

3/31/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 14

A milestone of sorts was reached last night: our first meeting via internet, after almost 42 years of sitting together in one room. The Zoom program was reasonably functional, though with our poor internet it stretched the definition of reasonably. (Harmony, frustrated with our service in the 24th largest city in the US, sought an estimate of the cost of improved internet, and was told \$12,000, so we're sticking with what we've got.) We were able to carry on, with Harmony and Dylan joining us in person in the apartment over the garage where Nitya used to stay, and where we held the first 20 years or so of the classes, until we outgrew the space.

The setup on the computer resembled the old Hollywood Squares TV show, where second-shelf celebrities with a keen sense of humor were stacked vertically in a 3 x 3 grid. Perhaps we are the Bollywood Squares, or maybe the Golly-Would? Squares. In my youth, being called a Square was one of the worst insults imaginable, meaning you were un-hip, not "with it," in Beatnik terms. But times change.

The 14th verse is a lovely Taoist version of neti-neti, with some clever nuances. Here's a composite:

Looking and not seeing it,
we call it invisible;
listening and not hearing it,
we call it inaudible;
reaching and not touching it,
we call it ethereal. (H)

These three
Merge into the One
They form

The Ineffable Whole
Of the Tao. (Min)

From above it is not bright;
From below it is not dark;
An unbroken thread beyond description. (F)

It returns to nothingness.
The form of the formless,
The image of the imageless,
It is called indefinable and beyond imagination. (F)

Approach it and there is no beginning;
follow it and there is no end. (Mit)

Holding fast to the old Way,
we can live in the present.
Mindful of the ancient beginnings,
we hold the thread of the Tao. (LG)

In case you've forgotten the Key:

F – Feng

H – Hamill

L – Lao

LG – LeGuin

Min – Minford

Mit – Mitchell

P – Pine

We took turns reading a version to get the hang of the new format, which should serve well until we can resume the old normal pattern. Curiously, the situation illustrated the verse in an

odd way, almost an inversion of it: because we could see and hear each other, it seemed like we were all together, and yet the extra “vibe” of presence, of electromagnetic fields interpenetrating, not to mention hugs, was absent. It showed the degree to which we are mentally dependent on sensory input, and our gullibility has replaced direct contact quite thoroughly. I guess that’s the wave of the future, not only of the present: to become farther and farther removed from what were once the human qualities and needs. It’s rather hard for some of us ancients who remember a less technological world to let it go.

This was compensated significantly by the lingering vibe of Nitya’s presence in the room and the many years of class meetings here. It’s now my place of hermitage as well, a beautiful retreat dedicated to meditation on and writing about things that matter. There is a ghost of everyone here, almost as real as the teleprompter.

Whenever he stayed with us, Nitya had his bed in the corner and would sit on it to interact with a steady stream of visitors and well-wishers, who got the chairs and floor. You could claim it’s our imagination, but the spot still tingles for us who remember those glorious times.

Speaking of connections, the concept of the thread appears twice in the verse, and Deb began our discussion reminding us that the Sanskrit *sutra*—meaning verse or scripture—is the English *thread*. (The English word *suture* is a direct descendent of *sutra*, maybe because it ties up loose ends.) Deb said that the guiding principle of philosophy and insight is a thread, a thread in this case that is meaningful yet not touchable.

Jan was also taken by the thread idea, how it is like the binding strand, how multiple threads are woven together, creating changes. She read out Magister Liu’s translation, cited in Minford: “the Ancient Beginning that Binds.”

I cautioned that the binding of the thread does not have to produce bondage, it is what ties everything together. The thread is the crucial factor allowing all this—the ten thousand things—to be connected, so that each aspect has a relationship to the rest. Without it there is no meaning. The verse starts with an affirmation of nothingness, but that nothingness is the thread of continuity itself.

Commenting on the thread of the Tao, Nitya cites the Gita VII.7, with Krishna speaking as the Absolute: “In Me all this is strung as a classified series of precious beads on a string.” The string also comes from the same word, sutra. (I guess the sutra has to be a bit stronger than a thread to hold up the whole universe.) Darsanamala is an elaboration of this idea, and I’ll include an excerpt about it from my Introduction to Nitya’s exegesis in Part II.

Andy mused how in a few of the translations the first lines got him thinking how our failure to grasp the Tao results in our calling it something. It reminded him of the Mandukya Upanishad, the turiya verse where the absolute is ungraspable, presented as a series of negations.

Actually, Mandukya mantra 7 counterbalances its negations to cancel each other out, and even adds a couple of positives. I’ve included Nataraja Guru’s assessment along with Hume’s famous translation, in Part III. Nitya’s is very good and more readable:

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.

It's easy to see the close affinity with this verse, and to recall the flow of wisdom in ancient days from India to China and then to Japan, and the fabulous philosophical variations it spawned, so grounded in the places it took root.

Andy's idea of not grasping the Tao being a "failure" surprised me, but it comes from Pine's conclusion about the first three imperceptibles: "Three failed means to knowledge I weave into one." (I much prefer LeGuin's: "Triply undifferentiated/ it merges into oneness.") I don't like to think of our natural condition as a failure, it's just how things work. It's quite a successful system. I think the point is that no specification actually identifies the Tao, yet we function through naming and conceiving. We should accept that we are unable to pin it down. Where we go wrong is when we name it and then presume we know it.

Here is where religious terrorism has its gestation: "This is what God is. If you don't agree you don't deserve to live." Realizing we can't perfectly define the Absolute (I'd say the Mandukya is the best attempt anywhere, and this Tao verse is right up there with it) changes everything. We become accepting of the many subtleties in how people conceive of the inconceivable, instead of consigning them to eternal doom and offering to supply it ourselves when God fails to deliver....

From my comments on Gita XVIII.55:

The Absolute is always spoken of as being incomprehensible, but we naturally proceed on the basis of what we comprehend. Krishna assures us that the devoted, attentive supplicant will be able to sort out the important gap between what is grasped and what is ungraspable. Confusion here has led many to disaster, when the analogue is mistaken for the reality. The truly devoted and humble disciple realizes that any conception of the Absolute falls subtly short of being the Absolute, and so

refrains from total abandonment to a false image prior to complete absorption. And while they may conceptualize it as their favorite image, they acknowledge that others can and will have different images and be just as devout as they are.

Deb summed up nicely, that we are compelled to give the mystery a name precisely because we don't understand. She cited Merton, approximately: People call us by our name and then we think we know who we are.

I was struck while listening to the reading out of the seven versions we're using, how there is an up and down (without qualities) within the Tao, and later in the verse a front and back (also without qualities). Meditating on them, it produced an enlarged 3D sense of my being. I think we have a tendency as modern educated people to conceive of everything, including ourselves, in 2D terms, and I wondered how it might affect us.

I asked Andy if he found anything like that when he painted. He responded that the quaternion coordinates seem to be universal, and they give him a cosmological orientation, but he never felt constrained to two dimensions in his work. At least he doesn't find that working on a two-dimensional image affects his sense of himself in three-dimensional space, unless he's relating to what he's done *symbolically*.

He has been thinking about this in relation to the human body, however. We have a gravity that is pulling us toward the earth, and we have the association of light from above and dark from below. The front part of us seems to be going somewhere into the future, and the back seems to be lagging behind. Probably because our eyes are in the front. In his meditations he has been trying to dissolve this body identity, but he's found we have an intense identification with our physical form. (Maybe it's fortunate we can't dissolve ourselves just by thinking....)

I suspect our young athletes are more alive in 3D than most people, but they were too busy meditating to weigh in.

Bill was eager to move on to the end of the sutra. He was drawn to Mitchell's: "just realize where you come from." Most of the other translations were that we should be with the Tao or remember the Tao. The common thread of all that is that we are coming back to the Tao, getting back to the source.

There is some variety in the last two lines. LeGuin ends with "Mindful of the ancient beginnings, we hold the thread of the Tao." Pine has, somewhat baffling in its literalism, "Discover the ancient maiden/this is the thread of the Way." I especially like Hamill's "Discovering how things have always been/ brings one into harmony with the Way."

Deb mused that the ending is getting back to the Tao after all those grasping instincts that don't work. It's true, and yet I wanted to point out that with the dialectical perfection of the verse, the Tao is ungraspable and yet you are admonished to hold on to it. How do you do that? Bill conceded its indescribable situation, going back to that source beyond the indescribable. I still think you should learn how to hold on without grasping. It's critical spiritual advice.

We next read Nitya's Prelude, a poetic description of the water cycle, beginning with a trickle out of the snowfields of the Himalayas, gaining size and momentum in its journey to the sea, ultimately evaporating and returning as clouds to the mountains, where it falls again as snow. Deb felt it was like what Bill was saying about the purport of Mitchell's ending. Nitya had once upon a time given the downward half of this evocation as a prompt for Fred, Tom and me, the Boys from Planet Earth, to musically improvise on, and it was one of our greatest moments, bringing it to life with guitar, bass and piano.

We closed with more of the thread to contemplate, with Deb reading out *The Way It Is*, by Oregon's own William Stafford:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.

Part II

Beverley wrote:

I liked verse 14 very much and found it endlessly stimulating to read the various versions and commentaries again and again. I think Ursula Le Guin's one is the best this time and feel I can hardly improve on her concluding 4 lines myself. Still – I've had a go and here is my effort to get to the heart of verse 14.

Master the present.
Understand the source of things:
the wise subtle Tao.

It has no substance
so hold on with your spirit
and it will give you support.

* * *

This is what I read out from my Introduction to Darsanamala, on the thread:

Darsanamala means 'A Garland of Visions'. The garland likens consciousness to a series of ten flowers strung together on a golden thread, with a precious jewel pendant in the center. Each flower is a unitive vision, and is described with the utmost economy in ten succinct and evocative verses pregnant with implications.

Indeed, the image of the garland to epitomize consciousness by itself conveys a number of significant ideas. First, it is a decorative article of dress that is put on and taken off. The clear implication is that the essential Being wears consciousness as a kind of ornament for a time, and when it is removed the wearer remains unchanged. This allusion is in keeping with the Guru's absolutist perspective, and is typical of the vivid poetic imagery which infuses his writings. The perfection of the image is such that we can go on extracting meaning upon meaning: a garland is often given as a gift from one to another, just as we cannot claim to be the creators of consciousness, but rather receive it from the Unknown. It often marks a significant event or celebration, just as our life has an overriding importance to us, and deserves to be celebrated. Each stage of our conscious growth is so like a flower: complex, symmetrically beautiful, complete in itself; and its tinting reminds us of the coloration of our psyche with moods and biases. The golden thread that runs through the whole is an important image, implying an invisible continuity linking the stages of life into a meaningful progression. Even the shape of the garland as it hangs around the neck is significant. The first darsana begins high up on the shoulder with the very origins of consciousness, which may be taken either in general terms or in relation to the birth of the individual. This distinction is in any case minimized in Vedanta. There is a progressive development as the garland is

traced in a graceful curve of increasing objectification and subjectification down to the pendant jewel at the center of the neck: the supreme teaching and keynote of the whole, *tat eva sat*, “That alone exists.”

Following this high point of awareness, as it were, the garland ascends toward the other shoulder. During this second half of the work, consciousness is progressively turning inwards again. Narayana Guru’s highest ideal does not, therefore, come at the close of the work proper, but slightly before the end, in the fifth verse of Nirvana Darsana:

Having burned everything with the fire of wisdom,
aiming the good of the world,
doing action according to injunction,
the knower of brahman remains firm in brahman.

In fulfillment of methodological requirements in keeping with the Indian tradition of a complete presentation, Narayana Guru then goes on to include the progressive extinction of consciousness in the absolute ground.

While it is possible that the garland, after it disappears behind the wearer’s back, forms a complete loop to the first shoulder again, any such speculations are scrupulously avoided by both Narayana Guru and Guru Nitya. Their concern is a total presentation of consciousness, and no claims are made based on faith. Speculation on life after death, or any type of speculation, is placed by them in this work as belonging to a psychological reality based on the superimposition of personal values on universal values, and as such it is only a hindrance to the reduction and integration process that receives primacy here.

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This is actually a reprint of Part III from almost 5 years ago, Mandukya 7 (remember?). I meant to include it here only for the Hume translation, but the other excerpts and quotations are also worth revisiting:

One of many of my unfinished articles is about the Absolute, close kin to the turiya. I'll share a few of the quotations I collected for it, beginning with Nataraja Guru's excerpt that includes Hume's translation of the seventh mantra, well worth comparing to Nitya's present version:

From Ch. 6 of *Vedanta Revalued and Restated*, a definition of turiya or atman:

The notion of the Absolute has somehow to transcend all paradox, and even vestiges suggestive of it. This is an utterly necessary position, epistemologically speaking. Ultimate truth cannot be thought of as having a rival or be ranged against itself. That Vedanta does recognize this ultimate absolutist status for its Reality, Truth or Value is evident from the seventh verse of the *Mandukya Upanishad*, which reads:

Not inwardly cognitive (*anta-prajna*), not outwardly cognitive (*bahih-prajna*), not both-wise cognitive (*ubhayatah-prajna*), not a cognition mass (*prajnana-ghana*) not cognitive (*prajna*), not non-cognitive (*a-vyavaharya*) ungraspable (*a-graha*), having no distinctive mark (*a-lakshana*), non-thinkable (*a-chintya*), that cannot be designated (*a-vyapadesha*), the essence of the assurance of which is the state of being one with the Self (*ekatma-pratyaya-sara*) the cessation of development (*prapamcjobashama*), tranquil (*shanta*), benign (*shiva*), without a second (*a-dvaita*)—such they think is the fourth. He is the Self (*Atman*). He should be discerned.

Here, except that there is an implied equation between the Self and the notion of the Absolute and that it is calm, benign and non-dual in content, no specific positive qualities are attributed to it. Vedanta attains to a status as near to that of the *shunya-vada* of the Buddhist philosophy of the Middle Way (*Madhyamika*) as possible here. The other extreme position may be represented by the so-called dualists, such as Madhva.

An absolute can only be given in an intuition, while all the rest has to do with analysis.

Henri Bergson

Eddington: To gain an understanding of the Absolute it is necessary to approach it through the relative. The Absolute may be defined as a relative which is always the same no matter what it is relative to. (*Space, Time and Gravity*, Harpers, p. 82)

Zeus with his thunderbolt represents the great god on high as understood by the Greeks. Indra of the Indian context is likewise a chief of the gods of heaven. There is something quantitative still persisting in them in the attributes applied to them which implies horizontal values.

The Absolute is not a quantity with any magnitude, but rather a pure quality without magnitude. Even the hypostatic glory that we attribute to God in praising Him is not consistent with the image of the Absolute as understood in the purer non-theological context of contemplative Self-realization. Neither can we say, however, that the Absolute is without greatness. The “greatness” (as we have translated the words *mahas* here) is to be understood as a glory that participates more in the vertical aspect of values rather than in the horizontal. (Nataraja Guru, *Commentary on One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction*, p.75)

Nitya, in *Living the Science of Harmonious Union*:

Every religion has a central axiomatic principle on which the morality of that religion is established. In the Upanishads the axiomatic teaching is given as the unity of the one Self that is in the heart of all. It is this realization that leads us to both ahimsa and satya. Then we will have no private world. When we look inward we will see the entire infinitude of consciousness as our truth, the only Absolute. We will not see another there. When we look outward, from the blade of grass under our feet to the far off invisible galaxies also, they are all one. So there is nothing to be privately desired or grabbed. Then the truth itself stabilizes us in our belongingness with all. It is this vision of oneness that cancels out all pairs of dualities in a realized person's life. The basic nature of life is the knowledge of a single existence and that existence is not—even for a second—different from the total value or ananda of life. Thus the yogi is a person of open morality whose religion is a dynamic religion and not a static, structured one. (249-50)

Letter to Josie, August 31, 1977, now in *Love and Blessings*:

A relativist is one who lives always calculating the future and wondering how he or she can manipulate the mind of a friend, or a friend of a friend of a relative, to get some vested interest gratified in the name of a good that was intended to be done in the past or a promise of a great good that he or she will someday be able to do. Concealing two-thirds of the truth, painting one-sixteenth of the facts and leaving all inconvenient things to be merely promised, the relativist always wants to use others.

The absolutist is one who sits firmly on the conviction that there is a functional truth that runs all through life, sometimes obscure, sometimes pronounced and sometimes hard to detect. He or she knows that the best way to be in tune with this benevolent,

protective, friendly, hidden truth of life is never to belittle its glory, power, intelligence, beauty and absolute goodness. The Absolute is neither particular nor general; it is neither an idea nor a fact. It is the living meaning, the unalloyed value that insures the worthwhileness of life.