

## Be humble – and other lessons from the philosophy of water

You may know this feeling: you wake up to multiple unread notifications on your mobile phone; Your calendar is already packed with meetings, sometimes double- or triple-booked; You feel engaged, you feel busy. In fact, you feel productive. But at the end of it all, something still feels missing. You try to figure out what it is. But before you do, the next day starts all over again.

That was how I felt two years ago. I felt stressed, I felt anxious, I felt a bit trapped. The world around me was moving very quickly. And I didn't know what to do. I started wondering to myself: How do I keep up with all this? How do we find fulfillment in the world that's literally changing as fast as we can think, or maybe even faster? I started looking for answers. I spoke to many people, I spoke to my friends, I spoke to my family. I even read many self-help books. But I couldn't find anything satisfactory. In fact the more self-help books I read, the more stressed and anxious I became. It was like I was feeding my mind with junk food, and I was becoming mentally obese.

I was about to give up, until one day, I found this: "The Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way and Its Virtues". This is an ancient Chinese philosophy classic that was written more than 2600 years ago. And it was by far the thinnest and the smallest book on the bookshelf. It only had 81 pages. And each page had a short poem. I remember I flipped to one particular poem. Here it is. It's beautiful, isn't it?

上善若水  
水利万物而不争，处众人之所恶。  
居，善地；心，善渊；  
与，善仁；言，善信；  
政，善治；事，善能；  
动，善时  
夫唯不争，故无尤。

"The supreme goodness is like water.  
It benefits all things without contention.  
In dwelling, it stays grounded.  
In being, it flows to depths.  
In expression, it is honest.  
In confrontation, it stays gentle.  
In governance, it does not control.  
In action, it aligns to timing.

It is content with its nature, and therefore cannot be faulted."

Tao Te Ching – Passage #8

Wow! I remember when I first read this passage. I felt the biggest chills down my spine. I still feel that today, reading to you guys. My anxiety and stress just suddenly disappeared. Ever since that day, I've been trying to apply to concepts in this passage to my day-to-day life. And today, I'd like to share with you three lessons I

learned so far from this philosophy of water – three lessons that I believe have helped me find greater fulfillment in almost everything that I do.

This first lesson is about humility. If we think about water flowing in a river, it is always stay low. It helps all the plants grow and keeps all the animals alive. It doesn't actually draw any attention to itself, not does it need any reward or recognition. It is humble. But without water's humble contribution, life as we know it may not exist. Water's humility taught me a few important things. It taught me that instead of acting like I know what I'm doing or have all the answers, it's perfectly OK to say, I don't know, I want to learn more and I need your help. I also taught me that, instead of promoting my glory and success, it is so much more satisfying to promote the success and glory of others. It taught me that, instead of doing things where I can get ahead, it is so much more fulfilling and meaningful to help other people overcome their challenges so they can succeed. With a humble mindset, I was able to form a lot richer connections with the people around me. I became genuinely interested in the stories and experiences that make them unique and magical. Life became a lot more fun, because every day I'd discover new quirks, new ideas and new solutions to problems I didn't know before, all thanks to the ideas and help from others. All streams eventually flow to the ocean, because it's lower than them. Humility gives water its power. But I think it gives us the capacity to remain grounded, to be present, to learn from and be transformed by the stories of the people around us.

The second lesson I learned is about harmony. If we think about water flowing towards a rock, it will just flow around it. It doesn't get upset, it doesn't get angry, it doesn't get agitated. In fact, it doesn't feel much at all. When faced with an obstacle, somehow water finds a solution, without force, without force, without conflict. When I was thinking through this, I began to understand why I was feeling stressed out in the first place. Instead of working in harmony with my environment, I was working against it. I was forcing things to change, because I was consumed by the need to succeed or to prove myself. In the end, nothing did. And I got more frustrated. By simply shifting my focus from trying to achieve more success to trying to achieve more harmony. I was immediately able to feel calm and focused again. I started asking questions like: Will this action bring me greater harmony, and bring more harmony to my environment? Does this align with my nature? I became more comfortable simply being who I am, rather than who I'm supposed to be or expected to be. Work actually became easier, because I stopped focusing on things that I cannot control and only on the things I can. I stopped fighting with myself, and I learned to work with my environment to solve its problems. Nature does not hurry. Yet everything is accomplished. That's Tao Te Ching's way of describing the power of harmony. Just as water is able to find a solution without force or conflict, I believe we can find a greater sense of fulfillment in our endeavors by shifting from achieving more success to achieving more harmony.

The third lesson I learned from the philosophy of water is about openness. Water is open to change. Depending on the temperature, it can be a liquid, solid or gas. Depending on the medium it's in, it can be a teapot, a cup or a flower vase. In

fact, it's water's ability to adapt and change and remain flexible that made it so enduring through the ages despite all the changes in the environment. We also live in a world today of constant change. We can no longer expect to work to a static job description or follow a single career path. We, too, are expected to constantly reinvent and refresh our skills to stay relevant. In our organization, we host a lot of hackathons, where a small group or individuals come together to solve a business problem in a compressed time frame. And what's interesting to me is that teams that usually win are not the ones with the most experienced team members, but the ones with members who are open to learn, who are able to unlearn, and who are open to helping each other navigate through the changing circumstances. Life is like a hackathon in some way. It's calling to every one of us to step up, to open up, and cause a ripple effect. Now, we can stay behind closed doors and continue to be paralyzed by our self-limiting beliefs, such as "I will never be able to talk about Chinese philosophy in front of a huge audience". Or we can just open up and just enjoy the ride. It can only be an amazing experience.

So humility, harmony and openness. Those are the three lessons I learned from the philosophy of water so far. They nicely abbreviate to H-H-O, or H<sub>2</sub>O. And they have become my guiding principles in life. So nowadays, whenever I feel stressed, unfulfilled, anxious or just not sure what to do, I simply ask the question: What would water (H<sub>2</sub>O) do? This simple and powerful question inspired by a book written long before the day of bitcoin, fintech and digital technology has changed my life for the better. Try it, and let me know how it works for you. I would like to hear from you. Thank you.