

Seeking Silence & Stillness in the Rush of Business Life by Knowledge@Wharton

□Pico Iyer -- essayist, author, travel writer and thinker -- has a unique perspective on many things. His physical domain ranges from California (where he lived as a child) and England (where he studied) to Cuba, North Korea and Ethiopia (which he visited) and Japan (where he resides). His mental domain knows no limiting boundaries. In this interview with Wharton associate dean and chief information officer Deirdre Woods and Knowledge@Wharton, Iyer spoke on an unusual topic -- the value of silence and stillness amid the rush of business. If we spend too much time in the MTV rhythm, says Iyer, we won't be able to cultivate the parts of us that need more slowness. Iyer has written several books, including *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama* and most recently, *The Man Within My Head*.

□An edited version of the transcript follows:

□Knowledge@Wharton: Chronic distractibility seems to have become part of our lives. What do you think are the causes? And what are the consequences for individuals and organizations?

□Pico Iyer: The causes are the acceleration of the world, the bombardment of information that comes in on all of us at the moment, increasing with each year, and, ironically, our methods of communication. Somehow, the more ways of connecting and communicating we have, the more inundated we are and the harder it may be for us to communicate deeply. I feel almost as if many of us are on an accelerating roller coaster that none of us quite wanted or asked to get onto. But now we don't know quite how to get off. My image of the modern world is of teenagers joy-riding in a Porsche at 160 miles an hour around blind curves -- which is the excitement of it, but also sometimes the unsettling quality. So the more time-saving gadgets we have in our lives, the less time we have.

□Knowledge@Wharton: What is the antidote to this condition and how have you dealt with it in your own life?

□Iyer: All of us -- more and more of us at least -- are trying to unplug and find practical methods to disconnect. Almost everybody I know has this sense of overdosing on information and getting dizzy living at post-human speeds. Nearly everybody I know does something to try to remove herself to clear her head and to have enough time and space to think. Some of my friends go for runs every day. Some do yoga. Some cook. Some meditate. All of us instinctively feel that something inside us is crying out for more spaciousness and stillness to offset the exhilarations of this movement and the fun and diversion of the modern world.

□What I do is probably pretty extreme and maybe even close to being a Luddite. I live in

rural Japan without any media and with no TV I understand. Until recently [I had] just dial-up Internet. I don't have a car or a bicycle or any means of transportation other than my feet. I have never used a cell phone, which I'm not proud of. I functioned in my mobile busy life 15 years ago without a cell phone and I feel I can still do that equally well now. I try severely and rigorously to ration my time online or in the midst of these beeping machines that seem to be moving more quickly than my mind can. I only go online at the end of my day after I've finished my writing, and then I try never to spend more than an hour on all e-mails. Beyond that, I am never online. I've never been on Facebook and I don't Tweet. I can feel the wonder and the new possibilities of those, but I just don't trust myself [to be] at the mercy of them.

□Knowledge@Wharton: We have young people who are growing up with almost relentless text messaging and Facebook connectivity and exposure to other forms of social media. What impact do you think this will have on their lives, especially their work lives?

□Iyer: I've got to admit that I am talking to you now as somebody aged 55, who's more or less tethered to the habits of my generation and all that I grew up with. If I were 16, I would be just as hooked on Twitter and texting and everything else. I think humans in some sense don't ever change. So a 16-year-old today will find ways to be just as soulful and deep and contemplative in the midst of all these new tools as I do in the midst of my old tools. But, of course, the danger is that our attention span gets ever more fragmented. The more text messages we're sending and receiving, the less time and energy and thought we have to give to everyone. And my sense is that most of us humans, when put in the way of temptation, nearly always lose out to the temptation.

□I find that with my little laptop, I have the library of Alexandria and six billion people in my room. And it's very hard not to want to communicate with them and hear what they're saying and doing. So if I had all the mechanisms that the 16-year-old has, I'm not sure I would ever get an off-screen life completely. I suppose my feeling is that if, for example, we can't read long sentences, we won't be able to read one another. And if we spend too much time in this MTV rhythm, it'll be very hard for us to cultivate those parts of us, such as understanding or empathy, that require more slowness.

□I was recently reading about one teenager in California who sent and received 300,000 texts in one month, which is 10,000 a day or 10 for every waking minute of her month. And I was wondering if she had time to do anything in the way of living. I think every generation has its dangers. When I was young there were other new machines that were likely to take me hostage. So I don't think the modern younger generation is worse off than we are and in many ways they're better off. I was on a radio program a couple of weeks ago talking about this and the host of the program said that his 17-year-old had just chosen to go off Facebook because she was finding it too overwhelming. And as we were talking, one young person after another called in to say yes, we're really having too much of this and we're trying to find a way to escape it.

□Knowledge@Wharton: Sometimes people justify this by saying that it makes them better at multitasking. Do you feel multitasking is efficient or inefficient, and why?

□Iyer: I know many people know much more about this than I do, probably both of you included. There are surveys which show that multitasking loses billions of dollars a year, that 28% of an office worker's time is lost through multitasking. They have found

that nobody can get more than three consecutive minutes free at her desk now in an office. All of this to me suggests that if you're trying to do many things at once, you can't really do any of them properly. And I'm not saying that in a censorious way but more in terms of basic human happiness. I know in my own life, my happiest moments come when I'm completely lost to a conversation or a scene or a film or a book or a piece of music. If we are multitasking and if we're skittering on the surface of ourselves in many places at once, then something in us is getting denied and neglected. And it's probably the best part of us, which is to say our soul.

□Knowledge@Wharton: What you just said reminds me of something that happened when I was at a conference and the speaker asked the people in the audience how many of them were listening to her. Of course, everyone put up their hands. And then she said, and how many of you also have your cell phones or Blackberries open in front of you and are also checking your messages? And at least half the audience put up their hands. And she said, okay, so half of you are honest about it.

□Iyer: And these are adults. I'm sure if it were a classroom, that proportion would be even higher.

□Knowledge@Wharton: Right. And then she launched into the subject of her talk which was continuous partial attention. One of the things very striking about her view was that she felt people are afraid of being disconnected. Do you agree with that view? And what might be some of the consequences?

□Iyer: I understand that view, though I don't necessarily agree with it. I was talking to one of my friends last week in Washington, and he said if you have an office job, you can't afford to be offline. And you can't afford not to be answering e-mails, even though as fast as you answer them, new ones come in. We've somehow worked our way into this corner where we feel that we can't even perform our jobs, let alone lead our lives, if we're disconnected. I'm in a luxurious position because as a writer, I am my own boss and I can live far from the office. So I disconnect myself fairly radically by spending a lot of time in a monastery where I have no access to e-mail or telephones or anything other than silence and peace and clarity. In some ways I feel that being connected in the office is a little like standing two inches away from a wall. You're getting instantly the excitement of all the latest information, but you have no way to put in perspective, to step back and really see its consequences. It's as if we're all in Plato's cave addicted to breaking news on CNN. But we never have the ability or the chance to step back far enough to see what this breaking news will mean.

□I think the fear of being disconnected quickly translates into an inability to see things in the long term. I think it's like the difference between being stuck in traffic when the radio's blasting and people are shouting and people are riding their horns. And then if you just step out of your car and climb a hill next to the freeway, within about three minutes you can instantly see the larger picture in every sense. You can breathe and you can decide exactly how you want to respond to it. But so long as you're in the middle of it, you're in the midst of the trees and can't begin to see the woods.

□Deirdre Woods: As someone who is in the trees, I think our networked world can be a positive force. One obvious example is the Arab Spring, but people also use information networks for doing things like raising money for hospitals or getting companies to backtrack on outrageous decisions. None of this would be possible without our networked, highly connected world. Is this just a kind of illusion in some sense -- that this highly

connected world is having as much impact as we think it is?

□Iyer: You're absolutely right. For example, I couldn't live in rural Japan on a tourist visa while my family and my bosses are in New York without technology. It's only e-mails and fax machines before that that allow me to live 6,000 miles from the office. And it's only planes that allow me to live a continent or an ocean away from my mother but still feel that she's only a few hours away. I'm speaking about somebody in a relatively privileged position. And I think that especially for those people who are very cut off from the world, whether by poverty or politics or circumstance, the Internet and all the things we're describing are a huge liberation. If we're in rural India today or Africa or a somewhat oppressed place like Burma or Tibet, it's as if the machines we're discussing have thrown open windows that would never have been opened for millions of people otherwise. Conversely, I think those of who are lucky enough to be in a country like this and to have quite a lot of freedom and mobility have to think a little more closely about what the machines are giving us and what they're not giving us.

□There's an inherent disequilibrium in our thinking whereby whenever something new comes along, we're understandably excited. And we see all the ways that it changes our life. But it takes us a lot longer to see things it doesn't change. For example, with cars and now with television, they've unequivocally expanded and liberated and bettered our lives. But nowadays after a few decades of living with them, we can see that they're also posing challenges, whether it's pollution or traffic jams or passivity in front of a TV. One of the things that most excites me is my sense that it's the people who are in the trees, as you said of yourself, and who know most about technology who seem to be most conscious of what technology can't do.

□When I was visiting the campus at Google, for example, I was impressed to see the meditation rooms and the trampolines and the playpens and the way that the company makes sure its workers have a lot of time free from the office, because that's where creativity takes place. When I wrote the piece in The New York Times about quiet, I was impressed to hear from one of the leading voices of Silicon Valley who wrote to me and said, many of us here observe an Internet Sabbath. We're the ones who have helped to give the world the Internet and who've helped to expand possibilities with it. But we also know that it's really important for us to spend a day every week or a couple of days offline to nourish ourselves and to be able to have the vision to see how best to guide the Internet revolution.

□I was struck that it was Intel that was the one that experimented with enforcing quiet time, four hours of uninterrupted time every Tuesday for 300 of its workers. It realized that only by turning off the machines could people come up with the ideas that would make Intel a visionary company. So, as I might have said before, I don't distrust technology. I just distrust myself using it. In other words, it's opened up this amazing candy store. It's just that I, when set loose in a candy store, never stop and then end up with a stomach ache and a headache.

□Woods: Do you have any insights about why this stuff is so addicting? As you said, you hold yourself back from it.

□Iyer: I think it's because it's so fun and so tasty. If somebody were to put a bowl of gruel or oatmeal in front of me now, I wouldn't begin to start eating it. But if somebody put a bag of tortilla chips with salsa, I would never stop. And then I would suffer the consequences. So the only reason that some of us are wary of technology is

because it's so enticing, distracting, endlessly fascinating. I find I'm only scared in life of the things that are really pleasurable. I think the addictiveness is a sign of its power and seductiveness. Television makes us quite passive. But Internet technology really engages us. It often makes us very active.

□Knowledge@Wharton: I wonder if you could go back to the point you mentioned earlier about the quiet time at some companies. Now almost every company wants its employees to be innovative. I wonder if you could speak a little bit about what you think is the value of silence and solitude in encouraging creativity, which is so critical to innovation.

□Iyer: In my experience, silence is where we come upon depth and spaciousness and intimacy. It's also where we find things inside ourselves we didn't know we had inside ourselves. When I'm talking superficially to a friend or answering an e-mail or going through my round of activities, I'm really talking from the surface of my personality. And there's very little that comes out of me that surprises me. But when I'm in silence and I can collect myself, so to speak, and begin to think slowly down through the depths of myself, it's an amazing journey into a kind of outer space, except it's inner space, into these areas that I never would have imagined exist.

□This all sounds very abstract, but 20 years ago a friend of mine here in California who teaches high school said that he takes his high school classes every spring to a Catholic monastery for three days. And that even the most jittery, 15-year-old California boy only had to be in silence for a few days and suddenly he sunk into some much deeper, more spacious and actually happier part of himself. After a couple of days there he never wanted to leave.

□I went to that same place -- although I'm not a Catholic and not a hermit -- and I did find this thrumming silence all around me. But it wasn't the absence of noise. It was the presence of something else. It was something very invigorating. And I walked straight into my little room and I began writing. And I couldn't stop writing for four-and-a-half hours. Since then, I've been back to that monastery 60-70 times, sometimes for as long as three weeks.

□I think silence is both the cradle of creativity and the one place where you can see what to do with your noisy, non-silent life. In some way, I've always felt that the paradox of any technological revolution is that you need to go offline in order to find wisdom and emotional clarity to make the best use of your online life. Online is an amazing wonder world, but you have to step back from it in order to see how to navigate it. I think that's where silence helps.

□Knowledge@Wharton: Many companies are encouraging meditation as part of wellness programs. Do you know of any evidence about what kind of results they have seen?

□Iyer: I think there's lots of great evidence. Unfortunately, I'm not an expert on this. So I haven't been keeping in touch with it. Somebody just a couple of weeks ago sent me a wonderful story about Gandhi, who apparently once said that this is a very busy day so I need to meditate two hours rather than one. I do spend a lot of time with the Dalai Lama. An empiricist and a scientist have been following him to see what are the concrete, secular, ecumenical fruits of meditation. And I think they've found that in terms of compassion, peace of mind and clarity -- they have actually been hooking machines up to monks and registering their brain movements -- there is tangible evidence

of the fruits. In Wisconsin, which is the center of a lot of this research, 200 public schools have made meditation part of the curriculum.

□Knowledge@Wharton: You've traveled extensively around the world. What have you learned about the way companies globalize their operations? And what could they do differently?

□Iyer: I'm very, very impressed by the way companies globalize. Many people I know are always criticizing globalization, and corporations are easy to find fault with. But I think that companies, by shifting their product with each market, are actually making this a much more diverse world. When McDonald's or Starbucks go to a 100 different countries, in each case the country takes that same formula and converts it into its own cultural context. For example, when I'm in Japan and I go to my local McDonald's, they're serving moon viewing burgers in September at the time of the traditional East Asian harvest moon. When I go to McDonald's in India they're serving chai and pizzas and mostly vegetarian dishes. I don't think that the world is becoming one in that sense.

□Knowledge@Wharton: Capitalism was built on the Protestant ethic. Karl Marx once famously said, "Accumulate, accumulate. That is Moses and the prophets." Is this drive towards accumulation compatible with a world view based on compassion and kindness?

□Iyer: It is compatible with it. But what I think most of us find is that beyond a point, once our material needs are met, we still have much profounder emotional and spiritual needs that material goods aren't satisfying. Once you have three cars, most people are not necessarily liberated by the fourth or fifth. In fact, they may well be imprisoned by it. Once you have one house, having a second or a third house doesn't make you feel more fluid and mobile, but less so. What I notice is the case in the West. I think it's quickly going to become the case in China and South Korea and maybe one day in India. I think accumulation itself is a terrible thing. We all need enough to get by. But accumulation as an end in itself is probably shortsighted and is never going to satisfy us.

□Woods: One of the things we've been thinking about a lot here at Wharton is our MBA curriculum and our business curriculum overall. We teach 18-to-21-year-olds. We teach 27-year-olds. And we teach 33-year-olds and then executives. Is there a place for thinking less about material goods and more about overall wealth in a business program?

□Iyer: Definitely. I think some of what you've been telling me and I've been learning from you in this conversation points that out. The fact is that businesses do try to make time for meditation. I'm thrilled that so many people in the business world are not just aware of, but are actually encouraging these reminders -- that, in some ways, affluence is not a matter of what you have but what you don't lack. If your needs are satisfied, that is the ultimate state of affluence.

□Knowledge@Wharton: One final question, based on what we've said: Do you think it's possible to be a so-called Zen capitalist? And if so, how?

□Iyer: I love that idea. And I think yes, it's not just possible but maybe desirable to have inner and outer wealth in balance. [It is] both to be trying to make the world a more comfortable and richer and more exciting place, as so many technological pioneers have done, but also to see that fundamentally it's our inner resources that are going to get us through. If you look at many of the people who in the 21st century are seen as models of worldly success, one reason we take them for models is that we feel that they

have a lot going on inwardly and invisibly. They radiate either happiness or clarity or peace or something that we envy. Zen capitalist is probably what most of us are aspiring to, because we need the capitalism in order to take care of our loved ones and ourselves and have a comfortable life, but we need Zen to make sense of that life.