

12/1/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 58

This is one where subtle variations in translating make a remarkable difference in our appreciation. Mitchell once again skis off-piste to add additional insight.

It opens with a kind of libertarian premise: when government is dull and leaves its hands off, the people thrive, and when the government gets actively involved, the people are stymied. It made more sense in the ancient world than now, as we will see. Mitchell mitigates this, converting the dull side to mean governing with tolerance, and the active side to repressive (thus intolerant) measures. Along the same lines, Hamill's second premise is:

When government pries and intrudes,  
people are needy, contentious.

Next we have a very Taoist premise that happiness and misery, or fortune and calamity, are two sides of the same coin. On this people are confused, leading to their confounding directness with deception and evil with good, never realizing that the one turns into the other, naturally.

LeGuin's second stanza is unique:

The normal changes into the monstrous,  
the fortunate into the unfortunate,  
and our bewilderment  
goes on and on.

To avoid this dilemma, the sage is an edge that doesn't cut, a point that doesn't pierce, a line that doesn't rigid or straight, and a light that doesn't shine.

Feng words this last part to highlight its practical side in communication, as we explored later:

Therefore the wise are sharp but not cutting,  
Pointed but not piercing,  
Straightforward but not unrestrained,  
Brilliant but not blinding.

Hamill's last two lines, in the same vein, are that the sage:

is straightforward without being tactless,  
enlightened,  
  
yet not shining.

LeGuin's footnote includes:

In the last verse most translators say the Taoist is square but doesn't cut, shines but doesn't dazzle. Waley says that this misses the point. The point is that Taoists gain their ends *without the use of means*. That is indeed a light that does not shine—an idea that must be pondered and brooded over. A small dark light.

It appears most pundits take this and similar verses as advice on leadership, and think of it in terms of governance. As usual, we affirmed its value for interpersonal relations, since none of us are likely to ever be in prominent positions in government, and right now (as always?) government is utterly closed Taoist philosophy. QAnon is just fine.

We all agreed that studying the Tao Te Ching in 2020 was perfectly in tune with the time, when very little was possible. It has helped us to be calm in lockdown, using it for depth dives more

than outward displays. The public swimming pools are closed, but you can still sneak in at night and go skinny dipping by moonlight....

Deb opened the talk by appreciating the Taoist sages' ability to be fluid and receptive without forcing their framework or ideas in any way.

I felt that especially the last stanza is advice primarily for teachers: you can get your point across without causing upset, without separating it out as different or in opposition to another person's position. It makes for an all-inclusive, gentle, often humorous, partnership in the educational process.

One reason this seems so "foreign," is that most people are used to being severely disciplined in the educational process: judged, graded, and humiliated at every step. People's meanness comes from the defensiveness they have to adopt in such a culture. In a spiritual setting, where the learners have to transform themselves, they make progress when they *don't* judge themselves harshly, or add any tangential issues to present circumstances.

I grew up on the East Coast of the US, where the culture was all about being the smartest and putting others down. The most popular darlings were those who had the snappiest comments, the cleverest put-downs. Making people laugh moved you up the ladder, and it usually involved nastiness toward someone outside your group. As a kind of natural Taoist, I was perplexed by it, and hurt, yet it was the way the world was, so I played along. I believed for many years that the way to make people smarter and better was to insult their shortcomings. I did it mostly gently, but I was in that game. Who wasn't, in my world? That was, and still is, the world that produces many of our statesmen, politicians and so on.

Later I saw how the meanness of my culture rebounded with innumerable unforeseen negative consequences. Children with hurt feelings don't easily heal: many become bullies, or other types of

social saboteurs. The Sixties culture was a kind of painful birth out of that highly repressive state of the state, imperfect, sure, but inaugurating a generational, glacial process to become more aware.

What Lao Tzu offers here is exactly how you stimulate people to be their best, by living your vision without trying to inflict it on anyone else. You don't need an electric shock to get people going—the world is full of shocks already. You not only accomplish it by not being mean, you accomplish it by not meaning to do it. As LeGuin pointed out in her footnote, the Taoist means is no means.

So: your knife, your “edge,” is used to dissect the corpus delicti, and not to stab your fellow investigators. Your “point” is a spot on a map or blackboard, not a finger jabbed into someone's midsection. Your “line” isn't rigid or straight, it takes in the terrain and accommodates unanticipated obstacles and opportunities. And if all this switches on the light of your intelligence, you don't have to make a big deal about it and start a sales program. You just keep living with your light substantially veiled, letting slip out just enough to light your way and take note of what else is out there.

This brought me in mind of Nataraja Guru, who could be very cutting, which served well for certain types of people. Some of us do need a kick in the pants to wake up. Yet Nataraja was very funny, too. Just trying to keep up with his torrent of ideas was sometimes enough to jolt you loose. Nitya used the acid approach early on, but he weaned himself away from it fairly quickly. Few Americans were able to handle it; it's more a part of Indian culture to be strictly disciplined by a guru. I just listened to a cassette converted by Peter Long to an MP3 (I'll be sharing it eventually on his website) where Nitya's hilarity, his happy, nonjudgmental, belly laugh exchange with some Australian students brought back fond memories. It was so much easier to love him for his sweetness and non-forcing invitation to make ourselves like him.

Deb agreed that when you make a concerted effort, honest easily becomes dishonest, and so on. Instead of pushing a concept or an idea to the ultimate end, if it is to be brilliant but not blinding, it succeeds much better if we don't push it and only make sure it's out there in a public format.

Anita had read a number of sages in preparation for the class(!) most of them focusing on the Taoist take on leadership. She wasn't buying it, feeling very much convinced our society needs to have rules, like don't drive through a red light, wear a mask during pandemics, seatbelts save lives, etc. The lockdowns that people are so upset about are necessary for our well-being, and that has to be a matter of priority. Is a business going under more important than lives? She wanted to know how our present needs are addressed by this philosophy.

I agreed that at least the governing take on this verse is out of date, though it still matters on a more personal level. In 500 BCE, most people made their own living and had little or no relation with a governing body, unless they were a part of it. So, it's obsolete in that sense. We live interrelated lives where we depend on each other much more—the pandemic is proving this, in case you didn't get it before. Who do you know who manages all their needs on their own property? Nobody. We need each other to survive, and that organization is provided by governments of various sorts. Collectives. Ideally, they are the way we work together for the common good, common meaning everybody. The wellbeing of others is our wellbeing also. The so-called libertarian attitude might have been hinted at 2,500 years ago, as in the first stanza here, but it wasn't codified until it was long obsolete. Anything approaching it in modern times has been instantly perverted by those in power, and would make the pandemic look like a walk in the park if actually practiced.

Deb gave us a brief history lesson, how the Chinese always talked about the leader and the state as a shorthand for how you as

a person are: in essence, you are the state. In those days, “you” included your family and relations—you didn’t exist in pure isolation. How a person acted within the family was what the state would be, also. In Confucianism, the heart of the gentlemen was the essence of how the state was grounded, at least in theory.

The isolated individual towering over the mass of humanity is a weird fiction of a world where people are in fact separated from meaningful contact with other beings, so are free to imagine all sorts of disconnected things. It’s actually a tortured, abstract state of misery trying to imagine happiness. Yes, we are isolated in many ways, but we are also interdependent with the rest of the planet. We have to keep both aspects alive in us to live in harmony.

Anita thought of this in terms of parenting, how the principles that this verse is putting forth about not being authoritarian were challenging. It’s hard to raise a child with the right amount of guidance; certainly it’s impossible without any guidance. She could take it personally and put herself in the place of the state, too. Do you let children wither and motorists crash and die, or do you intervene for their benefit?

Anita’s point is well taken, but all those sages she read may not be upholding Lao Tzu’s ideals the way he would have. I see it as honing down excesses rather than doing away with all involvement in mutually beneficial learning programs. To me, the short version is being kind to others is better than bullying your way through life. We can teach a child by encouragement and example, or we can make it a punitive matter, threatening them with God’s disapproval and scaring them into behaving the way we want. In the long run that produces defective adults. We need to give kids room to learn on their own, with support, and it can be done. It includes making mistakes and finding out the consequences. Don’t get me started on the pressure tactics of adults toward kids, especially religious adults! It’s beyond

disgusting, it's child abuse in many cases.

Bill cited Mitchell's "improvised" second stanza: When the will to power is in charge—in other words, when someone wants to influence others—the higher the ideals, the lower the results. That means if you try to create happiness with force of will, it's not likely to be successful.

Kris felt Mitchell's follow up spoke to this also: "the Master is content to serve as an example." As a child and even as a parent you look at what other people do and you say that's how I want to do it. Really, teachers can show you an effective way to live and open your eyes, without forcing anything. If you love learning, you don't have to impose it on kids, they'll pick up on it and go with you.

Deb agreed: you don't have to teach it, it manifests on its own.

I added that since you're already the Tao, there's no need to strive to be the best. Central to unitive thinking is that the ordinary person is spectacular: at once the best possible and utterly mediocre. We don't have to treat these two premises as mutually exclusive.

Anita talked about capitalism, the "American way," pull yourself up by your boot straps, and all that. Underlying that capitalistic approach is for everyone to compete to beat everyone else out. It's carried over into sports, even. Competing isn't a bad thing, it's just taken to such extremes.

Yes, we live in a winner take all society, and so people do nefarious things to be best. I've read some incisive articles lately about the devastating effects of the meritocracy, which boils down into divisive, ruthless capitalism. It was devised as a means to promote fairness, but, as Lao Tzu keeps saying, when you try you fail. It's easy for a meritocracy to slide into nepotism, and there's always bias and limited awareness in play. I'll clip a bit from *Path to the Guru* in Part II about this, from right when Krishna is

making the point: pitiful indeed are they who are benefit motivated.

Anita has also been thinking about how happiness rests on misery. It's the yin and yang of everything. She sees it as a big pendulum, swinging back and forth. After all, you wouldn't recognize happiness if you didn't have misery: it's *defined* by its opposite.

In Vedanta, happiness has both a dual quality and a unitive one as an aspect of the Absolute, ananda. In the dualistic world, happiness is the flip side of misery. Most people are aware of and seek the happiness that is a kind of breathing space from suffering. Unitive happiness is related to at one-ment with the Absolute or the Tao. It's peaceful and neutral. Only neutrality encompasses true happiness. What we're all after is true, unitive happiness. The other stuff comes and goes. Relative happiness can fail at any time.

Deb told us about how Confucianism was the original meritocracy, and sang us a verse from The Band's song Shoot Out in Chinatown:

Confucius had once stated  
All across the land  
Below the surface, crime and love  
They go hand and hand

Even in the original meritocracy, the ideal was never matched with the actual, it was undermined at every level. Corruption was rampant.

The River Master, in Minford, explicates the boring, dull side of governance very nicely, in his version of the verse:

The Taoist Ruler teaches his subjects to be Generous. This Teaching may seem Dull, it may seem to lack Light.



But the folk  
Are Happy,  
They prosper,  
They live in friendship.

But when the Ruler is alert and busy, then the folk:

Speak with their Mouths,  
Not from their Hearts.  
Words reach no further  
Than their ears,  
Deeper Trust and Understanding  
Are lost.  
The Taoist is straight,  
But bends  
To Follow others,  
Without displaying Self.  
The Taoist glows,  
Does not shine.

We talked politics for a while, and then Jan wanted to bring us back to the essence of the verse. She talked about how we can sense when we're truly accepted by someone, and the opposite is also true, if they are harboring judgments about us, we can pick up on that. That means we should go to the peaceful state in ourself, and that is our best contribution to everyone's wellbeing. We get bound up by clinging too tightly to what is right, and it messes things up. We're being asked to go to a deeper place where there isn't right or wrong.

Magister Liu, in the Minford, is in agreement:

The Greater Right of No-Right, of No-Judgement, Prevails over the Ordinary Right of Judgment. It may seem Dull, whereas Ordinary Right appears sharp and alert.

Non-Action,  
Non-Meddling,  
No Heart-and-Mind,  
Clarity and Calm,  
Bring All-under-Heaven  
To the Greater Right.

There is no narrow Judgment of Right in the Taoist Ruler's Heart-and-Mind. The folk are Transformed Of-Themselves by the Ruler's Breath-Energy, they are Happy and Contented. But when the Ruler is busy Meddling, then a narrow sense of Right is entrenched in the Heart-and-Mind, and the Cycle of Fortune and Calamity commences.

The Taoist  
Glow  
With a Contained Light,  
With the Dark Light  
Of Spirit.  
This is  
The Greater Right  
Stemming from a Root  
Deep in the Tao.

We closed with Perfect Joy from Merton/Chiang Tzu, linked in Part II, and Bo Juyi's description of his calmness and release from reading Chuang Tzu, in the Minford:

*Far from home,*

*Parted from kin,  
Banished to a strange place,  
I wonder that my heart feels  
So little anguish  
So little pain.  
Reading Master Zhuang,  
I have discovered  
My True Home,  
In Nothing-Land.*

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

58

A Taoist master  
Will be content to live as  
an example. He

shapes without cutting,  
and points out without piercing:  
a bright light of truth.

\* \* \*

Deb recalled a favorite poem, "Ask Me" by William Stafford, as being in tune with the verse, and read it out to us:

Some time when the river is ice ask me  
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether  
what I have done is my life. Others  
have come in their slow way into  
my thought, and some have tried to help

or to hurt: ask me what difference  
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.  
You and I can turn and look  
at the silent river and wait. We know  
the current is there, hidden; and there  
are comings and goings from miles away  
that hold the stillness exactly before us.  
What the river says, that is what I say.

\* \* \*

Our Merton/Chuang Tzu story was *Perfect Joy*, p. 99-102, at  
<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>.

Deeply in resonance with verse 58, here's an excerpt:

I cannot tell if what the world considers 'happiness' is  
happiness or not. All I know is that when I consider the way they  
go about attaining it, I see them carried away headlong, grim and  
obsessed, in the general onrush of the human herd, unable to stop  
themselves or to change their direction. All the while they claim to  
be just on the point of attaining happiness.

For my part, I cannot accept their standards, whether of  
happiness or unhappiness. I ask myself if after all their concept of  
happiness has any meaning whatever.

My opinion is that you never find happiness until you stop  
looking for it. My greatest happiness consists precisely in doing  
nothing whatever that is calculated to obtain happiness: and this, in  
the minds of most people, is the worst possible course.

I will hold to the saying that: "Perfect joy is to be without  
joy. Perfect praise is to be without praise."

\* \* \*

In PTG, under the Gita's II.48:

A ready example in modern life of how people are led astray by a desire for attainment is the craze for sports records or becoming an Olympic champion. Motivation is drawn from the desire to accomplish some kind of supreme achievement in physical ability. Lured by such a goal, millions of athletes strive mightily, eyes on the prize, pushing themselves to the limit, often causing themselves serious injuries, and even cheating by taking performance enhancing drugs. It's all about being number one.

Out of those hopeful millions, a very few reach the pinnacle of success, where they remain for a relatively short time. In a system like that there are a handful of winners and armloads of losers. Wouldn't it be better all around if everyone did what they did simply for the enjoyment of it? It's less spectacular, sure, but who needs a spectacle when you're having fun? The Gita's philosophy has a parallel in the adage "It's not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game."

There is no need to dismantle the business of professional sports or ban the Olympics. This is an individual decision and can be implemented at any time. Just stop striving to be a winner and start concentrating on your present performance, seeking to discover who you are. You may well improve faster with such an outlook, and you surely will enjoy yourself more, no matter what you do. By doing this you will have disaffiliated yourself from the context of suffering, which is the defining achievement of yoga given in VI, 23. You are in the midst of the same milieu, possibly performing the same actions, but you have turned your focus inward to your true nature instead of outward in competition with the rest of the world.

Everyone wants to be recognized and appreciated, and supposes they have to do something awe-inspiring to be noticed. They are welcome to try whatever they like, but the Gita's advice is to discover our essence as the Absolute, which brings us an abiding satisfaction that is not dependent on either other people's opinions or our rating in respect to them.

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A sampler of Pine's sages:

Wang Pi says: "Those who are good at governing use neither laws nor measures. Thus, the people find nothing to attack."

Wang P'ang says: "All creatures share the same breath. But the movement of this breath comes and goes. It ends only to begin again. Hence, happiness and misery alternate like the seasons. But only sages realize this. Hence, in everything they do, they aim for the middle and avoid the extremes, unlike the government that insists on directness and goodness and forbids deception and evil, unlike the government that wants the world to be happy and yet remains unaware that happiness alternates with misery."

Lu Nung-Shih says: "Those who cannot reach the state where they aren't direct, who remain in the realm of good and evil, suffer happiness and misery as if they were on a wheel that carries them further astray."

Te-Ch'ing says: "The world withers, and the Tao fades. People are not the way they once were. They don't know directness from deception or good from evil. Even sages cannot instruct them. Hence, to transform them, sages enter their world of confusion."

They join the dust of others and soften their own light. And they leave no trace.”