

## THE BIG IDEAS

**Your Thoughts + Feelings**  
Accept them.

**Arambhashura**  
Don't be a hero in the beginning.

**Newton & Mr. Mo**  
= BFFs.

**Ripples**  
Let's send them out via action.

**Gradualism = Kaizen**  
Constant incremental improvement.

**Controllable**  
What is and what isn't?

**Tolerating Feelings**  
Is of supreme importance.

*"The Art of Taking Action isn't simply about keeping busy or checking things off your to-do list. It's about choosing what to do, how to do it, and the development of character."*

~ Gregg Krech

# The Art of Taking Action

Lessons from Japanese Psychology

BY GREGG KRECH · TODO INSTITUTE BOOKS; 1 EDITION © 2014 · 134 PAGES

"It's not just about doing more and procrastinating less. It's about your dreams, your passion, the risks you need to take and the opportunity to forget yourself and simply disappear into the moment as it unfolds. It's about less talk and more action. It's about less blaming and more appreciation. It's about less mindlessness and more presence. ..."

You just need to figure out how to work with your life — with your circumstances, your feelings, your family members, your challenges, your dreams and your disappointments. You have to figure out what you need to do, when you need to do it, and how to do it to your best ability. There's nobody whipping you from behind. Your life is in front of you, waiting . . . for your next move."

~ Gregg Krech from *The Art of Taking Action*

Gregg Krech is one of the world's leading teachers of Japanese psychology.

This book integrates three core facets of the work he has done for the last 25+ years: Morita Therapy + kaizen + Naikan.

The essence of Morita's work is the fact that we have way more control over our behaviors than we do our thoughts and feelings; therefore, if we want to live effectively, that's where we should focus our energy. Kaizen, of course, is the practice of small, consistent, incremental improvement. And, Naikan is all about cultivating our self-awareness.

Gregg brings the wisdom from each of these traditions to life throughout the book. I really enjoyed it. (Get a copy [here](#).)

We touch on similar ideas in our Notes on David Reynolds's *Constructive Living*, Dan Millman's *Everyday Enlightenment* and Patricia Ryan Madson's *Improv Wisdom* plus Steven Pressfield's *War of Art*, Robert Maurer's *One Small Step*, and Stephen Guise's *Mini Habits*.

The book is written in mini-chapter form and is packed with Big Ideas. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

## ACCEPT YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

"A Japanese psychiatrist named Shoma Morita, M.D. (1874-1938) developed a model of psychology now known as Morita Therapy in the early part of the 20th century. Rooted in Zen and borrowing from an Eastern world view, it is an approach that fosters action. ..."

Morita's premise—that our thoughts and feelings are mostly uncontrollable—leads to his prescription:

**Accept your thoughts and feelings.**

**Rather than fight what goes on in your mind, simply accept it."**

*"I call this book The Art of Taking Action, because, like all arts, we can only improve through practice. We become skillful at taking action by taking action. What do you need to do next?"*

~ Gregg Krech

Morita Therapy is grounded on the central theme that our thoughts and feelings ARE NOT (!) within our direct control. They're much more like passing clouds in the sky of our minds.

Sometimes weird thoughts pop up. That's just how it is.

Recognizing the fact that we aren't directly responsible for every.single.thought that shows up in our minds, we accept them.

And then, very importantly, we focus on what we DO have control over: Our behavior.

When we do that, we can cultivate the ability to take effective action \*regardless\* of how we feel—which, of course, is the mark of a healthy, highly-functioning human being.

I've often said that David Reynolds' *Constructive Living* is the best little book you've never heard of. Here's how he puts it ([see Notes](#)): "*Our behavior is controllable in a way that our feelings are not. There is a very special satisfaction for the Artist of Living who works within life's limits to produce a fine self-portrait. The more control we develop over our actions, the more chance we have of producing a self we can be proud of.*"

## EXCITEMENT, HEROES AND SANSKRIT

"It's not really the feeling of excitement itself which is the culprit here, it is the loss of excitement which then prompts us to abandon our efforts towards fulfillment of our dreams — dreams which were, at one time, very exciting to us. If anticipatory excitement moves us to action, the loss of excitement often prompts us to stop. Action dissolves into inaction.

Meditation teacher Eknath Easwaran tells us of a Sanskrit word — *arambhashura* — which means 'heroes at the beginning' — people who take up a job with a fanfare of trumpets but soon find that their enthusiasm has tiptoed down the back stairs."

*Arambhashura.*

To be a hero in the beginning. That's one of my new favorite words.

Here's how Eknath Easwaran (one of my absolute favorite teachers!) puts it in his meditation classic, *Conquest of Mind* (see Notes on that plus his translations of *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Dhammapada*): "*In Sanskrit we have a word which means "heroes at the beginning": people who take up a job with a fanfare of trumpets but soon find that their enthusiasm has tiptoed down the back stair. Those who go far in meditation are the ones who keep on plugging. They may not be very spectacular; they may never hear a trumpet. But they keep on trying day in and day out, giving their best in every situation and relationship, never giving up. Such people are bound to reach their goal.*"

Do you often start ALL (!) FIRED (!) UP (!!!) only to tip-toe out the back door the moment it gets a little boring?

All good. I've mastered that as well, but we want to notice that tendency and KNOW (!!!) that our excitement is ABSOLUTELY going to wane every.single.time we start a new habit.

We need to quit being surprised by that and be prepared to handle the inevitable boredom of the plateau like a MASTER—continuing to show up diligently, patiently and persistently as we wink at the old version of ourselves that would have bailed once the buzz wore off.

There are few things I'm more excited about these days than my absolute recognition of this reality. I literally rub my hands together with glee (hah!) when I see how a practice has gotten boring.

Then I show up and rock it again. And again. And again. *Knowing* THAT is what it's all about. :)

Remember: We want to be heroes at the END not the beginning. So, how about *you*? Any areas of your life to which you can rub some anti-*arambhashura* cream?! :)

*"Monotony is the law of nature. Look at the monotonous manner in which the sun rises."*

~ Mahatma Gandhi

## NEWTON AND MR. MO = BFF'S

“Here’s Newton’s First Law of Physics:

*An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by some outside force.*

*“WARNING: Inaction and security may be hazardous to your purpose!”*

~ Gregg Krech

Sir Isaac Newton was one of the most extraordinary intellects of his time. He realized that when an object is at rest it will basically stay at rest unless something influences it. It’s also true that when an object is in motion it will basically stay in motion. This is what we refer to as *momentum*. This is why small steps can be so valuable. They offer momentum at a fairly low cost. In other words, it takes very little effort to create momentum. One pushup, one dish washed, one photo organized, one paragraph written in your novel-to-be. Have you gone very far? No. Do you now have momentum? Yes! And once you have momentum (you are in motion), you are more likely to continue — in motion.”

Love it.

We talked about a nearly identical idea in our Note on [Mini Habits](#). Here’s how Stephen Guise puts it: “Newton’s first law states that...

1. An object at rest will stay at rest unless an external force acts upon it.
2. An object that is in motion will not change its velocity unless an external force acts upon it.

*Can you see how this relates? Once you take the first step, you are officially in motion. You will find as I have, that once you get started it is almost as hard to stop as it is to keep going. Add to this that nothing is more motivating and inspiring than seeing yourself take action. Put it together and we get a new equation:*

*One small step + desired behavior = high probability of further steps.”*

We want to really get this. The hardest part of getting some momentum in \*anything\* is to simply GET STARTED.

We don’t need to commit to 3 hours of writing. We just need to write the first sentence. We don’t need to do a 60-minute workout. We can start with one push up. We don’t need to fill-in-the-blank-huge-thing. We can start with fill-in-the-blank-micro-action.

What’s *your* “big” thing you’re having a tough time getting some momentum on?!

What super-simple micro action can you take to get in action?!

I often get stalled on: \_\_\_\_\_

I’ll take this super-simple micro step next time I get stalled: \_\_\_\_\_.

(Awesome. Let’s do this! :)

## SENDING RIPPLES OUT INTO THE WORLD

“So when we are confronted by indecision, we need to take action despite our doubts or confusion. We need to move forward, even if we’re only taking small steps. Those steps, regardless of which direction they go in, are likely to give us new information and experience. Our actions send ripples into the world. The situation may change or reveal itself in a new way once we have moved to a new vantage point.

Think of your life as a movie you are watching. You are midway through the movie and you don’t know what is going to happen. *But you’re not supposed to know what is going to happen.* The movie is not over yet. This is the challenge posed by the demon of indecision: Can you move forward in the face of uncertainty? Can you co-exist with confusion and not-knowing and take the next step?”

*"Use your time wisely.  
It is a gift and it is only  
temporary. What is it that  
matters? What should you  
be doing?"*  
~ Gregg Krech

At the end of the book, Gregg walks us through how to defeat a number of what he calls "inaction demons" including fear, indecision, discouragement, perfectionism, television (yes, television!), boredom and difficulty.

That quote is obviously from a chapter all about helping us battle the indecision demon.

Have *you* ever been stymied by indecision?

(Laughing but if you're human and don't answer "yes" to that I'm not sure what to say. :)

Rather than loop thoughts over and over and over again in our head, Gregg suggests we simply take the next baby step.

He tells us: *"We can't figure out life in our minds. Life is resolved through life itself."*

I just love the vision of the ripples we create once we take action. As we move forward—however tentatively and in whatever direction—life responds. We get more information that we can use to optimize our approach.

Are you stuck in any indecision right now? Remember there's no such thing as a "right" decision. Just put on your lab coat and experimenter's goggles as you take the next step.

Ready. Fire. Aim.

Let's go create some ripples.

## GRADUALISM: INCREMENTAL CHANGES OVER TIME

"In June of 2006, Harriet, a giant tortoise, died at the ripe old age of 176. She was reportedly one of several giant tortoises that Charles Darwin collected on his visit to the Galapagos Islands. Harriet was a domed tortoise. She lived on an island that was fairly wet, where a domed tortoise had an easy time finding and munching on local grasses. Harriet had cousins called saddleback tortoises. The shells of these tortoises evolved in such a way that the tortoises could stretch their necks upwards and graze on above-ground cactus plants. This was necessary because the climate on the islands where they live is much drier, so ground grasses are not readily available.

This adaptation didn't happen instantly. It happened over millions of years. That's a timeframe that probably isn't well suited to most of us when it comes to making changes in our lives. We want to lose 20 pounds, not over the next year, but over the next month. We want to meet someone and fall in love with him or her and have a wonderful, romantic relationship, not sometime in the next 25 years, but during the next few weeks. We want to become proficient at a martial art, or foreign language, or watercolor painting. But that proficiency must happen quickly, for our minds have very little patience for gradual learning and gradual change. Yet the general principle of what Darwin called 'gradualism' — incremental changes over time — may give hope to those of us who have consistently tried and failed to make colossal changes in our habits or lifestyle."

Gradualism.

It took MILLIONS of years for Harriet and her cousins to adapt to their environments in such different ways.

Now, we don't need to take quite *that* long to create change in our lives but it begs the question:

How do you approach change in your life?

Do you try to snap your fingers and instantly change something big in your life?

That's one way to do it. And, of course, there are times when big changes stick once we've made a significant shift—provided we continue doing the new behaviors.

But a much better strategy is to go for the gradual, incremental change.

*"So the next time you  
consider a goal or dream,  
come back to the present  
circumstances of your  
life and take a constructive  
step forward. Make your  
effort the focus of your  
attention."*  
~ Gregg Krech

*“Conscious change may well require some simple, basic ingredients—have a clear purpose, show up, take small steps, repeat this formula daily, and be patient.”*

~ Gregg Krech

In Japan, this is known as *kaizen*. The word literally means “improvement” but generally refers to the process of small, CONSISTENT changes OVER TIME. That type of constant and continual improvement leads to \*huge\* results.

Darren Hardy captured the magic of this process in his great little book *The Compound Effect* ([see Notes](#)) where he tells us: “By the end of this book, or even before, I want you to know in your bones that your only path to success is through a continuum of mundane, unsexy, unexciting, and sometimes difficult daily disciplines compounded over time. Know, too, that the results, the life, and the lifestyle of your dreams can be yours when you put the Compound Effect to work for you. If you use the principles outlined in the *The Compound Effect*, you will create your fairy-tale ending.”

And, Jeff Olson describes the same basic process as *The Slight Edge* ([see those Notes](#)). Here’s how he puts it: “The things that take you out of failure and up toward survival and success are simple. So simple, in fact, that it’s easy to overlook them. Extremely easy to overlook them. It’s easy to overlook them because when you look at them, they seem insignificant. They’re not big, sweeping things that take huge effort. They’re not heroic or dramatic. Mostly they’re just little things you do every day and that nobody else even notices. They are things that are so simple to do—yet successful people actually do them, while unsuccessful people only look at them and don’t take action.

*Things like taking a few dollars out of a paycheck, putting it into savings, and leaving it there. Or doing a few minutes of exercise every day—and not skipping it. Or reading ten pages of an inspiring, educational, life-changing book every day. Or taking a moment to tell someone how much you appreciate them, and doing that consistently, every day, for months and years. Little things that seem insignificant in the doing, yet when compounded over time yield very big results. You could call these ‘little virtues’ or ‘success habits.’ I call them simple daily disciplines. Simple productive actions, repeated consistently over time. That, in a nut shell, is the slight edge.”*

And, a couple thousand years before Darwin or Gregg, the [Buddha](#) captured it beautifully as well: “Little by little a person become evil, as a water pot is filled by drops of water... Little by little a person becomes good, as a water pot is filled by drops of water.”

Any goals that you need to bring a little kaizen gradualism to?

## WHAT’S CONTROLLABLE AND WHAT ISN’T?

“Whenever we’re facing a challenging situation, one of the wisest things we can do is take a few minutes to distinguish between what’s controllable and what isn’t controllable. This is one of the key elements of Morita Therapy and it’s an example of how something very simple can also be very helpful. I suggest you use a pencil and paper. Simply divide the paper into two columns and, as you reflect on the situation, place each element into the proper column. What you end up with is a ‘map’ that shows what you can work on (actions which are controllable by you) and what you can’t control. This empowers you to move forward and do what you can do.”

This is a great little exercise.

In any given challenge, some things are controllable and, of course, some things are not. Here’s the key thing to know: The primary things that are OUT of your control are the RESULTS of your actions. Your EFFORTS are within your control. The results are \*not\*!!

For example, let’s say you’re looking for a job. You do not have control over whether you get a certain job or even how quickly you get a job. You do, however, have absolute control over how you approach the whole process—what you DO.

Searching for great potential opportunities. Reaching out to friends for ideas and support.

"What will you create that will outlive you? How many hearts and minds will be touched by your deeds? Use your precious moments wisely. Do what you came here to do."

~ Gregg Krech

Polishing your resume, drafting awesome cover emails/letters/videos/whatever. You can control the level of little + massive, diligent and persistent action you take.

And, of course, by focusing on that, you influence the likelihood of getting the outcome you're looking for. Same rules apply to EVERYTHING you may want. What do you want? What's within your control? What's not? What's the next baby step you can take?

## TOLERATING FEELINGS IS OF SUPREME IMPORTANCE

"Feelings are sensations. The ability to tolerate sensations we'd rather not have is supremely important. Without such tolerance, our lives remain needlessly vulnerable to our wild and fickle feelings, and our plans get needlessly derailed. Without such tolerance we can become preoccupied to an unhealthy degree with our private internal experience, and thereby become distracted from the world around us, the needs of others, and the tasks at hand. It is difficult to build our dreams without coexisting with the feelings that come up in the process of creating those dreams.

Notice the feeling, recognize it for what it is, take a deep breath, and shift your energies to that which needs doing."

That's the book in a nutshell.

Rather than avoid or distract ourselves from unpleasant feelings, we simply need to notice them, recognize and accept them as an inherent part of the process, take a deep breath and then do what needs to get done. Over and over and over again.

Here's to mastering the art of taking action as we optimize and actualize! :)

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**Brian Johnson,**  
*Heroic Philosopher CEO*

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you'll probably like...

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[Everyday Enlightenment](#)

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## About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Founder + CEO of Heroic. He's spent half of the last 25 years as a Founder/CEO and the other half as a Philosopher. Brian loves integrating ancient wisdom and modern science to help YOU become the best, most heroic version of yourself so we can create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](http://heroic.us).