

# The “Natural” Spiritual State of Existence in Zhuangzi’s Philosophy: Implications for Health Management Theory

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**Abstract:** The spiritual state of “naturalness” in Zhuangzi’s philosophy offers profound insights for modern health management. From a health management perspective, this paper argues that Zhuangzi’s “discourse on usefulness and uselessness” helps transcend narrow perceptions of health’s “usefulness,” guiding the establishment of a multidimensional, flexible health risk assessment system that aligns with the Health Belief Model. His philosophy of “equating all things” advocates respecting individual differences, laying the foundation for building an inclusive health promotion environment. The state of “carefree wandering” and cultivation practices like “mental fasting” and “forgetting oneself while sitting” align with self-determination theory and mindfulness training, empowering individuals to achieve self-directed health management. From cognitive and environmental dimensions to practical application, Zhuangzi’s philosophy contributes vital wisdom for enhancing holistic health.

**Keywords:** Zhuangzi’s philosophy; Naturalness; Health management; Usefulness and uselessness; Equating all things; Health promotion environment; Self-determination theory; Holistic health

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## 1. Introduction

The Zhuangzi holds a unique and indispensable place in China’s intellectual, literary, and aesthetic histories. The philosophical concept of “naturalness” advocated in the Zhuangzi aligns profoundly with the holistic health philosophy emphasized in health management. Health management focuses not only on physiological indicators but also prioritizes balanced development across psychological and social dimensions, for which Zhuangzi’s perspective on naturalness provides substantial theoretical underpinnings.

The world often mentions Laozi and Zhuangzi in the same breath, yet in truth, Zhuangzi places greater emphasis on the liberation of the individual spirit. The Zhuangzi places the individual life within infinite space,

uniting it with all things. Starting from the practical problems of the individual life, it analyzes the root causes of life's predicaments and offers the natural path of carefree freedom to escape them. Zhuangzi's discourse on nature is inextricably linked to his philosophy of life. Zhuangzi's discourse on "naturalness" does not merely discuss nature for nature's sake, nor does it address natural phenomena in isolation. Rather, it focuses on naturalness through the lens of human existence and the state of the human spirit. Within Zhuangzi's philosophy, naturalness represents not only a primordial state—an authentic condition devoid of artifice—but also a state of genuine beauty <sup>[1]</sup>. For contemporary individuals navigating fierce survival competition and intensely focused on health concerns, his teachings hold profoundly significant implications.

## 2. The debate on usefulness and the perception of health risks

For a considerable period, China's intellectual circles regarded the concepts of the Dao and embodying the Dao described in Zhuangzi's philosophy as mere empty rhetoric. They distanced themselves from this world-renouncing philosophy, deeming it "mad and untrustworthy," "grand yet impractical, heading forth without return," and ultimately concluding it to be "grand yet useless" <sup>[2]</sup>. In today's era, which prioritizes speed and efficiency, we place greater emphasis than ever on "usefulness." The distinction between useful and useless has become our primary criterion for handling many matters and relationships, and naturally, it has also become a key standard for viewing health issues. So what exactly constitutes "usefulness"? Usefulness is an understanding of the degree to which a thing's inherent qualities align with external demands; it is a value judgement. This value judgement exists both in humanity's assessment of its own state of being and permeates our understanding of the developmental processes of all things. Simultaneously, this judgement itself exerts a profound influence on human existence. Therefore, the author seeks to begin with this value judgement to first grasp the concept of "naturalness" within Zhuangzi's philosophy and its impact on the perception of health risks.

The judgment of usefulness or uselessness, beyond the inherent conditions and attributes of things themselves, involves more the cognition and discernment of the perceiver. In Zhuangzi's *Free and Easy Wandering*, it is recounted:

Huizi said to Zhuangzi: "The King of Wei bestowed upon me the seed of a giant gourd. I planted it, and when it bore fruit, it yielded five shi of water. Yet its rind was so thick it could not lift itself. When I split it open to make a dipper, the pulp fell out, leaving nothing to hold. It is not that it is not large enough, but I discarded it for being useless."

Zhuangzi replied, "Sir, you are indeed inept at utilizing the great. There was a man from Song who excelled in making a remedy for hands that would not crack in cold weather. Generation after generation, his family made their living by washing linen. A visitor heard of this and offered a hundred pieces of gold for the formula. The family gathered to deliberate: "For generations, we have earned but a few coins from washing linen. Now we could sell this skill for a hundred pieces of gold. Let us sell it." The visitor obtained the formula and presented it to the King of Wu. When Yue posed a threat, the King of Wu appointed him commander. That winter, he engaged the Yue forces in a naval battle and routed them decisively. For this, he was granted a fiefdom. His ability to prevent frostbite was one thing; whether it earned him a fief or merely spared him from washing linen was another matter entirely. Now, you possess a gourd capable of holding five shi of wine. Why not fashion it into a great vessel and float upon the rivers and lakes, rather than fretting that the gourd will wither and find no use? This shows that you still harbor the heart of a common reed!"

The “gourd of five stones” may seem large yet useless, but viewed from another angle, with a shift in perspective, it reveals an irreplaceable utility. “It can prevent hands from cracking—that is one use; it may be used for sealing, or it may not spare one from washing coarse linen—thus its applications differ.” The medicine that prevents hands from cracking is the same, yet the outcomes it yields are distinct. “Viewed through the lens of the Dao, all things possess neither high nor low value; viewed through the lens of things themselves, they naturally distinguish themselves as high or low” [Quoted from Zhuangzi: Autumn Waters]. Observing the world through the perspective of the Dao, all existence is devoid of inherent hierarchical worth; the distinctions we make between high and low value are merely outcomes confined to individual, partial viewpoints<sup>[3,4]</sup>. Under differing lenses, individuals manifest distinct values, rendering true hierarchy illusory and absolute value judgments non-existent. Simultaneously, all things gradually reveal their intrinsic worth according to their own developmental trajectory and timing. We ought to place greater emphasis on the conditional nature of individual value realization. We must cultivate a broader perspective to gain a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena, ourselves, our external environment, and the timing involved. This allows us to explore diverse possibilities rather than confining ourselves within established standards and boundaries, thereby becoming complacent and stagnant.

Things seemingly without use may prove profoundly significant. One ought not to belittle oneself due to external judgements or critiques, nor become mired in the torment of perceived uselessness. Much like Zhuangzi’s philosophy of embodying the Dao, for the common person, the distinction between usefulness and uselessness hinges on whether one can truly grasp its essence and share similar life experiences. Its value may not lie in practical application in the strictest sense, but rather in opening up an alternative dimension of existence, unfolding a different perspective on life, thereby unleashing its immense intellectual allure. The same principle applies to health management. An individual’s narrow perception and judgment of “usefulness” in recognizing health risks can often lead to the entrenchment of unhealthy behaviors. This may result in misguided decisions, overlooking associated risks, or even causing harm to one’s health. Health risk assessments should avoid singular, rigid criteria (such as prioritizing short-term weight loss or isolated physiological metrics) in favor of multidimensional evaluation systems. For instance, a seemingly “useless” leisure activity may yield far greater long-term benefits for stress relief and mental well-being than a single bout of high-intensity exercise. Health management programs should guide individuals beyond the prejudice of “short-term utility,” encouraging a comprehensive assessment of lifestyle choices’ long-term health impacts. Zhuangzi’s parable of the “gourd of five stones” reveals the relativity of value judgements, resonating with modern health management’s Health Belief Model: adoption of health behaviors depends on perceptions of severity, susceptibility, and benefits. Zhuangzi advocated transcending the “preconceived notions” of usefulness, inspiring us to establish more flexible health behavior assessment systems. This prevents neglecting long-term health benefits through excessive pursuit of short-term utility, or overlooking holistic health evaluations due to partial perspectives.

In today’s rapidly evolving society, we are invariably goal-oriented, prioritizing efficiency and speed—an approach that is not inherently objectionable. Yet, in our fervent pursuit of objectives, we often overlook and miss out on much, even losing sight of our authentic selves. Zhuangzi advocated acting from the heart, championing the principle of “interacting with things without being enslaved by them” [quoted from Zhuangzi’s *Landscape and Water*]. The unfolding of life itself possesses diverse hues; do not become a slave to material things, nor a puppet of “usefulness.” Only by setting aside ingrained prejudices and standards can we unlock the door to a multicolored world, embark upon entirely new life paths, and attain a different state of being. At its core, this philosophy rests upon the understanding that all things in nature exist as they are by their very nature. There is no division between

them, no distinction of right or wrong, good or evil. This is the most fundamental “naturalness”—the very essence of Zhuangzi’s philosophy of “equating all things.”

### 3. The doctrine of the equality of all things and the construction of health-promoting environments

The Discourse on the Equality of All Things stands as the most intensely speculative chapter within Zhuangzi’s philosophy, serving as a pivotal link in the unfolding of his thought. The principle that “the Way permeates all as one” provides the philosophical foundation for establishing supportive health environments.

The Zhuangzi’s *On the Equality of All Things* states: “Nothing is not that; nothing is not this. From that perspective, it is unseen; from this perspective, it is known.” Therefore, it is said: “That arises from this, and this also depends on that—such is the doctrine of mutual generation. Though birth and death arise simultaneously, and non-birth and non-death arise simultaneously; what is possible and what is impossible arise simultaneously, and what is impossible and what is possible arise simultaneously; arising from what is right and arising from what is wrong, arising from what is wrong and arising from what is right. Therefore, the sage does not follow these distinctions, but illuminates them through Heaven, also arising from what is right. What is right is also that which is wrong, and that which is wrong is also what is right. That which is wrong is also one form of right, and this which is right is also one form of wrong. Is there truly such a thing as that which is wrong? Is there truly no such thing as that which is wrong? Neither that which is wrong nor that which is right can find their counterpart; this is called the pivot of the Dao.”

All things mutually form one another; that exists through its opposition to this, and this arises through its opposition to that. They arise simultaneously and perish simultaneously, opposing yet mutually dependent. To Zhuangzi, concepts of opposition—such as self and other, right and wrong, self and object, life and death—all possess relativity, superficiality, and untruth. In real life, people invariably hold differing views and engage in endless debate: “Who, following their own inclinations, does not take something as their teacher? Why must one knowingly replace one’s own mind with another’s? The foolish do so! To hold to right and wrong before one’s mind is formed is like setting out for Yue today and arriving yesterday.” [Quoted from Zhuangzi’s *On the Equality of All Things*] This means that people develop prejudices according to their circumstances, believing themselves to be correct and clinging to their views. Everyone harbors preconceived notions, differing only in degree<sup>[5]</sup>. These notions breed distinctions between right and wrong, ensnaring us in their grip. Why cannot we comprehend that what we deem wrong has its own rationale, and what we deem right has its own justification? The two are not contradictory; they are merely two sides of the same coin.

People are often blinded by a single leaf, unaware that “when viewed through the Way, all things are equal.” This “equality” expresses unity beyond difference; without variation, there would be no need to speak of “equality.” Zhuangzi’s “equality of all things” is founded upon the very diversity of existence. He recognized both the distinctiveness and the shared essence of all beings. This “equality” may be termed the “equality of inequality”<sup>[1]</sup>.

The unity of all things, traced to their origin, stems from the Dao as the primal source of all existence. Heaven, earth, and all creatures derive their inherent nature from the Dao, flourishing and fading according to their own laws of growth<sup>[6,7]</sup>. As stated in *Knowing the North*: “The six directions form a vast expanse, yet none escapes its embrace; the finest autumn hair is but a speck, yet it forms part of a whole. All under heaven rise and fall, yet none escapes this cycle; Yin and Yang, the four seasons, run their course, each in its proper order; Obscure as if

absent yet present; Vague yet not formless, spiritually manifest; All things are nurtured without knowing it. This is called the root and source, observable in heaven!” From the vastness of heaven and earth to the minutest detail of a fine hair, all things under heaven, nurtured by the Dao, each find their proper order and abide by their inherent nature. The Dao’s nurturing is formless and soundless, yet it truly exists. All things are inseparable from the Dao, and the Dao manifests itself within all things. In the chapter *Knowing the North*, Dongguo Zi asked Zhuangzi, “Where is the Dao?” Zhuangzi replied that it is in the ants, in the weeds, in the tiles, and in the excrement and urine. His intent was to illustrate the omnipresence of the Dao. At the level of the Dao, distinctions of length, beauty, or ugliness hold no sway; all are manifestations of the Dao, achieving fundamental unity within it.

Conversely, as stated in the *Discourse on the Equality of All Things*: “The common reed and the temple pillar, the ugly woman and Xi Shi—all are equally strange and bizarre, yet the Dao unifies them as one. Their division is their formation; their formation is their destruction. All things, free from fixed formation or destruction, return to unity as one.” In the grand scheme, the myriad things—diverse and multifarious—are governed by the Dao in their growth and decay, manifesting the Dao. Simultaneously, we must recognize that each individual entity is self-generated and self-contained, each following its own order. The surge and wane of its vitality, the unfolding and retreat of its inherent nature, are not subject to any external force. This too is a manifestation of the Dao. These two meanings, seemingly contradictory, actually offer the finest interpretation of the Dao from different perspectives: the Dao’s governance is unconscious, not deliberate or contrived; it is a form of non-action that is action, a natural force enabling all things to self-generate, self-complete, and self-transform <sup>[7]</sup>.

Understanding this principle of “the Dao unifying all as one,” Zhuangzi proposed the methods of the “Dao pivot” and the “two paths” to resolve disputes over right and wrong and overcome prejudiced minds. Here, “pivot” refers to the hinge on a door. The “Dao pivot” is Zhuangzi’s metaphor for the Dao, signifying responding to change with “centrality,” revolving endlessly. When “the Dao unifies all as one,” there is no “right” or “wrong,” no “possible” or “impossible” <sup>[7]</sup>. Regarding the “right” and “wrong” within human society and among people, the “dual conduct” approach should be employed. In the parable of the monkey keeper in “On the Equality of All Things,” the simple act of changing the distribution of nuts from “three in the morning and four in the evening” to “four in the morning and three in the evening” produced entirely different outcomes. This illustrates how “names and realities remain intact, yet joy and anger are employed,” revealing how people are often deluded by the “mallow heart.” Only by adhering to the “Celestial Balance,” embracing both sides of right and wrong, and surrendering to nature can one transcend the realm of judgment and attain liberation of the spirit—this is Zhuangzi’s profound wisdom for life.

Zhuangzi’s doctrine of the equality of all things aims to help people recognize the balanced, reciprocal nature of the natural world, society, and the self, thereby achieving inner peace. The beauty of nature lies in its diversity—each element is indispensable, contributing to the whole’s harmony. Human society mirrors this principle: each individual possesses distinct life experiences, unique personalities, and varied life choices, naturally leading to divergent paths. One must neither impose expectations upon others nor upon oneself. Rather, one should understand one’s innate nature, embrace one’s uniqueness, and live in harmony with nature. By embracing nature, one can reconcile contradictions and adapt to change, thus achieving boundless potential. Only by forgetting age and forgetting barriers can one navigate the world with ease. Zhuangzi stated: “What may be done may be done; what may not be done may not be done. The Way is accomplished by action; things are called by names.” [Quoted from Zhuangzi’s *On the Equality of All Things*] Whether something is feasible or not, each holds its own rationale—there exists no absolute standard. The Way is traversed through practice, not as a rigid

code of conduct. Health management theory emphasizes that sound organizational and social environments should respect individual differences (such as cultural backgrounds and health perceptions), which resonates profoundly with Zhuangzi's doctrine of "dual paths." In health management practice, the "equality of all things" mindset can inform the design of diverse health promotion programs, such as flexible working arrangements and personalized health assessments, to enhance collective health literacy and improve group health outcomes. Organizational health policies should be inclusive and adaptable, acknowledging and respecting individual variations in health status, health beliefs, and life rhythms. For instance, diverse health options such as mindfulness meditation rooms, flexible exercise periods, and healthy eating subsidies may be offered, rather than implementing a one-size-fits-all approach like mandatory workplace exercises. Individuals should be permitted to pursue their own path according to their circumstances, thereby collectively enhancing organizational health literacy and cohesion while reducing psychological pressure stemming from uniform standards.

#### **4. The carefree state of nature and health self-management in harmony with the Tao**

In truth, Zhuangzi's discourse on the Tao and "nature" serves to connect these principles with human existence, enabling people to comprehend their inherent nature and understand their original state of being. Through this, one achieves unity with the Tao and attains true carefree freedom. Zhuangzi's state of carefree freedom, achieved by "riding the right of heaven and earth," can be operationalized through self-determination theory in health management. This theory posits that when individuals satisfy autonomy, competence, and relatedness, intrinsic motivation enhances adherence to health behaviors.

The chapter "Zeyang" in the Zhuangzi states that "all things have their own principles." Every entity and individual possesses their own "Dao," which knows no hierarchy of superiority or inferiority, nobility or baseness. To attain blissful freedom, one must return to one's authentic natural state, aligning with the "Way of Heaven and Earth" and the "Virtue of the Sage." This constitutes a spiritually detached state—primordial, original, and the highest human condition. Preserving such an innate, natural state ensures that "troubles cannot enter, nor can evil forces invade" [quoted from Zhuangzi's *Kei Yi*]. Thus, one achieves "complete virtue" and "preserves the spirit without loss"; thus, "emptiness, tranquility, and serenity harmonize with the virtue of Heaven" [quoted from Zhuangzi: *Deliberate Effort*] <sup>[8]</sup>. This represents a state of profound natural existence where body and mind are in perfect harmony. The ultimate goal of health management—whole-person health—aligns precisely with this ideal. It transcends mere disease prevention, pursuing holistic wellbeing across physiological, psychological, social, and even spiritual dimensions. Effective health management is not merely the application of techniques; it is about helping individuals reconnect with life's inherent rhythms, finding inner stability and order amidst the complex external world, and ultimately achieving the high-quality state of being where "emptiness and tranquility harmonize with the virtues of heaven."

In the "Free and Easy Wandering" chapter, Zhuangzi concentrates on discussing two levels of natural freedom: the first involves freely developing our innate nature, setting aside preconceptions, and fully unleashing our natural capacities. This capacity is "virtue" ("de"), which derives directly from the "Way" ("dao"). Virtue is that which enables us to become who we truly are. Through this, we attain freedom. The higher level of freedom is achieved through a deeper understanding of the natural essence of all things <sup>[7,8]</sup>. This emphasizes the relativity of the natural essence of all beings and the unity between humanity and all creation. To attain this unity, one

requires a higher level of knowledge and understanding. Only the freedom derived from such unity constitutes true, higher-order freedom. In the “Free and Unfettered Wandering” chapter of the Zhuangzi, after describing the happiness of great birds and small birds, Zhuangzi mentions a man named Liezi who could ride the wind. “He did not constantly seek to bring about his own happiness. Though he was free from the need to walk, he still depended on something.” His dependence was upon the wind; since he must rely on the wind, his freedom remains limited and relative. Zhuangzi then poses the question: “But he who rides the rightful course of heaven and earth and masters the six vital energies to roam the infinite—what need has he to depend on anything?” Therefore, it is said: “The perfect man has no self; the divine man has no achievement; the sage has no name.” The supreme person transcends the distinction between self and world, between “I” and “not-I,” thus having no self; the divine person unites with the Dao, which accomplishes all without action, thus having no merit; the sage unites with the Dao, allowing people to follow nature without interference, enabling each to fully and freely express their innate abilities. The Dao has no name, the sage also has no name. True, carefree happiness is the natural state of being one with the Dao.

To this end, Zhuangzi proposed the practices of cultivating the mind and sitting in forgetfulness, hoping to return to one’s natural state by purging the mind of distracting thoughts. This “forgetfulness” is not deliberate oblivion, but rather the recognition or return to one’s true nature in a state of natural unawareness and unconsciousness, or through cultivation to achieve such a state of unawareness and unconsciousness. “Fish forget each other in the rivers and lakes; men forget each other in the ways of the Dao” [quoted from Zhuangzi’s *The Great Master*] precisely embodies the meaning of “forgetting.” In Zhuangzi’s writings, “forgetting each other amidst rivers and lakes” signifies not the absence of affection, but the supreme love where “they love each other without knowing it.” Similarly, “rather than praising Yao and condemning Jie, it is better to forget both and transform through their ways” [quoted from Zhuangzi: *The Great Master*] does not imply blurring the distinction between Yao and Jie, nor a lack of discernment, but rather the supreme wisdom that allows all the ways of the world to coexist and transform naturally, where things and self move in harmony <sup>[7]</sup>. Forgetting objects, forgetting self, forgetting form, forgetting emotion—in essence, these all involve shedding artificial constructs to become naturally self-contained, achieving true natural freedom through the union of humanity and heaven, and the coexistence of self and object. Zhuangzi’s “heart fasting” and “sitting in forgetfulness” are fundamentally techniques for self-regulation, akin to interventions in health management such as mindfulness training and stress adaptation. All aim to enhance an individual’s autonomous control over health goals by reducing external interference.

## 5. Conclusion

Having delved deeply into the natural state of spiritual existence within the philosophy of Zhuangzi, we gain insight into this great philosopher’s unique perspectives and profound reflections on human spiritual life. Through his extraordinary wisdom, Zhuangzi proposed the philosophical ideals of natural non-action and carefree freedom, painting for us an ideal state of spiritual being. Within Zhuangzi’s philosophical system, nature represents not merely a cosmological view but a worldview of life itself. He advocated that people should follow the Way of Nature, discarding worldly distractions to pursue inner tranquility and freedom. This state of spiritual existence represents both a profound respect and nurturing of individual life, and a deep understanding of the harmonious coexistence of all things in the universe.

Through an exploration of the natural state of spiritual existence within Zhuangzi's philosophy, it becomes evident that he pursued a life experience transcending reality and returning to authenticity. He encouraged us to maintain a tranquil heart amidst the world's complexities, facing life's vicissitudes with a natural attitude. Achieving this spiritual realm requires constant cultivation of the inner self and deepening self-awareness, thereby attaining spiritual elevation and transformation.

In contemporary society, confronting manifold pressures and challenges, we may draw wisdom and strength from Zhuangzi's philosophical insights. By embracing the natural state of spiritual existence advocated by Zhuangzi, we can navigate life's predicaments with greater composure, attaining inner peace and freedom. The concept of "naturalness" in Zhuangzi's philosophy offers profound implications for modern health management, spanning both theory and practice. At the individual level, it guides us to transcend utilitarian cognition, reconstruct health risks, and foster positive behavioral shifts. At the organizational and societal levels, it advocates building inclusive, supportive health environments through the principle of "equality of all things." At its practical core, it emphasizes achieving true health self-management and empowerment through attaining a state of "carefree freedom." Integrating Zhuangzi's ancient wisdom into contemporary health management theory not only enriches its humanistic dimensions but also advances its ultimate mission of enhancing human quality of life.

In essence, Zhuangzi's philosophical thought offers a unique concept and practical pathway towards a natural state of spiritual existence. By deeply comprehending and practicing this philosophy, we may better understand ourselves and the world, engage in effective health management, and realize life's value and meaning.

## Disclosure statement

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