

FOUR THOUSAND  
WEEKS:  
TIME MANAGEMENT  
FOR MORTALS

*by Oliver Burkeman*

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## ABOUT:

This is a comprehensive summary of the book *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals* by Oliver Burkeman. Covering the key ideas and proposing practical ways for achieving what's mentioned in the text. Written by book fanatic and online librarian Ivaylo Durmonski. (Printable available only for supporting members.)

## HIGHLIGHTS:

- When we obtain what we wanted, we quickly find new things to want - never appreciating what we have.
- If your attention is ever fleeting, you'll never enjoy the current moment.
- We seek distractions when we perform both hard and boring tasks because such tasks reveal our flaws.

## ABSTRACT:

Our time on earth is insultingly brief – we have only around four thousand weeks. On top of it all, we waste much of it trying to do everything but eventually accomplish nothing. *Four Thousand Weeks* offers insightful philosophical tools that provoke deep reflection. Oliver Burkeman will help you figure out what's truly important in your life so you can regroup, escape activities that are unworthy, and learn to focus your attention on the here and now. In particular, stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Plainly, it's a book about how to use your limited time wisely.

## THE CORE IDEA:

Managing your time well is, foremost, realizing that not everything can be managed. Drop the impossible standards you are pursuing, and decide in advance what to fail at. That's one of the practices Oliver Burkeman proposes as tools for salvation in our culture worshipping busyness. All in all, it's not about trying to cram more into your day and feeling even more anxious when you can't do everything. But about strategically setting boundaries and deciding what not to do.

## KEY LESSONS FROM FOUR THOUSAND WEEKS:

- LESSON #1: BUSYNESS AS EMBLEM OF PRESTIGE
- LESSON #2: WE LIVE MENTALLY IN THE FUTURE
- LESSON #3: CARING ABOUT THINGS YOU DIDN'T WANT TO CARE ABOUT
- LESSON #4: EMBRACE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS
- LESSON #5: DECLINE OF PLEASURE AND HOW TO REST
- LESSON #6: PRACTICING PATIENCE IN THE HURRIED AGE
- LESSON #7: LIVE EVERY MOMENT TO THE FULLEST

LESSON #1:

# BUSYNESS AS EMBLEM OF PRESTIGE

What do we do when we get closer to our financial goals? When we finally satisfy our lifestyle needs?

Easy, we set new goals. We nominate new and shiner lifestyle needs to keep up with the growing demands of the hungry for more crowd.

The book starts with a depressing observation of how we perceive productivity – an umbrella term the author uses to capture our desire for work-life balance.

The products that were created based on the advance in technology. The same products that had to supposedly make us work less and enjoy more leisure time, are making us work more.

Oliver Burkeman points out that when he adopted the famous Inbox Zero system for managing emails – i.e., you get

tremendously efficient at answering emails in order to keep your inbox at 0. He discovered that he started getting even more emails.

It makes sense. You handle incoming emails faster. So, this invites even more emails because people get used to you being available all the time.

Similar things happen with our financial goals.

We earn more. But we spend more. This forces us to work even more so we can keep having enough to satisfy our growing needs. It's an absurd cycle where we never have enough. And most importantly, we never feel that we have enough.

That's why we label busyness as an emblem of prestige. We think that more working hours will lead to a happier state but this time never arrives. Only our work obligations increase while our satisfaction decreases.

*“It turns out that when people make enough money to meet their needs, they just find new things to need and new lifestyles to aspire to; they never quite manage to keep up with the Joneses, because whenever they're in danger of getting close, they nominate new and better Joneses with whom to try to keep up.”*

*Oliver Burkeman*



LESSON #2:

# WE LIVE MENTALLY IN THE FUTURE

In the days before the clock was invented. Our relationship with time and how we approached tasks was completely different from what we strive to achieve now.

Since the majority of the tasks of a regular farmer didn't require a complicated schedule and Zoom calls. His approach when having to milk the cows or when harvesting the crops happened naturally. Plainly, the cows were milked when they needed milking and taking care of the crops happened when it was harvest time.

Imagine someone trying to force milking or harvesting sooner?

This person would have been considered a lunatic.

Well, at least back then.

Now, we try to rush things so we can get more done in less time. The more we optimize the time spent per task, however, the more we have to do.

This approach creates a nagging sensation. Since there is so much to do, we live in a state where we want to “get through” tasks and get them “out of the way.” Once everything is done, we’ll then be happy. In thinking this way, we live in the future. We live *for* the future.

That’s why we hate Mondays and dream about weekends and holidays.

However, when we are working on a task and thinking about completing it, how are we enjoying life?

“We don’t,” concludes Oliver Burkeman.

That’s the modern wrongness.

We are kept indoors working on a beautiful day so we can potentially enjoy a future beautiful day.

You might say that it’s how our world works these days. But it’s also how we make it work. When we use our income to buy more consumer goods. We turn ourselves into better cogs for the economic machine.

*“Becoming more efficient just makes you more rushed, and trying to clear the decks simply makes them fill up again faster.”*

*Nobody in the history of humanity has ever achieved “work-life balance,” whatever that might be.” Oliver Burkeman*

LESSON #3:

# CARING ABOUT THINGS YOU DIDN'T WANT TO CARE ABOUT

What's the main component responsible for feeling pleasure?

It's probably not what you think.

To experience joy, your attention must be focused on what you're doing right now. Otherwise, things are happening to your body, not to your mind. Basically, you are not fully enjoying the incoming sensations.

As the author of the book beautifully explains it with the following sentence: "The finest meal at a Michelin-starred restaurant might as well be a plate of instant noodles if your mind is elsewhere."

This means that how our attention flows is way too important to be neglected.

Sadly, there is a machine in your pocket that is forcing you to care

about things you shouldn't care about. Forcing you to make wrong choices about how your attention should be focused.

Many of us already know that social media websites aren't really free. Basically, we are the product and our attention is what is sold.

But even if you're aware of this fact and you don't feel like you're damaged. There is one extra component that is probably left unconsidered by you – the information you're exposed to.

Except that social media sites are virtual slot machines. The whole system focuses you on things that are probably not related to your personal goals and ambitions. All you are presented with is filtered information determined by an algorithm. This makes you think that some things are more important than others. And this means that you're not really choosing what to pay attention to. It's already determined by your social media app.

Suppose you see more posts from people traveling abroad. Even if your day started with a totally different agenda. You're now centered on finding plane tickets for your next trip. After all, seemingly everyone is traveling.

When you don't define what's important to you and you don't have the willpower to pursue this thing – and block the rest of the stuff that are unimportant. You'll always find yourself wanting things other people want.

*“So it's not simply that our devices distract us from more*

*important matters. It's that they change how we're defining "important matters" in the first place. In the words of the philosopher Harry Frankfurt, they sabotage our capacity to 'want what we want to want.'" Oliver Burkeman*

LESSON #4:

# EMBRACE NEGATIVE THOUGHTS

A common practice we label as reasonable, is to distract ourselves with different thoughts when our mind offers something unpleasant to contemplate.

For instance, if you're afraid of bridges and if you're approaching a bridge. Your instinctive reaction will be to divert attention towards something else.

This type of thinking becomes habitual.

When we teach ourselves to think about other things. We never truly pay attention to what's happening now.

We automatically seek to think of something more enjoyable to avoid the bluntness coming from washing the dishes or doing tax returns. But this becomes a common repertoire. Thus, every time there is something unpleasant, we begin to seek distractions.

In the book, the author tells the story of Steve Young. A young student who wanted to become a Japanese monk. After being rejected several times from the Mount Koya monastery. Eventually, he was permitted to enter, but only if he followed a strict regime. One of the tasks was to “douse himself with several gallons of bone-chilling melted snow.”

At first, his reaction was to divert his attention and think about something else while bathing in cold. But the more he tried to not think about the icy water. The more he realized that this was the wrong approach. Only after he was able to concentrate fully on the current activity, that he found the ritual more tolerable.

Apparently, the monks who designed the task knew something we try to avoid all the time. By concentrating on the current moment – even if the current moment feels unbearable. The suffering is reduced. Conversely, the more we try to escape the agonizing thoughts emerging from what we’re doing. The more we suffer.

The solution to performing dreadful tasks is not to indulge in the emerging sensations promising an easier life when you redirect your attention. To resist experiencing what is happening to us. But to embrace what’s happening even if it feels painful. That’s how the discomfort would evaporate. This is also how you’ll teach the mind and the body to fully concentrate – and even enjoy – when difficult tasks need to be done.

*“Young began to understand that this was precisely the wrong strategy... Slowly it dawned on him that this was the whole point*



*of the ceremony. As he put it—though traditional Buddhist monks certainly would not have done so—it was a “giant biofeedback device,” designed to train him to concentrate by rewarding him (with a reduction in suffering) for as long as he could remain undistracted, and punishing him (with an increase in suffering) whenever he failed.” Oliver Burkeman*

## LESSON #5:

# DECLINE OF PLEASURE AND HOW TO REST

These days, while off work, doing nothing feels like you are failing at life.

If you're not self-improving – reading more books, preparing for a marathon, etc. – you are not becoming better. Thus, you are becoming a worse self.

In our era where leisure is expected to be a time where we improve our abilities. There is high pressure on our ego if we are not using every spare moment we have to get back to our queue of content that aims to better us in some way. This way of thinking is imposed by the modern economy. Arguably, more free time is good for the economy so workers can recover and improve for their work.

But should this be how we approach leisure? And should we justify our existence in terms of the economy?

As the author points out, in the ancient world, “leisure wasn’t the means to some other end; on the contrary, it was the end to which everything else worth doing was a means.”

Ancient Greeks deeply valued rest. They used this time for self-reflection and philosophical contemplation.

These days are long gone and spending your time off well is a tricky subject that requires a strategic approach.

As mentioned, our common response is to try to use our free time so we can improve our future. This prevents us from experiencing pleasure now. We see idleness as wasteful. And we rightly declare it as such because there is so much to do.

In the past, it was easier to do nothing – everything was closed. You couldn’t go shopping and there was no internet to drown in a sea of content.

Now, to rest. To give your head some space to recover, relax, think, and experience the pleasure of now. We have to set some rules.

In the book, the author suggests using some of the Jewish laws for better leisure. Namely, embracing the Sabbath where Jews are banned from doing a long list of things – one of them is a rule stating that you shouldn’t operate electrical switches.

While it might seem absurd to imagine that you should prepare

for your leisure time. It is needed. As the saying goes, “It is fun to have fun but you have to know how.”

Not every activity you do now should lead to something else. Stopping and experiencing joy from simple tasks; that are not all designed to upgrade you, should also be tolerated.

*“Lower East Side of New York that’s equipped with a “Shabbat elevator”: step inside it between Friday evening and Saturday night, and you’ll find yourself stopping at every floor, even if nobody wants to get on or off there, because it’s been programmed to spare Jewish residents and visitors from having to violate the rule against operating electrical switches on the sabbath.” Oliver Burkeman*

LESSON #6:

## PRACTICING PATIENCE IN THE HURRIED AGE

As soon as we slow down, a wave of anxiety will hit us hard and head-on.

To avoid feeling inadequate – because we are still not fit enough, rich enough, or smart enough. We usually dive back to our to-do list, find joy in online forums, or simply embark on the long journey of scrolling through “how-to” articles.

We rarely derive satisfaction from doing our current task, regardless of what it is. Instead, we tend to find more distractions. More resources to divert our attention from our still not perfect lifestyle. This means that we are never fully concentrating.

To actually slow down. To teach yourself patience. In the book, the author suggests following a tactic from an art history teacher at Harvard University – Jennifer Roberts.

The task seems simple but as you'll now find out, it's mentally horrifying.

Here it is: Go to the nearest museum. Choose a painting or sculpture and look at it for three hours straight. The only thing allowed is bathroom breaks. Nothing else. No technology. No chit-chat with visitors. No snoozing.

Why is this the first assignment the teacher gives to her students?

Because we are constantly pressured to move fast. To see more things. To multitask. With this assignment, teacher Jennifer Roberts wants to give permission to her students to slow down and allocate the time that art demands. And even more importantly, to focus on one single thing. When you focus your attention, you get to see behind the obvious. You spot the beautiful details and find things that cannot be found if you simply give a quick glimpse. You need to concentrate to *see*.

In addition to this painting-viewing assignment. The author presents his three principles for getting better at being patient:

- 1. Develop a taste for having problems:** We strive to deal with all of our problems and we tell ourselves that everything will be great when there are no more problems on our plate. But having no problems, as we eventually find out, feels meaningless. The idea is to find worthy problems and give them the time they require.
- 2. Embrace radical incrementalism:** The people who are able to

produce a great deal of writing – or anything useful. Focus on making writing a small part of their lives. They are fully aware that they can't write a novel in a month. But within a year or two? That's fully possible if you write every day. So, if you want to create something big, start small. Decide what you want to do. Then, define when you're going to do it – at what time every day. Lastly, stop when the time is up for that day. Stopping on time will keep you grounded and inspired to return to the task the next day.

- 3. Originality lies on the far side of unoriginality:** Accept that the first couple of years of your creative journey will probably be unoriginal. Your work will be based on others' work. And that's OK. The goal is to stay on the same route – keep doing the craft – till what was unoriginal becomes original.

One additional tip that unfolds at a later stage is this: Accept that not everything in your life will be perfect. That's the whole idea of accepting your finitude.

This means that: If you have a great body, probably you'll have a messy apartment.

If you have a great relationship with your spouse, probably you'll have financial obstacles and so on.

The idea is to consciously choose what to suck at and don't get emotional when you *do* suck at this thing.

*“...because it's all too easy to tell yourself that once you've taken a couple of seconds to look at a painting, you've thereby genuinely*

*seen it. So to prevent her students from rushing the assignment, Roberts had to make “not rushing” the assignment itself.” Oliver Burkeman*



## LESSON #7:

# LIVE EVERY MOMENT TO THE FULLEST

At its core, the book wants to plant the following idea about time deep down in our preoccupied brains: we are time.

If we wish happiness to unfold when we invested enough money. When we have a better house. When we have a different job. We'll never attain happiness. We'll live outside of ourselves. Outside the flow of now.

Fear, is what keeps us absent from the current moment. We avoid completely immersing ourselves in the now because now is never perfect. Now reveals our flaws while the future looks so promising.

For instance, now reveals that you're still not a musician while in the future, you're already the person you dream about. The person giving autographs after concerts. Or as the Swiss psychologist, Marie-Louise von Franz explains: "there is always the fantasy that

sometime in the future the real thing will come about...”

To help us anchor at the current moment and accept reality as it is – without constantly rushing to optimize everything. Oliver Burkeman offers five questions that will help us make the most of our time:

- **“Where in your life or your work are you currently pursuing comfort, when what’s called for is a little discomfort?”**  
Anything worthwhile comes with a degree of chaos. Of feeling inadequate. You can’t control everything. As you move through life, and you’re unsure how to proceed. Prioritize the decisions that enlarge you (make you a better person) over the ones that diminish you.
- **“Are you holding yourself to, and judging yourself by, standards of productivity or performance that are impossible to meet?”** It’s impossible to adequately handle all incoming demands. The trouble is that we try. That’s why we feel so crushed. We try to do everything. And when we can’t, we feel like a failure. Instead, the author suggests crashing your impossible standards. Then, pick just a few meaningful objectives and focus on them.
- **“In what ways have you yet to accept the fact that you are who you are, not the person you think you ought to be?”** Accept that you are who you are today. Not who you will become in the future. If you think that you’ll earn the right to exist when you become a better [write your own definition]. You are missing out on the whole journey. As the author points out, no one cares what we are doing with our lives except us. If you’re always trying to impress others. You’ll never impress yourself.

- **“In which areas of life are you still holding back until you feel like you know what you’re doing?”** You will never acquire enough skills to start your own business. Or to apply for the job you really want. We falsely believe that others have everything figured out. That’s not the case. In fact, the author labels everyone with the bold: “it turns out, everyone is totally just winging it all the time.” Not that you should stop improving. But don’t wait to get better to do something. Just do it.
- **“How would you spend your days differently if you didn’t care so much about seeing your actions reach fruition?”**  
When we think that our time is spent wisely only when the current results are good, we don’t get to see what’s possible. For instance, when your current job comes with a salary while the art you create is not getting attention. Should this mean that you should stop making art? Probably no. Probably the satisfaction you get from creating something helps you get out of the bed in the morning and makes the tasks at your work more bearable. Besides, what if you keep making art even when there are no obvious results for years? What will be the results? Doing something meaningful can be a project of your entire life – and beyond. What good can you start today that can blossom in the distant future?

*“We’re all in the position of medieval stonemasons, adding a few more bricks to a cathedral whose completion we know we’ll never see. The cathedral’s still worth building, all the same.” Oliver Burkeman*

## ACTIONABLE NOTES:

- **Pay attention to your attention:** Are you in control of what you want, or your to-do list is filled with things others want? And the question here is not related to what you do at your job. It aims to make you think about your personal goals. Since the online world gives us easy access to what others are doing – how others spent their days. It's easy to find yourself wanting things others see as important, not you. Things that get imposed subconsciously. When you spent a great deal of your time paying attention to what others are doing, you eventually start thinking that you should do the same things. But is this really what you want? Pay more attention to how your attention is allocated. You'll find that a lot of your daily tasks need to be ceased in order to make more room for what is most important to you.
- **Embrace boredom and difficult tasks:** Why does boredom feel so surprisingly, aggressively unpleasant? Commonly, we think that the current task is simply not so interesting for us to care enough. But Oliver Burkeman makes a very interesting – and truthful – comment about this. The intense reaction to succumb in the online world when we are alone or when we are working on a difficult task is because we suddenly have to face our limits. Both when something is hard or when it feels boring, we face our finitude. We start to spot our flaws. But since no one wants to admit his limited capabilities – even to himself. We handle such moments by submerging in modern distractions because online there are seemingly no limits. And even more importantly, because it distracts us from our imperfections. However, the

more we embrace the unfolding moments. Accept that *this is it*. The more we'll teach ourselves to be fully present. Spot our limits. And make further steps to expand them.

- **Find your atelic activity:** Find an activity you enjoy for its own sake, not for what you'll potentially gain. This is greatly described in the book by going for a hike. When hiking is your atelic activity. You don't do it to complete the walk. You do it because you enjoy the walk – the process itself. Quite normally, you'll stop at some point. But you'll never complete it. You will go on another hike some other day. If we solely focus on telic activities – activities that are goal-oriented, getting promoted, for example. Life loses its meaning. We start to think that happiness is always something that comes in the future. This way, we constantly postpone pleasure for a later moment. Thus, we never enjoy the present.
- **Cosmic insignificance therapy:** If we zoom out. Outside of our homes. Outside of our cities. Countries. Even further. Beyond our home planet. We can remind ourselves how insignificant our daily struggles are. On a cosmic timescale, not having what to wear at the upcoming b-day party feels like a spoiled narcissistic child rambling. There is a good reason we are egoists. If we don't care enough about our individual happiness. We'll never motivate ourselves to go outside and find food to survive, nor do the hard work needed to propagate our genes. Yet, there are moments where thinking about how irrelevant our problems are does help. Suddenly, deciding between a blue shirt or a green shirt is no longer an impossible decision. You move past it and focus on more significant problems.
- **The next most necessary thing:** The book ends with a simple prompt: When you don't know what to do, do the next right thing.

The author quotes Carl Jung who gave an answer to a question about how one should properly conduct his life. Jung said that, “There is no single, definite way...” After that, he added that the individual path “is the way you make for yourself, which is never prescribed.” You don’t know in advance what will happen when you are focusing on what you want. Therefore, you should, “quietly do the next and most necessary thing.” If you don’t know what it is, then the next most necessary thing is to learn what it is. This feels liberating because you shouldn’t do everything. You should focus on just that *one* thing.

## COMMENTARY

Calming.

This is the first word that comes to mind when I think about the text in the book *Four Thousands Weeks*.

Oliver Burkeman offers a wide variety of tools that will allow us to use our limited time more wisely. Plus, how to enjoy what’s happening right now, not constantly distracting ourselves with what could be potentially happening to us in the future.

But along the soothing words that make you feel comfortable about your current mediocre performance. There is another concept that creeps through the idea of accepting your finitude. Namely, it’s very hard to enjoy the current moment when the current moment feels

unbearable.

Along the text, you become increasingly aware of how your life sucks. Every new chapter introduces a new way of how modern life is depleting your potential and hurting your well-being. Sadly, you often don't have a choice. Yes, your job is probably sucking the life out of you. You realize that you should do something else. But there's hardly an immediate resolution.

The author talks about how we should focus on living in the present but how this can be achieved when the present is so damn hurtful? Understandably, our thoughts drift to a more pleasant (future) state where we will finally be happier.

With all of this. I don't want to say that the book is bad. Quite the opposite. It's good – quite good. What I want to point out is that the author is talking from the perspective of a person who is living a life doing what he enjoys – writing. For most of the people out there. It's not that easy to focus on the current moment when the current moment is a collection of agonizing tasks. But he does offer a way out. A way to think and a way to move forward. Put simply, to put one foot in front of the other and slowly find a happier path with more meaningful problems to conquer.

Key takeaway:

Accept the fact that you are a limited human. Yes, there are endless possibilities of what to do and who to become. But you should choose one path. Not only you'll feel saner. But you'll finally see how the scene you dreamed about is taking shape.

## NOTABLE QUOTES:

*“American meditation teacher Joseph Goldstein, “a plan is just a thought.” We treat our plans as though they are a lasso, thrown from the present around the future, in order to bring it under our command. But all a plan is—all it could ever possibly be—is a present-moment statement of intent.” Oliver Burkeman*

*“...you can’t avoid tough choices or make the world run at your preferred speed; that no experience, least of all close relationships with other human beings, can ever be guaranteed in advance to turn out painlessly and well—and that from a cosmic viewpoint, when it’s all over, it won’t have counted for very much anyway.” Oliver Burkeman*

*“But I sometimes think of my journey through adulthood to date as one of incrementally discovering the truth that there is no institution, no walk of life, in which everyone isn’t just winging it, all the time.” Oliver Burkeman*



# WORKSHEET

Reading alone won't help you understand the actionable notes. You need to engage with the content. Answer the question below to plan your next steps:

*1/ Towards where do you commonly direct your attention? Should it be adjusted?*

*2/ Plan to focus only on one thing. Note all the details and thoughts that emerge:*

*3/ What task do you enjoy doing where you're not focusing on the outcome?*

*4/ Categorize your problems into two buckets: important, insignificant:*

*5/ What's the next most necessary thing?*

# THANKS FOR READING!

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