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## MOTS Chapter 16: A Pearl of Priceless Worth

A very vast wasteland suddenly  
flooded by a river in spate—thus comes the sound  
that fills the ears and opens the eyes of the one who is never  
distracted;  
such should be the experience of the seer *par excellence*.

Free translation:

To one well-established in the Self, the secret of the Word comes  
as a cosmic sound. It fills one's ears and drowns everything in  
them like a flooded river inundating a desert. Just as it opens one's  
inner ear, it also opens the eye of the inner self.

Narayana Guru seldom if ever referred to the state of mind he  
was in prior to his cosmic vision. Here he sums it up in a few  
words that may or may not be personal: a very vast wasteland.  
Nuff said. More commonly he offers a benign characterization of  
it, where the seeker is thinking many thoughts, going through the  
motions of daily life, and so on. Verse 12 of Atmo mentions the  
“tragic” end of what we superficially focus on, yet only to  
reinforce the lasting focus he extols. I suppose the Guru felt we  
already knew how painful it was to be wandering in an empty  
desert without water, so why should he harp on it? He kept  
redirecting the seeker's attention to the oases.

It seems Nitya was a more passionate type, motivated by  
powerful emotions. Is this part of his appeal to many of us? He has  
shared his distress at times, which does make a good story and also  
resonates with our own discomfort. It's a very good motivator.

None of the gurus say much about the sudden change of state  
mentioned here, from desert to flood, likely for several reasons.  
Describing enlightenment kills the newness, the spontaneity of it.  
Plus, it creates a fixed expectation in the hearers that is antithetical

to the openness required to let in the floodwaters. Suffice to say it just happens. In any case expectations are a primary form of distraction, which we discussed in some detail later in the class.

The real-world grounding of this chapter is slight. Nitya is flying over Australia, most of which is desert:

During the flight what I saw from my window was thousands of square miles of white, gray and red sand dunes. It was awesome and frightening to see the vastness of such meaninglessness and valuelessness heaped up in those dunes, looking like mighty waves rolling on the surface of a vast sea of barrenness, and seeming to call into question the very existence of life.

It's purely a story—by the time he was jetting around the world teaching he was long past his days of anguish. It does put his feelings in a nutshell, and gets the point across. In case we don't catch it, Nitya knew to make it plain: "The sight of the desert reminded me of the early days of my spiritual search."

Deb noted the double vision of despair followed by beauty here. She was surprised because she had always just seen the positive half of this amazing verse. It depicts a breakthrough all right, but there is the desert, the wasteland, there too. She felt the previous night's misery of the US elections followed by tonight's celebration of Diwali sort of symbolized the two aspects.

I joked that some seers may start out enlightened and then convert to a wasteland mentality, but we normally only hear about those who go in the other direction. We suffer and so seek surcease of sorrow. If someone escapes from the ordinary, they are admired and their example followed.

Why is it that many people unconsciously—or even consciously!—believe that you have to make people suffer in order to force a breakthrough? I've started reading *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens, set in a time when religious *tightness* I guess I'll call it, was incredibly strong. We've forgotten how vicious the

suppression of the psyche has been in religions all over the planet. Don't you dare feel joy! You are worthless, less than worthless. Only God matters. Needless to say Narayana Guru didn't feel that was a successful strategy. He came from a caste that had been treated that way forever, and he could easily see how devastating it was. So he came up with an incredibly effective alternative.

There is no need to add to people's misery—there is plenty to go around already. Nitya's autobiography recounts some of his early struggles in detail. He searched long and diligently for truth, and was dissatisfied enough with what he found to keep going until he found the best teachers: Dr. Mees, Ramana Maharshi, and ultimately Nataraja Guru. Throughout he was inspired by the written teachings of Narayana Guru. The chapters leading up to Transformations in Silence, when Nitya retreated inside a hut and didn't speak for a year and a half, epitomize the painful questioning and doubt that can drive us to a breakthrough. (I put a bit of this in Part II.) He often cited the prime examples from his tradition, and does so here too:

The Upanishads describe the plight of a seeker as being like a fish struggling for life in a pond that is drying up in the summer heat. Sankara looks upon the anguished seeker as resembling a deer caught in the flaming cordon of a brush fire. The Buddha likens the emptiness of life to an old and blind stork waiting for fish in a dried up pond that has neither water nor fish.

Bill recalled a Zen master being asked how to seek for enlightenment, and he responded, "As if your hair is on fire!" Bill thought it took something like that to bring us to the sense of immediacy required. It can happen as it did with Nitya through desire, devotion and sincere seeking, which paradoxically causes the desert of emptiness we feel in the absence of the light as a stimulus.

Deb added that it didn't matter how lovely the world around him was, how lovely people were, Nitya felt a deep inner

bereftness. The deep point you get to can be the precursor to having a penetrating experience.

That kind of high intensity can sometimes do the trick, but what if we aren't so miserable? What is the trigger for the leap of understanding? It seems to be different for each person. Nitya does not spend any time on it in this chapter. Like Narayana Guru he almost never did, unless he felt it would propel a seeker to become a seer. Here we don't get any clue:

Years passed. At last the doors of the heavens flew open. The joy of realization comes not in trickles, but in the form of a torrential flood. It is very much like every grain of sand in the arid desert land of the seeker's heart changing into a drop of elixir or a pearl of priceless worth.

Jan jumped on "At last the doors flew open." Wait a minute—what? How? She wondered if Nitya ever talked about the realization he got from his open doors. He didn't talk about it directly, because the spirit is killed by being described. But there are some stories in his autobiography. I mentioned his experiential relationship with Christ described in "The Light of the World and the Life of All Beings," which takes place without any suffering. There is also the flood induced by Ramana Maharshi recently included in the notes, where Nitya might have been annoyed, but his attitude was hardly a factor at all. Probably his diligent preparation was the key, but that was truly an external stimulus. And then there is the accidental ingestion of a psychedelic, which is certainly a flood experience. Jan could see that we have room for many breakthroughs. They don't always produce a permanent transformation that is utterly final. There is always room for more enlightenment.

Several of us agreed that Nitya was very reticent in talking about enlightenment as a separate item. It isn't a thing, it's a way of seeing and being. Talking about it is outside that way. Deb described it as a flash of grace that leaves you transparent. Her

implication is that definitions add content, reducing the transparency. She put this beautifully: our programs inhibit the grace that would naturally arise.

Susan readily agreed: “I have programs all day and try to get a lot done. I am always trying to read, and listening to a lot of audio books when I cook and walk. But if I really try to not listen to anything, I can actually hear things and things occur to me and bubble up in my mind.”

Enlightenment is the most mysterious and elusive of all accomplishments, and we always want to know more about how to find it. Narayana Guru planted one secret clue in the verse: you have to be undistracted. Andy felt there was a big paradox here: your eyes and ears are open, yet you are not distracted. It’s like a koan. He figured one who is never distracted did not need their ears and eyes open, and yet Narayana Guru was wide awake. He was surrounded by people who were full of care, generosity, love—all major distractions. Yet once he crosses the threshold he sees that everything has that nature, so it no longer distracts him.

To me this is like the conclusion of one of my favorite E.E. Cummings poems:

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)

It’s not that the sense organs themselves are open, but the awareness of their transmitted meaning has opened up. I’d add that distraction is the opposite of *attraction*, and Narayana Guru, and Nitya for that matter, were attracted, not distracted. They got so into life that they had a complete focus no matter what agitation was present in the room. Because of this they were powerful agents of resolution of tension.

To me, distraction is definitely a paradoxical factor. Normally we imagine a spiritual program as having a goal that you work toward with undistracted focus, and anything that isn’t part of the program is a distraction. But that narrow focus is itself an

even greater distraction. We don't realize we are screening out so much to attend to what amounts to an ego fantasy. The true flood comes in unexpected ways, and is unique to each person, and even each occasion. Wanting it to come is itself a distraction, yet we have to have some kind of intention. It boils down to how do we try to not try? Somehow those two vectors can cancel each other out in the numinous, thereby "revealing the Absolute" in Nataraja Guru's phraseology.

I offered a fresh example. Deb had given me some poems she just had written to go over that morning. Two stood out. One of them was a concerted effort but it was clunky and forced, while the other was dashed off and it is one of her best. In the first she had been trying too hard, it seemed to me, while the other appeared effortless. She told us that the effort had gone on ahead of time, and then the poem burst out after a gestation period. It called to mind Isaac Asimov's Eureka Phenomenon, where you work at your writing or what have you, but when you get stuck you don't force the issue, you distract your conscious mind with a light movie or other diversion, and then the solution bursts into your mind. By distracting your surface mind your inner genius has more room to make its presence known. Or we might say you distract your horizontal interests so your vertical foundation can weigh in with less distraction.

Jan put this idea in a lovely way: By being receptive and listening carefully, we enhance our connection to the Absolute and the transcendent. As we live this way, we become more sensitive to how these moments happen in our life, and they are more likely to happen again. Susan agreed, adding that when she is in a desert kind of place she just reminds herself that that's where she is and that she will get out of it, and then she feels reassured enough to come back out more quickly. She even knows that such transition may lead her to a better place. Familiarity with a steady, grounded state of mind makes it much easier to get back to it. I suggested this is because we are tuning in to who we already are in essence. It isn't anything we have to construct from scratch.

One key is what Susan mentioned earlier, listening, not to anything, but as a suspension of all our activities, including narrative thoughts. As with our favorite Kafka quote:

It is not necessary that you leave the house. Remain at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait, be wholly still and alone. The world will present itself to you for its unmasking, it can do no other, in ecstasy it will writhe at your feet.

Bushra agreed, musing that sometimes you're not seeking anything at all and it suddenly hits you on the head. Or you're going about your normal business and then life throws you a curve and changes you. Just the other day she and Andy were heading out the front door to go shopping, and there was a homeless man passed out just outside. She had a profound experience in attending on him waiting for the paramedics to arrive. She asked him where he lived and he answered I live wherever I am. She and the man wound up crying together, in a celebration of their common humanity. Bushra felt a deep connection with his homelessness, like it was a call to something in her.

There was a general feeling of optimism about the possibility of a flood of bliss restoring our equanimity in the class. Jan marveled that we could have such a fine discussion based on such a small chapter of reading. The class has developed a really deep grasp of the subject, and this provides us with a vast terrain to explore, each one stimulating the others to new insights. It's a rare and excellent accomplishment.

I suppose mainly to tie the flood of enlightenment in with the verse that inspired the chapter Nitya ends with:

To a yogi it comes as a flood of the seven melodies of the supreme nada, the primordial sound waves of cosmic creation, filling the ear and opening the eye of cosmic vision.

Because of this we closed with a meditation on the *anahata*, the “unstruck sound” of the aum within. I still vividly remember one time in the Fernhill Gurukula asking Nitya about it. I had been trying very hard to hear the universal aum, but had only caught it in fleeting moments. Nitya simply said, “ Don’t you hear it? It’s very loud here.” And there it was.

## Part II

Many of you may have the section of Love and Blessings I mentioned memorized, but some may not, so I’ll share it again. Nitya has been taken by a parson he knew to a revival meeting of one of America’s most prominent Christian evangelists, scouring the world for fresh blood. Nitya had been having a terrible time with Nataraja Guru and was depressed enough the parson thought they were about to snare another convert:

Billy Graham’s convention was not like anything I’d ever seen before. He had his agents screening everyone. All those who had some emotional problem were gathered in by a couple of agents. They were preparing the minds of the most miserable ones to be dedicated that very night to Jesus Christ. The parson also acted as an agent, and I was soon handed over to Graham’s assistants to prepare me for a confession and immediate baptism.

Billy Graham’s appearance on the podium and dramatic oratory was calculated to cast a spell upon his listeners. It was almost like mass hypnosis. All were lined up to go one by one for a personal interview and confession. I found myself in a line of several hundred people who were being led by the nose, as it were, to the feet of the American missionary.

The two people who were taking care of me were continuously whispering in my ears about how much Jesus loved me and the rare opportunity I was getting to confess to the great Billy Graham. Disgust grew in me, which brought me to the point of nausea. I was gripped by a sudden fear that I had been deceived



and was being trapped. When I got almost to the cubicle where the confessions were taking place, I turned and ran out. The Christian agents ran after me. Like a fugitive I bolted into the darkness.

Feeling absolutely wretched, I somehow made my way to a public building. In the night it looked haunted. Although I was hungry and thirsty, I decided to just stay there alone. Meanwhile the parson was frantically searching for me. He finally got to the same building, where he found me sitting on the verandah, leaning against the wall. He persuaded me to go with him to sleep even if I didn't want to eat.

He took me to the house of a friend of his. The friend's mother seemed to be a very generous woman. She insisted I should eat before going to bed, and after the hot meal she cooked I felt relieved not only of hunger but of all the negative emotions which had brought my spirits so low. I slept well, relieved of the heavy sense of tragedy I had been feeling.

The next day when I returned to Varkala, there was already a rumor in the air that I'd run away from the Gurukula and been converted to Christianity by an American missionary. As I walked in, Guru met me at the front door. He started teasing me as if he really believed I had run away and become a Christian.

I decided to go home. Without explaining myself I went straight to my room and packed everything. Then I headed out to the front gate intending to prostrate before Guru and take my leave. Seeing my bundles, Guru said I didn't have permission to take anything from the Gurukula. I said I wasn't taking anything other than my own books and clothes. He called to the other man, who I totally despised, to call the police, since I had probably stolen some books. This made me so furious I threw the bags down and cried, "I don't want anything from here! Take it all!" Then Guru said, "All right, take those bags inside," and someone did.

I started walking down the road. He followed me, saying "You are mad, absolutely mad. It is dangerous to allow a madman loose in society." I stalked on. He shouted, "Suppose a tiger in a circus wants to run into the street, will the circus man allow it?"

Like that, I am the ringmaster and you are the wild tiger. Get back in your cage!” I didn’t see the humor of his comments, so I just kept walking.

Then Guru caught up with me and tenderly held my hand. “If you really are going, I can’t let you go scot-free. I should punish you.” I agreed, and held out my cheek like a martyr. He slapped me lightly twice. Like an ideal Christian I turned the other cheek, and he slapped me again. Then, in a prayerful voice full of benediction he said, “I am beating you so that the world will not beat you.”

I was still determined to leave him, and I started to turn away. He held my hand with the utmost tenderness and said, “Wherever you go, always remember Narayana Guru’s words *alapamatram akhilam* (it’s all a meaningless sound in the air). After all, what we hear from others is only the air vibrating. It can sound like praise or blame, but that is only our interpretation. True spirituality is to cancel out all pairs of opposites and maintain one’s equanimity.” My feet faltered. My anger was gone. Peace and a sense of great blessing came. I recalled how Ramana Maharshi had asked me to read the story of Milarepa, and remembered all the painful days of Milarepa’s intense mortification, which had brought him so many changes. But I decided to continue on into silence.

I hitchhiked home and told my mother that I would remain in the one-room outbuilding my father had built for me, completely cut off from the world, observing silence. From the next day onwards I would not talk to anyone. My reasoning was that I had been with the wisest and noblest of all people in Nataraja Guru, and if my words didn’t bring him sufficient reason to believe me, there was no longer any reason to talk.

## TRANSFORMATIONS IN SILENCE

A large number of people came to watch me vanish into my secret abode. I stood for a moment at the door looking out at the crowd that was showing all shades of sentiments. Many had their

eyes overflowing, some were sobbing, and some literally crying. My heart sank to a profound depth of sorrow. I closed the door and sat in silence the darkness. It was as if I was dead to the world.

After two hours of silent meditation, I became curious. From the growing silence, I knew that all those outside had gone away. I felt a desire to open a window and look out, but I thought it would be a dishonest way to sneak out of my silent state. So I stayed in meditation on my bed. But however much I tried to remain silent and without thought, I kept feeling as if I was falling into a great abyss, somewhat like Alice going down the rabbit hole.

At first it was just like falling into a bottomless pit, as if the solid plank under my feet had been pulled away and I was plunging downwards. Then I began to feel the terrible speed with which my body was going down. I needed something to hold on to and was frantically searching for support. There was nothing. A great fear came over me, and I began to think I was going mad. I wanted to cry out for help. Then I saw my will becoming stubborn to stop me from doing anything silly. I don't know how long I sat there, but around two o'clock in the morning I finally fell asleep.  
(172-4)