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MOTS Chapter 12: A Prayer for Grace

See the skin, bone, dirt and inner urges which end tragically to which the I-identity is conjoined;
this which perishes is the other; oh, grant the cherished boon that the great I-identity increases to perfection.

Free translation:

The ego clings to a perishing body composed of skin, bones, and all kinds of filth. This is the non-Self which is sure to decompose. One should aspire to transcend the limitations of the body and grow into the perfection of plenitude.

The bulk of the chapter is made up of Nitya's reminiscence about being with Ramana Maharshi the day he died. Deb was especially moved by this part, referring to the very moment he left his body:

A minute before it had looked as if the One Spirit that animates all bodies had still been present in him. With its passing the tie of unity in the crowd snapped. There was a great commotion. Some people fainted. In their haste to have a last look at the body of their beloved Master, people lost control and stampeded over those who were lying on the ground in grief or who had fainted.

Somehow a person imbued with spirit provides a unifying tie for all the people relating to them. Its influence doesn't necessarily end at death, though in the Maharshi's case there was a lot of confusion at first, since so many people believed they were dependent on him. There was a definite abruption in the mood. Jan was moved by the sense of loss you must feel when the person you so look up to is no longer there. Yet the bond certainly persists in a

different form, without the obvious focal point, though this is much harder to realize. Nitya implies this when he writes about the meaning of the verse:

Whether Sri Ramakrishna or Narayana Guru, Ramana Maharshi or Nataraja Guru, whenever any of those great Masters opened their mouths, they always spoke words of wisdom and love which not only comforted those who had the good fortune to be sitting at their feet, but the undying echoes of their words still live on in the hearts of millions of people. Nobody cares any more that their bodies were as perishable as those of any other person, or that pus, blood and dirt came from them when their bodies decayed.

Deb related some times when she looked on the spirit, what she described as “the shiny beautiful aliveness in people,” and could see how they almost always took it for granted. A young man brimming with energy couldn’t imagine he would ever be old, and a very old woman was nearly bereft of body but still so alive in her beingness. Deb felt, it isn’t you, exactly, it’s just something amazing passing through you. She meant the distinction the verse is making between the body and the spirit, the transient and the eternal aspects of who we are.

Bill was reminded of a friend who works with dying people in hospice, who told him of a similar perception. He has often seen the spirit leaving the body at death, but the family in attendance is so caught up in their grief that they don’t notice it.

I retold the closest story I know, of when I accidentally stepped on a kitten while moving some furniture. It was fatally injured, but as I bent over it its eyes lit up from within with a powerful light, like two green flashlights. They burned for a minute or so, and then gently faded away. My memory of it is still vivid after more than forty years.

Nitya’s light experience with the Maharshi was more dramatic, but similar:

All of a sudden I felt as if something was passing over my head. When I looked up, I was amazed to see a huge, luminous object almost the size of the moon slowly moving toward the peak of the Arunachala hills. Was it a meteor? I pointed the moving light out to a swami standing next to me. Then everyone noticed it. The entire multitude, filled with a sense of wonder as well as an awful dread, rose to their feet and marveled at it. I feared for the Maharshi's life. Though it was hard to turn away from that luminous wonder, I forced myself to look in again at his face. It was all over. The light that filled him was gone.

Deb noted how the spirit is not located in one single body but is unified in everything. That's the reality we have a hard time grasping. Several of us had a similar feeling with Nitya as the Maharshi's disciples had with him, that he was the home of the light and we were seekers of it sitting in the dark. It's a problem because after the guru passes, it's hard to start thinking that somehow the light isn't gone. Many disciples never do get self-motivated because of their longstanding dependency. It's actually a crucial transition when the external source is withdrawn. Ideally the time with a guru reduces the ego to the point where it is safe to think of yourself as worthy of the universal light too.... For Bill, being open is the key to the opportunity to be close to the Self. That means we have to be open to the possibility that we are also habitations for the light.

The spirit only *appears* to reside in a body, and even though we are most attracted to it there, we should turn inward and find how it fills us and abides in us. Nitya goes on:

The death of the body seemed to me to be the birth of the unbounded spirit. Until that moment the Maharshi was only in his body. When he breathed his last, it was as if he entered the hearts of all those who loved him. The perishable body was

holding within it the Imperishable, which is the same as what Ramanuja calls the Immortal Immanent Lord of all beings.

This reminds us that we are not to disparage the body, but only to realize there is more than just it. Instead of fixating on the transient parts of our existence, we should incorporate the eternal aspect too. Love your body and what it does, love your life, love the world, but remember that your true life is not losable. I talked about my brain injury, and how I was always present even though dead to the world and residing in a deep hellish place. It taught me how profoundly we are attached to our persona and all its embellishments, much more than we realize. We can theoretically think we don't care much for our outer life, but we do, we do. As Bill said, this is the place where Tibetan Buddhists especially concentrate their practice: on being ready to die, being ready to let go at the last instant.

Out of our uncertainty about our own Self, we turn to leaders who show it to us. For most of human history, leaders were the most exemplary people in the tribe, but in the last few thousand years we have lost direct contact with most of our leaders, and so there is plenty of room for deception. Misrepresentation. Our evolution has yet to compensate adequately, so we need to be very careful of all sorts of leaders: religious, political, academic, you name it. The only sure cure is to reawaken the source within us, or I should say, reawaken ourselves to its abiding presence.

The persistence of the light of the spirit in differing forms is the theme of this chapter, along with our invoking it through an act of grace, meaning something beyond our conscious control:

Many seekers put their bodies and minds through the most rigorous forms of discipline, undergoing great privations. They sleep on the floor, walk around naked, eat from their palm or their beggar's bowl, hold their tongue in silence, and flee from the warmth of others' love, and yet their spirit remains shrouded in darkness.

It seems the all-absorbing light of Realization is invariably preceded by a blinding darkness of spiritual ego. To dispel the cloud of ignorance and tear away the veil of the spiritual ego, there is no other way than kneeling down in humility and praying for Grace. Man's prayer from below is always reciprocated by the raining down of Grace from above. Until the alpha and omega are linked together by Grace there is no true Realization.

Jan was curious about this grace, and wondered how similar it was to the Christian concept. Actually, the Hindu version is quite alike, and all religions look to a deity or principle as an outside factor. Nitya early on was inclined to speak of a god or gods as a saving factor, but over time and as he traveled more widely he subtracted most of the anthropomorphic imagery.

The structural basis of the image of grace is the vertical relation of a supplicant reaching up for a grace to relieve them of their limited sense of self, and the universe showering down its blessings in response. In a way, it's how we proceed up the vertical axis, and in veiled form it's a nearly ubiquitous concept: seek and ye shall find, nature abhors a vacuum, for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction, etc. I have occasionally recommended prayer for people, with the caveat that the image you pray to is a reflection of your own internal guidance system, yet in whatever way you think "It's mine," has a limiting tendency and is readily co-opted by the ego. It is safer to think of it as 'other' so the ego has to let go of its urge to control. Even a scary and incomprehensible other, like an angry god, if you need it. In my case I am comfortable with a peaceful inner guru that I don't take any credit for. I listen to it as best I can, knowing I hear only a little of its wisdom, and honor it for whatever gets through to my dim wittedness. If I was religious it could easily be imagined as a god, but I'm not. Whatever way we imagine it, it is beyond that. As Nitya sums up a point in the current Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

study, “Trying to comprehend the incomprehensible brings one to a logical impasse.” (II. 216)

As is so often the case, our Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study runs a close parallel with our physical class. I read out a lovely story related to these ideas from it, which I’ll put in Part II.

Paul was wrestling with a contradiction, trying to distinguish a seer from a seeker, and this affords us a good example of the subtleties involved. He posited that a seeker tries to find evidence intellectually, but grace is not an intellectual process. This is an unwarranted separation. A seeker may well use their intellect, (as does a seer, by the way), but there is more involved. A true seeker is struggling to relinquish their ego-dominance, and may use any number of techniques, all of which can be co-opted by the ego, but also may not be. The intellect is one of the most critical aids in seeking—unintelligent seeking is a famous producer of obstacles. The fault would be in relying solely on the intellect, leaving out periods of silence and stillness, active involvement in games and other activities, loving friendships, exchange of ideas, and all the rest. Being silly and unpretentious with children. We can do all these, and they’re not mutually exclusive either. As we let go of these hard-and-fast categories, the distinction between a seer and a seeker also dissolves. A seer is still a seeker, and a seeker is (perhaps unconsciously) a seer as well. One part without the other is a recipe for stagnation.

I asked Paul about his evangelical Christian upbringing, and how they treated grace. He mentioned that they took it for granted: if you accepted that Jesus did all the work for you already, you were not required to do anything more, except follow the Bible. I pointed out how this attitude permits the ego to keep its firm hold on the psyche, and that is the source of the ugliness that such believers sometimes evince. Still, it would be possible to believe this and still keep searching for the openness of an integrated self, as many honest souls do. You’d have to wonder how to behave in each circumstance, based on what you know, keeping your participation alive and lively. If you rely solely on a book—the

Bible is full of contradictions, as Paul mentioned—it remains closed behavior and a ripe domain for ego-tripping. And we humans need to be careful of the fact that we recognize other people's egos much more easily than we can spot our own. This is why communication is so valuable, not to mention humility.

Our discussion ended nice and early, so we had time for a substantial reading and meditation. I read out the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and Love and Blessings excerpts you can find in Part II, BU first, as it's short. The L&B tale, familiar as it is to some of us, always makes for an amazing meditation when read with full visualization.

Our closing meditation was ineffable, and could have lasted much longer than it did. It was a fitting way to close the first 12 chapters, nearly a quarter of the book, and the “launching pad” stage of our investigation, marinated in bliss.

Part II

No meditation from Baiju this time, so I'll include the Ramana Maharshi story I read out from *Love and Blessings*, pp 139-42. The collected tales of Nitya's time with him, 24 pages, are here:

http://aranya.me/uploads/3/4/8/6/34868315/nityas_time_with_ramana_maharshi.pdf. The home page, once again, is here: <http://aranya.me/index.html>.

Below this, I have added the story of Nitya's birth that he remembered during this incident:

It was in 1948 during my summer vacation that I first went to see Ramana Maharshi. As he was Dr. Mees' guru, I went to him with great expectations. I had read many accounts about him and considered it a rare opportunity to meet such a person.

Tiruvannamalai is a hot place. One does not feel quite comfortable there. But the morning hours are very fresh and lovely. The night abruptly comes to a close. This is followed by the

golden light of the sun embracing everything, which in turn is accompanied by a very beautiful chanting of the priests.

Before going to see Ramana Maharshi in the ashram, I wanted to get a feeling for the few places in town that were associated with the early days of his tapas. I went first to the famous temple. Even though I wasn't much of a temple-going, deity-worshipping devotee, I stood before the sanctum looking at the drowsy flames of the temple lamps in that dark room. I kept absolutely still, imagining how the young Ramana first entered the temple without a ceremonial bath, yet drenched by a rain that had accidentally showered upon him. On the day I arrived, I was hoping to have a similar shower, but it didn't happen. Instead I perspired and my clothes were as wet as if I had been standing in the rain.

There were only a few people in the temple at the time. With someone's help I found the dark room in the basement where young Ramana had forgotten himself in bliss for days on end. According to the stories I'd read, his buttocks had been eaten away by ants or vermin. I went and sat in that sepulchral room, where a single lamp burned with a steady flame.

I felt tempted to go up onto the mountain and look at all the other places mentioned in his biography, but my curiosity to see the Maharshi was so strong that I went straight to the hall. There many people were seated around the figure of the Maharshi, who was lazily squatting on a wooden cot with a mattress on it. He was not conventionally dressed. He had only a t-string, like the local farmers wore. Even before entering the ashram I had seen many young and old people wearing t-strings, so when I saw Maharshi also wearing one it didn't surprise me. Under one arm he held a coiled white towel. On three sides of his bed men and women squatted on the floor, while on the fourth side there was a screen which served as a wall. Never in my life have I seen anyone so completely exposed to the public, day and night.

The Maharshi's bed was at the end of a fairly large hall, which was full of people most of the time. As everyone sat

absolutely silent, you would never realize there were so many people present until you entered. Even after seeing the gathering you didn't get the sense of being in a crowd, because each person was so much drawn inward, absorbed in themselves. Some people sat with their eyes closed. Many were dozing off. I saw a Catholic priest reading a book, probably his Bible. There was an old Muslim fakir with a rosary in his hand. He was counting the beads. From his lips I could see that he was silently muttering something. An old lady was copying a passage out of a book into her notebook. I saw a red-faced American whimpering, and occasionally sobbing and shedding tears.

The Maharshi sat erect. He looked like he was pondering over some abstract thought. His head was shaking slightly. My first impression was of an old man mildly suffering from Parkinson's disease.

My hero in those days was Swami Vivekananda. Like him I also worried about India's poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy, and its inability to organize dynamic work projects for groups of people in order for India to buck up and get out of the shackles of lethargy. The Maharshi sat before me like the concrete symbol of India's inaction.

For a while I felt sorry I had come. I didn't know why people were making such a fuss over someone who was not giving people any incentive to work hard to make India rich and beautiful. When the sun was about to set, I saw the Maharshi getting up and going out of the hall for his routine walk. I was told that for many years it had been his habit to walk around the hill. I followed him. He only walked for a short while. Then he sat on a rock.

It was just a change of place; otherwise he was exactly the same. People sat before him just as they had done in the hall. After a wash, which was done out in the open, he went back to his bed. Some Brahmins sat before him and chanted from the Taittiriya Upanishad. They also chanted some Vedic hymns, which I couldn't immediately decipher. The atmosphere was very reverent

and serene, but my feeling persisted that the Maharshi was just lazy.

When I had first come, I had stood before Maharshi and saluted him, but he didn't take any notice of me. Being a young man with a lot of self-esteem and ego, I had wanted to impress everyone with my ability to chant the Gita. After a couple of days of just sitting there quietly and anonymously I became very bored, so I decided to leave. In India it is a custom not to approach or leave a saint without offering some present, so I went out and bought some oranges. I placed them on the ground near his feet and prostrated, even though I didn't have the least desire to bow before him. He took no notice of me. I thought he was treating me like a shadow or a dead man. I was filled with resentment. I wanted to walk away as though I had done nothing more than my duty.

For some reason or no reason, I lingered there for a moment. Then what a wonder! Maharshi's gaze, which had been floating over my head, became slightly tilted, and he looked straight into my eyes. It was as though two magnetic shafts were coming towards me. Both struck me at the same time, right in the middle of my heart. A great darkness began spreading around me, and I felt very dizzy. My body started trembling. I couldn't control myself. Soon it was as if my own consciousness was an unflickering flame placed in the vastness of a lake of darkness.

A sort of retrospection started unreeling my memory from the present to the past. It was just like watching my life played out in reverse. I was riveted to the scene, unable to move. Many things that had happened in my life passed before my eyes. Soon I remembered being back in my mother's womb. At one point I felt a strong physical shaking, and remembered hearing that my mother had fallen off a collapsing bridge while she was carrying me. I continued to retrogress, back before my conception to my existence as a mathematical entity defined only by vasanas and dharma. A great peace filled my entire being, as I became totally

absorbed in the interstices of the cosmic matrix. After many years of search I had at last returned to the Source.

Eventually somebody tapped on my shoulder, and I came back to my senses. The Maharshi was no longer before me, and the people in the hall were also gone. Everyone had left for the dining hall. I was invited to come and eat. I walked as if in a dream. To my utter surprise, when I got to the dining hall I saw that the leaf on Maharshi's right hand was not claimed by anyone. I was asked to sit there. When food was served, Maharshi looked at my leaf as if to ascertain that every item served to him was also being given to me.

From that moment Ramana Maharshi was no longer a person to me. He was a presence, or rather he was The Presence. He was that which I was seeking, and he was everywhere. I needed no effort at all to be with him again. What held my heart with an imperiential enchantment was neither the memory of a social person nor the proximity of an unforgettable one. It was as if the duality between the perceiver and the perceived had become merged in a single unitive phenomenon.

That was how I met Ramana Maharshi for the first time. Thereafter I visited him off and on until a few days before his mahasamadhi.

The following account of Nitya's birth appeared originally in the rarity *Fable of a Yati*, most of which has been blended into *Love and Blessings*, and is found there on pages 4-5:

Now I shall tell you how I was born. When an animal has a vertebral column running beyond the length of its trunk, it becomes a tail. My memory also has a kind of tail, rooted far beyond the trunk of this present life in the folds of the prenatal past. Everyone's consciousness begins from this prenatal region, though only a few can recall it to mind.

When I think of the cosmos, my mind spreads out into the infinity of what we know as space and time. From the here and

now it stretches out beyond the horizon to the far fringes of outer space, lingering there in bewilderment since whatever lies beyond our known existence can never be more than a vague supposition. Similarly, as memory flows back from the present through the annals of history, plunging ever deeper into the fossils of prehistory and myth, the mind once again recoils on itself, unable to reach the beginning of time. And the imagination shoots into the future, piling possibilities upon possibilities until it too reaches a blind alley of bewilderment from an excess of complexity.

Such are the virtually immeasurable dimensions of our cosmos, the space-time continuum. But the cosmos marks only one of the poles of the axis of truth. The other pole or counterpart is marked by a point which has neither any dimension or location. This pure, spaceless, timeless, nameless aspect is the individual aspect of the all-embracing Absolute or Brahman. It throbs with a negative dynamism. In fact the movement is so subtle that it cannot even be termed a throb or a movement of any kind. Yet the negative charge precipitates the fusion of its own spiritual spark with a positive impulse from within the creative matrix of the cosmos.

Such an activated spark was the primal cause of my being. It became elongated as a mathematical line without thickness, on which were strung all my previous tendencies and talents. The pure ray which issued forth from the matrix of the cosmos and the dimensionless point became colored and split in two. One half became positively charged and attained the color of gold. The other was negatively charged and became blue. The two rays passed through the entire gamut of time and space, and through all names and forms and every kind of memory that anyone had ever had, and entered the psychophysical orbit of Earth from opposite directions. The golden ray circled the Earth clockwise and the blue ray circled counterclockwise, and both of them entered opposite halves of a ripe pomegranate. This very fruit happened to be in the garden of the haunted house where Raghavan and Vamakshy Amma had recently taken up residence. Seeing the fascinating

glow of the fruit, Raghavan plucked it, cut it in two, and gave half to his wife; both of them ate their share.

In that mystic communion the negative ray of the spirit entered Raghavan's soul, while the positive ray spread itself throughout every part of his wife's organism. They became possessed of a great love for each other and felt a strong need to cling together. During this loving consummation the two rays again united and became a fertilized ovum. The dynamic rays, before becoming a fetus, took from Raghavan twenty-three chromosomes with the qualities of becoming poetic, intelligent, kind, open, frank, gentle and sensitive, and from Vamakshy Amma the qualities of being willful, austere, forgiving, generous, and so on. The fetus began to grow in the mother's womb to eventually become the present writer.

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From Nitya's introduction to brahmana 8 of the third adhyaya of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, showing that even the gods must surrender their control before the Absolute. Thanks to Paul, our class already has a special affinity with grass:

In Upanishadic lore we come across only three females well established in the wisdom of the Absolute. The Kena Upanishad, which comes from the Sama Veda, narrates an episode about Agni, the presiding god of all rituals, Vayu, the animator of the world of living organisms and unifier of the inert world, and Indra, the controller of the senses and all sensory beings. In the story, they were tested by the Absolute in order to bring them to the humility of wisdom. Brahman came to them as an indiscernible apparition (yaksha) which questioned the magnitude of their prowess and challenged them to move a blade of grass. Agni was unable to burn it, Vayu, the god of wind, failed to lift it or blow it away, and Indra, the king of the gods, failed to destroy it. When the chagrined gods became fearful, in the very place where the indiscernible

spirit had been, Uma, the beautiful daughter of the Himalayas, appeared. She taught the gods that the knowledge of wisdom and the prowess of action both belong only to Brahman, the Absolute. This is the first instance of a female revealing the wonder of the Absolute in one of the Upanishads. (207)

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Speaking of grass, one of my all time favorite quotes from Nitya is from his letter to Ananda:

Dear Ananda, my daughter, disciple, and never failing friend; your church is built upon the rock of simplicity. It will not rise into the heavens like a Himalayan cliff, but like the humble grass which has legs to walk, it can creep around the globe and make our good earth ever more green and fresh.

The whole letter is here:

http://aranya.me/uploads/3/4/8/6/34868315/letter_to_ananda.pdf.