

7/9/19

MOTS Chapter 43

Even those of good action are caught by nature
and whirled around in vicious circles;
one should know that non-action does not bring release from
perverted action,
only the non-desire for the fruit of action.

Free translation:

Even good people engaged in virtuous action are caught in
Nature's repetitive compulsions, and they helplessly go round and
round performing obligatory action. Mere omission of action does
not cure the mind of its urge to modulate. Only unitive
understanding, which is desireless, brings emancipation.

This verse is very much in accord with the Bhagavad Gita,
and I'll bring in some of the parallels as we go along. The most
direct connection is quoted in Part II.

Deb opened with thoughts bearing implicit connection with
the Gita's non-desire for the fruits of action, as given in its first
definition of yoga in its second chapter:

47) Your concern should be with action (as such) alone, not for any
benefits ever. Do not become benefit motivated; be not attached to
inaction either.

48) Engage in activity, Arjuna, taking your stand on the unitive way,
discarding attachments, and capable of regarding both attainment and
nonattainment as the same: in sameness consists the unitive way.

49) Far inferior is the way of action to the unitive way of reason,
Arjuna, resort to reason for final refuge; pitiful indeed are they who are
benefit motivated.

50) Affiliated to reason one leaves behind here both meritorious and unmeritorious deeds. Therefore affiliate yourself to the unitive way; yoga is reason in action.

What more do we need to know? Yet putting this into practice makes for a lifetime of challenges and opportunities, which arise perfectly naturally—without any need to establish goals or delineate stages of development. Everything that happens is “an occasion for, as well as an instrument of, unitive understanding.” I like to quote Nataraja Guru on verse 47 above:

This is much-quoted and much-abused verse which has been bandied about by pseudo-pandits who seem to support the idea that a man who works should not think of any results. If a man should cultivate a field and if, when the corn is ripe, he himself should set fire to it to prove to his neighbours that he does not care for “the fruit of action,” that would almost correspond to the sense in which many such pandits seem to interpret the meaning of the verse. To expect reasonable results from any action that a man might do is but normal, hence purposely to minimize the importance of results in the sense indicated in the above example, would be absurd.

So it's a subtle business indeed. Deb's way of putting it was to try not to manipulate the world to our desires. Ordinarily, everything we do is directed to try to get what we want. Narayana Guru's exhortation is to let go of the force of needing to harness it all for “me.” Maybe the meaning is simply to not become obsessed with results, while not excluding them from the overall purview. Neglecting results has caused untold damage from technological innovations that were presumed to be purely positive because they were “scientific,” for instance. There's a religious-type assumption if there ever was one.... Goals are valuable, but they change as we

proceed and discover new aspects of a situation, so we need to remain flexible.

I added, as is my wont, that this unitive philosophy is 180 degrees opposite of the present paradigm, where self-interest is considered the gold standard of behavior, despite carrying us to the brink of disaster in just about every aspect of life.

Paul brought up the title of a movie Susan once had recommended: *The Shape of Water*. Of course water has no shape of its own, it simply conforms to the shape of its container. This got him thinking that prakriti, nature, provides the vessels for purusha or spirit to take shape in. He could see how the desire for specific benefits was like confining the spirit in a certain shape, but that truth—our higher calling--requires a different meaning. If we want the spirit to become it all, we have to have an unlimited viewpoint, unlimited shape.

While this is true to an extent, shapes provide meaning as well as limitations. In embracing the twin aspects of embodied life, Nitya uses the ongoing train metaphor to stand for the fixed, immovable aspect of life:

Man is like a turbulent river of life with a drop of consciousness pervading its water.... Our life combines the contiguous flow of a river with the programmed routine of a train.

Paul made the point that we distribute our values indiscriminately onto both what we can and can't affect, meaning we overlay our programmed routines onto the raging river of our spirit, making it more like a stagnant pool than a wild and free watercourse. We would be much better off to bring undammed values to bear (intelligently) on our routines.

Jan felt we needed to find more ways to bring undifferentiated spirit into our lives. Deb aptly described the paradox as needing to become receptive rather than restrained, meaning we can remain open to new options in our shape.

Paul asked, How do you break free? He retold the Alaska rough road sign he once saw, just before the beginning of a muddy stretch with deep ruts: Choose Your Ruts Carefully. You'll Be In Them A Long Time. Jan knew right away that the first and possibly most important step in spiritualizing our existence is to recognize when you're in a robotic state. In a rut, as we say. Unless we know about the ruts we're already traveling in, we aren't going to do anything about them. Nitya describes running our programmed ruts as robotic, conditioned behavior, and prescribes the alternative:

We get a different picture of action in the behavior of a yogi. A yogi sits in meditation. Nobody dictates what he should do. His organs of perception and action are withdrawn from all programs of perception and movement. He is not even thinking or reasoning. Even when ideas bubble up in his mind, he avoids linking them with other ideas or feeding them with his interest. He brings about such a state of non-action by acts of will. In other words, he is acting. In his case there is action in his non-action.

After practicing this while sitting, a yogi remains in that state while going through the day. Nitya goes on to caution this is no easy task:

Even if we discipline our mind and cultivate the most refined mode of behavior, it may still leave our unconscious free from the control of ratiocination and conscious deliberation.

The Gita's "well-founded reason" is much more than conscious deliberation: it is a transcendental synthesis of a subject and its objects. There is much about how to achieve it throughout the work, but I'll select a short section near the end of chapter II:

- 60) Even with a man of wisdom, Arjuna, in spite of his effort, excited sense interests can forcibly distract the mind.
- 67) Still moving amid sense interests, that item to which the mind submits draws away the reasoning as the wind does a ship on the waters.
- 64) But he whose Self is subdued, whose attachment and aversion are both within the sway of the Self, although his senses still move amidst sense-interests, he wends toward a state of spiritual clarity.
- 65) By spiritual clarity there takes place the effacement for him of all sufferings, and for one whose spirit has become lucid, very soon reason becomes properly founded.

The class lamented how difficult it is to change in a meaningful way as we get older. A lot of our discussion was how daunting this is, and yet everyone present exemplifies a measure of success in that department. I suggested it's another habit of mind to believe we are stuck in our comfortable place, when we're changing and interacting all the time, and with the help of the wisdom texts the change is having a positive effect in our lives. I wanted people to share that side of their experience, but apparently it's inhibiting to think in those terms. I see it as a negative proclivity: we're more comfortable sharing our blocks than our freedoms. Remember, we're not trying to totally eliminate our conditioning. It has many useful features. We are merely trying to become more conscious of it, and to free ourselves from the unnecessary burdens the worst of it inflicts.

We talked about a dear friend who was going through a tough time, and how a number of his friends preferred to make light of the situation, pretending there wasn't much the matter, when there plainly was. It was a vivid example of how we humans make up stories instead of facing actualities right in front of us. It amounts to desiring an impossible or unlikely outcome in place of meeting

the present as it is, or in the ancient language, a craving for imaginary fruit. Beneath the falsely cheerful exterior of those people, their discomfort was clearly visible, and may have even been one of the precipitating factors in the charade.

Paul gave a unique example of conditioning that's beyond conscious reach. Every year in the fire department we got a physical exam, due to the high injury and disease rate of firefighters. You got poked and prodded and turned upside down, but what he hated the most was having his knee tapped to check his reflexes. It really bothered him that there was no way he could prevent it, though he tried really hard. He had hated it all his life. I think most kids find the reflex amusing rather than frustrating, and of course we're very lucky to have so much essential bodily activity beyond our conscious, flawed control. The real issue of conditioning here is that Paul was raised in deadly fear of God, and a child learns to hold intense control over everything in his mind and body in order to avoid threats and punishments. That means the real conditioned reflex was Paul's self-protection mechanism, not the knee.

This is what Jan meant about recognizing our conditioning. A condition will never be ameliorated if we don't recognize its existence. The medical test just made Paul upset; he didn't know why. We likely can't do away with our initial reaction—they go really deep—but we can recognize it, and then cancel the habitual response. This is what Nitya is describing here:

We cannot deny the fact that there are certain areas of conditioning which are beyond the pale of our rational mind. Grief, pity, fear, sex-fascination, curiosity, and a number of other basic instincts originate from the inconscient seedbed of incipient memory. The slightest provocation from the faintest stimulus can cause the sudden upsurge of a latent habit trait. Very often we don't realize how much we are provoked before reason belatedly comes to our rescue. This is a tragedy to which even kind-hearted people of altruistic motives succumb.

We need not, however, continue to express the distortion of a conditioning when it might just as well be deconditioned.

Nitya provides a short list of our options:

Deconditioning ourselves is not easy. Resorting to inaction is not very helpful. Repression or withdrawal may even turn out to be pathological. Only by unitive action can one effectively cope with nature's demand for action.

The wrap-up of the chapter is a worthy attempt to briefly describe unitive action, no easy task. After hinting that balancing subjective and objective (horizontal) factors admits you into pure consciousness, or the vertical parameter, Nitya goes on:

From this we can clearly see that the spirit in us is an imprisoned splendor, which causes an action or reaction in every pulsation of awareness. That means action is imperative as long as the spirit is conjoined with the physical organism. This being the case, the question of giving up action doesn't arise at all. All that is left to us is using our skill to bring both action and reaction into perfect resonance with the original rhythm and harmony of the oversoul or the undifferentiated spirit, on the surface of which arise all the waves, whirlpools, and tidal waves of action and counteraction. Effecting this inner harmony is called unitive action or karma yoga.

Yes, the point is to release our imprisoned splendor back into our experience. It isn't easy, but so what? Wouldn't restoring that be worth whatever it takes? And it isn't just a goal, it's a lifestyle, as Nitya implies in saying, "In unitive action, action is treated both as an occasion for as well as an instrument of unitive understanding." The logical next question is:

One may turn around and ask what unitive understanding is. It is none other than bringing all forms of awareness and every kind of understanding within an overall scheme of correlation or an all-embracing structure. One cannot avoid seeing this if favored with a vision of the Absolute. Lacking this, one visualizes the boundless infinite in the heart of the finite. In one's own self one sees the Self of all.

Nitya often talked about his “unlimited liability” to all and everyone. He concludes by showing where that comes from, and how relegating it to nature takes away the infinite obligation it would entail if taken only individually:

This awareness or understanding makes us directly liable for and related to everyone's action. As that liability and primary initiative of action are obviously beyond the ground and range of the individuated person, we see action as belonging to nature, which perpetuates the fecund multiplication of animated individual organisms. The recognition of the individual's relation with nature lifts both the merit and liability of action from the individual's shoulders. It is as if the yogi of unitive understanding is absolved of the good and evil implications of action. This, in substance, is unitive action based on unitive understanding.

I want to address one other aspect we didn't discuss in class, Nitya's writing about the Will of God:

The action of a renunciate is what we refer to as non-action in action, with the difference that his will is the Will of God. The renunciate is an instrument of God.

Over his lifetime, Nitya used the term God less and less, since it's the most loaded of all terms. (His priceless case for its use is expressed in the chapter The Meaning of God, in *Love and*

Blessings. I can send it to you.) For Nitya, God was the philosophical Absolute, and all his teaching was aimed at accessing that reality. There was no Zeus wielding a thunderbolt or anything. The Will of God can stand for all the non-conscious forces strumming on our awareness. In our context, then, being an instrument of God symbolizes openness to the Universe as a supporting, nurturing ground of existence. Of course it's problematic: any surrender of our personal will is fraught with peril. Yet we have so many tools to insure we don't go off the deep end, I'm not even going to list them here. Don't miss the Gita verses directly below in Part II, as they're the very kind of thing we all need to have handy. And do remember Narayana Guru's creeper-laden tree that we contemplatives are meditating under: we have to remain alert so none of the vines ensnares us. Friends are a big help, able to see what's creeping up behind us, so we should always be ready to listen to them. They are something to be very grateful for.

As usual, everyone was elevated beyond expectations by sitting together in amity and concord. Amazing how that happens.

Part II

The gist of this chapter is based on the Gita's take on karma yoga, especially this section from chapter IV. Krishna, standing for the Absolute, is instructing:

14) I am not affected by works, nor have I any interest in the benefit of works; he who understands Me in this manner comes no more under the bondage of works.

15) The ancients performed work after knowing in this manner, therefore do that kind of work also, as was performed by the ancients, desiring emancipation in times more ancient.

16) On what is action and what is inaction even intelligent men here are confused. I shall indicate to you that action on knowing which you will be emancipated from evil.

17) One has to understand about action and understand also what is wrong action; again, one has to have a proper notion of non-action; the way of action is elusively subtle indeed.

18) One who is able to see action in inaction and inaction in action—he among men is intelligent; he is one of unitive attitude, while still engaged in every (possible) kind of work.

19) The one whose works are all devoid of desire and willful motive, whose (impulse of) action has been reduced to nothing in the fire of wisdom, is recognized as a knowing person by the wise.

20) Relinquishing attachment for the benefit of works, ever happy and independent, though such a man be engaged in work, (in principle) he does nothing at all.

21) One free of all expectancy and of subjugated relational self-consciousness, who has given up all possessiveness, and is engaged merely bodily in actions—he does not acquire evil.

22) Satisfied with chance gains, unaffected by conflicting pairs (of interests), non-competitive, remaining the same in gain or no gain, he remains unbound in spite of having been active.

23) In the case of one whose attachments are gone, who has gained freedom, whose spiritual being has been founded on wisdom, his works, having a sacrificial character only, become wholly dissolved.

24) For him the Absolute is the act of offering, the Absolute is the substance offered into the Absolute which is the fire, offered by

(him), the Absolute, the end to be reached by him being even the Absolute, by means of his peace supreme of absolutist action.

* * *

One important corollary that we didn't discuss in class was that this verse dismisses the idea that being good absolves you of the impact of prakriti, which is a widespread supposition. I always think of my friend who, after a bad thing happened to her family, angrily burst out, "I don't think I believe in karma any more!" What she meant was that bad things shouldn't happen to good people. Yet her good family had plenty of chances to take action, and merely crossed their fingers and hoped for the best, allowing an evildoer to win easily. Karma simply means action, and it produces an equal and opposite reaction every time. Narayana Guru makes it plain that the give and take of karma affects everyone, and that inaction is not an effective response. It doesn't stand up to anything. Nitya puts it this way:

Nature does not spare anyone. From the most well established yogi to the craziest man of action, all are caught in the whirlpool of nature's call for change and activity.

The bottom line is that morality does not bring about spirituality, despite the endless flogging of the righteous. Virtuous action has its own benefits, but that's another matter, especially since we are requested to not focus on the fruits of our actions, since that weakens what the Gita calls our "decisive nonattachment."

Here are some excerpts about that from my Gita commentary about moralizing, XIII.7:

Arjavam, straightforwardness, is a subtle and excellent tactic for living well. It includes openness and honesty, and an advanced discrimination of truth from falsehood. The moralistic exhortation to always tell the truth, like most simplistic pronouncements, falls

far short of the ideal. In his masterwork *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain demonstrates beyond any shadow of a doubt that there are times when a lie is vastly superior to all parties involved than guileless honesty. A muddle-headed thinker might require an easy-to-remember slogan for guidance like “always tell the truth,” but the yogi is expected to live as an expert, bringing wide-awakeness to every situation, and acting impeccably according to their best judgment. Following rigid guidelines will never do....

Purity, *saucham*, is usually associated with so-called moral behavior. But striving to always be good and pure feeds the spiritual ego like nothing else, leading to intractable problems. Spiritual purity is actually a totally different matter. When we latch on to certain static states, such as when we feel ashamed or upset or guilty, and especially when we think we have solved all our problems and are right where we’re supposed to be, then we aren’t open to the next thing that comes along. Our vision becomes clouded whenever we cling to the familiar, because we are not free to be open to the next moment. To stay in the flow we have to release our hang-ups and fixations. Whenever we get stuck, particularly in emotionally charged states, that is precisely where we need to do our work, to restore our fluidity.

When purity becomes a part of us, we will see life as *lila*, a divine sport, where all meaning occurs within the unfoldment of events just as the tree develops from the seed. Such an attitude allows for easy detachment and the flexibility to let go when the flow threatens to sweep you away from what you cherish or cling to....

If you are pure you can set aside your egoistic desires and act for the greatest common good, which includes your own part in it. This is very different from the Puritanical notion that purity means not breaking social rules, or not having any fun, such as enjoying sex or imbibing psychotropic substances. Dr. G.H. Mees succinctly corrects this in *The Key to Genesis*:

In Europe and America there is a strong tendency to identify morality and spirituality. But anyone who has common sense and looks around, is aware that there are a great many people who are moral saints, but lack inner peace and do not know true happiness. In the East the identification of morality and spirituality is as a rule avoided.

As I said about this quote in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study group: “That last sentence is wishful thinking, or else times have changed an awful lot since the 1950s. But the point is well taken that an obsession with morality is an impediment for a seeker of truth, and tends to draw a person away from a truly unitive orientation.”

And from XIII.21:

Unlike some religions, Krishna’s wording evidences a very open and nonjudgmental attitude. We aren’t faking what turns us on. Why should we? It’s just that bluenoses of all ages have uncaged their sadistic natures by trying to squelch other people’s happiness, and they’ve been very successful. This can only be because they have been denied joy in their turn, and are secretly jealous. What they rail against is what they inwardly crave. Because of all the false moralizing in virtually every society, we are forced to undertake a detailed yogic recovery program to return to our native state of joy. It’s really a shame and a waste of our precious time, but we have no choice.

Finally, this is from That Alone, where the verse likens our sensory life to five birds flitting about and eating fruits::

The movement of the birds is qualified as *nayena*, evasive. The word *naya* has several shades of meaning. The tactics of a diplomat are called *naya*. The implication is that in outward form one seems to be upholding ethical norms and correct behavior,

while at heart one is maneuvering with conceit. The defense mechanism of concupiscence is *naya*. In the Holy Koran one can find hundreds of passages decrying this kind of conceit. For a spiritual or moral life, one is asked to be straightforward and simple.

The Freudian concept of the clash between the id and the superego being reflected in the neurotic behavior of the ego, can be used to more fully understand the connotation of the term *naya*. The operation of the moral authority of the superego is a kind of mirroring within oneself of a fake image of public expectations. One then tries to conform to the requirements of that pattern with continuous deliberation, while at the same time indulging in a secretive enjoyment of forbidden pleasures, privately painting them with altruistic motives to look as bright and acceptable as possible. The ethical considerations of trying to please both oneself and the public are as enigmatic as the Sphinx. The kind of morality upheld by that kind of attitude is what Henri Bergson describes as "closed and static." It is opposed to the morality of an Absolutist, which is both open and dynamic. In *The Devil's Disciple*, Bernard Shaw tries to show the distinction between these two kinds of morality. The *dharma* that Narayana Guru wants adopted is what the Isavasya Upanishad describes as the ethics of a truthful person, *satyadharma*. (60)

Part III

Amara responded to the notes with a memory, specifically about the quoted paragraph:

" The class lamented how difficult it is to change in a meaningful way as we get older. A lot of our discussion was how daunting this is, and yet everyone present exemplifies a measure of success in that department. I suggested it's another habit of mind to believe we are stuck in our comfortable place, when we're changing and interacting all the time, and with the help of the wisdom texts the

change is having a positive effect in our lives. I wanted people to share that side of their experience, but apparently it's inhibiting to think in those terms. I see it as a negative proclivity: we're more comfortable sharing our blocks than our freedoms. Remember, we're not trying to totally eliminate our conditioning. It has many useful features. We are merely trying to become more conscious of it, and to free ourselves from the unnecessary burdens the worst of it inflicts."

I have taken a break from working with the small group that gathered in our home. They all are well and going their own ways now.

But when we gathered together I always pointed to how awake and awakening we all were despite troubles and seeming struggles.

Once when with Nitya, a young woman visitor was sad and fearful about a friend who was days late arriving at the Gurukula.

Nitya said nothing but pointed to a perfect rose bloom outside. It was such a beautiful moment, but she did not "get it".

Sorrow and projection had over come her. For me it was a teaching never to be forgotten.

Love, Amara