

2/5/19

MOTS Chapter 27: Narayana Guru Defines the Self

Sitting in the dark, that which knows is the self;
what is known then assumes name and form,
with the psychic dynamism, senses, agency of action and also
action;
see how it all comes as *mahendra* magic!

Free translation:

The Self is that knowledge which brings illumination to one's existence even when it is placed in the thick of darkness. This same knowledge assumes names and forms and engages in action equipped with mind and senses, for all the world like the miraculous performance of a magician.

There is a different feel to this chapter, and I finally realized part of the reason. I never really paid attention before to the locations and dates in the book, which flow along fairly regularly, but it appears this chapter was inserted several months later. Nitya might have done a first draft, but was dissatisfied with it. In any event verse 27 is a hard nut to crack, like his description of the ego in his That Alone excerpt I've put in Part II. Here we're getting a later product of heavy thinking. Just as with That Alone, his rewrites tended to be more philosophic and abstruse than his personal forth-speaking. Possibly because of Nataraja Guru's towering influence, he may have mistrusted his natural teaching ability, maybe felt it didn't quite measure up to his preceptor. We know Nitya as a brilliant expositor who improvised with tremendous relevance on a deep foundation of knowledge. Still, no disciple of Nataraja Guru dared take anything for granted. When Nitya went back to clean up his earlier work, sometimes something was lost. You can see this most vividly if you compare the That Alone version of verses 1-8 with the original version that surfaced

after publication, available here:

http://aranya.me/uploads/3/4/8/6/34868315/atmo_verses_1-8_original.pdf.

As is only fitting, Nitya sets the stage by defining the objective:

In these days of encyclopedias and computerized documentation it is not hard to gather information on any subject under—or above—the sun. Yet in spite of all the ingenious devices now at man's command to probe into the secrets of nature, one aspect of knowledge always eludes him: the knowledge of the Self. The Self presents to us the greatest paradox in life. Nothing is known more intimately or felt more profoundly than the Self, and yet it is the one thing which we cannot adequately explain or clearly define.

I'm currently getting a close reading on the history of the scientific revolution from several sources, and one of its features is wrestling with what the Self is. Does it even exist? How do you prove or disprove it? Nitya's paragraph on other invisible forces—a new concept in the West not so long ago, except for God—reminded me of the arguments over vitalism, that led up to Mary Shelley's book *Frankenstein*, among many other things. Isn't the Self like electricity and gravitation? What's the difference? They are all inferred from their effects, not known as what they are in themselves. Nitya writes:

The Self is not the only reality that is felt yet not seen. We see the apple falling but cannot see gravitation. We see iron filings clinging onto an iron rod yet cannot see magnetism. We see bulbs burning bright or coils becoming red hot but do not see electricity. In all these cases the method employed is to postulate a causal factor to account for certain events and give a name to this unknown presumption.

Since all we can do is name our unknown presumptions, there will always be plenty of room for argument, unless you understand these things as an undefined principle and not as some fixed entity residing somewhere like a god on a throne. Then there would be no need to argue.

The key idea is that we can all agree there is *something* that distinguishes a corpse from a living person. God was a handy fiction to gloss over the abyss, but once it was discarded (a gradual and painful process, still underway) science started looking for the vital principle in earnest, mostly as a materially detectable entity. That may never pan out, but it sure does keep the theoretical world spinning! Many of us agree with Socrates, who in Nitya's words, "considered the knowledge of the Self superior to any other knowledge." Knowledge of the Self and knowing exactly what it is are not the same thing, by a long shot! Like those other forces of gravity and electromagnetism, we don't know what they are but we can use them to our advantage so long as we recognize their existence. Fortunately (and unlike God) they work the same whatever we may believe about them.

All sorts of scientists, philosophers, ordinary blokes and religious adherents have very strong opinions about what Life or the Self is, but that's about all. Coming to grips with the Self reminds me of the carnival game Whack-a-Mole (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whac-A-Mole>) where you hit the mole head that pops out of a hole in a board, but then another immediately appears out of another, on and on endlessly. Many scientists believe they can rid the world of moles, that they don't actually exist. But wait, there's another one—whack! Few know the secret of subtracting the superficial level of awareness we are so fond of, making it dark enough so that the faint light of the underlying glow of (invisible!) knowledge can be discerned. As Nitya says:

It is our common experience that awareness is always flashing or flickering out of the dark, as if emerging from a cloud of

unknowing. Also, after its presentation each specific awareness vanishes, giving its place to a new awareness. In short, there is an experience of an awareness throbbing or twinkling in non-awareness. Narayana Guru calls that awareness the Self. Hence his definition “That which shines in the dark and becomes aware of itself is the Self.”

Narayana Guru posits darkness to epitomize a state of mind where the senses and their accompanying narrative are switched off. You may recall Atmo verse 10 employs the same image of two people sitting in the dark and communicating without any impediments. Sensory deprivation chambers are designed to abet this process of freeing ourselves from all sensory distractions, but meditation is the clean and dry way we can do it in our own living rooms. When all the mental and bodily clatter and clutter is tuned out, what is left is a purer, if not pure, Self. This is what yoga is all about, in case you’re still wondering. It is famously referred to in the Gita, II.69:

What is night for all creatures, the one of self-control keeps awake therein; wherein all creatures are wakeful, that is night for the sage-recluse who sees.

As Deb was off rehearsing her poetry performance for Friday, I opened the dialogue, talking about how when we meditate we are trying to replicate this proposed experiment of Narayana Guru’s by trying to stop listening to the senses while minimizing fixation on our own sense-oriented narrative, trying to make that part of the dark background. What’s then left is a sense of a relatively pure self, not being pulled out of its simplicity by complex needs and duties, something that’s deeper than that superficial level of our existence. It is famously hard to stop listening to our habitual train of thought, especially if we sincerely believe it’s who we are. That’s why defining or making any definitive statement about the

self is adding back more of the light and clutter that is actually and inevitably obscuring it.

Paul helped us clarify that the reduction can be either horizontal or vertical, and that excluding “noise” makes one-pointed attention easier in all cases. I agreed, and for that matter horizontal and vertical are not even two separate things—more like two different angles of vision of the one thing we are. There isn’t meant to be any exclusion, beyond a temporary one. We’re just trying to be more aware of what is happening, which is very useful in promoting our own enjoyment as well as helping us to interact with situations more successfully.

There is a corollary in the role of darkness Nitya hints at through one of his favorite comparisons. After mentioning several Western attitudes, he shows how you can achieve detachment even in suffering:

The Buddhist nihilist holds a different view. He agrees that there can be a tooth, it can have a sensitive root containing a nerve, and that the nerve can deteriorate and become agitated. The agitation of the nerve can be felt as a painful experience. But he sees nothing which justifies the presumption that it is “my” tooth, or that “I” have a toothache. To him, “I” and “my” are fabricated notions.

Nitya’s somewhat different thoughts about this subject are well expressed in *That Alone* v 30, and I’ll append some of it in Part II. Susan was really fascinated by this, and we talked for a while about how the mind can either attach or detach to pain or anything else. Pain readily gets our full attention, and normally there’s plenty to go around, so it’s a good place to work. If we become more grounded in the joy of the Self, then our pains will have less impact on us. The Buddhist idea is to erase any thinking about the self, to insist (via the self) that it doesn’t exist. It looks like the opposite of Vedanta, where there is nothing *but* the Self, yet it’s a lovely paradox that they both amount to exactly the same thing.

All, or nothing. Just the same. Both agree that the superficial self is based on false notions through and through, and that takes care of the important part. No need to argue.

This high point near the middle of the 50 chapters is a good time for a review, especially as Nitya brings in a classic Vedantic concept that we refreshed our memories about. His essay is built around reducing the triple aspects of knowing, doing and enjoying (or feeling) to a unitive state. You remember how our consciousness trifurcates knowledge into knower-knowledge-known; pure action adds a doer and a done-to; and we experience enjoyer-enjoyment-enjoyed. All these add a subject and object onto a purely unitive occurrence. Nitya first presents the threefold aspects undivided:

When I say “Self” what do I have in my mind? I am thinking of it in terms of various experiences like knowing, doing, and experiencing pain and pleasure. In fact, I cannot think of any awareness other than knowing, doing or feeling.

Knowing, doing and feeling bear a close resemblance to sat, chit and ananda, in the same order, and we discussed this in depth. It’s why Nitya can feel confident nothing has been left out in the scheme: rishis for many hundreds of years have been contemplating *saccidananda* and finding it adequately epitomizes the full range of being. Jan wondered how this might fit in with meditation, and I gave an unsatisfactory reply. You can read her valuable clarification in Part II. What I said at the time is that sat is truth, the solidity, if you will, of existence. Chit is the way we comprehend it, and ananda is how it affects us. Each of us will choose how we understand what we’re meditating on, what the ananda is to us. Further, meditation on truth doesn’t necessarily reveal how you’re going to feel about it. I used music as an example, since we are (hopefully) meditating when we listen to it. Listening is another kind of meditation. Regardless, the music is

what it is, *sat*, but each person has a prepared attitude, *chit*, about it—foreign, mine, weird, etc—and consequently a visceral reaction, *ananda*, to it: love it, hate it, have to leave immediately, give me more, etc. Jan let me know I had not reached her, saying (politely) “What makes sense to me is where this verse ends up: we’re trying to let go of our outer self and to find our true Self.” Which is of course exactly right. We’re trying to attend to the *sat* aspect when *ananda* has garnered all our attention, and we have no resource other than our *chit* intelligence to bring about the conversion.

In the light of what was said earlier about gravity, we don’t and can’t fully know the *sat* aspect of anything, and we operate on our best guesses. Some guesses are indeed better than others.... Somehow we have to overcome those built-in limitations. In the history of science each theory is replaced by a new one within a short time, but it seems to be always promoted by a display of certainty, of “at last we’ve got it.” What I’ve taken from my science review lately is that no one has any confidence in their Self, they are driven to look for it in an opposite direction, away from themselves. Happily the looking is highly inventive and stimulating however you do it. All the while, under examination are processes that are so utterly unbelievably amazing, that they amount to mahendra magic. The magic of mind and senses. How can thinkers be so coldblooded about the array of miracles they are observing? They are rightfully being careful not to be “religious,” but still. Why can’t we come from a place where we are confident we are already a miraculous being? In *That Alone*, Nitya concludes verse 27 (A wonderful adjunct to our class by the way, and not so long):

The Guru has given here the two aspects of a nondual reality. It is nondual, and yet it contains a duality. The dual aspects are the pure Self that hides in the dark as an unknown entity; and the so-called non-Self, consisting of this grand magical world of name and form placed in time and space, where there is a centralized ‘I’ identity

which is asking questions, recalling memories, making judgments, and assuming roles and thereby getting into various peripheral identifications.

This is highly paradoxical. The non-Self should be the not known, but it is the known. The Self, the knower of everything, is not known. It is as if it is sitting in darkness. At least once in a while you should move away from the grand magic of your life, sit quietly and ruminate, and try to penetrate beyond the cloud of unknowing. You are seeking to know what is luminous there which casts its shadows in so many ways here. This is the eternal theme for the contemplative. (194)

Paul has actually read *The Cloud of Unknowing*, from around the time of Dante, but admitted it isn't as good as Nitya's books. Nitya also loved it, and in fact used his veiled reference to it in both *Meditations on the Self* and *That Alone*, so it must speak to the darkness of this verse: the dark night of the soul. Paul was also brought to mind of the Rumi poem where the garden looks barren and dead but rest assured, underground the roots are full of life and growth. It's supposed to make us brave to enter the darkness, though something in us draws back in fear.

Duality curiously makes for three aspects, if you retain the overall context along with the subject and object. Like meditating in the dark, we are invited to reduce our reliance on the light of duality, becoming instead a neutral witness:

What is felt as 'I' is the most central awareness of the experience of knowing. Knowledge, the known and the knower are only aspects that we read into a homogeneous, indivisible, simple experience. It is not imperative to say I am the "knower" who "knows" that I am typing, it is enough to say there is "knowledge of typing," or "typing is known."

Nitya then directs us to perform the same reduction with action and enjoyment:

Doing is different from knowing only in the sense that in it there is a participation of the motor system of the organism in response to the judgments and the awareness of the sequential direction and movement of knowledge. We can say that doing is an active form of knowing.

Nitya goes on with a nice job of reducing feeling and action to subsets of knowledge:

In either case of knowing or doing what dominates the experience is awareness. The quality of awareness increases or decreases in accordance with the potential of the awareness to make its meaning, value or significance an overwhelming experience. That is what we call enjoying or suffering. Enjoyment and suffering are essentially feeling. Feeling is also another aspect of knowing. The experience of enjoyment or of suffering is an intensive form of knowing. In other words, the doer (the agent of action) or the enjoyer (the agent of evaluation) are not different from the knower. We have now reduced thinking, feeling and willing to knowledge and also cancelled away their corresponding agents, such as the knower, the doer, and the enjoyer. What remains is the awareness of knowledge.

Moni could see that this chapter is mostly about understanding the meaning of knowledge. Within it, enjoying and suffering are intensive ways of knowing whatever you are experiencing. We have all sorts of thoughts about doing things, good and bad judgments, so many things underneath consciousness. Through and through if you can see that you are part of the pervading self, it is very helpful, and only in meditation can you quiet your mind to think that way.

Moni admitted that in the years she was with Nitya she didn't ask him any questions, because there were always people coming

to him with theirs. She merely observed how he helped people, his approach to certain things. Her takeaway now is the only way she felt she could get closer to that healing concept he exemplified is when she has compassion in a situation. She could see how in any issue, your ego jumps up first, then intellect comes, and your mind gives you crazy ideas. Then after all those present their role to you, compassion comes. Only then do you feel you can manage a problem.

While we were aiming at a meditation to celebrate the role of darkness in revealing the Self, the class was so engaged that we talked avidly right up to the last minute. Then everyone hurried home to possibly assume a meditative pose in the dark of their own bedrooms, nestling back into their selves.

Part II

Jan added a clarification in writing of her ideas from the class. She is staying focused on becoming more aware of the ongoing paradigm, wanting to know how concepts like knowledge-actor-enjoyer and sat-chit-ananda apply to meditating, and how they might help us let go of the weighty events that we have to deal with. She wrote:

Since you recommended Verse 30 of Atmo [That Alone], I looked at it today. I found these lines that spoke to the “process” I was trying to get at in class...where we become aware of the Nonself and try to sink into the Self in meditation.

All the contemplation, meditation and discipline we do is only for this one purpose of disaffiliating ourselves from body identity and ego identity, and establishing an identity with our pure spirit. It is a pilgrimage. We are walking away from us to arrive at us. From where do we go? From the periphery of our skin and this feeling of ego. Where do we arrive? Deep down within us. The distance from our periphery to our centre, seemingly so close, is in reality

very, very far. That's why the Upanishads say it is far and near, inside as well as outside; it is the farthest from all the nearest of all. Nothing is nearer than your centre and yet nothing is a longer journey. It is very difficult to arrive at it, but once you do everything is expansive. (p. 213.)

In class, I was trying to apply, in a real world sense, the *sat, cit, ananda* to how we meditate, to what is described above. I thought, for example, something rough like - through our awareness and quiet we start to identify with the values of ananda, letting go of the ego and senses, and using our consciousness to see our own thoughts and identifications. That was the direction I was trying to go. Using these basic concepts in different ways helps my brain understand them more and understand the whole philosophy more. But I should just read up on them again!

Interesting and all good! Looking at Atmo reminds me again how beautiful that book is.

* * *

Here's the part I read out from That Alone (Atmo) 30, plus a bit more. The first comes right after Jan's quote:

There is suffering in this world, but if you are too concerned with it you will miss your whole life. In spite of suffering, in spite of diseases, you should go on.

When it comes to the ego, it is a hard nut to crack. Social acceptance has become a great necessity. A greater necessity, though, is your acceptance of your spirit, acknowledging your own truth, your real existence. Your primary and most valuable identity is not even recognized.

The part read out in class:

To release ourselves from the clutches of the body and the society, we transcend. Thereafter, pain may be in your body but you don't suffer. Disgrace may be sitting on your name in the society but you don't suffer. This is a scheme given to us for working out our own release from a twofold misery.

This is really one of the most beautiful verses of *Atmopadesa Satakam*. For years and years I have used this one verse for meditation. In all my troubles, physical as well as social, this verse has saved me many times. Again and again I go over it. Sometimes when there are bodily troubles, people around are upset, and the doctors are annoyed, giving me all kinds of medicines, I find over and above all this that the only medicine which gives me utmost relief is this one verse. It goes on saying, "This inert matter does not know anything. My pure soul is not the one which sits and thinks and worries. It is not the one which speaks to people. It's one all-pervading consciousness. This body is just one thing floating in that ocean of consciousness like a piece of cork. Sometimes it may be up and sometimes down." Thus there comes an expansive, transcendent consciousness. Is there pain? Yes, there is pain. Did someone say something terrible about me? Yes, he said I am a very evil man. Aum. Aum. "Are you not very evil?" Aum. Be it so. What of it?

You are really released. There is no greater achievement to make.

* * *

I asked the class about the meaning of psychic dynamism as used by Narayana Guru in this verse. Jan was the first to take it up as a general process, but it's specifically a group of four distinct activities of the mind within that process. Psychic dynamism is a basic building block of Vedanta, and we should have it clearly in mind, as it's a key aspect of returning to the Self. It's also a very useful way to understand our thought processes. For review, verse 2 of That Alone describes the psychic dynamism mentioned in verse 27 succinctly:

According to Vedantins, there are four categories of wakeful consciousness. The first is this questioning aspect, which is an attempt to assign meaning to whatever confronts you. Meaning is given to sense impressions or stray ideas by relating them to something already known. New impressions or ideas are oriented in relation to previously experienced situations in time and space. When they are thus given a formal fixation, they find a place in your scheme of understanding. In order to do this, you recall the memories which seem to be associated with what is being presented to your senses or mind. This faculty employed in the recall of memory is called *cittam*. It is the second category of consciousness.

After the relevant memory associations are revived, they are then used to decide the nature of the impression or idea under examination. The third category of consciousness is a faculty used to predicate the subject appropriately. It is called *buddhi*.

Now you are in a state of suspense until you make a judgement on the value of the new stimulus. Once its nature is decided, you feel either satisfied or disturbed by it. This feeling affects your personal identity in a variety of ways. The fourth category of consciousness is the affectivity of the ego, called *ahamkara*. *Aham* means 'I'. You relate your personal experience to a central consciousness in you called 'I' which is affected in terms of pain, pleasure or indifference. With this, one unit of impression has been almost instantaneously processed regarding its significance to the individual. Taken all together, these four aspects—*manas*, *cittam*, *buddhi*, and *ahamkara*—are called *karanam*.

After going through the process of questioning, recollecting, reasoning and being affected, you pass on to the next stage: reacting to the situation. For this you need the use of your organs of perception and action. The senses, body and mind all come together in a confection which becomes a holistic action, monitored by the major urge, drive or interest that dominates that

particular moment of your life. Each action-inaction complex contains a whole universe of interest. After one interest is fulfilled or thwarted, your mind moves on to another; thus you go from one world of interest to another in a continuous sequence. These worlds spring up from the awakening of the latent urges lying buried in the unconscious. (8-9)

* * *

Nitya speaking of the ease of getting information via computer (rather primitively in 1973) brought up a book I'm currently reading: *The Filter Bubble*, by Eli Pariser. The way the internet is currently configured is isolating every one of us in an invisible bubble—more like a prison—reinforcing our current attitudes and blocking us from the stimulation of the unfamiliar. This is a must read book, for anyone who uses the internet in any form. Its relevance here is that we are not just being isolated from others, we are being isolated from our true self, because it's the influence of others that sparks our own creativity. We thrive on outside influence, and that's how serendipity is stimulated. Yet we always have to be careful with maya, because it wants to bind us fast. Computers are maya raised to the power of near infinity. Lately I've been suspicious, due to several factors, that computers are taking over from my ability to freely choose. This book confirms it in shocking detail: the goal is to offer you in advance what they know you will want. It maximizes your buying into the game. Reclaiming your Self is the antidote to whatever delusory tricks maya comes up with, and this is the lollapalooza! Short synopsis: <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/10596103-the-filter-bubble>

Part III

Algorithmic bias bears a strong relation to some of the subtle aspects of ordinary bias that yogis confront every day. Here's an

article from the MIT Technology Review selected by my browser's algorithm, probably in response to me sending out the class notes mentioning Pariser's book, that poses some of the difficulties: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/612876/this-is-how-ai-bias-really-happensand-why-its-so-hard-to-fix/> .

* * *

Dipika wrote about the 4 kinds of mental functioning:

Interestingly... in Vipassana...we say there are 4 kinds of Minds which are constantly being activated every second by coming in contact with stimuli from our 6 sense doors - sight,sound,smell,taste,touch and thoughts.

These are Cognising, Recognising, Sensation and Reaction
Every stimuli goes through this process....when you see,hear,smell,taste,feel or think - your mind goes through being - *Conscious* of the stimuli,
Recognition / Evaluation, whether it is good or bad,
which sends an equivalent *Sensation*
and then you *React* with craving or aversion to the sensation

If we are aware all the time and stop at the 4th Mind - that is Reaction - we can change the habit pattern of our mind.

We all know that stimuli are bombarding us every second and to react to this as we normally do, just completely wears one out. By not reacting, and just observing,we can put ourselves in the neutral arena - we can try and be the Yogi.