

VIII Bhakti Darsana, Contemplative Devotion

Verse 4

Atma alone is Brahma. The knower of the Self contemplates the atma, not any other. This thus meditating the Self is named as bhakti.

8/21/7

Deb started us off by insisting that this was it! This verse said it all, so how could there be anyplace else to go? Even though we have 26 verses still lying in wait for us, she is in a sense correct. Certainly Bhakti Darsana is quite homogeneous, the first six verses being permutations of each other, and the last four underlining the stated verity that ananda, Brahma and Atma are three names for the same thing and are related to by the act of bhakti. Regardless of what you call That, it is One. Bhakti is conjunction with it.

In his translation of this verse, we can note that Nitya used meditating the Self, whereas we usually say meditating *on* the Self. This is another attempt like be-ness to bring unity to language. Meditating *on* something implies the meditator and the object of meditation are two separate entities. Simply meditating something means it is apprehended, and thus perhaps even created, by meditation alone. There is no separate existence anywhere.

Bhakti is unitive. *Anusandhana*, *dhyana* and *bhajati* have been translated as meditation so far in this Darsana. The three terms are progressively unitive. By way of review, anusandhanam means “investigation, inquiry, searching into, close inspection, setting in order, arranging, planning; aiming at;” (MW). Dhyana is

the usual term for meditation. Bhajati has many implications, the one most germane is probably “partake of, enjoy.” Nitya’s definition far exceeds the dikker’s:

Only... unconditional knowledge that transcends relativistic notions can be considered true Self-knowledge.... It is thoroughly in resonance with the Absolute, and it is that resonance that is described here as bhajanam, contemplation. The word bhajanam has in it a very subtle suggestion that the state described here is dynamic and not static, open and not closed. Its range is infinite and not finite. No experience of a relativistic order can fully reveal the true purport of bhajanam in its immensely rich mystical resplendence. However, we can get a faint idea by comparing it to the striking of a matchstick in an absolutely dark place. (377)

Nitya’s primary analogy in the commentary is that the individual self is like a bucket of water scooped out of the ocean. Although the water in both places is identical, once it is separated the water in the pail can no longer be considered ocean. The class added that since everything is ocean, it is only through the appearance of maya that there is any separation. The pail is also made of water, and there is nowhere else to scoop it away to. Yet miraculously, even though all is ocean, there is the appearance of being one separate thing or another.

This directed us once again to the primary thrust of the Bhakti Darsana: since our very essence is Brahma-Atma-ananda (or sat-chit-ananda) there is nothing to be constructed or accomplished, other than removing the ignorance by which our true nature is veiled. Bill reminded us of the opening line of the introduction: “Love, devotion, compassion, empathy, and consequent rapture of mind come spontaneously rather than as the result of mechanically practiced discipline.” We don’t have to

furiously scrape away the darkness—all we have to do is strike a match. Or better, simply look to the light, as there is no match and no surface on which to strike it. With the advent of light, which is what we are made of, darkness is automatically dispelled.

Eugene noted how we are trained to “do” things in order to “fix” them. He was raised to subsume himself in doing good for others, and being a teacher naturally follows that channel. The other night, while doing dishes, he had an epiphany of how that was limiting his relationship with his mentor. She is almost like a fairy godmother in his life, and yet instead of a direct connection, all these urges to do something or to prove himself to her kept getting in the way. The realization caused him to weep secret tears into the dishwasher.

Eugene’s revelation ignited many reminiscences of how we are all trained to take a monkey wrench, so to speak, to the darkness surrounding us. We have so very little training in looking to the light. And the result is to miss out on so much beauty, both given and received. We spend years and years nursing our wounds in private, feeling sorry for ourselves, which is our convoluted way of preserving those invisible buckets full of ocean water we call our self. It is paradoxical, true, that we have to stop doing good to allow Good to happen, but that’s how it works. As we have noted often before, doing good creates the flip side of being disappointed when good doesn’t seem to occur as a result. We are trying now to sit in between giving and receiving, hoping and despairing, and all other dualities, to reacquaint ourselves with the ocean of light and love in which we float.

It can’t hurt to revisit one of our favorite poems at this point:

A RITUAL TO READ TO EACH OTHER
by William Stafford

If you don’t know the kind of person I am

and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider--
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;
the signals we give--yes or no, or maybe--
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

Happily, Anita had a good practical example to share with us of how to do things unitively. Yesterday I tucked it into my Gita commentary. Since Chapter XVIII is a long way from being ready to put on the website, I'll share the whole verse with you now, of which her experience is the concluding example. Of course, I'm hoping to have many more good examples pour in from all the other Darsanamala students, so I can add them for the edification of the billions of readers the commentary will someday have:

45) Devoted each to his own occupation, man reaches perfection (in practical yoga); how, devoted to his own occupation he attains such perfection—that do hear.

There is perfection at every stage of life. Knowing this fact is helpful to free us from our manifold feelings of inadequacy and inferiority, and to learn to embrace all beings as intrinsically equally divine. Since everything has a flip side, this attitude can also breed complacency and acceptance of injustice. To guard against this it's good to make plans, hope for the future, solve problems, work for a better world, and all that. The unitive way to do this is to always appreciate the perfection of the situation and the people in it, even while trying to “improve” things and do your best. Improving on perfection is a bit of a paradox, but a relatively easy one to embrace. Improvement is an especially perfect thing to do.

Being devoted to your occupation, you are the one most likely to grasp the nuances and intricacies, and to know how to improve and streamline the systems involved. It is an ancient curse that politicians, dilettante managers, and busybodies want to butt in and direct the experts, instead of humbly asking for their input. Krishna clearly supports the on-site workers here.

Through the ages this verse has been interpreted to reinforce stasis in the lives of people, but that is a projection based on the master-slave dichotomy. The Gita always supports dynamism by way of creative thought and action. Actually, this and the following verse home in on one of the Gita's key teachings: that the divine is not found in some recondite corner of the universe, but everywhere. Right here in fact. Therefore we work on ourselves not by seeking any occult accomplishment but by dealing with everyday issues that land right in our lap. The more we come alive to the world around us, the more we can participate in the total situation with expertise.

A friend of mine, a typical office worker, has recently learned to put this teaching into practice. Where previously she jealously guarded her turf on programs she had developed over the years, she has stepped back to take a good hard but neutral look at what she was guarding. As soon as she did this she realized that it wasn't nearly as important to keep to herself as she had thought. It suddenly became easy to open up and share her expertise with others, who responded positively in kind. The step in the right direction was thus a blessing to herself even more than her coworkers, because she could drop some of her defenses. Defending turf takes a lot of energy, which has much better outlets awaiting its deployment. Yoga here means not defending and at the same time not letting others push you off the map, in other words holding firm if they want to take over the turf you have stopped defending. (Sounds just like the battle of Kurukshetra, doesn't it?) She has to learn a delicate balancing act between these twin forces. Such refined spiritual practice is hard to find in a meditation retreat—it requires engagement with other people on a transactional basis. So even more important for my friend was the reinforcement of the wisdom of working on yourself where you are. Spiritual growth isn't something that takes place sequestered in the meditation closet, it happens right where you live and work. When you see your job as an opportunity to put into practice spiritual precepts, it can be transformed from an arena of dread into an exciting theater for performance art.

'Doing' as an end in itself can lead to all sorts of attachments to results, and consequent defensiveness over petty issues. Being open takes plenty of effort and even bravery, but it leads to the oceanic insights of bhakti, including broad generosity. We can and possibly should still do good things, but they don't happen as conditioned reflexes or forced behaviors. We don't perform them

as trained seals. They are free acts of free souls, and so are infinitely more valuable and meaningful than anything intentionally designed. Such unconstrained actions set forth ripples and waves that give tacit permission for others to do the same. They dispel darkness for everyone in the vicinity. Thus, it is truly by freeing yourself that you do the most for others, since our nature is the very happiness that all are seeking.

Part II

This came from Jean:

I read your class notes yesterday and was immediately reminded of a thing I'd just read on MSN Explorer, something like "help yourself by helping others." The message was that people who help others feel happier themselves, and it seems to work better than therapy or medication. There was a study of MS-patients getting monthly phone support calls from a group of others. Many of the patients felt a little better after getting these calls. But the ones who felt REALLY better were the ones making the calls! Just a little thought in the "do good" debate.

There is no argument over whether we should act selfishly or globally. The distinction the Guru is making, which probably wasn't made very clear by me in the first notes, is between acting out of compulsion versus acting spontaneously. If we do good because we heard on TV it was a healthy thing, we're still following a code of mental abstractions. Much of our action is crafted mentally and then performed mechanically. As far as this goes, it can be artful or clumsy, or even downright disastrous. But what the Gurus are trying to show us is another way to live, one that can make us feel REALLY REALLY REALLY better. If you are a compassionate soul, you act compassionately not because you

should or it's a good idea, but because it is the perfect expression of who you are. And life continually provides opportunities for such expression; they seldom or never have to be sought out.

We shouldn't ignore the weaknesses in current "scientific" studies, either. There is no absolute measuring rod involved. Who felt better was determined by people's own answers on a sheet of paper to multiple choice questions that received a numerical grade that was then statistically tabulated. The patients surely enjoyed receiving phone calls, but still were sick, so they rated the experience fairly cautiously. The callers rated themselves higher, precisely because they were "doing good" and had been trained to think of this as an exemplary act. There's a whiff of ego in it. But of course no one's going to think that they touched someone else's life and that's a bad thing. So the veneer of science cloaks a tabulation of opinions. No wonder such studies usually ratify the prejudices of the testers!

If you aren't on a program of spiritual development, acting based on learned behavior is perfectly adequate. It's only when you want to get in touch with your dharma and allow it to shine forth brightly that this becomes less than adequate.

The key here is why Eugene cried: he recognized the limitations of his love that were embodied in static behavior patterns. He—just like all of us studying Darsanamala—needs to dig down below the surface and reawaken the great love that is slumbering there. Part of the access comes from being a little fierce with one's habitual responses, with not being satisfied with obedience to learned patterns. As this present Darsana is showing us, all we need to let the love shine forth is to scrape off the dead crust of half-baked cerebral living. The tears come when we glimpse the goal and have yet a little way to go to bring it to fruition.

Part III

Baird wrote:

I get a bit lost in this warp.

I have been reading the Abraham-Hicks material
(which is a source for the currently very popular “Secret” film)
and one of their tenets is that we should
let our feelings be our guide.

Specifically -

we should do things just because they feel good.

So is this what the Gurus are trying to show us:

another way to live,

one that can make us feel REALLY REALLY REALLY

better ?

--Baird

Yes, the Gurus are trying to show us how to live better, but feeling REALLY REALLY REALLY better is only a byproduct, not the main point. Besides, that was just my wordplay off what Jean wrote. I wondered if anyone would call me on it, and now I know!

“Let our feelings be our guide” sounds a bit simplistic to me, but I haven’t read the Hicks’ stuff myself. And isn’t that the movie where you get the BMW? Anyway, simplistic ideas work fine as long as they’re right, and they always have a popular appeal. In the Sixties we used to say “If it feels good, do it.” Charlie Manson demonstrated the fallacy of that notion beyond debate.

I couldn’t make up a formula of how to live if I tried—actually, the harder I try, the farther any formula recedes. Formulaic thinking is one of the stumbling blocks to a life of freedom, I’d say. Maybe that’s just a lazy opinion. Formulas have an undeniable appeal too.

Feelings are important, but so are needs, reason, and intuition. (That's water, earth, fire and air, in order.) An intelligent person blends these together into a delicious soup. Sometimes one dominates, and at other times others do. Mostly that's okay.

Feelings alone are too easily warped by selfish desires. If Mother Teresa had just followed her feelings, she would've quit tending the sick early on. She persisted over profound doubts out of sheer belief and a memory of a single encounter with Jesus. Her letters reveal that she was out of touch with "God" for very long stretches, and in those she was sustained by her faith- (and doubt-) filled mind. I think that's normal for most of us. We don't have a minute-by-minute contact with our divine interior, but we are guided by occasional flashes of insight and the wise words of others that get past our sense of doubt. Feelings are far too transient to be our sole source of input.

The Upanishadic rishis recommend reason in action, and in this instance at least we're trying to reasonably subtract false motivations. When a person like Eugene contemplates with a spiritual intent, they begin to see how their soul or self is laden with all kinds of drags. Most of them relate to how we're trained to act, consciously or unconsciously. Doing good can make us feel good in an egotistical sense, because we're proud of doing what we're "supposed" to do. Doing exactly the same thing because it's how we relate to the world is not forced, it's free. And that makes all the difference.

There's a certain cachet about religious claims that come either from God or some disembodied soul from the beyond. Wishful thinking makes these have more appeal than simple sensible truths spoken by the folks next door. (Perhaps this is additional proof that we are indeed descended from monkeys? We love the window dressing almost more than the gist.) So people go on arguing about what God wants them to do or what God says, even though they are just imagining the whole business. We'd get

along better if we treated the person we are arguing with as God, and didn't try to snow them.

Our thoughts, words and actions emerge from the Unknown to startle and amaze and occasionally embarrass us. The more beautiful our image of the Unknown, the happier some of us will be. Others prefer a dark and fierce Unknown, and that is available too. Vedantins think of these emerging from a seedbed of previous conditionings, which is neutral and karmically prepared. I prefer the neutral stuff myself, as long as it has the slightly positive impetus that we see played out all around us. It allows us to work on things, and not just feel like effects of a distant Cause.

I hope this doesn't make you feel more lost. It is easy to get confused analyzing this business, but if you are doing what you thoughtfully think is right, then don't overanalyze. Go for it. We have ample down-to-earth evidence that the universe will support your earnest endeavors.

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11/7/17

Bhakti Darsana verse 4

Atma alone is *Brahma*.

The knower of the Self contemplates the *atma*, not any other.

This thus meditating the Self
is named as *bhakti*.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

*It is the Self alone that contemplates the Absolute; The knower
of the Self meditates on the Self and not on any other.*

*That which is meditation on the Self
Is known to be contemplation.*

Ah! Another bhakti meditation. What a perfect way to spend an evening, gathered with a dozen loving souls to celebrate life at its most joyful. Nitya's commentary reads like a guided meditation in its own right, and we interspersed several others gleaned from the treasure trove of human sharing.

Nitya immediately invites us in to a cosmic inner vision:

If ignorance is like an ocean of darkness, knowledge is like an island of light where rises the resplendent sun of pure consciousness. Although darkness is negative, it does have the capacity to conceal truth and obstruct vision. When light comes it does not push away darkness. The very presence of light is the absence of darkness. Light not only causes its own existence but it also automatically reveals its presence. It not only presents itself but also illuminates whatever is within its ambit. (376)

Nitya reminds us in no uncertain terms to treat light as a metaphor for consciousness:

The light that is spoken of here is not physical light but the illuminating and self-revealing qualities of consciousness. The self-revealing consciousness is the *atma*. The revelation is not to any agent other than the Self because nothing else exists except the negativity of non-knowledge.

The most precious light of all: awareness. Consciousness. While there are degrees of consciousness, you either have it or you don't. If you switch off that light, it is utterly dark. Not like in your bedroom, where there's always some light seeping in no matter what you do.

Possibly even more fundamental than conscious awareness is something we call love: the initial impulse that brings a universe into existence, laying the groundwork for consciousness to evolve. I read out a brief section of Aldous Huxley's insight when his doors of perception were opened by LSD: "What came through the closed door was the realization... the direct total awareness, from inside, so to say, of Love as the primary and fundamental cosmic fact." It's a realization I can vouch for from my own personal experience, too. You can read more of the context in Part II.

Deb shared something else from Huxley, and that section is also found in Part II. Huxley is especially helpful in that he understood his transcendental experience in Vedantic terms, and as a writer was unusually capable of expressing it. His terminology dovetails perfectly with our study.

Nitya uses a water analogy to show us how *atma* and *brahma*, the Self and the Absolute, are the same and yet distinct:

As the Self is boundless and not tainted with any relativistic adjunct, it can as well be recognized as Brahma, the Absolute. The ocean can be called water because water is the only content of the ocean. Brahma and *atma* are related in the same sense.

This implies that the Self is the only content of the Absolute. At the same time, the distinction made here is essential to a complete understanding, mainly so we avoid the pitfall of equating our ego with the Totality and getting a swelled head. As Bill put it, we are given both an inspiration and a warning. The inspiration is to look at the knowledge of the Self that is not constrained by individuated consciousness, while the warning is that the absolute sense of knowledge can easily be mitigated if it is enclosed in ego boundaries. It is our default setting to become attached to one aspect of the light and reject others, but a devotee who is absorbed

sees only the purity of an unbounded awareness. Here's how Nitya expresses the downside of limitations:

The term Brahma as a self-signifying word is necessitated because the knowledge of the Self can sometimes be circumscribed with ego boundaries, and thus can manifest as conditional states. When a pot or jar is immersed in the ocean, no substantial change takes place either to the ocean or to its content, the water. But if the vessel is lifted out of the ocean full of water, even though nothing has happened to the basic formula of the composition of the water as H₂O, nobody would call it ocean. Now it is only a potful of water. It is this kind of crippling effect that comes to the conditional Self when it is identified as a conscious operation of awareness that is of a sensory, cognitive, or volitional import.

We not only have yanked ourselves out of the ocean of love (is that why we in the US are called Yanks?), but we yank each item of awareness out as well. To keep us company? A yank for a Yank, I guess it is. The meditation on the Absolute is about restoring separate items to the overall context of unity. This takes place naturally once we begin to look at the wholeness in which life plays its games. I suggested a movie screen analogy. When we watch a movie we are fixated on individual parts of the screen, and that is what makes the story and its effect work, but we tend to forget that what we're experiencing is all part of a single projected image, and those parts aren't actually distinct. They are all projected together. And as with our *purnamidah* chant, you can take something away or add something to it, yet it always remains what it is: in this case a movie. Its wholeness doesn't go away when you change an aspect. Only our awareness changes. As Nitya says:

And although there can be a relativistic increase or decrease in physical light or in the cognitive clarity of apprehending and discerning objects of perceptual or conceptual import, there exist no such degrees of comparison in consciousness that is pure, simple, and homogeneous. This is not a state that is manifesting, but it is what truly is and what is veiled by the phenomenon of relativism, which is comparable to the kaleidoscopic variegation of patterns and designs in an organically functioning tapestry of mental images.

This leads us to a practical aspect of bhakti. Our brains are always selecting one ensemble out of the total to focus on. It's a perfectly reasonable survival mechanism, but it's very limiting. The effort we have to make is to contextualize what we encounter within the totality of our awareness. At the very least this requires letting go of our learned *reactivity*. We have been trained our whole life to rate everything on a variety of scales and then select the best option. Not surprisingly, our choices are all 10s in our estimation, while those around us range lower, often much lower. Remember high school? Rating everything was a fulltime occupation, and our choices determined our peer groups and our behavior to a significant extent. No too much wrong with that, other than it excludes awareness of the Absolute, the neutral attitude of balance that is blissful in the extreme and the underpinning of fairness. Ratings are what we erect our ego boundaries based on. Those items of interest affect us mightily when we invite them to, and pretty soon we are stressed and miserable, unable to readily escape because we have so wisely chosen our ever-so-elegant bondage.

Bill concluded that our job is to find our true nature, and the Guru is giving us the keys. Our practice then (Bill loves the idea of Practice) is to try to discover our true nature despite the way we pursue the world. Jan suggested a more fluid way of looking at it: we can open our hearts to the ocean of love that is all around us. It

means turning back to yourself, and this includes taking steps to forgive not only others, but yourself as well. Forgiveness helps you to be at peace with others. It's one way to get over our obsession with rating everything. This inspired Paul to add that it was essential to not take our doubts and apprehensions too seriously. He has found that simply waiting can give the flow of life time to iron itself out. It is certainly true that we can do damage by pushing our agenda, yet we can also miss the boat by not upholding our valid agendas.

Nitya speaks of the resplendence of lighting a match in an utterly dark place. That means bringing our conscious intelligence to bear. Understanding naturally engenders forgiveness. The class had a lively discussion of how to bring light to life. Paul has often said we don't go into a cave and try to push all the darkness out so there will be light—we just bring a torch with us and the darkness disappears. So we have to work on ourselves to get the match lighted, and not worry so much about banishing the dark. That happens naturally as a corollary to being lit up.

Paul semi-humorously admitted to finding himself trying to subdue and strangle all kinds of loathsome apparitions. Bill thought his time might be better spent learning to be free. Easier said than done! Dispelling apparitions can become a fulltime job, and there are always plenty more waiting in the wings, if we do manage to thwart one. The problem is we think that's how to go about fixing things, even when we instinctively know better.

With all our ratings and so on we are profoundly addicted to pushing away what we see as darkness, in hopes that behind it somewhere lurks the light. We can't admit that the ones and twos have light also, not just us tens. Look at the public sphere: it's all about chasing evil away, walling it out, blasting it to smithereens, consigning it to hell. We modern humans have had a lot of practice at this self-deluding attitude. Real change requires a paradigm shift, and it is only going to happen in individuals, at least for now.

Don't look for criminal politicians to lead us. There's no Movement afoot. Self-correction will never be a popular or lucrative endeavor. Bringing light in a modest way doesn't make headlines, and it may well go unnoticed in the moiling and madding of the crowds. Union with the Absolute is so quiet and unobtrusive it hardly seems like the optimal contribution we can make to the world we live in. Yet it is, it is! The opening salvo of Atmopadesa Satakam puts this beautifully, including in Verse 5:

People of this world sleep, wake and think many thoughts;
ever wakefully witnessing all this shines an unlit lamp,
precious beyond words, that never fades;
ever seeing this, one should go forward.

Susan wondered if we weren't supposed to put an end to all mental modifications, a la Patanjali, meaning that any effort, no matter how well intentioned, is paradoxically contrary to proper practice. This is indeed a common belief, yet it is a fallacy. Several regulars missed the class two weeks back where I read out Nataraja Guru's clarification of *citta vritti nirodha*. It's posted in Part II of the Bhakti verse 2 notes. Basically, Patanjali's instruction means to restrain our outgoing or horizontal tendencies, so as to free up our vertical efforts to be at our best. Please do read it, but here again is the gist:

The verticalized activities of the mind should not be obstructed but instead must be allowed free scope, with *vitarka* (criticism) and *vichara* (inquiry) as functions. It is the outgoing tendencies or horizontal activities of the mind that produce dissipation of interest. It is only on the horizontal level that control is necessary.

Vitarka and *vichara* may sound daunting, but they are what we naturally do all the time to enable our learning and spiritual growth. We could be better at this if we aren't always coping with the demands of trivial interruptions, which life seems to delight in pestering us with. If nothing else, we have to make an effort to carve out some free time from the ceaseless demands of maintaining the life of the complex organism we happen to be. Nitya supplies us with another measuring rod to remind us we haven't finished the job quite yet:

Although effort is required for us to free ourselves of the ten thousand and one colorations and conditionings that come to our mind, once we are free of the tyranny of inhibitory or obsessive compulsions consciousness effortlessly shines forth without any need to dismiss the unreal. (378)

It's quite simple: when we are untroubled by whatever happens to us, able to treat it dispassionately as nothing more than "fringes and folds in the time-space continuum," we can stop making efforts to liberate our consciousness. Until then, working to free ourselves of our assumed obstructions and impediments offers terrific benefits.

Nitya sums it all up with a renewed definition of *bhakti*:

In the conditioned state, innumerable are the objects for the mind to meditate on, but in the unconditioned state the Self alone is, and it has not a second to be with. Hence we can say that it has become the all-filling Brahma which is never again tampered with by the advent of anything conditional, eventual, or consequential. This pure state is *bhakti*.

In keeping with the verse itself, the class was luxuriously meditative, and we closed with a lovely session, attuned to a

version from the latest Scientific American magazine (Nov. 2017) of an idea familiar to us all. Anyone could easily make up something similar for their own personal meditation. This one is adapted from *The Zoomable Universe: An Epic Tour Through Cosmic Scale, from Almost Everything to Nearly Nothing*, by Caleb Scharf, (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017). I read it out slowly so we could visualize its expansive ideas invoking eternity:

Do you want to hear the most epic story ever?

A long time ago the atoms in your body were spread across trillions of kilometers of otherwise empty space. Billions of years in the past there was no hint that they would eventually come to be configured as your eyes, your skin, your hair, your bones, or the 86 billion neurons of your brain. Many of these atoms came from deep within a star—perhaps several stars, themselves separated by many more trillions of kilometers. As these stars exploded, they hurled parts of themselves outward in a flood of scorching gas that filled a small part of one galaxy out of hundreds of billions of other galaxies, arrayed throughout a gaping span of space and time almost a trillion trillion kilometers across.

Some of these atoms have been in the shell of a trilobite, perhaps thousands of trilobites. Since then, they've been in tentacles, roots, feet, wings, blood, and trillions, quadrillions of bacteria in between. Some have floated in the eyes of creatures that once looked out across landscapes of 100 million years ago. Yet others have nestled in the yolks of dinosaur eggs or hung in the exhaled breath of a panting creature in the depths of an ice age. For others, this is their first time settling into a living organism, having drifted through eons of oceans and clouds, part of a trillion raindrops or a billion snowflakes. Now, at this instant, they are all here, making you.

Tat tvam asi, baby!

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

It is because a wise man is a knower of the Self that he meditates on the Self. Not only does he meditate on the Self, but he meditates on nothing other than the Absolute consisting of existence, subsistence and value (i.e. Bliss). He does not meditate on the inert and unreal non-Self which is the cause of suffering. He does not (even) meditate on the world. Because of meditating on the Self, it is called *bhakti* or contemplation. So, the man who meditates on the Self is the real contemplative. The Self is the Absolute, and the knower of the Self is the same as the knower of the Absolute. This is the same as saying he is a true contemplative. The characteristics of such a knower of the Absolute will be further described in the final chapter.

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From Nitya's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad commentary:

Reading a book and enjoying it is good, but reading yourself is more important. The language used to write a book has a grammar and a logic which govern how the words should be arranged to make meaningful sentences. Similarly, when you look at life to discover its grammar and logic, then alone are you participating in the remaking of your being. (Vol. II. 47-8)

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In *Storming Heaven*, Aldous Huxley is looking for ways to open the Closed Door to the Other World he has discovered through mescaline, and meets The Captain, Al Hubbard, a genius inventor and an expert at using LSD to precipitate a breakthrough:

Huxley initially had been skeptical of the reports coming out of Vancouver that had Al evoking the Beatific Vision in dentists and lawyers. But in October 1955... he decided to give the Hubbard techniques a try. As he later wrote... “What came through the closed door was the realization... the direct total awareness, from inside, so to say, of Love as the primary and fundamental cosmic fact. The words, of course, have a kind of indecency and must necessarily ring false, seem like twaddle. But the fact remains....” (56)

Jay Stevens, *Storming Heaven: LSD and the American Dream* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987)

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Speaking of Huxley, Deb read out a section of his famed *Doors of Perception*. I’ll reproduce a slightly expanded version here. The book remains one of the most cogent explanations of the psychedelic and/or spiritual experience, partly because he was a genius and a writer and partly because he was mentally well prepared—he knew a lot about religious and philosophical interpretations of the Great Experience. Here’s the beginning of his first mescaline trip, a couple of years before the one mentioned above (you may catch the connection with Nitya’s be-ness):

I took my pill at eleven. An hour and a half later, I was sitting in my study, looking intently at a small glass vase. The vase contained only three flowers—a full-blown Belie of Portugal rose,

shell pink with a hint at every petal's base of a hotter, flammier hue; a large magenta and cream-colored carnation; and, pale purple at the end of its broken stalk, the bold heraldic blossom of an iris. Fortuitous and provisional, the little nosegay broke all the rules of traditional good taste. At breakfast that morning I had been struck by the lively dissonance of its colors. But that was no longer the point. I was not looking now at an unusual flower arrangement. I was seeing what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation—the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence.

“Is it agreeable?” somebody asked. (During this part of the experiment, all conversations were recorded on a dictating machine, and it has been possible for me to refresh my memory of what was said.)

“Neither agreeable nor disagreeable,” I answered. “it just is.” *Istigkeit*—wasn't that the word Meister Eckhart liked to use? “Is-ness.” The Being of Platonic philosophy—except that Plato seems to have made the enormous, the grotesque mistake of separating Being from becoming and identifying it with the mathematical abstraction of the Idea. He could never, poor fellow, have seen a bunch of flowers shining with their own inner light and all but quivering under the pressure of the significance with which they were charged; could never have perceived that what rose and iris and carnation so intensely signified was nothing more, and nothing less, than what they were—a transience that was yet eternal life, a perpetual perishing that was at the same time pure Being, a bundle of minute, unique particulars in which, by some unspeakable and yet self-evident paradox, was to be seen the divine source of all existence.

I continued to look at the flowers, and in their living light I seemed to detect the qualitative equivalent of breathing—but of a breathing without returns to a starting point, with no recurrent ebbs but only a repeated flow from beauty to heightened beauty, from deeper to ever deeper meaning. Words like “grace” and

“transfiguration” came to my mind, and this, of course, was what, among other things, they stood for. My eyes traveled from the rose to the carnation, and from that feathery incandescence to the smooth scrolls of sentient amethyst which were the iris. The Beatific Vision, *Sat Chit Ananda*, Being-Awareness-Bliss-for the first time I understood, not on the verbal level, not by inchoate hints or at a distance, but precisely and completely what those prodigious syllables referred to. And then I remembered a passage I had read in one of Suzuki’s essays. “What is the Dharma-Body of the Buddha?” (“the Dharma-Body of the Buddha” is another way of saying Mind, Suchness, the Void, the Godhead.) The question is asked in a Zen monastery by an earnest and bewildered novice. And with the prompt irrelevance of one of the Marx Brothers, the Master answers, “The hedge at the bottom of the garden.” “And the man who realizes this truth,” the novice dubiously inquires, “what, may I ask, is he?” Groucho gives him a whack over the shoulders with his staff and answers, “A golden-haired lion.”

It had been, when I read it, only a vaguely pregnant piece of nonsense. Now it was all as clear as day, as evident as Euclid. Of course the Dharma-Body of the Buddha was the hedge at the bottom of the garden. At the same time, and no less obviously, it was these flowers, it was anything that I—or rather the blessed Not-I, released for a moment from my throttling embrace—cared to look at. The books, for example, with which my study walls were lined. Like the flowers, they glowed, when I looked at them, with brighter colors, a profounder significance. Red books, like rubies; emerald books; books bound in white jade; books of agate; of aquamarine, of yellow topaz; lapis lazuli books whose color was so intense, so intrinsically meaningful, that they seemed to be on the point of leaving the shelves to thrust themselves more insistently on my attention.

* * *

Michael B. sent a link, (under The Empty Brain, below) which he correctly estimated would be right up my line. I include it to expand on this section of the commentary:

The shimmering self-evidence of a person sitting in the dark and saying “I am” is a case of Self-knowledge, but in a badly limited and grossly conditioned state. The complexity of its relativity only increases when that consciousness is fed with the sense data of perception and the limitless conjectures of a mind that is capable of proliferating compositions of mental images. In this way, a person can have so many informational tags put into their bio-computer as to make them a bursting reservoir of information. This of course is not a case of the knower of the Self, and this knowledge is certainly not Self-knowledge. (377-8)

By the way, you can see here a hint of Narayana Guru’s thought experiment from Atmo:

Verse 10

“Who is sitting in the dark? Speak, you!”
In this manner one speaks; having heard this, you also
to know, ask him, “And who are you?”
To this as well, the response is one.

Verse 11

“I,I,” thus, all that are spoken of,
when carefully considered, inwardly are not many; that is one;
as the receding I-identities are countless
in their totality, the substance of I-consciousness continues.

The point, of course, is that piling up information does not bring Self-realization; in fact it often buries it under masses of distraction. This is very different from a computer, which gets more efficient as its information banks increase.

Nitya was musing on bio-computers back in the heyday of the idea, but the idea is increasingly inapt. The article from Michael raises a lot of doubt on the analogy, though it falls far short of a damning refutation. What is left out of Epstein's account (not surprisingly) is the transcendental factor, since it remains unknowable and unprovable. It is, however, essential to a complete picture of what's going on. I highly recommend you take the time to read this article, as it does what we are instructed to do in our meditations: intelligently exorcise ourselves from the thrall of mediocre thinking. Enjoy, you non-computers, you!

The Empty Brain

Your brain does not process information, retrieve knowledge or store memories. In short: your brain is not a computer:

<https://aeon.co/essays/your-brain-does-not-process-information-and-it-is-not-a-computer>

by Robert Epstein, a senior research psychologist at the American Institute for Behavioral Research and Technology in California. He is the author of 15 books, and the former editor-in-chief of *Psychology Today*.

* * *

Nitya makes a logical point in his commentary that inevitably reminds me of the beginning of the Mat Hatter's Tea Party in Alice in Wonderland:

This is why, in formal logic, the converse of a universal proposition is said to be not tenable. We can confidently say, “All oceans are water,” but its converse, “all instances of water are oceans,” cannot be accepted. The present verse recognizes knowledge as Self-knowledge only when it is free of any limiting conditioning.

I didn't explain the example I took from this very well in class, and promised to include the bulk of it in these notes. The following is part of my response in Nancy Y's Brihadaranyaka Upanishad online study group, from July 2016. It includes some of the riddle answers as a bonus, which constitute a fascinating bit of literary trivia, though not related to the class except that we are meant to laugh and have fun while we're learning:

The present material is right up my line! First a serious call to nontriviality and then a humorous dip into Alice in Wonderland. That they overlap is made clear by the following. First, Alice:

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he *said* was, ‘Why is a raven like a writing-desk?’

‘Come, we shall have some fun now!’ thought Alice. ‘I’m glad they’ve begun asking riddles—I believe I can guess that,’ she added aloud.

‘Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?’ said the March Hare.

‘Exactly so,’ said Alice.

‘Then you should say what you mean,’ the March Hare went on.

‘I do,’ Alice hastily replied; ‘at least—at least I mean what I say—that’s the same thing, you know.’

‘Not the same thing a bit!’ said the Hatter. ‘You might just as well say that “I see what I eat” is the same thing as “I eat what I see”!’

‘You might just as well say,’ added the March Hare, ‘that “I like what I get” is the same thing as “I get what I like”!’

‘You might just as well say,’ added the Dormouse, who seemed to be talking in his sleep, ‘that “I breathe when I sleep” is the same thing as “I sleep when I breathe”!’

‘It *is* the same thing with you,’ said the Hatter, and here the conversation dropped, and the party sat silent for a minute, while Alice thought over all she could remember about ravens and writing-desks, which wasn’t much.

We’ll get to the riddle later, but dig this from *The Psychology of Darsanamala*, Bhakti Darsana verse 4:

The term Brahma as a self-signifying word is necessitated because the knowledge of the Self can sometimes be circumscribed with ego boundaries, and thus can manifest as conditional states. When a pot or jar is immersed in the ocean, no substantial change takes place either to the ocean or to its content, the water. But if the vessel is lifted out of the ocean full of water, even though nothing has happened to the basic formula of the composition of the water as H₂O, nobody would call it ocean. Now it is only a potful of water. It is this kind of crippling effect that comes to the conditional Self when it is identified as a conscious operation of awareness that is of a sensory, cognitive, or volitional import. This is why, in formal logic, the converse of a universal proposition is said to be not tenable. We can confidently say, “All oceans are water,” but its converse, “all instances of water are oceans,” cannot be accepted. The present verse recognizes knowledge as Self-knowledge only when it is free of any limiting conditioning.

So cool that these examples resurfaced in my life at the same time, one more in a long line of mysterious “coincidences.”

As to the riddle “Why is a raven like a writing-desk?”, it was originally intended by author Lewis Carroll to be absolute nonsense, but over the years some fabulous answers have been derived. In my magnificent copy of *The Annotated Alice*, featuring background material compiled by Martin Gardner (brief bio below) some of the best answers are brought to light. (He also notes the British dormouse is a tree-living rodent more like a small squirrel than a mouse. Named from the Latin *dormire*, to sleep. Nocturnal, so it sleeps in the day.)

It’s the riddle where the book’s annotations reach their highest level. Pure gold. First, Carroll’s own clever solution was given in the Preface to the 1896 edition, 31 years after the first edition. After noting that originally there was no answer, he offers, “Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are *very* flat, and it is never put with the wrong end in front!” It is impossible to write on a sloping writing desk if it slopes away from you. Still, how does this apply to a raven??? We shall see.

The American puzzle genius Sam Loyd offered several riddle answers of his own; first: because the notes for which they are noted are not noted for being musical notes. He went on to add: because Poe wrote on both; bills and tales are among their characteristics; and because they both stand on their legs, conceal their steels (steals), and ought to be made to shut up.

Aldous Huxley supplied two nonsense answers in 1925: because there’s a *b* in both, and because there’s an *n* in neither. Another fellow offered a similar answer: because there’s an *e* in each. Another: because both have quills dipped in ink.

Gardner presents a number of others, but you’ll have to check out the book yourself. I will just add a couple more of them: Because one has flapping fits and the other fitting flaps; and

because a writing-desk is a rest for pens and a raven is a pest for wrens. I'm sorry—I find these infinitely amusing, and can only delight in the cleverness humans exhibit when not being shot at or otherwise persecuted.

It wasn't until 1976 that the mystery around Carroll's own curious answer was discovered. In the very first printing of the 1896 edition his answer was spelled one letter differently: "Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are *very* flat, and it is nevar put with the wrong end in front!" Carroll had spelled raven backwards as nevar, but an overeager editor had "fixed" it to *never* in all later printings, so his very clever wordplay was annulled. Carroll died soon after that new edition came out, so it's unknown if he ever knew about it.

While we're on the subject of riddles, this from Wikipedia about the compiler of *The Annotated Alice*:

Martin Gardner (October 21, 1914 – May 22, 2010) was an American popular mathematics and popular science writer, with interests also encompassing scientific skepticism, micromagic, philosophy, religion, and literature—especially the writings of Lewis Carroll, L. Frank Baum, and G. K. Chesterton. He was considered a leading authority on Lewis Carroll. *The Annotated Alice*, which incorporated the text of Carroll's two Alice books, was his most successful work and sold over a million copies. He had a lifelong interest in magic and illusion and was regarded as one of the most important magicians of the twentieth century. He was a prolific and versatile author, publishing more than 100 books.

Gardner was best known for creating and sustaining interest in recreational mathematics—and by extension, mathematics in general—throughout the latter half of the 20th century, principally through his "Mathematical Games" columns which

appeared for twenty-five years in *Scientific American* and his subsequent books collecting them.

Gardner was one of the foremost anti-pseudoscience polemicists of the 20th century. His book *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science* published in 1957 became a classic and seminal work of the skeptical movement. In 1976 he joined with fellow skeptics to found CSICOP, (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), an organization devoted to debunking pseudoscience.

Our exercise to “Contemplate and celebrate the emancipation of truth from traditional dogma and social roles in any place or era,” certainly resonates with “debunking pseudoscience.” All too often skeptics (the current one at *Scientific American*, Michael Shermer, is a prime example) evince hostility to religious ideas whether or not they have merit. Many of those ideas are easy targets. Often, though, some very powerful and wise concepts are thrown out with the bathwater, usually because the skeptic doesn’t bother to try to understand them.

Still, skepticism is essential to any truly spiritual quest. We are approaching one of Nitya’s all-time best quotes in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: “Science is to help us avoid the folly of putting our trust in nonsense.” (435) We also have similar advice in this lesson: “The true claim for wisdom comes from absolute certitude and not from inane beliefs or speculations.” (393) I also love two of his from *Living the Science of Harmonious Union*:

The yogi makes every effort not to be a howler telling untruth or a simpleton believing in something because somebody said it or it is written somewhere. (243)

It is not difficult to cultivate an awareness that is both critical and sympathetic. (371)

This last is where scientific fundamentalists (among others) fall down. We all have our faults and blind spots, so we should be charitable about them in others. Try kindness first, and only if hardheadedness prevails should we consider sterner measures.... Shermer started life as a fundamentalist Christian, which may go far in explaining his pugnaciousness: it's the reformed whore syndrome. I make it a policy to forgive people substantially for the faults I once had but have renounced, because I know how hard they may grip us hapless mortals. Luckily, fuzzy thinking isn't invariably fatal or even particularly detrimental to others. It does have a tendency to ignite anger, though, so it is best to bring it into focus.