

12/8/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 64

The translations of this classic verse are similar in the middle, but have subtle and provocative variations at the end and beginning. Therefore we should examine the middle first:

A huge tree grows from a tiny sprout.

A immense tower begins with a basketful of dirt.

And the famous line, which in hippie days graced virtually every refrigerator and every living room wall: A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. All our translations say the journey begins under your feet, which is in accord with the spirit here, where you prepare for action before you begin. The first step, then, is already a later stage of development.

We reminisced a bit about this most famous line in all of scripture. Andy was pretty sure President Kennedy quoted it: Andy surmised he must have been the last US President to quote Lao Tzu. I noted that we can always start journeys but we're also already on one, the big one. And many, many small ones. The gist may well be that we need to plan our route before we head out, though the line is normally taken to be an encouragement to get going: you'll never arrive if you don't set off.

Sung Ch'ang Hsing, in *Pine*, reduces this section to its essence: "From a sprout, the small becomes great. From a basket of earth, the low becomes high. From here, the near becomes far." It's most Taoist to maintain that making any plan moves you out of the here and now into degrading goal orientation.

The verse continues:

Those who act will fail, defeat their own purpose.

Those who seize or grasp will lose.

So the sage does not act and does not fail,

Does not grasp so does not lose.

Failure often comes on the verge of success, so take much care all the way through. Mitchell: Forcing a project to completion, / you ruin what was almost ripe.

Wang P'ang says: "Everything has its course. When the time is right, it arrives. But people are blind to this truth, and work to speed things up. They try to help Heaven and end up ruining things just as they near completion." The River Master calls it meddling.

Therefore the sages seek freedom from desire
Do not value precious things, those difficult to attain,
Learn without learning, without holding on to ideas, without being learned,
Recovers what people have left behind, bring people back to what they have lost, attend to what others overlook,

The various beginnings can be fairly easily grouped:
Stillness, peace, is easy to maintain. Mitchell's first line is magnificent: What is rooted is easy to nourish.
By planning, trouble is easy to prevent before the beginning.
(All agree in lines three and four that brittle things break easily and small things scatter easily.)
Deal with problems or solve them before they happen.
Put everything in order before chaos or confusion emerge. Pine:
Govern before anyone rebels.

Another Pine sage weighs in here. Lu Hui-Ch'ing says: "We should act before anything exists, while things are peaceful and latent. We should govern before anyone rebels, while they are weak and few. But to act before anything exists means to act without acting. To govern before anyone rebels is to govern without governing."

The ends are where we get the most nuance, despite everyone agreeing on holding back from action:

Stenudd: The sage wants all things to follow their own nature, but dares not act.

Feng: Sages help the ten-thousand things find their own nature, yet they refrain from action.

Hamill: To help all the world's beings / find their own true nature, / the sage does not act.

LeGuin: The wise go along with things as they are, / but don't presume to act.

Mitchell: The Master simply reminds people / of who they have always been. / He cares about nothing but the Tao. / Thus he can care for all things.

Pine: To help all things remain natural/ they dare not act.

Minford: Sages Refrain from Action, / Nourish the Myriad Things / In their Suchness, / The So-of-Itself.

The River Master: The Taoist Returns / To the Root, / Helps all beings / To be Natural and Free.

I pointed out even before the opening meditation that there is a glaring paradox here: most of the verse gives managerial advice, and yet it concludes with a stark proscription about acting. How do you manage without doing anything? It's something to ponder, and we did.

Before Deb could even get us going, Kris expressed her frustration that there is so much emphasis on not doing. As a practically-minded, nurturing person, she doesn't get it. I assured her that "not getting it" is part of the program: Lao Tzu is working to confound our understanding to make room for new possibilities. Plus, there is yoga here: the dynamic interplay of opposites. When the opposites are harmoniously engaged, they make up the whole sphere of possibilities. For this reason it's a good yoga exercise to

include shades of meaning, as with the various translations we're using.

In this teaching we are looking for doing without doing, for inaction in action, and vice versa. It's good to be somewhat frustrated, just not too frustrated, because it impels us to think harder and figure out how to force the opposites to coexist. After some mental pressure, they often get along just fine.

Deb agreed that the verse embodies opposition and conflict. She reminded us of LeGuin's footnote from last week's verse, 58:

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.

We normally have all these ends and machinations in mind, a cause-and-effect narrative. By contrast, a Taoist is merely part of the unfolding of the universe. It's a perennial question: how do we attain ends without any means?

The Gita is perfectly clear that it's impossible to live without action. In the third chapter, Krishna says:

4) By refraining from initiating activities a person does not come to have the attainment of transcending action, nor can one by renunciation alone come to perfection.

5) Not even for a single instant can one ever remain engaged in no action at all. By virtue of modalities born from nature, all are made to engage in action helplessly.

I suspect what the Tao Te Ching is referring to is the managerial or manipulative side of how we act. Non-action means we should act without personal prejudice or coloration. The more minimal your prejudicial involvement the more it is in accord with the Tao. The

problems arise with our intentions, which are likely biased toward selfishness, and we restrain ourselves by believing that we don't need to act at all. Then when action happens, it's as light as can be. As light as a feather.

To Deb, this is about how to discern between acting and not acting, while doing both at the same time. Mainly, you're not acting to govern the world, you're learning how to govern yourself — and not by manipulation, either.

Anita was put in mind of Schrodinger's cat, where the course of an event is not determined until we factor in our own observation of it. As the Tao was first coming into being none of this was determined, but the thoughts attached to it cause it to have a form and an effect. Even when we are not physically acting, we are acting with our thoughts and perceptions.

Bill liked this train of thought, saying, if you are in tune with the Tao all your actions flow naturally. For the sage, the thought "What can I gain from this?" is gone from the equation.

We read out some more of Pine's sages, including Wu Ch'eng, who says: "The sage seeks without seeking and studies without studying. For the truth of all things lies not in acting but in doing what is natural. By not acting, the sage shares in the naturalness of all things."

There is a confidence in nature in this philosophy, and it goes against the grain of the modern attitude where we humans are so much smarter than nature, we'll do it our way, thank you very much. As has been observed billions of times since the Tao Te Ching was written down, humans tend to think in a kind of shorthand, thereby leaving out huge chunks of the picture, which are the things that sabotage the result, often devastatingly. Nature is kind and seamless enough to include everything every time out, but humans are slow to catch on. Sadly, we do that with ourselves too: we make up a personal story that sounds good but leaves out a lot of critical elements. On that note, Bill quoted the Mitchell line

“The Master simply reminds people of who they have always been.” Allowing nature back in fills in all those blank spots in our adult psyche.

Ho-Shang Kung, quoted in Pine, gets it: “Others seek the ornamental. Sages seek the simple. Others seek form. Sages seek Virtue. Others study facts and skills. Sages study what is natural. Others learn how to govern the world. Sages learn how to govern themselves and how to uphold the truth of the Way.”

Andy is fresh off a week-long Zen retreat. One of its main themes was the first thing that you have to look at is that all things are ephemeral. If they are ephemeral, how could the sense of your self ever arise?

Andy went on: by simply *being* we are acting through all things, and that is a way of not doing. A lot of my retreat was just sitting. You are delving deeply into these kinds of issues, yet it’s not a philosophical examination, it’s a bodily connection. When you sit in a chair, most of the time you are not much there, you are elsewhere in your mind. The focus of sitting meditation is on really sitting in a chair and being where you are. Instead of being lost, you are allowing your awareness to encompass all irrelevancies.

Bill reprised his favorite quote from Suzuki-Roshi: you don’t sit to attain anything, you sit because it’s your true nature. I added that we do many things because they’re our true nature: we stand, work, eat, play—all of these are our true nature. The point is to inhabit our true nature, which is about awareness. Sitting being as close to nothing as you can do, everything is extraneous, and therefore highly noticeable. (Probably Lao Tzu should have written: The journey of a thousand leagues begins under your butt.) Our busier true natures tend to obscure the welter of extraneous thoughts we engage in, but there is no real reason why you can’t maintain your awareness in whatever you’re doing. Commenting on this verse, Needleman tells us:

The wise are distinguished not only by what they do but by the attention they bring to life. Out of this art of living there can emerge great practical wisdom. We are being told, in short, that our lives are a reflection of the quality of our attention.

The River Master, in Minford, was a great source of inspiration for the class, and as Jan said, he gets at the paradox that Kris is talking about. His elucidations include:

When there is Peace, while the seeds of Misfortune have not yet sprouted, and the fruits of Desire have not yet ripened and become tangible, while Misfortune is still weak and easily broken, while it is still fine and easily dispersed, then it is not hard to practice Self-Cultivation and to Rule a Nation. This is the relation of Being to Non-Being.

Meddling spoils things, it goes against Nature, against the grain.

The Multitude value Brilliance and Outward Show, but the Taoist values Buried Light, Hidden Splendor, Reality, and Simplicity. The Multitude study False Wisdom and Hypocrisy, the Taoist studies No-Study, Suchness, the So-of-Itself. The Multitude study how to Rule the World, the Taoist studies Self-Cultivation, how to Rule Self, how to preserve the True Wisdom of the Tao.

Others forsake
The Root
For the Branch,
Forsake the Fruit
For the Flower.
The Taoist Returns

To the Root,
Helps all beings
To be Natural and Free.

Jan loved the emphasis on self-cultivation, and how it says a lot about not restraining as well as not acting. We don't *do* with intent, nor do we *hold back* with intent. We just live in the state of balance.

Anita started us pondering the exhortation to pay as much attention to the ending as the beginning. Stenudd thought it alluded to birth and death, how because so many of us are afraid of death, we start out our lives full of energy and then it tapers off. Here's a bit of what he says, in addition to the life and death part (the link is in Part II):

The second half of this chapter deals with the danger of action. What is done is hard to undo, so it has to be considered very seriously beforehand.

Lao Tzu actually claims that most actions fail, if not all of them. Only if there is just as much care about the end as the beginning, there is a chance of success. That really means the same care all through.

That might seem self-evident, but it's easily neglected. We tend to start our projects with resolute energy and complete attention, but soon our concentration wavers and our efforts decrease. It's as if we tire quickly. Or we might have the illusion that things we start reach their completion automatically, as if nothing can go wrong along the way. It may be a combination of both.

Deb felt it was interesting how, in a verse about not acting, it also brings in that you need your clear attention persisting throughout. As Andy was saying, you have to be fully present

when you are sitting. We want to be conscious through our whole life, maintaining persistent awareness throughout.

I thought this was a place where most of the translations miss the mark, with their focus on staying involved. Managing our awareness. It isn't that simple; we are enthusiastic at the beginning of our lives or a project because we are infused with the Tao. An inner light turns us on. Especially if it's a lengthy project, at some point we start to manipulate and manage the process instead of flowing with the Tao. We start to worry about how it's going, and we start to redirect it according to our biased, educated interests. It takes that impeccable impetus we started with, and deadens, twists and perverts it. I read this verse as trying to keep that freshness alive throughout, advocating surrender to the Tao over our wiser-than-thou attitude.

Of course, that's very true of our whole life, too. We are born with little or no resistance to the Tao. The freshness of childhood comes from living in tune with it. But we learn how to take over control of our innate compass needle and resist when it points away from where we expect it to. Later in life we have often excluded the Tao from any participation in our trajectory. In that sense our life really does fail at the end. Fear of death is a factor, but the real killer is the soul-deadening beliefs we have wrapped ourselves in. We get more and more averse to risking our comfortable habits, hoping that death itself will release us from them. It will, but we won't be around to enjoy to any subsequent feelings of liberation.... We are meant to have the sense of a fresh new project every minute, right up to the closing bell.

Bill reminded us of Mitchell's line: "Forcing a project to completion, / you ruin what was almost ripe."

Nancy really related to the idea of what happens when you are involved in something that goes on for an extended period of time. You start out fresh, and then it becomes more labored. But if you leave it until the next day, you start fresh again. You can feel

that process within you.

Neuroscience has observed that too. College students who keep pushing their studies to exhaustion don't retain anything they've covered, after a point. They should stop studying and take a nap, during which time the brain consolidates the input and makes room for more. It's just as Lao Tzu, our Master master of ceremonies, has put it: we must keep returning to the root. Give the trunk, branches, leaves, fruits and flowers a rest.

Magister Liu's lovely version of the verse led us into our closing meditation:

If one abides in Non-Action, in Peace and Calm, if one never Grips, then problems that have as yet given no Sign are easy to deal with. But once Action and Gripping commence, even if a matter is near to Completion, it may still Fail. So the Taoist eschews Action that goes beyond what is Natural, beyond Suchness, the So-of-Itself.

True Knowledge
Of the Inner Springs
Of All-under-Heaven
Is to be found
In the interstices between
Being
And Non-Being.
In those dark
Inchoate moments,
When Good and Evil
Are still indistinct,
When things
Have given no Sign
And are still
Easy to manipulate.

One who pays no heed
To Beginnings
Will surely Fail,
One who proceeds
Without examining
The Springs
Will Lose.
The Taoist
Contemplates
The Inner Marvel,
The Inner Springs
Before they have come
Into Being,
Studies No-Study,
Nourishes
The Suchness-of-Themselves
Of the Myriad Things.

The Taoist Observes the Outer Radiance as the Springs become visible. The Taoist's Heart-and-Mind is Transformed, and all the Myriad Things are transformed, without Artifice or Effort.

They Return
To the So-of-Itself,
To Nature,
To Suchness.
The Seeker of the Tao
Is relaxed,
Motionless,
Silent,
Resonant,
Connected to All-under-Heaven,
Free from the stirrings

Of the Human Heart-and-Mind.

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

I was charmed to come across this famous saying in verse 64.

‘A thousand mile journey starts at your feet’.

I tried it as a haiku but it's better as it is, together with the tiny shoot and a mud brick which both develop, unbelievably, into something huge and wonderful - given time. It's an interesting contrast between the tall tree and the tall tower, isn't it?

64

All action in life
has its own in-built rhythm
and natural timing.

Understanding and
co-operating with this
is the Taoist way.

* * *

I forgot to read the Merton/Chuang Tzu the perfectly suited story, *In My End Is My Beginning*, p. 75 at

<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>.

* * *

Stefan Stenudd's translation and commentary:

<https://www.taoistic.com/taoteching-laotzu/taoteching-64.htm>

