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MOTS Chapter 15: Time as the Magic Spell of Pure Duration and the Engulfing Death of Painful Protraction

To the blessed ones who have sucked the milk of *para*
ten thousand years is but a moment;
but if knowledge succumbs to *apara prakrti*
half a second seems like a thousand years.

Free translation:

To those fortunate ones who are enjoying the cream of absolute wisdom, ten thousand years appears no more than a fleeting instant. But to those who are caught in the snare of relativism, even a split second can seem an eternity.

In That Alone, Nitya defines *para* as the Absolute. Most often it is taken as the Beyond or the Transcendent. Much the same thing. Narayana Guru's reference to it indicates the Absolute as the nourishing source of our sustenance. When we are dialed into it, time flies, and when we are out of joint, time drags.

This is something we all experience often, yet we somehow dismiss it as of little importance. Even the class wanted to speak in terms of monumental absolutes, disregarding the daily absorptions we experience. We are very fortunate to have plenty of opportunities to be caught up in what we are doing, while for many others, life is unendingly excruciating. This is partly good fortune and partly the efforts we have made to carve out a life apart from mere survival.

We have often talked about how the basic activities of the day can be considered boring chores or be more enjoyably examined in the light of the miracle of all existence. Andy talked about how when doing the dishes he sometimes cherishes the plates, their workmanship and the materials they are artfully formed of, imagining the people who made them, turning the

whole business into an exquisite meditation. Nitya often demonstrated that kind of enhancing meditation. If we are aware, everything becomes magical. Our weekly gatherings are mainly a reminder to keep putting energy into aliveness, no matter what.

Nitya sums up this attitude and its relation to time in a compact paragraph:

Mind has legs. It paces from thought to thought, and strolls from one observation to another. It seeks out new areas of feeling and fresh encounters with experience. When the mind flows smoothly, time passes unnoticed, but when it is involved in mechanical or cumbersome operations, time drags. When the mind is caught in an eddy of a meaningless fixation or a paranoid phobia, time stares us hard in the face.

Though the world abounds in paranoid phobias, especially in the time of fictional social media propaganda, and these can be lethal in a well-armed society, it's our meaningless fixations that weigh us down more than we realize, and are available to be upgraded to meaningful fixations at the very least. We might even ask why we have fixations at all, when we could live artfully with more flexibility, but it seems that fixations can help us to be less anxious anyway. To some extent they are simply how the brain works, its natural clinging, so they should only be discarded if they aren't replaced by fear and doubt. That may in fact be humanity's dilemma at the present: our old fixations have been erased by rationalism and science, but nothing commensurate has been successful at filling the void, unless you count hatred of the other. Love is much more subtle than hate, and harder to practice. So is speculation on the nature of things, the mental partner of a loving outlook, both of which aim to bring us together.

Speaking of which, I caught for the first time a sly hint Nitya includes in his essay, knitting the variety of forms of worship together in a single image:

Blessed is the babe of spiritual birth that can suck the milk of Allah's grace. It tastes nirvana. It has in it the alchemy to dissolve a million years into an instant and brew from it the wine of transcendence.

Definitely a mixed metaphor, but Nitya had a purpose. The babe is the central symbol of Christianity, here suckled by the Vedantic Absolute, which is given the name Allah. Nirvana belongs to Buddhists and Hindus, so that covers India's main religious groups (happily, Nitya mentioned Sikhs earlier). Then he even includes alchemists, who were early delvers into science and psychology, and lastly the wine loved by those of the Dionysian persuasion, the Ecstatics. All roads lead to the Absolute in Nitya's all-inclusive vision.

The class mainly mused on that most incomprehensible subject, time. It's fascinating even when no fixed conclusions can be drawn. Nailing time down in a definitive way is not the same as transcending it, fortunately, but the effort to make sense of it made the time pass swiftly. Nothing like activating the "little gray cells" immortalized by detective Hercule Poirot.

Nitya refers to a well-known puzzle of Vedanta:

It is significant that in the Sanskrit language both time and death are called *kala*.... To a spiritual aspirant, conquering time is the same as conquering death.

The importance of this curious coupling of time with death is emphasized by Nitya repeating it at the end: "Spiritual life can truly be measured by its capacity to transcend the time sense." So conquering time means transcending it. We aren't going to blast time apart with some infernal machine, but only slip out of our learned fixation on it. And this allows us to be more alive. Conquering death means becoming more alive, does it not? Maybe not forever, but surely for the present.

Deb thought that time disappears when we are part of the enfoldment of a situation, and there are so many possibilities when this can happen. What brings about the transcendence isn't specifiable, because for each person what we're attracted to is unique.

Bill wondered about the meaning of pure duration. He has been meditating on the chapter this week in preparation for the class(!), and wasn't able to come up with a satisfactory meaning.

While I'd say that that's the point of meditating: to realize we don't actually understand what we once took for granted, I could throw a little light on it. Henri Bergson was the source of Nataraja Guru and Nitya's use of the term *duration* to refer to the eternal state beyond time. In it there are no seconds—only the first. If things didn't have duration they would be gone in an instant, so for them to exist in a meaningful way they have to last. But that state is not at all dependent on the form of counting we measure with clocks and label time. Oddly, the relation between pure duration and clock time is a lot like the Absolute and the relative. Duration is absolute and time is relative.

That was in fact how Bill was conceiving duration in his meditations, as a kind of emptiness beyond our comprehension, so he got it, but just wasn't able to put what he got into words. No blame, as the I Ching would say.

Paul surmised that this means time imposes itself on pure duration. We take a concept like time and try to define it with limiting factors. In pure duration you become the seer that sees. He compared this idea to Nitya's wonderful affirmation in the last chapter, "I'm not a renunciate because the world is not mine to renounce." That would read something like, "In bliss I don't keep time, because it isn't mine to keep."

Paul is right that it is we humans who impose time on pure duration. It's a fiction we use. An important and useful fiction, of course. But we're the imposers here.

I suggested we don't have to live only in some absolute state, that this is only about having enough joy in our lives so time sits

lightly on our shoulders. Time doesn't have to be annihilated. We can make the world a miracle or a curse by how we think of it and relate to it. Narayana Guru is offering us incentives by pointing out what a drag time can be when we're out of joint with our dharma and how blissful the fleeting moments are when we're in tune with it. And we have a large measure of control in how that plays out. He has taught us how to rebuild our lives more in accord with our authentic predilections.

This all reminded Bushra of a book on Borneo she read before her travels there, by a man who hiked through its jungles. He would travel with the locals who knew the territory, wisely enough. If he asked them how long it would take to get to their next destination, they always said it depends whether we go in the sun or in the forest. They hate walking in the sun, so it takes much longer psychologically. Or they may find a river and go for a swim or find fruits to pick, and then it might take weeks. This brought home to Bushra how we have built our lives on the efficient use of time, and have forgotten the value of pure duration. To those alive to the jungle, just arriving at the destination is not that interesting. It's all in the going. Anything can happen.

Nancy lamented how much we miss because we don't allow living on that kind of time frame. We're all penalized if we aren't prompt and on time. It reminded me of Nitya's theory that Western punctuality stemmed from regular toilet training imposed on children, whereas in India, where kids didn't wear clothes, you just went whenever until you got the knack. That made time seem much less rigid. Indians don't have that unconscious pressure to perform on time that Westerners do.

Andy recalled Nitya describing time as a semantic fiction. We are busy creating a lineup of events, yet pure being is also happening at the same time. Andy has seen how all creatures have their own time frame that works for them, faster or slower than ours: meditate on this and you are filled with reverence. It's a poetic vision to step inside.

Bill, who has recently semi-retired, is getting used to a more flexible version of time. He didn't realize how much time pressures influenced how he made his way through the day when he was engaged full time. He's enjoying his release, where he can be sidetracked and have conversations without worrying about the clock so much.

Bill also related a time "back in the day" (i.e. young and stoned) sitting by a river in Big Sur, California, when he picked a cocoon out of the gravel and before his eyes a butterfly came out of it. He has no idea how long this took! He just knows he was mesmerized by the whole process.

Jan has certain dream states where she returns to a certain familiar place or experience in her life, and it's like it's always been there in her. The encounters aren't identical each time, it's more like there is evolution going on in the scenarios, but the setting and people are the same. And we do that with our waking lives too, don't we, she thought. In our mind we can go back and interact with old events in new ways, and revise them.

Bill chimed in that the way psychics describe their gift of looking at past and future is that it is all the same time. This reminded me of author Don Berry's idea that time exists so that everything doesn't happen at once. We would be overwhelmed by the totality, so it is strung out in time so we can deal with single aspects separately. But the true state is that everything is always present right now.

Modern neurology has shown that we retain everything we experience, so at least our entire experience is sitting inside us all the time. Mostly we're busy attending to an external event in the present, but we could also visit any of those other places if we turned our attention to them. This is where dreaming is most helpful—it's much easier to access those memories below conscious levels when we're sleeping. Or meditating. Conscious intent doesn't seem to be of much use to most of us in gaining access, but the inner guide can and does lead us to what we most need to get in touch with.

I invited people to tell of periods when time flew by for them. What is it that makes us forget sequential time? For Bushra it is when she swims. The world becomes timeless and she could go on paddling through the water forever. I wondered if as a videographer and movie lover that movies would absorb her that way too, but she said no. She knows too much about the process, which keeps her from the full absorption so many people feel when caught up in a story, especially a visually-aided one. That makes sense, because to me the best movies are the ones where I forget I'm even watching a movie—I'm actually in it.

Like Bushra, Andy didn't feel like he accesses the timeless state when painting, his main artistic enterprise. And I'm somewhat that way with my piano playing. If you are thinking diligently, it produces sequential time in some respects. There must be an element of mindlessness in true release, and I, unlike real musicians, rarely can let go like that. As an excellent violist said to me the other day when I was complaining about the difficulties I had, "It's hard if you think about it." True.

For Moni the timeless state comes from sitting and talking with a lover, just being in each other's company. And then there are unfriendly people who make the time seem endless, those you don't get along with.

We should include Nitya's contribution on this topic too:

If I consider when the endless hours have lost their significance in an ecstatic sense of pure duration, I remember it almost always occurred when I was either in communion with my Guru or engaged in a spiritual dialogue with him. Other occasions when time ceased to exist were when my mind made an inward spiral, as it were, and passed through the mathematical pinpoint of spacelessness and timelessness to enter the infinitude of an inner space of pure duration. Another experience of timelessness waits on me whenever I allow my consciousness to spread out evenly around me into the

infinitude of cosmic space. This automatically calls time to a reposing halt.

He adds:

Some of the truest hours of overflowing ecstasy came to me quite unsought, blowing up from the bottom of my mind. They filled both the earth and the heaven inside me with a fragrance of music that was as sweet as embracing the aroma of a rainbow. Yes, the experience was of all the senses thrilling at once, and yet it was paradoxically far removed from the senses or reasoning.

I think the “unsought” aspect is important. The spiritual paradox is how do we seek the unseekable, the unsought even, which is not quite the same? Or, how do we unseek the seekable? These qualities own us, we don’t own them. As in Paul’s recall of Nitya’s words. We somehow let ourselves go, into them.

Bill told us of a time when he and a friend were hiking in the Rocky Mountains and got into panning for gold. They got “gold fever” of a sort. Bill said they were at this one river for three weeks without realizing it. Hours at a time would just disappear. The process of sifting sand for gold flakes was totally engrossing. They got maybe an ounce or two for their efforts, but they didn’t care—it was all about the fun they were having, and their lives didn’t depend on making money at that point. This may also have been “back in the day.” Bill didn’t say.

Bushra wondered if the river was the key element, as it was part of several recountings. She’s a river lover.

I brought up something Paul and I share, being retired first responders to emergencies. When you’re rushing to the scene of a fire or medical call, figuring out what to do and how, and then carrying it out, you are on hyper alert status. Time doesn’t exist, beyond maybe knowing that the victim has 4 minutes, or 2, and time is ticking down for them. You’re pushing to get as much done

as fast as possible, and everything you know is brought to bear. Hours can go by in major incidents without you even thinking about the time. Once the scene is handled, time almost instantly becomes pure dead weight. You're doing menial cleanup tasks or just sitting around metabolizing your adrenaline, and the minutes seem like hours. Especially at 3:00 AM.

This reminded Andy of an incident that happened to him on the freeway years ago. As he was barreling along at 60 mph, a truckload of 4 x 8 plywood sheets came loose in the oncoming lane and flew up in the air right in front of him. He literally stood on the brake and stopped his car just as one of the sheets bounced off his front. Just a smidge more and the thing might have sliced right through the interior where he was sitting. He can still recall it in slow motion, because his brain recorded it at thousands of frames per second, and the adrenaline brands it permanently into memory.

Our experience definitely warps time that way. I knew another friend who was in a car accident, and was ejected from the vehicle. He wasn't badly hurt but had daily headaches for months afterward. He had no memory of what had happened. Someone suggested a hypnotist, and under hypnosis he relived the accident in super-slow motion. He observed every detail, and had no more headaches after that.

Deb told her own near-accident story, of driving in snow in Maine, hitting a patch of ice and spinning out. The car spun in slow motion, taking a seemingly long time before thumping into a snowbank and coming safely to rest.

So excitement can make time accelerate tremendously, but the ideal of yoga is that calmness and being centered are even more engaging than neurological thrills. We are actually even more alert in a yogic state than when we are watching the vampire approach the sleeping victim or the car chase through the city streets. Yoga is not so much excitement but total engagement. Being in balance helps you to be even more engaged. In my experience, the most excited firefighters would sometimes "lose it," making bad decisions because the pressure led them to make hasty decisions. I

was nearly killed a couple of times because of this. In our commercial world, the goads are mostly toward more excitement, and better yet, more expensive excitement. Yet a reflective attitude can open up even more of our authentic inner landscape. And it's far safer than free climbing in Yosemite.

Winding down, we shared some of the quotidian excitements we enjoy, like taking care of our plants and yard, puttering around the house, the kinds of things you folks at home do as well. They too bring about times when there is no time. Doing what we love is all that's necessary.

Andy wanted to know what current physics makes of time, and I told him it was still a total mystery. No one can figure a reason time flows only one way—it should be able to go either direction equally. Time has various descriptions, but no explanation. It's a fine example of something that doesn't exist but is at the same time undeniable.

Our closing meditation was to experience pure duration for a few minutes, paradoxical as that may sound. As always, the joy of sharing and digging into the subject together made for a mysteriously blissful, quiet finale.

Part II

This part of the class was discontinuous, so I'm putting it in separately. Being the disciple of Nataraja Guru, Nitya well knew that "Gurus are unpredictable. They choose to be uncanny in the most impossible manner at unexpected hours."

I first thought of this contrarianism of gurus in respect to psychedelic experience. For many of us "back in the day," LSD inspired what felt like "going with the flow." It raised the mind into a flowing state like rafting a rushing river, utterly absorbing and impossible to leave (why would you want to?). *Rushing* was the prevailing term for it. Time became instantly meaningless, and it was obviously relative to one's state of mind once it started to reappear late in the experience. For Nataraja Guru, by contrast,

psychedelics made time slow down, and so he found them tedious. During his visit to the San Francisco area in 1968, his hosts slipped him STP, and kind of super-psychedelic. The Guru felt it was somewhat amusing and his description is interesting, but his ultimate assessment was anything that slowed time down was not for him.

I also talked about how when I had my stroke-like illness in 2010, time expanded exponentially, just like the *apara prakriti* of this verse. It was very like Nitya's title: the Engulfing Death of Painful Protraction. Two days near death seemed like months, and I was conscious of literally being in a land of the dead. Yet here Nataraja Guru is in an even worse condition, permanently paralyzed, yet he is calm, not focused on himself, willing to accede to the wishes of others. In later stories he jokes with the nurses, just like nothing is the matter. If that isn't a mystical accomplishment, I don't know what is. Contrarianism at its best.

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In the mystery of synchronicity, the next morning my audio book I listened to as I drove to the doctor's (why the notes are late) was Philip K. Dick meditating on time.