

VII Jnana Darsana, Consciousness and its Modifications

Verse 9

The knowledge of “I am,” “mine,” and so on, is individual knowledge; the other, such as “that,” “this,” and so on, is spoken of as sensory knowledge.

6/19/7

Once again a seemingly simple verse sprouted wings as we poked and prodded it, discovering in the process why it was lodged near the very top of the Jnana Darsana. Narayana Guru has already sketched the four main types of reasoning according to his lights: perception, self-evident reasoning, inference and analogy. He omits specifying word testimony, found in most Indian systems of thought, but as Nataraja Guru notes that can be considered a subset of analogy.

We began the Jnana Darsana with unconditioned and conditioned knowledge in verses 1 and 2, and we go out with a mirror image, a summation of conditioned followed by absolute knowledge in verses 9 and 10. The Guru is here distinguishing the knowledge that is internal and known without sensory input from that which is, but reminding us that both are conditioned. We are well aware that sensory knowledge has its faults and limitations, but non-sensory awareness often slips past the censors, which is nonsense! Deb brought out that we mistake those possessively cherished factors highlighted as “mine” and “me” as contiguous with our inner certitude of existence. Thus we mistake our favorite images for reality.

It is tempting and very easy to make the substitution of individual awareness for absolute awareness. Vedanta insists we *are* the Absolute, so what's the problem? Unfortunately, the oceanic awareness comes only after shedding the possessive and limiting awareness of "my" take on things. If this doesn't happen, we are prone to grades of spiritual ego, up to and including the dreaded messianic complex. So it is crucial we keep in mind that the vast majority of our experience and comprehension is partial and in need of continuous reassessment.

Sometimes it is helpful to realize that our faults are forms of the Absolute too, to raise us out of self-doubt and consequent misery. But we have already achieved that in our study. Now, lest our egos intend to conquer not only themselves but the Absolute, we have to allow the Absolute to conquer us instead.

Meditation now assumes its rightful place as an essential factor of our further progress. We need to soak in a hot bath of unconditioned awareness, and let it seep into our pores and wash away the dirt of our conditioning. Meditation is where we practice taking off the soiled clothes of our mental configurations, to stand naked for a time. We are free to put them all back on as we resume our transactional games, but gradually we may learn to feel content without them too.

We are conditioned by what we like even more than by what we wish to avoid. When we first encountered the events that condition us, we had wonderful experiences for the most part. They were good things. We easily identified with them, called them "mine." The problem is that our desire to repeat them has driven all the new wonderful experiences out of the way, and we have become creatures of habit. This has been covered well already.

Deb read out *An Archival Print*, by William Stafford, a poem which portrays how we become fixed by our outlook and by the excuses we make for being who we are. We become like an old

photograph of ourself, slowly fading with age, gathering dust in the attic. How poignant! He speaks of the partial disguise we call our character, that we have become the veneer of our life, all the way to the core. He teases us to go ahead and keep up the façade, to keep reinforcing that image, so we can stay unchanged forever. It's a very powerful poem, found in *The Darkness Around Us Is Deep*, edited by Robert Bly and still under copyright or I'd type it up for you.

We have to be somewhat brave at this stage of our study. We have to insist to ourselves that we want to let go of habitual patterns of thinking, that we want to be more than a faded photograph. Darsanamala should have taught us that we are not benefited by all the fishhooks of habit that are caught in our flesh, even as we identify them as our persona, the well-crafted mask we hope will define us as worthy of love. Ick! A mask made of hooks! That should easily make us brave to take it off. But the process is a little bit painful, so we shrink from persevering. After a little struggle, we like to feel we have accomplished all there is to accomplish, and settle back into the familiar person we imagine ourselves to be.

Narayana Guru, like William Stafford, is very gentle. He doesn't urge or force us to remove our masks. He believes we can be teased out of hiding by the beauty and attractiveness of the Absolute alone. If we pay enough attention, we may well find out he is right.

Part II

Nitya mentions several different mental configurations in his commentary, including "my wife" and "that star." We were honored to have a soon-to-be bride in the class, as an earthside constellation corresponding to the spectacular conjunction of Regulus, Saturn and Venus with a perfect crescent moon in the summer solstice sky. Synchronicity is alive and well it seems.

The gist of Nitya's comments was how we attribute various shades of meaning to both inner and outer phenomena that are not inherent in them. When the young woman becomes a wife, she will encounter a number of firmly fixed beliefs about who and what she should be, including perhaps some lurking in her own mind about the meaning of marriage. Even she and her impending husband have different conceptions, without a doubt. If they can agree to share and learn and modify those concepts as they go along, all will be well. We see many examples, however, of those who are not so flexible. Family members may see marriage as the time for young people to "get into harness" of traditional behavior patterns. There is a perennial tension between the youthful exuberance for the new and the older clinging to the familiar. It is not always easy to retain one's value vision when confronted with ultimatums. Sooner or later unrecognized and/or thwarted expectations will rise to the surface and demand their pound of flesh.

Another paragraph from the 1973 Gurukula guidelines mentioned in last week's notes reads:

Let us consider the evil of social taboos, the dehumanizing culture of our forefathers, and the familial and other relativistic obligations that sap our vitality and make us a slave of necessity, always at the mercy of circumstances and fate. Let us do away with all our social fetters and take such resolve that no one can take away the freedom attained by identifying oneself with the truth that frees every earnest mind.

When we talk about the neutrality of the Absolute, it can be taken as nothing more sensational than not holding to fixed beliefs so we can be open to the present. Those values and activities considered "traditional" by older generations are an admixture of wishful thinking, nostalgia, and fantasy surrounding a small kernel of

actual happenstance. We should be respectful and gentle with everyone's feelings, but if we agree to knuckle under we will lose our self-respect along with our independence.

This may be easier to visualize when we examine how people of the past conceived of stars. We can see that there has been continuous change in scientific and religious beliefs throughout history. I especially like the currently discredited notion that the night sky is an inverted dark bowl with pinholes in it, allowing the light of God to shine through. Stars as points of light spun around the earth until modern times, and only very recently have we learned that they are kin to our sun, and yet very much unlike each other in many respects. As with Mark Twain's oysters, who believed they were the final achievement of evolution, at every stage we imagine we have the whole truth and nothing but the truth. As he said, "Now isn't that just like an oyster!"

At least with stars, we are far less likely to go to war over our fixed notions. This is due to the much lower "I" factor. The more we believe we possess something, the more we are subconsciously prepared to fight over it.

Perfect examples of what this means in everyday life are happening all the time. Last Saturday I attended a musical evening where some advanced amateur musicians performed all the Handel sonatas for violin, accompanied by cello and harpsichord. I have just begun working on one of them, so I was delighted to have a chance to hear them performed well. Musicians were invited to bring their scores and follow along, so there was a rare opportunity for us to study some of the nuances of informed playing.

It was a lovely evening all around, but I was very surprised by not one or two but three people seeing my sheet music and saying something disapproving like "Oh, so you're going to count mistakes!" The assumption was that only a nasty and callous critic would read the music as it unfolded. Definitely a conversation killer. I guess they thought they were being clever or amusing, but

such prejudiced attitudes twist and pervert whatever follows. I thought it sad, but it reminded me that much of interpersonal transaction is handled more like a kick-boxing match than a Japanese tea ceremony. Last one standing wins the prize! They might have said “Oh, you brought the music. What’s that for?” and it would have made all the difference, opening doors instead of closing them.

Why do we feel we have to have an opinion about everything, that if we enter a conversation without girding ourselves with opinions it is like entering a battle unarmed? Remember the Zen guy’s line: “If you wish to see the truth then hold no opinions for or against anything.” If we are brave enough to set aside the associations that immediately leap to our mind about every event, there is a world of enjoyable learning awaiting us. And it’s one of the least things we can do that will make everyone we meet more at ease and consequently happier to be around us.

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9/5/17

Jnana Darsana verse 9

The knowledge of ‘I am’, ‘mine’, and so on,
is individual knowledge;
the other, such as ‘that’, ‘this’, and so on,
is spoken of as sensory knowledge.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

*That awareness which as “I” and “mine”
And that other as “this” or “that” is also there;
The former as vital awareness and the latter*

As sense awareness is declared.

Joined by Peter M and Jyothi, we gathered under a pall of smoke from a heartbreaking forest fire heavily damaging a large swath of Portland's favorite recreational area, the Columbia River Gorge. Despite the oppressive atmosphere, we were once again able to delve into the profundity of the subject and bring ourselves together in an uplifting focus. Some habits really are beneficial!

I'm tempted to just direct the reader to the old notes on this verse, as tomorrow we leave for a long journey culminating in Harmony's wedding on a high mountain in Colorado. I find they say pretty much the same as what I'm about to recount, including how this seemingly simple verse blossomed into a surprisingly lovely complex of sharing. At Beverley's suggestion I haven't been reading those ten-year-old notes, so as to be as fresh as possible in the new ones, but I'm happy to find they are both quite similar and quite good. The class came to essentially the same conclusions this time out, though the examples offered are different. I'll clip in one nice section from it in Part II.

Deb noted that to fully make sense of this verse we have to pair it with the next, as it doesn't easily fit the scheme of correlation we have been used to. Individual and sensory knowledge seem to be basically the same as inner and outer knowledge, or the horizontal negative and positive, respectively. As I wrote in the old notes: "The gist of Nitya's comments is how we attribute various shades of meaning to both inner and outer phenomena that are not inherent in them." This stands in contradistinction to verse 10, where absolute knowledge is devoid of such functions as willing or theorizing. Absolute knowledge stands pure, unmodified by our opinions, but personal and sensory knowledge is sullied by our conceptual limitations.

Bill rephrased the verse in more traditional terms: individual knowledge is opposed to absolute knowledge, and sensory knowledge is opposed to it also. The horizontal is opposed to the vertical. Conditioning is opposed to liberation. All true, more or less. Narayana Guru, however, is trying to minimize their apparent opposition. So long as we recognize the limitations of our purview, it does not have to be opposed to a hypothetical unlimited vision. They can and do exist together. They are complementary. We cannot help but be limited, and if we dare to imagine our ideology is unlimited we have indeed made a serious mistake. Yet if we reach for the unlimited while accepting our limitations they are no longer antithetical. This is a good place to realize how deeply the social dedication to conflict and exclusiveness is, and what an accomplishment it is to break free of that mindset: we can hardly conceive of contraries that can exist harmoniously at the same time.

Deb remembered Nitya telling his classes there is a lie at the core our being, and that lie is the 'I'. There is no 'I' anywhere. 'I' is a fiction that we continue to pour putative substance into to try to make it real. We insist on our beliefs and perspectives, as though if we hold them hard enough they will magically make the unreal real. Of course they never do, and the despair this engenders has real and often dire consequences. Our urge to fight is a cover for our uncomfortable awareness of our conceptual fictions. Our deceptions—of ourselves and others—escalate in a desperate attempt to fill the infinite hole of nothingness that supports our personal sense of self.

Instead of fighting to propound beliefs, Vedanta suggests that these be treated as a form of dementia that we can wean ourselves away from. If we do, the urge to fight and defend gives way to the urge to love and care. Nitya used to also say that the 'I' has a legitimate role as a placeholder, a point of reference to distinguish

one person from another. Just so we don't try to build it into something it is not and can never be.

Andy put his finger on how critical understanding helps us. We believe our partial grasp is in fact a total grasp, and this keeps us trapped in a kind of claustrophobic mental condition. Once this is examined, though, it falls apart. Close examination is actually a very freeing activity, and not even that hard to do, but we have to stand up to our more mediocre beliefs that are well designed to console us in our chains. There is a certain bravery involved with breaking free, as the socialized ego quite easily deflects us from our purpose. Or, as we make progress, we take that as evidence of the special value of our chosen program, thereby converting it to another egotistical pastime. When people argue over the efficacy of various spiritual paths, touting theirs as the best, the ego is undoubtedly in the driver's seat.

In his comments Nitya briefly demonstrates the kind of critical self-evaluation called for in Vedanta. As he says, "This kind of scrutiny lays bare the anatomy of individuation." Not only that, but the reason we should doubt our own wisdom is that our lack of clarity "implies an ignorance which lurks at the very bottom of the individuation of personal awareness." The nice thing about getting to the bottom (root) of the problem is that when you adjust your attitude there it has a transformative effect on the entire psyche. This is to be contrasted with the superficial adjustments we make in tinkering with our conscious beliefs "above ground," which rarely take us very far.

Nitya then makes a curious claim that veteran students should readily grasp: "What is more surprising and yet taken for granted is the ease with which a subjective notion and an objective notion are fused into an organic whole." We do all manner of damage to the object by overlaying our preferences on to it, and taking for granted they are intrinsic to it. That might be okay up to a point, except that we fail to distinguish our learned attitudes from "our

inner certitude of existence,” as Deb put it in the former notes. Ordinarily we conflate that bedrock feeling of our existence with the arbitrary and capricious interpretations we have learned to wield to make our way in society. The more convinced we are of our rightness, the more prone we are to fight to defend the indefensible.

One of Nitya’s favorite examples is the wife or husband, which are fully theoretical beliefs overlaid on certain specific people, with profound implications. From the perspective of a sannyasin, these are extremely binding implications. He puts it this way:

The objective, observable woman to whom the reference of wife is made has nothing biologically or physiologically present which gives the distinguishing marks of a wife. Although the mind creates several such confections of knowledge spontaneously, we hardly notice how facts belonging to a heterogeneous order are treated as if they all belong to a homogeneous system.

Nitya offers simple examples, with only a hint at the kind of thinking we should be bringing to bear. For example:

In expressions like ‘my hat’ and ‘this house’, the objectivity of ‘hat’ and ‘house’ are of the same order, with the exception that there is an interjected subjective notion of an attitude of possessiveness in ‘my hat’, whereas ‘this house’ stands alone as a pure object. Even when the house is presented as an altogether independent entity, it has behind its presentation a fully concealed subject.

“My hat” is the kind of thing children fight over. Adults use the same principle to wage warfare over abstractions like “my

country,” “my religion,” “my race,” or “my caste.” I’m quite sure Nitya knew that hats were a simple thing to relinquish compared to our personal identities, but we can even feel that same anxious twinge of egoism if a friend makes off with our hat. We can start by dealing with those selfish twinges, and extend that skill to world peace once we get the hang of it.

Jyothi recalled an amusing example of Nitya’s. If your aunt dies, you are very sad. That’s because in your mind it’s “my aunt died.” But if some other aunt dies, it’s merely “an aunt died,” and there is no need to cry. When you take away the “my,” there is no sorrow.

Paul affirmed that words can be used either to imprison or liberate. Bushra made an excellent point that the idea of “my” can also do the same: it can be exclusive or inclusive, defensive or compassionate. “My country” can be a beautiful idea that stands for liberation, or equally an “exclusion zone” to keep otherness at bay. Nitya covers that same idea in Atmo 36-41, you may recall, where he recommends carefully observing your ego boundary and then enlarging it in stages to include more and more of the world, until everything is within the barriers. As usual, we can’t just use these ideas as templates. There are always unanticipated nuances to take into account. This is a game best played by alert, non-dogmatic thinkers.

I requested an example of how this works, and Bushra offered a perfect one. Our friend Johnny has been holding regular group discussions with inmates of a state prison. One theme of their work is “Stories We Tell Ourselves,” talking about the kinds of ideas the inmates believed in that got them into literal as well as ideological prison. Once they identified with certain modes of thought they were inevitably headed into bondage. Now they know first hand what that means, and they are eager to reassess their attitudes to bring a measure of liberation even as they remain incarcerated. Their self-defeating ideas were often taken to the

extreme of indelible physical markings like gang tattoos that are very painful and time-consuming to remove, and the scars in their minds are almost as resilient. Now they are delighted to have Johnny as a guide to reclaim whatever mental freedom they can. It brought to my mind Nitya's opening line when he gave a talk at maximum-security San Quentin in California: "We are all in prison." We are all chained in many ways. A person who hasn't yet been caught by the cops would do well to imagine they have, and take steps to keep out of any prisons of their own making.

Andy suggested that all this was pointing to us remaining psychically quiet, and Deb added that quiet means there is no need to prove your point or defend yourself. I suggested that the kind of quiet the gurus are advocating is dynamic. It is widely believed that if you simply quit then you can be quiet. How close those words are, quit and quiet! But dynamically remaining quiet involves serious self-examination, as mental chaos assuredly does not, while the quitting version might turn it off before the corrections are in place. Quiet isn't so much the end as a means to the end of putting a stop to unconscious self-sabotage.

Deb remembered Nitya speaking of the unconscious as a kind of sealed box, like the indestructible ones carried on commercial airplanes. We will be meeting the idea in Yoga Darsana verse 4, where Nitya says:

Autonomous modulation takes place as a conditioned reflex. The instinctive behavior of a person has behind it the inbuilt accumulation of the information of their genetic past, and hence the power of the autonomous to produce modulation is enormous, instantaneous, and mostly of an undetectable nature with regards to the implied unconscious motivation. This is a biologic 'black box' zealously guarded by the unconscious, and the challenge it offers to the yogi is the transmutation of the autonomous into the voluntary.

Deb recalled Nitya teaching that your reason can only take you so far into the black box, and then you have to quit trying in order to reach the depths of wisdom. I added that Nitya went a long, long way before he came to the end of his intellectual abilities and surrendered, and few of us make anything like that kind of dedicated effort. More often we use the idea as an excuse to give up early on, and then it's just another glorified form of laziness.

Andy gave as his supporting example of dynamic quietness the short poem of Narayana Guru called Nirvritti Panchakam. It's the one I kept on my locker door at work for my whole firefighting career, as emergency response is pretty much the polar opposite of quietude, and I'll tuck it into Part II. The refrain, after listing habits of mind in each verse, is "from questions such, when one is free, he gains release." It was a welcome poem to read after returning from a fire or first aid call, high on adrenaline. Or for that matter, after arguing absurdly with another inmate of the station.

Paul admitted that he sometimes exhausts himself wrestling with many of the very questions mentioned in the poem, but he is working to realize the truth of something he's heard: you don't have to drink the whole ocean to know the taste of water. If you know one sip, you know the taste of water everywhere. Sure, some water does taste slightly different, but it's a metaphor after all. We don't have to engulf what's far away and vastly huge to be aware. If we tune in to what's all around us, on what we are facing *right now*, that awareness can be valuable in all situations. Focusing on local at-hand issues is another way of quieting down, when global war and environmental destruction vie for our attention in ubiquitous media explosions. As Deb concluded, this is the essence of mindfulness.

We closed with a reading of Nitya's marvellous brief meditation on emptiness, which you too should read in Part II. It's one of his most stirring pages.

May the smoke clear soon!

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

Living creatures have awareness (in regard to themselves) in the form of "I" and "mine." This does not depend upon any of the external organs such as the ear, etc. Even deaf and dumb people are known to have this kind of awareness, commonly known throughout the world. Because of such awareness as "I" and "mine," depending on the vital principle, has been named vital awareness. We have to distinguish such vital awareness from awareness given to the senses which expresses itself in the form of "this" and "that" and is independent of any vitalistic elements, being only dependent on the senses.

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Narayana Guru: Nirvrtti Panchakam
Five Verses on Final Emancipation
(trans. Nitya Chaitanya Yati)

- 1) What is your name? Your caste? Your work? Your age?
From questions such, when one is free, he gains release.
- 2) Come! Go! Don't go! Enter! What are you seeking?
From questions such, when one is free, he gains release.
- 3) Departing when? When arrived? Whither and even who?
From questions such, when one is free, he gains release.

4) I or you, this or that, inside or out, or none at all,
From such cogitations, when one is free, he gains release.

5) To the known and the unknown equalized, without difference to
one's own or to that of others, even to the name of such indifferent,
From all such considerations, who is freed, he himself becomes
the one released.

* * *

The Value of Emptiness, by Nitya Chaitanya Yati

I am sitting here with a hot cup of tea in my left hand. I cannot drink it. It is hot, so I have to wait. Before me is a loaf of banana bread with a knife and a spoon on it. We are waiting for friends to come, so it is not cut. On my right side is a wicker basket beautifully made by some Chinese people. It is empty. The origin of the basket from China and the emphasis on the value of emptiness in the Taoist philosophy make the basket a double dose to move me away from the tea and bread into the first emptiness that is continuing to be in the process of being filled even though cycles of universes have come and gone.

I have in my lap my eyeglasses. They are of no use to me now, because I am sitting with my eyes closed. It's a paradox that things which are present do not interest me and what is not present has become the major interest of this moment. My friend who is taking down this dictation now tore off the sheet in hasty abruptness so that he could reach onto the next sheet before the coming of the word that was not yet articulated. Our preparation for what is yet to be seems more real than experiencing what is already given.

In fact, the whole theme of spiritual search is this reaching forward from the filled cup to the possibility of the empty basket.

What is taught is to be forgotten to find room for what is to be learned. Reaching forward in great enthusiasm, hugging half maddened by the excitement of holding on to what is not yet fully known, is followed by a passive forgetfulness which makes it easy to leave behind what is sought after with so much zest, and it is so wonderful that the mind is again filled with the same zest and zeal to stand in waiting for the advent of the unknown.

You and I are only expressions which are not as eloquent as this wicker basket, which has been filled and emptied many times before and is again empty to give us the lesson of the ever-fresh and ever-meaningful emptiness, the emptiness that gives birth to fullness.

May you be born of emptiness. May you grow into fullness, and may you be the emptiness that everyone seeks for fulfillment.