

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 3  
11/12/19

All versions are pretty similar; I read out the Minford and Mitchell.  
Since many of you have the Mitchell, here's the Minford:

Not to Honor the Worthy  
Puts an end to Contending  
Among the folk.  
Not to Prize Rare Goods  
Puts an end to Theft  
Among the folk.  
No to Display Objects of Desire  
Removes Chaos  
From the Heart-and-Mind  
Of the folk.  
The Taoist rules by  
Emptying Heart-and-Mind  
And Filling Belly,  
By softening the Will to Achieve,  
And strengthening Bones.  
The Taoist frees the folk  
From False Knowledge and Desire.  
Those with False Knowledge  
No longer dare to Act.  
The Taoist Accomplishes  
Through Non-Action,  
And all is well Ruled.

Minford quotes Master Mo, of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, a contrarian who insisted that the Rulers' task is actually to Honor the Worthy, to employ capable people in government. Minford holds with Lao-tzu: "This conventional Honoring of the Worthy was a pillar of the

Chinese meritocracy for centuries, and has lasted to the present day, with all of its concomitant ills—an obsession with social status, ambition, corruption, nepotism, and deadening conformity. The Taoist shuns all of this. In an important sense, Non-Action implies Anarchy.” (13)

This made me realize that the verses sometimes speak to rulers and other times aim more directly at truth seekers. While there is overlap, I’ve always admired the more personal ones most. All of the verses can surely be applied to our spiritual explorations. In China, personal integrity and the integrity of the state have always been linked. My own version of this truth is my motto, If people are self-realized, almost any political system will work. Until it is done, no system will work.

Susan sent her kids to Waldorf School, where parents are advised not to directly praise them, and she could see how this was in line with the verse’s teaching. Instead of gushing over their every act, you turn the arrow inward in a less ego-oriented way. Her example was instead of going on about how beautiful a child’s scribble on paper was, you’d say something like “That must have been a fun (or interesting) project.”

Despite, or perhaps because of, this admirable proposal, Susan’s daughter is extremely competitive. Susan is happy about this, as we live in a competitive era, yet it isn’t a Taoist attitude. Not to worry: we aren’t necessarily intent on becoming Taoists, only to grasp the philosophy in a meaningful way.

Coincidentally, a good friend had just read something in my book *Liberating Ourselves* that touched on this very subject. She was very excited to make the connection with my story about how as a child I was admired for my piano playing, and my family often made a big deal about it. Later in life I realized my latent desire for admiration was holding me back from being purely in tune with the skill and joy of making music: a kind of subconscious

impediment. And when I sloughed it off, I became more present in what I was doing.

My friend is a sports star who has had a few setbacks recently, but all through her childhood and young adulthood she was the golden girl, with tons of first place finishes. Now she's older and has had some injuries, she's been mostly unconsciously worried that that might slip away. Becoming aware of it has given her a key to annulling it. I've appended part of the excerpt she liked in Part II, if you care to read more.

To me, children benefit from praise and doting when they're young, and those who don't get enough (or any) are severely damaged, unlikely to recover from the feelings of low self-esteem that are generated. Lao Tzu is suggesting that praise has a contrary effect in adults, and I agree. We need to peel away the desire for approbation we grooved on in infancy, and seek and find our own authenticity. The worst is when *others* are praised and you aren't: children and adults begin to scheme ways to get that covetable feeling for themselves. That must be the key here, and it logically arises out of the last verse, where beauty makes ugliness and goodness makes wickedness. If some things or people are elevated, others must be abased. Deep down we all want a fair shake. If we imagine someone else is getting something, we imagine it will be good for us to get it too.

Hey, praise can never be enough. If you start praising kids in a classroom, you won't get around to all of them—it would be too tedious. Some will be left out. Teaching spiritual humility and non-grasping is a much better option.

Susan's ideas reminded me of Nitya's problematic experience working in a Montessori school. I've added his searingly brilliant essay about it from *That Alone*, in Part II. As Andy said, Nitya was reluctant to endorse over-managing people's education, as it dampens their natural drive of curiosity.

The Waldorf approach corrects a number of classic faults of our Western, purported civilization. I was talking yesterday with a man who was raised conservative Catholic, and has recently been attending some services to check into what he was taught ages ago. He was angry at how in Christianity everyone was not good enough. They were all sinners, and without the Church they were doomed. He could see how it perverted his whole sense of self-worth. It appears that praising and damning both have negative long-term impacts. We are aiming instead for a middle ground of acceptance and non-exaggeration.

Susan also talked about this verse's advice in the context of her meditations. She wants to believe that meditation will make her life better in any number of ways—else why should she bother—yet she also knows that she shouldn't have expectations. How do these two thrusts go together? And she does feel that meditation *has* made her better.

I said, say you want to become less anxious. If you meditate specifically on anxiety, you will be wondering if it's working. Are you getting less anxious? Is there more I should do to have more effect? That means the whole meditation is about anxiety. Instead, you know you'd like to be less anxious so you meditate. You don't meditate on any specific. Specific meditations are almost like prayer. So you sit quiet and simply open yourself, or listen passively to a guided talk, perhaps. When you still your mind, your inner workings, all that genius neurology, can set to work healing whatever isn't serving you well, and upgrading your good parts. If you trust in it, there's nothing you need to do to reduce anxiety, it will just be reduced.

Here's another motto of mine: The best part of not having expectations is the wonderful, unexpected things that keep happening!

Andy read out Ursula LeGuin's elegant translation; quite similar to the others, but the last bit is unique:

When you do not-doing,  
Nothing's out of order.

Remember, the full Taoist adage is “doing not-doing.” It isn't just not-doing. If you do nothing, nothing will happen. So it's okay to have direction in our lives, to meditate on something. That's the doing part. But our best tool for traveling to our destination is to not manage the whole experience with our ego. Shut it up, and tell it to enjoy the ride and not complain. That adds the not-doing aspect.

John Lennon of the Beatles, in *I Dig a Pony*, sang “You can syndicate any boat you row.” But why do we need to make a huge project out of rowing our boats? Just row. It doesn't have to turn into Rowing, Inc. Instead, as Lennon suggests, “you can radiate everything you are.”

Andy agreed meditation is about not doing. We don't have to look at spirituality as some kind of project. We are already spiritual beings.

There are many subtle things in this verse, for instance, although there may be attainments, the attainments are occurring on the vast face of the Tao. You may think you have a “high quality meditation,” yet Andy thought this verse undercuts that type of thinking. A spiritual search shouldn't wind up looking like an achievement. If it becomes a program that we strive toward, it invites the spiritual ego.

I added that the spiritual ego is the hardest to detach ourselves from, since it's all about being the best, most loving, most wonderful, and so on. It's much easier to believe in discarding our bad qualities than our striving for good ones.

Andy went on that you're not creating quietude, you're returning to something that you already have or you already own. If you're looking at meditation, it's like you want to add to

something that is already yours. The hallmark of this work is its amazing simplicity.

Well, let's let Nitya lend a hand. This is from Atmo 91 in *That Alone*, which I accessed for the Montessori comments below, then found this, speaking directly to our concerns here. What a guy, that Mr. Nitya!

You believe in productivity, in always producing something. Your thinking is that before you produced it, it did not exist; that with your own effort it was produced. Then you transfer this type of thinking to your happiness. If you are not in a state of happiness, you engage in some effort that you think will make you happy. You believe that happiness is produced, manufactured like a plastic wastebasket or some other consumer item. The Guru wants to correct this notion. He says happiness is your true nature, so it is not produced. It is unborn, *ajam*. It is also *avyayam*, unexpended. Just as it is not produced, it cannot be used up. (652-3)

Thomas Merton, in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, retells the story of Master Keng Sang Chu, who aggressively avoided his disciples and kept himself hidden. When they appealed to him to honor the traditional role of wise sages to make a good impression on others, the Master railed against the very idea, claiming that "The man who has some respect for his person/ Keeps his carcass out of sight,/ Hides himself as perfectly as he can." As to famous historical personages, "What good did they do to the world/ With their scrupulous distinctions?" He goes on, citing our verse:

If the virtuous are honored,  
The world will be filled with envy.  
If the smart man is rewarded,  
The world will be filled with thieves.

You cannot make men good or honest  
By praising virtue and knowledge.

He grows increasingly ferocious, concluding that because of all this virtue, “A thousand ages from now/ Men will be eating one another raw.” Voila, the Age of Trump. We have arrived.

Speaking of eating, Andy told us about a film he watched while at the Tassajara Zen retreat center over the summer, about Ed Brown, their master baker, who once was in charge of the entire kitchen at the Zen center, a position second only to the roshi in importance. In “How to Cook Your Life,” a German-made documentary, Ed, who wrote the highly successful Tassajara Bread Book and collaborated on Green’s Cookbook, recalled realizing as a monk in charge he was becoming famous. He wanted everyone to think he was the greatest cook and for them to all love him. Then he took down a battered teapot from a shelf, full of dents, and caressed it, saying, “Everyone loved my food but they didn’t love me. I was looking at this same teapot, thinking, ‘they get so full of dents but still they do their job.’” A tear rolled down his cheek. He admitted the desire for fame and love was ground out of him by the job. The movie showed that he was a brusque, impatient person, not very lovable. Andy was touched by the way he learned his lesson, that the things we do don’t bring us love, no matter how great we are at them; love has to come from within.

I felt that even the family cook, usually a woman, learns that very same lesson, making endless meals day after day with little or no gratitude expressed, all of it taken for granted. They have to compliment themselves for nourishing their family and watching them zoom out the door in good health. Deb has said that if she is ever buried with a headstone, it should read: She Made Lunch. Like Ed Brown, she nourishes many friends in addition to the family, and only rarely hears a word of appreciation, other than from me.

I'm warming up to *Meditations on the Way*, recounting Nitya's class on the Tao Te Ching, held in Ooty in February and March, 1980. That was right after the "Saipa Invasion" of a sizable chunk of Nitya's Western students between October and January. Good times! Here's part of Nitya's contribution to the class, as recounted by Peter O:

Guru then gave some examples of how his deliberate attempts to "benefit the people" of our neighboring village had continually backfired. He related how all his conscious attempts at generosity had finally served mainly to disrupt the happy life of the village and inspire conceit, craving, and even dishonesty in the minds of the very people to whom he was presenting things, such as clothes, food, and the use of a cow. He said that now his intention remains the same, but his approach has become more subtle, somewhat covert, and even primarily operative at a subconscious level.

He continued, "For me these stanzas are not primarily of social significance, but rather can have the effect of transforming one's very criteria of value, what one looks for, how one looks at things, and one's approach towards the everyday problems of life. The fruit of this verse should manifest right in the marketplace, but it does so by transforming the mind of the student who reflects on the verses." (9)

Andy stayed with Nitya in Ooty around 1982, and saw how there was still envy and a real tension between the poor villagers and the comfortable, if not wealthy, Gurukula. Nitya advised him that a lot of people will be coming to you and asking for things and you have to be careful what you give. Andy felt Nitya didn't want him to be taken advantage of. Nitya told him it was his job to be used



by everyone—he had to allow it. But Andy shouldn't, at least without careful consideration.

It was indeed a lesson to take heed of. Deb and I were there in 1986, with 5-year-old Emily Aruna. We brought a substantial first aid kit along, and one day a local child came in with a minor cut to her finger. Being an EMT, I carefully washed and bandaged it and sent her off home. The next morning I was astonished by a long queue of ragged kids at the door. I wondered what was going on, until the first few held up their hands. Some had tiny cuts they had made themselves, but most didn't have anything. They just wanted a bandaid. These were kids who had literally nothing, and the girl who sported a bandaid the day before had been the envy of them all. So I used up most of my stash giving every child their first tiny bandage. It made me realize what a tricky business it was to intervene in another culture, which historically has been far more tragic than this amusing incident.

Before our lovely final meditation, I proposed that the elements of the verse, especially belly and bones, could be taken in a symbolic sense. Filling the belly is of course a crucial notion in a country that has likely endured the most starvation in human history, but I thought there had to be more to it. Happily, Red Pine's citations confirm this. The verse pairs mind and belly, will and bones, in a dialectic fashion akin to yoga. Of the nine citations, three are most germane:

Lu Ning-Shih says, "The mind knows and chooses, while the stomach doesn't know but simply contains. The will wants and moves, while bones don't want but simply stand there. Sages empty what knows and fill what doesn't know. They weaken what wants and strengthen what doesn't want."

Wang Chen says, "Sages empty the mind of reasoning and delusion, they fill the stomach with loyalty and honesty, they

weaken the will with humility and compliance, and they strengthen the bones with what people already have within themselves.”

Liu Ching says, “This verse describes how sages cultivate themselves in order to transform others.”

We can easily see how Lu Ning-Shih had in mind the fourfold structure we use: mind and stomach are the horizontal negative and positive, respectively, and will and bones are the vertical positive and negative, respectively. Knowing this, Wang Chen’s statement adds an operational dynamic of how to achieve balance within those four positions. We make efforts to delete delusions and hold only honest positions about the world. We trust the stability of our origins, our bones, and try not to let our aspirations exceed good sense, while referring to other people’s wisdom for guidance. Which is how, as Liu Ching puts it, we cultivate ourselves.

Such a close accord between Taoism and Vedanta. Amazing!

After a profound meditation on nothing, we streamed out into the darkness of a brilliant full moon night.

## Part II

Beverley sent two complimentary haikus for this one:

Good order and kindness,  
An exemplary Master,  
Peace and quiet reigns

Act by inaction.  
Tame your will and order comes  
To life about you

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Nitya in *That Alone*, on Montessori schools, a place he worked in the 1950s while in Bombay, and, as ever, making an essential lesson out of it:

So why do you fail? You fail because you want everything to be put in terms of one limb of your consciousness, one quarter of your totality: wakeful consciousness. In the wakeful, everything has a definite name, a definite form, a mass, a dimension, and various specific qualities. When you are not interpreting events in this model you are at a loss. It is only the most gross aspect of your consciousness, but you hold on to it, you are riveted to it.

The Montessori schools are taking children's minds and riveting them to objects. The eyes are riveted to forms and colors, and afterwards the children can't get their eyes out of them. If a book has pictures, do we read it? There may be beautiful things written in it, but we just skip from picture to picture. That is their approach. Madame Montessori started her system to help handicapped children develop their sensory functions so they could share the world with normal children, and it worked very well in many cases. But now the schools treat all children as abnormal. Their spirits are drawn into the physical system and riveted there. They are never given the opportunity to enter into abstractions and generalizations, into the free flow of the mind to imagine. Even without this program, most of us become riveted to objects far too early in life! (653-4)

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Here's the excerpt from *Liberating Ourselves* that my friend found helpful. I had taken up making music again, after imagining I was going to give up everything and just "do Yoga":

I started to feel this nagging sense that something wasn't quite right. And as I was doing my musical meditation, I paid more and more attention to it. I eventually discovered that what it was turned out to be that as a little kid I had played fairly well and my family had always gathering around the piano. They were praising me. They were very excited. They admired me. And I realized that part of me had never let go of that. I was still playing in hopes of being admired and loved and appreciated. And I realized that was just an impediment. That's something that's getting in the way of me getting fully involved in music. And recognizing it was probably the first most important thing.

The reason I say this is universal is that you probably didn't play the piano, but you probably did something that made people love you. You might have done a number of things. And all of those things are extra baggage, ego baggage really, that we need to throw off in order to be free. So anyway, it took quite a bit of time, but every time it came up, I'd go 'oh there it is again. There's that little part of me that wants people to love me for playing the piano. And eventually, I did get free of it. It took a while, but that's the kind of work. That's real yoga. And the dialectic part was that for a long time I felt really awful when people would complement me or thank me for playing. And I realized that was the flip side of it. Because I had had to get rid of these feelings of appreciation and admiration that I was carrying, that when people came up with that genuine expression, which was perfectly fine, I reacted negatively to it because I hadn't totally come to a neutral place. I had overbalanced towards the opposite direction.

And that is the essence of yoga – trying to come to a balance between two sides of a coin or two parts of a dilemma. All of the problems that we face in life come as dual problems of good and bad, right and wrong, up and down and so on. And if we stick to

one side or the other, then we lose our balance. Yoga is the process of finding a neutral balance point in the middle of an entire situation, which in fact is a very freeing, liberating insight.

### Part III

Apparently the algorithms are reading the class notes, because this came up on my suggestions a half hour after I mailed the notes, on the dangers of mindfulness meditation as a fixed program. It definitely goes along with the verse:

[https://getpocket.com/explore/item/the-problem-with-mindfulness?utm\\_source=pocket-newtab](https://getpocket.com/explore/item/the-problem-with-mindfulness?utm_source=pocket-newtab)