

2/18/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 10

The tenth verse is a compendium of meditation techniques of Taoist yoga, plainly showing its close affiliation with Indian wisdom. There are six premises and kind of chorus or refrain, which appears at other times in the Tao Te Ching. Once again we passed out the seven books and read out one principle at a time so we could compare the varying translations. Here are some of the best of each:

Titles: Techniques (LG) The Infant (Min)

1

Can you keep your soul in its body
hold fast to the one
and so learn to be whole? (LG)

Nourish Spirit,
Embrace the One,
Can you keep it
Ever present? (Min)

Can you coax your mind from its wandering
and keep to the original oneness? (Mit)

2

can you make your breath as soft as a baby's (P)

In concentrating your breath can you become as supple as a babe?
(L)

Attending fully and becoming supple,

Can you be as a newborn babe? (F)

3

Can you keep the deep water still and clear
so it reflects without blurring? (LG)

[Can you] clarify to perfection your own dark vision? (H)

Washing and cleansing the primal vision,
Can you be without stain? (F)

4

Can you love people and run things,
and do so by not doing? (LG)

Can you love people and lead them
without imposing your will? (Mit)

Can you serve with affection
and govern without action? (H)

5

Opening, closing the Gate of Heaven,
can you be like a bird with her nestlings? (LG)

Can you deal with the most vital matters
by letting events take their course? (Mit)

Opening and closing the gates of heaven,
Can you play the role of woman? (F)

6

Can you view the Four Quarters
With Utmost Clarity,

With No-Knowledge? (Min)

Can you step back from your own mind
and thus understand all things? (Mit)

When your discernment penetrates the four quarters
Are you capable of not knowing anything? (L)

Understanding and being open to all things,
Are you able to do nothing? (F)

7

To give birth, to nourish,
to bear and not to own,
to act and not lay claim,
to lead and not to rule:
this is mysterious power. (LG)

The Tao Begets and Nurtures,
The Tao gives Birth
But never Possesses.
The Taoist Acts
Without Attachment,
Leads but never takes charge.
This is mystic power. (Min)

...this is the supreme virtue. (Mit)

It gives them life and rears them.
It gives them life yet claims no possession;
It benefits them yet exacts no gratitude;
It is the steward yet exercises no authority.
Such is called the mysterious virtue. (L)

This is the Primal Virtue. (F)

Key:

F – Feng

H – Hamill

L – Lao

LG – LeGuin

Min – Minford

Mit – Mitchell

P – Pine

In her opening talk, Deb noted the play of opposites, the way Lao Tzu brings in a second option to what we ordinarily expect. Andy added that this was not to replace one with the other, but to have them both together as mutually balancing factors. The unexpected part is not an alternative, it's a broadening. Some of the sages note that this verse is an exposition of Taoist yoga, and Andy's description is exactly that too.

In his comments, Nitya calls this a very subtle and important meditation. The class noticed how the yoga dialectic was present or implied in all the exhortations, which are in the form of inviting questions. Andy pointed out how they each include an action and a restraint of action, which are meant to be synthesized, lived simultaneously.

Ordinarily we think of acting and holding back as separate gestures. In the first premise, we normally proceed by acting and interpreting our life, which means attending diligently to its seemingly disparate aspects, but here in Taoist meditation we are advised to always relate the various aspects to their underlying unity. Only by bringing them together in an inclusive context do we experience wholeness.

The next premise has a range of translations, none of which seemed to me to get quite to the point, since a translator has to adhere to the symbol used, and cannot reveal its meaning if it does not appear in the original. This second premise compares concentrating the breath in what amounts to Taoist pranayama to the point where it is as gentle and supple as a baby's breath. Two versions speak of bodily suppleness as the outcome. Unmentioned by anyone, yet of supreme importance, is mental suppleness, mental flexibility, which as Andy said is an outcome of intense focus on the breath in yoga. He also noted that holding to the breath without effort implies the same kind of two distinct yet complementary qualities.

Nancy synthesized them for us: "To have a soft breath, you have to have a supple mind."

Speaking of Taoist pranayama, Deb told us how the Chinese poets used to have towers built for them, and they would climb up to the top and roar to the four directions, blasting their voices and their poetry to anyone within range. Nothing gentle about that! Red Pine, in his search for the old poets and sages, found some of those towers still standing.

Throughout the evening, the second premise put me in mind of my early childhood, sitting in that blissful, undifferentiated state, aware and unaware together, knowing and yet not selecting specific aspects from the surroundings. Alert yet absorbed, not aware I was even breathing. Since we all spent a billion years or so of mind-time in that place, it is ever-present within our grounded self. A kind of letting go can restore it at any quiet-enough time.

Jan noticed how some of the translations deemphasize the body, leading the class to some reflections about how the body influences the mind and vice versa. The Chinese sages, especially those cited by Minford, use the singular term 'heart-and-mind' to bypass the duality. We read out all his citations, because they are profoundly beautiful—I highly recommend his book. For instance,

The River Master says, “To cleanse the Mystic Vision is to purify Heart-and-Mind, is to see with clarity, deep in the Dark Well of Mystery.” This relates to the third premise, for which Nitya once again brings in his venerable idea of “transparency of vision.”

The verse as a whole reminded Bill of his Yoga Shastra study with Nancy Y, where the last two lessons had to do with eliminating judgments and suppositions that the mind lays over its interactions with the world. Only then are you able to see the self clearly. He especially liked the concept of getting to the point where you take out the influences of the mind and clearly see the self, which is prominently advocated in the third premise.

The third image is the mind mirror, a Taoist classic for sure. How do you polish a mirror without a dualistic attitude?

Andy was much taken with the washing and cleansing of the mirror to obtain the primal vision. I suggested it is a most paradoxical technique, because any effort tends to dirty the mirror. Not-doing is required. I cautioned that becoming purer-than-thou is a delicious temptation for the ego to feel better than others, and an exalted ego is the beclouding factor we are being asked to minimize if not eliminate entirely: that what we are to polish away. In this you're not abandoning your soul, it is continuing to function; in fact minimizing the ego is allowing you the ability to have recourse to the oneness within that is the true source of expertise.

I feel that Ursula LeGuin comes closest to the intent with her analogy of an aquifer or a well, where any effort causes ripples that distort the reflection: “Can you keep the deep water still and clear so it reflects without blurring?”

This resonated with something I came up with for Gita IV.36:

Imagine you are gazing into a beautiful pond in a remote mountain wilderness. Fierce winds are agitating the surface so much that no reflection at all is visible. As you sit the winds

begin to die down. At first vague shapes appear, fuzzy and distorted, but they become clearer as the winds abate. When the wind is reduced to gentle puffs you can begin to see a breathtaking scene reflected in the water. Despite the ripples, you can make out the general picture of snow-capped mountains, meadows and trees. Just at the moment the pond becomes perfectly still, the image leaps into crystal clear focus, and all the details can be discerned. However, it's still upside down because it is just a reflection, albeit a very fascinating one.

All humans without exception are enchanted by such a lake, because their consciousness is a reflecting pool for the world, shifting from clear to cloudy to completely obscured and back again, depending on the winds.

At any time the true scene could be admired by merely raising our gaze above the pond and looking directly at it. The degree of agitation of the surface of the lake does not impede our looking in any way; in fact, in some respects we are more inclined to look up when there is no reflection than when there is an enchantingly clear one. But for some reason we have come to believe that only the reflection is real, and so it's the only legitimate place for us to direct our attention.

We have been cautioned elsewhere about “mirror polishing Zen,” where you are fixated on purifying yourself and it becomes an ego trip. Lao Tzu was already well aware of this, it seems. Being more or less pure is obviously a relative proposition. I've added some thoughts about mirroring, from my Gita commentary, in Part II.

We talked about the fourth premise extensively, as it's the most practical. How do you lead without pressuring your

followers, either pro or con? How do you care and yet not push? The literal words are about governing the people, a typical style of the period, likely because the scriptures were actually meant to advise the Emperor and others in power. We have to take it more personally nowadays, obviously. I asked rhetorically if anyone knew of any politicians who acted in any way like the Taoist, quietist model, and none of us did. All of modern governance is grounded in unrestrained, aggressive competition, and a quiet wise soul would never be noticed within the clash of wills. Too bad, eh? But we all influence our friends, loved ones, and associates, and here is where we can best utilize the advice, which is meant to restrain the ego and allow the deeper (darker) wisdom to issue forth as a nourishing fountain.

Deb thought of the people who are the most effective leaders, how they get people to share their own thoughts, and then let them work freely. Andy felt it was a great instruction for teachers, showing how to guide other people's own explorations. Andy well knows how impossible it is to entreat students to follow a fixed program (he taught at university level), so it's more about inspiring them to follow their own inclinations.

I have noticed how truly effective managers are able to use everyone's talents to accomplish what is intended with minimal pressure. People work best when they feel like they're appreciated and are contributing something meaningful themselves. In any case, I've found the more you try to do something with sheer effort, the less effective it becomes.

The Gate of Heaven is of course a vaginal reference, but the translators tiptoed around it, coming up with some nice euphemisms. In the stark dualism of Chinese thought, male is active and female passive, whereas in the modern context we are trying to unite these traits rather than draw a thick line between them. It was quite revolutionary in 500 BCE to advocate the so-called feminine virtues in a region where maleness ruled the roost

with an iron fist. The class loved LeGuin's image of a mother bird tending to her nestlings. She doesn't insist on her babies showing gratitude, and she doesn't feel put out by having to fly off in search for food every minute of her life. There's a loving aura hovering over the whole scene, and she's undemandingly making everything happen that needs to.

Deb stood up for a positive take on femininity, that it's more than just being passively dependent, it's being supple and vulnerable. It's all about the middle ground. It's the valley spirit we met in verse 6, per Hamill:

The Valley Spirit never dies,
and is called the Mysterious Female.

The gateway to the Mysterious Female
we call the root of creation.

On and on its energy flows,
inexhaustibly.

Nancy added a unique, just right interpretation: the gates of heaven are the beginning and end of life.

I thought the sixth premise was the easiest to grasp, since the more you know the less you feel that a definite outline encompasses you. Lao puts it well: "When your discernment penetrates the four quarters, are you capable of not knowing anything?" The four quarters are the four directions, in other words, every which way. When you discern the totality. Only if we have a miniscule self-image can we imagine we are fully accounted for. Great art, psychedelic journeying, loving friendship, serendipity, so many opportunities arise to see that what we believe is vanishingly insignificant compared to What Is. Expanding out of our pinched self-image is a blissful adventure.

All we have to do is resist the urge to pigeonhole the experience, to ally it with relativistic tribal prejudices.

Jan was reminded of the *shavasana*, the Corpse Pose, in her Hatha Yoga practice. She finishes her practice with it as a time of letting go, of sinking into a deeper unity. After her moderately vigorous Hatha workout, she is prepared to simply lie still without thinking or needing to act, and it feels really blissful, very nurturing. It allows all sorts of good feelings to come into her, without any effort at all.

The seventh is more a refrain than a premise, summing up the essence of Taoism, and variations of it appear throughout the book. The affirmation is that Nothing accomplishes infinitely more than Something. Despite popular prejudice, which underlines an egoistic approach to everything, an honest person might admit that while they are trying hard to get things done, the things get done by themselves, for the most part. All our growth and development is subconsciously, even metaphysically, driven. Most of our encounters arise of their own accord. Even when we plan things, the plan is a mere sketch that the Tao itself fills out. So why not kick back and relax a little? The Universe is rolling along just fine—we're not shoving it ahead, no matter what we may suppose. We're merely hitching a ride on Something Grand for the briefest of instants.

Red Pine quotes Wang Pi: "If we don't obstruct their source, things come into existence on their own. If we don't suppress their nature, things mature by themselves." This is excellent Taoist advice.

Our closing meditation included several readings from Minford, ending with a poem from the unpronounceable Xie Lingyun (385-433), whose "hiking excursions in the mountains were both a form of physical exertion and metaphors for Self-Cultivation, for Embracing the One."

*I packed provisions,
Took up my light staff,
And tramped the long and winding way
To my hidden abode...
Here I shall live in Peace
Hold Fast to the One,
Let Calm and Wisdom fuse.
From this day forth,
My Spirit will begin to heal.*

A good Way To Go for our conflicted time, as well. Aum.

Part II

Beverley's haikus were highly praised by all:

10a

Learn from the dark moon:
(pause) - and sense the shifting flow
of Life's energy .

10b

With your mind birth ideas,
with your heart be like a child
simultaneously

* * *

The Atlantic magazine recently published a history of the Pearl of Lao-Tzu, which if nothing else demonstrates how fantasy can upend reality and often does. It's reprinted here:

https://getpocket.com/explore/item/chasing-the-pearl-of-lao-tzu?utm_source=pocket-newtab

* * *

From my Gita chapter seven commentary, on mirrors, which finishes with an important quote from Nitya:

12) Even sattva, rajas and tamas—know those manifestations to be My own. I am not in them, but they are in Me.

When seers speak of truth, they mean something more than the factual truth of ordinary physical objects or the socially accepted norms of behavior and perception. It can be described as a state of perfect attunement with the present moment. The dichotomy between seer and scene is abolished, and they become one. Specific items and facts are irrelevant to this type of absolute truth.

When the individual reasserts the sense of separateness, truth becomes increasingly colored or conditioned in direct proportion to the schism. At best, with minimal distortion, there is an unbiased openness to the environment on its most subtle level. In this state, all input is taken for precisely what it is and not run through any interpretive process to determine its value to the percipient. It is easy to see how everyone and everything will be impacted, and to act in concert with the greatest possible good. Such a state, often compared to a clear and highly polished mirror accurately reflecting what falls upon it, is called sattvic.

Most of the time we digest data for its relevance to our personal condition. Our preferences and dislikes, hopes and expectations, all tinge the mirror with the colorations of our emotional states associated with them. A million psychological studies have been performed to demonstrate the surprising degree to which one's mental state affects perception. Such interpretations provide us the impulse to react in our own personal interest.

Because self-oriented (“selfish”) desires affect truth to a significant extent, this state, predominant in the transactional world, is often compared to a cracked mirror with colored glass. Images are seen with varying degrees of accuracy, and it takes a serious analysis to reconstruct the truth of events from the partial and distorted recording of it in such a mirror. This state is called rajasic.

Eventually a self-oriented person will become bogged down in their own feelings to such a degree that any outside input is irrelevant. Emotions and obsessive thoughts, usually heavy and depressive, completely eclipse the actual world around. Addicts provide classic examples, where no amount of logic or heartfelt appeal can break their fixation on their favorite substance. For instance, the above-mentioned psychological studies reveal eye-witnesses to be right in identifying a suspect less than one quarter of the time, statistically. Our mind is sometimes like a mirror painted black or coated with iron. This is the tamasic state.

Sattva, rajas and tamas are found in all people. The gunas, or modalities of nature as they are sometimes called, cycle and overlap. For instance, in the morning we might wake up calm and refreshed, and usually have a little quiet time before launching into the busyness of the day. Then we go to work and tend to the many chores our life demands of us, as our calmness gradually ebbs. At the end of the day we may “unwind” with some alcohol or television, and then close our wakeful minds down entirely in sleep, completing one cycle of sattva, rajas and tamas.

While many religious systems aim to “polish the mirror” of the mind to perfect its reflection of truth, the Upanishads aim for a unitive state that surpasses the duality of the gunas entirely: the perfect attunement mentioned above. The rishis believe that basking in this Zenlike state heals the defect of the mind acting as a mirror automatically. Furthermore, no amount of polishing and cleaning will convert a mirror image into an actual thing. Hence, the repeated admonition to seek the Absolute (“Me”) first and

foremost. Then you stop reflecting the Absolute and start *being* the Absolute.

The mirror of the gunas is the world, in which we strive to see our image. We typically look to others, our friends and relations, to tell us who we are. But they only know our exterior, and they are flawed by their own prejudices. Their description of us is bound to be faulty. We are the only ones privy to our inner self. Despite this fact, we are taught—and have a natural proclivity—to look outward for our ratification. Very early in life we abandon our self-confidence and begin to build an image based on what other people perceive about us. So, for instance, the tint of our skin or the size of our nose or our grades in school becomes a defining characteristic, instead of our inner worth. This is the primary tragedy of the human race at its present stage of development. We might have a chance to remain comfortable as who we are if there was only a little idiotic feedback, but the pressure is wholesale and goes on for our entire life. Plus, we play into it. By the time we reach what passes for adulthood, we have been mesmerized by tens of millions of false impressions from the mirrors around us. Our core is almost certain to be totally inaccessible to us. We wander in an amusement park hall of distorted mirrors. Our dissociation from ourselves is the stuff of nightmares.

The cure is not to clean the mirror. That would mean reforming our associates so they can give a perfect reflection of us. The very attempt breeds the spiritual ego, the desire to be seen by others as we wish them to see us. Many are full of guile here, and they go on to become top dog gurus, because they show people what they want to see. It's a performance, a sham. The real cure is to realize the mirror is always going to distort who we are, it cannot be prevented, and to instead turn and face ourselves directly. This is why some seekers prefer to withdraw from society, trying to escape from its ubiquitous mirrors. But such extreme

measures aren't necessary. Once we realize we are getting prejudiced feedback, we can start immediately to resurrect our inner self from its tomb. We can become our own best friend. We can take the inspiring examples of the great teachers of history (or next door) and raise ourselves up from the dead by our own efforts.

We will always care what others think of us, but it no longer has to define us. We alone know if we are true, good, honest; or false, bad and deceitful. Everyone else can only wonder, or accuse. We can be amused at how much of what other people see in us is their own projection, and we can stop projecting our expectations onto others. This allows us at least a chance to come to know people for who they truly are, and it gives them the leeway to liberate themselves if they are so inclined. This is yet another way we can contribute to the welfare of the world. It is a win-win, a double affirmation, because by liberating ourselves we offer that possibility to others, and vice versa. As our world becomes less imprisoning, our own liberation becomes easier of attainment. It is even nearer than the mirror surrounding us.

Thus Yoga calls on us to transcend the dominating influence of Nature and its modalities to re-attain our innate freedom. This is not "mirror polishing Zen" or any incremental, puzzle-solving kind of path, but a total and absolute break with conditioned modes of thought. As such it is truly radical, going to the root of our mediocrity and hacking it off.

Guru Nitya puts this idea succinctly in his *Wonder Journey with a Wandering Guru*:

Do not look into the social mirror and then think that is what you are. You should have an inner estimation of yourself and the value of what you are doing. Of course, it is possible to be self-deluded and make mistaken judgments. In order to avoid that, you need a confidante who is detached. If you learn to strike a root in the

universal order, that gives you stability.... When you sit firm on your own truthfulness, your own trust, you can face any encounter.

Part III

From Charles Erickson:

I remember Nataraja Guru saying that women are naturally dialectical, but men have to learn.