



EFFORTLESS LIVING

Wu-Wei and the Spontaneous
State of Natural Harmony

無為

JASON GREGORY

Foreword by Damo Mitchell

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Note on the Romanization of Chinese Words

There are two commonly known romanization systems for Chinese words. The older and more familiar one is known as the Wade-Giles, while the new standard and more precise one is the Pinyin romanization. For example, the Chinese word 道 in the Wade-Giles system is Tao, and this is the romanization that many people are familiar with. It is somewhat pleasing aesthetically, but its sound is not quite accurate. On the other hand, the Pinyin romanization of this word is Dao. Many are not familiar with this spelling, nor, may we say, is it as aesthetically pleasing, but its sound is more accurate. In this book I have blended both systems of romanization for Chinese and give the spelling of both when we are first introduced to a significant Chinese word in the text. The romanization I choose for each Chinese word is based on what I believe people are most familiar with and also what I feel is best aesthetically.

FOREWORD

Shedding Skin to Liberate the Mind

Damo Mitchell

As a lifelong devotee of the Tao (道) only one thing has really ever held me back in my practice: a lack of trust. What is it that a true human should trust in?

We should give our trust to our unfolding path in life, which presents itself to us once we learn how to let go. This is both the simplest and most difficult of principles.

What stops a person from letting go and embracing trust in the unfoldment of the universe in their life is the interventions of the intellect. All those who walk the path of Tao will at some point or another realize that it is the machinations of their own minds that are preventing them from attaining the heightened states of consciousness alluded to by the ancient wisdom traditions. The nature of Tao is to flow and let life unfold in a harmonious manner. Those who can tap into this flow will be led toward a state of conscious elevation; those who cannot will generally be led down a path of trivial concerns. This was the underlying ethos of the teachings of the ancient Chinese master Lao-tzu (老子), and

for generations since it has been this deceptively difficult challenge that has lain at the heart of the Taoist tradition.

If we look at the majority of modern interpretations of Taoism, we see the hallmarks of a tradition that has sadly lost its way. Obscuring the original tenets are layer upon layer of useless trappings: ritual, hierarchy, worship, and other things generally associated with organized religion. Certainly the contemporary format of Taoism does not follow the teachings of its founders, nor does it serve to do anything but drag its adherents into a mire of trappings.

Having invested a great deal of my time and energy into a study of Taoism, I can see that my early years were concerned with learning as much as I could. I would study with any teacher I could find, spare no expense to travel to distant parts of Asia, and run myself ragged accumulating more and more information. The intellectual part of my mind thrived on my actions, but one day the realization dawned upon me that I was still no closer to really experiencing the Tao. I could perform no end of exercises, movements, and practices. I could quote classics and speak for hours on the theory of Taoism according to others, but I had no direct knowledge of what Tao meant. It was at this stage in my personal development that I understood that I needed to begin shedding. I needed to unclutter myself from the various trappings of Tao that I had accumulated, as it was these that were holding me back on my journey.

It is interesting for me to see how the majority of travelers within the internal arts go through a similar process. Those that move diligently enough along their path come to similar conclusions, so the process of unloading that which is

unnecessary becomes the path itself. Those who never fully come to terms with the nature of Taoism unfortunately miss this important point and instead continue to accumulate.

As this uncluttering takes place, it begins an unfolding process within the mind so that the most sincere practitioners begin to realize the nature of *wu-wei* (無為). Here, within the (non)act of nondoing, lies the heart of the Taoist tradition. Through noninterference in the natural flow of the cosmos, spontaneous truth is realized from within. As the great Taoist teacher Wang Chong (王充) said: “The Way to Heaven is to take no action.”

Within *Effortless Living* Jason Gregory eloquently explores the nature of Taoism and the concept of *wu-wei* from the position of somebody who has truly walked the path. This is a great relief to me, as I have grown tired of reading book after book written by pure Taoist theorists who butcher the tradition and in particular the nature of *wu-wei* through analysis from a position of pure intellect. It was like a breath of fresh air to spend time reading a text written by a true follower of the Way. As each chapter unfolds, you can see how Jason Gregory has been through the process of learning how to trust, let go, and manifest *wu-wei* through his very being. It is only when the majority of books on the nature of Tao are once again written by followers of the Way that Taoist literature will stop being so poor!

It also interested me greatly to see how Jason expertly brings the teachings of Taoism through into the modern age. An exploration of the nature of society and how it has developed in direct opposition to the way of Tao is by no means a mere modernism: a discomfort with societal

structure has always been present within Taoism throughout history, but few writers seem to pick up on this. When I engage with the writings of Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu (莊子), or indeed the vast majority of spiritual teachers around the world, I am confronted with radicals, misfits, and rebels. These are not prophets advocating the status quo; these are people who understood that stepping out of the structured nature of religion, society, and government was the only way to find some kind of personal liberation. What I learn from this is that only those who recognize the inherent sickness that pervades our societal structure will ever really be able to free themselves from the shackles of our societal paradigm. We are encouraged to live according to a narrative generated by a group of people who most certainly do not understand the concept of wu-wei, nor do they flow with the force of Tao. Rebellion is the natural inclination of many people who come to these conclusions, but in truth rebellion itself is against the flow of Taoism, because it too is a form of governance based within the acquired aspect of human mind. The real answer lies once again in the simplicity of wu-wei, the act of letting go and the trust that a new and spontaneous way of living will emerge.

Effortless Living is an important book, one that demands a place within anyone's mind, and especially any follower of the Way's library of resources. In putting it together Jason Gregory has undertaken a challenging task. One key reason that writing anything about Taoism is difficult is that the very tradition itself tells us right from early on in its key texts that it is practically impossible to discuss the nature of Taoism! It is a tradition that essentially transcends the

limited language of words, and yet at the same time the medium of language is required if the tradition is to be passed on. This is a difficulty I have encountered when writing my own books. Often I am left scratching my head at the problem of putting into the written language a feeling or realization that comes from deep within the center of consciousness—an abstract sense of “knowing” that people have to reach themselves to truly connect with. Despite these difficulties and the experiential nature of the tradition, it is the language of words that points the way and sets a person’s intention on the correct path. If I were to sit and consider how I would clearly and accurately put together a text describing the philosophical principle of wu-wei, I would certainly struggle, and yet with this book Jason Gregory has done an outstanding job of doing just that.

In conclusion, I would like to add that I truly believe it is important that any author or teacher within an internal tradition be a sincere adherent of the philosophy. If such a person does not embody the teachings in his own life, then he is simply adding to the watering-down of a timeless tradition as well as leading readers and students into the proverbial wilderness. As my role as head of an internal arts school has developed, I have found myself in many situations where I am mixing with other teachers and writers. The first thing I am curious about is the level of authenticity I find within these people. In many cases I am saddened to discover that they do not walk the path they are purporting to. Hypocrisy is an ugly human trait, and one that I have come to realize is rife throughout too many walks of life. In Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, I had the opportunity to spend time with Jason

Gregory and his wife, Gayoung. Over the course of our conversations it was clear that Jason had explored the meaning and practices within many different systems, and that his journey has truly enabled the teachings of the Eastern traditions to guide his life and release his *xing* (性), his nature. By letting go and putting trust in the nature of *wu-wei*, Jason has reached a state of being untethered to the restricting state of the world. As such, he has achieved a liberation of spirit that makes him more than qualified to write such a book. I believe that in this book, Jason's study, as well as his ability to put his conclusions into writing, has created an instant classic within the Taoist tradition.

DAMO MITCHELL is a teacher of the internal arts of China and follows the classical threefold path of martial arts, medicine, and meditation. His teachings are based on the philosophy that Dao is to be found when these three areas of study come into harmony with one another. His studies began at the age of four years old and have developed full-time throughout his life to include in-depth cultivation within several traditional lineages. He runs the Lotus Nei Gong International School of Daoist Arts, which has branches across Europe and America, as well as the Xian Tian College of Chinese Medicine, which focuses on both contemporary and classical therapeutic methods. He is the author of a number of books on the Daoist arts and continues to travel extensively and deepen his own studies between teaching events.

INTRODUCTION

The Effortless Mind

The experience of effortless mind is something we commonly attribute to athletes, artists, writers, poets, and philosophers. This state of consciousness is not bound by the limitations of the mind, but rather finds infinite expression and laserlike focus within the limited framework of our mental capacities and lives. We generally think of this mental state as *being in the zone*. We can sense this state when we watch a star athlete achieve the impossible or when a group of musicians improvise and feed off each other's energy to create a rhythmic synergy that nourishes our ears and inspires our hearts. Being in the zone is also the state of sustained concentration required to write a book, as I am doing right now. And yet there is an intrinsic paradox to being in the zone: in all crafts, to be effortlessly in the zone requires focused and sustained effort without any intention to achieve effortlessness within the mind. The effortless mind of the craftsman, then, is evoked by skillful effort *without* the intention of achieving that end. It is as though the craftsman and the craft are essentially one. Their effort is actually effortless because it is devoid of a person "doing" it; it is just happening spontaneously of itself in harmony with everything else.

The ability to focus the mind for a sustained period of time evokes the state of being in the zone, which allows us to achieve the impossible. This occurs because the conscious mind shuts down to allow the wisdom of the unconscious mind and body to take over. Muscle memory takes over, while the sense of “you” doing the task has been reduced.

According to cognitive science, the analytical conscious mind, the ego persona, what you refer to as “you,” is located within the cerebral cortex, which covers the front of the frontal lobe of the brain. This part of the brain is known as the prefrontal cortex (PFC). It is a part of the brain that evolved later than many of the others in an effort to navigate through the increasing planetary obstacles we continually encountered. Cognitive science refers to the prefrontal cortex’s analytical function as “cold cognition” or “System 2.” Cold cognition is the cognitive control function of the mind, which gives us the ability to exert effort and discern between “this” and “that,” and which formulates our opinions of “right” and “wrong” or “good” and “bad” based on our own personal experience. In our modern world the cold cognitive aspect of the mind is constantly overemployed from the beginning of life through education and then throughout working life, where it is thought that if we continue to force our effort continually, we will achieve our desired result. But as we all surely know, this is hardly ever achieved, because our focus is constantly distracted by the bombardment of external stimuli.

This analytical, active part of our mind in the prefrontal cortex is physiologically expensive if it is not supported by the more primal regions of the brain that we associate with

the unconscious mind. The function of the unconscious regions of the brain is known in cognitive science as “hot cognition” or “System 1.” Hot cognition is the function of our mind and body that is automatic, spontaneous, fast, effortless, mostly unconscious, and thought to be emotionally driven. Hot cognition is located within the earlier-developing primal regions of the brain and is associated with the unconscious. Its spontaneous and effortless function is what makes our head turn unconsciously when we see something beautiful in the environment, maybe a handsome man or ravishing woman, for example. And it can sometimes be a hindrance, as when we find ourselves unconsciously reaching for that piece of chocolate cake—a habit that arises from the way we evolved to seek sugar for momentary sustenance. On the one hand, hot cognition can produce all the miracles that spontaneously grow out of the mind and universe, and on the other hand it can lead us to being unhealthy (because there is an abundance of sugar that is constantly tempting us, for example). This is where the discernment of cold cognition is beneficial for our well-being.

The positive aspect of hot cognition is what drives those unconscious, spontaneous miracles achieved by many sports people; it is also what allows a musician to play her instrument without having to think about it. It is what allows artists, no matter whether they are painters, writers, musicians, gardeners, or athletes, to express the unconscious wisdom of the universe that lays dormant within our hot cognition. In all of these examples, the cold cognition within the prefrontal cortex that gave birth to the sense of “I,” the personality, has shut down to allow the effortless flow of the

universe to come to life. As a result, none of these creative types have to “think” to achieve the miraculous, and this is the effortless hallmark of being in the zone.

When we shut down our analytical, thinking mind, we achieve greatness. In India this is known as *grace*, and in ancient Asian thought it was understood that this grace comes about because of the ability to see that everything is done when left undone. Yet people were perplexed as to how a state of effortlessness within the mind can be attained with effort. Effortlessness, of course, implies no effort. As the American professor of Asian studies at the University of British Columbia Edward Slingerland has asked, how do we try not to try? In the ancient East most people were not craftsmen, and still are not, so they began to ask how they could attain the effortless, embodied skill of the craftsman as their everyday state of consciousness. People also wondered if being in the zone is beneficial, or even possible, in our ordinary lives.

In the ancient East wise people observed the mind of the craftsmen. They studied their ability to shut down their cold cognitive prefrontal cortex, so it appeared that their effort actually required no effort, as if their minds were at one with the universe’s unfoldment. Craftsmen’s work doesn’t look like work; rather it looks as if their mind and body have been attuned to the rhythm and dance of an invisible realm that brings a real joy to their lives and at the same time inspires others.

Craftsmen have this ability to be one with their craft without the sense of a person “doing” it. This is what interested the wise of the ancient East. As a result, the

documented birth of martial arts was based on the effortless mind of the craftsman. The martial artist focused on trying to cultivate an effortless mind, where being in the zone is one's ordinary state of mind *all* the time. The first traces of spiritually oriented martial arts, and their focus on health, longevity, and physical immortality, can be attributed to the philosophy of Yang Zhu (440–360 BCE: Wade-Giles, *Yang Chu*; Pinyin, *Yang Zhu*), who is credited with “the discovery of the body.” His philosophy is known as Yangism. There is speculation that the oldest forms of martial arts in China go back to the Xia dynasty more than four thousand years ago, but there is not much evidence to support this claim, and it is suspected that these forms of martial arts were only combat oriented.

Nevertheless, the foundation of spiritually oriented Asian martial arts in its original form lay in trying to cultivate an effortless mind all the time. This is still the primary focus of spiritually oriented martial arts today: being in the zone is thought of as a state of consciousness we can be in constantly. But the problem for Yang Zhu, and for many martial artists, was that excessive effort was still required to get even close to the effortless state of consciousness. The sense of someone “doing” martial arts was still there, which essentially eclipses the main objective of the craft, which is to transform our character.

It is this sense of “I,” the acquired personality, that is the primary focus in the East, because our true nature and reality can only be experienced when the “I” has vanished. The effortless mind of being in the zone is not something we can actively seek to attain, because this requires effort. Being in

the zone is an art that is evoked by essentially doing nothing to attain it. From this perspective, even effort is cleansed of trying and striving, because the sense of “I” is not there. This art and wisdom goes back further than the original martial artists and craftsmen. This book focuses on revealing the origins and history of the effortless mind, as well as on how to apply this art and science to our lives. I will go back to the basis of zone thinking in order to reveal an art of being in the effortless mind all the time, as my book is an attempt to explain that the zone we usually only experience briefly is actually our true natural mind. This wisdom goes back to an ancient sage of the East and a classical text attributed to him over two thousand five hundred years ago.

THE HEART OF LIFE

Though the spiritual texts and literature of all religions and wisdom traditions may be vast, many appear to skirt around the essential teaching that masters lived and avoid saying how we can apply their teachings to our lives. This is especially true in the case of that ancient master of China Lao-tzu (Wade-Giles, *Lao-tzu*; Pinyin, *Laozi*). From the time at which it is assumed that Lao-tzu lived (the sixth century BCE) until the present day, we know of only a few rare beings who have lived and revealed the mysterious depth of his teachings. One of them was the great sage Chuang-tzu (369–286 BCE: Wade-Giles *Chuang-tzu*; Pinyin *Zhuangzi*). Many spiritual seekers, martial artists, and teachers are fixated on “eating the menu”—talking about or dancing around the main meal instead of tasting it; that is, not going directly to the heart of things. But going to the heart of things was the

primary focus of Chuang-tzu. And this heart of things, according to him, is the mysterious “Tao of the Absolute,” which is centered on aligning to the source and substance of this ever-changing universe, rather than the “Tao of things,” which is focused on the temporary fluctuations of change that we usually seek to shape according to our own interests.

The *Tao* (道: Wade-Giles *Tao*, Pinyin *Dao*) of the Absolute is analogous to the Hindu *Brahman* and the Buddhist *Tathata*, and to the original concept of God in the monotheistic religions. Yet neither Lao-tzu nor Chuang-tzu is saying that the Tao cannot be known through the Tao of things. On the contrary, they both understood that the eternal presence of Tao courses through the veins of the entire phenomenal world, producing a metaphysical path that gives us a sense of guidance and order in relation to the universe within our ordinary lives. But they are attempting to explain that we become attracted only to the movement of energy within life, rather than to the source of our energy, which is the indescribable stillness at the heart of the human being and the universe. As a result, we have developed numerous methods of practice to explore this movement of energy through our bodies, such as the Chinese arts of qigong and t'ai chi, the Indian practice of hatha yoga, and the modern movement culture spreading across the globe. The problem with practical movement methods such as these is they can delay our quest for a liberated mind (enlightenment) if the practice becomes a habitual crutch.

A movement method becomes a habitual crutch when it is not backed up and supported by time spent in stillness. No real transformation of mind happens without regularly

stilling the mind. This is evident with martial artists, hatha yogis, and movement practitioners who incorrectly believe that they have control of the mind because they have control of their bodies. But we discover that, although they have good control of their bodies, their minds still run amok and have not essentially transformed. The essential principle of martial arts, hatha yoga, and any movement method is that the practice is supposed to transform our character into being more humble and respectful, which reorients our focus to within ourselves, thus cleansing us of our wrong perception of self, others, and the world. The point of these practices is to be conscious of the inner world and reach the spiritual sphere. Without the exploration of stillness, the Tao of the Absolute, the spiritual sphere becomes a mirage, because practitioners become intoxicated with the outer world of materiality and with the feats they can achieve physically. And yet this perception is in stark contrast to the wisdom of Lao-tzu, on which the philosophy of martial arts and numerous movement methods are built.

Nowhere within the beautiful verses of Lao-tzu's classic text the *Tao Te Ching* does he suggest that liberation is a bodily adventure of practice and discipline instead of a psychological freedom. Actually Lao-tzu does not teach any physical or mental exercise in the very small fragments of text he left behind. That only began with Yang Zhu's interpretation of Lao-tzu's philosophy.

The mysterious nature of Lao-tzu's lucid wisdom is the very reason why a multitude of interpretations of the inner meaning have surfaced. In fact, this is the genius of Lao-tzu's philosophy, because the *Tao Te Ching* has no definite

interpretation. This is the reason why the Tao referred to in the text could be molded to suit martial arts, other spiritual practices, or even business and war.

Though it may appear that I am criticizing martial artists, hatha yogis, movement practitioners, and spiritual practices somewhat, I am not; to get to the heart of things we need to discuss the things that have developed around Lao-tzu's wisdom since his time. In fact, I am always actively engaged in various forms of spiritual cultivation in my daily life, and I am also an avid admirer of those who have mastered this art of cultivation, especially martial artists, hatha yogis, and movement practitioners. But what I am trying to explain, in a sense, is a mirror of Lao-tzu's understanding, which is that any method of martial or spiritual practice is a means rather than an end. This end, which is eclipsed by our spiritual practice, is the psychological liberation of enlightenment. In *Zen and the Psychology of Transformation*, French psychotherapist Hubert Benoit explains this confusion between our attempts toward realization (enlightenment; *satori* in Japanese, *moksha* in Sanskrit) and the actuality of the experience:

The error which consists in considering realisation as the success of a training is epitomised in the adhesion given by so many men to systematic methods: the conception of this or that "ideal," yogas of one kind or another, "moral systems" proclaiming that such automatism should be installed and such others eliminated, in short any kind of discipline to which one attributes an intrinsic efficacy for realisation. *The*

error is not in doing and putting to the test what these methods require, the error does not consist in following these methods; it consists in believing that these methods can result by themselves in satori as roads issue at the end of a journey.

But this advice is hard to understand in the right way. If I see in it a condemnation of training I am mistaken, for this condemnation does not free me from evaluation; it only results in an inversion of training. In this false understanding I would train myself to train myself no longer, which would change nothing; I would be believing, without escaping from my error, in the efficacy for realisation of a counter-training which would still be a training. Zen tells us not to lay a finger on life: "Leave things as they may be." It is not for me to modify directly my habits of training myself. It is only indirectly that I can obtain the disappearance of these habits, by means of my understanding, ever more profound, that these attempts at training, which I continue to make, have in themselves no efficacy for realisation. It is a question, in short, of obtaining the devalorisation of these compensations which are my attempts at training; and this implies the defeat of the attempts and the correct interpretation of this defeat. I am not obliged to concern myself with the defeat; that will flow from the very nature of things; but I am concerned with the correct interpretation of this defeat. If I believe in the intrinsic efficacy of a discipline, I attribute its failure to all kinds of things but not to the discipline itself; so that it does not devalorise itself. If, on the contrary, I have understood the

intrinsic inefficacy of the discipline, while not by any means forbidding myself to practice it if I feel the need to do so, a profound lassitude will develop little by little in me which will detach me from this discipline in a real *transcendence*.

Satori, as we know, is not the crowning of an ultimate success but of an ultimate defeat. The consciousness of always having been free appears in us when we have exhausted all the attempts, all the training, that we believe may be capable of liberating us. If the disciplines could not be paths resulting in satori, that does not mean that they may not be paths to be followed; they are paths leading to blind-alleys, all leading to a unique and ultimate blind-alley; but they are to be followed just because satori cannot be obtained unless we have come up against the end of this last blind alley. They are to be followed with the theoretical understanding that they lead nowhere, so that experience may transform this theoretical understanding into total understanding, into this clear vision which is the arrival in the blind-alley and which lays us open to satori.¹

We are more attracted to the practice of spiritual cultivation than to what the practice is supposed to reveal. We are not willing to accept the ultimate defeat humbly, as Benoit puts it. As a result, we continue to exhibit gross spiritual pride toward our so-called attainments. This attitude can be directed toward practice of any kind. This psychological tendency is known as eating the menu. In

Effortless Living I am not interested in discussing the contents of the menu with you, even though we may trace over them to better understand the meal. This book is concerned with taking you beyond the menu to finally taste the ineffable mystery of Lao-tzu's sublime dinner.

THE FUNDAMENTAL CHINESE PHILOSOPHY OF WU-WEI

In order to taste the delicious meal Lao-tzu provided for humanity, we need to understand the core tenet of almost all Chinese philosophical systems. This foundational pillar of Chinese philosophy is found within the classics of Eastern thought, notably the *Tao Te Ching*, the *Analects* of Confucius, the *Chuang-tzu*, attributed to Chuang-tzu, and even the Indian text the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The core pillar of these classics, in China especially, is believed to originate from Lao-tzu, and it is his essential teaching that is veiled within the mystery of the Chinese word *wu-wei* (無為: Wade-Giles *wu-wei*, Pinyin *wu-wei*) (see figure I.1), which is the core of Chinese philosophy and a predominant principle in Eastern thought. This word is shrouded in misinterpretation. The main confusion arises from the Confucian translation of *wei-wu-wei*, which literally means “doing nondoing.” This interpretation is built on Confucius's philosophy of trying to install the eternal Tao and its virtue into our character as if it were some external agency. This is the completely opposite perspective to Lao-tzu's teaching of naturalness. Translated into English, *wu-wei*

means “nondoing,” “nonaction,” or “effortless action.” These translations are literally correct and lead us to the intuitive and ultimate psychological experience of wu-wei. This effortless psychological experience means “not forcing” or “allowing,” a state of “intelligent spontaneity.” The Trappist monk and author Thomas Merton describes wu-wei transparently in his book *The Way of Chuang Tzu*:

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Figure I.1. Wu-wei—nondoing / not forcing / effortless action
By Dao Stew

The true character of wu wei is not mere inactivity but *perfect action*—because it is act without activity. In other words, it is action not carried out independently of Heaven and earth and in conflict with the dynamism of the whole, but in perfect harmony with the whole. It is not mere passivity, but it is action that seems both

effortless and spontaneous because performed “rightly,” in perfect accordance with our nature and with our place in the scheme of things. It is completely free because there is in it no force and no violence. It is not “conditioned” or “limited” by our own individual needs and desires, or even by our own theories and ideas.²

In alignment with Thomas Merton’s description of wu-wei is the ancient Indian story of Krishna and Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*. The similarity comes from the Sanskrit *nishkam karma*, which means to remain active but be inwardly effortless, without any need of being rewarded for the fruits of labor. Krishna wants Arjuna to be so effortless that his actions are completely selfless and the sense of “I” has dissolved. The *Bhagavad Gita* states this in two key verses:

To action alone hast thou a right and never at all to its fruits; let not the fruits of action be thy motive; neither let there be in thee any attachment to inaction.

*Fixed in yoga, do thy work, O Winner of wealth (Arjuna), abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure, for evenness of mind is called yoga.*³

In the cosmic sphere of energy, wu-wei is the feminine (passive/receptive/Earth) principle of the universe. Psychologically within a human, it is the attribute of humility, which is more of an ontological or cosmic humility than the unctuousness of Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens’s

novel *David Copperfield*. The wu-wei at the core of Lao-tzu's philosophy is not something we can understand by intellectual discourse or attain by rigorous practice. On the contrary, the depth of wu-wei is only revealed to us when we are humble enough to let go of controlling our lives and instead live by its spontaneous principle. When we do not force or try to control life, wu-wei is experienced within our consciousness. It is hidden within the depth of our psyche as the formless Way of Tao beyond conventional thought and definite interpretation. Wu-wei is not something we can categorically explain or point to as an object of knowledge. Wu-wei is the truth that can be known through experience but cannot be given a form to appease the intellect.

THE PARADOX OF LANGUAGE

Wu-wei is the eternal aphorism of Lao-tzu and of Taoism and the martial-arts culture that was established after his life. This aphorism is not limited to intellectual knowledge, because it always reflects different aspects of yourself back to you according to your stage of conscious growth. To try and teach the experience of or interpret wu-wei is to lose sight of its depth. And yet here I am, dedicating a whole book to its mystery and the ability to apply it to our lives. In the same fashion, Lao-tzu explains within the first lines of the *Tao Te Ching* that to try and interpret or give meaning to the Tao is to lose grasp of the Tao, but paradoxically he goes on to write eighty-one chapters. The first lines of the *Tao Te Ching* state:

*The tao that can be told is
not the eternal Tao.*

*The name that can be
named is not the eternal
Name.*⁴

This form of paradox is a necessary tool in many spiritual teachings and traditions, especially those of the East. The use of language necessitates the paradox because it is paradoxical by nature. With language, for example, something either “is” or “isn’t.” We all know too well that there are always two sides to every argument or opinion. Language then becomes a device for explaining the field of duality only. It is a tool for partiality, which results in ignorance of nonpartiality. Cognitive science has revealed that language cannot have the same interpretation universally among all people, as Western thinkers originally believed. What one word meant to Lao-tzu is totally different to the way you and I may understand it.

Common misconceptions are built around language, especially among those who are spiritually inclined. The way people associate their understanding with certain words, such as consciousness, mind, awareness, perception, ego, self, truth, and God, all cause much confusion, because each word has the ability to change its meaning in correspondence to the growth of the individual. This confusion occurs even among people of the same language. On top of this, there is an immense amount of misinterpretation that is lost in translation from one language to another. In any event, language itself, no matter what dialect, is an inadequate tool for describing the nature of the universe.

Lao-tzu describes the limitations of language best in the first lines of the *Tao Te Ching*, as we see from the passage

above. Investigating language, we discover that it consists of ideas, sounds, thoughts, and words, which are structured building blocks contained within reality and are subject to its processes. Language cannot fully describe all of reality, because language is a part of that reality. Paradoxically, the microcosmic part of a human being contains the whole universe, but it is language that conceals our innate connection to, and identity with, the universe. A journey into the paradoxical nature of language can reveal this relationship between the macrocosmic universe and the microcosmic human being.

Exploring both sides of the coin of life has its benefits. We discover, as a result, the nonpartial perspective that Chuang-tzu demonstrated best. Discovering the paradoxical nature within our language and psyche reveals another “Way.” This is the doctrine of the *Middle Way* practiced in Buddhism, where opposites are thought to be mutual rather than in opposition. Our overstimulated intellect, which is constantly discerning between “this” and “that,” eclipses this mysterious Way with many mental sheaths. Contradiction in thought and language and the emergence of the Middle Way fly in the face of conventional logic. This perspective was embraced in ancient China with the birth of dialecticism because the Chinese use paradox, especially in language, to understand life. American psychologist Richard Nisbett articulates the essence of the paradoxical Middle Way of language and thought in his book *The Geography of Thought*:

The Chinese dialectic instead uses contradiction to understand relations among objects or events, to

transcend or integrate apparent oppositions, or even to embrace clashing but instructive viewpoints. In the Chinese intellectual tradition there is no necessary incompatibility between the belief that A is the case and the belief that not-A is the case. On the contrary, in the spirit of the Tao or yin-yang principle, A can actually imply that not-A is also the case, or at any rate soon will be the case. Dialectical thought is in some ways the opposite of logical thought. It seeks not to decontextualize but to see things in their appropriate contexts: Events do not occur in isolation from other events, but are always embedded in a meaningful whole in which the elements are constantly changing and rearranging themselves. To think about an object or event in isolation and apply abstract rules to it is to invite extreme and mistaken conclusions. It is the Middle Way that is the goal of reasoning.⁵

Psychologically, the intellect is the masculine principle of the universe, or in Chinese *yang* (陽: Wade-Giles *yang*, Pinyin *yang*), and its habitual tendency is geared toward force and control. On the other end of the spectrum, the feminine principle of the universe, or in Chinese *yin* (陰: Wade-Giles *yin*, Pinyin *yin*), is the intuition and heart of our existence, which perceives reality as it is rather than what we would like it to be according to our intellect and imagination. The characteristic of the feminine *yin* principle is analogous to space, because space is soft, receptive, and formless, and its natural essence lies in the humility of not forcing, of allowing and receptiveness, which are all attributes of the mysterious

wu-wei.

Our conditioned tendency toward hyperintellectualism veils and obscures the truth discovered beneath its parameters. This is not to say that the intellect is a problem that we need to eradicate. On the contrary, it is an important part of our existence, but the problem is that we have overemphasized the intellect. This keeps us in memories of the past and in the imagination or projection of the future, while never being in the *reality* of the present moment.

Our suffering as a species comes from the incorrect perception of living in the past through our attachment to memories that then shape our future. The phantoms of past and future are only of use to the intellect, because it gives individuals the idea that they are in control of their lives. Yet, as an individual grows, he begins to understand that no matter how grandiose his attempts at control, life always has a way of changing those plans. And in doing so, life also destroys the individual's imagined ability to control the future outcome. This mentality of forcing ourselves upon life is the socially accepted practice of modern civilization. An individual's attempt to control life according to her own beliefs, and as a result to force this perspective upon others, is the beginning of tyranny. Lao-tzu's essential teaching of wu-wei, on the other hand, illustrates the futility of our attempts to control life. He emphasizes that it is only when you give up forcing or controlling anything that you begin to get the kind of control you always wanted, but never knew existed.

The experience of wu-wei unlocks this mystery when our life comes into accord with not forcing ourselves upon any

now. Our lack of trust is destroying our civilization and also causing a huge dent in the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms.

This type of neurosis has gotten to the point that on an individual level we do not even trust our own psychological states. We do not act authentically, and we confuse our identity with our social identity. In being mere shadows of who we are, we cause violence toward others, condemn anyone who opposes our opinion, and hypnotically hurt those we love. All of this is done in the name of force and control. Social and cultural norms teach us this dichotomy. To act or function any other way is, from the point of view of the status quo, absurd.

Government, organized religion, society, and culture mark the physical advent of the trust that is lacking within the individual. If individuals lose their natural essence of trust, then some form of external tyranny in the guise of a trustworthy parental figure will take its place. Individuals fail to trust themselves, and this is why a lot of people ignorantly trust their government without question. In giving our power away to government, the individual begins to depend on the government as a parent, rather than seeing it in its original position—as a servant to the individual. Our lack of responsibility implies our lack of trust in ourselves.

Government is a phantom into which we invest too much energy. Individuals who sincerely trust themselves and others threaten the established order of culture, society, organized religion, and government. This threat could only become a reality if the truth of Tao is regained and a trust in life is realized. Wu-wei is the Taoist principle of trust. The

trust of wu-wei threatens any governmental, social, religious, and cultural landscape. We align with our innate trust when we are not forcing and instead allow life to take place. This capacity to align with your innate trust brings you back in harmony with the entire unfolding of the cosmos. To go with the grain or with a stream, one is not bound to the past, nor does one yearn for the future.

This grain or stream conforms to a cosmic organic pattern, which is the order of how the universe functions. The organic pattern is known as *li* (理: Wade-Giles *li*, Pinyin *li*) in Chinese. If we look into the grain of wood, the markings of a tortoise shell, the skin of an elephant, the spiral pattern of a sunflower, our own palms, and so on, we discover the organic pattern of *li*, which in some cases is mathematically fixed to the Golden Ratio of the Fibonacci sequence discovered by the thirteenth-century Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci. Tao is what courses through the pattern of *li*, and this fundamental process beautifies our world. Before his untimely death in 1973, the British philosopher Alan Watts explained *li* in his last book *Tao: The Watercourse Way*:

The Chinese call this kind of beauty the following of *li*, an ideogram which referred originally to the grain in jade and wood, and which [Joseph] Needham translates as “organic pattern,” although it is more generally understood as the “reason” or “principle” of things. *Li* is the pattern of behavior which comes about when one is in accord with the Tao, the watercourse of nature. The patterns of moving air are of the same character, and so the Chinese idea of elegance is expressed as *feng-*

liu, the following of wind.⁶

Coming into accord with *li* means we are coming into accord with that mysteriously eternal Tao. We cannot unite with the source of Tao unless we have given our life over to the nondoing, nonforcing, and nonreactive realm of *wu-wei*. Lao-tzu's essential wisdom is nothing more than that of an individual who can follow the effortless grace of *wu-wei* within her mind. Everything else that has developed around Lao-tzu's essential wisdom is a way either to get to the understanding of *wu-wei* or to delay our enlightenment through habitual crutches that take the form of spiritual exercises and practices. From the perspective of the ancient masters Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, enlightenment can only be realized in the ability to live *wu-wei*.

Almost all facets of what is perceived as Taoism since the time of Lao-tzu have turned this meditative, experiential way into a structure of control, hence *not* *wu-wei*. Within part 1 of *Effortless Living*, I will give a critical analysis of the difference between the religion of Taoism, which was built around the teachings of Lao-tzu with his essential wisdom of *wu-wei* and which gave birth to the martial and spiritual sphere of Chinese thought, and Confucian thinking. In part 2, I will explain the science of bringing the virtue of an effortless mind to society and culture, which could transform our concept of government into something much greater. We will also explore the power we possess from gaining the ability to trust and live spontaneously, which are the core components for the practice of being in the zone. In part 3 it all comes together to provide us the depth to live the art of an

effortless mind. *Effortless Living* will reveal that if we choose to follow this humble path paved before us by Lao-tzu, then we will gain the individual liberation that many people believe comes from the liberation of society. This individual liberation, according to Lao-tzu, is what secretly transforms and liberates the world. The practice of wu-wei is the vehicle we use to realize our innate freedom. This book may give us a chance to rediscover the art of effortless living, wu-wei.

PART 1

**THE ORIGIN OF THE
EFFORTLESS MIND IN
THE EAST**

inner and outer worlds. The Tao can be followed and experientially known when we have surrendered our controlled, conditioned identity over to the effortless realm of spontaneity and trust, *wu-wei*. This effortless realm is why the Tao is usually referred to as “the way of nature,” because when we follow the Way, we can experience the same spontaneity of nature within our own experience; as a result, we trust our path through life. The discovery of this spontaneity in life allows us to sink deeply into the awareness that we *are* nature and not separate from any aspect of it. This revelation of oneness with nature reveals a close relationship between the shamanic traditions of antiquity and the wisdom of Lao-tzu, minus the rites and rituals. In the essential teaching of Lao-tzu we discover small traces of some connection to the ancient shamanic traditions of China going way back into the Shang dynasty (1600–1046 BCE).

But in no way could there be any connection to shamanic practices, ancestral worship, sacrifice, rites, and rituals, because knowing and following the Tao according to Lao-tzu has nothing to do with outward gestures, no matter how dazzling to the eye. All forms of practice and ritual are controlling aspects of the intellect and its repetitive modes rather than natural spontaneity. We could say, however, that in ancient times they were performed because they expressed the concealed mystical truth of Tao. Lao-tzu was not against such activities, but he did become concerned when people viewed them as a form of liberation.

Both the great sages Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu explained that the real Way of Tao is beyond the outward form. Instead of being concerned with the temporality of such things as

rituals, we can directly access the depth of our being through the feminine quality of wu-wei. Yet the teachings of Lao-tzu have been discarded in favor of the shamanic practices, ancestral worship, sacrifice, rites, and rituals that have developed and been embraced by the world since his time. All of this came about from the misinterpretation of Lao-tzu's teachings by the social moralist Confucius and others down the line of history.

CONFUCIAN MORALITY AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF *JU*

Confucianism is still the predominant philosophy of East Asia. Aspects of Confucianism are not only found in China but are embedded in many different ideologies around the world. Confucianism is the moral and ethical outgrowth from the Taoist philosophy of Lao-tzu. We could only hazard a guess about whether Lao-tzu and Confucius knew each other.

When we study the mind of Confucius, we discover a man who understood the Taoist Way well and was a key contributor to the classic Taoist oracle the *I Ching*. But when we dissect the moral virtue of Confucius's superior man, we discover that his interpretation of Lao-tzu's wisdom may have only reached an intellectual level. This is because his primary focus was not on the liberation of the individual but on an enlightened society. I am not saying here that an enlightened society is impossible. But it needs to be clear that the foundation of a society comes from what is within the minds of the individuals who live in it. Hence Lao-tzu's insight is that the enlightenment of the individual takes us a step closer

to the total liberation of humankind.

This should make complete sense to anybody. Yet we have devised a whole social system of thought based on the concept that it is not the individual pieces that make up the whole, but rather it is the whole that controls the pieces. Surely you can recognize this idiosyncratic view of life within yourself. The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once said in regard to morality within society, “Morality—the idiosyncrasy of decadents, with the ulterior motive of revenging themselves on life—successfully.”¹

This concept has led to the formation of institutional power, which wields its influence over the individual through government, religion, the economy, academia, and other institutions. Confucius’s interpretation of Lao-tzu’s wisdom contributed heavily to this confused view of reality. Confucianism was not an enhancement of the Taoist Way. On the contrary, it deformed its wisdom into a vehicle that would only suit the morally and ethically “noble” of society. The Confucian way is to try and transform the individual according to the moral codes and ethics of ju (儒: Wade-Giles *ju*, Pinyin *ru*) philosophy.

Ju philosophy is the heart of Confucius’s teachings and the framework of Confucianism. It is constructed around four basic virtues (see figure 1.1). The first of these basic virtues is known in Chinese as *jen* (仁: Wade-Giles *jen*, Pinyin *ren*), which is translated in English as “human-heartedness.” This human-heartedness is the compassion and devotional love we have deep down for one another. It is the ability to identify with the suffering and joy of others as if they were our own.

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