

# 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.