

THREE DEPTHS OF DOING

This is an adaptation of a story I heard many years ago:

A student once visited a farm on which lived a three-generation family. The student's capstone project was to understand farmers' motivations. It was spring. The son, the father, and the grandfather were working together, planting seeds.

The student asked the teenage son what he was doing. Wiping the sweat from his forehead, the farmer boy shrugged and said, "Sowing the seeds." He had been working all day long doing the same thing over and over.

With a busy look, the father answered the same question. "Planting a crop," he said. He was working against a deadline to finish the seeding.

When the grandfather was asked the same question, he said with a cheerful look, "Feeding the planet."

The son was zoomed in, the grandfather was zoomed out, and the father was somewhere in between. While the son was intermittently focused on the immediate activity, he hadn't accessed the meaning of it. He wanted to be somewhere else, and thus his attention wavered all day long. He hadn't yet balanced the checkbooks.

The farmer saw an intermediate-level meaning that was focused on his immediate needs. His attention wavered because while doing one activity, his mind was busy planning the next; he had to keep it all together.

The grandfather had seen it all. He was a natural with the steps, and he intuitively connected what he did with its larger meaning. He also knew that meaning and effort had to go together: **meaning plays out in the long term, while the effort is invested in the short term.**

Zooming is your ability to shift your perspective from the very short term to the very long term. The greater your ability to zoom, the greater the repertoire of perspectives available to you, which frees your attention to access multiple ways to heal.

Over the past few decades, we have gone overboard in celebrating the now. Zooming in and engaging with the now alone isn't enough. Zooming out alone isn't enough either. **An optimal disposition is to have a combination of zoomed-out**

perspective, which provides the larger meaning to what you are doing and what life is about, and of zoomed-in presence, so you fully engage with what is. Perspective and meaning, when combined with intention and engaged presence, can convert a mundane job into a flow-generating activity that becomes enjoyable and memorable even though it's repetitive.

It'll help us to explore a little bit more about the neural zoom before we learn ways to manipulate it.

THE NEURAL ZOOM

The brain and eyes mature in parallel. A newborn can't see farther than one foot. As our eyes and the neural pathways that host vision mature, we start seeing greater expanse of the world. Further, as the rest of the brain matures, our mental projection expands.

Early on, we aren't at all shy about crying. We cry when hungry, wet, sleepy, unwell, or in pain. As we get older, our thresholds change. My five-year-old could cry if deprived of candy or the right hair clip. She also cares about pressing the elevator button. She is quite limited in postponing rewards; a lollipop in hand is better than two tomorrow. These are cute traits now, but the equivalent adult traits would be impatience, frustration, quick reaction, and selfishness. Often the instinct to take revenge also fits in this category.

Most animal brains remain locked in the perpetual present—able to zoom out to only the next few minutes at the most. The animals that behave as though they are planning for the future (such as when squirrels hide nuts) do it instinctively rather than because of a well-thought-out strategy after a series of committee meetings. Human brains are different.

As we mature and acquire wisdom, we learn to zoom out, like the wise owl that is born blind but in a matter of months develops the ability to scan through space and peer through the dark. We can take in the perspective and ask, "Will it matter five years from now? Ten years? Twenty years? Can this adversity help me long term in ways I can't even imagine? **Does my partner's annoying behavior reflect inner vulnerability and thus merit my compassion and not my reaction? Is this person who cut me off on the road struggling with low prefrontal dopamine level?**" With the ability to change the perspective, we look deeper and become less reactive.

These moments of zooming out, however, stay with us only for the short term. Instead of being totally zoomed in like animals or optimally zoomed out like exceptionally wise humans, we live stuck between the present moment and eternity.

Stuck in Between

Does this sound familiar? All these years you have gone out of the way to help a certain someone. But a few days ago, you weren't able to meet his or her expectations since you were super busy. Perhaps you delayed responding to e-mails and forgot an

anniversary. That was enough for that person to discount you from his or her life. Everything you did all these years was didn't matter.

This is extremely common. What happened yesterday is much more powerful in influencing opinions than what has happened over the last fifteen years. People can't zoom out and take in the perspective.

The In-Between Place

In general, we humans live like the farmer dad in the story in chapter 52—somewhere between zoomed in and zoomed out. **By developing a prefrontal cortex, humans have escaped the present moment. But we haven't yet claimed eternity, since to fully nurture a zoomed-out perspective, we need a stronger prefrontal cortex than we have right now.**

We thus live most of our lives thinking about something other than what we are doing. Some researchers call it "nexting." **We like to predict what will make us happy, are bad at making such predictions, and aren't aware how bad we are.** Not precisely a recipe for a happy life.¹

The in-between place isn't the most desirable abode. **Peace is in the present moment, but peace is also in having a long-term perspective. The greatest misery is in between, which is precisely where we are much of the time.** Most humans spend the bulk of their lives unable to access the joy of being in the moment (a skill they had as a child), and the peace that comes from a fully zoomed-out perspective. Developing a flexible zoom by learning to zoom in and zoom out at will can help. Here is how this works.

The Three Futures

The figure below shows your three futures. Zone A is your immediate future, usually measured in hours, zone B is your intermediate future measured in days, and zone C is the long term, spanning from months to years to decades or even longer.



Let's say you anticipate a difficult meeting this afternoon. You are prepared for it, but you are anxious. This anxiety can cause hyperventilation, thirst, and stomach cramps, which can leave you cranky and tired. The more you think about this meeting

the worse you feel, but every instinct of yours pulls you toward thinking about this meeting.

A good strategy now is to think about this meeting in the perspective of your entire life (zone C). Likely, it isn't that important. **Things become only as big as you allow them to become.** You can swap meeting for an annoying email, an unanswered text, less than courteous service, delayed flight, and more. In this situation, focusing on the plans for the weekend or for an upcoming trip (zone B) might be helpful too.

Another example: Next week, you have to undergo one of the most despised medical procedures of all time: a colonoscopy. If you don't have a disciplined mind, you'll likely think of the procedure twenty times every day, which will be exhausting. In this situation, either zoom in (into zone A) or zoom out (into zone C). Lift only the load of the next hour. A very simple way to do this is to notice more by projecting your attention externally and noticing novelty. Fill your time with work, read a comforting book, watch a funny movie, go to the theater, savor your food, or visit with friends. Most meditation and mindfulness approaches are geared to bringing you into the present. Zoom out by thinking about your vacation for next year, planning the next steps in your career, and asking yourself whether it will bother you in five or ten years. You can also find meaning in it: you're lucky that you are healthy and successful enough to get a colonoscopy (I know I am pushing it!), this procedure could save your life by preventing cancer, and you only need it once every ten years (Some patients with genetic predisposition to aggressive colon polyps need a colonoscopy once every year, and their screening starts at age fifteen. Perhaps this realization may fill you with compassion for them and gratitude for your good luck that you don't have the abnormal genes.).

The final example: Each day about forty-one thousand people in the world get a new diagnosis of cancer. Some are early stage, but many are advanced-stage cancers. Most patients with advanced cancer that limits their longevity go through a tough phase of adaptation. This high-stress situation increases the risk of cancer progression and death.²⁻⁹ Braking the stress response not only enhances well-being over the long term¹⁰⁻¹⁵ but also might impact cancer progression and recurrence (although this isn't yet fully proven).¹⁶ In such a situation, **zooming in by living your life one hour at a time can significantly decrease the load, enhance quality, and improve sleep and relationships.** Setting the right priorities, finding the right mind-set in which to reframe (with gratitude, compassion, and meaning), lowering your threshold to forgive, and faith can all help. For the unfortunate patients stuck in this situation, I have found social support and faith as the strongest resilience factors.

A Moment Is Too Little

The present moment is too evanescent for the mind to capture. Living in the moment, however, can last only for a short time. It is like the butterfly that is always a step ahead of you. A rich neural package within the prefrontal cortex that is wonderful at imagining and time traveling can be given a time-out for a bit, but it can't be silenced. Try as you may to live in the moment, you'll eventually fail.

Further, the present moment may not be always desirable. I don't want to be in the present when undergoing a medical procedure. I have to raise two kids, send them to college, decide whom to vote for, and so much more. All this needs thinking, planning, and mental time travel. Hence, a mind that can flow across time zones and focus attention on the zone with the greatest meaning and joy can serve us the best. Such a mind is authentically mindful. Interestingly, when you are flexibly flowing with time, you will find it much easier to access the present moment. Right when you give up and get busy with life, the butterfly comes and sits on your shoulder.

The current attention practices provide wonderful skills for zooming in. Let's talk next about zooming out.

WHEN IN DOUBT, ZOOM OUT

Zooming out isn't just a meditation or a transient state. It is a perspective; it is wisdom to be able to look at things more broadly. It is like having the sight of an eagle, able to scan the vast vistas. Zooming out expands the possibilities available to you in rethinking your challenges. With greater variety available to you, you can pick the more desirable explanations, tracks, and solutions to better negotiate life's challenges. Here are some ideas to help you zoom out.

Will It Matter Five Years from Now?

The simplest and most straightforward zooming-out skill is to pause and ask yourself, **will it matter five years from now?** Try to recall everything that stressed you out on this very day five years ago. Perhaps your memory will fail you. You'll agree that most likely it wasn't a week you had no worries or negative thoughts. **If what matters today likely won't matter in five years, then perhaps we can be more stoic about how we handle it.** Why wait five years for the sting to soften when we can change our perspective right here, right now.

If five years seems too short a period of time, expand to ten years or more. The purpose is to find a peaceful place in your mind in which you can steady your focus to put energy toward meaningful action.

Whatever the stressors, uncertainty, and chaos, nothing is worth having a heart attack over. Take care of yourself, since you are all you've got. Cultivate the art of finding peace within chaos while trying to fix the chaos.

Failure and success often seesaw in life. Success is often preceded and followed by failure. **If you're successful today, be humble for you'll likely fail; if you're failing, keep the hope and courage for you'll succeed.** This realization will prevent you from inflating and deflating yourself with each rise and fall, preserving your energy and helping you succeed more often.

Control the Controllable

Three strikes integrate to generate today's stress: genetic predisposition, childhood adversity, and present-day stressors.¹⁷

Researchers have identified many genes that can predispose us to lower resilience.¹⁸⁻²¹ People with vulnerable genes have a tendency to ruminate and have a low happiness reserve in their brains, predisposing them to depression and other mental-health issues. That is the first strike.

The second strike is childhood adversity. This can present in many forms: poverty, illness, parental neglect, abuse, war, bullying (including cyberbullying), and more. Many children facing these difficulties still thrive.^{22,23} Here is the most important reason.

The single most important resilience factor for a child is a caring adult.²⁴ Children who have at least one caring adult who loves and trusts them are able to withstand adversity much better than those who feel they are alone in the world. The brains of children with kind adults become structurally healthier when they grow up.^{25,26}

Unfortunately, the abuse of children at the hands of those who should love them is extremely common and is often the second strike. **Childhood adversity gets under the skin and affects genetic expression, predisposing them to inflammation, low self-regulation, mistrust of others, and poor relationships.**²⁷⁻³⁰ All of these increase the risk of the third strike: adult stressors.

Adult stressors come in many flavors: work, money, relationships, responsibilities, health, home, and many more. The impact of adult stressors depends not only on the severity of the stressor but also on our perception of how bad it is, how many resources we believe we have to overcome it, whether we believe those resources will be effective, and what it all means.³¹⁻³³

If you are already a grown-up, you have little control over the first two strikes. Even stressors that come to us from the world are often not in our control. You can exercise your vote, but you can barely nudge others to pick the nominee you feel is the worthiest. **What you can control is how you process your stressors, how much meaning you find in them, whether you can find right within wrong, and of course, whether you are willing to forgive.**

We should exercise control where we can. Taking control, even planning to take control, is pleasing. So, **take control of your mind, even if you can't take control of the world.** It is helpful to **believe that the smaller daily annoyances give us useful emotional workouts so we can better swim through and vanquish, when the tsunami of adversity arrives.**

Could My Adversity Have Prevented Something Worse?

This story may sound silly to you. I fully participated in the year 2000 stock-market crash. Over a period of a painful few days, I lost almost all my investments. As I was watching triple-digit drops in the Dow, I couldn't help but imagine how wonderful it would have been had I sold my holdings a week earlier. I am sure I wasn't alone in that fantasy!

I wanted to recover fast. So here is how I convinced myself. I said, "Had I sold all my stocks, I would have bought a flashy car with the money, crashed, and died. I am glad I don't have that money." In a few hours, I was actually feeling pretty good for having survived!

Ask yourself, "Can this short-term loss somehow help me in the long term? Is this pink slip somehow protecting me? Could this annoying supervisor have helped my career in some way? Was this missed flight a blessing in disguise?" I personally know two people who are alive today because they missed a flight.

I don't believe in being a Pollyanna. I also don't believe in negating the truth. **I believe in looking at the truth in its most optimistic version. That is wisely zooming out.**

Healthy Comparison

Here is my instinct: when I do well, I get haughty; when others do well, I get envious. I ascribe my success to my hard work and natural gifts; I ascribe the success of others to luck and unreasonable favors. I lived the first twenty-five years of my life blissfully unaware I had this instinct and have been fighting it ever since.

Unhealthy comparison is a perfect way to decimate happiness. It's best to choose otherwise. **Be humble when you succeed and inspired when you see others succeed.** Such change takes effort, often decades of effort, but is totally worthwhile. It gives you peace, inspiration, and friendship.

When others share their success, do not compare their success with yours. Also, do not ascribe it to just good luck or consider it unfair. Don't downplay it either. Instead, celebrate their success. When you celebrate their success, they will show up to celebrate yours.

It Could Have Been Worse

I once met a person who had been traumatized by an abusive relationship while living in a crowded inner city in the Northeast. She was surrounded by crime, drugs, and HIV. Her boyfriend, bad as he was, wasn't into drugs. He was also clean with respect to chronic infections. Although she validated her concern and shared that what she went through was pure misery, she found some comfort when she focused on the fact that she escaped that hell physically unharmed. It could have been worse, much worse.

I use this approach almost every week, telling myself that it could have been worse. Recover by thinking that it isn't as bad as it could have been. Once your energy drain is plugged, use your energy to fix what is still bad. **The intention isn't to say it is all good; it's to recognize that it needs fixing and that fixing will take time, and it's to decide not to allow yourself to be miserable during that time.**

Will It Be Fair?

Suffering comes in two forms: visible and invisible. Visible suffering is in many places, including emergency rooms, outpatient clinics, attorney's offices, courts, funeral homes, and police stations. One out of two people develop cancer, nearly everyone has experienced back pain, and the majority experience a traumatic event at some point.³⁴

Invisible suffering is even more ubiquitous. Two out of three professionals experience burnout, 60 percent of people feel discriminated against, half of us feel lonely every week, one out of five experiences depression, and about eight hundred thousand people worldwide commit suicide every year. That is about one every forty seconds.³⁵ For each person completing suicide, about twenty try.³⁶

Think about this: as you are reading this, about forty-four thousand people around the world are so desperate that they will try suicide today. The number of people who are severely depressed and have suicidal thoughts is multifold higher. If you and I are not among them, **if we have the privilege of being grateful today, then we have the responsibility to be compassionate.**

With so many people struggling, it wouldn't be fair if I never had back pain, never experienced financial loss, and was never deceived by a friend. This awareness and its preemptive acceptance empowers me to better engage with what is instead of fighting myself or living in fear of adversity.

Further, research shows that the happiest people aren't those who have faced either no adversity or overwhelming suffering. Moderate lifetime adversity correlates

with the lowest distress and posttraumatic symptoms and with higher life satisfaction. Your resilience also is likely to be highest if you have faced some adversity. With this awareness, **look at the adversity today (but not the overwhelming kind) as seeding happiness tomorrow.**³⁷

Neural Basis

Enron, WorldCom, Tyco, and Lehman Brothers are just a few companies in which brilliant people did truly dumb and unethical things. They forgot ethics, shareholder interest, the need to tell the truth, and so much more. They allowed the promise of short-term reward to dominate their brains at the cost of potential long-term consequences.

Our reward and fear centers are both strongly influenced by the potential for short-term gains and losses, respectively. The nearer the reward, the greater its potency. Some economists call it delay discounting. (We discussed this in chapter 24 and will talk some more about it in chapter 61.) Animals have little to no defense against this bias. We humans also struggle with it. If that were not so, there would be no divorces because of infidelity. Concepts like tax fraud, shoplifting, cybercrime, and wire fraud wouldn't exist. We discussed previously that given the opportunity, 70 percent of us lie and cheat. That predisposition somehow got into our DNA. As a first step, it helps to be aware of this predisposition. Then train yourself to think of the long term, of the broader consequences of your greed and cheating. One way to do this is to store a few algorithms in your head.

Algorithms

Algorithms are simple steps to solving a problem, particularly a mathematical problem. Algorithms also work in daily life. When you see a red traffic light, your brain signals you to stop. You follow three simple steps: remove your foot from the accelerator, plant your foot on the brake, and slowly press the brake until your car stops. You do the reverse when the light turns green. I am sure it took some time for these steps to become fluid and effortless. You can create the same algorithms for your mind. Let's look at two of them.

When someone is upset, you can see that person in two different lights: unreasonable versus hurt. Both may be true at times. The default algorithm for most of us is this:

Upset = Unreasonable = Call for reaction.

I have used this many times. It doesn't take me or the other person to a good place. Here is the alternative algorithm based on the simple idea that "an expression other than love is a call for help." The simple algorithm is this:

Upset = Hurt = Call for help.

I have personally never regretted assuming that **a person who is upset is actually hurt**. I know that if most of us live by this assumption, the world will be a better place for our children. Try to be a peacemaker rather than picking a fight. Do not take the bait.

Another example: I spilled milk on the dining table because my daughter didn't cap it tightly. The default algorithm is:

Spilled milk = Find who is at fault = Blame/get upset/react.

Of late, I have been asking this simple question of myself that I mentioned earlier: "Will it matter five years from now? Did I do this (or something like this) when I was a twelve-year-old?" If it won't matter in five years and I did or could have easily done the same mistake, why stress out and react about it today? Here is my new algorithm, which has removed 90 percent of my stressors:

Spilled milk = Won't matter in five years/It could have been me = Keep my calm.

You can swap spilled milk with a lot of different things: slow drivers, unreturned e-mails, flat tires, delayed flights, forgotten birthdays, and so much more.

Here are a few additional ideas that have helped me craft new algorithms:

- Think about what went right within what went wrong.
- Assume positive intent.
- Forgiveness is for me, not for the other person.
- It is difficult to dislike someone who you know likes you.
- No one struggles with being appreciated too much.
- Remind people of their strengths.
- Everyone is special and struggling.

My amygdala is a work in progress. It notices the slightest insults. It gets ruffled by the least bit of unfairness. But with these algorithms, I recover much faster, sometimes within a few seconds. Earlier, I would persevere for days if I heard someone bad-mouthing me or not paying attention to my preferences. But now I tell myself a more healing story. Perhaps the other person has a different perspective;

perhaps he or she is going through a tough time; perhaps he or she may have meant differently. The result of this thinking is that I avoid hurting myself over trivial issues. I am kinder to myself, which empowers me to be kinder to others.

Remember Finiteness

My brother lives in Princeton, New Jersey. We get to meet about twice a year. If I assume that I will leave the planet at about age eighty, quick math tells me that I will meet him probably only sixty more times in this life. That's it.

You can do that math for any of your relationships. **We have finite time with each other, less than we think.** This awareness inspires me to make the most of this day. It also helps me be kinder. I need this perspective to remind me almost every single day about what truly matters.

When I don't remind myself about finiteness, I get lost in the mundane. I spend too much time attending to dead screens even when surrounded by sentient beings.

I don't stew on finiteness. I get inspired by it. I don't wish to regret at age eighty that I didn't say "I love you" enough and that I carried grudges I really didn't need to.

I personally believe the vast majority of people are good. Sometimes they forget they are good; other times they are stuck in situations that prevent them from expressing their goodness. If I had infinite time to spend on this planet, it would be fine to squander it in grudges. But I am getting older by sixty seconds a minute. This awareness helps me enjoy the roses as I am weeding the yard.

Close the Roads You Won't Take

Sometimes **it helps to close the roads you won't take.** I will not physically hit my children. I will not be unfaithful in my marriage. I will not steal. I will not share details that could embarrass anyone. I will not breach the trust my patients place in me. I will not take advantage of anyone's vulnerability. These and a few more roads, I have decided, do not exist for me.

It helps to think through some scenarios and tell yourself that those aren't places you will go. The transient pleasure of a short-term reward is too trivial for the lifelong regret such moments can seed.

When we are faced with a tempting situation, the brain is designed to yield. If we do not yield, we run the risk of temporarily feeling miserable. One way to not yield and not feel miserable is to avoid the circumstances that put you in a tempting situation. If you don't wish to eat potato chips, just don't buy them; don't even look at them in the store. Once they are in your home or office, I guarantee you they'll find a place in you.

The second way is to plan your action ahead of time, not just for tempting situations but also the challenges. What will you do if when someone gives you a drink at the party? How will you respond to your child's temper tantrum? How will you deal with an insult hurled by a relative? What words will you use to shut a colleague who tries to bully you? The better prepared you are, more likely you will not succumb to the temptations or take the role of a prey to the unkind elements in the world.

Focus on the Long-Term Meaning

Think of why you arrived on this planet. Did you come to satisfy the unappeasable sensory wants, or did you come as a student to learn the lessons of wisdom and love? If it's the former, then you'll live in fear of death and will leave the world dissatisfied. If it's the latter, you will likely experience authentic love and become wiser as you grow older.

We get what we seek. If you seek sensory pleasures, you'll get them. But given that time is a zero-sum game for all of us, you'll spend the bulk of your life seeking and not finding. Also, once you get those pleasures, they will quickly stop pleasing you. Our senses carry no memory and quickly habituate. We also get past our happy moments quickly.

Excessively valuing personal happiness is associated with lower happiness and higher risk of depression.^{38,39} Conversely, if you seek to make others happy and if you find joy in meaning and contentment, then you are in for a treat in this world. I have no doubt that **because of the way the brain operates, the pursuit of gratitude and compassion will make you happier than the pursuit of happiness.** Try to seek long-term meaning for long-term joy. **The best way to be happy is to be a source of happiness; the best way to be a source of happiness is to seek it for someone else.**

Self-Construct

You can consider yourself to be a human being having a human experience, a spiritual being having a human experience, a human being having a spiritual

experience, or a spiritual being having a spiritual experience. I like the fourth option the best. It gives me an inspiring perspective about who I am and what is important. If you have that perspective, align your short-term actions with your long-term meaning.

The greater the number of people your long-term meaning serves, the greater its positive effect on you. Consider this world your home, and connect what you do with every person. A chef or a janitor in the hospital is as busy saving patients' lives as a physician is. Such perspective will give you the home-team advantage, no matter where you play.

Hold yourself in high regard. Get up each day and tell yourself, "I am a good person. A bad thought, hurtful word, or unethical action is unbecoming of me." **The day we all wake up feeling good about ourselves will be the day that, despite having pain, we will have overcome suffering.**

ZIZO: THE FLEXIBLE ZOOM

ZIZO

ZIZO stands for zoom in, zoom out. The best cameras have an adjustable zoom that can cover a wide range as well as use a narrow focus. That's what our minds need. Limiting ourselves to any one domain won't satisfy our curious and imaginative self.

The good news is that you can find peace by both zooming into the present moment and zooming out to the very long term—the ZIZO practice. It's in the intermediate zone, in the worries of tomorrow and the day after, that our greatest stress resides. The ZIZO practice guides you to develop a flexible zoom by zooming in and zooming out at will, whichever is most appropriate for the situation.

Here is a simple approach I suggest you implement this week:

- When the present moment is challenged, zoom out.
- When the long term is challenged, zoom in.
- When the intermediate term is challenged, zoom in or zoom out, depending on your preference and skill set.
- When you can't find peace anywhere, search for what went right or find meaning in what went wrong. If you can't find meaning, keep the faith that the meaning will present itself in due course.

Remember that the deeper the hurt, the longer it will take you to find meaning. Also, for those with faith-based practices, the choice of surrender provides great comfort. None of this means you won't solve the problem when you can. **If you have a thorn in your finger, first take the thorn out and then think about how it got there.**

An Example of ZIZO

Flexibility allows you to change how you approach your challenges. Some challenges, such as discarding a rotten apple, are easy to handle. Some, such as eliminating cancer, are presently unsolvable. Most challenges fall in between; you can make a difference yet not eliminate the problem.

I am reminded of how we handle snow on the driveway. We shovel the snow. Shoveling the snow doesn't melt it; it just pushes it aside. Often, that's all we can do for many problems, and that may be enough. A useful perspective can keep snow from annoying us: **snow is the water we will get to drink in the summer.** This perspective softens the stress for me when we have to shovel for the third time in two days.

Flexibility allows us to adapt solutions to the problems at hand and be comfortable with imperfect solutions in our current state of technological development.

I was recently chatting with a student who had failed a test and was preparing to retake it. He felt angry and sad, and he had low self-worth. Being forced to study the same material again made him feel like a failure. Here I saw the perfect application of zoom gone wrong.

This is how he was approaching it: while studying, his mind zoomed out and thought about all that could go wrong. He could fail the test, disappoint everyone, lose his scholarship, and fail in life. When thinking about his situation, he was too zoomed in, worrying about its immediate impact.

I asked him to reverse this process. When studying, zoom in and focus only on the goals of the next hour. When thinking about his situation during the rest of the day, zoom out and look at it from the perspective of his whole life, without catastrophizing. We also considered this experience to be meaningful, as it was teaching him patience and helping him handle disappointment. He did much better with this strategy. It stopped his fight with himself, which helped him save his energy for preparation. As I wrote these lines, I heard that he had passed!

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