

6/30/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 26

This verse is one of those that seems almost trivial, but once you get into it, it reveals its profundity, homing in on one of the key predicaments of spirituality: do we get into the world, get away from it, or what?

Most translations are quite similar, leading off with heaviness being the root of lightness, and the still or unmoving being the basis of movement or restlessness. Minford uniquely has “Gravity is the Root of Levity, / of all that is Light.” There is a play on light weight and the light that shines, making the world visible. Levity, in addition to humorousness or lightheartedness, can imply frivolity or an offensive type of flippancy.

A middle section of the verse counsels us to always keep close to our baggage, and even when amazed by the splendor of the world to keep detached and calm. (Pine notes that with one slight alteration, the “glorious scenes” could mean a military or guarded camp, and some translations reflect this. The scenes are anyway what captures our attention, upsetting our detachment.)

A great ruler must always be serious and not act lightly. If light, the basis is lost, if restless, authority is lost, and it ends there.

Mitchell’s excellent translation calls to mind present-day rulers, especially his last part:

Why should the lord of the country
flit about like a fool?
If you let yourself be blown to and fro,
you lose touch with your root.
If you let restlessness move you,
you lose touch with who you are.

As we'll see, Nitya always takes the reference as personally meaningful, yet the reference to the ruler suggests the widespread devastation that ensues when contact with the Tao is severed. Both aspects are important.

Regarding the last lines, Pine quotes Su Ch'e: "If the ruler is light, his ministers know he cannot be relied upon. If the ministers are restless, the ruler knows their minds are bent on profit."

The River Master, in Minford, tells us, "A light-minded and Rash Ruler, who wallows in luxury and frivolous sensuality, forfeits the respect of his ministers." The more things change, the more they stay the same!

Seriously, though, we love our enjoyments, and wonder what the benefit of abandoning them might be.

Since Deb was playing hooky, I opened the dialogue with my reaction to the apparent denigration of levity, which of course is simply a semantic issue. That first line is where I felt the inversion of Taoism with my take on Vedanta, and of therapy in general. Vedanta teaches that samskaras and vasanas, the accumulation of life experiences combined with genetic dispositions, is a heavy weight that impedes us from being carefree and open to new experiences. On top of that, humor is a technique to downplay the seriousness of some of the things that really bother us: laughter as a release of tension and all that.

In Vedanta, you lighten your load by discarding your baggage, lightening up to become freer and more expansive, while here you keep a close eye on it. I do recall that in our stoned revelries of the ancient era, profound ideas, ones that made you really go inward, were "Really heavy, man." Heavy meant deep. So there are two kinds of heaviness, profundity and impedimentary, like deep do-do. I wondered if anyone else was puzzled by the emphasis on heaviness over levity in the opening line. Is it meaningless to be drawn to beautiful and wondrous

things, or is it something that stimulates us to understand existence better?

Jan thought being rooted in the Tao wasn't worrisome at all. She liked the idea of grounding, and ground is heavy. Stable. I concurred that gravity pulls us down towards the center, while lightness goes up away from the center, and dissipates. Gravity concentrates.

Nancy didn't see them as being separated at all, as if one were good and the other bad. Heavy is the support of lightness, meaning if you are well rooted, you can experience a lot of light without being in jeopardy of being carried away by it. If there is too much light you can pull back into your roots. She is undergoing a stressful time, and she talked about how lately she has to draw a lot of strength from her roots. Her roots make her feel grounded and strong: she can pull in and not be branched out here there and everywhere.

Karen concurred, citing Mitchel that the heavy is the *root* of the light. That means light couldn't exist without heavy as a starting place. She added, if you let restlessness carry you away, you lose who you are.

Challenging times like ours emphasize the truth of the point. Healthy people naturally focus on what's affecting them directly, and it seems ridiculous to try to "change the subject." When things are truly important you are focused on them. That's your "body" and so you stay close to it. It's who you really are, and you don't want to get away from that.

Yet how many work even harder to ignore the loaded freight train bearing down on them? Make it a double, bartender, I have a lot of anxiety to quench. Plus, the trite concept of freedom is to do whatever strikes your fancy, including your right to ignore reality or stockpile lethal weapons. Lightness needs to have central core of meaning, it needs to be grounded in the Tao-root, or it's liable to cause grief.

Anita had an interesting reaction that took us straight to the main issue. She had read several translations, many of which use the word desire, as in don't follow your desires. She thought, if you turn that around, why else are we here on earth? Did not we come here to experience our desires? She thought she could see what this is saying, but she doesn't want to be grounded all the time. She wants life to be exciting.

Several of our translations, while not using the cliché word desire, cast subtle aspersions on the joy of experiencing life. I side with Anita, in that our greatest motivations are our joys. We are aiming for permanent, lasting joy, rather than the transient type, but simply denying our interests is a recipe for stagnation or worse. I wondered aloud if the original meaning was along those lines, and the Western mindset of the translators brought in that Judeo-Christian notion of the world as the Enemy, where detachment means having no contact. The world pollutes you. You live so that you can learn to escape life and go somewhere else.

Hamill, whose translation is elegant, has us “confronted” by the splendor, and so having to work to remain detached. In Pine, you remain aloof. In the Feng there are beautiful things to admire, but nevertheless you remain unattached. That's going the right direction—we aren't to become attached to the attractions, as if they are the *source* of our joy, but we can still enjoy them.

The essential point from a Vedantic perspective is our joy resides in us, and isn't found outside unless we have it already kindled in us. Minford puts this nicely: The Taoist when traveling... “Sees beyond the Finest Palace.” Mitchell likewise: not matter how splendid the sights, the Master “stays serenely in herself.”

Nitya often drew our attention to the glories of everyday objects, how even the most basic were interesting and exciting. Then again, if you dwelt overlong on them, he'd bring you out with a jolt: “Why are you always stuffing those scenic views into

yourself?” He remained profound and grounded yet ecstatic at all times, while watching movies, listening to plays and music concerts, making conversation, riding a bus or train, and he inevitably had an uplifting idea to inject about everything. His comments in *Meditations on the Way* are a fine example of him teasing out the essence of the subject matter, and I’ve included a long reading of it in Part II.

Nancy uses the Feng version, where you can appreciate and be aware of beautiful things but the secret is to remain unattached and calm. She remembered Nitya teaching that all the things you’re doing are wonderful, it’s just being able to leave something and not *having* to have it. You can enjoy life even better without the attachments. She felt the beauty of a thing was her *experience* of it, including whether it was good or bad, and she’s not going to stop getting super excited about the good parts of her life.

Not to dampen anyone’s enthusiasm, but it seems you appreciate much more by not getting super excited by things. Take a look at the raging people around us — dangerous, debilitating and insane. They are caught in the mania of extreme excitement, and it overwhelms their reason. I think that’s what’s being warned against here. When you go over the edge you become a danger to yourself and others. Surely we don’t want to miss out on life, to get to the end and realize we didn’t do anything worthwhile. I have a horror of it. I realize I’m only registering a tiny part of all the information around me, which ranges from amazing to numbing, but I’m always wondering what I might be missing and keeping my eyes peeled to spot it. I’m trying to let wonder in as much as possible, trying not to get into mind traps so that abundant life might go on right behind me and I’d never notice.

I had to say, I don’t see any of the class members being excessively excited. We’re all dignified, centered folk. It gets easier as you get older to keep your calm, so this is likely advice aimed at the young and the restless. Our problem is more in losing

the ability to get excited. Knowing that our inner wisdom is another kind of excitement, and that we don't need the popular variety, with its car chases, murders, tension and cruelty to amp up our emotions, is good enough.

Karen agreed wholeheartedly that it was easy and wonderful to be calmly excited. Unbeatable.

This brings us full circle to the weight of Tao-gravity. Michael first weighed in as a yogi: "You have to have a sense of weight in order to appreciate its opposite." An interesting idea: can you ever infer weight from weightlessness? It's tough to imagine. And then, what do we learn from weight that can teach us anything about weightlessness? They're obviously related, but then.... The solution here is that 'light' is only less heavy, not utterly without weight. It's Tao Lite.

Pine quotes some helpful sages for us. Confucius says, "A gentleman without weight is not held in awe, and his learning is not secure."

Ch'eng Hsuan-Ying says, "Roots are heavy, while flowers and leaves are light. The light wither, while the heavy survive. 'Still' means tranquil, and 'restless' means excited. Excitement is subject to birth and death. Tranquility endures. Hence, the still rule the restless."

Te-Ch'ing says, "'Heavy' refers to the body. 'Light' refers to what is external to the body: success and fame, wealth and honor. 'Still' refers to our nature. 'Restless' refers to our emotions. People forget their body and chase external things. They forget their nature and follow their emotions. Sages aren't like this. Even though they travel all day, they don't leave what sustains them." LeGuin also notes that the baggage is the body, the stuff we carry around with us.

Astutely, Mitchell substitutes 'home' for 'baggage', so the advice becomes to not leave home. His endnote expounds on this: "She never loses touch with who she really is. In the midst of joy

or anger or sorrow, she remains imperturbable.” I’d say he really nails it.

Depending on how you frame them, then, Taoist heaviness and Vedantic lightness are the same. Taoist baggage is connectedness; Vedantic freedom from baggage removes the obstacles to self-connection. At least at this stage, Taoism includes less psychological struggle, more “cutting through” as in Zen.

Magister Liu, in Minford, says “Nothing is weightier, nothing has more Gravity, more Calm, than the Tao. The Taoist eschews the Light and the Rash, Cleaves to the Weighty and the Calm, to Root and Master. Others treat Gravity with Levity, disturb Calm with Impulse, and in so doing lose Root and Master. Woe betide them!”

We concluded with a meditation on an excerpt of Lieh-tzu’s dialogue, in the Minford, all about letting go of the stuff we imagine is us:

The Legendary Emperor Shun asked one of his Ministers:
“Can one possess the Tao?”

“Your body is not your Possession. How can you Possess the Tao?”

“If my own body is not mine, whose is it?”

“It is the Form lent you by Heaven and Earth. Your Life is not your Possession. It is a Harmony granted you for a time by Heaven and Earth. Your Life-Destiny is not your Possession. It is a Flow granted you for a time by Heaven and Earth. Your children and grandchildren are not your Possessions. Heaven and Earth have lent them to you to be cast off as an insect sheds its skin. You are the Breath-Energy of Heaven and Earth. How can you ever Possess that?”

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

A grownup person
is not feckless, but grounded,
prudent, and thoughtful.

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Our Chuang Tzu reading was A Hat Salesman and A Capable Ruler, on page 37,

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

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Nitya's teachings in *Meditations on the Way* are a fantastic example of his teaching style during his prime. His Prelude Meditation strikes the theme:

What are my thousand and one untied strings of the past?....
What are my thousand and one programs of the future to which I must apply myself with diligence?....
How do I know which thread and which color to put in the shuttlecock to weave into the fabric of my life?....
How does sleep bring restfulness and peace to my tired body and mind?....
Do I have any knowledge other than what the Totality whispers into my inner ear?....

After the verse and initial banter, we get to the heart:

Vinaya remarked that he didn't understand the stanza about the gentleman and the cart, and Guru said, "For that you should know what your load is and who could be thieves and what is the

watchtower behind which you can rest. in my case I have a heavy load passed on from Narayana Guru to Nataraja Guru and then to me. They have placed in my trust a treasure of perennial wisdom which has been conscientiously handed down from teacher to student through the ages. Though it is eternal, still in the world of man it stands the danger of being polluted or adulterated if not cared for properly and passed on to another. It is not to be held for oneself.

“That is my load, and it comes in the form of several institutions, programs, personal austerity, and inner peace—hundreds of things which are to be maintained. Any distraction which comes into my life, diverting my attention from these things, is the thief. The Guru is my watchtower. If I never stray from his gaze (which is a factor within myself), then all the rest is vouchsafed.

“You should look into your own life to find the relevant corresponding meaning of this passage. If you become indifferent to your work, then the load, the treasure, is lost. If you become agitated and excited, then everything is lost.”

Margaret shared that in relating to people she might sometimes tend to be proud or competitive, and hence a string gets broken. Each moment passes so fast that it remains untied, but at every moment there can also be an effort to tie them together. Regarding her load, she feels she has given herself to a certain way of life for which there are many responsibilities to attend to.

Guru interjected, “You should learn to forget that there are ‘people’. There are no people. There is only the Totality. That is the first thing. The metaphor I gave was of a loom. When you weave, there is an alternating placement of the warp and the woof. One is horizontal, and the other is vertical. Each person with whom you are to relate is to be included as one woof. Your mind is the shuttlecock for which you have to choose a certain color thread for

each stroke. What is expected of you is that you weave a beautiful fabric of life

“The thread is your sentiment, your decision, your judgment. Just as in weaving there is an alternation between the righthand movement and the movement back to the left, you have to picture in advance the reaction which will follow from each action. Only then can you be said to be a clever weaver. No matter how strange, unpleasant, or alien another person appears, he has to be accepted as something which is somehow to be woven in. When a thread breaks you must know immediately which thread and where, and then attend to it.

“I was previously working with the blind on a weaving project, and I was amazed to see how when some thread would break, they would instantly sense exactly where the break was. For all our sight, those of us with healthy eyes would not be able to locate it that quickly. Similarly, if you are blind to your ego, released from it, you get an insight from your spirit which helps you to locate intuitively any break. You cannot proceed without mending each break. With our normal ego-sightedness, it will escape us.

“In this context the various highway robbers are jealousy, sense of alienation, lack of understanding, frustration, etc. If you have the feeling that your lord, your Guru, is always a light within you, both watching you as well as illuminating your path, then, with that consciousness, you are safe behind the watchtower.”

Carolyn said that the untied strings of the past made her think of her longstanding behavior patterns, habitual reactions, and conditionings, all of which need to be corrected and put together properly. “The future stands before me—open, unknown, wide. All I can see to do is to deal with what’s presented in the moment and try to choose the colors with a certain spontaneity and see that at the same time they blend with my highest values.”

Guru remarked, “Although we think that we are using our own knowledge, from where does that knowledge come? It arises from the total situation. Our mind is like a window, opening and closing to the light. When it is open, they we say, ‘Oh, sure, I understand.’ And when it is closed, we feel confused and in the dark. We have no hand with which to open the window, other than patience and an inner faith that there is Benevolent Light that will show us the way.

“Religious people call the maintenance of this patient faith in the light ‘devotion’. In simple psychological terms it is called ‘confidence’. The same is also called grace. Even someone who insists that there is no such thing as God is depending on an inner light which they trust to shed light on whatever their faculty of intelligence is directed. The believer in a God finds plenty of opportunity to praise this light as God. In either case it’s the same grace recognized and depended on by both as a benevolent presence in their lives. Only the phraseology is different.

“The dark side is that you formulate a big ego for yourself and then you can see only that which filters through its prejudices and preconceived notions. If you remove that, then all the colors will come through spontaneously.

“A pilot trying to land in a thick fog cannot see either the ground or any other air traffic. He must have total faith in a small electronic device before him which guides his every move. It is mathematics which is doing this for him. Others call this mathematics, God. Whatever you call it, it works for us. You can become receptive to this great Truth which is always present and guiding us. Then you are behind the watchtower.”

Guru continued, “When we think that a person has done a bad thing or a person herself thinks so, it is necessary to take into consideration the total situation. A so-called evil act is very much like a person slipping. It is not by deliberation that a person slips and breaks her leg. So much leads up to a ‘bad act’. There is the

emotional background of a person, her cultural conditioning, her inner state of peace or restlessness, her biochemistry, nutritional deficiencies, etc. We make a mistake when we judge a person only by her actions. An act is only the net product of many factors. She could not have done otherwise.

“Now coming to the good we want to do in the future, we can only slowly change some of these ingrained causes. If a person is restless, we can help him find something that will afford him some peace. If he is misguided by erroneous notions, we can patiently correct them. The same is true for our own self-development. It is not by injecting poisonous chemicals into the bloodstream or electrochemically altering the structure of the brain. Rather it is my belief that our *understanding* can have physical effects. If one is instilled with or inspired to have new dreams, new expectations, new value visions and appreciations, then every aspect of one’s life can be radically changed. In this way, when you take a resolution not to repeat your past mistakes, you take a resolution to reexamine your life and value structure. Once you do this, it will re-form you.”

Guru asked to see the text one more time and commented on each line as follows.

The heavy is the root of the light. “This is a light moment for us. We are not laboring under any big responsibility. What enables us to treat it as so light is that our root goes into the fundamentals of life. With this rootedness we can sit calmly and with great stability. But once we are uprooted, we cannot sit still. In a mental hospital you can see people standing around and shrieking even though nothing is actually happening to them. When, on the other hand, the mind is stable and you are rooted in truth, rooted in confidence, rooted in understanding, then the leaves and branches just sway in the wind. So I advise people to find their roots, and then they will be able to withstand any storm.”

The still is the lord of the restless. “There is a deep restfulness in which the surface storm is a small thing, nothing more than a tempest in a teacup. Stable understanding is itself the lord.

“Regarding the gentleman who all day long never lets the heavily laden cart out of his sight: even a little indifference or a little inattentiveness is enough to cause great damage. Once I was flying between Sydney and Singapore and just past Perth the pilot invited me to join him in the cockpit. First he asked me, ‘Swami, do you believe in God?’ then he quickly added, ‘Ah, but let us not discuss this now. We are at 30,000 feet hurtling through space at 600 mph. We will get into that after landing.’ Then he said, ‘But Swami, how can I not think of God when I see the vast ocean and infinite sky, and then think of this tiny metal projectile with all these people inside it casually joking and laughing with unconscious but total trust in me? I know that even one small seagull or a bolt of lightning could spell utter disaster. So many things are beyond my control. Yet I sit here confidently, and even as I talk to you, I keep one eye on the dials to make sure that the plane is right on course.’ He had a clear, sober mind, and on that attentiveness everything rested.”

If light, then the root is lost. “If you take away the light, then the root is lost. Everything depends on that root. You should always be conscious that if you have light and a sense of lightness, it is because of this root.”

If restless, then the lord is lost. “You yourself are the lord, when you are still and not when you are excited. Again, that is the root wherein you are established.”