

10/6/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 37

We were joined by Kris Sawyer, Nancy Scharbach and Johnny Stallings, in addition to our full house of Karen Davis, Susan Koe, Andy Larkin, Moni Pillai, Jan Atwill, Charles Erickson, Anita Carpenter, Bill Hughes, Nancy Richmond, Deb and Scott, for our largest gathering of the year. For the record I thought I should list our names, something I've rarely done. Now, after 42 years, I wish I had all along—it's been a continuously though gradually changing stream of dear friends the whole time.

This is a short and seemingly simple verse that spawned a great deal of fascinating discussion, which makes it a Taoist gem. Less is more.

All translations are in substantial agreement this time. Briefly, the Tao does nothing or makes no effort, yet there is nothing it doesn't do. If a ruler lived by it, the world would change by itself. Nameless simplicity brings stillness to the people, who because of it would not desire, and so be in stillness, at peace. The world would fix or settle itself, without needing any ruler to help out.

Feng adds 'formless substance' to nameless simplicity, hearkening to the venerable 'uncarved block' that Minford and Magister Liu both reprise. Liu has a lovely conclusion: "The Tao is the Heart-and-Mind, the Heart-and-Mind is the Tao. All is Calm and Still, Resonant, Connected with Heaven and Earth."

LeGuin's footnote sets an appreciative tone: "Here the themes of not doing and not wanting, the unnamed and the unshapen, recur together in one pure legato. It is wonderful how by negatives and privatives Lao Tzu gives a sense of serene, inexhaustible fullness of being."

The image that came into Deb's mind during the opening meditation was of our old golden plum tree. Once when Nitya was

here the tree was literally covered in golden orbs, and he was ecstatic at the ridiculous abundance of fruit. He often brought up Nataraja Guru's distinction between opulence and abundance: if you go to big cities you find manmade opulence but when you see a tree like that you are witnessing nature's abundance. Like that, the natural unfolding of the Tao happens without a five-year plan, or any other program marking off who does what or who gets what.

I brought in the corollary, so important now, that abundance is nature's perpetual gift, but opulence is not sustainable, and in the long run is degrading.

Anita was irked by the non-action business. In all aspects of life we see order, she argued, yet the Tao is said to not act. Where does order come from if there is no action from the Source?

Deb responded by describing a tree expressing its dharma without effort, how it grows from a seed to a sapling, up to a tree bearing fruit or cones or nuts. Nothing is planned but it's incredibly ordered, showing there's intelligence in the whole world.

Anita wondered how that's different from an inherent plan, and she has a point. She feels there has to be some entity or force that directs things to do what they do so magnificently. She came right out with it: is there someone who is planning?

Deb asserted that the natural order includes the planner and the planned. There's no one sitting outside directing it.

I suggested natural laws *are* the plan, and in that sense science agrees with the need for a guiding hand, so to speak. If the design is intelligent, then it's intelligent design. What science is resisting is the absurdity or inadequacy of certain old analogies, that have led to sociopolitical disasters. When philosophically reduced to its essence, God is the same as the Tao, the Absolute or Natural Law. Natural laws don't act, yet they make everything happen, just as this verse opens: "The Tao never does anything, /

yet through it all things are done.” (Mit) It’s a perfect description of the structure of our universe, one that allows for everything that can possibly be, yet never has to “do” anything. The laws never change, as far as we can tell. They don’t act, yet nothing can exist outside them.

The problems with God come in when humans add their self-interested scheming that isn’t in tune with the lawful abundance of nature. Call it uneducated guesswork: we’ve only recently begun to actually understand the laws of nature, and have plenty farther to go yet. For most of history we took stabs in the dark.

You can get away with abusing the planet for a while, based on false reasoning, but not forever, it appears. The term ‘God’ became corrupted when people used the concept as an excuse to trumpet their partial opinions as divinely inspired, instead of revising their ignorance in terms of divinity, perfection, or some other normative notion. The more our concepts are in tune with the inner structural relationships that actually exist, the more sustainably successful they will be.

Jan read out a perfect paragraph from the modern sage Chen Guying, quoted in Minford: “To be transformed is to be Born, to Flow and to reach Completion. When the Ruler Practices Non-Action, all things can develop according to their natural potential, expressing themselves freely and nurturing their own uniqueness. They have a stable and harmonious environment in which to grow.”

Bill mused, “What a mystery it is to think of action and non-action together. How does anything get done without action? Tao is the source of everything but it’s not an actor. According to Lao Tzu, if powerful people would immerse in the Tao then natural rhythms would come out. But I’ve been trying to wrap my head around this for a long time, and I still can’t.”

Nancy R. added it’s hard to understand how any action happens without desire: “My head ties in a knot if I try to get

farther than that. I can understand quietness and just being but then I think about my existence and in almost every action there is some desire that motivates that action.” Her examples were putting clothes on to stay warm, and caring for an infant because you want it to thrive, you have the desire to keep it warm and fed. The whole world is action and those actions come from noble, good desires. That’s what life is. To Nancy the verse touches on what our existence is and whether or not it could even *be* if there wasn’t action. She summed up that desire is implicit in motivating action. It’s what brings it about.

Johnny put in that one of the central tenets of Taoism is if you try to improve the world you will make it worse. For us it’s common sense that if we want to change something we should make an effort to change it. For a Taoist, if you are able to see something very clearly, everything will change. Clear looking and clear perception brings about change. Effort expended to change ourselves just keeps things going around, it doesn’t work, at least not through conscious effort. In this, personal transformation doesn’t happen by making an effort, like getting up early, or any other program. That’s the Western way.

Let me just put in that Johnny was speaking abstractly of spiritual self-development, and Nancy was speaking of practical matters. Seeing clearly doesn’t necessarily feed the baby.

In my classes I always run up against bafflement with these widely-believed concepts, that you shouldn’t have desires or expectations, and have come to amend them to say you shouldn’t have *extraneous* desires and expectations. Those in accord with right living are natural and important to our wellbeing. Our feelings incorporate a vast amount of intelligence, and it would be a shame to try to suppress it because it brings about desires and goal-orientation. It causes real disruption to the psyche when it sends the conscious mind its “best estimate,” and the ego fights it furiously, because it’s trying to be “spiritual.” So I say it’s only the

extraneous desires that are problematic, for instance, “I’m going to attain enlightenment if I do this, if I follow this program.” If we buy into those kinds of things it screws us up. Likewise with expectations. The principle of cause and effect remains operative. Thanks to all sorts of belief systems, though, we expect much that isn’t commensurate with the input, and then we’re disappointed in the aftermath. The aftermath just doesn’t add up. They should add after-math to the high school curriculum.

Kris likened this problem to when leaders interfere with flow of what’s happening for their followers. When people in power are agitating and interfering with the ongoing flow, it causes conflicts from other groups. Schoolteachers like Kris must feel this more acutely than most, and they are interfered with more disruptively than just about everybody.

This touched on a huge subject that we simply didn’t have time for, and didn’t do justice to. Hopefully we’ll return to it in future classes. Nancy did add there are a lot of leaders, and it seems like we’d have a better world without quite so many. Often they start out with good intentions, a desire to make some change, impact something, but they don’t keep themselves in line with their inner guiding self. It’s too easy for that desire to lead on and on if you don’t check it, whether on an individual or a grand scale. We need to find that quiet, still place, and not feel we always have to be the instigator of everything and make things better. (Here Nancy and Johnny are in agreement.)

That made sense to Anita, who told us “When I am around my adult children and grandchildren and there are interactions going on, I do like to voice my opinions, but when I sit back and observe, and just watch it unfold, I can see how the whole thing has a kind of natural shape that doesn’t need my assistance.”

I offered that the goal (if you will) of this mysterious verse is primarily to reduce our own interference with our internal unfoldment. Just as a seed has a program in it, so do we, with our

genetic heritage and likely many other factors. We grow in a more or less hostile environment that forces us to sacrifice the natural growth that is possible in us. It's very hard to resist being pulled out of our natural unfolding, yet sticking to it is the way to optimize our satisfaction with our existence. Leadership is rarely in accord with our needs, so it remains an individual matter. Sadly.

That is why, however, so many of us flock to truly wise leaders who are in accord with our needs, like Lao Tzu and his ilk, and why we should be extra careful of being overly enthusiastic about deceptive leaders who only appear to be in accord.

Pine quotes Wu Ch'eng in this regard: "The Tao's lack of effort is ancient and eternal and not simply temporary. Although it makes no effort, it does everything it should do. If rulers could uphold this Tao of effortlessness, without consciously thinking about changing others, others would change by themselves." Pine's earlier translation of "makes no effort" is "does nothing," in several places. I take that as a substantial upgrade. Does nothing is only half of the pair of 'doing' and 'not doing', while not making an effort allows for the doing and shows what is meant by not doing while you're doing, more like not interfering, not upsetting the natural unfoldment. That has to be what's meant here. It's not SO mysterious.

Anita still insisted we're talking about a program—algorithms, even. Her critical thinking is most stimulating to the group endeavor. We can't get by with our normal clichés. I did reassure her that a group of statisticians and math heads is convinced of a high probability that our universe is a computer program, which means there are little folks in white coats tampering with the algorithms all the time/ "Let's give them a Trump, and see how they squirm! Ha ha ha" Those are our gods, then. Search "universe as a computer program" or <http://www.bbc.com/earth/story/20160901-we-might-live-in-a-computer-program-but-it-may-not-matter> . The class thought I was

kidding, but I'm not. It could be true, and many scientists believe in it. I'm agnostic. Science is now in favor of Intelligent Design, only by their god, not yours. The key conclusion for philosophers is *it doesn't really matter one way or the other!*

Johnny spoke about how one of the main challenges is we're talking about a mythology that is completely at odds with the one we grew up with. There are basic differences about the great mystery that is our life, how it came to be. In the West the idea was that God created the world. Here the Tao is what stands in for God, but it doesn't have a face or a form or a name, so it's different from a god or a goddess.

To try to understand what is going on you can use a whole different set of metaphors other than Christian, where God does it all. The Tao always does nothing, and "doing nothing" is a central idea in this whole work. It's the opposite of the American way: doing something is what we were all supposed to do. To become virtuous and accomplished.

Johnny continued that doing nothing doesn't mean you don't perform actions, it just means that you stop and spend a lot of time in silence, not accomplishing anything. You spend time without thought or language, and then something special happens of its own accord. The boundaries between you and the world fall away. If you just stop and spend time not doing anything, something will open up.

I added the nuance that "doing nothing" is already doing something, so it's paradoxical. Taoism shares the same roots as Yoga, and the contradictions in it are meant to be resolved in a similar dialectic way. Doing and not-doing are the thesis and antithesis, and these are to be married together to reveal the synthesis, which is a more liberated life. The enigma is built into the Tao Te Ching, not to bring about an easy comprehension but to make us meld the concepts into each other. It's exactly the same as the Gita:

IV.18 One who is able to see action in inaction and inaction in action—he among men is intelligent; he is one of unitive attitude, while still engaged in every (possible) kind of work.

Creatively combining action and inaction brings about the unitive state of mind. It's an impossible state, and yet it is the only one that is truly liberated. That's why you *should* be baffled about “doing nothing.”

Andy wanted to tell us about the class in Zen meditation he's been taking this past month. In it, the whole meditation act is rooted in *noticing*, which is not an active verbal formulation at all. You're always noticing, you're aware, all the time, and that's at the root of everything you think is an action. Transformation is going on, but you are just meditating. It's the uncarved block, always working perfectly. It's about getting rulers out of the way, perfectly exemplified by your own factor of awareness.

Andy found it a nice way of thinking about meditating, where there was no sense of punitive discipline. It reminded him of a passage in Nitya's commentary on the Yoga Sutras, which he paraphrased for us. Your life is like a cup or bowl and it is filled with your portion of life and your only job is to sit with your bowl. Your responsibility is to bring your naked awareness to what's going on right in front of you.

Thankfully, Jan added how the awareness or self-reflectiveness is great when it can be paired with nurturing the self. The heart is the place that allows us to unfold naturally. We are held by ourselves. It's like “when the ruler practices non-action.”

Andy wholeheartedly agreed, and said that nurturing was the basis of morality, the basis of ethical behavior, when you're providing support for that awareness. We allow it to exist in conditions that permit it to fully unfold, and we're using our innate intelligence to make that happen.

Jan reechoed Magister Liu, how the Tao is the heart and the mind. That means the heart is important, only not just for having these isolated desires, but creating an integrated, deep-seated heart place for things to evolve.

Enshrining the heart was a fitting conclusion. I've added two quotes about the heart from Nitya in Part II.

We closed with a brief meditation on *The Bones of Master Zhuang*, by second-century philosopher-poet Zhang Heng, a message from a roadside skeleton that includes the famous line

Heaven my bed, Earth my pillow

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

All things are done by
Tao without effort. It works best
not interfered with.

So keep life simple,
check desires and follow the
Way of non-action

* * *

The Chuang Tzu/Merton reading was *Leaving Things Alone*, on pages 70-71.

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

The first section is amazingly germane, and includes:

I know about letting the world alone, not interfering. I do not know about running things. Letting things alone: so that men will not

blow their nature out of shape! Not interfering, so that men will not be changed into something they are not! When men do not get twisted and maimed beyond recognition, when they are allowed to live—the purpose of government is achieved.

Now the whole world is not enough reward for the “good,” nor enough punishment for the “wicked.” Since now the world itself is not big enough for reward or punishment. From the time of the Three Dynasties men have been running in all directions. How can they find time to be human?

* * *

Our current online Brihadaranyaka Upanishad lesson covers a mantra on *hridaya*, the heart. It’s also taken as the intellect, since intuitive feelings and emotions are a crucial aspect of the heart or central core of being, and also are factors in well-balanced reasoning or intellection. Nitya comments at length on this mantra, including:

Where do all these seeds of discord as well as concord lie? They are in the heart. Both the demonic spirit and the holy spirit have their coexistence in the heart. Thus a person is fated to always have a tormented mind, torn between piety and cruelty.... No person can hide any thoughts, words or deeds from [their heart]. Therefore the heart is called the spirit-witness (*manasakshi*). In the heart the sense of guilt accumulates and one starts feeling sinful. So one has to seek in one’s own heart the redeemer from sins, and befriend the divine which dwells in the heart. (50)

Although in principle Vedanta is supportive of the idea of the One without a second, in our daily life we always encounter the notion of the many. Therefore there has to be a continuous exercise of the

mind to again and again find similitude between the seemingly diverse forms, names and functions. There is a central focal point to which all the pluralities are to be centripetally referred, to give full orientation to our understanding of brahman. This central focus is found in the heart. That is why *prajapati* is identified with the heart. (53-4)

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Pine's panoply of pundits outdid themselves this time, including:

Te-Ch'eng: "When creatures first change, their desires disappear. But before long, their trust fades and feelings well up and begin to flow until desires reappear. When this occurs, those who are adept at saving others must block the source of desire with nameless simplicity."

Ho-Shang Kung: "'Nameless simplicity' refers to the Tao, which all creatures use to transform themselves and which nobles and kings use to pacify those who engage in cleverness and deceit."

Ch'eng Hsuan-Ying: "When people first change and begin to cultivate the Tao, they think about reaching a goal. Once this desire arises, it must be stilled with the Tao's nameless simplicity."

Su Ch'e: "Sages have no thought of embracing simplicity, nor do they show any sign of doing so. If the thought of becoming simple existed in their hearts, they would miss the mark completely."
Missing the mark is the original definition of sin, by the way.

Sung Ch'ang-Hsing: "Other creatures follow their natures without creating chaos or disaster. They change by themselves without seeking change. People, meanwhile, race through the realm of

existence and never know a quiet moment. They abandon their original innocence and don't practice the true Tao of doing nothing. They don't care about their lives, until one day they offend and retribution arrives."

Pine himself: "Name takes sides. Complexity limits options. Hence, those who uphold nameless simplicity don't take sides and keep their options open."