

The Potency of The Pause

Leveraging Stillness

Jaspal Bajwa

Executive-Coach for Transformational Leadership & Consultant for Organization Vitality

The Covid 19 crisis has forced an unprecedented global lockdown. Amidst the chaos, new learnings are being triggered. One such is to better understand the crucial role of the 'Pause' button, before we can once again, press 'Play'.



Many of us recall hearing 'Ready, Get Set, Go!' during Track & Field sports events at school. I can still remember waiting for the starter's pistol with a thumping heart. In that single moment – everything seems to come together. There is a creative tension between:

Stillness AND Potentiality.

The Pause invariably helps create a space – for what is waiting to emerge. Some say it is as if the whole cosmos comes together to conspire **in the moment**. In the Here and Now.

Later in life, the 'Go! Go! Go!' bug bites. Spurred on by hyper-competition, a frenetic pace takes over. Instead of bursts of well-calibrated energy – we mutate into Adrenaline-Junkies constantly living on a 'High'. The poet, WH Davies thus went on to say:

"A poor life this if, full of care,

We have no time to stand and stare"

Rhythms of Life

"Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better" remarked Albert Einstein.

Leonardo da Vinci, one of the greatest geniuses who has ever lived, was even more eloquent:
"Human subtlety will never devise an invention more beautiful, more simple or more direct than does nature because in her inventions nothing is lacking, and nothing is superfluous."

A fascinating aspect in Nature is the play of 'Rhythm'. Not just the ups and downs – but also the pauses in between. This is so evident with every breath we take. As it is with every sunrise and sunset we watch with wonder and awe. Or for that matter, the eternal change of seasons, eras and epochs.

Understanding this, transformational leaders intuitively toggle back and forth between apparent polarities. One such paradox is the ability to 'Zoom-in' AND 'Zoom-out' (ZiZo). Over-relying on either –

means missing the woods for the trees; or missing out on connecting with the Totality of the experience.
Ref: 1

In each cycle, at the top of the curve, as well as at the bottom of the trough, lies a **point of inflection**. That is when the tide turns. The key question is – what exactly is the role played by the moment of Stillness (the Pause)? Is it only a moment of transition – a change in trajectory? Either to **ascend** or to **descend**. Or could the pause hide a portal to **transcend** and change the game altogether?

Pause, Reboot and Play

“If you give me six hours to chop down a tree, I will spend the first four sharpening the axe” said Abraham Lincoln.

A few years back, I relearnt the importance of the Pause before rushing into action.

This opportunity came my way when I signed up for a *Kyudo* Zen Retreat in Vermont. *Kyudo* is the ancient art of archery which was practised by samurai warriors. We were fortunate to have a *Sensei* whose forefathers had been teachers to the Japanese emperor’s family.

For the first day or two, all we learnt was the discipline of addressing with respect - the equipment and the arena. Standing upright, holding the bow lightly by our side, our Sensei guided us to envision being like a tree. Gently but firmly, we were made to learn the subtle art of patience with an attitude of respect:

I can still hear the Sensei’s quiet voice inside my head: *‘Breathe evenly. Imagine your feet reaching deep into the ground, like the roots of a tree. Your upright spine is like the strong trunk. Your eyes gazing evenly ahead. Maintain a relaxed yet alert stance. Envision reaching for the stars like the branches of the tall tree’*.

It was much later that we were permitted to take our first shot. This happened only after we had attained some proficiency to remain in the moment ... never giving-in to the urge for a hurried shot. Nor falling prey to anxiety by being overly concerned with hitting the target. *“Just take the shot as effortlessly and as spontaneously as you can. Gently release the arrow. Allow it to go, where it needs to go”*. Sure enough, as we **learnt to get out of our own way**, the arrow increasingly found its mark.

With each passing day, we got better in the art form. The discipline of being **‘in-the-moment’** was not easy. Relentless hours of grueling practice helped. What helped even more was the deep reflection, as we went about the daily-chores of washing utensils and helping in the community-kitchen.

In the evening, we heard stories about how the knights & samurai warriors in years gone by, always took a moment of quiet meditative contemplation before entering the day’s fray. *“Deliberate much before saying or doing anything, for you will not have the power of recalling what is said or done”* said the great Stoic teacher, Epictetus. The slim book containing his teachings – *‘The Enchiridion’* – has been found at the bedside of many a world leader. Ref: 2

By the end of the retreat, the close parallels with life became more and more evident to all participants at the Retreat.

The key takeaways for my own journey of Life 'n Leadership were:

1. **Be Grounded** - Calm like the eye of the storm, even as you skilfully participate in swift (and sometimes violent) action which rages all around. Practice intuitive '**Play in the Moment**'.
2. Develop the art of **Active Listening**. Respect. Respond, not React. Seek inspiration from the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi - "Lord, grant that I may not seek so much to be understood, as to understand."
3. **Create the Space** for what is waiting to emerge.
 - a. **Respect Silence**: when creating music, it is said the space between the notes can make all the difference. The same applies to the art of Communication and Executive Storytelling.
 - b. **Create space for your team to grow** – Enable them to find meaning & purpose. Find opportunity and time to express themselves. Learn to respect each other. Help build 'Team EI' (emotional intelligence)
 - c. Learn the nuanced art of '**Less is More**'. *"The quieter you become, the more you hear"*
~ said the ancient sage Lao Tzu & Rumi.

To summarize:

The fullness of Life **IS** in the Here and Now. Each moment is complete in every respect. It encompasses the past and the future. Action AND Non-Action. And the Pause in between.

Cultivate an air of un-anxious Presence. **Play with Heart** - not permitting the 'Monkey-Mind' to come in the way. Neither be obsessed with your opponent, nor the scoreboard. Not even with your own technical prowess. Ref: 3 & 4

Tap into the immense **Potency of the Pause**. Explore the point of inflection, there lies a hidden portal to transcend. When tapped, it is possible to swing open the door to Creativity, Compassion, Excellence and Joy.

References:

1. Jaspal Bajwa: *The Play of Paradox*. Sunya Circle - <https://blog.sunyacircle.com/archives/121>
2. *Epictetus - The Enchiridion* – www.forgottenbooks.org
3. Herrigel, Eugen (1953): *Zen in the Art of Archery*. [United States]: Vigeo Press Reprint – Ch. 11
4. Suzuki, Daisetz Taitaro: *Zen Buddhism and its Influence on Japanese Culture* : Kyoto – The Eastern Buddhist Society, 1938 – Contains a translation of a treatise – '*The Unmoved Understanding*' by the great Zen Master – Takuan. It explains at length, the connection between Zen and art of swordsmanship.