

# The Price of Making Money

by Peter Ng

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In the face of the current global economic crisis, many people are questioning the way business is conducted and its pressures. A leading global financier has found meditative prayer offers a practical way through the stresses and strains of modern corporate capitalism.

Today we face more obstacles than ever before in our quest to live our lives with meaning, depth, significance and purpose. The distractions and demands that characterise much of modern living are particularly evident in the life of the business executive.

The unrelenting globalisation of business requires more business travel, which strains family life. Managing an international business across multiple time zones is taxing on both the physical and mental capacities of more and more executives. And of course, the advances of telecommunication and technology, which have produced electronic mail over the internet, keep many constantly on their toes.

In the past, the home or holiday provided much-needed refuge from work and the office. But today the executive is hooked to the BlackBerry. You can see this most vividly in how quickly the business traveller whips out a BlackBerry device the moment a plane lands at an airport, anxious to find out what email messages had been sent to him or her during the flight. The other problem of a modern lifestyle is that we are all in thrall to consumption; both our own consumption and the consumption of people who buy the goods or services that we produce. We are all in some kind of a rat race. The consumerist lifestyle forces people to work too hard in order to fulfil their consumer ambitions. Even sports and hobbies, which are supposed to be antidotes to our busyness, can themselves be busy occupations. Instead of giving relief, they often add to our exhaustion.

John Main, the Benedictine monk who introduced a new generation to meditative prayer, was well aware of the predicament of modern people when he said: "It's as though we were rushing through our lives, and in our hearts there is the flame of a candle. Because we are moving at such high speed, this essential interior flame is always on the point of going out. But when we sit down to meditate, when we become still,

when we are not thinking in terms of our success or self-importance, of our own will, when we are just in the presence of the One who is, then the flame begins to burn brightly. We begin to understand ourselves and others in terms of light, warmth and love.”

Fr John also saw meditation as meeting the urgent need of modern people who live their lives at an incredibly shallow level and who desperately seek depth and meaning. “None of us”, he said, “would meditate unless it had occurred to us that there is more to life than just being producers or consumers. All of us know that we can’t find any enduring or ultimate meaning in just producing or consuming. So we seek ultimate meaning. And we come to meditation because an unerring instinct tells us that, just as we can’t find any ultimate satisfaction in consuming or producing, so we cannot find ultimate meaning outside of ourselves. We have to begin with ourselves.”

I first began to learn to meditate about 20 years ago. My wife, Patricia, and I were then quite contented at the level of material needs. Our standard of living well exceeded what we had expected in our youth. I was doing well in my career and enjoying greatly the job of investing money. Family life was happy. We had two children who were then entering their teenage years. Patricia had quit her job five years earlier to spend more time with them, and she felt more fulfilled in caring for them than at her job.

Yet there was for both of us a restlessness amid the material contentment. We felt strongly that there was more to life than material comfort and career satisfaction. In a kind of mid-life crisis, we were searching for a spiritual path that could bring more meaning into our lives.

In hindsight, I discovered Christian meditation at that critical juncture of my life. At that point, the more likely direction of my career would have been an acceleration of the pace, to try to get to the top faster. Whether I succeeded in my career goal is now hypothetical, of course. But I feel sure that I would have paid a heavy price in terms of family welfare, personal relationships, health and spiritual development. Meditation put me on the road less travelled. I changed to a different gear, which has made the journey thus far more fulfilling, has restored a balance in lifestyle, and brought greater depth and meaning. The discipline of meditation was a necessary antidote to my busyness as a business executive. When I first began to meditate, it took me about two years to adjust my lifestyle and routine just to accommodate the two daily periods of meditation. But that adjustment process was a blessing as it made me realise that I had been wasting a fair amount of time in trivial pursuits or forms of addiction. For example, I used to spend long

hours on some evenings playing the Chinese game of mah-jong with friends, sometimes into the early hours of the morning.

At work, I spent an inordinate amount of time in business socialising. Much of it was unnecessary in the sense that my presence was not essential, and it really made no difference to my business or to the hosts whether I were attending those functions or not. By weaning myself away from those trivial activities, I not only found the time for the twice daily periods of meditation, but also the time for worthwhile causes, in my case to serve the World Community for Christian Meditation – the community that follows Main’s teaching – as the national coordinator for Singapore, and also as a trustee of WCCM. With the practice of meditation, I have found a new perspective of time and how to use it wisely. I now guard carefully my leisure hours, and have learnt how to say “no” to unimportant demands on my time, giving priority to relationships. I don’t think I have become antisocial; I enjoy my regular games of tennis and golf with friends and business associates, but try to limit the hours spent on them. With the practice of meditation, I have come to value silence and solitude more, and this requires a certain distancing from noise and crowds, and some abstinence from television and other distractions.

From my own experience, it can truly be said that in giving time to meditation, we are not losing but, in fact, gaining time. This gain is not only at the profound level of personal transformation, which considerably enhances the quality of our life and our work, but also at the mundane level in the sense that meditation will lead you to shed certain lifestyle habits that waste time.

As a frequent business traveller, I have also found meditation very helpful in mitigating jet lag. I can rest better and sleep well, even at odd hours. When we are far away from home in a distant country in a totally different time zone, there is an inevitable dislocation to our regular pattern and routine of life and work.

The morning and evening meditation, regardless of where we are, provides a certain stability and anchor that mitigates the dislocation of travel.

I recently read an inspiring book, entitled *Chasing Daylight*, by the former chief executive of accounting firm KPMG, Eugene O’Kelly. In May, 2005, O’Kelly stepped into his doctor’s office with a full business calendar and a lifetime of plans on his mind. This was how he described his job: “This job of CEO was incredibly privileged, but it was tough, relentless, full of pressure. My calendar was perpetually extended out over the next 18 months. I was

always moving at 100 miles per hour. I worked all the time. I worked weekends. I worked late into many nights. I missed every school function for my younger daughter. For the first 10 years of my marriage, my wife and I rarely went on vacation. Before this sounds like complaining, I must be honest. As long as I believed I could handle such a high-pressure position, I wanted it. I was profoundly devoted to and love my family. But I could not have settled for a lesser job. People don't walk into the top spot. They are driven."

That day in the doctor's office, O'Kelly was told that he had brain cancer, and less than 100 days to live. From that moment, he left his job and set about living his remaining days focusing on what was really important: his family, re-linking with friends, restoring relationships, and preparing to die well.

Before he died, he wrote the following words: "I had long believed that a successful business person could, if so inclined, live a spiritual life. And to do so it wasn't necessary to quit the boardroom, chuck it all and live in an ashram, as if only a physical departure that dramatic would confirm a depth of feeling about larger issues, including one's soul.

"After my diagnosis, I still believed that. But I also discovered depths to which a business person rarely goes. I learned how worthwhile it was to visit there, and sooner rather than later, because it may bring one greater success as a business person and as human being. You can call what I went through a spiritual journey, a journey of the soul. A journey that allowed me to experience what was there all along but had been hidden, thanks to the distractions of the world."

And what did O'Kelly say he learned in the 100 days before he died? He itemised four key areas: enjoying each moment so much that time seems actually to slow down; clarity and simplicity; spontaneity and the need to rekindle it in our lives; spending time thinking about our death and preparing for it. It was evident in those words that O'Kelly had moved into a level of contemplative consciousness.

He stepped off the treadmill of a busy life because of his imminent death. He wished he had stepped out earlier. Fr John saw that consumerism could lead to a dehumanising of life, and viewed prayer – meditation – as a way of breaking out of that pattern. "It is so easy for us to become dehumanised, to become just consumers in a materialistic, commercial society," said Fr John. "It is so easy to live our lives in some sort of mechanical way, going through routines each day, but losing the sense of freshness, of creativity, of freedom.

As a result, we live our lives in a sort of rush, one routine following the next, distracted perhaps for a bit by entertainment, by pleasure, or deadened by the pressure of work or play. To break out of this cycle, each one of us must learn to stop the rush of activity. We must learn the priority of being. We must learn to be still. That's what our regular times of meditation are about."

From my experience, even if we find the work of meditation a constant struggle, because of the unavoidable distractions, the discipline of taking time out every morning and evening will bear much fruit. Because of that discipline, we learn to establish the right priorities, and to distinguish between what is important and what is unnecessary. This will benefit not only our own lives and our families. It will also make a big positive experience to the life of our colleague and subordinates. We will respect their need for life balance by not making unreasonable demands on their time.

John Main had a humorous way of saying why busy people should meditate: so that they do not become busybodies. To meditate requires an act of faith. But beginning in faith will lead us to an experience that validates that faith. And the experience is that a contemplative practice built into the everyday life of a business person will result in a better business person and a more fulfilled human being.

In the words of St Bernard, we need to attend to the business of businesses, and our first business as human beings is to allow the work of God to be done in us.