



THE HACHI WAY

To Dog Or Not To Dog

Ten short chapters for the decision of a lifetime

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Hello

My name is Diona. I was born in Hong Kong, I live in Melbourne, and I share the house with my husband, Murphy the Labrador, and Marlo the cat, who answers to nobody.

I have spent fifteen years working with animals: zoos, wildlife reserves, assistance dog programs, and thousands of hours in living rooms and on footpaths with pet dogs and their people. My degrees are in Veterinary Science and Early Childhood Education, and I use the second one more. Dogs are closer to toddlers than to colleagues, and most of what I do is what a good kindergarten teacher does: routine, attention, relationship. You don't teach Maths in kindergarten.

In 2022 I left my job to do this full time. Since then I have worked with hundreds of owners, and I keep meeting the same person: someone who loves their dog, is exhausted by their dog, and was never told what owning a dog actually asks of you. This book is my attempt to tell you before you buy the lead.

I would rather talk you out of a dog now than meet you in two years with a dog you both resent. And if you read all of this and still want one, good. You will be exactly the kind of owner every dog deserves.

I don't call myself a dog trainer. I'm a person trainer.

What is a good dog?

A good dog is not an obedient dog. That is the first thing to unlearn, and the earlier you unlearn it the cheaper your life gets.

Ask most people what a good dog looks like and they describe a dog that sits, stays, and comes when called. Here is the problem: an obedient dog, when nobody is giving it an instruction, has no idea what to do. And nobody is giving instructions most of the time. You are at work, on the phone, carrying groceries, living your life. The dog is on its own for the decisions that matter.

What you actually want is a dog that knows how to behave when nobody is telling it anything. A dog that settles under the table at the cafe because that is what you do at cafes. A dog that watches the postman walk past and files it under boring. That dog is not built from commands. It is built from a relationship, met needs, and clear expectations, and it makes decisions on its own because the right decision was made obvious.

One more distinction, and it is the whole game. Almost every dog I meet is happy. Very few are content. Happy is the dog leaping at the door, wired, thrilled, exhausting. Content is the dog lying flat on its side in a busy room, floppy, switched off, sure of its world. People come to me asking for obedience. What they actually want, every single time, is content.

You came with a happy dog. You leave with a content dog.

Are there bad dogs in this world?

No. There are dogs under pressure, and owners who never learned to see the pressure building.

Every dog has what I call a waterline: a baseline level of arousal it lives at. Triggers push it up. Some dogs live at low tide, and it takes a lot to get a reaction. Some dogs live at high tide, and the doorbell, a skateboard, or a plastic bag is enough to tip them over. The barking, the lunging, the chewed couch: those are the waves on top. The waves are not the problem. The waterline is.

Five things push a dog's waterline up, and when I meet a struggling dog I check them in order:

- **Understanding of the world.** A dog that was never shown garbage trucks, storms, and strangers lives in a world full of alarming surprises.
- **Health and food.** A dog in pain, or running on filler, cannot be settled. Food feeds the brain as much as the body.
- **Clarity.** A dog that cannot work out what you want lives in permanent confusion, and confusion leaks out as what people call naughtiness.
- **An unbalanced day.** Play, brain work, rest, and freedom, in the wrong proportions. More on this in chapter eight.
- **Leash frustration.** A tight lead traps a feeling and makes it bigger. Half the lunging dogs I meet are fine the moment the tension comes off.

Nothing on that list is fixed by a louder no. All of it is fixable by an owner who knows what they are looking at. That owner is what this book is trying to build.

Your lifestyle, honestly

Before the breed quizzes and the puppy photos, audit the life you actually live. Not the life you plan to live once you have a dog. Dogs join the life you already have.

YOUR WORK

Do you work full time? Can the dog come? If not, who fulfils this animal on a Tuesday? A dog is not furniture that waits. If the honest answer is a dog walker five days a week, ask yourself who is actually raising the dog.

YOUR WEEKENDS

What do you love doing? If the answer is brunch, sport, and travel, can a dog come to any of it? A dog that gets included builds a life with you. A dog that gets left behind builds its own entertainment, and you will not like its hobbies.

YOUR HOUSEHOLD

Everyone under the roof holds the same rules, or the dog learns the rules are optional. One person letting the puppy on the couch undoes three people keeping it off. If your household cannot agree on dishes, agree on the dog first.

CHAPTER FOUR, CONTINUED

YOUR TRAVEL

How often are you away, and for how long? Boarding is \$60 to \$120 a night, and a dog with a good CALM travels well, but a dog is a reason to come home, not a subscription you pause.

YOUR FAMILY PLANS

A dog is an extra toddler. If you are planning a human one as well, know that you are signing up to run a small daycare. It is done all the time. It is just never done accidentally well.

Dogs join the life you already have.

The time

Budget 1.5 to 2 hours a day of actual engagement. Not two hours of the dog existing near you. Two hours of play, brain work, and outings where you are present and paying attention.

With a puppy, more. A puppy's brain is a sponge soaking up everything, which is wonderful and relentless. The first months are when you are laying every foundation the adult dog will stand on, and foundations are not poured in your spare five minutes.

THE BONDING HOURS

Beyond the walks and the games, the relationship is built in unglamorous time: grooming, lying on the floor together, the dog dozing next to you while you read. This is the time that makes the dog choose you later, when a rabbit and you are both options.

THE OUTSOURCING QUESTION

Walkers, daycare, and sitters are useful relief valves. But if outsourcing becomes the plan rather than the backup, be honest about the question it raises: if someone else exercises, entertains, and settles your dog, what exactly did you get a dog for?

THE ROUTINE TAX

Earlier mornings. Planning around toilet times. Leaving the party before the end because the dog has been alone six hours. None of it is hard. All of it is daily, for ten to fifteen years. That is the actual price, and it is paid in time, not money.

You need to be more fun than the dogs. That takes time too.

The money

An honest budget, in Australian dollars, from someone who sees the receipts.

GETTING THE DOG

Adoption runs \$50 to \$500 and usually includes vaccinations, microchipping, and desexing. A well-bred puppy from a good breeder runs \$1,000 to several thousand. Add the setup: crate, leads, bed, bowls.

KEEPING THE DOG

Food is the big recurring line: \$60 to \$200 a month depending on size and what you feed. Insurance runs \$20 to \$100 a month. Then grooming for the breeds that need it (\$80 to \$120 every couple of months), worming, flea prevention, and the vet.

THE EDUCATION FUND

The best money you will spend is on your own education, and I say that as the person you would be paying, so take it with the obvious grain of salt and then spend it anyway. Getting a puppy from eight weeks, put aside about \$500 for early foundational training and another \$1,000 for refreshers as the dog hits adolescence. School fees, essentially. Prevention costs a fraction of repair: fixing a reactive adolescent costs multiples of raising the puppy right.

CHAPTER SIX, CONTINUED

THE EMERGENCY FUND

\$500 to \$1,000 sitting ready, or insurance you trust. A swallowed sock does not check your pay cycle.

A REAL SAMPLE BUDGET

Fresh food, 25 kg Labrador	\$180
Pet insurance	\$80
Emergency fund contribution	\$50
Grooming	\$0 (short coat, lucky me)
Murphy, per month	\$310

That is a mid-size dog on good food with no groomer. Your number may be higher. It will rarely be lower.

Choosing the breed, and the breeder

The breed sets the raw material. The breeder shapes the first eight weeks of it, and those weeks matter more than most owners will ever know.

THE BREED

Every breed carries instincts that need somewhere to go. A Border Collie will herd something: sheep if you have them, children and bicycles if you don't. A terrier will hunt. A gun dog will carry things around your house forever. None of this is bad behaviour. It is unspent behaviour, and if you don't give it an outlet, it chooses its own.

So match honestly: your energy, your hours, your home, their coat, their drives. If you or your family have allergies, look at the low-shedding breeds. If you have young children, look at the patient ones, and know that supervision is your job either way. And a rescue can be a wonderful dog, with one caveat: you are inheriting someone else's first chapters, so go in with eyes open and support ready.

THE BREEDER

A puppy's brain does its fastest development before you ever meet it. The first eight weeks are the foundational software being installed, and a good breeder is deliberately shaping that brain: surfaces, sounds, handling, novelty, calm humans. A poor one is filling a shed.

Ask a breeder what the puppies have experienced by week eight. A good one will not stop talking. Ask what happens after the puppies leave. The best breeders stay involved, set their families up with structure and education, and care where their dogs land at eight months, not just at eight weeks. If a breeder handed you this book, you are probably in good hands: that is exactly the kind of involvement I mean.

How the good dog actually happens

Not through obedience classes. Through a balanced day and an owner who can read their dog. The method I teach organises a dog's day into four modes, and a struggling dog is almost always short on one of them:

- **PLAY** is real one-on-one engagement between you and the dog. Not throwing a ball while you check your phone, that is just lazy play. Play builds the bond, and the bond is what makes your dog choose you over the environment. Bond is control.
- **ANCHOR** is brain work: the dog processing the world and choosing well because you set the situation up so the good choice was obvious. A structured walk is anchor. For a nervous dog, standing still and watching the street is anchor. Brains need work or they freelance.
- **CALM** is rest on your terms. The off switch. A dog that can settle in a busy cafe is not born, it is taught, the same way children learn to sit through dinner. Calmness is a skill.
- **EXPLORE** is being a dog, within reason. Sniffing, pottering, watching the world. Be a dog, don't be a menace. Freedom is earned, and freedom at high arousal is how dogs end up on the road.

Two more things decide how this goes. First, socialisation: show the young dog the world, not just other dogs. Noises, surfaces, traffic, hats, umbrellas. Grow the sponge. Second, adolescence, around seven months, when training that was rented with treats gets handed back. Teenagers stop taking bribes. If the relationship was built on lollies, the lease runs out. Build it on bond and there is nothing to hand back.

And if you hire a trainer, hire one who teaches you. A trainer who demonstrates how well they handle your dog has shown you nothing except how good they are with your dog.

Fifteen years, including the last one

Most dogs live ten to fifteen years. Sign up for all of them, because the dog cannot read the contract.

The years in the middle are the reward: the dog you built, taking it anywhere, the friend who knows your routines better than you do. Then the needs change. The senior dog wants shorter outings, a softer bed, a warmer spot, more vet visits. Arthritis, cloudy eyes, a slower rise in the morning. Their world shrinks, and you become more of it. Plan for that dog too: the budget, the patience, the ramp to the car.

And then there is the last part, and I will not dress it up. One day you will likely have to make the hardest decision an owner makes, with your vet, based on quality of life rather than your readiness to let go. Nobody is ever ready. The measure I give people is this: when the bad days outnumber the good ones and the things that made your dog itself are gone, you are not ending a life, you are ending suffering. It is the final act of the same care you have given for fifteen years.

Grieve properly afterwards. A dog is not "just a dog", and the people who say so have never been met at the door by one. Take the time, keep the collar, tell the stories. You gave an animal a whole good life. That is the deal, and it is worth it, and it costs exactly this much at the end.

If the answer is not yet

Not yet is a good answer. It is a far better answer than a dog rehomed at eighteen months because the timing was never right. If this book has shown you the gap between your life and a dog's needs, mind the gap, and get your dog fix in the meantime:

- **Volunteer at a shelter or rescue.** Dogs who need exactly what you have spare: time and attention.
- **Walk or sit dogs you know.** A fortnight of dog-sitting teaches you more about your readiness than any quiz.
- **Foster.** The full experience, bounded. Hard to give them back, which tells you something too.
- **Borrow the neighbour's dog.** Half the dogs in your street are under-walked. Their owners know it. Offer.
- **Set a date.** If the obstacle is a lease, a job, a baby, name the milestone that changes it and revisit then. Wanting a dog does not expire.

The decision is not dog or no dog forever. It is dog or no dog right now, and the people brave enough to say not yet are usually the ones who end up being wonderful owners later, because they took the question seriously when it was cheap to.

The honest checklist

Tick only what is true today, not what you intend to fix. Every unticked box is a conversation to have before a puppy comes home.

- ☐ I can give a dog 1.5 to 2 hours of real engagement every day, including the wet Tuesdays.

- ☐ Someone is home, or the dog can come along, for most of the average day.

- ☐ Everyone in my household wants the dog and will hold the same rules.

- ☐ My weekends and holidays can include a dog, or I have a genuine plan for when they cannot.

- ☐ I can absorb roughly \$300 a month, plus a \$500 to \$1,000 emergency fund, without stress.

- ☐ I have budgeted for my own education, not just the dog's food and gear.

- ☐ I have picked a breed for my actual lifestyle, not for its face.

- ☐ I know what my breed was bred to do, and I can give that instinct a daily outlet.

THE HONEST CHECKLIST, CONTINUED

☐ My living situation is stable for the foreseeable future, and dogs are allowed in it.

☐ I am ready to be the calm one when the puppy is not.

☐ I am signing up for the senior years and the last day, not just the puppy photos.

☐ If I am honest, I want a dog in my daily life, not just the idea of one.

Ten or more ticks: you are ready to do this properly. **Seven to nine:** close, fix the gaps first. **Under seven:** the kindest thing you can do for the dog is wait, and chapter ten is for you.

THE NEXT STEP

Ready?

If the boxes are ticked and the answer is yes, congratulations. Do it properly from day one, because you raise the dog you want, not the puppy you got. Dogs do not grow out of things. You build them, or you fix them later at several times the price.

THE GOOD PUPPY BLUEPRINT

My online puppy program. Nine weeks of structure that starts before your puppy comes home, so the foundations are laid from the first day, not patched in later: what a good dog actually is, preparing the house, and then a week-by-week guide through the first nine weeks together, with video catch-ups with me along the way. It is the program I wish every puppy family started with, and it is AU\$440. Enrol at dionathetrainer.com/puppy-training and you start the moment you are ready.

IF A BREEDER GAVE YOU THIS

You are getting a puppy whose first eight weeks are in careful hands. Ask your breeder about the Good Puppy Blueprint litter arrangement, and take over from week nine the same way.

WHEREVER YOU ARE

Start with the free assessment at thehachiway.com/assessment, or find a trainer who works the way this book thinks at thehachiway.com/find-a-trainer.

Raise the dog you want, not the puppy.