

5/19/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 21

The twenty-first verse turns us back from the focus on interpersonal matters of the last three installments to contemplatively peer into the depths of our inner self. As you might expect, this favors meditation more than discussion. We were perked up by former classmate Anita joining us from the wilds of Idaho, thanks to the Zoom feature, and we had ample time to catch up with her. Longtime notes readers will remember her quick wit and thoughtful analysis, among other stellar qualities.

Our translations, all of them excellent, cover a wide range. LeGuin titles it *The Empty Heart*, reflective of the all-powerful emptiness at the core of existence, named the Tao in this book. Tao is also the irrefutable “This” of the conclusion, akin to the Vedantic berry in the palm of your hand—a most palpable reality. Needleman’s comments reflect this:

The great metaphysical visions and philosophies of the past are invariably based on what has been directly seen within oneself in the higher states of stillness and meditation. Metaphysics, whether Judeo-Christian, Hindu, Pythagorean, or Taoist, has always been based on experience—inner experience as the mirror of the universe. Such teachings about the cosmos are never mere speculation or based solely on extrapolations from sense observations of the outer world.... Only, one must learn how to look within.

We might as well begin with the ending, where the verse is headed. All muse something like How do I know? Because of This. Only Mitchell elaborates: Because “I look inside myself and see.” Minford at least makes sure we know that ‘this’ is the Tao. Otherwise, it comes as an abrupt ending, meant I guess to cut off

idle speculation, to prevent the reader from wrestling with what ‘this’ is. We are used to stories that build up to a climax, and the punchline ‘this’ hits home as an anti-climax.

So much for the ending. The verse starts with emptiness, empty virtue. The Virtuous Tao is empty, yet it contains images. In a couple, the images contain a creature (Pine) or a form (Feng), probably due to a different version being used. Either way, the images or forms have an essence, and their Essence brings things about. That makes things manifest, so they can be verified. We end with conviction, rather than pie in the sky.

Hamill tells us that the virtue (the very *Te* of Tao Te Ching) is a *virile* virtue, implying its creative power: “It conveys a sense of ethical or moral power, energy, and dynamism, the ethical forces of nature—virtuous power, or the power of virtue.” Minford’s is the only other version with titles, and for this he has Grand Power, taken directly from the River Master’s comments he cites. Emptiness and power are the same thing in Taoism....

Everyone in the universe seems to have a copy of the Mitchell, and I recommend reading it. He wends far from the literal to reveal what surely must have been the intent of the mysterious wording. I’ll reprint one verse, the one that drew a surprised and knowing laugh from everyone. “She” is the Master:

The Tao is dark and unfathomable.  
How can it make her radiant?  
Because she lets it.

Sweet!

Deb opened our discussion musing on the integration of This and Tao, and how the sense of it is reflected in Andy’s painting over my piano—the one that appears in miniature as the cover illustration for *That Alone, the Core of Wisdom*. (After the

quarantine, I recommend a pilgrimage to witness the grand version up close.) Deb described the blue pool in the center (I see it as an underground aquifer) as dark and seemingly empty, yet when looked at closely, all sorts of embedded images come to the surface. They are in there, but not visible from any distance. Like that, in this verse all the things we understand and relate to rise up out of the shadowiness, the vague and misty Tao.

Actually, we are telescoping through the verse back into existence from the emptiness of the beginning—a kind of backwards movement that has a quieting and stilling effect, achieved by thwarting our expectations, I suppose. We have just had three verses about the taming of social and rulership discord, (even if you only rule over the tiny room you inhabit...) and now we're back to directly addressing the Tao itself. It's most salient qualities are emptiness and virtue. While the verse also refers to imagery and substance, the thisness of the world, it's passing through those several dimensions from its grounding in the pulsating heart of nothingness.

Red Pine's sages take on the misty mysteriousness of the verse. Wang Pi: "Only when we take emptiness as our virtue can our actions accord with the Tao." Huang Yuan-Chi: "Emptiness and the Tao are indivisible. Those who seek the Tao cannot find it except through emptiness. But formless emptiness is of no use to those who cultivate the Tao." That's right: empty emptiness is no good! Emptiness has got to have form to have power. Yen Ling-Feng: "Without the Way, Virtue would have no power. Without Virtue, the Way would have no appearance." Ch'eng Hsuan-Ying: "Outside of the Tao, there are no things. And outside of things, there is no Tao." We can clearly see the dialectical treatment necessitated by the verse, and how comfortable the sages are with it. No bald assertions, please.

Anita shared a paragraph from a promising website, Center Tao (<https://www.centertao.org/>), relating the concepts of power

and emptiness to physics, which she found most helpful. We think things are solid but they're not, they're jumping around, eluding our grasp, and if analyzed enough they simply disappear. The particles, atoms and molecules we are certain make up our world are as dark to our normal consciousness as any spiritual concepts, like Tao, for instance. (I interjected that they probably are equally true, too.) Anita included the idea of indeterminacy from quantum physics: in regard to going into the center, if we break it down far enough, just trying to observe it makes it indistinct.

Emptiness, emptiness everywhere, nor any drop to drink!

I agreed that either way we have only images, though the modern belief leans more toward quarks than the Tao. Particles are useful, or useable, in technological terms. They work well if left alone, which is the Taoist approach, but they can also be manipulated, which is the moneymaking approach. We have that in math, too, where imaginary numbers allow for many useful equations.

Bill read Mitchell's end note, which ends: "the true name of eternity is Today." Bill's assertion was that we can make up all these ways of describing the world, but the one certain reality is that it all exists in this moment. He's right: we are paring down our imaginations to the minimum, which leaves us with Now, or Today. And of course we've never left Here, nor could we.

Pine is the only of our translators who emphasizes the *waxing and waning* of all the elements of the verse, in keeping with the lunar image at the core of Chinese philosophy. The moon being a symbol of our consciousness, the waxing and waning is as much about our awareness, which is acute at times and less so at other times. This verse is about our engagement with our world, how we often tune it out, barely even aware we exist, interspersed with periods of intense engagement. We covered this facet extensively in the first Class Notes for the course, now posted if you'd like a

review: <https://nitya-teachings.weebly.com/class-notes---tao-te-ching.html> .

To somewhat mitigate the mysterious and baffling nature of the verse, I read out *The Fasting of the Heart*, Thomas Merton's superb parsing of Chuang Tzu's ideas about the present verse, which is astoundingly relevant to now, as well. Thousands of years later, warlords are still very much with us. Part II has a link to the story, and an excerpt for your delectation.

Jan shared the single paragraph by the River Master, from the *Minford*, to settle us down:

The Grand Power of the Tao is Misty, it has no fixed identity, but there is nonetheless a Substance deep within it, a One, which brings about the Changes in All-under-Heaven, which Nourishes Breath-Energy and establishes Reality. The Tao conceals its Worth, it hides its Glory. How do I know this? I know it through the authentic evidence of this present moment, in which I see all beings receive the Breath-Energy of the Tao. I see them live and thrive in the Tao.

While still breathing in this beautiful passage, we meditated on a poem from Wei Yingwu, out of the *Minford*, for the close:

My office has grown cold today,  
And suddenly I think of my mountain friend,  
Gathering firewood  
Down in the valley,  
Returning Home  
to boil white stones...  
I'd like to take him  
A cup of wine,  
To cheer him  
Through the evening storm.

But fallen leaves  
Have strewn his mountain wilderness,  
And I shall never find  
His tracks.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

Joy in the moorings  
for those who know the unseen  
Tao is there with them

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There's a pdf online of Merton's *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, where you can easily read the amazing story The Fasting of the Heart, on page 50, that brings the verse into the immediate present in every way you can imagine:

<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>

Some very familiar habits of mind are dismissed, before arriving at the titled concept:

“Tell me,” said Yen Hui, “what is fasting of the heart?”

Confucius replied: “The goal of fasting is inner unity. This means hearing, but not with the ear; hearing, but not with the understanding; hearing with the spirit, with your whole being. The hearing that is only in the ears is one thing. The hearing of the understanding is another. But the hearing of the spirit is not limited to any one faculty, to the ear, or to the mind. Hence it demands the emptiness of all the faculties. And when the faculties are empty, then the whole being listens. There is then a direct grasp of what is right there before you that can never be heard with the ear or

understood with the mind. Fasting of the heart empties the faculties, frees you from limitation and from preoccupation. Fasting of the heart begets unity and freedom.”