

7/28/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 28

It was really lovely to get back into our class, after a couple of weeks of distractions. Though it seems these days a bit like the orchestra playing “Nearer, My God, to Thee,” on the afterdeck of a sinking ship, we’re going to keep playing as long as we can.

This most germane verse opens with several directives: to know the male but live as a female; know strength but be nurturing; know the white but be the black; know light but stay dark, know glory but remain modest, etc. In doing so you become like a child again, open and unconditioned.

Lao Tzu’s conclusion is to be like an uncarved block of wood. Tools are made from the block, but the block cannot be made from the tools, or utensils. A final tip is that the best carver does the least carving (Min, LG, H), or alternatively, the best tailor cuts the least (P, F). Minford quotes Waley: “The greatest ruler does the least chopping about.” Our leaders these days do a whole lot of chopping....

Deb opened the discussion mentioning how this verse revisits several familiar images: the valley, the uncarved block of wood, and the matched pair of Tao and Te, which are the unmanifested and the manifested, or the Immortal Virtue (Pine) and the Constant Power (Minford). They are icons of Taoism.

There was some confusion over the wording of the first part. Some translations speak of a stream, while the rest have a maidservant. Pine shows that the same word is the source of both, and he chose the maid because the verse opens with “Recognize the male / but hold on to the female” so he felt it made more sense to end that sentence with: “and be the world’s maid.” Mitchell’s wonderful translation has “receive the world in your arms,” conveying what the servant concept was meant to get across. However you put it, the valley is a receptive image, and either the

stream of water or the nurturing caregiver imply a forward momentum.

Anita was bothered by the sense she had that all female aspects are considered inferior. We took this on, as the Taoist is enjoined to be more feminine than masculine, all through the Tao Te Ching. It was set down at a time when there were few women above a kind of slave status, and is strongly contrary to that mentality.

I suggested Anita's feeling is common to most of us, and comes from our own culture, and not from Taoism. We are saturated in male domination to this day, and it colors our thinking to a profound degree. It's an area where we are doing hard work to overcome the bias. Anita readily saw the sense of this, and laughed how she had four brothers and no sisters, and she grew up wondering why they got to do all the cool stuff and she didn't. Those framings are built into our flesh; certainly our neurons. Anita also lives now in a part of the country that is unabashedly patriarchal. All this makes it easy for her to read feminine images as negative, including in Taoism, despite their being revolutionarily positive.

When a situation seems prejudicial (or otherwise unjust) but isn't, it's a perfect time for self-examination—where did that come from? Anita immediately realized how her many instances of boys given preferences, girls underestimated, etc. during her lifetime conditioned her to expect sexism as a matter of course. That's exactly what we're trying to counteract in classes like these. If each of us can get over that conditioning we'll be better able to heal it when we meet it, and humanity can move up a notch on the ladder of civilization.

It's even more likely that a situation won't appear prejudicial when it is, also thanks to our conditioning. That's when a group dedicated to learning like ours can assist each other in discerning where it's lurking. Nitya was a master at observing this. Either

way, the less prejudice a person has, the easier it is to notice it, hiding in plain sight.

Deb remembered how Nitya would say that in just the same way you absorb your culture growing up, you can use your tools to move out into the unmodified and universal. I've included a Brihadaranyaka Upanishad quote in Part II to show how this works.

Anita caught on that we shouldn't take feminine and masculine so literally in the Tao Te Ching. They are symbolic of aspects within each of us, however we identify ourselves. I think we covered this more in the early verses, before she was able to join us via Zoom. We've learned that the Chinese language doesn't have gendered pronouns—gender is taken from the context, so the English pronouns in the translations reflect Western society's mindset, not to forgive China for its sexist attitudes. Ancient China was as patriarchal as any, which makes Taoism all the more radical. It was birthed within a warrior-laden, super hierarchical society, where losing your head was far from a figure of speech. Deb affirmed that with the Tao, the feminine is more exalted, and Taoist imagery comes from the quiet and gentle moon, with its visible cycles.

Bill read out Mitchell's sole endnote: "*Know the male / yet keep to the female: Keeping to the receptive allows the creative to arise. Actually, the creative and the receptive are complementary sides of the same process.*"

Reading this as she prepared for class had stimulated Anita's contemplation of creativity, and she led us into an important discussion. She had been thinking of creativity as springing out of nowhere, in a sense, but now she saw how being receptive to the stimulation from your environment was a necessary factor: the creative impulse was a response to learning. Creativity comes out of being inspired. That means in order to be creative, you first must be receptive. These thoughts helped Anita get a lot out this verse.

This is such a good theme for bringing creativity down to earth. There has been a lot of demystification lately about genius. It was once treated as a magical, almost divine gift, and now it's thought to be nearly ubiquitous, but merely suppressed in almost everyone. It can pop back up without warning. Genius can be a mixed blessing, so in general we may be better off without it. Let someone else live on the edge!

I added that receptivity can be taken in a couple of ways. Anita was talking about receiving stimulation from the environment, and that creativity was a response to it. That is surely true, and we wouldn't even recognize creativity if it didn't speak in our language about things we recognize. It has to be paired with a context, as are we who admire it and benefit from it.

In a deeper sense, though, receptivity also means a damping down of the external noise, and getting out of your conditioning to plunge into the depths of your psyche. The Tao has no neurology, so it is not approached through structures. Receptivity in that sense means getting as still as possible. It doesn't originate in processing as much as in the primal nature of how our being expresses itself. It's like going into a well, yet what you bring out has to be expressed in comprehensible terms to be communicated, so it still needs to be processed to become public. Of course, much of it never is communicated, and most of it goes unrecognized even by the originators.

Anita cited Mozart, the poster-child genius, who would hear music and just write it down as fast as he could scribble. Actually, many if not all geniuses are receiving in their conscious minds the artistic products that amaze and enlighten everyone around them. I've often mentioned author Kurt Vonnegut, who when asked where his stories came from, answered, only half facetiously, "A radio station in Chicago." Conscious awareness and crafted expression are the last stage of the creative process. You're not making it happen with your conscious processing—you may be

fine tuning it, but it has already arrived in an advanced state of development. In fact, the more you think you are in charge, the more you inhibit the creative impulse. We should treat it more as an internal blessing, a gift. And geniuses are universally said to be gifted. That's what it means.

Charles shared a congruent concept of the different levels of creative or orthodox expression, including a link to a fantastic video of a Chinese woman painting, rapidly producing images that Charles described as hyper-realistic. Her act is more a dance than a planned exercise. I've put part of his Gita response in Part II, along with the link.

Sage Wang Tao sums the whole verse up perfectly, in the Pine: "Sages recognize 'that' but hold to 'this.' 'Male' and 'female' mean hard and soft. 'Pure' and 'base' mean noble and humble. 'White' and 'black' mean light and dark. Although hard, noble, and light certainly have their uses, hard does not come from hard but from soft, noble does not come from noble but from humble, and light does not come from light but from dark. Hard, noble, and light are the secondary forms and farther from the Way. Soft, humble, and dark are the primary forms and closer to the Way. Hence, sages return to the original: a block of wood. A block of wood can be made into tools, but tools cannot be made into a block of wood. Sages are like blocks of wood, not tools."

Pine notes, "Reverence for the spirit of wood is still shared by many of the ethnic groups along China's borders. During Lao-tzu's day, the southern part of his own state of Ch'u was populated by the Miao, who trace their ancestry to a butterfly and the butterfly to the heart of a maple tree."

Anita wondered about the block of wood, if it was cut from a tree, then it was already on its way to becoming manifest—wouldn't the living tree be a better image? I answered that the point was that the block is uncut, unshaped, so it is like a tree. It's yet another prejudiced concept we have, that a block is something

rectangular, orthogonal. I suggested our playing with blocks as children gave us the idea of a cube, but Lao Tzu is thinking only of the naturalness.

Yes, Anita, a tree is much closer to the meaning of 'uncarved'. Merton's Chuang Tzu story I read features trees, showing that their usefulness is their demise, so being useless is preferable. When I was looking for an appropriate story, the book opened itself to the right page, cited at the bottom of Part II. The reading ends with:

The tree on the mountain height is its own enemy.  
The grease that feeds the light devours itself.  
The cinnamon tree is edible: so it is cut down!  
The lacquer tree is profitable: they maim it.  
Every man knows how useful it is to be useful.

No one seems to know  
How useful it is to be useless.

Andy called the uncarved block the raw material, while Bill said it came from the void, the block of wood is from the void. Moni was also thinking of the many hidden possibilities in that block of wood. The more carved up it is, the fewer the possibilities, which goes well with the verse's last piece of advice, that the tailor who cuts least, or the carver who carves least, is most expert.

Deb concurred that the uncarved block is a reference to unshaped possibilities. The less you cut the block of wood to make your way, the more sophisticated and adroit you are. If you are able to intuitively seek the movement, it brings a much deeper penetration.

Nitya's bit in *Meditations on the Way* elaborates:

Guru reflected, “The uncarved block, the black, and the female all represent the great womb of obscurity to which everything belongs. From that you can carve and make a manifestation of beauty, which can be appreciated, but that then is only a relative aspect. Similarly, when you highlight something (this is the ‘white’ aspect) that is again only relative. Always we are trying to achieve things in the world of light, of knowledge, and of honor. But most of our being is still steeped in the unknown, the dark. We are not yet fully born. Hence what is considered respectable is only a trifling when compared to that which bestows respect upon it.

When Nataraja Guru was staying at the place of Meher Baba, day and night streams of people were filing by to pay Meher Baba their respects. He told Guru, “Of all this adoration, mine is one-millionth, and the rest is theirs. They bring their own great worth and pile it on me.” This was the great model he set before us. Know the honorable and assume the role for oneself of the disgraced. (118-9) [The somewhat jarring ‘disgraced’ comes from the Lao translation he was using: Keep to the role of the disgraced / And be a valley to the empire.]

Deb explained to us what Nitya’s talking about: in the dark you are the uncarved block, while the light is where you are making things out of it. I added that the Taoist knows how to *use* those utensils. The verse is teaching us to comprehend the outer world from a grounded place in the inner, and this is of central importance.

I was referring to the instruction to *know* the manifest but *reside* in the unmanifest. Very often in spiritual life, the manifest is treated as inimical to being comfortably established in a quiescent state, and it leads to shutting out anything unpleasant. Yes, unpleasant vibrations like war mania can be seriously disturbing, and we have to find a place of peace to be able to even think clearly, much less be comfortable. Yet this has led many religious

groups into the ostrich syndrome, steadfastly ignoring the present environment and peddling nostalgia for an imaginary golden age of the past. Instead, Taoists and Vedantins believe that knowing how the world works is helpful and even essential in coping with it well. The idea is to understand but not be sucked in to harmful or depressing states. It takes real expertise! And it's often given short shrift; ordinary thinking draws a thick line like a border wall between the two poles. Taoism seeks to keep the territory undivided: come on in, you're welcome!

The current Gita lesson in my online class ends with this verse, making the same point:

V.10) He who acts, placing all actions in the Absolute, having given up attachment, is not affected by sin, like a lotus leaf by water.

Bill has undergone a serious stem cell operation and is now recovering at home, doing very well, though he has to remain isolated for three more months. Deb asked him how his lifelong meditation and career of woodworking with previously uncarved blocks has influenced his recovery.

He responded, "As my energy comes back up I'm starting to be able to focus on a sense of my true nature, like the uncarved block. Going through all that medical stuff, it was more about accepting things for what they were and not reacting. A lot of what I went through was sorting out the emotional, the physical, and the odd circumstance of being in the hospital for two and a half weeks. It was all about just getting through it. When you're in the middle of something stressful like that, you're just maintaining. I'm sure it was much easier to deal with it, from what I've learned over the years in my sitting, and yoga practices.

"Since then I've found my meditations are clearer and have more of a sense of finding my way back to my true nature. Getting



back to the uncarved block of wood is loosely the function of meditation, but also to be able to see. The wise person knows the tools but stays with the black, the uncarved.

“I have a sense of being grateful for that background capability.”

For our closing meditation, I first read an excerpt from Nitya’s Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that gives the Vedantic equivalent of the dichotomies enumerated in this verse. Having just finished the second volume in our study group, I’d been proofreading the highlights I compiled before lodging them on his website. Lots of great new stuff on the site, by the way (<http://aranya.me/read.html>) Our meditation last night, plus another item from the highlights, are in Part II.

## Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

been in hospital.....fell over again ok now more or  
less bx here's verse 28

28

With an upright heart  
step out keeping time with the  
yin - yang flow of life

rather ironic in the circumstances!!

\* \* \*

Charles submitted this for our current Gita class, on the Introduction to chapter V, where I talked about expertise:

Expertise:

<https://www.facebook.com/100028340119141/posts/591588171795848/>

Elderly Chinese woman's brush drawing of a Tiger as an example of expertise,

With reference to the remarks about expertise you made in the introduction to your commentary to Gita chapter 5. specifically, the two levels of expertise.

This elderly Chinese woman isn't copying a model picture of a tiger. If you or I were assigned to make a copy of that picture we'd be operating on the first level of skill. To make an adequate copy would take hours of concentration and the result would look wooden. It would not have the vital appearance of the original. Her performance shows the spontaneity of the second level of expertise. She has spent a long time practicing a pattern of movements until she has it perfect in her muscle memory. It is a Tai Chi exercise she learned from a master. When she makes the drawing she isn't thinking. There is no more rationality in what she does as she does it than there is in a dancer's dance as she dances.

This freedom of the second level of expertise requires that there had to have been training and practice to perfect a technique. The ego and the rational mind working on the first level. Then technique can be forgotten in full intense absorption. in spontaneity, in the moment.

Charles added some more for us, when we asked him about the creative process:

Often the creative process doesn't work for me. You have two things that you're talking about: the first level of expertise and the higher level of expertise.

The old Chinese woman is doing this as fast as she can,

without a pause. She is not looking at a model or a photo, she has it in her muscle memory, so she's not thinking about it. She's a Tai Chi master, but she is making pictures rather than ballet type movements.

You develop your skills up to a certain point, and you have an intellectual understanding and a kind of manual mastery. If you left it at that point you could do competent and uninspired work. That is the first level. The woman goes on to the next level, where she is throwing herself into it. She is not thinking of her next move, she's fully intent on what she is doing with the brush.

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From Nitya's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary. The first item was our closing meditation:

The illuminating principle in all aspects of knowledge, whether conscious or unconscious, is called *ananda*. *Ananda* is identical with the meaning of meaning, which can be negatively expressed as *neti neti* and positively complemented as *satyasya satyam*. *Neti neti* is a wholesale denial of everything that can be conceived by the mind and expressed by words. After the sweeping denial of all concepts with the declaration of *neti neti*, the Upanishad complemented it with the statement *satyasya satyam*. Astonishingly, truth (*satya*) is mentioned as that which is perceived in the here and now. It is highly contradictory and paradoxical to put together *neti neti* and the truth of the perceptible into a single context. The crux of the Vedanta philosophy resides in this mystical contradiction, which comes close to the Tao which cannot be named yet is described as having ten thousand names. (BU Vol. II, 267)

No physicist has ever seen an atom, much less a subatomic particle. But, like religious people who make icons, the physicist has also made conventional models of atoms and particles. Any person who has gone to school and studied the model of the atom cannot be dissuaded from that mental picture. In this way even scientific knowledge becomes a matter of belief. The Upanishad sweeps away all images born of mind. That is why a true Vedantin can never be a religious person. (BU Vol. II, 575)

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Andy read out a resonant section from Nitya's Patanjali, from the place he and Bill are in their online study with Nancy Y, Sutra II:18. I've added a second bit from immediately after, that also speaks directly to the verse:

If you want to be emancipated from all the effects of the culturing you have undergone, the horizon of the application of your values needs to be expanded. For example, you would share what you have acquired not only with your own family but with the whole world, like Einstein who studied and worked very hard and then shared the results of his labor with all. To transform your value system you have to use the same faculties you used to acquire it, such as your brain. The same equipment that you use for experiencing is to be used to transcend that experience. First you accept your bondage, then seek and find emancipation. A true yogi can experience transcendence in immanence and immanence in transcendence, first making himself or herself bound, then enjoying that bondage for the benefit of the world. He or she works day and night as an example, being happy and sharing that happiness with all.

In life there is a magical element that can also be real. We have two worlds, the world of light and the world of darkness. Life is generated between the Sun above and the Earth below. A seed needs both to grow.

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More from *Meditations on the Way*:

Guru asked Steve B. what he thought the message was. Steve suggested that the passage restated the advice from the very first chapter, “Always rid yourself of desires in order to observe their secrets, but always allow yourself to have desires in order to observe their manifestations.”

Steve continued, “One is to know the male (which represents heaven as opposed to earth), know the white, and know honor, but keep them secret or sacred. Don’t profane them in transactional life. Rather, take the role of the lowly. The female is nourishing and accepting, whereas the male is a flash of lightning, which if you were to imitate in your transactions, would be aggressive. Keep that secret. Be receptive to the world without charging around. This recalls the advice of Jesus to pray in private, and similarly when fasting, not to put on a mournful face to show others you are fasting. If you follow the Way spoken of here, what is sacred won’t be expended, though its benefit will go to all.”

Cherian reflected, “Male and female, black and white, honor and disgrace—Lao Tzu is agreeing to the fundamental dialectics of life. Be a valley to the empire. That necessarily implies mountains also. According to Jung’s theory of anima and animus, the male and female are in each of us, and in order to integrate one’s personality, one must be both.”

Cherian went on to say, “Lao Tzu is an anarchist. White is symbolic. People want to conform to the status quo, because their

minds are 'whitewashed.' Black represents dissent. I think Lao Tzu is supporting an attitude of questioning and protest.”

He added, “A babe is wholehearted whether it is laughing, crying, smiling, demanding food, or whatever. The babe is innocent with the original that precedes ‘original sin.’ It is so natural. If the mother is not giving milk, the babe may go up to a cow which gives milk and call it mother.”

Guru asked Steve W. if he was being carved or was returning to the uncarved block. Steve replied that the latter was the case.

Guru asked, “Why? Are you familiar with Michelangelo’s ‘Captive’?”

Steve said, “Yes. It’s a figure emerging from a block of granite. There is no tension in it. The torso is not struggling to free itself from the block. It is at once coming forth and yet still merged with the block. It’s like the ‘male’ of Michelangelo’s activity on the passive ‘female’ of the block, and the form is emerging.”

Guru asked Carolyn if she could reverse the idea into knowing the female and playing the role of the male?

Carolyn replied, “The way I see it is to see the Whole but play whatever partial role is demanded by a situation, and to do so with a unitive vision. You should go through life without leaving a trace of any footprints, and without letting life leave any big trace on you. Then even at the end of it, you’re as untouched as a newborn babe.” (116-8)

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The Chuang tzu reading can be found here:

<https://terebeck.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf> . We read Confucius and the Madman, on 58-9.