

THE BIG IDEAS

The Monkey

In your mind.

Email Apnea

BREATHE!

Entanglement Tech

Is over 1 million years old.

Task Switching

Comes with great costs.

Experiment: Two Lists

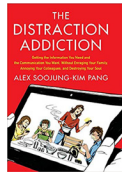
What's on yours?

Solvitur Ambulando

"It is solved by walking."

Luddites vs. Optimizes

Choosing wisely.



The Distraction Addiction

Getting the Information You Need and the Communication You Want, Without Enraging Your Family, Annoying Your Colleagues, and Destroying Your Soul

BY ALEX SOOJUNG-KIM PANG · LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY © 2013 · 304 PAGES

"We want our technologies to extend our minds and augment our abilities, not break up our minds.

Such control is within our reach. Rather than being forced into a state of perpetual distraction, with all the unhappiness and discontent such a state creates, we can approach information technologies in a way that is mindful and nearly effortless and that contributes to our ability to focus, be creative, and be happy.

It's an approach I call contemplative computing.

The terms sound oxymoronic. What could be less contemplative than today's technology-intensive environment? What could possibly be less conducive to a clear, meditative state than interactions with computers, cell phones, Facebook, and Twitter?

Contemplative computing isn't enabled by a technological breakthrough or scientific discovery. You don't buy it. You do it. It's based on a blend of new science and philosophy, some very old techniques for managing your attention and mind, and a lot of experience with how people use (or are used by) information technologies. It shows you how your mind and body interact with computers and how your attention and creativity are influenced by technology. It gives you the tools to redesign your relationships with devices and the Internet to make them work better for you. It's a promise that you can construct a healthier, more balanced relationship with information technology."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang from *The Distraction Addiction*

"Recent surveys and field studies have found that a majority of workers have only three to fifteen minutes of uninterrupted working time in a day, and they spend at least an hour a day—five full weeks a year—dealing with distractions and then getting back on task."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

Alex Soojung-Kim Pang is a professional futurist. (I think that is officially tied for first for the coolest job title ever. The co-winner? Professional Optimizer, of course. Hah. :)

He has a PhD in the history of science and is a former Microsoft Research fellow and visiting scholar at Stanford and Oxford.

I got this book after reading *Bored and Brilliant* and read it as part of my prep for Conquering Digital Addiction 101 and to continue my passionate pursuit of understanding how to Optimize our relationship to digital technology. (I read it right after I finished the Note on *Lead Yourself First* which focuses on the power of solitude and how hard it is to find these days given our "distraction addiction.")

I found the book fascinating and a great complement to the others. If you're equally passionate about understanding how to Optimize our interactions with technology and cultivate your "contemplative computing" capacity, I think you'll also love it. (Get a copy [here](#).)

It's packed with Big Ideas and interesting facts. I'm excited to share some of my favorites so let's jump straight in!

"The great computer scientist Donald Knuth gave up e-mail in 1990, declaring that while e-mail is a 'wonderful thing for people whose role in life is to be on top of things... my role is to be on the bottom of things,' to do fundamental research that required 'long hours of studying and uninterrupted concentration.'"

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

THE MONKEY IN YOUR MIND

"The macaques are living examples of the Buddhist concept of the monkey mind, one of my favorite metaphors for the everyday, undisciplined, jittery mind. As Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa explains, the monkey mind is crazy: It 'leaps about and never stays in one place. It is completely restless.'

The monkey mind's constant activity reflects a deep restlessness: monkeys can't sit still because their minds never stop. Likewise, most of the time, the human mind delivers up a constant stream of consciousness. Even in quiet moments, minds are prone to wandering. Add a constant buzz of electronics, the flash of a new message landing in your in-box, the ping of voicemail, and your mind is as manic as a monkey after a triple espresso. The monkey mind is attracted to today's infinite and ever-changing buffet of information choices and devices. It thrives on overload, is drawn to shiny and blinky things, and doesn't distinguish between good and bad technologies or choices."

Meet your monkey mind. You know, that undisciplined, jittery little thing in your head. Taming THAT guy is a big part of what the book is all about.

Wise teachers have been counseling us to tame our monkey minds for THOUSANDS of years. We've *always* been easily distracted. Now? It's almost like that crazy monkey in our mind has access to nonstop stimulants via our near-constant connection to inputs via digital distractions!

And... Speaking of monkeys... In our Note on *Lead Yourself First*, we talked about how Jane Goodall used solitude to tap into her intuition in her groundbreaking research on chimpanzees. She says: "*The first step on the road to experiencing true awareness is the cessation of noise from within.*" <- In other words, we need to tame the monkey in our minds. (Which, btw, leads us to the fun realization that, if Jane had an untamed monkey mind, she NEVER would have become the world's leading expert on monkeys and their minds.

And guess what? If YOU have an out-of-control (undisciplined/jittery) monkey mind, YOU will *never* become an expert at whatever it is you want to master—whether that's parenting, business or whatever. It's time to tame our monkeys.

So... What's one stimulant you can take away from YOUR monkey?

EMAIL APNEA

"Linda Stone is a technology consultant, writer, and former Apple and Microsoft executive, the sort of person who can coin a phrase like *continuous partial attention*, which describes the way a person divides his focus among multiple devices, never giving any single one his complete attention. In 2008, she noticed herself holding her breath while checking her e-mail. After observing people at cafes and conferences, asking friends, and doing some informal surveys, she found that lots of people held their breath when they checked their e-mail.

Stone called the phenomenon e-mail apnea. The term is a play on sleep apnea, a breathing problem caused by either a physical obstruction in the airway that keeps air from reaching the lungs or a failure of the brain to signal the lungs to breathe. People with sleep apnea can stop breathing hundreds of times a night, sometimes for up to a minute. It's not fatal, but it can contribute to fatigue and impaired cognition, and even to physical problems like obesity and heart disease.

E-mail apnea is probably more pervasive than sleep apnea. Somewhere between 100 million and 350 million people worldwide have sleep apnea; in the United States, it's estimated to be as common as heart disease, clinical depression, or alcoholism. But roughly two billion people worldwide, nearly a third of the Earth's population, use computers. Roughly two billion people have broadband Internet access. More than twice that number have mobile phones."

"Meditation is the original neuroscience, the world's oldest conscious exploitation of neuroplasticity, and it's a twenty-five-hundred-year-old answer to the twenty-five-year-old problem of digital distraction."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

That's from the first chapter in which we learn the first tool to tame our monkeys: "Breathe."

For as long as the wisest among us have been talking about taming the monkey mind, they've been teaching us to do so via our BREATH.

In Optimal Breathing 101 we talked about how our breath is our ticket to self-mastery via the vagus nerve. That 10th cranial nerve is named after the Latin word for "wanderer" because it wanders down from your brain stem through your heart and lungs into your gut.

Your breath is the switch through which you can flip your nervous system from stress to calm by sending calm signals back UP from your diaphragm to your brain. Essentially saying, "RELAX. We're good. See how calmly and deeply I'm breathing? Wouldn't be doing that if a lion was chasing me so turn off the stress response. Let's rest and digest and repair. Thanks."

But get this. You know what we tend to do when we interact with our smartphones and email and other online media? WE HOLD OUR BREATH!

And you know what that does? It creates a chronic low-level stress response that enervates you. But only all day every day. So... BREATHE!

How? In through your nose. Into your belly. With a slightly longer exhale. Optimal rate of 4 to 6 breaths per minute to dial in your heart rate variability, willpower and overall awesome.

How about we all take one now. Inhale through your nose. Nice and deeply into your belly. Exhale through your nose. Slightly longer than your inhale. Smile. Ahhhh... Your monkey just settle down a bit? Repeat.

P.S. Get this: "According to a 2010 Harris interactive poll (sponsored by tech giant Intel), computer users spend an average of forty-three minutes every day—five hours a week, or eleven days a year—waiting for computers to start up, shut down, load software, open files, connect to the Internet." <- Really? Wow.

Pro tip: Reclaim those otherwise lost micro-moments for a little breathing reboot!!

ENTANGLEMENT TECH IS 1M+ YEARS OLD...

"Entanglement teaches us that we shouldn't worry about becoming too dependent on technologies. Throughout history, Homo sapiens has been inseparable from technology.

Our protohuman ancestors first used stones as tools about two and a half million years ago; the Acheulean hand ax, a sharpened, pointed, versatile tool that required substantial skill to make, was invented about 1.8 million years ago, and variations of it remained among our ancestors' most prized possessions for more than a million years. (I've held million-year-old hand axes that still have their edge. Imagine any present-day technology even lasting a million years, much less still being usable and useful.)

Humans have literally never lived in a world without tools, and tool use in humans evolved in concert with both biological and cognitive innovations."

That's from a section in which Alex (with his PhD in the history of science), gives us a fascinating tour through the history of technology.

Short story: We've evolved for over 1 million years with technology. That's a VERY good thing. (It's impossible to wrap my brain around our protohuman ancestors creating the first stone tools 2.5 million years ago. And I marvel at the scientists who can figure out that date in history...)

It's not that technology is a problem per se. We're "entangled" with a super-broad range of tech tools—from signs on the road to bookmarks we use as we read.

The issue is: How do we best use the technology to express the BEST within ourselves and not let the perpetual distraction take over and LOSE that connection to ourselves?

"Building up your extended mind isn't just about adding newer, more sophisticated technologies. ... It's about choosing and using technologies that help you build habits and cognitive abilities that externalize and thus reinforce mental capabilities."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

Alex talks about Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi in this section (see Notes on *Flow*). He tells us: "The best moments in our lives, are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times." They "occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile."

Alex then says: "The ability to pay attention, to control the content of your consciousness, is critical to a good life. This explains why perpetual distraction is such a big problem. When you're constantly interrupted by external things—the phone, texts, people with 'just one quick question,' clients, children—by self-generated interruptions, or by your own efforts to multitask and juggle several tasks at once, the chronic distractions erode your sense of having control of your life. They don't just derail your train of thought. They make you lose yourself."

So... Are you in control of the contents of your consciousness—using your technology wisely to Optimize and actualize or do you hop from stimulation (aka distraction) to stimulation like an addicted rat chasing cheese? <- THAT's the ultimate tech question.

TASK SWITCHING COMES WITH GREAT COSTS

"Now imagine listening to a conversation on one subject while writing an e-mail about another, or trying to participate in a meeting while scanning the headlines. Or don't imagine it; just remember the last time you did it.

It may feel like dividing your attention between two simple tasks is a relatively easy thing, but the cafe experiment reveals that switch-tasking is expensive. Every time you move from one window to another on your computer or move from reading your e-mail to listening to a conference call, your mind has to spend energy. By some estimates, you can lose several working hours every week to these moments, which come at exactly those times when you want to be most productive. You also make more mistakes when you switch-task."

If you're feeling inspired, let's do a little experiment.

Get a stopwatch. (I prefer my old-school Timex watch rather than a Smartphone because of everything it *can't* do other than track time—which, by the way is the central theme of the chapter from which this experiment comes: "Simplify.")

Now... Time how long it takes you to count from 1 to 10. (Alex and I clock in at 1.5 seconds.)

Then time how long it takes you to recite the alphabet from A to J. (Again, 1.5 seconds for us.)

Pretty straightforward, right? You focus on counting or reciting the alphabet and you bang it out.

Now... Time how long it takes you to go from A-1 to B-2 up to J-10. How long did THAT take? If you're like me and Alex, it probably took you at least 10 seconds. That's more than THREE times longer than going from 1 to 10 and A to J by themselves.

And... THAT is the fastest way to *feel* the cost of task-switching. The science is unequivocal.

We may THINK we can effectively "multitask" but when we combine two SUPER simple tasks (even something as seemingly simple as talking on the phone while driving), our performance suffers. (And, of course, as discussed, when you TEXT while driving you might as well be drunk.)

But here's the funny thing. Although people who task-switch the most are "terrible at every aspect of multitasking" ... "In a sad twist, compulsive switch-taskers think they do it well." (Eek.)

Solution? Simplify. Go Deep. Focus. (Alex recommends "Zenware." Programs like [Freedom](#) and [WriteRoom](#) and other tools to help you simplify and mindfully focus.)

So... Q: What can YOU do to tame the monkey a little more today?

P.S. The final chapter is on "Rest." The #1 tip there? Create a digital Sabbatical—a day every week when you UNPLUG and rest. Ah...

"Contemplative computing requires experimentation and reflection; it's important to try new things, see how they affect your extended mind, and change your technologies to help you develop that mind and support your ability to be creative and focused."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

EXPERIMENT: TWO LISTS

"Ohio State University professor and virtual-reality researcher Jesse Fox... has students keep media diaries in which they track every engagement they have with social media, television, video games, and so on. The tracking can get overwhelming—'It's so much work!' they complain—but the results are often shocking: students find that while they *think* they're jumping online just for a minute or having a quick round of Drawsome with friends, they're actually spending two hours a day on Facebook or thirty hours a week playing video games.

What really gets Fox's students thinking, though, is this: Before the experiment, Fox asks them all to make lists of everything they'd like to do but feel they don't have time for. The lists have to be detailed to get them thinking seriously about how they'd spend their time: an hour every three days doing Pilates, four hours a week to visit someplace new, half an hour every day for coffee with friends, twenty minutes a day for laundry and cleaning, and so on. She then has them compare the diaries with the lists. In the eight hours you played video games, she points out, here's all the other stuff you *could* have done."

That's from the chapter called "Experiment" in which we learn (you guessed it!), how to experiment with different approaches to figure out what works best for us. I love this one.

Step 1. Make a list of all the things you'd LOVE to do if you *only* had the time. (Seriously: What's ONE thing that comes to mind as a "Wow. I wish I had time to do THAT!?"?)

Step 2. Track your time. Specifically, track all the time you spend engaged with media—in ALL its forms: from social media sites to apps (especially THAT app!) and news and email and games on your phone to TV, video games and blog reading and more email and news on your computer.

Now compare your media diary with that list of stuff you want to do. Any insights?

P.S. Here's the most important step: Step all the way back and see yourself at 95. What do you hope to accomplish with this one precious life of yours? Is your next engagement with technology going to take you one step closer to that goal?

SOLVITUR AMBULANDO

"The idea that walking helps thinking and can be a form of contemplation has been around since antiquity. The Latin phrase *solvitur ambulando*—'it is solved by walking'—is attributed to ancient philosophers as diverse as Diogenes, Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine. Buddhists and Christians share a tradition of walking meditation, in which walks along short paths or labyrinths stimulate spiritual reflection and renewal. Walking was an essential tool for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers. Jean-Jacques Rousseau in Paris, Immanuel Kant in Konigsberg, and Soren Kierkegaard in Copenhagen were all famously regular walkers. Kierkegaard declared, 'I have walked myself into my best thoughts,' and was drawn to walking for both its physical and mental stimulation (benefits that have been documented by modern scientists). So popular was the image of the walking philosopher that Friedrich Nietzsche famously stated toward the end of the nineteenth century, 'All truly great thoughts'—including Nietzsche's own—'are conceived by walking.'"

That's from the chapter "Refocus" in which we learn about Charles Darwin and the "clockwork" schedule he maintained for nearly 40 years. A key facet? His walk around his "thinking path."

We've talked about walking's benefits many times. But guess what Darwin and Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and all the other geniuses DIDN'T have on their walks? ... Their smartphones!!!

It always kinda bums me out a bit when I'm on the Trail and someone cruises by looking down at their phone. Really? I say: Let's take a *real* break--giving our default brains a chance to do their thing as we deeply contemplate and get our *solvitur ambulando* on!

"In the classic Zen in the Art of Archery, Eugen Herrigel's teacher urged him always to take his next shot unburdened by previous failures to hit the target; as he improved, his teacher urged him not to be influenced by his successes either, to stay in the present moment."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

"One of the wisest Buddhist sayings is that pain is inevitable, but suffering is a choice. Loss and death are unavoidable. ... You face a similar situation in this superconnected, high-tech world. Information technologies are inescapable... Distraction is a choice."

~ Alex Soojung-Kim Pang

LUDDITES VS. OPTIMIZITES

"One of the wisest Buddhist sayings is that pain is inevitable, but suffering is a choice. Loss and death are unavoidable. Friends come and go, loved ones die, catastrophes strike, and eventually we must all come to terms with our own mortality. It's not within our power to escape these things, but we can develop the capacity to deal gracefully with them. We can learn from painful experiences, become wiser and better through them—and make ourselves better prepared for the next setback.

You face a similar situation in this superconnected, high-tech world. Information technologies are inescapable. They're a part of how you work, how you keep in touch, how your kids play, how you think and remember. They clamor for your time and crave your attention. They rely on the fact that your relationships with information technologies are deep and profound and reflect the entanglement with tools that define us as a species. They promise to be helpful and supportive, to make you smarter and more efficient, but too often they leave you feeling busier, distracted, and dull. Some say that the unavoidable price of being always on and connected is that one's attention is perpetually fractured, the mind subject to endless demands and distractions. But that's wrong. You are the inheritor of a contemplative legacy that you can use to retake control of your technologies, to tame the monkey mind, and to redesign your extended mind. Connection is inevitable. Distraction is a choice."

Those are the final words of the book.

One of the themes of the book is the fact that, as we strive to Optimize our relationships with technology, we've gotta remember that we're not trying to GET RID of it all.

We've used "technology" for, LITERALLY, over a million years. From sharpened stones to printed paper, our tools have made us human.

So... We don't want to be machine-smashing Luddites about it. But we do want to be, shall we say, Optimizites with our technology—consciously CHOOSING how we can engage with our tools in the most empowered ways to express the best, most actualized versions of ourselves.

Let's remember: *"Information technologies are inescapable... Distraction is a choice."*

B

Brian Johnson,
Professional Optimizer

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives so they can actualize their potential as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + practical tools. Learn more and optimize your life at optimize.me.