

# Wu Wei

## *Comes Alive*



无为

Tekson Teo



# Wu Wei Comes Alive

Getting Things Done  
Naturally

**Tekson Teo**

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**TEKSON TEO**

**WU WEI COMES ALIVE**

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This book is gratefully dedicated to my  
tai chi master,  
Master Sim Pooh Ho.





# Preface

One of the best ways to deal with today's ever-demanding world is the practice of wu wei, a strategy you can ill afford to ignore.

The practice has been around for thousands of years, and it's still a well-kept secret, ironically, for its simplicity. People don't believe something so simple can be so powerful.

Variably translated as "non-doing," "effortless action," and several other names, the practice of wu wei 无为 finds its origin in an ancient philosophy known as the Tao.

It is a secret sauce of excellence for any fields, be it the arts, sports, sciences—you name it. By keeping you in a state of calm and ease, the practice brings out the best in you.

At the heart of the practice is a deep respect for nature. Rather than working alone and striving hard, you tap into the power of nature to get things done effortlessly.

It explains why the practice of wu wei is exceptional as a way to cope with the ever-demanding world that afflicts men and women with stress, anxiety, self-doubt, and whatnot.

Let the serenity and peace of nature fill the things you do. You accomplish work without the frantic doing that keeps many people trapped.

The calm and ease also allow you to listen to the whispers of your inner self. It has often become muted due to the rigidity and anxiety of life. The internal dialogues lead you to your purpose, and unlock the hidden potential in you.

This sense of inner peace can also miraculously help you integrate with the enormous universe around you, which will multiply your capacity manifold. Your life will never be the same again.

The Tao Te Ching, written by the sage Lao Tzu 2,500 years ago, is the best guide to the practice. It's the place where the sage coined the word wu wei and expounded the approach to life.

It's one of the most sought-after books of wisdom in history, and many people believe it's the most translated work, second only the Bible.

## **Making the wisdom work for you**

In order for the practice to work, you must have a basic understanding of the Tao's philosophy. You can find a summary of the philosophy in the Tao Te Ching written by Lao Tzu.

Although it is not required to read the ancient book for taking up the practice of wu wei, doing so most certainly helps.

For centuries the words of wisdom in the Tao Te Ching have never failed to inspire. It, therefore, is no surprise that the book counts legendary figures among its ardent fans and advocates. Let me just name a few of them.

I was told that Albert Einstein, a physicist I regard highly, had a German version of the book on his bookshelf. You can find his belief in

the ancient book revealed in his works, such as the connectivity of the universe and limitation of knowledge.

Leo Tolstoy, the great classic author of *War and Peace*, was so inspired by the book that he became its first Russian translator and publisher.

American historian Will Durant, best known for his eleven-volume *The Story of Civilization*, said, “Perhaps we shall burn every book but one behind us, and find a summary of wisdom in the *Tao-Te-Ching*.”

## **Learning the wisdom**

From the accolades, we can sense the depth of wisdom the *Tao Te Ching* teaches.

In this book that you’re reading, I’ll show you the wisdom that drives the practice before moving on to how you can immediately put them into practice to see results. You can use these as a springboard to achieve bigger things in life.

I have created a four-part road map in this book to help you get started with the practice, taking you from where you are today to the state of not doing.

I believe you will enjoy the experience of how this simple wisdom can impact your life.

For decades, I’ve been an avid reader of the *Tao Te Ching* and related literature, including the *I Ching*.

I was struggling with it and made little progress for several years. After years of repeated reading and reflections, I began to make more sense of it, despite there still being dots that I can’t connect.

A breakthrough came when I reconnected with my tai chi master Master Sim Pooh Ho in 2015. I met him in 1999, and I’ve been his disciple ever since. But for some reason, we lost touch for a few years.

After the reconnection, I had the opportunity to learn extensively from him the wisdom of Tao Te Ching, albeit from a tai chi perspective. I've since worked with him on two books, one in Chinese and another its translation in English. The English book is entitled *Decoding the Tao Te Ching*.

Seeing how the wisdom radiates from the ancient martial art of tai chi is a revelation. The problem with reading the Tao Te Ching is that while you know its profound teachings, it can be difficult to verify them in real life. You know it's helping, but you don't know whether or not you're doing it right.

I can immediately check whether I am producing results when I put the teachings into tai chi, an epitome of philosophy. The challenges in life are like sparring opponents, who can be intimidating. By adhering to the principle, I experience the power of softness and how being weak can be strong.

Whenever I'm thrown out of the ring, I can check if there are any tenets that I might have failed to observe. The sparring ring is my laboratory.

*There are even more revelations* when I combine the things I've learned in the philosophy with what I do. I've been a management consultant for decades and have worked with thousands of people from different continents. After seeing the positive effects of wu wei, I find it compelling to share what I've observed so that others could benefit from it as well.

I've put together a training program to accompany this book. Alongside the lessons, I'll provide exercises in bite-sized pieces so you can learn the practice more effectively! Do visit [Tekson.Org](http://Tekson.Org) to find out more about the program.

I'm so happy that you have picked up the book and in doing so companion my learning journey. Let's experience the power of wu wei together. It's too good to miss.

# **Introduction**

# **The Wisdom**

# Power of Wu Wei

To explain what wu wei means is never easy.

Most people tend to think that to achieve more, we have to work harder; to be in control, we need to fight for more control.

To tell them that one should do the opposite to achieve better results can be an uphill task.

Nevertheless, it's what the practice of wu wei is all about—and where its power lies.

Believe it or not, I even had difficulty deciding on the word to use to describe the practice. Should I be using the Chinese Pinyin “wu wei” directly, or other translations such as “non-doing” or “effortless action.” I chose to only use “wu wei” when finalizing this book.

The problem is very real. There's no equivalent word for the concept in English. Whatever word that I choose, the question is bound to come up of “What do you mean?”

So forgive me if I have to take more time than usual in order to explain a definition that will work.

“Do nothing and leave nothing undone,” says Lao Tzu. The statement aptly describes what the practice is all about.

If you find it puzzling, you're not alone. Is there really a way to do nothing and leave nothing undone? Even making a cup of coffee needs something to be done. The coffee will not fall out of nowhere, will it?

In fact, wu wei is not about doing absolutely nothing. The word has a special connotation and is very profound. You can't derive the meaning of the practice from its literal definition.

## **Going with the flow of nature**

The practice of wu wei is all about going with the flow of nature.

In everything we do, there is a natural thrust of flow. You feel it in the way you run, the way you speak, or the way you cook dinner. The more that you can go with the flow, the better results will come to you.

As far as possible, don't impede the flow, or you'll compromise the results by preventing nature from doing its best. Rather than intervening and imposing your will, find out what's occurring in the situation and flow with it.

In this way, you can ride the waves of nature to get things done. Nature is powerful, and it makes what you do powerful. You are easy and calm yet fully engaged; things happen as if with little effort on your part.

Think about the ways you breathe. Although you breathe every moment, you don't think about it at all. It happens naturally. The more natural you are, the more effective the breath is. If you, instead of wu wei, try to control, you intervene with the flow. Not only is the additional effort not helpful, but it also makes you feel giddy!

Well, there are breathing techniques for, say, singing or improving health. They, however, tend to harness the natural flow in other ways rather than to defy it.

If you can optimize the flow in everything you do, life is a breeze. Whether driving a car, giving a speech, or running a marathon, you just do what the flow requires, and things take place naturally.

Wu wei is a practice that observes the flow of nature to optimize results.

## **Optimizing the energy**

With wu wei, we make the best of the limited energy by leveraging the momentum of flow, turning a small amount of energy into a lot.

Let's examine the way an ancient tai chi master exploits it. It is a spectacle to behold.

Slow and meditative, tai chi is an intriguing form of martial art. It's so soft that many people regard it as an older people's exercise performed in parks. It is, however, a martial art that is both technically challenging and spiritually enlightening.

It's quite an eye-opener when you see an old master sparring a young man half his age and twice his size.

Rather than feeling intimidated, he's clearly in control. Swaying the young man left and right, he leaves his opponent gasping for air while struggling for balance. The more the young man tries to fight back, the more he puts himself in a tight spot. In the nick of time, the old master tosses him out of the ring like a ball.

It's wu wei in action. From how the old master prevails, we can learn a few things about the power of wu wei.

## **Yield to engage**

First, he conserves energy by yielding.



Instead of trying to fight back as most people would do, the old master yields. When he's pushed to the left, he goes to the left. When he's pushed to the right, he goes to the right.

He yields not to run away but to be fully engaged. By yielding, he's able to listen to the flow of energy. When the attack happens quickly and furiously, he accepts it with grace, which has the advantage of reducing much of the impact.

There is a flow trajectory of the attack, and the force soon declines as it goes beyond its peak. The old master hears it, and he takes the opportunity to act. Through a bit of effort, he deflects the energy flow like U-turning a flying bullet back to the person who fires. It throws the opponent off the ring.

## **Ground firmly to the center**

Second, he keeps to his center.

The old master yields to the attacking force in the whole process but never gives away his center. He hears how the center is being shifted and snaps into the new center when he's there.

In this way, the old master is firmly on the ground when the opponent continues to move and exposes his weak links—no wonder the old master is in control.

## **Leverage the opponent's energy**

Third, he "borrows" the energy of the opponent and returns it to him.

The more forceful the attack, the more energy the old master can capitalize on striking back, and the more the young opponent is tilted off-balance. The old master doesn't use his own energy to counteract. He literally "borrows" the opponent's force to fight him back.

By yielding, the old master lets go of control and is in better control. While many people see yielding as weakness, he makes it his primary strength. Instead of relying on force to fight against force, he yields and finds the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

By going with the flow of nature, a meager effort becomes a pool of energy. This is a marvel of wu wei.

If you can apply the tai chi wisdom of wu wei to the things you do and put up with, even adversity is strength. You're calm, easy and as formidable as the old tai chi master.

# The Philosophy

You must know the philosophy behind the practice of wu wei to make the best of it.

Wu wei is a translation of the Chinese word 无为 (pronounced as *wu2wei2*). It means doing nothing, and its magic lies in the notion of nothingness, which has a specific connotation here.

To know what nothingness means, we've to go back to the Tao Te Ching. But before we do that, let me ask you a question.

What do you think is the biggest thing in the world?

I get different kinds of answers to this question. Some are hilarious: elephants, whales, dinosaurs, aircraft carriers, the list goes on.

If you seriously think about it, isn't the biggest thing the Earth itself? What in the world can be bigger than the Earth?

So the Earth is big. But when you think about it, the Earth is, in fact, very small. It is just one of the nine planets that revolve around the Sun, and Jupiter alone is one thousand times its size. When we compare it to the Sun, it's even smaller. About 1.3 million planet Earths can fit inside of it.

So the Sun is big? While the Sun is without doubt gigantic, it's extremely small. Not only is the Sun not big, but it's also tiny! If you compare it to the Milky Way, it's only one of the one hundred billion to four hundred billion stars like the Sun in it.

So, the Milky Way is big? Not really! Residing alongside the Milky Way are billions of other galaxies. When we see the universe in this dimension, size no longer matters. It's simply too big, where even the Milky Way appears to be small.

Just imagine! While the Earth and the Sun are mammoth to us, they pale before the size of the universe. What about you and me?

We're tiny beyond description! But hang on. Here lies the biggest mystery of the universe.

While the universe is gigantic, who governs it? Who is in control and keeps it in order?

The harmonious nature of the universe surprises people. Despite every star and planet existing in one place, everything is perfectly in order.

Anyone who visits a kindergarten understands how difficult it is to control just a dozen noisy young children. In this sense, containing billions of planets and stars is no mean feat!

Just imagine how every planet orbits around its star like the Earth orbiting around the Sun in exact precision, not for a day, but billions of years.

## **The nothingness of the universe**

There's a dark, silent, and unifying force that underlies the entire universe and controls its behavior. It's almighty, ever-present, and yet without a trace.

Nobody knows what this force exactly is. Lao Tzu describes it as the Tao, although you're free to give it any other name.

While the universe is gigantic beyond our wildest imagination, it humbly submits to this silent, almighty force of the Tao.

"Something nebulous was born before the emergence of the universe. Serene and desolate, it was solitary and unchanging. Revolving unabated, it can well be Mother of the universe," marvels Lao Tzu.

Although the Tao is almighty, no one knows what it looks like. We can't see it, touch it, hear it, or smell it. It's a void. It's formless. For convenience, Lao Tzu gives it another name—"nothing," or wu 无 in Chinese.

This is what the nothing in the context of wu wei means.

Wu wei is, therefore, not about doing absolutely nothing, but how we can work with the formless Tao. Since the Tao is powerful, if we work with the Tao, then we can be immensely powerful too.

## **Tao follows nature**

Another challenge arises. How can we ever effectively tap into the invisible force of the Tao if it's formless? We don't even know what it looks like.

Fortunately, although we can't see the Tao per se, we can see it in its manifestations. In a way that we know electricity is working when it lights up a bulb, although the electricity current is invisible.

While everything is a creation of the Tao, and we can see its manifestations everywhere, nature tops the list, especially when it is untainted. It's so close to what things originally are, and this is inspiring.

When we see how the earth grows the crops, and the rain irrigates the farm, we know the enormous power of nature, and we appreciate the almightiness of the Tao behind it.

The traces of the Tao in nature are visible. If we can respect nature and work with it, nature is on our side, and it stacks the odds in our favor with the power of the Tao, making what we do more effortless and effective.

It explains why going with the flow of nature can be so powerful. Nature is a great partner in what we do. We let go of control to become part of the flow that gets things done by joining forces with nature.

It is no wonder wu wei is a great way to help us achieve more, even when we are not doing anything more.

# How to Use This Book

Thank you for embarking on the journey of wu wei with me, where we're going to explore how, by learning the wisdom, we can make whatever we do like a flow and our lives joyous and rewarding.

If you're new to this, you will be pleasantly surprised by how easily you can see results. By applying the wisdom to things such as how you plan your time, you will be able to enjoy a better flow of the day almost immediately.

If you are not new to wu wei, a deeper dive will undoubtedly give you more insight into the practice. It can also help you become more in touch with your purpose, the potential within you, and ways to tap into the universe for more energy and inspiration.

I'm glad to serve as your guide, but you must be ready to walk the path. No one but you can make the practice yours.

The book consists of five parts; each addresses a fundamental aspect of the essence of or wu wei. They include

- Introduction: The wisdom
- Part 1: Find the flow
- Part 2: Quiet confidence
- Part 3: Soft focus
- Part 4: Go with the flow

They take you from where you are today to the calm and ease essential to making the practice a way of life. You may read the book independently or as a foundation reading for the accompanying training course.

To find out more about the training, visit [Tekson.Org](http://Tekson.Org).



# **Part 1**

# **Find the Flow**

# What Is Naturally So

The concept of going with the flow is easy to understand but not as straightforward when putting it into practice, you may think.

If you can ride on the waves of nature, you're working alongside nature to get things done. Because nature is powerful, it in turn empowers you to be more powerful. The proposition is easy to understand.

But how to put it into practice? In the first place, what is nature? Are you talking about natural phenomena such as the mountains and rivers? If this is the case, how would you go with the flow of the mountains and rivers?

We need a clear understanding of what nature means to get started.

For that, let's go back to the Tao Te Ching and hear from the horse's mouth.

"Tao follows what is naturally so," says the sage in chapter 25 of the book.

The word nature in the Tao Te Ching is a translation of the phrase *ziran* 自然. While it's not entirely wrong to interpret it as a natural phenomenon, it goes a few steps further than that.

It's more about what things actually are or what is. As 自然而然, in Chinese.

It's to be as natural as nature, a manifestation of the formless Tao. We're going with the flow of nature and following "what is naturally so" or ziran 自然.

If the mountains and rivers are the what is, we go with their flow in terms of their nature, not form. From the mountains, we learn their virtue to be steady and firm. From the rivers, we learn the merits of the humility of lying low.

The mountains and rivers are being, and their virtues non-being. We see the non-being in being and being in non-being. We see not only what we see but the invisible virtue underlying everything.

In this context, we may see nature in three ways—one in you, one outside of you, and one that integrates the two of them.

## **The nature in you**

The nature in you is your authentic self and what you actually are. It's the embryo of your destiny. Derived directly from the Source, it's innocent, pure, and full of vitality.

When you go with the flow of the nature in you, your innate nature becomes an impetus for your success.

If you were destined to be a tree, allow the tree to grow to its fullest without interference. If you were a fish, you're relaxed and swim with your native charm and grace. If you were a bird, you soar in the sky with your inborn elegance.

## **The nature outside of you**

The nature external to you refers to what happens in the world outside you. In everything you do, there is a nature within it. It's "what is naturally so," and beneath it is the underlying principles. Understanding its dynamics makes it easy for you to get things done.

If you know there is a season for everything, then do not pluck the fruit prematurely. We give it patience and time. If we know it is impossible to change a person's attitudes overnight, then we would accept who they are and find another opportunity to do so if there is.

We listen but read between the lines and hear the unspoken, and enjoy the insight it sheds. We work hard but exert just the right amount of effort to keep the momentum of flow.

We learn from natural phenomena and go beyond and above them. We understand the essence of things, which is invisible but gives things their thrust.

## **Optimizing the flow**

When nature inside of us mingles with the outside, it raises the power of flow to a better level.

If we know that anger blocks what we hear from both in and outside of us, we don't allow it to get the better of us. By doing so, we instill calm into the ways we handle things. It helps us to see more clearly how we can tap into the flow of nature to work.

By blending nature both in and outside of us, we optimize whatever we do. It's powerful.

# What is in a Flow?

Flow is free like the wind, supple like water, and graceful like a dance. It's fluid, effortless, and natural.

To effectively tap into a flow, find out what's in a flow. Stay calm and let the natural flow take place.

We can't force flow to arise. It takes place when the conditions are right. If the flow is not ready, work on improving the conditions, not forcing it.

For that, we need three primary factors to come together—timing, place, and people. We may call them TPP. They must work seamlessly together or things will not happen.

It doesn't matter what you do. Whether you're conducting a meeting, cooking dinner, or building an enterprise, you need the TPP. If one of the factors is missing or lacking, things will not happen. Even if they do, they're not optimized, and there is no flow.

"All things arise from Tao, nurtured by Te, formed by matter, fulfilled by the flow," says Lao Tzu in chapter 51.

To hold a meeting, you need the participants, a place to gather—even if it's a virtual platform—and the timing for everyone to turn up. Otherwise, the meeting will not happen.

Similarly, you must be present in the kitchen to cook dinner and wait for the ingredients to be cooked. Just imagine that you take the food out from the wok too early! The effort can go down the drain.

With attention to the TPP, we see the nothing in something and the thrust in a movement.

“Non-being, the beginning of Heaven and Earth. Being, Mother of all things,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 1 of the Tao Te Ching.

Not only must the TPP be in place, but they must also work hand in glove together. Every primary factor must play its role and play it well.

We need a state of calmness and ease—a hallmark of wu wei—to allow the TPP to work together.

It's hard to optimize flow when you're tense and rigid. You can't hear the whispers of the voice deep in you, nor the dynamic of energy that propels the flow. You hear only your thoughts and see only your ego.

The more relaxed and calm you are, the easier it is to work closely with nature, and the more you can derive from the flow.

There are a few things that you can do to attract flow. To get started, let's learn about how you can see things in the seed

# See Things in the Seed

What do you see in a seed?

A seed, for the uninitiated, is nothing more than a seed. In the eyes of the discerning, however, it's an embryo of greatness. For a farmer, it can be a giant tree in the making.

If you want to make the best of everything you do, learn the art of seeing things in the seed.

Although invisible, it's the formless Tao in things. It leads you to spot opportunities that others can't see and avoid pitfalls people don't bother with.

You do a little but achieve a lot.

It helps you identify what matters, which is the essence of things and the potential of nature, something that you can tap into for growth.

It is the innovative idea that sprouts an enterprise, a motive that blooms into a symphony. It charts a path for achieving greatness.

Seeing things in the seed, you don't just work hard. You nurture and grow with purpose.

“A giant tree grows from a tiny sprout, a tower nine-story high rises from a pile of earth, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 64 of the Tao Te Ching.

The wisdom is simple. Ironically it’s also exactly where many people hit the blind alleys.

## **You can’t plant apples and harvest oranges**

First of all, you can’t plant apples and expect to harvest oranges.

The wisdom is plain as day, but it’s precisely where many ambitious men and women are trapped.

Instead of seeing things in the seed, they weave big dreams they fancy because they like it. They assume that if they have fire in their belly and work hard enough, they are guaranteed to make their dreams come true.

Sadly, if the dream is a wrong seed, they may end up harvesting fruit not of their choice, even when they’re successful in what they do. Can you imagine how sad it can be if you get oranges when you pour in your blood, sweat, and tears planting apples? It’s even more devastating if there’s no longer the time and energy to replant the seed.

“If we conform to the Tao, the power of the Tao flows through us. If we conform to the Te, the power of the Te flows through us. If we conform to loss, the power of loss flows through us,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 23 of the Tao Te Ching.

It’s clearly against the principle of wu wei. You’re doing a lot to achieve a result that you don’t want.

Know what’s in the seed, and you know what matters to you. You’re less likely to nurture a wrong seed.

In addition to seeing things in the seed, learn to appreciate emptiness in a cup.



# Emptiness in a Cup

What do you see in a cup?

Chances are you will notice its look—shape, material, colors, and so on. It is, however, not the most essential feature of the cup.

As Lao Tzu puts it, nothing in a cup is more important than its emptiness. Although invisible, it's the very purpose of its existence.

It's the nothingness in the practice of wu wei.

A cup exists, more often than not, to serve drinks. Without its emptiness, it can't fulfill its primary purpose of existence. If this is the case, a cup is useless no matter how elegant it looks.

In life, you have your version of "emptiness" as well. It doesn't matter whether you're tall, short, plump, thin, beautiful or ugly, rich or poor. It's the reason for your existence.

If you don't live your "emptiness," you miss your existence's very purpose, and it is difficult for you to feel fulfilled. You're unhappy even if you look charming or are rich and famous.

In contrast, if you can live your "emptiness," you shine in the ways you're meant to be. You're like a fish being a fish and a bird being a

bird. You live your intrinsic value and emanate a natural charisma that brings out the best in you.

“Losing not our center, we shall endure,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 33 of the Tao Te Ching.

## **In quest of your emptiness**

Fear not, nevertheless, if you’re yet to find your “emptiness” and ultimate purpose of life. You’re not alone. It happens to most of us. Few people are lucky enough to stumble into their purpose in the first instance.

You may find your purpose in the thick of a forest awaiting your discovery or somewhere you’ve never thought possible. It involves an ongoing and sometimes arduous quest.

Don’t give up or be put off the quest. Even though you may not find it immediately, the process of searching and discovering itself is rewarding.

Don’t be surprised if an epiphany dawns on you when you’re not prepared.

Once you’ve found the purpose, give it your utmost care. It’s a gift of heaven. It lights up your journey like sunshine and unleashes your potential like a magic spell. It’s definitely worth the quest.

## **Align what you do with your emptiness**

What if, having found your purpose, you realize that it conflicts with what you’ve been doing. You’re, say, stuck waiting on diners in a restaurant when your calling is to be a writer. It can be tormenting to know what you’re destined for but not able to embrace it.

Do by not doing. The way life evolves hardly seems plain as day. Take whatever happens in your stride. At the very least, see it as a way to build up your stamina and strength. Align it to your purpose to see how you can make the best out of the doldrums.

What about, say, observing people while waiting on diners or using what you see to develop a plot? The purpose is the unchanging in changes. See not only the kite but also the controlling hands, and there is less confusion.

Stay not knowing, and you're open to possibilities you've never thought possible. A doldrum can turn out to be a blessing in disguise.

# Accepting What Is

Nature is what is, a reality that is in favor of no one. Ask no favor from it.

Instead of burying our heads in the sands, accept what is. Acceptance enables us to engage—even with things not to our liking—to make the most of the situation.

Reality doesn't change even if you don't like it. While accepting it is tough, not accepting it can be more painful.

Learn from the ways water engages with a rock. In the face of a rock that blocks its way, water yields and, as a result, can stay close to the rock and wear it away little by little over time.

The rock is like an obstacle that you face in life. It allows you to engage more with the situation and do whatever you can to improve it by yielding to it.

“Heaven and Earth are unbiased; they treat all things as straw dogs,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 5 of the Tao Te Ching.

## **Be honest with what is**

Take a look at the flying kite in the sky. It floats with the undulation of the wind. Now soaring, and now gliding.

It doesn't know where it's heading. But who cares! Since it's not for it to decide, the best thing to do is enjoy the flight.

The position is quite different for the kite-flyer because they control, to a great extent, how the flight will go. The ability to assert control and see results is the joy of flying a kite.

In any life situation, ask yourself the question. Are you the kite or the kite-flyer? How you can tap into the flow of nature depends very much on the role you are playing and how you can play it well.

In addition to the kite-flyer, several other factors can impact the flight. The strength of the string, the force of the wind, you name it. They come together to decide how the kite flies and the directions it's going.

They collectively form the flow, a flow of what is.

## **Each has its role**

Other factors also have to play their role well. When managing flow in life, bear in mind that what matters most is the flow, not control. If you want things to arise naturally, you must respect what is with honesty and play your role in it.

If you are the kite, you don't try to control it like the flyer. If you are the flyer, you control the kite by resorting to the wind, the kite, and gravity.

Each factor has its role to play in the flow. Some are instrumental, others less so. Just do what's called for, don't steal the limelight, or you'll impede the flow.

Getting things done is, therefore, not just a matter of working hard. What really matters is how you can tap into the flow of nature to make the most of what you do.

If reality requires us to work hard, do so. If it doesn't, to work hard is a disservice. Being overeager can impede the flow of what you do and compromise or destroy the results you're after.

Just exert the right amount of effort. Not too much, not too little. This is the secret of wu wei. By doing so, you're calm and easy, and yet things get done. The more natural you are, the better the results.

You're part of the flow, not the flow.

Of course, it doesn't mean that we must always take things lying down. You can change the configuration of what is or even your destiny to a certain extent, so long as you do it with honesty and respect for nature

# Changing What Is

Can you ever change what is?

When we say that we must accept what is, it doesn't mean that we can't do anything about it.

Life is in flux. Everything changes. How much you can do to impact what is depends on the role that you play in it. In the kite-flying scenario, you can't do much if you are the kite. If you are the kite-flyer, then you're in more control. In fact, a joy of kite-flying is the control.

Whatever level of control that you have, you can only exert it with respect to what is. The kite flyer has to listen to the wind flow and strength of the string. Otherwise, they can never be in good control.

## Fusing the yin and yang

What the kite-flyer listens to is, in a nutshell, a tussle of the yin and yang forces.

Within everything that dwells in the universe, you will find opposing forces of yin and yang. Your front is yin and back yang. Women are yin, and men are yang. The night is yin, and the day is yang. Sadness is yin and happiness yang.

The yin-yang dynamics are part of what is, and the opportunities for us to change a reality.

When the yin-yang forces are lopsided, they lose balance and impede the flow. If you can manage the dynamics and fuse the yin and yang, it generates a harmony that generates flow.

For instance, when faced with a disagreement, you can slant it to extreme yang by introducing anger or soften the conflict by lending a listening ear. The ways the yin and yang forces swing can result in a very different outcome.

If you want to generate a flow, you'll have to fuse yin and yang into balance for the flow to occur.

## **Know what's unchanging**

To manage the yin-yang dynamics, you must know the principle of changes.

Everything changes in the universe. As the saying goes, the only constant in life is change. Managing changes is managing yin-yang.

To effectively manage changes, you can't just look at the changes. You must be able to see the unchanging in the changing.

Let's go back to the kite-flying scenario. Everything changes. The kite, the flyer, the wind. What's the unchanging among the changes?

It's the gravity.

What you do when flying a kite is nothing more than managing tussles of the yin and yang forces within the confine of the unchanging—the gravity.

The kite defies the pull of gravity and flows with the buoyancy of the wind. The flyer pulls it back to prevent it from drifting away. It creates a dynamic of the tussle of yin-yang.



No matter how things change, knowing the underlying principle helps us attain better control.

Lao Tzu calls the underlying principle “what is naturally so” or *ziran* 自然. Knowing it helps us navigate in the sea of changes. “Tao follows what is naturally so,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 25 of the Tao Te Ching.

The nothingness in the practice of *wu wei* is manifested in the yin-yang of the things you do.

Following “what is naturally so” is like following the compass when roaming an unfamiliar terrain of what is. Even when you’re not really sure about what’s going to happen next, there is less agitation and anxiety with the compass present.

# Know the Nothingness

The practice of wu wei is powerful because of the nothingness it observes.

The concept of nothingness is central to the practice of wu wei. Let's dive deeper into it here.

The Tao Te Ching is all about the Tao 道. But if you ask anybody about what the Tao is, no one can say it for sure, not even Lao Tzu who coined the word and began the Tao Te Ching by saying, "The Tao that can be mentioned is not the eternal Tao."

The Tao is formless and cannot be seen, heard, smelled, or touched. It is a void, and no one can describe a void.

Fortunately, although we can't describe what the Tao is, we can feel it.

Look to the sky at night. It is hard to imagine that the twinkling of stars would have traveled light years to meet your eyes. It's unbelievable just how big the universe is.

Despite the enormity, "the myriads of things," as the Tao Te Ching puts it, coexist with one another in harmony, and the universe is in perfect order.

How is that possible?

It is because there's an invisible force that holds the entire universe together. The force is none other than the Tao. By marveling at the greatness of the Tao, you can't help but also exclaim its mightiness.

Although the Tao is almighty, it's formless. No one can see it. It is, however, in and around us all the time. For convenience, Lao Tzu created a name for it.

For that matter, he uses the word *wu* 无, pronounced as “wu2,” for the description. The word means “nothing, void, or non-being.” Lao Tzu uses it to contrast *you* 有, pronounced as “you3,” which means “something, substance, or being.”

Here you are! The nothing is the formless Tao! It's the concept of nothing in the practice of *wu wei*.

So the statement “Do nothing and leave nothing undone” by Lao Tzu is easier to comprehend now.

Doing “nothing,” in this context, is not about doing absolutely nothing, but about doing things by observing the formless Tao. The Tao is powerful, and following it can make what you do a lot more powerful.

It explains why the first thing you learn in *wu wei* is to see the invisible in the visible and work on nothing to achieve something.

When dealing with a person, you don't just see his appearance; you observe the nothing in him, which forms his character. When you look for a house, you don't just look at its structure and design, but also the nothing in it, which is the space that makes it livable.

The nothing in things is what we don't see, but it's central to a thing's existence. It's the driving force and its vitality. Although invisible, it's profound for the impact it generates.

# Moving in Cycles

Everything in the universe moves. Even the mountains are no exception. They move; although the movements are so tiny, they evade detection with the naked eye.

Understanding this is crucial for managing flow. After all, flow is ultimately a movement.

As a matter of fact, not only do things move, they move in a similar pattern.

If you know the pattern, you'll be able to follow the trajectory to do the right thing at the right moment to optimize the flow.

What's the underlying pattern of the ways things move?

Many people tend to see things moving linearly. An event starts from point A and ends at B. So a day begins in the morning and ends at night.

Similarly, you begin drafting a report at point A and end the task when you hand the report to your boss at point B.

## Cyclical movements of things

It is, however, not the way things ultimately move. Instead of linearly, things in the universe move in cycles.

A day ends at night, but it's also where a new day begins. Your task ends with the submission of the report, but it kicks off another cycle of events.

"Ever revolving and enduring, it is Mother of the universe," says Lao Tzu in chapter 25.

With cyclical movement in mind, you don't see an end as an end. You see it as the beginning of a new cycle. You foster a long-term perspective of things.

The new cycle can be a good one, or it can, unfortunately, be a bad one as well. In all cases, new cycles pick up, and things move on.

Failure is an end of an endeavor. It's also the beginning of a new cycle. If you can see failure as a lesson learned, you begin the new cycle on a strong footing.

Of course, you may also see failure as an end of the world and plunge yourself into a downward spiral that sinks you to the bottom like a sinking ship.

You no longer see things as a one-off event. They don't happen in isolation. Their impact continues even with the seeming end of an event. Every cycle brings on a knock-on effect that begins a series of ensuing cycles.

It explains why an angry person tends to become angrier, and a happy person becomes happier.

To make the best of flow, end a cycle with a good cycle as far as possible. Even failure, which doesn't sound good, can begin a new, beneficial cycle.

"Returning is how Tao moves," says Lao Tzu in chapter 40 of the Tao Te Ching.

To generate good cycles, know the secret lies in the Spirit of Valley.

# Energy Never Dies

“Spirit of the Valley never dies, it’s the Mystical Femininity,” says Lao Tzu.

Many people find the statement baffling. What on earth does the Spirit of Valley mean? And what is Mystical Femininity?

You may see it as an illustration of a way to interact with the universe. Let’s begin with “Spirit of the Valley never dies.”

Valley is a void. Imagine that you’re on top of a mountain and shout to the valley below. What do you hear? You’ll hear your echo, your voice that travels back to you, right?

Is the echo your voice?

The answer is yes and no. The echo is your voice and not precisely your voice. It’s a reverberation of your voice bouncing back to you. So you may also see it as a response to your voice, not exactly your voice.

If you see voice as energy, then the echo is a return of your energy. The revelation is profound. It implies that you’ll receive the energy of a similar nature back like an echo when you release your energy.

So if you release good energy, you receive good energy in return. By the same token, if you release bad energy, you'll receive an echo of bad energy back.

The void of the valley is like the nothingness of the universe. Although it's empty, it's responsive. When you yell to the valley, you are as if talking to the universe. If you want the blessing of the formless Tao, it's paramount that you release good energy to it in the first instance.

It explains why an angry person gets angrier and a happy person gets happier.

## **The good energy**

How do you tell good energy from bad?

A simple answer is that when you release good energy, you feel good. You're lively, calm, and joyous. On the other hand, when you release bad energy, you feel bad. You're tense, unsettled, and unhappy.

Love is good energy. It's tender and warm. Just see how joyful a mother is when cuddling her baby. Gratitude is good energy. It delights and softens your heart. So is empathy. It connects and generates harmony among people.

In contrast, when you release bad energy, you feel trapped, which impedes the natural flow of energy. Anger, hatred, or jealousy are bad energy. They clog up the flow and stiffen your mind, body, and soul.

Release good energy and embrace its echo; you'll be pleasantly surprised how elated you feel while being rewarded with good energy manifold.

That is the Spirit of Valley. Now let's take a look at the Mystical Feminine. Many people find it even more perplexing.

## “It is the Mystical Feminine”

Femininity is a recurring theme in the Tao Te Ching. Lao Tzu talks about it time and again in the Tao Te Ching. “Mother of the universe,” “Keep to your feminine and become a brook under Heaven,” the “feminine power that rules the world” are among them.

Femininity in the Tao Te Ching is a broad concept that refers to a nature that’s soft and pliable.

Femininity is a source of great strength. As far as going with nature’s flow is concerned, you enjoy better flow when you can soften your mind, body, and soul.

It benefits you in every aspect of life. It is, for instance, an important approach to health. When your body is soft, it relaxes your sinews and clears your meridians, allowing energy to flow smoothly and invigorating you in the process.

What happens if you’re stiff and rigid? Your meridians and sinews are tense, and it creates blockages that impede the flow of your energy, making you feel sick.

Wu wei is all about flow, so femininity is of critical importance in the practice.

Lao Tzu, however, goes a step further here. He talks not only about femininity but also the Mystical Feminine.

The word mystical expands the meaning of femininity.

Mystical is a translation of 玄 (pronounced as xuan2), a very profound concept in the Tao Te Ching. To put it simply, it refers to anything that the sciences are yet to be able to explain.

With the concept of mystical, feminine becomes 玄牝 (pronounced as xuan2pin4). It still talks about softness but in an even more profound way.



It refers to the kind of softness that you rely on to connect to the Source. So it's a lot more sophisticated than the softness you refer to when talking about relaxation.

With femininity, you enjoy a softness that connects you to your inner self. When you can successfully cultivate Mystical Feminine, you can connect to the Source. The connection allows you to hear messages from the universe trickling in.

With Mystical Femininity, you're in tune with the Source. The energy you can draw on to nourish your body and get things done increases manifold.

Integrating your limited energy with the inexhaustible energy source of the universe is miraculous. The more effective the connection, the more energy you can tap into. It makes you many times more resourceful.

Knowing how to integrate the universe's energy to boost yours is a secret of how you can transcend your state of wu wei to a new level.

# Think Not of Greatness

Simplify greatness to make the most of flow.

If you're thinking of achieving something great, think not of greatness. Break it down into manageable parts, and it doesn't have to be intimidating anymore.

Even a journey of thousand miles is nothing more than a series of single steps.

Whether you want to build a house, care for the poor, or start a new business, think of it as a gigantic cycle composed of thousands of small cycles. Accomplish one cycle at a time, and the project is not daunting anymore.

Make things simple and greatness is within reach.

It is easy to complete a small cycle, and it makes achieving less stressful. You don't have to be great to achieve greatness.

"By not thinking of being great, the Master achieves greatness," says Lao Tzu in chapter 34 of the Tao Te Ching.

## Accept imperfection

Keep going, even when it is imperfect.

Because of your fear of failure, you often find yourself unable to start anything. If you can forget about the greatness, take the necessary steps, and limit failure to the tolerable level of small cycles, you're no longer afraid.

You're more willing to try things out and learn through failures should there be any. You're stronger.

"Deal with the big by working on the small. The Sage thinks not of doing anything great, so they achieve greatness," says Lao Tzu in chapter 63 of the Tao Te Ching.

## No more fallacy of "big picture"

You are less likely to fall victim to the "big picture" fallacies.

Growing a giant tree doesn't begin with the giant tree, neither does making a big dream come true begin with the big dream. But many ambitious people seem to have forgotten this simple wisdom.

They're obsessed with the "big picture," and see only the greatness of their dream, forgetting that without small things like tending the sprout and watering the plant, their "big picture" is nothing more than a dream.

You see the big in the small and the small in the big. Although you don't lose sight of the giant tree, you're not obsessed with it. You translate the ambition into the little things you do, from tilling the soil and watering the plant to weeding the ground.

You're daunted not by the big picture. By laying things down as small steps, a journey of a thousand miles is nothing but a series of manageable small steps.

If you look closely, the growth of a giant tree has really nothing to crow about. What's so great about watering a plant or tilling the soil? There is no pomp and circumstance, only consistent and targeted effort. Instead of grandiosity, you need only targeted small steps.

It's nothing grandiose because you're just doing your part in the bigger scheme of things. You achieve the big picture not by your own effort but by partnering with nature.

You find yourself doing what you should do and leaving the rest to nature. When your vision becomes a reality, it seems effortless.

You achieve more by not doing because you forget not the nothingness, which enables you to see what really matters. Dissecting it into simple steps and consistently doing the little things allows results to arise naturally as a butterfly emerges from a pupa.

"By not thinking of being great, the Sage achieves greatness," says Lao Tzu in chapter 34 of the Tao Te Ching.

## **Part 2**

# **Quiet Confidence**

# Naturally Confident

To effectively go with the flow, you must be natural both internally and externally.

You're who you are, and you respect what is in the flow. You possess a quiet confidence that imbues you with the serenity of your underlying nature.

With quiet confidence, you are not so easily distracted by emotional disturbances like stress and fear. You enjoy a state of ease and calm, no matter what you do or where you are. It makes going with the flow easy and getting things done effortless.

You do by not doing. Life is a breeze.

## How to be natural?

Being natural, unfortunately, does not come easy, even for things that you're familiar with and fully capable of doing. Let me give you an example.

Jenny is hilarious when she's with her close friends. She has endless stories to tell, and many of them are just downright funny. But when

she's asked to say a few words on stage, she's a totally different person.

Believe it or not, she's frozen! She can't say a word. It's as if her tongue doesn't belong to her anymore.

Why is there such a drastic change? Why can't she be as natural as she ought to be?

Apparently, she can't be nature because she has totally suppressed her innate nature when she's on stage.

If similar things happen to you, what would you do? Chances are you'd tell yourself to relax. Unfortunately, the more you admonish yourself, the more stressed you become.

How do you prevent similar things from happening to you?

You need more faith in yourself. You must cultivate not just confidence but quiet confidence—a hallmark of wu wei.

Quiet confidence is different from the loud, flashy type of confidence that many people think of. With quiet confidence, you're self-assured but at the same time humble, soft, and yielding.

You have both a strong belief in yourself and also a deep respect for nature.

You're unwavering but remain humble. You trust yourself but stay not knowing. Constrained not by what you can do or already know, you are fluid and firm, thus responding well to what is.

## **Like the thunder, like the wind**

You're both the thunder and the wind.

The thunder is fierce and intense, while the wind is soft and gracious. When a harsh response is called for, you're as swift as the thun-

der. Otherwise, you're as calm as a breeze. You're adaptable and responsive, despite fluctuations of the yin and yang.

When going through your daily routine, you know what you want, and indecision or procrastination don't hold you back. You're fast and furious when need be, but stay calm and composed whenever you can.

You exude a coveted quiet confidence.

## **As confident as the master boatman**

To cultivate quiet confidence, find inspiration in the fable of the master boatman. The story is from the book of Chuang Tzu, a great philosopher who complements Lao Tzu very well.

A disciple of Confucius meets a master boatman one day, known for his superb mastery of boating. Curiously the disciple asks the boatman, "Can anyone learn to handle a boat like you, sir?"

"Certainly!" says the master boatman. "It's simple. If you want to be a good boatman, don't worry about controlling the boat."

The answer baffles the disciple. "Not worry about controlling the boat? But how can I handle a boat if I don't control it?"

"Well, you don't worry about the boat. You just make sure that you can swim," says the boatman. "If a man can swim, he'll master boating after some practice. If he can dive, he'd know how to handle a boat, even if it is his first encounter with a boat."

Still feeling perplexed, the disciple seeks advice from Confucius.

"A good swimmer can master boating after some practice because he's forgotten water," says Confucius. "A diver can master boating in no time because he sees water as dry land and capsizing of a boat as overturning of a cart."



“Capsizing, backsliding, and whatnot, nothing perturbs him, and he remains calm inside. How can he not be at ease?”

Can you swim in water like walking on dry land? If you can, then you’ll master the skills of boating naturally.

In anything you do, there is something that moves the needle. If you can master it, it gives you all the self-confidence you need, something similar to what swimming is to the master boatman.

As far as quiet confidence is concerned, it’s about allowing your innate nature to come forward.

When innate nature prevails, it’s unshakable. Think about it, what earns your trust most in life? The chances are that it’s something authentic, just like the sincere people and natural food you trust.

What is more sincere and genuine than your innate self?

Your innate nature is what you actually are. If you know that it’s the real you, you no longer doubt it, even if it’s anything but perfect. If you have trust in it, you radiate an authenticity that earns not only your own trust but the trust of others.

Your natural self is what brings you quiet confidence. It’s captivating and endearing but never overbearing.

As you can see, nurturing quiet confidence is not a process of finding anything new, but one that lets go and allows your nature to come forward unimpeded.

It explains why those who enjoy quiet confidence are not always the ones who are outstanding. They could be so ordinary that no one takes notice of their existence.

They just live their true self and are naturally confident. It’s that simple.

By the same token, many people, including highly capable individuals, lack confidence because they fail to accept who they are. Worse, some of them are even pretending to be someone that they're not.

Accept and make the most of what's in you. Allow your inner self to come forward; then, you are like the master boatman who can swim and dive and never worry about sinking.

# Forget about the Skills

When you lack dance skills, the act of dancing is likely to be uncomfortable.

Of course, you can let go and just be who you are. But you're probably not doing the piece of dance that you have in mind.

We've been talking about the state of mind. But to get things done, there's a time when you've to go beyond calmness and be prepared to be uneasy.

You need the knowledge and skills to enable the flow. You pick up the skill and forget about the skill. As Lao Tzu puts it, you "do by not doing."

It can be baffling to many people. It's easy to understand that we have to pick up the skill. But why forget about it?

It is, however, where the magic of wu wei lies. Let me explain.

## From doing to not doing

In order to be natural, you often have to go through an unnatural process. It takes you from a state of doing or "you wei" 有为 to wu wei.

It's a three-step process. You go from high intent to medium and then to low or no intent.

Let's use learning a foreign language as an illustration.

When first starting, the going is tough. You take pains to pronounce every vowel and consonant and think carefully when uttering a phrase. You're now in the stage of "high intent" where there's hardly any flow. You're doing.

By practicing, things improve over time. Now you're conversing more easily. You struggle less and are now in between doing and not doing. There's hesitancy and pauses. But you're much better than when you first began. You're now in the stage of "medium intent."

Then it comes to you the days when you're proficient enough in the language that it comes to be second nature. You are spontaneous, natural and you have zero self-doubt.

You don't think of the skill when you speak. At this stage, thinking of the skill is a hindrance. You're now in the stage of low or even "no intent." You've graduated from the state of doing to not doing.

Now you're in the process of letting go and giving up control. Like Lao Tzu says, "Let go and let go, till we do nothing."

By worrying not about the skills, you enjoy a natural flow. You speak with little or no effort.

You're as if a swallow flying freely in the sky—light, agile, and with vitality. You don't seem to be working hard, but results emerge effortlessly. You let go of control, allowing nature to empower you with more control.

"Thus the Sage travels all day; not losing sight of their profound calmness. Notwithstanding their splendid abode, they move freely as if a swallow," says Lao Tzu in chapter 26.

Your mind, body, and spirit are in sync with knowledge and skill flowing together like a stream. You think not of the skill, only the flow.

You do by not doing.

## **Dismiss the myth of techniques**

In working with people, I find that many put too much emphasis on techniques. They think that they'll be excellent at doing something if they have skills related to it.

In earnest, they equip themselves with knowledge and skills and adorn their resume with a string of qualifications, forgetting that without the state of calmness, it's hard to harness the power of what they've learned.

As in the case of Jenny who we mentioned earlier, she's thoroughly competent in speaking and yet feels utterly stuck at the moment when she needs the skill most.

It explains why boxers who excel in drills are not necessarily those who reign the ring; an eloquent salesperson rote learning the best sales phrases is not necessarily a good salesperson.

Technical competence is essential. It's an enabler of quiet confidence. Without the calmness of wu wei, however, your competence can't come forward to serve you.

Doing and "high intent" help you pick up the skill. Once you've acquired the skill, forget about it so that you can allow calmness to reign and your natural self to do its best.

It allows you to transcend from doing to not doing.

# Your Hidden Power

It sounds like a platitude. But you use only a fraction of your potential, leaving much of it untapped.

It's true, though. In the eyes of the Tao, you are full of potential. You can be a mini-universe in its own right.

To be specific, you can be not just part of the universe, but a mini version of it. If the universe is a house, you're not just part of the house like a window or a door; you're a house with all the essential features, doors, windows, and all.

If the universe is powerful, so can you. If it's calm and easy, so can you. If it lasts forever, so can you.

It's nature in you, the formless Tao that has been in you since birth and will be with you forever. It's innocent, pure, and full of vitality. If you can unshackle it and allow it to come forward, you'd be amazed how much more you can do to make your life meaningful and rewarding.

"The beginning of the universe is Mother of all things. From the Mother, we know the child. Knowing the child, we return and keep to the Mother, and preserve the self from harm," says Lao Tzu in chapter 52 of the Tao Te Ching.

## Look internally for strength

Knowing the nature in you, it's unlikely that you'll look to external motivations for growth. You don't need a pat on the back to perform good deeds, nor a string of awards to prove your mettle.

You may even ridicule yourself for having to, so long, trade the gems in you for something that can't be yours. So powerful is the nature in you, no external forces can replace its vigor.

"Knowing others is clever; knowing our self is truly wise. Mastering others is strong; mastering our self is mighty," says Lao Tzu in chapter 33.

As a mini-universe, it's easy for you to integrate with the large universe and leverage its energy. It's life-changing! You'll be amazed at how you can achieve things that never seemed to be possible before.

To do that, stay soft and not knowing so that you can absorb nourishment from the larger universe like a sponge.

# Stay Not knowing

Life is a curious journey of discovery. Stay not knowing, and you'll be fascinated by how interesting and rewarding it can be.

Many people, however, are too complacent about finding out more than what they already know, ending up a prisoner of their own knowing.

It impedes flows and imposes limits on their growth.

Knowledge doesn't have to be elegant. When you've lost your way, a simple road direction is worth a ton. If you're too arrogant to hear what actually goes on to keep up with the changes, your outdated knowledge can lead to your downfall.

Life is a dynamic flow. What used to work a moment ago may not be working now. We must discard what we know that has outlived its relevance. The only way to do it is to stay not knowing.

Staying not knowing, you tap into the flow of nature, not what you know, and you're agile and adaptable. It steers you clear of pitfalls and can lead you to opportunities that you've not expected. It's too important for you to ignore.



“Those who are bigoted cannot see the light. Those who are conceited do not shine,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 24.

## **Not knowing yet we think we know, sick!**

There is an experiment where a bee and a housefly are kept in a transparent jar. Fearing for their lives, the insects frantically look for a way out.

The bee is the one that knows. The jar is placed upside down under the sun. Seeing the sunshine, it assumes the bright side is where the freedom is and keeps flying toward it. Sadly, the glass wall is in the way and bounces the insect back time and again.

Insisting that it knows, the bee refuses to give up. Despite the hard knocks, it bigotedly flies toward the light. Before long, it dies of fatigue and injuries.

In contrast, the housefly doesn't know. It has no preconceived ideas. By keeping an open mind, it gropes its way to the opening of the jar and flies to its freedom.

Refusing to stay not knowing is dangerous. It enslaves you to the confines of what you know. You may end up like the bee, and the result can be fatal.

If you don't know what is, it's hard for you to tap into the power of flow.

It doesn't mean that knowledge is useless. But it must not become an impediment to flow. Maintain a subtle balance between what you know and what you don't, and make knowledge a tool rather than an obstacle.

Nothing in the universe is permanent. Changes are inevitable. Staying nimble not only saves time but also saves lives. It helps us take appropriate actions, not just what sounds right.

## **There is no right or wrong**

There's a fable about Confucius who meets a man of green. One day, a Confucius student works in the yard when a man comes to ask for him.

"What is it regarding, sir?"

"I'd like to ask your Master a question. 'How many seasons are there in a year?' says the man.

"Oh, you don't have to ask my Master, I know the answer. It's plain as day; there are four seasons in a year," says the student.

"Are you sure? I thought there were three!"

"No, there are four!"

"Three!"

Hearing the commotion, Confucius comes out from the house, and the man is quick to turn to him to tell his side of the story.

Confucius smiles and calmly tells the man, "You're quite right, sir. There are indeed only three seasons."

The man is happy to hear the answer and thanks Confucius profusely before he leaves.

The student feels confused and asks Confucius, "Master, but there are four seasons in a year, am I not right?"

"You are right," says Confucius gently. "But did you see the man? He is thoroughly green. He is a grasshopper who'll never live to see winter. To him, there are only three seasons in his entire life."

It opens the student's eyes.

Many people like passing judgment. "You are right, and he's wrong." Forgetting that what's right can be wrong, and what's wrong can be right.

The world is complex. It takes an open mind of not knowing to see the light.

Don't judge. What appears to be right can be wrong. Furthermore, what is right for you can be wrong for another person. When we judge, we only hear what we believe.

What's more, you can't always correct what's wrong by waving a magic wand. Clarity does not present itself before the sediments settle.

There are also occasions when right or wrong doesn't matter. When you're dealing with your loved ones, love counts, not insisting on being right.

"The honest can turn wayward, and the decent can turn devious. It has long been confounding," says Lao Tzu.

Don't be fixated on right and wrong, which are situational. Right can be wrong, and wrong can be right. The secret is in maintaining the proper balance of yin and yang so that you can go with the flow of nature.

Stay not knowing. You're as fluid as water and will flow as effortlessly as it does.

"Watchful, as if crossing a river of thin ice," says Lao Tzu when he describes the wise masters of ancient times.

# Power of Softness

“The softest of all things can overcome the hardest,” says Lao Tzu.

What is soft is strong. The belief is a credo of the wisdom of the Tao and a big part of the practice of wu wei.

## **We’re like water**

When we’re soft, we’re like water. Although water is pliable and weak, it can wear away rock and reshape it into a cave. If we can be as yielding and soft as water, we’ll be able to cope with obstacles as hard as rocks.

Water is soft. It yields when it comes into contact with a rock. It doesn’t resist. By being soft, not only does it stay intact, but it also gives it opportunities to engage with the rock to wear it away little by little.

There’s no shortage of challenges in life, and they can be like a rock to water. In the face of obstacles, we tend to resist. Rather than yielding as water, we’re more likely to be another rock, feeling down and ready to pick up an argument or fight.

Imagine what happens when two rocks collide? Chances are, it causes harm to one or both of them. Now, imagine instead that you're as soft as water. There is no casualty. While you don't run away from the rock, neither do you crash with it like another rock.

You yield and engage. As a result, not only is there no crash, you stay close to the rock so that you can wear it away slowly. You don't give up easily when there is trouble.

Staying soft allows you to keep a listening ear. You're aware of what goes on. You can hear both what's being said and the undertone.

It doesn't mean we'll use no force. You exert effort when necessary, but there's a limit to how hard you can push. Once you've reached the optimal point, diminishing returns set in. Not only is the superfluous wasteful, but it can also be harmful.

Staying soft allows you more space to engage. It can help you turn adversity into an opportunity like an old tai chi master deflects the opponent's attacking force.

You can't do this when you're hard and rigid. You shut your ears to what is and take away the agility to respond, making wu wei difficult to work. The only way to keep rigidity from developing is to remain soft.

## **Softness is life**

In fact, not only is softness strong, but it also has the power to build lives.

"A person is born soft and supple. At their death, they are hard and stiff," says Lao Tzu in chapter 76 of the Tao Te Ching. "Green plants are born soft and tender. At their death, they are brittle and dry."

An infant is soft. It is, however, during infancy where we enjoy the most rapid growth in life. As babies, we typically grow from about half to one inch a month and gain about five to seven ounces a week

during the first six months. We easily double our birth weight by the fifth month.

Our growth gets slower as we grow older and turn harder. At the point of death, we're stiff.

It happens to other living organisms as well. When a tree is soft and pliable, water and nutrients travel freely in it, making it fertile and robust. When it's old, it turns rigid, brittle, and dry.

Although we can't stop aging, we stay tender to keep up vitality and young for as long as possible. Life is tough, but softness makes it easier to handle!

So it's crucial to stay soft. But how can we remain so all the time? The good news is there's a simple and surefire way to help you get started.

# Knowing You Have Enough, You Are Truly Rich

We know that to stay calm, we must remain soft. Staying soft, unfortunately, is easier said than done.

From stress and anxiety to fears, many aspects of life can steal your vitally important softness away. What can you do to keep softness with you all the time? Fortunately, there's a simple but effective way to help you get started.

Do as Lao Tzu says, "Knowing we have enough, we're truly rich."

If you are contented with what you have, you're by nature soft. Why is that so?

## Contentment is rich

First, when you know that you have enough, you're grateful and compassionate. You appreciate what you have rather than what you lack.

You feel happy, and the feeling fills your heart with good energy. Negative emotions such as fears and anxiety will have no room to

creep in. You spend less of your time worrying and more of your time living and contributing. You're soft.

With softness, qi or life energy in your body moves smoothly, bringing more vitality to your life. What's more, good energy attracts good energy, and you surround yourself with people of the like, who in turn enhance your good energy and softness.

Like Lao Tzu says in chapter 23 of the Tao Te Ching, "If we conform to the Tao, the power of the Tao flows through us."

What happens if you do the reverse and focus on the lack?

It's stifling. You're rigid and stiff. Feeling deprived, you fill your hearts with sorrow and disarray. It generates bad energy and triggers a series of vicious cycles.

It explains why Lao Tzu says in chapter 46 of the Tao Te Ching, "There is no greater misery than wanting more and more."

Whether to focus on what you have or what you lack is a matter of choice. However, the outcome turns out to be worlds apart.

## **"The Sage focuses on the belly not the eyes."**

Second, when you know that you have enough, you keep distractions at bay.

"The five colors blind the eyes, the five tones deafen the ears, the five flavors numb the palate, chasing and hunting madden the mind, precious goods leading one astray," says Lao Tzu in chapter 12 of the Tao Te Ching.

Distractions are constant interruptions to softness. They give you reasons to feel lousy and invite an endless stream of despair that might break your lives.



“Thus the Sage focuses on the belly, not the eyes. Hence they choose one and reject the other,” Lao Tzu continues what he says in the second half of chapter 12.

Lao Tzu uses the analogies of the belly and the eyes to explain this. When you focus on the eyes, you pay attention to the outside world and the never-ending distractions. The external focus is draining.

If your focus is on the belly, you look inward. You, as Lao Tzu says in chapter 10, “embrace your vigor and soul as one, with no gap between them.” Not only do you prevent distractions from encroaching, but you also enrich your energy with inner peace.

When you “know that you have enough,” you focus on the “belly.” There is no confusion, anxiety, or hesitation. It’s enhancing, never draining.

There is a fable about a dog and some meat. One day, the dog is walking home with a piece of meat in his mouth. When it crosses a river, he looks into the water and sees his own reflection in the water and mistakes it for another dog. He wants the meat in the reflection as well. But as he opens his mouth, the meat falls into the water. It is nowhere to be found again.

If you don’t appreciate what you have, you could be like the dog, losing the essence of life for the illusions. “There is no greater misery than wanting more and more,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 46.

Suppose you’re ever wondering why there are so many rich, successful people who might be miserably unhappy. In that case, likely, they don’t have an appreciation for all of their blessings.

**“Do by not doing, act by not acting, taste by not tasting.”**

Third, when you know that you have enough, you stay in the present moment.

The flow of life is made up of countless present moments. Although your past and future play a part in your lives, it's the present moment you can actually live.

The present moment is the most significant gift of your destiny. Without the present moment, you can't live a life. Just being thankful for having the present moment that you can live is motivating enough.

Being grateful for the present moment that you have, you're firmly grounded. You learn from the past, prepare for the future, but take action now. There is no hesitation and self-doubt. You want less but live more.

When you are eating, you enjoy what you eat. When you are talking to your loved ones, you enjoy every moment of exchange.

“Those who are content suffer no disgrace. Those who know when to stop suffer no peril. They are enduring,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 44.

Feeling content helps you to stay soft. Forming the habit of giving will soften you even further.

# Give to Receive

One of the common reasons that keep people awake at night is the fear of losing. The prospect of losing something you treasure is tormenting.

What if you can be indifferent to gaining or losing?

It's hard to do that for most people. But if you realize that gain in life is not a pure gain and that loss is not a pure loss, you can probably feel more at ease.

There is an invisible force in the universe that keeps gaining and losing in equilibrium. And so, whatever you gain will eventually come at the expense of something else.

For a glass to gain in water, it has to lose space in the process. The more water it gains, the more space it gives away.

To hold an apple, you let go of your palm so that it has room to accept it. Otherwise, the apple will have no place to land on your palm.

Even when it's as insignificant as a dollar or two, any gain comes with a loss. You gain by losing and lose by gaining.

It is similar to the concept of “opportunity cost” in economics. When you build a factory on a piece of land, you can’t build a school. The factory is built at the expense of the school.

However, the gains and losses in life are not always clear-cut, and they’re hard to measure. You may not even feel the impact, or you might feel it only later down the track. The tradeoff, however, is real, and it takes place all the time.

It explains why Lao Tzu says, “The Sage does not hoard. The more they do for others, the more they have. The more they give others, the greater is their abundance.”

When you’re afraid to lose, it’s hard for you to receive. If you don’t open up to giving, you’re only what you are. Giving expands your capacity to receive. No one can tell what’s going to end up on your palm.

If you practice wu wei, you’re not afraid to lose. You’re ready to give before you receive. You gain to lose and lose to gain.

“Tao of Heaven is like bending a bow. The high is pressed down, and the low is raised up. Take from the excess, and give it to the lacking,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 77.

Realizing it helps us see things in perspective. You’re ready for the bad days when the going is good and see hidden opportunities in failures. You have fewer sleepless nights.

## **Start small**

Giving doesn’t have to cost you an arm and a leg. You can start small, although the rewards need not be small.

When you pay attention to a speaker, you may motivate the speaker to give you the information that you had been searching for high and low to no avail.

What you give may be small, but it will produce gain. It might even turn out to be a great deal.

Be ready to give to receive. The more you give, the more you are likely to receive in return.

Guarding what you have can be tricky. While it's necessary for critical assets, people often overdo it by hoarding everything. They forget that hoarding also incurs a loss.

Strike a balance. Learn the wisdom of giving and receiving.

Although you can't control what goes into gain and loss, you can, to some extent, convert your losses into gains.

Failure is a loss, but the lessons it gives can be far-reaching. Rejection is a loss, but it forces you to rethink your strategy to make what you offer more robust. Doing chores may seem like a waste of time, but it can be an occasion to nurture your patience, impacting your long-term success.

In a similar way, Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed ten thousand times—I've successfully found ten thousand ways that will not work."

Knowing the secret of gain and loss makes it easy for you to stay calm in anything you do. It is easier to make tough decisions when you know that there can be benefits, even in bad ones.

If you're afraid to call a friend for help in fear of rejection, think about how you can turn it into an advantage should it unfortunately happen. It gives you the courage to pick up the phone and call.

It's the power of wu wei.

"Being and non-being engender each other. Difficult and easy enhance each other. Long and short define each other. High and low play off each other," says Lao Tzu in chapter 2.

By viewing losses as gains and vice versa, you experience the power of detachment.

# Power of Detachment

It's not easy to stay calm. Even the most stoic people are unlikely to be emotion-proof. We all have our fair share of bad days.

To bring your calm back, minimize emotional baggage, such as stress, fears, and worries. They're the main source of disturbances to your calmness.

To do that, follow the three-step method below.

## **A three-step process of detachment**

If you want to minimize the impact of emotional baggage, the simplest thing to do is to stay detached from it.

When you're indifferent, no matter what happens, the problem won't get under your skin. It, however, doesn't mean that you should run away from the problem.

It may sound contradictory. But this is precisely where wu wei is playing its strength. What it does is that it separates problems from emotions.

### **Step 1: Don't resist**

Whatever the problem is, greet it with compassion. Even if it's something unpleasant, say, unfair comments that are hurting. Listen to it with compassion. Not only that—give no judgment. You're like water encountering a rock, yielding and soft.

### **Step 2: Stay neutral**

Then, stay neutral. With compassion, you accept. Although they're unfair comments, they don't bite because you listen with no judgment. You don't taint what you hear with emotions. You treat them as "facts." You stay neutral and hear the comments as if a third party.

### **Step 3: Manage the energy**

Now in front of you are the "facts," tainted not by your judgment or thought. Turn them into good energy. Use it to enhance what you do, stabilize your center, or deflect it back at the attacker.

Once I was on a plane. The air was dry, and I coughed incessantly for a little while. Although it was harmless, the passenger in front of me turned round to give me an earful.



It almost flew me into a rage. Using the three-step approach, however, I listened with compassion. I didn't pass judgment. So I was not emotional when hearing the reproach.

Taking step 2, I stayed neutral. Being compassionate let me hear more about why he was so frustrated. His concern was for his tender-age daughter, who was sitting next to him.

Now to step 3. With the "fact" at hand, not only was I not angry, I found the need to signal my empathy. I waved at him with a gesture of apology. The plane was quite empty, so I walked to the back and repositioned in an empty seat. My throat was still dry, and I had to cough. But this time around, I did it with a towel fully covering my mouth.

Stay detached. Listen with compassion, and don't allow emotions to reign over the facts in your head. Manage your energy by staying detached from thought.

You are likely to find a solution without having to be emotional. Try it. It's very powerful.

# **Part 3**

# **Soft Focus**

# Power of Soft Focus

Not all focus is equal. To get things done, you need the right kind of focus.

You may divide focus into two types. One is hard, and the other soft.

When the focus is hard, you rivet on what you want. You're steadfast and don't easily change your course of action. You're determined to succeed and are a bit of a hard nut.

In the practice of wu wei, the kind of focus you need is not as hard. You're also riveted on your goal but remain nimble. You persevere. But you listen to the flow dynamically and are ready to change as necessary to optimize flow.

You're both firm and soft. It's the soft focus of wu wei.

## The three treasures

To cultivate soft focus, you must, first of foremost, learn to let go.

You let go of overthinking and the desire to control everything. By letting go, we're calm and in a state of ease. You listen without judging. We're single-minded but adaptable.

Your mind, body, and spirit are in oneness.

A way to cultivate the soft focus is to learn from Lao Tzu his Three Treasures, something he holds dear to his heart. Let's see what they are and how they can help you, especially in cultivating a soft focus.

There are several translations of the Three Treasures. To make sure that we're on the same page, I put the original Chinese characters alongside for your reference.

"The Three Treasures are Compassion 慈, Thrift 俭 and Not to be Ahead of the World under Heaven 不敢为天下先," says Lao Tzu.

## Compassion

First, compassion.

The meaning of compassion is broad. You can see it in several ways, such as love, empathy, and humility.

It sets things on the right footing because compassion is good energy. Whether it's love, empathy, or humility, with compassion, you're ready to listen and give. Not only are you in harmony with the universe, but you're also prepared to contribute to its state of oneness.

Good energy attracts good energy, and it surrounds you with good people who, in turn, reward you with good energy many times over. It also connects you to the universe, enabling you to integrate seamlessly with it for vitality.

You are in a state of ease and calm with good energy, enabling you to "do nothing and leave nothing undone."

## Thrift

The second treasure is thrift, also translated as frugality.

Some people interpret it as a spartan lifestyle, but it doesn't have to be so. From the perspective of wu wei, the implication is more about keeping to the essentials. You focus on what matters, not the superfluous.

You dream, but you don't keep wanting more and more. You work hard but don't go to the extent of being overwhelmed. You show your displeasure but do so with respect for what is.

When you focus on what matters, you're firmly grounded and not easily distracted. You generate a smooth flow of energy for working effectively with nature.

## Not to be ahead of the world under heaven

The third treasure is "not to be ahead of the world under Heaven."

As mentioned earlier, TPP, that is, timing, place, and people, must come together to form a flow for anything to happen. When we're in the flow, we're part of the flow, not the flow.

While you may play an instrumental role in some flows, your role in others may be so insignificant it's just a dot in the background. To go seamlessly with the flow, you must be clear about the role you play and put in just enough effort to fulfill it.

You follow rather than stay ahead of the world.

If the conditions for things to happen are not ready, doing nothing is doing something. You follow what is, not just your desires.

You may generate the conditions for things to arise, but you don't force things to happen.

You're not ahead of the world. You work with the world, and tap into the power of nature to get things done.

Although you can't control the world, you make the most of what you do by not being ahead of it. You let go of control, listen to the flow, and play your role well to allow nature to perform marvels.

When you're working with people, you motivate them by listening to their voices deep in them. When they create results by following their hearts, they find ownership in the results. Like Lao Tzu puts it, "We did it all naturally," they say.

If you can keep the Three Treasures close to your heart, "Heaven will come to our rescue and protect us with compassion," as Lao Tzu says. It instills the quiet confidence in us that can move mountains.

With the Three Treasures in the background, you focus softly, making going with the flow natural and unimpeded

# Planting Seeds

Be careful of what you focus on. You're growing a seed.

When you allow your anger to go unrestrained, you're growing an irrational behavior. When you're grateful for what your spouse has done for you, you're developing a great relationship.

Whatever you do creates an impact. Beware of what it's growing into. You're shaping your destiny.

If you want to grow an apple, be doubly sure that it's not a seed of orange.

It's especially crucial when the seed you're growing has the potential to become a giant tree. If it's a good tree, nurture it with all your love and care. If it's not, nip it in the bud before it grows into a tree. Otherwise, you'll have big problems over time when its root runs deep, and trunk grows robust.

In life, we grow seeds all the time. Among them are career, relationships, and business. While they come in all shapes and sizes, if we can see things in the seeds and are careful about what we grow, we reduce the regrets for planting the wrong tree.

You can't possibly take just any job and expect that it will grow automatically into a career you want. Neither can you expect a great relationship when you're nurturing it with clearly a wrong person.

Take good care of your seeds of choice. Enjoy who you are and focus on making the most of what you have, even if it appears to be lackluster in comparison to other people's. Who knows that what you nurture can't be an ugly duckling that's about to turn into a handsome swan.

To make sure that you plant the right seeds, listen. Listen to both the nature in and around you.



# Find Your Center

To harvest the fruit you want, plant the right seed. You can't grow apples and expect oranges.

In everything you do, there's a seed that you're growing. You don't blindly work hard. You do the right thing.

Find the center of your life. Find the center of what you're doing. It sets the tone for a soft focus.

Finding the center and identifying the right things to do, however, can be tricky.

What's right and what's wrong isn't cast in stone. What is right just now may be wrong now, and what is right for one person may not be right for another. If you're not discerning enough, you run the risk of being dogmatic.

To identify the right things to do, listen to what is.

Listen to not only what's being spoken but also what's hidden. You hear the undercurrent and the underlying principle, things that evade many people's attention.

You listen not only with your ears but also with your heart, mind, or even the entire body.

But how can you possibly listen to so many things all at the same time?

It explains why you need soft focus, which is not a technique but a state of mind. With soft focus, you hear messages that trickle in from within and outside of you, enabling you to be more discerning.

In this regard, you may resort to the six penetrating questions Lao Tzu raises in chapter 10 of the Tao Te Ching as a guide.

Chapter 10 is an anchor chapter of the book. Reflect daily on the questions it asks, and you'd have a good sense of the right things to do.

## **Embrace your vigor and soul as one**

Question 1: "Can you embrace your vigor and soul as one, with no gap between them?"

Vigor is about doing. Soul, on the other hand, is about nothingness or your purpose. It's your center. To get things done effectively, you must align what you do with your purpose. You must align them so that they're in oneness, leaving no gap between them.

You don't just do. You listen to the whispers of your inner voice. Life is dynamic, and your purpose may emerge in a different guise. Money may not be your purpose in life, but it can be a priority to live your purpose now. Don't set things in concrete. Listen to the whispers. They reveal what's in your soul.

For anything that you do, there's a soul in it. It's the essentials that you must not lose sight of. You don't just build a house; you build a house that you can call home. You don't just write to report; you write a report that sheds an insight.

When you align what you're doing with the soul; you accomplish what matters.

## **Be supple, like a newly born baby**

Question 2: “Can you focus your life energy and become supple, like a newly born baby?”

You don’t just focus; you focus softly. You focus your life energy with suppleness to the extent that you’re as soft and pliable as a newly born baby.

In this way, you’re purposeful but not fixated, firm yet adaptable. Although you’re dedicated to what you do, you’re mindful of the pulses and vibrations of what is.

## **Cleanse the inner vision**

Question 3: “Can you cleanse your inner vision, until not a stain is found?”

Within everything, there are tussles of the yin and yang forces. If you don’t manage them properly, they blur your focus.

You dust your vision not only today but every day so as to not lose sight of what’s in the deepest part of you or in the core of the things you do. Otherwise, the dust comes back and gets thicker.

It helps you to hold on to your purpose. At the same time, when you’re in the frenzy of getting things done, you’ll not forget the center and miss the forest for the trees. By realigning with the essence of things, you do the right things, not just do things right.

## **Not forcing our will**

Question 4: “Can you love your country and manage your people by not forcing your will on them?”

While you're clear of your purpose, you can't assume the same for everybody. Not everybody can see the purpose with the clarity you have.

Every individual has their priority and concerns. Instead of bulldozing your way, listen to what's going on in their heads. You win their hearts rather than forcing your will.

As far as possible, find alignment. Allow them to be in a bigger center of your center.

## **Interact with femininity**

Question 5: "Can you interact with the universe with femininity?"

Femininity implies being soft, humble, and pliable. Recall the moment when you're angry. You're stormy and muddled-headed. Can you hear anything beyond your anger? In contrast, when you're soft, you can hear the whispers deep in you.

In addition to listening to your center, interact with the universe with femininity. The universe is tranquil; you can't hear what it says when you're unsettling. Femininity puts you in the right frequency for dialogues with the Source.

## **Stay not knowing**

Question 6: "Can you stay not knowing, when acquiring true wisdom?"

A soft focus helps you keep pace with the ever-changing world by listening and adapting to changes. You "stay not knowing," so that you won't be a filled cup that rejects anything new; you constantly adapt to "acquire true wisdom."

Use these six questions as a checklist for your regular reflection. They will help you gain tremendous insight into the things you do.

“Losing not our center, you shall endure,” says Lao Tzu.

# Power of Less

Although it is clear as day that you cannot possibly do everything that you fancy, many people prefer to ignore this fact.

Endless desires swamp their lives, and because of this, they end up achieving nothing more than a lineup of regrets.

What we want in life is unlimited, but what we can actually do is highly limited. To strike a balance, learn the power of less.

“Less is gain, more is in disarray,” says Lao Tzu.

The beauty of less is the focus. It helps you focus on essentials, so you don’t drain your energy on the frivolous no matter how glamorous it looks.

## Find out what really matters

Find out what’s in your center. That’s what really matters.

The emptiness of a cup may not catch your eye, but it’s the reason for the cup’s existence. Similarly, what matters to you may not be elegant, but it’s an essential element in your journey to destiny.

There's also a center in everything you do. It's the essentials that make things work. If you're growing a tree, anything that helps its growth is essential, be it watering and fertilizing or weeding the ground. Anything that goes beyond that is frivolous.

If you focus your time and energy on the essentials, doing few things can fulfill your purpose. You'll achieve a better quality outcome for the things that you do, even if not more in quantity.

## **What matters is fluid**

It's not "the less, the merrier," though. The power of less happens only when you focus on what matters, not just doing less. Building a tower nine-level high requires more effort and resources than constructing a simple hut. You can't mindlessly cut down on resources.

However, there are times when the difference is subtle and fluid, and this can be tricky. It's, therefore, vital that you keep a listening ear and remain not knowing so that you can realign when what matters appears in a different guise.

## **Wobble like a roly-poly toy**

We can lose our center now and then. It's only natural since we live in a world permeated with the forces of the yin and yang. Take it in your stride. Just wobble back like a roly-poly toy that loses not its center.

A roly-poly toy is a plump and cute figurine. The toy's body is light, but its weight at the bottom is heavy, holding it firmly to the ground. No matter how hard you push it around, it'll not fall.

The toy wobbles a little when you push it over, but gravity soon brings it back to its center. The toy's bottom is round, so it is very adept, allowing it to regain its center quickly.

Your soft focus works like the toy's round and weighty base. It brings you back to your center.

Before, say, anxiety takes the better of you, wobble back. If you're overwhelmed with work, see how you can reschedule to bring back the balance. Make the correction as soon as you can.

A roly-poly toy can retain its center because of the weight at the bottom. It's your soft focus. It helps you stay conscious of your center so that you can wobble back to it when necessary.

In this context, falling sick is not a bad thing because it forces you to rest and reboot the body so that you can regain your center.

The center is where the vitality is. So long as you can keep to it, just like what Lao Tzu says, "you are enduring,"

Set aside time every day to see if you're keeping to what really matters in life or whether you are doing the right thing rather than just doing things right.

Less is beautiful when it brings you back to balance.

Stay vigilant and adept. Keep your soft focus. Allow it to work for you. Otherwise, you cannot hear your center when it's yelling for your attention.



# Power of Momentum

Momentum is the thrust in motion and the power we rely on to accomplish things, from sailing a boat and conducting a meeting to cooking a meal.

You ride on the momentum when going with the flow. To be effective in tapping into the flow of nature, you must know how momentum works.

Observe how momentum builds up, and the dynamics inside the cycle bring about the flow.

“All things arise from Tao, nurtured by Te, formed by matters, fulfilled by the flow,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 51 of the Tao Te Ching.

Let’s recap what we’ve learned about stages of flow in a cycle. Energy flows in a similar cyclical pattern. It goes through four stages, from birth and growth to harvest at full maturity, then the decline stage.

Knowing the ebbs and flows, we can ride on the momentum to optimize the flow. We do the right things at the right time.

## Momentum in action

Imagine that you're planning a presentation. Let's see how you can take advantage of the momentum to make it flow.

Every cycle flows through the four stages — birth, growth, peak and decline. A presentation is no exception. Bear it in mind, and you'll be able to conduct a presentation that works.

To start with, don't be too eager to dive deep. Although you're proud of the rich content that you've spent hours and hours putting together, don't be too anxious to wow your audience with it. You can put them off.

Why? Because the first stage of a cycle is birth. It's the moment to arouse curiosity and capture attention, not for spelling out details. However rich the content is, it won't work if you're yet to warm up the audience with curiosity.

Only when the audience is ready is it that you're in the stage of growth. It's time for you to wow the audience with exciting details.

Continue to listen to the momentum. It goes into decline once it peaks. Don't waste the opportunity by dragging any further. Go into the stage of harvest.

It's the right moment to pluck the fruit. Ask the audience to take the actions you have in mind. If you're selling, close the sale now. If you're educating the audience, get them to bring home the key take-aways.

When the energy reaches its peak, it decreases to the stage of decline. At this stage of the presentation, you may do a summary to let the information sink in with the audience. Like winter, the decline can be a time for conservation.

Of course, the end of the presentation is by no means where your work stops. A new round of interaction begins. You may renew the cy-

cle with, say, a question-and-answer session. If you've to call it a day, a new cycle starts after you've left. That might be a follow-up phone call or an after-sales service, for example.

By following the stages of the cycle, you create a natural flow of communication with the audience. It allows both you and your audience to optimize energy to tap into the flow.

Remember, a cycle is a double-edged sword. It can do you a disservice as well. If it's so, cut it off and, as far as possible, direct it to a new, beneficial cycle.

# Consistent Returns

Practice doesn't necessarily make perfect.

Just because you can talk doesn't automatically make you an enthralling speaker. Neither are you an outstanding marathoner just because you can run. Casually doing things is not enough to acquire competence.

Acquiring competence is going through many small cycles that lead to the completion of a big cycle. Every small cycle helps with the attainment, and you don't see it in isolation. It complements and builds on other cycles.

Alignment and accumulative returns are what building competence all boils down to.

If you're new to dancing, acquiring the skill is a big cycle. Every step you learn is a small cycle. The small cycles have to align and contribute for you to be a dancer.

Knowing it helps acquire competence for wu wei.

## **Do the right things**

Cycles are a double-edged sword that cuts both ways.

A skill that you learn must produce what you want. Otherwise, it can be a waste of time and energy.

I heard about a man who went up to the Sichuan province in China to learn Mandarin. As an eager learner, he picked up the language fast. Before long, he was able to speak as fluently as the locals.

One day, a group of visitors came, and he couldn't wait to show off his skill. Unfortunately, no one really understood him. Only then did he realize he had not been learning Mandarin but a dialect of the Sichuan province.

If you don't want a similar detour, find out what matters first before you embark on any journey, especially one that's long and arduous.

## **Do the things right**

Once you have decided on the right things to do, do them right.

You don't just work hard. You always find the sweet spot as far as possible for exerting effort. Working too hard or too little is equally counterproductive.

It is like holding a bird. Grabbing it not hard enough, the bird flies away. Pressing it too hard, you kill the bird. Life is a breeze if you can find the sweet spot for exerting the right amount of effort for everything you do.

Sometimes, you may have to go beyond just doing things right. You may have to connect to your soul, especially for things that require you to connect with people.

Let's use speaking as an example again. You can speak just to inform. But you can also speak to motivate and inspire. If you can connect what you do with your soul, it makes all the difference.

By constantly speaking with your passion for motivating and inspiring, the accumulative results can be a world apart in the long run.

Go through the small cycles of practice that are aligned with the acquisition of the competence. Do them right and, whenever appropriate, do them with passion. In this way, practice makes perfect.

# Working with Timing

Timing is mystical. If it's right, no matter what you do, things just get done.

When the timing is wrong, you go round and round and see no progress no matter how hard you work.

Unfortunately, while most of us are not unfamiliar with managing time, few are adept at managing timing. Timing, nevertheless, is so critical that we can ill afford to ignore it.

It explains the importance of soft focus. It's essential for picking out the right timing. It adds dimension to the ways you manage your time.

When you manage time as time, time is static. After Tuesday is Wednesday and following nine o'clock is ten o'clock.

Timing, in contrast, is dynamic. When you manage time with timing in mind, not every hour is equal. Making a phone call in the morning, for example, can produce a very different result if you do it later in the afternoon. You spend the same effort but produce a far better result.

With timing in mind, your plan can adapt to changes that can arise at any moment, sometimes beyond your expectation.

A comment made at the negotiation table, for example, can change the dynamics of the bargain all at once. What didn't seem to be possible is now possible. Of course, the reverse can be true as well.

Spotting good timing is never easy, but we can master it to some degree. It is, however, so powerful that it's worth the effort.

To get started, go small.

## **Spot good timing**

Your daily routine is where you can grow from. Start by picking your low-hanging fruits. Pay attention to timing while arranging your day, and see how it can generate more natural flow.

Look through the items on your task list for the day and ask yourself, "Can I improve what I do by considering the element of timing?"

Then, move things around. You may bring forward a meeting so that someone instrumental can be around or drop a project plan because the timing isn't sound.

Understand the stages of cycles that the task is in. If you're a morning person, you may want to move tasks taxing on brainpower to the morning.

Make observing timing a habit, not only when you are doing something of great importance. Listen to timing, even when you're running errands. You may have little to show for your efforts, but the skills you hone can produce formidable results later.

"Hold fast to Tao, and wander the world. Wander and suffer no harm, fill the heart with peace and calm," says Lao Tzu in chapter 35.

When the timing for doing something has arrived, move on with it. No hesitation, no procrastination. Just go with the flow.



When you're decisive, you enliven flow. So if early in the morning is the right timing for exercise, don't stay in bed when the alarm goes off. If it's the right time to call someone, pick up the phone and begin speaking.

If the timing turns out to be not as planned, hold back! Tweak your plan or, if need be, discard it altogether. Pressing ahead despite bad timing can do you more harm than good.

When you've formed the habit of listening to the flow of timing, any moment is good timing.

When you're standing in a queue, while idling away is a choice, you may also, say, watch the people and see if they can trigger inspiration for your next social media post.

By injecting timing into your actions, you animate the moments, making the flow more natural.

Lao Tzu says as much when he mentions the wise of the “unfathomable” of the ancient. “Watchful, as if crossing a river of thin ice. Wary, as if surrounded by hostile neighbors. Cordial, as if receiving a guest. Fluid, as if ice about to thaw. Plain, as if wood yet to be carved. Accommodating, as if an empty valley. Opaque, as if muddied water.”

## **Manage timing, not just time**

Get started now. See how you can improve at least three tasks a day over the next week by considering the factor of timing.

Everything has its season. If you miss the planting season, no matter how great the seed is, it remains a seed and will never become a tree.

Many ambitious men and women fill their calendars with activities. They want to make sensible use of their time, down to the last details

of every minute. They forget that if the timing is wrong, no matter how hard they work, they can be going round in circles and see no results.

Besides planning your time, see how attention to timing can make your life a breeze. If you can take advantage of good timing, you can get things done effortlessly.

See things in the seed, and you see the essence of things. Work on the potential, and you nurture a tree. By applying the principle to the things you do, you learn much about the wisdom of good living.

Following timing is following nature. It's embedded in flow. Tap into it.

Manage timing, not just time.

# **Part 4**

# **Go with the Flow**

# Five Forms of Wu Wei

Wu wei isn't a technique; it's a state of being.

You're calm and in a state of ease. Exuding an aura of quiet confidence, getting things done looks easy.

You're as natural as nature and always ready for the flow.

The state of wu wei, nevertheless, doesn't arise overnight. It takes time and patience to cultivate. Don't feel discouraged if it doesn't turn out to be smooth sailing. Every tiny improvement you make is going to reward you handsomely.

Seeing the practice as in a variety of dimensions helps. Here, let me outline it in five different forms. They're not discrete, neither are they sequential. Rather, they're closely related and complement one another.

The five forms of wu wei are don't do, not now, go with the flow, detachment, and stillness.

# Don't Do

The first form of wu wei is simple.

Don't do anything that can disrupt the flow.

Anger, for example, is what you don't do. When you're angry, you're muddled-headed and act impulsively. You fail to see what is. By not being angry, you avoid things going the wrong way. So anger is on the list of don't do.

Don't do things that impede flow, and you get a lot of things done.

Lao Tzu provides excellent guidance in chapter 29 of the Tao Te Ching, where he highlights three things that you must avoid to keep flow intact.

"The Master thus avoids extremes, excesses, and complacency 去甚、去奢、去泰," he says.

## Avoid extremes

The first thing you must avoid is extremes.

Nothing is absolutely good or bad in life. Anything good that goes to the extreme is bad.

Love is good, but when you overindulge in it, it's bad. When a person is over-possessive or doting, it can be stifling. Thinking is good. But overthinking is bad. It prevents one from taking action even when a rare opportunity is knocking on the door.

"The honest can turn wayward, and the decent turn devious. It has long been confounding," says Lao Tzu in chapter 58 of the Tao Te Ching.

## **Avoid excesses**

Second, you avoid excesses.

Wu wei is not about doing absolutely nothing. The nothing we talk about here is the formless Tao. It's the underlying principle of existence.

You exert effort by observing how nature works and putting in an adequate effort to contribute to the flow. Not too much, not too little.

You avoid the extra effort that can be harmful. Eating is a case in point. You must eat to stay healthy. But eating more than you need will do you more harm than good.

Another example is desire. Desires are motivators for achievements, but when you allow your desires to run wild, you keep wanting more and more, and it can be the beginning of disasters.

"There is no greater misery than wanting more and more," says Lao Tzu in chapter 46 of the Tao Te Ching.

## **Avoid complacency**

Third, avoid complacency.

When you are complacent, you're reluctant to listen or change. The world, however, is in constant flux. You will soon lose touch with real-

ity if you continue to ignore what is. Even if you work hard, you could be working on the wrong things.

If you can avoid complacency, you're open-minded and adaptable, allowing you to keep pace with nature's flow. It lowers the incidence of you getting stuck.

By avoiding extremes, excesses, and complacency, you focus on what matters. You're always ready for the flow and ready for the power of nature.

When things don't move in the ways you want, find out whether there is an oversight of don't do. Are there extremes, excesses, or complacency that you can avoid to smoothen the flow?

Make a habit of reflection every day and let go of the superfluous. It eliminates baggage, making your life more effortless and rewarding.

Although you don't do, you get a lot of good things done.

# Not Now

The second form of wu wei is not now.

It's different from don't do in that you avoid doing certain things only temporarily and will do them later when the conditions are right.

You hold something back because one or more of the primary factors in TPP are not ready. If the timing, for example, is not right, you refrain from doing it now. You'll do it later when the timing is right.

You may also opt for not now for a lack of clarity. If you don't have enough information to make a sound decision or lack specific skills to do the thing right, you may choose not to do it now.

"Who has the patience to wait till the mud settles, and the water is clear? Who can remain unmoving till the moment of action arises by itself?" Says Lao Tzu in chapter 15.

It doesn't mean that you'll have to do absolutely nothing while waiting. You can always take the opportunity to tweak the primary factors.

If writing a book matters to you, but the timing is not right because you're tied up, what about doing blogging instead? You tweak the con-



ditions and change the circumstance. It helps you fulfill your purpose via another avenue.

“What is at rest is easy to hold, what is yet to happen is easy to plan. What is brittle is easily shattered, what is tiny is easily scattered. Work on a problem before it arises, set things in order before they get out of control,” says Lao Tzu in chapter 64 of the Tao Te Ching.

# Go with the Flow

The third form of wu wei is to go with the flow.

When you are ready for the flow, just go with it! No overthinking. No self-doubt. No hesitation.

There is no what if, only what is. The more natural you are, the more that you can derive more from the flow.

Have faith in yourself. Let your quiet confidence prevail. Bear your goal in mind, focus on what matters., but stay nimble. Enjoy the flow and forget not the dynamics.

Make the best of flow, and your life is a breeze.

One of the major obstacles for going with the flow—as a form of wu wei—is emotions. A good strategy is to see the flow as a big cycle and break it into a series of small cycles. It keeps the general flow intact even if there are disruptions to the small cycles.

When you are running, every breath is a cycle. When you're learning a new language, every practice session is a small cycle. Although you have the final goal in mind, you're focused on the small cycles. Focusing becomes easy because there is less to consider, and the chances of making mistakes are not as intimidating.

Life is a gigantic cycle and a mammoth flow. If every cycle within it flows well, we live a meaningful life. See the small cycle as an integral part of the whole. Do them well. But don't let them bog down the ultimate flow should any of the small cycles go awry.

When managing the small cycles, don't stereotype the flow. It can be slow and steady. But it can be fast and furious. It comes in all shapes and sizes and paces in a variety of ways.

It's slow when it needs to be slow and swift when the situation calls for it. It's like water, which can start as a trickle but turn out to be a gush. So long as each cycle goes through the proper stages, it's a proper flow.

Watch how a cat catches a bird, and you'd understand what I mean. A cat is so quiet and slow when it moves toward the bird for fear of alarming it. Once it's ready to strike, it's so swift it leaves not a chance for the bird to react.

When the flow is ready, just go for it!

You can be as decisive as the thunder or as soft as the wind.

# Staying Detached

Staying detached is perhaps the most demanding among the five forms of wu wei,

You're extremely concerned about the results, but you behave as if the results bother you not a bit. It's hard to do it, isn't it?

It's something like that you see in a thriller movie. A hapless hostage is under the watchful eyes of his captors, but he's amazingly at ease. Despite the danger, the hero is so calm he's able to hear the flowing energy and strike when the opportunity arises.

All of a sudden, he swings to action, and at the speed of lightning, he grabs the gun from a thug and points it back at him.

How can he stay cool even under duress? It's wu wei in action and what can be described here as staying detached.

Fortunately, practicing detachment doesn't have to be so spectacular. You can apply it to all kinds of situations. When you're in an examination room, confronting an angry man, or looking for your car key. The list goes on.

It's all about striking a balance between being indifferent and fully engaged. You detach yourself from the nonessentials but stay fully engaged with the essential.

Engagement is paramount. Otherwise, you can't hear the flow and the opportunities hidden in it.

It's what martial artists do. They're calm and easy, as if nothing bothers them. But they're so attentive to the flowing energy they can hear a pin drop. It allows them to spot weak links of their opponent to strike on.

You listen to the situation, not your desires. Even if you have plan B or plan C, you don't dictate what you will actually do. You see how the reality unfolds before deciding on exactly how you should respond.

You detach yourself from the nonessentials and are fully engaged with the essence.

Emotions such as anxiety and fear don't help the flow. So they're nonessentials. On the other hand, softness and patience help you with the flow, so they are essentials. Ditch the nonessential to prevent interruptions to the flow, but embrace the essentials to engage in the flow.

"Tao of Heaven: Does not compete, yet wins; does not speak, yet responds; does not command, yet obeyed. It accomplishes, without obvious design," says Lao Tzu in chapter 73.

# Stay in Stillness

Last but not least, stay in stillness.

Talking about stillness, what usually comes to mind is meditation. Although many people assume stillness to be a spiritual ritual, it can, in fact, be very earthly.

For wu wei, stillness is key. It can be as brief as a split second and as lasting as a background of prolonged action.

When a basketball player makes their shot, they're in the stillness for just seconds when aiming. When a marathoner runs, their mind can be in stillness for hours.

Stillness is vital to wu wei for several reasons.

First, it generates clarity.

A troubled mind is like stirred water, having lost its transparency and reflectiveness. By staying still, your mind regains its clarity just like water does when the dust settles.

Second, it initiates dialogues with your inner self.

In tranquility, you can listen to your inner voice clearly without distortions and dialogue with it. It helps you discover who you are and what your purpose is.

Third, it connects you to the Source.

Stillness opens you to the universe and connects you to the formless Tao. It humbles you with the bigger scheme of things and inspires you to live a life that proves your full mettle.

Last but not least, it can make you more creative.

Being calm helps you to align better with reality. Although you're guided by what you've planned, it doesn't stop the world from shaping your plans. You are disciplined but adaptable and creative.

You let go of your limiting thoughts and tune in with the universe. You make the complexities simple and changes easy. Rather than trying to dictate or control the flow, you go with it. You turn out to be more creative.

Make it a habit of nurturing stillness and allow it to work in everything you do. It helps you not only to be calm and relaxed but also to think clearly. It is fundamental to the practice of wu wei.

# Like Water

If you can observe the five forms of wu wei, you're as soft and yet powerful as water.

It makes you naturally great.

Looking at the virtue of water is, I'd think, an excellent way for us to wrap up what we have learned in this book.

Water is a favorite of Lao Tzu. He uses it as an analogy time and again, to the extent that the Tao Te Ching is sometimes referred to as a philosophy of water.

Although water is soft, it is so powerful it can penetrate a rock. "The softest of all things can overcome the hardest. That without form penetrates that without space," says Lao Tzu in 43.

With the quiet confidence and soft focus of wu wei, you're like water.

First, water is flexible.

Water is so yielding it can be in any shape. When you pour it into a cup, it is in the shape of a cup. When it is running in a pipe, it fits into the shape of a pipe.



The flexibility allows it to keep to its center wherever it goes, whatever it does. Just like a roly-poly toy, it swings back to its center to rebalance now and then.

Second, water wins by not winning.

Kick the water and see what happens to it. It doesn't hit you back. It splits its way, finds its new space, and regains its balance in no time.

It is pretty different when two rocks collide. Neither of them is willing to yield. So one or both of them could suffer cracks or break into pieces with the impact.

What happens when water crashes with a rock. Both are safe and sound. The water is so soft it doesn't hurt the rock. Neither does the rock hurt the water.

With the softness, there is peace and harmony. It allows water to stay near the rock, wear it away slowly, and eventually shape it into a canyon and cave! Although the transformation doesn't happen immediately, there's progress in every encounter, however tiny it is.

In life, you'd have to overcome one obstacle after another along the way. Instead of resisting them, accept whatever challenges with open arms and do what is needed to engage, one step at a time.

By accepting, you focus softly on the obstacle in a way like water wearing down the rough edges of rock. It may take time, but the results can be startling.

"By not thinking of being great, the Master achieves greatness," says Lao Tzu in chapter 34.

Third, water defends its center like crazy.

Water is soft but not wishy-washy. It embraces its purpose and guards its center jealously. When the center is disrupted, it quickly swings back to regain its balance. A correction could be so drastic that it causes tsunamis to sweep away farms and towns.

Like water, you're fluid and pliable. But when drastic adjustment is called for to regain your center, you can be as rough as a tsunami.

"Losing not our center, we shall endure," says Lao Tzu in chapter 33.

Learn from water; put wu wei into practice. You'll be delighted to see how exciting life can be.

Let me wish you every success in your journey of wu wei.





# About the Author

**Tekson Teo** combines his quest for the Tao with the study of human potential, especially the practice of Wu Wei as a way of life. In addition to tapping into his experience as a management consultant that took him to countries across continents, he verifies his findings through tai chi and qigong. Energy movements of tai chi exemplify the teachings of the philosophy, and being a disciple of an ancient lineage allows him a privilege of experiencing them in raw forms. The fusion is a unique approach to applying the timeless wisdom with a modern twist. Hailing from Singapore, a melting pot of East and West cultures, Tekson attended traditional Chinese schools before receiving international education and awards of BSc (Econ) Hon from the University of London and MBA and DIC from Imperial College London.

For more information on books and training programs of the author, please visit [Tekson.Org](http://Tekson.Org)