

VII Jnana Darsana, Consciousness and its Modifications

Verse 2

That knowledge modulated as I-consciousness inside, likewise that which is modulated as knowledge of thisness outside, such knowledge is known as the conditioned.

5/1/7

One of my favorite mottoes is “self description is stultifying.” Most of our initial relationship to a spiritual program consists in trying to substitute a better self-image for a poorer one. Or we want to be affiliated with a superior religious program, one with improved values over what we formerly knew. But now Narayana Guru is lumping all self-images and all philosophical programs together in one bag and calling it conditioned awareness. This takes the self-generated wind right out of our sails. Absolutely whatever way we define and describe ourselves is limited, and therefore partial and, well, false. The Guru wants us to stop limiting ourselves due to our childish need to ratify our existence in the eyes of ourselves and others. Slightly better, or “new and improved” as the advertisers put it, is basically a fresh deposit of the same old crap. There is an infinite amount of incremental improvement we can amuse ourselves with, or we can drop that game, and go to the heart of the matter and get real.

As Nitya reminds us yet again, “The sole purpose of our present study is to release the mind from all painful conditioning and to lead it to its original state of pure unconditioned consciousness.” He is not making a distinction between painful and pleasurable conditioning here, by the way. All conditioning is

painful, in that it separates us from the full glory of the present moment. And Nitya underscores Narayana Guru's message: "The most brutishly ignorant man... and the philosopher-seer of the most sublime vision, meditating on the Absolute, are equally subject to the conditioning of consciousness. Whether a person is saying 'this is a pot' or 'I am the Absolute', there is no substantial difference in the conditional aspect of consciousness."

By this stage of our study we should not lament this blow to our pride, we should be deeply grateful. We have seen over and over again how cheesy our fixation on our selfish interests is, and how much more fulfilling it is to step outside our fortified lairs and greet the sun. And yet we slip back repeatedly—"boats against the current"—into believing we need to take matters into our own hands, and only permit carefully calculated sorties out of those lairs. We habitually interpolate attitudes from the transactional world into our spirituality, and become narcissistic instead of generous. We bedevil ourselves with figuring out how and what to do, instead of opening up to the situation and letting it teach us. We remain afraid to let go of imagining we are in charge.

Anita reminded us this by no means implies that we shouldn't do things. We still have to function, and we want to offer ourselves to every event we encounter. We have to find the happy neutral mean that stands outside both selfish action and selfless action. We still do everything we do, but we are no longer mucking it up with our conditioned reactions.

Brenda gave us a perfect example of how to grow above this, and I hope I can relate it accurately. Her mother is severely disabled, and has been a ward of the state since Brenda was three. Four or five years ago, buoyed by a recent marriage, Brenda decided to bring her mother into her home and care for her, which has been extremely challenging and frustrating, as well as rewarding and beneficial for both of them. Early on, Brenda had lots of plans and expectations for how things were going to go.

Pretty much all were regularly thwarted by circumstances, and this caused her tremendous disappointment and misery. Very often her efforts were met with scorn rather than appreciation. Yet Brenda did not relinquish her motivation to be helpful to dwell on her hurt feelings, and she gradually learned to let go of her role as director and just listen to what her mother's needs were at that moment. She shrugged off her disappointment as her own selfish baggage. As she let go of her personal expectations most of the pain ebbed away, to be replaced by a deeper love, which in turn allowed her to be even more responsive and helpful. Lately she can take the ups and downs in stride, retreating for a while when necessary, reinforcing when possible, and maintaining a steady state of supportiveness and care throughout.

This illustrates an excellent meditation one could extrapolate from the Jnana Darsana. When our feelings are hurt by contact with the outside world, it is direct evidence of our own conditioning. We should look right then at why we are hurt, and that will help us to stand above our own feelings and to clearly assess them. We can quickly learn that dwelling on and amplifying our unhappiness is useless and even absurd. It's a childish technique that once got mommy's attention, but hasn't particularly worked since way back then. Sometimes we have an adult relationship with someone, even a marital relationship, to try to replace that external mother or father image, but it usually fails in a relatively brief time. It is far healthier to bind the wounds and carry on, not as a martyr but as a wise seer.

Moreover, if we can stop obsessing on our imagined wounds to calmly examine what has happened, we usually become aware that the seemingly hostile situation or person didn't *intend* to harm us in the first place, so all the attendant emotional chaos is clouding our vision for no reason whatever. Knowing there are projections on both sides, we might even be able to laugh at ourselves in relief!

Giving up our ego fixation, purely the product of conditioning, is the classic win-win. We no longer feel false pains possibly leading to days and even weeks of the blues, and we are much better able to offer our hand to the other in love or simple friendship. They will simultaneously find it easier to let go of their own pains. What could possibly be holding us back?

Part II

Trappist Monk Thomas Merton is one of the most eloquent writers on spirituality and religion our species has ever produced. The following seems eminently relevant to our attempt to come to grips with the Karma and Jnana Darsanas, especially the question of how do we relinquish our sense of agency without abandoning our life and its meaning? It's from *Raids on the Unspeakable*, New Directions, 1966. Its fierceness lives up to the title:

And that brings me to Philoxenos, a Syrian who had fun in the sixth century, without benefit of appliances, still less of nuclear deterrents.

Philoxenos in his ninth *memra* (on poverty) to dwellers in solitude, says that there is no explanation and no justification for the solitary life, since it is without a law. To be a contemplative is therefore to be an outlaw. As was Christ. As was Paul.

One who is not "alone," says Philoxenos, has not discovered his identity. He seems to be alone, perhaps, for he experiences himself as "individual." But because he is willingly enclosed and limited by the laws and illusions of collective existence, he has no more identity than an unborn child in the womb. He is not yet conscious. He is alien to his own truth. He has senses, but he cannot use them. He has life, but no identity. To have an identity, he has to be awake, and aware. But to be awake, he has to accept vulnerability and death. Not for their own sake:

not out of stoicism or despair—only for the sake of the invulnerable inner reality which we cannot recognize (which we can only *be*) but to which we awaken only when we see the unreality of our vulnerable shell. The discovery of this inner self is an act and affirmation of solitude.

Now if we take our vulnerable shell to be our true identity, if we think our mask is our true face, we will protect it with fabrications even at the cost of violating our own truth. This seems to be the collective endeavor of society: the more busily men dedicate themselves to it, the more certainly it becomes a collective illusion, until in the end we have the enormous, obsessive, uncontrollable dynamic of fabrications designed to protect mere fictitious identities—“selves,” that is to say, regarded as objects. Selves that can stand back and see themselves having fun (an illusion that reassures them that they are real). (14-15)

Such is the ignorance which is taken to be the axiomatic foundation of all knowledge in the human collectivity: in order to experience yourself as real, you have to suppress the awareness of your contingency, your unreality, your state of radical need. This you do by creating an awareness of yourself as *one who has no needs that he cannot immediately fulfill*. Basically, this is an illusion of omnipotence: an illusion which the collectivity arrogates to itself, and consents to share with its individual members in proportion as they submit to its more central and more rigid fabrications.

You have needs; but if you behave and conform you can participate in the collective power. You can then satisfy all your needs. Meanwhile, in order to increase its power over you, the collectivity increases your needs. It also tightens its demand for conformity. Thus you can become all the more committed to

the collective illusion in proportion to becoming more hopelessly mortgaged to collective power.

How does this work? The collectivity informs and shapes your will to happiness (“have fun”) by presenting you with irresistible images of yourself as you would like to be: having *fun that is so perfectly credible that it allows no interference of conscious doubt*. In theory such a good time can be so convincing that you are no longer aware of even a remote possibility that it might change into something less satisfying. In practice, expensive fun always admits of a doubt, which blossoms out into another full-blown need, which then calls for a still more credible and more costly refinement of satisfaction, which again fails you. The end of the cycle is despair.

Because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. Our capacities for joy, peace, and truth are never liberated. They can never be used. We are prisoners of a process, a dialectic of false promises and real deceptions ending in futility.

“The unborn child,” says Philoxenos, “is already perfect and fully constituted in his nature, with all his senses, and limbs, but he cannot make use of them in their natural functions, because, in the womb, he cannot strengthen or develop them for such use.”

Now, since all things have their season, there is a time to be unborn. We must begin, indeed, in the social womb. There is a time for warmth in the collective myth. But there is also a time to be born. He who is spiritually “born” as a mature identity is liberated from the enclosing womb of myth and prejudice. He learns to think for himself, guided no longer by the dictates of need and by the systems and processes designed to create artificial needs and then “satisfy” them.

This emancipation can take two forms: first, that of the active life, which liberates itself from enslavement to necessity by

considering and serving the needs of others, without thought of personal interest or return. And second, the contemplative life, which must not be construed as an escape from time and matter, from social responsibility and from the life of sense, but rather, as an advance into solitude and the desert, a confrontation with poverty and the void, a renunciation of the empirical self, in the presence of death, and nothingness, in order to overcome the ignorance and error that spring from the fear of “being nothing.” The man who dares to be alone can come to see that the “emptiness” and “uselessness” which the collective mind fears and condemns are necessary conditions for the encounter with truth.

It is in the desert of loneliness and emptiness that the fear of death and the need for self-affirmation are seen to be illusory. (15-17)

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7/11/17

Jnana Darsana verse 2

That knowledge modulated as I-consciousness inside,
likewise that which is modulated
as knowledge of thisness outside,
such knowledge is known as the conditioned.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

*That which, accompanied by egoism, as if inside
And which again as qualified by thisness
Accompanied by conscious activity, such awareness
Is to be understood conditioned.*

Most people spend their lives trying to accommodate their conditioning, to adjust their orientation to line up with the demands of external reality. Spirituality is based on a different premise, a road less traveled: if we minimize our submission to external demands we may well discover an authentic self that is far less constrictive and much more fun to inhabit. How and why that decision is or is not made is one of the great mysteries of life.

Nitya epitomizes this course succinctly: “The sole purpose of our present study is to release the mind from all painful conditioning and to lead it to its original state of pure unconditioned consciousness.” Normally this does not come about by accident. Nitya reminds us of what those who are content with their constraints never realize: “It is very important for us to know what these conditions are, how they arise, and how they constitute experiences of pain, pleasure, and indifference.” These three, by the way, are all lumped under the “painful conditioning” of the former sentence. We aren’t just conditioned by pain: indifference and pleasure also condition us, and conditioning is always painful on some level. It restricts our soul.

It’s not like being conditioned is some rare malaise afflicting only the malcontents, it is ubiquitous. Nitya says:

As a matter of fact, all our subjective and objective experiences are conditioned.... Every explicit statement that is made by man in the form of a judgment refers either to his own personal identity and its relation with other things or to the objects of his own experience. (331)

There is cause for hope, however. While we humans are primarily focused on our limitations, both internal and external, this is only a small part of our total being:

It should not be thought that the whole of consciousness is involved in this subjective activity. Only a minute fraction of our unconditioned pure consciousness undergoes modification. Yet even from this fraction arises the infinitely large world of the time-space continuum. Such a world is constituted of millions of names and forms, together with a sequential train of emotionally charged thoughts and willfully deliberated actions. (332)

Nitya steers us clear of any “holier than thou” attitude, since it is not going to help. All it will do is make us complacent about our own level of ignorance. Nancy Y. said something about this to the latest Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study group, that Nitya had taught that too much preoccupation with one’s “right dharma” was an ego trip. The ego, of course, is always eager to co-opt every endeavor. Nitya’s assessment should disabuse us of any chance for that happening (don’t we wish!), since we are all in the same pickle:

The most brutishly ignorant man who, in addition to ignorance, suffers from the excruciating physical pain of some dreadful disease, and the philosopher-seer of the most sublime vision, meditating on the Absolute, are equally subject to the conditioning of consciousness. Whether a person is saying “this is a pot,” or “I am the Absolute,” there is no substantial difference in the conditional aspect of consciousness. (332)

As Deb said, we are not just trying to upgrade the kind of conditioning we suffer from, but to do away with it entirely. I myself don’t see anything wrong with upgrading, so long as it doesn’t distract you from the hard work of critical self-examination. Upgrading our attitudes can come as a byproduct of

letting go of flawed beliefs that support conditioning. But if we focus on it exclusively, the goal will recede from us forever.

I repeat this every week in the class in one form or another, with minimal effect. Conditioning is comfortable, and change is uncomfortable. That's why you have to really mean it to break out of a static mindset. Plus, the older we get the more fixed in our ways we become. Waiting until late in life to make a spiritual sortie is like waiting until the language center of the brain shuts down to begin learning a foreign language. But life is so busy we figure we'll just take it up later, like after retirement. Hmmm.

Working our way through the Jnana Darsana gives us an opportunity to make a serious dent in our voluntary conditioning. To aid our progress, Nitya offers another important insight into why we become attached to our experiences:

Even though the object in question is experienced as a factor external to the self, the joy or aversion generated by it is experienced internally. When we experience an external object, a number of subjective questions arise to keep the mind busy with modifications of consciousness, mainly of a conceptual nature. It is in this way that concepts and percepts become conditions (*upadhi*) capable of creating states of consciousness. (332)

One rather baffling idea was never addressed, as we slipped into a deep meditation at the end of the hour instead. It follows this assertion that conditioning creates our states of consciousness:

In addition to concepts and percepts there arise in the mind factors of affectivity or value. Some of these value factors are conceptual qualities; others come in the form of relationships. (332)

Concepts and percepts are horizontal interests, and value affectivity is a vertical negative quality. I wonder what Nitya means by the relationships these generate? Conceptual qualities are our deep-seated beliefs that undergird our thinking, but relationships tend to be secondary: we relate to people and aspects of the world, like art and music, in accordance with our development. Our conscious choices are horizontal, while the vertical impels us without our being especially aware of it. My best guess here at what is meant is that these unconscious impulses create and draw us into our relationships, which are the arenas where we have the most opportunity for meeting challenges and spurring growth.

Our brains evolved for hundreds of millions of years to assess every aspect of our environment as to whether it was lethal or not. One false move and you were lunch. Now we are trying to progress to a level of existence where more than survival can be taken into account. The safer our lives are, the better our chances at turning our attention to more sublime interests than “Is it going to kill me?” But fear is very profitable for many people. In the words of cartoonist Dan O’Neill that always ride with me, “Politics is business as usual: making money out of fear.” War and conflict are the best ways to pick peoples’ pockets in a big way. No penny ante stuff there! The point is, our default setting is obsession with the external world, and even though we now have safe zones where we could let go of our fears, we seldom do. Now that our walls quite literally do have ears, paranoia about what might be going on at the NSA deftly replaces the Tyrannosaurus Rex outside the cave.

It is little wonder that Karl Jaspers was beloved of both Nitya and Nataraja Guru. In *Reason and Existenz*, a collection of public lectures given in Holland in 1935, he gives a clear accounting of conditioning and its relation to his term for the Absolute, the Encompassing:

Our knowledge of objects in the world has the form of relating them to one another and deriving them from one another. What appears to us is understood by understanding its relation to something else. But where, in philosophizing, we are concerned with the Encompassing, it is clear that we are dealing with something which cannot be understood like some object in the world; more especially, we find that the modes of the Encompassing cannot be derived from some particular which appears in them. For example: if we call the Encompassing thought, we cannot derive thought itself from anything which can be thought of. Or if the Encompassing is our consciousness, it cannot be derived from anything which appears to this consciousness. Or if it is the Whole, it cannot be derived from any individual, be it ever so comprehensive. Or if it is empirical existence, then as such it can never be derived from any determinate, objectively known empirical thing. If it is reason, then we cannot derive it from the non-rational. Or if it is existence, it cannot be derived from any mode of the Encompassing, let alone one of its contents. In short, our being can never be derived from anything which appears to us; I myself can never be understood through anything which I encounter. (69-70)

This last phrase formed the basis of much of our class discussion. Susan was acutely aware of how her inner narrative and her reactions to the things that captured her attention all the livelong day were not really her. She knew she was much more than these things, much larger. And yet they are what others identify as “us”—even insist are us—and a kind of medium through which we are constrained to relate to the world. She feels painfully constricted by this. To a remarkable degree, even we ourselves have bought into the ersatz person we appear to others to be. I believe that recognizing the limiting nature of our inner narrative

and self-identity is one of the most crucial steps in spiritual development. And as Jaspers says, we cannot discover our true selves through our conditioning. The best we can do is become aware of the vast emptiness that surrounds—encompasses—the ceaseless chatter of our everyday habits. To move into that we have to move out of our boxes.

I suggested that for anyone caught in reactivity, meditation should take the form of interrupting their obsessions. Sit quietly without being impinged upon by any sensory stimuli, and as ideas pop into your head, set them aside. Tell them to wait. You can get to them later. It helps to know what Susan is realizing, that all that junk—even the high-quality junk—is not who we are in full. We are much more amazing than that. In guided meditations Nitya would often repeat, “I am not this body.... I am not this mind....” It helps you to sink to a quiescent depth that is most enthralling. Deep down we really do love peace and “surcease of sorrow,” especially if we don’t have to die to achieve it.

Nancy agreed, saying that when you do meditate, it is an effort to bring in a less conditioned state. Calm yourself; don’t just react. As we become comfortable in that place, we can rejoin the flow of life and enjoy how splendid it is.

Deb mentioned waking up and not knowing who or where she was for a brief time. It is a great place to linger in. Again, she has learned this gradually. Like everyone, she used to wake up and “pull herself together.” Here’s who I am and what I have to do. But giving yourself a pause before rejoining the fray makes a world of difference. Nitya recommended this to many of us.

Is it possible to look at something and not identify it? Ideally the artistic vision interrupts the urge to name and codify what is seen. Which is why I seldom use the audio recordings museums now offer to explain their displays. I want to look first without telling myself what the artifacts are supposed to be, and when I do that I often see something quite unexpected and quite moving.

Doing this in “real” life outside of museums allows you to see what the situation has to offer rather than what your fears about it are.

Deb recalled Bushra coming to grips with a potentially life-threatening illness, realizing after some time that everything she had been anticipating never happened. The actual course of events was always different than she thought it would be. In my 2/3 of a century of life, nothing has ever turned out as I expected, rarely even close, so I have renounced expecting also.

This idea resonated with Nancy. She has learned that letting herself experience loss and embrace it, instead of trying to deny it, frees her to be less upset. The problem isn't going to play out the way you think. Like Bushra, she accepts how to face it in order to walk through it. If we listen to what it is instead of what we are afraid it will be, the story is seldom so terrible. This brought to mind one of Nitya's greatest moments in *That Alone*, which I have clipped into Part II to amplify Nancy's insight.

Susan knew just what this meant. Her beloved dog Sam is nearing the end of his life, and she woke up in the middle of the previous night worried and miserable. She got into a really desperate place, but then realized she was imagining all sorts of things that might never happen, or at any rate would not happen in the way she imagined. Then she could relax and get back to sleep.

I reminisced about the time when I stood outside a fundamentalist Christian church, trying to engage its members in a dialogue about the US's use of torture, which last I checked was by no means a Christian virtue. Conditioned by hate radio and their vitriolic preachers, not one would speak with me. As a lifelong pacifist, I am kindly inclined, but the few who shouted at me refused my invitation, claiming they knew all about me. I was the devil incarnate, out to destroy them and everything they held dear. I was a mean, hateful person. Their conditioning did not allow them to learn the least bit about me or my ideas. When it gets to

that level, conditioning is fatal. There is almost no chance of emerging from something you so passionately embrace. The few I met were no better than barking dogs. Their job was to bark, not to listen or allow themselves to be petted.

Much of the class time was spent exuberantly recounting ways each person's conditioning was dissipated by the unspooling of unanticipated events. It was our premise that if you set aside your preconceived notions and watched closely, you would experience things more as they really are. There would be Newness. Since the brain compares the present with past recollections, we routinely convert new experiences to old hats. That's why we love surprises: they temporarily wrest us free from our habitual dullness. Then we explain them to ourselves and go back to sleep. Anyway, Moni especially told a long tale of unexpected happenstance, laughing gaily at the retelling. Newness can even give us a welcome jolt in memory form, it seems.

I expect this all sounds like familiar territory, as it should. Yet we are good at nodding in agreement with nice ideas while never actually taking ourselves to task. We might well ask, Why am I acceding to my conditionings if doing so is spoiling my enjoyment of my life that is flying by so swiftly?

Twice recently I tested whether the wise are as conditioned as the ignorant. At a dinner gathering the night before and at the pre-class conclave of tea and cookies, both of which were brimming with kind and loving thoughts and mutual support, I brought up the name of Trump. Very quickly the closeness was ruptured, and each person retreated into a set of well-hashed-over fears and projections. In the case of the dinner, it was soon time to go home. With the class, we could repair the damage by changing the focus and sitting again in amity. (This, by the way, is a fine example of an ungraded habit—time spent in group contemplation of high ideals becomes progressively easier to re-enter on the next occasion.)

At no time in the Trump discussion was I able to say what I had planned: it was all swept aside by the tide of pre-existing ill feelings. There was precious little interchange, just grandstanding. So it looks like Nitya is right, we are all conditioned. Moreover, a guy like Trump loves, absolutely loves, to make millions of people miserable without having to soil his shoes walking over them. Liberals, women, minorities—fantastic! They are all suffering, and he and his buddies are revelling in it. So our conditioning is not only damaging us, it is pumping up the world's most famous blowhard and his minions of marching morons. Seems like that by itself should be enough incentive to take Narayana Guru seriously.

Our vertical impulses have brought us to the metaphorical feet of a great guru who can help us wriggle out from under our oppressions. Can we dare to give it a try? Susan's awareness of being much greater than the sum of her parts is heartening evidence that we are learning, slowly yet surely, despite our woeful susceptibility to distractions.

We closed with a lovely, long meditation, as practice for giving ourselves space all the time. A glorious evening, unlike any other in the history of the universe, embraced us outside the door.

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

The conditioning of awareness consists of function and activity. This functioning has been already stated in chapter V, where it is present with its own specific and generic aspects, and with subtle and gross differences. Beginning from awareness of outside objects such as “this is a pot,” “this is a cloth,” and likewise to awareness of inner “objects” such as “I am the Absolute,” all functions are to be included within the scope of the varieties mentioned above. All functional activities are the

conditionings of that one awareness, which treats them as objects of consciousness. This awareness, although in reality independent of conditionings when functionally referring to corresponding “objects,” is called conditioned awareness.

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That Alone’s verse 30 deals with pain beautifully, but this is my favorite of all, from the end of verse 55:

On certain occasions in my life when I had a physical or mental affliction, I took the opportunity for the meditative purpose of evaluating the actual pain, the actual agony to which the body or mind was subjected. I quietly watched the body’s pain and wrote descriptions of exactly how I felt it to be painful. Immediately there came a psychological turnover of my interest from the pain itself to the norms of pain, intellectually conceived. That made the pain already a phantom.

The pain became less painful because my interest was of a critic making a critique of it. When you become a critic of your own pain, half of it goes away. Then you question whether the other half is real, because the first half already left. This is even more poignant when you are in an angry state and you make a journal of your anger. The bulk of the anger immediately dies down and becomes even humorous. You pose as the angry person and make a caricature of your anger. It becomes so satirical of your own state of mind that you see yourself as a big fool to get angry like that. There is so little content in it. It is blown all out of proportion. Once you see this, the whole thing leaves you and you wonder, “What is this thing called my anger? What is this thing called my pain? What are these things called my excitement, my sense of fame, my sense of importance?” All of it is reduced to an evenness. Somehow, up

to now you have not cultivated that acumen. You can try it and see what kind of difference it makes. (380)