

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term I.3

Opening Comments

The reading for this evening raises many interesting themes related to the nature of Tao and the kind of life that is lived in accordance with the Tao. The unifying theme this week seems to be the weakness, insignificance and even humility of the Tao. We see this in chapter 32:

Tao is eternal and has no name.
Though its simplicity seems insignificant,
none in the world can master it.
If kings and barons would hold on to it, all things would
submit to them spontaneously.
Heaven and earth unite to drip sweet dew.
Without the command of men, it drips evenly over all.

The insignificance of Tao explains why so few are interested in hearing about it, compared with other matters of interest in their lives (Ch. 35).

Passersby may stop for music and good food,
But a description of the Tao
Seems without substance or flavor.
It cannot be seen, it cannot be heard,
And yet it cannot be exhausted.

The insignificance of the Tao may be related to the way it takes no action, preferring simplicity, peace and tranquility to the hustle and bustle of the ever-active human world, as we heard in the Lectio Divina this evening (Ch. 37).

Tao invariably takes no action, and yet there is nothing left undone.
If kings and barons can keep it, all things will transform spontaneously.
If, after transformation, they should desire to be active,
I would restrain them with simplicity, which has no name.
Simplicity, which has no name, is free of desires.
Being free of desires, it is tranquil.
And the world will be at peace of its own accord.

The simplicity, tranquility and peace of the Tao is fundamental to its nature, as we learn in the last chapter of our reading tonight (Ch. 40):

Returning is the motion of the Tao.
Yielding/weakness is the way of the Tao.
The ten thousand things are born of being.
Being is born of not being.

The humility and apparent insignificance of the Tao can be seen in the remarkable description given of it in chapter 34:

The great Tao flows everywhere, both to the left and to the right.
The ten thousand things depend upon it; it holds nothing back.
It fulfills its purpose silently and makes no claim.
It nourishes the ten thousand things,
And yet is not their lord.
It has no aim; it is very small.
The ten thousand things return to it,
Yet it is not their lord.
It is very great.
It does not show greatness,
And is therefore truly great.

This metaphor of flowing water reminds us of the description of Tao which we saw in our first set of readings, which again highlights the apparent insignificance and humility of the Tao (Ch. 8):

The highest good is like water.
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 humility and weakness of the Tao means that the lives of those who cling to the Tao, and who use the Tao, will also exemplify the same humility and apparent weakness. This is why the *Tao Te Ching* raises up for our emulation the female, the infant, the valley, and the block of wood (Ch. 28).

Know the strength of man,
But keep a woman's care!
Be the stream of the universe!
Being the stream of the universe,
Ever true and unswerving,
Become as a little child once more.

Know honor,
Yet keep humility.
Be the valley of the universe!
Being the valley of the universe,
Ever true and resourceful,
Return to the state of the uncarved block.

As we have seen before, we are exhorted to avoid all vices that oppose the virtue of humility. One of the primary vices is to constantly be aware of one's own virtue (Ch. 38).

The man of superior virtue is not (conscious of) his virtue,
And in this way he really possesses virtue.
The man of inferior virtue never loses (sight of) his virtue,
And in this way he loses his virtue.

As we saw last week in our discussion of the phrase “yield and overcome” in Chapter 22, humility and lowliness reflect the nature of the Tao, which seems to reverse our own system of values (Ch. 39).

Therefore humble station is the basis of honor.
The low is the foundation of the high.
For this reason kings and barons call themselves the orphaned,
the lonely ones, the unworthy.
Is this not regarding humble station as the basis of honor?
Is it not?

Like the Tao, we should act without acting, and should not seek our own glory through what we do (Ch. 30).

Achieve results,
But never glory in them.
Achieve results,
But never boast.
Achieve results,
But never be proud.
Achieve results,
Because this is the natural way.
Achieve results,
But not through violence.

This brings us to the other aspect of pride that we see addressed in the reading for tonight with special clarity: namely, the way we seek to dominate others by means of force and violence. The Tao never uses force or violence, and so these actions are directly contrary to the Tao, and will not last (Ch. 30).

Whenever you advise a ruler in the way of Tao,
Counsel him not to use force to conquer the universe/empire.
For this would only cause resistance.
Force is followed by loss of strength.
This is not the way of Tao.
That which goes against the Tao
comes to an early end.

The same holds for the use of weapons and other instruments of violence and warfare. “Good weapons are instruments of fear; all creatures hate them. Therefore followers of Tao never use them.” Lao Tzu knows, however, that it is impossible to be a king and avoid the use of weapons of war altogether, and so he advises the ruler only to use them out of necessity, and never with the desire to dominate (Ch. 31).

Weapons are instruments of war; they are not a wise man’s tools.
He uses them only when he has no choice.
Peace and quiet are dear to his heart,
And victory no cause for rejoicing.
If you rejoice in victory, then you delight in killing;
If you delight in killing, you cannot fulfill yourself.

In order to reinforce the love of peace and tranquility, and to avoid attempting to dominate others by force, we are advised to celebrate victory in war as a funeral, in acknowledgement of all of the killing that lies behind the victory (Ch. 31).

This means that war is conducted like a funeral.
When many people are being killed,
They should be mourned in heartfelt sorrow.
That is why a victory must be observed like a funeral.

If you have seen the movie *Oppenheimer*, you saw an example of this when everyone at Los Alamos wants to celebrate the successful detonation of the atom bomb over Hiroshima. When Oppenheimer appears before his rapturous scientific colleagues, his initial expressions convey the sense of a victory being observed like a funeral.

Finally, the reading for tonight reminds us of the source of real enlightenment and strength (Ch. 33).

Knowing others is wisdom;
Knowing the self is enlightenment.
Mastering others requires force;
Mastering the self needs strength.

These seem like good words with which to conclude.