

5/12/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 20

We took on a challenging and unusual verse, with a fascinating variegation of translations. Bringing together a wide range of sagacious comments helped reveal its depth.

This is the third of three related verses affirming “the primacy of being at one with the Tao, rather than thinking about it as an ideal,” in Jacob Needleman’s words. It conveys a deeply ironic outlook that only gradually revealed its importance to us.

It begins by affirming that if you stop learning or thinking, your troubles will end. It implies a return to infantile innocence, which is explicitly noted later, and undercuts any pride we may still have about our own spiritual development.

The difference between abstractions like good and evil and yes and no, is seen as trivial. From the perspective of a child, the incomprehensible ideas behind those concepts are equally upsetting, equally foreign to their equilibrium. A child has to become learned, to grow up, before they can be properly distinguished. To a Taoist, this is TOO BAD.

After that there is much about “other people,” the ones imagined to be normal, in contrast with “I,” who is not interested in their follies, including fears, excursions, wealth, and mental assurances leading to well-directed action. “They” are bright and “I” am dull, busily obtaining what they want and need while I’m unsure what comes next. Instead of contentedly following orders, “I” am nourished by the Tao in the guise of the Great Mother’s breasts, another image of a newborn.

Part of LeGuin’s footnote gives the gist:

This chapter is full of words... [that] configure chaos, confusion, a “bewilderness” in which the mind wanders without certainties, desolate, silent, awkward. But in that milky,

dim strangeness lies the way. It can't be found in the superficial order imposed by positive and negative opinions, the good/bad, yes/no moralizing that denies fear and ignores mystery.

She adds that the differences between opinions like good and bad can only be understood by “clever” people—“a poor stupid Taoist can't make it out.”

Deb began the dialogue reminding us that this is the third of the three successive verses that underscore an inversion of our concepts of right behavior, the hierarchy of how we should be behaving that closes us off to our own inner self. She likened the sentiment to the last of Narayana Guru's hundred verses of Self-instruction, always worth repeating in full:

Neither that, nor this, nor the meaning of existence am I,  
but existence, consciousness, joy immortal; thus attaining  
clarity, emboldened,  
discarding attachment to being and non-being,  
one should gently, gently merge in *SAT-AUM*.

For Deb, “neither this nor that” means not knowing something in particular, it's being open to the unknown which will guide you in its own way. The order brought about by certainty provides little boxes for us to live in, in contrast to the Valley Spirit where we may wander unknowingly. These three verses are really advocating stepping out of the normal arena of oppositional thinking, so you can open yourself up to the unknown.

There were several “coincidences” where sages from our library worked their way into the class. Deb found a lost book by Robert Bly and a passage by Merton that bear directly on this verse. You can read them in our very rich Part II.

These verses encouraged Jan to feel the weight of social obligation and the limiting boxes Deb mentioned. It made her think

of the proverbial “they,” “they” do it *this* way. We hear it all our lives, so to truly cast it off, Jan affirmed you have to revel in the opposite.

Speaking of boxes, some of you are old enough to remember the song Ticky Tacky, from 1961. I’ve tucked the words in Part II and here’s a link to the song

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUoXtddNPAM> . Pete Seeger’s version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-sQSp5jbSQ> . Taoist-flavored folk music about the little boxes we live in.

I noted that there is a guru-paradox between this verse, with its warning against being pressured by your society, and verse 15, where we’re advised to be very cognizant of our neighbors’ beliefs. As always, we aren’t meant to make an inflexible rule from any of this, but to always meet circumstances on their own ground.

Red Pine cites two sages with helpful advice about the continuity between opinions and fears. Sung Ch’ang-Hsing says: “Even though ‘yes’ and ‘no’ come from the same source, namely the mouth, ‘yes’ is the root of beauty, and ‘no’ is the root of ugliness. Before they appear, there is nothing beautiful or ugly and nothing to fear. But once they appear, if we don’t fear one or the other, disaster and harm are unavoidable.”

For resolution, there is Wang P’ang: “Everything changes into its opposite. Beginning follows end without cease. But people think everything is either beautiful or ugly. How absurd! Only the sage knows that the ten thousand ages are the same, that nothing is gained or lost.”

As you can see, we were getting into deep water. I wondered how the verse was striking each of us, especially considering that this seemingly envious and rejective state of mind was typical of my early attitude, and, really, many of many peers. Unrefined, it conveys a certain integrity and pride about how we are doing, and I wondered if people were confident that it’s okay to feel that way.

Alienation from a society that so many around us take pride in can make us get down on ourselves, and there was little support in our childhood for this type of, well, *sane* attitude. Lao Tzu is telling us we are infinitely valuable just as we are, we don't have to be doing anything in particular to ratify our existence. If we had only known!

Charles, who I know shares my feelings on this, simply said, "This is me." A natural yogi/seer, he was convinced for many years of his inferior status as a misfit. The verse glorifies misfits, so long as they are authentic. It's possible to be one and remain inauthentic, of course, but haven't we gotten beyond that?

Moni told us that all the studies are helping her a lot, without specifics. It's nice to hear, regardless.

Karen told us what I was most hoping for: "When I first read the verse, I wondered what is it all about? Then I began to see it's exactly how I've felt through some of what we're going through now." She's a helping type person, so not having something to do that is useful to someone else, and just sitting around her house reading and doing meaningless work, made her question her value. "Now I realize I have a great gift to just be, I don't have to do something to make myself worthwhile." Sure, we want to be important to others, but we should first value ourselves so we don't seek that valuation in other people's assessments of us. That's never going to be enough. Karen suspects that much of the noise of demonstrating and swaggering around carrying guns these days is another futile way of feeling empowered, of seeking ratification from others. If you need that you're always going to be jumping through hoops.

Deb responded that it's almost as if doing nothing is the necessary thing when there is so much violent opposition and conflict around. 'Nothing' is like a vast open space, and she gets the feeling that being in it is what's being recommended. Andy agreed that this is a life-affirming ideology.

*Meditations on the Way* (MOTW), includes a classic excerpt in the spirit of the verse: When Rabindranath Tagore came to visit Narayana Guru, he prostrated at the Guru's feet and showered him with praise for all the great work he was doing in the area of social reform and betterment for the people. The Guru's reply was not delayed, "Neither have we done anything in the past nor is it possible to do anything in the future. Powerlessness fills us with sorrow." (A more complete excerpt is in Part II.) This is followed by a memory of Nitya's:

Nataraja Guru said that when he was a young student taking physics and his class was given their practical examination, all the other boys and girls finished with it in no time, but he took all day on it. During lectures and discussions they all assured the teacher that they understood, but he knew he did not yet understand.

The main point of all this is we don't need to ratify ourselves by performing acts, though that's so much a part of our psyche! Can't we just accept our existence as the crowning glory of the universe? Without getting a swelled head about it? We need to know we are worthwhile to begin with, as everything else depends from it. The verse is all about our beginning state of mind. An infant doesn't doubt their existence: that's an abstraction far in the future, after they've become learned. They aren't even grateful they exist: *being* is even purer than that.

The innocence of infancy is a crucial thread in the verse, but we didn't talk about it as such. Rather like the infant, the Taoist is homeless. Minford writes: "Taoist Hermits living in obscurity, with 'no place to go,' like poor rustics with no Home, were a favorite subject for Chinese poets and artists through the ages, exemplars of the Natural Life. Sometimes they were to be

encountered in the suburbs; more often they were sought out deep in the mountains.”

In MOTW, Cherian said, “A child initially smiles spontaneously, but once it *learns* how and when to smile, it begins to deliberate. Deliberation breaks the flow of the Way as it expresses itself in human nature. It occurs to me that all philosophies are second-thoughts and afterthoughts. Are they therefore a deviation from spontaneity?”

Pine cites Ts’ao Tao-Ch’ung about the symbolism: “People all seek external things, while sages alone nourish themselves on internal breath. Breath is the mother, and spirit is the child. The harmony of mother and child is the key to nourishing life.”

And why do we continue to depend on external verification of our value measurements, even as adults? We don’t have to look far these days for examples of the insane behavior of so-called grown-ups. The River Master’s line, “Others are joyful and dissolute, driven by Emotions and Desire, greedily anticipating a Great Feast, dissatisfied with their lot,” called up a recent near-riot at an ice cream parlor on Mother’s Day, an ultimate absurdity: <https://www.capecodtimes.com/news/20200511/unruly-customers-challenge-for-struggling-cape-cod-businesses> .

The Gita is in accord, referring to demonic men in chapter XVI:

15 & 16) I am rich and well-born; who else is like me? I will sacrifice; I will give; I will rejoice”—thus deluded by ignorance, maddened by many thoughts, caught within the snare of confusing values, addicted to lustful gratifications, they fall into an unclean hell.

The resolution is dialectic, as always. Bill shared the Mitchell end notes, including: “Understanding is delusion; not understanding is indifference. But when you reach the unattainable

Tao, it is like pure space, limitless and serene. Where is there room in it for yes or no?”

Fear is portrayed in the verse as an unhealthy attitude imparted by group thinking, so it's likely to mean fear of being different more than fear of pain and suffering. Being such a broad category, the translations interpret fear in a variety of ways. Lao's: "What others fear/one must also fear," sounds the most contagious. Pine's and LeGuin's are similar, though less imperative. Hamill has, "What others fear/ becomes our wilderness of fear," a step removed. Feng, by contrast, definitively makes the opposite point: "Must I fear what others fear? What nonsense!" Mitchell generalizes Feng's attitude about fear to "all values," and likewise ridicules the pressure to conform to them.

Minford quotes Arthur Waley on this: "The Taoist, who is the antithesis of other men, cannot obey these conformist rules. Fear, pettiness, meanness—all those qualities that pollute the 'temple of the mind'—are due to a shrinkage of the life-spirit." This goes to the heart of the matter. True spirituality enhances the life energies, while battered adult children struggle to preserve the illusory remnant left to them by their heritage. Self-confidence provides an abundance of resilience, absent the anxiety that it will disappear. The Taoist sees that being dependent on the dispensations of strangers is an uncertain posture. The Vedantin recognizes those purported dispensations as evanescent illusions to begin with.

MOTW includes an important caveat about the verse's attitude:

Peter reported that in spite of seeing wisdom in the sage's solitude and asocial vision, he personally felt a bit uncomfortable with the extent of the alienation and subtle arrogance implied in seeing the people as "vulgar" and of claiming that they are happy while he alone suffers. Peter

suggested, “It is indeed important to discriminate between conventional values and deeper values of a perennial nature but once one has done so, one need no longer fear or look down on what he has rejected.”

My guess is Lao uses the word ‘vulgar’ in its archaic form, meaning simply the common people. But Peter’s point is well taken. The surface reading of the verse has a dualistic air of negative superiority. It takes a careful reading to neutralize it and bring the purport into balance. Carolyn addresses this right away:

Carolyn said that she didn’t see the sage’s statements as being arrogant or as complaining that others are happy whereas he is not. “People think that what they are seeking is joy, when in reality their joys and pleasures may be quite superficial. They think that their own home is enough, when there is a wider world they can identify with. They don’t see beyond their own narrow purposes. They have a clarity [Lao’s word], but that clarity is only partial and transient.”

MOTW contains an unusual conclusion from Nitya:

Greer wanted to add that there was a seeming contradiction between the sage being like a calm sea and a high wind. Was it saying the sage is at once everything (the high wind) and nothing at all (the calm sea)?

Guru said that he purposely had been reserving his comments on these two lines, as well as the last two, all of which go together. “The calm sea is the Mother. The high wind is the ‘I’, which is also the son. Throughout there is a bipolarity between the high wind of self-consciousness and its continual source of nourishment, the calm sea. The relationship is much like that of mother and son.”



This is definitely a stretch, possible due in part to the translation, but it's a nice image anyway.

The wind doesn't appear in a number of the translations, and it's possible that "the high wind that never ceases," was meant to go with "The multitude all have a purpose," and doesn't relate to the sage at all. Mitchell has "I blow as aimless as the wind," but that's clearly an extrapolation. I'd been thinking about how the blast and counterblast of accusations characterizing our political sphere these days is like a howling windstorm, a hurricane full of purpose and direction, each side trying its best to knock down the opposition. On top of that, the force of social determination is a high wind blowing steadily all the time, with guardians of social convention dictating what we are going to do and the rest of us having to defy them to defend our integrity. What would happen if the wind simply stopped blowing? What could the calm teach us? It looks to many of us as if the pandemic is just such a "time out," where the quiet allows us to perceive the insanity of the ongoing sturm und drang perfectly clearly.

Mitchell quotes Pai-chang's wry observation: "After enlightenment one is still the same as one was before. One is simply free from unreality and delusion. The ordinary person's mind is the same as the sage's, because Original Mind is perfect and complete in itself. After you have had this recognition, please don't lose it." In other words, don't let arrogance creep back in.

Jan discerned that in a patriarchal society such as ancient China, the Taoists were balancing it out with the Great Mother. Deb talked about the rigidly constrained lives of women at the time, how they always had to behave in a certain way. Even their feet were severely bound. By contrast Taoism is very feminine. Minford quotes Duyvendak: "The Taoists certainly elevated the feminine as symbol of the Tao, but they did not personify the Tao

as a goddess.” They knew a mere goddess would have undermined their subversiveness.

Winding down to the meditation, Deb read out two poems from *The Boat Untied*, a book of illustrated Tang Dynasty poems:

### Reply to a Friend by Tai Shan

Occasionally under these pine trees  
the rock serves as my bed,  
the boulder my pillow.  
We don't count days by the calendar  
in these mountains, nor do we notice  
the passing of the year, except  
we know it takes place at the end of the coldest season.

### Where the Deer Live by Wang Wei

In these quiet mountains far from men  
One hears only faint sound of human voice.  
The late afternoon sunrays  
filtering through the deep woods  
cast long shadows on the green moss.

For our closing meditation we read, thanks to Minford, Lu Ji (261-303), “Summoning a Hermit”:

To still the Unquiet Mind  
The Hermit dwells  
In a secluded valley,  
In the morning  
Gathers cress  
By the southern waterfall,  
In the evening

## Rests

At the foot of the western hills...  
The plashing of the mountain stream,  
The cleansing jade-song of the cascade:  
Perfect Joys such as these,  
The unsullied Simplicity  
Of the Uncarved Block,  
Cannot be feigned.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku, with an introduction this time:

The Taoist teacher seems to be in a rather saturnine mood here; the verses come over as more personally bitter about the foolishness of worldly life and values. There's a feeling of 'What's the point when people never do listen to reason and sensible advice'. Perhaps he's being sarcastic in the poem about how he is the one labelled as foolish. In conclusion he says he will turn his back on the whole mess and retreats to a solitary way of life 'nourished only by the Great Mother'.

Worldly amusements  
pass me by: all that busy  
busy fret and fume

is not for me. I  
live quietly, nourished  
by the Great Mother

\* \* \*

This is an excerpt from a Message to Poets that Merton sent to a gathering in 1964 of Latin American poets in Mexico City. It intruded itself on Deb's attention just in time to weigh in for the class:

Let us obey life, and the Spirit of Life that calls us to be poets, and we shall harvest many new fruits for which the world hungers—fruits of hope that have never been seen before. With these fruits we shall calm the resentments and the rage of man.

Let us be proud that we are not witch doctors, only ordinary men.

Let us be proud that we are not experts in anything.

Let us be proud of the words that are given to us for nothing; not to teach anyone, not to confute anyone, not to prove anyone absurd, but to point beyond all objects into the silence where nothing can be said.

We are not persuaders. We are the children of the Unknown. We are the ministers of silence that is needed to cure all victims of absurdity who lie dying of a contrived joy. Let us then recognize ourselves for who we are: dervishes mad with secret therapeutic love which cannot be bought or sold, and which the politician fears more than violent revolution, for violence changes nothing. But love changes everything....

When the poet puts his foot in that ever-moving river [of Heraclitus], poetry itself is born out of the flashing water. In that unique instant, the truth is manifest to all who are able to receive it.

No one can come near the river unless he walks on his own feet. He cannot come there carried in a vehicle.

No one can enter the river wearing the garment of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin. He must know that immediacy is for naked minds only, and for the innocent.

Come, dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.

—*Raids on the Unspeakable* (160-1)

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Here's the section from *Word of the Guru* about Narayana Guru's meeting with Tagore:

Once came the poet Rabindranath Tagore, on one of his southern tours, to visit the Guru. In honour of the great poet of Bengal the people in the vicinity of the hermitage arranged a kingly reception. Elephants were requisitioned. He was to be brought in procession as far as the foot of the hill of the ashram. Musical accompaniments were arranged. The Guru stood in the verandah of his rest-house and himself ordered the best carpets that the hermitage possessed, to be brought out to adorn the foot of the seat of the honoured guest. The people thronged with the guest, anxious to hear the conversation between the Guru and the seer of Santiniketan. Each of the crowd thought himself the chosen follower of the Guru, and as space was limited, it took some time to establish silence for the conversation. The two veteran leaders greeted with joined palms, and sat down facing one another. The seer of Bengal broke the deep silence that marked their meeting, and complimented the Guru on the 'great work' he was doing for the people. The Guru's reply was not delayed, 'Neither have we done anything in the past nor is it possible to do anything in the future. Powerlessness fills us with sorrow.' His words sounded an enigma to some. Others thought he was just joking. Still others examined the logic of the statement. A characteristic silence followed the remark. The crowd looked at one another for a meaning, but it was the Guru's face itself that gave the silent commentary to the words. Deep silence and earnestness sat on his features. Smiles of curiosity and the rival expectations of the

people were drawn into the neutral depths of silence by the suggestion that was expressed on the features of the Guru. All was silent for a minute or two. The climax of the interview was reached in silence where all met in equality. Usual conversation followed and the poet and the crowd retired.

The apparently unproductive Principle which the Guru stood for, was all the time ripening fruitful results all round. Some were merely seasonal expressions of his message. Others had continuity beyond the limit of seasonal cycles.

\* \* \*

Deb discovered a forgotten book in our poetry shelf, just in time for it to come to class with her:

These poems are the introduction to the book *Jumping Out of Bed*, which “is a collection of Taoist-inspired poems by Robert Bly exploring the joys of solitude, the interdependence of all life, and the delights of being rather than striving.” It was published in 1987 by White Pine Press in Vermont. The two epigraphs at the beginning are one based on verse 20 of the Tao Te Ching, and the other, loosely translated, from the Old Testament, from Job, as Charles spotted, and also Ecclesiastes.

All around me men are working  
but I am stubborn, and take no part.  
The difference is this:  
I prize the breasts of the Mother.

I came out of the Mother naked,  
and I will be naked when I return.  
The Mother gave, and the Mother takes away.  
I love the Mother.

King James version of this second verse:

Job 1.21: Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

Qoh 5.15: As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand.

\* \* \*

As with Deb's discovery of the Bly book, I invoked the "library angel" and opened Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu* to two stories that exactly convey the sense of the verse, The Kingly Man and The Lost Pearl. I can only share a smidgen:

The Kingly Man—

Lets the gold lie hidden in the mountain,  
Leaves the pearl lying in the deep.  
Goods and possessions are no gain in his eyes,  
He stays far from wealth and honor... Etc.

Ends with—

His glory is in knowing that all things come together in One  
And life and death are equal.

\* \* \*

Little Boxes  
Malvina Reynolds

Little boxes on the hillside,  
Little boxes made of ticky tacky  
Little boxes on the hillside,  
Little boxes all the same,  
There's a pink one and a green one  
And a blue one and a yellow one  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses  
All went to the university  
Where they were put in boxes  
And they came out all the same  
And there's doctors and lawyers  
And business executives  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.

And they all play on the golf course  
And drink their martinis dry  
And they all have pretty children  
And the children go to school,  
And the children go to summer camp  
And then to the university  
Where they are put in boxes  
And they come out all the same.

And the boys go into business  
And marry and raise a family  
In boxes made of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same,  
There's a pink one and a green one



And a blue one and a yellow one  
And they're all made out of ticky tacky  
And they all look just the same.

Source: [Musixmatch](#)

Songwriters: Malvina Reynolds

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