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MOTS Chapter 34:

Mounted on the rotating wheels of a chariot which have half-moments
and such for spokes,
the world rolls on;
know this to be the beginningless divine sport
that is ever going on in knowledge.

Free translation:

This is going on through beginningless time, this divine sport of
the world, as if we are mounted on a chariot of becoming having
for the spokes of its endlessly rotating wheels the infinite
progression of milliseconds.

All those who enter massage therapist Karen's clinic are
greeted with the posted message:

Today is a gift. That's why it's called the present.

What a nice way to be welcomed!

Just as presents are given on birthdays, the present implies
time, specifically celebrated in the here and now of full
involvement. Presence in the present is also one of the restorative
aspects of a massage, of being touched with care and viscerally
reminded you aren't anywhere else. Touch draws you into the
present, allowing you to slough off the tensions that build up
whenever we drift into the past or the future and lose touch with
the glories that surround us.

No philosophy is complete without addressing time, and this
was our class's moment, our OM-ment. Nitya's thoughts,
undoubtedly influenced by Henri Bergson's speculation on
duration delivered via Nataraja Guru and his *Integrated Science of*

the Absolute, led us into a rarified meditation on this eternally intriguing Nothing that is undeniably Something.

As a companion read, Wikipedia has a helpful (and short!) entry on duration:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duration_\(philosophy\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duration_(philosophy)). Bergson was a highly respected philosopher when Nataraja Guru was in France and Switzerland, and significantly influenced his thinking. Bergson presented time's duration as resembling our intuitions regarding the Vedantic Absolute or *brahman*. To meditate on one is to meditate on the other. In case anyone doubts this, Krishna boldly proclaims he is Time in his most important teaching, the Bhagavad Gita.

Nitya's meditation here first takes cognizance of the varied content of the present:

What do I mean by the present? When did it begin? When will the present give way to the future? I don't see any abstraction of the present from the content of my immediate consciousness, which I inwardly measure in terms of units of gestalts. A gestalt can be an insignificant moment of boredom, a half-lived "pain-pleasure hit" coming from within or without, or a prolonged living configuration which has within it many interesting and varying patterns.

Bill agreed that defining the present is a mysterious proposition, wondering where does the past leave off and when does the future kick in? How slim is the space between them? They do seem to overlap. Maybe the present is the instant we recognize something.

Like Karen, Scotty does body work, and he told us how it keeps him present. He uses some techniques to consciously become more attuned to his performance. The idea is that as you lay your hands on another body, you experience leaning in, holding, and releasing. Lean, hold, release. He visualizes the leaning in is into the future, holding is the present, and the release is moving back into the past, and by the time you're releasing

you're moving on to the next cycle. Also, as he paints, he's always leaning, holding, releasing with his tools— it helps to keep him present there also. He added that in order for the Absolute to experience itself, it has to divide up matter and time. I guess since we think of them as two separate things, it must be true.

Karen agreed with me after class that the very act of touching someone calls you irresistibly to the present.

Paul admitted “he should probably wait for the movie,” the simplified version of this chapter. Time is a famous brain-breaker. Yet how can we resist? It's everywhere. Doesn't matter that we haven't a clue what it is. Paul asserted that the present is clearly more real to us than the Infinite, even if it does happen to be an imposition we project onto the infinite so we can make sense of it. We do this because it is much easier for us to pick out a part that is separate and outside of that unity.

We chewed on gestalts for a while, as we tend to vagueness about them. Another Gurukula cliché. Gestalt is a very Vedantic notion, that the mind has a holistic grasp of situations and doesn't simply build its impressions out of details of the moment. Of the present. It's hard to believe there would be any doubt about this, but some scientists are so attuned to the details that they become myopic. Ignoring forests to fixate on trees is a big factor in how and why humans have degraded the planet.

Jan wondered if gestalt implied a resolution of greater understanding, which ideally it does, but usually doesn't. Mostly we are unaware of how much manipulation we add to our perceptions, so you have to want greater understanding in order to get it. Bill offered a nice, simple definition that a gestalt was an experience that has its own presence to it. It is an amalgam of lots of experiences within us. Deb called it a unit of awareness.

In this light, Prabu mentioned that time is not the linear flow that we think it is. There is always a subjective factor and objective stand interlaced. Deb added that within a gestalt we can go back in time in recall and forward in projection. I think Nitya is also implying that the rotation of gestalts, the replacement of one with

another, is a component of subjective time. For Moni, multiple gestalts also come together and flash across her mind simultaneously.

In the nick of time, Jan shared a funny aspect of gestalt. A *déjà vu* is an awareness of the inner content that you feel but don't quite consciously recall. She had that feeling of familiarity when she went to a new hot tub place, but she was certain she had never been there before. As she stepped into the tub, she saw its special name: *Déjà Vu*. When you think of it, a hot bath provides a familiar touch that your skin probably doesn't need to locate in space.

I shared another funny *déjà vu* story, which I'll add to Part II. Any analysis of time is bound to start with an instant and grow from there. Nitya writes:

This brings me to the next question: how big or broad is the present? Is the present only as small as a pinpoint or big enough to sit comfortably on, like a saddle? Narayana Guru describes it as similar to a snap of the fingers. What does he mean by that?

His description is not to be taken literally. The snapping of the fingers is a very eloquent analogy of an experience in consciousness. It implies a cause and effect, a volitional direction of energy, an application of effort, a conscious witnessing of an event and its termination, and the irreversibility of what has already taken place. While it is true that the snapping of fingers takes less than a second, the living time that is punctuated by a change of the gestalt can be prolonged for a long stretch of duration.

To a yogi even an instantaneous snap has many parts!

Those of us alive during the Beat era may recall learning to snap our fingers, because it was the new "hip" way to applaud a performance, especially poetry or bongo drumming. We kids would work at it whenever we got the chance: it takes time to get a

finger snap loud enough. A roomful of snaps sounds pretty cool, and is better than hand clapping in some circumstances. You can bone up on the value of snapping with this article:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/22/fashion/snapping-new-clapping.html>. I believe it was Time Magazine who began calling the Beats ‘beatniks’, after the Russians launched Sputnik, in case you needed to know. It began as a derogatory term but was soon adopted as a badge of pride. So it goes.

Nitya liked to say that a second draws its name from the interval after the first instantaneous snap of the fingers or tick of the clock. One tick doesn’t do anything, timewise. An interval only appears if there is a second tick, hence the second became the name for this interval. He would always smile as he said it, a tipoff that it was possibly his own invention, or at least that he had discovered it independently.

Additionally, the ticking of the present includes all the other concepts of time we so casually bandy about:

The mind visualizes what is presented to it as a presentative cognition or as a representative recognition. Whether it is a passing thought, a retrospective memory, or a long-drawn-out investigation, the mind goes tick-tick-tick from sequence to sequence. What is cognized consciously as time is the ticking past of a sequence. All other references to time are only verbal symbolizations, no matter whether our reference is to a second, a year, or an entire cosmic cycle. Of course, there is a difference in the verbal connotation of the dimensions of time attributed to terms like second or millennium, but that does not mean that we experience the time content of an eon when we think of an eon or experience a cosmic cycle when we think of a cosmic cycle. All that we experience is conceptual imagery and not time in its physical or operational sense.

This “conceptual imagery” is perfectly enchanting. In the verbal mind’s eye, a second is twice as long as an eon. Neither requires a second tick.

Moni made a provocative suggestion that the big bang was a cosmic snap of the fingers. (“It was a snap!” says God.)

We began talking about the big bang and its evolutes, which brought up one of my complaints. Big bang models all have timelines, with various stages of time, starting from the first picosecond (trillionth of a second). But time did not exist in those days—I use the term intentionally, since there weren’t any days either—our traditional time concepts are built on the movement of our planet in respect to its star, which bear almost no relation to anywhere else in the universe. Yes, we can now define a second in terms of atomic vibrations, but there weren’t even any atoms yet. There was never a straight time line. What happened was time came into existence out of no time. It cannot be measured.

Paul had recently watched a science show that made the case that prior to the existence of matter, time and space didn’t exist. We really don’t know what happened before that, but after matter formed, time and space came about.

The overall point being that Nitya and Bergson are leading us to meditatively float free of conceptual time in pure duration. We humans strive to define ourselves in temporal as well as physical formats, and if we can take a vacation from them it will be at least very refreshing, like a whole-body massage for the psyche. It might even be enlightening. We are happy to indulge our scientific and emotional fantasizing for fun, but we should also cultivate the skill of letting it go. Nitya reminds us how we get caught by our games:

We should remember that all our conscious experiences are also instances of the transformation of consciousness into something specific and structured having for its nucleus a value that has the potential to create the specific field of interest. As mind functions only sequentially, a continuous or

prolonged experience is to be explained as the repeated retention of the transformed state in a uniform manner with regard to its general form, inner structure, meaning, validity, and value identity.

This is where the movie version will be a big help!

Like the universe's big bang, the human psyche begins with a big bang of its own: delivering a sperm into an ovum. The resulting "universe" undergoes a period of hyperinflation, then settles down to a lengthy semi-stable period of development, before succumbing to entropy. In our Vedantic meditations we are able to oscillate between an expanded awareness and one compressed into a singularity grounded in the Absolute. Remembering the core of consciousness helps keep our life in perspective as a divine sport, a *lila*:

There is a magic of magnification of this simple sequential function that, in its turn, projects into a psychologically inflated time sense and space sense, encompassing several worlds of infinite as well as finite magnitude. However big these worlds are, they all turn on the tiny wheel of sequential consciousness, which we have just described as a point which is mathematically dimensionless and yet psychologically rotating.

Nitya offers his own life as a fitting example. In 1972 he was newly arrived at international fame and was zooming all over the planet giving lectures and having discussion with leading lights, as well as us schmucks from Keokuk in places like Portland. He gives a capsule summary of those heady days, and we can be sure it was intense and intensely satisfying for someone with so much to give. Yet sitting in his tiny room in Varkala and reflecting on it, he is amused by its conversion into the epitome of memory:

Today when I recall those incidents, the silliest events and the grandest occurrences look equally meaningless as jokes of the past. All “sports” are meaninglessness visualized as meaningful acts. This attitude is complemented in the hour of meditation, in which all serious events turn out to be phenomenal jokes.

Deb felt that this sounded on its surface as though he’s making life seem meaningless, but really that perspective allows the true meaning of life to be accessed. Without our weighted judgments, life reveals its own trajectory, its own essence, not just what we want it to be. Deb often looks back at things that seemed terribly importantly awful in the past, and when she does she can sometimes be amused at her exaggerated feelings.

Nitya concludes by yogically unifying the two temporal aspects of experience:

There is dialectical interplay between a moment and eternity. It is the same as that between a point and a circle, finitude and infinitude, and also as that between the particular and the Universal. The Nile or the Ganges can be looked upon either as a never-ceasing flow of water or as incremental movements of countless millions of tiny little drops. We experience the tick of time within the unceasing flow of pure duration. It all looks like an eternal sport of the Divine to cancel the finite with the infinite and the momentary with the eternal.

From his calm attitude about resolving these paradoxes, we can sense and share his peacefulness. It’s all food for contemplation. He isn’t longing to repeat anything or avoid any inconveniences. He maintains a neutral stance, hinting we might do the same.

We had time for an extended meditation on time, or better, Bergson’s duration, where all manifestations of time were discarded as irrelevant impediments. During the meditation I made

a connection I hadn't before, despite dozens and dozens of voyages through Atmopadesa Satakam, the base material for these meditations on the Self. In Indian mythology the sun, *surya*, is drawn across the sky in a golden chariot, not unlike the one Narayana Guru evokes in his image of this verse. As pictured in our minds it is a horizontal movement across the sky, giving birth to time, which is the vertical aspect of existence. No matter how we think of it, the sun is always "out there." Yet here, especially in the free translation, we are put right in the chariot's seat. The mystical 90 degree shift in consciousness converts us from a detached observer to an active participant. We are suddenly going forward in time—really *in* it. If we can put ourselves in the central place of being the sun, pulled by life through the cosmos on our time chariot, this will lead us to the suns bursting forth of the next verse.

And why this moment? We are completing a major section of the original work. At this point we have been taught all the building blocks of realization and fully digested their import. And what comes next? The dawn of enlightenment, the famous verse echoing the Upanishads:

Like ten thousand suns coming all at once,
the modulation of discrimination arises;
the veil of transience covering knowledge is *maya*;
tearing this away, the primal sun alone shines.

Narayana Guru wove all sorts of complex interactions into this epochal work, truly a modern Upanishad. Unlike many other, more simple-minded seers, he was also a genius who was unafraid to employ his intelligence in sublime ways. I suspect the three-dimensional conversion of riding the chariot leading immediately to the eruption of inner light is an intentional undercurrent, like an invisible push into the wisdom of discrimination. Whee! Away we go!

Part II

I want to make a comment on possibly confusing statement in the text outside of the flow of Part I:

Memories are mental images, and in that respect they are not different from each other in their value content or in the quanta of their temporal dimensions.

Actually, memories are significant precisely because they *differ* in their value content. Our attractions and repulsions are grounded in the value factor of our previous experiences, which is our most salient impediment, and the conditioning they instill affects us in important ways. I think what Nitya is saying is that mental images in general share the value of being secondary and partial, and there is a similarity that encompasses all their differences that he describes here as being phenomenal jokes.

I'd also suggest that the second part of that quoted sentence means that however long the source of the memory, whether a week of misery or a momentary sting, the result is a more or less instantaneous feeling. The takeaway of meaning is not dependent on replaying the length of time from the original stimulus. Since we don't yet recognize quanta of time, though this has been speculatively proposed, it looks like Nitya meant simply a plural of *quantity*.

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The marvelous Oregon book *Ricochet River*, by Robin Cody, opens with some déjà vu on page 1:

The rap on Jesse—one of the raps on Jesse—was that he wasn't very smart. You'd try to help him out sometimes. Like down at the lake one time we had Link's boat out, checking the crawdad trap, and I said something about déjà vu. I'd just had one.

“What?” Jesse said.

“Déjà vu.”

Jesse gave me his dumb Indian look. “Whatever you say, Kemo Sabe.”

“Déjà vu,” I said. “It’s that eerie little brain-tick when something that just happened has happened before. Only it couldn’t have happened.”

He stared at me, his brown eyes empty. I was rowing. Jesse had one leg draped over the stern, trailing a bare foot in the water. I tried again to explain it. “Like something triggers this brain-whisper,” I said, “that you’ve been in this exact same place and time before, even though you haven’t. What’s happening has already happened. Déjà vu.”

He didn’t seem to get it. Skip it, I figured. I took a couple of pulls on the oars and then left them out to drip on the glassy surface of the lake. That’s the best part of rowing—the glide. Little drops from the oars plinked their circles on the water mirror. At the outer arc of each growing circle, black upside-down fir trees wriggled up into the ground-ceiling as if to find their roots and shake them loose.

“Vuja de,” Jesse said. He, too, was watching the water circles when I looked up.

“Déjà vu,” I corrected him. Some people can’t get anything right.

“Vuja de is the opposite,” said Jesse, who wasn’t very smart; everybody said so. “Vuja de is that weird feeling you’re the first one out here. Nothing in the world has ever happened before.”

Part III

Susan and I had an exchange around this chapter:

Thanks for the notes, Scott.

After I finished reading them, I had the thought that there are many ways in which we have to bring the past along with us. When playing a piano piece I must bring my previous knowledge from many, many practices with me. Sometimes, I am in the moment and sailing along a fine musical vibration but there are the constant struggles to pull up the past memories to get a phrase just right. As I am learning Italian, I am constantly looking into my struggling brain to dredge up word meanings and grammar details. As I interact with people in daily life, I am looking to the past to place a name with a face. When I read a book or read the family letters I'm archiving and working on, I love to ride along with the stories. In this sense I am in the present, despite the gestalts that inevitably come and all the things I have learned in the past that enable me to read and comprehend each story. But I love that feeling of going into another world and another headspace that isn't mine. I discover things. Discovery seems to ground one in the present, at least for a few moments. Then on to the next discovery. Gardening is also like this. You need prior knowledge to understand what to do in the garden but not a whole lot, especially if you are weeding. New moment, pull a weed. New moment, pull a weed. This kind of repetitive work, like chanting or meditating, is cleansing, centering, freeing.

Dear Susan,

Your points are very important. What you've said is so true! People get into the cliché version of "the present moment," but as Nitya has said and I've written in PTG, the present moment in a healthy mind contains the past and future. Those time elements aren't just isolated islands floating in consciousness, they're all present in us all the time in an integrated fashion. A very intelligently integrated fashion. Of course we can't *operate* in the past or future: we bring all our skills and speculations with us to bear in the present. When we talk of openness in the present, it is precisely this greater reality of our full being we are opening up to.

That said, for the most part we don't have to work to bring all that material to bear, especially if it is well integrated. Mostly we need to suppress the parts that are gumming up the works by causing anxiety, fears, paranoias and all, the unknowns I suppose, and the aftereffects of our traumas. But as with your piano performance, your previous work is sitting there ready to come forth. The more you are present in the instant of performance, the more those skills are free to contribute what they have to offer. As you know, all our moments should be so rich. They *are* so rich. So let's honor them rather than selling ourselves short—we're doing the best we can. We may not be Liberace, but we're pretty decent. You know my quote from neuroscientist David Eagleman: "If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you're the busiest, brightest thing on the planet."

Trite spirituality treats the past and future as impediments, and they are only if we disrupt the present by dwelling on them. But they are our riches, as you've so admirably noted. Our knowledge of them should give us confidence to rely on our inner genius to always be an active participant in our expression. Language is a perfect example, since when we're fluent we aren't thinking of what the next word is: it's delivered effortlessly to our tongue. The same with our artistic performances. Our whole life should be an artistic performance in this sense.

Scott—

Nice! Thanks for clearing this up! It sounds as though there are past things that are more benign than others. Such things are helpful and not cluttering, counterproductive, (self) sabotaging. They are a healthy way of living in the past. I keep thinking of Herman Hesse sitting by the river. Though he is in the present moment and looking at the current (sic) river moment in front of him, he is aware of all of the river that is past and all of the river to come and they are all one. Our ability to speak (as you mentioned) is like this.