



- [About](#)
- [Meet David](#)
- [Blog](#)
- [Contact](#)

- [Getting Started](#)
 - [Global Partners](#)
 - [Public Events](#)
 - [Services](#)
 - [Courses](#)
 - [Coaching Services](#)
 - [Speaking Engagements](#)
 - [Trainer Certification](#)
 - [GTD Connect®](#)
 - [Podcasts](#)
 - [Shop](#)
-
- [Public Events](#)
 - [Services](#)
 - [Courses](#)
 - [Coaching Services](#)
 - [Speaking Engagements](#)
 - [Trainer Certification](#)
 - [GTD Connect®](#)
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 - [Podcasts](#)
 - [Shop](#)

Zen and the Art of Task-Management

Date: Thursday, May 21, 2009 by GTD Times Staff

A GTD Times community contribution by Paul Lavender

The idea for writing this article came from the talk by Thay on the History of Engaged Buddhism in Mindfulness Bell No. 49. Specifically, when Thay talks about the future and mentions there will be courses held for businesspeople. I would like to share a practice that comes from the world of business, but has proved to be an invaluable tool in my practice of mindfulness.

Getting Things Done (GTD) by David Allen is a systematic approach to task management, which is gaining popularity at a phenomenal rate. When planning this article, and thinking about what you the reader may enjoy, I was undecided whether to emphasize the GTD methodology in an impersonal way, to focus upon my own experiences, or to draw upon the similarities with Zen Buddhism. I decided upon a compromise, and have divided the article into sections, each one focused on a key similarity between GTD and the practice of mindfulness, and within each section I will outline the relevant aspects of GTD, and a little of my own experience to help illustrate.

‘Mind like Water’

I came across GTD whilst flicking through some sample books on my Palm while waiting in a Doctor’s surgery. I was immediately struck by this book, and later that day downloaded the GTD audio book from iTunes and spent the entire weekend listening to the book and working through everything it suggested. For me to be suddenly so enthusiastic about something is almost unheard of, and I’ve spent some time trying to figure out exactly what attracted me so strongly.

The phrase ‘mind like water’ comes up a lot in GTD. It is a metaphor taken from karate, and used to indicate the still/spacious mind in its natural state of rest. When something splashes into water, it responds absolutely appropriately to the size of the disturbance before settling down. It doesn’t create a tidal wave in response to a pebble, as our minds so often do – creating mountains out of molehills; it returns to calm, ready to deal with the next splash.

This phrase is essentially the criterion of success for GTD. If you have a ‘mind like water’, then you are using the system correctly. When you think about that for a moment, it quite unusual for a task-management program to define success not as the amount of tasks you complete, but as the state of mind you have while accomplishing them. I think this is the key reason why GTD caught my eye, and perhaps the clearest overlap with Zen.

Get it out of your head

The GTD philosophy is based around findings in psychology showing that our minds are terrible at both prioritizing and time-management.

Once we decide to do something, our mind thinks we should be doing it right now. If we think we should be doing two things, then we have automatic stress – whichever one we are doing, our mind thinks we should be doing the other. We can have any number of things buzzing around our mind, all of which our mind thinks we should be doing simultaneously. I think all meditators need little convincing of this fact, as once we start to try to meditate, we become aware of all the background chatter in our heads. Furthermore, our mind has no sense of importance, it just recognizes incomplete tasks but isn’t sure which ones to shout loudest about. If you’ve been meditating on loving kindness or maybe even ‘emptiness’, the nature of reality, to find yourself distracted by whether or not you’ll fry or scramble your eggs for dinner tonight, you’ll need no persuasion of this.

When I first started meditating, I took a pen and paper with me to the mediation hall. The reason was that I knew my mind would instantly start spouting all the things I have to do (and had forgotten about) the

moment I closed my eyes. So, I would tend to spend the first ten minutes of my meditation scribbling down all this ‘stuff’, and after that could generally meditate well with a fairly clear head. Now, people more intelligent than I was would wonder why I didn’t meditate in my room for ten minutes before going to the hall, get all the ‘stuff’ out of my head and onto paper, and then go off and do a proper meditation. Well, that’s basically GTD, getting stuff out of your head into some kind of system you trust, enjoying the ‘mind like water’, and kicking yourself gently for missing such an obvious commonsensical approach! In fact, **David Allen describes GTD as: ‘A methodology to get things off your mind’.**



Bottom-Up Approach

One of the key differences in task-management styles is how to decide and prioritize what to accomplish in your life; essentially this can be broken down into top-down vs. bottom-up approaches. A top-down approach advocates working out all your life values/beliefs and the things you wish to accomplish based around those core values, whilst a bottom-up approach focuses on the little things that crop up each day before dealing with the ‘deep inner questions’.

For me, both GTD and Zen are firmly bottom-up approaches. GTD starts task-management with the little things, e.g. do washing, phone mum, sort desk drawer, for 2 reasons: 1) these are the things that either on a conscious or unconscious level are devouring our attention and energy, and 2) the confidence that arises from accomplishing these and the extra mental space that generates allows us to be far more effective when looking at our overall direction in life and our core values.

I believe this distinction can also be carried over into Buddhism. There are schools that encourage the development of and training in meditation practices that are extremely advanced from day one. I have seen many people for whom this simply resulted in increased stress, including myself. In addition to being stressed about all the ‘everyday’ things one’s not accomplishing, the spiritual things simply get added to the list and increase the stress, ‘I haven’t phoned mum, developed bodhichitta, done the washing, taken my inner energies to the central energy channel through meditation, etc.’. This is not a criticism of these practices, but a danger inherent to all ‘top-down’ approaches – that if the bottom level is clogged up, then adding more ‘things to do’ at higher levels is not going to help; in fact, it will do the opposite.

The thing that attracted me so much to Thay’s teachings is the fact that there is so much emphasis on everyday activities. Now making a cup of tea is part of my spiritual path, rather than a distraction from it. When this first dawned on me, I felt that this is something I could really do and complete, and the resulting feeling of confidence and joy was palpable. The overlap here with GTD should be clear, i.e. the

importance of doing things which have our attention well and mindfully, rather than trying to constantly shift our attention to somewhere it may not be ready to go.

Our Direction Comes from a Peaceful Mind

One famous task-management guru, who emphasizes a top-down approach, presented the example of someone who works very hard to fulfill his ambitions by climbing the ladder of success only to realize that the ladder was against the wrong wall. This is a powerful way of demonstrating that we need a life plan, or our lifetime's efforts may simply be taking us to somewhere we don't want to go, faster!

GTD is not a top-down approach; however, there is scope for future planning and development – it should just come from a stable foundation. To extend the analogy – don't flap around putting the ladder against the wall. Be peaceful, and you'll naturally pick the right wall.

To me again, this draws upon one of the most beautiful qualities of Zen. That when our mind is peaceful, so many of our questions, thoughts, ambitions just fade away, and whatever is left – well, that's worth perusing. However, trying to see what things in our mind have value while we are discontent is an extremely difficult task. At that point our mind simply isn't qualified to make any judgment. For me, personally, when I can't generate a peaceful mind, I have found it helpful to ask: 'If I had a peaceful mind, would I still have this thought/wish?'. If the answer is: 'No, it would no longer be there', then I know it's a wall I shouldn't be putting a ladder against.

The Ultimate Life Hack

So, as I wind up this article, I find myself hoping that I've provided enough insight into GTD for those of you are interested in such things to inspire you to find out more (a good starting point is www.davidco.com), although I appreciate I haven't gone into great depth into the nuts and bolts, this was necessary in order to stop that article from becoming way too long. For everyone else, I hope you have enjoyed and taken something from this.

In conclusion, both Zen and GTD are methods for getting things out of your head, having your attention firmly focused on whatever you are doing in that moment, and enjoying the resulting peace and tranquility. In my experience, this overlap has created a synergistic effect, where my understanding of one has helped my understanding of the other. I think I'm not alone in this regard either, judging by the following quote from Merlin Mann (productivity expert) and reported in the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2008 (note 'life-hacking' refers to any technique to make life easier): 'Sorry to disappoint the world, but the Buddhist tenet of mindfulness is the ultimate life hack.'

Thanks to Paul Lavender for contributing this article to GTD Times. Paul is a copy editor living in Basel, Switzerland. He thought this article would be of interest to the GTD Times readers.



One Response to “Zen and the Art of Task-Management”

1.  *bill* says:

[June 23, 2009 at 9:56 pm](#)

fantastic article! i'm saving this link for future friends and colleague that ask "why GTd?"

Thanks!

Bill

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