

10/27/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verses 40 and 41

I combined these two verses, not realizing that the very slight verse 40 would inspire more commentary than the long and complex verse 41. How Taoist is that! They are also distinct enough that in these notes I'll treat them sequentially, though we mixed them together in the class.

Verse 40 states the turning, or returning, is the motion of the Tao, and softness, yielding or weakness is its practice. All things are born of Something, and Something is born of Nothing, also called Non-being or the Void.

Mitchell notes: 'Non-being' means beyond the categories of being and non-being.

Pine found many helpful quotes. Liu Ch'en-Weng says, "Once things reach their limit, they have to go back the other way." Ch'ao Chih-Chien adds, "To go back the other way means to return to the root. Those who cultivate the Tao ignore the twigs and seek the root. This is the movement of the Tao: to return where the mind is still and empty and actions soft and weak. The Tao, however, does not actually come or go. It never leaves. Hence, it cannot return. Only what has form returns."

Wang An-Shih says, "The reason the Tao works through weakness is because it is empty. We see it in Heaven blowing through the great void. We see it in Earth sinking into the deepest depths."

Te-Ch'ing makes a most relevant point: "People only know the work of working. They don't know that the work of not working is the greatest work of all. They only know that everything comes from something. They don't know that something comes from nothing. If they knew that something came from nothing, they would no longer enslave themselves to things.

They would return, instead, to the Tao and concentrate on their spirit.”

Bill was really struck by last lines of 40, such a powerful statement in simple guise how everything comes from something, and something comes from nothing. In the Yoga Sutra class he and Andy are taking with Nancy Y, the sutra they just finished involves one of the limbs of yoga, the observances, on continuous contemplation. In it Nitya says when you're thinking about contemplating Isvara, the Absolute, which can't truly be named, you can think of it as the spark of the individual. The individual spirit, when it comes into interaction with nature, that's when it comes into being. After that it's influenced by all sorts of colorations and experiences, even by its DNA. For Bill it is a wonderful image, the idea of that spark creating being. Lao Tzu is saying all things are born of being, that interaction with nature, the creation of the world all comes from non-being, from what can't be named, the Absolute.

Deb concurred it is so evocative an image, such a beautiful contradiction, like the Sunyata, the shining void of nothing that gives rise to all beings.

I noted how this verse touches on the most essential question of all philosophy, why is there something rather than nothing? How did anything arise out of nothing? It's the greatest miracle, the greatest mystery.

Pine waxes rhapsodic himself on this: “The moon can't keep up with the sun, but as it gets farther and farther behind, the darkness of nothing gives rise to the light of something.”

Verse 41 opens with three categories of people or scholars: great, thoughtful or wise; middling or average; and inferior, thoughtless or foolish. Wise scholars begin diligent practice, trying hard to live by the Tao. When average people, like you and me, hear about the Tao, we sometimes get it and sometimes wander far afield. We have good days and bad days. The foolish types laugh

out loud and don't do anything about it. Lao Tzu notes that the laughter testifies to the Tao.

In true Taoist fashion, this can be taken two contrary ways, though none of the translations specifically emphasize the paradox. I proposed the contrarian view as more in keeping with the spirit of the work. Trying to be like or live in the Tao drives it away. Therefore the wise scholars are the least in tune. Average bumbler get it by accident occasionally. Only fools laugh. Some of the sages take this as sneers of derision, but laughter is a crucial reaction. It can also be the best possible reaction.

The fool is celebrated in many Eastern religions, especially in Taoism, since the more you define something, the more obscured it becomes. Laughter happens when you meet the unexpected, the surprise, the serendipity. We laugh when something defeats our expectations. That's why Lao Tzu calls laughter an indicator of the Tao. As Wei Yuan says (in Pine): "The Tao moves contrary to how most people look at things."

Deb spoke of how the laughter comes because the Tao is out of our usual perception of reality. We have a preconceived mental structure. The inversion reminded her of Gita II. 69:

What is night for all creatures, the one of self-control keeps awake therein; wherein all creatures are wakeful, that is night for the sage-recluse who sees.

Deb went on how the Tao is an expansive world and we are coming at it from a small construction in the corner. She was struck how really deep the twelve adages are, particularly important right now. They are the kind of balm we all need for our psyches and our hearts.

Laughter is also healing for our heart-and-mind. In its favor I brought in the classic quote from Long Chen Pa, on The Natural Freedom of Mind:

Since everything is but an apparition  
perfect in being what it is  
having nothing to do with good or bad  
acceptance or rejection,  
one may well burst out in laughter.

The more predictable take is well described by Li Hsi-Chai, in Pine: “When great people hear of the Tao, even if others laugh at them, they can’t keep them from practicing it. When average people hear of the Tao, even if they don’t disbelieve it, they can’t free themselves of doubts. When inferior people hear of the Tao, even the ancient sages can’t keep them from laughing. Everyone in the world thinks existence is real. Who wouldn’t shake their head and laugh if they were told that existence wasn’t real and that non-existence was?”

I noted how we get sucked in to making effort because we all want to be diligent and intelligent. If you are trying hard to be like the Tao, that in itself is going to prevent you from being it. It means you’ve missed the point of the Tao Te Ching entirely. The hierarchy here is inverted: wisdom causes greater darkness than ignorance. The fool is the wise person, and the wise one is the fool.

Indian wisdom has the same thrust in places, of negating finalized thinking, opposing opposites to baffle simplistic certitudes. Nitya, in his Gita, affirms “The *atman* that is to be known is the same as knowing the Tao.” He adds, from the Mandukya Upanishad, verse 7, that the Self or the Absolute is:

As not inwardly conscious, not outwardly conscious, as not  
filled with a knowing content, not conscious, not unconscious,  
unseen, non-predicable, ungraspable,  
bereft of quality, unthinkable, indeterminate,

as the substance of the certitude of a unitive Self, as the calmer  
of the unmanifested,  
tranquil, numinous, nondual is the fourth limb considered to be.  
He is the Self; that is to be recognized.

The preamble of the three types of hearers is followed by  
twelve precepts that were old even by 500 BCE. Te-Ch'ing, in  
Pine, tells us, "The Tao is not what people expect. Hence, the  
ancients created these twelve sayings, which Lao-tzu quotes to  
make clear that the Tao has two sides." For the sake of coherence  
I'll use Hamill's list of them:

Enlightened Tao may seem obscure.  
Tao advancing may appear to retreat.  
A smooth way may look rocky.  
Supreme power looks empty.

Perfect whiteness may appear pitch black.  
Abundant virtue appears insufficient.  
Vigorous virtue appears frail.  
Substantial realities appear to change.

The great square is boundless.  
The great vessel is slow to mature.  
Great music may be nearly inaudible.  
The perfect image has no form.

Su Ch'e tells us, "These twelve sayings refer to the Tao as it  
appears to us. Wherever we look, we see its examples. The Tao as  
a whole, however, is hidden in namelessness."

Since there isn't always much to say about these koan-like  
lines, I invited people to weigh in on any that struck their fancy.

Deb felt the first two go together: the brightest path seems dark, and the path leading forward seems backward (Pine's translations). She said, "We don't really know where our life is going to go. I don't know how often I have felt I've been struggling in darkness but because of my confusion, so much more has been learned. The Tao is hidden and nameless, so when we see the way looking dark and backward, that might be where we need to go."

Karen was drawn to Mitchell's "the greatest wisdom seems childish." She felt if we behaved with the innocence of children, we would be wise.

Mitchell did some wonderful extrapolations, which aren't in the original. I'm pretty sure Lao Tzu never meant us to take his words as gospel, but more as a jumping off point, and Mitchell often does that. He's brave enough to add his own. His other leap is "the greatest love seems indifferent." In his note he adds, "because it has no preferences." This was the line that Bill liked best.

Anita talked about "true clarity seems obscure," Stenudd's fine rendering of "Perfect whiteness may appear pitch black." Often the truth is staring us in the face but we can't see it because of our own expectations and predilections. We're not always capable of recognizing it, because we're so distracted.

I was attracted by the line "the advancing may appear to retreat." This relates to the opening of the previous verse that return is the Tao's motion. It speaks to going inward, withdrawing and retreating from our normal outward orientation via meditation, contemplation and reflection. Beginners always ask what is this telling us to do? But it's not about outward directedness, it's about a retreat into yourself. It's not telling us to do anything. We advance in self-awareness by going inward for guidance.

Deb was baffled by "the perfect square is without corners." I wondered if our in-house alchemist Charles could tell us about

squaring the circle, and he could and did. He liked this line as the only visible image, all the others being abstractions. As an image, it is irreducibly simple, which makes it easier for him to visualize. Still you have a circle and a square, and putting them together as one image is impossible. A square with no corners is a circle. If you think about it for several years, the moment you get it you can see both a square and a circle. Susan thought of it as a perfect koan, a means to cancel the interference of our conceptions.

Part of Magister Liu's magnificent interpretation, in the Minford, is

The Taoists  
Never speak glibly  
Of the Tao.  
Its Light  
Glow Darkly  
Through their Words.  
The Tao is a Great Square  
Without Corners,  
Unconstrained,  
Radiant and Pure,  
Naked and Free as an Infant.

Wilhelm, also in Minford, tells us, "Virtues in their highest form do nothing to put themselves in the limelight. The Great Quadrant [Square] has no corners because it is of Infinite Size and therefore eludes perception, just as the Silence of Great Music exceeds the range of what is audible."

That was another of my favorite lines, that the great music may be inaudible. It's like aum, the Music of the Spheres, which can only be heard by very close listening. Happily, during the closing meditation I heard distant songbirds spread through a primeval forest, very faintly but distinctly. Among the most

gorgeous choirs I've ever heard, and truly great music. Susan is also fond of choirs, and there's a link to her favorite in Part II. The sacredness of their music will definitely propel you into the Tao Void.

The last line I spoke about was "Abundant virtue appears insufficient." Too much virtue is inevitably artificial and soul deadening. It becomes rigid and dogmatic, a forced exercise of perverse willpower. Tao destroying. It made me think of the Calvinists now reborn in the US Supreme Court, eager to punish those who don't share their super-strict beliefs. Salem witch trial stuff. Mother Theresa also came to mind, a much gentler soul, the most virtuous saint of the twentieth century, who before her death admitted that all her good works didn't make her happy or wise. She did them because she thought they would, but they didn't.

Huang Yuan-Chi speaks to how to avoid abundant virtue: "Those who cultivate the Way should act with humility and harmony. The slightest carelessness, any action at all, can destroy everything. Those who cultivate Virtue look to themselves for the truth, not to the words of others. For those who understand that what moves them is also the source of their lives, the pill of immortality is not somewhere outside." Mother Theresa was just like that, and yet it wasn't enough. It was, though, very, very good. Many were benefited. You can't fail better than she did.

We read Buddhist monk Sun Chuo's Rhapsody "Wandering on Mount Tiantai," for the closing meditation, a slim section of which is:

My Heart-and-Mind  
Wanders,  
Unconcerned.  
My eyes roam free,  
My slow steps take me  
Where they will.



## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

41

Nameless and unknown,  
the Tao works secretly; it  
sustains and fulfils.

The truth about how  
can only be conveyed with  
endless paradox.

\* \* \*

Susan's beloved women's chorus, giving free online concerts this year: <http://www.inmulieribus.org/> .