

VIII Bhakti Darsana, Contemplative Devotion

Introduction

7/24/7

At last we arrive at the most delightful stretch of the Garland of Visions. After nearly two years of paring away delusions and false pretences—a redundancy if ever there was one, as all pretences are false—we stand ready to reencounter the love of the Self that comprises our body, mind and soul. Preparatory groundwork is laid; now let the revels begin!

Well, of course, we've been reveling all along, but now we can revel even more.

Nitya's introduction to the Darsana briefly summarizes the journey we have undergone to arrive at this stage. His opening sentence is "Love, devotion, compassion, empathy, and consequent rapture of mind come spontaneously rather than as the result of mechanically practiced discipline." One of the greatest, if not the greatest, struggles we have had is to stop thinking in terms of our relationship to divine love or realization or the Absolute as being the end product of a chain of actions or behaviors. Ends and means are to become fused, and not separated. Horizontal and vertical factors, distinguished for purposes of examination, are to be rejoined in an amalgam merging into a transcendent unity. Even the thought "I just have to clear the irrelevant details away from my life in order to have time for this" is a stumbling block to be discarded.

Fred, visiting from Florida, began and ended our class with a perfect example of unity: flowing streams of music from his

African thumb piano or kalimba. Music is a vertical value, while the specific notes he stroked on that Tuesday evening in that specific location comprise the horizontal expression. Obviously there cannot be any real division of the two aspects. Music without the notes you actually play or listen to would be meaningless and empty, while notes that don't make coherent music are merely noise. Neither "leg" has the ability to inspire on its own: they are inextricably woven together. And as Fred pointed out, in and behind and through the musical (or any other) experience is a luminous, transparent essence we refer to as the Self or the Absolute.

Luminosity is a key characteristic of bhakti, whose root means conjunction with light. Shankara and Narayana Guru both describe it as continuous contemplation on the true nature of the Self, which is light or love or perhaps best considered a nameless mystery. We don't have to name it except in special studies like this one, because we are always conjoined with the very things which attract us. Our heart automatically goes out to the lovable, the beautiful, the exquisite, and so on. We don't have to learn to love music, for instance, something in us is always ready to be enchanted by it. When we fall in love with another person, we don't have to carefully follow any eightfold path or twelve steps or ten thousand pranams. No effort is involved. Nitya exalts it thus: "The most popular experience in which people can easily transcend the sense of duality is when loving mates are overwhelmed with the thrill of each other's inseparable presence as the pearl of one's heart's sweetness." Bipolarity with the Absolute broadens and generalizes this experience to include every interaction at every moment. Which of course is where we're headed with this.

What we well know as we begin the Bhakti Darsana is that individual items of joyful experience are temporary, but the joy itself is eternal, just as music is eternal but we can never quite

regain the notes that floated through the room last night, bathed in the glow of a gentle sunset and the purple light of Adam's cosmic egg sculpture. We aren't so foolish as to think that we have to reproduce those specific conditions in order to be happy, and yet we fall for that illusion in more subtle ways, believing we have to structure our lives in a certain manner in order to have joy. We seek to repeat what made us happy before. The present Darsana should be fully convincing that joy is our "native place" and we are naturally conjoined with it all the time. We don't need to make it happen—it is always happening and available to us. Knowing this, the ups and downs of everyday life will be emblazoned with the radiance of our inner suns.

There is a specific secret transmitted in this Introduction that should be noted. Nitya directs us to attend to those experiences that are joyful to us, but instead of longing for their repetition, to allow them to stabilize us in our vertical core. As we philosophically generalize the specific experiences, the arena of our joy expands exponentially. By doing this we become

capable of remaining at sublime levels of an abstract sense of the lovable, the beautiful, the adorable, the wonderful, etc. In such a state there is little or no identification either with the individuated subject or the object ground on which the joyous experience is projected. For this reason it is normal for a person to remain at home in his or her personal center. The Guru describes such a spontaneous involvement with oneself as a joyous and effortless beatitude, an act of contemplative devotion.... It is in this pure joy that one experiences one's natural alignment with the Absolute.

There are many religious programs that consider joyful experience to be an impediment to realization, and their partisans tend to be sour and repressed, full of aggressive hostility toward

anyone evincing happiness. The Guru's philosophy does not go there. It is supremely blissful and loving, tolerant and compassionate. We are only asked to come to know our joy, and to offer it freely to our fellow beings. Nothing could be simpler.

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10/10/17

Bhakti Darsana Introduction

We decided to focus on the Introduction alone, as it's one of Nitya's perfect pages, epitomizing as it does the point of our study. We'll catch the first verse next week. The complexity of Darsanamala sometimes makes us feel lost, which can be a useful technique for overcoming our habits of mind, but it is nice to clear away the convolutions once in a while.

The story we've been following is that Darsanamala is divided right in the middle: the first half covering deconstruction and the second half reconstruction of the psyche. You may have noticed that there is substantial deconstruction still happening in the sixth and seventh darsanas also. Vedantins love their deconstruction! It is only now that we have finally arrived at the true beginning of rebuilding our psyches in an optimally balanced way. Having liberated ourselves from our dependency on a social persona in the first seven darsanas, we are free to investigate our authentic nature, the *atma* or Self, the rest of the way.

Because of the immense value of stripping away the chains of bondage, those who are closely following the instruction are likely to already be experiencing an enhanced sense of freedom in their lives. Most of us have been trained to feel guilty at slipping out of the straitjacket of our socially constructed personality, but the gurus have been gently advocating for it all along, with beatific smiles. In their guiding light we are safe to give it a try!

Unshackling turns out to be a self-reinforcing experience, since many other beings are secretly craving liberation as well, and they may well respond to us in positive ways. Being our authentic selves not only brings a welcome sense of relief, it invites those we come in contact with to relax and be more authentic themselves. Yes, some people do resist opening up in a kind of panic, adult children fearing rejection or punishment, yet there are many who are willing to let go, if only briefly. They will be grateful to any friend who has rediscovered their inner happiness, because its secret message is “You’re okay just as you are constituted.” That’s the vernacular for the Vedantic dictum that you are the Absolute, or more properly, the Absolute is you—*tat tvam asi*.

Deb highlighted the most critical aspect of the Introduction, that we naturally gravitate to an undefined region midway between the subject and the object, the ‘I’ and the scene. Nitya puts it this way:

Our entire life can be described as an aggregate of values and a network of relationships connecting or coordinating one item of value to another. Every value has a self-luminous nucleus which characteristically triggers a sense of joy ranging from an intense experience of bliss to a moderate sense of satisfaction or well-being....

When such an exteriorized apprehension of physical joy is object-oriented, mind has a tendency to seek a neutral midway point between the subject and the object. Such a joyous state obliterates the duality of the subject and the object, and the mind refuses to be descriptive in the cognizance of such an experience. (366)

This is clearly a dialectic, hence yogic, position. Deb noted the importance of not pinning down our experience: loving a high value we forget to describe it and simply surrender ourselves into

it. We have learned already that the delineating process, essential though it is to transactional behavior, is inhibiting to the non-contractual dimension of spirit. By doing it we wind up matching the newness of the moment with previous memories, and sapping its invigorating energy from our encounters. We have to suppress the mind's natural inclination to compare and reduce the vastness of each stimulus to what we already know, since the true dimension of experience is very much more than what we know.

Nitya reminds us that the interest generated by a high value is all that's necessary to encourage us to relinquish our dualistic posture consisting of self-identity matched with a fixation on our surroundings as we suspect it will impact us. He begins his essay, which renders bhakti as contemplative devotion, in this way:

Love, devotion, compassion, empathy, and consequent rapture of mind come spontaneously rather than as a result of mechanically practiced discipline. Although concentration is prized as a high value both in public life and spiritual pursuit, people quite often forget that it comes as a result of the evoking of a deep interest which is centered around a value that is most dear to one's mind. (366)

He adds later:

The glow of a value in itself and the awareness of the Self are not two separate experiences. For this reason one's identification with the total apprehension of one's imperiential selfsameness with a value automatically generates the contemplation of the Self and an affinity with the Absolute. (367)

This leads to the essential corollary of an absolutist perspective: realization is not an attainment that is the result of any special

program. It's a free form relationship with existence, lived all day every day. While there are many spelled-out forms of bhakti, the Gurukula version does not depend on following rules. It's about being guided by our inner light. Nitya expresses the idea pithily: "As the entire process is woven around one's awareness of the ever-attracting and resplendent Self within, *bhakti* is defined as the continuous contemplation of one's Self." "Continuous contemplation of the Self" does not mean sitting in a certain pose all day long, performing exercises; it means relating everything to your highest understanding, being keenly aware of what's going on, and giving it your best effort of loving support and involvement.

Jan shared that she recently woke up in the morning feeling extremely happy, for no reason. She was very happy to be happy! She has been going through some very challenging times, slogging through endless transactional demands, and is at last beginning to emerge. She feels relieved to not have to deal with everything in contractual terms, but can begin to live on the basis of connecting with her true self. In a way she is giving up her ego's intense hold on her self, and it has given her a welcome feeling of freedom. The joy she is enjoying is not dependent on anything external, it just is. Needless to say, this is the perfect example of what the Bhakti Darsana promises. Jan is realizing that all activity—not just the special, rare moments—can elicit the liberating continuous contemplation of the Self.

I remember Nitya telling us this is how you can measure your spiritual growth: you wake up in the morning eager and excited to embrace your life.

Paul cautioned that it is easy to lose that kind of connection, whenever we mistake the non-Self for the Self, and which is which is not a fixed matter. His example was in moralizing, which draws us away from the general and into the specific. We had been talking about the ideal of action being aiming at the highest

universal good, as Narayana Guru famously propounds in Atmopadesa Satakam. Paul talked about a movie he saw where a guard dedicated himself to protecting the king even if it cost him his life, because the king stood for the good of the kingdom. Over time the king became deranged and began hurting and killing people, and the guard had to question his dedication. He realized that protecting citizens *from* the king was now the higher good, so he shifted his behavior to accord with the new situation.

Since humans love to have a stable answer to their doubts, being flexible is a serious challenge to us, especially if we aren't willing to let go of our temporary certainties.

I agreed with Paul that 'absolute' does not mean inflexible or permanently fixed. Change is inevitable, and dealing with change is a major aspect of the expertise we have to bring to our lives. It keeps the interest level high. Expanding challenges our limited awareness. Religion all too often offers a pat answer that doesn't meet all contingencies, whereas spirituality takes joy in opening up to the new, fearlessly and free of the chains of guilt and habit encoded in our neurons. We can be stimulated by both positive and negative experiences, so it isn't a matter of seeking the one and avoiding the other, but only of meeting what comes with all our heart. Nitya urges us toward the essence:

It is in this pure joy that one experiences one's natural alignment with the Absolute. In the present case the Absolute should not be confused with anything astounding, voluminous, or infinite. It is absolute in the sense in which the roseness of a rose is absolute, the cheerfulness of a smile is absolute, or the quality of a teardrop is absolute. (367)

I asked how something like a teardrop can be absolute, and the answer is it is absolute when it's an authentic, direct experience. While a few actors can cry on demand, for most of us a tear is an

expression of a genuine, powerful feeling. More of us can fake smiles, especially for photographs, but the cheerfulness of an authentic smile is undeniable. Paul talked about how a baby's smile can light up a room, touching every heart. There is not an ounce of guile in it.

Whenever we interpret experience in terms of how it will affect us, we have moved into the relative. The absoluteness becomes interpreted in relative terms, and then it is no longer absolute. As spiritual seekers we have come to the point where we want to preserve the absolute aspect of life, because we've spent so much time on the relative that we've almost forgotten its source. In the next three darsanas we'll have the opportunity to see how far we can take it: how much bliss we can tolerate. Or will we keep postponing that option, in favor of keeping a stiff upper lip?

Everyone knows and loves love, and yet we find a million excuses to put it on hold while we take care of business, or behave properly in a socially defined sense. We learn to do it just so, to associate it with certain things and not with others. Obviously absolute love is not limited in that way. It surely doesn't have to be visible or demonstrative. It's the ground of existence, palpable yet mysterious. Bhakti is love, and the gurus are trying to teach us how to love authentically and subtly. Nitya dares to mention interpersonal love specifically:

The most popular experience in which people can easily transcend the sense of duality is when loving mates are overwhelmed with the thrill of each other's inseparable presence as the pearl of their hearts' sweetness. Holding this sense of rapturous fulfillment as the model to measure love and one's consequent devotion to it, Narayana Guru presents in this chapter a scheme which can serve us as an intelligent key to unravel the science of values and their interrelationships. (367)

The world frowns on you showing your love, but it isn't so hard to keep it inside, out of sight, where it can blaze away as an all-consuming effulgence. Adult humans are far more isolated than we realize, and consequently freer than we realize. Many of our behaviors were developed when we were under the constant scrutiny of our parents, but as adults that's no longer the case. Why should we act as though our parents were still judging us harshly? Religion puts an eye of God in their place to stifle us forever. Vedanta doesn't have any such evil. Let the evil eye go. Be free.

Deb brought the class to a beautiful close, talking about how whatever we worship as a lovable value infuses us with meaning and joy, and that's what bhakti is about. She invited us to take the gorgeous, expansive step of reintegration with our authentic being.

Part II

This morning I took a look at my commentary on the Bhagavad Gita's chapter on bhakti, and was gratified to see that it contains most of what I said in the class. I include it here for its relevance, and also as an invitation to read the whole chapter commentary along with our study of this darsana over the next few months. The [full text is available on my website](#). Here is the the introduction:

CHAPTER XII: Bhakti Yoga

Bhakti is often translated as devotion or even service, but at heart it means conjunction with light. Included in its broad net are all the various ways devotees relate themselves to the light. Bhakti is defined by both Shankara and Narayana Guru as continuous contemplation on the Self. For some, continuous contemplation and conjunction with light are two ways of expressing the same concept.

Continuous contemplation does not mean sitting in meditation all day long, as some imagine. It means being continuously aware of the subsurface level of the apparent world, the Absolute or light. This includes not being fooled by appearances, by being intelligently attuned to the context in which events take place. This chapter presents a fascinating reevaluation of the seeker's relation to their surroundings.

Most people consider their spiritual aspect as not overly important, more of a sideline to the important business of making a living. They find brief periods here and there to wonder if there is more to life and what it might entail. "Continuous contemplation" implies that these priorities are reversed: that everyday concerns move into the background, taking on a supporting role, while delving into the meaning of life moves to center stage, driven by a passionate thirst for truth. Back in Chapter VII, Krishna has already admitted that only a rare person is motivated enough to make the necessary effort.

The joy of being well fed and housed is undeniable, but there is more to life than gathering our daily bread. The most satisfying bliss comes from expressing our full range of creative abilities, be they artistic, intellectual, intuitive, entrepreneurial, empathetic, or what have you. Arjuna has just glimpsed his untapped potential and is eager to make it a continuous part of his life. Hopefully you have too.

This is the chapter that most delights religious-minded readers, as bhakti has widely come to be viewed in religious terms, where the idea is to become overwhelmed by some intense emotion and imagine that that links you with God. For highly constrained people such activities can certainly be therapeutic, providing them opportunities to overcome their inhibitions. While this may well lead to some blissful experiences, its undermining of the intellect can promote religious partisanship and exclusiveness. The duality implied in ordinary worship has a tendency to bite

back in the long run. In any case, Bhakti Yoga is not the same as mere bhakti in the popular sense. Rather than trying to lose yourself in some form of worship, the aim is to remain “found” in some way such as Arjuna achieved in the preceding chapter. The frenzy of uninhibited bhakti, similar to Arjuna’s rampant vision, is to be cooled down and made a permanent, sustainable state of mind.

Indian philosophers do not speak of love, exactly. Bhakti is one of the words that comes closest to describing that mysterious and delightful state. Regarding bhakti and its practices, Nataraja Guru comments in his *Integrated Science of the Absolute* (ISOA), “Emotion and Self-knowledge have the same difference as blind and true love.” (III, 61): The distinction is the same between ordinary bhakti and Bhakti Yoga.

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From ISOA, Volume II:

As we see in the last three chapters of Darsanamala, axiology comes into the discussion only in its barest outlines and broadest generalities. In Chapter VIII the Self when it contemplates itself is taken to comprise *bhakti* (devotion). When the two aspects of the Self are more subtly equated we have the subject matter of Chapter IX, where contemplation matures and becomes meditation. The last chapter refers to liberation and is meant to cover all forms of emancipation or salvation. Here the equation between the Self and the non-Self takes place in such a way that a positive direction is maintained in terms of spiritual progress. The last remnants of reciprocity or differences between the Self and the non-Self tend to be gradually absorbed. (II. 29-30)

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Deb mentioned something we've shared on Facebook that's a kind of absolutist revision. The naturalist John Muir, lover of mountains, had this to say about hiking:

I don't like either the word or the thing. People ought to saunter in the mountains – not hike! Do you know the origin of that word 'saunter?' It's a beautiful word. Away back in the Middle Ages people used to go on pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and when people in the villages through which they passed asked where they were going, they would reply, 'A la sainte terre,' 'To the Holy Land.' And so they became known as sainte-terre-ers or saunterers. Now these mountains are our Holy Land, and we ought to saunter through them reverently, not 'hike' through them.

Part III

My work this afternoon included two relevant paragraphs from the second volume of ISOA. The distinction between spirituality and morality is perennially confusing to truth seekers, as being good does not necessarily lead to being wise. In Greek mythology Dionysus is "drunk and disorderly" and Apollo is "sober, well-behaved," yet both have valid roles in wisdom transmission. Nataraja Guru writes:

Dionysus represents in principle verticalized versions of axiology. There is a complementary horizontalized version to go with this. This is represented by Apollo, who is social and orderly. (50)

The morality of the Upanishads also differs from ordinary social duties in the same way [as Dionysus]. Good works of social utility are, strictly speaking, outside the scope of the way of life found in the Upanishads. Siva's frenzy is the same as that of Dionysus. The relation between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is clearly one involving the horizontal and the vertical values in life. (51)