

VIII Bhakti Darsana, Contemplative Devotion

Verse 3

Ananda alone is meditated, not misery by anyone at any time.
That meditation which is blissful is bhakti, it is instructed.

8/14/7

This morning I awoke with a dream of being in a house like Hall St., crowded with pensive and happy people milling around just as they do in dreams. I was sitting on the floor with Nitya. He was simply beaming at all of us. I told him, “You read everything, but you don’t read the best books.” He looked at me, as did several other people, puzzled. He was a voracious peruser of whatever best books he could lay his hands on. “That’s right... You never read your own books. They are substantially better than any others!” Everyone laughed.

While it’s true that Nitya seldom revisited his books after he finished with them, being always busy with so many new projects, this must’ve been an echo of my own continuing admiration, exacerbated by the excitement of a visitor to the class, Eugene, who is inhaling those books at an astonishing rate. It is heartwarming to see someone who has caught the spirit of Nitya’s philosophy so beautifully, and for whom it so obviously resonates. We can only hope the Gurukula has enough material to enchant such a bright youngster for a significant period before he roars ahead to his destiny. His presence made the class even more special than usual.

So, on to the verse. This is a restatement of an important insight of Narayana Guru's, famously found in Atmo 49:

All beings are making effort in every way,
all the time, for the happiness of the Self;
in the world, this is the one faith;
pondering on this, without becoming subjected to sin, be
controlled.

This should be a familiar notion for Gurukula students, with very practical implications. If we realize that the person who is throwing a tantrum in our direction is actually seeking happiness, albeit in a veiled or ineffective way, we can accept it more easily and at the same time not be hurt by it. I think we all know that when people have different beliefs that we do, it isn't that they are evil or ignorant, but only that they are seeking happiness or satisfaction from their own perspective. This doesn't mean that faulty beliefs leading to damaging outcomes aren't worthy of improvement, but it does change a black vs. white oppositional mentality into a mutual quest for understanding. Thus it is a core outlook of Narayana Guru's philosophy, and lodged here, as well as in the core of the book of cores, *Atmopadesa Satakam*, the hundred verses of Self-instruction.

Nitya's comments on this verse are dense and trenchant, and were the focus of the evening's discussion. Meditation (*dhyana*) on the bliss of the Absolute is bhakti. This state is likened to a still pond, referred to also by Nitya's new term 'be-ness'. Thoughts—irrespective of their truth or falsehood, or positivity or negativity—arise and create ripples on the surface. The bliss we are consciously or unconsciously seeking is the quiet stillness of the unrippled pond. Stillness allows us to merge into the infinitude of the Absolute; movement produces individuality. Paradoxically, we strive mightily to become calm by trying out new ripples, with

varying degrees of success. It's like Nataraja Guru's image of a man standing in the center of a roomful of pandemonium and shouting for silence. Most of the time it heightens individuality and further obscures the unitive peacefulness.

There are several methods to return to the stillness of the core. One is to try to stop making ripples and wait a long time for the ones already present to subside. This is the way of the recluse, the monk or nun, who withdraw from the world and suppress as much activity as possible. According to the Gita, you have to wait an infinitely long time for the waves to subside. Still, there is much benefit from being even partially successful. It is a matter of taste whether you are nihilistic enough to want to do away with your individuality entirely, or prefer to enjoy it to the fullest.

Narayana Guru concurs with the Gita in recommending an active yoga, which intelligently posits equal and opposite waves to the ones already careening around your pond. The interference produced brings a state of equilibrium, dynamic in the sense that it incorporates the individual waves that already exist. There is no need to suppress yourself, indeed this is considered impossible anyway. What we can and probably should suppress are the giant boulders of misunderstanding we keep tossing into the pond, sending huge waves that slosh over our personal shores to drench our neighbors whether they like it or not.

And we are asked not to forget that those personal boundaries are what cause our waves to rebound and interfere with each other in the first place, sometimes negating and sometimes reinforcing each other in a spectacular eruption of spume and fury. If the sides of our pond are rigid and made of cement, the waves rebound undiminished. A gentle beach absorbs much of the energy. But when we dare to expand the boundaries, there is little to reflect the chaos back at us. The waves roll into the distance and dissipate naturally.

Ultimately, we can calm our waters somewhat through various techniques, but the true solution is to embrace the universal perspective. The larger we become, the smaller the disturbances are relative to the whole. As Anne put it, when we realize we have so little control over anything, we relinquish trying to manipulate things and open ourselves to the graciousness of the Absolute. Experience and accompanying insight allow us to trust the benignity of the universe more and more as we realize we are only a small part of a whole system that remains in balance at all times, chaos or no. Again, this is where we are going with this study.

Summing up I'll leave to Nitya's able explication:

When the individuated Self... is cut out into a separate entity with specific dimensions and unique character, the undisturbed state of consciousness that goes into the making of such an individual becomes substituted for by a series of peripheral mentations intrinsically connected with human physiology and its conditioned reflexes. That being the common lot of people, hardly anyone is in a state of meditation. *Atma, Brahma* and *ananda* fall into the vertical line of bhakti only when the manifested phenomena, conditioned consciousness, and the dual state of pain/pleasure affectivity are all reduced to the nondual reality of 'be-ness'. Such a reduction is not a mere intellectual exercise. In the present case, bhakti means embracing the universal; and hence the lover of the Absolute, who is seeking union through a state of nondual bliss, has to enter into a wholesale commitment to effect harmony wherever there is the likelihood of a disturbing element raising its head to tamper with the harmonious functioning of the world order. This is the concept of the merciful Buddha or of the savior that is seen in Jesus Christ. (375)

We well know from our previous studies that this means we are to grapple with our own demons and defang them, and also to offer ourselves as consolers and teachers to our friends and associates. Actual activities are powerfully harmonizing, while detached mentation can drive us mad. We can rediscover the joy of simple acts at any time: caring for others, tending our plants, living artistically even in mundane activities, exercising our bodies. Eugene is a voice teacher and singer, and he readily agreed that the act of singing propels you right into the heart of the unitive state. Many people think “I can’t dance,” or “I’m not going to sing!” but if they just let go and do it, they can become enveloped in a joy that transcends mental gymnastics. The Bible refers to “The peace of God, which passeth all understanding....” (Phil. 4.7), which is the same thing. That peace can be found right in the midst of every activity, through the loving bliss of bhakti.

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11/1/17

Bhakti Darsana verse 3

Ananda alone is meditated,
not misery by anyone any time.
That meditation which is blissful,
is *bhakti*, it is instructed.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

*It is even Bliss that all do meditate,
No one at all (meditates) suffering.
That which is meditation of Bliss.
As contemplation it is taught.*

In the first verse of the Bhakti Darsana we are directed to meditate on the Self, *atma*. In the second, the meditation was aimed at the Absolute, *brahma*, and here we are instructed to meditate on bliss, *ananda*. In the next several verses we will examine how these three are equated. Nitya gives us a first peek here:

Atma, Brahma and ananda fall into the vertical line of bhakti only when the manifested phenomena, conditioned consciousness, and the dual state of pain/pleasure affectivity are all reduced to the nondual reality of 'be-ness'. Such a reduction is not a mere intellectual exercise. (375)

What Nitya means is that we have to do more than abstractly identify our predicament and its resolution: we have to feel it in our bones. We have to make the transformation real. Reduction of our ignorance takes an effort. All too often our efforts are to hold openness at bay by conceptualizing and objectifying experience.

Bhakti is aimed at universalizing our sense of self, of embracing the totality. We can't do that physically; it's a conceptual achievement. Mostly we have to let go of what holds us tight and keeps us small. Deb mentioned letting go of aggressive behavior, of lightening up on "I want this/I hate that." The stuff our culture begs us to amplify to extremes. In regards to ananda, Nitya reminds us that bliss is not the same as sensory pleasure:

Both pain and pleasure are forms of misery. If pleasure is a positive agitation of the sensory system, pain is a negative agitation. Both amount to throwing the equilibrium of the composure of consciousness out of gear.

Thanks to Nataraja Guru's amazing knowledge base, I've added a short section from Plato, about Socrates making the same point that wisdom is a third state beyond pain and pleasure, in Part II.

Because of this quiescent third state we dedicated more than the usual amount of class time to meditation, sitting in undirected stillness. It was especially delicious as we have been working actively to reorient our thinking under the gurus' guidance. At this stage of the study, we are expected to have resolved the issues that impede us from enjoying a stretch of blissful quiet. While most of us can readily admit we have not yet perfected our deconstructed psyches, we can still go ahead and see what the Guru suggests. The joy of peaceful communion on these occasions can serve as a blissful invitation to continue to shed unnecessary baggage.

Michael felt stung by the second line of the verse, that misery is not meditated on by anyone any time. He has spent plenty of time meditating on misery! But we do that in order to free ourselves from it, not to wallow in it (though that can happen, given enough confusion). In Narayana Guru's vision, the lion's share of our misery is due to faulty ideas about where happiness is to be found. It's a fixable condition.

This is one of the rare verses when Swami Vidyananda's commentary is readily comprehensible. Nataraja Guru considers him the mouthpiece for Narayana Guru, and maintains that his words reveal what the Guru might have meant, but they are all translated in Nataraja Guru's inimitable style, so they tend to resist simple interpretation. This one's fine, though. Vidyananda first repeats a familiar adage of Narayana Guru from *Atmopadesa Satakam*, and then expands slightly on the idea that continuous contemplation constitutes bhakti:

All creatures in the world desire happiness. There is not even one living being wishing for suffering. As for the Absolute, it is made of Bliss. Therefore, the goal desired by all is the

contemplation of the Absolute, which is the contemplation of Bliss, and this is (True) contemplation. Such is the teaching of all knowers of the Self.

Vidyananda concludes with an important corollary: “By the term *upadisyate* (is taught) it is implied that contemplation constitutes an instruction by a teacher who is kind and has the authority to teach.” We are most fortunate to have access to teachers who epitomize the Indian concept of guruhood, even if secondhand via their written words. They worked very hard to make those words meaningful, eschewing simplistic bromides and yoga 101 notions, demanding that we become active partners in the learning process.

Paul wondered how Nitya and Nataraja Guru were related to the teachings of Narayana Guru. They were both wholly dedicated to the wisdom of Narayana Guru and felt they were only clarifying and elaborating what he revealed to them. Nataraja Guru knew him personally from childhood, and Narayana Guru must have sensed the boy had a rare intellect and keenness of spirit, as he put provocative questions to him from the first. The relationship persisted until Nataraja Guru was about 33. Nitya later became Nataraja Guru’s disciple for over 20 years. As Deb summed up, they agreed philosophically but they expressed their understanding in different ways.

That’s a key: the disciple is not expected to merely repeat what the Guru said. They are supposed to make the wisdom their own, and then share it in their own way. That’s how it is kept alive. Repetition is a faint echo of originality, though it is far better than nothing.

The way I characterize the three gurus—each of them almost embarrassingly brilliant—Narayana Guru’s written teachings are dense and extremely difficult nuts to crack. Without assistance they would remain incomprehensible to most people from backgrounds other than his own. Nataraja Guru descried a meaningful pattern in

his teachings and painstakingly interpreted it in terms of modern science and philosophy, with few concessions to ordinary mortals. It was Nitya who had the poetic flair to bring the teachings down to earth another notch, helping his followers to grasp the sublime meaning in terms they could become familiar with, and adding many examples they (we) can relate to. I have heard that Nataraja Guru was better at this in person than his writings indicate; that he was very careful to leave any personal instruction off the record, for what might be called political reasons. You can get a flavor of his personal instruction in English from Nitya's autobiography *Love and Blessings*, excerpted on his website at <http://aranya.me/>. The compiled stories are here:

http://aranya.me/uploads/3/4/8/6/34868315/nataraja_guru_in_love_and_blessings.pdf. Patrick Misson has (at my begging) put his memoir up on his excellent website dedicated to Nataraja Guru's writings: <http://www.advaita-vedanta.co.uk/index.php/component/content/article/290>. It includes the fabulous story of apologizing to the child I have shared in earlier notes. I might as well add it to Part II for easy access, for those who want to reread it.

We are so blessed to have the wisdom we are exposing ourselves to! If prejudice didn't exist and there was some kind of absolute world rating system, Narayana Guru would be in the top handful of seers of the human race. As it is, he is little known outside of South India, and it is merely by happy "accident" that we are being served the *crème de la crème*.

It looks like I'm wandering. It's Nitya's birthday today, and I can't help but feel immensely grateful to all three gurus. I cannot imagine what my life would have been like without their guidance. They truly and justly owned their "authority to teach."

So yes, we meditated during the class. We often have to strive to be calm, one of those pernicious paradoxes. But our "vibrations" also are essential. Ponds are rarely ripple free. We are

not being instructed to permanently turn off our life but to expand it into areas that our habitual ripples seal off from us. Nitya expands his newly-coined term, be-ness, for us:

Absolute well-being is perfect 'be-ness', in other words, being devoid of the prospect of becoming. Even the slightest ripple on the surface of water is an indication that its tranquility is disturbed. Consciousness is subjected to disturbance much more easily than the molecules of air or water. But this does not mean the highest state of harmony has to be inertial. (373)

In our "pulsation model" we access the unruffled karu, core, Absolute, Self, what have you, by setting aside our horizontal obsessions for a time, to simply be. After some time we get up and go about our lives, hopefully energized and blissified, more attuned to what our world has to offer and what it asks of us. We don't have to have a conscious program, as touching our true Self is so much more direct and all-pervading. Nitya continues with an example close to home:

Our own healthy body is a good example of a continuous harmony being sustained as it is engaged in various functions. We are not conscious of our bones, muscles, sinews, skin, circulation of blood, respiratory system, digestive process, or the eliminative functions of the kidney and bladder unless they begin to malfunction. From this it is clearly evident that a perfect state of well-being does not show up in the realm of objectivized consciousness.

We don't want a dead psyche any more than we want a dead body. We'll deal with that later....

The class didn't talk about objectivized consciousness, but it's worth a look at a possibly confusing paragraph:

All objectivizations are the result of a partial modulation of consciousness stimulated by a physical, physiological, or psychological encounter with a force that is alien to the system of harmonious function. Such stimulated modulations become highlighted as affective incidents, and all affective incidents circumscribe consciousness with a nucleic emphasis on an ego identity.

The idea is that when events bump into us, we aren't just bumped. We also do our best to "comprehend" what happened, and our comprehension is usually less than complete or perfect. In fact, it may be wildly off base. Our ego is formed, or at least shaped, by what we make of these incidents, and this will color our interpretation of subsequent events. Although it's an important function as far as it goes, it inevitably limits our perception, often severely. Nitya continues:

The ego can never be aroused without a boundary being provided for it. An ego boundary marks the threshold of confrontation and the line behind which the ego is propelled to stand in abeyance, defending individuation against being divested of its uniqueness. It is this threat that is experienced at several levels, such as the physical, psychological, and societal, and which perpetuates man's preoccupation with egogenic problems, the main source of human misery.

Deb admitted that this spoke to her (she felt "singled"), realizing how we defend our boundaries, stubbornly maintaining the sense of ourselves. She agreed it was well worth revisiting how we do that, how we hold on to love/hate and defend ourselves from whatever we feel coming toward us. Nitya goes on:

The first ripple in the calm surface of consciousness is the call to make a judgment of a projected situation. An instantaneous phenomenon that arises in such a contingency is the dichotomization of consciousness into the perceiver and the perceived.

Michael interpreted this in terms of a recent trip to Oklahoma, in the midst of the vast prairies of middle America. He had never been in a place with a 360-degree view, a full dome of sky above him and an infinitely receding horizon. Openness everywhere. He loved it! It's the kind of physical release Nitya alluded to earlier, provided simply by the scenery. Michael felt there were no significant obstructions, and it was calming and comforting to him.

Here's the thing that is very hard to get through our thick skulls, since we are addicted to defining everything we encounter:

Now it becomes obligatory for the perceiver to separate the characteristics of the perceived from the generality of its existence as a predicable attribute, and then to formulate the judgment, "This is such and such." What is predicated as 'such and such' is the conceptual projection objectivized to satisfy the initial question, "What is this?" *Dhyana*, or the pure state of contemplation, is said to be a state wherein such objectivization, conceptualization, and judgment are not warranted.

Objectivization is not always warranted! By reminding ourselves that objectivizing can be put in abeyance during our blissful meditations, the objectivization we do perform should be less inflexible. We will be more prepared to alter our prejudices to incorporate new understandings. We make ourselves rigid because we imagine it will keep us safe from the jostlings of fate. Instead it

freezes us into imprisonment, with far fewer options for expert responses. Nitya totally understands this feeling:

Every provocation is an exposure to misery. No being likes to be thus provoked. Even a worm wriggles to get out of a disturbing state to a more comfortable or tranquil one.

We're just trying to become something more intelligent than a creature that is purely reactive. Bill suggested we should notice what we are experiencing before we start to react. Then we can watch our reactions and see how they are traced to habits of mind that may not be true in the present. Seeing this, we have the chance to give them up. Paul agreed that reactivity made him feel like a ping-pong ball in a championship tournament. He longs to combine the vertical and horizontal perspectives to lessen the severity of his reactions. He might then be in a dangerous traffic situation, for instance, and not lose contact with the Absolute.

The driving meditation is Susan's forte these days. She admitted:

I tend to drive in a fast and stressed way, always anticipating what's coming and where I am going. I try to squeeze the most efficiency out of my routes and I tend to be (silently) antagonistic toward many pedestrians and other drivers in my way. I am now trying very hard to notice that I am doing all this and to take deep breaths, slow down, and just be in my car and more present with what is happening in my immediate vicinity.

As you can see, in the US driving a car is an ever-relevant metaphor. What will happen to us if computers do the driving? For the present, being in a car is a fine place to remind ourselves to be here now. Michael quoted Epictetus (who apparently lived in the Grand Tetons): "Does getting upset provide you with any more

options?” Cute. And funny. *Of course* getting upset limits our options disastrously.

Michael pointed out that it was kind of ironic that be-ness is the opposite of the bee-hive, so there are be’s and bees. He admitted he was in the buzz, the hum of the hive, all the time. He was referring to this part of the commentary:

As the individual is inhabiting a hypersensitive organism that can be easily equated with a beehive, with the bustle of several urges and potentials, he is easily exposed to provocation.... That being the common lot of people, hardly anyone is in a state of meditation. (375)

Mostly what we call meditation is simply thinking. True meditation is more of a neutral state, like a balancing act. Deb affirmed that harmony isn’t a frozen state—when you master a skill you get to a place where it happens naturally, without thinking.

Bill loved the definition Nitya gives at the close of his essay, a true mantra for repetition in the heart: bhakti means embracing the universal. It is part of a clarion call for us to be peacemakers in a world that very badly needs to know peace:

In the present case, bhakti means embracing the universal; and hence the lover of the Absolute, who is seeking union through a state of nondual bliss, has to enter into a wholesale commitment to effect harmony wherever there is the likelihood of a disturbing element raising its head to tamper with the harmonious functioning of the world order. This is the concept of the merciful Buddha or of the savior that is seen in Jesus Christ.

We don’t have to be famous or even noticed to be a peacemaker. We don’t have to go anywhere. Peace begins at home, it is said,

and our hearts are the home where it must be nurtured first. Nitya is hinting here that the problems the world gifts us with are the very sources for us to learn how to love, how to embrace the universal rather than just our preferred slice. Ideally we can do it without becoming agitated, but most of us will be upset by what we do one way or another. The trick is to regain our equipoise in place of augmenting our dissatisfaction. The latter attitude is ever-popular, but we are learning a new way of life that lets the habit go.

The whole class was charmed with the idea of embracing the universal. Bill felt it was a lesson in contemplation, of contemplating the bliss that's in the one. He thought this meant we shouldn't meditate on the transactional world, but what other world is there? We shouldn't focus on the transactional to the exclusion of all else, but we have been instructed all along to bring the bliss of oneness right into the transactional, and that's a kind of meditation too. This is not about eliminating the horizontal to live in the vertical, but to integrate them into a smooth-functioning whole.

We closed with a deeper meditation than usual, absolute stillness pervading the room. Outside a nearly full moon blazed through clouds patterned like organic cells, trailing faint rainbow colors. Then and now, it is good to be alive. Aum.

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

All creatures in the world desire happiness. There is not even one living being wishing for suffering. As for the Absolute it is made of Bliss. Therefore, the goal desired by all is the contemplation of the Absolute which is the contemplation of Bliss, and this is (True) contemplation. Such is the teaching of all knowers of the Self.

It can also be interpreted that what is desired by all living beings and for all time, and beyond which there is no higher goal to be desired on behalf of any living creature, can also be thought of as contemplation. By the term *upadisyate* (is taught) it is implied that contemplation constitutes an instruction by a teacher who is kind and has the authority to teach.

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Here's something I came across in my editing of Nataraja Guru's *Integrated Science of the Absolute* that touches in a general way on our study, and is especially relevant to this verse:

The presumption in the last item that knowledge accomplishes absolute avoidance of suffering is one which is fully valid and intuitive and dialectical in its import. It is not ratiocinative nor discursive. Socrates in the *Philebus* also points out there is a state beyond mere pleasure and pain. We read:

Socrates: Then we have a third state over and above that of pleasure and pain?

Protarchus: Very true.

S: And do not forget that there is such a state; it will make a great difference in our judgment of pleasure whether we remember this or not. And I should like to say a few words about it.

P: What have you to say?

S: Why, you know that if a man chooses the life of wisdom, there is no reason why he should not live in this neutral state.

P: You mean to say that he may live neither rejoicing nor sorrowing?

S: Yes and if I remember rightly, when the lives were compared, no degree of pleasure, whether great or small was

thought to be necessary to him who chose the life of wisdom and thought. (ISOA Vol. II, page 85)

And here's what I added after: Of course, I'm pro-pleasure and I vote, but I do know that, like ideas and beliefs, pleasure doesn't buoy us up in times of distress. It's true wisdom that stands by us when we most need meaningful support. That's what I have determined to count on, and I have found that even in the most miserable of times it has not abandoned me, though all else had.

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A Tale of Nataraja Guru, by Patrick Misson

Years later, I was staying at the Gurukula in Ootacamund, high in the Nilgiri Mountains of Tamil Nadu, where the green rolling hills and the chilly climate reminded one of England. The Gurukula there was a large study hall, with various bedrooms giving onto it and the Guru's room at the far end from the entrance. I lived in a small hut a little higher on the hillside. As we got up at five and were hard at it studying etc. until lunchtime, everyone would retire for a couple of hours' siesta after midday. One afternoon I came down to the main building to see if it was teatime and saw a bunch of small children come haring out of the door and off down the hillside. When I went in I saw that a lot of books had been pulled from the shelves and flower vases overturned etc. The Guru was standing there and he told me that he had woken up on hearing a noise and had come out and discovered some local kids trashing the place. He had told them off and had grabbed the cheekiest boy and given him a two-fingered slap on his hand to chastise him, and the kids had run off. The Guru then said that, although he had only smacked the boy's hand lightly (he demonstrated – just enough to sting), he had done it because he had lost his temper, which was

incorrect. We had our tea and then the Guru assembled the dozen or so disciples, put on his coat, took his walking-stick and we processed down the hillside to the nearby village.

Now you must understand that the Guru was 70-something years old; he was a very famous person, and held in awe by the local people as a great holy man. Also, the neighbouring village towards which we were heading was an untouchable settlement – these people were the lowest of the low in Hindu society and were forced to live in this filthy ghetto – their touch and their very presence were polluting to even the lowest-caste Hindu. So when we started processing down the one sordid street, the entire population came out of their houses and stared in silence and apprehension. The Guru called someone and asked them if they knew where was the house of the little boy he had smacked. He went up to the house where the parents of the boy were standing. They had their hands joined in namasté and were half-bowing to the Guru, obviously fearful of what would happen after their child had disturbed the great man. The little boy came out, cowering behind his parents. The Guru said that he, the Guru, had acted wrongly. Then he went down on his knees and performed the full prostration – the ultimate traditional Hindu gesture of debasement – that is, he lay flat on his face on the filthy ground and with his hands joined in supplication he touched the feet of the little boy and begged his forgiveness.

Why was he my Guru? Because when I saw this kind of thing I knew that this was a real man; this was what human beings were put on this earth to be – and if I could not become like him, I would at least serve him for the rest of my life.