In an incisive study of Zhuangzi, Chris Jochim offers a suggestive critique, emphasizing that it is important to also be aware of differences between the flow experience and Zhuangzi’s vision. He argues that while Csikszentmihalyi does highlight the joy of spontaneous flow experiences, he implicitly assumes that we need a guiding, goal-focused self to connect these activities into an overall meaningful life—a perspective Jochim argues is foreign to the Daoism of Zhuangzi.\(^1\) Jochim thus points out a paradox in Csikszentmihalyi’s conception of a flow-oriented life. On the one hand, Csikszentmihalyi maintains that un-self-conscious flow experiences make for a fulfilling life. On the other hand, he urges us to nurture a strong sense of goal-orientation and purpose. Jochim contends that there is a paradox in the belief that “a strong sense of self lies behind, and in some way facilitates, the periodic ‘joy’ of the loss of self-consciousness.”\(^{iii}\)

Jochim further suggests that Zhuangzi’s cosmology, which is open to chaos and to a pluralistic conception of the person, is more amenable to a genuinely spontaneous life than Csikszentmihalyi’s life of orchestrated flow. Zhuangzi observed that while it seems there should be some kind of guide or master within the human person, when we look for a master self, we don’t find one. Instead, we find feelings and impulses such as joy and sorrow, anger and pleasure, which come and go like sounds produced by the wind on various hollows; Zhuangzi pokes fun at the Mencian notion of the heart-mind (xin/hsin) as an irrevocable moral guide.\(^{iii}\) This supports Jochim’s argument that in contrast to Csikszentmihalyi, Zhuangzi does not hold a notion of a master self who is orchestrating our lives; Zhuangzi is comfortable with allowing things to happen rather than making them happen, in both the person and the cosmos. Moreover, while Zhuangzi values effortless concentration on certain skill-oriented tasks, he also appreciates “flights of the imagination and ecstatic states that feature loss of control.”\(^{iv}\) Jochim thus concludes that “when it comes to leading a whole lifetime of flow, Zhuangzi de-emphasizes control as
well as the pursuit of success (merit, name, etc.); he does not advocate a well-planned life punctuated by enjoyable moments of flow. Seeing a universe in flow, he invites us to participate in the flow, like fish swimming in water."

My response to this critique is to wonder whether there is indeed a paradox in the belief that a strong, guiding self lies behind and supports periodic loss of self-consciousness. As the American Buddhist teacher Joseph Goldstein writes, one has to have a strong sense of self to develop the experience of egolessness or no-self Buddhist release suggests; a strong core self can foster the release into spontaneity. vi

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ii Jochim, 65.

iii Zhuangzi, Chapter 2, “On Making all Things Equal.”

iv Jochim, 65.

v Jochim, 65. Jochim’s critique of Csikszentmihalyi’s conception of flow may be compared to critiques of happiness interventions, which are structured exercises designed by theorists of positive psychology to create a more fulfilling life. Aristotle conceived of the life of eudaimonia as one of developing objectively valuable character traits. Positive psychology systematizes these characters traits and designs exercises to “produce” happiness, in a typically American interventionist approach; they are meant to maximize the flow experience in one’s life. Positive psychology and the psychology of flow are different in tenor from the flow experience celebrated by Zhuangzi and the life of flourishing valued by Aristotle. Note, too, Nickolas Knightly’s critique of Csikszentmihalyi as offering “tricks” to create the flow experience. “The Paradox of Wu-Wei? Yes (and No)”, 10.

vi Joseph Goldstein, Insight Meditation: the Practice of Freedom, 93-95.