

EFFORTLESS ACTION

the ability to fulfil human needs effortlessly through working with nature

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Effortless Action? This term, derived from Taoist philosophy, sounds passive and incompatible with our modern society where effort seems decisive to success. I want to suggest that it can be very relevant to sustainability and explore some ways in which it might be applied by educators. Contemporary thought unconsciously conceives of ‘effort’ in a self-centred and modernist way that contributes to the unsustainability of our social and ecological system.

The notion of Effortless Action (*Wu Wei*) is one of the major themes of Taoism – an ecologically-oriented Chinese traditional philosophy that originated around 2500 years ago with the classic work *Tao de Ching* by Lao-Tsu (see Maurer 1982 for a full translation). Although Taoism originated in early China, over time practices in various cultural contexts have proved its wide applicability. It is philosophical yet practical, seeking to inspire and instruct practitioners in how to obtain an optimal state of harmonic integration between both material and spiritual realms of existence with lessons derived from nature (Kirkland 2002).

As one of the most distinctive characteristics of Taoist thought, Effortless Action is ‘a form of intelligence - that is, of knowing the principles, structures, and trends of human and natural affairs so well’ that achievements can be made through the least amount of effort (Watts 1975: 76). It is important to recognize that in Taoism, which urges ‘selflessness’ as opposed to ‘self-centredness’, ‘effort’ in Effortless Action refers to the total effort of all beings involved in and related to an action, instead of just effort of the self. Properly understood, then, Effortless Action is participative and inclusive rather than passive and anthropocentrically instrumental.

A recent advertisement for Volkswagen vehicles can help illustrate the difference between total effort and self effort. The advertisement shows how easy it is to drive and park the Volkswagen 4x4, followed by the slogan: ‘Tiguan, simply effortless’. It makes perfect sense – easy to use, hence, simply effortless. But, is it really effortless? It may be for the driver, but it is certainly not effortless when viewed through the perspective of total effort: the engineers’ effort in designing the car, materials and energy used in producing the car, the fuel imported from the warzone for running the car, the car parks and roads that need building, and the effort required to deal with the health consequences of pollution, accidents and the sedentary lifestyle of the driver. In addition, the fuels burned to build and run the car release carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, which requires current and future generations to make great effort to deal with the consequences of climate change. On the other hand, re-organizing life so that most journeys can be conducted on foot, by bicycle or wheelchair, requires physical

movement but, in comparison, is Effortless Action, since it flows with the natural order of things, which is for humans to expend bodily energy in moving from one place to another.

Learners could engage in practical active learning exercises to mind-map the total effort that goes into the production of daily products and services. This requires little more than a basic understanding of social and natural systems, and might be the easy bit. The more challenging bit is whether learners are able to think or are willing to think beyond the world of the self, to think of the self as a part of the social and ecological environment and build a holistic worldview in order to discover effortless alternatives for themselves.

Because our social system gets more and more complex, mutable and uncertain, it is increasingly difficult to trace every single effort involved, and it is easy to be misled by Greenwash and the supposed benefits of new technologies. For example, the generation of energy from nuclear fusion is one of the major ongoing projects that people count on to save humanity through providing clean and unlimited energy. No need to worry about peak oil and global warming once we get hold of the technology. However, the extension of human power through the use of fossil fuel energy has led to immense damage to ecosystems, and has massively accelerated the depletion of literally ‘vital’ resources like fresh water. Even more unlimited energy is not a ‘solution’ in itself, since it could be used to exponentially increase efforts to deplete vital resources and further accelerate the damage to ecosystems.

Effortless Action reminds us of our place in the world, and also points out the way to be truly effortless – through working with the flow of nature. As Ames (1986) describes, Effortless Action is a model for creative participation in the cosmos in a manner that coheres with nature rather than resists it. This does not have to be an esoteric or mystical notion; it can be one which is intensely practical. An example is flood control. Typically, flood control is dealt with using ‘hard engineering’ – the building of concrete barriers and the hardening of channels. This approach is the path of effort since it depends on complex machinery, large amounts of energy, and highly skilled labour. It is a path which generates multiple further problems along the line, as the National Trust (2008) points out:

Hard engineering works tend to increase the speed at which water moves through rivers, thereby increasing flood risk further downstream. Canalised rivers and drained floodplains are also bad for wildlife, and increased or more rapid run-off from land has a negative impact on water quality. Furthermore, the effects of climate change are already causing an increase in flooding, particularly as a result of extreme rainfall. Unless a new, more strategic approach to flood risk is adopted, flood risk management will require more and more expensive (and carbon intensive) hard defences.

Instead, the National Trust is promoting a ‘soft engineering approach’ based on ‘making space for water’. This path of Effortless Action involves:

wetland creation, woodland planting and soft engineering of the river course to return it to a more natural state, which have all helped to make space for water, with benefits for biodiversity and water quality, as well as reducing the risk of flooding. (the National Trust 2008).

Solutions which restore and enhance the natural flood resilience of ecosystems end up providing multiple solutions rather than multiple further problems, and therefore save vast amounts of effort. There is also the case of ‘missing-the-point’ conservation projects such as ‘Save China’s Tiger’, which has chosen to conserve the endangered south China tigers by transporting them from China to southern Africa for breeding and re-wilding (an action of great effort), instead of focusing on looking after their natural habitat in China. Lao-Tzu uses a water metaphor to explain the benefits of the ‘softer path’:

Nothing beneath heaven
is softer and weaker than water.
Nothing is better
To attack the hard and strong
And nothing can take its place.
The weak overcome the strong;
The soft overcome the hard.
There is no one beneath heaven
Who doesn’t know this,
Yet no one who practices it¹

In general, Effortless Action means wisely and intelligently making use of what is already available in nature (the so-called ‘ecosystems services’) to fulfill human needs rather than taking the hard path of conquering nature through immense fossil fuel subsidies, excessive use of technology, or inappropriate civil, chemical, genetic, nuclear or planetary engineering.

The significance of Effortless Action goes beyond ecologically sensitive design, however, to address one of the root causes of unsustainability – self-centredness and the overwhelming preoccupation with competition that results from it. We are facing a situation where huge amounts of effort are being expended in self-centred ways in order to compete and achieve goals such as having a high salary, a high status at work, a large car, or a prestigious address. These goals are not pursued because they are worthwhile for their own sake, but because people want to appear to be better than others.

This mindset is largely rooted in a form of individualistic self-centeredness. Individualism has been seen as one of the achievements of Western modernisation, a form of human development through self-realization. However, rearranged by the rich and the powerful through education systems, advertising, and the media, individualism now serves the goal of furthering consumerism. As Hartley (1997: 62) observes, ‘new forms of individual identity are rooted in conspicuous consumption’. Our identity is now less about who we are and more

about what we have, with the priority to have more things, different things, and better things than others. In the meantime, while more consumers keen on getting better things and different things are being generated, ‘the drugged, the deranged and the depressed’ (Hartley 1997: 63) are also mounting up, because not everyone can have more things than everyone else.

As Olive et al (2003: 237, 170) claim, the ‘major cultural error’ of Modern culture is the ‘hyper-individualistic self’, since ‘we lose our continuing commitment and capacity to participate in and negotiate culture within a fuller range’ of possibilities for relationships with nature, and are ‘left with a much more limited quality of “self” or “being”’ than we realize (Hilson-Katzenbach 2006). On the other hand, Lao-Tsu describes a more holistic way of being-in-the-world, a way of achieving self-realisation without self-centredness or competition:

True goodness is like water.
Water benefits the ten thousand things,
but does not compete with them.
It stays in humble places,
Therefore comes close to Tao.
...
If you do not compete,
You will not be faulted.
...
[The sage] does not compete with anyone,
and no one beneath heaven can compete with him.
...
Don’t exalt the worthy:
People then will not compete

Taoism, then, represents a gentler way, a softer way, a way that flows with nature, that blurs the rigid boundaries between self and other, thereby tackling the obsession with competition at its source. How can ‘I’ compete, if ‘I’ exists only in interconnection and interdependence with other people and natural systems? (see *Being-in-the-world*, this volume). By avoiding the competition altogether and moving beyond the concept of winners and losers, beyond the idea of better people and worse people, we cannot lose, and therefore become invincible, and, importantly, more sustainable, because we are not building our sense of superiority on the repression of other people or the destruction of the environment.

Looking around us, movements such as Permaculture (see www.permaculture.org.uk) and Transition Towns (see www.transitiontowns.org) show us hope and alternatives. Why compete against each other and build success upon other’s failures, when we can work together to create stronger and more resilient communities? Why expand competition culture through globalization, unnecessarily multiply wants, and satisfy them through immense international

efforts, when so many human needs can be fulfilled through the local community and ecosystems. Movements like the above have no place for competition culture, instead, they bring back a sense of community and trust and provide ways of acting effortlessly, flowing with nature to fill both basic and deeper human needs. There is, of course, a lot of physical work, design work, and teamwork that occurs when communities come together to fulfil their needs through practical local projects. This is not 'effort', though, because it is the kind of work that humans, as social animals, are naturally adapted for, work that resonates with who and what we are, as opposed to the effort of sitting isolated in front of computers, steering wheels, screens, and production lines, playing out a meaningless role in an unsustainable society.

Not only is our modern civilization built upon competition, the changes that are occurring are accelerating competition between individuals, between communities/societies, between humans and the rest of nature. Environmental degradation, resource depletion, economic crises and the continuing growth of population and consumption make being critical about the entire competition culture at personal, social, national and international levels, a significant part of Education for Sustainability.

Unfortunately, competition culture is extremely evident in formal education as well, mainly through evaluation based on exams and league tables. As Sterling (2001: 21) suggests: 'We are educated by and large to compete and consume, rather than to care and conserve'. This means that, in terms of sustainability, 'education is both part of the problem and the solution' (Sterling 1996: 18). If learners are to gain skills in 'effortless action', they will need to overcome the competitive atmosphere of educational institutions. They will need opportunities to work cooperatively with other learners, members of the local community, and local natural systems, in real projects of value for the future, rather than putting in effort just to get better marks than their peers. This is 'active learning', and if it is done in a way which flows with nature it becomes 'effortless active learning'. But how can this be taught? Lao-Tsu has some useful advice here about effortless teaching:

Therefore the sage
achieves without striving
teaches without talking

Notes

1. All translations of the work of Lao-Tsu are from Maurer (1982), with some small adjustments by the author.
2. Calligraphic stone stamps by Jiehua Gong

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