

VIII Bhakti Darsana, Contemplative Devotion

Verse 7

The wife does not merely worship the husband, nor the husband, the wife. By all, their ananda alone is worshipped, which resides in the sense interests.

9/11/7

Narayana Guru makes reference to the famous saying of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (II.4.5) that begins with the Guru Yajnavalkya instructing his wife and disciple Maitreyi “Verily the husband is dear (to the wife) not for the sake of the husband, my dear, but it is for the sake of the Self that the husband is dear. Verily the wife is dear (to the husband) not for the sake of the wife, my dear, but it is for the sake of the Self that the husband is dear.” He goes on repeating the same mantra, substituting children for the parents, wealth, intellect, activity, worlds, gods, beings, and finally, all. He concludes with “The Self (atman), my dear Maitreyi, should verily be realized: should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. Atman is that which is heard, reflected on and meditated upon.” This is the essence of an important realization of Vedanta. We associate our feelings of love or veneration with objects surrounding us, but they are merely exterior reflections of the love and veneration and other qualities of the Self of which we are constituted.

The second half of Darsanamala is a progressive restoration of our innate “be-ness” in the Self as the guiding light of our life,

which requires the simultaneous retraction of our accustomed projections onto outer objects such as those listed by Yajnavalkya above.

The Bhakti Darsana has already equated brahman, ananda and atman; the Absolute, joy and the Self. Here the reference is to ananda as accessed via the sensory side of life. We are in territory almost unique to Narayana Guru and a few of the Upanishadic rishis. While the common notion is that all these sources of wonder are elsewhere, detached, beyond, Narayana Guru asserts that they are right here in the midst of everything we see and do. He agrees though that they are not exactly “in” the objects worshipped, but rather that the experience of objects touches us in our core of ananda. The more we enjoy blissful experiences with a proper understanding, the more familiar we will become with the abiding state of eternal happiness that is our very nature, and that is in no way dependent on external events.

Adam started us off by describing the painting often called The Jewish Bride, by Rembrandt, which he said gave him a vivid experience of what this verse meant to him. The work shows a loving couple, but instead of gazing longingly into each other’s eyes, they both have faraway expressions of transcendental peace and wisdom. Their faint smiles could be studies for Krishna’s “semblance of smiling” in Chapter II of the Gita, which assures Arjuna that his problems are by no means insoluble. It is an ineffable example of art that calls us to something beyond the visible, that comes as close as possible to manifesting the unmanifest. We can plainly see love that transcends the situation that occasions it.

Moni gave us another excellent example, and one right out of the Upanishad. One of her coworkers brought an infant down to show her friends at the workplace. He is basically a sleeping lump wrapped in a blanket, but everyone oohed and ahed over him and was so happy. Their ananda was activated, or better put, they

allowed their ananda to be activated. Our ananda is always there, but we inhibit it through our guarded behavior. Since the child wasn't their own, no one felt the least worry or concern about anything. And of course a helpless baby is no threat whatsoever to cause harm to others. Wouldn't it be a different world if we treated everyone we met as we treat an innocent child? If instead of freezing up in fear we sympathized directly with their inner ananda and could resonate with their beauty? Where there is no threat, it is easy to access our ananda. Unfortunately, as Nitya reminds us in the commentary, much more often the 'other' represents a potential threat for which we plan and maintain elaborate defensive fortifications.

Star-crossed lovers are the abiding example of misplaced projection, so it is no wonder they are cited here. It is so Obvious that the other person is the cause of the love we feel. When they are present we are ecstatic, and when they ignore us or are elsewhere we are miserable. If they permanently leave us, we may be inconsolable for a very long time. The very thought that they might abandon us, steals the joy we would otherwise be experiencing. So we have to adopt all sorts of complicated strategies to preserve what we imagine to be the source of our joy. Complaining about our spouse, for instance, is a convoluted way of reaching out for happiness. We should keep in mind the flip side of this Upanishadic wisdom. The Other is not the source of our joy, but neither is it the source of our anguish. Both are experienced within and projected without. As long as we blame the other for our woes as well as our happiness, we will continue to be "tempest-tossed." Our study is intended to retract us from our doomed fixation on the surging waves to the unshakable happiness of the depths.

In his comments Nitya uses the Buddhist doctrine of mindlessness to stand for what we more commonly call affiliation with the Absolute. Where there is no mind, there is no problem.

Mind arises to cope with threats and to promote experiences of joy and satisfaction. When we are mindless, we don't have to work for either pain or pleasure, to avoid what we dislike and move toward what we do like. We are already there. Among many other things, this carries a secret of how to make interpersonal relationships stand the test of time. We have to stop clinging to the projections and hold instead to the ground we have in common.

Next Nitya treats us to one of his most valuable sentences, revealing the gist of Narayana Guru's intent in this verse:

Although pain and pleasure are both opposed to mindlessness, pleasure is benignly in agreement with the dissipation of awareness into mindlessness, whereas pain, both physical and mental, has the quality of constricting the frontiers of awareness to the painful actualization of the ontological severity of the here and now of transaction, leading to an acute problem of one's ego being riveted to his physical and social self. (386)

Anita reminded us that pleasure rivets us as firmly as pain, as long as we become fixated on specific sources of it. But the idea here is that we can also generalize and abstract our experience. We don't have to seek out babies to coo over. Whatever experience brings us joy is like a stream leading us to the ocean. In the ocean, joy is unbounded. From this perspective it is even silly to seek out the same stream repeatedly, just so we can have the familiar experience of flowing down into the ocean once again. Certainly, each unpolluted stream is infinitely perfect and delightful. But here the Bhakti Darsana begs us to revel in the oceanic bliss, and see how all streams empty into it. As teachers we may someday lead others down a familiar stream to access the ocean, but for now we are exploring the ocean itself.

Part II

While the concepts of this verse are found all over the place in the Gurukula books, Nitya's commentary on verse 13 in *That Alone* is an especially good exposition. I'll reprint a few paragraphs here for those who wish to peruse them, while recommending the entire chapter if you have time.

Take, for example, breakfast. The taste of it, the way in which it is lovingly served, along with your appetite, makes it very fascinating. Once you have eaten it though, that value factor, the fascination, is gone. You are now satiated. You can't sit there all day eating your breakfast. So, however great the value of an individual world is, it cannot remain long. You have to be presented with another value: now office work, now school, now friends, now something else. Shankara says the Lord of preservation, Vishnu, has a terrible job to do. He has to keep supplying you with interest after interest. Yet he somehow manages to preserve these millions of worlds, which are called *anantam*, endless. Endless are the worlds of interest.

In spite of what the mind creates and the values presented by the various qualities, time devours all these things. So the Supreme or the Infinite is described again by Shankara as the great Lord who crushes all these worlds of interest in his palm, turning them into ashes. He smears his body with them. What we see as a great reality is only ashes smeared on the transcendental God. It is not even skin deep.

The enjoying self in you has many concepts of attraction, but when you turn to your inner reality all these seem false. At that point you begin a return. It is a pilgrimage from unreality to reality, from your sense orientation to the realization of your most divine center. And when does this take place? Every day, all the time, whenever our senses are drawn outward to get glued onto objects, and the great surge of excitement comes. This is the time to hitch it

to the central core of our own divine being, rather than identifying the excitement with an objective, external situation, as we invariably do. Each time a pretty thing is attracting you, you become a beggar: haggard, poverty-stricken, wanting, desiring, stretching your hand, crying for it. You become miserable. Once you get it, you realize you have wasted a lot of time in pursuing this trifling thing. Now that it's yours, you just put it aside.

This happens between people also. Before someone is possessed as a friend, as a lover, as a wife or husband, many days and nights are spent thinking and worrying about how to get together with them. So many intrigues and posturings take place. But when they are finally yours, it can become a stalemate. Often you feel trapped, unable to extend your sense of adventure to the next person. Friends are not as easily stuck on a shelf as books.

So, at the very height of the excitement and joy of gaining something, you are asked instead to relate it to the very core, to spiritualize that experience. You are not asked to kill the joy, but only to look for its essence. You have to realize that it is not produced by objects, but is an essential part of your own divine nature. If the joy we see in a person, in a desirable thing, opens a window for us to see the Lord, the Absolute, the Divine, which is our own truest Self, then everything becomes a door for us to enter into our innermost sanctum. This critical process is described in the first two lines of the verse: "Gather your mind-modalities as flowers and make an offering of them to the Supreme, who transcends all the necessities of the world."

You are not asked here to withdraw from everything, but to transcend everything. This is accomplished by spiritualizing, by seeing everything as divine.

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11/28/17

Bhakti Darsana verse 7

The wife does not merely worship the husband,
nor the husband, the wife.
By all, their *ananda* alone is worshipped,
which resides in the sense interests.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

*The wife does not merely adore the husband,
Nor husband merely adore the wife;
It is Self-Bliss alone (that they) adore
As lodged within every sensuous object.*

Verse 7 is another where Nitya's words are compact energy packets designed to blast us out of our constraints as only a guru can. We listened to the reading of the commentary in that spirit, taking the opportunity to let go and not analyze, putting such machinations off until later to sit with as open a mind as possible, which is here equated with mindlessness. In his first sentences Nitya comes as close as he ever did to explicitly inviting that kind of listening:

The Buddhists equate nirvana or Buddha-consciousness to mindlessness, the transcendental counterpart of mindfulness. It is an indescribable state, so it is sometimes referred to as 'thatness'. It is from the indescribable that the describable arises. The describable is the mind, which is the opposite of mindlessness.

Taking this magnificent talk full circle, into the whirled and back out again, Nitya ends it with "the mindless beatitude of the final

extinction, the *nibbana*.” *Nibbana* is an alternative spelling of nirvana.

We in the West tend to equate mindlessness with mental illness or stupidity and so strive to avoid it, but in the Indian model the mind delineates form, which no matter how useful is always a limiting condition, so touching the emptiness of “no mind” is a freeing thrust of intention. In Yoga we dialectically integrate mind and mindlessness, with each enhancing the other. Since mindfulness is where we put most of our transactional energies to work, mindlessness is the much rarer condition that a spiritual aspirant must learn how to access. It’s a bit tricky, because “learning how” is an act of mind, so learning how only takes us to the verge of mindlessness. Going beyond is a mystical act that is paradoxically not an act at all.

Deb opened with a summary of the whole message, that mindlessness means stepping out of the constrictions of our mind. We are caught in the duality of subject and object, which initiates our being separated as a well-defined individual. Ananda, the bliss of the Absolute, allows these defining lines to melt, bringing about the greater merger we know as Love.

Going back and forth between mindfulness and mindlessness is another way of expressing the “pulsation model” we have often referred to. Many of the ancient disciplines are presented as a one-way trip from here to the beyond, requiring leaving “here” permanently behind, but the Gurukula version of Vedanta advocates the mutual benefit of both understanding and emptiness. In place of “Don’t allow yourself to feel or enjoy anything,” this is about regaining our truest happiness and bringing it into play in every aspect of daily life. Our love, our joy is a real wealth to be shared, particularly in a world where it has been linked to consumer goods, and so artificially made out to be in short supply. Here Nitya advocates for the true nourishment consumer goods cannot supply:

Each time awareness dissolves and disappears into mindlessness it is as if one has merged back into the total, and every reemergence into awareness can be like a fresh lease on life. This is the nourishment one seeks in the company of one's spouse, friends, children, pleasures of the senses, delightful entertainments, and positive indulgences in spiritual ecstasies. (386)

So we seek such nourishment in our pleasurable contacts, but they are the means to the end and not the parsimonious suppliers of what we so badly want. They help us access our own inner nourishment.

In place of being bound by rules and ironclad mental definitions, our moments spent outside the bounds of rules and necessities restore our innate sense of freedom, which then tangibly infuses all our activities. The mind has the crucial role of directing this released spirit effectively while curtailing behaviors that might be harmful to others or the very world we live in.

The abruption engineered by consumer society between our sense of who we are and the infinitely alive world we exist in has had devastating consequences for the planet. Believing that only our waking consciousness matters, we have consigned everything else to insentience in order to take advantage of it without the least sense of guilt for our cruelty. Deb touched on the new studies of how plants communicate with each other, while Bushra and Andy noted how whole swaths of people, especially the so-called primitive ones, believe everything is alive and aware. Such an attitude is at the basis of compassion, not to mention sustainability.

I suggested this is a much-needed belief that the ancient rishis have blessed us with. We might have our occasional flights of mindlessness and tell ourselves on our return that we are all that matters—nothing else is alive. There are no rules to how we must

interpret the void. Anything goes. Religion, spirituality and incisive philosophy offer us the sensible frames to make the most of our excursions. The refusal of “pure” science to include this essential aspect of understanding in its purview has certainly supported the destructive tide of technology.

Paul talked about how he worries that he hears all kinds of wonderful ideas but then he forgets them. Does this mean he isn’t learning? Will he stay stuck in place unless he consciously retains what he momentarily enjoys as compelling ideas? Deb felt the “fresh lease on life” brought about by mindless time was enough by itself without remembering anything, and most of the class agreed with her. But I think we are studying these matters specifically to enhance our way of interpreting our infinite resources in an upgraded fashion, in order to evolve beyond our mediocre, or at least static, default settings. So it is good to know and learn and grow. Still, there is a value in not worrying too much about all we miss. As a consolation I read out a paragraph from the front cover flap of *That Alone*:

The power of the Hundred Verses is summed up by Guru Nitya: “There is no need to learn each verse and then rationally apply it in everyday life. You can even hear it and forget it. Forgetting means it only goes deeper into you. Once you have heard it, it will go and work its way by itself. The effect will be very subtle. It comes almost without you knowing that it is something which you heard that is enabling you to see things in a new light or make resolutions in a certain more helpful way.”

The spiritual seeds of a guru are the best things to have planted in our psyches, but our garden will grow whatever is pressed into it. For instance, the toxic ideas of American mass media have been sown for at least thirty years in vast numbers of brain-gardens, and the chaos, intolerance, fear and lethal aggression now rampant here

are one result. So be careful what you take in, and clearly reject those poisonous seeds which fall in your soil unbidden. Some of them are just like weeds: they grow like crazy with almost no nourishment, while spiritual ideals need careful tending and plenty of nutritional support. Ease of growing is not necessarily evidence of divine origin. We are very fortunate to be in a cloistered environment in the Gurukula class, where we have the checks and balances of a network of pensive souls, so the likelihood of toxic seeds is reduced. Rest assured that many seeds planted in times past are already soaring toward the sky as youthful trees, shrubs and flowers. Some may have to be rooted out.

There is a need to trust and nurture without agitation, and there is also the need to actively seek and imbibe nourishment. Nitya reminds us of this here:

When a person expends energy in winning bread and consuming it, the energy spent is amply replenished with the breakdown of the food eaten into the required calories and various life-building and life-preserving constituent energies that reside in the food. Therefore, seeking the path of nourishment is a lively activity of a living organism.

Then, to help us make the connection, he reveals the metaphor's symbolic dimensions:

The need for nourishment described above as experienced on the physical plane is symbolic of the need to be nourished emotionally, morally, psychically, intellectually and spiritually.... Going in such paths is a perennial process of spending and replenishing one's libidinal energy.

Infinite are the outlets for our various kinds of nourishment, and each of us embodies a unique configuration of preferences. A wise

seer has no need to prefer one menu over another, and does not claim their way is better than others, or even worse, that theirs is the only true way. The point is that the externals are only a mirror of what is burning within. Andy described it as like a mirror of water, which is always trembling or surging with a million types of waves, adding the idea that we will see better reflections if we can remain calm.

The key idea is that we all have our preferred ways to enter the mindless state, and that is the domain of the Self, the Atman. Happiness does not reside in the object endeared to it, but in our Self. Narayana Guru here makes reference to a famous part of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and Nitya unpacks it for us:

However varied are the actualizations of finding one's exit into the mindless, all such exits are only differing means to attain the same end. That is why the seer Yajnavalkya tells his wife that it is not for the sake of the husband the husband is loved but it is for the sake of the desire of the Self, and it is not for the sake of the wife that the wife is loved but it is for the sake of the desire of the Self.

I'll add the expanded version of this in Part II, along with a bit of exegesis to emphasize the point that the ananda, the joy of the Self, is within us, and all the goals we seek and the endearments we crave are but opportunities for us to bring our loving bliss into the arena of life. It's actually, when you think of it, one of the most revolutionary ideas of the Upanishads, redirecting our intentionality 180 degrees from the outer world to the inner realms. The initial puzzlement this engenders needs to be "contemplated away," because its meaning is not immediately obvious. We are habituated much more than we usually realize to being victims of outer circumstances. Knowing the inner realm is the fountain source of what we really want is absolutely empowering. It is ours

alone to make of it what we can. We can work (play!) there whenever we have the time and inclination. While the rewards aren't usually very fast in coming—seeds taking time to germinate and develop—once they get going they don't disappear on us. They abide. Fecund soil is always available.

We are well trained as consumers to project our happiness outwards and make it dependent on the fun things we crave, yet a simple train of thought can prove to us that the Self is indeed the domain of happiness, rather than the objects of endearment. Riding a roller coaster or other amusement park ride is the optimal delight for some people while the mere thought of riding one brings about terrifying nausea-inducing misery. Certain types of music produce bliss in some people and send others running away as fast as they can. Your spouse may be utterly unattractive to me, but I endorse your marital bliss with them. And so on. Objects and processes would have to be a kind of selective magic to give joy to some and impart dread to others. No, it can only be each person's predilections and familiarity that draw them to their preferred entertainments. Oddly though, we forget, and boast about our likes and dislikes as though the objects themselves bore those qualities, and not us. It can make us selective and intolerant.

Bushra astounded everyone by saying she loved to fly in airplanes—it was like between freed up out of the world, in a capsule that was its own special place. Up there she can let her mind roam anywhere. A couple of our fear-of-flying folk couldn't believe what she was saying. For one of them flying evokes terror and for the other extreme discomfort for long periods. They couldn't believe anyone could feel good about flying. So it goes: more proof of Nitya's statement that pain and threats tie us tightly to our body and prevent our freedom of mind/no mind. They constrict the frontiers of our awareness.

Deb cited Nancy Y's account of her silent retreat from last year, how by minimizing her outward focusing she entered a quiet

space that was more vast than the great world around her. It was a dynamic quiet, where small unnoticed sounds became audible. Quiet is another great example of a condition that is exquisite for some and anathema for others, especially the younger set. Plus, you either believe in it or you dislike it. It can't be that quiet itself is some diabolical factor determining whether or not we are happy. Nancy has recently posted her lovely article on Nitya's website: http://aranya.me/uploads/3/4/8/6/34868315/the_contours_of_silence.pdf.

It is surely true that objects evoke *memories* of bliss, which are in their turn blissful. Nancy R did not want to disdain the bliss we get from recalling previous joys. Photos of our friends and family will always bring a warm glow to our hearts, and who would want to call them evil? The point is, we can tinker with our hearts but we can't (unless we're Photoshop literate) tinker with the photos. Let them be as they are—each of us will love them in the exact measure of our capacity to love and feel joy. *That's* where to do the stretching exercises.

Bill agreed that the world gives us opportunities to access the Self, the place of our bipolar relationship with it. This is exactly right. We just have to try to remember that the joy we are learning to appreciate is available everywhere and at all times. Bhakti means remembering to turn to it.

Andy laughingly talked about how we either allow or don't allow the kind of openness bhakti calls for. We like to judge and shut off those found wanting. He recalled a time when Nitya and his entourage were in Hawaii and a real loathsome character came to talk to the guru. Andy was amazed to observe them having a wonderful talk together, with Nitya showing no evidence of being put out by the fellow's repulsiveness. Andy took it as evidence for Nitya being in a state beyond the limits of normal social expectations. That quality benefitted all of us who were less than savory, too. I know from personal experience.

Paul remembered an idea of Nitya's that if you want to be hugged, open your arms wide. No one can hug you if your arms are clamped to your body. Bill agreed that when you do have opportunity to be mindless, when you come out of it you have a new lease on life, you come out of it refreshed. Jan contributed the word *enlivened*, to general approval.

Paul then talked about aging, and how we seem to take on more of the qualities associated with spirituality as we naturally close down to the bustling world of younger folk. His friend is doing it consciously and in good health. The not-so-healthy options are worrisome to many of us. It may be that working on turning inward will make the aging experience richer and less prone to dementia. I certainly think of the brain as a muscle in need of exercise, even more than your glutes and biceps. Deb added that we have less need for self-identification as we get older, and that fits in with freeing our mind to meditate on the overarching Self.

The outer world is certainly the domain of pain and pleasure, and Nitya takes this opportunity to reprise it. It is familiar stuff, but remember, we are being guided by the word wisdom of a guru. We know it, yet we don't *really* know it. His words are meant to energize and enable us to make it real in our lives. He says:

Although pain and pleasure are both opposed to mindlessness, pleasure is benignly in agreement with the dissipation of awareness into mindlessness, whereas pain, both physical and mental, has the quality of constricting the frontiers of awareness to the painful actualization of the ontological severity of the here and now of transaction, leading to an acute problem of one's ego being riveted to the physical and social self.

What an eloquent way of describing how attending to the pains and pleasures of the world "constricts the frontiers of our awareness."

They are bound to. These constrictions are managed and dealt with by the mind. At this stage of our study, we are learning to step out of our straitjackets to take a break from the transactional world, which vacation is here described as enjoying mindlessness:

As there is no third alternative [other than pleasure and pain] for an individuated self, almost all the wakeful hours of transaction are diverted to the purpose of relating oneself with as many favorable conditions as possible that can spiritually sustain oneself with the acquisition of opportunities to become mindless, however short such periods may be.

To me, this state is not really mindless, at least if you take the Vedantic stance that it's all Mind. It's a different aspect of Mind. We can enjoy spiritual ecstasies only when we stop holding ourselves back, reining ourselves in. Not a simple matter, by any means! But we've been working on how to let go of the need to define and defend our every waking moment. And we all know the joys of moments of release, when we are swept away by music or love or breathtaking scenery or great literature—so many ways. I'd say to whatever extent we know the joy, it is still within our mind. We don't actually leave our mind when we are mindless, we just stop needing to define and limit our self-definitions.

Nitya takes us through a review of the impact of the two sides of life's coin, first with the one we all prefer, pleasure:

Mind manifests in various degrees of awareness. Awareness comes as either a promise or a threat. The promise is the promise of immanent or progressive union in which awareness can pass through an objectivized euphoria to a passive merger until that aspect of mind is fully absorbed into mindlessness.

In other words, the joy of our experience is first objectivized: “I am enjoying this (music, party, interchange with a friend, etc.).” This allows the psychological defenses to be dropped momentarily, so absorption into mindlessness—openness—can happen. This is the easy route. The harder one is in relation to painful stimuli, which we invariably treat as threats to our wellbeing:

The threat is the threat of the ‘other’, which insists on occupying the legitimate territory of the living space of one’s persona or even takes the more positive posture of destroying one’s existential status. The threat is automatically followed by a conscious recognition of the need to reject the other and erect a wall of defense with one’s maximum ability to forestall the danger of any advance the other might make into one’s ontologically or teleologically available territory. Mindfulness of defense is hardened by objectivizing one’s existential ego and its counterpart, the threat from the other. In either case there is the expending of one’s libidinal energy.

I suggested that the invasion of the ‘other’ into ‘my’ territory “ontologically or teleologically” means interfering with my life now or my future aspirations. This is likely to be much more debilitating than physical pain.

Bushra feels that pain can vault her into mindless states too. If instead of resisting and being riveted to the feelings, she pushes beyond them, she finds she can let go and enter a space of ‘beyond’. She said that pain cracks you open and you have to let go of what you are attached to. Another secret for letting go of pain was to send it out as a prayer to the universe, like blowing it a kiss. It’s almost easier to give up pain, in a way, because we like to hold on to pleasure much more.

I recalled that That Alone verse 30 is an elaboration of what Nitya says here about pain, and read out some excerpts. I’ll include

some of it in Part II, but I highly recommend getting out your copy and rereading the whole commentary. The verse is one of Nitya's favorites. Here's one invaluable part:

Narayana Guru's suggestion is that we turn our affiliation from the physical body and the social ego to a third possibility, our own pure Self. He begins this verse by reminding us that the pure Self does not speak or even think: know that the discursive thought going on in your mind is not your Self. (212)

This complements the earlier quotation that "As there is no third alternative for an individuated self." Note that this applies to the *individuated* self. There *is* a third option, only not for the small 's' self. The third option is bhakti: continuous contemplation on the Self itself. Nitya further refines this idea here:

For man there is no holiday or escape from the need to be nourished by the love of his own dear Self. All seeming forms of discontent and rejection are the negative long shadows that are cast by the ever-moving caravan of the unquenchable desires to rediscover and re-enter the be-ness of the Self, the mindless beatitude of the final extinction, the *nibbana*.

So don't spend all your time on the petty details of threat and nourishment that transactional life furnishes in unending plenitude! When all is said and done:

The energy that is required to resist, to reject, to defend, to offend, and to flee is a killer activity. This is the gloomy night of the soul for which everyone seeks redress. Thus, on the whole, life is an interplay between looming destruction and benign sustenance.

Andy and Bushra agreed that it doesn't have to always be unbearable pain or overwhelming joy to rivet our attention, just a whiff of either is enough. We are already hyper-attuned to it. We've been practicing since the day we were born, using tools that have evolved over many millions of years.

Moni talked about a new baby in her family, and how amazed the family all are that she can do so many things without ever having seen or been taught them. Such a mysterious talent is charming as well as essential to healthy development. What we don't have much of in our DNA is spiritual training. A baby doesn't need it—they're already there. And one of the perplexing features of spiritual souls seems to be a loss of interest in reproduction. So many ascetics! The Self can capture so much of your attention you forget to have babies. No way to add your evolution to the gene pool. Luckily we do have word wisdom that can be passed along asexually, and once in a while someone actually learns something from it. Still, many realized people say words are no good, so forget 'em. Another form of reproduction denied. The Universe doesn't want us to catch on to its secrets, apparently.

In case his commentary strikes us as more depressing than it was meant to be, Nitya offers a sly hint:

The seeming motivation of love is only a fictitious label to give the items of love a sophisticated status in the social eye. But in all actuality, one's love is generated by the Self, and its fulfillment is re-entering the womb of one's own creativity.

Love turned outward is just a word we give to cloak our feelings and make us respectable in the public eye. Nitya insists that true love is generated by the Self, and the outcome of our direct relationship to it—bhakti—is going deep into the core of our being, where resides our authentic creativity. This is the creativity

of our full inner wisdom to relate to the world with expertise, not just as a painter or a poet, but as a real individual capable of expressing a lot of what we're made of. Why limit it by saying I'm a this or a that? What we truly are may not even be in our mindset. Mindlessness may break loose some other rough beast than what we expect. Part of the joy of being alive is finding out what that looks like.

Jan was inspired by the idea of re-entering the womb of creativity, and was nice enough to write up a related story. You can read it in Part II just ahead.

We closed with a brief reading from That Alone 30, which ends with a very touching confession, followed by these words of blessing that we were hopefully able to internalize: "You are really released. There is no greater achievement to make."

Part II

Swami Vidyananda's commentary:

Here the commentary explains how ordinary people think that when a husband takes care of his wife who ministers to him, it is not merely in the interest of the husband or wife that they do so. The truth is that whatever pleasure they derive from sense objects is really felt as pleasure by the Self alone. The ignorant man considers the source of pleasure as existing in things and is attracted to them. But the wise man finds the source of pleasure in himself, and sees the universality of such a pleasure. The well-known instance of the dialogue between Yajnavalkya and his wife Maitreyi found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (IV. 5. 1ff) supports this point.

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The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 2.4 begins Yajnavalkya's exposition on the love of the Soul, Atman, with the husband and wife, which is the epitome, but then continues the list. We feel the ananda in so many things, but we are advised to realize it is within us that the love is generated, so that we can optimize it. If we believe it resides in objects that come and go, we will be victims of fate, more or less. If we know that it is our deep be-ness where love-happiness-bliss originates, we can foster it regularly, making every contact more enjoyable.

The list goes on with children, wealth, followed by two caste titles (Brahmin and Kshatriya) that Hume points out meant in the time of the Upanishad devotion and sanctity, and rules or ruling, respectively. Next come worlds, devas or gods, beings, and if that doesn't make the point, Yajnavalkya concludes with "all." That pretty much covers everything. He sums up by making the point utterly explicit: Atman (Self or Soul) is that which is to be seen, heard, reflected on and meditated upon. By implication, we should look for it everywhere, instead of meditating on its absence.

In the following mantra, Yajnavalkya gives the inverse: each of these categories rejects anyone who imagines that they are separate from the Self. Or you might say the separation of things from their ground in the Self brings about a state of rejection or desertion.

* * *

Jan did the honor of retelling her main contribution to the class herself. Here's what she sent:

I especially liked the last part of this verse, and the idea of re-entering the womb of one's creativity, shown here:

But in all actuality, one's love is generated by the Self, and its fulfillment is re-entering the womb of one's own creativity. For man there is no holiday or escape from the need to be nourished by the love of his own dear Self. All seeming forms of discontent and rejection are the negative long shadows that are cast by the ever-moving caravan of the unquenchable desires to rediscover and re-enter the be-ness of the Self, the mindless beatitude of the final extinction, the nibbana.

On my family time over Thanksgiving, I had such a moment, where vividly I felt stuck in the “gloomy night of the soul for which everyone needs redress” and soon found myself transformed and liberated by an inner process where I reconnected with my own womb of creativity. Of all things, pondering the sheer black curtain on the airplane that separated my cabin from first class was the catalyst. I traced the beauty of its transparency with my eyes and felt a strong attraction to it, and instantly realized it excited me and freed me. I saw how meaningful the creative impulse is for me, and how strongly I connect to beauty. I also knew that that kind of transformative beauty resides in me and is always waiting for a chance to come out. Returning to my womb of creativity, and honoring beauty in me and outside me is a key part of how I as an individual feel most alive, most free, and most actualized.

In class I also recalled how the sheer scarf has been a thing for me, going back to when I would be in car rides to the beach with my family and grandmother, after we'd picked up my grandmother in Portland. She always had nice clothes and I'd borrow her scarf (when she let me) and let it fly freely outside the car window as we drove along through the trees. I loved that. Sometimes I lost it in the air. On occasion my sister and I would also dance with Granny-O's sheer scarves for the neighbor boy while at Neskowin....Anyways, its a joyful thing that is meaningful to me

and it all came together on that plane, and I felt much better. I know connecting to that part of me also allows me to be more compassionate and understanding of others, so it's a good thing.

* * *

More from That Alone, verse 30. First the verse:

Inert matter does not know; knowledge has no thought
and does not articulate; knowing knowledge to be all,
letting go, one's inner state becomes boundless;
indeed, thereafter he never suffers confined within a
body.

And a few excerpts:

When we are physically hurt we live in the body. Most of the rest of the time we live in a social image of ourselves. We live in the physical body at the breakfast or lunch table, when some delicate dish is enjoyed. Even then, if there is good conversation, we attend to our social image and may not even notice we are eating.

Our social identity says: "I am so-and-so. In the eyes of my colleagues, my friends, my competitors and my enemies, this is the image I want to impress." Part of this image comes from the expectations of others. Other people expect you to wear a certain kind of dress, to have a certain kind of form, to speak with a certain kind of dignity. You watch all these social expectations and secretly try to conform to them. Thus, in about twenty years you build up a personality: your social image. Afterwards if any part of that image becomes tarnished, you get frightened. You think, "Now I'm going to be rejected because my social image is no longer perfect." Someone can now easily exploit you through character

assassination or even blackmail. If someone's reputation is assailed, it is as bad as killing the body. One may even commit suicide. You should not confuse this social image with the soul or the Self; it is only the social ego.

We live in the body and the social ego. If we are not suffering from pains like a head or stomach ache we are suffering from the pains of what others think of us, or what happened to our trust in another person, or their trust in us, or to our love. This can become more gruesome and cause more suffering than physical pain. People have a remarkable resilience to physical pains, but when the social ego is tortured we may succumb rapidly to the pressure.

Here we are not saying that when a person has physical pain there is no physical pain. Certainly there is physical pain, but it is of the body, not of the Self. The body is animated by a fragmentary aspect of consciousness which is colored and conditioned so it knows pain. Over time this becomes your major concern and major affiliation, until you cannot extricate yourself from it.

You must learn to free yourself from your absorption with your bodily and egoistic states. If you are a fully released person, you can still attend to your bodily states and social functionings, but with a certain amount of detachment.

The most essential thing here is to know that there is a third possible affiliation, one with your pure Self. After affiliating with the Self you can treat your relationship with the ego and the body with a normal attitude, rather than the exaggerated attitude of most people. The Guru says if you do this you become a person with an expansive consciousness whose mind is no longer confined to one little thing in life, such as your headache or your toothache. You are still aware that there is a headache or a toothache, but you don't allow them to occupy your whole beingness to the point where you

are nothing more than just an ache or a pain. You maintain your inner clarity in and through your pains and pleasures.

All the contemplation, meditation and discipline we do is only for this one purpose of disaffiliating ourselves from body identity and ego identity, and establishing an identity with our pure spirit. It is a pilgrimage. We are walking away from us to arrive at us. From where do we go? From the periphery of our skin and this feeling of ego. Where do we arrive? Deep down within us. The distance from our periphery to our center, seemingly so close, is in reality very, very far. That's why the Upanishads say it is far and near, inside as well as outside; it is the farthest from all and the nearest of all. Nothing is nearer than your center and yet nothing is a longer journey. It is very difficult to arrive at it, but once you do everything is expansive.

There is suffering in this world, but if you are too concerned with it you will miss your whole life. In spite of suffering, in spite of diseases, you should go on. Let the body drop off. One day it will drop on its own anyway.

To release ourselves from the clutches of the body and the society, we transcend. Thereafter, pain may be in your body but you don't suffer. Disgrace may be sitting on your name in the society but you don't suffer. This is a scheme given to us for working out our own release from a twofold misery.

This is really one of the most beautiful verses of *Atmopadesa Satakam*. For years and years I have used this one verse for meditation. In all my troubles, physical as well as social, this verse has saved me many times. Again and again I go over it. Sometimes when there are bodily troubles, people around are upset, and the doctors are annoyed, giving me all kinds of medicines, I find over and above all this that the only medicine which gives me utmost relief is this one verse. It goes on saying, "This inert matter does

not know anything. My pure soul is not the one which sits and thinks and worries. It is not the one which speaks to people. It's one all-pervading consciousness. This body is just one thing floating in that ocean of consciousness like a piece of cork. Sometimes it may be up and sometimes down." Thus there comes an expansive, transcendent consciousness. Is there pain? Yes, there is pain. Did someone say something terrible about me? Yes, he said I am a very evil man. Aum. Aum. "Are you not very evil?" Aum. Be it so. What of it?

You are really released. There is no greater achievement to make.

Part III

If you recall, I listed the other subjects of the Honey section of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad in Part II. Today while continuing my proofing of Nataraja Guru's *Integrated Science of the Absolute* through chapter VIII, I found agreement for viewing Narayana Guru's epitome, given here as just the husband and wife, as implying the rest. Check it out, and don't be deterred by the difficult language. The second paragraph is most crucial, but the first three paragraphs of section 4 are relevant to the full meaning here. You might want to get a copy of the text and try chanting it yourself some day:

4. The Components of Normal Contemplative Value

After having examined the coherence of elements entering into bhakti, as revealed in the structure of this chapter, it is natural to find in the Upanishads a typical example wherein the cosmological, psychological and axiological elements are made to blend together into a unitive contemplative Absolute, metaphorically referred to as honey in the Brihadaranyaka

Upanishad II.5.1-15. The structural ossifications and articulations of this poetic composition respecting the philosophical principles of the Science of the Absolute are so clear, visible and transparent, that we feel justified in quoting it in full.

A splitting up of this piece of work would damage the unity of the vision underlying it and cut into its interest as a total confection meant to be enjoyed as a whole. These words are moreover meant to be chanted by the brahmachari in his gurukula. When heard in such a living way it has the strange effect of a mantra (mystic formula). This has the same value as contemplation when most normally expressed.

Individual mystical experiences might have one-sided slants wherein either emotion or intelligence dominates, although it would be wrong to condemn the value of any mystical expression simply because of the extraneous factors that might cling to it. A normalized and healthy version of mysticism is to be preferred. The right attitude is to forget the extraneous and only take the pure and precious content. When so treated all mystical experience is equally valuable.