

## Effortless Action and Playful Action—A Study of Taoism And Vedanta

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The concept of *wu-wei*, understood both as "effortless action" and "non-action" is a central concept in Taoism which has been developed in the *Tao Te Ching* and in *Chuangtzu*. In this paper, the exposition of the concept of *wu wei* will be based mainly on the *Tao Te Ching* and its commentary by Wang Pi (226-249 AD) and some of the modern commentators of the *Tao Te Ching*. The study of "playful action" will be based primarily on the writings of Ramanuja (1017-1137 AD) especially his commentary on Badarayana's *Vedanta Sutra* known as *Sri Bhasya* and on some of the modern writers of Ramanuja's Vedanta.

The basis for this comparative study is to explore a certain commonality between effortless action and playful action. Both are actions spontaneous flowing from the intrinsic nature of the Tao and God respectively. The *Tao Te Ching* says of the Tao that the Tao does nothing and yet it leaves nothing undone. God's "fullness of Being" and self-sufficiency lead to playful action and creation. However, the quality of "playfulness" as such could not be attributed to the Tao, since playfulness is an essential attribute of "personhood." The Tao as the Ultimate Tao and Tao as the "Mother of all things," as the *Tao Te Ching* says in the very first chapter, are both "impersonal" and the feminine description of the Tao is at best metaphorical.

The Chinese tradition attributes the authorship of the *Tao Te Ching* to the 7th century B.C. Chinese sage, Lao Tzu, considered to have been a senior contemporary of Confucius. Many Chinese scholars and Western Sinologists, however, question the very historicity of Lao Tzu, considering him a latter invention by the Taoists to stress "the antiquity" and thus "the authenticity" of their tradition. Unlike Confucius about whom we have definite historical information, there is scant historical information on the life of Lao Tzu, excepting the legendary story of Confucius meeting Lao Tzu at Lo-yang, the ancient capital of Chou dynasty, where it is stated that Lao Tzu was working as a low rank official in charge of archives of the Chou court.<sup>1</sup> There is also the legendary story of Lao Tzu leaving China for good "after witnessing the decline of the Chou royal house." When he was thus leaving China to travel "west," he was requested by the gatekeeper of Han-ku Pass, who had perhaps heard about the wisdom of Lao Tzu, to put his knowledge and wisdom into writing before leaving China. Lao Tzu is stated to have done this in one night and to have given the manuscript of the *Tao Te Ching* to the gatekeeper and left.<sup>2</sup> These two incidences are mentioned in the earliest work of Chinese history, *Shih Chi* or *Records of Historian*, written around 100 B.C. by the famous historian Ssu-ma Chien who also acknowledged the fact that there was very little historical information available on Lao Tzu. This lack of information on Lao Tzu led Ssu-ma Chien to identify Lao Tzu with another Lao Lao-tzu, a contemporary of Confucius, who is said to have lived to be 160 or 200 years of age.<sup>3</sup> Many modern scholars contend also that the text of the *Tao Te Ching*, in terms of its content and style, did not fit into the period of the seventh or sixth century B.C., but to the period of the Warring States (409-221 BC). Arthur Waley places *Tao Te Ching* at around 240 BC.,<sup>4</sup> and Bernard Karlgren and Henry Maspero place it at the beginning of the fourth century B.C. Many of the

military terms and ideas that are used in *Tao Te Ching* such as, "second-in-command", "commander-in-chief", "kings and barons", and "kings and dukes" did not become current until 300 B.C.,<sup>5</sup> and the anti-Confucian sentiments expressed in the *Tao Te Ching* also place the text well after the time of Confucius, when Confucian thought was fairly well-established. However, we should note that the traditional accounts of the authorship of Lao-tzu had occupied significant place in Chinese imagination. As Burt Watson writes:

Scholars both in China and elsewhere have long eyed this account [found in *Shih Chi*] with grave suspicion, and many now regard Lao Tzu as a purely legendary figure. Yet the story of how the book came to be written is apocryphal though it may be, seems to hover about its pages even today, and the scene of the old philosopher taking leave of the Keeper of the Pass before setting off into the unknown has never ceased to be a favorite subject with artists of China and other countries within the Chinese cultural sphere.<sup>6</sup>

Irrespective of the question of authorship, the importance of this text in Chinese history is to be seen in the fact that the text which was then called *Lao Tzu*, was elevated by the Han emperor Ching (reigned 156-141 BC.) to status of a *jing*, meaning a religious or sacred text.

To gain a fuller understanding of *wu-wei* as stated and elaborated in the *Tao Te Ching*, we need to place it in the historical context of the "warring states." The *Tao Te Ching* addresses itself primarily to the rulers on the "art of ruling." A.C. Graham points to a difference between the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang-tzu* on this matter.

...the two books differ considerably in thought, and it was some time before they came to be classed together. *Chuang-Tzu* is the one ancient collection of writings of and for outsiders who preferred private life to office, while *Lao-Tzu* [*Tao Te Ching*], although attractive to the same leadership, presents itself as another guide to the art of rulership.<sup>7</sup>

The art of rulership that the *Tao Te Ching* presents is firmly situated in *wu wei*, meaning "non-action." This non-action, besides meaning "no action" is also presented as "effortless action" and "minimal action" and directed to rulers living at a time of violence and unprincipled conquest and killing. According to Harold Roth,

*wu-wei* is a mode of experience not only for the subjects... but for the rulers as well. Such a ruler is tranquil and still and, at his deepest level, merged with the Tao. This enables him to always act spontaneously and in a timely fashion, to resonate (*kan-ying*) with the vital energies of heaven and earth and thus exert a numinous transformative influence on people (*shen-hua*), to adapt (*yin*) to the course and nature of things and to comply with their natural guidelines (*hsun, -li*), and to be sincere and benevolent.<sup>8</sup>

*Wu wei* is also a mode of "action" that reflects the nature of the Tao itself. There is an intrinsic dynamism in the way Tao functions which is exemplified in nature and natural phenomena. Nature functions "effortlessly" without "conscious" effort and with no specific "goal" or "purpose" in view. Water flows down to the lower grounds "effortlessly" by its own intrinsic nature and this it does not to "show off" its virtue of humility! There is nothing "intended" in the

way nature functions. Such a “natural action” is contrasted with “intended” and deliberate action in the *Tao Te Ching* where one intervenes to change things for the better or worse. It is the latter kind of action that creates tension or contention. Any “deliberate action” interfering with this natural flow of things is self-defeating. In the world of nature, there is a cyclical movement whereby things come and go as in the case of the seasons, and movements from one state to its opposite as in the case of day and night. Interference with the natural flow of things often results in disastrous consequences. Refraining from such interference and avoidance of deliberate or intended action by a person to make things “better” or “different” is the state of non-action. The sage-ruler knows the Tao, the Way, and seeks not to interfere with the natural flow of things. “The sages abide in the business of non-action,” *Tao Te Ching* points out, and through non-action,

They produce without possessing.  
They act with no expectation of reward.  
When their work is done, they do not linger.

Wang Pi reads the last statement as not taking credit for doing something and points out that since “abiding by their natural functions, all things achieve their own fulfillment... one cannot take any credit.”<sup>9</sup> Here non-action involves action since “it is to produce without possessing; to act without expectation of reward; to lead without lording over.”<sup>10</sup>

Holmes Welch writes:

...in Lao Tzu’s opinion no one can achieve his aims by action. How then can he achieve his aims? The answer was *wu wei*. ‘To yield is to be preserved whole....Because the wise man does not contend no one can contend against him’ (22)<sup>11</sup>

Of the many similes Lao Tzu uses, his favorite is water, which of all things is most yielding and can overwhelm [rock] which is of all things is most hard (43).<sup>12</sup>

Wang Pi states the benefits of softness:

Emptiness, nothingness, softness, and weakness: there is no where they cannot go and nothing they cannot penetrate. The softest thing cannot be broken; and projecting this, one knows the benefits of inaction.<sup>13</sup> This is the reason that “The Way does nothing yet nothing is left undone.”<sup>14</sup>

Holmes Welch sums up Lao Tzu’s views on the art of ruling thusly:

Lao Tzu recommends government by non-interference, Governments must by-pass the dilemma of action, recognizing in particular the futility of trying to control so complex things as a nation.<sup>15</sup> Those who would gain the world and do something with it, I see that they will fail, says the *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>16</sup>

meaning that acts of interference and enactment of more stringent laws to regulate the conduct of the subjects would fail. “The more taboos and prohibitions there are in the world, the poorer the

people.... The more cleaver and skillful the people, the more strange and perverse things arise. The more clear the laws and edicts, the more thieves and robbers.”<sup>17</sup>

And so sages say,  
“I do nothing and the people transform themselves  
I prefer stillness and people correct and regulate themselves;  
I engage in no activity and the people prosper on their own;  
I am without desires and people simplify their own lives.”

Commenting on these verses, Ellen Chen writes:

There are two types of government. An eager government intent upon improving the people’s lot will introduce legislations, issue edicts, multiply laws. Such a meddling government prevents its people from unfolding the activities inherent in their own natures, resulting in a restless, intractable, and poor population. The Taoist ruler, by doing nothing (*wu wei*), allows his people to develop themselves. *Ching* is the peace or tranquility of nature or of the female (ch.61) which begets motions of life (*tung*) (ch.15). Nature is ever peaceful and tranquil, yet ever active and productive (ch.45.2). The policy of “resting with people” produces the best results.<sup>18</sup>

A “good general” also will also exhibit the virtue of minimal action. Thus we read in the *Tao Te Ching*:

Those who are good at military action achieve their goal and then stop.... They achieve their goal and do not brag. They achieve their goal but do not boast. They achieve their goal but are not arrogant. They achieve their goal but only because they have no choice.<sup>19</sup>

According to Wang Pi, a “sage general” would say, “Not preferring military force, I use it reluctantly; then why do I have to be arrogant or brag about it.”<sup>20</sup>

Thus “ruling a great state is like cooking a small fish,” according to the *Tao Te Ching*. Wang Pi explains:

This means not to disturb it. Hastiness creates much harm; serenity preserves true nature. Therefore the larger the nation, the quieter is its master. Thus he is able to win the people’s hearts completely.<sup>21</sup>

There is another component to the art of ruling based on the *wu-wei*: according to the *Tao Te Ching*, the sage-ruler knows the right moment to act; to deal with the hard while it is easy, and deal with the big while it is small.

What has yet to begin is easy to plan for.  
What is brittle is easy to scatter.  
What is faint is easy to disperse.  
Work out things before they come to be;  
Regulate things before they become disordered.<sup>22</sup>

Holmes Welch comments: "In actions the [wise man values] timelessness. If one has understood Tao, i.e., the way the universe works, one can detect things at an exceedingly early stage in their development. Indeed, one can 'deal with things before it is there' (64), while if one waits until it is fully grown, one will face a much more difficult—perhaps impossible—undertaking for inaction."<sup>23</sup>

Both Taoism and Confucianism appeal to a "Golden Age" in the past when there were no conflicts, when people lived in harmony. While Confucianism sees it as a time when the rituals of family and social conduct (*li*) were fully observed, the Taoists see it as a time "when values and qualities were not clearly distinguished, when things simply were as they were spontaneously"<sup>24</sup> This period was followed, according to the Taoists, when distinctions among things were recognized, "but neither side of the dichotomies that arise from such distinctions is held up as absolutely superior."<sup>25</sup> The third phase of "progression" was when dichotomies came to be seen as opposites with the human desire to possess what was considered as best and reject its opposite, thus leading to greed, violence and war. The Sage ruler that the *Tao Te Ching* is focusing on belongs to this third age, who, through actions anchored on *wu-wei*, seeks to ease tensions caused by dichotomies and human greed, by his exemplary life and conduct. Here indeed is the "art of ruling" in a strife-torn world:

Those who would gain the world and do something with it,  
I see that they will fail.  
The world is a spiritual vessel and one cannot put it to use.  
Those who use it ruin it.  
Those who grab hold of it lose it.  
Sometimes things lead and sometimes they follow;  
Some times they breathe gently and sometimes they pant;  
Sometimes they are strong and sometimes they are weak;  
Sometimes they fight and sometimes they fall;  
That is why sages cast off whatever is extreme, extravagant, or excessive"<sup>26</sup>

The wise ruler follows the way of nature. Wang Pi points out that "the virtue of all things is based on nature.... Things possess constant virtue; to impose and act upon it will spoil them. Things ought to come and go [naturally]; to hold them is to lose them."<sup>27</sup> According to Roger Ames and David Hall:

When the patterns of nature are taken as counsel for political order in the empire, they teach us that the human world too will flourish if left to its own internal impulses. Coercive interventions from "above" while perhaps temporarily efficacious, are, in the long term and in the big picture, a source of destabilization and impoverishment. It is thus that sagacious rulers stay close to the center, and simply oversee a world that can be relied upon to order itself.<sup>28</sup>

"The sage [ruler]," Ellen Chen remarks, "is sensitive to the rhythm of the world and follows its contours of change. He takes care not to disrupt the cosmic procession of beings. His job is to dismantle the works of consciousness called overdoing, extravagance or excess from the viewpoint of a self-regulating nature."<sup>29</sup>

To sum up: *wu-wei*, as it is presented in the *Tao Te Ching* means two things: 1) “non-action” in a literal sense; and 2) “non-action” in a qualified sense. In some situations, no action would be ideal response; though on other occasions minimal action and response may be necessary. However, as the *Tao Te Ching* says,

Persons of highest efficacy neither do things coercively  
Nor would they have any motivation for doing so.

When one reaches the point with no intent to act, one still has to act. Therefore one should act with no specific intent, for to act intentionally is the calamity of action.<sup>30</sup>

The above statement of the *Tao Te Ching*, “when one reaches the point with no intent to act, one still has to act” rightly takes us to a discussion of playful action where also one does not *intend to play* but *plays however!* The doctrine of playful creation (*lila*) in the Vedanta of Ramanuja mediates between the notion of God as self-sufficient and the need for such a self-sufficient Being to create. The theological issue is whether there is purpose to creation. If God accomplishes something through creation then God is not self-sufficient. The Vaisnava theology’s notion of play as the “motive” for creation overcomes this difficulty by pointing out that creation is playful and hence an expression of spontaneity and delight, rather than any specific need on the part of the divine creator. Perhaps this playfulness is natural to the divine who in all respects is self-sufficient. The presentation of the doctrine of playful creation on which we will be focusing is in the writings of Ramanuja, a Hindu theologian of the 12th century considered to be the chief exponent of the Visistadvaita school of Vedanta. According to Ramanuja's theology, God/ Brahman/Vishnu is the embodiment of all perfections and self-sufficient, lacking nothing. However, God is also the creator and subsequently, the merciful Savior. On the “motive” for such a perfect Being to create, Ramanuja writes:

The motive which prompts Brahman (the Supreme Being)—all of whose wishes are fulfilled and who is perfect in himself—to the creation of the world comprising of all kinds of sentient and non-sentient beings... is nothing but sport (play/ *lila*). We see in ordinary life how a great king, ruling this earth... and possessing perfect strength... has a game at balls, or the like, from no other motive than to amuse himself; hence there is no objection to the view that sport is the only motive prompting Brahman to creation, sustention, and destruction of the world, which is easily fashioned by his mere will.<sup>31</sup>

Ramanuja’s presentation of play as the “motive” arises in the context of an opposing view (*purvapaksa*) which says that Brahman cannot be the creator for two reasons. First, Brahman has no motive to create since by his essential nature “all his desires are eternally fulfilled;” and, second, “For a being, all whose wishes are fulfilled, could concern itself about others only with a view to benefiting them.” Thus “no merciful divinity would create a world so full as ours, of evils of all kind—birth, old age, death, hell, and so on—if he created at all, pity would move it to create a world altogether happy.”<sup>32</sup>

By describing creation as “play,” Ramanuja avoids philosophical and logical difficulties connected with notions of “necessary” and “purposive” creation since both the concepts of “necessity” and “purpose” seem to impose limitations on the notion of “perfection” of God. Ramanuja also in this process rejects the claim of the non-dualist Vedanta of Sankara that the creation is illusory (*maya*). Creation is *real* but *not necessary or purposive*, he claims. Play is an expression of divine spontaneity as well as joy and not something that involves deliberation or planning. Many modern scholars of Ramanuja, highlighting this aspect of play, describe it as “purposeless purpose.” The spontaneity and joy side of play, P.B. Vidyarthi points out, tells us something about the intrinsic dynamism of Brahman.

Lila is a term that belongs to aesthetics and has reference to God indicating his freedom of expression. Isvara [Brahman] is Ananda, bliss, and it is the very nature of Ananda...to burst forth. Infinite Bliss or joy cannot remain pent up within itself. It must come out, must express itself. Infinite Bliss being itself the source and center of all happiness must find itself in the constant giving of its characters to all things. While it has nothing itself to seek, it fulfills itself in giving itself to others. This is the secret of creation, of the creation of the world by God and it is this in sum, that seems to be the real gist of Ramanuja’s theory of creation as lila, sport, aesthetic delight.<sup>33</sup>

According to P.N. Srinivasachari, “The idea of extra-cosmic Deity with an increasing cosmic purpose militates against the idea of omniscience and perfection. The theory of *lila* remedies this defect by insisting on the primacy of aesthetic consciousness and regarding the cosmic process as the spontaneous creative expression of Brahman as the divine artist.”<sup>34</sup> By stressing the aesthetic dimension of *lila*, Srinivasachari goes on to say, that the “worldview is transfigured into an artistic vision.”

Creation is then intuited as the play or sport of the divine Artist, and is regarded as His recreation or *lila*. *Srsti* [creation] is the creative joy of self-expression and self-division and the evolution of *nama-rupa* is the evolution of infinite forms of beauty from the infinite Beauty that has formless form. The world of space-time is the eternal interplay between the static and dynamic aspects of beauty. The free duration of time as creative evolution but spatialized by the intellect is one-sided as the static theory of reality which denies teleology, and explains the universe mathematically in terms of space. But the creative activity of God in the world of space and time or space-time is a symphony without any jarring note.... The world is a poem of beauty, and its sonorousness is imparted to every part of it and makes it vibrate with its music.<sup>35</sup>

We could describe the creation in general as the process where the “One becomes many.” Ramanuja in *Sri Bhasya* (Commentary on the *Vedanta Sutra* of Badarayana) makes a distinction between Brahman in the “causal state” and Brahman in the “effected or produced state” in order to explain the state of unity where Brahman could be spoken of as One only, and the state of multiplicity where Brahman is the sustaining and supporting base of the many. Ramanuja’s philosophical school of Vedanta known as *Visistadvaita*, “Qualified Non-dualism, is built around the notion of a *functional unity* among the three basic principles (*tattvas*) which are eternal. These are, Brahman (The Supreme Self/ Being), *atman* (the individual self/being), and *prakriti*, (primordial matter). These eternal principles are also “eternally” in relationship with one another;

Ramanuja describes the relationship among them as body (*sarira*) and the self (*sariri*), with *atman* and *prakriti* constituting the body (*sarira*) of Brahman. In terms of Ramanuja's metaphysics, the body is dependent in its intrinsic nature (*svarupa*) on the self and exists for the sake of the self.

At the point of playful creation initiated by Brahman, *atman* is transformed into innumerable embodied conscious beings (*jivas*), and the primordial matter (*prakriti*) into the rich and divergent physical, non-sentient, natural world. Ramanuja's affirmation of the Oneness of Brahman, in spite of the three ontological principles, is based on the fact that *atman* and *prakriti* are totally dependent on Brahman, and to that extent they lack independent and substantial existence. Thus one could speak of Brahman as "One only without a second" consistent with the textual/ scriptural affirmation of the Upanishads. In the words of Vedanta Desika, one of the post-Ramanuja theologians of the 14th century, "Sentient beings and non-sentient beings exist not for their own sake but for the fulfillment of God's purposes. Their nature is ever to exist for somebody else, i.e., the Lord. In using them for his own purposes, His glory is manifested"<sup>36</sup> All creation is for the sake of the creator since it is His playful creation and its true function, though not intended explicitly, is to manifest the divine glory.

In some ways "playful action" becomes an exemplary model to be imitated. This is to be done by all sentient beings, since somehow the playful perspective of the world has been lost, and we have come to develop a possessive and purposive view of the world. This indeed explains the tragedy of *samsara* afflicting all sentient beings "bound" to the cycle of life-death-rebirth, a cycle governed by the law of *karma*. To be free from this "bondage" to the reincarnation cycle, we need to return to a playful and "purposeless purpose" of creation where we are all participants in the divine play. For us, the "purposeless" world has become "purposive," the joyous playful world has been transformed into a *karmic*, *samsaric* world. We could speculate about this change from a *lila*-world to a karmic world. Enticed by the attractiveness of the created world, the *jiva* has come to *privatize* the divine, *lila* world. In the playful world, the role of *jiva* is to participate joyously in the created world witnessing divine play and beholding divine creativity as it is expressed in the rich multiplicity of the created world. However, in a privatized world, there are goals to be achieved by the *jiva* in order to make its life happier. Now, the *jiva*, instead of remaining a "witness consciousness" and a joyful participant in the divinely created and sustained world, by privatizing it, has made it purposive so as to serve its own personal goals and interests.

In terms of a comparative study, both effortless action and playful action are "ego-free" actions marked by spontaneity. The Tao and Brahman are exemplary models respectively of effortless and playful actions. Being exemplary models they have become models of action to be imitated in the respective traditions. The human situation is marked by deviation from and a loss of the pattern of behavior at the "original time." The recovery and imitation of these "ancient ways" are means of redemption. Both effortless action and playful action could be seen as returning to one's own intrinsic nature.

Brahman as “Person,” personified as Vishnu, especially in the Vedanta of Ramanuja, gives a distinct flavor to playful action. In fact, in the Vaishnava tradition that followed Ramanuja, the divine incarnations of Vishnu are highly celebrated, especially that of Rama and Krishna. Of these, Krishna’s playful actions as a child and as an adult in romantic relationship with the cowherds (*gopis*) of Brindavan, have become spiritually inspirational stories especially in Bengali Vaishnavism. Here, one might suggest, the devotees are enabled to recapture and experience a “playful and joyful vision of the world” having been inspired by stories of Krishna in the *Bhagavata Purana*, and by imitating modes of relationship with the child and adult Krishna, modes of “affectionate child” (*vatsalya*), “the sweet beloved” (*madhura*), and the dearest (*kanta*). We could not meaningfully speak of a “Taoist practitioner” seeking such personal relationships with the Tao since the Tao is essentially an impersonal absolute. Barring this exception, Brahman and the Tao appear to share a good deal of common ground.

Effortless action and playful action are important concepts in the Taoist and Vedanta traditions respectively, traditions that have historically no point of contact with one another. As a point of history, there has not been a great deal of interest among the Hindu scholars to study seriously the Chinese religious traditions nor among the Chinese scholars to study the Hindu philosophical and religious traditions. This lack of mutual interest is unfortunate. Both China and India offer to a serious student of comparative religion rich resources for cross cultural and religious studies. What had been undertaken here is but one example.

## NOTES

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  21. Ibid., p.112.
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  23. Welch, Holmes, *Taoism The Parting of the Way*, p.25.
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