

# ESSENTIAL ZEN HABITS

MASTERING THE ART  
OF CHANGE,  
BRIEFLY



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Leo Babauta

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FOR MY DAD, JOSE BABAUTA, WHOSE PASSION  
FOR THE TRUTH OF ART INSPIRED WHO I AM.  
AND FOR MY FRIEND SCOTT DINSMORE,  
WHO ALWAYS DREAMED BIG.  
I MISS YOU BOTH.



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# Introduction:

## The only reason we struggle with habit change

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

OKAKURA KAKUZO

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

It turns out that this fantasy, which I call the Mind Movie, is what stands in our way of making habit changes. As well-intentioned as the mind is when it creates this fantasy, it's also causing us frustration, struggle, bad feelings about ourselves, procrastination, distraction, and more. In other words, this Mind Movie is at the heart of all of our problems.

Creating a new habit, for example, should be a pretty simple task. In theory. It's simply repeating an action after a trigger (say, the habit of writing after the trigger of your morning coffee) over and over until it becomes more and more automatic. If you do the action after the trigger every day for

about six weeks, you should have a fairly automatic habit. Do it for several months, and it'll be pretty ingrained in your life.

So if it's so simple, why do we struggle to create new habits and drop old bad habits? Because the mind is like a little child—constantly seeking comfort and pleasure and control. This Childish Mind is playing a Mind Movie all the time, about how our lives should be so comfortable and pleasurable and orderly. The mind then runs from discomfort and fear and change and confusion, which aren't at all the fantasy playing in the Mind Movie.

Unfortunately, creating a new habit or dropping an old habit can't be done without discomfort. When we change our usual way of doing things, this becomes uncomfortable—sometimes to a really strong degree. The Mind Movie tells us that changing a habit should be easy and fun, but the reality is that we must wander outside our comfort zone. And so the Childish Mind rebels. It throws a tantrum.

This Mind Movie and the rebellion of the Childish Mind is not just at the heart of our struggles with habit change; it's at the heart of all our struggles. When we procrastinate on the important work we want to do, when we avoid pursuing our creative dreams because of fear of failure, when we struggle with healthy eating and exercise, when we are frustrated with other people or ourselves or our life situation . . . these struggles are a result of the Childish Mind and the Mind Movie.

### How I changed my life

I struggled for many years with health problems, procrastination, debt, being stuck in jobs I didn't like, never pursuing my dreams, being overweight, not being able to quit smok-

ing or junk food. I struggled with the Childish Mind and the Mind Movie, and didn't realize why I was struggling. What was wrong with me?

I tried many times to change all my habits, sometimes succeeding for a week or two, but always ending in failure and guilt. I'd end up just feeling worse about myself.

I finally overcame this cycle of failure and guilt by completely focusing myself on one habit change (quitting smoking), and not letting my Childish Mind run away from the discomfort. It was a massive struggle, but I learned that I didn't need to listen to this Childish Mind, that it would raise hell but ultimately all the complaining was just noise.

I proved to myself that I could overcome the resistance, and I learned to turn from the Mind Movie to embrace the reality in front of me. The moment in front of me was awesome.

I also learned to change habits in tiny steps, gradually, so that the Childish Mind wouldn't rebel so violently. One at a time, I changed my eating habits slowly over long periods of time. One change at a time, I was able to start running, start writing in the morning, start a business, start paying off my debt and saving and investing, start getting rid of clutter. I became a minimalist, a published author, a vegan, a marathoner, and more.

All from learning to deal with the Childish Mind.

I'd like to share what I've learned with you, in this small volume of distilled methods. I challenge you to work with me on these skills over the next 6 weeks.

## How this book works

I wrote a longer version of this book in 2014, but for this second edition, I decided to toss out those carefully crafted chapters with their stories and longish explanations. For this edition, I wanted no fluff, just the essentials.

So, with inspiration from a blog post by author Derek Sivers ([sivers.org](http://sivers.org)), I've decided to compress this book into a series of "Just Do This" instructions. I'll explain the instructions, but I won't go into detailed reasoning or stories. I'll assume you're ready to make a change, and you trust me to tell you what I've found to work. I'll assume you're going to do your best to implement the instructions.

In return, you'll get everything I've learned about changing habits and dealing with struggle in a compact volume that you can read in minutes a day, or all in one day if you wanted.

You can read it however you like, but I recommend that you:

1. Set aside 10 minutes every morning, and read one chapter a day.

2. Create one new habit for the next six weeks (not quit an old habit).
3. Follow the weekly focuses that I set out in this book, for your new habit.
4. Then read through the Troubleshooting, Quitting a Bad Habit and Life Struggles sections.
5. Finally, wrap it all up with the Just Do This section at the end, which will distill all of this book into a few pages of brief instructions.

In this book, I'll give you a method for dealing with the Childish Mind and the Mind Movie. If you practice the method over the next six weeks and beyond, it will help you not only become better at changing habits, but dealing with procrastination and life struggles.

This book isn't about how to make yourself a better person—it's about how to remove the things that get in your way.

### The Challenge: Commit to making a small change

I hereby issue a challenge to you: Commit to reading one brief section of this book every day (usually the daily missions, just a paragraph each), and commit to making one small change in your life as you read this book (but don't start the change yet!).

Each section is short and the missions in the chapters are easy, and all together the reading and missions should take about 10 minutes a day.

This challenge is essential to this book: if you put the ideas into action, you'll learn them through practice. If you



just read the book without acting (which you are probably tempted to do), you're wasting your time.

So: are you up for the challenge? If you are, make a decision this minute to make one small change as you read this book. Be all in. Don't start until Day 6 of the Week 1 chapter, but today you can make a strong commitment to yourself.

## Key Concepts to Know

Instead of doing a chapter on each of these ideas, here are the key concepts you'll see throughout this book:

1. **MIND MOVIE:** The fantasy your mind plays in its head about how things should be. This fantasy might be about how nice your life would be if you had a meditation habit, or ate healthily, or got fit with Crossfit. The fantasy might be about how disciplined or productive or mindful you should be. It might be about how considerate other people should be to you, or how they should ideally behave, or how great your life should be. These fantasies aren't true, but your mind believes them anyway, because it really wants them to be true. It feels like they should be real. Unfortunately, these Mind Movies get in our way of appreciating life and making healthy changes, and they create struggle for us.
2. **CHILDISH MIND:** The part of our mind that complains about how things are, that fears discomfort, that just wants pleasure and comfort, that doesn't want things to be difficult. This is like a little child who throws a tantrum every time he doesn't get his way.

We all have this Childish Mind, and in this book we'll learn to deal with this part of ourselves.

3. **MINDFULNESS:** In this book, we'll use the term "mindfulness" not as a general term for living in the moment, but to refer to two methods: 1) turning inward and seeing the Mind Movie, the Childish Mind's resistance, the urge to quit, the feeling we're having difficulty with; and 2) turning from the Mind Movie to the reality that's in front of us, and finding appreciation for that reality.
4. **GROUNDLESSNESS:** I stole the concept of "groundlessness" from Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron. It describes the feeling of not having solid ground under your feet—for example, when you lose your job or a loved one dies, and you feel like the rug has been pulled out from under you. You are adrift at sea, without an anchor. And in fact, this happens to us all the time, in big and small ways. Any time we're feeling resistance, dissatisfaction, frustration, sadness, uncertainty, fear, doubt, loss, unhappiness with ourselves . . . this is a form of groundlessness. In this book, we'll look at ways of dealing with the dissatisfaction and groundlessness that pervade our lives.
5. **RESISTANCE:** When we procrastinate or fail to follow our exercise plan, we do so because of resistance. It's the Childish Mind complaining about having to do something, about a situation, about someone else . . . because that person, task or situation doesn't match the Mind Movie, isn't comfortable. We're going to learn to deal with this resistance, which is of course another form of groundlessness.

6. **SELF-COMPASSION:** We've all found compassion for other people—a wish for their suffering or dissatisfaction to end, for them to find peace, happiness, contentment. This is a beautiful wish, and it makes us feel and act more kindly toward others. In this book, we'll try to practice this compassion with ourselves, as a way to deal with the Childish Mind, dissatisfaction, and resistance.
7. **INTENTION:** When you set to do something—let's say write a book, or have a conversation with someone—you can set an intention before you do that activity, as a way of consciously deciding what you're hoping to do during the activity. For example, you might have the intention of compassionately helping people as you write your book. This doesn't mean you actually think things will turn out this way (you might not help anyone), but it means you're bringing the intention of helping into the activity. This intention informs your approach, and how you feel and act during the activity.

These short summaries of the key ideas of this book are just an introduction. We'll expand on them as we work through the book.



## ✿ PART I ✿

# Creating a Habit

In this section, we'll work together to create a new habit over the next six weeks. We'll cover the basics by focusing on one key area each week, with daily missions. By the end of this section, you should know how to create a new habit, and be able to practice these steps with future habits.



## How to choose a first habit

You're not going to choose a habit today to work with in this book, but we should talk about good habits to choose. The habit needs to be easy, a new habit (not quitting an old habit), and something you can do once a day.

That would be an ideal habit to start with, because you won't face as much resistance as a very difficult habit (difficult exercise routines, for example) or quitting an ingrained habit (like smoking or Internet addictions).

For example, here are a few ideas for good habits to work on:

- Walk for 5 minutes
- Do 10 pushups
- Drink tea in the morning
- Meditate for a few minutes
- Write a couple paragraphs a day
- Sketch something simple
- Journal
- Eat a vegetable with lunch
- Find 5 pieces of clutter to recycle/donate



- Drink a glass of water in the morning
- Put clothes in hamper after you shower

Notice that none of these is that difficult (if any seems difficult, don't choose it). What you don't want to choose is something hard like "clear email inbox every morning" or "declutter entire house in a week" or "eat all vegetables and whole foods, no junk." These are much harder to do, and not good habits to pick right now.

### Quitting habits vs. starting a positive habit

Another type of habit not to choose right now is the negative habit: not doing something (like not checking social media) or quitting a bad habit (like smoking or shopping). We'll get to these types of habits in the Quitting Habits section later, but for now, choose a positive action ("do 10 push-ups") rather than a negative ("don't give in to distractions"). If someone can see you doing the action, that's a positive habit.

The reason is that quitting old habits is a bit more complicated. Quitting requires all the same steps as starting a new positive habit, but also requires you to deal with the urges and resistance of quitting the old habit. So it's a more advanced practice, and it's better to start with the basics first.

## Two questions before you start

These are two common questions that come up as people do the steps in the following chapters.

**Q: WHY ARE THERE SIX DAYS IN EACH OF THE WEEKS IN THE FOLLOWING CHAPTER?**

**A:** I don't want to overwhelm you with too much to do, so I made each day quick to read and easy to do, and gave you a day off each week. But if you miss a day, you can use the day off to catch up if you like.

**Q: WHAT IF I MISS A DAY OF DOING THE HABIT?**

**A:** That's totally normal! Practice the technique of not attaching to the Mind Movie of doing it perfectly, but instead just learn from what happened and keep going. The most important thing is to keep going. Don't quit just because you missed a day or three.

I highly recommend that you practice expecting imperfection. You won't do this habit perfectly—no one does. So expect to mess up, consider it a part of the process, and just enjoy the journey.

## Week 1 focus: A slow start

Over the next 6 weeks, I am challenging you to stick with one daily habit, with a different focus each week, and missions six days of every week. Don't start doing your habit yet. This week's focus is "A Slow Start," and we'll be preparing to start the habit and then starting as easily as possible. Try to do one mission a day, with a day of rest each week. Note: If you miss multiple days, that's OK, just keep going and pick up where you left off—we're not on a deadline.

### Day 1: Pick one change

Today I'd like you to simply pick a new habit to work on. Refer back to the last chapter, "How to choose a first habit," for some guidelines on choosing a good habit. Think about something that would be easy, but a positive, meaningful change. Something you actually care about, and that feels connected to a purpose that's important to you. Don't start on it yet, until Day 6!

### Day 2: Create a vow

Today, consider your intention with this new habit. Why are you doing it? Does this reason feel important to you, connected to one of your deeper purposes? Is it a compassionate act for yourself or others? Understand your reason, and set an intention. Now make a big commitment to yourself—be all in, and vow not to let yourself down. Write this vow down somewhere you can see it each day, and honor yourself by sticking to this vow to your utmost ability.

### Day 3: Make it small

We made a big vow, now we're going to make the habit as small as possible. We're not going to start yet, but today, I'd like you to consider how to make this habit as easy as possible once you get started. Can you cut it down to just one minute each day? For example, if your habit is meditation or writing, can you say that for the first week or so, you'll just try to do one minute a day? You're going to expand it once you get into the rhythm, but to start with, just consider how small you can make the habit.

### Day 4: Create a space

Today, I'd like you to create space to focus on the change you're going to make. If this habit is to be a priority, you need to set aside some time. When will you do it? I prefer doing it in the mornings, because if it's important, you want it to come before all the busywork you need to do, but you'll need to figure out when is best for you. Make this a priority, and set aside at least 10 minutes to do this habit—even if

you're only going to do it for a minute to start with, it's good to have a cushion. Consider this a sacred 10-minute space, which can't be violated by checking things online or other busywork. During this time, you'll only focus on your habit and these missions.

### Day 5: Set a trigger & reminder

In the introduction, I mentioned the idea of a trigger—something already in your routine you're going to tie the habit to. A new habit, to become automatic, must be bonded to a trigger. By repeating the trigger-habit sequence over and over, you create a heartbeat rhythm (ba-pum, ba-pum!) that becomes ingrained in your mind. So today, before you start the habit, find a trigger that you already do each day. If you don't think you have a routine, you might write down everything you do in the morning and see if there's something on that list that you do every day. Some possibilities: morning coffee, opening your laptop, taking a shower, brushing your teeth, waking up, getting to work, getting home from work, eating breakfast (or lunch or dinner), going to bed. After you've picked a trigger, write out a reminder on a piece of paper and put it near where the trigger happens (near the coffeemaker if the trigger is drinking coffee). This reminder will be useful when you start doing the habit tomorrow.

### Day 6: Start easy

Today's the day you actually start the habit, at last! To start, I'd like you to do what I call the Minimum Viable Habit—the smallest version of the habit, which doesn't limit you to doing more, but is the bare minimum you need for success. For

the next week or so, do the habit for just one minute or so, right after your trigger. Yes, doing it for a minute will seem silly, but it's important to make the habit as easy as possible for the first week, to overcome the resistance of the Childish Mind. This is the strategy I used to start the running habit—all I needed to do for my Minimum Viable Habit was lace up my shoes and get out the door. That was so easy I couldn't say no. As you do your habit, try to mindfully enjoy it, and then congratulate yourself on sticking to your vow! You should also do the habit on Day 7 if you can, focusing on just starting the habit.