

1|# Daoist Wisdom and the Way of Business

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3|## Ding Long's E-Book • Expanded Edition

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7|# Author's Note

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9|My name is Ding Long. I am a huojun daoshi — a "fire-dwelling" Daoist priest of the Zhengyi tradition — now in my twenty-fifth year.

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11|The identity of a huojun daoshi is unfamiliar to many. Simply put, I don't live in a monastery. I don't retreat to the mountains for secluded cultivation. I live in the same world of dust and noise as you do — working, living, dealing with people of every stripe. And precisely because of this, over the past twenty-five years I have come to know people from every walk of life. The biggest group among them, unexpectedly, has been entrepreneurs.

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13|By a rough count, I have met no fewer than three or four hundred founders. Some have achieved great success and fame. Some have ridden the waves, up and down, again and again. Some wagered everything they had and eventually walked away in defeat. They often come to talk with me — sometimes to consult the oracle, but more often just to have someone to talk to. And the more I listened, the more one thing became clear: many of them were not defeated by the market. They were defeated by themselves — by impatience, by the need for control, by an ignorance of what I can only call "the underlying patterns."

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15|This book doesn't do academic theory. I won't give you a word-by-word textual analysis of which version of the Dao De Jing is more authoritative. I won't talk about metaphysics, or destiny, or divination. What I talk about is patterns. Patterns exist whether you believe in them or not. What Daoism has been talking about, over and over for thousands of years, is really just this one thing: patterns.

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17|And I don't deal in grand abstractions. I tell stories. The founders I've known — their predicaments, their breakthroughs, the pits they fell into and the paths they carved out — these are the flesh and blood of this book. Behind every concept stands at least one living, breathing human being.

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19|You might ask: what gives a Daoist priest the standing to talk to entrepreneurs about business? My answer is this: beneath business lies human nature, and beneath human nature lie patterns. For twenty-five years I have observed patterns, experienced and verified patterns, and watched several hundred entrepreneurs have their own encounters with those patterns — and be validated or humbled by them. I am not a business school professor. I am a witness to the patterns.

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21|This book is not about "seeing through the vanity of the world" — quite the opposite. I hope you engage with the world more deeply. Only this time, bring a pair of eyes that can see the patterns.

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23|Settle in. We begin with water.

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27|# Chapter 1: 上善若水 — The Highest Good Is Like Water

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29|## I. Deep Dive into the Concept

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31|### The Five Qualities of Water

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33|In the Dao De Jing, Laozi uses water as a metaphor for the highest form of goodness, developing the theme across multiple chapters. I have read and reflected on this for over twenty years, and I have broken it down into five qualities to share with you. Each of these five qualities may seem simple on its own, but taken together, they form the most complete set of business survival principles I have ever encountered.

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35|The First Quality: Benefitting Others (利他).

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37|Water nourishes all things. Without water, there is no life. Yet water never demands anything in return from what it nourishes. It flows through, things grow, and it moves on. In business, this is called value first. The longest-surviving businesses I've seen have invariably solved the question "What value am I creating for others?" before they asked "How do I make money?" Those who reversed the order — well, they didn't last very long.

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39|The Second Quality: Non-Contention (不争).

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41|Water flows to the low places. It does not compete with mountains for height or with stones for hardness. Throw a rock into water — the rock sinks and the surface soon returns to stillness. Water won't contend with you, but it has never lost. In business, "non-contention" doesn't mean abandoning competition. It means competing on a different dimension. Don't go head-to-head in your competitor's strongest territory. Find your own low ground.

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43|The Third Quality: Dwelling in the Low Place (处下).

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45|"Dwelling in places that people despise" — water stays in the low-lying hollows that people tend to avoid. If an entrepreneur is willing to do the work others find tedious, to serve the customers others look down upon, to cultivate the fields others ignore — that entrepreneur is already halfway to winning. Dwelling low is not low self-esteem. It is a strategic choice.

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47|The Fourth Quality: Softness and Resilience (柔韧).

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49|Water is the softest thing under heaven, yet it can bore through stone. Not because of force, but because of persistence. Once doesn't work — try twice. One year doesn't work — try ten. Resilience in business means staying flexible in your methods while remaining firm in your direction. Banging your head against a single approach is not perseverance; it's rigidity.

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51|The Fifth Quality: Adaptability (适应).

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53|Water has no fixed shape. Pour it into a cup and it takes the shape of a cup. Let it flow into a river and it

takes the shape of the river. Merge it into the sea and it takes the shape of the sea. This capacity for adaptation is one of the rarest qualities in a founder. The market changes — you must change. Customer needs shift — you must shift. Team structure evolves — you must still evolve. What stays constant are the core principles; what changes is the external form.

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55|You can think of these five qualities as a measuring stick. Whenever you face a difficult business decision, take it out and measure: Is this benefitting others? Is this avoiding unnecessary friction? Is my posture humble enough? Is my method flexible enough? Can my form adapt to the environment? Ask all five questions, and the answer often surfaces on its own.

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57|### Interpreting the Original Text of the Dao De Jing

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59|In Chapter 8, Laozi says: "The highest good is like water. Water is good at benefiting all things yet does not contend with them. It dwells in places people despise, and thus it is close to the Dao."

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61|In my own words: the highest goodness is like water. Water excels at nourishing all things without competing with them. It willingly stays in the low, unwanted places that others avoid — and that is what brings it closest to the Dao.

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63|Many people frown when they read "dwells in places people despise." Why stay where everyone else finds distasteful? The word "despise" here doesn't mean morally evil — it means loathsome, the places people recoil from. Everyone wants to go high: shiny, prestigious, fast-money businesses. Water, contrarily, flows downward. But what's the result? Wherever water flows, life springs up. The rocks up on the high ground — what do they look like ten years later? Exactly the same. The low-lying hollow — ten years later it may have become a pond teeming with life.

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65|Chapter 78 offers another angle on the philosophy of water: "Nothing under heaven is softer or weaker than water, yet for attacking what is hard and strong, nothing surpasses it — there is nothing that can replace it. That the weak overcomes the strong and the soft overcomes the hard — everyone under heaven knows this, yet no one can put it into practice."

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67|There is nothing softer than water in the world, yet when it comes to breaking through what is hard and solid, nothing beats it. Water dripping through stone — it doesn't rely on a single burst of force, but on ceaseless continuity. The weak defeats the strong. The soft defeats the hard. No one in the world is unaware of this principle — and yet no one actually acts on it.

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69|Why? Because of those four words: "no one can practice it." The distance between knowing and doing is the longest distance on earth. Resilience requires patience. Dwelling low requires subduing your vanity. Benefitting others requires giving first. Every single one of these goes against human instinct. But precisely because "no one can practice it," those who do are the few — and the few hold the majority of the results.

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71|## II. Western Parallels

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73|### Darwin vs. Laozi: A Different Reading of "Survival of the Fittest"

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75|Darwin spoke of "survival of the fittest," and many people take this to mean survival of the strongest, survival of the most ferocious. That's a misreading. What Darwin meant by "fit" was adaptive, not powerful. The birds that survived on the Galápagos Islands weren't the strongest — they were the ones whose beak shapes happened to match the local seeds. This aligns astonishingly well with Laozi's "water has no fixed shape": the fittest are precisely those most capable of adapting to environmental change.

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77|The difference: Darwin tells you the outcome from a biological perspective; Laozi tells you how to do it from a philosophical perspective. Darwin says "the ones suited to their environment survive." Laozi says "be like water — make yourself suited to every environment." One describes the pattern; the other gives you the method.

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79|### Jim Collins: Level 5 Leadership and "Dwelling in the Low Place"

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81|In Good to Great, Jim Collins introduced the concept of Level 5 Leadership. After studying over a thousand companies, he found that the CEOs who led their enterprises to breakthrough transformations all shared a common dual trait: extreme humility coupled with extreme professional will. They were low-profile. They attributed success to the team and to luck, and took personal responsibility for failures. Yet at the same time, they possessed an almost obsessive resilience — an unyielding determination to see things through.

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83|Is this not precisely "dwelling low" plus "resilience"? Humility is dwelling low; professional will is resilience — as low-key as water, and as stone-boring as water. The conclusion Collins reached through more than a decade of empirical research, Laozi had already written on the surface of water more than two thousand years ago.

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85|## III. Ding Long's Case Studies

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87|### Case One: Old Zhang and Young Li — A Tale of Two Restaurateurs

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89|Old Zhang is one of the entrepreneurs I've known the longest. In 2008, he opened a local Hangzhou cuisine restaurant. The flavors were authentic, the ingredients honest. After a few good years, Old Zhang got a bit carried away. He started to feel that his positioning was "too low-end" and wanted to build a high-end dining brand. He shut down the old restaurant, renovated, hired a French cuisine chef, and multiplied his prices several times over.

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91|Nine months later, the place was closed. When Old Zhang came to see me, half his hair had gone white. He said, "I just wanted to move up in the world — what's wrong with that?"

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93|That's when I talked to him about water. I said: water reaches the ocean not because it struggles to climb higher, but precisely because it flows to the lowest places, and those low places eventually converge into the sea. You wanted to go up, but your foundation, your team, your supply chain, your entire customer base — they were all rooted in the mid-to-low end. You abandoned the low ground, and you couldn't hold your footing on the high ground. Water that hangs in the air is the fastest to evaporate.

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95|Old Zhang thought about this for a long time. Later, he opened another restaurant — once again, local Hangzhou cuisine, honest prices, faithfully serving the neighborhood. Two years later, he opened a third branch. Now he has six locations. They're still positioned in the "low place," but they're steady as a rock.

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97|Now let me tell you about Young Li. Young Li ran an Instagram-bakery business. He entered the market in 2019, rode a wave of photogenic marketing to six months of explosive success, and was then rapidly copied — within three months, over a dozen competitors had sprung up in the same city. Young Li's response was to fight back head-on: cut prices, pour in more advertising, poach competitors' chefs. The vicious competition dragged on for over half a year. Margins were drained. Reputation collapsed.

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99|Young Li eventually found his way to me through Old Zhang. I told him about another quality of water: non-contention. Everyone else was doing Instagram bakeries and racing to the bottom on price — why not switch ponds? He pivoted to corporate tea-break catering, a segment that almost no one was serving at the time, and one that actually had much healthier margins. Today his company is called "Water and Wood Catering" — a name he chose himself, as a way of remembering that lesson.

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101|### Case Two: Ah Wen's SaaS Pivot — "Water" in the Tech World

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103|Ah Wen is a technical founder I met in 2015. He had built an ERP system for small and medium enterprises. The technology was solid, but the market was already dominated by giants like Yonyou and Kingdee. His initial playbook was frontal competition: more features than them, lower prices than them. After two years of burning cash, user growth never took off.

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105|At his lowest point, Ah Wen's co-founder left. The team shrank from over forty people to fewer than ten. When he came to see me, I asked him a single question: "Have you considered that you've been competing with rocks on hardness — but you were water all along?"

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107|Ah Wen went silent for a long time. What he did next was this: he transformed his system from a generic ERP into a vertical tool specifically for small food-processing factories. These tiny factories might gross only a couple of million yuan a year. Yonyou and Kingdee couldn't be bothered with a market that small. But this "place that everyone despises" — this low ground — turned out to be Ah Wen's blue ocean. No giant competitors. Clear customer needs. High referral rates. Three years later, his company was acquired by a mid-sized software group. The price wasn't astronomical, but it was more than enough to give him financial freedom.

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109|Ah Wen later said to me: "Ding Long, do you know the one thing you said that I'm most grateful for? You said, 'Rocks are hard, but water never competes with rocks on hardness. Water simply flows past them.'"

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111|## IV. Conceptual Framework Summary

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113|The business framework of the Way of Water can be summarized in five progressive layers:

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115|Layer One — Set the Foundation: Your existence must first benefit others. Create value before you consider returns. This is the starting point of the Way of Water — and also the starting point most easily skipped

ed.
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117|Layer Two — Choose the Battleground: Use the mindset of "non-contention" to select your competitive dimension. Don't launch a frontal assault on your competitor's strongest ground. Find the low place where water flows.
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119|Layer Three — Set Your Posture: Root yourself in the mindset of "dwelling low." Be willing to serve overlooked customers. Cultivate neglected fields. Build irreplaceable moats in the low places.
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121|Layer Four — Set Your Resilience: Execute with the method of "flexibility." Firm in direction, elastic in approach. Replace the one-time explosive burst with sustained micro-force.
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123|Layer Five — Set Your Evolution: Iterate according to the principle of "adaptability." When the environment changes, you change. Adjust your form like water poured into different vessels — but your core value remains constant.
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125|These five layers are not a one-time cultivation. They are a daily practice, a cycle repeated over and over. With every business cycle, you walk through all five again.
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127|## V. Practical Exercises
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129|Reflection Questions for This Week:
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131|Question One: Take a sheet of paper. On the left, write down every value your current business creates for customers. On the right, write down what you receive in return. Now look at the left column — is that list long enough? Solid enough? If you removed any single item of value, would customers still stay? If you raised your returns by 20%, would customers still feel it's worth it?
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133|Question Two: Who is your strongest competitor right now? List the three things they are most dominant at. Now ask yourself — are you grinding head-to-head against them on these exact same three points? If yes, where is your "low place"? Find a gap — something they overlook, something they can't do well, but something customers genuinely need.
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135|Question Three: Think back over the past year. What were the three most important adjustments your business made? Were they reactive or proactive? Have you been forced to respond to change, or have you been actively adapting to change? If the latter — congratulations. You already have the embryonic form of water.
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137|Action for This Week:
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139|Choose one goal you've been trying to conquer but making slow progress on. Don't increase your force — change your angle. Redesign your strategy using the logic of water: this path is too hard — is there a way around it? This competitor is too strong — is there a battlefield where they're absent? This approach is too rigid — is there a softer way?
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143|Key Takeaways

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145|- Water teaches five essential business qualities: benefitting others first (value creation), non-contention (strategic positioning), staying low (serving overlooked markets), flexibility (method without rigidity), and adaptability (evolving with the environment).

146|- Darwin's "survival of the fittest" and Laozi's "be like water" converge on the same insight: the fittest are not the strongest, but the most adaptable.

147|- Jim Collins' Level 5 Leadership — extreme humility plus extreme professional will — is a modern empirical validation of water's dual nature: it flows low yet wears down stone.

148|- Every business decision can be stress-tested against water's five qualities. When in doubt, ask: Is this benefitting others? Is this avoiding unnecessary friction? Is my posture humble enough? Is my approach flexible? Can this adapt?

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152|# Chapter 2: 无为而治 — Stop Doing Too Much

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154|## I. Deep Dive into the Concept

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156|### The Three Levels of Wu Wei

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158|Wu wei is perhaps the most misunderstood concept in all of Daoism. When most people hear "governing by non-action," the image that pops into their heads is of a hands-off boss, lounging in a chair with a cup of tea, doing absolutely nothing, waiting for things to magically fix themselves.

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160|This is the crudest misreading of wu wei. Wu wei has never meant doing nothing. It means not acting recklessly — refraining from actions that are excessive, that go against natural patterns, that are born of anxiety or arrogance, and that interfere with the natural unfolding of things.

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162|I break wu wei into three levels. These levels progress from the individual to the team to the system. Each level you go deeper, your understanding of wu wei is reshaped.

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164|Level One: Personal Wu Wei — Subtraction.

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166|The core principle here is: "In the pursuit of learning, one adds day by day. In the pursuit of the Dao, one subtracts day by day." Learning requires constant addition, but cultivation requires constant subtraction. Translated into the entrepreneurial context: the problem with most founders is not that they do too little — it's that they do too much. Chasing five directions at once. Running eight product lines. Pushing ten channels without mastering any of them. This kind of "busy" is an anesthetic. It makes you feel like you're working hard, but you're really just avoiding the things that truly matter.

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168|The essence of personal wu wei is having the courage to stop doing the things that "seem like you should be doing them" and concentrate your attention on the one or two things that actually drive results. Le

ss is more. This isn't a motivational slogan — it's a pattern.

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170|Level Two: Team Wu Wei — Letting Go.

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172|Level One is about restraining yourself. Level Two is about trusting your team. Many founders never get past this gate. They micromanage everything. Every decision must be personally approved. The team becomes an execution tool rather than a decision-making body. The result? You become the single biggest bottleneck in your entire company.

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174|Team wu wei doesn't mean you stop managing. It means that after you establish clear boundaries and principles, you give the team full autonomy within those boundaries. There's a difference between you setting the direction and them setting the direction: you set where we are going; they set how exactly we walk that path. A good founder should make their own presence felt less and less, while the team's sense of capability grows stronger and stronger.

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176|Level Three: System Wu Wei — Let the Patterns Take Over.

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178|This is the highest level of wu wei. When an organization has developed self-running mechanisms, a self-optimizing culture, and a self-generating capacity, the founder can shift from being the operator to being the guardian. It's not that you don't manage — it's that you don't need to. It's like spinning a top: once you've given it enough rotational speed, it keeps its own balance. Your role shifts from "the person constantly cracking the whip" to "the person making sure the table stays level."

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180|The precondition for system wu wei is that the previous two levels have already been done to the extreme: you personally have subtracted enough to keep only the core, and the team is operating autonomously within its boundaries. At this level, what you do is no longer "management" — it's "design." Designing rules. Designing incentives. Designing the way information flows. Systems govern behavior; culture governs the heart. You govern the direction of the systems and the culture.

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182|### Interpreting the Original Text of the Dao De Jing

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184|Chapter 48: "In the pursuit of learning, one adds day by day. In the pursuit of the Dao, one subtracts day by day. Subtracting and yet again subtracting, until one arrives at wu wei. Through wu wei, nothing is left undone."

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186|When I translate this passage for entrepreneurs, I usually put it like this: learning to do business is about constantly adding tools to your toolbox — that's the addition. But a true master, upon reaching a certain stage, starts removing tools — fewer and fewer, until in the end there may be only one or two that fit the hand perfectly. But those one or two are wielded with supernatural skill. When the subtraction reaches its end, it looks as though nothing is being done — yet everything gets done. Because the master has stopped fighting against the patterns and has begun to move with their momentum.

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188|Chapter 37: "The Dao constantly practices wu wei, yet nothing is left undone. If lords and kings could abide by this, the ten thousand things would transform themselves."

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190|The Dao is forever without reckless action, yet there is nothing it cannot accomplish. If a leader can hold to this principle, all things will naturally evolve in a positive direction on their own. The key is those two words: "transform themselves" — it's not you transforming them; they transform themselves. You create the conditions and the environment. Growth happens naturally. The best manager is one whose presence as a manager is never felt.

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192|## II. Western Parallels

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194|### Tim Ferriss: The 4-Hour Workweek and "Subtract and Again Subtract"

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196|Although the title of Tim Ferriss's book is a bit of an exaggeration, its core logic aligns remarkably well with Laozi's "in pursuit of the Dao, one subtracts day by day." Ferriss advocates using the 80/20 Principle (the Pareto Principle) to cut and cut again: identify the 20% of things that produce 80% of the results, then ruthlessly eliminate the remaining 80%. Then, within that 20%, find another 20%. Keep "subtracting" until you're left with only a tiny handful of things that genuinely create leverage.

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198|Ferriss also introduced the concept of "mini-retirements" — don't wait until you're 65 to enjoy life; distribute rest and experience throughout your entire lifespan. What this implies, underneath, is precisely the rhythm of wu wei: when you work, work with extreme focus. When you rest, let go completely. Both states should be extreme — rather than lingering in the draining in-between state of half-doing, half-not-doing.

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200|### Cal Newport: Deep Work and the Personal Cultivation of Wu Wei

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202|In Deep Work, Cal Newport argues that in an age of fragmented information, the ability to sustain deep, concentrated work is becoming a superpower. He advocates drastically reducing shallow tasks — emails, instant replies, multitasking — and reserving your time and cognitive resources for the things that truly require deep thought.

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204|This aligns perfectly with personal wu wei. The "shallow tasks" Newport describes are exactly what Laozi wants you to subtract. You think you're busy, but you're really just doing the things with the lowest cognitive cost to avoid the genuinely important deep work. Entrepreneurs are especially prone to this trap — replying to messages, attending meetings, reviewing dashboards. Busy all day, then you look back and realize the substantive progress on the business is zero.

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206|### Basecamp (37signals): The Calm Company

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208|Jason Fried and DHH's Basecamp is a rare specimen of wu wei in the business world. They reject hustle culture. They reject the cult of growth. They reject mindless scaling. With only a few dozen employees, the company generates tens of millions of dollars in annual profit. The books they've published — Rework and It Doesn't Have to Be Crazy at Work — can almost be read as modern business manuals for governing by wu wei.

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210|Basecamp's practices include: minimize meetings, protect employees' blocks of uninterrupted time, don't pursue being the biggest in the industry but pursue being the most sustainable, and rather miss some opportunities than overdraw the team. Behind all these decisions is a common creed: do less, but do ever

anything you do to the point where it can't be improved. This is Basecamp's version of "through wu wei, nothing is left undone."

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212|## III. Ding Long's Case Studies

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214|### Case One: Ah Cheng's SaaS Company — From "I Want It All" to "Just One Thing"

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216|Ah Cheng is an entrepreneur I met in 2017. He was building enterprise collaboration software. Sharp mind, endless ideas — he wanted to chase every trend he saw. By 2018, his company was simultaneously working on four product directions — document collaboration, project management, video conferencing, and customer CRM — with a team of fewer than thirty people.

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218|The results were predictable. All four directions were lukewarm. Product experience couldn't keep up. Marketing's feedback was: "Customers have no idea what you actually do." R&D's feedback was: "Everyone is running ragged and nothing gets deep." Sales's feedback was even more direct: "I go out to sell and I don't even know how to introduce the company."

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220|When Ah Cheng came to find me, he was in bad shape. He said he was working fifteen or sixteen hours a day, but things kept piling up and his sense of control kept shrinking. I gave him a basic Daoist teaching: a teacup that's already full can't receive fresh tea. Your problem right now is that your cup is too full — you're doing so many things that each one can only be done to a sixty-percent level. Can you accept pouring out half?

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222|Ah Cheng struggled with this for a long time. He's an ambitious person. "Cutting" felt almost like self-negation to him. But in the end, he made the decision. He shut down document collaboration, video conferencing, and CRM — three entire product directions. The whole company kept only one product: project management. He focused all R&D, marketing, and sales firepower on a single point.

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224|After this decision was made, three things happened. First, the team's anxiety dropped dramatically — with a clear direction, everyone knew what to do. Second, product experience improved by leaps and bounds — thirty people building one product versus thirty people building four is not a fourfold difference; it's night and day. Third, customer positioning became crystal clear — no longer "we want to meet all the needs of all enterprises," but "we focus exclusively on project management for companies of 30 to 200 people."

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226|A year and a half later, Ah Cheng's company tripled its revenue. Not because they did more. Precisely because they did less.

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228|### Case Two: Old Zhou's Furniture Factory — Profits Doubled After Letting Go

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230|Old Zhou ran a furniture factory for fifteen years. He grew it from a husband-and-wife operation to over two hundred employees. But he had always lived an exhausting life. He had to sign off on procurement. He had to review production scheduling. He had to personally vet big-client proposals. He even had to look at the factory cafeteria menu. He was the most "diligent" boss I've ever met — and also the most exhausted human being I've ever met.

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232|One day over tea, he said to me: "Ding Long, tell me — am I just cursed? If I don't personally watch over every single thing, something goes wrong."

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234|I said: "Have you considered that the reason your team can't do anything is precisely because you watch over everything?"

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236|It wasn't the kindest thing to say, but Old Zhou froze. Slowly, he came to understand what I meant: if every single time procurement needs a decision, you make it for the procurement manager, then the procurement manager will never learn how to make that decision. When you carry all the responsibility on your own shoulders, your team's shoulders never develop any muscle.

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238|Old Zhou began to do one thing. He set a rule for himself: define only principles and boundaries. Do not intervene in execution-level decisions. The procurement manager had the authority to make decisions within the budget. The workshop supervisor could adjust production schedules within standard guidelines. The sales manager could negotiate with clients on their own, so long as they stayed above the price floor. If they made mistakes within those boundaries, no fear — that was simply tuition. Old Zhou's role shifted from "decision-maker" to "coach."

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240|This transition was not easy. In the first three months, Old Zhou lost five kilograms — because "not managing" is more anxiety-inducing than "managing." But six months later, the effects began to show: procurement costs dropped 8%, because the procurement manager understood the rhythms of the raw materials market better than Old Zhou ever could. Customer satisfaction rose, because sales managers no longer had to seek approval for every little thing, and response speed improved dramatically. Old Zhou's own actual work hours per day dropped from fourteen to eight.

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242|Most critically, Old Zhou discovered that once he was no longer the bottleneck, the entire company's operating speed increased. Before, all information had to converge on him, all decisions had to radiate from him — a two-hundred-person company with only a single CPU. How could it not be stuck?

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244|He later said something to me that I remember to this day: "It turns out that for fifteen years, I thought I was managing a company. I was really just managing my own anxiety."

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246|## IV. Conceptual Framework Summary

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248|Wu wei is a systematic cultivation that moves from the inside out:

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250|Personal Level — Continuously subtract. Use the principle of "in pursuit of the Dao, subtract day by day" to repeatedly re-examine your task list. Cut out the activities that don't create genuine value. Core tool: the repeated application of the 80/20 Principle until your daily energy is concentrated on the one or two most critical things.

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252|Team Level — Establish "bounded autonomy." Your job is to set principles, set boundaries, set direction. Within those boundaries, let the team make decisions, execute, and take responsibility. You shift from decision-maker to coach and guardian.

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254|System Level — Design self-running mechanisms. When systems, culture, and incentive structures form a closed loop, the organization begins to "transform itself." Your attention shifts from "making things happen" to "maintaining the health of the system."

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256|These three levels become progressively harder as you go deeper — but the deeper you go, the less your enterprise depends on your personal stamina and willpower. And that, precisely, is the truest measure of an organization's health.

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258|## V. Practical Exercises

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260|Reflection Questions for This Week:

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262|Question One: Open your work log. Look at everything you actually spent time on over the past two weeks. Honestly label each item: which things, if you stopped doing them starting today, would have literally zero impact on the business? Which things can only be done by you? If the first category accounts for more than 30% of your time, you've already fallen into the "busyness trap."

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264|Question Two: When was the last time you let your team make an important decision independently? If it happened, what was the result? Did you afterward find yourself unable to resist intervening? If it hasn't happened — what are you afraid of? Afraid of the outcome going wrong, or afraid that you are "no longer essential"? Write the answer down on paper. Look at it. Don't flinch.

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266|Question Three: If your company suddenly lost you for three months, what would grind to a halt? List these things. Now ask yourself: what proportion of these are because "only I know how to do them" (capability dependency), and what proportion are because "only I am allowed to do them" (delegation problem)? If it's the latter, what you need to change should be crystal clear right now.

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268|Action for This Week:

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270|Choose one thing you've been doing that someone else could actually do, and hand it off this week. Completely. Not "you do it but I'll review it at the end" — really hand it over. Do only one thing: during the handoff, clearly communicate the expected outcome and the non-negotiable boundaries. Then shut your mouth and wait. Whatever the result, resist the urge to step in. If the result isn't good, don't blame the person who took it on. Ask yourself: did I make the boundaries clear? Did they understand my criteria for judgment? What can this mistake teach them?

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274|Key Takeaways

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276|- Wu Wei (无为) is not inaction — it is non-interference with natural patterns. At the personal level, it means relentless subtraction; at the team level, it means bounded autonomy; at the system level, it means designing self-sustaining mechanisms.

277|- The West has independently validated Wu Wei: Tim Ferriss' 80/20 elimination, Cal Newport's deep w

ork philosophy, and Basecamp's "calm company" model all converge on the same principle — do less, but do it at full depth.

278| Every founder eventually becomes the bottleneck of their own company. The only way out is to systematically reduce your decision-making footprint, replacing "I decide" with "I design the boundaries within which others decide."

279| The ultimate test of leadership is not what happens when you are present — it is what happens when you step away. A company that needs its founder to survive is not yet a company; it is still a project.

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283|# Chapter 3: 知止不殆 — Know When to Stop

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285|## Chapter Overview

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287|In the business world, nearly everyone talks about growth, expansion, and scaling up. But after twenty-five years as a huojia daoshi and watching countless businesses rise and fall, I have come to realize that the truly difficult thing is not the advance — it's the stop. Laozi's four characters, zhi zhi bu dai — "know when to stop, and you will not be endangered" — may be, in today's business context, the most underestimated piece of operating wisdom there is. In this chapter, we will take it apart and examine it from three dimensions: the boundary of expansion, the restraint of desire, and the rhythm of time.

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291|## I. Deep Dive: The Three Dimensions of Knowing When to Stop

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293|### Dimension One: The Stop of Expansion — Boundary Awareness Is the Scarcest Strategic Capability

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295|In 2018, a friend of mine who runs a chain restaurant business said something to me that I have remembered ever since. He said: "Ding Long, I've noticed a pattern — every time I open three new locations, my profit margin drops by one point." At the time, he had over forty locations. The top-line numbers looked gorgeous, but at year-end, when he did the math, he was making less money than when he only had eight

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297|This is not an isolated case. Over the past twenty years, among the business people I have known, seven out of ten fell not because they couldn't build something — they fell because they expanded too fast. Laozi's "know when to stop" speaks first and foremost to this: you don't need to spread your operations as wide as possible. You need to spread them to exactly the right size.

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299|What does "the right size" mean? Let me define it with a simple metric: when an additional unit of input — a new store, a new hire, a new market — begins to yield returns lower than the return rate of your existing base, you have crossed the line. Before this line, it's growth. After this line, it's bloat.

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301|Many bosses are unwilling to face this fact, because the word "growth" is too seductive. The team needs growth for motivation. Investors need growth for the numbers. The media needs growth for the story. B

ut Laozi saw through this over two thousand years ago: "Hold a cup and overfill it — better to stop before it spills. Hammer a blade to its sharpest edge — it will not last long." (A cup filled to the brim will overflow; better to stop in time. A blade sharpened too keenly cannot preserve its edge.) Translated into modern business language: don't draw the bow to its limit. Don't push the model to its breaking point. Leave slack. Leave room for error.

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303|### Dimension Two: The Stop of Desire — Knowing What You "Don't Want"

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305|Deeper even than the stop of expansion is the stop of desire. With expansion, at least you have an external yardstick — profit, efficiency. The stop of desire is entirely an inner practice.

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307|What I have observed is that what truly separates great entrepreneurs from the rest is not what they want, but what they don't want. Most people suffer in business not because they can't make money, but because they want to make every kind of money. Today they see someone blowing up on livestreaming and their heart itches. Tomorrow they see someone doing private-domain viral growth and they want to build a system too. I have seen this "opportunity-hunger syndrome" far too many times.

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309|Laozi was crystal clear about this in Chapter 46: "There is no calamity greater than not knowing when one has enough. There is no fault greater than the desire to acquire. Therefore, the satisfaction of knowing enough is an enduring satisfaction." The greatest calamity is discontent. The greatest fault is insatiable greed. Knowing when you have "enough" — that is true abundance.

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311|This is not an invitation to coast. Quite the opposite. "Knowing enough" is about focusing your limited energy on the things that genuinely matter. An entrepreneur who wants everything ends up doing nothing deeply.

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313|### Dimension Three: The Stop of Time — Rhythm Matters More than Speed

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315|The third dimension is the easiest to overlook: the rhythm of time. In nature, nothing grows continuously without pause. Bamboo grows to a certain height and then stops — and begins to grow in density instead. The same is true of people. The same is true of companies.

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317|In all my years as a Daoist priest, my deepest experience of the seasonal nodes — the solar terms — is this: if you don't harvest when it's time to harvest, everything goes awry afterward. At Grain in Ear, you must rush to gather. At Frost's Descent, you must store the seeds. If you insist on sowing seeds in winter, you are fighting against the entire system.

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319|The mistake many entrepreneurs make is equating "fast" with "good" and "never stopping" with "hard work." But in reality, a team with no sense of rhythm — the faster it runs, the sooner it dies. The true masters know when to accelerate, when to cruise, and when to stop and strengthen the foundation.

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321|The "stop" in "knowing when to stop" is not about quitting. It's about knowing, within any given cycle, when to advance and when to pull back. This is a mastery of temporal rhythm, and it is the hardest skill to cultivate.

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325|## II. Interpreting the Original Text: Chapter 44 and Chapter 46

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327|### Key Passage from Chapter 44

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329|> "Fame or your person — which is dearer? Your person or your possessions — which is worth more? Gain or loss — which is more harmful? Therefore, excessive attachment exacts a great price. Excessive hoarding invites heavy loss. Know when you have enough, and you will not be disgraced. Know when to stop, and you will not be endangered. Thus you can endure."

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331|In this passage, Laozi asks three questions: Which is closer to you — your reputation or your life? Which is more valuable — your life or your wealth? Which is more harmful — gaining or losing?

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333|These three questions, translated into today's business context, cut straight to the bone. Let me render them in contemporary terms: That brand name you're breaking your back to build — is it worth more than your physical and mental health as a human being? Those assets and wealth you've accumulated — are they worth more than your ability to still eat and sleep well? That market share you've won — weighed against the judgment and quality of life you've lost in the process, which side is the greater loss?

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335|Laozi's own answer: excessive attachment to any one thing inevitably exacts a great price. Hoarding too much inevitably invites massive loss. Knowing what is enough spares you humiliation. Knowing the boundary spares you danger. Only then can you endure.

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337|The key to those four characters — zhi zhi bu dai, "know when to stop and you will not be endangered" — is the word know. You are not being forced to stop by external circumstances. You yourself know, clearly and inwardly, where that line is drawn.

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339|### Key Passage from Chapter 46

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341|> "When the Dao prevails in the world, warhorses are turned back to pull manure carts. When the Dao is absent from the world, warhorses give birth on the battlefields. There is no calamity greater than not knowing when one has enough. There is no fault greater than the desire to acquire. Therefore, the satisfaction of knowing enough is an enduring satisfaction."

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343|This chapter is even more striking. Laozi opens with a powerfully visual contrast: when the Dao prevails, warhorses are sent back to the fields to haul fertilizer. When the Dao is absent, even pregnant mares must foal on the battlefield. This contrast speaks to the cost of "excess" — when a system is pushed relentlessly to its limits, even the most fundamental productive units are consumed.

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345|Translated into the context of a company: "the Dao prevailing" is when the team has slack, cash flow is healthy, and no one has to run themselves ragged. "The Dao absent" is when everyone is constantly firefighting, cash flow is stretched to the breaking point at all times, and key people are quitting one after another. What's the difference? Often, it lies in whether the leader knows when to stop.

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349|## III. Western Parallels: Who Says the West Doesn't Talk About "Stopping"?

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351|### Peter Thiel: The "Monopoly" in Zero to One Is Essentially "Knowing When to Stop"

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353|Many people misread Peter Thiel, thinking he advocates limitless expansion. In fact, in Zero to One, Thiel repeatedly emphasizes a core idea: the truly great company is not the one that does everything on a big platform — it's the one that achieves absolute dominance in a market small enough to own. His exact words: "Start by dominating a small, specific niche market."

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355|Is this not "knowing when to stop"? You first achieve perfection within a sufficiently small boundary, rather than trying to change the world on day one. Thiel even explicitly states that most startups fail not because they lack ambition, but because their ambition is too diffuse — they spread themselves too thin.

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357|### Nassim Taleb: The "Wisdom of Subtraction" in Antifragile

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359|There is one idea of Taleb's that I particularly love: a system's fragility often comes from too much intervention and over-optimization, rather than from "not doing enough." He calls this "iatrogenic harm" — there was nothing wrong with the patient, but they insisted on taking medicine, and the medicine made them sick.

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361|The most common mistake entrepreneurs make is "over-management": the moment performance fluctuates slightly, they restructure the org chart. The moment a competitor twitches, they change strategic direction. Taleb's advice: very often, the best action is no action. Removing excess does more to make a system robust than adding more ever could.

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363|This is entirely the same idea as Laozi's "in the pursuit of learning, one adds day by day; in the pursuit of the Dao, one subtracts day by day." Learning requires addition. Cultivation requires subtraction. Running a business, past a certain point, subtraction matters more than addition.

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365|### Patagonia: The "Don't Grow" Manifesto

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367|The most extreme example comes from Patagonia's founder, Yvon Chouinard. He has publicly said: "We don't want to be a big company. We want to be the best company, not the biggest." Patagonia even ran a Black Friday ad that said "Don't Buy This Jacket," urging consumers not to buy new clothes and to wear their old ones instead.

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369|This practice, by conventional business logic, looks insane. But the result? Patagonia's loyal customers became even more loyal. The brand's pricing power grew stronger. Profits became healthier. Because when a company dares to say, "You don't need to buy this," the trust it earns is priceless.

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371|This is not a marketing gimmick. This is genuine "knowing when to stop" — knowing who you truly serve, knowing where your boundaries are, knowing that growth is not the only goal.

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375|## IV. Ding Long's Case Studies

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377|### Case One: Sister Fang's Bakery — Expanded to Seven Stores and Nearly Lost Everything

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379|Sister Fang is someone I've known for seven or eight years. She started a bakery business in Hangzhou. Her first store was in a residential neighborhood — honest ingredients, great taste, lots of repeat customers. After two years, daily revenue was steady at three to four thousand yuan. After costs, she was netting about forty thousand yuan a month.

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381|And then the curse of "growth" arrived.

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383|First, friends said: "You're doing so well — why not open more stores?" Then, every business course told her: "A single store can never scale." Sister Fang's heart was stirred. Within three years, she went from one store to seven.

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385|And then? All the problems hit at once.

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387|First: quality control. At her first store, she personally tasted every cake every morning. Was the batter too thin? Was the sweetness right? Was the bake just so? She knew it all with her own senses. With seven stores, she couldn't even visit them all. Quality control now relied entirely on store managers' self-discipline. Customer complaints began to rise. Old customers started saying, "The taste isn't what it used to be."

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389|Second: team management. With one store, four employees were like family. With seven stores and over sixty people, just scheduling, performance reviews, and turnover was enough to wear her down to the bone. She told me that at that time, her first thought every morning upon waking was: "Who's going to quit today?"

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391|And most fatally: the cash flow. Seven stores' worth of rent, payroll, and raw material procurement all pressed down at once. Cash was perpetually tight. With one store, forty thousand yuan flowed in steadily every month. With seven stores, the top-line numbers were bigger, but the margins were paper-thin. If just one store had a bad month, the whole operation was in the red.

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393|The year before last, she made a decision I deeply respect: she closed four stores and pulled back to three. All three are neighborhood stores, covering different areas, and she spends at least two days a week at each one. Now, the combined monthly profit from three stores is substantially higher than it was from seven. And her complexion — her whole demeanor — is visibly better.

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395|She later said to me: "Ding Long, what I regret most isn't that my expansion failed. It's that when my first store was in such a comfortable, good place, I actually thought that state was 'not good enough.'"

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397|Sister Fang's story is Laozi's "know when enough is enough, and you will not be disgraced; know when to stop, and you will not be endangered." It's not that she lacked the ability to expand. She was pushed along by the anxiety of "everyone else is expanding" and forgot to ask herself one question: what kind of li

fe do I actually want?

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399|### Case Two: Old Zhao's Hardware Factory — Living Longer by Proactively Refusing a Big Client

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401|This is a case where "knowing when to stop" made the business.

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403|Old Zhao runs a hardware processing factory in Foshan. Small scale — just over thirty workers. One year, a large corporation came knocking with an offer: twenty million yuan in annual orders. For a factory with annual revenue under ten million, this was practically a windfall from heaven.

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405|But after doing the math, Old Zhao turned them down.

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407|His logic was simple: to take this order, he would need to more than triple his production capacity. He'd need to take out loans to buy equipment, hire a flood of new workers, relocate to a larger facility. This meant putting his entire life's worth on the line. And most critically, he would have only one client. If that one big client ever changed anything — squeezed on price, altered terms, or simply switched suppliers — he would have no fallback at all.

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409|"I ran the numbers," Old Zhao told me. "If I take this order, my risk doesn't go up by three times. It goes up by thirty times. I'd rather not make that money."

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411|And afterward? Two years later, that big corporation did indeed start squeezing prices massively. Many of the suppliers who had expanded to follow them were left in a living hell. Old Zhao's factory, meanwhile — still small, still steady, with over a dozen stable mid-sized and small clients — profits weren't huge but they were reliable. Workers' wages were never late. And he slept soundly at night.

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413|This is textbook "knowing when to stop" thinking: not every opportunity is worth grabbing. Not every growth trajectory is worth chasing. Old Zhao knew where his boundary was — and more importantly, he respected that boundary.

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417|## V. Conceptual Framework Summary

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419|The core logic of "knowing when to stop, and you will not be endangered" can be understood in three layers:

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421|Layer One: The Boundary of Capability. Within what scope is your model effective? Beyond that scope, your core competence gets diluted. The lesson from Sister Fang going from one store to seven is right here: her core competence — hands-on quality control, community relationships — was diluted past recovery as the scale grew.

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423|Layer Two: The Boundary of Risk. Can you afford to lose? This is the calculation Old Zhao made. A twenty-million-yuan order sounds beautiful, but the concentration risk behind it is catastrophic. Taleb calls this "blow-up risk" — it doesn't matter how many times you win. You only need to lose once.

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425|Layer Three: The Boundary of Desire. What do you really want? This is the hardest layer. When Sister Fang first started opening more stores, she didn't genuinely need those stores. She was swept up in the narrative of "you should scale up." That narrative came from friends, from business courses, from society's entire definition of "success."

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427|Laozi's solution is simple and radical: "He who knows enough is rich." Knowing enough is not about not striving. It's about knowing, with clarity, the direction and the boundary of your striving. Wealth is not an absolute number. It is a clear definition of what "enough" looks like.

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431|## VI. Practical Exercise Zone

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433|### Exercise One: The Fear Inventory

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435|Take a sheet of paper. Draw two columns.

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437|In the left column, write down the things you are "afraid to stop." For example:

438|- Afraid that if I stop expanding, the team will lose momentum.

439|- Afraid that if I turn down a client, a competitor will snatch them up.

440|- Afraid that if I slow down, I'll fall behind my peers.

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442|In the right column, write: if these things actually happened, what would the worst outcome really be? Is it truly something you couldn't handle?

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444|In the vast majority of cases I've seen, the left column is terrifying to write — and by the time you finish the right column, you realize it's really not that bad. Fear in the light is never as frightening as fear in the dark.

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446|### Exercise Two: Action for This Week — Do a "Reverse Budget"

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448|This week, set aside one hour of quiet time. Do this thought experiment:

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450|Suppose that by this time next year, your business must shrink by 20% — whether in store count, employee count, or client count. How would you shrink? After shrinking, what would happen to your profit, your time, your energy level?

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452|The purpose of this exercise is not to actually make you shrink. It's to help you see clearly: which of your current inputs genuinely create value, and which are just costs that make you feel "busy" without producing real results?

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454|After completing the thought experiment, identify one or two things that you could shrink "without really caring," and actually go do it. Those are very likely the places where you should "stop."

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458|## Key Takeaways

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460|> 1. "Knowing when to stop" is not about quitting — it's about recognizing the boundary where additional effort destroys more value than it creates.

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462|> 2. The most dangerous business trap isn't failure to grow, but growth that dilutes your core competence beyond recovery.

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464|> 3. Laozi's three questions — fame vs. wellbeing, wealth vs. peace, gaining vs. losing — remain the best due diligence framework for any business decision.

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466|> 4. Saying no to a big opportunity is often a more strategic act than saying yes, especially when concentration risk is involved.

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468|> 5. True wealth is not a number. It's knowing exactly what "enough" looks like — and having the discipline to stop when you reach it.

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1|# Chapter 4: 大器晚成 — Great Vessels Take Time

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3|## Chapter Overview

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5|"Great vessels take time" may be the four most misunderstood characters in the Tao Te Ching. Most people interpret it as a consolation — you haven't made it yet, but don't worry, you will someday. But Laozi's original meaning runs far deeper than that: a great vessel takes time not because of bad luck or insufficiency, but because the very nature of a great vessel demands a longer timeline. The foundation of a palace and the foundation of a thatched hut simply require different construction periods. In this chapter, we'll explore how to build something worth slowing down for, in an era where everyone is racing to be faster.

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9|## I. Deep Knowledge: Time Is the Fire That Tempers the Vessel, Not the Enemy

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11|### Re-understanding the "Great Vessel": Not Delayed Success, but a Different Kind of Success

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13|I've spent half my life as a Taoist priest, and I've seen countless people come seeking "speed" — quick wealth, fast promotions, rapid comebacks. Every time, I tell them the same thing: tasks can be fast, but a vessel cannot be fast. "Tasks" are actions; the "vessel" is who you are — your character, your understanding, your foundation. You can accelerate actions, but if you rush the foundation, it becomes hollow.

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15|This is the same principle as firing ceramics. Every seasoned master in Jingdezhen knows that large pieces of porcelain cannot be rushed. If the temperature rises too quickly, the body heats unevenly inside and out, and it will surely crack. Those heirloom blue-and-white vats, from throwing to firing, take a minimum of three months and often more than half a year. If a single step in between is rushed, the entire vessel is ruined.

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17|Building a business is the same. Surface-level growth can happen fast — throw money at it, expand channels, wage price wars — and you can double revenue in three months. But the underlying "vessel" — team chemistry, customer trust, supply chain resilience, the founder's judgment — none of these can be built at speed. You can open thirty stores in three months, but you cannot cultivate thirty qualified store managers in three months.

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19|### The Lesson of Bamboo: Four Years Underground, Then It Shoots Skyward in the Fifth

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21|There's a phenomenon about bamboo that I love sharing with entrepreneurs. During the first four years after planting Moso bamboo, you'll see almost nothing above ground — maybe a few centimeters of growth each year. But during those four years, its root system grows frantically underground, spreading across dozens of square meters. Then, in the rainy season of the fifth year, it can shoot up to fifteen meters in just six weeks.

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23|Most people only notice the explosive growth in those final six weeks, assuming the bamboo grew because of those six weeks. In reality, without the four years of root development, there would be no soaring momentum later.

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25|Is your business currently in the "root-growing" phase or the "stalk-shooting" phase? If you're clearly still growing roots but insist on comparing your height with those already shooting stalks, you're just making yourself miserable — and it's completely meaningless.

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27|### The Rosewood Metaphor: Density Requires Time

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29|A more extreme example than bamboo is rosewood. Hainan huanghuali takes over a hundred years to grow to a size suitable for harvesting timber. You cannot accelerate this process — any chemical fertilizer or growth stimulant will reduce the wood's density, loosen its grain, and render the resulting material worthless.

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31|This is the fundamental logic behind "great vessels take time": valuable things are often naturally slow. Value comes from density, and density requires time to settle. You cannot maintain density while accelerating growth — that's a law of physics, not a matter of attitude.

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33|Japan has over 33,000 businesses that have been operating for more than a century — the most in the world. Look at the common traits of these enterprises: not a single one survived to this day by being "fast." What carried them through was dedication to their core craft, an almost obsessive commitment to quality, and humility before time.

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37|## II. Tao Te Ching — Original Text Analysis: Chapter 41

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39|> "When the highest type of people hear the Tao, they diligently practice it. When the average type hear the Tao, they half-believe it, half-doubt it. When the lowest type hear the Tao, they burst out laughing. If they didn't laugh, it wouldn't be the Tao. Thus the established sayings have it: The bright Tao appears dark. The advancing Tao appears to retreat. The smooth Tao appears rough. The highest virtue seems like a valley. The purest white seems stained. Ample virtue seems insufficient. Robust virtue seems slack. True substance seems changeable. The greatest square has no corners. The greatest vessel takes the longest to complete. The greatest sound is barely heard. The greatest form has no shape. The Tao is hidden and nameless. Yet only the Tao is good at bestowing and bringing to completion."

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41|This chapter is extraordinarily rich in content. I will focus on the context in which "the great vessel takes the longest to complete" appears.

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43|Laozi builds three layers of groundwork: those with the highest understanding hear the Tao and set to work steadily; those with middling understanding remain skeptical; those with the lowest understanding burst out laughing — and if they didn't laugh, it wouldn't be the true Tao.

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45|Then he offers a series of seemingly contradictory statements: "The bright Tao appears dark," "The advancing Tao appears to retreat," "The smooth Tao appears rough." And then comes that line: "The great vessel takes the longest to complete."

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47|In Laozi's view, "taking time" is not a defect — it is a defining feature. Just as "the greatest sound is barely heard" (the truly immense sound is inaudible) and "the greatest form has no shape" (the truly vast is formless), the "great vessel" takes time not because it's delayed, but because its completion is not "completion" in the ordinary sense — it doesn't "finish" at some point on the timeline, but rather continuously accumulates density throughout a long process.

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49|This stands in stark contrast to modern business logic of "rapid iteration, small fast steps." Both logics are valid, but they apply to entirely different objects. For a small tool or a short-term project, rapid iteration is fine. But if what you're building is a "great vessel" requiring over a decade of accumulation, then you must approach it with a completely different relationship to time.

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53|## III. Western Parallels: The Modern Debate Between Fast and Slow

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55|### Silicon Valley's "Move Fast" vs. Laozi: A Collision of Two Time Philosophies

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57|Zuckerberg's famous motto "Move fast and break things" can be seen as the condensed spirit of Silicon Valley over the past two decades. This logic has indeed worked in software and internet domains — code can be deployed rapidly, errors can be rolled back instantly, and user feedback can be collected in real time.

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59|But have you noticed that this same logic often fails in hardware, manufacturing, healthcare, and education? Because some things, once broken, cannot be "rolled back." If a defective medical device causes harm, no patch can make up for it. If a customer relationship is treated roughly, no discount coupon can repair it.

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61|Laozi's philosophy of time applies to things that are irreversible. The products you build, the trust you establish, the team culture you cultivate — once these are sacrificed for speed, they are nearly impossible to restore.

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63|### Amazon's "Long-Term Thinking": Bezos's Day 1 Philosophy

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65|Bezos has a famous mantra: always maintain a Day 1 mindset. What does Day 1 mean? Not the excitement and impulsiveness of the very first day, but rather the long-term perspective of that first day — you've just begun, you know everything takes time, and you won't let short-term financial metrics define success or failure.

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67|Amazon didn't turn a profit for its first six years. Wall Street sang doom every day. But Bezos kept investing in logistics infrastructure, cloud computing technology, and customer experience. At the time, these investments seemed agonizingly "slow." But looking back twenty years later, they constitute Amazon's deepest moat.

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69|This is the modern business version of "great vessels take time": dare to be slow in the places that matter most. Not slow everywhere — but on the elements that determine long-term competitiveness, allow them to grow at their own rhythm.

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71|### Taleb's "Lindy Effect": The Older Something Is, the Longer It Will Live

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73|In Antifragile, Taleb introduced a concept called the "Lindy Effect": for things that naturally perish (like human life), each additional day lived means one day closer to death. But for things that don't naturally perish (like technologies, ideas, books), each additional day of existence means it is more likely to continue existing — because time has already done the filtering for us.

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75|Applied to business, the logic goes: if your business model still holds up ten years from now, it will likely still hold up twenty or thirty years from now. Conversely, if a technology or business model was only hot for a year or two, be cautious — it's probably a short-lived phenomenon.

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77|The deeper meaning of "great vessels take time" finds validation here in Taleb's work: things with genuine vitality need a sufficiently long time to prove that vitality. That century-old shop you admire today was once just a small store that had been operating for ten years. It had no magic formula — it simply lived long enough, and grew stronger every single day it remained alive.

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81|## IV. Ding Long's Case Studies

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83|### Case 1: Mr. Zhou the Tea Master — One Thing for Ten Years

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85|Mr. Zhou is a tea master I met in Wuyi Mountain, Fujian. He's in his fifties now, and has been making rock tea (yancha) for a full twenty-five years.

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87|The first ten years, he was completely unknown. He contracted a small plot of tea gardens, and did everything himself — plucking, shaking, roasting. His annual output was very limited, just a few hundred jin, sold to a handful of regular clients, barely scraping by.

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89|Many people urged him to scale up, advertise, build a brand. He refused every time. He said something that left a deep impression on me: "I still haven't fully understood the soil on this mountain. What business do I have building a brand?"

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91|For the first decade, what he did looked to outsiders like a complete waste of time: recording the picking times for different plots every year, noting the withering duration under different weather conditions, tracking the effect of different roasting temperatures on flavor. He filled over a dozen handwritten notebooks, dense with all this "useless" data.

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93|The change came around year twelve. His tea started getting noticed in high-end tasting circles — not because of marketing, but because the quality had genuinely reached a level that was hard to ignore. By year fifteen, his tea was auction-grade, and every year's new harvest was fully pre-ordered before it was even ready.

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95|Looking back now, Mr. Zhou's first ten years were his "root-growing" period. He didn't try to force stalks while still growing roots. He knew what kind of thing he was building, and he knew what kind of time rhythm that thing required.

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97|I asked him: "Weren't you anxious during those first ten years?"

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99|He smiled and said: "Of course I was anxious. But I figured out one thing — if I still couldn't make this tea a well after ten years, it meant I simply wasn't cut out for tea-making. And if I was cut out for it, then ten years was just the beginning."

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101|This sentence captures the core mindset behind "great vessels take time": you don't need to prove anything in the short term. You only need to confirm you're on the right path, and then keep walking.

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103|### Case 2: A Tech Company's "Slow Choice" — The Story of Notion

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105|The tech industry has its own "great vessels take time" stories — they're just rare.

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107|Notion is a company that makes note-taking and collaboration tools. Founder Ivan Zhao started working on the product back in 2013. But Notion didn't really enter mainstream awareness until 2018 or 2019. For nearly five years in between, the team was tiny, the product iteration speed wasn't particularly fast, and at one point they were even on the verge of shutting down.

108|

109|But Ivan Zhao made one critical decision: don't chase trends, don't rush to raise money and expand — first, build the product until you're satisfied with it yourself. They spent enormous amounts of time polishing the editor experience, the modular architecture design, and the most fundamental logic of organizing information. These are things users can't directly "see," but once they start using the product, they can feel the difference from competitors.

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111|After 2020, Notion experienced explosive growth, with its valuation once exceeding ten billion dollars. But I believe what's truly worth talking about with Notion isn't the later explosion — it's those five or six years of quiet accumulation that came before. During those years, what they were doing wasn't "growth" — it was "becoming who they are."

112|

113|This is what I believe a "great vessel" means: not being bigger than others, but being something others find very difficult to replicate. Because the time you've spent, the detours you've taken, the touch and feel you've built up layer by layer — these are all products of time. No amount of money can buy them overnight.

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117|## V. Knowledge Framework Summary

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119|"Great vessels take time" is not an invitation to lie flat and take it easy — it's a call to build a correct relationship with time. This time philosophy has three layers:

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121|First, distinguish between "tasks" and "vessel." Tasks can be fast — tactical moves, marketing campaigns, short-term goals. Pursue efficiency on these without guilt. The vessel cannot be fast — your core capabilities, team culture, customer trust, industry understanding. These are the foundation, and they can't be rushed.

122|

123|Second, accept the existence of a "root-growing phase." Bamboo has four years underground; rosewood has a century-long maturation period. Your business will definitely have a phase that looks fruitless on the surface but is actually accumulating core capital. This phase is not a waste — it's a necessity.

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125|Third, use the Lindy Effect to examine what you're doing. If what you're building likely won't exist in ten years, then by all means, move fast. But if what you're building will probably still be around in ten years — and will be more valuable because of time's accumulation — then you should slow down and do it thoroughly.

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127|Laozi said "great vessels take time," not "great vessels never come." The key is that you must first confirm you're building a "great vessel" before you have any business talking about "taking time." If what you're building can't withstand the test of time in the first place, waiting longer won't help.

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131|## VI. Practical Exercises

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133|### Exercise 1: The Ten-Year Backcast

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135|Take out a sheet of paper and do this thought experiment:

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137|On the first line, write: Ten years from now, how do I want people to describe me and my business? (One sentence is enough.)

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139|Then work backward from that sentence:

140|- For that description to be true, what must I accomplish in five years?

141|- For the five-year goal to be achievable, what must I deliver in three years?

142|- For the three-year goal to be achievable, what must I complete in one year?

143|- For the one-year goal to be achievable, what must I do this quarter?

144|

145|Note: During this backcasting process, the things that "must show results this year" will naturally surface; so will the things that are important but can't be rushed. The key is to distinguish between these two types of things and give them different time budgets. Measure urgent things in months; measure important-but-not-urgent things in years.

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147|### Exercise 2: This Week's Action — Find Your "Root Zone"

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149|This week, find a quiet afternoon and ask yourself the following three questions. Write down your answers:

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151|1. In my business, which capabilities are "slow capabilities" — the kind that can't be acquired through short-term sprints, but once possessed, become a long-term moat? List three to five.

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153|2. Over the past year, how much time have you spent on these "slow capabilities"? If the percentage is below 20%, you are effectively borrowing from the future to pay for the present.

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155|3. Choose one of these "slow capabilities" and create a six-month deep-accumulation plan. This plan doesn't need to be flashy, but it needs to be specific. For example: "Read two in-depth industry reports per week and take notes" is a hundred times more useful than "improve industry knowledge."

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157|Remember: you don't need to change every rhythm all at once. You only need to ensure that someone is quietly working on the things that truly matter, rather than letting them be forgotten in the ocean of "urgent but unimportant."

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161|## Key Takeaways

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163|> 1. "Great vessels take time" is not a consolation for the unsuccessful — it's a structural truth: things of lasting density cannot be rushed without compromising their integrity.

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165|> 2. Distinguish between "tasks" (which can and should move fast) and "vessel-building" (which requires patience): strategy, trust, craft, and judgment all belong to the latter category.

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167|> 3. The bamboo spends four years building an invisible root system underground before shooting up in six weeks. Your business has a "root phase" too — don't mistake it for stagnation.

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169|> 4. The Lindy Effect teaches us: if your business model has survived ten years, it will likely survive twenty. Time is not just a cost — it's a filter that separates the fragile from the durable.

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171|> 5. Speed is only a virtue when the thing you're doing is reversible. For irreversible investments — trust, reputation, core competence — the wise move is to let time work for you, not against you.

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173|# Chapter 5: 柔弱胜刚强 — Soft Overcomes Hard

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177|## Deep Learning Unit: The Power of Softness

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179|Laozi once said something that, upon first hearing, most people think is a contradiction: "Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can surpass it."

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181|Translated into the language of the business world: when a small company eats a big one, it's not through head-on collision — it's through "softness."

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183|But this statement has been misunderstood for two thousand years. Most people understand "soft" as weak, as yielding, as admitting defeat. So when they hear "the soft overcomes the hard," they either dismiss it as feel-good鸡汤 (chicken soup for the soul) or as self-consolation for the weak.

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185|Let me tell you, based on twenty-five years of drinking tea with entrepreneurs: the "softness" Laozi speaks of is not weakness at all. Softness is resilience. Softness is endurance. Softness is adaptability. A steel plate is very hard, but bend it past a certain angle and it snaps. A bamboo stalk is very soft — the wind can bend it flat to the ground, and when the wind stops, it springs right back.

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187|On the entrepreneurial journey, what you need is not the hardness of a steel plate, but the supple resilience of bamboo.

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191|## Tao Te Ching — Original Text Analysis: Three Chapters That Settle the Matter

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193|On the power of "softness," Laozi used at least three chapters to emphasize it repeatedly. He wasn't being repetitive — he was afraid later generations wouldn't get it.

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195|Chapter 43: "The softest thing in the world overcomes the hardest thing in the world. That which has no substance enters where there is no space. From this I know the benefit of non-action."

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197|The softest thing in the world can freely travel through the hardest thing in the world. That which has no form can penetrate that which has no gaps. Water is the best example — take a knife and slash at water ; not a single mark will be left on the blade. But water can penetrate rock, can corrode steel, can slowly carry away an entire mountain.

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199|The Taoist logic has never been "confrontation" — it is "penetration." You've already seen this logic applied in business — A-Jie didn't go head-to-head with the giant's core product categories. He seeped in through a crack the giant couldn't see, slowly softening the edges of that market.

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201|Chapter 76: "When people are born, they are soft and supple. When they die, they are hard and stiff. When the ten thousand things — plants and trees — are alive, they are soft and tender. When they die, they are withered and dry. Therefore, the hard and stiff are companions of death; the soft and supple are companions of life."

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203|A person's body is soft when alive; after death, it becomes stiff. Grasses and trees are soft and tender when alive; after death, they become dry and brittle. So things that are rigid belong to the camp of death; things that are flexible belong to the camp of life.

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205|I've seen too many "rigid" companies — the org chart can't go three months without an update or everyone feels uncomfortable, the process manual is thicker than an unabridged dictionary, employees have to fill out a request form just to use the restroom. These companies look strong, disciplined, like a "professional army." But the moment the market shifts, they are like dried-up branches — a gust of wind and they snap.

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207|What does a "soft" company look like? I know a man named Old Zhou who runs a food-service supply business. Over two hundred employees, not a single paper process document. Someone once asked him how he manages. He said: "I have exactly one rule — whoever is closest to the customer makes the call. When the rules can't keep up with the changes, listen to the person closest to the customer."

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209|During the 2022 Shanghai lockdown, his company was the first among all competitors to open a community group-buying channel. Not because he had a contingency plan — because his structure was "soft" enough that frontline employees saw the opportunity and just did it, without layers of approval.

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211|Chapter 78: "Nothing in the world is as soft and yielding as water, yet for attacking the hard and strong, nothing can surpass it — because there is nothing that can replace it. That the weak overcomes the strong, that the soft overcomes the hard — everyone in the world knows this, yet no one can practice it."

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213|This passage is critical. Laozi says: the weak can overcome the strong, the soft can conquer the hard — there is no one in the world who doesn't know this principle, yet no one actually puts it into practice.

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215|Why? Because the strategy of softness has three aspects that go against human nature.

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217|First, softness requires patience. If you use water to drip on a rock, it might be three years before you see a dent. But if you use a hammer on a rock, one swing and you see fragments fly. Humans naturally love

the satisfaction of "one swing" and dislike the waiting of "three years."

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219|Second, softness requires restraint. You have to admit that you are small, admit that you cannot clash head-on. For an entrepreneur's ego, this is more painful than almost anything. I've seen far too many people whose scale is one percent of their competitor's, yet their strategy is identical — burn cash, expand channels, wage price wars. The results are predictable.

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221|Third, softness requires wisdom. Softness doesn't mean doing nothing — it means finding "the thinnest crack in the rock." This requires an extremely deep understanding of your market, your customers, and your competitors. Recklessness is far easier than wisdom.

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225|## Western Parallels: Three Modern Theories That Validate the Judo Strategy

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227|Eastern and Western wisdom converge at the highest levels. What Laozi articulated two thousand years ago as "the soft overcomes the hard" finds at least three corresponding validations in modern business theory.

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229|### Clayton Christensen and Disruptive Innovation

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231|In 1997, Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen published *The Innovator's Dilemma*, introducing a theory that shook the entire Silicon Valley: big companies get disrupted by small ones not because the small ones are stronger, but precisely because the big ones are "too strong."

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233|The big company's logic is: serve the best customers, pursue higher margins, continuously climb upward. Under normal circumstances, this logic is unbeatable. But it leaves a fatal blind spot — those customers at the bottom of the market that are "too low-margin, not worth serving."

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235|Small companies enter right there. They first gain a foothold in the low-end market, surviving on products the big companies don't consider worth making. Then they slowly climb upward. By the time the big companies notice the threat, the small companies have already hollowed out the entire market from below.

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237|Christensen calls this "disruptive innovation." I call it "water flows to the low places, then slowly softens the rock." Different languages, describing the same law.

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239|What small companies should truly fear is not the big company's strength, but their own tendency to "fight the way the big company fights." If you use your weakness to attack their strength, you lose no matter what. What you should do is find the corner the big company is "too lazy to bend down for" — and start there.

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241|### Malcolm Gladwell and David vs. Goliath

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243|In his book *David and Goliath*, Gladwell reinterpreted that classic biblical story. The traditional unders

tanding: the underdog got lucky and defeated the giant. But Gladwell points out: David was never an "underdog."

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245|Goliath was a heavy infantryman, wearing dozens of kilograms of armor, wielding a melee spear. His combat logic: you come into close quarters with me, I'll spear you in one thrust. David was a shepherd, wearing light clothing, carrying a sling. His combat logic: I won't come close to you — I'll strike your vital point with a stone from a distance.

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247|In the dimension of close-quarters combat, David had no chance. But he shifted the battle to a different dimension — long-range precision strike. In this dimension, the giant's armor became dead weight, and the giant's spear was useless. Goliath never even touched David.

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249|Translated into entrepreneurial language, this story says: don't fight on the battlefield defined by your opponent. Your opponent's "strength" is built on specific battlefield rules. Change the rules, and their strength becomes weakness.

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251|In all my years as a Taoist priest, I've seen too many small companies make the same mistake: whatever the big company does, they follow; whatever standards the big company sets, they strive to "do better" within those standards. This is entering Goliath's battlefield and engaging him in close combat. You can't win.

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253|What do smart small companies do? They find a completely new battlefield. If the big company competes on price, you don't compete on price — compete on service, on experience, on emotional connection, on community belonging. If the big company competes on feature breadth, you don't compete on breadth — compete on making one feature extraordinary. If the big company competes on speed, you don't compete on speed — compete on quality, on endurance, on being a "century-old shop."

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255|### Tai Chi and Boxing: Two Philosophies of Power

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257|The final parallel comes from Eastern and Western body philosophies. Boxing represents the Western view of power — jabs, hooks, uppercuts, relying on explosive muscular strength to knock the opponent down head-on. Tai Chi represents the Eastern view of power — borrowing the opponent's force to redirect it, deflecting a thousand pounds with four ounces, not pushing back but following the opponent's force and guiding it in a direction they themselves don't want to go.

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259|A boxer starts declining at thirty, because physical function inevitably deteriorates. A Tai Chi master is still teaching at eighty, because Tai Chi doesn't depend on muscle — it depends on understanding the flow of force.

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261|Building a company is the same. Companies that grow by burning cash, offering subsidies, and riding traffic dividends are essentially boxing — depending on the "muscle power" of external resources. Once the capital recedes and traffic becomes expensive, the "muscles" atrophy. Companies that grow through brand, user relationships, and organizational culture are essentially practicing Tai Chi — depending on internal "momentum" and "energy." This kind of power doesn't decline with age; it only grows richer and more mellow.

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265|## Ding Long's Case Studies

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267|### Case 1: A-Li Home Services — Taking Root in the Giant's Blind Spot

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269|In the autumn of 2020, a young man named A-Li came to have tea with me. He ran a home services business in Hangzhou with just eight employees, while his competitors were platforms like 58 Daojia and Haogeng Zaijia — companies that had raised hundreds of millions.

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271|A-Li was deeply anxious. He said: "Master Ding Long, they subsidize every order by thirty yuan. I only make forty yuan on an entire order. I can't afford to subsidize. Am I doomed?"

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273|I asked him: "How do your current customers find you?"

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275|He said: "All through referrals from old customers. I've been working in a mid-to-high-end residential community in Hangzhou for three years now. About three hundred households there are my clients."

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277|I asked him again: "How many times a month does a big platform's cleaner visit the same household?"

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279|He said: "Less than once. Their ayis are dispatched by a system — a different person shows up every time."

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281|I asked: "And your ayis?"

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283|He said: "My ayis are fixed. Each ayi is responsible for just one area. Most of their visits are to regular clients — some clients even leave their house keys with the ayi."

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285|I said: "Then you don't need to fight them on price at all. Within your community, you've already won."

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287|A-Li didn't understand. I drew him a diagram: "The big platforms compete on breadth — they need service capability in every city across China. You compete on depth — within just these few communities, you build relationships to their densest form. Breadth requires burning money. Depth requires time. You can't afford to burn money, but you can afford to spend time."

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289|A-Li later did something decisive: he renamed his company "Ayi Neighbor," stopped accepting orders from platforms, and focused solely on word-of-mouth within his own area. His ayis would proactively send WeChat messages to old clients once a month — not sales pitches, just a simple "Ayi has some free time this week, is there anything you need help with at home?" On holidays, the ayis would handwrite greeting cards and leave them at clients' doors.

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291|Three years later, A-Li's company grew from eight people to forty, covering six premium communities i

n Hangzhou. His customer renewal rate was 97%. The big platforms used subsidies to snatch some of his customers, but three months later, most of them came back. Because no one can replace the ayi who "knows where your circuit breaker is, knows your cat's name, knows your mother's back is bad so she massages it a couple of times before mopping the floor."

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293|A-Li didn't win because he was stronger than the big platforms. He won because he chose a battlefield where the big platforms "couldn't compete." Not couldn't do cleaning — anyone can do cleaning. They couldn't build that kind of trust relationship where "the ayi is like a neighbor." That kind of relationship requires time, requires stability, requires one person consistently showing up in the same household. The big platforms' dispatch model is structurally incapable of this.

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295|This is the power of "softness." The big platforms' "hardness" is capital, technology, and scale. A-Li's "softness" is relationship, trust, and the thickness of time. Hard things can be copied; soft things cannot.

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297|### Case 2: How a Small Design Firm Used "Unprofessionalism" to Beat a 4A Agency

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299|In early 2023, a young woman named Xiao Meng who does brand design sat in my tea room with dark circles under her eyes. She had just lost a pitch for a major brand to an international 4A agency.

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301|"Master Ding Long, our proposal was clearly better than theirs," Xiao Meng said. "The client admitted it themselves. But they still chose the 4A because —" she gave a bitter smile, "because the 4A has a team of three hundred people, and we only have five."

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303|I asked her: "Before the pitch, how many times had you talked with this client?"

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305|She said: "Once — the brief meeting before the pitch."

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307|"And the 4A?"

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309|"They have a long-term relationship with the client. They've been serving this client's parent company for years."

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311|I said: "Then you didn't lose on the proposal. You lost on the relationship. You'd met the client once. The 4A had worked with them for five years. The client chose them not because their proposal was better, but because choosing them carried less risk — a known quantity is always safer than a stranger."

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313|Xiao Meng went silent. After a while she said: "So what do small firms like us do? Without relationships, can we never win?"

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315|I said: "It's not that you can't win. It's that you can't use the same playbook as a 4A to win. What you're doing now is — whenever a pitch opportunity comes up, you join, and compete against the 4A on the same stage with your proposal. That's Goliath's battlefield. You need to find David's sling."

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317|I told her A-Li's story. Then I asked: "Have you ever considered — not doing pitches?"

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319|She said: "How would I get clients if I don't do pitches?"

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321|I asked: "Did all your current clients come through pitches?"

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323|She thought about it, and said no. She had three long-term clients, all small brands, all introduced by friends. These three clients contributed about sixty percent of her annual revenue.

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325|I said: "See, your foundation is these three long-term clients. Why did they choose you? Not because you beat anyone in a pitch, but because your service is good, your response is fast, the boss personally does the revisions, and it never takes more than three days. These are things a 4A can't do — in a 4A's service process, changing one color requires approval from the account director, the creative director, and the design director. The back-and-forth takes at least a week."

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327|"Your softness — what is it? Your softness is your smallness — small enough to turn on a dime, small enough that the boss herself is the most senior designer, small enough that the client can reach the decision-maker with a single phone call."

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329|My advice to her: stop doing pitches. Pour all your energy into serving your existing three clients exceptionally well, and turn them into your "word-of-mouth ambassadors." Then proactively seek out clients who have "been burned by 4As" — those who pay astronomical monthly retainers but never even get to meet the creative director. These clients are blind spots in the big agencies' service chain — just like the "low-end market" Christensen described — not that the big agencies couldn't serve them, but that they can't be bothered to.

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331|Xiao Meng followed through. Half a year later she came back to see me. Her company had grown from five people to twelve, and her clients from three to nine. All six new clients came through referrals from existing clients or reached out to her directly.

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333|She said something I've remembered ever since: "Ding Long, I only now understand. I never needed to beat the 4A. I only needed to find the places the 4A looks down on — but where I can swim like a fish in water."

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335|This is the complete logic of "soft overcomes hard." Not using softness to crash against hardness — crash and you'll still shatter. It's about not crashing at all. You fight your way, I'll fight mine. You are invincible on your battlefield; I am invincible on mine.

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339|## Knowledge Framework Summary

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341|"The soft overcomes the hard" is not a feel-good slogan — it's a complete competitive strategy. Its core framework contains four layers:

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343|Layer One: Recognize the true nature of strength. Hard and soft are not the two poles of strength and weakness — they are two different forms of power. Hard power comes from scale, capital, and speed. Soft

power comes from resilience, adaptability, and the compound interest of time. Which one you choose depends on your resource endowment.

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345|Layer Two: Do not enter your opponent's battlefield. This is the most critical step. Your opponent's strength is built upon specific battlefield rules — their scale advantage, brand advantage, channel advantage all exist within the game they defined. The moment you enter, you've already lost. A small company's first question isn't "how do I win" — it's "where do I fight."

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347|Layer Three: Find your own crack. Every giant has blind spots. These blind spots aren't technical vulnerabilities — they're business model "not-worth-its": margins too low to be worth pursuing, customers too small to be worth serving, categories too niche to be worth deploying. These blind spots are your entry point.

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349|Layer Four: Build walls with time. Once you enter through the crack, you must immediately do one thing — use time to build advantages your opponent cannot replicate. A-Li built relationship trust; Xiao Meng built hands-on, intimate service. Both are functions of time. No amount of money can buy them.

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353|## Practical Exercises

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355|### Reflection Exercise (Spend twenty minutes, write with pen and paper)

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357|1. In your company's current competitive landscape, are you doing anything that is a "head-on clash" with your competitors? If so, what is it? Why are you fighting on this battlefield?

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359|2. In your industry, what are the customers, categories, regions, or service segments that the giants are "too lazy to bend down for"? List three.

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361|3. If you chose to go deep into one of these cracks today, what would you need to give up? Are you willing to give it up?

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363|4. What is the "time moat" your company has currently accumulated? In other words, what is something your competitors could never replicate within a year, no matter how much money they burned? If you don't have one, what should you start accumulating today?

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365|### Action Exercise (Complete this week)

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367|Choose one competitive front where you are currently "clashing head-on," and pause it. Not abandon it permanently — just pause for one month. Redirect the energy and resources you save into one of the "cracks" you identified — even if it's just spending two hours a week talking to customers in that crack, with no selling, just conversation. After one month, come back and assess: do you hear the sound of flowing water in this crack?

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371|### Key Takeaways

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373|- Softness is not weakness. In the Taoist framework, softness means resilience, adaptability, and temporal endurance — the qualities that allow water to erode rock over time. Hard things break; soft things bend and recover.

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375|- Never fight on your opponent's battlefield. The giant's strength is battlefield-specific. Change the rules of engagement — compete on service intimacy when they compete on price, on depth when they compete on breadth, on trust when they compete on speed.

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377|- Disruptive innovation is water logic. Clayton Christensen's theory independently validated Laozi's 2,000-year-old insight: incumbents ignore low-margin niches, and that's exactly where small players should enter, grow roots, and climb upward.

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379|- Tai Chi beats boxing over the long arc. Boxing relies on explosive muscle that peaks at 30; Tai Chi relies on understanding force flow that deepens with age. Build a company that gets stronger with time, not one that burns out when the capital runs dry.

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381|- Time is your only non-replicable moat. Capital, talent, and technology can all be bought. Trust, relationships, and community belonging cannot. Start building your temporal moat today — it's the one thing no competitor can copy, no matter how much money they have.

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385|# Chapter 6: 少则得多则惑 — Less Is More

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389|## Deep Learning Unit: The Taoist Roots of Subtraction

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391|Laozi said: "Less leads to gaining. More leads to confusion."

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393|The fewer things you hold, the more you gain. The more things you hold, the less you know what you truly want.

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395|The first time I share this with an entrepreneur, they usually laugh. "Master Ding Long, I'm building a business, not decluttering my closet. If I have fewer things, how does the company grow?"

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397|I reply: you've misunderstood. The "less" that Taoism speaks of is not poverty — it's not having nothing. It is "precision" — keeping only what is truly useful in your hands, putting your strength where it counts. "More" is not wealth — it is "scatter." Wanting everything, grabbing everything, and in the end, holding onto nothing firmly.

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399|Chapter 48 of the Tao Te Ching makes this even clearer: "In the pursuit of learning, one does more each

h day. In the pursuit of the Tao, one does less each day. Less and less, until one reaches non-action."

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401|In seeking knowledge, you do addition — grow a little each day. In seeking the Tao, you do subtraction — reduce a little each day. Reduce until there's nothing left to reduce, and you reach "non-action" (wu wei).

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403|Many people only read the first half — "in the pursuit of learning, one does more each day" — and then frantically study, frantically accumulate knowledge, frantically pile features, products, and business lines onto their company. But the second half is the core of Taoism — "in the pursuit of the Tao, one does less each day." The ultimate purpose of building a company is not "more" — it's "completion." And "completion" often comes not from how much you've added, but from how many distractions you've cut away.

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405|Let me unfold this "less" in three layers.

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409|## The Three Layers of "Less": Product, Direction, Desire

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411|### Layer One: Product Less — You Don't Need a Feature List Thicker Than a Dictionary

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413|In 2021, an old friend named Zhou, who had spent ten years building internet products, came to have tea with me. His company had built a project management tool with a feature list longer than Jira's. But he was deeply puzzled: clearly they had the most features, so why was their user growth the slowest?

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415|I asked him: "Do you use your own product?"

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417|He said: "I do, but I only use about ten percent of the features."

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419|I asked: "Then why did you build the other ninety percent?"

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421|He fell silent for a long time.

422|

423|Later, Old Zhou did something drastic: he cut sixty percent of the product's features. Not hidden — actually taken offline. Users exploded in fury; the backlash was intense. But his team held their ground for two months. After those two months, something strange happened: new user registrations rose by forty percent, and paid conversion rose by twenty-five percent.

424|

425|The reason was simple: every remaining feature was genuinely good to use. Users no longer got lost in menus or needed tutorials just to get started. Old Zhou later told me that those two months of cutting features were the most painful sixty days of his entrepreneurial journey — every feature they cut was something he and his team had built through countless sleepless nights. But those same sixty days transformed his product from a tool that could "do everything" into a tool that did "one thing extraordinarily well."

426|

427|Product "less" is not crudeness — it's precision. For every feature you build, you should be able to answer three questions: Who is this feature for? What core problem does it solve? If it were gone, would users

leave? If the answer to the third question is "no," the feature can be cut.

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429|### Layer Two: Direction Less — Doing One Thing Is Harder Than Doing Ten

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431|If you chase two rabbits at once, you'll catch neither.

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433|In 2018, I met a consumer goods founder — let's call him Big Liu. Big Liu's company had five business lines at the time: a self-owned skincare brand, an agency representing Japanese snacks, a cross-border e-commerce platform, an MCN (multi-channel network) agency, and a paid knowledge product. Five business lines, with fewer than sixty employees total.

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435|I asked him: "Which one makes the most money?"

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437|He said: "Skincare."

438|

439|"And the second most profitable?"

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441|He thought for ten seconds: "Probably the snacks."

442|

443|"And the other three?"

444|

445|He didn't answer.

446|

447|I asked again: "Of your sixty people, how many are working on skincare?"

448|

449|He calculated: "About fifteen."

450|

451|"What are the other forty-five doing?"

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453|"They're... keeping the other four businesses afloat."

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455|I said: "You know what? Your company isn't a five-business company. Your company is a skincare company, supporting four unprofitable side hustles. Those four side hustles aren't helping you — they're bleeding you."

456|

457|Big Liu later spent half a year cutting three business lines — the cross-border platform, the MCN, and the knowledge product. He kept skincare and snacks. He redirected all forty-five people's energy entirely into skincare. A year later, skincare revenue quadrupled. Two years later, he cut the snacks too — because skincare's growth alone was enough to carry the company's entire future.

458|

459|"Running five directions simultaneously" sounds sexy, full of "ecosystem-building" energy. But most entrepreneurs don't have the resources to run five directions at once. The true master isn't someone who found many directions — it's someone who found the single correct direction among many, and then shut down all the others.

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461|This is what Laozi means by "less leads to gaining." When your directions are few, the force on each direction becomes concentrated. Concentrated force can penetrate. Once it penetrates, you "gain."

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463|### Layer Three: Desire Less — You Don't Need to Make Every Dollar Available

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465|This is the hardest subtraction of all.

466|

467|In 2019, I met a young woman in Chengdu who ran a specialty coffee brand — let's call her Xiao Tang. Xiao Tang had been building her brand for six years and had opened only four shops. Every shop was profitable. Every shop was like an independent work of art.

468|

469|One year, an investor approached her, offering a sum of money that would allow her to open twenty stores across Chengdu within a year. The terms were generous, and the valuation was good.

470|

471|Xiao Tang tossed and turned for a week, and ultimately said no.

472|

473|Her logic was simple, and deeply Taoist: "Every time I open a new shop, I personally need to stand behind the counter for three months, training every barista myself. My time is only enough to manage four shops. If I open a fifth, the fourth will start to decline. I don't do that kind of losing trade."

474|

475|The investor thought she was crazy. Her peers thought she lacked ambition. But if you go to Chengdu today and ask her how she's doing, she'll tell you — four shops, each generating a stable annual revenue in the seven-figure range (RMB), with profit margins far higher than those "rapidly expanding" brands. And she herself spends mornings hand-brewing a pot of coffee at the shop, afternoons chatting with regulars, and evenings at home with her child.

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477|Did she leave a lot of money on the table? Yes. But what she got in return was something money can't buy: consistency of quality, purity of brand, and a sense of control over her own life.

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479|This is where the deepest meaning of "less leads to gaining" lies. You think you're "taking less," but in reality you're "gaining more" — gaining freedom, gaining quality, gaining the person who is no longer anxious.

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483|## Tao Te Ching — Original Text Analysis: The Echo Between Two Chapters

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485|On the wisdom of "less," Laozi buried a hidden thread across two chapters.

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487|Chapter 22: "Yield and you shall remain whole. Bend and you shall become straight. Be hollow and you shall be filled. Be worn and you shall be renewed. Have little and you shall gain. Have much and you shall be confused."

488|

489|Notice the structure of these six lines. They are not six independent aphorisms — they form a logical chain. Yield to remain whole. Bend to become straight. Be low to be filled. Be worn to be renewed. Have little

le to gain. Have much to be confused.

490|

491|Laozi is saying one thing: states that appear disadvantageous often lead to advantageous outcomes. Yielding leads to wholeness. Bending leads to straightness. Wornness leads to renewal. And "less" — this state that appears so clearly disadvantageous — leads to "gaining."

492|

493|Conversely, "more" — this state that appears so clearly advantageous — leads to "confusion."

494|

495|The entrepreneurial world stages the tragedy of "more leads to confusion" every single day. A founder is juggling three projects simultaneously and wakes up every morning unsure which one to push forward today. A product manager's backlog has over a hundred items, and when the team asks for priorities, the answer is always "they're all important." A company's business lines are so numerous that it needs a mind map just to explain to investors what it actually does. This isn't "more" — it's "scatter." Scattered, there is no force. Scattered, there is confusion. Scattered, nothing gets done.

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497|Chapter 48: "In the pursuit of learning, one does more each day. In the pursuit of the Tao, one does less each day. Less and less, until one reaches non-action. Through non-action, nothing is left undone."

498|

499|This chapter is the master thesis of the entire subtraction philosophy. Notice the critical pivot — from "daily increase" to "daily decrease." In the phase of seeking knowledge, you must vigorously do addition — absorb widely, learn everything. But when you reach the phase of "seeking the Tao" — that is, the phase where you begin transforming knowledge into wisdom — you must start doing subtraction.

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1|# Chapter 7: 治大国若烹小鲜 — Don't Flip the Fish

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5|## Deep Learning Unit: The Cost of Intervention

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7|"Governing a large country is like frying a small fish." This may be the most misunderstood line in the entire Dao De Jing.

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9|Many people hear it for the first time and think Laozi is saying, "Governing a large country is as easy as stir-frying a small dish — you just breeze through it." Wrong. Completely wrong. What it actually means is: when you fry a small fish, you can't keep flipping it. Flip it too much, and the flesh falls apart, the skin tears, and by the time it reaches the table, it's a mess.

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11|Running a company follows the same logic. Frequent intervention is the greatest form of destruction.

12|

13|In my twenty-five years on the mountain, I have seen far too many founders fall into the same trap — that nagging feeling of "I have to do something or I just can't sit still." If the org chart hasn't been reshuffled in three months, they feel the organization is stagnating. If the performance review system hasn't changed in six months, they assume employees are slacking off. If the strategic direction hasn't been updated in a

ear, they worry they're falling behind the times. These people's intentions are good. They genuinely want to build a great company. But what is the result?

14|

15|The result is that every time they stir the pot, the company loses a piece of its vitality. Just like frying a small fish — flip it once, and the skin sticks to the pan; flip it again, and the flesh crumbles; flip it a third time, and all you have left in the pan is debris.

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17|When Laozi said this in Chapter 60, he followed it with a line most people overlook: "When the Dao governs the world, even the ghosts lose their power." What he means is: if your company has a sound system, a healthy culture, and solid foundational logic, those everyday problems won't need you to personally step in and "manage" them. The system resolves them on its own.

18|

19|Behind frequent intervention is not diligence — it is fear. Fear of losing control. Fear of uncertainty. Fear that "if I'm not visibly doing something, people will think I'm not working." And the Daoist wisdom tells you exactly this: true control is not about you controlling everything every day; it's about building a system so robust that it runs itself, without needing you to control it.

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23|## Dao De Jing Close Reading: The Four Tiers of Leadership and the Logic of "Frying Small Fish"

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25|On the subject of management and intervention, Laozi devoted at least two full chapters to constructing a complete framework.

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27|Chapter 17: The Four Tiers of Leadership

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29|This chapter may be the earliest leadership tier model in human history. Laozi said:

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31|"The highest ruler — the people barely know he exists.

32|The next — they love and praise him.

33|The next — they fear him.

34|The lowest — they despise him."

35|

36|He divided leaders into four grades.

37|

38|The highest-grade leader — the "highest ruler" — his people merely know he exists. He issues no commands, seeks no visibility, and does not appear on the CC line of every email. When things succeed, people feel they succeeded on their own — they do not feel the leader pushed them. This is what "barely know he exists" means.

39|

40|The next grade: people are close to him and praise him. He has charisma, presence, and people want to follow him. By modern management standards, this is already very high praise — the so-called "charismatic leader." Yet Laozi ranks it only second. Why? Because a charismatic leader is still a dependency of the team. If he leaves, the team loses its center of gravity.

41|

42|The third grade: people fear him. Driven by authority, by punishment, by the fear of "if you don't deliver, I'll replace you." This type of leadership can be highly efficient in the short term — because fear does get people moving. But it is absolutely unsustainable. People driven by fear work when you're watching; the moment you turn your back, they stop.

43|

44|The lowest grade: people mock and scorn him. This one needs no elaboration.

45|

46|This framework, applied to today's entrepreneurial landscape, yields a sobering conclusion: most founders are stuck between the second and third tiers. They are either desperately proving their presence so the team will "love and praise" them, or anxiously fearing loss of control and starting to apply pressure so the team "fears" them. Very few dare to be the first-tier leader who is "barely known" — because that requires enormous self-confidence and restraint.

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48|Consider Laozi's ranking carefully. Placing "barely known" above "loved and praised" reveals that what Daoism truly esteems is not "the leader people like," but "the leader whose presence people barely feel." Not because you lack ability, but because you have built a system that doesn't need you to intervene every day.

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50|Chapter 60: The Full Logic of Frying Small Fish

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52|Let's return to Chapter 60. The line "Governing a large country is like frying a small fish" has a complete context before and after it:

53|

54|"Governing a large country is like frying a small fish.

55|When the Dao governs the world, the ghosts lose their power.

56|It is not that the ghosts lose their power — it is that their power cannot harm people.

57|It is not only that their power cannot harm people — the sage himself also does not harm people.

58|When neither harms the other, virtue gathers and returns."

59|

60|This passage has rich layers. Let me unpack them.

61|

62|"When the Dao governs the world, the ghosts lose their power" — face the world with the Dao, and those disruptive "ghosts" lose their force. What are "ghosts"? In a company, "ghosts" are the everyday frictions, small crises, interpersonal conflicts, and process bottlenecks. If you have a sound underlying system — clear direction, reasonable incentives, transparent communication — most "ghosts" never appear in the first place. They appear precisely because your system itself is generating friction.

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64|"It is not that the ghosts lose their power — it is that their power cannot harm people" — even when problems do arise, they don't cause substantive damage. A resilient company is not one that never encounters problems; it is one where problems don't cut to the bone.

65|

66|"The sage himself also does not harm people" — the wisest manager also refrains from "harming" people. What behaviors cause harm? Frequent org restructuring harms people — every time you shuffle roles, employees have to rebuild their sense of security. Flip-flopping on decisions harms people — when the strategy announced yesterday is overturned today, the team's trust is depleted once more. Excessive surveil

lance harms people — the less you trust your employees, the less they invest their hearts in the work.

67|

68|"When neither harms the other, virtue gathers and returns" — ghosts do not harm, the sage does not harm, neither harms the other, and virtue converges. In translation: when you stop stirring the pot, the team naturally enters a positive cycle.

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70|Read this passage alongside Chapter 17, and Laozi's management philosophy becomes crystal clear: the best management is to build a good system, and then restrain your impulse to intervene. It's not about doing nothing — building the system takes enormous work. It's about trusting the system and trusting the team once the system is running, and not constantly flipping that fish.

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74|## Western Counterparts: Four Modern Management Schools That Say "Stop Flipping the Fish"

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76|Eastern and Western management thinking at the highest level converge on this point with astonishing consistency. The "frying small fish" logic Laozi articulated two thousand years ago corresponds to at least four mature modern management theories.

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78|Robert Greenleaf and Servant Leadership

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80|In 1970, Greenleaf proposed the theory of "servant leadership." The core inversion of this theory is: the leader's primary identity is not "commander" but "servant." The purpose of leadership is not for the team to serve you; it is for you to serve the team — clearing obstacles, providing resources, and protecting them from external interference.

81|

82|This aligns perfectly with Laozi's logic of "barely known." A servant leader does not steal credit, does not seek face time, and does not require the team to report in every day. He cedes the stage to the team and stands behind the curtain. When things succeed, the team feels they succeeded on their own — which is exactly "the highest ruler — the people barely know he exists."

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84|The closest example I have seen to the servant leader archetype is Old Liu, an e-commerce boss I met in Hangzhou. His company has over two hundred employees, and he doesn't have his own office. Every day, he carries a backpack and sits next to different workstations — not talking, just watching. When he sees a process bottleneck, he doesn't push it through himself; instead, he calls the two people upstream and downstream together for tea and lets them talk it out. When he sees someone doing well, he sends a red envelope in the evening with a short note: "Saw you did XX today. Well done."

85|

86|Old Liu once told me something I remember to this day: "Real management is not about telling your employees what to do. It's about building a system where the system itself lets everyone know what they should be doing." If Greenleaf could speak Chinese, he would have bought Old Liu a drink.

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88|Google's Project Aristotle and Psychological Safety

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90|In 2012, Google launched an internal research initiative code-named "Project Aristotle," spending two

years analyzing one hundred and eighty internal teams to answer a fundamental question: what makes the highest-performing teams?

91|

92|They hypothesized the answer would be "the smartest people together" or "people with complementary personalities together." The data overturned every assumption. The number-one characteristic of high-performing teams was not intelligence, not experience, not personality — it was "psychological safety."

93|

94|Psychological safety means: team members believe that in this team, speaking up with the wrong answer won't get you punished, voicing a dissenting opinion won't get you marginalized, and admitting a mistake won't be seen as incompetence.

95|

96|How does this connect to the "frying small fish" logic? Directly. A founder who intervenes frequently, flips on decisions, and routinely assigns blame — he is systematically destroying his team's psychological safety. Employees don't know if the rules will change tomorrow, don't know if raising an objection will provoke the boss's anger, don't know if what's right today will still count tomorrow. In that environment, no one volunteers innovation, no one admits mistakes, and everyone channels their energy into "self-preservation" rather than "getting things done."

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98|Not stirring the pot is giving your team psychological safety. When you are stable, the team dares to take risks.

99|

100|The Toyota Production System and the "Kaizen" Philosophy

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102|Toyota's lean manufacturing contains a concept called "kaizen" — continuous small improvements, not frequent large upheavals. Toyota's assembly line workers are empowered to stop the entire production line at any moment if they detect a quality defect. In traditional manufacturing, this is unthinkable — stopping production means losses. But Toyota's logic is: giving frontline workers the authority to solve problems the instant they appear is far more effective than having a manager high above conduct a "process optimization" once a week.

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104|This is another expression of "don't flip the fish." Toyota's system allows problems to be resolved on the spot, without layers of escalation, without "management intervention." The system itself possesses the capacity for self-repair.

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106|Netflix's "Context, Not Control"

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108|Netflix's founder Reed Hastings has a famous line that distills their entire management philosophy: "Don't try to control your employees. Give them sufficient context and let them make their own judgments."

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110|Netflix's expense policy is just five words: "Act in Netflix's best interest." No spending limits, no approval process, no receipt categorization rules. Employees judge for themselves: is this expense in Netflix's best interest? If yes, spend it. If no, don't.

111|

112|Most traditional managers' first reaction to this policy is: "Won't they get fleeced?" But Netflix's actual data shows: employees under this policy spend more cautiously than under a strict approval process. Bec

ause when the company trusts you, you become even more reluctant to betray that trust.

113|

114|"Context, not control" is Laozi's "When the Dao governs the world, the ghosts lose their power." You provide the broad direction, values, and boundaries — that is the "Dao." Then you don't need to "control" every person with trivial rules — the more detailed the rules, the more "ghosts" appear. The fewer the rules and the clearer the boundaries, the more self-disciplined people become.

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118|## Ding Long Case Studies

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120|Case One: Old Wu's Quarterly Restructuring — The Price of Flipping the Fish

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122|Old Wu is an exceptionally passionate entrepreneur. He runs an enterprise services company in Shanghai with one hundred and fifty employees, and his annual revenue had been stuck around eighty million RMB for three years — no matter what he tried, he couldn't break through.

123|

124|In the autumn of 2021, he came to have tea with me. Sitting across from me, his phone on the table, lighting up every five minutes — DingTalk messages, WeChat messages, email alerts. As he talked to me, his eyes kept darting sideways to the phone. I poured him a cup of tea and said, "Turn your phone over. This afternoon, until this tea is finished, the sky will not fall."

125|

126|He smiled sheepishly and turned his phone over. Then he started describing his predicament.

127|

128|"Master Ding Long, I don't understand. My team members were all poached at high salaries. Individually, every single one is strong. But together, they just don't produce results. Every month I'm optimizing processes, every quarter I'm adjusting the org chart, and I've swapped out the performance evaluation system four or five times now. Why does efficiency keep dropping the more I adjust?"

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130|I asked him, "When was the last time your company restructured?"

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132|He said, "Last month."

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134|"And the time before that?"

135|

136|"About a quarter ago."

137|

138|"You restructure every quarter?" I looked at him. "Do you know how long it takes for an employee to go from 'figuring out who I report to, what my KPIs are, and who to go to for cross-department coordination' to being able to produce smoothly?"

139|

140|He thought for a moment. "A month or two?"

141|

142|"At least two months. You restructure every three months, which means your team is perpetually in a adaptation mode. They have never entered production mode. Your employees spend every day wondering

one thing — is it going to change again next week? Will all my current effort still count when it does?" I poured him a second cup of tea. "You know, the thing most feared in frying a small fish is not the wrong heat — it's flipping it too often. Flip once, the skin sticks to the pan. Flip twice, the flesh crumbles. Flip three times, only scraps remain. For three years now, you have been constantly flipping that fish."

143|

144|Old Wu sat stunned for a long time. Later he told me that, in his eight years of entrepreneurship, that was the first time anyone had told him, "The problem isn't that you're not doing things — it's that you're doing too many things."

145|

146|After he went back, he set a rule for himself: organizational restructuring is allowed only once per year, and it must be announced three months in advance. The first year was excruciating for him — that feeling of "I have to do something or I just can't sit still" was unbearable. Late at night, several times he messaged me on WeChat: "Ding Long, I feel like the team's efficiency has dropped again. Should I make some adjustments?" Each time, I replied with only four words: "Don't flip that fish."

147|

148|By the end of the second year, his revenue crossed one hundred million RMB for the first time. Not because he did something new, but because he finally gave his team a long enough period of stability to switch from "adaptation mode" to "production mode." In his own words: "Ding Long, I used to think I was a diligent chef. Now I know — I was the fool who flipped the fish to pieces and then blamed the fish for not holding together."

149|

150|Case Two: Little Ma's "Responding to Change with Constancy" — A Restaurant Survivor in the Pandemic

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152|Little Ma is one of my lay disciples. He runs restaurants in Suzhou — three community noodle shops. When the pandemic hit in early 2020, the restaurant industry was in ruins, and his three shops were forced to close.

153|

154|During that period, many restaurant owners were frantically "saving themselves" — some pivoted to delivery, some switched to selling fresh groceries, some started livestream selling, some completely overhauled their menus. Everyone was like an ant on a hot pan, thrashing wildly. Little Ma was anxious too. He called me and asked whether he should jump on the bandwagon and try something new.

155|

156|I asked him, "In your noodle shops, what do the neighborhood regulars love the most?"

157|

158|He said, "That bowl of braised pork noodles. Auntie Zhang has been eating it for eight years, coming three times a week. She says I can change anything — just don't change the braised pork noodles."

159|

160|I said, "How much money do you have on hand right now?"

161|

162|"Enough to last three or four months."

163|

164|"Three or four months from now, if you can reopen, what will your neighbors want for their first meal?"

"

165|

166|He thought about it. "Still that bowl of noodles."

167|

168|"Then what are you thrashing about for?"

169|

170|Little Ma understood what I meant. He didn't do livestreaming, didn't change the menu, didn't pivot to any "special pandemic meal deals." He did something more "boring" than any of his peers: every day, he taped a handwritten note on the shutter door of his shop, telling everyone, "The braised pork noodles are still here. When we open again, it's on me." At the same time, he brought in his two cooks and used the downtime to refine the braised pork noodle recipe once more — simmering the broth an extra hour, selecting better cuts of meat, adjusting the alkaline water ratio in the noodles.

171|

172|Three months later, Suzhou lifted its lockdown. On Little Ma's first day reopening, more than forty people lined up outside. The neighbors said, "Little Ma, we passed by every day and read your notes. We've been waiting for this bowl of noodles."

173|

174|That year, one-third of community restaurants in Suzhou closed or changed hands. Little Ma's three noodle shops? Not one lost. The following year, he opened a fourth.

175|

176|Later, he said something: "Master Ding Long, I didn't actually do anything. I just didn't flail around. But 'not flailing around' — in an environment where everyone else was losing their minds — that itself was the hardest move of all."

177|

178|This is what "Governing a large country is like frying a small fish" means in an extreme environment. When crisis hits, your first reaction is often the most dangerous. The more afraid you are, the more you want to "do something"; the more you "do something," the easier it is to ruin the fish. What's truly difficult isn't finding direction — it's staying steady when everyone else is panicking, and still trusting the things you were already doing right.

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180|Case Three: The Company That Doesn't Need a CEO — Morning Star's Self-Management Experiment

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182|This case is not from China, but it fits so perfectly that every time I discuss "frying small fish," I can't resist bringing it up.

183|

184|In California, there is a company called Morning Star, the world's largest tomato processing enterprise. This company has a system that shocks every traditional manager: it has no management hierarchy.

185|

186|Yes — no managers, no directors, no VPs, no CEO. With over four hundred people, every employee signs a "Colleague Letter of Understanding" — you write out what your responsibilities are, who you need to collaborate with, and who will evaluate your performance. The people evaluating you are not your "superiors" (because you have no superiors), but the colleagues you work with most closely.

187|

188|How are salaries determined? At the end of each year, everyone writes a self-assessment describing their contributions for the year and proposes their desired salary. Then a committee of five to seven colleagues from your collaboration network reviews it. They have the authority to approve, adjust, or reject.

189|

190|Morning Star has been operating this way since 1990 — over thirty years. It is the number one tomato processing company in the U.S. by market share, with efficiency far exceeding competitors using traditional hierarchical management.

191|

192|What shocks me most about this case is not the design of its system, but that it validates a hypothesis Laozi made two thousand years ago: when the system is built right, people do not need to be "managed." Morning Star's founder, Chris Rufer, has never read the Dao De Jing, but what he did aligns perfectly with the logic of the Dao — establish the rules and boundaries (this is the "Dao"), then step back and let the system run itself. He doesn't flip the fish. He doesn't even pick up the spatula.

193|

194|I am not suggesting you go abolish all management layers like Morning Star. What I want to say is this: many of the "management actions" you currently perform in your company may not actually be "management" at all — you are merely satisfying your own anxiety-driven need to feel like "I'm doing things." And those truly great organizations win precisely through their clear understanding of what not to do.

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198|## Knowledge Framework Summary

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200|The essence of "Governing a large country is like frying a small fish" is not about "simplicity" — it is about "restraint." It contains three core layers:

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202|Layer One: The Cognitive Layer — Intervention Is Not Management. Most founders confuse "busyness" with "effectiveness." Processing fifty approvals a day does not mean you are managing the company — it means you are being the company's bottleneck. Real management is building systems, setting direction, and nurturing culture — not handling everything personally. Laozi said, "The highest ruler — the people barely know he exists." The team just needs to know you're around; you don't need to appear in front of them every day.

203|

204|Layer Two: The Behavioral Layer — Reduce the Frequency of Flipping the Fish. Restructuring every three months, changing the performance system every month, pivoting strategy every week — these are not signs of vitality; they are trauma. Every change consumes the team's reserves of security and trust. Set a hard rule for yourself: major org restructuring, at most once per year; strategic direction, execute for at least eighteen months before evaluating whether to adjust; process optimization, let it run for at least six months, gather sufficient data, then change it.

205|

206|Layer Three: The Systems Layer — Build a Company That Doesn't Need You. This is the ultimate goal. If your company can't function for a month without you, you are not a founder — you are the company's hostage. Build systems, build culture, build trust — so that your company runs better in your absence than in your presence. Old Liu can operate without an office; Morning Star can operate without a CEO — not because they manage less, but because their systems are sufficiently robust.

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210|## Practice Zone

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212|Reflection Questions (Spend twenty minutes, write your answers on paper)

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214|1. Looking back over the past twelve months, how many org restructurings, strategic pivots, or core process changes has your company undergone? For each change, what was the actual impact on team morale and output? Have you ever asked your team how they really felt about those changes?

215|

216|2. How much time do you currently spend each week on "approving," "checking," and "chasing progress"? Among these actions, which are truly necessary, and which are merely to soothe your own anxiety?

217|

218|3. If your company were left without you for one month, what would grind to a halt? Why would it halt — because only you can do those things, or because you have never let anyone else try?

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220|4. Laozi placed "barely known" above "loved and praised." Which tier are you currently on? Are you willing to move up one tier? To move up, what would you need to let go of?

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222|"No Stirring This Week" Action Exercise

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224|This week's exercise is extremely simple, but extremely difficult to do. Choose three things you habitually intervene in — for example, the daily standup you insist on attending, the client proposals you insist on reviewing, the contracts you insist on personally signing off on. This week, do not touch them at all.

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226|Assign each of these three things to a team member you trust. Give them only one boundary condition (e.g., "Only contracts over five hundred thousand need my confirmation"), then completely let go. After one week, come back and ask them three questions: How did it go? What difficulties did you encounter? Do you think you'll still need my involvement going forward?

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228|I bet you will hear things that both delight and deflate you — delighted because they are more capable than you thought, deflated because you will realize that all those things you thought only you could do could have been delegated long ago.

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232|### Key Takeaways

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234|- "Governing a large country is like frying a small fish" — don't flip it too much. Laozi's metaphor is not about ease; it's about restraint. Frequent intervention destroys what you're trying to build. Every restructuring, every policy reversal, every strategic pivot costs your team months of lost productivity and drained trust.

235|

236|- The four tiers of leadership map directly to modern management. Laozi's hierarchy — "barely known," "loved and praised," "feared," "despised" — aligns with what we now call servant leadership, charismatic leadership, authoritarian leadership, and failed leadership. The counterintuitive Taoist insight: the highest tier is the one where your presence is least felt.

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238|- Psychological safety is the modern name for "don't flip the fish." Google's Project Aristotle proved that the highest-performing teams aren't the smartest — they're the ones where people feel safe to speak up, admit mistakes, and challenge ideas. Frequent leadership intervention systematically destroys this safety.

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240|- Netflix's "context not control" is Laozi's "以道莅天下, 其鬼不神." When you provide clear context — mission, values, boundaries — you don't need detailed rules. The system governs itself. The "ghosts" of daily friction lose their power.

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242|- The ultimate test: can your company run without you? If not, you're not a founder — you're a hostage. Build systems, culture, and trust so that your absence is not a crisis but a non-event. That's the first-tier leadership Laozi described: they know you exist, and that's enough.

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246|# Chapter 8: 功成身退 — Know When to Leave

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250|## Deep Learning Unit: The Wisdom of Exit

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252|"When the work is accomplished and the name is made, the body withdraws — this is the Way of Heaven."

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254|This is the closing line of Chapter 9 of the Dao De Jing. It is also the hardest line in the entire book to live by.

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256|Harder than "non-action." Harder than "knowing when to stop." Harder than all the principles in the previous seven chapters combined. Because those earlier principles were all teaching you "how to get things done." This chapter tells you: after you have gotten things done, you need to learn how to walk away.

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258|In my twenty-five years as a Daoist priest, I have seen so many entrepreneurs walk the first half of the journey beautifully — choosing the right 赛道 (track), assembling the right team, surviving the brutal first three years, growing the company from zero to a hundred million, to a billion, even to IPO. But when it comes to "exit," seven or eight out of ten fail. It's not about the money. It's about the psychology.

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260|You poured your entire being into a company for ten, fifteen, twenty years. The company is your child, your identity, the first thing you think of when you open your eyes every morning. And then one day, you are told — or you tell yourself — "It's time to leave." That feeling isn't "retirement." It's amputation.

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262|But Laozi says: this is the Way of Heaven. In spring, the grass sprouts. In summer, it flourishes. In autumn, it bears fruit. In winter, the leaves fall and return to the root. Not because the leaves have failed — because the season has come. The Daoist view of exit is not failure, not escape, not being eliminated — it is a natural link in the chain of the life cycle. You have fulfilled your mission, so you make room for the person the next stage needs.

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266|## Dao De Jing Close Reading: The Complete Logical Chain of Chapter 9

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268|Chapter 9 is one of the shortest and most densely packed chapters in the Dao De Jing. In just four short lines, Laozi constructs a complete logic about "fullness" and "withdrawal." Let me go through it line by line.

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270|"Holding a cup and filling it to the brim — better to stop before it overflows."

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272|You hold a cup in your hand and keep pouring water into it until the water reaches the very rim — one more drop and it spills. Laozi says: rather than letting it fill to the point of overflowing, it's better to stop early.

273|

274|In the entrepreneurial context, what is this "fullness"? It's when you've taken a business to its extreme, with little room left for growth, but you keep piling on leverage — adding people, adding capital, adding capacity. Fullness at the extreme is fragility. One slight market tremor, and the overflowing cup spills everywhere. Better to stop while there's still a little space in the cup and defend what you already have.

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276|"A blade honed to its sharpest cannot maintain its edge for long."

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278|A knife — you sharpen it repeatedly until it achieves the ultimate sharpness. But ultimate sharpness means the blade is extremely thin, and extreme thinness means extreme brittleness. One swing, and it may not be the opponent that breaks — it may be your own blade that chips. "Cannot maintain for long" — you cannot keep it this way for long.

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280|What is "honing to the sharpest" in entrepreneurship? It's pursuing extreme market share, extreme growth rates, extreme efficiency in a single domain. You've captured eighty percent market share, and you want ninety. You've reached ninety, and you want ninety-five. For every additional percentage point, your costs may double, your organization may strain to its breaking point, and your risk exposure keeps expanding. Laozi says: this extreme sharpness — you cannot sustain it.

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282|"A hall full of gold and jade — no one can guard it."

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284|You've filled an entire hall with gold and jade. But can you guard it? You cannot. Thieves will come to steal, fire will come to burn, and envious eyes will come to plunder. The extreme accumulation of wealth inherently attracts risk.

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286|In entrepreneurship, "a hall full of gold and jade" is that state where the valuation has peaked, the cash on the books is so abundant you don't know how to spend it, yet the founder still cannot bear to exit. You think a hall full of gold and jade is your achievement, but Laozi says: you cannot guard it. Not as a curse — as a warning. The fuller something is, the more tempting a target it becomes. The more extreme the position, the more dangerous.

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288|"Wealth and honor breeding arrogance — this brings disaster upon oneself."

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290|You are wealthy, you are honored, and so you become arrogant — laying the seeds of your own downfall. This is the natural consequence of the first three lines. You hold fullness, hone sharpness, and guard gold and jade — over time, you naturally develop an illusion: "I earned all of this through my own merit. I can keep going this way forever." This arrogance blinds you, so you can't see that the wind has shifted, the market has turned, and your own energy can no longer keep pace.

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292|"When the work is accomplished and the name is made, the body withdraws — this is the Way of Heaven."

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294|The first four lines are layers of groundwork — fullness is bad, sharpness is bad, guarding is impossible, arrogance invites disaster. Then the final line delivers the conclusion: accomplish the work, make the name, withdraw the body — this is the Way of Heaven.

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296|"Work accomplished" — you got the thing done. "Name made" — your value has been recognized. "The body withdraws" — you, the person, leave. Three phrases, one indivisible chain of logic: you set out to do something to get it done, not to occupy that position forever. The position is a tool, not your life. Once the work is done, the tool can be put down.

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300|## The Three Layers of Exit

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302|Many people interpret "accomplish the work and withdraw" too narrowly, thinking it simply means "sell the company and leave." Exit actually has three layers, each deeper and harder than the last.

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304|Layer One: Physical Exit — Selling, Post-IPO Divestment, Handing Over to a Professional Manager

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306|This is the most direct form of exit. You convert equity to cash, transfer management authority, and leave day-to-day operations. This layer involves valuation, terms, taxes, legalities — complex, but at least there are mature financial and legal tools available. It is not the hardest layer.

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308|Layer Two: Psychological Exit — From "I Am the Company" to "The Company Is Not Me"

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310|This layer is ten times harder than the first. Many founders, even after physically exiting, have never psychologically exited. They've sold the company, but they still check the former company's news every day. Seeing the new CEO make decisions different from their own feels like a knife twisting in their heart. The company has gone public, and they sit on the board, unable to resist nitpicking every detail, making the new management's life miserable.

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312|The core of psychological exit is an identity question: if you are no longer "the founder of XX Company," who are you? Many people's entire identity is tied to their company. Once the company is gone — or rather, once the company no longer needs them — they themselves disappear. Laozi said "the body withdraws" — not just the physical body leaving, but this attachment to identity must also withdraw.

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314|Layer Three: Philosophical Exit — Accepting That Everything Has a Cycle, Including Yourself

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316|This is the deepest layer. Philosophical exit means you genuinely, from the heart, accept one thing: not only does your company have a lifecycle, but you yourself have one, too. Your cognition, your energy, your methods — they were all effective at a particular stage. Past that stage, you become the biggest bottleneck to the company's further development.

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318|This is not self-deprecation. It is clear-eyed realism. The founder who took a company from zero to a hundred million is not necessarily the best person to take it from a hundred million to a billion. Not because you're not good enough — because your skill set doesn't match that stage anymore. Admitting this requires enormous self-awareness and breadth of heart.

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320|The most lucid thing I ever heard on the mountain came from an old-timer who came for tea after selling his company. He said: "Ding Long, I finally understand now — I didn't lose my company. I finished all my responsibilities to it. The one to accompany it on the next leg of the journey shouldn't be me anymore."

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324|## Western Counterparts: Four Contemporary Exit Models

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326|Bill Gates: From CEO to Chief Software Architect to Philanthropist

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328|In the year 2000, Gates handed the Microsoft CEO position to Steve Ballmer. He was forty-five years old. Microsoft was at its peak — Windows 2000 had just launched, and its market cap was the highest in the world. The outside world was shocked: why exit at the peak?

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330|Gates gave himself a new title: "Chief Software Architect." He wasn't leaving Microsoft — he was performing a form of "body withdrawal" within Microsoft, handing over daily management while retreating to what he truly loved and excelled at: product and technology direction.

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332|In 2008, he fully retired from Microsoft, shifting his energy to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. This "body withdrawal" was even more thorough — he used the wealth and influence accumulated from Microsoft to solve an entirely different problem: global public health.

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334|Gates's exit path is textbook, layer by layer: first relinquish management authority while retaining technical involvement; then relinquish technical involvement and pivot to philanthropy. Each stage of exit created a new chapter of life, not a blank page.

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336|Warren Buffett and the Succession Plan

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338|Buffett is perhaps the most candid CEO in the world when it comes to discussing "exit." He began publicly talking about Berkshire Hathaway's succession plan in his eighties — not because he was waiting to die, but because he understood the "Way of Heaven." He once said something very Daoist: "My successor needs to possess not just investment ability, but a temperament that 'won't destroy what I've built.'"

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340|But Buffett also made a classic founder mistake: he waited too long. He has publicly admitted that before Greg Abel was confirmed as successor, he spent excessive psychological energy accepting the fact that "Berkshire doesn't need me anymore." One of the smartest people in the world — and on the matter of "exit," he too struggled for decades.

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342|Silicon Valley's "Exit" Culture: From Founder to Serial Entrepreneur

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344|Silicon Valley may be the entrepreneurial ecosystem most encouraging of "exit" in the world. In Silicon Valley, selling a company is not a disgrace — it's a badge of honor. Those "serial entrepreneurs" who have sold one or two companies find it easier to raise money than first-time founders. Because in Silicon Valley's investment logic, a person who has walked the full cycle of "founding — growth — exit" carries the most valuable résumé.

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346|This forms a stark contrast with East Asian culture. In East Asia, selling a company is often seen as "failing," "couldn't hold on," "betrayed the team." This cultural difference causes many Chinese founders to stubbornly hold on when they should exit, holding on until both the company and the person are wrecked.

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348|Founder Mode vs. Manager Mode

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350|In 2024, Silicon Valley investor Paul Graham wrote an article strictly distinguishing between "Founder Mode" and "Manager Mode." His core thesis: the way founders make decisions and the way professional managers make decisions are completely different — founders rely on intuition, lateral information networks, and bypassing hierarchy to directly engage the front lines. Professional managers rely on process, reporting, and hierarchical management.

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352|This distinction is especially useful for understanding "accomplish the work and withdraw." When a company transitions from the startup phase to the scaling phase, the type of leader it needs may fundamentally change. Founder Mode is a core competency in the zero-to-one stage; in the scaling stage, it can become a core obstacle. It's not that the founder is no longer good — it's that his "mode" no longer matches the company's "stage."

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354|Laozi's "accomplish the work and withdraw" is telling you: after fulfilling your zero-to-one mission, have the courage to hand the baton to the person best suited for the next leg. Whether that person is an evolved "Manager Mode" version of yourself, or someone else entirely.

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358|## Ding Long Case Studies

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360|Case One: Old Zhao's Death Grip — When the Founder Is the Company's Biggest Bottleneck

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362|In 2018, an old-timer who had been in manufacturing for fifteen years came to have tea with me. His surname was Zhao — I called him Brother Zhao. Brother Zhao built everything from scratch, starting from a hardware workshop and growing it to six hundred million RMB in annual revenue with over eight hundred

workers. In his industry, he was a towering figure.

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364|But when he arrived, something was off. Dark circles under his eyes, voice hoarse. The first thing he said when he sat down was: "Ding Long, I want to shut the company down."

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366|I poured him a cup of tea and asked him why.

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368|He said: "Every morning I'm the first one at the factory, before six. Every night I'm the last to leave, past eleven. I sign off on procurement. I personally do spot checks on quality control. I handle the quotes for major clients myself. My son came back from studying in the UK wanting to help me — I think he doesn't understand anything. My wife told me to hire a professional manager. I hired one, and after three months I couldn't take it anymore — the way he makes decisions is different from mine. I think he's messing things up."

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370|I asked him: "How old are you this year?"

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372|"Fifty-six."

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374|"How's your health?"

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376|He rolled up his sleeve to show me — his arm was covered in dense eczema. "Stress dermatitis. The doctor says it's from overwork, weakened immune system. But I can't help it. The factory can't function without me."

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378|I was silent for a moment, then asked him a question he had never considered: "Brother Zhao, have you ever considered the possibility that the factory can't function without you — not because you're too important, but because you've never truly let anyone take the reins from your hands?"

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380|He went quiet.

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382|I continued: "You say your son doesn't understand anything. How long has he been back in China? Have you ever given him real authority? Or did you give him the title of 'VP' and then overturn every decision he made? You say the professional manager's decision-making style is different from yours — different in style, but was the outcome worse than yours? Did you look at the data, or did you reject him outright the moment you saw 'the style is different'?"

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384|Brother Zhao went home that day with a heavy expression. Later I learned he went back and had a huge fight with his son. But after the fight, he did one thing: he signed a performance-based agreement with his son. From now on, his son would have full authority over the East China region's business, and Brother Zhao would completely stay out of it. They would review the results after one year. If revenue dropped more than ten percent, the son would resign; if it held steady or grew, the son would take over the whole operation.

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386|Guess what happened a year later?

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388|East China grew by fifteen percent. Not because his son was better than him — but because his son finally had real authority, without every decision being overturned. And Brother Zhao had finally pulled back the hand that kept flipping the fish.

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390|Brother Zhao later said to me: "Ding Long, I spent fifteen years building this company to six hundred million, but it took me an entire year to learn one thing — the company is my child, but I can't breathe for it. It has grown up. It should have its own lungs now."

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392|Case Two: Little Kai's Peak Sale — Exiting at Thirty-Two, at the Best of Times

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394|Little Kai is the most "old soul in a young body" entrepreneur I have ever met. Thirty-two years old, had been doing cross-border e-commerce for seven years, and had built his own outdoor equipment brand into the top three in its Amazon subcategory. Annual revenue around forty million USD, strong profits, solid brand reputation.

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396|In early 2022, a European outdoor group approached him with an acquisition offer. The valuation was generous — roughly eight times his annual profit.

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398|Little Kai came to have tea with me. He didn't come to ask "should I sell or not" — he already had his answer when he arrived. He came to find someone who could confirm that his answer wasn't crazy.

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400|He said: "Master Ding Long, everyone around me is telling me not to sell. My partner doesn't understand. My parents don't understand. Even my investors are saying, 'At your growth rate, you'll be worth at least double in two more years.' But I have an intuition — now is the best time to exit."

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402|I asked him: "Where does your intuition come from?"

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404|He said: "First, I'm already top three in this category. Before top three, effort and reward are proportional. After top three, for every additional point of market share, the cost is ten times what it was before. I feel like I'm about to enter that stage where 'the blade honed too sharp will chip.' Second, the European buyer has the offline channel resources that our category desperately lacks. My current team is online-native. We don't understand offline. And in this category, online penetration is nearing its ceiling. The next leg doesn't need me — it needs someone who understands offline. Third —" he paused. "I'm a bit tired. Not the kind of tired where I don't want to work. It's that I feel like I've taken this thing as far as I can. If I keep going, I'll just be repeating myself."

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406|After listening, I told him two things.

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408|First: "You're thirty-two, and you see things more clearly than most founders in their fifties. Your exit right now isn't running away — it's finishing the race."

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410|Second: "Laozi said, 'When the work is accomplished and the name is made, the body withdraws — this is the Way of Heaven.' Do you know there's an even sharper line? 'A blade honed to its sharpest cannot maintain its edge for long.' You're sheathing the blade when it's at its sharpest. That makes you one of the very few smart ones."

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412|Little Kai sold the company. The night the deal closed, he sent me a WeChat message. Four words: "Light as a feather."

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414|Six months later, he used the exit proceeds to start a small angel fund investing specifically in new cross-border e-commerce entrepreneurs. At the same time, he began doing something he had always wanted to do during the brand operations years but never had time for — a training camp teaching Chinese factory owners how to build brands for global markets. It doesn't make money, but he says it's the happiest period of his life since he started his entrepreneurial journey.

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416|He said something to me that I think is the best contemporary footnote to "accomplish the work and withdraw": "Ding Long, now I finally know — exit isn't the ending. It's the ticket to Act Two. If you don't buy that ticket, Act Two never begins."

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420|## Knowledge Framework Summary

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422|"Accomplish the work and withdraw" contains three progressive layers of meaning, and three key timing signals for exit.

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424|Three Layers:

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426|- Physical Exit — Selling, post-IPO divestment, handing over the baton. This is the easiest layer.

427|- Psychological Exit — Freeing yourself from the identity fusion of "I am the company." Your value is not equal to the company's value; your identity is not equal to your position.

428|- Philosophical Exit — Accepting that everything has a cycle, including your own capability cycle. Being a god at zero-to-one does not mean you'll be a god at scaling.

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430|Three Exit Timing Signals:

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432|- Capability Fit Timing — When you realize the capability mix the company's next stage requires is not your strength, and you either can't learn it or can't learn it fast enough. This isn't admitting defeat — it's clarity.

433|- Market Window Timing — When your valuation reflects fully optimistic expectations, and you know those expectations may not be fulfilled. Sheathe the blade when it's sharpest.

434|- Self-Depletion Timing — When you no longer love this thing and are only sustaining it on inertia. Inertia doesn't carry you far.

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438|## Practice Zone

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440|Reflection Questions (Spend twenty minutes, write your answers on paper)

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442|1. If someone made you an offer today at a price you couldn't refuse to acquire your company, would your first reaction be excitement or resistance? If resistance — what are you resisting? Is the price not high enough, or can you not imagine who "you without this company" would be?

443|

444|2. What stage is your company currently in? What is the core capability most needed at this stage? Is that capability your strength? Answer honestly — are you the bottleneck for the company's next stage of development?

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446|3. When was the last time you seriously thought about "exit"? Do you have a written exit plan — whether for five, ten, or twenty years out? If not, why not?

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448|4. Imagine you have been exited for three years. How do you hope people describe your time at this company after you've left? Does that description align with your current behavior?

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450|The Exit Countdown Exercise

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452|This is a "hypothetical" exercise — you don't actually have to exit. But doing this exercise itself will give you a much clearer picture of yourself.

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454|Step One: Set an imaginary exit date — three years from now, five years, or ten years. Write it on paper and circle it.

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456|Step Two: From today to your exit date, divide the time into four equal segments. For each segment, set one goal that "must be completed before exit." For example: Segment One — complete the management tier structure; Segment Two — de-founder-ize the core business; Segment Three — have the successor run independently for one year; Segment Four — transition and handover.

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458|Step Three: Look at the goal for Segment One — what can you start doing next week?

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460|The power of this exercise is not that you actually follow this timeline to exit. The power is this: once you accept the premise that "there will come a day when I leave," every decision you make changes. You'll no longer hoard every key relationship in your own hands. You'll no longer block middle managers from growing into senior leaders. You'll no longer enjoy the illusion of "the company can't function without me." You'll start truly building a company that doesn't need you — and that company is often the most valuable one of all.

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464|### Key Takeaways

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466|- "When the work is done, the body withdraws — this is the Way of Heaven." Laozi's Chapter 9 is the hardest teaching in the entire Dao De Jing for entrepreneurs. It's not about failure or giving up — it's about recognizing that completion is as natural as beginning, and that overstaying your season harms both you and what you've built.

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468|- Three layers of exit: physical, psychological, philosophical. Selling shares is the easy part. Disentangling your identity from your company is ten times harder. Accepting that your own capabilities have a lifecycle — and that what made you great at zero-to-one may not serve at scale — is the deepest layer. Most founders never reach the second, let alone the third.

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470|- The sharpest knife shatters first. "揣而锐之，不可长保" — an edge honed to maximum sharpness cannot be maintained. At some point, every additional point of market share, every incremental growth target, costs more than it's worth. Knowing when to stop sharpening is wisdom; knowing when to sheathe the blade entirely is mastery.

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472|- Gates, Buffett, and Silicon Valley all validate the Taoist exit logic. Gates stepped back at Microsoft's peak, transitioning to philanthropy. Buffett publicly wrestled with succession for decades. Silicon Valley turned "exit" from a stigma into a credential. The through-line: the best exits aren't endings — they're tickets to Act Two.

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474|- The exit countdown exercise isn't about actually leaving. It's about the clarity that comes from accepting your own impermanence. Once you internalize that you won't be running this company forever, every decision shifts — you start building systems instead of dependencies, successors instead of subordinates, and a company that's valuable precisely because it doesn't need you.

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478|# Afterword

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480|Eight lessons. Here we are.

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482|If you have read all the way to this point, you have probably already realized — this book has not given you any "silver bullet." I haven't taught you the secret to raising funding in three days. I haven't given you a universal growth formula. I haven't told you, "Follow these eight steps and you will succeed."

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484|Because Daoism never offers silver bullets. What Daoism offers is a way of seeing.

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486|Chapter One, "The Highest Good Is Like Water," taught you to be as flexible as water, to flow into places others cannot reach. Chapter Two, "Non-Action in Governance," taught you to restrain those hands that always want to meddle, and return the stage to your team. Chapter Three, "Knowing When to Stop," taught you to learn to pause, to hold your own rhythm in a world where everyone is sprinting. Chapter Four, "Great Vessels Are Late in Completion," taught you to trust the power of time — things that are fast are easily broken; things that truly withstand time are all slow. Chapter Five, "The Soft Overcomes the Hard," taught you not to clash head-on, but to find your crack, to take root in the giants' blind spots. Chapter Six, "Less Is More, More Is Confusion," taught you to subtract — not to do everything, but to take one thing to the extreme. Chapter Seven, "Governing a Large Country Is Like Frying a Small Fish," taught you to stop stirring the pot, to let the team switch from adaptation mode to production mode. Chapter Eight, "Accomplish the Work and Withdraw," taught you to leave gracefully after fulfilling your mission — to buy the ticket to Act Two of your own life.

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488|Taken together, these eight things are not a "startup methodology." They are a "way of being an entrepreneur" — a way that doesn't require turning yourself into a martyr or turning your company into a battlefield.

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490|If you are a Western reader, let me leave you with a few final words. Laozi's wisdom was born in the East two thousand five hundred years ago, but it speaks to timeless human dilemmas — the struggle between ambition and restraint, the conflict between speed and patience, the oscillation between control and trust. These things know no borders.

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492|Silicon Valley's "Move fast and break things" ran for twenty years. And the result? A lot of things did indeed get broken — including founders' own bodies, their teams' trust, and companies that could have gone much further. Now, the global startup community is reflecting — is there another way? A way that doesn't consume the self as much, doesn't consume the team as much, yet can still create great things?

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494|This book is my answer. It doesn't come from a business school. It comes from two thousand five hundred years of Eastern common sense.

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496|Have a cup of tea. Take a deep breath.

497|

498|Business is long. Take your time.

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500|Ding Long

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