

10/29/19

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 1

In her footnote to the first verse (or chapter), Ursula LeGuin says something that others have also noted:

A satisfactory translation of this chapter is, I believe, perfectly impossible. It contains the book. I think of it as the Aleph, in Borges's story: if you see it rightly, it contains everything.

Red Pine quotes Te-Ch'ing: "Lao-tzu's philosophy is all here. The remaining five thousand words only expand on this first verse."

The "all" of the Tao is the same as the Absolute, the karu, brahman, and even the purnam—the plenum—of our closing chant. Less favored by us yet widely used are terms like god or lord. So what does Lao-Tzu have to say about it? Here's Stephen Mitchell's translation:

The tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

The unnamable is the eternally real.
Naming is the origin
of all particular things.

Free from desire, you realize the mystery.
Caught in desire, you see only the
manifestations.

Yet mystery and manifestations
arise from the same source.

This source is called darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gateway to all understanding.

Deb and I like the Gia-fu Feng translation best, though they're all good:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.

The named is the mother of ten thousand things.

Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.

Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.

These two spring from the same source but differ in name;

 this appears as darkness.

Darkness within darkness.

The gate to all mystery.

While we did a fair amount of simply meditating, we also spent some time analyzing the fine points of the various translations. Where several describe the Tao as eternal, others have immortal and constant, which strike me as inferior. Immortal being the opposite of mortal, it is a dualistic concept right out of the gate, and so is constant, which conjures up a shape or volume, a something, which is then opposed to nothing. Both are temporal, hinting at a time element. Eternal seems to more closely imply a non-condition, an abiding existence without a second possibility. Since it could be argued that it *does* have an opposite, along the lines of non-eternal, we can see how it is impossible to adequately describe the Tao, and so all translations inevitably fall short. In any case, the Tao must be eternal and not subject to decrease.

However we express it, a description will limit our thinking. Whenever you say the Tao or the Absolute you are making associations and limiting the dimensions. What is being indicated is much more than what your words are defining. This is the leap we can ideally make in meditation, in pondering the Tao, settling into it without descriptions. We humans have a tough time silencing our inner narrative, but it does get easier with practice.

What is revealed by stilling the urge to name and define is variously called mystery or marvel, darkness, even understanding. Moni thought of it as *wonder*: we should wonder about it and not try to pin it down. She spoke about how darkness is the beginning of all manifestation, and out of it all things evolved. We don't know where it is all coming from, it's just dark. We feel it only from the breath, from the sound: sounds, energy, naming, heat: all releases and then we name it. When we trace back we go into the darkness, which is beginningless and endless.

Deb agreed it all is a wonder, and as soon as we construct a story about it, we push the wonder away. Interestingly she had just received a dream from a friend that is an excellent illustration of the meaning of this verse, and even features Nitya, almost as though he wanted to pop in to our class. Here's her account:

My friend Jane called last week to tell me about a recent dream she had had, and she was wondering what it meant. Jane knew Nitya, not well but she knew of my closeness with him. In the dream she was in a room with many people and Nitya was there talking. Due to all the ambient noise Jane couldn't hear what he was saying and was frustrated by the busy-ness and noise and her inability to understand. Another close friend, Martha, was also there and neither of them could hear what Nitya was saying. Finally in frustration Jane went off to the side to sit. Nitya then came up to her and put a hand on her back, something, she said, that was very calming to the anxiety

she was feeling. Then he also put a small kitten at the base of her spine, all warm and kitten-ish. The kitten then reached up and began gently nibbling on Jane's ear lobes, very softly. She said she then felt a flood of deep calm and peace and sat there with it.

My response to Jane was that in the room with all the confusion and non-comprehension, it was like so much of life—a surface of words and distortion and anxiety. When she sat quietly and when Nitya came and put his hand on her back, and especially when the kitten nibbled her ear lobe (ears the organ of hearing), she was put in touch with the inner meaning and comprehension beyond the surface anxiety, the meaning of sound and words, not the particulars.

How's that for a visual representation of the verse?

Deb asked for our thoughts on the two categories arising from the same source. What are they? We didn't really answer, but I will now. They are becoming and being, physics and metaphysics, here called the nameable and unnameable, the desirable and the desireless. I suppose also yin and yang. I pointed out that just by naming these in words doesn't mean anything: we are making small icons in our mind to stand for vast concepts, which can only be appreciated by contemplation and a withholding of our pigeonholing tendencies.

I offered a psychological interpretation of the verse, which I believe accords with both Vedanta and neuroscience. We now know from fMRI observation that our brain/minds develop our entire outlook and perception at length with incredible intelligence, and then present it to waking consciousness in finished form, almost as a map. Without noticeable effort our awareness is focused on important features, sight and sound are synchronized, contradictions eliminated, just like we're watching a movie.

We could think of this inner genius as the Tao. It is beyond the access of our waking mind, though the wakeful is permeated by it. There is value in trusting and inviting this Tao to teach us: what it offers is variously called marvel, mystery, understanding, and so on. LeGuin simply calls it the hidden. It has to be hidden because if we enter it with our puny conscious awareness, it is co-opted into being much less than it really is. The humility of Taoism helps preserve its integrity. So it is in “darkness.” The light we see isn’t in the brain at all, by the way, it’s part of the readout supplied by the Tao.

Injecting the conscious mind into this vast invisible intelligence would be extremely disruptive, as there’s no way it could keep up with all that intensity. On a psychedelic trip you get a taste of it, and it’s overwhelming. You can’t function normally under that intensity. To listen to it you have to stop whatever you’re doing and go with the flow. Just let it take you. In order to sink into more of a rapport with the inner self we are instructed to stop naming and desiring. We go into mental darkness to enter the mysteries. I’m sure we all remember the Gita’s verse about this:

II.69) What is night for all creatures, the one of self-control keeps awake therein; wherein all creatures are wakeful, that is night for the sage-recluse who sees.

LeGuin makes an important point that is absent in all the other translations we have on hand, though undoubtedly implied. Instead of desire, she uses ‘wanting’:

So the unwanting soul
sees what’s hidden,
and the ever-wanting soul
sees only what it wants.

It's that "sees only what it wants" that stands out, where others just say "manifestation." It brings in the Vedantic perspective that, to quote Paul Simon in his song The Boxer, "A man sees what he wants to see and disregards the rest." It's automatic that if we want something, our inner mechanisms shape our outlook to aim for its achievement, and things considered irrelevant are ignored.

Implying we should take great care that our wants are healthy, at the very least. This is a challenge because we aren't even aware of most of our wants, only the ones where our awareness makes a difference, and we're surely not aware of what we are leaving out. We are essentially creating reality out of our limitations. This is a major thing to realize: the shape of our understanding shapes the world for us. If we're brave enough we can let it be vast.

Deb has realized we don't know what trajectory we are on, though we think we do. Only later in her life has she been able to look back and discern the patterns unfolding in her life. We should try to be open to these unseen forces. She might have added that the pressures of living are major distractions to our staying open.

Moni agreed we go through life without seeing how it is all coherently connected, but later, looking back, we can see it. It convinced her that nothing happens in our life without a plan.

I shared a couple of other valiant attempts to describe the indescribable. The Mandukya Upanishad is a classic, where 'lord' is used in the broadest possible sense:

6

This the lord of all, the all-knower;
this the inner negation factor;
This is the source of everything,
and the beginning and end of beings.

7

As not inwardly conscious, not outwardly conscious, as not filled with a knowing content, not conscious, not unconscious, unseen, non-predicable, ungraspable, bereft of quality, unthinkable, indeterminate, as the substance of the certitude of a unitive Self, as the calmer of the unmanifested, tranquil, numinous, nondual is the fourth limb considered to be. He is the Self; that is to be recognized.

The Gita is very close to this in its fifteenth chapter, where there is a manifested and an unmanifested Absolute, kind of yin-yang Absolutes, and yet an utterly transcendent Absolute beyond both. After reminding Arjuna he is seated in the hearts of all beings, Krishna, the Absolute continues:

16) There are two Persons in the world, the Changing and the Changeless; the Changing comprises all beings, and the mysteriously fixed is called the Changeless.

17) That Paramount Person, however, is another, called the Supreme Self, the eternal Lord, who, pervading the three worlds, sustains them.

18) Because I transcend the Changing and am even superior to the Changeless, therefore I am celebrated in the world and in the Veda as the Paramount Person.

19) He who, undeluded, thus knows Me, the Paramount Person—he, the all-knower, adores Me in all aspects, Arjuna.

20) Thus this most secret doctrine has been taught by Me; understanding this, one becomes wise, and one who has done with all works, O Sinless One.

Red Pine includes many comments from history with each verse, and here he tells us that Confucius says, “The Tao is what we can never leave. What we can leave isn’t the Tao.” This could cast light on religion. If you think of your god as better than someone else’s, as if there’s a choice, you aren’t conceiving of an absolute god or Tao. You’re standing up for a cheesy one. To be truly ultimate, there can’t be anything left out.

Prabu shared a quote along these lines from Walt Whitman’s Song of Myself: “Did you guess the celestial laws are yet to be work’d over and rectified?” We can discover what the laws make possible, but we aren’t creating them as we go. Prabu emphasized that this meant you are not in control of anything, despite what you think.

Prabu is currently watching a famous dialogue between Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell on the power of myth. Moyers asked, does flower have any meaning? Campbell answered, the flower is mysterious—which is much more than meaning.

Moni described the effect on mystery of desire and the impact of naming things. When you say Democrats and Republicans, or Syrians, Iraqis, Iranians, the very act of naming them activates our attachments. Just by hearing a name people can get angry, even if they don’t know anything about it. Instead, if you see beautiful shots of earth from space and you think about all the people on earth as inhabitants, then there is a mystery that unites us, that teaches us how to live on it without falling off.

Deb concurred that once we name a thing, emotional attachments surge up. I mused that Americans who know absolutely nothing about Iran and its people, for example, except the propaganda they’ve been basted in, are filled with hate and ready to wage war over it. Likewise, the name Trump works almost as well to get liberals upset. Yogis and Taoists are supposed to be resisting being led by fictions and unnecessary imaginings,

but we can catch ourselves falling for lures all the time, if we pay attention.

Toward the close we meditated for a goodly stretch, letting the inner mystery permeate our beings. Before the closing purnams, I assured those gathered that it's not easy to sink into ourselves in the way Lao-Tzu has suggested, but it is simple enough to accept that your own inner self is extremely intelligent. You don't have to know *how* it works, only that it *does*. Remember my favorite quote from neuroscientist David Eagleman: "If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you're the busiest, brightest thing on the planet." You can be confident that the Tao—whatever that may be—is working for you 24 hours a day, which should give you the courage to live well and do your best. Rest assured it's not going to stop because we're fumbling around, distracted in the wakeful. It's been going since before we were born, and it will never leave us. And it wants you to join it in harmony. *Aum tat sat.*

Part II

Beverley is an enthusiastic participant, from England, writing:

By now I have read verse 1 umpteen times and out of the blue a little haiku came to mind....

The Way is hidden
by a glass darkly;
and necessarily so.

She later sent another really fine interpretation via haiku:

The darkness is where
an inner light shines;
enabling understanding.

Beverley is really getting into the swing of things, and sent new versions of the first three, along with this:

I am immersed in the Tao Te Ching. I have just added the Ursula Le Guin one to Red Pine and Stephen Mitchell This last one is a gem of a book - beautiful to see and hold but almost impossible for me to read these days even with glasses on. I have a state of the art magnifying glass which helps.

I keep on writing different versions of the haikus. I remembered the rule for the lines yesterday which is 5/7/5. This meant redoing verse 1 and 2. My aim, for myself is to try and pinpoint the essence as it were. I am not sure whether they would mean much to others??. Especially mention of a dark moon. I got this from Red Pine and it appealed to me.. Anyway here's the latest versions. I did verse three a few hours ago before lunch and right now like it.

1

The Way is hidden
In the depths of the dark moon.
Where inner light shines

* * *

Dipika also joined us from India:

so many wonderful translations... I pulled out my own Tao Te Ching and found that it is translated by John C. H. Wu.
(Shambala)

I have attached a pic of the translation for you.

More than that am very excited to share another translator who lives in your back yard! (I think somewhere Oregon seems to draw free wheeling /thinking individuals)

He is Benjamin Hoff... who has written the Tao of Pooh.

Am not sure if you have the time to delve into another translator... but he would definitely approach it from a very diff angle.

I will attach a little something of his intro of Lao-tse.

Love n rgds
Dipika

Here's the Wu, which I agree is excellent:

Tao can be talked about, but not the Eternal Tao.
Names can be named, but not the Eternal Name.

As the origin of heaven-and-earth, it is nameless:
As "the Mother" of all things, it is nameable.

So, as ever hidden, we should look at its inner essence:
As always manifest, we should look at its outer aspects.

These two flow from the same source, though differently named;
And both are called mysteries.

The Mystery of mysteries is the Door of all essence.

Dips has sent only photos of pages, but the Tao of Pooh looks fascinating. I'll just quote one sentence, "A basic principle of Lao-tse's teaching was that this Way of the Universe could not be adequately described in words, and that it would be insulting both

to its unlimited power and to the intelligent human mind to attempt to do so. Still, its nature could be understood....”

Part III

Jean read the notes, despite their length, and included the following in her response:

Like Debbie and Moni, I can look back on my life and see patterns unfolding and how everything is coherently connected, like the classical "now through a glass darkly, but then shall I see face to face," but who knows, it could all also be a good example of "A man sees what he wants to see and disregards the rest."

The 5-7-5 rule for haiku is based on *Japanese* syllables, and nowadays, in English, it's just as accepted to ignore the traditional rules and write haiku in freeform. The distinguishing marks for a haiku are closeness to nature and the natural world, and also this (words from Michael Dylan Welch): The haiku “gains its energy by the intuitive or emotional leap that occurs between the poem's two parts. The art of haiku lies in creating exactly that gap in leaving something out and in dwelling in the cut that divides the haiku into its two energizing parts.”

* * *

Charles also sent a nice appreciation. He has trouble with spacing on his I pad, so please forgive that:

Wonderful.

Im listening in.

This morning before your class notes popped up I had been listening to the prelude to Wagner's Rhinegold, hearing of creation

of the world from water.you might take this music as a nonverbal contribution to the Tao Te Ching,chapter one.Life comes from water.creation of the world is always going on but we tell the story that it happened once upon a time.

Creation of the world is another way to approach the unapproachable,

Amnionic ,unconsciousness.The indescribable.what the indescribable might sound like to a fetal ear.

<https://youtu.be/cjkjF9OfMe0>