

**IV Maya Darsana,  
A Vision of Non-being Beingness**

**Verse Two**

Like the prior nonexistence in the clay alone, before it is fashioned, none other than the Absolute is known; what is that Absolute is indeed maya, of indeterminate possibility.

8/1/6

It is apparently against a basic law of the universe to compose a Vedantic work without at some point bringing in the metaphor of the pot and the clay. For many years I would nod off whenever it came up. But if we keep in mind the symbolism that clay represents the Absolute as substance and pot means a specific manifestation, particularly YOU, then it is more interesting and makes more sense. The world around us is like an amorphousness bending and twisting into a ceaseless series of morphs—forms—which are briefly stable and then morph into something else. The pot and the clay thing describes this process in more unitive terms than almost any other metaphor, accounting for its continual resurfacing. Rest assured, it will be back!

When we see that the pot is nothing but clay through and through, we can readily agree with Narayana Guru's definition of maya here. It is none other than the Absolute, unfurling. Everything is a temporary form of the Absolute. The pot of you is indeed the Absolute. Tat tvam asi, girls and boys!

Nitya makes a nice point in his commentary that when the unfurling of our life goes well we picture a benign God or Providence, and when it gets ugly we bring in the Devil or pitiless

Fate. We love to anthropomorphize. But basically it's inscrutable, the possibilities are indeterminate. As the seed grows into a tree, good and bad things happen to give it its shape and dimensions. We can retrospect and notice a lot of coherence in our unfoldment, but we can only guess and hope as to its future course.

Still, looking back and contemplating the course of our life has an important value at times such as this. When life appears bleak and frightening, as when warfare is redoubling around the globe and no way out can be imagined, it is comforting to notice that there is an intelligent direction to everything. Sadly, humankind as a whole seems to grow by fits and starts, by agonizing contractions between spurts of expansion. Doom seems certain, and yet life as a whole perseveres and furthers. The chaos stimulates our thinking and contemplative propensities. Too easily we become complacent. We want to have faith in our leaders, so we pretend they are not psychopathic lizard-people. We would rather follow than lead.

Happily, a balanced yogic approach means we should stay poised midway between leading and following, open to the next possibility. The class talked about how we need to plan and strive and set up programs in order for anything to happen, but at the same time how too much planning and programming makes serendipity impossible, diverting us from new directions. This is another arena in which to find the happy median. We don't want to be bound by our previous decisions if they become outdated, yet we want to accomplish and fulfill what we find rewarding.

We tried an exercise to look back at our lives to try to spot moments when something unexpected changed our course in a significant way. As Deb said, really everything is unplanned or unexpected. Mostly we talked about little things like plans for the day that got altered for the better, or at least for the nonce. But there are major events that start as a point source and spread to have earthshaking consequences. It is valuable to take a look for

them, if only to open up to the wonder of an invisible hand directing the course of the river of our life. Equally present are courses we once considered highly likely that came to nothing.

Finally Moni showed us the proper way to meditate on this idea. She talked about how when she had graduated from university and was wondering about her future, she received a letter from Guru Nitya inviting her to come to the Gurukula for a short visit. She was certain her father would not permit it, since it went against all propriety. And yet, when she showed him the letter he was enthusiastic about the idea. She went for two weeks, and later became Nitya's personal secretary and traveled all over the world with him. She got a US passport, so now she lives here. So many events in her life she was able to trace back to that one watershed letter. It was touching and beautiful!

It turned out Jebra (one of our two special guests along with Jean Norrby) had done a similar exercise to last night's, in a course after college to determine a suitable occupation. In her class everyone filled out a questionnaire listing highlights of their life to date. Then they looked at them closely. Almost everything in Jebra's involved some form of writing. Now she writes for a living—she doesn't like to call herself a writer, but the rest of us could. So sometimes you can reinforce already existing tendencies by consciously recognizing them. And this wasn't something that popped up by Chance, it had been there all along.

As we have been studying, each of us has many innate tendencies, called *vasanas* in Sanskrit. They are like seeds buried in the manure of our psyches, waiting for opportunities to grow and actualize their potentials. There is a mysterious mating of opportunities and potentials that has made us what we are, and which makes the world what it is. It is done with such finesse that it looks accidental, haphazard even. It is a seamless, flowing miracle. To participate in it is the greatest wonder. There is no blessing other than this. *Tat tvam asi.*

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10/4/16

Maya Darsana verse 2

Like the prior nonexistence in the clay alone,  
before it is fashioned,  
none other than the Absolute is known;  
what is that Absolute is indeed  
*maya*, of indeterminate possibility.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

*Just as, before the origin of the pot the clay itself is  
In its non-being, (so too before the origin of the world) as  
other than the world  
What had no being as the Absolute itself  
Such is maya (the negative principle) of indeterminate  
possibility.*

The return of Bushra, Andy and Nagib lent a festive air to our weekly dive into the ocean of possibilities, providing welcome inner sunshine to offset the first day of serious fall-like weather, in which class began well after darkness had closed in.

In this verse, the venerable analogy of the pot and the clay rears its head yet again. If we have grasped that it pertains directly to our overly rigid psychic condition and gives hints as to how to frame our life to make it more flexible, it will no longer be quite so dry and meaningless. We can but hope.

Nitya was fond of Spinoza's substance, wherein God is defined as a substance with infinite attributes. It's not a substance

like earthy clay, or even like the cloud of subatomic particles undergirding the universe, but wholly immaterial. Vedanta's clay is like that, a sea of potential that can be crafted into infinitely various forms, which are symbolized by the pot.

Once again Jan brought us to focus on the importance of this verse in our daily lives. She asked if this wasn't about becoming more skillful in what we are about. She's right, of course. What difference does it make to know that things are made out of an unformed substance? What most matters is that we have become rigidly formed ourselves. We live in a time when we enjoy pretty darn comfortable forms, with plenty of options and reliable sustenance, so not too many people even begin to question their pot-ness. Only a philosopher will anticipate that a static life is less than optimal, despite having all the niceties and necessities covered. But once we are baked into a pot, our development is frozen. If evolving is what excites you, then we need to find ways to tinker with our personal pot. Standing still just isn't that exciting, if it is even possible.

The revised almost-as-famous analogy of gold and the ornaments made from it is a bit less drastic. We can melt gold with heat and reshape it easily. A clay pot has to be smashed and pulverized before it can be remade. That's what gurus do, if you ask them: whip out a big hammer and start pounding. You have to be substantially dissatisfied with your state of being to invite that. Or a philosopher. But you have to at least be extremely dedicated for it—or young enough to not know what's coming.

The Gurukula gurus offer a model of mentally pulsating from the periphery to the core and back to the periphery, or in other words, back and forth between being the pot and the clay. The core (*karu*) is unformed, pure potential. Claylike. In our life as a pot, the periphery is where we have a personality and a fixed lineup of behaviors, reinforced by peer pressure and our own fears. By releasing our death grip on the periphery we can sink into the *karu*

to rejuvenate our existence, invite fresh perspectives and opportunities, and actualize those that appeal to our wise assessment. Unlike many religious and spiritual formats, we aren't supposed to remain in the potential state forever, but rather to bring its glories into the world we live in, to brighten our days and those of our companions.

Bushra asserted that she is always changing, and realizing that by itself is certainly a flexible-enough attitude. She thought of constant change as a kind of unity with the Absolute, yet the sea of pure potential does not change. If it did it would not be absolute. Change is the Absolute as maya; or better, maya is the changeful aspect of the Absolute. In this model, stasis is deadening, creative change is life-bestowing. This is again at odds with the widespread belief that we will have achieved the highest when we no longer suffer changes, that realization is a steady state. Well, it both is and is not. By the same token, we both are and are not the Absolute.

The radical note of Narayana Guru is made perfectly explicit here in this verse. Where maya is most commonly viewed as a hostile enemy, he equates it with the Absolute itself, as we suspected last verse, where “What is not known, that is maya; it alone shines as many forms,” accords maya an absolute status as “all this.”

Treating maya as an implacable foe is a typical human attitude. Narayana Guru wants to liberate us from all misconceptions, and pitting ourselves against the whole context of our world is surely a waste of time at best. Better to acknowledge its validity and learn to work well within it. To do that, of course, we have to surrender our fixed notions such as us against them or me against it. We are all together in a unitive situation, one that is continually evolving and being improved upon, even as its basis remains ever the same.

Bill called our attention to Nitya's phrase “universal volition,” wondering what it meant. It is not a common term for us.

I suggested it was a polite form of “God’s will,” referring to something like Shakespeare’s “tide in the affairs of men.” Nitya is comparing the creativity of the universal mind with that of creative people, where they begin at the negative alpha pole—a kind of sea of pure potentiality—and over time are able to actualize certain potentials and direct energy away from others:

The poet who writes a poem, the artist who paints a picture, a sculptor who carves a sculpture, a playwright who produces a drama, as well as the entrepreneur who becomes wealthy and powerful – all begin their role at the negative alpha pole of consciousness. The examples here, and many more which could be cited, are examples of the imaginations of people becoming sufficiently dynamic to produce individualized items or structures of an empirical utility or a transactional validity. The same is also true of the universal mind, beginning at the alpha pole of the nonexistence of the world in the Absolute. (201)

Nitya immediately equates the universal mind with a form of will, or possibly fate:

The universal volition can promote one, or many, or all of the possibilities of manifestation, from their indiscernible potentiality to their factual existence. The result is the world we universally share as a common reality.

We are not talking about some being sitting off somewhere who makes decisions that are subsequently carried out by a complacent universe. The creative impulse is intrinsic to the unfolding of creation itself. Still, there is undeniably intelligence involved. The process is coherent. No randomness at all. That awareness promotes us to being co-creators with the flow of existence, integral and essential aspects of the whole. Where society benefits

from making us feel like outsiders, there is nothing outside, no outside to inhabit.

Actually, citing Shakespeare was fortuitous. Let's look at a bit more of the quote:

**Brutus:**

There is a tide in the affairs of men.  
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;  
Omitted, all the voyage of their life  
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.  
On such a full sea are we now afloat,  
And we must take the current when it serves,  
Or lose our ventures.

(Julius Caesar, Act 4 Scene 3)

Every so often Shakespeare reveals himself to be a wise seer, and this is one of those times. (I'm being facetious.) The message of Darsanamala is the same as what Brutus is pondering: we are trying to cast ourselves into the tide of evolutionary history, which is the same as Bergson's "onrushing wave" that mystics open their hearts to. Shakespeare indicates that if we ride the tide it will carry us to fortune, but if we block it out—as most of us routinely do—we will be bound up in the miseries of a shallow life. The tide is supplying us with opportunities, but if we are not looking and listening for them, they pass us by. Sometimes we may get a second chance, sometimes not.

Of course, how we relate to our conditions makes a big difference in their value, too. A humble life can be magnificent or squalid, and a life of honor can be ennobling or promoting of egotism. How we treat it matters a great deal.

Brutus's affirmation is quite similar to another famous adage, from slightly later, in the remote fringe of the Roman Empire:

Jesus said, “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.” The Gospel According to Thomas, trans. Elaine Pagels.

Back to the play, Narayana Guru is not advocating murder a la Brutus, obviously. The role of our conscious mind is to distinguish between options on the basis of a moral and all-inclusive vision. Life is more interesting when we have a significant role to play in what we’re doing, and are not just being carried along passively by the tide.

The reason Nitya asks us to retrospect about our lives is so we can discern the coherent shape of who we are, and have been all along. In a sense it reveals the tide of life to us:

When we retrospectively examine the events in our life, it is possible to see how unexpected occurrences have given it definite directions. We may have been going along placidly in our accustomed manner and direction, when a new factor was introduced – perhaps a person, some item of information, or a sudden insight – and everything began to change. Life took on a new meaning and direction, and many of its components fell away to be replaced by different ones.

What seems chaotic and baffling in a present that is only partially known can be seen as the latest installment in an ongoing drama. It gives hope and instills excitement to see how we are unfolding like a flower or a tree, rather than like a modern artwork with meaningless splashes as randomized as possible. Unpleasant accidents may be impelling us to greater possibilities, as in one of my favorite sayings of Nataraja Guru: “Every time you get fired it’s a promotion.”

The recommendation is that we stop being such controlling masters of our self, and allow the totality of maya to infuse our being, inviting the universe to shape us in ways we cannot begin to anticipate. This is already happening to humankind as a whole; has been all along. Nitya says:

Sometimes a complete and radical change occurs in our lifestyle. Looking back we can see how many of what we thought were highly qualified probabilities turned out to be only possibilities that came to nothing, while what we thought to be only the faintest of possibilities became actualized, revealing a high probability factor we had overlooked. Because of this inability to predict the course of events, mankind in general often sees the negative aspect of the Absolute as a benign Providence when things go well, or as a malignant Fate when things go badly. On the whole we have to admit that it is indiscernible.

Earlier, in the Apavada Darsana, Nitya mentioned that maya was indiscernible because it both is and is not at the same time, and our poor minds cannot hold those opposites together.

We like to imagine we are totally remaking ourselves all the time, perhaps, but our creativity is seamlessly connected with our psyche, and is only rarely, if ever, discontinuous. Bushra doesn't wake up as Paul in the morning, she remains Bushra, despite having new plans for the day. But she is surrounded by open doors to discover new aspects of herself and her world whenever she wants. In such a magnificent ambience, how could anyone ever be bored? It should be hard to get stuck, but if we don't remain alert it is actually very easy.

In any case, maya is shaping us in ways that optimize our opportunities to function spectacularly. Why would we want to

exclude ourselves from such a blessing? The trick is that our egos are not the best implement for tilling that garden. In Nitya's words:

Possibility alone does not vouchsafe actualization. Out of a hundred possibilities there can arise many ratios of the probable and the improbable. Even out of the probable only a certain proportion finally become actualized. In one sense we can say it is maya that is the enigmatic factor which plays the vital role in the making of possibilities, impossibilities, probabilities and improbabilities.

I'm rereading one of Nitya's many favorite books, *The Dragons of Eden*, by Carl Sagan. The introduction is a prime example of the value of retrospection in detecting the course of maya's unfoldment, and learning valuable lessons from it. After reviewing the slow course of evolution of our planet, Sagan addresses the importance of complex intelligence in the present (*extragenetic* means not instinctual):

While our behavior is still significantly controlled by our genetic inheritance, we have, through our brains, a much richer opportunity to blaze new behavioral and cultural pathways on short time scales. We have made a kind of bargain with nature: our children will be difficult to raise, but their capacity for new learning will greatly enhance the chances of survival of the human species. In addition, human beings have, in the most recent few tenths of a percent of our existence, invented not only extragenetic but also extrasomatic knowledge: information stored outside our bodies, of which writing is the most notable example....

Today we do not *have* ten million years to wait for the next advance. We live in a time when our world is changing at an unprecedented rate. While the changes are largely of our own

making, they cannot be ignored. We must adjust and adapt and control, or we perish.

Only an extragenetic learning system can possibly cope with the swiftly changing circumstances that our species faces. Thus the recent rapid evolution of human intelligence is not only the cause of but also the only conceivable solution to the many serious problems that beset us. A better understanding of the nature and evolution of human intelligence just possibly might help us to deal intelligently with our unknown and perilous future.

A particularly interesting tack was initiated by Andy, who cited Nitya as often saying that what we are seeking is beyond the limit of conceptual understanding. That's right: concepts are like baked pots, and a pot can never fully represent the clay from which it was made. Unformed means unconceptualizable, and in that sense a pot is a kind of denial of clayness. So how do we keep from always being held fast by rigid concepts? As Jan put it, the Absolute is beyond our comprehension. If we know that, it is an opening in itself, inviting us to throw off our claustrophobic ideas. Paul added a great one-liner, asserting that "even the discernible is indiscernible." We only imagine we know what we're talking about. Once we start really looking, our understanding dissolves into nothing. Once we see the emptiness of our beliefs, they are a cinch to give up. And isn't that how we can reenter the karu in our meditations? By continually letting go of forms?

Andy waxed rhapsodic about how meditating on indeterminate possibilities softens your attitude toward your fellow beings. We all share in the inevitable limitations of existence, so it isn't that I get it and they don't. This means we no longer need to condemn other people and keep them at bay. Knowing we all spring from the same sea of potency, we can be recognized as brothers and sisters in the most ultimate sense.

Despite all our cogent theorizing, the idea of maya as being simply how we misunderstand the world came back up yet again: the Absolute is true, and maya is false. It's a dualistic version of maya, making it into a force standing in opposition to truth, blinding us to truth. Nitya even mentions this fallacy explicitly in his commentary:

Unfortunately, poetic descriptions of maya have created in the minds of many people several concepts of mythical personification. For many, maya has become a mythical, personalized face, such as the devil in Christian theology, or a kind of uncouth and ludicrous Shakespearean Puck.

Such a belief allows us to imagine we know truth and can hold onto it as long as we keep maya at bay. But if maya includes all of creation, not just material objects but thoughts and processes as well, we are not going to be able to get out of it, to somehow separate ourselves from it. Trying to do so is like a dog futilely chasing its tail. Maybe fun for a while, but we shouldn't make a career out of it.

In fact, truth and untruth (*vidya* and *avidya*) are covered in the next two verses. Avidya is what is being taken as maya by traditionalists. According to Narayana Guru and other Advaitins, maya is the context in which both vidya and avidya have their place.

Ultimately, the only problem with maya is that it so easily captures our attention, causing us to forget the underlying reality on which it foams and froths. If we reject its negative aspects and align ourselves only with the positive, we haven't done anything meaningful about re-accessing the total context. Therefore such a dualistic attitude is beside the point.

Bushra wound us down by frankly acknowledging what an inspiring concept the sea of pure potential is, and that all we have

to do is sink into it. It really is a beautiful way to look at life. There is an infinite upside, endless possibilities for us to express our finest qualities, which are biding their time waiting for us to wake up and invite them in. There is no exclusivity here. The pots we make of our lives can be wide open and as inclusive as the whole universe. Where many political and religious models are exclusive and fearful, asking their followers to make their pots small and tightly defended, we are learning how to make them hold more water, in every sense of the word. When we have explored all we can of the shape we have created prior to today, we can dive back into the sea and let some of our rigidity melt away, making room for new possibilities to be actualized. Bushra understood this as the true source of happiness.

In accord with Bushra's insight, Andy read out verse 71 of Atmo:

No one in this world remains free from becoming,  
in a state of sameness; this is said to be a beginningless play;  
to him who knows this, which is unlimited, as a whole,  
boundless happiness comes.

Atmopadesa Satakam has lots and lots of seas of potential all over the place.

Moni told us a story of a woman who wrote Nitya that she was pregnant, and was worried about it. Nitya wrote her back that what is in your womb is unfathomable, the product of millions of years of development, and it has now come into your body. He urged her to cherish the magnificence of what had been entrusted to her.

Andy brought us to the closing meditation by observing that we could well look at every moment of our lives that way. In other words, we are continually being impregnated with mysterious and unknowable impulses, worthy of being loved and nurtured and

shared, and who knows what will come of them. Let's see where they will lead us. If we can learn to live like that, we will have been rightly inseminated with Narayana Guru's cosmic vision.

## Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary is more interesting than usual:

Although the term *abhava* as used in ordinary language means nothingness, according to the Nyaya (Logic) school of philosophy, it is counted as a *padartha* (i.e., a category of existence). Even according to the Advaita philosophy, *abhava* is non-different from its counterpart *bhava* (being). Before the pot originated, its non-existence is to be attributed to the clay. In other words, it is the clay that remains as the prior non-existence (*prak abhava*) of the pot. Therefore, the non-existence prior to the origination of the pot, has its anterior non-existence which is stated to be the clay. To state this another way, the non-existence of the pot and the existence of the clay are the same. But in reality even after the origin of the pot, what is the being of the pot is a supposition, and the being of the clay is real. The non-existence of a certain object always resides in the existence of another thing. As the clay constitutes the anterior non-existence of the pot, it remains as another entity. Similarly, before the origin of the world its non-existence remains something which is none other than the Absolute. In other words, it is the Absolute alone. But from the Absolute which is without change of form, how this world with all its different forms came about, is a matter that cannot be decided on the basis of inferential reasoning (*anumana*), etc. Therefore, that non-existence which was the cause of the origination of the world and is non-different from the Absolute is described here as the principle of indeterminate possibility. In other words, *maya* is the non-existent—is the Absolute. That which does not really exist is *maya*, has already

been stated in the previous verse. Within the scope of the term *maya* it is not wrong to include also *manas* (mind), *sankalpa* (willing) and other faculties.

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Here's the brief mention of Spinoza's substance in Love and Blessings. Nitya had recently finished his 18 months of silence, but was still hardly ever speaking:

When I got back to the Gurukula, [Nataraja] Guru was giving the morning class. He asked if anyone there knew the significance of Karu, which comes in the first verse of *Atmopadesa Satakam*. The question was clearly aimed at me. I wanted to tell him that it was the same as Spinoza's substance, but I wasn't going to break my silence. Guru probably saw the struggle in my eyes, so he said, "If Nitya were speaking, he would have equated Karu with Spinoza's substance." He spent the class elaborating the nuances of the term. (179)