Shin’ichi Tsuji  
*Slow is Beautiful: Culture as Slowness* (Surô izu byûtifuru: Ososa toshite no bunka; 2001) 


*Slow is beautiful.*

What do I mean by “slow?” In addition to the standard dictionary definitions, the word “slow” can to me also encompass the meanings of the contemporary terms “ecological” and “sustainable.” While the word “slow,” which I will use again and again, could be replaced at times with “ecological” or “sustainable,” something is inevitably lost when we try to capture our thoughts and feelings using new, not yet fully digested terminology. I want to capture that part that won’t fit completely into the vessel of our modern terminology by using the larger receptacle of a more ordinary, even banal word. With this in mind, I prefer the word “slow.”

Ah, the poetic energy that lurks within this word, which at first glance seems so very unremarkable. We can juxtapose the word “slow” with many of the basic terms that define our modern lives. Slow economy, slow technology, slow science, slow food, slow design, slow bodies, slow love… This kind of wordplay may hold the potential to liberate our imaginations. It directs our attention toward alternatives at odds with the dominant common sense of modern society—toward alternative economics, alternative technologies, alternative sciences, alternative diets, alternative aesthetics—even alternative forms of love.

But although I use the word “alternative,” I don’t mean to suggest there is any novel or groundbreaking theory at work here. On the contrary, someone familiar with these ideas might feel that I’m just re-heating something old and familiar. And in fact, “re-heating” is precisely what I aim to do.

I use the adjective “beautiful” to describe slowness. Some thirty odd years ago, American blacks proclaimed “Black is beautiful.” With this rallying cry, they crawled out from the depths of long-standing discrimination and self-hatred, and declared that they would accept and affirm themselves as they were. My stance in declaring that, “Slow is beautiful” is similar. To pronounce something beautiful is to accept and embrace it as it is, in its original form, with neither reservation nor excessive pride, without rejecting alternatives or jockeying for supremacy.

Growth, the economy, GDP, efficiency, competition, mass production, mass consumption, mass disposal, development, technology, IT, and genetic engineering. These are the watchwords of our contemporary society, which in fact comes into existence only through a mass negation of our corporeality, our daily lives, and our culture. Our hitherto humble economics, vocations, life skills, traditional wisdom, diets, our relationship with nature, our interpersonal ties, love,
aesthetics, and physicality, are all denied and belittled for being much too slow. And on their skeletal remains thrives a monster known as “affluent society.” Now this monster grows even more enormous and fast-moving, as it has risen along with globalism to dominate the entire world.

As a result, our society and times have become bloated with the curses of self-negation and self-hatred. “Slow is beautiful” is a magic spell, a prescription, a frame of mind—perhaps even a prayer—meant to resist and free us from this curse.

*Take Time: Moving and Staying*

*The odd thing was that, no matter how much time he saved, he never had any to spare; in some mysterious way, it simply vanished. Imperceptibly at first, but then quite unmistakably, his days grew shorter and shorter. Almost before he knew it, another week had gone by, and another month, and another year, and another and another.*

Michael Ende, *Momo*

Things take time. Everything takes time. In our society, the fact that things “take time” is now seen as a hindrance. It’s a bother, an annoyance, a problem to be solved, or overcome somehow. When one says that something “takes time,” they are speaking of the demand for a commodity that’s in short supply. I am reminded of the beautiful, sad words of the painter Georgia O’Keefe: “Nobody sees a flower, really, it is so small it takes time—we haven't time—and to see takes time, like to have a friend takes time.” But when did it become such a problem to “take time?” According to Wolfgang Sachs, an environmental activist and critic of civilization, regarding time and space as constraints to be overcome is one of the essential characteristics of modernity. Thus:

Any two places separated by distance are thought to be too far apart. If there are two places, the very existence of distance between them is a nuisance. Anything tied to the passage of time is—for that reason alone—already too slow. That it takes time to do things is in and of itself regarded as a waste or a loss.

People living in such times are forced to constantly struggle against the constraints of space and time. We must overcome barriers, shorten distances, and eliminate waste. As Sachs says, “acceleration” is the imperative of the times. But what is the purpose of speed? To save time, probably, and put the time saved toward something more meaningful. But where on earth does the time saved by advanced technology vanish?

According to outmoded visions of the future, wasn’t the shortening of working hours supposed to bring us an abundance of spare time? Yet, the time we save is then re-invested in saving even more time. And that time is once again put to saving even more time…
Modern society, which has left us with bloated quantities and speed, is as a matter of course not gentle on nature. According to Sachs, the looming environmental crisis can be interpreted as the result of a clash between two discrepant modes of time. On the one hand is modern time; on the other, the time that governs living organisms and the earth.

Take, for instance, one of the defining issues of the twentieth century: the consumption and depletion of non-renewable resources. In the span of one year, our industrial system consumes a quantity of oil that took the Earth a million years to build up. One could call that the very definition of waste. The age of waste is but a fleeting moment on the earth’s clock, but petroleum deposits formed over a period almost inconceivably long from the standpoint of contemporary society’s timeline are used up in a flash, like a firework in the night sky.

Or consider the issue of global warming. The Earth’s built-in system for circulating carbon has broken down as a result of the massive amounts of carbon dioxide emitted by burning fossil fuels. To put it another way, the breakneck speed of CO2 emission has outpaced the slow, leisurely pace at which the Earth absorbs and assimilates those emissions. Modern industrial time is in the midst of a head-on collision with the time of living organisms. Sachs introduces the following case. A certain species of tree in the borderlands between Canada and the United States faces likely extinction with the advance of global warming. Trees that have slowly migrated across the globe over the countless millennia since the last ice age, adapting as necessary to climate fluctuations, are unable to keep up with the rapid pace of climate change today. It is said that during changes in climate, forests can migrate up to 500 meters in a single year; but climate change marked by increases in temperature of one to two degrees Celsius every thirty years would demand that such trees move as much as five kilometers a year. The trees are not given the biological time needed for the slow process of adaptation. Living organisms will be defeated time and again in the kind of unfair competition demanded by industrial time. And this takes place at a speed that doesn’t even allow enough time to include the losers on the endangered species list. There are even prognostications that by the end of the twenty-first century a third of the species existing today will face extinction.

Even in primary industry, an intense clash between industrial time and biological time is under way. It comes down to this: modern people have no patience for the slow pace of nature’s rhythms, the rhythms by which animals and plants slowly breed, grow, mature, and finally die, only to enrich the soil with their remains. We foist the quick pace of industry on living things, as if to say, “We’re not the lazy primitives of some undeveloped country, how can we be expected to adapt ourselves to that slow pace.” In agriculture, ranching, aquaculture (one fourth of the seafood consumed in the world is commercially raised), and logging, science and technology is channeled toward producing more, faster. We turn to selective breeding, mono-cropping, chemical fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, genetic modification, cloning…

One might think we would have duly learned the high price incurred when industrial time is forcefully injected into the nature’s process through our bitter experiences in the 20th century. The “unfortunate” creatures transformed into machines for producing eggs or meat. Infectious diseases that spring up one after the other. The destruction of the natural environment. Soil degradation. Erosion of topsoil. Loss of biodiversity. Driven by the whip of industrial time,
nature—held captive and robbed of the freedom to live by its own time—is disordered, destabilized, and debased.

*Where Does the Time Saved By Technology Vanish?*

Modern society, with its emphasis on getting “more, faster,” has also given rise to grotesque disparities between North and South, developed and developing countries. Isn’t it time for those who speak of justice, fairness, equality, and democracy, to start seriously considering ways to live with “less, more slowly?” On the other hand, has going “faster” made us richer, and thus happier? It is certainly regrettable that we sacrificed nature and the people of the third world. But has living on industrial time really made us richer or happier?

Let’s just reconsider the question: where on earth does the time that high technology saves us go? Automobiles, express trains, airplanes, mobile phones and computers. We can operate the air conditioner and the bath with a single remote, while enjoying a whole range of entertainment devices in our homes. Seated in front of the computer, we can access information from around the world, and cut out the middleman to receive a variety of services using the internet. Yet, despite these advances, we remain as busy as ever. Why are we still overworked? Why do we feel more stress and pressure than ever before? Technology was supposed to make our lives easier. (That’s what we were told, at least, and we believed it). It was supposed to save us time and labor, thus freeing up time for us. But that “free-floating” time is now nowhere to be found. Doesn’t that seem a bit strange?

How about the representative technological advance of the twentieth century, the automobile? Wolfgang Sachs has written a critique of civilization entitled *For Love of the Automobile.* Let’s say person A buys a car. By doing so he eliminates much of the inconvenience he had previously encountered while commuting, taking the kids to and from school, and shopping. In other words, he can complete his errands more quickly and easily (while expending less time and labor). Or so he thought. He breathes a sigh of relief, assuming that thanks to his new car he will now be able to enjoy that free-floating time as he likes. But the reality is quite different. Now that he’s discovered how convenient having a car is, it seems a pity to let it go to waste. Thus, with increasing frequency he busies himself with travel to all sorts of new destinations. Because he has a car, he can now travel to distant or inconvenient destinations that were previously inaccessible.

“Speed is seductive. Because it gives people power,” says Sachs. Steering a speeding automobile, or sending an email across the globe in the blink of an eye, gives the intoxicating sense of liberation from the constraints of time and space. There is a pleasure in the power we gain. This is a concrete manifestation of what Descartes refers to as “Humanity as the lord and owner of nature.”

But the power of speed that one finds in an automobile is not, in the end, used to reduce time spent on the move, but instead to cross ever greater distances. Along with time, our sense of distance has been utterly transformed, and locales that once were far now seem close at hand. Conversely, we now feel that places that are physically much closer are quite distant, and we can hardly believed people once easily walked such distances.
Fifty years ago Germans drove just 2000 kilometers a year; they now drive an average of 15,000 kilometers annually. It is not just automobiles that have changed. The time freed up by new technologies is re-directed to covering greater distances, producing more power, in order attend more business meetings or sales pitches. No matter how many new roads are built the traffic never diminishes.

**Speed Sickness: The Decline of Staying and Living Together**

As Sachs says, acceleration drives growth, while growth propels greater acceleration. This is why “speed sickness” is rampant in our society. Modern people have little choice in their individual lives but to catch this disease. In Japan, children are always told prompted to “hurry up,” “move faster,” and “stop wasting time.” These days it seems like both children and adults are perpetually busy. People who aren’t busy enough are looked down upon. Our society sees such folk as useless, unpopular, superfluous. That’s the popular image, at least. Which is why people have come to fear idleness. I don’t think the word “busy” was even part of my vocabulary when I was a kid.

Let’s look once more at the example of the United States. According to one study, Americans worked an average of 142 hours per year in the 1990s than they did in the 1970s. On the other hand, American parents spend an average of just 40 minutes a week with their children. Forty-five percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 64 feel that they have less free time than they used to. This is the true face of the “liberation from time and space constraints” accomplished by those in countries on the cutting edge of technology.

“I can’t waste time on this,” seems to be the mantra of our modern age. We mutter this as we curse the waste that surrounds our daily lives and bemoan our own inefficiency. Of all the things that “take time,” those tasks not directly tied to production or profit are regarded as “chores.” This is true of housework in general. These are bothersome tasks that we would do away with altogether if only we could. Spending time on chores is considered a waste. We grumble, “I can’t waste time on this,” as we engage in chores, as if we’ve suffered some crippling loss. Its not just cleaning and laundry—even spending time with one’s family comes to be seen as a “chore.”

In the study of economics, this is the conflict between “productive” time and “reproductive” time. The latter is inferior and gets forced into the corner. All kinds of activities are unceremoniously discarded in the basket of “reproduction.” Recreation, hobbies, childcare, study, nursing the sick, chatting, praying, growing, aging, associating with friends, loving, strolling, meditating, and resting are all no more than “chores” that fail to fit into the economist’s vision of productive time.

But isn’t life the accumulation of all of these little chores? As Sachs notes, we have become too concerned with “moving.” As “movers,” we think only of moving faster. Mobility more than anything is proof of success. As we focus our efforts on arriving faster and leaving faster, we have tended to forget the value of “staying” and “stayers.” The numerous “chores” listed above each involve the art of “staying.”
Living together, coexisting, also centers on the art and wisdom of staying in one place. The more you move, the more difficult coexistence becomes. But if coexistence is of essential value to human life, then isn’t it necessary to re-learn the art of “staying.” If not staying, shouldn’t we at least learn how to move more slowly?

“Staying” takes time. Coexisting takes even more time. And as Georgia O’Keefe says, it takes time to see a small flower. Just as it takes time to make friends.

We are back where we started. Things “take time.” But we also say “take your time” to encourage someone to take it slowly, at their own pace. Life takes time. And life is something worth spending time on. Take it easy. Take it slow. Take it at your own pace. Take time.

So, go on—
Throw away your numbers
Throw away your clocks
Throw away tomorrow
Hey, Akira!
Let’s plant stars in the field

from Nanao Sakaki’s “Let’s Plant Stars”