

6/9/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 24

This one has a very simple plot, and most of the translations are close kin. Lao Tzu counsels avoiding standing on tiptoe, going faster than a measured pace, showing off and boasting. It's all "excess baggage." Taoism is definitely for introverts.

In the first line, Lao's translation gives the impression of tiptoeing, of being quiet and sneaky, but all others concur it's standing on tiptoe, meaning trying to make yourself look taller than you are, which accords with all the verse's intent.

Nitya contributed several good stories, in *Meditations on the Way*. The first stems from the Lao version of tiptoeing, rather than standing on tiptoe. Nitya opens with an embrace of all Ways or religions as being essentially identical. Then he says:

I consider the Gurukula also to be a Way. Occasionally people sneakily tiptoe in just to see what's going on. They don't really want to devote themselves wholeheartedly to any search or way of life, they just wonder if maybe they can't sneak in and out again with something useful for themselves.

That's so true! There were always curiosity seekers edging into the back rows to see what was going on. The Gurukula being incomprehensible to the casual observer, they would tiptoe out again before anyone invited them any farther.

The second line is about striding out instead of strolling along at a comfortable walking pace. Pine notes that the word mostly translated as 'stride' also means 'straddle', and Hamill puts it that way: one cannot "straddle the way." Minford's "with legs akimbo" has the same sense. Pine quotes Ts'ao Tao-ch'ung, who emphasizes the dualistic aspect: "Those who straddle the two sides

are unsure of the Way.” The Way is of course always unitive. It’s a good point, but also divergent from the gist of the verse.

The next batch of cautions is somewhat curiously worded, but boils down to not blowing your own horn. LeGuin’s phrasing is impeccable, going away from the literal to convey the meaning in modern English:

You can’t shine by showing off  
or get ahead by pushing.

And:

Self-promoters never grow up.

Pine’s translation of the next line is more typical: “those who display themselves don’t shine.” Nitya rises to the challenge of Lao’s version, no easy task, having recourse to possibly his favorite quote of all time, from Rumi:

Regarding “He who shows himself is not conspicuous,” Rumi, the great Sufi, once declared, “Poverty is my pride and obscurity my refuge.” There is nothing like that—to not be conspicuous or to not show off. Even when you refrain from these tendencies, true worth will ultimately be recognized. If there is one tree in a whole forest which bears fragrant flowers, the tree has not to go in search of bees. All the bees will come to it.

Nitya, as is to be expected, has a lot to say about this section. I cautioned the class that since most of us don’t aspire to be full sannyasins, we don’t have to follow these guidelines, yet they are worth considering in the light of the culture of utter bombast in which we are currently drenched:

Two things are to be noted as important in connection with today's passage. One is that there is a conformity to the Way, and the other is a harmony with the congregation, or those with whom one is treading the path. The movement referred to is not physical. The path is to take you from where you are to where you want to be. If you are egoistic, then what you want to reach is something better than what others reach. But if you are not egoistic, then what you want is the path itself. Where it leads is the same for everyone. All who tread the path of the Buddha reach nirvana. All Christians attain salvation. All sannyasins are to come to *moksha*, liberation....

Sannyasins are not supposed to be interested in any external self-esteem. They are not to be in any way concerned with hairstyle or dress, etc. Secondly, a sannyasin is not supposed to care for the recognition or praise of the world, not for one's personal charm, nor one's ability, nor one's intelligence.

In the same vein, Nitya gives a vivid example:

Once when I was in Hardwar with Nataraja Guru, one afternoon he was missing. I searched for him and finally spotted him squatting with fifteen beggarly sadhus on the riverbank. As I came up from behind, I could hear him speaking to them. He was addressing them not as Dr. P. Natarajan, MA, D. Lit, Paris, M.R.S.T. London. He was asking simple questions and had them explaining to him about the nature of atman (the Self) and brahman (the Absolute). That attitude made it so easy for others to walk with him on the path. He did not say, "I am Dr. so-and-so, I know these things." That would have been striding. Instead, he was willing to go slowly along with others.

Minford renders the next line “Whosoever vaunts Self / Is not Truly Radiant.” Jan wanted to clarify this, because in the Gurukula we capitalize Self to mean the all-inclusive Absolute, but Minford is seemingly using it to mean the small ‘s’ self, the individual. Most of the Tao Te Ching translations sprinkle in generous helpings of capitals, despite Chinese, like Sanskrit, among many others, not having them. It does communicate a certain emphasis, but we should watch out for the kind of misunderstanding Jan spotted. She knew the meaning is the Tao is shining with the radiance of everything, and you aren’t supposed to boast about it or it gets hidden. We all agreed the idea is that the real shine of the Tao happens when you are quiet and paying attention and listening and not trying to impress people.

Pine’s rendering of the same line is “Those who display themselves don’t shine.” To me, the need to display ourselves is one of the holdovers from childhood that bedevil our adult years if we don’t put them to rest. I recalled how as a young child I felt it was important to point out things I saw and understood to the significantly self-absorbed adults who dominated my world. I didn’t comprehend what they were focused on, why they were so often distant, how they could miss things that were obvious to me. It wasn’t so much boasting as not being aware of other people’s needs and interests, which is natural for a child. For those accorded less indulgence from adults, “Look at me!” becomes an ongoing plea. It becomes an unconscious trait that fits in well with our visual, ad-based culture, and of course the educational system amplifies it even more, year after year. Wildly waving hands get called on, while the shy ones are bypassed. We become indoctrinated that if you don’t say anything about what’s going on, it didn’t happen. A mature person doesn’t need another person to participate in their experience. They know that beauty still exists, whether you are aware of it or not. It just doesn’t get you any attention.

I proposed that for most of human history, leaders could follow this sound Taoist advice of a dignified life, but once television and computing came along, leaders began to be chosen on the basis of extraverted visual displays that are essentially an echo of “Look at me!” Taoists will never be elected in the modern milieu, and it’s a shame. We would have to ban videos to level the playing field for quiet, thoughtful types to have a chance.

Lao’s version is more convoluted: “He who considers himself right is not illustrious.” Nitya riffs off this with another of his all-time favorite lines, stemming from the best-selling book of the early 1970s, *I’m OK – You’re OK*, by Thomas Anthony Harris. The most common mindset is I’m not OK – You’re OK, and Harris strives to normalize it to his title. Nitya comments:

“Illustrious” in this passage, is to be taken as the one who sets themselves as an example to others. Many people think they are right. Their watchwords are, “I’m OK, only, you are not OK.” Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has amended that as, “I’m not OK. You’re not OK. But that’s OK.” This is more correct.

Next are a couple of lines about bragging and boasting, which used to be understood as embarrassing or worse, before the era of loudmouthed louts spouting off to enthusiastic crowds of dingbats, amplified and distributed at the speed of light. Nitya gives a very Indian example:

“Not bragging” means to always level oneself in the eyes of others, as opposed to trying to raise oneself slightly above them. Normally, if one man comes up to another man and says, “This morning I saw a snake in my path, but luckily I saw it in time and escaped,” then the second man will puff up and retort something like, “That’s nothing! I can top that. Two months ago, out behind my hut, I saw a huge cobra, and it was only by

grabbing a nearby stick that I managed to chase it off.” The first man is thereby crestfallen. But what does one gain by such one-upmanship? There is no merit in having a greater exaggeration than another person.

Nitya invented a few great one-liners himself, and Peter reminded him of one of them:

At this point, Peter reminded Guru of the time they had been sitting together with another friend in a hotel room in Geneva. The third person launched into a long-winded story of several of his exploits in which, as is the case with so many of our stories, the teller himself was quite the hero. Guru had listened attentively, and finally when the person finished, he had gently said, “My friend, all that you have just said amounts to claiming, ‘My zero is greater than your zero.’”

Nitya by that time had learned some American idioms:

Guru continued: When something is useless in America, one says it is bullshit. Here in India, bull shit (or cow manure) has a great worth. In fact, it costs over \$150 for two truckloads. Maybe that says more about the worth of the dollar. Anyway, the kind of bullshit that comes from boasting and bragging is absolutely useless.

Meditations on the Way’s verse 24 is a greatest hits collection, and Nitya has room for one more, this time Nataraja Guru’s favorite saying, from Plotinus:

Those who take the path, walk their humble way. As Plotinus so aptly put it, it is “The flight of the alone to the Alone.” Even in company you are alone. Mohammad, the Prophet, declared,

“every Muslim is a lone pilgrim in this world.” There may be so many people around you, but you are alone with God.

Cliché Day in the Prayer Hall, but at least they’re fabulous clichés.

Deb talked about steadiness without exaggeration, of quietly being there in a place, with a sense of transparency. Being in the Way is not boasting or putting out a definitive hard-edged show, it’s about following the watery way of the Tao.

Anita immediately resonated with the watery fluidity. It made her think how the Tao is passive, and because of that people misunderstand it, as though it doesn’t move. Yet it’s always in motion. She loves water, how it takes the easiest route, and how strong and powerful it is even though it appears to be gentle and soft. It even carves the planet, and shapes it, rocks and all.

I chimed in that hard tools that are used to shape rocks wear out in the process, but water is never diminished, even after it has carved a Grand Canyon, due to its softness.

Jan connected this with the idea of the larger Self, how it’s all about being in this flow we’ve been talking about. The flow is the natural order that’s unfolding, much larger than us.

Speaking of the flow, Nancy pointed out the secret to it is the letting go: whenever you do an activity, it’s about moving on and not holding on to it, just moving through it.

Deb could see how we disrupt the flow when we proclaim, or even just think, “look what I did.” She was thinking of her satisfaction when she does something like can some food, a lengthy, old-fashioned project she does every year. She feels so good about it she has to take a few minutes to admire the line of cans cooling on the counter, thinking, “Look at what I just did!”

The real beauty of the way is that you don’t need to give that up. Nancy added that what you’re admiring might very well be wonderful, but not holding on to that moment of pride is what keeps it light and flowing. When you work hard or accomplish

something you can reflect on the satisfaction and beauty of it, but you don't keep it on display for months. You don't get caught up in owning it.

Nancy's advice reminded Deb of the story that someone asked William Stafford what his favorite poem was. He thought for a moment and replied, "The next one I write." He was never dwelling on what he had already written.

Anita politely kept us in balance, talking about her experience of writing something, then life goes on for some time, and then you come back to that piece of writing and you see it with fresh eyes, and it's cool. That isn't holding on so much as reexperiencing, and she finds it enjoyable.

The more self-satisfaction (or Self-satisfaction) we live with, the less we need to pick items out of the flow to make a big deal over. Waley, in the Minford edition, puts it this way: "The Taoist does not linger at the scene of success, or call attention to it." Mitchell's conclusion is just right: "just do your job, then let go."

Bill summed it up nicely: if you want to accord with the Tao just do what's required and then let it go. Needing to affirm it is not necessary.

The verse appropriately calls crowing about our accomplishments, overeating—excessive indulgence.

Chinese poetry has an incredible history, and Minford found yet another gem we used for our closing meditation, eighth century Liu Changqing's Snowy Night on Lotus Mountain:

Sunset  
Blue peaks  
Fade into the distance.  
Under a cold sky  
A humble cabin  
White with snow.  
Dogs bark tonight



At the wicker gate.  
Through the blizzard  
Someone is coming home.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

24

No self display: just pass by  
unnoticed. And when you act,  
do so discretely.

\* \* \*

Our Chuang Tzu reading was Active Life, page 141-2.

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

It's much more thorny than the Lao Tzu. This line got the most knowing chuckles:

Men past their prime prefer a dignified retirement, in which they may seem profound.