

## Death and Transformation: Krishna in the Sky with Diamonds by Scott Teitsworth,

At the 2023 Association of the Anthropology of Consciousness I attended, the topic was Death and Transformation. A lot was said about death, both physical and spiritual, but not much about transformation.

It made me wonder, what does transformation mean, in terms of human consciousness, and why does it matter? Is it something we should care about?

Whether stimulated by near-death experiences or philosophical enthusiasm, transformation has to mean something more far-reaching than orderly, evolutionary change, or meeting reasonable expectations: it implies a quantum leap in consciousness that has a permanent impact on the entire life of the leaper.

Holding the conference at The Chrysalis hotel set just that kind of tone. Metamorphosis in Lepidoptera is a perfect analogy for the spiritual uplifting of consciousness.

When a caterpillar has taken in its fill of nutritional input, it weaves around itself a protective cocoon or chrysalis, where it is safe to dissolve into a uniform mush, and then reform into an elegant creature capable of winging through the atmosphere. Most humans, when we get up from our fainting couch or meditation seat, remain practically unchanged, like a cocoon breaking open and the same old caterpillar crawling out. Why is that? What prevents us from achieving substantive enhancements from the application of our knowledge, our mental nourishment?

The short answer is the ego, the human go-to management system that tends to be ultra-conservative in sticking to familiar territory—even if you're not a conservative. Real change requires what is glibly called “ego death,” which is actually nothing more than a restraint of the ego's domineering, allowing the other 99% of the brain to participate. The ego needs to be swept out of the

way temporarily for meaningful transformation to occur, and its overdramatic sensibility pegs it as death.

Patanjali, the codifier of Yoga as a transformative system, tells us that the seeds of our habitual actions and choices will continue to bind us until we are both willing and able to let them go. This is the “moment of truth” in Yoga, and to the ego it is as frightening as ceasing to exist. If we insist on holding onto our self-definitions, we can maintain an exemplary life and “do” yoga and meditation all we want, but we will remain caterpillars. That’s the ego’s preference, and why the world is filled with spiritual pretense. Caterpillars sitting around boasting about the flights they will someday take, over lunch.

Our personality is a strategy devised in infancy, in order to to have our needs met by accommodating our caregivers, and we continually refine its basic template as we get older. Since many of those “improvements” are concessions to outside authority, both positive and negative, eventually we become significantly alienated from our core self, which has been bartered away in the process. When our tactics fail to keep bringing us happiness and contentment, we cast about for what we’ve lost.

At a crucial stage of this “mid-life crisis,” which can kick in at any age, we are forced by misery to decide whether to dutifully maintain the psychological schism as a well-behaved cog in the wheel, or to seek a way to reclaim our authentic nature, where the joy of being resides. An easy out is to blame other people for our problems, evading the demands of critical self-examination, but there is a much better option.

The transformation we secretly hunger for is to have our authenticity restored by rediscovering what we know in our heart to be true about ourselves: we are destined to soar like a bird through infinite skies of consciousness. We can have a sense of this freedom in advance because so many others have achieved it, and left us messages of encouragement.

Remaining a caterpillar forever is an unnatural, two-pronged process: we semi-intentionally restrain our inherent destiny while society explicitly restrains it, and both forms of soul-death have to be accommodated. To achieve metamorphosis, it's important to reduce our personal inhibitions first, because we have ready access to them. Social injustice gives way only very grudgingly, if at all. We can't hope to fix everything in the world in one lifetime, but we can figure out workarounds, and possibly have a modest impact. Regardless, it is essential to not postpone tending to our wellbeing until the outside world is fixed, because it never will be.

Ultimately, healthy people make for healthy societies. It might also work the other way around, but only if you're lucky enough to have a healthy society to begin with.

By accessing our authentic being, we align with the historical currents of all successful cultures, and these days we have the opportunity to learn about all of them, for support. They share a common core clothed in a variety of descriptions, and we need to make sure we don't sacrifice the former for the latter by presuming one costume is right and all the others wrong. The world is beautified by a wide variety of butterflies.

Older cultures retain a vestige of mystical tradition aimed at reconnecting their members with their true nature, because when done with compassion and tolerance, it actually makes for the highest-quality citizens, able to participate energetically, on their own terms. Periodically these traditions become frozen and restrictive, yet they originally began in intense rites of passage, very often energized by psychedelic substances, and they can still be restored by them.

The current understanding of psychedelic medicines is that they temporarily suspend ego-dominance, allowing freer access to the whole brain, resulting in a restoration of our sensible and compassionate nature, along with a holistic connection to the web of life. It is a transformation in the sense of dissipating the storm clouds of trauma to reveal our sunlit birthright of love and joy, while engaging us with our innate propensities.

Because of its relevance to a well-adjusted and satisfactory life, I presented an overview of my book, *Krishna in the Sky with Diamonds*, covering the psychedelic chapter in India's venerable Bhagavad Gita that emphasizes personal rehabilitation through mystical experience. By contrast, modern societies prefer palliative care to keep us comfortable in our dissociation: attention-grabbing entertainment and distracting medicines like alcohol and antidepressants.

My teacher, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, epitomized our dilemma and its resolution, in his masterwork, *That Alone, The Core of Wisdom*:

You have to see in each piecemeal experience what kind of modification has come, what its essential nature is, and how you can see through it. This means a transparency of vision is to be cultivated, by which you can neutrally assess a situation that is superficially dismal or cheerful.

[...]

Most of us make our lives miserable by taking the illusory as transactional and by not seeing a way out of the transactional into the transcendental. If the transactional is binding and you do not see a way out, then you are fully committed to it. But it should not be binding. There are any number of so-called transactional commitments which are unnecessary. You can free yourself from them. You don't have to perpetuate misery by keeping yourself obliged in so many situations. (593-4)

In this light, I underlined the importance of maintaining self-care through self-realization, especially while coping with the many serious problems of our societies.

If we blame X others for our dissociation, it undoubtedly has some justification, yet they are not capable of curing us, since they are just as alienated as we are. We have to manage the recovery process ourselves. I have a motto in respect to politics: Don't expect the criminals to fix what they have broken.

Master manipulators are expert at instilling defeatist attitudes, and especially at getting potential collaborators to fight against each other. We resist manipulation by making common cause, not by crowing about how bad this or that ethnic group is. Racism and snobbery are played in all directions, though every group exhibits a range of qualities from super-amazing to abysmal, demonstrating that racial and other stereotypes are false and misleading.

Patanjali's Yoga teaches us that truth is not attained via struggle with falsehood. Combat is not necessary. When truth is arrived at, falsehood naturally finds no place to lodge. Nitya amplifies this idea, in *That Alone*:

Nobody wants to have factionalism, but even as you are attempting to bring unity, you become part of a faction. It is in the name of unity that you are creating all these factions in the first place....

So the true knower of this secret withholds from all disputes. Narayana Guru made this so central to his teaching because it is in the name of this one dispute that we have been killing each other since the dawn of human history. There has been more blood shed in the name of religion than there is water in the seven oceans put together. It is such an important question for all mankind. If the dignity of man is to be enhanced, we need to find a solution to this eternal riddle of man killing man in the name of an opinion. (322)

An important aspect of any curative effort is to maintain a global perspective, taking real care to honestly comprehend the other's point of view, as *they* see it. The catch is, proclaiming a label or cliché doesn't get you anywhere—in fact, it increases the entanglement. Problems that are insoluble as a mishmash of distorted projections become progressively more manageable when clearly reflected on. Dreading or despising people makes them

seem much bigger than they really are. It's more helpful to think of them as ordinary than granting them enemy status.

We've not only been taught to carry on about our trivial little pains, but to fear strangers and strangeness, follow the rules, suppress our emotions, and all the rest. In the ultimate analysis, none of that is necessary, nor is it beneficial to anyone. But it is rooted at a deep level of the personality, so it requires some serious digging to pull it out.

Human brains are much more sensitive to bad news than good, a necessary survival tactic. If we don't consciously counteract this bias, madly exacerbated by the media, we can easily get downhearted, or worse, maniacal. Other than valid safety issues, though, what if we reminded ourselves there are good, kind, intelligent people all over the globe, and strove to connect with them? That would offset the depressing side of life a bit, and improve our chances to thrive during our one-of-a-kind visit to planet Earth. This is especially important to practice at times like now, when humanity is on the verge of another cataclysmic explosion.

Indigenous cultures maintained their stability by the transmission of high ideals via education, often including a climax of spiritual training using psychedelic medicines. In our time, corporate interests find it to their commercial advantage to dissociate the young from traditional wisdom, replacing an ethics-based community with a material goods culture.

Traditional goals once served to foster the highest community aspirations through individual development, as in the Greek Temple of Eleusis and the Indian Vedic culture, where secret substances were administered to "confirm" initiation. Early Christianity had a similar "confirmation," according to some scholars, though it also has long been deflated to a purely symbolic intimation. Cultures all over the globe once relied on psychedelic rites of passage. The ceremonies served to suspend the ego for a period, bringing profound affinity with the optimized cultural

wisdom transmission—very much like making butterflies out of caterpillars.