

Summary of Taoism

- 1 The *Tao* is the fundamental principle of the universe, the inexhaustible spring of all life and movement.
- 2 It is empty of self.
- 3 It is spontaneous and natural.
- 4 It does not share conventional human values.
- 5 It governs the universe through "inactive action."
- 6 The Man of *Tao* loves all things, and acts by "inaction."
- 7 Government should rule as the *Tao* rules, by "inactive action."

Other Forms of Taoism

In addition to the Taoism outlined here, which in English is often called Philosophical Taoism, and which the Chinese call the School of Tao (*Tao Chia*), other forms of Taoism have developed:

- Esoteric Taoism is the name given to a movement which sought to avoid death and attain physical immortality by various special means, such as breathing exercises, vegetarianism, or sometimes simply not eating. Some of its techniques are still practiced.
- Popular Taoism, called Religious Taoism (*Tao Chia*) in Chinese, is a form of popular Chinese religion which aims at longevity and prosperity through a variety of rituals, including the worship of gods and exorcisms. It is still very much alive, particularly in Chinese communities outside China, such as Taiwan and Singapore.

Some idea of the second form of Taoism may perhaps be gained from the exorcism ceremony. The Taoist priest first ascertains the person's animal sign from the year of his birth, and takes a paper image of that animal. For example if he was born in the Year of the Dog, the priest will take a paper image of a dog. By means of prayers and incantations he then transfers into the paper image of the dog any illness or evil present in the person, and then burns the image.

Taoist Ethics

The question of our relationship to others is scarcely discussed in the *Chuang Tzu*, but the *Tao Te Ching* has several remarkable statements on the subject, of which the main ones are collected in the next chapter, under the heading "Love." The wise man is not full of himself, but empty of himself. This enables him to identify with others.

The Sage has no self,
He makes the self of the people his self.

Consequently he will act towards others with love. It is right to love those who are good, but the man who is empty of himself will also love those who are bad.

To the good I act with goodness;
To the bad I also act with goodness;
Thus goodness is attained.

Even if men be bad, why should they be rejected?
Therefore the Sage is always a good savior of men,
And no man is rejected.

We should love even those who hate us:

Return love for great hatred.
Otherwise, when a great hatred is reconciled, some of it will surely remain.

Even in battle, we should love those against whom we are fighting:

He who fights with love will win the battle,
He who defends with love will be secure.
Heaven will save him, and protect him with love.

The wise man does not exact the last farthing, but is generous towards his partners in an agreement:

The sage holds to the left half of an agreement, but does not exact what the other holder ought to do.
The virtuous resort to agreement, the virtueless resort to exaction.

It should be acknowledged, however, that these statements are few in number, and a good deal hinges on the particular translation.



print this page

close window

The Tao of Star Wars

A look at the Taoist concept of *wu wei* through the lens of the Star Wars series.

By John Porter

Adapted from *The Tao of Star Wars* with permission of the author.

Wu wei may be the most misunderstood of all the precepts of Taoism. It's most commonly translated "nonaction or inaction," and appears in verses of the Tao Te Ching like:

Act without doing;
Work without effort.
—Chapter 63 (Stephen Mitchell translation)

Nonaction or inaction is almost a heretical thought in Western society. However, true *wu wei* is the most efficient action possible, the most spontaneous and often the most creative action. It is not a life of a sloth or laziness, but one in which the least possible effort yields the most effective and productive outcome. Actions come from a more intuitive area of the mind.

The closest analogy would be when an athlete is "in the zone." The actions are not coming from the thinking or calculating area of the mind, but they are being done. Obviously, this is not the same as doing nothing.

The master does nothing,
Yet he leaves nothing undone.
The ordinary man is always doing things,
Yet many things are left to be done...
—Chapter 38

So *wu wei* is not non-action but effortless action. It is action without meddlesome, contentious, or egotistical exertion. It's the effortless action that results from combining your inner nature (P'u and Te) with the natural laws operating around you. In short, it is being in harmony with the Tao.

The prerequisite for this is to feel the Tao. You cannot harmonize with the Tao if you don't feel it or are not aware of its presence.

Throughout the Star Wars series, those strong in the Force are constantly talking about feeling the Force. In Star Wars, when Luke is learning how to use the lightsaber against the remote, Obi Wan counsels him:

Obi-Wan: Remember, a Jedi can feel the Force flowing through him.
Luke: You mean it controls your actions?
Obi-Wan: Partially.

In *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda admonishes Luke to feel the Force during his training on Dagobah, saying "A Jedi's strength flows from the Force." In one scene, he tells Luke to focus in order to feel the Force:

Yoda: Feel it. (Luke becomes distracted by Artoo's frantic beeping and loses his balance.)
Yoda: Concentrate!

Later, Luke is standing upside down, but his face shows less strain and more concentration than before. Yoda stands beside him.

Yoda: Concentrate. (Equipment slowly rises into the air.)
 Yoda: Feel the Force flow. Yes.

When you are aware of the Tao and feel it, you can flow with it, and the right action appears for itself, spontaneously. This is the essence of *wu wei*.

Can you remain unmoving
 Till the right action arises by itself?
 —Chapter 15

Wu wei is related to patience. You wait, you feel, you harmonize, and the right action appears. It's a type of patience that can best be described as vigilance. You see it throughout the animal kingdom: the tiger in a crouch waiting to pounce...the crane standing on one leg waiting for the fish to swim by...the python lying in wait for the prey to pass by.

What do all of these have in common? Vigilance, not just mere waiting, but waiting for the proper time to act. It's being in the right place at the right time, but also being ready to act.

In *The Phantom Menace*, the very first scene has Qui-Gon telling Obi-Wan to "be mindful of the living Force." You feel the Tao. You are aware of the Tao. From this flows your strength, the strength of spontaneous, harmonious action: *wu wei*.

Effortless action does not come with egotistical forcing of things. It does not come with knowledge, for knowledge tries to figure things out. Knowledge leads to cleverness, which tries to devise better ways.

Do you want to improve the world?
 I don't think it can be done.
 —Chapter 29

Wu wei doesn't think. It isn't about effort. But the ego forces. Humans try. On Dagobah:

Luke: I'll give it a try.
 Yoda: No! Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.

Trying is not the way nature functions. The earth doesn't try to orbit the sun. The seed doesn't try to grow into a tree. Nature functions with effortless ease, invariably taking the path of least resistance. *Wu wei* doesn't try, it just does. And when it does, it doesn't appear to do much of anything, but things get done. Trying too hard leads to failure.

In order to practice *wu wei*, you have to let go. This is what Obi-Wan told Luke in *Star Wars* as he was attempting to release the laser torpedoes at the Death Star. Luke was using his ship's instruments to find the target and to determine the release point.

Obi-Wan: Use the Force, Luke.
 Luke looks up, then starts to look back into the targeting device. He has second thoughts.
 Obi-Wan: Let go, Luke.

You have to let go and trust the Tao.

True mastery can be gained
 By letting things go their own way.
 It can't be gained by interfering.
 —Chapter 48

There is one more element of letting go that is of prime importance. That is to let go of desire, which is just another way of defining acceptance. Nonacceptance of the way things are—desire—is at the root of every action, interference, or assertion.

The Tao never does anything,
Yet through it all things are done.
If powerful men and women
Could center themselves in it (They can!)
The whole world would be transformed
By itself, in its natural rhythms.
People would be content
With their simple, everyday lives,
In harmony, and free of desire.
When there is no desire,
All things are at peace.
—Chapter 37

When you have acceptance and act in harmony with the Tao, you can put aside personal priorities in order to take harmonious action. *Wu wei* is one of the greatest skills. Use it well; use it often.

Copyright 2003 Brumby Holdings. Dr. John Porter is chief of Trauma and Critical Care in the University of Arizona Department of Surgery. He practices Taoism and the martial art of Aikido.