

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term I.4

Opening Comments

The reading for this week opens with a marvelous description of the different ways that students respond when they hear of the Tao.

(41) The wise student hears of the Tao and practices it diligently.

The average student hears of the Tao and gives it thought now and again.

The foolish student hears of the Tao and laughs aloud.

If there were no laughter, the Tao would not be what it is.

Why is it necessary for foolish students to laugh when they hear of the Tao? Why would it not be the Tao without this laughter? As we have seen before, and see again tonight, the Tao has an appearance that contradicts its reality. When we try to understand the Tao the way we try to understand the ten thousand things that arise from it, it appears quite paradoxical to us, and, as we heard last week, we would much rather hear about food than about the Tao. This is why foolish students laugh when they hear of it.

(41) Therefore there is the established saying:

The Tao which is bright appears to be dark.

The Tao which goes forward appears to fall backward.

The Tao which is level appears uneven.

Great virtue appears like a valley (hollow).

Great purity appears like disgrace.

The paradoxical appearance of the Tao is mirrored by those who live in unity with the Tao, as we hear in chapter 20, which I take to be a self-portrait of the sage Lao Tzu.

(20) In spring some go to the park, and climb the terrace,

But 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.

Since the eternal Tao cannot be seen, heard, or named, it seems to have no existence, in comparison with the ten thousand things that we continually know and name.

(41) Tao is hidden and nameless.
Yet it is Tao alone that skillfully provides for all and
brings them to perfection.

As a consequence, the Tao upends the system of values we use to judge the world and our place in it.

(42) Men hate to be “orphaned,” “widowed,” and “worthless,”
But this is how kings and lords describe themselves.
For one gains by losing
And loses by gaining.

The same may be said of the virtue of non-action (*wu wei*). For those of us convinced that the busier and more productive we are, the more valuable we are, and the more we contribute to the well-being of the world, the teaching of non-action seems to be completely counter-intuitive.

(47) One may know the world without going out of doors.
One may see the Way of Heaven without looking through the windows.
The further one goes, the less one knows.
Therefore the sage knows without going about,
Understands without seeing,
And accomplishes without any action.

However, non-action is simply the manifestation of the way of Tao in a human life, remembering that returning is the motion of Tao, and weakness is the function of Tao (Ch. 40).

(43) The softest thing in the universe
Overcomes the hardest thing in the universe.

That without substance can enter where there is no room.
 Hence I know the value of non-action.
 Teaching without words and work without doing
 Are understood by very few.

Ironically, it is the ones who are always acting who never accomplish anything, because they are acting contrary to the Tao, and hence what they do cannot abide.

(38) A truly good man does nothing,
 Yet leaves nothing undone.
 A foolish man is always doing,
 Yet much remains to be done.

We saw the same thought in the second chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, which first raised the issue of non-action.

(2) Therefore the sage manages affairs without action (*wu-wei*)
 And spreads doctrines without words.
 All things arise, and he does not turn away from them.
 He produces them, but does not take possession of them.
 He acts, but does not rely on his own ability.
 He accomplishes his task, but does not claim credit for it.
 It is precisely because he does not claim credit that his
 accomplishment remains with him.

Because we all start from the position that our doing is the most important thing—setting objectives and goals and then going out and achieving them, often in competition with others—we can only attain the ability for non-action by emptying ourselves of all that we have tried to achieve, especially by means of our learning, which was highly prized by the Confucians.

(48) In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
 In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.
 Less and less is done
 Until non-action is achieved.
 When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
 The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
 It cannot be ruled by interfering.

We can now see what the *Tao Te Ching* means by non-action. It does not mean that we simply do nothing, as that is impossible. It means rather to be aware of the dynamic of Tao in all things, so that our

non-acting action takes place by allowing the Tao to act through us, the way it always already acts in the ten thousand things. Hence the opposite of non-action is interfering, often by force, and at times by violence.

(16) Empty yourself of everything.

Let the mind rest at peace.

The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.

They grow and flourish and then return to the source.

Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.

This raises the question of the nature of the transformation of the life of the sage who lives in unity and harmony with the Tao. Since the Tao that cannot be named is the *eternal* Tao, does this mean that when we empty ourselves of everything and return to our Mother the Tao, we also become eternal, and are no longer subject to the power of death? There are passages from our previous readings which seem to suggest as much, especially the conclusion of Chapter 16 (Chan).

He who knows the eternal is all-embracing.

Being all-embracing, he is impartial.

Being impartial, he is kingly (universal).

Being kingly, he is one with Nature.

Being one with Nature, he is in accord with Tao.

Being in accord with Tao, he is everlasting,

And is free from danger throughout his lifetime.

Feng's translation is even more emphatic in this regard:

Being divine, you will be at one with the Tao.

Being at one with the Tao is eternal.

And though the body dies, the Tao will never pass away.

The end of chapter 33 also suggests that one can transcend death by means of union with the Tao. In Chan's translation, this passage reads:

He who does not lose his place (with Tao) will endure.

He who dies but does not really perish enjoys long life.

Feng translates that last line, "To die but not to perish is to be eternally present." This sounds a great deal like the Sufi maxim, "Die before you die."

Although this is a provocative thought, scholars are in agreement that Lao Tzu did not teach eternal life for the sage. Rather, the ideal for the sage is a long, tranquil, and fulfilling life, for that is the life provided by Tao. Thus the translation of the end of chapter 16 by Robert Henricks reads: “If you’re one with the Tao, to the end of your days you will suffer no harm.” And his translation of the end of chapter 33 reads, “To die but not be forgotten—that’s true long life.”

We can see why this might be the preferred meaning when we look at the opposite of a life of suffering no harm, which is the life of the person who lives by means of violence.

42) What others have taught, I teach also:
 "Violent and fierce people do not die a natural death."
 I shall make this the father (basis or starting point)
 of my teaching.

This may be the key to understanding another provocative passage which seems to suggest that the sage transcends death.

(50) I have heard that one who is a good preserver of his life
 will not meet tigers or wild buffalos,
 And in fighting will not try to escape from weapons of war.
 The wild buffalo cannot butt its horns against him,
 The tiger cannot fasten its claws in him,
 And weapons of war cannot thrust their blades into him.
 And for what reason?
 Because in him there is no room for death.

There is no room for death in the sage because the sage is not clinging to *life*, but to the *Tao*, knowing that “returning is the motion of the Tao” (40). The sage who is one with Tao dies a natural death, as all things come from Tao, and all things return to Tao, from which all things will come again.

(16) The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their return.
 They grow and flourish and then return to the source.
 Returning to the source is stillness, which is the way of nature.

The way to avoid danger, and thus the way to live a long, tranquil, and fulfilling life, is to stay close to the Tao, the way an infant stays close to its mother. This is likely why the *Tao Te Ching* asks us if we can become like an infant before it has learned to smile.

(52) There was a beginning of the universe
 Which may be called the Mother of the Universe.

He who has found the mother (Tao)
 And thereby understands her sons (things)
 And having understood the sons,
 Still keeps to its mother,
 Will be free from danger throughout his lifetime.

Our problem is that once we have come to know the sons—the ten thousand things—we depart from the Mother—the Tao—and live our lives among the ten thousand things with ever increasing desire, competition, and acquisition, with no idea of when to stop, of when enough is enough.

(46) There is no calamity greater than lavish desires.
 There is no greater guilt than discontentment.
 And there is no greater disaster than greed.

We are in danger when we do not know when or how to stop, for then we shall never know contentment and tranquility. We are safe from danger when we know when to stop, because then we know contentment.

(44) He who is contented suffers no disgrace.
 He who knows when to stop is free from danger.
 Therefore he can long endure.

Or, to conclude more succinctly, “He who is contented with contentment is always contented” (46).