

MOTS Chapter 17: The Burning Wick and the ‘Shadowy’ Self

Having two tiers of five petals, whence pain arises,
rotating, beginningless, hangs the lamp of the self,
burning as the shadow (of true being), with the oil
of latent urges and mental modifications as the wicks

Free translation:

The Self is like a hanging oil lamp with two tiers, each with five wicks. It is of timeless origin and is always rotating. Its wicks are modes of the mind, and they are fed with the oil of preconditioned urges or vasanas. It burns as a shadow of the Self.

This verse always reminds me that enlightened folk read meaning everywhere they look. Probably Narayana Guru saw lamps like this one constantly, wherever he went, whether home or temple. Two tiers is a little bit fancier than average, but it suits the metaphor. I always imagine it hanging in a low-ceilinged rock temple, pitch black everywhere, with the light glinting off carved statues of the gods and goddesses filling every nook of the cave.

I’ve been in that value-drenched place myself. It’s not uncommon on a psychedelic expedition to have your inner sense of value in resonance with everything around you, though not so many of that type of traveler have the philosophical grounding to frame it as brilliantly as the Guru. The temptation is to pontificate on heterogeneous odds and ends, so you have to be careful, but it’s really fun to find meaning in the quotidian details.

The whole oil lamp apparatus is likened by the Guru to the Self, giving it a three-dimensional stature. And—curiously—when it is lit up it becomes a shadow of the inactive state that preceded it. We tend to think of a lamp as “on” when lit and “off” when not, but this is nearly the reverse. The implication is that when we are registering input through our senses we lose contact with our inner stability, and are easily pulled off center. The oil supply for the

lighting up is our vasanas, delivered by the wicks of mental modifications shaped by our samskaras. There is no judgment appended to this eternal phenomenon. We tend to believe shadows are wrong and false, but they are what life is made of. The only cautionary fact here is they are the sources of pain.

Deb mused that the shadows stand for our misunderstandings and projections, and that Narayana Guru and Nitya want to give us the exact structural pattern so we can see through them and not be beholden to them. Certainly our work should begin with the most egregious confusions and work up from there. This image does invite the question of whether we have any validity at all, but I think we have to proceed as if we did. Watch out for a subtle distinction: all this is a shadow of the Self, but shadows, plural, means something else. The shadow is maya, and we are trying hard not to give it a negative cast. It should be worshipped and reveled in, while keeping it in perspective as not wholly trustworthy.

Andy was captivated by the expression *burning as a shadow*. The light itself is the shadow—how can that be? It made him reflect on his senses and how they operate throughout the day. They are lit up constantly, and yet they are only a shadow of the Real. Of what? He felt the verse is asking us to hold these two aspects together as a way of evaluating the light of our experience. I added that if we only identify with the light, according to the image we are leaving out the true Self.

Andy spoke of the online Yoga Shastra class he and Bill are in with Nancy Y. During its course, each participant has developed their own unique meditation program. He felt that any such practice is a kind of simplification of what we're involved with every day. He wondered, how does the indescribable take the form of something like a practice or activity? Thinking of Kant's thing-in-itself, I asked him if form wasn't always indescribable, or at least incomprehensible. Yet, as a visual artist maybe he had to be captivated by form.

Andy adroitly answered that we all have basically the same issue—we are an expression of something that is indescribable, as

well as unnamable. At least we would be wise to not give it a name. But we all have a compulsion to experience form in some mode or other. He cited how his meditation sometimes feels boring, but lately he realizes that he's only bored if he thinks of it as a construction that he has to do. Otherwise his meditation can be just a stream of mental modifications, so the meditative situation never stops, and that's persistently fascinating.

It reminded me how Nitya would always say when asked that he meditated all the time. We neophytes would pester him to tell us what kind of meditation he did, because we were always thinking of it as a discreet activity, and the more mystical the better. He quickly disabused us of such notions, for which I am most grateful. Meditation means paying attention, especially to what's beyond your faulty convictions, and this should never be given a holiday.

Bushra told us that while meditation is often taken to mean mindfulness, it can also be an act of surrender, where you give up your sense of ego to become one. This led to a lively discussion of the meaning of surrender. Deb's contribution was particularly apt: surrender means not superimposing an already formed idea on the situation. Once you let go of superimpositions you are in a constant state of meditation. Paul was reminded of something Bushra said last week, that she likes to create a "third person" who isn't identified with her: Bushra is getting upset, or now Bushra is eating ice cream again. For him it might be, Paul is yelling at his daughter again. It takes the teeth out of the situation somehow, because you're looking at yourself as if you were someone else.

Nitya paints a vivid picture in this chapter of a typical event while sitting in an Indian railway station to emphasize the input of all five primary senses. There are unpleasant or painful aspects being delivered by all five. Rather than simply react, a Vedantin seeks to reduce their negative impact using intelligence:

A number of angles of observation must be brought to bear in the study of a perceptual impression to examine its

accompanying emotional release, [and] the consequential lowering or raising of the threshold of awareness.

I read this as inviting sifting through several points of view instead of only one, like what Paul and Bushra were suggesting, which brings a certain detachment. In this way we avoid the “disturbing provocations” brought on by blocking out the freshness of the world in favor of our prejudices. Still, Nitya’s ironic comment is well taken: “This is not an area that can be cordoned off from complexity in order to have a leisurely look at it.” He elaborates:

If the dichotomies of impressions are coming from his senses, how can [the yogi] ever get away from them? If the dichotomy is affected by the corticofugal activity, we should know whether the brain is playing tricks or is only obediently carrying out the dictates of the “mysterious master” of life.

“Corticofugal” is misspelled in the book, and it’s rare enough that I never found it while I was preparing the new edition back in 2004, when computer searches were more rudimentary. Nitya must have come across it in McCulloch’s *Embodiments of Mind*, which he was fascinated with for years, and from which he drew the example of neurological gobbledygook that appears later in the chapter. The *only* definition I could find today is in *Introduction to Basic Neurology*, Saunders et al. 1976. It refers to “systems of fibers arising in cerebral cortex and descending the brainstem to reach the dorsal column nuclei.”

While Nitya was fascinated by the discoveries and surmises about the brain that were coming out, he never lost sight of the berry in the palm of the hand:

We can examine this proposition from the side of the neurons, but that will only land us in the fallacy of the forest being veiled by trees.... To a yogi this approach is as useless as

studying the structural engineering of the piano would be to appreciating the music of a master like Beethoven.

Comparing the workings of an instrument with the music it can produce was a favorite analogy of Nitya's, and it goes right to the heart of what matters in life. Nonetheless the structure of the instrument is integral with what music it can make, so he was never one-sided about it. Instrument and song are two sides of a single coin, and you need them both to have music.

After reprising typical neurological gobbledygook, Nitya gives an example from Indian philosophy that must seem as weird and arcane to the uninitiated as the neurological version just prior to it. Happily, the class is somewhat versed in it already, so we were not put off by it. Nitya does emphasize the bottom line most succinctly here:

A yogi is not interested in information for the sake of information, even when the information is scientifically correct and mathematically precise. He wants to know who he is so that he can make peace with himself. Also he wants to know what the world around him is so that he can comply with its demands and be in harmony with it.

This is in contrast to those who are fearful of stepping outside of their carefully constructed prisons of limited beliefs.

Deb also felt that this other paragraph conveyed the most essential point:

When we understand the world of perception from the side of the universal, we will no longer call the universal an apparition. It is the One Reality that is putting on the masks of the many. But as long as the essential unity of the finite names and forms are not inwardly comprehended, the five senses and their corresponding mental appreciation will turn out to be the source of disturbing provocations.

Deb talked about how masks enchant us, and also how they invite us to try to see through them. Paul felt that a “transparency of vision” means seeing that one face underneath all the masks. He admitted he has a tendency to deify duality and recreate or reconstruct his own reality based on his experience. But then, don’t we all? He thought this meant the Self is just getting to know itself through us, and what’s wrong with that? We might call this “making friends with duality.” Good plan.

To clear up a spot of confusion, I added that unity and duality cannot be made a polarity of their own, tempting though that is, because then unity would instantly become dualistic. The Vedantic way to address this is that there is only unity, but humans are able to divvy it up into parts, which is of course quite useful. It’s our talent, as Nitya actually says here: “It seems the tendency of the mind is to create dichotomies and decide between opposites.” In so doing, though, we run the risk of forgetting the unitive aspect, leaving ourselves open to those “disturbing provocations.”

Deb has been reading Yuval Noah Harari’s excellent book on humanity, *Sapiens*. Early on he asserts that humans fictionalize everything, and that’s what separates us from all other creatures. We live in our fictions, and they expand our world. In his broad definition, fictions are what doesn’t exist in nature but we provide. Deb recounted Harari’s example of how the UN, at the time of the book’s writing, was criticizing Libya for its violation of the human rights of its minorities. While perfectly sensible behavior, he pointed out that all of it is a fiction: the UN is a fiction, human rights are a fiction, and indeed, Libya is a fiction. Any of it could disappear in a moment. Like religions, all these seemingly hard facts are merely abstractions in our mind, and bringing them to a consensual understanding is, in Nitya’s understatement, not very easy. In this light, Deb mentioned how the Gita gives us a sense of oneness that is so vibrant it can impart a full sense of belonging. This is the apparition of the Universal Nitya affirms we can derive from our sense perceptions and their related mental propensities,

buoyed by common consent. Again, this is only safe if we consistently rule out our flaws and projections, consistently distinguishing our brain's tricks from valid inspirations of our inner genius. (It's safer to not inflate that genius part too much, either!)

Bushra enlightened us that the word fiction comes from the Latin, meaning to give form or structure. Form to the formless.

This may all be boiled down to how do we integrate the horizontal and vertical factors, or the one and the many? Nitya implies a connection between them he elaborated on in some of his classes. After linking the five primary senses with the five elements in descending order (space, air, fire, water, earth, as sound, touch, sight, taste and smell), he implies it represents a transition from unity to duality, from the One to the Many:

In these senses we can see a hierarchically conceived process of the universal becoming more and more horizontalized until the One becomes manifested as the bursting and transforming bubbles of finitude.

He goes on to further examine the two most prominent senses, after a somewhat baffling exposition:

Surprisingly, neurophysiologists and gestalt psychologists have come upon a factor that looms very large in the estimation of yogis and Vedantins. Like a ghost in the machine, everybody experiences an *apparition of the Universal* in sense perception, especially of auditory and visual forms. The auditory perception is essentially the name, *nama*, and the visual is the form, *rupa*.

What is the substance of name? It is a structured sound representing an arbitrary meaning assigned to it by common consent. Common consent is very important. In other words, we allow the apparition of the Universal to make an articulated sound psychodynamic.

Nitya adds later: “The Indian psychologist, who postulates sound as the first phase of cosmic operation, explains it as having geometrical properties by which sound can produce form.”

The last sentence of the quote is a bit tricky: “we allow the apparition of the Universal to make an articulated sound psychodynamic.” I’d say it means we derive the confidence for a connection with everything else from a kind of ghost apparition or intuition, and this is required for successful communication, allowing us to use words (articulated sounds) to have an impact. Without something intuited that ties us all together, we will simply be babbling to ourselves, incapable of communal endeavors.

Nitya reminds us common consent is very important, and I think we’re all realizing this as such long-trusted consent seems to be dissolving in the public sphere. Babelization is rampant. So what’s a yogi to do? At the least, keep in contact with the essence of being. Listen hard to the connections behind the chaos.

So in this dense commentary we have made an excursion into the underlying complexities of manifestation, the bursting bubbles of finitude. Because he is a holistic philosopher, Nitya brings us back “home” with a satisfying conclusion.

It must be admitted that Nitya does a much more thorough job of interpreting the complexities of verse 17 in *That Alone*. In summing up here he only reiterates the basic connections, and then ends with his own version of a classic:

The true Self is like the one perennial sun that is reflected with differing sizes and brightness according to the quality of the reflecting surfaces, whether they be a mirror, the surface of placid water, the surface of a turbulent muddy lake, or oil, or a colored crystal. We do not see our Self, and in the ordinary course of life we may not experience it either. What we mistake for our Self is only a shadow of the Self.

Maybe there's an echo of Plato's cave here too. We took an extra long moment to meditate on listening to the still small voice that is too quiet to hear unless we still our usual ongoing narrative. Once more the group dynamic, after a period of penetrating thinking, led us to peaceful depths that are inevitably rare and refreshing. Aum sang sweetly to us. And then we went our own ways.

Part II

The “mental modifications” of this verse are lumped together in Vedanta as the three gunas: sattva, rajas and tamas. Atul Gawande's article in this week's New Yorker magazine (Nov. 12, 2018) is on how doctors have come to despise the way computers affect their practices. Speaking of software in general, Gawande found that “people initially embraced new programs and new capabilities with joy, then came to depend on them, then found themselves subject to a system that controlled their lives. At that point, they could either submit or rebel.” (65) Sattva, rajas and tamas for the cybernetic era!

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The beggar boys on the train reminded me of a sweet bit from *In The Stream of Consciousness*:

Sharing

When our train steamed into a major junction, we purchased lunch packets. Guru opened his packet and was about to eat his first morsel of food, when a small boy of seven or eight who stood outside the train stretched out his hand. Guru passed the ball of rice on to him. The boy quickly swallowed it and stretched his hand again before Guru had eaten the second morsel.

This annoyed me, and I wanted to push the child away. But Guru stopped me from doing that. He ate the second rice ball he

had made and then gave another ball of rice to the boy.

He turned to me and said, “I know people are annoyed by beggars. Poverty is bad, but it is not a crime. Every man is trying to live as best he can. What you see here in India can never happen in the West. This boy is a total stranger to us, but he is so confident of the love and compassion of others. It is that trust of man in man that makes him stretch out his hand. You should become tearful at the sight. This mutual recognition and sharing is discredited in sophisticated societies.

“Do not mix up the issues of abolishing poverty and relating to someone in need. If you take the first issue, you will have to tackle the economy of the whole world. Do it if you can. But the second question has an immediate urgency. You don’t have to renounce your happiness, you are only expected to share. Your own happiness is to be bracketed with the happiness of others.”

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Thanks to the internet I found the version of the Gita the chapter’s quote comes from: Edwin Arnold (before he was Sir Edwin), from 1885. It’s a more or less typical one of the period, striving for a poetically devoted tone echoing the King James Bible. I wish I had replaced it with Nataraja Guru’s when I did a final proof for the latest edition. Comparing the two versions highlights the excellence of the Guru’s translation. A quick survey of my library shows many that are more suitable for those with philosophic tastes. First Arnold’s:

The sovereign soul
Of him who lives self-governed and at peace
Is centered in itself, taking alike
Pleasure and pain, heat and cold, glory and shame. He is the
yogi, he is yukta, glad
With joy of light and truth; dwelling apart
Upon a peak, with senses subjugate

To where the clod, the rock, the glistering gold Show all as one.
By this sign is he known,
Being of equal grace to comrades, friends, Chance-comers,
strangers, lovers, enemies,
Aliens and kinsmen; loving all alike
Evil or good. (VI, 7-9)

Another discovery in the search was that “glistering gold” is found in a translation of the Norse Edda, and does appear occasionally in olde English, Robin Hood and so on. Glister is a variant of glisten.

Nataraja Guru’s same three verses:

7) To one of conquered Self, who rests in peace, the Supreme is in a state of neutral balance in heat-cold, happiness-suffering, honor-disgrace.

8) That yogi whose Self is satisfied by (synthetic) wisdom and (analytic) knowledge, established in unchanging immobility, who has gained full control over sense-attachments, is said to be unified—one to whom a lump of earth, a stone, and gold are the same.

9) As between dear well-wishers, friends, enemies, those indifferent, those in-between, haters, relations, and also as between good people and sinners, he who can maintain an equal attitude, excels.