

12/2/19

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 4

The Hamill translation stood out for me this time. We read several others, but this covers the main ideas well:

Tao is empty
but inexhaustible,
bottomless,
the ancestor of it all.

It blunts rough edges,
untangles the knots,
diffuses the glare,
at one with the dust of the world.

In depthless depths it is
whose child—
born before antiquity?

Some of the translations give the impression, as here, that the Tao itself is untangling the knots and blunting the rough edges, etc. for us. Others, like Feng and Lau, make it seem more the task we take on as seekers of truth. I suggested that both are true, and we should consider both nuances in our opening meditation.

After the meditation, Deb reminded us of Nitya's wonderful prose poem, *The Value of Emptiness* (reprinted in part II), so appropriate to this verse. It reassured her that emptiness contains infinite possibilities for unlimited growth, and if we settle into that apparent darkness, we encounter a mystery that gives rise to so many possibilities in our own lives.

While chewing on that, we shared some of the trenchant comments from our sources. Most crucial was Le Guin's point that

even many scholars try to pin down Lao Tzu's elusive subtlety by focusing on the Tao Te Ching's "positive ethical or political values." Because of this attitude, she writes, "the religion called Taoism is full of gods, saints, miracles, prayers, rules, methods for securing riches, power, longevity, and so forth—all the stuff that Lao Tzu says leads us away from the Way." (7)

Some of the subtleties we observed are: Mitchell has "older than God" in place of "born before antiquity." Red Pine has the more literal "it seems it was here before Ti." Ti was the first emperor, pretty much like God. He quotes Li Yueh in explication: "Ti is the Lord of Creation. All of creation comes after Ti, except the Tao, which comes before it. But the nature of Tao is to yield. Hence, Lao-Tzu does not insist it came before. Thus, he says, 'it seems.'"

Minford relates some lovely poems by Magister Liu and Bo Yuchan that I read out. One by Liu beautifully conveys the practical efforts/non-efforts we are to make/not make:

Smooth the Harsh Edges
Of Breath-Energy,
Loosen the Tangles
Of Worldly Emotion,
Glow with a Soft
Harmonious Light.
Dwell in the world,
Do not deny it,
Merge with the Dust,
Resonate with outer things,
Be Still
And not entangled.

Minford quotes Arthur Waley, the first English translator of *Monkey*, among other triumphs: "Dust is a common Taoist

metaphor for the noise and fuss of everyday life.” Wing-tsit Chan adds: “Taoism in its true sense calls for identification with, not an escape from, the world (‘merging with the Dust’).” It’s an acute yogic dialectic to identify or merge with the everyday reality and yet not become entangled in it.

Deb was reminded of verse 9 of Atmo, where an alert contemplative sits beneath a great Tree, and takes care not to become entangled by the creeping vines that cover the trunk. Nitya’s *Meditations on the Way* cites the last verse of Daiva Dashakam and the last verse of Atmo as being in the same spirit:

In the deep ocean of Your Glory,
Immersed let us all become,
There to Dwell, dwell everlastingly
In Felicity Supreme.

Neither that, nor this, nor the meaning of existence am I,
but existence, consciousness, joy immortal; thus attaining clarity,
emboldened,
discarding attachment to being and non-being,
one should gently, gently merge in *SAT-AUM*.

Deb felt these inspirational words are reminding us that the eternal state is not far away or back in the past, it’s always available and necessary for us. All of the things we attempt to do and make into a goal, all come out of that unformed state.

I felt that being aware of the presence of the Tao, Karu, Absolute, or what have you, is a most important contribution to our peace of mind. A noncontemplative person is trapped by entanglement in all the ten thousand things, all the created actualities that have arisen from the emptiness of the Tao. The original nothingness has become all this, and that is all there is for them. It is so important to realize that the eternal value is present

throughout our lives—it's not something that was lost, or has lost its meaning in respect to everything created. Just because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there. Bill quoted Mitchell in this regard: "It is hidden but always present."

I mused on the perplexity engendered by including emptiness in our fullness. If we were truly empty in meditation, we wouldn't necessarily come back to ourselves afterwards. There must be an invisible tether, an abiding link, maintaining an inner connection. Many of us who have taken LSD trips had the experience of flashing through dimension after dimension, universe after universe, in rapid and unending succession. The ego freaks out over the impossibility of returning to its familiar self, and yet it happens, automatically, at least for those who are grounded enough to begin with. A few did get lost permanently....

A favorite book from those halcyon hippie days was *Stranger in a Strange Land*, by Robert Heinlein, about a Martian who comes to live and teach on Earth. One of the Martian phrases I recall is "waiting will fill," apparently about how to hatch a Martian egg, which is how they are born. It's true of psychological eggs too. By trying, we interfere with many a natural process that will rebalance itself, or complete itself, much better if left alone.

In any case, we need to be able to free ourselves from the entanglements that naturally crop up around every endeavor, one way *and* another. Susan sent a summation of her contribution to the discussion, for which I'm grateful:

You were talking about all the negative ways we can get entangled by the world and so forget about the emptiness of the verse. It happens easily. Just listen to [newscaster] Rachel Maddow for five minutes and you're off into a world that seems so important (and she is pretty amazing) but it's also such a distraction. I chimed in about distractions that are more positive but still distractions, of course. I was thinking about what pulls

me out of meditation or my quieter moments of contemplation or even out of the stream of playing a piano piece. Often, it's about something I need to do and often those are exciting things, like figuring out some question, or learning something new or wondering what will happen next in a book. I guess I considered these more positive entanglements but they are still entanglements. I also have my personal entanglements that are negative — guilt, worry, fear — but I find these easier to identify as non-empty.

Deb made it clear that whenever you realize you are entangled, you can just let go and sink into the emptiness again. She related this to dharma: how do you find out what your life purpose and structure are? What are your interests, what keeps rising up for you? Like Susan, she loves learning new things, finding something else she can throw herself into. We all, of course, love our positive entanglements and are more ready to resist our negative ones. We probably even define the negatives as entangling and the positives as inspiring, and that's okay up to a point, as long as we don't get carried away....

As a means to recognize our entanglements, Deb remembered one time when Nitya was talking to Peter O, who was wondering about the same paradox. Nitya asked him to observe himself when he was having a problemless moment, in meditation for instance. What makes you leave that moment? What makes you have to get up, move out, create something? Look closely at that urge.

Bill admitted he found it intellectually difficult to get his head around boundlessness coming out of emptiness, that all the things that exist, exist in the void. Deb suggested it goes back to the very first verse, the mystery beyond mystery. Mystery is the gateway. That means we don't have to understand it perfectly. It may even be that bafflement helps open the door.

It has become clear that the Tao Te Ching is not going to provoke long discussions, and we may return it to private individual perusal fairly soon. But it is lovely to have a few peaceful gatherings primarily for meditation, which we proceeded to do. Aum.

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

It is always here,
Welling up from depths unknown:
The timeless first thing

* * *

Deb remembered this brief essay by Nitya, possibly from around the time of his Tao Te Ching class, and certainly inspired by it. We suspect Peter O to be the amanuensis referred to.

The Value of Emptiness, by Nitya Chaitanya Yati

I am sitting here with a hot cup of tea in my left hand. I cannot drink it. It is hot, so I have to wait. Before me is a loaf of banana bread with a knife and a spoon on it. We are waiting for friends to come, so it is not cut. On my right side is a wicker basket beautifully made by some Chinese people. It is empty. The origin of the basket from China and the emphasis on the value of emptiness in the Taoist philosophy make the basket a double dose to move me away from the tea and bread into the first emptiness that is continuing to be in the process of being filled even though cycles of universes have come and gone.

I have in my lap my eyeglasses. They are of no use to me now, because I am sitting with my eyes closed. It's a paradox that things which are present do not interest me and what is not present has become the major interest of this moment. My friend who is taking down this dictation now tore off the sheet in hasty abruptness so that he could reach onto the next sheet before the coming of the word that was not yet articulated. Our preparation for what is yet to be seems more real than experiencing what is already given.

In fact, the whole theme of spiritual search is this reaching forward from the filled cup to the possibility of the empty basket. What is taught is to be forgotten to find room for what is to be learned. Reaching forward in great enthusiasm, hugging half maddened by the excitement of holding on to what is not yet fully known, is followed by a passive forgetfulness which makes it easy to leave behind what is sought after with so much zest, and it is so wonderful that the mind is again filled with the same zest and zeal to stand in waiting for the advent of the unknown.

You and I are only expressions which are not as eloquent as this wicker basket, which has been filled and emptied many times before and is again empty to give us the lesson of the ever-fresh and ever-meaningful emptiness, the emptiness that gives birth to fullness.

May you be born of emptiness. May you grow into fullness, and may you be the emptiness that everyone seeks for fulfillment.

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Our ever-synchronous reading in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study group this lesson includes a scientific portrayal by Nitya of doing-not-doing:

Robert Oppenheimer [in *Science and the Common Understanding*, Oxford University Press, London, 1954, pp. 42-43] very humorously states our paradoxical knowledge: “If we ask, for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether the electron’s position changes with time, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether the electron is at rest, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say ‘no’.” So it is and it is not. The same is attributed to consciousness—it is conscious and unconscious. Between the range of the plus and minus there are many possibilities. (II.490-1)

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Out of nowhere, a definition of conative has appeared, in an important article about the downside of the current fad about mindfulness. Some of you may recall we have been puzzling over this term for some time.

“conative,” means involving motivation and goal-related behavior, from https://getpocket.com/explore/item/the-problem-with-mindfulness?utm_source=pocket-newtab

This is actually a little different from the Gurukula use of the term, though they can be tied together. I believe the sequence “cognition, conation, affection” was used by Nataraja Guru as a translation for saccidananda: sat, chit and ananda, respectively.

Charles dug up a reference about William McDougall (1871-1944), who is probably the source of Nataraja Guru’s use of cognition, conation and affection as a clarification of Vedanta’s sat chit ananda. <http://eli.johogo.com/Class/trilogy-1980.pdf> . The article informs us that McDougall “had done experiments and was prepared to represent psychology in a global manner in England

and later in America. He migrated to Harvard University in 1920, and ended his career at Duke University, where he taught from 1927 to 1938.”

Since my last fruitless search some years back, conation has found its way onto the web. Oxford has a good definition: the mental faculty of purpose, desire, or will to perform an action; volition. That pretty well equates with chit (cit) which I’ve always thought of as being the interpretive aspect of reality. Individual consciousness. Sat is existence, which is dependent on consciousness. Beings interpret existence and address it purposefully, which beings varying results, covered by ananda as value or meaning. It’s a loose fit, sure, but you can see where the Guru must have felt a kind of revelation in making the connection.

For the record, I’ve retrieved some past musings about conation from the archives. This is from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study group, part of my response to lesson I.3:

The reading includes another place where Nitya uses the obscure (if not mythical) term *connation*, or elsewhere *conation* (probably due to secretarial preference). It isn’t in any of my dictionaries. What I was eventually able to piece together was that “cognition, connation and affection” is another revisiting (probably Nataraja Guru’s) of sat, chit and ananda. What is meant by connation, then, is *connotation*: We cognize something (sat), make mental associations or connotations to put it in context (chit), which allows us to determine our affection for it, whether we are attracted or repelled by it (ananda).

We touched on the word in a couple of the Atmo classes here in Portland, and I recovered the two references in the class notes. The first is from That Alone 4:

Michael wanted some clarification on the word *connation*. Nitya speaks of the triple set of cognition, connation and affection. Connation is a rare word, here meant to include the associations our memories make with what is perceived. We cognize—observe—something; next we identify it, or it connotes some imagery; and then we decide whether we like it, hate it, or are indifferent. The three are so compressed and fluid they appear as one.

From what I can gather, Nataraja Guru tried to select English language equivalents for Sanskrit terms, as part of his attempt to make Vedantic wisdom available to scientists. I have the feeling that cognition, connation and affection were meant to substitute for sat, chit and ananda, respectively. Since Nataraja Guru failed to penetrate the well-defended fortresses of twentieth century science, the Gurukula is the only place you will encounter these terms used in this way.

It came up again in That Alone 21, where the new definition seems like it would be applicable to the current subject, though not quite in the way it's used:

Peggy and Michael did find a reference to connation, at dictionary.com, from the adjective connate. It's an interesting word, meaning "related to birth or origin, inborn." However, it doesn't fit with the intent of "I know it," the egocentric version of *chit*. I stand by my assessment that the intent is connotation, and we either misheard it or Nitya misspoke it.

Nitya's *In The Stream of Consciousness* has the following, in the chapter The Bed of the Stream:

Transaction implies establishing a relationship between I and the other. The procedural details of the process of transaction

are: cognition of the other, including an analytical survey of its constituent elements, followed by conation in response to the other, by first judging the qualities of the interrelational aspect of its predicables, and then assuming a certain responsive posture in the acceptance or avoidance of the other's envisaged value significance.

The "certain responsive posture" is the affection element, the ananda, which Nitya doesn't specifically mention.

Speaking of streams, Nitya opens his verse 4 commentary of *That Alone* with a major breakdown of cognition, conation and affection. This is what prompted Michael to ask about it:

Consciousness is like an ever-flowing stream. We do not always know the whole of it. We ignore causes to focus on effects. We hardly notice the contours of a riverbed, tending to look only at the effect it has on the surface. Within a limited purview this is not disastrous, but a river will occasionally enter into a gorge or a ravine and drop out of sight. Our experience is similar to this.

"Oh, here is my child," a mother thinks without thinking. It is not a mere idea. It fills her with a great joy. Although she does not say "I am rating this experience as a value," that is exactly what is happening. In this example there are three phases: cognition, conation and affection. The initial cognition or registration of the child in the mother's awareness can be summarized as "here is," or *asti*. Then follows the recognition that this is her own child, known as conation, *bhati*. Her unspeakable and spontaneous joy is at once a knowledge and an affectivity, *artham*.

In the present verse, Narayana Guru says *arrinnitumartham*. The Sanskrit term *artham* has two definitions which are relevant in this context: value and meaning. What immediately strikes a person is an intuitive recognition of the value. The rationale for it comes only later when one can sit back and ponder over the

experience. Although psychologists prefer to say that the experience of affection follows connotation, the Guru has changed that order. In the term *arrinnitumartham*, 'the captivating lure of its value', he combines the intuitive recognition of the meaning and the value one confronts in the wake of an experience. His reference is not merely to *bhati* but to the flash of consciousness that comes with the affective impact of the situation. Thereafter the person cools down. Next the Guru brings in pure connotation as such, which he describes as *pumantam arivu*, one's personal knowledge. Affection is called *ananda* in Sanskrit. It does not stand alone, which is why he identifies it as the conscious experience of being affected.

Verse 21 of That Alone is also very helpful:

Reality has three unifying aspects. One is called *sat*, existence. I exist, you exist, this couch exists, the house exists, the sky exists, the world exists. All these can be brought under one common heading of existence. All that exists is a genuine existence which implies the existence of all. It's called *sat*.

I am aware of my existence, of your existence, of the existence of the world. Thus I have an all-embracing awareness that includes everything. What is not in it, I will never know. This awareness, which includes in it good and bad, far and near, one and many, big and small, irrespective of all variations, is just one knowledge, *cit*. So we have one all-inclusive existence and one all-inclusive knowledge.

I value my beingness and you value your beingness. Everything tends to become valuable in one way or another. All these values are measured by our own happiness. This is called *ananda*. So we have *sat*, existence; *cit*, knowledge; and *ananda*, the primordial value. Taken all together, the whole of reality is therefore called *sat-cit-ananda*.

One can be permeated with the consciousness of *sat-cit-ananda*. It can be blissful if it is not differentiated, but instead of this generic sense of existence, subsistence and value, we tend to see things individually. When they are broken into bits we have instead *asti*, this is; *bhati*, I know it; and *priyam*, I love it. In Western terms these correspond to cognition, conation and affection. In the fragmentary notions of *asti*, *bhati* and *priyam* there is scope for a great deal of confusion. We can have “This is, I know it, I dislike it;” or even “This is, I do not know what it is, therefore I do not know if I like it or not.” Only when we cultivate an ever-prevailing sense of unity are we out of this confusion. When we identify with the egoistic self we see only through this fragmentation and do not experience *sat-cit-ananda*.

If we can approach life from the point of view of the all-seeing witness, which is not tainted with incipient memories or proliferating interests, then we will see the good of all, the general good, in which what pleases me is also included. This is not attained, as some mistakenly think, by summarily dismissing what pleases me as an individual. (152-3)

In *Neither This Nor That But... Aum*, Nitya uses the term once:

There can be two possible breaks in the continuation of the Self. One is when a person's ego identity changes from one universe of interest to a totally different universe of interest. This possible chasm is bridged here by saying that the ego is carrying over the same principle of cognition, conation and affection from one interest to another. The second discontinuity comes when the series of egos in a person is terminated by death. That again is no problem, because one man's ego series is only one in countless millions of ego apprehensions and affections. It is only the “I” that disappears, but its essence and momentum continues. (24)

This obscure reference is from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad highlights for Vol. II. Nitya writes:

During the wakeful, dream, deep sleep and transcendental states, a liaison continues between the body system and the peripheral electromagnetic field in which it is secured. The recording of the day to day memory of the impact of cognition, conation and affection, and the evolution of conceptualization which has due access to the variegated motor functions performed are perfectly coordinated with the lingatma, that part of the self which keeps a journal of a person's life in terms of perennial value. (532) (linga = causal; atma = self)

From Nataraja Guru's book Wisdom, p 4:

THE TOTAL CONTENT OF WISDOM

Wisdom concerns what humans feel, think or understand. Cognition, conation and affection come into its frame.

Nataraja Guru uses the term several times in his Atmopadesa Satakam commentary:

As we have said, this inner instrument of reason could be further vertically subdivided into mind, reason, relational faculty, individuation, etc., as has been referred to in Sanskrit psychology as manas, buddhi, chitta and ahamkara respectively. Whatever the subdivisions named or unnamed, they belong together to this inner organ when telescoped into one another as a single factor for purposes of easy nomenclature. This inner organ uses the five senses such as hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch. The very first

object with which we can be said to be in palpable contact is our own body. Objectively speaking, the body should have been our negative starting-point, and the physical sun its positive counterpart here; but, contemplatively treated, the inner organ itself, as the instrument of cognition, conation and affection, is the more correct starting-point in equating counterparts. (18-19)

We have to imagine a man who is not quite mentally alert or awake enough to realities, especially to values, as he ought to be. He sees a broken flower-garland in a badly-lit part of his house. He takes it to be a snake because of his conditioning to fear snakes. The rope in the classical example is an article that has no practical utility. Truth is compared to this kind of valueless object. Appearance is also on the other hand exaggerated as a dangerous snake. Between truth and falsehood, or rather reality and appearance, there is thus admitted in the comparisons corresponding to each of them, a polarity or contrast which tends to be dualistically conceived, even when both are thought of in terms of pure value. As a matter of fact, what is true in everyday life has at the same time a beneficial utilitarian or cultural value. Likewise, if we think of the transcendental aspect of life, which is the ambivalent counterpart of the utilitarian, even in this pure or ideological sense, truth is a beneficial value. The classical, abstract and academic example of the rope and the snake fails to look at the natural ambivalent factors of cognition and conation in terms of value, in which emotion enters as a detrimental factor against giving it unitive interest or value. (105-6)

Adhyasa (superimposition) has been defined as the grafting by memory of something which does not belong to the place or context. It is a special or particular instance of wrong perception. The associative or apperceptive masses that are formed by our long contact with objects in our past, however long, are not lost, but

remain as 'samskaras' or conditioning unit-factors which colour our present vision, giving it a 'reality' which is not really there. Subtle associative unit-masses of habitual forms called 'vasanas' (tendencies) operate to shape or determine our present view of things.

Western psychology does not give much place to this deeper aspect of the structure of perception. Perception becomes conception, and both of these interact, giving depth of meaning to everything. Emotive factors enter into cognition and conation to a larger extent than what is envisaged by the merely superficial stimulus-response or mechanistic psychology known in modern Europe or America. The Bergsonian theory of memory holds good here and gestalt configurations also count.

The whole question has to be viewed from a vertical rather than from a merely horizontal perspective. When we have done so, the verity of the statement in the first line of the verse above, [There is not one thing here that we have not already once known] which at first might appear too sweeping, will become more evident. Our consciousness, whether individual or collective, must, in principle at least, contain all that has been the least meaningful in our past life. There cannot be any effect without a corresponding cause. This cause must necessarily be any effect without a corresponding cause. This cause must necessarily be hidden in the past. (205-6)

THE glory of knowledge and the perfection of the Absolute have a common ground in the experience of the Self. The existential and the subsistential sides – into which categories of thought the central reality was understood as belonging in a polarized and dual fashion – attain a neutral unity in which cognition, conation and emotion merge into a central experience. The culmination of wisdom has to take place in the individual, and the mere thoughtful

analysis or synthesis to which it is prone will not bring it to the equilibrium or sameness or unity which is here to be understood. We know that the maha-vakyas of the Vedanta such as tat-tvam-asi (Thou art That) etc., have all of them two sides: one immanent and the other transcendental, or one ontological and the other teleological, which meet to produce the ultimate experience of the yogi or the correct dialectically-trained philosopher. In verse 99 below, the Guru himself will refer to this union of the self and non-self aspects of knowledge. In this verse and the next we thus touch the finalized position of Advaita Vedanta teaching. It should be noticed also that in the description of this rare experience of the true philosopher or yogi, as understood in this series of verses, as we see it in the last line of the present verse, there is a blending of rational and emotional factors. (281)

From Nataraja Guru's Gita, X.18:

Tell me, again in detail, O Janàrdana (Krishna), of your balanced perfections and specific expressions, for I am never satiated by hearing your words of ambrosial immortality.

The request is repeated with the additional reference not only to desire for guidance, but in the name of sheer enjoyment itself. The "cognition" desired in the first instance is here supported by sheer "affection" for the wisdom, which, taken together with "conation" already covered in Chapter IX, fulfils all the psychological prerequisites for a wholehearted affiliation to wisdom, even in its most specific aspects.