

Wu Wei

a way of mind

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Born as Stephanus Peters on an April Wednesday in 1957 in a small river town in south east of the Netherlands. Studied philosophy in Marburg, Germany and Asian cultures in Beijing and Bangkok. Bridging the cultural differences between east and west over the last 30 years.

Commitment to the Buddhist faith in 1976, was certainly a harbinger of the desire for more clarity and logic. The Buddhist way for me is still a reliable and rewarding resource in everyday and professional life. The exercises associated with the practiced Buddhism (including awareness and Mindfulness) benefited me very well in my professional field. 2005 was the promotion to the Dr Phil. managed after have been moved between different cities, Singapore, Shanghai, Beijing, Bangkok and now Sydney Australia.

After several years in working as adviser to world organisations I have started in 2001 my consulting company to teach cultures to businesses and universities.

Having a history in media, the production of Newspapers has always been part of my life and joy. This newspaper passion lead to the creation of the South East Asian Newspaper group, an organisation to inform and educate newspaper production people.

Wu Wei in the Daodejung

The Dao represents a key principle of Taoism, Confucianism and other ancient Chinese philosophical forms. The symbol for the Dao translates literally as the “way” or the “path”. Eastern philosophy of the Dao differs significantly from western philosophy. The Dao is a way of looking at the world in a holistic, rather than in an autonomous manner. The Dao cannot be explained adequately with words; yet, one can follow the principles of the Dao and integrate them into their life. The Dao cannot be controlled, but it can be understood to a certain extent.

One of the key principles of the Dao is the principle that every action creates a counter-action. These are expressed through the duality of the yin and yang. Even inaction creates a counter-action, bringing us to the topic of wuwei. Wuwei is the principle of actionless action. It refers to the idea that sometimes the best action is no action. The following will discuss various aspects of wuwei in the Dao. It will draw on modern, as well as classical works.

Life and Dao

In order to comprehend the principle of wuwei, it is necessary to first understand the nature of the Dao. The Dao is a constant and active force in the universe. It is not a set of ideals or standards, but rather an energy force that we encounter on a daily basis. It moves through our lives and created natural movements and processes in all things. People do not have to force the world into being. It will become of its own accord without any input from humans. The illusion of being able to control the Dao is simply that, an illusion.

The Dao means living in harmony with the natural ebb and flow of nature. Whenever a person tries to control the direction of the Dao, it often results in unwanted and unexpected consequences. According to Daoist philosophy, one does not have to strive to make the universe perfect; it will achieve perfection of its own accord without any input from us at all. Virtue is a natural state of being, not something that one has to strive for in their lives.

“Perfection” cannot be created or achieved by ones actions or intentions. This state will only be achieved when we let go and allow it to come to us through the Dao. Following the Dao means simply allowing things to be without attempting to make them better or improve upon them. It is to realize that a state of perfection already exists and that one only needs to allow it to be.

Wuwei and the Principle of Actionless Action

Once a basic grasp of daoist philosophy has been achieved, it is easy to incorporate the principle of wuwei. The principle of wuwei refers the ability to know when to act and when not to act. Wu translates into “not having”. Wei means “to act” or “doing”. Therefore, the entire phrase translates into “without action.” Wuwei can also be viewed as a natural action, something that occurs as a natural state of existence. For instance, the revolution of the earth around the sun, the erosion of soil, and the growth of a plant are all examples of actions that take place without any effort or input from humanity. Wuwei means doing what comes natural.

Wuwei is a powerful force. It can move mountains and can reduce the mightiest stone to sand. It is typically associated with water, a flowing force. Water lacks the desire to have its own shape. It is compliant and will conform to any shape that wishes to hold it, but it is also a powerful force. The water is much like the nature of wuwei. It will fill all of the cracks and crevices, leaving no space unfilled as it flows from one container to another. Such is the way of Dao energy as well.

The Wuwei and Destiny

The wuwei instills the concept that things happen of their own accord. We do not make things happen. Nature and the flow of Dao energy are the forces of creation and destruction. If one takes this stance entirely, it would make sense to discontinue action at all. If one simply needs to sit back and let the Dao energy take care of the world, then any input from us would be useless. This makes humanity appear to be nothing more than a watcher and observer of life, unless the person chooses to act in some manner. The concept of Dao and wuwei negates the need to take action. Nature will take care of itself.

However, one must remember that not taking an action is in itself an action. The person has the choice of whether to act or not to act. This brings up the topic of freewill. Chapter XXIII of the Tao and Wuwei suggests that man can control the Dao in some manner that will produce a result. If one understands the concept of action and reaction, then humanity has the choice to make decisions that direct the flow of the Dao, therefore altering the results achieved. One of the ways in which man can alter the Dao is in the way he pursues the affairs of his life. The Dao says,

“Therefore he who pursues his affairs in the spirit of Tao will become Tao-like. He who pursues his affairs with *te*, will become *te*-like. He who pursues his affairs with loss, identifies himself with loss” (Goddard and Borrel, Chapter XXIII).

This verse tells us that life is what we make of it and that our results are directly correlated to our actions and attitude in life.

The Daodejung distinguishes from actionless action and laziness. Actionless action is spontaneous and occurs with little effort. It is the natural thing to do. This is different from passivity (Kardash). Actionless action means going with the flow, instead of against the currents. The Dao tells us that this attitude of going with the flow is the answer to many of the social problems that plague society. The Wuwei suggests that political interference is the cause of problems and that they would resolve themselves without any additional input (Loy, p. 73-87).

For Every Action there is Reaction

According to Einstein, the Laws of Physics state that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. For instance, gravity opposes centrifugal force and light opposes darkness. The Wuwei recognizes that for every action another action will follow. However, it does not necessarily agree that action is equal and opposite. The Wuwei simply states that an action follows an action, even if this action is inaction.

Interactive media is an excellent modern reference that applies the Wuwei. A computer works on the basis of stimulus and response. The output of the computer is changed by the input that it receives. This system is one sided. The computer does not respond on its own accord and only the user can control the output by means of their input (Lawson). This happens with every electronic device that we come in contact with in our daily routine (Lawson). This is an example of the Wuwei at work. The response that we receive is directly associated with the input that we provide. This example demonstrates the Wuwei at work. However, unlike an electronic appliance, the response of the universe is not instantaneous, but happens at a much slower pace. However, it happens eventually, one must be patient.

Applying the Principles of Wuwei

At first glance, it would appear that when a person chooses to act in the spirit of the Wuwei, they must spend their days in meditation, doing nothing all day but searching for nothingness (Morgan). However, this is not what we find those who practice the Dao doing. They are some of the hardest workers in the world, regardless of their chosen profession (Morgan).

Confucius said that Shun ruled the empire by non-action. The people obeyed him from an admiration of his virtue (Morgan). Some persons are naturals in their chosen profession. Leaders rise up and the people follow. Sometimes they are not good speakers, or particularly charismatic, yet the people follow them anyway (Morgan). This is an example of actionless action at work. The person does not possess any special talents, yet the work is done through them, seemingly through no effort of their own. It is as if they allow themselves to be used as a tool through which the Dao can do its work.

To live the life in accordance to the Wuwei does not mean to live a life of roaming aimlessly. Flexibility is a key construct of the Wuwei, but this does not mean bending to the point of aimlessness. Flexibility is an important concept, but not to the point where focus is lost. Chang Tzu explains that one must maintain a certain degree of flexibility, but that one must be careful not to reduce Wuwei to a matter of flexibility (Fox). The proper amount of flexibility is the one that comes naturally to us, and the one that best fits the situation at the moment (Fox).

An excellent example of this principle is the art of cooking. When one cooks, they may follow a recipe. However, if they find in the middle of the recipe that the dish is cooking too quickly, they may have to exercise flexibility and make adjustments to avoid ruining the dish. They cannot follow the recipe without thought, but must make adjustments as they go along. Flexibility must occur spontaneously and must be integrated into what the situation requires (Fox).

Practicing the Wuwei produces a seamless dance in which the elements are not noticed of their own accord (Fox). When the actions are appropriate to the situation and the proper amount of flexibility is applied, no one will notice the transitions that have taken place. If one turns down the flame on the stove, naturally, as if without effort, no one will notice. However, if one were to choose to follow the recipe and not turn down the stove at the proper moment, the result would be obvious to everyone around. It may result in chaos, with smoke filling the room and the smoke alarm blaring. In this case, applying the right amount of flexibility makes the act of cooking seem effortless.

Different Interpretations of the Wuwei

Now that we address the key concepts contained in the Wuwei and have demonstrated some examples of these principles, it is now necessary to address the topic of translation and the affect that it has on interpretation and application of the principles. Chinese and English are not easily interchangeable. The best way to demonstrate this principle is to examine its affect on meaning using two different translations of the original.

According to the Mitchell translation, Chapter 5 of the Tao Te Ching begins, “The Tao doesn't take sides; it gives birth to both good and evil. The Master doesn't take sides; she welcomes both saints and sinners,” (Mitchell, Chapter 5). When one examines the translation of the same work by Lau, it reads, “Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs; the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs,” (Lau, Chapter 5). As one can see, these two translations are quite different and speak to the seeker in quite different ways. The meaning of equality in the Dao is the same, but the tone of the translation is quite different.

Differences in choices of translation can have an impact on the interpretation and application of the principles. One word in Chinese can have several different words of similar or equal meaning. The translator must make a choice regarding the word that is chosen. In this manner, the translator puts a bit of their own personality and worldview into the translation of the work. When we look at the next line of Chapter 5, both translations are similar. The Mitchell translation reads, “The Tao is like a bellows,” (Mitchell, Chapter 5). The Lau translation reads, “Is not the space between heaven and earth like a bellows?” (Lau, Chapter 5). Here both translations have similar meaning.

Voice plays an important role in the translation as well. Mitchell chooses to use second person, “Empty your mind of all thoughts,” (Mitchell, Chapter 16). Lau chooses to use first person, speaking as if through their own personal example. Lau translates the same passage, “I do my utmost to attain emptiness,” (Lau, Chapter 16). In this case, Mitchell's translation gives the reader a bit more information about how to achieve a state of emptiness. These differences in translation may be minor, but they significantly impact the ability of the seeker to apply the knowledge in their own lives.

Wuwei and Western Culture

Understanding the principles of the Dao, particularly the principle of Wuwei may be difficult for westerners to grasp. Actionless action is not a principle that is held dear to the divide and conquer western spirit. The idea of choosing to take no action is not a concept that is held dear in a society where “movers and shakers” are revered. However, when one examines the Wuwei more closely, it becomes apparent that simply sitting around and doing nothing is not what the work teaches at all. Rather, the Dao teaches one to do what comes natural to them, to go with the flow. If this means being a mover and a shaker, then that is what it means for that person.

The Dao recognizes a sense of perfection in nature and holds to the principle that when man interferes, they can create chaos. The essence of the Wuwei is knowing when to act and when not to act. One key example of this is when two children are fighting. The action that is “taught” in western society is that the parent must quickly intervene to stop the fighting.

However, when one examines this situation from a Daoist perspective, one will find that action is not always necessary. It is highly unlikely that the children will continue to fight forever, even if the parent does not intervene. They will eventually tire, get hungry, or get bored with this activity. Eventually, if the parent does not intervene, the conflict will stop on its own.

Sometimes when the parent intervenes, it creates more chaos and the children will quickly resume fighting. At times, the parent may consciously choose action to prevent physical or emotional harm to one of the children. However, when a parent hears a fight, their automatic reaction is to intervene, even if it is a minor squabble. Often, this form of intervention is in the form of absolute control such as threats or demands.

In the western mind, to simply sit back and let the argument run its course does not even enter one's mind. There is a feeling that one needs to "do something." This example illustrates the difference between Eastern and Western thought. The way of the Wuwei means to examine all of one's options, even the one of inaction and simply allowing the flow of the Dao to resolve the problem. Another choice is recognize the situation, not as a conflict, but as the flow of energy.

Applying the principles of Wuwei means making conscious decisions about the actions that one takes and the amount of flexibility that is needed in the action. Living in accordance with the Wuwei means living a life that flows easily from one event to another. The Wuwei teaches us that we do not have to be in control. In fact, it teaches us that we are not in control at all, but that we are riding the river of life and that it will take us on a journey if we only choose to travel the path of least resistance.

A sort version of my study

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