

FREE FIRST CHAPTER

5 PHILOSOPHY RULES FOR DAILY LIVING

Introspection

Enter Into A Personal Quest Of Expansive Knowledge And Start Living Life Anew With Greater Resilience, Deeper Relationships, And Steadfast Integrity — Chapter One. About a 20-minute read.

Philosophy has been with us for thousands of years.

It has inspired kings and presidents, elevated artists and lovers, and illuminated the genius of inventors and scientists. And yet, perhaps philosophy's most important mission has been to offer solace and guidance to regular people like you and me—to console, challenge assumptions, and catalyze human growth. Philosophy has accompanied our societies in their millennia-long development, holding their hand like an elder caregiver who can't suppress a smile. It can also accompany us in the same kind and wise way, helping both you and I live better lives.

Philosophy rarely presents itself in rules. Rather, it poses questions that lead to profound reflections. These questions are not even meant to be answered. They open new territories of thought, the exploration of which leads to valuable insights. These insights, in turn, can be articulated into pieces of advice to be implemented in life: The gifts of philosophy.

In the same way travelers bring back exotic souvenirs from their journeys, philosophers gift us precious, pearl-like nuggets of wisdom gathered from their intellectual voyages. As with any gift, using them is optional. However, for those of us who prefer clear instructions, who want wearable pearls, each gift can be translated into a simple rule of conduct—still fully optional, but more easily implementable.

In this book, I've compiled and interwoven the traditions of Stoicism, empiricism, utilitarianism, humanism, and existentialism, while also tapping into the wisdom of a few

thinkers who wouldn't fit these traditions—like Socrates or Heidegger. I've selected this particular assortment of philosophical ideas with the craft and care of a museum curator for your enjoyment and nourishment. Several powerful reflections emanate from this collection: They are meant to be received as gifts or applied as rules for life, as you prefer.

I first encountered philosophy in the form of an ontological dilemma at the age of seven. My mother and I were waiting for the school bus near our house in the countryside in Eastern Spain when she pointed to an olive tree and asked, "What is that, Kelsang?"

"A tree," I answered.

"But where is the tree? Is it in the leaves?"

"No, not in the leaves," I said. Of course, at age seven, I had seen leafless trees before.

"In the trunk? Maybe in the branches?"

"Hmm... I don't know, mummy. The trunk, I think."

"So if someone removed the leaves and cut the branches, leaving only the trunk, would that be a tree or a trunk?"

To give some context to my mother's inquisitive questioning, it's worth noting that my parents have been Buddhist practitioners since before my birth. At that time, she was studying emptiness, arguably the single most complex topic in Buddhist philosophy, and, knowing that I was a bright and clever boy, was curious to see the issue from the eyes of a seven-year-old.

The questions continued.

"And if instead of using the word tree to refer to it, we used the word table, would it be a tree or a table?"

Needless to say, I couldn't provide an accurate account of the tree's ontological status or identify the linguistic relativism of the tree-table dilemma, but nonetheless I was hooked.

The possibility of such deep questioning of reality stuck in me, and up to today is one of the most pleasurable activities I have engaged in.

Twenty years later, after having rebelled against my parent's religion—as any teenager ought to do—and lived a notably independent life, I found myself utterly lost in the world, and the spark of philosophical questioning reignited in me. At that point, finally, I dived deep into philosophy—and it changed my life. I came for the pleasure of intellectual stimulation, but stayed for the immense benefits it brought to my life, from health and emotional well-being to greater capabilities for love, wisdom, and finding purpose. Today, philosophy is, with its gifts and rules, the single most beneficial training in my life.

I wrote this book out of a desire to share this training. In particular, five gifts stand out: authenticity, accountability, connection, tranquility, and purpose—all aided by an extra gift: introspection.

Throughout humanity's philosophical tradition, the most remarkable brains have been tasked with advancing personal and social well-being. The apex of intelligence, cleverness, and wisdom awaits in the colossal philosophical body stored in our libraries and universities. Now, this vast philosophical reservoir lies at our disposal.

If you ever wondered what philosophy could do for you, you are in the right place. Turn the page and enjoy the journey.

Kelsang Bas Belda

Chapter 1: Introspection

Early in my writing career, before I even considered myself a writer, I moved to Berlin out of love. I had met a kind, loving, and fascinating woman in Spain. We had truly connected and had spoken about seeing each other in Berlin that summer. So there I went.

It wasn't as crazy a move as it might sound. I had lived there before, had friends, and knew the city—and Berlin is wonderful in the summer.

Just before my flight to Berlin, I got my first commissioned work as a writer. It was a fantastic opportunity that could kickstart my career, but it came with very strict deadlines and, as an aspiring writer, I was afraid of messing it up.

Upon arriving in Germany, this Berliner girl I was in love with—let's call her Rose—had developed deep doubts about us being together, much to my surprise. Her traveling-self and her back-at-home-self turned out to have quite different proclivities.

So, just as I was supposed to start my first professional writing job, I had to confront the painful collapse of my romantic expectations. I felt abandoned, deceived, and simply put, lonely. And then, of course, I was struck by the writer's block.

All It Takes Is A Step Back

Writing is a solitary endeavor. You spend hours in front of a computer by yourself, alone in your thoughts, with no one to dispel your insecurities with, which often occur with any creative endeavor.

When I had that desynchronization with Rose, I struggled to even sit and write. I was lonely past the threshold of such a lonely job.

As the days went on and the first deadline approached, the threat of failing became more and more pressing. I had to do something about it, but the more I thought about it, the worse things got.

I took a full day off. I planned nothing—no writing, no events, nothing in my schedule. I allowed myself to just be, to dwell in whatever I had to process in whatever way I could improvise. That was my step back.

I did some yoga, cooked some nice food, and spent some hours just doing nothing.

Soon I had to acknowledge that I was overwhelmed by life and my feelings. I had just moved to Berlin and was staying on a friend's couch with no space for myself, no structure, no

routine—not even a desk. How was I going to be able to write properly under those conditions?

Then I identified something else. I had started blaming Rose for my inability to write. “I am failing at writing because of what she has done to me,” my angry mind said. “If she had loved me as she said she would, I wouldn’t be in this situation,” my pain kept on arguing.

I also recognized how wrong I was. By expecting and demanding her love, I had put pressure on her, which had made her back away, which in turn increased my anger and blame toward her, leading to more conflict and putting our relationship on the verge of collapse.

And yes, some of the things my anger pointed out were true—Rose had behaved not so nicely—but they were also understandable from her point of view. A bit of empathy was enough for me to realize that, knowing what I knew about her, I had not so much to claim about her wrongdoings.

My deepest pain came from feeling alone and lonely; I had a strong need for companionship. That was a surprise for me, as it is not a common feeling for a lone wolf, introverted, happy-to-spend-time-by-myself type like me. Why did I feel that crushing need at the precise moment I had such a crucial writing task?

And then everything clicked.

That crucial task was my first ever writing commission, the beginning of the career I had dreamt of my entire life. It was scary as hell to face it alone. That, together with writing’s intrinsic loneliness, had made me unconsciously want to secure companionship. That’s why I pushed too much on Rose, and thus, why she backed away. And of course, as our relationship got shaky, I freaked out.

After realizing that, I went for a walk. What happened in that walk will come later in the book, but suffice it to say that by the end of my day off, I had gained a renewed

perspective: My fear of failing as a writer and the relationship complications were no longer two different distressing situations, but two sides of a single complex emotionally pattern.

These gained realizations were not going to solve everything by themselves. I still had to work on my blame and loneliness—the hard part of the work. However, thanks to that step back, I could now start making proactive decisions. At least, I knew the way forward.

Complex problems require complex solutions. Taking one step back will not automatically solve most of them, but it will provide the space to better identify the complex nature of the problem at hand. Sometimes, that step back is all it takes to start changing things.

Know Thyself

The Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates was already famous in Athens when a group of his friends and followers went to visit the oracle at Delphi, the greatest divination institution of the classical world. They asked one question about Socrates to the oracle: “Is there any human wiser than Socrates?” It was a bit of a joke. As any oracle who wants to stay in business, the oracle at Delphi tended to answer with very cryptic statements prone to a plethora of interpretations.

Imagine the shock of Socrates’ friends when the oracle gave the following answer: “No. There is no human wiser than Socrates.” Crystal clear, zero ambiguity.

Upon hearing this, Socrates found himself in a deep existential dilemma. On one hand, the oracle at Delphi was speaking the word of the Gods, and thus, according to Socrates’ beliefs, they could not lie—the statement had to be true. On the other hand, Socrates himself was experientially confident that he was very unwise because he was extremely aware of all the faulty patterns of his mind. He had examined it carefully for decades. Among other techniques for self-knowledge, Socrates was known to spend 24 hours, sometimes even up to 48 hours, in profound meditation, dwelling in his own thoughts and the very fabric of his mind. With all the self-deception, biases, and faulty mental patterns he knew he had, how could he be the wisest person on Earth?

If you are familiar with Socrates' most famous quote, you will probably intuit where this is going.

Bereft by this dilemma, Socrates set out to the streets and agoras of Athens to investigate the wisdom of his fellow citizens. After many years of annoying every shopkeeper and market goer with his piercing questions, he finally found his answer.

Socrates' fellow Athenians—and his fellow earthlings, for that matter—lacked the awareness he had over his own unwise. In other words, he knew precisely all the ways in which he was fallible at knowing.

In his famous quote, "I know one thing, that I know nothing," that subtle sense of Socrates' profound point is often overlooked. As cognitive scientist and philosopher John Vervaeke emphasizes, the brilliance of Socrates, the reason why he was the wisest human being on the planet and why his wisdom is still useful for us, is that he was knowledgeable of the ways in which he was subject to self-deception and biases.¹ He was a master introspectionist.

As often said in philosophy, "the mind is not obvious to itself." That lack of innate self-awareness is what befell the citizens of Athens and what Socrates overcame. We are not aware of our minds by default, but we can be conscious of thoughts and mental patterns with due practice.

You probably have heard or read the phrase "Know thyself" dozens of times. In Ancient Greece, it was thought to be a command from the God Apollo, and those words were inscribed in the temple of the oracle of Delphi. The point of knowing yourself, Vervaeke points out, is not to be accurately aware of your own biography, nor to carve a precise and nuanced narrative of your life. "Know thyself" stands for that introspective wisdom that Socrates excelled at.

We live in an ever more complex world. You might have experienced the increase in complexification in your lifetime, and research from many corners of academia agrees.^{2, 3, 4,}

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The more complex our society gets, the harder it becomes for us to make decisions and navigate that society appropriately. More importantly, the more complex our world gets, the harder it is for us to make meaning of it and the easier our minds fall into turmoil and self-deception.

When immersed in the chaotic, emotionally loaded, energetically consuming rhythms of modern daily life, we often feel overwhelmed and confused. We fall victim to misjudging situations and events, and, even worse, to misjudging others.

Introspection is here to help.

Taking one step back means precisely that. It is not intended to imply a withdrawal or retreat. The point is not to abandon whatever issue lies ahead of us. Neither is it meant to cut ties with people who are involved in whatever you are going through. The step back is a philosophical one—a critical, introspective one.

Sometimes, the philosophical step back entails taking literal distance—spending a day on your own, for example. It may involve pausing certain behaviors, especially those you sense as problematic. However, this is not a surrender, retreat into isolation, or abandonment of your connections with the world. The essence of stepping back is gaining a new perspective—viewing your situation through fresh frameworks with a renewed sense of perspective and curiosity.

This step back represents the activation and embodiment of introspection. As the initial phase in a comprehensive endeavor, it often kickstarts a journey of transformation and self-discovery.

So, what is introspection?

What Is Introspection?

Introspection is commonly known as the ability to look inside your own thinking. While that is a solid foundation to begin working with introspection, there is much more to it.

For example, according to Tibetan Buddhist psychology, introspection operates as the watcher of the mind. It is categorized as a mental factor that is always present, though it may sometimes lack sufficient capabilities or proper training. Think of it as a police department with guards and detectives; the Tibetan word for introspection, *sheshin*, is often translated as “vigilance,” and so is the equivalent Sanskrit term *samprajanya*.

The introspective guard patrols the mind, searching for unwanted thoughts. It requires specific instructions and proper training to succeed. For example, to avoid greed, I must first learn what greed is in my mind, both theoretically and practically (through study and meditation respectively). Then I can instruct my introspection to watch for such thoughts. If greed arises and my introspection is functioning well, the guard will raise the alarm, and I will quickly become conscious of the greed emerging in my mind. “Oh, I am having greedy thoughts,” I’ll recognize.

The introspective detectives, on the other hand, come into action when I want to deal with a complex network of unwanted thoughts, emotions, and judgments that have been present in my mind for some time. These complexes are usually painful and distressing and might be linked to trauma or wounded parts of ourselves. The detectives investigate how this mental pattern formed, what it is connected to, and how to untangle and dismantle it. In doing so, they often rescue valuable, legitimate thoughts and emotions from the web of confusion and delusion, which leads to insight.

Regardless of your views on this Buddhist approach, it helps identify two aspects of introspection: a reactive, reflexive one—the guards who raise the alarm—and a proactive one, which we consciously engage to gain insight into ourselves.

As a Buddhist, I was aware of this tool when I took that day off to cope with my broken-heartedness and writer’s block. Recognizing that anger and blame were making me feel miserable, I instructed my inner guards to alert me whenever such thoughts arose in order to catch them in time. During the day, I also had moments of active introspection. I would lie down, close my eyes, and delve into my mind to find the parts of myself that were in pain and rescue them from the tangle of bias and self-deception that had them kidnapped.

This is rarely an easy task, and it is usually terrible advice to tell someone, “Just change your thoughts.” And yet, these examples illustrate the functions and value of introspection.

Neuroscientist Anil Seth asserts that we are not passive observers of the world. Instead, we actively interpret it. We filter the information we receive and cast an interpretation outward. The result of this process is what we experience as reality.⁶

This process of filtering depends on our thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. They are the lenses through which we see the world. As lenses, they tend to be transparent in order to work. Think of a pair of glasses. They work because you don’t see them, but you see through them. If you see your glasses all the time, if they are very salient to you, they don’t work, because they don’t let you see the world beyond them. But, according to neuroscientists John Vervaeke and Leonardo Ferraro, those lenses may be faulty, imprecise, outdated, or entirely misguided. Introspection is like taking those glasses off and looking at them. If you wear glasses yourself, you’ll know they require cleaning once in a while. Introspection allows us to look at the lenses instead of looking through them.^{7, 8}

That’s the function of introspection: to look at the lenses and filters through which we see reality, to check for imperfections in them, and to adjust them to an optimal state. Thus, introspection is our innermost tool to ensure that we interpret our reality as accurately as possible. The better our mental lenses and filters, the better we can navigate the complex world in which we live.

Tricky enough, the lenses through which we view reality also influence what captures our attention. For example, if I emotionally believe that Rose is my enemy due to my anger lenses, I will be more attentive to any small action of hers that could be interpreted as an attack against me—trivial actions that might otherwise go unnoticed.

This process soon leads to feedback loops. If I see any minor action not from the benefit of the doubt, but from the bias of enmity, I thus gather more “information” that feeds back on the enmity interpretation—the bias itself—and reinforce it. Then I’ll be more prone to label further actions as hostile, and so on.

This specific vicious cycle between attention and bias is one of the many ways in which we can deceive ourselves. It results in misjudgments of people and situations and eventually leads to conflict.

Introspection helps us to stop that vicious cycle. By shifting our focus to how we perceive reality, we are shifting our attention to the structures that determine our attention. By correcting our assessment of a situation, we also rebalance the salience of particular actions or traits—we modify the degree to which our attention is prone to be captured by it.

Simply put, introspection is the skill of curating our mental and emotional landscape for optimal navigation of reality. It is a conscious attunement of our attention and meaning-making machinery.

Introspection leads to insight. In cognitive science, insight is the experience of clarity that results after recalibrating and readjusting our sense-making machinery—as a camera that gets back to focus. It's not just new information, but rather the information gained after a perspectival shift. That difference is important. It is that perspectival change that transforms us from fearful to daring, from lost to grounded, from angry to loving.

As this transformation occurs, insight also illuminates errors or imprecisions in our previous assessment of reality. Recognizing in which particular way we were wrong can also foster further introspection and insight. And this was precisely Socrates' brilliance. He was highly attuned to all the ways in which he could be wrong.

The Introspective Life

Socrates confronted many Athenians about their wisdom, or lack thereof, which earned him numerous enemies. Some powerful individuals in the city's politics had enough of him and accused him of teaching unethical ideas and corrupting the youth, and he was put on trial.

Athenian law and custom dictated that an assembly of five hundred men acted as judge and jury at Socrates' trial. At some point in the discussion, it became clear that they would

let him go if he stopped his philosophical work. But he refused. And he did so in an elegant fashion—with a sentence that would echo through millennia:

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

I believe Socrates' point was far more robust than it might initially seem. In my view, the unexamined life is one of unnecessary suffering and inner misery. If we let distressing thoughts and emotions dominate our lives and decisions, we end up harming ourselves and the people we love. Without introspection, we fall prey to self-deception, biases, blind spots, emotional sabotages, and, ultimately, meaninglessness.

Since then, the properly examined life has been the goal of philosophy. Living in accordance with the principles of self-transformation through introspection and reason constitutes the philosophical path. In the next chapter, we'll dive deeper into the philosophical path and what it entails.

Action Steps

Let's define introspection as the psychological skill of examining one's own thoughts, emotions, perceptions, judgments, and beliefs to adjust them and make them more suitable for navigating reality in alignment with one's core values and desires. So, how to introspect?

The first step, as we've already seen, is to step back.

One of my mindfulness teachers used to say, “Observe what is happening within you as if you were watching yourself from three feet behind.” Quite literally, watch yourself—watch your mind—from one step behind.

There's another meditation metaphor I use to teach mindfulness. Your mind, your current state of internal affairs, is like the screen in a movie theater. Meditation is recognizing that you are not the screen, but sitting somewhere behind it in the theater. Gaining that extra space is the first step back. Your thoughts and emotions are the contents of the screen, but you are not them. You can try this trick right now by simply recognizing that you can watch

yourself doing this very action of reading. You'll get a sense of extra space, and perhaps your peripheral vision will expand for some moments. There you go—a perspectival shift.

Taking a step back from your thoughts and emotions doesn't mean you should care less about them or become passive or inactive. The point of stepping back is to access a renewed, broader perspective. The goal is to gain agency and maneuverability in managing your thoughts and emotions.

These introspective techniques can be applied in both formal and informal meditation. Formal meditation means engaging in meditation by lying down or sitting on a chair or cushion for a few minutes with the explicit purpose of meditating. Informal meditation, on the other hand, occurs when we add introspection to any activity like washing dishes, cooking, commuting, chatting with friends, etc.

In both formal and informal meditation, mindful breathing is highly beneficial. A long, deep breath can work wonders even in the worst situations. As you probably know, your breathing is closely linked to your nervous system. Slowing your breath, or simply bringing attention to it, sends signals to your brain to shift towards calmness and openness. In general, conscious breathwork has a positive effect on mental health.⁹

This triad is an excellent starting point: conscious attention to what you are doing (from daily chores to sports to sitting cross-legged on a cushion), mindful breathing, and introspection—shifting attention inward.

If meditation is not your preference or if you are already practicing it and seeking something different, there are many other ways to embark on the introspective path.

A trick that has always worked for me is cutting down on habits that keep my mind overly busy. Taking off-screen time is usually my main way to go. Allowing myself to spend time in silence is equally beneficial—and challenging—for an avid audiobook and podcast listener like myself. Depending on how strong your habit is, you'll find it uncomfortable and dissatisfactory at first. For example, cooking, cleaning, or commuting in silence will feel strange. But if you endure that initial phase of awkwardness and discomfort, silence and

decreased stimuli will pay off. You will enjoy a more spacious, peaceful experience, which will help you ponder the contents of your mind. After all, it is very hard to make sense of your thoughts and emotions when constantly bombarded by voices and notifications.

Give yourself more time to be in touch with your emotions. Allow yourself to feel. Maybe once a week or month, or whenever you feel overwhelmed or emotionally burdened, find a comfortable spot to lie down and let the feelings wash over you. Cry if you must. Let it happen, let it touch you. Remember, it is okay to feel the way you feel. Whatever you are going through is a very human experience. And it will pass, change, and eventually go away if you let it happen.

Also, journaling can be a good tool to allow emotional release. Simply allowing your thought stream to leak to the page, unedited and uncontrived, is a good way of catching up with your inner life.

Journaling is in itself a very good introspective tool. It can help you track your own thought process, illuminating motivations and fears you weren't aware of, and sometimes even leading you to answers you didn't know you already had. A good place to start the journaling flow is any dilemma where you can identify two competing inner "voices." Start by writing the dilemma as an either-or question, then continue by elaborating on the two competing perspectives, and see if they manage to reach an agreement or compromise.

Open-ended questions are also brilliant journaling prompts. What does summer mean to me? What is the value of my time? How can I be my own best friend? What do I find inspiring in my mother/friend/movie character? In these cases, you are never looking for a "right" answer, as if this were a school exam or essay. Instead, you just want to get your thoughts flowing at a steady, linear, not-too-quick pace.

A gratitude log is another incredible tool to train your introspection while acknowledging the role others play in your life and increasing your sense of connection to them. You can include it in your morning routine: Set aside 5 minutes to write down a list of things you are grateful for. Once you identify something that sparks your gratitude, focus on the person

you are grateful to—they should be the main character of log entries. And the more specific, the better.

Finally, seek support and counsel. Introspection is necessarily individual, as you can only peer into the contents of your mind, not the minds of others. However, you can rely on your social connections to bounce ideas with someone you trust, to reach out for advice, or to simply soothe your inner discomforts by mere feeling of companionship and togetherness.

The Rule of Introspection

“Focus inward: wise reward.”

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