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## Self-Cultivation: To Strive Or Not To Strive?

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Are we obligated to cultivate our talents and strive for personal excellence? We may form a consensus that humans possess a different type and level of potential than any other being. We are endowed with reason and free will at birth, but the question is to what extent we strive to cultivate our excellence using these uniquely human gifts.

Giovanni Pico della Mirandola of the Italian Renaissance asserts the need for us to benefit from our potential and cultivate ourselves to the highest degree. In the *Oration of the Dignity of Man* he declares, "...we have been born into this condition of being what we choose to be— that we ought to be sure above all else that it may never be said against us that, born to a high position, we failed to appreciate it..." (*Oration*, p. 3) Pico urges us not only to be "impatient of mediocrity" and to "pant after the highest things," but to go so far as to try to live like gods. If we do not recognize and harness our talents, we have failed as humans and sunk to the level of beasts.

Prominent Taoist Chuang Tzu takes a much different position regarding our path of cultivation. For him, none of these god-reaching aspirations are necessary or even natural. Describing a sage who follows the Tao, he writes: "What is meant by a 'true man'?/...No great exploits. No plans./ If they failed, no sorrow./ No self-congratulation in success." (*The True Man*, 60). This ideal cannot be further from that of Pico: a man with no motivation for achievements, feeling no shame in failure. Depending on where we find ourselves in which time period, we could become our best selves either by acting like gods or not striving for anything at all.