The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term I.1

Opening Comments

Good evening, and welcome to the fifth year of the Mercy Seminar; and welcome back to David Peck, my dear friend and colleague in this endeavor. In past years, we have studied the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu traditions, both on their own and in relation to Christianity, to see what we might learn about mercy and compassion from traditions other than our own. We decided this year to continue proceeding further east from India, in order to consider the spiritual riches of China and Japan, focusing on the *Tao Te Ching* from China and *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* from Japan. The latter is a major training manual in the use of the *koan* in the Rinzai Zen Buddhist tradition. As we shall see, Rinzai Zen is very different from the Theravada and Mahayana Buddhist traditions we studied two years ago, and it was deeply influenced by the *Tao Te Ching*, even though the latter is not a Buddhist text.

The first question to address this evening is, why read the *Tao Te Ching*? To begin, this little book has had an enormous influence on the development of Chinese culture, including its religious life. To quote Wing-tsit Chan, who did one of the translations we will be using: "No one can hope to understand Chinese philosophy, religion, government, art, medicine—or even cooking—without a real appreciation of the profound philosophy taught in this little book." The importance of this little book is reflected in the fact that to date there have been more than six hundred commentaries written on it in Chinese and Japanese, with the most influential commentary being the one by Wang Pi (226-249 CE), with some of his commentary even being incorporated into parts of the text. It is said that for every seven words of the *Tao Te Ching*, a book of commentary has been written.

Another reason to read the *Tao Te Ching* has to do with its popularity in the world outside China. To date, there are over one hundred translations of this text, with more appearing every year. Reflecting on this phenomenon, one translator, R. B. Blakney says:

> I suspect that nearly every foreigner in China who has taken the trouble to study this collection of mystical poems has felt the same way: so many translations of it have appeared. For one reason or another each translation, in its turn, fails fully to satisfy one who knows the original, and at length, one tries his own hand at it. Will he, in his turn, satisfy? Probably not; but he may add his share to the ultimate understanding of one of the world's truly distinguished religious works.

Each translation creates its own meaning and tone, which is why I have decided to include two different translations of the book in our readings, to give you a sense of the different ways the book can be rendered into English. For instance, the Chinese word "fu" may be translated: beginning, origin, beauty, process of change, being, human beings, father, and great sage. Hence each translator has multiple options in translating the Chinese into English. If you compare the translations in our reading, you will get a sense of how differently the text can sound. However, the ready availability of the *Tao Te Ching* in English means that it has already influenced the religiosity and spirituality of English speaking people. I first came across this book in high school, as it was very popular in the 1960's and 70's.

This brings us to our next question: who wrote the *Tao Te Ching*? Tradition has it that a fellow named Lao Tzu (meaning The Old Master) wrote the book toward the end of his life, in the sixth century BCE. According to the historian who wrote the first biography of Lao Tzu,

> He was in charge of the royal archives in Zhou. Confucius once went to Zhou wanting to ask Laozi about the rites. Laozi replied: "As for the things you are talking about—those people along with their bones have already rotted away! All that remains is their words. Moreover, if the gentleman lives at the right time he rides in the carriage of an official; if he does not, then he moves about like a tumbleweed blown by the wind. I have heard it said that the good merchant has a well-stocked warehouse that appears to be empty; and the gentleman, though overflowing in virtue, gives the appearance of being a fool. Rid yourself of your arrogant manner, your many desires, your pretentious demeanor and unbridled ambition. None of these is good for your health. What I have to tell you is this, nothing more." Confucius left and said to his disciples, "As for birds, I understand how they can fly; with fish, I understand how they can swim; and with animals, I understand how they can run. To catch things that run, we make nets; to catch things that swim, we make lines; to catch things that fly, we can make arrows. But when it comes to dragons, I cannot understand how they ascend into the sky riding the wind and the clouds. Today I meet Laozi, and he is just like a dragon!"

As you can see, this story describes Lao Tzu as a contemporary of Confucius, and the story of their encounter shows that Lao Tzu gets the better of him. As you may know, Confucian thought places great emphasis on the rites, such as music, arithmetic, and writing, in creating the virtue of humaneness, an emphasis with which the *Tao Te Ching* disagrees. As the historian goes on to say later, "In our age, those who study the thought of Laozi belittle Confucian studies, and the Confucians belittle the ideas of Laozi." Moreover, the description Lao Tzu gives of himself—the sage appearing to be a fool—sounds like a description he may be giving of himself in the reading for next week (Chapter 20):

> I alone am drifting, not knowing where I am.
> Like a newborn babe before it learns to smile,
> I am alone, without a place to go.
> Others have more than they need, but I alone have nothing.

> I am a fool. Oh, yes! I am confused.
> Other men are clear and bright,
> But I alone am dim and weak.
> Other men are sharp and clever,
> But I alone am dull and stupid.
> Oh, I drift like the waves of the sea,
> Without direction, like the restless wind.
> Everyone else is busy,
> But I alone am aimless and depressed.
> I am different.
> I am nourished by the great mother (Tao).

The Chinese historian goes on to describe the way in which the *Tao Te Ching* came to be written.

> Laozi cultivated the *Tao* and its virtue (*te*). In his studies he strove to conceal himself and to be unknown. He lived in Zhou for a long time. But, seeing the decline of the Zhou, he decided to leave. When he reached the checkpoint at the pass, Yin Xi, the official in charge of the pass, said to him, "Sir, you are about to retire. You must make an effort to write us a book." So Laozi wrote a book in two sections, explaining the ideas of the *Tao* and its virtue in something like five thousand words, and left. No one knows how he ended.

Modern scholars think that the text was originally oral, and that its poetic form made it easier to memorize. It then came to be written down, first on bamboo or wood strips, and then in silk books. There have been recent discoveries of early versions of the bamboo strips and the silk books, which may allow us to see the way the text developed over time. The chapters of the book were added later, as was its arrangement into two sections, the *Tao Ching* and the *Te Ching*. The order of these books can be reversed in some editions, likely indicating its use by the legal traditions of China. We are reading the book in its primary traditional version, with eighty-one chapters, beginning with the chapters on the Tao.

Finally, what is the best way to read the *Tao Te Ching*? As you have likely already seen, this text is best understood as being a mystical poem, with both metaphysical and political themes. As a mystical poem, its language is cryptic, enigmatic, paradoxical, metaphorical, and condensed—hence the emergence of hundreds of commentaries. We can hear the mystical poetry in the opening chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*:

> The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
> The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
> The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
> The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
> Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
> Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.

These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
The unity is said to be the mystery.
Mystery of mysteries, the gate to all wonders.

The best way to read the text is the way you would read any poem, especially by someone like T. S. Eliot, which is to read patiently, slowly, and contemplatively. I would also recommend reading the text aloud to yourself, as that often helps to slow us down so that we hear as well as read the text. I would also recommend looking for repeating patterns and repeating themes. What does the text hold up for our approval? And what does it want us to reject? Put another way, what does the text see as our problem? And what does it propose as the solution? I look forward to discussing these questions with you, as well as others you may have, when we return from our time for review.