

9/15/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 35

Another short but piquant verse kept us engaged for the full period. The initial concept is that those who adhere to the One, the Great Image, of the Tao, are attractive to everyone, since it is the domain of safety, happiness and peace. Nicely, LeGuin puts it as the world *will come to you*, additionally implying a deepened relationship with the environment, that you will be more alive to it if you are in tune with the Tao.

The middle motif refers to people's love for food and pleasure, for entertainments, and admits that the Tao is insipid, bland and uninviting to those "passersby." Those of superficial interests. Hamill suggests that it's the Tao *explained* that is dull and monotonous, and that's excellent. It can't be explained, so stop trying. All translations agree, the Tao as a Great Image can't compete with the flashy side of life, that's not what it's about. It can't succeed as a spectacle, which is what many religions try to provide. We see them degenerating into hatred and dyspepsia, partisans of their own Great Imagery.

Deconstruction is a way of *unexplaining* things, of explaining how they became so corrupt and ill-serving and unzipping it. That's roughly how our class is focused, trying to let go of convictions that no longer serve anyone's interests. Oddly, the less well they serve the harder we are likely to hold on, as if the vestige of an effect could somehow be resurrected through tightness of grip.

The final concept is that while the Tao is invisible and inaudible, it is inexhaustible. Most translations also call it *useful*, and in fact the word inexhaustible implies that something is going on, it's being used, it's practical. There's a *practice* involved. We've been getting schooled in the uselessness of the Tao, so it's a bit of a jolt, and Anita and Karen wanted us to look into it, as we'll

see. Just how do we “use” the Tao? What “practice” are we talking about?

Susan was touched by LeGuin’s alternative last line, that instead of the Tao being inexhaustible, those who hold to it can’t get enough of it. Nice. Those of us who are motivated to be more than passersby find tremendous attraction and satisfaction in the indescribable emptiness we find in the heart of all existence.

Hamill also phrases the last part very well, adding a nuance related to usefulness. Where most of the others straightforwardly describe it as imperceptible, Hamill has:

Seeing it is not enough to see it.
Listening is not enough to hear.

This emphasizes that while the Tao is not perceptible, nevertheless so much of our “practice,” our “usage,” is to strive to perceive it. That means we need to know that all analogies are only an approximation, and are never going to arrive. We should stop chasing them, imagining we don’t already have the Tao.

Despite filling the tree, the Tao is not the tree; it is much more, and much less. It is the wholly Other. “Listening” in this setting means listening to wise disquisitions: no matter how brilliant and uplifting they are, they are not the Tao, they’re only *about* the Tao. Therefore we must not permit ourselves to be satisfied with listening to a wise preceptor.

What we think is the Tao is merely a Great Image. It’s not enough. It’s not the Tao.

Since Deb is at the coast breathing pure air while we suck up a toxic brew of oxidized hazardous chemicals, I opened the discussion in her stead, pointing out that there is a pesky paradox in this seemingly simple verse, when you look at it more closely: the Tao-image starts out being universally attractive, for very good reasons, but later it is uninteresting and neglected.

My opinion is that the first sentiment, all are drawn to those who adhere to the one, since it is the source of peace and happiness, sounds like wishful thinking, especially these days, when herds of angry people are stampeding this way and that, online and off, following those who preach antagonism and violence. There isn't a chance in hell that the message of the sages could even be encountered by them, and if it was, they would have no basis to recognize what it means.

The opening does, however, reinforce the Tao-balm of not fighting fire with fire, as so many are tempted to do. We may be helpless as calm witnesses radiating good vibes, but how much more helpless would we be as pawns in a life-or-death video game of annihilate the aliens for world peace? Sure, peaceniks are irrelevant, mere "Boomers," if not Taoists. It's only after a gigantic meltdown that the value of zero—neutrality—uselessness—is reaffirmed by desolated civilization. But the Buddha was utterly correct in saying that hatred has never been dispelled by hatred, only by love.

The second sentiment hints at this: Tao is not sexy, so those who aren't dedicated much prefer outward experiences that come and go, like food (survival) or entertainment, or for that matter political clout, aren't going to notice it. They don't realize that eventually the clouter gets clouted, and the entertainment is sorely missed when it isn't happening, leaving the connoisseur vacuous.

As Su Ch'e, quoted in Pine, says: "Banquets and entertainment might detain visitors, but sooner or later the food runs out, the music ends, and visitors leave. If someone entertained the world with the Great Image, no one would know how to love it, much less hate it. Although it has no taste, shape, or sound with which to please people, those who use it can never exhaust it."

"Visitors" or "passersby" don't know how to use the Tao (which is to be useless, etc.); you have to be a permanent resident. You have to really care.

Narayana Guru was the opposite of evangelical, yet he expresses the activism of wisdom with perfect clarity:

It is a good time to immerse deeply into the depth of beatitude. Alas! That does not befit the occasion. It is not the time to be lost in spiritual absorption. Look, here is the world drowning in the dark ocean of misery. In body and mind millions are diseased. By drinking they have increased their torpor. These unfortunate wretches are to be roused from their drunken madness. Oh ye people, wake up now! It is time for you to enter into the cleansing river of eternal wisdom and perennial joy.

It's kind of maddening that not everyone is attracted to the Great Image, especially when you have spent a lifetime encouraging peace, tolerance, amity, and so on. Maddening that despite thousands of years of wisdom propagation, violence and hatred are still so attractive to so many people. Or working really hard to stupefy your brain. Humans are more easily gripped by things we can feel, the stronger the better, and hating is supremely strong. It's undeniable, where the Tao is ineffable.

Jan reassured us that if someone is practicing and living it, then others are attracted to it. It happens all the time. The Tao has some recognizable features, despite being featureless. Certainly we feel an attractive harmonious radiance from people who are not exclusively superficial.

Moni agreed that seeing is not enough — when you truly see a thing it's not just through your eyes. It's the power or source behind the eyes that makes us see. We have to go deeper into it to get to Tao, otherwise what we do is merrymaking and drinking and not seeing anything.

After some further pondering we got into Karen and Anita's question: What is the use of it? If it was useful, you'd think it

would be popular. In a way, use is its fault, its weakness. *Use* specifies what is ultimately unspecifiable. If something is exhausted, it implies that there is a use, a function, and all of our functions are based on a quantum of energy that gets used up. To be inexhaustible denies there is use happening. It's a stumper, absolutely contrarian.

Jan bailed us out by saying if you think of it like water that flows, it is continuous and undiminished. There is a movement, a flow in it, and that keeps it alive. She read out from Magister Liu's comments in the Minford, including:

In its Origin
The Tao is
Calm and Flowing,
In tune with Change.

Nothing that stands still can stay alive. Moni agreed that it requires a merging with it, instead of a definition.

I suppose using or practicing the Tao means not doing anything. Its use is to be useless. This whole business is close kin to yoga: the clash of those impossibly contradictory values drives you to the center rather than pulling you away to a specific perspective, and the center is a heightened synthesis.

Bill mused that it may have to do with the fact that Tao is the source of the 10,000 things, and also for us to bring pure spirit into our individuated consciousness. The Tao is the source of everything that arises in us as individuals, so in that way we are using the Tao as it creates the world.

Chang Tao-Ling, quoted by Pine, says: "What the Tao says is the opposite of the mundane or the clever. Most people find it completely senseless. But within its senselessness, there is great sense. This is what sages savor. The Tao prefers simplicity of form and minimum of expression. Hence, it is hard to see and hard to

hear and also hard to follow. But those who can follow it and use it enjoy limitless blessings.”

I brought up the Donald Hoffman TED talk Anita introduced last week, (part of the notes is copied here in Part II, for convenience). In some ways it’s basic spiritual understanding, yet his scientific touch is worthwhile, and he has some cool demonstrations of how our minds project what we perceive. The gist is the world we see is a dumbed-down version of Whatever It Is, produced to make our life simple enough to function in an immensely complex universe. It’s not reality as such. I feel that just knowing this positively changes how you live.

One mind-blowing idea I really liked was from his computer interface concept (see below), how an image on the desktop was nothing like what it represented, but it was very useful in simplifying our actions. Hoffman said if you zoom in on the image, you see it’s made of pixels, and you might think that’s its reality. It’s the same way we think about atoms and particles, but it still isn’t the reality—it’s just how the *interface* is built. It doesn’t matter how closely you examine the image, it isn’t going to reveal anything about the Source.

Hoffman’s 5-year-old talk is very prosaic, and he’s likely gone way beyond it, but I didn’t have time to check further, yet. I think it would boost our conversations if some of us listened to more of his stuff. Anita was stimulated by him to consider all sorts of questions, such as if we are creating our world, then why do we create what we create? Why do we have pains, chronic illnesses in our family? Where does that come from? She wondered what else is out there about causation: is there someone pulling the strings?

One analogy Hoffman used struck me: just as you can’t teach monkeys to perform advanced mathematical calculations, humans may not have evolved yet to the point where we can comprehend the reality behind our “desktop images.” We have a long way to go, a welcome admission of humility from a scientist.

While I agree in principle about the yawning gap between appearance and reality, I advocate for how much we can learn about how we shape our reality by examining our history, observing important notions from early childhood and how they grew to influence our adult perceptions and inferences. Right and wrong ideas have stayed with us and produced anomalies of various types, many of which are strictly binding. By meditating and scrutinizing them you can deenergize some of your anomalies, anyway. You might not get to full reality, but it's a way to strip off obstructions and impediments.

Anita recalled how Vedanta has vasanas and samskaras, and they are the same principle, seeds and habits that shape our daily existence, keeping it more constrained than it needs to be. Vedanta advocates burning them up so they can't sprout any more.

This makes sense. We are the product of amazingly complex development, retaining every bit of information we accumulated all through our lives, and we're very fortunate our inner guru simplifies it for our use. Nonetheless, we are people living in self-absorbed fictions, and the real attraction of the Tao or the Absolute is that it represents the goal of breaking out of our prisons. To some of us, that's even better than a good meal.

Anita told us that Hoffman started meditating after he realized the implications of his theories, and now it's a big part of his life. She added that she was eager to discover what is behind the interface — this was her first reaction, even. That's the inexhaustible quest that gets more and more exciting as you go.

My conclusion was it's really good to wonder about these things, and it's good that Hoffman didn't give answers. Just believing that we're living in a world that is our brain's highly convincing production, is a huge leap. Our inner Self is worthy of worship, it's the divine conduit for everything we know and do. And it's sitting right with us where we are, for easy access.

Before we quit, Anita wanted to talk about Mitchell's first stanza, which is unique to him: The Master perceives the universal harmony, even in the midst of tremendous pain, because she has found peace in her core. It's a real leap from the text, but it is an important matter.

Anita, who is well acquainted with pain in many forms, has been listening to Pema Chodron talk about it, about going into pain. She told us, "I don't like pain and my instinct is to run away from it, but what I have learned from facing it, is that it's a doorway to relief. Sitting with it rather than getting anxious, and learning not to be afraid. Then I don't exacerbate it, and the pain actually gets less."

I seconded the importance of not exacerbating our pains. When we have pain, we can make it much worse by continually being fearful or anxious. While our natural reaction is to try to escape, if we take ourself in hand, we can transcend at least the part we are adding onto the problem. I've added a clip from Nitya's That Alone commentary, in Part II. Many of you remember Jill Bolte Taylor's insight on processing, which is more about emotional pain than physical, but can also influence that side:

Although there are certain limbic system (emotional) programs that can be triggered automatically, it takes less than 90 seconds for one of these programs to be triggered, surge through our body, and then be completely flushed out of our blood stream. My anger response, for example, is a programmed response that can be set off automatically. Once triggered, the chemical released by my brain surges through my body and I have a physiological experience. Within 90 seconds of the initial trigger, the chemical component of my anger has completely dissipated from my blood and my automatic response is over. If, however, I remain angry after those 90 seconds have passed, then it is because I have *chosen* to let that

circuit continue to run. Moment by moment, I make the choice to either hook into my neurocircuitry or move back into the present moment, allowing that reaction to melt away as fleeting physiology....

What most of us don't realize is that we are unconsciously making choices about how we respond all the time. It is so easy to get caught up in the wiring of our preprogrammed reactivity (limbic system) that we live our lives cruising along on automatic pilot. I have learned that the more attention my higher cortical cells pay to what's going on inside my limbic system, the more say I have about what I am thinking and feeling. By paying attention to the choices my automatic circuitry is making, I own my own power and make more choices consciously. In the long run, I take responsibility for what I attract into my life. (146-7)

Bill read out the Mitchell end note, "She is centered in the peace; thus she can give herself fully to the pain."

Anita agreed, and she tries to observe her pain with detachment, to try to find ways to qualify it, or in some ways to find attributes to the experience of pain, even to find words or expressions that help to identify it.

I noted how many people believe that giving an unknown problem a name actually conquers it significantly. It's certainly oversimplified, but it comes from that need to investigate rather than tune out.

Ultimately, Anita took from the verse how perceiving the universal harmony, even with the pain, was the key—the ever-elusive key.

For our meditation I read out *The Pivot*, by Merton/Chuang Tzu, a yogic framing of polarities.

We're getting to the point where the text is saying pretty much the same thing over and over. It's lovely, and yet we might begin thinking about moving on to something more transformative and challenging. I solicited suggestions for "the best of the rest." I know there are some great ones still ahead. We're not done yet, but we could skip the most redundant anyway.

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

35

Tao's attraction is
not a physical thing – it's
Food for the spirit.

One becomes serene,
at peace; always hearing its
Subtle, soundless song.

* * *

From last week's class notes, on Donald Hoffman:

According to Hoffman, everything we see we create, it's not actually "out there." He likens our awareness to a computer desktop interface, presumably to get through to the younger generations. On the desktop you click on an icon and drag it to the garbage, and it looks like what you are doing is moving the file, but no, that's just an interface. All sorts of complex processes are involved, and you would be overwhelmed and distracted if you had to pay attention to them. So the program just makes it simple, and we don't need to attend to the inner workings of the computer.

Like that, Hoffman says, the world we perceive is an interface. All the material things are presented to us in simplified form, so they are easy to comprehend and work with. Yet the true reality is what is *behind* that interface.

In modern lingo, the interfaces dumb down reality for us. Anita added some more about how this impacts our lives and shape the meanings that can be derived, but I found these secondary notions unsatisfactory, puerile. I'm definitely not sure it's "all about" anything, though reproductive success is surely one thread. It appears to be very much constrained by our social default settings, but I've not checked it out thoroughly yet. Probably if you're interested you should go to the source, maybe starting with a TED talk:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oYp5XuGYqqY&list=PLBDvvhxSE6PNWNFz7f2pXtt4_ZYa6q1n7&index=16&t=0s .

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Atmo verse 30 is all about pain, and highly recommended. Here's the last part of Nitya's commentary:

To release ourselves from the clutches of the body and the society, we transcend. Thereafter, pain may be in your body but you don't suffer. Disgrace may be sitting on your name in the society but you don't suffer. This is a scheme given to us for working out our own release from a twofold misery.

This is really one of the most beautiful verses of *Atmopadesa Satakam*. For years and years I have used this one verse for meditation. In all my troubles, physical as well as social, this verse has saved me many times. Again and again I go over it. Sometimes when there are bodily troubles, people around are upset, and the doctors are annoyed, giving me all kinds of medicines, I find over and above all this that the only medicine which gives me utmost

relief is this one verse. It goes on saying, “This inert matter does not know anything. My pure soul is not the one which sits and thinks and worries. It is not the one which speaks to people. It’s one all-pervading consciousness. This body is just one thing floating in that ocean of consciousness like a piece of cork. Sometimes it may be up and sometimes down.” Thus there comes an expansive, transcendent consciousness. Is there pain? Yes, there is pain. Did someone say something terrible about me? Yes, he said I am a very evil man. Aum. Aum. “Are you not very evil?” Aum. Be it so. What of it?

You are really released. There is no greater achievement to make.