

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term I.2

Opening Comments

The reading for tonight gives us more insight into the deep and elusive mystery that is called Tao, as well as much more insight into the shape of a life lived in unity with Tao, which is called Virtue or Te. We already saw in our reading last week that the Tao is an unnamable mystery.

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.

We also learned that the Tao is “an empty vessel” that is “used, but never exhausted,” and this empty vessel is the “unfathomable source of ten thousand things” (4). The Tao is also described by the metaphors of a valley spirit and a Mystic Female (6).

The spirit of the valley never dies.
It is called the subtle and profound female.
The gate of the subtle and profound female
Is the root of Heaven and Earth.
It is continuous, and seems to be always existing.
Use it and you will never wear it out.

The Tao is also like water, for “water gives life to the ten thousand things and does not strive. It flows in places men reject and so is like the Tao.” The Tao is also said to be invisible, inaudible, mysterious, vague, and elusive (14).

Going up high, it is not bright, and coming down low,
it is not dark.
Infinite and boundless, it cannot be given any name;

It reverts to nothingness.
This is called shape without shape,
Form (*hsiang*) without object.
It is The Vague and Elusive.
Meet it and you will not see its head.
Follow it and you will not see its back.
Hold on to the Tao of old in order to master the things of
the present.
From this one may know the primeval beginning
[of the universe].
This is called the bond of Tao.

We see the same themes of mysterious origin and goal, as well as of mother, in the reading for tonight (25).

Something mysteriously formed,
Born before heaven and earth.
In the silence and the void,
Standing alone and unchanging,
Ever present and in motion.
Perhaps it is the mother of ten thousand things.
I do not know its name.
Call it Tao.
For lack of a better word, I call it great.
Being great, it flows.
It flows far away.
Having gone far, it returns.

We also come to see much more what the life lived in unity with Tao would look like, and what it would avoid. To begin, a human life lived in oneness with Tao would appear to be as mysterious and elusive as the Tao itself (15).

The ancient masters were subtle, mysterious, profound, responsive.
The depth of their knowledge is unfathomable.
Because it is unfathomable,
All we can do is describe their appearance.

We see the same way the mystery of Tao informs the life of the sage who lives in union with Tao in chapter 21.

The greatest Virtue (*te*) is to follow Tao and Tao alone.
 The Tao is elusive and intangible.
 Oh, it is intangible and elusive, and yet within is image.
 Oh, it is elusive and intangible, and yet within is form.
 Oh, it is dim and dark, and yet within is essence.
 This essence is very real, therein lies faith.
 From the very beginning until now its name has never been forgotten.
 Thus I perceive the creation.
 How do I know the ways of creation?
 Because of this.

However, among the chief characteristics of the sage are emptiness and tranquility, which come from observing the emergence of all things from their source in Tao, and the return of all things to their source (16).

Attain complete vacuity,
 Maintain steadfast quietude.
 All things come into being,
 And I see thereby their return.
 All things flourish,
 But each one returns to its root.
 This return to its root means tranquility.
 It is called returning to its destiny.
 To return to destiny is called the eternal (Tao).
 To know the eternal is called enlightenment.

The one who is enlightened by knowing the eternal is thereby transformed, becoming open-minded, openhearted, impartial, royal, in accord with nature, and one with the eternal Tao (16). We can see the way the openheartedness of the sage makes the sage like its mother, the Tao (27).

Therefore the sage takes care of all men
 And abandons no one.
 He takes care of all things
 And abandons nothing.
 This is called “following the light.”

We saw the same motherly characteristics of the sage last week (10):

Can you play the role of the female in the opening and closing
 of the gates of Heaven?

Can you understand all and penetrate all without
taking any action?
To produce things and to rear them,
To produce, but not to take possession of them,
To act, but not to rely on one's own ability,
To lead them, but not to master them—
This is called profound and secret virtue (*hsüan-te*).

Becoming one with Tao is therefore the way to attain Virtue or Te.

He who follows the Tao
Is at one with the Tao.
He who is virtuous
Experiences Virtue.
He who loses the way
Feels lost.
When you are at one with the Tao,
The Tao welcomes you.
When you are at one with Virtue,
The Virtue is always there.

Finally, in tonight's reading we see a number of paradoxes presented which are to startle us into the realization of what life according to Tao is and is not (22).

To yield is to be preserved whole.
To be bent is to become straight.
To be empty is to be full.
To be worn out is to be renewed.
To have little is to possess.
To have plenty is to be perplexed.
Therefore the sage embraces the One
And becomes the model of the world.

On the other hand, to live opposed to the Tao and its virtue means to put on a display, to justify yourself, to boast, to brag, or to quarrel. "Therefore the ancients say, 'Yield and overcome.' Is this an empty saying? Be really whole, and all things will come to you." Along similar lines we hear in chapter 26: "The heavy is the root of the light; the still/tranquil is the master of unrest/the hasty."

We also hear words tonight that are a clear shot across the bow for people like me who live a life of scholarship and teaching: “Give up learning and put an end to your troubles” (20). Or more provocatively:

Give up sainthood, renounce wisdom,
And it will be a hundred times better for everyone.
Give up kindness, renounce morality,
And men will rediscover filial piety and love.
Give up ingenuity, renounce profit,
And bandits and thieves will disappear.
These three are outward forms alone; they are not sufficient in themselves.
It is more important
To see the simplicity,
To realize one’s true nature,
To cast off selfishness
And temper desire.