

How to do everything by learning to do NOTHING

Why you've got to know the difference between movement and action

by Nancy Ann James 1978

In a newspaper office where I once worked, I occasionally rode the elevator with a 60-ish man who pushed the "Door Close" and "Door Open" buttons instead of just letting the doors work automatically. "Just speeds it up a little," he explained. "You actually save three or four seconds that way." I was about to ask what he did with those seconds--like, save them up for a big spree once a year?--but a glance at his intent face cut off my smile and I just nodded.

Then one day years later, at the height of my own administrative career, I found myself impatiently pushing a "Door Close" button. "Et tu," I thought, and perhaps that was the beginning of my attempts to reorder my life. From the usual frenetic pace of our goal-oriented, *doing* society, to--I knew not what. I only vaguely recognized something was wrong and needed changing; I had little idea what should result from the change.

What was wrong, it seems to me, has the proportions of a national epidemic that hits students and those who work at home as well as employed people. It is that most of us are under enormous psychic and physical strain. We suffer from a wide variety of ailments, from high blood pressure to bleeding ulcers, alcoholism, heart attacks and nervous breakdowns, all related to stress. Less critical but more chronic, we experience ill-defined feelings of discontent, of "What's it all for?" We're afraid of wasting time, unable to relax, occasionally depressed.

The strain caused by our way of life is, I think, intimately bound up with our concepts of time and accomplishment. We fear we waste time or lose time whenever we aren't busy accomplishing something. We have little sympathy for the notion of doing nothing. But I'd like to suggest that we frequently waste time through busy-ness, accomplish more through stillness. I'd like to consider here the quality of what we accomplish rather it's quantity or speed. And I'd like to examine the role of non-doing in achieving that quality.

Please pause for a few seconds right now. How's your breathing? Stop, please, and just notice your breath as it goes in and out. Where does it come from? Mid-chest? From the belly? Is it coming in short, jerky movements, with stops and holds? Or is it moving smoothly and fluidly, rounded at the top? Just notice it, nothing more.

"We're in such a hurry most of the time we never get much chance to talk," wrote Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. "The result is a kind of endless day-to-day shallowness, a monotony that leaves a person wondering years later where all the time went and sorry that it's gone."

"Sheer doing is not living," wrote R.G.H. Siu in the *The Tao of Science*. "The former is but a mechanical manifestation of the later."

"There is accumulating evidence evidence that a major predictor of heart disease is. . .Type A behavior," wrote Dr. Hugh Drummond in a recent issue of *Mother Jones*. It describes an orientation to life that involves a speeded-up sense of time, a quality of impatience and restlessness. . .Speaking, moving, eating, lovemaking, every experience is thrust forward, propelled at some melancholy-mad, Parkinsonian gait. . .There is no being, only having and discarding, until the heart stops from the exhaustion of constant anticipation."

" 'Poor old man, sitting in the sun doing nothing,' we might think," wrote May Sarton in a newspaper column last fall. "But the old man on a park bench may actually be very busy doing nothing, because he is being something."

How can you do nothing in order to be something? The point is that constant doing, activity, giving of your energy and skills, depletes you and leads to psychic exhaustion. If there is no space for taking in, the effort of giving out tends to become scattered rather than calm, mindless rather than mindful. The quality drops. Providing a space for non-doing, while at first may sound negative or too easy, may actually be the most positive, as well as the most difficult, direction you can take.

Let me quote again from Pirsig, this time from a pamphlet called "Zen in Minnesota".

"Sitting quietly, doing nothing, would seem to be the easiest thing in the world, but it is soon discovered to be something else. One learns that doing *nothing* is every bit as hard as doing *something* and all the difficulties that were formerly thought to reside in the job one was doing are still there, even though one does no job and makes no effort at all. . .In time one discovers there are advanced levels of *non-doing* quite as difficult and profound as the levels of *doing* . . ."

What Pirsig was writing about is a form of meditation called zazen, the chief practice of Zen Buddhism. I've practiced it for years and I prefer to call it "just sitting" rather than anything more complex or mysterious-sounding.

The first time I "just sat," cross-legged on a cushion, thoughts as usual raced through my head. But a curious thing happened. Instead of paying attention only to their substance, I began to become aware of the process--of the endless internal monologue going on. At the end of a long train of thought, I'd suddenly realize where I was. And some other part of me would reply to the monologist, "So what?" Or "Who cares?" Or finally, "Oh, shut up." At the end of the sitting, I wept with relief. It was the first time I'd ever listened to myself.

My friend Liz tells about being kicked out of college 10 weeks before she was to graduate. Her adviser called her in and said, "Liz, when are you going to stop running?"

"I had some inkling that I was running," she says, "but no idea of how to stop and only vaguely aware of some huge pressure inside me that I was running from. And I was sure that if I stopped--even if I knew how--I'd be overwhelmed and terrified."

The fear is real, I've encountered it in others to whom I've tried to explain what happens when you "just sit." Such explaining, incidentally, is as hopeless as trying to describe the taste of a certain food or the feeling of cold water on one's face in the morning. You have to try it to know. But words, descriptions, may help point in a certain direction.

During sitting, thoughts go in and out--it's almost impossible to stop them--but I try not to attach to them, just let them come, and then leave. I begin to realize the thoughts are not me, they're just added on. What I finally get to--occasionally, when I sit long enough--is a basic stillness or emptiness that may sound scary but is actually just complete openness to whatever exists. Right here, right now. And I come "face to face with myself," as Liz puts it. There's no hiding, no self deception possible.

"Most of us," says Liz, "have some idea of how life is supposed to be and we try to make it that way, instead of being fully alive to whatever actually is. The thing that's important to me about sitting is that it brings me right smack up against *now*--puts me right in the middle of my life with no illusions."

Non-doing, or just sitting, doesn't stop you from leading as active a life as you want. Rather, it can provide a solid grounding for you activity, so you act out of a center of stillness rather than out of commotion and anxiety.

Please pause now and be aware of your breathing again. Next time you exhale, let the breath go *all* the way out. Way down to the bottom of your chest and further. Be very still. Let the diaphragm below your rib cage push up to start the next intake of breath. Let that intake continue as long as it's comfortable, then exhale slowly, back down to your belly. Do that three or four more times.

Did you actually *do* that exercise, or did you just read it, or skip over it to get on to the more "substantive" prose? It's a natural tendency to want to read about solutions rather than actually take action, experience something--but that in itself is one reason the problem I'm talking about is an epidemic. And besides, if you do skip over it, you may be missing the most beneficial effect this article could have on your life.

Because deep breathing, while it starts out sounding like a single technique and nothing more, can gradually open up a whole new realm of understanding.

"If you can get your breath even and steady, your emotional state will get even and steady," says Dr. E. Phillip Nuernberger, a psychologist who leads biofeedback therapy at the Minneapolis Clinic of Psychiatry and Neurology.

Deep breathing is an extremely important technique for reducing stress, says Nuernberger, author of a new book called *Unwinding the Corporate Executive*. The change to diaphragmatic breathing alone causes one to relax somewhat. The metabolic rate is lowered and the work of the heart reduced.

Look at a baby breathe, its stomach going rhythmically in and out. In contrast to our usual shallow, jerky breathing. "As we grow up, slowly we build up psychological tensions and we freeze in places like the chest or shoulders," Nuernberger says. Being aware of your breathing allows you to come into gradual awareness of those tensions in your body, so you can relax your shoulders, for example, when you realize they're tensed up. This can lead to a broad awareness of the connectedness of you mind and body, which can in turn lead to continuing discoveries about physical and mental well-being far beyond the scope of this article.

While people often feel they need to be stressed to perform. Nuernberger says that's untrue, "Creative response comes from quietness of mind."

Besides deep breathing and meditation--relaxation, or "just sitting"--what else might help produce this quietness of mind? Dr. Drummond, quoted earlier, suggests gardening.

"A garden is not compatible with Type A behavior. It will not be hurried. It has an implacable tempo with subtle variations of rain and sun played out against an ancient endless rhythm of the days. Getting in touch with that rhythm will add ten years to your life. . . Several hours of working in the earth bring one to a different psychic space similar to a meditation one."

Pirsig of course, had his motorcycle riding. "You spend your time being aware of things and meditating on them. On sights and sounds, on the mood of the weather and things remembered, on the machine and the countryside you're in, thinking about things at great leisure and length without being hurried and feeling your losing time."

Obviously, then, the list of things you might *do* is endless: jogging or yoga, bioenergetics or Gestalt therapy, tennis or Tai Chi, giving up smoking, changing your diet or job. Any and all of these might help, but there is a big hitch.

It was alluded to by my friend Karen, a psychologist, who was despairing one day over a woman client she'd been seeing for six years. "She'll do anything I suggest, anything at all. She'll try it and when it doesn't work, she blames me. And nothing will ever work because basically she hasn't decided to take responsibility for her life." The hitch is, it's not what you do but the attitude you do it with. Changing the way you look at your life and the world actually changes the world, and your life.

By some means or other, you must come to the realization that you in fact *are* in charge. It won't come quickly or easily, or by reading words on a page. But in any activity or path you

choose, you should have the underlying purpose of increasing awareness of yourself. Becoming more conscious. Then the world you create can be free of the stresses that plague you.

Take my friend Willa, who worked as a receptionist at a radio station, hating the job and the pay but most of all hating the nerve-wracking daily situation. "Two studios were always in use, one on the air, the other for rehearsing. My desk was in between the two and I could hear everything going on in both studios. I was required to have the radio playing at my desk, the phone rang, people went in and out giving me messages and I was supposed to type things too."

One day someone introduced Willa to the music of John Cage: musical passages interspersed with squeaks and scratches, mouth noises, bursts of instrumental sounds, incidental noises and silence.

"I loved it," Willa said. "From that moment my life changed. I became aware of sound as it is, rather than prejudging certain sounds as unpleasant noise and resisting it, thereby creating tension and anxiety. When I began really listening, all those noises became an incredible symphony and everyday was a surprise, an adventure in sound." She worked there two more years with no problem.

Nuernberger too emphasizes that we create our own tension. "There is nowhere you can go," he says, "nothing you can point to and say 'That's stress.' Tension is created by your relationship with the world."

"I can't cure people of pain," he says, "But you won't *consciously* create pain for yourself. So my whole point is to develop your awareness of what you are doing to yourself. Everything I say to my patients or have them do is a technique to get them to the point of accepting responsibility for their lives."

One more pause to consider your breathing. Take a long, slow breath and let it *all* the way out. Take another and feel it filling your chest cavity and spreading out into your pelvis. As you exhale, be aware of your heartbeat. Try to feel the coolness and warmth of the breath just as it enters and leaves your nostrils. Relax your shoulders. Try this entire sequence several times today. Take a breath between your actions. Between bites. Between paragraphs.

At a very simple, everyday level, I became deeply aware of how my own experience changed because of a change in my attitude.

The hedge was shooting up, scraggly and uneven, mid-June. My usual mode of operation was to wait till I couldn't bear it's ragged appearance any longer, then attack with the clippers. I'd pick a resting point and clip away till I reached it, hot and sweaty, arms all scratched up from the

prickly twigs, breathing heavily, then lie exhausted on the lawn till my heartbeat returned to normal. Each working space grew shorter as my stamina gave out.

This time it was the day after I'd sat at a seven-day meditation retreat. Going at a slow and even pace that came naturally, with only two short breaks, I finished the job far sooner than usual. And not tired. Not even breathing hard. I hadn't tried to do this. It just happened when I let my body and calm mind take over.

"When you want to hurry something," wrote Pirsig, "that means you no longer care about it and want to get on to other things." When I trimmed the hedge ordinarily, it was sheer doing, getting an unpleasant job out of the way. I didn't care about the process itself. I wanted to get on to other things.

After the retreat, my state of mind was completely changed. I did not label the activity "unpleasant task." I neither enjoyed it nor disliked it. I simply did it with full awareness. I was aware of how the sun felt on my arms, the delight of an occasional breeze touching my face, the sharpness of twigs I managed to easily avoid, the correct slow pace to maintain so my heart and breathing did not speed up.

After finishing, I went into the house smiling so my husband asked what I had been doing. "I just trimmed the hedge," I said, no more. Nothing special. Also nothing extra, no groans about the heat, no sighs, no pleas for praise. Only I knew it was the first time I had ever "just trimmed the hedge."

In the form of meditation I practice, we do a slow ten-minute walk in between the 40-minute sittings. I once disliked it intensely: such slow, boring movement. Then I watched the Zen master instruct a group on how to do the walk. You are never quite still. You put the ball of your right foot down gently as you inhale, slowly lean down on the heel as you exhale, then move your body weight slightly so you can raise the next foot, to put the ball down on the next inhalation. You try to be aware of the flow of movement at each moment.

And as I do so, I begin to feel I am in the midst of a wonderful slow-motion dance. The realization begins to dawn, and grows more powerful over time, that meditation and the slow walk are not separate from the rest of my life at all, that everything I do can be done, if I am careful with this here-and-now awareness. Nothing is to be hurried through or avoided but simply done with mindfulness, with deliberate attention. The hedge must be trimmed, so just trim it. The noise is a symphony. The slow-motion dance is my life.

"We want to make good time," Pirsig wrote of his motorcycle travels, "but for us now this is measured with emphasis on 'good' rather than 'time'. And when you make that shift in emphasis the whole approach changes." Try emphasizing the quality rather than the speed and watch your life change.