

1/28/20

Tao Te Ching Class Notes, verse 9

This time, all the translations are quite similar. One we didn't read out, LeGuin's is typical:

Brim-fill the bowl,
it'll spill over.
Keep sharpening the blade,
you'll soon blunt it.

Nobody can protect
a house full of gold and jade.

Wealth, status, pride,
are their own ruin.
To do good, work well, and lie low
is the way of the blessing.

Whenever we read "the way" or "the Way of Heaven" it is a translation of "the Tao."

We began with a prelude from Nitya's Meditations on the Way to help us get in the optimal mood, paced with long pauses:

Observe the most positive area of your consciousness... and then observe the negative aspect of consciousness as it recedes into the unknown.... Now find the neutral point between the two and remain with that.... The image given to describe this point in the Bhagavad Gita is of the bright and steady flame of a candle in a windless room, which shines on without a flicker. Such an image is compared to the mind of a contemplative....

A second analogy for the same state of mind is that of a tortoise which has withdrawn its tail, head, hind legs and fore

legs.... The tail represents the alpha point. At the base of your life are various instinctual urges. Withdrawing the tail means you sit and withdraw or neutralize your urges so that no urge is compelling you to act.... The head is the omega point, the future possibilities for actualization towards which you are all the time striving. Withdrawing the head means sitting still for the time being, without the need to move away from your seat to go anywhere.... The hands are what you act upon and manipulate things with. Withdrawing them means you are not entertaining any programs of action or occupying your mind with any programmatic thoughts. Thus you sit free of urges, ambitions, motions and programs....

Now, with this attitude read today's passage.

Red Pine makes the claim for this verse that "This recipe for long life has been repeated in every civilized culture, and yet it has forever fallen on deaf ears." So true!

Deb opened the discussion recounting her thoughts on a recent walk in the forest. She was meditating on the watery imagery of verse 8, and didn't immediately see its continuity with this verse. It's been very wet here, and as she walked she looked at the puddles, noticing how water filled every contour and washed away barriers. It came to her what connected the two verses: we push meaning into things until it spills over the edge. She saw them as intending to dissolve our fixed notions.

Today's verse consists of five brief propositions, and I suggested we could extrapolate a lot especially from the first two. Most of us are comfortable with the hazards of ostentatious wealth and pride in it (3 & 4), as exemplified by the current US President. A spiritual aspirant is sure to have been counseled to not "rust on their laurels" regarding their accomplishments, but to fluidly move on to the next challenge (5). We wound up concentrating on this aspect, however.

The too-full bowl of water warning is number 1, and is the epitome of Taoism. Life is cyclic, so fullness is succeeded by emptiness and nature abhors a vacuum, so the emptiness is soon filled. Taoists try for emptiness, but I figure this is mainly to add balance to the craving for fullness that the untutored mind is always obsessed by. We should be able to accept the range of states that a natural life passes through, and to leave room for serendipity, for more to be added. Nitya was reminded by this first image of a fountain he saw in Japan, which is recounted in Part II.

We have a saying in America: an egotist is really full of themselves. If we are full of ourselves, it's like the bowl is full, heading for a spill. When it gets really bad, they are said to be full of something other than water.... Yet it works in advertising to present images of success and fullness, so our public sphere is obsessed with it. Quiet and restraint don't make good movies. Gentleness and emptiness are nowhere exalted in our society.

As to the second image, the over-sharpened knife, we in America are taught to compete in school to be the "sharpest" thinker in the room. It's often mentioned as a compliment that so-and-so is really sharp. It's an intellectual image. The caution is that we should not depend on continuously adding to our store of knowledge, but to use what we have right now to dissect our understanding. Many of us simply presume that a very smart person will have solved all of life's riddles and be living a spectacular existence, but that's plainly not true. The idea that the blade becomes dull by over-sharpening tells us that much is left out by the rational intellect. I've written in the past of studies showing pundits are much poorer at predicting outcomes than ordinary people, such as this from my Gita chapter XVI commentary, from *How We Decide*, by Jonah Lehrer:

Science is also coming to see how we routinely subvert our inner intelligence. Citing a study of punditry done by Philip Tetlock of UC Berkeley, Lehrer quotes his conclusion:

Tetlock writes, “The dominant danger [for pundits] remains hubris, the vice of closed-mindedness, of dismissing dissonant possibilities too quickly.” Even though practically all the professionals in Tetlock’s study claimed that they were dispassionately analyzing the evidence—everybody wanted to be rational—many of them were actually indulging in some conveniently cultivated ignorance. Instead of encouraging the arguments inside their heads [which presented contrary evidence], these pundits settled on answers, and then came up with reasons to justify those answers. They were, as Tetlock put it, “prisoners of their preconceptions.” (209-10)

Bill noted there were two different translations of the second line, sharpening until blunt and sharpening until ruined. He realized you can do something to the nth degree and it falls apart. Andy ruefully admitted that sharpening the knife until it breaks is a way of learning, and we all could see how we had done the same, trying too hard to figure out something better left unforced. The very failure teaches us to try a different approach. Nitya admits to the same in his Part II excerpt, when he throws up his hands in despair.

Lao Tzu’s advice may appear to be an overly humble approach, so Nitya’s opening point in *Meditations on the Way* struck a welcome note:

Guru began his reflections by saying that he is not a very great fan of the virtue of humility. For him the sage is one who sees Truth clearly and neutrally, free of all exaggerations. One’s own self is just naturally one of the many items which is not

exaggerated. “The virtue here is not humility as such but simply clear vision.”

We could all readily see how humbleness as a goal tends to become just another ego exaggeration: I’m so humble. How do I stay humble in this situation? Truth is a more neutral value, and so is really what we are seeking in any situation. Barring insanity, it’s much harder to claim as something we actually possess. The ego is always looking for a better identity to make it more acceptable to others, but in both Vedanta and Taoism we are advised to give up such childish pranks.

Bill cited Red Pine’s idea that vanity about success was the road to failure. He added, when you do something to get some reward, you tend to keep doing it, and the bowl is going to go over the top. It’s better to do your work, do it well, and then step back. As someone who built many homes for people, he well knows that some tasks have an actual end. I’m sure he wished they all did, for the times he was made to keep attending to details after the job was technically over, but that’s another story....

Jan has noticed how the Tao lets things unfold naturally. That means the universe is acting on our process too. If you can step back, it will allow more to happen, and someone else will be more likely to contribute, also.

Deb loved the last line, and felt it was like the Gita saying you should let go of the fruits of your actions, which it is, and this turned into our major discussion. She was prompted to bring it up because I had disagreed with the advice as it came across to me, that you do your work and then drop it. To me, good work is not static, and brings up more complex possibilities to become involved with. In this sense there is no end point. If you’re learning an instrument, there is never a moment when you say I’ve got it. My example was my long apprenticeship with the Gita, culminating in ten years writing a detailed commentary. I might

have said, there that's it, but it has continued to breed further elucidations, becoming a couple of books, and later leading to online study groups where I've been guiding others through it. We're not meant to cling to what we've accomplished, yet if we don't it may well continue to provide new opportunities.

Some of the other versions we read have a more basic last line: do your work and retire. The idea is not to hold on to something once it is finished. It doesn't mean to totally abandon what we've accomplished, but more to let go of the pride of accomplishment, which is bound to interfere with the new cycle that should already have begun. Pine quotes Wang Chen: "To retire doesn't mean to abdicate your position. Rather, when your task is done, treat it as though it were nothing." Huang Yuan-Chi takes it one step further: "You need a raft to cross a river. But once across, you can forget the raft. You need to study rules to learn how to do something. But once you know how, you can forget the rules." This is how an advanced musician improvises, for example.

Deb agreed the last line is referring to the creative process. She recalled William Stafford being asked what his favorite poem was. His response was "the next one I'm working on." To Deb this meant you are part of this conduit of energy and expression, because you're not holding on to your last final stage. She invoked benevolent chance, how it seems like these verses are recommending doing nothing, but it seems to her that a lot of opening or accomplishment is being invited. They aren't counting new opportunities out, it's more about how you view it and participate in it. A kind of looking off to the side.

Jan ruefully admitted that often enough we don't even reach the peak of what we set out to accomplish. Many times she gets to a place where she can't go any further, but then, with patience and a kind of persistence, another possibility comes along. Deb thought if you could stop before you get to that utterly sharp knife, and see what transpires, doors would open.

I agreed with Jan that there are lots of peaks, many high points, not just one. We cycle up and down, so there is no point in imagining some real Mount Olympus or Parnassus—they are symbolic Mount Analogues to prompt us to keep at it.

All of us pictured the moon in this context, the mother image of Taoism, with its steady oscillation of light and dark, and the need to embrace all possible (and impossible?) permutations between them. Andy felt that giving up our total exaggerations was the point at which it actually starts to work. Whatever “it” is.

Once again our friendly discussion led us effortlessly into a peaceful state of silent sharing, where all the stimulating ideas of the evening could sink deep into our corpuscles, without needing to be particularly distinguished any longer. Aum.

Part II

Beverley’s haiku:

9

Don't overdo things,
Work well and don't look for praise.
Live in balance with Tao.

* * *

Here are the rest of Nitya’s comments on 9 that we read out:

The first lines about not filling the vessel reminded Guru of a fascinating fountain in the courtyard of his hotel in Osaka. “From four corners there are arching jets of water which all meet in the center. In the center there are four buckets on a pulley arranged so that when one is full it tips over, spills out and circles to the

bottom, whereas another which was previously empty at the bottom is raised up to the top where it receives its fill, until by becoming full it then suffers the same fate of being emptied and lowered to the bottom. Each bucket gets a turn and then returns again. One can sit staring at this fountain for hours without becoming bored. All sorts of philosophical thoughts come to one's mind, such as: "Everyone gets their chance. Just when one feels totally exhausted or drained of inspiration or fortune, one suddenly is filled with them. Yet your very success can cut at your root. Once again you are given the opportunity to begin afresh from scratch."

Guru continued, "Along with this, the 'hammering to a point of sharpness' reminds me of our attempts to achieve some degree of perfection. Whenever I want to be completely satisfied with some writing I have undertaken with great inspiration, something will happen before I finish, such as high blood pressure or a fever, which will force me to set it aside. When I return to it in a few days, the enthusiasm has gone. I never quite achieve my own standard of perfection, and I have had to learn to accept that. Now, I think, 'It's my baby. I can still love it, poor thing.'

"I have learned to live with a certain degree of mediocrity in my own undertakings. I have developed my own dicta. The first is, 'It's okay.' But if the people or things which are threatening to disturb me persist, I say the second one, 'What of that?' If they are very insistent and even more obstreperous, I say, 'Never mind.' And finally, when worst comes to worst, 'I don't care.' This attitude, if sincerely cultivated, brings a lot of peace into one's life.

"Something peculiar to the disciplines of both Taoism and Zen is that they set forth very clear indications of and guidelines to perfection. Yet both of them are very careful to provide an outlet for you if and when you fall short. The attainment is not held out as something far but within the effort itself, in the beingness of the disciple.

“In my own life and undertakings, I have found that Someone or Something is seemingly standing just behind me. Right when I have to throw my hands up in despair, when I have had to say, ‘I can’t do it,’ and I expect everything to come crashing down from that moment, I find that I am in the hands of some greater being which has still deeper resources, and somehow the task is accomplished. But I can’t honestly say that ‘I’ did it.

“It is with regard to this recurring phenomenon—and I think all of you must have had this experience—that I feel a great and profound gratitude. That gratitude is not exactly to any person or thing outside myself, but to something unknown and mysterious within.”

* * *

The long version of the “So what?” meditation, from Love and Blessings, 81-2, including the previous paragraph, where Nitya gently subverts British racism. This is during the time Nitya was shanghaied into their army during WWII:

After a while the Commanding Officer became friendly with me, and he promoted me to the Chief Superintendent’s position. That put me in direct contact with every British officer as well as the other British ranks. My immediate superior was an Indian, so the British didn’t bother to salute him. Instead they would all come directly to me. So I typed out an order that no British officer was to go to the Superintendent’s office before seeing the Commanding Officer and giving him a formal salute. I had no sense of malice when I did this, only a simple desire for justice. My dark-colored officer beamed with delight when he at last saw white men walking into his room and formally saluting him.

In one section I had to deal with, the British were receiving new battalions into the transit camp from overseas, arranging

meals for them, posting them to war fronts, and notifying their families in case they were injured or killed. One day I received a message that a convoy of 160 soldiers was coming in that night, and they should be given hot meals. I passed the message on to my good friend Fernandez, the steward, and he promised to feed them.

When the convoy arrived I received them, showed them their tents, and directed them to the mess hall. When I called over, I was told that Fernandez had gone home and there hadn't been any instructions to make dinner for the new arrivals. The hungry men in the convoy were furious. They had to make do with bread and canned fish.

There was no possibility of avoiding a court martial. It was painful for me to join the proceedings against my friend, but I hid my conscience behind the regulations. When the charge sheet was handed over to him and read before the presiding officer, Fernandez smiled in his gentle way and said, "That's okay." When the officer asked him why he neglected his duty he said, "I didn't do it on purpose. I just forgot and went home." The officer told him that forgetfulness was not a valid plea, and that he was liable to be punished with a pay cut and a stint in the army prison. He answered, "It's all right. I don't mind." When the officer went on that it would adversely affect his ability to be promoted, he said "What of it?" He was awarded a three week pay cut and five days in prison. When I nervously took his hand and told him how sorry I was, he consoled me with the reply, "I don't care."

Many years later when I was with Nataraja Guru, he took me aside and told me four great dictums to live by. They were to say "It's okay," whenever you were in trouble. If the situation persisted in bugging you, you should say "What of that?" When you are convinced of the imperativeness of the situation, say "Never mind." If worst comes to worst, say "I don't care." I had already learned this from Fernandez, but when the Guru endorsed it I finally realized just how important it was.

