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MOTS Chapter 37: Brute Facts and their Transcendence

The other is replete with difficulty;
and it is hard to win over without the power to discriminate the
unbroken;
having won over the difficult,
attain to that discrimination which is opposed to sense interests.

Free translation:

It is hard to win over the obduracy of ‘the other’ without having achieved a vivid vision which leaves nothing outside of it. By conquering the power of the indistinctiveness of ‘this’, which forces consciousness to split into specificity, one should gain the wisdom of integral unity. That alone will gain one access to pure wisdom, which leaves no room either to objectivize or to have the agency of a subject.

Nataraja Guru’s translation is quoted in the text, as Nitya had not yet done the ones we’ve been using:

To subdue even somewhat the obduracy of the “other”
Is hard indeed without wisdom’s limitless power;
By such do gain mastery over it and unto Her who is Wisdom
The anti-sensuous One, close access attain.

The spring sniffles have struck several class members, so we had a minimalist gathering, happily joined by son-in-law Dylan, who has been staying with us recovering from an injured ankle. Small groups are less daunting to newcomers, and Dylan was able to participate almost as easily as the veterans.

Continuing the examination of *sama* and *anya*, sameness and otherness, Nitya uses the occasion of his train travel to demonstrate how those elements make an appearance in our everyday reality.

Jan astutely noticed right away that being crammed in to an uncomfortable compartment was a perfect analogy for the small ‘s’ self, which often feels like it’s wedged in where it doesn’t really want to be. This individual self is the basis for discriminating between what is ‘ours’ and what is ‘not ours’. This is the most practical arena to work on expanding our awareness, which when sufficiently enlarged can turn into wisdom. As the free translation spells out, if we work to overcome the demands of specific factors on our attention and subsume them in an integral unity, that is enough to bring us to pure wisdom.

There is nothing perceptible in a train compartment that even hints at unity. Unity is a contribution of conscious awareness, or at a minimum of digging beneath the surface. Not of objects. As Karen reminded us, we’re all made of the same molecules, even though we can’t see them. Science has embraced that kind of unity, at least. And as I’ve often thrown in, all our perceptions come to us as processed productions screened in the brain for the mind’s eye to witness. That means every element is related, in the same way a play or TV show is an inclusive unity. We never say that part of the show isn’t in the show, but this other part is. It’s all in the show.

Nitya provides another ten-dollar sentence that the class kept coming back to:

Wisdom is an expanse which includes or brings within its scope everything that is otherwise differentiated by its name or its form.

We can see there is a proviso to work on this inclusiveness. It doesn’t just magically happen. When wisdom is present it is all-inclusive; when it’s not complete we have to make an effort in that direction. Names and forms are what activate our selective memories and throw us off a balanced presence.

Human history has made us acutely aware of differences, which is necessary for survival. “Others” were often fatally hostile,

and for hundreds of millions of years. Deb mentioned how she read that in France in the 16th and 17th centuries, if a stranger walked into a village, nine times out of ten they would just kill them. Benign exploration is a relatively recent activity. So we are genetically and theoretically predisposed to be suspicious in evaluating every new aspect of our environment. Only in modern times have we begun to be able to trust the unknown enough to try to rise to a new level of existence. At the least, universal acceptance has to be practiced in a safe environment. Maybe that's why the lifetime in a cave or convent was so popular: you could relax your guard and turn your attention to higher aspirations only when you were sealed off from threats.

While advocating for higher values, Nitya is perfectly aware of the demands of getting through the day: "The actualities of life, however, bristle with the activity of choice and rejection." Yet since "To the contemplative such divisions are fictitious," we need to continually reconnect with the underlying unity, if only to keep from sliding into a fictitious life. Specious lives are everywhere on display, as they hold a bizarre attraction to bored and worried humanoids, but while many advocate for becoming bizarre as an amusement, we are in favor of the joys of authenticity, which by definition cannot be based on falsehood. Well, they often are, but ersatz authenticity doesn't hold up to scrutiny. Suppression of authenticity causes psychological heartburn that can't be cured by lading on more junk.

Nitya bases this chapter on impressions registered amid the confusing swirl of activity at an Indian train station, along with the utter obduracy of riding in a crowded third-class compartment on a train that stops at every podunk station. India may have the largest and most impressive rail system in the world, but that doesn't mean the cheapest option isn't nearly as painfully basic as it can get. The image mimics our own confusion, caught up as we are in oppressive chaos while trying to make our way from here to there. Nitya brings out the key point of this chapter:

To sum this up, we arrive at two basic functions of consciousness, inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion implies an act of integration, and exclusion implies an act of segregation or isolation. Integration is possible only on the ground of homogeneity or on the ground of the possible relation of values. To the self, anything other than the self is an outside factor. The only reality to the self is its own existence, its own subsistence or self-awareness, and its own value or innate state of bliss. In Sanskrit these are *sat*, *cit* and *ananda*. The “other” does not come within the scope of the existence of the self, its innate awareness, or its identity of ananda.

This epitomizes the dual focus of the ordinary ego-based sense of self. In order to transcend it we have to first access a common ground: without it we are merely being pretentious. It may be an admirable enough pretention, but we can do better. We can make it real.

One thing that blew my mind about this section of the Hundred Verses when I first encountered it, is that we don’t have to make a quantum leap to perfect inclusion, we can just annex new territory a region at a time. Making the ‘other’ part of our self expands our awareness. For me, I just take what life presents as the new domain to come to terms with. There is no need to go looking for hearts and minds to conquer; there are plenty close by, and I’ve never run out of work to do on my relation to them. Obviously each person may take an approach that suits them, but that’s mine.

Our inclusiveness varies over time, but the direction the gurus are advocating is overall positive, based on their own total inclusiveness, or as Nitya liked to put it, their “unlimited liability.” Humanity at the moment is experiencing a retrenchment into exclusiveness after a rapid period of mixing of “others.” Genocidal tendencies are again boiling up. Narayana Guru’s superlative advice is not being heeded in many places. Too bad.

Nitya provides us with a means of measuring expansiveness, saying “the scope of the self... depends on the clarity and vision

that the self's consciousness possesses in a given situation at a given time.”

Deb wondered why the other always seems so powerful compared to us, and Narayana Guru addresses the fearful ignorance that ensues when the other looms large, in Darsanamala I.7 and I.8:

When Self-knowledge shrinks,
then ignorance is fearful;
substantiation by name and form,
in the most terrible fashion, looms here, ghostlike.

This is terrible and empty of content,
like a phantom city;
even as such, the whole universe
is made as a wonder by the Primeval One.

It sounds to me like he's describing the ugly side of politics in the 21st century.... Paradoxically, a shrinking into an isolated self does not have to be a disaster; it's all in how you handle it:

The self can contract and confine itself within the shell of a simple moment, kicking away everything that belongs to the world of space. That is the state of a person lost in the darkest agony of self-pity, or it could also be the state of a peaceful recluse.

When done right, a self-focused contemplation forms the basis for re-expansion on a more valid footing, and it can be a natural process, not dependent on forcing the issue:

To such a one everything other than the notion of his or her own self in this moment is devoid of any name or form. The dimensions of the self can also expand. The depth and area of its extension in the existential sphere is in accordance with our

awareness of the value interest attracting us and the scope of its application at a given time in a given situation.

The Gurukula approach is not to abandon duality in favor of unity, but to learn how to have them work together. Deb admitted it was nearly impossible to imagine a world where there was no other. I'd say it is impossible, and the teaching is not to eliminate the other but to add the sense of unity into our familiar dualistic orientation, making it vastly more effective. In fact, Nitya extends his metaphor to remind us that however universal his ideals may be, he still can't go sit in the more comfortable compartment reserved for ladies:

Here the universality of my vision is not the least helpful for transcending the brute facts of necessity. In the gross world of actuality where my own self shrinks back into the physical frame and accepts the label of its social identification—otherwise known as my name—I have to crouch in my own corner of the compartment and accept the facts of life.

Confusion at this juncture is commonplace, but it's the ego that wants to push a universal vision into areas where it isn't welcome or isn't appropriate. We've already been warned that the good of all is the prime consideration, not the good of Me, so we don't want to transgress at this stage.

Several of us were thinking of prisoners as examples of where this ideal matters most. Dylan has worked at San Quentin in California coaching running, and Deb has been part of the Oregon program Open Hearts Open Minds, a name based on the very principle we are discussing here. Moni and I have been tangentially involved as well. Getting to know criminals as human beings is a transformative experience. Deb noted that as humans they are sama, acceptable to our self, but if you only look into their background and the crimes they committed, they are very much other, anya. It is tragic to condemn a person to eternal damnation

for a crime that they may have already atoned for for years. As the warden of a prison I toured years ago told us, most of the inmates regretted their acts—often committed in inebriated states—immediately. It wasn't really who they were, deep down. Yet in America there is slim likelihood of them ever having a second chance.

Dylan knew exactly what this meant. One of his star runners got out this past year and qualified to run in the ultra-exclusive Boston Marathon. Dylan knows him as an exceptional human being, and is very proud of his accomplishments. One time he wrote his full name in an article, and he was contacted by a woman who had looked up his crime. She was angrily indignant, asking how he could ever do anything for such a terrible person. Dylan was shocked at her egotism and self-righteousness. All he could say was if you knew him now, you would see what a truly exemplary person he was. Certain people believe you should be punished forever for a mistake you made as a young adult, and they don't believe in the principle, espoused but not often followed, of rehabilitation. But as Moni said, their attitude is based in fear. We pay to support people for years in prison because we expect them to get out one day as functioning citizens. Why shouldn't they be different than they were the first day? Deb agreed the crime didn't describe the whole person, and I was reminded of a favorite quote from Friedrich Nietzsche: "Avoid those in whom the desire to punish is strong."

Deb mused how we like to think we know who we are, so we adhere to stances, which are often rigid and unthinking, Dylan feels the need to be protective of prisoners, because he knows them as totally normal people. They aren't the only ones who made a mistake, but they are the ones who got caught. And we non-prisoners have made amends—shouldn't prison time be counted as time making amends also?

Karen made the connection how in our time the asylum seekers are despised like prisoners, but they too are just humans in need. Their livelihoods have been destroyed by climate change or

political prosecution—that doesn’t make them evil people. She laughingly imagined that when alien invaders arrive in their UFOs then the human race will at last unite in its own defense.

The idea inspired Moni to reminisce about last year’s floods in Kerala, which had long been splintering into angry religious factions. When the devastating floods arrived, people were no longer Muslim, Hindus or Christians, they were just people, and everyone helped each other to survive. There was a great feeling of togetherness, and people were excited about it. Since then, though, the old animosities have slowly returned. Can it be we are only at our best under extreme duress?

Because of this great example, I asked the class for their own triumphs where their attitude of sameness or otherness made a difference in their experience, and got some excellent responses. As a prompt I talked about how Nitya himself was superb at remaining at his best no matter what—he never seemed to even make an effort, because he had it *down*. Traveling around India with him in hot, muggy weather, clothes stuck to my skin with perspiration, listening to Malayalam language lectures, waiting endlessly for the next ride, or trying to meditate as the mosquitoes hummed in my ears and bit every available part of me, I would be riveted to my miseries, but he would be cheerful, making fascinating conversation, seeing lessons everywhere, smiling and welcoming whatever charm might appear out of the gloom, seemingly oblivious of any irritation. His example helped draw me out of my self-conscious miseries, at least a little bit.

Jan talked about how important it is for her to commune with nature, that she has to get outside at some point during her day to feel her best. Somehow it helps her have a better attitude about what she’s doing, and if she doesn’t get her “dose,” she doesn’t feel quite right. The NY Times had just featured a related article by neurologist Oliver Sacks on the effect of gardens and natural environments on our mental health that is linked in Part II. Deb mentioned the modern therapy of “forest bathing,” which you can learn about here: <http://www.shinrin-yoku.org/shinrin-yoku.html>.

(Don't miss the Alan Watts quote at the bottom of the page.) We do a lot of forest bathing here in the Pacific Northwest. And sun bathing if we can find any.

Dylan brought up the number of kids these days suffering from anxiety and depression, he felt to some extent due to living in artificial environments and having their every move decided in advance by their parents. Deb noted how some pediatricians are now prescribing outdoor time for the kids under their care. Dylan is all for unscheduled time, since the scheduling itself produces anxiety: will I be on time? Will I do as well as I should? Unsupervised play doesn't produce performance stresses.

It made me wonder if there had ever been studies of whether artificial gardens on computer screens provided the same healing as a real forest or garden. There was doubt in the class, but we're all old. I wonder if the "new humans" who are half machine-mind have transcended the need for quality time in nature? Will screen mania fill the gap, or just delay the reckoning?

Deb spoke about being a budding feminist in her college days, a posture that was still heavily opposed by mainstream society in the 1960s. Her beloved brother played devil's advocate (he was and is well-suited to the role), and she burst into tears of rage and frustration. Much later, after becoming more confident in her stance, she had a similar argument with another person, and this time she burst out laughing at his absurd arguments for male supremacy. She realized the difference was she was by then secure in her understanding. When she was feeling her way across an unknown landscape, she was vulnerable and touchy. This applies nicely to any argument: people get defensive when they aren't sure of themselves. Egos need to seem like they know what they're talking about, so they fight more, or get more upset, if they are less sure of themselves. As I put it, we don't need to defend what we're secure in knowing, but we do actively defend our insecurities. This can give us a handle on the inner motivations of argumentative people, too.

In conjunction with an expanding contemplative attitude, we can add a measure of withdrawal from attending to discomfort. At the present time there are many people who are almost never uncomfortable, so this may seem old fashioned. India of 50 years ago certainly provided ample opportunities to practice transcending discomfort, and who knows? They may come back. Nitya writes:

No doubt it is unpleasant to sit huddled together in this hot, sticky weather in a crowded third-class compartment of an Indian train. But heat and cold and pain and pleasure are only conditioned states of the mind arising from its conjunction with physical states. By lifting the mind from its preoccupation with its conditionings to another value, the physical states become irrelevant.

Moni was reminded by this of an overnight train she took with a friend from Kochi to Chennai. She booked an AC (air conditioned) compartment, but when they arrived at the station they had not been given AC and there was none available. Due to her studies with Nitya, Moni took it in stride, but her friend was really upset and hated the whole trip. She complained the entire time, so the pleasant conversation Moni had been looking forward to never happened. This was a perfect example of two people doing exactly the same thing, yet solely due to their attitude one kept her cool and one hated every minute of it.

Narayana Guru was aware that overcoming the assault of displeasure is not a trivial accomplishment. The other is obdurate, meaning not only hard but (via Merriam-Webster) “stubbornly persistent in wrongdoing,” and “resistant to persuasion or softening influences.” The trick is to activate an overriding interest, and the difficulties will fade into the background, if not disappear. Nitya wraps up with a lovely summation:

The mind is quite capable of overlooking physical inconveniences so that it can devote itself to a joy of immeasurable depth. Such is the meditation in which we are engaged for the time being. In this meditation the subject of interest and the object of interest are not two. Where there is a pronounced duality between the subject and the object, the mind has to turn away from the true nature of the Self to reflect the non-Self. The result is one's becoming subjected to the pains of necessity. If, despite the difficulty, we train ourselves to transcend the duality of pain-pleasure objects, we can remain established in the pure Self that is beyond the pale of all pain and pleasure and devoid of the disrupting sense of the other.

With the implicit hint that we are engaged in this sort of meditation all the time, we dedicated the last moments of the class to an intentional version.

Part II

This Sunday's NY Times included an article by Oliver Sacks on the value of the natural world in healing, that goes along nicely with Jan's ode to nature:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/18/opinion/sunday/oliver-sacks-gardens.html> .