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MOTS Chapter 30: The Dead Matter that has no Mind and the Brilliant Spirit that does not Cerebrate

Inert matter does not know; knowledge has no thought and does not articulate; knowing knowledge to be all, letting go, one's inner state becomes boundless; indeed, thereafter he never suffers confined within a body.

Free translation:

The inert body does not know. It does not cogitate or articulate. One who knows all this to be only variations of knowledge becomes expansive in the transparency of comprehension, and does not thereafter suffer from body identification.

I'm sure you're on the edge of your seats wondering, so corticifugal or corticofugal refers to efferent nerves or their impulses, outbound from the CNS. Nitya posits these as blocking incoming sense impulses during sleep and, presumably, deep meditation. He was always keen to keep abreast of the latest neuroscientific theories, yet he was always careful to keep them within the perspective of practically-oriented wisdom, a factor that science intentionally leaves out. It has always disappointed me that the scientific community never discovered Nitya or his guru, Nataraja, as their ideas sweep away tons of detritus gumming up the works. We seekers are fortunate to not be so constrained by the strict rules of self-limited experimentation and theorization, and can speculate on what these theories mean to our daily lives.

So while the scientist stares at graphs of nerve impulses, Nitya shows us how, regardless of any final accounting, we can detach ourselves from obsessions with misery-causing influences simply by changing our perspective intelligently. What a relief! What a clarion call to sanity!

Nitya jumps ahead of efferent nerve inhibition instantly, referencing the organizing factor that coordinates the buzzing input of the senses into a comprehensible format:

The software of the cortex has no better equipment of knowledge input than the senses unless it is also operated on by the mysterious universal, which alone handles the “know-how” and the “what for” of the thousand and one coordinated functions of the body mechanism.

This doesn't mean there isn't any operational connection with actual tissue; only that this organizing principle has a supremely intelligent apprehension not wholly limited to the tissue. It transcends any limited perspective so it can provide universal symbols that the ego can readily interpret, almost, as visitor Uma put it, like a carrot on a stick, the old apocryphal trick to get donkeys to pull a cart. Egos, like donkeys, are stubborn, and what works for one may not work for the next. Regardless, this operative energy, even while drawing us forward, remains a vast mystery. We can honor it and invite its aid, but it resists definition. It's a genie we can't get into any bottle, though in a way its discovery is like releasing the genie from its bottle, which often proves frightening and awe-inspiring as its truly vast dimensions are revealed to the surprised bottle-toter.

We tend to describe this feature of existence as the inner guide or guru. Nitya likes calling it the inner controller, and highlights its universal quality. If it were solely a personal factor, it would be a subset of the ego, but this has to be something else.

Nitya writes here, “What I mean by universal is a *mysterium tremendum*,” (one of his favorite terms). Arjuna's confrontation with Krishna's absolute nature in the Gita's eleventh chapter is a good example of *mysterium tremendum*. Aldous Huxley elaborates on the idea in *The Doors of Perception*:

The literature of religious experience abounds in references to the pains and terrors overwhelming those who have come, too suddenly, face to face with some manifestation of the *mysterium tremendum*. In theological language, this fear is due to the in-compatibility between man's egotism and the divine purity, between man's self-aggravated separateness and the infinity of God.

Nitya describes the controlling or organizing process clearly:

Take for example the case of smell, say the smell of jasmine. Strange particles fly off from a jasmine flower or a bottle of jasmine essence and enter the nose where they fire the nerves in the olfactory receptors. In no time the individual impacts of all the nerve endings are collated, structured, identified, and labeled by the brain as “smell of jasmine.” Similarly, when scattered beams of light fall onto the retina of the eye they kick up the rods and cones into a flurry of energy, and the total impact will be deciphered by the all-witnessing interpreter and commentator who programs the biocomputer in me as, for instance, “a butterfly fluttering on the petals of a white chrysanthemum.”

The brain as a computer was all the rage at the time of his writing, and I suspect that even though he accepted the premise, Nitya would be glad in the twenty-first century we are going beyond it. Computers do not have a mysterious inner controller, it's all precisely spelled out, and the search for the mysterious “extra” quality is at the cutting edge of machine development. Vast computing power did not magically produce true sentience, much less any *mysterium tremendum*. It remains obviously apparent yet incomprehensible in living beings.

The reference to light reminded Deb of when we went with Prabu to a screening of 2001: A Space Odyssey last year, we talked about how space is full of light but the light is invisible. It

looks utterly dark out there. We don't see light until it encounters an object. So it is the object itself that reveals the "divine" light to us. In a sense we still aren't seeing the light, only a kind of reflection of it. And we forget that there is light within us as well. We are habituated to seeing it on outside objects, but if we close our eyes we can see light within as well.

Nitya supports his description of the organizing talents of the inner controller with Vedantic wisdom thousands of years old, that nonetheless remains elusive:

In the physical world of things there are no "jasmynes" or "butterflies" or "chrysanthemums." All these are arbitrarily coined labels invented by the makers of language to classify and categorize structured ensembles of sensory or neural agitations. The mysterious coordinator who is programming our brains is the one creative genius hiding behind all minds and reading meaning into the disarray in the entropy of the gray matter.

For a philosopher the most intriguing aspect of how our minds function is the universal element. It's relatively simple to account for individual variations, since each of us is infinitely unique beginning from conception and compounding exponentially forever. Yet, above and beyond all external similarities, there is a communality of comprehension, a universal language all of sound mind are naturally bequeathed. When we communicate, very different ideas are shared with a reasonable expectation of them being understood, because the communicators stand on common ground. When we don't get it, we can iron out the misunderstandings with additional outreach, again thanks to this common ground. We have an "orderly cosmos" built out of exploding stars and rapidly oscillating specks impelled by level after level of invisible energies. Somehow our sentient consciousness is able to make sense of this, and don't even begin to imagine your feeble intellect is responsible! Nitya writes:

What is structured out of the randomness of the many particular movements, collisions and groupings of molecules of the brain are experiences in terms of universal images. These universal images are the primal stuff that goes into the structuring of what man calls the orderly cosmos. The constituents of primal stuff such as light waves, sound waves, and gravitational quanta are as blind and free of consciousness as a piece of charcoal or a bit of granite.

We tend to take this extraordinary ability for granted, because most of us function in a similar fashion, so we don't question it. There are some who turn their inner genius to non-quotidian pursuits: the geniuses of art and spirituality and even, sometimes, science.

Nitya's most profound encounter with this was in the person of Ramana Maharshi. He makes mention of it here, but you might be more interested in the compilation of all his English writings about the Maharshi:

http://aranya.me/uploads/3/4/8/6/34868315/nityas_time_with_ramana_maharshi.pdf . This is on Nitya's website:

<http://aranya.me/index.html> .

The value of all this is in knowing that we can take a turn away from the obvious and necessary and go into the depths of our nearly infinite capacity we normally take for granted. The fact that most of us have our basic needs routinely met gives us the freedom to venture beyond the ordinary, at least on a part time basis. Which is fine. Nitya leads up to it in this way:

I know of another state in which the "inner coordinator" pushes the senses and the mind out of the way to assume a solitary role of its own. I was initiated into this strange phenomenon in one of my encounters with Ramana Maharshi.

He then describes a man obviously alert and alive yet absorbed in a non-transactional state:

He was sitting there in complete oblivion.... He was not in a state of hypnosis or catatonia. The Maharshi looked relaxed, fresh, and even vigorous.... From the Maharshi's face the impression I gathered was that he was alone. His aloneness was not an exclusive loneliness, however. It was characterized by an air of universal inclusiveness.

I think most of us feel obligated to be present when others are around us, which is why "alone time" is so important. But the Maharshi was able to live in that detached state no matter the bustle around him. Nitya wrote elsewhere that he never saw another person so exposed to the public gaze at all times.

The most important takeaway is Nitya's characterization of the state in simple terms, which is no simple achievement:

It took a long time for me to learn what causes the oblivion of spiritual absorption. It is a state in which all individual or specific forms melt into a universal formlessness and all names dissolve into the Universal Word, which cannot be spelled, which cannot be named, and which cannot even be articulated.

I advocated for Narayana Guru being a better model for the class than the always intriguing Ramana Maharshi. The Maharshi accomplished a great deal with no outward concern, but Narayana Guru did have plainly visible compassion, and this made him even more effective. He gave himself freely to everyone and everything. Conflicts never threw him off, as he was always on solid ground, but he added humor and loose interactions to his commanding presence. We had just received several copies of Vinaya Chaitanya's new book: *The Unitive Life: Conversations with & Selected Works of Narayana Guru*, a book I contributed a final edit on. Narayana Guru's sense of humor stands out, as well as his pithy quips that gently redirected people's attitudes in more constructive ways. It's a gem for those of us who only knew his

serious side. We have two loaner copies, both of them already out, plus one you can read here.

Narayana Guru is the nonpareil example of a dynamic genius working effectively to transform his environment employing enlightened methods. He showed how we are at our best in relating to situations when we have a measure of detachment. We lose our cool and become less effective when we are upset by a conflict. Lately there is an explosion of madness globally, so we are challenged every minute to not be drawn in, especially where we can have no impact. And this is not an excuse to refrain from participation. Lend a hand, and this includes your calm state of wisdom painstakingly achieved.

Part II has a bit about our discussion of witnessing to stay effective, around an excellent article from the newspaper. Its author has come to the same conclusion that retaining your balance and refraining from being maddened by too much information is essential to being effective. The word 'indifference' used there and elsewhere bugs Deb no end, but she saw what it means in the best sense, of not operating on the basis of our anger or outrage, for instance. She affirmed that if you are attached to a narrowly defined attitude, that's where angst comes in. You have to be grounded in universal love so you won't be torn apart by life's tragedies. She reiterated that people like Narayana Guru and Ramana Maharshi are disengaged while not being fixated on a particular idea or object. If you are fixated you are unable to sink deeper into the universal.

Susan seconded the value of neutrality, and mentioned how she went to a political rally with us and was surprised that we were there perfectly naturally as witnesses, and were not caught up in the hullabaloo. We cared very much, but didn't have to proclaim it loudly.

Deb gave the example of a book she recently finished on the French Troubadours of the Middle Ages. The Cathars of Southern France were lovers of art and in favor of interpersonal love, yet they hated the body, believing it weighed them down from

ascending to heaven. Some even starved themselves or committed suicide to rid themselves of the weight. Deb felt they were missing the crucial point that you're born into this gorgeous world so you can experience its glories. Don't run away! Participate, and enjoy!

Struck by the Cathars' odd mixture of beliefs, Paul dryly commented that a lot depends on your definition of love.... He sees that for many people it's about possession — if I don't get what I want then I don't want you. The love of our wise philosophers is given without expectation or attachment. Recently he was moved by a line from a movie, where one guy was giving relational advice to another: the one that cares less retains more power. It's rather stark, yet from what we've learned about centering it can be salvaged. Paul agreed that if we get attached to something, it makes it hard to get to true love based on freedom. Deb rephrased it as you can love more fully if you don't let yourself get overwhelmed by one specific aspect.

I noted how we are manipulated by our attachments, and we are often willing victims of the manipulation because we care so much about our likes and dislikes. Our computers are filled with willful manipulations, both honorable and dishonorable.

Narayana Guru's verse presents a strict dichotomy between inanimate and animate, but Nitya is also highlighting the territory between them, where the accuracy of knowledge and what it's related to is a central factor. How we define things affects our peace of mind and our ability to thrive. The more we identify with nothing but the physical the more our options are restrained.

I reminded the class of the spectrum or continuum at the core of this philosophy, ranging from abject necessity at one pole to perfect freedom at the other. Most of our behavior lies in between these extremes, but we can slide one way or the other based on outside and inside pressures and predilections. In other words, how we think and conceive moves us one way or another on the continuum, toward or away from freedom. Idolizing one extreme or the other tends to freeze our position. It doesn't help us grow. Instead, in integrating those twin aspects we achieve the inner

freedom we crave without depending on any particular outward circumstances.

Deb concurred that simply knowing this starts to alter our world. It's no longer, I have to be this, I have to change that. We can just relax into it. We like to think that if we make some spiritual renunciation, we are being really special. Yet if, without any announcement, without any words, we simply sit in that place, that's one of the greatest commitments we can make.

Jan agreed. In her life, the periods of solitude and reflection have allowed her to sink into that deeper place, to reorient, and find higher values again.

Paul remained a bit frustrated with our perhaps overly glib attitude about these difficult challenges. The glibness was not intentional—all us “oldsters” know there is nothing easy in this. Paul specifically complained how hard it is for us to let go of what our ego decides it needs, and it is, it is! Paul quoted Nitya's favored line from chapter 14, how he didn't renounce the world because it isn't his to give up. Do you see how it is pre-renounced in that statement? That's part of what makes it so clever. To renounce something you have to first have claimed it. But why shouldn't we skip the whole stupid process?

As an example of unitive activity, I retold the famous story of Narayana Guru addressing a large crowd in Tellicherry (now Thalassery). One of his main themes was always humans are one caste, so the caste system had to go. There was a disturbance in the back of the crowd, and the Guru called out what's the matter? Angry voices shouted back that an outcaste boy was trying to come to the talk, and they were driving him away. The Guru told them, bring him here. Perhaps they imagined he would punish the miscreant. The Guru had a chair brought, and seated the boy in it, right next to him, and then went on his lecture as if nothing had happened. He didn't have to argue with anyone, he didn't have to call the police, but he made a lasting impression in just about the most resistive aspect of human nature. I believe the boy became a

follower from that day, traveling around with the Guru, a continuing lesson to the unconverted.

Speaking of caste, here's one of the last stories in Vinaya's new book:

151. The Guru was exempted from appearing in courts of law by the order of the Travancore state government, and a (court-appointed) commission would come to record the Guru's statements. Once the commission was questioning the Guru about his age, caste, etc. The Guru answered: *Our caste is human*. The commission again requested caste details with humility and the Guru insisted: *We are human in caste* and the commission recorded this as such.

Nitya winds up with a lovely poetic meditation on the interplay of light and darkness:

Both absolute consciousness and absolute unconsciousness share the same qualities of insensitivity and inarticulation. A beam of light, which paradoxically is darker than the unconscious due to being devoid of any sensitivity or consciousness, and which can be classified for that reason with a crude stone lying buried in the dark, can symbolize the world of dead matter that has no mind. Its counterpart is the self-luminous spirit that is too universal and all-embracing to cerebrated or articulate by itself, except when its self-luminous effulgence is caught in the hinterland of matter engulfed in the ocean of Spirit; just as in the case of the eye that sees the light, but the light does not see either the object it illuminates or the eye which is solely dependent on it. In this coming together of spirit and matter in the experience of sight, the eye appreciates light as its greatest benefactor, and in turn the light places an encomium on the eye as the true window of the soul of the Universe.

Earlier, Eugene contributed a response to this:

The concept of energy not knowing itself is superbly profound for me. This. Is. Love. I am almost convinced that the intersection of being, such as light meeting the eye, is creation. Love creates something that was not there before. Does Love know itself?

Nitya closes with an affirmation of the value of looking beyond the superficial presentation of our senses:

He who sees everything as a tapestry of form and meaning that is woven on the warp and woof of matter and spirit is no longer tyrannized by the grotesqueness of any form or the tragic connotation of any meaning. Such a blessed soul will always see all specific forms as ripples on the infinite ocean of the formless and all meanings as a commentary of the one inexhaustible Word.

Just before our closing meditation I read out the end of That Alone, chapter 30, where Nitya gives a personal account of being “no longer tyrannized” by the pains and fears we add to our experience. I’ve clipped that bit into Part II, and I recommend the whole chapter as of inestimable value.

Part II

Sunday’s NY Times (Mar 10, 2019) included an excellent article, *The Industrial Revolution of Shame*, by Salvatore Scibona, about online outrage: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/09/opinion/sunday/internet-shaming.html>. It’s about nuances of judging, and how social media has enabled an explosion of judgmentalism that harms all participants, not just the victims. A friend in one of the Gita classes I’m teaching wrote how she gets drawn into her favorite social

media site and argues with all the things written there. Thanks to Krishna's guidance, she recently realized, "I am literally staring at an inanimate object and having a moral high point." Scibona writes:

Judgment serves a crucial end, in both public and private life. Abolition, women's suffrage, civil rights, all required many people to assert their judgment that something was wrong and had to change. Yet technology has so multiplied the outrages confronting us that they crowd out our ability to discuss much else. Previously remote controversies now feel so much a part of our lives as to demand that we do something about all of them.

The bit I read out, after several writers were cited:

All three have the skill of deep watching. When they describe in detail a conflict that cries out for us to take a side but hold back from explicitly taking a side themselves, they are not overlooking the moral stakes. They are compelling a moral response from us that's more challenging than approval or disapproval. Under the influence of their restraint, our conscience is engaged in a new way, as a *witness*.

Scibona cites the Oxford English dictionary on 'witness', which includes an older definition in tune with our predilections: "knowledge, understanding, wisdom." He also demonstrates how adding a prejudicial word to a literary description makes "the crisis turn into a quaint sermon with no power to hit you where you live." He goes on to support the thesis that "to love and remain indifferent"—to be a detached witness—is a far more effective attitude than ceaseless condemnation.

I added that we are already morally developed, so there is no need for us to prove our correctness—that's a holdover from childhood, when you could get in trouble if you didn't defend

yourself. The thought that you may well be more effective by withholding from “taking the bait,” as Scibona describes it, can help us to establish the kind of witnessing that does contribute knowledge, understanding, and on a good day, wisdom.

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Here’s the excerpt from That Alone, the end of verse 30:

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.

Part III

You can send responses any time. This just came from Susan:

I have been thinking this morning about the wonderful verse and conversation last night. There are many things I appreciated (re)learning in this verse, but two specifically. One is a way to think about the pain of the world, both physical and mental — that this pain is unattached, unrelated to the greater consciousness living in us and through us. The other thing is the idea that we are a kind of vessel. We are a necessary vessel — that idea of being a co-creator with the Absolute. So that without the material world, without each of us, there would be nothing to contain/reflect/attest to that eternal light, that ocean of consciousness.

Both absolute consciousness and absolute unconsciousness share the same qualities of insensitivity and inarticulation. A beam of light, which paradoxically is darker than the unconscious due to being devoid of any sensitivity or consciousness, and which can be classified for that reason with a crude stone lying buried in the dark, can symbolize the world of dead matter that has no mind. Its counterpart is the self-luminous spirit that is too universal and all-embracing to cerebrated or articulate by itself, except when its self-luminous effulgence is caught in the hinterland of matter engulfed in the ocean of Spirit; just as in the case of the eye that sees the light, but the light does not see either the object it illuminates or the eye which is solely dependent on it. In this coming together of spirit and matter in the experience of sight, the eye appreciates light as its greatest benefactor, and in turn the light places an encomium on the eye as the true window of the soul of the Universe. (102)

Nitya in Atmo 30 says you are released. Love that. I relaxed as soon as I heard you read it. The thing is to let go of our fixations on things — try to let go of worries and about whether we are liked or disliked. Will this horrible thing happen? Will I do this the right way? Did I forget something (again!)? It always helps me to go

outside when I am starting to worry or fixate. Always easiest to see the ocean of consciousness when I am in nature. Trees don't worry about whether the other trees like them or not. Birds don't think about climate change and politics, though they are so affected by those things.