

9 Tao Te Ching

Dao De Jing – Exam Notes on Selected Topics

1. Freedom vs Precise Rules

Core idea: The Dao De Jing emphasizes freedom, flexibility, and responsiveness over rigid, precise rules.

- Tao and complexity
 - The tao is the natural, ever-changing order of the world.
 - It cannot be fully captured in fixed formulas or detailed rules.
 - Life is fluid; rigid rules are static → mismatch.
 - Wu wei and freedom
 - Wu wei = “non-forcing” or “effortless action.”
 - You act, but not by straining against how things naturally go.
 - Freedom here means:
 - * Acting from understanding and attunement.
 - * Not being bound by checklists and micromanaging rules.
 - Why precise rules are often problematic
 - Too rigid for real life: Rules can’t anticipate all contexts.
 - Letter vs spirit: People may obey the rule while missing its point.
 - Encourages box-ticking: Focus on compliance instead of wisdom or virtue.
 - Ego and control: Detailed rules often express a desire to dominate outcomes.
 - Sage’s alternative
 - “Cast off extremes, excess, extravagance.”
 - Does not display, assert, or praise themselves, yet they “shine” and “stand out.”
 - Leadership by character and understanding, not by over-specifying what everyone must do.
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2. How “Pushing” with Precise Rules Can Backfire

“Pushing”: Forcing outcomes through confrontation, strict rules, heavy-handed incentives or punishments.

- Fragility of over-control
 - “Brittle is easy to break; fine is easy to scatter.”

- Over-structured systems become fragile; small shocks can break them.
 - “Act and you ruin it; grasp and you lose it.”
 - * Over-interference can destroy delicate processes.
 - Near-success failure
 - “People commonly ruin their work when they are near success.”
 - As success nears, people often:
 - * Clamp down, overcorrect, micro-manage.
 - * Become anxious, controlling → they “grasp” and thereby lose what they had.
 - Psychological backfire
 - Strong pressure provokes resistance (contrarian impulse, see below).
 - People comply superficially but disengage inwardly.
 - Creativity, initiative, and responsibility decline.
 - Over-simplification
 - Simple rules are tempting but the world is complex.
 - Crude rules ignore context, leading to:
 - * Unfair applications.
 - * Perverse incentives (people optimize for the metric, not the real good).
 - Illustrative patterns (you can adapt into examples)
 - Parenting by micromanaging every move → rebellion, sneaking, or helplessness.
 - Workplace ruled by metrics and checklists → gaming the system, no real commitment.
 - Rigid self-improvement regime → burnout, giving up entirely after small failures.
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3. How (If at All) Should We Try to Influence Events?

The Dao De Jing does not reject influence; it rejects crude, forceful, and ego-driven influence.

3.1 Wu Wei: Influence Without Forcing

- Wu wei: Acting without strain, compulsion, or rigid willpower.
 - You act with natural tendencies, not against them.
 - Outcomes come from harmony with the situation, not from brute control.
- Water as the model
 - “Best to be like water”:
 - * Benefits all things and “does not contend.”
 - * Flows to low places that others avoid.
 - Water is soft but persistent: it shapes rock over time without direct confrontation.

3.2 Steering Rather Than Pushing

- Early, subtle intervention
 - “At rest is easy to hold; not yet impossible is easy to plan.”
 - “Create before it exists; lead before it goes astray.”
 - Influence is most effective:
 - * Early in a process.
 - * In small, gentle adjustments rather than dramatic last-minute pushes.
- Focus on conditions, not direct control

- Instead of forcing specific actions, shape the environment so good actions are natural:
 - * Arrange incentives and surroundings.
 - * Remove obstacles.
 - * Provide models and examples.
- Let desired outcomes “grow” from conditions rather than be imposed.

3.3 Passivity, Responsiveness, and Non-Contention

- Passivity ≠ laziness
 - The sage is:
 - * Cautious like crossing a winter stream.
 - * Polite like a guest.
 - * Yielding like melting ice.
 - This is readiness and attentiveness, not apathy.
- Non-contention
 - “Only do not contend, and you will not go wrong.”
 - Avoid turning situations into open power struggles.
 - Soft and weak (yielding) often “overcome” hard and strong:
 - * You redirect force instead of meeting it head-on.

3.4 Inconspicuous Influence (“Hide”)

- Influence without visibility
 - The sage:
 - * “Does not display themselves and therefore shine.”
 - * “Does not assert themselves and therefore stand out.”
 - Ideal: influence events in a way that:
 - * Minimizes tension and conflict.
 - * Does not provoke defensiveness or envy.
 - Manipulation objection
 - Worry: Hidden influence = manipulative, disrespecting others’ autonomy.
 - Daoist-style reply
 - Non-coercive: No threats or deception; just shaping conditions and leading by example.
 - Aligned with others’ nature:
 - * “Helps all beings find their nature, but does not presume to act.”
 - * Aim is to let people become more fully themselves, not to bend them to arbitrary plans.
 - Lacks self-serving ambition:
 - * Sage “desires no desires, prizes no prizes.”
 - * Influence is for the good of the whole, not for personal glory.
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4. Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Motivation (Daoist Perspective)

Intrinsic motivation: Doing something because you understand and value it for its own sake.

Extrinsic motivation: Doing something for external rewards, punishments, or mere rule-following.

- Daoist preference for intrinsic motivation

- The sage:
 - * “Desires no desires, prizes no prizes” – not driven by status, prizes, or external validation.
 - * Studies “no studies” and returns to what others pass by – follows inner understanding, not fashionable goals.
 - Wu wei: effortless activity that flows from who you are and how you see the tao.
 - How precise rules and pushing shift motivation
 - Strong external control:
 - * Makes people focus on rewards, punishments, or approval.
 - * Crowds out inner curiosity and care.
 - People obey but do not internalize the reasons:
 - * When rules or supervisors disappear, so does good behavior.
 - * Creativity and genuine engagement drop.
 - Skillful influence of motivation (Daoist style)
 - Help others see for themselves:
 - * Explain, model, and embody the values.
 - Create spaces where:
 - * Good actions feel natural, enjoyable, and self-expressive.
 - Reduce dependence on external pressure:
 - * Over time, as understanding grows, less rule-enforcement is needed.
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5. The Contrarian Impulse

Contrarian impulse: The tendency to resist being controlled or told what to do, even when the request is reasonable.

- Daoist recognition of this impulse
 - “Trying to control the world? You won’t succeed.”
 - “Those who control, fail; those who grasp, lose.”
 - Contemporary interpretation:
 - * People often rebel (openly or quietly) when they feel dominated.
 - * Heavy-handedness creates enemies or passive resistance.
- Strong vs weak; hard vs soft
 - “Humans are born soft and weak; they die stiff and strong.”
 - “The stiff and strong are Death’s companions; the soft and weak are Life’s companions.”
 - “Weak overcomes strong; soft overcomes hard.”
 - Over-obvious strength and control invite challenge; softness disarms the contrarian impulse.
- Practical implications
 - Over-insistence, boasting, or visible dominance can:
 - * Trigger defiance.
 - * Invite rivals to tear you down.
 - Non-contention and humility:
 - * Lower others’ need to prove themselves.
 - * Make cooperation easier because no one feels humiliated or overruled.
- Daoist strategy
 - Lead quietly, without constant commands.

- Take low, humble positions (like water flowing downward).
 - By not triggering contrarian impulses, the sage can guide more effectively.
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6. Understanding Before Action

Central message: Grasp the situation deeply before acting; action without understanding leads to failure.

- Why understanding comes first
 - The world is a “spiritual vessel”:
 - * It is subtle, living, not a machine we can simply program.
 - * Trying to “control” it with simple rules misreads its nature and fails.
 - Many things are easy to guide early, hard to fix later:
 - * “At rest is easy to hold; not yet impossible is easy to plan.”
 - * “A thousand-mile journey begins with a single step” – initial direction matters.
 - Attitudes that make understanding possible
 - Cautious, hesitant, respectful:
 - * Like crossing a frozen river or dealing with neighbors.
 - Receptive and open:
 - * “Blank, like uncarved wood.”
 - * “Open, like a valley.”
 - * Not clinging rigidly to theories or agendas.
 - Calm observation:
 - * “Mixing freely, like muddy water. Calm the muddy water; it becomes clear.”
 - * Instead of rushing to act while everything is “muddy,” let confusion and emotion settle first.
 - “The way is gained by daily loss”
 - Understanding requires subtracting:
 - * Letting go of:
 - Preconceptions about how things “must” work.
 - Intense fear, anger, and pride that distort perception.
 - Ego-needs to appear strong, decisive, or always right.
 - By losing these, you see more clearly what is actually there.
 - From understanding to minimal, skillful action
 - Once tendencies are understood:
 - * Act in small, timed interventions rather than large, late pushes.
 - * “Proceed at the end as at the beginning”:
 - Maintain calm, non-grasping attitude even when success is close.
 - Sometimes the best “action”:
 - * Is to wait, yield, or redirect.
 - * Not to push harder, but to remove obstacles and let natural processes work.
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These notes focus on how the Dao De Jing connects freedom, non-forcing (*wu wei*), motivation, contrarian psychology, and the priority of understanding into a unified approach to influencing events without rigid rules or destructive pushing.