

The Value of Effort & Release

Based on a talk given by Rev. angel Kyodo williams on March 20, 2008 at the Center for Transformative Change/New Dharma Meditation Center in Berkeley, California.

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 30

Whoever relies on the Tao in governing me doesn't try to force issues or defeat enemies by force of arms.

For every force there is a counterforce.

Violence, even well intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself.

*The Master does his job and then stops.
He understands that the universe is forever out of control,
and that trying to dominate events goes against the current of the Tao.*

*Because he believes in himself,
he doesn't try to convince others.*

Because he is content with himself, he doesn't need others' approval.

Because he accepts himself, the whole world accepts him.

--written by Lao-Tzu & translated by Stephen Mitchell

As we read the Yoga Sutras we get to Chapter 12, which basically says, here's what you need. You need *abhyasa* and *vairagya*, practice and non-attachment. You need both practice and non-attachment.

Last time we talked about that a little bit, and I think I lobbed in some statement about Zen practice as an aspect of non-attachment, in that particular way Patanjali's speaking of in the Yoga Sutras, as not completely clear.

We discoursed through that a little bit, and it reminded me that, in addition to being very excited about the fact that I had stumbled upon this, I also came to the conclusion that this pair, *abhyasa* and *vairagya*, are also the antidote, if you will, for much of what plagues our movements for social justice and social change.

We have this imbalance overall on the practice side, the effort side, for good reason, right? The world is in a mess as far as we can tell, and so, those of us

who have made the decision to apply ourselves to the cleaning up of this mess become very fixated on the practice, the *abhyasa* (the effort), the what-needs-to-be-done, and there's no room for the *vairagya* (the release). You wouldn't even think such a thing. You are applauded the more hours you work; the more poorly you eat; the less you take care of your body. Haven't seen your partner or family in weeks? Good. You're changing the world.

"But whoever relies on the Way in governing men doesn't try to force issues or defeat enemies by force of arms." (Tao Te Ching by Lao-tzu, Chapter 30)

We think "arms" and machine guns come to mind. We think tanks and missiles and handguns. This cat, [Lao-tzu] knew what he was talking about, and he wasn't just limiting himself to just the small view. The arms of our own will are just as dangerous when they aren't balanced by a soft side, by an acquiescent component, by a non-attachment of *vairagya*.

We run out into the world wanting to fix things with no sense of the need to release the outcomes, so that the outcomes can reveal themselves, so that the fruit of our labor can reveal itself. It's the tragedy, really, of our social change sensibilities and our progressive sensibilities. Because, just like in formal practice, if you have nothing but effort, nothing but practice, nothing but pushing, nothing but applying yourself, the grasping ego that compels you gets all the room, the grasping ego that is driving you toward accomplishment, that's driving you toward, *I'm going to be a good meditator; I'm going to be a good yogi* is getting center stage. And there's no room for the antidote of non-attachment to also come up and feed into the system-into, frankly, this insidious way of releasing outcomes—thereby keeping the force, the attachment to force, in check, in balance. So the *vairagya*, the non-attachment, is so difficult for us.

Of course, we're attached. We want people that are homeless to have homes. We want people that are starving to eat. We want people that are being killed to live. Of course, we're attached. And still, pure awareness is mistaking itself for that stuff of our lives. So we can't completely trust this stuff of our minds. We can't completely trust where the effort is coming from, where the intention itself is rooted **unless** we create the opportunity to come to clarity about it by releasing the attachment—by actually invoking the effort toward effortlessness. Only then do we have a glimpse of, not only what it is we've produced, the impact of our effort, the impact of our practice, but also the opportunity—as a result of seeing the impact—to see where our initial intention was driven from to begin with.

How many times do we—anyone of us—do we head into something *so sure, so sure* that we are doing the right thing, *so sure* that we have the right idea only to get on the other side and realize there were some less than savory intentions mixed up in our otherwise good intentions. Anybody ever had that experience? One of us, two of us, maybe? A little bit here and there?

You know how that sureness is, it's not like this, Well, I'm mostly sure. It's like this: **I AM** sure. You know what you're doing...self-righteous to the nth degree. This is the right thing; I am right; they are wrong. This is what needs to happen, and we are charging in. And not only are we charging in, we're charging in and we know what it'll look like on the other end. And we're shaping and we're molding it, and we're trying to get whatever the situation is to fit the picture that we have in our minds only to eventually discover that, in fact, our view of the situation was distorted by past experience, that we had a little trigger in the situation. We leapt forward not being able to see clearly what was going on because someone's voice reminded us of something from the past. Someone's tone reminded us of something very, very old, and we charged in to take care of *that* person in *that* situation because we were not going to let that happen again.

And then we could see, only in hindsight, that, in fact, it wasn't the situation we imagined it to be. That, in fact, we had turned on our old movie and got it running, and we were playing that scenario out instead. Sometimes these efforts are fairly benign in terms of their impact, and sometimes they're quite harmful.

Non-attachment builds in the space necessary to see things for what they are. If we don't invest ourselves as much in the practice of non-attachment, of non-reaction as we do in effort, in application, in practice, in making the change happen, we won't be able to see, or we'll see too far down the road, to course correct well.

“For every force, there is a counterforce.” (Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tzu, Chapter 30)

For whatever good intention we have, and we apply that good intention, there is a counterforce; there's an impact. It doesn't just get out there cleanly. It doesn't continue on and on. And we're not able to view that impact and the possibility for that impact without a sense of non-attachment, without a sense of non-reaction. Because once the movie's going, you see what you're projecting. You don't actually see what's happening; you see what fits your story.

Does that make sense?

You've got the movie going. You have to decide what needs to happen here, and you can no longer see—I always say when we're triggered by something we go blind, deaf, and dumb. We are clueless about the reality unfolding before us because we are completely stuck in our own movie. And everyone is stepping into the pre-designed roles that we constructed when we were four and five and six and something else. And everyone just steps into those roles for us, plays their little part and we get to play ours.

Does everyone know what I mean? Is this something you've experienced before? That you don't see what's happening and you're just in it? And there you go and then you get on the other side, and you say to yourself—Oh. Do we imagine for one second that this is not happening on a larger scale? That somehow all of this good intention, frail as it is, does not play itself out on a larger scale when we get together and we decide what needs to happen for the world to change?

Then we are caught in this mix of self-righteousness. We gravitate toward the groups and the organizations that further keep our *vritti*—our patterns of consciousness—in play. So we go to the little groups that shout, Yeah! Down with the whoever! Screw the everybody! Whatever! And we organize ourselves in these greater and greater little factions of separateness. Organizing ourselves around smaller and smaller obsessed pieces of identity, smaller and smaller issue areas—and I'm not saying these are not important. I'm not saying that any of the issues are not important. I'm saying that we get ourselves fixated in our view and being driven in our actions from a place that has no balance, that has no counterforce, no antidote to enable us to see clearly.

“Violence, even well-intentioned, always rebounds upon oneself. Violence of action, word, and thought even well-intentioned always rebounds upon oneself.” (Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tzu, Chapter 30)

So the sutras go on particularly to say that *vairagya* is the declaration of mastery and that non-attachment is the declaration of mastery over this charging forth self, that to invoke this non-reaction is to declare mastery, is to create the opportunity for balance in such a way that one is able to be masterful, to be skillful.

“The Master does his job and then stops.” (Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tzu, Chapter 30)

The master does his job, *abhyasa*, and then stops. *Vairagya*. These are two entirely different texts [Tao Te Ching and the Yoga Sutras]. They're saying the same thing. You apply your effort, your practice. You get on your cushion; you choose your issue, right? Do your action. And then, you “relax the skin,” as we say in our yoga practice. You let go of good meditation, bad meditation,

frustrating meditation, monkey-mind meditation. Let go of: This is what's going to happen. All of the bad Republicans are going to blow up and go to another planet.

"The Master does his job, does her job and then stops. She understands that the universe is forever out of control." (Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tzu, Chapter 30)

And that, in fact, this is what life presents us with and that a kind of obsession with getting it into our image of how it should be doesn't acknowledge reality as it is, doesn't acknowledge the truth of things as they are. *"That trying to dominate events goes against the current of the Way."* So Lao-tzu does say the Master does his job; he doesn't say the Master goes to sleep, the Master forgets it all and says never mind. *"The Master does his job and then stops."*

You bring yourself to it. Every fiber of your being is brought to each intention anew. It is anew, made fresh over and over again by that release, by that non-attachment, by that *vairagya*. It's what makes the moment new and fresh again. Otherwise, you're just spinning on this particular circuit that you put yourself on. You can't come back fresh, anew over and over again if you don't back off, ease up, let go, see the situation for what it is.

Don't try to dominate events. It's that sense of grace that let's us say—the Christians would say, "let go and let God." You let go and you let God; you let reality reveal itself. You put in your little chips, and then you let the hand get played. You can't go around and play everybody else's cards for them. That's none of your business. And how wonderful, because that's what life is. They play their hand; you get to play yours. And this beautiful, unfolding dance—this dance is not so beautiful and doesn't feel like it's enjoyable when you're tight and constricted telling yourself, You really should've moved your left foot!

You can't enjoy the dance if you're so fixated on dominating the events, on controlling the outcome, on making everything work the way that you think it should work from that mistaken identity that you started out with.

If we didn't have the mistaken identity, then we would have pure awareness. If we weren't caught up in this mistaken identity, where pure awareness is overwhelmed by the stuff of our mind, if we didn't have that, we could abide—pure awareness could abide, in its own true nature and reflect itself through consciousness, because consciousness is what we operate in relationship to. But pure awareness would reflect itself, its nature, through consciousness, and we would have an excellent outcome: We would believe in ourselves. We would believe in ourselves—*"and because the master believes in himself he doesn't try to convince others. Because he is content with himself he doesn't need*

others approval. And because he accepts himself, the whole world accepts him.” (Tao Te Ching by Lao-Tzu, Chapter 30)

And isn't that all we're after, anyway?