

10/13/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 38

Verse 38 is one of the greats, with incredible richness of interpretation.

Before I go on, we have been planning our next move for the class and surveyed the members about it, and the results are in. From here on in the Tao Te Ching there is a lot of repetition. We could perhaps always milk new insights from it, but the time is fast approaching for us to return to our area of expertise. There are thousands of Tao study groups, but only one or two serious Gurukula study groups in English at any particular time.

Most of us were content to end the year in the Tao and begin a new project around the new year, meaning the winter solstice. I've gone through the rest of the book and selected 6-10 verses that merit further examination. They are 39, a combined 40 and 41, 42, 47, 58, 76 and 77. Possible additions are 56, 57 and 64, the last one containing Lao Tzu's most famous line but otherwise unremarkable. Probably the most famous sentence in all of scripture. Do you know it off hand?

The profound negativity of Taoism has been the perfect sustaining influence for the ghastly year 2020, where not-doing is not just a good idea, it's the law. Several of us are eager to get going again, and let's hope that's in tune with the times.

We will transit to a neglected gem of Nitya's, *In the Stream of Consciousness*, to bring our study back to reality, whatever that is. Almost no one I know has even read it. I imagine class participants already own a copy. I have a few for sale, and Nancy Y likely does also. If you're going to try to get a copy from Varkala, you should start the process now, and I wish you luck. Please let me know if you have any success.

If we survive into 2021, it's likely we'll do a last journey through *That Alone*, on Narayana Guru's Atmopadesa Satakam,

the One-Hundred Verses on Self-Instruction, surely la crème de la crème. After that we'll move on to Bingo in a care facility somewhere. I will of course maintain my online Gita classes based on Gurukula wisdom as long as interest lasts.

Verse 38 describes the descent from the Tao into ordinariness, beginning with higher and lower versions of what some translate as Virtue and the rest as Power. As the Way is discarded, it is replaced by kindness, justice, and finally, ritual, which is the entrance to chaos and confusion. Once ritual is corrupted, its keepers “roll up their sleeves” to enforce it. This idiom is common enough it must have been the same in China, which is both surprising and charming.

This hierarchy is actually crucially important, and definitely not just about the foolish others who adhere to imbecilic attitudes. We all want to fix things, to make them better, and don't always take into account how that accords or not with the Way of the universe. Anita inaugurated a discussion about this that we'll examine later.

In what might have been an entirely new verse at the end, augury is disdained. Fruit is extolled as the true substance, while the flower is eschewed as superficial, clearly an early jab at the decline of serious spirituality in favor of more trivial entertainments.

We could spend days examining these five categories in detail, but I'll offer a taste of it to get you going. LeGuin's footnote is a good place to start:

A vast, dense argument in a minimum of words, this poem lays out the Taoist values in steeply descending order: the Way and its power; goodness (humane feeling); righteousness (morality); and—a very distant last—obedience (law and order). The word I render as “opinion” can be read as “knowing too soon”: the

mind obeying orders, judging before the evidence is in, closed to fruitful perception and learning.

In her translation, “Opinion is the barren flower of the Way, / the beginning of ignorance.”

I noticed a kinship with the three gunas, which would not have been known as such by Lao Tzu, but the basic principles surely were. After the perfect neutrality of the Tao or Absolute, at our next best we act unitively, which is called the lesser power or lesser virtue, because we’re *trying*. It’s better to *be* than to *try*. After unity is lost, our best efforts are sattvic, aimed at kindness and benevolence; then rajasic, concerned with issues of justice and morality; and lastly tamasic, based in ritualism, where we need to be told what to do, to follow a format. Once you abandon your integrity to external forces, chaos and degradation ensue.

Hamill’s unique translation stands out as exceptionally clear. He uses virtue instead of power, which I prefer. The second stanza is:

Supreme virtue takes no action
and needs no action.
Inferior virtue acts on its own.

It’s a perhaps subtle distinction, but we know the feeling. When we’re fully engaged, we aren’t thinking of where it will lead, we are just doing what we’re doing. At times we slip out of the groove and have to plan and direct ourselves back on task.

Hamill uses ‘propriety’ in place of ritual, a perfect word really, meaning (per Oxford Languages) “the state or quality of conforming to conventionally accepted standards of behavior or morals.” Also “the details or rules of behavior conventionally considered to be correct.” Hamill’s conclusion is:

Propriety makes a veneer
of loyalty and sincerity,
and discord sets in.

Sounds familiar, eh? The paradox, though, is that “conventionally acceptable attitudes” are roughly what ours are. What Lao Tzu is trying to teach us is that by pushing them in full confidence that we are right, we go wrong. We become ego-oriented and close ourselves off to a full accounting. Intolerance beckons. Discord arises from the clash of partial understandings, where the goal may well be quite similar, but it is cloaked in different expressions.

Deb opened the discussion attributing this to the way our thinking separates us from others, and the more we think about a course of action, the more specified it becomes, and the more distant we get from other ways of comprehending.

Andy has been in several study groups lately in which the highest form of discipline is not based on rules, but on inner authenticity. Order is more an artistic approach, a karmic construct, yet he is perplexed by a tragedy that happened two nights previously in Portland. Basically, some rioters did damage to the heart of our liberal city, supposedly in the name of revolutionary ideals. The perpetrators are unknown, but it feels like a serious personal injury to those of us who not only love our home but have an awareness of history. Andy was further disturbed because some of his friends were happy about it, people who imagined it would have a positive impact on the status quo, correcting historical wrongs. He felt such ideas were rooted in a rigid moral conviction of superiority, and just as this verse declares, lead to violence and chaos. It's the opposite of the uncarved block, which invites flexibility and nuance.

Deb has also observed that rigidity in radical political movements, where people are desperate to correct dire situations. The Chinese revolution sprang out of the intense desire to

overthrow a terrible state of affairs, including massive starvation, and it did, but then the rigidity employed led to the Cultural Revolution, dedicated to restructuring society from the ground up and erasing any tendency to rebuilt the old authoritarianism. Typically, it launched a new authoritarian regime. Den and I once lived with a violinist who had his instrument smashed and was sent to the fields as a laborer in that period, a typical fate even for the sympathetic ones. Just having a western instrument was evidence of complicity with the past wrongs.

I have often written about how our angry forcefulness in the Sixties antiwar and civil rights movements engendered a tidal backlash that helped bring on the ferocious repressiveness of today. Much of it, like now, was actually provided by the opposition, but many of us fell for their ruses. It surely brought a lot of chaos, which serves political power quite nicely.

Deb noted Patanjali's *dharana*, restraint, as being crucial to the wise exercise of power or virtue. Here's a relevant excerpt from Nitya's Yoga Shastra:

Ultimately, there shouldn't be any conditioning, but you cannot arrive at that state immediately, so you apply a method of deconditioning.

When all conditionings are scraped off, recall and association become less frequent and stability is established. The inner organs undergo a drastic change. The ego is no longer paranoid about the countless messages brought in by the sense organs. For instance, even if a person is shouting scandalous words at you, if you treat it only as noise, then you put up with some noise and you are not provoked. In this way the external world is nullified to the yogi. When the ego, the questioning mind, and memory recall are all pacified, the intellect, like a transparent crystal, reflects only the pure light of the Self. That

prepares you for emancipation from the bondage of the world.
(130)

Jan made the point that this verse is very much a mirror for us to examine how we really are, instead of what we *think* we are. Our judging others always comes from a state of self-righteousness, and you can see how Lao Tzu isn't supporting it.

Anita admitted she is out of joint with much of the commentary, how passive it is. So contemplative. Susan, absent last night, is in total agreement. It's a time for action now, and Taoism seems to her to be wholly anti-action. Anita has been writing letters to her Senators asking for an end to the secrecy around the President's illness, shall we say because his mental health is questionable. She believes expressing herself is important to the wellbeing of the nation, that even if nothing obvious comes of it, there are invisible factors always in play. Doing nothing is what oppressive government thrives on. What she's concluded is that Taoism is about sitting still: go within, don't do anything. Anita is fed up: she is eager to participate, and that includes judging what's happening.

Andy hastened to reassure her: mail those letters! There is no intrinsically Taoist action. If you are motivated instinctively, then that is in accord with the Tao. Any genuine motivation that arises is Taoist. Bill seconded the emotion.

I agreed also. Taoism does not prescribe a particular way of being. Only general principles are presented, and nothing is mandatory. I'm an activist myself, so I know what Anita's talking about. A close reading of this verse simply helps us distinguish between egotistically-generated behaviors and more authentic ones. If we scheme and plan our actions, they become tainted and almost always lead to chaos, but if our motivations are pure and natural, they may fail, but at last they won't add to the confusion.

In part, Anita is seeking knowledge, to penetrate the veil of secrecy, and it's hard to say that's wrong at all.

Deb joined in, assuring Anita that when your indignation or whatever springs up naturally, you're in the flow, and that's the idea. Go with the flow.

Of course, mad bombers go with their flow, so this is not a trivial issue. In sympathy with Anita, Andy cited the Gita's famous affirmation that action was an elusively subtle business, from chapter III:

16) On what is action and what is inaction even intelligent men here are confused. I shall indicate to you that action on knowing which you will be emancipated from evil.

17) One has to understand about action and understand also what is wrong action; again, one has to have a proper notion of non-action; the way of action is elusively subtle indeed.

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.

We might also quote Hamill again:

Supreme compassion acts without forethought.
Supreme justice requires action.

I read out the Chuang Tzu/Merton story *The Empty Boat*, on pages 114-5, because it goes to the heart of how the Tao can help. Find it here: <https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>. The most germane part for our discussion is:

If a man is crossing a river

And an empty boat collides with his own skiff,
Even though he be a bad-tempered man
He will not become very angry.
But if he sees a man in the boat,
He will shout at him to steer clear.
If the shout is not heard, he will shout again,
And yet again, and begin cursing.
And all because there is somebody in the boat.
Yet if the boat were empty,
He would not be shouting, and not angry.

If you can empty your own boat
Crossing the river of the world,
No one will oppose you,
No one will seek to harm you.

So it's not that you should go out in your boat, but finding that emptiness within removes the projections we are prone to make in every situation. Those of us who aren't monks don't have to *reside* in emptiness, but only have regular access to it, to get the benefit of straightforward perception. It's a wonderful story, and it clicked for Anita, who admitted to observing her projections often enough. In talking with her family she sometimes makes claims that she later realizes were not justified in the situation, but were things she was carrying. Recognizing it led her to different realizations, and she would readjust her ideas to minimize the projections.

I assured her that being aware of our own projections is a major spiritual accomplishment. We project mostly what we believe and like and feel comfortable with, and are strongly resistive of any threats to those positions. It's much easier to spot them in other people. It takes real discipline to admit them in ourselves.

Anita almost didn't register her complaint about her feelings, and that would have been a great loss for her and the class. That's the pressure of ritual, of what she perceived as the "conventionally acceptable attitudes" of our group. Au contraire, we *want* those to be challenged! We learn so much when they are. If something is bugging you, it's your inner guide prompting you to open up the topic. So do it. It brings about a win, win, win situation, even better than a win-win one.

Talking about projections brought us to the augury bit in the last stanza. Hamill and Pine call it foreknowledge, LeGuin opinion (knowing too soon), Minford prophecy, Feng knowledge of the future; Mitchell ignores it. Anyway, it's all the same thing.

Duyvendak, in Minford, says: "Prophecy is the wish to know beforehand how the Tao is going to unfold. This Art of prognostication was much practiced in later, less pure forms of popular Taoism."

Deb found that to be still true on her trip to China in 1986, as part of the US-China People's Friendship Committee. She visited several Taoist temples (the Communists were trying to demonstrate religious tolerance for their special guests), and they were filled with all manner of auguries. You burn notes to the gods and the smoke carries your message to them, or you pray to the deities for intervention with your problems. It's a main theme of Chinese religion, and is similar to things like astrology, trying to read the Bible as a map of the future, and so on. Humans always want to know what's coming around the corner. Oddly, these things often bear some resemblance to what does arrive.

I suspect that the I Ching was the complaint of Lao Tzu's time, predating the Tao Te Ching by several hundred years. Wise and generalized as it is, it is often taken as a prediction of the future. Again, it has remarkable resonance at times, which is perhaps an interaction of our own hopes and needs with its timeless wisdom, which is surely in tune with what we want to

know. Lao Tzu wanted to be as scientific as possible, and as is usual with humans, his very tight scripture is most often taken very lightly. One can but laugh.

I promised to type up the magnificent closing poem in the Minford (Heaven Forgive me, please buy his Wonderful Book), by Jia Yi (200-168 BC), titled “The Owl Rhapsody.” Read it without haste:

The Taoist
Abandons things
And cleaves to the Tao alone.
The deluded Multitude
Burden their Heart-and-Mind
With Desire and Hate.
The Taoist
Is Clear and Still,
Finds Peace in the Tao alone.
The Taoist
Is Vast and Empty,
Swift and untrammelled,
Transcends Self,
Soaring on the wings of the Tao.
The Taoist
Discards Wisdom, forgets Form,
Is borne on the Flood, sails forth,
Resting on river islets.
For the Taoist
Life is a Floating,
Death a Rest.
The Taoist
Is an unmoored boat,
Drifting freely
On deep still springs...

Part II

Beverley's haiku, and an appreciation:

38

I found it very difficult to sort out the various strands of this dense verse. It's almost impossible to condense it. I started with this, influenced by Ursula le Guin...

"Less is more", applies
to the exercise of power,
in all walks of life"

but finally decided that I could get to the heart of the verse with these three haikus.

No Golden Age now
but there is hope of lesser
virtues surviving.

In general people
can be kind, just and moral
although falling short.

For a country, if
only a show of virtue
remains, chaos reigns.

Tell Jan how often I find myself agreeing with what she has to say about the Tao Te Ching verses. I like Anita's comments too.... Indeed I like everybody's comments! It's interesting how the Zoom experience is developing into an even richer view of the study.

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Needleman's end notes:

Genuine goodness is action that springs spontaneously from the vital center of oneself, not merely action done in conformity to an ideal, however noble, that is held by thought. Compare St. Paul's teaching that Christ came not to destroy the law but to fulfill it—in other words, righteousness is not forcing the body to obey the thought, but is rather the appearance of a new principle within ourselves which the body and mind voluntarily and instantly obey. Compare also Nietzsche's "third metamorphosis of the spirit" in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, how the spirit becomes a camel, then a lion, then a child.

* * *

The River Master, in Minford, speaks to the first stanza:

The Nameless Rulers of High Antiquity had Higher Power. And yet they can be said to have had No-Power, since they never used their Power to instruct, but instead followed Nature, the So-of-Itself, thereby Nourishing the True Life-Destiny of the folk. Their Power was invisible. It was One with Heaven and Earth, it Harmonized with the Breath-Energy of All-under-Heaven, it helped the folk Attain Wholeness and Perfection Of-Themselves. Lesser Power is different: it never Lets Go.

The lesser Power
Of Titles and Honors
Is visible,
It seeks Praise,
Takes Credit.

Lesser Power is Action, gives Orders, Meddles, creates Name and Fame for itself. Prophecy is a mere Flower of the Tao. It has no Substance. It is the Beginning of Folly.

* * *

Pine's sages include:

Wang Pi: "Those who possess Higher Virtue use nothing but the Tao. They possess virtue, but don't give it a name."

(Naming has curiously become a spiritual cliché for overcoming obstacles, but it is in fact a serious stumbling block to true understanding. At most it should be a tentative first step.)

Yen Tsun: "Those who embody the Way are empty and effortless, yet they lead all creatures to the Way. Those who embody virtue are faultless and responsive and ready to do anything. Those who embody kindness show love for all creatures without restriction. Those who embody justice deal with things by matching name with reality. Those who embody ritual are humble and put harmony first. These five are the footprints of the Tao. They are not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is not one, much less five."

Wang P'ang: "Kindness is another name for virtue. It differs, though, from virtue because it involves effort. The kindness of sages, however, does not go beyond fulfilling their nature. They aren't interested in effort. Hence, they don't think about it."

Su Ch'e: "These are the means whereby sages help the people to safety. When the people don't respond, sages threaten and force

them. If they still don't respond, sages turn to law and punishment.”

Fan Ying-Yuan: “‘Augury’ means to see the future. Those in charge of rituals think they can see the future and devise formulas for human action, but they this cause people to trade the spirit for the letter.”

Wu Ch'eng: “The Tao is like a fruit. Hanging from a tree, it contains the power of life, but its womb is hidden. Once it falls, it puts forth virtue as its root, kindness as its stem, justice as its branches, ritual as its leaves, and knowledge as its flower. All of these come from the Tao. ‘That’ refers to the flower. ‘This’ refers to the fruit. Those who embody the Tao choose the fruit over the flower.”

Pine himself adds: “And yet plastic flowers of civilization still deck a billion altars.”