

10/9/19 Class Notes
Tao Te Ching Introduction

Our first class taught us a lot about how this new endeavor is going to unfold. We had lots of meditation time, sprinkled with brief readings to stimulate the soaking in. In the future there will be even less to read out. This means the notes I write are mostly going to be pointless. For all our history hosting classes, the Portland Gurukula has offered explicit guidance for reframing our mental outlook in a more helpful manner, so that people could meditate about it in their own way in their own time. We'll see how it works to Mostly Meditate while here. It felt good to me last night, but isn't so suitable for some of the more active types. In fact, I've already gotten complaints. People missed the discussions, and they prefer to meditate in the bathtub or an easy chair, at home.

We now have quite a stack of translations. In addition to the already mentioned Stephen Miller, Ursula LeGuin, Red Pine and Gia-fu Feng, we've added Sam Hamill and John Minter, and we also have access to the one used in Nitya's *Meditations on the Way*, by D.C. Lau. LeGuin's is the only one I spotted by a woman, surveying the large Taoism shelf at Powell's. Since it's a more or less feminine alternative to the mainly masculine Confucianism, this is surprising. Irritating too.

Ms. LeGuin wrote me a letter after I naively asked her to blurb my first book, *Krishna in the Sky with Diamonds*, since I had loved her Tao Te Ching translation so much. I had no idea what a brief review would entail from her, but I was asking a lot. In gently turning me down, she wrote, "I'm beginning to feel like the Dalai Lama's Aunt or something—I've been getting so many requests to blurb books on Eastern Spiritual Traditions." Her letter was gift enough. I had told her I felt like Lao Tzu, ready to ride out of town on a donkey and disappear. She concluded her note: "Anyhow

don't ride out of town on a donkey. Portland needs you." Sweet! We used to run into her at the post office occasionally, where she would be retrieving her daily box of fan letters from around the globe. She had her own department in the PO, probably getting as much mail as a thousand of her neighbors.

Peter Oppenheimer produced a book based on a class on the Tao Te Ching by Nitya, titled *Meditations on the Way*, first published in 1981. It reads somewhat like a proto Class Notes, in fact. In his Foreword he sums up the gist quite well:

The source of wisdom is not anywhere to be found in the outside world. It is an inner factor within each person, though its "still small voice" is often drowned out or ignored in the bluster and bustle of transactional life, which when lived unreflectively tends to degenerate into a knee-jerk series of stimuli and responses, conducing more toward anxiety and frustration than toward peace and fulfillment. When Socrates voiced the truth that "an unexamined life is not worth living," it was not his intention to fill the coffers of academic institutions but to awaken each of us, wherever we stand and in whatever path or "walk of life," to the rich source of transformative wisdom within ourselves which has the power to illuminate our own particular inmost goals and values and to guide us along the surest paths to their attainment.

Back in the class, we read out several excerpts from various introductions, covering the basic tenet of Taoism, which is quite close to Vedanta, with its Absolute Core and peripheral expansion into daily life. We'll explore this more next week, as the first verse says it all. The Tao is the Core and the Te (Virtue) is the technique. Red Pine writes helpfully about the Te:

Despite the elusiveness and namelessness of the Tao, Lao-tzu tells us we can approach it through *Te*. *Te* means “virtue,” in the sense of “moral character” as well as “power to act.” Yen Ling-fen says, “Virtue is the manifestation of the Way. The Way is what Virtue contains. Without the Way, Virtue would have no power. Without Virtue, the Way would have no appearance.”... Han Fei put it more simply: “Te is the Tao at work.”... Te is our entrance to the Tao. Te is what we cultivate. Lao-tzu’s Virtue, however, isn’t the virtue of adhering to a moral code but action that involves no moral code, no self, no other—no action.

These are the two poles around which the *Taoteching* turns: the Tao, the dark, the body, the essence, the Way; and Te, the light, the function, the spirit, Virtue. In terms of origin, the Tao comes first. In terms of practice, Te comes first. The dark gives the light a place to shine. The light allows us to see the dark. But too much light blinds. Lao-tzu saw people chasing the light and hastening their own destruction. He encouraged them to choose the dark instead of the light, less instead of more, weakness instead of strength, inaction instead of action. What could be simpler?

Going to the core in China is taught by Taoism, and managing the periphery is covered by Confucianism. Lao-Tzu, literally, the “Old Master,” was senior to Confucius, though almost nothing is known about him. As with all the ancient stalwarts like Buddha, Jesus and Mohammad, all the tales about them are almost certainly apocryphal. As Sam Hamill puts it, “In all likelihood, Lao Tzu compiled and edited the *Tao Te Ching* to a far, far greater extent than actually writing it. The text is full of folk sayings, lines from folk songs, and poetic and philosophical tidbits often surprisingly juxtaposed.” Sounds like a compilation for sure. There is no Ur-text—many variants exist, revealing the tinkering of

various editors, and Hamill goes on, “For a couple of centuries, the most famous book in the Chinese pantheon didn’t even have a title.” (xii) Yet good myths are quite satisfying, and apt to be vociferously defended by partisans.

One of our most cited translations is sure to be Red Pine’s, whose introduction begins:

The *Taoteching* is at heart a simple book. Written at the end of the sixth century B.C. by a man called Lao-tzu, it’s a vision of what our lives would be like if we were more like the dark, new moon.

Lao-tzu teaches us that the dark can always become light and contains within itself the potential for growth and long life, while the light can only become dark and brings with it decay and early death. Lao-tzu chose long life. Thus, he chose the dark.

Red Pine lists a number of moonlike qualities of the Tao to prove his point. The yin-yang symbol beloved of Taoists represents the two phases of the moon. Which highlights my discomfort with Red Pine’s opening idea. Darkness moves to light and light moves to darkness; they don’t terminate at their opposite, the opposite generates a new round of rotation. It just keeps oscillating. The I Ching makes this perfectly clear, with darkness leading to light and light leading to darkness. Our failing is to imagine that we can sit tight at one stage or another. Humans can imagine stasis—we tend to think statically—but life and reality is in continuous motion. Ideally it’s harmonious motion, but it certainly isn’t standing still. Our contemplation of the Tao is meant to get us moving, to break us out of static notions.

The ancients worshipped (or admired) the sun as the light- and life-giving Absolute Source, so it’s a subtle move that contemplatives later turned to the moon, with all its variability. In

Vedanta the moon symbolizes consciousness, for all the same reasons it appeals to Taoists. Above all, the moon's light is a reflection of the source, just as consciousness is a reflection of the core. We even use the term: we *reflect* on the meaning of life, on what it's all about. We perceive something and register it in our mind as an image, which is a kind of reflection. It is not the original. It only represents it.

While I was shopping for more translations, I discovered a fine new one (2018) by John Minford; the introduction is very promising. Minford clearly delineates the dichotomy between Taoism and Confucianism:

Broadly speaking, we may say that Confucianism as it evolved in subsequent centuries emphasized the need for order, respectful harmony within family and society, coded ritual, precise terminology, clearly delineated duty, and structured hierarchy in daily life. Taoism, on the other hand, emphasized inner freedom, meditation, and the Self-Cultivation of the individual, surrender to the spontaneous rhythms of nature, primordial intuition, and exploration of the mysteries of the human condition and the wonders of the cosmos, listening to the silent music of the Tao.

Deb assured us that these two paths or way were treated equally in China, though I maintained we have an obvious leaning in the West, if not elsewhere, as the former opens the door to totalitarianism and the latter is something of an antidote to it. At least we shouldn't blame Confucius for sins committed in his name. Humans are easily drawn in by the temptations of dominance. At any rate, Taoism is more a hippie revel than a powermonger's bible.

Heavy hitters Lao-tzu and Confucius are two more of the UFO offloads who arrived around 500 BCE, along with the Buddha, Mahavira and Moses. Quite a turning point of history!

Minford's favorite commentators are "those medieval Chinese hippies, the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove," and his favorite verse is the sixth, focusing on the divine feminine, which begins:

The Valley Spirit never Dies.
The Mystic Feminine,
The Gate of the Mystic Feminine
The Root of Heaven and Earth...

Ending his Introduction, he shares the comment on this by one of his own teachers, Magister Liu, making for a perfect ending of the evening:

The Valley Spirit
Exists for ever,
It is the Mother
Of All Marvels,
Gate of the Mystic Feminine,
Opening and closing
According to season,
It is the Root
Of the Primordial Wonder
Of Heaven and Earth,
Of spontaneous Motion and Stillness,
Of Calm.
Wherever this Spirit is,
There is the Tao.

Part II

Part II is dedicated to input from the greater class, those of you spread around the globe who aren't with us in the flesh. I suggest reading the verse of the next week, thinking about it a bit, and then writing a paragraph about your thoughts to send in to get published here. Late entries will easily fit in the next week's slot, as the Tao Te Ching is basically All One Subject.

Most of the readings will be a matter of a minute or two, as we may do several short verses together at times, so this will not gouge your time too much. Your help is solicited especially because there isn't going to be much for me to write. And you don't have to write much either! I just hope for some tidbits. It's the Way to go. Thank you in advance.