

12/15/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 76

Gliding to the end of our examination of this marvelous scripture, the Tao Te Ching, which began October 9 of last year and supported us through this whole Pandemic Year, the class demonstrated its ability to wring significant meanings from a simple allusion from Lao Tzu. That we are in a kind of aftermath is shown by Needleman offering no more of his trenchant end notes after verse 75, and Mitchell actually adhering closely to the text—why improvise when the source is already perfect, and perfectly comprehensible?

All our translations are nearly identical. We are born soft and weak and when we die are hard and stiff. All things, just like plants, begin with soft, pliable shoots, full of sap, and are withered, brittle and dry at the end.

Just to stretch the verse out a bit, Lao Tzu reiterates that death's companions, disciples or followers are hard and stiff, unbending, while life's companions, disciples or followers are soft, yielding and weak.

He concludes that an inflexible army loses and a rigid tree is cut down, so the rigid and strong are below and the supple and weak are above. Thus the weak will overcome the strong.

Even the evocative River Master, cited by Minford, keeps unusually close to the text:

When men are Born, they are Soft and Gently alive with
Numinous Breath-Energy, they Embrace Spirit within. In Death
the Breath of Harmony is extinguished, Spirit is lost, they
become Hard and Rigid.

All living things,
All herbs and trees,

Are born
Soft and Tender.
The Gentle Breath of Harmony
Abides within them.
When they Die,
That Breath departs,
Leaving them
Dry and Brittle.
The Tao
Of Heaven-and-Nature
reduces the Strong,
Succors the Gentle.

His luminous translation bears more than a little resemblance to adorations of a gentle babe soon to be celebrated in Christmas, notably in an exuberant carol that opens with an echo of the River Master's Tao of Heaven-and-Nature:

Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare him room,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven and nature sing,
And heaven, and heaven, and nature sing.

Heaven, of course, is the vertical omega, (earth the alpha), while Nature is the panoply of the horizontal. When they sing together in harmony, life is optimized. It is divine.

Where do you start with such a compact gem? Fortunately, Deb is always brave enough to crack the door open for us. She acknowledged how easy it is to miss the point of such an unpretentious verse. We tend to think of power and will as something that pushes its way into a room, strutting and fretting.

What we're being reminded of is that all these new young things are not only vulnerable but expressive, and their weakness is powerful. They remain open, while the other side becomes rigid and closed. Little babies are the weakest and most vulnerable, yet are powerfully alive. As a much older person, you become sure of what you know and you become tight because of it.

I riffed on that tightness: when you're frustrated by something, the natural reaction is to get uptight, as we used to say, and the problem easily compounds. We also frequently used the hippie counter-blessing: hang loose! Hanging loose was a "revolutionary" concept in the US, where tension and rigidity were celebrated literally to the death. Pot, art and literature helped us to learn the value of being loose and relaxed. In our culture especially, people get more and more uptight thinking that it's going to miraculously solve their frustrations and convert the other person to their position, when it clearly has the opposite influence. Because of the polarizing effect, which is self-reinforcing, we tend to hold to our narrow position and even exaggerate it, far beyond the needs of the situation. It becomes more of an ego assertion than a solution to a dilemma. As you become more flexible, you are being life-oriented instead of death-oriented.

I felt a kinship in the verse with the rotation of the gunas, how we are inspired by something, make it actual, and then its form becomes frozen, a la sattva, rajas and tamas. The trick is to continue the rotation by going from tamas back to sattva, from being ossified to getting inspired again, rather than holding on to the rigid place you've painstakingly arrived at. Yes, it's "yours," but according to Lao Tzu it's also the encampment of morbidity, death. Understanding this is perhaps the most critical and tangible benefit of spirituality: not just in keeping an open mind but recovering it, prying it back open after it's been intentionally closed.

As Deb put it, there's no creation if new things aren't allowed fresh space to come up.

Recovering our flexibility is something we all have been doing our whole lives, so I invited people to share their examples, and after the usual waiting period of reflection, the floodgates opened.

I primed the pump with a simple example from my fire department career: we found a dramatic difference in outcomes of auto accidents, where the people who were really drunk and therefore relaxed came through much better than those who were alert, and so tensed up and tried to avoid it. Of course, in an accident it's perfectly natural to get a shot of adrenalin and react with everything you've got, so it probably can't be helped, but it does support Lao Tzu's contention. We can at least apply it in less-than-lethal situations, where you have the breathing space to let yourself calm down.

Anita chimed right in with a good example, how making herself relax has helped with her pain management. She found her pain pills weren't working for her back spasms, so she's been lying on her back and telling herself to relax. As she tries to let go, the pain first shoots in, and then she plays the philosopher: she strives to pay attention to what the pain's message is, and as she does so, the pain gets less hard to bear. It doesn't go away, but it does become a bit more tolerable.

She has instructed herself to not panic but listen and see what her muscles are trying to tell her. I commended Nitya's comments for verse 30 in *That Alone* as a supportive essay on this very topic. The least we can do is not add extra pain to the amount we're already suffering, but we often do, without realizing it. Philosophy has a role to play here.

Anita had another example for us, that she is being extra generous with her tipping in these tough times, and has been happy to see that it seems to really matter to the young people who are

her beneficiaries. Tipping in America is somewhat rigidly determined, like an automatic part of the bill, and it took resolve for Anita to up the ante, so to speak. When she changed the game, both she and others felt good about it.

I shared a similar small but not trivial example. When I phone a company about a problem, I assume the person I talk to has been fielding complaints day after day forever and getting blamed by angry callers, so early in our conversation I assure them that I know they are not responsible for my difficulties. Sometimes it enlists their help in my cause, too. Often I can sense a lowering of defenses on the other end of the line, and sometimes so much relief that we briefly become friends. They are used to callers who are so upset they are insensitive. I know I have gotten better and more pleasant assistance than someone who is abusive would.

Susan has a couple of young nephews, and her example was of boys building towers with blocks and either knocking them down or being afraid of it happening. One of the boys wouldn't let anyone near his constructions, and would get really upset if they were smashed, but he's gradually learned it's not such a big deal. It can be fun! Lots of kids get a laugh out of the tumbling part. It seems important to Susan to be able to do this, so you can build something new.

Jan was just at a family wedding, and she noticed how the adults had all sorts of rigid opinions about this and that, and were carrying on about their judgments, including regarding the newlyweds. She isn't like that. As she told us, "when you see the two young people talking about love to each other, you melt, and you are in awe of their bravery. A new world is opening up for them!" Driving home afterwards with her brother and his wife, and her son, she could tell that, like her, they were all feeling reverent of the love they had been witness to, knowing it was very special.

A starker contrast between life and death discipleship is hard to imagine. We need to combat that urge to weigh in on everything

with our well-baked and divinely-sanctioned opinions, and let the love and beauty of innocence permeate our corpuscles. Yes, old timers know lots more than those kids who tied the knot about *some* things, but they'll find them out for themselves all too soon. Let them be.

This led us to an exploration of a contrary proposition, not surprisingly spearheaded by Anita, that lots of things come into the world soft but they have to have a shell or a rigid exterior for protection, or they wouldn't last very long. That process of development is part of the flow, inherent in all living things.

I agreed wholeheartedly, adding that the fixed shapes we become allow us to excel at being what we are. Those young sprouts aren't capable of much yet—they're just beginning on their way, so we don't want to always be like that—all potential and no actualized abilities. Yet we do want to stay tapped into the sap of life, so we need to keep inviting it into our developed form. We should never replace our creative urges with complacency. Even though our sap is failing with age, being rigid and intolerant is not the way to preserve it. *Au contraire!*

Karen was drawn to the plant imagery of the verse, and felt her garden is a good example of its meaning. There are a lot of really dead things in it this time of year, yet you chop them down knowing that pretty soon there are going to be some beautiful little beginnings that sprout from that dead hulk of a plant that looks so ugly now. There's a future there. Knowing that, it's fun to look at the deadness and know there's life underneath it, waiting for its next opportunity.

Andy's eyes glistened. "It's the time of year when we're at the bottom of the cycle, and there's something magical about that, being at the low point. We're going to start back up soon.

Andy went on, in Mexico there's a belief that when you're born, you're wet, and your whole life is spent drying yourself out. They're taking it as a positive.

LeGuin's footnote about the verse is spot on:

In an age when hardness is supposed to be the essence of strength, and even the beauty of women is reduced nearly to the bone, I welcome this reminder that tanks and tombstones are not very good role models, and that to be alive is to be vulnerable.

Deb appreciated LeGuin's paean to vulnerability, underlining that we have to allow ourselves to be vulnerable as we grow older, and not fight against it.

Anita admitted that life is very humbling, especially now seeing how young people relate to people her age (around 70, like many of us). The prejudices they have about us are almost palpable, and mostly demeaning.

Deb concurred, admitting we have to give up our pride now. It's tough.

Anita recalled her own youthful pride, and how confining it was. As a young person, you always worried about your appearance, but when you get older, your body is going to do what it does anyway. Instead of looking at it as a tragedy it can be freeing, when there's not as much emphasis or concern about trivialities. When we stop worrying about superficial ego things, our minds can move on to more fruitful topics.

It reminded Deb of something Nancy Richmond once said, when they were together at a middle school performance. Watching the kids cavort on the stage, she observed, "They all look like their souls are floating in the air around them trying to find a way back in."

I feel it's a blessing that young people are protected from knowing old people as we truly are by a kind of naivety, and I well (and ruefully) recall what an ignoramus I was about them, even well into adulthood. Younger people don't need to know all the

harsh “facts of life,” and it would inhibit them to be too much aware of where they’re headed. Feeling immortal is fabulous! I’m always reminded of two women in the first Portland Gurukula. Penelope, pregnant with her first child and smitten by Nitya, gushed that she would never read fairytales to her children, only scriptures and books of wisdom. Dear Debbie Twombly indignantly responded, “Well I’m not going to read anything *but* fairytales to mine!” I’m with her.

The focus on youth reminded Deb of her many moves growing up, always finding herself in a new school in a new neighborhood. You’re either very defensive because you don’t know anyone, or you force yourself to be friendly. Both are rigid postures, but then you slowly let go of them and you begin to meet people and start to think of it as home, and you’re okay again.

Jan mused that simply having a persona is rigid. Especially, not knowing that we’re doing that, holding on tight to our persona, is inhibiting something fresh from coming forward.

Andy told us about his recent experience of a dialogue on rigidity, in his meditation retreat. In such rituals you’re exerting a lot of control, watching your breathing, trying to do what you are supposed to do. At a certain point you realize you can permit your thought processes to just be, you can simply watch them, and it admits a moment of freedom. It involves being loose, stopping controlling, giving up your judgment of yourself for being bad and letting the whole process of your mental life unfold. In the process of including it all, you are actually paying attention. If you can let your management off the leash, it’s an act of compassion to yourself and the fuller world.

My last example was more personal than the others, and highlights how the conscious work we do to become flexible is only part of the story. When we have these patterns wired into our neurology, conscious work is only the tip of the icefield. Although I’m a decent pianist, I freeze up in public and play poorly, to my

utter chagrin, because I so want to communicate in that medium. I've been working in myriad ways to get over my blockage for half a century, and it only gets worse. And yes, I've included plenty of "not working" in there too. Nothing helps. It doesn't mean that not trying is a better strategy. It means we do have a certain shape—some thrive on being in the public eye, and others shrivel. One implication is we should be compassionate about the rigidities of old age, because they're much more powerful than we are, for the most part. Wanting to change doesn't always make us change.

This verse comes after a stretch of the Tao Te Ching that addresses rulership very specifically, which is one reason we skipped it. That thread passes through the whole scripture, and is touched on here to. Andy was thinking about war and peace in connection with the US Republican party, where a lot of people want to change things through violence, through increasingly harsh and violent methods. He wondered what's on the other side of that, and if it succeeds, what then?

Deb cited the sage Wang Chen, in Pine:

It isn't hard for an army to achieve victory. But it is hard to hold on to victory. There is no great army that has not brought on its own defeat through its victories.

She told us about a time when she was really resisting things on the political stage, and Nitya said you need to welcome what you don't like. Make friends with it. She wrestled with it for at least twenty years before she could put it into practice. She realized you have to be vulnerable, you have to give up wanting everything your way. On a personal level, it's very hard.

This attitude is the opposite of modern beliefs, unfortunately, and goes against our conditioning. I talked about the rigidity of our attitudes in the upheavals of the 1960s. It was easy to feel right about racial justice, feminism, anti-war, anti-corruption—on the

TV news every evening we watched villagers in a pastoral country being blown up for profit. Few of us engaged with or even conceded that our opponents deserved any quarter. They were simply The Enemy, so of course violence escalated, mostly provoked by their side, but not resisted enough, thanks to the absolute polarities. I would say we lost a lot of opportunities for success because of it.

Jan spoke of a parallel in her law practice, which once she got a job with a firm, she discovered it was a very hostile environment. Us against them. Always putting the other guy down. You had to be protective of your turf, and newcomers were seen not as colleagues but as threats. Right off the bat she discovered of her co-workers, “these guys are not my friends, they’re not on my side—they want to kill me and get me out of the way.”

Law as practiced was not about trying to make accord with someone. Now she finds it easier to be at peace with any client or other attorney, even. She looks for ways to build connections so they are relating in the best way they can. She didn’t say it, but she’s admired for that very quality, because clients don’t always want to play the blame game, either.

Anyway, Taoism is not for fighters. We returned to the peace of wild things to wind down our fascinating penultimate meeting.

Magister Liu discreetly conveys the sexual tone of the verse, while expressing it with compassionate expansiveness:

Soft and Gentle
Is the Gate of Life,
Hard and Rigid
The Root of Death.
When plants
Push through the soil,
Their shoots are
Soft and Tender,

Burgeoning with Life.
As branches age,
They wither,
The Sap Fails,
And Death
Draws near.

The Forceful and Rigid watch their Essence and Breath-Energy diminish, they watch their Spirit grow dim, they are Companions of Death. The Soft and Gentle reduce Idle Thought and Desire, they do no Harm to Mother Energy, they are Companions of Life.

Wang Ji's poem, also in the Minford, made for a perfect closing meditation, and was a clear inspiration for Beverley's haiku:

*As evening fades,
I steer my little boat.
The white clouds
Vanish,
The Yellow River
Winds its way back.
Going with the breeze,
I hug the north bank,
Drifting with the waves
toward the southern isle.
The heaving waters
Surge,
My heart goes wandering afar.
Life is but
A sojourning,
And this*

*A floating world.
Where are
The Isles of the Immortals?
I sit quietly
Through the autumn of my years.*

Part II

Beverley's haiku:

76
One way to see life:
we are but sojourns here
on a floating world.

* * *

While writing these notes, an article about a new mathematics where a rigid system and a flexible system have an essential underlying equivalence arrived. How timely is that!
https://getpocket.com/explore/item/mathematicians-explore-mirror-link-between-two-geometric-worlds?utm_source=pocket-newtab

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I read last week's Merton/Chuang Tzu story, still perfectly suited to our ponderings, *In My End Is My Beginning*, p. 75, at <https://terebeess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>. Its haunting image, with ambiguous implications, compares life to a bird's beak that opens to sing its song and then closes again.

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Pine's sages:

Ho-Shang Kung says, "When people are born, they contain breath and spirit. This is why they are soft. When they die, their breath ceases and their spirit disappears. This is why they are hard."

Li Hsi-Chai says, "Although the soft and weak aren't the same as the Tao, they approach its absence of effort. Hence, they aren't far from the Tao. Although the hard and stiff aren't outside the Tao, they involve effort. Hence, they lead people away from it."

Lieh-Tzu says, "The world has a path of perennial victory and a path of perennial defeat. The path of perennial victory is weakness. The path of perennial defeat is strength. These two are easy to recognize, but people remain oblivious to them."

Su Ch'e says, "As long as it contains empty breath, the body does not suffer from rigidity. As long as they reflect perfect reason, actions are not burdened by severity."