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# Introduction

In Daoist cosmology, human beings form an integral part of nature and the greater universe, which functions in perfect harmony and is fundamentally good. Created in a series of transformations without a radical break from pure, formless Dao, the universe—and through it all beings, human and otherwise—manifest in a wondrous combination of manifold forces that ideally work together in perfect health and harmony. They participate actively and continuously in the goodness of the cosmos, which both encompasses and transcends human effort and morality.

Deeply inborn into human beings, this inherently good Dao-nature appears as a sense of well-being, inner harmony, and overarching excellence. Allowing—even demanding—the realization of our full potential in all different dimensions, it manifests in a state of exuberant flow and masterful expertise, outlined variously in traditional Daoist literature and described as skillful spontaneity. In other words, living Dao in the world means the activation of our unique potential to the greater happiness of ourselves and the enhanced benefit of all.

The main factor that connects human beings to the cosmos is described as spirit, a pure form of vital energy. A primordial, formless, and ever-changing force of life, spirit is the main factor that allows consciousness. Firmly rooted in the body, it is a subtle energetic power that vibrates at a faster speed than physical matter. Consciousness as spirit flows through the heart as well as the other organs of the body and provides awareness that aids the overall functioning of life—not only in terms of survival and knowledge but also with regard to the full realization of personal uniqueness in cosmic oneness.

That is to say, we as human beings participate fully in the cosmos through the never-ceasing flow of spirit in our lives, but we are also completely unique in our being—ranging from genetically determined physical characteristics, such as fingerprints, retina, hand lines, bite patterns, and more, to our particular psychological predisposition toward certain preferences, behaviors, and competences. All these are inborn and come naturally, a feature the Chinese describe in terms of inner nature or inherent tendencies. This, moreover, is coupled with destiny or life's circumstances, the

overall setting we live in—family, location, country, and culture of birth—which makes it possible, even if on occasion difficult, to realize our full potential and natural talents.

If the two combine positively and are activated in harmony, we experience the greatest satisfaction and deepest thrill in life: having followed our inherent tendencies and developed and trained them to the fullest under the auspices of our life's circumstances, we reach a point where we are highly competent, involving ourselves completely in a task and doing it well without demands, regrets, or second thoughts. The activity comes to us naturally, using our natural talents and inherent aptitudes, yet at the same time it requires a certain level of training and professional skill. It involves our full attention and allows us to realize our highest expertise: interesting and challenging enough not to be simple or boring, it is yet straightforward and accessible enough not to be complex or anxiety-provoking.

Ancient Chinese texts describe this state in terms of free and easy wandering or skillful spontaneity. Reaching this, we live in the world and fully express our natural skills and inborn talents in a dimension of superb excellence. We know about famous people who have attained this—like the violinist Yehudi Menuhim, the baseball pitcher Babe Ruth, and the physicist Albert Einstein—but it holds true for everyone in all walks of life. Thus, as the Chinese note, the outstanding woodcarver makes bell stands that seem to be out of this world, while the master swimmer can dive into a massive water fall that races and boils along for miles. Not only do they not strive or come to harm, but they relish and delight in the experience—to them it is pure fun!

To develop to this level, the full realization of fun and excellence, the best we can be in life, the optimal expansion of our natural talents and inherent aptitudes, requires three things, which are also core factors in guiding our children: recognition of what we are naturally good at, systematic and high-quality training, and a place in society to exercise our expertise and earn respect and material rewards.

Western psychologists describe the deep sense of personal fulfillment in work and play through seemingly effortless movement as flow, a concept developed by Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi. In flow, we are beyond boredom and anxiety and attain our personal best. We can experience it in all sorts of activities and even make it a constant factor in our life, filling every day with resonant joy and inner well-being, attaining the height of inner power and creativity. This successful attainment of flow as a mode of life or work, then, requires the unfolding of certain character strengths and enhancement

of key human virtues—closely matching Daoist ideals—described notably in the “authentic happiness” project by Martin Seligman.

Another aspect where Daoist wisdom connects to Western psychology is the idea of temperament, outlining individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, divided dominantly into extrovert and introvert. In addition, it focuses on the idea of intelligence, traditionally measured in terms of language, logic, and mathematical abilities. Now, thanks to the work of Howard Gardner, the concept has expanded into eight multiple intelligences that take into account also musical, artistic, athletic, and social skills, variously applied today.

Modern psychologists understand the intelligences as ways of information processing, i. e., as tools to be used in learning and development, essentially serving to control baser tendencies. Daoists in contrast see the different dimensions of mental functioning as vibrant aspects of the universe, essentially positive in nature and ends in themselves that need to be grown and perfected. Activated differently in the brain, subject to both genes and training, they become apparent in the different stages of childhood development and are enhanced by optimal learning conditions, manifold forms of play, and conscientious parenting. The aptitudes, then, based on but not identical with the intelligences, come in three dimensions and nine forms.

Social aptitudes, matching the basic temperaments of extroversion and introversion, signal people who excel at situations that require either interactive or self-reflective qualities.

Sensory aptitudes, reflecting the three basic modes of sensory learning—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—are essential to excellence in musical, artistic, and athletic pursuits.

Systematic aptitudes, recovering the traditional understanding of intelligence and matching the evolution of human consciousness, find expression in spatial thinking and tool management, numerical calculations, language including rhetoric and storytelling, plus analysis and abstraction. They form the inherent foundation of superb technical, mathematical, linguistic, and analytical expertise.

Each and every one of us is born with all these aptitudes, and we utilize and grow all of them in the course of life, but not to the same degree. In other words, due to hereditary dispositions as well as environmental impacts, we find that some are special to us, inviting us to grow into excellence. Some we enjoy to a certain level: they allow us to have fun but will not support

outstanding achievements. A third group, finally, seem comparatively alien to us, and we can only marvel at the amazing talents and skills of others.

Thus, we are obviously either extrovert or introvert; we have a clear preference in how we perceive, by seeing, hearing, or feeling; and we also know very well that we have most fun and do best with either technical tinkering, number manipulation, storytelling and communicating, or analysis and abstraction.

Rather than identifying one single talent or aptitude as the center of personal growth, we are, therefore, looking at three, one on each level, that combine in a uniquely productive way to produce outstanding excellence and skillful spontaneity. The other six, moreover, are not to be neglected, but should be developed to the point of comfortable competence, opening areas of enjoyable exploration as time allows.

The trick is to identify which is which not only in ourselves but also in our children, then provide them with the best possible guidance and most suitable training to enhance all potentials. This means setting up challenges and advanced training in the top areas so we (and they) can reach the excellence of skillful spontaneity, while also providing gentle guidance in dimensions that do not immediately resonate, thereby ensuring that we grow to competence in these. The goal is to support them all in the best possible way, growing our unique constellation of talents to full potential, so we can live a great life completely realizing our full potential.



