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Chapter One — The Life We Try to Control

The Invisible Contract

The older I get, the more I realize how much of my life was spent trying to secure outcomes that were never fully mine to secure.

Not just the large things either. Anyone can recognize the futility of trying to control death, illness, time, or the choices of other people. Those truths eventually become too obvious to deny. What surprises me now is how deeply the need for control had rooted itself into ordinary moments—small conversations, expectations I never voiced aloud, imagined futures I quietly rehearsed in my mind as though life itself had signed some invisible agreement to deliver them.

For years, I thought peace was something earned through proper management.

If I worked hard enough, planned carefully enough, loved sincerely enough, anticipated problems early enough, then life would eventually soften. The tension inside me would finally release its grip. The difficult conversations would resolve.

Relationships would heal. Financial worries would disappear. The people I loved would understand my heart without me having to explain it so often. Loss would somehow become less painful if I prepared myself thoroughly enough in advance.

Without realizing it, I had built an entire philosophy around the belief that peace existed just beyond successful outcomes.

The problem was that life kept refusing to cooperate.

There were moments when everything appeared stable on the outside while inwardly I felt exhausted from carrying the invisible burden of emotional management. Even during good seasons, part of me remained watchful, as though happiness itself might suddenly collapse if I loosened my attention for too long. I did not

recognize this as attachment at the time. I simply called it responsibility. Caring. Commitment. Love.

But attachment is difficult to detect when the world praises the behaviors surrounding it.

We admire people who sacrifice endlessly for outcomes. We celebrate those who “want it badly enough.” Entire industries are built around manifestation, optimization, achievement, influence, growth, and control. Even our language reveals the obsession. We speak constantly about securing futures, building legacies, protecting investments, fixing relationships, maximizing potential, managing perceptions, and staying ahead.

Very few people ever ask a more uncomfortable question:

What if the exhaustion we feel is not coming from effort itself, but from attachment to results?

That distinction took me years to understand.

Because effort, by itself, is not the enemy. There is dignity in effort. There is meaning in commitment. There is something deeply human about loving fully, working honestly, creating passionately, and showing up for people with your whole heart. Some of the most beautiful moments of my life emerged precisely because I cared deeply. The answer was never indifference. It was never detachment in the cold or distant sense. It was never about becoming numb enough to avoid disappointment.

The problem was the grip.

The quiet tightening that happens inside us when effort slowly transforms into emotional dependence on outcome.

I can see now how often I confused love with the need for resolution. How often I confused faith with the expectation that life should unfold according to my understanding of fairness. How often I believed that if my intentions were pure enough, the ending should naturally reward them.

That belief sounds innocent at first. Maybe even noble.

But hidden inside it is a subtle form of control.

Life eventually exposes this in everyone.

Sometimes gently. Sometimes mercilessly.

A parent discovers they cannot protect a child from painful choices. A husband learns he cannot force emotional closeness no matter how sincerely he loves. A grieving son realizes no amount of longing can create one more conversation with his mother. A writer discovers that honest work does not guarantee recognition. A person of faith discovers that prayer does not function like a transaction machine where devotion automatically produces desired outcomes.

At some point, reality breaks our private negotiations with life.

And when it does, many people become bitter because they unknowingly believed effort should purchase certainty.

I understand that bitterness more than I wish I did.

Not because I became cynical, but because there were seasons where disappointment accumulated quietly inside me like weight added to a backpack one unnoticed stone at a time. No single burden destroyed me. It was the accumulation of unresolved expectations that became exhausting. Expectations about relationships. Expectations about timing. Expectations about healing. Expectations about what life at this age was supposed to look like compared to what it actually became.

Some of the heaviest suffering I have experienced did not come from tragedy itself. It came from arguing internally with reality after tragedy had already arrived.

That internal argument is one of the great hidden sources of human pain.

We replay conversations that cannot be changed. We resist seasons already unfolding. We mentally negotiate with facts already standing in front of us. We exhaust ourselves trying to emotionally rewrite events that have already entered history. Even grief

sometimes becomes entangled with attachment—
not because love is wrong, but because part of us
refuses to accept that life continues moving
forward without the people or moments we
desperately wanted to hold onto longer.

I began noticing how often suffering increases the
moment reality collides with insistence.

The collision sounds different in every life.

This should not have happened.

They should understand me by now.

After everything I gave, things should be different.

I should be further along.

My life should look better than this.

These are not merely thoughts. They are emotional
contracts we create with reality without realizing
we created them.

And reality never signed them.

That realization can initially sound depressing, but strangely, I found it liberating.

Because once I stopped demanding that life obey my expectations in order for me to remain at peace, something inside me began to loosen. Not instantly. Not perfectly. But noticeably. I started seeing how much energy had been consumed trying to mentally control things that had always existed outside my authority.

The strange irony is that much of my life already reflected this truth physically long before I understood it philosophically.

In Ki-Aikido, forcing rarely improves technique. Tension weakens movement. Desperation destroys timing. The harder someone grips, the easier balance disappears. Again and again, training reveals the same lesson: calm extension produces more stability than rigid force. A centered mind responds better than a panicked one. The body functions more naturally when fear stops interfering with movement.

I understood these principles on the mat long before I learned how poorly I practiced them in daily life.

That is often the way wisdom works. We can recognize truth intellectually years before we embody it emotionally.

There were countless moments where I taught ideas I still struggled to live consistently myself. Moments where I could explain calmness while privately wrestling anxiety. Moments where I spoke about extending Ki while inwardly shrinking into fear about outcomes I could not secure. Moments where I understood the philosophy of release conceptually while still gripping expectations tightly in relationships, family, ambition, and identity.

Perhaps that is why growth humbles us.

Real growth eventually exposes the distance between what we know and what we actually practice under emotional pressure.

And life applies pressure generously.

It applies pressure through aging parents and strained relationships. Through unexpected silence from people we hoped would stay close forever. Through uncertainty about health, finances, purpose, or time. Through seasons where the future becomes foggy enough that our normal methods of emotional control stop functioning.

Most people respond by gripping harder.

I did too.

When afraid, human beings naturally tighten emotionally. We tighten our expectations. Tighten our timelines. Tighten our need for reassurance. Tighten our demands for certainty. Tighten our attempts to hold together identities we fear may be changing.

Yet the tighter we grip life, the more fragile our peace becomes.

Because peace attached to outcome is never stable.

It rises and falls constantly with circumstances.

A phone call can destroy it.

A diagnosis can fracture it.

A conversation can shake it.

A disappointment can erase it for weeks.

That kind of peace is not peace at all. It is temporary emotional weather dependent upon cooperation from the external world.

Real peace must be rooted deeper than outcome or it will collapse every time life refuses our preferences.

I did not fully understand this when I was younger because achievement and movement can temporarily hide attachment. As long as progress continues, we mistake momentum for inner stability. We think we are peaceful when perhaps we are merely distracted by forward motion.

But eventually life slows enough to reveal what truly governs us internally.

For me, some of those revelations arrived quietly during ordinary moments rather than dramatic crises. Long drives. Early mornings. Silent

reflections after difficult conversations. Watching relationships change despite sincere effort. Realizing certain reconciliations might never unfold the way I once imagined. Feeling both grateful for beautiful parts of life while simultaneously grieving parts that never became what I hoped they would.

That emotional coexistence confused me for a long time.

How could I feel joy and sorrow simultaneously?

How could life be beautiful and painful at once?

How could gratitude exist beside grief?

I spent years unconsciously believing peace required resolution. That happiness depended upon completion. That fulfillment meant finally arranging life into emotional symmetry where every wound healed neatly and every relationship settled comfortably into understanding.

But life is rarely symmetrical.

Some prayers are answered differently than we hoped.

Some doors never reopen.

Some people never fully return.

Some misunderstandings remain unfinished.

Some losses become permanent companions rather than temporary interruptions.

Yet strangely, peace remains possible anyway.

Not because pain disappears.

Not because outcomes improve.

But because attachment slowly loosens its grip around the heart.

I did not arrive at that understanding through mastery.

I arrived through exhaustion.

Through finally recognizing that trying to emotionally control life was draining the very life I was trying so hard to protect.

When Love Becomes Attachment

One of the most difficult truths I have ever faced is that attachment often disguises itself as love.

That realization did not arrive all at once. It emerged slowly through years of reflection, disappointment, prayer, conversations, strained silences, and the uncomfortable recognition that some of the suffering I blamed on circumstances was actually being intensified by the way I clung internally to how those circumstances were supposed to unfold.

The distinction between love and attachment is subtle enough that many people spend their entire lives confusing the two.

I know I did.

Because attachment does not initially feel destructive. In fact, it often feels virtuous. It feels responsible. Caring. Loyal. Deeply invested. The attached person is usually not trying to harm anyone. More often, they are trying desperately to preserve connection, prevent pain, maintain identity, or avoid loss.

Yet underneath attachment there is frequently an unspoken condition:

I need this outcome in order to remain emotionally okay.

That need changes everything.

It changes the way we listen.

The way we argue.

The way we worry.

The way we love.

The way we parent.

The way we pray.

The way we work.

The way we grieve.

Once emotional survival becomes tied to specific outcomes, fear quietly enters the relationship. And fear has a way of tightening itself around even the most sincere intentions.

I can see now how often fear shaped my own reactions long before I recognized it as fear.

Sometimes it appeared as overthinking. Sometimes as frustration. Sometimes as emotional exhaustion.

Sometimes as the silent ache that follows unmet expectations we never fully admitted aloud. There were moments where I convinced myself I was merely trying to help, when in reality I was struggling to tolerate the discomfort of uncertainty. Moments where I wanted resolution not solely for the benefit of others, but because unresolved situations disturbed something inside me that I could not easily calm on my own.

That is one of attachment's quietest deceptions: it convinces us we are responding entirely to external problems when often we are reacting to our own inability to internally tolerate uncertainty, ambiguity, grief, or lack of control.

The human mind craves closure.

We want relationships to make sense.

We want effort to produce reward.

We want loyalty returned.

We want kindness acknowledged.

We want wounds repaired neatly enough that the story feels complete.

When those things do not happen, attachment begins tightening around the gap between reality and expectation.

I have spent long stretches of my life standing emotionally inside that gap.

Sometimes the gap involved family relationships that did not heal according to my hopes.

Sometimes it involved dreams that evolved differently than I imagined years earlier.

Sometimes it involved trying to understand why certain acts of love were received warmly by some people and rejected entirely by others. Sometimes it was simply the painful realization that good intentions do not guarantee mutual understanding.

That last lesson alone can humble a person deeply.

When we are younger, many of us unconsciously believe sincerity should naturally produce clarity.

If our hearts are genuine enough, surely others will eventually see that. Surely effort counts for something. Surely time heals. Surely love wins.

Life is more complicated than that.

People interpret events through wounds we cannot fully see. They remember moments differently. They carry private pain we may never completely understand. Some are capable of reconciliation while others protect themselves through distance. Some communicate directly while others retreat into silence. Even within families, entirely different emotional realities can exist under the same roof.

The older I get, the more compassion I have for how difficult being human actually is.

Not because harmful behavior becomes acceptable, but because nearly everyone is carrying invisible history into present relationships. Fear, shame, disappointment, insecurity, pride, grief, regret, longing—all of it travels quietly beneath conversations like underwater currents beneath calm surfaces.

And attachment magnifies those currents.

Especially when identity becomes entangled with outcome.

That entanglement can happen almost anywhere.

A parent becomes emotionally dependent upon children remaining close.

A spouse becomes dependent upon constant reassurance.

A creator becomes dependent upon recognition.

A leader becomes dependent upon influence.

A believer becomes dependent upon receiving specific answers from God.

A grieving person becomes dependent upon the past remaining emotionally untouched.

The attachment itself becomes exhausting because reality cannot permanently sustain emotional arrangements built upon control.

People change.

Children grow older.

Dreams evolve.

Bodies age.

Relationships shift.

Time moves.

Loss arrives.

Seasons close.

No amount of emotional gripping stops life from moving.

Yet human beings continue trying.

I understand why.

There is comfort in believing we can secure permanence through enough effort, awareness, sacrifice, or vigilance. There is comfort in imagining that if we love correctly enough, we can somehow prevent endings. Prevent distance. Prevent disappointment. Prevent change itself.

But life does not honor permanence.

Life honors movement.

Everything moves.

The tide withdraws.

Children become adults.

Parents disappear.

Friends drift.

Opportunities pass.

Bodies weaken.

New seasons emerge whether we welcome them or not.

For years, part of my suffering came from resisting movement while simultaneously living inside a universe built entirely upon it.

I wanted certain moments preserved.
Certain relationships repaired.
Certain understandings reached.
Certain emotional conclusions finalized.

Yet life kept unfolding without asking permission from my preferences.

That reality can either harden a person or deepen them.

For a while, I think it hardened parts of me internally in ways I did not immediately notice. Not outward bitterness exactly, but a quiet emotional fatigue that settled into my thinking. A weariness born from carrying unresolved expectations too long. I suspect many people live this way without recognizing it. They continue functioning, smiling, working, helping others,

fulfilling responsibilities—yet beneath the surface they remain emotionally tethered to outcomes that never arrived.

Sometimes those attachments are obvious.

Sometimes they are nearly invisible.

A person can remain attached to being understood.

Attached to fairness.

Attached to recognition.

Attached to apology.

Attached to certainty.

Attached to the version of life they thought they would have by now.

What makes attachment dangerous is not merely that it creates disappointment. It gradually conditions peace itself upon cooperation from circumstances outside us.

That arrangement leaves the soul constantly vulnerable.

I remember periods of my life where a single difficult interaction could emotionally dominate an

entire day. One strained conversation could linger internally for hours, replaying itself repeatedly in my mind. I would mentally revise responses, imagine alternate outcomes, interpret tone, search for reassurance, and quietly negotiate with reality long after the moment itself had ended.

Externally, life continued moving.

Internally, attachment remained trapped inside unfinished emotional loops.

The exhausting part was not always the event itself.

It was the resistance.

Resistance to uncertainty.

Resistance to unresolved tension.

Resistance to accepting that some things cannot be controlled into healing.

The more I reflect on this now, the more I believe many people are not truly suffering from circumstances alone. They are suffering from the internal argument they continue having with circumstances.

That argument drains enormous amounts of life energy.

It steals presence from ordinary moments. It interrupts gratitude. It fractures attention. It quietly places conditions around joy:
I will finally relax when this situation changes.
I will finally feel peace when this relationship heals.

I will finally breathe easier when the future becomes certain.

But certainty rarely arrives for long.

Even during beautiful seasons, life remains fragile. Everyone eventually learns this. The phone rings unexpectedly. Health shifts. Financial stability changes. Relationships evolve. Plans collapse. Time reminds us repeatedly that control was always partial at best.

For some people, this realization creates panic.

For others, it eventually creates freedom.

Because once we fully accept that peace cannot safely depend upon controlling outcomes, another possibility begins to emerge.

A quieter way of living.

One rooted not in passivity, but in presence.

Not in apathy, but in openness.

Not in giving up, but in releasing the desperate emotional demand that life unfold exactly according to our preferences before we allow ourselves to remain inwardly steady.

That shift sounds simple when written on paper.

Living it is another matter entirely.

Especially when the heart is involved.

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