

Darsanamala Combined Class Notes 2023

IV Maya Darsana, A Vision of Non-being Beingness

Verse Three

8/7/6

In 2006 we combined verses 3 and 4, and in 2016 discussed them separately, so there is also a verse 4 document.

The non-Self is unreal, the Self is real; thus, the means by which such knowledge comes, that is this vidya, like the recognition of the truth about rope and snake. (IV, 3)

The Self is unreal, the non-Self is real; thus, the means by which such knowledge comes, that alone is avidya, like the erroneous cognition about rope and snake. (IV, 4)

Once again a vast conception is epitomized in a few words. Our class was like those boxes full of compressed paper snakes, the ones you open and they expand and shoot out all over the room. Very festive, but difficult to summarize, to squeeze them all back in the box and shut the lid.

I've been writing about truth quite a lot lately, trying to get a handle on its elusivity for my Gita commentary. So I was well prepared to recognize that Nitya does a masterful job of delineating truth in a few short paragraphs here. Understanding the distinctions between truth and falsehood are the starting point for a sincere swim in clear waters, and we've been working diligently on that very subject for a long time in our study. It's almost time to see where it will take us.

Narayana Guru highlights an aspect I at least hadn't separated out before, even as editor of this very book. He is saying here that vidya is not just knowledge of truth, but the transitional experience of "getting the picture," of suddenly "seeing the light." What is going on when you finally realize it is a harmless rope and not a poisonous snake in front of you? Your first impression of something terrified you; adrenaline shot through your system and you freaked out. But this time instead of running back to the village to raise a posse armed with machetes, you stopped and looked more closely. And right before your eyes the deadly thing morphed into a harmless bit of detritus. Now relief surges through you; you want to laugh. You can make fun of yourself and be on your way. I don't think Narayana Guru is saying we should just substitute one loaded set of memories for another, but that there is a fresh way of seeing without memory tags at all. He wants us to watch how we transition from a loaded, conditioned state of mind filled with negative expectations to an unconditioned one, and not just think of the end result but of the movement this entails. If we know "the means by which such knowledge comes," perhaps we can make it a permanent part of our repertoire.

I have to plug verse 20 of *That Alone*, where Nitya and Narayana revalue the rope and snake metaphor. It's a great essay. Reading it will throw a lot of light on this part of the study, and the "snarope" comes back in the next verse too.

As part of his unification plan for science and religion, Nitya describes how a materialist can have a contemplative relationship with his world. He posits a chemist who wants to know the true nature of ordinary table salt. Beneath its sensory qualities he first knows it as sodium chloride. Going deeper, he can examine sodium and chlorine separately as atoms and then observe their subatomic particles, which are essentially the same everywhere. At last he arrives at the mystery of the primal source of all matter, which we call the Self or the Absolute.

Later in the comments, for dialectic perfection Nitya offers the parallel version of the intelligent contemplative, who begins by asking herself “what is it that compels me to act?” She will see that action comes from volition, volition comes from desire, and desire comes from preference for pleasure over pain. Nitya goes on:

Pleasure is a quality of awareness that reflects the element of happiness, which in truth belongs to the Self. If the seeker understands this, he will realize that he should turn his attention inward into his own being to find true and lasting happiness, instead of seeking it through the gratification of his senses in the world external to himself. When one gains this knowledge, he naturally curtails all activities in which he previously engaged which are born of the confusion arising from the ignorance of his projected values. Then he is saved from the world of transient values that the Isavasya Upanishad describes as darkness. It is for this reason that the Isavasya Upanishad says that a man who knows the secret of ignorance will transcend death.

As previously noted, Maya Darsana consists of a series of definitions. This verse is Narayana Guru’s definition of vidya, knowledge. He is unequivocal that true knowledge of the Self is vidya and knowledge of the transactional world, for instance of salt as a sensory seasoning, is *asat* or untrue. Whether we’re a chemist or a mystic, we should look beneath the surface and trace all our snakes back to their source, where they lose their sting.

We spent a lot of time on verses 9-11 of the Isa Upanishad, that Nitya brings in as a parallel teaching:

Into blind darkness enter they
That worship ignorance;
Into darkness greater than that, as it were, they

That delight in knowledge

Other, indeed, they say, than knowledge!
Other, they say, than non-knowledge!
—Thus we have heard it from the wise
Who to us have explained It.

Knowledge and non-knowledge—
He who this pair conjointly knows,
With non-knowledge passing over death
With knowledge wins the immortal.

Deb noted that the delighters in knowledge live in greater darkness because they are closed to new knowledge. At least an ignorant person welcomes light into their darkness, but once they decide they know it all, their doom is sealed. Many people only want to know that salt makes their food taste better, period. Don't confuse us with molecules! With salt the darkness isn't particularly lethal, but in other cases it is.

I gave the example of Israel living in a self-imposed bubble of conceit of a chosen people surrounded by hostile enemies. Almost all information and education in the country is tailored around a paranoid mindset. In our terms, ropes are depicted as snakes, and anyone who disagrees is ostracized. There have been snakes sometimes, so you either agree that all ropes are snakes, or you're out. The Arab children crouching in bomb shelters are not really children, they are subhuman and threatening, so bombing the shelters is justified. There could be a terrorist anywhere, so kill them all and let Jehovah sort it out. As long as you crouch behind a wall of ignorance and exclude all who disagree with your selected "knowledge" you don't have to even look at the disasters you cause. Dozens of peace initiatives have been ignored out of hand, because the presumption is that only war will bring peace. Pleas

for sanity are only to be sneered at as the whining of the ignorant. “Never again” has been perverted to mean that this time we will be the perpetrators, but never again the victims.

The class then moved back to the personal level. It’s not so good to use such large-scale holocausts as forceful teaching aids. As Nancy pointed out, we can’t do anything immediately about far off disasters, but we can remind ourselves to always stay open to the All. And we can but hope that some day all the good folks who have held to the light in their personal actions and meditations will tip the scales in favor of a peaceful and compassionate world.

Susan had some very good examples from her relationships with her children that led to a lively exploration. Kids are masters at pushing our buttons, natural gurus. We have a universal urge to instruct them, and they have a universal urge to resist. It’s the macrocosm writ small. Both world wars and family skirmishes are fought over who gets to instruct who. Paradoxically, if we abstain from pushing our own agenda, peace sometimes breaks out. Maybe our specific agenda wasn’t as important as we thought; we can adapt and compromise.

Susan has been closely watching how certain acts of her children bring up floods of memories, many tinged with fear, which color her own feelings as well as magnetizing her responses. She is then able to let those go and act more from a neutral place. A terrific accomplishment, I must say, and an ongoing effort for everyone.

Well, this is already too long, and I have some killer excerpts from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad to tack on here at the end. Too bad I’ve barely scratched the surface. The fine thing is that the richness of Darsanamala is flowering forth in our discussions, and that of course is a self-reinforcing energy. A new, clear chain reaction.

Okay, call this Part II. I could mix these into the text, but I think you'll see the relevance. They're all from Volume II of Nitya's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary, and all close together. First, a cute sentence to remind us not to panic that we haven't figured everything out yet:

The body is "a perilous and perplexing place" for the Self to reside. (573)

Another take on the darkness of partial knowledge:

No physicist has ever seen an atom, much less a subatomic particle. But, like religious people who make icons, the physicist has also made conventional models of atoms and particles. Any person who has gone to school and studied the model of the atom cannot be dissuaded from that mental picture. In this way even scientific knowledge becomes a matter of belief. The Upanishad sweeps away all images born of mind. That is why a true Vedantin can never be a religious person.

The human ego is like a medium out of which one can fashion commendable patterns as well as incoherent ideas. As a result, a person with a mind that has sense impressions registered in it which are colored with likes and dislikes is tempted to apply all the previous memories and preferences to current experiences. Patanjali thinks it is this so-called scientific certitude that stops a person from going into transcendence. (575)

All purpose good vibes:

As we are used to accomplishing things and obtaining desirable ends by our actions, we entertain the false

impression that for the self to become *brahman* there has to be some kind of process by which the part can evolve into the whole. Mantras seventeen and eighteen remind us this is not so. We are always the whole. All that we need to do is forget the false notion that we are anything other than *brahman*. Realization is not accomplished by a forward march but by a regressive dissolution. Up to the last moment you have a choice to skip the whole process of samsara merely by accepting the fact that you are the Absolute. (583)

And finally, this is to help explain that mysterious and, let's admit, baffling verse 11 of the Isa:

What is death? The non-Self is opposed to life. When you develop a hankering for the pleasures you expect to get from the non-Self such as love objects, you are allowing part of your self to be afflicted by the darkness and ignorance of the non-Self. That is one way of embracing death. When you withdraw your desire from anything which prevents you from ennobling the Self or being at one with the Self, you are opting to put the Self in the position of the non-Self. Inside you will grow bright and more in resonance with the Self. To that extent you transcend death. You need not force any mechanical renunciation upon yourself. While living in the body, the senses are like handmaids to you and the mind is like a trustworthy friend. Thus it is to your advantage to live physically and have enough opportunities to be a silent witness of your organism functioning as if it knows what it is and what is going on.

Both life and mind are simple if we do not complicate them. A river does not need to take extra care to flow over any land where it chances to be and ultimately reach the ocean. A river reaching its natural destination, the ocean, is

symbolically the same as the self arriving at the Supreme or Absolute. If, in your poetic exuberance, you put on many festoons and make yourself so artificial that you are giving too much thought to body and mind, you give up most of the freedom of the person living in your body. (564)

And so, good night sweet princes and princesses!

Part II

I've been asked to clarify the Isa bit about those who delight in knowledge living in greater darkness. The qualm was over the notion of delight. Delight is just fine. Indeed, it is one of the warning signs of enlightenment. One can easily note the same root in both.

What the Upanishad is talking about is the attitude of self-satisfaction, satisfaction in a partial vision, which may in fact be exacerbated by delight. If we believe something and it makes us happy, we ask ourselves what more do we need? It's a bit of a paradox, the same paradox found between temporal and eternal happiness. Not so easy to sort out, when you think of it. Beliefs, however, tend to become static and lose their charm the more they are believed. They easily become memories of delight, and we cling to them all the more as they slip into shadow. This starts the cycle of striving to renew the sensation of delight by repeating the activity associated with it. Soon we're focused on the activity itself, and the delight slowly fades away. We become "defenders of the faith" when we should be letting it go.

Delight—struggle—stasis. Sound like a familiar pattern? Sattva—rajas—tamas, isn't it?

The antidote for this ensnarling cycle of the gunas is expressed as a dialectic relation with knowledge. We don't hold back from the world, we enjoy it. And we don't allow ourselves to be caught by anything in particular, we are open to all of it. Above

all, we don't identify our happiness with the object "out there." We discover—un cover—it in ourself, and then everything is to an extent a factor in our total state of happiness.

My friend was worried that the Isavasya Upanishad was recommending that old-fashioned religious withdrawal from everything, a giving up of joy. Not at all. Go for it, and let the dead bury the dead! In other words, don't cling to dead forms of imagined delight. By all means look to your own nature, which is the value-form of delight, as Narayana Guru put it somewhere or other. Or seek ye first the Republic of Heaven, and all things shall be added unto you, as the Bible has it. In closing, it may not hurt to peek ahead just a bit, to verse VIII, 8 of Darsanamala: "Thus the wise man sees everywhere nothing but the joy of the Self—not even a little of anything else. His bhakti indeed is the highest."

Part III

Yesterday at the library I stumbled across an interesting-looking book titled *The Ignorance of Certainty*, by Ashley Montagu and Edward Darling. Nice to know that the Isa Upanishad isn't alone in being suspicious of the knowledge-enamored. From the flap:

Meanwhile we trudge along, believing what we *want* most to believe and planning our future action as if our crystal ball were unclouded. This, alas, is how the ignorance of certainty leads to the certainty of ignorance. We must mistrust the man who is certain. Absolute certainty is the right of uneducated minds, absolute fools, and fanatics. For the Thinker certainty is never an end, but a search, at best the highest degree of probability that attaches to a particular judgment at a particular time level, and hence, like truth, infinitely perfectible.

Nataraja Guru opened his magnum opus with the carefully chosen words “Science seeks certitude.” He certainly did not mean “Science finds certitude.”

From the Preface:

The ignorance of certainty is that lack of information which makes us bold to assert that we see the truth, pretty much the whole truth, and discard anything which is not the truth. It appears to be a human trait that our certainty is inversely proportional to our knowledge—that is, the thinner our information is, the surer we are we’re right and the more viciously will we defend our position and the more fiercely liquidate deviationists of every color, preferably (at the low ebb of wisdom where the barrens of complete ignorance begin) with suitable torture. The heretic must die in agony.
(xiv-xv)

Greater darkness indeed.

* * *

10/11/16

Maya Darsana verse 3

The non-Self is unreal, the Self is real;
thus, the means by which such knowledge comes,
that is this *vidya*, like the recognition
of the truth about rope and snake.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

*“The non-Self is unreal, the Self is real”,
Thus what looms is vidya, knowledge*

*As the reality of the snake (appearance)
(Superimposed) on the rope-reality is understood.*

The first aspect of maya Narayana Guru addresses is vidya, knowledge. Where maya includes both rope and snake, vidya is represented by the rope and avidya, nescience, endlessly produces virtual snakes.

The class took up two issues. Deb asked why and how does knowledge transcend death? Later we explored the dual and conflicting definitions of knowledge we find woven into much of Indian philosophy, even here in the Gurukula.

Happily, Jan knew the answer to the first poser, that transcending death means transcending the oppression of the transactional. She found for us the paragraph where Nitya mentions this explicitly:

The entire world of transaction, along with whatever is of empirical knowledge, comes under the category of the actual. To apprehend the real, one has to transcend the transactional. Even at the transactional level the only reality is the Self alone. In comparison to the Self, the transactional world is unreal. Therefore “right knowledge,” mentioned in this verse as *vidya*, can only be knowledge of the Self.

This is another instance where Nitya clearly distinguishes between the actual (transactional or horizontal) and the real (Self or vertical). In his comments he cites three famous mantras from the Isavasya Upanishad on how to unite knowledge and ignorance dialectically:

Into blind darkness enter they
That worship ignorance;
Into darkness greater than that, as it were, they

That delight in knowledge.

Other, indeed, they say, than knowledge!

Other, they say, than non-knowledge!

– Thus we have heard it from the wise (*ahira*)

Who to us have explained It.

Knowledge and non-knowledge –

He who this pair conjointly (*saha*) knows,

With non-knowledge passing over death,

With knowledge wins the immortal. (v. 9-11)

Those last two lines hold the claims Deb was asking about. A close scrutiny helps. In his commentary on this Upanishad, Nitya defines immortality as fearlessness, and death as submission to the constraints of social pressures, adding:

Such continuous exposure to the enigmas of a world governed by its rationalized irrationality continuously brings to each member of the community the fear of their imminent extinction or abandonment. This negative and dark side of life is here poetically alluded to as death (*mrityu*). Compared to that, going breathless and leaving the body is only a minor death.

Fortunately, Nitya spells out the antidote to socially mandated psychological death in some detail here:

An intelligent person should ask: “What is it that compels me to act?” As he seeks to understand his own state, enquiry will disclose to him first that action is preceded by volition. Then he will see that volition is preceded by desire, and that desire is born from the preference for pleasure and the avoidance of pain. Pleasure is a quality of awareness that reflects the element

of happiness, which in truth belongs to the Self. If the seeker understands this, he will realize that he should turn his attention inward into his own being to find true and lasting happiness, instead of seeking it through the gratification of his senses in the world external to himself. When one gains this knowledge, he naturally curtails all activities in which he previously engaged which were born of the confusion arising from the ignorance of his projected values. Then he is saved from the world of transient values that the Isavasya Upanishad describes as darkness.

It is for this reason that the Isavasya Upanishad says that a man who knows the secret of ignorance will transcend death. A wise man who is initiated into the secrets of the ultimate meaning of life and the reality of the Self should also know how he can bring the light of his wisdom to bear on everything that happens.

In the way I conceive of it, spiritual death is when we become stale due to our habitual behaviors, closed off to the living flow of the spirit. We limit the vast cosmos available to us to a prescribed series of pitiful contractual thoughts. Nitya calls to mind the absolutely perfect sonnet fragment from William Wordsworth, with an introductory comment:

What is termed here as ignorance is the world of transactions, where we are concerned only with the factual and objective entities of that world. Pragmatic people who take pride in their down-to-earth attitude miss most, if not all, of the sublime values of life. Wordsworth complains of such people:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
(Sonnet VIII)

Without having in them an element of transcendence, worldly transactions can become very prosaic and spiritually unrewarding. For many people, music, poetry, and the other fine arts become meaningful only at the level of commercial propositions.

This last statement reminded me of something I had just read in the program notes by Elizabeth Schwartz to the Oregon Symphony performance of Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto. After arriving in Boston on his first tour of North America, he was an instant sensation, but:

Despite his success, Rachmaninoff heartily disliked America. In a letter to his cousin, he wrote, "In this accursed country you're surrounded by nothing but Americans and their 'business,' 'business' they are forever doing, clutching you from all sides and driving you on. Everyone is nice and kind to me, but I am horribly bored by the whole thing, and I feel that my character has been quite ruined here." Lonely and homesick, Rachmaninoff returned to Russia in February 1910.

Being accosted every moment by scheming hucksters is a kind of living death. Such stampedes of desperate panic attacks are only resolved by Self-realization, of coming to know that the source of our equanimity and happiness lies within us already.

Such a blissful state is referred to poetically as immortality. Immortality happens when we realign our conscious mind with the ever-new exuberance of our inner currents. The instant of connection is blissful and liberating in the extreme, William Blake's "eternity in an hour." It might only last a second, but its

impact never dies. For most of us it is an all-too rare occurrence, yet one that makes all the difference. The Ramana Maharshis, Hypatias and Narayana Gurus of this world appear to sustain the state for their entire lives, but even mere mortals are welcome to moments of immortality.

As Andy observed, we are fortunate that immortality is our native state and we don't have to make it happen. Rather we only have to remove the impediments that have displaced it into the hidden depths of our being. In other words, we don't have to know anything about it to be it.

Andy recalled fondly mantra 15 of the Isa Upanishad:

The entrance to Truth is closed with
a golden disc. That, you, O Nourisher,
open (so that I) established in Truth
and Law, may see.

The way our minds hide truth behind a compelling description of it is another depiction of spiritual death, one which hints at why we are so readily satisfied with ersatz reality. The images we produce to invoke the sublime essence of our being are beautiful, and we have learned to be content with them. Why look at the moon when we can already see it in the mirror? Now if we can only polish the mirror so it is a bit clearer....

Bushra loves the idea of going beyond the aspect of the mind that keeps us at a permanent peripheral level of awareness. She likes to settle into her breathing or some other kind of inner rhythm, and then the "golden disc" of description is stilled, revealing what is always right behind it.

In what turned out to be a very fruitful interaction, we redirected our attention to a contradictory aspect of knowledge, something Andy described as a compelling paradox. Where the Isa Upanishad warns that to delight in knowledge is a great darkness,

Nitya comments that anyone who gains knowledge of the Self, “is saved from the world of transient values that the Isavasya Upanishad describes as darkness.” So, what is knowledge after all—salvation or dispossession?

We tend to think of knowledge as being like grains of sand that accumulate to make a beach, and the bigger the pile, the better the beach. All through our early development we delight in the growing pile and like to compare it to our neighbors’ piles. This is how transactional knowledge becomes deeply embedded. But knowledge of the Self, delightful though it is, is an all-pervasive state, not based on any kind of accumulation. And it is called incomparable for a reason: being unique, it cannot be compared to anything else. Plus, it’s universal.

In a paean to this central notion of our study, Andy recalled verse 31 of Atmo:

Inert matter does not know; knowledge has no thought
and does not articulate; knowing knowledge to be all,
letting go, one’s inner state becomes boundless;
indeed, thereafter he never suffers confined within a body.

Knowledge and consciousness in this sense are identical. If knowledge is all, then consciousness is preeminent. Matter is its evolute. Some physicists are beginning to suspect this may be the next revelation of science, though dogmatic posturing is still widely entrenched.

Narayana Guru is by no means advocating a remote and impossible state to be arduously attained. He well knew that this wisdom pertains to our everyday lives, each moment of which could be an immortal moment of intense connection. We are not working hard to become something else, we are allowing our natural essence to burst forth. Bushra likened it to a tree growing on its own, which reminded me of another musical discovery of

this week. I recently came across this by preeminent Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu in the notes to his 1967 composition blending Japanese and Western instruments, November Steps:

3. The sounds of Western music dispose themselves along a horizontal. The sounds of the shakuhachi occur vertically, the way a tree grows.

4. Perhaps you have heard: The sound which a shakuhachi master hopes to achieve in performance, the consummate shakuhachi sound, is the sound the wind makes when it blows through a decaying bamboo grove.

5. First of all you must listen totally, open your ears wide to what you hear. Before long you will understand the aspirations of the sounds themselves.

To generalize these ideas: by allowing our inner dynamism a chance to spring forth and grow in a natural way, we free our latent abilities to emerge in a most satisfactory fashion. Happily we even shared some practical examples of how this plays out.

Deb and I recently attended that Rach 3 concert referenced above. The piano part was performed by one of the greatest living pianists, Mark-Andre Hamelin. Seemingly effortlessly, as though he was sitting on the back porch taking tea, he blazed out the most ferociously difficult and rapid playing imaginable. Actually, unimaginable. That inhuman ability alone overturns the theory of mechanical impulses, because there is no way to be that subtly accurate and hypervelocic using mere nerves and muscles. And because of his relaxed ease, Hamelin was able to be supremely expressive and nuanced as well. It exemplified yoga at its best.

Artistic endeavors like this are the perfect paradox to cast ourselves into. Don Berry used to talk about how you had to get

your skills well honed, but also you got to a point where they became your well-disciplined servants and you made the leap into true art. Without the practiced skills, the result is usually mediocre. Without the art, it is soulless. Effort and non-effort have to go together, and not necessarily one before the other, but both simultaneously.

Andy told us how D.T. Suzuki, the famous author of *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, distinguished the schools of effort versus what he called the “sudden school,” the school of immediate insight. Do you work hard to achieve something, or simply let it happen? Many of us, exhausted from a lifetime of forced effort, long for ease of the sudden school. In Vedanta these two factors are to be yogically brought together and not viewed as mutually exclusive.

Deb recently visited the new Afro-American Museum in Washington DC, and related how the exhibits were mostly very depressing, filled with genocide and oppression, but the people attending—she estimated 90% Afro-American—were inspired and uplifted nonetheless. There was sharing and communicating going on everywhere. A woman showed Deb the pictures she’d brought along of her ancestors. Barriers were ignored in the excitement. The material frame was there as a kind of stage, but the real artistic performance was in the living interactions of people. Connecting, communicating: that’s what brings inanimate objects to life.

Jan similarly recalled the amazing dioramas at New York’s Museum of Natural History, a place many of us know. Again, the exhibits, while beautiful, are in themselves dead and static. Everything is stuffed. It’s our own imagination that brings them to life, making them an exciting and transformative experience.

And of course, all these things are what you make of them. If someone is prejudiced against what they are seeing or their mind is elsewhere, they will dislike it, no matter how wonderful another person finds it. While the environment is a valuable staging area,

the source of delight is always within. We are learning to access it as a dynamic factor, and not so much as passive entertainment.

Nitya sums up the gist of this transformative philosophy:

In the Bhagavad Gita it is said that a wise man should not disturb the world, nor should he be disturbed by it. When the wisdom of a man is sound, he lives in a state of transcendence without neglecting his role in the world of transactions. The Isavasya Upanishad speaks of such a man as one who becomes immortal in wisdom.

Everyone stayed a while after the closing meditation to listen to a little of November Steps. It is utterly unexpected music, noisy and chaotic, especially at the beginning. Since the night was getting on, no one had the patience stay long enough to let it blow their mind, 1960s style. It's just as well. To each their own. It is enough to dip one's toes in at first.

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

That knowledge which sees things as they really are is knowledge or science. That knowledge which makes us aware that the Self alone exists and all else outside it does not exist is (also) knowledge or science. *Màyà* has a bright intelligent side and a dark ignorant side, of these the bright intelligent side is here referred to as *vidyà* or science which is the way to salvation.

* * *

Deb felt this poem by Anne Carson fit well with our class discussion:

My Religion

My religion makes no sense
and does not help me
therefore I pursue it

When we see
how simple it would have been
we will thrash ourselves.

I had a vision
of all the people in the world
who are searching for God

massed in a room
on one side
of a partition

that looks
from the other side
(God's side)

transparent
but we are blind.
Our gestures are blind.

Our blind gestures continue
for some time until finally
from somewhere

on the other side of the partition there we are

looking back at them.
It is far too late.

We see how brokenly
how warily
how ill

our blind gestures
parodied
what God really wanted

(some simple thing).
The thought of it
(this simple thing)

is like a creature
let loose in a room
and battering

to get out.
It batters my soul
with its rifle butt.

* * *

Class notes on the Isavasya Upanishad, verses 9-11, from June of 2012, can be accessed here:
<http://scotteitsworth.tripod.com/id31.html>. I'll clip in a few excerpts:

Nestled in the exact center of the Upanishad is one of the most powerful teachings to be found anywhere, spread over three

mantras. We look forward to digging deep into the ways we can benefit from meditating on it.

A significant part of the impact comes from the gauntlet thrown at the feet of our ego, which invariably takes delight in knowledge. Even those who denigrate knowledge are showing off the superior knowledge they have that knowledge is overrated. In fact, knowledge is the ego's primary protective defense. As we have learned, defenses constrict our world, and so are inimical to the thrust of liberation. There is a very thin line, if any, between bondage and our defensive fortifications. As seekers it is time to free ourselves from these limited parameters.

Jan got us off on exactly the right foot, claiming that it doesn't make sense to equate knowledge with darkness. Don't we strive for knowledge to set us free, to bring us to the light? Of course we do, and the Isavasya Upanishad is not telling us to quit. But we are instructed to change our relationship with what we know. There is knowledge that liberates and knowledge that binds, and we need to be clear about the difference.

Susan sent a quote this morning from Fyodor Dostoevsky:

It seems, in fact, as though the second half of a man's life is made up of nothing but the habits he has accumulated during the first half.

Sad but true. The Upanishad is begging us to avoid the knowledge that reinforces our habits, and open ourselves instead to the knowledge that breaks their hold on us. It's a very large challenge, because we like our habits very much.

Ignorance and knowledge are the polarities here, and they will be resolved dialectically in mantra 11. Notice that the Upanishad is speaking here of *worshipping* ignorance and *delighting* in knowledge. Ignorance and knowledge are normal and inevitable

aspects of conscious life, but when we habitually cling to them we are not only unable to treat them dialectically, we are sure to become stuck fast in a mental dungeon. The more we love them and treat them as ends in themselves, the less likely it is that we will ever be able to expand our awareness.

We should be aware at the outset that the Isa Upanishad is targeting spiritual egoism as much as anything. After all, who reads Upanishads other than seekers of truth? A large percentage of spiritual practices are the most intractable of traps, and the spiritual ego is the most resilient defense of all. It shouts, “You have to love me because I’m so special!”

I want to share a couple of excellent quotes that express the same sentiment as the present mantra. From Goethe:

None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe they are free.

And from Leo Tolstoy:

The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him.

In other words, once you are convinced that you know all you need to know, you have closed and bolted the door of your prison. A yogi must never fall into that trap. Even as we seek certitude, we must remind ourselves that it is the seeking and not the certitude we’re really after.

The Upanishadic rishis want to help us reclaim the much larger freedom we have abandoned in order to secure our basic needs. This entails seeing the ignorance in knowledge and the knowledge hidden within ignorance, and letting both go. This is not something an infant or child can do, or a young person trying to make their way in the world. It requires some form of security and stability. Either we can be a mendicant and minimize our needs, or like most of us have some kind of supply line in place. Anyone who is fortunate enough to have their needs met has the rare and exceptionally wonderful opportunity to make the leap to the next level of human potential. That is exactly what the Upanishad is designed to foster.

Knowledge and ignorance are two sides of a coin we hold onto very hard. The seer transcends them by contemplative yoga, to arrive at “immortality,” which means a liberated state of mind. Nitya equates immortality with fearlessness in his commentary.

Nitya’s original genius is to associate the knowledge side of the coin with the collective ignorance of humanity. It’s tough enough that each of us is an ignorant soul, but then we quite naturally gather into groups like families, tribes, nations and religions. Each of these more complex entities chooses and enforces rules and customs, which become the narrow channels for thinking and acting we are required to adhere to. This collective ignorance becomes exalted as “knowledge.” It is definitely a “greater darkness” than mere individual ignorance, because it is so pervasive we may hardly notice it, and like gravity it pulls us back to earth whenever we try to soar high.

Okay, enough for now. It’s pretty good reading, I must say. There’s quite a lot more, if you can bear it.

