Unfold: Samples

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How to Use This Book

This is not a book you need to read in order. It is built so that you can open any chapter. Each of the fifteen central chapters is a self-contained essay — part analysis of a framework, part personal account of how that framework arrived in my life, part honest assessment of where it holds and where it doesn't. You can read the chapters in sequence, or you can start wherever your current problem lives.

If you are leading a team through a difficult period, begin with Chapter Fifteen. If you are trying to understand why your habits keep breaking down, begin with Chapter One. If you are negotiating a difficult relationship, begin with Chapter Four. The chapters are grouped into three parts to help you navigate. Part One deals with the inner work — identity, character, psychology, and the relationship between who you think you are and what you are able to do. Part Two deals with the thinking mind — how we process information, form judgements, relate to others, and create the conditions for focused work. Part Three deals with the tools of building — starting companies,

sustaining growth, managing disruption, and navigating the genuinely hard decisions that come with leadership. The opening and closing essays are different in kind from the fifteen framework chapters. They are the framing story — the one that preceded this book and the one that follows it. Read them first and last, or skip them entirely if frameworks are what you came for.

A note on how the frameworks are presented: I have tried to be honest about what each book actually argues rather than what a motivated summary would prefer it to say. Where I disagree with a framework, I say so. Where a framework has been misrepresented in popular discourse, I have tried to correct the record. Where a framework worked precisely as described in my own experience, I have tried to be specific about how and why. The personal material is not decorative. It is the evidence. Begin wherever you are. That is the only instruction this book has.

Chapter Zero: Before We Begin

A Confession, a Verse, and Three Questions
Being also a synthesis of fifteen books, one grandfather's pair of missing shoes, some samosas, a shared toilet, a Vipassana bell, and the Bhagavad Gita.

First, A Confession
I don't write from the position of extraordinary success. I write as someone still working things out. Many books about personal growth come from people looking back after remarkable achievements. This book comes from a different place — inside the process itself. I am a person from Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh — a small hill city whose chief exports are, as far as I can determine, good weather, steep roads, and a particular disposition toward stubbornness that Himachalis prefer to call determination. My grandfather was a farmer who did not own shoes. My father grew up without them and spent his adult life putting savings into fixed deposits because FDs represented, for someone who

had experienced actual scarcity, the only form of security simple enough to trust. My parents are middle-class people who came from poverty, and they spent my childhood communicating, through the specific vocabulary of concerned Indian parenting, that the ideal life was a secure one — a government job, a stable salary, a house that was fully owned, and a son who did not do anything alarming. I spent a substantial portion of my adult life trying to deliver this. I worked at Dell. I worked across the Indian technology sector, building expertise in data analysis and business intelligence. I wore reasonable shoes. I was, by most external measures, on track. And then I began doing things that were harder to explain. I backpacked through Europe. I sat in silence for ten days at a Vipassana centre in Pune. I volunteered at a hostel in Pushkar. I met two women in the Netherlands who told me I did not know my own country — the most useful humiliation I have received in my life. I trained in Karate, Muay Thai, and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I wrote poetry nobody read. I moved to Granada, Spain, in my forties and rebuilt a consulting practice in a language I did not yet speak, in a market that had not been waiting for me. None of this constitutes success by the standard that magazine covers use. I am aware of this and entirely unbothered by it. My success is defined by me, measured against my own values, assessed by the only judge with access to the full evidence. These fifteen books did not give me wealth or fame. They gave me something I consider more valuable — a set of frameworks precise enough to be useful in actual difficulty, tested across a life that has been genuinely varied and, occasionally, genuinely hard. I came into this world alone. I will leave it the same way. In between, nobody else has sufficient information to decide whether my

life constitutes a success or a failure. That judgement belongs to me. I have made it. The verdict is favourable.

The Billionaire Problem

We have developed a peculiar relationship with extraordinary success. We use it simultaneously as inspiration and as a measure. We read about Musk and feel inspired by the ambition and diminished by the gap between his outcomes and our own. We watch Pichai and think: 'What did he have that I do not?' This is a cognitive trap of the variety Kahneman spent a career documenting. Using a billionaire as your reference point for a successful life is the equivalent of looking at Everest and concluding that hills are failures. The hills are not failures. The hills are where most of us live. And there is considerably more interesting life happening on the hills than at the summit — more variety, more weather, more unexpected encounters, more of the texture that makes a life feel like a life rather than a single sustained achievement. Here is the more useful question: Compared to the version of yourself that existed five years ago, in which direction are you moving? That comparison is both more meaningful and more available. It requires only self-knowledge rather than information about other people's interiors that we never actually have.

What the Gita Said That All Fifteen Books Were Also Saying

I grew up in India in a household saturated in philosophical traditions that most of the world has to travel to encounter. The Bhagavad Gita was not a text I studied — it was weather. It was in the language, in the approach to difficulty, in the particular Indian relationship with effort and outcome. The verse I return to most reliably:

कर्मण्येवाधिकारस्ते मा फलेषु कदाचन। मा कर्मफलहेतुर्भूर्मा

ते सङ्गो’स्त्वकर्मणि॥ Act — that is your domain. The outcome is not. Do not mistake yourself for the author of results, and do not let the uncertainty of results become a reason to stop acting. Notice something: This is the synthesis that all fifteen books are circling back to from different directions. James Clear says: ‘Build the system, not the goal.’ You control the showing up. You cannot guarantee the outcome. Stephen Covey says: ‘Work from the inside out — character before technique.’ Viktor Frankl says: ‘You cannot control what happens to you, but you can always choose how you respond.’ Jim Collins says: ‘The flywheel is a patient, consistent push that accumulates into momentum so gradually that observers think something dramatic happened, when only something consistent happened, for long enough.’ Ben Horowitz says: ‘The struggle is normal, and the job is to keep making the best available decisions with whatever you have.’ The Gita arrived at the same place three thousand years earlier, with more economy. Do the work. Do not attach to the fruit. Do not use the absence of a guaranteed outcome as a reason for inaction. This is not passivity. *Nishkama karma* is not indifference to outcome. It is the discipline of having full commitment to the action while releasing the death grip on the result. You work completely. You work without the anxiety that comes from needing the work to produce a specific outcome in order for the work to be worthwhile. The person who works in the grip of outcome anxiety makes different decisions than the person who works in the freedom of *nishkama karma.* The first one protects themselves. Takes fewer risks. Produces, over time, work that is competent and insulated and does not contain much of themselves. The second one works as if the work is the point, because it is. They fail

more publicly and more productively. They occasionally produce something that neither they nor anyone else could have predicted.

What the Difficulty Is Actually For

If you are reading this because you feel like you have not done enough, like you are behind some schedule that was never stated but is universally understood, like the gap between what you expected your life to look like by now and what it actually looks like is a source of persistent distress, then I wrote this for you. Here is what I can tell you from the specific life I have lived: The period when I was surviving on one samosa a day was not a failure. It was Collins' Stockdale Paradox in literal form — faith that the situation would resolve, combined with complete honesty about the present reality, held simultaneously for seven days until day eight arrived. The three years in a small dark room with one shared toilet were not a failure. They were Clear's Plateau of Latent Potential — the period where compounding happens below the surface, where progress is real but not yet visible, where the people who stop miss the breakthrough accumulating beneath their feet. The twenty-six engineering backlogs were not a failure. They were a zero-to-one problem in Thiel's sense — a situation where the consensus had decided something was impossible while I had access to the specific secret the consensus missed: The number of backlogs was not the variable. Commitment was. The difficulty is not a sign that something has gone wrong. The difficulty is the curriculum.

Three Questions

I refuse to give you a bullet list. The fifteen chapters ahead are full of them. What I will give you is three questions — because three is the number you can hold in working memory on a busy Tuesday morning

when the frameworks are nowhere to be found, and the situation requires an answer. Question one: Compared to who I was five years ago, in which direction am I moving? Not compared to Pichai. Compared to the earlier version of yourself. Are you wiser? More capable? More honest about what you value? If yes, in even one dimension, the flywheel is turning. Keep pushing. Question two: What would I do with this day if I knew the outcome was not guaranteed, that the work might not produce the result, but I was going to do it anyway, because the work itself is the point? This is the *nishkama karma* question restated for a Tuesday morning. Question three: What is the one habit, the one practice, the one small action that if I started today and maintained it without fanfare for two years would produce an outcome I cannot fully imagine from where I am now? This is the compound interest question. The compounding is invisible at the beginning. Undeniable at the end. The time to begin is always before it is visible. Three questions. Ask them regularly. The answers will change as you change. That is the point.

An Honest Accounting

I do not know if this book will change your life. I hope it will. But books do not change lives. People change lives. Books provide the framework; the person provides the application. What I can tell you, with the confidence of someone who has made a considerable variety of choices across a considerable variety of contexts and survived most of them, is that the direction of more engagement, more honesty, more curiosity, and more action is almost always better than the direction of more safety, more comfort, more comparison, and more waiting. The conditions will not improve before you begin. They improve because

you begin. This is the compound interest principle applied to life. The interest does not accumulate while you wait for the right moment. It accumulates from the first deposit, however small. My grandfather had no shoes. My father put his savings in fixed deposits. I sat for ten days in silence, cleared twenty-six engineering backlogs, survived on one samosa for a week, moved to Spain in my forties, and wrote this book. I am still in the middle of the thing. So are you.

Chapter 1:
The Monastery Had a Bell

The Architecture of Tiny
Based on Atomic Habits by James Clear

Introduction

Four in the morning. A bell. That is how every day began for ten days at the Vipassana in Pune — a sound that gave you no choice, that asked nothing of you except that you get up and sit in the hall with a hundred other people who had also voluntarily surrendered their phones, their books, their voices, and most of what they ordinarily used to manage the hours.

The rules were simple. No speaking. No reading. No writing. No eye contact with other participants. Wake at four, meditate until six, breakfast, meditate, lunch, meditate, meditate, meditate, brief teaching in the evening, sleep by nine-thirty, bell at four. Repeat. For ten days. No weekends. No exceptions.

By day three, I understood something I had never understood from reading about habit formation: The environment was the instruction. Nobody was telling me to meditate. The bell told me. The cushion in front of me told me. The absence of anything else to do told me. Every element of the physical arrangement had been designed not to motivate me but to make the next action structurally obvious. You did not need willpower to sit. There was nothing else to do.

James Clear argues that most people fail to build habits not because they lack discipline but because they rely on motivation, which is intermittent, contextual, and entirely unreliable under pressure. What sustains is not how you feel about it. What sustains is whether the environment has been designed to make the right action the path of least resistance. The Vipassana centre had understood this for centuries before Clear put it into a framework. The bell was the cue. The hall was the context. The cushion was the anchor. The whole system was constructed so that showing up required nothing except being present in a space that had already made the decision for you.

I came to Vipassana in the middle of what had been a genuinely disordered period of my life — years of work across multiple companies in the Indian technology sector, a backpacking journey through Europe that had unsettled me more than it had settled, and a growing sense that the professional competence I had built was not the same thing as the kind of inner architecture that made a life feel coherent. I had worked at Dell, at multiple product companies, at consulting practices, and at technology startups from Chandigarh to Gurgaon to Noida, accumulating experience in data analysis, business intelligence, and

delivery management. I knew how to perform. I was not sure I knew how to inhabit my own time.

The ten days at Vipassana did not fix this. But they gave me a working model of what it looks like when a system, rather than willpower, does the heavy lifting. That model is what this chapter is about.

The central insight of Atomic Habits, dressed differently: You do not rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems. A goal tells you where to go. A system is the mechanism that actually gets you there, independent of how inspired or disciplined you happen to feel on any given morning.

PART ONE

The Invisible Architecture of Behaviour

Identity, systems, and the compounding that nobody can see

How Identity Actually Changes — A Story About a White Belt

I started training in martial arts in my early twenties. I want to be careful about what I say here because the temptation when writing about martial arts is to romanticise it in ways that obscure what the training actually involves. What it actually involves, in the beginning, is repetition that is so boring it is physically uncomfortable. The same stance adjusted for the forty-third time. The same combination is drilled until your hands move before your brain has finished deciding to move them.

For several months, I was unambiguously bad at it. I understood this intellectually, but I had not yet understood it in the way that

matters, which is to say, I had not yet stopped being embarrassed about it. I showed up to class with the low-grade self-consciousness of someone who believes they are being evaluated against a standard they have not yet met. I was not yet a martial artist who was learning. I was a civilian trying to look like one.

The shift, when it came, was not produced by a single training session or a specific breakthrough. It was the product of accumulated small decisions — showing up when I did not feel like it, drilling when drilling was tedious, asking the same question again when I had not understood the answer the first time. Somewhere in that accumulation, without my being able to identify the specific moment, I stopped performing the identity of a martial artist and started being one. The stance stopped being something I was trying to hold. It became how I stood.

Clear calls this identity-based habit change. The core error, as he describes it, is going after the outcome — the ten kilograms, the novel, the marathon — while leaving untouched the deeper question of who you believe yourself to be. I learned this from training, not from reading. On the mat, you cannot sustain a gap between what you are doing and what you believe about yourself. If you are drilling a combination while privately seeing yourself as someone who is merely trying out martial arts, that shows up in your commitment, your recovery, and your willingness to be corrected. The practice does not change the self-concept. The self-concept shapes the practice. Clear's point is that this runs in both directions — deliberately changing the self-concept through accumulated small actions that vote for a new

identity eventually changes what the practice looks like without requiring constant effort of will.

The more durable move is to work from the inside out. Not 'I want to become someone who meditates' but 'I am someone who takes their inner life seriously, and meditation is what that looks like at seven in the morning.' Not 'I want to exercise' but 'I am someone who treats their body as a working instrument that requires maintenance.' Each small action you take is a vote cast for a particular identity. The identity does not require a unanimous election — only enough consistent votes that the picture becomes coherent.

I have also trained in Muay Thai and in Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu over the years, and each martial art required not just new techniques but a new relationship with difficulty, with failure, and with the kind of discomfort that comes from being outclassed by another person in a physical contest. You cannot fake competence in reality. You cannot borrow someone else's experience on the mat. The identity has to be real, which means the votes have to be real, which means the showing up has to happen even when — especially when — it is the last thing you feel like doing.

There is a difference between endurance training and combat training that I did not fully appreciate until I had spent years doing both. Endurance teaches you that you can go further than you believed, that the wall you hit at eight is not physical but narrative, a story your body tells your mind to get you to stop. That is valuable. But sparring teaches you something harder and, I think, more transferable: How to remain calm while being hit.

On the mat, when someone connects cleanly — when the strike lands or the takedown drops you — the instinct is to react. Flinch. Tense. Escalate. Panic. Every one of those reactions makes you worse at what comes next. The trained response, the one that takes months of accumulated votes to install, is the opposite: absorb the impact, stay present, and find the next useful action. Do not make the hit larger than it was. Do not let the story about the hit replace the reality of the hit.

Life, I have found, hits in precisely the same way. The diagnosis you did not expect. The job that disappears. The relationship that ends. The instinct is the same — flinch, tense, escalate, panic — and the trained response is the same too: absorb, stay present, find the next useful action. Sparring did not teach me this as a metaphor. It taught me this as a physical pattern, drilled into muscle memory, that I have drawn on in every significant difficulty I have faced since. The mat is where I learned that staying calm in chaos is not a personality trait. It is a capacity. And like every capacity, it begins with showing up enough times that the practice becomes part of who you are.

Goals Are the Map. Systems Are the Journey.

I have set more professional goals than I can accurately count across a career that has spanned data analysis, business intelligence, project delivery, consulting, and now writing. Some of those goals I achieved. Many I did not. The pattern I notice when I look back is not that the goals I failed were the wrong ones. The pattern is that the goals I failed were the ones where I invested in the goal without investing in the system.

A goal without a system is a wish with a deadline. It creates a binary experience: You either hit it or you do not, and it provides

nothing to sustain you during the plateau before the result is visible. The person who decides to read fifty books this year has a goal. The person who puts a book on their pillow every morning, reads for twenty minutes before sleep, regardless of how tired they are, and keeps a notebook of what they are reading has a system. Both have fifty books as a destination. Only one of them will get there, and only one of them will still be reading at fifty-two books.

After the Vipassana retreat, I tried to transfer what I had understood about the environment design into my ordinary working life. The results were instructive. The habits that survived were the ones where I had changed the environment to make them structurally obvious — the meditation cushion visible by the bed, the notebook open on the desk, the next task already written before I closed the laptop the previous evening. The habits that did not survive were the ones I had committed to in motivation and forgotten to design into context. Motivation had run its predictable course. The environment remained what it had always been.

The Chain That Cleared Twenty-Six Backlogs

I want to tell you about a specific habit chain, because it is the one that rebuilt my academic life from rubble.

I came out of my ECE engineering degree with twenty-six backlogs. Twenty-six. That is not a typo, and it is not an exaggeration. It is the number of examinations I had failed across my undergraduate years, each one a small brick in a wall that was supposed to be impassable. The consensus among the people who knew me was clear: This was not a recoverable situation. The number was too large. The pattern was too established. The conclusion was already written.

The consensus was wrong, but not because I was secretly brilliant or unusually determined. The consensus was wrong because I changed the system.

After college, living in a room that was too small for ambition and too dark for self-pity, I built a habit chain. It was not sophisticated. It was not inspired by any book I had read; I had not yet encountered Clear's work or anyone else's formal framework for habit formation. It was simply the structure that emerged when I asked myself: What is the smallest possible morning routine that guarantees I will do the work?

The chain: Wake. Meditate for ten minutes. Write — not the exam material, but whatever was in my head, clearing the mental queue. Review yesterday's study notes. Begin new work. Each link triggered the next. The meditation settled the noise. The writing emptied the anxiety. The review reconnected me to where I had left off. The new work began from a position of calm rather than panic.

I cleared all twenty-six backlogs in three attempts. Not because the material had changed. Because the system had changed. And the system changed who I believed myself to be. I was no longer the student with twenty-six backlogs. I was someone who sat down every morning and did the work, and the backlogs were simply the backlog of a system that had not yet caught up with the person operating it.

Clear would call this identity-based change. I would call it the morning that saved my career. Both descriptions are accurate. The chain was the engine. The identity was the fuel. Neither was visible to anyone who was not in the room at six in the morning, watching a

young man with very low grades sit quietly with his eyes closed before opening a notebook.

The Plateau of Latent Potential — The Gap Between Effort and Evidence

I have been writing poetry since my early twenties. Not for publication, not for an audience, not for any purpose that could be explained to someone who asked what it was for. For the same reason, the ice cube sits unchanged through the first twenty degrees of warming; the change is happening in the material before it becomes visible in the shape.

Clear calls this the Plateau of Latent Potential, and it is the place where most people stop. Not because the approach is wrong. Because the approach is right but the result is not yet visible, and the absence of visible results is interpreted as evidence of failure rather than as the normal experience of work whose effects compound below the surface before they compound above it.

The poetry is still not primarily for publication. The practice is now nearly three decades old. What I notice is not that I have become dramatically better at any single poem; individual poems are still as uncertain and as difficult to land as they ever were. What I notice is that the attention available to me when I approach a poem is different in quality from the attention available to me thirty years ago. That difference is the compounding. It happened so slowly that I did not observe it accumulating. I observe it now only in the gap between what I could do then and what is available to me now.

The honest thing about the Plateau of Latent Potential is that you cannot know, while you are on it, how long it will last or whether the breakthrough is days or years away. What you can know is that the people who stopped during their plateau are the people for whom the breakthrough never arrived. Persistence is the only answer. There is no second one.

PART TWO

The Four Laws of Behaviour Change

The mechanism of every habit you have ever built or broken

Law One: Make It Obvious — What the Vipassana Centre Understood That Most Gyms Do Not

Most of our environments are the opposite of Vipassana — rich with cues for what we do not want to cultivate and sparse with cues for the ones we do. The phone on the nightstand is a cue for scrolling. The television visible from the sofa is a cue for watching. The notebook in the drawer is a cue for nothing, because it requires two additional actions before it becomes available. The guitar in its case in the wardrobe has not been played in three months and will not be played again until someone takes it out and puts it on a stand in the room where they actually spend their evenings.

When I returned from the European backpacking years and settled into the India travel period — Pushkar, Rishikesh, a Kerala ashram near Koregaon Park in Pune — I found myself in environments that made certain habits structurally easier than they had ever been in professional life. The hostel in Pushkar where I volunteered had a courtyard. I meditated in the courtyard every morning, not because I

was disciplined but because the courtyard was there and the morning was quiet and the context made sitting still the most available action. The yoga teacher training in Rishikesh produced a certified practitioner, not through my unusual willpower but through a schedule so complete that the practice was built into every hour. The environment was the instruction. The instruction was the environment.

Implementation Intentions

Clear identifies one of the most reliable tools for habit initiation: the implementation intention. Rather than 'I will meditate more,' the effective formulation is 'I will meditate for twenty minutes in the courtyard at 6:15 each morning after I have made my first cup of tea.' The specificity is not pedantic. It eliminates the moment of decision that is the primary point of failure. When 6:15 arrives, and the tea is made, there is no negotiation with yourself. The decision was made in advance, when you had full clarity, so that your future self does not have to make it again in a moment when tiredness or distraction had reduced the quality of available judgement.

Habit Stacking

The related technique — linking a new habit to an existing one — is the natural structure of every working daily practice I have ever developed. After I sit for meditation, I write. After I write, I review what I produced the previous day. After I review, I begin new work. Each link triggers the next. The chain requires no additional willpower after the first link is established, because each subsequent link is simply the continuation of a sequence that has already begun.

You saw this chain earlier in this chapter, clearing twenty-six backlogs. You will see it again throughout this book. The morning

sequence has changed in its specific contents over the years — the ten minutes of meditation became twenty, the writing shifted from journal to books, the review expanded to include client work in the Granada years, but the architecture has remained the same. One link triggers the next. The system runs itself once the first link engages. The first link is the only one that requires a decision.

Law Two: Make It Attractive — The Company You Keep Is the Habit You Build

I spent two months as a volunteer at a hostel in Pushkar. The people who passed through that hostel — travellers from Europe, from East Asia, from South America, backpackers in their twenties who had left stable jobs, older travellers doing something they had postponed for decades — had a particular relationship with curiosity that I had not encountered in the same concentration anywhere in my professional life.

Two women arrived one afternoon — one from the United States, one from Australia — who had been in India for several months. They sat at the common table in the evening and began talking about Hampi: the ruins, the boulders, the light at certain times, and the specific quality of the silence around the Virupaksha temple at dawn. Then they mentioned Jaisalmer. The forts, the desert, the way the sand changed in the hour before sunset. I sat and listened, and somewhere in the listening, I understood something that has stayed with me; they knew my country better than I did. They had gone to places I had never been, in the country where I had lived my entire adult life, and found in them things I had somehow never thought to look for.

That evening produced a specific kind of discomfort — not shame exactly, but the productive embarrassment of realising that your curiosity has been smaller than it could have been. I began planning what became two years of travelling in India. The habit of curiosity, made attractive by proximity to people for whom it was natural, compounded into a practice that changed how I understood the country I came from and the professional questions I had been asking about it.

Clear's argument about social environment is precise: We are extraordinarily sensitive to the habits of the groups we belong to and the people we admire. Not because we are weak or imitative, but because social calibration is one of the oldest survival mechanisms we have. The most efficient way to find the optimal in a new environment is to observe what the successful members of that environment do and do likewise. The problem is that this mechanism works equally well for bad habits as for good ones. You will converge on the average of whoever you spend time with. The question is only whether you have chosen that convergence deliberately.

Law Three: Make It Easy — The Cigarette That Finally Stayed Out

I want to be honest about something that most productivity writing elides: The gap between knowing what to do and actually doing it is not primarily a knowledge problem. It is a friction problem. I have known for years that meditation produces measurable benefits across multiple domains of cognitive and emotional functioning. I have experienced those benefits personally. I have studied the mechanisms. None of that knowledge, on any given difficult morning, is as decisive as whether the

meditation cushion is already on the floor or whether it is in a bag in the wardrobe that requires locating and unpacking before I can begin.

I want to tell you about quitting cigarettes, because it is the best example I have of what Clear means by making it easy — specifically, making the good path easier than the bad one.

I smoked for years. During the Delhi working years, cigarettes were woven into the texture of every break, every stressful evening wind-down. I tried to quit multiple times. Each attempt followed the same arc: strong motivation on day one, manageable discomfort on day two, a single moment of stress or boredom on day three or four, and then the first cigarette, which brought with it the collapse of the entire attempt and a small, corrosive deposit of evidence that quitting was something I could not do.

What finally worked was not a surge of willpower or a dramatic declaration. It was a substitution. I started working out again, not with the goal of quitting smoking but with the goal of being someone who took his body seriously. The workouts made smoking taste worse. They made the mornings after smoking feel noticeably heavier. They introduced a physical feedback loop that made the cigarette less attractive without my having to argue with myself about it. The friction of smoking increased because the competing habit made the cost tangible in a way that abstract health warnings never had.

Over weeks, the balance shifted. The workouts became the anchor. The cigarettes became the thing that interfered with the anchor. I did not quit smoking through discipline. I quit smoking because I had built a system that made not smoking easier than smoking. The identity

followed: I was no longer a smoker trying to quit. I was someone who trained, and smoking was incompatible with who that person was.

Clear's framework explains this with more precision than I had at the time: Reduce the friction of what you want, increase the friction of what you do not want and let the environment do the work that willpower cannot sustain. The cigarette that finally stayed out was not defeated by determination. It was made structurally unnecessary.

The Two-Minute Rule

When I was at the yoga teacher training in Rishikesh, the schedule was demanding enough that the question of whether to did not arise — the schedule made that decision. When I returned to ordinary working life, the practice needed a different anchor. The one that worked was the smallest possible version: two minutes of intentional breathing, sitting, before I opened my laptop each morning. Not twenty minutes. Not a full asana sequence. Two minutes.

The two-minute version was so small that resistance to it was almost zero. It ran every morning. Over weeks, it expanded naturally into something longer, because the identity of someone who begins each day with stillness was being reinforced by the daily act of beginning each day with stillness. But the seed was the two minutes. The two minutes were non-negotiable precisely because they were too small to negotiate about.

Law Four: Make It Satisfying — The Chain and What Happens When You Break It

Of all the mechanisms, the one I have found to be the most practically powerful is the simplest: Make progress visible. The human brain does

not easily experience the satisfaction of compounding — the improvements are too small and too slow. What the brain responds to is the immediate, concrete, visible signal that something has been done.

I have kept a writing log for longer than I can precisely date. A simple record: date, what was done, how long. Nothing sophisticated. The value is not in the data it accumulates but in the daily act of making a mark that was not there before. Each mark is a small reward that the brain processes before the larger reward of the work itself has had time to arrive. Each mark makes the next day's mark slightly more necessary because a chain exists, and the chain does not want to be broken.

Clear's formulation is precise: Never miss twice. One missed day is a human event. Two missed days is the beginning of a new pattern. The recovery protocol is not motivation, inspiration, or a renewed commitment. It is the smallest possible version of the habit, performed the next day, so that the identity remains intact even when the execution is minimal. You are always one good decision away from being back on track. The gap between the slip and the return is what determines whether a practice survives.

The final principle of this section is also the first: You do not need motivation to start. You need a system. Build the system — the cue, the tiny version of the habit, the environment, the visible record. The motivation follows from the momentum. The momentum follows from the showing up. Start with the next two minutes.

PART THREE

Advanced Levers for Long-Term Success

Genetics, the Goldilocks zone, and the habits that survive

Finding Your Edge — What You Are Drawn To Is Information

Not every habit will feel equally natural for every person. This is not an excuse; it is a design principle. The martial arts that compelled me were the ones that required enough cognitive engagement to hold my attention alongside the physical demand. Pure endurance work — long runs, distance swimming — produced in me a specific kind of motivational friction that mat work and striking practice did not. I could force myself through it. I did not sustain it. The practice that survived was the one that sat closer to the intersection of physical discipline and the kind of focused problem-solving that I find intrinsically engaging.

Endurance teaches mental motivation — the brute refusal to stop when the body is asking you to stop. Sparring teaches something more nuanced — self-control and patience while being hit. Both are valuable. But the second one compelled me in a way the first did not, and that compulsion is data. It tells you where your natural engagement lives, which is where your long-term practice is most likely to survive.

Clear's point here is that genetic disposition and natural temperament are not obstacles to habit formation; they are navigational instruments. The question is not whether you can force yourself to maintain a habit that runs against your grain. You probably can, for a while. The question is whether you need to. The habit that aligns with

your natural strengths and genuine interests will survive the boredom phase that kills most practices. The one that requires constant self-coercion will not. Choose the game where the odds support your specific set of abilities, and then play it with the kind of consistency that makes the Goldilocks Principle work in your favour.

The Goldilocks Principle — Why I Left the Top Six

The most successful practitioners are not the ones who are endlessly motivated. They are the ones who have learned to show up when it is boring. Motivation is a wave; it rises when the work feels meaningful and falls when the work feels routine. The professional shows up regardless, not because they have solved the motivation problem, but because they have removed motivation from the equation. The practice happens because it is what they do, not because they happen to feel like doing it.

But Clear adds a qualification that matters: Habits performed in tasks that are too easy become mindless and lose their appeal. The beginner session that felt challenging in month one becomes a warm-up by month six. If the difficulty does not scale with the developing capability, the habit starts to feel pointless. Boredom, not failure, is the silent killer of long-term practices.

I know this because I lived it in reverse. As an IT, I had reached the top six companies in India. By any external measure, I had won the game my parents had wanted me to play. The salary was excellent. The work was competent. The trajectory was stable and upward. And I was, for the first time in my professional life, bored in a way that felt dangerous.

Not bored in the sense of having nothing to do. Bored in the Goldilocks sense: The work had become too easy for the person I had become. The challenge no longer sat at the edge of my capability. It sat comfortably within it, and the comfort was eroding something I valued more than the salary — the sense that I was growing. The flywheel was spinning, but it was spinning in a groove that had been worn smooth. There was no friction, and without friction, there was no development. I was maintaining. I was not becoming.

So I quit. I left the top six to pursue writing books. My father stopped talking to me over this decision. He could not understand how his son, who had finally achieved the kind of security that his own shoeless childhood had taught him to crave, was voluntarily walking away from it. From his paradigm, this was not courage. It was ingratitude. From mine, it was the only honest response to the Goldilocks data: The work had stopped being the right difficulty. Staying would have been comfortable. Staying would also have been the beginning of a slow decline disguised as stability.

Clear's solution is calibration: Consistently working at the edge of current capability rather than comfortably within it. This is what the Vipassana teachers called the technique — not comfort, not suffering, but the specific, narrow attention required to observe experience at the level where it is actually happening rather than at the level of the story about it. The Goldilocks zone is not a fixed location. It moves as you develop. The practice is to move with it.

Review, Reflection, and the System That Maintains the System

One habit has supported all my others across the years in ways that were not always visible to me until I attempted to explain them to someone else. I review. Not formally, not elaborately, but regularly — what is working, what has happened, what the current evidence suggests about what needs to change. Without this meta-habit, the system drifts. The practices that have stopped serving their original purpose continue through inertia. The new practices that would serve better do not get incorporated because no one is attending to the question of whether the current configuration is optimal.

The habit chain that cleared my backlogs eventually became the morning writing ritual that produced five books. The meditation practice that began as ten minutes of silence in a small room eventually became the twenty-minute anchor of a consulting day in Granada. The martial arts training that started in a dojo in my twenties eventually became the physical practice that I had to fundamentally redesign after the diagnosis in Spain. Each transition required a review — not of the goal, which remained the same (be someone who does the work), but of the specific system through which that goal was being pursued. The system is not sacred. The identity is. The system serves the identity, and when it stops serving, it gets rebuilt.

This is the final and most important principle of this chapter: The system that maintains the system is the habit of honest reflection about whether the system is still working. Without it, you are a machine whose purpose you have stopped examining. With it, you are a person who is paying attention to their own life with the respect it deserves.

About the Author

Akhil M Sharma is an author, technologist, and entrepreneur based in Granada, Spain. He grew up in Hamirpur, Himachal Pradesh, studied engineering, worked across the Indian technology sector at Dell and elsewhere, then spent a decade testing the frameworks in this book against the texture of an actual life — backpacking through Europe, training in three martial arts, sitting ten days in silence at Vipassana, volunteering in Pushkar, rebuilding a consulting practice in Spanish in his forties.

He writes non-fiction you can use and fiction you can't forget. Unfold is his first book.

The full book arrives 16 June 2026.

Pre-order at akhilmsharma.com, or join Margin Notes — his newsletter on the writing, the thinking, and the rest of it — at akhilmsharma.com/newsletter.

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