

The Tao of the Commute

finding peace on the path

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The trajectory

A few years back, I used to commute to my job as a graphic designer on my bicycle. I'd start from my apartment in Somerville and navigate towards the beehive of downtown Boston. Peddling hard along the edge of the road, around 12 minutes into my journey I'd rise up with the slope of the Longfellow Bridge, cross the Charles River, and at the bottom of the far side enter the infamous chaos of downtown. These streets allegedly criss-cross in their haphazard way thanks to their evolution from old cow paths rather than the work of colonial city planners. On any given weekday morning at 8:30, they're clogged with delivery trucks, hell-bent cabs, a potpourri of cars, busses, bicyclists, and large groups of pedestrians hovering curbside. Successful navigation here is an art form.

Inevitably at some point on my daily journey it would happen: a commuter would do something that I found questionable at best. A driver on their cell phone would mindlessly change lanes and nearly cause an accident. A taxi would take a hard right cutting me off and make me throw on the brakes. A pedestrian mob would spill forth in jaywalking mayhem right in front of my speeding path. This I found particularly frustrating. As I approached they'd perch en masse like rain about to fall out of a dense cloud. Those on the packs periphery would wait for the cars to pass and then jump off the curb despite seeing me coming. They'd trot and scamper across the street with coffee cups in hand, and in doing so unleash a lemming-like following, some of which saw me coming, some of which were blindly following the procession. I'd let out with a loud "Coming through! Heads up! Heads up!" and make them give way to my trajectory.

It was all about the trajectory, which spread out in front of me like an invisible extension of myself. It was as if my immediate path-to-be was my property, and if it was invaded I felt wronged.

Often residing in my backpack was a copy of the Tao Te Ching, the ancient Chinese book about the movement of life. I had started reading it in my early 20s while hiking in the forests of the Pacific NW. Walking there in the company of trees, I was engrossed in a comparison of the Tao and the rain forest. I saw many Taoist ideas manifested in the effortless synchronicity of the forest.

Peddling through the streets of Boston a few years later, I wondered how those same ideals that were so easy to see in the forest could be found in the chaotic Boston

commute. Couldn't I experience the same ease I felt in the forest while peddling along Milk Street and taking a right onto Congress in front of a speeding Fed Ex truck?

Whether commuting by bike, automobile, or the crowded subway cars, I found the same irritation arising within myself and observed it in my fellow commuters. The trajectory is something each of us wears throughout our daily journey like a garment. It's our path-to-be, which is not to be interrupted, else we get upset.

It seems that those who are truly satisfied are those who enjoy the journey, whether it's the trip to work on any given morning or the ultimate journey of a lifetime. The *Tao Te Ching* is a road map for journeying. But its first lesson is that reading the map gives you some understanding, but of course it's only in the walking of the trail and through our own personal charting of the journey that we begin to really know the Tao.

The Tao Te Ching

The writing of the *Tao Te Ching* is attributed to the Chinese sage, Lao Tsu. Legend has it that around 2500 years ago, Lao Tsu was the keeper of the imperial archives and was well regarded as being very wise. Deciding to leave society and live in isolation as he approached the end of his life, he was stopped at the edge of town and asked by the gate keeper to set down in writing the essence of his teachings. Thanks to this alleged encounter, the *Tao Te Ching* was born.



The text consists of 81 chapters, each fitting comfortably on a single page, creating the resemblance of a book of poems. It's simple but penetrating messages have been consulted for over two millennium, and it has been translated more often than any other book with the exception of the Bible. The variation in feel from one version to the next can be great. Some are poetic, others analytical. I enjoy exploring different versions which I jump between for comparison. Of the numerous editions some are translations and some "renditions," crafted by writers who do not speak Chinese, but have created their version of the text by consulting earlier translations and renditions.

Consider these examples of the same line of text, the first line of the *Tao Te Ching* taken from various renditions and translations:

- The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. (Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English translation)
- The way you can go isn't the real way. (Ursula K. Le Guin rendition)
- Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself. (Stan Rosenthal translation)
- Words and names are not the way. (Jim Clatfelter rendition)
- The Way that can be experienced is not true. (Peter Merel rendition)
- The Tao that can be followed is not the eternal Tao. (Charles Muller translation)

My favorite version happens to be the first that I encountered: the Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English translation. This is the text I hiked with in Washington and later biked with in Boston.

The messages of the Tao Te Ching have a universal appeal. In their simple way, they seem to speak to the grandest and the simplest qualities of life. They have to do with struggle and transcendence, with separateness and interconnectivity, and with journeying as a sage through this life, awakening to the present moment, listening, and realizing that there really is no separation between any of us and the infinite whole.

The Tao

Central to Taoism is, of course, the "Tao." It is most frequently translated into English as "the way" or "the path" although most versions of the text leave this word as "Tao." The Tao can be thought of as *the way* all things follow, from the relationship of the galaxies to the workings of society to the thoughts forming in each of our minds. Everything follows the Tao. It refers to the natural structure and flow of the universe and all life within it. The Tao is the infinite source. But understanding the Tao's true essence is difficult to grasp as even in its native Chinese there is no simple definition. In fact, part of the definition of the Tao is that it cannot be defined! It is to be experienced rather than analytically deciphered. We can talk about it, and indeed the Tao Te Ching itself is an example of this, it being a tool we can use to access lessons about the Tao, but ultimately the Tao can only be *known* through direct experience.

Consider these two translations of the opening passage of the Tao Te Ching:

I. (Feng-English translation)

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named is not the eternal name
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth
The named is the mother of ten thousand things*

I. (Stan Rosenthal translation)

*Even the finest teaching is not the Tao itself.
Even the finest name is insufficient to define it.
Without words, the Tao can be experienced,
and without a name, it can be known.*

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The opening passage of the Tao Te Ching contends that a true understanding of the Tao will never fully be reached using language, only through experience that transcends language. "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao." The first lesson of Taoism is that we can talk about it and analyze it until the cows come home, but it will never truly be known if it exists for us merely as a belief system or abstraction.

Finding the Tao: Let's look to the rain forest for example. Take a ferry west from Seattle across Puget Sound and you'll reach the Olympic Peninsula, an expanse that is home to the Olympic Mountains, the Hoh Rain forest, and unrivaled beauty. Walking there amongst the trees, you are surrounded by a slowly unfolding example of the Tao. If you let yourself, you can begin to naturally move with it all. Have you had those kinds of hikes before, where your senses are heightened as you take in the smells, sounds, and sights of the woods as you walk along connecting with the landscape in a special way? Suddenly you lose track of time. Your car, the drive you took to get out there, whatever you left behind at home or at work, these all disappear. Your awareness becomes immediate. You hear the sound of your feet on the forest floor mixed in with occasional bird calls, wind in the trees, water trickling down a bluff. These sensations are as far as your thoughts go. The usual unconscious chitter-chatter of the mind condenses simply into an idea of "I am here" and then perhaps even further, simply to "Here."



Trees are great Taoist masters. Reaching into the earth while reaching into the sky, they gradually take shape reacting to light and weather, following the Tao. In the rain forest, time is slow and wet. You can catch glimpses of thousands of years. "The way" of the forest is one of seemingly endless possibility. Every conceivable twist and turn is there. The old-growth elders tower up to the sun covered with soft green moss and lichen, predating everything around you except maybe the mountains. The trees that died and fell to the forest floor long ago still lie with their form mostly intact, slowly decaying. As if finding a second wind on the doorstep of death, new growth sprouts from their side. The ground is spongy and soft, the very soil itself made up of long ago disintegrated tree matter. Everything around you is "tree". They are there in every possible stage of development and decay from the sapling to the ancients to the ghosts in the soil. When I stand there surrounded by them, I feel like I'm somehow standing in a classroom surrounded by teachers.

I find it easy to feel connected to my surroundings when I hike in the woods. I begin to tune-in to the trees being interconnected, and then to me being connected with them. In the city, I'm much more apt to find the edge of where "I" end and where everything else exists. Becoming angry with the distracted cell phone-using driver, I create in my mind a distinct separateness between him and me. Indeed, at times I am more apt to see each entity I encounter as being separate and *contra*-related. It's "every man for himself" so to speak. This is the attitude that breeds frustration and conflict. When I embody this attitude, it is almost impossible to move *with* anything.

The forest somehow speaks like a living painting of the Tao, a kind of teaching metaphor. Despite its apparent randomness, it all makes sense. You can see how when a particular tree fell many years ago it wedged itself into the crook of another trees mighty arms and then continued to grow like this. This place is wild and untamed, but yet it still follows a natural flow.

*Harmony is only in following the Way.
The Way is without form or quality,
But expresses all forms and qualities;
The Way is hidden and implicate,
But expresses all of nature;
The Way is unchanging,
But expresses all motion.*

*Beneath sensation and memory
The Way is the source of all the world.
How can I understand the source of the world?
By accepting. (Peter Merel - verse 21)*

In the woods we can see how the Tao "expresses all forms and qualities." It seems that in the thick of the forest, anything can happen; life can take form in infinite ways; eloquent and graceful, twisted and knotted, dense and matted, open and airy. The Tao is the source of all of this, "the source of all the world."



*Every being in the universe
Is an expression of the Tao.
It springs into existence,
Unconscious, perfect, free,
Takes on a physical body,
Lets circumstances complete it.
That is why every being
Spontaneously honors the Tao.*

(From Verse 51 – Stephen Mitchell translation)

Travel back to the city. Step out of the Boston “T” stop for Downtown Crossing onto the sidewalk outside Filenes Basement. People are walking in every direction at once, some changing their route to avoid collisions. But at the same time it has a certain flow to it that seems very natural. People of all shapes and sizes and of every conceivable temperament and personality converge in a single moment of improvisation that is both chaotic and graceful. We can see the presence of the Tao here just as we did in the forest.

We are always moving in relationship to the Tao. But again, it seems that in hectic settings it is easy to lose sight of our interconnectedness. Even when we are able to intellectually relate to the Tao as a concept, this does not necessarily mean that we are *moving with* it. We might feel that we understand the basics of Taoism quite well, but then when our path is thwarted in the midst of a particularly grueling commute, we suddenly get upset and experience the feeling of hitting a brick wall. Fighting the flow of the Tao, “swimming upstream” so to speak, requires a lot of effort and leaves us unsatisfied. The trick is, of course, to learn how to swim with the current, to move with the Tao.

Wu-wei

Let’s journey back to the classroom.

Living in the rain forest next to the tree is another Taoist sage: the river. Walk down a bluff making your way to the rivers edge. As you approach, the sound of your feet on the forest floor starts to give way to the sounds of the movement of water. Stand there at the rivers edge and quietly watch how it moves and you'll see the Taoist principle of wu-wei played out before you. Wu-wei translates as "act by not acting." Watch how the water effortlessly moves around any obstacle it meets. A large boulder, a fallen tree, a bend in the terrain; all are met with wu-wei as the water flows past without struggle.



To move effortlessly and efficiently like water, this is what I tried to embody commuting on my bike in Boston. It's easy to do to a point. If you are someone who enjoys driving, or riding a bike, it can be quite enjoyable to be mobile.

In the early 90s, my dad's old '79 Motobecane 10-speed was my major means of transportation. The hand-me-down didn't attract much attention chained up next to the newer hybrid mountain bikes with street tires and shock absorbers. I rode this bike multiple times a day, every day, in all kinds of weather. I discovered that no matter how cold it was outside, if I put enough layers on, a few minutes into the journey I could be quite comfortable. This got me under beautiful night skies in the dead of winter that I ordinarily would have had merely a glimpse of while hurrying to the car. Hopping on the bike and pushing off on a journey, I'd get the breath going like the stoking of a fire for a steam engine and begin to move through my environment.

The bike was an extension of my body. Mounting it and pushing off felt as natural as walking. I rode it in all kinds of situations; in busy downtown streets in the height of work hours, and late at night alone on the road. I remember riding past the Harvard Coliseum at around 2am once. It was the dead of winter and very cold. I was riding along with no hands, enjoying the night and thinking about how quiet it was when up in front of me I saw a bike light coming the other way. Some other lad then rode past me going the other direction, also riding with no hands. We nodded our ski-masked heads at each other while we passed, listening to the sounds of two bikes on road, and two humans powering them with muffled breath.

With time and experience comes intimacy. The more I rode that bike the more connected I was with it, and with the experience of movement it enabled. It's a very distinct kind of calm thrill to ride along the Charles River at dusk, breathing and peddling, and perhaps going past the left turn into Cambridge just to prolong the ride a bit. Taking turns on a bike or in a car that you're intimately familiar with, you can get in a zone and move smoothly, as one with your vehicle. This is a kind of wu-wei experience. Your movement is fluid and graceful and without struggle.

The question is what you do when an obstacle comes along. Are you able to continue the effortless, smooth fluidity, or are you swept up with emotion and try to *fight* your way through? Do you bend or do you break?

The Zen and Taoist scholar, Alan Watts, illustrates the concept of wu-wei by using the parable of the pine and the willow in heavy snow:

The pine branch, being rigid, cracks under the weight; but the willow branch yields to the weight, and the snow drops off. Note, however, that the willow is not limp but springy. Wu-wei is thus the life-style of one who follows the Tao, and must be understood primarily as a form of intelligence-that is, of knowing the principles, structures, and trends of human and natural affairs so well that one uses the least amount of energy in dealing with them. ¹

I guess when you boil it all down, what gets us upset during a commute (or at any other time for that matter) is when we don't get what we want. Little things come up all the time: obstructions to our path; disagreements with a loved one; problems at work; things that we depend on suddenly breaking and needing expensive repair. It doesn't matter what the source is, life is full of unexpected obstacles. If we are practicing wu-wei, we move past them like water. We bend like the willow branch.

Watts makes a point to say that the "nonaction" of wu-wei is not to be thought of as "inertia, laziness, laissez-faire, or mere passivity...wu-wei as "not forcing" is what we mean by going with the grain, rolling with the punch, swimming with the current, trimming the sails to the wind, taking the tide at its flood, and stooping to conquer." ²

Try this exercise:

Observing wu-wei

Sit either on a park bench in any city, or under a tree in any wooded area for 30 minutes. Observe your immediate surroundings looking for examples of wu-wei. Look for people or things that come up against some obstacle and move around it smoothly. Look for examples of the opposite. Observe. What are the characteristics found in moments of wu-wei? What characteristics are found in moments of struggle?

So how do we get to this place where we move with the Tao? Simply intellectualizing wu-wei is not enough. Again, it's one thing to understand it as a concept, and another to live it. Watts goes on to say that wu-wei is a kind of *innate wisdom of the nervous system* or "unconscious" intelligence in combination with the act of taking the line of least resistance in ones actions. How can we possibly learn an "innate wisdom"? It sounds like something one either has or doesn't have.

In a way this is true in any given moment, but in general, this innate wisdom can be cultivated and grown. Ultimately we don't *need* any practice or guidance as it is possible to awaken and become aware of our intrinsic Wholeness spontaneously at any moment, but for those of us who do not experience a *satori*, a spontaneous awakening, there are practices which have been passed down for thousands of years which help develop this awareness.

I have found that to practice wu-wei simply requires a conscious effort over time in which you develop that "innate wisdom of the nervous system" that Allan Watts speaks of. This in turn allows for effortless responses that move in accordance with the Tao. In the gym we work our muscles and develop them into a refined, physically powerful state. The unconscious intelligence of wu-wei can be developed in much the same way, but through exercising the mind and body in unison by practicing meditation and yoga.

Our typical way of being is one of wandering, grasping mind. We aren't usually conscious of our desire driven actions, we just move from one to the next. Being objectively aware of this doesn't stop it from occurring either. But a different reality can be experienced through yoga and meditation. Through yoga built up stresses can

be released, and a kind of attentive, strong calm can be cultivated that helps one begin to practice wu-wei without even thinking about it. When we move with this innate wisdom we are able to align with the Tao and be effortlessly free like the stream we see in the woods.

We need to remind ourselves however that it's *the practice itself* rather than an end state which matters. We don't meditate to achieve wu-wei, but with a sustained commitment to our practice, we just automatically start to move with the Tao. This irony is a tricky concept. Typically we gravitate towards meditation and yoga because we want balance and peace in our lives, and indeed, as we practice we experience these benefits. But if we make our practice goal oriented, we end up striving for achievement and in doing so push the present moment away.

*In not wanting is stillness
In stillness all under heaven rests
(From verse 37 – Ursula Le Guin rendition)*

So there's our practice: To cultivate balance and consciousness through meditation and yoga so that we move with the Tao no matter what obstacle comes our way. Balance and consciousness: this is what the commuting sage has in her briefcase. She sees the world she moves through as interrelated, one that has a natural order that she can groove with. When challenges come she bends and moves past them without struggle.

Journey as destination

The other morning I turned onto I-5 and was met by a crawling commute. All the lanes were filled for as far as the eye could see and barely moving. I nestled my way into the far left lane, sipped my coffee, changed the radio from NPR to music, and began the two step (First gear - stop. First gear - stop). It was overcast and drizzling, and it was one of the first days that a temperature appropriate of fall came onto the scene. Summer was passing, almost gone, and with this realization came thoughts of what my fall had in store. The seasonal changes come as landmarks, a point in time when it's natural to reflect on the last season and look ahead through the next.

We have physical paths that we take to and fro – sometimes for years on end. We walk countless paths, each with the arc of beginning, middle, and end. But ultimately, each and every trail head we start out on leads to the same place: the present moment.

It is good to connect with the future, set goals and to walk towards them. But ultimately it's the journey itself which is perhaps the most satisfying destination of all. In meditation we learn not to be goal oriented. To focus on desired end results during meditation is to ignore the immediacy of the present moment. Through meditation we learn that to focus on desired end results is to ignore the immediacy of the present moment. It's not important where you think you're going or what you hope to experience there. All that matters is the present moment. Each breath. Each

moment. The experience of meditation *is* the destination in that sense. Likewise, in commuting to work we have the opportunity to experience the journey itself as the destination.

If you know the Way, then you know the goal, because the goal is not at the very end of the Way, the goal is all along the Way – each moment and each step it is there. It is not that when the Way ends you have arrived at the goal; each moment, wherever you are, you are at the goal if you are on the Way. To be on the Way is to be at the goal. – p.8 Oshos’ “Tao”

Deer Paths & undergrowth

I first heard the words “Wu-Wei” while visiting my father in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Where his backyard ended and the woods by Hough creek started, there was an opening in the trees and the beginning of a path. He explained that he had named the path “wu-wei” because of the way it meandered through the woods twisting and turning this way and that in accordance with its’ surrounding terrain. This place was a trail head for me in more ways than one. We took our walk with the dogs into the woods and back, but in a way I’m still on that trail today. That talk and others around that time were my introduction to Taoism and Buddhism with which I immediately felt a strong resonance.



Back in those Pennsylvania woods there were also deer paths that parted the thick undergrowth and thorn bushes. I would hypothesize about their origin while walking along the main path and looking down their narrow ways. Were these marks on the land reflective of foraging patterns? One deer stepping on a particular area and soon, after another did the same thing this trodden spot losing it’s plant life and turning into a foothold for additional path making? How many of our life paths are developed in a similar fashion, not planned out ahead of time but found due to foot holds that point us in a particular direction? Each of us has major trails in our life – whether they be spiritual in nature or having to do with our careers, family or general interests. And stemming from them we have our deer paths that exist for various lengths of time, either cutting their way into our life landscape and taking permanent residence, or eventually disappearing over time back into the undergrowth of possibility.

My encounters years ago with the Tao Te Ching and the rain forest somehow stuck me at the time as being revolutionary in my life. I didn’t know how it would manifest, but I knew that I had found an ancient trailhead and that my journey had somehow changed. The Tao Te Ching is a trailhead to the infinite, and on that path we learn that

the journey itself is the destination, we learn that as we're walking, we're already "there".

There are countless paths which teach a sadhana of peace and strength and stillness and that lead the journeyer to the present. I encourage you to find the path that resonates for you, and I hope that wherever it leads, that you enjoy the journey.

*May the long time sun shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you guide your way on*

- Old Folk Song

¹ Allan Watts, Tao: The Watercourse Way (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 76

² Allan Watts, Tao: The Watercourse Way (New York: Pantheon Books, 1975), 75-76