

9/22/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 36

One of the smallest verses of all, verse 36 stimulated an outsized conversation, and pointed us toward much more than we had time for. It begins by emphasizing the rotation of opposites, suggesting if we want one pole, we promote or at least allow the other pole in order to get it. Some translations stress personal pressure for the outcome more than others, such as Pine: “what you would weaken / you first should strengthen.” Hamill, Senudd and Mitchell are in accord. Feng favors the neutral version: “That which fails / Must first be strong.” LeGuin concurs. Minford strikes a sort of middle ground: “To be Soft, / First be strong.” There is a measure of intent, but it’s gentler, more internalized.

Other pairs in the opening salvo, following the identical pattern, include shorten/lengthen, shrink/grow, topple (or raze – H)/ raise, take/give, and receiving/giving.

The first thing to notice is the desired half of each pair is the opposite of what our extroverted culture favors: what we want is short, weak, to get rid of something, to fail, shrink, contract, cast down; even, ruin. A very Taoist take, and evidence of how far from rabid Americanism this philosophy is. Desiring the weak half is to counteract precisely what is exalted in materialist culture: flourishing, expansiveness, strength, giving, and so on.

This technique is described as the secret enlightenment (H), the small dark light (LG), hiding the light (P), perception of the nature of things (F), subtle perception (Mit), the Subtle Light (Min). Whatever it’s called, all translations agree it’s how the weak conquer the strong.

There is a third stanza that’s a bit jarring, and yet we found it revealing also: fish should remain in their depths of ocean, and the true weaponry of the state should remain hidden. LeGuin dispenses with it entirely, calling it an anticlimax in her footnote, where she

offers, in addition to the literal translation: “the real means of rule / should be kept dark.” This moves toward a personal option. Pine quotes Han Fei: “Rewards and punishments are the state’s greatest weapons,” which takes the edge off our modern conception of firearm-type weaponry, especially in an America saturated with lethal armaments. Chuang Tzu’s take (in Pine) is even better: “The sage is the world’s greatest weapon but not one that is known to the world.” Nonetheless, we were all relieved by Mitchell’s translation that turns the state weaponry image to spiritual advice: “Let your workings remain a mystery. / Just show people the results.”

Deb began the interchange by recapping the central Taoist concept that whenever something reaches its peak expression it begins to change into its opposite. Yin-yang, light and dark, each side has a dot of the other in it, reminding us how something will always move toward its opposite. We can watch and see how it begins to turn and become a balancing action or process. That’s why what’s given prominence isn’t something strong and overt but what is weak and obscure. She felt it was an interesting way to look at the personal as well as the global situation.

Bill continued what Deb began, that the natural movement of things is from one side to the other and back again. He liked how Mitchell says this is learning to accept the way things are. We’re learning to understand that circumstances are continually changing, so it’s best to not get too caught up in them.

Deb added that we stay in the obscure but it’s really our place of greatest possibility. Those in the limelight are far more constrained.

Anita waxed rhapsodic as to how opposites flow from one to the other, and once again she really got the ball rolling. In her extensive readings she has been struck by the idea that any experience is exactly what it is, and it’s only our interpretation that makes it one or the other of the opposites. The same event can be

wonderful for one person and awful for another. The Tao is simply itself, yet our perceptions make it look like there are opposites or even just movement. *We* decide whether it is weak or strong.

I recalled that Taoism is based on how the moon does actually alternate between light and dark. It means reality has a pulsation, a rotation, inherent in it. It's not just our opinion that the moon is full or empty. I felt Anita was addressing a kind of second stage where we interpret the Tao in certain limited ways, and that's surely the place for us to do our work. It's actually an important distinction, since we can't stop the phases of the moon or the tides, but we can work with what we make of them, and whether we love the bright or the dark phase more doesn't necessarily need to be changed, either.

Anita related it to the Hoffman thread from the last two classes, how we're creating all that noise about what we perceive, but it's just about our "laptop interface," our illusory imagery. That doesn't make what we think irrelevant—it's mysteriously connected to the Tao, or How Things Work, just not directly. There are innumerable invisible links. It is a nice advert for the hidden side, the Subtle Light that's the subject here.

Deb stayed down at the beach last week to escape the smoke, by a bay where the tides were really low and really high, Taoistically related to how the moon waxes and wanes, and it reminded her trying to stop the tide is amusingly foolhardy. You can observe the patterns and move with them, but it's useless to fight them.

And yet, in most translations this verse says that you *aim* to do this or that. You are trying to manipulate a result. This is a classic Chinese aspect: it's a *strategy*, and not as open-ended as Vedanta or Zen, where you fully go with the flow. Here you might want to subvert the power of the demon emperor, so your strategy is to not resist, letting him destroy himself without your assistance.

Before I could even invite examples, Anita brought up a perfect one, showing us not to take this too literally. Imagine a married couple where the husband is abusive, continually threatening the wife's life and causing her pain. Does the advice mean she should meekly absorb the abuse, hoping that he will change for the better before she is killed?

It was easy to respond to this as *we* would, yet relating it to the verse is trickier. Obviously a strategy is needed. And it proves that the advice is symbolic and spiritual more than realistic in an outward sense. Once again we should avoid the sin of literalism.

The verse is not saying to put up with terrible things and let them go on, it's more that you don't fight back in the same way, you find alternatives. Meeting an aggressive person with aggression only escalates the violence. If you can somehow be absent—in Anita's case physically absent—there is nothing for the other to abuse. Being "absent" in human relations is an art form. It has to do with lowering our ego so it doesn't need to respond in kind to an attack. I've appended an eloquent elucidation of this by Nitya in part II.

Deb agreed it was all about how you respond. Fighting back physically would be a disaster, so you know you need to find another way to get yourself out of any situation of confrontation and abuse. You could notice how that person is overwhelmed with anger, whether it is curable, and how far your compassion might succeed. It calls for great skill. Capitulation is not a real cure, though it might buy time.

Pine quotes Sung Ch'ang-Hsing on this, though it doesn't adequately address Anita's doubts: "According to the way of the world, the weak don't conquer the strong. But Lao-tzu's point is that the weak can conquer the strong by letting the strong do what they want until they become exhausted and thus weak. Those who cultivate the Tao speak softly and act with care. They don't argue about right or wrong, better or worse. They understand the

harmony of Heaven and Earth, the Way of emptiness and stillness, and become adept at using the hidden light.”

To me, the first thing to do is get out of harm’s way. The insistence of society and religion even now that a wife is merely a toy for her husband is a criminal attitude that needs to be rejected.

Jan introduced another thread that really intrigued her: the fish symbol. She saw the idea of fish representing the wisdom of the Tao and the need to stay hidden, out of sight. The Tao is not something we should attempt to see clearly or try to grasp. It’s more our natural environment.

Deb compared the fish that cannot live out of deep waters with human beings in the Tao. They both have to keep within that greater movement that sustains them. This addresses our daily challenges: do we leap into the fray in crazy aggressive situations, or can we stay centered and be clear about how to effectively move away from that with integrity?

I likened the fish swirling in the depths to our authentic nature. Deep water is a fish’s true nature. If the fish comes out of the water so it can’t breathe, it’s like us abandoning our true nature, so we die spiritually. To live well, humans need to be our true selves.

This relates to Anita’s idea about abuse, how any abuse we suffer tends to make us want to respond in kind, like a fish coming up into the open air. We need to stay in our depth, where our innate support is. Our true nature is hidden from all others, and often even from ourselves. If the computer interface theory is correct, it’s *always* hidden from us.

Deb read out Te-Ch’ing’s wisdom, in the Pine, “Weakness is the greatest weapon of the state. But rulers must not show it to their people. Deep water is the best place for a fish. But once it is exposed to the air, a fish is completely helpless. And once rulers show weakness, they attract enemies and shame.” She paraphrased that the state’s greatest strength is its weakness, and if a state

shows its weakness then it will be impotent. That means the state's ability to be mobile and fluid, rather than aggressive and rigid, is its weakness in a way, and paradoxically that's its strength. It runs counter to what most people think of as strength.

I wondered how you get that weakness in a system that is like a locomotive on a track going at full speed. The positive weakness is flexibility, openness to new ways of looking and seeing. We live in a society governed by rigid laws backed by computer algorithms that are unnaturally unforgiving. Back in Lao Tzu's day, flexibility was easier to come by. The law was the whim of the ruler in the vicinity, and while harsh, it was subject to change. We have essentially omitted human decision making from the political process.

Deb wanted to change the subject, saying "I take umbrage with the bit about the state." Jan agreed it doesn't seem that helpful, it's just the patriarchy coming through. So we left it at that. Just like Ursula LeGuin did.

It was time for some concrete examples, which should have been easy to come up with, but Zoom makes us extra shy. I offered one (still thinking of the state), when you have the beginnings or continuation of a fascist dictatorship oppressing you, throwing rocks at it is the wrong response. That's just what the dictatorship is looking for as an excuse to up its swagger. It's well known as a pretext. Stillness, quiet, peace, doing yoga poses naked in front of the bristling troops, defuse the intruders, if only momentarily. The Taoist way is to not be confrontational.

Susan brought up an excellent personal example. Her brother often gets mad about her children, even though they're now adults, and lectures her about it. Usually she rises to the bait, engaging in an argument with him and getting defensive. Her brother can out-argue her any day of the week, so she knows it won't solve anything to butt heads, but she can't help herself. Of course she wants to protect her children. Now though, she's resolved to just

say that she can see that he is angry and not engage about the kids.

There was talk about whether this was surrendering, and it is and it isn't. Not fighting is not surrender, surrender is where you turn yourself over to the enemy. Susan is holding her ground, and doesn't need to defend it against a rude, uncalled-for intrusion, especially one with such a long and futile history. I'd add that discerning the brother's real motivation would be helpful, and adjusting the discussion in that direction. What she *is* surrendering is her need to fight back, in order to teach the other a lesson or gain their respect, which likely isn't coming anyway.

Remember Jiu jitsu? Where you use the attacker's momentum to carry them over your head and onto the ground? It's like that. Martial arts and marital arts are almost the same.

I retold my favorite Buddha story, the one about him being hassled by a malcontent, a 500 BCE Proud Boy, going on and on, and the Buddha asked him, "What if you gave a banquet in my honor and I did not attend?" I love it! Just refuse to show up for the banquet. Putting it that way gives the other person a chance to drop their hostility, if they can.

Deb thought this was the essence of how weakness wins — it doesn't engage on that level. You're not going to enter the ring. She was happy to admit that every time she fails in a situation like that, she knows she'll have another opportunity. Anita added you can choose to say you're going to have more opportunities! We get lots of them.

I recalled another type incident where a family member desperately needed addiction treatment, he was totally out of control and a danger to himself and anyone nearby, yet whatever anybody tried, he just threw it back in our faces, multiplied by a hundred. He blamed us for everything, nothing could possibly be his fault. All our efforts had no effect whatsoever, other than to make him dig in harder, no matter how cleverly we tried. All we could do was give up, allowing him to hit rock bottom, as the

cliché goes. He surely did. Not that he ever regained full mental health, but he was eventually brought back from the brink, sort of.

That segues into Mitchell's end note, both for oneself and others. He gets to the up side of downsizing, speaking of *If you want to shrink something*: For example, defects in your character. When suppressed or ignored, they continue; but when allowed to be present in your awareness, they eventually wither away. Or, as Blake said from a slightly different perspective, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom."

Honestly, I'm not sure that the Blake quote relates well at all, but it's a good one. Mitchell must have just wanted to sneak it in somewhere.

Jan wasn't going to let those fish get away! She continued her previous thoughts: one other way we can be small and weak is by living deeply in our social sphere. We don't have to be having direct confrontations with the state. This was something that was reinforced in a Jungian lecture she recently listened to by Jeffrey Kiehl (<http://www.jtkiehl.com/>). The little things we do, supporting each other, sharing love and kindness, living peacefully, does change the world in a collective sense. Weak and small really will have an impact in subtle ways. Jan felt it's especially important now, when the overall situation is on the descent side. Collectively we seem to be contracting after a long period of rapid expansion.

Deb concurred, saying that being who you are to a full clear extent can be both very weak and very powerful. She's aware of so many fabulous hopeful things happening under the wild rush.

Without any more examples coming up, I gave a tip of the hat to Bill, who in his career as a home builder withstood a lot of antagonism, always meeting it with gentleness and respect, and in that way minimizing the battles that are an inevitable part of getting big things done on time and to the customer's satisfaction. I

would guess a lot of his clients learned something from his approach, and at least were adequately mollified.

Jan read out part of Magister Liu's take on the verse, in the Minford, a sweet way to wind down for the meditation:

Those who Cleave to the Great Image will Master the Art of Life.

Wherein lies this Art?
It lies
In going with the Flow,
Guiding the Flow gradually
Till it Halts.
The Subtle Light
Lies hidden
Within,
Like a fish
In the Deep.
It glows,
Safe from Harm.
Fish find Nourishment
In the Deep.
If they are taken thence,
They Die.
The Taoist
Guided by the Subtle Light,
Is sheltered
From raging flames,
Tows a boat
Through muddy waters,
Unaffected
By the world.

We included an excerpt Jan liked from Taoist Master Zhuang, also in the Minford:

Do not be an embodier of Fame. Do not be a storehouse of schemes. Do not be an undertaker of projects. Embody to the fullest that which has no end, and wander where there is no trail. Hold on to all that you have received from Heaven, but do not think you Possess anything. Be Empty, that is all.

Part II

Beverley's haiku, which her computer put as 'hikers'—I'm sure the ancient sages would appreciate the term, considering how far these words of wisdom have traveled:

36

Tao is all about
how to live with opposites,
the yin-yang of life.

One can't avoid them,
so observe how life flows and
go with it quietly.

* * *

The end of verse 59, That Alone:

When I first came to my Guru, I had plenty of trouble with people, with my fellow disciples. Guru called me and said, "I shall give you a secret: allow the other to be victorious. If somebody fights you, let you be the vanquished and not the victor." I found there is nothing more helpful than this, to be vanquished and not to

become victorious. Just say, “You have the upper hand. Let all the glory be yours. I shall lie in the dust.” It is very difficult, but it works. You don’t make any claim. You don’t indulge in any feelings of martyrdom. You just give up.

The basic truth rests on this: there is only One and not a second. If there is someone to be punished, it is only you. If there is someone to be corrected, it is also just you. ‘You’ means ‘me’. In my personal life I correct the other by correcting myself. I punish the other by punishing myself. I silence the other by going into silence myself. I bring peace to the other by making myself peaceful. I bring happiness to the other by making myself happy. It is a very intimate experience, to work with one’s self. And it is the one place where you can conveniently work, where your volition, your knowledge and your feeling are all at hand, at the very source from which the idea ‘I’ comes.

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Deb sent today’s reading on the Tarot, which she found closely related to our class:

From @thejessicadore on Instagram about the Tarot card The Star:

There’s a fascinating distinction made by the anonymous author of Meditations on the Tarot where he interprets The Tower as being about construction and The Star as being about growth. A juicy twist on the destructive energy that everyone thinks of with The Tower imo, but like I always say the “reversal,” the complementary energy or opposite is inherent in the symbol when it’s upright, as it is in life too, I think.

Anyway he basically says that what is built is dry and what is grown is wet, moist & sticky with “the sap of life,” and wow did

that activate some things for me. I thought it might for you too, especially if you're the type of person who's excellent at dreaming and then sort of manipulating (not in a pejorative sense necessarily) the environment to align with the vision. This isn't at all to say that's a bad way to be but when you build something there has to be some sap there also, where things are allowed, encouraged, to grow at the pace they need to.

When we get up into the higher mysteries of the major arcana we're learning to reconcile and transcend opposites—which to me means we're beyond the flat dimension of building or growing, dry or wet, down or up and we get that we don't have to choose but instead find a way to work with the forces of each...

Just incomplete musings and I think I like it this way, pitching food for thought I guess & perhaps some added depth for your own work with the tower & star synergetic if you're interested...

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The Chuang Tzu/Merton reading was *The Turtle*, p. 93
<https://terebeck.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>.

Part III

Charles told me about some ideas of Marshall McLuhan after Zoom zipped up, from his very timely reading in *Understanding Media*, particularly about hubris in the modern context, and the explosion/implosion potential of technology for culture. He was kind to send some of his thoughts too. I should add that those of us who live in the USA are facing a major civilization meltdown right now, and most are exceptionally anxious about it. Here's Charles:

It's like stacking one thing on another on another to see how high the stack gets. The economy has to keep expanding, the military has to get bigger. And yet common sense tells us this can't go on forever!

The higher your place, the longer the fall. The original ethnic groups in first world societies are in the situation of maximum extension ("the overheated medium"), or the balloon that's blown up so big it's got to pop.

White privileged liberals in America, are not adapted to what's coming. We don't know what's coming but in terms of our values, it's implosion.

Explosion is the medium heating up beginning with the Renaissance, the Reformation.

Maximum expansion, to pick an arbitrary date, 1917, end of the First World War. That was the break boundary.

Then, slowly the implosion into cultural coolness begins. We lose momentum, gravity takes over. With our short lifespans we don't see it happening, not for a long time, but it accelerates over time. Where did the middle class go? Where did the Democratic Party go? Just in our lifetime, just in the 21st century, things are noticeably falling apart.

Humpty Dumpty