

8/4/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 29

The hits just keep on coming! Another simple verse with myriad implications and a vital resonance with the present day stimulated the Zoom Gurukula last night.

The translations are mostly quite close. Right off the bat Lao Tzu weighs in, in a casual way: “I don’t suppose it matters, but here’s what I think.”

What he speculates is: If you try to govern by force, or rule your life with active intent, it will fail. The world is a sacred, spiritual entity. As Red Pine has it, “To force it is to harm it/ to control it is to lose it.” Or Feng: “If you try to change it you will ruin it. / If you try to hold on to it, you will lose it.” That sort of thing.

A number of Pine’s sages weigh in on this. He quotes Sung Ch’ang-Hsing, “We can’t control something as insignificant as a mustard seed. How can we control something as big as the world?”

Next comes a series of dialectical propositions. Mitchell treats them in the manner of Ecclesiastes 3, which I’ve cited in Part II, along with a link to the Byrds performing Turn, Turn, Turn! which uses the words. It’s interesting that Ecclesiastes was composed within a hundred or two hundred years of the Tao Te Ching, though there isn’t any known connection, except the dialectical awareness in both that likely originated in Mother India, midway between them. The propositions are things like lead/follow, strong/weak, nurture/destroy, and so on.

Lao Tzu’s conclusion is that, in order to adhere to these insights and avoid failure, sages avoid extremes (P, Min, F, H, LG), extravagance (L, P, Min, H, LG), excess (L, P, F, LG), with the few variations being only grandeur (Min), extravagant pride (H), arrogance (L) or complacency (F). Mitchell reiterates not

controlling, letting things take their course, and does not list any specific qualities.

Many of the sages Pine cites refer to this concluding stanza. Wang An-Shih says, “Resting where you are eliminates extremes. Treasuring simplicity eliminates extravagance. Being content with less eliminates excess.”

Even better, Lu Ning-Shih says, “Sages get rid of extremes with kindness. They get rid of extravagance with simplicity. They get rid of excess with humility.”

Hsueh Hui makes it simpler still: “What Lao-tzu means by ‘extremes,’ by ‘extravagance,’ and by ‘excess’ is not what people mean nowadays. Lao-tzu means whatever involves an increase in effort beyond what is easy.” (His “nowadays” is the first half of the sixteenth century. Still true, of course.)

Deb’s first thoughts were that when she first read the translations, it seemed the message was about change and about what we can and cannot do. Later she realized the truly essential part is that the empire, that is, our universe or world is *sacred*. We fail as long as we stand outside that sacredness. In order to merge with what is sacred, we can’t be acting from our own partial standpoint.

I emphasized how acute and timely this advice is right now. When things are out of whack, it’s very difficult to go along with the flow. So many things need fixing these days, and we are really conscious of how helpless we are on any significant scale. Taoism counsels us to live our lives as best we can, without giving in to despair. I think the real take away is being able to accept our helplessness. It helps to know it’s not a disastrous position but a balanced one.

At the same time, I have some reservations. This philosophy came out of a time when the natural world was virtually the complete context. We’ve now progressed far into a different type of life, where mechanical/technological creations are dominant.

Lao Tzu's advice might not be spot on anymore. Technology does require some effort by us to keep it going, since its default setting doesn't support life. It seems to me it was easier in 500 BCE to say things would be fine if you didn't do anything. Today our "not doing anything" is more nuanced, more complicated. Actually not doing anything gets you dumped in a permanent dead end, no matter how amazing you are internally. Peter O has a similar reservation, and Nitya speaks eloquently to it in the excerpt from *Meditations on the Way*, placed in Part II.

Deb thought that once you merge with spiritual world, the way forward is part of the actual beingness of the universe. There is no ABC to understand, we have to just do it deep in our hearts. True, but not as easy as it sounds. There are many, many ways we are habitually trying too hard.

One of the sages got me really pondering this. Pine quotes Wang Chen about the first line, where governing by force fails: "Force' refers to the mobilization and deployment of troops. But the world's spirit cannot be controlled with weapons." Practically all major governments, most of all ours in the US, govern by nothing else than force, though it's routinely disguised as high morality. And its failures have perhaps never been so glaringly obvious. They are truly Titanic failures.

Everyone who owns weapons thinks the world can be controlled by weapons. With them, there is no non-interventionist alternative. I approve of the heartfelt efforts being made by millions of humble and caring souls. for an alternative. I've observed that the less people feel like they're in charge of something, or want to be, the more genuine their efforts.

Lao Tzu is totally correct that we suppress our own development by thinking we have to act in a certain way. Because the Tao is invisible, materialistic people don't have faith in its efficacy, not realizing how so much of importance develops in obscurity, out of our grasping manipulations. As things get more

edgy, people try harder and harder to control things. Letting go is universally despised. Instead, everyone wants to present a blueprint for getting out of the trouble, and then we wind up fighting over which blueprint is the right one. We judge everything by its nomenclature, with little sense of how it might work out.

Andy said, with a rueful tone, that we have to prepare to be made extinct in an instant. It's true that if you can accept that, you won't be disturbed by the immanence of the threats currently ramping up once again to an explosive peak.

Actually, Andy's observation reminded me of a recent discovery of some microbes found in a 100 million year old rock formation, that came back to life when released and fed. It's a very cool assurance that life is impossible to extinguish once it gets going. Higher life forms maybe aren't so resilient.

<https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2020/07/scientists-pull-living-microbes-100-million-years-beneath-sea> .

Andy wanted to know how the microbes transcended boredom. It's true many of us wouldn't envy them their longevity.

Moving right along, Bill shared the end notes from Mitchell, who reminds us of an old Indian adage—why try to cover the earth with leather, when you can protect your feet from stones by simply wearing shoes? This is a central motif, that we need to work on ourselves, at home, and the universe will take care of itself, thank you very much. Bill loved Mitchell's final lines, that the Master remains in her own nature, described as residing in the center of the circle. She comes back to it because she has found peace in her heart.

Bill also cited Nitya's Patanjali as echoing Mitchell, about the witness who watches the world, who sees things as they are and watches them with impartiality.

I took issue with that as a glib platitude: *everyone* believes they are seeing things as they are. I advocated for not being so sure you are seeing things perfectly. It's an admirable goal, but not an

attainable accomplishment. People should try to figure out what is going on instead of thinking they know already.

Seeing things as they are only works when you aren't seeing anything, when your mind is empty. Bringing that belief over into horizontal brain functioning is an ongoing disaster, because it excludes the alternatives. Bill agreed that you have to find your own true nature to see things as they are, but again, how is that determined? It requires listening to others and taking into account what they are saying. The circle should be an open one, which is really no circle at all, so that you never think you are sitting in the right spot. You continually invite in an expanding perspective.

Andy was reminded by this of the process of sitting down and meditating. If you are meditating on breath, for instance, all these thoughts come up, and the first impulse is to suppress them. But the process of having them, embracing and accepting them, is the point of meditation to begin with. If you can admit all the things coming up with a spirit of friendship, your mind stabilizes. You're not fighting.

He went on, "It's like making art. When I'm working on the next Atmo picture these days, it never goes well. You have to try one thing after another, and when you get frustrated you start to swear. You start paring away an effortful project, and then it all kind of dissolves and you are left with a kernel of something valuable, or artistic anyway, that has arrived by itself, and is far more elegant than anything you could have consciously rammed into being. In a way, in making art you are constantly screwing it up. Yet with the Taoist state of mind, there is a sense that you're not doing that.

Andy invited Charles to contribute his ideas, and he only admitted that art is difficult for him, and gets worse as he gets older. Having known a number of truly exceptional artists, he felt his work was not satisfactory at all.

Deb mentioned that we always see other people doing it that way (seamlessly), and not ourselves. Yet it's hard, when we have instant access to the top echelon in every field. We should accept our level of mediocrity, and just flow on. Really, it's the judging our ability that can be inhibiting, and that's the flipside of excessive satisfaction. We will only flow when self-criticism doesn't even arise. One of the Bible's best bits of spiritual advice is "judge not, that ye be not judged." Judging is contagious and deleterious, to oneself and others.

Charles feels what he does is a certain kind of doodling. For him it's not art, it's therapy. In his mind, his paintings are all okay, but nothing going beyond a certain level. He knows it's not terrible, and what he's working on is going to be okay. As they say in Texas, it's close enough for government work.

Charles wrote just now, and sent some of his doodles (a large file I'll send to anyone on request), saying: "In addition or to one side of my laborious attempts to do Art, I also [use it] as a way of emptying the mind and relaxing, doodle. WHAT JEAN LETSCHERT CALLED MY TELEPHONE DRAWINGS. means the kind of mindless doodles you do when talking on the phone. I don't consider it to be art, It's therapy." I'll send the one painting he sent, separately as a Part III, his "Present ongoing laborious stressful attempt to do art."

Charles shows exactly my point: dissatisfaction is a wonderful part of creativity, in assuring our life is engaged as a living process. Without dissatisfaction, humans have little impetus to do anything. It's essential to us. That doesn't mean we should go out of our way to make things difficult: they are already tough enough, if we are paying attention. But satisfaction per se plays into the numb brain mindset.

Andy liked that: "meditation — is constant imperfection. Working to achieve something we imagine we don't have." I expanded the concept to include everything about life, not just art

and meditation. Our life is art, and we do these things in every awakened aspect of it.

In this light, Minford quotes Wilhelm, of I Ching fame: “The Vessel of Spirit is a spiritual organism which cannot be dealt with by contrived, soulless, or mechanical action.” Nice. Also Duyvendak: “The general idea is clear. By forcing things one goes counter to their natural development, and consequently loses them.”

Jan contributed her thoughts on this and more, in writing this morning:

What the verse calls for is a deep appreciation and honoring for what “is” in any aspect of our life or the world around us, and from that deep sense and awareness our conduct and life steps are formed. We seek to be Transformed through Inner Power, not Mental or Egoistic Action.

The other ideas I loved about this verse were that it said this deep understanding allows us to live most closely to the essence of things and the sacredness of All-under-Heaven.

Only by living this philosophy do we deeply know and experience the sacredness of everything. Otherwise, all we are doing is meddling. I can see also how deeply appreciating the sacredness of All-under-Heaven also causes us to see clearly how little our input is needed and how little we control things, like we often talk about in class.

The last idea I spoke about was that the verse explains how the moderation and simplicity and harmony of Taoism allows the Taoist to cause “All-under-Heaven to Transform itself Of-Itself.” From this I gleaned that by being this way in our world we allow things to become what they are naturally, and as Bill says, in their true nature. That idea comforts me as I let go of being with my kids, which I have been with for the last few months as they came home during the pandemic. It soothes me

to think of accepting the “isness” of this new reality where they live apart from me and far away from me, and I appreciate the sacredness of this order and still find my deep connection to myself, them and my life. I envision all things including them transforming into their essence.

Deb appreciated the idea that we need to focus on what something *is*, rather than trying to change it. If we don't do that, we miss so much! People can have their own transformations that you can't imagine, and you'll never know unless you hear it from them.

The Library Angel selected another perfect Chuang Tzu reading for us, which can be found here:

<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf> . I meant to share it, The Lost Pearl, on page 74, but it got overlooked in the non-rush non-haste. I hope you'll read it, since I missed my opportunity to bring it to you. It's short and very pithy.

The closing meditation brought the Spirit of Gentle and Harmonious Calm in a poem from the eighth century by Qian Qi, in the Minford:

*At this little grass hut in the valley,
As the evening clouds rise
Above the vine-clad wall,
The bamboos are fresh with rain,
The mountains tender in the sunset.
Cranes glide early to rest,
Autumn flowers slowly fade...
I bid my boy sweep the grassy path
For the coming of my friend.*

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

Improving the world
often goes wrong; it's better
to leave well alone.

The world will change in
its own time; welcome each change,
then move on enriched.

* * *

Speaking of how useful it is to be useless, this just came in from Tom Robbins' *Skinny Legs and All*:

Like all artists, [mockingbirds] are out to *rearrange* reality. Innovative, wilful, daring, not bound by the rules to which others may blindly adhere, the mockingbird collects snatches of birdsong from this tree and that field, appropriates them, places them in new and unexpected contexts, recreates the world from the world. For example, a mockingbird in South Carolina was heard to blend the songs of thirty-two different kinds of birds into a ten-minute performance, a virtuoso display that served no practical purpose, falling, therefore, into the realm of pure art. (6)

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Ecclesiastes 3 is on the same track as this verse, and Mitchell makes it obvious. One of the Byrds' most classic songs (from my formative years) uses the words almost verbatim:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4ga_M5Zdn4 .

[1] To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

[2] A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted;

[3] A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up;

[4] A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

[5] A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;

[6] A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away;

[7] A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;

[8] A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

* * *

from *Meditations on the Way*:

Guru remarked, “The neutrality of a guru or sage is not mere cancellation of opposites. Their neutrality has a positive content of absolute compassion and wisdom. The neutrality is expressed only in terms of justice; otherwise a sincere caring is always there.”

(121)

Peter said that he felt the need to spend some more time with this verse, for it raised some questions in his mind. Taking Guru as an example, Peter sees him night and day engaging in activity which benefits others and could be said to improve their inner and outer “empires.” Peter said, “Guru has a vision of how things can be further beautified and harmonized, and he actualizes that vision.

Thus I feel there must be a subtle rather than mechanical or simply 'laissez faire' application of the teachings of this passage. One thought that came to me was that primacy should be given to a grounded understanding and appreciation of what *is*, of the existent, rather than giving primacy to our desire that things be other than they are, often without first realizing what truly is. Normally we approach every situation stressing our desire, or, in other words, 'what is not' rather than having the patience and discipline to absorb and soak into 'what is'."

Guru responded to Peter's uncertainty by saying, "We always have this temptation to handle something with the intention of perfecting it, utilizing it better, or correcting it. Without knowing fully how it is, we want to make a partial attack. This creates drastic and even tragic situations, sometimes which you cannot extricate yourself from.

"Once I was traveling with Nataraja Guru by train, and a fellow passenger, a communist, wanted to know from Guru how we can rectify Indian society so that there won't be any beggars. His intentions were very noble. Nataraja Guru said, 'To deal with this, if you are really sincere, you will have to take up the task of reorganizing the entire structure of international economics. Beggars in this country are not an isolated problem. You have to understand and reform the patterns of production, labor, distribution, and the values which regulate man's needs for consumer goods. When you are making a spaceship to land on the moon or some distant planet, the resources which are necessary for the launching of that ship are to be seen as the mouth of a geo-dialectical dragon, and the tail end is a hungry man begging for a morsel of bread.'

"This, in its entirety, is what is referred to as the empire, *ritam*. *Satyam* is what is basically true in principle, and *ritam* is the harmonious functioning of truth. If you try to improve upon it, you are only meddling."

Guru told a story about four children intently playing house. One was the father, another the mother, one a child, and the fourth a neighbor or somebody. Seeing them, an elderly person thought of amusing himself or helping them. He came and sat down in their midst to play with them. They disgustedly stopped and walked away. They couldn't believe such arrogance. He disrupted what they had established. Between them there was perfect trust and an understanding of the roles and the game.

Guru concluded, "This is the empire. Do not disturb it. If you know two lovers are in the next room, lost in their love, should you go in and give them company? No, of course not. That's again the empire, and you shouldn't touch it. Touching it would be like gathering the dewdrops glistening on the spider's web. You should not cross the magic circles around the empire." (122-3)

(The bit about the spider's web referred to the beginning of Nitya's Prelude meditation on the verse text: "In the morning sun the dewdrops on the spider's web glisten like precious gems.... Can I gather them for a necklace?")