**Chapter 3: How to Use a Notebook: Basic Edition**
**1. Note-taking Techniques for "Thinking"**
Let me summarize what we have discussed so far. The message of this book is about note-taking techniques for "thinking." When you hear "note-taking techniques," you might imagine specific technical skills. However, a Solo Retreat does not require any difficult techniques or complex procedures. You just need to face your notebook and write down what is in your head. That is all.

You do not need to continue this every day like muscle training or a diet. Of course, repeating it will increase the effect. However, you do not need to force yourself to find time when you are busy. If you have 30 minutes of free time, open your notebook at a cafe or at home. Just that will produce results.

Also, the way I use notebooks is just the method that suited me. You do not need to be bound by my method. You have your own way. Please find the style that suits you best. To be honest, I think, "Any method is fine, just write!" You can write on the back of a flyer. You can write with ink on your finger. You don't need to know any techniques.

Some people read books and feel satisfied just by reading, without taking action. In fact, most people probably do not take action. For those people, this book might feel like it has nothing new. However, the turning point of whether your life changes or not is whether you actually try what you read. First, please try it for just 30 minutes. If you take the time to write in a notebook, you will realize the fun and effect of the "Solo Retreat Note Technique." That is the moment your life begins to change.

**2. Notebooks Should Be Handwritten; Recommended Notebooks**
"Can I use a computer instead of a notebook?" I am often asked this question. My answer is that I insist on handwritten notebooks. Certainly, typing on a keyboard is faster than writing by hand, and your hands get less tired. I understand that for people used to digital devices, computers or smartphones feel easier. However, from the perspective of activating the brain, handwriting is the winner.

Handwriting is overwhelmingly better for generating ideas. When you are stuck on an idea at work, you might stop thinking in front of the computer and start scribbling on paper. Many of you probably have the experience of coming up with an idea this way. There are many research results showing that handwriting activates the brain. For example, a study by the University of Leeds in 2017 showed that analog methods are more effective for memory retention and goal achievement. In another study at Princeton University, handwriting showed higher accuracy in understanding conceptual questions compared to typing.

Thus, the effect of handwritten notes has scientific backing. Handwriting activates the brain more than digital devices. This is now almost common knowledge. If someone insists, "I use a tablet and a special pen, so it is the same as handwriting!" I would answer, "If you really want to, that might be okay." However, using digital devices during a Solo Retreat makes it easy to get distracted by social media or YouTube. This reduces concentration. In that sense, I recommend a physical notebook.

As for the size of the notebook, a large one is recommended. The bigger it is, the more space you can use, and it becomes easier to have free ideas. You don't need a computer for a Solo Retreat. If you don't mind how you look, you can carry a sketchbook under your arm and a pen in your pocket. You can go to a cafe almost empty-handed. However, carrying a sketchbook is not very practical for daily life. So, I use an A4 size notebook.

Regarding the paper type, some people like lined or grid paper. That is fine if you prefer it. However, I feel that plain (blank) paper allows for freer ideas because there are no restrictions when drawing diagrams. Some people say, "Use a luxury notebook!" But I prefer notebooks that

cost about 300 to 400 yen. If the notebook is too expensive, I feel, "I can't write weird things. I must think carefully and write neatly." This stops my hand. On the other hand, if it is a cheap 100-yen notebook, the ink might bleed through. So, 300 to 400 yen is just right. I recommend the "Tsubame Note A5009." It has good paper quality and does not bleed.

"Is it okay to separate notebooks for each theme?" I am often asked this, too. I recommend consolidating everything into one notebook as much as possible. Many people want to separate private life and work. But it is better not to separate them. If you are a student taking a specific class, or if you need to take massive memos for work, you can separate those. However, for "thinking notebooks" like the ones in this book, do not separate work and private life. Summarize them in one book. Your brain does not distinguish between the two. Also, having multiple notebooks increases the risk of leaving one at home or at the office. If you don't have it when you need it, it is meaningless. So, please consolidate into one notebook.

### 3. No Index Needed. Just Date, Time, and Title

Now, let's actually write in the notebook. There are not many special rules. There is only one rule. When you start writing on a page, always write the **date, time, and title** at the very top. That is all.

Organized people might want to create an index (table of contents) on the first page of the notebook. They might want to write page numbers on every page and make a list. It feels convenient for finding things later. I thought so at first, too. But after trying many things for many years, my conclusion is: "You do not need an index." There are three reasons.

First, creating an index takes more effort than you imagine. Writing page numbers and copying titles to the front page seems simple, but it is actually troublesome. It stops your thinking process. You also often forget to copy it.

Second, you rarely refer to the index. There are few occasions where you need to look back at what you wrote in the past. It is not worth the effort. If the purpose is "recording" or "learning," referencing has meaning. But for a "thinking" notebook, the value is not in referencing. Once you think about something, it becomes part of you, even if you think you forgot it. You rarely need to refer to the information in the notebook. Even if you lose track of where you wrote it, if you think about the same topic again, you will reach almost the same conclusion. If you reach a different conclusion, that new conclusion fits the current you better. So, there is no problem. Therefore, do not waste energy searching for information you cannot remember. Use that energy for "thinking" instead.

Finally, even if you look at the index, you often cannot find the information you want. The content and the title are not always perfectly linked. As you write, the content might drift away from the title. And as the number of notebooks increases to two or three, you won't know which notebook contains what.

If you want to create a database for future reference, use a computer or smartphone. However, you might still want to know what you wrote in the past. In that case, the answer is "flip through the pages." Humans have a vague memory of "when" they wrote something and "where" on the page it was. For example, "I think I wrote it about two weeks ago, around the middle of the left page." From this vague information, you can find the target. That is why the date and time are important. Also, the title gives you a hint when searching. That is why you need to write the date, time, and title at the top.

### 4. Decide on a Title, Even if Random

Titles not only help you search later but also play a role in focusing your thoughts. I do not recommend starting without a title. But don't worry too much about it. You can start with a vague title like "Current Thoughts." You can cross it out with a double line and change it later. Even if you want to decide the title after finishing the page, you should give it a tentative title first. This

creates a constraint. This focus helps ideas flow.

You might think ideas come more easily when you are free without constraints. Actually, the opposite is true. The more constraints you have, the easier it is for the brain to produce ideas. The brain basically tries to be lazy. It is not that you are lazy; the organ called the brain has a lazy nature. Without constraints, the brain thinks, "I can be free now," and doesn't work. By setting a title, you define the range of thinking. This makes it easier for the brain to judge and produce ideas.

"If constraints are good, should I make rules like dividing the notebook or using grid paper?" Some notebook methods recommend this. But those are optimized for taking classes. The Solo Retreat is a "thinking notebook technique." It focuses on organizing your head and producing ideas. So, you don't need complex frameworks. Simple bullet points are fine. Some people separate colors, but I use only black. Changing pen colors breaks my concentration. Writing with one black pen places the least burden on the brain. As a result, ideas come out easier. Color-coding is effective for memorization (studying), but it is not necessary for generating ideas.

## 5. Wash Out Your Mind with Bullet Points

There are no strict rules for writing content. As I mentioned, bullet points are fine. If you want to draw a picture, please draw. Do not try to write "good things" or organized thoughts from the start. Write down whatever comes to your mind, even if it seems obvious.

For example, if you are thinking about work worries:
- "I feel vague. My brain isn't working."
- "Work hasn't been going well lately."
- "What does 'not going well' mean specifically?"
- "Definition of going well."
- "If I can achieve the same sales as Mr. A, it feels like it's going well."
- "Maybe I should start by imitating Mr. A."
- "When else do I feel things are going well?"

Like this, if you get stuck, asking yourself questions is effective. This uses a technique called "Self-Coaching." Asking "For what purpose?" or "Specifically?" helps you adjust the abstract level of your thoughts (Chunk up / Chunk down). Asking "Anything else?" helps expand your thoughts.

Should you fill the whole page? Yes, it is better to fill it. Sometimes I reach a conclusion in about three lines. But I try to write at least half a page. Even if you reach a conclusion in three lines, keep writing. While thinking, "I have nothing more to write," if you force yourself to write, unexpected ideas or new perspectives often appear. The human brain tries to fill vacuums. To fill the blank space in the notebook, it squeezes out ideas.

In the second half of the page, you might find yourself writing about something completely different from the original theme. That is fine. Good ideas often come at such times. I do not leave blank spaces in my notebook. Some methods say, "Leave margins for adding notes later," but I don't feel the need. If I have a lot to add, I just start a new topic on a new page. Even if you write about the same topic many times, it's okay. If you get just one new idea, it is worth it. Repetition clarifies the structure. Finally, you can turn it into a diagram if needed.

## 6. How to Empty Your Head Completely

"Write everything in your head." Even if told this, many people find it hard to write. Words don't come. Or you just repeat similar expressions. You might think, "It's embarrassing if someone sees this," and your hand stops. Don't worry. Everyone is like that at first. My old diaries were very thin and shallow.

If you spend 30 minutes and can't write anything, usually the topic is too big. For example, "How

should I live?" is too grand for 30 minutes. You need to break it down. How is work? Family? Hobbies? Health? If it is work, is it about your main job or a side job? 10 years later or 1 year later? If you set a specific goal like "Goal for my current job one year from now," it becomes much easier to think. Do not tackle abstract and huge problems suddenly. Build up from what is visible in front of you.

If you still can't write, focus on "why you can't write." Is it a lack of information? Are you embarrassed? Or maybe you don't actually care about that theme? Realizing that the topic isn't important to you is a great discovery. For example, you might write "How to earn 1 million yen a month," but realize you aren't interested in the money itself. Then you can shift to a more essential topic for you, like "If not money, will mastering my hobby make me happy?"

Do not rush. You don't need to reach a conclusion in 30 minutes. If you get even one important realization, your life begins to change.

## 7. Notebooks Can Be Messy

"How often do you read back your notebooks?" I am often asked this. The conclusion is: I rarely read back what I wrote. Why? Because there is no need. The value of the notebook is in the act of thinking at that moment. Even if you write about the same theme again later, you can just think about it anew. Your thoughts won't change that much. If you work in planning, browsing through old notebooks might give you idea seeds. But generally, thinking "I must leave useful information for later" makes you want to write neatly, and you stop writing freely. The harm of this is greater. So, I think it is better to assume "I will write and finish, and never look back." Write messily.

My notebooks are not neat enough to show people. Sometimes I can't even read my own writing. But just looking at the page revives the memory of the thought process. Using time to write neatly is a waste. This is a notebook for organizing your head, not for showing others. Neat notes are for school. But for thinking, messy is fine. Trying to be neat stops your hand. It stops your "crazy" or novel ideas because you fear judgment. That is a big loss.

## 8. Example of a Solo Retreat Notebook

(In the book, the author presents a diagram of his actual notebook notes). The notes show the moment the idea for *this book* was born. At first, it just has the date and a vague idea: "I want to convey the value of Solo Retreats." I had a trouble: "It is hard to put the value into words." Title: "How to convey the value of Solo Retreat to the world." I wrote down the problem. Then, I categorized types of books. I listed thoughts randomly. Then I approached the essence: "Simple note technique." But I hit a wall: "That is too simple." Then, casually, the words "Solo Retreat Note Technique" appeared. It wasn't a dramatic "Eureka!" moment. It was just scribbled down. But looking back, this was the turning point. The note ends there without a conclusion. It looks like just lazy writing. But that is fine. The seed of the idea born here grew into this book.

## 9. What if You Can't Find Anything to Write?

If you go to a cafe and can't think of a topic, that happens. To prevent this, prepare themes beforehand. Write "Themes for the Retreat" the day before. Also, keep a list of ideas on your smartphone (Evernote, etc.) during daily life. Talking to a friend (wall-busting) helps, too. Casual chat produces seeds of ideas.

If you still can't find a topic, here are some suggestions:
- What would you do if you had unlimited time and money?
- Where do you want to be in 10 years?
- What resources do you have now?
- Ideal house and office.
- Ideal daily schedule.
- Habits you want to change.

- List people you want to thank.
- 100 Dreams.
- Things that irritated you recently.
- This month's schedule and To-Do.
- Business ideas.

Anything is fine. If you can't write, it means you are too serious. You might think notebooks must be proper. Let go of that. Write for yourself. Freely, messily, and appropriately.

**10. Things to Keep in Mind When Writing**

Please keep these 5 things in mind:

1. **Decide not to show anyone.** If you think someone might see it, you will self-censor. Honest thoughts won't come out.
2. **Don't try to write "correct" things.** Ignore social norms. Your "madness" or unique views are valuable in the notebook.
3. **Don't try to reach a conclusion.** Don't compromise just because time is up. Think until you have no more ideas.
4. **Write a massive amount.** Quantity leads to quality. Don't use expensive notebooks that make you hesitate. Use cheap ones and write a lot.
5. **Have fun.** There are no mistakes. Treat it like a game.