

Darsanamala Combined Class Notes 2023

IV Maya Darsana, A Vision of Non-being Beingness

Verse One

What is not known, that is maya; it alone shines as many forms: vidya, avidya, para, apra, tamas, pradhana, and prakriti.

7/24/6

One of our rare summer evenings, with a light breeze, sitting on the porch and watching the sky do its psychedelic performance, vibrating with intensity.

Verse one lays out eight terms that will be taken up one by one in the course of the darsana, with maya itself making two appearances. These are mostly tools for continuing the process of distinguishing the real from the unreal, but with more direction aimed at finding the pearl in the oyster so to speak. We will be enabled to discern the truthful basis of our superimpositions of falsehood, as Nitya puts it. We are now beginning to turn away from falsehood and towards truth in our overall study program.

Like a garland, Darsanamala resembles an inverted arch. It drops down rapidly into the phenomenal from the noumenal, then gradually begins to bend from the negative to the positive, simultaneously slowing its descent. The turning point in the exact middle is Aum Tat Sat: That Alone is real. That Alone again! Afterwards it moves upward with increasing alacrity, sweeping up to disappear once again in the Nirvana Darsana, the tenth.

We are in an exciting moment in the unfoldment of Darsanamala, but considering the slow pace we're taking, there were a few ripples of impatience in the group last night. Where is the truth in all this? True, on the surface we're wallowing in the

vines that encircle us, but it is essential to recognize we're bound before trying to become free. Otherwise it is likely to be an imaginary freedom. In order to be sure, we have to really look at those pesky things holding us in place.

The key idea is that truth is not something we make or create, it is sitting there all the time. Only it is overlain with piles of junk we have encountered and danced with. Whatever extent we are able to discard the crap is the precise extent we will encounter truth. I shouldn't even call it crap, because we tend to love and cherish our junk, our psychological tchotchkes. Our endearments is the better term used by Narayana Guru in his One Hundred Verses of Self-instruction. In the cliché lingo they are called attachments, but words sometimes get used so often they lose their import. Anyway, we frequently make the mistake of trying to build up an image of truth, instead of paring away the extraneous to let it stand revealed. We insist on belief. "Do you believe in God?" "Do you accept Allah!?" As if these mean something specific, items fixed and knowable. We make tchotchkes out of the divine mystery, and stick them on our shelf.

Nitya beautifully describes maya in the first verse. Manifested things come and go, are born and die. When they are here they are as real as anything gets, but then they disappear, first leaving memory traces and then into nothing. They become unreal. Maya is what is both real and unreal, in the sense of emerging and remerging from the primal soup. If there was no underlying reality, it would truly be chaos, but apparently there is something that holds it all together. There is a continuity to the whole that surpasseth understanding.

We are going to learn that instead of imagining that our happiness is dependent on the things that come and go, it is actually intrinsic to our nature, and those things derive their apparent radiance from us. If we turn to the source within instead of the reflection without, our happiness will become steady, instead

of fluctuating with the availability of the things we cherish. We can and should still dance with the things we love, but our love will be vastly expanded to include everything. We will be making this change of outlook as real as we can in the coming months, under the guidance of a couple of truly great masters.

By the end of the class, with glowing darkness wrapping us in its arms, we spoke of the thing we all cherish most: our mothers. How is it that something so transcendently dear and important can pass away, and what are we left with? Perhaps we are in bondage to our mothers, because we believe our happiness is so inextricably entwined with their existence. Or perhaps we have been shown the ultimate lovable beauty the universe can create out of its infinite compassion. We can take that example of pure selfless caring and return it to That Alone which nourishes us, sharing it and teaching it to our lonely fellow beings. What is there to stop us?

Part II

Oddly, tchotchkes don't make most dikkers, being Yiddish. It's a very handy word. From the internet: *Tchotchke* is from Yiddish *tshatshke*, "trinket," ultimately of Slavic origin.

More from netlingo.com:

tchotchkes, a.k.a. knickknacks -or- swag -or- schwag
(pronounced: choch-keys)

Promotional items emblazoned with company logos, from the traditional type of giveaway (baseball cap, T-shirt, tote bag, or mouse pad) down to really weird junk (barf bags, butterfly nets, neon sunglasses, or pogo sticks). These items are usually given away in the thousands at [shows](#) and are given to other people in turn or retained as part of an individual's [geekosphere](#).

see also: [SWAG](#)

It also reminds me of Nataraja Guru's definition of siddhis, (psychic powers) which are "psychophysical dynamisms. They are like the plastic spoons, soap-powder packets, etc.: free gifts of very little value." So, yeah, it's just what you thought it was—junk.

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9/27/16

Maya Darsana verse 1

What is not known, that is maya;
it alone shines as many forms:
vidya, avidya, para, apara,
tamas, pradhana, and prakriti.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

*What is not real, that is Negation
Which by itself, as science-nescience,
Transcendence-immanence, darkness and prime potency
Of Nature, in many forms, looms.*

The first verse of the Maya Darsana is basically a list of the topics we will examine over the entire course of the ten verses. Its first half is an exceptional definition, as Deb pointed out, one that practically equates maya with the Absolute: maya is what is not known, but shines as the many created forms of existence. Isn't that exactly how the Absolute is described elsewhere?

Narayana Guru lived in a time (don't we all!) when maya had become a cliché for the problems of life, the intrinsic opposition

posed by transactional encounters; what my father called “the obstinacy of the inanimate.” Something to curse, a hostile force pitilessly pitted against us. The Guru felt we should appreciate maya’s absolute necessity and wonderfulness, counterbalancing the negativity with a positive spin, and aiming ultimately for neutrality. If we are going to be free of maya’s heavy pressure, we have to seriously realign our attitude about it.

To that end we had a very fruitful discussion in the class. There was fruit all through, starting with the frosty juice of our backyard apples and grapes that got us off to a roaring start, moving on to fruit ripening as a perfect metaphor for the evolutionary process.

The Sanskrit words in the verse are given valuable definitions here. For the most part, the Sanskrit word-by-word definitions have been left out in this digital version, but these are especially important. Keep in mind these are selective definitions of words that all carry a broad range of meanings:

vidya—knowledge in the true and absolute sense.

avidya—ignorance, in the sense of relativistic notions, opinions and conditioned reflexes.

para—consciousness pertaining to the reasoning self, mind and senses; with which one discerns happiness and sorrow.

apara—the unconscious and instinctive self that is instrumental in carrying out all physical and biological functions.

tamah—the state of confusion in which the discriminative power of the reasoning self is at its lowest.

pradhanam—the prime potency, such as of a seed to develop into a tree or a big bang that can cause an expanding universe.

prakriti—that which has the tendency to proliferate, replicate, and cause endless varieties of mutations.

Deb ramped us up by pointing out how all the aspects of maya listed in the verse are, in a sense, negations of the unsullied Absolute ground of being. Whenever something exists, it at least appears to be separate from the ocean of pure potential that spawned it. Actual existence is invariably limited. All the eight words in the verse stand for negations in the sense of not being eternal conditions, and they cover the whole of manifestation.

It is essential to remember that negation is by no means an evil. I noted how the idea of evil is a projection, and a selfish one at that. The modern mind is obsessed with good versus evil. “Maya is an evil. Ignorance, *tamas*, all evil.” It’s essentially a self-defeating ego ploy. If we view evil as external to us, we can blame others for everything and conveniently ignore the area where we actually could do some improving work—in ourselves. I recalled that the original Aramaic words that were translated into good and evil in the Bible, during a particularly brutal period in European history, originally meant ripe and unripe. I’ve said this before, but it finally seemed to click with the group how liberating that idea is. We are not pitted against an implacable enemy dedicated to evil, just someone who has more to learn. We are all in a slow process of ripening, and all of us are at different stages of the process. In order to make things better, we can help each other and be supportive of the ripening that’s going on, instead of trying desperately to eradicate that terrible other fellow, and in the process putting our own ripening on hold too.

The idea of yoga is not to defeat ignorance with knowledge, for instance, but to see how in every situation we evince an

admixture of knowledge and ignorance. They go together, inextricably. By despising ignorance we merely polarize our psyche, creating a schism where there doesn't have to be any. Compassion isn't just a kindness, then, it is a way of healing all sides of the equation, and it has to begin with a global understanding.

Jan wanted to know how this teaching could be actually applied, always a critical element of the study. I suggested that we are used to making plans and carrying them out, but especially when changes are in the air, we are better off to restrain our desires to have things turn out in a certain way. This philosophy recognizes a total context of harmonious unfoldment that we are an integral part of, and we cut ourselves off from it to some degree when we selfishly push our personal agenda. Of course, tough times are just when we feel most pressed to come up with solutions in our own best interests, but that is just when we should restrain our enthusiasms. If we have a measure of confidence that ripening is taking place, we should give it plenty of room to happen. Holding on to a fixed idea of what will make us happy is bound to cause anxiety, while an optimistic openness invites all sorts of unanticipated potentials to join the dance. The attitude might be "Let's see how this will turn out," in place of "This is what I need to have."

One way this can be accomplished is by reframing your enemy as a fellow human being looking for happiness just as you are. It might be possible to work toward a common goal of happiness in place of believing your happiness depends on a diminishment of the happiness of the other. That person may well believe that you're playing a zero-sum game, with winners and losers, so you have to be alert to such problems even as you advocate for compromise and mutual accord.

Restraining our expectations does not mean restraining our participation. We still have much to do; only it is open-ended.

Flexible. We don't entertain worries and fears, which fill the void where the ocean of potential needs to be freest to operate. Jan did like Nitya's ocean image here, by the way:

When we survey the events, situations, and existential experiences of life, we can see that it is a continuously changing pattern of mysterious emergences and equally mysterious reemergences. Life on Earth can be compared to a vast ocean, over whose surface roll the emerging waves of birth and reemerging ripples of death. Birth and death, heat and cold, pain and pleasure, victory and defeat, fame and disgrace – all such dual aspects of life come as ceaseless agitations of our objective and subjective consciousness.

Standing back far enough to see the overall patterns of emergence and re-mergence leaves room for all kinds of new possibilities to fill the void. (The book has a typo here: “the re-emerging ripples of death,” which makes no sense. The ripples of death re-merge, not re-emerge.)

Practically every situation is an opportunity to fine-tune our outlook, and life is always kind to furnish us with chances for improvement, so long as we don't cop an attitude that we are victims of oppression and therefore helpless. We are brilliant beings that have barely touched our vast potential, and our challenges are goads to wake up and be more fully alive.

We are conditioned to demand and expect success, but one of the best insights of our class was how failure should be embraced as a tremendous positive factor. If we have limited expectations, success means we will remain glued to our tunnel vision. Failure may well cause us to expand our parameters dramatically. It can be a force to break our tamasic mental cocoon, and consequently open doors to renewed sattvic possibilities. In a society that shuns failure and insists on success, we are well trained to deny this key

element in evolution. Hostile public opinion is precisely what makes ripening so difficult. We struggle to put lipstick on our failures to make them look like successes, rather than admitting what went wrong and trying to do better.

Paul has developed a new respect for failure, and is now framing it as a deconditioning aid. He noted how so many times we walk down the same dead end streets, getting nowhere, yet pretty soon there we are again, unconsciously making the same mistakes. It's hard to stop doing what we are so thoroughly trained to do, unless an awareness of failure somehow seeps in. Failure gives us the incentive to change for the better, opening the door to creative options.

In Deb's previous day at the prison dialogue group, they talked a lot about failure, how to accept it and use it as an opportunity for growth. One of the inmates knew Pema Chodron's book on the subject, from which I will put excerpts in Part II. She says very similar things to what we discussed about maya, so it's well worth a look. At one point she mentions James Joyce:

Someone gave me a quote, something from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, where Joyce wrote about how failure can lead to discovery. And he actually didn't use the word "failure"; he used the word "mistake," as in making a mistake. He said, that mistakes can be "the portals of discovery." In other words, mistakes are the portal to creativity, to learning something new, to having a fresh look on things.

Many of you may remember verse 95 of *That Alone*, which is excellent background reading for this darsana, as well as one of the very best chapters of that book. I'll clip in a short bit from it for Part II also, where Nataraja Guru and Gurdjieff advocate for making good mistakes.

Here's another example of how to work with maya. An old friend of mine has been suffering from an undiagnosed ailment: a splitting headache that has lasted for several weeks. Doctors were no help. My friend—a rather high-strung type—was very worried, and fantasized about all sorts of terrible outcomes. To make a long story short, he finally found the cause, which was essentially jaw clenching from stress (and consequent worry), relaxed the area with massage and pain medication, and had an explosive release of the pain. The headache then went away.

This is a perfect example of maya in action. When we don't know what's going on, even if we *think* we do, we project all kinds of weird possibilities, making ourselves miserable. Once we figure it out, we are much more likely to stop abusing ourselves. Telling ourselves a falsely positive story may help a little, but it turns us away from finding the actual cause of our problem, so we may ignore a treatable condition. The best outcome is full comprehension.

The bottom line is that, particularly in matters that disturb us or cause us pain, we need to dig in and find the true cause. Otherwise the problem will continue to plague us. We may soldier on and get used to the thorn—we often do—but wouldn't it be much better to remove it?

Nitya describes the situation this way:

In any experience in which there is an element of mystery there are two functions. One is the emergence of something out of an unknown factor. The other is the disappearance of what seemed to be factual into another unknown factor. In either or both the emergence and reemergence, we experience the positivity of pleasure or negativity of pain.

The key is that with diligence we can decode the mysteries of maya, and spare ourselves and our associates much confusion. In

the Apavada Darsana, verse 7, Nitya notes, “the Guru says a close scrutiny of the apparent reality of things restores all individuated objects to their primeval status as the Absolute. When viewed from this standpoint, *maya* becomes irrelevant.” Going back to the very beginning of the work, he says:

It may seem to us as if *maya* functions in a magical way, yet one who understands how to perform magic is no stranger to its secrets. The magician is the master of his mysterious world. As there is a secret to be mastered in the practice of magic, so also there is one to be penetrated if we are to understand the mystery and power of *maya*. (I.2)

Really there isn't much to distinguish between this attitude and ordinary consciousness. Only this: for most people, things exist in isolation, but for yogis there is a conviction that there is a unifying ground that ties everything together. That idea by itself makes a world of difference. Unfortunately, since the ground is not manifest, it isn't as obvious as all the material things that so captivate us. Many unripe people are content to ignore the unifying principle and stick to what they can perceive with their senses. It usually takes a colossal failure of some sort to open the mind to the more complete picture. Paul quoted a favorite bumpersticker of his: *We are here to eliminate the illusion of separation*. My addition: illusion can't be eliminated, but it can lose its grip on us. Then “*maya* becomes irrelevant,” or at least less pressing. Less demeaning.

Nitya wields some Vedanta in his commentary, listing the four main types of negativity according to Indian philosophers. Number 4 got a laugh:

4) *atyantabhava* – In a lump of granite there is no trace of milk. Here we have a negation arising from the total absence of one thing in another.

It reminded me of our daughter Emily, when she was nearly two years old, asserting that the family dog was not a candlestick. That also drew a laugh!

The idea of negativity was the most fruitful stimulant for the class. Scotty recalled how his qigong instructor always spoke about creating space. Scotty thought of it as zooming to zero, dissolving into nothingness. His friend Uma, who graced us with her presence, was taught that you have to create a void to promote change; she felt it was a crucial idea. How can change happen if we are diligently following a fixed program? We harked back to Nataraja Guru's quote from last week: "If you are brave enough to create a vacuum, nature abhors it, and the vacuum will immediately be filled." But let it be filled—don't hastily fill it yourself.

This is the reason that desire is considered a hindrance in spirituality. As soon as you are able to create a little space, which is hard enough, you rush to fill it back up with what you want. Your desires have a lot of power to move you. What's really needed is to restrain yourself from filling the void prematurely, and instead remaining open to what the greater environment will supply. This is where we often come up short, since we are hardly ever aware of how our wants and expectations block every creative avenue instantly and unnoticeably. And resisting desires takes courage, because the outcome is not known, so we fantasize.

In this our positive desires are the hardest to resist. We want good things for the world, and for our loved ones, not to mention ourselves, and we are disheartened by the tragedies that abound on all sides, much amplified by the media. We are being spoon fed a very negative take on life, because it is commercially profitable. People

are drawn to downers and pay little attention to things that don't have any tension. Who wants to watch happy, wise people? Boring. We may begin to feel like failures because we have so little impact on the ongoing disasters around the world. This is actually a crucial issue, and Uma and Scotty spoke eloquently about it. We don't want to withdraw or content ourselves with wishful thinking. Instead we should be confident that our every contact with the world around is an opportunity to shed more light, to be more kind and caring.

Here again, that sense of failure can either cause a resignation from participation, or it can stimulate us to do something worthwhile. We should accept that we only affect a very small slice of the universe, so we shouldn't judge our success on whether the world is healed, but only whether we have done anything worthwhile in the normal course of our day. I quoted Ramana Maharshi, "Your own Self-realization is the greatest service you can render the world." By working on yourself you are contributing to the well-being of the greater milieu. Only a happy person can teach or share happiness.

Deb quickly reminded us that this didn't mean withdrawing and becoming isolated. According to Narayana Guru, our happiness is bound up with a sense of community. Preferably the broadest possible community. We work out our betterment in interactions, which are multifaceted, and not so much by linear practices in seclusion. She added that mere tolerance is a closed and condescending attitude. We have to make it real. But how?

My point is that we have one person, and one person only, who we are most responsible for, and who may actually listen to what we think. That would be ourself. We have the potential for sharing joy and wisdom, and lending a hand where somebody is reaching out for one. Doing so can help us to feel valuable even as we are aware of the myriad tragedies that fill our place in space.

I think we were all astonished at how germane the Maya Darsana is shaping up to be. As Nitya ends that famous verse 95 of That Alone: “This is a happy day for us, being with maya.”

Part II

Swami Vidyananda’s commentary:

The term *maya* refers to what is not real. What really does not exist but seems to exist in practical life is what is to be understood here. It is this same *maya* which is not real but in practical life seems to us to be the basis of science, etc.

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Here is part of Pema Chodron’s book on the fine art of failing, titled *Fail, Fail Again, Fail Better: Wise Advice for Leaning into the Unknown*. The first is likely from her Introduction:

In her commencement speech at Naropa University, Pema Chödrön explains that if there’s one thing we all need to practice, it’s how to fail well.

When Naropa asked me for the topic of my talk, I decided not to give it to them because I thought if I did, they wouldn’t let me do it! My talk is inspired by a quote from Samuel Beckett that goes like this: “Fail. Fail again. Fail better.” I thought if there is one skill that is not stressed very much but is really needed, it is knowing how to fail well. The fine art of failing.

There is a lot of emphasis on succeeding. And whether we buy the hype or not, we all want to succeed, especially if you consider success as “it works out the way I want it to.” You

know it feels good in the gut and in the heart because it worked out. So failing, by that definition, is that it didn't work out the way you wanted it to.

And failing is what we don't usually get a lot of preparation for.

I think if there is one thing that prepares you for having some idea of how to work with the rawness of things not working out the way you want them to, it would be contemplative education. You have gotten a lot of instruction and encouragement and support for feeling how things impact you—not just going down the tubes with it but actually taking responsibility for what is happening to you and having some tools about how to work with painful feelings, raw feelings.

So fail, fail again, fail better. It's how to get good at holding the rawness of vulnerability in your heart.

A nice series of excerpts from the book is here:

<http://www.yogajournal.com/yoga-101/fail-fail-fail-better-lean-unknown/>

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From That Alone, verse 95, on mistakes:

This verse is for all people to become light-hearted. We should see the light side of life rather than becoming so grumpy about everything. If you make a mistake it's because Mother Nature wants you to make it. So don't have any sense of guilt, make your mistakes gladly. If you don't make little mistakes, God will call out to you: "Fool! I gave you a chance. I sent you to the world, and you didn't make any mistake. Stupid! Get out!" If you are here in this world, make some mistakes. Maya is sitting there and asking us to do all these things. Nataraja Guru used to tell us in

the Gurukula that we should make interesting mistakes, not stupid or clumsy ones. Whatever mistakes you make should be very clever and interesting.

Fritz Peters tells a great story about Gurdjieff. At his school one time he had to be away for a few days, so he put a trustworthy woman in charge in his absence. On his return she showed him a little black book in which she had kept track of all the offenses the students had committed. It was quite a long list. To everyone's surprise, Gurdjieff took out his wallet and started giving each one money, paying so much per offense. Fritz had been at the top of the list so he got the most money, but he was ashamed to spend it, feeling the old woman had been let down. She had carefully chronicled all the crimes, and now Gurdjieff was giving everyone presents for their mistakes. But Gurdjieff said life was like that, and if you didn't make mistakes life would never be interesting.

So here you are being given an invitation to make mistakes. And what kind of mistakes is maya causing you to make? Her mistakes are not freaks of nature. She has a system. We can see how comedy and tragedy come in such a way that over time they balance each other out.