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Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 27

The verse begins with five mystical premises. You should:

Walk without leaving tracks

Speak without stumbling

Count (reckon) without a mechanical assistant

Keep your doors firmly closed without resorting to locks

Tie knots without using ropes, that cannot be undone

Shorn of their antique wording like this, we can get a good sense of Lao Tzu's intent:

Walking without tracks means living in the present, going forward lightly without expectations and without looking back in regret, and not worrying if anyone will follow.

Those who truly know their topic do not struggle for words, they flow without effort, since they are not crafted to bring about certain goals. They are non-manipulative.

LeGuin puts the third premise nicely: "Good counters don't use their fingers." The ancient idea was to compute without a tool, by pure, abstract contemplation. This is even more important at a time when the computer is taking over many mental tasks and humans are losing those capacities. If the computer crashes, we might have to count on our fingers again one day.

A Taoist adheres to their way of life without locking themselves into any rigid platform: their motivation is loving kindness.

Useful knots are formed of the natural interactions of the threads of a person's life, they aren't constructed out of the binding ropes of religious or political beliefs.

Mitchell notes, “This is one of the most important chapters in the Tao Te Ching,” and he takes broad liberties with the first stanza, “because the central point—openness to reality, openheartedness—needs to be made as clearly as possible.” He invents two lines to evoke the gist of the last four premises, roughly:

A true artist is guided by intuition

A good scientist is free of fixed concepts and has an open mind

Anita was struck by how crucial his line about scientists is, since she attends the Unitarian Church in Idaho Falls, and a number in the congregation are engineers. Many of them, even non-engineers, are extremely rational, logical thinkers, not into anything that smacks of mysticism. They say that if it’s not rational, it’s not true, but that doesn’t mean that if it *is* rational it must be true. With her grasp of the value of intuition even in a scientific setting, Anita is boiling to tell the engineers to let go of the scientific method and see how much they will learn of new aspects of truth. She is convinced it is ludicrous that they think they have proofs of anything, it’s just a snapshot of our understanding at the moment. Mechanical truths are only a fraction of the whole enchilada.

Deb and I agreed that the history of science is of one certitude being replaced by another, at an ever more rapid pace. Last week’s fact is this week’s risible folly. There is of course a core of more or less stable forms that interact in predictable ways, but how we interpret the big picture is far from fixed. Yes, you throw a switch and the light goes on, but isn’t there much more to life than that? Man does not live by electricity alone.

Deb cited the opening line about walking as relevant to this: to have full freedom we need to be able to move in a non-objectivized way. Without locking any doors, if we construct them

skillfully they stay closed on their own. It's a non-disjointed way of moving with the Tao. To her, the heart of religion is a sense of mystery and openness.

I left Anita with a tip for her overly materialistic friends. Rationalists often insist they don't believe in metaphysics, but all ideas are metaphysical. What isn't material or physical is immaterial or metaphysical, including words, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and emotional constructs. So if you don't believe in metaphysics, you can't have beliefs. It's absurd.

Andy offered another vein of interpretation, that knots and doors and paths are relative categories that don't exist for the master, who is completely transparent. Transparency is thus the key to the impossible "knot that is not tied, and so cannot be untied." It reminded me somewhat of the mythical Gordian knot, which Andy recapped for us. Essentially, it's an impossibly complicated knot that can't be untied, so an alternative strategy is required to undo it. Alexander the Great supposedly sliced through the Gordian knot with his sword in a single stroke, what might symbolize a stroke of genius. Similarly, a Taoist could walk through a "tangled web" by not being ensnared in the strands of intrigue that easily captivate superficial thinkers. Deb agreed that this line is saying you are so skillful that you don't get caught in extraneous pathways. Solutions then are ready to hand.

I felt that this can apply to so many fields. When we address situations piecemeal, complicating factors keep cropping up, and you can get severely bound up to the point that you can't accomplish anything. In the legal/political sphere, that's a primary tactic for the side that is sure to lose in a fair argument. They just keep throwing up dust, making a case for irrelevant issues to become the focus, "tying up" the proceedings. It takes someone who can stand outside the clinging vines of necessity, like Narayana Guru's contemplative of Atmo 9:

Growing on both sides, in a blossoming state,
is the one vine which has come, spread out and risen to the top
of a tree;
remember that hell does not come
to the man dwelling in contemplation beneath it.

Pine quotes Ho-Shang Kung on the five premises: “Those who are good at walking find the Way within themselves, not somewhere outside. When they talk, they choose their words. When they count, they don’t go beyond one. When they close, they close themselves to desire and protect their spirit. When they tie, they secure their mind.”

Similarly, Te-Ch’ing tells us: “Sages move through the world with an empty self and accept the way things are. Hence, they leave no tracks. They do not insist that their own ideas are right and accept the words of others. Hence, they reveal no flaws [in talking]. They do not care about life and death, much less profit and loss. Hence, they count no beads. They do not set traps, yet nothing escapes them. Hence, they use no locks. They are not kind, yet everyone flocks to them. Hence, they tie no knots.”

The middle section of the verse relates how sages treat all beings equally, guiding the less-than-good people to become better. Some translations invoke the Western good versus bad dichotomy, but LeGuin gets it right, with less than good and not good yet, in place of bad. Minford has the Not-so-Good; Hamill, lacking goodness. Deb agreed that good and bad are the wrong words. Let me quote myself, regarding IX.26 in the Gita:

We should not be surprised that ancient texts rely more heavily on nature-based metaphors than is the practice today, since people lived much closer to nature in those days. Neil Douglas-Klotz, in his book *The Hidden Gospel*, examines the Aramaic roots of Biblical language, which relies heavily on agricultural

allusions. The original word used for *good* means ripe, and the word translated as *evil* means unripe. This takes the heavy sting out of Biblical diatribes as they have come down to us, with their thick barricade between the saved and the damned. So-called evil just needs more time to ripen. It is in no way barred from becoming good, given enough sunlight and nourishment. Viewing life like this teaches us to be patient with the unripe people among us, instead of blasting them literally or figuratively. We should lend them a hand rather than offering them a fist. This Biblical ideal bears a close resemblance to the present verse, where the Absolute is endeared by whoever approaches it, in whatever stage of development they may be.

I added that unripe means preliminary, along with the implication that you have to want to ripen to take advantage of the sages' teachings. Lunatics are not going to eagerly seek discipline from a good teacher. It's only those who recognize they have more to learn, that they aren't optimized yet, who are willing.

To Needleman, passing along wisdom gained about the Way "is among the highest forms of human love." I've cited his full note about the verse in Part II.

There's also a paradox here between not caring and the deep care that motivates the preservers of the light and their desire to pass along how it can be accessed. Feng translates: "The wise take care of everyone / and abandon no one." Nitya, in his Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary, writes: "If you are not affected by what you see, what you touch, what you feel, what you notice, what is the difference between you and a stone?" At the same time, the River Master says, "The Taoist is free of Judgment, does not hold the commonest stone in low regard, does not prize the most precious jade." How are we affected by experience if we don't "prize" anything? The impact is all the more excellent if we

appreciate the oneness of all; by selecting preferences we negate the unity and paradoxically diminish the value of everything.

The verse closes with an explicitly mysterious stanza about the interaction of guru and disciple, proclaiming that the transmission of wisdom is an essential mystery. It's Minford's Lineage of Light, Mitchell's great secret.

While most translators highlight the respect the teacher and student must have for one another, some sabotage the static hierarchy this often tends toward. Pine has the wise being blind to the distinction, neither honoring the teacher nor cherishing the student. Hamill notes this neutrality baffles even the wise, and it is the essential mystery meant.

LeGuin notes "Having replaced instinct with language, society, and culture, we are the only species that depends on teaching and learning. We aren't human without them." Her version is you've gone astray if you don't have respect for the teacher or the student.

Anita enthused about how much teachers learn from their students. It's a collaboration, as in any group process, and it grows and is magnified by different energies. She spoke of her grandchildren, who are young adults now, how she thinks she's going to offer them something from her experience, and yet they come up with concepts she's never thought of in that way before. She's fascinated how much she learns from the young people that she never would have experienced otherwise.

I wholeheartedly concurred. A learning experience requires both sides of the equation to be in harmony. It's very much a mutual process, yet in some cases the older people have offerings the younger ones can't anticipate. Very often they are not open to taking it in, either. We live in a culture with much disdain for its elders, fostered in large measure by commercial interests that gain new customers by divorcing young people from good sense. As Lao Tzu realized a long time back, it's a great mystery how and

why any transmission occurs, and that it's lasted for so long is a true miracle.

It's important to realize we are not the guru, we are the eternal student, and the universe itself is the guru. Otherwise stagnation will be our lot. In a letter to Vinaya in May 1977, Nitya expresses this beautifully:

The Guru is the eternal present which greets you as the rising sun in the dawn, the flowers that bloom in the garden, the ideas of hope and beautiful visions that stimulate your mind, and the plank of truth on which you stand firm to take your resolves. A disciple's true homage to the Word of the Guru becomes actual and meaningful only when it is lived day after day, moment after moment.

Some truly wonderful excerpts from Nitya about this verse will be found in Part II.

I asserted we are at a time in history when the lineage of light is severely abrupted. The computerized generations do not have much interest in the wisdom of their ancestors—the new technologies are too thrilling. It will be fascinating, if not disheartening, to see how the species continues once the individual guidance systems are replaced by corporate ones.

We closed with more of the River Master, quoted in Minford: “The True Lineage of Light is a Transmission from Teacher to Disciple. If the Disciple does not Esteem the Teacher, if the Teacher does not deign to Teach, then the Transmission is broken. Without the Lineage of Light, however hugely knowledgeable and clever and wise one may think oneself to be, one loses the way. To fathom this is to fathom a Great Mystery of the Tao.

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

There's a transmission
that underlies true learning
that can't be explained,

but shared respect helps,
a flexible teacher and
a willing student.

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Nitya's *Meditations on the Way* has some great moments:

Guru asked Steve W. "How do we make our performances excellent?" Steve responded, "One guarantees the excellence of one's performance by being attuned to one's own nature, seeing the overall picture, and through that, maintaining dexterity."

Guru commented, "A person may see very well in his mind a great beauty. That in itself does not assure the talent to paint it or sing it or describe it in poetry. Performance involves a craft. It does not come by mere knowledge. When you say, 'tuning in to one's own nature,' you should recognize that nature is a vast crude material which is to be both tamed and refined. A person's nature will have negative inhibitory and obstructive forces as well as beneficial ones. When you generalize nature, it becomes very vague. One has to spend a whole life to find out one's true nature.

"Each person's nature has certain restrictions as well as permissions. This is like being able to bend one's finger into the palm, but one cannot fold one's finger back up the other way. As you become more acquainted with your nature, you can cultivate what is permitted by removing what inhibits. This requires both insight as well as the operation of tremendous will. To succeed,

that will must resonate with the Universal Will. This has been discussed in previous passages as rootedness.”

Cherian said the main image that stood out for him was the “Shutting without a bolt.” He reported, “I took the process of ‘shutting’ to be one’s uncompromising and absolute allegiance to the vertical or eternal nature of Truth. The ‘bolt’ would represent resorting to a horizontal element. Those who excel stand in the vertical plane. Looking at them from the horizontal plane, nothing spectacular or extraordinary is visible. But whatever is done is done perfectly. Nothing special is to be seen from outside. Perfection resides in the very core of the act.”

Guru summed up by going through the passage part by part....

One who excels in shutting uses no bolts yet what he has shut cannot be opened. “There are moments in life when a certain gestalt is to be closed. But because of our weakness, sentimentality and a lack of consideration for the future consequences, the gestalt is closed clumsily and reopened again and again. An absolutist closes things with finality day after day. And that’s it.”

One who excels in tying uses no cords yet what he has tied cannot be undone. “You go to some people to join with them, and they want written proof of your commitment in duplicate; they call witnesses and leave copies with attorneys. Even then, the contracts will be broken. You meet another person, and you cannot get away from them. There is no contract, but your bond is total and final.”

“People who think themselves too clever want to reject this tradition of wisdom. But why would you want to make your own Ganges or Rhine or Mississippi, or try to erect your own Himalayas? You can tap into and use the greatness that is already

there. Krishnamurti is a ‘teacher’ who is very much against teachers, but I’m sure he uses an existent dictionary. A dictionary is a guru; it tells you “this is that.’ I’m sure he does not create a brand-new dictionary.

“Nothing is built from scratch. Don’t try to be clever. Better to be humble, or there will be much bewilderment. This is essential, and this is the secret.”

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Needleman’s end note is worth quoting in full:

This chapter is important for the light it throws on the way the advanced follower of the Tao manifests in the world. I take it to be speaking of the center of gravity of the wise teacher’s outward action and the quality of attention he or she brings to it. To put it simply, the principle intention in the life of the wise is to pass on to others what they have understood of the Way. This, surely, is among the highest forms of human love, the crux of the mystery in human relationships. Love for one’s neighbor here does not mean “liking” the other; it has nothing to do with emotional attraction, nor is it organically or socially conditioned family, sexual, or intellectual love. For the wise, the other is neither “good” nor “bad”—the other is only an individual who is or is not following the Tao. And because all meaning and happiness for humanity depend ultimately on following the Tao, the wise teacher seeks only, and naturally, to arrange the details of his or her relationship to others to support and further their progress along the way. This is an immensely important issue, within the confines of which lies the whole question of spiritual transmission, communal forms, and the metaphysical basis of ethics.

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Lastly, thanks to Emily for this fun and visually arresting essay. Science is catching on to spiritual truths—now can humans catch on to the science?

<https://www.vox.com/science-and-health/20978285/optical-illusion-science-humility-reality-polarization>