

9/11/18

MOTS Chapter 10: I Am That I Am in You and in Me

“Who is sitting in the dark? Speak, you!”

In this manner one speaks; having heard this, you also to know, ask him, “And who are you?”

To this as well, the response is one.

Free translation:

Someone sitting in the dark asks another, “Who are you?” and the other out of curiosity asks in return, “And who are you?” The answer coming from both will be the same—“it is I.”

Narayana Guru’s thought experiment directs us to imagine who we are if we “turn out the lights,” in other words, if we take away all sensory input. Our self-definition is grounded in perceptible or comprehensible factors: what we look like, our genetic background, memories, beliefs, prospective expectations, and so on. Without those, what is left? Whatever we might imagine should be left, what do we have if we don’t imagine anything? The idea is, if you strip down your self-image from its more or less superficial external presentation, you arrive at a place where you are the same as everyone. Universal. It’s rather a challenging experiment, as it asks us to become a true contemplative and perform a pure meditation without any guidelines, if only for a short time.

Happily, a couple of us had just tried it out the hour before. We offered a meditation session prior to the class, attended by Jan and Scott and the two dogs Kai and Lucy. (Since it’s impossible for most of us to come early, we’ll try out other options in the future to be more inclusive.) I began with a superbly meditative piece of piano music, the second movement of Prokofiev’s seventh sonata. The dogs hurried down to join us because they love the music. At first there was Scott the pianist and Jan the audience.

The music led us from ordinary consciousness to sublime speculative heights, and then on to a reflective, mystical finale. After that I took my place in the meditation circle in silence.

As our minds stilled, the distinctiveness of the two of us faded out. There was no prompt to maintain our boundaries. The silence invited us to let go of our self-definitions, resulting in a vastly expanding—I don't even know what to call it—sense of self? Unoccupied space? Experience of nothingness? The less I focused on my individuality, the more blissful it felt, supposing I didn't think "I am blissful," and just let it be. I'm guessing Jan had a similar experience, but we didn't talk about any specifics afterwards, just that it was really nice. Occasionally Kai would thump his tail in approval, and after a few groans of protest that the music ended too soon, Lucy peered peacefully out from under the piano, where she likes to lie and feel the vibrations of the mechanism to the max. I know all this because I opened my eyes a few times, but with them closed the whole room instantly dissolved into nothingness. Due to the pervasive peace, there was no call to reanimate my personality and tune out the delicious emptiness. The point of it all is that without our boundaries we naturally fall into the state of oneness, of unity with all beings, and this is a very psychologically healthy condition. It felt wonderful.

Freedom from definition is something all people experience at times, and spiritual seekers seek it out, most often with well-defined techniques. (Notice a contradiction there.) Because of this I invited the class to share their stories of emptiness and non-specific connection. While they were dredging them up I filled in with a couple of more examples than the ones Nitya gives.

Actually, Baiju's contribution via email sets us up perfectly, though we didn't bring it up in class. He is reading the several Gurukula commentaries on each Atmo verse to stimulate his meditations, and has *That Alone* in mind when he writes:

Guru Nitya describes an example of a mother and her child, and their behaviors and interactions, to analyze and explain on

the basis of psychology the oneness of the self of the mother and that of the child, though the mother and child are unaware of it. This is true of any selfless relationship of love between any two individuals – they are not conscious that the selfless love is the expression of the common Self they both have as their core. If such relationship can become many-to-many, the circle of selfless love expands. Can it really happen? When one is truly enlightened by the knowledge that the very same Self resides in all living organisms, the circle of selfless love becomes one of infinite radius! The Guru who lived with such love for all humanity helps us here to attain that transformation.

The mother and child relationship is classic, because it invariably has its ups and downs(!) but through it all the core connection persists. It's the strongest psychic bond anywhere. At stressful times the underlying bond may be the only consolation, but it's something that virtually all are well aware of.

Since Deb is away on a trip, I offered a tale she might have recounted, one many of you have heard already. also about family. Her grandmother fainted at the exact moment when her brother unexpectedly died, some 700 miles away. No one could figure out why she, young and strong, had passed out, until the news came later the next day. Not too many people are that sensitive, but I think we've all had that subtle feeling of the presence or absence of a loved one. Science has never discovered any physical law to account for such things, though a few absurd attempts have been mooted. As soon as we define the indefinable, it morphs into something it isn't. Has to.

Susan delivers prepared meals to elderly people in need, and she talked about how she feels a connection with everyone she meets on her rounds, almost as if they are aspects of her psyche. She sees herself in the angry and frustrated man, as well as the woman who is shy and apologetic when she comes to the door to receive her gift. Everyone reflects her self to her.

Bushra resonated with this, feeling that she herself is many selves, which she experiences through the different people in her life. It's the same as the excerpt from *Walkaway* posted in MOTS 8, Part III. Different people bring out different aspects of her, and she probably wouldn't experience them without the relationships. In that sense she needs the friendships. She sees there are so many possibilities, including contradictory selves in her. It makes one wonder if we don't realize all we are simply because we don't have friends to cover those aspects. Or does life give us the precise feedback we need so we can understand ourselves better? No more friends than we need?

Jan riffed on Bushra's point, recalling how sometimes she can go beyond self-restraint and self-inhibition with her friends. They get to talking and sort of lose themselves in the joy of communication, and she often feels enlightened in a new way. She recalled conversations as a young adult where she discovered deeper aspects of her self and they helped her to grow.

Bushra thought such behaviors were a "girl thing," that women do this naturally and men don't. I conceded that the ladies are way ahead of the men, especially as we get older, but suspect that it's more about humans' innate reticence about people who are different than a strict gender trait. At any rate it's highly admirable that women lift each other's spirits. Jan finds it happens when she and her friends get to talking incessantly, which sort of draws them out of their corral of familiarity. Bushra called it bonding.

Jan felt sheepish about the gender bias, and remembered a time when she and her brother were very close and talked about their perceptions about all sorts of things, relationships, lives, goals, dreams, always sharing in a deep way. It's quite natural for siblings to be more open to each other. Anyway, I hope you don't write off all men just because 97% are total losers.

To me, it's very exciting to let yourself go when you're interacting with others, and it's something young children do until it's squashed out of them. We can grow back into it if we try. I consider life too short to waste it on clichés, so I like to think I've

had many, many deep conversations with lots of people in my life. And yes, a substantial majority of them were with women. Men are much more inhibited, on average. It's sad. And then again, men and women don't trust each other, often enough. It's a good place to put the Guru's suggestions into place. In the dark we're just divine beings, not boys or girls.

Andy took the tack that as we grow older we don't feel like we have changed in our core. Our central sense of 'I' stays the same as when we were, say, twenty. He's talked to very old folks who feel the same way. Andy well knows we are colored by all sorts of experiences, and that persists as our learning, yet the colorations don't seem to him to intrude on that core sense.

This reminded Paul of a vivid experience he had when he was maybe five years old. He was holding his pet dog on his lap for a photograph, when a cat ran across the street in front of them. Of course the dog tried to leap up and chase it, but Paul held on mightily so the picture could be taken. In his mind he can still see the scene, reinforced by the photograph, and he can recall how he felt, trying to prevent something going wrong. I hope he brings the picture to class next week.... Paul remembers that young self as fearful and eager to hide behind a protective wall. He knows he has played different games throughout his life for his own protection, but these have oddly reinforced his insecurities. He can sense when he's around a non-judgmental person, and finds it very refreshing.

I concurred that it's a fine thing when you are allowed to drop your pretenses. I have found, in doing so, that each human being is almost infinitely vast. We are huge, expansive beings, capable of so much we can hardly imagine. It's thrilling. We create our boundaries to keep us safe, not realizing how we curtail (bad pun if Paul had to hold his dog by the tail) our world. To quote poet Robert Frost *yet again*,

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out

But that's an adult speaking, teaching. Children just know they need protection. We can only undo the damage when we have gained strength and stature. Like now.

Prabu gave us a fine example of walling out and its unfortunate consequences. A friend of his in his mid-30s has been having conflicts with his girlfriend, so Prabu studied their relationship at his request and figured out what the problem was. The man felt the girlfriend should only be in contact with him in a circumscribed area that he determined, while she wanted to be in touch with the whole of him. He resented the invasion of his privacy, and she felt excluded from many things he enjoyed. Not having full access to him created the conflict in her. Prabu saw how not having admission to the eternal self makes people dependent on partial contact, where deep down they crave wholesale immersion. Obviously, this is an angle that affects practically all relationship to some degree.

Speaking to Andy's point, Jan felt like she *had* changed, that her inner being was not the same one she knew as a younger person. She could see a certain consistency, yet she doesn't have the same boundaries now as she did before.

Andy responded you can experience it both ways. Obviously there are differences when you look in a mirror (metaphorical or otherwise). He's right, and both ways are really one thing seen from two different angles. And remember, the darkness of the metaphor means we are subtracting all the apparent traits, and those are what are subject to change. Our core is indefinable, an intuitive feeling at most. Its unchangeability is its most salient characteristic. That means unless we subtract our fascination with the visible traits, we aren't going to know the core.

There is nothing closer to us than our true self. Andy struggled for the right word for it, and came up with immediate. Your self is the thing you're most confident of, that you really know. Thus it is *immediate*, including the sense of not being mediated. When we describe and think about who we are, we mediate the purity of the universal Self within. If we don't, we are

being immediate, and the effect occurs in that slim slice of reality known as the present, which is the most vivid part of our existence.

Andy continued that in his example Nitya has an immediate sense that he has to name himself as 'I', meaning we have a sense of ourselves, there is an entity there. It is an undefined entity, very immediate.

Bushra agreed, adding that it's a primal thing to say "me," or "I"—you don't configure an image of you yet: that's secondary. So the 'I' must touch the core. She went on, "If I start to really think about it, there is the part of me that is my husband Andy and that is my friend Debbie and that is my dad. My 'I' is all these things coming together. The core 'I' is all those. So I don't think there is an essential I beyond that."

Moni disagreed, maintaining that in addition to the numerous roles, there is one single point of I. The 'I' is beyond all of them. It made Paul wonder if there is any wisdom or benefit in separating the individualized self from the non-individualized self. I think the trick is they are not two things, so separating them is a fool's errand we readily undertake. In our class we aim to realize how they are in fact one, although they sure do look as if they are disparate.

The fact that our outward identity is merely "one of the many transient manifestations of the true Self," is the rub. Bushra expressed the starting point beautifully when she explained how each of her dear friends and family members represents a part of her psyche, as if they are symbols of her being. Yet this is not the true Self as put forth in Vedanta. Or better yet, it is and it isn't. It's a modulation of pure consciousness and at the same time a temporary and short-lived phenomenon. We know the transient phenomena, but not the lasting, eternal part, and that's what the Guru wants to reintroduce us to. Sure, we can ignore it (at our peril?) but there is ample testimony that it's well worth recovering. And that's what we're about here.

I suggested an idea that might help, and it seemed to. There is a self within all of us that we see as our true self. While each of our

relationships is an important and worthwhile part of who we are, our understanding of them is finite, since we distinguish them from our other relationships. They must all be limited. Our true self, however, is infinite—the very definition of infinity in fact. Infinity cannot be arrived at by adding up integers, or any kind of discrete numbers. We are more than the sum of our parts, the totality of our relationships, and we will not know that totality if we limit ourselves to only those relationships. In a sense then, the true self and the limited relationships are mutually exclusive. This is not to cast aspersions: relationships are the best thing about life, and not to be discarded in favor of some intangible infinity. That's the seclusion error: you can no more subtract integers to arrive at the Absolute than you can add them. You can add or subtract all day long and you'll be no closer to your goal. What we're aiming for now is letting go of all the ways we block our awareness of totality by putting all our energy into what's perceptible. Narayana Guru isn't rejecting any of those temporal aspects, he is trying to lead us back to a more inclusive awareness. So let's save some of that outward-directed energy and see what else we can find within. I think many of us have already discovered new psychic terrain, and that naturally encourages us to continue to delve into the depths. Of course it is by no means mandatory, just an idea worth pursuing if you wish.

Andy noted that this is the distinction between *para* and *apara*, the transcendent and the immanent. He described them as the beyond and the localized relational self, and agreed they go together. He went on that at the moment when you look at yourself as an object there arises a sense of agency that never goes away. If you try to delete it you get an infinite regression, since at each step you retain some sense of self.

To this, Moni quoted Nitya, "It is the conventional man in me." She reminisced that when she first had this class with Nitya she had never thought of these ideas, as so many millions of people don't think this way. It's a noisy world, and you may never look

into it. To her it was a beautiful breakthrough when she first found out about the value of knowing and being who you are.

Bushra, after pondering all this, suggested that if you start deconstructing the self you see all the rubbings, all the ways we are affected by our experience, and if you can peel them away you are like a little infant coming new into the world. It makes a terrific meditation! And the newborn, if it had a healthy gestation, just about exactly is the true self. Getting back to it by peeling is almost, but not quite, an infinite exercise, unfortunately. Which is why psychotherapy takes a whole lifetime. It's a worthy practice, though, especially as our inner controller is clever to present the most significant traumas first, and we can safely neglect most of the rest. But the opening up we're hopefully doing with *Meditations on the Self* is a different way to get past our hang-ups.

After recounting a story based on Narayana Guru's exact framing of two strangers in a dark room, Nitya describes two contrary situations, the first where there is no one physically present yet a remote friend seems utterly real to him, and the second where he is in a crowd of people yet has the feeling there is no one present: all are like shadows. Because of this, "I become all the more convinced that the physical aspect of a person has very little to do with the idea of the self."

At one point I reprised the account of an LSD trip with three female friends in the high Cascades, where for a short while all four of us found ourselves together in one group 'I'. It was very weird, I promise you! We were all perfectly aware of it, and perfectly uncomfortable. It was somewhat like a meeting place: our whole selves were veiled from each other, but any conscious thoughts were immediately registered by all four of us. Of course, when you realize this is happening, you try to suppress the "impolite" thoughts, and then those instantly stand out like a beacon. It made us all grateful that we do have barriers. Imagine what would happen to performers, for instance, if the audiences' chaotic thoughts invaded their minds—they could never maintain their concentration. The value of knowing we are one doesn't

mean we should all become a single many-headed beast, only that we should be “dedicated to the proposition that all beings are created equal,” to paraphrase Lincoln’s Gettysburg address. Knowing this changes everything, as sages of all times have proclaimed.

Atmopadesa Satakam begins with obeisance to the Karu, the central core of all beings, and at the tenth verse we arrive at a practical instruction for accessing it. This completes the introductory groundwork of our search for the Self, our Self. Nitya notes this as he provides the meaning of his full name, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, beginning with Yati. In the 1950s he started out with the Yati first: Yati Nitya Chaitanya (Yati Nitya is like Swami Nitya or Guru Nitya), and that’s the order he uses here:

Yati means one who restrains, withdraws or controls. If I am a Yati, I am withholding or withdrawing myself from something or someone, or am restraining myself from some situation that is exterior to my interest. All restraints are at first consciously deliberated, though it is likely that a conscious restraint can afterward change into an unconscious inhibition. In terms of modern psychology, the Yati is the parent in me. It is this “parent-Yati” who provides me with a mask of sacredness and urges me to conceal my shabbiness. It is the manipulator of all my private motives and interests. It arranges all my tantrums. The Yati in me lives in the public eye. It is the conventional man in me, but the question is, am I he? This marks the beginning of my search for the true Self.

There’s a strong implication that the true Self he seeks is quite different from his public persona. Gurukula students may know this theoretically, but relinquishing our persona tends to be resisted by all our well-established neurological wiring. Hopefully the communal spirit of the class and some meditative interludes will make the transformation a bit easier. Even the foil Nitya we are observing in this account has an inkling of what we already know:

Earlier I said, in the dark room a voice asked me who I was. Right now I feel I am sitting in the dark chamber of my psyche. I suspect it is inhabited by a more mysterious and truer self than me. It is now my turn to ask: Who is there?

Silence

This silence is not a negative response. It is the response of the eternal in me, the Nitya, which is the same Self that shines in all sentient beings as an imminent principle of the Absolute, and also that which transcends all names and forms as the meta-Self. The Yati is only one of the many transient manifestations of the true Self in the form of circumlimited *chaitanya*, or consciousness. In another sense it is a modulation of the pure *cit*, the eternal and unaffected pure consciousness.

So if you ask, with Shakespeare, what's in a name? now you know.

Then it was time for a slightly extended closing meditation, giving everyone an opportunity to let go of their identity in safe and supportive surroundings. I put forth one last example to lead into it. We maintain several bird feeders here at the Portland Gurukula, and usually when I fill them the birds and squirrels run for cover. Only a couple of times I have been in a state of invisibility, of non-definition, and the birds have remained, zipping all around me, going about their pecking business without any fear. It's so ecstatic to be in a cloud of flying birds! Yet even *trying* to be invisible is too much, and the birds sense it and take off. You have to be in that place without trying.

After the meditation our little living room was glowing radiantly, as we gave the closing chant drenched in equanimity. Giving away pears and plums from our orchard, and some jars of jam Deb had lovingly prepared, with everyone swirling around me, I felt like I was in a happy cloud of rare birds indeed.

Part II

Since we've upped the meditation quotient, I thought of including my summary of the Gita's sixth chapter, on meditation, titled Dhyana Yoga, or Unitive Contemplation:

Krishna reiterates that not being dependent on the results of action is proper renunciation, not giving up doing things, which is the popular misconception. As long as you aim for particular ends, you can never be a yogi. Know that you are your own best friend. Support yourself, take care of yourself. Do not become your own enemy, as so many do. Then you will be steady and fair in all your dealings with the world.

Krishna then gives Arjuna simple instructions for meditation: to attune with the Absolute you must sit quiet and focused, without exaggeration, and the very stillness of it is unity with the Absolute. When the mind wanders, bring it back to the focal point. He gives a definitive definition of yoga: disaffiliation from the context of suffering. Duality is the context of suffering, and yogic unity is its cure. In it, you easily enjoy happiness that is ultimate. In this state, all beings and all events are seen to be equally divine.

Arjuna has his doubts, because the mind is very hard to control. Krishna agrees but gives him encouragement that success is possible. In yoga, nothing is ever lost. It is not a religious program that depends on the whim of a god or any specific form of behavior. A resolutely open mind does not close. Krishna assures him that a yogi is superior to all other types of religious or scientific seekers, and that is exactly what he should decide to be.

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Baiju's meditations are both instructive and exemplify active meditation at its best. Here's his for chapter 10:

Narayana Guru is instructing us, through a scientific demonstration described in verse #10, of the eternal truth which is the very basis of Advaita Vedanta. It occurred naturally to the Guru to decide on this experiment because the sole concern in his life was that the vast majority of people were groping in the darkness of ignorance; and they still are.

Guru Nitya relives his own experience in MOTS chapter #10 which matches exactly with Narayana Guru's experiment. A person who happened to be in a pitch-dark room all of a sudden had a very feeble feeling of the presence of another person in the room, which was unexpected. Spontaneously he asked, "Who's there? (Literally, who are you?)". Probably the other person did not expect anybody to be in the same room either, and he reacts involuntarily asking the same question, "Who are you?" The Guru says, "In the anxious moments of an unexpected situation like that the spontaneous answer to both the questions will only be one – '*Aham*' (i.e. 'I')".

It is indeed a scientific demonstration the Guru makes. Humans do fear to face darkness all alone. And an unexpected realization of an unknown in a solitary dark space will intensify the fear, though maybe momentary, to a level that causes a jolt. In such moments of anxiety, one will forget everything else. His only answer in a situation like that will be "I", as the Guru asserts. Such an involuntary utterance will be the truth as the person will lack the "presence of mind" to color his thoughts. The theory behind this experiment may perhaps be akin to the modern interrogation techniques employed to get the truth out of an accused.

Every one of us has this 'I' within. Maybe in a normal situation I will respond only by saying, "I am Baiju"; it's not natural for me to say I am that 'I'. At the same time, the Guru is most certain about the response if someone is left alone in a dark empty room and surprised by the presence of an unknown. Thus he has now

demonstrated to us that it is the same ‘I’ that resides inside everybody. But we all may think, I have an ‘I’ in me and he has his ‘I’ in him. Such is our ignorance, and only when in great anxiety an ordinary human being blurts out the correct answer ‘I’ to the question, “Who are you?”.

Guru Nitya describes an example of a mother and her child, and their behaviors and interactions, to analyze and explain on the basis of psychology the oneness of the self of the mother and that of the child, though the mother and child are unaware of it. This is true of any selfless relationship of love between any two individuals – they are not conscious that the selfless love is the expression of the common Self they both have as their core. If such relationship can become many-to-many, the circle of selfless love expands. Can it really happen? When one is truly enlightened by the knowledge that the very same Self resides in all living organisms, the circle of selfless love becomes one of infinite radius! The Guru who lived with such love for all humanity helps us here to attain that transformation.

The glimpses of the unitive nature of the individuated selves do occur, though unconsciously, to men and women at times, particularly at trying times such as those of natural disasters. The recent floods that affected almost the entire parts of the state of Kerala was no different. Affected people of different strata of societies (such differentiation may be unspeakable in the civilized societies today, but evidences make it obvious that the minds of people are not yet free from such differentiating thoughts) co-located in the rescue camps shared their woes and worked with one mind to pacify one another. They all had only one common thought: we were able to survive and should be happy that our lives are saved. They all have lost their houses and properties; to the vast majority of the rescued, what they lost were what they managed to save and make for their life time. Still they all shared their happiness that they were saved from the hands of death; they

helped each other like the children who were born of the same mother.

An elderly lady who reached one of the rescue camps had grabbed a few essential things while fleeing from her flood affected home. Later when she was in the safe camp, she found, for her own pleasant surprise, that she carried a note book of her own poems. In the camp, she gathered all the children and to them she began singing the poems. The children who were already on the brink of traumatic afflictions began dancing together, singing along with the lady. That brought cheer to everybody in the camp. That was a moment when they all forgot they were flood-affected. That was a moment they, though not consciously, felt they were all one and the same.

Several thousand young men and women volunteered to help snatch the flood affected thousands away from the grasp of death, which approached like a sea monster of gargantuan [appetite](#) to devour them all together. They saved their fellow beings, tens of thousands of women, children and elderly people--a large number of them bed-ridden, who had to be carried on shoulders! In the process many volunteers had to succumb to the rage of the rising waters. Unperturbed, the volunteers continued with their *yajna*! Why? Guru Nitya has answered it so well in *That Alone*.

A fleeing family from their submerged house realized after a little while that, in the panic, they left out their dog. An elder boy of the family turned back, managed to wade across the surging deluge, and grabbed the dog, held it in his arms pressing it against his chest, and kept hugging and caressing it all the way back even while struggling to get back to safety. The dog in turn, with relief, gratitude and boundless love, kept its mouth close to the boy's face, as if whispering in his ear, "After all, aren't we one, the transitory modulations of the non-dual *Brahman*?"

The love that the Self exudes knows no bounds. Beyond such special situations like the disaster, how can we sustain forever that sublime love in the individuated selves?

The Guru's endeavor in all his works is to help us bring the truth of that oneness from the unconscious to the conscious plane. Rain or shine, calamity or normality, that alone can sustain the collective happiness of humanity.

Aum tat sat