

10/20/20 class notes

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 39

We had quite a fascinating study of the various translations, covering a range of interpretations. I suspect the original Chinese words carry these implications, but English requires several to get the full flavor. Anyway, that's the fun of the class, expanding a handful of seeds into a bountiful garden.

It's an impressive verse. LeGuin titles it Integrity, and Minford, The One. I found Hamill's first stanza the clearest:

Since ancient days, these attained oneness:  
heaven attained unity and grew clear;  
earth attained unity and grew tranquil;  
souls attained unity and grew powerful;  
valleys attained unity and produced abundance;  
all beings became one and gave life;  
rulers attained oneness and rule grew virtuous.

Stenudd (hereafter referred to as S), agrees with 'unity' for immersion in the Tao. Other versions have oneness (Min, P) and wholeness (LG, F). Mitchell comes up with a variety of fullness and completion concepts, a distinctive effort.

The second stanza imagines corruption and decline in those same five categories, due to not attaining the unity (H, Min), or else due to remaining static, even in the most perfect state (P). In some the attainment of wholeness *prevents* the described decline (F, S, LG).

Pine's point that if a category persists in only being unified, it falls apart, is rather surprising and contrary, yet makes sense. In the Tao, everything is always rotating and cycling through dark and light, so even if we attain unity, it's important to maintain motion. I suppose that means slipping in and out of unity into duality. One

of the failings of most belief-systems is that they say this is how the ideal state is supposed to be. This is right, all else is wrong. It leads exactly to the corruption described in the verse. It brings us to what is so often described as maintaining law and order, though what happens in practice is being ordered to break all laws. Kill the enemy, to defend the holy premise Thou shalt not kill.

Mitchell does a unique and wonderful job of bringing the text up to date in the second stanza. If “man” goes against the Tao, the disasters of modernity ensue: pollution, loss of balance, mass extinction. He uses masculine pronouns where he is expected to use feminine, possibly because they are more demeaning sounding, so he was being careful. Regardless, making the lines relevant to our current condition is an admirable stretch, and to me the most important reason to dig into an ancient text in the first place. We aren’t trying solely to go back to how it was back then, but to also find out what it can teach us about our present circumstances.

Wang Pi, in the Pine, says: “All things become complete when they become one. But once they become complete, they leave oneness behind and focus on being complete. And by focusing on being complete, they lose their mother. Hence they crack, they crumble, they dissipate, they dry up, and they fall. As long as they have their mother, they can preserve their form. But their mother has no form.” Mother of course is Tao.

Stenudd gives a nice overview of the first two stanzas:

This chapter focuses on the necessity for the main parts of the world to be in accordance with Tao, or they will cease to function and there will be disorder. That goes for all the parts. They are equally needed in the grand scheme of things. So, there is no point in any one of them being exalted above the others. It's a team work, one might say, a great harmony where every piece fits, and nothing could be removed without damage to the whole.

Stenudd later muses on spirits, what Hamill renders as souls, LeGuin, Minford and Feng have spirit (singular), while Pine agrees with spirits. Stenudd notes some translations have gods, but Lao Tzu has little to say about divinity or deities, “as if not at all convinced of their existence.” A likely culprit is ancestral souls, the spirits of the dead. He also spouts a glaring contradiction: “They might also be expressions of some animistic concept, regarding all things in nature as equipped with some kind of soul, life, or will. Whatever the case, they are not to be understood as spirits within living creatures.” How’s that different from souls?

We should recognize there is a mystery here: what can these spirits or spirit be? What is a soul? I might offer consciousness, or self-awareness, or simply sense of self. It has to be an immaterial substance of some kind. In the verse’s structure, on one side there is Heaven and Earth; on the other, Valleys and Procreation. The middle line, Spirit, looks like it should be occupied by humanity.

The last section sums up that things like noble and high are based on humble and low. Rulers describe themselves as orphaned, destitute, unworthy and so on, to proclaim their humility, in order to affirm its root (S, H, Min, LG). Pine makes it clear such talk is *not* the basis of humility. Feng maintains that humility is the source of their strength. The aim in all cases is obviously *genuine* humility, not mere play-acting.

Jade and stone, special and ordinary, are contrasted at the very end, either to exalt the common (Mit, S) or negate both (F, P, H). LeGuin has my favorite, affirming both:

Jade is praised as precious,  
but its strength is being stone.

Minford’s is also good:

Do not tinkle like jade:  
Rumble like rock,  
Attain the One.

The contrast between jade and stone is likened to high and low, but some translations make the telling point that they are made of the same substance. They appear different, but their intrinsic nature is the same.

Su Ch'e, in Pine, says: "Oneness dwells in the noble, but it is not noble. Oneness dwells in the humble, but it is not humble. Oneness is not like the luster of jade (so noble it cannot be humble) or the coarseness of rock (so humble it cannot be noble)."

Deb began our discussion by reviewing that each of the beings mentioned are different from one another, with particular qualities that make them essential for being what they are, yet they all need to be grounded fully in the Tao. The Tao allows all that beauty to manifest. The book is showing how all these things have their grounding in the Tao, which is fecund and ceaseless.

She continued that it's an important reminder that high has its basis in the low, which is helpful in not getting attached to those ideas in relation to oneself.

Anita was perplexed by the line in Mitchell, "The Master lets Himself be shaped by the Tao," along with his end note that this can be a painful process. She thinks we have a role in our shaping too, and doesn't believe it should be relinquished. I offered that we allow it because it's already there. We *are* the Tao, and our role is more letting it unfold naturally than channeling it in an appealing way. Channeling forces us to lose touch, and can end quite badly. We need to do it, but preferably in tune with the Tao, the natural context. Otherwise we might be motivated by fantasies.

Anita was also bugged by Mitchell's second stanza, which opens with man *interfering* with the Tao, bringing degradation.

She asked, can't man contribute anything positive or beautiful? Is it all just interference? We didn't discuss this as much as we should have, as it's quite important. Our very being is a magnificent contribution, but if we take credit for it, we become conceited or narcissistic. "Taking credit" is the interference. "Allowing it" means not making a big deal about it. The sad thing is how we're all so isolated, especially these days, so it's almost as if we have to shout out our good qualities, or no one will notice them. Times like this, it's okay to bend the rules and stand up for yourself.

And, once again, Taoism is a very solitary belief system. Ancient China was in some ways like in a modern prison: if you fraternize, you fall under suspicion, and dreadful things can happen. So only isolated work is permitted.

Deb likened the implicit dilemma to being rolled under by waves at the beach. We can't fight them. If we do, we'll suffer even more. We have to let them blast us before we dare come up for air.

Kris grew up in Hawaii and was a surfer for many years, so she liked this analogy. She told us how sometimes you go under the wave and you have to stay calm and patient for some time before you come back up. You can easily get disoriented, so it isn't safe to act. She thought it was just like the idea that without humility, things fall apart. By resisting. And that's when people get destructive. Thinking perhaps of present politics, she figured in someone not humble at all, the amount of ego they generate can do such destruction. They are thinking they are jade when they are a stone.

I thought riding waves was a great example. When you're in tune with a wave, staying in the right spot, it's a supremely exciting experience, but if you go the wrong way you get bashed around. You might run into a rock instead of open water. In big waves you could even die. The Tao acts like a tide or wave that is

always going, and historically it's now coming to a peak, another explosive peak.

Our daughter Emily told us recently that she always scorned Germans for allowing the Nazi holocaust, but now she sees how it can happen anywhere. It's hard for her to imagine what could have been done to prevent its resurgence.

Once again there doesn't seem to be much we can do about it, as it blossoms in the former US of A. Just like being rolled under a wave, we have to relax, hold our breath (metaphorically) and hang on to the bottom for dear life. Don't get swept away in the current.

It's funny how even like-minded people are disdainful that we haven't done anything to stop the degradation, as if it's our fault. Humans feel very comfortable blaming others when they are caught in a dilemma. You imagine if you can blame someone else, that frees you of your own helplessness. Yet it's purely egotistical to think that there is some solution. Solutions tend to be deadly. That's not how it works.

The negative ego is also under reference here. We tend to downplay ourselves because it causes less static, but any position we adhere to stops us from going with the flow. By contrast, a neutral attitude says I'm not high or low. Just as with the Tao, you don't say I am this or that. Such self-description is stultifying; it freezes you in place.

Susan thought of a related issue as the class was winding down, and she was kind enough to write it for us:

I find that people (myself included) are tending to wallow in speculation about the future and the darkness they see. I heard just today about an article that predicted that our civilization would be at least for the remainder of our lives freaked out by germs and wanting to live lives masked and behind plexiglass. That is a horrible thought but I just don't agree with it and even

if I did, it does no good to speculate. It seemed related to our discussion in a way. Just as we don't want to be stuck in one way of being (or however Scott said it earlier in the class) you certainly don't want to be predicting what will happen in the future in a way that makes you miserable or makes you stuck. I guess a surfer does need to check the weather and the wave forecast but they don't decide how their wave riding will go because they are in the moment, taking the water as it comes. This doesn't mean that we don't work hard to avoid a bleak future. We still demonstrate and vote and live our lives in a progressive way perhaps but maybe it is better not to get too wrapped up in what things will be like. Yes, I suppose one needs to prepare for an earthquake but better not to wring one's hands constantly in anticipation of that possibility.

This would of course have made for a good discussion, but I get the sense that people were so dispirited already, so exhausted, that we wouldn't have wanted to talk about it. People are already in burnout mode, and the game has just begun. Well's insight in *War of the Worlds* how the Earth saves itself is spot on. Remember, it was the microbes.

I should also say that the class isn't strictly about being on a certain topic. The overarching topic is our self-development, which means all serious questions about our problems are welcome and germane. Often we can even tie them into the material of the reading, but it's not mandatory.

This would be good to bring up again next week. For now, the advice I suggest is to examine those feelings without giving in to them. Normal human behavior is to be afraid, and then to try to ignore or deny the source of the fear, to make it go away. It never works. What does work is to face the fear, really confront it. It's a lot like paddling out into big Hawaiian surf, with huge rollers bearing down on you amongst awesome beauty. If you shut your

eyes and duck, you're going to crash (or crack, crumble, dissipate, dry up, and fall).

Of course we have no idea what the future will bring, and it's amazing how even an article can be devastating in its impact. I read one yesterday about a "nice guy" running for office in Georgia, being hounded out by rabid heavily-armed lunatics, including the Trump supported QAnon Republican candidate, and it makes you despair for the human race. The nice guy, who thought he could bring civility back into politics, has fled to a state 1000 miles away, in fear of his life. Anyway, these things are true, or possible. We need to remind ourselves that the future is not set in stone (or jade) and that we are prepared to be made miserable by events, and make the best of it. We have each other, and we have great art and literature. We have enough to eat. If we don't hang on to worries that may never come about, that should be enough.

We have had this same discussion before, in a long ago class, but I have no idea how to find the notes for reference. Some things have to keep coming up, and this benighted time surely brings up the beasties. I'm sure there's much more to be said about it.

Magister Liu, in the Minford, outdoes himself this time, giving us a fittingly beautiful conclusion:

Wholeness is Achieved  
By Attaining  
The One.  
Without the One,  
Things Fail.

The One is the True Breath-Energy contained within the Supreme Ultimate, it is the Mother of the Myriad Things, it is itself without Form but sets Form in Motion. The One enables everything to be what it is—Heaven, Earth, Spirit, the Valley. Without the One, Kings lose Authority, they Tumble, however high their Rank. The



One is Root and Foundation of all. Kings call themselves Orphans and Waifs, out of Humility. The Tao, the Root of all, is enjoyed by every one of the Myriad Things through Attainment of the One, just as many Carriages have as their Root No-Carriage at all. Their Usefulness lies in the Empty Space, in Non-Being.

Put Jade  
Out of mind,  
Return to Rock,  
To the One,  
Most precious thing of all,  
Mystery of Mysteries,  
Gateway to All Marvels,  
Ancestor of the Myriad Things.

Let's hope the King of all Liars tumbles very soon. Aum.

Part II

Beverley's haiku is no haiku:

Most profound, eh? She also agreed: "I feel too that it's time to round off the TTC. It has been a joy - a really creative experience. A bow here to your truly impressive preparation and class notes."