

Wu Wei

A Taoist Invitation to Bring Your Conscious and Unconscious Thoughts into Pleasing Alignment

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Wildcat Mountain ski resort in Pinkham Notch, New Hampshire has a novice trail called Polecat. The trail snakes 2.75 miles from summit to base along the northeastern boundary of the resort. Polecat is a beginner's joy. It lays out before you long sweeping turns with few obstructions and ever-changing patterns of bright light and tree-filtered shade as the sun arcs over the trail during the day. In the morning you are fresh, in the afternoon you are tired – in between you may be hungry or thirsty, exultant or sad, searching for an old friend or making a new one. For any given skill level, mood and moment, there is an optimal set of curves, of accelerations and decelerations, of leanings right and leanings left that carries you from summit tipoff to rooster-tail stop at the end of the trail. We might call this optimal set of curves your true line down the mountain. Finding the true line requires some conscious thought, some formal preparation and decision-making – indeed, it requires that you consciously learn to ski at some point in your life, then drive to Pinkham Notch and buy a lift ticket – but it equally requires an openness to what the non-conscious part of yourself is ready to provide in the way of embedded skill and intuitive judgment, what your unconscious self is ready to feel as you allow the slope to pull you down, what it is ready to embrace, ready to love. If you can carve your path down the mountain along what feels to be a true line that brings your conscious and unconscious thoughts into harmony, the reward within your reach is a sense of oneness, of holistic expression of your undivided self. A skier's graceful yielding to gravity along a true line down the mountain is a manifestation of the Taoist concept of wu-wei.

Wu wei can be translated from the Chinese as “without effort” or “without action”. To the Western mind, attuned to hearing trumpets, this hardly seems a good starting point for a stirring idea. But wu wei is a fluid concept with no single definition. The path into its meaning that I like best sets the phrase in a longer, explicitly paradoxical phrase: wei wu wei, that is, effort without effort, action

without action. The student of this fully-stated Taoist paradox will come to see that wu wei does not counsel doing nothing, rather it asks for scrutiny of the sort of effort that must be present and the sort of effort that can be cast aside. Effort there must be, but wu wei asks that it not be raggedy, sloppy, blunt effort. Wu wei evokes instead effort that is so economical, so wisely attuned to its history and so engaged with its setting that the effort flows forward with ease and grace that suits the moment – the effort feels effortless.

If this seems an exercise in wordplay, the Taoist sage would shrug and smile, for the characterization is a fair one. Taoist philosophy, indeed, much Eastern philosophy, loves to use verbal paradox as a tool for insight, to present ideas in words that celebrate the interplay of opposing forces – which are themselves often framed poetically in images that portray contesting forces in nature.

In some of the natural imagery the surface is gentle and the interplay of forces is present but subdued. Thus Taoism urges that you “act as the world’s valley”, an accommodating image that suggests much good can come from being the vessel through which forces flow, with the forces not opposed by you but shaped by your channel and your canyon walls. We in the West are more accustomed to maxims that encourage us to gain scope and power by climbing high, out of the valley and up to the mountaintop. Perhaps it is exactly because climbing high to assert our selves comes so naturally to human beings that the Taoist works hard to suggest alternative paths to success and simpler forms of assertion. In this vein Laozi, to whom is attributed the *Daode Jing*, the seminal work of Taoist thought, writes: “Be still like a mountain and flow like a great river.”

Lest we be lulled into too mild an incarnation of the valley metaphor, we can turn to Sun Tzu, author of the 2,500-year-old *Art of War*, who drew explicitly on Taoist principles as he described the general so able he could win the battle before a sword was lifted. Sun Tzu wrote:

What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but wins with ease. But his victories bring him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage. For inasmuch as they are gained over circumstances that have not come to light, the world knows nothing of them, . . . inasmuch as the hostile state submits before there has been any bloodshed, he receives no credit for courage.

. . .

Hence the skillful fighter puts himself into a position that makes defeat impossible . . . and only seeks battle after the victory has been won, whereas he who is destined to defeat first fights and afterwards looks for victory. A victorious army opposed to a routed one is a pound's weight place in the scale against a single grain. The onrush of a conquering force is like the bursting of pent-up waters into a chasm a thousand fathoms deep.

We see that events in the Taoist valley are not always placid, and the roots of Colin Powell's doctrine of overwhelming force run back millennia in military history.

A Westerner who became fluent in Eastern thought and its interpretation is Alan Watts. In a luminous passage he suggests a deep origin for this Taoist affection for natural imagery and offers a view of the self that is, in suitably paradoxical fashion, both modest and magnificent:

Underneath the superficial self, which pays more attention to this and that, there is another self more really *us* than *I*. And the more you become aware of the unknown self – if you become aware of it – the more you realize that it is inseparably connected with everything that is. You are a function of this total galaxy, bounded by the Milky Way, and this galaxy is a function of all other galaxies. You are that vast thing that you see far, far off with great telescopes. You look and look, and one day you are going to wake up and say, “Why, that's me!” And in knowing that, you know that you never die.

As we assimilate the Taoist comfort with military might astutely deployed and a cosmic scope for the self, whatever trace of the insipid may be left in the concept of wu wei leaches into the ground. The wu wei that endures is an invitation to move forward with knowledge of terrain and of self, with understanding of surrounding forces, with awareness that much may be accomplished by small measures and good timing. The invitation is a sly one, however, for even standing still can be a form of moving forward. Consider the classic Taoist image of the sage who stands still in the river. Consider, too, that the image is not as simple as it might seem on first glance. The sage may be standing still in the river, but he has chosen a place where the current is not too deep or too powerful and where he can plant his feet securely in the bed of the river. The conscious and the unconscious are both at work. A commentator writes:

[Wu wei] is the practice of going against the stream, not by struggling against it and thrashing about, but by standing still and letting the stream do all the work. Thus, the sage knows that relative to the river, he still moves against the current. To the outside world, the sage appears to take no action – but in fact he takes action long before others ever foresee the need for action.

Water is a natural element in Taoist stories. We hold it dear as a progenitor of life and we know its variable moods. It can be a torrent that sweeps through a chasm or a current that does no more than swirl around the ankles of a sage. Besides its dynamism, there is another feature of water that conduces to a lead role in Taoist drama. It is steadfast in its response to gravity. It knows what it wants – to find the nearest low spot and flow into it, and to flow from there to the next low spot, and from there to the ocean. Its clarity of purpose is consonant with one of the simplifying tenets of Taoism. As you strive for authenticity you will also necessarily strive for simplicity. A given moment may hold many possibilities, but there are likely to be only one or a few ways for you to deeply engage with that moment, to be alive to the connection between you and exactly where you are in time and place and mood. To engage authentically is to avoid flailing against forces too big to master or travelling a rocky road to little effect. It is instead to choose carefully and not try to do too much. To do a few things well.

Like walking the dogs.

If wu wei is a guide for all moments, then we can encounter it not only in a skier's elegant line down the mountain but in the simple act of taking the dogs for a walk.

The walk I have in mind occurs early one misty morning. I sling my camera across my shoulder and loose my companions, Bondo and Vixie – rescue dogs, one black, one tan, both sturdy and ecstatic to be off to the woods and the fields. We spend most of our time in the woods where the moisture rising through cool air gives the shafts of sunlight, so often invisible till they meet the earth, a chance to show off their paths through the air. Finally we emerge from the woods as we draw close to home and discover that the dew is in full frolic in the meadow. Spider webs seem to be made of spun glass, and in the drops that hang from the blades of grass I can, by lying amidst them, peer into a tiny inverted world in each watery lens. Lying on my side now, remembering the dogs only enough to hope they will not stray from the field, I am drawn into a Thoreauian world of green leaves and brown stems, of scattered broad leaves and many slender ones. I

squeeze between the hummocks and begin to woo images out of this natural welter. The grasses are cooperative models, quivering in sexy elegance but holding their position in my viewfinder, letting me compose and refine the photograph. I am drawn first to the nearly ubiquitous dewdrops. They give an early-morning freshness to the image I capture and say in a quiet way, here I am, water, the life-giver – that without which the soil and the seeds can perform no magic. Aqua vita. And yet, as I squirm further amidst the grasses I feel another image reach out to me. It is more spare and somehow closer to the essence of the meadow. I have moved into the realm of another species of grass, thinner and less amenable to the dew. Within the rectangle I impose on these blades, they etch themselves into a filigree, each blade asserting its place and according just so much space to the one next to it – a triumph of niche-filling, a song of a species perfectly suited to its micro-climate, a song just waiting to be heard, an image just waiting to be captured – or am I the one being captured, being stalked by the grasses who will in this moment impose their world on mine if I am open to them, if my blend of conscious and unconscious reaches a trigger point and I click the shutter? – which I do.

Grasses in a field are now living in my camera. They are not lilies, but they are clothed in raiment fine. I am not Michaelangelo, lying on his back beneath the Sistine ceiling, but I am Rick, lying on my side in the meadow transforming bits of data into art. Did I find the true line through the moment? Did I, to borrow a phrase from sage Zhuangzi, hear the song of the meadow by using “my spirit, my entire being”? Did I experience wu wei? Perhaps.