

Wu Wei: The Way of the Water

The scene set before you is a nature spot surrounded by tall trees of green with violet leaves encompassed in sunshine. In between this greenery is a beautiful blue waterfall with a crystal-clear pool of water that lies below it. On the other hand, there is a waterfall that flows through dark black rocks to create a pool of water so dark that you cannot see its contents. The two bodies of water are complete opposites of each other. When asked, most people would associate more positive feelings, thoughts, and emotions with the first waterfall, and more ominous or negative ones with the second. In the same session, people were shown an image of a sloth and were told to assign adjectives to it. Adjectives that were assigned to it were things such as cute, adorable, and lazy. All of these reactions to images segue into a much deeper meaning. As human beings, seeing one image could make us feel a thousand things, as did the waterfall and sloth. Both can be used as a close analogy to the Daoist concept of Wu Wei.

Wu Wei is the act of “non-doing”, or quite literally “doing nothing”. This concept is at the heart of Daoism and promotes concentration, flow, and being one with the natural world. Daoism has the idea that “human life is really only a small part of a larger process of nature, the only human actions which ultimately make sense are those which are in accord with the flow of Nature — the Dao or the Way” (Bloom 2023). In the Dao De Jing, it is taught by Lao Tzu that the way never acts, yet nothing is left undone. The way and Wu Wei go hand in hand in what they promote, and how they encourage people to approach life.

There is a common confusion in following this concept of not doing and mistaking it for laziness or apathy. When people are often shown an image of a sloth, although they do say it is

also adorable, a common word that comes up to describe the sloth is lazy. We view the sloth as a creature that moves extremely slowly, hangs from the trees all day, and is in no rush to get its tasks done. However, this is only what we think, and not what we know. The truth behind the sloth is that they eat a very leafy low-calorie diet and have a very slow metabolism to match which is the cause of their slow movement. This slow movement is often confused with laziness, when in reality, the sloth is three times stronger than the average human being. The face of a sloth always appears as a smile, even if it is experiencing pain, stress, or anxiety. Finally, the sloth is faster in water than it is on land. I believe the mere existence of a sloth ties into the idea of Wu Wei.

In the same way that its slow approach is taken for laziness, the “go with the flow” approach of Wu Wei is taken for laziness as well. Meanwhile, the sloth is stronger than us when it takes this calm approach to life. This could represent that a calm approach to life and experiences may strengthen us as people, and if we stopped trying to do everything with so much force, we could be stronger. The sloth’s face is etched into a smile when it takes this calm approach to life. This could represent the happiness that we could find in this way of life. Finally, the way that the sloth moves faster in water than on land could be the literal representation of how when you are one with the water, and let it carry you, it will take you where you need to go.

Wu Wei promotes the idea of being one with the current, rather than against it. The waterfall is one of the strongest currents that we could flow with. When a waterfall flows, you can see the rush that starts at the top at the end of the river and hits the bottom making a pool of water. There is a Daoist meditation that will have you close your eyes and envision yourself laying down in the river and allowing yourself to be carried with the current into the pool of water below. When your eyes are closed, you can't see which type of pool you are landing in.

Will it be crystal clear and surrounded by colorful scenery? Or will it be black and cloudy surrounded by jet black rocks? Since we have no way of telling which we may land in, humans are often afraid to take the chance and allow themselves to flow with the current. There is a chance that we could end up in darkness, but there is also a chance that we could have a good, beautiful outcome if we allow ourselves to let things work naturally. We may be glad that we did so.

A brief history of Wu Wei and its roots in Daoism, will tell you that it is “a philosophy, a religion, and a way of life that arose in the 6th century BCE in what is now the eastern Chinese province of Henan”, with the principles of “inaction, simplicity, and living in harmony with nature” (Ames 2023). Past the individual level, some of the many effects of Daoism on the evolution of the world on a general level are its contributions to “Chinese medicine, science (the invention of gunpowder), and martial arts (Taiji, Wudang)” (Liu 2015).

The Dao De Jing / Tao Te Ching written by Lao Tzu / Laozi in 500 B.C.E, was designed to “promote a stable social order at a time of great political and social unrest” (Collins 1988). This text will tell you in regard to Wu Wei to “do that which consists in taking no action and order will prevail” (Livni 2017). Ways that one could approach practicing the idea of Wu Wei could be as simple as painting, meditating, or just making sure that with every difficulty you encounter, comes a calm mindset and the absence of force. Take these difficulties as they are, do what feels right, and learn from them.

There are many counterarguments that may be presented when it comes to the promotion of Wu Wei. Opposing viewpoints may challenge the concept by drawing attention to the fact that we live in a very demanding modern world. It can be nearly impossible to just “go with the flow” when there are jobs, responsibilities, and expectations that we feel we must uphold to contribute

to our society. It could be said that we simply need to have control in order for things to get done. We need structure, order, and control on the things that happen so that when something goes wrong, we can fix it in a just way. This is tied to survival as well. How are we meant to survive without control, and without giving in to the demands that keep our society moving?

While all of these counter arguments are valid to propose, the answer is not black and white, and cannot be set in stone. There is so much gray area when it comes down to figuring out the right and wrong ways to go about life. It can be clarified that the goal of Wu Wei is not to ignore responsibility and disregard your need for survival, but to just release the need for control over things you cannot control and let it help you for the better. Nature comes full circle and tends to itself if no one tends to it, as will the qualms of your mind. Issues that come to you are a natural part of life and they must be faced as such. The good that comes to you is well deserved and should be enjoyed as such. The human ego and the need to prove ourselves to others and our brains can fuel such an unhealthy cycle of making us believe that we must give in and use the same approach to get different results. Wu Wei wants to teach a more relaxed way of going about things and taking the good in stride just as much as the bad.

All in all, the existence of Wu Wei in our experience as humans is much more than just telling people to live and let live. Although trying to define Wu Wei kind of goes against the purpose of just letting it be, there is a lot to learn in letting things be out of your control and allowing yourself to tackle what comes your way with a wave of ease. The teachings of Lao Tzu can allow you to look at things in a different way than you've viewed them before and take an approach that feels right. An approach that feels simply human. When we were young, before we learned how to walk and talk and shape our thoughts to fit in with others in society, we were blank slates, open to whoever was ready to teach. There was no need for judgement, expectation,

and control until we learned it. So to revert back to this blank slate and allow life to be what it is in accordance with your existence, may be the happiest way to exist. To flow with the current and be one with the water is not for the faint of heart, but it could make you stronger, happier, and you might even find yourself moving faster with the water when you let it carry you than you did when you tried to force yourself to move faster on land.

Works Cited

- Ames, Roger T., et al. "Daoism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 28 Apr. 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Daoism>.
- Collins, Harper. "." World Religions Reference Library. . Encyclopedia.com. 3 May. 2023 ."
Encyclopedia.com, Encyclopedia.com, 4 May 1988,

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/dao-de-jing>.

“Introduction to Daoism: Asia for Educators: Columbia University.” *Introduction to Daoism | Asia for Educators | Columbia University*,
http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/china_1000bce_daoism.htm.

Liu, Warren. “The Influence of Daoism, Buddhism, and Legalism on Chinese Culture.” *Blog Di News e Informazione*, 2015,
<https://www.albertoforchielli.com/the-influence-of-daoism-buddhism-and-legalism-on-chinese-culture/>.

Livni, Ephrat. “An Ancient Chinese Principle Can Help You Get Comfortable with Doing Less-and Make You Happier, Too.” *Quartz*, Quartz, 1 Jan. 2017,
<https://qz.com/876067/the-chinese-principle-wu-wei-eliminates-the-need-for-lifehacks>.