

VII Jnana Darsana, Consciousness and its Modifications

Verse 7

That form of modulation of knowledge, by which the appraisal of the possibility produced by concomitant inherence is deduced, is inference.

6/5/7

Two-thirds of the way through Darsanamala we encounter the last of the big, burly commentaries of Guru Nitya. From here on there are only short and gentle challenges. At the top of the Jnana Darsana we also peel ourselves away from the last clinging vines of ordinary thinking, to begin to discover and express our freedom. Diligently meeting mostly weekly for almost two years, we have laid the groundwork for a new and edifying edifice.

The verse, baffling at first glance, is essentially a definition of inference. Inference simply means to draw conclusions by reasoning based on data. It's a very common mode of thought. Nataraja Guru reminds us that even a cow uses inference, as when it bolts if you approach it with a raised stick. So don't get supercilious over your ability to make inferences.

Narayana Guru says here that when we infer something, we are appraising possibilities based on concomitant inherence, in other words, by association. Concomitant refers to those things that occur along with other things or events. Inherence means qualities that are essential parts of the thing or event.

What this means to a spiritual aspirant is that we encounter new things all the time, but we tend to compare them to known

factors in our memory banks. While this is undeniably useful for survival and transactional functioning, and so has become our primary mode of knowing, it substitutes a mental image or conclusion for actual experience. We seldom notice that we have “killed” the thing itself and are operating in a self-imposed prison of static concepts. In short, we infer only what we expect and deny any serendipity in what we encounter.

Nancy shared a recent dream with us that perfectly expressed the thrust of this verse. In it she went down to a waterfront area and saw all sorts of unsavory characters that she wanted to get away from. She went uphill to a tavern and asked the people inside for directions. Then she found herself inside a set of monkey bars, a climbing structure for kids in the form of a rectangular matrix. Instead of metal bars this one was made of sturdy 6 x 6 timbers. She began to feel boxed in, and looked all around for an escape, but whichever way she went she encountered more of the matrix. Then she stopped casting about and looked steadily straight in front of her, in a kind of meditation. She saw that the way was open. She went forward and emerged from the monkey bars. She found herself on a street where she could read all the signs and easily find her way where she was going.

Nancy’s subconscious was certainly doing its homework for this class! Leaving aside whether the waterfront stands for the freak festival currently taking place downtown and the tavern on the hill was the Gurukula, the matrix represents the concomitant inherence of our mental framework. It’s stolid and unbendable. We can climb all over it but it’s hard to escape, because it represents the way we define reality. Curiously, if we stop focusing on our structure and look straight into what is right in front of us, we gain our freedom. Associations are what exists on the sides. Looking straight forward means letting go of those associations.

Nitya put this idea in a general way in the commentary: “The relationship between dreams and incipient memories is one of

intimate functional dynamism. Just as the synonyms and antonyms of words are classified and grouped together in a thesaurus, so, in somewhat the same manner, associated ideas are grouped together in our mind.... It is not hard to see that ideas of things become interrelated, and how such interrelation produces matrices.” (349-50). Nitya also quotes William James, from *The Principles of Psychology*: “Objects once experienced together tend to become associated in the imagination, so that when any one of them is thought of, the others are likely to be thought of also, in the same order of sequence or coexistence as before.”

Nitya provides a substantial survey of eastern and western logic, in which analysis and inference are taken to extremes. His conclusion leads us directly to the way out of our personal matrix of associations:

The trouble with this kind of abstraction is that it takes us away from the whole meaning of our pursuit. Life is not lived in terms of mathematically reduced atomic propositions. Our interest... is that we are on the lookout to see how our life in the transactional world, where we have to be concerned with specific characteristics, catches hold of us and makes us identify with particular individuals, things and events, and also how our consciousness is vivified into multitudinous morbid formations. This makes our return to universal concomitance of one existence... difficult if not impossible. (357-8)

The gist is that we overlay the beautifully complex simplicity of life with learned patterns of thinking that turn it dark and ugly. Anne noted how this study has helped her to discard negative expectations and frameworks, certainly her major attainment from the study so far. She suggested we should look for several last

examples as we prepare to spread our wings and leave our cages for good.

Jealousy is a prime example of how destructive inference can be. We first become suspicious of a friend because of thwarted hopes or feelings, and we begin to build a matrix of false beliefs about that person. If they say something in all innocence, it can strike us as evidence that they are rejecting us or leaving us for another. Ordinary acts take on hidden significance. Innuendo is transformed into certainty, and our misery increases with each new occasion to misinterpret our friend's position. Even reassurances from the friend will be secretly transformed into projections of deceitful dissembling.

Jealousy does not only occur between individuals. Whole nations are subject to it. Christian nations are jealous of Muslim nations for many reasons, and so brand them as evil. Once the mindset is in place, there is no recourse. All attempts to redress problems are treated as sinister gambits and rebuffed. The only solution has to come from the side of the jealous partner, but jealousy is so fixated on the faults of the other that it never looks at itself.

The image I keep in mind came to me on a walk around town some years ago. I'm a dog lover, and I ran into a cute little dog on a nearby street. I stopped to talk to him, but he just barked at me. He was conditioned to bark at strangers. Nothing I could do produced anything other than redoubled barking. I could not get him to realize my kind intent. Then I thought, what kind of superior being looks at me the way I'm looking at this dog? Am I just barking my conditioning at the very things that are offering me solace and love? Shouldn't I stop smugly broadcasting my opinions and start listening to what others have to offer?

I shared a simple example of my own faulty inference with the class. I am deathly afraid of heights, and was even more so as a child. The Good Lord allowed me to grow up in Texas swampland

and South Jersey, which is an alluvial delta and as flat as a lake, so I didn't have to confront my fears for a long time. When I was 8 the family took a first trip to the Virginia mountains. As we drove up into them, my fears kicked in. I became terrified, and lay down on the floor of the car, crying and carrying on. Fear of heights produces a weird kind of extreme tension and nausea. My family laughing at me and my younger brother gazing excitedly out the window only added to my misery. It was an endless road up and up, and I could picture death-defying precipices all around. Finally I got a slight grip on myself and peeked out. It was nearly flat! Virginia mountains are old and rounded. There was absolutely nothing to be afraid of. Well, my pride was at stake, so I kept up the glumness for a while longer, but even I couldn't deny the truth: the whole event was manufactured in my imagination. Nowadays I'd say I inferred it from sketchy data.

When "sketchy data" causes us so much unhappiness, why do we cling to it? What makes us opt for the comfort of inferential identification over being alive? The matrix of our beliefs forms a kind of womb, and it can get pretty cozy in there if we pad it properly with conventionalism. But for students of Darsanamala there is a strong desire to break free of the tyranny of our conditioning. We have only the whole universe to gain, and nothing to lose but our confusion. We fully intend to be born out of the once-nurturing womb of our illusions, into the bright light of day.

We closed with a reading of Mending Wall by Robert Frost, which perfectly expresses the sentiments of this verse. I'm sure you've all read it many times, but here's a synopsis anyway: There are walls between people, propped up by their unquestioning acceptance of received wisdom. But Nature or Life doesn't like walls, and it is always knocking them asunder. When the walls come down far enough, two people can walk side by side. Maybe the walls shouldn't come all the way down, because we love our

isolation too, yet there could at least be gaps where we could touch. But so many want to maintain the walls, to keep separate and apart, one on each side. When Frost meets his friend, instead of connecting outside the barriers they carefully set the old blocks back between them, renewing the separation. The urge for Life makes Frost wonder why, and he goes so far as to ask his friend about it. The friend merely mouths an adage that semi-relates to the situation, but it satisfies him thoroughly, defeating any desire for connection that might still survive. Frost muses, “Before I built a wall I’d ask to know/ what I was walling in or walling out/ and to whom I was likely to give offense.” Our walls offend as well as defend. But they are only made from our mindset, and so are available for deconstruction and transformation if we so choose.

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8/15/17

Jnana Darsana verse 7

That form of the modulation
of knowledge, by which the appraisal of
the possibility produced by concomitant
inherence is deduced, is inference.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

*That function of awareness by which
The means to an end is appraised
And which arises out of associative innate disposition
That is inferential awareness.*

Nitya loved to keep up with current scientific thinking, and this verse commentary gave him the opportunity to share a fistful

of his findings, especially about memory. An amusing feature of his essay is Earl C. Joseph's idea of "paperless books," written before the advent of personal computing, which anticipates with astonishing accuracy the mechanical word processing we now take for granted. With a couple of exceptions we skipped poring over the numerous excerpts from books and journals, and addressed ourselves to the primary subject, inference.

Since there was some confusion about the terminology (not least that mystifying invention 'concomitant inherence'), let's take a look at it. The verse's main topic is inference, which refers to how we derive logical conclusions from known premises or ones assumed to be true, as well as the act of reasoning on that basis. It comprises a large part of our ordinary thought processes. For the yogi, the critical issue is whether a thing is actually known or only being assumed; and as we have learned, what we purport to know, on examination often turns out to be merely a rough estimate. This is a very fertile area for contemplative exploration.

Both induction and deduction were brought in, and in the final analysis there is precious little difference between them. Induction is the process of deriving general principles from particular facts or instances, while deduction is drawing conclusions based on reasoning. Sounds like they are interchangeable to me.

While logical thinking and its inferences are proudly put on display as evidence of rational humanity at its most admirable, in many cases it leaves a lot to be desired. Nataraja Guru puts it in perspective as less than special in the Preliminaries of *An Integrated Science of the Absolute*, at the beginning of the chapter "Steps from Logic to Dialectic":

Simple inferential logic, of which even a cow is capable when it welcomes a man carrying a bundle of grass or avoids one with a raised stick, belongs to the instinctive level where living

beings adapt themselves to what is favourable in their environment and abstain from what is unfavourable.

Rising from simple inference at this primitive level of logic, we are able to recognize many ascending steps giving each its own variety of logic until we reach the highest kind belonging properly to wisdom. This highest kind of logic Plato calls dialectic, “the coping stone of wisdom.” (85)

From what we can tell, humans often perform more complex reasoning than cows. But we’re talking here of a straightforward alignment between the world and what we make of it—a significant human weakness.

At this stage, as Deb pointed out, Narayana Guru is surveying the most important forms of thinking, clearly noting them as forms of modulation and thus horizontally oriented. Only at the tenth verse do we arrive at dialectic reasoning, where “the union of the Absolute and the Self” is said to constitute absolute knowledge. This is similar to an unmodulated state, though it is dynamic rather than static thanks to the intentional attainment of union. Needless to say, this form of knowledge is little appreciated in our day, where the brain is conceived more as a computer, and in that sense capable of rudimentary inferences (thank goodness!). Moreover, it seems that merely differentiating facts from assumptions has modern society stupefied. Spiritual seekers are expected to work out such elementary matters with minimal instruction, and be capable of higher reasoning.

We chewed on what concomitant inherence has to do with all this. ‘Concomitant’ is a familiar enough term that means things that are closely associated, occurring along with each other at the same time. ‘Inherence’ has, in addition to indicating what is inherent in anything, a specialized meaning in logic: the relation of an attribute to its subject. Does a moustache mean you are a criminal, or simply too lazy to shave? Is there any other

possibility? We cannot do better than apply Nataraja Guru's translation to the original term that Nitya derived his translation from (*sahacarya samskara janyaya*): "associative innate disposition." In other words, we want to know the *valid* connection that relates one thing or event with another, or know one thing with its *actual* attributes.

We should note the word *samskara* smack in the middle of that unusual Sanskrit term, which explains Nitya's extended disquisition on memory. Associations are grounded in memory, and he was wondering if there was any physical correlate to memory that might establish a factual basis for its connection with perception. While there has been some progress in the field since the book was written in the 1970s, it's safe to say the relationship between matter and memory remains highly speculative. Nitya does give us one hint at the direction he is taking us:

The relationship between dreams and incipient memories is one of intimate functional dynamism. Just as the synonyms and antonyms of words are classified and grouped together in a thesaurus, so, in somewhat the same manner, associated ideas are grouped together in our mind.

This grouping process is not always reliable, meaning many of the connections we draw are false. Scientists purport to reason carefully and without prejudice, but it is a rare seeker of truth who realizes how easy it is for us to be fooled. The mistaken equivalencies that confound our social coherence supplied the class with fertile terrain for seeing the relevance of this verse in everyday life.

For instance, in receiving medical care, doctors diagnose patients on the basis of the most likely correlation between their symptoms and known causes. Never mind that the causes keep getting shifted by new knowledge and perspectives, sometimes—

possibly even more often than not—this correlation produces an accurate diagnosis and treatment will be appropriate. Often, however, the patient may not perfectly describe their symptoms, or they may have another disease with quite similar symptoms. Many of us in the class have felt the frustration of being misdiagnosed and having the doctor (subtly or overtly) refuse to consider viable alternatives, as though it was our intentional fault that we didn't match the accepted wisdom of the day.

A doctor has to infer the cause of a problem based on whatever evidence is given. Obviously, right evidence is more likely to bring a happy result. Possibly because of the rigidity of the medical training system, many doctors are not able to think very far outside the box. My dear friend the pediatrician loves to tell me stories of the times when he has taken on a hopeless case from a puzzled colleague, really listened hard to what was going on, and came up with the right, lifesaving diagnosis. He is outstanding at his job, and really stands out for his willingness to get beneath the surface.

I gave a simplified example, based on Nataraja Guru's cow analogy. When the stick is raised, the cow shies away. It is right to do so if the herder is going to strike, but wrong if she is simply pointing out a bird in a tree to a friend. Of course, the cow may as well play it safe, but there are plenty of times we react incorrectly to our associations, and serious difficulties ensue. It's worthwhile contemplating some of them in advance.

A friend just told me how he just realized he wasn't listening to his children as well as he thought he was. He expected he knew what they were telling him, and so unwittingly paid them little heed, especially when his mind was already elsewhere. Recently, due to some immanent changes in their relationship, he started paying closer attention to what his children were saying to him, and learned much more than he expected. I suggested that children easily recognize if they are being given scant consideration, and

learn to hold their thoughts and feelings back. He has resolved to listen more diligently to his children, and reduce his expectations of knowing in advance. Interestingly, good listening—a rare enough skill—is a key component in attuning with the world we live in, and it enables better inferences about it. We have to tune out our prejudices and assumptions before we can fairly hear what the other is trying to tell us. It can be a most exciting and rewarding endeavor.

My friend's knowing posture is not unlike the doctor who is instantly sure what your problem is before even hearing much about it. In the book *How Doctors Think*, by Jerome Groupman, he discovered that primary care physicians in the US listen to their female patients for an average of 15 seconds before weighing in with an opinion—often a prescription for antidepressants—and around 30 seconds for males. Doctors, at least in the US, coping with a for-profit medical establishment, learn to have a “disregard for uncertainty” that leads them to leap rapidly to conclusions. Fortunately, when we non-doctors do it, it is rarely as consequential, though it might easily turn out to be.

Racial prejudice is the all-time classic example. No matter how wonderful or terrible a person might be, their skin color gets top billing, and is often the sole basis for decision making. Such an un-yogic attitude has led to one or two problems over the years....

Deb summed it up by saying we live within a chain of associations and we make our inferences from within it. A chain, of course, has two major implications, one positive and one negative: it links everything together and it also binds with tremendous tenacity. So within the realm of modulations of conscious—the horizontal, transactional world—inference is exceedingly important. Nitya generalizes its significance and underscores its importance in making us who we are:

The Guru envisions the cosmic volition of *paramesvara* as the primeval cause of the phenomenal world. According to him the creative and motivational imagination (*sankalpa*) triggered by the incipient memories (*vasana*) of the individual (*jiva*) is the causal factor of the making and undoing of the personality structure. The Guru relates our inferential awareness to our associative inner disposition. This inner disposition is to be understood in depth. (355)

The “understood in depth” part is critical. Very often we are at the mercy of our assumptions unless we are keenly aware of them. We may be even more guarded about being aware of them because of our fear of being wrong, which extends to being afraid our misunderstandings will be found out and we will be humiliated or otherwise suffer. Better just to ignore the whole mess and hope for the best. Maybe God will help us sort it out.

Narayana Guru’s intentions are scattered throughout the commentary, so I have picked out a couple of Nitya’s points for ready reference:

The Guru touches the fundamentals of memory consolidation, and the consequent awareness of modified consciousness, as the causal factor that decides the appropriateness of the inference that is being drawn. (355)

And:

In the present verse Narayana Guru speaks of inference drawn from the consolidated memory of things associated in the mind, in terms of generalities that govern the relationship between causes and effects. (351)

This leads us to a simplified explanation of the verse: the accuracy of our interpretations of events, which are very often reached through inferential reasoning, determines a cascade of after-effects. Obviously, the more accurate our understanding, the more palatable the consequences. I'm sure we have all known people (we might even *be* people) who have gone ballistic over a misapprehension and wreaked all sorts of havoc before we realized we were ripping apart a straw man—a projection of our own ignorance.

I have just digitized an [interview with Nitya from 1970](#), and will be sharing it shortly with everyone as well as posting it on his website. He happens to talk briefly about after-effects in it, among many other things: “You cannot work out the course of life on wrong mathematics for long. Like scrap metal, the derailed pursuits that tumble downhill as evil will be thrown back in the melting pot. God is not in any terrible haste to correct. He revels in abundance.”

So yes, we are free to make what we will of our limited understanding. We can still insist that we already know everything we need to know, and act accordingly. By contrast, we might admit to a limited knowledge, and allow ourselves to remain open to new possibilities. Many people are wary of joy and kindness, and prefer to paint a gloomy picture of the meaning of life. They should at least know that darkness usually leads to greater darkness and light often leads to greater light. Either way, it takes dedicated work to get to the essence.

The work involved is quite a bit like weeding a garden: it is done so the wanted plants are free to flourish. It's not like putting plants together from scratch, or building them from a kit. Another section of Nitya's interview addresses this very nicely:

Q: How do you practice your spiritual beliefs?

Nitya: Here again, we should qualify the question because of certain implications.

The word “practice” has a connotation which does not suit my attitude. When you say “practice,” it is different from living. You practice something to gain a certain proficiency—then you utilize that proficiency. A plant just grows and brings forth the flowers, and every moment of its life is an unfoldment. Likewise, I consider life has to be a natural, spontaneous unfoldment all the time. So I do not practice anything, I just live.

It’s heartening to think that while we have our weeds to pull and plenty of other tasks to perform, through it all a natural unfolding of our innate being is taking place. We are like flowers gracing our moment in the sun with color and beauty. We learn more of who we are as it appears before us, already well developed and brimming with promise.

After an admittedly gruelling discussion that includes all manner of abstract reasoning, Nitya brings us home to the point of it all: revealing and vivifying the absolute trinity of existence, awareness and endearment, popularly known as *saccidananda*, pulsating within the heart of every life:

The trouble with this kind of abstraction is that it takes us away from the whole meaning of our pursuit. Life is not lived in terms of mathematically reduced atomic propositions. Our interest in the mark (*lakṣana*) and concomitance (*vyapti*) is that we are on the lookout to see how our life in the transactional world, where we have to be concerned with specific characteristics, catches hold of us and makes us identify with particular individuals, things and events, and also how our consciousness is vivified into multitudinous morbid formations. This makes our return to universal concomitance of the one

existence which is the ground of all existence, to the one knowledge that makes all awareness an illumination of the Self, and to the one norm or criterion which makes all individual cases instances of the endearment (*priyam*) of the Self, difficult if not impossible. (357-8)

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

That awareness establishing certitude through the use of specific marks of recognition (*linga*) is inferential awareness. When we see smoke in the kitchen, we conclude that there is fire there. By constant association we understand that wherever there is smoke there is also fire. Thus, we understand that in all places where there is smoke there is fire. This is associative and refers to innate dispositions of memory factors, because of the necessary and eternal connection between the smoke and fire as seen in the kitchen. This kind of associative awareness pertaining to memory dispositions takes the form of functional activity. Because of this functional activity established by associative memory factors we are able to be aware of the fact that there is also fire when we see smoke rising out of a distant mountain side. The awareness arising in this manner is called inference. Here the effect is the smoke, and the cause is fire. The fire having the status of being the means is inferred by the effect which is the smoke, and is compatible with it. Such an awareness is none other than inferential awareness.

* * *

Because of our lengthy discussion of memory—Andy was excited to think of our memory roots encoded in our DNA as being as old as life on our planet, more than three billion years—we

touched on its central role in our existence as individuals, and I promised to include a previously shared favorite:

Self and Memory
Peggy Grace Chun

As my mother's Alzheimer's disease slowly melded her brain and melted her ability to orient via identity,
I suffered after each visit, sitting in my car weeping.
She suffered deeply also, grasping at flickers of fond memories,
panicking when she'd look in a mirror,
drawing maps of relationships, losing them.
We grasped and flailed together,
until one day I came for a visit and she said,
"I have no idea who you are but you're just lovely." And I said,
"Shall we walk in the garden?"
From that day forth, our suffering ceased, no longer orienting via
identity
but rather connecting via our deeper selves in the present moment.
of course, she could no longer safely or freely interface in the
broader world,
so I'm not recommending Alzheimer's disease as a path to "Be
Here Now."
But that remarkable shift we shared
remains my sacred foundational axis...
in life, in love, in art, in the grocery check out line... in standing
side by side
quietly peering at the garden's beauty
where only that delicate purple iris exists.

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