



## Ancient and Modern Concepts of Flow

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### Ancient Flow: Taoism and Wu Wei

The essence of Taoist philosophy is living in harmony with the Tao – the natural way or path of the universe.

### What is the Tao?

Dao or Tao is a Chinese word meaning “way,” “path,” or “road.” The Tao Te Ching, traditionally attributed to Lao Tzu (circa 5th–6th century BCE), is one of the most translated and influential philosophical texts in history. It is often translated as “The Way” or “The Path.”

However, attempting to fully define the Tao is ultimately impossible. Our understanding is limited by human perception and language. The Tao that can be spoken or described is not the complete Tao. The true Tao is a universal force beyond full comprehension and cannot be grasped fully by the senses or the rational mind.

Even though we cannot fully “know” the Tao, the aim is to live in harmony with it—similar to the Stoic idea of living in accordance with nature.

There is no single method to achieve this. Common themes in Taoist practice include:

- Stillness of mind
- Reducing unnecessary stimulation and sensory overload
- Humility
- Releasing excessive striving and control

These practices open us to the natural flow of life.

### Stillness of Mind

Stillness of mind does not mean passively sitting or withdrawing from life. It does not need to be formal meditation—although meditation can help.

Stillness of mind can coexist with action. When we are fully present, focused, and engaged in the moment, our actions can become effortless, precise, and free of inner friction. This is where Taoist ideas begin to overlap with what modern psychology calls flow.

### Wu Wei: Effortless Action

Wu Wei is a central concept in Taoist philosophy. It is often translated as:

- Non-action
- Effortless action
- Action without forced striving

In practical terms, Wu Wei resembles the state athletes call being “in the zone.” In this state:

- Actions feel natural and fluid
- There is little self-consciousness
- Time can seem to speed up or slow down
- Effort feels light, even during demanding tasks

Lao Tzu describes this quality beautifully:

“That which offers no resistance  
Overcomes the hardest substance.  
That which offers no resistance  
Can enter where there is no space.  
Few in the world can comprehend  
The teaching without words, or  
Understand the value of non-action.”  
— Tao Te Ching, Chapter 43

Wu Wei is not laziness or passivity. It is intelligent non-forcing—knowing when to act, when to pause, and how to align with the natural flow rather than pushing against it.

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## Modern Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience

### The Experience of Flow in Everyday Life

In modern psychology, flow describes a state of deep, absorbed engagement in an activity. It enhances creativity, performance, and wellbeing. Flow is closely connected to self-actualisation (fulfilling one’s potential) and eudaimonia (living a meaningful, flourishing life).

Because flow is intrinsically rewarding, people who experience it regularly often seek to recreate it, leading to a more engaged and satisfying life.

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identified eight core characteristics of flow:

- Complete concentration on the task
  - Clear goals and immediate feedback
  - Altered sense of time
  - Intrinsic reward from the activity
  - Effortlessness and ease
  - A balance between challenge and skill
  - Merging of action and awareness
  - A sense of control over the task
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## What Is Effortless Action?

Effortless action involves the power of gentleness and the capacity to trust the process.

Many problems resolve naturally over time. When we over-strive, force outcomes, or try to control every variable, we often:

- Waste energy
- Increase stress and burnout
- Create additional problems
- Lose contact with our values and intuition

A person in flow approaches tasks skilfully rather than forcefully, understanding:

- When to act and when to step back
- How to find the “goldilocks zone” between anxiety and boredom
- How to match challenge to skill

As Nakamura and colleagues (2009) note: “Inducing flow is about the balance between the level of skill and the size of the challenge at hand.”

This contrasts with Western cultural messages that glorify pushing harder, constant productivity, and self-sacrifice—often at the expense of wellbeing.

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## Nature, Rivers, and the Path of Least Resistance

Taoism often uses water and rivers as metaphors for life.

Life is like a river with its own course. When we are in the river, we can:

- Swim against the current
- Cling rigidly to a branch
- Or move with the stream

Many people spend their lives fighting the current, trying to control everything. But:

- We do not consciously control our digestion, heart rate, or wound healing
- We cannot control other people
- We cannot control the future

Much of life unfolds through natural processes with or without our interference. When we align with the current, we align with the natural course of events. This is the path of least resistance. We still navigate and respond, but we do not cling to the illusion of control.

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### **The Qualities of Water**

Water symbolises Taoist virtue:

- Softness and humility – it yields, yet shapes rock
- Lack of ego – it has no fixed agenda
- Nourishment – it supports life wherever it goes

Despite its softness, water overcomes hardness over time. It is powerful without aggression, purposeful without striving, and life-giving without self-importance.

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### **Letting Go and Entering Flow**

To experience flow, we must let go of excessive control, fear of failure, and preoccupation with outcomes.

In a state of flow:

- We are fully immersed in the task
- We are not fixated on external validation
- Past regrets and future anxieties soften
- The present moment becomes vivid and absorbing

Letting go is like:

- Releasing the struggle against the current
- Letting go of the branch
- Moving with the river

We do not abandon responsibility; we release resistance. We engage deeply with what is in front of us, right now.

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