

9/1/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 33

Lao Tzu demonstrates how to fit a vast amount into a few words in this concentrated gem.

All versions are quite similar, and the ideas arrive in pairs, which we can examine separately. First is:

Knowing others is wisdom

Knowing yourself is enlightenment (illumination, realization)

Deb opened the discussion by asking us what is difference between wisdom and realization, and for that matter, force and strength? She partly answered it herself: we all have understanding or capability in molding the world around us, but real wisdom comes from turning into ourselves, from becoming transparent. This is where disciplining oneself comes into play. When we are seeing others, they are an object to us, so there's no deep inner connection.

In their translations, Mitchell and LeGuin have intelligence in place of wisdom and wisdom in place of enlightenment. I feel this is making the meaning into a linear, rational proposition, whereas Lao Tzu is indicating an order-of-magnitude conversion. Knowing oneself is the true rarity, while being perceptive of the other's motivations is clever but deals essentially with the surface. We are likely to treat ourselves in the same way, gauging and judging our salient traits and how they are accepted by those around us. Knowing the self is another matter entirely—bypassing the surface entirely, to enter the core of being.

Deb agreed we tend to relate to ourselves as we do others, and opposition either inward or outward is not constructive. Chogyam Trungpa taught you should befriend yourself first, that's the beginning of the path. Most of us carry a substantial enmity

toward ourself, almost without realizing it. For that matter, enmity toward others is also enmity to ourself.

We can learn to understand other people's behavior readily enough, and that's a useful skill, but to really understand them in vivid way, going beyond mere likes and dislikes, we have to know ourselves first. Lao Tzu is not only turning us back inward but also pointing out that doing so is a supreme achievement in itself.

In his end note Mitchell clarifies that this is what he means, that his "true wisdom" is basically like enlightenment: "When I know myself, I know others. When I master myself, I don't need to master others."

In this light, Bill read out a quote from Dōgen, the thirteenth century Japanese Buddhist priest:

To study the way of enlightenment is to study the self. To Study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be Actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad Things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds Of others drop away. No trace of realization remains and this No-trace continues endlessly.

When you first seek dharma, you imagine you are far away From its environs. At the moment when dharma is correctly Transmitted, you are immediately your original self.

Pine's translation is, if you know others you are perceptive, and if you know yourself you are wise. He quotes Su Ch'e, saying: "Perception means to distinguish. Wisdom means to remove obstacles. As long as our distinguishing mind is present, we can only know others, but not ourselves."

Minford quotes Magister Liu: To pass Judgment on Others, to make distinctions between High and Low, may seem like Knowledge, but it is not."

We need look no farther than present-day political discourse to see that Non-Knowledge is just about all it contains. It's easy and popular to demonize the other. Those few honest souls in politics who avoid criticism and offer legitimate alternatives are passed over with scorn by major media and punditry.

I touched on our conceited youthful attitudes as attempting self-definition by scorning what you despise, secretly hoping there will be something worthwhile left over once you're done, to define yourself by. Since it's a failed technique, many of us keep trying for our whole lives without ever getting past square one. All we accomplish is to build up a huge backlog of hostility.

The next pair is a kind of corollary:

Mastering others is force or strength
Mastering yourself is power

Li Hsi-Chai (in Pine) speaks to all the first four lines: "Perception is external knowledge. Wisdom is internal knowledge. Force is external control. Strength is internal control. Perception and force mislead us. Wisdom and strength are true. They are the doors to the Tao."

Again, we can easily see examples of the powerful who have no self-knowledge. Recently, external knowledge has been jettisoned too, in favor of pure Make Believe Reality. The antique sages would not expect this to have a propitious future.

The next two lines are different enough to treat separately.

Those who know they have enough are rich.

An old article of mine on a class of Nitya's speaks to this, and you can read it in Part II.

Wang P'ang (in Pine) says: "The natural endowment of all beings is complete in itself. Poverty does not reduce it. Wealth

does not enlarge it. But fools abandon this treasure to chase trash. Those who know contentment pay the world no heed. This is true wealth. Mencius said, “The ten thousand things are all within us. How could we not be wealthy?”

Perseverance takes willpower

Senudd’s translation, thanks to Anita, is helpful: Those who are unswerving have resolve. It’s really pretty straightforward.

Pine quotes Wang Pi, showing the link with the next line: “Those who strive with devotion reach their goal. Those who examine themselves and work within their capacity don’t lose their place and are able to endure.”

Those who stay where they are endure.

To die but not to perish is to be eternally present.

The last line is the most mysterious in the verse.

Andy was struck by Mitchell’s version: “If you stay in the center / and embrace death with your whole heart, / you will endure forever.” Andy thought you could be embracing your death the way you can embrace everything else, and by seeing every experience as the center, it comes to life. We can’t have an experience without the self shining through it. If you experience your death in that way, you have the self shining through that also.

More than anything, Andy was taken by the idea of wholeheartedness, that we have to embrace death with our whole heart. It’s rare for any of us to be fully present at any time, and the result is half-hearted.

I felt this got to the main point, though I don’t take death literally in cases like this. Death symbolizes the ordinary way we treat everything: we are the living dead, the zombie apocalypse. In

these studies we are trying to bring ourselves back to life. Immortality means you are fully alive *now*.

Arthur Waley, quoted in Minford, relates the religious fervor the last line initiated, when taken literally: “Longevity [Long Life] means, strictly speaking, potential longevity, “staying power,” what we would call having a good constitution, and is a quality that may be possessed by the young as well as the old. One branch of the “life-nurturing” school of Taoism sought it by means of diet, hygiene, drugs, etc.”

Immortality in Hinduism and the Semitic religions has created the same stir. I maintain that the meaning is not long life, but *true life*, breaking through the deadened mentality we “get along” with in normal circles. Jesus bringing the dead back to life, causing the lame to walk and the blind to see, are lovely metaphors for the breakthrough of spiritual insight brought about by a guru.

This reading of “death” and “eternity” forges a connection with the external awareness and internal enlightenment of the opening lines.

Anita was excited about Stefan Senudd’s version, which cites some recent scholarship on the last line that you can read about here: <https://www.taoistic.com/taoteching-laotzu/taoteching-33.htm> . Two much older texts have come to light, giving a more sensible reading:

Those who die without being forgotten get longevity.

Senudd concludes:

Lao Tzu has no faith in escaping death, but being remembered by one’s fellow men is defeating it in a significant way.

The misunderstanding of this line influenced Chinese Taoists of old substantially. There were many of them

believing that a Taoist life could lead to extreme longevity, even immortality, and they experimented with potions to accomplish it. Some of these potions contained poisonous heavy metals, so they reached eternal life quicker than expected.

In this sense, Lao Tzu is still thriving after 2500 years, though like everyone in the Age of Deconstruction, he is now thought to be fictional. It still counts as fame, however. The Dead don't care if they're fact or fiction.

Deb's memory was jogged, that many Taoists had the same path as the western alchemists — always searching for eternal life. I added that changing lead into gold was another of those metaphors meaning transmutation into a spiritual life, to go from a dull, poisonous blob of dutiful, malleable gunk to a shining, inspiring rarity highly valued by everyone. Literalists got hung up in changing element 82 into 79, which is clearly impossible, and later scientists imagined that disproved alchemy, when all it does is disprove a false surmise about it.

Anita offered yet another version of immortality. She's been revisiting her family photos, looking forward and backward in time and seeing the resemblance they all have with each other. She's found immortality in the faces of her family, that mysterious, inexplicable *something* that connects the generations.

Nancy went a step farther: we not only have the genetic link of our relatives, but friendship does the same thing. When you lose a friend, the memory and what you carry forward is a living reality: the memories that all who are alive carry on.

It's what the new translation of the last line indicates as well. And not just friends, but *those you know*, live on through you.

It got Andy thinking about our causal impact on the world, how your taxes, your day by day accounting of yourself, all the memories, the zillions of things you do in your life, set up ripples

that have endless repercussions. We can't be extracted from that causality. What is local is hitched to everything.

Deb sighed that our breath is being breathed forever, just as we are breathing Lao Tzu's breath even now.

I asked what wholeheartedness really means, and Andy returned to embracing death with your whole being. We have to be completely lost in our thoughts, not defining them so they can be displayed. Wholeheartedness means seeing the totality of your physical and mental behavior connected to something that is colorless and undifferentiated, and being simultaneously aware of those two contradictory states.

Deb chimed in that wholehearted means that there are no distractions. When are we ever 100 percent present? People who are realized are in that place of being deeply in themselves and in that translucent world. Andy concurred that death partakes of that state. Yet it's not a cessation of those modes of being. You can be at one with your death and with your life.

However you conceive of it, wholeheartedness is a good way to be.

Magister Liu concludes beautifully, "This is to Return Home to the Uncarved Block, to Purity, to Non-Action. This is to Return to the Tao, to Knowledge of Self, where Being and Non-Being are One, where Outer Radiance and Inner Marvel merge." That's the best intimation of wholeheartedness yet!

Speaking of the uncarved block, Charles sent a link to an interview with visionary David Bohm, including some of his own thoughts, you can find in Part II.

Jan was enchanted with the outer radiance and inner marvel, imagining where they merge. She thought it was a perfect description of that state where we are experiencing bliss and connectedness to everything, with love. It seems a little of the joy of the ancient sages seeped through once again to enliven our time together.

For the closing meditation, Jan read out the story of Sun Deng, “one of the famous Taoist Immortals,” in the Minford. It’s reason enough to secure a copy. In part: “He was once thrown into the water in an attempt to make him angry, but he just emerged from the water and broke into an enormous guffaw.” I’m going to try to keep that in mind.

Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

With experience
gain knowledge and then wisdom;
thus you'll know yourself

* * *

An old essay of mine goes along with the line “Those who know they have enough are rich.”

Wealth and Poverty
by Scott Teitsworth – late 1980s

If you keep an open mind, occasionally you learn something new. Once, many years ago, I was taking a class from a wise old Indian philosopher. Everyone in the class shared at least one common belief: that America was fabulously rich and India untouchably poor. (This was back in the Seventies, before Reagan’s revolution has in fact bankrupted the country.) At one point during the lecture this fellow said, “America is a very poor country, while India is incredibly rich.” The statement shocked us to the point of outrage. What could this guy be talking about?!

“In America, you have so much money and material goods,” he went on. “But your attitude is one of extreme poverty. You all hold out your hands and cry and whine that you don’t have enough, that no one is doing anything for ‘me, me, me.’ You are like the worst kinds of beggars. No amount of material opulence will satisfy you.” We shifted uncomfortably in our seats—perhaps a lot of us matched that description. Many of us were always complaining without helping, taking without giving, filled with unwarranted desperation for...what? We were like lost children trapped in adult bodies, still crying for their parents to come and comfort them.

“In India we have few material goods, but we are nonetheless rich. If you are hungry, the poorest person will share his last crust of bread with you. So many people will offer you a place to sleep, clothes to wear; they will walk with you to show you to your destination. They don’t ask if you’re a member of a particular sect or religion or political party, they deal with you as a human being. Their arms are always open in trust and friendship, no matter whether they have a lot or a little to give. That is real wealth. That is how truly rich people behave.” Many of us hung our heads in shame. Right there a resolve was born in us to change our attitudes, to replace our impoverished sense of ourselves with an outlook of calm contentment and fearlessness—in other words, of psychological wealth. Looking back to that class, I see it as a most important step in gaining maturity, in becoming an adult in the actual sense, as opposed to what passes for adulthood in our manifestly immature society.

“Many of you are standing there holding out your cup and crying and begging to have it filled. But grace is showering us on all sides. The universe is fabulously rich. The problem is that you are holding your cup upside down. You have only to turn your cup upright, and the many blessings this life is full of will fill it to the brim over and over again. Thank you.” The professor strode off the

stage, leaving us rooted to our chairs, pondering and pondering again.

* * *

I read this out at the fire ceremony on Sunday, but it speaks of immortality in yet another way.

Electrons
by Lucille Lang Day

Elementary particles with no known
components or substructure,
the ones in our bodies are older than the ancients
who drew mammoths, bison, bears
and snakelike symbols in Rouffignac cave.

They belong to the first generation
of the lepton particle family,
older than the dinosaurs, the trilobites,
the mountains, the oceans, and the Earth itself.
Their electric charge is negative one.

The electrons in all our cells are older too
than the sun and the constellations.
They congealed in the early universe
even before atoms and molecules appeared.
Thus, we are one with the beginning of everything.

Being fermions, no two electrons
can occupy the same quantum state
in accordance with the Pauli exclusion principle.
Flowing through a wire, they create a current.

In our brains, they turn energy into colors and love.

Inside our bodies, they move across chasms
one ten-billionth of a meter wide, by the quadrillions,
every second. We are intricate and myriad
as the galaxies. We worry about small things
while the cosmos surges inside us, insistent as time.

(Nostos, Vol IV, 2020)

* * *

Charles sent Towards Wholeness – an interview with David Bohm:

https://youtu.be/GFLieeAQ_Bw

One amazing thing after another!

I have trouble reading.

These days since my eye surgery, I often can't follow the track, drift off. Get tired, have to take a nap.

Even listening to podcasts to save my eyes from fatigue, I often have trouble following. because of short attention span.

Bohm may come across as hesitant, like a blind man groping, or even as a bit simple. I find it easy to follow what he is saying. though.

He talks about Helen Keller. As he was talking about her I had the idea that she was the uncarved block. and then I jumped to the conclusion that he, Bohm, was the uncarved block also, because his thought as it is unfolded in his speech had a rough texture that made it easier to grasp than the smooth polished discourse of finished speakers.

* * *

The Merton/Chuang Tzu reading was *The Tower of the Spirit*, on page 134: <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>. Susan also read *The Need to Win*, p 107, the one with the archer who has all his skill when shooting for no reason, but as the stakes get higher they become more distracting, and the skill drains away, due to the need to win.