

8 Hacking Meaning

Dale Davidson was adrift. He had graduated college and been accepted into Navy SEAL training, just as he had been working toward. Yet several months in, he dropped out for reasons he's still unsure of. It would have made sense if he had another option in mind, but he didn't: "I was thrust back into 'civilian life' and felt aimless." It was as if he had set his sights on a big wave, paddled out to catch it, but then let it pass underneath. He was afloat with no sense of what to do next. Then he came across Tim Ferriss's *4-Hour Workweek* (4HWW) and envisioned making easy money while working remotely from an exotic beach—an alternative title for Ferriss's book was *Broadband and White Sand*.

Earlier we learned how Maneesh Sethi, like Davidson, had been inspired by Ferriss. Sethi set out to live the 4HWW lifestyle. Sethi managed to create an absentee business (writing content to attract Google AdSense money), travel the world (doing push-ups on animals), quadruple his productivity (by paying someone to slap him), and invent the Pavlok wrist zapper. Davidson's efforts, though, did not work out.

After I dropped out of Navy SEAL training in 2010, I spent a few years trying to become a "digital nomad" by moving overseas to Egypt to teach English and start an online business. Though I enjoyed the adventure, my business did not take off and overall, I wasn't any happier. I tried to double down on all the Lifestacker and Tim Ferriss tips by trying to test new business ideas out and becoming super productive, but something was still missing. I felt stuck, like I was spinning my wheels.¹

In 2014, Davidson tried something different. He turned away from Ferriss and *Lifestacker* and began an experiment, an "ancient wisdom project." He hadn't abandoned the hacker approach, just the source of his inspiration.

Davidson would focus on eight different spiritual traditions that had survived for more than five hundred years: “Ancient wisdom is robust; lifestyle design blogs are fragile.” His challenge was to adopt a practice from an ancient tradition every thirty days in the hope of cultivating a virtue.

I learned from Stoicism that to maintain our tranquility, we need to cultivate a certain level of detachment from things outside your control. I learned from Catholicism that to add meaning to our lives, we should focus less on what we want and focus more on the servings. Epicureanism taught me that we are bad at enjoying ourselves, and that true pleasure comes primarily from avoiding things that bother us.²

Clearly, life hackers are looking for more than tips on how to tie their shoes. Even if their approach is unusual, they seek what most people want: comfort, health, and connection. Often, life hackers first pursue near enemies: fierce efficiency, optimal fitness, and tidy interactions. They go about this in their characteristic way, as rational individuals fond of systems and experimentation, to varying degrees of success. Because of their fondness for self-measurement and management, they have been called control freaks. Yet like Davidson, some will realize that much of life is outside of their control, that even as they pursue a good life, they will confront disappointment and loss. In one of Ferriss’s books, he equates living the good life with VIP treatment at restaurants and bars.³ But there is another notion of the good life, that of a meaningful life despite its disappointments. To riff on the Serenity Prayer, life hackers seek the cleverness to hack what can be hacked and the Wisdom 2.0 to know and accept what cannot.

When it comes to hacking meaning, to making sense of disappointment and loss, life hackers often translate principles and practices from ancient traditions. Davidson’s experiment was unusually eclectic; life hacking, more generally, pulls from two sources. From Stoicism, life hackers adopt a way of coping with loss and a lack of control. From Buddhism, they borrow the aesthetics of Zen and the practice of mindfulness. Translation, however, is always accompanied by drift. Some things are exaggerated, others elided. When Stoicism is understood as a “personal operating system” and mindfulness as a “performance enhancing tool,” what is lost in translation? To answer this, we must understand something of the source text, its appeal, and the mindset of its translators.

The Ancient Stoics

Some life hackers tend toward extremes. For example, we saw digital minimalists quit their jobs, pare down to a hundred things, and move to a new country every few months. For some, in time, this lifestyle became its own sort of fetter. The minimalists had escaped the enemy of too much stuff, only to fall prey to the near enemy of too little. Consequently, many abandoned the minimalist label and stopped keeping as careful a count of their stuff. They embraced moderation.

This appreciation of moderation is shared with the ancient Stoics. As a life philosophy, Stoicism is a set of principles and techniques for blunting life's hardships and enhancing its joys. The ancient Stoics took a middle path between the competing schools of the sensual Hedonists and ascetic Cynics. Seneca the Younger, Roman statesman and author, cautioned that "philosophy calls for simple living, not for doing penance, and the simple way of life need not be a crude one."⁴ The simple life is one in which you can appreciate what you have and not despair over what you don't. But achieving such equanimity is not easy.

In the previous chapter, we saw criticism of a couple who strive for fairness in their marriage by bidding on chores. Critics worry that the couple is unrealistic, given that people are imperfect and life is unfair. Although disappointment is inevitable, this position is defeatist if taken to imply we shouldn't bother. Such efforts are worthwhile, even as they are frustrated. The challenge is to remain engaged with life, nonetheless. Whereas some turn to supernatural beliefs—or belief in the power of supplements, cryogenics, and sentient machines—Stoics seek equanimity by way of two practices. They prepare for inevitable loss, appreciating what they have in the present. And they acknowledge they have little control over the external world, turning inward to shape their own disposition.

Ancient Stoics did not shy from recognizing discomfort and loss. In *Letters from a Stoic*, Seneca warned: "Winter brings in the cold, and we have to shiver; summer brings back the heat and we have to swelter. ... These are conditions of our existence which we cannot change." Even so, we can experiment with hardship to see if it is as bad as we fear. Seneca suggested setting aside days "during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare, with coarse and rough dress, saying to yourself the while: 'Is this the condition that I feared?'"⁵ In other words, "Is that it? That wasn't

so bad.” Stoics also run experiments in their minds via negative visualization known as *premeditatio malorum*. The Stoic who asks “Could this disaster befall me?” will never cry “How could this happen to me?” The point is not incessant worry, but occasional contemplation. This allows Stoics to prepare for all eventualities, take the sting out of upsets and, more important, be grateful for what they have. There’s little sense in ruminating about a past that is done or pining for a future that may never come. By experimenting with discomfort, Stoics steel themselves against misfortune and become more appreciative of the present.

In addition to exaggerated fears of loss, we also imagine we have far more control over life than we do. We are sorely disappointed when our most fervent hopes and best-laid plans fail us. Stoics attempt to focus on what can be controlled, on reasoning and disposition. As Epictetus, a Roman slave for much of his life, wrote: “External things are not within my power; choice is within my power. Where am I to seek the good and the bad? Within myself, in that which is my own.”⁶ Marcus Aurelius, a Roman emperor, often reminded himself not to let others annoy him: “Do unsavory armpits and bad breath make you angry? What good will it do you? Given the mouth and armpits the man has got, that condition is bound to produce those odors.”⁷ Perhaps the man could be reasoned with and given hygiene tips, but beyond that, it’s not something you can change, even if you’re the emperor, so why get upset? On the flip side, Cato the Younger thought it foolish to worry about what others thought of his appearance, so he was purposefully unfashionable, so as to elevate his choice over the arbitrary judgment of others.

Given Stoicism’s fondness for experimentation and reliance on reason, life hackers’ fondness for Stoicism should not be surprising.

Stoicism’s Translators

Stoicism has of late been experiencing a renaissance of a sort. In addition to appearing on *Lifehacker*, *Boing Boing*, and *Study Hacks*, it is discussed in the pages of *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and even *Sports Illustrated*. This is in part because of the willingness of two academic philosophers to return to the field of practical philosophy. William Irvine, author of *A Guide to the Good Life: The Ancient Art of Stoic Joy*, believes that although practical philosophy is no longer taught in school, the need to make sense of life remains.⁸ In addressing this need, Irvine is joined

by fellow philosopher Massimo Pigliucci, author of *How to Be a Stoic: Using Ancient Philosophy to Live a Modern Life*.⁹ Pigliucci is responsible for a number of highly placed opinion pieces extolling Stoicism.

In addition to these two philosophers, two life hacking gurus have greatly contributed to Stoicism's popularity: Tim Ferriss and Ryan Holiday. Near the end of his interviews with guests on *The Tim Ferriss Show*, Ferriss asks a bunch of questions as part of his rapid-fire Q&A—these are also the basis of his 2017 book *Tribe of Mentors: Short Life Advice from the Best in the World*.¹⁰ For example, what book have you given to others the most and why? It's a good question. Giving a book is a profound communication: I hope this will be meaningful to you and help you better understand me. When Ferriss answers this question himself, he estimates he's given away over a thousand copies of Seneca's *Letters*. Believing that busy folks prefer audio books, Ferriss also published an audio version in 2016, *The Tao of Seneca*, segments of which he includes on his podcast.¹¹ The importance of Stoicism for Ferriss is even seen in the fine print of his online content, which is owned by Seneca and Marcus, LLC. Through his blog, podcast, and audiobook, Ferriss has expanded Stoicism's reach, especially in Silicon Valley.

Like Ferriss, Ryan Holiday is more showman than engineer, and they both excel at hacking systems of attention and success. Like Tony Robbins, Holiday began his self-help career as an apprentice to an existing guru, Robert Greene, author of *The 48 Laws of Power*.¹² (Robbins was seventeen when he went to work for Jim Rohn; Holiday dropped out of college at age nineteen to work with Greene.) From there, Holiday went on to promote authors, brands, and musicians using tactics that courted controversy, including risqué American Apparel ads and various media stunts: he purchased billboards on behalf of a client, surreptitiously vandalized them, and then publicized the vandalism to attract attention. Holiday quickly turned his work—and notoriety—into a career as an author. He began with business best sellers: *Trust Me, I'm Lying: Confessions of a Media Manipulator*, in 2012, followed by *Growth Hacker Marketing* the following year.¹³ *Growth hacking* is used to describe self-help for start-ups, which has been described as “traditional marketing's aggressive, automated, and masculinely-coded baby brother.”¹⁴

Soon thereafter, with Ferriss's help, Holiday pivoted from growth hacking to meaning hacking. The two men connected back in 2007 over their common appreciation of Seneca. In 2009, Ferriss invited Holiday to write a long guest post entitled “Stoicism 101: A Practical Guide for Entrepreneurs.”

Interest from book publishers followed. Five years later, Holiday published his first book of practical philosophy using the hero format: telling the story of an accomplished subject and extracting a life lesson connected to some bit of insight. He had the titles of his subsequent 2014 and 2016 books, *The Obstacle Is the Way* and *Ego Is the Enemy*, tattooed on his left and right forearms, respectively, to remind him of the aphorisms' importance. Holiday was also one of the first guests on Ferriss's podcast, and Ferriss published the audio version of *The Obstacle Is the Way*, which he also excerpted on his podcast. In 2016, Holiday distilled all of this into a book of quotations for each day of the year.¹⁵

Some find Holiday's pivot vexing. In major newspapers, Holiday's media manipulation and hacking has been described as deceitful, disturbing, and chilling. An unflattering *New York Times* article accused Holiday of using these wiles to sell "Stoicism as a life hack": "He is like a snake-oil salesman who swears he has abandoned snake oil, but not the highly effective sales tactics."¹⁶

These two prolific promoters, then, are our translators: porting source material for an audience of ambitious type-A personalities—as Ferriss often describes himself and his audience. You might already guess how this will color the source materials' translation.

The Stoic Life Hacker

Even absent Stoicism's renaissance and its promotion by Ferriss and Holiday, you can see parallels between it and the hacker ethos. Tynan, the former professional gambler and pickup artist, demonstrates this in a post about "Emotional Minimalism."

In the same way I strive to need almost no possessions, I also want my emotional needs to be minimal. What does that look like? I think a simple test is to think of how long you could remain in solitary confinement and be okay. I think I could last there indefinitely and, in fact, there's some appeal to the idea. ...

Meditation is good training for this. So is just cold-turkey removing your favorite stimulating activities and dealing with whatever arises in your mind. ...

Once you achieve some level of emotional minimalism (mental minimalism really sounds like a euphemism for stupidity), you find a different sort of satisfaction from it than you get from more stimulating times. You'll appreciate both for what they do for you. For me, spending a week at home eating the same food every day, drinking tea, and doing work, is a great week. I feel energized and satisfied with the progress I make.¹⁷

Such an attitude is also helpful in his poker playing, in which emotional upset is anathema to sound game play. For example, Tynan did well in the 2015 World Series of Poker and tells of making it to the final twenty players. Sitting to his left was a stronger player, with three times as many chips, but the guy had a “bad beat,” “went on tilt,” and blew through his money. Even if others have better technical skills, Tynan believes he has better “emotional mastery, nothing is going to affect me.”¹⁸ In any case, in the excerpted post we see an appreciation of simple pleasures, a desire for equanimity, and a willingness to consider deprivation. Tynan is acting the Stoic though he never mentions the word; he later told me he had no philosophy in mind when he wrote about his ideal disposition, “but I suspect most of my original ideas aren’t as original as I think they are.”¹⁹ Beyond Tynan, it is not difficult to find other examples of Stoicism’s intersection with the life hacker ethos of rationality, systematization, experimentation, and individualism.

For the Stoics, reason was the defining characteristic of being human and a necessary tool in pursuit of the good life. Although they spoke of gods, they did so without supernatural supplication. Zeus was not asked to intervene; rather, the Stoics felt obliged to be the reasonable beings Zeus created them to be. Because the life hacker ethos aligns with the rational style, Stoicism’s focus on reason is appealing. And for those who are religious, Stoicism is not necessarily incompatible with their beliefs. In *A Guide to the Good Life*, Irvine writes that Stoicism complements Christianity nicely and that there are also parallels with Buddhism. In fact, his own interest in Stoicism began as part of a project about human desire, which led him to Buddhism. He wondered if this research would result in his becoming a Buddhist, but he “came to realize that Stoicism was better suited to [his] analytical nature.”²⁰

For the analytically minded, Stoicism can be understood as a system of principles and rules. Ferriss typically describes the philosophy as a personal operating system for making better decisions in a high-stress environment. When Ferriss invited Holiday, then twenty-one years old and working at American Apparel, to write “Stoicism 101” for entrepreneurs, Ferriss prefaced the piece by referring to the philosophy as “a simple and immensely practical set of rules for better results with less effort.”²¹ Long before life hacking emerged, the French philosopher Michel Foucault also noted the Stoics’ fondness for formulating rules of conduct. Foucault included such rules among his *technologies of the self*, which enable people to transform themselves “in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom,

perfection, or immortality."²² In this regard, Foucault's technologies of the self anticipated life hackers and their fondness for Stoicism.

Those rules are validated and optimized, of course, by way of experimentation. We've seen life hackers challenge themselves to work maniacally, to live minimally, to do push-ups, and to talk to strangers. Other Stoic-like challenges includes taking cold showers, which is central to a number of life hacking regimes.²³ Ferriss and some friends conducted a multiweek no-complaining experiment, and it doesn't get much more Stoic than that. Ferriss's "No Booze, No Masturbating" thirty-day challenge was unusually candid and entrepreneurial: more than six thousand people signed up for the challenge at coach.me, a site in which Ferriss is an investor. Following Seneca, Ferriss has also undertaken one-week practicing-poverty experiments. And following Cato, Ferriss once wore ugly "party pants" and grew a "creepy porn mustache" "so as to inoculate myself to superficial attachment to what others think."²⁴

Finally, Stoicism is suited to an individualistic and competitive digital age, one of get-rich dreams and fail-fast realities. Just as it was "popular with the educated elite of the Greco-Roman Empire," Holiday writes that Stoicism is perfect for the entrepreneur of today: "it's built for action, not endless debate."²⁵ Ferriss notes that Stoicism is being adopted by "thought leaders in Silicon Valley" and players in the NFL "because the principles make them better competitors."²⁶

It's striking that, like minimalism's, Stoicism's target audience is so skewed toward the elite. In response, Epictetus's status as a slave—*Epiktētos* means *acquired* in Greek—is called upon as evidence that anyone can benefit. But even here, it is coupled with a rags-to-riches story. Before he was freed, Epictetus was an educated slave who served at court; his own master was a wealthy freedman. What of a loincloth-to-nothing story? In *A Guide to the Good Life*, Irvine argues that a man with only a loincloth can still be happy that he at least has that. If the man were to lose his loincloth, he could *still* be content in his good health: "It is hard to imagine a person who could not somehow be worse off."²⁷ This is true, but it appears that this sort of imagining is reserved for clever folks with much more to lose than a loincloth—similar to entrepreneur Paul Graham's belief that he'd still be happy as the lowest rung in a super-rich society.

Minimalism and Stoicism can be of use to anyone, but empirically, they are most appealing to those who believe in the merit of hustle and who have much to lose.

Mindfulness and Its Translators

In the popular imagination, Zen is associated with the beauty of a bonsai tree, the elegance of a brush stroke, and the ceremony of drinking tea. Similarly, when programmers discuss the essence of an elegant technology, they speak of its zen. “The Zen of Python” (the Python of the title being a programming language) famously begins:

Beautiful is better than ugly.
Explicit is better than implicit.
Simple is better than complex.
Complex is better than complicated.²⁸

Life hackers, too, have a fondness for this type of aesthetic. They read *Zen Habits* on their Macbooks. They practice material (and emotional) minimalism and thrive under daily routines. Some even engage with Asian culture directly. Ferriss majored in East Asian studies at Princeton and speaks Japanese and Mandarin. Tynan met with his Japanese tutor at Samovar, a San Francisco tea lounge—where you can buy “Tynan’s Traveling Tea Set” for \$69.

For the most part, this affinity is distant from deeper spiritual beliefs or practices. Even though Buddhism has principles similar to those of Stoicism (e.g., both stress equanimity in the face of impermanence), Stoicism is more accessible to Western life hackers. Buddhist teachings, or *sutras*, reflect their origins as an oral tradition with many redundancies and enumerations. Stoics wrote in Latin, making for easier translation into English and other Western languages. Buddhism is deeply embedded in Asian cultures in which myth, veneration, and chanting are common. Stoicism requires nothing so alien or, possibly, superstitious. Nonetheless, beyond aesthetics, there is another element of Zen that life hackers are fond of: meditation. Just as with Stoicism, our understanding of this practice is influenced by what is selected and how it is translated.

There are many types of Buddhist meditation to choose from. In mantra meditation you repeat a phrase as the object of meditation. With koan meditation you ponder a statement while awaiting insight. During Tibetan Tonglen meditation you visualize the transformation of suffering into compassion and healing. Metta (loving-kindness) meditation is similar, involving visualization of well-being and ease for yourself, a loved one, a neutral acquaintance, a difficult person, and all living beings. (You work your way up in an empathy spiral.) In mindfulness meditation, you pay attention to the

present moment. Following your breath while sitting is popular, but mindfulness can also be applied to walking or drinking tea—anything really.

Out of all this source material, it is mindfulness that has received the greatest attention among techies and life hackers. Its translators include secular researchers, engineers, and app designers.

Mindfulness's current success is due, in large part, to the efforts of Jon Kabat-Zinn. In the 1970s, as a young doctor, Kabat-Zinn studied Buddhism and believed that meditation could be useful to a wider audience. While at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, he developed the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program to help patients manage pain. In the following decades, research by Kabat-Zinn and others demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of secular meditation. The MBSR program went mainstream with the publication of Kabat-Zinn's 1991 book, *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness*.²⁹

Not surprisingly, meditation and life hacking intersected in California. In the mid-1800s, the San Francisco Bay Area served as a new home of Buddhist immigrants from China, Japan, and Korea. A century later, this immigrant culture intersected with the American counterculture. In 1959 Shunryū Suzuki arrived in San Francisco to serve as the priest of its Soto Zen temple. He quickly gained a following among Americans, and his Zen Center became a hub for Zen's popularization in the 1960s. The area continues to serve as a locus for many Buddhist traditions in the United States. It is also home to entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley, researchers from nearby universities, and engineers at Google.

One such engineer is Chade-Meng Tan, who was born in Singapore, studied computer engineering at UC Santa Barbara, and thereafter joined Google in 2000 (as employee number 107). Though Tan was hired to work on search products, Googlers can offer extracurricular classes to one another, and Tan did so in 2007 with "Search Inside Yourself" (SIY). This course, inspired by Kabat-Zinn's MBSR, was popular and influential at Google. Because of this, Tan was able to dedicate himself to SIY and became known as Google's "Jolly Good Fellow." In 2012, he was able to spin out the SIY program as its own nonprofit institute.

That same year, Tan published *Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)*. The book presents mindfulness

for tech-types—one of the better books on the topic. Tan focuses on MBSR practices as a way of developing emotional intelligence (EI), including self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. He thinks engineers generally lack these attributes, so he gives advice on building trust, offering skillful praise, restoring relationships, and living according to one's values. He believes there are unexpected benefits in having an engineer teach this topic: he can do so from a skeptical and scientific point of view. Also, he says, “my engineer-oriented brain helped me translate teachings from the language of contemplative traditions into language that compulsively pragmatic people like me can process.” For example, “where traditional contemplatives would talk about ‘deeper awareness of emotion,’ I would say ‘perceiving the process of emotion at a higher resolution.’”³⁰ In Tan's translation, “higher resolution” can stand in for “deeper awareness.”

While Tan looks the part of a Buddhist and is often photographed sitting cross-legged and wearing a shirt with a mandarin collar, Bill Duane looks more Harley-Davidson. He is another longtime engineer who happened to attend a Google Tech Talk by a Stanford neuroscientist. It was an eye-opening experience. Duane realized that the mind could be beneficially hacked using scientifically sound practices. When he took Tan's SIY course, he was hooked. In 2013, with Tan turning his focus to his institute, Duane transitioned into being Google's “Superintendent of Well Being.” Duane teaches Google's “Neural Self Hacking” course with the intention of reaching “his people.” Instead of selling “hippie bullshit” to those in yoga pants, he says, “I wanted to speak to the grumpy engineer who may be an atheist, may be a rationalist.”³¹

In 2015, Tan's book was followed by a similar effort by Michael Taft, *The Mindful Geek: Mindfulness Meditation for Secular Skeptics*. Taft also teaches meditation at Google and works with Tan's SIY institute and with Wisdom Labs, a corporate wellness consultancy. He caters to his audience by referencing geeky staples, including *Blade Runner*, *Dune*, and *Star Trek*. Taft speaks of meditation as a technology, explaining that it fits the definition of a “practical application of knowledge.”³² He even includes a flowchart of meditation as an algorithm (figure 8.1)—though this seems like overkill.

Tan, Duane, and Taft are three of the most prominent mindfulness gurus now circulating in the high-tech world. They distill the zen of Zen and translate what remains into terms suitable for geeks. What they choose to translate

The Meditation Algorithm

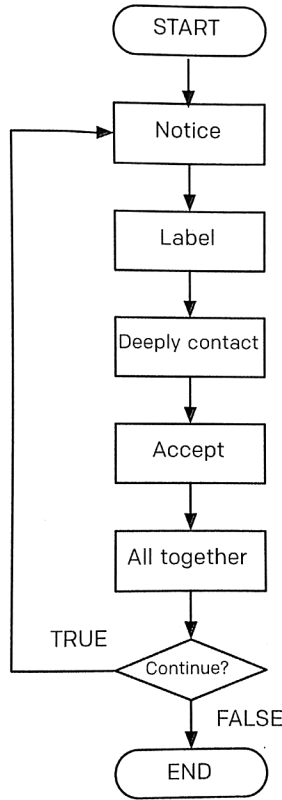


Figure 8.1

From Michael Taft, *The Mindful Geek: Mindfulness Meditation for Secular Skeptics* (Kensington, CA: Cephalopod Rex Publishing, 2015), 11.

(secular mindfulness) and their audience (entrepreneurs and engineers) influences the result, as we will soon see. But before that, let's consider the hype that surrounds what is being translated in the first place.

Apps, Gadgets, and Woo

Meditation gurus and wellness consultants are now commonplace in the corporate tech scene—so much so that this is parodied in the HBO series *Silicon Valley*. Gavin Belson, the CEO of a large social media company, has

a South Asian spiritual advisor on call. When faced with a crisis of conscience, Belson summons Denpok from afar.

BELSON: Denpok, I know you were in Aspen, thank you for coming. Please, have a seat.

DENPOK: I'm not sitting this summer.

GAVIN: Of course: incredible!³³

Denpok's practice is reminiscent of the health claims we saw about standing all day in chapter 6, now applied to spirituality. Of course, not everyone is wealthy enough to have a personal guru, but guidance can be had via personal gadgets, accompanied by similarly dubious claims.

The larger meditation market is estimated to be worth a billion-plus dollars, so the Android and iPhone stores are full of Zen wallpapers and meditation guides and timers. Some of these apps are promoted by life hacking gurus and make problematic claims similar to those seen in previous chapters.

The market leader among meditation apps is Headspace, born of a meeting between Andy Puddicombe, a former Buddhist monk running a meditation clinic in London, and Rich Pierson, a stressed-out advertising executive. In 2010, the two launched the app with the hope of making meditation accessible to millions, and they succeeded. In 2017, *Forbes* reported the app had been downloaded eleven million times and had more than four hundred thousand paying subscribers, bringing in about \$50 million in annual revenue.³⁴ The company runs advertising campaigns, sponsors podcasters (including Ferriss), and is widely covered in the press.

Despite this success, and like Denpok's summer of no sitting, meditation apps are mostly hype. The efficacy of meditation itself is increasingly challenged because its effects might not be universal or unique. Meditation might not be universally applicable because it can actually be an anxiety-provoking experience for some. And its positive effects don't appear to be specific: meditation is one of many techniques for promoting relaxation and limiting ruminations. It can be effective, but it is not a panacea. Researchers find that mindfulness apps, in turn, are poorly designed and that their purported benefits could easily be the result of a "digital placebo effect."³⁵ In response to such criticism, Headspace's Pierson claims that the company has ongoing research underway, and, in any case, "We are just trying to put stuff out there that will help people." He adds, "I don't think Western science has a monopoly on the human condition"³⁶ The Western science

complaint is a trite canard. The placebo effect, for instance, is not a Western phenomenon.

I've found only a single controlled study on the effectiveness of a meditation app. In "Putting the 'App' in Happiness," researchers randomly placed subjects in one of two groups, both of which used an app for ten minutes a day.³⁷ Those in the experimental group ($N=57$) used Headspace; those in the control group ($N=64$) used a note-taking app to journal their daily activities. Subjects were surveyed, before and after, with questions about their subjective feelings of well-being. The researchers found no statistically significant differences in satisfaction with life, flourishing, or negative emotions. (Social scientists have a bevy of distinct but related concepts.) They did find statistically significant medium-sized effects on positive emotions and small effects in reducing depressive symptoms. Yet these notions of medium and small effect sizes are specific to the research context. Practically, after using Headspace, the mean score for reports of positive emotions rose 8 percent. The mean for those in the control group dropped 5 percent. However, this 8 percent lift is the strongest finding, out of many measurements, in which the control group varied by 5 percent anyway.

This study, which was a short-term intervention, indicates that Headspace *might* be a useful way of facilitating some of the benefits of meditation, but these findings need to be rigorously replicated. There are also many questions to ask. How do meditation apps compare to human-facilitated meditation? Are meditation apps more useful to newcomers or experienced meditators? Because apps are more convenient, are users more or less likely to stick with the practice? What are the consequences of using a smartphone, a source of distractions and notifications, as a mindfulness facilitator?

There is a lot of hype for little evidence. Fortunately, there are few harms beyond wasted time or a few dollars spent on an app, but as one critic suggests, taking a long walk could be just as good, if not better.³⁸

Life hackers, of course, like to take things further. Beyond the seeming passivity of meditation, what if we could more directly manipulate the mind? This possibility inspires the Consciousness Hacking movement, started in 2013.

One approach to consciousness alteration is pharmacological, using psychedelics to enhance performance, address mood disorders, and deepen spirituality. As a supplements enthusiast, Tim Ferriss, not surprisingly, is

an advocate. Although he has discussed microdosing LSD—and contributed to its uptake in Silicon Valley—he focuses his advocacy on psilocybin, a mushroom-derived psychedelic. On the research side, he led a crowdsourced campaign to fund work at Johns Hopkins University on psilocybin’s usefulness for treating depression. On the questionable side, Ferriss promotes Four Sigmatic mushroom-infused coffee, a podcast sponsor.

Another technique for consciousness hacking is transcranial stimulation, using electric impulses or magnetic fields to affect the mind. Instead of the mind being trained to relax, as in biofeedback, the brain is stimulated directly. On the research side, the field has the same, or worse, problem of replicability as psychology as a whole.³⁹ On the consumer side, device makers use the same evasions as their peers in the supplements industry. They reference the uneven research with suggestions of improved mood, accelerated performance, pain reduction, and improved sleep but offer little to no evidence for their specific devices. Instead, testimonials extol immediate and amazing results. So as to not run afoul of the FDA, device makers then disclaim any medical use in small print: they do not claim to “treat, diagnose, assist, cure, or prevent any medical condition.” This is the typical *woo dance sidestep*—*woo* is a skeptic’s term for pseudoscientific claims.

In the end, what differentiates consciousness hacking from things like homeopathy and crystal healing is that the latter are certain nonsense. As we saw with health hacking, claims ought to have plausible theory about how an intervention works and rigorous evidence that it does so. Homeopathy and crystals are classic *woo*—what Google’s Bill Duane would call “hippie bullshit.” They have no intelligible mechanism for how they could work, and there is rigorous evidence that they do not. As yet, psychedelics and transcranial stimulation have potential to benefit and harm us—especially those dosing and zapping their brains on their own—but we have only tentative theories for how they might work and uneven evidence that they do.

Look Outside Yourself

Silicon Valley is notoriously competitive, and this is what precipitated Gavin Belson’s crisis of conscience in HBO’s *Silicon Valley*.

DENPOK: What’s weighing on you Gavin?

BELSON: Jared Dunn quit today to join Pied Piper. I hate Richard Hendrix, that little Pied Piper prick. Is that wrong?

DENPOK: In the hands of a lesser person perhaps. ... In the hands of the enlightened, hate can be a tool for great change.

BELSON: You're right once again!⁴⁰

Denpok's observation about hate is probably right, but Denpok is a con man, and Belson is not yet enlightened. Critics of the mindfulness hype are similarly concerned not only that it is being used to sell snake oil, but about how selfish it has become.

When Tim Ferriss speaks of meditation, he speaks of it as a tool for success: it "helps [him] be more effective, not just more efficient."⁴¹ Meditation allows him to focus and prioritize. Even so, he has worried that it might also cause him to lose his edge. In a conversation with Tara Brach, a Buddhist psychologist and teacher of meditation, Ferriss asked, "How do I manage energies like anger or aggression, when those have served me well?" Ferriss is competitive and ambitious, and the expression "second place is the first-place loser" easily comes to his mind. So does the anecdote of a wealthy tech entrepreneur dashing the pieces off a chessboard after losing: "Show me a good loser, and I'll show you a fucking loser." He conceded this has caused him suffering, but isn't this what drives Silicon Valley success? In turn, Brach skillfully redirected Ferriss, asking him what he would choose to be known for by the end of his life. Ferriss responded, "Creating learners that are better than I am. If I can do that, I can create a benevolent army of tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of world-class teachers that self-replicate." Ferriss still spoke in terms of comparison and domination (i.e., an army of better), but Brach suggested that his goal is a collaborative undertaking, not a competitive one.⁴²

Ferriss's candidness about his struggle is commendable. It reveals that his strength (ambition) can also be a source of suffering (anger). He, like anyone else, is finding a path toward his understanding of a good life; in time, this might even broaden from a focus on personal success toward one of greater compassion.⁴³ As a guru, however, the example he sets, the path he advocates, and his vision of a good life deserves scrutiny, especially when mindfulness is translated as a tool for individual effectiveness and corporate wellness.

Ferriss's instrumental approach to meditation is not unique. Its appeal to individuals can be seen in a high-profile ad campaign for Headspace that featured ordinary athletes next to pithy testimonials. In one, a woman curls a dumbbell: "I meditate to crush it." Others meditate to "stay present," "not

freak out,” “get [basketball] buckets,” “have the edge,” and “not compete with myself.” These are all competitive, even the last, as competing with yourself gets in the way of competing against others. There is also the corporate sell. In a *Wired* piece about how mindfulness was the new rage in Silicon Valley, Chade-Meng Tan, founder of Search Inside Yourself, spoke of the consequent benefits of greater emotional intelligence: “Everybody knows EI is good for their career. ... And every company knows that if their people have EI, they’re gonna make a shitload of money.”⁴⁴ Tan’s intentions go beyond “shitloads of money,” but his audience of Silicon Valley techies has colored his translation of the Buddhist source.

In Buddhism, compassion for oneself is interconnected with that for others. Tonglen and Metta meditation, which work to transform suffering, are a realization of the principles of interdependence and nonself. When I looked for discussion of these types of meditation on Headspace’s forums, I found only a few postings, including two people asking for guided Metta meditations. In the third, a user asks about their absence: “Whilst I see separateness from religion and religious concepts as a valid point, I don’t see love as a specifically Buddhist or religious concept and I wonder what others think.”⁴⁵ None of these lonely posts received a response.

Even typical hacker-types have noticed this paucity. Alex Payne is a software developer and investor who has been practicing meditation on and off for more than a decade. He would not begrudge anyone his or her own meditation practice, whatever its form, but reading about it in the corporate world makes him uneasy. The problem, he writes, is that mindfulness has become wrapped up in the idea of the Quantified Self, making it “socially acceptable amongst the self-serious.” He continues that “mindfulness is so much more than a performance enhancing tool. ... If that’s what you’re searching for, you’re better off with caffeine; there’s better data on it, anyway.” Otherwise, mindfulness should raise questions about the social context: Why do we feel the need to be more effective, and who benefits?⁴⁶

Questions about the larger context came to the fore at the 2014 Wisdom 2.0 conference. The Wisdom 2.0 series of conferences, begun in 2010, brings together technologists and top gurus. If there is such a thing as a meaning hacker conference, this is it. It is usually held in San Francisco, a city struggling with the increasing cost of living brought about by wealthy technologists. At the 2014 conference, during the session “3 Steps to Build Corporate Mindfulness the Google Way,” protesters jumped on stage and

unfurled an “Eviction Free San Francisco” banner. The panel members were Chade-Meng Tan (“Jolly Good Fellow”), Bill Duane (“Superintendent of Well Being”), and Karen May (VP of “People Development”). The protesters were four affordable-housing advocates. Once on stage, they chanted, “Wisdom means stopping displacement! Wisdom means stopping surveillance! San Francisco is not for sale!”⁴⁷ After a few minutes, they were ushered off stage, and Duane asked the audience to “use this as a moment of practice”: “check in with your body and see what’s happening with what it’s like to be around conflict and people with heartfelt ideas that may be different than what we’re thinking.” The panelists and audience then sat quietly. This was a skillful response, perhaps the only one that could have reasonably followed. And the protesters had made their point, which was soon taken up by others.

Ron Purser and David Forbes are professors who study the movement of meditation into secular contexts. Even before the Wisdom 2.0 conference, they worried about “McMindfulness,” the “atomized and highly privatized version of mindfulness” being adopted by corporations. Mindfulness is appealing to businesses because it is “a trendy method for subduing employee unrest, promoting a tacit acceptance of the status quo, and as an instrumental tool for keeping attention focused on institutional goals.” For Purser and Forbes, this bears a close resemblance to the human relations and sensitivity training of the 1950s and 1960s, during which corporations exploited counseling techniques, such as active listening, to mollify employees: “These methods came to be referred to as ‘cow psychology,’ because contented and docile cows give more milk.”⁴⁸ The same is now being done with mindfulness.

Purser and Forbes followed the conference protest with the claim that the mindfulness community had been seduced by Google and the Wisdom 2.0 crowd. The idea of kinder and gentler capitalists is appealing, “but mindfulness has escaped its moral moorings.” Buddhists differentiate between wrong and right mindfulness, in which the latter is characterized by wholesome intentions, including “well-being for others as well as oneself.”⁴⁹ Purser and Forbes believed the Googlers’ response to the protest revealed a head-in-the-sand type of spirituality: “their form of corporate mindfulness is at best a privatized spirituality, narrowly conceived as a practice for searching only inside your self, encouraging a ‘spiritually correct’ form of passivity, quietism and dissociation from societal malaise.”⁵⁰

It's difficult to lay the blame for the expensiveness of San Francisco at the feet of the individual panelists, but the broader critique of McMindfulness is spot on. If we are lucky, we might soon see this incident parodied in an episode of *Silicon Valley*.

Lost in Translation

Something is always lost in translation. Today's definitions of the words *cynic*, *stoic*, and *epicurean* would be unrecognizable to their ancient proponents. Dedicated readers of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius—myself included—have multiple translations of the same Latin texts because they vary in meaning and meter. Alongside Stoicism, Buddhism is the other source most often translated by meaning hackers. Most of their focus is on aesthetics and meditation, but there are Buddhist sentiments that seem to align with the hacker ethos. A popular aphorism attributed to the Buddha is to “believe nothing, no matter who said it, not even if I said it, if it doesn't fit in with your own reason and common sense.” This is a suitable credo for the self-reliant individual fond of reason and experimentation. Yet when the Buddhist monk Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu sees variations of this sentiment in popular culture, he believes its meaning has been “lost in quotation.”

One way that we translate is by metaphor. We've seen Stoicism likened to a personal operating system and mindfulness to a performance-enhancing tool. In keeping with this, “Headspace frames the user's experience of their brain as if it was a computer, and the mobile phone is a recalibration tool used to update and improve it,” as one scholar of these apps notes.⁵¹ We've also seen aspects of life represented as a flowchart, from calories consumed and expended, to work, to meditation. Taft's “meditation algorithm” chart is especially gratuitous, as there are no forking decisions, only linear steps. Nonetheless, Taft believes calling the steps an algorithm, represented as a flowchart, makes meditation more accessible to techies. Similarly, Headspace's framing might make meditation accessible to smartphone users, though putting gadgets aside altogether could be the wise thing to do.

Another way we translate is to highlight and elide, often unintentionally. The Buddhist aphorism about being skeptical and self-reliant is taken from the Buddhist sutra known as the “Charter of Free Inquiry.” It is attractive to many because of its seeming regard for self-reliance. But Ṭhānissaro notes that the original teaching includes a skepticism in regard to external

and internal authorities.⁵² Yes, you should not exclusively rely upon external rumors, legends, traditions, scripture, or status. You should also not rely exclusively on your internal reasoning—but this warning is dropped in translation. Although reason, self-reliance, and experimentation appeal to the life hacker, the Buddha's recommendation was to *combine* these things with the support of community and teachers.

Dale Davidson's thirty-day experiments of engaging with different traditions highlight some things and miss others. When he experimented with the eight traditions, he attended church, synagogue, mosque, and a yoga class. For Buddhism, "all I did was sit on the floor for 10–20 minutes every day and try to pay attention to my breath." Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Taoism were similarly lone undertakings. Davidson is admirably cognizant of these differences and the limits of DIY religion, but he nonetheless pursued an asocial translation of Buddhism.⁵³

The danger of the individualistic and instrumental pursuit of wisdom is that "you can easily side with your greed, aversion, or delusion, setting your standards too low," as Ṭhānissaro warns. To counter this tendency, practitioners need those who can challenge and guide them. And just as the apprentice carpenter learns to better appreciate his mentor's skills as his own increases, so it is with wisdom. Finding wise teachers is a skill itself, one that grows with practice. Yet this is usually forgotten in the cut-and-paste Buddhism found in the West: "In particular, the idea of apprenticeship—so central in mastering the habits of the dhamma [teachings] as a skill—is almost totally lacking. Dhamma principles are reduced to vague generalities, and the techniques for testing them are stripped to a bare, assembly-line minimum."⁵⁴ Most ancient philosophies, Stoicism included, were apprenticeship based. In Western philosophy, the Socrates-Plato-Aristotle lineage is well known. The transmission of Zen from master to student can be traced back to the sixth century, perhaps further.

Davidson shows that life hackers have many principles and techniques from which to craft their life philosophies. As in every domain of life, they like to tinker and experiment on the path to a meaningful life. The individualistic and instrumental translation of Stoicism and Buddhism into Wisdom 2.0 has its strengths, especially for hacker types. Yet as the Zen saying goes: the finger pointing to the moon is not the moon itself. Wisdom 2.0 can be a near enemy of wisdom if it serves only to justify, without challenge, the corresponding weaknesses inherent in the hacker ethos.