

Wuwei I
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Good evening, everyone.

In the midst of a great deal of activity I've been thinking a lot about what the Daoists call *wuwei*, which is 'effortless action.' We'll talk a bit about that tonight. It picks up on a number of threads of some things we've been talking about over recent months.

Effortless action is an old Chinese idea that was in both Daoism and Confucianism, then was picked up in Buddhism particularly in Chan and the koan tradition, so it is very much a part of our heritage. It's talked about as natural, spontaneous action and it's also talked about as skillful action. How do you get good at effortless action?

This is an interesting question and seems to come up over and over again in different forms. I want to make some suggestions about how it might be possible to get good at effortless action, but first remind you of how much time you spend in your life efforting — cultivating effort. How much time did it take you to get educated? How much would it take you to unlearn all you've learned? How long does it take to get good at a physical activity; to figure out love; to master an art? It seems quite natural to us that we would spend lots of time in our lives doing things that require application, attention, and our perseverance. We could also turn that energy, sincerity, and consistency toward effortless action as well.

One simple way to talk about natural spontaneous action has to do with the difference between a reaction and a response. When I say reaction, I'm not talking about instinctive reactions like when you put your hand on something hot and pull it away immediately. I'm talking more about thought reactions — something happens and you immediately have a thought reaction to it. You immediately have a judgment, an opinion, about it, or a feeling about it. What happens is that the judgment, or feeling, or opinion becomes more compelling than whatever it is that is actually happening. So, all of a sudden you're not in the situation anymore, you're in a relationship with what you think and feel about the situation. With a bit of intention, we can see how often we do that and how much time we spend in a primary relationship with our reactions to things rather than to the things themselves.

With a reaction, there is an overwhelming and unbalanced emphasis on the self, on the importance of the self. There's what is happening and then there's what I *think* about it, and what I think about it is so important it must be taken into account and paid attention to. This just reinforces that sense of a separate self, a self that is moving through circumstances and trying to navigate and figure out how we feel. Most of us probably know that sometimes that way of being is lonely, alienating, and can feel embattled.

Our *response*, in contrast, isn't fundamentally centered in the self and what the self thinks. With a response we don't move from what's actually happening to this second order of experience, i.e., what we think about what's happening, but instead stay with what's actually happening, and we don't separate ourselves out from what is actually happening. We are a part of what's actually happening so there isn't that sense of distance or separation or alienation; there is more a sense of participation in, being part of what's going on.

The English writer and philosopher, Iris Murdoch, had a wonderful term for this. She called it being 'unselfed.' If a reaction is a re-enforcement of the self, a response unselfs us in a really good way. We're not center stage, we're not the protagonists in the drama. It's not all about me and how I feel about it, but there's a sense of participating in something larger and a curiosity about how the whole situation feels about it. What's happening in the field? How can I participate in that?

One of the ways we've talked about that recently is when coming into a situation or noticing that we're in a situation, instead of asking the selfing questions — How do I feel about this? What do I think about this? What do I need to do about this? What do I need to fix this? — all of the I, I, I, I, kinds of things — instead ask two simple unselfed questions : What wants to be enjoyed here? And, what needs to be attended to? The emphasis is on the situation; the emphasis is on the whole field. Is there something that wants enjoying? Is there something that needs attending to? That's the response. When we come like that, not allowing ourselves to be separated out and taken into the side room of our opinions, when we allow ourselves to stand, then our response arises not out of that tight, restricted, habitual, boring place, but from the field as a whole. It's as if the whole field is responding to what's happening and that response is flowing through us, moves through us, and comes out through our hands in some way. We participate in some particular way as a result of being connected to what the situation wants, what the situation feels about what's happening.

I hope that gives you a sense of what natural and spontaneous means. We talked in recent months about another aspect of it when we looked at the *Bhagavad Gita* which talks about how we have to act and how we also have to be unattached to the fruits of our actions. We act and once we act we're done, that's that. The *Daodejing*, an old Daoist classic, says, "Do your work, then step back; the only way to serenity." So you do what you need to do, you make the action, and then you step back and you let it work. That's a peaceful life according to Daoists. So often when we're selfed, we're in a situation for our own reasons and purposes (which can be negative as well as positive) we have such giant agendas — whether we know them or not — about what ought to be happening, and what a good outcome ought to be, and what will make us feel comfortable, and how the world needs to be for us to feel comfortable, and what I want, and what I deserve, what's appropriate ... [Laughter] all that good stuff. Huge, huge agendas. The *Bhagavad Gita* suggests something else, which is : you do it, you do the best you can, and you don't have an agenda about what needs to happen. Those of us who've been doing this a while develop a sense of futility about having any real sense of the way things ought to be, or how things ought to go, or what a good outcome is. It's so likely to change, so likely to be different, and usually bigger than it looks from the perspective of the self. One of the things that wei wuwei is about is giving up the small perspective, giving up the constricted idea of what ought happen, and allowing things to get much bigger, because we recognize that more than just our individual selves are participating. It's a more complicated and rich picture. Fortunately, we don't have to do it all ourselves; fortunately, we're all doing it together.

Maybe one way to think about becoming skillful at effortlessness is to notice when we're being and acting selfed, and when we're allowing ourselves to be unselfed. To notice what the habits of distancing and alienation are. A dharmic way, or technical way of talking about that is to notice what we do that reinforces the sense of the self and what we do that allows the sense of the self to get porous and spacious and much bigger. That's a good way to look at what we're doing and what its effect is. Then there's a deconstruction that we do of those habits of alienation we keep noticing and we try something else, catching it as quickly as we can and doing something else instead. That's the deconstructing part, the part where we notice our habits.

The second part, which is tremendously important, is to notice where our allegiance is. Is your allegiance to the agenda? Is your allegiance to your preconceived ideas about how things

ought to be or where they ought to go? Is that where your allegiance is, to that construction and reinforcement and endless iteration of the self that all of that means; and / or is your allegiance towards something larger than that, something that the Daoists call the Dao — the way things are. The way things are moving. Wei wuwei is equally about finding how you move into the stream of the Dao — how we work with it rather than thinking that things are about imposing our will, making things happen a certain way. Instead we look for ‘what’s the big picture, what’s the big flow of things, how is the current going, and is there a way we can work with and go with them?’

That’s not a passive thing, that’s not just a matter of finding the way the current is flowing and lying down on it and going. It takes a lot of attention and discernment to try and see which way things are going because of that tendency we have to jump immediately into how we’d like things to be going or to have gone. We keep imposing a picture on it. But if we don’t, we might try sitting down a couple of times a day for a half an hour and just listening, just paying attention, just noticing. Not imposing any agenda, not having any big idea about things, but letting them happen to us. When we sink into meditation, one of the beautiful things that happens is things tend to swim up towards us to meet us. I would encourage you not to shoo them away, but to listen, to pay attention to those things that swim up and ask for our attention. So looking for the currents, trying to understand how’s it going; what’s the great what-is right-here; how’s the great what-is manifested right now; how can I align myself with it, rather than coming in with some agenda or idea that is completely separate from it, completely artificial in comparison. We have talked over the years about the *rio abajo rio*, the river under the river, and that’s what the Dao is. It’s the river always flowing underneath everything that we can forget about but that’s always there. We can always touch and put our feet in that river and ask : How’s it going? What’s happening? What’s the field? What’s the big picture? How do I participate? Not, how do I bend it to my will, but how do I participate in what’s going on? The more we do that the more we begin to feel a natural shift of allegiance from the agenda of the self to the participation in a larger sense of things. How beautiful that is, what a relief it is, how not lonely it is to do that when there’s a sense of, as Buddhism says, “everything arising together, everything connected.” How seriously do we take that? What would it be like to take that seriously — that everything really is connected, that we are part

of something very large and very complicated and incapable of deciphering completely. So stop. Don't try — that's not the point, but rather, how can we participate fully in it.

Effortless action. How do we notice the habits that alienate us? How do we allow our allegiance to shift from the small, constricted space of the self into the larger space of the self in the sense that the self grows larger and includes much more, includes a field? Rather than impose what we think and make things happen, how do we participate in what is happening?

I'll stop there and take any comments or questions you may have.

Q1 : Thank you so much for talking about exactly this. I live in a community where everyone goes away for the winter. I love it. Something I notice when I sit [in meditation], is this stream of wanting with occasional gaps. And in those gaps, usually, there's not any wanting at all. It's just an okay-ness with things as they are. I'm really interested in this fine line of participating, because I'd like to participate more from that part of myself rather than the part that has strong opinions ... Yet that part of me doesn't have much oomph.

JIS : So it needs more attention.

Q1 : There's the part that my agendas, that has lots of *sally-forth* and then there's a part of me that when I relax out of that, I'm really ok with what's happening. I hear you say it's not about passivity, yet that part of me isn't terribly active.

JIS : Yeah. So in the situation you're talking about with the [community] coming back together after dispersing [for winter] — what rises through that part? What rises through the gap?

Q1 : Do you mean when I'm aware of everyone coming back and I relax into that? There's a control — part of me wants to control how things go, and that drops away in that gap.

JIS : Okay, so that's the first step. The first step is the dropping away of it. The second step is what's in its place. What's there instead? That gap's an opening that something else can come up through. That control stuff is over here and then there's this gap and that gap is connected really, really, deeply.

Q1 : So just pay attention to the gap?

JIS : Yeah. *Fall* into the gap. Exactly. And notice what wants to rise up through that gap. For what is that gap an opening?

Q1 : I think the gap is a break in all those agendas and I don't know how to make it coexist if I'm really sitting in the soup of community issues and upcoming meetings and all that. It tightens again. It'd be interesting to see if I can actually sit in the situation and have the ability to stay.

JIS : Look at it the other way. Sit in the gap and hold the situation. You know the gap. You know it. So there ought to be a way you can touch in with it and think of *it* as the thing that's holding the situation, rather than something that has to happen within the situation. *It* is holding the situation, rather than something you have to allow in or find. What would it be like if it were held in that?

Q1 : So see if its what's running the show.

JIS : Or what would it be like if it were held in that.

Q1 : Is it here?

JIS : Of course it's here, where else could it be?

Q1 : About the flow of the river — if you see someone you love, someone you care about, and in the flow of the river you see them being destructive — I guess the concern I have is, if you go with the flow, observe the flow, well then I become complicit. I become an enabler by not engaging and trying to arrest that flow. Also, if the flow is contradictory to my values ... then I find it difficult ... you said it's not passive. That's difficult for me in that kind of context to embrace what you're saying.

JIS : Okay, so a couple of things. One is notice the tendency to think of yourself as observing the flow. You're in it. You're there; you're part of what's flowing, you're part of what's happening. So your discomfort, your worry, all of that stuff is part of what's happening. It's not held as an observer and then this other thing's happening. That's the first really important shift. The real includes you.

Q2 : I'm an actor on the stage.

JIS : Yeah. But that makes a huge difference, because all of a sudden it's not like you're watching the person go by. You're there; you're part of it. If you include all of your participation, what's that like? The flow gets a lot more complicated. So that's the first thing. Secondly, you're feeling is that things are wrong and maybe dangerous. That's fine. What we tend to do is jump immediately into those kinds of evaluations of what's going on without pausing to really acknowledge that this is what is. So that's got to be the first step. We can't be

fighting with the situation for being the situation. *It is*. Where we often get into trouble is not pausing to say, “Yeah goddamit, this is the situation.” When we’re not fighting with it for being what it is, we release energy to respond to it. But we’re responding to what’s actually happening, not fighting with how we think things ought to be.

I want to say another word about the process of moving off of fighting with life for being life. Probably we’ve all been in situations where we think, *this shouldn’t be happening*. As Issan Dorsey beautifully said, “You get what you deserve, whether you deserve it or not.” So *this shouldn’t be happening* is an impossible relationship to have to anything, but if you stay with it the first shift may be to something like *I feel so sad that this is happening*. And the shift from *this shouldn’t be happening* to *I feel so sad that this is happening* is a huge shift, because suddenly you’re actually located in your experience of what is happening. When you settle into how you actually feel about the situation rather than thinking it shouldn’t be happening, then it can allow for the third movement, which is to *this is what’s happening*. Because you’re not fighting anymore and you’re accepting how you’re feeling about the situation. That all important third shift to *this is what’s happening* is possible only when we’re able to stay with what we’re actually feeling. To say “this is what’s actually happening” isn’t closing the book — that’s the end, there’s nothing we need to do — but rather it allows us to be able to act more realistically. Just compare acting from *this shouldn’t be happening* and *this is what is actually happening*. There’s worlds of differences in terms of what the possible responses are. It’s all a matter of bringing us to being able to respond more realistically to things.

Thank you.