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## MOTS Chapter 18: My Death in the Body and Resurrection in Consciousness

The “I” is not dark; if it were dark we would be in a state of blindness,  
unable to know even “I, I”;  
as we do know, the “I” is not darkness;  
thus, for making this known, this should be told to anyone.

Free translation:

The Self is not darkness. If it were darkness, we would not have known and identified ourselves as ‘I’, ‘I’. As we do know, we should let everyone realize that the Self can be known.

Narayana Guru realized that wisdom instruction was not for everyone, especially as put forth by evangelists, whose hidden subtext is the egotistical “I know and you don’t.” One of his most famous mottos is “Ours is not to argue and win, but to know and let know.” In other words, we can share as equals, but the main thrust should be to come to understand for our own benefit. Every once in a while, though, he would give permission to teach as he does here, implying that certain ideas are important and universal enough you can pass them along to anyone. Of course, you have to craft the presentation so it makes sense to and is considerate of the recipient, and before you do that you have to really know what it means. Quite a challenge, actually.

The class didn’t directly address this idea, but I think it needs to be mentioned, as most of the Guru’s teachings aren’t intended for the casual listener. In my estimation of why this one is okay, the idea that the Self is remote or nonexistent is very depressing to people, and may well lead them to despair. That should be enough reason to share with them that we all know the state of bliss in our core: it isn’t anything far away, and we definitely have access to it.

Of course it's one thing to *believe* we are made of happiness, that we already are the Self we are searching for, and quite another to know it as a living truth. Narayana Guru palpably exemplified the engulfing bliss we ardently hope to discover. The paradox is that if we go looking for it, we are in a sense abandoning it. It means we have forgotten that we already are the light. Narayana Guru's philosophical arguments may well have been too abstruse for most of the people he interacted with, but he radiated a feeling that is integral with Self-awareness that spoke to everyone. I'd say it's even amplified by the restraint rishis of his caliber exercise. Trying too hard to peddle the idea waters it down.

Jan found the thought that we are already the Self even when we don't recognize it very reassuring—she felt comforted and encouraged. Feeling this way requires a solid foundation, and doesn't hold up for us if we are simply trying to imagine we are something we are not. It felt real to her.

Deb marveled that it wasn't that hard to comprehend the Self intellectually, but to experience the basis of consciousness without any sensory data is profound. She also talked about a recent dream of a dear friend from the distant past, how real it was to her and yet apparently fictional; certainly it all took place independently of sensory input.

Chapter 18 is one more valiant attempt by the gurus to communicate the obvious, which humans are uniquely incapable of grasping. Our eyes naturally look out, not in. Nitya says:

The strangest paradox in the world of awareness is that the very consciousness which has the power to observe, probe, scrutinize, analyze, assert, recognize, memorize and recall, can remain blind to its own identity. This is the case with most people.

What would the human species look like if we all reinforced our wonderfulness, instead of denigrating everything outside our petty (un)comfort zone? It has taken a determined effort—likely since

the dawn of sentience—to perpetuate the illusion of ignorance. To Nitya, this is another quirk deserving of the adjective *strange*:

People spend years of penance and search to realize their Self. It's strange that they do not recognize the seeking Self as the very Self that is sought after. It is not concealed or veiled in darkness at all. It's just there, where your thoughts are, where your feelings are, and even in your state of deep sleep it looks on as an unblinking witness.

This is reminiscent of neuroscientist David Eagleman's assertion in his book *Incognito*, that "If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you're the busiest, brightest thing on the planet." I'll tuck a couple more juicy quotes from him in the second Part, because scientists are starting to catch on too.

Nitya makes reference to the schism between Vedanta and Existentialism, which did not have the benefit of neuroimaging when it was formulated. For that matter, neither did Vedanta, but it read the brain more accurately somehow. In Nitya's words:

Jean Paul Sartre says, "existence precedes essence," but we say, "existence is established in awareness."

Deb thought we should investigate this provocative statement. To me, the rational version of existentialism is that consciousness is an evolute of matter, while the Vedantic take is that consciousness is primary. Nitya uses 'awareness' here in place of consciousness to distinguish the ground of awareness from waking consciousness, which everyone agrees is a tiny sliver of full consciousness.

Andy was put in mind of something he's come across in his Patanjali study, that awareness or knowledge is "the revelation of the luminosity of the Self." That particular item of knowledge was a revelation to him, and he spoke of it reverentially.

There was some inclination in the class to suppose consciousness and matter arose together, as per the Bhana Darsana,

but generally in Vedanta consciousness is considered primary, though not in any exclusive way. The sense of a Self that is independent of a body argues in its favor, though the body is necessary for communication, so there is never going to be adequate proof for a dedicated skeptic. The idea made Deb wonder how we can experience the Self in everyday life without being a receptacle of stimuli that cause us to bounce around like a rubber ball.

Moni recalled a time when Nitya had a simple operation for a suspected cyst on his back, by Dr. Pillai in Indiana, in fact. When his back was opened, the doctor realized the problem was far more complicated than he'd anticipated, so they rushed to the hospital for an emergency operation. There was no time to secure anesthesiologists, so it was done without any painkillers. Nitya later told Moni that he separated his self from his body before he went into the operating theater, so he didn't feel any pain. I then read a story about another emergency of Nitya's from *Love and Blessings*, that you can find in Part II.

Another concept I touched on in class is that we are born and live for a time in a blissful state of openness, and this creates the memory bank where our certitude of unity resides throughout our life. Neuro-imaging has shown that the brains of young children and people on psychedelic journeys are very similar: kids are tripping all the time, basically. Deb remembered asking Nitya about this in terms of wise yogis (not hippies!), and he agreed there was a likeness. The only difference was that the wise person knew they knew, while the child did not. Which may explain why we are so vulnerable as children to undermining of our self-confidence—we have no idea it could be lost.

It's easy to imagine what a torrent of disinformation—more like a Niagara—we've experienced since emerging from the womb: an endless litany of reasons to abandon our Self and become something other, from pretty much every side. All “for our own good.” Virtually all instruction is to become disconnected with our inner reality and play a profitable game according to the

rules set down hither and yon in the past. Perhaps this is even a necessary stage of development. Regardless, it usually leads us into an emotional desert as a side benefit. Narayana Guru was a compassionate fellow, who in this and other verses gives permission for us to hand out maps to thirsty travelers directing them to a nearby oasis, or at least to suggest to them that oases exist. Accurate maps help make wandering in the desert purposeful, and possibly even exciting. It's much easier to get the idea across if you've actually visited an oasis than if you're simply passing along a secondhand account.

One of Nitya's visits to an oasis is recounted here as a source of his confidence in handing out his own maps. Nitya wandered throughout India for many years as a mendicant. Well, he was always a mendicant, but early on he was unknown and not yet appreciated, so he endured stretches of extreme hunger and privation. Here he gives an account of what may have been a kundalini event. After a period of "hectic work and travel," he lay down under a tree and was suddenly unable to move. Good Samaritans got him to a hospital. The only clue we have of the cause was a kind of electrical surge like those the kundalini force causes: "Occasionally there came a spasm of pain, which moved like a wave from my feet to my head, leaving me unconscious each time."

Exhaustion has been intentionally sought for millennia as a way to precipitate certain religious experiences. Coupled with the intense fear from loss of functioning along with whatever yogic practices Nitya would have been undertaking, it isn't surprising that he lost control of his body. The kundalini experience is a lot like getting an electric shock, where all voluntary movements are overridden. It happened to me once, and my body writhed rhythmically, the waves starting from the feet and rising upwards. Like Nitya, I couldn't speak either.

Prabu has had a kundalini awakening, and it felt like a burning fire touching all his chakras, up to the anahata, anyway. He talked about a vivid experience that came from it of actually

being made of light. He felt like he was a diamond giving off light—he wasn't just an inert stone being lit up by an external substance like photons, he was the source itself. Since then he has been pondering how to keep the light alive, because it seemingly subsides once you come out of the experience. Even knowing it is still present, you want to regain that vividness.

This brought to my mind the time when I had shed my ego identity through a superlative, oft-mentioned LSD trip. One of the primary motivations that came out of it was I needed to find a guru to teach me how to stay in that place permanently. The drug ushered you into the home of light and love, but then you came down, expelled so to speak, and I wanted to stay matriculated forever, so I knew I needed something else in the mix. This led me “accidentally” to Nitya, yet oddly I never did come quite down ever again. The vividness subsided into a deeper residence, yet it always has felt present.

Nitya's point in relating his near death experience is that, despite an inert body, his sense of Self never left him:

Although the body was absolutely incapacitated and its very many stimulations pouring in through the senses remained unrecognized, the identity of the Self was experienced as a whole, complete being, not wanting in anything.... This was my first experience of the self-luminosity of consciousness absolutely untainted by any sensual or physical imagery.

Deb was also touched that he wasn't coldly detached—he found viewing his inert body “poignant.” I wonder if he felt that at the time, or if it came up in retrospect. We'll never know. Nitya reaffirms the core conviction the experience gave him, and we can note that the “terrible state” is likely also a later assessment, as there's no indication he felt upset at the time:

Only the Self knows there is light and darkness. All other things in this world have to be illuminated by light in order to

be seen. In one respect light itself is dark, because it does not know itself. But even in that terrible state when I needed someone else to lift my hand or leg, the existence of which I was oblivious to, I did not need anybody's help to know that "I" existed.

We also noticed there was a hint of the classic out-of-body experience in Nitya's account:

The surprising thing was that even in that state my mind was calm and had the clarity to watch and judge with lucidity and dispassion. The objective nature of the body became more distinct and poignant than ever, while the subjective consciousness could feel itself to be a separate entity which could pull itself out and look at the body as an inert mass lying motionless on the bed.

It seems looking at your unconscious body from a distance is a quite common experience, and everyone knew someone personally who had had it. Researchers have documented cases where unconscious patients not only accurately recalled conversations among the doctors and nurses in attendance, but noted visual details from a perspective almost always looking down from the ceiling. Both Prabu and Andy knew someone who as a child was buried alive and survived. Both remembered details of what transpired their whole lives.

I recounted my own similar experience, meditating with a friend on top of a stone tower in Connecticut while tripping on a light dose of what was said to be mescaline. Suddenly I was about a hundred feet up looking down on the two of us, sitting in lotus pose. I was terrified I would fall, and panicked. Too bad, because I missed a great chance to really fly high. I had never anticipated any such thing, so I was afraid I might never get back in my body. The minute I panicked, I zipped back down into it and stayed there. Oddly, on my biggest excursion a couple of years later, the one

mentioned above, spending endless non-time in what I presumed was the asteroid belt between Mars and Jupiter, I retained body awareness all along, so that must have been a different sort of experience.

Back when *Meditations on the Self* was written, human gurus were a highly respected bunch. Now, not so much. Nitya didn't feel he needed to make a case for the value of being helped to overcome our inability to spot the forest obscured by all those trees. Plus, people were beginning to really seek him out, so he could say with full confidence:

As in the analogy of the cave of Plato, somebody has to rouse us from our spiritual drowsiness so that we may turn away from our own shadow to our real substance. In fact, this is the role of the Guru. The Guru lifts the consciousness of the disciple to an awareness of its identity with eternal consciousness that does not depend on any physical crutch.

Nitya adds a nice touch of bringing his perspective to bear in a Christian context:

Jesus says that every seeker has to die and be reborn to enter the kingdom of God. Death in the body is the death of the 'I' and 'me', and its resurrection is the identity with the immutable all-filling Self.

Deb also contributed a quote relating the Guru ideal to the art world, from author James Baldwin:

The role of the artist is to illuminate that darkness (the wilderness of the self), blaze roads through that vast forest; so that we will not, in all our doing, lose sight of its purpose, which is, after all, to make the world a more human dwelling place.

We closed with one of Deb's all time favorite poems for the meditation:

### Night Rain at Kuang-k'ou

The river is clear and calm;  
a fast rain falls in the gorge  
At midnight the cold, splashing sound begins,  
like thousands of pearls spilling onto a glass plate,  
each drop penetrating the bone.

in my dream I scratch my head and get up to listen.  
I listen and listen, until the dawn.  
All my life I have heard rain,  
and I am an old man;  
but now for the first time I understand  
the sound of spring rain  
on the river at night.

Yang Wan-li (12<sup>th</sup> century) from *Heaven My Blanket, Earth My Pillow*

## Part II

Nitya had several medical emergencies during his lifetime. One he recounts in *Love and Blessings*, in the chapter Heart Pangs. He was attempting to bring peace between the Gurukula and SNDP Mission in Singapore, when Nataraja Guru arrived on the scene:

Just at that time Guru came. Our behavior patterns differ very much. My policy is to wait, giving a lot of opportunities for people to present themselves as they think they are, and only after establishing ties with them do I start correcting them. But Guru never wanted to waste any time. He never minced words, and in less than a minute he would cause a confrontation.

Whenever he saw even the slightest exaggeration, he would tell the person right to his face that he was mad. Those with latent abnormalities would come out of their hideouts immediately with all the frenzies of really mad people. And after such an outburst they would either calm down or leave in a fury, never to return. This is exactly what happened to the Singapore crowd. After two weeks Guru returned to India with all the peace talks in shambles. I felt deeply wounded in my conscience, and decided to leave as well.

Parenthetically speaking, I met Nitya at a time when he was trying out Nataraja Guru's techniques, which were strong medicine indeed. Too strong for some of us! I was a recipient of the "you are mad!" technique, and I can attest to its shock value, coming from a highly respected wisdom preceptor.

After a sojourn to Delhi, where he was the director of Nehru's Psychic and Spiritual Research Institute—which Nataraja Guru was highly critical of—he found his efforts undermined there as well. Nitya was becoming desperate:

Guru had driven a wedge between the Institute and me, and I was ready to walk away. So I went back to Singapore with the intention of bringing a rapprochement between the Gurukula and the Mission. This time I succeeded, but the emotional strain of mediating between different groups with intractable vested interests caused me to lose my stamina, and I fainted while giving a talk. I was rushed to the hospital, where the doctor surmised I had had a heart attack. There was no foundation for the diagnosis; even so, I was initiated into the mystery of myocardial ischemia by being given all the worst drugs that are administered to heart patients.

After sixty-five days in the hospital, the doctors gave up on me. It was a remarkable night. Several nurses spent the entire night in my room, kneeling by my bed and praying to the Good Lord Jesus to save my life. I think God must have listened to

their prayers. Next day, I was flown to Kuala Lumpur where a doctor consoled me, saying that there was a good chance I would live for at least six more months. I just wanted to hold out ten more days so that I could get back to Varkala and pay my last respects to Guru.

My sister was a pathologist and her husband was a cardiologist. They met me at the Trivandrum airport with a stretcher, a wheel chair and bags full of medicine, and took me up to the Gurukula, where Nataraja Guru insisted that I be accommodated in his room. After the doctors had left, Guru came in and looked disdainfully at all the pills and capsules and tonics. He insisted that I throw them all away as part of my therapy. In the morning he expected me to get up at half-past four and take down notes as I had always done. He thought that lying in bed would only worsen an ailing heart. Later he took me by the hand and made me walk around the hill a bit.

Under Guru's care I slowly started improving. Little by little he gave me small assignments to do, and in the morning and evening he took me out for short walks. His theory was that we die when the plus side of our life is robbed of its vital interests. A good remedy for seemingly fatal diseases is to cultivate enormous interest in accomplishing something worthwhile.

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Pater M. sent this timely excerpt from Kurt Vonnegut's Book of Bokonon. The subtext might be "gratitude for atheists":

### The Last Rites of the Bokononist Faith (excerpt)

God made mud.

God got lonesome.

So God said to some of the mud, "Sit up!"

"See all I've made," said God, "the hills, the sea, the sky,  
the stars."

And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look  
around.

Lucky me, lucky mud.

I, mud, sat up and saw what a nice job God had done.

Nice going, God.

Nobody but you could have done it, God! I certainly  
couldn't have.

I feel very unimportant compared to You.

The only way I can feel the least bit important is to think  
of all the mud

that didn't even get to sit up and look around.

I got so much, and most mud got so little.

Thank you for the honor!

Now mud lies down again and goes to sleep.

What memories for mud to have!

What interesting other kinds of sitting-up mud I met!

I loved everything I saw!

Good night.

~ Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. ~

*(Cat's Cradle)*

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From David Eagleman, *Incognito*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011):

There are as many connections in a single cubic centimeter of brain tissue as there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy. [Roughly 100 billion] (2)

If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you're the busiest, brightest thing on the planet. (2)

The first thing we learn from studying our own circuitry is a simple lesson: most of what we do and think and feel is not under our conscious control. The vast jungles of neurons operate their own programs. The conscious you—the I that flickers to life when you wake up in the morning—is the smallest bit of what's transpiring in your brain. Although we are dependent on the functioning of the brain for our inner lives, it runs its own show. Most of its operations are above the security clearance of the conscious mind. The *I* simply has no right of entry.

Your consciousness is like a tiny stowaway on a transatlantic steamship, taking credit for the journey without acknowledging the massive engineering underfoot. (4)

You're not perceiving what's out there. You're perceiving whatever your brain tells you. (33)