

## Chapter 10: The Art of Guarding Commitments: The GK book and the to-do lists

*‘The palest ink is better than the sharpest memory.’*

*-A Chinese proverb*

This chapter introduces a tool to guard *each and every* commitment and promise that we make. By guarding I mean that we should avoid breaking a commitment by not forgetting it and renegotiate it if we find that we would not be able to fulfill it. For example, if we were not able to return a book on Wednesday as promised, we should take an extension from that person hence effectively renegotiating our promise.

This tool is the system of the GK book and the to-do lists. This simple system is extremely powerful, giving you a fool proof method to remember and track your commitments, or in other words ‘guard’ them.

Recently I met a participant of our workshop who said that he had not broken a *single* commitment in the past year; this was true for both his professional and personal life. It was indeed heartwarming but was it a surprise? No. Anyone following the system outlined below can easily make such a claim. Inshallah, you could be that person!

### **The ‘Gatekeeper of Tasks book’ or simply the ‘GK book’**

The GK book is not the name of a physical entity rather the name of a concept that you should have the means to record each and every commitment that you make. In other words:

**“You must not make a commitment unless you record it as you make it.”**

No time lag must occur between a commitment and its recording. Accountants are trained in recording transactions instantly because the moment there is a time lag, memory comes into play, introducing the chance of things being forgotten.

Our memory has not been designed to keep everything that we come across permanently. Keeping things permanently in our memory requires extra effort like memorization of the Quran. Our minds have been designed to forget, which is a blessing. Imagine life if we were to vividly remember the death of a loved one years later!

This is the reason that Allah (swt) has commanded:

O ye who believe! When ye deal with each other, in transactions involving future obligations in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties: let not the scribe refuse to write: as God Has taught him, so let him write. (2:282)<sup>1</sup>

Since commitments are made at all times, it is natural to demand that the GK book, the tool for recording commitments instantaneously, should be portable and with you at all times. If you are without your GK book, the rule is simple: do not make a commitment!

The GK book could be in any form: a simple pocket notebook, Palm Pilots or Pocket PCs. A piece of paper will also work but I strongly advise against as it could easily be lost. Nevertheless, it is still far better than memory: *a short pencil is better than a long memory (a Far Eastern Quote)*

Someone enquired if the people in the prophet's (sas) era kept notebooks. Arab society then was an oral culture with highly developed memories allowing the memorization of vast amount of information instantly. Stories abound of how the Arabs would memorize hundreds of verses of poetry when coming across them just once. Well, if you have a memory like that then your GK book is your mind but if you are like all of us average people, GK book is a must.

To initiate the system is to start carrying a GK Book and recording all commitments. This is the key function of the GK book.

An additional function of the GK book is to record all useful bits and pieces of information that come your way, giving you the confidence that all information recorded in the day would be in

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali.

one, readily accessible place. This will help you fight the urge of putting pieces of information here and there. People waste time finding numbers scribbled on newspapers.

The GK book, if it is a notebook, has a filing system as all information is being filed chronologically. For example, if you want a telephone number taken 5 days ago, you would search the entries that you had made approximately around that date which is inefficient. *The GK book is a good place to gather information, not store it.*

If carried faithfully, your GK book would have entries from both your professional and family life like:

1. Telephone numbers and addresses with accompanying notes.
2. General reminders like buying a battery for your watch or buying a stapler for your office
3. Daily or travel expenses.
4. Reminders regarding appointments with people.
5. Picking up milk for your home.
6. Grocery lists.
7. How much you jogged the other day.
8. The winning idea that came to you while you were stuck in the traffic jam.
9. An excellent proverb or a verse from poetry that you would like to refer to later.

When the GK Book starts getting filled, the next step is to take information from the GK book and file it in its proper place.

### **Filing of Information from the GK book**

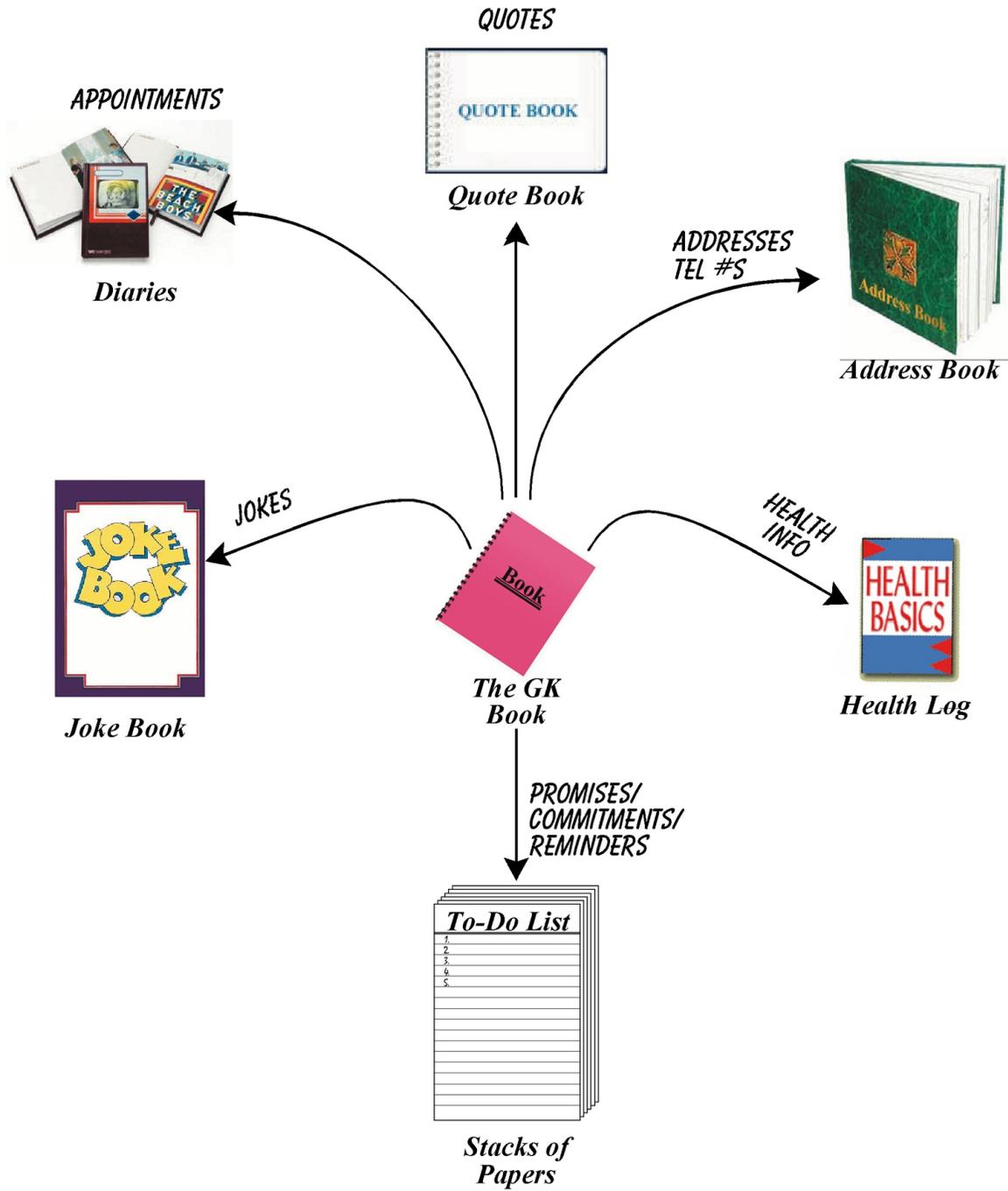
Mr. Abu Ahmed Akif, a friend, gave a beautiful example: When we bring groceries home, we never leave them in the basket: Eggs go off to the fridge; the meat is placed in the freezer; the biscuits in the cookie jar, etc. If there is an item which doesn't have a parking place, we find a place for it. Why? Because when the time comes to fetch an item, we would not have to rummage through the whole of the kitchen.

The same goes for the GK Book; all information that finds itself worthy of being in the GK book must have a place where it must transfer to. If a piece of information doesn't have a parking space, then you would have to make one.

- **Addresses and telephone numbers:** These must be put in address books, databases like outlook or other contact management software.
- **Appointments and Meetings:** These can go in our appointment diaries, the Daily Scheduler (DS, another tool that we shall introduce later) or electronic tools like outlook etc.
- **Financial information:** This would go into a financial log or an accounts book.
- **Health Information:** You may be logging how much you jog and this would enter into a health log.
- **Quotes:** These could be entered into a folder titled 'quotable quotes'.
- **Commitments, promises and reminders:** These would go into the to-do lists.

On extraction of the information, the pages of the GK book should be discarded. If you can't tear pages out, staple them together indicating that information has been taken out.

# Filing of Information from the GK Book



## The To-do Lists

To-do lists have been in use for time immemorial. It is commonly advised to start one's day by making a to-do list by thinking of all the things that we have to do in the day and jotting them down. One should start working on them after prioritizing them and cross the tasks as they are done.

The above is better than having no procedure at all. But there is a serious flaw. Can you guess?

The flaw is that you are making the list out of your memory except for the items which have been carried from the previous day. And again, once memory gets involved, there are chances of forgetting. No wonder, many a time our schedule is disturbed when we remember something in the middle of the day that we had forgotten to write earlier.

Let me introduce a simple but a very powerful procedure:

**Step 1:** Title five sheets of paper as below:

- Master to-do list (MTL)
- Current Year to-do list (CYL)
- Current Month to-do list (CML)
- Current Week to-do list (CWL)
- Today to-do list (TTL)

**Step 2:** Go through the entries in the GK book one by one, focusing on the commitments, reminders and promises that you have made to yourself all which are referred to as to-dos. If you have still not started maintaining the GK book, scan your memory for commitments that you have made and things that you need to do.

Ask yourself:

1. Is it (the to-do) to be done today? If yes, then log it in the TTL.

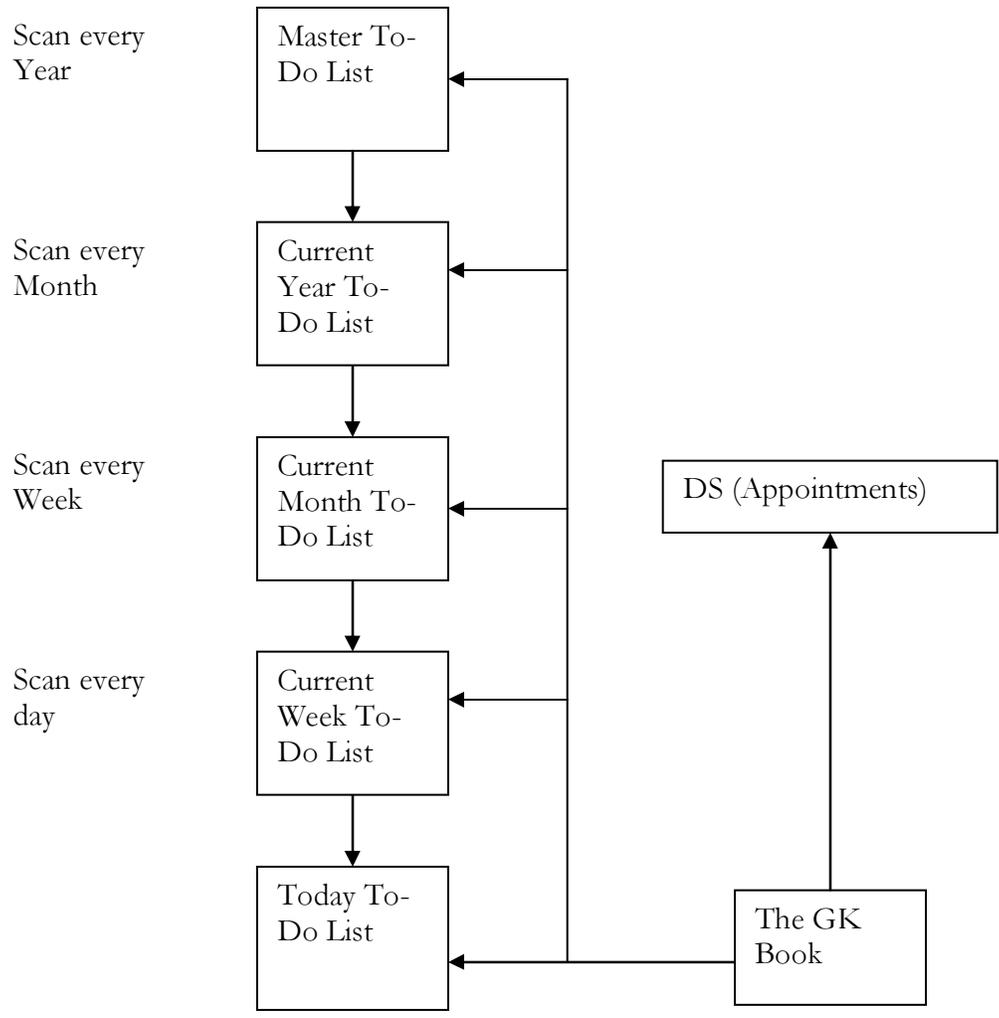
2. If it doesn't need to be done to-day but must be done by the end of the week, then log it in the CWL.
3. If it doesn't need to be done in this week but must be done by the end of the month, then log it in the CML.
4. If it doesn't need to be done in this month, but must be done by the end of the year, then log it in the CYL.
5. And lastly, if it has to be done but doesn't have to be done by the end of the year, then log it in the MTL.

The above five steps will get you started on your to-do lists which will grow by each passing day.

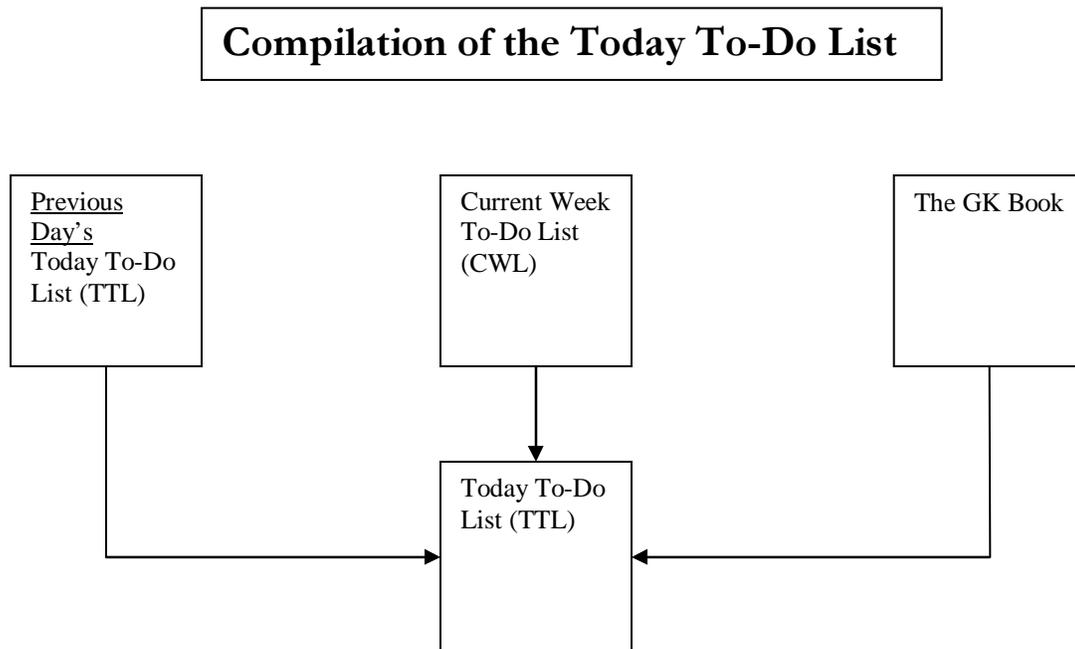
The day that you start on the system, follow the TTL that you had generated, making a new list the next day. This new TTL will receive entries from three sources:

- a. The first set of entries would come through the five steps outlined above where you take your GK book and file its entries. If you are following the rules of the GK book then no commitment must be found in memory rather all commitments and promises would have been recorded and would be found in the GK book hence the GK book will contribute some entries to the TTL.
- b. The second set of entries would come from the previous day's TTL. Usually there would be items which you were not able to complete or tackle the previous day. You would look at those items and file them just as if they were entries in the GK book according to the five rules mentioned above. So the to-dos which need to be done today would be brought forward from the previous day's list.
- c. Lastly, you would scan you CWL and see which of the items from the list you would like to do today and bring them into the TTL.

**Interaction of the GK Book with the To-Do Lists**



According to the system, the CWL would be scanned every day of the week.



Please keep in mind that all of this scanning of to-do lists should be done at the time that you have dedicated to planning at a particular point in the day. Once the TTL has been constructed, you will not keep going back to any of the lists till the next day at the time of planning.

Your day will start with your TTL and your GK book. If a to-do comes in the middle of the day then you would ask yourself a question: does it have to be done today and if the answer is yes then you would put it down on the TTL otherwise it will go in the GK book. Please note again that during the day the other to-do lists must not be repeatedly opened as it would create too much hassle and inconvenience. Let the to-dos that don't have to be done today go to the GK and come on to the proper list the next day during your planning.

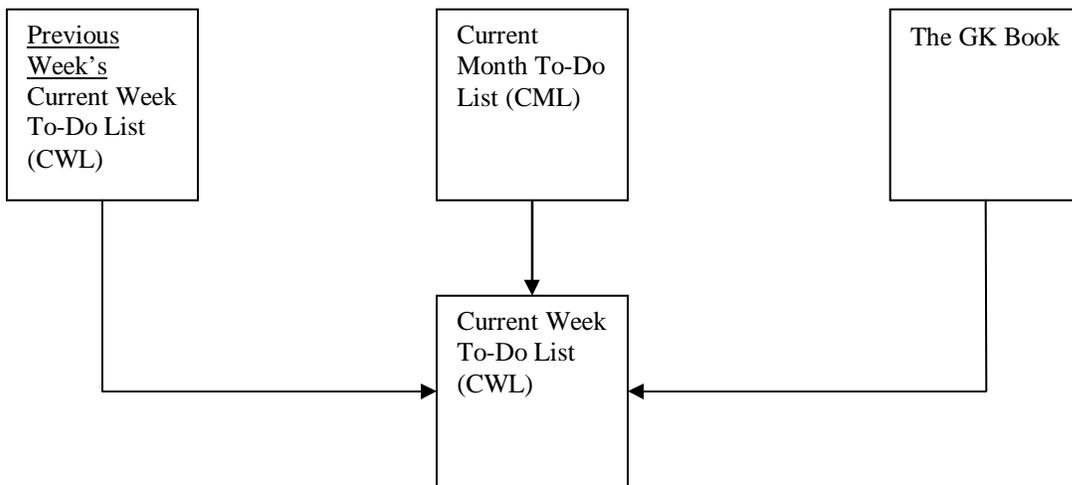
There are two very critical habits (Decision Making Routines (DMRs)) that you need to develop without which the system will fail:

#1: After each to-do has been done from the TTL, you must strike it off the list and at that time take a quick look at the whole TTL and select the next to-do that you would want to do.

#2: Whenever you change your physical location (home to work, work to client, client to project site etc.) you must take a quick look at the TTL. For example you had to make an international phone call that can only be made from the office and can't be made from the project site. If you left for the project site without looking at the TTL, you will be in trouble.

At the end of the week, we shall be making a new CWL by carrying forward items which have been left untouched from the previous week. Next we will scan the CML and pick items which need to be done this week. In this manner, the CML would be scanned 4 times a month.

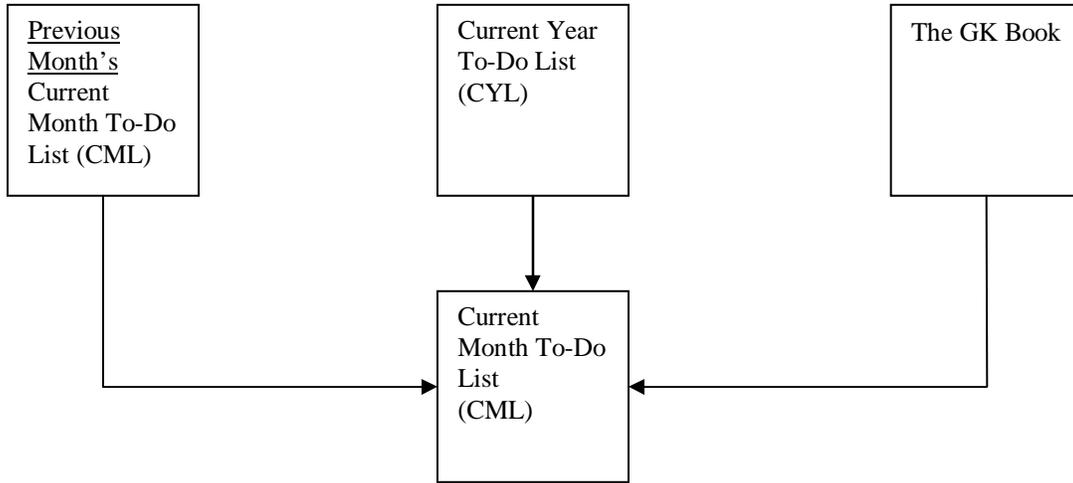
**Compilation of the Current Week To-Do List**



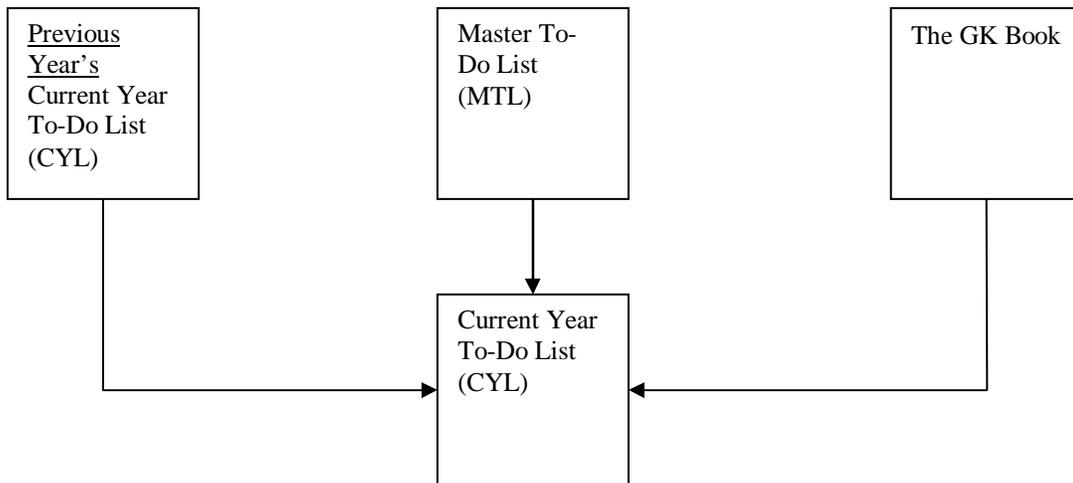
The same procedure is now repeated for making a new CML in the end of the month by scanning the CYL and the CYL by scanning the MTL.

The CYL will thus be scanned 12 times in a year.

**Compilation of the Current Month To-Do List**



**Compilation of the Current Year To-Do List**



The above steps can be depicted in the form of the following formulas<sup>2</sup>:

$$\text{TTL} = \text{GK} + \text{TTL (previous day)} + \text{CWL scan}$$

$$\text{CWL} = \text{GK} + \text{CWL (last week)} + \text{CML scan}$$

$$\text{CML} = \text{GK} + \text{CML (last month)} + \text{CYL scan}$$

$$\text{CYL} = \text{GK} + \text{CYL (last year)} + \text{MTL scan}$$

You will notice that in the system the moment a commitment was made it was recorded into the GK book from where it was moved to one of the five lists and from where it came to our TTL by the process of being scanned. At no point in the above routine was memory involved and hence the chances of forgetting a commitment are zero. The elimination of the role of memory from the process is the most powerful aspect of the system.

It is important to note that the primary function of the above system (GK book and the to-do list) is to guard our commitments and not strategic planning or handling our long term goals or objectives. Many people use the to-do list to also handle their projects or goals. It can be done but this is not the primary function of the to-do lists. For example someone wanting to perform hajj can list the different steps required to complete his preparations and handle the steps through the to-do lists. For example he can list the different steps as:

1. Apply for a National ID card.
2. Apply for a passport.
3. Apply for a visa.
4. Get the proper training and knowledge of hajj.
5. Buy the equipment and gear for hajj.
6. Save money to buy the tickets and for payment of the boarding and lodging during hajj.

After having listed the steps, he could then log each step into the different lists (MTL to the TTL) and let the system take over from there.

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<sup>2</sup> This brilliant contribution was made by Jahanzeb Ahmed of Siemens when he attended our workshop in January 2004.

I have seen the following challenges when I ask people to make the to-do lists:

1. People sometimes start to use the lists to handle the planning of their goals and projects and completely miss out on guarding commitments. This means that they have not realized the primary function of the to-do list.
2. People would attempt to make and manage to-do list without regularly carrying the GK book. If you are not regularly carrying the GK book and not faithfully recording *all* of your commitments in it, you are by-passing the system. The to-do lists will not be reflecting all your commitments and hence things will be falling through the cracks.
3. Some people follow the system for some days and then take a few days off. This will create extreme frustration and could lead people to doubt the whole concept. For the system to operate, you have to be following the system 100% of the time. Also, not following the system 100% may create a false sense of security. Commitments which otherwise you would have been carrying on your head would be missed by falsely assuming that the system will remind you of it.

If you were to miss a commitment while following the system, there would be only two reasons: either you are not following the system properly or you have intentionally ignored the commitment. There could be no other reason!

Now people can no longer tell their bosses that they forgot. The response from the boss would be, "How can you forget? Are you not on the system?" If the person admits that he is not on the system, then he would be asked to come on to the system.

There is a concern that through this system we are developing a dependence on a tool. Yes, we are developing a dependence which is both healthy and positive. Once wrist watches were not worn, but now life would be very difficult without such an important tool. Same is true for mobile phones. The GK book and the to-do lists are also a necessity in the fast paced life of today if one is determined to guard his commitments and promises.

Another concern is that the GK book would compromise our memories. The main function of our minds is not to memorize things rather to process information. When we try to carry too

many things in our minds which could have easily been written down, we clutter it and compromise our ability to think and analyze information. If we want to enhance our memories, memorizing sections of the Quran would be a better idea.

One course participant said that after taking the course, his concentration in his prayers has increased and he is disturbed less by thoughts floating into his mind while praying. The reason was that by recording all matters in his GK book he didn't need to carry all the clutter in his mind.

Here is a simple test to check whether you are using the system properly. Make a list of things that you did yesterday both in and out of work. Strike out activities which were generated during the course of the day yesterday. Take a look at the rest of the items; if they were present in your CWL or the previous day's to-do list, then you are on the system otherwise you need to ask yourself as to why these didn't appear on those lists.

As said earlier, GK book is a concept and not the name of a physical entity. Similar could be said of the to-do lists. I suggest that people start off on paper, understand the concepts and then move on to other forms of maintaining the to-do lists like databases. Microsoft outlook can do a marvelous job of maintaining your to-do list. Palm pilots also have such functions.

### **Handling daily or weekly reminders through the to-do lists**

Since the CWL is scanned every day, you can easily use it for daily reminders. For example if you would like to remind yourself to charge your phone daily, put this reminder in your CWL and since you would be scanning it daily, you would be reminded. Similar could be done regarding weekly and monthly reminders.

### **Test Questions**

Here are some questions related to the to-do lists that have appeared in the exams that we take. It would be nice to reflect upon them to see whether you are able to answer them.

1. In the section on to-do lists, how many to-do lists are there and how does the system works? How does the GK book interact with the to-do lists?
2. For the to-do lists, how many times in a month according to the system would you scan the CML? How many times in a week would you scan the CWL?