

10/16/18

MOTS Chapter 13: Intimations of Immortality

Having offered the flower of your mind to that Lord
smeared with sacred ashes, the three *gunas*,
having cooled down the senses, unwound everything, and become
calm,
when even the glory of aloneness has gone, become established in
mahas.

Free translation:

To become established in the Supreme Being, offer the flowers of
your mind to the Great Lord, whose body is smeared with the
ashes of the triple modalities of nature. Incline before Him in
devotion. Turn your senses away from all objects of desire. Feel
freed of all bondage. Become cool, and do not be excited even by
the wonder of the Absolute.

I again received catcalls for claiming that this was another of
Nitya's greatest essays, which it is. The problem is there are so
many that the term "greatest" hardly makes sense anymore. I
suppose it only means that this one speaks volumes to me, but I
don't think I'm alone in this....

We used the chapter reading as an extended meditation, and
really there is hardly anything for me to add to it in the notes. It's
eminently clear and straightforward. Nitya shows his familiarity
with the normal condition of all humans, and provides a fully
vernacular reading of how a Vedantin upgrades it to a love-
drenched, incisive version of normality.

Nitya was very fond of the dialogue style he uses here. His
book on the Bhagavad Gita uses it throughout, as an echo of the
Gita's epic dialogue. He used an identical technique in One
Hundred Steps to Realization, serialized in Gurukulam from

Spring 2007 through Spring 2013 (we only got through 25 of them before the end of the Portland-issued magazine).

Dialogue is central to the traditional guru-disciple relationship, as mutual give and take between them goes far beyond one dictating an instruction and the other following it. It's like what Baird Smith disdained as "Power Point Churches," where projected instruction is given in a pre-produced set form that can never vary, as contrasted with churches where there is an active engagement between the preceptor and the congregation. The former is constrictive, the latter expansive.

Nitya opens with an account of interacting with someone he despises, in order to demonstrate the three basic emotional states known as the *gunas*: *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. This is helpful since we don't always realize which one we're in, and as they each provide a different coloration to our perceptions, we have to extricate ourselves differently from them. The conclusion of each category is:

To feel negatively towards another person and to have a closed mind is evidence of a state of consciousness that can be described as *tamasic*, meaning dark or opaque.

Rajas is a state of emotional turbulence which makes the mind very self-centered or egocentric.

The clear state of mind of calm disposition indicates a *sattvic* state.

Nothing too arcane here! I think we all are very familiar with those states. Nitya then presents the yogi's method of coping with them:

It is not unnatural for us to become negative and angry, but it is not spiritual either. The path I have chosen is the way of a yogi, a contemplative who is also a man of unitive action. The model or pattern of life recommended to a yogi is that of a *gunatita*. A

gunatita is a person who has tamed his natural urges and has successfully transcended the unilateral impact of any of the three functional dynamics of nature: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

Many allegedly spiritual techniques amount to repression of these states, yet modern psychology is well aware that repression leads to a number of bad outcomes. Yoga provides a much healthier alternative. Nitya muses:

I cannot simply swallow my anger or annoyance. If I do, it may cause the malfunction or dysfunction of my psychosomatic system and make me sick. Nor do these emotions disappear by themselves without leaving karmic traces. So I prefer to express my annoyance and anger rather than repressing them.

Jan seconded the idea that repression causes illness, and that denying outlets for our emotions is not healthy. Giving our full being valid and valuable outlets is a real art form, and in a way that's exactly what we're studying here.

Yogis include the calm state of *sattva* in the same category as *rajas* and *tamas* in terms of its effect on the psyche, so even when in a state of euphoria, as with upsets and callousness, we should "Allow it to prevail for a while and then pass on like a beautiful cloud formation gently floating over the hills." This poetic line may have been inspired by the Wordsworth poem that gives the chapter its title. You'll find a link to it and some excerpts in Part II.

Deb felt it was a perfect lesson the way Nitya stays free of the clutch of the *gunas*, and how we have to allow the cycling of the various states to abate before taking a course of action. Jan agreed and was appreciative of Nitya's honesty in admitting to having all the turbulent emotional states the rest of us do.

Nitya always strove to demystify the post of guru, to show that all humans were basically the same. Meeting their disciples where they actually are is essential to having a meaningful exchange with them. If the teacher is thought to be in any way

different than the student, it instills a subtle resignation in the seeker's mind that they are unworthy of the attainments the teacher is trying to lead them to. Nitya had to battle such deeply entrenched mental blocks all the time. Pretty much all of us had a tough time thinking of him as a normal human. We were awed.

Bill was also touched by Nitya's honesty, humility and clarity, showing him how even gurus are caught up in the modulations of being, while remaining quiet within. Each and every one of us experiences the transactional plane, but we can come back to the place of witness.

Nitya's answers to his questions in the dialogue are intended to go beyond the limits imposed on Western psychology, where identifying the problem is the primary thrust, and considered to be the end of the psychiatrist's role. In *Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*, you may recall, he muses "If self-realization is the motive of the psychologist, why do we stop half way? Why don't we push it all the way until the patient is no longer a patient but a student, and further, not a seeker but a seer?" That's really what's missing in the lives of the dissatisfied. They're already aware on some level of their miseries, but unaware of their innate grounding in an exalted state. So the questions pose the problem and the answers give a way toward the yogic ideal of "disaffiliation from the context of suffering" by making our way to fullness.

Nitya presents several alternatives for processing anger and other negative states of mind. First is direct confrontation—after bringing oneself to a clear and more or less calm state first, of course. Then there's talking it over with a neutral friend, shown experimentally to be very therapeutic. When those options aren't available, Nitya would do something we could all relate to:

I'll write a letter conveying all my self-pitying anguish and wrath to a friend who lives in a far off country. When it is all out of my mind I just tear the letter up. I don't have to mail that dirty laundry to anyone.

Nowadays we are more likely to type our complaints up on the computer, but experiments have also shown that actual writing is more therapeutic. Regardless, don't accidentally hit 'send' before trashing your work, as Bill laughingly warned. Got to be careful!

Again, many people imagine that we are spiritual if we don't get angry or upset. Nitya calls this a pathological state, a kind of numbness. It's much better to feel fully and then process our experiences of all types.

Nitya is busy throughout the book in countering the overly worshipful attitudes many of us have about gurus, showing himself to be a perfectly ordinary human being:

I don't think I'm very firm. I'm a somewhat weak person. There is a mighty unknown force on which I lean with trust for all decisions. Only this gives me the strength I need.

Deb got a delighted laugh out of his admission of what could be called a mean streak, another feature many of us are loath to admit to:

My astrological sign is Scorpio. Those who dabble in astrology say that altruistic idealism and forgiveness are strong in me. Equally strong is the negative tendency to reduce an adversary to dust. I get strong pulls to hit hard long before a potential rival even dreams of hitting me. It is only by God's grace that I have never succumbed to such negativity.

Scorpio is a scorpion, famed for the lightning fast strike of its poisonous tail. While this may be exalted in Mafia-style behavior, it's far from yogic.

This brings us to an essential question: do we initiate action or should we simply respond to provocations, or even do nothing at all? In Indian tradition, quietism is central, and busyness is considered non-spiritual. But Nitya was of an active temperament, as he admits here:

Did I not try to become a Ramana Maharshi? It didn't work. I also tried to sit quiet for many months without any word or activity. It was like a young bull trying to fast and meditate. My mind always wanted to graze in new pastures. Eventually I found out that was not my trip. My gregariousness has become somewhat chronic, and my hands are always hungry for action. As a young man I initiated several ventures and got into endless troubles over them. I think I've learned my lesson. I do not any longer initiate any new programs of action, but that does not mean I wantonly avoid or escape action situations.

All of these allusions are fully recounted in *Love and Blessings*, including the hilarious results of his business ventures, and are really fun to read.

Deb agreed it was really important to not either initiate actions or refuse them (which is a kind of negative initiation), but simply to attend to natural tasks, endeavors and relationships.

While in Bombay, Nitya was given several opportunities for fame and fortune, which can easily lure us into initiating action. In his Letter to Ananda he writes:

I could have become very rich in India. At least five times big fortunes came unsought to my doorstep, and it was by God's grace that I was not caught in the trap of the glittering devil.

I had the privilege of facing ten to twenty thousand people and on a few occasions even fifty thousand people to talk to and play on their sentiments whatever games I liked. I also rejoiced seeing my name appear on posters and in daily papers. Again it was by God's grace that I could turn away from the world of public media to the cloister of spiritual obscurity. I certainly do not want to return to the world of money and publicity.

This marks the boundary between the ordinary person and a true contemplative. Nitya saw firsthand the impositions of fame on two of India's most prominent citizens:

Nothing is more inconvenient and troublesome than being famous. I have seen with my own eyes what it did to Mahatma Gandhi and Ramana Maharshi. Nobody wanted to leave them alone even for an hour, except perhaps when Gandhiji was in jail. Otherwise, he could only slam his door against the waiting multitude. I always think of the wise words of Jalaluddin Rumi, "Poverty is my pride and obscurity my refuge."

So here we are. We want to bring about change and growth, yet we are wary of initiating action in any ordinary sense. So what do we do? Here is where charlatans and politicians offer to lead us, so that we can stop thinking for ourselves. They'll take care of it. It's an easy way out of the dilemma. But anyone who is paying attention will soon see the dangers. We must never surrender our good sense, even as we are aware of its limits. Nitya insists we don't abandon our mind, tempting as it is:

We have no instrument other than our mind to take us to our own true being. The mind, however, has some grave defects. It is conditioned and colored by its past experiences. It is burdened with many dormant habit traits. When we employ it to observe, reconnoiter or measure consciousness, it merges with it and becomes part of the uncharted and indistinct "conscious- unconscious." Instead of reporting back it loses its identity. So we cannot depend on our mind as a foolproof instrument.

Despite this, Nitya repeats, "Still, in our search for the Self we have no other option than to use our mind." Then a broad hint: "The first step is to give it a direction."

Nitya isn't talking about having abstract goals like becoming enlightened. To me, this idea of direction means becoming steady and brave enough to examine our state of mind *right now* with a neutral air. If we can resist either ignoring or getting entangled in a situation, while remaining present, it is already quite liberating.

The idea of detachment really baffles some seekers of truth. There is much to confuse and distract us in our environment, but we have to be careful not to tune out the important stuff, the good, the true and the beautiful. We find our center right in the bliss of being in contact with life in all its richness. Don't turn away. Nitya truly believed and lived this. He advises:

Retain your liaison between your senses and the mind. Allow your senses to bring home all that you love, such as the sunrise, flowers, children and lovers. Every item of affectivity touches your center. Make yourself familiar with that spot in your inner awareness. It is right here. The spirit dwells in you. It is the auspicious Siva, the transcendental joy of eternal peace, dancing his cosmic dance.

This is not a call to worship any deity, but to attune with a freeing principle. Nitya mentions Siva because he is the Lord smeared with sacred ashes of the gunas of the opening verse. He is often feared as the God of Destruction, but Narayana Guru well knew his destruction was to sweep away the garbage that keeps us in thrall to mediocrity, and that opens our hearts to supreme love.

We are well instructed here to not turn away from all the beautiful things in order to find our center—they lead right to it. It's just that we shouldn't be stuck on our preferred version, but open and tolerant of other versions as well. And we do not have to merely quiet the mind to become more aware, we can also offer the joy to others. We don't have to remain isolated.

Jan was really touched by this, how the senses are given a vital role in bringing home all we love. It's frustrating how even in the Gurukula people cling to the idea that the senses are the enemy.

One thing that sets it apart for me is the enthusiasm for lived experience, for making love a reality and not simply an abstraction. Distrusting our own experience is one of the most deeply lodged impediments—habits of thought—we humans suffer from. As Deb added, it is love that transforms you, rather than a sterile program. And we love what we see and know. This down-to-earth approach also helps keep us sane, by the way.

Nitya winds down with a magnificent paean:

No one can attain to the status of the Absolute without cultivating an overwhelming love for it. When such a love fills our heart, our vision changes. Relativistic considerations are caused by patterns of love and hatred engendered by partial visions. When the mind is filled with an overflowing sympathy, its resultant neutral vision will liberate us from all lopsided obligations and tribalistic or clannish vested interests. When all the unhealthy feverishness of life leaves the mind it becomes cool and collected and will be filled with a sense of wonder at the vision of the Absolute.

So this is where we're headed, and the determination to go there is the direction we want to give to our mind. Love is a direction? Yes, the kind meant, anyway. It sounds simple enough, yet it is elusive to many, and hardly mentioned at all in the mainstream of social life.

Nitya concludes with the merging of seer and seeker, the ultimate achievement of the dialogue form of wisdom transmission:

In the reciprocation of identity that naturally becomes established between the self that admires and loves and the Transcendental Self that is seen and adored, one experiences the ecstasy of Union. When the seeker attains to the status of a seer and continuously experiences the neutrality of spiritual vision and the abiding joy of the Absolute, it becomes a matter

of course to accept such a condition as permanent. This is the true state of Blessedness. This is the intimation of Immortality.

I noticed, maybe for the first time, that Nitya secretly infuses the definition of the Absolute, *saccidananda*, into his closing blessing. *Sat* is the permanent condition, *chit* is the continuous experience of a neutral spiritual vision, and *ananda* is of course the abiding joy of the Absolute. So there you have it! About as clear a presentation of the game and the goal as the Gurukula has ever produced.

Part II

Baiju has taken leave for a time to attend to pressing matters. Here's a link to Imitations of Immortality, by William Wordsworth, the amazing poem that inspired the title of this chapter. It's little wonder that Nitya found it enthralling:

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ode-intimations-immortality-recollections-early-childhood>

Reading it at the end of class, we noticed how it was enriched by the thoughts we had discussed, or I should say, our appreciation was enriched. It was clear that in a pure form the fall from grace and return to God of Christianity is a close parallel with the tenets of Indian philosophy, where a single Substance is altered to produce the mystifying many, and our call is to rediscover the essential oneness. Wordsworth sketches the idea in terms of the innocent bliss of childhood corrupted by the cares of older age.

So many great lines here! Let me share a little. The opening first:

There was a time when meadow, grove, and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,

The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day.
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.

Wordsworth hears the call of the return to grace:

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;
No more shall grief of mine the season wrong;
I hear the Echoes through the mountains throng,
The Winds come to me from the fields of sleep,
And all the earth is gay;

A few more classic bits:

Oh evil day! if I were sullen
While Earth herself is adorning,

Whither is fled the visionary gleam?
Where is it now, the glory and the dream?

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;

Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie

Thy Soul's immensity;

O joy! that in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That Nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!

Delight and liberty, the simple creed
Of Childhood, whether busy or at rest,

Hence in a season of calm weather
Though inland far we be,
Our Souls have sight of that immortal sea
Which brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither,
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

What though the radiance which was once so bright
Be now for ever taken from my sight,
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;
In the primal sympathy
Which having been must ever be;
In the soothing thoughts that spring
Out of human suffering;
In the faith that looks through death,
In years that bring the philosophic mind.

in my heart of hearts I feel your might;

And the last sentence:

Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Part III

A wheelbarrow full of our homegrown quinces greeted class members as they arrived. We've had a bumper crop, and they are gorgeous. Later it occurred to me that quinces are candidates for being Hercules' golden apples of immortality of his eleventh labor, the same as the ones that caused heightened awareness in the Garden of Eden. So intimations of immortality were literally parked at the door.

* * *

In working through my chapter VI Gita commentary, preparing the next lesson, I came across a few paragraphs that are quite relevant to this chapter also:

About verse 36:

Those lucky ones who have had a transcendental experience by accident spread the word that it can only be attained by not trying. And yes, striving can block any number of possibilities from spontaneously springing up. But we lay the groundwork for wisdom by bringing our intelligence to bear, and bringing it back when it wanders. Without that effort, we become sloppy and unfocused and little or no transformation will take place.

Under 37 & 38:

The truth is that realization is not only of the special and spectacular, it includes the ordinary quotidian side of life too.

Every bit of existence is miraculous, and it's only because we have become dulled to it that we long for "signs and wonders." Instead of looking for something far away, we should bring our attention to the here and now, and accord it its full measure of wonder.

Verse 39 includes one of my favorite quotes from *That Alone*:

We have not seen the Buddha, we have never met Jesus Christ, nor Socrates. We have never seen Kant or Spinoza, Shakespeare or Shelley, Kalidasa, Valmiki, or the philosophers of far-off China. Bach, Mozart and Beethoven were isolated within a tiny section of our planet. Still, our human heritage is molded by the brilliant thoughts of all these wonderful people from all around the world: the poets, storytellers, those who made the myths and legends, the inventors, composers, scientists and discoverers. Whatever they have contributed is still present in our lives, guiding us, teaching us, and helping us every moment. But they are not here. Only the friend next to you is here, the friend who exemplifies and incorporates all those wonderful qualities and insights. And we can all share this tremendous inheritance and even more, with each other, to make life an ecstatic and joyful experience. (140)