

# 9 Tao Te Ching

## Dao De Jing – Exam Notes on Selected Topics

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### 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.