

11/5/19

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 2

Mitchell's translation is excellent, but I think LeGuin's is the best of all:

Soul Food

Everybody on earth knowing
that beauty is beautiful
makes ugliness.

Everybody knowing
that goodness is good
makes wickedness.

For being and nonbeing
arise together;
hard and easy
complete each other;
long and short
shape each other;
high and low
depend on each other;
note and voice
make the music together;
before and after
follow each other.

That's why the wise soul
does without doing,
teaches without talking.

The things of this world
exist, they are;
you can't refuse them.

To bear and not to own;
to act and not lay claim;
to do the work and let it go:
for just letting it go
is what makes it stay.

Her footnote:

One of the things I read in this chapter is that values and beliefs are not only culturally constructed but also part of the interplay of yin and yang, the great reversals that maintain the living balance of the world. To believe that our beliefs are permanent truths which encompass reality is a sad arrogance. To let go of that belief is to find safety.

Deb opened our discussion admitting it's hard for us to be conscious and not have the sense that one thing is not this, another thing is not that, and because of this they can all be rated as good and bad. She has recently had more than her usual trips to host dialogue groups at a men's prison, and she always comes home reflecting on how malleable good and bad are there: they are all really good people who did something awful at one period of their lives—usually while fairly young and clueless. Being with them now, it's much easier to forgive. She sees how we can bring this insight back to ourselves, to see how we judge people in ways that barely or no longer fit them. What we notice about people is due to our own characteristics, not necessarily theirs.

We read a number of translations, mostly quite similar but with important variations. It's fascinating how the Tao, being

indescribable, can only be indicated negatively. We must come at it from various perspectives—which is why we’re using so many translations—to try to get a fuller sense of it, yet what they leave out also adds to our understanding. The absence of something stands out as a kind of quality in itself, too.

The first verse (we’re going to stick with ‘verse’ over ‘chapter’) focuses on the Tao; now in the second duality comes in as its companion. After affirming unity, we now affirm duality grounded in unity. We wouldn’t have the world, without duality. We are reminded here to stay in touch with that unity as the basis of understanding. If you pick one side or the other and stand by it and swear by it, it leads to conflict and confusion.

Jan has been practicing this with satisfaction, and she told us, when you’re living your ordinary life and you find yourself going one way, try to go the other way, try to spread yourself out to get a more balanced view. It does take an effort, but then you find yourself with more space, more room.

LeGuin’s comment about our rigidity is quite restrained, “To believe that our beliefs are permanent truths which encompass reality is a sad arrogance.” It’s also a widespread and toxic arrogance, as she well knew, to imagine that our inner conviction somehow nails truth down to a fixed position. Scientists can be as guilty as the religious in this. Humans are oddly persuaded by the appearance of certainty, and become cocksure they are right and their opponents are wrong. Secretly anxious that we lack certainty in ourselves, we long for a savior to “lay it on us,” and there are plenty who oblige, for a whole spectrum of reasons, from the compassionate to the exploitive. The notion of the Tao teaches us to find our comfort in an open, flexible orientation.

Noting this, I asked the class think of ways the dichotomies listed in the verse are symbolic of everyday issues. We did very little with it, but we can return to it at any time in future classes. I did note that the relativity of high and low, for instance, doesn’t

just reference physical objects (My head is higher than the rug and lower than the ceiling, so 'I' am simultaneously high and low), but makes reference to social castes. The gulf between nobility and peasantry has been as terrible in China as anywhere on the planet, and it's been terrible everywhere for most of recorded history. Worldwide, we are sliding back toward it even now. Lao Tzu was subtly challenging the assumption that the rich are favored by the gods, they are a different type of person than those who are made to grovel for a living, who are seemingly cursed by the gods. Calvinism exalts this idea with especial cruelty, and modern capitalists worship a soulless version that doesn't even bother with a make-believe god, except to confound the gullible. Yet we are all, high and low, simply humans, and how we live is due to circumstances almost entirely beyond our control. In a very real sense, then, you can't have high living without lots of lows serving you, and the reason you are low is that the high are forcing you to your knees.

The socialist, democratic and communist revolutions of the past two hundred years or so have proclaimed the inherent unity of human beings, but have been unable to make it a viable reality. This is not an adequate reason to abandon the attempt, however.

I talked about the dichotomy of sound, which really makes a clear case for unity within plurality. Red Pine has it as "note and noise accompany each other." LeGuin has "note and voice make the music together." Mitchel, oddly, leaves it out. Feng has "voice and sound harmonize each other," which is very nice. Minford, "Melody and Harmony resonate with each other." My prized survey of twentieth century music, by Alex Ross, is titled *The Rest is Noise*. There is no clear dividing line between noise and music, the false dichotomy of this phrase. Much of modern music is incomprehensible and therefore ugly to many people. The music they think of as beautiful makes other music ugly, just as the verse proposes. I recalled how some cities play opera music in covered

bus stands—a friend told me about this and thought it was a beautiful gesture that showed how culture was blooming. Yet the actual reason is that gangs used to hang out in those areas and scare bus riders away, but they hate classical music, opera in particular, so they won't stay where it is playing. It drives them away nonviolently. The music I love may be stomach churning to others, and theirs may be to me. Yet it is exactly the same music. The only difference can be in our personal predilection, something we learned as we developed, and now have a remarkable affinity for. Our conditioning, in other words. Knowing this naturally makes us more tolerant, a happy value in a world where intolerance is being over-hyped and even revered.

Another value attuned to this wisdom is expertise in action. Duality causes us to *think* about our actions and try to control them, which impels a kind of stuttering—thought and action are not seamlessly fused. Many meditation programs teach athletes and other performers how to eradicate the “time lag” of their controlling thoughts and simply BE, which normally improves performance. We've all felt moments when we were “in the groove,” and life flowed merrily along, and also when our thoughts and actions were out of joint. Bill liked Mitchell's writing about this, from his Foreword:

A good athlete can enter a state of body-awareness in which the right stroke or the right movement happens by itself, effortlessly, without any interference of the conscious will. This is a paradigm for non-action: the purest and most effective form of action. The game plays the game; the poem writes the poem; we can't tell the dancer from the dance.... Nothing is done because the doer has wholeheartedly vanished into the deed; the fuel has been completely transformed into flame. This “nothing” is, in fact, everything. It happens when we trust the intelligence of the universe in the same way that an athlete of a

dancer trusts the superior intelligence of the body. Hence Lao-tzu's emphasis on softness. Softness means the opposite of rigidity, and is synonymous with suppleness, adaptability, endurance. Anyone who has seen a t'ai chi or aikido master not-doing will know how powerful that softness is. (viii)

This reminded Deb of the Gita's famous verse IV.18:

One who is able to see action in inaction and inaction in action—he among men is intelligent; he is one of unitive attitude, while still engaged in every (possible) kind of work.

Deb recalled her early years as a ballet dancer, how the teacher taught her “when you are really in touch with the dance you *are* the movements.” Bill thought that extending that kind of ability to our normal activities is a challenge. We need to remember to bring unity into how we act, letting go of our over-management. We are helped by the verse's last idea: the Tao never leaves us. It's there, even when we are struggling. Bill recollected the line from Confucius shared in the last class, “The Tao is what we can never leave. What we can leave isn't the Tao.”

I've also included the few trenchant paragraphs about this from Thomas Merton, which we read out in class, in Part II.

In merging opposites, our arch villain Deb likes to quote The Band's song Shootout in Chinatown, from the Cahoots album:

Confucius had once stated
All across the land
Below the surface, crime and love
They go hand in hand

Relax! Deb is actually not much of a criminal. This song was penned in 1971, in the heady time when the progressive movement

was still criminalized by the Establishment, so our crimes really were motivated by love: universal rights, pot and LSD, and being against the war were high crimes. The same was true in Confucius' day, when insulting the Emperor for amusement, or otherwise not acting like a slave, could net you torture and death. The implication is that whenever we break out of the rigid bondage of stereotyped reality, it makes a lot of people very uncomfortable. Some of them get nasty about it.

Deb added that in the I Ching, as soon as a movement reaches its fullest power, it starts to decline. Opposites are continually in rotation. In my ongoing attempt to make this relevant, I noted how the wealthiest people now are probably more remote from the rest of humanity than they have ever been, though there are plenty of other similar periods. With all that fabulous wealth, the edifice it rests upon is wholly undermined by lunatics, truly insane human beings. At least the ones out front are. So the decline (crash?) is already well underway. Historically, power is initially grabbed by reasonably intelligent people, but as they stagnate in their upper echelon, ever-accelerating decomposition sets in. Sad arrogance, indeed.

Bill recalled Ursula LeGuin's line once more: "To believe that our beliefs are permanent truths which encompass reality is a sad arrogance." It reminded him of his study of Patanjali, who also claims that we constantly mistake cultural truths for literal truth. I made the point that this is aimed directly at those people who, insecure in their self-doubts, insist on giving their favorite scripture (or science text) divine status as unassailable truth. The more uncertain they are, the more rigid in holding to their beliefs. Differing viewpoints become so threatening that some are even willing to kill to suppress them.

Deb stated we accept all this unconsciously, and read out the piece on Temperance you can find in Part II in substantiation, in

hopes we'll learn to recognize our foibles. Here's the juiciest part in relation to the class:

Joseph Campbell said the Garden of Eden was a metaphor for the kind of innocence that is “innocent of opposites,” a Utopia that the trauma of living has ripped us away from, a space we may have no memory of ever being in but to which we all long to return. This theme shows up everywhere—from biblical myth to behavioral therapy to Vedantic nondualism & Hermetic philosophy, which states “opposites are identical in nature but different in degree,”—highlighting its enduring significance in our lives. We can start by knowing there is always more than one truth to every situation, & by seeking alternative viewpoints to thicken & diversify our narratives.

Recall Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and that was why they “died.” Their death was to realize they were naked—innocent—and the knowledge of good and evil destroyed their innocence forever. They actually lived a long time, but they had to put “clothes” over their innocence. At the time, all they had were fig leaves, but they served the purpose. Clothes are the opposite of innocence. They stand for pretensions, personas crafted to interact with family and society. Even today a fig leaf means “a thing designed to conceal a difficulty or embarrassment.” Innocence is highly embarrassing to the pretender within. Without projections of good and evil, we wouldn't have anything to be embarrassed about.

None of us may ever regain full innocence, but we can draw back from the harsh exclusivity of “my way or the highway.” Yoga, Tao, Absolute, etc. gives us room to be inclusive. Bill cited Mitchell's comment about softness: being agile and flexible, not hardened. I reminded our new friends present that the Aramaic word translated as ‘evil’ in the King James Bible means more like

‘unripe’. It leaves room for improvement, for becoming ripe. Evil, by contrast, must be utterly cast down, since we don’t dare admit the slightest failing on our own part. This has vast cultural ramifications, such as the unrealistic demands we make on politicians to be perfect, and if they aren’t we don’t have to accept anything they say. Ralph Nader makes a poignant plea in a movie we just saw, *Corporate Coup D’Etat*, where a Senate hearing silences his eminently justifiable claims on the basis of some trivial nonconformism. Nader insists he shouldn’t have to be a paragon of virtue in order to fulfill his rights of citizenship, and he’s totally right. It’s just another way to sabotage progress.

The US is not alone in being centuries away from an intelligent attitude about personal, private behavior, but it’s perhaps the least excusable, as it’s the first modern nation founded on the basis of liberty. And now privacy is hardly even possible any more.

Before our closing meditation, Deb reprised some key ideas. The Tao is something you can’t leave—losing something is the result of possessing something. How can people lose what they don’t possess? You forget the work and then it lasts forever.

During the meditation it was easy to feel connected as “a roomful of people” instead of isolated individuals lost in an infinite emptiness. The indescribable Tao was nonetheless a tangible presence. Sitting together in peace and amity is truly a fantastic way to celebrate.

Part II

Beverley continues her haiku series:

2

Neither this nor that:
Study how opposites work

Together in life

* * *

From *The Way of Chuang Tzu* (Thomas Merton, New York: New Directions, 1965). Chuang Tzu is the source of most of what we know about Lao Tzu, and for that matter, Taoism:

The key to Chuang Tzu's thought is the complementarity of opposites, and this can be seen only when one grasps the central "pivot" of Tao which passes squarely through both "Yes" and "No," "I" and "not-I." Life is a continual development. All beings are in a state of flux. Chuang Tzu would have agreed with Herakleitos. What is impossible today may suddenly become possible tomorrow. What is good and pleasing today may, tomorrow, become evil and odious. What seems right from one point of view may, when seen from a different aspect, manifest itself as completely wrong.

What, then, should the wise man do? Should he simply remain indifferent and treat right and wrong, good and bad, as if they were the same? Chuang Tzu would be the first to deny that they were the same. But in so doing, he would refuse to grasp one or the other and cling to it as an absolute. When a limited and conditioned view of "good" is erected to the level of an absolute, it immediately becomes an evil, because it excludes certain complementary elements which are required if it is to be fully good. To cling to one partial view, one limited and conditioned opinion, and to treat this as the ultimate answer to all questions is simply to "obscure the Tao" and make oneself obdurate in error.

He who grasps the central pivot of Tao, is able to watch "Yes" and "No" pursue their alternating course around the circumference. He retains his perspective and clarity of judgment, so that he knows that "Yes" is "Yes" in the light of the "No" which

stands over against it. He understands that happiness, when pushed to an extreme, becomes calamity. That beauty, when overdone, becomes ugliness. Clouds become rain and vapor ascends again to become clouds. To insist that the cloud should never turn to rain is to resist the dynamism of Tao.

These ideas are applied by Chuang Tzu to the work of the artist and craftsman as well as to the teacher of philosophy. In “The Woodcarver,” we see that the accomplished craftsman does not simply proceed according to certain fixed rules and external standards. To do so is, of course, perfectly all right for the mediocre artisan. But the superior work of art proceeds from a hidden and spiritual principle which, in fasting, detachment, forgetfulness of results, and abandonment of all hope of profit, discovers precisely the tree that is waiting to have this particular work carved from it. In such a case, the artist works as though passively, and it is Tao that works in and through him. This is a favorite theme of Chuang Tzu, and we find it often repeated. The “right way” of making things is beyond self-conscious reflection, for “when the shoe fits, the foot is forgotten.”

In the teaching of philosophy, Chuang Tzu is not in favor of putting on tight shoes that make the disciple intensely conscious of the fact that he has feet—because they torment him! For that very reason Chuang is critical not only of Confucians who are too attached to method and system, but also of Taoists who try to impart knowledge of the unnamable Tao when it cannot be imparted, and when the hearer is not even ready to receive the first elements of instruction about it. (30-1)

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Deb shared her favorite Tarot philosopher, @thejessicadore, on Twitter as #thejessicadore.

Temperance:

The need to sort and categorize things as either good or bad is partly just our brains doing what they've evolved to do, but I think it's also partly a post-traumatic defense strategy to protect ourselves from getting hurt again. If you were hurt in early relationships you may notice a tendency to see people as either all good or all bad at any given time; an otherwise good person does something that triggers pain so you toss them in the "bad, terrible person" category, just to be safe. Tarotist Rachel Pollack wrote about how at the root of dualistic thinking is the fear that we do not know ourselves. We see things as either this or that because we don't trust ourselves to flexibly navigate the complexities & contingencies of life and still be okay. We see this concept in contemporary therapy models, too; dialectical behavior therapy teaches people to think in a way that accommodates & integrates seeming opposites, under the assumption that "black & white" thinking underlies so much dysfunctional behavior. A person who has never examined their tendency to view things in terms of extremes & opposites experiences depression & believes in that moment that depression is all there is in life even though just last week they were feeling connected & alive. Problematic, obviously. Joseph Campbell said the Garden of Eden was a metaphor for the kind of innocence that is "innocent of opposites," a Utopia that the trauma of living has ripped us away from, a space we may have no memory of ever being in but to which we all long to return. This theme shows up everywhere—from biblical myth to behavioral therapy to Vedantic nondualism & Hermetic philosophy, which states "opposites are identical in nature but different in degree,"—highlighting its enduring significance in our lives. We can start by knowing there is always more than one truth to every situation, & by seeking alternative viewpoints to thicken & diversify our narratives. By noticing where we believe aspects of life should be all pleasant or all painful, where we don't have space for

imperfections, & where to be right we must make another person wrong. It is our nature & also there's room to grow.