

12/17/19

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 6

The Hamill translation is quite suitable:

The Valley Spirit never dies,  
and is called the Mysterious Female.

The gateway to the Mysterious Female  
we call the root of creation.

On and on its energy flows,  
inexhaustibly.

We studied this short verse by itself because it exalts the feminine aspect of the universe, and we wanted to give it its due. After all, without creation none of us would be here to admire existence and share our good feelings about being alive. And a good case can be made that much of our malaise is due to a excision of femininity in our mentality and behavior.

The Valley Spirit *is* the mystical feminine. Deb spoke of it as a potent symbol, from which the ten thousand things continually arise. It is always giving birth, an open and limitless potency.

I noted that the modern conceit is to imagine the ancients having a static view of existence, believing in an unchanging world of earth, sun, moon and stars. Yet the inexhaustible energy of Taoism, and the tumultuous prakriti of Indian thought, prove their awareness of a dynamic universe, and moreover one that emerges from a point source, or a gate, just like the singularity of the physics of the big bang. Such a view supports creativity, by invoking an ever-expanding universe.

Each human psyche is like an inverted pyramid, beginning from a single cell or even nothingness, and expanding upwards in

all directions. Think of the psyche as a conical pyramid, without any edges.

All existence bursts out of a gate of sorts, as it converts from virtual to actual. It would be incredibly clumsy if things emerged fully formed, so they begin as small as possible.

Most translations mention the Valley Spirit's utility, which several of us, Jan especially, took umbrage to. Hamill emphasizes its eternal availability, which is lovely, leaving the usability as simply an implication. Yet we do make use of what is created, and this is an aspect of what Lao Tzu intends at this stage of the development of his thesis. (Arthur Waley suggests this verse may be one of the very old "general stock" Lao Tzu used.)

Red Pine quotes Te-Ch'eng as agreeing with Jan: "Purposeful action leads to exhaustion. The Tao is empty and acts without purpose. Hence, it can't be exhausted." There's a definite sense that focusing on a thing's usefulness demeans it, changes it from a principle to a clearly-defined actuality. We are aiming in the opposite direction.

Deb and Jan concluded that citing the flow of energy is better than the idea of use, which is strictly limited and terminal. Energy flow is eternal. Even atoms are eternal—they don't run down. Somehow we take that for granted, but it's a tremendous miracle. Even when the form they are residing in expires, atoms simply spin off to another agglomeration. As far as we can tell, they've been going as they are since the universe sprang into existence, and they show no inclination to stop spinning, producing essentially infinite power. They are inexhaustible. The ancients knew this by observation, without the aid of microscopes.

Jan well appreciated the dynamism, noting how fixed concepts and attitudes inhibit change. The Tao allows the necessary room for new things to come in. That's so true: the Tao teaches us to keep growing by remaining flexible. We aren't to be the imposing yet sterile mountains but the valleys, where things are

moving, growing, flowing. Jan has proved this to herself, realizing she has had to give up some cherished notions in order to keep up with the changes in her life. We resist, and then we often find the new suit fits better than the old one.

Deb waxed rhapsodic over the mystery and possibility of it, and how accepting that idea allows her to sit still in good faith when she gets stuck over something. In a way, knowing you don't know is much more transformative than pretending you do.

In Nitya's class recounted in *Meditations on the Way*, he offers a kind of ode to femininity. Being of the male gender he is automatically attracted to females. He sublimates this powerful tendency "by blunting it, generalizing it, turning feelings of love into feelings of reverence," and altering the need for one particular woman "into an appreciation for the universal dynamic principle of nourishment and protection."

In the same book, Steve W. notes that the mysterious female "is elusive and desirable and thereby represents the longing one feels to establish oneself harmoniously in the neutrality of the 'center' indicated here." Peter O said "the valley, of all places, is lush and fertile, Mother Nature in her most nurturing attitude. The spirit of the valley is that it places itself below the hills and mountains and makes itself hollow. It is because it is lowly and empty that the waters from all the neighboring hills drain into it, and it remains protected from strong winds and storms." He connects this with the womb and sexual reproduction, and adds that sages take this aspect of the Tao as a model, and by emptying themselves and placing themselves below others, they become nourishing, fertile beings for others, while remaining united with their own transcendental beingness. Nicely put!

Moni wondered about control freaks, who seem to be everywhere and insist on running the show. Of course, "control freak" is already a demeaning term, created by the Sixties drug culture. When you were high and resting on a cloud, busybodies

definitely brought you down. Fellini's opening scene of  $8 \frac{1}{2}$  depicts it perfectly: he's soaring through the air like a kite, and suddenly is yanked to earth by Catholic priests holding a rope he's attached to. The next scene he's stuck in traffic, the only car going to wrong way, his '57 Chevy smoking in fury. Control freaks are nothing new, only the term is.

The Tao philosophy is anti-control freak, of course, but modern attitudes are very much pro-control freak. No one believes that by listening to your inner voice, wonderful things will happen in the horizontal sphere. It should be obvious to anyone that, thanks to all the control, our cultures are wildly out of control. A Taoist would suggest that trying ever harder to maintain control is exactly the wrong thing to do, just making things worse. Yet no one will ever get elected on that platform. We can only employ it on a personal level, more's the pity.

Moni talked about trying to get her dual citizenship, and all the blocks that she encountered from the control freak world. Finally she was at an impasse, needing information she could not possibly get. After bouncing from one inflexible demand after another, someone told her to just enter a series of zeros in the spot, which bypassed the computer intelligence and got her her document. It was a kind of anti-control that finally worked for her.

I recounted how children who are punished become control freaks in the hope that by managing their environment they can stop the pain, and it sometimes even works in the short term. If the pain is severe enough and there is some success, it is a powerful lesson that will stay with them forever. After that, anything below the surface represents a threat to them, whereas spiritual people trust and eagerly dive into mysteries. There is a major divide in human beings here. Lao Tzu is showing why trying to maintain control is a failed strategy, and our suffering earth is proof he's correct. Instead of listening at the gate, we are striving to bolt it shut forever.

The Gita likewise insists that having expectations and fixed intentions is mentally constipating. The universe isn't a linear proposition, and there is far more involved than is dreamt of in our meager philosophy. I gave the familiar but apt story of Nitya's first visit to America. He thought he was responding to an invitation from friends in Australia, but he actually wrote back to a man in Portland, "Sure, I'll teach a class there, just send me a ticket." When a ticket to the US arrived, a control freak would have sent it back as a mistake, and just gone where he expected to go, but Nitya treated it as an opportunity, and all of us reading this and sitting in our classes are beneficiaries. Vast beneficiaries, beyond all accounting. It shaped so many lives!

To set off the closing meditation, I read from Minford, first quoting Magister Liu: "To Know the Spirit of the Valley, seek guidance from a True Teacher. Without such a Teacher, all is vain speculation, and the Spirit remains elusive." We hope for such guidance also from the words of wisdom we find in books.

And finally, Li Bo (701-762), the Drunken Immortal. In China, being drunk can be a spiritual state, especially one conducive of poesy. Minford feels his famous poem, *The Mountain and I*, evokes something of the Valley Spirit:

*The birds have flown away,  
A cloud floats idly by.  
We never tire of looking at each other,  
The mountain and I.*

## Part II

Beverley's haiku also mentions utility, but in a less laborious way. Hers is a really happy solution:

The Great Earth mother,

Nourishes all life on earth  
Free for all to use.

\* \* \*

Deb sent one of her poems today she feels relates to the verse:

Some People Know How

She strokes the child's cheek and the air brightens,  
now alive with sounds, a new morning.  
Bowing to the beginning light, she closes her eyes,  
her heart opening, breaking almost, and walking forward she bows.

Mist around the mountain and trees rise through the gray.  
All day he is alone. In the evening clouds disperse and stars river  
across the dark. Evening settles on the earth and he bows  
low to the silence, eyes and hands open.

Some people know how to bow, not embarrassed, not trying to  
rush  
but a slow unfurling of the body, head down and the neck,  
shoulders,  
torso all bending forward, offering themselves. Respect mingled  
with pride, saying, I place myself here, you are honored.

\* \* \*

Poems are a theme today, and this one is too perfect:

**O sweet spontaneous**

By E. E. Cummings

O sweet spontaneous  
earth how often have  
the  
doting

fingers of  
prurient philosophers pinched  
and  
poked

thee  
,has the naughty thumb  
of science prodded  
thy

beauty how  
often have religions taken  
thee upon their scraggy knees  
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive  
gods

(but  
true

to the incomparable  
couch of death thy  
rhythmic  
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring)

\* \* \*

The Gita describes four states in relation to the Absolute, or the Tao. It uses Krishna, who is speaking, as the “Me”: “Become one in mind with Me; be devoted to Me; sacrifice to Me; bow down to Me.” Chapter XVIII has a verse for each stage, and the second one strikes me as addressing the paradox of our Tao Te Ching study:

55) Through devotion he comes to know Me, how far comprehensible I am and who, in accord with first principles; then, having known Me philosophically, he immediately enters into Me.

One small step removed from total absorption is indicated in the invitation to “be devoted to Me.” One with unitive devotion immediately enters into the Absolute, because the separation is so slight. Devotion is equated with philosophical knowledge, in other words comprehending the Absolute as far as is possible. One must be at least some degree removed in order to apprehend what one is contemplating. Thus this level of minimal separation is perhaps the most intriguing to outside observers and fellow seekers.

The Absolute is always spoken of as being incomprehensible, but we naturally proceed on the basis of what we comprehend. Krishna assures us that the devoted, attentive supplicant will be able to sort out the important gap between what is grasped and what is ungraspable. Confusion here has led many to disaster, when the analogue is mistaken for the reality. The truly devoted and humble disciple realizes that any conception of the Absolute falls subtly short of being the Absolute, and so refrains from total



abandonment to a false image prior to complete absorption. And while they may conceptualize it as their favorite image, they acknowledge that others can and will have different images and be just as devout as they are.