

## The Tao of Wu Wei

By Charles MacInerney  
Expanding Paradigms – Spring 2009

Hotei was a Zen master who had no desire to be called a Zen master or to gather disciples around him. Instead he walked the streets with a big sack, begging for gifts. These he gave to children who gathered around him in play. He established a kindergarten of the streets. One day a visiting Zen master recognized him on the street and inquired: "What is the significance of Zen?" Hotei immediately plopped his sack down on the ground in silent answer. "Then," asked the visitor, "what is the actualization of Zen?" At once Hotei swung the sack over his shoulder and continued on his way smiling.

Wu Wei is a Taoist concept which literally translates as "not doing". The *significance* of Wu Wei lies in knowing when to act and when not to act. When I first encountered this idea I tried to remember doing nothing as one of the options to be considered in any situation. This goes against the grain for those of us raised in a Western mindset. In a crisis, it is generally perceived that doing something is better than doing nothing, even if the something does not work... "Well at least he tried!" The implication is that *not trying* is worse than failure.



As I learned more about Wu Wei, I realized that it refers to 'effortless doing' as opposed to 'not doing'. It points to the internal state of being without effort, rather than to any external actions or lack thereof. As Yoda said "Do or do not, there is no try!" The *actualization* of Wu Wei flows from living in a state of perfect equilibrium, or alignment with the Tao. Athletes who experience this state later talk of being 'in the zone' and of achieving peak performance without calculation, hesitation or effort.

In the West, individually and collectively as nation states, when confronted with a complex problem we tend to either ignore it or attack it head on (sometimes even declaring 'war' on it). We resort to throwing solutions at a problem that we do not yet understand. In so doing, we merely muddy the water and often create a host of unintended consequences, some of which can be worse than the original problem. Before attempting to solve a problem, we must first seek to understand the problem.

We cannot hope to understand a complex system while either ignoring it or interfering with it. Instead we must pay attention to it without judgment or interference. We must join the process and flow with it to actualize Wu Wei.

Of all the complex systems in the universe our own mind is undoubtedly one of the most complex. Detached observation meditation is a path to self-knowledge. The rules are deceptively simple and should sound familiar to you. Pay attention. Do not control. Do not Judge.

“Freedom from the desire for an answer is essential to the understanding of a problem.... If we can really understand the problem, the answer will come out of it, because the answer is not separate from the problem.” - Jiddu Krishnamurti