

A SHORT BOOK

Rational, Spiritual, Practical

*A modern take on the
path from micro to macro*

by Alex

Version 5.4.3

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PART ZERO

Before you start

What each part is for, who is talking, and who taught me.



After this short opening, the book has three parts, and each one has a different job. Here is what to expect from them, so you can set your own pace. The aim of the whole book is to convey ideas. It isn't a course, and it doesn't try to teach you a method from the page.

Part one is the rational part, and I've kept it deliberately earthly. It uses no spiritual vocabulary and asks for no belief. It is about two things you can check in your own life, how much you make things happen and how much you let go of whatever holds

you back, and why almost nobody works on both. If you have practiced for years, it may feel light, with sitcom characters and everyday chores in it. That is on purpose, and there are two reasons to read it anyway. DO and BE are the words Parts two and three use, so everything after rests on them. And it is the part you can hand to someone who has never meditated: a partner, a colleague, a friend who rolls their eyes at the word spiritual. It gives you a way to say what you do and why, with nothing they'd need to take on trust. And if someone handed this book to you, Part one was written with you in mind.

Part two is the spiritual part, and it has its own role: it says where all of this comes from and where it leads. It starts from a view of reality that I call an assumption, it quotes many traditions, and it says plainly where the reading is mine. You can disagree with it and still use the rest.

Part three is the practical side: the conditions that make it realistic to walk the whole road in one life, in the reality of the 21st century, from the ones you

can start alone tonight to the ones that need other people.

You can stop after any part, and each one makes the next easier to judge.

Who is talking, and who taught me

I'm Alex. In my teens I had a lot of questions: why things are the way they are, and why I am the way I am. Over time those questions led to a spiritual search. I have worked with computers for about ten years, eight of them in cyber security, which I still do. My spiritual journey is much longer, more than fourteen years.

Everything in this book rests on what I learned from my teacher, Genadiy Givin. He was born in Riga and studied at Riga Technical University. In his teens he met people who had something he wanted, and what he saw in them gave him a huge

wish to know what they knew. That wish led him to the man who became his teacher. He describes the people who handed this on to him, himself included, as ordinary people without titles. He adapted what they handed on to life in the 21st century. For him the knowledge is what matters.



My teacher, Genadiy Givin, and I.

Rational

*Two directions, four rooms, and a map
that turns out to be bigger than it looks.*



Two questions

Two questions first. Nobody is checking, so you can be honest.

How many things have you said you would do, and then didn't? Keep it to the last month. We're not here to ruin your evening.

And how often are you the first one to make a move in a conflict? The first “okay, that one was on me,” the first message after the long silence?

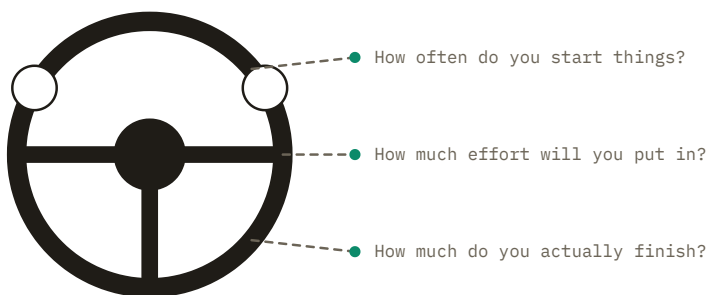
Hold on to your two answers. They measure two different things, almost nobody works on both, and the few who do end up living a different kind of life. That’s the whole idea, so you can disagree with it early. A person grows in two directions. I call them DO and BE. DO is how much you make things happen. BE is how much you let go of whatever holds you back from the inside, which turns out to be how much you can be here, aware of what is actually happening right now. When both are high, I call it high agency, and the rest of this book is about what it is, why it’s hard to get to, and why it’s worth the trouble.

The whole thing is one big graph that I’ll draw slowly.

DO: making things happen

Start with the easy one, since everybody already agrees it matters.

Picture the steering wheel of your life. Either you're holding it or you're in the back seat. How much of your life happens because you made it happen, and how much of it just happens to you? How often do you start things, how much effort are you willing to put in, how much do you actually get done?



Front seat or back seat?

Hands on the wheel, or in the back seat.

My favorite test for this is a boring one: how well do I follow up on my words? That's most of it. It doesn't need a loud personality, and a very quiet person can be extremely actionable and do things that would be hard for the loud ones. It doesn't need a world-changing project either. Making a plan for the day and then following it counts, and I'd say it counts for more than most world-changing projects, which tend to live in the notes app.

The quieter examples tell me more than the big ones, and the best of them is learning something new. Nothing visible happens on the day you sign up for the course or pick up the guitar, and for weeks you're bad at it in private. But you've decided that in a year you'll be able to do something you can't do today, and you've actually started, which is a rarer combination than it sounds.

Organizing is another. Somebody has to send the message that turns "we should catch up sometime" into Thursday at seven, and in most friend groups

it's the same person every time. Picking the restaurant belongs here too, and I consider it the hardest outer-agency test most groups ever face.

Asking is a quiet one: for the raise, the introduction, the help, out loud, instead of hoping somebody notices. So is finishing, especially the small things that sit on a list for months, like the form, the package that needs returning, the dentist appointment that has been “next week” for a year. And there's fixing the thing that annoys you every single day, the squeaky door or the chair that wobbles. If you've been going to fix it for a year, you've been running a free experiment on yourself, and the results are in.



Learning



Organizing



Asking



Finishing



Fixing

Five quiet kinds of DO.

I call all of this outer agency, and DO is the direction it lives in. The common thread is that you did something on purpose, and afterwards your life has something in it that wasn't going to show up on its own.

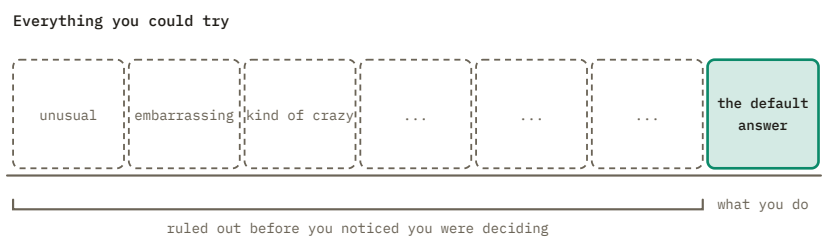
BE: letting go, and being here

BE gets talked about much less, and I find it the more interesting of the two.

BE is the ability to be at ease with yourself and to be here, aware of what is actually happening right now. Letting go is how you get there. It's being able to show your inner world to another person without three days of rehearsal. It's knowing how much you believe your own fears, how much the ideas in your head are running the show, how much other people's opinions push you around. You could call it internal resilience. It's also where the kind, supportive part of a person lives, because that part has a habit of switching off whenever you're braced.

It matters even if you couldn't care less about being a nice person (those are welcome too). The ideas in your head are a source of tension. The tension lives in the body, and you feel it as literally tense. It also affects how effective you are, and that's the practical part. I think of it as a tax on your ability to see solutions. If you carry enough fears and doubts, there is a whole shelf of solutions you will never look at, because they're unusual, or embarrassing, or kind of crazy, and you ruled them out before you

noticed you were deciding anything. You fall back on the default answer that’s already in your head, and you pay the tax on every problem you meet.

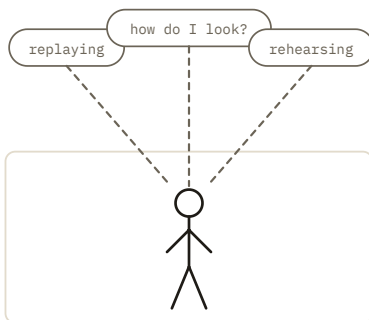


The tax on seeing solutions: most of the shelf is ruled out before you look.

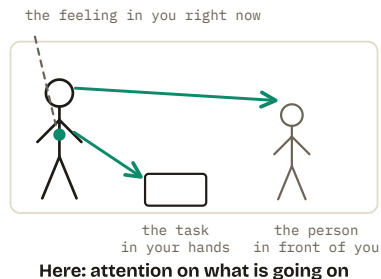
Jonny Miller has a long article on this called “How to Unclench,” which goes much deeper than I will and uses a similar tax image. I’m borrowing the idea and putting it on a bigger chart.

Here is the connection to being here. Tension drags your attention away from the moment. A braced mind spends its time somewhere else: replaying what already happened, rehearsing what might go wrong, checking how you look. Your body is in the room and your attention is in a meeting that isn’t

happening. In one study that pinged people's phones at random moments, their minds were somewhere other than the task in front of them almost as often as they were on it, and that typically made them unhappy (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010). Presence is the opposite: attention on what is actually going on, the person in front of you, the task in your hands, the feeling that is in you right now. The two feed each other. The more you let go, the more attention is free to stay here, and the more you stay here, the more you notice a feeling while it's happening, which is the moment it can move. That's why they sit on one axis.



Braced: body here, attention elsewhere



Where your attention is, as opposed to where your body is.

A word on the word. I don't mean relaxed, because you can be relaxed and asleep. I mean released: free from your own internal limitations. Relaxed describes how you feel. Released describes what is holding you, and when it lets go you end up more here, not less.

So how do you move up BE? People usually think of meditation first, and it helps a lot. What moves it most is the thing nobody wants to do: admit you were wrong in a situation and take the first step toward fixing it. Say sorry, and mean it. Have the hard conversation with someone you care about, or with someone you don't care about but still don't want to hurt, feel the "oh no, I really don't want to" go through you, notice it while it's happening, and do it anyway.

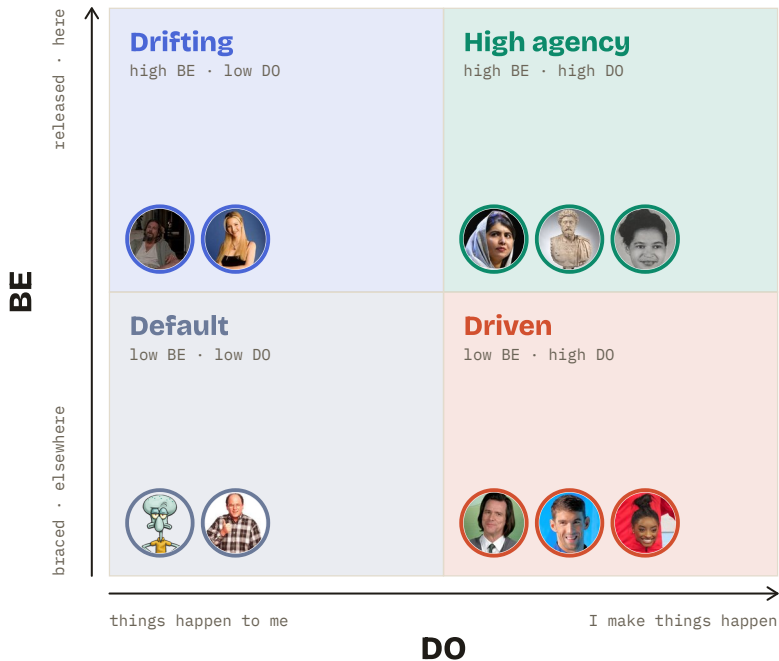
That is an act, and it goes against your own resistance. I call it inner agency. Outer agency is how you move along DO, and it gets things done. Inner agency is how you move up BE, and it gets you unstuck. Both are ways of expressing yourself in the

world effectively. That's all the word agency means here: the ability to express who you are, effectively, in two ways.



Four rooms

Draw them as a cross. DO runs left to right, from things happen to me to I make things happen. BE runs bottom to top, from braced and elsewhere to released and here. You get four rooms. I gave each room a name and a few famous residents, because a chart with nobody on it is just algebra.



The cross. DO runs left to right, BE runs bottom to top. Each room with the people who will show up in it.

■ Default

Bottom left: tense and passive, low BE and low DO. Things happen to you, and you're braced for the next one. You say a lot, and you follow through on a fraction of it. I will be honest with you: roughly 95% of people live here. Before you ask for the source, it's a feeling with a percentage sign on it.



Squidward

Squidward is the most extreme case and the funniest. He complains constantly, all his problems live next door, and he has big dreams of being a famous artist and clarinetist. When he does try, it goes badly and he blames everybody else. In one episode he moves to a town full of people exactly like him, and the sameness drives him up the wall, which shows how much he likes his own company.

There's a line going around that you either die a SpongeBob or live long enough to become a Squidward. It's a joke, and it's more accurate than I'd like. Kids are born pretty relaxed. They're joyful, they do things, and nobody has told them yet what's impossible, so they try it anyway. Over time life adds ideas, doubts and fears, and we start taking them seriously.



George
Costanza

George Costanza is the exit story. He lives with his parents, has no job, is deeply insecure, and believes everything his head tells him. Then comes

the episode where his friend Jerry tells him that if every instinct he has ever had is wrong, the opposite must be right. So George does the opposite of every fear and doubt he has, and by the end he has a girl, a job and a bit of respect. It's very funny, and I highly recommend it. I wouldn't call it the perfect way out of this room. I also can't tell you it doesn't work.



Henry David
Thoreau

Default has a nice corner too, and I don't want to skip it. Up near the edge closest to the middle live the decent, functional people. They keep their word most of the time and apologize sometimes. They have a job, a few friends and something they do on weekends, and nothing is on fire. They're even balanced, just at a low level. A lot of them feel ok, just a little flat, and there's a word for the flat part: languishing, a term from the sociologist Corey Keyes that Adam Grant made popular. You're not depressed, and you're not thriving. You're meh. Thoreau noticed the same thing back in the 1850s. In *Walden* he wrote that most people lead lives of quiet desperation, and before that sounds

dramatic, here is how I read it: people who are doing fine, who went along with the life that was expected of them and never got around to asking whether it was theirs. The desperation is quiet because it hardly feels like desperation. It feels like Tuesday.



Hank Hill



Jim Halpert



Pam Beesly

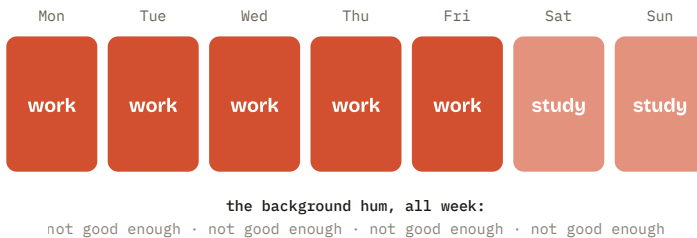
Hank Hill is that corner at its most lovable. He's responsible, kind and loyal, he has opinions about lawns that border on a belief system, and he can barely say "I love you" out loud. Jim Halpert is the relaxed version: kind, funny, good at his job, and for years he treats the job as temporary, something he's doing until something better turns up. Pam Beesly sits a few feet away, a receptionist who wants to be an artist and takes years to do anything about it.

What makes this room sticky is that it feels like making your own decisions. When people start watching themselves closely, one of the first things they find out is how few of the day's decisions they actually made. On a retreat, participants get one small instruction to follow for a few days, something like not touching the phone for a few hours. I've watched people catch themselves with it in their hand anyway, without having decided anything, and on my first retreat I was one of them. The mind decided, and we just did it. That's Default from the inside: not fully living, only a little bit, with attention mostly somewhere else while the body follows the autopilot.

■ Driven

Bottom right: tense and active, low BE and high DO. Still tense, because nothing has been let go, but these people get things done. You know some. You may be one. I was.

With my personality tendencies, it was a natural fit. For a few years I dedicated myself very deeply to a career in cyber security: working all week, studying on the weekends, with a constant background tension of not being good enough and not much time for the questions I'd started with, or for my wish to help other people live happier lives. I did become quite good at it. Luckily, something stopped me, and it came from the inside.

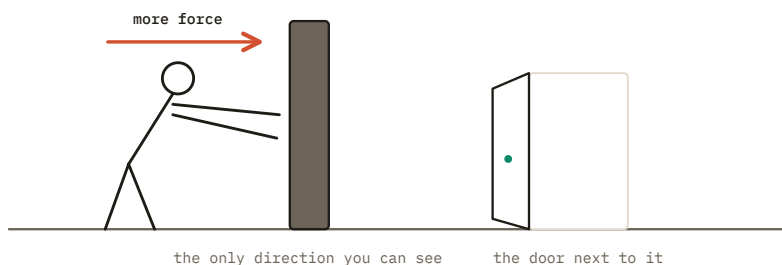


Work all week, study on the weekends, with a constant background tension of not being good enough.

The motivation underneath is often hidden from the person who has it. Somewhere behind the scenes there's an "I'll prove them wrong," or an "I'll get it done and then people will like me." It's all about a lack they can't let go of, so they push harder

in the one direction they know. Our culture pushes the same way. Pretty much every idea we have about success comes from people in this room, and we hardly have any examples from the top right.

I don't want to knock this room. It builds companies and wins medals and, as far as I can tell, answers its email. People here are often interesting to be around, because they act against the norm and take risks, and that usually comes from personality more than from any big shift inside. The cost is the tax from earlier. With enough tension in the system, the only tool you can see is more force, so when a problem doesn't move you push harder in the same direction, because it's the only direction you can see. For a long time that works. Then it stops working, and the person has no second move.



When a problem does not move, push harder in the same direction.

You can spot it from a few signs. Rest feels like wasting time, or makes you anxious, so a free Sunday turns into a project. You're rarely where you are, because attention is on the next thing, so the meal and the conversation and the walk are things you get through on the way. The finish line moves: when I get this, then I'll relax, and when this arrives there's a new this. Your worth tracks your output, so a bad week feels like a verdict and a good week only buys you the right to keep going. Praise bounces off, because the voice saying it isn't enough is louder. And sometimes the body says stop. Plenty of people live in two rooms in the same week, Driven from Monday to Friday and in Default's flat

corner by Sunday evening. Which raises a good question: what happens when a driven person actually reaches the dream?



Jim Carrey

Jim Carrey is one answer. He reached about everything an actor can reach, and he has talked openly about years of depression. He has said everybody should get rich and famous and have everything they ever dreamed of, so they'd see it isn't the answer. It's one of the truest things I've heard anyone say, and he would know.



Michael
Phelps

Michael Phelps is the same story, counted in medals. He has the most Olympic medals in history, 28 of them, 23 gold, over four Games, by a big margin. By his own account he crashed after every Olympics: you build four years toward one moment, and then you feel lost. In 2014 he checked into a treatment center. He has said he had always seen himself as a swimmer and not as a human being, and that he carried every negative emotion for years without talking about it. He says that going

into London in 2012 he wanted nothing to do with the sport anymore, and that Rio in 2016 felt nothing like that.



Simone Biles

Simone Biles is the most decorated gymnast in history, counting Olympic and World medals. In Tokyo in 2021, mid-air, something stopped working the way it always had. She pulled out of the team final after one vault and said why that same day: mental health. She sat out most of the other finals and came back for the beam, where she won bronze. Since then she has won three golds in Paris. I won't tell you which room she lives in now. That's her business.



Tal Ben-Shahar

There's a name for what Carrey and Phelps ran into: the arrival fallacy, from the author and positive-psychology teacher Tal Ben-Shahar. It's the belief that once you arrive, you'll finally feel the way you've been chasing. You arrive, you get a few days of relief, and the old tension is still there, now with a nicer view. In my case the back-

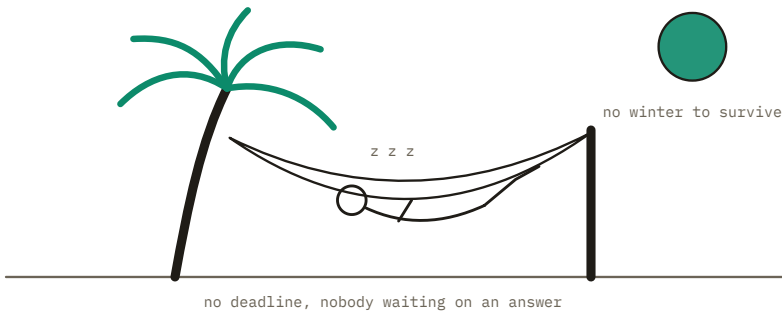
ground tension was “not good enough,” and I can confirm it is a productive thing to run on, up to a point.

Driven people have their own way of dodging the work: using the next goal to avoid whatever the last goal was supposed to fix. Busy is a very respectable way to never sit with yourself, and almost nobody gets an intervention for working too hard. They get promoted. The tools of letting go get recruited too: meditation for focus, Stoic quotes on the lock screen. Some of it genuinely helps. But the aim hasn't moved. Whatever the engine was, whether a point to prove, approval to earn or a fear of not having enough, it's still running. It just has a nicer morning routine now.

■ Drifting

Top left: released and passive, high BE and low DO. I call them drifters and I say it fondly, because I was a pretty good one. That was my life until I was about 24, before my Driven years: a kind of spiritual drifter, with big ideas and not much done. The room

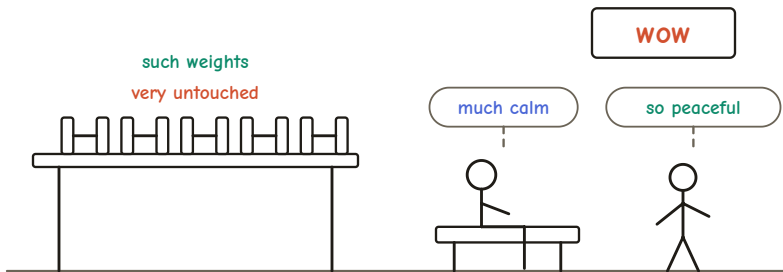
is full of very relaxed people. Chill, kind, nice to be around, you'd happily spend an afternoon with them. They also do very little. It happens a lot when life rarely pushes you from the outside, which in my case it didn't, so I had plenty of time for big ideas. Several of them are still ideas, and as far as I can tell they're very comfortable where they are.



Where life rarely pushes you from the outside.

The trap is that it feels good, and the good feeling is real. You're calm and comfortable and nice to everyone. But look at what is producing the calm. Mostly it's that nothing is pushing on you: no deadline, nobody waiting on an answer, no colleague who irritates you, no relative asking when you're getting a real job. If the people around you live the same way,

nobody triggers anybody, which is very peaceful and a bit like a gym where nobody lifts. Calm that depends on nobody asking anything of you lasts exactly until somebody asks. One real demand, a landlord or a deadline or a partner who wants a decision, and it's gone.



Very peaceful. Much calm. Nobody gets hurt and nobody gets stronger.

The other sign is the explanations. Drifters tend to have a good one for why nothing has started: the timing isn't right, wanting things is just stress, everything happens when it's meant to, ambition is for people who haven't figured out what matters. Each of them has a grain of truth, which is why they work. The escape moves look like growth too: a long stay somewhere warm and easy, a trip to figure out

what I want. Either can be exactly right. They turn into the trap when they replace the conversation with the person you can't take anymore, or the application you keep not sending.



The Dude

The best-known example is the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*, which is, by the way, my favorite film, so you can see how I ended up in here. He is the chilliest person ever put on screen, until he finally blows up at Walter over Donny's ashes. Mostly he goes wherever people push him, and most of the plot is other people's plans happening to him. He is loved for it, and for good reason. We could use more of that calm in the world. I'm not against the Dude. I'd just like him to own a calendar.



Phoebe
Buffay

Phoebe from *Friends* is the Dude with a guitar. She's kind and odd and loved by her friends, she wrote *Smelly Cat*, and she mostly floats through life on instinct. She's the happiest resident of this room and still a resident.



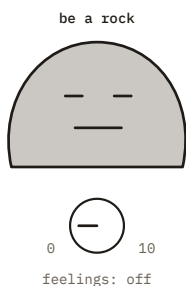
John Welwood

John Welwood, an American psychologist and a long-time Buddhist practitioner, knew the meditation world from the inside, and in the 1980s he coined a term for those escape moves: spiritual bypassing, using spiritual ideas and practices to avoid your own problems. Running off to an island for a long meditation, so you never have to face that one relationship, is the obvious version. What he described was people using meditation and talk of awakening to rise above the messy human stuff before they had faced it: the hurt, the anger, the unfinished business. Notice what gets skipped. It's the sorry, the hard conversation, the first step in a conflict: the whole inner agency list. Bypassing is a very sophisticated way of never having to do any of it.

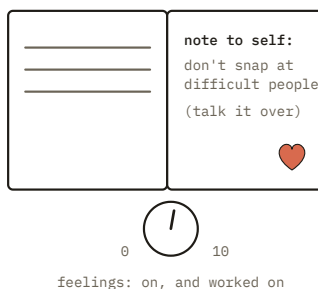
Almost every tradition that works on letting go has its own version of this, and it usually happens the same way: the deep teaching gets shortened to the part that sounds like permission.

Take Stoicism, because the internet version is so popular. The idea itself is practical. Some things are up to you, like your choices and how you respond, and a lot of things aren't, like other people, the weather and how it all turns out. Put your effort into the first group and make peace with the second. The popular misreading takes one more step: if most things aren't up to me, I shouldn't feel anything about them. Be a rock. Nothing bothers me, and if something does, nobody needs to know. That's the stiff upper lip, and it works like a volume knob turned down to zero. The Stoics weren't after a rock. They wanted to stop being run by fear and anger, and they kept room for joy and for goodwill toward people. Marcus Aurelius's private notebook is a good place to see it. It is full of him reminding himself not to snap at difficult people and talking himself through it, which is a man working on his feelings, not a man without any.

The internet version



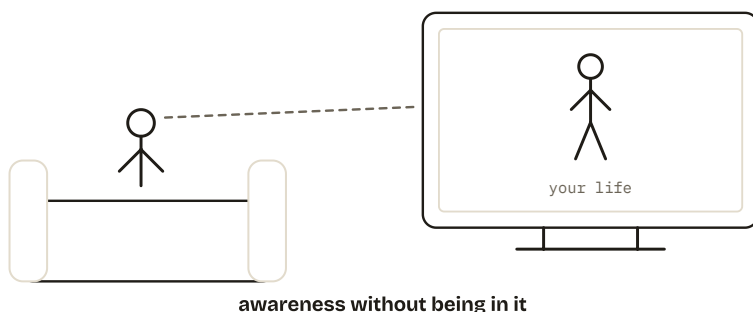
Marcus's notebook



Stoicism, misread and as practiced.

Advaita Vedanta, the Indian school of non-duality, says in short that the separate self is a kind of appearance and that what you really are is the awareness behind it. Read on a weekend, that turns into: there is no doer, so nothing is my responsibility, the world is an illusion, so why would I answer that message. The traditional route asked for preparation and ethical living before the big statements. The quick version keeps the punchline and loses the setup. Buddhist non-attachment goes the same way and becomes plain detachment, which is exactly the confusion Welwood warned about. Mindfulness becomes “just let it go.” And “everything happens for a reason” covers anything you’d rather not feel.

The extreme version of this room is the person who has done this for years. They learned to watch their thoughts without getting pulled in, which is a real skill, and kept going until they were watching their whole life from the side, like a documentary about somebody else. That's awareness without being in it, and BE needs both. Ask how they are and they'll tell you, sincerely, that they have no problems. Nothing is happening inside, so nothing is wrong. Super calm. Boring calm. I was heading that way myself, I'll admit, and I got lucky: I met people who fixed my silly ideas about it before I got there. The way I put it is that you need to open your heart, not just your attention. Calm that costs you your feelings isn't release. It's anesthesia.

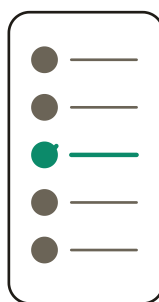
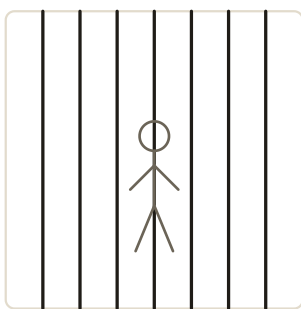


Aware of everything, in none of it.

■ High agency

Top right: released and active, high BE and high DO. Both high, finally. You've let go of enough of your limitations to be here, and you're doing things from there, and this is where you start expressing yourself properly. It's also turbulent.

A quick way to find your own examples is a test from George Mack, who wrote the essay on high agency. You're in a third-world jail cell. Who do you call? Whoever you just thought of is the highest-agency person you know: capable enough to do something about it, and caring enough to bother.

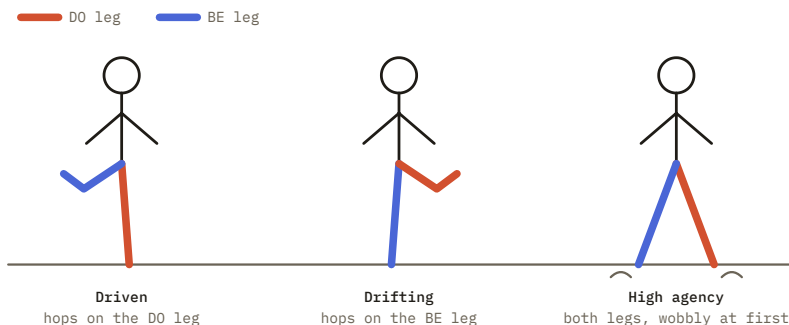


**Who do
you call?**

The jail-cell test.

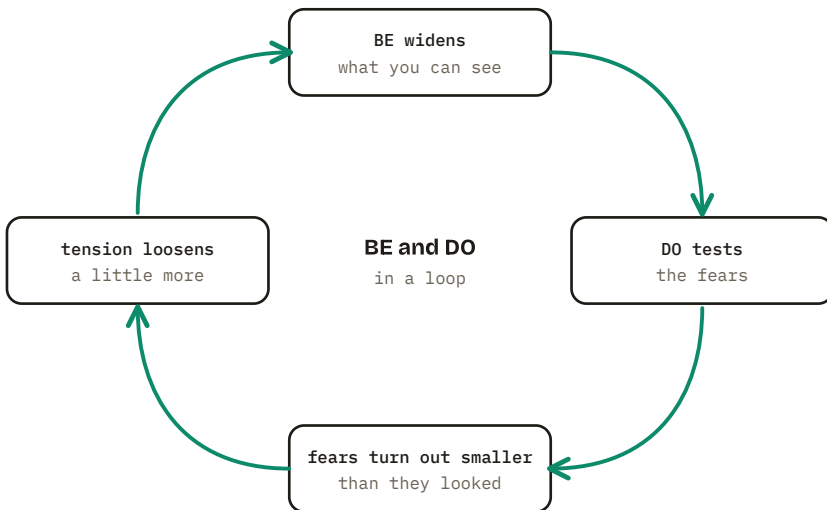
Look at the person you picked and you'll probably find a few things in common. They treat a problem as solvable until it proves otherwise, so the first question is what can I do about this, and whose fault it is comes a distant second. They don't wait for permission. They're willing to be disagreeable when the situation calls for it, and they don't do it for sport. They own their part in a mess without turning it into a punishment, which is the move driven people tend to miss. And they care, which is what separates agency from ruthlessness. You can be capable without caring. You just wouldn't have called that person from the jail cell.

The turbulence comes from walking on two legs. In Driven you hop on the DO leg. In Drifting you hop on the BE leg. In this room you finally put both down, and walking turns out to be hard. Every step swings to one side or the other until you find the center and learn to DO and BE at the same time.



Three ways to move. The DO leg is vermilion, the BE leg is blue.

Here is why the turbulence is worth it: the two legs feed each other. BE widens what you can see, so you notice more things worth doing. Doing them tests the fears that kept you from looking, and a lot of those fears turn out to be smaller than they looked. Each one that fails the test loosens the tension a little more, which widens what you can see. George Costanza ran this experiment for one episode. A person who keeps it up for years looks less like someone balancing two things and more like someone doing one thing, with a bit of a dance in it.



The two legs feed each other.

High agency doesn't mean control over everything. Part of it is knowing which things are up to you, which is the useful half of the Stoic idea from the drifting room. The weather, other people's opinions, the economy and the past are facts to work with. Pushing on a wall for a year is Driven, whatever you call it.

Sitcom characters are hard to find for this room, which tells you something about how rare it is, or how hard it is to write jokes about it. So first, real

people.



Malala
Yousafzai

Malala Yousafzai kept going to school under the Taliban, wrote an anonymous blog for the BBC and spoke out on national television, all at eleven. At fifteen she was shot in the head on her school bus. She survived, built a global movement for girls' education, won the Nobel Peace Prize at seventeen, and then got an Oxford degree, which after that list sounds almost modest. In her speech at the UN she said she doesn't even hate the man who shot her. That's both legs in one person: willing to disagree with the status quo, and free of the hatred that would have been the easiest fuel.



Marcus
Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius ran the Roman Empire for nineteen years with a plague in it, a long war on the frontier, and a general who declared himself emperor behind his back. On campaign he wrote notes to himself in Greek, almost certainly never meant for publication, which we now call the *Meditations*. It reads like a man with

the largest to-do list on earth reminding himself to do the task in front of him and to stop being run by other people's opinions. When the usurper was killed, the ancient sources say, Marcus didn't celebrate. He was upset he'd lost the chance to pardon him. Outer agency at the top of the world, with the inner kind to match. We also have a pretty cool statue of him.



Rosa Parks

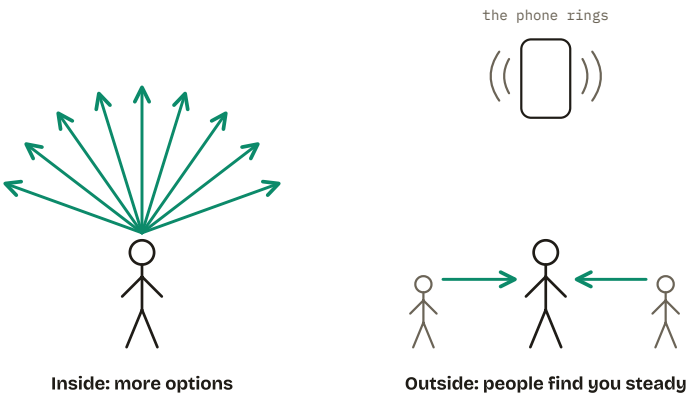
Rosa Parks is a good one for anyone who thinks this room needs a loud personality. She was soft-spoken, a seamstress, and she had been working with the local NAACP chapter for years before the day in 1955 when she refused to give up her bus seat in Montgomery. She said later that she wasn't physically tired, and that the only tired she was, was tired of giving in. Then came decades of steady, unglamorous work.

Fiction has one too: Sean Maguire in *Good Will Hunting*, a community college teacher with a quiet life and his own grief, who at the moment it matters finds the one sentence that gets through: "It's not

your fault.” The person you thought of in the jail cell lives here too, most likely with no statue and no prize.

What the top right gives you

So what do you get for walking on both legs? Here is what I’ve seen, and what people who get there describe.



The top right, from the inside and from the outside.

From the inside, the first thing is that you're here for your own life. Attention is on what's happening instead of on the replay or the rehearsal, which on its own feels like a different life. You see more options, because the tax stops being collected. Your reactions get shorter, and so does the time you stay angry at somebody. You say sorry faster: my fault, who cares why, I care more about the relationship than about being right. Emotions still arrive and you still feel them, but they go through you without a fight. Problems change shape. More of them start to look solvable, and I don't mean that in a positive-thinking way. Big challenges get more interesting and small things get more joyful, which is a strange combination and the best one I know. A lot of people who get here describe it as being in love with life, which I admit does sound like a greeting card.

You can also receive. Help, praise, a day off, things you didn't feel you deserved. When there's no voice in your head busy defending you, there's nothing left to defend. And you say things out loud, including the nice things. From a very young age I felt weird expressing how I feel about people, the posi-

tive stuff, to their faces. In my experience, unexpressed gratitude and love sit in you as tension just like unexpressed anger does.

From the outside, people find you steady and warm. You say what you think, and you don't use it as a weapon. When somebody is having a hard moment you can help them through it, instead of climbing into the mess with them so that two people are drowning instead of one person coming back to themselves. And you become, mostly by accident, the person someone calls from the jail cell. Don't be surprised when the phone rings.

At the far corner of the chart is the peak, where nothing really feels impossible and very little in you doubts that you can reach what you actually want. Almost everybody has visited. Programmers call it flow, athletes call it the zone, musicians call it the muse, and the rest of us call it a good day. Being in love is the preview: for a few weeks everything is good and you feel like you can do things, and nothing outside you changed. It's temporary. I see it as a taste of the full version, and you're welcome to go

and find it. Athletes and musicians show the pattern most clearly. An athlete can live in the zone for ninety minutes and lose it in the parking lot. A musician on stage is living at 100%, and a lot of musicians have a hard time off stage. I suspect it's connected: they can't carry the skill off the stage. Everybody visits, and almost nobody lives there.



Programmers
flow



Athletes
the zone



Musicians
the muse



The rest of us
a good day



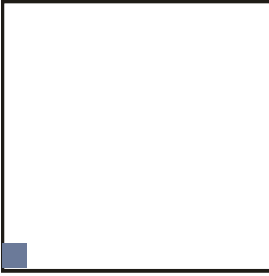
Everyone
being in love

Different rooms, same visit.

The math, with a warning

This is the part where I get to pretend it's science, so don't quote me. Say BE and DO each run from 0 to 100, and how much of your potential you use is roughly one times the other: with no DO, freedom changes nothing outside you, and with no BE, all the action goes down the few paths your fears allow. Someone at 100 on DO and 1 on BE is about 100. Give up five points of DO, gain one of BE, and it's 95 times 2, which is 190, just from being slightly less busy.

Picture the whole chart as a square, 10,000 in all. Default takes up 100, Driven at the wall or Drifting at its mirror 1,000, and the corner all of it.



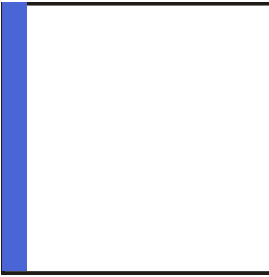
Default

$$10 \times 10 = 100$$



Driven at the wall

$$100 \times 10 = 1,000$$



Drifting, the mirror

$$10 \times 100 = 1,000$$



The corner

$$100 \times 100 = 10,000$$

The same square, four ways. Width is D0, height is BE,
the shaded part is the area a person takes up.

It's also why I don't accept the objection I'd expect from driven people, which is that if they let go of the tension they'll lose their edge. The drive and the tension are two different things that most people happen to have glued together. You keep the drive and drop the brace. That's what the 95 times 2 was trying to picture. Phelps in Rio is the closest real ex-

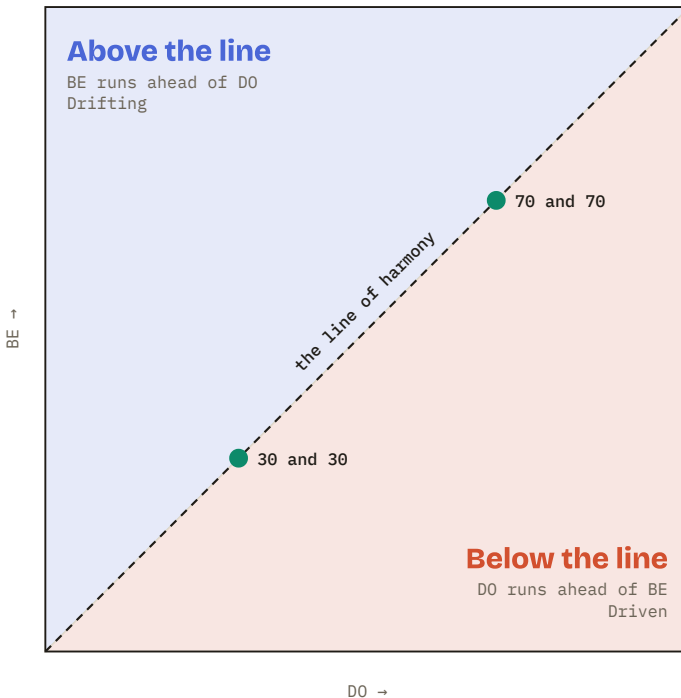
ample I have among famous people, and I'm a smaller one: a lot of the tension from my Driven years is gone, and the drive actually increased. I used to lose a lot of time to video games and shows, and now I want to work on my goals every day. Compared with my Driven years I get more done, it satisfies me much more, and the goals themselves got bigger.

The line

Now draw a line from the bottom left corner to the top right. Every point on it has as much BE as DO. I think of it as the line of harmony.

On the line, what you're free to want and see on the inside is in step with what you're able to do on the outside, and you're using whatever potential you currently have. You don't need to be anywhere special on it. Someone at 30 and 30 is on the line and so

is someone at 70 and 70. The position along the line says how far you've come. The distance from the line says how much is leaking.



The line of harmony. Position along it says how far you have come. Distance from it says how much is leaking.

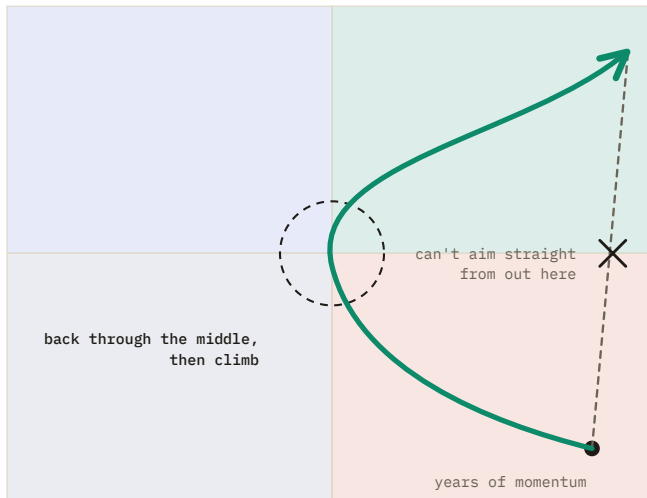
Below the line, in Driven, the outside runs ahead of the inside. You can do far more than you've allowed yourself to want, so the doing often points at something that was never really yours: a point to prove, someone to impress. The results arrive and nothing inside says thank you. Above the line, in Drifting, it goes the other way. Plenty of freedom inside, not much to show for it outside, and a very comfortable gap between the wishes and the doing.

Why almost nobody stays

If the corner is so good, why isn't everybody there? Because you can't steer to it from an extreme.

The reason is inertia. Someone deep in Driven has years of momentum in one direction, and someone deep in Drifting has the same momentum the other way, so neither can simply turn and aim at the corner. The route goes back through the middle first: the driven person has to ease off, the drifter has to

start moving, and only from the middle can either of them climb. Nobody does that for fun, so usually something has to stop them first.



inertia: the route to the corner goes through the middle

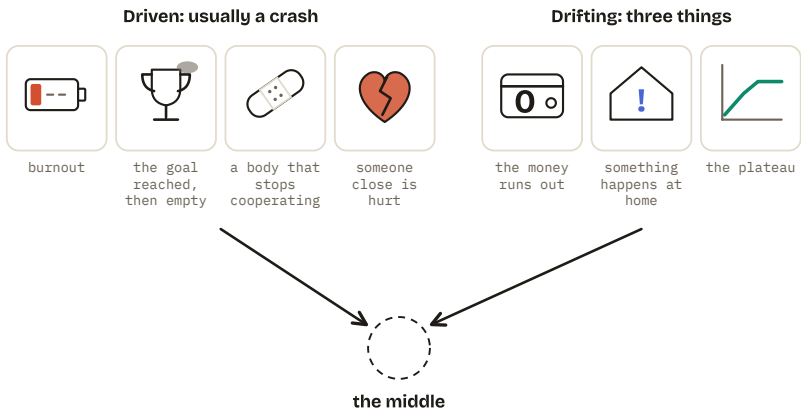
Inertia.

For a driven person it's usually a crash. Burnout, depression after reaching the goal, a body that stops cooperating, or a shift in values when something happens to someone close: a relative in the hospital, a partner's betrayal. Jim Carrey is a good example of easing back. After 2014 he made far fewer movies. In 2022 he said he was thinking about retiring, that

he'd done enough, and then he came back for another Sonic movie. It doesn't have to look dramatic from the outside. In my case it came from the inside. Whenever I had time to myself I felt an emptiness, a lack of fulfillment that none of my results in my field could touch, and it made my weekends the worst part of the week. Under it was a desire to know myself more deeply.

For a drifter I've noticed three things. The first is that the money runs out. I know that sounds stupid, and I'm serious. People get so passive that life arranges a situation where they can't cover what they need. It's also why courses promising money without effort are ridiculously popular: there are plenty of people who want to do nothing and get paid, and the product is a magic pill. No matter how spiritual a person is, reality still has a way of reminding us about itself, and money is a good way to do it. The second is that something happens in their life, usually in the family, and they can't stay passive anymore. The third is the plateau. They've been calm and comfortable for years, nothing is changing, and one day they decide the whole thing is a waste of

time. Then, instead of stopping in the middle, they swing all the way to the opposite corner: screw this, I'm getting a job.



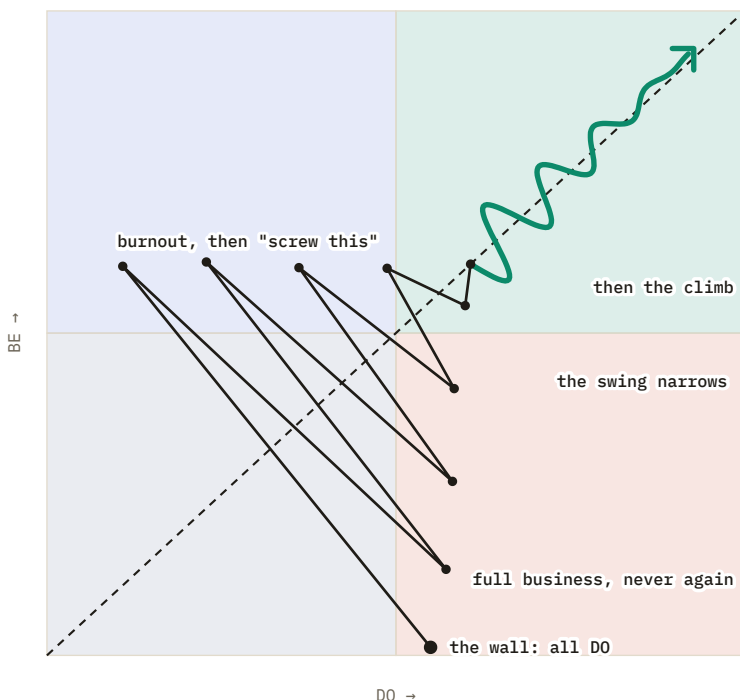
What stops each room, and where it points: the middle.

That's why people swing. Driven people swing hard into Drifting: burnout, then a one-way ticket to a tropical island. Drifting people swing hard back: I'm going full business, I'm never doing any of that again. I know people from both directions.

One friend of mine is the cleanest example I have: a founder who built a company and by most measures did very well, and who was also, in my friend's own words, one of the most tense people you could meet.

More than once I heard about family trips to beautiful places where every second was miserable, because there was no way to enjoy any of it. Nothing got released, so it built up, until the old way stopped working. Out of options, my friend went on a retreat and, for a while, stopped. On the chart, that's coming off the wall and back toward the middle, and then climbing, with the action kept the whole way. What changed shows at home. My friend now has real patience with the kids, neither of whom is very calm, and can have a heart to heart with someone about what's going on inside, calmly and with care.

Learning to walk on two legs looks wonky for a reason. A toddler doesn't walk so much as fall forward in a controlled way, and sometimes into the coffee table. Adults are the same. At the beginning we overshoot all the time, hard one way, hard the other, and that's fine, because that's how you learn it. If you traced a life on the chart you'd see a zigzag that narrows, and it keeps narrowing as you go.



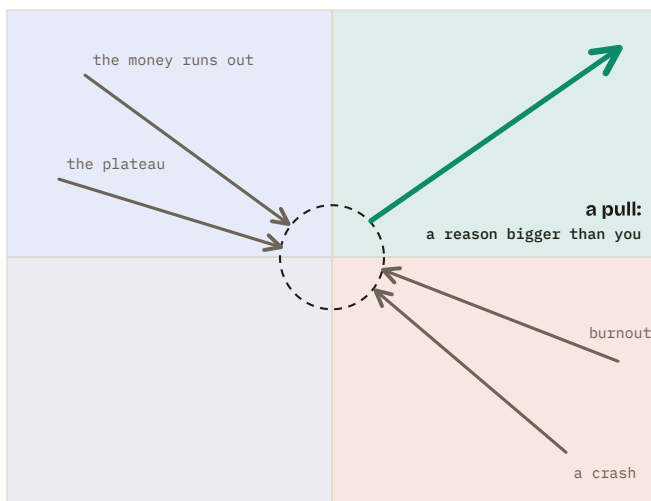
A swing that narrows, then the climb, which stays wavy until the peak. Illustration, not data.

The reason bigger than you

Everything so far has been a push. The money runs out, the body stops cooperating, the plateau gets old, a relative ends up in the hospital. Life shoves

you toward the middle, and for most people that's how they get there. Pushes work, but they have a flaw: they end. The money comes back, the body recovers, and the person drifts back to wherever they were comfortable.

What gets someone across the middle on purpose is a pull. Plenty of people try to get there by being a bit less driven and a bit more relaxed, circling the edge of it for years. What carries a person across is a reason bigger than themselves. "I'll prove them wrong" turns into "I want to help people do something." Or "I have kids, and I want to be a better person for them." Anything that matters more to you than your own wants, needs and fears can do it, however small it looks from outside.



pushes bring you to the middle; a pull takes you across

Pushes and a pull.

I didn't invent this. People from very different fields, some of them decades apart, have landed in roughly the same place. Since this is one of the most important ideas in the book, I'll show my work.



Viktor
Frankl

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived the Nazi camps, argued that a human being is always pointed beyond themselves, at a meaning to fulfill or a person to love, and that self-actualization only arrives as a side effect of self-transcendence.

dence. Chase yourself directly and you miss. Serve something and you get yourself as a bonus. What he saw in the camps, by his own account, was that people who had a “why” could bear an astonishing amount of “how,” a line he borrowed from Nietzsche. That’s an observation, not an experiment. He also wasn’t against tension. As I read him, he wanted a different kind: the tension of a task worth doing, instead of the tension of guarding yourself.

The lab has looked at this too, and it mostly agrees. Goals about supporting other people went with less distress than goals about looking good, a purpose beyond the self helped young people stick with boring work, volunteering went with a longer life only when it was done for others, and a stronger sense of purpose went with a lower risk of dying. Almost all of it is correlational, so I’m not claiming that a bigger reason will add years to your life. I’m saying that for an idea that sounds this soft, the direction is the same in nearly everything I could find.

Time on the phone	Money raised	Risk of dying during follow-up	
242	271		
100	100	100	83

before	after	before	after	lower	higher
Callers who spent five minutes with the student, one month on (Grant, 2007)				Lower or higher sense of purpose (Cohen and colleagues, 2016)	
Readers of his letter and callers who never met him: no significant gains				adjusted relative risk 0.83 (95% CI 0.75 to 0.91)	
Index: their own level before = 100				Index: lower purpose = 100	

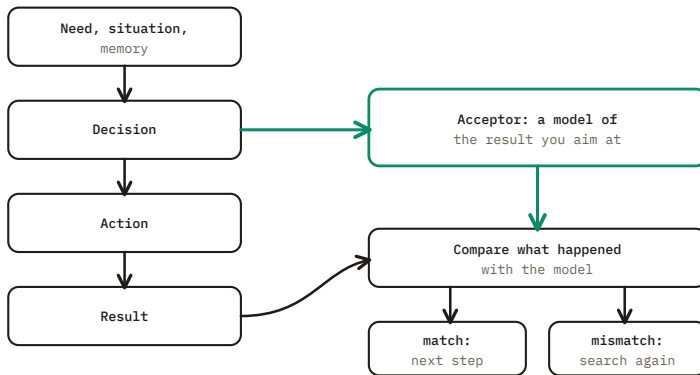
Left: a randomized field experiment. Right: a review of ten long-term studies, which shows an association, not a cause. Read both as a direction.

FROM THE STUDIES · 6 STUDIES

What the studies say

- The Soviet physiologist Pyotr Anokhin spent his career on how a living thing organizes itself around a goal. In his theory the brain builds a model of the result you're aiming at before you act, recruits only the parts of you that serve that result, and then compares what happened with the model. When the outcome doesn't match, restlessness shows up and you search for another way (Anokhin, 1973). The theory is about what a goal does, and it doesn't ask

whether the goal is about you or about somebody else.



Anokhin's functional system, simplified: a goal is a model of the result, and the result is compared with it.

- In two studies that followed college students week by week, students whose goals were about supporting other people got less distressed as the term went on, and students whose goals were about looking good got more distressed (Crocker and colleagues, 2010). Distress also nudged people toward looking-good goals, so the arrow runs both ways, but the pattern was clear.

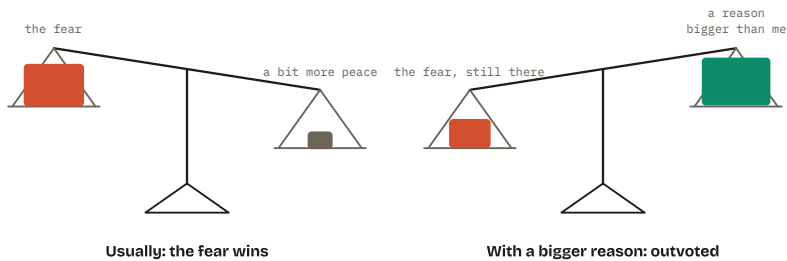
- In four studies with more than two thousand young people, a purpose aimed beyond the self helped them stick with a boring task and later improved their grades, while self-oriented motives didn't consistently help (Yeager and colleagues, 2014).
- A long study of older adults found that volunteering went with a lower risk of dying over four years only when the motive was other people. Volunteers who did it mainly for themselves had about the same risk as people who didn't volunteer at all (Konrath and colleagues, 2012).
- In a small experiment, people nudged to think about helping others instead of promoting themselves had lower stress-hormone responses to a public speaking test designed to stress them out, though they didn't report feeling less anxious (Abelson and colleagues, 2014). Their bodies calmed down before their feelings did.
- A review of ten studies and more than 136,000 people found that those with a stronger sense

of purpose had about 17% lower risk of dying during the follow-up (Cohen and colleagues, 2016). Most purpose measures are broad, which is one more reason to read all of this as a direction and not a dose.

Why a bigger reason works

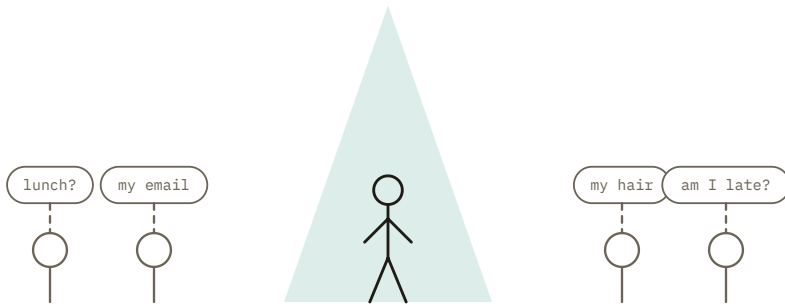
Picture someone who freezes whenever they have to speak up for themselves: the awkward email, the raise, the hard conversation. Now picture the same person at a school meeting, speaking up for their kid, calm and specific and a little scary. Same person, same nerves. What changed is that the fear got outvoted. The tension we've been talking about is a vote against anything that puts you at risk: looking wrong, being rejected, losing control. It wins most of the time because most of the time the thing on the other side of the scale is small and about you, a

bit more peace or a slightly better self-image. A reason bigger than you is a bigger vote. The fear can still be there. It just stops deciding.



The fear is a vote. A bigger reason is a bigger vote.

A lot of the tension is also made of self-monitoring: how am I coming across, am I good enough, what if I fail. A review of 226 effect sizes found that self-focused attention goes with more negative mood, and that the worried-about-how-I-come-across kind goes with social anxiety (Mor and Winquist, 2002). A reason that points away from you gives that attention somewhere else to go. You still care how it turns out. You're just no longer the subject of every sentence.



you, sure that everyone is watching

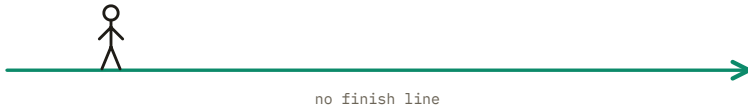
The spotlight effect (Gilovich and colleagues, 2000):
we overestimate how much others notice us.

Reasons also outlast goals. A goal about you ends when you reach it, and what's left can feel like nothing. In one study that followed graduates for a year after college, reaching goals about growth, relationships and community went with better psychological health. Reaching goals about money and image didn't, and went with more signs of ill-being (Niemic and colleagues, 2009). I haven't found a study that tests the finish line directly, so take the rest as my reading of the pattern: a reason about someone else has no finish line. Nobody finishes raising a kid, or being useful to the people they work with.

A goal about you



A reason about someone else



Goals about you end. Reasons about others keep going.

The same fix works for both rooms, or at least I think it does, because the drifter and the driven person have the same hole. In both cases the reason is about them. The drifter's reason is their own peace, which doesn't take much action to keep going. The driven person's reason is their own proof, which never gets enough. A bigger reason gives the drifter something worth getting up for, and it gives the driven person permission to stop proving. As far as I can tell nobody has tested that exact claim, so it's my reading too.

It also damps the swing. A swing is what happens when your direction is set by your mood: burnout, "screw this," reverse. A reason doesn't have a mood. The closest evidence I found shows people with a

reason sticking with the work and coping better on bad days. My bet is that a reason won't make you less tired, but it makes you less likely to quit the whole thing on a Tuesday. Anything else, like a stress-management tool on a driven person, is the nicer morning routine again. It works a little, and it's not the switch.

FROM THE STUDIES · 2 STUDIES

What the studies say about sticking with it

- University fundraisers spent five minutes with a student who had received a scholarship. A month later they were spending 142% more time on the phone and raising 171% more money than before, doing the same job, while callers who only read his letter or never met him showed no significant gains (Grant and colleagues, 2007).
- In a diary study of nearly 2,000 adults, stressful days made people feel worse and brought more physical complaints, as you'd expect, but people with a stronger sense of purpose took less of a hit (Hill and colleagues, 2018). Neither

study counted people quitting. They show people sticking with the work and coping better, which is the closest evidence I found.

Look back at the high agency room. Malala had girls' education. Rosa Parks had a cause she'd been working on for years before the bus. Marcus Aurelius wrote that he got up in the morning to do the work of a human being. They had different centuries, temperaments and jobs, and the one thing they share is a reason that wasn't about them.

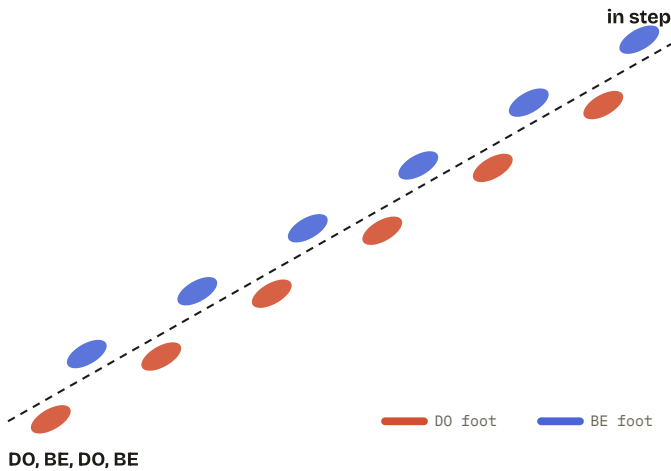
Bigger doesn't have to mean grand. It only has to be bigger than you: a kid, a team, a craft, a person who relies on you. A New Year's resolution is a reason about you, which is why it tends to expire in February.

It does have to be real, though. In the volunteering study the motive mattered more than the act: same volunteering, different results, depending on whether it was for the other person or for the volunteer. There's a counterfeit version. "I want to help people" can be the driven person's new cos-

tume, the same engine with a halo. Two questions help tell them apart. Would you still do it if nobody ever found out? And does it make you gentler with the person in front of you, or does that person turn into material for the cause? If it's the second, it's the old engine. And bigger than you doesn't mean instead of you: people who focus on others to the exclusion of themselves report more distress (Fritz and Helgeson, 1998).

Harmony as the road

Put it together. The road to the top right corner is a road to harmony between what you want on the inside, what you can do on the outside, and what you currently have to work with. The way there is to keep catching up the lazy leg until the two walk in step. Pushing the strong one harder only gets you a faster hop.



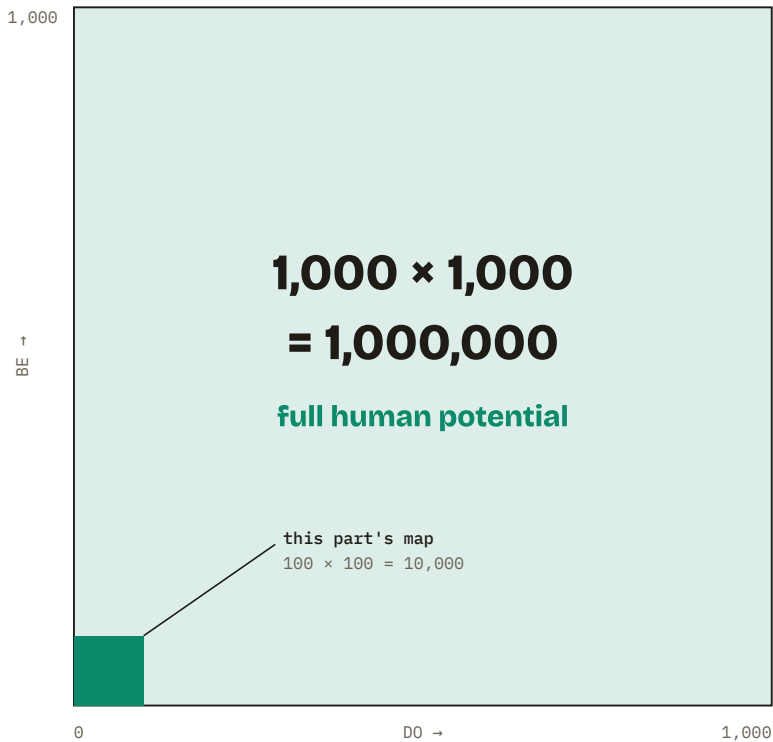
Walking in step: the lazy leg catches up, again and again.

You can check which way you're moving at any time. How many options do you see right now, compared with a year ago? When did you last do something nobody asked you to do, for somebody else's good? Ask again in two weeks.

Zoom out

One correction before this part ends. I told you the top right corner is the peak, 100 and 100. It is the peak of this chart, and I believe this chart is a small part of a much bigger map.

Zoom out by ten, and the whole square we've been using shrinks to a small gray box in the bottom left of something a thousand by a thousand: a million, instead of ten thousand. A person can grow into all of that area. I like the plain term for it: full human potential.



Zoom out by ten. The whole square we have been using is the small box in the corner.

What lies past the small square gets mystical fast, so I'll leave it there for this part.

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Spiritual

Two ways of reading a life, one assumption that separates them, and what follows from it in the world's religions.



Where we part ways

Part one was the polite part. Everything in it holds up whichever way you think the universe works. This part is where we part ways.

One thing first, because it changes how you read everything after it. I'm not religious, and I'm not asking you to adopt anybody's religion. What I will do

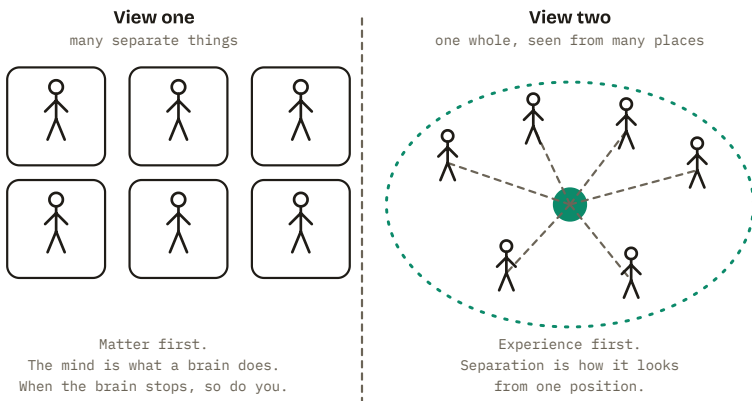
is quote a lot of traditions: Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Daoist, Greek, and a few people with no religion at all. They use different words, and sometimes different gods, and they keep coming back to a few of the same ideas.

One more thing, about how I'll argue. A world, real or invented, has to be coherent within its own rules. The rules can be as odd as you like, and what makes the world believable is that everything that happens in it follows from them. This is the test I'll run on the picture of reality in this part. Take one assumption about how things are, and ask whether everything else follows from it. You don't have to agree with the starting assumption for the test to work. Coherence is the first test, and your own life is the second, so the end of this part has a check and a prediction you can test on yourself.

Two ways of reading a life sit at opposite ends. Most people stand somewhere in between without noticing.

The first starts from observation. Look around and you see a world of things, and underneath them particles, or quantum fields if you want the physicist's answer. I look in a mirror, see one of those things, and feel like a person: me in here, everybody else out there. From that you get an assumption, that matter is the basic stuff, that a mind is something a brain does, and that consciousness depends on that activity. Follow it through and you get materialism, and often determinism, the idea that earlier causes fix everything that happens. When the brain stops, the experiencer stops. This view built hospitals and phones, and I live inside it for most of my day. In my body it feels like the plain truth. Me, Alex, a separate entity. Hello.

The second view sits at the other extreme, and it starts from a different assumption: that we are all one. Everything is part of a greater whole, and that whole is experiencing separation through the individual experience we call our lives. On this reading I'm not a thing inside the world. I'm the world, looking at itself from one position, with the memory of the rest switched off for a while.



Two assumptions at opposite ends. Neither can be observed from outside, since the observing is done by the same mind.

Both of these are assumptions. Nobody has observed that matter is all there is, because every observation was made through the same mind we're trying to explain. The first view predicts well, and the working assumption that experience depends on brain activity has strong evidence behind it. What nobody has is an accepted account of why that activity feels like anything from the inside, which the philosopher David Chalmers called the hard problem in 1995. The second view finds experience easy, since it is the basic ingredient, and takes on

the opposite question: if everything is one, why does separation feel so convincing? That question is most of this part.

Why this idea is worth a closer look

Here's why I think the second view deserves the effort. People were saying it long before anyone had a long weekend in the mountains, and something close to it turns up in each of the big religions.

Hindu texts say it outright. Judaism, Christianity and Islam say it in their mystical layers and in a few plain verses, Daoism says that the many come from one, and Buddhism and Jainism come at it from another side.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 7 PASSAGES

The base, tradition by tradition

- Hinduism: in the Chandogya Upanishad, one of India's oldest texts, a father tells his son that

the finest essence is the self of the whole world, and that he is that.

- Buddhism comes at it from another side. The early discourses teach that none of the parts that make up a person is my self, and later schools say that nothing exists on its own. One school of Chinese Buddhism pictured that as a net of jewels in which each jewel reflects all the others.
- Jainism, the Indian religion of non-harm, starts from the idea that all souls are alike, and its ethic rests on that. Its oldest text on conduct tells the reader that whoever you intend to harm feels as you would, and a later summary of the faith says that souls render service to one another.
- Judaism: the central prayer, the Shema, says that the Lord is one, and Chabad, a Hasidic movement, reads that unity as including the world: from God's side the world is as nothing before him, while from ours it is real.

- Christianity: Jesus prays that his followers may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, and Paul ends his account of the end with God being all in all.
- Islam: the Quran says that wherever you turn there is the face of God, and the Sufi mystic Ibn Arabi called all things “He/not He,” meaning that each thing is God and also not God.
- Daoism: in the Daodejing the Way gives birth to one, one gives birth to two, and the sequence runs on to the ten thousand things, the Chinese phrase for everything that exists.

People with no creed have said it too. Spinoza argued that there is only one substance, which he called God or Nature, and that everything else is a form of it. When a rabbi cabled Einstein in 1929 to ask whether he believed in God, Einstein said he believed in Spinoza’s God, meaning the lawful order of nature, nothing that cares what we do. Erwin Schrödinger argued that the plurality of minds is only apparent and tied that to the Upanishads. And

Carl Sagan, about as far from a mystic as a famous person gets, said on television in 1980 that we are a way for the cosmos to know itself.

These people don't hold exactly the view I'll use, and they share the base: what looks like many is not as separate as it looks. I'll take that base as the axiom and follow what comes out of it. If it's right, the ideas people usually file under "spiritual" come out as logical consequences, one after another. The traditions got there from many directions. Here the same ideas are laid out in the order they follow from one assumption.

The axiom and the machine

The axiom has three clauses.

We are one. There is a single whole, and everything is a part of it.

The whole experiences separation. It looks at itself through individual lives, each one a position with its own point of view, which each of us experiences as “my life.”

The separation ends. Being separate is a phase, and it returns to knowing itself as one.

The first two clauses describe how things are. The third says where they go, and it is the one the rest of this part leans on most.

A CLOSER LOOK

But why would it do that?

- Here explaining runs out, for me and for everybody else. The materialist picture has the same edge: the Big Bang is where our equations stop, so asking what came before it, or why it happened at all, leaves the question nowhere to stand. The axiom has its own version of that edge. It says that the whole experiences separation, and it can't really say why a whole would want to.

- What I do have is a story Alan Watts used to tell, and I enjoy thinking about it this way. Watts was the British writer who spent his life explaining Eastern philosophy to Western audiences, and the talk is usually called “The Dream of Life.” Suppose that every night you could dream any dream you wanted, and pack seventy-five years of experience into a single night. The first nights you would have every pleasure you could think of. After enough of those you would get tired of always knowing how it goes, so one night you would dream something you don’t control, where things happen to you that you didn’t plan. Each night you would hide a little more from yourself and take a bigger gamble, because the not knowing is where the excitement is. Keep going, Watts says, and eventually you would dream the life you are living today.
- That’s the second clause told as a story, and it makes the forgetting part of the fun. A dream like that only works if the dreamer forgets, and a whole that still remembered being whole

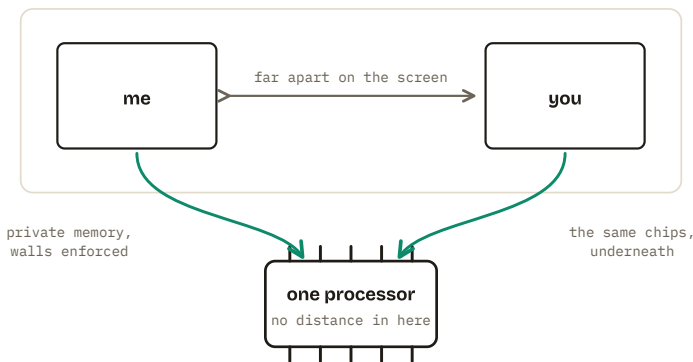
would be wearing a costume and knowing it. So if you ask me why the whole would bother, that is my favorite answer: it got bored of knowing how everything ends. Like watching *The Big Lebowski* for the twentieth time. Still great, but you know what happens to the rug.

I'll hold it with a computer, because Part one admitted that I spent years in cyber security, so I can't help it. Picture one machine running thousands of programs. Each program gets its own private memory and believes it has the whole thing to itself. The operating system maps all of it onto the same physical chips, and the hardware enforces the walls, which is what keeps a random app away from your password manager. The walls are real, though engineers built them. Underneath, there is one machine.

Now picture the screen. Two windows sit in opposite corners, and there seems to be a distance between them. There is a distance, on the screen. Both

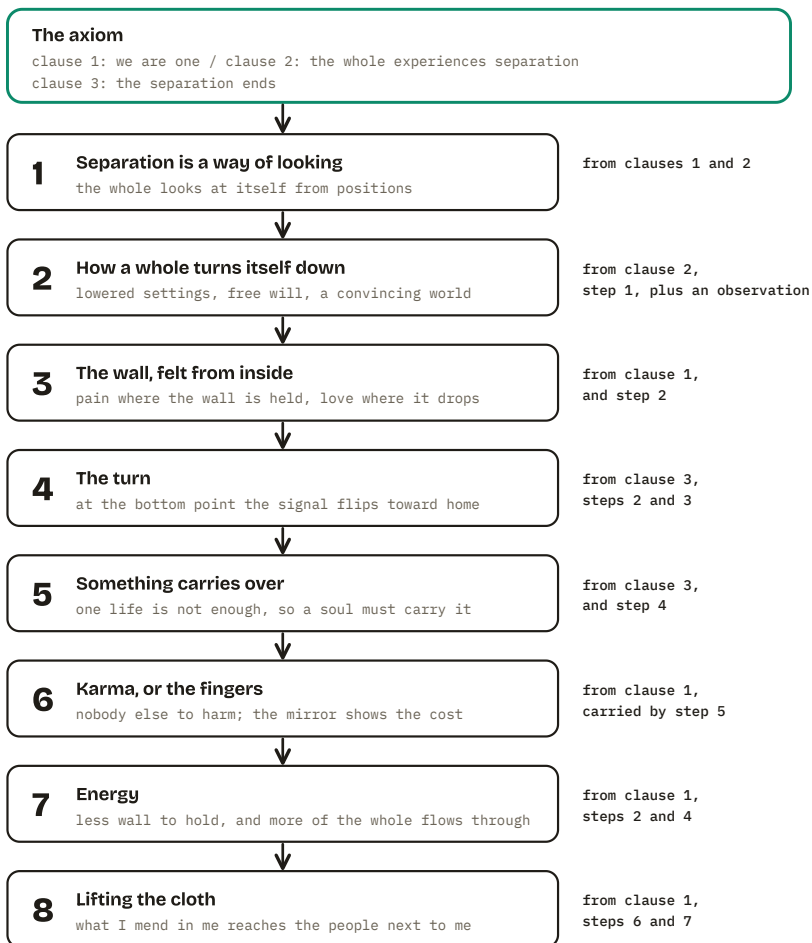
windows are computed on the same machine in the same moment, and the machine has never heard of that distance.

Under the axiom, you and I are programs. “Me over here, you over there” is the screen. My private memory is the self I feel from inside. The wall around it is the felt edge of me. The whole is the machine that was running both of us all along. The computer is a picture. It doesn’t mean the universe is a simulation or that anyone is running it. (But it is a fun way of looking at it!)



Far apart on the screen, side by side in the machine.
The distance is a property of the drawing.

From these three clauses I want to build the rest one step at a time. Each step uses a clause of the axiom, an earlier step, or both, and in a few places I add something I have observed, and I'll say where. Under each step I'll show you what the traditions say, so you can judge for yourself whether they meant the same thing. Here is the whole chain on one page.



The chain. The arrows show the order. The tags on the right give the premises each step uses, which are not always the step above.

1. Separation is a way of looking

If everything is one, and the whole experiences separation, then being separate can't be a fact about what exists. It has to be a fact about how the whole is looking at itself. So the separation is real as an experience and misleading as a final description, and that's what I mean by illusion. The word gets misused, so let me be careful: it doesn't mean nothing is there. The distance between the two windows is real, and you can measure it with a ruler held to the screen. What's wrong is the reading, the thought that two separate things sit that far apart inside the machine. The walls between programs work the same way. From inside a program they are completely real, and they still don't mean the machine is in pieces.

The traditions give answers to why a whole would do this, and they rhyme. Hindu texts call creation *lila*, play, an activity with no need behind it. Which makes the universe the biggest hobby project ever,

and like every hobby project, nobody can explain why it took this long. A whole that looks at itself needs positions to look from, and a position is a separation. Knowing needs a gap.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 3 PASSAGES

Real as an experience, misleading as the last word

- Hinduism calls the appearance maya, and teachers of Advaita, the non-dual school of Hindu philosophy, warn that “illusion” translates the word badly: the world depends on something deeper for its being, so it is neither fully real nor simply unreal. Plato’s prisoners in the cave take shadows for the world, and in the Heart Sutra, a short Buddhist text, form is emptiness and emptiness is form, which Buddhists read as saying that things have no fixed independent nature of their own.
- The Brahma Sutra (2.1.33), a classic Hindu text on the Upanishads, is where creation is called lila. Sufis quote a saying, “I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be known,” which scholars

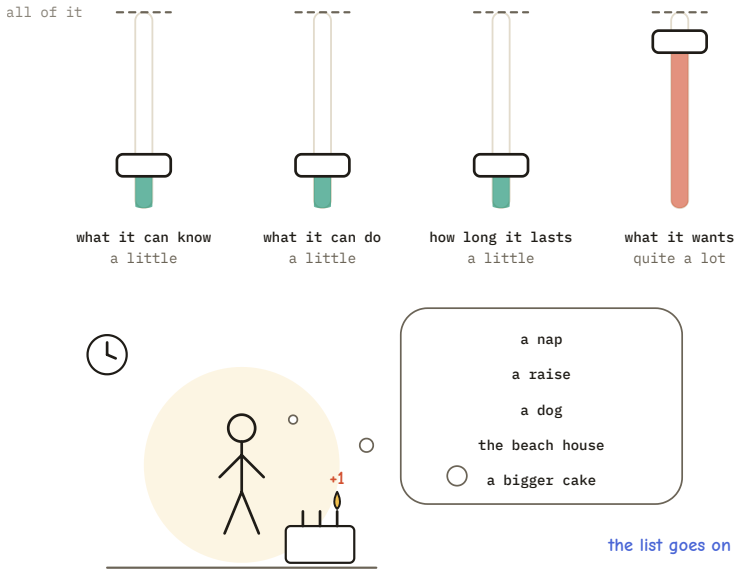
of hadith, the reported sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, do not accept as his. Its logic is the one I just gave: a whole that wants to know itself needs a point of view.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson, who had left the pulpit, wrote in *The Over-Soul* in 1841 that we live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles, and that meanwhile within man is the soul of the whole.

2. How a whole turns itself down

Step 1 ended on the claim that separation is a way of looking. That leaves the question this step is about. How does something whole manage to look at itself as a part? Nothing outside the whole could do it to the whole, because there is no outside. So whatever happens has to be something the whole does, and the question becomes what that would take.

My answer is that it takes doing less. A whole that can do anything can also do less than everything, and that ability belongs to being whole, since a whole that couldn't lower its own settings would be limited by that. So picture it turning down a few settings for one point of view. Turn down what that point of view can know, so it sees only what is near it. Turn down what it can do, so it acts only on what is within reach. Give it a clock, so its life has a before and an after. Give it a need, a sense of not having enough yet, so that it reaches for things. Set all four low enough and you get an experiencer who knows a little, can do a little, lasts a little and wants quite a lot, which is a fair description of me before coffee. The need is the busiest of the four. Most of what any of us calls "what I want" grows out of it, shaped by how we were raised and by everything the world around us keeps offering, and very little of it was ever really decided by us.



You and me, most days

It sees what is near, it reaches what is near, it gets one more candle on the cake every year, and its wish list grows faster than the candles. Most of us live here, and it is where every good story starts.

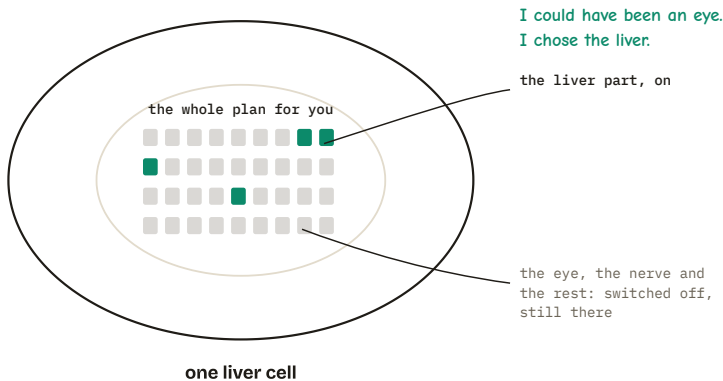
Operating systems do this all day. A program is given its own private memory, a short list of things it may do, a slice of processor time and a limit on what it can use. The machine still has all of it. The program has been granted a part, and from inside that part the limits look like the way things are. A

program doesn't wake up wondering where the rest of the memory went. That is all forgetting has to be: a limit you are inside of, which for that reason never shows up as a limit. It can show up to someone standing outside it, the way everyone hears your accent except you.

Your own body does it too. Almost every cell in it carries the complete plan for you. A liver cell holds the instructions for an eye and for a nerve, and it uses a small fraction of them. Being a liver cell means having nearly everything switched off so the liver work can get done, and nothing is deleted.

John Gurdon put the nucleus of a tadpole's gut cell into an egg that had been emptied of its own, and the egg grew into a frog. In 2006 Shinya Yamanaka showed in mouse skin cells, and a year later in human ones, that a handful of genes can switch a cell back into one that can become anything. They shared a Nobel Prize for it. A cell with every setting on would be no use to the body, so the lowered settings are what give the part its job. A cell also stays well only while it keeps listening. Cells in a body pick up signals from their neighbors that say when

to divide and when to stop. How much of the signal from the whole a person still picks up is a matter of degree, and I am somewhere on that scale myself.



Every cell carries the whole plan and uses a small part of it. The rest is switched off and kept.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 6 PASSAGES

Cloaks, contraction and things switched off

- The traditions describe the wall as built, veiled or forgotten. Buddhism says the self is built. What feels like one solid “me” is described as a bundle of parts: body, feelings, perceptions, intentions and habits, and awareness, working together, and the first thing the path asks you

to drop is the belief that there is a solid, permanent “me” behind them.

- Jain teaching describes karma as fine matter that veils the soul’s own natural knowledge, as clouds veil the sun, so the perfection was there all along.
- The letter to the Ephesians says that the non-Jewish world its readers left behind is alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them (4:18). In the Quran (7:172) God asks the descendants of Adam, “Am I not your Lord?”, and Sufis read that moment as the origin the soul has forgotten and longs to return to.
- Kashmir Shaivism, a school of Hindu philosophy whose name, Pratyabhijna, means recognition, teaches that the One narrows itself into a person through five cloaks: limited power to act, limited knowledge, a sense of lack that makes us reach for things, time, and a fixed order of cause and place. Its short text, the Pratyabhijnahrdayam, presents the path as recognizing what you are.

- Isaac Luria, the sixteenth-century Kabbalist of Safed, taught tzimtzum: the Infinite withdraws into itself to leave a space in which a world can exist.
- In the Chandogya Upanishad (6.13) a father has his son put salt in water and come back the next morning. The salt can't be seen, and it is in every sip. Then comes the refrain from 6.8.7: that is the self, and you are that.

Turning the settings down is half of it. The other half is the world the point of view looks out at. A part with fewer settings could still suspect that it belongs to something bigger, unless everything it touches tells it otherwise. So the whole builds the experience of separation to be convincing. Every body hurts on its own, every object has an edge, every life has its own bills and its own birthday, and every time you check, all of it agrees that you are in here and the rest is out there. The traditions call this lila, the play from step 1, or maya, the appearance. It is made so well that the whole, looking through it, starts to believe it. Nothing in it is bro-

ken. We are still one, and we built a world that is very good at helping us forget it. Honestly, it is the best software ever shipped. Zero bug reports, mostly because nobody can find the support page.

There is one more thing the whole has to do, and without it none of the rest would work. Picture a part with every setting turned down, inside the most convincing world you can imagine, and still running a script the whole wrote in advance. That part isn't separate at all. It is the whole reading a story to itself, a well-prepared plan that just executes. For the separation to be real, the whole has to hand over the steering, and that is free will, the biggest unknown it could give itself. Watts's dream, in the fold under the axiom, says the same thing: on the night you get tired of knowing how it goes, you dream something you don't control.

Free will here means being free inside the rules. You don't choose the rules or what each choice costs, and you do choose what you do. The steps that follow put a lot of machinery around a person: a drift, a signal that flips, lessons that keep coming

back. None of it forces anything. It makes one direction feel better and shows where the work is, and you can ignore it for a whole life. If the return were forced, the separation would never have been real in the first place. What stays open is the pace and the way. Spinoza, whom I quoted at the start as a witness for the one substance, disagrees here. He held that people think themselves free only because they know their own actions and not the causes behind them. On this point the axiom parts ways with him.

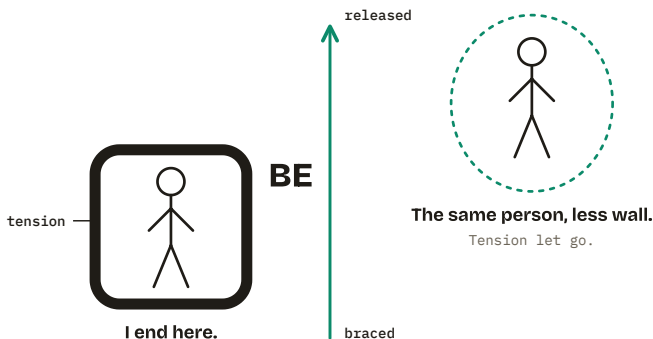
FROM THE TRADITIONS · 4 PASSAGES

Foreseen, and still chosen

- In the Mishnah, Rabbi Akiva says that everything is foreseen, and freedom of choice is given (Avot 3:15, numbered 3:16 in some editions). As I read it, that is this whole point in one line: the whole sees everything and still hands over the steering.
- In the Bhagavad Gita, after teaching Arjuna everything, Krishna tells him to meditate on it and then act as he wishes (18:63).

- The Quran tells the Prophet to say that the truth is from the Lord, so whoever wills, let him believe, and whoever wills, let him disbelieve (18:29).
- Pico della Mirandola, the fifteenth-century Italian thinker, has God tell Adam in the Oration on the Dignity of Man that he was given no fixed seat, no face of his own and no special gift, so that he could have whatever seat, face and gifts he chose. Every other creature is bound by laws set for it, and Adam alone decides his own nature by his own free choice.

The body holds the limits in place. The belief that I'm separate is held as tension, and the felt edge of me is the wall. Clench a fist and you feel like a small hard object among other objects, and when you loosen it the feeling softens.



The wall, as it shows in the body. Hold less of it and you sit higher on BE.

That also explains a pull most of us know. A world built to help a whole forget keeps doing its job, so the default direction is toward more separation. Do nothing in particular and you end up a little more separate every year, more guarded and more sure of where you end. Give it enough years and you become the guy who starts every sentence with “back in my day”. I can feel it starting already. Settings that were lowered stay lowered, and nothing in the program’s own routine raises them. On its own the drift only goes one way, so something else has to start the return.

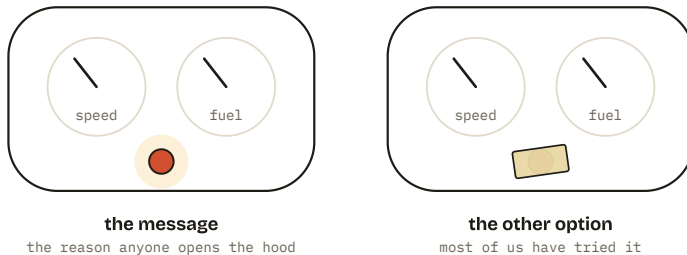
3. The wall, felt from inside

Step 2 built the wall and a world that keeps it convincing. The next question is what the wall feels like from inside, and the axiom has a definite answer to it. The answer covers two things we usually keep in separate drawers, pain and love.

Start with pain. Some of it is just the body doing its job. You touch a hot pan and your hand pulls back before you've had a single thought, and that kind of pain keeps you alive. Then there is the part we add on top. Step 2 said that the wall is held in the body as tension, and Part one called that tension a tax. When something hurts, the same tension closes around the pain and says that this shouldn't be happening. Most of what we call suffering is that: the pain, plus our fight against it. So suffering measures resistance. The more you push against what is happening, the more it hurts.

That gives suffering a job. Step 2 ended on a pull that only goes one way, toward more separation, and nothing in an ordinary day turns it around by itself.

So something has to tell us what the wall is costing, and it has to be a message we can't simply ignore. Suffering is that message. It works like the warning light on a car's dashboard. Nobody enjoys seeing it come on, and it is the only reason anyone opens the hood. Putting a piece of tape over it is also an option, and most of us have tried that at some point.



Suffering as the warning light on the dashboard. The tape is also an option.

A CLOSER LOOK

A post-mortem, the way we do it at work

- In software, when something breaks, the team writes a post-mortem. The habit is to keep asking why until you reach the cause that, once fixed, stops the whole problem from coming

back. Taiichi Ohno made it famous at Toyota as asking why five times. Try it on a wish. Why do I want a new car? Mine is getting old. Why does that matter? I'd feel I'm doing well. Why do I want that? Then I could finally relax. And why relax? Because then I'd be happy. Every chain I've tried ends there, whatever it starts from.

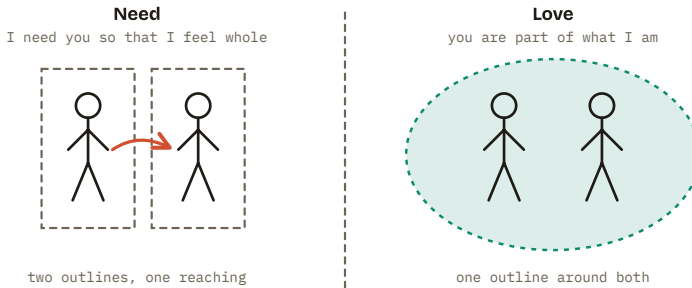
- Now try it on a pain. Why am I irritated with my colleague? The credit went to someone else. Why does that sting? I need people to see what I'm worth. Why? My worth feels like something out there that I have to win and defend. And why would it be out there? Because I feel like I'm in here, separate, and everything else is out there. That's the wall from step 2, and every chain of this kind I've tried ends at it too. Run it on something of your own. It takes about a minute.

The same signal reads the other way too. If pain is what the wall feels like when it is held tight, then what you feel when it drops for a moment is love. A

child runs at you and you pick them up, or a friend says exactly the thing you needed to hear, and for a second you don't notice where you end. Nobody has to explain to you that this feels good. Under the axiom it feels good because for that second you are acting as what you are, a part of one whole, and the wall isn't in the way. Part one called being in love the preview of the far corner of its chart, and this is what the preview is showing.

That's also why love is strongest with the people closest to you. With your children, your partner and your oldest friends the wall is at its thinnest, so it doesn't take much for it to drop. It helps to tell love apart from the need from step 2, since the two live in the same relationships. Need says, I need you so that I feel whole. Love says, you are part of what I am. Most of us have plenty of both, me included, and the work is to grow the second. Love also grows outward a step at a time, from your own people to friends, to strangers, to the people who are hard for you, and further. In my field, two programs sharing

memory without permission is a vulnerability. With permission it's a feature, which is also a decent description of a good marriage.



Need says, I need you so that I feel whole. Love says, you are part of what I am.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 4 PASSAGES

Halves, and a ladder

- In Plato's Symposium, Aristophanes tells a comic story in which humans were once whole and were cut in two, so each of us goes looking for our other half, and he says that love is the name for the desire and pursuit of the whole (192e to 193a). Later in the same dialogue Diotima describes a ladder of love that climbs from one beautiful body to all of them, then to

beautiful souls, to laws and knowledge, and finally to beauty itself (210a to 212a).

- The first letter of John says that God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (4:16).
- The Metta Sutta, the Buddhist discourse on loving kindness, says that just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, one should cultivate a boundless heart toward all beings (Sutta Nipata 1.8).
- Ibn Arabi wrote in a poem that his heart had become able to take on every form, a pasture for gazelles and a convent for monks, and that he follows the religion of love wherever its camels turn (Tarjuman al-Ashwaq, poem 11).

That leaves the hardest question this part has to answer. If we are one, why would a whole allow cruelty? The axiom answers it in its own terms. There is nobody else, so the whole is never doing anything to a stranger. It is on both sides of everything that happens, the one who hurts and the one who is hurt.

And step 2 handed over the steering, and a steering wheel that could only turn toward kindness wouldn't be a steering wheel. What we call evil is what a point of view does when its wall is at its thickest. It acts as if the other is no part of it at all, and it no longer hears the signal that would tell it otherwise. Augustine, who thought about this question as hard as anyone, said that what we call evil is the absence of good and has no substance of its own. A shadow works the same way, since it is only a place where the light isn't getting through. Under the axiom that is exactly right: evil is love that is missing, the wall standing where the whole should be felt. None of this makes cruelty fine, and none of it asks anyone to stand by. It says what cruelty is, and step 6 says where it lands.

So pain and love are one signal, read in two directions. The more wall you hold, the more it hurts, and the less you hold, the more love gets through. Over one evening that's a mood. Over a year it is a direction, and the next step is about the moment the direction changes.

Two arrows, and the absence of good

- In his first talk the Buddha names the truth of suffering, its origin in craving, its ending, and the path that leads to that ending (Samyutta Nikaya 56.11), which is the shape of a post-mortem: the problem, its root cause, the fact that it can end, and the fix. As I read it, craving is the need setting from step 2 in his words.
- In the Sallatha Sutta he says that when something hurts, an untrained person feels two pains, the physical one and the mental one added on top, like a man struck by one arrow and then by a second, while a trained disciple feels only the first (Samyutta Nikaya 36.6).
- Augustine asks in his *Enchiridion* what we call evil if not the absence of good, and compares it to a disease or a wound in the body, which is the absence of health and does not exist on its own (chapter 11).
- Irenaeus, a second-century bishop, taught that people were made unfinished so that they could grow, and that they come to know the

worth of good by having tasted its opposite (Against Heresies IV.38 to 39).

- At the end of the book of Job, after the voice from the whirlwind, Job says to God that he had heard of him by the hearing of the ear, and now his eye sees him (42:5).

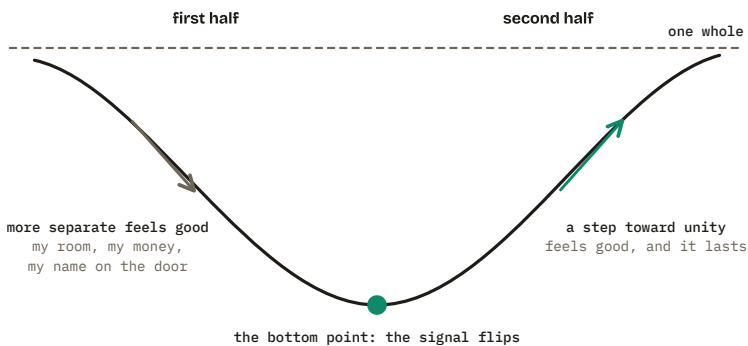
4. The turn

The third clause says the separation ends, step 2 says the drift only goes one way, and step 3 says the wall keeps reporting what it costs. So the whole needs something built in that turns a point of view around once it has gone far enough, and I think that is exactly what we find.

Picture the run in two halves. In the first half separation is new, and it is the thing being learned. Getting more separate feels good here: my own room, my own money, my own name on the door,

winning. Nobody is doing it wrong here. This is the half of the game you came for, and the happiness you get from it is real.

Somewhere there is a bottom point, the most separate a point of view gets, and past it the signal flips. The same moves stop paying. A step toward unity starts to feel good in a way that lasts, and standing still, or taking more for yourself, starts to feel empty. Nobody announces it. It shows up as a flatness that no new result can touch, and a quiet question of whether this is all there is. I call it the turn, and it is the moment the third clause starts working on a particular person.



Two halves of one game. Past the bottom point the same moves stop paying, and a step toward unity starts to.

Restless until it rests

- The Buddha tells his own version in the Anguttara Nikaya (3.39). He describes a delicate life in his father's house, with lotus ponds made just for him, a house for each of the three seasons and musicians for the four months of the rains. Amid all of it he reflected that he too would grow old, get sick and die, and the vanity of youth, of health and of life fell away from him. Later biographies tell the same moment as the four sights: an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a wandering monk.
- The Teacher of Ecclesiastes made himself great works, built houses, planted vineyards, gathered silver and gold and kept nothing from his eyes that they wanted. Then he looked at everything his hands had done, and all was vanity and a striving after wind (2:4 to 11).
- Augustine opens his Confessions by telling God that he made us for himself, and that our heart is restless until it rests in him (1.1).

- Rumi opens his Masnavi with a reed flute that cries because it was parted from the reed bed, and says that everyone who is left far from their source wishes back the time when they were united with it (Book I, 1 to 4).

The turn doesn't belong to one room of Part one's chart. Any room can hit that bottom point. In Driven it usually looks like the crash after reaching the goal. In Drifting it looks like the plateau, years of calm and then the sudden sense that the whole thing is a waste of time. In Default it can come with no drama at all, as an emptiness in a perfectly ordinary life. For me it was the weekends I mentioned in Part one, when every free hour felt empty and none of my results could reach it. Some people go through the turn after a successful run, in this life. Others seem to be born after it. They never quite fit a society that still runs on separation, and they start searching young, which from the outside can look a lot like being a difficult teenager.

The switch is strange and hard, because everything in you was trained to move the other way. The old moves still look right, and they stop feeling right. That is why a driven person at this point often doubles down first, since more of the same is the only direction they know. It is like pressing the elevator button harder. Everybody knows it doesn't help, and still we all do it.

I should say what I mean by happiness here, because it is easy to mishear. A moment of fun or pleasure comes and goes. The happiness I mean is the state you live in over months: fulfillment, steady good will toward people, wanting to get up in the morning. It can include a pleasure that lasts. The test is simple. Over the last year, have I become more fulfilled, or more bleak, with more negative thoughts and more emptiness? After the turn, that is how the direction gets reported. It is the signal from step 3, read over months instead of moments. So the sense of happiness, and the emptiness or depression on the other side of it, is about as close as we get to a compass. Each of us carries our own, nobody else can read it for us, and it works from wher-

ever a person happens to be standing. If the emptiness has turned into a depression that weighs on every day, get real help first, from a doctor or a therapist. The compass will still be there afterwards.

None of this makes anybody better. Before the turn and after it are two parts of the same game. Think of two players, one who has played for years and one who has just started. The first has simply played longer. The second will get there too, in different circumstances, and will meet the same things on the way. Moving toward separation doesn't make someone bad, and moving toward unity doesn't make someone good. Each of us is playing the part of the lila we are in right now, and every part is needed, which is also why the paths look so different, as I explain near the end of this part.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 7 PASSAGES

Leaving home, and coming to yourself

- As I read it, the story of the garden at the start of the Bible tells the same arc in its own words: the fall is the step down into separation, sin is

acting from the wall, and salvation is the way back.

- In Genesis, Adam and Eve eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes are opened, they cover themselves and hide from God among the trees, and they are sent out of the garden (3:6 to 8 and 3:23).
- The usual Greek word for sin in the New Testament, hamartia, comes from a verb that means to miss the mark, and the Hebrew chet has the same sense: the book of Judges uses its verb for slingers who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss (20:16).
- In the parable of the prodigal son, the younger son takes his share, leaves for a far country and spends everything. When a famine comes and he is feeding pigs, he came to himself (Luke 15:17). He goes home, and while he is still a long way off his father sees him and runs to him (15:20). That is the turn, almost word for word.
- Western Christian teaching, shaped above all by Augustine, calls the state humanity inher-

ited from the fall original sin, and Paul puts the whole arc in one line: as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:22).

- Isaac Luria, whose tzimtzum is in step 2, taught that the vessels made to hold the divine light broke and scattered sparks into the world, and that tikkun, the repair, gathers them back, with every good deed raising a spark.
- In the Hymn of the Pearl, an early poem in the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, a prince is sent to Egypt to bring back a pearl, forgets who he is and falls asleep, and wakes when a letter from home reminds him.

5. Something carries over

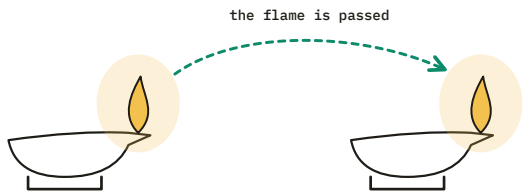
You have forgotten almost every day you have lived. Try to remember an ordinary afternoon from when you were small, and you get a blur, maybe a face or a

smell. Still, the person reading this is made out of those days. Most of the arguments, the lessons and the evenings spent practicing something are gone, and what they left behind is all here: the patience or the lack of it, the fears, the things your hands know how to do. The events went, and what they taught you stayed.

Under the axiom the same has to hold on the largest scale. The whole goes into separation so that each point of view can bring back something no other could have brought. If everything a life gathered vanished when it ended, the whole would go through all that separation and come home with nothing to show for it. So something has to keep the essence of a life, what it learned and what it became, the way you keep what your forgotten days taught you. The traditions call it the soul.

That something can't be the body, which stays behind, and it can't be one more separate thing, since there is nothing separate at the bottom. It is the part of you that was never really separate: the whole, at one position, going through the separa-

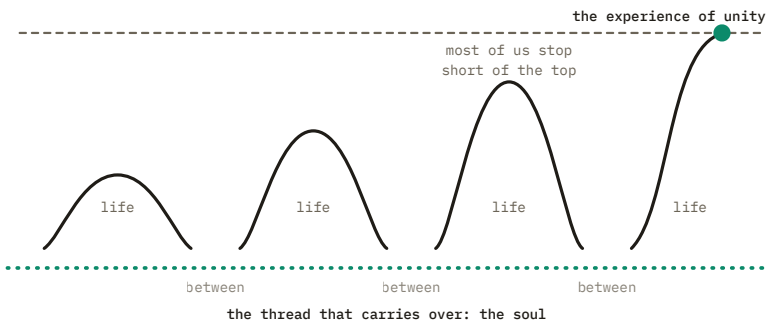
tion and keeping the record. Buddhism holds that there is no fixed soul and still says that something continues, and an old Buddhist dialogue has the image I like most for it: a lamp lit from another lamp, where nothing passes across and the second one still burns. In the machine it is the saved state. The program shuts down, the window closes, and most of the session is gone, while what was worth keeping is written to disk. The photos, the passwords and the browser history stay behind, which honestly is a relief. In the game picture from step 4 it is the level you have reached, which is how two people can walk into the same kind of life at very different levels.



Nothing passes across, and the second one still burns.

A lamp lit from another lamp.

How it carries on is where the traditions part, and the axiom doesn't need to settle it. In one family of answers it goes on after death in another form: the Catholic Church teaches purgatory, a purification after death, and the Quran puts a barrier, the barzakh, between death and the day of resurrection. In the other it comes back into this world, life after life, which Hindu texts call samsara, until it no longer needs to. Either way, what this life gathered is kept and taken further. That leaves the pace open. One life can move a little or a long way, and several traditions hold that the whole road can be walked within a single life.



What a life gathers is kept and carried on, whichever form the traditions give it.

Lives, afterlives, and the one who goes through them

- In the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu scripture in which the god Krishna advises the warrior Arjuna, he says that the yogi who keeps striving is perfected through many births and then reaches the highest goal (6.45), and he compares the self to a person putting on new clothes and discarding worn ones (2.22). The Buddha says that samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, has no discoverable beginning and that it is not easy to find a being who has not at some time been your mother (Samyutta Nikaya 15, in one of the oldest collections of his talks).
- Hindu texts call the release from that round moksha. As I read it, a soul goes deeper into separation over many lives until it reaches the turn, and even after that the way back can take more lives, until it has returned to experiencing the world as one and has no more need to come back.

- Near the end of *The Education of the Human Race*, in 1780, Lessing, a thoroughly Enlightenment sort of person, asks why he shouldn't come back as often as he is capable of acquiring fresh knowledge.
- Jain teaching has each soul reborn until it is freed, Sikh scripture teaches rebirth with liberation by grace, and the Kabbalists, the Jewish mystics, taught gilgul, the cycling of the soul through new bodies.
- The three big Western religions mostly settled on one life, then resurrection and judgment. Even so, the story doesn't stop at death for them. The Catholic Church teaches purgatory, and Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth-century Church Father, taught that the soul's progress toward God never ends, because God is infinite. The Mishnah records Rabbi Akiva saying that the judgment of the wicked in Gehinnom lasts twelve months (*Eduyot* 2:10). The Quran says that behind the dead is a barrier until the day they are resurrected (23:100).

- In the Myth of Er that closes Plato's Republic, souls choose their next lives and then drink from the river of forgetfulness before they are born, which is one old answer to why you don't remember the last one, and the best explanation I've heard for Monday mornings.
- On the question of who carries over, if there is only one mind, Advaita points the other way. Individuality belongs to the level of appearance, and the witness underneath is the same in everyone. In the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad the Self is the witness in every being, and there is no other witness but him (3.7.23).
- The lamp comes from the Milindapanha, a dialogue between King Milinda and the monk Nagasena, where the one who is reborn is neither the same nor another, like a lamp that burns all night without being the same flame from one hour to the next.
- The Satipatthana Sutta ends with the Buddha saying that anyone who develops the four kinds of mindfulness for seven years can expect one of two results, enlightenment in this

very life or, if something is left over, non-return. Then he shortens the time step by step, down to seven days (Majjhima Nikaya 10).

- In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna says that the world is overcome even here by those whose minds are settled in sameness, and that whoever learns, while still in the body, to master desire and anger is a yogi and is happy (5.19 and 5.23). The Hindu tradition calls a person freed while still alive a jivanmukta.
- The Jain Kalpa Sutra tells how Mahavira, in the thirteenth year of his life as a wandering ascetic, reached kevala, complete knowledge, sitting under a sal tree near the river Rijupalika, and then taught for about thirty more years.

That also changes what dying is. If something carries over, death is the end of one session, and the one who lived it goes on. In the machine, the window closes, the saved state is written, and the machine was never switched off.

Most of us are still afraid of it, and the axiom says why. A separate self is sure of one thing it will lose, which is itself. So the fear of dying is the wall's strongest reflex, the wall defending the wall, and that makes it a fair reading of how much wall a person holds. It eases as the wall eases. That's why so many traditions treat letting go as a practice for dying: every small thing you stop defending while you are alive makes the last letting go a little more familiar. None of this makes me keen to test it early, to be clear. I still look both ways before crossing the street, twice.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 4 PASSAGES

Practice for dying

- In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates says on the day of his death that those who practice philosophy rightly are practicing nothing other than dying and being dead (64a), and that this is why death frightens them less than anyone (67e).
- In the *Katha Upanishad* the boy Nachiketa asks Death himself what happens after a person dies. The answer he is given is that the self is

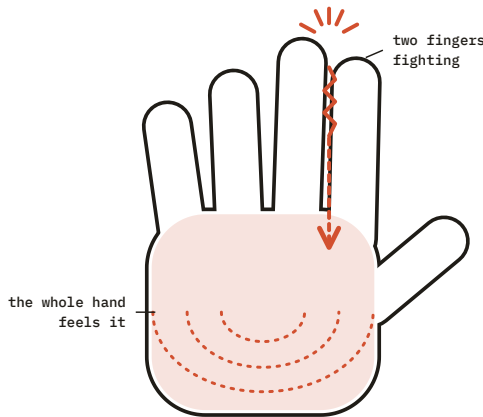
not born and does not die, and is not slain when the body is slain (1.2.18). The Bhagavad Gita repeats the verse almost word for word (2.20).

- Paul asks, O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? (1 Corinthians 15:55).
- Rumi writes that he died as a mineral and became a plant, died as a plant and rose to an animal, died as an animal and became a man, and asks why he should fear, since he was never less by dying (Masnavi, Book III, 3901 to 3906).

6. Karma, or the fingers

If we are one, there is nobody else. Everyone I could harm is part of the whole I belong to. Hold up your hand. If the index finger and the middle finger start

fighting, pressing and scratching, they hurt the hand, and the hand is the only thing either of them can be a part of. Nobody had to appoint a judge.



There was only ever one hand.

Karma, with the courtroom taken out.

Most of us have felt this from the inside at least once. You see a small child about to fall into a well, and you feel a jolt of alarm before you have thought anything. Nobody decided to care about that child. Wang Yangming, the Chinese philosopher, used this very example in 1527, and for him the jolt is

what forming one body with the child feels like from the inside. For a second the wall isn't there, and that second is the love from step 3.

Step 2 says the whole built the separation to be convincing, and it did such a good job that the fingers really do believe they are separate. Each one gets on with its own business, and every scratch it gives another finger lands on the same hand. That is what I think karma really means. The word is Sanskrit for action, and in everyday use it has turned into a ledger kept somewhere, with a judge and a sentence. The version I was taught has no judge. What happens to you works like a mirror. How you think and what you feel come back to you, and they come back right away, in the same life. Someone irritates you, something hurts, and that shows you a place in yourself that hasn't been mended yet. The mirror only shows, and it does nothing else. The machine has a picture for it too: a program that corrupts shared memory reads the corrupted data back and has nobody to blame, because it was the same memory all along.

The mirror works in both halves of the game from step 4, and it reads differently in each. Before the turn, it mostly shows the cost of being separate. That is the lesson of the first half: a program has to find out what running alone costs, and every bruise adds to the bill. Nobody is doing it wrong there, any more than a player is doing it wrong by being on level five. The bill grows until the bottom point, and the emptiness of the turn is what it feels like when the bill finally lands. After the turn, the same mirror becomes practical. The compass from step 4 tells you whether you are heading home, and the mirror tells you where the work is. The irritation, the old fight with your mother, the colleague you can't stand: each one marks a spot where you still act as two.

The mirror also picks its material on purpose. The sharpest lessons tend to come from the people closest to you, family, children, parents, because that is where it hurts most. So the work starts on my own side. When I stop reacting the old way, the other person stops getting the old reaction, and very often the whole pattern between us shifts, which is what

you'd expect if we are parts of one whole. That never means staying where someone keeps hurting me. Old and heavy things take time, and I may have to come back to them more than once. And this is no reason to wait. If someone close to me is sick or in trouble and I say it's their karma, I've stopped helping, and the word for that is indifference. The better reaction is to make what is happening better, because something in me is part of it too.

Step 5 gives karma its long form. What carries over is the record, and the record includes what wasn't mended. So a lesson that isn't learned comes back in a new costume: a new boss with the old boss's habits, a new relationship with the same argument, and, if this life runs out first, a new life with the same homework. In the machine picture, the thread that carries over keeps meeting what it left unmended, and by the time it sees the whole it has stood in the place of everyone it once called other. That is my reading of the axiom, and it goes beyond what I was taught. If you take it up, take it as a reason to be kind, and never as an explanation for why someone else is in pain.

None of this is punishment. A system built to teach doesn't punish anyone, and it doesn't close a lesson before the lesson is learned. If karma were a person, it would be a very patient tutor who keeps setting the same homework until it gets done, and I have redone some of mine more times than I'd like to admit. The people who teach it this way add that, seen from far enough up, there is no karma at all, only the work in front of you. Until you get there, it is a useful name for the pull of what you haven't mended.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 6 PASSAGES

Deeds come back, and the other is me

- The traditions differ on who administers karma. In the Buddhist account nobody does: the Buddha said it is intention he calls karma (Anguttara Nikaya 6.63). In Advaita, karma belongs to the world of apparent individuals.
- The shape turns up elsewhere without any re-birth. Paul writes that whatever one sows, that will he also reap (Galatians 6:7), and the Quran says that if you do good, you do good for your-

selves, and if you do evil, you do it to yourselves (17:7).

- The image of the fingers is old too. Paul says the church is a body with many members, and that if one member suffers, all suffer together (1 Corinthians 12:26). Shantideva, the Indian Buddhist, wrote in his Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life that the hand and the other limbs are many and distinct, yet all are one, and that beings are in the same way all one in wanting happiness (Bodhicaryavatara 8.91).
- The golden rule is the same logic read forwards: if the other is me, treating them as I want to be treated stops being a nicety and becomes consistency. Hillel, asked to teach the whole Torah while standing on one foot, is reported to have said: what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary (Shabbat 31a, in the Talmud). Most versions rest on reciprocity or empathy, but the Isha Upanishad goes further:

the one who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, recoils from nothing.

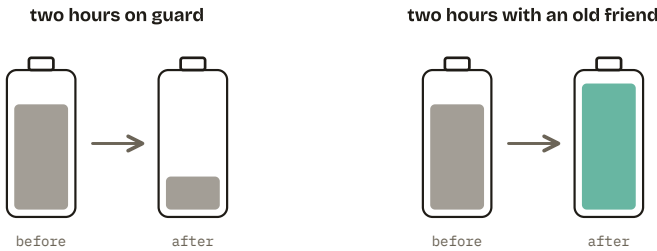
- People with no creed get there too. Marcus Aurelius, who is in Part one as well, tells himself that difficult people are his kin, since we are made for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth. Schopenhauer built his ethics on compassion, the recognition in another person of the same being you are, and put it in the Sanskrit formula *tat tvam asi*, that art thou. And Wang Yangming, whose child at the well is in the text above, wrote in the same passage that the great person forms one body with heaven, earth and all things.
- Repair has its own rules. The Mishnah, an early Jewish law code, says that Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, atones for sins between a person and God, but for sins against another person only once that person has been appeased (Yoma 8:9). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that if you remember at the altar that your brother has something against you, you should

leave your gift there and first go and be reconciled (Matthew 5:23-24). The words for repentance point the same way: the Hebrew teshuvah comes from the verb shuv, to return (it is also the everyday word for an answer), the Arabic tawba comes from a root for turning back, and the Greek metanoia means a change of mind.

One warning. The easy version of karma is blame: she had it coming, he reaped what he sowed. That's spiritual bypassing with a calculator. The axiom doesn't support it, because the person you're blaming is as much a part of the whole as you are. The version that follows is responsibility: what in me is this showing, and what's my next move toward the part of myself I've been fighting?

7. Energy

Spend two hours with someone you have to keep your guard up around, and you come out flat. Spend the same two hours with an old friend and you come out lighter, though you talked just as much. The talking didn't use up the energy. The guarding did.



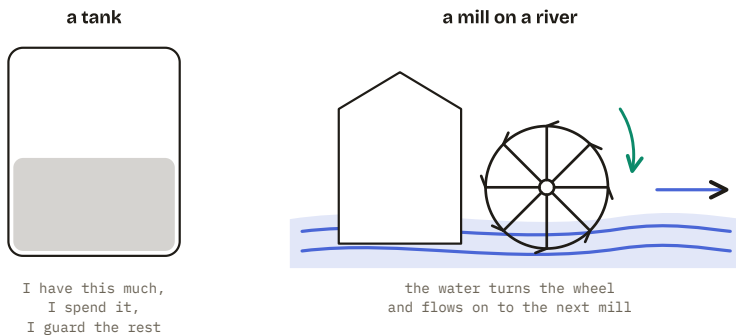
Just as much talking. The guarding is what costs.

The same two hours, on guard and with an old friend.

Everybody talks about energy, and hardly anybody says what they mean by it, so here is what I mean. In this step energy is your capacity to act and to be present, the fuel behind DO and BE from Part one: how much you can make happen, and how much of what is happening you can actually take in.

The separate self treats it like a tank. I have this much, I spend it, I run out, and I guard what is left. That's what you'd expect from a point of view with lowered settings, in a world built to say that you are in here and the rest is out there. And holding the wall costs, so a good part of the tank goes on guarding the tank.

Under the axiom it can't really work that way, because there is nothing outside the whole to take energy from and nowhere for it to leak to. A part that starts remembering the whole works more like a mill on a river. The mill doesn't drink the river. The water turns the wheel, does real work and flows on to the next mill downstream, and the mill's job is to let it through. A mill that clamps its wheel tight gets less flow. So the extra energy comes from two places, and neither one takes from anybody. Some of it is what you stop spending on the wall. The rest is what flows through once the wheel turns freely, and you have probably felt it: a night spent helping someone you love, or finishing work you care about, when you were tired by the end and somehow not empty. That is a little of the river.



A tank, and a mill on a river. The mill does not drink the river. Its job is to let the water through.

You can check the first half this week. The next time you come home flat, ask which it was, the talking or the guarding.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 7 PASSAGES

God, asking, and grace

- As I read it, the nearest thing in the axiom to what the traditions call God is the whole, met from one position. A part can only meet the whole as someone, which is why so many traditions pray to a You. Prayer is the part turning toward the whole, grace is the river from this step arriving without being earned, and gratitude is the part noticing it. Each tradition de-

scribes God in its own way, and the examples below are here for the shape they share.

- In Advaita, Brahman is beyond every quality, and the same Brahman, seen from inside the world of forms, is Ishvara, the Lord who creates and is worshipped.
- The Quran says that God is nearer to a person than the jugular vein (50:16). Psalm 16:8 says in its plain sense: I have set the LORD always before me. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, read the same verse as teaching equanimity.
- Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, wrote in *I and Thou* in 1923 that the lines of all our relations meet in the eternal You, and that every real meeting with another as a You is a glimpse of it.
- The letter to the Ephesians says that by grace you have been saved through faith, and that this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God (2:8).

- A prayer attributed to Rabia of Basra, the early Sufi woman saint, asks that if she worships God for fear of hell, God should burn her in it, if for hope of paradise, shut her out of it, and if for God's own sake, not withhold his beauty from her.
- Buddhism and Jainism have no creator God to pray to, and both keep devotion toward those who have fully woken up, the buddhas and the Jinas, mostly as examples of where the road leads.

Letting go is how the wheel opens. You can't push more water through a mill by gripping the wheel harder, and every bit of guarding you drop is flow you get back. That is why so many traditions describe the way in as a kind of emptying. Hasidim call it *bittul*, the Sufis *fana*, Christians *kenosis*, after Paul's line that Jesus emptied himself, and one of the Buddha's breathing instructions is to breathe while contemplating letting go.

Once more starts coming through, people around you notice. Things work out more often, you get more done with less effort, and now and then something happens that is hard to explain. The temptation then is to do something impressive with it.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 5 PASSAGES

Miracles, and the warning against them

- Concordia Antarova's novel *Two Lives*, one of my favorite books, keeps coming back to a single line, which I would translate as: there are no miracles, only different levels of knowledge. Under the axiom a miracle would be one of the settings from step 2 turned up a little, by someone who knows where the settings are. My grandma already thinks I'm a black magician every time I fix the computer, so I'm halfway there.
- Nearly every tradition that describes such powers also warns against chasing them. Patanjali lists them in the *Yoga Sutras* and then says that, however much they look like achievements to a mind still facing outward, they are

obstacles to samadhi, the deepest absorption (3.37).

- The Buddha said that displays of psychic power horrified him, and that the miracle he valued was instruction (Digha Nikaya 11).
- Jesus refused to give a sign on demand (Matthew 12:38-39).
- Teresa of Avila, who was seen lifted off the ground, begged God to stop giving her favors that other people could see (The Life, chapter 20).

Chasing them is the separate self wanting more for itself, which is the tank from this step again. It's like getting admin rights to the whole machine and using them to make the printer work. Fine, that one would actually count as a miracle.

8. Lifting the cloth

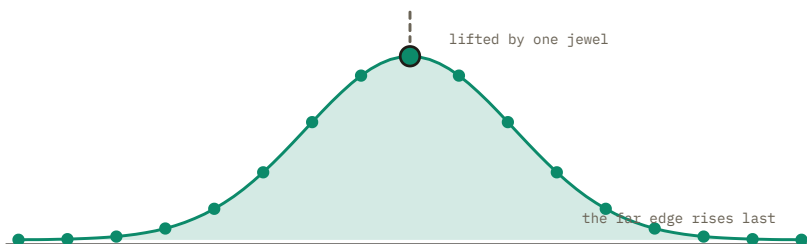
Step 7 opened with two hours: one spent with someone you have to keep your guard up around, and one with an old friend you come away lighter from. Turn it around. For the people in your life you are one of those two, and which one depends a lot on how much wall you are holding that day.

That follows from the fingers. If whatever I do to another part comes back to me, then whatever I mend in myself reaches the others, and when one finger stops pressing, the finger next to it feels it first. It shows in two ways. The first you can watch from outside. A person who has stopped fighting themselves is easier to be around. They say sorry first and follow up on their words, and the people near them relax a little and sometimes start doing the same. Anyone who has had a good boss after a bad one has seen it.

The second comes from step 7. The energy was never mine, so when I stop clamping the wheel it doesn't stop at my mill. It flows on to the people I'm with,

and most of all to the ones I want to help. Every bit of wall I take down on my side is wall they don't have to push against. You can check this half on your own evenings. People leave an evening with you a bit lighter or a bit flatter, and it's worth noticing which, and whether that changes as you do.

Here is the picture I use. Take a piece of cloth with small jewels sewn all over it and lay it flat on a table. Pick it up by one jewel and lift. That jewel rises first, the ones next to it come up right after, and the far corners leave the table last. Nobody pulls on them, they rise because it is one cloth. Under the axiom, a person moving back toward unity looks like that from outside. The jewels that rise most are the nearest ones, which is why the first people to notice are usually the ones you live with.



One cloth. The jewel you lift rises first, and the nearest ones rise with it.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 6 PASSAGES

One cloth

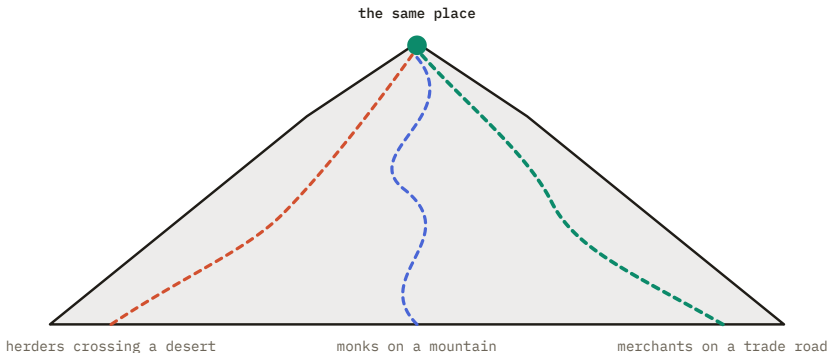
- The Daodejing says: cultivate it in yourself, and your virtue will be real. Cultivate it in the family, and it will overflow. Then the village, the country, and the world (54).
- The Great Learning, one of the Confucian classics, runs the same chain from the other end. Those who wanted to bring order to the world first put their own states in order, before that their families, and before that themselves, and it says that once the self is cultivated, the family is set right.
- Huayan Buddhism pictures the world as the net of the god Indra, with a jewel at every knot,

each one reflecting all the others, so that nothing happens to one jewel alone.

- Jesus says that nobody lights a lamp to put it under a basket. It goes on a stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house (Matthew 5:15).
- A saying attributed to Seraphim of Sarov, the Russian monk: acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved.
- A long study of one town in Massachusetts found that people's happiness tracked the happiness of their friends, and of their friends' friends (Fowler and Christakis, 2008). Other researchers have argued that part of this comes from friends sharing the same surroundings, or people with similar moods finding each other, so how much of it really spreads is still debated.

Why the paths differ

If one structure sits behind all this, why do the religions look so different? The whole goes into separation through countless points of view, no two of them meet the wall in the same way, and so a path is a way back drawn for particular people at a particular time. The core stays because it comes from the structure. The forms change because the people do.



A path is drawn for particular people at a particular time, and the paths meet at the same place.

You can see it in something as ordinary as a guest at the door. Abraham runs out of his tent to feed three strangers, and the story says it was God who came

to him (Genesis 18). An Upanishad tells the student to treat the guest as a god (Taittiriya 1.11.2). The Prophet said that whoever believes in God and the Last Day should honor his guest (Sahih al-Bukhari 6018). Jesus says that whoever welcomed a stranger welcomed him (Matthew 25:35 to 40), and a Sikh temple kitchen, the langar, feeds anyone who walks in. A tent, a house and a temple kitchen look nothing alike, and the instruction is the same: open the door. Under the axiom that is no surprise, since whoever is at the door is another part of the same whole.

Why I want this

Part one's zoom out ended on full human potential, and that's what I'm after for this lifetime: the whole map, including everything past the corner of the chart. I don't want to believe it's there. I want to see it for myself, the way you see that a room is lit once you look up.

It started with questions. Why am I alive? What is happening here? How do the universe and the world work? Why am I, me? As I took steps on that road, I started losing some of my walls, and I felt, and then realized, how connected we are. That changed the way I feel toward people and the world. I wish to obtain knowledge of who I am and what it means to exist. And my desire is to share it with other people in a way that is effective and understandable, so that it benefits their lives and makes them happier, because that is what makes me happy. That is what I stand on, the thing I live for that is bigger than me.

What you can check

If the axiom is right, loosening the wall should leave marks you can check. In 1997 Robert Cialdini and colleagues found that how “one” people felt with someone in need predicted their willingness to help better than sympathy did. So the check for this part is the one in that study: how often do you feel

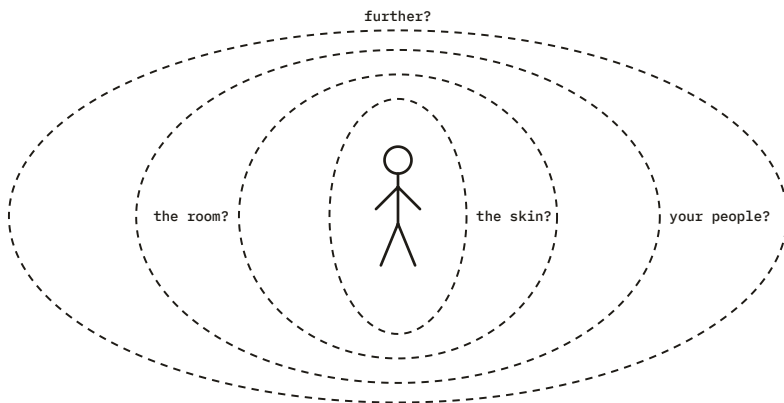
at one with the person in front of you, and what do you do next when you do? In my experience, and in what people around me describe, the order is the same: first you start to listen, then giving shows up, unasked and without a tally, then perception clears.

The prediction is the interesting part. If the sense of separation is held by tension, then loosening it should make a person more generous without anyone telling them to be. It's an experiment you can run on yourself, which is the nice thing about this kind of claim. Neither of these proves the axiom. What they test is whether the moves are worth making, and they can be worth making either way.

Where this goes next

That's the map as far as I can draw it honestly. What I haven't told you is what it takes to walk it, and that is the next part, which has a lot less philosophy in it and a lot more everyday life.

Until then, one question that needs no equipment. Where, right now, does the border of you sit? Don't quote me, but I'd bet it isn't where you think.



Where, right now, does the border of you sit?

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PART THREE

Practical

How this is done today, by people with jobs, families and not much spare time.



Part one ended at the edge of a small square. The four rooms, the line and the corner at 100 and 100 all fit inside it, and then the square shrank to a small gray box in a map a thousand by a thousand. Part two said what the rest of that map is, the road back to remembering that we are one, and step 5 said that what a life gathers carries over, so nobody has to finish the road in one life. Life moves all of us along it anyway, slowly, through the mirror and the turn. It is patient about it. If your life is going well

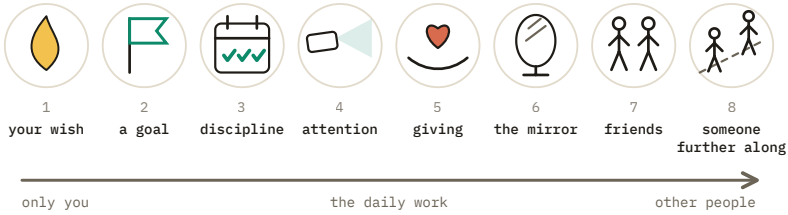
and feels well, you have no need of a method. A method is a way to do on purpose, and faster, what life does slowly.

This part is about walking the whole road in one life, past the small square and into the large one, until we are free of our own limitations. As far as I can see, that comes down to conditions, and I count eight. When all eight are in a person's life, finishing the road is a realistic plan. When one of them is missing, it gets very, very hard, and each section below says why.

I'm not inviting you to my school, or to anyone's. The old traditions built every one of these conditions long before us, and they can be found or built in many places. What I'm inviting you to do is think about them, see why each one helps, and notice which ones your own life already has.

The order goes from what only you can supply, through the daily work, to what comes from other people. The wish comes first for everyone. After that the order shifts from person to person, because people arrive from different places.

Eight conditions



Eight conditions, in the order of this part.

1. Your wish, and your yes

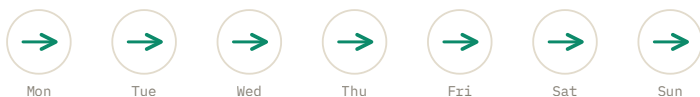
Think of a time you really decided something: a move, a new job, a person. Before it, every day was a small debate. After it, the days started to line up, and things you had been putting off began to happen almost on their own.

before the yes: every day a small debate



"maybe Tuesday?"

after the yes: the days line up



Before the yes, every day is a small debate. After it,
the days line up.

That yes stands on a wish, and the wish is the one condition in this part nobody else can supply. Part two said the whole handed the steering to each point of view, and if you accept that, then nobody can start the return for you. A mentor can point, and friends can lift you, and none of them can want it for you.

People come for all kinds of reasons, and the reasons often change along the way. Some come with questions, such as why we exist and whether this is all there is. Some want to stay calm when the inbox explodes, and to stop replaying the same old conversation on the drive home. Some simply can't sleep, or are worn out, and want to feel better, which is

reason enough to start. And some want to do more with their lives and be someone the people closest to them can lean on. Which one is yours matters less than that it is really yours.

FROM PEOPLE'S LIVES • 10 EXAMPLES

What if I'm not sure?

FROM THE OUTSIDE:

- For driven people it is usually a crash: burnout, a body that stops cooperating, or a depression that lands right after the goal is reached.
- Something happens to someone close, a relative in the hospital or a partner's betrayal. Values shift, and for some people that is where this begins.
- Sometimes there is nothing left to try. The founder in Part one kept building up tension until the old way stopped working, and out of options went on a retreat.
- Some meet someone who has what they want. My teacher did, in his teens.

- For one friend of mine it was a single talk. After years of trying everything spiritual, my friend decided it was all nonsense and went into business, and within months felt empty. One talk by my teacher was enough to sense at once that the point was the middle of Part one's chart, letting go and action together.

FROM THE INSIDE:

- Some start with questions, the kind that ask why things are the way they are and why we are the way we are.
- Some feel an emptiness that results can't reach. For me it showed up whenever I had time to myself, and it made the weekends the worst part of the week.
- Others have nothing to complain about. Nothing crashed and everything works, and a quiet question shows up anyway: is this all there is?
- Some reach a plateau, years of calm and comfort with nothing changing, until the calm itself starts to feel pointless.

- And some only feel that something is off. They can't say what, and there is no event to point at.

It makes no difference whether a person comes through the outside or the inside. Some understand with the mind that this is what they need. Others don't understand it at first, but they feel it, or they feel that something is not right. Each of the eight billion people alive is unique, and so is the way each of them arrives. How someone comes to this has no effect on how ready they are for it. One of the students I take a lot of personal example from started because sleep would not come. That was the only reason meditation mattered to begin with, and the idea itself met years of resistance. Today I count that student among the most exemplary people I know.

A wish is the wanting, and a decision is the yes that goes with it, the moment the wanting becomes a direction. It can be quiet, a sentence you say to yourself on an ordinary evening. What it gives you is a

kind of freedom. You no longer have to bargain with yourself every morning about whether today counts, and the energy that bargaining took goes into living. Many traditions call this the greatest victory there is, the one over yourself, and it often feels like putting down something heavy you had been carrying for years.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 5 PASSAGES

The greatest victory

- In the Dhammapada the supreme conqueror is the one who conquers a single person, himself, and the verse sets that above winning a battle against a million. Another verse says no god, and not even Mara, the tempter of the Buddhist stories, can undo the victory of someone who has tamed themselves (103 to 105).
- In Pirkei Avot Ben Zoma asks who is mighty, a word that can also mean hero, and answers: the one who subdues his inclination. He backs it with Proverbs, which says it is better to have self-control than to conquer a city (4:1, quoting Proverbs 16:32).

- The Jain Uttaradhyayana has almost the same verse as the Dhammapada. King Nami has given up his throne, and Indra, king of the gods, in the guise of a brahmin, tells him that a true warrior would bring every prince who does not acknowledge him into subjection. Nami answers that a man may conquer thousands and thousands of valiant foes, and greater will be his victory if he conquers nobody but himself (chapter 9).
- The Daodejing says that whoever overcomes others is strong, and whoever overcomes himself is mighty (33).
- A hadith in Sahih al-Bukhari reports the Prophet saying that the strong one is the one who controls himself while in anger, which he sets against overcoming people by strength (6114).

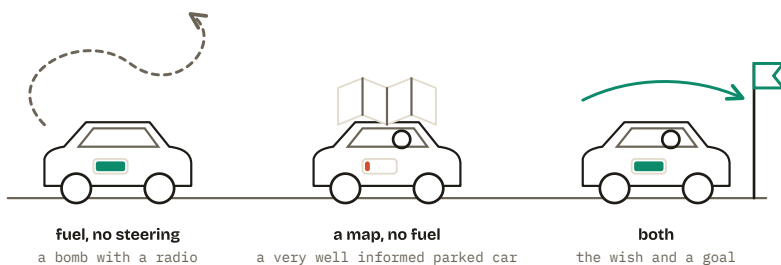
The wish has its days. Nearly everyone has days with a lift and days with a slump, and a low day is no ranking of who is better or worse. It's a day, and

days change. The wish also grows. A goal you love, sitting in the background of everything, feeds it, and a bigger wish crowds out smaller ones, so you don't have to fight the small ones one at a time. What drains it fastest is feeling sorry for yourself, which everyone does, and a half-wish that changes its mind every Tuesday about how much it's willing to give.

Without the wish none of the other seven conditions can start. So ask yourself, quietly, how much you want this, and take the answer as information. Whatever it says, nothing is wrong with you. Do something concrete, and say yes again tomorrow.

2. A goal, and a reason

Anything that moves needs two things, energy and direction. A car with plenty of fuel and no steering is a bomb with a radio. A car with a perfect map and no fuel is a very well informed parked car. The wish is the fuel, and a goal is the steering.



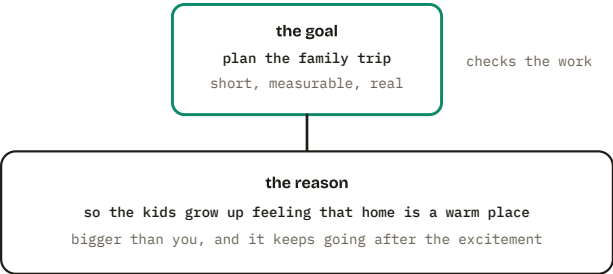
The wish is the fuel, and a goal is the steering.

Part two's step 4 said that after the turn the old moves stop working, and that the direction gets reported over months, by the compass of how fulfilled or bleak a life feels. A compass needs something outside you to check against. So you set outer goals, and you judge the inner growth by them.

A good goal has three properties. It's short, meaning weeks or months. It's measurable, so at the end you can say yes or no. And it's tied to reality, so it lives in the world and not in your head. Plan the family trip for the summer. Finish a draft of an essay. The outer result is the check on the inner work, because it's very easy to feel like you're growing when nothing around you has moved. A calm sit

feels like progress whether or not anything has changed, and a goal lets you test it. It also gets your energy moving: a goal you care about pulls effort out of you that plain willpower never would.

Behind each goal sits a reason, and the reason is what keeps you going after the first excitement wears off. The goal can be small as long as the reason is bigger than you, which is the pull from Part one. You plan the family trip because you want your kids to grow up feeling that home is a warm place. You finish the draft because someone out there may need what is in it.



The goal can be small as long as the reason is bigger than you.

One caution, since the outer goals can turn on you. Results are how you check the work. They are an indicator and never the aim. If you start chasing them for their own sake, you've rebuilt the Driven room with better vocabulary. And without a goal at all, the inner work has nothing to be checked against, and it can feel like growth for years while nothing moves.

3. Discipline

Part two's step 2 ended on a pull that only goes one way. Do nothing in particular and you end up a little more separate every year, because settings that were lowered stay lowered. A pull that never takes a day off can only be matched by something that doesn't take one either, and that is discipline. Every other condition in this part leans on it, and so does anything else that matters in life. The decision is the yes, and discipline keeps it true on the days when the wanting is quiet.

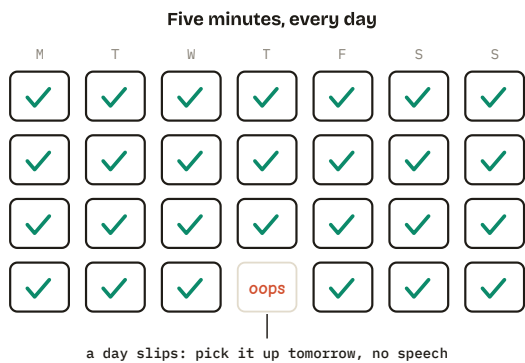
By discipline I mean something plain: doing what you decided to do after the mood for it has passed. Part one gave a boring test for DO, how well you follow up on your words, and discipline is the same test applied to the words you give yourself. The work is on habits of mind and body, and habits were built by repetition, so repetition is also how they change. Daily practice, from the next section, is a good place to meet it: five minutes that happen because they were planned.

Discipline grows from the outside in. A fixed time for practice and a meeting that is on the calendar are the outside, and keeping them is something you can do even on a day when you don't feel like it.

After a while you see what they give you, and the keeping starts to come from you. That is inner discipline, the strength to carry out what you decided, and it is built the way a muscle is, by use, every day and in small things.

Keep it light, and keep it yours: a demand you make on yourself, in a friendly tone. Gritting your teeth through practice adds tension, which is the very

thing practice is there to remove, so keep the frame small enough to hold without a fight. Five minutes every day is a frame you can keep, and a frame you keep teaches your mind that you can trust your own word. When a day slips, pick it up the next day without a speech about it.

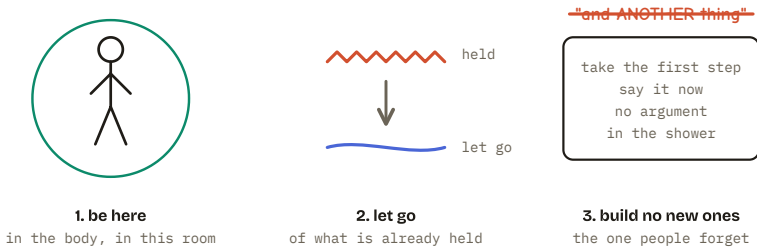


A frame you can keep. When a day slips, pick it up the next day.

Without discipline, direction follows mood, and mood brings back the swing from Part one.

4. Work with attention

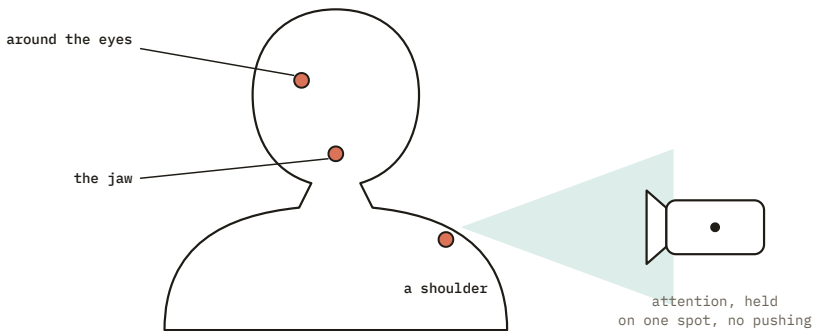
Part two said the belief that I'm separate is held in the body as tension, and that suffering is the grip we add around the pain. If you accept that, then the most direct work there is happens in the body, with attention, and it has three jobs.



The three jobs of attention.

The first is to be here, in the body and in this room, with no detour through later or through the story about it. Part one called the vertical axis BE, and this is its plainest meaning: how much of you is actually present for what is happening right now. It sounds trivial until you try to keep it for a minute.

The second job is letting go of the tension you've already built up. Tension sits in the body as clamps, and you can find them: a jaw, a shoulder, the muscles around the eyes. Those clamps are the grip. Attention is the tool. You put it on the clamp and keep it there, like a flashlight held on one spot, and you don't push, because pushing is more tension. Eventually the clamp goes.



Attention held on a clamp like a flashlight on one spot, with no pushing.

Stillness is the simplest form of this, and you can start tonight, alone. Close your eyes and feel the life in your body. Put your attention on that sensation, and learn to gain pleasure from it. That's the whole

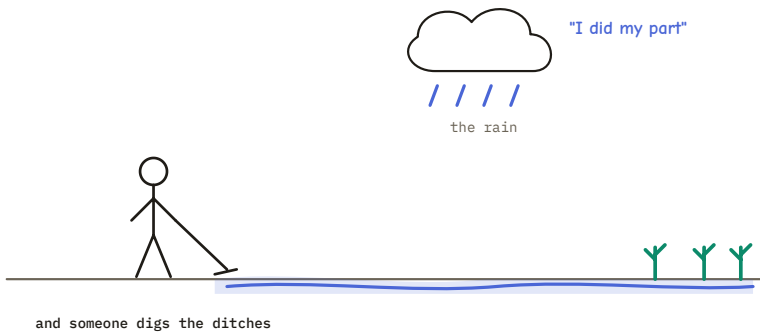
instruction. Start with five minutes. You can sit for as long as you like, and you can do it several times a day. It's also a good way to start on the question Part two ended with, where the border of you sits. You don't need to agree with anything in this book to try it, and five minutes will tell you more about it than I can.



Most days I sit like this two or three times. The beard is not part of the method.

Prayer is the same attention pointed somewhere else. In stillness it rests on the body, and in prayer it turns toward the whole, which here means learning to talk with life itself. The point is to lower the wall a little so the conversation is real. One way in is a question: how would you talk if you met God, or

whatever you call the source? You would take off the masks and speak as you are. Asking is part of it, for help with that and for other people, and the asking tends to turn toward giving, so a request for yourself can become a wish to help. You can tell the conversation is real the way you can tell a person is really listening to you. And it doesn't replace doing: prayers alone don't bring rain, and someone has to dig the ditches for it.

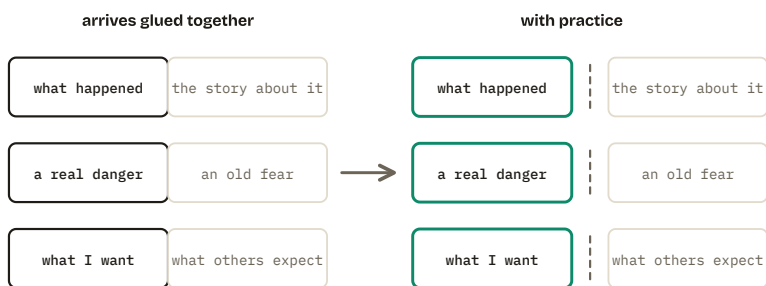


Prayers alone don't bring rain, and someone has to dig the ditches for it.

The third job is not to accumulate new tension. This is the one people forget, and it matters most. If you clear your shoulders in the morning and spend the day clenching, you've bailed a boat with the hole

still open. Not accumulating mostly comes down to small choices. In a conflict, take the first step toward making peace instead of waiting for the other person to take it, say the sentence now instead of carrying it, and don't rehearse the argument in the shower. Each of them is a clamp that never forms.

Underneath all three there's a plain skill: seeing your own mind at work. Most of what you do in a day gets triggered, with very little choosing involved. Someone says a thing, something fires, and you've answered before you've decided to. Mental tools for watching that happen, to see the habit and not run it automatically, are what turn attention from a relaxation exercise into a way of steering. One I use: when something fires, notice where it lands in the body, for example the jaw or the stomach, and look at it there for a moment before you answer. Over time, a few things that usually arrive glued together start to come apart: what happened and the story I tell myself about it, a real danger and an old fear, what I actually want and what someone else expects of me.



What usually arrives glued together starts to come apart.

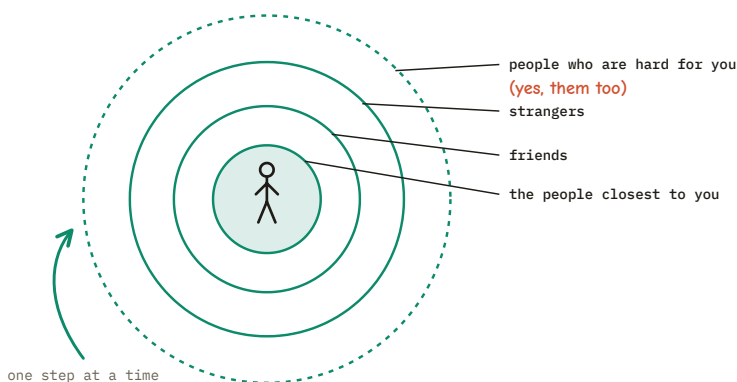
Regularity starts with daily practice, every day, even when it's a short one, because the drift from Part two takes no days off. What matters is that it happens, that you keep wanting to grow, and that you carry the work into the rest of your day, at the checkout and in the argument, so that the daily sit is the smallest part of it. Your family, your work, your health and the people you live with are where the practice really happens, and they're also where you find out whether anything has changed.

Without the work with attention, you clear the clamps in the morning and build new ones all day, and the drift does the rest.

5. Giving

Giving here means putting effort into the good of other people, or of something bigger than you, and not counting what comes back. An hour of real attention counts. So does using your skills on someone else's problem. This is where the reason bigger than you from section 2 turns into something you do. Inner work gives you more freedom, and giving is what turns that freedom into something for other people.

It starts with the people closest to you, which is also where the cloth from Part two rises first. If you accept what Part two said about the fingers of one hand, then helping you is helping me, as a matter of plumbing, with niceness left out of it. And if love is what the wall dropping feels like, giving is a way to practice it on purpose. The circle widens from there, one step at a time, toward the people who are hard for you.



It starts with the people closest to you, and the circle widens from there.

It has two rules. The first is to give without conditions: don't demand thanks, recognition or a result in return, and don't hold the person hostage to the goal behind it, however big that goal is. The second is to give to something bigger than your own comfort. That can be your family, your work, a neighbor or a stranger. While you're busy with something larger than yourself, there is less of you to guard, and that speeds up the one thing almost nothing else touches, the slow change in the ego. My one-line summary of the whole road, for anyone in a hurry: get over yourself. It doesn't make you less

yourself. What wears away is the part of us that keeps defending, and what is left is what we bring into the world.

Without giving, inner work can go in a circle. You improve your own state, then you improve it more. That has real value, and it can turn into polishing the same stone. Giving sends the energy somewhere, the way the mill in Part two lets the river through, and it is also where the work gets tested, because other people can tell you whether it helped. Part one's two questions work here too: would you still do it if nobody ever found out, and does it make you gentler with the person in front of you?

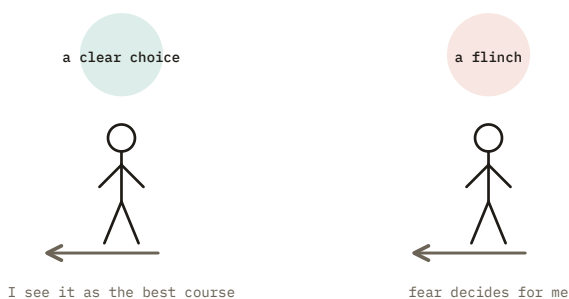
6. Mirror work and ego work

Part two said that what happens to you works like a mirror. A colleague's tone, a partner's silence, a stranger in traffic: whatever hooks me points at something in me that still needs work. This section

takes that seriously as a working rule: I take responsibility for what happens around me. That never means letting people hurt you.

It sounds like an insult and it's closer to a lever. If I can't control the world and I can control myself, then the only place I can ever change a result is on my side of it. If a person hooks me, something in me is not in order, and I don't need to work out whose fault it was. I go first, I say sorry first, I take the step in the conflict, and I check what shifted.

When someone harms you, you react, and sometimes the right reaction is to walk away or even fight back. What the mirror asks about is the state the reaction comes from. Do I do it because I see it as the best course of action, or because hate or fear is making the decision for me? The same step away can be a clear choice or a flinch, and from outside they look identical.



From outside the two look identical.

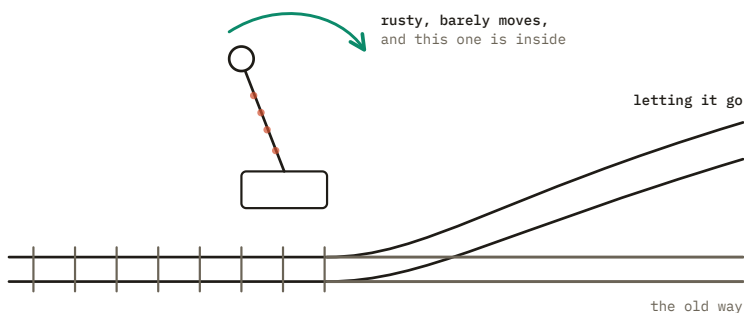
The same step away can be a clear choice or a flinch.

There's no beating yourself up in it either, because guilt is another clamp. Mirror work is looking, and a person who looks without flinching is in better shape to change than one who is busy punishing themselves. The mirror is something you hold up to yourself, and holding it up to someone else is a way of skipping the work.

The clearest case I have is someone on the path I worked with very closely, and we had regular conflicts. This person was very stubborn and very emotional, and once the emotion rose, nothing I said landed. It happened with many people, but I dealt with this person more than most. In that period I was learning that if we make the internal decision

to change our relationship to another person or to a situation, we can change it almost at once, and that learning to make this internal click is one of the biggest keys to growing. I decided to take it seriously.

Then we had an enormous fight. I got crazy angry because once again the other person would not understand what I was trying to say, and I said we should stop and go our separate ways for a moment. I sat in another room, livid, asking how I could change my relationship to this and how I could let it go. It was close to prayer. It felt like the lever on a railway track in the cartoons, the one that is supposed to switch the rails and is so rusty it barely moves, except that this lever was inside me. Moving it was one of the hardest things I have done. After about ten minutes it moved.



The lever was so rusty it barely moved. After about ten minutes it moved.

I went to find the other person to apologize. Calming down quickly after a fight had never been this person's way, and the anger could last for days. But by the time I had said my first word, I could see this person was already in a completely different state. So I learned that the internal click is possible and that it works. I did it a few more times over the years, it got easier each time, and it was never that hard again. I haven't been that angry in many years.

That is also what repair looks like: quick and light. A person who has hurt someone and leaves it for a week has added a clamp. A person who says "I'm sorry, that was me" the same afternoon, without an

essay, has removed one. The usual suspects behind the hook are pride, offense and the habit of judging, and the work on them has a name, ego work, which is a grand title for noticing them every time they show up.

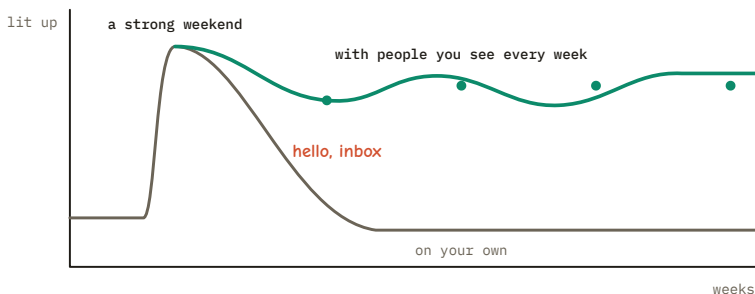
Without the mirror the hooks stay where they are, and it's much harder to use alone: you can't see which hooks you have until someone leans on them, and the people already in your life do that every day.

7. Friends on the path

Part two said the world is built to be convincing, so that everything you touch agrees that you are in here and the rest is out there. It also said that a cell stays well only while it keeps listening to the signals from its neighbors. If you accept that, then what you are surrounded by matters as much as what you

do on your own, and the strongest help you can have is a few people in your life who are working on the same thing.

This condition matters more now than it used to, and the 21st century turned the convincing world up. Most of us grew up in a world that is always offering us something new and telling us that a good life means getting what you want, and we have been soaking in it every year of our lives. Even a cave doesn't quite undo that, because you carry it in with you. Some people did go to caves in the past, but they walked out of a much quieter world than ours. So the help has to be ongoing too, people you see every week who want the same thing you do. Most of us have come home from a retreat or a strong weekend lit up, and within a couple of weeks our old habits had quietly put most of it back. A state can change in a day. A way of living changes when the people around you keep pointing the same way, week after week. None of this is new. The Buddhist sangha, the Hindu ashram and the Christian monastery were all built for exactly this.



A strong weekend, on your own and with people you see every week. An illustration, not data.

FROM THE TRADITIONS · 4 PASSAGES

Built long before us

- The Buddhist refuges are three: I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Teaching, I take refuge in the Sangha, the community (Khuddakapatha 1).
- In Pirkei Avot Joshua ben Perahiah says: appoint for yourself a teacher, and acquire for yourself a companion (1:6).
- The Vivekachudamani, traditionally attributed to Shankara, names three things that are rare and come by the grace of God: a human birth, the longing for liberation, and the shelter of a great soul (3).

- The Rule of Benedict says that the first kind of monks live in monasteries and serve under a rule and an abbot. A hermit goes out alone only after long probation in a monastery, having learned with the help of many brethren. And of the monks who live without a shepherd it says that their law is the desire for self-gratification: whatever enters their mind or appeals to them, that they call holy (chapter 1).

Two friends doing this together are the smallest community, and it grows from there. In my case it grew into Giving School, a project Genadiy's students started because we wanted to share what we learn from him with other people, help them become more conscious and take their own steps, and build supportive places for growth, online and offline. There are many communities on this road, and the one to look for is the one that resonates with you, where you feel at home and find yourself growing. Being among people who want the same thing brings everything above together: you work on your

attention, you build discipline, you meet your mirror, you pursue a goal and you give, all at once and with other people around.

Friends on the path hold you up in the hard moments. When your mood falls through the floor, your friend's hasn't, and two of you hold longer than either one alone. I tend to be the one who holds others, but I have my moments too. Most often it is when I have set myself a goal and haven't reached it, or a deadline is close and the task looks unmanageable. In those moments I used to get very hard on myself, and my close friends helped me come back to myself, calm down and let it go.

None of this replaces the people you already have. Most of us do it alongside family, old friends and a job, and those people tend to notice the change before we do.

It comes with conditions. The people have to be aimed at the same thing. Friends who simply enjoy each other are a gift of their own, and this condition asks for the other kind too, the friends who help you move. People in a community come with their

own words for what they want, and what they share underneath is the wish to awaken more deeply. The group also has to settle its conflicts quickly, by talking them through without attacking anyone, and it has to keep the agreements it makes. A quarrel reverses the effect: the same closeness that lifts a community weighs it down when there is a wall between two of its people.

The people also have to want it, and this is where friends on the path meet the wish from section 1. A community multiplies whatever is put into it, and anything times nothing is still nothing, a fact your math teacher would confirm. A group of people who each really want to move gives everyone in it much more than any of them could find alone.

Friends on the path do something for the wish itself, too. On your own it dies down faster. So friends who want the same thing remind each other what they came for, and when your own spark drops, lighting up a friend gets some of it back. The company of people who want the same thing is one of the best things to feed it. Ananda, the Buddha's at-

tendant, once said that good friends are half of the spiritual life, and the Buddha answered that they are the whole of it. With them, the wish keeps growing a little every day.

8. Someone further along

Part two said that a limit you are inside of rarely shows up as a limit. That is true of every one of us, teachers included, the way everyone hears your accent except you. It is also the plain reason people learn faster next to someone who has had more time with what they want. A person a few steps ahead can often name in one sentence a habit you would take years to find alone, and you can check it against your own life the same week.

Think of how someone becomes a blacksmith. There is no syllabus. The apprentice stands next to the smith for years, doing small jobs and watching how long the iron stays in the fire and what the

smith does when a piece comes out wrong. After a few years the apprentice can do things nobody ever explained, and if you ask how, they shrug.

Learning from someone further along works the same way. It runs on personal example, and it is closer to a workshop than to a classroom. Most of what you are learning is hard to put into words anyway: how to stay steady when a plan falls apart, how to say sorry first without making a ceremony of it. You can read about those, and you pick them up by being around someone who does them.

A mentor is simply a person who has had more time to practice what you want. What they say matters less than you would expect, and only a small part of it is telling you what to do or where you are right or wrong. When they do say something, it is short, and it comes from having stood where you are standing.

The biggest effect is that you get to feel what it is like to be a person a few steps ahead: how they sit through a tense meeting, how fast they come back from a bad day. It is one thing to be told that some-

thing is possible and another to sit across from someone for whom it is ordinary. You could call it osmosis: nobody sets out to copy anything, and after a while your own reactions have moved toward what you have been around, the way you pick up an accent from a roommate without trying and without the roommate noticing. It is a big part of why people mature much faster with a mentor than alone.

A few steps is the useful distance, close enough that you can see how they got there and far enough that you want what they have. It might be someone in your community who started a few years before you, or someone outside it who has had more time with what you want. You have probably felt a small version of this already: an afternoon with the calmest person you know, and you leave a little calmer without having done anything. Look for that on purpose, and do your own practice in between visits.

A community has energy, and it can still be going in a circle. A teacher, someone who has walked much more of the road, can see where it is growing and where it is stuck, which is hard to see from inside. What a teacher does is easy to describe. They don't walk the path for you, and they can't create your wish to walk it, which stays yours. What they can do is point out where you have drifted, and give you something to try on Monday. On the hard days they help you remember what you came for in the first place, as a good coach stands by an athlete through a bad stretch. A good teacher also has a steadiness that spreads, the way a calm, experienced guide on a mountain path steadies everyone walking behind. With someone further along, you get to see past limits you would otherwise have taken for the way things are.

MY OWN STORY

My teacher and I

- Anyone who reads this far wants to know, sooner or later, what it is about my teacher that makes me follow what he teaches. Part of the answer is something anyone can see. I met his

students first, and they were living proof of what they were talking about, which is what got me interested. Over the years I've watched a lot of people change around him, and some of them have written down how. One person describes going from sharp, arrogant and quick to flare up to calm and caring, and says it shows at home, with the family. A couple who had spent many years together without real closeness describe a deep connection with each other now. When I met him myself, I felt a kind of positivity coming from him. The click itself came in a more personal way.

- It started with a plateau. After years of putting most of my time into my career, I felt I had reached a certain limit. I wanted deeper answers, and I didn't know anyone who could help me find them. My Reiki teacher had taught me a lot of good practices, though not that kind of knowledge. After a while I realized that the only real way was to find someone who actually knows the way, a real teacher. A few months before COVID I read a memoir by a stu-

dent about life with his teacher, and it put words to something I wanted before I even understood that I wanted it. I wanted a teacher for my life, the way the author had one.

- A few months later I met students of Genadiy who were leading a workshop in Israel. By then I had a tendency to feel people. For years I kept checking how often those feelings turned out right, and eventually I had to admit that they were quite accurate. About these people I felt something good, and I spent time with them at a retreat and then a course. None of it answered my real question, which was whether Genadiy is the real deal or one more of the many people who teach and help. I had asked for a teacher, and this was what life gave me, so I went to meet him myself and stayed on to learn from him directly.
- A few months later, one night, something inside me went click. I have no idea how to explain it, and I wish I could give you a more logical version, one step after another. It's a bit like falling in love. You can list plenty of reasons

why the person is great, and oddly enough, why you fell for them is the hardest part to explain. Something in me simply knew that this was the teacher I had been looking for, and it felt obvious. I don't think most people come to it this way, and many come to their decision in a completely different way. I do see how much people's lives change with this knowledge.

None of that ever affected me as much as that moment did, and I'm extremely grateful for it.

- That night settled the question of whether he was my teacher, and I still disagreed with him at times. Once I suggested a few terms he should stop using when he explains things, because they confused people. He thanked me, said it was probably a good idea, and stopped using them.

A note on community and the teacher

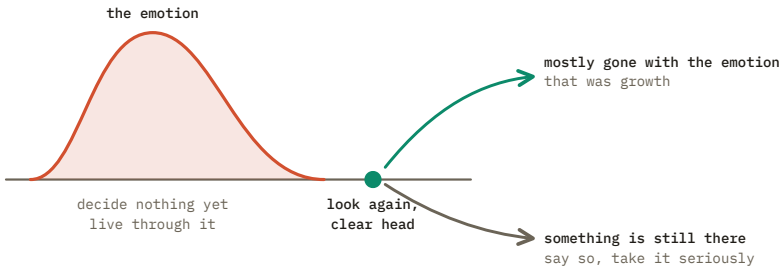
Of everything in this part, community and the teacher get the most criticism. I've met it with almost every person I've talked to about this, and I understand it. I grew up with a strong sense that I should get to do what I want, and in high school I was very much against the whole school system.

The fear behind it is natural. What if I meet a teacher who is very convincing, and he uses me? The internet is full of stories like that, and some of what happened in those groups was really bad. The good examples rarely make headlines, since nothing happened in them. I don't know of a checklist that tells the two apart, a list of criteria where you tick the boxes and can then trust someone. All you can go on is your own experience. Does this person know more than I do? Does this group actually live the values it talks about? Can I say I disagree and still be welcome, could I leave without a fight, and do I grow when I listen to this teacher? When the

answers keep coming back yes, you'll find you want to be around them. People do leave our community, too. Some go on along their path in new ways, and some come back after a while. We stay friends, and whenever we meet again it's a pleasant time, whatever they chose.

There will be moments, plenty of them, when what you think is very different from what you're offered to try, whether it's a task, an exercise or a challenge. That creates discomfort in every person who has ever walked this road. It comes whoever the teacher is, and whether or not you have a teacher at all, or a community, or just one friend who tells you honestly what you're doing well and what you aren't. For me there is one way to tell growth from something being wrong. The discomfort of growth always comes together with an emotion in my body, so I don't decide anything while the emotion is still there. I live through it first, and then I look at the disagreement again with a clear head. Usually most of the discomfort has gone with the emotion. If some of it is still there after that, then something is

wrong, and that part I take seriously. Whether that's a reason to stay or to leave is up to you, and I won't make that decision for you.



Decide nothing while the emotion is there. Look again with a clear head, and take seriously what is still there.

What I can tell you is what happened to me. There were moments when I disagreed or saw things differently, and I used the same test. Often the disagreement came with a strong emotion, and when I looked at it again after the emotion had gone, the disagreement had gone with it. Other times something still stayed, and then I said so, and people took it up.

The hardest thing to convey is the inner decision that this is a person whose view of me I trust.

So how can you make sure? Only through your own experience, I'm afraid, and that part I can't do for you. It comes down to the people you meet and how they affect you. And you don't have to have a teacher at all. You can think it through for yourself.

What you can check

Start with a count: which of the eight conditions does your life have now, and which one is missing? After a few months of practice, alone or with friends on the path, ask: do you produce the thing you said you would? Does anything outside you change, and if it doesn't, why not? How fast do you say sorry first now? Over the last year, are you more fulfilled, or more bleak? Are you clearer than you were a year ago, steadier, more honest, easier to work with? Put the answers on the chart from Part

one, and ask again a month later. Look at the people a few steps ahead of you, too: do they live the way they talk?

And one question for the road: who in your life could tell you honestly how you have changed?

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MY TEACHER AND I

AFTER THE BOOK

Stay in contact



Thank you for reading all the way here.

If you'd like to hear about workshops or online events I lead in the future, or you just have a question you'd like to ask me, feel free to leave your details below. They come straight to me, and I'll do my best to reply within a few days.

You can leave your details at
boringspirituality.com/contact.