

**III Asatya Darsana,
A Vision of Nonexistence**

Verse 9

To the mature mind of the old the world appears in the Self as a forest in the sky, even as the unreal form of a puppet seems otherwise to a child.

7/11/6

As the third darsana winds down, untruth is characterized in a highly symmetrical form along the vertical time axis. It appears like a drum or hourglass, wide at the top and bottom and pinched in the middle. Down below towards the alpha, the mind imbues everything with imaginary attributes, in a process called eidetic by the gurus and psychologists. The inner sense of reality of the child is projected onto the surroundings, and a doll or puppet can be fully alive and capable of interactions. The maturation process replaces personal ideations with socially agreed upon ones, the so-called factual reality. The middle stage is filled with interpersonal transactions in which a common playing field is essential. The infinite range of possibilities must be severely circumscribed to insure mutual compatibility among the participants. As the person ages and contemplates the shaky nature of so many previously unexamined “facts,” the mind again expands to galactic dimensions. Here it is crucial to stay alive and alert, with a wise philosophy grounded in the Self. Then there is blissful Self-absorption. If, on the other hand, a person fritters away their life and doesn’t exercise their cranial muscles, it can lead to fearful dementia and unconsciousness.

We talked about how, as our normally accepted reality disintegrates, we can either celebrate it or regret it. We are trained to be attached to the fictional “facts” of everyday life by those who wish to manipulate us: advertisers, politicians, vested interests of all sorts. Over a lifetime we become habitually attached to a world of trading, and to being outwardly “sharp,” along with buying costly products to maintain and pad our self-image. When this mirage begins to fade, as it surely does if we are fortunate enough to live long enough, we can either desperately cling to the dissipating vestiges or else turn inward to discover a more substantial realm that will not disappear.

Nitya mentions how adults, including parents, sometimes take advantage of credulous children, whose world has little demarcation between fact and fiction. Unfortunately, adults are not much better off. Our world abounds in very convincing con jobs, which we all too readily accept as factual. Screens of course are the most masterful, easily bypassing the critical parts of the mind to address the seedbed of desires. They sell not only products, but their “news” itself creates fears along with a dependency mindset, to place the viewer at the mercy of authority figures. Religion has been doing this far longer than electronic devices. It’s good for the economy. Theirs.

Harmony and I talked earlier in the day about how most of the commonly accepted “scientific facts” are simply made up out of thin air. When you’re old enough, you’ve been through several generations of different ones, and begin to see the cyclic patterns. I was pleasantly surprised that Harmony not only agreed with my statement, but had a recent example. A friend had said it was scientifically proven that if you didn’t wear clothes the temperature had to be more than 75 degrees (24 Celsius) or you would die. I wish I had volunteered for the experiment, which we both suspected never took place. You can imagine naked people in different conglomerations being kept at different controlled

temperatures, dying off one by one until the 75 degree group just barely held their own. Right! Sadly, far stupider and more deadly beliefs are taken for gospel. I don't suppose I have to make a list; I'm sure you know what I mean.

The process of *asatya*, the presentation of which is coming to a close but which must never cease being an aspect of the contemplative life, includes examining widely accepted "truths" to determine their value. While it's hard to see the forest for the trees, an awareness of history helps a lot. I go back to when it was commonly accepted that cigarettes were good for you, stress reducers and all that. My grandfather the doctor smoked. The history of changing food fads is enough to confuse even dieticians. The right clothing is different every year. And on and on.

At the older end of life, all that mass of charming but imaginary beliefs driving the human dynamo begins to recede in importance, resembling a forest in the sky, or what we call a hallucination. Becoming loses its glamour, and being becomes more attractive, until they are in balance. Their harmonious interdependence induces blissful expertise in whatever endeavor one chooses.

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8/30/16

Asatya Darsana verse 9

To the mature mind of the old the world appears
in the Self as a forest in the sky,
even as the unreal form of a puppet
seems otherwise to a child.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

*To the mature mind this universe
Looms like a sky-forest in the Self;
Even as an unreal puppet-form
To a child (would seem) contrariwise.*

As the deconstructive process of Darsanamala proceeds apace, the Asatya Darsana builds to an unsettling implication, which drew us in to a fascinating exploration. Because of the drastic nature of the subject, Nitya reminds us, at the end, of where this is headed. Without his reassurance we might well lose our equipoise. It's high time to dispense with some of our cherished illusions, which are not what we expect them to be.

As Bill noted, the verse reveals a process of development. Innocent children accept everything they perceive as real, even as they project their own provisional and faulty interpretations onto the world around them. As Nitya puts it, "The child does not draw a line between fact and fiction." Meaning the child's fictions are taken as factual. We may still remember how we once imbued a doll or puppet with an incontrovertible reality, and we could interact with them just as we did our friends and family. Even better, often enough, as we single-handedly supplied both sides of the dialogue.

The maturation process Bill referred to is the gradual realization of the falseness of certain elements, culminating in a stage late in life or at least advanced maturity where, as with Vedanta, we perceive a measure of unreality in everything manifest. Nitya describes how this fits with the verse:

As the child grows he will discover that there is a deceptive element in his experiences which is capable of thwarting his hopes and bringing them to dissatisfaction or frustration. When other similar occasions arise in life, the growing child becomes wary of so readily accepting things. Skepticism grows; truth

and falsehood are thereafter sorted out with increasing precision. When the child grows into a mature youth, the critical acumen is applied to everything. Transactions become rigid. Definitive criteria are employed to safeguard the verity of facts.... In this stage of life the mind of a person is at the extreme opposite pole of the child's visualization. All transactions of life are once again treated as make-believe, though of a reverse order.

Science and philosophy have progressed to the point where even 'facts' and 'definitive criteria' are revealed to be provisional and uncertain. The gurus suggest that only by aligning our psyche with a theoretical absolute principle known as the Self can we avoid the loneliness and desolation of old (or any) age. But that comes much later in the study. First we have to rid ourselves of the false props we employ to inject meaning into empty illusions. In a way we are still lending credence to a world of our over-simplified imagination. Being dependent on the external ratification of our existence—which is far and away the norm—we may surrender to despair as everything we hold dear falls away. If our world is reduced to nothing but a projected forest floating in midair like a mirage, we may well abandon hope. In many respects, Darsanamala is Narayana Guru's antidote to such despair. It is a medicine that may be hard to swallow initially, but as Nataraja Guru famously said, "A bad disease needs a drastic remedy." (Gita, 121) The remedy includes facing our dilemma squarely, after a lifetime of avoidance, and this is anything but easy.

Shankara makes it sound simple enough, if we are paying attention. Nitya explains: "According to Shankara, an illusion disproves itself by becoming ineffective in showing the intrinsic qualities or potential reactions of factual things or events." This is echoed by author Philip K. Dick's definition: "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." But when

do you stop believing in it? Only when it fails you. In the meantime we are masters at prolonging our illusions. Deb affirmed that illusion proves itself by its insufficiency, by the failed expectations that lie in its wake. Yet wouldn't it be nice to change course in advance of such a disaster?

The hard part is bringing a balanced skepticism to bear on our cherished fantasies. Moreover, we have to stay alert to not befuddle our thinking. Although the word 'contrariwise' has a long history, I can't help but wonder if Nataraja Guru used the word in his translation with Tweedledee (from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*) in mind:

“Contrariwise,” continued Tweedledee, “if it was so, it might be; and if it were so, it would be; but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic.”

Pretty confusing logic at that! Yet if it's convoluted enough, it becomes plausible if we aren't careful.

Moving along the age continuum, Nitya turns his focus from young children to young adults, with their own version of puppets:

A young person has to face a complex world of emotional fantasies, generated by the instincts of sex or self-preservation. Sexual fantasies make the mind romantic, and it attributes to the loved one many imaginary qualities. In this case also, the principle of efficiency acts as a reliable criterion to test the factuality of things believed to be true. When lovers begin getting into each other's need to respond to their several demands, transactions reveal the inefficaciousness of their assumptions. As a result, disillusionment comes.

When his puppets no longer behave like rag dolls and instead stand up for their own needs and feelings, the puppeteer is sure to be

frustrated and dismayed. He may generate religious or social strictures to force the puppets to behave as he wants. We live in a time when many former puppets gallantly refuse to be shrunk to servile status, and demand their right to independence. The clash between puppets and puppeteers is a primary element of modern history. At the same time, it is best not to go from one extreme to the other. When you push long and hard, once the opposition gives way there is a powerful momentum to keep going far beyond the balance point. Here is where an uncommon restraint is needed. Nitya touches on this in his assessment of the need for security:

The instinct of self-preservation exaggerates the sense of insecurity and prompts the need to find measures by which one can have economic, social, moral and spiritual security. These exaggerated needs of the mind push the person into various avenues of activity, which should more aptly be called karma—actions prompted by desire—and desires born of ignorance.

Life is generally uncertain, but we crave certainty. Security is one of the projected values we might examine based on this verse. Can I have enough faith in the beneficence of the universe to live with a fair measure of insecurity? Security is a first-chakra issue; in other words it is a primary need on which to build a healthy psyche. But if we exaggerate our sense of insecurity we may never be secure. Surely if it is based on external supports, security will always be something we can lose, so our anxiety will not go away. Nitya cautions:

The negative aspect of the instinct of preservation produces many forms of irrational fear. When such fear is intensified, a person may even go insane. Even in normal persons there are several hidden pathological tendencies, and even in “noble” sentiments, such as love or devotion, the operating dynamic can

be a pathological sense of insecurity. This is a predominant factor in women when they grow old and lose their bargaining powers of physical appearance and sexual charm. People who make a living with their creative powers are also very apprehensive of old age. In old age the external world becomes anemic or barren and devoid of values.

The apprehension about old age made up a significant chunk of our class discussion. I'll add some consoling ideas about it in Part II I think you'll find amusing.

In my understanding, Nitya's last sentence above is what Narayana Guru is referring to with the mirage forest: "In old age the external world becomes anemic or barren and devoid of values." If we have not struck a close relationship with our inner truth, when all of what we rely on in its place fails us, we will be left destitute. Sensing this on the horizon should energize us to turn to a firmer basis for our joy. Nitya puts it this way: "Inner maturity that is not vitiated by pathological tendencies turns naturally from the external world to a more abiding reality which is seen in the Self."

Bill mused how the old in our society are considered useless throwaways, and if we anticipated them to be wise it would change our social expectations dramatically. We didn't address the stake that business and politics have in keeping people isolated, and especially keeping them from factual knowledge, but those are powerful forces working against the sane attitude Bill proposed, where we are connected and aware, transcending all stratifications including those by age. In short, it makes good economic sense to write off the wise as ridiculous. Our society is masterful at doing it convincingly.

In addition to those horizontal pressures toward despair, many successful religious charlatans offer themselves or their programs as the stable basis for faith, and apparently this satisfies

legions of seekers. Narayana Guru is honest in treating such attitudes as another strata of illusory projections. In Nitya's words, they are examples of *rati*: projected value-visions that we eagerly interact with. The value people assign them, whatever they may be, is what makes them adorable. As long as you know you are projecting and it could fall apart at any time, you can go ahead. But beware! Many have been sucked in far beyond what they expected.

As we know and Deb reminded us, the solution is to discover ourselves as the source of happiness and awareness. When we are grounded in Self-realization, everything we encounter is affected by our glow. The open secret is that beauty is not intrinsic to the object; we connect with it in ourselves. Jan talked about how much she loves beauty and is always looking for ways to further that experience. She feels she has a growing capacity to see beauty everywhere, and it is very exciting to her. Additionally, she has achieved a new level of independence in her life, so she doesn't have so much pressure to keep going toward some factual goal to accommodate others. She can take time out to appreciate the glorious environments she moves through, whenever she wants.

Deb agreed that ideas, programs and plans are just our private fantasies in a way. Narayana Guru is suggesting that here is where our understanding is off the mark. We tune out the world's magnificence when we substitute our petty framing.

Bill talked about an article he read recently in Tricycle magazine about taking the time to see and enjoy the world's beauty. We have to decide to set aside our ongoing agenda to really look at things. In a way, we have to aspire to alertness. Moni agreed you have to slow down before you can begin to move to an inner focus. Deb sagely described it as seeing in context. She gently disagreed with the simplistic way it is often taken, that we tune out the world to access our inner reality. Turning inward does not mean turning away from anything. Again, this is a yogic

secret that we will be making much of, in the later darsanas of our study.

I recalled how Nitya would often pause during walks to admire something beautiful, to remind those with him to stop and smell the flowers. He well knew the joy he felt was his own contribution. He would sometimes say, looking at a rose or a sunset, “Aren’t I beautiful?” The object was eliciting his innate joy, and his joy was in turn illuminating the object as worthwhile. Reciprocity is the key. Both halves belong together.

I gave one of many possible examples of projected value-visions that throw our lives into turmoil, in hopes that some of us will take the gurus’ invitation to see through their illusory nature. As a young man I was caught up in the spirit of the 1960s, full of passionate antiwar and pro civil rights outbursts. In those days our enemy was labeled either the Establishment or simply the Country. We railed against the hypothetical concept of the Country, not realizing it was a vague compilation of a vast number of concepts ranging from true to false. In other words, it was a fiction. Had to be. On account of this our efforts were often in vain: like Don Quixote we were tilting at windmills, and the windmills just kept blowing in the wind. With the passage of time, I can see that the concept of Country has steadily changed throughout my life. When was it ever real? Never. It was a fiction we used as a kind of shorthand for our beliefs. We were exploding with misdirected energies, in most cases causing more damage than we repaired.

Nitya often noted that ‘husband’, ‘wife’, and so on were similar fictions that cause us no end of confusion. Maya is a favorite cliché of Indian philosophers, a term to excuse the inability to grasp any subject. “It’s just maya.” Case closed. We will have to work hard to avoid that pitfall in the next darsana, the Maya Darsana. All this projecting is “ignorance,” which is yet another vague concept deflecting us from meaningful contemplation.

Deb's suggestion that what we needed was humility—to be humble about our selves—was spot on. We have to accept that the mask of our persona, of being in charge, will have to be lost. We need to understand it's okay to proceed without it.

It's hard to believe that there is still more material in this brief verse commentary, but at the end Nitya offers a consoling yogic perspective that Jan brought to our attention:

The principle drive of life, known as *rati* (the capacity to interact with objects of pleasure and projected value-visions) disappears, and in its place *arati* comes. *Arati* is total indifference to all kinds of aids, physical or mental. At this stage a person can easily become indifferent and withdrawn; *arati* leads to death. But if the mature person is wise, there arises a natural consciousness out of the subjective promptings to seek happiness and the situations that bring fulfillment out of dissatisfaction. Duality fades out, the blissful nature of the Self slowly or suddenly becomes unveiled, and wisdom prevails. The revealed reality of the Self is the only factor that remains thereafter unassailed by the ravages of changing forms. Out of the ever-changing flux the beingness of pure duration emerges.

Jan astutely realized that *arati* is not the correction for *rati*, it is the dialectical opposite, and they are to be canceled out in a neutral wisdom that includes both together while transcending their impact. Where *rati* leads to immersion in life at the expense of our freedom, *arati* leads to death through abandonment. Somehow we have to access a third option, which adds a whole other layer to life beyond the ordinary dichotomy, one that can only be revealed by yogic contemplation. In Jan's estimation this is what leads to ripeness in old age. She also felt it was well worth asking yourself what are the key ingredients of the rest of my life? Hopefully they would include a stable grounding in self-awareness, so that when

the less permanent ingredients fade out, as they must, the happiness of the Self would not go with them.

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

Wise people look upon this world like a sky-forest imagined in the Self. In other words, they see everything in the form of the Self and they treat the world as unreal, because it is supposed in the Self. They understand that the Self alone is real. It is only unwise people who think the world is real. Children who lack understanding treat lifeless and inert puppets as equally real as themselves and play with them carrying on a conversation. Only those of maturer years know that such things are inert and lifeless.

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One of our dear departed friends here in Portland is Terry O'Donnell, a celebrated author who lived in Iran for some 20 years. Iran has a culture that respects old age, something that we can hardly imagine ever returning to our part of the world. He wrote about when his servant Mamdali, a spectacular character out of the old-fashioned Iranian peasantry, has just related an absurd story to him, vouching for it by the fact that it was told to him by a very old man:

He must have noted the incredulous look on my face, for he repeated that the man who had told the story had been very old. It reminded me of the evening when he was lighting the fire with an old copy of *Time* magazine and I happened to explain to him *Time's* practice of choosing the most important man of the year for its New Year cover. "Oh, I see," he said. "You

mean the oldest man in your country.” And there came on his face that smile, musing and tender, which always appeared when to him the world seemed right. (23)

Terence O’Donnell, *Garden of the Brave in War: Recollections of Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980)

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Here’s the old article on wisdom and aging that I’ve shared before, which should help you frame your fate in a more positive way. The original may be found here:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/20/health/research/20brai.html?
r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/20/health/research/20brai.html?r=0)

Older Brain Really May Be a Wiser Brain

By SARA REISTAD-LONG

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When older people can no longer remember names at a cocktail party, they tend to think that their brainpower is declining. But a growing number of studies suggest that this assumption is often wrong.

Instead, the research finds, the aging brain is simply taking in more data and trying to sift through a clutter of information, often to its long-term benefit.

The studies are analyzed in a new edition of a neurology book, “Progress in Brain Research.”

Some brains do deteriorate with age. Alzheimer's disease, for example, strikes 13 percent of Americans 65 and older. But for most aging adults, the authors say, much of what occurs is a gradually widening focus of attention that makes it more difficult to latch onto just one fact, like a name or a telephone number. Although that can be frustrating, it is often useful.

"It may be that distractibility is not, in fact, a bad thing," said Shelley H. Carson, a psychology researcher at Harvard whose work was cited in the book. "It may increase the amount of information available to the conscious mind."

For example, in studies where subjects are asked to read passages that are interrupted with unexpected words or phrases, adults 60 and older work much more slowly than college students. Although the students plow through the texts at a consistent speed regardless of what the out-of-place words mean, older people slow down even more when the words are related to the topic at hand. That indicates that they are not just stumbling over the extra information, but are taking it in and processing it.

When both groups were later asked questions for which the out-of-place words might be answers, the older adults responded much better than the students.

"For the young people, it's as if the distraction never happened," said an author of the review, Lynn Hasher, a professor of psychology at the University of Toronto and a senior scientist at the Rotman Research Institute. "But for older adults, because they've retained all this extra data, they're now suddenly the better problem solvers. They can transfer the information they've soaked up from one situation to another."

Such tendencies can yield big advantages in the real world, where it is not always clear what information is important, or will become important. A seemingly irrelevant point or suggestion in a memo can take on new meaning if the original plan changes. Or extra details that stole your attention, like others' yawning and fidgeting, may help you assess the speaker's real impact.

“A broad attention span may enable older adults to ultimately know more about a situation and the indirect message of what's going on than their younger peers,” Dr. Hasher said. “We believe that this characteristic may play a significant role in why we think of older people as wiser.”

In a 2003 study at Harvard, Dr. Carson and other researchers tested students' ability to tune out irrelevant information when exposed to a barrage of stimuli. The more creative the students were thought to be, determined by a questionnaire on past achievements, the more trouble they had ignoring the unwanted data. A reduced ability to filter and set priorities, the scientists concluded, could contribute to original thinking.

This phenomenon, Dr. Carson said, is often linked to a decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex. Studies have found that people who suffered an injury or disease that lowered activity in that region became more interested in creative pursuits.

Jacqui Smith, a professor of psychology and research professor at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan, who was not involved in the current research, said there was a word for what results when the mind is able to assimilate data and put it in its proper place — wisdom.

“These findings are all very consistent with the context we’re building for what wisdom is,” she said. “If older people are taking in more information from a situation, and they’re then able to combine it with their comparatively greater store of general knowledge, they’re going to have a nice advantage.”