

7/16/19
MOTS Chapter 44
From the Dust Storm of Doubt to the Shower of Grace

The many faiths have but one essence;
not seeing this, in this world, like the blind men and the elephant,
many kinds of reasoning are used by the unenlightened who
become distressed;
having seen this, without being disturbed, remain steadfast.

Free translation:

The normative essence of everyone's conviction is the same. Those who do not know this secret become fanatical in establishing relativistic points of view, arguing like the proverbial blind men who went to "see" an elephant and couldn't agree between them in its description. Avoid all such disputes by cultivating the all-embracing attitude of sameness.

We've arrived at one of the "cream" sections of Atmo, and it will persist until the end of our time in these *Meditations on the Self*. Here we have an opportunity to put everything we've learned into practice, with every hope that it will provide a significant upgrade in our way of life.

Nitya opens with a simple yet typical situation. He was trying hard to concentrate on elucidating ideas for an article he was writing, and a visitor willfully interjected noisy distractions, maintaining being loud is his right, and he has no obligation to respect Nitya, since he's a renunciate, and renunciates are not supposed to care. Nitya begged him to be quiet to no avail. Near the end of his rope, Nitya abandoned argument and simply surrendered:

Having found it difficult to convince him of the trouble he was giving me, I stood up and embraced him and told him he was sweet. He blessed me in return and went away, leaving me to myself.

People are so conditioned to fight and expect opposition from others, that if you slip over to their side they may well be disarmed. Nitya puts it very simply: “An irrational dispute can be settled by effacing the ego of one of the contestants.” Agreement may succeed where disagreement brings further entanglements.

In her opening talk, Deb told us how in arguments she pictures a limitless chessboard where each person is standing on their own square. She is sure she is arguing from a correct viewpoint, yet it’s just one small point on the board, and neither of them has a comprehension of the entire field. A complete understanding of the field is necessary, however. We have to give up our identification with our little piece. This means that no matter how right you think you are, and possible really are, it can’t possibly be the whole truth.

Deb felt that Nitya’s example was particularly beautiful because instead of treating the annoying man as an enemy, he treated him sweetly and gave him a hug. Like that, when she listens to Ocasio-Cortez (a charismatic progressive politician) she admires that she doesn’t get caught in the attacks against her. She keeps her focus on what she can do that’s positive, avoiding the negative interplay.

I pointed out that that’s the rhetorical position: if you can coerce your opponent into arguing on your terms, you have already won. The troglodytes of our time are experts at drawing everyone into their abysmal world view. I recommended the new biography of Narayana Guru by Nancy Yeilding, with lovely examples of how the Guru never got dragged into demeaning arguments, though many people tried. He always remained full-fledged, accepting, and tolerant.

Bill felt that realizing we are all on the same page was key for him: it mitigates and allays confrontation, even if you're not conceding anything to another person. If we approach a conflict realizing that we are the same, it smooths things out.

Deb remembered Nitya telling a story of two brothers who had had a long-standing family argument and were filled with antipathy toward each other. One day they asked him to intervene. He sat in between them and let them each tell their side of the story. Having him as the neutral moderator, they were forced to listen to each other. The meeting ended with them hugging each other and crying with relief.

I mused on the deep-seated need to prove we are right, that seems to underlie so much conflict. If we could accept that we don't know it all, that we only have a partial awareness, we could relax, realizing we are all in this together. Instead we bully and coerce, to force the other to accept that our partial truth is wholly true. All that punishment and humiliation for being wrong is hard to break free from.

For Nancy, the key is learning to really listen. Usually you're thinking about what you believe instead of listening to what the other person is trying to say. She said, "When I really can do that, then it reciprocates — if I feel like they are really listening too, and you do get to that place of reciprocating, of finding what you have in common, even if it's something you are really opposed to. If you listen to why that person feels that way, it is something you can understand."

Of course it's wonderful when that happens, but typically in these polarized times one side won't give up, won't listen no matter what. Still, unilateral surrender is always helpful in a discussion, as it calms the ego. At least we can always ask ourselves "let's see what happens if I agree with them." Deb added that you can't plan it out as a strategy, you just have to be aware and attentive in the moment.

Jan laughed ruefully and again read out Nitya's "An irrational dispute can be settled by effacing the ego of one of the

contestants.” She finds herself more drawn into *rational* disputes—which tend toward the irrational anyway, don’t they? She has debates these days with her highly rational college-age son, and the only solution is for her to give in to him: “yes, yes, whatever you say.” He is never going to let her win, he’s so convinced he’s right, so it’s pointless to fight him.

We all laughed along with her, and Nancy added it’s all irrational. We only think we are the rational one.

Effacing the ego works on a personal level, but the modern world especially is peopled by armies of believers, who cling to their leaders and disagree, sometimes violently, with other groups. There isn’t so much personal contact; we hide behind barricades and hurl curses or bombs and bullets at those who see things differently. Nitya hints at this in a gentle way. Instead of political factions, he cites “the uncompromising verbal battle that was going on between the followers of Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, who founded the schools of nondualism, qualified monism, and dualism, respectively.” Most of us don’t get quite so worked up about philosophical fine points, but the underlying principle is the same. Nitya admits the qualitative difference between meetings of individuals and the clashing of believers:

When yesterday there was disagreement between a noisy visitor and me, our differences could be overcome by simply agreeing that he was right. But the doctrinal differences between these great masters are of a very different kind, and the protagonist of each version had at his command rhetoric, logic and semantics to defend each argument and to validate each conclusion.

We have been well instructed that all clashes are dualistic, my side or point of view against yours. The effort is to draw a hard line between the sides. In yoga or unitive understanding these are dealt with in an overarching context, and the lines are seen to be fictional. Nitya writes:

It's a shame that even great philosophers sometimes fail to see the other person's point of view. Narayana Guru had no difficulty in placing anyone in an all-embracing unified vision and an overall scheme of correlation. In the absence of a properly coordinated understanding, even the best vision can be equated to the partial view of a blind man who, after careful scrutiny of an elephant, describes it as resembling a hose pipe or a pillar or a rugged granite wall or a broomstick.

In case you've somehow missed the most famous teaching story from India about the blind men and the elephant, there's a long version here:

<https://www.peacecorps.gov/educators/resources/story-blind-men-and-elephant/> .

Humans analyze as well as synthesize, and it's important to do both. The elephant isn't a composite pile of partial perspectives, it's a living creature. We understand it better when we know all the parts, but we also need to know what the parts comprise. This is the truth that is automatically excised by partisanship. Nitya winds up his brief chapter with two powerful paragraphs on this. First:

One should not presume from my mention of Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva that they did not grasp truth. It needs, however, the unitive vision of a Narayana Guru to see the complementarity of their teachings. If we are initiated into the secret of unitive understanding, the apparent differences of religions, systems of philosophy, and political ideologies will all turn out to be fictitious semantic shadows obscuring the vision of the one and only truth, which is seen by everyone from many different angles and with varying degrees of certitude.

Bill talked about how a lot of people cling to their vision of truth so they can feel certitude, even when they're riddled with

doubt. Religions especially, provide articles of faith that people hang on to irrationally.

Nancy agreed, that the need is driven by fear. For her, thinking in terms of the Absolute takes the fear out of it. Yet in most religions, you're fearing what's going to happen, religions are built around that. There has to be a constant peeling away of the fear, if you start feeling doubt.

Deb's inversion of this was, if you're not afraid you don't have to worry. The trick is to know you're truly not afraid, because it's an invisible motivator in these cases. Sometimes we think we aren't afraid, but we're still acting to avoid a fantasized negative outcome.

I asserted that the premise that kills us is thinking we know truth, and that truth is some kind of fixed quantity, even though every day there are millions more things added to our knowledge. I've moved the ensuing discussion of science and religion into Part II, as it's its own topic, though highly relevant.

What we have to remember in the elephant and the blind men story is that the elephant is indescribable. It represents something infinite and indefinable. We think we can nail it down but we can't: truth can't be put in that kind of context at all.

This got Deb to recall the black obsidian discs of Teotihuacan Andy mentioned for chapter 42, how they reflect in a way a non-delineated world, and we are drawn into it. It was in part a discrete prompt to get Andy talking, and it opened the doors for him. He spoke passionately of several possibilities he's visualized for himself lately, such as how easily his life's path could have taken a different tack with the slightest of altered luck. He thinks it's true that we have everything in us, though it isn't all going to be expressed. Because the truth is limited, we are always projecting some finite aspect of ourselves. All those possibilities are contained in the black disc, an infinite number of unexpressed possibilities, a few of which are drawn into the world as manifestations.

Andy realized he's been in a married state more than half his life, yet he could never figure out where his projections stopped and those of his partner took over. He asked us to remember that what you think you see in your spouse is some aspect of yourself.

Deb mused that the possibilities that we see in the other and dislike are the ones just outside our peripheral vision, and Jan laughingly added that even the ones we like are.

I agreed that what Andy said about projections was true, and it was true of everyone, not just spouses. There are no hard and fast lines between people; we overlap, merge into one another. Those fortunate enough to have a dear friend, a spouse, a caring parent, or a quality guru or therapist receive the benefit of having their projections and possibilities reflected back to them so they can understand themselves better. It's harder to walk away from a marital partner if we don't like what we see, but we always have the option to leave. It's good to expect that the reflections we encounter are not always beautiful, and the ugly ones can teach us a great deal. Having some version of the unclouded mirror in our life is most important if we want to learn and grow.

Deb was reminded of a line in Wallace Stegner's book *Angle of Repose*, how different people that you know bring out different parts of you, and you don't express those parts unless you are with those people. That really emphasizes the value of personal interactions.

One of Nitya's favorite philosophical sayings was "Philosophers kick up dust and then complain of poor vision." It is derived from Bishop George Berkeley:

I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves. We have first raised a dust, and then complain we cannot see.

This, I think, provided the dust of the title and the magnificent final paragraph:

Knowing this secret, we should make haste to retrace our steps from the cloud of dust raised by controversies to sit in calm repose, so that the all-embracing Absolute can finally prevail upon us. The peace that comes from understanding is a gentle shower of grace which can wash away from our heart even the last vestige of doubt.

As we retraced our steps into silence at the end of the class, with the evening glow darkening through the picture windows of our living room, Nancy called our attention to the silhouette of a great horned owl sitting on the very top of a tall fir tree in the near distance. Nitya always looked like a very wise owl to me, and this one was facing directly toward us, as if it was looking down on our gathering. “Bird gives blessing,” as baby Emily once said, when a great blue heron flew over us at the lake where we were camping, just at dusk. This one did too. In awe we “sat at the feet” of the owl for a few minutes, black on a black tree backed by the blue-black sky, and then it swooped down and was gone.

Part II

The class had a long discussion on the hubris of scientists, since the “I’m right and your wrong” attitude has moved beyond religion to include what can only be called a religion of science, where Science is the god incapable of doing wrong, with religion its sworn enemy. Science is a religion proudly devoid of morality, surely a risky business.

To me, Vedanta and Buddhism get it right: it is not a matter of science versus religion, which are actually close cousins, but of ignorance versus knowledge. Dispelling ignorance is something we all agree on, though people follow different routes to try to accomplish it. Knowing this we can admit there is much of value

in a religious attitude as well as a scientific one. And neither is perfect in itself.

Deb and I have been listening to Dan Brown's latest pot boiler, *Origin*, which pits religion against science in simplistic terms that should have gone out of date long ago. It employs the straw man principle to posit the most absurd version of religion so it can easily be shot down. I keep hoping Brown will turn the tables and show the flaws of all perspectives, but most of the way through it looks unlikely.

It got me thinking of the science of the past, how wrong we know it to be, but at the time it was also revered as Absolute truth. Karen and Nancy talked about this, how every few years a new paradigm takes center stage. It should teach us to accept that all positions are necessarily partial, and to judge ideas on that basis, rather than a black and white canvas—my way or none—that seems to captivate humans with ease.

I remembered my middle school science presentation on the pseudoscience of phrenology, the science of correlating bumps on the skull with behavior and propensities, and how everyone now agreed it was laughably misguided. Sunday's NY Times (July 14, 2019) featured a long article on "Facial Recognition's Racist History," by Sahil Chinoy, where the secret police of the US and other countries are now using computer facial recognition "in ways that threaten civil liberties." Chinoy writes:

The technological frontiers being explored by questionable researchers and unscrupulous start-ups recall the discredited pseudosciences of physiognomy and phrenology, which purport to use facial structure and head shape to assess character and mental capacity.

Artificial intelligence and modern computing are giving new life and a veneer of objectivity to these debunked theories, which were once used to legitimize slavery and perpetuate Nazi race "science".... Apparently, we still haven't learned that faces

do not contain some deeper truth about the people they belong to.

The article makes it clear that science, like religion, can be good or bad depending on how it's used. Chinoy quotes a post: "Using scientific language and measurement doesn't prevent a researcher from conducting flawed experiments and drawing wrong conclusions—especially when they confirm preconceptions."

This is precisely the kind of grave error that Narayana Guru and Nitya are trying to help us avoid. It bears repeating Nitya's "magnificent sentence" from the commentary:

If we are initiated into the secret of unitive understanding, the apparent differences of religions, systems of philosophy, and political ideologies will all turn out to be fictitious semantic shadows obscuring the vision of the one and only truth, which is seen by everyone from many different angles and with varying degrees of certitude.

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In the same vein, it's a very big mistake to imagine scriptures are attempts to describe material reality. They are efforts to describe psychological or spiritual reality, and they are very good at it. Modern science is very bad at it, though that is finally changing with the promotion of neuroscience to the front rank. I cited this favorite excerpt from *The Key to Genesis*, by GH Mees. Dr. Mees, was Nitya's first guru. What he wrote about the Bible applies to scriptures everywhere, including the Gita:

LITERAL AND SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION

The first Chapter of Genesis has been generally assumed to present an account or theory of the creation of the material universe and of the evolution of life. For that reason it cannot be a source of wonder that

modern man, with his knowledge of material processes in the universe and of biology, has tended to look down upon Genesis as a poor product of an ignorant mentality. No doubt the people who knew the meaning of Genesis in past ages would have shaken their heads if they had come to learn of the modern way which tends to take everything at its face value alone and to interpret spiritual scriptures as if they were textbooks of astronomy, physics or biology. For Genesis does not describe cosmic and biological processes. Its purpose is more profound.

The aim of religion is to make man happier and to help him find peace and bliss, within himself and in his relation to the world without. It does not make anyone happier to know how the material world is created (assuming that such knowledge is possible at all) and how the physical processes take place and can be controlled. In connection with many aspects of science the world has learned to its cost to what extent control of matter can endanger and destroy peace and happiness. Atomic bombs and clouds are now looming in the sky threatening to shatter man's peace altogether and to cloud his horizon for evermore.

Modern man has largely lost interest in "established religion", because its dogmas, based almost wholly upon a literal interpretation of Scripture, offend his intelligence. He has become convinced that the great astronomers and physicists of these days have something to tell us that is more intelligent than the superstitious and outworn traditions which are contained, according to his belief, in Scripture. And who can blame him, as long as he does not know the deeper meaning hidden in the fundamental teachings of "Genesis"?

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Nitya's That Alone verse 44 commentary is one of his best. Always worth a reread. Here's an excerpt, about the limits of religious partisanship:

Once you go from the spiritual vision to religious belief, you have already strayed far from the truth. When we fight, the discord is about religion and not any spiritual vision. In two people who have a spiritual

vision there is no difference of opinion: they melt into each other. But when you have only heard something and then you or a priest interpret it for yourself, you take a stand. Your position is rigid to precisely the extent that your vision is limited. You have to think of your loyalty to the man from whom you heard. He can express only one millionth of his total experience through his words or example, and your sole authority is that one little fragment. As it is not in any way yours, you are always afraid to move a little this way or that way from what you have heard. You don't want to blaspheme. You want to hold onto it, but you do not know either its intention or extension. The result is that we become victims of narrow religious thinking. In order to support our religion we know only argument. We go on reasoning endlessly, but reason is absolutely useless and meaningless, if not destructive, in this matter.

This is the only tool we know. But what else can we do? The Guru here says *pala mata saravum ekum*, the essence of all those intellectualized versions of total reality or the Absolute is the same. Our mind can be turned towards the spirit, towards the source of our own inner light, or it can be turned towards the world illuminated by our senses. One concerns the source of illumination, and the other concerns the objects which are illuminated.

When your mind is focused on the illuminated world, you are naturally tempted to segregate things, vivify things, and specify them. In that world, when you hold an opinion it will be different from another person's opinion. Then you come to a state like that of the several blind people who went to see the elephant in the famous story. You hold different views because of outwardness. If you always look through the wrong end of a telescope you will have a distorted view of things. It will bring much frustration. But in a sense this is exactly what we are doing in our daily life. We do not agree with each other, not only about the highest truth but even about simple truths.

We forget that in none of our mental functions are we in direct relationship with the original, we are always only interpreting sensory images received in the mind. When we intellectualize, our mind is giving its own version, its best estimate, not a total picture of facts or data. The data is only what we presume. 'Fact' is a fiction. There is no

fact. There can be only a comparative range of fictions which are more or less useful or reliable. We make an approximation, even when we loudly swear our certitude.

Narayana Guru says “First of all, come to know that you are living in a world of approximation, where you arrive at conclusions derived by the intellect.” From the previous verses, we already know that this intellect is capable of making great magic, and unless you transcend it you are never with the total, with the whole. In the next five verses, he is going to tell us how this affects our social life.