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The Wisdom of Siddhartha: Think, Fast and Wait

By Sophia Dao



Sophia Dao is AVP & actuary at Genworth Financial. She is also the incoming chair of the Management & Personal Development Section Council. She can be reached at Sophia.dao@genworth.com.

Imagine yourself at a job interview, and your prospective employer asks: “What skills do you have? What can you do?” You respond: “I can think. I can fast. I can wait.” Do you think you’d get the job?

Siddhartha¹ did. In his search for enlightenment, Siddhartha, a son of a Brahman, tried different things, including becoming an ascetic, following the Buddha, hanging out with a famous courtesan, working as a businessman, and finally becoming a ferryman. During his time living as an ascetic, Siddhartha learned three important life skills—think, fast and wait. That was how he got a job as a businessman and went on to be a very successful one.

What does this have to do with you, an actuary who is trying to succeed in a competitive and demanding field? In this fast-paced world of instant gratification, self-indulgence and just-do-it mentality, we can all benefit from doing a little more thinking, fasting and waiting.

THINKING

As actuaries, we are paid well for our ability to think. Almost anyone can push buttons or follow procedures. Ever more jobs are being replaced by machines. Even now, I hardly interact with a live person anymore when I call a large corporation. I have a robot cleaning my house, and my smartphone acts as my travel guide. With technology making leaps and bounds in new discoveries, our life is getting easier, but our livelihood is being threatened.

Luckily, robots can’t think. This is where we add value to business and to society, and secure our future. Recently, a co-worker from the claim area, after finding out that I’m an actuary, asked to shadow me. He’s interested in having the “inside look” into what an actuary does. My first thought was “How can you watch someone think?” My second thought was “What do I really do (beside pulling my hair out and hitting my head against the wall)?”

All kidding aside, this particular incident makes me

think about what we, actuaries, do for a living. It is true that most of us are good at math and working with Excel spreadsheets, but that’s not what we are paid “big bucks” for. The higher up you go, the more you spend your day thinking of ways to solve business problems, big and small. Robots cannot do that, at least not yet. Therefore, it’s important that we continue to apply and grow our capacity to think. Otherwise we’ll eventually be replaced by robots.

As for that co-worker from claims, I found another actuary, whose role is more aligned with that co-worker’s interests, to help him out. I hope that he learned more than hitting his head against the wall!

FASTING

In Siddhartha’s days, human needs were very basic: food, drink and shelter. Thus, if one can fast, argued Siddhartha, one can have greater control of his or her life by not being pressured into doing things for food.

Applying this principle to modern day, the ability to fast means the ability to abstain from material desires. For example, if you have big mortgages and giant bills to pay every month, you always feel the pressure to hold on to a job, no matter how much you hate it. You may even be willing to compromise your principles for a steady income. On the other hand, if your needs are few, you can make decisions based on what’s right and what’s good for you.

I think this is good advice for everybody. If you think about it, most of us don’t really need all the things that we possess or want to possess. For example, I haven’t seen anyone die from not watching TV or not owning the latest iPhone. I moved recently and realized that I didn’t need half of the things I owned. While I’m not a confirmed minimalist yet (far from it), I’m working on my “fasting.” The less material things you need, the more freedom you have.

WAITING

Why wait? Because good things take time to materialize. It takes time to master new skills. It

takes time to build relationships. It takes time to establish a good reputation. If you don't master the art of waiting, you will feel disappointed constantly. Or, worse, you will rush into things only to face a crushing failure shortly after.

Consider this scenario: Jim and Joan are co-workers and are both new FSAs. Both are good workers who have a lot of potential, but they lack experience. When their boss, the team leader, quits, Joan applies for his job and gets it, since Joan is very convincing and senior management doesn't want to lose her.

Joan has never managed anyone before. Now she's in charge of a 10-people team. Due to her lack of experience, the job is too demanding. She works long hours and neglects her family, jeopardizing her marriage. After six months, Joan gets burned out. When she makes a 50-million-dollar mistake on the job, she gets fired. This experience makes Joan lose confidence in herself and feel discouraged to go after other opportunities at that level.

On the other hand, Jim doesn't think he's ready for the job and, hence, doesn't apply for it (even after the position is open again due to Joan's firing). Instead, he focuses on improving his existing skills and learns new ones. He gradually assumes more responsibilities and earns a good reputation among his peers, subordinates and senior management. A few years later, when the team-leader position is open again, Jim is the obvious choice. He excels in his new role and gets promoted again a few years later.

Now, you may argue that it's not wise for Jim to wait because he may not get another opportunity again for years. I would disagree. There are a lot of opportunities for superstars, no matter what company you work for. If you are a true superstar, doors will open for you. That's why it's wise to focus your energy on achieving "superstar" status, rather than chasing after roles that you are not ready for. Succeeding in the latter may give you instant gratification, but succeeding in the

former will give you long-term, continuous career advancement and personal satisfaction.

So, are you ready to think, fast and wait? Perhaps you are not ready to boast those skills to your prospective employers, but possessing them may help you get the job you want. More importantly, they may help you have a better, less stressful life. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ Siddhartha is the protagonist in Herman Hesse's acclaimed novel, *Siddhartha*.

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