

8/18/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 31

We managed one more physical class, on a lovely warm evening. It's already getting darkish by eight o'clock, so we'll be back on Zoom quite soon, yet having friends over is a treat, even if hugs have to wait for a vaccine....

Since Nitya's Tao class has now ended, we are no longer under the Guru's care, at least in a print version. And by the way, Nitya's first class in Portland began in mid-September 1970, which was when Deb and I first came in contact with him. A half century ago now. A stroke of great good fortune.

Once again all the versions of the verse are substantially similar. It opens by damning weapons in no uncertain terms: they are instruments of fear (F), despised by sages (H, P), hateful to living things (LG, F, Min), detested by all decent men (Mit). They are Instruments of Ill Omen, per Minford.

All translations agree that weapons are to be used only as a last resort, when there is no other option. If you enjoy weapons you must enjoy killing people, and if you do, you lose your share in the common good (LG, Min), can never attain your true place in the world (H), or be fulfilled (F).

War should be conducted like a funeral, and all those lost mourned. Never gloat over victory.

Minford's go-to guy, the River Master, doesn't hold back in his powerful explication of the verse:

Weapons
Perturb Spirit,
They are
Instruments of Evil,
Never to be cultivated,
Never to be beautified.

The True Gentleman despises them. As a last resort they may occasionally be used, in times of chaos, when catastrophe looms. But rulers bent on controlling the Destiny of Others with Force, with cruel punishments, lack the Tao and the Inner Power wherewith to Transform Others. They merely Harm the Innocent. In Ancient Times, the victorious general adopted the Rites of Mourning, wore white robes, and lamented.

Pine quotes Su Ch'e: "We take up weapons to rescue the distressed and not as a matter of course." Nowadays in the US, weapons are more often turned on the distressed. There is no sense of nurturing or protecting the downtrodden, only treading harder. I can think of several very large countries following roughly the same protocol.

Deb opened our discussion with the idea that the clearest and most obvious reference is to the weapons of war, but that also we should ask ourselves, what are the nonmaterial weapons that we use that hurt other people? Things like insults, hatred, cynical sarcastic remarks are also weapons.

There is a reference in the verse to left and right, and Red Pine explains that 'left' means east and the power of creation and humility, 'right' is destruction and war aggression. There is a time for each, but the best way to live is to the left, toward creation and humility. Deb felt it was a manual for peace in ourselves.

Nancy agreed how if there is something that displeases you, the reaction that you have right off is you want to get rid of it. It's an everyday reaction that is disruptive to peace, an active mood to do something about a problem rather than accepting it with humility.

Deb admitted it's hard to live with what we don't like. We're invited here to assume a posture of creativity. Creativity is welcoming in some way. Nancy added that creativity means

making something different, so if it's live and let live, you move things around so everyone can have space, adjusting so it's more comfortable for everyone to exist together.

Jan liked a line from Magister Liu, in the Minford: "When Hard and Soft exist together in human affairs, this is the True Tao." It made her think of Michelle Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention the night before, how it was powerful yet humble, full of tolerance and generosity. She focused on the need for finding the right solution, for building a world that takes care of everybody. Her directness in appealing to the humanity of the average person was very moving.

I put in that it was a great example of hard and soft going together. If a speech doesn't have a meaningful point, if it doesn't face important issues directly, then all the softness is tepid, meaningless. Jan assured me that her speech addressed the grave issues of our time, which gives vibrancy and relevance to the gentle and wise aspects of what she said.

Following Deb's initial prompting, Magister Liu also makes a similar point: By Weapons is meant any form of Violence that causes Harm.

It reminded me how in my childhood during the 1950s and 60s, weapons were worshipped in American society. Most of the TV shows—a new phenomenon—were "Westerns" with everyone shooting "bad guys" of every stripe. I got play guns for birthdays and Christmas, even at 5 or 6. Boxing gloves one year, which I tried out, until I got bopped on the nose, which really hurt. Made my eyes water. Books for kids had lots of gunplay, and my dad thought it essential I learn to shoot a rifle. Hunting animals was taken for granted. Our society still worships firearms, no matter how much mayhem they cause, though my native pacifism rose up and displaced it long, long ago.

In addition to the normalizing of killing, we Americans also learned to attack other people for having divergent views, while

paying lip service to tolerance. Violence in our society is unconsciously accepted, if not publicly admitted. Often religion is deployed as a weapon. If you disagree with someone you are driven to refute them, so you fire scriptural talking points. Or you quote people who agree with you. I felt our schooling played a role, since we are trained to defend our arguments, and bolster our opinions. It's becomes important to be "right," for grades, social acceptance, and to avoid punishment in many cases.

Indian psychology recognizes words as weapons: they are *sphota*, invisible bomblets that explode into meaning in the recipient's body and mind. The injuries they cause can be incredibly hurtful and long lasting. Sure, in the Gurukula we teach treating them only as hot air passing over vocal cords, but it's a hard thing to do, and we shouldn't blast someone else without ample reason: as the verse puts it, it must be a last resort when all else fails.

The quietude and peace of this philosophy remains little known in America, how we don't need to be armed in our position, we can be ourselves and remain open and flexible. Instead of having to be right all the time, we can become defenseless. Again this "soft" position requires us to be strong of "hard" enough in our self-respect to not allow another person's *sphota* to injure us. The newscasts sell themselves by instilling terror and paranoia in every listener. Susan said that gun sales in the US, always massive, have recently escalated even more. We're getting ready to blast anything that moves. Whoopie!

In Pine, King Hsiang of Liang asked Mencius, "How can the kingdom be pacified?" Mencius answered, "The kingdom can be pacified by uniting it." King Hsiang asked, "But who can unite it?" Mencius answered, "One who does not delight in killing others can unite it." Needless to say, this goes starkly against the plan of "divide and conquer" currently holding sway in many nations.

We held a most interesting discussion about true nonviolence in our actions. Moni mused that if you rejoice in victory, you also delight in killing—they go together. Deb could see the idea underlines the importance of quiet and listening. We have to avoid making up our minds before we hear the evidence.

This inspired Susan to tell us about her feelings for her neighbors, who are very conservative. While there are a lot of highly toxic conservatives around these days, some remain principled and dignified. As she's gotten to know them, she's had to let go of her negative assumptions. She's seen how sweet they are with each other, and how important this is compared to someone's policy positions, at least in private life.

Deb seconded how our assumptions can throw us off track—we're dealing with our own concepts rather than letting the other person tell us what they really believe. Everyone is hiding in their little safe places, projecting.

Moni had just seen a news story about Las Vegas, a city which is only 1% Black, featuring an old woman who had lived through the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, talking about how much fear and distrust still exists between the races, especially after dark. She felt if she could just sit down and talk with people, they would become friends and the problems would disappear. It wasn't so much that they were haters, but they were afraid. Both sides are afraid of each other, until they get to know each other, and the hostility keeps them apart.

I was brought up in the wake of WWII, to believe that our country was all about liberty and justice for everyone; that we are judged by what we do, not by what we look like; that I should never judge a person by their appearance, but only by their actions. My mother was aggressive about having me play with children from other cultures, and I'm grateful, because now I realize it was an exceptional upbringing. I assumed it was universal, but that's hardly the case. Many parents taught just the opposite. Our "Sixties

culture” was an explosion of the positive values I was raised with, because they were widely held, and psychedelics reinforced them beautifully. A great example of that spirit is the Yardbirds song You’re a Better Man Than I, from about 1965. Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/The-yardbirds-youre-a-better-man-than-i-lyrics>

Song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tgC8iz_ALik .

Moni talked to a friend who went to India, and when she came back told Moni, here we call it racism, there they call it caste. It’s the same thing, so there’s no point in thinking we’re better because there’s no caste in America.

Deb mused that war is the projection of images of the way we are.

Jan really appreciated the message, and enthused how when you first meet someone and don’t like them, if you can find a way in, you find a way to love them. It’s the opposite of being defended, and I suspect Jan is rather good at it, since she was glowing as she spoke. The rest shared some examples of when this had worked for us, too. Because it does. Below a prickly exterior, most everyone is a human being who craves love and understanding. If they sense a measure of acceptance on our part, they often will respond to some degree.

Deb recounted again how in her many moves during her childhood, she was always meeting new kids. She eventually learned from experience that the one she most disliked at first would become her best friend later on. Somehow, our similarities can be off-putting, just like magnets, where the same poles repel each other. In loving kindness, there’s only one pole, and we’re in it together.

Deb brought up dispassion again, saying it means acceptance of everybody, allowing them to be in their place. That’s right: you’re not doggedly holding to your own position, but giving room for the other to show you their position. If you can do it, it makes them feel better about you, at the same time.

In Pine, Hsuan-Tsung says: “The greatest victory involves no fighting. Hence, dispassion is the best policy.” Going deeper, Li Hsi-Chai says: “Lao-tzu says dispassion is the best policy, because it secures victory without a display. This might seem odd, but dispassion means to rest, and rest is the root of victory. Meanwhile, passion means to act, and action is the basis of defeat.”

Moni wondered if dispassion meant being inactive, but I suggested that at its best, it was a dynamic state. You have to actively resist your conditioning, your emotional reactions, to stay calm and neutral, and only then can you clearly hear what is coming in.

For the meditation we used Chuang Tzu’s *Advising the Prince*, on pages 139-40: <https://terebeck.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>. Since it’s supremely to the point and quite unexpected, I’m going to dare to reprint it in Part II. It seemed that most of us were very surprised by it, yet most of all it reminds me of Nitya’s teaching style.

Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

31

Force; weapons, war, fear;
Taoist rulers reject these,
they know peace is best.

* * *

Chuang Tzu/ Merton’s *Advising the Prince* reminds me very much of Nitya’s attitude, accusing us of hidden selfish motives beneath our compassionate proclamations, to highlight their roots in the ego:

ADVISING THE PRINCE

The recluse Hsu Su Kwei had come to see Prince Wu.
The Prince was glad. "I have desired," he said,
"To see you for a long time. Tell me
If I am doing right.
I want to love my people, and by the exercise of justice
To put an end to war.
Is this enough?"

"By no means," said the recluse.
"Your 'love' for your people
Puts them in mortal danger.
Your exercise of justice is the root
Of war after war!
Your grand intentions
Will end in disaster!"

"If you set out to 'accomplish something great'
You only deceive yourself.
Your love and justice
Are fraudulent.
They are mere pretexts
For self-assertion, for aggression.
One action will bring on another
And in the chain of events
Your hidden intentions
Will be made plain.

"You claim to practice justice. Should you seem to succeed
Success itself will bring more conflict.
Why all these guards
Standing at attention

At the palace gate, around the temple altar,
Everywhere?

“You are at war with yourself!
You do not believe in justice,
Only in power and success.
If you overcome
An enemy and annex his country
You will be even less at peace
With yourself than you are now.
Nor will your passions let you
Sit still. You will fight again
And again for the sake of
A more perfect exercise of ‘justice’!

“Abandon your plan
To be a ‘loving and equitable ruler.’
Try to respond
To the demands of inner truth.
Stop vexing yourself and your people
With these obsessions!
Your people will breathe easily at last.
They will live
And war will end by itself!”