

The Psychology of Darsanamala

Nitya Chaitanya Yati, 1987

The best comments from our two classes during the digital era, 2005-8 and 2015-18. The first class did not cover Scott's Introduction.

9/15/15

Darsanamala Introduction

Despite a number of our stalwarts having other plans, last night's initial exploration of our new study consisted of a substantial and beaming group of dear friends. My optimistic leanings were proved to have been overly restrained. The class was spectacular! The good work we all have put in for many years to really grasp the purport of the teachings will serve us very well in rising to the challenge of this masterwork of spiritual psychology.

This is probably the fourth time we at the Portland Gurukula have gone through Darsanamala, certainly the third, though only a couple of us in the present group have done it even once already. But the coherence of the teachings support each other very well, and we now have a very solid background, as well as an advanced level of trust and respect, that should make this a terrific excursion.

I pointed out that this was likely the only Darsanamala study group on the planet; certainly the only one with the depth we intend to accord to it. In a sane world, a book like this would be read and admired in every town and village, but so far that has not been its fate. Our small group, expanded via internet to a fair number, is the only effort of its kind in the world, as far as we know. Considering the decades of deep contemplation given to the subject by the three gurus before us, we are being served a rich banquet indeed. The intent of this introductory class was to make us fully aware of the profundity of our endeavor. It is like standing on the doorstep of a great temple or monument, preparing to go inside and explore. In my mind it was the Ellora temple, carved

from the top down out of a single mass of mountain, which sits in my psyche like a permanently ongoing psychedelic experience.

We read out highlights from the Introduction, rounded off by Don Berry's appreciation of Nitya in the last two paragraphs of the Foreword. There is much that is helpful in both essays, so reading the whole is recommended, if you have the time.

Deb started the class off by recollecting the mirror Nataraja Guru installed at the Somanahalli Gurukula. Though it was eventually broken by monkeys, it honored the radical installation of Narayana Guru, who sited a mirror in the place of the deity in the core of a temple, so when you made your way into the depths and looked there for God you saw your own face. Such sacrilege! Such genius! Shock waves reverberated from the act all over South India. Even now it is hard to imagine that God is truly within us, that we are all divine. Trying to get that message across keeps good gurus busy for endless lifetimes.

Throughout the evening we touched on several of the main themes of the work. The uniting of materialist and spiritual attitudes is handled with great brilliance in the early going. The way concepts are developed and take hold of the psyche, and how to cope with them, is perhaps the most important strand. The universality of the ground of existence, here termed the Absolute, with its attendant ideals of tolerance, compassion, humility, and so on, will be explored in depth.

Jay recalled working on a medical problem (a cure for muscular dystrophy) and how scientists suffer from the same kinds of limitations as religious people. He brought in the analogy of the blind men and the elephant, since each faction working on it was taking a different tack, and each faction defended its turf. If you believed that your way was right and all the rest wrong—an attitude pretty much ubiquitously required for gainful employment—you missed the elephant entirely. Yet if you could combine all the different pieces each group was privy to, you had a much better chance of getting a clear picture of the animal you were groping with.

In science as well as religion, a simple change of attitude can have a major impact. Embracing rather than rejecting wins the prize. Discerning the core reality that we universally share makes it easily possible, converting conflict into amity coupled with broad tolerance.

Andy pointed out that we think of scientists as knowing their subject, but they are actually peering into the unknown. I added that if we are sure we already know a subject, then we don't really look for anything new. It's the humility of being aware of our ignorance that prompts us to learn and grow. We could also add that gurus are expected, like scientists, to be experts in their field, brimming with finalized knowledge. But having that kind of excessive self-esteem can be deadly. One of Nitya's best qualities was his continuing search for truth, and his frank acknowledgment of his delight in learning more.

This summer, Roby Rajan ran across an English language magazine in a Marxist bookstore in Kerala dedicated to Nitya Chaitanya Yati, and was kind enough to procure a copy for Deb and me, as well as Nancy Y. It mostly reprints some of Nitya's shorter essays, but there are a few articles assessing his role in the lives of those who knew him.

MD Nalapat makes an important distinction in the article *Humanising the Godman*:

India has no shortage of Godpersons, and indeed, the gifting of such personages to foreign lands is a principal export of our country. To their followers these individuals have divine qualities that place them far above humanity as a mass. Some—Nityananda comes to mind—may use such faith in order to live lifestyles that may seem far from spiritual. Others, such as Sri Sri Ravishankar or Mata Amritananda Mayi, ensure that institutions get created which help hundreds of thousands of individuals in their lives. Both are regarded as divine by devotees. However, a century ago, Sri Narayana Guru entered on a different trajectory, rejecting the notion that he was

endowed with special qualities. The Guru saw all human beings as equals of each other, and disregarded the barriers that practices such as caste had instituted in order to segregate human beings into self-sealing pools.

Sri Narayana Guru had a message that was magnificent in its very simplicity, and through his teachings and the example of his own frugal life changed the lives of millions by giving them the confidence that they could achieve anything other human beings could....

Nitya Chaitanya Yati was a seer-philosopher in the tradition of Sri Narayana Guru. He rejected any pomp or show, moving effortlessly among his many admirers both in India as well as abroad as one among them.

Those who sought to give him a more exalted status were gently corrected. He remained entirely faithful to the elite-less credo of his teacher, Sri Narayana Guru.

Very nice, MD! It is a curious paradox that by exalting a person as exceptional and different, which is meant to increase their mystique, their ability to influence ordinary people in meaningful ways is severely diminished. The crucial idea that we are all created in the same fashion despite all our superficial variations gives us hope that we can excel no matter what our circumstances. It is one of the key building blocks of the Gurukula philosophy, as well as of Vedanta itself.

We discussed this in the light of the *mahavakya* Jay brought up: *tat tvam asi*, That thou art. The meditation it inspires is on how we belong, not how badly we fall short. Deb reminded us that That comes first so that we merge into it. Nitya warned us at times that if it is translated, as it often is, as You are That, by putting *you* first there is a possibility of getting a swelled head. The glory of the Absolute is thus appended to your ordinary self. It is much better to append our ordinary self to the Absolute, to give That precedence. Since even a swelled ego is far less than one percent

of our total being, we are better off to let the infinitely greater part of ourselves do the heavy lifting.

One of my favorite parts of the Introduction is where it takes the image of the garland and extrapolates several sweet analogies from it. There is yet another garland image that deserves recognition, found in Narayana Guru's revision of the time-honored rope and snake metaphor. A meter long piece of old rope lying in semidarkness on a jungle path is essentially worthless, though it still has the power to elicit terror when only partially perceived. The unfortunate (and likely unintentional) implication is that ordinary reality is worthless, like a piece of discarded detritus. Narayana Guru, in verse 20 of *Atmopadesa Satakam*, changed the image to a *garland* mistaken for a snake. Therefore life is no longer meaningless and crude, it is gorgeously beautiful, something to love and admire. Yet in low light we may still mistake it for something lethal and terrifying. It's a subtle difference, but almost infinitely important. In the Guru's philosophy we are not trying to escape the tedium of life, which leads to entrenched spiritual poverty, but to embrace it in all its magnificence, and even enhance its beauty with our unique personal contribution. In the process we are raised to a more delightful level of functioning.

Andy shared some nice reminiscences about his time in India with Nitya, and hopefully later he will write some of it up to share in the notes. Possibly due to Berry's closing paragraph in the Foreword, Andy talked about the value of silence. Berry wrote:

As in all Nitya's works, *Psychology of Darsana Mala* is infused with his characteristic compassion for the student. His commentary and examination are never merely for the sake of intellectual fancy. His eye is always on direct realization of the unitive life, approached through the mind but not grasped by it.

Andy recalled a time when he was driving around with Nitya and they pulled into the Always Ashram. Nitya was immediately

surrounded by the Swamis, but there wasn't much talk. Silence permeated the place, situated as it is on the banks of a gorgeous river. Andy was profoundly moved, and tuned in to the underlying stillness and peace of existence. He felt this epitomized the spirit of South India. In his retelling you could get an almost audible sense of the bliss he experienced there.

Nitya radiated stillness, even in the midst of activity. I remembered how he was like a bastion of strength and solidity against which my mind flung its chaotic projections, seeking for a comparable steadiness. Having Nitya as a contrasting pole to my psyche heightened awareness of my own imbalances, which stood out like a fistful of sore thumbs. Of course, chafing about them only made them worse, so the trick was to let go of all resistance and surrender to the peace of the environment. Being in Fernhill with him provided ample opportunities to calm down and become centered. Once in a while it worked. Andy's special fondness for that day in Always was undoubtedly one of the occasions when he successfully merged into the silence for a time, an almost unbearably intense nothingness.

We did some review about subjects like the horizontal and vertical that we have covered extensively already, so I'll not repeat any of it now. Regarding dualities in general, Paul recalled a quote from Nitya that Spirit is self-actualized as Nature and Nature is self-realized as Spirit, unifying the dichotomy.

We will keep our fingers crossed that Andy shares his memory of witnessing Nitya channeling part of the sixth darsana of Darsanamala, which he related with gripping intensity. Speaking of channeling, one of the true channelings of information from elsewhere that I have personally experienced was selecting *That Alone* as the title for Nitya's book on Atmopadesa Satakam. Actually it selected itself, emerging from the depths to impress itself on my conscious mind. Over and over it has struck me as perfectly right. I was reminded of it again when reading from the Introduction, that in Darsanamala "the supreme teaching and

keynote of the whole [is] *tat eva sat*, “That alone exists.” It seems that once again our subject is That alone, or That Alone. Aum.

Part II

Nataraja Guru’s *An Integrated Science of the Absolute* (hereafter ISOA) includes the original Darsanamala commentary done by Swami Vidyananada under the direction of Narayana Guru himself. I will include a streamlined version with each verse as we go along. I would include all of it, except that the diacritics don’t copy properly, and the result is a total mess. I will try to fix most of the problems in what I do send. If you want the full version, which includes the original Sanskrit and a word by word translation, you can have recourse to the book. In the inimitable way the book was brought out, it is a challenge to find this essential part of each chapter, which is not listed in the Table of Contents. It appears right before the Epilogue of each chapter.

For now I’m only including Nataraja Guru’s introduction to this section.

The complexity of thought represented by these comments is astonishing. You really get the sense that Narayana Guru was speaking from the clouds, struggling mightily to put his ineffable insights into words. Then Nataraja Guru dedicated his whole soul to expressing the ideas in academic terms, and finally Guru Nitya threw his whole soul into making the import comprehensible to a dedicated seeker of truth in the modern, more casual sense. Thus the cream of three long lifetimes of concentrated contemplation has gone into the masterwork we are once again turning our attention to.

Nataraja Guru begins:

(A GARLAND OF VISIONS OF THE ABSOLUTE)

FOREWORD

What follows here is a transliteration and translation from the original Sanskrit of Narayana Guru's *Darsanamala*. It is followed by a short commentary by his disciple Swami Vidyananda who took instruction each day from Narayana Guru so that he could strictly adhere to his own commentary. Each day the Guru had the commentary read back to him for correction and approval. Those phrases which happened to be extraneous were deleted while the rest of the commentary received his approval.

The present writer has been an eye-witness to this co-operative effort between Narayana Guru and his disciple. The feature of teacher-disciple collaboration undoubtedly enhances the value of the commentary, however brief it might seem to anyone trying to understand the *Darsanamala*. Narayana Guru also tacitly indicates the double-sidedness of the responsibility for his work by a verse he wrote as *envoi* for the commentary, which reads:

Let this commentary called *didhiti* (gloss)
Coming from my disciple Vidyananda
Be looked upon graciously by the wise
As belonging to one of tender years.

The Guru's own hand is clearly visible in just those phrases where subtle epistemological or methodological aspects have to be initially glossed over, at least tentatively, in view of further clarifications such as what we are attempting in this book. The rest of the commentary has only an incidental value for us, and is not so important. We have taken some liberty with it, taking care, however, to put whatever additions we make within brackets. We have, on the other hand, tried to keep as close to the original when we suspected Narayana Guru's own handiwork, so as not to spoil the perennial value of the interpretations and intentions coming directly from him.

I hereby recognise my deepest gratitude to Narayana Guru as also my indebtedness to my fellow disciple, the late Swami Vidyananda, whose permission for following the broad lines of this commentary can only now be sought by way of courtesy.

Wherever further clarifications have been felt to be necessary, the present writer has taken care to throw some light on them, either in the **Prologue** of each chapter or in the **Epilogue**.

In the present commentary, translated by us, we have tried to adhere as strictly as possible to Narayana Guru's own words expressed through Swami Vidyananda. Swami Vidyananda claims no credit for himself in the matter of being responsible for this commentary and attributes almost the whole of it, as he openly states in the preface to the Malayalam edition, even the naming of the title, *didhiti* meaning 'throwing light', to Narayana Guru. He especially states that the Guru made the comments first and these, when put on paper, were then corrected more than once by him. In the light of these circumstances, it would be safe to assume that the purport of these comments, though not the presented form, belongs to Narayana Guru himself.

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For the record I'm including the bits of historical interest I wrote in the class invitations:

On checking up, we started our last journey through Nitya's superb *Psychology of Darsanamala* exactly ten years ago: September, 2005. It seems fitting that we revisit it next. Beverley is digitizing the book for us, and I've been proofreading the docs, and they are as amazing as we all remember. It's a perfect format for a weekly reflection on the depths of consciousness.

Darsanamala was Narayana Guru's last word on the evolution of consciousness. According to the introduction, it is "a thoroughgoing exposition of psychological states from the origin of individual consciousness to its extinction in nirvana." As always with Nitya, the emphasis of his commentary is on the practical application of the spiritual insights the work overflows with.

Regarding the Introduction:

This was my first major piece of writing, and it was as close to giving birth as a man is likely to get. I had gotten the historical details from Nitya, and had spent several years very carefully editing his notebook. My personal life was under terrific stress. All these factors swirled around in me for several months before I took pen and paper (no computers yet!) out to the garden, knowing that time was running out. Nitya had written to tell me it was now or never. After a while, very much like having birth contractions, the whole thing began to spew out. With some cleaning up, it emerged fully ready for the press.

My weekly class notes are a kind of mini version of this, though more like giving birth to tadpoles. It would be an insult to those who really do bear children to compare those minor productions with what they go through. But this first big effort—bigger than me, for sure—gave me a faint sense of what actual childbirth might be like. I am happy that this child, riding on the shoulders of Nitya's amazing accomplishment, continues to frolic in the rarified atmosphere surrounding the Gurukula and its friends.

At the time of writing this was Nitya's magnum opus. Now there are several. I don't know if it's fair to have three or four magnum opuses, but it's nonetheless true. How lucky we are!

This is a serious study. Please give it your concentrated attention and, as always, share your best thoughts and questions when possible.

Part III

As those of us with firsthand memories of Nitya roar toward oblivion, it is worthwhile to set down whatever we can about the life of the extraordinary gentleman we happened to be associated with. Here's my best recollection of Andy's story in class about the production of the present work:

Andy was in London in 1981 with Nitya, who was dictating some of the Darsanamala to Nancy, who, I think it is safe to say, has taken more dictation than the rest of the Gurukula combined. Andy remembers waking up at five o'clock, which he considers an ungodly hour. He grabbed a cup of coffee and went into Nitya's room. Nitya was sitting crosslegged on his bed, with his long hair and beard flowing out in all directions, like a sunflower. Andy was instantly aware that the guru was looking straight at him but not seeing him. His gaze was boring right through him. It was as if he was possessed. He began pouring out a long, intense, highly coherent exposition covering the subject of the hour. As was so often the case, the result emerged quite close to its finalized form. After this spine-tingling exposition, Nitya relaxed, resumed an air of normalcy, and quietly said, "Okay." Andy stumbled from the room in a daze, certain he had been a witness to a transcendental experience, some kind of celestial transmission.

Nancy Y. has kindly added her recall of the time:

It was 1981 (March?), after we (Guru, Andy, Peter, myself, and some of the time, Kamalabai Genard!!) were in the Netherlands for the seminar Guru was a presenter for. More than once after we left Portland (where he did a lot of the work on DM) he mentioned that he was not yet done but that the time wasn't right. Then, when we were in London, it was. We worked on it quite intensely. That was just before I came here and the Island Gurukula Aranya story began to unfold.

I (Scott) want to second Andy's story. Most nonfiction writing is more or less academic, a painstaking compilation of other peoples' ideas in a comprehensible format. Nitya's style of the direct production of original material is quite different. It's what the word *darsana* indicates, actually. He would do his homework (boy, did he!), saturating himself in the subject matter,

but when the time came to give his talk he would bring his unique take on it from out of the depths of his being. Not only was it astonishing how well-organized the result usually was, but there was the added thrill imparted to us of bearing witness to that process of accessing the wisdom of his inner self. It communicated a tacit teaching on how to tune in to the atman, that level of genius we all share but routinely ignore.

Later in life, in his classes (almost always one in the morning and one in the evening) Nitya would usually sit very relaxed with his eyes closed and talk softly and slowly. Earlier in his life he looked just like the topnotch teacher he was, with his charming manner and surefooted presentation, animatedly gesturing and drawing diagrams on blackboards (we still had them!), all the while radiating electric needles of intensity. Back then he once used the analogy of a light fixture: he pointed to one in the ceiling and said, “I am like this light bulb. Without electricity, nothing happens. It is inert. Dark. But I have been formatted to transmit electricity into visible light when it flows into me. The electricity is supplied by my guru, Nataraja Guru.” This was in 1970, while Nataraja Guru was still alive, but we all felt sure that even after his death there was the same kind of symbiosis present.