

# *Momo*, Dogen, and the Commodification of Time

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## Abstract

The children's fantasy novel *Momo*, by Michael Ende, contains profound insights into our modern attitude toward time. This essay explores the resonances between Ende's view of time in *Momo* and the Buddhist perspective on time, particularly as expressed by the Soto Zen master Dogen. Understanding what Ende and Dogen have to say about time helps us understand the commodified way we experience time today.

The odd thing was, 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. (*Momo* 65)

One of the most remarkable novels of the late twentieth century is *Momo*, by the German writer Michael Ende. Although apparently written only for children, it contains profound insights into our modern attitude toward time. Is it a coincidence that Ende later became interested in Buddhism? (He visited Japan several times: the first trip in 1977 included a discussion with a Zen priest; the second time in 1989 to marry his second wife, Sato Mariko.) This essay will explore the deep resonances between Ende's view of time in *Momo* and the Buddhist perspective on time, particularly as expressed by the Japanese Zen master Dogen (1200–1253). These resonances are of more than literary or historical interest: understanding what Ende and Dogen have to say about time gives us important insight into how we experience time today.

How do we experience time? What social scientists have termed a “time-compression” effect means that today we seem to have much less time to do the things we need or want to do. This contributes a “manic” quality to much of life: increased stress at work and in school, sleep deprivation, up to half the U.S. work population suffering from burnout, workaholism and sometimes death from overwork, no time for family and friends, children left by themselves...

A 1992 survey by the U.S. National Recreation and Park Association found that 38 percent of Americans report “always” feeling rushed, up from 22 percent in 1971. In *The Overworked American* (also 1992) Juliet Schorr argued that Americans are working much longer hours, and more recently Joe Robinson in the *Utne Reader* (Sept-Oct 2000) claims that the United States has

now passed Japan as the most overworked land in the industrialized world. He says that the husband and wife of an average US household are now working an average of 500 more hours a year than they did in 1980. Needless to say, the Japanese situation is little — if at all ! — better. Lou Harris public opinion polls have shown a 37 percent decrease in Americans' reported leisure time over a twenty year period, leading him to assert that "Time may have become the most precious commodity in the land" (Levine 107). But what if commodifying time is itself the problem ?

One of the most amazing things about *Momo* is that it was published in 1973. Since then, the temporal nightmare it depicts has become our reality.

## Momo

"Life holds one great but commonplace mystery...time. Calendars and clocks exist to measure time, but that signifies little because we all know that an hour can seem an eternity or pass in a flash, according to how we spend it. Time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart." (55)

Michael Ende (1929–1995) became world famous for his novels *Momo* (1973) and *The Neverending Story* (1979), both of which also became commercially successful films. Although Ende rejected the film version of *Neverending Story* and even tried to stop its production, he authorized the film version of *Momo* and even appears in the opening scene. In the Author's Postscript to *Momo* (which in the film we see at the beginning) Ende tells us that he "wrote this story down from memory, just as it was told" to him by a mysterious man on a long overnight train journey (237).

We first meet Momo in the ruins of an amphitheatre, in an indistinct time and place in modern Italy. She is a homeless street child of gypsy-like appearance who does not even know her own age. Having escaped from an institution, she is adopted by the poor families living nearby, who soon find themselves visiting her often. Momo has a wonderfully calming influence and the marvelous gift of truly listening to others: for instance, she helps two old friends Salvatore and Nino end a long feud, and even gets a silent canary to start singing again ! She knows the value of each individual soul, so that even "if someone felt that his life had been an utter failure," after speaking to her he realizes "that there was only one person like himself in the whole world" (18–19).

The plot thickens around a secret army of men in grey suits who plan to rule the world and are slowly taking over the city. As we discover later, they are beings that live only on other people's time, by constantly smoking cigars rolled from other people's stolen time-lilies. They promise their "clients" more time in the future, to be stored in the Time Bank, but in return their victims must save as much time as possible by speeding up their work, cutting social life, and in the pro-

ness destroying all joy in life. The mottoes of the grey men — all too familiar to us today — are “Time is precious — Don't waste it ! Time is money — Save it !” (67).

Figaro the barber is one of their first victims. When he is in a bad mood, doubting the value of his existence and feeling “an utter failure,” he is the perfect victim for their spurious arguments and timesaving mathematics. One of the grey men recommends that he save time by eliminating all the activities that in reality give meaning and quality to his life: the time he spends with his elderly mother, with his handicapped friend Miss Daria, his social life, his reading, even his day-dreaming. Suddenly he becomes future-oriented, with disastrous consequences. “The determination to save time now so as to be able to begin a new life sometime in the future had embedded itself in his soul like a poisoned arrow,” yet by changing his lifestyle “he was becoming increasingly restless and irritable. The odd thing was that, no matter how much time he saved, he never had any to spare” and “his days grew shorter and shorter” (65).

Many other inhabitants were similarly afflicted... Admittedly, timesavers were better dressed... earned more money and had more to spend, but they looked tired, disgruntled, and sour, and there was an unfriendly light in their eyes... It had ceased to matter that people should enjoy their work and take pride in it. (66-67)

Chapter six ends: “People never seemed to notice that, by saving time, they were losing something else. No one cared to admit that life was becoming ever poorer, bleaker and more monotonous ... [for] time is life itself, and life resides in the human heart, and the more people saved, the less they had” (68).

Salvatore the brick-layer tells Momo that he often gets drunk because it is the only way he can stomach the stress of a speeded up life and the “shoddy workmanship from top to bottom,” the awareness that the “tenements we're putting up aren't places for people to live in, they're hen coops. It's enough to make you sick.” He mourns the loss of job satisfaction but sees no answer except in daydreaming about the future. “It used to give me a kick when we built something worthwhile, but now... Someday, when I've made enough money, I'm going to quit this job and do something different” (76-77).

The innkeeper Nino and his wife Liliana are also victims of this speeded-up, commercialized way of life. To increase his profits, necessary because of a rent increase, Nino ejects a group of poor, elderly men, including his wife's uncle. Liliana rejects timesaving values — “If being heartless is the only way you can get somewhere in life, count me out” — and even Nino admits that the atmosphere in the inn “seems strange — cold somehow.” So he decides to resist peer group pressure and apologizes, briefly going back to the old, simpler life where people are more highly valued than profits (79). However, he too eventually succumbs. When Momo returns a year later she finds that his little old tavern has become a self-service fast food restaurant where customers,

"all eating in frantic haste," have to eat standing because there are no chairs (173). What did Ende think of Japan's fast-food noodle shops, or the empire of Ronald McDonald?

Ende also targets modern toys and the excessive consumerism of both parents and adults, which results in family breakdown and the increasing inability of children to use their imagination. After the grey men start changing society, "most of the [child] newcomers had no idea how to play," for "children turned up with all kinds of toys you couldn't really play with: remote controlled tanks" and so forth. "They were highly expensive toys such as Momo's friends had never owned" but "they left nothing at all to the imagination" and were unfulfilling, leaving the children "mesmerized but bored" (70-71). Family life deteriorates quickly: one little girl goes to the cinema every day because it's cheaper than a babysitter; a little boy has eleven books on tape because his mother is out all day and his father is too tired to tell him stories anymore; Paolo argues that "The grown-ups dish out money to get rid of us," and all of them sadly admit "they felt abandoned" (73).

Experts in consumerism, the grey men tempt Momo with Lola the Living Doll, a talking Barbie-type toy with a never-ending wardrobe of clothes, accessories and even friends to accumulate, the perfect toy to teach children the important economic lesson that "There's always something left to wish for" (85). According to her tempter, "All that matters in life is to climb the ladder of success, amount to something, own things. When a person climbs higher than the rest, amounts to more, owns more things, everything else comes automatically: friendship, love, respect, et cetera" (87).

Because of the importance of imagination in childhood, and children's ability to live so fully in the present, the grey men believe that "children present a greater threat to our work than anyone or anything else" and are "natural enemies. But for them, mankind would have been completely in our power long ago. Adults are far easier to turn into timesavers" (106-107). They soon persuade the adults to legislate against the free time and daydreaming enjoyed by children, arguing that "Children...are the raw material of the future," the experts and technicians of tomorrow (167).

In compulsory prison-like "child depots" (modern daycare centres, kindergartens and schools?), they are controlled and allowed only useful, educational games so that "they forgot how to be happy, how to take pleasure in little things, and, last but not least, how to dream." As the conditioning takes effect "the children began to look like time-savers in miniature. Sullen, bored and resentful, they did as they were told" (168). When Momo meets three old playmates a year later she finds them in grey uniforms, their faces strangely stiff and lifeless, on their way to class to learn games that are no fun but "useful for the future" (192-193).

When an agent fails to bribe Momo, the men in grey decide to attack Momo's two best friends:

Guido Guide the storyteller (who is removed by making him a successful media figure) and Beppo Roadsweeper (who is put in a mental hospital). Guido's stories become a big hit and make him rich and famous, leading to so much business that finally even his time is totally controlled by his secretaries. From Ende's perspective — which rejects “Time is money” in favor of “Time is *life*” — his so-called success becomes ridiculous.

As a roadsweeper Beppo has been deliberately slow and even Zen-like in his total attention to the present moment. In order to sweep all day long he had learned that it doesn't work to hurry: “You must only concentrate on the next step, the next breath, the next stroke of the broom, and the next, and the next. Nothing else...That way you enjoy your work, which is important, because then you make a good job of it. And that's how it ought to be” (36). In old Japan he might have been regarded as a Zen master, but instead he is widely believed to be “not quite right in the head” because he takes all the time in the world to answer questions, being determined never to say anything untrue (35). When Beppo desperately tries to escape from his hospital, a grey man appears with the lie that Momo has been kidnapped, and has him released only on the agreement that Beppo will ransom her with one hundred thousand hours of hard — and hurried — work.

In the meantime Momo has been led by the tortoise Cassiopeia to the magical residence of Professor Secundus Minutus Hora, who lives in Nowhere House in Never Lane, where “all the time in the world comes from” (142). He is the custodian of time but has no personal power to stop the time thieves because “What people do with their own time is their own business” (143). He is the sworn enemy of the grey men and the only one they fear more than Momo. When Momo asks him if he is Death, he smiles and tells her that “If people knew the nature of death, ...they'd cease to be afraid of it. And if they ceased to be afraid of it, no one could rob them of their time any more” (144).

Professor Hora teaches her the secret of time by showing her the hour-lilies. Momo has a mystical experience — *a satori*? — watching the lilies blossom and fade away as time's pendulum swings back and forth across the lake. She begins to hear music and then words: “the sun and moon and planets and stars were telling her their own, true names, and their names signified what they did and how they all combined to make each hour-lily flower and fade in turn.” She realizes with awe that “the entire universe was focused upon her like a single face of unimaginable size, looking at her and talking to her” (147). The Professor tells her that she has been in the depths of her own heart, watching her own time, for “There's a place like the one you visited in every living soul, but only those who let me take them there can reach it, nor can it be seen with ordinary eyes” (148).

Then Momo falls asleep for a year and a day, but when she awakens her friends have all gone and life has changed into a nightmare of efficiency and time-saving.

Professor Hora devises a plan to help her fight back. He can stop time for one hour only by giving her a special time-flower, but during that period she must find the grey men's secret hoard of frozen time-lilies and release every stolen minute. If she does not succeed, the grey men will poison the air around Nowhere House with their cigar smoke and make everyone ill with a fatal disease called "deadly tedium." People will become increasingly bored until "you don't feel anything any more...Joy and sorrow, anger and excitement are things of the past. You forget how to laugh and cry — you're cold inside and incapable of loving anything or anybody...You bustle around with a blank, grey face, just like the men in grey themselves — indeed you've joined their ranks" (215). Note that Ende wrote this long before he visited Tokyo, where he must have observed the hordes of grey- and blue-suited commuting salarymen trapped in its deadly tedium. As this suggests, the grey men are not a Western problem or a Japanese problem, but a modern problem.

When Momo succeeds and the lily flowers return "to their true home in the hearts of mankind," suddenly "people found they had plenty of time to spare" (234).

Children played in the middle of the street, getting in the way of cars whose drivers not only watched and waited, smiling broadly, but sometimes got out and joined in their games. People stood around chatting with the friendliness of those who take a genuine interest in their neighbours' welfare. Other people, on their way to work, had time to stop and admire the flowers in a window-box or feed the birds. Doctors, too, had time to devote themselves properly to their patients, and workers of all kinds did their jobs with pride and loving care, now that they were no longer expected to turn out as much work as possible in the shortest possible time. (235)

Everyone's values and sense of time returns to normal — or does it? Do we still consider such a healthy sense of time normal?

## Commodified Time

"The time we call spring blossoms directly as an existence called flowers. The flowers, in turn, express the time called spring. This is not existence within time; existence itself is time." (Dogen)

As *Momo* implies, our problem with time today is not so very different from our problem with everything else. That problem is commodification, which tends to convert everything into marketable resources appreciated only according to their exchange value. The whole earth — our mother as well as our home — continues to be commodified in new and ingenious ways, most recently including the genetic codes of biological species and even the tragicomedy of carbon emission trading rights.

Even as the economic globalization promoted by neoliberal capitalism commodifies the earth into resources, human life is commodified into labor (work time), also bought and sold according to supply and demand. Today that applies to our understanding of time generally, the most precious “resource” of all because we can never have too much of it. The grey men teach Momo's friends that their time is a commodity that can be saved and invested.

The commodification of time was made possible, perhaps inevitable, by the clock. As clock-time became central to social organization, life became “centered around the emptying out of time (and space) and the development of an abstract, divisible and universally measurable calculation of time.” The collective objectification of clock-time means that now we all live according to it, for the complexities of our social interactions require such a continuum for their coordination — despite the fact that “our mechanical way of repatterning time has led to a way of knowing it that is totally divorced from the real world. We have reduced time to pure number” (Aveni 135).

Aveni also wonders if “Our quest for the precise time of day may go down in history as the greatest obsession of the twentieth century” (100). Before doing anything Gulliver looked at his watch; he called it his oracle. The Lilliputians concluded, quite naturally, that it must be his God. Today we need to read a children's novel like *Momo* to gain some perspective on our obsession. Premodern tribal societies, which lack such a precise and abstract reference point, continue to puzzle us because they do not objectify a time apart from the activities which occur “in” it. Evans-Pritchard's classic study on the Nuer of central Africa rather wistfully concludes (103):

I do not think that they ever experience the same feeling of fighting against time or having to coordinate activities with an abstract passage of time, because their points of reference are mainly the activities themselves, which are generally of a leisurely character. Events follow in a logical order, but they are not controlled by an abstract system, there being no autonomous points of reference to which activities have to conform with precision.

According to Edward Hall, for the Hopi Indians as well time has no objective reality: “the Hopi cannot talk about summer being hot, because summer is the quality hot, just as an apple has the quality red” (Levine 94).

Clock-time or event time: with the former, objectified time is outside the activity and regulating it; with the latter, the time of an activity is integral to the activity itself. We can sometimes hear the difference in the way music is played: the notes march along following the time-signature, or we are so absorbed in the notes that we do not notice the time-signature at all, because the music contains its own time.

This suggests that our problem with time today may be characterized more precisely: it is the dualism we experience between an event and its time. For Mahayana Buddhism this is a fundamental delusion that contributes to our *dukkha* “unhappiness.” The Japanese Zen master Dogen, the Buddhist who had perhaps the most to say about this dualism, deconstructed it by reducing each term to the other: by demonstrating that *objects are time* (objects have no self-existence because they are necessarily temporal, in which case they are not objects as usually understood); and, conversely, that *time is objects* (time manifests itself not in but as the ephemeral processes we call objects, in which case time is different than usually understood). “The time we call spring blossoms directly as an existence called flowers. The flowers, in turn, express the time called spring. This is not existence within time; existence itself is time.” In his *Shobogenzo* Dogen combines subject and predicate in the neologism *uji*, which is usually translated as “being-time” or “time-being”:

“Time-being” here means that time itself is being...and all being is time.

Time is not separate from you, and as you are present, time does not go away.

Do not think that time merely flies away. Do not see flying away as the only function of time. If time merely flies away, you would be separated from time. The reason you do not clearly understand time-being is that you think of time as only passing.... People only see time's coming and going, and do not thoroughly understand that time-being abides in each moment.

Time-being has the quality of flowing....Because flowing is a quality of time, moments of past and present do not overlap or line up side by side.

Do not think flowing is like wind and rain moving from east to west. The entire world is not unchangeable, is not immovable. It flows. Flowing is like spring. Spring with all its numerous aspects is called flowing. When spring flows there is nothing outside of spring. (Dogen 76–80)

Such time cannot be saved because we *are* it. To treat it as a commodity is to be caught up in a delusion that makes us hurry up in order to have the time to slow down — the trap that Momo's time-thieves encourage. The commodifying attitude that tries to save time cannot help but carry over into the rest of our lives. Understanding time as a resource to be used like any other means we lose the ability to *be* it. It is another case of being objectified by our own objectifications.

Why do we distinguish between events and clock (absolute) time?

For Aveni, our most basic motivation, the common denominator of our temporal schemas, is a quest for order, which is necessary to secure the cosmos and the self that inhabits it. “Temporally speaking, we desire the capacity to anticipate where things are going, to relieve our anxiety by peeking around nature's corner as far as it will follow” (331). Deeper than the desire for order,



however, is what Damian Thompson describes as our “deep-seated human urge to escape from time which, in the earliest societies, was usually met by dreams of a return to a golden past” (325). Christianity put an end to that, by situating us toward the end rather than the beginning of time. Yet the difference is less important than the common need to transcend time as we know it, for its ineluctable course carries us all to the same final destination. Thompson sums up his study of apocalyptic time by concluding that the human understanding of time is always distorted by death: “The belief that mankind has reached the crucial moment in its history reflects an unwillingness to come to terms with the transience of human life and achievements. Our urge to celebrate the passing of time fails to conceal an even deeper urge to escape from it” (332).

Rest not ! Life is sweeping by;  
Go and dare before you die  
Something mighty and sublime,  
Leave behind to conquer time. (Goethe)

Who wouldn't like to conquer time ? Because whether or not time conquers all, it certainly conquers us. Goethe had a great fear of death (greater than most of us ? or just more conscious ?), which the symbolic immortality of his literary success evidently did not allay. The compulsion to accomplish something does not need to be so dramatic. The psychoanalyst Neil Altman wrote in similar terms about his years as a Peace Corps volunteer in southern India:

It took a year for me to shed my American, culturally based feeling that I had to make something happen...Being an American, and a relatively obsessional American, my first strategy was to find security through getting something done, through feeling worthwhile accomplishing something. My time was something that had to be filled up with progress toward that goal (quoted in Levine 204-5).

Individualistic cultures emphasise achievement more than affiliation. In psychoanalytic terms, the pressure we then feel to accomplish something is an introjection of the intentions we project outward into the world.

Since the self lacks any being or ground of its own, according to Buddhism, it can be understood as an ongoing process which seeks perpetually, because in vain, to feel secure, to make itself more real. If the modern, more individualised ego-self is that much more of a delusion, it will be all the more unsatisfied; but then it must explain that dissatisfaction: the reason must be that I have not attained my goals ! Since the goals I do accomplish bring no satisfaction, I need more and more ambitious projects....

Unfortunately, the same dynamic seems to be operating collectively: it explains our modern preoccupation with economic growth and technological development. As Max Weber realised, this historical process has become all the more obsessive because it has no particular goal except

“more and more...” Ende understood this: in a talk given in Japan in July 1985, and later published in the *Asahi Journal*, he declared that “My urgent concern is how to set human beings free from the obsession of economic growth.”

The more objective time is for us, the more alienated is the sense of self that is *in* (i.e., other than) time, which therefore uses time in order to try to gain something from it — and the greater, too, is our awareness of the end of our own time. Our own sense of separation from time motivates us to try to secure ourselves within it, yet according to Buddhism the only satisfying solution is the essentially religious realization that we are not other than it. As Professor Hora tells Momo: “If people knew the nature of death, ...they'd cease to be afraid of it. And if they ceased to be afraid of it, no one could rob them of their time any more” (144).

For Dogen the interdependence of objects and time means that objects themselves are unreal, but their relativity also implies the unreality of objective time — and therefore the delusion involved in commodifying time. If there is only time then there is no time, because there can be no container (time) without a contained (objects). When there are no things that have an existence apart from time, then it makes no sense to speak of things as being young or old, or as aging. Dogen makes this point using the image of firewood and ashes:

Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past. You should understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash, which fully includes future and past. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, you do not return to birth after death.

This being so, it is an established way in buddha-dharma to deny that birth turns into death. Accordingly, birth is understood as no-birth. It is an unshakeable teaching in Buddha's discourse that death does not turn into birth. Accordingly, death is understood as no-death.

Birth is an expression complete this moment. Death is an expression complete this moment. They are like winter and spring. You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring. (Dogen 70-1)

Because our life and death, like spring and summer, are not *in* time, they are timeless. If there is no one nontemporal who is born and dies, then there are only the events of birth and death. But if there are only those events, with no one in them, then there is no real birth and death. Or we may say that there is birth-and-death in every moment, with the arising and passing-away of each thought and act. Then there is nothing lacking in the present that needs to be fulfilled in the future, and spring is not an anticipation of summer: it is whole and complete in itself.

What implications does this have for our need to slow down and experience time in a different way? We conclude with a reflection on this question.

An end to objectified, commodified time implies a “new” understanding of life as play. That is because play is what we are doing when we do not need to gain something *from* a situation. When we do not need to extract something from this time and place, we will not devalue it by contrasting here-and-now with some other location (e.g., heaven) or time (the future, or some Golden Age in the past). Then there will be time to join in the children's games, to enjoy the flowers, and to do our jobs with loving care.

To resacralise such events would be to resacralise such times, and therefore time itself — no longer abstract, something that can be saved and banked, but always with a particular texture and flavor. If we did not need to gain something from our times, something which might survive our deaths, then we might recover an awareness of how essentially mysterious time is — the mystery Ende symbolizes in Professor Hora's time-lilies, eternally blossoming and fading away as the pendulum swings back and forth, back and forth...

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