

Coming Back to What Matters

(Based on a talk given by angel Kyodo williams, September 2008, Center for Transformative Change | New Dharma Community, Berkeley, CA)

Tao Te Ching, Chapter 63

Act without doing;
work, without effort.
Think of the small as large
and the few as many.
Confront the difficult
while it is still easy;
accomplish the great task
by a series of small acts.

*The Master never reaches for the great;
thus she achieves greatness.
When she runs into a difficulty,
she stops and gives herself to it.
She doesn't cling to her own comfort;
thus problems are no problem for her.*

-translated by Stephen Mitchell

Useful. Particularly appropriate when your energy is low and you have someone telling you, you "should act without doing, work without effort." But what does this mean? To act without doing and to work without effort? With all of these juxtapositions, what is really being pointed at over and over again here?

"Confront the difficult while it is still easy." The difficult being, by the time it's difficult it's big. Confront it while it's easy, when it's manageable, when it's graspable. And juxtaposed to that line is: "Accomplish the great task by a series of small acts."

Everything in the first part of the passage is pointing towards letting go of our loftiness. We can think of it as overdoing all of the things that we would like to accomplish in our life to be full of hot air, to be bigger than they really are, like a series of small things thrown together. So we kind of make ourselves big and grand. We poof ourselves up with self importance, with our self centeredness. We're in the middle of all things. It's *all* happening to us. It's all unmanageable. The Book of the Way is calling us to just deal with the small things, not the great many tasks we have, because where do a great many tasks live? Where do the huge things collect? They collect out there somewhere. So when you're over here looking at something that's over there, it seems big. If you just stay right here, just with what's in front of you, there isn't a huge thing to accomplish. There's just the next step. You don't have a long, long journey to go on. You just have the very next step to take. Come back to right now, to what matters and don't blow things up. Blow them out into the future.

It's nice to think about things you'd like to accomplish. It's an entirely different thing to allow those thoughts to become distracting and thus actually prevent you from taking the next step. Strangely enough, the next step is all you can ever take. That's all you can ever do, no matter what. You actually can't take the step that's in the future. You can never get to the great task without the small task.

But we overwhelm ourselves. We overwhelm our thoughts. We overwhelm our sense of 'what has to be done' with the idea of 'what's coming.' And there's never anything more than what's happening. I dare you to find something other than what's happening right now. Go get it, bring it to me! And so, when the world seems vast and the task seems great and when overwhelm seems to be living over you, all you have to do is recount being in this moment that's in front of you, to bring your focus, not into a narrow place, but just into *a this place*. Bring your focus onto just what's right here. Step by step.

The notion that "the Master never reaches for greatness" is again about the distance of the future from the now. Thus, to choose greatness by **not** reaching for greatness, by not putting greatness someplace other than the moment that's upon us, greatness is achieved. When we reach for greatness, when you reach for accomplishment, when you reach for a better sit, when you reach for a more solid practice, when you reach for all those things that you're *going* to get to, you lose what's right in front of you.

You lose the relationship to what's in front of you, right here.

How many of us have spent our time fretting about what's to come, and spilled something on ourselves and knocked something over, stepped on someone or something that was **right there**? We lost the taste of life that was in our mouths because we were salivating on something not yet cooked; salivating on that which is not yet cooked and the taste of life is right there on our very lips.

In the practice of Ramadan (which I'm currently doing) there is this very precise calculator. It tells you exactly when sunset is for your location anywhere in the world--up to the minute and each night, all month. Even when I went east, it changed the time. And there would be some point in the day, 7:40pm, 7:35pm, 7:28pm, and a little stomach acid would begin to flow and a little saliva would come to the mouth. Then I'd just release it. I've not managed once to eat before an hour after sunset. All that time I was spending preparing and waiting, and 7:40pm would come and I'd just start picking up my water and chopsticks and start going. But by me releasing the idea of what is to come, the greatness of my meal, it just unfolds as it is. It just unfolds into nothing but the moment. And I'm no hungrier, I'm no less hungry. It's just what it is.

Now life is this same way. We fill ourselves up with these ideas of the importance of our great things...Whatever they maybe, our great relationships, our great work to do, the great thing that we haven't yet done and we're gonna get to it. And we arrive at the moment in which it's in front of us. How many of us has experienced the very disappointment of it not being quite what we made it out to be because we poofed it up, filled it with a lot of air and essentially diminished our--not the thing itself--but diminished our ability to have right relationship to it? We diminished our ability to have perspective, to appreciate things as they are--not full of the frills and tassels and glitter, the big bright lights and fireworks that we want to shine on it. And that gets repeated over and over again, the thing in our life that was like "the thing." We tell ourselves, Oh, if I could just...when this happens it will really start. And, Life will begin after this moment.

Life's always, always here. And it's always, always sweet--sometimes it's a little bitter--but It's always sweet and it's here to be lived.

You're life is here to be lived and you are the only one that decides whether or not you will live the life you have in front of you or you will *be lived* while you look towards something else that hasn't yet happened. *Will you live or will you be lived?*

*Will you reach for greatness or will you be great?
Will you reach or what is to come or will you appreciate, what is right now?
Will you drool down the front of your bib, salivating for the meal that is not yet cooked?
Or will you taste the life that is on your lips in this moment?*

Now, time for questions.

Speaker One: Will you say something about regret as opposed to reaching?

aKw: Regret is the flip side of reaching, so it's reaching into the past, where things are already done, and wishing they were other than what they were. Nothing done, undone. You can change something that is current but can never actually undo what has already been done. And so regret comes from reaching into the past and filling your present with that which is in the past. They're related in a cycle, because when you are distracted from what you might do, what you could do, what you should have done, such that you don't live fully into this moment, you end up with regret.

I've never met anyone who lives their life and regrets having lived it. The only regret is not living. You only ever, ever regret not living. And so if something arises for you to do, you just begin to act on it. There's no regret; there's no room for regret. You have things to do. There's nothing else left. But if we think, Oh, there's something to do; Oh, this is really important to do--so important I'll do it next year--then we don't live into it *in the moment* and say to ourselves, Yes, this is going to happen, and allow that to be alive for us. Not that we don't make plans, of course, we make plans, because there is only now, and there are only but so many things that could be happening right now.

The point is to be in relationship to what you set yourself up for and how you then choose to live your life. If you make it the poofy things that you're never ever going to get around to, regret is sure to be there. But on the other hand, if you set about with great plans and take small steps towards them steadily in an engaged way, there's no room for regret. There's a clear sense of: I'm living, I'm tasting.

Second Speaker: I realize sometimes things seem like they happen in auspicious ways. They're appropriate even though there wasn't the intention of them happening appropriately. I like that idea, although I don't think everybody does. To me it's recognizable and it exists.

aKw: Does it exist for you?

Speaker Two: Yeah.

aKw: Then that's what matters. People that have no sense of the auspicious, it doesn't exist for them. And so it doesn't exist. And if you have sense of things being auspicious, then it exists. And it exists one hundred percent, and it exists everywhere. But if you agree, then there's a view of things as just ordinary. Nothing ever happens in a way that is particularly special. It's all just mundane coincidence that you're calling things auspicious. You want to see things like that, so you just made it up. And for people that think in that way, there is no auspiciousness. And there's no auspiciousness in their life.

Speaker Two: Would you say that what you believe really matters?

aKw: I would say that that would be true. Not only what we believe...you know 'matters' is such a great word: What we believe matters, materializes; what we believe comes into being. You could question whether it's there or not, but perspective is so important. The there, or not there, is just a matter of who's asking, who's looking. It's the notion of a fixed and concrete reality that everyone can agree on. Right? And in our lives there are these sort of agreements, agreements with ourselves and agreements with others. So we make the life that we want to live based on the agreements that we make with ourselves and the agreements that we make with others. We can make agreements of having mundane, merely coincidental lives or we can make agreements with having auspicious events and occasions that express to us the utter alignment of all things.

I realized I left a passage out of Chapter 63. I wouldn't say it's the most important but it kind of has a little juice.

aKw: "When [the Master] runs into a difficulty, she stops and gives herself to it."

[Everyone laughs]

So I'll tell you that Stephen Mitchell (a translator of the *Tao Te Ching*)--he lives here at Berkeley--is one of the finest modern translators. And this is one of the finest works, because it's so thoughtful of the feminine and really brings the essence of the *Tao* into the English language. Not such an easy task. If you had a chance to see say six different translations, you'd understand that this could say, "Sticks and stones will break your bones but words will never hurt you." *That* could be the translation of this verse instead of what we have.

But if I were going to do a translation of this line right here, "When she runs into a difficulty, she stops and gives herself to it," I would write over here, "No regrets," because that's the instruction. And I'd include: "When she runs into a difficulty, she stops and then just gives herself to it. She stops and gives herself to it." Both things.

The Master lets go, lets go of whatever she had in mind so that she can give herself to the difficulty, because she gives herself to it without any concern of her comfort.