

ISHI

The Discipline of Determined Intent

意志



GARETH HOLEBROOK

Acknowledgement of Calligraphy

The 8 calligraphy works reproduced in this book were created by Inoue Shunbō of Imabari City, Japan, through the kindness of Kevin McAloon, whose family facilitated the introduction. I am deeply grateful for that generosity and for Inoue-san's willingness to engage seriously with the philosophy that sits at the centre of this manuscript.

Four of the works were commissioned around the phases of the Ishi Spiral: 意志 (Ishi), 修行 (Shugyo), 我慢 (Gaman) and 反省 (Hansei). These appear before the corresponding chapters and are written in Gyosho, a semi-cursive script whose movement carries continuity, pressure and disciplined practice. That choice resonates with me: these chapters concern lived self-governance, where intent is continuously enacted rather than static.

Four further works appear at key thresholds in the text. 觀自在 (Kanjizai) opens the book, inviting the reader to begin with clear seeing and unforced attention. 決定 (Kettei) was added to mark the moment where intent becomes decision: not merely aspiration, but a commitment fixed clearly enough to govern subsequent action. 脚下 (Kyakka) appears before the case studies of failure, as a warning to look beneath one's own feet before judging what went wrong.

洗心 (Senshin) introduces 'Ishi in Action', signalling the need to clear the mind before moving from philosophy to practice.

Shodo is not included here as decoration. It is meaning expressed through form, carrying lineage, restraint and standards of practice that deserve respect. While still a student, I have learned enough through this process to understand how much remains to be learned. If Japanese language appears in this book, it must do so with accuracy, humility, respect and proper craft. These works helped make that possible.

親
友
會
友

二二五



Prologue: When My System Failed

Kailua-Kona, Hawaii, October 2022

I'd swum 3.8 kilometres, without getting seasick, faster than any of my training swims. I had biked 180 kilometres almost exactly to plan in 5 hours and 50 minutes. Now I was 35 kilometres into the marathon at the Ironman World Championships. The course ran through the infamous 'Energy Lab', a brutal lava field where the afternoon sun claims professionals and age-groupers alike. No shade or mercy from the elements, just lava radiating heat that exposes every gap in your preparation. With 2 small climbs before the long descent to the finish line, I could already hear Mike Reilly, the voice of Ironman, in my head saying, 'Gareth Holebrook, you are an Ironman!' for the 10th and last time as I crossed the famous finish line on Ali'i Drive.

In Kona, my big dream turned into a nightmare. My race had been on point for 25 kilometres of the run. I was about 10 hours into the race before I noticed I was starting to struggle. Then, at 35 kilometres (22 miles), I was on the ground.

I was never fast enough to qualify outright for the World Championships. Instead, I secured a Kona slot through the Ironman Legacy programme in 2018, which rewards persistence over podiums. It was a one-time opportunity: no second attempt, no redemption if it went wrong. After deferrals due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the race finally happened in 2022.

When I finally toed that start line on Thursday 6 October 2022, 18 years of preparation were about to culminate in around 12 hours of racing. With only 7 kilometres (4 miles) of the run remaining, however, I found myself on the ground, curled into the foetal position, cramping and in tears. I'd lost consciousness only for a moment, but it was enough to make me realise I was done. Even writing about it now, I'm welling up. I can feel the heat of the black tarmac, the dizziness, the way the world narrowed. Strangely, I also remember feeling cold and starting to shiver.

A few athletes, closing in on their own dreams, had stopped to help. Once an ambulance was called, I told them to finish the race. One athlete reminded me that the tagline for that year's race was 'Ku like', Hawaiian for 'We're in this together'. While I lay on the ground, half-delirious, I came up with the perfect title for the closing chapter of the book I was already wanting to write: 'I've Found My Limit.'

This was supposed to be my lifetime goal, my Everest. I'd set myself a time target of 11 hours and 20 minutes: a 1:15 swim, under 6 hours on the bike and a 4-hour run. All doable.

However, when I checked my watch as I lay on the ground, I saw my finish time tick past. I couldn't stand. I had taken months off work, focused entirely on training that year and even spent a month acclimatising in Hawaii. I'd given this race everything, and here I was on the asphalt. It was over. I told those around me: 'I give up. I'm done.'

A paramedic arrived on a scooter. I asked him to radio the finish line. My wife Thiri was volunteering as a race doctor, and I didn't want her to see my tracker frozen and start to panic. 'Tell her I'm pulling out,' I said.

The course doctor stopped briefly and told me another athlete was down behind me; I should sit tight. I drank water and waited. Brad, a sponsor and spectator, arrived on his bike. 'How much salt have you taken?' he asked. I thought I'd managed about a gram per hour, 8 tablets in total, half on the bike, half on the run. But I'd dropped a few in the wind and couldn't keep the Gatorade down.

'Not nearly enough!' said Brad. He handed me a 500 ml bottle with a 1.5 g sodium tab dissolved in it. I downed it, added my last gel (30 g of carbohydrates) and sat still.

Thirty minutes later, I was upright again. When the doctor came back, he checked my eyes to see if I could focus, checked my heart rate and asked my date of birth and race number. All fine. I told him I'd walk to the next aid station. I walked one, jogged the next, then ran the rest.

Crossing that finish line wasn't exactly graceful, but it was memorable. Mike Reilly's voice did indeed call out 'Gareth Holebrook, you are an Ironman!' I'd done it. Thiri was there ready to hand me to the medics for an IV of saline. One looked me over and smiled: 'You look fine to me.'

This experience taught me more than any theory I've read. How to decide, how to persist and how to stand up again when everything in you says stay down. *Ishi: The Discipline of Determined Intent* has its origins in how I have learned to operate under sustained load.

Across endurance sport, leadership work and long technical projects, the same failure modes kept reappearing: effort without boundaries, persistence without review and decisions made too late to matter. The discipline described here emerged from trying to correct those patterns in practice, not from studying theory alone.

I've spent years trying to understand why some people stay steady while others fold. I now know that stability in life comes from maintaining determined intent under pressure, not luck or talent. It's choosing to keep going when the outcome is still in fog. For me, Ishi started as a compass before turning into a discipline and crystallising as the Ishi Spiral, which has 4 phases: Decide, Forge, Persist and Reflect. The Spiral keeps purpose alive when noise and fatigue set in; it is not a loop of productivity.

A few days after the race, Brad sought me out on Facebook. Here is what he said:

'Just wanted to congratulate you on finishing your race in Kona. I was the guy on the bike who saw you lying on the road with a few athletes around you. I saw you later on in the run and you were back with the athletes. It was amazing to see you back up on your feet so quickly.'

On reflection, I can see exactly where my system and plan had disintegrated. I had prepared with clinical specificity: to finish inside 11 hours and 20 minutes. I had specific splits for each leg. I had a carefully written nutrition plan taped to my bike: 30 g gel every 30 minutes, slow-release starch drink and energy bar at the halfway turnaround, drink to thirst and at least 1 litre per hour. But my planning was flawed. Sodium intake was listed as 'about a gram per hour'. No exact protocol, no boundary, just an approximation that encouraged in-flight interpretation. In the end I didn't even take that much, taking a salt tablet only at times when I was sheltered from crosswinds allowing me to take one out of my food storage bag. That single omission added 2 hours to my ultimate finish time.

I had prepared for the distances more than the conditions. Winter in New Zealand did nothing to prepare my body for Hawaiian heat and humidity. Even with a month of acclimatisation, I still had gaps in my armour. I practised my hydration plan but never truly tested it under real race conditions until the day itself.

The gap between what I thought I knew and what the race demanded only became visible when it was too late to close it. I'd been repeatedly told about the heat, but I had previously excelled in races in Western Australia, known for dry heat in the 30°C range, and thought that I'd be fine. I had also learned over the years to ignore horror stories of races, which are usually overstated. The heat and humidity in Hawaii, however, are an exception: even the top athletes suffer.

As I lay crumpled on the roadside at the 22-mile marker, my persistence had evaporated. If

Thiri had been there instead of volunteering at the finish line, she would have pulled me from the race immediately. Three years later, in 2025, both leading women, Lucy Charles-Barclay (LCB) and Taylor Knibb, succumbed to the same conditions. LCB's husband was on hand to withdraw her when she was doggedly trying to continue even though it was clear it wasn't safe. Taylor Knibb was leading with only a few kilometres to go when she started wandering in circles and then collapsed. She sat watching as the eventual winner, Solveig Løvseth of Norway, ran past. Knibb didn't try to carry on as I did. She is a professional triathlete, I'm not. She would have known the consequences to her career of putting her body in danger.

I became emotional watching that moment live. I was much slower, of course, but exactly the same things had happened to me 3 years prior. What I called 'determination' in that moment was actually ungoverned persistence. I had no mechanism to distinguish between effort that still served the original intent and effort that was ungoverned. The only review I did was afterwards, sitting in the hotel room, realising that the plan I thought was precise had been vague and carried consequences. In writing this book, I have come to realise that the intent and determination I have shown throughout my life, which got me to that finish line in Kona, have also put me in genuine danger.

As my experience in Kona demonstrates, intent alone is insufficient. What we need is a discipline that governs how decisions are made, how preparation is tested, when persistence should hold and when it should release. Without that discipline of self-governance, endurance can be hazardous.

Finishing Kona exposed the cost of pursuing persistence without sufficient governance.

Author's Preface

You are about to engage with a discipline where effort, attention and intent are the measure of progress. *Ishi: The Discipline of Determined Intent* is a handbook for self-governance: a way of seeing, deciding and acting that unfolds over time. *Thought that leads to action, action that is thoughtful.*

This approach to self-governance is designed for situations where choices count, consequences accumulate and consistency is paramount. Each chapter of the book opens with an autobiographical experience from endurance sport or business, from which a problem is

surfaced and resolved through disciplined practice.

I wrote this for people who value productivity and are at the same time familiar with the costs of ungoverned or misdirected effort. High standards are not the problem. Alignment breaks when urgency, noise and competing obligations distort judgement. The objective is to regain the ability to choose what is of value, protect it and finish it without destroying everything else.

The Ishi Spiral has 4 phases: Decide, Forge, Persist and Reflect. Each phase governs intent through boundaries and constraints so that you can continue to thrive when motivation fades, friction becomes constant or commitment escalates unchecked. The discipline, tools and practices are primarily designed for personal use. The examples draw heavily from engineering, coaching and endurance racing because I have first-hand experience of how those environments punish undisciplined practice.

The discipline presented in this book has been tested across these contexts, including business failure, near burnout and life's other challenges that never make the headlines. The Ishi Spiral reflects what I regret not understanding when my persistence became dangerous and there was no language or explicit model for me to recognise it.

The Ishi Spiral is a record of what has held up for me across endurance sport and the work that sits alongside it. For everyone else, it remains a hypothesis, offered as a disciplined practice to test in your own context, then keep, adapt or discard based on your own experiences. The Spiral will evolve as it is tested under different conditions. It was never intended to remain a closed system for one person. Where practice reveals gaps, those gaps will be examined and addressed.

The endurance sport lens features prominently in this book because sustained effort exposes what governance under load actually requires. Where that lens feels unfamiliar, the Ishi Spiral may translate through other forms of long-arc work.

In this book, governance is applied personally. Self-governance is the ability to make a decision clearly when calm, give it clear limits and then hold that decision under pressure without letting urgency rewrite it. This book applies to how we govern our own decisions and effort. The Ishi Spiral exists to keep your intent, effort and learning aligned when the load rises. A subsequent book, *Organisational Ishi: The Discipline of Governing Intent*, will address how intent and boundaries operate when authority is shared across people and

organisations.

It is important to make clear that I am not presenting 'settled science'. Wherever I reference physiology, psychology or decision research, I am writing as a practitioner, not as a researcher. Some of the claims made here are contestable. Some of the language is metaphorical. This is intentional because I want to share *ideas* rather than *absolutes*. The point here is not to win academic arguments. It is to develop a discipline that holds itself up in real conditions, then invite you to keep, adapt or discard it based on what you observe and your own context.

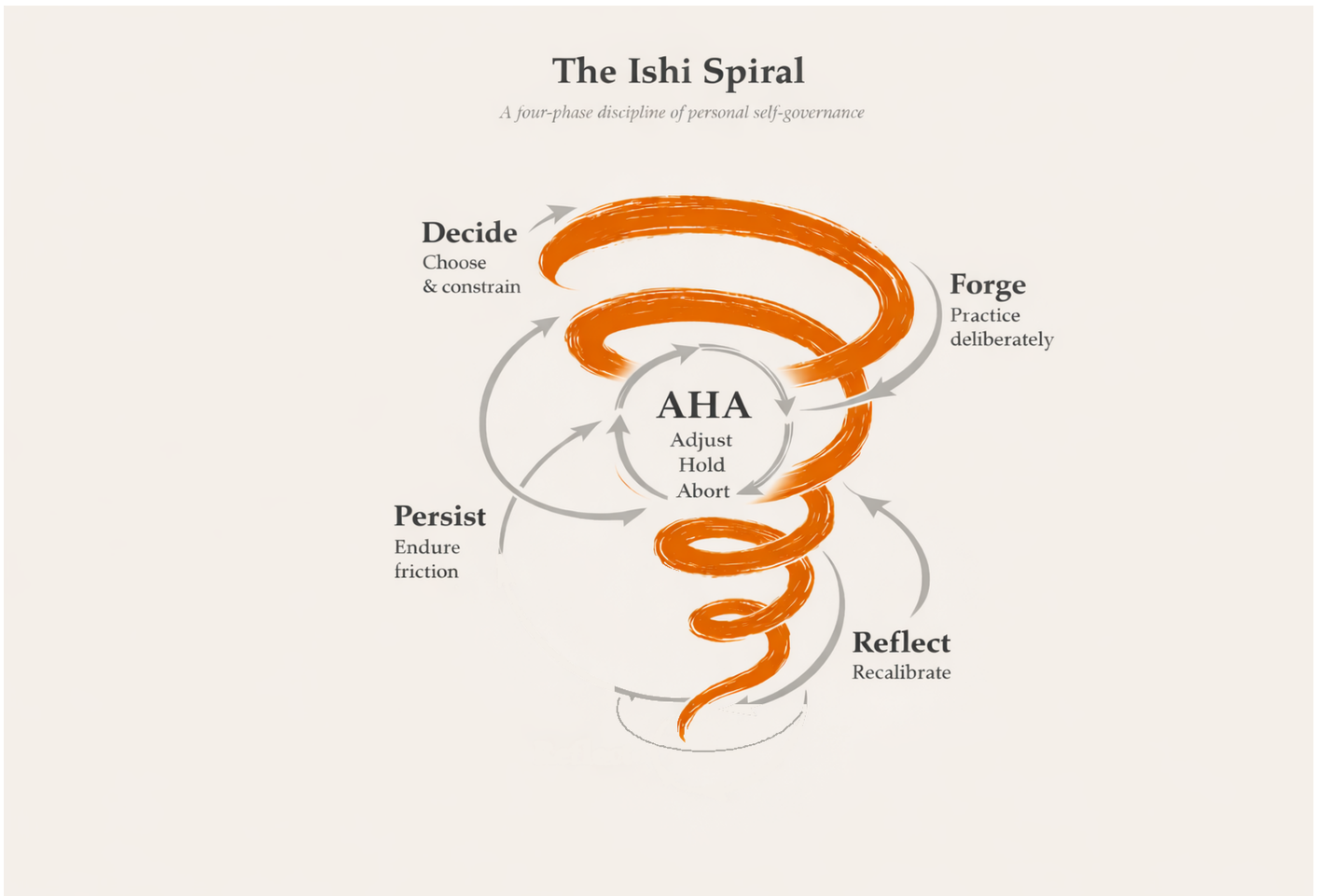
A Note on the Japanese Terminology Used in the Book

The Japanese term *Ishi* (意志) appears throughout this book and has 3 related interpretations in English. First, it names the Japanese concept of governed will, intent made actionable. Second, it names the novel discipline of self-governance set out in this book: the Ishi Spiral. Third, it identifies the first phase of the Spiral, the Decide (Ishi) phase, where decisions are made and bounded. This layering is deliberate. The concept, the phase and the system share the same foundation. Whenever you encounter 'Ishi' in the book, the surrounding context will make clear which meaning applies. The layers of meaning expressed by Ishi are similar to those of the word 'practice', which can mean an activity, a capability or a discipline, depending on context.

But first.

Before you read another page, find an index card. Write today's date at the top. Beneath it, write one thing: what you intend to do today, in one sentence. Not a list, not a plan, not 3 priorities competing for the same hours. One intent, named and bounded. That is an Ishi Card in its most reduced form. It takes 30 seconds. It is handwritten because the friction is the point. Part II introduces the Minimum Viable Ishi and Part IV gives the Card its full architecture, but the mechanism begins here, before my triathlon stories, before the theory, even before the language or the Ishi Spiral is named. A Card on your desk governing a single day is more useful than a book you finished but never acted on. I do this daily. Write the Card and then keep reading.

PART I: INTENT UNDER PRESSURE



What Endurance Racing Proves

Ironman is often seen as a test of endurance. That's true, but it misses the point of why I do it. The format is straightforward: a 3.86-kilometre swim, a 180.25-kilometre bike ride and a 42.2-kilometre marathon, completed in that order in a single day. For me, it usually takes between 11 and 12 hours. But it's not the distances that define the race; it's how you make decisions under fatigue. Fatigue degrades judgement.

Going hard in the morning when the legs feel fresh means you can make great progress up the field, but 8 hours later you'll find yourself walking with nothing left in the tank.

Metabolically, we have a limited store of glycogen and can only take on a certain amount of carbohydrates per hour. If expenditure exceeds income, then your savings are depleted until you are in debt. Ironman is hard because small mistakes made early compound and collect their debt much later, when you are least able to negotiate.

The day begins with tension that outwardly appears as relative calm. Months, even years, of preparation are already behind you. By the time you stand on the start line, the hard work is done. I find relief in that. Eat, check gear, check it again. Reassuring self-talk. Visualise.

Around you, people speak softly. Everybody shares nervous energy, but also mutual respect. Those who recognise one another give a polite pat on the shoulder and a 'Good luck, enjoy the day.' The atmosphere physically resonates as the MC amplifies the energy of the crowd. Everyone knows what is coming. When the cannon fires, the world narrows to the turbulent tunnel of water ahead.

The swim is a discipline of rhythm. Stroke, breathe, sight, repeat. Within minutes, the mind drifts. It always does. I tend to think about work, the farm, Thiri, my family who've come to watch. Sometimes I compose paragraphs of this book in my head. Then I notice the drift and return to the next stroke. That return is the practice. Focus means noticing the drift and coming back to the present.

The bike is where judgement is of paramount importance; mistakes feel justified and are rationalised. The body is fresh enough to nudge the pace. Power comes easily. Speed feels controlled. Overtaking the faster swimmers is fun and exhilarating. Every signal suggests capacity, not cost. Progress, not restraint. This is the phase where discipline is most likely to be abandoned, one poorly governed decision at a time. I ride the bike with constraint, not ambition. Going too hard is my most common error. Numbers exist to limit behaviour, not to motivate it. They tell me when to stop taking advantage of how good it feels. Ignore them and the ride becomes a secured loan taken against the future. Nothing breaks immediately. The cost is deferred.

Every Ironman offers the same temptation. You feel good early, better than expected, ahead of schedule. Being a relatively weak swimmer and stronger cyclist, I know this well. On the bike I catch up and pass the faster swimmers early, and it feels like progress. If I've had a slow swim, I feel the temptation to 'make up some time'. This is where races are lost. In cycling it is known as burning your matches. Push now and pay later, or hold back and

preserve your legs for the run. The race keeps its own accounts. The debt is collected on the run, with compound interest. It is said that Ironman doesn't really begin until the marathon. By the time you start running, you're not building the deficit anymore. It's being revealed to you. Every choice made on the bike shows up here.

The first part of the run always feels relatively easy: standing upright again, no more pressure on my 'undercarriage', using different muscles, hearing the crowd. I always go out too fast and have to consciously back off. I know I am doing it, and I still do it. By the first marker, my watch tells me I am running faster than is sustainable. I tell myself out loud to slow down. It is a long day. In the first half hour of the run, anyone nearby can hear me talking to myself, insisting that I slow down. It probably looks and sounds bizarre.

It's usually between 20 and 30 kilometres when the race adopts a new, more menacing character. My mood changes. I'm accustomed to the pain and fatigue, but now the mind is starting to tire. The body begins to negotiate. You can walk. *Just stop, nobody will judge you.* Sometimes I realise I have started walking without noticing. The dialogue is predictable. My capacity to respond degrades. I start to barter with myself: 'Just walk at the aid station' and then 'Save my legs, just the hill.'

By then, my glycogen stores are depleted. Counting becomes functional: 1, 2, 3, 4, in, out, in, out. The watch beeps every 5 kilometres. My pace slips to a gentle jog, then to walking, sometimes stopping to refresh at an aid station and reset. The finish time is never about how fast you go; it is about how little you slow down.

In rare races, everything aligns. The body holds; the pace stays steady. When that happens, I don't trust it. I push harder and hurt myself more, as if suffering validates the effort. More often, though, I feel defeated before the finish: cramping, nausea, nerve pain, losing my balance, even slurring my words. In those moments, I'm not thinking about finish lines or medals. I'm deciding whether to take the next step, complete the next kilometre.

Eventually, the finish line appears. The noise reaches you before you see it. You see athletes walking back to their hotels, medals and towels around their necks. You can hear the announcer calling people in. You straighten up, lift your head and, for a few hundred metres, pain recedes just enough to let you pass. I always, without fail, run the last few kilometres and down the finish chute. It amazes me that I can find the energy when an hour earlier I could barely stand upright.

I have heard my name called 15 times at Ironman finish lines, dozens more in similar races. The feeling is never glory, but it is an immensely emotional experience. The agony, boredom, doubt and frustration of the race and training match the relief and pride of the finish line. Relief in that the tense negotiation between mind and body has concluded, at least for now.

Ishi: Determined Intent

The Japanese word *Ishi* (意志) does not translate directly into English. It is often rendered as 'will', 'determination' or 'intent', but none of those are sufficient on their own. 'Will' implies force. 'Determination' implies stubbornness. 'Intent' can be abstract. *Ishi* exists at the point where choice becomes governable. *Ishi* extends action beyond merely wishing.

The distinction is important because most of us operate with vague intent. We want to be healthier, build something meaningful, run a faster race. But wanting creates no obligation. *Ishi* is the moment that vague intent sharpens into a decision you're committed to defending. *Ishi* is the difference between 'I should train more' and 'I will complete an Ironman.'

Aspiration floats while commitment anchors.

I first recognised the properties of *Ishi* before I had a word for it. I did not go looking for the word. It came much later. Collapsed on the side of the road in Kona, 35 kilometres into an Ironman marathon, I was not thinking about philosophy or etymology. I was thinking about whether my body would cooperate long enough to get me upright again. Looking back, that moment stripped intent down to its essentials for me. No motivation or bravado. Just a decision made under constraint.

Endurance is commonly treated as a physical quality: stronger legs, bigger lungs and better preparation. Those things are important but don't decide whether you continue when the margin disappears. Endurance begins earlier, with a decision, and it is governed moment by moment by how that decision is maintained.

At the start line of an Ironman, I always feel a sense of completion. The race has not begun, but the work is already done: months of early mornings, training through fatigue, choosing consistency over comfort. None of that required inspiration. It required alignment, discipline and self-governance. This is where *Ishi* operates: in the accumulation of ordinary decisions that are easy to justify skipping and hard to explain later.

We celebrate willpower in the West. Go hard or go home. Grit not quit. That approach works

in short bursts, but it degrades quickly under sustained load. Willpower is brittle and relies on resistance. Ishi works differently. It *governs* rather than *commands*. On the road in Kona, there was no fight left in me. The clenched jaw version of endurance had failed.

When fatigue builds, the body begins to negotiate. The arguments are familiar: the dialogue stays the same but my relationship to it changes. Ishi means deciding which signals matter and which do not. That distinction becomes critical when effort is expensive. Ishi is a discipline, not a trait. It offers coherence, not guarantees.

Over time, it became clear to me that intent alone was not enough. Ishi names determined intent, the moment where decision, resolve and action align. But determined intent on its own is unstable. It can flare brightly then dissipate, harden into stubbornness or be pointed in the wrong direction. I have lived all of those failure modes.

What was missing, I realised, was self-governance: a way of governing intent once it has been declared. Over years of training, racing, leading and building things, I found myself repeating the same internal sequence. Eventually, I stopped improvising and wrote it down. *Decide clearly. Prepare deliberately. Persist within bounds. Reflect honestly before continuing.*

From this was born the Ishi Spiral, a disciplined practice that governs determined intent over time. Its objective is to keep intent coherent under sustained pressure. Where Ishi is the determined intent that initiates action, the Ishi Spiral protects it from drift, burnout and blind persistence. Think of Ishi as my decision to one day race in the Ironman World Championship at Kona. The Spiral is what kept me training through 18 years and dozens of ultra-endurance events until I got there.

The 4 phases of the Ishi Spiral are succinct enough to carry in your head:

- **Decide:** Make a concise, bounded decision.
- **Forge:** Prepare through disciplined practice.
- **Persist:** Endure while the conditions remain valid.
- **Reflect:** Review honestly before recommitting.

The Ishi Spiral is a discipline of self-governance that regulates effort rather than amplifies it. It is a spiral rather than a loop because each pass changes the person moving through it, while the external conditions also shift. Experience accumulates, judgement sharpens and the work deepens rather than resets.

If you have spent time around strategy, quality or learning disciplines, you might recognise

this pattern. W. Edwards Deming introduced the improvement cycle Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA), a refinement of Walter A. Shewhart's Plan, Do, Check, Act (PDCA), in Japan in the 1950s as a way to build quality through disciplined experimentation. John Boyd, a fighter pilot and military strategist, later developed the Observe, Orient, Decide and Act (OODA) loop in the 1970s to explain why rapid, high quality sense-making wins under pressure. I have used both models in my career, and both continue to influence my thinking. I want to acknowledge that lineage while differentiating these models from my own conceptualisation. PDSA is designed to improve systems through repeated tests and measurement inside an organisation. The Ishi Spiral was originally developed for self-governance of intent under sustained pressure. OODA, meanwhile, is built for tactical engagement where an adversary and a shifting environment demand rapid reorientation.

In the Ishi Spiral, the decision is not a moment that gets left behind once an action starts. The decision stays alive through boundaries, exclusions, abort conditions and a standard of review that can tolerate future examination. Each phase of the Spiral aims to retain authority clear as effort accumulates. Action does not get to justify itself. Persistence does not earn the right to overrule the terms that made the commitment legitimate. Reflection is not narrative; it renews or replaces intent with more coherence than the last cycle.

The Japanese use the word *Hansei* (反省) to describe the continuous improvement practice of looking back and thinking about how a process or personal shortcoming can be improved. *Hansei* acts as an operational control in the Spiral. It exists to restore the fidelity of a decision before the next commitment is allowed to stand. It starts by restating the original Ishi in its exact terms: intent, boundaries, abort triggers and time horizon, so that the review doesn't drift into storytelling. It then separates decision quality from outcome quality.

A good outcome can still come from a weak decision, just as a bad outcome can still come from a sound decision executed under uncertainty. *Hansei* records observed drift, the first signals that were missed and the point where persistence started defending itself. It ends with a single change made before the next cycle: revised intent, revised boundary, revised trigger or an explicit decision to stop. If none of these change, the Spiral has not turned and *Hansei* has not occurred.

Foundation of the Discipline

I have been drawn to the culture of East Asian countries, especially Japan, for most of my life, long before I had any language for why. As a teenager growing up in Stockport, with a tendency to solitude, I trained in Shotokan Karate. It wasn't the combat that appealed to me but the discipline. The structure, precision and sense that effort was guided rather than improvised were what attracted me. Even then, it was clear that the practice extended beyond the dojo.

In the 1980s, Japan's influence loomed large in Britain. Japanese companies like Nissan, Toyota and Sony opened factories and research centres across the country, and for a period Japanese investment in the United Kingdom was the highest in Europe. The press talked about quality, efficiency and purpose. British industry was paying attention, and Japan's manufacturing philosophy became the fashionable subject of management theory.

After leaving school, I joined the Royal Navy as an engineering apprentice, spending a year at sea on HMS *Beaver*, including active duty in the Adriatic during the Yugoslav Wars. When redundancy came in 1994, I used the resettlement package to complete a postgraduate diploma in Engineering Management at the University of Greenwich. The curriculum covered systems thinking, feedback loops and continuous improvement, drawing heavily from Japanese manufacturing philosophy. Toyota's approach was being studied seriously, and British industry was learning that discipline could be designed.

By the late 1990s, I was working as a product development engineer for Sony Corporation (Digital Media Europe), helping design satellite set-top boxes and early digital televisions. On paper, it was everything I had dreamed of, especially for enhancing my CV. In practice, it was frustrating. The organisation was slow, hierarchical and internally fragmented. The discipline that had built Sony's reputation had been replaced by structure without intent. Years later, Gillian Tett would describe this pattern in *The Silo Effect*. I had lived it. Excellence had not vanished. It had been buried. That distinction between discipline lost and discipline merely obscured would later inform my understanding of drift.

My experiences at Sony broke the myth for me. Japanese success was determined intent, sustained over time. When that intent faded, so did results.

In 2000, I moved to New Zealand and joined Navman, a small company building GPS and marine navigation systems. There, I discovered Japanese thinking as working practice again. Toyota's *Kanban* (看板), meaning 'signboard', was being used to highlight where work is

piling up or the flow is constrained on the production floor: small, deliberate, incremental improvements. Process as practice, not policy. The philosophy I had studied academically now showed up as working practice.

When I later moved into coaching and consulting, those ideas came with me. By the 2010s, *Kaizen* (改善), meaning ‘change for the better’ or more broadly understood as ‘continuous improvement’, and lean thinking were part of my professional vocabulary. Around the same time, endurance sport had become central to my life. The overlap was immediately obvious. Heroic effort didn’t drive progress; small, deliberate actions repeated over time did.

In parallel, I found myself drawn to the ancient Stoics for similar reasons. I respect how that lineage has been made accessible in contemporary writing, particularly in *The Obstacle Is the Way* and *Ego Is the Enemy* by Ryan Holiday. Where Stoicism stops for me is at endurance. It refines posture and interpretation, but it does not provide a mechanism for governing effort over time.

In recent years, I have worked alongside L. David Marquet, former captain of the USS *Santa Fe* and author of *Turn the Ship Around!* His work on Intent-Based Leadership resonated strongly with me: authority pushed to information where people doing the work get to decide how to do the work; leadership through competence and clarity, not control; and ‘let the doers be the deciders’. These ideas echoed the Japanese management theory I had studied decades earlier and subsequently applied in practice.

When I began writing a book on the nature of intent, grounded in Japanese philosophy, I fell into a rabbit hole. In mid-2025, I was seeking clarity and looked up the Japanese word for intent. That was when I discovered *Ishi*. When I researched the word more deeply, I recognised the pattern I had already been living. I can trace that pattern back across decades. As a child walking the hills of the Pennines with my grandfather, I told him I would one day live in ‘the hills’ myself. Decades later, I do, albeit in New Zealand. As a teenager, I wanted to join the Navy and did. After leaving, I set myself the goal of building something of my own and did. When I began triathlon, I decided I would one day race in Kona. It took 18 years and a dozen races to qualify, but I got there.

What Governs Sustained Effort

It is difficult to spot a failure as it is happening. Failure comes when effort continues after

awareness diminishes, or when intensity accelerates without constraint. In both cases, activity persists while judgement erodes. These dual failure modes, drift and burnout, recur across multiple domains.

Drift occurs when systems remain functional on the surface while awareness erodes beneath. Work gets done. Metrics hold. Confidence grows. Over time, routine replaces vigilance and assumptions stop being tested. Nothing feels urgent enough to interrupt momentum, so reflection is deferred. When failure finally presents itself, it is described as sudden or unexpected, even though the conditions were often present for years. This is how competent teams ground ships or optimise themselves into irrelevance.

The second failure mode is burnout. Here the system does not drift; it consumes itself through ungoverned intensity. Purpose is clear, effort is high and endurance becomes identity. The response to pressure is always more commitment, more speed, more sacrifice. Boundaries are framed as weakness and reflection feels like betrayal. Capacity depletes faster than it can be restored.

Most motivation-based approaches fail because these patterns go ungoverned. Inspiration fades under cognitive friction. Discomfort is misread as a signal to change direction. Structure is abandoned the moment it becomes awkward. Many frameworks describe what 'good' looks like, but few intervene early enough to stop momentum from outrunning awareness. What is missing is not effort, intelligence or belief. What is missing is governance.

The Ishi Spiral provides that missing layer at the most important level: the individual. It is neither an organisational model nor a motivational framework. It is a personal governance discipline designed to regulate how effort is applied over time.

The Ishi Spiral works by enforcing deliberate alternation between thinking and doing. It restores authority to decision-making before execution begins, maintains awareness during persistence and requires reflection before drift or burnout takes hold. By maintaining boundaries between defined phases, it prevents both erosion through habit and collapse through ungoverned excess.

Endurance as a Lens

This book began as an attempt to understand and share the rationale of my own decisions, not my athletic performance. Endurance sport provided the raw material for me because it

compresses time, consequence and identity into situations where intent cannot hide. When effort is prolonged and fatigue accumulates, habits surface, judgement degrades and values are tested in ways that feel familiar in contexts far beyond sport.

The stories that follow are not included for their exceptionalism; if anything, my race performance is slightly better than average. Endurance strips away optionality. It forces a commitment to confront reality. In doing so, it reveals patterns of decision-making, discipline and self-governance that recur in work, leadership and life wherever persistence is required over time. I draw experience from business, my own startup failure, my life in technology development and case studies of organisations through the lens of the Ishi Spiral.

The endurance narrative is a framing device rather than the central message. The mechanisms described in this book are not training methods or athletic strategies. They are self-governance patterns: how intent is set, translated into practice, sustained under pressure and revised when conditions change. The endurance lens helps to make those mechanisms visible. The aim is to self-govern more effectively.

PART II: GOVERNING

INTENT

The Self-Governance Problem

Failure is rarely caused by an absence of effort or competence; it is more likely caused by effort applied competently yet without governance.

People often persist in a task or project far longer than is viable, continuing to work, train, decide and react even as the conditions that justified the original effort change. Momentum begins to mask misalignment, and governance is the missing capability in that moment.

Personal governance is the ability to regulate how effort is applied over time. Without governance, intelligence and discipline become unbounded accelerants rather than safeguards.

An operational definition is useful here. Self-governance, as this book uses the term, is the capacity to decide, practise, persist and reflect under a structure that prevents any one of those activities from overriding the others. It is not self-regulation in the narrow psychological sense, nor executive function, nor metacognition alone, though it draws from all 3. It is the integration of those capacities into a discipline that holds across time and under pressure.

Ungoverned effort produces 2 illusions, both of which avoid the pause. The first is that persistence equals progress: as long as activity continues, it feels productive. The second is that changing direction equals progress: a pivot feels decisive even when it is avoidance of the harder act of stopping to examine what is happening. Both illusions are reinforced by modern work environments that reward speed, responsiveness and visible output.

This is why motivation-based approaches to self-governance fail. Motivation increases energy, but it does not regulate direction. Motivation pushes harder on the same system, assuming that intensity will compensate for misalignment. In reality, motivation without governance accelerates drift, which is what happens when purpose diminishes while execution continues.

When effort is ungoverned, systems fail in predictable ways that express either drift or burnout. Attention fragments under cognitive load. Persistence hardens into escalation of commitment, often fuelled by sunk-cost thinking. These failures are not obvious at first; they feel like responsible persistence in the moment.

The core problem to consider is not how to *generate* effort, but how to *govern* it: how to decide deliberately, persist without drifting and stop before damage becomes structural. Until effort itself is governed, improvement remains accidental and endurance remains potentially unsafe.

What follows examines how this failure expresses itself in practice. Not as moral weakness or poor discipline, but as a natural consequence of systems that reward motion without regulating awareness.

Ungoverned Effort

The central hypothesis of this book is that most modern failures are not caused by a lack of

effort, intelligence or commitment, but by the absence of self-governance. Effort continues, often intensifies, while judgement degrades. Systems keep functioning long after awareness has stopped keeping pace. By the time collapse becomes visible, the conditions that produced it have usually been in place for a prolonged period.

Self-governance is the capacity to decide deliberately how effort will be applied over time, under uncertain conditions, without outsourcing authority to habit, urgency or identity. When that capacity weakens, people do not stop working, but the ability to direct work precisely is lost. Motion replaces choice. Persistence replaces judgement. Reflection occurs only after damage has already been done.

Much of modern life is reactive rather than intentional. Intentionality is eroding not because people no longer care, but because fewer decisions are being made deliberately.

Commitments are taken on loosely. Decisions are deferred or left unbounded. Effort is expended without clear purpose, and authority diffuses as a result.

A common failure mode here is drift. Work continues, metrics hold and confidence grows, but the reason for the work is no longer actively examined. Other people's priorities replace one's own. The agenda is inherited and called productivity. Nothing feels urgent enough to interrupt momentum, so reflection is postponed.

Technology amplifies this effect. Notifications demand immediate response. Algorithms optimise for engagement rather than purpose. The cost of distraction tends to zero while the cost of sustained attention rises sharply. The result is a population trained to react quickly at the cost of deliberate decision-making.

This environment produces predictable distortions. Some people hesitate, overthink and abandon effort early because nothing feels settled enough to commit to. Others persist too long, carrying too many commitments at once, because stopping feels irresponsible. Both failures emerge from the same root cause: effort without governance.

If intentionality is weakening, attention is where it is being lost. Attention is the gateway to intent. What we attend to shapes what we value and ultimately what we act on. When attention is fragmented, intent cannot form. It becomes reactive, provisional and easily displaced.

Most people wake into a stream of signals that already carries urgency. Messages, notifications, news and calendars establish the tempo of the day before a single deliberate

choice has been made. Attention is pulled outwards immediately. From that point on, the work becomes managing interruption rather than directing effort.

This is not accidental. Digital systems reward engagement over judgement. Repetition, novelty and intermittent reward keep attention cycling. Product incentives make this inevitable. The result is an environment where attention is continuously redirected and rarely settled long enough to support deep thinking or clarity in decisions.

The cost of all this is cumulative. Each interruption imposes cognitive strain. Attention loses depth; people skim rather than think. Busyness replaces effectiveness. The deeper problem is that attention now carries moral weight. Being reachable signals commitment. Busyness signals importance, or silence is misread as disengagement. In this environment, defending attention requires justification. Focus becomes an act of resistance.

When attention is unstable, persistence becomes dangerous. People either push harder against fragmentation, exhausting themselves, or disengage and drift. Both responses are rational reactions to an environment that rewards local optimisation, which is suboptimal at the system level. The same dynamics play out inside a single person's day. Neither restores agency. Attention must be governed before persistence can be trusted. Until attention stabilises long enough for intent to form, commitment is noise. Deciding requires a pause. It requires space long enough to see what is being asked of you and whether it deserves your effort.

The underlying error is a category mistake. Persistence and judgement are treated as the same skill, but they are distinct. Persistence answers whether you can continue. Judgement controls whether continuing still makes sense. One without the other is dangerous.

Persistence is phase bounded by intent and reviewed through reflection. Endurance is applied and withdrawn deliberately. Stopping is competence when the original conditions no longer hold. The Spiral's Decide (Ishi) and Persist (Gaman) phases name the specific conditions. Effective quitting requires self-governance. Knowing when to stop is not enough. You must be able to stop without identity collapse, the sunk-cost fallacy or external pressure overriding judgement.

These patterns are not independent. Each reinforces the others. When intent is vague, attention fragments, and then persistence can become misapplied. Effort continues, but alignment dissipates. The system remains active while judgement degrades. This is an

absence of self-governance.

None of these failures require extraordinary insight to prevent. Ordinary attention applied consistently is sufficient, especially when confidence makes it tempting to relax. The signals are present while the system is still functioning. Assumptions can be tested. Pace can be adjusted. Effort can be bounded. Reflection can occur before damage hardens.

Governance introduces friction by design. Slow deliberate thinking, clear decisions and bounded commitment feel uncomfortable because resistance to drift and excess appears as inefficiency in fast systems. In reality, it is stability.

The Spiral enforces deliberate alternation between thinking and doing. Intent is established before execution begins. Awareness is maintained during persistence. Reflection is required before drift or burnout emerges. By enforcing movement between defined phases, the Spiral prevents erosion through habit and collapse through excess. It restores authority to decision-making while things are still working.

What follows is not the full system, but an immediate bridge into it. You do not need to understand the entire Ishi Spiral before you begin using it. The Minimum Viable Ishi exists so you can start governing intent now, while the deeper mechanics are introduced in later chapters. You can run this in parallel: act with the Card today, read the phases deliberately and allow practice to deepen as understanding grows.

Minimum Viable Ishi

The problem has been identified, and the forces that disregard or distort intent have been named. What is important now is to describe the discipline and practice. The Ishi Spiral's depth is explored in the chapters ahead, but you deserve an immediate bridge from understanding to action.

The Minimum Viable Ishi is the simplest move that turns intent from an emotion into a governed commitment. The goal is to create traction with so little cognitive inertia or static friction that you cannot rationalise your way out of starting. Ishi is intent with clarity and constraints. It is a decision you can defend, not an aspiration you can reinterpret. Often we fail because the goal never becomes real enough to survive fatigue, distraction and the first contact with an already busy life.

The Minimum Viable Ishi is small by design: write down what you intend to do in one

sentence. Do it in language that would make sense to you on a challenging day, not in language designed to impress you on an ideal one. Put a time boundary on the intent so the commitment has a start and a finish. Once written, the intent stops floating and starts behaving like something you can govern.

The Ishi Card holds the intent, the time horizon and the boundaries that prevent drift and overreach. This lets you decide what 'in bounds' looks like so you stop renegotiating with yourself every time the day gets messy. The Card also creates a place to record what you actually did, which matters more than what you hoped you would do. This is a low-fidelity artefact of self-governance. It helps you make decisions in advance and review them against what you actually decided, not what your memory now wants you to have decided.

On the Ishi Card, you are effectively deciding what you will say no to. Adding another commitment to a schedule that is already full is a neat way to manufacture failure while feeling virtuous. Discernment is capacity management. When the intent competes with everything else, the intent loses, and you learn the wrong lesson about your own discipline. The Card also forces a first step that is small enough to start and specific enough to count. Once that first action is defined, the rest of the Spiral has something to attach to instead of spinning in abstractions.

Two practical examples illustrate how this works at different scales. What I call the Ishi Sprint could be a 90-minute session of focused work that begins with a written statement of intent and ends with a brief reflection on what was learned. This differs from techniques like Pomodoro because the intent is explicit and the session closes with deliberate review, not just stopping.

A Daily Ishi is the single outcome that would make the day successful regardless of what else happens. It might be completing a draft, a difficult conversation or a specific repair. The Daily Ishi often contains multiple Ishi Sprints. The Ishi Sprint serves the Daily Ishi.

Part III explores how these scales nest together, but for now the principle is straightforward: start small, write it down and close the loop with reflection.

The difference is practical. A written intent becomes an artefact you can return to and interrogate later without relying on your memory's creative writing. You can be governed by it, and you can govern your future self. The Minimum Viable Ishi is the smallest tangible commitment that can survive real life. Start by writing one intent and bounding it. Let the

Spiral do its work on you.

Once your intent is on the Ishi Card, the work stops being hypothetical and you finally have something to govern yourself with.

The Japanese Spine

You now have the minimum structure to begin. Before I go on to examine each phase of the Ishi Spiral in depth, one final piece of groundwork is important: the language that governs the system.

The Ishi Spiral comprises 4 phase labels (Decide, Forge, Persist, Reflect) that function as verbs in use. The choice of verbs is intentional because they describe action rather than attitude. They keep the structure usable without ceremony and prevent the system from becoming ornamental. The verbs are blunt instruments. In Western usage, words like 'practice', 'endurance' and 'reflection' have lost their operational precision, which creates confusion when clarity is required.

This is why the Japanese backbone of the Spiral brings clarity. The phases stay the same, but the terms tighten the behavioural contract. Japanese terms compress discipline, restraint and expectation into fewer syllables without losing precision. That compression is functional, not aesthetic. It changes what we can demand of ourselves in a single word.

Ishi names the quality at the centre of the system. It is determined intent, formed when thought and will are bound tightly enough to survive friction. **Ishi** has already been explored in Part I. What remains is to give the same structural precision to the remaining phases so the system holds under pressure. Ishi carries 3 meanings here by design: the determined intent, the discipline and the first phase of the Spiral.

From this point forward, the Spiral will primarily be referred to as Ishi (意志), Shugyo (修行), Gaman (我慢) and Hansei (反省) rather than Decide, Forge, Persist and Reflect. Each term defines a discipline that constrains behaviour and limits self-deception. Without those constraints, the Spiral becomes descriptive, not a discipline of self-governance.

Shugyo refers to disciplined practice undertaken for transformation rather than accumulation. Shugyo reshapes the practitioner through attention to form, energy and correction, not through repetition for efficiency or training measured only by output. When practice lacks Shugyo, effort increases while learning stalls and progress becomes illusory.

Gaman refers to restrained endurance governed by objective judgement, not ego. It is often flattened into grit or stoicism, but that flattening removes its ethical boundary. Gaman holds effort steady only while the original intent remains valid. When persistence continues after

alignment has failed, Gaman has already been abandoned.

Hansei refers to structured reflection aimed at correction, not self-protection. Hansei requires facing what occurred without narrative inflation and returning to action with clearer intent. When reflection is absent, endurance hardens into inertia, and practice decays into repetition. Together, these terms stabilise the system and prevent drift over time. Intent initiates direction. Practice builds capacity. Endurance sustains effort. Reflection enables alignment between awareness and judgement. When I use these terms subsequently, I mean them in this strict sense.

With the Spiral now fully named, each phase can be examined on its own terms. The following chapters treat these phases as operating modes rather than metaphors.