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## MOTS Chapter 31 & 32: An Inferential Feedback Can Come Only from a Storage of Information

Without prior experience there is no inference;  
this is not previously perceived with the eye;  
therefore, know that the existence of that in which all qualities  
inhere is not known by inference.

What is known is not that in which all qualities inhere, only the  
qualities;  
as this, in which all qualities are said to inhere, is not visible;  
earth and all else do not exist;  
remember that there is only a form in knowledge which supports.

Free translation:

Without prior experience one cannot make inferences. As the Self is not a perceptible factor, one cannot infer the existence of any principle postulated as *dharmi*, the basis of attributes.

What we know is only the attributes and not their source. As universal abstractions cannot be perceived, it is incorrect to say that earth and all such are factual realities. They are only compositions of modes.

It's high time in our *Meditations on the Self* study to start peeling away our pretensions, or perhaps I should say getting serious about the process. Mostly we humans console ourselves with nice stories about what's going on, as a way to counteract the harsher, more popular fairytales that still abound, and that's fine as far as it goes. It's just that we shouldn't somehow imagine we are automatically uncovering truth when we do no more than counteract falsehood. Only a fully neutral perspective "reveals the Absolute," as Nataraja Guru words it.

Naturally, then, Nitya wants to start by calling very basic assumptions into question. Apparently he was giving a public lecture that day, a natural enough activity in that hotbed of Narayana Guru enthusiasts, Alleppey, a port on the Kerala inland waterways:

I came here to give a talk on Self-realization.  
Do I know what the Self is? What does realization mean?

In popular spirituality, ‘Self-realization’ is the king of clichés, a tantalizing, unreachable goal like the lost city of El Dorado to the Spanish conquistadors. Obviously only “someone else” could ever become realized, and then they would become rich in wisdom, the all-seeing and all-knowing object of universal admiration.

Such a dreamy image is bound to inspire romantic fantasies, along with reinforcing the certitude that we have no claim and never will to the territory. Which at least is preferable to claiming a place that cannot be claimed, because it isn’t a place at all.

Narayana Guru is making the simple point that all our thinking is built up from our experiences—of course!—but that the Absolute is not accessible in that way. No set of definitions will pin it down. Like the mathematical zero, it can only be defined by what it isn’t: the absence of everything else, or its hypothetical location at the center of every continuum.

So how would you make that real?

Curiously, that’s what all beings are doing every moment, making the Self real. It’s a wholly natural phenomenon, probably made more elegant the less we tamper with the process. We are all busy turning potentials into actualities, mostly unintentionally.

Nitya epitomizes this process:

Something which is only an idea in the mind is not actual. It is not real. It is only an idea. Actualizing an idea means making it real.

He is speaking here of our intentional (horizontal) realizations, but the class mused on how we also realize the Self in our evolutionary (vertical) development. The baby is impelled to turn into a child by not only what it learns from its environment, but also at the behest of an inner unfolding. This means that every entity is a realization of the Self or atman.

This simple idea liberates a person from hatred, judgmentalism, grandiose ego-projections, and so on. If you want to see what the Absolute can turn into, it's in everything. Just don't imagine what you see is the Unmanifest: it's what the Unmanifest is converted into as it creates universes.

When all those impediments are subtracted, we are left with not only direct experience but inferences and analogies, which are accepted in Vedanta as the best anyone can do by way of description, so long as we remember the map is only a partial representation of the territory. Nitya reminds us:

Self is the word in English which corresponds to atman in Sanskrit. When I hear the word Self, it connotes a meaning in my mind. I use the same conceptual information to understand the word atman. The semantic validity of a term like atman or Self is no assurance that I have realized the idea implied in the connotation. Maybe I'm only drawing inferences.

No maybe about it! The place where humans veer into insane behavior is when they insist that the partial version they are partial to is the only right one, and all others are diabolical. Sound familiar?

Deb started us off by noting the endless forms we encounter, form upon form; even the room we're in now is a collection of forms. All of us are injecting our values into those forms. It's not that this is a 'charming sock' or 'comfortable chair', we supply those values that we see in the forms based on well-established opinions. Our job is to realize that the essence is formless and therefore is not describable in those otherwise very useful words.

While this is certainly true, I added that without some notion of an Absolute value to serve as a parameter, we might go through our whole life in ignorance of the hub on which the world disc spins. The Absolute principle is something that you can't directly perceive, only perceive through intuitive opening up, but it has to be there. The key is that without it the universe dissolves in the imagination into a composite of disparate elements without any meaning, which is an open door to disaster. Look around.

Having discarded the previous layers of religious beliefs, the world has not yet substituted a widely accepted replacement. This is likely because it has to be neutral to work, and humans are drawn to everything *but* neutrality. Any supreme principle loses its value when it's made into a specific expression, leading to puerile conflicts. As soon as you nail it down you kill the spirit, since no fixed form can act as the neutral hub of even a very small universe.

Paradoxically, the more we want to get things exactly right, the farther from our inner flow we go. We lose contact with precisely what we want to pinpoint. Nitya gives a lovely example from one of his college classes, with a prompt that elicited a bouquet of culturally-based responses:

Once I had to teach the psychological intricacies implied in the act of drawing an inference. Before the class began I wrote on the board, "He gave his last kiss and shed his tears unconsolated." I asked the students to guess who was kissed and who kissed, why the person who kissed shed his tears, and why he was unconsolated.

You can read the creative responses his students gave in the text, which are quite touching. This section got me to wondering if an earlier reading had unconsciously nudged me to come up with the venerable Apple Experiment I used for the 2004 Peace class I taught. It's a fun parallel read:

<http://scotteitsworth.tripod.com/id39.html>.

In both instances, every stimulus sets off a cascade of associations, which is why I say in the essay, “The actual source of our thoughts is hardly encountered at all after our first few years of life.” Our brains are compulsive association-makers, which generates endless inferences. Nitya puts it this way:

Even when we listen to absolutely novel and unique experiences, our mind is busy recalling many mental images which can be pressed into service to give a conceptual base to the mental composition of an apparently unique ensemble or gestalt.

In other words any uniqueness is lost by our Procrustean reduction of experience into the well-made bed of our expectations. We can get along quite happily without newness, but can newness get along without us? Are we missing anything?

Bill continues to be excited about his Patanjali class online, feeling that he’s getting a whole new take on the yoga sutras this time, having a deeper look at that process, especially the inferential part. He talked about how Nitya’s Letter 12 in the Appendix was similar to the present chapter, about how we infer something based on our memory and experience, which then puts a name and form on it. To Nitya, the job of a yogi is not to fantasize *or* actualize, but to *realize* the true nature of the self. For this the yogi has to be aware of how that is influencing how he perceives his world. It means you can have an experience where you are the doer and the seer, yet you don’t get caught up by what Patanjali calls your mental modifications, *citta vritti*.

Deb added the caveat that this doesn’t mean fantasizing about some other world and turning away from this one. The place to work on this is right here. When you withdraw it’s not as if you’re locking yourself in a closet. You are more present for the world when you don’t have all those projections diverting your awareness. There is immense brilliance and vivacity present in every situation, if we only attune to it.

Bill has been previously focused on simply shutting out input so he can sit peacefully, but has come to the realization that if we don't have previous experiences we can't have a reaction to anything. So we should have them. This led us to ponder the role of early learning in shaping our adult awareness, the forms we perceive in relationships and social institutions. Jan mused how, although we're aiming to sink into unformed consciousness, it's impossible to speak about pure consciousness directly. We need to return to forms and names to relate our experiences. So both aspects are crucial to a healthy outlook.

That's right—we aren't supposed to do away with our own form, only to realize its limitations so we can work effectively with them. We tend to think we're seeing reality as it is, but unless we've examined the ways we personalize it, the way the mirror is distorted, we won't actually be seeing clearly. I've been getting ready for my 50<sup>th</sup> high school reunion, flashing back on my early life and the things I believed back then that I no longer do, yet seeing how their influence is still hanging around. It made me who I am in so many ways. Reliving memories is not always empty nostalgia, it can be a chance to straighten some of the bent strands, and it's quite vivid. My memories are *me*, not an abstraction.

Deb has been quoting poet Gary Snyder recently, about when he was asked on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday how he felt about the huge load of memories he must be carrying (60 used to seem old to some folks). He responded, "It's great—there's so much *material* to work with!" So perfect: our memories and experiences are our true wealth, and they make us who we are, for better or *way* better. Or for worse. We aren't trying to discard it all to sit in perfect emptiness. Even the greatest saints and yogis have unique personalities. There are no cardboard cutouts in realization, no generic wizards. It's just they aren't overly constrained by their negative proclivities. They've broken out of their limitations to a substantial degree.

Nitya mentions the “easy recall” of memories, and what he’s referring to is the automatic association process, not the struggling to remember details that our conscious mind undergoes:

All inferences are based on partial perceptions or mental images that can be easily recalled. Nothing can be revealed that has not already been experienced. Since nobody remembers ever having experienced the Absolute, it goes without saying that it can never be inferred.

Deb was not sure about the phrase, “All inferences are based on partial perceptions.” How can we ever have new experiences if that’s true? She protested that ever since the age of two she has been having new experiences. The Vedantic point is that while we do have new experiences all the time, we very quickly convert them to comfortable definitions based on previous experiences, and the older we get, the bigger the load. And all those experiences were only partly understood when they happened. In a sense the point of yoga is to allow for new experiences by inhibiting the memory linking process, but we seldom can. It’s automatic. Yogic restraints are meant to stop our blocking the ever-new joy flooding in at all times with our lead blanket of defenses and presumptions. Bill was really onto this too, noting how we use old memories to reconfigure something new, but it’s still kept within the circle of memory and reprocessing.

I think it’s very fortunate that our unfolding over time is not totally disrupted by the inhibitions of our partially-realized thought forms. I can see now how the stories I told myself in childhood were way off, but they served well enough to keep me searching for more clarity. Great teachers on the way have helped me upgrade my stories and toss out the worst of them. Despite our faulty stories, our vertical elaboration keeps going, not unlike a rose bush, and subject to similar environmental influences: pruning, watering, fertilizing, and so on, eventually producing flowers and fruit and seeds. We may be filled with stupid notions,

but the *élan vital* keeps evolving despite our worst efforts. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who should be grateful to Fate for not following my passionate directives!

So yes, we make a story out of everything, and it likely bears a nodding resemblance to what's actually happening. We can use better stories and be happier, or worse ones and be less happy. You can see that at work everywhere. Another key reason for this study is to upgrade our stories intelligently, not because we're ever going to be finally "right," but because we'll be "better off." Any time we substitute a partial story for direct experience, the result undermines its dynamism.

Susan gave a couple of fine examples. In grappling with her road rage she now uses upgraded stories that help her relax, and she reported a 60% success rate. Her earlier stories were bitter denunciations of the road hogs, but now she makes up an excuse for them and forgets about them. She has also been caring for some young children, and seeing how their parents unconsciously influence them without the slightest awareness of doing so. Even if she points something out they still don't get it. Of course there are conscious influences also, but kids read their parent's unconscious as clearly as a book. These are highly intelligent people, but we all can be fooled with consummate ease by our egos, since they know just how to do it.

While we're sorting out details of the chapter, you might have noticed how Nitya lays the groundwork for his later coinage of the term *imperience* as a complement to experience, honored in all Nancy Y's online lessons with the final line "Share your experiences and imperiences." Experiences always look outwards, whereas im-periences look inwards, and both are essential, as is their integration:

The word 'experience' literally means coming into an encounter with a person, thing or event which is external to the central reference of the consciousness that is subjectively recognized as 'I'. Thus an experience has to be necessarily of



the form of relating the self or the I-consciousness to something that can be perceived or conceived.

Without the imperience to minimize the typical insistence on perception and conception—the horizontal positive and negative respectively—we inevitably lose touch with our dharma, our authentic inner landscape. We impose inferential hypotheses onto reality and live in them instead. Some egos even employ a sly strategy of claiming to find reality within their familiar inferential turf in order to dominate the gullible. That may be business as usual, but the Gurukula gurus are thoroughly honest about upholding authenticity, because it really does heal and promote inner progress. Nitya is always passionate about this, because our egos are expert at tuning it out, and he knew he had a chance to get us to wake up whenever he was addressing us:

It is absolutely futile to look for the Absolute in the world of phenomenal perception and conceptual inference. There is no doubt that it is next to impossible for the mind to operate without the aid of sense perceptions and the compositions of mental conceptions. Yet there is no alternative for Self-realization other than turning the mind away from these aids which vivify consciousness and segregate one part from another.

The fifth darsana of Darsanamala, the Bhana Darsana, should be fresh enough for many of you, as we covered it in our class just two years ago. Nitya sums it up here because it details the process that mesmerizes us into a fixation with horizontal values. First we accept a belief and then we project it onto the surroundings:

It is inevitable that the value of a thing should be first felt within the subject, and almost simultaneously projected onto the object.

A little bit slower and we might catch ourselves projecting, but it takes place as an oscillation at something like 60 cycles per second, so it appears seamless to our senses. Solid. It would actually be quite irritating to notice the oscillation all the time, so it's good it's so well executed by our inner programmer, but a philosopher needs to know that, while it's true that what you see is what you get, nevertheless what you get is way less than it could be. A yogi does not want to be a docile accepter of dictated realities, but rather a discoverer and implementer of their own truths.

Nitya succinctly describes the *bhava vritti*:

In the recognition of an object there occurs a high-frequency oscillation of consciousness between the subjective pole, recognized as the 'I' factor, and the objective pole located either outside the body or else outside the periphery of the subject if the object of interest is a sensation or item within one's own body or even within one's mind. This oscillation of consciousness assuming a certain form is called the *bhava vritti*. The transformation of consciousness into specific forms is automatically colored with an affectivity, which brings pleasure, displeasure or indifference according to the earlier conditionings of the mind.

So in summing up, we must not get trapped by our favorite inferences, our working hypotheses that don't always work very well. We cannot access the Beyond via the Known. As Nitya puts it, "What is beyond is not known to the mind. It is realized only when the mind is reabsorbed into pure consciousness."

Nitya often praised the miracle that despite our uniqueness and the fact that everyone has a personal take on reality, we are able to communicate. We understand each other, and can iron out our misunderstandings if we have good will. Decoding another person's attitude is a fascinating puzzle that yields enhanced communication. Susan has been really feeling this lately, and

talked about despite how we all infer in different ways, it has taken her a long time to realize that everyone doesn't think like she does. She keeps relearning this, and thinks it's especially hard if you don't know about or aren't seeking the river that unites us all. But if you do, your tolerance and compassion level goes way up.

Moni made a nice summary of the teaching for us: the question is what is realization, what is self? Everything we say is in the form of previous experiences transmitted through the mind. We can only realize the Absolute, we can't actualize it. For that we have to go to a deeper place where there is no name and form. But we should be careful: as soon as we experience anything we put a name and form on it, and then we are limiting it.

This inspired Bill to quote Nitya saying that what's beyond is not known to the mind because the mind is the mechanism of putting the form on. You can't grasp the Absolute with the normal tools we use to define our world. The only way to do that is to have new way of seeing, of "turning the mind away from these aids which vivify consciousness and segregate one part from another."

We closed with a meditation to settle the *citta vritti*, the mental modifications. As Deb paraphrased it earlier, there is an underground river streaming within the world without any form, and to really understand things we need to sink into it. The instruction was to sit very still and see if we can apprehend the inner flow without adding any definition: to stop trying to identify it and just sit in it. The preparation afforded by the class discussion really opened us to a peaceful moment outside the need to conceptualize. Aum.

## Part II

Deb contributed a science article that presents recent thoughts on metaphoric thinking and its limitations:

<https://getpocket.com/explore/item/the-empty-brain>

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We didn't talk about this part of the chapter, but it's fascinating, because of what it can teach us about our own projections:

From the individually cognizable properties and qualities we fashion generalized notions, such as a crowd of people, a fleet of ships, a flock of sheep, a forest of trees, etc. Except in the particular these general notions have no *locus standi*, nowhere to exist. That was one of the reasons why Aristotle rejected the Platonic archetypes.

This implies that every time we generalize, we are adding our own prejudices to whatever simple notion we might have started with. How often do we talk about humans this or humans that? Have we ever met anyone who matches those broad brushstrokes?

Generalizing may have some value in keeping us safe, but we should always remember how partial it is. How untrue it is. I see plenty of people getting really upset and furious over their assumptions, often delivered by sinister propagandists, abstract images that in Thomas Merton's immortal words "live, and speak, and smile, and dance, and allure us and lead us off to kill."

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Deb read out a poem from M.S. Merwin, the towering poet who just died, from back when he still used punctuation. We've been rereading some of his amazing output, and this one not only struck her as a close match for the chapter, but our class discussion added a significant amount to what we all got out of it:

The Archaic Maker

The archaic maker is of course naive. If a man he listens. If a

woman she listens. A child is listening. A train passes like an underground river. It enters a story.

The river cannot come back. The story goes on. It uses some form of representation. It does not really need much by way of gadgets, apart from words, singing, dancing, making pictures and objects that resemble living shapes. Things of its own devising.

The deafening river carries parents, children, entire families waking and sleeping homeward.

The story passes stone farms on green hillsides at the mouths of valleys running up into forests, full of summer and unheard water.

In the story it is already tomorrow. A time of memories incorrect but powerful. Outside the window is the next of everything.

One of each.

But here is ancient today

itself

the air the living air

the still water

W.S. Merwin, Rain in the Trees