

## 327: The Benefits of Taking Inaction (with Jinny Uppal)



### Full Episode Transcript

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**Jen Riday**

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## **327: The Benefits of Taking Inaction (with Jinny Uppal)**

You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday, and on this episode we're talking about creating more moments of thoughtful reflection and how doing so can make us way more productive. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Welcome back. I'm Dr. Jen Riday. And you're in the right place if you want to be more productive without always hustling. My guest today is Jinny Uppal, and she is no stranger to driving contrary and innovative thinking. She has done so much in the business world working with Fortune 500 companies to increase productivity. She's a graduate of Harvard Business School and she practices Buddhist meditation and breathwork. She has found through recent research and authoring an award winning book, *IN/ACTION: Rethinking the Path to Results*.

That when we create moments of letting our mind wander, of observing our thinking, it activates a region of our brain that connects the dots, that can solve problems in creative ways so that we can work not harder, but smarter and easier. There is a movement within the business world of no longer hustling your way to the top, but simply letting your work be easy. Receiving creative energy, solving problems in new ways without all of the cortisol and all of the stress. If you want more of that in your life you're going to love this episode.

Now before we dive in I want to share our review of the week. It is from Maple 713 in the US. She wrote, "I have been listening to Jen for a few

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years now and love her. Jen is authentic, encouraging, kind and honest in her words. She brings guests that not only are wonderful examples of vibrant happy women, but who share real stories that allow you to take something away from each conversation.” I love that. Thank you for leaving that review. All of you, please leave a review on Amazon Podcasts or on Apple Podcasts.

You can learn more about leaving a review at [jenriday.com/review](http://jenriday.com/review). I appreciate it. It helps us to grow, to get the word out there and it helps people to know what you think of this podcast. Alright, well I can't wait for you to hear this interview with Jinny Uppal and let's dive in.

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Jen: Hey, everyone, I'm here with Jinny Uppal and we're going to be talking about inaction. I know in our society we are so focused on action, but Jinny has a new approach to this and I'm just super excited. We started to talk before I began recording and then I said, “Wait, wait, wait, I have to record this, this is so good.” So here we are, welcome to *Vibrant Happy Women*, Jinny.

Jinny: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Jen: So you wrote a book, tell us that interesting title, because I know, I want to hear about inaction. I have spent my life thinking about action.

Jinny: Right, yeah. I mean as you rightly said you and I are a product of a society that values action. And had you spoken to me before I wrote this book I would have described myself as a very action oriented person. I've had a corporate career for 20 years. I've had a few pivots. I've

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accomplished a good bunch of stuff. And I would easily tell you stories of I took this action which is why I got this result.

Now, during the pandemic I found myself in an unexpected downtime. I did have a conventional job and I was getting frustrated that I'm not doing enough for my career, for my life. And I found myself reflecting in my life every time I have made a big move, a big pivot which was positive. Even though I could tell you that, look, I took these steps which is why I got the result. The fact is before I took that action, there was always a period of reflection or a slowdown. The fact is I don't like those periods of reflection. They're uncomfortable.

And they're very intangible because I don't know what I'm doing when I'm not doing anything. But the fact of the matter is that inspiration comes up during those periods of downtime which is what happened in my case. So the book really started as a question, what really drives phenomenal results, is it really the action that you can point your finger to? Or is it those moments of reflection? And the conclusion is in the book that we underrate those moments of reflection but that's where powerful ideas come from.

The happy irony of my journey is I never meant to write a book. I was happy with my corporate career. I would happily go back to it. But look what came out of the downtime of the pandemic. I wrote a book which has been such a fulfilling experience. But I would have never thought of doing it because I would be doing my same old, same old. So that's the premise of the book illustrated by life experiences in my own life.

Jen: I love this. I know as so many people including myself are thinking, she wrote a book. I watched a lot of Netflix.

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Jinny: Well, I did that too. I will say reflection is not watching Netflix and it's not that if you're reflecting you can't, but watching Netflix is bad. It's making room for all of the above, not just working all the time and doing all the time.

Jen: I think this is so essential. It's absolutely true. As you spoke I reflected and I thought, yeah. And I thought of this idea when I was on that vacation. And I thought of that idea when I was at a hotel having a break from my family for a while. Let's back up, you are a graduate of Harvard Business School. So that tells us that you're a high achiever or have been. But you also do meditation and breathwork. How have you kind of found your way to this what I would call a balance of yin and yang, drive and receptivity, and achievement and relaxation?

Jinny: Right. That's such an interesting question. I think it's an ongoing quest to find the balance even today. Meditation showed up in my life, again, I was not interested, I wasn't looking for it, but somebody recommended I do meditation. It just so happened, Jen, when I look back, Steve Jobs once said, "You can always connect the dots when looking back, in the middle of it you don't know what's happening." There was a period in my life 2008, to 2010 when I went to Harvard Business School. This was 10 years after having graduated.

And around the same time I got into meditation. I find myself a very scientific person, so I used to be very skeptical of meditation because it's so abstract. And in 2008 it wasn't even a thing in the US. Yoga was always popular, meditation back then was a very obscure phenomenon. So it is interesting to me that the techniques I learned in my meditation, the first set of courses I went to, which is breathwork, or being present, being in the moment.

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It's fascinating that in my Harvard Business School courses they actually had a leadership course where they taught breathwork. They taught being in the moment. And it was remarkable that the techniques were slightly different, but the end goal was all about training your mind to be in the moment and leveraging the power of breathwork to get there.

So it was good for me in retrospect, my skeptical mind needed the backing of Harvard Business School, or some science based logical explanation for why these techniques work. And they coincidentally came into my life around the same time. Since then I've been a committed practitioner. Meditation is very much a part of my daily life.

Jen: I love that scientists have been researching meditation. So many people have come to love it and then they want to understand why. There's so much meditation research and so many benefits. So for you, what does meditation look like, what forms, how long?

Jinny: Right. It's really a practice. It's a way of living, the tangible or tactical aspects are my daily meditation practice, my daily breathwork. I do multiday silent retreats. I listen to talks of a certain nature but then I also read scientific books on neuroscience research. And now I'm starting to myself understand that this phenomenon that I've heard about in what I would have called spiritual conversations, there is an explanation for that from neuroscience. So over years and years of studying I can now connect the dots.

But the purpose of meditation really is training your mind to be okay with doing nothing, building that internal ability to be okay with what is as opposed to constantly interfering. And constantly trying to be in a place where you're trying to control something. So it's interesting. My business life requires that I constantly be doing something, and my meditation

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practice teaches me to be okay. And they, on the surface they sound like they are conflicting each other. And I remember in the beginning being very skeptical about meditation because I don't want to become one of those woo-woo types.

I don't want to be a guru. I don't want to be those constantly happy people who do nothing. So I was afraid that they were conflicting. But of course having been in that practice for, I guess, 14 years now you find that one strengthens the other. One lends itself to the other. So they actually work beautifully. If you make a commitment they actually work very well together.

Jen: So do you actually sit still and meditate and try to just stop thinking for a certain amount of time? Or do you do it every morning and night?

Jinny: Yeah. I have a daily practice, for 20 minutes I'll meditate, before that I'll do about 10 minutes of breathwork which can help because breathwork can ease you into just naturally going into a quiet place. I have to tell you, not every day is my mind quiet and that's one thing you learn. Beginners, and I write a little bit about this aspect in my book which is *IN/ACTION: Rethinking the Path to Results*. I talk about the dilemma, that very action oriented people run into when they sit to meditate.

We've all read the marketing around meditation that it is, the goal of meditation is to be in a no thought place. So we all, at least beginners come in with this expectation that I'm going to do something and I'm going to go into a no thought place. And the moment you sit into meditation, beginners realize that their mind is flooded with thoughts. And then they try harder to make the thoughts go away, except they don't. So a lot of beginner early meditators they give up exactly because of their action bias, their desire to control thoughts by doing something.

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And whereas the teaching, eventually if you try it long enough you realize there's nothing for you to do. The thing for you to do in meditation is to observe what's happening and thoughts are happening. You come to appreciate and respect. In fact the goal of meditation is not to get rid of thoughts. You really humbly realize you don't have the power to get rid of your thoughts.

Jen: So many, yeah.

Jinny: You can just sit and be okay with them, which is why I say meditation is training to then be more accepting of other events and happenings in life which is not the same as giving up on life or being defeatist. It's about first accepting what is and then taking action from there.

Jen: I love that you say that. If we think 60,000 thoughts a day and there is part of our brain telling our heart to beat and our lungs to breathe, yeah, you're right. Our thoughts don't stop. I know so many people who try to meditate and beat themselves up because they can't stop thinking. And your approach, just observing the thoughts makes way more sense, so I love that.

Jinny: Right, right. One is to give up on the goal that meditation is about no thoughts. It's actually about accepting thoughts which completely flips the point of it. And it can put people off. But it's so powerful when you get to that place of accepting. And the paradox is the moment you accept and observe thoughts do go away. You've got to experience it to know it. The more you try to make them go away the more they fight. And the more you let them be they just run the course and they go away. It's like clouds come and go. You let them go.



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Jen: You know, I've been thinking about the topic of holding space lately. People get so busy that they're always acting and not noticing their thoughts. People will go to therapy where a therapist or a coach can hold space for them where they can think about what they're thinking, and they say it out loud. The therapist reflects it back. They have the space.

But really in essence meditation acts as the exact same thing and it's a much easier thing to do every day, just to hold space for yourself, what am I thinking? Interesting. I'm feeling that. I'm thinking that. Okay, fascinating. So it's therapy really.

Jinny: In the early days of meditation when I got into it, and I was still a little skeptical I came across a book called The Happiness Hypothesis. It's by a psychologist, a professor called Jonathan Haidt. And I reread it last week because after all these years I felt the need to remind myself of what he said. And this book was very persuasive to me because I'm in a skeptical state of mind back in 2009 whenever I read it, I needed to hear a science person's perspective.

In the book he essentially addresses the subject of what makes us happy. And he comes up with three solutions that have been tested and tried, one is of course meditation. The other is drugs, like Prozac for those people who are chronically, they're just nothing can be done. And he actually says it's not a bad thing, they are not exactly addiction building. The third interestingly he mentions is cognitive based therapy. I've not had therapy in my life, but I've had meditation.

But I've heard other people who have gone through therapy and in the way they describe how, what their experience is and how they come to accept things as they are or change their perspective. The end result, I agree, I understand what Haidt is describing. The end result is the same. If you're

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not able to do meditation because meditation can be a little abstract. And unless you have the right teacher and you have that, some inner conditioning that lets you be by yourself, therapy is a perfectly good alternative or a mix of two.

I think some therapists also recommend meditation. So these are all good tools to have in your toolkit. And the end goal of it all is to be more in observation and the thesis of my book is be as ambitious as you want to be. The book is not about slowing down. The book is about getting results. The subtitle is Rethinking the Path to Results.

So instead of chasing action to get results, deploy these strategies which are available, and you'd be amazed at how many creative ideas you get. And how quickly you can get to your results without burning out or fatiguing yourself which is what happens when you chase action all the time.

Jen: Yes. I love this. When I think about holding space I think about a cluttered attic with jeans over here and clothes, and a pile of books, and newspapers, and nick nacks, and it's just cluttered. And right in the middle of the clutter is the space with an empty Rubbermaid container. And it's just like, whoa, such a contrast. And I think meditation, or you mentioned cognitive behavioral therapy, tools which I use as a coach. I teach about thoughts, feelings, actions, and results, all of it comes together.

We just need to have time to stop being in the clutter and find our Rubbermaid container. And what you're saying, it leads to greater productivity. So I love this, yeah.

Jinny: Yeah, that's a great analogy. It's a cluttered room and this isn't about decluttering it permanently. It's about finding the balance between it gets

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cluttered, then you declutter, then it's of course going to get cluttered again. And you're finding your balance there.

Jen: And having the one space that is not cluttered, is so important. Do you have an example or two of when you were quiet, and it did lead to that greater productivity and accomplishment?

Jinny: The process of writing this book is probably the most recent example of a huge accomplishment because a book is quite a production, my book is about 200 pages. I'm a first time author.

Jen: Congratulations. It's amazing.

Jinny: Thank you. And I have a business background, so I did not think myself capable of writing a book because I thought I'm not a writer, I'm not a storyteller. But I embarked on the journey, and I was very committed to it. And book writing is the most abstract and creative thing I have done and produced. I remember there were days, and weeks, and months of writing where I would get very lost in ideas. Or I would get very excited. Or I would get stuck. Over and over again what I found myself doing is walk away from it. If it's hard, walk, just drop it.

Go to bed, go for a walk, find something else to do. I cannot tell you how many so called writers blocks or mental blocks that, I don't know how, I could have fought my way through it. I could have bullied my way through it. I don't know what would have happened. I probably would have given up. At some point when you fight too hard with a problem you will just give up. From the time I decided to write the book to the book being published was less than a year which is very short as things go. Books usually take a long time.

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In many ways I got the chance to practice what I was preaching in the book because I have different techniques, different ways of embracing thoughtful pauses. So I got to drink my own Kool-Aid, and I'm glad I did.

Jen: I love it. I want to drink the Kool-Aid. Well, if someone's listening today and they are thinking about this idea of thoughtful pauses where they can get that creative spark, or figure out a solution to a problem, where should they start? What's a step by step, maybe three steps you could give them to start them off today?

Jinny: That's such a great question, Jen. And I tell you, I get asked that question a lot. In the beginning I'd be like, "My book is really descriptive, not exactly prescriptive. It isn't 10 steps to be happy forever." But because I have interviewed a whole bunch of people and they've shared their techniques. So the book is a collection of techniques through the stories of other people. I'll share you a couple of ideas which I have been embracing myself. So I am a practitioner of meditation, so I am used to it.

But as a practitioner of meditation I used to have a very poor opinion of mind wandering. Because meditation is the, you know, often teachers will tell you, "Your mind is wandering. It's going from the past to the present, to the future. It's never in the present moment." And during research in my book I came across neuroscience research that actually talks about the benefits of mind wandering. I define mind wandering as sitting there staring into empty space and letting your mind do whatever it needs to.

Turns out, I think you probably mentioned this maybe before we started recording that you get your best ideas when you're not doing anything. And people tell me they get their best ideas in the shower or when they are driving. Means they are not very engaged. Turns out there is a reason,

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because there are parts of your brain that light up when you're not doing activity. And those parts of the brain are called default mode network.

And the function, the design of the default mode network is to let your brain connect the dots of all the information you've been collecting and come up with wow ideas, bursts of inspiration. The thing is, we don't give ourselves a chance. We don't give that part of our brain a chance because even when we have nothing to do, what do we do? We scroll social media. We catch up on news which means your eyes are engaged. So it's a different part of the brain that lights up.

So for those people who are, you know, don't have a meditation practice, or find it very intimidating, and I started doing this, I would schedule half an hour meetings during the week, twice a week. And I would call it mind wandering. And it sounded funny at first and very silly, what does that mean? But for those who struggle with meditation, schedule half an hour. It's very difficult for us to live a life anymore where we don't have back to back meetings. Most of us, we're not living that life where we have a nine to five job, and we just have the whole evening or all of weekend.

So to them I say, "Just introduce half an hour breaks, 15 minute breaks during the day. Start there. It is enough and give your mind a complete break. When you see the power of what comes out of those breaks then you will want to do more of it."

Jen: This is huge. So that default node network, is that what you said?

Jinny: Default mode network. There's a good amount of research. They kind of discovered it for the first time in 2000 by an American neurologist by the name of Marcus Raichle. And there has been so much more research on it now.

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Jen: Does that same network activate when we're in REM sleep as when we're daydreaming or mind wandering, is it all kind of related?

Jinny: I don't know about REM sleep but daydreaming and mind wandering, yes, they kind of go together.

Jen: I'm thinking of spaces where we could easily do the mind wandering. So I'm thinking moms in the pick-up line at school, when you pull in the driveway just sit in your car 15 more minutes. Obviously, you can do it in bed. The central piece though is that phone cannot be in your hand. That's so essential because we waste all of that free time on the phone.

Jinny: I have a funny moment I want to share. So on the one hand I have a meditation practice, you would think I have self-control. But when I first started doing mind wandering, which means eyes are open. If I tell myself I'm going into meditation now, I go into it. But mind wandering was new to me because eyes are open, I'm not trying to meditate. And I would do it for five or 10 minutes and, Jen, I would suddenly realize, wait, I have my phone in my hand and I'm already scrolling. And I would completely forget that I'm meant to – I didn't mean to do that.

And it made me laugh, look at how robotic my arm is, it just goes out to reach for the phone. And then I started putting the phone in the other room so that it's my way of warning that it may not be that easy but laugh at your behavior. And just make it mean that you're going to do it for 20 minutes. And then you get better over time.

Jen: Absolutely. I was thinking a lot of times we still feel like we have to have a reason so there's another kind of popular thing right now, everyone knows you need to ground. So to go put your feet in the grass or even lie down in the grass. I've found when I do that my kids are so astonished that

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they'll come and join me. And we're just looking at clouds, does that count as mind wandering, that kind of thing?

Jinny: Yeah. So think of it simply as you are disengaging all your senses as much as possible which means you are not processing input. So if your kids are around you that's fine. But if you're chatting with them then you're chatting with them.

Jen: Yeah, that's true, okay.

Jinny: Right, which is okay, let them be. Just you are literally staring at the clouds and let your mind do what it has to do.

Jen: Okay. Listen up, moms, she's prescribing alone time without your phone. We can do this.

Jinny: I think we can do it. And now a lot of people are starting to travel, maybe you're flying, maybe you're waiting for the train and just stare. It's what kids do or used to do, kids, their brain grow rapidly at a certain age. And you'll find kids staring into nothing. Stuff is happening in their brain. They're not being stupid. Their brain is putting stuff together it's just that we, and even kids don't allow ourselves time to do that anymore.

Jen: It makes me sad. I wish our society wasn't quite as achievement focused or that they saw achievement the way you do, in school, pay attention, pay attention. I even have this phrase I'll use with my daughter, "Hello, come back from LaLa land." And I need to stop that and let her go there is what you're saying.

Jinny: And maybe tell her, "Hello, time to go to LaLa land."

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Jen: Yes. Have fun in LaLa land, I'll see you in 15 minutes. This is great. This is great. Well, Jinny, any other thoughts you want to share before we say goodbye?

Jinny: I just want to encourage everybody to keep your ambition, have the dreams you want to and just know that chasing action and working all the time long hours is not the only path to success. That is the point of the book, that there is an alternative path. It is less fatiguing, it's less exhausting, and it's possible. And there are plenty of interviews in the book of people who have not done the conventional 80 hour work weeks and they have been very successful.

So know that there is an alternative to being happy and being successful and that involves a lot of thinking, and reflecting, and we can all do it.

Jen: Yeah. The phrase coming to mind is not working hard but working easy, choosing the easy way, yeah.

Jinny: Yes, for sure.

Jen: Well, important work. I love to see this pendulum swinging in this freer less hustle oriented way. So I appreciate you doing what you do and sharing with us today.

Jinny: Amen to that.

Jen: Yes. Thank you, Jinny.

Jinny: Thank you so much for having me, it was such a pleasure to talk to you.



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Jen: I should add. Where can people connect with you on social and the web?

Jinny: Of course. I am easy to find. My first and last name is pretty unique, so people can go to my website J-I-N-N-Y-U-P-P-A-L.com. Contact me there or DM me directly on LinkedIn, Twitter, I'm fairly easy to find. And the book is available to buy online wherever you buy books.

Jen: Okay, thank you so much for being here. Take care.

Jinny: Take care, Jen.

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I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did. I am going to do a little bit more daydreaming, mind wandering, cloud watching, sitting in my car without my phone. I've taken to leaving my phone at home more often. And there's always a little bit of a panic because I've trained my brain I need to be available. What if someone calls or this or that happens? But I kind of enjoy that freedom. And I think my brain does too. So I want to challenge you to create those moments of allowing your thoughts to wander.

See what dots your brain can connect on how you can solve a problem with your teen, or your spouse, or the clutter in that closet, or that promotion you want at work, or the finances, or the weight loss. Let your brain figure it out and keep doing that work because it's a supercomputer. You've got this my friend. I want to tell you that I love you, I admire you, you are doing fantastically. Keep listening, keep moving forward creating the life that you love, and I will see you again next time. Until then make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

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