

NOT-DOING

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A distinction is made between skills of living and the art of living. Skills of living refers to specific practices and techniques one can utilize to improve one's life, such as behavioral self-control strategies and meditation (Mikulas, 1983). Art of living refers to one's mental set and attitude toward living, including those that occur while one is developing skills of living. Included here are moods, associations, expectations, and intentions. Healthy and helpful parts of the art of living include a welcoming openness, interested reflection, being in the here and now, taking responsibility, making friends with oneself, having fun, and not-doing (Mikulas, 2002). Over time I have come to appreciate more and more the significance, power, and range of applicability of not-doing.

The meaning of not-doing is very similar to some meanings of wu wei, a central concept of Taoism, such as the definition of wu wei as "doing nothing unnatural". Other related meanings of wu wei include allowing events to flow naturally, refraining from activity contrary to nature, not forcing, taking no unnecessary action, and abiding in harmony with Tao. Wu wei has slightly different meanings in different Taoist texts. In the Tao-te ching it means going with the principles of the Tao, in an active non-forceful way; while in Chuang-tzu it is more non-interference (Wong, 1997). Cultivating wu wei, and thus not-doing, is a central Taoist practice.

NOT-DOING

When Max the cat is sleeping on the living room floor, we can walk right next to him and not disturb him. But one day he needed to go to the vet for yearly shots. As I casually approached him, he quickly woke up and took off running for a round of catch the cat. How did he know? In my attempt to be natural and casual, I had what my wife called "sneaky feet". I eventually overcame sneaky feet by not trying so hard to not have sneaky feet, not-doing.

A magic trick often involves one or more "moves", such as dropping a coin in a pocket or palming off the top card of a deck of cards. Misdirection is one way hiding a move. But more important is doing the move as a part of other actions, and doing it in such a natural way it doesn't catch the viewers' attention. The magician casually reaches for the pen in his pocket and drops off the coin. When mastering a new trick, the magician often tries hard to look natural when doing the move. But this trying causes the move to be unnatural and to attract attention. It is only with practice and not trying to look natural that the move eventually disappears, not-doing. Not trying to make the move natural is one of the most common pieces of advice from professional magicians.

In acting, an actor may make the mistake of trying to act funny, when it is the situation that is funny if he just behaves naturally. Common advice from actors such as James

Dean is don't try to "act"; rather, simply do what is required in the here and now with no preconceptions, not-doing.

Early in his dating, a young teenage boy asks for advice from his mother. She responds with perhaps the most common suggestion, "Just be yourself." But instead, the boy tries to act in a way that fits his image of how an ideal date should act, perhaps imitating a popular peer. Often this is not a good strategy, and he would have done better by less trying and more being himself, not-doing.

The essence of not-doing is to allow the situation to spontaneously bring forth the action which is appropriate. When one's self intervenes and tries to "do" something, one's action is often less appropriate and/or less compassionate. Clinically, this often manifests as adding an unnecessary component of heaviness or melodrama to one's life, which may increase anxiety and/or depression. An important therapeutic component for many people is learning to simply do what is needed without adding unnecessary baggage.

In therapeutic and personal growth situations, not-doing often overlaps with acceptance. Sometimes one does something to change the situation and/or one's behavior. Other times it is better to alter one's mental set to be more accepting of the situation, to fight less against the natural or inevitable flow of events, particularly when one cannot or should not alter the situation (Shapiro, 2003; Shapiro & Astin, 1998).

In Constructivism it is appreciated how people search for and create meaning in their realities. Not-doing warns of the existential trap of attachments to some assigned meanings and social-roles, which may impair one's effectiveness and growth. For example, consider people who inaccurately perceive themselves as living in a hostile world that they are in conflict with and/or estranged from. They may adopt a confrontational stance toward living which reduces their effectiveness, increases their problems, and works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Therapy may help those people perceive more accurately, think more rationally, and behave more appropriately. In addition, not doing addresses the learned need to take some type of stance toward the world.

MEDITATION

The practice of meditation can be described in terms of four components: form, object, behaviors of mind, and attitude. Form refers to what one does with the body during meditation, such as sitting or walking. Object refers to the primary stimulus of one's attention during meditation, such as one's breathing, an external visual or auditory stimulus, a sound or phrase said to oneself, or an imagined being or scene. The object usually determines whether a particular practice is primarily religious, therapeutic, educational, occult, or something else. Behaviors of the mind refers to whether the emphasis is cultivating concentration and/or mindfulness. And the attitude of meditation is the mental set in which one approaches meditation (Nairn, 1999; Suzuki, 1970). This attitude is the same as the art of living, discussed in the first paragraph, including not-

doing. Attitude is the least well understood and emphasized of the four components of meditation; yet the best advice for a mediator, from beginner to advanced practitioner, is often related to attitude.

An important part of meditation attitude is letting be, rather than trying to accomplish something. There may be many reasons why one meditates and various expected benefits. This is fine and appropriate. But during meditation one should simply be in the here and now of doing the practice, not trying to accomplish something. Alan Watts gave parallel examples, such as singing and dancing. The purpose of singing is not to get to the end of the song; the purpose of dancing is not to get to the other side of the dance floor. These activities should be enjoyed in themselves. The same should be true for meditation. But for most people this is a major obstacle to optimal meditation. They try hard to concentrate, or to be aware, or to recreate yesterday's experiences. Hearing that one thing they want to accomplish is not trying to accomplish anything is both paradoxical and frustrating at first. Then they gradually learn not-doing. Chögyam Trungpa was struck and amused by the fact that for many Americans a major obstacle to meditation was a feeling that they were "wasting time"; they should be doing something instead.

Relative to the art of living, meditation is a microcosm of living in general. Consider the part of the art of making friends with oneself. During meditation one can become aware of the mental dynamics that keep one from being friends with oneself (e.g., "I'm not as good as the others in my group." "I feel foolish." "I can't do this.") After developing this awareness in the relatively simple mediation situation, one can gradually become more aware of similar dynamics in more complex situations. The same is true for not-doing, although it is much subtler than for being friends with oneself.

ENLIGHTENMENT

One understanding of enlightenment is that it is always already the case, and therefore there is nothing one can do or has to do to obtain enlightenment. If enlightenment is something one eventually obtains, then it is limited in time and outside of oneself, both of which are denied by the viewpoint of this particular understanding. One is already enlightened, even if the personal level self does not realize it. This profound understanding can be found in dzogchen, mahamudra, advaita-vedanta, zen, and the teachings of Krishnamurti and Adi Da.

Dzogchen ("great perfection") is the highest and primary teaching of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. It is taught that the enlightened pure mind is always present; one must only wake up to one's natural condition. To facilitate this awakening one must cease the doing of the ego, not-doing (Ray, 2001). Mahamudra ("great seal"), the highest teaching of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, makes the same points. Discussing the absence of contrivance in mahamudra, Kalu Rinpoche (1997, p. 234) said, "we leave the mind as it is, without altering it through any intervention or contrivance whatsoever. We do not try to produce anything or improve on our present state of mind."

The yoga of advaita-vedanta (“nondual end of the vedas”) postulates the equivalence of the individual and God/fundamental-ground. Union with God is not something to be achieved, it is already the case; it just has to be realized. Speaking from this perspective, relative to not-doing, Jean Klein (1995, p 77-81) recommends giving up knowing and intentional living. This allows openness to life, being “completely open to the moment itself”.

Zen is a beautiful Japanese blend of Indian Buddhism and Chinese Taoism, with wu wei often very apparent, as in the classic poem by Seng-tsan, the third Chinese patriarch of Zen (Foster & Shoemaker, 1996). The poem encourages letting things be, and discourages activities such as agreeing and disagreeing, selecting and rejecting, and getting lost in other dualities. “There is no need to seek, the truth, just put a stop to your opinions.” Shikantaza is a form of Zen meditation in which one simply sits, without supporting techniques such as breath counting. It is based on the not-doing understanding that this meditation is not to attain enlightenment, but rather is a manifestation/realization of the ever-present enlightened nature.

Krishnamurti (e.g., 1954) was a popular and respected spiritual teacher whose teaching included mindfulness plus not-doing. He taught that there is no path or method for enlightenment. In fact, the search itself is a trap. The way out is to give up the search and simply see things as they are, “choiceless awareness”. Toni Packer (2002), combining Zen and Krishnamurti, helps her students realize that there is no required practice and nothing to do. It is a matter of cultivating a here and now presence.

THE PERSONAL SELF

A central and existential question relative to doing and not-doing is: who or what is the doer? Most of the answer to this question is beyond the scope of this paper (cf. Mikulas, 2002), but a few summary points are relevant. First, is that “doing” is associated with a subjective sense of self that through an act of will does something. This personal self inhabits an idiosyncratic, learned, conscious reality. Dynamically, doing is a means to perpetuate the sense that the self is a constantly existing entity, and to maintain beliefs about the nature and function of the self. This is part of how the self-centered personal reality is constructed; in Constructivism humans are understood as “dynamically developmental self-organizing systems”.

Since it is the personal self which is the doer, getting the self out of the way is often part of not-doing. At first the musician is personally involved with playing a piece on the instrument. A personal self through an act of will is using an instrument to generate music. But later, the self may disappear, the musician and instrument become one, and music is simply happening. This occurs in many cases of being “in the zone” in sports (Murphy & White, 1995) and what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) calls the “flow” experience.

Enlightenment practices include systematic exploring and passing through the subjective self (e.g., Ramana Maharshi’s self-inquiry, vipassana, depth psychology) and surrendering the personal self and individual will to something transpersonal, such as

God, Self, or big mind (e.g., Christian mysticism, karma yoga). There are two major traps here. The first trap is the common mistaken idea that one must suppress, undo, or kill the personal self in order to become enlightened. But there is no problem with the personal self as a functional entity at the personal level of being. The problem is attachments to this self as the totality of who one is, attachments which veil the enlightened mind and hinder the effectiveness of the personal self. What is needed here is not-doing, not doing in; it is a matter of awakening to one's true nature.

The second trap ensnares practically everyone on the path of awakening. The personal self converts the awakening into a self adventure. Now it is the self which is awakening and transcending the self, which, of course, is impossible. The personal self cannot move into the transpersonal, cannot become enlightened! But the self deceives itself that it is developing transpersonally or spiritually, when it is really strengthening egocentricity. Chögyam Trungpa (1973) talked about this in terms of "spiritual materialism". Again, part or all of the solution is not-doing.

QUALIFICATIONS

Not-doing does not mean one should be passive or uncaring. On the contrary, most of us need to be actively in the world doing things with personal, professional, and social implications. The trick is to keep from imposing on what we do a personal melodrama of expectations and demands. If some part of the world does not match how we think it should be, this discrepancy can be a stimulus to action. But, if in addition, we upset ourselves over the discrepancy, then we have created unnecessary suffering and probably reduced our effectiveness.

One of the most important factors in biological and psychological health is the person's belief in personal control, that one can do what is required in various situations (Shapiro & Astin, 1998). It would be a mistake to impair this in the cause of not-doing. Rather, in clinical situations, one helps the client develop a sense of personal control, usually by developing self-control skills and strategies; but with a few clients this development can be done with a not-doing attitude. Relatedly, in some clinical cases it may be necessary to work with the personal self, such as integrating the self or altering the self as object (e.g., self-concept, self-esteem). For many of these cases it would be undesirable to emphasize by-passing or transcending the self, as in some enlightenment practices.

Relative to enlightenment, if there is nothing that must be done, then what is one to do? One utilizes the practices of the great wisdom traditions, including not-doing, to facilitate awakening; after which one realizes that one did not have to do anything, but needed to do things to realize this. Strongly recommended here is ordering one's life along moral and practical guidelines, plus the four universal somato-psycho-spiritual practices of quieting the mind, increasing awareness, opening the heart, and reducing attachments (Mikulak, 1987, 2002). These practices will improve bodily health, psychological well-being, and happiness and peace-of-mind; and they will uncover the

transpersonal level of being, the domain of enlightenment. And all of these practices are optimally done with an attitude of not-doing.

For example, one might decide it is good to regularly floss one's teeth. One should then simply do it. One should not run around town bragging about being a flosser or believe one is more spiritually advanced than someone who flosses less. Constructing a temple for floss or philosophizing about the metaphysics of floss is not helpful. Similarly with a spiritual practice. One simply does the practice with an attitude of not doing.

SUMMARY

Not-doing can facilitate a wide range of activities, including interpersonal relationships, sports, and art. Clinically it can reduce stress and increase openness and flexibility. Spiritually it is a basic Taoist practice and a high teaching in many wisdom traditions. It also illuminates other dynamics, such as related to nature of the self and will. Not doing is very powerful and pervasive, and the beauty is there is nothing to do.

On a practical level, one simply relaxes into the here and now and simply does what needs to be done, with humor and compassion, and without adding unnecessary heaviness or melodrama. One plays with not-doing and doesn't convert it into another form of doing. One gradually gets out of the way and discovers an easier way of being. Not...

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