



Trying Not to Try: Ancient China, Modern Science, and the Power of Spontaneity

By Edward Slingerland

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A deeply original exploration of the power of spontaneity—an ancient Chinese ideal that cognitive scientists are only now beginning to understand—and why it is so essential to our well-being

Why is it always hard to fall asleep the night before an important meeting? Or be charming and relaxed on a first date? What *is* it about a politician who seems wooden or a comedian whose jokes fall flat or an athlete who chokes? In all of these cases, striving seems to backfire.

In *Trying Not To Try*, Edward Slingerland explains why we find spontaneity so elusive, and shows how early Chinese thought points the way to happier, more authentic lives. We've long been told that the way to achieve our goals is through careful reasoning and conscious effort. But recent research suggests that many aspects of a satisfying life, like happiness and spontaneity, are best pursued indirectly. The early Chinese philosophers knew this, and they wrote extensively about an effortless way of being in the world, which they called *wu-wei* (ooo-way). They believed it was the source of all success in life, and they developed various strategies for getting it and hanging on to it.

With clarity and wit, Slingerland introduces us to these thinkers and the marvelous characters in their texts, from the butcher whose blade glides effortlessly through an ox to the wood carver who sees his sculpture simply emerge from a solid block. Slingerland uncovers a direct line from *wu-wei* to the Force in Star Wars, explains why *wu-wei* is more powerful than flow, and tells us what it all means for getting a date. He also shows how new research reveals what's happening in the brain when we're in a state of *wu-wei*—why it makes us happy and effective and trustworthy, and how it might have even made civilization possible.

Through stories of mythical creatures and drunken cart riders, jazz musicians and Japanese motorcycle gangs, Slingerland effortlessly blends Eastern thought and cutting-edge science to show us how we can live more fulfilling lives. *Trying Not To Try* is mind-expanding and deeply pleasurable, the perfect antidote to our

striving modern culture.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *Trying Not to Try*:

A *Guardian* Best Book of 2014

A 2014 *Brain Pickings* Best Book on Psychology, Philosophy, and How to Live Meaningfully

"Looks like a self-help book, but it's actually an insightful and lucid introduction to some of the most fruitful ideas in ancient Chinese philosophy."

—**Julian Baggini, *The Guardian***

"Edward Slingerland treats us to a work of seminal importance. Yet never was there such an important book that takes itself so lightly. Slingerland explains the correspondence between ancient Chinese philosophical ideas about *wu-wei*, or doing by not doing, and modern neuroscience. In doing so in erudite fashion, he also manages to discuss Woody Allen, magic mushrooms, his daughter's storybooks, Luke Skywalker and how hard it is to get a date when you're desperate."

—***Huffington Post***

"*Trying not to Try* is an enlightening introduction to the often misunderstood mindset of *wu-wei*, the 'being in the moment' that is the key to Eastern wisdom. Slingerland's volume is an invaluable guide to anyone on the quest for a full life, lived spontaneously."

—**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, author of *Flow***

"Ancient Chinese philosophy has never been more accessible. Not even in ancient China. Slingerland is not just a philosopher, he's a time traveller."

—**Russell Brand, author of *Revolution***

"*Trying Not to Try* navigates the confluence of two mighty rivers: the burgeoning science of the mind and the classic wisdom of China's Taoist and Confucian traditions. This is a thoughtful, grounded book about traditions that should be better known—and more often put into practice—in the West."

—**Daniel H. Pink, author of *Drive* and *To Sell is Human***

"East meets West in Edward Slingerland's *Trying Not to Try*, an entertaining and thought-provoking account of how the principles of ancient Chinese thought continue to apply—indeed, may apply even more—in modern times. Slingerland will make you reconsider your approach to everyday life and will challenge you to approach success—and failure—in a new, refreshing and reenergizing light."

—**Maria Konnikova, author of *Mastermind***

"'I'll give it a try,' says Luke Skywalker, and Yoda snaps: 'Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.' In this fascinating book, Edward Slingerland brings together ancient Chinese philosophy and contemporary cognitive science to solve the secret of *wu-wei*—the art of acting effortlessly and spontaneously, of being active and effective, even brilliant, without ever trying. The book itself is a testament to the power of *wu-wei*, as Slingerland explores rich and intricate ideas with confidence, clarity, and grace. *Trying Not to Try* is intellectually stimulating, a pleasure to read, and might well change your life."

—**Paul Bloom, Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor of Psychology, Yale University; author of *Just***

Babies and How Pleasure Works

"*Trying Not to Try* is fascinating, original, and mind-expanding — it shows us a completely different way of thinking about success and happiness."

—**Amy Chua, John M. Duff, Jr. Professor of Law, Yale Law School; author of *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother***

"Ancient China produced some of the greatest wisdom in human history, and Slingerland makes those riches accessible to modern readers. This book represents the humanities at their best — it's grounded in careful research about an ancient culture, yet speaks to the eternal challenge of being human in a complex and confusing world."

—**Jonathan Haidt, Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business; author of *The Happiness Hypothesis* and *The Righteous Mind***

"A remarkable time-traveling synthesis that shows how classic Chinese philosophers anticipated contemporary brain science and also looked beyond it, offering sage advice about how to live lives that flow. We meet Confucius, Daoists, the first Zen Master, a 6th century hippie, and other ancient Eastern educators, whose ideas have never been rendered more relevant to our times."

—**Jesse Prinz, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Committee for Interdisciplinary Science Studies, City University of New York**

"Through a combination of hard science and ancient philosophy, *Trying Not to Try* has convinced me that my usual approach to life—smashing through walls and grinding out painful victories—isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes trying hard is overrated. Slingerland has written a charming, intellectually rigorous book that can help all of us improve our lives."

—**Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal***

"A fascinating read. With state-of-the art science and interesting stories, Slingerland provides key insights from the East and West for achieving happiness and well-being."

—**Sian Beilock, professor of psychology, University of Chicago; author of *Choke***

"Edward Slingerland is one of the world's leading comparative philosophers and the foremost advocate of bridging the gulf between cognitive science and the humanities. In *Trying Not to Try* he reminds us that philosophy truly is a way of life, that classical Chinese philosophy offers deep insights into human flourishing, and that this classical Chinese wisdom anticipates in compelling ways what the best contemporary cognitive science teaches. This is a landmark book— clear, sparkling, and humane."

—**Owen Flanagan, James B. Duke Professor of Philosophy, Duke University; author of *The Bodhisattva's Brain***

"This wonderful book not only shows us how to live a more satisfying life, it helps explain why social life is even possible: spontaneity, Slingerland argues, is the key to trust, and ultimately, the evolution of cooperation. A thought-provoking book by a truly gifted writer."

—**Harvey Whitehouse, Director of the Institute of Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology, University of Oxford**

"Slingerland's book exemplifies the very principles it elucidates. Although the material is sophisticated, we effortlessly glide through a highly original integration of ancient wisdom and modern science towards a deep understanding of how one can simultaneously set a course in life and live spontaneously."

—**Jonathan Schooler, Professor of Psychological and Brain Sciences at the University of California**

Santa Barbara

"In this fascinating book, Edward Slingerland tackles one of the most infuriating obstacles we encounter in our attempts to live meaningful lives. When we try with too much conscious effort to feel happy, or achieve our goals, we sabotage ourselves – but trying to be spontaneous is equally futile. The way out of this paradox is *wu-wei*, the ancient Chinese ideal of effortless yet accomplished living. *Trying Not To Try* is both a deeply researched history of this enviable state of relaxed success, and a witty guide to achieving it yourself. Don't overthink whether you're going to read it -- just read it."

—**Oliver Burkeman, author of *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking***

"I tried hard to avoid reading this book — just too much to do. But I lost control, dipped in, and was swept along by apparently effortless prose describing the contrast between Confucianism and Taoism, and its relevance to our modern lives, including the good evolutionary reasons why commitment is usually more successful than manipulation. This is the perfect book club book."

—**Randolph Nesse, Arizona State University Center for Evolution, Medicine, and Public Health, and author of *Why We Get Sick***

"Slingerland lucidly addresses the power of developing a 'cultured spontaneity' and accessibly explains how the need to shut off our minds and bodies can be challenging in an age when smarter and faster is the status quo...A studious and fluent appeal for the benefits of a sound mind."

—**Kirkus Reviews**

"Slingerland's book is valuable and refreshing; it illuminates traditions unfairly overlooked in the West, and does so in a way that's clear-eyed, amenable to science, and largely free of the facile relativism that often mars Western accounts of Eastern philosophy."

—**The Skinny**

From the Hardcover edition.

About the Author

Edward Slingerland is Professor of Asian Studies and Canada Research Chair in Chinese Thought and Embodied Cognition at the University of British Columbia. Educated at Princeton, Stanford and the University of California, Berkeley, he is an internationally renowned expert in Chinese thought, comparative religion, and cognitive science. In addition to over twenty academic journal articles in a range of fields, he has written several scholarly books, including *What Science Offers the Humanities* and a translation of the *Analects* of Confucius. He lives in Vancouver with his wife and daughter.

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Skillful Butchers and Graceful Gentlemen

The Concept of Wu-wei

The story of butcher Ding is perhaps the best-known and most vivid portrayal of wu-wei in the early Chinese tradition. The butcher has been called upon to play his part in a traditional religious ceremony involving the sacrifice of an ox, in a public space with the ruler and a large crowd looking on. This is a major religious event, and Butcher Ding is at center stage. The text is not specific, but we are probably witnessing a ceremony to consecrate a newly cast bronze bell. In this ritual, the still-smoking metal is brought fresh from

the foundry and cooled with the blood of a sacrificial animal--a procedure that demands precise timing and perfectly smooth execution.

Butcher Ding is up to the task, dismembering the massive animal with effortless grace: "At every touch of his hand, every bending of his shoulder, every step of his feet, every thrust of his knee--swish! swoosh! He guided his blade along with a whoosh, and all was in perfect tune: one moment as if he were joining in the Dance of the Mulberry Grove, another as if he were performing in the Jingshou Symphony." The Dance of the Mulberry Grove and the Jingshou Symphony were ancient, venerated art forms: Ding's body and blade move in such perfect harmony that a seemingly mundane task is turned into an artistic performance. Lord Wenhui is amazed and is moved to exclaim, "Ah! How wonderful! Can skill really reach such heights?" Butcher Ding puts down his cleaver and replies, "What I, your humble servant, care about is the Way [Dao, ?], which goes beyond mere skill." He then launches into an explanation of what it feels like to perform in such a state of perfect ease:

When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the ox as a whole. And now--now I meet it with my spirit and don't look with my eyes. My senses and conscious awareness have shut down and my spiritual desires take me away. I follow the Heavenly pattern of the ox, thrusting into the big hollows, guiding the knife through the big openings, and adapting my motions to the fixed structure of the ox. In this way, I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

The result is that Butcher Ding is not so much cutting up the ox as releasing its constituent parts, letting the razor-sharp edge of his cleaver move through the spaces between the bones and ligaments without encountering the slightest resistance:

A skilled butcher has to change his cleaver once a year, because he cuts; an ordinary butcher has to change his cleaver once a month, because he hacks. As for me, I have been using this particular cleaver for nineteen years now, and have cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet its edge is still as sharp as when it first came off the whetstone. Between the joints of the ox there is space, and the edge of the blade has no thickness; if you use that which has no thickness to pass through gaps where there is space, it's no problem, there's plenty of room to let your cleaver play. That's why, after nineteen years, the edge of my blade looks like it just came from the whetstone.

It is not all smooth sailing. Occasionally Butcher Ding's effortless dance is interrupted when he senses trouble, at which point his conscious mind seems to reengage a bit, although he still remains completely relaxed and open to the situation confronting him: "Whenever I come to a knot, I see the difficulty ahead, become careful and alert, focus my vision, slow my movements, and move the blade with the greatest subtlety, so that the ox simply falls apart, like a clod of earth falling to the ground." Lord Wenhui clearly sees something in this account that goes far beyond simply cutting up oxen. "Wonderful!" he exclaims. "From the words of Butcher Ding I've learned how to live my life!" This remark signals to us that we should be taking the story of the ox as a metaphor: we are Butcher Ding's blade, and the bones and ligaments of the ox are the barriers and obstacles that we face in life. Just as Butcher Ding's blade remains razor-sharp because it never touches a bone or ligament--moving only through the gaps in between--so does the wu-wei person move only through the open spaces in life, avoiding the difficulties that damage one's spirit and wear out one's body. This is a metaphor that has not lost any of its power. I, for one, can attest that, after forty-odd years of sometimes hard living, my own blade feels a bit nicked and dull.

Another of my favorite portrayals of wu-wei also concerns an artisan. A woodcarver named Qing has received commissions to carve massive wooden stands for sets of bronze bells--precisely the sort of bells that were consecrated in Butcher Ding's ritual sacrifice. Again, this is high-stakes public art, commissioned by

the ruler himself, and involving the promise of a juicy monetary reward and official honors. As with Ding, Qing demonstrates almost supernatural skill: the bell stands that he produces are so exquisite that people think they must be the work of ghosts or spirits. Like Butcher Ding, he is praised by his ruler, who exclaims, “What technique allows you to produce something that beautiful?” Again, like Ding, the woodcarver demurs, denying that what he does is all that special. “I, your servant, am merely a humble artisan. What technique could I possibly possess?” After being pressed a bit, though, he acknowledges that perhaps there is a secret to his success, having to do with how he prepares himself mentally to begin the work: “When I am getting ready to make a bell stand, the most important thing is not to exhaust my energy [qi], so first I fast in order to still my mind. After I have fasted for three days, concerns about congratulations or praise, titles or stipends no longer trouble my mind. After five days, thoughts of blame or acclaim, skill or clumsiness have also left my mind. Finally, after fasting for seven days, I am so completely still that I forget that I have four limbs and a body.” The idea of carving a bell stand without a sense of one’s limbs or body might seem odd, but the point is that Qing has so focused his attention that all external considerations have fallen away. “There is no more ruler or court,” he explains, “my skill is concentrated and all outside distractions disappear.” He’s ready to get to work.

Now I set off for the mountain forest to observe, one by one, the Heavenly nature of the trees. If I come across a tree of perfect shape and form, then I am able to see the completed bell stand already in it: all I have to do is apply my hand to the job and it’s done. If a particular tree does not call to me, I simply move on. All that I am doing is allowing the Heavenly within me to match up with the Heavenly in the world--this is probably why people mistake my art for the work of the spirits!

It’s striking how similar this story is to the lore surrounding a great public artist from an entirely different time and culture, Michelangelo. When questioned about his own apparently supernatural sculpting talents, he supposedly replied that, when given a commission, he simply waited until he found a piece of marble in which he could already see the sculpture. All he then had to do was cut away the stone that didn’t belong. Here, as with Woodcarver Qing, there is a sense that the materials themselves dictate the artistic process. The artist’s own contribution is portrayed as minimal, and the creative act is experienced as completely effortless.

The stories of Butcher Ding and Woodcarver Qing both come from a book called the Zhuangzi, one of the two Daoist works that we will be looking at, and the richest hunting ground for wu-wei stories among Warring States texts. Characterizations of wu-wei in the other of our early Daoist texts, the Laozi, take the form of concise, cryptic poems rather than stories--much of the book probably rhymed in the original Chinese pronunciation, which we can now only imprecisely reconstruct. A typically mysterious passage from the Laozi describing the “Way of Heaven” is clearly meant to provide a model for how a properly cultivated person should move through the world:

The Way of Heaven

Excels in overcoming, though it does not contend;

In responding, though it does not speak;

In spontaneously attracting, though it does not summon;

In planning for the future, though it is always relaxed.

The Net of Heaven covers all;

Although its mesh is wide, nothing ever slips through.

The “wide mesh” that nonetheless captures everything is reminiscent of the relaxed concentration of Butcher Ding or Woodcarver Qing: at ease and yet open, profoundly attuned to the environment. Unlike our Zhuangzian exemplars, however, who attain perfection only after long periods of training in particular skills, the Laozian sage attains wu-wei by not trying, by simply relaxing into some sort of preexisting harmony with nature:

Do not go out the door, and so understand the whole world;

Do not look out the window, and understand the Way of Heaven.

The farther you go, the less you know.

This is why the sage understands the world without going abroad,

Achieves clarity without having to look,

And attains success without trying.

These sorts of passages, where wu-wei is an explicit focus, are quite common throughout the Zhuangzi and the Laozi, which is why the concept of wu-wei is typically associated with Daoism.

What is less widely appreciated, however, is that the sort of effortless ease and unselfconsciousness that characterizes these Daoist accounts also plays a central role in early Confucianism. This may come as a surprise, because Confucianism is typically associated with hidebound traditionalism and stuffy ritual--both of which strike us as the opposite of wu-wei. It can't be denied that the Confucians do a lot to earn this reputation. In the early stages of training, an aspiring Confucian gentleman needs to memorize entire shelves of archaic texts, learn the precise angle at which to bow, and learn the length of the steps with which he is to enter a room. His sitting mat must always be perfectly straight. All of this rigor and restraint, however, is ultimately aimed at producing a cultivated, but nonetheless genuine, form of spontaneity. Indeed, the process of training is not considered complete until the individual has passed completely beyond the need for thought or effort.

Confucius himself, in a passage that serves as a wonderfully concise spiritual autobiography, portrays wu-wei as the goal for which he has spent his entire life striving: “The Master said, ‘At fifteen I set my mind upon learning; at thirty I took my place in society; at forty I became free of doubts; at fifty I understood Heaven’s Mandate; at sixty my ear was attuned; and at seventy I could follow my heart’s desires without transgressing the bounds of propriety.’?” The phrase “my ear was attuned” literally means “my ear flowed along / went with the flow” and suggests that when hearing the teachings of the ancients Confucius immediately grasped and took joy in them. By age seventy, he had so internalized the Confucian Way that he could act upon whatever thought or desire popped into his head and yet still behave in a perfectly moral and exemplary fashion. The end result looks as effortless and unselfconscious as that of the Zhuangzian butcher or Laozian sage but is, in fact, the product of a lifelong process of training in traditional cultural forms.

Confucius’s form of wu-wei--an effortless, unselfconscious but eminently cultured spontaneity--was inherited as an ideal by his two Warring States followers, Mencius and Xunzi, although they disagreed profoundly about what’s required to reach this state. Mencius tried to split the difference, as it were, between the Daoists and Confucius by presenting wu-wei as the natural outgrowth of cultivating our nature. For him,

morally proper wu-wei was like a sprout waiting to break through the ground, or a body prepared to move with a catchy beat. Xunzi, on the other hand, was unimpressed by the Daoist celebration of nature and returned to the model championed by Confucius, whereby wu-wei was the result of a lifetime of rigorous education. For Xunzi, “not trying” was neither easy nor fun: the perfection of form and emotion that finds its ideal expression in dance was, for him, a hard-won achievement resulting from years of difficult training and cultural learning. In any case, this preoccupation with how to cultivate wu-wei was at the center of early Chinese controversies about how to attain the good life. This is a conversation worth paying attention to, because it brings to the forefront ideas, like spontaneity and charisma, that have fallen through the cracks of our contemporary mind-set.

YOUR BRAIN ON WU-WEI

In the early Chinese accounts of wu-wei described above, a couple of features are immediately apparent. First, although there is only one Butcher Ding or Confucius in the world, these wu-wei exemplars experience themselves as split. They seem to feel a gap between an “I” (the locus of consciousness and personal identity) and various forces--spiritual desires, desires of the heart--that take over when they enter wu-wei. Wu-wei is characterized by an internal sense of effortlessness and unselfconsciousness, even though the person in wu-wei may actually be very active in the world. Someone or something else must be doing the work besides the conscious mind that we normally think of as “us.” Second, people in wu-wei are extremely effective: huge oxen fall apart with a few swipes of the blade, and complex social situations are negotiated with masterly aplomb. My guess is that we have all experienced this combination of effortlessness and effectiveness at some point in our lives. While we are completely absorbed in chopping and sautéing, a complex dinner simply assembles itself before our eyes. Fully relaxed, we breeze through an important job interview without even noticing how well it’s going. Our own experiences of the pleasure and power of spontaneity explain why these early Chinese stories are so appealing and also suggest that these thinkers were on to something important. Combining Chinese insights and modern science, we are now in a position to understand how such states can actually come about.

Colloquially, we often speak of ourselves as if we were split in two: “I couldn’t make myself get out of bed this morning,” “I had to force myself to be calm,” “I had to hold my tongue.” Although we use such phrases all the time, if you think about them they’re a bit weird. Who is the self who doesn’t want to get out of bed, and what is its relationship to me? Does my tongue really have a will of its own, and how do I go about holding it? (And who am I if not my tongue?) Since there is always only one “me” involved, this split-self talk is clearly metaphorical rather than literal. At the same time, the fact that we fall back upon this kind of language so frequently means that it must reflect something important about our experience. And talk of split selves is certainly not limited to English: we can see it in many wu-wei stories from early China that involve a narrative “I” confronting a part of the self that is more or less autonomous.

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