

The Wu-Forms in *Tao Te Ching*

The Chinese word *Wu* means negation and can be translated as “no” or “not.” In Taoism, this word is used as a prefix before certain words, in order to form what are referred to as the Wu-Forms. Ames and Hall summarize the meaning of these forms:

It encourages the cultivation of a disposition that is captured in what we have chosen to call its Wu-forms. The Wu-forms free up the energy required to sustain the abstract cognitive and moral sensibilities of technical philosophy, allowing this energy, now unmediated by concepts, theories, and contrived moral precepts, to be expressed as those concrete feelings that inspire the ordinary business of the day (Ames and Hall, 2003, p. 36).

In the Chinese world, things do not possess habits, rather *they are habits*. The Wu-Forms, then, should be practiced until they become habits, until they become the disposition of the heart and mind. The cultivation of these habits will increase the range of creative possibilities in one’s life, and will increase the value of the natural, social, and cultural world (Ames and Hall, 2003, p. 36).

There are eight Wu-forms. The three most familiar are *wuwei*, *wuzhi*, and *wuyu*. They refer, respectively, to *noncoercive* actions; *knowing* without resorting to rules; and *desiring* which does not seek to possess its object (Ames and Hall, 2003, p. 36). In other words, one sees events as they are and responds to them. Desire in itself is not a problem, but greed, control, and egotism are problems. The other Wu-Forms are mentioned in the order of their use in the *Daodejing*.

Meaning of the Wu-Forms

1. Wushi: No-interfering-acting
2. Wuwei: No-coercive-acting
3. Wuxin: No-mediated thinking and feeling
4. Wuyu: No-possessing or clinging-acting
5. Wuzheng: No-contentious-acting
6. Wuzhi: No-prejudicial-knowing
7. Wuqing: No-egotistical-likes and dislikes
8. Wuming: No-final-understanding

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References

Ames, Roger T. and David L. Hall (2003). *Dao De Jing: "Making This Life Significant," A Philosophical Translation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Tao Te Ching

From a translation by S. Mitchell

1

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.
This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.
The gateway to all understanding.

2

When people see some things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good,
other things become bad.

Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other.

Therefore the Master

acts without doing anything
and teaches without saying anything.
Things arise and she lets them come;
things disappear and she lets them go.
She has but doesn't possess,
acts but doesn't expect.
When her work is done, she forgets it.
That is why it lasts forever.

3

If you overesteem great men,
people become powerless.
If you overvalue possessions,
people begin to steal.

The Master leads
by emptying people's minds
and filling their cores,
by weakening their ambition
and toughening their resolve.
He helps people lose everything
they know, everything they desire,
and creates confusion
in those who think that they know.

Practice not-doing,
and everything will fall into place.

9

Fill your bowl to the brim
and it will spill.
Keep sharpening your knife
and it will blunt.
Chase after money and security
and your heart will never unclench.
Care about people's approval
and you will be their prisoner.

Do your work, then step back.
The only path to serenity.

20

Stop thinking, and end your problems.
What difference between yes and no?
What difference between success and failure?
Must you value what others value,
avoid what others avoid?
How ridiculous!

Other people are excited,
as though they were at a parade.
I alone don't care,
I alone am expressionless,
like an infant before it can smile.

Other people have what they need;
I alone possess nothing.
I alone drift about,
like someone without a home.
I am like an idiot, my mind is so empty.

Other people are bright;
I alone am dark.
Other people are sharper;
I alone am dull.
Other people have a purpose;
I alone don't know.
I drift like a wave on the ocean,
I blow as aimless as the wind.

I am different from ordinary people.
I drink from the Great Mother's breasts.

21

The Master keeps her mind
always at one with the Tao;
that is what gives her her radiance.

The Tao is ungraspable.
How can her mind be at one with it?
Because she doesn't cling to ideas.

The Tao is dark and unfathomable.

How can it make her radiant?
Because she lets it.

Since before time and space were,
the Tao is.
It is beyond *is* and *is not*.
How do I know this is true?
I look inside myself and see.

22

If you want to become whole,
let yourself be partial.
If you want to become straight,
let yourself be crooked.
If you want to become full,
let yourself be empty.
If you want to be reborn,
let yourself die.
If you want to be given everything,
give everything up.

The Master, by residing in the Tao,
sets an example for all beings.
Because he doesn't display himself,
people can see his light.
Because he has nothing to prove,
people can trust his words.
Because he doesn't know who he is,
people recognize themselves in him.
Because he has no goad in mind,
everything he does succeeds.

When the ancient Masters said,
"If you want to be given everything,
give everything up,"
they weren't using empty phrases.
Only in being lived by the Tao can you be truly yourself.

24

He who stands on tiptoe
doesn't stand firm.

He who rushes ahead
doesn't go far.
He who tries to shine
dims his own light.
He who defines himself
can't know who he really is.
He who has power over others
can't empower himself.
He who clings to his work
will create nothing that endures.

If you want to accord with the Tao,
just do your job, then let go.

28

Know the male,
yet keep to the female:
receive the world in your arms.
If you receive the world,
the Tao will never leave you
and you will be like a little child.

Know the white,
yet keep to the black:
be a pattern for the world.
If you are a pattern for the world,
the Tao will be strong inside you
and there will be nothing you can't do.

Know the personal,
yet keep to the impersonal:
accept the world as it is.
If you accept the world,
the Tao will be luminous inside you
and you will return to your primal self.

The world is formed from the void,
like utensils from a block of wood.
The Master knows the utensils,
yet keeps to the the block:
thus she can use all things.

34

The great Tao flows everywhere.
All things are born from it,
yet it doesn't create them.
It pours itself into its work,
yet it makes no claim.
It nourishes infinite worlds,
yet it doesn't hold on to them.
Since it is merged with all things
and hidden in their hearts,
it can be called humble.
Since all things vanish into it
and it alone endures,
it can be called great.
It isn't aware of its greatness;
thus it is truly great.

57

If you want to be a great leader,
you must learn to follow the Tao.
Stop trying to control.
Let go of fixed plans and concepts,
and the world will govern itself.

The more prohibitions you have,
the less virtuous people will be.
The more weapons you have,
the less secure people will be.
The more subsidies you have,
the less self-reliant people will be.

Therefore the Master says:
I let go of the law,
and people become honest.
I let go of economics,
and people become prosperous.
I let go of religion,
and people become serene.
I let go of all desire for the common good,
and the good becomes common as grass.

75

When taxes are too high,
people go hungry.

When the government is too intrusive,
people lose their spirit.

Act for the people's benefit.
Trust them; leave them alone.

