

9 Laozi

Dao De Jing – Exam-Focused Notes

These notes cover ONLY the exam topics listed.

Background Concepts (Very Brief)

- Tao (Dao): The underlying way or flow of the universe; natural order that things follow when left to develop according to their own tendencies.
- Wu wei: Literally “non-action,” but really means non-forcing: acting in a way that is effortless, natural, and in harmony with how things already tend to go, instead of pushing, straining, or fighting.

These basic ideas underlie all the topics below.

1. Freedom vs Precise Rules

Taoist attitude

- The Dao De Jing emphasizes freedom, flexibility, and responsiveness, not rigid, detailed rules.
- Ideal conduct is like water:
 - Benefits all things, does not contend.
 - Flows around obstacles; adapts to the shape of its environment.
- The sage:
 - Avoids trying to control or grasp the world.
 - Avoids displaying, asserting, praising, or contending; yet thereby actually succeeds and endures.

Why freedom is preferred

- Precise rules:
 - Assume we fully understand complex situations.
 - Encourage mechanical, one-size-fits-all behavior.
 - Lead people to cling to a plan instead of responding to the present reality.
- Freedom/loosely structured guidance:
 - Let people respond to subtle changes.

- Encourage judgment, sensitivity, and creativity.
 - Fit better with the idea that the Tao is “deep beyond knowing” and cannot be fully captured in formulas.
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2. How “Pushing” with Precise Rules Can Backfire

What “pushing” means here

- Using forceful, confrontational, crude, or overly simplistic strategies:
 - Strict, detailed rules.
 - Micromanagement.
 - Heavy-handed rewards and punishments.
 - Constant pressure and control.

Key Taoist claims

- “Act and you ruin it. Grasp and you lose it”:
 - Interfering too much with a developing process often damages it.
- “Those who control, fail. Those who grasp, lose”:
 - Attempts to dominate complex systems (people, societies, nature) frequently backfire.
- “People commonly ruin their work when they are near success”:
 - Extra push at the end—out of anxiety or greed—often undoes previous good work.

Why pushing backfires (philosophical mechanisms)

- Reactance: People resist when they feel excessively controlled.
 - Rigidity: Strong rules make you stiff and inflexible; but the text repeatedly praises being “soft and weak” over “stiff and strong.”
 - Over-intervention:
 - Like stirring muddy water: you keep disturbing things and they never settle.
 - Better: let the water become still, and it naturally becomes clear.
 - Misjudgment:
 - Precise rules reflect simplified models of reality.
 - When reality doesn’t match the model, forcing the model onto it can worsen problems.
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3. How, If at All, Should We Try to Influence Events?

Not pure passivity

- Wu wei is not literal inaction or apathy.
- Text shows the sage:
 - “Helps all beings find their nature.”
 - “Leads before things go astray.”
 - “Creates before it exists” (acts early and subtly).
- Also: “Work when it’s time.” The issue is how you act, not whether you act.

Core strategy: Steering, not pushing

- Steering vs pushing:
 - Pushing: applying large force against resistance.
 - Steering: noticing tendencies early and guiding them with small, well-timed nudges.
- Examples from the text:
 - “Not yet impossible is easy to plan”: address things while they are still small and flexible.
 - The huge tree starts as a small shoot; the tall tower starts from a pile of earth; the long journey starts with a single step:
 - * Sages influence initial conditions, not just crises when things are already rigid.

Style of influence: Soft, inconspicuous, low-conflict (“hide”)

- Influence in a way that minimizes tension and conflict:
 - Be like water: benefiting others, staying low, not contending.
 - Be “blank like uncarved wood,” “open like a valley”:
 - * Non-threatening, receptive, not showy.
- “Those who sustain tao do not wish to be full”:
 - Avoid drawing attention; don’t try to appear powerful.
- One passage urges accepting a country’s “filth” or “ill fortune” to become its true master:
 - By taking the low, humble, absorbing role, one quietly stabilizes the situation.

Objection: Is this manipulative?

- Worry: Hidden, low-conflict influence might seem like covert manipulation.
 - Taoist reply (reconstructing):
 - The sage does not “presume to act” in the sense of imposing ego-driven schemes.
 - Influence is:
 - * In line with others’ own nature (“helps all beings find their nature”).
 - * Aimed at reducing conflict and suffering.
 - * More like setting up conditions and leading by example than tricking or deceiving.
 - The ethical ideal: minimal-force, minimal-ego guidance, not control for personal gain.
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4. Intrinsic vs Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation as “pushing”

- Extrinsic motivation: doing things for rewards, prizes, praise, or to avoid punishment.
- The text is skeptical:
 - The sage “desires no desires, prizes no prizes.”
 - This suggests resistance to prize-focused, status-focused motivation.
- Heavy use of rewards/punishments:
 - Is a kind of pushing and control.
 - Treats people as means to an externally set target, not as beings with their own nature.

Intrinsic motivation and Taoist ideals

- Intrinsic motivation: doing something because it is naturally satisfying or fitting.
- Taoist picture:
 - People have a natural way when not distorted by fear, greed, or competition.
 - The sage helps beings “find their nature,” not conform to arbitrary prizes.
- Why intrinsic is better (on this view):
 - More stable: not dependent on constant external stimulation.
 - More harmonious: aligns with the Tao, not with artificial pressure.
 - Less conflictual: if people act from their own understanding and inclinations, there is less need for coercion.

Backfiring of extrinsic motivation (connection)

- Overuse of extrinsic rewards can:
 - Crowd out intrinsic interest (doing it “for the prize,” not for its own sake).
 - Increase anxiety and competition (which the Taoist sees as harmful).
 - Fits the general theme:
 - Pushing (with prizes, punishments, status) tends to produce tension, resistance, and distortion.
 - Better: cultivate environments where natural motivations can operate.
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5. The Contrarian Impulse

Contrarian patterns in the text

Many sayings reverse common expectations:

- “Crippled becomes whole, crooked becomes straight, hollow becomes full, worn becomes new.”
- “Soft overcomes hard, weak overcomes strong.”
- “The bright road seems dark; the road forward seems to retreat.”
- “Those who do not display themselves shine; those who do not assert themselves stand out.”

What this contrarianism is doing

- Not mindless rebellion; it is diagnosing common errors:
 - People overvalue strength, assertion, display, speed, control.
 - They undervalue softness, humility, patience, receptivity.
- Purpose:
 - To shock readers into questioning the “obvious” belief that:
 - * More force → more success.
 - * More rules → more order.
 - * More visibility and self-promotion → more influence.

Connection to happiness and action

- The contrarian stance supports:

- Letting go of status-seeking and competition.
 - Embracing a life of simplicity, low contention, and softness.
 - This underlies the Taoist suspicion of:
 - Rigid rule-following as an unquestioned good.
 - Constant striving as the main route to happiness.
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6. Understanding Before Action

Caution and deep perception

- The ancient followers of the Tao are described as:
 - “Cautious, like crossing a winter stream.”
 - “Hesitant, like respecting one’s neighbors.”
 - “Polite, like a guest.”
 - “Mixing freely like muddy water,” but then letting it settle so it becomes clear.
- These images suggest:
 - Slowness to act without understanding.
 - Respect for complexity and uncertainty.

Let the situation clarify

- “Calm the muddy water, it becomes clear”:
 - If you constantly stir things up (interfere, react impulsively), you never see what’s really happening.
 - Understanding often requires stillness, patience, and observation.
- “Those who sustain the Tao do not wish to be full”:
 - They don’t rush to think they’ve fully grasped everything.
 - Intellectual humility supports better understanding.

Early, informed, minimal intervention

- “At rest is easy to hold. Not yet impossible is easy to plan. Brittle is easy to break, fine is easy to scatter”:
 - Address issues when they are small and malleable, not after they become crises.
- “Create before it exists; lead before it goes astray”:
 - Understanding patterns lets you:
 - * Shape initial conditions.
 - * Guide gently before harmful tendencies harden.
- “Proceed at the end as at the beginning and your work won’t be ruined”:
 - Maintain the same care and clarity throughout a project:
 - * Don’t become careless once you feel confident or close to success.

Steering vs pushing (revisited)

- Understanding before action is what makes steering possible:
 - If you don’t understand the natural tendencies of a system, your attempts to guide it will likely be crude pushes.

- Wu wei as the outcome of understanding:
 - Once you grasp how things tend to flow, you can act in ways that:
 - * Feel effortless.
 - * Use small, well-placed adjustments instead of large, violent efforts.
 - * Avoid the failures that come from acting blindly or rigidly.
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Summary for Exam Use

- Freedom vs precise rules: Daoism favors flexible, responsive freedom over rigid rules that ignore complexity.
- Pushing backfires: Excessive control, rules, and pressure often lead to failure, resistance, and distortion.
- Influence events by:
 - Acting early and subtly.
 - Steering rather than pushing.
 - Influencing inconspicuously, with minimal conflict and ego.
- Intrinsic vs extrinsic motivation: Prefer alignment with natural inclinations over rule- and prize-driven behavior; extrinsic pushing can crowd out genuine motivation.
- Contrarian impulse: Soft > hard, weak > strong, humble > assertive; used to challenge common assumptions about power and success.
- Understanding before action: Be cautious and observant; let situations clarify; then act minimally and skillfully, in harmony with natural tendencies (wu wei).