

6/16/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 25

The first part of Nitya's Prelude in *Meditations on the Way* was used as a guide for our opening meditation. Here it is in full:

What was my existence before my mother's conception [of me]?... What was the nature of my being when I was in my mother's womb?... After I was born, by what model was my mind, intelligence, volition and ego fashioned?... What law enabled and guided the orientation of my perception of the world to be one of coordination and coherence between the subjective and the objective?... Is the order that I see the Cosmic Order?... Is the beauty that I perceive the Cosmic Beauty?... Is the love that I love the Cosmic Love?... Is the joy that I experience the Cosmic Ananda?... Is my path the True Path?...

The verse itself is a lovely paean to the mystery at the heart of Everything. LeGuin starts it off particularly tersely, as "There is something / that contains everything." In her footnote, she says, "I'd like to call the 'something' of the first line a lump—an unshaped, undifferentiated lump, chaos, before the Word, before Form, before Change. Inside it is time, space, everything, in the womb of the Way." LeGuin's lump is Vedanta's clay, the eternal substance from which the ten thousand "pots" are derived.

The Womb-Mother of All comes out of this "silent... formless... solitary and unchanging, all-pervasive, inexhaustible," something, per Hamill. Lao Tzu admits the lump has no name and no definition, so he simply calls it Tao (the Way) and describes it as Great. The greatness flows on, goes far, then heads back and returns. A hierarchy appears out of it, of humans, earth, heaven,

Tao. Their relation evokes some of the comments that can be derived from this highly mystical, trans-verbal verse.

For instance, Ho-Shang Ch'ung, in *Pine*, presents it as descending and ascending dialectics: "The Tao is great because there is nothing it does not encompass. Heaven is great because there is nothing it does not cover. Earth is great because there is nothing it does not support. And the king is great because there is nothing he does not govern. Humankind should imitate Earth and be peaceful and pliant, plant and harvest its grains, dig and discover its springs, work without exhaustion and succeed without fuss. As for Earth imitating Heaven, Heaven is still and immutable. It gives without seeking a reward. It nourishes all creatures and takes nothing for itself. As for Heaven imitating the Tao, the Tao is silent and does not speak. It directs breath and essence unseen, and thus all things come to be. As for the Tao imitating itself, the nature of the Tao is to be itself. It does not imitate anything else."

Pine says of this grouping: "Lao Tzu's point is that the ruler, being only one of the four great powers of the world, should not be so presumptuous of his greatness, for he depends on the other three." The advice is valid for us mere mortals, obviously. Indeed, the older translations have a literal ruler or king, while the more recent ones have shifted to humanity in general. We moderns are toppling the kings off their perches, at least in our minds. In the more recent version, the Feng translation substitutes 'human being' for the 'king' it used to have, a trend in keeping with the contemplative outlook. Most of our translations, go in that direction, except the older Lao and surprisingly, the Minford. *Pine* stands astride the divide, featuring both ruler and humanity. We can certainly take the reference to a king to mean us as individual sovereigns of our lives, of course.

The hierarchy culminates with the Tao reflexively being what it is, while the other three are contrasted with their complements, as so well expressed by Ho-Shang Ch'ung. Needleman warns us

away from misunderstanding this, citing the Feng translation: “*Tao follows what is natural*: This should not be taken to mean that there is a level of reality, called nature, that is distinct from Tao. Tao is spontaneously what it is, through its own nature.”

Deb shared that the character translated as great, she knew, simply meant big. She is no longer an expert on Chinese, so there are surely other implications, but that’s its main meaning. Just big. Nitya in his Part II talk notes that brahman, the Absolute, essentially means the same: big enough to include everything.

Referring to humans-earth-heaven-Tao, Deb talked about how each of these four entities fills up space, they are extensive everywhere, and they work together as a community. It’s important for us to think about the Tao as us, not anything remote. In the different translations, whether king, ruler, humankind, man, she felt that Lao Tzu is reminding us that human beings are part of this field. She added, “How I understand that is that the text is laying out an unlimited space, it has markers that we recognize but they are eventually subsumed by the Tao.”

In the spirit of the verse, we didn’t want to talk about it so much as get high from contemplating it. The Zoom format inhibits intimate sharing, too, so we mainly read out tantalizing excerpts, saving our personal stories for the day when we can be together in a room again. I’ve begun rereading *Acid Test—LSD, Ecstasy, and the Power to Heal*, by Tom Shroder, which begins with a wonderful account of Albert Hofmann’s wholly natural experiences long before he made the most important discovery of the twentieth century, or, as he wisely put it, “I did not discover LSD; LSD found and called me.” That’s how it works, folks.

Speaking of which, last Sunday’s NY Times (June 14, 2020) has a long interview with another towering guru-figure, Bob Dylan. Asked about his plans to write new songs, he responded:

Those kinds of songs for me just come out of the blue, out of thin air. I never plan to write any of them.... They just fall down from space. I'm just as bewildered as anybody else as to why I write them.... The songs seem to know themselves and they know that I can sing them, vocally and rhythmically. They kind of write themselves and count on me to sing them.

Anyway, I read a bit from the first pages of *Acid Test*, which is a delightful book from start to finish, and gets my highest (sic) recommendation. Hofmann as a youth was walking in the woods in the “greening spring,” and

“All at once everything appeared in an uncommonly clear light. Was this something I had simply failed to notice before? Was I suddenly discovering the spring forest as it actually looked? It shone with the most beautiful radiance, speaking to the heart, as though it wanted to encompass me in its majesty. I was filled with an indescribable sensation of joy, oneness, and blissful security.”

He gaped, transfixed, for an immeasurable moment, then watched, helpless, as the preternatural light slowly receded into mundanity. He felt spent, at once deflated and transformed.

“How could a vision that was so real and convincing, so directly and deeply felt—how could it end so soon? And how could I tell anyone about it, as my overflowing joy compelled me to do, since I knew there were no words to describe what I had seen?”

This was only the first of young Albert's several similar encounters with the ineffable, and through them he became convinced of “the existence of a miraculous, powerful, unfathomable reality that was hidden from everyday sight.” (1-2)

Arthur Waley's contribution, in the Minford, conveys a similar tone:

The Return is "to what was there at the Beginning," to the "unconditioned," the "what-is-so-of-itself." By passing on and on through successive stages of consciousness, back to the initial Unity, one can arrive at the Tao, which controls the multiform apparent Universe. As Taoist Master Zhuang wrote in his Chapter "Far Away Wandering," wanderings "alone with the Tao in the Great Wilderness" are not external journeys, but explorations of oneself, back to the "Beginning of Things."

The idea is that this type of direct experience is utterly blissful and ultimately accessible, if we can unwind the accretions that overlie it. Karen did dare to share one of her "best days," walking in one of our area's most beautiful parks, Oxbow, which would pass for a wilderness in most countries. The trees lining the magnificent river spontaneously lifted her to a state of oneness with everything. It happened during the time she was living at the Center Family, and so was attuned to spirituality as the core of her life, but the change of mind came out of the thin air, like Dylan's compositions. As Deb said, it can happen without any planning. In fact, planning tends to add an extra level of interference.

Deb spoke for Bill, who was absent, in the way he might have talked about a favorite idea of Nitya's that the Zen moment is the moment *before* you notice it or define it or have the impulse to do something about it. Before your mind makes an identification, there is a "crack between the worlds," as Carlos Castaneda put it. We don't always have to choose the everyday side, but we are prone to. The extraordinary side inhabits the moment before.

Despite the challenge of speaking about the indescribable, one thing that occurred to me about the verse relates to when something is far away and then returns. I was visualizing all the

stages of the given progression: a state of stillness and emptiness begets a flow, which goes far away and then comes back. It struck me as an amazing meditation, how you are in something like the moment before, perfectly untroubled, and then a flow of ideas comes in, which carries you farther and farther away from the pre-birth moment, or the womb moment. We often let the flow lead us away from our center, but once you notice that it has taken you far away, by that very awareness you are bringing it back into yourself. The realization returns you to your eternal moment before. It seems as if the internal cycling of your attention is being described in the verse. In meditation, your consciousness recedes into the distance, but you bring it back into yourself in the process of centering.

Shy to speak about her own intimate experiences, Jan read out Magister Liu's thoughts, from the Minford:

The Tao is Nature. Nature is the Tao. All is Embraced and Threaded Together within the One, within the Tao. It is Ultimate Being within Ultimate Non-Being, Ultimate Substance within Ultimate Emptiness. The Tao contains all things in its Greatness. It is everywhere, it "passes on" from one place to another, through every Connected Place into the Distance. And from that Distance, it Turns, it begins again, it Returns. This Flow of Breath-Energy, this Cycle, is never broken, it has no End. Everything in All-under-Heaven is part of it, partakes of this Breath-Energy.

Andy shared the famous last stanza of Atmopadesa Satakam, with its invitation to gently, gently merge in undefined Truth:

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*.

Much of Nitya's talk in *Meditations on the Way* demonstrates the close affinity between the twenty-fifth Tao verse and the Upanishads. Since it's fairly long, I've consigned it to Part II.

Our closing meditation was based on the Tao Yuanming poem in the Minford, and the Merton/Chuang Tzu verse called Tao, on page 150, which bear a surprising resemblance to each other. The Chuang Tzu link again is

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

Chuang Tzu's *Tao*, which came to me out of thin air, begins:

Cocks crow
Dogs bark
This all men know,
Even the wisest
Cannot tell
Whence these voices come
Or explain
Why dogs bark and cocks crow
When they do.

The Yuanming poem is about Return, and also features dogs and roosters, plus hinting at the frustration of the barred cage of social distancing:

A dog barks
In the deep lanes,
A cock crows
Atop a mulberry tree.
No Dust and Confusion

Within door and courtyard.
In the empty rooms,
More than enough leisure.
I lived too long
within a barred cage,
Now I can Return again
To Nature.

May that sweet Return come to us all, sooner rather than later!

Part II

Beverley's haikus:

The unknowable:
the imagined first thing, that
informs all with life,

-call it Tao- that links
the great cosmic cycles with
human life on earth.

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Veteran campaigner Michael B joined us, and shared some new translations, reading out from a promising one by Stefan Senudd. Senudd includes this in his Preface, relevant to our class: "To be understood at all, the text needs to be contemplated and interpreted by several minds." His verse 25 keeps the king and rulership, but the early going is crystal clear and poetically expressed. (The verses are accessed far down on the page.)

Michael's note:

Here's what I read from this evening.

<https://www.taoistic.com/taoteching-laotzu/>

I rather like these translations here:

[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Tao Te Ching](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Tao_Te_Ching)

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These are the excerpts we shared from *Meditations on the Way*:

After the verse reading, Guru asked Cherian what his image was. Cherian replied, “the totality of heaven and earth is Mind. Mind is that unnamed thing which created heaven and earth. Silent and void—that is Pure Mind, Pure Knowledge, Pure Awareness. As Narayana Guru says, ‘Mind contains everything.’ Everything is created in awareness. It is capable of being the mother of all beings. Mind is the storehouse of all energy. Heaven and earth are its kinetic manifestations. Behind each and every event is this Mind as its mother. There is a dynamism which is like a chicken emerging from an egg. The egg is the potential, and the chicken is the kinetic manifestation.

Guru commented on his reflections:

This is a very beautiful passage. No other passage so far is so close to the fundamentals of Vedanta. Earth is to be taken as the ontologic, and heaven as the teleologic. It says here that what was before either of these possibilities, these dualities, was silence and the void. This is very reminiscent of the words of the Taittiriya Upanishad (2.4) that the Absolute is that, failing to reach which, “words turn back, together with the mind.”

Here it says, “It stands alone.” In the Chandogya Upanishad (6.2.1) it says, “In the beginning this world was just Being, one only, without a second.”

Further it says here, “It does not change.” In the Maitri Upanishad (2.7) we read, “Verily [the Atman] is pure, steadfast and unswerving, stainless, unagitated, desireless, fixed like a spectator, and self-abiding.” Yet Lao Tzu also says here, “It goes round and does not weary.” In the fourth verse of the Isavasya Upanishad it says, “Unmoving, the One is swifter than the mind. The senses could not overtake it, since it ran ahead. Remaining stationary, It outruns all other runners.” In other words, as fast and as far as the senses and mind can reach somewhere, this Absolute is already there when they reach. And regarding its not wearying, in the Gita (11.17) it says, “Know that to be indestructible by which all this is pervaded. None can bring about the destruction of This that knows no decrease.”

Lao Tzu goes on to say, “It is capable of being the mother of the world.” In chapter VII, verse 6 of the Gita, Krishna says, “Know that all beings have this as their common womb.” And then in chapter XIV, verse 4, Krishna says, “Whatever tangible forms are produced in all the wombs, great Brahma is their (common) womb, and I am the seed-bestowing Father.” In chapter X, verse 42, we read, “Supporting this whole world by a single fraction of Myself, I remain still, as ever.”

Lao Tzu says “I give it the makeshift name of ‘the Great’.” In Sanskrit, the word for the Absolute is *brahman*. Its literal translation is “the great,” or “the big.” It is that which is so big that everything is contained within it.

Here it is depicted as “great yet receding, receding and far away, far away yet turning back.” This is very reminiscent of the Upanishadic teaching that the Absolute is the closest of the close and the farthest of the far. There cannot be anything farther, yet it is within all. It is at once the in-dwelling, all-pervading, and the

all-enveloping (Isavasya Upanishad, 5). In the Gita it says, “without and within beings, immobile and mobile too—because subtle, That is unknowable; That stands far and near also.” (XIII.15)

Lao Tzu says, “Being far away, it is described as turning back.” Although we are born of the Absolute, we break away from our infinite base in the process of individuation. We then suffer and struggle, feeling cut off from our universality. Freud and Jung agreed that there is nothing more tragic than being severed from our own unconscious.

Regarding the last stanza: with your normal intelligence you come into the world. The world you perceive around you is your model, and you learn the law of the world. Then you have to ask yourself if that worldly law is in harmony with the law of heaven. Only then can it be considered the True Way. These need ultimately to come in one line—your way, the way of the world, and the way of heaven. If you agree with the world, and the world agrees with you, then you are on the true path. This is why the Gita (XII.15) qualifies the yogi as one who does not disturb the world and is not disturbed by the world. Nothing in me should disturb the world; nothing in the world should disturb me.