

9 Tao Te Ching

1. Freedom vs. Precise Rules

Central Taoist Idea

- Good living and governing should emphasize freedom and flexibility, not rigid, detailed rules.
- Key concept: *wu wei* – “non-forcing” or “effortless action.”
 - Not literal inaction.
 - Acting in a way that fits smoothly with natural tendencies and circumstances.

Why prefer freedom to rules?

- Reality is complex, always changing. Fixed rules are too crude and simplistic.
- Over-specific rules:
 - Ignore context.
 - Encourage people to game the system rather than do what's genuinely best.
- Taoist ideal:
 - Simple, broad principles (e.g., be like water: helpful, non-contentious).
 - Let people respond flexibly to situations.

Political / personal freedom

- The text suggests that:
 - Over-regulated societies create resentment and clever rule-breaking.
 - Over-regulated lives (personal schedules, self-rules) create stress and rigidity.
- Instead, cultivate inner understanding and character so detailed external rules are less necessary.

2. How “Pushing” via Precise Rules Can Backfire

What is “pushing”?

- Trying to get results through:
 - Direct pressure, confrontation, force.
 - Rigid plans and strict rules.
 - Aggressive control of self, others, or the world.

Taoist diagnosis of backfiring

1. Act and you ruin it; grasp and you lose it.
 - Interfering too much can disrupt natural processes that would have gone well on their own.
 - Example: micromanaging a competent team; constant “fixing” makes things worse.

2. People ruin work when near success.
 - Over-pushing near the end:
 - Adds pressure and anxiety.
 - Leads to mistakes and burnout.
 - Implication: keep the same calm, patient attitude throughout.
3. The world is a ‘spiritual vessel’ that cannot be controlled.
 - The world (and people) are too subtle to be mastered by force.
 - Attempts at tight control:
 - Often provoke resistance.
 - Create new problems (unintended consequences).
4. Hard vs. soft, strong vs. weak.
 - What is stiff and hard is vulnerable; what is soft and flexible endures.
 - Forceful “pushing” is like a rigid tree: impressive but easy to break.

Overall lesson

- Pushing and rigid rule-following often overshoot, misread the situation, and generate the very problems they aim to solve.
- Taoism doesn’t say “never act” but urges less brute forcing, more subtle steering.

3. How (If at All) Should We Try to Influence Events?

Not total passivity

- Taoism is not pure fatalism.
- Ideal is responsive, low-friction influence, not domination.

a. Steering Rather Than Forcing

- Analogy: steering a boat with the current, not rowing furiously against it.
- Approach:
 - Notice existing tendencies and directions.
 - Make small, well-timed adjustments instead of grand, heroic interventions.
 - Work with people’s motivations and habits instead of against them.

b. Influence Through Understanding and Timing

- Attend to what is easy to influence early:
 - It’s easier to guide a small plant than a giant tree.
 - Easier to shape habits early rather than correct entrenched behavior.
- Influence by:
 - Anticipating problems before they become severe.
 - Acting early, gently, and quietly.

c. Influence in an Inconspicuous Way (“Hide”)

- Ideal sage:
 - Does not boast, show off, or seek credit.
 - Influences in a way that minimizes tension and conflict.

- Is like water: helpful, but not competing for status or praise.
- This “hidden” influence:
 - Avoids triggering ego, defensiveness, and rivalry.
 - Lets others feel ownership of decisions.

Objection: Is this manipulative?

- Worry: If you influence others without them noticing, are you secretly controlling them?
- Taoist reply (as reconstructed in class):
 - The sage does not impose selfish agendas; instead:
 - * Helps others “find their nature.”
 - * Tries to remove obstacles, fear, and anger.
 - The aim is harmony, not domination:
 - * Influence is light-touch and reversible.
 - * Listens and responds, rather than secretly plotting.

d. Casting off extremes, excess, extravagance

- Influence should avoid:
 - Extreme policies.
 - Overreaction.
 - Unnecessary showiness.
- Moderate, simple actions are more stable and less likely to provoke backlash.

Summary

- We should try to influence events—but:
 - Indirectly, gently, and early.
 - With humility and willingness to adapt.
 - Seeking alignment with others’ good and with natural tendencies.

4. Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation

Definitions

- Intrinsic motivation: Doing something for its own sake (interest, meaning, joy, care).
- Extrinsic motivation: Doing something for external rewards or to avoid punishment (grades, status, money, praise, fear).

Taoist emphasis

- Taoist practice leans strongly toward intrinsic motivation:
 - Do what fits the tao (the natural way of things) because it is right and harmonious, not for reward.
 - The sage “desires no desires, prizes no prizes”:
 - * Not driven by external prizes or recognition.
 - * Finds contentment in simple, natural living.

Dangers of extrinsic motivation

- External rewards:
 - Intensify competition and contention.

- Encourage showing off rather than genuine virtue or insight.
- Lead to attachment – never “enough,” always wanting more.
- When rules are tied to rewards/punishments:
 - People follow the letter, not the spirit.
 - They may obey when watched, cheat when unsupervised.

Intrinsic motivation and wu wei

- When intrinsically motivated:
 - Action feels effortless and enjoyable (wu wei).
 - One “flows” through life instead of struggling for external markers.
- Taoist happiness:
 - Found in the activity itself (e.g., helping, creating, living simply), not in its payoffs.

Exam angle

- Be ready to explain:
 - How Taoism criticizes over-reliance on external incentives.
 - Why cultivating intrinsic motivation fits better with freedom, non-pushing, and effortless action.

5. The Contrarian Impulse

What is the contrarian impulse here?

- Many Taoist claims sound paradoxical or opposite to commonsense:
 - “Crippled becomes whole.”
 - “Weak overcomes strong.”
 - “The bright road seems dark.”
- This is not just wordplay; it’s a deliberate challenge to standard assumptions.

Targets of Taoist contrarianism

1. Strength and hardness
 - Ordinary view: strong, tough, assertive is best.
 - Taoist view: soft, yielding, and flexible actually survive and prevail.
 - Water wears down rock.
 - The soft newborn is alive; the stiff corpse is dead.
2. Visibility and self-promotion
 - Ordinary view: to succeed, one must stand out, advertise, compete.
 - Taoist view:
 - “Do not display yourself, and you shine.”
 - Hidden, unpretentious virtue is more stable and effective.
3. Straightforward progress
 - Ordinary view: the right path is obvious, linear, and clear.
 - Taoist view:
 - The true path seems dark, backward, or strange at first.
 - Wisdom looks foolish to those who only respect conventional success.

Philosophical function

- The contrarian style:

- Breaks habitual thinking.
- Forces re-examination of what “success,” “power,” and “control” really are.
- It supports the Taoist claim:
 - Our intuitive preference for pushing, strict rules, obvious strength is often misguided.
 - We need to reverse some values: prize softness, subtlety, and hidden influence.

Exam tip

- Be ready to:
 - Give examples where weakness beats strength (e.g., flexibility in negotiation vs rigid demands).
 - Explain how this contrarian stance supports wu wei and skepticism about control.

6. Understanding Before Action

Core slogan

- Understanding must precede meaningful, effective action.
- Taoism calls for caution, observation, and responsiveness before doing anything significant.

a. Cautious, observant attitude

- The wise person is:
 - Careful, like crossing an icy river.
 - Respectful, like a considerate neighbor or a polite guest.
 - Open and receptive, like a valley or uncarved wood.
- These images stress:
 - Humility – you don't already know everything.
 - Attentiveness – you pay close attention before acting.

b. “Calm the muddy water; it becomes clear”

- The mind is often like muddy water:
 - Agitated by fear, anger, desire, preconceived theories.
- If you stop thrashing:
 - The mud settles.
 - You can see what's actually there.
- Application:
 - Before acting, quiet strong emotions and biases.
 - Let understanding arise from clear perception, not from theory alone.

c. “The way is gained by daily loss”

- To understand better, we must let go of:
 - Unhelpful intense emotions (fear, rage, greed).
 - Rigid assumptions and ideologies.
 - Overcomplicated, ego-driven plans.
- “Daily loss”:
 - Not losing important values, but dropping what blocks clear seeing.

d. Planning early, but not over-acting

- It is wise to:
 - Notice things when they are small and easy to guide.
 - Plan before situations become entrenched.
- But:
 - Excessive, fussy action (“act and you ruin it”) undermines the very project.
- Balance:
 - Understand the tendencies early, act lightly and precisely.
 - Maintain the same care at the end as at the beginning.

e. Steering vs. preconceived schemes

- Taoism warns against:
 - Clinging rigidly to pre-made plans and “systems” about how the world must work.
- Instead:
 - Watch how things actually unfold.
 - Adjust – “mix freely” like muddy water stirred, then allowed to settle.
- Understanding is interactive:
 - You test small moves, see responses, and learn.
 - Big, irreversible actions taken without understanding are dangerous.

Exam summary

- “Understanding before action” connects all other themes:
 - Without understanding, precise rules are blind and crude.
 - Without understanding, pushing backfires.
 - True influence comes from seeing clearly and timing well.
 - Intrinsic motivation and contrarian insight both arise from deep reflection, not shallow imitation of conventional ideas.