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MOTS Chapter 21: Agreement to Differ is the First Step to Agreement

Endearment is one kind; this is dear to me;
your preference is for something else;
thus, many objects of endearment are differentiated and confusion
comes;
what is dear to you is dear to another also; this should be known.

Free translation:

This thing is dear to me. To another, something else is dear. Thus there comes confusion in the appraisal of the correct value of the objects of endearment. One should know that his experience of happiness is essentially the same as another's.

The next five verses comprise a special section of Atmopadesa Satakam, the foundational document to these Meditations on the Self, where Narayana Guru addresses social ethics. Nitya's title is an ideal summation of the concept encapsulated in verse 21. So many of us are sure we are right, and back our certitude up with religious or other supreme authority. We are also sure ours is the only right way, which makes anyone who differs with us automatically wrong. All around we see dogmatic religious traditions that are dead set against allowing agreement with other faiths, adding the imprimatur of God to seal the crypt.

A yogi can easily spy the ego behind this game. The first step in growing out of it is to accord the other person a right to their own perspective. If we can grasp what motivates them we might even find the differences are less grievous than they initially appear. The idea of universal human rights is a no-brainer, legally supported everywhere, yet in practice there is tremendous

opposition to it. The immature human ego is as usual the culprit, and this is really a very challenging area for it to work on.

Nitya first lays down some of the basics of awareness in the Vedantic scheme for us:

Consciousness is experienced in several ways: as knowledge of an inner state of feeling, the awareness of the occurrence of an idea, the formation of a question, or the active or passive witnessing of the state of mind.

These are inward-directed perceptions. From there the mind turns outward, and the result is an admixture of subjective and objective notions:

When the mind's awareness is focused on an external factor, it is experienced as an appraisal of the properties of the object with which the mind is related. Most of our experiences imply a dialectical interplay between our subjective notions and their corresponding objective data.

We humans tend to forget the subjective aspect and assume we're perceiving "reality" as such, which also reinforces our sense of unchallengeable rightness. It is most important to retain a suspicion that the shape of our thoughts throws a constrictive (or constructive) framework over whatever we are interacting with. This leaves room for others to fill in our gaps, offer corrections, or open new doors for us.

In any case, the ego responds to its perceptions in certain categorical ways, variously listed by the rishis as the moods, or *rasas*. For some reason Nitya uses *bhava* here, perhaps because they are all states of being, but elsewhere you'll see him using the more usual term *rasa*:

When both of these poles [inner and outer, or subjective and objective] are related to the 'I' factor, the self assumes a certain

mood. It is described in Indian theatrical art in terms of one or the other of nine moods (*bhava*), namely feeling pleased, displeased, angered, pacified, embarrassed, awed, emboldened, compassionate or erotic.

Nitya then lists some of the factors that color our experience to produce those moods:

These moods depend on the total picture structured in the mind of the perceptual factors outside and their corresponding concepts inside, to which there are associated value fixations in the mind derived from pleasant or unpleasant experiences of the past. Hereditary factors, racial colorations, acquired archetypal symbols, social placement, bilateral relations, adoptions or disadoptions, motivations, drives, intensity of instinctual urges, aesthetic appreciations, ethical considerations, and personality makeup are only some of the known factors that contribute to the actualization of a certain mood at a certain time in a certain person.

Adoptions and disadoptions are used in the Gurukula sense, meaning the affiliation or rejection we have with a person or ideology. Technically we would have to adopt a hypothesis before we could disadopt or reject it. Nitya comments dryly on all the listed possibilities of disagreement: “As the constituent factors are so very divergent, it should not be surprising if two people do not always agree in their approval or disapproval.” Nitya was also fond of an equally dry comment by Carl Sagan, in his *Dragons of Eden*, some of you may remember from *That Alone* verse 4:

The human brain contains about ten billion nerve cells, or neurons. These neurons are connected by synapses, across which chemicals diffuse, providing the means by which messages are conducted from one cell to another. According to Carl Sagan, an average human neuron has from 1000 to 10,000

synapses. He tells us that “the human brain is characterized by some 10^{13} synapses” and that “the number of different states of a human brain is 2 raised to this power—i.e. multiplied by itself ten trillion times. This is an unimaginably large number, far greater, for example, than the total number of elementary particles (electrons and protons) in the entire universe....These enormous numbers may also explain something of the unpredictability of human behavior.”

When you think in these terms, it's amazing any of us can agree at all. We are likely in accord not in any exact way, but only by making assumptions and ignoring the differences, which can be an unsettling thought. Happily and fortunately, in practice we can get along very well without exact agreement.

So why shouldn't we expand our area of tolerance? It worked well for the gurus we're listening to.

Narayana Guru generalized all human experience until he arrived at happiness as the most general motivation of all. That means it is the operative principle of everyone, even though we often don't see it because precisely what makes us happy is different from what makes someone else happy. Nitya first directs us to recover our own core happiness, without imagining it resides outside as a goal or promised land:

The experience of happiness is not external. It is felt at the very core of consciousness where the identity of the self with an existential factor is illumined as a dear value. In other words, the experience of a value-identity is a unique moment in which the self is one with itself.

Deb opened our discussion citing the idea of the self at one with itself as the key point here, and especially Nitya's conclusion that “The more we are attuned to the Self, the greater is the possibility of seeing everyone else's dear values as legitimate aspects of our own self.” She affirmed that in the experience of

happiness you aren't looking at something outside that makes you happy, you just are happy. She meant a calm, centered happiness, where you can look at the unity of experience of every day from a steady state, content in your relation to the world. She acknowledged the difficulty of going beyond theoretical understanding to work together with someone of a significantly different orientation.

I added that this is not meant to make us put up with injustice, but only to understand its motivations, which could give us a way to actually address it effectively. Presuming the other is a lot like us is a successful opening gambit, while condemning them as wrong or cursed of God or whatever is instantly fatal to communication. Often a respectful approach invites a workable relationship, if it's possible at all. This doesn't guarantee a fair payback, unfortunately, but it's still a good idea.

Bushra talked about how we can see this universality more easily in friendly gatherings. Recently she and Deb were at a board meeting of Open Hearts Open Minds, the prison outreach program, just talking things over. She saw how everyone present loved the program and the sessions in the prisons, but when they go into it they all have different reasons. The feeling about it is the same, but no two people express the feeling in the same way. Deb agreed that in the experience of happiness there is a gratifying commonality.

Several people talked about how we easily have sympathy for others: their crying makes us cry without any reason, and laughter is famously contagious. Yet, as Paul said, we like to draw a border around our belief systems and refuse reciprocity to outsiders. We put more energy into defending our egos than working toward compassion. Coming from a repressive religious background, he could see how critical agreeing to disagree is to a harmonious life.

Susan offered a nice analogy, of plants growing near each other in soil. They look separate, but if you move the soil away it reveals how intertwined all the roots are. You'll find more on soil in Part II.

Scotty told us about an example he observed in a supermarket lunchroom recently. There was a young man and a policeman eating in there near him. Normally they are in oppositional groups these days, “Feds and heads” but the man asked the cop politely about a possible violation of his rights. To Scotty’s surprise the cop was impartial and calm, and took the lad seriously. It turned out he was homeless, and the officer gave him some advice on where he could get help, as well as on his rights. Scotty kept getting urges to break in and interrupt them, and he restrained himself, thinking “this isn’t my conversation.” Instead he practiced letting go of the emotions the situation generated in him. It sounded like everyone was benefitted in the encounter. Portland does do some police training, which sadly is far from universal, but it’s the kind of thing that can save a lot of grief.

Deb talked about a recent interchange with an old friend who got her really upset with a political and racist diatribe. Deb “went ballistic” as we used to say, meaning exploded in anger. It took her a while to clam down, but the agitation persisted a long time. Nancy characterized it as righteous indignation, which is always something that should be respected. Deb felt the anger subverted her ability to respond adequately, however.

Susan had had a similar rough time with a very close friend over politics, and realized she, Susan, was being overly negative in trying to argue her point. Then she remembered the Kim Stafford poem Jean sent us (Part III, MOTS 19) *Practicing the Complex Yes*, and it spoke to her perfectly about how to heal the rift, which she proceeded to do. Interestingly, at their last session at the Two Rivers prison, Bushra and Deb had had Kim along as the visiting Oregon poet laureate, and he had shared that very poem with them. So it goes.

Scotty is an adept at qigong, and talked about how one strand of it is to bounce back. As soon as you feel some pull, some gravity, you invert it to give you a lift. It’s just like saying yes instead of no. He’s found it’s amazing the transcendence that happens all around you when you say yes. He also had an example

of talking with an old friend, who suddenly swerved into a political diatribe picked up from the tele or other propaganda screen. Scotty was shocked and was about to argue angrily, then he thought this guy is my old friend. Then he made a few points from this gentler place, and the friend was not offended. In Scotty's words, the atmosphere went from acidic to neutral. It pretty much all in the tone he maintained, not so much the content, and it made a big difference. Maybe even taught the friend something of value.

Andy mused how much it hurts to argue, how the other person is afflicted and their feeling is as pained by the conflict as you are. If you have the patience to really see how much in pain the combatants are, you can try and have some imaginative insight about how the distortion happened that is causing the pain.

I noted how often the combatants are not even aware of the pain that is their motivation. Knowing pain was driving you would help reduce the anger, but instead we feel like we're just operating normally, so there is no effort at restraint.

Jan has been making good progress lately in coping with family stresses. She's been trying to address certain persistent conflicts by trying to hold to her position and explain it a bit, in a neutral and non-emotional way. She has endured a long history of misunderstanding and criticism, but she's finding standing up for herself is making a difference. She said you have to let people know what's important to you, your value identity, and then they can relate to it even if they have different values. In the past Jan has simply ceded to others in her family the right to decide things, but now she is putting her foot down—gently of course—and earning new respect. As Deb said, it's important to not allow yourself to be taken over by other's wishes, and Jan agreed, adding that the more she stands up for what she believes in and what is fair to her in situations, the more opportunities for harmony have come along. That's definitely in the spirit of this chapter.

I reemphasized that standing up for ourselves is an integral part of fairness. So much of our grief stems from abandoning the playing field to others, and everyone benefits (whether they realize

it or not) when you are a staunch advocate for fairness. Jan agreed, adding that those who live dogmatically also want to be themselves, so they may secretly admire others who can do it. Deb added that sharing what's important to you gives them a clear way to relate to you, especially if you're not feeding anger back into the relationship.

Paul was a little envious of Jan's success, as someone in his family is way more dogmatic than her sibling, and he well knows how impenetrable the walls can be. He burst out, "My mother's way worse than your sister!" Funny, but ouch. He knows ignorance can only exist in the absence of light, but some people are more comfortable in the darkness, and they defend it ferociously. Paul does admit he isn't all-knowing, so he feels uncomfortable defending his position sometimes, but after all there are some folks who you'll never get anywhere with. Sometimes they're the closest people around.

Andy suggested taking an expanded view of the situation, bringing in the past and future, and seeing how they all interrelate. He is practicing this with our current President, who had an abusive childhood that taught him meanness. Andy thought he must be suffering from his upbringing still, which keeps him from hating him as much as many people do. I put in that our history leaves us with tender places that are easily aggravated, especially by family members who intuitively know how to push our buttons.

"I have more buttons to push than your piano!" was Paul's rejoinder. He was in rare form. I should have told him they are called keys, not buttons, and that makes all the difference, but I was too busy laughing. Those buttons are really keys to healing. What's the point of healing where we aren't injured? It's the sore points that need attention, so they are the keys. Narayana Guru's "grown up perspective" is a meaningful way to go about the necessary task of healing.

Bushra wondered why she couldn't avoid suffering when people push her buttons. She sees how they are suffering in the same way. She also has a sibling in this game. She said the

problem with arguing is that you aren't really listening, you are preparing your next onslaught. On top of that, it becomes pleasurable to "blow them out of the water," though she knows it isn't constructive. Therapeutic maybe, but not constructive. She did get a laugh from several of us who have also detonated torpedoes, though Nancy cautioned that when you blow them out of the water there is always a little twinge that you hurt them. Not always so little, either.

And darned if Susan didn't admit to a sibling challenge too. No wonder sannyasins abandon their families—instant smooth sailing. Maybe. The rest of us have our homemade challenges.

I harked back to the value of listening. If you simply listen you will eventually see any openings that come up. Sometimes it brings you into the conversation smoothly enough so that your more radical ideas are tolerable. Deb added how that includes giving up expectations—you step back, let go a little bit, and then you can be more aware of exactly who they are, free of your assumptions. You aren't necessarily supporting their position, but by keeping your distance you can be more tender with them.

Paul nudged us toward a happy ending with something he learned in a movie, *Little Chaos*, that a flower opens itself regardless of the severity of the season, even in a storm. It's an annual event that keeps happening. He feels like when he defends himself he is fighting for a value, but a flower doesn't fight for value, it just displays its beauty.

Time was up, so I didn't get to say that standing up for a high value is eminently defensible. The unwise sort of defense is when our ego is afraid to be tarnished, so we dissemble to make it look perfect to all eyes present. Nitya's technique of admitting guilt to any and all accusations can help reduce the ego's need to show off its magnificence, but of course the ego is rather clever to turn just about any technique into another proof of its glory. Anyway, don't stop defending high values! Living them is the best defense, too, because they are admirable in their own right.

In his wonderful conclusion Nitya implies a whole Jacob's Ladder of hierarchical values, where in the core we are united in one universal condition, and the farther we withdraw from it the more specific and prone to conflict our condition will be. This is not to say that conflict is always wrong or that we shouldn't be engaged with the world, but rather that keeping in touch with the core is the basis for right conduct in all occasions:

The more externally oriented one's interest is, the greater the likelihood it will differ from others. The more we are attuned to the Self, the greater is the possibility of seeing everyone else's dear values as legitimate aspects of our own self. Those who know this secret will have no qualms in agreeing with another's disagreement and disapproval. A proper perspective on possible variances and differences is the secret of effecting unitive understanding, *advaita darsana*.

As noted earlier, one of Nitya's best techniques for an argument was to immediately agree with any criticism leveled at him. His tactic was "I am even worse than you think," and it quickly took the wind out of many an accuser's sails. He knew it was only his ego that needed to be admired for its perfection, so he had no qualms in admitting his weaknesses.

Nitya was a superb debater, and he never lost an argument that I witnessed. If you fight back when insulted, the game is on, but if you surrender immediately then no battle is going to take place. Nitya also would speak to the person in their own terms, providing a tacit agreement right off the bat. If you monolithically stand by your own framing, it is bound to clash with the other person's favorite monolith. Nitya could bring his wisdom over into the other person's field and have his interchange with them there. He respected their position, knew something of their background, or else enquired into it. Mostly the discussions could then be done in a highly civilized fashion. His intensity was ramped up only if it

would serve to blunt an attack or enlighten a truth seeker. Then the lightning flashed and the thunder roared!

We closed with a reading from Guy Murchie about the living earth for our meditation, copied in Part II. Despite the disastrous devastation of the planet proceeding apace, you can sense it is a gigantic being that is persistently alive. It may even be an egg about to break open and reveal... what? Grand as it is, it too is our core. We connect with it internally, and incline toward it externally.

Good planets are hard to find. We are incredibly lucky to be on one. Let's honor her. Aum.

Part II

The following wasn't part of the class, but it's germane, so it goes in Part II, as a perfect example of the different endearments found in Indian and Western perspectives.

Nitya opens his chapter comparing the practical and skeptical attitude of a Western friend with the then-typical worshipful mindset of an Indian associate, who according to Moni was Madhavan:

My Indian friend, on the other hand, has in mind the hoary figure of the archetypal Guru. To him a Guru is not a man at all. He is a manifestation of the most sacred and worshipful, who should be honored, revered, and implicitly obeyed. He should never be questioned. No allegation should ever be made against him. However inscrutable, there must be sufficient reason for a Guru to behave even in what may appear as the strangest manner. According to this attitude, even when we don't understand a Guru, it's not that he is funny or silly—it's only our mind that is dark and foolish. He believes we should wait until wisdom dawns upon us to see the meaning of what the Guru says.

It's interesting that the very day of the class I encountered a vivid example of this schism. I worked diligently for several years to prepare a long-awaited new edition of Nataraja Guru's *Integrated Science of the Absolute*. Since then, a team from the home Gurukula, having discovered the first draft of the work, is going to substitute a careful reconstruction of that draft for my scrupulously edited manuscript. In the words of one of the masterminds, speaking of the draft:

After seeing the sheer labour that was put into the manuscript we felt that this edition should be an archival copy exactly as the Guru wrote it. Later editions in future can be edited and changed, updated if necessary. At least we now have a record of Nataraja Guru's original words and style which will serve researchers and scholars.

Of course, there is never going to be another edition, but setting that aside, this is an example of worshipping the Guru and fearing to change anything he did, because his work must have been perfect on its face. The result will be much more difficult to read than the edited copy I submitted, but reading and understanding aren't the point. The point is to accurately imitate the exalted being that once walked among us.

Needless to say, this was not Nitya's attitude, though Nataraja Guru had some of it himself, enough at least to ward off tinkering by mediocre helpmates. I suppose there's a whiff of karma here, because of that. But I do picture his spirit in heaven jumping up and down in a fury that a readable version of his masterwork almost happened, and then didn't due to traditional mulishness. Often copies of early drafts of important works are kept for archival purposes, as they should be, but in a healthy environment, subsequent drafts are an improvement in a number of ways, and are so honored. And read.

I was never consulted on the decision, or even informed of it until I begged. In any case, respecting other people's ideas is only a beginning, the attitude that makes community or family decision-making possible. Narayana Guru's philosophy was not intended to reinforce stagnation, but to foster creative development. We might imagine how Trump came to be the miserable narcissist he is, yet being sympathetic doesn't mean we have to support his policies. This is the point that is so often missed. Agreeing to differ—to be different—is just a fair starting point for a debate. It does not have to mean you go your way and I'll go mine, and never the twain shall meet.

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Peter M sent a fantastic Guardian news article about the new discovery of a vast underground ocean of microorganisms:

https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/dec/10/tread-softly-because-you-tread-on-23bn-tonnes-of-micro-organisms?CMP=share_btn_link

This links up nicely with the excerpt from Guy Murchie's *Seven Mysteries of Life*, from our concurrent Brihadaranyaka Upanishad reading in the online class, which I read out. The subject is *vayu*, air:

Another vital part of the soil is called humus, which comes from rotting vegetable and animal matter and is the mucky protein that helps hold the skeletal grains of quartz together, along with many other compounds of carbon, oxygen, nitrogen, phosphorus, etc., that add up to the basic living substance of Earth. And all these parts of soil, both organic and inorganic, are mixed together none too evenly while, except in sandy places, they tend to form crumbs up to about one eighth of an inch in diameter, which are each a tiny sample of the local earth. These crumbs are familiar to anyone who

gardens or handles dirt, and seem to be tranquil little clods of inert, mellow tilth. But their apparent quiescence is almost completely illusory, for they are not only teeming with individual vegetable and animal life but are in a real sense alive themselves. They actually inhale oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide, and tests show that normally the air in soil down to about 5 inches deep is completely renewed every hour. And for many feet below that the soil breathes, though progressively more slowly as the moisture and carbon dioxide content of the air increase with depth. If it seems incredible that hard clay could be breathing, just remember that crevices only on thousandth of an inch wide, much too small to see without a microscope, are as much bigger than an oxygen molecule as a valley 120 miles wide is bigger than a man. (95)

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Deb found this cheerful report from the frontiers of physics:

The Hippies Were Right: It's All about Vibrations, Man!

A new theory of consciousness

by Tam Hunt

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/the-hippies-were-right-its-all-about-vibrations-man/>