

Wu Wei Comes Alive

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Chapter: Power of Wu Wei

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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* or *non-doing* 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.