

4/7/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 15

Let me just summarize this long and complex verse, featuring some thought-provoking twists in the various translations. It starts off honoring the ancient sages, who we cannot know directly, even in Lao Tzu's time, but only as exemplifying certain qualities. (key under v 14) They:

focused on the indiscernible (P)

penetrated the dark (P, Min)

were subtle, spiritual, mysterious, penetrating (LG, H, F)

unfathomable (LG, Mit, F)

too profound to be known (L, Min)

Because of this, we can only know them through their characteristics:

Like fording a river in winter, they were careful (H, P, Mit), hesitant (Min), watchful (F), tentative (L), cautious (LG). Mitchell has them crossing an iced-over stream, which to me is very different. You are waiting for the ice to give way, so it's more an external focus. Wading an ice-cold river, you are careful to keep your balance and step in the best places, so it's an internal effort, feeling your way via the less slippery spots.

Like being worried about the neighbors, they were cautious (P, H), apprehensive (Min), alert (LG, Mit, F), hesitant (L), fearful (L), respectful (H). Mitchell and Feng add an interesting twist. Instead of neighbors, Mitchell has the super-intense "alert as a warrior in enemy territory." Feng similarly has with "alert, like men aware of danger." It may be they translated a different version of the verse

from the rest. There are a number of them. LeGuin used several for her work.

This worry about the neighbors is a very Taoist trait. We've been advocating fearlessness in Vedanta, of not being inhibited by social pressures. That's only possible in a non-lethal culture. If you can be executed for standing out, it's more important to pay attention to what others might be thinking about you.

Like a guest, they were reserved (P), courteous, (F, Mit), cautious (Min), polite (H, LG), formal (L), quiet (LG). A guest doesn't own where they are staying; it's rather like being an Indian sannyasin, where you move on every couple of days, to minimize possessiveness.

Like melting ice, they were yielding (F, H), elusive (LG), falling apart (L—odd), melting (Min), fluid (Mit), ephemeral (P). This image didn't "light up" for me. Now I wonder if it means they soften their rigidity, becoming like the puddle mentioned later.

Like uncarved wood, they were simple (P, Min, H, F), shapable (Mit), blank (LG), thick (L—again odd). Like the Tao, uncarved wood can become anything. It emanates potential. Once it has been shaped, it is fixed, and cannot become anything else, only tweaked.

Like valleys, they were vacant or empty (L, LG), open (H, P), receptive (Mit), broad, (Min). Feng has hollow, like caves. LeGuin notes that valley and uncut wood images recur throughout the work.

Like the amorphous puddle left by melting ice, they were murky (P, Min, L), muddy (H, L, F), opaque (F). Mitchell has them clear as a glass of water, though he adds the mud later, and LeGuin has them mysterious, like troubled water. Su Ch'e (quoted in Pine)

says, “A puddle reminds us that we are no different from anything else.”

The mudpuddle image segues into holding still so the mud settles out, leaving clear water. Pine quotes Wang Pi: “By means of tranquility, the murky becomes clear.” In his endnote, Mitchell informs us that the mud “stands for concepts, judgments, desires, expectations—everything that obscures and narrows reality.”

Mitchell asks if we have the patience to wait long enough for the mud to settle, and makes the reason explicit: “Can you remain unmoving/ till the right action arises by itself?” In other words, can we defer to our inner wisdom, grounded in the Tao, instead of barging ahead with our snap judgments, or even our well-founded reasoning? This is certainly a far cry from Vedanta, where reasoning is used to intentionally reduce the mud and to assist in keeping still.

Thoughtful Karen was really touched by this idea. Loa has it as: “Who can be at rest and yet, stirring, slowly come to life?” Minford: “Who can Attain Calm/ And live in Gentle Motion?” Feng, after waiting quietly for the mud to settle, asks “Who can remain still until the moment of action?” Everyone more or less gets this point across. There is a stilling and then action. It isn’t just one or the other, it’s a cyclic movement. After action, stillness is again necessary. Partial stillness only agitates the mud more.

The conclusion of the verse is that the Taoist seer is humble, self-abnegating, worn and incomplete. They are not fulfilled, and don’t want to be, so they don’t need to be renewed. Final goal achievement is death, in a cyclic universe. It’s important to keep moving along.

What, really, does *worn*, used by both Minford and Lao, mean? In the Lao, the Taoist is explicitly worn like a shoe. In the Minford, my listening made it seem like the sage is worn by events

that are not disregarded. As in, engaged with. Worn, but not worn out, because the wear and tear doesn't affect them. Hence no need for renewal.

Nitya has a lovely take on the series of images, which you can read in Part II.

Deb started the discussion off by noting that Lao Tzu is not saying the ancient sages were smart or thoughtful or anything, what they are is left very open and unspecified, like a blank piece of wood or a deep valley. Bill added how he liked that their wisdom was unfathomable, a word used in three translations and enthusiastically picked up on by Beverley in her haiku.

Deb underlined that right action arises by itself—it's not that you do it, but more you just let it happen. That led us to talk about the value of settling down our agitation to make room for a peaceful and comprehensive vision.

Susan shared a lovely example. Though she lives a reasonably secluded lifestyle, in the first weeks of shelter in place she felt a lot of anxiety and even dread. Now she is getting used to the constraints and is psychically slowing down, settling in, beginning to appreciate the trees with their spring blooms, feeling inspired by the peace and quiet around her.

The whole planet is quieter now. We've all shared Arundhati Roy's recent essay in The Financial Times, *The pandemic is a portal*. <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca> . It concludes that the current disaster is a golden opportunity to disavow the past and begin the world anew in meaningful ways. The suffering currently compounded daily by unregulated capitalism managed by psychopaths and sociopaths, on top of an already devastating disease, makes a wise choice almost mandatory. The mud is being stirred madly. Who will have the patience and the resilience to let it settle out before becoming

frenzied about what-to-do next in the Brave New World? It's an open question if ever there was one.

Karen felt that all through our lives we are continually being stirred up and then calming down again. By now, we've had a lot of practice. Bill added that it was incumbent on us to settle down and wait for the right action to carry us, rather than taking it upon ourselves to make decisions. Like Susan, he has spent a lot of time staring at his cherry blossoms. (The flowering cherries are spectacular this year in Oregon, and he lives on a beautiful property.) The stillness reminded Susan and Deb of a favorite quote from Franz Kafka:

It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet.

The image of an unshaped block of wood reminded Deb that Bill himself has been a woodcarver. He told us he was saving nice chunks from his woodpile to carve during his retirement. With a Zenlike attitude, he told us he allows the wood to show him how it should be carved. If you wait and silently observe, soon you begin to see lines inviting you to get to work. When you look at what you do that way, action comes out of your apprehension of the wood's potential. Essentially, the wood tells you what it wants to become.

This is quite unlike a local Northwest US phenomenon, where commercially-minded folk carve up logs with a chainsaw, to make salable bear and beaver sculptures for the less-discriminating. They aren't listening to the wood at all—couldn't hear it if they were, thanks to the roar of the saw.

Nancy, chuckling, said that to her the unaltered wood was fine already, just as it is. To her, some of the most beautiful objects

are the simplest.

Andy threw in a pun: you have to be settled to see that.

We closed with a meditation on a verse from Merton's Chuang Tzu, on Wholeness, which must have been inspired by this verse of the Tao Te Ching. It even includes the keyword of the verse, "unfathomable." (What's *unfathomable* in Chinese?) Here's a fragment for your delectation, speaking of the true man of Tao:

When he is beyond form and semblance,
Beyond "this" and "that,"
Where is the comparison
With another object?
Where is the conflict?
What can stand in his way?

He will rest in his eternal place
Which is no-place.
He will be hidden
In his own unfathomable secret.
His nature sinks to its root
In the One.
His vitality, his power
Hide in secret Tao.

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

Wise masters of old,
preferring seclusion, chose
quiet, hidden lives.

Later their lives seemed
unfathomable, so they
thought of metaphors.

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In *Meditations on the Way*, Nitya showed top form in linking the various images to his guru. The first three examples are from Lao's description of the ancient sages:

Guru [Nitya] said that when he heard this verse, what came to his mind was Nataraja Guru. The images aptly fit his nature and his way of life:

Minutely subtle: Every morning and evening I used to sit with him and read out of some book at prayer time. Where the book was ancient or modern, scientific or mystical, he always saw a meaning which nobody else saw. He had a subtle skill of breaking up word meanings so as to sweep aside the conventional meanings. The effect was as if the clouds had been pushed away, and the sun itself had become visible.

Mysteriously comprehending: He had a grand vision which was at once clear and mysterious. Within this overall vision, somehow everything which came to his attention became organically related.

Too profound to be known: Sometimes I gained certain insights into Guru, and I thought I knew him. Then after a few days a whole new level of the same facet would open up, and I said to myself, "Oh, I thought I knew him, but now only I see so much more." After twenty years with him, I discovered that I was still improving my understanding of his ways and his words. They were

that profound. Now it is after thirty years, and he is no longer physically present, but I still carry with me numerous open gestalts regarding him, which I find very intriguing, which I am still studying, and about which I am learning fresh aspects.

Tentative, as if fording a river in winter: I always found with him that I had to modify what I once knew. This made me more tentative the next time. He himself was difficult to approach or cross, like a river in winter, for one never knew where the obstacles might be and where the undercurrent might come through.

Hesitant, as if in fear: Once when I was with him in Bihar, I told him that the Governor was my good friend and that he would welcome us to his home and arrange widely attended lectures for Guru to give. Guru's response was, "Uncle me no uncles, because God is my uncle. Prize me no prize, because death is my prize."

He used to avoid honor as if he were afraid of it. He would be very shy before a crowd when sitting with other "luminaries and pundits." He did not want any limelight. Yet when he had to face a crowd alone, he could become very bold and call a spade a spade.

Murky...: Ah yes! Every week in the Gurukula he would stir up so much trouble that everyone there felt so confused and foolish that they wanted to just run away from the place. Then again he would allow things to settle down for a while. Everybody would attain a new level of clarity. And then he would stir things up again.

In summing up, Guru Nitya said that even when you describe all this, still you have only seen very little of the sage. His reality is the reality of the Absolute. In one sense the Absolute can be said to be full. Yet in another sense it has been aptly described as an ocean into which all the rivers are spilling from all sides, and yet it can still receive many more.

