

4/28/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 18

This is a classic verse that turns ordinary expectations on their head, and is ultra relevant to the present. It's about what happens when people, especially those in charge, lose contact with the Way. The two titles are: Decay of the Tao – Minford; Second Bests – LeGuin. I might name it Out of Touch. Humans everywhere replace flowing resonance with the Tao with inept attempts to reconstruct it. An honorable effort, yet it's exactly what separates us from our core. We restore it by a mysterious amalgam of non-effort and best efforts.

As in the previous verse, there are four stages of degradation here that result once direct merger with the Tao is abandoned. (The key of translators will be found at the bottom.)

The first things to arise are benevolence and righteousness (LG, Min, L), goodness and piety (Mit), justice and mercy or kindness (H, P), kindness and morality (F), all qualities we think of as positive. Yet without the presence of the Tao, they are artificial to a degree, and therefore false, to the same degree. They are attempts to imitate the natural state, and their falseness corrodes the psyche and brings about progressive degeneration. As Mitchell puts it, "people act according to rules, not from the heart." Man, we do not want to lose heart!

The next stage is where the great pretense of deceitfulness or hypocrisy begins to intentionally compensate for merger with the Tao by introducing: wisdom and intelligence (F, Min), reason (P), cleverness (L), wit or knowledge and cleverness (H, Mit), or learning and prudence (LG). All may be seen as aspects of the same basic gesture, which LeGuin nicely epitomizes as prudence. Let's take a look at that less-common word, in the Merriam-Webster definitions. Prudence is:

- 1 : the ability to govern and discipline oneself by the use of reason
- 2 : sagacity or shrewdness in the management of affairs
- 3 : skill and good judgment in the use of resources
- 4 : caution or circumspection as to danger or risk

What's wrong with any of these? Prudence's antonyms include carelessness and heedlessness, which is interesting because inept seekers imagine that acting without restraint, as these terms imply, restores contact with the essence, where they are actually the 'B' side of an already-disconnected condition. The superb Needleman quote I've entered in Part II ends:

It must be kept in mind that blindly going against conventional morality is as fruitless as blindly obeying convention.

Morality, remember, is one of the specters that first arises when the Tao is lost. This dialectic principle holds good for all the qualities listed in the verse. Following set pathways make us blind to the promptings of our internal flow. Resisting set pathways simply keeps us attached to them.

Nitya's most germane point in *Meditations on the Way* relates to this second stage of disassociation, where several of our translators mention cleverness. "Cleverness is, at its core, the attempt to make one's personal ego prevail upon some situation," Nitya writes. "The antidote is recognizing that order and chaos are cyclical aspects of the same Absolute. They constantly alternate. Cleverness won't help. Instead one has to feel an inner resonance of the Tao and flow with that." That persistent feeling that there must be *something* we can do to fix things is a snare and a delusion.

In the third stage of the verse, the disordered family is full of dutiful children and parents (LG). It's very Chinese to equate the Tao with order, where we Westerners think more of order as

interfering with openness. The lack of peace in the family, where the “six bonds” are broken, brings about filial piety (Mit, L), piety and rites of devotion (H, F), filial devotion and compassion (Min), obedience and love, (P). (Filial means coming from your children.)

Wang Pi tells us that the six relations are between father and son, husband and wife, and elder and younger brother—going both directions makes them six.

We breezed over this stage, yet for the Chinese the family is the basis of all harmonious and inharmonious resonances, and these shape the society.

I’ve observed how when parents and kids aren’t getting along, the parents sooner or later assert their dominance and say you have to do it this way, and (if they’re young enough) the kids will obey. That’s filial piety. If there is accord and harmony in the family, that never becomes necessary. Doing the right thing isn’t obedience, it’s a natural expression of love and caring. In a society where naturalness is considered the enemy and is pounded out of children from the earliest time, harmony is unlikely to ever be possible.

This leads directly to the last of the four stages, when the country is in chaos (P, Mit, F), crisis (H), disordered (LG), in tumult (Min), benighted (L), patriotic or loyal officials elbow their way to the front ranks.

The use of ‘benighted’ is interesting, as the Oxford has it as “in a state of pitiful or contemptible intellectual or moral ignorance, typically owing to a lack of opportunity,” as well as the more neutral second definition where darkness sweeps over the scene, physically, emotionally or psychologically. Benighted times are upon us.

As she opened the discussion, Deb told us this is one of her favorite verses, and though it seems prickly and paradoxical at first, it gives a key to what we do every day all the time. She recalled Nitya talking about “problemless moments,” and

suggesting we should look for what takes us out of them. When we start thinking about things we divorce ourselves from the flow and begin adding on concepts.

In a similar vein, Deb also recalled how Nitya made decisions. People would rush up to him and ask for advice, or something would need fixing, and he'd tell them he was waiting for his inner voice to speak to him. After a time it would be clear to him what the best option was. There was no need to struggle. Over the years she has adopted a better attitude of listening to her own inner voice, which might take some time to come up with a wise course of action. Few of us have learned that kind of patience.

Listening properly to our own inner inspiration is a crucial skill to develop. When those intuitions come up, we have so many conditioned reflexes that convince us to ignore them. If you are obsessed with severely judging your intimations, you suppress them, thinking they're wrong, or others won't approve, or you're not quite ready—we have a million excuses. We'd rather listen to “authorities” who will give safe advice. Loyal ministers are standing by.

Nitya waited without haste to see what came up, and the result was always brilliant. He was not in a hurry to just fill the void. It reminded me of “waiting will fill,” or “waiting for fullness,” a motto of the Martian who visits earth in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert Heinlein. (The title is from Exodus 2.22.) Give your fabulous, mega-cosmic brain some time to work. It's unbelievably fast, but there is a lot to consider to permit it to discover the best course....

To me, there is a real sense of irony in this verse, where so many of the qualities we have been led to admire are exposed as fraudulent. Their negative aspects stand out, and our defense of them is revealed as pretense. All of them are about scheming, putting a plan over on others. That's what we do when we don't have any groundedness. From the Taoist perspective, the highest

values of humans are also failings and lead to disaster, implying the very effort to inculcate them is wrongheaded.

Andy felt there is an impulse of management implied here, where virtuous people believe earnestly that they can arrange things so that they work out. People are unwilling to pull back from an egotistic impulse of control. He mentioned he used to work for an art college whose parent organization was the Education Management Corporation. He was perennially embarrassed to cash their checks. Education should be brought out freely, not “managed.”

To me, management is a milder form of scheming. Call them collectively, “efforts to manipulate.” It’s really what we all do, but the premise here is that by including the Tao as central, our decisions will be much more than what an instruction manual or a course in business can convey.

Andy feels it’s time to realize just how managerial we humans are always trying to be, even though we’re all staying in separate spaces at the moment. We call each other up and ask, what did you do today? And our friend responds, not much, how about you? We can only do our own little thing and watch our habits. It’s an interesting moment: the pause, the powerlessness—you can’t get out and do your karma.

The River Master, cited in Minford, sorts the verse out as we would expect, in that so long as the Tao prevails, all is well in country and family. Its decay leads to false righteousness and false benevolence. Rulers of false intelligence and spurious wisdom invite hypocrisy and deceit, and the degeneration of family and country destroys the natural harmony and it is replaced by false devotion and insincerity.

Whenever I read this verse I naturally *feel* this interpretation, but the words don’t automatically convey it, only imply it. There’s no reason we can’t consider all angles here.

Duyvendak (cited in Minford) tells us:

This Chapter is directed against the school of Confucius and its moral precepts, against its insistence on artificial obedience to the discipline of Rites and Moral Education. If all things are allowed to follow the course of the Tao of Nature, without human intervention or constraint, then there is no need of these so-called Virtues, which are contrary to human nature, and only exist as a reaction against a corrupt society. They are evidence of the Decay of the True Tao.

After all these thousands of years of moral education failing spectacularly, it's amazing that busybodies refuse to give it up, and continue to work their will on gullible innocents.

I offered that while it may not be making the news, the natural world is the most beautiful it's been in years. It's as though the whole earth was breathing a great sigh of relief, and I think people are feeling it all over the globe. At least those willing to give nature some credit.

Deb brought up the recent videos she's seen from empty towns where wild animals are wandering the streets, wondering where all the humans disappeared to. Jan enthused about how great it was to see families together in her neighborhood more than she ever remembered. People are taking time out to be together, even if they can't be too close physically. Susan thought it was like a holiday, everyone is home, and it's a nice feeling that everyone is on holiday, yet there're no holiday routines and rituals to perform.

Deb gleefully offered a new response for us for Andy's query of what have you been doing? We can say: I've been opening my little roots to the Tao.

I lamented that humans have lost faith that the natural world knows the Way. We have come to feel that it is dependent on us, rather than the other way around. Now everyone can see that

nature is thriving without our help. It doesn't need us. In fact, it needs us to stop helping quite so much.

This whole argument about the arbitrariness of our good intentions is hard to accept without the insights of the sages. In Pine, Su Ch'e says, "When the Great Way flourishes, kindness and justice are at work. But people don't realize it. Only after the Great Way disappears, do kindness and justice become visible." So in a sense, kindness and justice and the rest are much more expansive when we don't bottle them as snake oil and put them up for sale. It's reminiscent of the tragic efforts of good-hearted evangelists to teach their rigidly-defined values to people who were busy just living them, yet who might not have even had words for them. The egotism at the base of the motivation poisoned the gift.

Let me paraphrase Wang An-Shih: The Tao is formless. Discontent produces names and forms, and when these are born, "we get distinctions such as kindness, justice, reason, and so forth." And Ho-Shang Kung: "When the kingdom enjoys peace, no one thinks about kindness, and the people are free of desire. When the Great Way prevails, kindness and justice vanish, just as the stars fade when the sun appears." The evangelicals' intent was to bring out the sun, but they thought they could do it by getting crowds of unpretentious people to fixate on a single star....

Peter O, in *Meditations on the Way*, shared a lovely supporting example:

This [verse] reminds me of the night when I called Guru "generous," and he corrected me, saying that generosity implies a lofty donor and a needy other. For him there is no such duality, and the question of generosity does not arise. There is simply a natural flow of the goods and resources of life going in all directions. It is only when one becomes unnatural that the question of generosity arises.

Hamill's take on the last category is a bit different than the others, and strikes me as alien to Taoism: when the country is in dire straits, patriotic ministers enter, as if they are the good guys coming to rescue the country. Actually, Nitya also makes this point. All these positive qualities may be well-intentioned attempts to restore the Way, but according to Taoists they are sure to fall short, often with supremely tragic results. The others translators make it more clear that patriotism is intrinsic to the disease of the crisis itself. In America, where so-called patriots are a bloodthirsty, intolerant lot, this is easy to perceive. It's more that the patriotic ministers are the *cause* of the crisis rather than its resolution.

In my youth, American patriots were those loudly supporting the savage war on peasants in Vietnam, while the "traitors" were the antiwar legions, sidelined and painted as hostile to their own country, no matter that that country was historically democratic and antiwar, for the most part. Our loyal ministers were the yes men, and that was (and is) the sole basis for determining loyalty: go along with the top dog. Loyalty means signing on to a diabolic program instigated by rulers, never about loyalty to high ideals like peace and justice. Definitely not loyalty to the Tao.

It struck me that rules and rulers go together, and are something to steer clear of.

There is a vast gap between doing something and *believing* you are doing it when you aren't. Right now we have government officials taking credit for the pittance that is trickling down to the people as economic welfare, boasting about their generosity and kindness, while secretly directing much of the relief into their own pockets and those of their buddies. It reminded Andy of Lewis Hyde's book, *The Gift*, the chapter on the erotic life of property. Successful cultures truly believe in spreading wealth around for the benefit of all. Deb mentioned the Native American potlatch, where the entire wealth of a community was given away, to keep the gifts circulating. The twentieth-century notion that pure self-interest

accomplishes this even better, continues to devastate the planet and its inhabitants.

Deb noted it is easy to see the smugness in the political sphere, or the lying within generosity and kindness when we are obsessed with moral behavior. She feels that after reading these translations, there is an other flow underneath all this posturing that we can open ourselves to. She read us out the very helpful Needleman comments, which I highly recommend you check out, in Part II.

In keeping with the Taoist sense of amorality, which is very different from immorality, I talked about how when you are deciding between good and evil you are inevitably ruling out oneness. This polarity has become more and more a matter of righteous hysteria in the modern era. I recently came across a flawed article with a very good premise, that our ancient myths and original fairy tales, were not about the battle between good and evil. Their teaching is more ambiguous and all-encompassing: how to deal with real-life situations. Modern society is obsessed with good and evil, which rarely if ever exist monolithically, and this causes psychic degradation, loss of the Tao. Despite a number of flaws, the article is worth a look: <https://aeon.co/essays/why-is-pop-culture-obsessed-with-battles-between-good-and-evil> .

This idea reminded Charles of Genesis and its Garden of Eden with two trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Unity and duality, obviously. The advice is not to eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil, for it will destroy your innocence.

Jan really liked the idea in this verse of returning to the root, where our true nature springs up. Being rooted in the Tao, out of it comes the flow that doesn't need the labeling but manifests better than anything else. It sets loose a flow of energy and meaning without being stuck in your head with all those ideas of I'm going to be this, I'm going to be that. As a gardener, Jan admitted the

idea of being nourished by our roots appeals directly to her, how you draw your sustenance up through yourself from a deep source.

Jan read out Magister Liu's contribution, from the Minford:

The Great Tao Encompasses and Connects everything. If it Decays, then all so-called Virtues lose their Root. They have Name by no Substance. Instead there is Great Hypocrisy, there is Discord and Tumult. The Great Tao brings all together as One Whole. The Great Tao is the Original Mother of All. If the Mother once Decays, then these Virtues have no Root, they do not arise naturally, Of-Themselves. They are forced and hypocritical.

Hold the Tao
Close.
Do not let it
Decay.

Deb read out the Needleman comments below for the closing meditation, and then we Zoomed home in an instant.

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.

* * *

Philosopher Jacob Needleman supplied an Introduction and comments for the new Feng/English edition, which also does away with the gender-biased pronouns, with Jane English's blessings. Here's his gem of a take on chapters (verses) 18-20:

These chapters affirm the primacy of being at one with the Tao, rather than thinking about it as an ideal. Lao Tsu warns us that concepts of virtue, ideals of wisdom and morality, and all the precepts that are intended to lead us toward the good all too easily make us forget the main thing, which is to open within ourselves to that radiant energy whose action upon us will conform our lives to the Tao. Consider St Augustine's "Love God, and do what you will," and the spontaneous arising of compassion (*karuna*) along the way of the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. "Morality" is often only the imposition of one part of ourselves (the mind) upon the other parts, which remain, as it were, unconvinced and fundamentally untouched. This does not mean that seekers of the Way abandon moral rules, but that at a certain point they see that external morality without internal morality can be a kind of tyranny over others and over the living forces within ourselves. And the way toward this inner morality may seem startlingly or even shockingly opposed to "morality." For example, *Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom*. Again, it must be kept in mind that blindly going against conventional morality is as fruitless as blindly obeying convention.

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Minford's Introduction contains some exceptional quotes, which I'll share here and there as we proceed. One from Angus Graham goes to the heart of the topic:

The Taoist relaxes the body, calms the mind, loosens the grip of categories made habitual by naming, frees the current of thought for more fluid differentiations and assimilations, and instead of pondering choices lets problems solve themselves as inclination spontaneously finds its own direction, which is the Tao. At the deep end is the mystical, at the shallow end Self-Cultivation may serve as a means to relaxation, poise, loosening of habit, creativity, quickening of responsiveness, for the Chinese wrestler or for the California businessman using meditative techniques to enhance efficiency.

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Key:

F – Feng

H – Hamill

L – Lao

LG – LeGuin

Min – Minford

Mit – Mitchell

P – Pine