

1/7/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 7

For this verse, the Liu translation used by Nitya's class for *Meditations on the Way*, is apt:

Heaven and earth are enduring. The reason heaven and earth can be enduring is that they do not give themselves life. Hence they are able to be long-lived.

Therefore the sage puts his person last and it comes first.  
Treats it as extraneous to himself and it is preserved.

Is it not because he is without thought of self that he is able to accomplish his private ends?

The class examined the nuances of the seven translations in detail. I read out the last line from Nitya's book even before we read the verse, as it's so perfectly him, and perfectly makes a subtle point:

Guru concluded today's meditation by registering his objection to the use of the word 'therefore' at the beginning of the second stanza. He said that this gives the impression that the sage is motivated to attain long life, as that attained by heaven and earth. "The behavior of a sage and the blessings of heaven and earth are not to be conceived in contractual terms. A better word than 'therefore' would be 'similarly'. Wisdom is not to be held out as an enticement, but accepted simply for the truth it embodies. Wisdom is its own reward."

Red Pine also uses 'therefore', and LeGuin uses 'so', which likewise has the self-motivated aspect that Nitya downplays. The

others manage to maintain a neutral attitude regarding the sages' activities.

Before class formally began, we talked about the need for making the teachings more practically applicable. It's what many of us love about Nitya's lessons. In the Tao Te Ching practical advice is minimized or generalized to an extent of being very abstract. Several of us are not satisfied to simply admire the concept of Tao, but like to relate it to our everyday activities. That kind of focus can deflect us from due reverence for the purity of the Absolute as presented by Lao Tzu.

Deb feels that the Tao Te Ching classes haven't been as profound and involving as the ones based on Nitya's teachings, and invited everyone's ideas about a new trajectory. We all do enjoy the Tao evenings, but several of us agreed we would like to get back to the Gurukula philosophy in fewer than the 81 sessions of a full Tao study.

Bill suggested we could combine several verses in one class, to not only get through it faster but to increase the level of discussion, and I said I had tried to, but each verse so far has such a distinctive flavor that it hadn't worked yet, anyway. It remains a possibility. We can crowdsource whether there are any pairs or triplets awaiting us. Let me know.

Karen wondered if there was a sequence to the verses, and there really isn't. Each stands pretty much on its own, presenting a facet of the diamond of the Tao. They were probably collected over time, maybe in the way a poet produces an oeuvre, and there are definitely citations of older material, which the scholars have noted. While there is a philosophical unity to the work, it is not like the Gita or Darsanamala, a single coherent narrative with beginning, middle and end. You can get the same level of instruction at any point

For example, this verse is a composite. Chi Ch'ien Chih notes that "Heaven is eternal and Earth is immortal" is an older

saying, and Lao Tzu is quoting it in order to explain its meaning. His contribution, presumably, is the part about the sages.

No definite conclusion was reached, but it's likely we will do a number more Tao classes and then revert to our forte. Deb mentioned *In the Stream of Consciousness*, which we've never taken on before. She and I are also in process of digitizing Arivu—editing and proofing it has already made the commentary more comprehensible. Eventually we'll have to get back to That Alone, naturally. I've posted our class history in Part II.

We all expressed our love of the study despite its limitations. (We could probably read nursery rhymes and feel just as blissful, in the atmosphere we so easily slip into together.) I expressed my appreciation for the rich human legacy of works like the Tao Te Ching, that have helped train humans to be open and caring. More than train, really, to *preserve* the innate loving and nurturing traits that helped our primate forebears to survive and thrive. This is perhaps the most wonderful, creative part of our species. When you look at the world in turmoil, it's not so obvious any more, but historically we enjoy a rich connection with all the wisdom traditions everywhere. It is more universally available than ever before.

Today the dominant religions are all about self-interest, but we can turn to the wise teachers of all history and feel we are in good company. Red Pine quotes Wang Pi: “Those who live for themselves fight with others. Those who don't live for themselves are the refuge of others.” Also, Ho-Shang Kung: “The reason Heaven and Earth alone are eternal and immortal is because they are content and give without expecting a reward, unlike Humankind who never stops chasing profit and fighting over possessions.”

Deb noticed the same tone here as Narayana Guru in his One-Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, verse 23:

For the sake of another, day and night performing action,  
having given up self-centered interests, the compassionate  
person acts;  
the self-centered man is wholly immersed in necessity,  
performing unsuccessful actions for himself alone.

In the *Meditations on the Way* class, Daya invoked the identical verse. Deb paraphrased it as “the person who is most selfish ends up losing everything: the more we grasp something, the more quickly we lose it.” She found it a good example of how this philosophy affects personal lives. It’s a reminder that at every moment we have a choice to be open or constrained.

This has always inspired Jan to work hard on herself, to keep in mind how you are unconsciously withdrawing from connections, and keep them alive. Of course, it’s the unconscious defenses that always trip us up, and in a sense making our unconscious proclivities into conscious choices through a lowering of defenses is the essence of spirituality. I mentioned one hint we can look for, to help us spot our unconscious blockages: if we get upset. Yes, some things should upset us, but very often it’s an unconscious prejudice or shortsightedness that sets us off. It’s worth a peek. Usually when something hurts our feelings, we’d rather turn the other cheek or walk away. Before doing that we might take a closer look at what the root cause might be.

Susan has found she is more aware these days of how her body feels when she’s holding tension. She gets pain in her gut. She also uses this to notice when she’s able to let go. She feels unwound in class, as an example. Physical feelings count as much as emotional ones, in learning how to be well.

Deb acknowledged the paradox that if we struggle to get at the things that bother us, we may unintentionally be keeping them bound up. To get over this difficulty we have to stay fluid and

open. She added that sometimes you can look back and see that some of the things that you held really tightly have loosened. When her children were little she was fiercely determined to do things a certain way. With time, and maybe more detachment she mused, you see how you can be really compelled and yet somehow the energy runs out, and you can actually let go.

Jan, who's at the time of life of redefining her relationships with her newly adult children, agreed, and boiled it down to heightened awareness of ourselves. In this our kids can serve as our guides, since they are pulling away harder and faster than we are capable of letting go.

Stephen Mitchell's version comes closest of the seven to giving practical advice, and we took it to heart. The Tao is infinite because it doesn't have any desires for itself, and because of this is present for all. 'Desire' is a favorite Buddhist concept, but we can substitute more psychological terms like self-reference, conditioning, or limitation. It is easy to see how the more we hold to our personal position, the less open we are to the full panoply of other possibilities. Humanity is once again desperately holding on to its preferred limitations, fearful of being swept away by changes and variety. Change is a natural fear, especially of the traumatized soul, so it takes effort to embrace to totality.

Mitchell puts two more classic paradoxes perfectly in his translation, speaking of the Master. The first is:

She is detached from all things;  
that is why she is one with them.

No wonder the mystery remains mysterious! Oneness cannot be grasped, attained or discovered, but those are the only ways we know to search. We are trained to go after goals. Unfortunately, those methods only take us to things, not to non-things like the Tao

or the Absolute. Detachment is a practical effort to restrain from being captured by the twining vines of actual events.

To me, this is also saying you're present for everyone because you're not judging. Judging gets in the way, because you don't yet know the truth of the other; you're comparing them with a template of similar outlines, and only a few are acceptable. Oneness calls us to embrace everything and everyone as an aspect of the Tao. That was the theory behind democracy, as a matter of fact, to try to embody a kind of universal value in every person, according each full respect. It shouldn't surprise anyone that it was flawed from the start, and likely always will be. It's satisfying and even necessary to make improvements as you go along, and we're quite blind to those that haven't yet occurred to us. Yet democracy's founders believed in theory that all humans were created equal. At the moment, as a species and as nations we're going the opposite direction, trying to make the most dire threats of superficial differences, and crush everyone who isn't just like us. Such programs look enticing to the ego, but they breed disaster after disaster. When will we ever learn? Three thousand years of education still hasn't sunk in.

Susan recently came across a fantastic line by Emily Dickinson: "Not knowing when the dawn will come I open every door." It's a paean to openness. We also don't know *where* the dawn will come—it could be anywhere. Sages proclaim that it is.

For some odd reason, Susan can't take notes while talking, but she was kind enough to fill in what she was thinking, later on:

I thought the quote related to the verse last night in that it's better to live with fewer expectations and certainties. It's better not to hang on to our perceived certainties and crutches. This is how I interpret the idea of not knowing when the dawn is coming. I like that it also has the meaning of not knowing when we will come to realization/understanding. I know I hold on to

many things in my life as certainties (family, food, shelter, my own survival). I also keep hoping that my study of various subjects and problems will lead to understanding. Emily's words, and the verse, are a reminder that you need to let go of all that expectation and grasping because it is unnecessary. Even counterproductive. In not knowing, we can and do open every door — we are ready for what may come, we are open.

Dickinson's quasi-physical version of openness reminded me of times at work or in "the marketplace" when I was with people I used to look down on, who were very different from me. I'm also used to being despised by those types. As I matured (don't laugh) I drew away from my teenage default setting of harsh judging and put downs, helped by Nitya, who was surely an advocate of open-minded listening, and I began to see some light seeping through doors that were once slammed shut. It didn't matter that the others' doors remained shut and they didn't want to get any light from me. I was the beneficiary of my change of heart. Openness, like wisdom, is its own reward. It's good for the psyche, which craves expansiveness.

Mitchell finishes Lao Tzu's practical instructions with:

Because she has let go of herself,  
she is perfectly fulfilled.

We hold fast to things because we imagine they will be fulfilling, but they are only fulfilling for a short time, and then we have to crank it up again. This is another key to abiding happiness—that we stop looking outward for fulfillment and find the true satisfaction of our being, within. Likewise, we don't have to defend anything we have truly let go of. We can be criticized and it is only a lesson, not an attack to be taken personally.

Deb recalled a recent theme Andy has talked about, that there is a moment before our thought, before our action, before we've defined it and made it ours. In a sense it's something we have to back into. By going forward we always get farther away from that emptiness. Not mentioned was that the roots of our thoughts and actions are very deep, so "undefining" is no trivial matter. This is where Nitya excels, in teaching us how to truly refute our conditioning, and showing us the falsity of many of our ideas. Simply stopping their enunciation as the last stage of expression jams up the system, and can be really unhealthy, like jamming on the brakes in heavy traffic. Meditation does supply tranquility, which is a good framework for deconstructive impulses, but it isn't the whole ball of wax. You have to really examine your motivations. This is where a guru is most helpful, both showing where to look and providing an extra push to change tack. There is a lovely example in *Meditations on the Way* that brought knowing laughter all around the room:

After the second stanza, Guru asked Peter, "How does a sage put his person last?"

Peter remarked that this stanza implies a miracle which he personally witnesses every day. He said that nobody identifies less with his own body than does Guru, and yet nobody has more people clamoring to pamper it with food, drink, clothes, hot water for baths, etc. Similarly nobody is more unconcerned about his social image or the praise and blame of others than is Guru, and nobody is held in higher esteem.

Guru interrupted and said, "I didn't ask you *who* is a sage, but *how* a sage puts his own person last."

Peter then suggested that through a vision of and identity with the reality of his greater beingness, which is eternal and infinite, the finite body and the ephemeral vagaries of public opinion are not that important to a sage.

How often we can be satisfied by something we say that is actually irrelevant or even diversionary! We are very fortunate if a guru, most likely in the guise of a trusted friend, can help us turn the arrow of our interest in a better direction.

Deb invited Nancy Y to share her thoughts on this idea of fulfillment through letting go of our self. Nancy has been attending on a dear friend's passing, and Deb remembered Nancy telling her when you are there for that person, not thinking of what you yourself want, you become part of something alive and extensive. Nancy replied, in the face of something so inescapably real as death, superficial things don't even enter the room. Even though it's sad, something that true for all of us has a great peace and a great beauty exactly because it is so true. The 'I' doesn't even enter — none of the little 'I's make an appearance.

This brought me in mind of how Nitya was always trying to get us to see how miraculous everything is: the more we appreciate the world around us, the less we need to call attention to our tiny part in it. So often, in spirituality, we become fixated on our self, on doing this or that work. He believed if we lifted our eyes to the whole picture, that alone could lift us out of the doldrums. If we don't try, then it remains for the gurus of Death or Disaster to remind us of what truly matters.

Jan is convinced that the self doesn't live for itself only, and she resonates with the idea of nature as the enduring earth of this verse. Nitya's efforts to open our eyes fits with what she gets from nature: a way to lose herself. She said, "We can lose our little self and become so much more."

I read out the beautiful contribution of Magister Liu, from the Minford book. It ends with:

The Taoist, like Heaven and Earth, Resonates freely with All-under-Heaven, dulls the edge of Cleverness, and Eschews False

Knowledge. The Taoist puts Self Aft, and yet True Self comes effortlessly to the Fore, through Humility and Self-Effacement. This is the perfection of the Tao.

Then I brought in another perfectly-Nitya paragraph from *Meditations on the Way*, where he takes issue with the first-and-last dichotomy of this verse. We might call it a Taoist cliché. Nitya is speaking:

When one takes an interiorized view of the reality of one's self and one's world, the sense of separate personhood is simply unreal. This is a correction I want to make in your concept of the sage putting his person last and the person of another first. There's no such thing. When, from within, you know the oneness, there's no separate self here with an 'other' out there. The so-called 'other' is very much an extension of one's own self, and one cannot but feel the shame and sorrow of that one as one's own shame and sorrow, and take responsibility for it.

So, as in an ideal democracy, you stop making distinctions between yourself and others. Both are equal. Deb didn't accept my use of the word *equal*: you simply are the same one, you see the one. I think they are saying the same thing. Equality has been demeaned and diluted in any number of ways, but ideally it acknowledges the unity of all beings. She's right, though, that an equation has to have two sides, even if they are the same value.

We modern humans are taught to think in terms of cause and effect, which breeds hierarchies and relative truths. Instead of cause and effect, Taoists think of the world existing in a steady state of knowledge, wisdom, unity, what have you. The less you name it, the steadier the state becomes. We're not getting instruction from this book that we are going to put into practice. We aren't learning how to live, we're simply living. Being together

in a group in amity drenches us with good feelings, for ourselves and for each other. The outcome isn't dependent on exactly how you understand it, as if we were building a bomb and a jet or anything. This is an entirely different subject.

Bill extolled elements like the last line, when you let go of presuppositions, yourself, your intellect, and so on, exemplifying how you can sink into yourself. Appropriately, he has a very different interpretation from mine here, that we practice what we have been encouraged to do and we can continue to do. He contributed his recent thoughts on this from his Patanjali Yoga Shastra study group with Nancy Y, which you can access in Part II.

We started our meditation reading *The True Human*, Thomas Merton's paraphrase of a poem of Chuang Tzu. Merton lived before we changed the universal referent from man to human, and I'm sure he would be happy that I modernized his poem for him in his absence. It beautifully summarizes the powerful gist of this amazing verse. It's two pages long, but here are a few examples to absorb:

The true humans of old were not afraid  
When they stood alone in their views.

If they failed, no sorrow.  
No self-congratulation in success.

They took life as it came, gladly;  
They took death as it came, without care;  
And went away, yonder,  
Yonder!

Minds free, thoughts gone  
Brows clear, faces serene.  
Were they cool? Only cool as autumn.

Were they hot? No hotter than spring.

## Part II

Beverley's haiku:

Tao is infinite.  
Wise souls should be open to  
Whatever change brings.

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Here is Bill's response to Patanjali I:40 and I:41, which are:

The yogi's mastery extends from the finest atom to the greatest infinity.

In one whose mental modulations have been attenuated, consciousness remains stabilized in the cognizer, the act of cognition, or the cognized, taking the form or color of that, like a transparent crystal.

My main focus from these verses seemed to go to the idea of the transparent crystal. I found myself trying to be more aware of this idea as the lens thru which I could view the world. There were times this took an almost physical presence in me. It was not one I could define intellectually but seemed to draw me in to my center and allow that clear view that comes with a stabilized consciousness. I tried to imagine Patanjali's description of consciousness stabilized in the cognized, the act of cognition or the cognizer, though I think identifying that closely and clearly will take a lot more practice.

I tried to be aware of the conditioning power of consciousness as it manifest in my reaction to the world and experience. It was surprisingly difficult for me to stop and identify the affect of the questioning mind, memory recall, ego and intellect on those reactions, but when I could remain in the stillness and imagine looking thru that crystal I could achieve not only some perspective on how my reactions were being formed, but also could rest in that image, freed from the impacts of the external world and imagine that it was reflecting the inner illumination of the pure self.

This was a useful exercise for me . As Nitya mentioned, by practicing a new view and replacing previous conditioning with new conditioning you can take some of the recall and association out of the equation and establish more stability – with the hope of someday eliminating all the conditionings.

A quote from Pema Chodron looked at it from a Buddhist perspective:

The essence of awakened mind is unbiased, fresh and open.  
You can rest in that space  
because you are not caught in the push and pull, like and dislike.

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History of Portland Gurukula classes since record keeping began  
(all have class notes)

2004 – Gita (Jebra’s house) (Peace class and misc also)

2005 – Gita (UU Church)

9/05-5/08 – Darsanamala

5/08-11/11 – Patanjali Yoga Shastra

1/12-10/12 – Isa Upanishad  
11/12-4/15 – That Alone  
5/15-8/15 – Mandukya Upanishad  
9/15-5/18 – Darsanamala  
6/18-9/19 – Meditations on the Self

Prior to this we studied That Alone, Darsanamala twice, the Gita twice, Arivu, and Saundarya Lahari (which is obviously overdue).

### Part III

Dearest Friends,

Thanks so much for the notes, Scott, this time and so many other times. The list of all our studies, at the end of this class notes, is quite amazing. "Tis a large morning to be thoughtful of," said our wonderful poet Carl Sandburg.

I did want to clarify what I said and feel about continuing with the Tao de Ching. It is a beautiful, profound work and I am happy we are taking more meditation time with it. My main reason in asking the class how they feel about staying with it is that I wanted to be sure others felt it to be a personally worthwhile and constructive work to do as a class. The response seemed to be positive and I'm happy to continue with it. With long roots in Chinese poetry and philosophy, it's very special to me. I do think that we may find that want to take a break and do a smaller work of Nitya's for awhile. To be determined as we all proceed on.

Debbie