

4/21/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 17

According to Red Pine, it's likely that 17 and 18 were once a single verse. They are clearly related, but both are very powerful and most relevant to the present, so we will examine them separately.

The Minford title is: We Did It Ourselves! LeGuin's: Acting Simply. Mitchell calls it "One of several chapters that are as relevant to child-rearing as to government." I'd add, to self-development.

One of the few, yet substantive, differences between Vedanta and Taoism is the more hierarchical bent of the latter. This verse baldly spells out four grades of value in Rulers, listed from the top down:

The highest masters are so subtle as to be nearly invisible, beyond Knowledge (Min), a shadowy presence (L) Hardly known (LG, H, Mit, F)

The next grade are loved or revered, and praised (nearly all), known and admired (LG)

The next lowest are feared (nearly all), merely respected (H)

The worst are despised (P, L G, H, Mit, F) reviled (Min), those with whom the people take liberties (L). Minford quotes The River Master: "When an Inferior Ruler lacks Good Faith, subjects in their turn deceive their Ruler and are devious." No need to look far for that, eh?

Pine quotes Lu His-Sheng on the whole group: "The virtuous lords of ancient times initiated no actions and left no traces. Hence, the people knew they were there and that was all. When their

virtue diminished, they ruled with kindness and justice, and the people loved and praised them. When their kindness and justice no longer controlled people's hearts, they governed with laws and punishments, and the people feared them. When the laws and punishments no longer controlled people's minds, they acted with force and deceit, and the people despised them."

Several lemmas are derived from this in the rest of the verse. First that without trust there is no trust (Mit, Min, F, LG) or no sufficiency (H); without honesty there is dishonesty (P) without faith there is no faith (L).

Pine quotes Sung Ch'ang-Hsing: "When trust disappears, chaos appears," and Huang Yuan-Chi: "Among the arts we cultivate, the most subtle of all is honesty, which is the beginning and end of cultivation. When we embrace the truth, the world enjoys peace. When we turn our backs on the truth, the world suffers." From ancient times "this has never varied." It's still in force. It became uncomfortably obvious as we read these out that Lao Tzu was accurately predicting the mafioso type leaders of the twenty-first century, with his bottom tier. Or maybe he still needed Dante to complete the picture.

The last point, whence the Minford title, is that when the most subtle ruling technique is used, including minimal verbiage, people don't notice and think they've just accomplished things on their own. It's really brilliant! LeGuin has a sweet footnote about this:

This invisible leader, who gets things done in such a way that people think they did it by themselves, isn't one who manipulates others from behind the scenes; just the opposite. Again, it's a matter of "doing without doing": uncompetitive, unworried, trustful accomplishment, power that is not force. An

example or analogy might be a very good teacher, or the truest voice in a group of singers.

In *Meditations on the Way*, the Ooty class: Carolyn said this reminded her of how the Gurukula kitchen, which had deteriorated into a dirty shambles over the last weeks, was scrubbed and tidied up after a mere critical observation by Guru. “Now people here just take the improved state of affairs as ‘natural’, not thinking that if Guru hadn’t said anything, nothing would have happened.”

This was when the kitchen still shared the building with the cowshed and the water tank, so sanitation was, shall we say, old style. I think it’s best not to elaborate, but you can ask me about it in person, if you wish. And most of us were still young, and not overly fastidious.... We’re much better now.

While we’re on *Meditations on the Way*, Nitya closed by drawing a parallel with free India’s first four (or five) rulers:

Guru’s final comments were:

In the history of India’s rulers since Independence, first we see Nehru, who was not so much a political figure as a *presence*. It was as if the heart and soul of all the highest cultural values of India through the centuries had taken form, and it was reassuring just to have him there. He was succeeded by Sastri, who was very positive and assertive. He had very specific programs to initiate. His presence was strongly visible, and people praised him. He was followed by Mrs. Gandhi, who declared an ‘Emergency’ and ruled with an iron fist. She was very much feared by all. After her came Mr. Desai, who was so weak that everybody felt they could get away with anything; corruption and waste were the order of the day. Then the government was dissolved, and for a time God alone was ruling over the country’s affairs. Things went well, and once again

people felt the comfort that things were just going on naturally. Thus all four types of rulers have headed India in succession, exactly in the order given in today's passage by Lao Tzu.

Deb's opening statement was how she had at first thought the verse seemed almost cursory, obvious, but then as she pondered it more, it struck her as a profound and insightful set of injunctions, germane to our social condition, as well as the political situation. It was also about how we are as people ourselves in our own being: that "the leaders and the people below them" is really about ourselves and how we are in relation to the people we meet. Suddenly it became essential and fascinating to her. She particularly noted that the second to the top is a leader or a master who is loved and admired, while the one above that is barely noticed, because he does things in a transparent way.

Karen was thinking, boy, this reminds me of our political leaders, how if you don't trust the people, you make them untrustworthy. If you have a truly great leader, he doesn't have to tell you how great he is, the way ours is always doing. She resonated with how in good government, the ordinary people think they did it themselves. With history's greatest leaders, people are hardly aware they exist, as Mitchell puts it.

This got Andy musing about Narayana Guru as the epitome of the subtle approach. He mentioned the touching opening chapters of Nataraja Guru's paeon to him, *The Word of the Guru*, and wanted me to clip in the first chapter, which you'll find in Part II. Andy pictures him as a simple man wearing a simple, yet elegant, robe, standing erect in perfect dignity of pose, indicating only minimally what should be done, and leaving it to others to do it on their own, which they did, in all eagerness.

We are amazingly fortunate to have a close association with such an embodiment of perfection. I contrasted Narayana Guru with Gandhi, who epitomizes the best of the second shelf leader:

always devising programs and pressing for their implementation, someone ostentatiously admired and praised and loved (which automatically produces its opposite). His programs caused major upheavals and conflicts, whereas Narayana Guru's sublime anti-methods produced a truly bloodless transformation. As Andy put it, with that kind of leadership, the grass roots are allowed to flower. The people have to carry the torch. Deb ran with that: the dark source of sublime governance emerges from the Valley Spirit, the Mother.

I elaborated on how valuable the advice of this verse is for our personal perspective as well. We are advised to make things happen with minimal tinkering, mainly by just allowing them to unfold. In Taoism, being loved and praised is a step down, so we aren't seeking that. It's an ego thing, nice, but ego-based. The "ruler" of the verse can be taken as different degrees of ego involvement, since the ego is the governor of our psyche. The more ego interference, from the Taoist perspective, the more we risk losing effectiveness and trust. The more we try to manipulate our activities, the more we muck them up, and then unsullied honesty winds up sacrificed to practicalities. And it isn't only about how others will react to us: it's about our own self-respect. We have the feeling that the more we act poorly—the greater the mismatch between our intentions and feelings with how we are behaving—the more we despise ourselves. The natural response to the mismatch is to try harder to control yourself, yet the more you do that the more you degrade yourself. It widens the schism. Instead, we should try harder to *stop* controlling ourselves. Within reason, of course! No running out into traffic without looking, unless you live in a big Indian city, and then you don't *dare* look.

The bottom line is, by doing less and having less regulation and less fixed structure to your behavior, you are benefitting yourself.

Andy mused that there comes a moment when we are

required to act by circumstances: “I encounter situations in life where my action is called upon. I’m trying to put this verse together with that moment that I experience now and then. I think it offers guidance for someone who feels that they have to act, But I’m not sure what the guidance is.” Deb, suspecting what Andy was referring to, added that the situation in itself is calling you out, you haven’t been sitting there constructing a plan from scratch. Yet you have to rise to the occasion.

Of course, the scripture can’t and doesn’t predict specific situations, we have to put the general principles to work ourselves. I invited Andy to share what he was hinting at, so the rest of the class could learn from it too.

When Bushra died last year, she had been working on a film about the annual play our friends have helped produce at a major Oregon correctional institution for the last dozen years. The title is *A Midsummer Night’s Eve in Prison*. There is much ado about something, which is that a lot of the film is left unfinished. Possibly enough money has been raised to complete it, and help is ready to be hired, so Deb, Andy and a couple of others have formed a committee to manage the project. As Andy said, “Neither one of us wanted to do it, and neither of us is trying to lead it.” Some tough decisions have had to be made, and Andy’s preferred M.O. is to let things take their own course. Here it wasn’t possible, and he is grateful to Deb for being able to help make the hard decisions, first by consensus, but then hold to them when the inevitable waffling started.

The point being, I guess, is that managerial situations like this thrust us into the governing hierarchy mold, whether we welcome it or not. Most of us are quite unskillful, and others must move in more or less willingly to fill the void. Ignoring the need courts disaster. Deb agreed the beautiful part is when everyone thinks they thought of it, that *they* did it. She functioned as the

unmoved mover here, or more appropriately, the unmovable mover.

I noted that this is where we can see how honesty is the most subtle and difficult art to cultivate. You have to placate and not offend people, as you resist them. It isn't a matter of true or false answers on a test, as we've been trained, there are all sorts of nuances. T or F only applies to limited statements of fact, and life is always so much more than that. There are ranges of correctness.

Deb suggested that honesty can be almost transparent: if you're really honest, it's just like a clear river. She didn't explain, but it inspired Susan to relate a recent image from the quarantined age, of a jellyfish swimming in the Venice canals, which are running clear for the first time in 500 years (my random number). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZTNzDulq0Y> .

Jan brought up that with holding to honesty comes the natural simplicity emphasized in the verse. Simply by simplifying communication and life in general, allows for some of these positive outcomes to emerge. She cited a great line in the Minford edition, the River Master's take on the subtlest type of ruler:

The Highest were  
True Gentlemen,  
Supreme Rulers  
Of Highest Antiquity.  
They had No Name,  
But an Abundance  
Of Natural Simplicity.

Jan also has an abundance of natural simplicity and directness, which she shares with all her friends.

Recently I discovered a fun site, <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/misquotesfaq.html> of quotes mistakenly attributed to Shakespeare, and that Oh what a tangled web we weave/ When

first we practice to deceive, is actually from Sir Walter Scott, not The Bard. Tangled webs being the polar opposite of simplicity. We might also quote Twain in this matter: “The glory which is built upon a lie soon becomes a most unpleasant incumbrance. ... How easy it is to make people believe a lie, and how hard it is to undo that work again!”

Bill cited Mitchell again: “the master doesn’t talk, he acts.” Nitya mentions hesitation in his quotation in Part II. Wang Pi (in Pine) always has a good line: “Where there are words, there is a response. Thus, the sage hesitates.”

This verse and the next have such an intense bearing on our disastrous zeitgeist! We may lose everything but our wisdom, so hopefully it is sufficient, having gone beyond the imaginary stage. I read out Confucius and the Madman, from the Merton *Way of Chuang Tzu*, which resonates with the verse, and also contains an apt warning for our time:

When the world makes sense  
The wise have work to do.  
They can only hide  
When the world’s askew.  
Today of you can stay alive  
Lucky are you:  
Try to survive!

You could be wiped off the face of the earth at the whim of the Emperor in Loa Tzu’s time, and we’re sliding back to the same mentality yet again. It requires a bit more subterfuge to commit murder now, but the result is the same. That true Mob mentality is another good thing to take shelter from.

Our closing meditation was graced with Minford’s poem from Hanshan Deqing (1564-1623), describing the Serenity of a Zen Master, Zen being a close cousin to Taoism:



Body like dead wood,  
Thoughts like ashes,  
Snow on my skull,  
Frost on my jaw.  
It's not that I disdain the world  
Because I am old.  
The Dust can find nowhere in my eyes  
To land.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

17 and 18  
The best leader is  
unobtrusive; people think,  
'We do things ourselves.'

The worst leaders seek  
power and wealth; enforce many  
harsh elitist laws

The Tao way is lost  
with rules and regulations;  
hypocrisy reigns.

I felt verses 17 and 18 needed to go together. As I looked for the heart of the matter a third haiku appeared in my mind. It is similar to Ursula leGuin's 'Second Best' idea in her heading for verse 18.

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Here's Peter's fine contribution in *Meditations on the Way*:

Peter said that he found the [verse] very meaningful, especially after having translated the Ruler-Subject relationship into the Teacher-Student relationship of which he has had experience of both poles. "The best experiences I ever had as a student were when the discovery and the learning seemed to arise from some subterranean source within my self, rather than simply receiving some bit of information from another. Guru is a model teacher for me, and yet my experience is that Guru's lectures and meditations are like provocative suggestions which stimulate unique meanings to arise in my own mind. In effect, it is as if I am giving myself my own lecture, though I recognize in Guru a precious source of inspiration. When I experience the light of understanding and the flash of insight arising in my own mind, this is the ennobling experience of 'It happened naturally.'

"On the other hand, when one feels oneself to be a mere passive recipient of a most praiseworthy teacher, there is a subtle element of demoralization connected with placing the 'other' as superior and oneself as inferior. That is why the much loved and praised teacher is spoken of here as not so good as the one who is hardly even noticed.

"As one recognizes the Guru or source of wisdom within oneself and experiences the naturalness with which this inner light ever guides us, true faith is born. And as this faith is in what is naturally one's own, good faith between that person and others also abounds, because there is no need for grasping, clinging or manipulating."

Greer asked for some clarification on the part about, "When there is not enough faith, there is lack of good faith," and wondered if that had anything to do with the hesitancy of the next line.

Guru responded, “This is very true. A little faith is worse than no faith at all. Having some, but not enough, faith is a common symptom of many people, and it manifests as a hesitation, a half-heartedness in relating to the other to whom one could be turning in full faith. Many people exhibit this hesitation in wholeheartedly relating to a guru. They want to relate, but they cannot give themselves fully. Thus they only waste their time and create a lot of agony for themselves, and others too. Some people can spend years in very close proximity to a guru or wise teacher but not be in the least benefited. A person with partial faith is just like an inverted jug. You can go on pouring water to it, but not a drop will enter.

Greer again asked about the last stanza, and wondered if this was also suggesting that the best ruler is one who remains in the background. Guru concurred, and repeated Peter’s example of a teacher who does not teach by harsh directives and explicit instructions, but instead has a very gentle way of stimulating and encouraging the student, who ends up taking their own initiatives.

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Chapter 1 of The Word of the Guru, by Nataraja Guru

### **Introductory**

WHERE is happiness? Where is rest from the fever of life? Where is the image of perfection? Where is the fountain-source of wisdom from which a thirsty traveller can drink? Where is that luminous something, in which we can live apart and be free—free from a sense of want and suffering?

These seem to be some of the eternal questions echoing and re-echoing through the ages within the heart of humanity. Some think the answer can be found in material comforts. Some search for the

answer in books. Some sit in meditation trying to tune their life-breath in unison with the Great Knowledge. Some others 'scorn delights and live laborious days.' All these attain degrees of success.

Once in a hundred years, solitary among a hundred thousand, there arrives at the caravanserai of life one, at the sight of whose features the seekers instinctively arise from their varied occupations and greet him, and see in him and his ways a clear commentary, a silent interpretation, a radiant centre of all that they were seeking. He is able to dispel age-long doubt and darkness by his words: and the hearers smile and for a moment feel a strange happiness. Literature and art and science grow round his person. Historical events find a centre round which to turn.

Narayana Guru was one of such. He was one of those who followed in his life the ancient and immemorial programme of oriental saints and prophets. He left his home in search of Truth. He lived in lonely hill, cave or forest for years, unknown to men, performing *tapas*.<sup>1</sup> He emerged from seclusion, having solved some great riddle in life and he wanted to give his solution to the world at large. Therefore, without any sort of hesitation whatever, he called himself a *guru* or Teacher. Penniless himself, he began to command an influence over rich and poor, educated and uneducated. People flocked to take the dust of his feet.

Today his words are recognised as a most modern echo of the ancient wisdom of the Orient. In him we had, combined once again, a bard who sang about the aspirations of the soul of man, a philanthropist whose one aim in life, night and day, was to devise ways to minimise human suffering, and a seer whose daily food and drink was the highest form of Truth.

Although out of reach of newspapermen and propagandists, this silent sage was the recognised spiritual leader of more than two million people in south India, to whom his word was more

imperative than law. Within a period of less than a decade he had established more than one hundred places of worship on the west coast of India alone, which are day by day growing into centres of educational, philanthropic, and economic activity. Crowded meetings are held in which his name is the unifying element. His message to the people is the subject of weekly comment on many platforms, and scores of associations have been organised in various parts of south India to spread his ideals. By the spell of his name, young and old are seen to join hands in a common undertaking: rich and poor are seen to rub shoulders. It can be asserted that he has set in motion a force which is bound to spread into a new impetus for the regeneration of India and the world.

### Part III

Bill shared this reflection on last night's chapter from The New York Times, touching on some of the governing principles discussed in the class:

#### We Need Great Leadership Now, and Here's What It Looks Like

These times are testing leaders from the schoolhouse to the White House, from city halls to corporate suites.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/21/opinion/covid-dov-seidman.html?smid=em-share>