

12/22/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 77

It's a glorious winter day to write the final notes for the Portland Gurukula's serendipitous Tao Te Ching class, our first veering outside the core curriculum. We started classes without Nitya in charge in 1978, listening to poor-quality tapes of his Gita classes with a small handful of his admirers. We're still a small handful, but a different one, except for Bill and Nancy. Class Notes began in 2004, I believe, though it seems hundreds of years longer than that. In any case, my computer won't open anything older than that anymore. Too old fashioned.

Verse 77 is the true climax to the work, elegantly epitomizing the essence of Taoism. The final four verses strike me as anticlimactic, and although in Taoism every climax must have its anticlimax, we'll let it ebb away without our participation. The moon will wax and wane whether we attend to it or not, fortunately for Everything-under-Heaven.

Speaking of moons, the verse opens with a bow image, a crescent moon stand-in in many traditions. When a bow is strung, the top must be squeezed down and the bottom up to provide the tension for it to be useful, and Lao Tzu specifically mentions this. It's très Taoist. The Tao always compensates.

Pine's sage Lu Hui-Ch'ing says: "The Way of Heaven does not intentionally pull down the high and lift up the low. It does nothing and relies instead on the nature of things. Things that are high and long cannot avoid being pulled down and shortened. Things that are low and short cannot avoid being lifted up and lengthened. The full suffers loss. The humble experience gain."

The next section affirms the Way as taking from those who have too much and giving to those who have too little. Sages follow this path, ordinary people the opposite, where they take from the poor and give to the rich. Or as the sage Ye Ch'ing puts

it: “The Way of Heaven is to give but not to take. The Way of Humankind is to take but not to give.”

Those who have more than enough and give it freely to the world are the wise. They have no interest in being appreciated or even known. Sung Ch’ang-Hsing, in Pine, additionally says of this: “The skill of the sages is unfathomable and inexhaustible. How could it be revealed?”

The River Master, in Minford, sums the verse up nicely:

Dark is the Tao
Of Heaven-and-Nature.
A Bent Bow
Well adjusted,
Well balanced,
Generous Harmony
And Moderation.

Lesser Mortals take from the poor to give to the rich. The Taoist Ruler forgoes Honor and Wealth, and gives Generously to All-under-Heaven without expecting any recompense. He shares Inner Power, Accomplishing but not abiding in Accomplishments, never seeking the admiration of Others.

In keeping with the Solstice spirit and the end of a loooooong year, we mostly listened to a few readings and talked little.

Deb began the dialogue noting how the bow image underscores finding the neutral balance between polarities or extremes, specifically, here, between generosity and selfishness. The person who can give without losing that balance is in tune with the Tao. They embody a stream of generosity without end, without taking ownership or being praised, which makes it a quintessentially Taoist verse.

I was fascinated that the image is about readying the bow to

be used, rather than using it. That implies the Way is about readying ourselves and not so much hitting the mark or even aiming. We are merely getting prepared, similar to verse 64, where the journey of a thousand leagues begins *under your feet*, and not with the first step, which is possibly a strictly Western perspective, since we didn't find it in any of our translations. Here the compensating, the balancing, gets the bow—us— ready for use, which amounts to an unspecified generosity of spirit.

Another point that struck me was that every bow is left unstrung when not in use. If you leave the string on, the bow loses elasticity, gradually adapts to its new position, and then there is less tension for when a shot is necessary. It's also very Western to be "high strung" all the time, ready for instant retaliation, while Taoists prefer to be unstrung.

Sage Wang P'ang gets at this when he says: "The Way of Heaven is based on the natural order. Hence, it is fair. The Way of Humankind is based on desire. Hence, it is not fair. Those who possess the Way follow the same way of Heaven."

Deb added that you aren't determining what's going to happen, you're simply ready for what will come, for whatever arises. That's why the last part is about not taking credit, not forcing something, just going with it, even as it emphasizes generosity.

And yet there is effort in it. Unintentional effort? Maybe more like a participatory effort, where the high is brought down and the low raised up, so the whole instrument is in closer accord with the Tao.

So the Tao takes from those with too much and supplements those who don't have enough. I was struck by the parallel with Robin Hood, who in the 13th or 14th century took from the rich and gave to the poor, after the rich had claimed ownership of the commons which the poor had depended upon for their livelihoods from time immemorial. His story is an overlay of the life of Jesus

onto the Green Man of Pagan Britain, though not so many have made this connection. Some must have. (Start with Little John knocking Robin in the stream, “baptizing” him, his Merry Men were his disciples, he is betrayed and wounded to death, etc.) Though he once was a beloved standard-bearer for Christianity, he has now fallen out of favor, as the Sheriff of Nottingham’s acolytes are dictating the narrative. My guess, unsupported, is that hoods and hoodlums derive their name from Mr. Hood himself, and are in the voice of the Haves: Robin Hood was just another hoodlum.

Learning about the Green Man is fun if you’ve got the time: <https://spiritofthegreenman.co.uk/green-man-legend-mythology/> . Cool picture of him, all leafy. I suppose I should write an article about Robin one of these days.... We need more stalwarts like him.

When we devolved into talking about financial generosity, Deb countered that this is about giving our talent, our time, all the ways we can be generous, not just money. Like that, Robin Hood was an administrator of justice in all sorts of ways.

Bill liked that Mitchell uses the word balance in his translation, and we haven’t encountered that word overly much.

I responded that balance is intrinsic to the Tao, and it’s conveyed most often in poetic ways. The Tao is more about rotation, though if the rotating entities (yin and yang, for instance) are out of balance, they fly apart. Then too, it’s easy to get thrown off balance when you think about balance—it’s more something you have to feel, so the sages were at a loss to say much about it. I read out Jacob Needleman’s excellent endnote, which I typed up for Part II, with its sage advice to stop making claims. When we claim this or that, we tilt our balance. The sages extolled in the end of the verse do not claim anything, they simply act in fairness., with justice.

Magister Liu once again has a most poetic take on the verse:

This is the Tao

Of the Bent Bow,
The Tao
Of Heaven-and-Nature,
The Return
To the Primal Root,
To the Inchoate Mist,
To the Mystery of Light.
Poised and flexible,
In Perfect Balance,
Every Excess reduced,
Every Insufficiency made good.

Lesser Humans take from Insufficiency, and add to Excess. Cares and Idle Thoughts arise. Essence is dissipated and Spirit wasted. The False prospers. The Taoist loves everything without exception, from the very Root of Heart-and-Mind, expecting no recompense.

Our closing meditation began with the Chuang Tzu story linked and excerpted in Part II, and finally, again from the Minford, with the reflections of Wang Ji on Retreat, basically a restatement of verse 9 of the Tao Te Ching:

*Stop pouring
At the right time
Into an upright vessel.
That's better by far
Than filling it
To the brim.
Don't hammer
An iron bar
Too hard,
Or the edge won't last.*

*If you stuff
A hall
With jade and gold,
The treasure can't be kept
Intact.
The Pride of Wealth and Rank
Brings naught but
Calamity.
Achieve, and then
Retreat—
Such is the Tao
Of Heaven.*

Part II

Beverley's last haiku:

77

A bent bow is like
the moon – a reminder of
Tao's dark mysteries.

We need to respond
flexibly to the endless
yin – yang tides of life.

* * *

Chuang Tzu this time was *The Breath of Nature*, p 38-9.
<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/MertonChuangTzu.pdf>

It exalts the voice of the wind, and all the apertures of nature where
it plays its music. It ends:

Yu replied: I understand:

The music of earth sings through a thousand holes.

The music of man is made on flutes and instruments.

What makes the music of heaven?

Master Ki said:

Something is blowing on a thousand different holes.

Some power stands behind all this and makes the sounds die down.

What is this power?

* * *

Needleman's endnote on verse 71 is spectacular:

Plato tells us that the oracle at Delphi called Socrates the wisest of all men. "What in the world does the god mean?" asks Socrates. "What in the world is his riddle? For I know in my conscience that I am not wise in anything, great or small; then what in the world does he mean when he says I am wisest?" Socrates then proceeds to question citizens of Athens who have a reputation for wisdom—statesmen, scientists, artists, craftsmen—and is shocked to realize that no one else is any wiser than he. "The fact is that neither of us knows anything beautiful and good, but he thinks he does know when he doesn't and I don't know and don't think I do" (Apology 21). Socrates' wisdom consists in the awareness that he is not wise.

This succinct chapter offers echoes of a truly momentous idea in the great spiritual traditions, expressed most paradoxically in the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine that *nirvana* (freedom) is *samsara* (slavery). *Nirvana* is the total awareness of *samsara*; freedom is the total awareness of slavery; knowledge is the total awareness of ignorance. Such awareness is not mere mental awareness, not

merely the thought that one knows nothing or is enslaved. It is awareness as a tangible force and can carry with it the power of feeling and sensing that itself conducts a great liberating energy into our human life. Thus, in the Christian contemplative tradition, the most important factor in the inner life is remorse, “tears” in confrontation with one’s own distance from God. This remorse opens the way for the grace or mercy of God to enter. It cannot be simulated; it must be genuine. This is the principle meaning of humility. “Blessed are they that mourn...” (Matthew 5:4).

Part III

Same day as the earlier notes—the US Vice-President warns people of the terrible likelihood that Progressives will “make the rich poorer and the poor more comfortable”:

https://www.commondreams.org/news/2020/12/23/yes-exactly-say-progressives-after-pence-warns-democrats-will-make-rich-poorer-and?cd-origin=rss&utm_term=AO&utm_campaign=Daily%20Newsletter&utm_content=email&utm_source=Daily%20Newsletter&utm_medium=Email .

Part IV

Dipika, has been following the Class Notes at a gradually closing distance for at least a couple of years. She’s almost caught up now, writing this for verse 76, but I’m tucking it here because it expresses her gratitude for the whole class. Good work, everyone!

Great Class notes Scott & Deb

Made me feel what

Deb,Jan,Anita,Susan,Andy,Karen,Bill,Kris,Moni,Nancy were feeling from within...

I so agree with you Scott...whenever calling up to complain about a particular problem with a Company...you are never connected to the actual Company staff..it's always a Call Centre ...and they probs some time do not even know the procedures of the Company ...just log complaints...so its always good to be nice!
Uptight and hang loose just got a fresh new look instead of being a rhetoric!

And yes as Jan mentions ...over the last few years...especially as contemporaries reach the zenith of careers and especially after 50...everyone feels they have to have a certain 'character' that defines them...so they tend to take stands. This is so stultifying...it's like imprisoning yourself in these verticals...so much better to be free flowing and merging like watercolours to create rainbows wherever you go 😊

And what Andy says also feels so true...cause when I first started with Vipassana...I was so scared I wld miss out on some nuance or 'rule' that I would never learn to sit still...that I used to be so tired from being tense...and then it struck home...one of vipassana's tenets is regardless of what is happening at the moment...even if your mind is wandering...so be it ...accept...and then just gently come back to your breath. It really allowed me the freedom to grow at my pace!

As ever.. Beverly's Haiku is a gem!