

8/25/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 32:

Curiously, our two in-person classes were on anti-war verses, and now we're back to Zooming, with a sweet and gentle reprieve, a kind of promise from Lao Tzu of the worth of the negative path of Taoism. Everyone felt relieved. Poised on the edge of what feels like the war of Armageddon, we want to reclaim what's left of the higher values, which are grounded deep down below the moil and toil. The verse felt like bathing in truth after wading for days through a lost land. Here's a sketch:

LeGuin titles her translation Sacred Power. The infinite power of the universe is described as *small*, and discussing smallness dominated the discussion. Lao Tzu next mentions that if the powerful would realize this, all things would be in order; as E.E. Cummings puts it, they'd be where "everyone's in love and flowers pick themselves." (Full poem in Part II.)

A gentle rain or "sweet dew" would fall.

"People would no longer need laws, and all things would take their course." (Feng) Fairness would prevail.

Once the whole is divvied up, it expands, so names are needed, which leads to more and more naming, getting farther and farther from the Source, the *small*. Somewhere in there you need to stop helter-skelter expanding, or there will be problems.

The verse ends by asserting names and their Source are related as rivulets that return into the Sea.

Deb opened the exploration: "In reading and listening to these translations, I was touched by the reference to the Tao as small. We normally think of the divine as large and powerful, yet the essence of Tao is small, and it is undivided. As beings start to divide it up and name its parts, it moves into an increasingly

unmanageable state, and it gets lost. Remembering the small is a tender and unique understanding.”

While smallness is paradoxical in terms of deities, it is typical of beginnings. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad starts with an egg, Hiranyagarbha. For that matter, everyone starts from an egg. Universes start small and grow immense and uncontrollable. Even in physics, the universe is conceived as an infinitesimal dot that expanded to what we know now as ultra-gigantic. One theory I’ve heard about how our universe could spring out of nothing, is that due to positive and negative forces counterbalancing, the whole shebang could have arisen from something like a tenth of an ounce of matter. No one has any idea where that first leaven came from, but it wouldn’t take much. In all cases, things have to start small. It’s essential to our meditations to think this way, taking our immense and complex world and shrinking it back down like an inverted cone to our core, the dimensionless center. This is why Lao Tzu counsels us to hold up on the continuous expansion, so we never lose contact with the origin, the Tao. People forget it all the time. They shouldn’t.

The need to take ourselves in hand and halt the endless proliferation of cause and effect is the most practical message of the verse. LeGuin’s footnote includes: “You have to make order, you have to make distinctions, but you also have to know when to stop before you’ve lost the whole in the multiplicity of parts. The simplicity or singleness of the Way is that of water, which always rejoins itself.”

Pine produced a plethora of pundits for this passage. Wu Ch’eng addresses this same central issue: “The Tao has no name, but as Virtue it does. Thus, from nothing we get something. But Virtue is not far from the Tao. If we stop there, we can still go from something back to nothing and return to the Tao. Thus, the Tao is like the sea, and Virtue is like a stream, flowing back into the Tao.”

We talked about the value of restraint at length. Deb laughingly related how she eventually learned to *let things alone* once they got out of hand, instead of pushing, pushing, to fix them. She was amazed to see how they kind of repaired themselves, without her intervention. She was always wanting to do one more thing, but now that urge reminds her of the movie about Dr. Strangelove, who, as an American military adviser in the Cold War, had to forcibly restrain his arm from giving the Nazi salute and revealing his true beliefs. Deb tells herself, “hold your hand down — go back to the nothing. Life can go on without me there.”

Nazism epitomizes the will to dominate, which is how this one connects to the previous verses.

Andy wholeheartedly concurred, admitting he’s come to worship his computer. We wanted to know why. He replied, “I use it to make pictures and it records each step of the process. When I look back at those steps, I can see that my “improvements” have gotten progressively worse. I think I’m improving the work but then I realize it was a colossal error.

I invited more examples, but Andy’s was sufficient. In any case, we are trained to keep butting our heads against problems, to keep striving to solve everything. That kind of effort has its place, but a measure of faith in our inner compass allows us to invite the whole context to weigh in, and we get a more comprehensive perspective. It makes us more open to unimagined solutions, and is a key aspect of creativity. How often do we have a spurt of inspiration, but then whittle it away by trying to make it “work”? To fit in? To make it better?

Jan got the sense that within the small things was a direction, an inner direction, or better, a directedness, though she had no preconceived notion of what way it was going. It’s simply inherent movement, like the way water flows — we’re trying to connect with whatever that flow is, even though it’s hidden from us.

I considered that we bring a kind of directedness to everything we think about, because it's built in to the way we're structured. In English we read left to right, but Arabic is right to left, and China and Japan read vertically. Because of this, we Westerners think of things developing to the right. The graphs of the expansion of the universe I've seen all start with a point singularity on the left and expand cone-like to the right and up. These are just linear ways of depiction, and it would be impossible for a newly minted universe to move in that way. It must spread out in all directions, but we can't make a sensible graph to show that. Jan's point that these things are not static or fixed is important, so we don't just get stuck with our naming, our conceptualizing.

Mitchell has a brief end note about smallness, but Needleman's, dealing with verses 32 and 34, goes farther:

Small: In these two chapters and in others (for instance, chapter 52), the word *small* may be taken to mean exceedingly fine, light, invisible, and so on—all these terms referring to that which is the highest and most powerful reality or force in the universe. Such terms invite us to consider the quality of awareness that is needed to contact the highest—a very fine, subtle vibration, a consciousness that appears in us under interior conditions of great, vibrant silence. Finally, this “small” awareness may be understood as the ultimate force itself or, to put it in other terms, mysterious as it may sound: consciousness of the Tao *is* Tao. The highest consciousness is consciousness of itself. This self-luminous light expands and descends into the world of the ten thousand things. Compare the use of small in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, III, iv. 3: “Small as a grain of rice is that Self... yet greater than all the worlds.” Compare also the mustard seed of the Gospels and the “still small voice” heard by the prophet Elijah.

Pine quotes Ho-Shang Kung: “Those who can see what is small and hold onto it are rare indeed.” This led us on a fascinating swerve into the true source of action. It began when Andy recalled trying to read anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s article on the effects of conscious purpose on human adaptation. He tried to read it and found it most incomprehensible, but he did get the punchline: Bateson wasn’t hopeful that human development would be helped by conscious intentions.

Fortunately, science has come a long way since then, and the concept of conscious awareness having at best a secondary role has been verified with brain imaging. We have better ways to explain it now. What the ancient sages and neuroscientists agree on is that our conscious mind is being presented with the end product of extensive preconscious development, to which the conscious mind is a more or less passive witness.

I have just shared a good article on it with my Gita class, and I’ll clip it in here. The authors of the article imagine this means our waking mind has nothing to contribute, it’s just watching an unalterable movie, but that’s ridiculous. While we bear witness to a most convincing story prerecorded on our behalf, our ego has the option to override or modify the outcome. We make the final decision, we have some role, in what we do. Here’s the article, with the comments I included to the Gita class:

Yes, science is catching up with Vedanta... finally!

https://getpocket.com/explore/item/what-if-consciousness-is-not-what-drives-the-human-mind?utm_source=pocket-newtab

The authors believe this information renders us helpless.

Somehow they are leaving out the role of the ego, our conscience, in deciding which narratives to promote. Our world is generated for us, but we still have a say in what we do with

it. I guess it will take more years before that concept comes up in science circles.

This is old hat to Gurukula participants, but the point we were discussing is that, despite having a say in things, the more that we try to improve them, the more we interfere with a most creative program, because we have only a vague sense of what the program is. Returning to the small, the origin, is one way of honoring all that invisible development, and not damaging it.

Deb agreed this is essential if we want to get to a more profound level of creativity and energy. I have come to see that believing this process descends from a god or goddess makes it easier to surrender to it. The ego wants to co-opt it as *me* or *mine*, and that alienates it. Imagining it as ‘other’ in some fashion instills respect, and, for the serious seeker, a greater willingness to listen. In some way we should appreciate that the Unknown is delivering our life to us. Deb cited Nitya’s perfect term, that we are *co-creators*. Co-creators with God, he often put it. We are working with something much greater than our awareness has room for.

Nancy related that many years ago she went to a seminar, with neuroscientists and chemists speaking. Their research led them to the conclusion that the surface area of all the brains of all the people on earth is like a membrane of a cell, and it’s our connection to the greater universe. Our collective brains make up a single cell receiving and broadcasting something that is irrelevant and unknowable to individual egos. It’s just like the Tao — we think we’re making things happen but in a sense we’re just a part of something we can’t grasp. It’s not for us to understand. We are just a tiny speck in it. Yet you can feel that energy in the surface of your brain. When you are meditating you can feel the energy going out or coming in. At least Nancy can.

Another recently-shared article is similar. Since the psychedelic era, I’ve always thought the universe was the human

brain turned inside out, and vice versa. At least there are striking similarities: https://getpocket.com/explore/item/the-strange-similarity-of-neuron-and-galaxy-networks?utm_source=pocket-newtab .

Deb mentioned there are other theories that the earth is one organism and the plants and animals are all part of that organism. Dr. Lynn Margulis is well-known as a proponent of the Gaia Hypothesis, the Earth as a single entity. Teilhard de Chardin was an earlier one. Nancy felt it was obvious that we only perceive a small fraction of what's around us, such as a snippet of the light spectrum. Birds navigate using magnetic fields that we are unaware of, and so on.

Yet there is a dogged belief that what we see is what we have to work with, and we leave out nearly an infinite amount from our calculations.

Red Pine reveals a secret: “The phrase *kan-lu*, “sweet dew,” also refers to the saliva produced during meditation by pressing the tongue against the roof of the mouth. Narayana Guru mentions this same yoga pose in the Yoga Darsana of Darsanamala, verse 9:

When meditation is done with the gaze between the eyebrows
and the tip of the tongue fixed above the uvula,
then happens *khecari mudra*,
which dispels torpor and fatigue.

I've added some excerpts from Nitya's commentary on this in Part II.

Two of Pine's sages mention the sweet dew. Jen Fa-Jung says: “In terms of practice, if people can be serene and natural, free themselves from desire, and put their minds at rest, their *yin* and *yang* breaths will come together on their own and penetrate every artery and organ. Inside their mouths, the saliva of sweet dew will appear spontaneously and nourish their whole body.” Li Hsi-Chai

says, “Although Heaven and Earth are high and low, they join together and send down sweet dew. No one makes them do so. And there is no one who does not benefit.” Minford quotes Chen: “The Sweet Dew is the Rain which Nourishes all Life.”

Pine writes that the word for stream and the word for valley are the same in Chinese, (which for me adds to the sense of humbleness) and the various translations use one or the other. In addition to her wonderful haikus, Beverley sent us some basic and helpful information about how Chinese words are formed, and have several meanings depending on pronunciation, etc., also included in Part II.

Wang Pi is always superb: “If people embrace the simple and work without effort and don’t burden their nature with material goods or injure their spirit with desires, all things will come to them on their own, and they will discover the Tao by themselves. To discover the Tao, nothing is better than embracing simplicity.”

Pine quotes Lao Tzu himself, from verse 66: The reason the sea can govern a hundred rivers / is because it has mastered being lower.”

Our closing meditation began with Merton/Chuang Tzu’s *When Knowledge Went North*, a marvelous sendup of the gist of this verse, beginning on page 118:

<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>.

I felt immensely restored by the cheerful gathering, despite the “distance” of the medium. We had eleven sweet hearts, the most we’ve had in a while. Sharing nontrivial contact remains an essential element of a healthy, harmonious life. Aum.

Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

Tao endures nameless.
Change leads to names, then more names,
then it's hard to stop.

Words have great power
to control things, but Life
is beyond control.

* * *

Beverley also wrote:

I was talking to my brother about a book he's been reading about China's ambition to replace America as the next global power. The book is called The Hundred Year Marathon: China's secret strategy to replace America as the Global Super power. John Pilsbury Amazon often gives one the chance to read a long excerpt from a book which they have done in this case. I usually check out books that John has been reading although I don't agree with a lot of his opinions.

Anyway I came across a really interesting section on the problem of understanding the Chinese language and indeed the Chinese as well because of the way they use language. I dictated the following excerpt with the Dragon. First time I've done this and it worked quite well. love b

One of the first things a student of the Chinese language learners is its essential ambiguity. There is no alphabet, and Chinese words aren't formed by letters. Rather, words are formed by combining smaller words. The word for size combines the character for large with the character for small. The word for length combines the word for short and long. Chinese use dictionaries to organise

thousands of characters which must be filed under approximately 200 so-called rate radicals or families, all sorted according to relatedness. Under each category of relatedness the dozens of characters are again sorted in order of the total number of strokes required to write a character from a minimum of 1 to a maximum 17 strokes.

Adding to this complexity are the tones and pitches that delineate words. The effect of tones is to give a single word four possible meanings. A classic example is **ma**. The first tone, ma means mother. The second tone is a rising tone that means numb. The third tone means horse, and the fourth tone, which falls sharply, means to scold. The Chinese must talk loudly to make the tonal differences audible. Another ambiguity is how few sounds the Chinese language uses for syllables. The English language has 10,000 different syllables, but Chinese has only 400. Thus many words sound the same. Puns and misunderstandings abound. The language's very complexity is like a secret code. As a foreigner I must make important decisions about how to translate Chinese concepts, which can inherently lead to misunderstandings.

* * *

The Darsanamala verse on *khechari mudra* (IX.9) begins:

There is life in a seed but it sleeps. When it is roused, the sprout comes out like a waking person getting up from bed and standing erect. A sleeping person cannot stand erect and balance their body on their feet. The head becomes heavy and the neck cannot support it. Even the eyelids become heavy, and it is hard for a sleepy person to keep their eyes open. Even when the person keeps awake, if there is not enough stamina in the body and the system is assailed by lethargy, it is difficult to apply oneself physically to any work or to keep the mind attentive to do any task. The more one becomes attentive, the

greater is the clarity of the mind and the agility of the body to engage every part to function effortlessly.

There's a parallel with the proliferation of the small in the present Tao verse. Nitya later describes the mudra itself:

To get into *khechari mudra*, the most essential and dynamic power of the visual faculty is detached from the rest of the organism and is placed in-between the eyebrows. This synergic center is called the *ajna*, the center from which all volitions come in the form of the will to act. Concentration is identical with the centering of consciousness in the *ajna*. When this is possible, consciousness has a mastery over all.

And:

Erotic energy is the highest that humans can wield. This is concentrated in the mouth, and as a base for sublimation the tongue is erected in a vertical position and inserted through the cavity behind the uvula. Thus the verticalized flow of energy is brought into conjunction with the synergic center of volition, *ajna*, and the aspirant yogi roots out all incipient memories that are of an expending nature.

* * *

who knows if the moon's
a balloon, coming out of a keen city
in the sky—filled with pretty people?
(and if you and i should

get into it, if they
should take me and take you into their balloon,

why then
we'd go up higher with all the pretty people

than houses and steeples and clouds:
go sailing
away and away sailing into a keen
city which nobody's ever visited, where

always
 it's
 Spring)and everyone's
in love and flowers pick themselves

(E.E., of course)