

6/2/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 23

The opening idea is a timely one: the expressions of nature and the Tao are temporary, so how can we expect human efforts to last? With the dismantling of civilization and “the end of history” upon us, this verse cannot have ever been more relevant.

Civilization, with all faults, seemed so solid, so permanent. And now it’s revealed to be an elaborate illusion. Maya. Darn it! I’m going to miss it.

George Harrison seems to have used the opening lines as the inspiration for one of his best creations, the title song of his first solo album after the breakup of the Beatles, *All Things Must Pass*. His former group being possibly the most exciting musical experience in all history, the whirlwind of pop stardom at its peak had just ended, so he was really in tune with the spirit of this verse. I’ve put the words for his song and a link to listen in Part II.

The metaphor used in the verse is of the urge to ratify one’s existence through speech, comparing it to storms of wind and rain. For those who don’t know silence is golden—in other words, that their existence needs no proof, it’s self-evident—it is often replaced by the supposed reality of talking. LeGuin’s opening stanza is the clearest translation, and gets this idea across very well:

Nature doesn’t make long speeches.  
A whirlwind does not last all morning.  
A cloudburst doesn’t last all day.  
Who makes the wind and rain?  
Heaven and earth do.  
If heaven and earth don’t go on and on,  
certainly people don’t need to.

The need to talk endlessly stems from insecurity and self-doubt. Where all partial measures to provide security fall short, knowledge of the Tao or the Absolute is the lasting balm. Words inevitably communicate less than what they intend to describe, so a person has to keep on striving to make up for the gap; yet the more they try, the farther they get away from Self-assurance. Bill thought Mitchell's opening lines were just right: express yourself completely and then be quiet. The tricky part is how to express yourself completely, and that's where self-confidence has to already be in place before we can be quiet in a harmonious way.

A couple of times in my life I worked with non-stop talkers, which on a 24-hour shift was a real struggle for someone used to give and take, not to mention long periods of silence. My initial impulse was rejection and avoidance, but I began to detect the insecurity behind their false bluster. They literally did not believe in their existence unless they were generating tangible evidence for it. My hopes of reassuring the world of its ultimate meaning, its ananda value, came into play, and I saw how if people realized they existed, they could stop trying so hard to make a splash.

There is real kinship in this verse with the Sanskrit idea of words as *sphota*, spoken bombs we hurl out of our mouths that explode into meaning in the recipient's mind. Duyvendak, in the Minford, tells us: "Like short-lived natural explosions, Words are a form of Violence which does not Endure. Instead of striving to Achieve a goal, we should take things as they come, we should let them unfold. If we succeed, well and good. If we fail, that is good too. This is the Flow of the Tao."

Pine quotes Te-Ch'ing about this: "This verse explains how sages forget about words, embody the Tao, and change with the seasons. Elsewhere, Lao-tzu says, 'Talking only wastes it / better to conserve the inside' [verse 5]. Those who love to argue get farther from the Way. They aren't natural. Only those whose words are whispered are natural. Lao-tzu uses wind and rainstorms as

metaphors for the outbursts of those we love to argue. They can't maintain such a disturbance and dissipation of breath very long. Because they don't really believe in the Tao, their actions don't accord with the Tao. They haven't learned the secret of how to be one." True enough, but in my experience they can go on forever.

Magister Liu, a regular feature of the Minford chapters, paraphrases the whole verse beautifully: "The Tao has nothing to say. To utter Words is a form of purposeful Action. Like the whirlwind and the cloudburst, Words do not last. The Taoist utters Few Words and never engages in a deliberate quest for Inner Power, for the Tao. They come of their own accord. The Taoist's Heart-and-Mind Flows with the Tao, Trusts in the Tao utterly, is part of the Tao, part of the Power, Surrenders to Life-Destiny."

The second part of the verse hints at how, when you give yourself to the Tao, life becomes well tuned. Deb initially took it to mean that whatever we see in the world, that is what the world becomes. That's New Age thinking: we create our own failure or success by our attitude. But listening to the various translations, she heard it more as, if you give yourself to the Tao, it will take you to places of failure and success.

We may play a role in how we respond to life's ups and downs, but a most of that comes from outside influences we only wish we could control. The way I hear Lao Tzu's advice is to accept whatever comes to you. We will be called on to provide necessary responses most of the time, but we are prone to waste a lot of energy on denial and divergence. The sooner you accept the situation, the more effective your response is bound to be.

The various versions we're using list the twin achievements as success and failure (P, H), power and failure (Min), power and loss (LG), virtue and loss (F, L), and uniquely, insight and loss (Mit).

Accepting the positive half is easier than the painful side, though from a Taoist perspective that's unfortunate. As Lu Hui-Ch'ing says, "Success. Failure. I don't see how they differ." Both draw us out of our center into externalized, and therefore disconnected, thinking.

The lines about loss or failure are most intriguing, highly evocative and subject to several possible interpretations. Needleman, after asserting that this is probably the most puzzling part of the entire Tao Te Ching, quotes Richard Wilhelm, of I Ching fame, that the passage is "seriously beyond interpretation." Needleman first wonders what kind of loss is meant, ordinary setbacks or loss of contact with the Tao, and offers several subtle ways to look at them. After our long discussion, I assured the class that if 2500 years of Chinese sages couldn't pin it down, we should be undismayed that we hadn't been able to, either. The idea certainly does open a vast area for speculation.

My understanding is in line with psychology: we try to fend off loss or heartbreak, mounting denial and resistance. These produce chaos in the psyche, over things which we are often helpless to do anything about. At some stage of the grieving process, we have to accept the inevitability of the tragedy, and this begins the healing, the stabilizing.

We're not talking about theoretical losses. Generally, when you are facing an unavoidable loss, it's an undeniable, solid thing. Our state of sorrow and injury makes us wriggle in resistance, to gnash our teeth and rend our garments. It's part of the recovery process, so it shouldn't be suppressed. Eventually you have to simply accept what happened, realize it was just Tragedy unfolding. It can be a long process, but it's the way to healing. Acceptance has to come. Loa Tzu is saying you have to accept it or it will continue to eat at you.

Mitchell, whose translation wanders far afield yet makes the most sense, shares this view:

If you open yourself to loss,  
you are at one with the loss  
and you can accept it completely.

Deb agreed that acceptance was how we give ourselves to the Way.

Acceptance is like “surrendering” to the situation. LeGuin’s translation adds a little mystery: “Give yourself to loss/ and when you’re lost you’ll be at home.” There’s a sense in it not so much of tragedy but of abandoning your certitudes, which allow the Tao to enter in. Feng’s is “When you are at one with loss,/ Loss is experienced willingly.” At bit more effort in his than merely being at home.

Hamill pairs loss with gain, and instructs us to welcome both, which seems likely to be the original intent, in keeping with the waxing and waning of the moon. Pine’s is along these lines, pairing failure and success, and portraying them as natural features of the Way. Minford has Failure contrasted with Power, implying the more typical metaphor of rulership. In our time, extremes of power and failure are inextricably interwoven, busy with their Tweets.

Andy recalled someplace in the writings of Suzuki-Roshi he said to his students that when he looks at them he knows they are all enlightened. Until they open their mouths. It sounded like an upgrade of a venerable Americanism: Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak and to remove all doubt.

Andy’s point was no one can lose the Tao, but a sense of its loss can be apparent to you. You can become convinced that you have lost the Tao and you can live as if you have. As soon as we talk about gaining and losing we are in the realm of relativity.

It's a great point—no one can lose what they are made of. We experience this mainly in less abstract ways than “loss of Tao,” by feeling like outsiders, or cursed, or out of line. Most religions make a big deal about whether you are on or off their Bus, proving their God is a chickenshit little pinhead, not in any way connected with the ground of the universe. (Sorry, my patience is wearing thin these days.)

The Tao is not something that goes away. You only lose it by not being aware of it.

Deb waxed rhapsodic about the restoration of birds in the present human pandemic retrenchment, how they are coming back into former human-dominated territories. As humans have gotten quieter, the sound of the birds' chirping has swelled to fill the stillness. She compared the Tao to the birds: the Tao has always been here, too, but when we are quiet it rises up more into our awareness.

Moni talked about how this verse can be applicable to our personal life as well as the world at large: it is just what we are experiencing with Covid-19, a big change. Just as the rain and wind don't last, it will also pass. We have to remain in Tao at all times.

The class talked about coping with loss, something that everyone experiences, yet finds hard to talk about. Andy shared his feelings from last year of losing his dear wife and father-in-law, within a few months. His impotence to change the course of events was tremendously humbling and revealed to him his utter ignorance.

I concurred with how tragedy highlights many falsehoods in our basic assumptions. Our usual ways of managing the world become completely ineffective. We hurl words and thoughts and hopes against the stone wall of fate, and they hit like feathers.

Deb added it's not that you have no understanding about what's happening, yet all your ideas are ephemeral and forced.

When you are face to face with something utterly real, it is beyond your narratives. You hit a point where you have no words.

Andy acknowledged we have a default mode for experiencing things, and in such a loss it's exactly like hitting a wall.

Anita has just had a family tragedy, and she agreed that words fail. It's like being hit by a locomotive. It's a physical, overwhelming feeling when you have to face loss. She took a long drive after hearing the news, and then sat by the beautiful river where she lives. She was listening to the birds, and felt how the Tao was there in all those elements of nature. She has not yet been able to accept the recent loss, but becoming aware of her surroundings helped. As she was driving away from her secluded spot, she saw a movement in the brush, looked closely, and saw a huge moose placidly browsing, the first she'd seen in five years of living in the area (Eastern Idaho, along the Snake River). It was a special moment, and it did help her.

The moose reminded me of a sunset near Timothy Lake in the Cascades, when our first daughter Emily was approaching two years old. Standing together in the gorgeous twilight, snow-clad Mount Hood rising above the still expanse of the lake, a great blue heron flew up from the far shore and came right toward us. We watched in wonder for a long time, and as it flew overhead, silhouetted against the cobalt sky, Emily piped up, "Bird gives blessing." Utterly original in our family lexicon, the truth of it was undeniable. The natural world is aware of us noisy and ignorant humans, and is sending us blessings all the time. We would know it if we had but ears to hear.

Some of the translations close with something like LeGuin's "To give no trust/ is to get no trust." Pine notes that this is almost certainly a later addition; he and Hamill don't include it, but his translation in the notes is helpful: "Where honesty fails / dishonesty prevails." Minford quotes Waley: "If one uses disbelief

[Lack of Trust] as an instrument of government, the result will be a nation of liars.” It’s a shame we have to keep proving the veracity of that statement, over and over, when we’re already convinced it’s true.

We closed with a roughly 9½ minute meditation, tacitly in solidarity to the millions around the globe lying down for that period to commemorate the fascist murder by police of yet another innocent victim. Black-skinned, of course. When you aren’t moving, 9 minutes is a very long time. Without breath, brain death begins after 4 minutes.

Loss is inevitable, but causing it is in so many cases unnecessary, and utterly inexcusable in those sworn to serve and protect. The least we can do in a life of honor is try to minimize the damage, and to cause no further harm. Aum.

## Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

23

Be at one with Tao  
and you will be at ease with  
all life's ups and downs

If you wish to speak  
be brief, simple and sincere;  
This is the Tao Way.

\* \* \*



All Things Must Pass, by George Harrison, is in the spirit of this verse:

Sunrise doesn't last all morning  
A cloudburst doesn't last all day  
Seems my love is up and has left you with no warning  
It's not always going to be this gray

[Chorus]

All things must pass  
All things must pass away

Sunset doesn't last all evening  
A mind can blow those clouds away  
After all this, my love is up and must be leaving  
It's not always going to be this gray

All things must pass  
All things must pass away

All things must pass  
None of life's strings can last  
So, I must be on my way and face another day

Now the darkness only stays at nighttime  
In the morning it will fade away  
Daylight is good at arriving at the right time  
It's not always going to be this gray

All things must pass  
All things must pass away  
All things must pass  
All things must pass away

You can listen here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=it7mVLJaWIc>

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I thought the story Bozo the Button Buster, by Carl Sandburg, would add a little levity to the class, and be in tune with the verse, but it didn't fit with our discussion. Bozo is a real blowhard, and beneath his clothes there's nothing at all. It's a good one, and quite short:

<https://userpages.monmouth.com/~colonel/rootabaga/bozo.txt>