

5/26/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 22

This wonderful poem begins with a more ancient section based on lunar imagery, reflected last night in a perfect crescent moon smiling down on us from a crystal clear sky. Some translations make it clear that the transformation described is something we can have a hand in, others that it is merely the progression of the natural order, just like the curved moon will always become round and then curved again.

Minford emphasizes curves in his translation, and later comments on the ubiquity of curved shapes in many forms of Chinese art, where there are no straight lines.

First off, the incomplete (P), curved (Min), broken (H, LG) or partial (Mit) is said to become whole. Feng has this as yield and overcome, Lao as bowed down then preserved.

The next image is similar: be crooked, bent or twisted to become straight.

Third, the hollow becomes full. Several sources note that a hollow in the ground fills with water.

Lastly, all are in accord that the worn or worn-out becomes new.

Minford cites Wilhelm, of I Ching fame, on these four images, as taken from nature:

The Curved is the new Moon, which becomes full. The Twisted is a caterpillar or rope which changes from a state of tension to one of relaxation. The Empty is the hollow in the ground that fills with Water. The Worn is the self-renewing foliage of a tree.

Needleman, quotes Waley on them:

To remain whole, be twisted.

To become straight, let yourself be bent.  
To become full, be hollow.  
Be tattered, that you may be renewed.

I loved the first line especially, because in my days of youthful folly, getting high was often called getting twisted. “Let’s get twisted!” we’d shout, as we rushed off into the woods. We regularly ridiculed “straight people” which meant those who didn’t get high in our sense of the term, but also stuck to the “straight and narrow,” puritans who were uptight about everything they did, not to mention judgmental about us, the Twisted people who were relaxed and uncertain. Being twisted made us laugh. Minford quotes Li Dou’s memoir of 1795: “Every new twist and turn leads on to yet another splendor.”

The middle section is expressed in a variety of ways, some more confusing than others, advocating less over more. Pine’s is about as clear as any:

those with less become content  
those with more become confused  
sages therefore hold to one thing  
and use this to guide the world

Pine quotes Lu Hui Ch’ing on this: “Only those who find but one thing can act like this. Thus to have less means to be content. The reason most people cannot act like this is because they have not found one thing. Thus, to have too much means to be confused.”

This Taoist tenet is as anti-capitalist and anti-American as you can get. The confusion generated by “more-ness” is plain to see. We have more more here than ever before! A sordid boon indeed.

Pine quotes Wang Pi: “As with a tree, the more of it there is, the farther it is from its roots. The less of it there is, the closer it is to its roots. ‘More’ means more distant from what is real. ‘Less’ means closer.”

Lately I have been pruning a lot of trees and bushes. In the past I have been reluctant to curtail them in this way, but now I realize the essence of the plant is in its roots, so I’m not injuring it so much as shaping its outward expression. The core of it is undamaged, so the pruning can even be a health-giving practice.

The “one thing” of the verse is the oneness we are familiar with, not an actual thing like a holy grail or anything. In case we miss it, Minford titles his whole verse Embracing the One. LeGuin gets this across beautifully:

So wise souls hold to the one,  
and test all things against it.

Hamill also:

So the sage embraces the One,  
unity in all things under heaven.

Jan read out the translation of Magister Liu, in the Minford, which includes a unique Taoist conclusion: “This is to Embrace the One, to be Woman, not Man.” No one picked up on it, but all these humble, self-deprecating qualities are associated with femininity, and if nothing else it shows why they are relatively rare in modern, male-o-manic societies.

Several brilliant observations stem from knowing the One, before a recap by Lao Tzu at the end to reinforce the truth of the original propositions. These lines are the most stimulating food for thought of the entire banquet, supplying very direct practical advice. There are several, roughly:

By not thinking of themselves, they are made visible.  
By not showing off they shine.  
By not boasting they succeed.  
By not bragging they lead.  
By not competing or quarreling, no one competes or quarrels  
with them.

Mitchell's translation is fabulous. Speaking about the Master:

Because he doesn't display himself,  
people can see his light.  
Because he has nothing to prove,  
people can trust his words.

Pine quotes Hsuan Tsung: "Not observing themselves, they become whole. Not displaying themselves, they become upright. Not flattering themselves, they become complete." It reminds me of one of my favorite mottoes: "Self-description is stultifying."

Deb opened the discussion in some perplexity at its contrary concepts, first thinking we are meant to balance the pairs, by looking for opposites to reach the neutral point, as in yoga. She admitted it is a challenging set of lines: be broken to be whole, twist to be straight, to be empty and not fill up things that you know. Then she realized the verse is about how all the things we try to do to be full are a way of trying to order or control the situation, and the Tao Te Ching is trying to teach us how to let go of our grip.

I find it helpful to look at the opposite of those propositions, because those behaviors are commonplace, especially in the public sphere. Politicians are strutting around like peacocks proclaiming their splendor, clearly demonstrating they are liars working overtime to manipulate people's perception of them.

The very effort undermines their intent, though it seems that the propaganda does succeed with the incautious types. The only way for them to not put that across would be to shut up, but that isn't how our society works anymore. In an authentic context, our natural innate being does not need to be spelled out, and the more we force the issue the farther we get from it.

In our world filled with advertising, propaganda and self-promotion, these truths are not practiced and likely unknown to many, but they are intuitively obvious to awake observers.

So many are trying so hard to prove themselves! Yet humans can easily perceive the self-serving thrust of their arguments, and it undermines what they have to say, except in those who are desperate to be led. One great thing about Nitya as a truly dedicated sannyasin, was he was never trying to be admired or make a living off what he said. He simply spoke truth, and it had a decidedly obvious potency because it was not watered down by self-interest. He neither sought nor shunned the limelight—all he did was accept it when it arrived. Nitya didn't proclaim anything, he was quite humble about his abilities, but you immediately felt his radiant power of knowingness, as with Pine's "not displaying themselves they shine." For that matter, Nitya was not naturally humble at all, but he had learned how to act that way, and it worked for him just as this verse says it will.

We have to give up all pretensions! To become President, you pile pretense on pretense, but to connect with your core it is essential to jettison them as soon as you recognize them. Humility helps. Nitya includes a famous quote of Nataraja Guru's, in *Meditations on the Way*: "What does it matter if I am foolish, so long as God is wise? That's the important thing." Deb reminded us that God is the same as Tao, and I added that Nataraja Guru was not averse to using the term, so long as it meant the Absolute.

Jan was fascinated with the idea of the curve. For her it hinted at not being able to look too far ahead, since you can't see

around the bend. She likened it to the gunas, the different states that we grow through, but can never be quite sure of. It's not that we need to try to always be in balance, but we can also accept our incomplete state of development. It teaches us to be humble, knowing that we are crooked, curved, and only seeing a small part of everything.

Jan reminisced about her lovely garden, with its miniature pool and waterfall, how she loves to put energy into it, but really she wants to hide there, surrounded by her plants. For her it's a special feeling to be enclosed in nature, out of sight, and it reminded her how she and her friends were always going exploring in the underbrush when she was little.

Several of us could recall the exquisite feeling of a child nestled in the bushes, in utter privacy, knowing we were totally alone, spying on whatever we could make out through the leaves. Deb reprised the recent Japanese practice of Forest Bathing, where you open yourself to nature without taking your clothes off. She likes how you are simply there in the spirit and energy of the forest, not manipulating anything.

Susan shared how when she's been anxious about the pandemic lately, she feels like she's bursting out of her skin. She's been able to remind herself to let it be, to let go and allow herself to be okay with the feeling. When she does that, the discomfort disappears and the anxiety dies down. These days she's feeling that she's on a roller coaster, holding on for dear life until it ends—hoping it will end someday. Yet she's handling it.

Deb echoed her, saying we all want it to be different than it is right now. Moni insightfully chimed in that this is exactly what is meant by Feng's translation, to yield and overcome: when you try to command your life in a certain way, you meet resistance, but if you yield then you overcome it. Yielding means to not fight against your feelings, but accept them.

I mentioned one of the quibbles I have with the style of the Tao Te Ching—and it may be unavoidable, I admit—that it makes it seem like you should *want* the second state of either pair, yet if it's treated as the goal, it doesn't happen. That kind of thinking immediately blocks the possibility. The goal becomes a dead end. The point is about letting go, and that has to include letting go of expectations along with your resistances. If you can really let go, then the Tao comes through you, possibly causing you to be *something*, but you don't know what it is (do you, Mr. Jones?). What you're really saying is I'm not full, I'm empty, and so on, and only if you truly accept that can the change happen.

Jan felt like that definitely made sense, and seemed to embody the meaning of the verse for her, but it's not always easy to do. Which drew a laugh—if it was easy, we'd have taken care of it a long time ago. We are saturated with goals. Switch two vowels and you have goals.

Mitchell includes a curious and provocative idea, that goes along with this thread:

If you want to be reborn,  
let yourself die.

Dying means letting go 100%. Mitchell's phrasing calls to mind all the people who ardently desire to be reborn, and even claim they already are, making a big noise about it. Those few we know of who really were reborn spoke of a dark night of the soul, total emptiness, nothingness, etc. They gave up in despair, even gave up the hope of anything coming of it, prepared to simply die, and only then were they reborn. And they didn't go around peddling any bromides afterwards.

The point is, we need to accept our flawed nature, just being where and what we really are. We've all built neat little shacks over to the side of our true selves, in hopes others will admire them

and love us on their account. We keep fixing up our shack to keep it neat and cute, but it doesn't heal our heart. Verse 22 insists we should abandon all those fantasies. In another group, Robert Yeilding recently shared psychologist Carl Rogers' famous and perfect quote, "When I accept myself as I am, then I can change." The opposite is strongly implied: So long as we're making a false version of ourselves for display, no real change can happen.

Deb told a humorous story about a boy who sneezed, and his teacher exclaimed, "You just sneezed!" The boy protested, "No, it was sneezing me." Deb felt we should be "sneezed" by the Tao, too.

Karen agreed. Sneezing is something we can't control, it happens of its own accord. Like life. I added that some people boast they are the best sneezer, hoping to get elected to high office.

Andy was intrigued by part of Wu Ch'eng's observation in the Pine: "By exploring one side to its limits, we eventually find all sides. By grasping one thing, we eventually encompass the whole." It reminded him of meditating on your breathing, how if you do it long enough with concentration, eventually there is only breathing, nothing else. You touch pure being through that radical simplification. His thoughts reminded Susan of Walt Whitman, how he realized that all truths are found in all things, how he would admire something simple and it would explode with meaning and beauty for him.

Anita is one who finds it essential to find a practical example in the subject matter, and she took off with Chuang Tzu's idea of the Empty Boat. She had recently seen a YouTube video on surveillance capitalism, and it made her think the "boat" of your computer looks empty but there are actually a bunch of people in there, you just can't see them. She wondered if the advice was to let go of her feelings about being watched, and how those people are trying to manipulate our decision-making, and just picture it as an empty boat.



I responded that the advice wasn't to pretend the other boat is empty, it was for *us* not to "man our boat," not to sail as if we were in charge, rather, to drift with the tides, in a sense. There's no reason we shouldn't know that the apparently empty boat of computer information is actually bristling with millions of people intent on making money off our carcasses. They're crashing their supposedly neutral boat right into us! I don't think Lao Tzu is trying to teach us to be ostriches with our head in the sand—that's our problem to begin with. He's trying to help us get a breath of fresh air.

Those of us who grew up with a substantial amount of privacy still assume there is something like that around, but certainly not on the internet, or any other electronic medium. Hell, these days your *toaster* is watching you! The watchers are not neutral, either. Knowing how our thinking is peddled for profit is crucial for living in the modern world. I recommended Eli Pariser's excellent primer *The Filter Bubble*, though it's almost ten years old, and the situation is much more dire (think of the Russians helping elect their Manchurian Candidate as US President in 2016). There are other exposés, but Pariser's is very readable and not too scary. The gist is that information is cued by computer algorithms to what we already believe and like, which creates a bubble that screens out alternative viewpoints. Computers are feeding us what we want to hear, not what we need to know. Plus, if you don't know why your attitudes are valuable to commercial interests, you should know, even if you're happy to be shown things you actually might want to buy.

Another way our empty boat is valuable is that nowadays anyone of progressive or artistic merit is prone to getting attacked by internet trolls, so it's worthwhile to be obscure and unknown. It lowers your chances. I have been brushed by a couple of them, and they're super ugly. They have caused lots of people to commit suicide, and wear it as a badge of pride. They certainly have

degraded public discourse to grade school playground levels.

As Deb put it, the person in tune with the Tao tries not to influence or sway other people and tries not to be swayed by them. You have to be aware that someone is aiming to sway you, and you have to be certain in yourself. When everything is uncertain, that's a very tall order.

I've included some fact checking website links in Part II, to help with verifying claims you read.

We returned to a more placid tone for the closing meditation, with a poem from Wei Yingwu, followed by a rereading of Mitchell's translation, which is superlative. Yingwu's poem seems to have been an inspiration for Yeats's masterpiece The Lake Isle of Innisfree, building a small cabin retreat, and searching for Peace "In the deep heart's core." I've posted the Yeats in Part II. Yingwu's lovely poem ends:

One day I shall finally Retire  
And build a cabin here,  
As Tao Yuanming did long ago.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

The significance of curves has the most emphasis in the commentaries. This can apply to the way life unfolds. Also harmonious curves are a major feature in Chinese art especially calligraphy. Nature is curved - there are no straight lines. Verse 22 is a complex set of ideas with different translations and commentaries. My second haiku is something I have produced as a conclusion for myself.

The Tao Way has curves;  
there are subtle signs for those

who know how to look.

Following the Way  
reveals possibilities  
of self renewal.

\* \* \*

We read The Empty Boat from the Merton/Chuang Tzu you can find here <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf> , on pages 114-115. It speaks especially to the part of the verse where the Taoist doesn't compete and so no one can compete against them.

The key image:

If a man is crossing a river  
And an empty boat collides with his own skiff,  
Even though he be a bad-tempered man  
He will not become very angry.  
But if he sees a man in the boat,  
He will shout at him to steer clear.  
If the shout is not heard, he will shout again,  
And yet again, and begin cursing.  
And all because there is somebody in the boat.  
Yet if the boat were empty,  
He would not be shouting, and not angry.

If you can empty your own boat  
Crossing the river of the world,  
No one will oppose you,  
No one will seek to harm you.

\* \* \*

The World Is Too Much with Us  
William Wordsworth

The world is too much with us; late and soon,  
Getting and spending we lay waste our powers;  
Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!  
This Sea that bares her bosom to the moon,  
The winds that will be howling at all hours,  
And are up-gathered now like sleeping flowers,  
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;  
It moves us not. –Great God! I'd rather be  
A Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;  
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.

\* \* \*

**The Lake Isle of Innisfree**  
By William Butler Yeats

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,

And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

\* \* \*

**Fact checking sites.** It's wise to check more than one for important information. The UCF (U of Central Florida) has a list for you. Interestingly, they don't list snopes.com at all; it has lost cred due to commercial influence, if nothing else. It was the first major one. Pick some of these:

<https://guides.ucf.edu/fakenews/factcheck>