

4/14/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 16

Both Minford and LeGuin title the verse Return or Returning to the Root. (The rest don't use titles.) The Root, which is the Tao, is the fulcrum of the verse. Su Ch'e, cited in Pine, describes how we all arise from our true nature and return to it, just as plants arise from their roots and return to them, or waves rise from water and return to it. Stillness is found by returning to your nature, but not through mere suppression of thoughts and activity. Su Ch'e concludes, "Only what returns to its nature becomes still and enduring, while what does not return to its nature is at the mercy of others and cannot escape." Without being well grounded, we will always be at the mercy of those who want to inflict their will on us.

I read out The Pivot, from Merton's Chuang Tzu, brilliantly describing dialectic thinking in relation to the Tao, which among its other talents is the root of Stillness:

THE PIVOT

Tao is obscured when men understand only one of a pair of opposites, or concentrate only on a partial aspect of being. Then clear expression also becomes muddled by mere word-play, affirming this one aspect and denying all the rest.

Hence the wrangling of Confucians and Mohists; each denies what the other affirms, and affirms what the other denies. What use is this struggle to set up "No" against "Yes," and "Yes" against "No"? Better to abandon this hopeless effort and seek true light!

After giving some fabulous examples, Chuang Tzu concludes:

[The wise man] sees that on both sides of every argument there is both right and wrong. He also sees that in the end they are reducible to the same thing, once they are related to the pivot of Tao.

When the wise man grasps this pivot, he is in the center of the circle, and there he stands while “Yes” and “No” pursue each other around the circumference. The pivot of Tao passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge. He who grasps the pivot is at the still-point from which all movements and oppositions can be seen in their right relationship. Hence he sees the limitless possibilities of both “Yes” and “No.” Abandoning all thought of imposing a limit or taking sides, he rests in direct intuition. Therefore I said: “Better to abandon disputation and seek the true light!”

This type of advice is often mistaken as a blanket condemnation of thinking, which tends to lead to stagnation and closed-mindedness. Its real aim is to forego clinging to a particular limited ideology, not to cease cerebral functioning. So much of our thinking is a kind of semi-desperate grasping, trying to give substance to the nothingness of appearances, and that is a snare and a delusion.

In his endnotes, Mitchell downplays the intemperate denigration of the intellect, pointing out that “emptying your mind” doesn’t mean we should suppress our thoughts, but only step back from our self-conscious fixation on them. Our minds should be as open as a mirror, reflecting but not retaining images.

Deb began the discussion highlighting the importance of this “stepping back,” made vivid for her by struggling to get the Zoom program to work despite getting a lesson from her son-in-law Dylan. She was drawn into a Bad Mood. Computers can really get our goat when they fail to do what we want, usually because of some trivial misconnection. Honestly, the Zoom class is adequate in some respects, but the loss of intimate contact, the conversation

of reality to a screen with lots of oddly amplified noises and feedbacks, and the time delay due to third-class internet, make a return to normal devoutly to be wished. There are better ways to have our egos called on the carpet.

In sympathy, Jan read out the opening of the Minford translation, which she found very consoling:

Attain Utmost Emptiness,
Purest Calm.
The Myriad Things arise.
I watch their Return,
Each thing in the World's Profusion
Returning to its Root,
Its True Life-Destiny.
The return to Root is
Calm.

The world with its pandemic is anything but calm these days! Jan spoke about our beautiful springtime, and how she's seeing things happening of their own accord in the natural world. She finds it beautiful and comforting that life goes on undaunted by all the human commotion.

It's surely much harder to benefit from a valuable philosophy when things are unrooted. I have noticed how in the early stages of the pandemic, we have solved more by not doing anything than by all the furiously developing programs meant to counteract the disease. Many of these will have their role to play eventually, but for now the stopping of human activity has had a nearly instant healing effect on the entire planet. The not-doing, the return to the root, has been crucial.

The verse extols the value of returning to the root after arising as part of the manifest world. By establishing a consistent root-connection, the Tao is achieved through a telescoping series

of exceptional qualities. It is most interesting to compare the final sequence in the various translations:

Hamill – Not knowing leads to eternal disaster, but an all-embracing mind leads to impartiality, then nobility, then heaven, and ultimately the Tao.

Pine – Not knowing is to suffer in vain; knowing how to endure is to yield, which is to be impartial, which is to be the ruler, which is heaven, which is the Way.

Lao – “Woe unto him who innovates without knowing the constant.” Knowledge of the constant leads to impartiality, to kingliness, to heaven, to the Way.

LeGuin – Without knowledge of what endures there is ruin, disorder. With it there is wisdom, which is to be openhearted, magnanimous, regal, blessed, following the Tao, the way that endures forever.

Mitchell – If you don’t attain the source, you stumble in confusion and sorrow. When you realize where you come from, you become tolerant, disinterested, amused, kindhearted as a grandmother, dignified as a king, immersed in the wonder of the Tao.

Minford – Without constancy: delusions and calamity. Constancy is acceptance, which is noble, which is whole, which is one with the enduring Tao.

Feng – Not knowing constancy brings disaster. Knowing constancy, the mind is open, thus you will be openhearted, so you will act royally, so you will attain the divine, and thus be one with the Tao.

The series begins with constancy or enduring. I prefer the former, as to endure leans more to the time element, also implying a bit more of a struggle. Constancy means you are consistent because of being grounded in the Eternal Tao, so there is less effort involved. Call it quibbling if you wish.

The grounding makes you impartial, the prerequisite, if you will, of all the rest of the excellent qualities listed.

Andy liked the way Mitchell posits the benefits of the root as depending on “when you realize where you come from.” It makes it close-to-home and easily obtainable. It’s your native place. He admitted he tends to “fly off the handle” when watching the news, and this is a nice antidote.

Deb remarked that Heaven has its fulcrum, which is the same as a pivot: the Valley Spirit, the dark gate leading to that mystical valley, and that’s where our roots are.

Mitchell uniquely includes you become “amused,” from this perspective. Wouldn’t it be better to find the prattling subterfuge of politicians amusing rather than upsetting? Wouldn’t it inoculate us from being made ill by their unforgivable rants? I drew the parallel with Nitya’s perennial invocation of wonder: amusement and wonder are closely related, after all. I recently reread the early part of *That Alone* and was struck at how much it was about wonder. The first chapter directs us to a life of wonder, including this:

In the process of our sophistication we have lost our natural innocence, our capacity to stand in awe and wonder. We have to cultivate that sense of wonder once again....

You have done away with all your sense of wonder through acts of analysis and labeling. After having filled the pigeonholes of your mind with hoarded labels, you think you have become wise. But these labels are blocks which only

increase your blindness. You have become devoid of the sense of the numinous. If you say “God” and there is no feeling in you, if you say “Absolute” and you don’t become overwhelmed, be sure you have no idea of God or the Absolute. You need to rehabilitate your numinous essence.

The instruction directs us not to withdrawal, but to heightened engagement and appreciation of our existence. You become so engaged that you go all the way to the root, deep beyond the surface details, and the more you do, the more you appreciate the wonder of it all. If that doesn’t amuse you, I can’t imagine what would. The Viking Boat ride at the country fair?

The references to rulers and nobility are typical of Chinese scriptures. The sages may have felt they should respect those types so they could keep their heads on their shoulders. Or perhaps they were hoping to educate them away from their normal barbarian behaviors. For us, Feng’s “acting royally,” makes more sense: act from a sense of already having it all, of not being needy. Generous. LeGuin’s “magnanimous and regal” is good; noble (Minford) and dignified (Mitchell) are also concepts we ordinary mortals can use.

I felt that the aim of this kingliness was more akin to what a leader is like in a small community, where everyone is in touch with each other. Modern rulers have little contact beyond propaganda with their subjects, but Lao Tzu must have meant someone like Nitya, a leader in touch with those close by. We students of his always had recourse to Nitya’s advice, and we sought it because it was invariably sensible and good, bringing in facets we hadn’t thought of ourselves yet. Anyone can become that kind of ruler, where ruling is essentially a byproduct of intelligently getting along in a society.

This inspired Andy to bring up what became the most important idea of the class. He recalled how Nitya would adopt a position that was the opposite of the one he knew someone held, as

a way of destabilizing their fixed views of things. I asked him if he kept his cool when this happened to him, and Andy felt he had, but it was still a point of marvel for him. He gave the example of how for years he was thinking that there was such a thing as sacred art and that all other kinds of art were nonsense. Then he was with Nitya in a modern art museum and he was exclaiming over all the paintings, not just the sacred ones. Nitya didn't have any line between sacred and non-sacred—all quality art was sacred to him. The example led Andy to change his attitude.

Opposition was actually an intense guru-technique meant to get a rise out of the recipient, and as Bill said, Nitya suffered the sting of that from Nataraja Guru to an extreme degree none of the rest of us were subjected to. It was central to Nataraja Guru's style.

I had some examples I wanted to share, but the class went in another direction. I've added a good one in Part II. You might also recall from a class not too long ago how I mentioned that Indians didn't have saying "thank you" as part of their culture—it was a Western practice some had learned, but was not Indian. A few folks were horrified. Their reaction could have been used to examine the influence of their ego and taste a different view, or it could have been be a reason to hold all the harder to their preferred behavior. Happily, Prabu was on hand, and he could tell everyone how saying thank you was indeed something he only learned when he came to the US. It's a cultural thing, and it simply wasn't part of life in rural Tamilnadu. That didn't mean people there were rude: they are far less rude than Americans, on the whole. Isn't it funny that rude cultures are the ones that have more rules of politeness? Mainly in hopes politeness will take hold one day, I guess. It reminds me of Gandhi's line when asked what his opinion of Western civilization was—he thought it was a good idea, and someone should try it.

Confronting an opposite stance is a way to for us to work on resolving our reactivity, and doing so is central to this course in the

Tao, in fact. It's precisely the things we believe are good that our ego clings to the most—spiritual people are always giving up their faults willingly, aren't they? Anyway, you don't even have to surrender your favorite notions, but why not use your gut reactions to notice your attachments? That's when they become visible. Just pretending you don't have attachments doesn't make them go away. If it did, we wouldn't need gurus *or* therapists.

Andy put this in a nice, nonthreatening way: it's a question of pausing in a polarized interaction, just pausing. Of course it's much easier if you're already a calm, steady person.... Simply pausing becomes harder the more attached you are.

Deb suggested that because of this, when we have a fixed opinion on someone else, or the state of the world, we need to think of what is the opposite, and what combines them. How do you step outside yourself to see the opposite? She loved Chuang Tzu's demonstration of the way opposites are absolutely related to each other. If we can go to the invisible root, we can see how the polarities are not as crucial as we might have imagined.

Bill liked how in the verse the 10,000 things arise and fall back to stillness. They run their course and then go back, naturally. That works fine for the spiritually-inclined, otherwise that return to the root happens at death, which some of us are too impatient to wait for. We want to check out the root *before* we die.

Deb is reading Richard Power's woodsy novel *The Overstory*, and just learned that every bit of the forest is dependent on the nurse logs (really nursery logs), which are dead tree trunks that the young plants use as their growing medium. Meaning death is truly essential to the life of the forest.

One last point of interest in this verse is to note that divinity is a lesser state than the Tao, just as Krishna distinguishes himself in numerous ways from the gods in the Bhagavad Gita, for instance in X.2:

Neither the hosts of the gods, nor the great sages know My origin; for I am indeed in every way the source of the gods and the great sages.

LeGuin's important footnote reads:

To those who will not admit morality without a deity to validate it, or spirituality of which man is not the measure, the firmness of Lao Tzu's morality and the sweetness of his spiritual counsel must seem incomprehensible, or illegitimate, or very troubling indeed.

Sweet. We closed with a meditation on another marvelous poetic exegesis in the Minford, by Magister Liu, part of which reads:

From the Emptiness
Of Non-Being,
The Mystic Pearl
Crystallizes
In effortless Transformation,
Seen no with Eyes
But with Spirit,
In Inner Silence.

With the return to the Primal, to the Root, to where Non-Being and Being are One again, the World's Hurly-Burly grows quiet.

With the flick of a button on our computers, we were all home in a flash!

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

16

Rooted in nature
be still. and grow - flourish - die,
synchronized with Tao

* * *

Nitya liked one line from the Lao, in his reflections:

The key idea here is “Woe unto him who innovates without knowing the constant.” Knowing the constant is called discrimination.

More:

Apart from the gross actualities of our daily life and the stream of thoughts and reveries with which we are continually occupied, there is an undercurrent running through our life which, like the depth of a river, is not at all affected by the ripples, waves, whirlpools and momentary calm of the surface. Most of us live very much at the surface of our consciousness. Swept along by our urges of each moment, we never know the constant which remains ever at the root of our life.

Our life's destiny is not different from our life's source, just as a seed's destiny is to again become a seed, contained within its own fruit. It is possible to know or discriminate this root aspect only by being it. When one can remain identified with this beingness, one's life gains a consistency and substantiality which is uninterrupted and undisturbed by the surface fluctuations of that life. One who knows this, knows that “Truth is Being.” That alone

is real.... There is a glorious profound depth into which one can sink and remain submerged in the eternal happiness of that beingness.

Elsewhere Narayana Guru describes this experience as the rising of 10,000 suns all at once in the sky of one's own consciousness. Similarly, in the 100th verse of *Atmopadesa Satakam* the Guru concludes, "I am neither this nor that nor all the possible interpretations of this and that. Rather I am pure existence, pure consciousness, and immortal bliss. Without becoming caught up in all the countless dialectical pairs of horizontal factors, such as being and non-being, one should gently, gently sink into one's own vertical depth where aum (the Logos, the Word, or seed and destiny of all) alone exists."

One does not just remain there dead to the world. Rather one comes back to one's life, and from that vision of the totality of being, one's actions take on a new dimension of impartiality. One does not do any injustice to anyone. Because one is no longer swayed by one's individual urges nor blinded by partiality, one knows where to place each person in the total scheme. Every action one performs and every word one speaks takes into consideration the happiness of each as well as the cumulative well-being of all, from which one does not exclude one's happiness.

A life which does not have this broad-based constancy running through its entirety, giving it stability, meaning and direction, but rather is occupied with the urges and promptings of each moment, is something very pathetic indeed. (58-9)

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Here's one of my best examples of the Guru using opposition to highlight my ego, making it glaringly visible to me. You might remember it from the Darsanamala Class Notes of 7/18/17, on Jnana Darsana verse 3:

My other example might be familiar to a few of you. It demonstrates that the ego is more willing to give up its acknowledged faults than its items of pride. I am a lifelong pacifist, having consciously adopted a childish version of ahimsa around age 8, and having had many reinforcing experiences over my lifetime. I was and am deeply committed to it, and feel sure that with all my faults, at least I am kind and considerate to others of all species. I believe that true civilization won't arrive until all weaponry is put away for good.

Foolishly and naïvely, in 1971 at the first Portland Gurukula I asked Nitya to teach me as a guru. Was I ever in for a series of surprises!

Possibly the most intense event of two solid months of soul-shattering intensity might sound trivial enough, but to me at the time it was devastating. When a member of the Portland Gurukula had personal questions we would make a date with Nitya in his room for a private talk. I had been quite severely battered (fish 'n' chips, anyone?) for some time, and couldn't understand when my well-meaning attitude didn't cut the mustard with him. Among other things he had recently thrown me out of his *Integrated Science of the Absolute* class as being too abysmally stupid. Well yes, I had some pride in my intelligence, which had been meticulously measured and fawned over in schools practically my entire life. Still, I could give that up, as my new spiritual orientation was absurdly anti-intellectual (which is another story). In any case, I went in to defend my position with Nitya and we got into an explosive argument. He just would not cede me an inch of consideration. I became amazingly upset, pleading my case as a sincere disciple who loved him profoundly and was willing to do anything he asked. At the culmination he blasted me with a thunderous look and shouted, "You're a liar! You are going to go out and get a gun and come back and shoot me!"

The accusation was so shocking to me that I felt as if I'd been shot in the heart myself. Only decades later did I realize that he was hitting me exactly where my ego's pride smugly resided. My commitment to non-hurting was zealously guarded in the "this part of me's okay" area of the psyche. I had imagined Nitya and I would be teaming up as allies against my weaknesses, and my strengths were already in the bank, making me a worthy person. Rotten old me, worthy at last. It felt nice to have some good qualities. Too bad they were being unjustly viewed as ego projections and one of Siva's demolition agents was in the vicinity and closing fast.

The bottom line is I had no idea of how attached I was to my ego pose, and how clever it was at deflecting assaults on its dominance. It was willing to be party to a polite charade, so long as a true realignment was never undertaken. Yet I *had* asked for it, and the Guru was going to give me what I'd asked for. Whoa! I wrestled with the ensuing pain for at least five years.

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An account of the same incident with a different takeaway appears in the audio book, *Coming Back to Ourselves*:

Fairly early in our relationship when I went in to talk to the guru—and we had some arguments, some intense words—he said “Well, you're a dangerous person. I think you're just going to go out and get a gun and come in here and shoot me!” I was just horrified at how unfair and how wrong that was. It shocked me to the depth of my soul. It was totally wrong. And yet, here was this person who I totally respected, was brilliant, insightful fellow, he was accusing me of something I was sure I had nothing of. Of course we know that everyone has violent tendencies and anger and harshness somewhere repressed inside themselves.

So this was forcing me to dig down and admit to that. I didn't want to admit to it and I didn't feel it. My persona was totally oriented toward peace, love and kindness, but again, that was part of my mask. By attacking me right where I thought I was unattackable, unassailable, he enlarged my sense of self outside of my persona, my mask. And, not just by himself, I mean I had to, I had to really.... I'd have to say I had several years of intense pain and self-doubt over the work we were doing.