

Unpack your Mind

*How to let go of compulsive thinking and
discover the joy of living in the present
moment*



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Preface

Unpack your mind – The journey of its creation

“If you find yourself in a hole, stop digging.” If there is one thing I picked up during my MBA in the early 2000s, it was that expression. A finance professor said this when he was discussing the Enron scandal, which contributed to the creation of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act in 2002. His advice was to immediately stop doing what you were doing if you came across fraudulent behavior at work. “Never be the highest ranking official with a secret.” was his other advice.

It was 2004 and I was in a hole at that point and kept digging fiercely. I was not in a hole connected to fraud but I was suffering. However, to know that you are in a mental hole, you need to be aware that you are suffering and that awareness simply was not there.

The suffering slowly emerged in the twenty years after I graduated. In 2019, also the year Covid emerged, I finally began to admit that something was wrong. Early 2019, I realized I was stuck in a rut, which you can consider an elongated version of a hole. On the outside things looked great but deep inside I was unhappy, even borderline depressed. I needed to change something but had no idea what.

I was lucky enough to find Georgina Halabi, who would become my lifestyle coach. She helped me take the first steps toward meditation. We started observing my beliefs. At the time, I was convinced that I had to live abroad to be happy and that I had to continue working in marketing in the corporate

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world. These beliefs turned out to be false. Or, if you want to remove judgment, they turned out to be part of old programming that still lingered in my mind. They might have helped me overcome a feeling of low self-worth. But accepting that I was enough already turned out to be much more helpful.

But to reach that realization, I needed two years of reprogramming. During this period, I learned to understand the influence of my ego and the powerful influence my thinking mind had over my well-being. Or rather, I realized how my own thinking obstructed my well-being because it kept telling me that there was always more to be accomplished, obtained or experienced and then I was allowed to say that I was happy.

She helped me unpack my mind and break that vicious thinking mind cycle.

With a lighter mind, I was able to be present in the moment. Then I realized that something wanted to be written, a story of which a clear storyline emerged in my mind. Over a period of about a year, I wrote it down. It is the story of Miles, a young man living in Berlin, who discovers a new door in his living room one day. The door gives him access to another world where dreams and reality seem to co-exist. He is confronted with the dark secrets of his late father.

This story has not been published yet—it might be one day, but that is not important. It showed me that something wanted to be created, and it wanted to be created through me. This is similar to what other artists, musicians, and writers might tell you. They felt that what they created was already there, and they just wrote it down or crafted it.

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Once the story of Miles, titled ‘Miles Away’, was written, this book wanted to be created. For both manuscripts, Georgina helped me observe what emerged and helped me, through meditation, to reveal what wanted to be created.

‘Unpack your mind’ is based on my experience going through the process of awakening. It takes inspiration from spiritual thinkers and teachers. It emerged as a practical guide, taking inspiration from traditional and contemporary teachings.

It is meant to guide and inspire you. It provides an entry point to the state of being, calming your thinking and observing your ego at work. When I came up with the subtitle, I realized that the book does not specifically focus on the always-on mentality that has infiltrated our society. Instead, it provides a more generic approach that can help you overcome an addiction to the temptations and vices of the Internet. It is a guide to being, which people have sought for centuries. The essence of being is independent of the effect of the Internet on you, your life situation, and what you think your reality is. At least, that is what the intention is and how it emerged from within me.

Approach it with a curious mind and see if your mind is receptive to the pointers and meditations it proposes. Perhaps your mind resists at times, and in that case, I encourage you to take your time. If you accept to be guided, your mind might accept you to be. That is the greatest gift you can give yourself. I hope Unpack Your Mind will provide inspiration for just that: for you to be.

— Matthieu Vermeulen

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Introduction

Suitcases and living in the moment

When was the last time you picked up your phone? How many times have you picked it up since you woke up? Who is asking for a decision? What is going on in the world? Are you worried? Why do all these other people look so happy?

Triggers, alerts, messages, news, opinions, judgments, advertisements, distractions.

This is the new reality. Since Steve Jobs announced the iPhone, a tectonic shift has occurred in the way we access, use, and consume digital content. For many, it is the other way around. Digital content consumes them and, specifically, their attention. It is a widely spread and growing addiction.

This book is not about understanding or explaining why it is possible that Internet use spreads on such a vast global scale. It starts with the assumption that all we do in life is the result of the thinking that happens in our minds. The way most people use the Internet feeds this thinking. And for many, this use has grown beyond their control. They are addicted. Or rather, their mind is addicted.

You carry your mind with you everywhere. Like you need legs for walking, you rely on your mind to guide you through your day. Your mind interprets everything you do, observe, decide, and avoid. Every action in your life is subject to thinking.

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Our thinking is programmed during our childhood, in college or high school. The programming persists when we start working or go to university. Most people hardly ever consider this programming as something that requires regular revision. We always apply thinking to what we do. And for most of us, this works well. The problem starts when we notice that we are complaining or suffering. Work is stressful and does not pay enough. Your studies seem endless, and you are unsure if they will get you a job. The promised purpose in life that would come from hard work and discipline does not materialize. And yet, you behave like a frog sitting in water that is slowly brought to a boil. The frog remains still, unable to realize that it can save itself by jumping out of the water. You stay in your situation and suffer from programmed thinking. You keep telling yourself that you need to have a career, buy a house, and get married. You cannot be a creative thinker or philosopher because that doesn't pay. When, or how, do you jump out of this and allow yourself to look beyond the boundaries and limits you are convinced exist? Are these boundaries and limits ever there? Or are they created by your thinking mind?

That same thinking tells us that we are unhappy. Most people think and thus feel this way all the time. This is mind-made suffering. But what do you do when you do not have the job of your dreams, your marriage is in shambles, or raising your kids overwhelms you?

What if you notice you are suffering? Most people's first reaction is to think about solutions, reason and consider changes, make lists of alternatives, seek therapy, and get training. But this is the thinking mind coming up with a solution for the suffering caused by thinking.

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Thinking has become a liability. There is too much of it on your mind. Your thoughts control you, even though this thinking and old programming cause suffering. If only you could change that if only you could stop that thinking for a while and...

Unpack your mind.

Most people experience a form of thought-driven suffering in their life but never come to the realization that their mind is causing this. It is essential to calm down your thinking to diminish or end that suffering. Your mind can benefit from a reset. You need stillness in your mind. Stillness is a state where thoughts stop, and as a result, you create space to be. You detach yourself from the past or the future. You stop identifying with possessions or future achievements. Being still is also called awakening or being conscious. Your mind enters a state where you are fully aware of the present moment. With a still mind, you focus on nothing else. In this state, your mind is fully unpacked.

You may have read about the benefits of not thinking on the Internet or in a book about it. You may have also tried to enter the non-thinking state through yoga, meditation, spiritual teaching sessions, retreats, reading, or listening to podcasts.

You probably picked up this book because you are suffering and feel something needs to change. The idea of becoming enlightened, awakening to your life's full potential, and ending suffering sounds great. You probably have heard what the Buddha once said: I teach you suffering and the end of suffering. Bring it on!

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But for most people, awakening seems unachievable. You might get glimpses of it when you start meditating or during yoga. But as soon as yoga is over, your meditation app announces the end of the session, or you finished reading a book or listening to a podcast, reality awaits you and suffering continues. At times, it feels even more intense than before. The kids, your job, the family, financial troubles, the commute, the rain, and the in-laws are still there and require the attention and action of your thinking mind. You fall back into your old programming and thinking habits. You face the same reality and any progress you seem to have made vanishes.

Your mind is still packed with thoughts.

This book is about unpacking your mind for good, and the suitcase is a great starting point to help you understand how this works. This is what the first chapter of this book is about. We start observing your thinking mind in our material and consumption-driven world. When you pack for a trip, you are able to select a fraction of all the stuff you own. That concept can be applied to selecting what is relevant in the vast collection of thoughts and programmed habits occupying our minds.

You pack within the limits of your suitcase's size and the weight you can physically carry. That which does not fit or does not seem necessary stays behind.

Become aware of that for a second.

The stuff we leave behind is what we don't need for the period of time the trip lasts. But what if this period is extended voluntarily or not? Could the stuff you pack in your suitcase be enough for a longer period, or maybe even

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the rest of your life? So what is then the value of the things that you leave behind? And what does that stuff mean to you while you are away? Could you simply decide to get rid of all the things you leave behind?

Your first thought is, "No way!" I am going away for a few days or weeks and intend to return. I will be staying at a guest house or a hotel, so I don't need to bring my bed, couch, or television, but I look forward to using them again when I return.

Now think about packing again and try to become aware of everything you own. Think again about your ability to travel with only a selection of essential items. But are you fully aware of what these items are? Again, have you compared this to all you own, including debts, mortgages, your job, a spouse, kids, or a dog?

Maybe you are, and perhaps you are not, and this is the first time you allow yourself to become aware of this concept.

'Oh great,' you might think, 'now I am sort of aware, and you made your point, why does this book have so many pages?' What is the relationship between suitcases and awakening? How can this book be a guide to living in the present moment?

Allow me to explain.

Anything you own is part of what is called your form life. If you wonder what your form is, ask yourself, 'Who am I?' Chances are that you reply with your name, where you live, what you do in life, your age, and your marital status. In short, you reply by stating the things that define you and that you identify with. If you are asked what you want to do in life or have done, you might

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answer by explaining your ambitions or your goals. Or you proudly talk about what you have achieved.

But what if all of that is taken away from you? Who are you then? Why should you become aware of stuff in your life? Where should or could that take you, and what purpose could this have?

What if you try not to answer the question, ‘Who are you?’ Instead of referring to what you are or have in your form-life, which includes your name, your body, where you work and where you live, you could try to be still.

That is difficult. If you take a moment right now, you realize that you identify with what defines you as a form. But who are you without things like your name, your work, and the type of dog you own, or do not own, or do not want to own or do not care to own? It all seems inseparable from yourself. You have been working hard for it and have made choices about it. And you continue to do that because it seems to be who you are.

But can you answer the question with ‘I am’?

Some of you will put the book down here for one of two reasons: either you are not into spirituality and have no intention of learning anything about it, or you are already so enlightened that you won’t need a guide to a more enlightened life.

In both cases, do not hesitate to put this book down and forget about it. You need to suffer a bit more and then one day, you will reach a state where you are more receptive to awakening.

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This book is for those who have taken a few steps and explored spirituality, as well as for those who meditate daily or do yoga but are still struggling with living in the moment and awakening.

As a guide, it can help you take steps towards a better understanding of what living in the moment is. It helps you shed things that you no longer need. This will help you unpack your mind. Unpacking also means that you keep the few things that are useful in your form-life. But rather than keeping them in your mind all the time you pick what you need and put them in your mind's suitcase. You create a life that balances awakening with form-identity. And when prioritize awakening in your life and manage your form-life from an awakened state of mind, you get closer to what is called flow in spirituality. You accept what is. At the same time, you find purpose in your form-life that comes from an awakened state of mind. This helps you define and select the things you cherish, that you want to identify with and that you want to take on the rest of your journey called life.

This book helps you to become aware of the level of identification you have with future or past events with the awakened state as the basis. This will help you accept that life's things are what they are. At the same time, the way you react to them determines whether you let suffering happen or not.

When I started my journey, I was lucky enough to find a coach who helped me through dialogue and meditation. She helped me understand the concepts of recognizing false beliefs and being in the moment. Coaching inspired me to read books and listen to podcasts by spiritual teachers like Eckhart Tolle, Ryan Holiday, and Deepak Chopra. These teachers discuss the concepts of being in the moment, abundance, and awakening. They inspire you through exercises and stories that are deeply rooted in spirituality.

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I realized that these teachers make spiritual living and awakening sound simple when you listen to their podcasts. In reality, it is very hard for most people even to get a glimpse of what it means to live consciously. To no longer identify with the things you own, do, or believe and to let go of the past and the future. Most people do not get very far on the journey to awakening. There is nevertheless a practical way of applying the principles of awakening. Over time, I noticed how I did this myself, especially in the beginning. The mind's consciousness grows by getting rid of useless thoughts and programming first. This opens the door to experiencing moments of stillness. These moments of stillness allow you to approach the thinking about what you need to organize in your form-life differently. Thinking initiated from a still mind is more balanced and less likely to create more suffering in your form-life. Acting from a place of presence will reduce suffering. It can help you even remove it almost entirely from your life. An awakened mind as a starting point for thinking allows more space for your still mind to manifest. The result is that you live a more spiritual life with less suffering. And yet, you don't take on the lifestyle of a monk. To paraphrase another spiritual thinker, Robin Sharma, you can be a monk in a Ferrari.

When you listen to Eckhart Tolle's podcasts, you will discover that he advocates a life where you merge the concept of being present. At the same time, you have a so-called form-identity of form-life. This is the life you live where you own or achieve certain 'material' things. This book helps you in a practical way to balance your form-life with an unpacked awakened mind.

Let's hit the pause button here for a moment. Take a deep breath here and stop reading. When you take that deep breath, close your eyes and feel the air entering your nose. Then, exhale and feel the air flowing out. I will call this

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exercise taking a conscious breath. This breathing exercise will help your thinking mind to stop for a short moment. It frees up space in your brain. It is a mini-meditation and if you do this multiple times a day, can be as effective as one long meditation session.

In this book, I will indicate the one conscious breath with this symbol:



When you see this symbol, read the instruction that precedes it, take a short moment for a deep conscious breath and reflect on what I have asked you to observe or become aware of.

As I explained before, this book will help you to free up mind space by becoming aware of things that define your form identity. Things you identify with. I will bring them to your attention and invite you to become aware of it or observe it.

These exercises help you unpack your mind. We repeat them until you are left with a light and nimble mind.

About this book

The metaphor of packing a suitcase will take you through the first stages. You can stop reading this book at any time and continue later or not at all. There will not be anything to do or achieve. Any learnings or changes will come to you through awareness. If you decide to do something with it during a meditation session, then do this. Meditation done with the right intention can be very powerful.

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Once you plant the seed of awareness, very little is needed to grow it. However regular breathing exercises will help tremendously. If you would ask any spiritual teacher, they will say there is nothing to do. You are already complete, and consciousness is in each of us. We just have to allow it into our lives.

This is a book that provides you with thought experiments to help you uncover what in essence you already are. Each chapter allows you to grow your level of awareness by observing things around you. I have taken examples that most of us will deal with and while progressing through the chapters, the observations become more abstract and spiritual. This book is not about achieving higher levels of awareness or a better life. But how can you become something without doing anything? It is indeed paradoxical and some doing is required to uncover the being that is deep inside of you. To accept being in the moment, you must let your own consciousness guide you. You will have to put effort into creating that situation first.

I hope you will become aware of the programming that most of us received as children when we started studying and during our work. Most of us learned to think that happiness waits for us somewhere in the future and that where we are today is not where we should be. This programming goes beyond owning or aspiring to own things. It is about how we look at our mistakes and our achievements. Many readers suffer from this old programming.

But what happens if you accept where you are, live a conscious life in the present moment, and live without fear?

I assume that you accept, at least somewhat, that the ultimate objective in life is to discover the path to a more awakened and lighter way of living. You will

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see that unpacking your overloaded mind and packing what you need in your mind's suitcase is a great starting point to discover that happiness is already around you. The suitcase will be the metaphor for simplification on this journey.

Make sure you have one at hand and get ready for departure.

How to read this book

You can start reading this book from start to end. But just like in life, events don't evolve linearly. You can read chapters in a random order. Especially when you have read the book from start to end, I recommend picking it up occasionally to revisit chapters or parts of it.

Each chapter ends with a reflection on potential resistance to what you just finished reading, and also helps you to understand where you are on the journey towards enlightenment. But let me call out something fundamental again:

Being on a journey towards enlightenment is not a competition. Even if you will be in phase 1 for the rest of your life, this is fine. It is not better or worse than being fully enlightened.

First and foremost, what is this scale of enlightenment? The first thing that comes to mind is the path to Samata, or calm. Samata is the ability to achieve single-pointed perfect concentration, free of thought. There are nine steps toward this state, starting with a black elephant, a black monkey, and a monk with a goad and a lasso. The elephant represents the mind, the monkey is the distraction, and the monk is still led by his mind and the mind's distraction. In a series of steps, the monk and the mind evolve. In the ultimate step, the

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elephant has turned white to show its ability to fix and hold concentration. The monk sits alone and a rainbow emanates from his heart.

This book is not about achieving Samata. At best, it will help you develop concentration that would fit in the first steps of the path to Samata. If you wish to achieve the highest state of Samata, other books will provide better guidance. I also recommend finding a teacher or a community that can support you.

Partial Samata, or profoundly understanding it and getting glimpses of presence through short meditations or breathing exercises, is already an important gain compared to a completely unaware or unconscious mind.

In this book, I will use a scale built around the principle of intentionally focused presence. This principle is explained further in chapter 6. The chapters before that will set the stage for this. You will find the concept in the remaining chapters.

The idea behind this concept is the following. I start prodding your brain and your current state of mind. This helps you to become aware of things around you. Once you grasp that, I will introduce you to the idea of forcing your mind to act as if it is present. From there, I guide you towards a state where being in the present moment becomes a more natural state of mind. This will establish two things: the way you live your life will become simpler and more focused, while you also free yourself of obstacles that are in your way on the path to Samata.

You can decide whether to continue on the path to Samata. I hope this book and its method help you become aware of the things that make your life

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complicated and unfulfilling. You may reach a state where presence becomes a more natural state of mind through intentionally focused presence.

There are certain states that you go through while awakening. Again, you should not consider the following framework as a way of measuring progress. Enlightenment is not an achievement.

The seven states of an unpacked mind

The unconscious thinking mind: You live your life based on the programming you receive. You suffer, have no idea how to change anything, and complain a lot.

The concerned mind: your suffering is consuming you, and you have started to talk to others about it. You have some pointers towards awakening, spirituality and living in the present moment. But for now, probably, skepticism reins

The curious mind: You have opened up to questioning your suffering and wondering where it comes from. You are beginning to understand that some, if not all, of it results from your thinking. You have started to explore spirituality, awakening, and enlightenment.

The receptive mind: your curiosity has transformed into taking action. You are gathering information, reading books, and listening to podcasts.

The attempting mind: you are now ready to take the first steps. This is the phase where some try yoga or meditation and immediately feel that it is a daunting task to not think and focus on something and not think. You feel it

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as an act, more than an activity you do regularly, which resembles training, which is the next state.

The training mind: You continue your exercises and slowly get the hang of them. This is also the phase where most people feel they have reached a ceiling. Awakening seems close yet unattainable.

The enlightened mind: you can spend time not thinking through meditation or body awareness. Your mind is enlightened, it is unpacked. When you use your thinking mind, you know it is doing this and you can observe it. You are free of fear and detached from your past and future.

In this book, I provide guidance through all of these stages. As you progress, you unpack your mind more and more, filling a suitcase with a mix of spiritual notions and practical concepts.

Does that mean my mind is awakened by the time I reach chapter 16?

Where your mind is after reading chapter 16 is not so important. It is likely that you reach the trained mind state and that, over time, you get glimpses of the enlightened state through the training state.

When will that happen? That is irrelevant in this context. To become enlightened, you need time until you realize you don't need time.

The enlightened state is within all of us. However, we cannot access it because we are constantly thinking and distracted. The monkey and the elephant symbolize this in the first stage of Samata.

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Over time, starting in early childhood, our minds become covered in grime and dust. Have you ever seen someone clean an antique rusty tool or an old car found in a barn or a backyard and restore the object to its original shiny and beautiful state? The grime and dust these items collect prevent them from functioning correctly. Thinking does the same to our present mind.

Human beings are in the process of awakening on a universal scale, but we are not fully there yet. We are still being raised and programmed in society to live unconsciously, covering us with grime. This stops us from living and being in the present moment. To get rid of this grime and dirt, you need time. You get rid of grime by dusting, sanding and polishing the object. The same applies to grime, which is the programming of our thinking mind. The cleaning can take a long time. How much time will depend on the amount of suffering you experience, and many other factors. It can be a short or a long process. But the moment you become enlightened, you realize that this presence was always in you. That is when you realize you didn't need time because it was already there.

Our society requires you to work for a living. It is hard for anyone to survive as an enlightened being, living happily and fulfilled in an enlightened state and not working at all. In theory, you could spend the rest of your life sitting on a park bench watching the world go by. But that is not what most of us want and what society seems to expect from us. Most of us will want to comply with society and aspire to a materialistic form-life. You function to the extent that you can pay for a house and afford food and clothes. To function in your form-life, you require thinking and the programming you received during childhood.

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Let me reassure you that it is good to take time to go down the path towards enlightenment. You will need time to figure out how you can combine an enlightened state of mind with your current life. Ultimately, most of us want to live a form-life with a basic comfort level. Most readers do not envision themselves on a park bench, watching the events unfold.

And perhaps this happens to some readers; frankly, that is fine as long as they don't starve to death.

To sum it up. Read this book and experience the awareness it wants to create in you. The guiding principle will be the metaphor of packing a suitcase and traveling to a destination. Don't worry about the outcome. You embark on a journey where you will let the universe guide you more and more. It will take time, and the outcome will be what it is.

Some attentive readers might wonder why I did not discuss Internet addiction in detail in this long introduction. The reason is simple, focus on unpacking your mind and the rest will follow.

Let's go and start to unpack your mind!