

12/10/19

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 5

This week I liked Feng's best, particularly because he uses dummies in place of everyone else's straw dogs:

Heaven and earth are ruthless;
They see the ten thousand things as dummies,
The wise are ruthless;
They see people as dummies.

The space between heaven and earth is like a bellows.
The shape changes but not the form;
The more it moves, the more it yields.
More words count less.
Hold fast to the center.

Where Feng uses 'dummies', everyone else employs the literal translation, straw dogs. A straw dog was a ceremonial item of ancient China, treated with the greatest reverence for a time, and then tossed into the street and trampled to smithereens. Red Pine likens it to a Christmas tree, worshipped for a period and then chipped or burned up.

Deb noted how when she first read the Feng translation in the 1970s, it seemed to her that the sage treats people like dummies, and she found that offensive. She didn't appreciate that he meant dummy in the sense of a mannequin or idol. In those days a dummy mostly meant a stupid person. But the idea is something lacking in human qualities, since the Tao is beyond human qualities.

It is tricky to get across the sense of neutrality meant here. Feng and Lao have it as ruthless. In place of ruthless, Red Pine has heartless, and Minford "not kind," which likewise leave a negative

impression for the casual reader. Hamill and LeGuin have “not humane,” which inches closer to neutrality. The latter explains that inhumanity doesn’t mean cruelty, which is a human quality. Nature and the Tao are neither kind nor cruel, because those are human attributes. Taoists, like Nature, act selflessly, which brings LeGuin to the very Indian conclusion that “altruism is the other side of egoism.” To me, Mitchell gets it just right: he has it that the wise, and heaven and earth “don’t take sides.” That’s because there aren’t any sides. Sides are a human construct.

I was relieved by “don’t take sides,” because in my prep I had read all the other versions first. They all sound like the western attitude that nature is pitted against us, and worse, the wise, or at least the rich and powerful, are pitted against us. On a superficial level this may be true in some respects, but not on the profound level of truth that the Tao represents.

Moving on, the bellows is an interesting image: a kind of imitation lung, empty but powerful. There is an intimation of prana in it. In *Meditations on the Way*, Nitya says:

Heaven and earth are the bellows which creates the alternating dynamics between the All and the Void, Existence and Non-Existence. Actually respiration is a very good symbol of this, because it consists of inspiration and expiration, a continual alternation between the two. We inspire, and we expire. When we are inspired, we create; and when we expire, we disappear. It goes on like this. The sage takes heaven and earth as his model.

Deb related that in Chinese culture all individuation, the uncountable world of manifestation, comes from that bellows.

Then, paradoxically, the emptiness that impels existence in the alternation of a bellows breath, is vitiated by words being formed out of that breath. Words are the manifestation of the

power, but they have a diminishing impact. As Feng puts it, “More words count less.” Jan affirmed that speaking about and discussing the Tao is not the way to regain it. It seems that words are directed outward, away from the core, and the verse instructs us to hold fast to the unmanifested core.

Nitya talks about his discipline of keeping silent for a very long time:

Much speech leads inevitably to silence. When I was younger, I spent eighteen months in a retreat observing silence. At first when I would see someone passing by my secluded hut, I would feel an impulse to call him over and to tell him something. I restrained myself and instead examined the compulsion. I found that what I had wanted to say was really not at all important. Soon silence became just like a friend to me. It became like a home to me.

After a while I began to wonder why people talk at all. After I came out of it I would often go visiting with Nataraja Guru to someone or another’s house. I let him do most of the talking. Occasionally a flash of brilliance from Nataraja Guru’s words would strike me. At such times I would invariably think, “That was very beautiful. But it is even more beautiful unsaid.”

As always, I spoke up on behalf of words. They are meant in our classes to help us recognize the image-worship we humans are prone to. The complexity is called for by the fact that just by deciding words are impediments doesn’t break their hold on our minds. Our very thought structures are made up of verbal-type associations, and it takes a concerted effort to disassociate from our habits. That being said, periods of silence also have a role to play. Surely the more we try to describe the indescribable, the farther it recedes.

Bill mused about his Patanjali study, where he's in a section where there are lots of techniques to get back to the center and quiet your mind. It's an activist approach.

Minford quotes the River Master, who points out that while a bellows is empty, it also produces a Resounding Breath. He goes on:

Much Business
Harms the spirit,
Many Words
Harm the person.
If the mouth keeps opening,
If the tongue keeps wagging,
Misfortune will surely follow.

Bill concurred that we can talk about the true nature of the self all day long, but we have to experience it directly, to touch it. That's why we need to hold to the center.

For Jan it was all about realizing the sameness, that nothing in the ten thousand things was more important than anything else. If we know this, it's easier to be non-judgmental or unattached to things. She did admit, with a laugh, that it's hard not to be enamored of certain things. Our preferences easily take hold of us. The laugh was partly in recognition of a rant we joined in during the tea time before class. We may talk tough about neutrality, but we love to proclaim our preferences.

As Deb said, when we hold to our opinions we close ourselves off, and are not acting in the open way being presented here.

It's true that irritating things give us more to work with than pleasant gatherings in a meditative setting, but then Andy countered with an account of his week of doing just that—an eight day retreat at Dharma Rain Zen center. He found being constantly

restrained in a rather rigid environment to be a rich experience. Despite the rigidity, the teacher showed him that equanimity is not the same as being like a rock, it's more like being open and curious.

Our task is to stay open.

Deb agreed that such a program makes you more aware of everything you do. So much of what we do, we do only half consciously. She added that in Confucianism, you are to be a person of heart. If your heart was in the right place, the world around would be harmonized — then the family and then the kingdom would also become harmonized.

I added that like that, Yoga is a more flexible attitude where you don't just hold to a fixed way of being, there is room to counterbalance what is taking place around you. By being an aware counterpart, the overall context becomes harmonized. Just because you may be a *kutastha*, a rock-solid philosopher, doesn't mean you need to stay in one place. It's a paradox that the less you do the more movement there is, psychologically. By being still you move, you're flexible; and by being frantic, you become rigid.

The idea reminded Susan of the Chinese finger trap, which used to be ubiquitous in our childhoods. The harder you try to pull your finger out of the trap, the tighter it becomes. The only escape is to relax, stop pulling, and maybe make a very slight move *into* the trap.

We closed with a lovely poem by the 12th century Neo-Confucian philosopher Zhu Xi, from the Minford edition:

At the dawn window,
Forest shadows unfurl.
From the night pillow,
Mountain springs are heard.
In this seclusion,
There is no more searching.

It is wordless,
This Heart-and-Mind of the Tao.

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

Between Yin and Yang
There is a creative space:
Source of all being.

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Here's the section I read out of the Gita, chapter II, when Krishna begins addressing Arjuna's confusion and sadness. He is beginning the process of weaning Arjuna from his limited attitudes to a more overarching neutrality, the "not taking sides" of this verse of the Tao Te Ching. It even starts with the bellows, kind of:

11) Krishna said:

You are sorry for those for whom sorrow is unreasonable. You speak in terms of reason too. Veritable philosophers are not affected in regard to those whose breath has gone and those whose breath has not gone.

12) Further, never was I nonexistent, nor you, nor these chiefs of men; neither shall we, all of us, ever cease becoming hereafter.

13) As there is here in the body, for the embodied, childhood, youth, and old age, so also the passing on to another body in the same manner; those firm in mind are not thereby bewildered.

14) Momentary sense contacts, on the other hand, yielding cold-warmth, joy-pain, alternately coming and going, are transitory. Do you endure them, O Arjuna.

15) That human indeed of firm mind who is unaffected by these, equal-minded in joy as well as pain—he is destined for immortality.

16) What is unreal cannot have being, and non-being cannot be real; the conclusion in regard to both these has been known to philosophers.

17) Know That to be indestructible by which all this is pervaded. None can bring about the destruction of This that knows no decrease.

18) These bodies (however) of the everlasting indestructible and undefinable embodied One are spoken of as having an end. Therefore go on with the battle, O Arjuna.

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From Dipika:

I found a recording on Youtube of Stephen Mitchell maybe you haven't heard it yet ? and may like to

<https://youtu.be/UxEvRoAaYBM>