

# 9 Laozi

## Tao Te Ching – Exam Notes

(*Freedom, Rules, Pushing, Influence, Motivation, Contrarian Impulse, Understanding Before Action*)

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### 1. Freedom vs. Precise Rules

#### Core idea:

The Taoist ideal is *freedom* and *flexible responsiveness*, not living by rigid, precise rules.

- **Tao is ineffable and shifting**
  - The Tao (the Way things naturally go) is subtle, hard to see or describe, and always changing.
  - Because reality is complex and fluid, **no fixed rulebook** can cover every situation well.
- **Why precise rules are problematic**
  - They assume we can predict and control complex situations.
  - They encourage **mechanical obedience** instead of understanding.
  - They make people **focus on the rule**, not on what is truly needed here and now.
- **Taoist alternative**
  - Develop **inner qualities**: calmness, humility, sensitivity, flexibility.
  - Act like water: beneficial, adaptive, not rigidly “contending.”
  - Use **simple guiding attitudes** rather than detailed prescriptions (e.g., “don’t contend,” “know when enough is enough,” “work with natural tendencies”).

#### Exam angle:

Be able to explain why, for Taoists, living well **requires freedom and responsiveness**, and why **overly precise rules are mistrusted**.

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### 2. How “Pushing” and Precise Rules Can Backfire

“**Pushing**” = trying to force outcomes through direct pressure, confrontation, or crude, oversimplified strategies.

#### A. Backfiring in personal projects

- “**Act and you ruin it; grasp and you lose it**”

- When a project is delicate or almost finished, **extra pressure and interference** often break what is working.
- Example: over-editing a nearly complete paper until it becomes worse; over-training just before a performance and getting injured.
- “**People commonly ruin their work when they are near success**”
  - Anxiety near the finish line leads to overcorrection and micromanagement.
  - Taoist advice: keep the same calm, careful attitude **at the end as at the beginning**.

## B. Backfiring in controlling others / the world

- **The world as a “spiritual vessel”**
  - The world is too complex and alive to be controlled like a machine.
  - Those who try to **control and grasp** often **fail and lose** what they cling to.
- **Rules and pressure trigger resistance**
  - Harsh, obvious attempts at control provoke:
    - \* Rebellion, passive resistance, or superficial compliance.
    - \* Loss of trust; people do the minimum to satisfy the rule, not what's genuinely good.

## C. Crude “pushing” vs. skillful influence

- Taoism doesn't say *all* rules and effort are bad, but:
  - We **overuse** direct pushing.
  - We **underuse** more skillful, subtle, and context-sensitive methods.

### Exam angle:

Be ready to explain **mechanisms by which pushing backfires** (anxiety, resistance, fragility of complex systems) and how Taoist texts warn against “acting” and “grasping.”

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## 3. How, If At All, Should We Try to Influence Events?

Taoism doesn't urge total passivity. It urges **a different style of influence**: *wu wei* (effortless, non-coercive action).

## A. Wu wei: working with, not against, natural tendencies

- **Wu wei** is not doing absolutely nothing; it is:
  - Acting without strain, ego, or force.
  - **Aligning with** how things naturally tend to go, instead of fighting them.
- Analogies:
  - **Steering a boat** using the current and wind, instead of rowing furiously against them.
  - **Gardening**: you don't force plants to grow; you create the right conditions.

## B. Steering, not pushing

- **Early, light guidance**
  - “At rest is easy to hold; not yet impossible is easy to plan.”
  - It is easier to shape something **before** it gets rigid or out of control.

- Tiny early corrections (steering) are better than big late pushes (panicked control).
- **Proceed consistently**
  - “Proceed at the end as at the beginning” – avoid last-minute forceful interventions.
  - Consistent calm attention is more effective than occasional frantic pushing.

### C. Passivity and responsiveness

- Taoist “passivity” = **openness and responsiveness**, not laziness.
  - Cautious like crossing an icy stream; humble like a guest.
  - Calm muddy water and it becomes clear: instead of thrashing around, **wait for clarity**.
- Don’t cling rigidly to preconceived notions of how things operate.
  - Your model might be wrong; **watch and learn first**, then act.

### D. “Hidden” influence and the manipulation objection

- **Influence without being seen to influence**
  - The sage helps beings find their own nature “but does not presume to act.”
  - They avoid drawing attention to themselves: no self-display, no insistence on credit.
  - This reduces ego clashes and resistance.
- **Objection: Is this manipulative?**
  - It *could* be manipulative if:
    - \* You secretly control others for your own benefit; you deny their autonomy.
  - Taoist reply (as interpreted for this course):
    - \* The sage minimizes ego, prizes no prizes, desires no selfish desires.
    - \* Their “hidden” influence is more like **setting up conditions** for others to flourish and to act freely, not puppeteering them.
    - \* They “do not contend” – they avoid conflict rather than winning power struggles.

#### **Exam angle:**

Be able to contrast **pushing vs. steering**, explain **wu wei**, and discuss whether **inconspicuous influence** is problematic or can be ethically acceptable on a Taoist view.

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## 4. Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Motivation (Taoist Perspective)

### A. Definitions

- **Intrinsic motivation:** Doing something for its own sake (because it is meaningful, interesting, or satisfying in itself).
- **Extrinsic motivation:** Doing something mainly for external rewards (money, praise, status) or to avoid punishment.

### B. Taoist preference for intrinsic motivation

- The sage “desires no desires” and “prizes no prizes”:
  - Not **addicted** to wealth, status, or external recognition.
  - This loosens the grip of extrinsic rewards.
- Taoism does **not denigrate bodily pleasure**:

- Enjoyments are fine, but:
  - \* Avoid **attachment** – don't let pleasure-seeking control you.
  - \* Avoid **desensitization** – constant chasing makes pleasures dull.
- “Knowing when enough is enough is enough”: stop before craving takes over.

### C. How extrinsic motivation and pushing can undermine things

- Using **rewards and punishments** as main tools:
  - Encourages people to act **for the reward**, not from understanding or care.
  - Can **crowd out intrinsic motives** (e.g., loving learning vs. studying only for grades).
  - Fits with the “pushing” mentality: treat people like objects to be controlled.
- Taoist alternative:
  - Create environments where people can **discover and follow their own nature**.
  - Influence gently; rely on example, simplicity, and good conditions rather than bribes or threats.

### D. Happiness and effortless action

- Wu wei is **effortless and enjoyable**:
  - When you act in harmony with the Tao, you avoid constant struggle and conflict.
  - Happiness is not a product of maximizing external goods through willpower.
  - Be skeptical of **simple formulas** (“do X steps, follow Y rules, and you'll be happy”).

#### **Exam angle:**

Explain how Taoist ideas support **intrinsic motivation** and why overemphasis on **extrinsic rewards** and crude “pushing” is criticized.

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## 5. The Contrarian Impulse in the Tao Te Ching

The Tao Te Ching often asserts **paradoxical, counterintuitive** claims. This is a deliberate **contrarian strategy**.

### A. Key paradoxes

- “The soft and weak overcome the hard and strong” (water vs. rock).
- “Crippled becomes whole; crooked becomes straight; hollow becomes full.”
- “The bright road seems dark; the road forward seems to retreat.”
- The sage does not promote themselves, and thus **truly stands out**; does not contend, and thus “no one can contend with them.”

### B. Purpose of the contrarian stance

- **Challenge default assumptions:**
  - Society admires hardness, force, dominance, loudness, speed, visible success.
  - Taoism points out the **hidden strengths of softness, yielding, quietness, and patience**.
- **Reframe success and power:**

- True strength is being flexible and adaptive (like water or young plants), not rigid.
- True influence often comes from **humility and non-competition**.
- Taking the “low place” (accepting blame, not seeking prestige) can bring deeper authority and trust.

### C. Contrarianism vs. mere rebellion

- This is not being contrarian for its own sake.
- The point is: **common sense is systematically biased** toward pushing, force, and control.
- The text uses paradox to **jolt us** into reconsidering those biases and noticing how often **softness, patience, and non-contending actually work better**.

#### **Exam angle:**

Be able to give examples of Taoist paradoxes and explain how they serve a **philosophical purpose**: criticizing our overvaluation of force and simple rules.

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## 6. Understanding Before Action

### A. Why understanding must come first

- The ancients following the Way are described as:
  - Cautious, hesitant, polite, yielding, blank like uncarved wood, open like a valley.
- These images suggest:
  - **Observation, humility, and receptivity** before decisive action.
  - Recognizing that **our initial theories may be wrong**.
- “Calm the muddy water, and it becomes clear”:
  - If we are emotionally agitated or in a rush, our perceptions are “muddy.”
  - First step: **settle down**, watch, and let things reveal their patterns.

### B. Concrete contrast: understanding vs. pushing

- **Pushing-first approach:**
  - Immediately impose plans, rules, and controls based on preconceived ideas.
  - Tends to ignore the actual situation and people involved.
  - Leads to misfits between policy and reality; more pushing is then needed to fix the damage.
- **Understanding-first (Taoist) approach:**
  - Study natural tendencies: what do people already care about? What are the underlying flows?
  - Then **steer gently**, aligning with these tendencies rather than fighting them.
  - Example: a teacher observes how students learn best, then subtly adjusts; doesn’t just add stricter rules and more homework.

### C. “The way is gained by daily loss”

- “Daily loss” = **shedding**:
  - Unhelpful intense emotions like fear, anger, greed.

- Rigid opinions, ego-centered desires, and unnecessary complexity.
- This loss **clarifies understanding**:
  - With less ego and noise, you can see what is actually happening and what is truly needed.
  - Action then becomes simpler and more appropriate—closer to wu wei.

**Exam angle:**

Explain why Taoists insist on **understanding before acting**, how this connects to **passivity, responsiveness, and daily loss**, and how it differs from the typical modern strategy of acting first and reflecting later.

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**Very Brief Summary for Last-Minute Review**

- **Freedom vs rules:** Taoism prefers flexible responsiveness over rigid rule-following, because reality is complex and changing.
- **Pushing backfires:** Over-control and last-minute pressure often ruin projects and provoke resistance.
- **Influencing events:** Use wu wei – steer gently, early, and in line with natural tendencies; be responsive, not forceful; hidden influence can be acceptable if ego-free and non-manipulative.
- **Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation:** Value inner motivation and simple, sufficient pleasures; excessive pursuit of prizes and rewards distorts behavior and undermines happiness.
- **Contrarian impulse:** Paradoxes (soft > hard, low > high) challenge our bias toward force, control, and visible power.
- **Understanding before action:** Calm, observe, and shed ego and rigid views before acting; then act lightly and effectively, like steering rather than pushing.