*New York Times* bestselling author of *FOUR THOUSAND WEEKS*

# MEDITATIONS FOR MORTALS

## Four Weeks to Embrace Your Limitations and Make Time for What Counts

Oliver Burkeman

**ALSO BY OLIVER BURKEMAN**

*Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*

*The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*

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‘It is easier to try to be better than you are than to be who you are.’

— MARION WOODMAN

‘Is there life before death? That is the question!’

— ANTHONY DE MELLO

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INTRODUCTION

# The imperfect life

This is a book about how the world opens up once you realise you're never going to sort your life out. It's about how marvellously productive you become when you give up the grim-faced quest to make yourself more and more productive; and how much easier it gets to do bold and important things once you accept that you'll never get around to more than a handful of them (and that, strictly speaking, you don't absolutely *need* to do any of them at all). It's about how absorbing, even magical, life becomes when you accept how fleeting and unpredictable it is; how much less isolating it feels to stop hiding your flaws and failures from others; and how liberating it can be to understand that your greatest difficulties in life might never be fully resolved.

In short: it's about what changes once you grasp that life as a limited human being – in an era of infinite tasks and opportunities, facing an unknowable future, alongside other humans who stubbornly insist on having their own personalities – isn't a problem you've got to try to solve. The twenty-eight chapters in this book are intended as a guide to a different way of taking action in the world, which I call 'imperfectionism' – a freeing and energising outlook based on the conviction that your limitations aren't *obstacles* to a meaningful existence, which you must spend your days struggling to overcome, en route to some imaginary point when you'll finally get to feel fulfilled. On the contrary, accepting them, stepping more fully into them, is precisely *how* you build a saner, freer, more accomplished, socially

connected and enchantment-filled life – and never more so than at this volatile and anxiety-inducing moment in history.

If you decide to read this book at the suggested pace of one chapter per day or thereabouts, my hope is that it will function as a four-week 'retreat of the mind' in the midst of daily life – a way of actually living this philosophy here and now, and doing more of what matters to you as a result, instead of mentally filing it away as yet another system you might try to implement one day, should you ever get a moment to spare. After all, as we'll see, one main tenet of imperfectionism is that the day is never coming when all the other stuff will be 'out of the way,' so you can turn at last to building a life of meaning and accomplishment that hums with vitality. For finite humans, the time for that has to be now.

So I sincerely hope you find this book useful. To be completely honest with you, though, I wrote it for myself.

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In my late twenties, I started working as a general feature writer at the *Guardian* newspaper in London, where my job, upon arriving at the office in the morning, was to be assigned some topic currently in the news – the fate of refugees fleeing an unfolding geopolitical crisis, say, or why green smoothies were suddenly so popular – and then to turn in a big-picture, intelligent-seeming 2,000-word article on it by 5 p.m. the same day. An hour or two before deadline, my editor would begin pacing the floor near my desk, clicking his fingers to expel nervous energy, and wondering aloud why I wasn't closer to finishing. The answer (as I doubtless told him on several occasions) is that writing an intelligent-seeming 2,000-word article in seven hours flat, on a topic about which you previously knew nothing, is a fundamentally preposterous undertaking. Still, it had to be done – and so my days at the *Guardian* were shot through with the feeling of being on the back

foot, fighting against time, and needing to buckle down immediately, if I were to stand any chance of closing the gap.

Not that I can really blame my editor for any of this. By that point in my life, I was already on intimate terms with the feeling of playing catch-up; indeed, few things feel more basic to my experience of adulthood than the vague sense that I'm falling behind, and need to claw my way back up to a minimum standard of output, if I'm to stave off an ill-defined catastrophe that might otherwise come crashing down upon my head. Sometimes, it felt like all I needed was a bit more discipline; at other times, I was sure the answer lay in a new system for managing my tasks and goals, which I'd track down just as soon as I got this article on smoothies out of the way. I devoured self-help books, tried meditation, and explored Stoicism, growing slightly more anxious each time another new technique proved not to be the silver bullet. Always over the horizon, meanwhile, hovered the fantasy of one day 'getting on top of things' – where 'things' could mean anything from emptying my inbox to figuring out how romantic relationships were supposed to work – so that the truly meaningful part of life, the really *real* part, could finally begin.

I know now, though I didn't back then, that I'm not alone in feeling this way. Frankly, I could hardly be less alone. Hundreds of conversations and email exchanges I've had since 2021, when I published a book about the challenge of using time well, have convinced me that this sense of not having life nailed down just yet – and needing to exert oneself harder and harder, if only to avoid slipping further back – is close to universal these days. The younger people I encountered seemed utterly daunted by the task of getting life into working order, while many older ones were dismayed that by forty or fifty they apparently still hadn't managed it, and were starting to wonder if they ever would. Certainly, it was clear that achieving wealth or status didn't cause the problem to go away – which makes sense, since in the modern world, external success is often the result of being even more enmeshed in the desperate game of catch-up than everyone else. 'Most

successful people,' as the entrepreneur and investor Andrew Wilkinson has observed, 'are just a walking anxiety disorder, harnessed for productivity.'

The most common form of the anxious feeling I'm trying to pinpoint here is sheer, overwhelming busyness, the sense of having far too much to do in the time available for doing it. But it takes other forms as well. For some it manifests as imposter syndrome, the belief that there's a basic level of expertise that pretty much everyone else has attained, but that you haven't, and that you won't be able to stop second-guessing yourself until you get there. It also arises, for many of us, in the feeling of not yet having cracked the code of intimate relationships, so that for all our outward accomplishments we feel thwarted on a daily basis by the bewildering complexities of dating, marriage, or parenting. For still others, the falling-behind feeling is mainly a matter of believing they ought to be doing more to address the national and global crises unfolding around them, but having no idea what they could do, as individuals, that could possibly make any difference. The thread that runs through all these, though, is the idea that there exists some way of being in the world, some way of *mastering the situation* of being a human in the twenty-first century, that you have yet to discover. And that you won't be able to relax into your life until you do.

Yet the worst of it is that our efforts to address the problem seem only to exacerbate it. In my book *Four Thousand Weeks* I labelled one version of this 'the efficiency trap,' to describe the way that when you get better and faster at dealing with an incoming supply of anything, you often end up busier and more stressed. Email is the classic example: vowing to address the deluge, you start replying more promptly, triggering more replies, many of which you'll need to reply to; plus, you acquire a reputation for being unusually responsive on email, so more people consider it worthwhile to email you in the first place. Moreover, as you struggle to handle everything, your days begin to fill with less important tasks – because your belief that there must be a way to do it all means you flinch from making difficult decisions about what's truly worth your limited time.

But my conversations helped me recognise a deeper issue, too, which is the way our ceaseless efforts to get into the driver's seat of life seem to sap it of the very sense of aliveness that makes it worth living in the first place. The days lose what the German social theorist Hartmut Rosa evocatively calls their 'resonance.' The world feels dead; and for all our efforts to get more done, we find ourselves somehow less able to bring about the results we were seeking. It happens even when our attempts to get in control of things *do* work. You manage to make yourself meditate daily, and suddenly it feels soul-crushingly boring to do so; or you get around to organising a date night with your spouse – because everyone says that's how to keep the spark alive – but the whole thing makes the two of you so self-conscious that it's fated to descend into bickering, and you end the evening feeling like failures. In my days as a 'productivity geek,' I was always embracing some new system for designing my life, and as I downloaded the relevant app, or purchased the required stationery, I'd feel excited, even intoxicated: I was on the verge of great things! Then, within a day or two, my new schedule would seem dismal and lifeless, another list of chores I had to slog through, and I'd find myself angrily resenting the jerk who had the temerity to dictate how I spent my time in this manner – even though the jerk in question was me.

These are admittedly minor examples. But this loss of aliveness also helps explain the epidemic of burnout, which isn't merely a matter of exhaustion, but of the emptiness that comes from years of pushing oneself, machine-like, to do more and more, without it ever feeling like enough. The increasingly rage-filled and conspiratorial character of modern political life might even be seen as a desperate attempt, by people starved of resonance, to try to feel anything at all.

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The essential trouble, as Rosa tells it, is that the driving force of modern life is the fatally misguided idea that reality can and should be made ever more

controllable – and that peace of mind and prosperity lie in bringing it ever more fully under our control. And so we experience the world as an endless series of things we must master, learn, or conquer. We set out to make mincemeat of our inboxes, defeat our to-read piles, or impose order on our schedules; we try to optimise our levels of fitness or focus, and feel obliged to be always enhancing our parenting skills, competence in personal finance, or understanding of world events. (Even if we congratulate ourselves on, say, prioritising friendship over making money, we may still approach it in the spirit of optimisation, pushing ourselves to make more friends, or to do better at keeping in touch with them – that is, to try to exert more control over our social lives.) The culture reinforces this doctrine of control in multiple ways. Advances in technology always seem on the cusp of permitting you to tame your workload at last – at the time of writing, virtual assistants powered by artificial intelligence are what's about to do it – while the hyper-competitive economy makes it feel ever more essential to do so, just to keep your head above water.

Yet everyday experience, along with centuries of philosophical reflection, attests to the fact that a fulfilling and accomplished life *isn't* a matter of exerting ever more control. It's not about making things more predictable and secure, until you can finally relax. A football match is exciting because you *don't* know who'll win; a field of intellectual study is absorbing because you *don't* yet have a handle on it all. The greatest achievements often involve remaining open to serendipity, seizing unplanned opportunities, or riding unexpected bursts of motivation. To be delighted by another person, or moved by a landscape or a work of art, requires not being in full control. At the same time, a good life clearly isn't about giving up all hope of influencing reality. It's about taking bold action, creating things, and making an impact – just without the background agenda of achieving full control. Resonance depends on reciprocity: you do things – you have to launch the business, organise the campaign, set off on the wilderness trek, send the email about the social event – and then see how the world responds.

It's hardly surprising that so many of us spend so much of our lives attempting to lever ourselves into a position of dominance over a reality that can otherwise seem so unmanageable and overwhelming. How else are you supposed to handle all those to-dos, pursue a few cherished ambitions, take a stab at being a decent parent or partner, and do your bit as a citizen of a world in crisis? But it doesn't work. Life edges ever closer to being a dull, solitary, and often infuriating chore, something to be endured, in order to make it to a supposedly better time, which never quite seems to arrive.

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*Meditations for Mortals* is my attempt to begin where the sort-your-life-out, get-on-top-of-everything school of thinking fails, and instead go somewhere more meaningful and productive, and importantly also more fun. (The chapters draw heavily on my email newsletter *The Imperfectionist*, and on many generous responses from its readers.) Rather than fuelling the fantasy of one day bringing everything under control, this book takes it as a given that you'll *never* get on top of everything. It starts from the position that you'll never feel fully confident about the future, or fully understand what makes other people tick – and that there will always be too much to do.

But none of this is because you're an ill-disciplined loser, or because you haven't yet read the right bestseller revealing 'the surprising science' of productivity, leadership, parenting, or anything else. It's because being a finite human *just means* never achieving the sort of control or security on which many of us feel our sanity depends. It just means that the list of worthwhile things you could in principle do with your time will always be vastly longer than the list of things for which you'll have time. It just means you'll always be vulnerable to unforeseen disasters or distressing emotions, and that you'll never have more than partial influence over how your time unfolds, no matter what YouTubers in their early twenties with no kids might have to say about the ideal morning routine.

Imperfectionism is the outlook that understands this to be good news. It's not that facing finitude isn't painful. (That's why the quest for control is so alluring.) Confronting your non-negotiable limitations means accepting that life entails tough choices and sacrifices, that regret is always a possibility, as is disappointing others, and that nothing you create in the world will ever measure up to the perfect standards in your head. But these truths are also the very things that liberate you to act, and to experience resonance. When you give up the unwinnable struggle to do everything, that's when you can start pouring your finite time and attention into a handful of things that truly count. When you no longer demand perfection from your creative work, your relationships, or anything else, that's when you're free to plunge energetically into them. And when you stop making your sanity or self-worth dependent on first reaching a state of control that humans don't get to experience, you're able to start feeling sane and enjoying life now, which is the only time it ever is.

This volume also tries to address a problem that's gnawed at me for years about books purporting to help people live more meaningfully or productively. The worst of these just offer a list of steps to implement – which almost never works, since they ignore the internal journey the author had to take in order to arrive at them. (If *they* had to struggle with, say, the emotional roots of their resistance to getting organised, why should *you* expect results from merely following a list of organisational tips?) A better sort of book offers a shift in perspective, a changed understanding from which different actions can follow. But shifts in perspective fade depressingly quickly: for a few days, everything seems different; but then the overwhelming momentum of the usual way of doing things reasserts itself once more.

So my goal here is for whatever you might find useful in these pages to sink under your skin and into your bones – and thus to persist. Obviously, how you read this book is among countless aspects of reality I can't possibly hope to control, and it can absolutely be approached like any other. But I invite you to proceed at one chapter per day, in order, through four weeks

that have been designed to build on each other: facing the facts of finitude in Week One; taking bold, imperfect action in Week Two; getting out of your own way and letting action happen in Week Three; and finally, in Week Four, showing up more fully for life in the present, rather than later.

In describing this as a 'retreat of the mind,' I mean to suggest that you approach it as a return, on a roughly daily basis, to a metaphorical sanctuary in a quiet corner of your brain, where you can allow new thinking to take shape without needing to press pause on the rest of your life, but which remains there in the background as you go through the day. The chapters feature both shifts in perspective and practical techniques, and my hope is that sometimes one of them will change, in a small but concrete way, how you live through the twenty-four hours after reading it. *That's* what makes change last, in my experience: real feedback, from doing things differently in real life.

Naturally, if *Meditations for Mortals* works on these terms, I can only expect it to do so imperfectly. Relatedly, I recommend making no over-industrious efforts to retain what you read, or to put it into practice; instead, trust that if something strikes a chord, it'll linger through the day by itself. This isn't one of those books promising that if you implement its contents flawlessly, you'll have the ideal system for running your life. Human finitude ensures that's never coming. Which is exactly the reason to dive wholeheartedly into this life, now.