

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term I.5

Opening Comments

As we come to our fifth reading from the *Tao Te Ching*, I thought it would be good to return to an excellent question that was posed during our discussion last week, namely, what is the Tao, anyway? As is likely clear by now, the answer to that question is that the Tao is nameless mystery, that is nonetheless the source of every named thing. Hence we can see that the first chapter of the *Tao Te Ching*, at least in the authoritative received edition, represents an overture to the whole work:

1. *Feng*: 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 mystery.

As we have noted before, this nameless mystery is also quite elusive, as it cannot be perceived by the senses or comprehended by the mind.

14. *Chan*: We look at it and do not see it;
Its name is The Invisible.
We listen to it and do not hear it;
Its name is The Inaudible.
We touch it and do not find it;
Its name is The Subtle (formless).
These three cannot be further inquired into,
And hence merge into one.
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.

However, as we see in chapter one, the one thing we know is that the Tao is the origin and source of everything, which the Chinese endearingly call the ten thousand things. But note that it is the origin not in the way that God the Creator is the origin of the universe, but in the sense that all things evolve and emerge from the Tao. One can even say that all things are born of Tao, and that Tao is the womb and mother of the ten thousand things

42. *Feng*: The Tao begot one.
One begot two.
Two begot three.
And three begot the ten thousand things.
The ten thousand things carry yin and embrace yang.
They achieve harmony by combining these forces.

Nonetheless, Lao Tzu keeps returning to the namelessness of the Tao, to remind us that it can only be taught by not speaking, and only followed by non-action.

25. *Feng*: 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.

Hence another thing that can be known about the Tao is that all things flow from the Tao, so that all things can return to the Tao. Or rather, the Tao flows out into all things, and then returns to itself.

40. *Feng*: Returning is the motion of the Tao.
Yielding is the way of the Tao.
The ten thousand things are born of being.
Being is born of not being.

Another thing we can know about Tao is that it is the opposite of violence. In a rather beautiful couplet that could be a mantra for meditation, the text tells us:

46. *Feng*: When the Tao is present in the universe,
The horses haul manure.
When the Tao is absent from the universe,
War horses are bred outside the city.

This is the reason why it is so important that kings and rulers learn to rule according to Tao, for rulers are always tempted to govern by competition, force and violence, or at least the threat of violence. If they follow the Tao instead, all things in the universe will naturally obey them, because they would bring all things into harmony.

32. *Feng*: The Tao is forever undefined.
Small though it is in the unformed state, it cannot be grasped.
If kings and lords could harness it,
The ten thousand things would naturally obey.

Tao manifests itself in the ten thousand things by bringing them to completion, by nourishing them and bringing them to become what they by nature already are. “The Tao is hidden and without name. The Tao alone nourishes and brings everything to fulfillment” (41 *Feng*). In this way, Tao manifests itself in the ten thousand things, and thus in human life, as Virtue/*Te*. “21. *Feng*: The greatest Virtue (*te*) is to follow Tao and Tao alone.” And *Te* reveals the motherly aspect of Tao.

51. *Feng*: Therefore all things arise from Tao.
By Virtue they are nourished,
Developed, cared for,
Sheltered, comforted,
Grown, and protected.
Creating without claiming,
Doing without taking credit,
Guiding without interfering,

This is Primal Virtue.

Notice how the Primal Virtue of *Te* reveals the significance of the human virtue of non-action: creating without claiming, doing without taking credit, guiding without interfering.

This brings us to another aspect of Tao and *Te* that we have come to see the past two weeks: the presence of *Te* in one's life protects one from harm. Thus Tao is the opposite of harm.

55. *Chan*: He who possesses virtue in abundance
May be compared to an infant.
Poisonous insects will not sting him.
Fierce beasts will not seize him.
Birds of prey will not strike him.
His bones are weak, his sinews tender, but his grasp is firm.
He does not yet know the union of male and female,
But his organ is aroused.
This means that his essence is at its height.
He may cry all day without becoming hoarse,
This means that his (natural) harmony is perfect.
To know harmony means to be in accord with the eternal.
To be in accord with the eternal means to be enlightened.

One is protected from harm because one does not use force or violence, nor does one interfere or compete. Rather, one manifests perfect harmony, which is the same as being enlightened. "To know harmony means to be in accord with the eternal. To be in accord with the eternal means to be enlightened." This protective power of Tao and *Te* extends to protecting us from possibly harmful spiritual beings.

60. *Chan*: If Tao is employed to rule the empire,
Spiritual beings will lose their supernatural power.
Not that they lose their spiritual power,
But their spiritual power can no longer harm people.
Not only will their supernatural power not harm people,
But the sage also will not harm people.
When both do not harm each other,
Virtue will be accumulated in both for the benefit [of the people].

Tao and *Te* are also known as being the opposite of learning and knowledge. Just as the sage acts by non-action and teaches with no words, so the sage rules by not using knowledge or cleverness.

65. *Chan*: In ancient times those who practiced Tao well
 Did not seek to enlighten the people, but to make them ignorant.
 People are difficult to govern because they have too much knowledge.
 Therefore he who rules the state through knowledge
 is a robber of the state;
 He who rules a state not through knowledge
 is a blessing to the state.
 One who knows these two things also (knows) the standard.
 Always to know the standard is called profound and secret virtue.
 Virtue becomes deep and far-reaching,
 And with it all things return to their original natural state.
 Then complete harmony will be reached.

Knowledge takes things away from their natural state, and from their rootedness in the Tao, so that we call this good and that evil, this beautiful and that ugly, this attractive and that repulsive, this right and that wrong. By refusing to govern through knowledge, the sage returns all things to their natural state, to the way Tao operates in them, which brings all things into harmony. “Virtue becomes deep and far-reaching, And with it all things return to their original natural state. Then complete harmony will be reached.” Or as the text says in another chapter for this evening:

64. Therefore the sage seeks freedom from desire.
 He does not collect precious things.
 He learns not to hold on to ideas.
 He brings men back to what they have lost.
 He helps the ten thousand things find their own nature,
 But refrains from action.

Being free from desire and free from holding onto ideas and names, the sage also acts in a way that transcends reciprocity. The sage is good to the good and to the evil, even as the sage is honest with the honest as well as with the dishonest.

9. *Chan*: I treat those who are good with goodness,
 And I also treat those who are not good with goodness.
 Thus goodness is attained.
 I am honest to those who are honest,
 And I am also honest to those who are not honest.
 Thus honesty is attained.

The sage therefore lives in harmony and tranquility free from competition, harm and violence, because the sage does not cling to the names of friends and enemies.

56. *Feng*: Those who know do not talk.
 Those who talk do not know.
 Keep your mouth closed.
 Guard your senses.
 Temper your sharpness.
 Simplify your problems.
 Mask your brightness.
 Be at one with the dust of the earth.
 This is primal union.
 He who has achieved this state
 Is unconcerned with friends and enemies,
 With good and harm, with honor and disgrace.
 This therefore is the highest state of humanity.

This equanimity reflects the universal reach of the Tao—the Tao gives rise to the universe, and the Tao nurtures and cares for everything in the universe, without exception. We cling to and follow the Tao when we care for and show mercy to everyone and everything, without exception.

62. *Feng*: Tao is the source of the ten thousand things.
 It is the treasure of the good man, and the refuge of the bad.
 If a man is bad, do not abandon him.
 Why does everyone like the Tao so much at first?
 Isn't it because you find what you seek and are forgiven when you sin?
 Therefore this is the greatest treasure of the universe.