

5/5/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 19

Most of the translations are substantially alike. We are directed to:

Give up holiness, and prudence or cleverness, (LG, H), sainthood or sages, and wisdom (F, L), wisdom and reason (P), sages and wisdom (Min), holiness and wisdom (Mit), and it will be a hundred times better for everyone.

Abandon benevolence or altruism, and righteousness or rectitude (H, F, Min, L, LG), morality or kindness, and justice (Mit, P) and people recover true devotion (H, Min), will do the right thing (Mit), will again be filial (L, F), once more love and obey (P, F), will remember family feeling (LG).

Give up planning, industry, artfulness, cunning or ingenuity, and profit (all)  
and there will be no more thieves and robbers (all)

But these tactics are not enough, says Lao Tzu!  
Because they are outward forms, we also must turn to the simple, symbolized by undyed silk and uncarved wood—this is our true nature. Reducing selfishness and desire is the Way. Hamill adds that by being less selfish, desires dissipate. Mitchell advises we should stay in the center while events unfold. LeGuin has it:

Need little,  
want less.  
Forget the rules.  
Be untroubled.

It's noted in several places that the raw silk and uncarved wood are traditional symbols for simplicity and naturalness.

This is supposed to be, and is, a perplexing, confrontational verse. It torpedoes many of our most basic assumptions of how to behave. It took time, but as we contemplated the ideas, they began to make more sense. We were aided by several sages, including the Needleman comments quoted last episode, which are particularly germane to this verse, with its anti-morality tone:

“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.*

Wang Chen, cited in Pine, clarifies the perplexity by adding adjectives: the impediments are wisdom that “leaves tracks,” reason that “deceives,” “condescending” kindness, “treacherous” justice, and so on. It is important to contemplate how these virtues can be and are perverted in practice, so we can avoid making the same mistakes and watch out for them from others in our interactions with them.

My Gita comments on verse III.27 also touch on this theme, in a less direct way—we need to surrender what we imagine are building blocks to excellence, in order to make room for true excellence to put in an appearance:

The Gita maintains that life is nature unfolding and expressing itself according to its innate potential. We are fortunate to be

able to witness the process, the “greatest show on earth!” as the circus marquee states, but are in charge of only the tiniest part of it. The ego tries to validate itself by taking credit for making things happen, but the Absolute, which really does animate the whole game, bears no such sense of inadequacy. As we mature, we should get over the need to prove ourselves, and just be who we are, which is wonderful enough. We should identify with the Absolute and not so much with our ego. Spiritual unfoldment includes enlarging our identity from the ego to the Absolute.

The Zoom format seems to be inhibiting of the more extended conversations that were more common in the physical class. There may be a sense that when you’re “on TV” you have to keep the ball rolling: dead air is time and money wasted. Which, since we’re essentially free and not taking up much time, we don’t need to worry about. I think we should try to relax and let everyone’s thoughts percolate up to be shared, because when they are we are at our best as a class.

Deb’s first thoughts were on the undyed silk and uncarved wood: how they represent limitless depth and endless possibilities, the aspect of the Tao that this section is focusing on.

I suggested the qualities listed are all finite, while the latter part is infinite, which is why the qualities themselves are insufficient. You can never adequately generalize from specifics, meaning the Tao isn’t accessed by an accumulation of praiseworthy attainments. Our identification with these admirable qualities is likely to be an ego posture. To say, “I am wise” is to prove you aren’t. This is not about compiling a list of qualities that we can boast about or take pride in, either—it’s much more than that. If we don’t simply live them, they aren’t really happening.

Bill read out the Mitchell end note: “When some folks are called saints, other folks think of themselves as sinners. When one

fellow is called wise, others imagine there is something they need to know.” He liked the idea that when you judge some people to have those qualities it intrinsically means that some people don’t. Nitya went into this quintessential idea at length, based on his personal experience, and his thoughts are posted in Part II.

Deb noted that when we make these kinds of divisions, we are causing others to feel incompetent, and she rued how easily and thoughtlessly we do that. After all, we live in a society obsessed with divisions.

I had just come across a most relevant example, in an article on modern online cults in The Guardian. The featured guru uses a lot of the same terminology we’re familiar with, and I realized the key difference is not so much the philosophy, but this setting up people as superior and inferior, through the distinction between the leader and everyone else who wants to achieve what they supposedly have. I saw how easy it is to get sucked in, because it’s a really subtle difference between a leader being abusive and authoritarian and one who is only trying to help people overcome certain blocks. In Vedanta and Taoism the unity is emphasized, while in a cult the polarity is highlighted. A cult leader evinces the kind of wisdom that “leaves tracks”—furrows across people’s souls. Here is a long but important article, especially if you know people the right age to be mesmerized by demagogues on screens: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/09/strange-hypnotic-world-millennial-guru-bentinho-massaro-youtube> .

Andy shared his thoughts about the uncarved blocks of wood in his basement, brimming with artistic possibilities. He has saved them for many years, imagining someday he would get around to carving them. Yet he is not discontent. He feels an uncut block has a lot going on in it, like weird currents of energy and growth possibilities, with nothing needed to be supplied by him. Yet *something* is flowing through that material. When he carves, when

he even just makes a mark, he knows he has to cooperate with what's inherently there.

He inspired Bill and Nancy, also both sculptors, to add that when you are carving stone, for instance, you have to carve with the faults that are in the material. Nancy went so far as to tell us you have to have a conversation with it, that you have to forget your intentions and discover what's already there in it, by asking it.

Moni told us how raw silk is very strong in the crude form of it, very unlike the soft, supple product it is changed into when it's processed. She saw the metaphor of the verse as saying that if you shed social norms, you get back to your "original wood." There's a toughness to it, and in a sense we have to give away everything that's taken form in us, to return to that neutral place.

I mentioned how the ancient Indians had the analogy of the clay and the pot, very down-to-earth, and when it was transferred to China it became fancier, with the wood and silk. All three are natural substances brimming with potential, just like the Tao.

Our closing meditation was primed by the unclouded thoughts of Tao Yuanming, as cited in the Minford:

Ah, how short a time it is that we are here! Why do we not then set our hearts at rest, and cease to fret whether we remain or go? Why wear out the soul with anxious thoughts? I desire neither wealth nor rank: I have no hopes of Heaven. Let me stroll in my garden through the bright hours of morning, among my flowers, or let me mount the hill and sing a song, or weave my verses beside the limpid brook. Thus I will live out my allotted span, content with the appointments of Fate, my spirit free from care.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

Your inner self knows  
integrity is needed  
in all your doings.

So, in daily life,  
simply go with the flow and  
keep things simple

\* \* \*

Nitya's comments on the verse, from *Meditations on the Way*:

The Tao Te Ching is a wisdom text, so when Lao Tzu says, "Discard the wise," he does not mean it. The archetypal embodiment of wisdom is the sage, and the entire Tao Te Ching is a glorification of the sage, of wisdom, and of the Way. The problem which he is pointing out here is not the sage's problem, but a problem of how people view themselves in relation to the sage, and to wisdom. The tendency is to simply say that wisdom belongs to the sage, so why should we worry about it.

In the Gurukula you can see this tendency for people to become lazy and complacent, thinking, "There is a guru here. He is so wise. He will take care of it." Instead of relying on a sage, you should bring yourself to the level of the sage, working day and night for the wellbeing of all, just as he does. Instead you want to sit in the lap of your Guru and be spoon fed.

You can see the same tendency in all organized religions. If you go to a church, the people there will be praising the great Jesus Christ, who spilt his blood for the salvation of mankind, and then they will pray, "So please take away my headache also." They

dump all the responsibility on Christ to save all the world from sin and tribulation.

When Nataraja Guru “quit his body,” (an eventuality Guru also sometimes refers to as “kicking the world), everyone expected me to rush back from Europe to assume charge of the several Gurukula centers he had been directing. Instead I decided to remove myself from the scene so that at all of the centers the people had to fill the vacuum by each seeking the guru within themselves. Now, for example, when Prasad writes something, I don’t know whether he wrote it or I wrote it. He has come to a high level of understanding through self-teaching.

If someone is weak and you rush there to help them, then how will they grow? We had an American in the Gurukula a few years back who had a great deal of money in a trust fund back there. He was very generous, and every month, like clockwork, when his trust fund check arrived, he distributed it to all the gurukulas. I thought this was the worst thing that could happen. Everyone at all the centers waited for that check like it was some kind of booty. When it stopped coming, the people at the centers felt a great sense of poverty, which before the trust money had come they had not felt. They had become dependent on it. When that benevolence and expectancy is taken away, people have to find their own feet and exercise their own hands and wits.

Nataraja Guru used to say the reason that the government does not really benefit the people is because in their authority and ingenuity they have created boxes of air-conditioned rooms with big desks, and when an official closes himself in and looks around, he thinks, “What next?” And he can’t see anything meaningful to do. He has now effectively cut himself off from the rest of the world and its problems. He has then to fill up the whole day pushing buttons, asking for coffee, and shuffling papers around.

Loa Tzu says, “These three won’t work,” but even when you discard these three, that is not enough. The people want something

to which they can be attached. Simply discarding things is not enough. There should be something else to relate to.

You have to relate to the best in your own self. You are finite; you have to relate to the infinite. Only then do you feel your fullness, the Absolute, or what many call "God." God is only half the story, and man is only half the story. There has to be a plus and minus, like the electrical charge resulting from the cathode and the anode. This can be seen in Michelangelo's depiction in the Sistine Chapel of God and Adam reaching for contact between one another.

But people don't know how to relate to God or the Absolute. They don't know it is within them. Most people, when they think of the Absolute, think of it as a vast space outside them, and a long stretch of eternity, also beyond their reach: the time-space continuum. These are, in reality, not external factors.

I read the other day about some recent brain experiments reported in a book dealing with the psychology of the mind [Carl Sagan's *The Dragons of Eden*]:

In one case of electrical stimulation of the occipital lobe, which is concerned with vision, the patient reported seeing a fluttering butterfly of such compelling reality that he stretched out his hand from the operating table to catch it. In an identical experiment performed on an ape, the animal peered intently, as if at an object before him, made a swift catching motion with his right hand, and then examined, in apparent bewilderment, his empty fist.

In this tendency to project inner factors as outside ones and then to chase after the projection, man is no different from a chimp.

People have to relate their egos to others' egos, and here again we keep running after mirages. We think we have found or gained something great, but then it fails us, or rather we fail. We



think, “This time I am really in love. This is finally the right person.” Then after a few days, “Oh, that was not it.”

The corrective is given here as “having few desires.” We are so blinded by our desires that all we see are the desires themselves. But if you can minimize this tendency toward projection and desire, then you can get into a dialogue with the Absolute within. Of course, once you have succeeded in cultivating this dialogue, you will see that selfsame Absolute outside also. It is here that you may sense a calling or a mission in your life. This can be shared with others, provided they also stand on neutral ground. This way your attempt to both realize and actualize your highest values can work. Otherwise it doesn't.