

III Asatya Darsana, A Vision of Nonexistence

Verse 2

By ignorance, which is none other than the mind, all worlds are imagined; when by this knowledge dissolution comes, then everything becomes like a painting.

4/17/6

Guru Nitya recommends examining a broad stretch of time in our life to get perspective on the ignorance that strikes us as so immanent and necessary at the moment we encounter it. What seemed when we were caught up in the excitement to be of surpassing importance, later seems trivial. We learn this by stepping back and taking a good hard look at our personal or social history.

Such ignorance, as it's called in Vedanta, occurs both on the individual and the collective levels. Nitya reviews the standard love infatuation to exemplify the individual obsession, and the familiar religious and political fervor to epitomize tribal or social obsessions. He added one very familiar to those of us of the post-World War II generation: the space race. Spurred on by nationalistic pride and scientific fascination, stupendous amounts of energy were poured into sending humans into space and later landing them on the moon. Younger folk can't begin to imagine the intense excitement accompanying every launch, with the whole world watching and listening to the stentorious countdown: "Ten... nine... eight... seven... six... five... four... three... two... one... ignition... liftoff!" As kids we repeated those lines in a wide range

of games, and dreamed of growing up to be astronauts. The thrill of anticipation was indeed palpable.

My first moment of real doubt and enlarged perspective about this came in July of 1969. We were in a small café having lunch in a remote stone village in Northern Spain. Very rustic. When we asked the proprietor what kind of soup they had, she said “Buena sopa!” Good soup. As we ate we noticed they had switched on a small black and white TV in the back to reveal the flickering, fuzzy image of the Apollo launch vehicle poised to go for the first lunar landing. Some old geezers in berets were playing cards and drinking their lunch at a nearby table. One asked why the TV was being turned on, and another answered gruffly, “The Americans are going to the moon.” He shrugged and they turned back to their card game, never once glancing up again as the countdown wound down: “Three... two... one....”

Nowadays of course, only scientists and a few Trekkies get worked up over far more interesting missions than three guys in a tin can going up and coming down. My attempts to kindle a flame—even a spark—of enthusiasm in my kids fizzled out quickly. They’re plenty interested, but in other things, which their children in their turn won’t be amused by either. Tastes change.

A “spiritual” person isn’t someone who isn’t interested in anything. Quite the contrary. They are interested in everything. It’s just that they are confident that the interest resides in them and not in the object or idea that the interest is temporarily cherishing. With such an attitude there is no need to cling; one can freely move on to the next, knowing full well it will be engrossing too. They don’t have a stake in something that needs to be defended, because the Absolute is in everything, not just here and there in selected locations.

Everyone’s favorite sentence was: “If it so happens that a person discovers within himself that there is an abiding bliss which is none other than the beingness of his own Self, only then will he

see that the world he looked upon as real was merely a creation of his mind.”

Nonetheless, it’s a spectacular mystery that all humans are driven by their interests, simultaneously being enthralled and entrapped by what we experience. This verse is given mainly to steady us, so we sit (or participate) calmly instead of rushing toward an attraction and later rejecting the same item in disgust or boredom.

Susan correctly pointed out that this is the cycling of the gunas. Sattva attracts you to something with its brightness. Then you put energy into getting and keeping it with lots of rajasic effort. Finally the attraction bogs down in tamas, and you’re ready to move on to something better. You look around for something bright and alluring....

Deb added that eventually you get tired of putting out all this energy, and settle into a steadier state. As Nitya says, “The desire for peace and the need for spiritual security turn the mind away from all worldly values.” Moreover, “the mind will recoil from its fantasizing of imaginary pleasures only after realizing the absolute nature of the supreme Self.” It’s not a question of suppression, but of opening to something far greater.

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6/14/16

Asatya Darsana Verse 2

By ignorance, which is none other than the mind,
all worlds are imagined;
when by this knowledge dissolution comes,
then everything becomes like a painting.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

By nescience which is no other than the mind
All this world is a presentiment of the will;
This (nescience) by knowledge gets re-absorbed,
Then the whole world (becomes) a mere configuration.

The Portland Gurukula was blessed with a special evening, having two old friends attending the class to bid us farewell, one permanently, one hopefully not quite. Anita Carpenter, who was a regular for a number of years but hasn't been able to come for around seven years, stopped in with her 20-year-old granddaughter. Anita has retired and is moving to Eastern Idaho in few days, but it was like old times to have her in her favorite chair and questioning every assumption that came up with her typical alert vivacity. It was a profound gesture to close a broad circle of association, one in which she feels benefitted by the alternative ideas she learned with us. Her granddaughter Brooke is like a wise conscience at her shoulder, helping her and keeping her centered as she enters a new stage of her life.

Jean Norrby also paid us a visit before returning to Sweden. She has been here for some time caring for her aging mother, so this was the only class she was able to attend. With any luck she will pop in again some day.

Verse two of the Asatya Darsana is a classic, with Nitya adroitly explaining how our ignorance blinds and manipulates us, and showing the way to get out from under it. One important line from the commentary: "This tendency of the mind to breed false values into its own fantasy is described in this verse as avidya, ignorance." Ignorance in Vedanta isn't just not knowing the name of the capitol of the Central African Republic, it is imposing external factors on the natural bliss of our being and then hoping they will hold up under pressure. Moving from a life chasing will-

o'-the-wisps to one grounded in the Self is the exciting prospect before us.

Narayana Guru's present verse is quite similar to his verse 85 of Atmopadesa Satakam, the Hundred Verses of Self Instruction:

No shadow exists independent of an actual form;
as there is no original form anywhere for the existing world,
it is neither shadow nor substance;
everything that is seen is like a snake painted by a master.

It is a big help to read Nitya's commentary there also. I'll put some paragraphs from it in Part II. Or you can look it up.

Anita wondered about the painting and what it means. Basically, what we encounter is an image depicting reality rather than some utterly absolute reality, and therefore much depends on our personal preferences. We are free to take it any way we like. More on this is in the Part II excerpts.

Bill summarized the purport of the verse as desires and fantasies never achieve lasting happiness, which is a very familiar assertion. This is a much bigger challenge than it sounds, however. Knowing the mind is endlessly projecting illusions, we are trying our best to go beyond it or get outside of it. Unfortunately, at the outset of this Vision of Nonexistence we learned that everything manifest is within the mind, in its full definition. That means there isn't any outside, nowhere else to go. No escape. Breaking free requires a subtler attitude than simply foregoing desires. We have to find a way to gently sink into a condition of abiding happiness, because it is the ground from which all transiency originates.

Anita argued that we have to face up to the transient aspect of life and not just try to run away from it. She recommends an 80/20 plan, where 4/5 of the time you are engaging with the transactional world and the rest sitting in some kind of peaceful withdrawal. That's fine, and we compared it with our pulsation model, where

the psyche is refreshed by regular dips into silence and quietude, but then is brought back to full engagement with the environment. There are plenty of religious and even spiritual programs that advocate rejection of the world; the Gurukula suits us because it is not escapist. Narayana Guru knew that whatever validity there is in creation exists right here with us. A nondual orientation cannot posit a separate reality we are migrating toward. As we go back and forth from our outer and inner visions, the imaginary dividing line between them gradually melts away.

Jean worried about how we can retain our sanity as this loosening of our grip takes place, and that is one crux of the matter. It is common and possible to lose our balance and start believing in all sorts of projections if we are not buying into the collective hallucination. Jean's mother has occasional bouts of dementia that clash alarmingly with her surroundings, but she cannot tell whether she is self-generating perceptions or actually perceiving reality. And here we are busily undermining the beliefs that allow us to rely on received fictions.

Anita also wondered how anyone can ever tell what reality is, since to each of us what we see is what we believe (I'm simplifying her comments). Deb suggested that our personal experience was not visible to others, and agreements with outside witnesses was the only way to know that you aren't just making things up to suit your fantasies. As this is such an important issue, I'll add some valuable ideas about brain health in Part II, from the director of the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago. It is becoming clear that we can do a lot to avoid dementia, and the kind of study we are engaged in is an excellent tactic. One finding noted in the article is that high levels of harm avoidance, anxiety, neuroticism and depressive symptoms significantly increase your likelihood of dementia. Just the sort of thing we aim to ameliorate. (Harm avoidance is "a trait that encompasses shyness, excessive worrying and pessimism.")

This Darsana of close self-examination reveals that we all have a blurred line between registry of our surroundings and projections of our imagination. We might be unhorsed by this realization, but Nitya suggests it can be taken in a very positive fashion also, depending on how we frame it. His conclusion, if we are willing to pay attention:

In this verse Narayana Guru gives us hope to ward off frustration. A person who is endowed with the power of discrimination will be able to learn from their own mistakes that they are a victim of projections arising out of their own imagination. There is the danger, even after realizing the folly of one's situation, that when the mind is filled with desire and craving it has the power to draw a dark blanket over the recognition of previous failure, which could otherwise guard the individual against making a fresh attempt in the same wrong direction. (169)

Self-awareness not only allows us to fine tune our thinking, it steers us away from repeating our mistakes. So why is it something that most of us would prefer to avoid? Somehow we've become convinced that honest self-examination will undermine our happiness. So strange! Nitya points out:

When we review life like this, we can see that the world we live in is generated by our own fantasizing mind. We live mostly in a fantasized world of values generated by the mind—a mind which is not very clear about what is true or untrue, and what is of real worth or not. Throughout, an element of pleasure, a spark of joy, a dream of attaining greater happiness, operates as the dynamic for creating one fantasy after another. (168)

Please don't lose heart: this awareness has strong positive implications despite its unsettling appearance. I asked the class what the antidote to being adrift in a sea of fantasies and desires is. While most everyone paused in perplexity, Jan read out the answer that Nitya provided in this very commentary. Then we made her read it over a couple more times:

Finally, if it so happens that a person discovers within themselves that there is an abiding bliss which is none other than the beingness of their own Self, only then will they see that the world they looked upon as real was merely a creation of their mind.

In other words, our true nature is abiding bliss. It isn't anything that has to be made or discovered, only perhaps uncovered. It doesn't reside solely in some special place far away. Jan finds her way into her core by looking for her honest feelings. She isn't satisfied with make-believe feelings. She knows people who control themselves too strongly, trying to live up to an arbitrary ideal, and the tension they are under is palpable. It even gives some of them squeaky voices. She echoed Bill's earlier point, saying that the bliss we are made out of lies much deeper than what we want, in other words, than our desires. We can't go there by desiring anything, but only by letting go of the need to control. Deb agreed that our need to control distorts our psyche. It is certainly deeply ingrained as the ego's main tactic.

Nancy added that our expectations (related to control) limit our experience. Allowing for serendipity opens up more possibilities for joy in our lives.

Jan cited Nitya's two-sided coin as an important reminder that this isn't about just being good or being nice, because we all have the opposite propensities in us. Here's what she was referring to:

Affectivity is a two-sided coin. Love, worship, fidelity, kindness and beauty are inscribed on one face. On the other we find hatred, anger, repudiation, lack of faith, meanness and ugliness. It is from the same mind that both these responses arise. As the coin flips, one may repeat again and again the mistake of thinking that the soul mate has finally been discovered.

“Soul mate” can stand for whatever primary external factor you have decided will make you happy. We very often apply it to our love partner, but this is an unfair burden, and really, unfair to both. Alain de Botton’s article in the New York Times, *Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person*, takes a look at why. It’s a good one: http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html?_r=0 .

Nitya’s essay makes it seem that coming to the realization that externals are not the keys to happiness is a natural outcome of the aging process, and I wish that were incontrovertible. He writes:

When old age comes, this kind of fantasy leaves the mind, and a new awareness dawns that all the achievements of youth and middle age were of little worth. The desire for peace and the need for spiritual security turn the mind away from all worldly values.

It seems to me that while we do settle down some as we age, it takes a sincere effort to apply these insights, and many people manage to avoid them for a whole lifetime. They are not universally advocated, and not necessarily obvious. Peddling and servicing fantasies are central to the economy. But getting out from under them is so important! I would even argue that awareness of our core being helps brain health in many ways, and the three

Gurus of our lineage are prime examples. All were alert and incisively clear to their last day of life, despite suffering ailments that often cause severe mental impairment. They naturally practiced many of the ideas recommended in the Alzheimer's article below.

Jean resonated with Nitya's example about journaling. She has kept journals all her life, mostly facts and details about her activities, but occasionally pouring out her heart. She admitted that reading her old journals made her cringe in embarrassment, and she could hardly bear to do it. Nitya uses this to demonstrate how our current thinking is not as much "us" as it appears:

People who keep journals of their own daily moods, reactions, ambitions, pursuits, and dealings with other people have the feeling that they are recording every day a correct version of the world they are living in. After a few years, when they retrospect and read the same pages, they realize how mistaken their actions were and how they looked upon things of little value as being the most important in life.

Whether or not we keep a journal, we keep track of our life as it unfolds. We have learned in Darsanamala that the harder you cling to your beliefs, the more rigid your life becomes, and the more likely you are to come in conflict with others. Even your own body and brain suffer. When we latch on to a fiction, we have to hold tighter and tighter as it threatens to melt away into the nothingness it is made of. Once again we are invited by the Gurus to relax and let go of our tensions. Let the bounty of the universe seep into our souls. Then our relationships will be as real as real can be.

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

It is the mind that is to be considered the same as nescience. It is because of this ignorance that the world seems to be real. For destroying this ignorance which is nescience there is no other way than through knowledge, that is true knowledge of the Self. When nescience is abolished Self-knowledge prevails, i.e., when nescience is abolished and science prevails, the whole world resembles a configuration (drawing) presented by the mind. In the same way, by the power of nescience which is of the form of mind, the whole world is willed. Therefore, this world is non-existent. When Self-knowledge prevails the fact that the world is unreal becomes experienced.

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As promised, some excerpts from That Alone, from verse 85. Nitya begins with a masterful elucidation of the venerable pot/clay theory of Vedanta. Then he applies it to every aspect of life:

How does Narayana Guru explain it? He says that when an expert paints a snake and the painting is placed in dim light, it can frighten a person. The dread can be so great that the person might even collapse and die. So the painting can function as a snake to some extent, but as soon as it is closely examined it will be found to be only a painting.

When it turns out to be a painting, it does not cease to be. The snake doesn't disappear. It continues to be what it always was—a painting done by a master. What changes is your reaction to it. You no longer react with fear but with great admiration. You say, "Look how lifelike it is! It's wonderful!" You might want to possess it: "Let me take it home. It's a terrific picture!" Once you accept it, it is no longer a snake. When you were dreading it, it was also not a snake. It all came from the mind's projection. (599)

Now let's go back to the idea of 'wife'. The original clay is there: some flesh, a body. On it you project your dear wife, just like the potter projected the idea of pot onto the clay. The process is of course a little different. Here, a greater potter has done the first part of the work in fashioning the woman, but it only becomes meaningful when you project the idea of 'wife' on top of her, so to speak. Does this idea have validity or not? It has validity. Has it full validity? No. It is valid only until you telephone an attorney to effect a separation.

This doesn't only refer to the husband-wife business but is a handy way of understanding something general in life, where people get infatuated with so many things and then after some time effect a separation from them. Marriages and divorces are going on all the time between people and their relativistic values. They aspire to something, but when they get close to it they no longer want it. They think it is not what they were looking for. That's because the beingness of those things has the same status as a painted picture. The painting is done from within. Is it real or unreal? The Guru says you cannot say it is real, nor can you say it is unreal. It's simply a wonder. (599-600)

To apply this in your life, you have to look for the being which cannot be explained away. What is that being? It's called existence. You should also look for the knowledge which cannot be explained away. Such knowledge is awareness. Existence is called sat; the awareness of subsistence is called cit. Sat and cit never change, but you can fashion the sat like the potter fashions a pot, like the lover fashions the beloved, like the buyer of a commodity fashions its value, like the admirer of beauty fashions light into a beautiful form. The substratum is perennial existence. What you temporarily create out of it has existence only during the time when it is valuable to you.

This brings us to a third factor, the utility of a thing, its *prayojana* or value. The potter knows the clay will always remain clay, but he sees a utility in fashioning it in a certain way so it will hold water. Holding water is an important symbol. Every value should “hold water.” It should serve your purpose. When it no longer holds water, when it does not serve your purpose, you throw it away. Its existence is finished.

A pot serves its purpose when you want to use it. At that point you don’t have to say it is only clay. The pot has a transactional validity that you can accept. But in order to not become disillusioned you should always have a permanent notion beneath the surface operation. After all, the primary existence is not of a particular thing, but resides in another category.

The other kinds of pots I am speaking of, like husband and wife, friends, neighbors, enemies and so on, are fashioned out of an already transitory substance called the life process. The stream of life is moving, changing and transforming all the time. On top of this ever-flowing process you are making other suppositions. So there is every possibility that in the flow your suppositions will be dislocated. What you think of as permanent is really an impermanent fixation superimposed on an already impermanent substance. But that impermanent substance really does reside in a beingness which does not change.

So there are three levels: the changeless, the changing cosmic process, and, within that, an individual arrangement. It is in the individual arrangement within the cosmic setup we see what we call *ulaku*. If the image we see in the *ulaku* were copied from somewhere else, as Plato has it, we could transfer ourselves to that real world. But there is no such additional reality. This is not a copy of anything. Then, is it real? No, it’s still not real at all. We have to learn to accept the transitory nature of life and the impermanence of all arrangements, while keeping in mind that

every arrangement is valid for just as long as the ananda aspect is reflected in it. (600-1)

The other day a friend from the class said, “The last three days when I have been sitting here and listening to the meditation, it has not been reaching me. I wish I were sitting at home instead.” When it worked for him, he was here. When it doesn’t work he wonders why he bothers. That is a failure of the ananda. The existence of the image really belongs to the ananda. When the ananda fails the image collapses. It fades out.

What is it that interferes with the ananda? The whole process is a search for happiness. What is opposed to happiness is called maya, darkness; or avidya, ignorance. Christians call it sin or guilt, or personify it as the devil. And how can ignorance come and take away the joy of something you have enjoyed? Because your basis for that joy was only a supposition. If you saw joy right in eternal existence itself, in eternal awareness itself, it would not have broken down. But we are forever fashioning something out of that and projecting our happiness onto this temporary creation, which is moving and changing all the time.

What we are saying is that you should not build your abode on transitory stuff. Jesus said the same thing: one who wants to have a strong house should build it on a rock and not on sand. You need to remember that your experiences are neither the original or a shadow of the original, but have only the status of a painted picture. You have to explore how you can get from a sandy foundation to one that is rock-solid. To do this you have to go beyond name and form, beyond the world of your senses, the world of your imagination, beyond the world of your fantasies. (601)

In you there is a witnessing self, a saksi. It is the big eye which watches the visions of the two small eyes, one seeing the

external world and the other the internal world. Only when that witnessing eye is relied on will you be able to transcend the other two. Until you come to that experience you will be alternately fearing the snake and admiring its beauty, and also losing interest again and again and again. (601-2)

Ninety percent of your suffering is imaginary. You sit there and imagine what must be happening to your father or mother, or your wife at home, or someone else somewhere else. While you're sitting there, from your last chakra or synergic center, something goes to the next imagination and then the next. Then the whole thing burns inside. (603)

This verse is not of merely intellectual interest. It has a great spiritual import. To those who meditate on it and want to take benefit from it in their life, it gives so much. It is just like Jesus saying, "Come to me, those who suffer. Unload all your burdens on me." Why should you carry them around in your head? The whole thing is a supposition—leave it where it belongs. Feel right. Be happy. (603)

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Some highlights from the very worthwhile article Banking Against Alzheimer's, by David A. Bennett (Scientific American Mind, July/August 2016)

Subtitle: Research has provided a host of clues to age-proofing our brains and making them more resistant to dementia.

Summary:

Several large longitudinal studies are offering important clues about how we can bolster our brain to better withstand the physical changes that come with aging.

Virtually all brains in old age contain some pathological signs of Alzheimer's disease, but only some people suffer any symptoms as a result. Those who do not develop dementia appear to have greater cognitive reserve to fall back on.

Choices we make throughout life, from learning a second language or studying music in childhood to finding purpose and remaining physically, intellectually and socially active in retirement, can build cognitive reserve and dramatically reduce the risk of developing dementia.

Pull quotes:

The brain is the most adaptable of all our organs. As Alzheimer's unfolds, it fights back, drawing on cognitive reserve.

Education can help secure brain health as we age. Bilingualism seems to delay the onset of dementia by as much as four years.

Staying active, seeing friends, being conscientious and feeling a sense of purpose in life all appear to reduce the risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Inset box:

Building a better brain as we age—

Based on the results of scores of studies, here are 10 things you can do to reduce the risk of losing cognition and developing Alzheimer's dementia:

1. Pick your parents well! Make sure you get good genes, a good education, a second language and music lessons. Avoid emotional neglect.
2. Engage in regular cognitive and physical activity.
3. Strengthen and maintain social ties.
4. Get out and explore new things.
5. Chillax and be happy. [chill and relax?]
6. Avoid people who are downers, especially close family members!
7. Be conscientious and diligent.
8. Spend time in activities that are meaningful and goal-directed.
9. Be heart-healthy: what's good for the heart is good for the brain.
10. Eat a MIND diet, with fresh fruits and vegetables and fish.