

# Being busy: a Daoist view of a cardinal sin

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'This isn't getting anything done!'

We are constantly worrying about what has to be done, and what comes next, rather than being present.

Being busy is considered a virtue in our society. The crude equation is made that the busier you are, the better a person you are. Conversely, sloth or laziness is one of the few traditional mortal sins that still inspires dread.

The moral superiority of busyness has become so ingrained in our culture that it is accepted as true without question or reflection. This is why it often comes as a bit of a surprise to my students when I mention that busyness, constant activity, was once considered to be a manifestation of the capital sin of sloth, or *acedia* as it was called. What could possibly be lazy about constantly being on the go?

*Acedia* is the post-classical Latin equivalent of the ancient Greek word *akēdía*. It is a negative word: < *a-* not, without + *kēdos* care, concern. Literally, it means a 'non-caring-state'.

The lack of care that is the hallmark of *acedia*, is the care for what we fundamentally *are*; the 'despairing refusal to be oneself' as Kierkegaard put it.<sup>1</sup> This perspective is shared by the Daoist tradition. The antidote, suggested by both traditions, is stillness, or as Joseph Pieper put it, 'leisure'<sup>2</sup>:

Leisure, it must be clearly understood, is a mental and spiritual attitude — not simply the result of external factors, it is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a weekend or a vacation. It is, in the first place, an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul, and as such utterly contrary to the ideal of 'worker' ...

Compared with the exclusive ideal of work as activity, leisure implies ... an attitude of non-activity, of inward calm, of silence; it means not being 'busy', but letting things happen.

Leisure is a form of silence, of that silence which is the prerequisite of the apprehension of reality: only the silent hear and those who do not remain silent do not hear. Silence, as it is used in this context, does not mean 'dumbness' or 'noiselessness'; it means more nearly that the soul's power to 'answer' to the reality of the world is left undisturbed. For leisure is a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the whole of creation.<sup>3</sup>

Here's a little exercise to try. Find a comfortable place, and sit there for five minutes without feeling the need to do anything. Just sit there and enjoy sitting there. Notice whether you start to feel guilty; that you ought to be doing something, rather than wasting your time sitting around.

As a culture, we tend to feel that we have to justify our existence with activity, that it's not enough just to be here. The great spiritual traditions, east and west, tend to hold the opposite view: that it is busyness that is the waste of time, distracting us from the real work of life, namely, engaging with reality.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Pieper, J., *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964) p.27.

<sup>2</sup> *Musse* in German.

<sup>3</sup> Pieper, J., *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, pp.27-28.

The *Zhuangzi* puts it this way:

The Sage's stillness is not because (he) says 'stillness is good', and so is still. The ten thousand things are not enough to disorder his heart-mind. That is why he is still.

When water is still, its brightness reflects the whiskers and eyebrows. Level, centred, and in accordance (with what it reflects), great craftsmen take their standard from it. If still water is bright, how much more so is pure spirit (*jingshen*)! The still heart-mind of the sage is the reflection of heaven and earth, the mirror of the ten thousand things.<sup>4</sup>

It should be mentioned that stillness and leisure are not to be confused with indolence, which is equally as slothful as busyness in its refusal to be present. Daoist practices are designed to enable one to be present in any and all of the five modes: lying down, sitting, standing, moving and interacting with people, in short, in all of the activities of life. The phrase from the *Laozi* that encapsulates this is, 'Wu wei (do nothing) and nothing is not done'.<sup>5</sup>

This is the subject of *song xin*, relaxing the heart-mind. Relaxation, letting go, is a prerequisite for stillness. The place to start, as with all of our practices, is standing – *zhan zhuang* – as we do in Tai Chi Fundamentals (Energy Gates Neigong). It is the easiest way to learn to let go, merge your mind with your body, and become present. From there, breathing practices such as those outlined in Bruce's *Relaxing Into Your Being*,<sup>6</sup> will take you further.

Of course, not everyone is interested in reflecting Heaven and Earth, or steeping themselves in the whole of creation. But they are interested in being healthy and happy, and our capacity for both relies on our ability to be present. We are living in an age of distraction and anxiety. The two are directly linked. Learning to settle the mind into the body is the antidote. There is a famous passage in the *Zhuangzi* that contrasts the busy attitude, with the Daoist *wu wei* orientation:

Huizi said to Zhuangzi: 'I have a big tree. ... Its big trunk is so contorted and swollen that it cannot be measured, its smaller limbs are so bent and crooked that they are not fit for the compass and carpenter's square. It stands, and no carpenter would give it a backwards glance. Today, your words are big and useless, and everyone similarly discards them.'

Zhuangzi said: '... Now you have this big tree, and you worrying about its uselessness. Why not plant it in Nowhere-land, in the Broad-and-Boundless fields? Then you can pause and do nothing (*wu wei*) beside it, or lie under it and sleep free and easy (*xiao yao*). It'll not die young from an axe or hatchet, nothing will harm it. Being without use, it is neither worried nor surrounded by suffering.'<sup>7</sup>

If we can stand like Huizi's tree, or lie beneath its canopy with Zhuangzi, we might just find the stillness that enables us to be open to what is and what we are.

Furthermore, there is also a certain serenity in leisure. ... Leisure is not the attitude of mind of those who actively intervene, but of those who are open to everything; not those who grab and grab hold, but of those who leave the reigns loose and who are free and easy themselves ...<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps next time you feel the pressure and expectation that you should be getting on with things, don't just do something, stand there.

4 ICS *Zhuangzi*: 13/34/14-16.

5 *Laozi* 37.

6 Frantzis, B.K., *Relaxing Into Your Being* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2002).

7 ICS *Zhuangzi*: 1/3/4-10.

8 Pieper, J., *Leisure the Basis of Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), pp.28.