

1/14/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 8

Hamill's was accorded best for this one, which sported a surprising variety of translations:

It's best to be like water,
nurturing the ten thousand things
without competing,
flowing into places people scorn,
very like the Tao.

Make the earth a dwelling place.
Cultivate the heart and mind.
Practice benevolence.
Stand by your word.
Govern with equity.
Serve skillfully.
Act in a timely way,
without contentiousness,
free of blame.

Red Pine notes this is one of the most quoted verses in the entire Tao Te Ching. It's a classic image, but I suggested it was popular also because it offers specific instructions. People love to have rules to follow, which makes things simpler. They also have a tendency to take pride in how well they follow the rules, which can lead to stretching rules and even deceptiveness. But we aren't going to fall for that in our humble study. There is no one we're out to impress. We can just take this as good simple advice. Hamill has made it about as simple as possible in his translation.

Deb thought it was the perfect time of year for us to be thinking of water. We're having a typical wet, cold, grey winter in

Oregon this year, plenty of rain filling the rivers and powering the waterfalls. On our hillside, springs leap out of the gopher holes. I used to hope enough water would drive them away (they are very destructive), but the clever critters must channel it to leave their living spaces high and dry. No matter: it's satisfying to see our world of water in full spate. Though it is rechanneled every year by the animals, water always finds the best way forward, to the sea.

I've added a wetly soaking, drenched paean to rain by Thomas Merton in Part II. His take on The Joy of Fishes, in *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, is worth looking up: world class one-upmanship between Chuang tzu and Hui Tzu.

Deb could readily see this verse as a guide for everyday life, how water has a way of following a low, unknown path and yet it is so powerful and true to its own nature.

Jan wondered about the lowness, what was meant by it. Deb took it as advocating humility, not taking a situation and fighting against it like a wall or attacking it, but sizing it up to understand the flow, based on the geography of you and the other person. Water finds hidden pathways that are the most effective way to get through, and it never has to compete or compare, it just moves ahead.

I suggested another implication: the Tao is the Way, and the water naturally finds the way. Even when the ground looks flat and featureless, water reveals the hidden topography, it finds its way downhill, and if it meets an obstacle it waits until it fills up where it is blocked, and then flows on. Just as water is driven by gravity, we can be driven by the Tao, by an invisible rightness we can channel.

In the same vein, Arthur Waley is cited by Minford:

Even ordinary people realize the importance of the Taoist principle of "water-like" behavior, i.e., not striving to get on top or to the fore. This lyrical, almost ecstatic acceptance of the

Universal Laws of Nature has inspired some of the most moving passages in Taoist literature.

Humility is certainly a central tenet of Taoism! Deb summed up that it doesn't mean not taking action but taking the most effective movement through a situation.

Susan related going to the Japanese Garden recently with her friend Bobby, talking about metaphysical subjects while wandering along its exquisitely landscaped watercourses, like two ancient sages. There was light snow falling, water flowing in a usually dry creek bed. At the bottom, near the parking area, there are rectangular ponds, and Susan felt transported as she stopped to gaze into them. She noticed the raindrops making especially distinct rings pulsing out and out, interacting with each other. It made her think about how every action and every person affects everyone else, and it filled her with a gentle ecstasy.

Nancy also waxed poetic on the many qualities water has — rushing, smooth, rippling, but always moving in the right direction.

We had seven attendees last night, and we use seven books as references. There are seven water qualities mentioned in the verse. So we tried a new ploy that worked nicely, passing out the books to everyone, and then going around the circle reading out the parts one at a time. We were able to see the nuances of interpretation, and we discussed them briefly. The conglomerate reading made more sense than any of them by itself.

Mitchell, normally an anchor of clarity, was seen to be “off-roading” somewhat, which may have been due to his using a different source, but is curious nonetheless. Where most have depth of mind or thought, he has, “In thinking keep to the simple.” Liu is more typical: “In quality of mind it is depth that matters.” Most curiously, Mitchell has “In work, do what you enjoy,” and “In family life, be completely present.” The other translators stress competence rather than enjoyment, for the first, and having timely

action instead of presence in the family for the second. We didn't take the time to dissect these over much, but it broadened our sense of what was being communicated in the original. Modern language is more specific, whereas the older, poetic utterances were meant to carry multiple implications. Our close reading gave us a sense of this, and we will likely do it again.

Nitya gave his own analysis of the seven qualities in relation to Narayana Guru, which I read out. You can read it yourself in Part II, along with the Lui translation he used.

Red Pine quotes Sung Ch'ang-Hsing on the qualities also:

Those who free themselves from care stay low and avoid heights. Those whose minds are empty can plumb the depths. Those who help others without expecting any reward are truly kind. Those whose mouths agree with their minds speak the truth. Those who make demands of themselves as well as others establish peace. Those who can change as conditions change work with skill. Those who act when it is time to act and rest when it is time to rest move with time.

Pine also quotes Kuan-Tzu that "Water is the source of creation, the ancestor of all living things. It's the bloodstream of Earth." This is ancient insight, and it's amazing that from high in the air watercourses look exactly like the network of blood vessels in animals. Yet not even the Chinese had airships in those days....

Deb read out some water references from the I Ching, which I'll add to Part II.

Once again, we made much out of nothing, just as the Tao keeps doing. We shared a lovely, inspiring evening, thanks to the many wise predecessors who have thrown so much light our way.

For this verse, Minford quotes Li Bo's lovely poem we used for our closing meditation:

You ask me why I dwell in the green mountains.
I smile and make no reply.
My heart is free of care.
The peach-tree blooms,
The waters Flow
Into the unknown.
I dwell in the Realm
That is not of Men.

Part II

First, Beverley's haikus. She wrote, several days ago, "Now here are two haikus for verse 8 which I have just finished. Somehow one haiku is not enough. Still - why not two occasionally?! I like the discipline of finding the right words to pinpoint the key concept for myself. I notice the class usually goes on a different track, which is why I need to get my version to you before I read the Notes."

8a

Water, like the Tao
Gives its benefits freely;
The blood stream of life.

8b

Going with the flow;
Co-operating with all;
The best Way to live.

* * *

From Meditations on the Way, Nitya's take on the seven qualities, from the straightforward Liu translation, which reads:

Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefitting the myriad creatures without contending with them, and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the Way.

In a home it is the site that matters;
In quality of mind it is depth that matters;
In an ally it is benevolence that matters;
In speech it is good faith that matters;
In government it is order that matters;
In affairs it is ability that matters;
In action it is timeliness that matters.

It is because it does not contend that it is never at fault.

Guru said that, as he is familiar with the style, pattern and many details of the life of Narayana Guru, he found today's passage to be an exact description of that man and his life. Narayana Guru moved from village to village, quietly and mysteriously, just like a rain cloud that drifts through the sky showering rain on every man's garden, and then disappears. He never used to announce where or when he might be going. Often he walked long hours in the evening, stopping at some devotee's house late in the night. By morning, word of his arrival would have circulated through the village, and a crowd would gather. The sick would come to be healed. People with disputes would put their cases before him for arbitration. People would consult him for advice. He would gently deal with each person. Meanwhile a feast for the entire village would be prepared in his honor. While it was still going on, he would quietly slip away and continue on to another village.

The importance of a site for a home was not lost on Narayana Guru. If you visit the several ashrams he established, you will

notice that each one is in a most aesthetically inspiring setting. Whatever else goes on there, the beauty of the site remains constant.

The depth of his mind needs no further commentary than his own works we have been studying, such as *Atmopadesa Satakam* and *Darsanamala*.

The centrality of benevolence as the most precious core of any alliance was demonstrated by him in his handling of the different factions of Mahatma Gandhi's nonviolent army and several militant groups, who all came together in a common cause against oppression in the town of Vaikom. The prevailing atmosphere of mutual benevolence which he generated silenced much potential hostility and enabled the allies to succeed ultimately in their common struggle.

“In government it is order that matters.” Elsewhere in the Tao Te Ching a good government is qualified as one which remains unobtrusive, so that the people are not even aware of it. There is a natural order which should be allowed to prevail. This is not the interventionist order of governments which stress “law and order,” but it is a very gentle way of remaining in the background as much as possible. When your body is governing itself well, you don't even notice all the work that is going on. You don't even think about having a left upper molar unless something goes wrong. Only then do you notice it. Thus “noticing” something and something being out of order go together. Narayana Guru had this characteristic of somehow seeing that so much got done without ordering anybody to do one thing or another.

The ability and sense of timing mentioned in this passage refer not so much to ability in an outward sense, but imply an inner vision which is wide, vigilant, and has a certain transparency of time to know what is likely to come up in advance. Thus problems can be dealt with leisurely, in plenty of time, rather than one

becoming panicky because of not seeing the possibilities and probabilities of eventuality until the last minute. (30-1)

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Raids on the Unspeakable, by Thomas Merton

Rain and the Rhinoceros

Let me say this before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By “they” I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value, that what cannot be sold is not real, so that the only way to make something *actual* is to place it on the market. The time will come when they will sell you even your rain. At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness.

The rain I am in is not like the rain of cities. It fills the woods with an immense and confused sound. It covers the flat roof of the cabin and its porch with insistent and controlled rhythms. And I listen, because it reminds me again and again that the whole world runs by rhythms I have not yet learned to recognize, rhythms that are not those of the engineer.

I came up here from the monastery last night, sloshing through the cornfield, said Vespers, and put some oatmeal on the Coleman stove for supper. It boiled over while I was listening to the rain and toasting a piece of bread at the log fire. The night became very dark. The rain surrounded the whole cabin with its enormous virginal myth, a whole world of meaning, of secrecy, of silence, of rumor. Think of it: all that speech pouring down, selling nothing, judging nobody, drenching the thick mulch of dead leaves, soaking the trees, filling the gullies and crannies of the wood with water, washing out the places where men have stripped the hillside! What a thing it is to sit absolutely alone, in the forest, at night, cherished

by this wonderful, unintelligible, perfectly innocent speech, the most comforting speech in the world, the talk that rain makes by itself all over the ridges, and the talk of the watercourses everywhere in the hollows!

Nobody started it, nobody is going to stop it. It will talk as long as it wants, this rain. As long as it talks I am going to listen. (pp. 9-10)

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The I Ching has three hexagrams with water as the central feature, and Deb shared a few highlights. Here is some of it:

29. K'an – The Abysmal (Water)

The name of the hexagram, because the trigram is doubled, has the additional meaning, "repetition of danger." Thus the hexagram is intended to designate an objective situation to which one must become accustomed, not a subjective attitude. For danger due to a subjective attitude means either foolhardiness or guile. Hence too a ravine is used to symbolize danger; it is a situation in which a man is in the same pass as the water in a ravine, and, like the water, he can escape if he behaves correctly.

THE JUDGMENT

The Abysmal repeated.

If you are sincere, you have success in your heart,
And whatever you do succeeds.

Through repetition of danger we grow accustomed to it. Water sets the example for the right conduct under such circumstances. It flows on and on, and merely fills up all the places through which it flows; it does not shrink from any dangerous spot nor from any

plunge, and nothing can make it lose its own essential nature. It remains true to itself under all conditions. Thus likewise, if one is sincere when confronted with difficulties, the heart can penetrate the meaning of the situation. And once we have gained inner mastery of a problem, it will come about naturally that the action we take will succeed. In danger all that counts is really carrying out all that has to be done—thoroughness—and going forward, in order not to perish through tarrying in the danger.

48. Ching / The Well (Deb's most common hexagram in the old days)

above K'AN THE ABYSMAL, WATER
below SUN THE GENTLE, WIND, WOOD

Wood is below, water above. The wood goes down into the earth to bring up water. The image derives from the pole-and-bucket well of ancient China. The wood represents not the buckets, which in ancient times were made of clay, but rather the wooden poles by which the water is hauled up from the well. The image also refers to the world of plants, which lift water out of the earth by means of their fibers. The well from which water is drawn conveys the further idea of an inexhaustible dispensing of nourishment.

THE JUDGMENT

THE WELL. The town may be changed,
But the well cannot be changed.

It neither decreases nor increases.

They come and go and draw from the well.

If one gets down almost to the water

And the rope does not go all the way,

Or the jug breaks, it brings misfortune.

In ancient China the capital cities were sometimes moved, partly for the sake of more favorable location, partly because of a change in dynasties. The style of architecture changed in the course of centuries, but the shape of the well has remained the same from ancient times to this day. Thus the well is the symbol of that social structure which, evolved by mankind in meeting its most primitive needs, is independent of all political forms. Political structures change, as do nations, but the life of man with its needs remains eternally the same-this cannot be changed. Life is also inexhaustible. It grows neither less nor more; it exists for one and for all. The generations come and go, and all enjoy life in its inexhaustible abundance. However, there are two prerequisites for a satisfactory political or social organization of mankind. We must go down to the very foundations of life. For any merely superficial ordering of life that leaves its deepest needs unsatisfied is as ineffectual as if no attempt at order had ever been made. Carelessness-by which the jug is broken-is also disastrous. If for instance the military defense of a state is carried to such excess that it provokes wars by which the power of the state is annihilated, this is a breaking of the jug. This hexagram applies also to the individual. However men may differ in disposition and in education, the foundations of human nature are the same in everyone. And every human being can draw in the course of his education from the inexhaustible wellspring of the divine in man's nature. But here likewise two dangers threaten: a man may fail in his education to penetrate to the real roots of humanity and remain fixed in convention-a partial education of this sort is as bad as none- or he may suddenly collapse and neglect his self-development.