

Back to Now

Zen × Mindfulness for Love and Work

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Introduction

Have you been carrying feelings like these lately?

- In love, your emotions swing with a single message—or the lack of one.
- At work, you feel chased by evaluation and deadlines, and your breathing becomes shallow.
- In your head, you know you're "overthinking," but your mind won't stop.
- You're resting, yet you don't feel rested.

If so, you are not weak. It's simply that modern life has put your mind into a state where it can't stop.

Our days move too fast. Notifications ring, comparison pours in, we wait for replies, chase results, and rewrite the future again and again in our heads. Repeated enough times, the mind can no longer stay in "here, now." And in both love and work, suffering grows.

This book will not try to solve that suffering through "thinking" alone. Because much of our anxiety and urgency happens in the body and nervous system before words even appear. It's not that you're doing something wrong. Your nervous system has just been working too hard for too long—and it's tired.

What Zen × Mindfulness Means

What this book explores is Zen × Mindfulness.

This is how I understand Zen: Zen is the direction of returning. Where do you return to? To "here, now."

And this is how I understand mindfulness: mindfulness is the power to notice. What is happening right now? What am I about to react to? It is the ability to notice those facts.

When these two come together, you become someone who can return.

Not someone who erases anxiety completely. Not someone who never wavers. But someone who can waver—and still return without being swallowed.

The Future This Book Promises

By the time you finish this book, you will be able to do the following:

- Notice the moment anxiety or urgency arrives.
- Pause, even slightly, before moving on reflex.
- In love, stop chasing too hard—and choose your words.
- At work, stop holding everything—and return to "the next step in front of you."
- Let go of the late-night "review meeting" in your head—and return to sleep.

None of these are dramatic changes. But they will reliably make your daily life lighter.

How to Read This Book

You can read this book from beginning to end, or you can start with the chapters you need most. But I have one request: Practice before you try to fully understand. This book does not ask for long training. Ten seconds is enough.

- Exhale one breath a little longer.
- Say, “Here, now.”
- Choose: “Just one step.”

If you can do that, you pass. Forgetting is fine. Being unsettled is fine. If you can return the moment you notice, that is practice.

Your life is not only love and work. But when love and work collapse, the whole of life becomes easier to collapse with them. So in this book, I narrowed the focus to those two. And I gathered one way of returning that works for both.

Now, let’s begin—so you can return to this moment, here and now.

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Chapter 1:

Why Do We Feel So Tired Now?

1 More Choices, but Less Calm

In the past, people suffered because they could not choose. But now it is the opposite. We can choose, yet we suffer. This is a big contradiction in modern life.

For example, if you walk in an American city, you will see many choices even for coffee. At Starbucks or a local café, you can choose the beans, the milk, the sweetness, the temperature, and the size. You only want one cup of coffee, but a small meeting starts inside your head.

Love is the same. When you open a dating app, faces keep coming, one after another.

“Is this person really okay?”

“Maybe there is someone better.”

It can feel like “something better” is always hiding behind the next screen.

Work is the same too. Online courses, job sites, side jobs, remote work.

“Is my current job okay?”

“Maybe there is a place that fits me better.”

The more choices we have, the more our mind spreads out. Instead of feeling safe, we feel scattered.

In Buddhism, there is a saying: “The mind is like a monkey.” A monkey jumps from branch to branch and cannot stay still. The modern mind is the same. Notifications, choices, comparisons—your mind loses a place to rest and keeps jumping.

And there is one more important point. When there are many choices, people start to think: “If I choose wrong, it’s over.”

So every choice becomes scary. Even after you decide, your mind does not come back. You keep checking: “Was this really right?”

Zen says: it is not because your willpower is weak. You live in a world designed to make you restless. So you do not need to blame yourself. Instead of blaming yourself, try one small thing.

Find one choice in your life right now, and say: “For now, this is enough.” Do not search for the perfect answer. Choose an answer that helps you calm your mind today. That is the entrance to Zen.

In the next section, we will talk about “comparison and judgment,” which can make suffering even stronger in a world full of choices.

2 Comparison and Judgment Come Before Breath

What do many people do first in the morning? Before they are fully awake, they reach for their phone.

This is the same in America and Europe. In bed, they open Instagram and watch someone's story: a friend's trip, a photo with a partner, a beautiful room, a fit body. And before they even brush their teeth, they start giving themselves silent scores.

"I'm behind."

"I'm not enough."

"Everyone else is doing better than me."

This is not only comparison. It is a state where comparison comes before breathing. You should first inhale and exhale and feel that you are alive. But judgment enters first. This is exhausting.

In Buddhism, there are three main poisons of the mind, called the "Three Poisons." They are greed (wanting more), anger, and ignorance (not seeing truth). Modern comparison activates all three.

Greed: "I want to be prettier." "I want more money." "I want to be loved more."

Anger: "Why am I like this?" "Why only them?"

Ignorance: You mistake one edited moment on a screen for the whole truth of a person's life.

SNS is a highlight reel—an edited version of someone's life. But the mind believes it is the full truth. That is why we suffer.

In love, comparison becomes a quiet poison too. A friend gets engaged. A coworker buys a home with their partner. You see a couple holding hands on a street in Europe, and your chest feels a little cold. Without noticing, you start measuring yourself with this rule: "Having a partner means value."

Work is the same. Open LinkedIn and you see promotions, new businesses, awards. Comments say "Congratulations!" You are still on the train, but your mind already starts to rush. Before breathing, judgment enters: "I'm not enough." Zen gives us an important viewpoint here: Comparison is not really seeing the world. It is seeing a habit of the mind.

Some people see the same post and feel nothing. So why do you suffer? The post is not the problem. You are not weak. It is simply that your mind has a habit of comparing.

And if it is a habit, it can change. This is where mindful awareness (mindfulness) helps. Mindfulness does not try to stop comparison by force. If you try to stop it, it often becomes stronger. Mindfulness does something simpler:

Notice: "Comparison is happening." That's all.

You do not need to fall into the river. You can stand on the bank and watch it.

“Now I’m comparing.”

“Now I’m thinking I’m not enough.”

The moment you notice, you return a little to the “bank.” Here is a small practice you can do today. When you open your phone, look at someone, and feel pain—before you close the screen, take one breath and say: “This is comparison. It is not the truth.”

It can be short. It can be quiet. This one sentence gives control back to you. In the next section, we will talk about something that can control the mind even more than comparison: notifications, read receipts, and the pressure to reply fast—why they make love and work painful.



3 Notifications, “Seen,” and Fast Replies Decide Your “Weather”

In the past, people looked at the sky to know the weather. But now many people look at their phone to decide the weather of their heart.

A notification comes: sunny. No notification: cloudy. “Seen” appears: hope. Seen but no reply: storm.

This is the same in America and Europe. On the subway, everyone stares at a screen. With one small movement of someone’s thumb, your mood rises or falls. Quietly speaking, this means you are giving the control of your heart to something outside.

In love, it is very clear. You send a message. Then you wait. While you wait, your mind starts writing a story.

"They're just busy, right?"

"But they were online a moment ago."

"Did they lose interest?"

"Is there someone else?"

Nothing has happened yet, but inside your mind, a court case begins—and even a final judgment appears. In Zen, this extra suffering is called "adding more than needed." The event itself is small, but what your mind adds becomes heavy.

Work is the same. Slack, Teams, email. A notification sound makes your shoulders tighten. If you reply late, you worry: "My evaluation will go down." In global workplaces, time zones make it worse. Messages can come even at night. The mind loses a place to rest and stays ready to be "called."

Buddhism has a teaching called dependent origination. It means events do not come from one cause. They come from many conditions.

If we apply this to messages, there are many possible reasons for a slow reply: on a train, dealing with family, feeling low and unable to write, or simply not looking at the phone.

But the mind prefers one simple cause. And often it chooses this:

"It's because my value is low."

"I'm not important."

This is not fact. It is a shortcut the mind creates. And that shortcut makes your inner weather worse.

What Zen and mindful awareness do is simple:

Zen: return to the present moment.

Mindfulness: watch what is happening without judgment.

Please remember this: Notifications are events. Interpretations are in your mind. They are different things.

Mindfulness practice starts by separating "event" and "interpretation." In love and work, when you can do this, the mind becomes much lighter. Here is a small practice for today. When a message makes you feel shaky, divide it like this inside your mind:

Fact: "Seen." / "No reply yet."

Interpretation: "They hate me." / "My evaluation will drop."

Body: tight chest / stuck throat / heavy stomach

Then take one breath and say: "Only the facts are here now. The interpretation can wait." When you can do this, you change from a person who only reacts to a person who can choose. In the next section, we will look more deeply at the "stories" the mind creates—how love and work become painful because of the stories in your head.

4 Love and Work Become Painful Through “Stories in the Head”

When you feel pain, in many cases the center of suffering is not the event itself. It is the story your mind creates about the event. Think about a common situation in love. You send a message and get no reply. The real event is only that.

But the mind does not stay quiet. The mind hates empty space. When it sees a blank, it tries to fill it with words.

“They don’t like me anymore.”

“Did I say something weird?”

“This person is always like this.”

“I’m always not treated as important.”

And before you notice, you jump from “no reply” to a life sentence: “I’m not loved.” Work is the same. Your boss sends a short message: “Can we talk?” That’s all. But your mind quickly makes a movie.

“I might get scolded.”

“My evaluation dropped.”

“They don’t expect anything from me anymore.”

“I’m not capable.”

The reality may be only “let’s talk,” but the mind finishes a “disaster story” first. Zen quietly understands this mind activity. In modern words: You are living a story, not reality.

In Buddhism, there is a word: delusion. It may sound like a special or extreme condition. But here it is very normal. It means the mind decides a future that has not happened yet.

There is also a word: ignorance (in Buddhism, “not seeing truth”). When we are in ignorance, we do not see what is happening. We believe the meaning in our head is the truth. In love and work, suffering is born like this:

1. An event happens.
2. The mind gives it a meaning (creates a story).
3. You believe the story is truth.
4. Mind and body react (anxiety, anger, rushing, self-hate).

What Zen and mindful awareness do here is very simple. They do not try to erase the story. They do not force positive thinking. They only create distance from the story. Mindfulness is the power to notice. So first you notice:

“A story has started.”

That alone moves you a little—from a character inside the story to a person watching the story. Zen values this movement, because freedom lives there. When you fully

believe the story, you have only one option: panic, chase, fall, get angry. But when you notice it is a story, options appear.

Breathe. Take a walk. Put down the phone. Do one small task. Sleep before blaming someone. Zen and mindful awareness are a path that returns you from a “reaction life” to a “choice life.”

From the next chapter, we will clearly explain what Zen is. Zen is not only about a quiet room. It is a skill for returning to quietness inside, even in a noisy world.

