

## **Harmonious Classrooms With the Daoist Principle of Wuwei**

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**Abstract** *This article is a reflection on the Daoist principle of unforced action known as wuwei and how contemplations of it by teachers can potentially help in nurturing more harmonious classrooms. It begins with an outline of the philosophy of Daoism together with its core principle of wuwei. It also discusses further Daoist principles associated with wuwei such as the virtue-less virtue of de, the natural spontaneity of ziran, the dynamic harmony of yin-yang, and the vital energy of qi. It then examines some of the metaphorical illustrations of wuwei found in the classical Daoist texts of the Laozi, the Zhuangzi, and the Liezi. In doing so, it considers how the ancient notion of wuwei might serve as an inspirational guide to novel perspectives and approaches to contemporary teaching and learning, and therefore help to effortlessly align classroom environments with the natural spontaneity of the Dao.*

**Keywords** Classical Daoism; wuwei effortless action; spontaneity; harmonious classrooms

### **Introduction**

Daoism is one of the three main Chinese philosophies, alongside Confucianism and Buddhism. They are collectively known as China’s Three Teachings. Daoism’s three seminal texts, the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi*, were written at the dawn of classical Daoism over two thousand years ago. They were part of the Hundred Schools of Thought that arose during the late Warring States period from the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC. This was a period in China’s history during which various states battled each other for territorial supremacy. These Daoist classics were mainly geared towards people of social influence as a way of encouraging gentleness, peace, and harmony during that tumultuous time.

The Dao in contemporary Pinyin Romanization (or the Tao as in earlier Wade-Giles classifications) is a Chinese word meaning the “Way” in its noun form, as with a path or as a method. In its verb form, it means “to speak.” The renowned Daoist scholar Kohn (2009) referred to the Dao as being “an integral part of nature

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and the greater universe, which functions in perfect harmony and is fundamentally good” (p. 365). Other well-known Daoist scholars, such as Norton (2014) noted the Dao’s “natural order that underlies the substance and activity of the universe” (p. 2), and Mair (2000) said that the Dao “existed before heaven and earth but cannot be described as possessing action or form” (p. 43). The Dao is ineffable, without form, in constant flux, incomprehensible beyond worded attempts to define it, and unfathomable beyond mathematical efforts to measure it. Yet it can be effortlessly aligned with through flowing with prevailing situations, because everything—humans, animals, trees, mountains, streams, birds, insects, plants, and indeed the entire cosmos, is the Dao. This is so because the Dao is simply the way things are in their natural state.

Our present-day world is spiraling ever more out of alignment with the natural spontaneity of the Dao and is heading towards the brittle extremes of rigidity and inflexibility. This imbalance became considerably exacerbated with the Industrial Revolution in Europe and America during the 18<sup>th</sup> century with its reverence for the busy-ness of mass production in the name of progress, and the conquering of new frontiers for human and material resources as a source of maximizing profit. Following over another century of colonialism and imperialism, together with the destruction of the Second World War and the waning of Christianity, emerged the compulsion to find meaningfulness and security through the alternative avenue of consumerism in times which offered lesser guarantees for its sustainability (Watts, 1951). Testimony of the further increasing imbalance between the naturalness of the Dao and the compulsivity of humanity are today’s exponential levels of political strife, global warming, economic fluctuations, trade wars, unemployment, poverty, disease, nuclear catastrophes, cyber-attacks, and terrorism. These have all have become considerably more complex and potentially more destructive with the current Covid-19 pandemic—itself another significant symptom of the world spiraling even further out of alignment with the Dao.

However, an interest in Daoism has resurfaced in recent times among teachers who value peaceful, harmonious, and compassionate classrooms as foundations upon which to inspire the youth towards contributing to a more tolerant and less combative world for future generations. Among them is Nagel (1994) who wrote *The Tao of Teaching*, a popular reflective book with insights for teachers drawn from the wisdom of the *Dao De Ching* (also known as the *Laozi*) for the embracement of authentic virtue, the appreciation of stillness, and mutual respect using real classroom examples for more inclusive and holistic learning environments where “tranquility is more important than perfection” (Nagel, 1994, p. 133). Following in Nagel’s inspirational footsteps is Doerger (2004) with his article “The Teacher as Taoist” who noted that Chinese “philosophies align well with many of the contemporary ideas related to humanistic ideals, holistic views, interdisciplinary instruction, and constructivist education” (Doerger, 2004, p. 1). He

focused on eleven chapters of the *Laozi* that exemplified these ideals in the contemporary educational setting, together with insights for their classroom applications.

Also, there are the writings of contemporary educational philosophers and psychotherapists who have drawn upon Daoist perceptions, such as Bai (2001a, 2001b, 2006 & 2009) who provided insights into Daoist intersubjectivity, mindfulness, human agencies, and animism, as well as Bai and Banack (2006) who focused on educational notions of complexity and morals. Then there is the work of Bai, Cohen, Culham, Park, Rabi, Scott and Tait (2014) who accessed Daoist wisdom through contemplative approaches and applied this to educational scenarios, and Bai, Scott and Donald (2009) who coupled contemplative pedagogies with the role of teacher education, as well as Bai, Park, and Cohen (2016) who extended the Daoist contribution to martial arts towards modern-day educational scenarios. Also, there is Cohen (2009) who introduced educators to the basics of Daoism, as well as his works with Bai (2007, 2012, 2019) wherein they focused on further Daoist-inspired holistic and contemplative approaches to current educational scenarios.

In addition to these, are the contributions of Flowers (1998) who infused Daoism with problem-solving approaches in the field of technological education, Bird (2012) who applied *wuwei* and simplicity to his teachings, Culham (2014) who emphasized the Daoist-inspired role of compassion in education, Yang and Lin (2016) who applied the Tai Chi model (based on *yin-yang* principles) as an alternative to the dichotomy of student-centered learning and teacher-centered learning, Castillo (2016) who shared his pedagogical inspirations derived from the Daoist water metaphor and *wuwei*, and Yang (2019) who advocated drawing upon Daoism as a source of re-emphasizing individuation in education through turning the attention away from “the massive production of college degree holders [towards] a nurturing garden where students’ nature as humans are understood and their individual differences are respected” (Yang, 2019, p. 117). These are some examples of the growing numbers of contemporary educators who are inspired by the ancient wisdom of Daoism and who seek to inspire classroom environments that engender a long-lost thirst for a return to a simpler life that is more in tune with nature and aligned with the Dao.

Inspired by these Daoist educators, this article focuses on the core Daoist principle of *wuwei* and suggests ways in which it can nurture harmony in contemporary classrooms. It does so by looking at some of the metaphorical illustrations of *wuwei* in the Daoist classics of the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi* and suggests how these could inspire more compassionate, peaceful, and harmonious contemporary classrooms.

### **The Principle of *Wuwei***

*Wuwei* is a core Daoist principle (Kohn, 2001; Slingerland, 2000 and 2003; Komjathy, 2013; Gregory 2018). Directly translated from Chinese into English, *wu* means “not” and *wei* means “action.” However, *wuwei* does not imply taking no action at all, and is rather the notion of actionless action and of doing without doing; therefore, a state of unforced action guided by a peaceful and unencumbered mindset of gentle and creative quietude which appreciates the limitations of excessive force. Ray (2012) said that *wuwei* “describes not physical inactivity, but the phenomenology of individuals who act with a kind of unselfconscious ease (yet exceptional skill) in daily life” (p. 197). Likewise, King (2015) added that the concept of “non-action is not the lack of action, but a state of mind to be maintained while acting” (p. 55). Also, Komjathy (2013) noted that *wuwei* is a state of mind based on “non-interference and non-intervention” (p. 21).

Further Daoist-informed observers of *wuwei* have described its essence similarly. For example, Norton (2014) said that *wuwei* is “a state of mind wherein the practitioner removes biased intentionality from action” (p. 1). Slingerland (2000) said it is a state of “acting effortlessly and spontaneously in perfect harmony with a normative standard and thereby acquiring an almost magical efficaciousness in moving through the world and attracting people to oneself” (p. 296). Gregory (2018) noted that “one who fully comprehends *wuwei* understands that developing healthy relationships with other people is the spiritual adhesive that harmonizes the Dao among humanity” (p. 98). Castillo (2016) mentioned that “*wuwei* involves following the path of least resistance and waiting for the right time to act” (pp. 11-12). *Wuwei* has also been compared to the skill of tacking from side to side along a river in a sailboat while harnessing the wind to make one’s way upstream, rather than struggling directly against the current in a rowboat (Watts, 1997).

Equally, within the walls of classrooms, *wuwei* does not apathetically imply forgoing the conscientious study of facts and practice of skills, but that once knowledge has been accumulated and skills acquired, they can be effortlessly applied without excessively forceful interventions driven by overstimulated and cognitively fragmented mindsets which tend to go against the intrinsic flow of things. Regarding the notion of “going with the flow,” Bird (2012) made the following observation:

The popular phrase “go with the flow” actually came from Taoism. Although much overused and now clichéd, the idea contains a profound truth. Nature almost always goes with the flow, naturally. Water flows over rocks. Birds slice through the air. Leaves bud and grow and change color and fall. (Bird, 2012, p. 2)

It is useful to note at this juncture that *wuwei* is closely associated with other accompanying Daoist principles such as *de*, which is the concept of virtue-less virtue (Slingerland, 2003; Gregory, 2018). *De* is described by Ivanhoe and Van Norden (2001) as “the natural therapeutic effect Daoist sages have upon the people, creatures and things within their presence” (p. 358). Doerger added that Daoism, and Chinese philosophy in general, focus more “on virtue and wisdom instead of wealth, prominence, and status” (Doerger, 2004, p. 1). *De* is thus associated with the humility of a Daoist sage, as King noted:

In acting with the Dao, the sage is able to see the world as it is and recognize what will become. He chooses not to perform greatness but to achieve greatness through non-action. In this the sage is not concerned in making a name for himself or appearing to be in the center of activity, instead he is focused on the seeming trivial and mundane affairs that lead to the larger events in the world. (King, 2015, p. 55)

*De*, therefore, suggests that the Daoist perspective of a virtuous leader is someone who is dignified humbly, and does not insist upon blind obedience. Such styles of leadership are founded on the genuine integrity of *de*, which in turn is related to *wuwei* through the absence of striving to be virtuous.

In addition to *de*, *wuwei* is inextricably associated with the Daoist concept of *ziran* (literally meaning “nature” in Chinese). Komjathy (2013) described *ziran* as “the state or condition realized when one returns to one’s innate nature, which is the Dao” (p. 88). Thus, *ziran* is the naturalness, the spontaneity, the “suchness,” and the “as it is-ness” of being in a *wuwei* state of “self-so-ness.” It is a non-dualistic inward alignment of beingness and inseparable with all that which is outward, such that which is inward and which is outward are inseparably compatible, and in being so we become intimate entities with the wider universe, in the same way that apples are entities of the trees from which they spontaneously emerge.

This realization of the non-duality of *ziran* lies beyond the façade of apparent paradoxical dualities and is embodied in the principle of *yin-yang* complementary polarity. This has its origins in the *I Ching* (also known as *The Book of Changes*) which can be traced back to the early unfoldments of the long Zhou dynasty which lasted from 1122 to 256 BC (Ritsema & Sabbadini, 2005). The principle of *yin-yang* views apparent opposites as mutually interdependent. *Yin* represents the subtler nature of the cosmos whereas *yang* represents its bolder nature. *Yin-yang* implies a balanced harmony between the *yang*-ness of intelligence, rigor, logic, progress, competition, linearity, practicality, specificity and scientific evidence, and the *yin*-ness of wisdom, intuition, mysticism, process, harmonization, cyclicity, asymmetry and ambiguity. It transcends the static notions of separateness such as black versus white, us versus them, good versus bad, and pass versus fail.

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These have strong implications for the role of teachers in contemporary education. For example, Nagel said that “truly good teaching [is] an interactive combination of evocative (leading out) and narrative (telling) practices, not just one or the other” (Nagel, 1994, p. 2). To this notion of the inclusivity of instructional approaches, Doerger added:

Taoists believe that all things contain *yin* and *yang* and it is their blended influence that promotes harmony. It is this constant balancing that is at the heart of Taoism and, ultimately, in the interest of the best teachers... [so] instead of using labels such as authoritarian or humanist, taking the best aspects from all approaches will result in the finest possible teacher an individual can be. (Doerger, 2004, p. 2)

Thus, from a *yin-yang* perspective of education, while student-centeredness is *yin* orientated and teacher-centeredness is *yang* orientated there is ideally a subtle alteration between *yin* and *yang* modes throughout each lesson. For example, there are times when it is appropriate for a teacher to be in a *yang* mode, such as at the start of lessons where the subject matter is explained while the students listen attentively in a *yin* mode, but thereafter the teacher can adopt a *yin* “guide on the side” mode while the students take ownership of the learning process in a *yang* mode. In their proposed Tai Chi model of education based on *yin-yang*, Yang and Lin said:

Education should be an endeavor embracing the oneness of teaching and learning. We prefer to describe education as an integrated whole that transcends the polarization of student-centered or teacher-centered teaching and learning. (Yang & Lin, 2016, p. 46)

Through the harmonious interplay of *yin-yang* emerges the life-giving energy of *qi* which flows throughout the cosmos and through which everything is interconnected. Daoist-inspired teachers would, therefore, tend to regard their classrooms as fields of *qi* energy and be more acutely aware of positive and negative energy flowing therein. In this regard, Cohen and Bai noted the authenticity of *qi* and that “it is important to emphasize that *qi* is not something abstract and mysterious” (Cohen & Bai, 2007, p. 8). Therefore, it could be said that the Dao opens self-sustaining energy fields of reciprocity, inter-reliance, and harmony through *qi* cosmic energy which in turn is derived from the interplay of *yin-yang*, and that *wuwei* is the natural alignment with it, and harnessing of it, as the effortless pathway towards aligning with the Dao.

From such observations, *wuwei* could be perceived as being rooted in the linguistically undefinable and numerically unquantifiable mystery of the Dao

through *de*, *ziran*, *yin-yang*, and *qi* and is the effortless path towards alignment with the Dao's essence. They indicate that *wuwei* is a self-generating and non-entangled Daoist-inspired mentality of not needing to push anything beyond its limits. This is similar to all of nature which reveals itself asymmetrically rather than in clean-cut rectangular or three-dimensional forms, for such are merely abstract measurements of it (Watts, 1962).

Consequently, *wuwei* encourages a relaxed immersion into effortless spontaneity with a simplicity that is in perfect harmony with the Dao. *Wuwei* can thus be experienced as naturally as the way “your stomach will digest your food for you without your having to supervise it consciously” (Watts, 1997, p. 10). In transcending the excessive cognitive interferences of the chattering mind, *wuwei* helps in breathing more effortlessly when thoughts are not overly concerned with breathing and in falling asleep more easily when not excessively trying to do so.

While Confucianism shares the concept of *wuwei* with Daoism, its philosophy is focused more on civility and ritual whereas Daoism is focused more on naturalness and contemplation (Chen, 2004). It is also interesting to note that Daoism served “as a bridge via which Buddhism could be assimilated into Chinese culture” (Chen & Holt, 2002, p. 153). For example, the Chinese form of Ch'an Buddhism arose from the fusion of Mahayana Buddhism and Daoism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD and which later spread to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan (where it is known as Zen).

### ***Wuwei* Inspiration in the *Laozi***

The *Dao De Ching* (which in English means “The Classic of the Dao and its Virtue”) was the first foundational Daoist text. It is referred to as the *Laozi* in this paper, in honor of its semi-legendary author Master Lao Zi (literally meaning “Old Master”). The *Laozi* is a short book of 81 poetically styled chapters written sometime between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 4th centuries BC.

As to a more exact time in which it was written is an ongoing subject of scholarly debate. According to Kirkland (2004), it was possibly written around the late 4th century BC. This date coincides with the time attributed to the earliest excavated portions of the *Laozi* from the Guodian tombs near Jingmen City in the Hubei Province of China, discovered in 1993 (Xing, 2000). However, the *Laozi* might have been written as early as the 6th century BC, a time that other scholars hold to be when Master Lao Zi lived and that he had been a contemporary of Confucius with whom he was believed to have met on one occasion, according to the late Han dynasty historian Sima Qian in his *Records of the Grand Historian*. However, and despite these ongoing uncertainties, the *Laozi* remains one of the most translated works in world literature, perhaps only surpassed by the Bible (Chan, 2013). It is divided into two main parts: the first about the Way (chapters 1

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to 37), and the second is on the Daoist concept of *de* virtuousness (chapters 38 to 81).

The first words of the *Laozi* are: “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name” (Lau 2009, p. 3). Similarly, it could perhaps be said that an apple as defined in a dictionary is a perfect linguistic description of it but it is not the apple itself, and that the only way to experience an apple first-hand is to pick it from the tree and eat it because “the use of words is to point beyond themselves” (Watts, 1973, p. 14). Also, in chapter 56 it is said: “One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know” (Lau 2009, p. 139). The implications of such observations suggest that *wuwei* is a state of mind that guides the unforced actions of “walking the walk,” and which acknowledges yet simultaneously transcends the role of “talking the talk.” As such, the principle of *wuwei* becomes a guide towards acknowledging the usefulness of words in a similar way to which stepping stones are useful in crossing a stream—as a means to an end, but not necessarily as an end in themselves. Perhaps for similar reasons, Nagel (1994) urged teachers to “use few words” (p. 71), and thus to teach by example as well. Therefore, while words mostly play a supportive role, it is the legacy of actions that would seem to leave much deeper and lasting lifetime impressions among students.

There are numerous references to *wuwei* throughout the *Laozi*. Examples of these in the Lau (2009) translation are: In chapter 2: “the sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practices the teaching that uses no words” (p. 84), in chapter 3: “do that which consists in taking no action and order will prevail” (p. 85), in chapter 11: “what we gain is something, yet it is by virtue of nothing that this can be put to use” (p. 93), in chapter 29: “the sage avoids excess, extravagance and arrogance” (p. 111), in chapter 37: “the way never acts yet nothing is left undone” (p. 119), in chapter 43: “the most submissive thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world...that is why I know the benefit of resorting to no action” (p. 126), in chapter 47: “the sage knows without having to stir, identifies without having to see, accomplishes without having to act” (p. 130), in chapter 48: “in the pursuit of learning one knows more every day; in the pursuit of the way one does less every day” (p. 131), in chapter 63: “do that which consists in taking no action; pursue that which is not meddlesome; savor that which has no flavor” (p. 146) and in chapter 64: “the sage, because he does nothing, never ruins; and, because he does not lay hold of anything, loses nothing” (p. 147). Thus, Cline noted that these references to *wuwei* in the *Laozi* “cautions that those who actually try to take hold of the Way are not likely to be successful. The key to returning to the Way is found in *wuwei*” (Cline, 2011, p. 226).

The paradoxical unity of *wuwei* is also found within all apparent opposites, and chapter 2 of the *Laozi* expresses this as:

Something and Nothing produce each other; the difficult and easy complement each other; the long and short offset each other; the high and low incline towards each other; note and sound harmonize with each other; before and after follow each other. (Lau, 2009, p. 84)

*Wuwei* can, therefore, be regarded as a path of transcendence away from things which only superficially appear to be irreconcilably opposed, towards an awareness of the non-dualistic mutual arising of everything through *yin-yang* interdependency. In education, such appreciations of apparent paradoxes might help to transcend the commonly held perspective that we are distinctly separate entities from our surroundings. It is therefore important to understand that *wuwei* nurtures the realization that we are not distinct from nature, but that we are inextricably interconnected with and entirely inseparable from it.

*Wuwei* in the *Laozi* is also often metaphorically expressed as water (Chen & Holt, 2002; Giblett, 2009; Lee, Norasakkunkit, Liu, Zhang & Zhou, 2008; Lee, Yang & Wang, 2009; Lu, 2012). In chapter 8 in the *Laozi* is written: “Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefitting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the Way” (Lau, 2009, p. 90). This notion of the humility of water is entwined with *de* virtue-less virtue, expressed in chapter 38 in the *Laozi* as “a man of the highest virtue does not keep to virtue and that is why he has virtue. A man of the lowest virtue never strays from virtue and that is why he is without virtue” (Lau 2009, p. 121). Observing water, as did the Daoist sages of ancient times, reveals that it does not contend with circumstances but spontaneously fills the spaces in between, including the hairline cracks within the most stubborn of rocks. In doing so, it effortlessly turns apparent weaknesses into strengths, like the streams which are the personifications of *wuwei* by flowing around the rocks along their paths to the sea and dissolving them into fine grains of sand over long periods.

Therefore, just as rivers never follow the same course to the sea, but work patiently with the terrains in which they find themselves and carve out their unique paths towards their destination, and their ultimate source, which is the sea, *wuwei* inspires teachers to assist students to become their best authentic selves through building upon their unique inclinations, aptitudes, and skills, so that they too can carve their unique paths throughout the landscapes of their lives. By the virtue of the virtue-less virtue of *wuwei* the sea lies lowest of all, for in humbly taking the lowest position it receives all the rivers of the world, without favoring one river over another, and accepts them all with unconditional love. In the same way, the *wuwei* inspired teacher welcomes all the students into the classroom in the spirit of the virtueless virtue of *de*.

In addition to water, *wuwei* in the *Laozi* is also metaphorically associated with the Daoist notion of *pu* meaning the “the uncarved block” (alluding to the natural

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and unlimited potential of unhewn wood). This is similar to the innocent mind of a child. The psychologist Carlson (2007) saw similarities between the notion of *pu* and the perfect childhood moment of totality, wholeness and contentment (experienced by many children), to which the cyclic nature of the Dao and the authenticity of *wuwei* harmoniously encourage us to return. Also, the martial arts master Lee (1997) noted that returning to the uncarved block was similar to a refined state of “cultivated ignorance” (p. 28), and after many years of practice, his actions flowed effortlessly like water. To the Daoist notion of cultivated ignorance, Castillo added:

We do not know how we learn, and we never will. Once we accept this perpetual ignorance, the aim is to set a few conditions, test a few methods, to give place for the unique appearance of the mystery of the experience of learning. (Castillo, 2016, p. 13)

These notions also had a strong influence on Zen master Suzuki who said “if your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few” (Suzuki, 1970, p. 21). In addition to *pu*, other metaphors in the *Laozi* are “unbleached silk” (alluding to naturalness), the “valley” (alluding to humble emptiness), and the “female” (alluding to receptiveness). Reflecting upon these metaphorical illustrations of *wuwei* in the *Laozi* can help to harmonize classrooms through encouraging actions that are gentle, simple, and sublime.

In chapter 42 of the *Laozi* are the words “the myriad creatures carry on their backs the *yin* and embrace in their arms the *yang* and are the blending of the generative forces of the two” (Lau, 2009, p. 125). It is the mutual arising of these complementary *yin-yang* elements that unites Heaven and Earth and generates the abundant life force of *qi* energy. *Wuwei* in education is thus a subtle balance that promotes a creative and harmonious atmosphere through blending the *yang*-ness of tangible human constructs of personal identities, rules, and regulations, course outlines, deadlines, examinations, and grades with the equally important *yin*-ness of the intangible dimensions of nurturing, facilitating and inspiring.

Nagel (1994) reminded us that “the Way has its own rhythm; use it” (p. 108). Therefore, from a *wuwei* perspective, the blind pursuit of grades is similar to the greed for profit, for both are at the cost of the obsession of and addiction to “success” in terms of “more is better” than in terms of “less is more.” Conversely, *wuwei* encourages mutual trust and maximizes the intrinsic enjoyment of learning through promoting a classroom atmosphere where learning need not be forced. It does so by dissipating the proneness towards anger, limiting disproportionate pride, and by not making excessive demands. Also, *wuwei* orientated classroom environments would tend to avoid situations of excessive rewards and punishments

for these are signs of desperation and exasperation which ruin trust and encourage students to become rebellious.

Finally, *wuwei* is associated with the Three Treasures of Daoism, which are compassion, frugality, and humility expressed in chapter 62 of the *Laozi* as “I have three treasures which I hold and cherish. The first is known as compassion, the second is known as frugality, the third is known as not daring to take the lead in the empire” (Lau, 2009, p. 150). In the classroom, *wuwei* typifies compassion, frugality, and humility as if all undertakings were like boiling a small fish for in chapter 60 it is said “governing a large state is like boiling a small fish” (Lau, 2009, p. 143). This implies that with the utmost care and gentleness things do not easily fall apart, as they invariably do when they are poked around with too much. Therefore, *wuwei* avoids over-striving, over-planning, the pushing of agendas, the relentless effort to sustain ever-higher levels of productivity in the name of progress, and as Culham (2014) noted: “The compassion called for by Daoists is impartial, expects nothing in return, and is not possessive” (p. 37).

### ***Wuwei Inspiration in the Zhuangzi***

The *Zhuangzi* is the second definitive Daoist text following the *Laozi*. It consists of 33 chapters and is attributed to Master Zhuang Zi (and called after his name), who lived during the latter part of the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC towards the end of the Warring States Period. Its stories are full of humor, paradox, and parody. Gross and Shapiro (1994) said that they serve as “an invaluable guide to great knowledge, wisdom, and the art of living” (p. 64). *Wuwei* in the *Zhuangzi* is described as states of “perfect happiness” through “free and easy wandering.” In chapter 26 of the *Zhuangzi* (titled *External Things*) is a humorous perspective of the role of words:

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you’ve gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you’ve gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you’ve gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (Watson, 1968, p. 233)

Therefore, it would seem that, in an educational setting, *wuwei* humorously encourages the Zhuangzian notion of perfect happiness through free and easy wandering by facilitating spontaneous alignment with the intrinsic nature of all things without unnecessary force derived from not taking everything too seriously and enjoying every passing moment of it. *Wuwei* is thus the companion of cheerfulness, given that humor is a virtuous counterpart whenever the stifling effect of excessive seriousness may dampen the joyfulness of the learning environment. It acknowledges that laughter is the spontaneous companion of “ah-ha” moments as a

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sense of joyful elation and because it is the light-hearted dance between the intellectual *yang* and the intuitive *yin*. Humor also helps in happy ways of overcoming the senselessness of excessively trying to make sense of everything.

A well-known illustration of *wuwei* in the *Zhuangzi* is the story of Cook Ding (from the beginning of chapter 3 on “The Secret of Caring for Life”):

Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-Hui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee, zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-Shou Music. “Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wen-Hui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!” Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So, I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint. A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month, because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room, more than enough for the blade to play about it. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.” (Watson, 1968, pp. 50–51)

This story is an example of good leadership to Lord Wen-Hui who observed Cook Ding skilfully cutting up the ox not only with the *yang*-ness of his knife but also with the *yin*-ness of his spirit; that is, by not forcing things but in working with their natural order. He did this by moving his cleaver effortlessly within the spaces of the ox, instead of directly hacking through bones and tendons. This story confirms that *wuwei* is not opposed to the acquisition and practice of skills through hard work, because Cook Ding did so for three years before he no longer saw the whole ox as a physical entity and began to see it with his spirit. Once having acquired the skills through hard work and effort, he could then transcend the necessary high levels of concentration and enter into a flow state of seeing the ox beyond its form and working effortlessly with it through his spirit. In this respect, Bird noted: “As

teachers, we must read and study and plan—but after the reading, after the study, after the planning, comes the time to turn off our overloaded brains and let the teaching flow” (Bird, 2012, p. 2). This is again similar to the notion of returning to the uncarved block, where, having accumulated skills through hard work and long practice, one returns to a state of childlike innocence and enters effortless flow states of exceptional performance, as did Cook Ding when he carved up the ox through his spirit. Thus, it could be said that Cook Ding carved up the ox so effortlessly because of his accumulated skills as a butcher together with his mindset which had returned to that of the uncarved block.

*Wuwei* orientated classrooms similarly work with institutional spaces by ensuring that everyone is welcome within them. This allows for the unconditional accommodation of the multifaceted and ever-changing nature of students. This softens the glare of dualism in education and encourages a less mechanical delivery of lesson plans. In this regard, Bird commented:

I may have an elaborate plan for a day’s class, but I write that plan on a Post-It note. All the parts of the plan that I do not write down are in my head, or written down elsewhere, but I come into class with that lonely Post-It note. And then I let the teaching flow. I try to get my big brain out of the way and follow my own inner nature and the natural laws. I do not achieve *wuwei* every day, but I do achieve it more often than not. (Bird, 2012, p. 2)

Therefore, it is in such spaces that there is found a greater spontaneity for the unfoldment of situations, and in which the Zhuangzian sense of perfect happiness and free and easy wandering is engendered. In this respect, Cohen and Bai said:

A teacher who is intent on covering his or her lesson for the day, and pays little attention to the students’ in-the-moment existential states of being is, albeit inadvertently, oppressing the students and diminishing their spirit. (Cohen and Bai, 2007, p. 9)

Classrooms that embrace *wuwei* thus have a deeper propensity to unconditionally accept that students are individuals with innate sets of abilities, aptitudes, intrinsic inclinations, and self-expression. Some tend to be extroverted while others tend to be introverted. Some prefer to learn visually, others auditorily, and yet others prefer learning kinaesthetically. Also, while some are inclined towards subjects like engineering, others are inclined towards languages, given that they are inherently drawn towards certain authentic expressions.

The humility of *wuwei* thus opens the spaces for students to joyfully tap into the freedom of exploring their curiosities without fear of being harshly judged or

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ridiculed. In so doing, *wuwei* inspires the freedom to explore the creative spaces which are often hidden behind the curriculum, behind the hard walls of classrooms, behind the anxiety of grades, and behind the strictness of disproportionate discipline, and where the learning experience itself also becomes the teacher, and where the teacher also merges with the learning process itself as an inseparable entity. As Castillo explains:

Just as in a well-trained, concentrated athlete, the right movement occurs on its own accord, effortlessly and unhindered by the conscious will. The poem writes itself; it is impossible to separate the dance and the dancer. Nothing is done, since the actor has completely vanished in the action, the same as how a kiss between lovers is not given, but rather, emerges with the situation. (Castillo, 2016, p. 12)

Another story illustrating *wuwei* in the *Zhuangzi*, among several others, is that of the Useless Tree (from the fourth chapter “In the World of Men”). It is about a tree that had become so old and gnarled that woodcutters ignored it, knowing that its wood would not be desirable for carpentry. So, it was left alone to live out a long life. This is the story of the useless tree:

Carpenter Shi went to Qi and, when he got to Crooked Shaft, he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering above the hills. The lowest branches were eighty feet from the ground, and a dozen or so of them could have been made into boats. There were so many sightseers that the place looked like a fair, but the carpenter didn't even glance around and went on his way without stopping. His apprentice stood staring for a long time and then ran after Carpenter Shi and said, “Since I first took up my ax and followed you, Master, I have never seen timber as beautiful as this. But you don't even bother to look, and go right on without stopping. Why is that?” “Forget it—say no more!” said the carpenter. “It's a worthless tree! Make boats out of it and they'd sink; make coffins and they'd rot in no time; make vessels and they'd break at once. Use it for doors and it would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat them up. It's not a timber tree—there's nothing it can be used for. That's how it got to be that old!” (Watson, 1968, p. 30)

The message of this story is that it can be preferable to be considered useless and become ignored than to be considered useful and exploitable. As Doerger noted, “In the Tao, mastering the Way is never the final goal since the Way cannot be

mastered. Instead, it is a life long journey of learning and experience that constantly ebbs and flows” (Doerger, 2004, p. 5). Along with this, Flowers, who focused on a Daoist path to solving problems in technological education, noted:

It is difficult to delineate the separation between humans and nature, and just as difficult to find the real difference between the human-made and natural environments. It is nearly impossible to name any terrestrial environment that is all human-made (without having been affected by the sun, for example), or one that has not been influenced by humans. These distinctions seem to isolate people from the world around them in an “unnatural” way. Yet, definitions of technology often attempt to make just such a distinction. From a Taoist perspective, some definitions of technology seem more like creeds about the nature and purpose of humans. (Flowers, 1998, p. 22)

The above highlights the inherent tendency to conceptualize ourselves as being somehow separate from our surroundings, especially through our technological prowess. However, the Dao counterbalances this through *wuwei* which offers an alternative mindset that perceives us and nature as inseparable entities. Transferring such Daoist notions to the classroom would also refine the type of focus that revives *qi* energy, and helps to optimize the bliss derived of the humble acknowledgment grounded in the virtueless virtue of *de*. This would pave the way towards acknowledging that the vastness of the unknown exceeds our capacities to fully understand it and that technological advancements based solely upon greed and profit motives are not sustainable in the long-term.

*Wuwei* can, therefore, be experienced first-hand in the learning environment through letting go of excessive attachments to the impulses of purposefulness, and in being an educator who spontaneously infuses the learning experiences of students with the humorous wisdom of the Zhuangzian notions of perfect happiness and free and easy wandering. As Culham (2014) noted: “Daoists hold that everything, living and non-living, emanates from the Dao and as such contains some element of the Dao within it” (p. 33).

### **Wuwei Inspiration in the *Liezi***

The *Liezi* (meaning “The Book of Master Lie”) is comprised of 8 chapters based on renowned mythological and historical figures. It is the third classical Daoist text, following the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. Whilst its origins are unclear, it is believed to have been written by Master Lie Yukou, a Daoist philosopher who lived around the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Master Lie Yukou is mentioned in five chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (Komjathy, 2013), and was also said to have refined *wuwei* effortlessness such that he could “ride the wind” (Watson, 1968, p. 3). The final compilation of the *Liezi*

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was probably completed around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (Graham, 1990). Cleary (2009) said the *Liezi* "...is one of the greatest works of cognitive art and educational science that has ever been produced" (p. 5).

In chapter 5 of the *Liezi*, titled "The Questions of Tang," is the story of a fisherman called Zhan He which has strong parallels with the story of Cook Ding in the *Zhuangzi* as "both Zhan He and the butcher model their actions on the Dao" (Cline, 2011, p. 232). Zhan He made "a fishing line from a single thread of silk out of the cocoon, a hook from a beard of wheat, a rod from one of the pygmy bamboos of Ch'u, and baited it with a split grain of rice" (Graham, 1990, p. 105). Zhan He then described fishing in accord with *wuwei* as follows:

When I overlook the river holding my rod, there are no distracting thoughts in my mind. I contemplate nothing but the fish. When I cast the line and sink the hook, my hand does not pull too hard nor give too easily, so that nothing can disturb it. When the fish see the bait on my hook, it is like sinking dust or gathered foam, and they swallow it without suspecting. This is how I am able to use weak things to control strong ones, light things to bring in heavy ones. (Graham, 1990, p. 106)

Though Zhan He's fishing equipment may have seemed simplistic, it was entirely made from his natural surroundings without terribly much destruction to them—a thread of silk, a hook of wheat, a rod of bamboo, and a bait of rice. His implements therefore embodied *ziran*—the authentic self-so-ness of nature. His actions reflected the *wuwei* association with *ziran* for they were calm, patient, and based on gentle engagement without needing to apply excessive force. He did so by merely accepting the reality of his circumstances and with which he worked in harmony. In doing so, he applied the Daoist principle of less is more, where apparent weaknesses imply genuine strength. This has implications for contemporary classrooms where everyone should ideally become engaged in a learning experience where excessive comparisons, judgments, and criticisms are discarded. Similarly, Nagel (1994) said "seek simplicity and honor what is known" (p. 113). Castillo also noted that "the educator need not push, nor guide, nor facilitate; the educator need only be there...The educator inspired in Taoism is unlikely to explain or to have a planned dialog; he simply converses and acts without acting, letting things happen" (Castillo, 2016, p. 13). Such would allow for the unforced manifestation of *wuwei* in classrooms in a similar manner to how Zhan He went about fishing in effortless alignment with the Dao.

### **Conclusion**

This paper reflected on the Daoist principle of *wuwei* and how it could help in nurturing more harmonious classrooms. It began with an outline of the philosophy of

Daoism and its core principle of *wuwei*. It discussed the roles of further Daoist principles associated with *wuwei* such as the virtue-less virtue of *de*, the natural spontaneity of *ziran*, the dynamic harmony of *yin-yang*, and the vital energy of *qi*. After that, it examined some of the metaphorical illustrations of *wuwei* found in the classical Daoist texts of the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi*, and suggested ways in which the notion of *wuwei* might serve to be an inspirational guide to inspire novel approaches to contemporary education, and therefore help to effortlessly align today's classroom environments with the natural spontaneity of the Dao.

*Wuwei* was discussed as a key Daoist principle of unforced action based on its metaphorical descriptions in the *Laozi* in terms of the humility of water, the innocence of the uncarved block, the Three Treasures of compassion, frugality, and humility, and of the similarity of ruling a vast empire to that of boiling a small fish. After that, the stories of Cook Ding and the Useless Tree in the *Zhuangzi* were shared to illustrate the Daoist perspectives of *wuwei* through working within spaces and in finding comfort in uselessness, and how such perspectives could inspire creativity in classrooms. Also, the story of Zhan He the fisherman in the *Liezi* was related to illustrate the Daoist wisdom of less is more, and how this could be of benefit to today's classrooms through lessening the need for comparisons, judgments, and criticisms and allowing for the spontaneous essence of the Dao to shine through into everyday classroom situations. It was emphasized that *wuwei* influenced classrooms inspire the youth to accord with nature, for the sake of a more tolerant and less combative world for future generations that would be more aligned with the Dao.

Given the paradoxical nature *wuwei*, the question of how to “try not to try” is significant. Slingerland, advised:

...one way of dealing with the cognitive paradox of “trying not to try” is to turn away from the cognitive and toward the behavioral: for instance, toward a regimen of meditative or breathing practices designed to bring about psycho-physiological changes in the self. (Slingerland, 2003, p. 14)

A possible way of doing so is by keeping a personal diary. Dairies help in fulfilling the wisdom of chapter 33 in the *Laozi* where it is written “he who knows others is clever; he who knows himself has discernment. He who overcomes others has force; He who overcomes himself is strong” (Lau, 2009, p. 115). The author of this paper undertook extensive diary studies based on Daoist principles and found them to be effective approaches in attaining states of *wuwei* in the learning environment (Jeffrey, 2015, 2019a, 2019b).

Meditation is also helpful, and a popular Daoist form of meditation is known as *zuowang*. Kohn (2010, p. 1) translated *zuowang* as meaning “sitting in oblivion” and described it as:

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...a state of deep meditative absorption and mystical oneness, during which all sensory and conscious faculties are overcome and which is the base point of attaining Dao [where] things just arise and pass away one after the other, [and] one is fully merged with the natural processes and completely free from all reactions, feelings, classifications, and evaluations. (Kohn, 2010, p. 99)

Komjathy added that “this form of Daoist meditation is contentless, non-conceptual, and non-dualistic. It emphasizes stilling and emptying the heart-mind until one enters a state of stillness and emptiness. This is one’s innate nature and original connection to the Dao” (Komjathy, 2013, p. 21). Therefore, meditation is also recommended as a path to manifesting *wuwei*. It does not have to be *zuowang* meditation specifically. Any form of meditation would be beneficial for aligning classrooms with the natural spontaneity of the Dao. All forms of meditation still the mind, making it more receptive to the Dao.

Other ways to harness *wuwei* would be to practice a martial art such as Tai Chi or Kung Fu, or to indulge in the Chinese form of geomancy known as Feng Shui, or to undertake consultations with the *I Ching*. Whichever approach is chosen, it is still important to read the classical Daoist texts of the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi*, and the *Liezi* daily and to contemplate their wisdom. These help in becoming an agent of positive change towards a more compassionate, frugal, and humble world in alignment with the Three Treasures of Daoism together with a *wuwei* elegance of navigating through life without needing to force anything.

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