

The Power of the Dao: 7 habits for living in Flow, Fulfilment and Resilience

Example interview with author Max Landsberg

Total 4,400 words = 30-40 minutes

Introduction to Max Landsberg:

- Best-selling author; 1 million copies; 15 languages
- 40 years experience as coach; former partner at McKinsey & Company; Senior Partner at headhunters Heidrick & Struggles and Korn Ferry - working mainly at Board level and with CEOs
- Etc

1. To start with, tell us briefly what the book's about, and why you decided to write it?

Thanks (to interviewer).

Well, this book is about how to achieve a state of flow in the way that you live your life, and as a result of that how to find greater joy, fulfilment, productivity and resilience.

The book has seven tips for how to achieve this state, and they are based on very powerful principles and habits drawn from the ancient Chinese tradition of Daoism.

2. Tell us more about this flow state

This state of flow is where you are like an athlete who is 'in the zone'...

Most people have experienced this state at least for a moment or for a minute – perhaps during sport, or in an artistic activity like singing, or painting. Or cooking or doing household chores. Or even at work when a project just seems to be humming along.

Everything just seems to be going perfectly.

... you are on top of your game

... you seem to be doing something almost automatically, without having to think about it, or try very hard

... you are completely absorbed, and have a feeling of complete focus

... you experience very deep enjoyment, even ecstasy!

As I mentioned, most people have experienced this state at least for brief periods

As well as being just deeply enjoyable, the thing is that this flow state has lots of other benefits. We become 200% more creative; 400% more motivated, five times more able to learn, and FIVE TIMES more productive !

Now ... most of the research on this flow state has looked at people doing SPECIFIC TASKS.

But I wanted to show how you really can live in this flow state not just for a minute or an hour BUT FOR MOST OR ALL OF THE TIME!

3. And why did you decide to write *The Power of the Dao*?

I guess, there are 2 reasons for doing anything in life. First there's a long-term passion for something, and second there's a short-term trigger to act.

For me ... the long term passion is that I have for about 3 decades been really interested in how to live in this state of fulfilling and productive flow that we'll talk about. That is, how to live in flow for short periods, and be 'in the zone' for specific tasks ...BUT ALSO how to live in flow all the time!

For many years I have experimented on myself, researched this with people I have coached, and also studied Daoism very deeply. As a result of all that, I found some answers that I wanted to share with people.

The short-term trigger for writing this book was Covid!! I don't think I ever caught it. But like most people during the lockdowns, I had some extra time available!

So those were the main reasons for writing the book....

There was also a third reason. A slightly broader reason. In the last 5-10 years, the world has become a much more uncertain place – war, inflation, cost of living, climate change. But you can be much more resilient to these things if you can live in a state of flow. So I wanted to share some helpful tips on that too.

4. I think I get what being in flow is like for a specific activity. What's it like to live in flow 'all of the time'?

Great question!

In many ways living in flow all the time is just like a whole succession of living in flow for a project or task. That is, you get the deep enjoyment, creativity, motivation and productivity in most or all of the things you do.

But there is one big difference. For a specific task or project we have some control over whether or not we do it.

But for life more broadly, as John Lennon said: Life is what happens to us when we are making other plans.

In other words, to live in flow across a lifetime, you have to develop the mindset where Shakespeare's 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune' can't de-stabilise you. It really is like finding your inner Yoda.

5. Well, if it's so good, what's the catch; why don't more people just live in flow?

Another Great question!

Well, firstly there ARE people who do live in flow pretty much all the time; I have met them!

Secondly, I think many people just don't try to live in Flow – because they just do not know it's possible and don't know the benefits.

And finally there's discipline. It's a bit like with exercise and diet: we all know we should do at least 10,000 steps a day and not eat sugar ... but it requires discipline.

6. In the book, you uncover seven different principles of Daoism (Yin-Yang, Li, Ziran, Pu, Wuwei, De & Zhenren). Could you tell us more about them and what they relate to?

So, if you want to live in flow for most of the time, then you have to find a particular kind of mindfulness.

I'm not talking about meditation – though meditation does have a role to play in all of this. I'm talking about a way in which you FIRST subconsciously see very clearly how everything in the world is connected, and the patterns and principles by which they work; and THEN can react intuitively and spontaneously to a given situation, based on what you are seeing.

As the famous martial artist Bruce Lee said:

“Moving, be like water.

Still, be like a mirror.

Respond like an echo.”

(Bruce Lee actually took this from Zhuangzi who was a 4th C BC Daoist!)

After exploring this for literally decades, I concluded that the principles and habits of Daoism were the most helpful way for most people to get the mindset required to live in Flow.

7. So what are these principles?

There are seven principles in total. 3 are about how we see the world; 3 are about how we interact or “co—operate” with the world; and there's a final principle about mastery. I'll run through each of these principles briefly, and each Principle has a habit associated with it.

Let's start with YIN-YANG

This principle helps us to see the subtleties and shades of grey within any situation, and also how to be more attuned to the energy flows that cause change to happen - for the better or for the worse...

Most people are probably already familiar with the idea of yin-yang, from its circular black-and white symbol. It seems to be popular as a tatoo!

This symbol represents how everything in the cosmos comprises both Yin and Yang. This applies to everything - from our moods, to our relationships, to our business opportunities.

Yang stands for Bright. It is about expansion, opening out; being glorious, evident, explicable, purposeful and positive. If a mood or relationship or business situation is working well, then we might think of it as yang.

In contrast, yin stands for Dark. Yin is about the shaded, the hidden, the mysterious, negative – and importantly it also stands for latent and receptive power.

The key point of this yin-yang Principle is to notice that, lurking inside any positive yang-like situation is always a little bit of yin that is likely - at some point - to grow. And vice versa.

For example, smart people know that their strengths (which are YANG) can sometimes turn into their weaknesses (which are YIN).

Winning the lottery seems to start as positive Yang for most people; but can turn to Yin for other winners.

By getting good at noticing yin and yang, we can see how any situation is likely to change. The change is kinda “powered” by the continuous interplay between Yin and Yang.

One of the problems of our human condition is that we like to label things quickly as either good or bad; big or small; happy or sad. If we become more aware that any situation contains both yin and yang, this can help us to see the subtleties, and to react more constructively – whether that yin-yang is in our mood, our relationships, or in a business situation.

Three stories in my book show how you can benefit from actively noticing yin-yang. One story, for example, shows that breaking your leg could actually be not a disaster, but something to be grateful for!

8. What about Li?

The second principle is called Li. Li is the Chinese word for Patterns. The ability to recognise Patterns is really important if you want to live in Flow for extended periods ...

It's interesting that the Chinese character for Li or Patterns is a combination of two other characters that mean Jade and Interior.

How come? Well, when they were carving jade, Chinese craftsmen paid a lot of attention to the marbled veins and patterns inside the stone ...

First, so they could avoid wasting this material that was – and still is – more valuable than gold. ... and

Second, so they could follow the curves to produce a gem with a shape that fitted the raw material – and do so naturally and with minimal effort.

So the Chinese character symbolises patterns and trendlines that can be valuable to us in daily life.

We can see these kinds of pattern in all aspects of our ecosystem of family, relationships, work, and even in our selves ... if we have the intent to notice them.

And that allows us work with the grain of a pattern – which is usually far more productive than trying to hack across it!

The physical world offers the simplest examples of patterns that are useful to notice. For example:

It's best to cut meat or vegetables along the line of the striations – not across them.

You can improve your endurance by noticing and perhaps tweaking the pattern of your posture and how you walk. There are Iphone apps to help you...

You can sleep better by aligning with the patten of your circadian rhythms

Then there are examples of how patterns are important in business. For example you can't build a business strategy without seeing the various market segments within the bigger pattern of your overall market.

The sculptor Michelangelo summed this all up when he said

"The sculpture is already complete within the marble block, before I start my work. It is already there, I just have to chisel away the superfluous material." He had seen the pattern of the figure an 'released' it.

So, the habit that comes from this second Principle, Li, is to pay attention to patterns within your ecosystem – so that you can live more easily with the world.

9. Next up is Ziran

Yes, Ziran is the third principle. This Chinese word is quite hard to translate. It's core meaning in Daoism and in Flow is 'the process by which something happens naturally'.

But this ziran also means ‘the process by which something happens spontaneously, by itself, automatically, and just-as-it-should (that is ... as it should according to how the cosmos works – rather than what is ordained by a society or law)’.

So, inspired by this principle, the Daoist believes it is better to work with things rather than against them. And it is best to do so in a way that is true both to the ziran way – the quintessential way – that the world works, and also to your own true nature.

In other words, don’t try to be too smart and think you can outwit everyone and everything!

To simplify horribly: to gain flow, we need to understand the ziran of the forces that are at work in our cosmos, and act in cognisance of them, to our advantage. This is where yin-yang (energies) and li (patterns), as mentioned in an earlier video, can help us.

Western philosophy, since Aristotle, Newton and Descartes, has seen the world as a kind of mechanism, with events unfold in a chain of causes and effects.

In contrast, the Daoist sees the world as an organism. Things arise spontaneously, simultaneously, and mutually.

For example, does a mountain create a river or does a river create a mountain? In fact the mountain and the river arise mutually, because the mountain causes condensation of water from the air, and this runs down to create a river. But simultaneously the river carves out a valley which then defines the mountain.

By paying attention to this ziran, we can be more alert to the risk of unintended consequences if action is overly forced and out of tune with the cosmos and its timing.

Rather than ‘pushing the river,’ the Daoist favours ‘using the river’ ... or even ‘being the river.’

More enlightened modern leaders and managers often use this principle. They find it more effective to draw in, nudge and tempt the team in ways that amplify people’s ‘flow.’ Forcing a change in course, through directive instructions, is rarely sustainable.

So, by attending to ziran – the natural ways of things, and how things are related to each other, we can experience greater calmness, creativity, growth and flow.

10. Pu is the first of three principles on how you choose to interact with your environment. What could you tell us about it?

Yes, those first three Principles were mainly about how to observe your cosmos with greater insight. When I say 'your cosmos', I don't necessarily mean stars and galaxies! I just mean all the events, people, activities and relationships in your life.

The next three principles are about how we actually interact with that cosmos.

The first of these goes by the Chinese word pu – in English that's spelt pu - which means simplicity.

So in Daoism, pu represents simplicity and clarity of understanding.

To adopt pu means to perceive things without the distortions of filters, biases and prejudgements.

By doing this, we have a better chance of living in Flow. This is because we can get a highly accurate and insightful view of the world, which means we can 'get things right first time'. We see the unvarnished reality of our team, our relationships and our environment and avoid an ignorant outlook. We absorb what we see and feel without blinkering and filtering the sensory messages.

Then we can use our full peripheral vision and achieve our potential.

You may have read Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh* which sat on The New York Times bestseller list for 49 weeks. The title of the book makes a pun on the word Pooh – as he uses it to mean both a character from A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh stories – and also pu as in the Daoist idea of simplicity and clarity.

In this book, the character Rabbit shuttles about and overthinks things yet does not accomplish much. In contrast, Pooh-bear has a more open-minded approach and often happens to find the solution to problems that the group faces, in a non-deliberate and unexpected way.

So, how do we achieve this simplicity and purity of perspective?

Well, meditation clearly helps. In Daoism this process of calming and decluttering is often referred to rather poetically as 'fasting the heart-mind.' It is also called 'sweeping the lodging house of the spirit.'

This meditation helps in ways that sometimes seem miraculous. The Daoist classic text Liezi elegantly states the benefits:

My body is aligned with my mind, my mind with my energies, my energies with the cosmos, and the cosmos with the Dao. Because of this intimate union, I perceive any interference in the universal harmony – whether it comes from the eight wildernesses far away, or from between my eyebrows and my eyelashes. I can't say by which organ I perceive it. I know, without knowing how I knew.

So this Daoist Principle of pu, points to the value of seeing things clearly if we are to live in Flow. And we do that through meditation and other ways to evade the stranglehold of our biases.

11. What is Wuwei?

Our next Principle is Wu wei. This is the Chinese word that literally means 'no action', but is usually interpreted as 'effortless action' ... or even more helpfully as 'uncontrived action'.

Wu wei is about a person being so in tune with the natural order of things, that he can perform a specific task through intuition alone, and with complete spontaneity ... and with apparently no effort and no pre-conceived thought. This clearly corresponds to a state of flow at the level of a specific task.

There are many Daoist stories that illustrate this wu wei in action. These are called 'knack' stories, because they show how someone well-practiced in an art has a particular knack, and can deliver exceptional performance with apparently no effort.

The most famous of these stories is that of Cook Ding. It's worth hearing it:

Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for his ruler Wen-Hui. When the ruler asked Cook Ding how he made it look so simple, the Cook replied:

"When I first began to cut up oxen, I saw nothing but the entire carcass. But now I deal with it in a spirit-like manner. Feeling along the natural lines, my knife slips through the great crevices and slides through the great cavities, taking advantage of the nooks and crannies thus presented. My knife steers clear of the ligaments and the great bones."

He continued, "An ordinary cook changes his knife every month; a good cook changes his knife every year; but I have used this knife for 19 years. It

has cut up several thousand oxen and yet by carving with art, its edge is as sharp as if it had just come from the whetstone.

“The edge of the knife has no appreciable thickness; when that which is so thin enters between the joints, how easily it moves along! The blade has more than enough room to glide casually in. But whenever I come to a complicated joint, and see that there will be some difficulty, I proceed with caution. I do not allow my eyes to wander from the place, and I move my hand slowly. Then by a very slight movement of the knife, the part is quickly separated, and drops like a clod of earth to the ground.

The way a child learns a language offers a further example of wu wei. A child learns to speak largely unintentionally and without the conscious will to learn. But an adult learning a foreign language, tends to invest much effort in memorizing the vocabulary, studying the grammar, and exercising the pronunciation. The child is learning by being in ‘flow’, wu wei-style; it is more efficient than the adult’s more cumbersome approach.

So, here we see a principle that will help us to be in flow. It’s hard to achieve wu wei directly, because the more you ‘try not to try’, the less you succeed!

However, the other core principles of Daoism can help you get there.

12. The final Principle in this group of three is De. So, what is that about?

De – which is spelt d e in English translation is a Chinese word that has a wide meaning including: inner power, strength of character, and personal values.

This principle de, which sounds strange to the Western ear, is at the core of how to stay in Flow across your lifetime, not just for a few minutes or hours.

We can see this core importance of de by looking at its Chinese character. This character combines the symbol for ‘go’ with that for ‘virtue’. So this principle of de is literally “the way you choose to go with virtue”. And importantly, the character for virtue, combines the symbols for straight, proper with xin 心 (heart, mind, soul). So this principle of de is the way you choose to ‘go with virtue’ – in a way that represents your proper heart, mind, and soul.

De is about having strong personal values and radiating them in how you express yourself to your friends and the cosmos, and perhaps how you nurture people too.

This may give you a magnetic or charismatic influence, as we see in people like Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Abraham Lincoln.

But de is not about showing off. As the Daoist classic the Daodejing says, using Ron Hogan's brilliant translation:

People with integrity don't even think about it.

That's how you can tell they have integrity.

Other people talk about how much integrity they have, when they really don't have much, if any.

Truly powerful people don't do anything, but they get the job done.

Other people are always busy doing something, but nothing ever gets done.

So, just to summarize: *de* is the set of ways in which you habitually engage with your environment and the people in it. It is your coherent and cohesive set of values that show who you are.

De creates a kind of stabiliser that helps you live in flow for longer periods. It may also mean you radiate a magnetic attraction and inspiration, based on your authenticity.

13. Finally, Zhenren is about mastery. So, how do you achieve it?

Yes, the final principle is about mastery of flow. The Chinese word for Mastery is zhenren

The Daoist concept of Mastery, aligns very closely with the idea of mastering the ability to live in Flow.

In both these aspects of mastery, you are true, genuine and authentic ...

... and not merely to your own values but also to the way the cosmos ticks.

This mastery is not mastery over the world, nor mastery over other people, nor even mastery of a task.

It is mastery over your Self, including the way the Dao lives in you and in your interactions.

You might also end up with mastery over the world, people or a task – but that will be purely a by-product of your Daoist mastery of your Self. In contrast, a strategy of artificially contriving and scheming for success is unlikely to bring you mastery of the world – as most dictators have eventually discovered.

One of my favourite quotes from Daoism illustrates how a Master lives, and also what it's like to live in Flow most or all the time.

The lines come from Zhuangzi who was a Daoist of late 4th century BC.

The lines were also a favourite of martial artist Bruce Lee.

Zhuangzi said:

“Moving, be like water.

Still, be like a mirror.

Respond like an echo.”

What does all this mean?

Well, “Moving like water” means to find the best way forward in a way that is EFFORTLESS, and in a way that nourishes all things.

“Being like a mirror” means To see and reflect on the cosmos accurately and without distortion.

“Responding like an echo” means Acting intuitively and spontaneously, without overthinking.

So, this Daoist mastery sounds very much like living in Flow

These practices of Daoism have endured for millennia. But the notion of zhenren, Mastery, is perhaps even more relevant to us today than to the early Daoists.

Our own cosmos is a more hectic, accelerating and globally connected world.

By becoming a zhenren – or nearly so – we can be content without over-optimizing. We can find beauty in the mundane. We can side-step ailments such as boredom, loneliness and depression. We can remain balanced when the unexpected strikes us, and alert to opportunities hidden within uncertainties.

So, by becoming a master of Daoism, using the Principles and Habits we have discussed, you become a master of living in Flow, with all the benefits of joy, fulfilment and resilience which that brings.

14. What would be your top three tips for anyone who's looking to live more in a flow? What would be the first steps?

1. Strengthen your awareness.

... to see that it is indeed possible to live in a state of flow for most or all of the time.

You can do that by noticing which of your friends, family and colleagues seem to live in this productive, resilient and joyful state. This will give you confidence that it's achievable.

2. Create a simple program.

Living in flow eventually becomes automatic, intuitive and spontaneous.

But to start living in that way, most people need to make a conscious effort to tweak their mindset and a few daily practices.

So my second tip is to reflect on these principles we have discussed, and on your own current situation, and then jot down a simple program for your own practice that will focus on the areas of most immediate benefit for you.

That may or may not include things like meditation, or aiming to do at least one bit of Wu Wei every day, or reflecting at the end of the day what Yin and Yang you have noticed.

3. Know how you will stay motivated and disciplined.

Tweaking your mindset and adopting new habits requires motivation.

One way to stay motivated is to use an idea from Charles Duhigg's well-known book *The Power of Habit*.

He talks about the three steps for creating new habit: Cue -Process- Reward. So if you wanted to develop your habit of noticing how yin and yang influence events, you define a Cue to remind you to pay attention to a, then have a process, and a reward for it.

So, this third tip is about finding a way to keep your momentum as you build the seven habits.