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The Art of Stopping when it’s Time to Stop. A Philosophical Approach to the Daoist Notion of Wú wéi

Stop trying. Stop trying not to try. Stop stopping.
Zen proverb

Abstract
One of the most significant current discussions in Chinese philosophy is the problem of interpreting the notion of wú wéi. As one of the popular concepts of ancient Chinese thought, wú wéi was used and differently interpreted in various philosophical schools from the very beginning. In this article, the Daoist notion of wú wéi will be explored as the “art of stopping when it’s time to stop”, taking the philosophical approach and appealing to the text of the Zhuangzi. The critical investigation into the sinological literature allows us to reveal several different contemporary attitudes towards wú wéi as the aim, process, and ground for the “ideal” human existence.

Keywords: Daoism, Zhuangzi, wú wéi, nature.

The concept of wú wéi (无为) is usually translated into English as “non-doing” or “non-action” (Kohn 1992; Roth 1999, Zhu 2002, and many others), “effortless action” (Slingerland 2003). It may be interpreted as “non-interference” (Kirkland 2001) or even as “anarchy” with a specific meaning of this word (Ames 1998, 7-8). Thus wú wéi – from the first sight a very simple – concept appeared to be one of the trickiest philosophical Daoist notions for the modern mind, not only for the ordinary people but for the philosophers as well. Even the well-known sinologists do not agree what wú wéi means in a concrete context. This concept is widely analyzed by the scholars of Chinese philosophy who are trying to extract its physical, psychological, social, political, and other aspects. Sometimes it is investigated from the metaphysical perspective as non-action of Dào and the primal Emptiness. Sometimes it is adapted into the contemporary social and/or economic discourse as well.

There is always a danger to narrow down the notion of wú wéi while emphasizing just one of its aspects or trying to create the universalized theoretical concept
distant from the everyday life. Both cases would be alien to the ancient Chinese thinking. In our contemporary life, there is no concept of the all-embracing *Dào* and some things that probably were matter-of-course for the ancient Chinese are totally alien to us. Thus, is it possible to grasp the essence of *wú wéi* not being a Chinese? And what to do with the non-doing in the contemporary world full of various “doings” – rushing and pushing us to rush with it?

In this article, I shall explore the Daoist notion of *wú wéi* as the art of stopping when it is time to stop appealing to the classical Daoist text the *Zhuangzi*. The aim of this article is to reveal and discuss three aspects of *wú wéi* as the forms of ceasing/stopping and stages of non-action while seeking for the perfect mode of existence. The objectives of the research are: 1) to inquire into the “partial” and goal-orientated non-action when there is a clear understanding why an actor is doing/not doing something; 2) to analyze the person orientated non-action when *wú wéi* is realized as a transformation of one’s heart-mind (*xīn*) and acting spontaneously according to the situation and nature of things; 3) to discuss the final stage of non-action which reveals itself as the actualization of creative primal emptiness. In this paper, without pretending to develop an exhaustive and all embracing theory, I will explore the different “layers” of *wú wéi* found in the *Zhuangzi* paying attention to the possibility of actualizing them in the everyday life. A huge amount of critical literature tempts me to present all possible opinions concerning the interpretation of *wú wéi* and to create a historical survey of them. I choose, however, to focus on the philosophical analysis of the notion even though I will leave some of the important interpretations aside.

**Passivity, intentionality and mastership**

To start talking about *wú wéi*, we have to remember that it is not an absolute passivity in the physical or intellectual level, and almost all sinologists agree with that. *Wú wéi* is always some sort of doing/non-doing or doing/non-doing of something. The notion of *wú wéi* is ambiguous and its meaning fluctuates according to what meaning is given to the negation *wú* and the affirmation *wéi*. It is easy to realize that every affirmation and even every rational thought about *wú wéi* is a form of “acting” (*wéi*). As it will be showed in the article every, even the most insightful, idea leaves the possibility to go further in the direction of negation’s aspect of *wú wéi*. Therefore, I will try to take the advantage of a Zen proverb, which can help us understand better the Zhuangzian notion of *wú wéi* and creates some kind of systematic approach without putting strict borders. The proverb sounds like this: “Stop trying. Stop trying not to try. Stop stopping”.

The idea of *wú wéi* as a stopping does not appear in the *Zhuangzi* as an exact phrase but it can be extracted from the various stories and the main
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line of Zhuangzi’s thought. In the forth chapter, at the end of the story about the fasting of heart-mind (心斋 xīn zhāi) there is said: “Good fortune lies in stopping when it is time to stop. If you do not stop, this is called “galloping while sitting”” (Zhuangzi 4/32; Mair 1998, 33). The notion of stopping appears together with its reverse – inability to stop. This concept of “galloping while sitting” or “rushing while sitting” (坐驰 zuò chí) means perpetually worried state of heart-mind (心) that is so common these days. Most of the contemporary people are literally sitting while working. They do not feel peaceful and comfortable themselves, nevertheless. Seeking for inner peace they take outer measures such like vitamins, alcohol, extra day-off, and so on. We should not think that our lives are more intensive or busy than the lives of people in the ancient China. The time when Zhuangzi lived was named a Warring States period to some purpose. Zhuangzi, however, was an exceptional philosopher who proposed to change the heart-mind instead of trying to change the world.

In such situation, we can understand wú wéi as the first segment of the proverb (stop trying) which can mean the ceasing to change the environment in order to achieve the inner result. According to Zhuangzi, it is possible to achieve a state of peacefulness even in the midst of disturbances if you are living in accordance with Dào. In the sixth chapter, there it is said about Dào: “Its name is Tranquility in Turmoil” (Zhuangzi 6/42; Mair, 57). Dào does not do anything, and a man has to “do nothing” if he wants to achieve a state of tranquility.

Some authors, however, declare that we can understand Daoist wú wéi as a sort of an active non-doing thanks to which the particular goal is reached. For example Rui Zhu asserts that wú wéi in the Dào dejing is more external non-doing and it works as a mean to achieve a very practical goal wú-bù- wéi which is usually translated as “leaving nothing undone” (Zhu 2002, 55). The world (or state) flourishes after the leader stops governing it in one particular definite way.

Such kind of non-doing is quite understandable for modern people both in the East and the West. As the evidence of this we see numerous publications named “Dào of Business”, “Dào of Management”, and others which are supposed to help us achieve our goals. Non-doing is understood as a purposeful abstention from purposeful actions and thus leading to the successful solution of the problematic situation. Such kind of non-doing is considered better than doing but is placed in the wider sphere of activity. For example, it is better to say nothing to a person filled with anger and wait until he or she calms down. Non-doing, however, becomes simply not doing of something and just a mean for something else. It is easy to interpret such notion of wú wéi as a mere shifty manipulation.

An active non-action is important but far from being exhaustive meaning of wú wéi and, according to some authors, it is typical of Laozi’s but not
of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. Livia Kohn asserts that in the *Zhuangzi*, *wú wéi* means rather a state of consciousness and is independent of the outer activities of the person: “non-action in the *Dào dejing* is a way of dealing with the things of the world – with government, material goods, and culture. In the *Zhuangzi*, it is a state of consciousness. Non-action is the quality of the true person’s mind, whatever he or she does in the world” (Kohn 1992, 57). Rui Zhu upholds a similar view. He is convinced that *wú wéi* in the *Zhuangzi* is not a mean to achieve a state of *wú bù wéi* but an inseparable aspect of the same process: *wú-wéi-wú-bù-wéi*. Thus to be *wú wéi* means to live naturally and harmoniously in the world without intentions and goals (Zhu 2002, 59).

In the *Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, we can find several examples of the intentional and at least partially towards external goal orientated non-action. Such state is sought and achieved as the highest level of mastership when there is no trying, just doing left. The cook Ding, the carpenter Qing, an old man diving from a waterfall, a cicadas’ catcher, and even a fighting cock are “doing nothing.” They do nothing (or nothing special) as they explain. They still have an aim, at least in the beginning of their way. Their non-action is directed not towards a material goal. They aim at being perfect and while aiming for this they stop trying to do something special. When a person reaches such a level of mastership he/she does not need to think about what is done or what needs to be done. The woodcarver Qing says: “I no longer presume to harbor any thoughts of congratulations and rewards, of rank and salary. […] I no longer presume to harbor any thoughts of censure or praise, of skill or clumsiness. […] I abruptly forget that I have four limbs and a body. At that time, I have no thought of public affairs or the court. My skill is concentrated and all external distractions disappear” (Zhuangzi 19/56-58; Mair 1998, 183). Thus, the master does not try; the master simply acts and acts successfully because he is in harmony with the world.

**Keeping harmony**

The exact meaning of harmonious state in the world might be understood as a matter of interpretation because “harmony” is one of the rather intuitively perceived notions. There are no criteria for measuring harmony. If I feel harmony within myself and between myself and the world – would anyone necessarily feel comfortable near me? The world is changing all the time, thus the harmony cannot be a fixed state. It should change according to the situation, what makes the strict definition of harmony almost impossible. The only “steady” feature of harmony could be named the “mutual understanding” of man and the world, a kind of commonness.

Exactly this question about reciprocal harmony arises while reading the article of Russell Kirkland. While analyzing the Daoist attitude towards ecology and ethics (i.e. human relationship with the world), Kirkland gives some
examples of \textit{wú wéi} from the everyday life. According to Kirkland, \textit{wú wéi} will be actualized when not interfering in the “natural” processes. Observing vanishing species of animals, a Daoist sage would not try to save them under any circumstances, as Kirkland claims. Moreover, he asserts that a true Daoist would not try to rescue even a child fallen into river, i.e. he would be guided by \textit{wú wéi} and would “do nothing” in the strictest sense of the word.

Without explanation, such an attitude is hardly understandable for anyone, not only for a modern Westerner. According to Kirkland, the main reason for such behavior is not a lack of compassion or responsibility but an outlook more complex than the Western world view. Kirkland asserts: a Daoist sage “trusts that the world is already operating as it is supposed to be operating, and all human activity – no matter how well-intentioned – can add nothing of value to such operating, and can logically only interfere with the course of nature as it is already unfolding” (Kirkland 2001, 288). Thus, according to Kirkland, the only right and proper moral action is just to keep sitting and watching a drowning child without taking any interventional action (Kirkland 2001, 288-289). Would it be the real harmony with the world?

Talking about the inner aspect of \textit{wú wéi}, Kirkland defines a “proper” treatment of life as maintaining of one’s right and integrated perspective and controlling emotions (Kirkland 2001, 290-291). Kirkland gives an example from the everyday life again, specifically from the upbringing of children: “we teach them never to follow their raw emotional responses, but rather to govern their emotions, and to learn to behave in a responsible manner, according to principles that are morally correct, whether or not they are emotionally satisfying” (Kirkland 2001, 290). Rightly noticing that Daoists encourage us to accept everything what life gives with equal equanimity, Kirkland stays on the side of Confucianists and rationalists by emphasizing the control of emotions. The relationship between natural and unnatural, as well as the strength of the will, stays unclear in this process of “governing emotions”.

We can agree that in the world everything flourishes lives and dies, emerges and disappears according to the general course of \textit{Dào} and without human intervention. This notwithstanding, we can easily imagine a person of a very strained mind who is trying \textit{to not-act} with all his might. This happens, if we emphasize the restraint from outer action and the control of emotions. This will hardly be a picture of a Daoist sage, though nature all around will keep following its natural course of development. There will be a harmony in the nature but not in the man.

I argue that a Daoist sage is not guided by emotions not because he does not feel any of them and not because he controls them by the means of a reason as a Confucianist or a rationalist would do. A Daoist sage \textit{does not attach himself to} emotions and therefore emotions do not limit or condition him. A sage shares in harmony of Heavenly order and \textit{acts} spontaneously without ceasing to live \textit{wú wéi}. Therefore it is said, “if someone who is not
angry exhibits anger, his anger is an exhibition of non-anger; if someone who is not acting exhibits action, his action is an exhibition of non-action” (*Zhuangzi* 23/78; Mair 1998, 235-236). Thus an action is still possible but there is no necessity for it to become an interventional action (wéi).

Sometimes Zhuangzi is pictured as a relativist denying any intentional action and any kind of conscious decision or responsibility. According to Alan Fox, such opinion is influenced by misinterpretation of *wú wéi*. He asserts that inevitability and acting according to 道 in the Zhuangzi does not mean any kind of determinism: “the genuine person is not rigidly constrained to a single response, but rather inevitably slips into the most natural (comfortable: shì 適), most effortless groove. The grooves in this case are not the ruts of repetitive and habitual activity. They instead represent the limitations and inevitabilities one encounters in the world, such that effortless activity follows the trajectory of the groove just as surfer follows the motion of the wave” (Fox 2003, 216).

**On the other side of good and evil**

The question following from what is said above is this: whether a Daoist sage would really never ever – under no circumstances – rescue a drowning child? It is obvious that one side of wú wéi is some sort of activity and the text of the Zhuangzi justifies this. In the same section about fasting of 心, there is a saying: “to eliminate one’s footsteps by not walking is easy, but to walk without touching the ground is hard” (*Zhuangzi* 4/30; Mair 1998, 33). So wú wéi is not about absolute non-doing and inner passivity. It is about something else. Livia Kohn says: wú wéi “is constituted by the complete absence of conscious evaluation, by the disappearance of likes and dislikes. Non-action means to go along with whatever situation has developed; it is not a prescribed way of (not) acting” (Kohn 1992, 57). Another scholar of Chinese Studies, Geling Shang claims almost the same: “Zhuangzi’s devaluation is neither reversing nor creating values but removing them from our mind along with all controversial opinions so that they can no longer interfere or interrupt the actual course of nature. So Zhuangzi’s devaluation is more of an inward transformation of one’s mind and perspective rather than the action (wéi) of changing, destroying, and creating things” (Shang 2006, 116-117).

That means wú wéi as the action should be based on the clear mind – clear from all traditional and personal evaluations. It should be based on the spontaneous response to the situation and not conditioned by preconceived notions and standardized values. Therefore it might be right to say that a Daoist sage would never ever dive into the river under the influence of the traditional differentiation between good and evil or following his/her sentimental emotions. In this sense, we can even affirm that he/she will not
rescue a child, for the conception of “rescue” already has the opposition of good and evil in it. To rescue somebody means to save someone from evil. In this case, to save from death which is considered evil comparing to life.

Such evaluation would be alien to the main line of Zhuangzi’s thought. In the Zhuangzi we can find a lot of stories which show that we do not know whether death is really worse than life. The story of the “great dream” (Zhuangzi 2/73-92; Mair 1998, 22-23), Zhuangzi’s conversation with dry empty skull (Zhuangzi 18/22-29; Mair 1998, 170) and others supposedly have to help us understand that there are no totally “good” and totally “evil” things or events especially when we talk about life and death. According to Hoffert, “the point is that our limited understanding of death leads to an unwarranted fear of the “unknown”, which can be overcome by broadening one’s perspective and relying on non-purposive action to lead one to “ultimate happiness” regardless of whether this ultimately leads to life or to death” (Hoffert 2001, 175).

Keeping in mind what is said about the understanding of good and evil in the Zhuangzi, there is no reason to assert, however, that a Daoist will not do anything in the strict sense of the word; that he will not pull a child out of the water spontaneously (zirán) and will not go his own way without giving prominence to his dead, without considering it to be “good”, or better to say, already “forgotten” his action. We can paraphrase the former saying from the Zhuangzi: not to save a child is easy, but to save him and refrain from considering this action a “good dead” is hard. Thus Kirkland’s belief that a Daoist should not rescue a child when doing nothing presupposes stiff and standardized understanding of Daoism and wú wéi. He remains in the realm of oppositions and categorical assertions, what is far from main line of Daoist thought.

Problem of “naturalness”

According to Kirkland, the main principle of wú wéi is to not intrude into the natural processes of nature and only to heal the nature injured by human activity. Kirkland leaves the question open, what criteria of “naturalness” we should use. This can be a matter-of-course while living according to the Daoist principles all the time. Looking from the perspective of an ordinary contemporary person, however, the notion of “naturalness” is not as simple and it is not unequivocal. David Loy sees the freedom of the concept’s interpretation as the main point of misunderstanding. Everyone can interpret the concept of “naturalness” as he or she wants because there are no definite criteria for distinguishing between intentional-volitional action and spontaneous-natural action (Loy 1985, 775-776).

In the Zhuangzi, the metaphors about animals and plants supposed to be
references to the naturalness of human life. It is too less to say, however, that spontaneity is to be as the nature is. This is one of the most difficult ideas to understand for modern mind which is egocentric and is considered to be totally separated from the nature’s world. On the other hand, the exaltation of a primitive nature and downgrading of human activity without keeping equipoise would be another kind of the same oppositional thinking. Thus Zhu asserts that “non-acting is not yielding the privilege of action to nature, but acting on behalf of nature and in the way of nature” (Zhu 2002, 58). And again, it is not quite clear what it means in the concrete context. What human activity is natural? How can we assert that the rational thinking or emotions are unnatural and alien to human nature? Are the scientific achievements natural or not? How should we heal the nature without using them? Or maybe some scientific achievements such as discovery of a new bacterium are natural, but the application of this bacterium in the industry would be considered unnatural?

Looking at the whole body of Zhuangzi, it does not seem that human nature or spontaneity should mean the melting of a man into the world’s nature. We would exclude a man from the nature as extraneous and unnatural element if we will associate naturalness with the world’s nature only. The stories about where it is better to sleep, what is considered to be beautiful (Zhuangzi 2/64-70; Mair 1998, 20-21), and others make evident that for Zhuangzi naturalness is connected with individual nature of things. Naturalness manifests itself differently every time and cannot be standardized by creating one definition of it.

We can agree that in the Daoist context, to follow Dào means to preserve the unimpaired nature. The question is – whose nature? Dào is a principle which actualizes itself as in things as in human beings. Thus the true nature is one for everything but simultaneously every thing has its own individual nature. As Geling Shang says, “Virtually every being-in-the-world has a right to exist the way it chooses, for there is no violation whatsoever of the Dào of nature as long as one acts or transforms by one’s own nature (zihua, zixing, 自性)” (Shang 2006, 48). Consequently, everyone has to know one’s own nature and act according to it in order to live with Dào.

On the other hand, it is not so easy to know one’s own nature and the nature of all things, i.e. Dào. Only when there is no opposition between the man and the world or between subject and object left, the life in harmony is possible. Only a sage acts in such a manner that his action does not prevent things from going their own way and his action is not disturbed by things anyhow. This is the active side of wú wéi. As Rui Zhu says, a sage “does whatever he wants to and meets no obstruction at any place or at any time. Such a person has his way all the time because his subjective way is also the objective way, the way of the world” (Zhu 2002, 61). Looking from this perspective, wú wéi is not a refusal to act but a non-action in the action;
wú wéi is not preservation of the world’s nature while sacrificing the man’s nature or *vice versa* but seeing the common nature of both.

**Wú wéi in the consciousness – stop trying not to try**

Thinking about the possibility of wú wéi in the intellection, the same question about the absoluteness of non-doing arises. Is wú wéi an annulment or maybe a restriction of thinking? Is the human consciousness really an unnatural thing and why should we consider it as such? How can we claim that there is a worldly nature of a human being at all, if the consciousness is not natural? What exactly should stop when Zen Buddhists are saying “stop trying not to try”?

Analyzing the concepts of wú wéi and naturalness, David Loy asserts: “the root irruption of the natural order of things is man’s self-consciousness [...] the natural action must be that in which there is no such self-consciousness – in which there is no awareness of the agent as being distinct from “his” act” (Loy 1985, 76). We can reasonably claim, however, that Zhuangzi does not promote the total negations of self-consciousness, for even in the concept of empty self of a sage (吾我 wú wǒ – “self which has lost self”) there is a notion of self (wǒ) left. Taking into consideration the absence of categorical statements in the *Zhuangzi*, we should agree that the inner aspect of wú wéi or wú wǒ is not an annulment of self-consciousness but its transformation. The very self-consciousness does not contradict the natural order of things as well as it is not an unnatural feature of human being. This notwithstanding there is something in it or something that arises from it what *can* violate the order of things separate man from his deeds and from the world. The menace lies in the consciousness’ tendency to fragment, evaluate, and get attached to standardized opinions and values. The natural order of things and the inner nature of man are violated when a man is put in the “center of the world” and rational thinking is considered “better” than spontaneous action.

On the other hand, the spontaneity does not mean raw instinctiveness and does not eliminate human reason or will. The explanation about what the fasting of xīn is begins with the characterization of it as “maintaining the unity of your will” (*Zhuangzi* 4/26; Mair, 32). Thus, the will does not disappear anywhere, at least in the beginning of the process (心斋 xīn zhāi). The “unity of will” indicates the total involvement of the will with the performed action. Lee Yearley asserts therefore that there is a more radical notion of non-action in the *Zhuangzi* apart from the conventional, quiet and fatalistic notion of wú wéi which is usually taken as the basic meaning of this concept. According to Yearley, this is “a complex mixture of attachment and detachment. A total involvement with each moment and enjoyment of it, combined with detachment from the moment once it passes and a lack of
desire that it returns” (Yearley 1983, 135). Wú wéi as the inner non-action thus is neither a rejection of reason, emotions or will, nor an exclusion or an exaltation of any of them. There is no hierarchical relationship between reason and emotions or between will and intuition.

According to Shang, it is not so easy to achieve such a state: “It requires enormous courage and effort to practice and fulfill such a task. To reach the state of wuwei one should do (wei) a lot of work [...] This doing, practicing, or trying is called xiu or xiu-yang in Chinese, meaning perfecting self or self-cultivation. Going through this practice (gongfu, 功夫) of xiu (修) is the only path for the accomplishment of self-overcoming” (Shang 2006, 126). The second segment of the Zen proverb indicates the restriction of inward orientated will (stop trying not to try). It presupposes, however, an intention and a certain act of will that is necessary for stopping. The problem arises because such act of will is directed not towards some content but towards absence of any content, i.e. towards emptiness and this can be understood as the third segment of the proverb – “stop stopping”.

Stop stopping

In Daoism, the primal emptiness of Dào is considered to be the source of all things, human beings included. Thus, to reveal this emptiness in one’s xīn is to return to the very source of everything. Emptiness in wù wéi does not mean a disappearance of external things like the non-action does not mean disappearance of all actions. According to Isabelle Robinet, such emptiness is akin to purity and openness but not to vacuum. Therefore as she says, “spontaneous way of acting and living (zìrán) is the positive face of emptiness and non-intervention. Emptiness is seeing in darkness and hearing silence within; it is not be blind and deaf. It is not a disappearance of the visible, but a deliverance from it” (Robinet 2008, 1044).

Wù wéi has a notion of emptiness or lack (无 wú) in it. However, as it was said in the beginning of the article, the movement towards emptiness (虚 xū or 空 kōng) is endless. There is an action (wéi) though, as long as there is an endeavor to reach a particular goal and conviction that this is the only right goal and it has to be achieved. Consequently, neither Dào, nor emptiness or wù wéi can become such a goal the person is attached to. According to the mentioned Zen proverb, we have to stop trying not to try, i.e. we have to cease considering wù wéi a goal of our life. Robinet notices: “as long as one has a goal there is no emptiness” (Robinet 2008, 1044). Shang affirms similarly talking about the concept of wú (无). According to him, “to be attached to or obsessed by wu, Zhuangzi has pointed out, would obstruct one’s view to see the world as a whole and block the Way for one to attain ultimate enlightenment” (Shang 2006, 21).
In the Zhuangzi, the “method” of moving towards emptiness without being attached to it is called “the fasting of xīn” (心齋 xīn zhāi; Zhuangzi 4/24-34; Mair 1998, 32-33). What does it mean in the contemporary context? An ordinary fasting is not the starvation up to death. It does not mean an emptying one’s stomach on rare ritualized occasions either. An integral part of the fasting is to keep away from a surfeit. On the intellectual and psychological level, it could mean to not overburden one’s heart-mind (心 xīn) with the unnecessary information, intellectual patterns, emotions, aspirations, and fears.

What does the contemporary man have to do in order to fast? What has to stop then? There is a huge flow of information in our everyday life. Many jobs are directly associated with an intellectual activity and people are working with information not necessarily personally important to them. People are different in nature, and not everyone can spend his days meditating in the countryside. In the case of a New York stockbroker, how should the fasting of xīn look like? Is this incompatible? Are there some professions and jobs that make wú wéi impossible? It does not seem so. For the cook of a grand restaurant, maybe it is more difficult to fast but it is not impossible.

The emptiness of fasting is conditional as well as the non-action of the master is conditional if he/she still has an aim. We can affirm this conditionality because of a certain measure – the emptiness and non-action of Dào. As Robinett puts it into words, there is “difference between the emptiness that is the functioning of the Dào (or the “small void”) and the Real Emptiness (or the Great Void) that is the last step of the alchemical work, about which there is nothing to say” (Robinett 2008, 1044). Thus there is a final stage, a final “emptying” of oneself, and the negation of all negations and negation of the very process of negation. This is the last segment of the Zen proverb – stop stopping which is similar to the concept of “non-existing nonexistence” (无无 wú wú) found in the twenty second chapter of the Zhuangzi. This is the negation of negation and the relativistic relativity.

Resplendent Light inquired of Nonexistent Existence, saying, “Master, do you exist or do you not exist?” Not getting an answer to his question, Resplendent Light looked at the other’s sunken, hollow appearance intently. For a whole day, he looked at him but couldn’t see him, listened to him but couldn’t hear him, groped for him but couldn’t grasp him. “The ultimate!” said Resplendent Light. “Who else could attain such a state? I can conceive of the existence of nonexistence, but not of the nonexistence of nonexistence. And when it comes to the nonexistence of existence, how could one attain such a state?” (Zhuangzi 22/65-68; Mair, 220).

The authentic answer of Nothingness or Nonexistent Existence is the absence of any answer. The absence of the answer hinders us from reasonable assertion or negation. If we apply the idea of wú wú to the case of wú wéi, it would be right to say that the final and perfect non-action is such level of spontaneity when there is no thought about action and non-action; when
there is no concern about something that can be “left undone”; when there is no stopping because there is no grasp of causal succession. There is nothing to stop if there is just a moment. A moment is end-less and beginning-less. The answer to the question “what does it mean to live in wú wéi?” would be different each moment and never the same. So we can say that there is no (one, definite, final) answer at all.

Conclusion

As the investigation into the notion of wú wéi showed, the mere external “stopping” may easily become a tactical strategy while mere inner “stopping” may lead to the destructive understanding of the very human nature. Harmony which is needed for the all embracing wú wéi is possible only in the case of instantaneous and constantly changing approach to oneself and the world. It involves also the spontaneous action without attachment or getting stuck. All forms or manifestations of wú wéi can be properly understood only keeping in mind the final stage of stopping which is construed in the Zhuangzi as the primal emptiness.

Considering the practical purpose of the text of Zhuangzi the very talking/writing about wú wéi and stopping may look an internally contradictory aim. It seems that Zhuangzi should simply stop talking and do not say a word as the Nonexistent Existence in his story does. Neither of the words can convey the essence of wú wéi like the Resplendent Light (which might be interpreted as the light of the reason) can achieve nothing there. Many scholars of Chinese studies claim, however, that the very writing style of Zhuangzi transmits and embodies the idea of wú wéi (Moeller 2006, 9; Wu 1990, 67; Schwitzgebel 1996, 76 and others3). Writing in such a unique manner Zhuangzi enables us not only to hear about the non-action or merely feel his non-action, but creates the possibility for us to live our own wú wéi if we want to. He gives us not an explicit theory or detailed guidelines but “story-bits reflecting life-slices” as Wu Kuang-ming names it (Wu 2002, 76-77). As the listeners of these “story-bits” we may draw our own picture of life. We may create a new theory in the field of Chinese Studies or may say that all this is nonsense. Thus, the talking/writing about wú wéi as well as the listening/reading about it can become equally wéi or wú wéi. Zhuangzi himself says that stopping is not a value by itself – one has to know when it’s time to stop so that the stopping would lead us to the harmony and not to the stagnation.

Bibliography


Notes

1 I totally agree with Chris Fraser, who asserts that “because little historical information is available on the authorship and provenance of the Zhuangzi, [...] the appropriate interpretative approach is to focus on the texts, not their unknown authors. That is, instead of attempting to reconstruct the systematic thought of one or more authors [...] interpreters should focus on exploring and reconstructing the rich discourses on various themes found in the anthology” (Fraser 2008, p. 142). Therefore, I will use the name “Zhuangzi” as a general term for the authorship of all ideas appearing in the text of the Zhuangzi.

2 Chapter and line are indicated according to Harvard-Yenching Zhuangzi Yinde index and Chinese Tex Project but English translation is taken from Victor H. Mair’s book (Mair 1998).

3 The existence or non-existence of Dào is more of the problem of religious belief or disbelief than a philosophical question. It can be philosophically discussed, however. According to Shang, “Zhuangzi advanced the notion of wu into a radical claim of wuwu, a double wu that deconstructs the entire metaphysical account. First, if wu was designated as the beginning of the universe it would be no more No-thing or Non-being but something. Secondly, if wu was conceived as the real Being of beings, the whole world of becoming would be denied as a real world. For Zhuangzi, therefore, it is not enough to realize the No-thing-ness of things, or Non-being of beings, the wu itself must be “wued” (deconstruction itself should be deconstructed)” (Shang 2006, 20).

About Author

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