

Lao-tzu: the human being's relationship to Tao

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Okakura, the author of *The Book of Tea* reflectively comments about the late nineteenth and early twentieth century A.D. Occidental's practice of religion:

How can one be serious with the world when the world itself is so ridiculous! The spirit of barter is everywhere. Honor and chastity! Behold the complacent salesman retailing the good and true. One can even buy a so-called religion, which is really but common morality sanctified with flowers and music. Rob the church of her accessories and what remains behind? Yet the trusts thrive marvelously, for the prices are assuredly cheap - a prayer for a ticket to heaven, a diploma for an honorable citizenship. Hide yourself under a bushel quickly, for if your real usefulness were known to the world you would soon be knocked down to the highest bidder by the public auctioneer. Why do men and women like to advertise themselves so much?

Obviously Okakura recognizes that the so-called denominational religion has replaced the individual human being's relationship to the source of life, or perhaps what people call "God" whether as Elohim, Allah, **Tao**, Nirvana Brahmin (although essentially this equates to *emptiness* and, as such, does not mean an absolute entity which could be "God"), and thus, what Cicero and Thomas Aquinas call the "natural virtue of religion". This replacement, according to Okakura is signaled by "...the spirit of barter..." and using prayer "...for a ticket to heaven..." So, if one does such things, then one ceases to relate directly to **Tao**, or the source of life and begins to relate indirectly through a denominational church.

An astonishing picture emerges as to Lao-tzu's view of the human being's relationship to **Tao**, perhaps what occidentals refer to as "God", if we interrelate tone poems 67, 13, 50, 52, 70 and 73.

#67

All the world says that my **Tao** is great and does not seem to resemble the ordinary. It is precisely because **Tao** is great that **Tao** does not resemble the ordinary.

If **Tao** did resemble it, **Tao** would have been small for a long time.

I have three treasures; guard and keep them:

The first is the maternal heart of mercy.

The second is frugality.

And the third is not to dare to be ahead of the world.

Because of deep love, one is courageous.

Because of frugality, one is generous.

Because of not daring to be ahead of the world, one becomes the leader of the world.

Now, to be courageous by forsaking the maternal heart of mercy,

To be generous by forsaking frugality.

And to be ahead of the world by forsaking following behind -

This is fatal.

For deep love helps one to win in the case of attack.

And to be firm in the case of defense.

When Heaven is to save a person,

Heaven will protect him through the maternal heart of mercy.

#13

"Favor and disgrace cause one dismay;
What we value and what we fear are within the Self".

What does this mean:

"Favor and disgrace cause one dismay?"
Those who receive a favor from above
Are dismayed when they receive it,
And dismayed when they lose it.

What does this mean:

"What we value and what we fear are within the Self?"
We have fears because we have a self (literally, a mortal body).
When we do not regard that self as self (literally, an eternal self),
What have we to fear?

Therefore he who values the world as self
May then be entrusted with the government of the world;
And he who loves the world as self (as eternal, or spiritual in source) -
The world may then be entrusted to his care.

#50

Out of life, death enters.
The organs of life are thirteen (four limbs and nine external cavities,
though a female has ten, one more than a male);
The organs of death are also thirteen (so, the female is not subject to death
because that tenth is her vagina, where she conceives life and thereby shares in it)
What sent man to death in this life are also these thirteen.
How is it so?
Because of the intense activity of multiplying life.

It has been said that he who is a good preserver of his life
Meets no tigers or wild buffaloes on land.
Is not vulnerable to weapons in the field of battle,
The horns of the wild buffalo are powerless against him;
The paws of the tiger are useless against him;
The weapons of the soldier cannot avail against him.
How is it so?
Because he is beyond death.

#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 son,
Still keeps to its mother,
Will be free from danger throughout his lifetime.

Close the mouth.
Shut the doors (of cunning and desires)
And to the end of life there will be (peace) without toil.
Open the mouth,
Meddle with affairs,
And to the end of life there will be no salvation.
Seeing what is small is called enlightenment.
Keeping to weakness is called strength.
Use the light,
Revert to enlightenment.

And thereby avoid danger to one's life -
This is called practicing the eternal.

70

My doctrines are very easy to understand and very easy to
practice,
But none in the world can understand or practice them.
My doctrines have a source, *Nature*; my deeds have a master, *Tao*.
It is because people do not understand this that they do not understand me.
Few people know me, and therefore, I am highly valued.
Therefore, the sage wears a coarse cloth on top and carries jade within his bosom.

#73

He who is brave in daring will be killed.
He who is brave in not daring will love.
Of these two, one is advantageous and one is harmful.
Who knows why Heaven dislikes what it dislikes?
Even the sage considers it a difficult question.
The *Way* of Heaven does not compete, and yet, it skillfully achieves victory.
The *Way* does not speak, and yet, it skillfully responds to things.
The *Way* comes to you without your invitation.
The *Way* is not anxious about things and yet, it plans well.
Heaven's net is indeed vast.
Though its meshes are wide, it misses nothing.

The key to understanding the relationship of human beings to *Tao*, through what Cicero and Aquinas would call the natural virtue of religion is the threefold treasures about which Lao-tzu reflects: first, the maternal heart of mercy, secondly, frugality and thirdly, "...not to dare to be ahead of the world". These three treasures, also natural virtues to Cicero and Aquinas result in the wise person acquiring three virtues: courage, generosity and humility. Rejecting these three treasures is fatal to humans; they die spiritually.

If, for instance, a person rejects the maternal heart of mercy, then the person reacts to any disturbance, dissipating one's energy, weakening oneself and, therefore, making oneself susceptible to attack. Then, if the person rejects frugality, the person does not know when to stop acquiring material possessions and loses perspective upon his or her relationship to nature and, therefore to *Tao*. If, finally, a person rejects humility, that person will be more aggressive and, therefore, more in danger of losing out to someone stronger, more favored or more popular.

Of these three, however, the first, the maternal heart of mercy, or maternal love is most important because "when heaven is to save a person, Heaven will protect him through the maternal heart of mercy". In addition, this tone poem shows not only love is the most important, but love generates both frugality and the humility of not being first in the world. Love, after all is "all you need". When one lives as the maternal heart of mercy acts, one places little value on material goods and one places the beloved first and self second. The lover's one concern is the good and nurturing of the beloved, so love permeates one's life; the lover's life changes in that one's daily life revolves around the beloved. Love truly is "all you need".

Of course, this emphasis upon the maternal heart of love, both as to the *Tao* in its relation to the human being and the human being in relation to *Tao* is not new. The *Myth of Gilgamesh* provides the same emphasis through the words of Upnaptishim. The love of friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is the means through which both Gilgamesh and Enkidu "become human together".

Then Upnaptishim reminds Gilgamesh that this same love of friendship both provides the presence of Enkidu and the "God of love and compassion" in Gilgamesh's heart so all Gilgamesh needs to do is look within his heart for the presence of both.

These three virtues of love as practiced through the maternal heart of mercy, frugality and humility presented within the **Tao** are non-competitive so they are natural, so to speak and complementary one to the other and thereby result in peace with self and nature. We can reinforce our understanding of these three virtues by contrasting their vices, namely, hate, greed and pride. Pride induces a superior attitude, leading to greed so the person becomes reactive to anyone else being or possessing something better than that person does. Such greed, spawns a hatred of any such person appearing better or richer and results in personal antagonism and anger which produces internal turmoil and outward contention.

Thus, these three vices are competitive so they are unnatural, so to speak fractious leading to divisions, ultimately war and probable death. Of course the classic story about such vices is Midas, son of Cybele and Gordius, the king of Phrygia with his "golden touch". Midas cared for a friend of Dionysus, the aged satyr and drunken Silenus. Grateful, Dionysus offered to grant Midas any favor he chose. So, the avaricious monarch, discontent with boundless wealth, thirsting for more, wanted everything he touched to turn to gold. Midas played with his new-found ability, turning rocks, plants, even dirt into gold, but such activity made him hungry and thirsty. Midas ordered food, however, as he touched it, the food turned to gold; Midas ordered wine to drink, but as he grabbed the goblet and touched the wine to his lips, the wine turned to gold. Consumed by greed, Midas died of hunger and thirst!

Tone poem 13 speaks of two essential effects of love, namely, that love is unifying and dissipates fear. Both fear and its companion guilt are divisive to the human spirit; both drain the human of energy and draw the human to focus on negative aspects of life. Love, on the contrary invigorates the human person and unities a person with the spiritual self, the "I" who extends into the body, bringing peace. As a consequence, the loving person is at peace with both self and with the world. So, this world becomes an extension of one's spiritual self which is in the image of the spiritual **Tao** not the physical self which is mortal. Thus, orientally speaking to be inside one's breathing brings the person into contact with the life source of breathing, the **Tao** since breathing is itself the basic life activity. So, just as **Tao** is united with Mother Nature, so this self now is united to the world as an extension of the spiritual self and is **ipso facto** united to **Tao**. Such a person is at home in this world and, therefore, has nothing to fear, so this "deep" love dispels fear and generates peace.

Tone poem # 50 speaks of another effect of love, namely, that a person who loves is one who truly lives on the spiritual level of human existence; mere existence, working, eating, being in control is not an issue because a person who lives "in love" is a "good preserver of life" and nothing can kill such love - reflect on the Apology of Plato and see how Socrates' love of wisdom transcended his physical death and continues to live today through that dialogue of Plato! Love by its very nature replicates a loving self both because love is attractive and because love is infectious.

Tone poem # 52 calls attention to the fact that such deep love brings a person to awareness of the very source of life, namely, **Tao** whose presence is perceived indirectly when humans understand the Mother of all beings as

present in the **yīn**, that "small" aspect of every being whose **yáng** is "great" – as perceived directly through the senses. Of course, the **yīn**, as feminine unites with the **yáng** as male through love and both become one, as did **Penia** with **Poros** in Plato's myth found in the Symposium. Therefore, the **yáng**, or that which exists because of the receptivity of the **yīn** becomes the perceptible so-called profane through which the sacred presence of the **Tao** shows itself through the **yīn**!

The wise person, therefore, closes the mouth and the doors of our human senses and reverts to the enlightenment which self-reflection upon the receptivity of the **yīn** manifests, thereby avoiding danger to one's life and practicing life as transcending the mortal world. Life, after all, is characterized by nature's seasons, living through the death of winter in the life of spring, year after year and, therefore, sharing in the characteristic of the eternal **Tao**, as manifested through the **yīn**, or female, rather than the **yáng** as manifested by the mortal world. Implied here, of course, is that the essence of Mother nature, typified by Spring as loving being alive so her love promotes and preserves life. Therefore, the wise person's imitation of and union with Mother Nature must be in and through actions of love, thereby being receptive to the **Tao** itself and thus identifying oneself with eternal life itself.

Tone poem 67 lists frugality as the second treasure and generosity as the third. This sequence of virtues is logical and practical. As noted above, the maternal heart of mercy is the very source both of frugality and humility. For instance, if and when a person is frugal in the midst of material prosperity, that person has perspective and is able to view material reality within the context of spiritual living. So, frugality gives spiritual capacity to such a person in the midst of material fullness to become generous and, thereby, imitate **yīn**, but ultimately, the **Tao** itself of which **yīn** is the sacred manifestation. At the same time, if a person is humble, then that person becomes thankful both to Mother nature as well as to **Tao**, since being alive is recognized as a gift, unique and irreplaceable.

Tone poems 70 and 73 observe that Lao-tzu's doctrines have their immediate source in Nature and the deeds he practices and recommends have **Tao** as their master. Thus, just as Mother Nature operates out of love, a love which promotes and preserves life as manifested within the **yīn**, so too does Nature's and Lao-tzu's master, namely, **Tao**. Indeed, tone poem 73 states unequivocally that the Way possesses the three treasures and, therefore, any one who follows the Way must practice and possess these three treasures. Therefore, given the fact that the Way comes to a person as gratuitous, namely, out of love and given the fact that practicing this Way is to live according to nature and thereby to walk on the IU of **Tao**, then this gift of life each person receives immediately from Mother Nature and ultimately from **Tao** can only be responded to out of gratitude and, therefore, love.

If we reflectively read the Gospel of St. John, particularly, the so-called Sacerdotal prayer of Christ at the Last Supper, we can not but marvel at the parallels and echoes we find within the **Tao** of Lao-tzu, a Chinese pagan, or so-called non-Christian of the sixth century B.C.

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word and my Father will love him and we shall come to him and make our home with him. Those who do not love me do not keep my words and my word is not my own, it is the word of the one who sent me. I have said these things to you while still with you, but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you

everything and remind you of all I have said to you. Peace, I bequeath to you, my own peace I give you, a peace the world cannot give. This is my gift to you. If you love me, you would have been glad to know that I am going to the Father for the Father is greater than I. I have told you this now before it happens so that when it does happen you may believe. I shall not talk with you any longer because the prince of this world is on his way. He has no power over me, but the world must be brought to know that I love the Father and that I am doing exactly what the Father told me. Come now, let us go. (John: 14: 24-31)

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