

Book Review: *Trying Not to Try*

*Trying Not to Try: Ancient China, Modern Science and the Power of Spontaneity*¹ was written in 2014 by Edward Slingerland, a philosopher and sinologist with extensive experience in the field of comparative religion. His thesis centers upon the assertion that a life of spontaneity, happiness, and charisma, cannot be achieved through exertion and discipline, but rather through the ancient Chinese art of not trying called wu-wei.

Wu-wei translates literally as “no trying” or “no doing” and Slingerland describes it as the “dynamic, effortless, and unselfconscious state of mind of a person who is optimally active and effective.” (p.7) People who are in wu-wei come into the possession of *de*, which is translated as virtue, or power; especially charismatic power that ensures success in life and it is linked to the charisma one radiates.

The paradox of wu-wei concerns the question of how to achieve it without seeking it; how to try not to try. Slingerland asserts that “We are attracted to people in wu-wei because we trust the automatic, unconscious mind,” (p.11) and that “Chinese tradition...offers an important corrective to the tendency of modern Western philosophy to focus on conscious thought, rationality, and willpower.” (p.13) He explains that even the “culmination of knowledge is entering a state of wu-wei,” (p.14) which requires the sense of being absorbed in a larger whole, referred to as the Dao, or “Way.” (p.15) During wu-wei, “someone or something else must be doing the work besides the conscious mind that we normally think of as “us.” (p.26)

According to Slingerland believed that human thought was characterized by two distinct systems: hot cognition or system 1 which is fast, automatic, effortless, and linked with the body; while cold cognition is slow, deliberate, conscious, and linked with the mind. (p.28) The author

makes an unusual distinction between the unconscious knowing of “how” versus the conscious knowing of “that,” and states the goal of wu-wei is to get both hot and cold processes working together, completely integrated; a process that I think may be linked with the theosophical doctrines of personality integration and soul fusion.

Slingerland produces research with brain imaging which suggests that the (ACC) anterior cingulate cortex acts like a smoke detector for mental and emotional conflict. The (PFC) lateral prefrontal cortex serves as the fire response team, involves working memory, and the integration of conscious and unconscious knowledge. Slingerland uses the metaphor to show that “when the unconscious mind is stymied, it sends out an SOS via the ACC to the conscious mind...” (p.59) He asserts that wu-wei is different from the concept of “flow” originally forwarded by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who reported the six requirements for achieving flow as: deep, effortless concentration; responsiveness to the environment; high degree of effectiveness; profound enjoyment; loss of a sense of self; an altered sense of time.” (p.42) Therefore, flow requires exposure to spiraling challenges and complexity that force people to stretch themselves beyond their comfort zones, but does not necessarily involve the immersion in something bigger and better than oneself. Wu-wei, on the other hand, includes a focus on caring, on getting beyond the self. Slingerland asserts that most flow situations occur in low complexity, social situations, while wu-wei states requires greater complexity and challenge. (p.46)

The author identifies two strategies developed in ancient China to help people achieve these states, and notes that they oscillated between trying and not trying strategies. Confucius looked upon the Zhou dynasty (1000-700BC) as a lost Golden Age and believed wu-wei could only be obtained after a lifelong program of *trying*, despite his endorsement of spontaneity and an

emphasis on cold cognition upon both a cultural and an individual level. Slingerland says that “the conscious mind can acquire new, desirable goals and then download them onto the unconscious self, where they can be turned into habits” that are automatic, thus we transform effort and disciplined conscious action into wu-wei. (p.65) To do this, one must get beyond merely understanding the Dao, and live it; cold cognition must be made hot.

While Confucius saw human beings as fundamentally crude and in need of cultivation, Laozi, believed that human nature is fundamentally good, and education and training are counterproductive. Laozi wanted to shut down the conscious mind in order to allow the spontaneous hot system to run without interference. According to Slingerland, Laozi spoke of returning to the “mind of an infant” to disable the developed regions of the mind, and this reminds the student of Christ’s admonition in Matthew 18:3 to “become like little children.”

As Slingerland begins to close the book, he summarizes, “the key to enlightened wu-wei is not learning more about doctrine but seeing and responding appropriately to what is in front of you.” (p.154) He equates the situation of an individual who has been transformed by wu-wei and possesses de to the text of John 17, wherein disciples are extolled to “be in the world but not of it. (p.159) For the author, civilization itself is the triumph of cold cognition over the hot; through emotional education with shared values taking precedence over a litany of laws, because Slingerland states that “laws are something you obey, values are something you feel.” (p.176)

1. Slingerland, Edward. *Trying Not to Try*. Crown, 4 Mar. 2014.

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