

ZEN HABITS

MASTERING THE
ART OF CHANGE



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Leo Babauta

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FOR MY DAD, JOSE BABAUTA,
WHO PASSED AWAY AS THIS BOOK WAS GOING
TO PRESS. YOUR ART, YOUR PASSION, YOUR
SENSE OF HUMOR LIVE ON THROUGH ME.

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· INTRODUCTION ·

Become the Master of Change

*The art of life lies in a constant
readjustment to our surroundings.*

OKAKURA KAKUZO

Imagine you could take a magic wand and use it to instantly change something about yourself. What would you change? Would it be ending procrastination, pursuing creativity, exercising and getting fit, being more disciplined, having better relationships, being happier with yourself, being more mindful, learning new skills, getting out of debt?

Now ask yourself this: what is stopping you from making this change? The steps to make your change are likely fairly easy. Why don't we make these changes?

It's because in the deep dark recesses of our brains, unseen and unknown to most of us, our minds have been working against us.

I first discovered this in 2005, when I tried to quit smoking and start running. I couldn't figure out why I kept failing at habit changes, why I had none of the discipline I thought I had. What was wrong with me?

The discovery came when I started to watch my thoughts, like watching a film inside my head. It was totally insane, once I saw what was going on: I would resolve to go the day without smoking, and my mind would completely believe that. Then when the going got a little difficult, an urge to smoke would appear, out of habit. I didn't want the urge, but it just arose out of nowhere really.

But then another part of my mind said, "No! You said you wouldn't smoke today." And the first part, that had the urge, would say, "But just this once won't hurt. Why not make yourself happy this once? Why make yourself suffer? What are you doing this for? Is it even worth it?"

Usually this debate would happen unseen, and I'd almost immediately give in. But now I was watching, and I couldn't believe how strong my mind could become when it really wanted to escape discomfort. It would rationalize, bargain, plead, cry, ask for mercy, negotiate some more. It was a little child, doing whatever it could to get its way.

What I learned from this was not only to watch what was going on, to watch the movie playing in my head, but how to overcome it. I learned how to see the film that was playing in my mind as the root of all my problems.

The One Problem

There's a projector in our minds, and it's constantly playing a movie about how we'd like things to be, our ideals about the world, our expectations of how things will turn out, how others should be, how we should be. These images aren't based on reality, but are just a fantasy this film projector has created from nothing.

The mind, as talented and well-intentioned and clever as it is, is at the root of the One Problem. The mind seeks comfort and pleasure and control, and runs from discomfort and fear and change. That's why it plays this movie all the time—it's trying to create a perfect image that keeps the fears of discomfort and change and uncertainty away. What's the problem with that? Well, it stops us from doing what we want to do, from productive work to changing habits, because we're afraid and we procrastinate and we avoid.

Unfortunately, the real world never quite matches this movie. We have a plan for our day and things come up unexpectedly. We have expectations of how others will act, and they decide to behave differently. We have expectations of how disciplined we should be, and then we fail to live up to them. The reality of life never lives up to the movie that plays in our heads, and this causes all kinds of problems.

And as I've worked with people to help them change their habits, I've found that all of our problems come down to one problem, with the movie playing in our minds at the root of this problem.

Let me repeat that: all our problems are really just one single problem. The One Problem of the Mind Movie.

Imagine learning how to recognize this Mind Movie, and finding a method to solve the problem. You'd be able to handle anything, because you'd have a method for getting at the root of any problem.

A few things this wonderful mind leads us to do:

- Procrastinate when we have difficult work to do.
- Avoid exercise and seek the comforts of the Internet.

- Eat unhealthy food and gain too much weight.
- Become overwhelmed, stressed out, full of anxiety.
- Put off meeting new people because we're afraid.
- Avoid pursuing our dreams, building a business, finding our fulfilling careers.
- Avoid facing our debts so we can start building a stronger financial foundation.
- Put off our creative pursuits or the learning we've been wanting to do.
- Fail at new habits.
- Smoke, drink to excess, become addicted to drugs, even though we know these things aren't good for us.
- Doubt ourselves, feel bad about ourselves, compare ourselves to others.
- Become angry, frustrated, judgmental of others.

Busy mind.

Which means, if we can find the method to solve the One Problem, we'll have the keys to removing the obstacles in our lives, and our paths will be smoother.

That's what I discovered when I learned to become aware of the Mind Movie: if I turned my attention from the movie to reality, I could see how great reality was, without the movie. I could take action without the fears, being in the moment. I could go without smoking because I no longer had the ideal of needing to smoke—reality was great without the smoking. I could go for a run because I no longer had the ideal of being in comfort all the time—the reality of the discomfort wasn't too bad, and in fact I eventually learned to associate this discomfort with the wonders of growth and learning.

Learning to turn from the Mind Movie to reality, and appreciate reality for what it is, changed my life. I could now act without fear, make changes without procrastination.

What this book will teach you

What you'll learn from this book isn't how to make yourself a better person—it's how to remove the things that get in your way. When we do that, we have happiness, peace. We no longer feel anxious, we don't need to procrastinate, we let go of anger and resentment, and we can fully live in this moment, enjoying it.

That's what this book is about. Delving into the One Problem of the Mind Movie, and practicing with this method by experimenting with a small change ... and in the process, mastering the skills of discomfort and change.

With these skills, we'll learn to form mindful habits that will make us good at any change we want to make and learn the flexibility we need to stick to that change for the long term. We'll learn to deal with stress and anxiety, with frustration with ourselves and others, with procrastination and debt, and more.

We'll become masters of change. This is the Zen Habits Method.

How to use this book

The biggest mistake you'll make is skimming through this book and then putting it aside, hoping you've gleaned a few useful pieces of knowledge. The skills we'll talk about

in this book aren't things you can read about and then know. You need to practice them.

So what we'll be doing is creating change as you read the book. One small step at a time. It's the only way to truly understand the concepts of the book—put them into practice.

What I've laid out is a step-by-step plan for change, one step at the end of each chapter. You'll pick one small change to make, and implement it during the course of the book.

This means you'll be taking the first step in getting used to discomfort, and also practicing a key principle that has helped me to change my life completely: SLOW CHANGE. It's profoundly important, and yet slow change is difficult for most people because they want results right away.

Finally, this book will require a commitment: you'll need to set aside time to read and practice it. This small time investment, of just 10 minutes a day, will result in great changes in your life if you can commit to it.

THE CHALLENGE: COMMIT TO
MAKING A SMALL CHANGE

I hereby issue a challenge to you: Commit to reading a chapter of this book every day (they're short chapters), and commit to making one small change in your life as you read this book. Part of this commitment will be to do the daily missions at the end of each chapter. Write this commitment down, put it in your calendar, and tell someone else about it.

INTRODUCTION

This challenge is essential to this book: if you put the ideas into action, you'll truly understand them and get good at change. If you just read the book without acting (which you are probably tempted to do), you're wasting your time.

So: Are you up for the challenge? If you are, make a decision this minute to make one small change as you read this book. Don't be on the fence, or say you'll think about it later—commit right now.

✿ PART I ✿

Getting Started

This section aims at preparing you to make a habit change, setting yourself up for success, and getting started. Many people don't ever get started, because of their minds' resistance. Many of us start but don't keep going when resistance comes up. I'll show you how to overcome those common problems.

• O •

Why make a change?

Before we dive into how to make a change, and how to deal with change . . . we should start at the beginning, and talk about why it's important at all. Why should you put all this effort into change?

In my life, it's become very obvious what change has meant to me. I was an overweight, sedentary smoker who was broke and deeply in debt, stuck in procrastination, surrounded by clutter and disorganization, with no time for important things like my family and health and writing. I wanted to make changes, because I was unhappy with myself, but I couldn't figure out how to change. I was stuck.

When I learned how to change habits, I became unstuck. I learned about myself, and mindfulness, and enjoying the process rather than focusing on the outcome or goal. I learned that I can change things that made me unhappy, instead of being stuck in a rut. I learned to become happy with myself, not because I was now fitter or more productive, but because I trusted myself. I built that trust, one step at a time.

My life transformed, one small step after the other. I became a different person.

That said, life wasn't without frustrations. Every time I thought I knew how to change habits, I'd come across a new obstacle. I found frustrations in other areas, like relationships and working with other people and dealing with criticism. I wasn't always good at dealing with frustrations.

By creating the habit of mindfulness, I learned to see what was going on, to deal with the frustrations, and to be able to make more conscious choices.

I became calmer, more at peace, less frustrated with others and myself. My relationships improved as I became a better husband, friend, colleague, father. I'm not perfect by any means—there's no such thing as perfect—but I'm better at dealing with others and myself. I'm happier with others and myself.

Those are amazing results, though I could not have predicted nor controlled them. They emerged from learning about changes.

And that's the biggest reason to make changes and to get better at dealing with changes: you learn an amazing amount about how you work, about others, about life. This has been an unimaginable learning experience for me, and it hasn't ended and (I hope) never will.

I wish these same learning experiences for you and hope to guide you along the way.

MISSION: CHECK YOUR COMMITMENT

One very common problem people face is that they say, "Oh, I should start exercising," but then don't actually take the action needed to get started. In their minds, they haven't overcome the initial resistance to starting. You're

going to work on overcoming that in the next few chapters, but for today, just ask yourself: how committed am I to making a new change, and to actually starting it in the next week?