

3/10/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 13

The worldwide virus scare is having an impact even on our class. We may have to suspend it for a while. Fortunately this time, Susan (cautious, not ill) was able to listen in by phone, her face beaming up at us from the middle of the rug. It's some mystery called Facetime, though for her it was more likely Foot-and-Ankle time. I could foresee the day when Deb and I have a class with 7 or 10 Smartphones sitting in front of us, with a different face in each one. The only thing we'll miss is the interaction of each one's electromagnetic field, a grievous loss. Yet we'll still be able to carry on, amidst the storm.

This time reminds me of the plot of *The War of the Worlds*, by HG Wells, one of my favorite books as a kid. In place of Martians we have corporate greed backed by militarist authoritarianism out to destroy the planet. Remember how it ends?

Okay, on to the verse. The Minford translation struck me as superb and unequalled, but I'll paraphrase most of it, as all are similar. Red Pine tells us that the first two lines are a quote from a more ancient source, and the rest is Lao Tzu's explication of what they mean. Combining all the versions, these equate two dialectical pairs as equal:

Success—Failure

Favor—Disgrace

and

Honor—Fear, Distress, Disaster, Calamity

Self-respect—Suffering

High Rank—Great Trouble

Lao Tzu shows how these pairs inevitably arise in sequence, one proceeding from the other, and knowing this, instead of desiring or fearing them in isolation, leads to a happy Taoist conclusion. For instance:

Whosoever Cherishes
All-under-Heaven
As Self
Can take charge of
All-under-Heaven
Whosoever Loves
All-under-Heaven
As Self
Can be Trusted with
All-under-Heaven (Min)

and

Surrender yourself humbly; then you can be trusted to care for all things.

Love the world as your own self; then you can truly care for all things (F)

Loa Tzu's solution is to not be concerned with loss or gain, and to accept that if you are in a body, suffering is assured. We cannot live without undergoing suffering as an integral part of existence.

Minford clues us in on the special relevance of this kind of advice for the ancients, which we can easily translate to our current predicaments, political and social. He writes:

The Cycle of Favor and Disgrace was an inescapable feature of life, in a society where every educated individual sat the

examinations to enter the public service and climb the ladder of officialdom. The Taoist, through Seclusion and Self-Cultivation in the Tao, through Cultivation of No-Self, aspired to Attain Freedom from this Cycle, from the vicissitudes of public life.

One of the less fortunate outcomes of this attitude is that only those in utter ignorance of the cyclic nature of reality seek office nowadays. The US presently boasts an Executive (well-named) Branch in an environment where personal glory lasts only a matter of weeks, after which more heads roll. The banished are consoled in their disgrace by plenty of filthy lucre and like-minded companionship, but what an ugly existence! All fools are invited to pitch in, if you're willing to suffer the consequences.

Minford's translation has Favor perturbing from above and Disgrace arising from below, which is endemic to hierarchy. Many of the sages cited by Pine note this directional element. Wang Chen sums it up how it works:

People who are favored are honored. And because they are honored, they act proud. And because they act proud, they are hated. And because they are hated, they are disgraced. Hence, sages consider success as well as failure to be a warning.

Despite the obvious political aptness, I suggested we should, as always, take the advice as pertaining to our personal orientations, and we found it to be profoundly relevant. We need to know how to apply this to our everyday lives.

Jan drily asked if in those days public life wasn't only for men? *Raw-ther!* We paid homage to the traditional devaluing of women, and how movement toward equality has barely begun in many circles. Still, we had just celebrated International Women's

Day last Sunday—what more do you want? Happily, this advice is freely available to all who want it, whatever their gender, etc.

We first of all agreed it was a huge relief in our lives to not being pressed to enter public service during our school years, to be instead invited to find our bliss and pursue it, I suppose with the same downside as mentioned above. Political life has rapidly become unbelievably debased in the absence of idealists. Many good people were sabotaged by the slogan of the early 1970s, “The Revolution is over—we won!” Turned out to be a bit premature. I took it positively, as an exhortation to live as an enlightened person, and not wait for the society to change to permit it, but there surely was substantial complacency generated as well.

Our motivation was a lot like what the nineteenth century sage Huang Yuan-Chi preached, as quoted by Pine:

We all possess something good and noble that we don't have to seek outside ourselves, something that the glory of power and position cannot compare with. People need only start with this and cultivate this without letting up.

Now that the US is instituting a kind of perverse corporate monarchy, spiritual groups will be marginalized even from the minimal role they once played in democratic societies. No matter, Yuan-Chi's is the advice we are striving to internalize, as has always been, in good times and bad.

Andy immediately resonated with the powerful first phrase, “We all possess something good and noble that we don't have to seek outside ourselves.” It turns out we've all been somehow convinced there is nothing inside us, that what we need is something extraordinary we have to conquer and assimilate. Andy movingly shared how the revolutionary Taoist concept leads to endless discovery: we don't realize any merely good and noble thing. It's not a fixed place or goal, yet it deepens us as we look

toward it.

I noted how by doing so we substitute an inclusive image for all the externalities that bring us to disaster. If we care too much what others think of us, we wind up trading our self-possession for seeking the honor of others. We are barely even aware of how much that impacts us. For instance, even though I'm locally famous for noticing that as a child I was playing the piano to impress my family, and I surrendered that a long time ago to concentrate on a more direct relationship with music, I just recently realized that it has remained active on a subconscious level, in a somewhat altered form, but embodying the same externality. I now suppose it's my intense desire to share beautiful music with people, to try to give something spectacular that moves me to my core to others. While I have done all the groundwork about superficially rectifying that situation, it's still there, undermining my ability. Natural musicians play by heart, and somehow their ego consciousness doesn't interfere, and that marks one very significant difference between a great artist and an adequate amateur.

This got Andy thinking about Japanese puppetry, Bunraku (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bunraku>). Each often life-sized puppet is operated by three people clad in black but still visible, only occasionally with their faces unveiled. The black-clad figures are like the subconscious, inner mover, the inner good and noble impulses. With all that expertise coming from the darkness, the nuanced gestures of the puppets can be incredibly subtle. At the same time there is an absolute neutrality by the puppeteer, no expression, complete stillness. The juxtaposition makes the emotion conveyed even more powerful. Andy could see it isn't quite the same as where the ego is getting in the way, but it is close. At least it highlights the dichotomy of our personas.

Jan is a "middle child" (famous for arbitration and peacemaking), and wanted us to include that you can be aware of

people's perceptions of you without being egotistical at all: it's called being sensitive and aware. She admitted there are things we want recognition for, but didn't feel it was in any way negative.

That's right, of course. Just because we're studying Taoism doesn't mean you have to be a Taoist—just take what resonates with you and leave the rest. It broadens the understanding, is all. Yet you let outside opinion infringe less on your authenticity if you are aware of it—awareness of our subtle motivations is essential to any spiritual attitude, in my estimation. What other people think has been very important to all of us, ever since we were babies. How might that impact our freedom or genuineness of expression?

The simplistic response is to reject all social conventions, as if that will automatically fix the problem, but it's still basing what you do on what other people are demanding. Rejection and acceptance are both dependent on an imaginary norm. Yoga advocates relief from those demands by synthesizing both to stand in freedom. In that way you neutralize, balance, find a place in between actively soliciting honor or equally retreating into disgrace or distancing.

In my background, we hippies hated and rejected the status quo, which was causing worldwide devastation for profit, so we retreated willingly into disgrace. We did not take into account that all humans were all in same dilemma of trying to balance our own needs and planet's needs with the needs of society, so it was often solely a polarizing behavior. Of course, just going along wouldn't have accomplished anything either. Bringing about peace and justice for all is not a simple problem....

The thing is, if we're working hard for approval because once upon a time our parents didn't approve of us, maybe it isn't going to do much good. Our friends are mostly prepared to accept us as we are, and we could cut ourselves some slack by realizing we are already okay. For some of us, it frees up our psychic energy for more creative endeavors.

In *Meditations on the Way*, Nitya asks the classic question, “which is more painful—physical death or moral death?” By moral death he meant being rejected by society for your independence, as in the oath of sannyasins. It is a very big deal for a renunciate. Physical death comes later, but moral, social death bites in the present, while we’re alive.

Susan contributed her thoughtful take on “We all possess something good and noble that we don’t have to seek outside ourselves” via email, and you can read it in Part II. You can also email your own thoughts any time—remember how that used to happen?

There was some perplexity about the “not having a body” part of the verse, as it seems we can only avoid suffering by not having one. Wang P’ang clarifies it in Pine:

It isn’t a matter of having no body but of guarding the source of life. Only those who refuse to trade themselves for something external are fit to receive the kingdom.

Andy found “guarding the source of life” very evocative. He told us, “I meet people who are impressive from the standpoint in that they have no reserve in their commitment to deep values, people who are pure hearted, no calculation. Guarding the source of life has deep genuineness. It’s an intriguing phrase, implying an effortless commitment to truth, goodness, and authenticity.”

Jan mused about our own lives, what aspects seem to be a source of life and how we go about protecting them. Sometimes we sense it in someone else’s life, too. We might not understand it, but we can still know it is a source of light for them. We grapple with trying to accept and honor that more, and even find ways to promote or nurture it.

I added that this verse is saying that because you are careful about your own body, you can be trusted with the world’s body.

We have our source in Tao that is the source of all we are, and all everyone else is also. This is the way of committing to a social situation without any hierarchical distortions. The Taoist preserves that connection, defending it from being relinquished to external forces, knowing that that seed will have a unique shape in others.

Susan has been following a Sam Harris meditation program lately, which has led her to think of consciousness in a spatial way. He asks, in observing the senses, what do we notice coming into our consciousness? How do you notice yourself, Susan, coming into consciousness? It makes what she once took for granted much harder to figure out. Now she's wondering What is Susan? Who am I? Are my conditionings part of me or not?

I mentioned that Ramana Maharshi's technique, such as it was, was to keep asking Who am I? As you do it, your assumptions begin to look arbitrary and false, and you begin to realize the spaciousness of not clinging to fixed notions about who you might be. We started out in life striving to define ourselves, but why stop there? Striving to undefine ourselves allows us to partially reclaim the vastness of our early existence.

I wondered if the virus pandemic would give all of us a good chance to live at home alone for a period, not having to worry about our social behaviors, our social anxiety. How will we be with no one looking over our shoulder? We won't have to carry that burden, but can we even set it down? I admitted that for me, shrugging off the influence of what I imagine to be other people's opinions of me is a central theme in spiritual life. At least taking a break is a worthwhile thought experiment.

For our closing meditation, we had the perfect prompt: Arthur Waley's quote of Master Guan, in Minford:

Throw open the gates, bide in silence, and the Radiance of Spirit shall come in and make its home.

The silence we bide in must include all those anxieties, worries, and certitudes about what the Emperor thinks of us. Otherwise the radiance remains outside, patiently waiting for us to drop our guard. In company with our dear, supportive, nonjudgmental friends, we sank into a blissful, relaxed reverie together.

Part II

Beverley's wrote, about her haiku project:

I puzzled over this one for a few days and nothing felt right. then suddenly while I had preparing breakfast the verse arrived.. I dropped everything and hurriedly got a pen and paper and wrote it down quickly before it escaped. I'll be interested to see what the Class make of it. sent with loveBeverley

13

worldly ambition
for power and wealth endanger
both body and soul.

I came across the well known Confucius saying, 'Life is very simple but we insist on making it complicated', and realised that it makes a haiku with a small change. It seems to sum up the gist of the Tao Te Ching verses.

Life is so simple,
but we insist on making
it complicated.

* * *

Susan, our virtual notetaker, sent this this morning:

I looked at the notes again and remembered that one of the main reasons I brought up that bit about meditation was because of that thing you read at the beginning of class, which Andy quoted as:

We all possess something good and noble that we don't have to seek outside ourselves

I feel as though I am really seeking this lately. Well, for the last 20 years. I didn't even know this was a thing until I started studying Vedanta. Until then, I looked at myself entirely through others impressions of me. Even as I write this, there is that little (conditioned) voice inside saying, don't be selfish, don't get so self-absorbed. But I suppose it's actually about taking the body seriously. Taking it seriously so that I can go beyond in many senses of that word.

I turned to Ursula LeGuin's 12 just now before I got to 13 and this last part of 12 is just right here:

So the wise soul
watches with the inner
not the outward eye,
letting that go,
keeping this.

I am finding this study pretty cosmic. Thank you.

* * *

I shared a few Gita verses that evince the same neutral spirit as verse 13:

VI.7) To one of conquered Self, who rests in peace, the Supreme is in a state of neutral balance in heat-cold, happiness-suffering, honor-disgrace.

XII. 18, 19) He who is the same to foe and friend, and also in honor and dishonor, who is the same in cold and heat, in pleasure and pain, and who is free from attachment,
to whom censure and praise are equal, who is silent (in manner), content with whatever happens to come, having no fixed abode, mentally constant—such a man of devotion is dear to Me.

XIV 23-25) He who, seated as a neutral, is not moved by the modalities of nature, realizing that they operate in rotation, who, standing apart, is unmoved,
the same in pain and pleasure, at rest in himself, to whom a clod of earth, a stone and gold are alike, firm in attitude alike to loved and unloved, who regards his being blamed or praised equally,
the same in honor and disgrace, taking no sides as between friends or foes, abandoning all initiation of works—he is said to have transcended the modalities of nature.