

Darsanamala's verses are like Zen koans, each of them a potent seed for contemplation. Here are a few of the fertile ideas Narayana Guru wanted to share.

I. Adhyaropa Darsana – Cosmic Projection

The first darsana is titled Cosmic Projection. Cosmic projection refers to how we project the world in consciousness, not how the universe may have been projected in its putative beginning. Narayana Guru is not presenting a physics treatise on the creation of the universe, he is speaking of the dawning of personal awareness. It doesn't help us to evolve to know how the world was created, but it does to know how our interpretation comes to appear real to us.

This is hinted at by his saying that in the beginning the world was *like a dream* filled with vasanas (latent memories), which are what we nowadays call genetic potentials. If dreams and memories are present, the ultimate beginning must have already occurred, if there ever was one, but the beginning of our awareness is brought about by a kind of vital urge or a will to actualize that causes those potentials to begin to manifest as an individual being. The process by which our sense of self and our world view emerges from an unformed state and becomes fixed and useful is a vast study in its own right.

The Guru does not accept that consciousness is somehow a product of inert matter. However it came to be, the world springs into existence when it is cognized by conscious awareness. Whether or not something was present before there was consciousness to perceive it is irrelevant: a meaningless theoretical exercise, like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin.

If consciousness is seen to be the basis of creation, as held by Vedanta and agreed to by Narayana Guru in the Adhyaropa Darsana, then psychology precedes physics, and is the proper domain in which to search for a unified description of the universe. Later, in the Bhana Darsana, consciousness and world are seen to

be created simultaneously, and from that perspective consciousness and matter, or metaphysics and physics, are coexistent, dual aspects of the same stupendous event.

Physics eternally seeks for a cause to unify all the myriad effects we perceive. Perhaps someday it will work its way up to consciousness as the first cause. It's halfway there already, what with relativity, quantum indeterminacy, and perceptual uncertainty. Neuroscience is beginning to find evidence for ideas espoused for millennia by India's rishis.

When the Unformed takes a form, whatever the benefits may be, it becomes limited, relative. One important lesson we can take from this is that each individual has their own perspective, and none of them is absolute. All are partial, products of the selective structuring of their neurology. In this first darsana Narayana Guru gives us seven analogies that epitomize how the unmanifest becomes manifest, which we can use as keys to decode the workings of our mind, and in the process free up much more of our apparently limitless potential.

Neuroscientists have estimated that there are about 100 billion neural connections in each cc of the human brain, roughly equal to the number of stars in our galaxy, and they are continuously hard at work below our conscious radar. We could be getting measurably smarter every day of our lives and still barely scratch the surface of the vast intelligence we possess but are unaware of. We can instead make a quantum leap by realizing the nearly infinite power residing in our brains, respecting it, and inviting it to teach us.

It is a useful methodology to treat this unknown part of ourselves almost as a foreign entity and make an appeal to it. This is how nonreligious types can come to grips with terms like God and Lord: they represent our unknown depths, and calling upon them can open us up to their domain. Since the territory is unknown and unknowable, we can't be sure what we are reaching out to. Divine images are a symbolic way of acknowledging we know very little and would like to know more. If we think, "Well,

there's obviously none of that, no God," we will remain isolated in our petty egos. The discomfort we feel in addressing an imaginary god is simply our ego refusing to accept its true, much reduced amplitude. Whenever we substitute a prepackaged concept, we run the risk of remaining closed off to our inner wealth. Of course, God and Lord can easily become prepackaged concepts also. That's why the Guru prefers the Absolute, because it eludes definition. The *atman* or capital S Self is meant to indicate the Absolute as it manifests, including within the individual.

To avoid solipsism, we must posit an Absolute or unknown ground from which all our limited manifestations arise.

There are plenty of ways we can open up to our vast potential. What spoils the game is when we—intentionally or unintentionally—bow to a prefabricated *idea* of what “the Lord” or “Nature” has to offer. That's what fundamentalists, both religious and materialist, do, and it's called superimposition. When we superimpose comprehensible concepts onto the mystery of totality, we inevitably get into conflicts over them with those who have superimposed different concepts. These concepts are our idols, and Narayana Guru would like us to admit they are limited and allow for the existence of other attempts to describe the indescribable. If we can still our mind, with its propensity to superimpose concepts onto the underlying reality, and simply listen—contemplate—we will not only be more available to intelligently assess the present, we can begin to intuit new and valuable insights. Polymath and arch-materialist Isaac Asimov named the scientific version of this intuitive process the Eureka Phenomenon, and suggested it was the real source of scientific, artistic and literary advances.

Cosmic projection means we have fixed notions that we superimpose on our experience, which converts fresh experience into stale echoes of previous experiences. The aim of spirituality, as well as the enlightened scientific mentality, is to free ourselves from the stultifying conditioning that is an inevitable part of being alive. It means that, despite being utterly convinced of what we believe, we have to let go of that conviction part of the time. It is

only useful up to a point, and after that it becomes a hindrance, and possibly even dangerous.

The pathological outcome of superimposing trite notions onto a grand universe is indeed “terrible and empty of content, like a phantom city,” in the Guru’s words. Tap into the popular culture some time. You’ll meet projection after projection of meaningless “entertainment” designed to instill despair and promote consumerism: truly hell on earth. Narayana Guru was shocked by the rustic world of South India at the beginning of the twentieth century. It’s hard to imagine how he would describe the civilization of our time, so much more chaotic, ugly, degraded and heartless. He was convinced we are equally capable of creating a beautiful and peaceful society if we choose to.

The first step is to realize our cherished convictions are ultimately false. When people lose faith in their illusions, it can feel like falling into a pit of despair if they don’t have a healthy alternative. That is precisely what the Guru will be offering.

Narayana Guru wanted everyone to relinquish their allegiance to their phantom cities, the belief systems they cling to out of fear and immaturity, and discover the Absolute ground of being, which ratifies our existence with an undeniable and benign certainty. Unless that happens, humanity will continue to be the most destructive force the biosphere has ever unleashed, brutal to ourselves and devastating to everything we touch.

II. Apavada Darsana – Truth by Consistent Refutation of the False

Regardless of your preferred belief system, at least the world as we *perceive* it is an evolute of consciousness. It is a play staged in our brain, concocted of nerve impulses set in motion by sensory stimulation. The input resembles an immense blast of static, like the readings of a radio telescope or a television tuned to a channel that’s off the air. The brain selects the most salient vibrations, and structures them in a way our feeble consciousness can comprehend. It supplies the light, the color, the shapes and sounds,

the feelings based on value assessment, and cobbles them all together into a very convincing display that we perpetually mistake for reality.

The “moving picture show” of our mind’s eye is a miracle among miracles, expertly tailored to match each viewer’s predilections. No wonder it is so hard to surrender! We would rather staunchly stand by it and defend it to the death. But by defending our personal sound and light show we exclude not only other people’s perspectives, but new input that could make our own opinions more enjoyable all around.

What the rishis knew and modern science is discovering is that the world we perceive is in our mind. Quite literally, then, if we hate something we are hating ourself, because the thing we hate (or love or injure or ignore) is a figment of our highly developed imagination. It is not “out there” at all. Whatever’s out there is something else.

One of the dualistic ways we have learned to conceive of things is as the effect of previous causes. This violates the unity at the core of being. Narayana Guru points out that from this perspective every cause is the effect of a prior cause, and this can recede ad infinitum. Therefore, everything is an effect, and a world of only effects must be unreal. After receding all the way to an imagined beginning, we postulate the Absolute as the original cause. Materialists have tried to substitute the Big Bang for the God, the Big Banger, but now the evidence is mounting that the recent Big Bang also has a prior cause, and there were earlier Bangs.

It is of course absurd to believe the world is unreal, because here it is. We all experience it. So we are dependent on an Absolute and immediate first cause, whether we like to call it that or not. It cannot be distant in time, or it would have to be infinitely distant, which is the same as not existing at all. The Cause, then, is eternally present in the now. It is merely our limited perception that interferes with the connection.

Many of the ills and problems that duality brings about are the false attributions of cause. We don't really know what causes what, but our belief systems condition us to accept certain "facts" that are highly dubious. The course of history is a litany of true beliefs that were shown to be patently absurd by the next generation. The Guru's stance is that replacing one false system with another is a futile pastime: we should move instead to a unitive perspective that is open and dynamic. It takes an infinite number of steps to arrive at a fully enlightened perspective, so rather than approaching it via the accumulation of knowledge we have to make a direct leap into the core of the Absolute. We accomplish that by letting go of our false attachments.

The Isa Upanishad hints at this tyranny of ideas in its mantras 9 and 11:

Into blinding darkness
enter they who worship ignorance.
And into still greater darkness, as it were,
enter those who delight in knowledge itself.

One who knows both of these together,
knowledge and ignorance,
having overcome death with ignorance,
enjoys immortality with knowledge.

Direct experience is unmediated. The intent of the yogi is to develop a transparent vision that does not add interpretive layers on to direct experience. This doesn't have to be a fulltime program—it adds richness to a life that is also mediated with intelligent interpretations. It provides the hub for our interpretations to revolve around, keeping them harmonious. Even a little of the practice is very helpful in clarifying the mind.

It is relatively easy for us to note the absurdities in the belief systems of other people, but much harder to critically examine our own. The Guru directs us to forgo the easy path and confront our

own favorite fallacies, based on a unitive understanding grounded in the potent neutrality of the Absolute.

Yes, in Verse 5 Narayana Guru is politely calling us stupid if we treat our relativist projections as absolute. More than stupid: that is how we are led to abandon our good sense and pit ourself against everyone who doesn't share our delusions. Fanatics take their unexamined positions as gospel; yogis turn the focus back on themselves and their inner connection with the totality, for purposes of liberation.

III. Asatya Darsanam – A Vision of Nonexistence

To be honest, the second, third and fourth darsanas combine to describe one powerful deconstructive effort. It is enlivened by the Guru's perspective, as someone who has put into practice what he is preaching. Part of the reason he instills such confidence is that he is not a hypocrite, and his advice is not theoretical. He is describing what he came to know by his own incisive diligence.

Scientists continue to be baffled by the human mind, which appears to have no location. It's only a virtual state. Narayana Guru also found no mind in his penetrations of the Self, hence "mind is nowhere to be seen," of the first verse.

In our state of ignorance "all worlds are imagined." If our ordinary mentality is ignorance, what are we ignorant of? What is the truth? Obviously, reimagining a better world will not lead to realization, but that's the normal route. The pitched battles of different creeds and disciplines are about their conflicting images of the world's structure, and even the peaceable ones are mainly striving to perfect their definition of the world. Only a few follow the Guru's lead and strive to break out of their conceptual boundaries completely.

Without a dedicated effort, we will easily be contained within our mental parameter. Breakthroughs are rare, shocking, and asocial, even antisocial.

The true nature of the Self is bliss, ananda. This means when we are not blissful, our true nature is veiled from us. The unhappy state is meant to be rectified: unhappiness is the incentive for us to seek truth. Unfortunately, in the modern world we mostly find ways to medicate or otherwise divert our attention from this natural prompting, the outgrowth of which is chronic depression in place of our natural happiness.

Mind is a nonexistent but apparent entity we presume. Narayana Guru saw what neuroscientists are beginning to visualize with their instruments: that what we perceive is a magic show produced in awareness. If we get some distance on it, it looks like a painting, in other words, like an arbitrary interpretive arrangement made to please the viewer. We never know the scene as it is, because we are condemned to view our interpretation of it, and everyone else is in the same pickle. Our task is to refine and normalize our interpretation so it has a universal basis rather than clinging to our personal preferences.

Realizing this allows us to expand out of the personal and into the universal. This frees us to be more effective, because the bonds of our limited personality are broken.

IV. Maya Darsana – A Vision of Non-being Beingness

Manifested things come and go, are born and die. When they are here they are as real as anything gets, but then they disappear, first leaving memory traces and then nothing. They become unreal. Maya is what is both real and unreal, in the sense of emerging from and remerging into the primal soup. If there was no underlying reality, life would truly be chaotic, but apparently there is something that holds it all together. There is a continuity to the whole that defies linear understanding.

We are going to learn that instead of imagining that our happiness is dependent on the things that come and go, it is actually intrinsic to our nature, and those things derive their

apparent radiance from us. If we turn to the source within instead of its reflection without, our happiness will become steady, instead of fluctuating with the availability of the things we cherish. We can and should still dance with the things we love, but our love will be vastly expanded to include everything.

It is apparently against a basic law of the universe to compose a Vedantic work without at some point bringing in the metaphor of the pot and the clay. For many years I would nod off whenever it came up. But if we keep in mind the symbolism that clay represents the Absolute as substance and pot means a specific manifestation, particularly YOU, then it is more interesting and makes more sense. The world around us is like an amorphousness bending and twisting into a ceaseless series of morphs, forms, which are briefly stable and then transmute into something else. The pot and the clay analogy describes this process in more unitive terms than almost any other metaphor, accounting for its continual resurfacing.

When the unfurling of our life goes well we picture a benign God or Providence, and when it gets ugly we bring in the Devil or pitiless Fate. We love to anthropomorphize. But basically it's inscrutable: the possibilities are indeterminate. As the seed grows into a tree, good and bad things happen to give it its shape and dimensions. We can retrospect and notice a lot of coherence in our unfoldment, but we can only guess and hope as to its future course. In the present we have a severely limited but important role to play.

A balanced yogic approach means we should stay poised midway between leading and following, open to the next possibility. We need to plan and strive and set up programs in order for anything to happen, but at the same time too much planning and programming makes serendipity impossible, makes new directions impossible. This is another arena in which to find the happy median. We don't want to be bound by our previous decisions if they become outdated, yet we want to accomplish and fulfill what we find rewarding.

There are major events in our lives that start as a point source and grow to have earthshaking consequences. It is valuable to take a look at them, if only to open up to the wonder of an invisible impetus directing the course of our life. Equally present are courses we once considered highly promising that came to nothing.

Each of us has many innate tendencies, called *vasanas* in Sanskrit. They are like seeds buried in the manure of our psyches, waiting for opportunities to grow and actualize their potentials. There is a mysterious mating of opportunities and potentials that has made us what we are, and which makes the world what it is. It is done with such finesse that it looks accidental, haphazard even. Yet it is a seamless, flowing miracle. To participate in it is the greatest wonder. There is no blessing greater than this. *Tat tvam asi*—That is what you are.

V. Bhana Darsana – A Vision of Awareness

Here we begin to study the way the mind functions in earnest. There are four basic states of mind: wakeful, dream, deep sleep and transcendental. Wakeful and dream are referred to as the horizontal positive and negative respectively, while deep sleep and the transcendental comprise the vertical axis from negative to positive. The Maya Darsana dealt with “what is” and the Bhana deals with “what ought to be.” “What is” refers to the horizontal factors, and “what ought to be” comprises the progression through time along the vertical parameter. Goal orientation is vertical and its actual implementation is horizontal. Integrating the horizontal and vertical elements is the essence of a spiritual life.

The first division of awareness Narayana Guru makes is into generic and specific, and it is here that we can go seriously wrong. The two categories should be complementary: the generic should express the truth of the sum total of specifics, and each specific should be an integral part of the generic understanding. Quite often they will be found to be out of joint. Examples are legion of the disconnect between them, but here’s one that springs to mind.

Most everyone agrees that education aims to develop strong, independent people, and it is only natural that there are almost as many methods as there are teachers. Yet we tend to believe that our way of teaching is the best, and other methods fall short. This leads to competition and promotion of the most popular strategies. When fixed programs are instituted, the focus turns to books and tests and required information, and the enthusiasm of raising the level of discourse is damped down. Programmed education becomes a straitjacket that kills the spirit instead of releasing it to elysian fields. Therefore specific directives should be minimized, kept subordinate to and harmonized with the overall goals.

A dualistic thinker believes that educational goals are achieved by incremental steps, and argues over the steps. A unitive thinker focuses on the goal, the joy of the subject matter, and does not employ a rigid format. Unitive teachers are free to respond to their students' varied interests, and their very enthusiasm draws the students in. We all can recall those rare but exceptional teachers who inspired us to love knowledge by the delight they themselves took in it, as well as the deadly boredom of classes where the teacher was only going through the prescribed motions.

The generic I at its most idealized approaches the Absolute, as in the great dictum (*mahavakya*) "I am the Absolute." Specific items forever demand our attention and cause us to forget the generality from which they spring. The pot makes us forget the substance from which it was made, and our body causes us to forget our unlimited aspect of the optimized I. Lesson plans cause us to lose sight of the lesson. Hence the gurus remind us to meditate on the general and the specific and how they interrelate, in order to free ourselves from self-imposed limitations.

Normally we focus on specific items all the time, and this is acceptable if we can remain flexible and disentangled. But we very often suffer a kind of mesmerization in our relationship with things. Our outlook becomes increasingly exclusive and fixated, and the result is spiritually disastrous.

Somewhere along the line we learn to believe that a specific set of behaviors or actions will put us in touch with reality or the divine, and all other behaviors are worthless. Moreover, all people who use those other methods are mistaken, and often enough are condemned to eternal torment. The very least insight we can draw from this darsana is to become generous in our tolerance of different methods and techniques used to approach the ideal, however it is defined. If we take it farther, we can realize that such mannerisms have nothing whatsoever to do with spiritual life. Our very faith in them turns our awareness away from the present, which is chock full of love and amazement and opportunity, and directs it into a dead realm of imaginary worshipful pleasures.

We may begin with clever insights and a degree of understanding, but if we take pride in our cleverness we slip out of the flow and are instead content to bring up the same old insights over and over again. Almost immediately they lose their efficacy. Living life requires presence in the present, rather than obediently following a blueprint for well-crafted behavior.

VI. Karma Darsana – Cosmo-Psychological Functionalism

Contemplation does not always have to be abstract, it should also address transactional issues that can and do have an impact on our well being. Let me quote Nitya from his autobiography:

Realization comes not by seeing everything as unreal but by making every moment real enough to love and adore it. (L&B 422)

A major part of spiritual life is first realizing that we are bound in many ways that we ordinarily don't much think about, and then finding ways to break free of that bondage to achieve greater and greater expressions of freedom. As neuroscientists now know, cortical consciousness is merely the last stage of readiness for action, and the vast majority of the groundwork takes place before we are aware of it. If our sense of self is merely the tip of an

iceberg foolishly believing it is in charge of our destiny, is our freedom merely imaginary? Where then is true freedom to be sought? Free will has become an endangered species in our brave new world. Where once they bravely advocated free will in the face of religious intolerance, scientists are now advocates of implacable fate.

Going a few steps beyond current neuroscience, Narayana Guru asks us to reimagine the world as unfolding through its own spiritual impetus and not as the clumsy result of individual plotting and planning. The difference is he knows the Absolute as a benign force and not a hostile intruder in our petty domain. Once we have aligned with it, many good things happen. We can drop the anxiety of worrying whether what we intend will succeed and how much we have to push to bring it about, and become more like midwives to the natural birth of the next thing, and the next. It's all going to happen anyway, but we can attend it and be a part of the fun.

Another benefit of changing our perspective is that we become much more open to opportunities. When we have a predetermined course of action and hold to it, all that can happen is the fulfillment of our expectations. But what about all the things we don't expect? If we dread the unknown possibilities and try to block them out, we will choke off most of what our own unconscious is preparing for us. Who knows how many serendipitous events have offered themselves to us, only to be brushed aside as inimical to our mission of the moment?

In the first verse of the Karma Darsana the Self is described as detached and self-luminous, mystically evocative of the sky and the sun. The sky symbolizes the Void, the qualitylessness of Absolute. The sun, on the other hand, exemplifies how the Absolute transmutes that emptiness into action. It radiates powerfully its full spectrum of benefits like light and warmth, but there is no motivation as we understand it. It just does it. The sun does not seek or take credit for what it does. It goes on pouring out its very essence, to the benefit of all creatures great and small.

This is highly instructive of how we should act as individuals. When we dig down to our core, it is empty in a sense. But that emptiness is paradoxically full of potentials, of vasanas or incipient memories. As those potentials become actualized, they grow into abilities and characteristics which are visible and tangible. If we allow ourselves to be who we are, we radiate those qualities into the world as loving beams of light. What a terrific scheme of “divine manifestation” that is!

VII. Jnana Darsana – Consciousness and its Modifications

The Jnana Darsana is placed between the Karma and Bhakti Darsanas because that is where the transition from duality to unity occurs. In karma, action, duality is necessary and appropriate. In bhakti, conjunction with Light, duality must be transcended for the conjunction to be possible. Jnana, intelligence, provides the bridge, and like a bridge there is two way traffic between the opposite banks. At times we act in the dual world of transactions and at other times we center in unitive contemplation. As we go farther through Darsanamala, action and contemplation are brought together in Yoga, until each complements and infuses the other. Lastly, we merge progressively into the Source in the Nirvana Darsana.

We are motivated by the conviction that if we just understand everything exactly as it is, it will bring about some kind of breakthrough. History is the unfolding drama of discovery, of the gradual improvement of our awareness. Final truth does not seem to be attainable, however. Fortunately for us, life does not depend on our level of understanding it, or we would have died out long ago. Still, our partial understanding marks our separation from the flow of existence. So rather than seeing our knowledge as leading us somewhere, we should see it as a game we are continuously playing, on a stable field. Otherwise, we vacate our place in the scheme of things, deferring our joy until we come to a final conclusion. Part of us is desperate to live conclusively, so we

attach ourselves to various isms that claim to represent truth. Needless to say, this marks our downfall as independent monads of the Absolute.

Traditional spirituality is highly suspicious of the intellect, because it can be yoked to very dubious propositions. But the intellect is also our primary defense against the dubious propositions put forward by religious schemers. We are impelled to surrender to something greater than ourselves, to pitch in wholeheartedly to some meaningful enterprise. The world is filled with various grades of enterprise, all proclaiming their superiority. Sorting out where to put our energy should not be left to chance.

The final six verses of Chapter XVII of the Bhagavad Gita describe *aum tat sat* as designating the Absolute. In the tenth verse of the Jnana Darsana Narayana Guru describes this mantra as indicating the union of the Self and the Absolute. For this union to happen, the excess will of the ego must be curbed. Indian philosophy distinguishes ego and intellect, while the West generally does not. Here the reasoning intellect is the tool to bring the ego down to its proper size, so it can be a harmonious participant rather than a howling demagogue.

VIII. Bhakti Darsana – Contemplative Devotion

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

clear the irrelevant details away from my life in order to have time for this” is a stumbling block to be discarded.

Of course, spontaneous raptures cannot be peddled, so in a commercial environment it's the long chains of effort that can be profitably franchised, and the longer the better. Our school training of studying hard to pass tests prepares us perfectly to fall for the lures of spiritual marketing.

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

Individual items of joyful experience are temporary, but the joy itself is eternal, just as music is eternal but each hearing is unique. Hopefully we aren't so foolish as to think that we have to reproduce certain specific conditions in order to be happy, and yet we fall for that illusion in more subtle ways, believing we have to structure our lives in a certain manner in order to have joy. We seek to repeat what made us happy before. The present Darsana should be fully convincing that joy is our “native place” and we are

naturally conjoined with it all the time. We don't need to make bliss happen—it is always happening and available to us. Knowing this, the ups and downs of everyday life will be emblazoned with the radiance of our inner suns.

The idea is to attend to those experiences that are joyful to us, but instead of longing for their repetition, to allow them to stabilize us in our vertical core. As we philosophically generalize the specific experiences, the arena of our joy expands exponentially. This is the secret of bhakti.

IX. Yoga Darsana – Transpersonal Union

Yoga is generally thought of as a program leading to conjunction with light, or bhakti, yet Narayana Guru puts it after. There is a subtle correction implied in this. As we have said, enlightenment is not dependent on any stepwise program. Yoga in the highest sense is unitive action, the seamless coupling of contemplation and activity, and not a graded series of techniques. After we are restored to our true inner light, yoga naturally takes place.

Yoga is our native state. When a rift appears between our inner convictions and what we do, it produces unhappiness. This should provide the incentive to reunite our actions and our beliefs, but this is apparently a well-kept secret. In place of yoga, of bringing our actions into line with our ideals, we medicate our miseries or try to distract ourselves from them with entertainment. We abandon our ideals, and consequently the quality of our actions begins to decay.

Everyone gets depressed. It's a normal and natural state of human beings as we cycle endlessly up and down, and it is one of the most important incentives to seek truth for enabling release from our suffering. Only in the last few decades has it become viewed as a terrifying disease to be squelched at all costs. Not coincidentally, the drug companies that make billions of dollars peddling pills of dubious efficacy are the prime purveyors of that

viewpoint. If depression “unmans” us, then we should find a way back to who we are, and each person will have a unique struggle to do so that is their personal spiritual quest. The sight of the One Beyond, meaning an all-absorbing interest uniquely tailored to our own value vision, lifts us out of depression and even out of recession.

The Yoga Darsana proper begins with a structural orientation:

That which always unites and also gets united with *cidatma*, which is in the form of restraining mind, that is praised as yoga. (IX, 1)

The restraint spoken of here is in part a tip of the hat to Patanjali, who literally wrote the book on yoga. *Cidatma* is the Self that is consciousness in essence, otherwise known as the reasoning Self. So we have an image of a bipolar affiliation between the limited mind and the total consciousness, brought about through a form of restraint. With Narayana Guru the restraint is not via any mechanical system of exercises, but through a mutual attraction that naturally leads the mind to withdraw from any and all obstacles.

To highlight the distinction between more morose forms of restraint and the Guru’s ecstatic version, Nitya speaks extensively of *lila*, divine sport, in his commentary, which is one of his very finest, by the way. He assures us that sport is the best model of yoga. In play there is no extraneous force involved. We are effortlessly drawn into a wholehearted participation in what we love. While we play our games we are fully absorbed in them, and when they are over we pass on to the next game without regret.

X. Nirvana Darsana – A Vision of Extinction

The final darsana marks the progressive extinction of consciousness in the total fullness or total emptiness of the Absolute. As consciousness enters in the first darsana, it exits in

the last. Life is not a linear progression to its terminus, but every bit of the journey—every flower of the garland— is important. The goal, so to speak, is to be fully present now, rather than deferring our experience until later.

Nirvana is often taken to be the goal of realization, but not here. Each darsana is valuable in its own right. Ends and means are converged. Every effect is also a cause. If we transpose our happiness to a future state like heaven or worldly success, we will basically miss out on our life, which, no matter what the claims, might be our only moment in the sun.

Much of the popular version of spirituality is about escape, seeking absence. There is a powerful attraction to getting away from our problems, whatever they may be, and for injured or abused people it may seem the only option.

Because of the stresses that beset us, we have to first distance ourselves from them in order to gather ourselves back together. If our difficulties are grave enough we begin to imagine that if we didn't exist, life would be much more pleasant. In any case, we have to find peace first of all. The hermit fantasy is a familiar aspect of insular spirituality, of an unwillingness to cope with the present. In rare cases escape by itself could produce a full cure, but not very often. Most of us learn much more from meaningful interactions with others, once we begin to properly know ourselves. That's what Narayana Guru keeps underlining: the greatest "escape" is to be here now, to find truth within existence.

There is a huge industry built around relieving suffering, or promising to. Come away, give up your daily chores, cut yourself away from society. It's very appealing. But Nitya and his forebears, including Krishna of the Gita, were also teaching *presence*, in addition to absence. It may be that presence grows out of absence. We retire to develop wisdom so we can be more available, more present. We still strive for absence from our faults and intractable problems, but not from our value to our surroundings. For those who have recovered themselves, the practice is to become more in tune with the world and improve our

capabilities to interact with it. Opting out is tragic. It is the child's immediate response to a hurt ego. When a child's ego recovers from an insult, they eagerly get back in the game. But if it is battered long enough, the child's spirit is defeated, and they only seek surcease of sorrow. They may even commit suicide to escape the pain. Or they continue to live, but with an unbridgeable abyss between life and self.

Narayana Guru's teachings direct us to restore the connection: to develop presence, heightened involvement, in whatever we do. We don't have to follow a formula or change our lifestyle, but only engage in what we do as completely as possible. We aim to be as alive as we can, if only at odd moments, when our focused attention is brought to bear.

Perhaps the greatest appeal of Narayana Guru's philosophy is that it is totally down to earth. There is no separation between the exalted state and us: there is no special place to go or thing to do. We live realization right where we are, in our daily activity. He assures us we are already realized. So many great teachers have an other-worldly air. He does too, and yet it's combined with a fiery intensity that pressures us to wake up and live, exactly where we stand. It's a philosophy that can have a fantastic impact on our life if we have ears to hear with.

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Plus this from Nitya's Taittiriya Upanishad commentary, for the Nirvana Darsana:

The Absolute can be conceived as one which brings forth countless millions of pleasures and pains. That fecund possibility is called *vibhuti*, specialized manifestations of the Divine. In the Bhagavad Gita, this is exemplified and described as *Vibhuti Yoga*. Then one sees the special manifestation of the Absolute as the fragrance of earth, the taste in water, form in fire, the touch of

wind, the encompassing of *akasa*, the stability of an oak, and the all-consuming fire of truth. In so many ways this is a coupling of two exercises in the path of the seeker, that is, to decide what one's sustaining intrinsic values are, called *svadharmanistha*, and out of the emanation of relativistic values, choosing to be with all the auspicious qualities which bespeak the glory of the Absolute, called *samasthakalyanaguna*, the plethora of auspicious qualities. When such kind of awareness of unity becomes a steady state of wisdom, a person becomes blessed with an attitude of maintaining their poise and sensitivity. Arriving at such a state is called *avyakrita*, which is an imperturbed state of only seeing the One. When one becomes established in the retention of unity, which is imperturbably held as one's own true foundation, the state of the *brahmavit*, the state of all as brahman comes to stay.

After attaining that blessed state, if one retains a fragment of ego for the purpose of acting as an agent of true knowledge, a precipitator of goodness, and a bringer of beauty to the world, then that person is called a *brahmavid*. A further excellence can come to that same person identified with the perfection of the Absolute. That is the state of *brahmavidvilashyam*. This ultimate state of the supremely peaceful and blissful brings an aloneness that has no comparison. This aloneness is called *kaivalya*. When one remains in that state of aloneness, there is no second to shake that unity. Coming to the state of being permanently established in the Absolute is described as *brahmavidvarishthan*, where there is only the pure existence of the pure knowledge of the *summum bonum*, *sat-chit-ananda*. Thereafter, there is no repeated life and death. That is termed as *natpuravritti*, there is no return. On attaining such a state, the original ego, *aham*, is fully transformed into the absolute state of consciousness in which there is no relativistic blemish. The state of that being is *aham brahma asmi*. This peak experience of imperiential identity is ananda.