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POWER
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Seven Essential Habits
for Living in **Flow**,
Fulfilment and **Resilience**

Max Landsberg



THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO LIVING IN A FLOW

What if you could live your life in flow? Being in flow is when you are 'in the zone', 'on your game', or even 'on fire'. This is both a mental state and a physical one. You have a feeling of complete focus, full involvement and deep enjoyment in whatever you are doing. You feel the activity takes no energy from you – indeed you feel that it is giving you energy. You barely notice the passage of time. You feel calm but almost ecstatic.

Most of us have glimpsed being in this state. But what if you could be in your zone not just for a moment of flow, nor merely for a day, but always and forever?

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INTRODUCTION

ATTAINING THE DAO TO LIVE IN FLOW

*(Seeing a clear way forward. The key principles of Daoism.
Where this book comes from. This book's structure.
Using this book.)*

Of my several near-fatal accidents, the happiest (or at least the most enlightening) was when I was nearly killed by a pizza.

Three decades ago, when I was still a workaholic, I had been working at home one Friday evening ... while also watching TV and eating that pizza. I had not been concentrating on any one of those activities. A sharp pain suddenly pierced my throat. I sipped some water, but the pain got worse. I drank another sip; the pain ratcheted up. I glanced down at that pizza and, to my horror, saw not a splinter of wood ... but half a splinter. A throat inflammation can quickly suffocate you. So in quick succession there was the ambulance to the emergency room, the general anaesthetic, the endoscopic removal of the other half of the splinter, and a weekend in hospital recovering with a drip in my arm.

A friend gave me a book to read while I recuperated. It introduced me to Daoism, the insights of which would

have a huge influence on my life. The techniques of Daoism helped me write a book that has sold more than a million copies. They gave me simple advice that I could offer to the hundreds of clients whom I would later coach over three decades. More holistically, they stopped me from being a workaholic and helped me live in 'flow,' fulfilment and balance most of the time.

This book aims to offer up those insights in a simple and practical way, so you can see a clear way forward and live in flow, even as the world's kaleidoscope of change swivels ever faster. Using Daoist principles, you can access the state of flow for extended periods. This in turn can help you solve your daily problems, make the most of your opportunities, and help the people you are coaching or leading live a richer life.

This book presents seven habits that will let you achieve this. Each habit is anchored robustly in one of the enduring principles of Daoism. Over thousands of years, these principles and habits have led to improved performance, fulfilment and resilience. For each habit I offer three succinct maxims and stories, to act as prompts as you develop and live these habits.

SEEING A CLEAR WAY FORWARD

Being in flow is when you are 'in the zone.' You are 'on your game,' or even 'on fire.' This is both a mental state and a physical one. You have a feeling of complete focus, full involvement and deep enjoyment in whatever you are doing. You are utterly absorbed. You are resourceful and resilient. Things are effortless: your activities take no energy from you – indeed, they give energy to you. You barely notice the passage of time. You feel calm yet almost ecstatic.

You may have glimpsed being in this state of flow – when hitting the perfect tennis shot, cracking the egg perfectly with no loose bits of shell, cracking the perfect joke. But it is indeed possible to be in this zone not just for a moment of flow, nor merely for a day of flow, but always and forever.

Much of the secret of reaching this state lies in seven habits. These start by developing your ability to see or sense the unvarnished truth of your surroundings in a clear and unblinker way. This is the promise of Daoism. That promise is symbolized by the very word for *Dao* in Chinese:

道

This character has two parts. On the left, 辵 means ‘walk.’ On the right, 首 means ‘head.’ So, the symbol 道 ‘Dao’ implies ‘to go ahead.’¹ As with most Chinese characters, it contains further undercurrents and meanings, woven into this single picture. For example, the character for head also means chief or first (as ‘head’ coincidentally does in English too: head chef, head teacher). And the rectangle in the centre of the head is an eye. So, the Dao character also suggests ‘the chief way forward,’ and even ‘seeing the way forward.’

The stories presented throughout this book show you how to find and use this clear-sightedness. This can lead you to deliver virtuoso performance more consistently – and live in the type of flow set out in Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s foundational 1990 book *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. This can also give you greater fulfilment and resilience.

1 See Wieger, *Chinese Characters: Their Origin, Etymology, History, Classification, and Signification*, p 789 for ‘going and pausing’ and p 326 for ‘go ahead.’

THE KEY PRINCIPLES OF DAOISM

Daoism is a set of principles and habits that help you live more in tune with the world. It favours simple beliefs and practices over commandments, and it offers new mindsets rather than detailed prescriptions and instructions.

Daoist thinking and practices emerged in China 3,000 years ago. In Western terms, it is a rich cocktail that includes the simple Stoic principles of Ancient Greece. It mixes in, however, the joyousness and spontaneity of the hippies. Early Daoists did not belong to religious institutions, and they rejected complex theories. Thus Daoism is not really a religion. Some people consider it a philosophy; if so, it's an extremely practical one.

Before looking in detail at each principle and its related habit, let's take a quick look at the underlying mindset on which they are based. (I use the word 'cosmos' quite often in this book. I intend this to mean not 'stars and galaxies,' but everything that is going on in the world. Similarly, by 'nature' I do not mean merely 'trees and bees' but everything going on in the world. I therefore use the following terms interchangeably: cosmos, world, nature, ecosystem, environment, etc).

The Daoist mindset includes several core beliefs: the cosmos is a connected ecosystem; change is continuous and pervasive; we are better working *with* the dynamics of our team, family or environment rather than thinking we are smart enough to 'push the river' and substantially go against the cosmos; self-development is a worthwhile venture that often means discarding assumptions in order to see the past, present and future with greater clarity and simplicity.

At its heart, Daoism aims to encourage your own energy to act in synergy with the energy of your surroundings and

the cosmos. We call this pervasive energy *qi* 气 (pronounced 'chee') in Chinese.² This vital force is inherent in everything. As Einstein observed in his theory of relativity: $E = mc^2$!

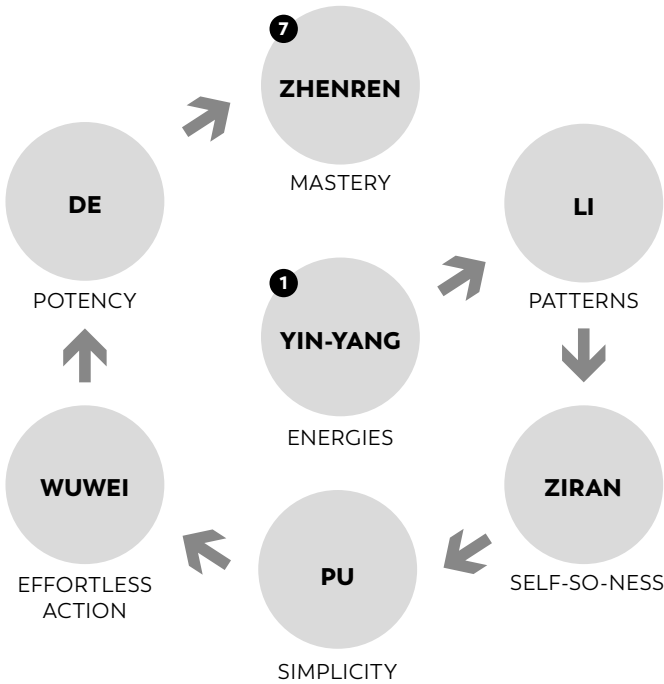
Qi is also a central factor in traditional Chinese medicine and Chinese martial arts. You may be familiar with them from their influence on the practices of tai chi and qigong.

Below are the seven principles and habits that can best help us live in flow. Daoism, of course, has many additional principles. But for this book I have selected a manageably small number of these principles to serve as an introduction. I present them sequentially to create the best journey for your exploration and discovery. You will, however, see that most of these principles are strongly related to each other.

You can use the diagram below as a guide as you develop your understanding and intentional practice. To simplify, the first three principles, starting with *yin-yang* at the centre, are about the way that you and your environment work. These include: Flows of potential energies, Patterns, and Natural self-so-ness³. The next three principles are more about how you choose to interact with your environment. These include Simplicity, Effortless action, and Potency. The last principle is where you end up 'attaining the Dao' (Mastery). By attaining the Dao you are able to live your whole life in flow.

2 The simplified character 气 comes from an ancient character that showed a link between the three horizontal lines of Heaven, Mankind and Earth. The traditional character 氣 shows steam rising above rice 米. As rice combines the idea of low, watery *yin* and high, sunny *yang*, the traditional character suggests the flow of energy from *yin* and *yang*. The new, simplified character is said to represent steam from a sacrifice rising energetically upwards.

3 We explore the 'self-so-ness' aspect of spontaneity in the chapters on *ziran*.



MAP OF THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES

These principles and their related habits will be explored in detail in later chapters. As a high-level summary, however:

1. **Yin and yang**, as characterized by the well-known symbol ☯, represent complementary forces in the environment, such as good/bad, active/passive, etc. These forces are in continuous and interrelated flux. By being able to habitually sense the *yin* and *yang* in a situation, you can better sense how energies are flowing, and see the opportunities and threats that you might otherwise overlook.
2. **Li** means patterns. By recognizing the patterns in people, situations and nature, you can gain a better view of how and when to use the undercurrents of the cosmos in your favour.

3. **Ziran** is hard to translate, but means the ‘natural self-ness’ of how the cosmos (including people) typically behaves. By staying in tune with this, you can act in concert with things, and avoid unintended consequences.
4. **Pu** means simplicity and clarity: sensing the world in an uncomplicated way. As we will see, you can get there by using meditation to ‘fast the heart-mind,’ and dissolving your biases by ‘sweeping the lodging house’ of your spirit. *Pu* helps you observe and interpret *yin-yang*, *li* and *ziran* more truthfully, and to understand your environment with great clarity and accuracy.
5. **Wuwei** means effortless action. By mastering this, you cultivate your energies, rather than frittering them away in stratagems that are too contrived. It can generate moments of being ‘in flow.’
6. **De** means potency. It is how you act in ways authentic to yourself and to the prior five principles. When you act in tune with your *de*, you radiate an attractive power that draws people and serendipity to you.
7. **Zhenren** means mastery. This is mastery of yourself-as-connected-with-the-cosmos. It is what allows you to live a life that is in flow all the time. In the words of the Daoist book *Zhuangzi* (and repeated by martial artist and movie legend Bruce Lee) you will:

“Moving, be like water.
Still, be like a mirror.
Respond like an echo.”

You can apply these principles in any situation. By following them in a regular, habitual way, millions of people have lived better, happier and more productive lives. A long list of eminent people have embraced them. This includes philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant,

Arthur Schopenhauer and Bertrand Russell; writers such as Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Oscar Wilde; psychologists such as Carl Jung and Abraham Maslow; architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright; songwriters from George Harrison to rapper RZA; Nobel laureates such as Niels Bohr and Tu Youyou, who in 2015 became the first Chinese woman to win the Nobel Prize; and even Bruce Lee and Steve Jobs.

THE STORIES

This book brings each of these principles – and their related habits – to life through *chengyu* stories.

Chengyu are Chinese sayings. They are maxims like the English ‘every cloud has a silver lining,’ except that the *chengyu* typically have deeper meanings. They often have a backstory that further embellishes the gist. For example, one of the *chengyu* to illustrate *li* (patterns) is *Old Frontiersman Loses Horse*. The story is only a page long, but it deepens our understanding, and makes it more memorable. These stories, and their *chengyu* titles help convert the concise maxim into a trigger to pop up and remind you of its main meaning when needed.

Other *chengyu* we explore include *Brush Stops, Meaning Continues*; *Pierce Wall, Steal Light*; *Eight Immortals Cross the Sea*; and *Legs Akimbo, Practically Naked*.

With remarkable economy, most of these *chengyu* are just four characters long (in Chinese!).

WHERE THIS BOOK COMES FROM

During 30 years of coaching hundreds of successful leaders, managers and experts, I realized a pattern. I noticed that the principles and practices of the Daoists, in which I had long held an interest, were highly relevant for personal development. They also offered uniquely valuable signposts for the broader quest to 'live in flow.' Their lack of dogma makes them very attractive to the modern heart-mind.

I searched for a guidebook to give to my clients. It would offer up the essence of the Daoist way. It would present the advice clearly, and with a practical bent. I found many academic works that were scholarly but abstruse. I found other books and articles that merely recounted the history of the Daoist way. I found some books that came close to what I sought, and I cite them in the following pages. But I failed to find a guidebook that spoke to me with the mix that I sought of conceptual rigor and clear usability.

This is the book that I had failed to find. It draws from four main sources. Firstly, it is based on my own 30 years' experience of coaching many hundreds of people. As a partner or senior partner at one of the world's top business consulting firms, and at two of the world's top executive search firms, I have been privileged to coach a wide range of people. In these roles, I developed a passion for helping people become more effective in their jobs, and also more at ease with themselves and their worlds. I found that most people can learn to become more successful in their jobs. But I noticed that relatively few people manage to achieve this success while also living in flow. I took a strong interest in how those latter people accomplished that.

Secondly, the content of this book comes from a deep study of the daily practices of Daoism. In the 25 years since

I wrote the million-copy-selling guide *The Tao of Coaching*,⁴ I have studied Daoism in depth. I have explored the Daoist mountains of China on foot, and have tried to live as a Daoist of sorts.

The third source of content is the *chengyu* maxims and stories. I first read of them in my hospital bed, after the near-deadly pizza.

Finally, I included material from five principal texts of Daoism. First is ***Daodejing*** (meaning *The Classic of the Way and [Its] Power*). You may know it as *Dao De Jing* or *Tao Te Ching*. It is a collection of verses from around 300 BCE. It is traditionally attributed to a man named Laozi, meaning ‘the old master,’ though it more likely derives from multiple sources. Second is ***Zhuangzi***, named after Zhuang Zhou – a thinker and aristocrat who died in 286 BCE. The work is a compilation from various authors, dating from 5th-3rd century BCE. Third is ***Liezi***, also known as *The True Classic of the Perfect Virtue of Simplicity and Emptiness*. It is a compilation of pithy stories named after a sage who may or may not have existed. Fourth is ***Neiye*** (meaning *Inward Training*). This dates from the 4th century BCE. It is one of the earliest Chinese texts to focus on breathing, meditation and the circulation of the vital energy, *qi*. The fifth foundational text is the far older ***Yijing*** (*Book of Changes*, aka *I Ching*).

Each of these texts has its own character, as you will see. *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*, in particular, tell succinct stories in engaging prose. They are worth a read. The Further Reading section describes these books in more detail.

4 Dao is a more contemporary rendering of ‘Tao.’

THIS BOOK'S STRUCTURE

Each part of this book addresses one of the seven principles set out above.

I first explain the principle in detail, including where and why to notice it, and then show techniques for developing awareness of it and applying it as a habit.

Three short stories in successive chapters then illuminate important nuances of the principle. Each story is headed by a *chengyu* maxim, as explained above. I have also included several contemporary stories to highlight the current relevance of the principles.

Each story aims to take you on an adventure. You will discover memorable tips, tweaks of mindset, and mini-mantras that you can adopt and can pass on to others. These can help you live more fully and creatively.

To help you digest and apply the learnings, each chapter ends with a brief summary and suggestions for reflective learning.



This guide focuses on the practical lessons of classical Daoism, not on its later religious additions. The early Daoists advocated freedom of thinking (in part as a reaction to the growing strictures of Confucianism). They rejected dogma. Yet within a few centuries, hierarchies of priests, canons and libraries had emerged – the very complexity that the early Daoists had avoided. This book focuses on the former ‘practical philosophy,’ rather than the later ‘religion.’ That said, many of Daoism’s later developments, such as the inclusion of Confucian and Buddhist principles, may be of interest and value to you. I therefore outline these developments in Appendix 1.

USING THIS BOOK, AND THE YIN-YANG NEEDLE

The goal of this book is not to convert you into being a full-time Daoist. Rather, it offers you a lens through which you can see the world, and your interactions with it, in new and valuable ways. Even if you can tap into just a few of the habits suggested, you can gain the immediate benefits of focus, calmness and creativity. If you can live all of the principles *continuously*, then your world will be a far better place.

Finally, this book is not a recipe book of instructions or a workbook in which the reader is meant to do most of the work; it is, however, a mix of these two genres.

Let me explain. As I was writing this book, it struck me that *any* book should be like a *yin-yang* needle. As we explore shortly, *yin* can represent ‘receptivity,’ while *yang* can represent ‘activity.’ The words, ideas and statements in a book are thus like the active *yang* tip of the needle. But equally important is the receptive *yin* eye of the needle. The eye of the needle is a portal through which you can thread your own meaning, values and relevance. Once you have threaded the needle, you can pull it through the fabric of your own life. In other words: you will get the most out of this book if you follow at least some of the suggested reflections, and experiment with putting the insights you develop into practice.

You can gain the benefits of the Daoist way using any of three approaches:

- Picking out several habits to adopt that can help you right now in your daily life.
- Tweaking your mindset to see more fully the value of working in tune with your cosmos, by quite literally co—operating with it.

- Reinforcing your own grasp of Daoism, as a leader or coach, by helping your team, family or friends to discover the power of the Dao.

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yin yang

PRINCIPLE 1

YIN-YANG

(ENERGIES)

SENSE THE ENERGIES ...
TO BETTER SEE OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS


This chapter explains *yin* and *yang*. It then shows where you can discern them, and the benefits of doing so. It also illustrates how you can develop your sense of *yin-yang* in your daily life. You will find the *yin-yang* principle woven through much of the Daoist way.

For the Daoist, everything has the qualities of both *yin* and *yang*. *Yin* and *yang* are characteristics, not substances. You can think of them as the blackness and whiteness that exist in various degrees of greyness. Situations, things and even people have both *yin* and *yang* traits, as we shall see.

The *yang* characteristic is often described as positive. Translations of *yang* include ‘bright, glorious; open out, expand.’ Its Chinese character is a useful signpost to its wider meanings. *Yang* is 陽, which combines the symbol for a hill, rotated sideways (阝) and the symbol for the sunny side (日). So, *yang* means bright and also evident, explicable, patent, purposeful and positive.

In contrast, *yin* 陰 is the shaded side (陰) of the hill (山). So *yin* stands for the characteristics of shaded, hidden, mysterious, latent, receptive and negative.

Crucially, *yin* and *yang* are not opposites that exclude each other; rather, they complement each other in a dynamic way. The hill symbolism helps us here. One side of the hill is bright because of the positive *yang* illumination of the sun. The other side is dark because of the *yin* lack of sunlight. So as the sky turns from night to day, it is the shift from *yin* to *yang* that creates the energy flows on the ground. Anyone who has camped near the foot of a hill will have felt the morning breeze rise up the hill, and the evening breeze flow down it. For a simpler analogy, you could think of *yin* and *yang* as the two sides of the coin that is *qi* (vital force).

As shown in the well-known symbol of *yin-yang*, the *tai-jitu* symbol , Daoists see the world as composed of change that is both continuous and interrelated. Daoists are keenly aware of the energies driving that change, which is powered by the interplay between receptive *yin* and animated *yang*. Nothing is absolutely at rest; rest is merely an intermediate state of movement, or latent movement, which is pregnant with possibility.

Daoists know they will be happier and more fulfilled if they adapt to the changes in circumstances that are powered by *yin* and *yang*, and advance with the times.

This stands in contrast to typical Western philosophy. In the West, we often focus on achieving specific states, with change seen as a way to get from one state to another. Even though Heraclitus pointed out that you ‘can’t put your foot in the same river twice,’ he did not explain clearly how to live and work with that idea. Daoism does.

The *yin* and *yang* in a situation are often obvious: positive-negative; purposeful-reflective; push-pull. Sometimes the dynamic is less obvious: conscious-subconscious;

health-unwellness; poverty-wealth; before we can put one foot forward, the other must press back.

Crucially, nothing is ever completely *yin* or *yang*. A *yin* situation always contains the seeds of its *yang* complement, and vice versa. You can see that within the *taijitu* ☯. Those seeds are represented by the dot of black inside the white, and the dot of white inside the black. The aggressive person offers a real-life example: his *yang* explosiveness is evident, though it probably hides a seed of *yin* insecurity.

The Daoists see cyclicity as inevitable. *Yin* eventually transforms into *yang*, and vice versa. In this cyclicity, *yin* and *yang* ‘arise mutually.’ This mutual arising is a fundamental aspect of Chinese philosophy, termed *xiang sheng* (giving birth to each other).⁵

The Daoist classic *Daodejing* puts it this way in verse 2:

Being and non-being produce each other.
 Difficult and easy complement each other.
 Long and short define each other.
 High and low oppose each other.
 Fore and aft follow each other.

And in verse 58:

Good fortune has its roots in disaster,
 and disaster lurks with good fortune.
 Who knows why these things happen,
 or when this cycle will end?
 Good things seem to change into bad,
 and bad things often turn out for good.
 These things have always been hard to comprehend.

5 Appendix 3 is a brief glossary and guide to pronunciation.

When the *yang* in a situation is evident, the Daoist looks for where the *yin* is hiding and finds the relevance of the interplay, and vice versa.

By sensing the *yin* and *yang* in a situation, you can better discern the flows of energy, and see opportunities and threats. This can help you as a leader or in your life more generally. An opportunity frequently hides inside a threat, and vice versa. The stories in the following chapters illustrate this in practice.

However, these cycles are not the simple to-and-fro of a pendulum's swing. They form a dialectical process. That is, there is dialogue between *yin* and *yang*, which creates a new state and a further complementary opposite. These two new states, in turn, interact and the process continues, like a kaleidoscope. This view of the holistic and dynamic is characteristic of Daoism, and indeed of Asian philosophy more broadly.⁶

So, where can you try to observe *yin* and *yang*, and why should you pay attention to them? How can you become more adept at working with them?

Your body. You can start by noticing the *yin* and *yang* in your body. The whole of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is based on balancing *yin* and *yang*. TCM is beyond the scope of this book, but let's focus briefly on your nervous system.

Your sympathetic nervous system (the *yang* part) is activated by danger or stress. It gets you ready for 'flight, fight or freeze.' In contrast, your parasympathetic nervous system (the *yin* part) regulates your 'rest and digest' or 'feed and breed' functions. The problem with today's hectic pace is that it can nudge you deeply into the *yang* mode.

If you spend too much time in that *yang* state, you do not have time to nourish and heal your body. This leads to problems with sleep, muscle stiffness, feelings of frustration,

6 See Peng, "Naïve Dialecticism and the Tao of Chinese Thought."

and anxiety. You risk becoming locked into this mode. Too much continuous *yang* means your brain becomes hard-wired – literally. When you are calm, signals from your sensory organs first travel mainly to your neocortex. This is the ‘rational’ part of your brain, which decides whether to pass the signal on for action. If an external threat needs urgent action, your neocortex passes the signal to your amygdala. Deep in your brain, your amygdala then releases adrenaline and cortisol to prepare you for fight, flight or freeze. However, under relentless stress and anxiety, the wiring that runs from your sensory organs directly to your amygdala get upgraded to full-fibre broadband, while your rational neocortex remains on dial-up. Slight threats produce immediate and extreme reactions. In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, psychologist Daniel Goleman called this amygdala hijack ... but you could also call it neocortex bypass.

In contrast, by balancing these two modes of *yin* and *yang* you can gain energy, health and calmness. Ask: Am I balancing these two modes? What changes in my work or social routines could benefit me?

Your level of activity. Many of us blast through the day expressing *yang* energy, only to slump down in a *yin* state of exhaustion at the end of the day. Perhaps this is OK. But perhaps you can spread out the *yang* and *yin* more evenly. You could even go as far as to take a nap midday, as Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher did. This can help you keep your internal battery charged, rather than frequently running it flat and thus eroding it.

Your mood. Most people experience periods of exuberance (*yang*) and periods of unhappiness (*yin*). If you remain attuned to both *yin* and *yang*, you can see the embers of happy *yang* in an unhappy *yin* situation. By perceiving this, you can then fan the embers of happy *yang* back to life. This can help you become more resilient.

Conversely, it's good to recognize in a happy *yang* period that *yin* will eventually pop up, and to be prepared for that. This is another source of resilience.

Your relationship with your partner or close friends. Are you someone who talks (*yang*) more than you listen (*yin*), or vice versa? If you talk a lot, doing more listening can help you learn, and encourage others to engage with you. If you are the listening type, then expressing yourself more can help you share your vision. This can inspire others and help you engage with their manifestation of the Dao.

The team or organization you lead. Effective leaders can sense the *yin* and *yang* in their teams. For example, they know which of their colleagues are more *yin* reflective types, and which are more *yang* doers. Great leaders know how to combine these energy sources for greater team power, as we will see.

BENEFITS AND YOUR DEVELOPMENT

By attuning yourself more to the *yin* and *yang* in the world and in yourself, you can gain a deeper and wider view of what is going on. You will make wiser use of your energy, and recharge your energy levels more effectively; become more creative as an individual or team leader; and build better relationships as you master the dance of interaction with your conversation partner.

By attending merely to this first principle, your life starts to develop more flow. To gain these benefits, steps to understand *yin-yang* include:

1. **Practice sensing *yin* and *yang* in different situations.** For example, art and architecture have both positive structures and negative spaces. Music has loud and quiet; fast and slow; triumphant and sentimental. Rivers have

- gushing torrents and limpid pools. Mood can be manic and depressive. Fine-tune your ability to notice *yin* and *yang*, and see how one might be hiding inside the other.
2. **Sensitize your antennae to how *yin* may change into *yang* and back again, and notice the energy flows.** You can sense these transitions even as you walk. You can start with a *yin* amble, stroll or saunter; then switch into a *yang* march, strut or swagger. Try some tai chi. Notice the ebbs and flows of conversations, team discussions or arguments.
 3. **Experiment consciously, and perhaps radically, with trying more *yin* or more *yang*.** Notice what happens when you amp up your *yin* or *yang*. Play with being more *yin* (e.g. receptive) or *yang* (e.g. assertive) than you might otherwise be in a given situation.

THE MAXIMS AND STORIES

In the following three chapters, *Brush Stops*, *Meaning Continues* explores the core aspects of *yin-yang* energy flows. *Pierce Wall*, *Steal Light* illustrates the oft-overlooked power of *yin*, and the cyclicity of *yin-yang*. *Eight Immortals Cross the Sea* shows how *yin-yang* diversity can contribute to a team's success.

As you read these stories, it is useful to ask yourself:

- Where are the *yin* and *yang* in the story?
- How can I discern *yin* and *yang* in my own life more deeply? How do they 'arise mutually'? What does that imply for me?
- How does – or could – managing the interplay between *yin* and *yang* create more energy for me?

After reading the stories, you might decide you want to further develop your insights into *yin-yang* energy flows. If so, use the template following each story to help you plan your growth.

意到筆不到

yi dao bi bu dao

1. BRUSH STOPS, MEANING CONTINUES

Embracing the power of *yin*
to achieve more through less

I prepare to paint.

Yesterday I had cleared the table of distracting objects. This morning I cleared my mind of distracting thoughts. Now I am ready. The four treasures of Chinese painting arranged in front of me: brush, ink-stone, ink-block and paper.

I start to paint a landscape in the Chinese style of ink wash. The first, lighter washes of distant mountains turn out well.

My pencil sketch of the landscape is propped up in front of me. I grind the ink-block against the stone and add a few drops of water. I smudge a few peaks to create some clouds. The shoulders of nearby hills emerge in the middle distance – from the serendipity of the ink’s flow. Shorter, stabbing strokes create a forest and a solitary pine in the foreground, next to the stream. The hermit’s hat emerges as an accidental masterpiece. Offshore a small flotilla of fishermen’s boats emerges, unbidden. Tiny figures bend over the stern to pull in a fishing net. You can practically feel them straining.

The painting is perfect. I call my painting master and he comes to see it a few days later. “Not bad,” he says, “... but the painting does not really work ...”

Crestfallen, I glance at him askance. He says nothing. I follow his roving gaze to discern where the painting might be falling short. I raise both eyebrows higher in inquiry.

He waits and waits. At last, the empty space in the conversation triggers in me an inkling of understanding.

“The brushstrokes are pretty good,” I say, “... but I guess the picture is too full, too busy ... too much ink and not enough empty space. If I’d spared the brush, the painting might have had more meaning.”

Cramming too much into a painting or conversation can be counter-productive.

In 1679, there appeared in China an influential painting manual. Filled with valuable maxims and archetypal images, the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* presented tips and techniques drawn from the country’s old masters. It inspired hundreds of painters over many centuries, in both China and Japan.

One of its maxims – ‘Brush Stops, Meaning Continues’ – is incredibly rich in insights. It is a Swiss Army knife that you can unfold to use in many situations, not just in painting.

The essence of that maxim is: even vacant space – apparently empty and void, where the brush has not arrived – can carry meaning. The space is, in fact, pregnant with potential power. Any masterpiece relies as much on the space between the brushstrokes as on the painted parts, because it relies on the interplay between them.

For the Daoist, this is a manifestation of *yin-yang* energy flows. Any painting needs a bit of driven, positive-principle

yang. But it also needs some receptive, negative-principle *yin*. The tension between *yin* and *yang* creates energy, and energy creates power. Though the paintbrush has stopped, the meaning has not, and the meaning indeed has more power when the whole painting includes complementary empty space.

The maxim has further nuances. Any conversation needs both *yin* and *yang*. A conversation may have gaps, pauses and unsaid words, but those vacancies may indeed be laden with meaning. Our friend or colleague may not paint their thoughts and meanings out loud for us. Of course, that does not mean those thoughts do not exist – the person may just be unable or unwilling to express them. We may have writer’s block, but that does not mean we lack things to say. You get the drift: any aspect of living needs both *yin* and *yang*.

You can see this in works of fiction too. Great novels often engage the reader because the author omits things, so the reader can fill them in. Umberto Eco carried this to an extreme. He was the father of the ‘open text’ school of fiction in which the author offers details only sparingly. Leaving stuff out can be powerful: it actively engages the ‘existential credentials’ of the interpreter as she or he provides the missing details.⁷

Paulo Coelho offers a further example. In *The Alchemist*, he often forsakes the details when talking of deserts, trees and even people. When he writes of crossing a desert, he leaves us, the readers, to fill in our preferred images of that desert. In doing so, we gain more from our interaction with the book.

7 Commenting on Eco’s ‘Open Text’ and the poetics of openness, Cary Campbell of Simon Fraser University says that ‘open text’ engages by offering multiple interpretations.

William Goldman was a novelist, playwright and one of Hollywood's most successful screenwriters. He won Academy Awards for *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* and *All the President's Men*. When coaching aspiring writers on how to engage an audience, his first advice was, "Make 'em laugh, and make 'em cry but most importantly, make 'em wait!" The power of the pregnant pause emerges again ...

In M. Night Shyamalan's 2004 movie *The Village*, our terror is sustained for most of the story by demons whose faces and actions we do not see. The elders refer continually to "those of whom we must not speak." Empty space has power.

These and other examples show clearly how the principle of *yin-yang* is embedded deep within the maxim 'Brush (or pen) stops, meaning continues.' When we fill a discussion or project with too much purposeful *yang*, we deny the power of receptive *yin* to contribute.

To help us understand how we can apply this maxim, let's first pause briefly to notice the first character of the phrase: 意, which stands for 'meaning.'

A simple translation from the Chinese would be: idea, meaning, thought. But the character carries other powerful nuance too: wish, desire, intention, to expect, to anticipate.

We gain a deeper understanding if we look at this character's etymology. Looking closely, you can see that 意 is built up from the character 音 *speech* at the top and 心 *mind* at the bottom. So, this first full character of the maxim implies 'speech of the mind.' And that character 心 for *mind*, with its central pump and peripheral signs of blood in flow, also signifies *heart* and *soul*, as we shall see later.

So, a deep literal reading of this chapter's maxim would be: the speech of the heart-mind-soul arrives, even though our utterance through brush, pen or spoken word does not.

There are at least three distinct ways to use this maxim.

First, it can remind us to **not overfill the pot**. Even experienced leaders and managers can talk too much, tempted to be over-generous with their advice. This can leave too little space in the conversation for the other person to express their own observations, feelings and motivations. See your contributions to the conversation as not just your *yang* statements, but also as the brushstrokes that define the empty *yin* spaces into which the other person can engage. Some of the best conversations may emerge when there are pauses that are uncomfortably long ...

In *Art and Illusion*, distinguished art historian Ernst Gombrich translates this maxim. His version is 'ideas present, brush may be spared performance.' For the charismatic leader, this means not painting a full and final vision of the future – but instead leaving spaces for others to fill in and thus commit to the vision. We all have a friend who gushes and talks all the time; it's not very attractive. As an artist, make sure that the canvas you paint or the photo you take has enough empty space. This creates a flow of energy between those spaces and the filled-in parts.

Secondly, the maxim reminds us to **discern the subtext in a situation**. The subtext is the hidden or less obvious meaning in a situation. Few people speak exactly what they are thinking, and even fewer express all their feelings. Screenwriting guru Robert McKee tells us in his brilliant book and masterclasses, entitled *Story*, that the surest way to have your film script rejected is to write 'on the nose.'

This Hollywood term refers to creating characters who always say exactly what they mean. But this is not faithful to real life. Subtext is omnipresent, which is why Hollywood requires it.

For example, Don Corleone in *The Godfather* does not explain in detail about how his adversary will suffer. He does not say that his adversary will wake up next to the severed head of his favourite, million-dollar racehorse. He merely whispers that he's gonna make him an offer he cannot refuse. The meaning arrives, though the screenwriter's brush has stopped.

In the flow of an everyday conversation, it is easy to overlook subtext, but this maxim can keep us alert to it.

Thirdly, the maxim can help you if **you have writer's block**, or feel some other impediment to expressing yourself. It can give you courage to progress your project even if you have not yet brought it to life in a tangible way.

This third application uses a slightly different reading of the maxim. The variant is: even though your brush or pen has stopped, your meaning does still exist, even if it's still only inside your head ... Times of fallow fields and wallowing feelings can indeed be pregnant with energy.

RECAP

Brush Stops, Meaning Continues is a maxim that reminds us to engage the power of *yin*. The power of positive *yang* is usually very evident. But a battery with only one terminal will never work. By noticing both *yin* and *yang*, and encouraging the subtle interplay between them, you can create more motivation in yourself and others. Recalling this maxim can prompt you to:

- **Engage more deeply with people** – by creating space for their contributions.
- **Be more aware of your surroundings** – by tuning in to the subtexts.
- **Persevere in your own creative acts** – by recognizing that the ideas are there, even if you are not yet sure how to express them.

EXPLORING THE MAXIM

[See the following page for a worked example]

1. Reflect: What aspects of this maxim resonated most with me?

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2. Consider: Where and how could this maxim help me, right now?

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-
-

3. Plan (optional): Define a relevant goal and how to get there *

GOAL: *specific goal related to focus area: measurable, achievable*

-

REALITY: *where I am on achieving this goal: evidence from present / past*

-

-

-

OPTIONS: *3-4 different options to achieve my goal*

-

-

-

WAY FORWARD: *Chosen option: first step, by when, support needed*

-

-

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*See Chapter 17 for a worked example of using this GROW method.

EXPLORING THE MAXIM

1. Reflect: What aspects of this maxim resonated most with me?

- Liked the idea of using more 'yin,' not just 'yang' all the time – the power of empty space and receptivity
- Liked the idea of the way yin and yang influence each other and create something new – like mentioned in Chapter 1
- ...

2. Consider: Where and how could this maxim help me right now?

- I was recently promoted to manage a troubled restaurant site.
- I have been very directive – issuing instructions – for the last two weeks. Need to complement this 'telling' with more 'asking.'
- Looking at the yin-yang dynamics of the team could help me.
- ...

3. Plan (optional): Define a relevant goal and how to get there *

GOAL: specific goal related to focus area: measurable, achievable

- Gain more commitment from staff, by applying yin-yang thinking at work every day for three weeks. Then do a staff satisfaction survey.

REALITY: where I am on achieving this goal: evidence from present / past

- I've told the staff my plans – I've been very clear / directive / 'yang'
- Directive is my normal way to manage teams
- Staff have complied but become quiet / surly; restaurant has less 'buzz'

OPTIONS: 3-4 different options to achieve my goal

- Use yin: go on a 'listening tour' to get staff input and show I care about their views, OR ...
- Map out the yin-yang energy flows between the team members to help spot the issues, OR ...

WAY FORWARD: Chosen option: first step, by when, support needed

- Go on a 'listening tour' – ask each team member's views on how we should turn around the restaurant. Engage in a nonthreatening way.
- Write down my agenda for the conversations and how I will position the conversation.
- ...

*See Chapter 17 for a worked example of using this GROW method.