

The Paradox of Effective Action

Dr. David Norris

It's long been known that the source of the most creative, lasting and satisfying results in life is some combination of having a very focused intention and an equally strong capacity for letting go of any attachment to it. While being focused on a goal is essential for guiding action, that action is most effective when it is not too tightly constrained by the goal but rather is performed in a state of flow. This is just as true in managing a relationship or a family as it is in succeeding in the arts, sports, business or any other field of human endeavor. Already as early as the 6th Century B.C. we find in the Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu the following observation:

“The Tao never does, yet through it everything is done”.

In other words, to be clear about one's aim and simultaneously to be unattached to it seems to be at the heart of effective action. Though this may be true, it merely begs the question: How? How can these two so completely opposite poles fit together in a coherent way?

The key to answering this question lies in recognizing the power and the mystery of paradox. On the surface, paradox is a self-contradiction that defies any attempt at rational understanding, leaving one merely confused. And no amount of force of will can penetrate that veil of confusion; in fact, the harder one tries the denser the veil becomes. This is so not because we lack the intelligence to grasp the answer, but because of the attitude with which we come to the question. The nature of a paradox is that it refers to itself and so when dealing with one, we must approach it in a way appropriate to its nature. If we see it as a puzzle to be solved rather than as a paradox to be resolved, we remain on the surface, locked out from the mystery behind the veil. To resolve a paradox is to dispel the appearance of self-contradiction inherent in the paradox by including in the process of perception the one who is perceiving it. In other words, the rational mind attempting to pierce the veil is itself part of the veil. Thus, to see through the veil we must bring a particular kind of seeing to the task – a self-

referential kind of seeing, which is not encumbered by the linearity of rational thinking.

The pursuit of a goal reifies not only the goal but the one pursuing it as well. So long as there is a fixed someone pursuing a fixed something, the veil remains intact. However, the mystery is dispelled when the separation between the intended goal and the one intending it is revealed to be an illusion, and with that their mutual reification is dissolved and a flow state naturally and effortlessly presences itself. The flow state is the natural condition of life; it is the flow of the Tao. The rational mind conceals that flow by imposing its reductionist point of view on all that it perceives with the result that only separate, individual objects can appear to the mind. We don't see life; we see the life that rationality gives us to see.

Eliminating the gulf between observer and observed by revealing that it never really existed in the first place is what opens us to the post-rational experience of flow. And this is why reaching the goal by letting go of the attempt to reach it leads to effective action. For example, in the process of giving birth to a child, a way of being becomes accessible to – and even necessary for – a woman in labor; a way of being that is neither active nor passive, but rather responsive, participative.

Thus, engaging with the paradox of effective action goes far beyond merely achieving a desired result. Perhaps more importantly, it also offers the opportunity for further maturation as a human being by inviting a collaboration with life in a moment by moment dance that is both creation and discovery. Just as we outgrew childhood when we became an adolescent and adolescence when we became an adult, so too we can outgrow the constraints of observer consciousness to know ourselves as participants in the flow of life. In the instant of experiencing flow there is neither an intention nor the one intending, there is just flow. Effective action is merely the term we use to explain it later.