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MOTS Chapter 41

“This is a pot;” in that, what comes first, “this,” is the difficult to discern; “pot” is its qualifying predicate; for intellect and such *mahendra* magic to manifest, this itself becomes the *karu*, thus one should see.

Free translation:

When one says, “This is a pot,” what comes first as ‘this’ is difficult to discern, while ‘pot’ is its qualifying attribute. When the endless sense-oriented cogitations proliferate, one should bear in mind that the indicative pronoun ‘this’ is the fountainhead.

The free translation clarifies a potential for confusion in the original verse, that may only reside in the English translation. In the last line, “this itself becomes the *karu*,” it sounds like the ‘this’ is referring to the predication as the *karu*, but it isn’t: the ‘this’ is the subject. ‘This’ becomes (or is) the *karu*. I’m sure that’s why the second translation takes such pains to make it clear that ‘this’ is the fountainhead, a capital T This. That’s clearly what the Guru means.

But wait! This verse must be paired with the next, which reads:

“This is knowledge”; in that, what comes first, “this,” is sameness; its qualifying predicate is awareness; for intellect and all such to vanish, and for the true path to come, this should be meditated on.

“For intellect and all such to vanish, and for the true path to come, this should be meditated upon.” Narayana Guru must mean if we make the *predication* the *karu*, we get intellect and mahendra magic, but if we meditate on the *subject*, the ‘this’ aspect, we get

the true path, undeflected by sense input and intellection. He makes it explicit that this is *sama*, sameness, and the “qualifying predicate” is *anya*, or awareness. And we already know they are to be taken together.

It looks like the free translation, then, merely brings the point forward from the next verse, so it doesn’t exactly convey the sense of this admittedly complicated verse.

The idea is that subject and predicate, or *sama* and *anya*, divide the world up between them. In the first half of the commentary, Nitya explains his revelation as to the meaning that occurred to him while teaching a college class. Nitya’s story about Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* got an additional vetting in *Love and Blessings*. I’ll tuck them both into Part II. You can preread it if you want, but the essence is:

Every subject is an object of inquiry, and every judgment is the predication of some quality to the subject. So every judgment is divided into a subject and a predicate.

Despite the verbal complexity, the class really pounced on the implication of Narayana Guru’s point here: that we continually reduce the whole, represented semantically as “This,” to a predication, and in so doing we limit our conception of it. Once that happens, it is no longer the absolute This, it is a specific item, at least in our mind. Humans argue about their predications, and the smaller or more closely-defined they are, the more arguments are spawned.

One corollary is that we have learned to identify the subject *as* the predicate, but the Guru shows that once we do that, we leave out all the other potentials residing in the subject, the *sama*. We unintentionally and severely limit our thinking. We *make* the subject into just another predicate.

Deb opened the dialogue with a recent account of a one-year-old friend who is just learning to speak. We have watched videos of the mother prompting her to identify her knees, ears, forehead,

toes, on and on, and the baby touches each one as it is named. Sometimes she already has the word. It's the "What is this?" game. To Deb this showed that we live in a world of name and form. With a baby who is residing in a vast, undifferentiated space, you can see how she is being shaped into a limited perspective. It's totally necessary, and every parent does this with great excitement, since their dear child is at last beginning to communicate verbally with them. It's fantastic! At the same time, I couldn't help but see how we're still stuck on that level of mentation, writ large. Satisfactorily identifying objects goes so deep and is so happily reinforced by our closest companions, that we can't help but feel it's the whole goal.

But we so need to move on, into territory where we don't necessarily receive the kind of encouraging feedback we got as children, so we have to be self-motivated. Otherwise, our every contact only serves to further restrict our psychic space. Do you recall the pull-quote I used in the Introduction to Darsanamala, from Nitya's first chapter commentary:

As a result of the conditioning of the faithful by the established religions, and of the skeptics by the categoric statements of science, man has become bifurcated in his sense of his true beingness. Having thus separated him from his true ground—that substratum that gives rise to all beings—those responsible for this have largely repressed in him the sense of wonder and delight in which one who knows his true being lives all the time. Looking in vain for some religious statement or scientific formula which will neatly encompass the whole mystery of being, so that we can file it away in our box of consumer goods and calendar maxims, we have forgotten that the mystery we seek to penetrate is our own mystery.

In the present terms, we've dropped the true subject and are living lives of pure predication. All the while wondering what's missing,

and assuming it's a fault of our own rather than a generic systemic one.

Deb remembered doing a clever teaching experiment for middle school children, where they looked at slides projected on a screen. At first she showed the slides completely out of focus, and she asked them to identify what they saw. All made guesses and defined the blurs. Then she brought the slides a little more in focus, and they said no, they were wrong before, now they are something else. She kept refining the focus, and each time there were new objects perceived, until they were all the way in focus and everyone knew what they had been shown. At each stage though, the children were able to make an identification.

Adults go through a similar process in confronting the unknown. We start guessing with minimal information and maximal predisposition, and hopefully revise our opinions as we add more information. Bigotry holds on tight to the with minimal information and maximal predisposition stage, refusing to upgrade. One of the critical lessons of an education should be to be always willing to improve your understanding. Somehow, it routinely fails in this.

Our own predications, being dual in nature, automatically generate an opposite, an enemy, if you will. Ayn Rand's book *The Fountainhead* is a perfect example. The fountainhead of our free verse is reduced to a predication that "my fountainhead is better than yours," so I'm better than you. Leave me alone. Vedanta celebrates a universal fountainhead that gushes out every possibility in an awesome display that we render judgment on at our peril. It places the predications as secondary to the infinite source, and in so doing truly turns us toward and opens us up to the creative impulse. The ugliness of a selfish attitude is averted by continually referring to this universal karu, egg, fountainhead, creative principle, or what have you. Nitya offers a lovely analogy:

Thisness in its purest form can be compared to the paint in an artist's brush. Nobody can predict whether it is going to be

impressed in the form of a flower, a bird, a man, a cloud, a symbol, or a non-representative stroke. Once a form is impressed though, it gains a status of its own, and it automatically negates all other forms, which therefore become outside factors. The common stuff out of which this magic-like world is created by the mind is a consciousness which can only be described as “this”.

Deb has been combing through her 200+ pages of letters from Nitya to her, and found one where he wrote about meditation, along the lines of, “I’d like to recommend not having any program of goal in meditation, but only to settle into an undifferentiated state.” I pointed out this was not the kind of meditation you can make a business—or a religion—out of. In a way it’s anti- all of that. But it is precisely what he’s trying to convey in turning to an undefined This, which is the same as That Alone.

In another letter to Deb in *Love and Blessings*, Nitya wrote:

In Narayana Guru's Darsana Mala, bhakti is defined as continuous meditation on the true nature of one's self. Jesus said, “Your heart is where your treasure is.” Nothing is a greater treasure than one’s own self. The intrinsic quality of self is being joyous. The joy that is spoken of here is not to be confused with sensuous pleasure, or sentimental elation. True joy manifests in the free flow of one’s energy going into everyone like the radiation of light and receiving in your heart the gentle breeze that brings the loving care of all. When your outside and inside harmoniously resonate like a throb which is at once of your psyche and of the entire cosmos, you are in a true state of joy. In that there is a recurring memory which is not tainted with expectation and obligatory memories of the world. There is only the sense of fulfillment in giving, and receiving is only incidental.

It doesn't work to think, "I'm going to radiate light into everyone," but by cultivating a light-filled and joyous state of meditation that is a natural byproduct. The "I'm going to" converts it to an ego proposition, so leave that out. Just let it be; let it happen.

There is still an interaction going on: we rarely plunge into true nothingness. In our classes we meditate with as open minds as possible, but we have just implanted a series of (hopefully) frontier-shattering ideas. That means there is implicit direction within the emptiness, yet we aren't making ego-based plans like, "this is what I'll get out of this idea." More likely, it's "I don't know WHAT they're talking about." Which is actually a very good attitude.... Here's an update: instead of feeling upset you don't get it, be happy that you have been exposed to something that exceeds your grasp. The it becomes an invitation.

Paul wondered if this was a kind of dissociation, and in a way it is. The word has a negative connotation from psychology, where a psychotic person doesn't recognize objects or ideas correctly, but we are talking about not feeling compelled to identify everything based on previous definitions, in order to make room for an enlarged perspective.

Jan has been through 'dem changes' lately, with her two kids heading off for summer jobs far away, and when she was coming back from the airport from sending off the second one, she first thought What am I going to do with myself? Then she thought, I'm going to try something different. When she got home, instead of making plans, she decided to just sink into herself. She lay down on the couch and became peaceful, and practiced letting go of her associations. She very quickly became light and joyful, and she brought her bright soul to class with her last night. Without trying, she was radiating light into all of us.

All this made me wonder why adults, especially in groups, feel they have to always be right, to always nail everything down? They hate to admit they don't have all the information, so pretend they do. Why is it such a compulsion? I brought this up because I'm heading to Singapore to talk to adults about how to better

communicate with young people. I believe they would listen more eagerly if we didn't pretend to be pundits, but were more like them, and more interested in their perspectives. Most young people shut their ears in the presence of wisdom spouters. We have to resist the deep-seated training to be right all the time.

Paul wished that religious people could follow Jan's example and just let go, too. Growing up, he felt a tremendous compulsion due to threats of hell, that tried and true technique for whipping people into line. Moni concurred, that religion provides the ratification people crave, so they can feel all-knowing even when they aren't. Maybe they actually only associate with a book or an object of worship, but they feel it puts them in the right. After being in the wrong for a long time, it brings a great feeling of relief. Jan called it ego protection, and that's exactly right. And sadly, it's necessary, unless you have a meaningful measure of independence. An insecure ego is not going to let go of anything.

I could see how the threat of punishment in childhood underlies the powerful desire to seem right and therefore beyond reproach. But I was also getting at the positive pressure of being rewarded with approval for touching our knees when mom said the word knee. Even if you get lots of approval in other ways, it still feels great to make mom smile and hug you, and without it you might always be bereft of something essential. So we become performers. When we grow older and no one cares about us so much anymore, we feel our performance no longer measures up. We're not getting enough attention, so we become depressed or cast about for a better act. The one thing we almost never do is turn to look at the performer itself. If we do, we'll see it's a predicate: it isn't really us. We can be ourselves without putting on any show. And it feels great that way; much better than always seeking approval from outside.

Jan told us about going to her "gentle yoga" earlier—gentle hatha yoga, that is—and how the teacher had discoursed on Patanjali. It recalled our study to her, how some of it was pushy and some not pushy, meaning (I think) it was about trying and not

trying. As she lay on her mat, she was touched by the teacher's golden sentence, that you can just step into the river of life and it will carry you. Soooo easy. It helped her let go some more.

Paul countered with some fire department experiences where there were a thousand reasons not to flow. If your life is in danger—run, or at least get out of the way! Again, that relates to the world of name and form, of knees and ears. It has its due place, of course. But when we slip into the river of life in a safe environment, we can indulge moments of freedom from all those compulsions that have accumulated over our lifetimes.

As Deb put it, it's all about how to change perspective, how to see in a new way. She remembered moving during her third year of high school and how she hated it, yet it turned out to be the best thing ever, because it broke her free of the world she was stuck in and hadn't realized it. Something in us craves familiarity, long before we should stop seeking. She arrived at the new school and could plainly see how everyone else was stuck in their world too, so she didn't abandon herself into it. Instead she struck out in unconventional ways. Now she sees what a lucky thing it was.

Paul had a perfect story to back that up, and it fits with the animal conditioning we've been talking about lately, thanks to Frans de Waal. Paul has a fancy aquarium, and for a long time loved to add new specimens to his collection. Often the new fish were killed by the residents, because they are fiercely territorial. Then he got a tip that saved the day: you rearrange the plants and rocks in the aquarium whenever you add a new fish. It worked! With their familiar surroundings gone, the fish were not territorial any more, and by the time they were again, the new fish had become part of their familiar territory.

We celebrated this profoundly wonderful idea with a meditation on the undifferentiated state, with no fixed abode for reference, and then poured out into one of the most blissful evenings in the history of the Portland Gurukula.

Part II

In case you've forgotten the meaning of *mahendra* magic, it is well explained by Nitya under its other appearance in *That Alone*, verse 27 of Atmo:

In this verse, the Guru is equating the Self and the world to a grand magic. Here the magic is in the way things are experienced. When we experience things they are there; and when we do not experience them they are not there. Ultimately we cannot say whether they are or are not. They are, otherwise we would not experience them. But at the same time they are not: if they really existed they should continue, but they don't. That's a great magic.

At one moment, two lovers hug each other and whisper in each other's ear how much they care and what wonderful love they are having. In the next moment they behave like strangers. Everything said up to then no longer has any value. They cannot even remember it. Then again their mood fluctuates and changes. They are willing to bury everything for a new deal. And so, on and on.

The Magician comes with his five children for entertainment. He is the mind itself, and his children are the five senses: onlookers as it were. Together they start a big magic show. The senses are really more like angels than children, so they are called *indriya*, a name derived from Indra, the shining one. Even though the eye, for instance, is made up of inertial matter like skin, water and nerves which by themselves have no ability of knowing anything, the eye is sensitive to sunlight and it can clearly see everything. It is like a *deva*, a luminous angel. So all five senses are called *indriyas* or *devas*.

Mind is a superluminous thing that sees what the eye sees, hears what the ear hears, touches what the hands touch, smells what the nose smells, and tastes what the tongue tastes. In addition, it is capable of producing all these effects even when the senses are out of commission, such as in a dream state. Thus mind is called *mahendra*; *maha* means great, and *indra* means that which brings ideation. This *mahendra* in us, the mind and the senses, is producing the world jugglery, the world magic.

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Nitya occasionally referred to his revelation about F.H. Bradley's philosophy in his classes, and it found its way in two places into his English writings. Chapter 41 of *That Alone*, while elaborating his revelation in detail, does not mention the source. I guess I mainly remember him teaching it in person, I have no idea when. He did exactly what he describes in this chapter: repeated What is this? five times fast. We were all baffled. Then he did the next version slower, while pointing each time to a specific item. Then it made perfect sense. It really does elucidate Narayana Guru's Atmo verse quite beautifully.

This is a good place to place the two written instances side by side. First, from this week's study of *Meditations on the Self*, chapter 41:

An old reminiscence comes to mind. In the early 1950s I was teaching F.H. Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* in the Vivekananda College in Madras. In the course of my lecture I stumbled on a strange statement of his. It read somewhat like, "This 'this' is different from this 'this' because of the 'what' of this 'this' and the 'what' of this 'this'." I got stuck in a cloud of confusion and dismissed the class.

To boost my mind I sipped a cup of black coffee and walked up and down my room. I casually picked up Narayana Guru's *One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction* and opened it at random. The first verse that caught my attention acted on my mind like a magic spell. Even before finishing the verse, the confusion that arose in the classroom became at once transparent, and I was overwhelmed with the joy of a newfound secret. The delight of the discovery boiled over all night.

When I entered the class the next day, I asked rapidly five times, "What is this? What is this? What is this? What is this? What is this?" My students thought it was very funny. I again

repeated the question, but this time pointed to different articles in the classroom, such as the table, the board, a piece of chalk, a book and a chair. Though my questions of the first series were presumably aimed at different objects, they appeared to the students only as vain repetitions. The second series was different because they could easily see that the subject under reference in each question had a specific quality predicated to it.

Secondly, the autobiography highlights the curious “coincidence” that he was drawn to the exact verse that addressed the same idea. Nitya was teaching in 1953 at the Vivekananda College in Madras when this occurred:

A very beautiful thing happened while I was teaching F.H. Bradley’s *Appearance and Reality* to the students of the senior M.A. class. In it Bradley presents his idea of “this” and “what”. His whole contention can be summarized as follows: “This this is different from this this because of the what of this this and the what of this this.”

On first reading we get only a jargon of words. When taken individually, in every item of cognition a certain “this” is presented, and we are curious to know what “this” is. “This,” as such, is an undeciphered presentation of an unqualified presence. The cognitive function has to examine the features of what is presented to see how it can be distinguished from whatever was presented previously and whatever is to be presented afterwards.

Bradley’s statement did not yield any immediate envisioning of the problem it presented. So I allowed the students to disperse, and they all went to the canteen for coffee. I returned to my residence and had a cup of hot coffee. After taking a few sips, I opened a book that was lying on a table. It was Narayana Guru’s *Atmopadesa Satakam*. I opened it at random and read, “In ‘This is a pot’ the first impression, ‘this’, is the difficult to discern; ‘pot’ is its qualifying predicate.” The gist of what Bradley was trying to say in an elaborate essay running to many pages was given by

Narayana Guru in just two short lines. I was thrilled by how he explicated this philosophical problem without going into the jargon of logic. I could hardly wait for the next class to share my new insight and joy with my students. Then I thought there should be more opportunities for me to teach Narayana Guru's vision rather than beating about the bush with Bradley's philosophical paradoxes.

The immediately subsequent section speaks to our thesis of being open to new fields of exploration, adding a beautiful piece of advice from Nataraja Guru:

By the beginning of 1954 the atmosphere at the college had become rather suffocating. Although nobody directly asked me to resign, there were several pinpricks. I thought I would wait for Nataraja Guru's counsel before taking an initiative. And although I thoroughly enjoyed my sessions with the students, I felt an urge to walk away from institutions and find the freedom to go into whatever pleased my inner self. The call to go into an elaborate comparative study of Narayana Guru with all the major philosophers of the world was becoming irresistible. Moreover, my stance for equality was getting me into hot water with the administration.

A few days later Nataraja Guru came to see me again. When I told him how smothering the college atmosphere was and how I felt like revolting against it, Guru said, "An educational institution is a sacred place. When you were in need of it, the Vivekananda College opened its doors and welcomed you. When you leave it, you should go out with dignity, without regret and without malice to anyone. Give your blessings to the students and say goodbye in good taste to your colleagues." He added that leaving a position should always be considered a promotion, like leaving a short ladder to get onto a taller one. So I tendered my resignation with good grace.

Though as usual Nataraja Guru had said exactly the opposite of what I'd expected, it was sound advice. If he hadn't cleared my mind I'd have felt very angry and frustrated. Afterwards I learned firsthand of the Benevolent Grace that guided me to leave my academic career behind when I revisited Vivekananda College twenty years later. I went to the philosophy department and saw all my old friends sitting on dirty chairs in musty rooms and looking no brighter than the fossils displayed in the biology lab. (161-3)