

## INTRODUCTION

A thin, intense-looking man sat quietly next to a small pond near the southern tip of India. The man's legs were crossed in lotus pose and his body remained quiet, but his thoughts were intense and penetrating. A bright sun shone brilliantly on the surface of the water, and each tiny wave carried a burning image of the solar disk on its crest. The pond was alive with the dancing, shimmering wavelets, undulating hypnotically in a way that would have mesmerized anyone less wakeful.

The soil in this region is sandy in all directions, to the south and west joining the shore of the Arabian Sea with a barely noticeable break. Palms and scrub undergrowth grow sparsely in the desert soil, twisted by heat and prevailing winds. At the foot of the nearby mountains, increased nutrients allow the jungle to grow more thickly, while the tropical climate favors an exuberant outburst of life. Vines cover the trees, epiphytes blossom on every branch, and insects swarm in profusion. Snakes, many of them poisonous, lie camouflaged in branches fallen to the ground.

As the day wore on a light breeze sprang up, and sand and dust sifted onto the pool's surface. The man watched carefully as the dirt slowly sank into the crystalline water, swirling downwards as myriad speckles of light, until lost in the darkness of the depths. He knew that in time the little lake would fill totally with sand, becoming as dry and barren as much of the land around it, but that the wind would also scour out a new hollow in a new location which the monsoon rains could fill up in turn.

As the young man critically studied the scene the depth of his contemplation intensified. The wind sang through the vine laden trees nearby. The multiple sun-images gradually merged together, increasing the light to a dazzling degree. Suddenly, like a dam giving way, his awareness was flooded with insight rushing upon insight, and he was enveloped in a gloriously all-embracing happiness. In the face of such meaningful brilliance, the best he could imagine doing was to incline in reverent adulation of the source of all this wonder.

Deep in his state of blissful contemplation, the man's mind reeled with the implications of the scene before him. Not a single insight, but a full flood of them prevailed on all sides, filling his whole being with understanding. The wayside pond became a perfect image of humanity's eternal situation.

Whatever elements were present in the surrounding world, the winds blew them into the pond. This meant that if an individual self was likened to a neglected pond in a waste land, the winds bringing in dust from the surroundings represented the forces of nature or maya presenting perceptual and conceptual material. Each of these sensory forces affects consciousness by producing some kind of reaction, as an agitation of the surface. By its very presence the material affects the clarity of the water, and as it sinks to the bottom its accumulation alters the terrain in the same way that samskaras condition the individual, by slowly changing its shape.

To the blissful meditator the one sun above clearly represented the Absolute, the giver of all light and life which remains unaffected by the rotation of the earth, cloud activity, storms, or any other terrestrial phenomenon. This was the Self with a capital 'S'. The multiple images reflected by each separate wave, mirror, dewdrop, or other surface on the earth below were like the endless parade of changing individuals, selves with a small 's'. Each of these images reflected the true sun in a beautiful and uniquely distorted manner. When the pond was still the images grew more and more perfect, though no one would be so foolish as to mistake even the most perfect of them for the sun itself. When wind rippled the surface the images became increasingly agitated, until at their most extreme the image of the sun was entirely obscured. But no amount of clouding or evaporation had even the most negligible effect on the sun above. It was exactly like the individual self's relation to the Self: close and harmonious in moments of peace, farther from sight as one became more agitated.

The man, of course, was Narayana Guru, and just such a profound realization came to him as he sat alone in the wilds of South India. Through him the fruits of his revelation would begin to spread out in ripples of wisdom which would eventually benefit the whole world. But first he had to allow the inner principle that was instructing him to increase his understanding as much as possible.

Like a grand book, the whole universe is a symbolic expression of higher truth, and the guru principle is a name for the beautiful way in which this truth reveals itself to the seeker. For Narayana Guru the world of nature around him was the medium of this invisible wisdom transmission, so that everywhere he looked what he saw was full of meaning. The vines climbing into the trees spoke of the pattern of our lives where the accretions of

memories slowly choke and submerge our original form. The red hot ember of a stick from a cooking fire being twirled around to produce virtual images became an analogy for the course of our lives, with its bright, moving spark of the present leaving a virtual aftereffect in shapes in memory. Spinning oil lamps hanging in the dark of a simple place of worship spoke to him of the inner structure of the human body. Waves rolling in to the shore whispered of individual existences sweeping across the depths of the Real. Each grain of sand became for him a precious jewel of value beyond price. He was overwhelmed by intense happiness and gratitude for this oceanic awareness, and knew he must share it with anyone who might also wish to embrace it. The time of teaching was not far in the future.

Sitting quietly in the midst of this flood of meaningful images, the Guru began to formulate a new and revolutionary philosophy. While the prevailing belief of most of humanity is that this world is either unreal or merely a practice ground for a future life in another place, he knew from inner assurance that this was the whole, and it was many times over more than enough. That Absolute, which everyone spoke of in different ways, was itself manifesting as all This. Everything was here, at this very moment. But when it was conceived of as having a specific form, people tended to forget the original mold from which it came—its Karu—and focus only on the form. This led to arguments and disputes. But those who remembered the source had no need to quarrel, they were content to know and share their knowledge.

This was not so much a casting down of gods and the religions that paid homage to them, as an emancipation from illusory ideas. The seeming loss brought about by the dissolution of imaginary deities was more than offset by the gain through the understanding of one's own being. If people could truly appreciate the unity of the created with the creator they would at last be freed of all constraints, and absolute happiness would be seen to be their own essential nature. This would free everyone from so many delusions and release them from misery! The Guru's heart went out to everyone and everything. He must bring this insight to the world!

Filled with intense happiness and a boundless compassion for humanity's suffering, Narayana Guru moved to the fringes of civilization, where he soon attracted the attention of sensitive souls. All who came to associate with him felt a pervasive peace in his presence, and found their

minds becoming activated in ways that solved problems rather than invented them. Very rapidly his followers became numerous, and his influence spread.

It is mysterious how one person can act as a catalyst for social change, while others who might uphold the same beliefs remain unknown and ineffective. Narayana Guru spoke gently and lived simply, but his message went directly to the heart of the people and began to have important consequences. The populace felt moved to action by his words and presence as nothing had ever moved them before. Life in South India began slowly to change for the better, though as with all change it was a slow and challenging process.

Everywhere he went the Guru rhetorically asked people, if the Absolute is the source of all things equally, why should there be high and low castes, why should women be treated as unworthy, and why should humanity treat the environment—in a sense the body of the divine—as an evil to be eradicated or a waste receptacle. And as these were commonsense ideas, they began to take hold. In a land where the downtrodden and fortunate alike had come to accept their places as divinely assigned, and the social code was rigidly enforced by fear of mundane as well as divine retribution, sea changes began to occur. The various castes began to have contact with each other, with some radicals, led by the Guru himself, even maintaining that castes should be abolished altogether. Schools for girls were instituted, and a more universal education began to chip away at inequality based on privilege. Only in the area of man's relation to his environment did the Guru's message fail to move the rock of habitual behavior, but considering the magnitude of the task of totally reorienting society it is understandable that this was put on a back burner until the most egregious human wrongs could be attended to. Worldwide, humanity as a whole has barely begun to address this issue, though it looms large in the near future, as the earth begins to seriously decline from overpopulation and pollution.

Through his long lifetime of introspection, Narayana Guru's philosophy evolved from one virtually indistinguishable from Sankara's to a radical vision that was uniquely his own. Whereas the ultimate analysis of India's ancient schools was that this world is unreal and the Absolute alone is real, the Guru decided that falsifying the world around us was not only invalid but led to a state of mind which allowed all the evils of religious corruption to overwhelm the world's innate beauty, in the same way that parasitic vines

engulf and often kill the trees on which they grow. India in Narayana Guru's time, the late nineteenth century, was a stultifying example of this, with a tremendously oppressive social structure held rigidly in place by fatalistic acceptance, with all people's hopes for happiness deferred to heaven worlds and future existences.

Instead of dismissing the world as an illusion born of maya, Narayana Guru's vision embraced the world as simultaneously true and untrue, both real and unreal at once. Resistant of but not impervious to scientific analysis, these elements mixed together in a way that could only be described as a wonder, a wonder so perfect as to deeply inspire the contemplator of the mystery of existence.

Guru Nitya speaks to this point towards the end of *Atmopadesa Satakam*:

There is a generally held belief that because Vedanta treats this world as maya it dampens one's interest in everything here, making one ineffective. Many European critics think even now that the progress of India is retarded because of Vedanta's emphasis on maya as explaining away the need to do anything in this world. Narayana Guru restates Vedanta in such a way that every individual reaction, every aspiration which is ontologically valid, has a relevant place in life. There is no shying away from any responsibility or any efficient action, as long as it is done at the right time and in the right place. In this way we can say he corrects the notion of Vedanta in these verses.

Now by verse 92 the proper status of the transactional world is well established. Life is valid. It only lacks validity when we are confused regarding the *pratibhāsa* and the *vyavahāra*, or everyday, aspects. *Pratibhāsa* means that within the transactional world there are possibilities for illusion. It's true those illusions are to be avoided, but this doesn't mean that because it gives rise to illusion we should neglect the necessary aspects of the ontologic world. That would be an unwarranted extrapolation.

This way of looking at the world charges us to engage in our own life to the maximum degree. Reality is not a substitute for something else—it is

exactly what it is. There is no other place, no heaven or hell to which our actions are leading us. The implications of such a philosophy are profound, and indeed the Guru's life as one of the great emancipators of the human race clearly demonstrates the potential of those implications. Unfortunately, it is such a radical belief that few have been bold enough to embrace it. Humans are all so deeply grounded in escapist belief systems that even when we encounter such an example we are unconsciously drawn back to our fantasies of future payoffs, diverting and diluting our capabilities from any involvement in the burning issues of the present. Even within the mystery school of the Guru's own philosophy, the Narayana Gurukula, there is only an incipient appreciation of this revolutionary outlook.

Narayana Guru directly embodies the ancient ideal of the lone seeker experiencing the "flight of the alone to the Alone." The smattering of stories that have been passed down about his early life show that he was an unusually wise and sensitive child, with strong tendencies towards absolutism and the courage to follow his own instincts with little regard for social pressures. Though perhaps instructed by his family, no one speaks of his having had a guru. When the time came to leave home, he plunged alone into solitude. He rediscovered his true nature on his own, far from any ashram or school, by sitting quietly and contemplating deeply. He went deeply into his own core and there discovered the Core of all, what he calls the Karu in the present work. Later on, when he studied the classics, he could see he was allied with ancient rishis like Sankara, Ramanuja, and Patanjali. As he himself said, "First we experienced it in ourselves and then we found it was written in books."

During his lifetime, Narayana Guru became widely known and tremendously influential. His philosophical reevaluation of the weak points of the ancient wisdom teachings, such as the issues of caste and orthodoxy, bringing them up to par, as it were, places him in the forefront of the great Indian teachers of history. The insight he experienced transformed those around him, flowing outwards like the ripples on a pond to affect society as a whole. Such was the power of his influence that today Southwestern India is celebrated as one of the most advanced societies in the world.

Naryana Guru clearly foresaw the importance of a demonstrable ideology in keeping with the tenets of science, so that people all over the world could understand his message of unity and tolerance. With this end in mind, he sent one of his three preeminent disciples, P. Natarajan, the future

Nataraja Guru, to do graduate work at the Sorbonne in France, in order to become well-versed in Western philosophy and science. The combination of Vedantic reductionism and scientific mental discipline had a profound effect on him, and he was later able to express the elements of Self-realization in a revolutionary scheme of correlation that was free from localized or limiting elements. This allowed him to interpret the mystical truths of his guru in academically strict, scientific and mathematical terms. In order to perpetuate the teachings of Narayana Guru he started the Narayana Gurukula, loosely based on the model of the traditional Indian ashram.

Nataraja Guru was succeeded by his disciple, Guru Nitya, who excelled at interpreting the teachings in human terms, expressing them clearly and simply on the level of daily life. It was his role as a teacher of all who approached him with sincerity, including the Americans to whom the present commentary was given, that assisted him to hone his communication skills to a fine point. Through these three teachers, the parampara or heirarchy of the Narayana Gurukula has brought over 100 years of continuous contemplation to fruition in the present work.

One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction is Narayana Guru's best known large-scale work. In it the timeless wisdom of Vedanta is presented in a loosely organized, somewhat informal manner reminiscent of the Upanishads. It was written in 1897, at the request of Narayana Guru's disciples, notably Sivalinga Swami, around the time he moved from Aruvipuram to Sivagiri, the ashram near Varkala at which he centered the last stage of his life. The imagery of the natural world from Narayana Guru's years in the wilderness makes up the core of its analogies. Each image, developed in from one to a small group of verses, is more an angle of vision or point of view than a finalized statement of absolute truth. The work as a whole is a sum total of many of these points of view. Originally there were some sixteen or eighteen more verses which the Guru eventually edited out, streamlining the work to a "modern" one hundred. It is widely read today in Kerala and surrounding areas, forming a significant part of the philosophical background of Southwestern India.

In his earlier writings, Narayana Guru had couched his vision in terms of the Hindu pantheon, whose symbols saturated every aspect of life in South India at that time. With further contemplation and insight, he moved steadily

throughout his life towards a universal, scientific appraisal that would not be limited to any particular time or belief system, but would harmoniously take all of them into account. The present work was composed towards the end of this development, and so is nearly, but not completely, devoid of religious references. It was only with his last great work, *Darsanamala*, that Narayana Guru's philosophy became fully scientific and completely free of regional imagery. A knowledge of the complex pantheon of Indian iconography is therefore unnecessary for the appreciation of these later works.

Even in systems in which faith is not considered a valuable or even important element, a certain amount of faith is necessary to enter into a program in the first place—the faith that the study will produce results. This is the faith exemplified in the opening verse, where a kind of mental obeisance is paid to a principle and a set of ideas which it is hoped will lead the aspirant to a return to the wisdom of the Self. By the 100th verse the two counterparts—the individual and the Karu or cosmic core—are reunited as one in the embrace of the celestial pulse of aum, and the necessity for faith is gently and peacefully extinguished.

It is a common idea in the modern world that lack of a belief in a god or gods is tantamount to moral and ethical collapse, and that humanity must live in fear of eternal punishment in order to behave correctly. The One Hundred Verses dispels this notion, demonstrating that a proper understanding is all that is needed for the highest ethical standards to prevail.

The brightly shining center of AS is the core or Karu. Unitive and singular, it is like a dimensionless point. As a seed it sprouts and grows into the flowers of the endless dualities of existence: sleeping and waking, day and night, pain and pleasure, the self and the other, and so on. The gist of the practice involved with this study is meeting and neutralizing the manifold dualities by attuning oneself to the nondual core, the Karu, that infuses them. Dualism is surprisingly persistent and difficult to disarm. As it comprises practically everything conceivable and perceivable, it is always met on its own terms, so to speak. Only by a profoundly mysterious act which cuts through the duality, like the inward obeisance recommended by Narayana Guru at the very outset of this study, can the Karu be apprehended.

Arriving at the point where such a gesture is even possible, meeting and overcoming each obstacle, is where there is much work to be done. This is paradoxically why, despite the instantaneous dawning of insight, the road is



simultaneously long and arduous. The result of this effort, though, is the transformation of perception, the harmonization of activity, and the infusion of happiness or bliss into every aspect of life.

And A.S. truly is a work that will transform dedicated students of its teachings, not necessarily by putting them in touch with some mysterious external force, but by helping them do away with excess mental baggage, replacing it with a wise and compassionate philosophy. A careful reading of the commentary, combined with an honest assessment of its relation to everyday life, will surely bear the fruit of increased happiness and satisfaction.

Because Atmopadesa Satakam was intended as an instruction for Narayana Guru's disciples, it reveals a great deal of the way in which a guru imparts knowledge. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a more perfect medium for guru/disciple instruction. It is in many ways a unique presentation of a guru instructing his disciples. As such it is well suited for use as a template or course of instruction. But unlike a tract for individual study in the home, it calls out for the elucidation of a wisdom-preceptor. As such this commentary, while not intended for casual perusal, can reveal the implied significance of the verses in their original intent to the seeker who apprentices himself to the task of delving deeply into the subject matter.(fix this paragraph)

The work presents a number of perspectives on the Self, or the Absolute, since no one angle of vision is sufficient to fully appreciate it. The visions are not strongly organized as with modern scientific treatises, but rather loosely affiliated along the lines of more ancient texts. (For those who are interested in such matters, a structural analysis is supplied in Nataraja Guru's commentary.)

The koan-like verses reveal many layers of meaning to the thoughtful contemplative; happily for the more casual reader we now have Guru Nitya's own meditations, products of a lifetime of contemplation and study. Just as no perspective can totally encompass the Absolute, no commentary could fully explore the potentials in each of these verses. Nitya's versions are by no means exhaustive, only examples of what can be gained from the verses by reflection.

There is always some degree of limitation in describing the indescribable. This is particularly to be expected when the subject of the study is affirmed at the outset to be incomprehensible, indescribable, and indeterminate, as it is in this work. Because of this fluidity, any nonpoetic,

fixed statement of “truth” regarding the Absolute tends to be untrue to the extent it is inflexible or circumscribed. A more subtle style is called for, which can in its turn bring about a greater depth of insight and certitude than any linear course of instruction.

To overcome this limitation of mental imagery a guru will often give example after example, some of them overlapping or even mutually contradictory, to be dialectically assembled until wisdom dawns in the disciple’s mind. In this work, Narayana Guru is presenting the indescribable Absolute from various angles of vision, piling up allusions and analogies until the reader can achieve a breakthrough in understanding. Guru Nitya uses this approach in his commentary also, so that the reader will find certain ideas that contrast with or even contradict previous ones, but are nonetheless true in their particular context. Contradiction is considered an important technique to force the disciple to seek his own interpretation, and to dig deep beneath the surface to find hidden areas of agreement between seemingly diverse factors.

There is a well-known story of some blind men and an elephant. A number of sightless people are trying to determine what an elephant is really like. The one touching the ear says, “Ah, it is like a rug!” The one touching the tail says, “No, it’s more like a rope!” A third with a leg says, “ It feels like a tree trunk to me!” They argue more and more vehemently about it, with each unwilling to give up his own petty point of view. Of course, the blind men are a wonderful metaphor for religious dogmatics, kept ignorant by their arrogance in believing the small part they are in contact with is in fact the whole. But what if they decided to share their views with each other and incorporate as many perspectives as possible? In that case the more people who were involved, the better the picture they would be able to develop of the beast they were examining.

Narayana Guru spent his life mediating such confusion among roomfuls of disputants, demonstrating to people how their opinions could be coordinated and made into a useful program. His motto was that people should always be prepared to “know and let know, rather than to argue and win.” Such a plan underlies the structure of AS as well. In it there are many angles of vision, all very carefully and thoughtfully coordinated and assessed. In other words, there are so many “blind men” here, that an accurate depiction of the elephant actually becomes possible.

This multifaceted approach is in fact an essential method of instruction in this type of work, being more abstract and less rigid than either a classical academic approach or a vocational course of instruction. These aim to reestablish preexisting ideas, whereas Narayana Guru seeks to bring the student to an orientation where he can discover truth for himself. Because of this, *Atmopadesa Satakam* is not a book that offers a mechanical program of steps to take to achieve some predictable result. Rather, it reveals the reader's own inner nature from a series of metaphysical perspectives. It is up to the individual to make as much as possible out of it. Remembering the reality of the Self is sufficient in itself to bring about a dynamic change of orientation in one's whole being. With the addition of Guru Nitya's commentary, the implications of such a reorientation in one's everyday life are made clear with an irrefutable certitude.

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The commentator, Nitya Chaitanya Yati (1924-1999), grew up on a matriarchal, communal plantation in rural South India, where his parents and relatives encouraged and inspired him in his intellectual and artistic endeavors. After many years of wandering and seeking, which brought him in contact with Mahatma Gandhi, Ramana Maharshi, G. H. Mees and others, he became the disciple of Nataraja Guru, a primary disciple of Narayana Guru and a thoroughgoing absolutist in his own right. After a stormy apprenticeship, Nitya became the third of the gurus in the lineage of Narayana Guru. He spent many of his teaching years traveling the globe, establishing two Narayana Gurukula centers in the Western United States. Over time he became conversant with the unique needs and modes of thought of the West, which actually overlap the traditional Indian world very little. He spent his lifetime teaching, writing, and interacting with many thousands of disciples worldwide.

In the year 1977, a mere two years after declaring categorically that he had only one student and that was himself, Nitya and a group of disciples moved into one floor of a house on the side of a hill in Portland, Oregon. Nitya was giving classes at nearby Portland State University, writing books and keeping up his voluminous correspondence, reading widely and studying science, art and philosophy, and all the while instructing a sizable group of

seekers. The place hummed with activity all day and most of the night. Towards the Fall, a plan was made to begin a course of instruction in Atmopadesa Satakam, the 100 verses of Self-instruction. The students agreed to spend 100 days on the project, examining one verse in depth each day.

Nitya's plan was to meet for an early morning class, where one verse would be introduced and its meaning elucidated. Then, throughout the day, the students would ponder the implications in the midst of whatever activities they were engaged in, striving to bring the truth of the Gurus' words into their everyday lives. In the evening they would all return for a discussion of what they had observed. This gathering usually had all the hallmarks of Upanishadic instruction, with disciples asking probing questions and the Guru expounding at length, often bringing personal elements to bear as well. Unfortunately, the evening sessions were never recorded. The morning meditations were taped, however, and transcribed later the same day. This book is the result.

A guru's talk is similar to a teacher's lecture, an extemporaneous presentation with background of memories and insights substituting for written notes. Further, the guru practices a form of prophecy, or "forth-speaking." By gently lowering and quieting the ego, the wellspring of intuition is tapped and allowed to flow naturally to the surface. Coming from such depths, it is as if the ancient traditions are speaking through him, and all his rich background is brought to bear on the subject. In the 100 verses study, Nitya first led the group in several short chants to bring a state of attunement, then meditated intensely for a few minutes before beginning the talk. In many cases the result was nothing short of a revelation, having a profound transformative effect on the gathered disciples, who then went about their daily tasks in a state of wonderment and ecstasy.

The students of the incipient Portland Gurukula represented a diverse sampling of Westerners of 1970s America. For those unfamiliar with that heady time, a brief sketch is perhaps in order. The social climate in America especially was very intense. People believed their beliefs with a vengeance and often preached them aggressively. The fact that people were visibly suffering and dying due to ideological turf wars lent an air of desperation to nearly every discourse. Young adults were everywhere filled with passion; many had left their homes in what was called the Generation Gap. Disbelievers in the Vietnam War clashed with true believers from World War

II and Korea over issues of patriotism, and the young refused to accept the time-honored hypocrisy of racial prejudice as well. Unquestioning obedience to authority was being supplanted by an as yet unguided independence, and drugs and multiple love affairs accelerated the excesses of youth to a fever pitch. All socially accepted standards, the good along with the bad, were thrown away. Even those who sought sanctuary in meditative groups and retreats were quiet with a passionate intensity. In the anarchic moral psychosphere of the West, few realized that their beliefs were being shaped by their desires and personal preferences as much as by external events. It was a time of chaos and excitement almost unimaginable now, in the sedate years of the 21st century.

In the midst of this moral hodgepodge and shimmering dream nightmare, Guru Nitya arrived in 1970. With a commanding presence and a visible inner certitude that marked him as unique, he began teaching in a side room of a church in downtown Portland, Oregon. Such was the interest in Indian philosophy in those days, that fledgling KBOO radio taped and broadcast his class on the Bhagavad Gita to listeners all over the city. It was quickly clear that his intensity was more than a match for the confusion around him, and he built a small but focused group of followers.

Some years later this group, augmented by seekers from around the U.S. and even Australia and India, gathered together and rented the house in Hall Street, less than a kilometer from the site of Nitya's first Gita class in Portland. The heterogeneous group was made up of doctors, teachers, writers and other artists of various stripes, blue collar workers, householders, and mendicant wanderers.

Early in his adulthood, Guru Nitya had been told by an astrologer that throughout his life he would be surrounded by women, artists and madmen. To an Indian in midcentury, the idea of women following a guru was much more unbelievable than even artists or madmen, but in this case the stars turned out to be right. Women, artists and madmen would be a fair assessment of the makeup of the disciples at Hall Street. In fact, many fell into two or even all three categories! A number lived in the house, and as many more came from all over the area to spend their days in the congenial environment, rising in the dark to arrive in time for the six o'clock morning class.

The one uniting factor in all the students was a strong desire to understand themselves and their place in the universe. But in a situation where

so many different people are brought together in such an intense environment, there are often a number of problems that come up. Intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts form the backdrop of the commentary of the One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction. The Guru often addressed these issues directly at other times, but he also took pains to point out the relevance of the day's verse to the problems that were raised by the people around him. Without this process of relating subtle truths to the world of concrete dilemmas, the teachings remain an academic exercise, to a degree sterile and abstracted. Their very importance lies in how they influence a student's actual life.

Although he transcended religion for himself, Narayana Guru always embraced its value for others. He repeatedly said, "Whatever the religion, it is good if it makes a better person." The implication is that abstract beliefs are of no value in themselves, only in whether and how they lead us to improve ourselves. Drawing direct connections between ideas and their implementation was also a keynote of Nitya's teaching style.

The careful reader will quickly realize this is much more than an academic commentary. The format of the 100 verses is used to instruct disciples as well as elucidate the text. This shapes the commentary, with the guru heightening and bringing focus on certain areas while deemphasizing certain others, simultaneously bringing it to life in a way few academic works ever could. Such a technique provides an interesting "inner commentary," while at the same time using the work as it was truly intended to be used: as a method for a guru to instruct disciples and other aspirants.

In this it will be very helpful for the reader to actually picture the images that are presented, rather than merely attending to the intellectual content as is usual in the reading process. Taking the time to really make the images come alive in the mind reveals the depth of the subject much more vividly. Certainly that is how the Hall Street class assimilated the work.

The verses make more sense (cf. Nataraja) in the original Malayalam. Their koanlike appearance in English is partly due to the difficulty of encapsulating a rich terminology into a language which lacks words for many of the concepts involved. Sanskrit and its modern offshoot Malayalam often

require paragraphs of explanation to reveal all the nuances implicit in them—another reason for an extensive commentary.

Historically, the interpretation of word meanings has been an important element of Indian spiritual life. Since words convey ideas, and ideas lead to action, a slipshod interpretation of word meanings indicated an undeveloped orientation to the whole of life. From this perspective, the student is only learning to read the verses properly, coming to understand their meaning when the concepts are correctly sorted out. However, the large number of Malayalam and Sanskrit terms dealt with in detail in the class have been greatly reduced in order to make the commentary more readable.

Of course, they are artistically presented (+Nat. ideas), so that a reader in Malayalam would also benefit from extensive elucidation....

AS is widely known in South India, and its implications are certainly more apparent to someone with a background in Indian ideology, but a work like this can only be fully appreciated with the help of a commentary from one who has thought about it for many years. For Westerners the koan-like nature of many of the verses, even after a couple of generations of refinement of the translation, makes them almost totally obscure standing on their own.

A careful reader should be able to deduce the inner teaching being presented to the living students in the class. Picture the images which are being evoked by the statements, how they string together to make an almost symphonic composition in addition to the academic material. For the listeners this was often more real than the words they heard. Not infrequently the flow and clash of these images, presented in the lively fashion of the highly animated teacher, produced a state of exhaltation or sense of great peace by the end of the class, or at other times jolted the students out of their complacency to spend the day in critical self-inquiry....

Occasionally there is a reference which seems to have no referent. During the time of the class in the Hall St. house, meetings and discussions were underway all day long. After meditating on the verse of the morning throughout the day, the class would meet again in the evening for another talk and group discussion, of which there is unfortunately no record remaining. Some of the seemingly ungrounded references are to ideas brought up in these

other encounters, and are left in only because they make implicit sense in the present context.

Popular ideas such as reincarnation are downplayed here, in part because the class was fixated on them. As such they are impediments in their own right, regardless of their existential validity. While in much of Asia reincarnation is taken for granted, it is bypassed here as being of only an intellectual, rather than a spiritual or philosophical, significance. From the perspective of AS, the greatest mistake we make is to identify with the individual self rather than the all-inclusive Self, and the idea of reincarnation feeds directly into this misapprehension by focusing attention on the individual psyche. Moreover, thinking about reincarnation is another subtle way in which we remove ourselves from attending to the present to fantasize prospectively and retrospectively. (The revised position views the Self as continually renewing itself by incarnating over and over as the whole panoply of existence.)

Verse 92:

Because of the obscuring aspects of prakriti we spoke of earlier, the true nature of the Self is veiled to different degrees on different occasions. At times the veiling principle can be easily removed, and at other times it persists for a long time, leading you to get involved in more action.

There is no time when the aspiration to be with our own true nature is not with us. Our seeming alienation from it comes not in reality but in the individuated forms of our consciousness. When the Self manifests itself with a body, the body identity acts as a coloring or conditioning agent. This is the first veiling principle. Because of it, part of consciousness feels as if it is segregated from its true field, its true home, so it is always seeking to return to its native nature.

The inner quest continues in us, never leaving, perpetuated by the conditioning of the physical body. In reality nothing is alien to us, everything belongs to the Self and the Self is existence through and through. So in every existential factor there is a possibility of discovering the ananda aspect of the Self. This is why the mind is again and again drawn to individual things, people, events, possibilities. The



existential aspect and the ananda aspect have become linked in our awareness, and are continuously operating within us.

So we have a great bifurcation or division into two: an outer manifestation where action never ceases, and an inner manifestation where the quest for being with our own true Self is also going on continuously. The Guru says what seems to be action outside is only an external reflection of this incessant quest we are feeling inside. All actions which happen outside mirror in themselves what is happening inside, that is, the eternal quest.

In this light the 100 verses is a secret bomb aimed to destroy the hypocrisy and false ideology we carry around with us all the time. It appears on first impression safe and peaceful, a bit like a house cat sleeping in the sun, but it is in reality a powerful blast aimed at the root of our own false sense of a separate self. Not only does it attack the social mask we maintain for the dubious benefit of others, but, it exposes the taproot of our own self-delusion as well. Such self-delusion is the starting point for all the other masquerades and deceptions we obtrude into the social arena, and with its demise all other pretenses wither and fade.

In verse 9, Narayana Guru's reprises one of his favorite images: that of a contemplative sitting alertly under a great tree. Growing on the tree and simultaneously reaching out to engulf the contemplative is a proliferating vine: the beautiful profusion of creation. Many of us humans have become mesmerized by the swaying branches of the creeper, and have forgotten the magnificent tree which supports it, giving it shape and providing its nourishment. We surrender to the embrace of the enfolding vines. The Guru here counsels us not to run away and not to try to destroy the creeper, but to sit alertly, uncaught, appreciating how wondrously the situation remains in balance, with all elements in their place.

It is not easy to maintain a balance between the real and the unreal. It requires intense contemplation. We must remain awake to the changing situation, walking a fine line as it were, a razor's edge of harmony. When we relax our vigilance we drift to one side or the other, becoming caught in the deceptions of worldliness or, on the other hand, drifting away from involvement with the world, considering it of less importance than some

abstract, hypothetical notion. Only a dynamic interplay between our assessment of the tree and the creepers produces a living, creative philosophy.

Humanity has a long history of listening to inspiring words of wisdom, nodding indulgently in vague appreciation, and then continuing on unchanged, wandering in confusion and bringing misery and fear upon itself. This stems from the methodological error of attributing authority to an outside agency, such as a hypothetical god or gods or worse yet a priestly caste, and relegating humans to an automatic and unremitting state of sin. This unwarranted duality is effaced in Narayana Guru's philosophy. Each of us is seen to be of an equal status with all other elements of creation, and the responsibility for action and understanding lies solely within the individual. The world is unassailably united with the perceiver of it, and what is done to it is done to oneself. This is a radical revaluation that bestows a great freedom coupled equally with an unlimited responsibility. As Guru Nitya says in verse 98:

Many people do not retrospect and examine all the significant aspects of their life in order to learn and grow. They just walk on. They are not confused only because they don't think about things, not because they have resolved them. But they are really no better than the person who retrospect and is confused.

Such kind of a nonreflective way of life leads you to the most agonizing kind of experience. The bright moments of life bring you, for a while at least, satisfaction in what you are doing. The next moment the whole thing appears to be futile, meaningless. Then come a few bright moments. Then doubt assails. The net result is living in a vicious circle.

Verse 98:

This verse is a challenge to us. When Narayana Guru says we have not known anything, we should be able to say we *have* known, we have learned from our substantial efforts. For that to be possible we should at least make a sincere attempt to raise our consciousness to another level. Such an effort cannot be made by someone else on our behalf, we have to do it for ourselves.

You have to bring your life to a white heat. Even in material things, such as splitting the atom or studying the depths of space, seekers have to make contrivances which look almost impossible, but they do it. And what do you

gain by smashing an atom? If you want to know the least bit about a particle, an *anu*, you have to spend so much money and effort, keep a great vigil and constantly refine and sharpen your tools. Then, to know about the Absolute how much greater dedication should you have? How much more willingness should you have? How much more preparedness?

The most significant structural feature is the division into two halves between verses 49 and 50. The first half deals with more or less pragmatic considerations of the seeker's relation with the world, while the second half is more focused on introspection and the contemplative's inner unfoldment. Nataraja Guru summarizes this in his own commentary on the One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction (Gurukula Publishing House; Varkala, Kerala, India; p.167), as follows:

With this fiftieth verse which marks the centre of the hundred verses of the composition, when read together with the immediately previous one, we have to note that there is a change-over from one aspect of Self-instruction to another. The change-over could be described philosophically as passing from the ontological to the teleological.

Verse 49 ended on the note that one should settle down in inner peace of mind. Those aspects of Self-realization that are most conducive to this peace as understood in this contemplative context have been treated of by the Guru in a certain methodological and epistemological order. In both the halves of the work we notice that the topics discussed are round factors of subjective import as the subject matter of the whole composition would warrant. Introspection however becomes affirmed deeper in the second half as deeper recesses of the Self are brought up into view and scrutinized more carefully where again the reader would profit by noting the inward approach to the subject matter. Cosmology and psychology enter into the structure of the verses in their own manner, and one is to be understood in terms of the other. A contemplatively neutral psycho-physical method and theory of knowledge, besides an axiology or science of values, all viewed in an

absolutist sense, are implied in the verses as they now pass on to the latter half of the work.

Atmopadesa Satakam literally means 100 verses of Self-instruction in Sanskrit. A satakam is a work of 100 verses. The word atma, here translated as Self, is used by Narayana Guru as it was used in the Upanishads. Often translated as soul or oversoul, meaning a universal spirit, it is here understood as a neutral matrix in which everything comprising the world has its existence. The states of consciousness are mere epiphenomena flickering through it. Upadesa is an instruction given by a guru to a disciple. When the 'a' and the 'u' are combined between atma and upadesa they become an 'o'. Atma-upadesa is by no means referring to self as an ego or individual. The work is not intended for teaching yourself, as in "self-help manual." Rather the reference is to instruction *on* the Self or the Absolute.

Two different words which look alike and may cause some confusion are self and Self. It is important to understand the distinction here, which at some level is arbitrary or even false. This is a key concept in the 100 verses. The Self is akin to the collective unconscious, coequal with God or the Absolute, while self refers to the ego or the individual.

From a dualistic perspective, the terms appear very wide apart, as in God and the individual. As the ideas become increasingly refined they move closer together, eventually converging in unity. They have become identical, in the same way the individual in essence *is* God or the Absolute.

The following description by Dr. Peter Oppenheimer from his foreword to Nitya's book *Meditations on the Self* is an excellent summary of the differences between the self and the Self:

"Light is one. Though it can radiate as many rays, reflect its image onto many mirrors, and become multicolored when passing through prismatic mediums, it remains one self-same light....

"When we say, "my mind;" "I change my mind"; "I witness my mind", we are recognizing a central core of the light reflected in the mind which radiates its light outwards and to which in turn all impressions converge. This point of reference is, in the West, called the *ego*. It may be referred to as the

self with a small “s.” It can be compared to the image of the sun mirrored on the surface of a lake; it is not the sun itself. When ripples and waves disturb the surface of the lake, the bright image of the sun throbs, changes and gets distorted. Similarly, when the mind is restless and subjecting itself to the many possible surface agitations, then the light of the Self mirrored in it becomes distorted, and the notion of I becomes unclear and unstable. Thus one’s self-identity expands and contracts. Because it is circumlimited, changing and transient, we give this notion of I the label of self with a small “s.”

“The Self with a capital “s,” on the other hand, is unlimited, unchanging and eternal. Like the sun in the firmament, the Self is never tainted or colored by the prismatic mediums through which it passes; it is never dimmed by the opacity of the mirrors that reflect it; and it is never disturbed by the surface agitations of the bodies on which it shines. It is this one pure *light* that is lending its absolute reality to all realities; it is this one all-witnessing *eye* that is lending its total vision to illuminate all partial visions; it is this one unchanging *value* that is lending its pure bliss to be the value behind each and every value.

“Darkness has no positive existence of its own. It is merely the absence or negation of light. In the same way, ignorance is nothing but the absence of knowledge, and suffering is the negation of beingness. It is only the self-luminous light of the Self that can dispel all darkness and burn away the dross of all ignorance, so that what remains is the existence of the knowledge of a joy of fathomless depth.”

A group of terms, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, appear here with no introduction, since they had been discussed extensively prior to the beginning of the study of this particular work. They are the three states or modalities of nature, the *gunas*, and as such are all reflections, effects of the one cause. *Sattva* is the transparent mode, clearly reflecting the essential nature of things and situations; *rajas* is the translucent mode of colorations and interpretations; and *tamas* is the opaque state of darkness and regeneration. The effect of the alternation of the *gunas* on one’s state of mind is very important. Seekers traditionally have emphasized *sattva* and attempted disassociation with *rajas* and *tamas* in an imagined purificatory process, but in the philosophy of

Narayana Guru (and indeed going back to at least Patanjali) each is to be seen as having a rightful place in a balanced interpretation of life. The subtleties of their interrelations are discussed throughout the work, receiving a final clarification in verse 88.

Despite Nitya's deferring to his Guru's commentary in the foreword, the present book is the definitive one for the Western reader, at least. Nataraja Guru made few concessions to the beginning student, and spoke the language of serious philosophy rather than everyday English. His work is more properly viewed for most as an adjunct to the present one, which someone seeking another layer of depth might seek out for its structural analysis and contemplative rigor. Nitya has also written a brief commentary on the One Hundred Verses, *Neither This Nor That But... Aum*, which, by pinpointing the essence of each verse, can be a very useful addition to the study as well.

Verse 89: The whole universe is like a book, in that everything in it is a symbolic expression of higher truth. We are getting educated in that truth day after day. That truth grows, sustaining the meaning and value of life. If you turn to it, you see there is nothing devoid of knowledge. Such knowledge brings you to the oneness of everything.

Verse 93:

The way the Absolute manifests is through each individual desire. In the desire you can see the mark of the Absolute. So all desires are to be seen in the Absolute, and the Absolute is to be seen in each desire.

Of all earthly pleasures for human beings and other animals, the one that most excels is when a couple is in the deep embrace of love, experiencing orgasmic ecstasy. But the Upanishads say that experience is as nothing compared to the coupling of the cream of your intellect with the Self in the cosmic embrace. When that happens it is as if you have all the embraces of the world. You are in eternal union. It is this eternal union with the Self that you should see reflected in all other forms of embrace.

It may be just the eye caressing a flower or the finger giving a tender touch of loving care, but you should be able to see in it the coming together of the essence of your own life with the totality. The

individual essence and the cosmic essence merge into one another. What pulls these two together is desire—a priyam or endearment—but it is that which brings you to the ultimate release, the absolute perfection.

In this verse, from an ontologic ground the teleologic finality of the soul's search is brought to its complete perfection. As the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad says, "This is a man's highest path. This is his highest achievement. This is his highest world. This is his highest bliss."

Another element that distinguishes this commentary from dry philosophy is the pervasive underpinning of love between the teacher and the taught, and the deeply felt concern and respect between friends in the class. To retain a sense of this in the present work we have included some of the colloquial elements that are an inevitable component of any oral course of study.

Much is lost in transcribing an oral presentation to a written form. Perhaps the most lamentable loss is the tremendous amount of humor with which Guru Nitya taught. Lightheartedness and humor nearly always infused the commentaries. A number of statements which might appear somewhat ferocious, were often given with a disarming laughter or an obvious physical exaggeration that added an invisible but essential dimension. His jokes were wry and amusing rather than obvious, and are likely to be missed entirely when read over. What may look like a straightforward, illustrative story was probably told with an air of delight and vivaciousness. Some intense and pointed truths were mitigated by a lighthearted tongue. For the maximum appreciation of this commentary, the reader should read slowly and with mental "inflections," which will perhaps bring out some of what was originally conveyed by gesture or tone of voice.

The twinkle in the eye at those times was occasionally counterbalanced by a look filled with lightning bolts. The ego is very clever to annex almost any teaching to its own glory, even teachings advocating its own dissolution. In this regard the spiritual ego is said to be most powerful and tenacious of all. One of the most important roles of a guru is to destroy this seemingly indestructible form of ego, since the individual is virtually helpless to do it on his own. The disciple implicitly grants the guru the right to try to at least

shrink his ego, which often requires drastic measures. A few of the verse commentaries have this tone, which may strike the reader as a far cry from the safe and unchallenging environment of the modern schoolroom.

This almost ferocious self-examination stands in decided contrast to the ego-friendly approach, as in much of the so-called New Age spirituality, for example. The former exemplifies the kind of critical thinking that has long been considered essential to a successful search for truth, while the latter is often characterized by nothing more than a superficial interest in intriguing concepts. Those who uncritically accept tantalizing or lurid ideas are easily duped by exploiters of all kinds, of which the modern era abounds. The history of religious thought is as often a tale of battles against the dubious manipulations of a priestly caste for its own material benefit as it is a portrayal of a philosophical search for truth.

Intangible elements like gestures, smiles and frowns, and so on, were a very important part of the class, and are unfortunately mostly lost despite great care to point them up. The most profound of these were those moments when the Guru really did criticize the students—as a group—more or less directly. The sense of tension and alarm imparted to the class resembled that of an immanent thunderstorm, and literally galvanized the class into a more concentrated attention.

Some of the more pointed statements are directed to a problem of someone in the class, and may seem to be a bit outside the scope of the day's verse. The Guru was giving instruction on the spot. Since the attentive reader can easily imagine the situations these examples are dealing with, and they have universal applications as well, they have generally been left in. A little of the hot sting of the words may still be felt, and this may be efficacious to goad the student to further efforts. (rew)

Some of the comments are not direct elucidations of the verse, but rather digressions intended to instruct the students in the class. There is always a connection with that day's verse, but it may not be immediately obvious initially. These extrapolations are valuable in their own right, however, by demonstrating the way in which a guru brings wisdom teaching to bear on the everyday problems of his disciples. By studying the guru's technique, the reader can learn how to bring the teachings to positively influence his own situation.



Delete: A guru will often make a point by saying something sharp that is not necessarily to be taken as gospel in all contexts. A good example is his diatribe against the popular Western approach to yoga instruction in verse 98. What he says has a great deal of merit, of course, but the Guru would usually concede more flexibility in how a teacher presents the material, and that there might be some utility in merely performing physical yoga exercises for their own sake. Here he is striking at the egotistical approach to the doctrine rather than any particular methodology. The reader should be able to appreciate how harsh and sacrilegious the casual phrase “I do yoga,” sounds to one who knows its full purport, realizing the guru’s intention is not to proscribe a pleasant and moderately beneficial exercise but to curtail the hubris of the lukewarm spiritual seeker.

Verse 100 (ending not included in the verse commentary):

It is providential that we close this hundredth verse of Self-instruction at the anniversary of the time when the *sat sisya*, the good disciple of the author of the present work, Narayana Guru, who happens also to be the teacher of this person here, entered into the Absolute with the same attitude, as a bold, fearless person, into the silence of aum. Let that silence lead us to the profound silence of our own life. Aum.