

12/4/18

MOTS Chapter 20: This World is Real: As Real as Music

Other than this the world has no reality;
“there is”—all such that people say is without reflection;
even if to a numskull it appears to be a snake,
will a fresh flower garland ever become a serpent?

Free translation:

This world has no other reality. People who say it has are wanting in sufficient reason. Even if a dim-wit mistakes a garland of fresh flowers for a terrifying snake, does that make it one?

Narayana Guru sets himself apart from any religious tradition with this definitive statement of grounded common sense. Where so many explain away the illusoriness of the world as maya, which automatically implies another reality somewhere else, he will later affirm maya as reality: as real as manifestation can get. In case you’ve forgotten, here’s verse 88 with Nitya’s opening comment:

Everything is real in itself; one who grasps the basic truth
will understand all this as one;
if not known introspectively,
maya’s great enmity certainly creates much confusion.

After such a minute study of all aspects of the Self and its indivisible aloneness, even when we come to the eighty-eighth verse of *Atmopadesa Satakam* the world has not disappeared. It persists, through all the reevaluations we have had. And we are the same people. We are engaged in the same kinds of activities, and we still react to each other the same way.

If the world persists must it be real? Is it real or not? Does it exist or not exist? Narayana Guru says have no quarrel—just take it for

granted the world exists. Not only this world. Whatever there is. It's all okay. *Sakalavum ullatu*, everything is real.

Here in verse 20 Narayana Guru wants us to subtract all fantasizing and gather our mental powers into the present. If we make the effort to reflect about this, we will encounter a lot of resistance from our own presumptions, which have a long history of reinforcement from our fellow beings. The worthwhileness of the enterprise is not always immediately obvious, either, since fantasized utopias are quite comforting to our insecure egos. Only when the layers of padding are stripped away do we begin to enjoy a heightened clarity that is rewarding enough to ignite its own bountiful satisfaction, which may make us brave enough to continue living without a metaphorical metaphysical crutch.

The “other world” of our imagination has traditionally been compared in Vedanta to the dangerous snake we project onto a piece of rope lying on the ground, if it is obscured by shadows. Narayana Guru has upgraded the image, replacing the piece of garbage that is a section of discarded rope with a beautiful, artistic flower garland, a gift of love. He means we aren't just fantasizing based on the ugly, cheap crap of the world, we are selling a magnificent planet very, very short.

Deb opened our discussion talking about how children have a hard time holding two contradictory ideas at the same time, but we have to learn how to do that in order to live well despite the myriad types of suffering in the world. Even many adults believe injustice and pain have to be completely eradicated before they can allow themselves to be happy, but that is basically a guarantee they will never stop suffering. Since pretty much everything has an upside and a downside, happiness cannot be based on external circumstances or it will recede indefinitely.

Nitya closes his chapter invoking Beethoven's ninth symphony, quoting Schiller's Ode to Joy that he set to music as its finale. The Ode is an invitation to drink joy straight from the earth itself, from life. Both symphony and poem were written at a time

of extreme religious mystification in Europe, as integral parts of the effort to revise it intelligently. I talked about a covert additional factor Nitya was probably not aware of: the Ninth musically describes the history of the universe from the first impulse until the present, with the last movement being the arrival of sentience. With the addition of humanity the most sublime music depicting the natural world takes a quantum leap in magnificence. The human voice explodes onto the scene. The joy we can know is the culmination of billions of years of painstaking evolution, hardly an embarrassing mistake to be eradicated with a “spiritual” or “religious” attitude. Beethoven, like Narayana Guru, was showing us what gorgeous opportunities awaited our explorations, if only we would free ourselves from inhibiting beliefs.

Prabu was charmed by the line from the ode about the worms that feel spring’s madness. Worms are the lowliest of creatures, yet even they feel the pulse of life. I added that we humans sometimes feel we are no better than worms—I know I have felt that way—and yet even in our cloistered depressions we are moved within by the delectable promptings of nature. This music gives the assurance that we are all capable of responding blissfully to the vibrations surrounding us. In that spirit, Deb quoted a favorite line of Walt Whitman, whose 200th birthday is being celebrated this year: “a mouse is miracle enough to astound sextillions of infidels.” Whitman well knew that religious believers were the true infidels: the ones who didn’t believe in the glorious world where we live and breathe, where every lowly creature is totally astonishing.

Jan spoke up for Rumi’s poetry at this point, and Prabu obliged with a reading of A Just-Finishing Candle:

A candle is made to become entirely flame.

In that annihilating moment
it has no shadow.

It is nothing but a tongue of light
describing a refuge.

Look at this
just-finished candle stub
as someone who is finally safe
from virtue and vice,

the pride and the shame
we claim from those.

(Translated by Coleman Barks)

Prabu talked about how we live mainly to satisfy past expectations, for the most part based on the opinions of others, and then we wind up living in the past or some other idea of what life is. This philosophy is calling us to live each moment with openness.

I couldn't agree more. I come from a culture where as teenagers we competed for the best put-downs, where ridiculing others was a high art form. Pre-judging everything and everybody was the norm. It takes hard work to realize how destructive and limiting this popular and amusing attitude is. You find you are hiding behind a wall of pretence, buoyed by other people just like you, allied against the rest, us versus them. It's not hard to see how this worldwide malaise is still deeply entrenched. As an antidote I read the last page of verse 20 in *That Alone*, which I'll append in Part II.

Moni really clicked on that reading, and she was profoundly affected by it. She told us how she had once said to Nitya it was her fate to be a certain way, and he had told her he didn't believe in fate. She was surprised and puzzled. Fate was an accepted norm in her world, one she had never questioned. That was over forty years ago, and just now in listening to the reading she had a flash of insight why he didn't believe in fate. Now she knew we cannot blame fate for our confusion, we are the author of our lives, at least

in how we approach it. Our interpretations are piled one on top of another to shape our entire existence.

Deb was excited by this story, and she could see how Nitya not giving Moni a pat agreement, and not even saying why, caused her to ponder over it for her whole life. And after all these years, it finally made sense.

This is a good example of how a guru teaches. Fate can refer to all the forces that we are not responsible for in our lives, and there's no reason Nitya wouldn't believe in them. But we come to use the word as an excuse to not try when we should be trying. It can be a dismissal of our responsibility, and that was what Nitya was criticizing. And in many cases a direct confrontation only creates resistance, but his passing comment intrigued Moni and was not threatening, so it was actually just the right approach.

I noted that a guru sometimes says the opposite of a previous comment, depending on the situation. Nitya likely accepted fate, but he wanted to address Moni's *fatalism*, which is an unhealthy extension of it. The resolution of the issue these 40 plus years later is evidence of a refined teaching technique at work.

Prabu noted that the disciple needs to be prepared to be taught, and here, I agreed, Indians have a distinct advantage. Americans don't recognize the guru principle, so we can be clueless about learning from confrontations. Then again, not knowing can make the teaching hit home even harder, if you survive. I related a story along those lines, from the first Portland Gurukula, when I was a maximum simpleton. During the evening class at the Overton house, which would have 25 or so people spread around the living room listening to Nitya's discourses, my close friend John, Deb's brother, was lying down with his feet toward the teacher. This is very rude in traditional India, but we had no idea whatsoever. Nitya unloaded on him, and I took it personally too. Here's the reference from Love and Blessings:

During the class I saw John lying down with his eyes closed. I know this is a way of listening in the West, especially for those

who have weakened their nerves with constant drug trips. It was so sad to see him in such a miserable state. I could have condoned it, but I was looking for an opportunity to correct him. The inertial tamas that is increasing in him had been noticed several times before. I asked him to sit up, and I spoke with sharp words. I'm sure he didn't understand why I shouted at him when he thought he was listening to me. Well, it won't hurt to be confused. He can slowly learn if he wants. (303)

Nitya was a Scorpio who could really sting you with his scorpion's barb. I was utterly shocked, and didn't connect the incident to any guru-disciple training. I just figured we had deeply offended someone we totally admired. Later that week a flaky older guy who sometimes dropped in was at the evening talk. Right away he lay down on the fireplace hearth with his feet practically in Nitya's lap. Before long he was snoring loudly. I sat waiting eagerly for Nitya to lambaste him for his rudeness, but he took absolutely no notice of him. This was a good second lesson for me: that my ego was looking for expiation of guilt through someone else's suffering. Now I can see that the fellow was not a disciple, so Nitya had no cause to say anything to him. Nitya was not even slightly bothered by it, to all appearances. Whether he was giving me a second lesson I'll never know, but I got one anyway. I might have read it right, but I was too confused. It illustrates also Nitya's sentence toward the end of the chapter: "Even the most outrageously capricious aspect of the world flux can be seen falling into order when one comprehends that the substance of the universe is none other than our own mind-stuff." I wish I'd known this concept, but then I would likely have missed out on years of rueful pondering.

This elicited another story from Moni, where Nitya invited her to go on his morning walk with him and she declined. He liked to take an early stroll with whoever was around. When he came back he criticized her for not coming along, and she told him he misunderstood, which made him furious. It had really been a battle

of wills, and of course as the guru he had expected to prevail. Tamas might have played a role in this mishap, too.

The class discussed fate for a while, trying to sort out what it really means in place of how we are prone to use it to excuse our laziness. Prabu was sure we don't have free choice over everything that happens to us; there are many forced issues that come up that we can't avoid. I seconded that point, adding that the widespread belief that if something bad happens to you it's your fault is really debilitating and just plain false. While we are not responsible for everything bad that happens to us, this is not an excuse to relinquish our role in addressing it.

Deb remembered that the Greeks had the idea that women sat up in the sky weaving the threads of events together: these are the original Fates. Our lives consist of various threads of theirs that are our fate. You're put in the middle of this tapestry and you have to respond and create and make something of it. Deb maintained it's your understanding and choices of how you respond that you have control over, and that's exactly right.

Jan framed this in terms of the value vision we occasionally reference, and that Nitya brings in here. Our values predispose us to react in certain ways, and a large part of our study is to upgrade our preprogrammed responses. We can take the vagaries of fate as opportunities to learn and grow, or else as oppressive, inhibiting events. Improving our "posture" in these matters is hard work, but it's work that really pays big dividends.

The men Deb works with at Two Rivers prison have found that out, discovering meaningful and inspiring ways to carry on despite the outer constrictions they have to endure. They even have come to feel like being incarcerated was life-saving for them, and it has given them the chance to reconstruct their lives in a much more positive way.

New visitor Keith agreed that the effect of fate is ours to make. Fateful events are always happening to us, but we do have a say in their impact. This inspired Deb to compliment Jan on how she handled her son's chronic illness some time ago, which was

extremely stressful and fear-inducing. Jan responded that it was one of the times that the difficulties induced a learning process, and she and her son acknowledged that they got a lot from going through it. The people she knows who experienced what he went through all feel like they've gained something valuable from it. We have often talked about this in class, how we don't need to set out to cause problems, as there are plenty to go around, but that humans really do need promptings to be at our best. Our default setting is likely to be stagnation, so life keeps bring on the oppositional waves. In our responses to stress we frequently do our best and rise to the heights.

Keith was curious to know how we in the Gurukula compare fate with karma, an excellent point to consider. Deb felt that karma related to how we initiate action and then a cascade of consequences ensue from that starting point, which is always worth considering at the outset of any action. Do we entangle ourselves again and again in necessity, or can we extricate ourselves?

I added that Nitya worked to do away with the simplistic notions of karma that are aligned with prejudices. Actual karma is very complex, with millions of aspects coming together in each moment. It's impossible to say one thing or another is an isolated cause, much as humans fall prey to doing it. Fortunately, life is a kind of readout of all the factors converging on the present moment, so we don't actually need to sort it out in that way. Maybe computer nerds might be trying to input all the variables of some present instant that's already past, but it's beyond human capability, for sure. And we really don't need to. We tend to use karma in the way we use fate: as an excuse to deny culpability, to let our egos off the hook. Nitya would have us recognize and accept our failings, so we are able to do what we can to ameliorate them.

In this regard I meditate on the convergence of forces when I'm at the Oregon coast, with its sea mounts, cliffs, beaches and shifting sandy bottoms. Waves coming in from all directions are already unique from variations in tide, wind, debris and other

factors, and then they crash in very complex ways against the shore, rebounding and interacting with each other. We might spend a lifetime trying to determine what all the factors are and their relative importance, but nature invariably shows us exactly what the sum of forces is, at every microsecond. Our lives are a lot like this.

Bill added there is a personal responsibility in how you do your actions, including a mindful attitude in how you're living your life. We are not simply an effect of external forces, our intentions are another important element.

Keith agreed, saying it's the energy you bring to the system that causes the shift. This is the part you contribute with your mind, heart and focus. Deb agreed how your actions are dependent on your vision and understanding, which is why we investigate these matters. A selfish, possessive attitude will create different outcomes than if we go in with a loving attitude.

In the compressed version we are now studying, Nitya reduces the idea of another, better world to a bare minimum:

The other world is a creation of wishful thinking. It is not inferred on the grounds of logical necessity, though it clearly has the backing of psychological necessity. In spite of the world's flux-like nature, its substantiality has to be located within itself rather than in a third factor.

He does offer some elaboration, slyly showing how a hypostatic religious viewpoint is not really different from the materialist assertion of the unreality of mental functioning:

If the world is just a phenomenon that is hanging in midair, so to speak, the mind that is aware of the existence of the world cannot be a self-founded reality either. It is as phenomenal as the world it perceives. Take away from such a mind all impressions of the world, all memories of past experiences, and all possible imaginations of the future, and if that were possible

the result would be a cessation of the mind along with a cessation of the world.

I think we're seeing in the present century where this attitude leads: to the untethered self-serving assertions of power-mad lunatics. The human race is currently at their mercy, psychopaths untroubled that their actions may destroy the very planet we live on. Maybe we always have been at their mercy, only now they are much more powerful than ever before in history. In any case, the gurus don't want us to simply substitute a nicer false reality for a terrible old one. They want to show us how to resign from that flawed game entirely. And we hold to the possibly erroneous belief that in this is our best hope.

The gurus are not alone in this. Many philosophers advocate homing in on the present. Where there is a difference, it is perhaps because it isn't always taken as far as it should be. Nitya sketches the territory for us:

When we look closely at the situation, both the mind that experiences the world and the world that is experienced by the mind have a here and now status. The mind can only function in the present. The world of yesterday is a memory that is evoked here and now. Even the anticipated world of tomorrow is a fancy of the mind created in the here and now. The mind cannot get out of either the present time or the present space to look for another habitat. So it is not hard to see there is no logical ground to establish the existence of another world more real than this.

This speaks to those who attempt to construct their ideology with reason. There is no point in trying to instruct those whose desperation leads them to cling to filaments of imaginary hopes. There are plenty of religious and political systems that cater to them, and profit mightily from them.

Even the most beautifully crafted belief systems can give an impression of the need to reject the world we live in. Patanjali's yoga sutras are usually interpreted in this way, as a way out rather than a way in. Nitya refers here to two other elegant ideologies:

It is in this world we are seeking happiness. All religious teachers exhort their followers to turn away from this world, which is a vale of tears. Buddha and Mahavira treat the world as an aggregate of painful experiences. Yet it is in this very world that they all sought and found eternal happiness.

The distinction that we should make is between the bare-bones essence of reality and the padded versions we like to cuddle up and take naps in. We need to understand how our values affect our experiences. Nitya felt that physicist/philosopher Erwin Schrodinger was on to this:

Schrodinger says this world is structured of percepts, concepts and relations. The engineering of the structure is according to the "value visions" of each person's mind. Even the most outrageously capricious aspect of the world flux can be seen falling into order when one comprehends that the substance of the universe is none other than our own mind-stuff.

In other words, as we subtract our mental modifications we approach the essence of any situation. We have addressed this in previous classes as careful listening, which requires silencing of our inner narrative in order to clearly hear. As we tune out our own static, the broadcast "falls into order" and we can receive it better.

The cosmic broadcast has been characterized as music of the spheres, and everyone loves some kind of music. Nitya mentions one of his favorite books of the period:

To know this one need not be a mystic. Anyone who understands the inner harmony of the primary waves such as sound, light and gravitation can easily agree with Donald Andrews, author of *The Symphony of Life*, that the world is made of music.

Nitya spent the second half of his life working on producing a symphony of values that would integrate all value visions. I think it's appropriate that it was always a work in progress. We have ours too.

Part II

Chapter 20 in *That Alone* gives a more complete accounting of this important verse. Deb read part of the opening:

Occasionally this world we inhabit will appear to be very dark. We feel like running away from it. We think that somewhere there could be another world, one where everything is as it should be.

"I should run away from this wretched world to a more spiritual place." With these kinds of thoughts people have made conceptual hells and heavens. They comfort themselves by thinking that as miserable as they are now, someday they will go to heaven and everything will be set right. At the same time, a lot of their motivation comes from the threat of a hell somewhere. Even great philosophers like Plato thought of a world of intelligibles where all the archetypes are, in contrast to this world of shadow—the shadows of the archetypes.

Narayana Guru says this kind of duality is unwarranted. It cannot be justified. What is is only this world.

It is how we understand the world that makes all the difference. Either you can think of it as a sea of tears, full of misery, or you can see in it the possibility of actualizing all the dearest values.

Here is the ending I read, that helped Moni to a fresh insight:

The passing moments of our lives are to be made lively and rich. One thing I have learned in my life is that the moment that comes will not come again. It's gone. You can see the moment approaching. Receive it with open arms. Glorify it by enriching it with your joy, finding a new value, a new sense of direction in life. Have a renewed sense of wonder. Thus, that moment becomes eternalized in your life, it is a moment to be remembered and to be proud that you could live it so well. Then you can move on to the next moment; this one has already been immortalized in you. What you have achieved in that moment is your eternal repository. Wonderful! You feel fulfilled. You are filled with gratitude: "Oh, I lived this moment so wonderfully!" This is your own life, in this very world, with all these amenities given to you in the here and now.

With this understanding you are eager to race to the next moment because it is going to be wonderful, going to be beautiful. It will yield so much. You see the promise of the future already in it. It is going to be still more wonderful than what you have already lived. Then you pass on to the next with joy and grace. The day opens up with such beauty, such promise. There is nothing like life, nothing like this world, a world where you can make friends, a world where you can create beautiful things, a world where you can share beauty with others and where you can make others part of your own self. A world where there is such an abundance of love and sharing.

The only thing is that you shouldn't drift into darkness. Don't look at the world as something horrid, but as beautiful, divine. Every bit of it. Then we know we are the creators of our own fate. Not through this individual ego with all its vagaries, but through a full affiliation with the eternal, supernatural light that enriches everything. Only then will we have the strength to become masters of the situation, the whole beauty of creation, the beauty that has painted the petals of the flowers, which has given shape to the butterflies and birds, which makes the mountains look awe-inspiring and the oceans look vast, which makes the clouds float so gracefully overhead. This is where we find our true freedom.

You belong to the same overmind of beauty. Not with your ego but with your spirit. Participation in it will reveal to you the divine artist in you, the divine musician in you, the divine intelligence, the divine creator, the divine lover, the divine unifier, the divine peacemaker within you. It's such a blessing to be in this world, to be born here and to live here. This body of ours will fall away just like a candle burning out. But before it burns out the candle gives off a lot of light. What does it matter that it is eventually extinguished? It has lived its moment of light. We live surrounded by smoke and darkness. Make up your mind that you will live this day, each coming moment, in all its worth and beauty, and that you will share it with all. This is the great teaching the Guru offers us.

Part III

Keith wrote a nice addition for us:

Hi Scott,

Thank you for a very enjoyable meeting! It was a real pleasure to meet everyone who was in attendance last evening. I look forward to further discussions as time allows.

This morning I awoke with to find my mind focused on the ideas of fate and karma and the brief exchange that occurred last night. It was interesting for me hear your comment which I interpreted as meaning thattying together ones individual efforts regarding belief/mediation/prayer and outcome can lead to self-remorse or guilt if progress is not made. It reminded me of the backlash that occurred in the 1970's with the visualization work and self-healing related to cancer.

The comparison of fate and karma seems an obvious one but it not one I have directly pondered before. As I reflected this morning a little more clarity began to develop. Fate, as I see it at this moment,

is a state of lassitude to some degree. It is a description of one who “accepts ones fate” with little or no effort to move toward insight/Knowledge regarding that fate. The idea of karma allows for a more complex and specific understanding being that one’s thoughts and actions can influence fate/karma over a life or over lifetimes. This idea by itself underlies much of Yoga. That said, it is clearly not a direct cause and effect as you most eloquently pointed out with your description of the waves at the beach. I have always visualized it more as a web or field like phenomenon but I like your idea of fluid dynamics which reminded me of some of Da Vinci’s drawings.

The search for Knowledge through whatever means (In yoga-Karma, Bhakti, Jnana and/or Raja) can and does have effects on ones path if there is a disciplined practice. Of course spontaneous Self-Realization occurs it is still the daily work of meditation that exerts profound effects of one’s ability to connect with the acausal phenomena of synchronicity. What is synchronicity if it not a description of a humans experience in the space-time continuum becoming more connected with the subtle and astral energetic fields of Mind and Spirit which is the ultimate energy matrix that we touch as human beings?

In light of these thoughts it is my experience that an individual can influence their fate/karma through Yoga and that is what we are here for in the deepest sense. While at the same time caring for all those whose paths we cross in the here and now as well as beyond. Guilt regarding not doing it “well enough” or failing or not feeling good enough are psychological bumps on the road that are ultimately transcended with deeper Knowledge.

Therefore the statement “I don’t believe in fate” is a fair statement and not necessarily a reference to not believing in karma but a reference to humans ability to modify their fate/karma and not

accept it a hardened path but one that is in constant flux and influenced by each breath you take.

My teacher, Ganesh Baba often enjoyed singing the following excerpt from Longfellow's poem "A Psalm of Life". It seems to me to be an appropriate paraphrase of the above.....

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant !

L Let the dead Past bury its dead !

SEP Act,— act in the living Present !

L Heart within, and God o'erhead !

I am hopeful that my ramblings above hold together in a fashion that is coherent, at least to some extent.

With Love,
Keith

* * *

'The mind cannot get out of either the present time or the present space to look for another habitat. So it is not hard to see there is no logical ground to establish the existence of another world more real than this'

This is such a hard hitting insight. That the mind just CANNOT move out of the present. It first sent me into a bit of panic... like I was in a prison of the 'present'... no place to run away from the here and now!

But... when you sit in this thought and see how you can mold everything around you to be taken in the most positive, happy manner... you understand how you can be the 'maker' of your world.

It's almost a feeling of being 'undefeatable'!!

Nothing and no one can 'make' you feel depressed or angry or lonely.

You can absolutely decide to choose whatever emotion you would like to be... and in your own mind your choices can be uplifting, positive & enhancing your life.

That choice of change is in our hands... at every moment... we can choose the positive over any negatives... as Deb mentioned... that even the prisoners feel their sentence is for making them better humans!!!

'Don't look at the world as something horrid, but as beautiful, divine. Every bit of it. Then we know we are the creators of our own fate.'

How absolutely empowering the above para is.

Thank you Scott for being here for us and teaching us with so much love and patience.

I have a long way to go to change many habit patterns of the mind but at least the awareness has been switched on :)