

MOTS Chapter 1

Permeating the knowledge which brilliantly shines
at once within and without the knower
is the *karu*; to that, with the five senses withheld,
prostrate again and again with devotion and chant.

Our class was joined by two fresh faces, old friends Kris and John, both comfortable enough to join in the discussion with ease. I wish all visitors felt that way!

Nitya and Peter traveled and meditated together in 1972, compiling the chapters of our book. At some point they discerned an unexpected affiliation with its 50 chapters and the first 50 verses of Narayana Guru's epochal Atmopadesa Satakam, and so we will include them in our study as a valuable point of reference, verse 1 with chapter 1, and so on.

Deb and Moni recalled the initial meeting between the two fast friends, in the spring of 1971. Peter had been traveling around Europe after college, and while in Greece was inspired to follow the overland "Hippie Route" to India, which was inexpensive and reasonably safe in those days. Peter was looking for a place to study Hatha Yoga, and caught a bus to the Mahatma Gandhi school. When the bus driver learned he was interested in yoga, he dropped him instead at the gate of the Varkala Gurukula, where the inmates were kind enough to actually pass along a few Hatha lessons along with the more heady fare.

Meanwhile, Deb was on her legendary round-the-world trip with Nitya, and they soon arrived in Varkala. At first Nitya thought Peter was Curran de Brueller, leader of the anti-Nitya Western disciples of Nataraja Guru, but eventually the ice was broken and a lifelong collaboration began. *Meditations on the Self* is one of the many supernal results of their friendship. For instance, within a few months, Peter would be the moving force in starting the Portland Gurukula, of which our place is a faint echo, now almost 47 years later.

The first chapter takes on a core issue in spirituality: the relation with the so-called outside world. Humans famously get mesmerized and manipulated by perceivable events, and to align with their true nature, a certain detachment or realignment is necessary. That can lead to disdain for the world and an insulated state of mind. As we well know, Narayana Guru's legacy is quite the opposite. While he did spend a long period in isolation, his realization was that the world is the Absolute in essence, and so should be celebrated and cared for rather than cordoned off. Finding the perfect balance of inner bliss amid outward chaos is no simple matter, and it seems life is always up to the challenge of breaking us out of our complacent fantasies, whatever they may be. Our expectations are constantly being rearranged, if not blown to bits. The Guru however, along with his disciples Nataraja and Nitya, exemplifies how we can hold to realized truth even as we are assaulted by disappointing or shocking situations, and by holding steady even becoming a factor in helping resolve them.

Nitya right off the bat addresses the escapist, dismissive attitudes that many humans adopt in order to cope with hostile actualities:

What we want to call knowledge is not a passing phenomenon. It is an intimate participation in the what, how, and why of life when life is treated as a total unit.

Intimate participation with totality: that's the crucial point. We have so many defensive barricades in place that we have lost touch with real participation. Several of our various depressive malaises are brought on by the longing of our souls for real, meaningful contact with Life. So our orientation should be *toward* Life rather than away from it. I'm capitalizing Life to contrast it with life, in the same way we contrast self and Self.

Along the same lines, Deb started the discussion by reiterating the two forms of knowledge and Knowledge, the first type observational and the second more profound and unifying. In

her ordinary machinations, Deb realizes she is only moving around blocks of memory, imagining if she puts them in the right order they will resolve a problem. But they are, after all, only habits of thinking, and so are more the problem than the solution. We need to find ways to allow another kind of comprehension to come up: intuition. And this comes by an act of grace, as Nitya puts it. It can't be forced, but it is always there waiting for its chance, so we have the option of letting go of our habitual patterns of thought and perception to invite spontaneity. Especially when we are frustrated, angry or afraid—as we all are these days in the face of the new Nazism erupting around us—we tend to repeatedly stack the same mental blocks over and over, and somehow we have to stop doing that. She summed up with reference to writing her poetry, which doesn't become very poetic until she steps out of her fixed modes.

The subject of creativity cued John. His take on trying to solve a difficult problem is to go into it with all his known resources, like ingenuity and creativity. You get all that done but still it only takes you so far. You tend to get frustrated and try other avenues, but they're still being managed by the ego. But if when he runs into a brick wall he can stop and be patient, as if by grace the answer will present itself.

I added that the preparation part is important to the process too, and shouldn't be dismissed as erroneous. In a way it directs the inner intuition, focusing it on the topic. I also mentioned Isaac Asimov's spectacular essay on the Eureka Phenomenon, which is cited in *Path to the Guru* but has been taken down from many sites, including that one. Happily I found another: <https://aharchaou.com/the-eureka-phenomena/>. It's a fun read. I especially like the part about how no scientist will admit the mystical aspect of the process, but instead always takes credit for "thinking up" the answer. But, Asimov argues, and with plenty of personal experience, the insight invariably comes when we stop thinking of the problem. Credit should be given to the inner genius, if not the "Divine."

Nancy also knows the feeling. She lamented that she has to work on a schedule, and almost always with a deadline—a very un-Nancylike constraint. As she put it: “I’ve found that if I’m working toward something new for a project I just incorporate it into my being. Then later, no matter whether I’m chopping carrots or at the symphony or waking up, there will be something that comes through, some perception of the way to take. I could never have intentionally gotten to that thought. I’ve relied on that through the years, and it always works for me.”

Deb cautioned that the ego has a role in judging the veracity of the intuition, and so in harmonizing our daily life. Her *bête noir* is Sylvia Plath, who was an inspired poet but who went overboard and became crazy, vernacularly speaking. Her tragic end does not bear repeating. Deb affirmed that if a healthy ego is not in place, really sinking deeply can be dangerous, difficult and destructive.

This is why anyone embarking on a spiritual trip should have a guide or trusted friend nearby, to substitute for the ego during its intended absence. Bushra agreed that humans can as easily be led into negative states as positive ones, because of our sympathetic relation to things around us, so we should choose wisely.

Deb has also just finished Michael Pollan’s book, *How to Change Your Mind*, and she waxed rhapsodic about the role of psychedelic medicine to overcome habitual thinking and invite creativity. She especially liked the part about Alison Gopnik’s studies of children as terrific problem solvers, because they have yet to become conditioned to the tried and true ruts of adulthood. In Gopnik’s endearing words, young children are tripping all the time. Deb and I loved her TED talk:

https://www.ted.com/talks/alison_gopnik_what_do_babies_think.

Paul brought the discussion back to contrasting the inner and outer worlds, as our most bedeviling conditioning is molded around the rules of living in society. We then carry them over into our psyches—a pernicious way that the outer mirrors and even constrains our inner space. He posited that for the same reason,

experiences of outer beauty have an improving effect on our inner being, and deserve to be cultivated.

The karu to which we are directed by Narayana Guru to prostrate and chant to should be thought of as our own core too. As Baiju put it, more or less, prostration is the surrender of our domineering ego to the vaster context in which it floats. Chanting in this context can be more than repeating formulas, it can include the recalling of instructions, or any other way words can be used to inspire us. Just so long as how it's done doesn't become a habitual behavior of its own. Nitya wants us first to invite our greater reality to participate in our awareness, or better, for us to realize it is already doing a great deal for us:

If we take note of our several worlds of interest which we both know and do not know, and add in the mostly invisible activities going on at the physical, chemical, biological, and psychological levels, we get a sense of how vast and complex the unconscious world of knowledge is. This totality governs, as if from behind a curtain, the multivalent phases of life as a whole. The flow of life from the unknown to the conscious is spontaneous, fairly easy, and also vastly harmonious.

Nitya then divvies up the outer and inner realms as conscious and unconscious states, including the mysterious act of grace:

Anyone who yearns to know the secrets of nature has to invent devices which can function as extensions of the mind and the organs of perception and action. On the other hand, to enter into the secret portals of the spirit we have to turn away from the senses and even the mind in order to merge into our own unconscious depths. Whatever is unconscious to the external mind and yet functioning within each of us should then reveal itself, as if by an act of grace. A true seeker aspires for both knowledge of the conscious as well as the unconscious realms.

In other words what we are seeking is the Knowledge of knowledge or the Science of sciences.

John asked for clarification on turning away from the senses. Ordinarily the idea is taken simplistically, in that you just turn everything off. Here though, the meaning is that we don't permit ourselves to identify sense impressions as the source of our happiness or misery. Instead we relate them to the source, the core, within which they are peripheral but still essential. I shared part of my Gita commentary, reprinted in Part II, which bears on this, and I think you'll find it helpful. Knowing the senses are subordinate to the core of our being takes the edge off the paranoia the world routinely generates within us, among other harmonizing qualities.

Bushra noted that most of the time we are not even aware of our senses, and this allows them to have an undue influence on us. If we focus on the senses it quiets them, and this can reduce (she said destroy) the ego. She rightly interpreted the lesson: whatever you focus on can lead you to inner truth, if you *really see it*—birds singing, water flowing, you name it. Andy extended the idea, stating that to really see something is to acknowledge the infinite existence that you share with someone or something else.

I added the caveat that we easily fool ourselves that we are paying attention when we are merely listening to our habitual ideas and not really paying attention at all. For spiritual people this means that having the idea is by no means the same as actually carrying out the work required. We imagine that just because we believe in something, we “get” it, but there is quite a lot more involved.

This struck a nerve with Susan, who related an occurrence she had with her family on a walk. There was a trivial, annoying interaction with another couple passing them the other way, but when her family compared notes, all three of them had a different take on what had happened. It made her acutely aware of the subjectivity of her experience.

And this in turn struck a nerve with Kris, who said we need to humbly realize that they are always our own perceptions, colored and distorted by our point of view. She realizes we get so used to the colorations that we think they are true the shape of the universe, but this is a delusion.

Next we come to a direct paraphrase by Nitya of the Atmo verse, “the knowledge which brilliantly shines at once within and without the knower:

A knower of the Science of the Absolute is called a *brahmavit*. To such a knower, knowledge is not a catalogue of information or an approximation of statistics, it is a homogeneous whole that shines within as the universe of the psyche and outside as the universe of the cosmos. They are in a state of perennial vision of the Absolute.

Those of us who followed the Darsanamala study just concluded will recall that grades of *brahmavit* make up the last darsana, on Nirvana, so there is a nice continuity here. And if Nitya didn't consciously intend it, the connection with Atmo verse 1 is nonetheless unmistakable.

So yes, realization should be easy. A piece of cake! But where's the fun of that? We need challenging adventures filled with lots of surprises, so we are given brains whose default setting is to look away from inner truth, and then are sent out witlessly into the world to blunder around and try to figure out what's the matter, crashing into all sorts of delicate objects. We are most fortunate there are compassionate helpers around, or we would undoubtedly stay confused and lost, doing plenty of damage in the bargain. Nitya hints at the trick played on us by unexamined sense impressions: “In our own body our eyes are so placed that they can be used to scan the world around, yet they are of no use to see what is behind the head or inside the body.” Our first step is to turn our attention to what is behind or within us. Although we have all well begun this process, the chant called for by the Guru is to remind

ourselves to keep doing it, because our resting brain doesn't stop believing, to invert Jack Flanders' truism, that what's coming from us is really coming at us.

Paul talked about his intentionality, and how difficult it is to suspend it in favor of immediate action/reaction propensities. If we weren't afraid of the consequences, we would be much more able to find alternative paths that could be way better than the ones we have chosen by intent. In a kind of Freudian slip he talked about his in-tensions, putting a break in the word intentions. When we guide our lives by ego, we are constantly in tension. This philosophy is an invitation to relax and enjoy!

The first chapter concludes with this essential task before us, of minimizing our blockages and distortions to allow the inner genius to manifest as a regular aspect of our life:

Although it is one and the same pure consciousness that shines through everything, its unity is scattered and diversified to suit the nature of the perceiving senses and the observing mind. So we have to free our knowledge from whatever coloration has come to it from the senses and the mind.

Knowledge cannot be freed from its conditions and colorations unless the seeker who aims at such freedom withdraws attention from the senses and the surface mind and silently surrenders the ego again and again to the Higher Consciousness in adoration of the glory of the Absolute. This alone enables a wise one in the humility of wisdom to teach the secret of the Silent Word.

The class we are starting promises to be somewhat lighter fare than the heavy work we've been doing with That Alone and Darsanamala, and I hope to not bore you with so much explaining in these notes. Instead, please contribute your thoughts, and I'll just pass them along. It's well worth dedicating a few minutes a week to pondering the material on your own.

New friend Baiju in Kerala has already thrown himself wholeheartedly into the study, adding a new dimension of authentic Indian flavor—be sure not to miss his contributions in Part II. He has invited me to make comments, which I will provide from time to time, though his writing is top notch. I read the first half of his contribution to the class, and Andy immediately noted how he conveys all through it a posture of awe, bringing out the sense of immense wonder that Narayana Guru incorporates into his first verse even more than all the rest. It's a true blast of wisdom energy! The reading led to an important discussion that I'll recount in Part II. The Nataraja Guru excerpt included there is particularly valuable. I think you'll also like the quotations from Ursula Le Guin that we wound down with, a possible reason for the good feelings we get from gathering together in contemplation of sublime values, also in Part II.

John brought us to our brief closing meditation with an inspiring rhapsody, talking about how just knowing that if we contemplate behind the wall of our conscious mind, it could open us up to the infinite embracing mind of everything, really makes him feel awe. The ramifications are huge. We go along in a new light, seeing our experience as in tune with a guiding mind, being directed by it to see certain things that seem to be coming at us as coming from us. If we look at that as instructional, we can be infinitely enthusiastic. It means we are being taught whenever we allow ourselves to be taught.

Amen. Aum. Amin. (All the same Word.)

Part II

Baiju meditated on the first chapter and sent his thoughts in advance, which you are welcome to do too:

How I understood Meditation (1)

(After reading Guru Nitya's Meditation 1 I went once back to Narayana Guru's verse in Malayalam, and chanted the verse again

and again. For my own self instruction, I put down all that I could gather. I am so happy that I am part of this study team and could embark on this “journey” to the Self.)

Think of the One whose knowledge transcends all empirical knowledge; appreciate Him to be the Knower of all knowledge and beyond. The brilliantly shining core that is within Him shines at once in all the world outside too, the Guru says. That Core is what the Guru wants us to know. The Knower referred to, the Core and the transcendental Knowledge (with a capital “K”) are not different from one another – the different names and expressions the Guru uses are part of a methodical process that will enable us see the Truth.

The Knowledge of all knowledge is of unbroken continuity; its shine and resplendence pervade within (the subject) as well as in all the objects of the world without. It is one and the same Knowledge that remains the core of all manifestations. This Core, i.e. Knowledge, is the primal cause and source of everything that is manifested. We also call it the Self or the *Atman*. Is it not a wonder that something imperceptible as this is the core of the entire perceptible Universe, all of us included? All the functions, including the life function, within each one us, and those of the external world operate about this Core! Yet we do not get to know It in the normal course of our lives. We do not know how It regulates all those functions of this Universe which appears to operate with certain laws to keep everything in a state of perfect equilibrium. Is It not awe-inspiring? Is It not above everything else we know of in terms of value? In the normal course of life human beings value their own lives more than anything else. But when we fully comprehend (from the Guru's words first) It to be the Cause that enables us even to value our own lives, we tend to incline to It. The more we become familiar with It the greater we adore It. The Guru sets out to take us through the definite path to the Core, which is the Self.

To know the Self is the ultimate goal of every man. Knowing the Self is knowing oneself truly and completely. The true

knowledge of oneself, which is the knowledge of the Self, alone makes one free from suffering.

To know the Self:

1. One has to look inward; should not be looking at the external world. We use the five perceptive organs to “look” at the world outside. All of them must be turned inward, which practically means that the sense organs have to be shut down because there are no sense-perceivable objects within. All the data inputs via the sense organs thus get inhibited. For example, the eyes may remain open but there is no active looking taking place. The mind then does not have any inputs from the empirical world to work with, and therefore the mind has only the choice to dwell upon the inner self.
2. Once the senses are turned inward, one has to prostrate that Knowledge which is the Core or the Self. The Guru asks us to keep repeating it. It is important here to understand what prostration means. Prostration (falling down on the ground, with joined palms, at the feet of the prostrated) in India is done to something or somebody who is of the Highest Value to oneself – could be a deity or the Guru, as examples. Prostration is the symbol of complete surrender to the prostrated. It also symbolizes one hundred percent devotion and adoration. Those who whole-heartedly appreciate the infinite potential of the Self to project the cosmic “magic show” (in which all of us are made to act without either our knowledge or our volition) will naturally be filled with devotion and adoration for It. Here we prostrate the Knowledge that transcends all other knowledge in the same fashion (which means with one hundred percent devotion and adoration), with the difference that the prostration here is an act of the mind, not of the gross body.
3. Along with the act of prostration, the Guru suggests that we chant repetitively as long as the prostration continues. We may wonder what to chant! We can safely presume that we

need to chant something that, to each one of us, fully represents and reminds us of the Knowledge (Self); in fact, we need not search for anything new to chant when we have the verses of the Guru in front of us.

The mental prostration along with the mental chanting is the act of meditation we have to continue. The chanting will (and should) keep reminding us of what we are prostrating upon – the Knowledge of the Self, which is the Absolute. When we see a thing in the world, whether an ant or an elephant, a grain of sand or a towering mountain, our meditative chanting should continuously remind us only of the one and the same Knowledge (Self) that pervades in all of them as well as in us at once.

Aum tat sat.

I've guessed that Baiju meant Knowledge *of* the Self in that last paragraph, and not *or*, so I've changed it. Let me know if I'm wrong, Baiju.

This is a very beautiful meditation, just the kind of thinking the Gurus would have welcomed and expected from their disciples. I have only one clarification. Baiju starts off with an accurate paraphrase: "The brilliantly shining core that is within Him shines at once in all the world outside too, the Guru says." Later Baiju starts his three points on how to know the Self, saying, "One has to look inward; should not be looking at the external world." While this is true enough, I would modify it to, "When we look at the external world, we should remember to look for the inner core values within everything."

There are times to meditate with eyes and other senses turned off, and there are plenty of times we should extend that meditative attitude into our sensory-mediated world. It is important not to draw a thick line between the two states, especially as they are one in essence, and that is what we're trying to get into our heads here.

Indians especially love to have knickknacks on their altars: gods and goddesses, flowers, animal statues, a bowl of seeds, etc. These are to be interpreted symbolically as they are being admired and even worshipped; the point is to see the divine within each and every item. And then you go out and take that all-embracing attitude with you to the village well or the city bus.

Baiju concludes by saying as much. But oftener than we realize, clichés slip in to tint the windowpane, and avoiding the external world as an impediment is one of the most popular clichés of all. The Gurukula urges us to not tune out but to tune in, always remembering that everything we encounter is the Absolute at its core. All through *Meditations on the Self* we will be looking at scenes and situations through the Guru's glistening eyes, and hopefully taking his perspective to heart.

The cosmos being as beneficent as it is, I wrote this and then turned to my Gita commentary (V.11), to prepare for the online class. It's talking about the exact same subject! Here's how it starts, including the crucial Nataraja Guru comments:

11) By the body, by the mind, by intelligence, and even by the senses alone, yogis engage in action, abandoning attachment, for (purposes of) purity of Self.

To be permitted to engage in action “even by the senses alone” so long as it doesn't involve attachment, is a startling aspect of the Gita's teaching, and one that is consistently underplayed in favor of the traditional conceptions of joyless yoga disciplines based on sterile detachment. The Gita being a song, it should not be too surprising that listening to music or visually contemplating beauty, among other sensory experiences, would be appreciated as sublimely purifying. Yogis will take all such events in stride, never being deluded that the transformative power of the experience resides outside their self. Beauty perceived evokes a reciprocal

beauty latent within us that otherwise would remain dormant.
Nataraja Guru agrees:

Suppression of the senses is spoken of as the first stage of spirituality in other disciplines, but a certain freedom of the senses is permitted in the Gita, and a yogi is to that extent different from a mere ascetic who is only negatively conditioned.... To avoid the stagnation produced by willful inaction and its consequent morbid psychic states, and to permit the free interplay of natural tendencies and impulses, some sort of non-obstructive working out of tendencies is required. Repressions benumb the spirit and cathartic easing is a remedy known to modern psychology. (265)

The other categories mentioned here are included in this generous and joyous view of life. The pleasures of the body, like exercise, sports, sex, or simply being aware of being alive, can produce euphoric states conducive to contemplation. If they are treated as ends in themselves, producers of the euphoria, then their spiritual value is bypassed, but when taken for what they are as aspects of existence, they have substantial value. The same is true for mental pursuits like learning, planning, examining and remembering, and also intellectual and intuitive engagement with others, both human and nonhuman. In short, all action can be liberating if treated correctly.

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Susan submitted a sheaf of lovely thoughts from Portland author Ursula Le Guin, that certainly resonate with our class:

Speech connects us so immediately and vitally because it is a physical, bodily process, to begin with. Not a mental or spiritual one, wherever it may end.

If you mount two clock pendulums side by side on the wall, they will gradually begin to swing together. They synchronise each other by picking up tiny vibrations they each transmit through the wall.

Any two things that oscillate at about the same interval, if they're physically near each other, will gradually tend to lock in and pulse at exactly the same interval. Things are lazy. It takes less energy to pulse cooperatively than to pulse in opposition. Physicists call this beautiful, economical laziness mutual phase locking, or entrainment.

All living beings are oscillators. We vibrate. Amoeba or human, we pulse, move rhythmically, change rhythmically; we keep time. You can see it in the amoeba under the microscope, vibrating in frequencies on the atomic, the molecular, the subcellular, and the cellular levels. That constant, delicate, complex throbbing is the process of life itself made visible.

We huge many-celled creatures have to coordinate millions of different oscillation frequencies, and interactions among frequencies, in our bodies and our environment. Most of the coordination is effected by synchronising the pulses, by getting the beats into a master rhythm, by entrainment.

[...]

Like the two pendulums, though through more complex processes, two people together can mutually phase-lock. Successful human relationship involves entrainment — getting in sync. If it doesn't, the relationship is either uncomfortable or disastrous.

Scott—we can surely expand this to include a roomful of people focused on a common subject. I believe the group entrainment we experience in our little gatherings contributes to the sense of bliss that fills our hearts and persists for a period after. And, sadly, it's one valuable thing missing if you only read the account after it's

over. Since physical distance is a myth to the spirit (as Nitya once wrote me in a letter), you can calculate when 8:00 to 9:30 pm Pacific Time happens in your time zone, and inwardly entrain with us wherever you are.