

III Asatya Darsana, A Vision of Nonexistence

Introduction

4/3/6

At last we have begun the Asatya Darsana, the Vision of Nonexistence. The Udgitha we chant in class begins *asato ma sat gamayah*, lead us from nonexistence to existence. Implicit in this is the notion that we must first become aware of the falsity of what we take for granted before we can embrace the Real that permeates it.

First off, I'll quote my Introduction, to review where we stand in the unfoldment of Darsanamala as a whole:

The first darsana, Adhyaropa, presents the creation and essential structure of consciousness. Perception is examined in some detail, and is shown to be of the nature of projection or superimposition on the actual ground of being. The Vedantic approach makes it clear that in this we all share a kind of generic defect in our awareness; the same is transformed by everyone into personal, specific variations which merit the attention of the psychiatrist only when they become exaggerated. As Guru Nitya says on page 65: "The world we think to be real has in fact very little objective reality. It is padded out in all directions with half-baked conceptual notions and hidebound prejudices." The aim of the second darsana, Apavada, is to correct this universal condition through recognizing and refuting that which is false. In the course of this several dual aspects of existence are highlighted, including cause and effect, unity and multiplicity, and the self and the

other. How the individual attains knowledge is also treated here.

The Asatya Darsana is based on the principle that the knowledge of what is false is the most potent way to eliminate it. Knowing how the unreal appears real to us, and how we substitute mental pictures for reality, can motivate us to undertake the discipline of correction for our own benefit instead of merely treating it as an interesting abstraction. Up to this point of the work there are parallels with conventional psychotherapy, as the subject matter is generally the correction of errors in cognition. Beyond this point Darsanamala takes the reader further to discover their own true nature, something that has yet to come within the purview of the Western science of psychology. (9-10)

So Adhyaropa covers creation, Apavada then notes the complications of interpreting it, and Asatya brings it home to our own specific condition.

One key point of the introduction to the third darsana is “It is paradoxical that the mind which brings all kinds of bondage and suffering can also lend itself to be the most efficient weapon to prove, analyze, scrutinize, and lay bare the truth of itself.” (159) We have unburdened ourselves from the commonplace prejudice that to break free of mental conditioning we have only to stand still, like a frightened rabbit, and it will go away. Nor are we interested in self-hypnosis through ritual to produce a semblance of no-mind. We want to really look closely at the process of the mind’s transformations, so that when we dive deep into intuitive states we won’t be misled by any egoistic trickery. We know at the start that what appears to be real is just that: appearance. Narayana Guru is going to teach us to see through appearances by recognizing them for what they are, not for what they seem to be or we would like them to be.

We first reviewed how the idea of “facts” or “truth”, which seem so solid and self-evident, are a product of wishful thinking and prejudicial assumptions. Our vasanas (incipient memories) seek expression in meaningful situations, and overlay their needs onto the ground of existence. In a sense they literally create the world. We presume everyone agrees to the same set of facts, but if we checked there would be very little similarity. When examined, the world dissolves into a disorienting chaos. Tamas stabilizes this flux enough to give us a place to stand, one of many positive benefits Nitya mentions of this much-maligned guna.

Happily, the class immediately focused on practical examples of how eidetic presentiments, or the projection of incipient memories and just plain memories, interfere with a direct and unhampered relationship with the environment. Susan talked about her son, who she spends a great deal of quality time with. At times when he wants to play and she has things to do he’ll say “You NEVER do anything with me!” She can see that his childish manipulation will be to some degree codified as the (false) belief that his mom didn’t care for him, didn’t play with him. Knowing this wasn’t true, she then extrapolated to her own feelings about how her parents didn’t give her much attention. As an adult she could understand they had other needs and interests than just her, and revised her negative assessment to a more positive one.

Jan told a similar story. She used to resent her father being withdrawn, but now she also feels the need to pull back into herself when family chaos gets to be too much. She has replaced her hurt feelings with more compassion.

These stories sparked a memory of how I felt as an occasionally over-exuberant child. When my parents didn’t have the energy to put up with me any more, they told me politely to bug off, and I would feel hurt, resentful, disappointed, and so forth. Those feelings helped drive the creation of the sense of a separate “I,” as I felt sorry for myself in private. Even worse, as I recalled

this I realized I had noticed the same sort of feelings in our dog when he still wants to play and we have “better” things to do. The only difference is that dogs don’t sulk about their feelings very long.

How many such imaginary pains do we pack along with us through life? A lot. Enough so that if we only dealt with them one at a time we might spend a lifetime in getting free of our problems. Narayana Guru is trying to show us how to grasp the principle underlying this game, thereby loosening the grip of all such binding beliefs in a single blast, allowing a reconnection with our true Self. Then we can apply the technique to events as they arise. Contemplation of the true nature of reality can become habitual.

Time and again we see how people’s cherished beliefs lead them to heartbreak, separation, misery, and even violence. It is just as possible to hold beliefs that unite people and lead to peace and happiness. Once again we felt that the group study reinforced a much healthier outlook, and were grateful to have accidentally fallen into the hands of wise preceptors.

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5/10/16

Asatya Darsana introduction

A Vision of Nonexistence

The introduction to our next darsana reviews some key ideas that are often not given their proper weight in popular spirituality or science. It’s an important read in order to be better prepared for what lies ahead.

We first discussed something Nitya did not, probably because for him it is old hat: what exactly does non-existence mean? From our modern perspective, it is absurd to affirm that all of what we

perceive and conceive does not exist. But to a Vedantin there is an important difference highlighted by the term. Deb and Moni knew what it was: only what is eternal has absolute reality, and anything that comes and goes has only a temporary reality, or what we will be calling actuality. This distinction is one of the main building blocks of a spiritual orientation. Fixating on the reality of the transient impedes our view of its lasting underpinning. We are being invited, not so much to disparage the world show, but to access another level, the one that imparts its brilliance to the show, that gives it life.

All too often in worshipping the underlying unity, people feel compelled to disdain the transient. In the Gurukula's wise accounting, the unity is meant to infinitely enhance the days of our lives, not supplant them with an abstraction. Darsanamala is the place Nitya's teachings inaugurate a distinction between reality and actuality, so that the "non-existent" can be described as *actual* in place of *unreal*. It's a very significant upgrade. First, here, he points out the fragility of the idea of reality:

"Reality" is a term which is not used in quite the same sense by everybody. A religious person is likely to say that his particular scripture expresses all that can be known of what is real. But a physicist may be slightly amused by the same scripture, while a professed atheist might be outraged. For many people reality is what they see. (158)

Then, in the seventh darsana, the Jnana Darsana, verse 5, Nitya sets down the critical distinction:

Usually we consider the word 'real' as being synonymous with the word 'actual'. In the present darsana Narayana Guru makes a distinction between *atmajnanam*, knowledge of the Self, and *vastu vijnanam*, knowledge of things.

In the Random House Dictionary the word ‘actual’ is given these meanings:

1. existing in act or fact;
2. existing at present; current; real as of now;
3. pertaining to or involving acts or action.

The corresponding Sanskrit term is *yathartha*, which means ‘conforming to the true meaning of the word’. The truth that is referred to here is of an empirical order. Such truth as this is to be contrasted with absolute truth. Absolute truth in Sanskrit is called *paramartha*. We would very much like to use the English word ‘real’ to mean absolute truth, in contradistinction to the word ‘actual’. Such a concept is not attached to the word ‘real’ by lexicographers. However, in the present study we intend to attach that concept to the word so that the reader will always distinguish the real from the actual. (341)

Nancy affirmed that everything we experience is comprehended in terms of memory, and the memory aspect is an existent entity even if it isn’t physical. It certainly affects what we do as we go through our life. I added that the point of the efforts we are being called to make on our own behalf is to not be dominated by oppressive memories that bog us down and make us ineffective. We are meant to meet the present in a fresh way that is not so dominated by the past.

Nancy also noted how she can look at pictures of her forebears and get a sense of a persisting reality she shares with them. Although they look very different and live in different time periods, she feels a kinship with them that transcends the externalities they each are clothed in. This imparts in her a sense of eternal reality behind the transient.

The glib belief that we should discard all our memories to be empty available in the present is a recipe for zombiehood. We want to have a measure of independence from conditioning, but are pleased to remain unique by not dissolving in an undifferentiated stew. This philosophy is not about subtracting all our individuality to live up to some abstract ideal. That may happen at death, but what's the rush? Nitya gives memory its due here:

A continuous stream of memories is always passing through a person's awareness. Many of them go unnoticed, while some are recognized, a few are relived, and some are critically reviewed to assess their affective connotation. This is happening all the time, except when we are in deep sleep, although deep sleep is also a functional state of mind. We have an extensive dependence on our past memories for both the purpose of reasoning and of responding to sensory stimulation. Memory gives the right bearing to every passing thought or sensation so that it finds its appropriate place in the structuring of a meaningful situation. Again, it is the value implied in the associated memories of the past which goes a long way toward making a person decide one way or the other in determining a course of action. In short, memory is associated with reasoning, feeling, and willing.

The poet W.S. Merwin, in a recent video biography, states that we live all the time in the past, shrouded in memory. Momentary glimpses of the present are very rare. He's right. What we perceive looks like the present, but it is tape-delayed, replayed after the fact. Plus, the impact of memory processing adds additional delays and distortions. The creative artistic moment properly invoked can break into the present at any instant, with memorable results. You may have read Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, where Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters took lots

of drugs and tried desperately to speed up enough to catch the present, but always lagged at least an instant behind. Powerful motorcycles don't go nearly fast enough. Perhaps the speed of light might do it. Much of psychedelic experience is advanced memory processing and repair, but the breakthrough moments are glimpses of an unalloyed immediate reality, always unfamiliar because it is unclouded by any memory. The Merwin bio, one of the best of its genre, superbly inspiring, can be accessed [here](#). In keeping with the poetic muse, the fabulous poem Deb read out from Jim Harrison will be placed in Part II.

Because the Asatya Darsana deals with tamas in depth, Nitya addresses it here. Susan was pleased to read about the good side of tamas, so often disparaged in the popular imagination. Sattva, rajas and tamas, the three gunas, are often taken to stand for good, mediocre and bad, respectively. The Bhagavad Gita laid that to rest some time ago, but humanity is slow to catch on. A trite cliché will often beat out a philosophical insight. Against this tide, Nitya often extolled the positive value of tamas.

Karen liked how tamas provides a protective cover so you only have to deal with one thing at a time, and also hardly notice when you move on to the next. Otherwise we'd be perennially confused, with multiple thoughts piling on top of each other. Moni added that tamas slows things down for us, and Deb added that it allows you to concentrate. We have talked about it lots in the past, so we'll leave it at that. The bottom line is, while many people say things like "we should try to be more sattvic," the truth is that all three gunas are part of a balanced and healthy mentality. And, we can stand outside of them, as Krishna recommends.

In preparation for Narayana Guru's Asatya Darsana, however, Nitya brings out a subtle negativity about tamas:

Memories are shielded and preserved by tamas. This close association of tamas with memory shows a near identity of

incipient memories with ignorance. Incipient memories are called *vasanas*, and ignorance is called *avidya*. In both the systems of Vedanta and Yoga, *vasana* and *avidya* are sometimes treated as interchangeable terms. (157)

If your search is for total rejection of your life and its world, then this can be an appealing formula. Most of us are not interested in anything that extreme, however. We merely want to foster our positive *vasanas* (potentials) while weeding out the negative ones. Nitya is right that *vasana* and *avidya*—genetic inheritance and ignorance—are ultimately related, as Narayana Guru will instruct. But remember that ignorance is like non-existence. It is not a monolithic negative, it is the natural outcome of being alive. It's okay. It is actual if not real. So it isn't a matter of escaping from ignorance: it is our native state. This would be a good answer to the question once universally asked in India of foreigners: "what is your native place?" Ignorance, of course. I live there all the time.

Rejecting ignorance just compounds our ignorance. Try accepting ignorance instead. It actually works very well. Humbling and opening.

In any philosophy there are subtle contradictions for us to contend with, and this is one of those places. For the most part Nitya advocated for the spectacularly liberal and open attitude of the Gurukula, but occasionally the more conservative background that permeates much of India creeps in virtually unnoticed. We can see how over time this was thoroughly weeded out, but at this stage there are still some vestiges. Though published much later, *The Psychology of Darsanamala* was among his earliest commentaries.

Everyone's basic assumptions are really just like the ocean to a fish: an environment so omnipresent as to be taken for granted. Learning to notice the shape of our thinking so we can eliminate its

distortions makes for a good exercise. That's where we're headed in this darsana especially, and in the whole work as well.

There is an example of subtle contradiction right here in the Introduction. It begins with Nitya's excellent comparison regarding the unknown:

In religion, most of the inexplicable factors are relegated to the domain of God. Scientists use the blanket term "nature" to cover up most of their ignorance. The most convenient term that has come to the psychologist to explain all such phenomena is "the unconscious." Memories are said to be residing in the unconscious when they are not required. On recalling them, they show up from the depths of the unconscious.

He goes on with an amusing affirmation:

However, there is a disadvantage in accepting this theory of the unconscious. The only instrument which can make any kind of probe in any realm is the conscious mind. The unconscious, by the very definition of that term, should be beyond the reach of consciousness. This being the case, it looks ridiculous for anyone to claim that they have an insight into the structural details of the unconscious. (156)

This always brings a laugh, because it neatly torpedoed some of the fantasizing of the ego about its capacity. Yet, as the class eloquently maintained, the essence of the spiritual search is making the unknown known. Evolution is the process of incorporating what we don't yet have into what we do. Nitya himself says this later in the essay:

In our search for a starting point, or some fundamental principle on which we can have a firm footing, we shall have to take the risk of making a plunge into the unknown. From the darkness of the unknown and from the mystery of the unconscious will arise our first glimpse of the intimation of an awareness. However intangible the origin of this awareness is, we should step onto it as the alpha point of our search. (160)

Karen chortled, “Isn’t that the point of meditation? To invite the unknown parts of us into our life?” Yes, of course. The aim of our efforts is to minimize the impediments we (for the most part unconsciously) put up to promoting our best abilities, namely creativity, compassion, listening, making progress, and all the rest.

What it amounts to is that our memories pile up and take over from any unfettered perception of the present moment we might otherwise have. After a while the infusion of new growth via inspiration is brought to a halt, and we replay the same familiar scenarios over and over, even if they are painfully constraining. The fearful seeker always wonders what woes the unknown may intend to add to their state of mind. It is a significant achievement to attain an optimistic attitude about our inner being so that we can welcome its input instead of shutting it out. The accomplishment is made even more challenging by the negative pronouncements of unenlightened social and religious proponents.

After recounting the morose negativity at the basis of several prominent religions, Nitya offers the contrast of Narayana Guru’s philosophy:

In *Darsanamala*, Narayana Guru is not much interested in the analysis of man’s woeful condition of ignorance. He is interested in imparting a positive discipline called *atmavidya* – a Sanskrit term meaning “knowledge of the *atma* or Self.” It is only through the acquisition of true knowledge that man can be

freed from what he sees as nauseating or sorrowful conditions which are bound to arise during the span of his conscious life on earth. *Atmavidya* is a discipline of understanding evolved by seers over a period of thousands of years, and they have found it to be effective in releasing individuals from the negative conditions arising from ignorance. (158-9)

When we get bogged down in memories and social constraints, our own personal being is suppressed, which leads to depression, malaise, and the inability to accomplish much of interest. Our inner being is always trying to find ways to be expressed, and if we don't permit it, we suffer. Deb and Jan told of how nothing more than performing some simple task and bringing it to completion felt terrific. Of course, all such actions are temporary, but therein lies their beauty as well. Nancy summed up that each day is an opportunity for us to express ourselves, and these studies help her foster a healthy attitude. Once we realize that all transient expression floats on the solid reality of the Absolute, we can take joy in everything.

Nitya invites us to face the challenges looming up in the next stage of our study:

Narayana Guru, in the third darsana of the present work, places before us a number of examples to make us familiar with all the implications of what he calls darkness and ignorance, that is, *tamas* and *avidya*. The examples given in the darsana are to be seriously meditated upon. In order to be able to decipher the subtleties of the differences given in each analogy, we must continuously remember that this is not a safe ground for us to engage in fanciful speculation. Holding fast to the Guru's hand, we must go step by step into the interior castle of our realization. (157-8)

Once again I invite everyone to come up with examples, and please share them if you dare. Because of our native ignorance, each of us may only be able to think of a couple of examples. If we pool our insights, the potential benefits will be much greater.

Part II

Deb read out Jim Harrison's last poem in his last book. (He died in March, 2016):

Bridge

Most of my life was spent
building a bridge out over the sea
though the sea was too wide.
I'm proud of the bridge
hanging in pure sea air. Machado
came for a visit and we sat on the
end of the bridge, which was his idea.

Now that I'm old the work goes slowly.
Ever nearer death, I like it out here
high above the sea bundled
up for the arctic storms of late fall,
the resounding crash and moan of the sea,
the hundred-foot depth of the green troughs.
Sometimes the sea roars and howls like
the animal it is, a continent wide and alive.
What beauty in this the darkest music
over which you can hear the lightest music of human
behavior, the tender connection between men and galaxies.

So I sit on the edge, wagging my feet above

the abyss. Tonight the moon will be in my lap.
This is my job, to study the universe
from my bridge. I have the sky, the sea, the faint
green streak of Canadian forest on the far shore.

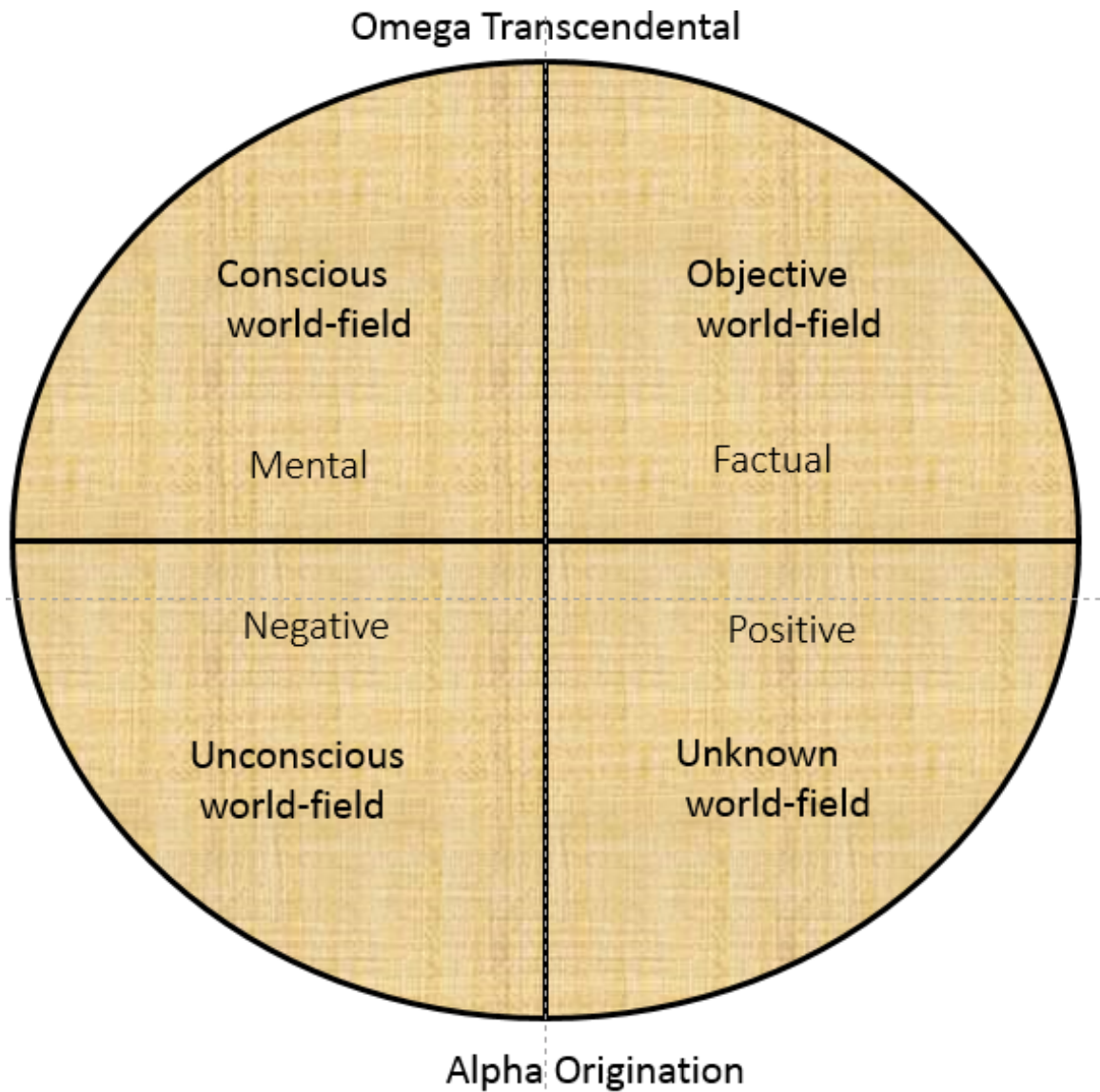
—Jim Harrison, from *Dead Man's Float*, 2016

Harrison appeared again in today's *Writer's Almanac*, sent along
by Nancy Y:

We live far out in the country where I hear
creature voices night and day.
Like us they are talking about their lives
on this brief visit to earth.
In truth each day is a universe in which
we are tangled in the light of stars.

Part III

Prabu contributed a version of the diagram from the
Introduction I could copy:



* * *

Pratibha wrote about the diagram:

The positive and negative words could lead people to think this is the bad / good theme.

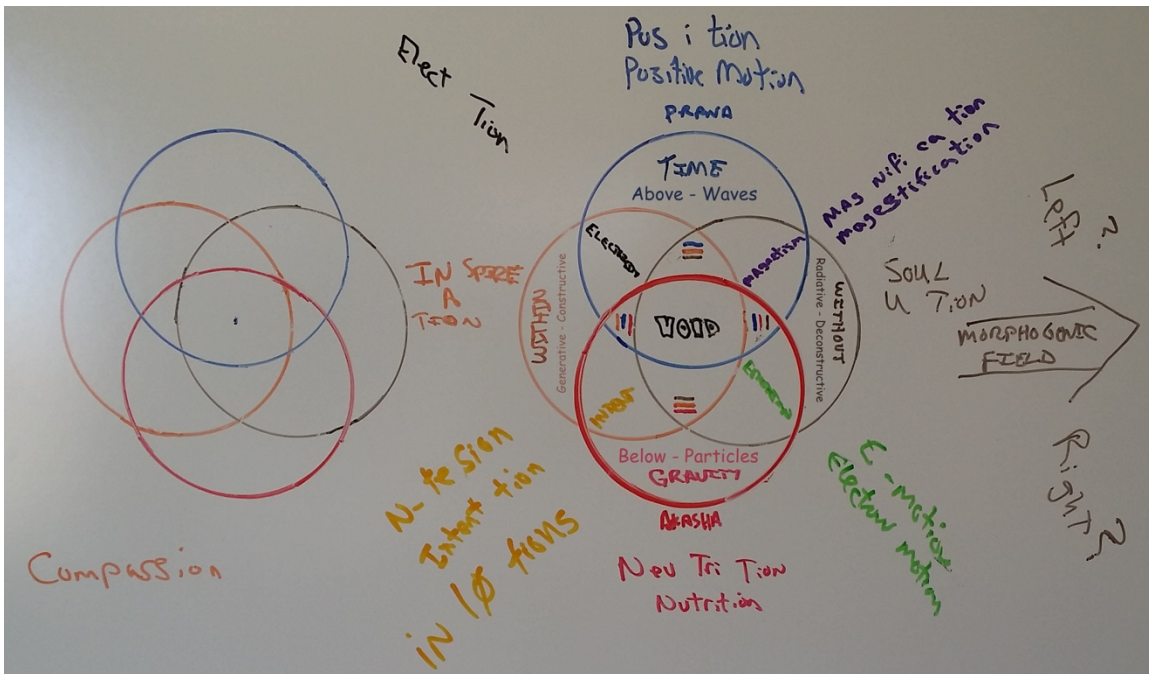
It is the magnetics or electro-magnetism of the universe.

It is showing the opposites that exist in the universe, but one is consciousness / negative magnetism and materiality / positive

magnetism. It does not presuppose bad and good, that is a discussion all its own - although it does fit into the magnetics of the universe as described in Samkhya. The concept is deep.

* * *

Michael from Nevada sent some diagrams of his own. When I asked him about their provenance, he wrote, "These are some of my personal notes from the last two years. I am always happy to find other quadratic diagrams, but these are entirely original." I've been forced to load them in reverse order, but I don't think that's important, as they're not specifically related to each other. You should be able to zoom in (Command +) and make them more readable.



AKASHIC + PRANA
RECURS OF BEING

INDIVIDUAL
HIGH SYMMETRY ENTROPY CHAOS
KINETIC ENERGY WAVES
CENTRIFUGAL RADIATION
HIGH ROTATION LOW ROTATION

MORPHOGENIC FIELD
OF BELONGING

SOURCE

UNATTENDED

↑

INDIVIDUATED

↳ RETURNING

TO SOURCE

↓

○ SEPARATING

INTO 1^s

↓

SEPARATED

1^s

↓

MICRO

INTERIOR

WITHIN

↑

ISOLATED

1^s

↑

1^s REVERTING

INTO ISOLATION

↓

1^s CLUSTERING

INTO GROUPS

WITHIN 0²

↓

1^s CLUSTERED

INTO GROUPS

WITHIN 0³

+i
positive
imaginary
numbers

FIRE PHASE
3rd DIMENSION

INDIVIDUAL
INTERNAL
MOTION

WATER PHASE
2nd DIMENSION

+r
positive
real
numbers

INDIVIDUAL
EXTERNAL
TENSION

INDIVIDUAL
SYMMETRY
CHAOS
GROUP
ORDER
SOCIAL

INDIVIDUAL
SYMMETRY
CHAOS
GROUP
ORDER
SOCIAL

-i
negative
imaginary
numbers

AIR PHASE
4th DIMENSION

MICRO
INTERIOR
WITHIN

MACRO
EXTERIOR
WITHOUT

EARTH PHASE
1st DIMENSION
(also 5th dimension
for prime numbers factor
(and next generation here))

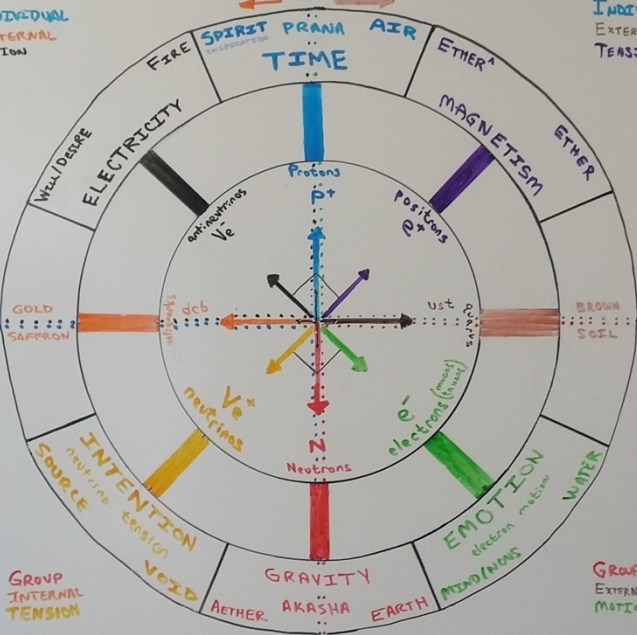
-r
negative
real
numbers

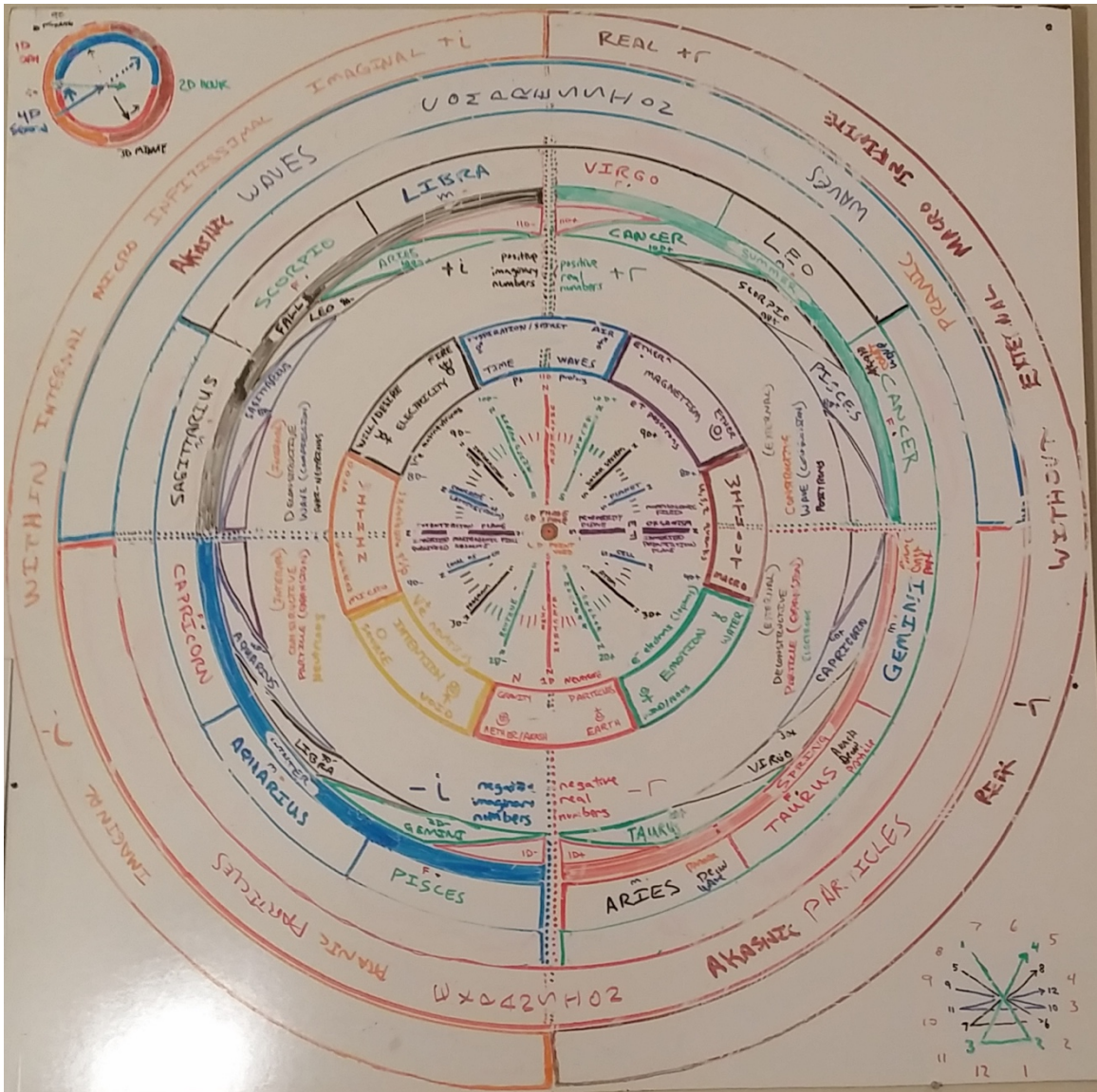
$$P^+ = N + e^+ + ve^+$$

$$N = P^+ + e^- + ve^-$$

GROUP
HIGH GROUPING ORDER SOCIAL
POTENTIAL ENERGY PARTICLES
CENTRIFUGAL GENERATION
HIGH ROTATION LOW ROTATION

MACRO
EXTERIOR
WITHOUT





The Above is Waves
 The Below is Particles
 The Within (Left) is Imaginal-Subtle
 The Without (Right) is Real-Gross

Part IV

Jim Harrison struck a nerve. Deb read me the epigram of Harrison's *In Search of Small Gods*. They are possibly his friend Antonio Machado's best-known lines. So perfect:

Walker, your footsteps
are the road, and nothing more.
Walker, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.
Walking you make the road,
and turning to look behind
you see the path you never
again will step upon.
Walker, there is no road,
only foam trails on the sea.

Goodreads has it this way—I prefer wanderer to walker, but also foam trails over wakes, so you can split the difference:

Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more;
wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By
walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one
sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is
no road— Only wakes upon the sea.

Then Paisley wrote:

I'm reading *Dead Man's Float* [the name of Harrison's last book] too. I also went over *In Search of Small Gods* and it's now on my top 10 list.

I've been carrying this one around in my pocket.

Spring

This small liquid mouth in the forest
is called a spring but it's really
a liquid mouth that keeps all the secrets
of what has happened here, speaking in the unparsed
language of water, how the sky was once closer
and a fragment of a burnt-out star boiled its water.
This liquid mouth has been here since the glaciers
and has seen a few creatures die with its billions
of moving eyes-- an ancient bear going bald who went to sleep
and never knew that it died, an Indian woman
who plunged in her fevered face, deciding to breathe
the water. Since it is a god there is a delight
in becoming unfrozen in Spring, to see the coyote
jump five feet in the air to catch a lowly mouse
or to reflect a hundred thousand bright moons.
To sleep under a deep mantle of snow or feel
the noses of many creatures who came to drink,
even the man who sits on the forest floor, enjoying
the purity of this language he hopes to learn someday.

Jim Harrison

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5/31/16

Asatya Darsana Introduction, Part II

It felt great to get back to our Darsanamala study, which for many of us is a chance to sink in to an all-too-rare state of blissful and quiet alertness. A rather delectable rhubarb pie set the stage, with its yogic balancing of sweet and sour nourishment floating

above a solid yet flaky ground of crust. Face it, mmm and aum are very closely related.

The introduction to the third darsana is a solid presentation of some of the key concepts in Narayana Guru's philosophy. While none of them are particularly foreign to the modern seeker of truth, they have a unique tinge of gentleness and compassion that invites us in as valued human beings. I just ran across a fan letter for one of my books that reminded me of how this philosophy differs from the norm. The "help" he says I offer is merely to pass along the wisdom I have been privileged to have been served by Guru Nitya and company:

Most often religious or spiritual literature either seems heavy on doctrine divorced from the reality I know, or makes me feel horrible about who I am.... I've been reading and studying religion and spirituality my whole life and more times than not it would leave me feeling depressed and sad knowing I could never achieve the rarefied heights of god-realization or sainthood. With your help, I'm getting over that. To view everyone and everything as revelation of the Absolute is quite different than considering the world a fallen and evil place that somehow I am responsible for.

We could say that Narayana Guru's transformation of his world had a lot to do with converting the prevailing hierarchical view of spirituality, brimming with top dogs and under dogs, to a democratic one in which all are equal as manifestations of the ultimate reality nested in the heart of plurality. We are striving to make that vision real in our own lives, not as a mere idea but as a conviction. Nitya highlights our best tool to accomplish this:

We should adopt an attitude of wary skepticism coupled with relentlessly critical scrutiny when seeking the path of our

intended search for the nature and meaning of mind. It is paradoxical that the same mind which brings all kinds of bondage and suffering can also lend itself to be the most efficient weapon to prove, analyze, scrutinize and lay bare the truth of itself.

We in the class compared our efforts with those of scientists and were able to isolate an important difference within the similarity. Philosophers can dare to posit a ground of being, while scientists prefer not to rely on it since it is likely to affect their abstract reasoning. Nonetheless, we are all seeking the same thing, the discovery of the fundamental reality of existence, which is, after all, the ground of being. Where scientists aim to comprehend and delineate reality from a detached vantage point, a spiritual seeker aims to participate as fully as possible in it.

Prabu cited Kant, who asserted that we can't know any thing-in-itself, but at best develop only a rough interpretation of it. Prabu rightly saw this as also the starting point of Vedanta, to accept that what we perceive is not reality as such but a partial reconstruction of it. The brain erects its world from a tiny handful of suggestive impressions. With diligence we can always add more impressions, but never enough to fully match the original, and even then there is sure to still be a gap between them.

Despite this limitation, scientists and philosophers both persist in refining what we can know of the thing-in-itself. It makes for the unfolding of history! So what if we are never going to come to the end of it? That's a good thing. We won't ever run out of life to live. Only if we falsely believe we have grasped the entire picture do we hit the wall and come to a halt.

Deb argued that the difference in Vedanta is that we can believe that it *is* possible to access reality, that we can get out from all the blocks and conditionings that limit our understanding. Yet I would say that for the most part this is a delusory belief, or at least

it may be that we surrender too soon. We can certainly improve our vision, but as soon as we stand pat on what we believe to be finalized truth we come up short. There is always more knowledge beyond our grasp. Realization does not depend the accumulation of knowledge, period. And this is another very good thing.

Nataraja Guru puts this beautifully in his own commentary on Atmo verse 16, with a nod to its author, Narayana Guru:

The sound that opens the eye of wisdom is an ideogram familiar in India, and the recluse of full self-discipline is also a model popularly understood. The main point that we have to notice here is that wisdom gets established not by labored graded steps, but that it happens when the personal attitude and the intelligence work together to usher in the result. No staircase is needed to ascend to wisdom. The duality between ends and means is abolished. Further, speaking as he must be from his own personal experience, this view has to be given the full credit it deserves as a direct wisdom teaching of rare value.

Fortunately we don't have to have a perfect understanding in order to be an enthusiastic participant in the universe. Participation is our native state. As is ignorance—we will never come to the end of what is possible, so that we could finally say “That's it!” Or, with a short-lived movement from the 1980s: “I Found It.” As soon as you say such a thing, the limitation of your idea stands exposed for the ignorance it is based on, and that will never come to an end.

Nitya specifies the central role of the ground of being even in Western philosophy:

According to Sartre, there must be some form of existence which is antecedent to the essence of any experience. He prefers not to call this existence “God,” but he is willing to qualify it as “Godlike Beingness.” We need not get into

controversy with Sartre, but his “Beingness” is no more helpful than “mind.” So it is advisable that we deal with the word “mind” even though it is now appearing to us as vague, ambiguous, and somewhat strange. (159)

We should note that mind in this perspective is coextensive with God or the ground of being, which is why leaving the mind is such an immense challenge. The entire universe resides within the mind, or better, *as* the mind, so there is nothing outside it. Where else could you go?

Scientists have intentionally deleted even the presumption of a ground of existence. We can see how it is implied in their thinking, as Nataraja Guru examined in *The Search for a Norm in Western Thought* (now part of *Unitive Philosophy*) but they will deny it, and that’s perfectly right. It is all too easy for any assumption, no matter how basic, to expand beyond its boundaries to sabotage the purity of the truth as it is interpreted.

Another essential aspect of Narayana Guru’s (and other’s) philosophy is that we are not made up of our beliefs and ways of thinking. We are learning to let go of the ideas we cling to, to discover what is prior to them. It’s a very liberating realization to see that we don’t disappear when we give up believing that we have to know everything. It’s basically a school-induced obsession. As we let go of our cherished beliefs we don’t vanish; our real basis comes out more and more. I’ll clip in Ram Dass’s realization of this, an oldie but goodie, as Part II.

Deb recalled the image of the sculptor paring away the extraneous parts of the stone to reveal the glorious sculpture hidden within. It caused Bill to quote Patanjali, who famously advocated the restraint of mental modifications. When I asked the class what restraint actually meant, it sparked a lively discussion.

Deb said it meant you don’t allow yourself to get carried away by your reactions or your enthusiasm for the social consensus

of the moment. That's a good starting point, and when we look at the utter chaos echoed and amplified by the popular media, there is ample room for restraint in our everyday awareness. As Nancy put it, we are like pool balls, always crashing into each other so long as we stick to our chosen trajectory. Some day soon we may have cars with built in anti-crash features, so we never collide—we sometimes act that way ourselves. But again, this is just relating to the transactional aspect of life. What might spiritual restraint look like? Would it be any different?

Many people take psychological restraint to mean you squelch uncomfortable feelings and thoughts whenever they threaten to surface, but as we know, that's a recipe for mental constipation or worse. What Nitya suggests is taking a good hard look at your mental modifications, without necessarily broadcasting them far and wide. When we do that, they may be seen to be much less important than we thought. Or our interpretation changes in a positive way. Once they are seen to be of secondary value, they dissolve on their own. Putting things in proper perspective in this fashion is known as wisdom.

Jan often reminds us that our energy is better spent in understanding our blocks rather than trying to keep them repressed out of sight. Like her, once we have a measure of success in intelligently releasing the hold of our confusion, it lends us the courage to enjoy the process despite its difficulty. She thought it was pretty easy to question ourself, so what's the big deal? It's a form of common sense, really. But can we go with the flow, confident that our inner resources are guiding our prospects for the best? That's a bit trickier. We have to trust that our ego is riding on a vast, intelligent system that supplies "divine intervention." Inviting that in helps to pry us out of our constrictive mentalities.

In keeping with the goal-orientation of the diagram reproduced in the last notes, Nancy took it to mean that we postulate a solid truth and then work to get to it. She also was sure

that it gets easier to let go of our blocks as we age. They just don't seem so important any more. I'd add that this is partially because we have already examined those issues, perhaps many times.

Ultimately mental modifications are restrained from within, by being subsumed in a greater awareness. Per the Gita, when the One Beyond is sighted, the urge to revel in unhelpful ideas disappears. The image is like exploring a cave with a dim and spluttering torch, when someone switches on the electric lights. The torch may still be burning, but you can't even see it anymore. And you no longer need it.

A couple of us cited Nataraja Guru saying one of the most important ways to restrain yourself is to give up the desire for things, which is a well-known concept, but one that tends to make an end run around our intentions unless we are a thoroughgoing absolutist like him. There's a lot of pretense in this area. I prefer Nitya's take, from *That Alone*, where we are to restrain our small ideas in favor of broader ones. He concludes his spectacular verse 56 commentary with an invitation:

To my mind, the ice-creamlike grace for which you crave is only one tiny little drop of the whole truth. The greatest grace is to have an insight into this great truth from inside.... You are breaking up the real grace, and throwing it away into meaninglessness, when you lift yourself out of the whole. I'm not taking grace away from you. I am asking you to trade in your childish grace for the real grace. You attain a greater freedom when you give up your small freedoms. (388)

Deb echoed this with a quote from Nitya's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary we are simultaneously studying with Nancy Y. online: "By simply seeing [Isvara] the manifested ego is corrected of its relativistic weakness." Just make sure your ego isn't pretending to be Isvara, and all will be well.

In a sense we are trying to get outside our self in order to be our Self. The self we have made is like a too tight set of clothing we have outgrown, and it squeezes. Some of it may burst from the strain, but we can also strip some of it away and give ourselves more room to breathe.

This can feel like entering unknown territory. Having guru-exemplars demonstrating the freedom that comes from having relinquished their restrictive self-identity can give us courage. Remember the first time you dared to swim into the deep end of the pool as a child? Scary at first, and then so delicious! Better than pie, even. Nitya says:

In our search for a starting point, or some fundamental principle on which we can have a firm footing, we shall have to take the risk of making a plunge into the unknown. From the darkness of the unknown and from the mystery of the unconscious will arise our first glimpse of the intimation of an awareness. However intangible the origin of this awareness is, we should step onto it as the alpha point of our search.

Part of the class notes on the first part of this introduction is worth repeating. Remember, we were discussing memory's role in shaping us, but also in limiting us:

What it amounts to is that our memories pile up and take over from any unfettered perception of the present moment we might otherwise have. After a while the infusion of new growth via inspiration is brought to a halt, and we replay the same familiar scenarios over and over, even if they are painfully constraining. The fearful mind always wonders what woe the unknown may intend to add to our state of mind. It is a significant achievement to attain an optimistic attitude about our inner being so that we can welcome its input instead of

shutting it out. The accomplishment is made even more challenging by the negative pronouncements of unenlightened social and religious proponents.

When we get bogged down in memories and social constraints, our own personal being is suppressed, which leads to depression, malaise, and the inability to accomplish much of interest. Our inner being is always trying to find ways to be expressed, and if we don't permit it, we suffer.... Once we realize that all transient expression floats on the solid reality of the Absolute, we can take joy in everything.

Nitya puts it this way:

What has eluded the comprehension of philosophers, psychologists and theologians is an understanding of the real and fundamental cause, which gives rise to the presentation of an eidetic origination of consciousness, together with that which can release consciousness from the inhibitory clutches of the seemingly factual and psychic into the realm of transcendence.

Nitya then describes the meaning of the diagram presenting the fourfold scheme of correlation. Despite looking static on paper, it represents a dynamic movement within the psyche. As we travel through life, we are going forward from the alpha to the omega, which is from the bottom to the top in the diagram. Nitya always talked about a corresponding movement from the top down, meeting us exactly where we are. Or really, from in front: the beckoning of the mystery for us to enter into it. I added a thought last night that just occurred to me: the vertical line of our forward progress is actually more like an inverted cone. It emanates from the apex at the alpha end, but our progress through life is ever-expanding, accessing wider ambits all along, in all directions. It's a

misshapen cone, too, because we sometimes strain to hold back on the expansiveness, or get stuck at certain levels. But the lure of transcendence permeates the whole of our being. As Robert Frost so beautifully put it in his poem Mending Wall: “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, that wants it down.” He amusingly adds, “It’s not elves exactly.” In fact, it’s nothing we can put our finger on. Here’s how Nitya expresses the innate urge for transcendence this time, in describing his diagram:

At the negative alpha pole, the first modification of consciousness – signaling the origination of an individuated awareness – begins a movement up the vertical pole to culminate in the omega point of the transcendental or universalized consciousness. From the universal or transcendental consciousness there arises a counterpart of the individuation of awareness moving downward. The awareness from the alpha point and the awareness from the omega point meet at the center. The whole pulsation of awareness operates in the individual from the central point of conjunction. This enables the individual to contract consciousness to a pinpoint of awareness, and also to expand it simultaneously to locate that specific experience as an integral part of a universal field of experience. This is like a constant dialogue going on between the dual principles of immanence and transcendence. (161)

It’s well worth taking this to heart, for as Nitya says, “If you can follow the instruction of the Guru this far, you can also comprehend how the individuated self can become universal.” First we comprehend it, then we realize it. Not a bad game, isn’t it?

Part II

Here’s a reprise of Ram Das losing his various personalities

and finding his soul, thanks to psilocybin, a psychedelic medicine. As retold by Don Lattin, in *The Harvard Psychedelic Club* (New York: Harper One, 2010):

Alpert really started coming on to the psilocybin. There was too much talking in the kitchen, so he walked into the living room, a darker and more peaceful setting. He sat down on the sofa and tried to collect himself. Looking up, he saw some people over in the corner. *Who are they? Were they real?* Then he started to see them as images of himself in his various roles. They were hallucinations, but they seemed so real. There was the professor with a cap and gown. There was a pilot in a pilot's hat. There was the lover. At first, he was a bit amused by the vision. *Those are just my roles. That role can go. That role can go. I've had it with that role.* Then he saw himself as his father's son. The feeling changed. *Wait a minute. This drug is giving me amnesia! I'll wake up and I won't know who I am!* That was terrifying, but Alpert reminded himself that those roles weren't really important. *Stop worrying. It's fine. At least I have a body.* Then Alpert looked down on the couch at his body. *There's no body! Where's my body? There's nobody. There's nobody.* That was terrifying. He started to call out for Tim [Leary]. *Wait a minute. How can I call out to Tim? Who was going to call for Tim? The minder of the store, me would be calling for Tim. But who is me?* It was terrifying at first, but all of a sudden Alpert started watching the whole show with a kind of calm compassion.

At that moment Richard Alpert met his own soul, his true soul. He jumped off the couch, ran out the door, and rolled down a snow-covered hill behind Leary's house. It was bliss. Pure bliss. (54-5)