

6/26/18

## MOTS Preliminaries

On a most beautiful summer evening, nearly the full group of venerable participants met in the antechamber in joyous conversation, before adjourning to the living room to begin the celebration of what promises to be a stimulating revival of a neglected masterpiece. It is thrilling to see such a convivial atmosphere generated among friends who have plumbed the depths of thought together for a substantial length of time. True friendship and respect filled the air.

I didn't mention it, but I've been noticing for years how the general population considers a guru to be like any other kind of preacher: most likely a charlatan, and possibly a sexual or financial predator. Whenever I hear those "given truths" I turn inward and express my undying gratitude for the true guru that graced my life and our lives, who day after day worked to help us remove our darkness, and was never clichéd, always appropriate, kind and considerate, even when unbraiding us bumbling mortals. Nitya begins his Preface with an abiding truth we are able to take for granted because of our good fortune in accidentally becoming allied with the real thing:

A time-honored formula of the Upanishads for the realization of the Self is to listen to a wise teacher or guru, to meditate on their words of wisdom, and to live the truth revealed in fruitful meditations.

That is precisely what we set out to do every week in our class, and our meditations have already been very fruitful. In Part II, Baiju uses this same quote as a jumping off point for his erudite assessment of the preliminaries, and Beverley addresses our class directly, as if she was able to sit among us—don't miss her blessing. Meditations on the Self promises to evoke stories and impressions, so please do share your thoughts with us! For today,

at least, the second part, which normally brings in extra material, is the longer.

Deb opened the discussion with a reference to the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, by Anthony Doerr. The title itself seems to bear on our search, does it not? She and I both loved the book, and are now listening to an audio version that adds another dimension of appreciation. One of the two protagonists is a blind teenager, whose mind is filled with light, yet there is an unbridgeable barrier between her and the world, naturally. Doerr is explicit at one point about the neuroscience of the brain's perception of light, which is internally generated, as spiritual seers have known for millennia. Keeping this in mind, though, is elusive, since what we see—self-generated as it is—is so convincing that we mistake it for a fully external reality. As Deb put it, we use our light to configure the world. Blind Marie Laure's understanding of the world arises from her own being, incredibly vivid, yet unique and invisible to anyone else. Synesthesia abounds. The question is how are we to bring self-generated light to our life as a meaningful dynamic? What is the balance point—balance region—between our awareness and the external world? The question is becoming even more intense as computers now offer the ability to craft reality and sabotage the portrayal of pretty much everything we believe in. If we have an inadequate grounding in the Self, we are going to be at the mercy of some very ugly manipulations. It's already in play. In Deb's words, there is such a negative magnetism in our world already, and it threatens to suck us into an ugly gray smoky universe. We must see on the deepest level, or else we may be taken down by it.

So yes, this seemingly simple book from a much less ominous time and place is going to speak to us poised on the cusp of physical and psychological destruction on a scale never before unleashed—and that's a very high bar. The “monsters from the id” are once again in full flood. Will they cause our species to collapse, or will we find enough resilience in the strength of our core? Can a quiet meditation in a Bangalore park 46 years ago help

us to maintain our equipoise in the face of colossal and intentional ignorance? We'll see. Stay tuned.

Prabu read out the crux of the matter from the Foreword:

In the final analysis it is only our awareness of anything that we can know, and not the thing in itself. *Insight* hence becomes a good word to describe the extent to which we can apprehend, appreciate, and evaluate each modulation of our own consciousness, otherwise experienced as our encounters with the external world.

Insight is quite literally seeing within. Seeing within throws light on what lies without, which we can never be wholly certain about. Prabu noted how we sometimes make the mistake in spirituality of looking for an experience “out there,” some fantasy kind of thing. In day-to-day awareness, everything is centered on the ego. We put ego in the middle of experience and we spoil it. Or anyway, tarnish it. We unbalance it. We have to drop our ego and embrace the bigger part of who we are. Only then will we be able to use the wealth we are given to its maximum potential.

I suggested that is why the Gurukula and the Gita, among other sources, dissuade seeking siddhis, psychic powers. If they come as a natural outcome of contemplative insight, fine. They may be a nuisance, but let them be. But if we set out to learn how to levitate or otherwise bend the world to our will, it automatically becomes an ego proposition. We are going to do things to make certain other things happen, which is pure dualism. The ego has to relinquish its dominance before we can have full access to the 99.99 % of our capacity that lies beyond its domain.

The ego can learn to humble itself, but it's a tricky deal. The ego can be very proud of its humility, of any other laudable quality. It wants full narcissistic credit for everything, like having our own personal Trump. (He's exactly like a pure ego on display, by the way, so he can be taken as a teaching tool, if your stomach is strong enough.) The class shared a few success stories of when

the ego is properly calmed and the inner guidance system kicks in. Doing so has a famous role in creativity, but also works in the most banal circumstances.

We talked about Michael Pollan's new book, *How to Change Your Mind*, where he brings in the latest neuroscience of the sense of self. When that part of the brain is quieted, spiritual, mystical, creative experiences readily happen. The MRI images of advanced meditators and people on a psychedelic voyage show the same deactivation of the default mode network. So teaching the ego to assume it's proper role instead of trying to manage everything is a key to the kind of creative living promised by a spiritual outlook. Reading the book would be a very valuable adjunct to our study, I would say.

Andy noted how it's interesting to do something you don't know how to do, something you have little experience with. His (nicely symbolic) example was he was driving and got lost. He felt a moment of panic—how do I figure out how to get home?—but then realized he could just head in the general direction of his goal and the route would become evident as he went along. He could simply watch it unfold. It worked! He is well aware how the ego provides a running narrative about what we must do and how it has to happen, and this clouds the natural unfoldment of inner wisdom.

There is a subtle alchemy between having a goal and allowing the route to take its own natural course. We don't always have to have a goal, but it's often a worthwhile contribution to the creative process. If we do have a goal, we have to take care not to muddy it up with rote programming.

Poetry seems to be a special aspect of creativity where the bursting forth is possibly even more primal than in other arts. Deb averred that her best writing comes out of dreams or nowhere, so she doesn't always have a fixed idea of where she's going. Yet sometimes she does. She talked about one poem that had a gestation period of almost a decade. We had visited Wolfgang's Botanical Sanctuary and he had told her about a special orchid in his collection, one that flowered underground. Deb being an earth

sign and fascinated with fecund soil, went wild. She knew she had to write about it, but she never could come up with the poem that tantalized her so with its absence. Something must have been going on out of sight, though, because one day it came to her:

white orchid

waxy petals unfurl slowly against the tropical earth  
pale insects burrow in drawn by fragrance  
escaping molecule by molecule through soft loam  
surrounding the tendril of whitened stem  
piercing soil branching off a flower  
then another creeping underground  
this life unseen unheeded above ground  
our life drawing sustenance from the dark explosion

Deb also remembered a time at a writing workshop when the group took a hike in rugged mountains. The teacher assured them that they didn't have to look at the trail in front of their feet the whole time. If you just look just occasionally, your brain processes the trail for a significant distance, so you can spend plenty of time safely admiring the scenery. There is an unrecognized part of your brain that is taking care of the trail detail so you can take in the sights.

The concept inspired Prabu to comment how when we stumble over something, we think the problem is out there. We always put the blame on the object, but it's more likely that the subject is the cause. When you have a subject and object, your reasoning is inevitably dualistic. The implication is that the ego is expert at diverting responsibility, and when it does it never learns to stop stumbling: it makes stumbling into an iconic behavior.

Prabu shared his own example of creativity being processed invisibly over time. He was working on a story for four years and never could get it to gel. Then last fall he was staying with Scotty at his cabin at the coast, not even thinking about the story. He woke in the morning to a damp smell that reminded him of an odor he was fond of as a child. Somehow the smell triggered his creative juices, and he started writing the story.

After the class I stumbled onto a relevant article about creativity on an excellent website, quoting poet E. E. Cummings on the courage to be yourself:

<https://www.brainpickings.org/2017/09/25/e-e-cummings-advice/>.

There are multiple links on it to other paeans to creativity. If you have the time, be sure to at least follow the link to Seamus Heaney's commencement addresses. So these ideas are not arcane, not limited to ancient spiritual wisdom. They're out there. And maybe repeating them is futile. I'm optimistic, though, that we will be able to trust our inner talents at least once in a while, and as they burgeon forth we will welcome their appearance more and more. I've provided a slightly skewed image of my own about this in Part II.

Paul talked about fear and other inhibitions to creative catharsis, which tend to dominate in the average human. He told an amusing story about tricking his mother into accepting a "newfangled labor-saving device" that her preference for the habitual denied her. They hid the gizmo (a microwave oven) out in the forest and took her for a walk there, so she found it all by herself, like magic. She was so touched and pleased at the game that it broke through her defenses, and she brought it into her house.

Andy ruefully agreed that we easily get mentally stuck, and it can lead us on wild goose chases. He recently spent days looking for an obscure color of rock for his new garden plot, being repeatedly defeated but plodding ahead determinedly, wasting acres of time. Her finally got the joke when the neighbor boy took pity on his frustration and brought him a bag of very pretty rocks, purloined from his father.

Jan talked wistfully about a process of unfoldment, of learning to allow yourself to live in a state of greater freedom. She still feels constrained by the quotidian details of life, all the things we deal with on a daily basis.

I commented that you can fairly easily change your attitude about life's limitations, seeing them either as impediments or

opportunities. Nitya says as much in his Preface: “The prior absence of the cosmos lies buried in the amorphous fibers of chaos. The deft hand of a contemplative can weave out of this tangle a tapestry of beauty.” That means (among other things) that we shouldn’t imagine a beautiful world to unfold in and then become mired in regret that it doesn’t exist or that we don’t know how to reach it. Or even worse: that someone else is blocking our joy by not collaborating with our personal program. We should instead get busy making the world we inhabit as beautiful as we want it to be, and sharing that with our friends. Jan is of course very good at this already. Karen expressed the concept nicely as staying in the capital S Self.

Paul spoke to our need to have feedback from others, for correction as well as for mutual sharing. It reminded me of a favorite quote of Nitya’s from Love and Blessings: “When I contrast my early understanding with that of the very many teachers at whose feet I sat with reverence while I listened to their teachings, I can readily confess that I would not be what I am now without having been illuminated by their wisdom and gentle examples of excellence.” We are so fortunate to have a fine weaver of beautiful tapestries in this age of chaos to help us keep our heads together! And the sharing within our small class, surrounded invisibly by many others around the world who tune in via their devices, radiated a gently healing balm of light that all felt uplifted by. The harmony we shared followed us out into the environs, as we went our separate ways bathed in the glowing radiance of a full moon in a clear sky.

## Part II

Here are some recent highlights from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study that pertain to today’s subject. These are in Volume II:

Unknowingly we are accepting two superimpositions in [the] conceptualization of 'you' and 'we'. Even when we refer to ourselves or our group as 'we', there is only the Self. The conceptual figure of an ego or an ego-multiple is superimposed on that Self. Secondly, when you say 'you', the reference is our concept of a person which we objectivize and put 'out there' to mark the object. That is equally unwarranted. The first mistake is that the natural, ever-present omniscience of consciousness is fragmented to make a convenient concept of ego. That ego is made into a conceptualized 'I' to act as a principle of cognizance in the here and now located in the animation of the psychosomatic organism. Thus the very first differentiation between subject and object is a step into ignorance. The one indivisible totality of one's being is alienated so that one can formulate an I-concept which is basically a superimposition. Secondly, one creates a counterpart of one's ego to act as the other and superimposes it on a secondary fragmentation made on the basis of sensory data. (136)

Our initial entry into the frame of reference provided by empirical cognition causes us to forget the genuine reality of the Self. In its place a secondary, shadowy image of the Self is generated and held as an entity separate from an experience of the objectivized other. We are sitting behind a dark veil. The veil is not merely a hindrance of truth, because a kaleidoscope of changing forms and voices incessantly comes from the veil, causing the confusing appearance of a purely imaginary world. (136)

The truth is that the Self is the most public; there is nothing secret about it. It is not away from anyone, even for a split second, whether awake, dreaming or in deep sleep. We should keep this in mind as we read this series of mantras about the Self. (137)

If you make the subject an objectivized version for analysis and observation, the Self is already fabricated into an unverifiable non-Self. Almost all scriptures warn us about this. (137)



We are conditioned by our focusing on fragments, delimiting the subject in the frame of reference of the time/space continuum and providing every concept with content. Only by unlearning and not pursuing can we arrive at the true import of the Self. That itself is a contradictory statement because there is no coming, no going, no seeking, no realizing. Every attempt brings the opposite effect of making the real unreal, naming the unnamable, visualizing the invisible, bifurcating the nondual. In these mantras, Yajnavalkya offers us a reorientation to various aspects of the world and the individuated beings in it. (137-8)

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Baiju graced us with the first response, even before we began the class:

Thoughts based on the Forward, etc.:

In Vedanta the Guru symbolizes *Brahman* itself. We already learned from Narayana Guru and other Upanishad *rishis* that those who realize *Brahman* merge themselves into it – they experience the oneness with *Brahman*; in fact, each one of them become *Brahman* itself. A Guru is one such *mahatma*. If one gets accepted as a disciple of such a Guru and His grace is bestowed upon the disciple, then he is well on to the path, which otherwise is extremely tedious, of realizing *Brahman*. The Guru's grace itself is the way of illuminating to make the disciple free of ignorance, which is also referred to be darkness.

The Preface starts saying, “A time-honored formula of the Upanishads for the realization of the Self is to listen to a wise teacher or guru, to meditate on their words of wisdom, and to live the truth revealed in fruitful meditations.” The three steps in this formula are denoted by the Sanskrit terms *shravana*, *manana* and

*nididhyasana* respectively. An important element during the entire process to be followed by the seeker is the grace of the seer (the Guru), which is practically the insightful Guru's guidance (more often unspoken than verbal) to keep his beloved disciple stay on course during every moment of the three stages in Self-realization - *shravana, manana and nididhyasana*. The insightful Guru instinctively knows the weak areas and shortcomings of each of his disciples.

It is not impossible to attain the 'goal' without such a Guru; some (maybe one in many millions) are born with that grace; a few others attain the goal with the absolute devotion (of their lives) to the Absolute (*Brahman*).

The Vedantic texts often say that what you seek stays very close to you, in fact within you. It is in the form of knowledge (*chit*). The luminous *chit* is also of the nature of bliss or delight. Ignorance (which is also denoted as darkness) hides that knowledge like a thick dark sheath. When all the factors that cause the ignorance are removed, the ignorance itself vanishes and the luminous *chit* is directly experienced.

The Forward has this beautiful metaphor to distinguish between the individuated self and the Self with a capital "S": "It (the self with a small "s", or for practical purpose it is the individual mind) can be compared to the image of the sun mirrored on the surface of a lake; it is not the sun itself. When ripples and waves disturb the surface of the lake, the bright image of the sun throbs, changes and gets distorted. Similarly, when the mind is restless and subjecting itself to the many possible surface agitations, then the light of the Self mirrored in it becomes distorted, and the notion of I becomes unclear and unstable." So the mind is like a disturbed lake with ripples and waves; it is always active and many a time tumultuous. Therefore the image of the Self is distorted (beyond recognition) and the Self in its true nature is not experienced. That

immediately gives us the solution too! Make the mind still, we will see the true nature of Self; and then it is only about establishing ourselves in the Self. One-pointedness (*ekaagrata*) and mediation make the mind still and help in further progress.

Maintaining one-pointedness for longer durations, which is a tough task for the beginners, is the key to success in meditation. This is one place where the practical application of traditional Vedanta becomes relevant. Likes and dislikes (*raga and dwesha*) are the two aspects of desire (*kama*), like the two sides of the same coin. What we like we crave to possess; what we dislike we want to avoid by all means. All the activities of the mind one way or the other are about these two aspects of desire. As long as the activities related to desires continue to be in the mind, it will have ripples and waves. Only a mind free from desires can be made still.

That explains the difficulty of experiencing the Self, even when it is so close to us, sitting within and without each one of us. Only one desire shall be entertained by a seeker; i.e.: the desire to know and be the Self. Self is the one point to concentrate on, and to meditate upon.

In a practical sense, Sri Ramakrishna used to advise his disciples to stop intellectual philosophizing beyond a point, and to focus on *sadhana* (practice of meditation, etc.). He used to say that the knowledge in its entirety will in anyway be yours once you reach the goal.

Come to think of it we see that even an ideating mind will continue to have ripples and waves....

May the fifty meditations help us experience the oneness with the Self.

One who enjoys the oneness with the Self will be free from suffering, obviously because he has no thoughts about his physical body (including the subtle body of mind, etc.), which is the source of all suffering.

*Aum tat sat.*

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Beverley also helped start us off with a bang:

I had such a happy time savouring my copy of *Meditations on the Self* this week. It has been sitting there on the shelf devoted to Gurukulam books for years. It is handsomely produced I think. I was mesmerised by Andy Larkin's cover image, and have just finished a response you might like to use for your class notes. I will attach this separately and the image too in case you want to send that out as an attachment. It occurs to me that quite a few of those who receive your Class emails will not have purchased the book.

I like Peter's masterly Foreword. I felt the need to pause at length after each paragraph in order to enjoy his prose style as well as the content. I am being showered with texts on the Self at present. My attitude is more nuanced these days - at least I think so. No need for any conclusion now - or ever probably. Just be refreshed by the shower!

[Here's her attachment]:

I am so pleased Scott and his Class have decided to look at *Meditations on the Self*, and that I am able to share this with them. I like the beautiful symbol of the Self, created by Andy Larkin, on the front of the book cover. Here it is.



I notice the egg shape first. This reminds me of the 'karu', the cosmic egg of pure potential. Here this potential is seen developing and proliferating in the transactional world. It is divided into a light, and dark half like the Ying/Yang symbol. I see the spirals as the life force working its magic in the seeds and propelling them into existence. This is indicated by the little spheres. I notice that the white half continues into the lower spiral and the brown half into the upper one. So we have counterparts that will jointly bring about a holistic union.

I wondered about the proliferating, inter-connected triangles. They are a process going on along the boundary between the light and the dark. Perhaps they are all those complicated ideas, suppositions, theories, intuitions, and axioms proliferating in my mind? Are they stitching the two halves together? If so the process seems rather jagged and certainly complicated. Do the triangles represent Maya?

I look a little longer and then I see something else. There is a hint of the subtle way the Self connects with and works through an individuated self. If you look carefully at the brown half you can

see thread like lines indicating this process, which is integrating all these triangles in a mysterious way.

[If you look even closer, the lines are present in the light side as well—ed.]

One more subtlety in the symbol. If you start at the bottom you can trace the white to the centre of that spiral and then out on the colour getting darker to brown which then produces the little sphere - potential, idea, intuitive flash from the light of the Self. This travels up through the triangles..... and ends up in the top spiral turning golden and coming into existence.

I am dipping into DM again. I found this in Bhana verse 5. I think I shall call Andy's symbol Pashyanti.

(Wikipedia says on Pashyanti.... In Indian philosophy the notion of individuality, which is the third level of personality and the seed of all thoughts, speeches and actions is called *Pashyanti* , meaning 'that which witnesses'. )

Here's the bit in Bhana verse 5 somewhere near the middle of a long commentary which is quite wonderful.

*Indian psychologists begin their studies with the absolute ground of semiosis, and identified it as the un-manifested aspect of sound. This ground is named para, after the Absolute itself.*

*The first stirring of manifestation in the world of sound should not be assigned to the activity of electromagnetic waves. The faculty of hearing is actually born of a particular kind of seeing. Extraordinary though this statement may sound to most of us, it is by no means just a pet idea of Indian philosophers. Scientists of the calibre of Whitehead and Bertrand Russell acknowledge this fact. However, the kind of seeing meant here should not be confused with normal external sight, nor even with the visualizations of the dream world. It does not fall within the*

*field of what is usually considered to be the subjective. The most primary transformation of what is formless into the realm of form, which takes place at the causal consciousness, is here referred to as the primary act of seeing. In Sanskrit this is termed pasyanti.*

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Lastly I want to share an expanded metaphor to a familiar one that I think adds something important. In his Foreword, Peter recounts the familiar image of the ego:

It can be compared to the image of the sun mirrored on the surface of a lake; it is not the sun itself. When ripples and waves disturb the surface of the lake, the bright image of the sun throbs, changes and gets distorted. Similarly, when the mind is restless and subjecting itself to the many possible surface agitations, then the light of the Self mirrored in it becomes distorted, and the notion of I becomes unclear and unstable. Thus one's self-identity expands and contracts. Because it is circumlimited, changing and transient, we give this notion of I the label of self with a small "s."

The Self with a capital "S," on the other hand, is unlimited, unchanging and eternal. Like the sun in the firmament, the Self is never tainted or colored by the prismatic mediums through which it passes; it is never dimmed by the opacity of the mirrors that reflect it; and it is never disturbed by the surface agitations of the bodies on which it shines. It is this one pure light that is lending its absolute reality to all realities; it is this one all-witnessing eye that is lending its total vision to illuminate all partial visions; it is this one unchanging value that is lending its pure bliss to be the value behind each and every value.

I've recently rediscovered a version I cooked up for my Gita commentary, for IV, 36, on the mystery of darkness or ignorance, which irons out a subtle wrinkle:

I offer a meditation to throw some additional light on this mystery. Imagine you are gazing into a beautiful pond in a remote mountain wilderness. Fierce winds are agitating the surface so much that no reflection at all is visible. As you sit the winds begin to die down. At first vague shapes appear, fuzzy and distorted, but they become clearer as the winds abate. When the wind is reduced to gentle puffs you can begin to see a breathtaking scene reflected in the water. Despite the ripples, you can make out the general picture of snow-capped mountains, meadows and trees. Just at the moment the pond becomes perfectly still, the image leaps into crystal clear focus, and all the details can be discerned. However, it's still upside down because it is just a reflection, albeit a very fascinating one.

All humans without exception are enchanted by such a lake, because their consciousness is a reflecting pool for the world, shifting from clear to cloudy to completely obscured and back again, depending on the winds.

At any time the true scene could be admired by merely raising our gaze above the pond and looking directly at it. The degree of agitation of the surface of the lake does not impede our looking in any way; in fact, in some respects we are more inclined to look up when there is no reflection than when there is an enchantingly clear one. But for some reason we have come to believe that only the reflection is real, and so it's the only legitimate place for us to direct our attention.

The opaque surface represents the state of *tamas*, sometimes associated with evil, the agitated image represents *rajas*, active and distorted, and the clear reflection is *sattva*, the most true to life. Many religious people become so infatuated with being good, with clarifying their pond by remaining as still as possible, that they seldom raise their eyes to the breathtaking vista before them, but narcissistically admire their own beautiful reflection as the epitome of holiness. In any case this is a universal condition: the way we humans, from the best of us to the worst of us, are constructed.



The mysterious impetus to turn away and lift our eyes to liberation, to “seek the Havens,” cannot be predicted. It comes uniquely to each person, by an act of grace or luck. Until then, even liberation is only an image. Therefore “holier than thou” attitudes are unjustified, if not downright damaging. They are stumbling blocks on the way to universal wisdom.