

Busyness is Laziness

The above is adapted from a talk Dr. Reggie Ray gave as part of his *Meditating with the Body* retreat.

Many, many people tell me “I’m having a lot of problems doing this [meditation] practice because I am so busy. I’m really busy. I have a full life. It’s busy and I run from morning ‘til night.” People actually say that.

Now think about that for a minute. What kind of *life* is that? Is that a life worth living? Some people feel it is. America is probably the most extreme example of a speed-driven culture—and this is not my particular personal discovery, but something that has been said to me by many people from other traditional cultures. The first time this was said to me was when I was 19 and I went to Japan. Western people are running from themselves and they use the *busy-ness* of their lives as an excuse to *avoid having to actually live their own life*. We are terrified of who we actually are, terrified of the inner space that is the basis of the human experience.

We are actually incapable of being alone—of any work that requires genuine solitude, without entertainment, that requires making a connection with the silence of the inner being. The American family engineers a life in which there is never any time alone, where we never have to actually talk to each other. Even dinnertime is around the TV, at best—or we’re just grabbing something at McDonald’s. But it’s not the larger culture. It’s actually *us*. It’s *me* and it’s *you*. We load our life up to the point where it’s about to snap. And when you ask someone to sit down and be with themselves they go, “I can’t. I don’t have time for that.” Now you and I may realize that there actually is a problem. Most people don’t think there is a problem.

We run our kids in the same way—and it’s destroying them. The soccer practice and the music lesson and three hours of TV and homework—it goes on from the minute they get up until they go to sleep. They never have an opportunity to experience silence. Psychological development requires periods of solitude. Anthropological psychology—studying other cultures, as well as our own—shows that when children do not have completely unstructured time, when there are no parental expectations looming over them, they actually can’t develop normally.

The problem with being busy is that it is based on *ignorance*—not realizing that by keeping your mind occupied constantly you are actually not giving yourself a chance. We even put an activity in our life, called meditation, where you practice not being busy. Think about it. It’s actually genius. You have added *another* thing on top of everything else you do, but you are pulling the plug for a period of time every day—so it actually has a reverse effect of opening up and creating space. So you are just going to be more busy now! But this is good, especially in Western culture. People put meditation on their *To Do* lists. This is something I tell my students: “If you don’t put meditation on the top of your *To Do* list, it will be at the bottom, and it won’t happen.” I find that if meditation is not the first priority of my day it won’t happen. You know if I am foolish enough to say, “Well, I have to make this phone call, check my email...,” then it’s over. Finished. “I’ll do it later.” It never happens. Look at your life and ask, “Am I being honest with myself? Is it really true that I don’t have time?”

When I was in graduate school I worked with a Jungian analyst. She used to say, “Work expands to fill all of the available space.” The problem is not the amount of things you have in your life, it’s the attitude. It’s your fear of space. Busy-ness in the Tibetan tradition is considered the most extreme form of laziness. Because when you are busy you can turn your brain off. You’re on the treadmill. The only intelligence comes in the morning when you make your *To Do* list and you get rid of all the possible space that could happen in your day. There is intelligence in that: I fill up all the space so I don’t have to actually relate to myself! Once you have made that list, it’s over. There is no more fundamental intelligence operating. So the basic ignorance is not realizing what we are doing by being busy. What we are doing to ourselves, what we are doing to our families, what we are doing to our friends.

When my daughter Catherine, who is now 24, was a newborn baby my wife Lee and I went home to my mother’s house. My father had already died. I grew up in Darien, Connecticut—the ultimate suburbia. Everyone works in New York and they are all busy. My best friend from high school came over with his wife, who was also a close

friend of mine, and my godfather came over. This succession of people all came in...and Lee picked up on it right away, because she is from Alberta and out there, there is a lot of space! These people...we loved each other. We were so close. But it was always the same: after 10 minutes they said, "Well, we got to run!" Every single one did the same thing. And Lee said to me, "What are they so afraid of?" Not one of them was actually present. These patterns are deeply ingrained in us, and running away is not going to solve the problem. It's *in* us.

"I'm too busy." I am sorry. I don't buy it. It's self-deception: "I am too busy to relate to myself." I don't care if you have four children and three jobs—we have *one* human life. And if you can't make the time, 15 minutes to relate to yourself, everyone else in your life is going to suffer. You have to realize that you are harming other people by making up excuses and not working on yourself. This is serious. I *do* understand that things happen in life, and in the course of a week there are going to be times when you can't practice if you have a job, a family. But to say that over a period of three months I can't practice because I am too busy? That is the very problem that you came here to solve. I implore you. One of the things about being busy is that it is a un-examined behavior. It's habitual.

What's the Point?

So when something comes up and you think "I need to do this," the first question to ask is, "Why do I need to do this? What am I expecting to get out of this particular activity? What is the benefit going to be?" A lot of times we actually don't even think what we are going to get out of it, or what it's going to accomplish. Amazing. Say I need to call so-and-so right away. Okay: "Why?" You'd be surprised. You think "Well, it's obvious." It isn't. We have not thought through most of the things that we do *at all*. We haven't looked at what the desired consequence is.

What are the Odds?

I may think I am likely to get something, and sometimes I do. But what is the likelihood that something is not going to happen? How sure am I that what I think I am going to get, will happen? What is the percentage of possibility?

Is Other Stuff Likely to Come Up?

This is the big one for me. Does this action have unforeseen consequences? For example: I want to call up somebody and check on something. A lot of times they start telling me some terrible thing that has just happened. I'd allowed five minutes for this conversation, and 45 minutes later I am still on the phone. We do this all the time. We don't look at the consequences of a particular action.

My ambition to accomplish things is going to be one of the last things to go. I can't help it; it's just the way that I am. I see a pile of leaves that need to be raked up and I start salivating. I love to *do* things. I love to be active. And you can say, "Well, that's great." But there's neurosis in that. It's a way of shutting out space. This is another thing my wife has taught me: when there's no space *nothing really happens*.

When you actually take care of yourself, work with yourself and create openness in your life, life will respond by cooperating. And when you are unwilling to relate with yourself at the beginning of your day, your life is going to give you a hard time.

I realized that the way you accomplish things in life—whether with family or going to work—is through practice. One hour of work with the practice behind you is worth two days when the practice isn't there. Things just don't work well—there's too much neurosis in it. When I don't feel busy, things I have to do fall into place. Going through my day with a sense of relaxation, I connect with people. I appreciate the outdoors when I walk to my car. *I see the sky*.

Busy-ness. It's the most commonly mentioned obstacle that everyone faces, and I know for me it's #1. So I thought it would be worthwhile spending a little time with it. I invite you to take a fresh look at your life. Relate to the fear that comes up when we are not busy. Am I still worthy? It's that Calvinist thing, underlying our culture. But try letting go and lo and behold it's a better human life, and much more beneficial for other people.