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MOTS Chapter 36: The Ego Center and the Spirit Center

The power of knowledge is endless;
the end of all this can be marked as “sameness” and “the other”;
thus, in this way, there are two divisions; in this,
merging the other with sameness, one should remain awake to that
clear state of being.

Free translation:

Innumerable are the powers of knowledge. They can be mainly categorized as two: ‘sameness’ and ‘the other’. One should awaken to the clarity of vision in which all forms of ‘otherness’ merge and become one with ‘sameness’.

Verse 36 begins a short yet potent section on *sama* and *anya*, sameness and otherness. Narayana Guru explicitly states they comprise the whole enchilada, the whole dosa. It’s his fresh take on unity and duality, words that have gone beyond clichés to become something even more meaningless. Changing the terms is an effective strategy.

The 36th verse of Atmopadesa Satakam was a major mind-blower for me, during the intensive study in 1977 that was transcribed to become *That Alone: The Core of Wisdom*, simultaneously putting spiritual seeking in perspective and completely inverting my attitude about who was doing what to whom. Listening to Nitya’s discourse, I was thoroughly chastened to realize that my well-intentioned efforts to be helpful were actually a subterfuge: a disguised way of projecting my own opinions on others, in place of actually reaching out and listening to them. Although I was preaching sameness, otherness was my M.O. I can still feel the shock as Nitya’s presentation of this verse broke through my complacent self-definition, renewing my resolve to rediscover a more authentic approach to life.

This verse is a perfect example of how a frankly dualistic teaching can precipitate a unitive orientation. Narayana Guru and his expositors are offering us the opportunity to catch on over and over. I'm reminded of Nitya's Foreword to *That Alone*, which is most germane to this chapter, especially this part:

The point, however, is that truth is so very simple we don't need to make any effort to know it, but an undetectable ignorance conceals what should be obvious. Then we take a lifetime of beating around the bush to arrive once again at what is already known to us. Once the lost truth is regained, the search comes to a close and there is no need to utter another word.

Between the effortlessness of the obvious and the silent wonder of regaining the forgotten truth, there are many hurdles to be cleared. The truth we speak of is neither fact or fiction. It is not the object of immediate perception or the subject of mediate inference. Either you unconditionally know it or you do not. This is the knowledge which cannot be taught but, paradoxically, it dawns upon you on listening to one who knows.

There is no assurance you will know because you listen, and there is also no assurance you will know if you do not listen. What one listens to is a word symbol of that which cannot be adequately symbolised or represented. To rectify this defect, a series of mutually complementary symbols can be presented by the knower. One or all of these analogies may prepare the listener to have a state of mind which can suddenly get the jolt of confronting the Absolute. There is no guarantee, but it is in the compassionate nature of gurus to offer any number of chances to those who are willing to listen.

In the Atmopadesa Satakam, the polarising of the Self and the non-Self is therefore presented with one hundred variations.

I suppose you could call the shock of my ego becoming aware of its shenanigans as “confronting the Absolute.” There was a clear feeling of an opaque curtain being swept aside and light pouring in. Nitya offered a very practical way of adjusting that I immediately adopted. Since the ego boundary makes an other of not just what’s “out there” but also what’s “in here” as my identity, you can just become aware of your ego boundary, and gradually expand it to include more and more of the otherness. Incorporate the other into your native sameness, like liberating occupied territory. Sure, it’s a gradual approach, but it works. Whatever strikes you as the other, examine it to see how it is not truly different, how you can include it without reservation. It may seem better to just include everything at once, yet that often is another self-deception where we imagine we’ve opened up but all our latent barriers are still in place.

Somehow Nitya knew the power of this verse, and we might well guess it, coming as it does in sequence right after the dawning of ten thousand suns. He takes plenty of time to draw out his explication, and the result is a tour de force. We can also see that this is the only chapter that he expanded later, nearly two months after finishing the project. I think this indicates he was mulling it over, and I would guess the last third of the chapter, with its more practical thrust and clearer examples, was written after the period of pondering. It shows how after wrestling with a difficult problem, a period of rest allows the unconscious to do a lot of processing, so when you come back to it, wrinkles have been ironed out and fresh insights are waiting for you.

Nitya begins by delineating the two aspects of the psyche that uphold sama and anya:

There is something in us which is directing our love towards all, to the all-inclusive Absolute. There is also another, an individual mind, which is closed and always on the defensive. In everyone there is a universal appraiser as well as an individual promoter.

And he hints at how this trips us up:

The individual promoter experiences uniqueness.... There is a relation between the individual subject and its object of encounter which is uniquely characteristic of the individual's personality.

This means what we perceive is not an absolute fact, it is a confection of several factors which vary in their validity. Of course we prize uniqueness, and by no means want to suppress it, yet it remains the basis for disagreement. All we have to do is remember that each of our perspectives is provisional, especially our favorites. Despite a certain human mania, there is not just one right answer to the quiz. There isn't even a quiz! We are different and that's okay. As Nitya once said, riffing off the book *I'm Okay, You're Okay*: I'm not okay and you're not okay, but that's okay.

This is where the feverish ego has to insist that God is backing their opinion, in order to prove it is totally correct. There are other less obvious ways we seek to affirm our biases, but the principle is the same. The antidote is a realistic self-examination. Nitya writes:

When we look closely at the social ego, we can see it is structured with phantom images of assumed or imaginary gestalts which are either borrowed from neighboring minds (society) or manufactured by preconditionings which remain latent in us as incipient memories. The resultant social ego is both real and unreal, like a rainbow or the frightening ghost on a moonlit night. If the light beams that cause a rainbow in the water particles of the atmosphere change their direction, the rainbow will disappear. A closer look at the ghost with a fearless mind can reveal it to be the stump of a tree. That means our social ego is a phantom which both communes and communicates from a fictitious locus of uniqueness.

I could always relate to the ghost in the tree stump, because that's exactly what happened to me one night. I was in my early teens and my family was staying at an old farmhouse in Vermont, for skiing. We slept in a remote cabin about a kilometer away from the main house, connected by an old wagon road through deep woods. After dinner the adults would sit around talking in the warm farmstead, but I wanted to get back to our place, so I set out in bright moonlight for the cabin. As I slipped into the forest a chill ran down my back that had nothing to do with the near-zero temperature. It was perfectly quiet except for a slight rustling of the wind in the branches. The moonlight was dazzling, yet produced strange shadows on all sides. The woods were empty, dark and deep, the same woods Robert Frost knew so well. I began to jog, and it gave me a tingly feeling there was someone behind me, so I picked up the pace. Real fear began to seep beneath my overcoat, and soon I was flying in a full-blown panic down the track. And then in a flash, there was a witch, close in to the right, with just the right hat, and arms out to grab me. The shock stopped me dead, adrenaline shooting through every cell. I almost exploded. I can still feel the intense terror that struck me. As the blood drained out of my head and I struggled not to faint, the witch resolved into a huge stump dappled with snow, looming and dreadful, but very much rooted to its spot. I was in too much shock to even feel relieved. It was a magnificent lesson in projection, and I got it. It was only my imagination! Exactly what Nitya says here: "This negativity has no existence, but like darkness it has an operational efficiency." It affected me, all right. I slowly shuffled the rest of the way down to the cabin, too stunned to be in a hurry, digging for balance. A moment never to be forgotten.

Next we have Nitya's capsule epitome of maya in this chapter:

Now we can say with assurance that the individual experiences of love and hatred are phantom states of mind superimposed on a more basic reality of the universal, which is obscured or

partially obliterated by a negative limiting factor. This negativity has no existence, but like darkness it has an operational efficiency.

This is also a good time to clip in an operational directive from the text:

Only by cutting across the personal ‘I’ and the collective memory can we arrive at the all-unifying sameness which abolishes the duality of ‘I’ and the other.

In other words, clinging to our stuff will keep us forever at a remove from the universal core under discussion. There is no question that a settled, mature mind probably wouldn’t have had the exaggerated response to the stump-ghost I did as a dolorous adolescent. Like many of my generation, sitting in my memory banks is the terrifying witch on the cabin roof hurling fire on the scarecrow from the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, to name only one. What felt like an intense direct experience was in fact the product of accumulated samskaras, coupled with the vasanas developed in the ancient past, when the threat of being rudely eaten by a creature with Very Large Teeth was an ever-present possibility. These are the very hangovers that a contemplative approach can liberate us from.

Jan was quick to point out it takes time. Fears are not exorcised in a day. This is work that will be with us as long as we live. But it’s not only fun, it is indeed liberating, meaning there is psychological growth involved too. So what else are ya gonna do?

Okay, so let’s get back to the text. One complex sentence might be simplified: “The apodictic character of ontologic verity is impressed on our mind as a logical or mathematical necessity.” How about, “self-evident truths are very compelling.” We could go on about how the ego often uses a mere pretext of logic or science to support its claims, but the class didn’t go there, so I won’t. You

already know how crucial that is, and Nitya even drops it a passing mention:

The spirit center in us is sometimes so convinced of the truth of something that it wants to give its assent at once. Even then the ego center may hasten to fashion another argument on phony grounds or using unexamined premises to suit its private purposes.

Very often our phony argument provides an excuse to ignore the deeper reality yawning up before our timid persona. A million (more or less) psychology experiments have revealed the ego as an inveterate liar that will use any trick to back up its position. That's right: not just Trump's ego, but all of them. The difference is those "private purposes." If you aim the good of the world, as gurus are apt to suggest, your ego's duplicity is likely to be far less harmful than if you're scheming to own the world and severely punish its inhabitants, oblivious of the aftereffects. But don't imagine that being better than the next guy gives your ego a bye so you can stop questioning your own motivations.

Nitya contrasts the ego center with a spirit center, meaning our universal aspect:

It is again the 'I' that is subjected to the mathematical or logical compulsion of the imperativeness of certitude. It is the same 'I' that upholds truth even against the interest of the person concerned. Thus 'I' as a point of reference and a locus of orientation has to play the role of universal consciousness by being an impartial umpire. If it weren't for this universal character of consciousness, everyone would live in a jumbled world of emotional chaos infested with self-pity, paranoiac fear, and megalomaniac fantasies.

Reading out that last line got a laugh from everyone, and when Deb started our dialogue she cited it immediately as the crux of the

reason we address these issues: infested emotional chaos is widespread these days, and not just in the lunatic fringe. Deb was consoled we don't have to find something missing, because profound connection is always here. There is a unified universal consciousness that we belong to, and all we have to do is move beyond the gates of our ego to participate in it.

Paul mused about his various identities: he was recently at a family reunion, where his identity was as a family member, and at sports events where he was one of the fans. Where we usually cling to something from just one perspective, he doesn't feel the need to. He easily sees how he is much more than those identities, even though they are his and he likes them. That's a fine operational tactic. So many people are "trying to fit in," as they've been told to do, but allowing yourself to not fit in is so much less fraught with stress and peril I don't know why it isn't the first choice.

Deb just enjoyed *An Uncommon Reader*, by Alan Bennett, where the Queen learns to read books, and although all her life she had been far removed from the actual lives of human beings, through coming to know all the literary instances and characters she became a more universal person: by learning about a variety of individual expressions, she came to appreciate the universal aspect of life. And that's how we work, too. Jan said how grateful she is that literature and poetry speak to those deeper places in ourselves. She also mentioned how hard it is to identify with the witnessing self when you are feeling attacked or threatened. The flip side is that if we want to bring out the best in people, we shouldn't make them feel under attack. As Narayana Guru says on occasion, "This should be made known."

I did note that being under pressure is an ideal place to work on your reactivity if you can bear it. The unguarded ego comes out only rarely, so much of our spirituality is hypothetical. Under fire the veils are temporarily stripped away, and we have the opportunity to make neural rewiring a reality. In times of peace we can't see where to work. We can also use the ploy of doing some

work on our faults and then letting the inner awareness process the project further on its own.

Although we hold to a sharp division in our minds about our ego territory's sacred space, that's also an illusion. Of course, it's an illusion with a tremendous "operational efficiency," but for a healthy life we have to come to grips with how it's sabotaging our existence. As Paul said, it's totally self-destructive, and doesn't lead to anything positive.

Fortunately for us our "better half" cannot be completely discarded. As Nitya puts it:

Although in an analysis of the Self we could conveniently put the phantom ego on one side and the universal foundation of consciousness on the other, these aspects are so welded together that we cannot separate them.

It appears that all that's needed is to bring our concepts in line with this core reality of our being. We don't have to build something new out of nothing. We're busily clinging to the broken half of our psyche and violently resisting the healing impulse. Nitya homes in on this need:

Apart from the ego consciousness there is another real center, which cannot be named and which has no I-identity. It is an uncolored, unconditioned aspect of everyone's pure being. All experience comes under one of these two categories. The first is the experience of an individual ego in relation to a projected other in which the projection is an objectification of value. In the other there is a merger of the possibilities of all otherness into the pure state of consciousness, which brings about a complete annihilation of the duality of 'I' and the other.

Paul has been really looking at how his experience is a projection of previously held values, so this really clicked with him. He sees his need to defend his ego, and feels that that too is innate. The ego

quite naturally has to defend itself in a group setting, and so as long as it's at the proper level, it shouldn't be a problem. But let's not overdo it!

I'd add that most of us are in limbo somewhere in between these extremes of pure ego or pure spirit, and it's valuable to include a practical working position. We don't have to be fully realized or completely annihilate duality in order to put the principle into practice.

Another practical point lies within Nitya's observation that "The other is not a constant, but it determines which mask the ego has to put on from time to time." How often do we realize we are playing a role crafted to our audience? It's a very natural performance, one we've been doing our whole lives, so we don't notice unless it is brought to our attention and we make the effort to hold back. People are always pleading to me how the "have to" behave in a certain way, they have to conform to what they *think* other people expect—a Gordian knot if ever there was one. The more you worry the knot, the more entangled you become. For that type of bondage, the only solution is to cut it, not untie it. Few people are willing to actually do that, yet putting on masks all the time gets really tedious. The solution does not lie in that direction. Nonetheless, "Spiritual experience or spiritual life is a transference of our natural habitat from the ego center to this unnamable spirit center." Nitya goes on to add to our perplexity:

This is an impossible thing to achieve through effort, since the ego center is aided by all our faculties. For example our sense perceptions can identify the other person, so we know the other is there. Our emotions well up and seek an object to dwell upon; our reason finds something to think about. Thus all the human faculties aid in experiencing the relative. But in the absolutist experience we have to leave all these instruments behind as useless. Pure being is beyond our senses, beyond our emotions, beyond our reasoning, beyond our mind. That's why duality is expressed so obviously in our everyday life.

In further consideration of the resistance of the ego to perceived incursions, Nitya adds:

The ego, being the central reference, has sovereignty in its own domain. Just as you cannot have two kings in one country or two presidents in the same nation, you cannot have two ego centers. So the sovereignty of the ego makes a demand upon the rest of the system to keep it free of incursion by any other ego.

From here there is a geometric examination of two egos interacting, each person pictured as a circle with a locus point in the center, moving closer and farther away from each other. Nitya ostensibly speaks of marriage, but I suspect what he really has in mind is an ideal guru-disciple relationship:

This being the case, when two people enter wedlock and become associated in everyday life, the question arises, “If we are to be bracketed together as a married couple, whose ego will rule or dominate?” This conflict of the domination of one ego by another cannot be resolved so long as they see two separate ego centers operating.... Just as two concentric circles coincide in such a way that the central locus of both becomes the same, there has to be an identity of purpose, identity of mission and identity of vision by which there can be complete coalescence or identity of one with the other.

Whether the union is spiritual or marital, this is an extremely rare achievement, and also bound to be temporary. No matter what level of commitment two partners have, even the closest people need space at times. Nitya adds another possibility:

Harmony can be achieved also by the placement of the two egos in terms of a numerator-denominator relationship where

one complements the other. Then there is no question of domination. It's a matter of complementarity.

This is more normal and leaves room for varying degrees of closeness. It's "upside down" from our normal perspective, because the denominator is the whole and the numerator is the part, so the optimal is on the bottom, but that's not so hard to compensate for. Complementarity is not hierarchical.

Finally, Nitya speaks to the rest of us on our less-than-best days:

Where there is no complementarity there is sure to be contradiction and cancellation. Each ego impinges on the other. It brings pain, hatred and agony. When people who may be very good in their own estimation or appear to be very good to others, are brought together, we see that they can make a living hell out of everything in their attempts at ego domination.

We again had a few rueful chuckles of recognition.... Next we are given a lesson in humility to correct a domineering ego:

Now suppose they have the insight that this ego on which they harp is a meaningless attachment to a false notion, and the truer Self is something beyond the ego, beyond the person, beyond the body, beyond the senses. Then there is no question of domination. There is only the sharing of opinions and information. We don't get agitated when we hear someone's opinions expressed in a certain way, even when we don't agree with them. In your own home you might hear a hundred and one opinions with which you don't agree. But you know that each opinion comes from a particular person's standpoint, and you can treat it as just one possibility among many.

It's truly shocking, when you think about it, the extent we identify a person with their opinions—because we identify ourselves with

our opinions. Why do we pin our very existence on what we believe? It's the primary source of our bondage, but we cling to it harder than it clings to us. This is the key deformation society imposes on its members, and after a brief historical excursion into liberality, static beliefs are back with a vengeance. Literally. Nitya laments how we are unable to separate the divine being in front of us from their opinions, making them appear rather less than divine:

Sadly, this is not often accomplished. Usually we relate the opinion to the owner of the opinion, and the owner is not an abstraction, it's a flesh-and-blood person. So our nonacceptance of an opinion is implemented by the rejection of the person who expressed it. Instead of denying the opinion, you want to deny the person. Instead of erasing the opinion, you want to blot out the other ego. When it comes to that point, a person may even attack or try to kill the other. Or when you see that your ego is not accepted, your frustration may make you think, "If you don't accept me, it is as good as my not existing any more!" This thought can drive a person to suicide. Thus all the madness we see in this world in the form of killing or dying or fighting or struggling stems from this very unfortunate illusion or delusion of ego supremacy.

I talked about how fMRI visualization of the brain in action has given evidence of what Vedanta has presumed as a fact: there is a lengthy period of preparation for each conscious thought. The brain is busy humming away in all its parts, cross-checking and selecting an optimal summation, which up to ten seconds (an electronic eon) later is delivered to the waking consciousness or ego, at which point it exclaims "I just thought of something!" It reminded me of how rationalists and fundamentalists of all stripes take that last instant, not even 1/1000 of a percent of the whole process, and insist that's it—that's the extent of truth. By doing that, they are adhering to the conflict-generating attitude of separateness, willfully omitting the ocean of universality that went

into the production of everyone's thinking, including their own. It's like everyone is wearing virtual reality headsets and arguing and carrying on about what they are seeing in their set, insisting other versions are wrong. The virtual reality they are viewing is a play put on by the master director, their mind.

Susan told us of a video antidote to this isolationism, where people are shown their commonality as overriding the differences they most identify with. It's only a few minutes long, and the link is added in Part II. We also talked about how music is a universalizing force. While Notre Dame burned the other day—an inestimable loss to human heritage—crowds gathered as close as they could and spontaneous singing burst out, taken up by all present. No one was checking to see if they were foreigners or natives, and so on, they simply sang together. The tragedy was far too great to hold in mere thoughts. Susan is reading *Dead Wake*, by Erik Larson, a novel about the Lusitania, which was sunk by a German U Boat during WWI, with more than 1000 casualties. As the passengers floated in the water preparing to die, they too took recourse in singing.

Jan noted that what all the studies show about meditation and other ways of calming our body's systems is that we can get better at it. She told us more about DBT, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, which is like yoga in directing you to the witnessing consciousness. It helps people connect better with their spirit center, by going inward and witnessing what they're feeling. It helps people with real dysfunction to finding that neutral place, and it gives them the tools to halt the turmoil before it gets out of hand.

Nitya often cited mothers of infants as exemplifying a spiritual state, and he must have been giving a talk as part of this chapter, as he cites one being present:

Instead of relying on the contentious ego, there is something more benevolent in us to which we can turn. For instance, when this baby here is not well his mother feels as if she is not well

either, because her center can be shifted easily to the child. Though the projected “I” or “me” cannot really function in the child as her ego, she thinks that she has no other center for the time being than the child. So his happiness can be her happiness. Such a center is not ego, since it can be transferred from person to person. It is the spirit center. If you can have the same attitude as a mother feels for her child toward injustice to anyone in the world, including even a mad dog, you become one of universalized vision and universalized sympathy.

In situations like this where there is no possibility of conflict, abiding in the spirit center is the most natural thing in the world. As Deb said, when you’re close to the people you care about, you’re in the middle of their lives and they are in the middle of yours, and this happens all the time in the world. Another technique is to start from those places where you are naturally at ease and centered, and begin applying them to new possibilities. There is no point in hurrying this—if we get ahead of ourself the ego center will jump back in. As Jan affirmed earlier, the more you spend time in this place, the easier it is to bring it to bear elsewhere. It really is a good habit to learn, and an especial challenge these days in the face of raving fearmongers on many a street corner and screen channel. Continuing his adoration of the mother and child, Nitya writes:

Your center can be placed in any number of bodies, and can identify itself with the pains and pleasures of all other bodies. That requires a very pliable mechanism of your mind so that it can be unbolted and taken out of your personal system and placed within another’s system. When this is achieved, you become the circumference of all and simultaneously the center of all. Thereafter there is no ego strife.

Even making this a policy weakens its potency. We have to remain neutral throughout, observing, listening:

This can come only from an unflickering realization, which, like an ever-open eye, is always looking on and seeing everything. Its evaluations are not based on your personal history of pains or pleasures but on the homogeneity of the all-embracing consciousness that throbs in all forms of life.

Nitya's very beautiful conclusion segued perfectly into a deep group meditation, sitting together free of compulsions:

Even the slightest understanding of this can save a person. You still belong to the same world, you still live in the same body, and you still relate yourself to the other, and yet it is only like a game played by your ego and the other before the eye of the Witnessing Self, which acts as a referee. It takes no sides. It has no emotional coloration. Once you know it, you know also that there need not be any conflict between the application of love and the appreciation of love, the acceptance of truth and the living of truth. The universal will finds expression in the individual. This knowledge alone brings real peace.

Part II

Here's Susan's very touching video link on sama:

It's from Denmark and I cry through almost the whole thing every time I see it:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jD8tjhVO1Tc>

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A recent radio report presents a nuance or two about empathy worth considering:

https://www.npr.org/2019/04/15/712249664/the-end-of-empathy?utm_source=pocket-newtab