

III Asatya Darsana, A Vision of Nonexistence

Verse 4

The visible is imagined by the will; the visible is seen only where there is will, and not where there is no will—like the snake in the rope.

5/9/6

This was one of those nights when the value of a class becomes most apparent. Starting out with only a vague notion of what Narayana Guru meant, everyone mutually reinforced and augmented each other, throwing a lot of light on the subject. I imagine such evenings are satisfying to all involved, though I seldom ask directly about such matters. Perhaps I'm projecting....

The rope/snake analogy is a Vedantic cliché, yet it is so perfect it never fails to lead contemplatives into fresh insights. Examining the way we store memories and then overlay them onto new situations so that we can break free of their entanglements is a lifetime task.

The idea of will here was initially perplexing, but Nitya's comments helped us. The fear and hope highlighted in the last verse spring from our desire to keep ourselves alive. We fear nonexistence and hope for eternal existence. The problem is we have learned to doubt our existence, and as Anita pointed out, we spend our lives doing things to try to ratify ourselves, to prove to ourselves and others that we exist. We adopt schemes to assure our staying alive. This is where the will comes into play. Because we doubt, we feel we need to make efforts to continue our existence. And yes, efforts are necessary; they are part of the game. But

instead of opening to the flow, we choose a path, usually dictated by our social environment. We may become greedy, suspicious, lustful, guarded. Intentionally, even.

The old saying is, when a pickpocket meets a saint he sees only his pockets. This means we see the world through a selective vision based on our presumed needs and desires. A greedy person is always wondering what profit he or she will get from every interaction; an angry person is always prepared to become incensed by something the other person says or does; a suspicious person doubts everyone's motivations, and imagines they are trying to take something from him. Preteens imagine everyone is looking at them and judging them. The list is endless. These are the snakes we perceive in the rope of life.

The most valuable exercise, certainly, is to check out what your own snakes are. You have to de-snake your own rope before you can begin to offer meaningful suggestions to others. Besides, most people are quite comfortable with their snakes. They become accustomed to the constant threat: like a morning cup of coffee it keeps them going. So don't worry about them. Just strive to see the Absolute in every moment.

Narayana Guru upgraded the rope/snake analogy to a flower garland/snake image in verse 20 of Atmo. The failing of the original is that a piece of rope holds little or no interest in itself. The Guru wanted to remind us that creation is precious and filled with delight. When we come to know the underlying reality beneath our projections, it is like a love offering from a dear friend which fills us with happiness. Sour-faced religious types might want to argue that love and delight are also projections, and prefer to visualize life as boring and useless, a thing to be transcended. And it's true, love and delight *can* be projections. But Vedanta claims the essence beneath all projections is of the nature of ananda, the "value-form of delight." Why should anyone strive to realize the true nature of things if it has no meaning? What attracts

us to go beneath the surface is that it's where happiness resides. Projected happiness is empty, but grounded happiness is all-filling.

This is another department where our will tricks us. Instead of being content with our true inner nature of happiness, we scheme ways to obtain it from outside objects and scenarios. Once something opens us up to our own happiness, we believe it has in fact caused the happiness, and then try to reproduce the event over and over. The weakness with this idea is that grafting our happiness onto things that are transient means we have to hold ever tighter when they start to fall away. As mentioned in past classes, the initial bliss of pure experience becomes watered down with our memories and expectations, and the experience grows less satisfying. We should be seeing our happiness in everything that we encounter, but by mistake we have selected a few places where it seems to exist, and we feel unhappy when those aren't happening any more.

Conversely, we talked about how things we dread often turn out to be fun, so the period we spent dreading was a wasted, even miserable, time. Jan mentioned finding office parties agonizingly tedious, yet at the last one she decided to stay open and pass over her negative anticipation. She wound up having an excellent interaction with someone she really connected with.

I flashed back to being three or four years old, when I was going to get a shot at the doctor's. I knew it would hurt a lot, and my will was furious about the whole business. I cried and carried on for hours, miserable in my helplessness to alter my destiny. I was a strong kid, and put my full energy into the performance. Eventually I was dragged kicking and screaming into the office. I redoubled my caterwauling. Then I opened my eyes. Everyone was looking at me, and the doctor was putting away his needle. I realized that I hadn't even felt the shot. I was so stunned I couldn't even pretend it hurt. Even as a young kid I realized that all my carrying on had been for nothing.

That's why the Gurus are suggesting this tack. If we stay open and don't project about what is coming along, our life will become a voyage of discovery, with mutual support and plenty of bliss. The fear-filled other will become our dear friend. Our insistence on seeing a snake in every flower garland is due to unfortunate conditioning, and it's not so hard to let it go, if we can permit ourselves to trust in the beneficence of the universe in which we find ourselves.

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7/26/16

Asatya Darsana verse 4

The visible is imagined by the will;
the visible is seen only where there is will,
and not where there is no will –
like the snake in the rope.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

*This visible world results from a willing presentiment;
Where willing is present alone
Is this visible world seen; not anywhere else
As a snake too, where (alone) a rope is found.*

Asatya Darsana is a single vision, broken up of necessity into ten parts by Narayana Guru. It takes some extra effort to knit the parts together into a seamless understanding. We do our best to try to do justice to the grand vision he delineates in these verses. It's especially challenging when we are not yet halfway through, or if we've already missed some of the building blocks. Nitya's opening

insight about mind is similar. After recounting the various parts we have so far examined, he writes:

The total phenomenon is called mind, just as a group of trees is called a forest or a number of people is called an assembly. General terms have no content other than what is derived from their particular constituents.

This accords well with the modern assessment of the mind as an epiphenomenon produced by the various elements of the brain. What that view tends to leave out is the intelligent programming that leads the mind to function so spectacularly as a harmonious unit. Its output is far from random, far from a loose affiliation. The parts are able to function dynamically as a whole. So, epiphenomenon or not, a mysterious purposefulness dominates the result.

Deb opened the class by mentioning that the quiet center of this verse is where Nitya reminds us that the individual self is not solid or true but is a projection on something solid. Our practice is to try to see through the projection's superficial images to access a more extensive reality.

When asked how we do this, she suggested that in every situation we should see beyond what we want to what is good for everyone. It entails stepping back to identify with the entire panorama. This is the essence of contemplation.

I added that we don't necessarily have to impact anyone other than our self. The universal compassion we attune with may or may not produce visible behaviors. What we do with it is a secondary consideration in Vedanta. We are afflicted with a powerful urge to hold ourselves tightly bound, and we have to allow ourself to let go. After that, the sky's the limit. But the program we are following is not going to prescribe activities, except perhaps as a fallback to the inability to mount the necessary

effort to become free. Barring release, we should do good works. The real point is to free ourself first; otherwise whatever we do will be freighted with our own confusion.

Happily this is not solely a consciously chosen path. Somewhere within our psyche great plans are being cooked up and offered to us as opportunities. Too bad we have been trained to tune them out, to ignore them in favor of commonly accepted reality. Yet if we restrain the rational urge to negate unseen organizing forces as being causally important, admiration for the inner workings of our psyche is easy to come by.

Nitya introduces a neglected word in his commentary, *presentiment*, which we examined in depth. We are led by presentiments to a surprising extent, but do we ever stop to question them? Presentiments are our intuitions, and when we believe we are acting spontaneously, we are actually being guided by well-designed and unconsciously planned impulses. Our conscious task is simply to distinguish the worthy from the unworthy impulses. They are often associated with a sense of foreboding, which is the touch of the fear element, the most potent goad of all.

What this means is that we barely notice our fears. We don't have to, because they demand a lot of energy, and they tend to stop us in our tracks if they are fully realized. Since we have known fear in the past, only a whiff of it is enough to make us move in the way we are being prompted. The slightest suggestion of fear is enough. The gurus tell us over and over that we are driven by fear without being aware of it, so it is crucial to a spiritual engagement with life to examine our presentiments and forebodings. Some will be supporting excellent programs, but just as often they will steer us away from the very lessons we need to confront. Spiritual transformation includes discovering that what we wish to avoid may be essential to our wellbeing. It certainly entails learning to

accept more and more of the universe as it is. Put simply, if we seek to avoid conflict, we will not grow.

An important element of this philosophy is that “God,” or this inner inspirational force by any other name, is not to be feared, but to be honored and delighted in. Those subtle promptings, whatever their source may be, are our lifeline to happiness, to full engagement with our world. If we thoughtlessly turn away from discomfort to seek comfort, we will miss all our life lessons. It is easier than ever to be content with mere comfort nowadays, the delivery of which is a massive industry. But our inner intelligence cannot communicate with our wakeful mind only through comfort. It often requires dissonance to get our attention.

While not being in any way gullible, we should welcome our presentiments—forebodings and all—as important communications to be carefully attended to.

The book *Synchronicity: Science, Myth, and the Trickster*, by Allan Combs and Mark Holland (New York: Paragon House, 1990) describes how we may intuit some kind of intelligent programmer at work behind everyday events. In the Preface, after describing two major historical instances of synchronicity, they write:

We as individuals also experience occasional but dramatic interventions of coincidence. Such interventions produce an immediate and palpable sense that something more than blind chance is working behind the scenes of life’s dramas.

Often, however, it is not from the dramatic visitations of chance, but from the smallest of coincidences that we feel some agency to be operating behind the scenes. This agency asserts itself in the most random of events, stamping them with an uncanny intelligence that can only be called purposeful....

While we may conclude that such coincidences are produced by nothing more than the endless shufflings and reshufflings of random everyday events, the frequency with which they occur

belies such an interpretation. Occasionally you experience a sequence of coincidences so dramatic as to make such an explanation seem nothing short of silly....

The most common meaningful coincidences are those seemingly random but apparently purposeful events which speak to us directly in terms of personal meaning....

If we, like Jung, take synchronicity seriously and begin to examine its implications, we will, like him, be led to a fundamental reexamination of human nature, the nature of the physical universe, and the relationship between the two. (x-xii)

I'm harping on this here because we didn't have much time for it in class, but I think it's the key to this verse. The will Narayana Guru is addressing is not the surface inclinations of the ego, but the hidden structure that underlies our relationship to the world. The implication is that we can upgrade our attitudes if we can develop the right relationship with this fundamental layer of our whole being. If we sit pat, content that what we already have is good enough, we will be at the mercy of the winds of chance, many of which are blown by people with only selfish interests. We cannot be free if we are being driven by mechanisms we don't even acknowledge.

The will of this and the next verse is a translation of *sankalpa*. Deb peeked ahead and found that the next verse is where Nitya clarifies the subject:

In Sanskrit the act of giving a specific form to consciousness is called *sankalpa*. Usually it is translated as "will." As willing is an act of volition, such as when one is determined to say or do something or to become steadfast in a certain judgment, it lacks the wider connotation of the Sanskrit term *sankalpa*.

Sankalpa is somewhat equivalent to the drawing of a blueprint in consciousness which will lead to the actualization

of an event, the attainment of a state, the acquisition of a desired object, or to the establishment of a new relationship with oneself or with another person at some time in the future. These do have an element of will implied in them. That is why *sankalpa* is usually translated as will.

These two aspects of willing are fertile sources of spiritual confusion. Usually we opt for the obvious version, and then we are only amplifying and attending to our ego's desires. It takes effort to question our motivation, and even more effort to rein in our impulses if they are not in synch with a more subtle prompting, which is the *sankalpa* will. That's why Narayana Guru also offers some practical advice to help us make the right decision, for instance in Atmo 22:

The happiness of another—that is my happiness;
one's own joy is another's joy—this is the guiding principle;
that action which is good for one person
should bring happiness to another.

Nitya echoes this in his own inimitable fashion:

The individual's devotion in the social context is in the procurement of his personal happiness. When this is given up in favor of an altruistic dedication to effect universal harmony and the sharing of joy with all, it can be interpreted as devotion to the Absolute.

There is a world of difference psychologically between being squeezed tightly in a narrow, selfish perspective and being willing to consider aspects of life outside our normal comfort zone as being potentially legitimate. Being of one mind does not mean

making yourself an island, safely cut off from the world. As Nitya puts it:

When an individual transcends his body limitations, social conditionings, and psychic colorations, his consciousness widens its horizons and gains the qualities of being universal. This is how the idea of becoming of one mind is to be understood.

Transcendence sometimes happens naturally, of course, but when it doesn't we are called to assist it by forcing ourself to rethink the matter at hand. The excitement of the Gurukula philosophy is generated in substantial measure by its leading logically to vast and blissful attitudes. We can indeed think ourselves out of many of our boxes, and doing so is its own reward. Nitya also argues the point another way. After citing the Gita's verse IX, 34, where the Absolute is to be related to on all levels of being, he writes:

Ignorant man sacrifices his health, time and talents for the realization of his private ends. When the same is done more openly for universal benefit, it becomes a sacrifice to the Absolute. Bowing down to the Lord can be understood as consistently emphasizing a universal value in preference to the transient pleasures of the world. As a result, the individual becomes unified with the Absolute. When one promotes himself to this level of understanding, it is possible to convert, in one's mind at least, both the appearance and meaning of this world into something that can be easily accepted as one of precious values. The world is no longer frightening to one with such a vision. (176)

My own commentary of IX, 34 includes this elaboration:

The exhortation to bow down to the Absolute covers those times when we are not paying attention at all, because we are engaged in everyday activities like job, food prep and housekeeping. In these we don't need to act like a Ninja warrior or a Picasso, we are performing menial activities requiring little or no brain power. The difference between a regular fellow and one who "bows down" to a greater reality is that a harmonious attitude is built in from the start. Knowing that the Absolute dwells in the hearts of all beings, for instance, inspires us to act with kindness and consideration as a matter of course. Nor will we feel sorry for ourselves, or blame our coworkers for our own shortcomings. If we see that we are veering into some hostile attitude, we can rectify it with reference to the loving neutrality of the universal ground, but we won't feel any need to repair ourselves by blaming someone else for our faults.

Bowing down is not about groveling at the feet of some deity. It means incorporating the wisdom we have gleaned into our everyday life. As such it covers a very wide latitude for potential yogic activity, of opportunities for bringing compassionate intelligence into action. As we do this, the joy of living expands exponentially.

The tried and true metaphor of the snake and the rope epitomizes the challenge of discerning truth below the reactive level of the surface mind that must act on immediate impressions to protect us from danger. As Deb put it, we need to ask ourself what snake we are adding to the situation, and then delete it. The feeling of relief when the dreaded snake turns out to be a meaningless piece of rope is a sweet high all of its own. And as Moni pointed out, in Atmo Narayana Guru upgraded the trivial rope to a flower garland lovingly gifted by a dear friend. The underlying reality is in no way meaningless: it is the very expression of beauty, which is an even sweeter high. Regardless of

your preference, there is a rebound of joy when the unnecessary dread is removed, which should activate your reward circuits:

The prevalence of darkness creates an ideal situation for the projection of a presentiment. The presentiment is a previously acquired image associated with fear. The whole coloration of the situation is derived from fear. If the element of darkness is removed, the snake also vanishes. This will automatically banish from the mind the presence of the snake and the fear relating to it. When this happens, one realizes the utter folly of seeing a snake where it was not. (174-5)

Susan tied this realization to a familiar theme of Nitya's: that we are co-creators of the world, agents of the Absolute, as it were. If we create the fearsome snake, we can also create loving gifts like the flower garland. In her words:

Recently, I had a thought about being a co-creator with the Absolute. I was singing random notes. I realized that the sound (and more — the impulse, the ability) came right from the divine and I was the instrument, the co-creator of that sound. When I write (say) these words, they are also coming from the divine in some sense but I am shaping them. This was an inspiring and grounding realization. It made me much more respectful and loving of every note, word, creation.

It's such an empowering realization! We are meant to express our own uniqueness, but due to social constraints we have bottled it up. It doesn't have to be spectacular: every minute gesture is a miracle. Consigning our uniqueness to jail causes bad indigestion, or worse. We need to bring it to life. The Absolute, being solely a principle, can't do anything on its own. It requires actual people and other

creatures to express the boundless enthusiasm for creation that it holds purely in potential form. And guess who that includes? You.

Deb agreed that for her, music is a means of expressing what wants to come into existence. She recently had a typically amorphous, vague dream, when suddenly a voice rang out: “What you need in your life is MORE MUSIC.” Music of course can stand for any kind of aliveness, of joyful interaction, and especially of soulful expression. Sometimes when we are listening closely enough, our inner guide can speak to us as plainly as plain can be.

Jan picked up on this spirit, quoting from the second paragraph: “The essential nature of an individual self is to treasure its identity as the most valuable reality on earth.” She added that kindness balances the raw tendency to self-preservation, so there is universal benefit. No one in our class is a loudmouthed, selfish person; rather we all suffer (if at all) from excessive inhibitions. We are all well-behaved people who were trained to hold ourselves back in deference to others. Now we need to learn to sing our special notes as our contribution to the choir.

Humans tend to imagine snakes—fearful apparitions—everywhere, and then there is a tendency for the aversion to build up to explosive levels. Periodic wars are the most dramatic result of faulty collective will, faulty sankalpas. These and other disasters will continue so long as we prefer ersatz explanations for reality-based awareness. Moni lamented how we create a false world and then interact with it, insisting so often that what is wrong is right. As Deb said, we have to perceive our bias, the coloration we add to the scene. Unfortunately this is not anyone’s default setting. It has to be achieved through mental effort. Maya always slyly asks us, to undermine our commitment, “Why bother?”

I mused about the verse’s first line: *The visible is imagined by the will*. I thought that it should have been the conceptual world is imagined by the will. But then I remembered that the visible world is a construction of the brain-mind, put on for the benefit of our

conscious awareness, to kind of bring it on board with what the inner programmer is discovering. The will as used here is the blueprint by which the visible world is presented in a comprehensible way. We take for granted that our blueprints are the true ones, but the gurus are begging us to understand that they are provisional efforts and not holy writ, that we should both tolerate everyone's blueprints as having a measure of validity and be compassionate for the very real difficulty of amending them and restructuring our thinking. Not too many make a sincere effort here where it is most needed.

Jan cautioned that our attempts to break out of boxes aren't always perfect. True enough! Her example was a recent meeting she attended. She has resolved to be more assertive in a healthy way, but she found that her attempts at assertiveness at the meeting shaded into anger or other annoying attitudes. She could see she wasn't very good at it yet.

There is no reason to expect or demand instant perfection. These are hard skills to master, especially when our natural and legitimate assertiveness has been suppressed for most of our lives. It's like learning to walk as an infant. We will stumble about and occasionally fall down, but eventually we'll get the hang of it. This is a perfect example of what I meant by dealing with presentiments. We could try to avoid what bothers us—Jan could just decide to be meek and let others make her decisions in their interest, instead of hers—or we could see uncomfortable situations as opportunities to practice our budding skills. This is a second stage of commitment: to not be discouraged by temporary setbacks. You'll be better next time, so make sure there is a next time. The Absolute needs you absolutely, to express the range of its potentials that falls within your purview. Then you will be crowned and mitred as yourself, as the guru Virgil grants Dante as he emerges from Purgatory:

Here your will is upright, free, and whole,
and you would be in error not to heed
whatever your own impulse prompts you to:
lord of yourself I crown and mitre you.

These are fitting words to end with. I am shocked at how much of the class I didn't cover. These gatherings are all so rich! But next week continues the same subject, so with any luck everything will have its moment in the sun. May your moment in the sun be bright and full. Aum.

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

All visible things are the product of willing. Only where there is willing is there any object. If there is no willing there is nothing at all. The snake imagined on the basis of a rope is merely a product of willing. For a man who has the presentiment of a snake, a piece of rope lying in a place badly lit seems like a snake. When a lamp is brought and the object is examined, there is no snake in the rope. If we now inquire where the snake was, we can see that it has its being only in the will. This snake has neither a work-a-day reality (*vyàvahàrika*) nor an absolute reality (*pàramàrthika*). It has only a reflected eidetic (*pràtibhàsika*) status. In the same way as with this eidetic snake, if we consider any other of the many objects presented to us we conclude that they are only products of the will. Here we find the justification for what was said in the first chapter about the creation of the world by the mere will of the Highest Lord. In the same way as this eidetic snake came from the vitalistic will (of the individual), (so too) this work-a-day world is the product of the will of the Highest Lord. All things, as presentiments of the will are unreal. When knowledge comes they

are destroyed. But the difference we should note here is that the snake-rope is of the nature of vital presentiment of the will. When the right knowledge which belongs to the living being is operative they (i.e., snake and rope) get abolished. But in the case of this work-a-day world, having its origin in the will of the Highest Lord, even after we come to know of it as unreal we cannot abolish it completely because the Lord's willing is stronger than individual vital willing and because all beings are caught and helplessly spun around by the will of the Lord. It is only the will of the Lord that can abolish altogether this collective presentiment (called) the visible world. In spite of this, however, those great souls who have attained to the experience of reality through Self-knowledge, know the unreality of the world in respect of the three aspects of time whether past, present or future. Because it arises from the will and is also dissolved by the will the world is non-existent in the same way as the snake supposed in the basis of the rope. By bringing in the analogy of the rope and snake we have to understand that the world was not before or after but only present in the intermediate period when nescience prevailed and knowledge had not asserted itself. What is not present in the past and in future can certainly be said to be non-existent in the present.

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For contrast with the verse, here's another excerpt from Nataraja Guru's *Autobiography of an Absolutist*:

There are thin, invisible leading-strings that, like Ariadne's thread, can sometimes guide you through subterranean labyrinthian paths, of which chance elements life essentially consists. At times, one almost hears one's own name called from a distance and sees some strange hand beckoning from afar, leading one from one kind of probable possibility to

another kind of possible probability. Thus wending our way through probabilities and possibilities we may finally arrive at the beautiful glory of Nothingness that the Absolute presents. If the reader now wonders if Nothingness is my philosophy I can quote here with advantage from Keats: "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever; Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness...." Here we see that Beauty and Nothingness are treated as interchangeable terms.