

Wuwei II
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Good evening, bodhisattvas.

Last week I spoke about the Daoist idea of *wuwei*, which transliterates as ‘action without action,’ but which we were calling ‘effortless action.’ It seemed to be a subject that was of interest to some of you and had liveliness to it, so I thought I would carry on a bit more this week.

One of the things we spoke about last time was the importance, in Daoism as well as in the *Bhagavad Gita*, of acting without attachment to the fruits of the action. In early Chan, which is Chinese Zen philosophy, which inherited a lot from Daoism, that was important because it was seen that if you’re doing something and the formula is *I am doing x so that y will happen*, the *so that y will happen* part, the part where we’re interested in the fruits of what we do, is strongly constituting and reinforcing of the self. The thought that we can perform some action which will have some result reinforces the idea that we are an agent in the world, that we’re an agent who can do things and make things happen. So, the idea was to pull back from that to a place we can see it clearly — in the *paramitas*, which are the ‘perfections’ of various kinds of qualities and practices. The *Heart Sutra* is a *prajna paramita* about the perfection of wisdom. There is also *dana paramita*, which is the perfection of giving or generosity. One of the ways that *dana paramita*, the perfection of giving, is described is as the ‘three empties’. The giver is empty, the gift is empty, and the recipient is empty. In the Mahayana literature of the bodhisattva there is a fourth thing, that there is no reward. The reward is empty, too. That’s the fruit, or attachment to the fruit, of what happens to the reward one way or another.

The first meaning of ‘empty’ is the idea that there is a giver and a gift and a recipient and a reward — that we know what those things are and can divide the action up into those ways — it is empty, has no meaning. It has no substance. It’s just an idea. It’s just an opinion. If we use our own language, where we tend to speak of the vastness rather than emptiness, that’s another kind of interesting spin : the giver is vast, the gift is vast, the recipient is vast, the reward is vast. That’s that movement we talk about when we’re looking to deconstruct the self, to stop reinforcing the self, but instead of trying to pare it down and make it smaller and

shut it up and cut it off, you go the other direction and let it get really big. The doer is vast, the thing done is vast, the results are vast. I'll come back to that in a minute, but that's a different way of getting us out of this local mind frame of 'I'm doing this so that that will happen.'

If we take the Mahayana tradition at its word and there is no reward, or we renounce the fruits of our action, then we make an important shift from 'I do this so that that will happen' to 'I do this.' Can you feel how huge that is? *I do this*. This is what I'm doing. This is, right now, where I stand. Right now, what I give myself and my heart-mind to, is just this.

We were speaking about *tathagata*, the understanding that each thing rises in the universe as tathagata, as 'thus come,' as completely itself and nothing else, and that each thing rising as tathagata, fills the universe, falls away, and then the next thing rises as tathagata. When we can experience things rising against the bare ground as tathagata, they are very vivid and alive and particular and vast; and we have that encounter, and then that falls away, and we have the next encounter and the next, so you have serial tathagatas going on. This is what we're talking about here when we shift from 'I do this so that that will happen' to 'I do this.' That's tathagata. That's a statement of tathagata. I do this. I meet this. I encounter this. And that falls away, and then I do this, and I encounter this, and I meet this.

How do we get more comfortable with 'I do this' rather than 'I do this so that this will happen?' The early Chan tradition has a little bit to say about that, but as usual, it gives us a fairly loose, big view, and lets us fill in the details, because the whole idea is that there aren't rules and recipes for how to do things. There are guidelines for how to approach things. The fundamental optimism is, if we approach things in a certain way the details will sort themselves out, they'll become apparent to us.

The first bit of moving into 'I do this' would be something that the Daoists and the Chan people would assume you were doing anyway, so they don't mention it, but we can assume we're doing it anyway, so we'll mention it. [Laughter] That is that always, always, always you are looking for the way the Dao is flowing and looking for how to align yourself with that. Every moment of every day in some way you are listening, looking, paying attention, and bringing your warm curiosity to what's going on around you, so that you can see which way the Dao is flowing and see the most beautiful and skillful way to line up with that or to influence that. When we talked about how the thought that you're doing something so that

something else will happen really constitutes the self, the opposite thought, *I won't do anything; I'll just be passive, I'll just flow along with things*, equally constitutes the self. There's still a self doing something or not doing something.

It doesn't matter whether it's doing something or not doing something, as long as you have the idea that there's the self doing that. It's not about moving from action into passivity. Those are seen as equivalent to each other, not different from each other, in the fundamental way, which is what does it say about the self? We're talking about something else. We're talking about doing the best we can to look the Dao in the face, to look what we sometimes call "the great what is" right in the face. Not to simply say, *okay, that's the way it is and that's it*, but because any action has to be based in reality. To the extent that it's based in reality and is what's really going on, the greater chance there is that it's going to be skillful because it's not going to be fighting with the way things are, it's going to be working with them even if it's to change them, to change the course in some way. That's the first bit of coming to 'I do this' — a constant attunement to the way things are flowing and looking. How do we understand that more deeply, subtly, better, and clearer?

The second thing is, when do I act? Now we're getting into Daoist advice territory. We have a tendency to notice whether something needs attending to and just do it, *this can't wait*, because there's an anxiety about something being off-kilter and we want to fix it right away. Or we have another tendency to turn away from it, procrastinate, and think *in some other lifetime I will attend to this matter*. This is something else. This is another kind of attention like the first one about when should I move, when should I act, what is skillful, what will be the most skillful intervention to have. There's no recipe for knowing that; there's only the experience of trying, seeing what happens, and discovering for yourself what the signs are that this is the moment to act, or this is not the moment to act. Reading the Dao, aligning with the Dao, and looking for the right moment to act.

Then there's a third thing, looking for the right moment to *stop* acting — equally important. As the *Daodejing* says, "Do your work then step back. That is the way to equanimity." Here we get a fine discrimination between what's a response and what's interfering. That's another thing we have to learn by doing. At what point does response become interference, because you're done, but you don't realize that you're done, and so you carry on. What's the quality of that? That's one of the questions I'd ask you to take with you

and look at : what's the difference between response and interference? And how do you know? What are some signs that you've moved from one into the other? What are the signs that it's time to stop — that whatever that action was, it's complete — 'I do this' is done; there's nothing else to do and it's on to the next tathagata.

The last thing is actually something we add from our perspective of this koan way, which is : how do you notice what happened; how do you notice what worked and what didn't work; what felt skillful; what felt like it was in the Dao and what felt like two muddy boots on the white carpet? How do you learn to see what happened realistically and to make course corrections based on what you learn? That's also tremendously important, that's also another way of more easily and naturally aligning with the Dao the next time.

Another big piece has to do with the next movement. If we move from 'I do this so that will happen' to 'I do this,' the last and most beautiful move is when 'I do this' becomes 'this happens.' Where you don't have a sense of, *I'm acting and I'm making this happen, and I'm the agent of this action*, but rather you have a sense of, *I am participating in this action that is arising. I'm a part and not the all important agent of what's happening*. That way of looking at it becomes very simple if you let your view get big; if you remember that this thing that you're invested in, have spent so much time wondering about and focusing your energy on — all of that mental activity that we tend to bring to the kind of action we're talking about — tends to focus, concentrate us, and fool us into thinking that it's all about a laser beam of attention and this very narrow thing that's happening. So, it's tremendously important, not at the same time, not to abandon that, but to step back and remember that this action is happening in a big field and that what's going on is in a moment that stretches from before the beginning of the universe to after the end of the universe and all through time and space. When you remember that, the idea of 'I'm doing this and making this happen' becomes ludicrous. Carl Sagan used to say a beautiful thing, "If you really want to create an apple pie from scratch you have to begin at The Big Bang." You get that sense of action — that everything's participating, everything's brought it to this moment, everything's connected in some way, and I've got an eensy weensy transitory part in what's going on and that's about it. I think that's a salutary view point to have and also a tremendously important one because then in a way you really are aligning yourself with the Dao. You're taking on the perspective of the Dao. We can do that, it's possible for us to do so that we don't have the sense of the action being driven by our

will. We don't have a sense of our having created and manufactured and are now managing something, but more a sense of having made ourselves available for what the moment needs to rise up and through us and out our hands. How great is that to have a sense of having made ourselves available for what the moment calls for?

I'll stop there for now and am glad to hear any comments or questions or reports on the week.

Q1 : You posed the question : how do we evaluate after the action? I thought you were going to tell us, but you moved right along! I'm curious how that can happen, if there is any guideline to help us know. I think it would be hard to know sometimes.

JIS : Well, if you were going to create ideal criteria for some successful action, what would they be? What would that feel like?

Q1 : No harm and some benefit.

JIS : Okay. As best you know it, right? So now there's a range of possibilities.

Q2 : I'm grappling with 'I do this,' then it becomes, 'This happens.' I was noticing before you said that what was missing was a sense of purpose. Would you think it fair to say no good gets done in the world without someone acting with a sense of purpose? That purpose doesn't have to be mechanical, *I have to do this to make that happen*. That purpose too can have a sense of vastness to it, which may be another way of saying 'because this happens.' The other part of the equation could be equally large but it needs to be there, right? There's got to be something guiding why you do this. Which may also be behind how we assess our actions.

JIS : I'm not sure that purpose is always there and I'm not sure that purpose is necessary for good to be done. I think a lot of good gets done by accidents and serendipity. And that's actually lovely. But there certainly is good that gets done with purpose and that would be part of the 'I do this.' The unhooking comes from 'I do this so that ...' It's possible to have purpose without the 'so that ...' without the attachment to the result that has to come from that. *I do this because my heart is made this way. I do this because I can't not do this. I do this because every fiber in my being wants to respond to this. I do this because I can, fortunately I'm here to do this. I do this because it's kind*. There's a gazillion kinds of purposes that can come into 'I do this.'

Q2 : So I guess my question also is, if I say, 'I do this because my heart's made this way' that's not necessarily because I was born this way. Because my heart got shaped another way through a reflective process. Because I want my heart to be a certain way. How do we do that without further entrenching our sense of self? Because it is about me, it's my heart. I guess that's part of the dynamic mystery and tension — how to do that and not make it small and mechanical.

JIS : Immediately what I think of is, yes, it's about your heart, but it's not about your heart as cut out from the rest of everything. We've been talking recently about a place where your heart meets the great heart of the world. So what's that place like and what's it like to act when you say, 'I do this because my heart is made this way.' What's it like to think of the heart that meets the great heart of the world in that place deep in silence? That's different than the personal heart that's created by circumstance; it's also attached to this larger sense of things. What's it like to imagine that being the source of purpose?

Q2 : Then in this great heart of the world is there only goodness?

JIS : No. There's tremendous sorrow and pain.

Q2 : And what about darkness?

JIS : Yes.

Q2 : So it's possible to align with the darkness as well as the goodness?

JIS : It's possible, yeah. I don't see it happening too often amongst us, but sure.

Q3 : I think I have a similar question. It seems like in the field of possible risings, in any moment there's good and bad and dark and light, etc. How do we improve our skill set to increase the potential or probability for good?

JIS : You're doing it, that's what you're doing. This is one way of doing it.

Q3 : Yesterday at the koan salon Adolf Hitler was brought up. When Hitler was a young man he applied to art school. And he didn't get in. You wonder what would have happened or not happened if it had been different. That's the kind of thing I'm thinking about with this skill potential. There was a huge potential there, but maybe if he got into art school he would have destroyed art.

JIS : He tried anyway.

Q3 : He hoarded it, that's for sure. Ok, so do what we're doing. Thank you.

JIS : Thank you.