining insight into what's really going on inside the careenium.

I'm not saying, of course, that you should make all your important life decisions using the flip of a coin. The coin flip is just a psychological trick to distract the brain, and sneak past its well-meaning attempts to interfere with your authentic desires.

Rolling the bones

An interesting extension of this coin-toss idea is the Yi Jing, the Chinese *Book of Changes*. Instead of two possible outcomes, it gives you sixty-four. When you're wrestling with some difficult question or problem, you can use coins, yarrow stalks, or any other method you like, to choose one of the Yi Jing's hexagrams at random: for example, number 3, *Chun: Difficulty at the Beginning*. What you end up with may give you an interesting insight into the problem, or at least a new angle from which to think about it.

It's not that the Yi Jing knows what's going to happen, of course: it's hard to make predictions, especially about the future. The hexagrams and their gnomic commentaries won't give you the answer, but they'll give you clues: prompts to send your thinking in unexpected and potentially productive directions. The specific hexagrams don't really matter: you could make up your own, or read your horoscope, or use Brian Eno's *Oblique Strategies* cards ("Is there something missing?")

> *The comment is invariably oracular, vague, and ambivalent, but a person taking it seriously will use it. like a Rorschach blot and project into it, from his "unconscious," whatever there is in him to find in it. This is surely a way of allowing oneself to think without keeping a tight guard on one's thoughts, whether logical or moral.*
>
> *The same sort of process is at work in the psychoanalytic interpretation of dreams and in eidetic vision, whereby we descry faces, forms, and pictures in the grain of wood or marble, or in the shapes of clouds.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "Tao: The Watercourse Way"

The point is that, to make good decisions, we need to understand what it is that we really want, and that's just another way of asking who we really are. It's not always easy to see that from inside, for the same reason that you can't see the back of your own head. Seeking out alternative viewpoints is a good way of figuring out who it is that's doing the looking.

3. Change

> *The mind can change all the furniture around in the room but the walls remain.*
>
> —Jean Klein, "Who Am I? The Sacred Quest"

Now that we understand a little more about why it's so hard to change our habits, good or bad, or indeed to apply any kind of discipline to ourselves, let's look at *how* we try to change, and why we so often fail.

Is the self-help industry okay?

There's a vast literature of books, videos, and other content out there predicated on the idea of helping each of us "become a better person". You know the kind of thing: be more productive, be happier, be calmer, be kinder, be wiser—even be richer. It's interesting that the one thing all these books take for granted is that *there's something wrong with us that needs fixing*.

And maybe, as consumers of these things, we're a little complicit too. After all, change is hard work, and it might mean facing up to some unpalatable truths about who we are and where we're going. Much easier just to go and buy another new self-help book. It's a kind of displacement activity that means we don't have to actually *do* anything.

Even if we procrastinate about changing, though, we still seem to feel somehow—and the world does its best to reinforce the idea—that we're not good enough as we are. Further, that if we just take steps to fix the things that are wrong with us, we'll be a perfect person and therefore happy.

What if there's nothing wrong with you?

What if that just weren't true, though? What if the idea that perfection is attainable were just a myth? And what if you already have, and are, everything you need? And what if, whatever you are, there's nothing you can do to change it anyway?

I mean, it would explain a lot. For one thing, the continued success of self-help books. If they actually *worked*, why would people keep on buying them, year after year? Clearly, a lot of people feel that there's something wrong with them, and that they need to change something about themselves, and that reading self-help books will achieve that. Equally clearly, it doesn't.

People who sell solutions, in other words, have a vested interest in convincing us that we have a problem. But I don't think we do.

For example, lots of people want to sell us the practice of meditation or mindfulness. We can buy books, apps, podcasts, classes, courses, streams, and goodness knows what else, and the fundamental sales message behind all of them is that they will cure what ails us.

"Are you anxious, angry, or unhappy? No problem: after consuming this product or service, you will magically be a calm, serene little Buddha full of bliss." How wonderful!

The self-help quick fix

To be sure, mindfulness and self-help books often do make people feel better, at least for a little while. But, just as with cabbage soup retreats, the effect is temporary, because it's not really bringing about any lasting change. Why not? The answer is simple: *habit*.

We are what we repeatedly do, as the saying goes, so it doesn't matter how fervently we do something *once*, or even for a couple of weeks. Sooner or later our old habits will return, and we'll have the same 83 problems we had when we started.

So if reading self-help books doesn't turn you overnight into a serene person, what does? Becoming a monk, perhaps?

Monks are people too

Monks seem pretty serene, at least as seen on TV. But the truth is they're just ordinary people, with the same flaws, irritations, doubts, and vices as anybody else. When a group of people live closely together, they get on each other's nerves; anybody who's ever shared a house, or even just been part of a family, knows this perfectly well.

That's why the 6th-century Italian monk Benedict of Nursia wrote a famous book on how to deal with these interpersonal problems: the so-called "Rule of St. Benedict". He provides practical advice and remedies for such everyday issues as disobedience, pride, oversleeping, gossip, anger, jealousy, laziness, unpunctuality, gluttony, and even monk-on-monk violence. Clearly these things do happen in monasteries pretty often, or Benedict wouldn't have felt the need to address them.

So monks are people too, with all the innumerable faults and failings that every person has. They are, however, at least striving to overcome them, or at least to mitigate them, through deliberate effort and discipline. But they don't see the process as a cure for some disease (being human?). No-one gets discharged from a monastery because they're "fixed". Nor would they want to be.

Living with your 83 faults

Shall we say, then, that just as everybody has 83 problems, they also have 83 faults? While it's a seductive idea that you should, or could, fix everything that's wrong with

you and become perfect in every way, that mistaken belief is simply the 84th fault.

What if we tried a new, rather radical approach: accepting that we're all extremely imperfect and that *that's okay*? Further, that attempting to fix our imperfections doesn't work, and only serves to reinforce the pervasive idea that there's something wrong with us: we're weak-willed, undisciplined, and unfocused, and the only thing that can save us is buying more self-help books.

> *So long as there is the motive to become something, so long as the mind believes in the possibility of escape from what it is at this moment, there can be no freedom.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Wisdom of Insecurity"

You can't change yourself, in other words, because you don't have one. All there is is a deeply flawed human being with a careenium full of nonsense, the same as everybody else. Some of the thoughts bouncing around in my head are, no doubt, noble, intelligent, and virtuous. Other thoughts are selfish, dumb, and lazy. I contain multitudes. There's no "I", indeed: only the multitudes.

So there's no excuse for procrastinating and refusing to really get on with your life until you're "fixed". What you are now is what you'll always be. As much as you may dislike that person, or want to point out their faults, fundamentally, they're who you are, and for better or worse, you're stuck with them. Maybe you should think about making friends with them instead.

Paradox: while you can't change yourself, you *can* change to be *more* yourself.

Who is it, after all, that wants to change? Maybe it's less about becoming a different person than it is about peeling off the various layers of disguise that we've accreted over our lives, revealing who we really were all along.

> *Therapists don't perform personality transplants; they just help to take the sharp edges off. A patient may become less reactive or critical, more open and able to let people in. In other words, therapy is about understanding the self that you are.*
>
> *But part of getting to know yourself is to* ***unknow*** *yourself—to let go of the limiting stories you've told yourself about who you are so that you aren't trapped by them, so you can live your life and not the story you've been telling yourself about your life.*
>
> —Lori Gottlieb, "Maybe You Should Talk To Someone"

And, while we can't actually *be* a different person, we can *do* differently. Perhaps that's a better thing to aim for. It's at least more achievable.

Bringing about lasting, positive change *intentionally*, though, is difficult: we all suck at it.

Resolutions

Let's talk about New Year's resolutions, for example. Why don't they work? We all know they don't, but we continue to make them every year.

For the first two weeks of January we feel very virtuous, but towards the end of the month we're already feeling guilty and conflicted, and by February we've often conveniently forgotten our resolutions altogether. No problem: we'll just stash them in our personal Closet of Failure, along with all the other things that didn't take, like ice skates, the clarinet, and a ton of exercise equipment.

Why New Year's resolutions don't work

The first reason that resolutions don't work is usually that they're vague, sweeping aspirations that are impossible to pin down to anything specific: "Live life to the fullest". What does that even mean? How would we know if we were succeeding or failing?

"Spend more time with family and friends"? Define "more". Define "time". Define "friends". And so on. The intent is clear, but it's not actionable.

On the other hand, we sometimes make resolutions that sound impressive, but might not in practice amount to very much: "Learn Portuguese". To what standard? Good enough to pass as a native speaker? To be able to converse fluently, at length, on any and all subjects? Or just to be able to order a beer and a *pão de queijo*?

If we take ten weeks of night classes, and get a deckle-edged certificate of completion, does that count as "learning Portuguese"? Surely not, but it's *something*, all the same. What if we just memorise the fifty most common nouns? And so on. Basically, we can define success as unambitiously as we want.

Unachievable goals

Another problem is that our resolutions are often grand, all-or-nothing pronouncements that don't admit for the possibility of *partial* success.

"Quit smoking" seems pretty straightforward, but what if we successfully avoid cigarettes for eleven months, then cave and have a couple of puffs at a Christmas party? Does that count as success or failure? What if we continue to smoke, but cut our cigarette consumption in half? That's not nothing, but it's also not the same as quitting.

Other resolutions fail because they're simply unrealistic. "Run a three-minute mile" is not a good resolution because no matter how disciplined we are, we can't achieve it, and nor can anyone else. Similarly, "become a calm person" is not something that's within our power to do, so there's no point resolving to do it. We're only setting ourselves up for more failure.

Just as we can't hypnotise someone to do something they fundamentally don't want to do, we also can't hypnotise *ourselves* with a resolution that we don't really care about or that goes against our own nature.

"Do 100 press-ups every morning" isn't an unreasonable resolution in itself, but we probably won't do it because it's hard, boring, and irrelevant. Suppose we *did* succeed: what then? We'd still be the same person, in the same place, with the same problems. Just with bigger triceps.

Let's be smart about this

If you read business-oriented self-help books, you'll be familiar with the idea of *SMART* goals: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound. Sure, it's jargon, but there's a core of truth in it.

The resolutions we've seen so far fail at the first four of those hurdles, and the fifth usually takes care of the rest: we neglect to specify any kind of schedule or deadline for our new habit.

For example: "Go to the gym regularly". Define "regularly"! If you go three or four times over the year, does that count, as long as it's at equal intervals?

Or even: "Keep in touch with old friends / family members?" How often? To what extent? For how long? And when do we have to start?

While we're enthusiastic about making bold resolutions at the beginning of the year, we usually never think about them again. We certainly don't regularly check in and review our progress—indeed, with such unachievable resolutions there's a strong disincentive to do this.

Without giving these things some kind of anchor point in time, and measuring our progress towards them at frequent intervals, then, it's impossible to really know whether we're succeeding or failing at them.

Win or lose, you always lose

And that's yet another problem with this way of attempting to change our habits: we tend to set it up as a pass/fail test. If we fail, as we almost inevitably will, it makes us feel bad, reinforces the idea that there's something wrong with us as a person, and discourages us from any further efforts at change.

On the other hand, even if we succeed, so what? We still have 83 problems, and we're the same flawed human beings that we were on January 1st. Oh well, never mind. There's always next year.

Focus

One thing we can say in favour of resolutions, I suppose, is that they at least identify something important that we want to do or to change, and that gives us a point of focus. Maybe that's something we can work with.

If our resolution every year were simply "Be a better person", for example, that doesn't give us anything to get hold of. "Be fitter", by contrast, at least gives us a clue that it's our physical well-being we're concerned about.

We could take that idea and ask "What if, instead of setting myself more or less vague and unrealistic goals about this, I simply decided to *focus* more on this issue in the coming year?"

Choose focus areas, not resolutions

Instead of setting ourselves up for failure, then, what if we set ourselves up for success? Suppose, instead of making resolutions, we leaned in to the "point of focus" idea, and identified a few values we care about, or areas of our lives we want to put more emphasis on?

For example, suppose we said something like, "This year, I want to focus on being a good friend".

We might jot down a few specific ideas to flesh out what that could look like: "Make myself available to friends when they need me", or "Concentrate on listening when friends have problems, instead of giving advice".

We could make a deal with ourselves that every month, on the first day of the month, we'll spend a few minutes thinking about what we've done towards this goal during the previous month, and over the year so far. Write down occasions when we feel we did something positive towards our focus area, and also when we forgot about it, or slipped up, or our efforts didn't work out for one reason or another.

When you fall, pick something up

For example, maybe your friend wanted to tell you about how she made a mistake at work, and instead of listening, you made the conversation all about you: "That's nothing. Wait till you hear the foul-up that *I* made this week!"

Whoops. Well, we all make that kind of mistake, and sometimes recognise afterwards that we should have done something different. By reviewing, thinking, and writing about what you did, you may just learn something useful.

Listening, after all, is something we could all stand to focus on a little more.

"Ah, I see you're trying to vent. May I offer you some annoyingly pragmatic solutions?"

The New Yorker, March 18th, 2024

Over the course of a year of this kind of focus, and perhaps even subsequent years, you'll have some small successes, and many small failures.

You'll feel like you're making progress at times, or standing still at others, and even sometimes going backwards. That's normal. Your goal was just to remember to *focus* on the thing, without pre-judging what should or shouldn't happen. And you did it. Well done!

Staying with your choices

The important thing is to make a clear decision about what to focus our limited resources of time, energy, and self-discipline on. By doing that, we implicitly give ourselves permission not to worry too much about everything *else*.

We can only focus on one thing at a time, after all: that's what "focus" means.

Of course, while focusing our minds on what really matters can help a lot, it's of no use if it doesn't actually change what we *do*. This is mostly a matter of *habit*, and that's the subject of our next chapter.

4. Habit

> *Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man, but coaxed downstairs a step at a time.*
>
> —Mark Twain, "Pudd'nhead Wilson"

Do we have free will? It sure feels like we do, but of course that's exactly what it *would* feel like, even if we didn't. And a lot of the time the question is purely academic, because so much of what we do is not a matter of conscious choice, free or not: it comes from instinct, accident, or habit.

Breathing, for instance, is a hard habit to break (if you succeed, it might be the last thing you ever do).

And habits, good or bad, hold the key to making lasting changes to our lives. Yet we don't really seem to understand much about how and why we form habits in the first place, which probably explains why we don't have much success at trying to change them.

Learning to change

Suppose you've read the previous chapter and decided there's something you'd like to focus on in your life. The first step to achieving that is to change your habits: either by establishing new ones, eliminating old ones, or both.

That sounds difficult, and it is, if you don't know the tricks. Let's take a look at some techniques we can use to manage habits more effectively.

Tracking behaviour

One interesting thing about habits is that we're often not even aware of them. That's why one powerful idea for getting to grips with our own behaviour is *tracking*: recording and reviewing the activities we're interested in.

For example, let's say you want to lose weight. Where should you start?

If you're gaining weight, it's because you're consuming more calories than you burn, on average. That's just math. Okay, how can we shift the balance of this equation the other way?

We can do that by either consuming fewer calories, or burning more, or both. The most effective approach is likely to be "both", but let's look at the consumption side first and ask what the numbers are actually saying. How many calories *are* you consuming on a daily basis?

First, face the facts

That's step 1, then: do this experiment, and record the results.

You'll need some kind of data-recording device, and that could be as simple and low-tech as a notebook and pencil, or as absurdly overpowered as your smartphone. Whatever you choose, it should be something you'll always have with you, so that you can make a note of everything you eat and drink throughout the day.

Next, weigh yourself, ideally with a set of good digital scales, and write down the result and the date.

Now you're ready to begin the experiment. For the first couple of weeks, don't try to do anything differently, apart from recording what you eat.

Don't switch to low-calorie foods, special diets, or try to starve yourself. Don't take unusual amounts of exercise. The point is to gather enough data to establish a baseline.

If, like me, you already enjoy this kind of thing, it'll be easy and fun. This is science!

> *There's nothing more exciting than science. You get all the fun of sitting still, being quiet, writing down numbers, paying attention. Science has it all!*
>
> —The Simpsons, "Bart's Comet"

"I'm gonna have to science the shit out of this"

But if by chance you're *not* excited about quantifying yourself in this way, stick with it. At the end of each day, work out roughly how many calories you consumed that day. There are various websites or apps that can help with this, but don't worry about being super-precise: calorie counts are only approximate anyway. What's important is how the numbers *change* from day to day, and week to week.

Once you have a couple of weeks worth of data, put them into a spreadsheet and calculate your mean average calorie intake per day. You can do this by adding up all the calorie figures, and then dividing by the number of days.

If you're a bit of a spreadsheet fiend, you could even compute a *moving* average: that is, a figure for each day that reflects the average over all the previous days. If you graph the information, for example, most spreadsheets can display a "trend line" for you, which is essentially a moving average.

The power of data

One striking thing about doing a behaviour-change experiment like this is that just the simple act of *recording* our behaviour often has an effect on it.

For example, if you count calories for a couple of weeks, you'll probably find that the moving average will probably decline a little over the fortnight. You very likely consumed fewer calories towards the end of the period than you did at the beginning, and that's because you started paying more attention to what you ate.

You probably noticed yourself making slightly different food choices than you otherwise would have, precisely because you knew you'd be recording your calorie intake. You might even have lost a little weight, or gained less than in previous periods.

Just paying attention triggers change

This is a pleasant and helpful side-effect of tracking anything about our behaviour: the mere fact that we're tracking it tends to create a behavioural nudge in the right direction.

In other words, just paying attention to something, such as calorie intake, makes us give a little more thought to the choices we make from day to day. It's no longer just a matter of habit: observing and recording our behaviour immediately makes us a little more intentional about it.

Finding the levers

Now that you have your baseline data, you can start doing things a little differently, but keep on recording your calorie intake and weight regularly.

Pay attention to whether you're losing or gaining weight, and by how much. A good way to do this is to calculate a two-week moving average, and see how it changes from one week to the next.

What you'll probably find is that, on average, you're either gaining a little, losing a little, or staying the same. Make a note of this result, along with the average calorie intake that produced it.

What you're trying to tease out of the data is your *equilibrium* point: the calorie level at which you maintain the same weight over time, neither losing nor gaining. Finding this fulcrum gives you the leverage to start changing your weight in the direction you want.

The body has a very sophisticated built-in *homeostasis* (Greek for "staying the same") mechanism to do this, but it's not infallible. In many people, the *set point*—the weight the body tries to maintain—is a bit too high or low for good health, and often tends to drift a bit in one direction or another.

We can help out our hard-working homeostasis machinery by recording accurate data, and using it to inform our decisions.

Suppose you find, for example, that when you consume an average of 2000 calories a day, you gain a small amount of weight from week to week. That's okay. It means you're not far above the inflection point where gains will become losses.

Try aiming for a daily target of 1900 calories for a few weeks, and see what happens. Don't skip meals, fast, or eat weird things. Just try to eat as normally as possible, but keep recording your calories and checking them against your daily target.

It's not a problem if you go over target on some days—after all, every day is different. If it's your birthday, or you eat at a restaurant, or tour a winery, you'll probably consume a few extra calories, and there's nothing wrong with that.

Remember, we're not trying to punish ourselves, or to set up a regime that's too brutal to be sustainable. That's the asceticism trap: "It's hurting, so it must be working!" Instead, just keep applying a gentle, sustainable pressure in the right direction, watch the numbers, and see what happens.

It's not failure, it's data

If you do find yourself regularly over target, it can be helpful to record the *number of days* you've been in the danger zone.

For example, when totting up your calories at the end of the day, and you find that for the first time in a while you're over your desired average, write down "1 day over target". The next day, if you're still over target, write "2 days over target," and so on.

This helps us focus on how we're doing, and whether there's a problem that we need to take action to solve. If I find myself writing down "10 days over target", for example, this creates a certain beneficial psychological pressure. I'll be that bit more determined not to have to write "11 days", and that helps me resist everyday temptations, such as an unscheduled snack.

This scientific approach to understanding our own behaviour works in many other areas too, of course: it's not just for weight loss. Whatever you want to change, start by simply *recording* it. As we've seen, this can often move the needle in the right direction, just by making us aware of what's going on. Then, review the data regularly, and try making small changes in your habits, and seeing what effects they have.

Importantly, don't set a specific target weight to achieve. Your weight is an output of this process, known as a *lagging indicator*: it's not something you can control directly. You can only affect outputs by changing inputs. So keep watching your calorie intake: that's your *leading indicator*, the thing you *can* control. By seeing how the two indicators fluctuate together over time, you'll start to get a handle on how one affects the other.

Behaviour-changing tools

The reasons why we do what we do are complex and sometimes unpredictable, as we saw in the first chapter, and it's essential to have some way of checking how well our

strategies are working.

Some promising ideas may turn out to have no effect, or even a negative effect. Other techniques might prove to be more effective than they seem at first sight.

> *It is a capital mistake to theorise before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts.*
>
> —Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes"

Whatever we do, we *may* succeed in changing our habits, or we may not, but without data, how will we even know? *With* data, we can experiment to find out what works, and even more importantly, what doesn't.

The power of streaks

The little Jedi mind-trick of recording "how many days over target" is a good example of the psychological power of *streaks*.

Suppose you want to establish a new habit of practicing the piano every day, for example. Here's a good way to do that.

After your first practice, record the fact that you now have a streak of one "day on target"—one consecutive practice day. Make ticks or hash marks on an index card, or carve a notch in the piano (please don't do this, especially if it's not your piano).

The next day, if you successfully do your practice, you'll have extended your streak to 2. But if you skip a day, you've broken the streak. Big fat zero. Start again.

You'll probably start out with a decent streak of at least a few days, before the novelty starts to wear off. Now comes the challenge: the day when you really don't feel like practicing.

You're a little tired; a little hungry; you have too much to do, and not enough time to do it all. *Something* has to go. Why not the piano practice? Well, here's why not: we hate to break a streak!

It's like those signs you see in factories saying "X days without an accident". Sure, it's a meme, but there's also a reason why they put those signs up: they work. Sometimes.

The longer the streak you can build up, the more motivation it provides. Imagine you're on a streak of 18 consecutive days piano practice, and your motivation wobbles a bit on the 19th day. Do you *really* want to cross out that "18", and reset it to zero? Of course not. Harmonic minor scale, let's go!

Turning your practice routine into a game like this can be surprisingly helpful. It taps into that ancient and potent part of our brains that enjoys competition. Why not play against your friends, and see who can build up the longest streak?

Making change stick

There's a saying that it takes 21 days to form a new habit, though actual research (as opposed to Facebook memes, for example) suggests that successful habit formation can take from a few days to a few months.

Regardless, sooner or later, there comes a point where we no longer have to keep making an intentional effort to perform the habit every day. Instead, it just becomes... well, habit. In other words, we don't have to keep up our motivation forever, only for as long as it takes for our brains to get the message, and add the new thing to the list of things it takes care of for us automatically.

That's reassuring for those of us who occasionally struggle with motivation (is there anyone who doesn't?) When the change we want to make is getting rid of an unwelcome habit, rather than adopting a new one, the calculus is much the same. If we can set ourselves up to succeed in making the change stick, by tracking, recording, and using the power of streaks, we'll probably only need to do it for a short period.

Getting off the runway

For example, if you've ever tried to quit smoking, you may, like me, have tried and failed a few times in the past. If you haven't tried this, hopefully because you were too smart to take it up in the first place, don't let anyone kid you: it's rough.

The first few days after quitting are absolutely miserable: you feel awful, you have constant nicotine urges, you might have trouble sleeping, and your emotional state is probably all over the place.

If you're going to lapse or backslide into your addiction, this is when it's going to happen. It's not so much the immediate physical and mental discomfort as the feeling that it's just going to go *on* like this forever, and that's something you can't cope with.

Fortunately, however, it doesn't last. If you can get through the first three or four days—which sadly many people can't—it gets easier. Still a bit unpleasant, but nowhere near as bad as the first day.

After a week or so, you wake up one morning and feel almost… normal? You might not even realise what's missing for a while, until you suddenly think to yourself, "I'm not having a nicotine craving!"

They still keep on coming for a while, of course, but once they know that you can beat them, somehow they seem to lose heart for the fight.

The only power that the cravings had over you in the first place was making you fear that they'd last forever. Once you realise that in fact they only last a couple of minutes, this fear goes away, and so do the cravings. In a surprisingly short time they stop altogether.

Positive change is self-reinforcing

Once we can steel ourselves to gut it out for 21 days, or however long it takes to break through the habit barrier, the rewards that lie on the other side are usually enough to lock in the change permanently.

If you keep practicing the piano, you'll start finding the practice sessions easier, you'll be sounding better when you *play* a piece, and you'll be having more fun overall.

If you can stay off the cigarettes, you'll reap the benefits, too: you'll be able to taste your food, smell rain on the spring air, and walk up a flight of stairs without needing to sit down and wheeze for five minutes (ask me how I know).

Planning to fail

When it comes to eliminating negative habits, it's easy to inadvertently set ourselves up for failure by being too sweeping. "I won't ever look at online news again!"

This is probably a great idea, in principle, at least as far as your mental health is concerned, but the problem with being "on the wagon" like this is that, once you fall off it, it's always hard work to get back on.

Falling off the wagon

For example, suppose you keep up your "no news" habit for a week, but then, in a moment of weakness, you backslide. This is how it happens: you find yourself at your computer waiting for some slow website to load, or for a meeting that's starting a few minutes late.

Almost by reflex action, you find yourself browsing online drama and breathless dispatches from the front lines of the culture war. The adrenalin surges, your heart starts beating faster, and a sense of impending crisis grips you.

Worse, because you've broken your solemn self-vow, there is no longer anything stopping you, psychologically speaking, from browsing yet more unpleasantly stimulating news.

While you were on a seven-day streak of news fasting, the streak itself helped to sustain you. But once it's broken, the streak can actually work against you. "Oh well," you might reason, "I've broken the streak for today anyway. I can always start a new one tomorrow, but in the meantime, let's keep doomscrolling!"

No. Let's not. Instead, let's turn the computer off, go outside, and touch some grass. Easy to say, but hard to do when we're in the grip of a news-induced, nation-in-crisis adrenalin high. And the fact that we've just awarded ourselves an all-day pass to break the rules doesn't help.

Tracking is better than banning

So aiming for streaks of *not* doing the negative habit can work well, until it doesn't.

A better idea is "track, don't ban". Instead of setting an all-or-nothing goal ("Even one online news check means total failure"), just make it about gathering data. Record how often you find yourself checking the news, maybe even how long you spend each time.

By all means aim for "zero checks" on any given day, but don't feel bad if you end up checking once or twice—it's not a big deal. Nonetheless, keep count. Just like when you're counting calories, it's not about whether you occasionally go over target, it's *by how much*, averaged over a reasonable time period.

Again, the mere act of paying attention to your behaviour, by recording how often you do the negative habit, helps to stimulate changes in that behaviour.

If you slip up and check news once, then you still have the opportunity to keep your weekly total down to 1. If you find yourself checking again a day or two later, the new target of 2 is still within your grasp.

You can keep readjusting your target, when necessary, without falling off the wagon altogether and giving yourself an excuse to binge on angry tweet-wars for the rest of the day.

Being humble about our ability to change

Absolute bans, then, don't tend to work well as behaviour-changing tools, because they don't allow for our occasional, and inevitable, lapses. Tracking and *counting* lapses, on the other hand, with a view to keeping the running total as low as possible, is much more effective.

By expecting and allowing for minor deviations from the new habit regime, making sure they don't capsize our motivation, we can stack the odds in our favour and avoid setting ourselves up to fail. By *planning* to fail, strangely enough, we succeed.

Using habit tricks like these that price in our own weakness and indiscipline is actually a form of humility. If you don't like that word, think of it instead as just being realistic about what we can and can't do, right here, in this moment.

We *don't* have unlimited willpower, and we all find it hard to stick to over-ambitious new habits, especially at first. By dialling back our expectations of ourselves just a little bit, we can achieve much more meaningful changes, and succeed in locking them in for the long term.

Success supplies its own motivation: as a carrot, it's much more effective than giving ourselves stick.

Use your limited willpower effectively

Don't waste precious willpower on routine chores. We all have 83 things we need to do on a regular basis, and most of them aren't particularly about making our lives meaningful. They just have to be done: buying groceries, renewing insurance, checking the tyres on the car.

Our brains are not very good at remembering these things—at least, not at the right time to do something about them:

> *Do you have a flashlight somewhere with dead batteries in it? When does your mind tend to remind you that you need new batteries? When you notice the dead ones! That's not very smart. If your mind had any innate intelligence, it would remind you about those dead batteries only when you passed live ones in a store. And ones of the right size, to boot.*
>
> —David Allen, "Getting Things Done: The Art of Stress-Free Productivity"

That's okay. We have more important things to do with our brains, such as everything we're talking about in this book. Lose the clutter: outsource "buy batteries" tasks to

some external reminder system.

Use a "personal brain assistant"

Most smartphones or computers have a simple "to-do list" function, and the simpler it is, the better. That way we won't be tempted to waste all our time optimising our to-do lists instead of, you know, actually *doing* the stuff.

Put all your routine and regular tasks into this external system, so that you don't have to think about them anymore. Set it to remind you at the exact times and places a reminder would be helpful.

Don't try to mix and match different systems: you need a *single* trusted system that exists outside your head and that will act as your personal brain assistant.

But don't over-think this: you don't need powerful software with a million options. A simple list of tasks will be fine. One extra I personally find useful, though, is the ability to have tasks automatically repeat themselves at regular intervals ("take out garbage"), and to assign a due date to time-sensitive tasks ("send Christmas cards").

Once you've settled on your choice of personal brain assistant, start dumping everything out of your head and into the system.

You might be surprised at how much stuff was kicking around inside your cramped little skull. It can be a tangible relief just freeing up that headspace.

You might also find that the sudden cranial pressure drop makes room for some interesting and valuable new ideas. Capture these, too. They'll start coming to you more and more often, now that you've made some room for them to move into.

Don't be worried if you end up with a lot of tasks. I just checked my own list, and I have exactly 3,895 tasks on it. I don't think that's excessive, or even unusual. I suspect most people *have* approximately this many things to do (maybe even 83 problems is an underestimate). They're just not aware of it, at least on a conscious level.

In fact, they're probably frantically trying not to think about half of these tasks, while anxiously trying not to forget the other half. That's a lot of mental activity for any brain, and while it's going on, there's not much chance of having any more productive thoughts.

Fall down seven times, get up eight

It's easy to get discouraged when trying—and failing—to form new habits, or to eliminate unwanted ones. It's tempting to feel that maybe, unlike other people, you just don't have what it takes: discipline, willpower, tenacity, fortitude, grit, moral fibre… the list of things you don't have seems to be endless!

The good news is that absolutely no one is born with any of those things. The ability to exercise control over our behaviour and habits is more of a skill than a natural talent.

Anyone can learn it, and, indeed, we're all learning it and getting better all the time. Practice helps. Determination counts.

More than anything else, what distinguishes those who get good at it from those who don't is their ability to accept failure, to learn from it, to overcome it, and to keep trying. Failure is not the falling down, as the saying goes, but the *staying* down.

Learning to do hard things is hard! If you're not repeatedly failing in many ways, you're probably setting your sights too low. Watch a toddler learning to walk: it's no easy thing to master. It probably took you yourself quite a while to get good at it, and you almost certainly fell on your face a bunch of times. But you got up again every time, and that's the point.

The art of change

Understanding and learning how to change our own behaviour is a skill, too, and, just like walking, while it may be a struggle at first, we can all master it eventually. The rewards, in both cases, are more than worth the effort.

This is true of many important things in life, as a matter of fact. No worthwhile ability can be acquired without a good deal of effort, determination, and diligent practice. Not everyone is willing or able to pay this cost, and that's what makes such skills so valuable once you have them.

Indeed, there's a word for abilities like this: *craft*. And that's the topic of our next chapter.

5. Craft

> *His words did not come in a rush; they came with such pathetic slowness, considering the man was a writer by trade, you would have drawn the conclusion, watching him, that a writer is one to whom writing comes harder than to anybody else.*
>
> —Thomas Mann, "Tristan"

There are few things more enjoyable or fascinating than watching a craft master at their work, whether it be glass blowing, basket weaving, joinery, or any other complex and delicate skill. (Well, perhaps it's not very interesting to watch someone writing, but I can at least say that it's a lot of fun to be the one *doing* the writing. Most of the time.)

And, as you'll know if you practice any kind of craft yourself, it can be a tremendously satisfying activity, and also utterly absorbing.

Craft, almost by definition, requires total attention and the full resources of body and mind:

> *Audience members often ask me what I think about when I'm playing. To quote the great Wanda Landowska, "The notes, dear, the notes!" If only it were that simple. The concentration is exhausting and yet the performance must look easy. You're engaged in incredible mind games (people rave about a pianist's fingers, though the real marvel is the brain), but for a pianist's message to have meaning it must have emotion behind every note, it must tell stories, it must transmit a work of transcendent beauty. Every fibre of your being, from head to toe, participates in a good performance.*
>
> —Angela Hewitt, "When I play the piano I'm engaged in incredible mind games"

And if we can reach a certain level of proficiency, craft can be not just enjoyable but economically valuable, too. People, including me, happily pay money to hear Angela Hewitt play. But that's not why most people *practice* craft: no one is going to pay me to play the piano, though it's quite possible that they might be willing to pay me to stop.

That doesn't matter to me in the slightest, though, and it's certainly not why I do it. I don't sit down to piano practice thinking "Just a few thousand more hours and I'll be able to start making minimum wage playing tinkly jazz in hotel lobbies!"

Rather, it's the experience of playing music itself that's joyful. The craft is its own reward. As Richard Feynman liked to say about science, it's a bit like sex: sometimes something useful comes of it, but that's not the reason we do it.

But craft, again almost by definition, is hard to learn. That's discouraging at first, of course, but as you progress, your investment of time and effort starts to pay off. The rewards get bigger, and the work gets easier. Like a fire, the process of craft mastery pretty soon becomes self-sustaining. The tricky part, as with a fire, is getting it started.

Fundamentals

So are there some things that all crafts have in common, some meta-craft techniques that we can all use to improve our ability to learn and hone our skills?

I think there are. Let's start with the fundamentals.

First learn stand

As you may know, in my day job I teach software engineering skills. I have a wide range of students of all different levels of ability, from complete beginners to very experienced experts, who know a great deal more than me about many subjects.

However, I've found that there are some useful things that I can impart to all of them, and one of those things is an emphasis on mastering fundamentals.

Generally speaking, people don't like learning fundamentals. What usually attracts people to a craft are the rare, dramatic, and exciting things you can do at the highest level. That's what they expect they'll be learning, and indeed they will—eventually.

But when they walk into a classroom or dojo for the first time, the teacher will, quite rightly, start them off with something much more basic.

> DANIEL: *What was that you were doing on those stumps over there?*
> MIYAGI: *Called "crane technique".*
> DANIEL: *Could you teach me?*
> MIYAGI: *First learn stand. Then learn fly.*
>
> —"The Karate Kid" (1984)

That can be a little dispiriting. If we join a karate class expecting to do eye-popping crane kicks on the first evening, we're destined for disappointment. We're more likely to spend a couple of hours doing hamstring stretches, press-ups, or maybe straight punches.

In other words, fundamentals (yawn).

> *If you ever teach a yodeling class, probably the hardest thing is to keep the students from just trying to yodel right off. You see, we build to that.*
>
> —Jack Handey, "Deep Thoughts: Inspiration for the Uninspired"

Some people can't get over this first hurdle. "That class was dumb," they think to themselves. "I need to find the class where you start by learning the cool kicks." And they never do.

Being a beginner

So that's the first important thing that makes the difference between those who'll succeed at craft and those who won't: the understanding that we'll have to start on the ground floor, as a beginner.

Also, the first things we'll need to learn may seem almost insultingly basic, and certainly not the kind of skills that would impress the general public. That's just the way it is. Sorry about that.

The first craft challenge, then, is psychological: re-framing our goals from initial lofty ambitions to something more practical and immediately attainable.

If your dream is to play the piano sonatas of Beethoven, for example, you might quite reasonably assume that you should spend most of your limited practice time playing the sonatas of Beethoven. But a good piano teacher will tell you that, counter-intuitively, this isn't the most efficient route to your goal.

Paying your dues

In fact, that approach will slow you down and impede your progress. Instead, you need to do a whole bunch of things that *aren't* playing Beethoven: technical exercises such as scales and arpeggios, studying the theory of harmony, learning to read music, and so on.

By taking the time to master these first, your progress through the next stages will be quicker, and so it goes on.

And if you find it hard to motivate yourself to play "Boring Pieces for Tiny Fingers", or whatever, I absolutely sympathise. It feels like wasting time on stuff that's irrelevant, but it's not. These are the waypoints on the quickest route to where you want to be.

Once you accept that fact and just lean into it, you'll get on a whole lot faster. If you're struggling, try putting a little bust of Beethoven on top of your piano, to remind yourself that he had to learn this stuff, too.

"Peanuts", November 26th, 1951

Beginner's mind

It's hard being a beginner at anything, but if we're willing to *be* a beginner, we won't stay a beginner for long. There's a slightly more subtle attitude trap that lurks for some more experienced students, though, which is that they feel they've already passed through that stage. Anything that seems to them like "fundamentals" looks like a step back, and they can be very unwilling to take it.

No reverse gear

Worse: because they missed out some of the fundamentals, they've already picked up various bad habits and patterns that are holding them back. Before they can let go of these and make progress, they have to first recognise that they *are* bad. That's difficult, psychologically, for any of us.

If we think we already know what we're doing, in other words, it's that much harder to rewind our self-image back to being a beginner. Our identities are bound up, in some sense, with being an expert.

By contrast, genuine beginners have no such problem! Since they don't have anything invested in the image of themselves as a skilled practitioner, it's much easier for them to accept new knowledge.

> *Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.*
>
> *Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.*

> *The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"*
>
> *"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"*
>
> —Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, "Zen Flesh, Zen Bones"

It's characteristic of people who reach high levels of craft skill that they're able to hang on to this "beginner's mind" for much longer than they're really a beginner.

Indeed, the more we learn about the craft, the more we come to realise there still is to learn.

What is a master but a master student?

Neil Peart, widely acknowledged as one of the most technically accomplished rock drummers of all time, is a great example of this. After decades of worldwide fame and success with the band Rush, he did a rather surprising thing: he decided to take drum lessons.

> *During a break in this summer's Snakes and Arrows tour, I scheduled a lesson with Peter [Erskine]. When I parked in front of his house in Santa Monica and walked up to the door, sticks in hand, I had to smile at myself. I was a thirteen-year-old beginner again…*
>
> *And of course, that's how I had to feel—there's no point in taking lessons if you're not going to surrender to the teacher. That's what I had done with Freddie [Gruber] back in '94—followed his guidance to the extent of changing just about everything I had done before, in thirty years of playing: the way I held the sticks, the way I moved my hands and feet, the way I set up my drums, the way I sat at them—everything.*
>
> —Neil Peart, "Far and Away: A Prize Every Time"

It's exactly this kind of attitude that distinguishes the true greats. As Peart remarked in an interview, "What is a master but a master student?" It's a good point. Anyone, no matter how accomplished, who *thinks* of themselves as a master, is in trouble. It means they've stopped learning.

Tracking your progress

Mastery, then, is not a level of achievement but a process. Indeed, it's a lifelong one. The nature of craft is such that we never get to the end of it. If you're a terrific painter, you can always be a better one. And the way you do that is by constantly testing yourself. You look at what you've done and see where it could have been better, and the next

time you try something different, and see how *that* goes. And so on.

It can be a delicate balance sometimes. We need to feel that we're making at least *some* progress, or we'd probably give up. On the other hand, we have to be discriminating enough to spot the flaws in what we're doing. As we learn more and more, we become more discriminating—more conscious of what's good and bad—and so we find more flaws in what previously seemed like good work.

Keeping records is a very effective way to do this. By taking snapshots of your current skill level at different moments of time, you can look back and see how far you've come, which helps a lot with motivation. Even though it often doesn't feel that way, you *are* getting somewhere.

By scrutinising the latest snapshot carefully, looking for things you could improve, you'll generate many new ideas and experiments to try. If you're a musician, record yourself playing your best pieces (and your worst, too). If you're a writer, keep samples of your writing. If you're a software engineer, go back and review some of your old projects with this in mind.

Learning from others

The best way to learn how to be productively self-critical, of course, is to look at what *other* people are doing, especially people you think are pretty good. It's not about comparing yourself with them: that would be pointless, because you're *not* them. Instead, it's about asking what you can learn from them.

When I first got interested in music as a kid, I played the guitar. It's a pleasantly accessible instrument: small, cheap, portable, and easy to make nice sounds on without much skill. The trouble with *that* is that it's true for everyone else as well. It seemed to me that everyone I knew played the guitar too, and better than I could!

I found this very depressing at first. However much I learned, and however good I thought I was getting, just about every week I'd meet someone whose guitar skills would totally blow mine out of the water. What's the point of practising, I thought, if I'll always be the worst guitar player I know?

But then a better idea occurred to me. Every time I met someone who was a better musician than me, I'd get them to *teach* me something. When someone played a cool lick, or had a nifty technique I'd never seen, instead of getting envious and pissed off, I'd say "Show me how to do that!" And generally they would.

Abandoning end-gaining

I learned a lot of cool licks that way, but the meta-lesson was even more valuable. What I really learned was that I'm not *playing* guitar in order to be the best guitarist in the world. That is unachievable, unless you're Guthrie Govan. Instead, the correct reason to play music is that it's awesome. If we have the right attitude, it doesn't matter if we've been playing for a day, or for a decade: it's a deeply enjoyable and fulfilling activity.

And, in a rather Zen sort of way, perhaps it's only when we relinquish all ambition to be any good that we can start *becoming* really good.

Unless we love the craft for *itself*, not for any external rewards it might bring us, we probably won't get far.

Learning any craft to a high level has to be a labour of love, to some extent, otherwise we simply wouldn't do it. Very few crafts actually make *economic* sense to practice, given that we probably won't ever get good enough to make our living at it.

Instead, we usually have to do something else to make money, so that we have the freedom to practice our crafts for the sheer joy of it. That's probably for the best, all things considered. Crafting to please other people always means compromise, and that means less good craft.

We can't choose who to fall in love with (more's the pity), and the same principle applies to craft. I don't think you get to choose the craft to master: rather, it chooses you.

Eating bitter

Even when we love the craft, and enjoy practising it, there will always be times when it's not fun.

When I first got interested in martial arts as a teenager, I joined a karate class, and the teacher told us something I've always remembered. "If you want to get good at this," he said, "you need to train regularly. You need to come to training every week, even when you don't feel like it. *Especially* when you don't feel like it. That's what will make the difference."

Sticking it out

He was right. There were some people in the class who weren't bad, even quite good, but one by one they dropped out and stopped showing up.

They probably never explicitly made a decision to quit. Instead, one week they were tired, or busy with other things, or not in the mood, and they didn't go to training, and then they just never went again. It happens.

> *"Today, people don't like to train so hard," Chen said calmly. "Everyone has other things to do. They have time for movies, for golf, for watching television… but no time for training."*
>
> —Phillip Starr, "The Making of a Butterfly: Traditional Chinese Martial Arts as Taught by Master W. C. Chen"

I and many others stuck it out, though. And it certainly *wasn't* always fun. Sometimes it was brutal. It's certainly among the most physically demanding things I've ever done.

Some weeks, after the training session, I'd be so wiped out I couldn't make it to my car, and I'd have to sit down in the coffee shop for fifteen minutes until my legs stopped feeling rubbery and I started to get some of my breath back.

Relishing the challenge

In a weird way, though, I started to take almost a perverse enjoyment in the sheer toughness of it.

Every time I was brought to the edge of exhaustion, or I got a painful kick in the head, or my lungs felt like they were going to fall out of my chest, and I survived, I got that little bit stronger and fitter. Not just physically, but mentally.

I was learning to push myself, and be pushed, to the limits of what I could do, and that's the only way to expand those limits.

As usual, the Chinese have a phrase for it: "eating bitter". Meaning, roughly, enduring hardships, and not being daunted by them.

Unless we're willing to eat bitter, we won't make any significant progress in martial arts, or any other craft. If what we're doing in training always feels good, then we're simply not training hard enough for it to be worthwhile.

It's easy to misunderstand this point, by the way, and many people do: it doesn't necessarily follow that just because we're suffering, we're making progress! That's not true at all. Hitting yourself over the head with a plank hurts like hell, but it doesn't make you any better at karate.

Masochism is not a useful training strategy: this is why "influencer monk mode" doesn't work. Eating bitter is not about punishing ourselves. Instead, it's about overcoming our own quite natural instincts to quit anything that seems hard or initially unrewarding.

The joy of doing hard things

It's not always about physical pain or discomfort, either. Sometimes eating bitter is a matter of sticking it out through repetitive and boring exercises, or even just showing up to training on a cold, wet night when we'd rather stay home and eat snacks in front of the TV.

It's about building the right habits, reinforcing self-discipline, keeping up motivation. Doing things, in John F. Kennedy's famous words, not because they are easy but *because* they are hard.

It's not that developing resilience and mental and fortitude makes us better *people* in some way. Each of us is already the best person we can be, and we won't get any better.

Rather, the secret of eating bitter is to be able to find joy in facing difficulties and overcoming them. Once we learn to do that, there's nothing in the world that can stop us from achieving whatever we want.

6. Practice

> *Sometimes magic is just someone spending more time on something than anyone else might reasonably expect.*
>
> —Teller, quoted in Chris Jones, "The Honor System"

"How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" asks the old joke, and everybody knows the answer: "Practice!"

Clearly, as we saw in the previous chapter, the amount of practice we're willing to put in is one big factor in whether—and how quickly—we'll become a craft master.

Return on investment

How much time should we spend practising, then, and what should we spend it on? Let's do a little analysis.

The 10,000 hour rule

As well as the music-hall jokes, another thing everybody knows is the "10,000 hour rule": popularised by Malcolm Gladwell, it suggests that on average it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become expert at any particular skill.

Now, this "rule" has been widely debunked, and it's obviously an oversimplification, from which people are only too ready to draw incorrect conclusions. For one thing, it's an example of *survivorship bias*: it's drawn from research on the number of practice hours put in by competent musicians.

Bad musicians, I assume, were not contacted for this survey, but there are plenty of them, and I'm sure many of them have been bad for ten thousand hours or more. You can do something the wrong way for as long as you like, and it won't make you any better at it.

All the same, I think Gladwell picked that number to make a point: the amount of practice that's typically required to reach the highest level is *way more than most of us probably think*.

Of course, no one thinks they're going to master the violin in a couple of months, or (as books often like to promise) "Learn C++ in 24 Hours". All the same, we tend to expect to make faster progress than we do, and we generally don't have a very realistic idea of how much time we'll need to put in overall.

> *Walk into any bookstore, and you'll see how to Teach Yourself Java in 24 Hours alongside endless variations offering to teach C, SQL, Ruby, Algorithms, and so on in a few days or hours… The conclusion is that either people are in a big rush to learn about programming, or that programming is somehow fabulously easier to learn than anything else. Felleisen et al. give a nod to this trend in their book How to Design Programs, when they say "**Bad** programming is easy. Idiots can learn it in 21 days, even if they are dummies."*
>
> —Peter Norvig, "Teach Yourself Programming in Ten Years"

Audiences don't see the practice sessions

This can be demotivating. When we spend a lot of time and effort on something and it doesn't seem like we've made a dramatic improvement, it's easy to say "Why bother?" If we extrapolate this rate of progress into the future, the sheer amount of practice we'll need to get to the top can be quite daunting.

And when we enjoy watching someone perform a craft expertly, what we *don't* see is the 10,000 hours they put in before the show. So we have basically no idea how much practice they had to do to reach that level. Thus, we have no idea how long it'll take *us* either.

Another reason our practice expectations are out of whack is that it suits the purveyors of books, courses, and classes to keep them that way. After all, if there *were* a book called "Teach Yourself Programming in Ten Years", would you buy it? Probably not. Instead, there's a strong incentive for teachers to encourage students to believe they'll achieve more in less time than is really possible. And the students want to believe it, too.

Optimistic beats realistic

Have you ever wondered why big infrastructure projects, like bridges and tunnels or high-speed rail, *always* go way over time and over budget? Of course, it's hard to estimate how long a complex project will take in advance, but it can't just be that, or the errors wouldn't all be one way. Rather, it's a selection effect: only projects with optimistic estimates ever get started in the first place. If you tell your boss that what she wants will take ten years and cost a billion dollars, she'll probably just drop the idea (or find someone who'll give her a more attractive estimate).

Once a project is under way, and the true costs become clearer, it's too late: bailing on a project is psychologically difficult, because no one wants to admit they got fooled. And the contractors rely on this, of course. Similarly, if a teacher presented us with a true and fair picture of how much time and effort we'd need to reach the highest level of our craft, we'd probably be so dismayed we'd quit immediately. And, while this is entirely understandable, it's the wrong way to think about things.

The rewards start today

We're thinking about it like a game show where the participants are told "If you're willing to go to prison for ten years, you'll win a million dollars!"

Some people would take that deal, I'm sure (and I'd probably watch that show), but that's not what craft learning is like. It's not sacrificing a huge chunk of our lives now in exchange for a glittering prize at some point in the far future: that would be crazy.

This end-gaining approach is a recipe for disappointment and disillusion. Instead, it makes more sense to think about craft practice as a reward in itself.

Take surfing, for example. It takes a long time to get good, and most of us never do, but the point is that it's still fun even when we're absolutely useless at it. Indeed, a friend of mine likes to say that the only way to be bad at surfing is *not* to be having fun.

Little kids love to get in the sea and splash around, and surfing is simply an excuse for grown-ups to do the same without embarrassment. In the same way, playing music is rewarding and delightful at whatever level of skill we've currently reached.

If we *don't* find the practice itself delightful, we're unlikely to do it enough to attain what most people would recognise as a significant level of achievement. It may be a sign, in fact, that this is not the right craft for us.

For the love of craft

To find the craft that chooses us, we usually have to try out a lot of things. With luck, we'll find one or two that we enjoy so much, we spend more time doing them than virtually anything else.

As a result, we'll hardly be able to avoid becoming pretty good at them. Importantly, though, that's not the goal.

It doesn't matter if we *don't* become a master, or, at least, I'm suggesting it shouldn't matter. In a rather Zen sort of way, perhaps practising the craft just for itself, rather than as a means to an end, is the true mastery.

There's always more to learn, but whatever we've already learned is valuable, all the same.

> DANIEL: *I just don't know if I know enough karate.*
> MIYAGI: *Your feeling correct.*
> DANIEL: *You sure know how to make a guy feel confident.*
> MIYAGI: *Daniel-san, you trust quality what you know, not quantity.*
>
> —"The Karate Kid" (1984)

Doing it for the love is certainly the best way to avoid being stricken by disappointment that our karate, or whatever, hasn't made us rich, famous, and successful, even if we're

very good indeed. The truth is simply that *most* people aren't rich, famous, and successful, which is the main reason we pay attention to those who are.

That's another source of our unrealistic expectations, of course: *selection bias*. The musicians we're *aware* of are, by definition, the tiny minority who are famous and successful. What a surprise!

The mistake would be to infer that, since all the musicians we know about are famous, if we become a musician *we'll* be famous too. The reality is overwhelmingly otherwise, and that's okay. Again, if we abandon end-gaining and the prospect of material rewards, there's a much greater spiritual reward from craft practice: bringing happiness, meaning, and purpose to our lives.

Unlocking the power of practice

As a thoroughly non-famous musician, I feel it's only really in the last few years that I've truly come to appreciate the importance of practice. I wish I'd learned it earlier in life, because I'd have reached a higher level of skill by now—but, of course, there's always something we can say that about.

I try to communicate this to my students, too, not always successfully. It's a bit of a Catch-22: if we don't put in serious practice, we won't see the benefits of practice. And practice is hardest at the beginning, when we don't really know what we should be doing: all we know is that we're not good!

This is where mentoring and coaching can help. There's only so much that can be *taught* about any craft, in the sense that you could write it down or put it into PowerPoint slides. At some point, the student just has to *do* the thing. A lot.

But students can learn a huge amount just from watching someone else with more skill do the craft, and this *tacit knowledge* is like a rocket booster. It can accelerate them through the dismal early stages and into that productive region where their rapidly improving results become their own motivation.

A good mentor can also guide the student's practice. As we've seen, putting in at least a few thousand hours is probably necessary for significant achievement in any craft, but time by itself is not sufficient: it also matters a lot what we spend that time *doing*.

So, how should we practice? I usually recommend to my students that they divide their practice time into roughly three main areas: theory, technique, and projects. Let's look at these in turn, starting with theory.

Theory

You can of course become a master musician without knowing anything about the theory of it. It's just *way* harder. For example, if you can't read sheet music, the only way you can learn new pieces is by ear, which is a slow and demanding process even for

experts. If you put just a little effort into learning to read the dots, it quickly unlocks a vast world of new music for you to play.

Understanding is a force multiplier

Similarly, you could noodle around the keyboard for months or years, occasionally stumbling on nice-sounding combinations of notes, without actually becoming more *likely* to find those combinations. On the other hand, if you spend half an hour reading an introductory book on harmony, scales, and chord theory, you'll have a musical superpower that will stay with you for life.

If you can play a 12-bar blues progression in E, for example, that's great, but it's a bit limited. What if you want to jam with a harp player whose instrument is in the key of A? A little bit of theory (I, IV, and V7 chord structure) unlocks that progression in *all* keys. It's a massive force multiplier.

So, read books, watch videos, take courses. Sit and think about the subject. Try to write about what you learned, or to explain it to someone else: this is very helpful for clarifying and organising your thoughts, as well as identifying those parts that you still don't really quite understand.

Every time you pick up a new piece of theory, try to apply it to something you already know, and see if you can deepen that understanding. Then, use it to generate new practical things to do. From those experiments you'll be able to derive more theory, and connect it back to the theoretical knowledge you already had. And so on.

Many people neglect theory, feeling (quite understandably) that they'd be better off just *doing* the thing: playing sonatas, or whatever. While doing is important, and we'll come to it in a moment, probably the most impactful thing right now that we can do to increase our rate of craft progress is to embrace the study of theory.

A teacher can help a lot

If you can find a good teacher, this is the best and fastest way to absorb power-enhancing megadoses of theory. Don't be like me, wasting decades twiddling unproductively on a guitar while being too proud to admit I needed help.

As soon as we're wise and humble enough to accept that we're a beginner, it follows that the next step should be to find someone who knows more than we do, and learn all we can from them. Teaching ourselves is possible, of course, but why would we assume that it's the *optimal* strategy? That doesn't seem likely on the face of it.

Expect the best teachers to be both expensive and very busy. A cheap teacher, like a cheap pair of shoes, is a false economy. Ask yourself, or find out, how much it would cost to hire an expert practitioner to *do* the craft, on an hourly basis. A good teacher should cost no less, because they should not only be an expert in the craft, but have *teaching* skills into the bargain.

In fact, skill in teaching is probably more important than skill in the craft itself, especially since the craft skills aren't usually directly transferable. I'm sure we all know people who are awfully good at what they do, but just seem to be incapable of explaining it to anyone else. It turns out that's something we have to learn, too.

Books and courses as a displacement activity

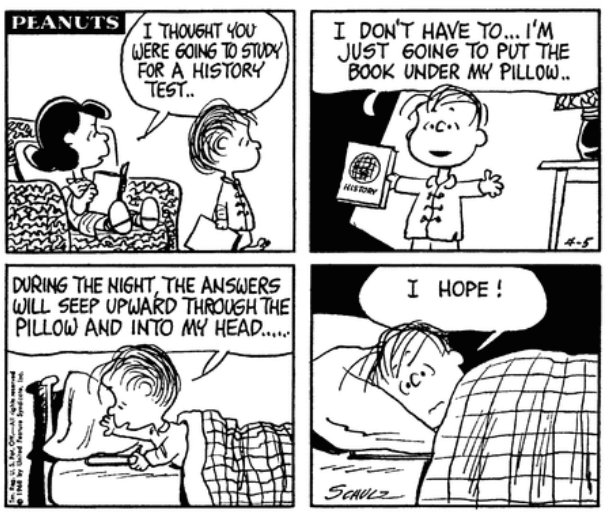
If you don't have access to a teacher, books and courses are the next best thing. Again, expect to pay for quality materials. Free resources are great, and we all appreciate them, but they won't be the best available. How could they be?

Making good stuff takes a lot of time and effort. No one can afford to give it away. Instead of asking for discounts on paid resources, consider asking how you can spend *more* to get better stuff. Everything has its best-value price point, and it's not usually "zero".

On the other hand, some people are perfectly happy to pay top dollar for the best learning materials, as they should be, but then somehow they get stuck in the "theory" phase and can't move forward. I know people who've bought half a dozen books and courses, studied each of them a bit, and still aren't making progress. Their solution to this is usually to go out and buy another course.

I think this is a rather unhelpful combination of retail therapy and displacement activity. Studying is hard! Much easier just to buy another book instead.

Maybe if we keep it lying around the place, or put it under our pillow, we'll magically absorb the knowledge within. Maybe.



"Peanuts", April 5th, 1968

Technique

Even when diligently studied, though, theory won't make any of us a master by itself. Reading a terrific book about weightlifting doesn't make our muscles stronger.

What it *will* do is give us a sound theoretical understanding of the subject, and that in turn will help us figure out what exercises we should be doing, and how to do them in the most productive way.

Tackling the technical

In the end, though, we have to put the book down and do something. So this is the second component of a useful practice regime: *technique*.

In musical terms, this would be things like playing scales and arpeggios. It's not quite playing *music*, as such, but it is music-adjacent. In essence, it's boiling down something like a piano sonata into its component parts, and giving us the opportunity to work on those components in isolation, which is much easier.

Again, theory will help here. Books and teachers will suggest helpful exercises, and once you get the idea you can start inventing your own.

Similarly, if you're having trouble playing a particular piece because of a technical problem, try isolating the technique and practising it separately. For example, if there's an awkward repeated note, you can create an exercise where you play *nothing* but rapidly-repeated notes.

The key is to be specific about what you're practising. Identify the technique you want to improve, or the technical problem you want to solve, and set a realistic, near-term goal about it.

> *Your students need to know what practice is—and what it is not. It is not mindless repetition, even though repetition is involved. Practice is repeating a small portion of a piece (or a technical exercise) with a specific goal in mind. This goal should be small enough to reach by the end of the session so that the student can judge whether or not he met the goal.*
>
> *"Fix the middle of the Scarlatti" is not a good goal because it's too broad and too unfocused. "Decide on and write in the fingering in measures 20-40" is a fine goal. For the second day, the goal might be "Learn to play measures 20-30 with the new fingering".*
>
> —Martha Beth Lewis, "Teaching How to Practice"

How technique practice helps

Like theory, technique is an oft-neglected part of craft practice, and I can completely understand why. It is at least recognisably closer to the actual craft than, say, reading a book about it, but it's still not the thing itself. It is, however, the thing that *gets* us to the thing.

Once we put a little work into some technical exercises, the rewards are soon apparent. We might begrudge the time spent playing scales, but it's better thought of as an investment.

Scale practice helps us learn our way around the particular key (C sharp minor, as it might be), just as well as we know the way around our own neighbourhoods. It becomes familiar and easy territory to navigate.

Now we don't have to waste part of our precious brainpower remembering which note comes next: we can devote it instead to producing a beautiful, expressive sound. Tricky passagework starts to sound more fluent and cohesive, because we've already solved all the technical problems of how our fingers get past each other without getting tangled up.

What technique exercises look like depends on the craft, of course, but it will always be possible to find or invent them, if we know how. In software engineering, for example, we can write little toy programs purely to practice some concept or language feature that's new to us.

Students often disdain such things, wanting (naturally enough) to get on to more realistic and challenging projects, but if they're smart, they soon learn the value of working on techniques in isolation.

Mixing it up

Repetitive practice of difficult things doesn't sound like much fun in itself, of course, and a certain amount of "eating bitter" is required here. It needn't be a drudge, though, if we approach it in the right way.

One thing that can help is to add variety to our practice activities. Studies suggest that we actually learn more, and retain it better, when we frequently switch between different learning modes, instead of sticking with each one for long periods.

So, mix it up. Make a set of 3x5 cards (or the digital equivalent) labelled with different kinds of practice activity, and deal yourself a randomised practice session. For example, for piano study, you might have activities like "scales", "arpeggios", "harmonise a tune", "improvise for 15 minutes", "revise repertoire pieces", "left-hand octaves", and so on.

This helps keep practice sessions fresh and unpredictable, stops you getting bored, and stimulates your brain with variety.

Building the practice habit

As with anything else, it's far easier to keep up your practice if you can establish it as a habit. To that end, try to accustom yourself to at least one craft practice session a day.

You can do more than one session a day, of course, if you want to, but when you're getting started, a single session is fine. Frequency and regularity is more important than the actual amount of time you spend.

Just as with habits, there are always little Jedi mind tricks we can use to help us, and make things more fun. For example, when you don't find yourself looking forward to a practice activity, try using a timer to make your sessions manageable. If half an hour of scale practice seems too much (and it probably is), challenge yourself to do fifteen minutes. If that's still too daunting, go for ten. And so on.

No matter how hard or boring the activity seems, there's usually *some* length of time that we can comfortably envisage doing it for. Find that time, make it your goal, and aim to gradually increase it, as you get more used to the practice.

"Coffee is for closers"

You can also boost motivation by linking your practice or study sessions to small rewards: a cup of tea, a snack treat, a walk in the woods. Whatever you enjoy doing and look forward to, you can use it as a lever to encourage yourself: one 15-minute scale practice session earns one chocolate-chip cookie, for example. (This might not work well if you're simultaneously trying to lose weight, though.)

When you miss a session, or genuinely can't face it on that particular day, don't beat yourself up. Console yourself by looking at the track record of practice sessions you *did* complete on previous days. While it's great to maintain a streak, it's not the end of the world if you break it.

Most of us probably spend a lot of time worrying about whether we're practising enough, or practising the right things, whether we're making the right amount of progress, and so on. Actually, that time would be much better spent just getting on with it. Don't fall prey to analysis paralysis.

> *I joke with students in my clinics, saying that I want them to borrow five minutes from those hours they spend obsessing about themselves, and use it to practice!*
>
> —Kenny Werner, "Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within"

Life has a way of interfering with our plans, and we need to be able to roll with the punches if we're to build a lifelong habit of craft practice. One day doesn't matter much in the scheme of things. If you like, treat it as a scheduled break, and go back to work on the practice tomorrow feeling refreshed and renewed.

Projects

Finally, the easy part: actually doing the craft! This is the bit students generally don't need much prodding to undertake. They *want* to work on projects.

Their problem is usually that they choose the wrong projects, don't work on them the right way, focus on the wrong things, get distracted, don't finish them, and then switch to another ill-considered project, where the cycle repeats.

A mentor can be invaluable here, because they should have a good idea of where you currently are in your craft abilities, and they can help you choose just the right project at the right time.

It should be something that interests you, so that you'll stay motivated to work on it. It should be challenging, a little daunting, and slightly beyond your current level of skill—but not so far beyond that you just flail around helplessly and get stuck.

Picking your projects

As a professional mentor myself, I've come to realise how critical it is, not only for students to *have* a project of their own to work on, but that it should be the *right* project. I can help guide them to good choices. Without any way to know in advance how difficult something will be, it's easy to set yourself a problem that you're just not ready for yet.

I also find that many students need help to focus their time and energy on a single project at a time. The tendency is, as soon as things get a bit difficult or they start to lose motivation, to switch to something else. The result of this is a half a dozen projects in various stages of incompleteness, nothing that really works, and no sense of achievement from finishing something.

Of course, some projects genuinely get bogged down or run out of steam, and in that case it's better to abandon them than to plough on with grim determination.

It's hard for a beginning student to distinguish between a project that's really going nowhere, and one that's just giving them the mild, but necessary, discomfort of "eating bitter". Some degree of perseverance is helpful, but we also have to know when to cut our losses and move on.

Data

Smaller projects, or ones that can be completed fairly quickly, are a good idea because the student can iterate rapidly, building on the experience gained from each project. It's often only when we look at the finished result that we can see where we went wrong right at the beginning.

The more times we can go round this loop, and the quicker we can go round it, the better. We can learn equally from every stage of the project lifecycle, instead of only ever just knowing what it's like to *start* something.

And don't just rely on your memory. Write things down. Take notes, keep a diary of what you do, the decisions you made, and document what did and didn't work.

When you review the results, this will generate some new experiments to make with the next project. Feed the results of *those* experiments forward into the project after that, and so on. It's a continuous process of refinement and improvement, and keeping detailed records is a key part of this.

Do you have the time?

While some students try to take on too much, others aren't willing to take on enough. Despite my earnest assurances about the benefits of a solo craft project, some find the prospect unappealing. The most common objection I encounter is "I don't really have time to work on a side project".

My answer to that is "Then maybe you don't really have time to learn." And I'm quite serious. Craft study demands a lot: time, energy, motivation, discipline, dedication. That's why not everyone is a craft master, and why craft skill is so valuable.

Before we make a serious attempt to take up a craft, we should ask ourselves if this is really important enough for us to potentially rearrange our lives around it.

After all, there are only so many hours in a day, and for most of us that time is already spoken for, in some cases many times over. If we're to start doing something new, that means we need to do less of something else. That's straightforward, but it's a conversation we need to have with ourselves.

These, then, are the three pillars of craft: theory, technique, and projects. They complement and support one another, and if we neglect one, the others will suffer as a result.

Without understanding *why* what we're doing works, or doesn't work, we're just groping around in the dark. Similarly, without a strong grounding in the fundamentals, we won't be able to produce anything worthwhile, except by accident.

And, of course, if we don't actually *do* the craft, it's hard to see how we could get good at it!

The test of patient growth

Let me add one more craft secret, though. It's hard to be a beginner, as we've seen, but sometimes it can be even harder to be a mid-level or senior practitioner.

We tend to make rapid progress at first, but the more we advance in the craft, the more this rate of improvement tends to slow down. At times, it can feel like we're making no progress at all.

This is what's called in some Chinese martial arts *the test of patient growth*. At the beginning, when we're making rapid and obvious advances, it's easy to stay motivated. As

time goes on and we start to slow down or plateau, it's more difficult to stick with the practice.

In fact, craft progress is far from linear. Beyond the beginner level, it can be more like a *punctuated equilibrium*: we practice and practice, but we don't seem to get much better from one day to the next.

Suddenly, though, something shifts, and we find ourselves thinking "Gosh, this isn't bad. I couldn't do this a few weeks or months ago". Remember those moments, and keep tracking and reviewing your progress so that you can prove to yourself regularly that the practice *is* working.

Getting worse instead of better

Sometimes it goes the other way, of course. The more we learn about what's possible in the chosen craft, the less accomplished our own efforts can seem. This "the more I practice, the worse I get" paradox can be demotivating, but it's completely understandable.

After all, at the beginning we have no ability to discriminate between what's good and what's bad. What *we're* doing seems fine. As we grow in craft knowledge, our taste becomes more educated, and our eye for good work gets progressively better-calibrated.

As a result, when we look at our own imperfect work, it can suddenly look rather shabby. But that's okay. It's a good thing, because we can't improve until we can find the faults in what we're doing. The more we know about the subject, the more faults we'll be able to find.

The test of patient growth is also sometimes about whether our motivation can survive the occasional setback. Sometimes it seems not just as though we're not making progress, but that things are actually going backwards. "I could play this piece fine last week. How come I can't play it today?"

This is also perfectly normal. Our craft abilities, along with everything else, fluctuate from day to day and week to week, just like our energy levels and physical health.

Some days we're absolutely on top of our game and we're crushing it. Other days it's a struggle, and the harder we try the more trouble we seem to have doing even merely competent craft work. It's okay: that's just the way it is.

In fact, it's probably more useful to think about craft skill as a *range* of ability, or results, rather than a precise level. Advancing in the craft is about raising not just the upper limit, but the lower one, too.

For example, many athletes can put in amazing performances every once in a while, but the rest of the time they struggle to find that form. Building consistency, and making small but continuous improvements, can be more important than breaking records.

Investing in loss

You'll have failures and make mistakes, and that's also a key part of the craft process. In fact, the more mistakes you can make, the better. It's your quickest route to mastery.

> *An expert in any subject is someone who has already made all possible mistakes.*
>
> —Freeman Dyson, "Infinite In All Directions"

An old proverb about the subtle, beautiful board game of Go says that you should aim to lose your first fifty or a hundred games as quickly as possible. We might quibble about that number—perhaps it should be ten thousand, or more, but it doesn't matter.

The point, of course, is that *winning* doesn't teach us very much. If we win every game, we're probably choosing the wrong opponents.

Even against decent opposition, it can be hard to learn anything unless we're willing—at some level—to lose.

> *When you sit down to play a game is your aim to win the game or to become stronger? You probably think you can do both, but these are quite different projects.*
>
> *The problem with trying to win—besides the fact that it makes it hard to enjoy the game—is that you don't trust your feelings about where to play. When you look over the board there'll be a place you find you want to play, but if you're concerned about winning, you're not going to trust your feeling. You'll think and analyze and nervously play somewhere else.*
>
> *This is a terrible way to play Go. You should look at the board and play wherever you want to. This is the way to get stronger. I say this everywhere I go, around the world, but no one believes me. Nevertheless it's true.*
>
> —Takemiya Masaki, address to the 2008 US Go Congress

If failure is not an option, then innovation is not an option either. Martial artists talk about "investing in loss" for exactly this reason.

Okay, when you're fighting for your life, it's important not to lose. But the stakes aren't usually that high (and if you find yourself, as a martial artist, in that situation, then something's gone wrong).

When losing a fight risks injuring only your pride, you can take advantage of that fact to let your opponent teach you something new, and that probably means they'll beat you. Every loss is a lesson.

7. Self

> *Where do I begin and end in space? I have relations to the sun and air which are just as vital parts of my existence as my heart. The movement in which I am a pattern or convolution began incalculable ages before the (conventionally isolated) event called birth, and will continue long after the event called death.*
>
> *Only words and conventions can isolate us from the entirely undefinable something which is everything.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Wisdom of Insecurity"

The mind is a weird place, as we've seen in previous chapters. It's so full of chaotic and inconsistent thoughts and impulses that it needs to tell itself a benign fiction about how it works: the homunculus fallacy.

I am not myself

In other words, to make retrospective sense of our otherwise bizarre and illogical behaviour, we invent the idea of a *self*: also known as a "personality". But, on some level, we also know it's just a convenient way of talking, and we don't identify the self with anything fundamental.

Otherwise, we wouldn't say things like:

- "I'm not myself today"
- "Just be yourself"
- "This is not who I am"
- "You forget yourself"

When you're not yourself, who are you?

> *Would you want me when I'm not myself?*
> *Wait it out while I am someone else?*
>
> —John Mayer, "Not Myself"

Have you ever gone to work and realised that, in the rush, you've left your keys at home, or your wallet? What if you forgot your *self*?

Who else could you be?

This way of talking is very revealing about what we really think is going on. For example, telling someone to "just be yourself" implies that there's someone else they could be! And, of course, there are many people they could be. They contain multitudes.

There's even a medical condition called *dissociative identity disorder*, formerly known by the more descriptive name of *multiple personality disorder*. Patients with this complaint have exactly the same crazy, mixed-up minds as the rest of us. It's just that, from time to time, they fail to sustain—at least, in public—the agreed fiction that there's a single, cohesive self in charge of it all. The mask slips.

We all know the feeling that we seem to be a different "self" in different company. I'm one person when I'm with my parents, another with my friends, and yet another when talking to clients in a business meeting. All these people have the same face, but they speak and act differently, and if you only knew them by their speech and actions, you might easily conclude they inhabit distinct bodies.

Are you a person?

So, there are various public selves that we keep handy, bringing out each one for the right occasion. But there's also the self that we pretend to be to *ourselves* (if you follow me). So who's *that*?

> THE DOCTOR: *Clara, be my pal, and tell me. Am I a good man?*
> CLARA: *I don't know.*
> THE DOCTOR: *Neither do I.*
>
> —Doctor Who, "Into the Dalek"

None of us know the answer to that, because there isn't one. Even if you ask yourself, "Am I a good person?", the answer has to be "Yes… and no." Do you sometimes do good things? Yes. Do you sometimes do bad things? Undoubtedly. So, what kind of person are you, good or bad? *Are* you a person? It's complicated.

What if there *are* no good or bad people, because there are really no *people* at all: just a bunch of humans frantically trying to make some sort of sense of themselves? This could explain a lot.

Inconsistent or irrational behaviour would be, not the dysfunctional exception that needs to be medicalised, but the natural consequence of having a careenium. And it would go a long way towards explaining the difficulties that we all experience, on a fairly regular basis, with "being ourselves".

The chief difficulty, of course, is to work out who "yourself" is supposed to be in the first place. Are you good, bad, greedy, generous, lazy, hard-working, thoughtful, impulsive, kind, selfish? Yes to all of those. It just depends what day you happen to be asking about.

The Barnum effect

This is what makes horoscopes, stage mind-reading, and other kinds of confidence tricks, work so well. Have you ever been told something like "You have a great need for people to like and admire you", or "You have a tendency to be critical of yourself"?

You probably have, and it probably sounded plausible to you. Of course it did! Statements like this are true of everybody, at least sometimes, and in some circumstances. It's called the *Barnum effect*: the tendency to believe that generic personality descriptions apply specifically to ourselves.

In other words, there's a sucker born every minute.

> *I don't believe in star signs. But then, that's me—typical Pisces.*
>
> —Traditional

The man behind the curtain

Nonetheless, even though on some level we know it's fake, the self is extremely important. Those of us who haven't yet absorbed careenium theory are labouring—and it can indeed be hard work—under the misapprehension that this "self" we're lugging around every day is important to us. That it *is* us. It's hard to break a lifetime's habit of thought.

> *It was explained to me finally that "You have a new personality now." But this statement was no explanation at all. It puzzled me more than ever since I had no awareness at all of any "old" personality. If they had said, "You **are** a new personality," it would have been much clearer. That would have fitted.*
>
> *They had made the mistake of thinking of a personality as some sort of possession, like a suit of clothes, which a person wears. But apart from a personality what is there? Some bones and flesh. A collection of legal statistics, perhaps, but surely no person. The bones and flesh and legal statistics are the garments worn by the personality, not the other way around.*
>
> —Robert Pirsig, "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance"

Playing a role

It's surprising how much of our mental runtime is devoted, from moment to moment, to evaluating our thoughts and actions against this carefully-maintained personality template. You do something, realise it's "out of character" with who you're supposed to be, and then you say "I'm just not myself today!" Who in the world are you, then?

Staying in character

We spend an awful lot of time trying to construct this personality out of our past actions and future aspirations, filtered through cultural and societal expectations. Then we spend a bunch more time thinking about what we're going to do next and whether it fits the personality we've invented. We're like actors trying to stay in character, while simultaneously creating the character as we go.

It's hard work! It can also be a source of stress, as we jealously guard the reputation of this fictitious person against attacks, accusations, and slights from all sides. Why else would it bother us so much when, for example, someone insults us?

Suppose someone walks up to you in front of your friends and says "You're dumb," and walks off. Devastating, right? But why? I mean, *are* you dumb? Probably not. Statistically, you're of average intelligence.

You know you're not dumb, so the insult has zero actual information content. It's simply a false statement. In theory, that shouldn't bother us at all. If I told you the Moon is made of green cheese, you wouldn't get upset: you'd probably be amused. Your sense of self-worth isn't predicated on facts about lunar geology.

Challenging our control over the narrative

Why are false statements about *us* so emotionally disturbing, then?

Clearly you yourself don't believe this insulting statement—if you did, it wouldn't be an insult. You'd simply regard it as a true fact, an accurate observation supplied by a helpful and dispassionate critic.

So, are you worried that your *friends* might believe it? Not really. They know you pretty well, and whatever their private opinion of your smarts, or otherwise, it's unlikely to be affected much by a random stranger's trash talk.

What really upsets us about this situation is that we spend every moment of our lives trying to maintain rigorous control over the narrative of "who we are", and someone has just challenged that control. Is it any wonder that there's a whole industry of "public relations" devoted—for a price—to helping us fight back?

The pecking order

The Chinese, as usual, have a ruthlessly simple and penetrating way of looking at this: the concept of *face*. Face is a bit like dignity, prestige, authority, reputation, or respectability, but it's not any of those. One nice definition of "face" is *sociodynamic valuation*: it's a bit of a mouthful, but it captures the point.

In any group of social animals there's a pecking order: that's why we *have* that metaphor. A troop of chimpanzees has an alpha male, and so on. These are not fixed valuations: they fluctuate all the time based on what happens in the group, hence "sociodynamic".

When someone calls you dumb, you lose face. When you hit back with a well-crafted premium zinger, you regain face. You may emerge from such an encounter, well-handled, with net positive face.

All human societies, at all times, in all places, are tremendously concerned with face; some of them just don't acknowledge this openly. But everybody's aware of it, at every moment.

Prisoners of face

Face helps us work out our own positions in the pecking order, and those of others, and that's important for knowing how to act with different people in different situations. But, in a way, we're all prisoners of face. Once we *have* a position in society, however high or low it may be, we want to hang on to it, and we don't want to do anything that would diminish it: diminish *us*.

But if we were willing to lose face, or even to have none at all, that would be like a superpower. We could do anything!

We might say something like "Okay, whatever I am, in reality, is what I am, and that's that. It doesn't matter what I claim or pretend: the truth is what it is." Then we could do whatever we want without running it past the "self" for approval.

We need not fear insults or criticisms: either they're accurate, in which case we shouldn't feel insulted, or they're not, in which case we can ignore them.

A tortoise in the mud

The moment you don't care whether or not you have face, you're free to be whoever you really are.

> *While sitting on the banks of the P'u River, Chuang-tse was approached by two representatives of the Prince of Ch'u, who offered him a position at court. Chuang-tse watched the water flowing by as if he had not heard. Finally, he remarked, "I am told that the Prince has a sacred tortoise, over two thousand years old, which is kept in a box, wrapped in silk and brocade."*
>
> *"That is true," the officials replied. "If the tortoise had been given a choice," Chuang-tse continued, "which do you think he would have liked better—to have been alive in the mud, or dead within the palace?" "To have been alive in the mud, of course," the men answered.*
>
> *"I too prefer the mud," said Chuang-tse. "Good-bye."*
>
> —Benjamin Hoff, "The Tao of Pooh"

The need to constantly maintain and polish our public image is not only exhausting, but in some ways counterproductive. We edit ourselves and second-guess ourselves,

and the results are… not good.

The moat of low status

As we discussed in the chapter on craft, one of the biggest obstacles to learning any new craft is often simply allowing yourself to *be a beginner*. Why is this so hard? Mainly because we associate it with low status. When other people see that you're a beginner at something, you feel as though you're losing face.

A positive way of thinking about this, which I like, is what Sasha Chapin has dubbed "the moat of low status". Precisely because it's hard to let yourself be a beginner, if you *can* do it, you immediately have an advantage over those who can't—or won't.

When you set out across the moat of low status, it means you're giving up a little face now in return for much greater face later on. Those who remain too attached to their identity as a skilful practitioner to risk it in learning something new will be left behind.

Once you realise that, although your public persona is a useful fiction, it's not who *you* really are, then it doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. Now you can do whatever you want, and cross any moat of low status. You have to give up control of your fake self to get control of your *real* self.

Being truly humble

Have you ever felt nervous before speaking in public, or giving an important presentation or performance? I bet you have. And did it affect the quality of your performance? Probably.

What was the true source of that nervousness? Did you really doubt your own abilities? I suspect that what we really fear in such situations is that other people won't see us in as favourable a light as we want them to.

But why should we care about that, all things considered? Maybe stage fright or performance anxiety is actually a kind of painful attachment to an inflated self-image. *We* know we're not really that good. What we're worried about is that others might see through the pretence too.

> *If we walk on to the stage, or into a lesson, with an excessive hunger for approval or adulation we stifle something inside us. Aside from any moral or cultural distaste one might have for boastful, egotistical people, such self-absorption rarely makes sense from a purely practical standpoint.*
>
> *It's like driving on the highway and looking too closely at the car in the next lane—the lack of perspective is dizzying and dangerous. Or like seeing reality in a mirror—observing ourselves only through the eyes of others and their approval or lack of it. The great pianist Egon Petri once said that we would never be nervous if we were humble.*

> *This is a battle with the self which is never completely won, and each defeat can be a further source of discouragement.*
>
> —Stephen Hough, "Problems Playing the Piano?"

If we were truly humble, we'd never be nervous. That makes complete sense to me, and I find it a comforting thing to reflect on before giving any kind of talk or performance.

Nobody here but us chickens

It's just like the self-improvement paradox: there's no self, and no one to improve it! But the more we believe in the reality of this "Instagram self" we so carefully curate, the further away from *us* it seems. Could we ever live up to it, indeed? It seems unlikely.

> *I can only think seriously of trying to live up to an ideal, to improve myself, if I am split in two pieces. There must be a good "I" who is going to improve the bad "me". "I," who has the best intentions, will go to work on wayward "me," and the tussle between the two will very much stress the difference between them. Consequently "I" will feel more separate than ever, and so merely increase the lonely and cut-off feelings which make "me" behave so badly.*
>
> *We are struggling to make sure of the permanence, continuity, and safety of this enduring core, this centre and soul of our being which we call "I". For this we think to be the real man—the thinker of our thoughts, the feeler of our feelings, and the knower of our knowledge. We do not actually understand that there is no security until we realize that this "I" does not exist.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Wisdom of Insecurity"

There's no one behind the mask

It's very liberating to realise that your public persona is not *you*; it's just a mask you wear when necessary. But here's the real eye-opener: there's no one *behind* the mask either! There's no little homunculus in there watching the screens and pulling the levers. Just simmballs bouncing around the careenium, imagining they're a person.

That's true of everyone else too, of course. The world seems a populous place, but that's just a rather stubbornly pervasive illusion. There are no *people* here at all.

> *In order to help others, one should first see clearly that there are no others.*
>
> —Francis Lucille, "Eternity Now"

Most of us are understandably inclined to resist this way of looking at things. "But *cogito ergo sum*! I know I'm thinking, so if I don't exist, who's doing the thinking?"

An ego enclosed in a bag of skin?

With all due respect to Descartes, he had it backwards. The fact that "I" am thinking indicates only that *there are thoughts*. The "I" who is supposedly in charge of them is a psychologically convenient fiction, no more. Or, as the poet Emily Dickinson put it, "I'm nobody! Who are you?"

Another persistent illusion we have—and from now on you should assume that I'm using the words "we", "you", and "I" with a wry smile, since none of those people actually exist—is that we are somehow separate from the world, and from each other. Nothing could be further from the truth, as it turns out.

> *The prevalent sensation of oneself as a separate ego enclosed in a bag of skin is a hallucination.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are"

It may all sound rather philosophical, but let's put it in concrete terms. The "bag of skin" we walk around in, while useful for stopping our innards leaking out and getting lost, has its downsides too. It keeps us in, but it also keeps everyone else out.

Superorganisms

It really makes no sense to talk about a human being, or any other living thing, as an independent unit distinct from its environment. Can you exist without air, without food and water? Without warmth? Take a spacewalk without a suit sometime, and let me know how you get on.

In the same way, it's not particularly useful to talk about, for example, individual ants, or honey bees, as independent organisms. The right level at which to think of such animals is that of the colony as a whole. Creatures like this should really be considered *superorganisms*, composed of many bodies: distinct, but not separate.

It's not a big step from this to seeing our own species as a superorganism. A newborn baby can't survive in the absence of other human beings, and we never really grow out of that mutual dependence; that's why solitary confinement is such an effective form of torture.

And, just as no individual member of a species can survive on its own, nor can any species itself exist in isolation. All forms of life (at least, that we know of) depend, ultimately, on all *other* forms of life.

That's why it's such a bad idea for us to go on wiping out other species at the present alarming rate. Apart from the fact that we don't have the moral right to exterminate

anyone who gets in our way, it's also bad for *us*. We're sawing off the branch we're standing on. By the time we hear ominous cracking sounds, it might already be too late.

Everything is one

The biologist Paul Ehrlich likened our effect on the biosphere to someone progressively popping out rivets from the wing of an aeroplane. "Don't worry," says the rivet-popper, "these things are way over-engineered. I've taken out dozens of rivets already, and the plane still flies just fine." Thanks for the reassurance.

It's precisely this mistaken idea that we're somehow separate from nature that makes us feel free to destroy it, or at least ruthlessly exploit it to a totally unsustainable degree, as though it were something that's surplus to requirements. In fact, we depend on it utterly. We need the whole biosphere: it's literally our life-support system. There's no planet B, as the saying goes.

> *When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.*
>
> —John Muir, "My First Summer in the Sierra"

The whole Earth is a kind of *super*-superorganism, and of course even the Earth doesn't exist in isolation. It's here because the rest of the universe is here. Everything that exists is, not merely connected, but in an important sense, part of *one* thing.

It doesn't really matter what you call that thing; that's just a vocabulary issue. Call it Nature, or the Universe, or the Tao, or the Whole Sort of General Mish Mash if you like. Since there *is* only one thing, it hardly needs a name. The point is to realise that you *are* it.

> *Some people claim that in the beginning there was nothing at all and that everything has come out of nothing. But how can this be true? How can that which is, come from that which is not?*
>
> *In the beginning there was only one Being, and that Being thought, "I want to be many, so I will create." Out of this creation came the cosmos. There is nothing in the cosmos that doesn't come from that one Being.*
>
> *Of everything that exists, this Being is the innermost Self. He is the truth, the Self Supreme. And you, Shvetaketu, you are that!*
>
> —The Chandogya Upanishad

A useful point of view

So am I, naturally. And so is everyone. We're all one thing: the *same* thing. It's remarkable how much simpler things look from this point of view (for a start, there are fewer of them).

For example, it makes no sense to harm someone, since you're only harming yourself. There's no point in arguing with anyone either, for the same reason.

Love, on the other hand, makes perfect sense. When you love someone, it's because you feel deeply connected to them; that in some sense, you are both vibrations of the same string. Everything is connected to everything else, and that's not just hippy talk: physicists agree. Sometimes the connections are invisible, or just hard to see, but they're there all the same.

> *"Of course I will explain to you again why the trip to the Bahamas was so vitally necessary," said Dirk Gently soothingly. "Nothing could give me greater pleasure. I believe, as you know, Mrs Sauskind, in the fundamental interconnectedness of all things. Furthermore I have plotted and triangulated the vectors of the interconnectedness of all things and traced them to a beach in Bermuda which it is therefore necessary for me to visit from time to time in the course of my investigations. I wish it were not the case, since, sadly, I am allergic to both the sun and rum punches, but then we all have our crosses to bear, do we not, Mrs Sauskind?"*
>
> —Douglas Adams, "Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency"

It's important to know who you truly are, and the answer, it turns out, is "everyone". That's great. But, on a purely practical level, we still have to live inside these bags of skin, and that means we have to deal with our minds and bodies. And that can be a real problem.

Let's tackle the mind first and see if there's anything we can do to make life with it a little more manageable.

8. Mind

> *The mind is only a vehicle. When we don't need our legs we don't use them. Likewise, let the mind rest when not needed.*
>
> —Jean Klein, "Who Am I? The Sacred Quest"

The mind is a *lot*, as we've seen in previous chapters. It can be a rather exhausting place to live sometimes. No wonder, when there's so much going on.

Is it possible to get a break from the mind and its endless, restless distractions? Could we dial it all back a little bit, and make some headspace for *productive* thinking? Or even give the mind a rest altogether while the body gets on with just *being*, for a change?

How not to meditate

Maybe we could. It's a struggle, though, especially at first, just because we're so used to the mind rattling on at a million thoughts per second, every hour of the day and night. If you've ever had trouble getting to sleep because your mind won't shut up, for example, you'll know just what I'm talking about.

Quieting the mind is impossible

Many people, to help relieve this cranial indigestion, are drawn to practices such as meditation (enthusiastically promoted wherever self-help books and apps are sold). But meditation never quite seems to live up to the sales pitch, and most people try it once or twice and then move on, disappointed.

Let's try to dig in to why that might be, and see if there's something we can do about it.

I think if you asked most people what meditation is, they'd probably say something like "Quieting your mind". Fine. Let's try that, then. Experiment one. Sit down somewhere comfortable, put this book down, and just spend a minute or two attempting to quiet your mind. Then come back here (we'll wait).

Did it work? *Not at all*, I suspect. In fact, the more you frantically concentrated and

tried to force your mind to stop working, the less calm and centred you probably became. Irritating, isn't it?

You tried meditation and failed, so you're just one of those people who's not good at meditation. It's not for you. Oh well, there's always crystal healing, or Zumba, or binaural beats. Right?

Well, yes. It's true, you can't meditate, but don't feel too bad, because there's a reason for that: *no one* can meditate.

Magical expectations

At least, no one can meditate in the way it's typically sold to us: you assume the lotus position, close your eyes, and instantly become calm, happy, and relaxed. That's just not a thing that happens.

> *Many people come to meditation with a kind of mystical, magical view. "If I sit down in the right posture, wearing the right clothes, with the right expression on my face, and in the right environment, something magical should happen in my mind."*
>
> —Rob Nairn, "Diamond Mind: A Psychology of Meditation"

You can't switch off your brain, and that's probably just as well, since you'd die more or less instantly. But it *feels* like something we'd love to do, at least for a little while every day, and we all get quite frustrated at our apparent inability to do it.

An experiment

It's actually quite interesting to observe what the mind does when we're suddenly looking at it. Let's try a slightly different experiment, then. Again, sit comfortably—so probably not in the lotus position, unless you're unusually flexible. In a chair is fine.

Now, don't try to be calm, to quiet your mind, or to think of nothing; we've established that's physically impossible. Instead, just sit there and pay attention to whatever happens inside your head. If a thought pops up, what is it about? If you find yourself boarding a *train* of thought, where does it go?

You're not trying to *do* anything, remember, just to notice what goes on. Whatever happens is okay, in this experiment: you can't get this wrong. When you think it's been one or two minutes, stop.

What was your interior monologue like? Mine usually goes something like this:

Hmm. This is boring. I'm hungry. Also, I should probably visit the bathroom soon. But not quite yet. I need to finish this meditation first. It doesn't seem to be going very well. I must have been here ten minutes already and I'm not feeling remotely calm. Man, I suck at this. Concentrate! What is that buzzing noise? Is that a fly? Or is it just the fridge motor?

I wonder if the fridge is breaking down. How old even is that fridge, anyway? Maybe three, four years? It should last longer than that, shouldn't it? What part of a fridge could even wear out, anyway? I guess… the compressor? Do fridges still have those? Some kind of motor, anyway. If it does go wrong, I hope it's not when I'm on vacation.

Like that old bit of Michael McIntyre's: "You go away for two weeks and you think your appliances will start to combust! So you unplug every single thing in your home. Everything except the fridge. We trust the fridge!"

Not always exactly like that, of course, but something along those lines. First, the mind rebels at the momentary lack of outside stimulation. Then, it starts to generate its own entertainment. Sounds, feelings, memories, physical sensations like itching or discomfort, act as the seeds around which the crystal grows. One thought triggers another, and very quickly I'm on a wild ride of free-association.

The mind adores its own fabrications

When it's not dredging up old comedy bits, my mind likes to gnaw away at things that are worrying me about the future, or berating me about the past:

What's going to happen about that email? I think I came across kind of rude. I hope that person doesn't think I'm rude and angry. What if they send an angry reply? Maybe they've already replied. I should check my inbox. But then I'd get stressed. Or is it more stressful sitting here wondering whether that email is there or not, and not knowing?

Is it any wonder that we sometimes feel more agitated after a session of "meditation" than before it? Here's part of what I think is going on. The million and one thoughts bouncing around inside the careenium are making a lot of noise, but most of the time we ruthlessly suppress it by being busy. "La la la! I can't hear you!"

Talking, working, watching TV, listening to podcasts, driving, playing games, or just scrolling on our phones: more or less anything that engages the brain circuits seems good enough to keep the intrusive thoughts, worries, and random nonsense at bay—at least for a while.

In the end the mind adores its own fabrications.

—Jean Klein, "Who Am I? The Sacred Quest"

You cannot stop thoughts

If we turn off all that incoming information for a minute, though, we're abruptly exposed to the din that's going on inside our heads. It was always there, but we were just studiously avoiding paying attention to it.

For a random thought in the careenium, though, used to feeling neglected and ignored among the chaos, this is a rare and precious opportunity. All of a sudden, it has our attention! Time to shout even louder. Maybe this time it'll cut through.

As a careenium owner, this is highly disconcerting. It's like trying to have a dozen conversations all at once, each with someone suffering badly from attention deficit disorder. Not a pleasant experience, and of course it's most people's *first* experience of anything like meditation.

> *When we meditate we inevitably make assumptions about what we should be able to do. One assumption we may make is that we should be able to "clear the mind," because we have read this dreadful phrase in books.*
>
> *You won't believe the number of times I've said to groups of people, "When you meditate you can't clear your mind, you cannot stop thoughts, you cannot get rid of emotions," and within ten minutes somebody will say "When I started meditating, I couldn't get rid of these thoughts that kept coming back to me."*
>
> —Rob Nairn, "Diamond Mind: A Psychology of Meditation"

Calming? Far from it. Better reach for your phone and load up some more distractions. As long as we keep gently tickling the surface of the mind, giving it enough input to maintain a constant level of mild stimulation, it won't turn round and bite us. We hope.

Catching grace

So this is usually the first obstacle in the path of anyone who wants to sit quietly and just be with themselves for a while. We have unrealistic expectations that we'll achieve immediate tranquillity, but instead we're assailed with lots of uncontrollable, intrusive thoughts, and as a result we consider that the experiment has failed: *we* have failed. Likely, we won't try again.

Learning how not to do things

It's the same sort of problem that we encountered with the approach to craft study, isn't it? We sabotage ourselves in advance by adopting an *end-gaining* mindset.

Indeed, this is probably completely unconscious, because it's drilled into us almost from birth: you're not here to enjoy yourself, you're here to work hard and achieve things. *Strive for goals!*

We're so used to seeing life through this lens that it's actually quite difficult to set it aside, even for a few minutes. We carry around this presupposition all the time that we should be *doing* something, every moment from cradle to grave.

> *"Learnin' how not to do things is as hard as learning how to do them. Harder, maybe."*
>
> —Terry Pratchett, "A Hat Full of Sky"

In this context, meditation is unique. It's the one thing you can't *do*, because it's precisely about *not* doing anything. That's good news, because it means you can't fail! All you have to do is sit there for a while. If you can do that, it doesn't matter what else happens: you've succeeded.

In fact, most of us can't do even that at first. The brain's withdrawal agony at being deprived of its own fabrications is so intense, we probably can't sit still for more than a couple of minutes at a time before leaping up like a startled pheasant.

It gets easier, though. Another paradox: not doing anything takes practice.

Let the mind rest when not needed

This is one reason I don't think the word "meditation" is particularly helpful, because of course it implies that you're doing some activity, which is the opposite of the truth. If instead I just said something like "not doing anything", it wouldn't sound nearly so impressive, but perhaps that's a good thing.

We *shouldn't* think about meditation as some rare and exotic activity, or something that's reserved for special occasions. Instead, let's think about it as simply letting our minds rest when not needed.

Opportunities for this arise all the time, once you know how to spot them: when you're waiting for the traffic lights to change, while you're waiting for the water to boil, when you're listening to hold music and the repeating message that "your call is important and will be answered as soon as possible".

In moments like these, don't think to yourself "Now it's time to meditate, I'm going to put my mind into a special state and become calm and tranquil". Instead, just focus on being aware of what's going on, inside and outside you. Thoughts and bodily sensations form, float by, and dissipate, like passing clouds. Rather than batting them away, or latching on to them and pursuing them, just let them go, and admire the view.

> *Freedom from thought does not mean no thoughts. It means that thoughts come and go freely.*
>
> *Tranquillity does not mean that we start feeling lovely. It doesn't mean that we start feeling blissful. It doesn't mean our mind stops having thoughts. Tranquillity means that we begin to settle down in the presence of whatever is happening.*
>
> —Rob Nairn, "Diamond Mind: A Psychology of Meditation"

No filter: experiencing the present

Just for a few moments, try to suspend the ingrained habit of judging and evaluating what's around you ("This is bad / uncomfortable / too hot / too cold / too noisy"), and let everything be just as it is, good or bad.

Allow the photons to simply hit your retina, and the phonons to hit your ear, without trying to form them into pictures and then subjecting the pictures to intellectual analysis.

Let all that frantic brain machinery rest for a minute, and just sit and drink in things directly, as a flow of unmediated sense-impressions. Let yourself be a vessel that the world fills up.

> *Experiencing the present purely is being emptied and hollow; you catch grace as a man fills his cup under a waterfall.*
>
> —Annie Dillard, "Pilgrim at Tinker Creek"

How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?

The universe is not waiting for your instructions

Imagine that you've been carrying around a heavy weight all day, and for the first time you've been able to set it down and relax. How does that feel? Now take a breath, and savour it.

Feel the air rushing in through your nostrils, your diaphragm expanding, and your lungs inflating. Let the air go out again, without forcing.

See how the body knows how to breathe by itself, without you having to supervise the operation? Now let your mind do the same thing.

> *Sitting quietly, doing nothing*
> *Spring comes, and the grass grows by itself.*
>
> —Matsuo Bashō, 1644—1694 CE

Don't worry if this is a struggle at first: of course it is. Your mind doesn't know how to *stop* struggling, because until now it never has. And the more you try to force yourself to stop forcing yourself, the harder it gets. It's like trying to look at the back of your own head.

The grass knows how to grow, your heart knows how to beat, and the Sun and Moon know how to rise and set without your help. None of these things needs your active involvement, and indeed they'll get on much better without it. Nothing bad will happen if you let go of the controls for a minute.

> *Relax. The universe is not waiting for your instructions.*
>
> —Bumper sticker

Catching a glimmer

After a while, if you're sitting quietly in some pleasant place, you'll probably get distracted or tired of the "meditation striving", and something strange will happen. You'll suddenly realise that for the last few moments you haven't been thinking about anything.

That's a weird sensation. Of course, you never experience it *directly*, only in retrospect. If you were aware at the time that you weren't having any thoughts, then you'd be having a thought. Instead, it's more like waking up and realising that you must have been asleep, because there's a blank space in your memory just before right now.

At first it's like catching a glimmer of some faint star, and you immediately start tilting your head this way and that, squinting in a vain effort to recapture what you thought you saw. Ignore this tendency and resist the temptation to switch back into the striving, end-gaining mode.

> *There is a Chinese story of one who came to a great sage, saying "I have no peace of mind. Please pacify my mind." The sage answered, "Bring out your mind (your 'I') before me, and I will pacify it." "These many years," he replied, "I have sought my mind, but I cannot find it." "There," concluded the sage, "it is pacified!"*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Wisdom of Insecurity"

Just keep sitting, maintaining a constant gentle awareness, and accepting whatever comes.

In particular, don't try to push away thoughts that arise: just let them alone. Whether the thoughts are pleasant or unpleasant, if you don't engage with them, they'll simply pass over you and melt away.

Don't get frustrated or mad at yourself for failing to suppress these thoughts, or for not being tranquil enough. Every time you catch yourself in the act of thinking ("I wonder what to have for dinner tonight? I should get something at the store") just relax and let the thought go.

Instead of getting annoyed when thoughts arise, smile as though you're greeting an old friend: "Thinking! Great to see you again. How's it been? Okay, see you later!"

Nothing to do and nowhere to go

After you've done this a while, and let off some of the high-pressure mental steam that's been filling your head for years or decades, you'll find that you're less and less likely to fall into the trap of thinking "This meditation is going badly". Instead, there's a new trap waiting for you: thinking "This meditation is going well!"

It is impossible to succeed at meditating

But it's really just the same trap in a different disguise, isn't it? Instead of berating yourself for failing at what seems like an easy task, you're congratulating yourself for succeeding at something that most people can't do. Being a good meditator makes you a special person, a better person.

Oh, really? But aren't we just back again to end-gaining, goal-striving, and trying to fix something about ourselves that's broken or unsatisfactory? The danger is that even though we know meditation isn't an activity, once we slap a label on it, it *feels* like something we could be good at (or bad at). It's not.

Nor is it a means to an end. There's nothing to be achieved in meditation, except perhaps a respite from the constant *need* for achievement.

In particular, it's not a way of achieving *enlightenment*, because there's no such thing. "Enlightenment" means nothing, because there is nothing and no one to enlighten. As soon as you realise that, you'll be enlightened!

There are no goals

We're so attached to goals, as a society, that we get a bit worried when people don't have them. "Unambitious" is never a complimentary way to describe someone, whereas "ambitious" often is (as long as they're not *too* ambitious, of course: that's bad).

But what is ambition other than a kind of unhappiness? If you're happy right where you are, doing what you're doing (or not doing), then you're happy! No need for any goals or ambitions.

Being goal-focused is like saying "I'm not happy here and now, but if I could just solve these 83 problems, I would be".

Well, good luck with that. Maybe a better way to be happy ever after, though, is not to be after too much.

> *As soon as there is a goal, there is a potential problem because it brings with it the idea of achievement or failure. We need to understand the general principle, that change will come about if we learn to work skilfully with the mind but we don't make change the goal. That's not our job. The change will arise in its way and in its own time due to the effect of meditation.*
>
> *Having no goals bewilders most people in the beginning because in life we are obsessed with goals. "How can we get anywhere if we don't have a goal?" The answer is that if we let go of the idea of getting anywhere we come to see that we are already there. There is nowhere to go.*
>
> —Rob Nairn, "Diamond Mind: A Psychology of Meditation"

Making time for nothing

So here's the paradox: meditation isn't something you can do, because it's about explicitly giving yourself permission *not* to do anything—and it seems we need that permission. It's not an activity of any kind. Maybe we should call it an *inactivity*.

But you still need to make time and space in your day for this very important nothing to happen. Don't wait for there to be a blank space on your calendar: *make* one. Who's in charge, after all? Who pushes whom around inside this careenium?

Find a crack in the day and slip a crowbar into it, then use that leverage to open up a little space where you're allowed not to do anything. More, you're explicitly allowed to *do nothing*. It's rare to see this on anyone's calendar, but sometimes it's the most urgent appointment they could have.

> JERRY: *So, what'd you do last night?*
> ELAINE: *Nothing.*
> JERRY: *I know "nothing", but what did you actually do?*
> ELAINE: *Literally nothing. I sat in a chair and I stared.*
> JERRY: *Wow, that really is nothing!*
> ELAINE: *Told ya.*
>
> —"Seinfeld"

It is impossible to fail at meditating

If you find sitting still for more than a few minutes very difficult, which most people do, try going for a walk instead. Walking is another way of giving ourselves permission to

do nothing for a while, except put one foot in front of the other.

Whether you're sitting or walking, resist the temptation to think of what you're doing as "meditation". That sounds like something exotic and difficult that you could fail at. It's pleasantly impossible to fail at sitting (unless you fall off your chair for some reason; try not to do that).

Similarly, you can hardly fail to go for a walk. Oh, sure, you can get lost, or trip over a root, or end up somewhere you hadn't planned to go. But that's all just a matter of colour and interest. The point is that you succeeded at *walking*.

When a cat gets tired of sitting, it gets up

Think of meditation, or "brain-resting" if you prefer, in the same way. It doesn't matter *where* your mind goes, or how many times it trips over itself. It's all success. What we're really doing here is gently building the discipline necessary to resist the mind's stubborn tendency to manufacture, and then consume, its own distractions.

It also doesn't really matter how *long* you sit (or walk, or swim, or whatever you do to tell your brain it's time to rest). An hour is great. Ten minutes is great, too. Longer periods will be harder, especially at first, but don't fall into the asceticism trap. Meditation isn't about purifying ourselves through deliberately prolonged suffering. It's more like we're giving ourselves a little break from the ingrained human drive to be always *doing*.

Animals, by the way, don't suffer from this: when there's nothing to do, they do nothing. How easy they make it look!

> *Those who understand the Tao delight, like cats, in just sitting and watching without any goal or result in mind. But when a cat gets tired of sitting, it gets up and goes for a walk or hunts for mice. It does not punish itself or compete with other cats in an endurance test as to how long it can remain immovable.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "Tao: The Watercourse Way"

Playing with mud

You don't need a special place, or a special time, or even special clothes, to meditate. It's just letting the mind rest when it's not needed, and that's the case more often than you might think.

Whenever you find yourself feeling bored, or impatient, and you crave distraction or want to "kill time", instead just slip your brain into neutral and simply sit in awareness, drinking in every sensation and letting your thoughts come and go like clouds.

After a while, this won't be a mode that you need to deliberately engage: your mind will learn to recognise when it's not needed for a little while, and take a nap of its own accord. Meditation ceases to be a task, and becomes a rest. All goals and self-criticism

and dissatisfaction melt away, and we become caught up instead in the timeless moment.

> *We are just doing it like a child playing with mud. It doesn't play with mud for any reason, but it is totally absorbed, fully fascinated, absolutely enjoying it. If we were to ask the child why it is doing that, it wouldn't be able to tell us. It's just doing it. This is meditation.*
>
> —Rob Nairn, "Diamond Mind: A Psychology of Meditation"

When you're completely absorbed in something, or (even better) in nothing, the conscious mind seems to switch off. For a little while, you're connected directly to reality, all filters disengaged, and it's as though Time is pouring straight into you, like a waterfall.

We say that you "lose yourself" in the moment. Lose your *self*. Isn't that interesting?

Entering power-saving mode

So, though we don't meditate with the *goal* of quieting the mind, that's nevertheless what happens, eventually. At first, it may take fifteen minutes or half an hour, or even longer, for our thoughts to calm down a bit and stop bouncing off the walls of the careenium. But they will.

Don't try to force this to happen: just keep sitting and watching in awareness and enjoyment, like a cat. Pretty soon you'll notice that there's a small blank spot in your memory of the immediate past, where you slipped into a timeless moment.

Don't chase this state, or try to recapture it. Keep sitting, letting thoughts roll slowly across the sky without interference, and the mind will start to shut itself down, like a TV going into power-saving mode.

The more you make space in the day for this to happen, and the more you regularly give yourself permission to do nothing, the easier and more enjoyable it becomes. It's not that we get better at meditation with practice, exactly: there's nothing to practice and nothing to get better at.

What changes over time is simply that we learn how to be more gentle with ourselves, to stop interfering with the mind, like stirring up muddy water, and instead just let it settle. After a while, if you leave it alone, the mind naturally goes to a quiet place.

It's like learning the route to a new friend's house. At first you might need detailed directions, and it still takes you a while to get there every time, because you keep getting lost. After you've visited them a few times, though, the route becomes familiar and you no longer need to pay so much attention to where you're going.

Eventually you don't have to think about it at all: you can just go there any time you want. Without any conscious navigation, you find that you've effortlessly arrived at your

new friend's house.

In the next chapter, let's talk about what you'll find inside.

9. Peace

> *It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.*
>
> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance"

We talked in the first chapter about the austere, transcendent movie *Into Great Silence*, and the remarkable effect it has on the viewer's brain. With audio-visual experiences like this, who needs drugs?

Making a monastery

The slow pace, the long, sustained shots, and the lack of any dialogue or narration make it hard to watch at first. It's as though we can't find anything to get a grip on. We're used to a style of TV and movies that constantly screams for our attention, filling every second of screen time with loud sounds, bright lights, pulsing colours, and fast cuts.

Do not adjust your set

Watching *Into Great Silence*, on the other hand, you might think at first that something is wrong with your TV. On the contrary, everything's right with it.

> *The embodiment of protracted patience, the film is an elegant and experiential contemplation on the overarching power of silence.*
>
> —Paula Marvelly, "Philip Gröning: Into Great Silence"

Director Philip Gröning said that, rather than making a film about a monastery, he wanted to *make* a monastery. In other words, his movie deliberately creates the kind of uncluttered, contemplative state of mind in you as a viewer that you'd experience if you went to a monastery yourself.

First empty your ears

In this book we've talked about a set of ideas that constitute a sort of portable monastery: one that you can take with you everywhere you go. As a modern monk, you give yourself permission to dispense with the irrelevant, to focus on what matters, and to live the way you want to, without having to give a damn about what anyone else thinks.

Just like the movie, it starts with silence. As we saw in the previous chapter, silence is not something you can impose on the mind by sheer effort of will. Instead, you have to abandon goal-seeking, let go of ideas like self-improvement and enlightenment, and simply accept whatever comes. Eventually, what will come is silence.

Now, it's clear that this isn't going to happen in a nightclub, or surrounded by a noisy, jostling crowd, or sitting in front of a blaring TV. No one would try to meditate in such circumstances: the idea is laughable.

If the problem is that your head is already full of noise, why would pouring more noise into it help? How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your ears?

Silence in the city

Silence outside leads to silence inside. As we've seen, though, you don't need to sit cross-legged on top of a mountain to meditate, or floating in an isolation tank. Meditation is wherever you are and wherever you go: peace is every step.

Silence is not necessarily an absence of sound. You can sit with birdsong, flowing water, or the rustling of wind in the trees, and still be in perfect silence. The same goes for a crackling fire, a rumbling dishwasher, or even the roar of traffic on the highway. If you listen carefully, there's always silence behind these sounds, and when you've learned to tune them out, the silence is all that remains.

But, just as a week-long yoga retreat can't make up for an unsustainable and manic lifestyle, occasional pockets of quiet meditation won't help much if your whole life is full of noise.

Stop all the clocks

You are what you eat, as the saying goes, and surely the same applies to the mind. What happens inside your head must depend on what you put into it. If you're constantly cramming it overfull of stimulation, distraction, and dopamine snacks, it's no wonder you occasionally get bouts of mental indigestion.

The attention vampire

The most egregious source of noise, both literal and metaphorical, is, of course, that Pandora's box in your pocket. The supposedly smart phone is making us stupid, because it never stops ringing and pinging with new information, urgent alerts, social

media updates, adverts, and other things you absolutely, positively need to pay attention to. Now, now, *now*.

I'm not going to suggest you should throw the thing away altogether, because it has its uses. But, like a parasite, once it's got its hooks firmly in, it starts to make use of *you*, and that's not okay.

There are thousands of highly skilled and highly paid engineers and psychologists whose whole job it is, every day, to think up new ways to keep you glued to your phone, and their apps in particular. The one thing they cannot allow you to do is put the phone down, even for a moment: that negatively impacts revenue.

And yes, for those who've grown up with always-on digital devices never out of reach, there's a tendency to assume that it's normal to be extremely online. We're so used to people expressing concerns about the effect this might have on our mental health that it becomes reflexive to write them off: "Sure, grandpa, let's get you to bed." But maybe there's room to be a little more nuanced about it.

> *For centuries, adults have worried about whatever "kids these days" are doing. From novels in the 18th century to the bicycle in the 19th and through comic books, rock and roll, marijuana, and violent video games in the 20th century, there are always those who ring alarms, and there are always those who are skeptics of those alarms. So far, the skeptics have been right more often than not.*
>
> *But the skeptics are not always right. I think it is a very good thing that alarms were rung about teen smoking, teen pregnancy, drunk driving, and the exposure of children to sex and violence on TV. The lesson of "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" is not that after two false alarms we should disconnect the alarm system. In that story, the wolf does eventually come.*
>
> —Jon Haidt, "Yes, Social Media Really Is a Cause of the Epidemic of Teenage Mental Illness"

The machine that never stops

It's not that the internet and social media aren't fun; far from it. The problem is, they can be *so* absorbing that everything else gets drowned out. When you need never be bored, never be lonely, never lack stimulation, that seems like a wonderful thing. But at some point you just become a brain in a jar, and that proposition is less appealing.

Communications technology means we can be more in touch, with more people, than at any time in human history. You'd *think* that would be an unequivocally good thing, but the tone of discourse on the internet begs to differ. Looking at the current state of our society, it's hard to conclude that just because we're more connected, we're necessarily closer together.

> *"I want to see you not through the Machine," said Kuno. "I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine."*
>
> *"Oh, hush!" said his mother, vaguely shocked. "You mustn't say anything against the Machine."*
>
> *"Why not?"*
>
> *"One mustn't."*
>
> —E.M. Forster, "The Machine Stops", 1909

Not everything is more fun online, and not all our interactions need to be through the wearisome Machine. Indeed, the more people we interact with, the fewer friends we seem to have.

> *Rich was often lonely. He consoled himself with the thought that most people are often lonely, actually. And he had a wide circle of online friends… his computer was a window into a literally worldwide nexus of friendship. So he had no reason to feel lonely. Ergo, his sometimes feelings of loneliness were irrational and should be ignored.*
>
> —Adam Roberts, "The This"

Digital minimalism

So, while it's easy to resist the simplistic idea that "phones are bad, and social media has no benefits", it turns out to be a little more complicated than that.

> *We added new technologies to the periphery of our experience for minor reasons, then woke one morning to discover that they had colonized the core of our daily life. We didn't, in other words, sign up for the digital world in which we're currently entrenched; we seem to have stumbled backward into it.*
>
> *Increasingly, these technologies dictate how we behave and how we feel, and somehow coerce us to use them more than we think is healthy, often at the expense of other activities we find more valuable. What's making us uncomfortable, in other words, is this feeling of losing control.*
>
> —Cal Newport, "Digital Minimalism"

Digital minimalism is a more moderate and reasonable approach to the problem than "ditch your phone and go live off-grid in a yurt". It suggests that, actually, we have some choice in the matter. We can choose how we use our phones, what for, and how often. That way, we don't have to throw the benefits out with the bathwater.

Taking back control

So, if you want to cultivate a little more silence in your life, starting with a more intentional relationship with your phone, is there any hope? What can you possibly do to push back against such a well-resourced and determined attention-mining operation?

Well, quite a lot, it turns out. For example, you can turn off notifications: why should the phone be able to overrule whatever you're doing at any moment, day or night? It should be your choice when to interact, not the device's. How long do you really go without looking at the thing, anyway? Nothing bad will happen if you tell it not to ping you in the meantime.

Turn off sounds, buzzes, pings, banners, pop-ups, and newsflashes. Turn off alerts: the little red circles that tell you you have 76 new micro-stimulations waiting. How many of those 76 things *really* deserve your attention, after all? I'm guessing very few of them. Brain miners have long understood the psychological leverage of the little red dots: they know we can't leave them alone.

Remove your work apps, and your work email account, from your personal phone. If you need to be contactable by work during work hours, fine: they can provide a separate phone for that purpose. When your work and non-work life coexist on the same device, it becomes impossible to keep a clear boundary between the two worlds. How can you relax in your monastery if the boss could call or text at any moment, or you could get a chat message saying "hi, quick question?"

Making your phone worse

Another good way to regain some control over your phone is to deliberately make it less fun to use:

> *Configure your display to be black and white. This makes your phone look much more drab and boring and makes you correspondingly less likely to accidentally fall down a brightly-colored pit of clickbait.*
>
> *Configure "Downtime" for apps and websites. This makes whipping out your phone for a quick scroll through nonsense you don't actually care about noticeably less enticing.*
>
> —Robert Heaton, "How to make yourself happier by making your iPhone worse"

It sounds silly, but it really works. Try setting your phone to black and white mode for a day or two. It's rather restful. When you turn the colour back on, you'll be struck by how aggressive and in-your-face the effect is: vibrant and vivid, like a jar full of multicoloured candies. How can you resist? Score another one for the attention miners—unless you go back to black.

"Cat rang bell. I ate food"

With these modest settings changes, you can install a little silence on your phone, but it's still hard to overcome the effect of many years of habit. You've been trained to look at the thing hundreds of times a day, rewarded with little jolts of dopamine every time you do. Cigarettes have the same Pavlovian effect. Once upon a time, whenever we had a spare moment with nothing to do, we'd light a cigarette. Now we check our phones (and perhaps vape as well).

It's not really the phone's fault, it's just that we've gradually trained ourselves to absorb information in thousands of tiny blips throughout the day, rather than through long, sustained periods of deep attention. This process is self-reinforcing: the more our attention spans wane and our boredom thresholds plummet, the more sugary snacks become the *only* brain food we feel like consuming.

To begin to reverse this debilitating process, and restore the cognitive physique we once had, we need to undertake a programme of diet and exercise. Mental diet, that is, and mental exercise, to build up our flabby, atrophied attention muscles.

Chewing gum for the eyes

Let's start with the diet. It's a good idea to watch what we eat, and the mental equivalent is watching what we *watch*. Too much TV is, of course, bad for us: that's what "too much" means. But, just as with food, quality matters more than quantity.

Try this experiment: keep a little viewing diary for a couple of weeks. Make a note of every TV show, stream, video, or movie you watch over the period, and how much time you spent watching it. Include videos on social media.

At the end of the period, or every so often if you want to continue the experiment, quickly tot up your total watch time. The result may surprise you. Three or four hours TV or video watching a day doesn't feel like much at the time, but it soon adds up.

Feed your head

Let's say you've logged 20 hours of digital entertainment in a week. Now ask yourself how much of that viewing was really worth it. I'm sure some of it was. Did you see a movie that was rewarding, thought-provoking, stimulating, and life-affirming? Great. How about a documentary that was intelligent, objective, analytical, and left you feeling smarter and better-informed than before you watched it? Fantastic.

The good, the bad, and the trashy

TV and movies don't have to be empty calories and brain-candy. They can be as emotionally powerful as a great novel, or as instructive as a scientific lecture. Sometimes a viewing experience can be genuinely transformative: *Into Great Silence* is a good exam-

ple. Even genre fare such as sitcoms, sci-fi, or thrillers can be well-made: rich in plot, character, and observation, and as nutritious and satisfying as a truly great meal.

But, if we're honest, *most* TV is simply junk. We watch it to fill an idle moment, to keep ourselves company, or because we can't quite muster the mental energy to read a book or do anything else more demanding. Yet sitting in silence and being alone with our thoughts *feels* demanding, so we flip on the TV or refresh a 'For You' page instead.

Fine dining for the mind

What TV show would you watch if you only had a month to live? I can think of one or two, perhaps. How much of what you logged during your "quantified viewing" experiment rises to that level of quality and importance? Very little, I suspect.

And when you see just how many hours you spent watching the rest, lolling flaccidly in a chair while passively absorbing mediocre entertainment through your eyeballs, you might reasonably think that you could have found better ways to spend that time. I agree with you.

So here's our first cognitive diet tip for modern monks: consume less digital entertainment, and be more discriminating in what you do consume. Select in advance what you're going to watch, and curate a digital library of only the highest-quality viewing. It's like cooking a healthy, nourishing meal from fresh ingredients, instead of ordering takeout or reheating a frozen dinner.

This isn't to say you should feel bad for occasionally consuming mental convenience foods: just that you shouldn't let them be the default. Just as pizza once in a while is delicious, but your doctor wouldn't advise you to eat it every night, it matters what you feed your brain on, too.

A show about nothing

What would the TV equivalent of tasty, but nutritious, real food look like? There are intelligently stimulating traditional TV shows, as we've seen, but I'm also a big fan of so-called *slow* TV. Like *Into Great Silence*, slow TV shows are self-confident enough not to desperately beg for your attention. Instead, they're long, they're slow, they're contemplative, and they positively invite your mind to wander.

> *The iconic slow TV program is "Bergensbanen: minutt for minutt," the real-time recording of a train journey, from Bergen to Oslo, in 2009. That show was nearly seven and a half hours long, and consisted mostly of footage from the train's exterior as it moved. The landscape often changed. Even when it did, though, it did not change much.*
>
> *Soon after the train show, Norway's public-service broadcaster, NRK, aired a twelve-hour program about firewood. It featured people chopping logs and then discussing how to stack it. That took four hours; the remaining eight of "National*

> *Firewood Night" depicted the logs burning in a fireplace. (Stephen Colbert: "It destroyed the other top Norwegian shows, like 'So You Think You Can Watch Paint Dry' and 'The Amazing Glacier Race.' ")*
>
> —Nathan Heller, "Slow TV is Here"

Other slow classics you can enjoy, gently, include a five-day boat trip among the Norwegian fjords, a 12-hour canal voyage, and two hours of migrating reindeer crossing the spectacular transarctic wilderness beyond the end of the world. If you like, you can leave the Earth altogether and see it from space, perhaps going on to take a trip around the Moon.

I find slow TV a great way to unwind, to let my brain cool and spin down at the end of a hard day, and a surprisingly effective stimulus to thinking. There's only so long you can look at a reindeer, and the utterly unhurried pace of the show gives you every opportunity to drift away, to daydream, and to engage the deeper machinery of your mind while the visual cortex is temporarily occupied.

It's time to panic

Slow TV, indeed, is the perfect antidote to things like TV news, which is as stress-inducing as slow TV is stress-relieving.

Instead of long, restful shots of our beautiful planet, the news is all "War! Catastrophe! Disaster!" Far from drifting off into pleasant daydreams, you dare not look away for fear of missing the next fast-twitch blipvert of misery and fear.

> KENT BROCKMAN: *When cat burglaries start, can mass murders be far behind? This reporter isn't saying that the burglar is an inhuman monster like the Wolfman, but he very well could be. So, professor, would you say it's time for everyone to panic?*
>
> PROFESSOR: *Yes, I would, Kent.*
>
> —The Simpsons, "Homer the Vigilante"

"There is no news"

We seem to be a rather news-obsessed society these days. A hundred years ago, the BBC radio evening bulletin reported simply, "There is no news," followed by fifteen minutes of relaxing piano music. Today, dozens of 24-hour news channels and streams fill the airwaves with a constant buzz of… if not exactly news, then a kind of vat-grown news substitute. Powdered, freeze-dried, zero-calorie instant news: we'll bring you more on that breaking story as it develops.

Indeed, continuous-news outlets usually have so little real information to report, they tend to repeat themselves about every quarter of an hour. While the newscaster tells you nothing from the studio, and goes live to a reporter on the scene who also has nothing worthwhile to say, a chyron of *unrelated* nothing scrolls across the bottom of the screen. It's somehow simultaneously boring and stressful, like filling out income tax forms.

And when some genuinely significant major national or world event *is* happening, the TV news never seems to have much of interest to say about it. We see footage of people in suits arriving or leaving government buildings in black cars, which doesn't tell us anything useful, but since the TV crews can't actually film what's happening *inside* the building, this is the best they can do.

You don't need people's opinions on a fact

Mostly, we just see talking heads: often half a dozen of them, or more. None of them people who are directly involved in the story, of course: they're too busy to be interviewed. Instead, they're "commentators", whatever that might mean. Why would their comments be informed, interesting, or useful? We're never told, but by gosh, they seem to have a lot to say.

The most desperate way that TV news tries to fill airtime is the "vox pop": stopping random people in the street and asking them what *they* think about whatever's going on. These poor folk are, if it were possible, even less qualified to pronounce intelligently on world events than the professional talking heads in the studio.

But, in their defence, they never claimed to be. All they know about the situation they learned from the TV news, just like you and I did. It follows elegantly that they can have nothing new to say about it; their opinions are worth nothing, if not slightly less than nothing.

> *You don't need people's opinions on a fact. You might as well have a poll asking "Which number is bigger, 15 or 5?" Or "Do owls exist?" Or "Are there hats?"*
>
> —John Oliver, "Last Week Tonight"

The fundamental problem with TV news, though, or any video-based media (TikTok, for example), is that they're limited to the *visual*. If it doesn't scatter photons into a camera lens, news can't really cover it. And that leaves out a lot of important subjects; hence the repetitive footage of people walking to their cars, or of correspondents standing in front of government buildings saying things they could perfectly well have said in the studio.

This report contains distressing images

TV news channels (and, for that matter, TikTok influencers) need viewers, which means they need to entertain. What's entertaining? Drama, and what's dramatic? Conflict, danger, violence, and death, of course.

It's a big world, so there's always some conflict to be found somewhere, and you can be sure the news will rush it straight to your eyeballs. The overpowering, but false impression, is that the world is full of violence and catastrophe and horror, and that we should all be very afraid.

This reporter isn't saying that a crazed gunman is lurking in your house right now, but he very well could be. Whatever you do, keep watching the screens.

There's another filtering effect, too, which is the time dimension. What is "news", anyway? Stuff that's new. That means TV news and other streaming media can only cover things that happened *today*. For example, you never see news stories like "Major war that's been going on for months is still going on," even though that's objectively quite important.

So anything that lasts longer than a few days without dramatic fresh developments, or visually interesting activity, is basically a non-story as far as the news is concerned. Why do we even watch news anyway? So that we can be informed citizens of the world who know what's going on, presumably.

But, as we've seen, TV news won't tell us that—or, at best, we'll get a heavily filtered picture of world events, angled and reframed for novelty, visual appeal, and ideally a few dead bodies.

The brain gym

I won't labour the point; suffice it to say that TV news, social media, and so on, is basically a branch of entertainment. Not that there's anything wrong with that, in moderation: it just doesn't do much to help us take our full part in society. In that sense, we've been rather mis-sold.

The longer view

For a really interesting shift of perspective, try reading weekly and monthly publications, such as magazines, rather than daily newspapers or online news sites. A weekly magazine like the *New Yorker*, to take one of my favourites, obviously can't hope to bring you up-to-the-minute information, so it doesn't try. Instead, it considers, it digests. It reflects.

What you get is a more thoughtful report and analysis of the week's developments: not just what happened, but what it *means*, and how it fits into the ongoing narrative of history. A monthly magazine, such as the *Atlantic*, arrives even later in your mailbox, and

so is even more measured and contextualised. It's a refreshing change from the jittery fast-twitch headlines of the 24-hour news cycle.

Pumping paper

Following this logic, *books* must be even better, and so they are. Not all books are intelligent, thoughtful, and informative, of course: there's junk food mixed in with the good nutrition. But if you want good thoughts to come out of your head, it makes sense to put good thoughts *into* it, and you'll find most of those on bookshelves rather than on newsstands.

People don't seem to be very good at reading these days, which perhaps explains why many of them aren't very good at thinking: reading is to the mind as exercise is to the body, as the saying goes. If you never get off the couch, you can hardly expect to be fit and healthy, and if you never crack a book, your brain won't be in especially good shape either.

The problem is that the mind, like the body, is essentially lazy: thinking is hard, so we prefer not to do it unless absolutely necessary. Intelligent reading is another kind of thinking, and when we're not used to it, it feels like heavy lifting.

Just as your doctor would advise you not to suddenly take up running marathons, it's wise to build your mental muscles up gently too. If you feel like you could afford to lose a little flab between the ears, you might like to try putting together a little "Couch to 5K words" programme of brain-building. Let's see how it might go.

Going clear

First, cut out online news, social media, and internet doomscrolling in general. That's the mental equivalent of methamphetamine, and no medically-approved fitness programme I'm aware of starts with a wrap of zoom.

Next, be more selective about your TV watching. Pick one really good series to watch, and watch it, one episode at a time, no bingeing. We used to get a week between episodes to think about what we saw, talk it over with friends, and wonder what will happen next time: try giving yourself that breathing space again. A handful of chocolates is nice, but eating a whole box at once makes you sick. The same applies to box *sets*.

Put your phone in a drawer so that you can be more intentional about how and when you choose to use it. Go for walks where you don't take your phone with you. It feels weird at first, but gets easier.

Remember the Sabbath day

Fence off one day a week where you don't consume any digital entertainment at all: no TV, no games, no listening to music, no internet. Allow yourself only the mental recre-

ation that a monk would have: some reading, perhaps playing or singing a little music, maybe a little intelligent conversation.

This weekly "day of silence" is a powerful practice. It may be very difficult to stick to at first, like going cold turkey. If you find it hard, try a slightly shorter period of digital fasting, such as between sunrise and sunset. Work up to a full day gradually.

Read books. Again, start slow, if you're not used to doing a lot of reading. Try some long-form magazine articles or essays. It doesn't really matter *what* you read, especially at first: the aim is simply to get your brain used to the reading process again, after years or decades of neglect. Thrillers are fine; you can always work your way up to more highbrow stuff later if you want to. For now, just enjoy the experience of losing yourself in a book again.

Enjoy a concert at home

Another thing we seem to do less and less these days is listen to music. That is to say, actually *listen* to music, rather than simply experiencing it as a constant, low-level background to whatever else we're doing.

Don't get me wrong, background music is pleasant, and it can help us concentrate on cognitive work such as writing, by excluding other, more distracting sounds. But music is not just an undemanding sort of aural wallpaper. It can be something compelling, exciting, involving, and moving of itself, just like a great book or film.

Music has never been more easily available, yet somehow we've never paid less attention to it. But people still pay good money to go to concerts, even though they could listen to the same music at home for free, in greater comfort, and probably better audio quality. Why?

Well, quite apart from the thrill of seeing (and financially supporting) your favourite musical artist, attending a concert in person puts the music in the foreground, not the background. You're *there* to enjoy the music, not to dribble it absent-mindedly into your ears while you play video games or cook dinner.

Concerts are expensive, though, and your whole-hearted enjoyment of the music is often rather undermined by the presence of all those *other* people, many of whom don't seem to appreciate it as much as you do.

> *I know two kinds of audiences only—one coughing, and one not coughing.*
>
> —Artur Schnabel, "My Life and Music"

So why not enjoy a concert by yourself, in the comfort of your own home? Lower the lights, put the music on through your expensive and high-quality stereo system instead of your $9.99 Bluetooth headphones, and listen to the entire album in one sitting, with your full and undivided attention. When's the last time you did that?

I guarantee you that when you try this "home concert" idea, even with recordings you've heard hundreds of times, you'll hear something new in the music and the performance that you never heard before.

It's amazing what a difference attention makes. Your attention is so valuable, in fact, it's no wonder that everybody is trying so hard to steal it. Speaking of which...

The fresh horrors device

Being connected is great, but it's also good to take a little internet break every now and then. As we've seen in previous chapters, "detox" is not a thing that we need to do, or that would be helpful (nutritionally speaking, if you're consuming *toxins*, you're in real trouble: see a doctor, or your local poison control centre).

A brief digital detox, though, does no one any harm, and can be an illuminating experience. When you go back online after your weekly day of silence, for example, you might be surprised at the rush of adrenalin that hits your veins almost immediately.

> **wakes up and looks at phone**
>
> *ah let's see what fresh horrors await me on the fresh horrors device*
>
> —Miss O'Kistic

Social media in particular is optimised—if that's the word—to stimulate your hormones and neurotransmitters as much as possible, making you excited, fearful, edgy, and angry. All algorithms prioritise content that triggers an emotional reaction, usually not a pleasant one. Therefore, the mere fact that you're *seeing* something online means it's already won a competition to increase your stress levels.

Cutting the cord

When large doses of any drug are taken regularly over a period, the body gets habituated to them, its tolerance grows, and we stop noticing how much we're being overstimulated. Weaning yourself off this digital IV of jitter juice isn't easy, but you have to start somewhere.

To me, and perhaps to anyone else over the age of twenty or so, it's astounding how quickly we all got used to being plugged in to the internet 24 hours a day. I'm not saying the global digital society doesn't have its benefits, of course, but surely we can enjoy many of those benefits without necessarily having to also sacrifice our mental health and peace of mind—can't we?

> *So much of digital public life is an unending supply of micro dramas about somebody somewhere in our country of 340 million people who did something that can*

> *fuel an outrage cycle, only to be pushed aside by the next. It doesn't add up to anything and leaves behind only a distorted sense of human nature and affairs.*
>
> —Jonathan Haidt, "End the Phone-Based Childhood Now"

So, here is the news you actually *need* to know: you don't have to live your life as a dopamine fiend, enslaved by algorithms and constantly pecking the Skinner box in your pocket for microdoses of mental meth. This isn't what we signed up for.

People are always talking about how they want to "take back control". Fine. Why don't we start right here?

10. Silence

> *Silence is not the absence of anything, but the presence of everything.*
>
> —Gordon Hempton, "One Square Inch of Silence"

As we've seen, it's not difficult to make a little silence for yourself if you want to: it's just that the world seems determined to keep breaking that silence.

Silence considered harmful

Silence, in general, seems to worry people a great deal: their first reaction to it is usually to try to dispel it by opening their mouths.

> *One of the things Ford Prefect had always found hardest to understand about humans was their habit of continually stating and repeating the very very obvious, as in "It's a nice day," or "You're very tall", or "Oh dear you seem to have fallen down a thirty-foot well, are you alright?"*
>
> *At first Ford had formed a theory to account for this strange behaviour. If human beings don't keep exercising their lips, he thought, their mouths probably seize up. After a few months' consideration and observation he abandoned this theory in favour of a new one. If they don't keep on exercising their lips, he thought, their brains start working.*
>
> —Douglas Adams, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"

All silence is waiting to be broken

The writer Sara Maitland, after a noisy childhood and a busy adulthood as a wife, mother, and journalist, decided to seek out a life of solitude and silence in a remote house on the Scottish moors. Predictably, her friends were very worried by this decision: it's clear that they thought Maitland was off her head, and did their best to dissuade her from such a ridiculous choice of lifestyle.

"Silence is the place of death, of nothingness... All silence is waiting to be broken," a friend wrote to her plaintively. Maitland knew better, and wrote a lyrical account of her journey to self-discovery and spiritual fulfilment:

> *It is quite hard to remember which came first—the freedom of solitude or the energy of silence. I became less driven, more reflective and great deal less frenetic. And into that space flowed silence: I would go out into the garden at night or in the early morning and just look and listen. For the first time in my life I noticed the gradation of colours before sunrise—from indigo through apricot to a lapidary blueness.*
>
> —Sara Maitland, "A Book of Silence"

The great hermit

It's telling that, in order to find silence, Maitland had to get well away from her fellow human beings. As she found out, solitude and silence go together: they can both be scary in prospect, but rewarding in actuality. Others have found the same.

> *I fell into solitude gladly. Alone, I found it was safe to be fully present. I began experiencing life with such intensity that it was as if I was tripping. I held my hand out in hailstorms until it bruised. I gazed at lambs in the field. I stayed up listening to the wind keening through the telephone wires. I absorbed. Moments of sadness and beauty were mine alone, shared with no one.*
>
> *The possibility of a quiet life, a new life in which I could exist without misery, opened up before me like a revelation. Solitude ran through me like an edifying fire.*
>
> —Jade Angeles Fitton, "Hermit: A Memoir of Finding Freedom in a Wild Place"

On the other hand, you don't *have* to move to a remote island, or the top of a lonely peak, to find silence for yourself. It's possible to be silent anywhere, even in the middle of a bustling city: it's just a little more difficult. As an ancient Chinese saying puts it, "The small hermit lives on a mountain. The great hermit lives in a town."

We like to chit-chat

Where is all this noise coming from? We're a talkative species, as Ford Prefect observed, and that's not necessarily a bad thing in itself. Conversation can be one of the great joys of life, and most of us find it very hard to go without it for any length of time.

> CHIEF WIGGUM: *You have the right to remain silent… but I hope you don't. It's a long way to jail, and I like to chit-chat.*
>
> —The Simpsons, "Funeral for a Fiend"

One thing we know about monks, though, is that they often observe a vow of silence. While most denominations of monks don't abstain from speech completely, it's often restricted to certain times and places. For example, monks may need to speak briefly to one another in order to do their work, or carry out the business of the monastery, but *idle* chatter, of the "How 'bout that local sportsball team?" variety, is not encouraged.

Esteem for silence

Fifteen centuries ago, Benedict advised his monks to zip their lips:

> *Let us follow the Prophet's counsel: "I said, I have resolved to keep watch over my ways that I may never sin with my tongue. I was silent and was humbled, and I refrained even from good words." Here the Prophet indicates that there are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence.*
>
> —Benedict of Nursia, "The Rule"

And he has a point. While silence tends to make us nervous in unfamiliar company, it can be comforting and even pleasurable with close friends, or a partner. Indeed, silence is a form of intimacy: when two people truly understand one another, there's very little that *needs* to be said.

One-way conversations

We also enjoy talking with those close to us, of course, and sometimes the more frivolous the conversation, the more fun it can be—provided it really is a conversation, not a monologue.

Often, though, people seem to be talking *at* us rather than with us, and that's just irritating. No one likes to feel as though they're merely a sounding board for whatever random ideas happen to be bouncing around inside someone's careenium.

> NILES: *You know what I think about pop psychiatry.*
>
> FRASIER: *Yes. I know what you think about everything. When was the last time you had an unexpressed thought?*
>
> NILES: *I'm having one now.*
>
> —"Frasier"

You don't need to say everything that's on your mind. Sometimes your friend knows perfectly well what you're thinking, so why say it?

In any kind of conversation, it's worth running a thought through a few little filters before actually connecting it to your mouth:

- "Do *I* need to say this?" Maybe not. If the idea is obviously right, then you won't impress anyone by saying it. If it's obviously wrong, then you'll just sound dumb. Even if this needs to be said, maybe it's better to let someone else say it.
- "Do I *need* to say this?" What's your desired outcome here? Would sharing this thought really benefit you in some way, or is it just bubbling irresistibly towards your lips? The cleverer the *bon mot* that occurs to you, the less likely it is that voicing it would be a good idea.
- "Do I need to *say* this?" Talk is cheap: often it's better to just get on and do the thing, rather than tell people about it. And sometimes your silence says more than your words ever could.
- "Do I need to say *this*?" Maybe something needs to be said, and maybe by you, but is this actually the right way to say it? Or the right time, or the right situation? A little reflection might help you shape what you want to say into a kinder, more considered, or more effective form of words.

Wouldn't it be nice to have people say about you, "I wish he'd talk more"? Most of us have exactly the opposite wish about the people we know. Someone who talks less than we'd like is still a pleasure to be around: we can always supply the missing words ourselves. Someone who talks too much, though, is excruciatingly poor company.

When people are being irritating, or offensive, or verbose, and we'd rather they stopped talking, it's generally because they neglected to run their thoughts through one or more of these filters. We needn't make the same mistake.

> *Sometimes silence is the best thing to say.*
>
> —Frank Herbert, "Chapterhouse: Dune"

An inviting silence

When you *want* someone to talk, though, silence on your part is often the best way to encourage it. When a friend is upset, and finding it difficult to say what's on her mind, badgering her with questions may not help. Instead, we can simply be with her in silence for a while, and this may give her the opportunity to get things straight in her mind.

We've all had the experience of trying to talk to someone who's a bad listener, and it's no fun. Bad listeners keep interrupting, trying to take control of the conversation, arguing, telling us our feelings are somehow invalid: "You're worrying about nothing!". Or they give us something we're not asking for: "Ah, I see you're trying to vent. May I offer you some annoyingly pragmatic solutions?"

At worst they don't hear what we say at all, taking it merely as a cue to make the conversation all about them ("You think that's bad? Wait till you hear what happened to *me* at work today!")

Being a good listener, then, is often simply a matter of keeping quiet and restraining our natural impulse to respond. Absolute silence isn't necessary: we can encourage the speaker with non-verbal signals like nodding, making eye contact, and the little "mm-hm" noises that mean "I'm hearing you, tell me more".

And it's fine to occasionally reflect what they've just said, in our own words, to confirm that we're understanding it correctly. "It sounds like that was a very scary experience for you." When we get this right, the person will say something like "Exactly", and then elaborate, or if we get it wrong they'll correct us, but either way they can be reassured that we're paying attention.

But in any meaningful conversation, just as when we're at the piano, we need to leave some space between the notes, so that the music can happen.

> *In movies, therapist silences have become a cliché, but it's only in silence that people can truly hear themselves think. Talking can keep people in their heads and safely away from their emotions. Being silent is like emptying the trash. When you stop tossing junk into the void—words, words, and more words—something important rises to the surface.*
>
> —Lori Gottlieb, "Maybe You Should Talk To Someone"

Trapping a mole

Silence can be a powerful tool for extracting information from people who don't necessarily want to reveal it, too. Just watch any movie where the detectives are interviewing a suspect. Instead of berating them with questions, the canny cop will keep quiet and let the silence grow until it fills the room. Pretty soon the suspect breaks down and confesses—if not to this particular crime, then to some other crimes. Anything to break that awful silence.

Similarly, when you want someone to tell you something, and they don't particularly want to tell it to you, a judicious use of silence can work wonders. Watch Alec Guinness as George Smiley in the classic BBC drama *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*; there's a Russian mole right at the top of the British Secret Service, and it's Smiley's job to flush him out. Cue some intense and powerful conversation scenes, long on meaningful silences.

They don't make TV like they used to, and this is a good example, by the way: a well-crafted show doesn't need car chases and superhero battles to grab and hold the audience's attention. It's not quite slow TV, exactly, but it's probably the most gripping seven hours of people talking quietly in rooms that you'll have seen in a while.

As Smiley tracks the mole, his mild-mannered interview technique is a masterclass in

silence: he drops a seemingly simple question into the conversation and waits for the ripples to slowly spread out. Occasionally he polishes his spectacles on the end of his tie, or just looks a bit tired.

Rarely has the simple act of not saying anything been so psychologically devastating: no spoilers, but the mole's most dangerous enemy is this quiet man in a beige raincoat.

You do not have to say anything

And, of course, when you're the one being interrogated, silence can be a defensive weapon too. When you're not sure what to say, say nothing. It automatically makes you seem wise and thoughtful (a trick I've used many times as a consultant, and as a teacher, but don't tell anyone). If you don't like the question, just don't answer it.

Most of us are well aware, for example, that we should never talk to the police, and with good reason. Anything you say may be given in evidence, and it likely won't be to your advantage. So when you find yourself in a tricky situation, say as little as possible; ideally, nothing at all.

> *Poirot shook a finger at her. "It shows you, Madame, the dangers of conversation. It is a profound belief of mine that if you can induce a person to talk to you for long enough, on any subject whatever, sooner or later they will give themselves away."*
>
> —Agatha Christie, "After the Funeral"

The silence in your head

Conversation can also be a joy, of course, when it's not between detective and suspect. When we meet with friends or family just for the pleasure of being with them, a lively conversation is always part of the fun. It would be strange to keep silent in this situation, in the literal sense of not speaking, but we can use the gentle power of silence in a slightly different way.

Being fully present

For example, we can be completely present for the conversation, which means we're not also checking our phones, watching football on a TV in the background, or looking over our friend's shoulder to see if someone more interesting has arrived yet. It's a very frustrating experience trying to have a real conversation with someone whose gaze is fixed on their phone:

> ATTORNEY: *Mr Zuckerberg, do I have your full attention?*

> ZUCKERBERG: *You have **part** of my attention. You have the minimum amount.*
>
> —"The Social Network"

Whether the unseen interloper in the conversation is Facebook or something else, we definitely get the feeling that our second-screening friend doesn't find us exactly riveting. That may well be the case, of course, but if friendship means anything, it means listening to what our friends have to say even when it's not particularly interesting.

So there's a big difference between being silent because we're listening with rapt attention, and being silent because we're doomscrolling under the table. Another way to bring the right kind of silence to a social conversation is to let the speaker speak, without interrupting, heckling, grimacing, beating them to the punchline, or trying to top their story.

The tyranny of opinions

It's also not necessary to give our own opinions about what the speaker has just said, whether we agree with them or not. If we *do* happen to disagree, it's not necessary to immediately bring this up and start a debate, especially when the subject is an emotive one.

It's fine for someone to have a different opinion to us. Their head, their rules. Some people seem to feel deeply affronted when we don't share their views, and insist on lecturing us about why we should. This is boring at best, and patronising at worst. The underlying message is "You only feel that way because you haven't really thought about it like I have. Here's what you've failed to consider..."

Sometimes the motivation is simply to make themselves feel and sound smarter than us, and they want to play rhetorical games. We don't have to participate in any game we don't want to play, and a dignified silence can sometimes be a more effective riposte than words. For our part, of course, we shouldn't try to play such games with anyone, but especially not our friends, at least if we want to keep them.

In fact, you're not obliged to *have* an opinion on anything. Once you do, it becomes a burden: you feel you have to defend it, and it has to be dragged out and exhibited any time the topic is under discussion. The game of opinion tennis ("Is!" "Isn't!") is exhausting, and not particularly good for your health.

Cultivate not knowing

I wish we could normalise saying "I don't have an opinion on that," but this damaging admission will usually earn you some very suspicious looks. It's almost a social law that we must have an opinion on everything; having no opinion sometimes seems like a worse crime than having the *wrong* opinion. How tiresome!

A wise person knows when she doesn't know enough about something to have a useful opinion about it, and she also doesn't waste any of her precious brainpower opining

about things she's not directly concerned with. In fact, she knows that the most sensible and logical position for all of us to take on almost any issue is simply "I don't know."

> *One day some old men came to see Abba Anthony. In the midst of them was Abba Joseph. Wanting to test them, the old man suggested a text from the Scriptures, and, beginning with the youngest, he asked them what it meant. Each gave his opinion as he was able. But to each one the old man said, 'You have not understood it.' Last of all he said to Abba Joseph, 'How would you explain this saying?' And he replied, 'I do not know.' Then Abba Anthony said, 'Indeed Abba Joseph has found the way, for he has said: "I do not know." '*
>
> —"Sayings of the Desert Fathers"

Being boring

The other kind of argumentative blowhard is the one who deeply cares about the issue, and can't rest until they've convinced us to share their position on it. But we already know they won't, so the conversation is a waste of time for both of us. Has anyone actually changed their mind on anything as a result of being lectured by a pub bore? It seems unlikely.

At a fundamental level, we should be very suspicious of the idea that there's just one correct view on anything. There *are* empirically true facts, of course: reality, as Philip K. Dick observed, is that which doesn't go away when you stop believing in it. When you kick a rock, it hurts your foot, whether or not you find that notion appealing. You're free to believe you can fly, but believing doesn't make it so, as you'll soon discover when you jump off a roof.

Everything else, though, is arguable, and boy, do people like to argue about it. Unfortunately, it's not the kind of argument that can actually *settle* the question, so the arguments will never end. Enjoy taking part in them, by all means, but don't fall into the trap of thinking that there's a right answer, that you know what it is, and that you could convince everybody else to agree with you if only those idiots would just *listen*.

When someone like this has you in their sights, it's pointless to try to win the argument, or even to engage with it at all. But keeping silent may not be enough to evade it: the speaker may mistake our silence for attentiveness. Perhaps withdrawing not only our speech but our very presence may be the only way to escape the passionate proselytiser.

Battling internet goons

Needless to say, if we find people gradually edging away from *us* at parties, we should recognise that we ourselves have become the bore, and that it's time to find something more congenial to talk about. Or, perhaps, let someone else talk for a while.

Social media and other online forums can sometimes be like a giant party that you can't escape, with an infinite number of bores who insist on trying to correct your wrong views about everything. It's impossible to win an argument with them. Like the Terminator, they can't be bargained with, they can't be reasoned with, they don't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And they absolutely will not stop, ever. Apparently they don't have much else to do with their time, which seems a shame.

If you ever do manage to defeat one of these online goons, another one—or more–will instantly pop up to take their place. The internet can stay irrational longer than you can stay sane.

You don't need to argue with people online (or anywhere else). You don't need to tell people your opinions about everything. You don't need to have a social media "presence". In fact, perhaps the best thing to have is a social media *absence*. Just quit it, enjoy the silence, and use the time you save to do something else—or, even better, to do nothing.

Some people enjoy being a keyboard warrior, of course, and it often *feels* like fun at the time, but it really isn't. It's an ever-flowing stream of stress and conflict that our poor pituitary glands never evolved to handle, and if you let it, it will seriously damage your mental health. Don't feed the trolls, and, needless to say, don't *be* one yourself.

The space between the notes

Another person to avoid being if possible is the Great Recommender: he's always telling us what book we should read, movie we should watch, or music we should listen to. No doubt he *means* well—he just wants us to have an enjoyable experience, and he has suggestions—but somehow, we find his relentless mavening just a little irritating.

I saw this and thought of you

I'm sure we've all done this at some point: read an article we enjoyed, or saw a funny tweet, and thought to ourselves, "X would love this! I'll send it to her." Practically every website or app has some kind of "share" button for exactly this purpose. It's almost too easy to click it. Chat groups and social media are full of shared links, reposts, or comments saying "Have you seen this?"

I used to be a serial offender: I'd send X links all the time that I just *knew* she'd love. But then I'd ask her about it later, and she'd say, with a marked lack of enthusiasm, "Oh, yeah, I'll read that at some point. Thanks."

How ungrateful! I can't help feeling that she should have leaped into action right away, read the piece, thought about it, and sent me a brief thank-you note for taking the trouble. Shouldn't she be pleased that I'm thinking of her, and scouring the internet for stuff that'll tickle her fancy?

The burden of recommendations

The thing is, though, we all have enough to read already. What I was actually doing, every time I sent her an interesting link, was polluting her overloaded inbox with *extra work*. Now she has to look at the thing and have an opinion about it, and if you have a dozen other friends all doing the same thing a dozen times a day, being recommended stuff basically becomes the equivalent of a full-time job.

There's also a rather patronising subtext that says "My taste is superior to yours, so don't bother trying to find things for yourself: just follow my recommendations and you'll do fine." Thanks a lot, buddy! Appreciate the compliment.

The recommender thinks they're acting selflessly, but it's really about stroking their own ego. Woe betide you if you don't express sufficient enthusiasm for the event or product they've heartily endorsed: the recommender will take it as a personal slight.

> *Today's conversations about television are all an exhausting barrage of recommendations. The only way to endure it is to return fire: find something you've seen, the more obscure the better, and recommend it forcefully back. "Oh, you really must give it a try! And I am going to keep talking about it until you capitulate and promise that you will!"*
>
> —David Mitchell, "I'm lost in the foothills of a mountain of TV"

We don't need people to recommend stuff to us, we don't need extra things to read or watch, and, be assured, if we ever do want recommendations, we'll ask for them.

In turn, you can create an enjoyable silence for your friends by not pressuring them or trying to mould their tastes more closely to your own. You don't need to be a thought leader, and no one wants to be your follower.

Small talk, big silence

Speech can be a valuable social lubricant at times, but small talk for its own sake usually feels forced. Particularly irritating is the person who appears to have been on some kind of "making conversation" training course, and keeps up a rapid fire of questions ("What do you do? How long have you been doing that? Do you enjoy it? What are your hobbies?") without seeming to be much interested in your answers.

If you're not a natural mingler, a good way to strike up a conversation with a stranger is simply to ask some opening question ("How do you like the food / the drink / the music / the local sportsball team?"), and then let them answer at whatever length they want to.

If they want to continue the conversation, *they* will think of something to ask *you* in return. If they don't, they won't. Don't pepper them with questions; this tends to make them feel like a murder suspect.

The better we know someone, the easier it is to be comfortably silent with them. The

monks of the Grande Chartreuse don't feel the need to acknowledge one another as they move in and out of rooms and corridors, or to make polite conversation. In fact, their mutual politeness consists in *not* conversing, which is surely the best kind of all.

Asking nothing, expecting nothing

Hell is other people, the saying goes, but that's not quite right. Hell is other people who just *won't shut up*.

> *I have so many people in my life demanding things from me: pages, rewrites, interviews, blurbs, money, mowed lawns, answers, food, water.*
>
> *Mark is one of the few who requires only my presence—and my occasional thoughts about food. If he's taught me anything, it's that doing nothing, asking nothing, expecting nothing, is a precious skill to be mastered in a life well lived.*
>
> —Harrison Scott Key, "Fast Times on America's Slowest Train"

We should all be so lucky as to have a friend with whom we can spend time in easy silence, asking nothing of one another except to be there. Not all communication needs words, and sometimes we say more by saying less.

By leaving space between the notes, we give ourselves—and others—a chance to breathe, to think, and to listen. We can take a useful lesson from the monks by cultivating a little more silence in our minds, in our lives, and in our friendships. If we stop exercising our lips quite so much, our brains might just start working.

11. Meaning

> *My husband, T.S. Eliot, loved to recount how late one evening he stopped a taxi. As he got in, the driver said: "You're T.S. Eliot." When asked how he knew, he replied: "Ah, I've got an eye for a celebrity. Only the other evening I picked up Bertrand Russell, and I said to him: 'Well, Lord Russell, what's it all about,' and, do you know, he couldn't tell me."*
>
> —Valerie Eliot, letter to the *Times*, February 10th, 1970

I can't either, of course, and one rather sympathises with Russell, who probably just wanted to get home after a long day. But the taxi driver's question seems a legitimate one all the same. As we approach the end of this book, I'd like to unpack it with you a little, and talk about some possible ways we might start to answer it.

Choose your own adventure

One of the problems with a question along the lines of "What's it all about?" is that much depends on precisely how you phrase the question, as Douglas Adams points out with his usual mordant satire.

When the mighty computer Deep Thought is asked to tackle the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything, after a suitable period of contemplation, it confidently announces that the answer is in fact… forty-two.

The big questions

> *"Forty-two!" yelled Loonquawl. "Is that all you've got to show for seven and a half million years' work?"*
>
> *"I checked it very thoroughly," said the computer, "and that quite definitely is the answer. I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."*
>
> *"But it was the Great Question! The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe and Everything!" howled Loonquawl.*
>
> *"Yes," said Deep Thought with the air of one who suffers fools gladly, "but what actually **is** it?"*

> *A slow stupefied silence crept over the men as they stared at the computer and then at each other.*
>
> *"Well, you know, it's just Everything... Everything." offered Phouchg weakly.*
>
> *"Exactly!" said Deep Thought. "So once you do know what the question actually is, you'll know what the answer means."*
>
> —Douglas Adams, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"

Another popular, though no more precise, way to formulate the question is something like "What's the meaning of life?". But, again, what kind of answer would make sense? I'm not sure. It's like asking "Why are we here?"

Not all "why?" questions have answers, which is something that most of us learn as children, but it doesn't always stop us asking them. They're also ambiguous: "Why is the Earth round?" is a question about cause and effect, whereas "Why do you ask?" is a question about intention and purpose.

Why we're here

The first way to answer the "why we're here" question, then, would be in terms of cause and effect: the physicist's approach.

If you take a big ball of energy and let it cool down, sooner or later you get a warm plasma of electrons and protons. A bit later still, the plasma condenses out into atoms, mostly hydrogen and helium. These attract each other, forming clumps, which eventually get big and dense enough to trigger nuclear fusion, creating stars, which eventually form heavier elements such as carbon and oxygen.

Sooner or later, if you let these elements swill around enough in a primordial soup, they'll spontaneously form into molecules, and, given enough time, the molecules will randomly hit on a form that can replicate itself. A few billion years after *that*, the replicating molecules will have evolved fairly sophisticated survival machines to protect them, carry them around, and recombine them with one another. That would be you and I. Hello, fellow machine!

And that's why we're here. It happens to be true, to the best of our current knowledge, but many people don't find it an especially satisfying answer. They apparently want to ask the kind of "Why?" that's about intentions and purposes, but questions like that don't apply to inanimate things.

Things are the way they are, and that's that, says the physicist. There's no particular purpose or intention to the universe, it's just what happens more or less inevitably when you get enough energy together in one place.

It's also not building up to anything terribly significant. Eventually the heat engine will run down, the stars will go out one by one, and there'll be nothing left but a gradually cooling and expanding cloud of rarified gas.

Some people find this depressing, upsetting, or even frightening, but I've never been quite sure why. "What would you *prefer*, then?" I ask them. And do you know, they can't tell me.

A sense of purpose

I get the impression, though, that some people would like it if the universe had been put together with some specific purpose in mind that we were supposed to fulfil. Maybe it was, but if so, its creator seems to have a strange sense of humour, since he, she, or it neglected to leave us a note saying what it *is* that they want us to do.

It would be easy to do this, by the way, and it doesn't even need to be written in thirty-foot-high letters of fire on a mountainside. The simplest way to leave us a message would be to encode it in the digits of π, like the benevolent super-aliens in Carl Sagan's novel *Contact*. Perhaps one day we'll find it; it would be nice if it were something like "Be excellent to one another".

(Of course, this message *is* encoded in the digits of π, along with every other possible message, including the complete text of the Bible and, for that matter, of *Mein Kampf*. The trick is knowing which of the infinite number of messages is the authentic one from the deity.)

Alternatively, we might be living in a simulated universe, running inside some advanced computer system built by aliens, or even by humans. There are some statistical arguments that suggest this scenario is not only possible, but likely. It's fun to speculate about, but even if it's true, would it really make any difference to the way we live our lives? I suspect not.

Absent evidence to the contrary, though, I suggest things are just what they seem, and there's no built-in meaning or purpose to our existence. In that case, it's up to each of us to find our *own* purpose, and to fulfil it. That doesn't actually sound too bad, does it?

A legacy in the sand

So what would that look like? I don't think it's necessarily something that we should do, make, or achieve, in the goal-seeking sense. Some people feel, for example, that their life will have been a waste of time if they don't leave some significant impact on the world: some enduring legacy.

That sounds rather arrogant to me, too reminiscent of those bygone kings who spent vast amounts of their subjects' blood and treasure to build enormous monuments to themselves:

> *And on the pedestal, these words appear:*
> *My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;*
> *Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!*
> *Nothing beside remains…*

—Percy Shelley, "Ozymandias"

The world is too big for us to make more than a fleeting mark on it, as our childhood sandcastles are washed away by the tide. And who needs to make a mark, anyway? Are we so insecure that we need to feel everybody will remember who we were for centuries after our deaths? The trouble is that people are often remembered as much for the wrong reasons as for the right ones: most of the names we can recall from history are, one way or the other, those of mass murderers.

Maybe whatever the purpose of your life is, you're already fulfilling it, just by doing what you do. Isn't that an interesting thought? You are necessary to the overall plan of things; otherwise, you wouldn't exist. You're here in order to be *you*, and so long as you remember to do just that, you can consider your life a success. Congratulations!

The main character

Worrying about the legacy of our lives, by doing the equivalent of trying to build huge statues, is missing the point. Fundamentally, it's not *about* us. That's just falling back into the old fallacy of seeing ourselves as separate beings, cut off from everything and everyone else.

LIZ: *I'm sorry you got caught up in another one of Liz Lemon's adventures.*

JACK: ***My*** *adventures. I am the protagonist!*

—"30 Rock"

Everyone is the hero of their own story, but the thing about all stories is that they come to an end. Just as with the fate of the universe as a whole, the ending of their own story is something that most people find very difficult to come to terms with.

They think it's all over

For some, the fact of mortality is frightening and depressing, and they don't see the point of doing *anything* if they know they're just going to die eventually. Well, maybe there is no point, in some sense, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't enjoy ourselves all the same.

Vacation anxiety

It may help to think of life as being like a delightful vacation, somewhere sunny and carefree. You know how it is: for the first week you're enjoying yourself so much, you can't even conceive of the trip coming to an end. But at the start of the second week

the gloom starts to descend, and you're already feeling stressed at the thought of being back at work.

On your last evening, though, having been through the usual stages of denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, you finally reach acceptance. "Oh well," you say to yourself, "this is our last night of vacation. We'll be back home tomorrow, so let's just relax, enjoy ourselves, and live completely in the moment."

And if we're sensible, we'll spend *every* day of the vacation doing just that. How silly it would be to instead mope alone in our hotel rooms, thinking "What's the point of going anywhere or doing anything? It'll all be over in a week or two." And we'd be very sad when we got back, to think of the time we wasted when we could have been having fun.

Well, here we are—on vacation, as it were. Are we going to stay in the hotel with the blinds drawn, paralysed by gloom about the transience of it all, or are we going to hit the beach? It's up to us. This is all the time we'll ever have, so don't waste it, but don't hoard it either. Instead, let's spend it wisely.

Pay now, live later

Many people, sadly enough, spend most of their lives doing things they don't enjoy, in the hope of some big payoff at a future date. We're pre-programmed with the idea that we should be constantly working and striving, chasing some reward that's always just a little way off.

"This place is nice, but what would we really do if we lived here? Lie around and be happy all the time?"

The New Yorker, March 11th, 2024

The plan seems to be to sacrifice all our free time *now*, so we can work hard and get rich, so that we can retire and then we'll have nothing *but* free time. Actually, that sounds awful, don't you think? Permanent, enforced leisure is not really what we want, because it's no fun at all.

Why wait till you retire to start really living your life? Why not *pre-tire*, and start living it now? What's the point of slaving away to earn money that you don't have time to spend?

Going nowhere

Does it really matter if we don't "achieve" anything in a worldly sense, such as wealth, status, fame, or possessions? Those things are never as satisfying in actuality as they are in imagination.

The fact is, you can't take it with you. One of these days will be your last, and on that day everything you've piled up will just evaporate, like leprechaun gold. It's time to stop chasing so hard after meaning, and recognise that everything we need to have a good life is right here. And it has been all along.

> *Most of us are always rushing. We try so hard to find the answer, and we seldom have the patience to wait for it. You are never going to get anywhere anyway. Can you accept that? Can you really accept that? The moment you do, BOOM! Life opens up.*
>
> *It's very ironic because if you're really in a rush to know what life is all about, then just do it and get it over with. You could be born, take the first breath, give one loud cry-AHHHHHH—and die. That's very efficient. That was really a success, wasn't it?*
>
> —Al Huang, "Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain"

Making it

A good question to ask yourself at various stages of your life is "Have I *made* it?" We probably all mean different things by that phrase, but the important thing is what *you* mean by it. So, have you made it yet? And if not, what would that look like? Is it a certain bank balance? A solid gold house? A fellowship of the Royal Society?

To me, "making it" means reaching the point where you no longer feel you have to strive quite so hard, and you can start to enjoy some of the fruits of what you've already achieved. For most of us, if we've reached a point where we can support ourselves and our loved ones, in reasonable comfort if not fabulous luxury, then we've made it. It's not that the game is over: it's just that its initial "frantic struggle" phase may be drawing to a close, and a new phase beginning.

Instead of constantly running at full speed just to stay in the same place, we can pause, take a breath or two, and look around to see how far we've come. There may still be

things we're unsatisfied with or unhappy about; in fact, that's very likely. The question now is whether those things are best addressed by further striving, or by readjusting our own ideas about what will really make us happy.

If you feel like you've made it, then you have. It doesn't matter what anybody else's ideas of success are: they don't apply to you. The world can be a pretty tough place, despite its beauty: if you've survived this far, then you're doing pretty well. Congratulations! You've made it. Relax a little. (If anyone disagrees, just print out this page and show it to them.)

So, if you don't need to amass great wealth, achieve fame and influence, or build huge statues to yourself, in order to make your life a success, what *should* you do? That's up to you, but I have a few suggestions.

An unexpected gift

Imagine you wake up one morning and you find your bedroom stacked high with gifts, like every Christmas and birthday come at once. It's very mysterious. Who could have brought you all this stuff? You weren't expecting it, you didn't ask for it, but here it is. What a strange occurrence!

Well, that's basically the situation we're in. We find ourselves in this incredible universe, full of beauty and richness and diversity. We have a vast planet to enjoy, fully equipped with oceans, mountains, forests, and millions of species of fascinating plants and animals.

Looking further afield, we find other worlds to explore, and the sky is filled with uncountable stars, each surrounded by yet more worlds, and beyond those, millions of galaxies like our own, each with a hundred billion more solar systems. The scale of the cosmos is dizzying.

And it's all ours. By "ours", of course, I mean intelligent beings, inhabitants of the universe, of which great family our own species may be just the smallest and most obscure branch. But this amazing universe is the greatest free gift anyone could possibly imagine.

Is this all there is?

So the first thing we should probably do is enjoy it. Go outside one night and look up at the stars. Really look. It's quite a sight, and it's one we may not be able to enjoy for very much longer.

> *Today, as light pollution envelops our planet, the stars are almost gone. Instead of thousands being visible on a dark night, in today's cities we see only a few dozen — and astronomers fear these will soon be vastly outnumbered by artificial satellites. Most people in the US and Europe can no longer see the Milky Way at all. It is a catastrophic erosion of natural heritage: the obliteration of our connection with*

> *our galaxy and the wider universe. There has been no major outcry. Most people shrug their shoulders, glued to their phones, unconcerned by the loss of a view treated as fundamental by every other human culture in history.*
>
> —Jo Marchant, "The Human Cosmos"

Humans being what they are, though, some people aren't satisfied with even this cosmic generosity. "Is this all there is?" they ask. How ungrateful! Isn't this enough at least to be going on with?

We know what they mean, of course. They want there to be other exciting things, too: ghosts, magic, superstitions, gods, telepathy, spoon-bending, and so on. Sure, that would be fun, but it just turns out that (as far as we know) those things don't exist. We can still enjoy speculating about what it would be like if they *were* real.

On the other hand, though, if you're looking for things that inspire awe and wonder, but also actually exist, there are plenty of those. Black holes, gas planets, neutron stars, gravity waves, dark matter, gamma-ray bursts, quasars, and millions of unimaginably alien worlds: these are a few of the things we've found in the sky *so far*. And we've really only just started looking.

The real world is full of amazing things and thrilling mysteries to be solved, patiently waiting for our wits to grow sharper. If this is all there is, I don't know about you, but I'll take it!

How to love the sky

Sometimes, though, we can feel a little oppressed by the sheer beauty of Nature, as strange as that may seem. It's as if we know we *should* be having a transcendent experience, but instead we're worrying about whether or not we're really enjoying it enough.

This is another symptom of the checklist syndrome that comes with our relentless social efficiency-programming. Seen an incredible sunset? Quick, Instagram it, so everybody knows you're having a better time than they are.

No spectacular natural viewpoint is allowed to be without a helpful sign saying "YOU MAY PHOTOGRAPH FROM HERE." Thanks very much.

The result is that we're taken completely out of the moment:

> *Years ago, when I would see a sky filled with stars, my mind would say 'Wow, I should really dig this sky!' I was actually pressuring myself to love the sky. Later, as my mind became quieter, I could stand out there and merge with the beauty.*
>
> —Kenny Werner, "Effortless Mastery: Liberating the Master Musician Within"

What a wonderful world

There are plenty of beautiful things to see down here on Earth too. It's okay to just enjoy seeing them, in a gentle way, without feeling you have to turn it into work, ticking sights off your list like a high-efficiency tourist grimly determined to see everything worthwhile in Paris in sixty minutes or less.

Patterns and secrets

Next time you find yourself getting tangled up in evaluating your own enjoyment of something, just stop and take a breath. Put your mind on pause and let yourself be filled up by pure sensation.

It doesn't have to be an Instagrammable sunset, or a sky full of galaxies: you might just be transfixed by the sight of a caterpillar on a leaf, or a still, reflecting pond, or the grain in a rock by the side of the path.

Everything is beautiful when you look at it the right way. The world is a book, if you know how to read it. All it takes is a little attention.

> *There are patterns and secrets throughout the world — the rings of trees, and tracks of animals, and the traces of water down the sides of a valley are as clear as any scripture.*
>
> —Deng Ming-Dao, "Everyday Tao"

And you don't have to be a Taoist or a Zen monk or any other kind of monk to understand these scriptures. You can be those things if you want, but it's not necessary. In the spirit of this book, you can be a *modern* monk just by giving yourself permission to look up from the screen every once in a while and see what's going on.

It's not about escaping the world to reach some higher plane of mystical contemplation. Quite the opposite. It's about jumping out of bed, opening your unexpected gifts, and taking your rightful place in the world at last, as an essential and indivisible part of it.

> *Far from offering a means to transcend the material world, the process of Zen practice deepens and opens the material world, revealing its inner richness. This is accomplished not by making the physical world symbolic nor by filling it up with explanations or complications, but simply by entering it wholeheartedly, on its own terms.*
>
> *When you do that, you see that the material world is not superficial or mundane. What is superficial and mundane is our habit of reducing it to a single dimension.*
>
> —Norman Fischer, "When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen"

The boy in the bubble

For some reason many people seem to be terribly afraid of Nature (meaning, presumably, the part of it that doesn't include themselves). They do everything they can to insulate themselves from having to experience it, huddling in concrete cities where every blade of grass or shy wildflower is ruthlessly exterminated as soon as it appears.

They live in sterile white boxes where the windows don't open and the temperature never fluctuates, and on the rare occasions when they willingly go outside, they take good care to wear headphones so they can't hear anything, and stare at their smartphones so they won't see anything. It seems a shame, doesn't it?

Ultimately, our increasingly desperate attempts to isolate ourselves from the rest of creation don't work. They can't work, because we *are* part of the world and the world is part of us, and the more we try to fight that, the more futile the effort proves. The moment we stop fighting, though, everything suddenly seems to fall into place.

> *To understand this moment I must receive the experience without resisting it or naming it, and the whole sense of conflict between "I" and the present reality vanishes.*
>
> *For most of us this conflict is ever gnawing within us because our lives are one long effort to resist the unknown, the real present in which we live, which is the unknown in the midst of coming into being.*
>
> *Living thus, we never really learn to live with it. At every moment we are cautious, hesitant, and on the defensive. And all to no avail, for life thrusts us into the unknown willy-nilly, and resistance is as futile and exasperating as trying to swim against a roaring torrent.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Wisdom of Insecurity"

Don't climb every mountain

It's time we stopped seeing everything around us as an obstacle to be swept away by the tide of progress, or even a challenge that needs to be conquered. There are some people who can't see a mountain without having to climb it. Why? Because it's there.

How arrogant and insecure! And how like a human to see something beautiful, and instinctively want to put our dirty great boots all over it. Most likely we'll plant a flag at the top, too.

The thing about high mountains, of course, is that you can see them from a long way away. They sit there in our peripheral vision, reminding us constantly that there's some part of Nature that remains undominated by us—a situation that cannot be allowed to stand.

Actually, there's a lot we can learn from mountains, if we can only refrain from climb-

ing them. They are remote and silent places that touch the clouds and the sky, yet remain firmly anchored to the earth, which makes them good places to build monasteries.

You can get high on mountains, as long as you're careful not to get above yourself. When you build your own personal, portable monastery, you might like to site it on one of the mountains of your mind. Just not right at the top.

> *There are mountains hidden in treasures. There are mountains hidden in swamps. There are mountains hidden in the sky. There are mountains hidden in mountains. There are mountains hidden in hiddenness. This is complete understanding.*
>
> —Dogen, "Shobo Genzo: Treasury of the True Dharma Eye"

For all mankind

The Moon is like this, too. Every night it hangs in the sky, beautiful, unspoiled, entire of itself. It is a mountain hidden in the sky, and it has its own mountains, hidden in hiddenness. For hundreds of thousands of years it must have been a deep personal affront to every human who saw it.

Finally, though, and with an incredible expenditure of time, money, and effort, a few years ago we were able to plant a flag there and put our dirty boots all over it. Thank goodness! Another box ticked, and we can all relax and move on.

Is it really such a blow to our pride to admit the existence of things greater than us? What if instead, we just let the mountains be? Do we need to scrawl our names on the Moon to make it ours? Must we tame every stream, plough every field, and cut down every wood?

The early white settlers of California certainly felt that way, for example, and they had a characteristic reaction to the extraordinary natural beauty they found spread out before them: "It'll have to go," they said.

> *The trees were so grand and venerable that they could not let them grow a hair breadth bigger, or live a moment longer to reproach themselves. They were so big that that they resolved they should never be bigger. They were so venerable that they cut them right down.*
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, journal entry

Needless to say, this was a considerable annoyance to the non-white people who'd been there for at least twenty thousand years before Europeans turned up. Apparently *they*

didn't see Nature as a threat to their human sovereignty, or even a resource to be ruthlessly extracted. It was just the place where they lived.

My family and other animals

We live there too, of course, so perhaps it's time to start thinking of the world *as* our home, a place we'd like to keep clean, tidy, and welcoming, instead of dumping our rubbish all over half of it and treating the other half as raw material to feed the ever-hungry furnaces of late-stage capitalism. Just a suggestion.

And we're not the only ones here: we share the planet, if "share" is the right word, with a vast range of other living creatures, which unfortunately we're doing our best to exterminate—not necessarily on purpose, and not because we don't like them. They're just in the way of progress, that's all.

The funny thing is that the other animals seem in most ways a lot better-adjusted to living here than we are. *They* don't seem to worry about the meaning of life, or whether they're sufficiently appreciating a sunset: they just get on with it, in the most spiritually perfect and harmonious way imaginable.

> *At times almost all of us envy the animals. They suffer and die, but they do not seem to make a "problem" of it. Their lives seem to have so few complications. They eat when they are hungry and sleep when they are tired, and instinct rather than anxiety seems to govern their few preparations for the future.*
>
> *As far as we can judge, every animal is so busy with what he is doing at the moment that it never enters his head to ask whether life has a meaning or a future. For the animal, happiness consists in enjoying life in the immediate present—not in the assurance that there is a whole future of joys ahead of him.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "The Wisdom of Insecurity"

Honestly, the best self-help advice I can give anyone suffering from stress, anxiety, or civilisational malaise is to sit down and watch an animal for an hour or two. They really have this stuff figured out. We could learn a thing or two from them.

> *A common response to all of nature is to assume that the bird itself is filled with some of the feelings of joy that its performance inspires. I don't believe that or, at least, I feel we can never know what it feels.*
>
> *Yet there is in its behaviour a kind of joy—or would we be better to call it a kind of love?—that is rooted in it being only and perfectly itself. It is our encounter with this absoluteness in the natural world that heals us but which, as a society, we have yet to value truly or find a means to harness fully.*
>
> —Mark Cocker, "Claxton: Field Notes from a Small Planet"

Living and dying

When Thoreau went to the woods, famously, it was because he wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and to see if he could not learn what it had to teach. There are still enough woods left for us to do the same, at least for now.

Spending time in Nature is a useful reminder that it's not all about us: we are not the protagonists, and the universe is not waiting for our instructions. On the other hand, we can't stand outside the universe, dispassionately observing it, like some alien simulation supervisors.

Nature also reminds us that nothing stands still. Everything is in flux. Change is the only constant, yet nothing ever really changes because everything moves in cycles and returns inevitably to its source, as rain returns to the sea. Living is dying, and vice versa. That's what makes this vacation so much fun.

> *When I give myself over to the contemplation of the realities of my aging and dying, I become used to them. I begin to see them differently. Little by little I come to see that I am living and dying all the time, changing all the time, and that this is what makes life possible and precious.*
>
> —Norman Fischer, "When You Greet Me I Bow: Notes and Reflections from a Life in Zen"

You yourself are not a static thing, frozen in time, but a continuous process of change, yet you can never change, because you already are everything. What a strange paradox! I wonder what Bertrand Russell would have made of it.

12. Life

> *Taoists know that life comes and goes. They deny none of their natural penchants, repress none of their desires, and never feel the spur of reputation. They saunter through life, gathering its pleasures as the whim moves them. Since they shun personal fame and gains, they are beyond care and fear. They climb the mountain of life, see the setting sun gild the sky, and announce triumphantly: "Take it easy."*
>
> —Qiguang Zhao, "Do Nothing & Do Everything: An Illustrated New Taoism"

Now that we know the meaning of life is "no meaning", that the question is its own answer, and that we go constantly round and round in order to get back to the place we started, we have achieved the goal of our inquiry, which was the discovery that there are no goals.

A few simple, but pragmatic questions remain, though. Knowing what we know, how should we live? What should we do? And how will we know if we're getting it right?

I don't have the answers (sorry, no refunds), but maybe I can suggest a few helpful ways of thinking about these questions. There are some ideas about how to live that not only chime with our common sense, but seem to work out well in practice, too. I offer them as experiments for you to try, and you can let me know how you get on.

The way of things

The first idea, which doesn't seem too controversial, is that things often seem to have a natural way that they want to go. If you want to get some water to flow downhill, for example, that's easily done: just stand back, don't interfere, and the result you want will happen by itself.

On the other hand, if you want the water to go *uphill*, that's a more difficult problem. You can arrange a system of pumps, pipes, and so on, but that costs money, takes time to set up, and requires constant maintenance to stop it breaking down. It's a very human folly to try to push water uphill, but maybe a wiser person would simply decide that the water's better off where it is.

"We can do this the hard way, or the easy way," as the bad guys say in action movies, and that applies here, too. Actually, there are usually lots of hard ways to do things, but only one or two easy ways. If you're doing something that seems really hard, perhaps a sensible conclusion would be that you're doing it the wrong way, and that you should try something different.

The Tao does not exist

The Chinese word for "way" is "tao", pronounced like "dow", and we've met the followers of the Tao before, in the first chapter. They are the merry monks who seem to be always smiling, having fun, and acting as though life is too important to be taken seriously.

Taoism isn't really a religion, though, because the Taoists don't *believe* in anything, as such. It's more that they take it as self-evident that you shouldn't try to push water uphill, so why would it need to be a matter of faith?

> *Since the Taoists make no claim that the Tao exists, it saves them a world of trouble in trying to prove that the Tao exists. This is really Chinese common sense at its highest!*
>
> —Raymond Smullyan, "The Tao is Silent"

Making perfect sense

Indeed, the philosophy of Taoism positively rejects the notions that most religions take for granted. Many Christians seem to believe that our very flesh is a sin, and that life is an extended test of our ability to refrain from doing anything enjoyable. Taoists, on the other hand, enjoy food, drink, sex, and other natural pleasures, because they *are* natural. Why would we be given body parts we're not supposed to use?

Buddhists believe that all is suffering, and that we live countless lives trying to escape it, mostly in vain, as though we were trapped on some giant hamster wheel of reincarnation. I think a Taoist would say that suffering comes from wanting what you don't have, and that it's better to enjoy what you *do* have, during the one brief life we seem to be allotted.

To follow the Tao, then, is to do what comes naturally. If you feel like taking all your clothes off and dancing in the rain, then do it! But don't get angry when your neighbours call the police, because that's a natural reaction, too.

You don't have to call it "Tao", if that term seems mystical or weird. You can just think of it as the way things go. It's hard to talk about such fundamental things without sounding pretentious, so maybe the best thing to do is not talk about them.

> MONK: *There's a Buddhist saying. "As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart, the wind cannot overturn a mountain."*
>
> HANK: *You're talking like a song from 'The Lion King'. Stop that! It makes no sense.*
>
> MONK: *Or does it make perfect sense?*
>
> —"King of the Hill"

Dancing in the rain

So the Tao is the way. We might easily misunderstand the word "way" here, though, as meaning something like "the path you should follow". But the thing about the Tao is that you can't *not* follow it!

Everything in the universe unfolds according to its nature, including our lives, and there's nothing we can do about that, any more than we can make water flow uphill without elaborate hydrodynamic interventions.

What you *can* do about the Tao, though, is not *fight* it. "Kick the world, break your foot," as the saying goes, and raging against the inevitable is just a waste of time and effort.

We all know people like that, though, don't we? They seem to live in a perpetual state of umbrage at the world because it's not sufficiently organised in their favour.

These are the people who drive over speed bumps without slowing down, then complain when their car's suspension collapses. "The speed bumps shouldn't *be* there!" Maybe, but we have to deal with the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.

In the water, they make a great fuss and a lot of splashing, battling upstream against the flow and getting nowhere. Swimming *with* the current, as an intelligent person would, is taken as a sign of weakness. "The current should be going the way *I* want to go!"

But the Taoist knows the water isn't going anywhere, if you take the long view. It flows to the sea, where it evaporates to become clouds, and falls again as rain on the mountain. Instead of fighting against the water, the follower of Tao is always *with* it: she watches the clouds, surfs the waves, and dances in the rain. That's what it means to go with the flow.

Winning without fighting

The Chinese, with their great common sense, have a name for this principle: *wu wei*. Literally, "not do", but we might say instead, "not forcing, not striving". Not fighting the current. More haste, less speed. Relaxing and letting things unfold naturally.

> *Thus wu-wei as "not forcing" is what we mean by going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the current, trimming sails to the wind, taking the tide at its flood, and stooping to conquer. It is perhaps best exemplified in the Japanese arts of judo and aikido where an opponent is defeated by the force of his own attack.*
>
> —Alan Watts, "Tao: The Watercourse Way"

In fact, the Chinese martial arts are an even better example of the power of *wu wei*. Yes, they have the usual punching and kicking techniques we all know and love from the

movies, but any idiot can punch and kick someone: that's not martial arts. The art is in not *letting* some idiot punch and kick you.

Meditations on violence

Take the art of taiji, for example. From the outside, it looks like a slow, graceful dance, nothing to do with combat. The sort of thing you see old folks doing in parks at seven in the morning. What could be less martial?

What you're seeing, though, is the *form*, which is just a practice technique. Perhaps it also serves to obscure the truly martial nature of the art from suspicious eyes. Either way, you rarely see a taiji practitioner actually fighting. Either they avoided the fight altogether, or they won it so quickly that it's already over.

There are a lot of misunderstandings about martial arts. One of the biggest is that people practice martial arts because they like violence. But that's exactly wrong. It's like thinking people become doctors because they love illness.

On the contrary, violence is the problem that martial artists are working to solve.

> DANIEL: *Karate's fighting. You train to fight.*
>
> MIYAGI: *That what you think?*
>
> DANIEL: *No.*
>
> MIYAGI: *Then why train?*
>
> DANIEL: *So I won't have to fight.*
>
> MIYAGI: *Miyagi have hope for you.*
>
> —"The Karate Kid" (1984)

Be water, my friend

All martial arts partake of *wu wei* to some extent, floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee, but taiji *embodies* the principle. It is the art of yielding, circling, and flowing. When you try to punch water, for example, that doesn't work: the water slips past you and out of your way. If you punch harder, it just hurts your fist. Taiji is the art of being the water.

When set upon by assailants in a dark alley, the karate fighter beats them up, the judo fighter tricks them into beating *themselves* up, but the taiji practitioner just walks down a different alley. Truly this is Chinese common sense at its highest.

After all, who wants to get into a fight? Fighting is a really dumb thing to do. Someone could get hurt! Surely the intelligent approach would be to win *without* fighting.

In the West, we associate being good at fighting with being big and strong and heavy, and having big muscles. But the bigger you are, the slower you are, and the easier a target you are to hit. Also, fighting is less about strength than it is about speed.

If you've ever split logs for firewood, for example, you'll know there's a trick to doing it well: stay relaxed. Don't try to bring the axe down hard, but instead let it whip around loosely in an arc and strike *through* the target. The kinetic energy you can develop in this way is astounding, once you get the hang of it. The Zen saying "chop wood, carry water" has many meanings, like all such sayings, but maybe this is one of them.

Flowing and yielding

In the same way, where the "external" martial arts are about punching and kicking, using muscle against muscle, bone against bone, the "internal" arts like taiji are about using softness to defeat hardness, relaxation against stiffness, yielding against forcing. Peace is power.

If you have to kill a man, the saying goes, it costs nothing to be polite. A taiji practitioner will do everything they can to protect you from the consequences of your own folly, but if you absolutely *insist* on fighting them, they will dispatch you in the gentlest possible way. You may not even realise that you've lost until after it's all over.

There's a related art called "drunken boxing", which doesn't actually require alcohol, just an understanding of some of its beneficial effects:

> *Once I was on a lurching, jerking subway car where everyone was tense and unbalanced, trying to hang on and fight the swaying. Then I saw a man walking down the car, and his way of completely giving in to the lurching and swaying of the car was beautiful. He was really centered, flowing and yielding to the movements.*
>
> *Then when he sat down he collapsed in a heap, and I realized that he was dead drunk! Most of us waste so much energy fighting the forces around us when it is so easy to yield to them. You don't have to be drunk to let go and be more yielding.*
>
> —Al Huang, "Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain"

Motion and stillness

While taiji is simply the application of *wu wei* to fighting, you could also say that *wu wei* is living your life as though you were practising taiji all the time. Yielding and flowing your way past problems, meeting aggression with softness, and dancing between raindrops: this is complete understanding.

Sure, it may not impress onlookers as much as punching and kicking, but it's usually a lot more effective. The question about any fight is not whether you want to win, but what "winning" even means.

CHET: *You train people to fight?*
MIKE: *No. I train people to prevail.*

—"Redbelt"

You may feel that martial arts aren't for you, but maybe you just haven't come across the right kind of art yet. If you're the kind of person who abhors violence, and would go to just about any lengths to avoid getting in a fight, then congratulations: you're already halfway to being a martial artist.

The body was made to move, and martial arts practice is as refreshing a treat for the body as a period of stillness and silence is for the mind. Indeed, taiji combines the two: it represents stillness *in* motion, if that makes any sense, and if it doesn't sound too much like a song from *The Lion King*.

Standing like a tree

The "punching and kicking" arts, such as karate, tae kwon do, and kung fu, are good fun, great exercise, and a very effective cardio workout. On the other hand, taiji might teach you more useful things about self-defence, if it ever comes to that, and it'll certainly teach you a lot about *wu wei*.

So will the practice of *zhan zhuang*, or "standing like a tree", which is a crucial part of training in taiji and the other Chinese martial arts that rely on developing internal power. It seems ridiculous on the face of it that simply standing still could be any kind of exercise at all, doesn't it? But try this experiment.

Stand with your feet parallel, shoulder width apart, and your knees unlocked and slightly bent. Raise your hands as though you were holding an inflatable beach ball in front of your chest. No trouble at all, right?

Now hold this position and pay attention to what happens inside your body. After a minute or two you will start to feel the strain in your arm and back muscles, and a burning in your thighs. After three minutes you will feel like you're working very hard indeed. After five minutes, if you make it that long, you will be begging for death.

Now, tell me again how standing motionless isn't exercise. The fact is, you're doing work against gravity every moment you remain upright, and most of the time you don't really notice it. *Zhan zhuang* practice makes you notice it. If you keep on doing it, a few minutes a day, for just as long as you can manage plus a few seconds more, your body will start to learn a more efficient posture.

You'll begin to automatically stand (and thus move) in a way that doesn't require so much muscular tension and effort. In modern life we spend most of our time sitting or lying down, a little time walking, but almost no time standing, so it's no surprise that we don't really know how to do it. First learn stand, then learn fly.

Zhan zhuang standing is a martial arts practice, but it's also a kind of meditation. The more you do it, the less difference you'll see there is between those two things. And it is,

of course, the ultimate expression of *wu wei*: "not do". That's why it's such hard work.

Overcoming action bias

Just a word of caution: *wu wei*, as straightforward and common-sense an idea as it might seem, is nevertheless often misunderstood. It doesn't mean sitting back, slumped in apathy, and letting life happen to you. It means seeing what's really there, and engaging with it in the right way:

> *Wu wei is not passively doing nothing, but rather doing everything effortlessly, as bamboo shadows sweep the terrace without stirring any dust, as moonlight pierces a marsh but leaves no traces. It is knowing when to act and when not to act.*
>
> —Qiguang Zhao, "Do Nothing & Do Everything: An Illustrated New Taoism"

Nothing, as we've seen in previous chapters, is often the best thing to do as well as the wisest thing to say. However, it doesn't come naturally: quite the opposite. That's why we need to remember about *wu wei*.

We're wired by evolution to have an *action bias*, which is the cognitive mistake that makes it feel like we should tackle every problem by *doing* something. Hence our attraction to the idea of punching and kicking, but that rarely makes any situation better. When there's nothing to do, do nothing.

It takes a little bit of wisdom and maturity to know when problems don't need solving, when they can't be solved by deliberate action, and when the best solution is simply to walk down a different alley. That's *wu wei* in practice.

A kind of magic

Another principle that seems to bring good results when you live by it is *kindness*. You might think that treating people kindly is such a sensible and obvious idea that it doesn't need saying. I hope you're right, but indulge me anyway—as a kindness, if you like.

Brothers under the skin

The word "kind" comes from the same root as "kin", meaning "alike", or "related". And that's not a coincidence: we can be kind to others to the same extent that we understand they are like ourselves. What I find upsetting or hurtful, you probably find upsetting or hurtful too, and so does every living creature. That's because, whatever the size, shape, and colour of the bag of skin that encloses each of us, we're all the same inside.

Another word for kindness is "compassion", which comes from the Latin for "suffering with". We all know what pain and suffering is like, and that means we all know how to

treat other people so as not to cause them unnecessary pain. It's just that from time to time we forget, or do things we don't really mean to, and unkindness is the result.

Once you understand that we're not really separate creatures at all, but connected parts of the same superorganism, it becomes obvious that harming others is idiotic: it's only harming yourself. Conversely, treating others kindly is being kind to yourself: we could describe it as enlightened selfishness, if you like.

Overcoming hardness with softness

Now, there are some people we're already inclined to treat with love, kindness, and compassion. Our friends, family members (with occasional exceptions), partners, and so on. Those are easy. It's the *other* people who pose more of a challenge. You know the ones I mean.

For example, what about someone who's been unkind to you? Shouldn't you return the favour by being equally unkind to them? I mean, are you going to let them get *away* with behaving like that? What kind of message would you be sending if you responded to unkindness with kindness?

Well, if you really think about it, you'd be sending absolutely the *right* message. When someone is kind to us, it gives us warm feelings about them. If someone is mean to you, on the other hand, it's probably because they don't have particularly warm feelings about you. What would be the best way to change that, do you think?

When a little child has a meltdown at the supermarket and starts screaming and crying, should its parents respond with kindness or unkindness? Which is more likely to solve the problem? Similarly, if someone yells at you or cuts you off in traffic, will hitting back at them make the situation better?

Maybe the reason they cut you off in the first place is that someone else just cut *them* off. Sure, punishing one random stranger for the misdeeds of another random stranger makes no sense, but here we are. The question for you is whether you want to perpetuate this foolish chain reaction, or end it.

Seeking to understand

Sometimes people say things like "I only acted the exact same way he did. Fair's fair." But are we really being fair by returning someone an equal measure of their own unkindness? After all, we're probably being inadvertently unkind to people all the time. Is *that* fair? To redress that balance, wouldn't it make sense to be *deliberately* kind as much as possible?

If you think about the last time you were rude or unpleasant to someone, what was the reason? Were you genuinely intending to hurt them, or was it just that your emotions got the better of you? Had you had a bad day, and was this the last straw? Did you feel frustrated, angry, helpless, or wronged? And when you reconsider your outburst now that you have calmed down, do you wish you had acted differently?

Now, take a snapshot of all those feelings, and transfer them into the mind of the person who's just yelled at *you*. Other people have complicated inner lives, too. They are probably fighting battles we know nothing about. That driver who cut you off on the highway may have been rushing to the hospital where her daughter has just been admitted to the emergency room.

If we knew the truth behind other people's unkind actions, we would almost always feel compassion for them, and want to treat them kindly. It's only our ignorance that leads us into what psychologists call the *fundamental attribution error*: when I act like a jerk, it's because I have my reasons, but when someone else acts like a jerk, it's just because he's a jerk!

Tout comprendre, ç'est tout pardonner, the saying goes: to understand all is to forgive all. Living by kindness is not only about being nice to people: it's also going as far as we can to understand their actions, and thus to forgive them. We are all kin: kindness is simply the recognition of that fact.

One final thing to say about kindness is that it has the additional virtue of being mostly unexpected. When you're kind to people who regard you unkindly, it unsettles them. They start to worry about what you might be up to. Keeping the enemy off balance is always a good idea.

Keeping it simple

Here's another of the characteristics we tend to notice in people who enjoy life: simplicity. They don't need much, they don't want much, and as a consequence they don't have much. And how free and happy they seem as a result!

Monks, for example, aren't big on personal possessions. In some monasteries, a monk who wants to own some non-essential item has to apply to the abbot for permission. Imagine if you had to do that for every single thing you own. You'd probably find that there are a great many things you can easily do without, especially if it saves paperwork.

Things you can do without

It's funny how we're driven to acquire more and more things, and yet somehow most of the enjoyment tends to be in the anticipation of having the thing, rather than the having. Once you actually *own* it, it seems less desirable than it did in the shop window, or at the dealership.

Indeed, everything you acquire comes with its own new set of problems: where are you going to keep it? What if you lose it? What if it gets stolen? What if your next-door neighbour buys the same thing, but a slightly nicer model than yours?

Many of our possessions, if not the majority of them, are probably things we're no longer really interested in owning. It's just that we haven't got around to getting rid of them yet. Have you ever noticed how much harder it is to throw something out than

it is to buy a new one? There always seems to be a little voice in the back of our minds saying "What if I suddenly need this?" But we never do.

> *"This will be my man-drawer!" That's our little zone in the house. And we fill it with things we think we need. There will be batteries of indeterminate life, instructions for appliances we don't even own anymore, foreign currency no longer in circulation, keys from homes I don't live in anymore, mobile phones from history, and takeaway menus, despite the fact that we always order the exact same takeaway every time.*
>
> *What is it we are preparing ourselves for with the man-drawer? Perhaps an anonymous phone call in the middle of the night: "I need you to go to your old home, via the side gate. Do you still have the key? There will be an elderly man awaiting you. You must pay him in drachma. He will have with him an Argos toaster, circa 1998. You'll also need nine AAA batteries that don't work. Then you must order a Chinese, on a Nokia 3210."*
>
> —Michael McIntyre, "Live and Laughing"

Decluttering your man-drawer, your woman-closet, or indeed your whole house and life, can be a very spiritually liberating process. Marie Kondo suggests that, apart from things you actually use on a regular basis, you should keep only things that spark joy, and I think that's good advice.

This rule rapidly eliminates many things you can do without: unwanted gifts that you feel guilty about throwing away; equipment for hobbies and interests that no longer interest you; clothes that no longer fit you and it's time to accept that they never will again. They spark the opposite of joy, so out they go.

Lightening the load

What you're left with is a lot more space, and even better, everywhere you look, you see only things that delight you. They don't have to be practical, useful, or even valuable: maybe your most cherished possession is something that anyone else would throw out in a heartbeat. No matter: it makes *you* happy, and that's the point.

I'm not suggesting you should give away all your possessions: that sort of performative minimalism is really a kind of reverse extravagance ("Look at me, the person with no possessions!"). It's just an interesting and different way to think about the material things you own: not as assets, but as liabilities. If you had to carry all your worldly goods on your back, how many steps would you get before falling flat on your face?

Try lightening the load. Clear your room or house and enjoy the extra cubic feet of oxygen. Clear out your self-storage unit, and enjoy the savings in rent. Instead of accumulating money so that you can die rich, try spending it so that you can live happy.

We all like a bargain, but some things are worth spending money on, because *saving*

money on them just means you have to buy them more often. As a rule of thumb, if you spend more than 10% of every day using the thing, don't cheap out on it: buy a really good one. Your bed is a good example.

With things like this, ask yourself "Will this be the last X I buy?" If not, why not? Could you spend a little more and get one that will outlast you?

It doesn't have to be something you can justify on practical grounds, necessarily: not everything in life has to be practical. If something brings you joy every time you look at it or use it, that's worth a lot. When you buy fewer, but better, things, you'll have a little more space in your house, and a little more joy in your life; two things we could probably all do with.

Small is beautiful

As well as freeing yourself from the mute tyranny of *stuff*, it can be worthwhile to try downsizing in other areas of life. You don't need a car that can do 200mph if you only use it to drive to work. Who wants to get to the office more quickly, anyway?

Instead of dinner at a fancy restaurant in town, why not try the little family-run place on the corner? They may not have a Michelin star, but they do cook the kind of food that people actually enjoy eating, rather than taking photos of. And the service is better, because the person serving you has a stake in the business.

You don't need to vacation in expensive, faraway pleasure spots. Go somewhere nearby instead and you'll save money on hotels, save time queueing at the airport, save carbon emissions, and maybe help save your local economy, too.

In a sense, simplicity is the application of *wu wei* to your relationship with wealth, status, and material things. Once you have enough to cover your basic requirements and take care of those you love, who needs more? It's all just excess junk that we have to drag along with us as we go. As anyone who's battled their way through the airport with heavy luggage knows, a journey is much easier and more enjoyable when you travel light.

Another word for simplicity is "modesty", which seems a rather old-fashioned word these days, but I like it. A modest person doesn't make a fuss about themselves; they don't make a fuss about anything. Their clothes don't make a big statement; their car doesn't make a big noise. They are just, quietly but unmistakably, themselves.

Violent moderation

When a little of something is nice, it doesn't automatically follow that a lot of it is better. In fact, it can go the other way: overindulgence can make you so jaded and desensitised that you no longer appreciate the thing at all. I love pizza, but I don't eat it every day, precisely *because* I love it. If I only have it once in a while, it stays special.

The same is true of many other things: they're best enjoyed in moderation. For example, you might love your husband (I hope you do), but if he's hanging around all the

time, after a while you'll stop feeling a thrill every time you see him, and a vague sense of irritation may even start to creep in.

Relationship counsellors often advise that couples make a point of spending some quality time together—by having a date night, for example. That's not wrong, but I think that perhaps couples should also be sure to regularly spend some quality time *apart*: an "antidate", if you like. It's nice to be with someone you love, but sometimes it's even nicer to have the chance to miss them a little.

Be moderate in your work as well as your play. Even when the work is fun—in fact, especially when it is—don't forget to build in plenty of rest, recreation, and downtime. There's no point driving yourself so hard that it leads to burnout and nervous collapse. You'll be more productive in the long run if you harvest your time and energy in a sustainable way, rather than taking the slash-and-burn approach.

In general, the less often you indulge in some enjoyable activity, the more you appreciate it when you do. This isn't about self-denial or asceticism: think of it instead as a form of attention management. Don't let over-familiarity dull your senses: keep your pleasures fresh by enjoying them in moderation. The word comes from the same root as "modesty", and that's not a coincidence.

Staying grounded

A related word that you also don't hear so often these days is "humility". It's also much misunderstood. Humility is not false modesty or humblebragging, to impress others by making a big deal of how we're not really a big deal. No one is fooled by that: it's just rather sad and contemptible.

Nor is humility the same thing as low self-esteem. Believing that you're worthless and useless is not being humble, it's a mental health issue for which you should seek professional help. Real humility is something quite different.

Ever so 'umble

The word "humility" comes from the Latin "humus", meaning earth or soil. So to be humble is to be down to earth: to be grounded. When you are humble, you are practical, straightforward, sensible. You have your feet on the ground, not in the air. You're realistic about things: you don't live in a fantasy world. You see things as they really are, not as you wish they were or fear they might be.

Humble people are self-reliant; they don't constantly seek attention and presume on other people's good nature. They don't need help with every little thing, like a baby. They have the basic practical skills that we expect of independent adults. They can fit a plug, light a fire, and change a wheel. They don't have meltdowns or emotional crises and demand that all their friends rally round to comfort them.

They're not "highly strung". If anything, they're lowly strung. Flexible. Resilient. Easy-going. They project calm in a crisis, even if they don't feel that way inside. They don't

take offence; they don't take umbrage; indeed, they don't take anything that doesn't belong to them. They don't flap, they don't panic, they don't hold grudges, they don't need validation. They're capable, reliable, adaptable. That's true humility.

Another, more subtle aspect of humility is that you don't depend on other people's opinions for your sense of self-worth. You know what and who you are, good or bad (for most of us, good *and* bad). You're not swayed by praise and flattery, nor cast down by criticism. You do what you do because *you* think it's right, not because someone else says so.

You don't need the outward trappings of success and status. Like Chuang-tse's turtle, you would rather be alive and happy in the mud than dead in the palace. You're not trying to be the best in the world at anything, or even better than the person next to you. You don't compare or compete with anyone: rather, you understand that competition is weakening, because it makes you afraid to lose.

Not being the best

Humility is not just knowing that you're not the best, it's not *needing* to be the best. Only a desperately insecure person has to triumph over others in order to feel good about themselves. A well-adjusted person is content to *be* whatever they are, without striving or fighting, and without making a big fuss about their achievements.

The truly accomplished person doesn't need medals, certificates, or badges to advertise their fine qualities. They don't need to advertise at all.

> DANIEL: *What kind of belt do you have?*
>
> MIYAGI: *Canvas. You like? JC Penney, $3.98.*
>
> DANIEL: *No, I didn't mean a belt like that, I meant—*
>
> MIYAGI: *In Okinawa, belt mean no need rope hold up pants.*
>
> —"The Karate Kid" (1984)

For example, there's no black belt in taiji. There are no belts of any colour, actually, unless you need one to hold your trousers up. If you're good, you're good, that's all: when you meet someone else who's good, they'll know. You won't need a belt to tell them.

Also, if things go wrong and you can't avoid a fight, why advertise your skill level to the opponent in advance? The more overconfident they are, the better for you, and the more surprised they'll be when you put them gently, but firmly, flat on their backs.

Nothing special

Humility may be the most difficult of the principles we've talked about in this chapter. Not because we're naturally boastful or proud, but just because society relentlessly programs us to think that we have to stand out, to impress people, to *be noticed*. If you don't

constantly tell everyone how great you are, they might not think you're anything special!

Having people think you're something special seems nice at first, but it rapidly loses its appeal, because everyone starts to *expect* things from you. The more impressed they are with you, the higher the expectations, and the more duties and responsibilities people want to heap on you. That usually leaves you with much less time for doing the stuff that made you so renowned in the first place.

> *To do real good physics work, you do need absolute solid lengths of time. It needs a lot of concentration. If you have a job administrating anything, you don't have the time. I'm selfish, okay? I want to do my physics.*
>
> *So I have invented another myth for myself: that I'm irresponsible. I'm actively irresponsible. I tell everyone I don't do anything. If anyone asks me to be on a committee for admissions, "No," I tell them, "I'm irresponsible."*
>
> —Richard Feynman, "The Pleasure of Finding Things Out"

When no one thinks you're anything special, they won't ask you to do things. (If they think you're *really* useless, they'll ask you *not* to do things, and what could be better than that?)

Even better, they won't be envious of you, they won't resent you, they won't feel you're making them look bad, and they won't need to find ways to take you down a peg or two. The person who's nothing special is popular with everyone: in a strange way, that's what makes them special.

Where are you heading?

Kindness, simplicity, humility, and *wu wei* are not goals: you can't achieve them. You don't work away at it for years and then one day announce, "Good news, everybody! I'm humble now!"

Instead, I think of these things as *values*: they're what I measure myself against to find out whether or not I'm living right. I can ask myself questions like, "When was I kind recently? When was I unkind? Why was that? How did things turn out as a result? And what would I do differently now?"

They're also guidelines, or marker posts, to help me choose when I'm not sure what to do or how to act. Faced with this decision, what would be the simplest approach? Am I doing something because I want people to think I'm the best, and do I really care what they think? How can I solve this problem most efficiently with *wu wei*?

You may find that a different set of marker posts is right for you, and that's okay. The important thing is to think about it a little, to ask yourself who you really are, to find out what matters to you, and to try to live your life according to those principles.

> *We often assign ourselves goals in life, and never question them again.*
>
> —Francis Lucille, "Eternity Now"

When we do ask questions like this, the answers can sometimes be surprising, and they can lead to big changes. But isn't it better to change course now if you need to, rather than ending up somewhere it turns out you didn't really want to be in the first place?

13. Afterword

We began this book by thinking about monks, and how strange the monastic lifestyle seems to us looking in from outside the monastery. Even a movie of monks going about their business is hard to watch at first, because it's full of stillness and silence, and those things are very unfamiliar to us.

It doesn't strike most of us as much fun to live that way, and yet the monks seem to be quietly happy. So what's going on?

> *It is an important and popular fact that things are not always what they seem. For instance, on the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much—the wheel, New York, wars and so on—whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than man—for precisely the same reasons.*
>
> —Douglas Adams, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy"

The monastery

The monks don't have any of the things we conventionally associate with happiness: wealth, possessions, status, leisure, or the company of photogenic swimwear models. They aren't particularly respected by society at large: they don't have face. No one tells their kids, "If you study hard and grow up right, some day you could become a monk."

Yet I think we all feel, at some level, that *something* isn't quite right with the increasingly hectic, noisy, overworked, anxious, and acquisitive lifestyles that society *does* hold up as successful. Powerful, wealthy, and famous people don't seem to look as happy as they should, do they? Having, presumably, worked so hard to get where they are, why don't they look like they're enjoying it?

Monk mode

The final irony is the popularity of so-called "monk mode", where you're supposed to dispense with everything *except* grinding away at pointless tasks to make things no one wants, so you can get money to buy things you don't need. Can this really be the answer?

> BOBBY: *Let the wind take the world away. What do you hear inside, Connie?*
>
> CONNIE: *I just hear my dad's ignorance and my mom's empty-headed materialism. No! Wait, wait… I hear my dad's empty-headed materialism too. That's the loudest.*
>
> —"King of the Hill"

That's not my monk mode, and needless to say, I'm pretty sure *real* monks wouldn't think much of it either. The monk mode influencers have missed the point completely. Yes, monasticism is about discipline, but it's *self*-discipline. The monks are volunteers, not prisoners. To be a monk is to make a conscious choice about what's important to you, to dispense with everything else, and to stick to your plan even when it's not fun in the moment.

Code for your life

The monks we see on TV are a group of highly religious people who have decided that the true purpose of their lives is worship and prayer. But I hope that reading this book has convinced you that this isn't the only way to get the benefits of a monastic approach. You don't have to be religious at all, though if you are, I see no reason why that should be incompatible with the way of life we've been talking about.

Instead, you're free to find your own path and purpose, and to live it the way that makes sense to you, without reference to anyone else's standards or expectations. That doesn't mean a life of self-indulgence and "just doing whatever": it means that the only discipline worth following is the one *you* choose. The rules are up to you: once you've decided what they are, you either follow them, or you don't.

> OMAR: *A man got to have a code.*
>
> —"The Wire"

The paradox at the heart of *true* monk mode is that we find self-indulgence more immediately attractive than self-discipline, yet it's living in a disciplined way that makes us happy in the long run. I think that's because when life gets difficult, and our 83 problems start to get on top of us, we have to have a reason to keep going. Ultimately, it all needs to be *about* something.

Into great silence

I don't think there's a reward (or even a punishment) waiting for us when it's all over. I don't think that when we die we'll go on to spend eternity in a better place. Sorry if that offends your belief system, but I have a strong feeling that *this* is the good place, and it's all there is.

> LISTER: *I don't mean to say anything out of place here, Kryten, but that is completely whacko, Jacko. There's no such thing as "silicon heaven".*
>
> KRYTEN: *Then where do all the calculators go?*
>
> LISTER: *They don't go anywhere! They just die.*
>
> KRYTEN: *Surely you believe that God is in all things? Aren't you a pantheist?*
>
> LISTER: *Yeah, but I don't think it applies to kitchen utensils. I'm not a* ***frying*** *pantheist!*
>
> —"Red Dwarf"

The book of changes

If that's true, or maybe even if it's not, then we should make the most of the time we have. That probably means making changes, and we've talked about some ways to choose the right changes and make them stick. Habits are a good servant, but a bad master.

One of the greatest pleasures in life is to be good at something, and happiness is doing what you're good at. "The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne," as Chaucer puts it, and if you're going to get good at anything it would be wise to start as soon as possible.

Craft takes practice, but the practice itself is the reward, so time spent perfecting your skills is time you'll never regret. When you love your work, it's not "work".

> *I grew in those seasons like corn in the night… they were not time subtracted from my life, but so much over and above my usual allowance.*
>
> —Henry David Thoreau, "Walden"

For one and all

The ultimate skill is learning how to be the owner of a careenium, and the more we grow in skill and discipline at that, the clearer it becomes that each of us is not a single entity, but a collective: my name is Legion, for we are many. The self is a fiction, albeit a useful one, and it's difficult to do without it altogether. Just don't mistake the abstraction for the reality.

And as the many emerge from the one, so the one emerges from the many. We feel ourselves to be separate egos, each independent inside our bag of skin, but that is not the case. We are all strands of the same world-wide web. The web *is* the world.

Understanding our place as part of Nature is vital if we are to avoid destroying it, and ourselves as a result. Fortunately, immersion in the natural world is not a chore but a reliable source of peace, spiritual refreshment, and deep happiness.

The silence we find in Nature, and eventually in ourselves, is not something to be feared, but something to be welcomed. It's not just the absence of noise, but the presence of everything else. Eliminating the distractions from our lives may mean that, for perhaps the first time, we can hear ourselves think.

Celestial navigation

One thing we won't hear in the silence is a voice telling us what to do and where to go. That's up to us to decide. This life does not come with instructions, but it's also not a test. If you've been waiting for it to start, don't wait any longer, or it might be over before you've even read the exam paper.

Guidance won't come to us from outside, but we can place our own marker posts along the way, to help us make sure we're always moving in the right direction, even if it's only one step at a time. Steering is more important than speed, and if you don't believe that, remind me not to lend you my car.

You can make buffalo go anywhere, just so long as they want to go there: that's Tao, and *wu wei* is the art of finding where the buffalo want to go. Kindness is a more effective approach to most problems than kicking the world and expecting it not to break your foot. Simplicity is easier to get right than complexity, mostly because there's less of it. And staying grounded beats climbing every mountain.

With these principles in mind, I don't think you can go too far wrong. Use them as foundation stones and building blocks for your own monastery. Inside it, peace always reigns, and no one can tell you what to do. At last, you can focus on what truly matters.

Engage monk mode.

About this book

What I do

I'm a teacher and mentor of many years experience, specialising in software engineering, career skills, and life coaching for developers. I've helped literally thousands of people with friendly, supportive, professional mentoring, and I can help you too, if you like. Come and see me at my website:

- Bitfield Consulting

Feedback

If you enjoyed this book, let me know! Email john@bitfieldconsulting.com with your comments. If you didn't enjoy it, or found a problem, I'd like to hear that too. All your feedback will go to improving the book.

Also, please tell your friends, or post about the book on social media. I'm not a global mega-corporation, and I don't have a publisher or a marketing budget: I write and produce these books myself, at home, in my spare time. I'm not doing this for the money: I'm doing it so that I can help bring the power of Go to as many people as possible.

That's where you can help, too. If you enjoy my writing, and you'd like to support it, tell a friend about this book!

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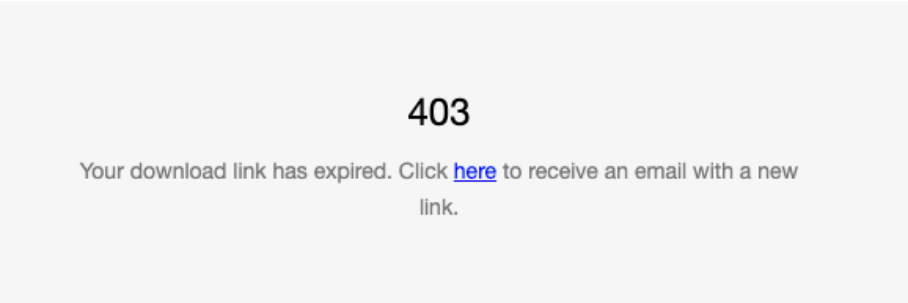
NOTE: The Squarespace store makes this update process confusing for some readers, and I heartily sympathise with them. Your original download link is only valid for 24 hours, and if you re-visit it after that time, you'll see what *looks* like an error page:



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Code For Your Life

Code For Your Life is a practical, readable, and funny guide to tech careers, distilling the lessons of a lifetime into the ultimate guide for anyone who wants to succeed in this industry.

In these pages you'll learn the key skills for finding the right job, nailing the interview, cracking the technical test and the take-home task, and succeeding in the job despite impostor syndrome.

Where is your career going? How can you plan and negotiate your promotions, pay rises, and contracts? How do you become a master of your technical craft, whether that's programming or something else? Does your future lie in management or on the staff engineer track? When is it time to launch your own business, and how can you succeed as an independent engineer?

The message of this book is empowerment: you can and should take control of your career progress, your skills development, and your working life. The book is crammed with wise, memorable, and often amusing advice, anecdotes, quotes, tips, tricks, and guidance for engineers at every stage of their career.

"I wish I'd had this book twenty years ago," said one rueful reader, but wherever you are on life's journey, the inspiring takeaway of *Code For Your Life* is that it's not too late. You

can recapture the magic and excitement of your first steps in programming, and use it to build a fun, rewarding career.

The ultimate goal, as the book reminds us, is to build a life you won't need a vacation from. And what a delightful prospect that is.

For the Love of Go

For the Love of Go is a book introducing the Go programming language, suitable for complete beginners, as well as those with experience programming in other languages.

If you've used Go before but feel somehow you skipped something important, this book will build your confidence in the fundamentals. Take your first steps toward mastery with this fun, readable, and easy-to-follow guide.

Throughout the book we'll be working together to develop a fun and useful project in Go: an online bookstore called Happy Fun Books. You'll learn how to use Go to store data about real-world objects such as books, how to write code to manage and modify that data, and how to build useful and effective programs around it.

The For the Love of Go: Video Course also includes this book.

Further reading

You can find more of my books here:

- Go books by John Arundel

You can find my blog posts and articles here:

- Bitfield Consulting

I have a YouTube channel where I post occasional videos on Go, and there are also some curated playlists of what I judge to be the very best Go talks and tutorials available, here:

- Bitfield Consulting on YouTube

Acknowledgements

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