

2/26/19

## MOTS Chapter 29: You are Right—Have it Your Own Way

For the man who offers his mind-flowers to worship God  
there is no other work to do;  
pick flowers of the forest; or, if not that,  
by ever-repeating the *maya*-formula *maya* will disappear.

Free translation:

For one who sacrifices the blossoms of the mind to the Supreme Lord, there is no other duty to perform. Otherwise one can do overt action, such as gathering flowers from the forest and engaging in ritualistic propitiation. A third alternative is to be a contemplative who steadily avoids all snares of phenomenal illusion by exercising proper discernment.

Narayana Guru epitomizes three main types of devotee with words pregnant with meaning. The first “resigns” the ego to follow the inner flow of life with minimal interference, the second performs rituals, and the third is philosophically attuned to discerning the miracle of every moment. Nitya reminds us we don’t have to choose a particular path, but can invent our own. They’re only broad categories. In That Alone’s verse 29 he notes: “The Guru has pointed out these three pathways, but in between them are many shades and varieties of search.” Nitya also goes into some detail there about the multi-tiered meaning of Narayana Guru’s words.

Ritualistic convictions have mostly been discarded in the modern world, and the progressive wing of the Gurukula doesn’t particularly encourage or discourage them. In keeping with the tenor of the times it tends to be more philosophically oriented. For all intents and purposes we twenty-first century seekers of truth fall into the other two categories: either we “go with the flow,” or we try to bring the best available ideas to bear in striving to liberate

ourselves from our own ignorance. Both methods can easily be present in the same person, or for that matter all three can. All of them are valuable. Sometimes a simple gesture free of any hint of intention is just perfect.

Deb keyed on the phrase “offering the mind-flowers to the divine,” because it doesn’t suggest we should ignore or destroy the conceptualizations we display, but only that we should loosen the hold of wrong identity we get stuck in. In this view you are able to express great beauty of mind but not be captured by believing you are the doer and owner of it. This is a lot like what the Gita says about giving up anticipating the fruits of your actions.

I agreed, and added that abandoning the sense of agency is facilitated by referring what’s happening to a greater context. Once again this is 180 degrees opposite of the Ayn Rand religion in vogue, where acting purely for yourself is the basis of all good. That toxic belief-system may have become so popular because old modes of religious belief were imposed from without and really were inhibitory in most cases. Freedom is crucial, but selfish freedom is not freedom at all. A better term for it is license, the freedom to get away with murder and mayhem. By including a greater context in our self-interest we not only resolve the dilemma, we open up our creative potentials, psychologically even more than artistically. And within that expansive state there is no need to discourage others from doing what they are doing just because it happens to be different.

Prabu mused that this means there is no such thing as a good mind or a bad mind, and I added that it’s more like we are all fruits on a tree, or better, in a varied orchard, growing at different rates and ripening into our own expression of deliciousness. It makes me wonder why people cling so tenaciously to their separateness, when easing off on it to access the inner bliss, the inner sap, is so satisfying.

Jan affirmed that separation is the natural ego tendency, and you have to unlearn it to get to a more spacious capacity. Deb described the belief being if we don’t hold on to our identity

tenaciously, we as the ego will disappear, and if we don't exist as a separate social person, that's a scary thing.

Well, yes, we're directed from the beginning of our lives to build and defend a persona, yet it still baffles me how even those who are lucky enough to hear about letting go of it have such a hard time. It's not like you really disappear, you just believe you will. I always think of Ram Das' story of his first psychedelic adventure, when one after one his various identities appeared in front of him and then vanished. He was growing more and more frightened, but consoled himself that at least he still had a body. But then he looked down, and there was no body either! Yet even after every bit of him had disappeared, he was still conscious and present, he was still himself, and that realization liberated him on the spot. No matter how good the stories about enlightenment, we prefer to cling to something that doesn't even exist. I think I'm right to wonder about it, anyway, even if you can explain the reasons for it to me.

Jan took a novel approach, relating how her family of origin thrived on competition, and a big part of the family identity was how good you were at besting or defeating others. The atmosphere was always super competitive, and you felt most at home when you had a story to tell about winning over your enemies. Her family vied for more turf than the next guy, even if after they claimed it they could be friendly with the losers, inviting them into "their" space. It's something Jan still contends with, that long-ago learned urge to win against the Other, and she tries to work on it each time it rises up uninvited. She knows it doesn't have to be part of her identity, but it doesn't go away, either.

That's why I hope people don't feel guilty for their initial selfish urges—they are truly built in at the foundation of a typical childhood. It's what you do with them after they arise. Hoodlums act on them, keeping them potent, while the wise have a variety of ways to dissipate their poisonous influence.

The premise that every moment is divine in some sense can help with this. At least you know if you don't see something as a

miracle you have the opportunity to look for what you're missing. Deb's example from an earlier class of people who bothered her initially and then became friends leaps to mind. She even came to believe if she didn't like someone at first, that meant she would soon be fast friends with them. It's a worthy proposition to substitute for the more typical one of being on guard for all the evil lurking everywhere in all the bad people.

That Alone is a wonderful supplemental read to this chapter's brief sketch of types, and I highly recommend it. One paragraph in it succinctly sums up why seekers turn inward:

It is hard for us to remember that we are of a divine origin and our pure state is of the Absolute. Our senses go out and feed on the fruits of enjoyment, and in this way we go away from the center of our beingness. We begin to think the only thing in life is the gratification of our urges. The desire for gratification envelops our whole being like a creeper which is blossoming all the time with some modifications of mind. Somewhere deep down in us is a spark of consciousness which is consistently shining, but it is covered over with the great darkness of ignorance. Our light is feeble, and even what little light there is is colored by our own egoistic tendencies. The Self itself is mistaken for our ego, and we get into various ego trips.

And one more mentions where this confusion leads us:

When we mistake an object as a source of joy, and having lost the inner vision to see the oneness of all, we fight with our own brothers and sisters. Since objects are limited we become competitive, elbowing into the thick of the fray, pushing people out of our path, and becoming totally selfish.

Interestingly, this aspect came out of its own accord in the class. American feminists are currently somewhat at odds along racial lines, and Jan had just come from a lecture on Black Feminism at

the library. She had been pondering how despite common goals, humans often wind up in conflict. It's too easy to project our heart's desire onto a specific set of steps, and then disagreement inevitably blossoms. This has undermined many large-scale, well-intentioned movements. It's one of the reasons sannyasins fight shy of mass involvements and Confucians posit that social change happens from the family outwards. If we make a difference in ourselves first, then our subsequent actions will have at least some chance of having a positive impact.

Deb remembered the widespread disappointment back in the Sixties when those same racial divisions surfaced in the newly energized field of feminism. In fact it turned out that the racial issue was more critical than any other, and it remains an unresolved issue. It doesn't matter that science has erased any basis for race: humans still love to fight over perceived differences, whether imaginary or simply hypothetical. Deb made a plea for melting the sharp lines of division we harbor, knowingly or unknowingly.

Jan was struck by the lecturer's point that in breaking down the master's house, you have to use different tools than it took to build it. ("Master's house" is a reference to the long American history of white masters and black slaves.) Of course what that implies is anyone's guess, but that's okay. Bulldozers and sledgehammers can break apart more than the intended target. Jan being a lawyer thinks in terms of legal tactics more than violent smashing, I imagine.

Jan was dismayed by how even the Black Lives Matter movement, recently started by women, has been taken over and now focuses mostly on men. So it goes. But black men are being executed in America at far higher rates than black women, so there is some justice in it, too. Yet it's surely disheartening for those who make the effort to get something going to then have it wrested from their care with barely a nod of appreciation.

Jan learned how important it is to make space for other people to tell their story: otherwise you are implying that what you

say is more important than they are. Deb lamented how our “habits of dispersal and duality” just keep rising up and separating us. Finally, Karen related it all to empathetic consciousness—saying that’s our test. We have to figure out how to be conscious. She remembered how she grew up in Portland unaware of the conflicts raging in the larger world around race. It seemed to her everything was fine, and there was no obvious hostility in her schools that she knew of. Yet Portland was a highly racist town beneath the surface, and she learned of it later in life.

We talked about this at much greater length, but the key idea is how deeply lodged this type of negative discrimination runs in the human species. We are working on fostering evolution here in our little class, and there is plenty of room for improvement. Waiting for old-fashioned natural selection to get it done would take far too long, and so we are speeding it up a lot, but it’s still not very much. Too much of it is theoretical, I suppose. We have to change our lives in real ways if they are to become progressive evolutionary steps. As Deb put it, making progress is not easy, but it’s beneficent whatever we can manage.

This morning Jan sent a brief account of the lecture she attended along with some links you can find in Part II.

Nitya offers good insights into what the three general pathways imply, especially the first, which is linked to the ferryman in Herman Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. It may help to think of resignation as renunciation, the essence of sannyasa, though most people do not take it that far:

In the Sanskrit language the sense of resignation is called *upeksa*. The attitude of *upeksa* is one of indifference in its negative sense. It has also a positive aspect, that is, reliance on Providence. Providence can take the form of a theologically conceived deity such as Rama or Krishna or Devi or Jesus Christ. A theological abstraction like Allah is not very different when employed for the purpose of adulation or seeking grace. It can be a poetically conceived metaphysical notion such as

the Tao. A metaphorically visualized benevolent Chance that never fails is also not different from a deity when it is accepted as the keystone of one's reliance in everyday life.

In my Gita chapter X commentary I have collected some good ideas about chance, which I'll post in Part II. Just this for now: "Fate, Chance and Luck are terms that indicate the hidden hand of the Absolute in temporal affairs. Because of this arbitrary or inscrutable factor, a wise rishi will never get a swelled head (or a shrunken head) in matters of fame or shame, praise or blame."

Nitya's lumping so many varieties of deities and attitudes into one category can teach us the common basis for the forms of worship that still find manifold ways to fight with each other. No matter your degree of certitude, or the philosophical reality of what you defer to, it boils down to a form of the Absolute. Only when we abandon the absolute basis of our concepts do we go mad and project others as our enemies. Of course they are doing the same to us.... These are mostly religious categories, but again that is fraught with conflict: the looser our attachment to our favorite version the more room for amity and concord:

The old ferryman in Siddhartha is not described as a religious person. He had in him a consistent reliance on the benevolence of chance. To him the river was a symbolic expression of the reality of life. The unfolding of life is as determined as the course of a river, and yet it is as undetermined as the water that is incessantly flowing through the channel.

This image nicely accords plenty of room to both determinism and indeterminism. If we don't get them mixed up, things can go along pretty well with both in resonance.

Faith in or acceptance of a larger purview than the ego's invites what is known as serendipity, named for the island fourth-century Arabian traders called Serendib, now Sri Lanka. Nitya extends his river analogy:

Consciously or unconsciously, some people recognize their boat's toeing the line of the unknown. They don't care what's scheduled for each day, nor do they find it surprising to stumble on the unanticipated. When things occur or events unfold, understanding arises from within like an insight into the meaningful togetherness of what has come to be.

Despite internalized social suppression, when true intuition makes its way through our defenses to appear in waking consciousness, we should welcome it, even if it makes waves. Nitya goes on:

The wise automatically give their assent to it. Like Leibnitz they will agree that it was the best of all possibilities. If by the compulsion of the situation they have to kick or wriggle, that is also understood as an imperative role of the game.

This reminds me of a joke told me by Peter O: An optimist is someone who believes this is the best of all possible worlds, and a pessimist is one who agrees with them. In any case, properly processing our inner certitudes is a rare art form, and it shouldn't be a surprise that we have a lot to learn, especially when there are thousands of us gathered together under one banner or another.

The way of ritual actions is demonstrated by a Tamil saint Prabu learned about in school, though he didn't recall (it was school, after all) the line Nitya so loved about protecting God. Nitya never related this story without a beatific smile and a faraway look:

Among the Tamil saints admired for their devotion to God, there was an ardent lover of Vishnu by the name of Perialwar. In spite of all his love for God, he did not give up his self-reliance. He preferred to row his boat rather than to allow it to float. He believed in making his own schedule rather than accepting another's program, even if such a program was

drawn up by Divine Providence. He was meticulous in carrying out every detail of the daily ritual with which he worshipped Vishnu. One day he became overzealous in his concern for God and said, “My darling God, have no fear. So long as I live, I shall protect you from all evils.”

Using this example Nitya clarifies the unification of poles between God and human, or depth and surface, that is the essence of yoga:

The sense of agency in an ordinary person is relativistic in the sense that he thinks of himself as one of the many actors, and at least when he thinks of God, he is sure to consider God as the Prime Actor. In the present case there is no room for any duality of agency. Perialwar thought of himself as the sole actor. Thus even God had to depend on him for protection. This wholeheartedness marks *sraddha*, the second variety of models among wisdom seekers.

Deb loved the line, “In the present case there is no room for any duality of agency.” Perhaps it should be that in the present there is no room for it, period. Deb felt it was not the world we are giving up, only our purported possession of it. If we cling to possession, we’re keeping the duality, the chasm, between the world and us alive. Yet the world is not ours to renounce, as in Nitya’s wonderful line Paul loved in chapter 14: “I did not renounce this world, because it is not mine to give up.”

Nitya saves the best case for last, with Ramana Maharshi standing for the attitude he most favored, as did Narayana Guru, that the ideal attitude is to make every moment supremely meaningful and endearing:

A wise contemplative seer like Ramana Maharshi complements his indifferent resignation (*upeksa*) and absolute devotion (*sraddha*) with searching questions to gain intuitive insight (*vicara*). In this third type of seeker Realization is not a

singular event. Every moment has its own unique revelation to make. Wisdom lies in one's effortless flow from one intuitive vision of the Real to another beautiful and soul-stirring vision of Truth. The attitude is: mind you, you are right. Whatever route you choose, walk on, and you will also reach where others have reached.

Deb remembered a postcard from Peter O with a quote from Nitya in this same spirit: When you find your path, don't sit in it: walk on it! She's made a copy and I'll try to mail it out separately.

Deb was enthusiastic about how for this third type of seeker every moment has its own soul-stirring vision of truth, yet it doesn't have a specific code of action. That means the unitive state is an active process, not a fixed reality sitting somewhere. There's a continuous interactive unfolding taking place. Jan thought it was more like an *orientation*. Deb riffed off that: it's like walking on a balance beam, and you're always available to bring yourself back into balance when you feel yourself growing exaggerated on one side or the other.

Prabu was inspired to tell us about Ken Wilbur's book he is reading, *Grace and Grit*, about the challenges he had in his marriage. His wife was diagnosed with cancer five days after the wedding, and his career and daily life were severely impacted immediately. He was struggling to regain his balance for years, and it sounds like he never did. Yet what else can you do but try? Running away has an immediate appeal, but if you take the greater context seriously you can't take that option seriously.

We all concurred that life is not a steady state. It requires dynamic balance, fulltime yoga or its equivalent therapy. Getting along with someone who is different from you, married or not, is a high spiritual challenge, nowhere more so than in a truly dedicated relationship, marriage being by far the most popular version at present.

With an impending snowstorm, the class went into our meditation early, and broke off to head for home before travel became dangerous.

## Part II

Jan has been dismayed (who wouldn't be?) at the racial conflicts that have hampered the feminist movement. Simple ideas can be devilishly hard to implement! Here's her report from the lecture she attended right before class, by a Portland State University (where Nitya used to teach) professor:

Last night's talk on Black Feminism was inspiring and educational for me, which was great! The talk covered black activism, the media, the hashtag culture and cultural appropriation. Lots to cover and learn about.

One take away for me was her statement (Professor Shirley Jackson) that African Americans need safe spaces to claim and reclaim themselves in this society. White people need to honor that. Along those lines, I saw this related quote in the first article linked below.

"Instead of calling out others, white allies should center, listen, and learn from those who're being oppressed. You can use your privilege to start the discussion but ensure that there's room for the oppressed to speak out."

Ms. Jackson called out people/allies to do more than just espouse rhetoric to help move toward racial equality.

One issue I really focused on last night was the safety issue and how activists are still so at risk when they speak out and call out oppression or backward thinking. I think that issue is a critical

piece of creating safe space for the thinking and communities to emerge that break down oppression.

That is all I can throw out now....I am still low on the learning curve. But listening and building alliances seems like a good place to be given my values and our Vedantic philosophy. Jan

<https://www.damemagazine.com/2016/06/27/what-it-really-means-be-woke/>

<https://splinternews.com/how-woke-went-from-black-activist-watchword-to-teen-int-1793853989>

<https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/say-african-american-or-black-first-acknowledge-persistence-structural-racism>

\* \* \*

Speaking to Nitya's "A metaphorically visualized benevolent Chance that never fails is also not different from a deity when it is accepted as the keystone of one's reliance in everyday life," my comments on the Gita's X.36 add some nuance to the idea, and just happen to quote Hesse too. Krishna is listing his many absolutist qualities:

36) I am the chance-risk of (irresponsible) gamblers; I am the brilliance of the brilliant people; I am victory; I am decisiveness; I am the goodness of those established in the real.

Chance-risk is a convoluted term for what we often call luck or fate. It is a manifestation of the invisible shape of things, perhaps longed for in advance but only revealed to us mortals by its expression in the present. The luck of gamblers; the roll of the dice; how the yarrow stalks fall to be decoded by the I Ching; who lives and who dies in the bomb blast; patterns of seeming

randomness—these are the topology of the Absolute. Its precise configuration cannot be predicted in advance; we read it as it appears to us in the form of “here” and “now.”

Virtually every commonplace action demonstrates fate to us. For instance, if we could calculate exactly the weight and velocity of the dice, their orientation, the friction between them and the table, taking into account air density and humidity and all other variables, we could exactly predict which dots would come out on top. But we don’t have to busy ourselves all day with pencil and paper, because “chance” or “luck” always gets it perfectly correct every time. After throwing them (which is critically important) all we have to do is read ‘em and weep, as the gamblers say; in other words note their position and cope with how it affects the game. We can register the result “in real time” for every event, and read the writings of fate therein. The only thing that alters such determinism unpredictably—the fly in the ointment, so to speak—is individual choice based on personal preference. In other words, consciousness. And as much as materialists would dearly love to find a way to make human consciousness predictable, it deftly eludes every attempt to kill its randomizing spirit.

The interjection of gambling into the list has puzzled commentators, and legitimately so. Yet *sannyasa*, renunciation, a central theme of the Gita, is itself a kind of gamble. You have to cast yourself at the mercy of the good offices of the invisible. You don’t know where you are going or how you’re going to get there, but you set out nonetheless, hoping for the best. The opposite of this attitude is to hold back and try to channel your life through rational guidelines. The Gita is ever in favor of bravely launching forth to meet your fate. Little or nothing will be learned by hiding from the myriad possibilities life has to offer, whether cloaked in respectability or not. And as carefully as we craft a predictable existence, life has a way of turning the tables right at the moment we begin to feel secure. Upsetting the apple cart appears to be part of its educational program.

Herman Hesse is one Western writer who grasps this idea. In *Demian*, first published in 1919, he offers this:

There was no duty for enlightened people, none, none, except this: to seek themselves, to become certain of themselves, to grope forward along their own path, wherever it might lead.... I had often played with images of the future, I had dreamt of roles that might be meant for me, as a poet, perhaps, or as a prophet, or as a painter, or whatever else. That was all meaningless. I didn't exist to write poetry, to preach sermons, to paint pictures; neither I nor anyone else existed for that purpose. All of that merely happened to a person along the way. Everyone had only one true vocation: to find himself. Let him wind up as a poet or a madman, as a prophet or a criminal – that wasn't his business; in the long run, it was irrelevant. His business was to discover his own destiny, not just any destiny, and to live it out wholly and resolutely within himself.

Anything else was just a half-measure, an attempt to run away, an escape back to the ideal of the masses, conformity, and fear of one's own inwardness. Fearsome and sacred, the new image rose up before me; I had sensed it a hundred times, perhaps I had already enunciated it, but now I was experiencing it for the first time. I was a gamble of Nature, a throw of the dice into an uncertain realm, leading perhaps to something new, perhaps to nothing; and to let this throw from the primordial depths take effect, to feel its will inside myself and adopt it completely as my own will: that alone was my vocation. That alone! (107-8)

Nataraja Guru has added the adjective 'irresponsible', which is only implied in the terms used, but it makes the puzzle even more delicious. If you're responsible, you must not be really gambling. "Responsible behavior" is often the very thing risked in gambling. If your mother would approve, it takes all the fun out of it, not to mention the opportunities for evolutionary leaps. The Guru gives the example of a sailor who leaps into the sea to save a

drowning man as a gambler in the best sense. We can imagine that in risking one's life for a cause there is a heightening of intensity throughout the whole being. In such cases it would seem to be at least semi-responsible gambling. Irresponsible gambling is when you bet the baby's food ration at the corner card game. Perhaps the very irresponsibility of it heightens the excitement, but it would be strange to consider this an absolute value. It's the abandoning of personal control in favor of the "roll of the dice" of Fate that is the essence here. But the sailor who leaps in the sea had better be able to swim!

Anyway, if we think of the gamble as being like a firefighter rushing into a burning building to save a child, then it is easy to link this with the brilliance of brilliant people, whether entertainers, scientists, athletes or what have you. At their best, all are acting at peak levels, with decisiveness, and are experiencing different kinds of victory. The adulation of others is secondary to the exhilaration of the successful outcome, and is often felt as detracting from rather than enhancing the bliss of the pure act itself. Krishna is recommending a life with that kind of expertise brought to bear frequently.

Decisiveness means you are making decisions, deciding for yourself, and thus is the opposite of gambling. Both factors figure in a complete life at different times or in different combinations. A slipshod kind of spirituality leaves everything to chance, leading to degeneration and mediocrity. When outside factors are overwhelming, it is easy to imagine that they are too powerful to combat, so you simply give up and go wherever the winds of fate take you. Surprisingly this is a model of spirituality for many people, even those who haven't been taught such an attitude by their religious preceptors. It even retains the possibility of success, though it more often leads to failure.

Seeming somewhat out of place here is the goodness of those established in the real. It had to be tucked in somewhere, and the other values of this verse also relate to reality in a similar sense. But it stands alone: when one has successfully allied one's psyche

with the Absolute one becomes established in the real. Goodness in the unitive sense is the natural expression of this merger. Further, we don't have to be good to become established in the Absolute, we have to become established in the Absolute in order to be good, at least regarding good unmotivated by any temporal or otherwise limited considerations.