

The Digital Dao: Ancient Eastern Wisdom for Digital Detox

By Ding Long

Foreword

My name is Ding Long. I'm a huojun Daoist priest of the Zhengyi sect — ordained for twenty-five years now. "Huoju" means I don't live in a temple. I live in a Shanghai longtang alleyway, with a wet market downstairs and an auntie frying youtiao every morning right outside. I have a wife, a child, a phone, WeChat, and a Moments feed I can't stop scrolling. I live in the same era as you — phone in the left pocket, scripture in the right.

This book is not going to teach you how to become an immortal. It's not going to tell your fortune. And it's definitely not going to tell you to delete all your apps and go live as a hermit on Mount Zhongnan. I just want to have a conversation with you — using what I've learned in the Daoist tradition over these twenty-five years — to help you take a fresh look at your relationship with your screen.

My master used to say: "The wisdom of the Dao is not up in the clouds. It's in your rice bowl." So there are no grand, mystical teachings in this book. Just stories, reflections, and ancient scriptures written more than two thousand years ago that still read like they were written about our phones today.

Make yourself a cup of tea. Let's take our time with this.

Chapter 1: The Noise That Won't Stop

If you put your phone on the table right now — don't silence it — how many times will it buzz in the next five minutes?

I've asked a lot of people this question. Answers range from twice to twenty times. Nobody has ever said zero.

In my third year of training, my master put me in charge of an important ritual. I had just bought my first phone — a Nokia, the kind where you could play Snake all afternoon. Midway through the ceremony, my phone went off. Just a little "beep-beep-beep." My master didn't say anything. He just looked at me.

I will never forget that look for as long as I live.

It wasn't anger. It was regret. The kind of look you give a child carrying a full bowl of water — when the water spills, you don't yell at him. You just feel sorry for him.

Afterward, he said something to me that I still remember: "The moment your phone rang, your heart was no longer on the altar. Your body was there. Your spirit was not."

Not being present — that's the first thing I want to talk about.

Over two thousand years ago, Laozi wrote something in Chapter 12 of the Dao De Jing (Dào Dé Jīng, the foundational classic of Daoism — dào means the fundamental principle by which the universe operates, and dé means the expression of that principle in all things):

The five colors blind the eye. The five tones deafen the ear. The five flavors dull the palate. Racing and hunting drive the heart mad.

In plain language: too many colors and you can't see straight. Too many sounds and your hearing goes numb. Too many flavors and your taste buds stop working. Chasing stimulation all day makes your mind go crazy.

The first time I read this passage, I thought Laozi was describing my phone screen. The five colors? Look at the app icons on your phone — red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet — every single one deliberately designed to grab your eyes. The five tones? Notification pings, message alerts, the buzz of a like — how many times do you hear those in a day?

Laozi was describing court life 2,500 years ago — string instruments and flutes, silk robes and fine food, sensual pleasures and wild hunts. But today? Every one of us carries a sensory bombardment machine in our pocket that would put any ancient palace to shame.

I have a friend who works in internet product design. He taught me a term: "dopamine feedback loop." It's that feeling — you pull down to refresh your Moments feed, you have to clear the red notification dot, you post a photo and check every thirty seconds to see if anyone liked it. In the West, a young man named Tristan Harris — a former design ethicist at Google — says modern apps are essentially "attention casinos." Every screen, every button, every color is designed to manipulate you, to keep your brain pumping out dopamine so you can't stop.

My friend eventually couldn't take it himself. He came to me and said, "Daoist master, I spent five years designing addictive things, and now I can't get out myself. Every night I'm still on my phone at 2 a.m. I know I have a meeting tomorrow. I know I should sleep. But my thumb won't listen."

I poured him a cup of tea and said, "This isn't a willpower problem. You're trying to fight a thousand engineers' intelligence with nothing but your flesh and blood."

He asked, what should I do then?

I said, "First, get the phone out of your bedroom."

That simple? That simple.

I'm not telling you to throw your phone away. I'm telling you to put a little distance between your phone and your body. Distance creates clarity. Laozi said, "The sage is for the belly, not for the eye" — eat until you're full, don't let your eyes lead you around. Your body needs rest. Your eyes need stimulation. These two are constantly at war. You need to help your body win.

In twenty-five years as a Daoist priest, the biggest "demon" I've ever encountered is not a ghost — it's a notification sound. Seriously. During rituals, everyone's phone has to be turned off. Not because it would disturb the ceremony — Daoist rites are all crashing drums and clanging cymbals; you'd never hear a ringtone. We turn them off because, as long as your phone is on, there's a part of your mind that is worried it might ring. That worry is more dangerous than the ring itself. It keeps a piece of your attention permanently dangling outside, and you can never pull it back in.

We Daoists talk about "collecting the heart." What does that mean? It means gradually gathering back the

attention you've scattered outside — like picking up beans you've spilled, one by one, and putting them back in the bowl. Every time you pick up your phone and scroll for five minutes, it's like tipping another handful of beans onto the floor. Spilling them is easy. Picking them back up is hard.

Have you ever noticed this phenomenon: you pick up your phone just to reply to one message, and when you come to your senses, you've been watching short videos for half an hour. In that half hour, you didn't use your phone. Your phone used you.

This is exactly what Laozi meant by "racing and hunting drive the heart mad." The hunter chases the prey and forgets why he set out. You chase information and forget you only meant to reply to one message.

Here's a small exercise I'd like you to try today — not some lofty esoteric practice. Every time you reach for your phone, pause for three seconds and ask yourself one question: "Do I genuinely need to use my phone right now, or am I just reaching for it out of habit?"

That three-second pause, in Daoist language, is called *jue* — awareness. Awareness isn't enlightenment. It's much simpler than that. It's the moment you realize what you're doing — and in that very moment, you're no longer trapped inside the inertia.

Awareness is where all change begins.

Key Takeaways:

- Laozi warned 2,500 years ago that sensory overload blinds and deafens us — today, your phone is the ultimate sensory bombardment machine.
 - The problem isn't the device itself but the "phantom ringing" in your mind — the part of your attention that never fully returns to the present.
 - A three-second pause before reaching for your phone is the first step: awareness breaks the dopamine loop.
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Chapter 2: Emptiness Is Not Nothing

Our Daoist temple is on the outskirts of Shanghai. It's not big — a courtyard and three rooms. My favorite part is that courtyard in the middle.

The courtyard is empty. No rock garden, no fishpond, no flower trellis. Just a clean sweep of grey brick, clean and bare.

Every year, devotees come to burn incense, look around, and say: "Master, this courtyard is too empty. Wouldn't a tree be nice? How about a grape arbor?"

I tell them: "It's good that it's empty. Empty means there's room for people to stand. During festivals, you all come and it fills right up. On ordinary days, when it's just me, I stand in the courtyard and look at the sky — and the sky is full."

Westerners are afraid of "emptiness." I've hosted plenty of foreign visitors curious about Daoism, but the moment the word "emptiness" comes up, they tense up. In their culture, empty equals void, equals nothing, equals nonexistence. Who would want to become "empty"?

But Laozi didn't see it that way.

Chapter 11 of the Dao De Jing is, in my opinion, one of its finest chapters. Laozi says:

Thirty spokes converge at a single hub, but it is the empty space at the center that makes the wheel useful. Clay is shaped into a vessel, but it is the hollow inside that makes it useful. Doors and windows are cut to make a room, but it is the empty space that makes it useful. Therefore, what *is* provides benefit; what *is not* provides usefulness.

What does that mean? Thirty spokes come together at a hub — the hub is hollow, and the wheel can turn. You knead clay into a bowl — the bowl is hollow, and it can hold things. You cut doors and windows into walls — the room is empty, and people can live in it.

So "what is" gives you convenience; "what is not" gives you function.

Do you see it? Laozi isn't talking about some vague, abstract philosophy. He's pointing at a very simple, concrete truth: emptiness is what makes things useful.

Your phone's storage has to be empty to hold files. Your stomach has to be empty to eat. Your time has to be empty for you to inhabit it.

In my first decade as a priest, my biggest problem was stuffing my schedule completely full. I thought "busy" equaled "important." Every morning I'd look at my calendar, every slot filled, and feel a strange satisfaction — look, so many people need me, so many things are waiting for me.

But eventually I noticed a pattern: my most inspired moments never came on those packed-to-the-brim days.

The genuinely good ideas — how to write a ritual text, how to help a devotee untangle his problems, how to explain a scripture passage to a disciple — never appeared during "scheduled" time. They surfaced out of nowhere on the walk home from the temple. They dropped into my head while I was sitting alone in that empty courtyard, staring at nothing. They flashed through my mind in the middle of the night on a trip to the bathroom.

The most remarkable time: for three months I'd been trying to find the right words to help a distressed entrepreneur friend, and nothing came. Then one afternoon I had nothing planned. I just sat in the courtyard watching ants march home. Watching and watching, suddenly a sentence floated up from my heart. Later, when I shared it with him, he froze. Then he said, "Master, that one sentence just saved me half a year of useless thinking."

I'm not saying daydreaming is more important than working. What I'm saying is: a completely full schedule is like a bowl packed solid with stuff — nothing new can enter it.

There's a popular concept now called "Deep Work," proposed by an American named Cal Newport. He argues that truly valuable thinking and creativity require long stretches of uninterrupted focus. But the modern person's schedule has been shredded into fragments — interrupted every few minutes by a notification, pulled out of flow just as you're settling in.

This is exactly what Laozi was talking about. Your attention is a container. Fragmented information stuffs it full, and the deep things can't get in.

There's another saying: "Boredom is the fuel of creativity." Because only when you're "empty" can you hear the voice inside your own head. You fill every second — scrolling your phone while waiting, scrolling on the subway, scrolling on the toilet, scrolling while eating — and you drown out every inner voice you have. Then you come to me and say, Master, I feel strangely hollow inside.

Yes — because your outside is too full, so your inside has become empty. Flip it around: empty your outside

e a little, and your inside fills up.

I have a rule for my disciple: every day, at least one hour with the phone in another room. Do anything — read, practice, daydream, take a walk — just no screens.

He said the first few days were agonizing, like quitting smoking. His hands didn't know where to go. He had this constant anxiety that he was "missing something." After about a week, he told me he'd started hearing birds. There was a turtledove in the tree outside his front door. It had been calling for three years. He'd never once noticed it.

How long has it been since you simply waited while waiting for someone? No phone, no messages — just standing or sitting, watching people come and go, listening to the sound of your own breathing?

That is what Laozi meant by "what is not provides usefulness" — the empty part, that's the part that's actually for you.

Key Takeaways:

- "Emptiness" in Daoism is not nothingness — it's capacity. An empty bowl can hold food; empty time can hold inspiration.
 - A completely packed schedule leaves no room for your best ideas to emerge. The most creative moments come from unstructured time.
 - Daily "empty time" (phone in another room, no agenda) is not laziness — it's creating the space where deep thinking and self-awareness can arise.
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Chapter 3: The Clock Your Screen Is Breaking

My master was a very quiet man. He didn't say much, but every word was like a nail — once driven in, you couldn't pull it out.

One winter, I was in terrible mental shape. Drowsy during the day, sleepless at night, temper flaring — the smallest thing would set me off. My wife put up with it as long as she could, then one day said, "Go ask your master if you've been possessed or something."

I actually went. My master listened to everything, then asked me three questions:

"What time do you go to bed at night?"

I said it varied — midnight on a good night, two or three in the morning on a bad one.

"What do you do before bed?"

I felt a little guilty. "Look at my phone."

"What are you doing during the zishi hours?"

Zishi is 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. I answered honestly: "Looking at my phone."

My master set down his teacup and said something I've never dared to forget: "If you don't sleep during zishi, your gallbladder energy won't rise. If your gallbladder energy doesn't rise, a hundred illnesses will follow. You think you're resting — but you're overdrawing."

I didn't fully understand at the time. I just felt the weight of his words. Later, when I seriously studied the

Huang Di Nei Jing (Huáng Dì Nèi Jīng, the oldest and most important classic of Chinese medicine, traditionally recorded as a dialogue between the Yellow Emperor and his medical advisor Qibo), I realized just how deep this goes.

The Huang Di Nei Jing contains a system called *ziwu liuzhu* — the midnight-noon ebb-flow. It maps the body's twelve primary meridians (think of them as energy channels) to the twelve two-hour periods of the day. During each period, a specific organ is "on duty" — qi and blood flow to that organ, and it uses this window for repair and detoxification.

Zishi — 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. — is when the Gallbladder meridian is on duty. During this time, your qi and blood flow to the gallbladder, and it does its work: secreting bile, detoxifying, repairing. If you're not asleep during this window, your body has to divert the energy that should be supporting your gallbladder and redirect it — to keep you scrolling through your phone, watching videos, or just tossing and turning.

What happens when the gallbladder meridian goes wrong? The Nei Jing says the gallbladder is the "official of justice and decision-making." Let me translate: when your gallbladder is impaired, you become hesitant, timid, and easily startled. You might notice that the Chinese word for "gallbladder" appears in expressions for "courage" and "nerve" — that's not a coincidence. In Chinese medicine, the gallbladder governs decisiveness and courage.

Even more crucial: after zishi comes choushi (1 a.m. to 3 a.m.), when the Liver meridian is on duty. The liver and gallbladder are deeply connected — if the gallbladder suffers, the liver won't fare well either. The liver governs smooth flow, stores blood, controls the tendons, manifests in the nails, and opens into the eyes. In plain speech: if your liver is off, you'll have dry eyes, a volatile temper, vertical ridges on your nails, muscle cramps, and irregular menstruation.

I was a textbook case: dry eyes (from staring at screens), explosive temper (liver fire rising), sleepless at night and drowsy during the day (circadian rhythm in shambles).

Now do you understand what my master meant? "You think you're resting — but you're overdrawing."

What stunned me even more: it was only years later that I came across Western research on blue light and melatonin suppression. The blue light from your phone screen tells your brain: "It's still daytime. Don't sleep." So your pineal gland doesn't release melatonin, you don't feel sleepy, you keep scrolling, you keep feeling awake, you keep scrolling — a perfect vicious cycle.

This is called the circadian rhythm. Western science has spent decades running countless experiments to prove the relationship between melatonin and blue light. Yet over two thousand years ago, a group of ancient Chinese — with no double-blind trials, no hormone level measurements — simply observed their own bodies and their relationship with the movement of heaven and earth, and arrived at a sleep guide precise to the two-hour period.

I followed my master's advice and adjusted my schedule. I started getting ready for bed at 10:30 p.m., leaving my phone in the living room instead of on the nightstand. The first few days were genuinely hard. Lying in bed, my head full of the day's events, my hand reaching instinctively for the nightstand — touching nothing and remembering the phone wasn't there.

After about a week, the changes arrived. First, my daytime energy clearly improved. I wasn't surviving on coffee anymore. Then my temper — my wife said, "You seem less explosive lately." Then my eyes — no more dryness or grittiness. And the most unexpected change: my decision-making sharpened. Previously, I'd agonize over tough choices. Now my mind felt clearer — I could judge more quickly what to do and what t

o let go.

That's "gallbladder energy rising." Believe it or not — this is my lived experience.

I'm not here to hand you a "Daoist timetable" dictating what you must do at every hour. That's not realistic. Everyone has different jobs, families, lifestyles. But I do want to draw your attention to one thing: what are you usually doing between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m.?

If you're awake during that window, staring at a screen — you're not just "staying up late." You're using blue light to beat your gallbladder with a hammer.

Try this, starting today: no screens during zishi. Read a book, talk to your family, sit quietly, soak your feet — honestly, do anything, as long as it's not a screen. Stick with it for seven days, then come back and tell me what changed.

Oh — later, my wife said to me: "Thank your master for me. He finally cured your rotten temper."

I said: "My master didn't cure my temper. He cured my gallbladder."

Key Takeaways:

- According to the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon*, the gallbladder meridian is most active between 11 p.m. and 1 a.m. — staying up on screens during this window directly damages your body's repair cycle.
 - Modern science confirms what ancient Chinese medicine observed: blue light suppresses melatonin and disrupts the circadian rhythm, creating a vicious sleep-deprivation loop.
 - Move your phone out of the bedroom at night. Give your body the darkness it needs to heal — the first seven days are hard, but the transformation is real.
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Chapter 4: Five Emotions, Five Screens

In twenty-five years as a Daoist priest, I've noticed something fascinating: the devotees who come to see me say things like "Master, I haven't been feeling well," "Master, I can't sleep," "Master, I've been fighting with my husband." But if you dig down three layers, what you find at the bottom — nine times out of ten — is emotion.

There's a line in the Huang Di Nei Jing that I find truer the longer I practice:

Anger injures the liver. Excessive joy injures the heart. Overthinking injures the spleen. Grief injures the lungs. Fear injures the kidneys.

Five emotions, five corresponding organs. When an emotion goes too far, it damages the organ it's linked to.

Notice: it's not that "anger is bad" or "grief is wrong." Emotions themselves are not the problem. Of course you feel anger when you encounter injustice. Of course you grieve when you lose someone you love. Of course you feel fear when facing danger. The problem is excess and persistence. A storm once in a while — the earth absorbs it. A storm every single day — you get a flood.

So what does this have to do with your phone?

One day, sitting in the temple, a thought hit me: don't the different apps on your phone correspond almost perfectly to these five emotions?

Anger injures the liver — the apps that make you furious.

There's always someone fighting on Weibo. There's always something on Twitter that makes your blood boil. News comment sections are permanent battlegrounds. Open any of these apps, and within five minutes, you'll see something that makes you angry. Anger is traffic fuel — the platforms know this better than anyone. Get you angry, and you'll comment. Comment, and you'll stay. Stay, and there's ad revenue. The platform needs your anger. But your liver doesn't.

The liver governs the smooth flow of qi — it's responsible for "dredging" your emotions outward. Anger is like a flood. Once in a while, it clears the channel. Every day, and you get erosion. I've seen countless people with liver fire blazing — bloodshot eyes, throbbing temples, teeth marks on the edges of the tongue. I ask, and sure enough: two hours a day fighting with strangers on Weibo.

Overthinking injures the spleen — the apps that make you anxious.

The spleen governs transformation and transportation — it "digests" your thoughts and worries. Scroll through Xiaohongshu, and everyone's life is better than yours. Scroll through LinkedIn, and everyone's advancing faster than you. Scroll through WeChat Moments, and everyone's happier than you. Your spleen starts running at full speed: "Am I not good enough?" "Am I falling behind?" "Is my life going wrong?"

This kind of comparison and mental churn is chronic. It's not as intense as anger, but it's more persistent. It's like simmering your spleen over a low flame until it can't process anything anymore — and then you get loss of appetite, bloating, fatigue, mental fog.

People with weak spleens share one trait: they think too much and do too little. Look at those who spend all day envying other people's lives on social media — they're often the ones with the least ability to act. Because the spleen governs muscles and limbs — when your spleen is depleted, you literally don't have the energy to move.

Fear injures the kidneys — the apps that terrify you.

The kidneys store jing — your body's "reserve." Your vitality, your resilience, your capacity to recover — all of it is held in the kidneys. Fear directly injures the kidneys, like drilling a hole in the bottom of a reservoir.

News apps are fear generators. Open one any day — disaster, war, disease, economic crisis. You read one headline and your chest tightens. Read another, and it tightens again. Your body stays in a state of alert, adrenaline pumping over and over — an emergency response that evolved for confronting wild predators, but you're now using it to confront push notifications.

What does chronic fear do to the kidneys over time? Sore lower back and weak knees, hair loss, tinnitus, depleted energy, being easily startled. The Nei Jing says, "Fear makes qi descend" — fear causes your qi to sink downward, unable to rise. Have you ever noticed that after a scroll through the news, your entire body feels heavy and you don't want to move? That's not laziness. That's your kidneys running on empty.

Grief injures the lungs — the content that breaks your heart.

The lungs govern the skin and body hair, and control breathing. Excessive grief damages the lungs — you feel tightness in the chest, shortness of breath, dull skin. Those heartbreaking crowdfunding stories in your feed, the devastating social news on Weibo — every post you read with a sigh, your lungs are quietly taking the hit.

Excessive joy injures the heart — not happiness, but overstimulation.

Your heart is always half-waiting for the phone — did someone like it? Is there a new message? A new video

o? This constant low-grade excitement is what Chinese medicine calls "the spirit not settling in the heart." The heart houses the shen, your spirit-consciousness. Your spirit should rest peacefully in your heart, not be dragged around by red notification dots on a screen. "Excessive joy" doesn't mean "laughing too hard gives you a heart attack" — it means excessive sensory stimulation prevents your heart from settling, and your spirit can't return home. When the heart doesn't house the spirit, you can't sleep, can't remember, can't be still.

So there it is. Five emotions, five categories of apps. Your five organs are being separately attacked by five attention merchants.

I'm not telling you to stop scrolling Weibo, stop reading the news, stop using social media. I've said it before — this book is not about deleting apps. But I want you to be aware of this: every time you pick up your phone and open an app, you're also opening one of the organs inside your body.

Do you know what you're opening?

I once had a client who worked in investment banking. He came to the temple pressing his right ribcage, saying he had a dull ache in his liver area — all medical tests came back negative. I asked him three questions: What do you scroll every day? Who have you been angry at lately? What time do you go to bed?

He thought for a while, then admitted he spent two hours every day on Weibo following a public figure he despised, reading his posts and getting furious.

I said, "You don't need medicine for this liver pain. Just unfollow him."

He didn't believe me, but he did it anyway. A month later, he came back to the temple. His liver didn't hurt anymore.

It's not mysticism. When the emotional input stops, the body slowly repairs itself.

There's a passage at the very beginning of the Huang Di Nei Jing that I've taken as my guiding principle as a Daoist priest:

Be calm and detached, and the true qi will follow. Keep the spirit inward, and how can illness arise?

Maintain inner peace and simplicity, let the true qi (the body's fundamental energy) flow smoothly, keep your spirit guarding the interior rather than scattering outward — if you do this, where could disease possibly come from?

Keep the spirit inward. That means no longer handing your emotions over to things outside yourself — whether those things are people or apps.

Key Takeaways:

- The five core emotions in Chinese medicine — anger, over-excitement, overthinking, grief, fear — each damage a specific organ, and different apps reliably trigger different emotions.
 - Your liver doesn't know the difference between real-life anger and rage-scrolling Twitter — the physiological damage is the same.
 - "Spirit inward, not scattered outward": every time you hand your emotional state to an algorithm, you're giving away something precious that belongs inside you.
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Chapter 5: Stillness: The First Hexagram of Digital Cultivation

In the Daoist tradition, there's a practice called biguan — "closing the gate."

Sounds mysterious, doesn't it? But really, it's this: you shut yourself in, cut off contact with the outside world, don't speak, don't read, don't see anyone, and simply face yourself.

A lot of people think biguan is about cultivating supernatural powers. It's not. Biguan is about stopping.

In Chinese, if you call someone "shameless," it's an insult. But take the word literally — "no face" — temporarily setting aside the face you present to society, peeling off the mask, and seeing who you really are underneath — that's exactly the point of biguan.

Every year during the Spring Festival, I do a three-day retreat. For those three days, my phone is completely off — and I don't mean airplane mode. I mean off. The temple gate closes, a "Closed for Retreat" sign goes up. It's just me — in the courtyard, in the scripture hall, in the tea room. I can read, but no news. I can write, but no messages. I can think, but I speak to no one.

The first year I did this, I nearly lost my mind.

That was about ten years ago. The moment I pressed the power button on that first morning, it felt like quitting cigarettes — you know that feeling? A hollow ache inside, the sense that something's missing, your hand constantly reaching into your pocket. That day, at least five times, I instinctively reached for a phone, then remembered — oh, it's off.

The first day was the hardest. My head was like a party no one had left. Thoughts bouncing everywhere — oh, that devotee's issue isn't resolved yet, I wonder if anyone messaged me on Moments, what ended up happening with that news story yesterday — I was sitting in the scripture hall, but my body was all that was there. My heart was not.

The second day was a bit better. The thoughts still jumped, but not as frantically. I noticed I was starting to see things I'd never seen before — the angle of winter sunlight on the floor of the hall, how sparrows bathe themselves in the courtyard, the way the temperature of tea changes on my tongue. All of this had always been there. But your attention had been siphoned away by your phone. You'd never truly seen it.

On the third day, something remarkable happened.

That evening, I was sitting in the courtyard, not thinking about anything, just watching the sky slowly darken. And suddenly, I "heard" my own breathing. Not with my ears — my entire being felt the rhythm between the inhale and the exhale. Then I heard my heartbeat. Then I felt my mind as clearly as a glass of murky water slowly settling — the clear part rising to the top, the sediment sinking to the bottom.

In that moment, for the first time, I wasn't thinking about "what should I do." I felt "who I am."

That is the power of stillness.

Later, when I studied the Yi Jing (the Yì Jīng, also known as the Zhou Yi, one of China's most ancient classics — a system of wisdom that uses sixty-four hexagrams to understand the patterns of change), I came across Hexagram 52 — the Gen hexagram. Gen is Mountain. Two mountains stacked: mountain upon mountain. "Keeping still."

The hexagram statement says:

Keeping his back still, he no longer feels his body. Walking in his courtyard, he does not see his people.

The first time I read those words, I sat there in silence for a long time.

"Keeping his back still, he no longer feels his body" — when you stop, the things you normally care about — your identity, your roles, what others think of you — all of it falls away. "Walking in his courtyard, he does not see his people" — you pass through someone's courtyard, but you don't see the person. You're still there, but the "you" who plays all those social roles is not.

This is exactly what I experienced on the third day of retreat. You stop thinking "I am Ding Long," "I am a Daoist priest," "I am someone's father," "What should I be doing." You are just you. Pure. No labels, no roles, no shoulds or shouldn'ts.

In the West, there's a trendy term now — "dopamine fasting." Cut off all high-stimulation input for a short period to break free from the addiction cycle. Silicon Valley tech elites go into the woods, lock their phones in safes, and talk about "resetting their brains." There are also "silence retreats" — you pay money to go somewhere and not speak for a week.

I find this pretty interesting. We old Daoist priests have been doing this for thousands of years, and they've finally caught on.

But I have to say: retreat is not a fad. It's not "I did a dopamine fast last weekend, it was amazing." Stillness is a cultivation, not a one-time act. You can't permanently fix your relationship with your phone by "fasting" for one weekend — just like you can't permanently fix your eating habits by starving yourself for two days.

The meaning of the Gen hexagram isn't that you stop permanently — no one can stop permanently. Its meaning is: in the moment you stop, you see yourself.

You see what you're actually reaching for when you pick up your phone — is it information? Validation? Escape? Companionship? You see where the "hook" is that pulls you in. For some, it's anxiety. For some, it's loneliness. For some, it's habit. For some, it's fear of missing out.

Without stopping first, you'll never see any of this. You'll stay trapped in the inertia forever.

The Image Commentary on the Gen hexagram says: "The noble one's thoughts do not leave his position."

What does "do not leave his position" mean? Your mind stays exactly where it should be, right now. When you're eating, your mind is on the food. When you're walking, your mind is in your feet. When you're talking to someone, your mind is on their face.

But ask yourself honestly: when you're eating, is your mind on the food? Or has it already wandered into your Moments feed? When you're talking to your family, is your hand still holding your phone?

Stillness is pulling your scattered heart back home.

I suggest you try a small version of "stopping." Not three days — three hours is enough. Pick a weekend morning, turn your phone off for three hours. You can do anything — walk, cook, write, daydream — just don't turn the phone on. If three hours is too much, try one.

What matters isn't the length of time. It's the first time you experience this: oh — after I stop, I'm not "out of things to do." I'm "back in the company of myself."

Key Takeaways:

- The *I Ching*'s Hexagram 52 (Mountain/艮) teaches that stopping is not failure or laziness — it's the pr

erequisite for seeing yourself clearly.

- You cannot understand your relationship with your phone while you're still inside it. A pause, even just three hours with the phone off, reveals what you're actually reaching for.
 - Dopamine fasting and silence retreats are modern rediscoveries of an ancient truth: only when the noise stops can you hear who you really are.
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Chapter 6: The Art of Letting Go

In the temple, I have a study. It's not big — about ten square meters. You might not be able to picture what it used to look like: books piled on the desk, books on the floor, books stacked in the corners. The shelves couldn't hold any more, so the overflow crept onto the floor. Every time I needed a scripture, I'd spend ages digging for it. When I finally found it, I'd read two pages, my phone would buzz, I'd glance at it, put it down, pick the scripture back up — and I'd already forgotten where I was.

Eventually I couldn't take it anymore. I spent a whole weekend clearing things out. I got rid of two-thirds of what was in there — gave away books I no longer read, tossed things I no longer used, even swapped the desk for a smaller one. Now that study contains just a desk, a chair, a single bookshelf, a lamp, and one framed calligraphy scroll on the wall.

The character on that scroll is: 损 — Sun, Decrease.

In the Yi Jing, Sun is Hexagram 41 — Mountain above, Lake below. Water erodes the mountain; the mountain diminishes. Sounds like a bad thing, right? But that's not how the Yi Jing sees it.

The hexagram statement says: Decrease. There is sincerity. Supreme good fortune.

"Decrease" is actually "supreme good fortune." Why?

Because the spirit of the Sun hexagram is "decrease what is below to augment what is above" — trim away what's excessive at the base to strengthen what matters at the top. Pull out the weeds so the crops can thrive. Cut the meaningless words so the important ones carry weight. Strip away everything superfluous from yourself so the essential you can emerge.

Laozi says the same thing in Chapter 48 of the Dao De Jing:

■ In pursuing learning, one accumulates daily. In pursuing the Dao, one decreases daily. Decrease and further decrease, until one reaches *wu wei*.

Learning is addition — every day, a little new knowledge, growing more and more. Cultivating the Dao is subtraction — every day, a little less excess, paring down and down. When you've subtracted everything that doesn't belong, you arrive at *wu wei* (wú wéi, a core Daoist concept — not "doing nothing," but acting without force or contrivance, aligning with the natural flow of things).

I used to have no idea what "decreasing daily for the Dao" meant. I thought — shouldn't cultivation make you more powerful, more knowledgeable, more supernaturally capable? How is it subtraction?

It took me many years to understand: cultivation isn't about building abilities. It's about being natural. Like a tree — it doesn't need to tell itself every day "I must grow taller, I must grow more lush." It simply doesn't obstruct itself. Water comes, it drinks. Light comes, it absorbs. Leaves fall in winter, buds break in spring. This is *wu wei*.

And all that excess you're carrying — excess desires, excess anxiety, excess social obligations, excess apps

— these are the obstructions. They prevent you from living naturally.

Now, back to the phone.

My phone used to have three pages of apps. First page: the essentials — WeChat, Maps, Camera, Calendar. Second page: occasional use — banking, shopping, video, music. Third page: the "why did I even install this" page — random games, random social apps, random tools "just in case I ever need them."

One day I decided to do a "Decrease." I asked myself one question:

"If my phone could only hold ten apps, which ten would I keep?"

That question was brutal. It took me two hours to answer. WeChat — keep or not? Keep. Maps — keep or not? Keep. That learning app I haven't opened in three months — keep or not? Ugh... delete. That news app that makes me angry every single day — keep or not? Delete. That "productivity tool" I installed three years ago and never once opened — keep or not? Delete, delete, delete.

In the end, my phone had barely half a page of apps. Not to prove anything. I just truly realized: I didn't need a single one of those deleted apps. They weren't serving me. They were occupying me. Occupying my screen space, occupying my mental space, occupying those few precious seconds of attention they stole every time I swiped past them.

Every app I deleted, I felt a little lighter. Not my phone — me.

This is the art of Decrease. When you eliminate something you don't need, you're not "losing" it. You're reclaiming the part of yourself it was occupying.

There are two modern Western concepts that resemble this.

One is Minimalism — the fewer things you own, the freer you are. Not poverty — freedom from being weighed down by possessions. The other is Essentialism — do only what matters most; discard everything else.

I resonate with both. But I think they both fall a little short of Laozi's "Decrease." Minimalism and Essentialism are more about method — "how to be more efficient," "how to live more freely." The ultimate goal of "Decrease" is not efficiency, and it's not freedom. It's — returning to who you originally are.

What does "who you originally are" mean? It's the you that hasn't been buried under all those layers of "should" and "must."

Let me tell you a true story. A young man came to see me. He wanted to do a "digital detox" but couldn't stick with it. Every time he deleted an app, a few days later he'd reinstall it. He was full of self-reproach — he said he felt like his willpower was just pathetic.

I asked him, "Which app is the one you delete and then reinstall?"

He said it was a short-video app.

"When you reinstalled it, what did you do?"

"Scrolled for an hour."

"How did you feel afterward?"

"Even emptier."

I said, "Then don't you already know the answer? What this app actually gives you, and what you think it's

going to give you, are not the same thing at all. You think it's going to give you relaxation — but it gives you deeper exhaustion. You think it's going to give you information — but it gives you more anxiety. You're not deleting it because you need to 'quit' something. You're deleting it because you don't want it anymore.

"

He paused. Then he said that actually... yeah. That was exactly it.

Decrease is not renunciation. Renunciation is suppression — you want it but you won't let yourself have it, and the restraint is agonizing. Decrease is clarity — you see clearly that something is harmful and offers nothing, so you naturally stop wanting it. Like when you were a kid, you loved candy. As you grew up, you learned that too much sugar is bad for you, so you naturally stopped eating so much. Not because you're forcing yourself — because you understand.

That's why I never tell anyone "you must delete this app." I only say: quiet down for a moment. Feel into it. After you use this app, what state are you in? Better, or worse? If worse — what exactly are you keeping it on your phone for?

When you truly see the harm something does to you, you don't need to "resist" it. You just — don't touch it anymore.

This is "decrease and further decrease, until one reaches wu wei."

Key Takeaways:

- The *I Ching*'s Hexagram 41 (Decrease/损) and Laozi's teaching of "daily decrease" reveal a counterintuitive truth: less is not deprivation — less is liberation.
 - Every unnecessary app, notification, and digital obligation occupies not just your phone's storage but your mental and emotional bandwidth. Deleting them is reclaiming yourself.
 - True decrease isn't about willpower or "quitting" — it's about seeing clearly that something harms you. Once you truly see it, you don't need to resist it; you just let it go.
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Chapter 7: Return: Recovery Is a Cycle

At the temple, I have a regular — actually, not really a client, more of an old friend. He works in tech, thirty-five, doing well for himself. But he has one problem: digital detoxing always fails.

He comes to the temple to talk, and it's always the same pattern. First, he's in great shape: "Master, this time I'm really doing it! I deleted TikTok, I deleted Weibo, I even turned off my Moments feed!" Two weeks later, he shows up, head hanging: "Master... I scrolled again."

The third time he fell off the wagon, he was almost in tears in front of me. He said, "Am I just hopeless? Do I just have no self-discipline? I can't even last three days — what can I even do?"

I looked at him and thought of a hexagram from the Yi Jing — the Fu hexagram, Hexagram 24, Return.

The image of the Fu hexagram is "thunder within the earth" — the last month of winter, when the sound of thunder is already stirring deep underground. On the surface, everything is still silent and still. But yang energy is quietly beginning to rise. Spring hasn't arrived yet — but it will. It absolutely will.

The hexagram statement says:

Returning to the Dao. In seven days comes the return.

Nature moves in exactly this rhythm — the sun sets and rises again, night passes and dawn breaks, winter ends and spring comes. No path only goes up and never down. No path only goes down and never up. It repeats. But it always returns.

I said to him, "Come with me to the courtyard."

There's an old locust tree in the temple courtyard. I pointed at a branch and said, "See this branch? Last winter, the snow snapped it." He looked — sure enough, a thick branch was broken, the stump dry and withered. Then I pointed next to the break: "Now look here."

He leaned in. Beside the dead stump, a new shoot had grown — tender green, growing wildly in the spring air.

I said, "The tree lost a branch. Did it sit there wallowing in self-pity? Saying 'I'm a failure of a tree, I wasn't strong enough, the snow broke me'? No. It just — grew a new branch. Broke, then grew. That's nature. You broke your digital detox plan and you think you've failed. But have you ever considered — the fact that you 'broke it and came back' — isn't that itself the Fu? Isn't that Return?"

He stood there looking at the branch for a long time.

The truth of the Fu hexagram is very simple: breaking isn't what's scary. What's scary is breaking and never coming back. You slipped. You scrolled short videos for three hours. Fine — you realized it, and you stopped. That is Return. You don't need to start over from zero. You just keep walking. It's like tripping while walking down the road — you don't go back to the starting line and begin again. You stand up, dust yourself off, and keep going.

Chapter 40 of the Dao De Jing contains a line I've always believed is one of the deepest insights in all of Daoist philosophy:

Returning is the movement of the Dao.

The character fan (反) has two meanings: one is "return," the other is "reverse." The movement of the Dao is return — all things go out and come back, all things fall and rise again. The movement of the Dao is also reversal — anything pushed to its extreme turns toward its opposite.

So when you've flipped day and night, scrolling on your phone until dawn, pouring all your energy outward — the moment you've scattered yourself to the absolute limit, you'll naturally want to come back. That's "returning is the movement of the Dao." Return isn't forced from outside. It's the direction of life itself.

Later, I shared an analogy with my friend. He says it helped him immensely.

"Your relationship with your phone," I said, "is like breathing. You exhale, and you inhale. Have you ever heard someone say, 'I'm only going to exhale from now on, no more inhaling'? Or 'I'm never going to exhale again starting today'? No, right? Breathing is out and in, exhale and inhale. Your relationship with your phone is the same — you'll pick it up, and you'll put it down. You'll overuse it, and you'll return to balance. What matters isn't never picking it up. What matters is that every time, you're able to put it down. And you get faster at it — what used to take three days of being lost before you came to, now takes three hours to realize, and someday it'll only take thirty minutes."

In Western psychology, there's a concept called "Self-Compassion," developed by a researcher named Kristin Neff. She argues that the best way to change isn't self-criticism — not beating yourself up with "why am I so useless" — but treating yourself the way a good friend would: "Alright, you messed up this time. It's

okay. Let's try again."

I've noticed that among the people who come to me for guidance, the ones who are hardest on themselves tend to be the ones who "relapse" most often. Because after every slip-up, they spend so much time attacking themselves — "I'm so worthless," "I'm such a failure" — and while they're busy attacking themselves, they casually scroll another two hours. Then they feel even more ashamed. Then they scroll even more. A vicious cycle.

Conversely, the ones who are gentler with themselves — "it happened, let's move on" — recover much faster.

This isn't self-indulgence. It's objective law. The Image Commentary on the Fu hexagram says: "The ancient kings closed the gates at the winter solstice. Merchants did not travel, and the ruler did not inspect the provinces." At the winter solstice — the day when yin energy peaks and yang energy has just begun its return — the ancient sage-kings had everyone stop. No commerce, no travel, no governance. Why? Because you stop in order to let the return happen.

So if you're trying to change your relationship with your phone, and you "broke" again today — I want to say one thing to you:

It's okay. This is Return.

You've been exhaling for too long. It's time to inhale. You haven't failed. You're just breathing.

Key Takeaways:

- The *I Ching*'s Hexagram 24 (Return/复) and Laozi's "returning is the movement of the Dao" teach that recovery is cyclical — not a straight line. Breaking, returning, breaking again, returning again: this is the natural rhythm.
 - Self-compassion is not self-indulgence. Beating yourself up after a relapse fuels shame-spiraling that makes you reach for the phone even more. Treat yourself like you'd treat a friend: "You slipped. Let's start again."
 - Digital detox is like breathing — there is no "I will only inhale and never exhale." You will pick up the phone again. What matters is that you keep learning to put it down faster each time.
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Chapter 8: Never Finished

The Yi Jing has sixty-four hexagrams. If you read it from start to finish, you'll notice something peculiar.

The very last hexagram is called Wei Ji — "Before Completion."

Ji means to cross a river, to finish. Wei Ji — not yet completed, still on the way.

Hexagram 63 is Ji Ji — "Already Completed," having crossed the river, finished. By all logic, that should be the ending — a satisfying conclusion. But the author of the Yi Jing didn't put it last. The last one is Wei Ji.

This is a message left for us by an editor-compiler over two thousand years ago: true wisdom never arrives at "finished."

Twenty-five years ago, when I first entered the Dao, I was up every morning at three or four to train. Standing meditation, sitting meditation, chanting — two hours straight. Back then I thought: after three or five y

ears, I should be pretty much there, right? After ten years, I should be "done."

Three or five years passed. I realized I was nowhere close. Ten years passed. I felt like I'd barely started. Twenty-five years have passed — and this morning, I still got up at 3:30 to practice. Nobody ever "finishes" cultivation. There is no graduation ceremony for walking the Dao.

Your relationship with your phone is the same.

There won't be a day when you stand on a mountain peak, radiant light behind you, declaring to the world: "I — have completed digital detox! I shall never again be addicted to my phone! Henceforth I am invincible!"

That day will never come. And I don't want it to come. Because if it did, it would mean you've fallen back into black-and-white thinking — either you're addicted, or you're totally disconnected. But life doesn't happen at either extreme. Life happens in the vast, grey, in-between — where every day requires a little adjustment.

Today, your relationship with your phone might be a little better than last year. Next year, it might be a little better than today. But sometimes you'll still lose control — scroll until 2 a.m., delete an app and reinstall it. That's being human. That's life.

Daoist wisdom never pursues "perfection." Perfection is rigid. It's dead. In the very last chapter of the Dao De Jing (Chapter 81), Laozi wrote a line to close the entire book:

The Dao of Heaven benefits all and harms none. The Dao of the sage acts without contending.

The Dao of Heaven — it nourishes all things and does no harm. The Dao of the sage — act, but don't contend.

"Act without contending" — this is what I've been doing my whole life. I'm not in a war with my phone, trying to declare a winner — "I won! I'll never scroll again!" This isn't a battle. It's coexistence. I live with my phone the same way I live with my stomach, my sleep, my emotions. Some days are good. Some days, not so good. But I don't contend. I just keep going, keep adjusting, keep walking forward.

The Japanese have the concept of kaizen — continuous small improvements, every day a little better than yesterday. Stoic philosophy speaks of "lifelong practice" in the same vein — virtue isn't a destination you arrive at; it's a road you walk every day.

But I think the Yi Jing's Wei Ji goes deeper than both. Kaizen is still striving for "better." Stoicism is still striving for "virtue." Wei Ji says — you can even let go of the idea of "completion."

It's like walking a road. You don't need to wonder "at what point have I finished this walk?" You just walk. Every step is the entire journey.

At the temple, young people often ask me: "Master, after twenty-five years of cultivating the Dao, what does it feel like?"

I think about it, then say: "In the beginning, I felt like I didn't understand anything. Now, I still feel like I don't understand anything — but back then, I was anxious about not knowing. Now, I'm at peace with not knowing."

They laugh, thinking I'm joking. But I'm serious.

When I first started, I was afraid of "not knowing." I thought not knowing meant incompetence, meant I'd been wasting my time. Slowly, I came to realize: true wisdom isn't "knowing everything." It's "knowing wh

at you don't need to know." The things you don't need to know — when you let them go, your heart empties out. And what do you do with that emptiness? You — live.

It's the same with your phone. I don't need to know everyone's latest updates on Moments. I don't need to know every piece of news in the world today. I don't need to know everything those carefully designed apps want me to know. I only need to know — what am I doing right now? Who am I with right now? Am I awake right now?

That's enough.

As I write this book, my own phone sits right here on the desk. Between paragraphs, I pick it up and glance at it. Sometimes I get drawn in, and twenty minutes later I realize I've drifted. Then I put it down and keep writing. I don't blame myself. I just — come back.

This is the most important thing I've learned in the past twenty-five years, and it's the one thing I want most for you to take from this entire book:

You are always on the way. You will never be "finished." And that is good. Because that is exactly the way the Dao moves.

The road still stretches ahead. The story still unfolds. And you — you are still here.

We all are.

Key Takeaways:

- The *I Ching* deliberately ends with Hexagram 64 "Before Completion" (未济) — the deepest wisdom recognizes that there is no finish line. Digital wellness is not a destination you arrive at, but a practice you live every day.
 - Stop framing your relationship with technology as a war you must win or lose. It's a coexistence. Some days are better than others, and that's not failure — that's being human.
 - After 25 years as a Daoist priest, I still practice every morning. No one ever "finishes" the work. The path is the practice. Keep walking.
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Afterword

I've refilled my teacup three times while writing this book.

Just now, my little daughter ran in, holding up her tablet to show me a drawing she made. The drawing shows a figure in a blue Daoist robe, standing next to a little girl with braids. "This is Daddy," she said. "And this is me."

I thought of my master, all those years ago, looking at me holding my phone. That look of regret in his eyes — it was really care. When I watch my daughter with her tablet now, I probably have the same look in my eyes.

But I'm not going to tell her, "Put the tablet down." I'm going to tell her: "This drawing is beautiful. Daddy loves it so much."

And then, a little later, I might invite her out to the courtyard — that "empty" courtyard — to watch the clouds together.

Because I know: the most powerful kind of change is never preaching. It's companionship. It's example. It's you living a life that isn't trapped by screens — and someone else seeing it and thinking: oh — you can live like that? — and then wanting to try it for themselves.

This is the true meaning of the very last line of the Dao De Jing: "Act without contending." You walk your path. You don't contend with anyone — not with others, not with yourself, not with your phone. You just walk, quietly, on your own Dao.

I hope this book can walk a stretch of the road with you.

May you find, in the digital flood, your own Dao.

Ding Long
Yunjian Dao
Shanghai

The End