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MOTS Chapter 45
Exclusive Dogmas and Inclusive Visions

One faith is despicable to another;
the *karu* described in one is defective in another's estimation;
in the world the secret of this is one alone;
know that confusion prevails until it is known to be thus.

Free translation:

One person's faith will appear as unworthy to another. A basic tenet of another's religion is often rated unsatisfactory and looked upon with disdain. Such confusion is born of irrational prejudices, and continues in the minds of people as long as the secret of universal sameness remains unknown.

Nitya uses a clever example to illustrate Narayana Guru's point, with two friends diametrically disagreeing about something he had written, exemplifying typical religious and scientific viewpoints. The "childhood reminiscences" Nitya is probably referring to are from his early autobiography, *The Fable of a Yati*, and I will include more about this in Part II.

For the class purposes we pursued a more general discussion. Nitya brilliantly epitomizes how partisans of either polarity easily get stuck in a pitiful, shrunken coffin of ideology:

Everywhere we meet with people who are convinced of the infallibility of one belief or another. Even the most rational man can make a mummified dogma out of his logical conjectures. And even the most fanatic religious dogmatist who thinks that truth is beyond reasoning can be seen engaged in piling hypothesis upon hypothesis to establish his conclusions.

Whenever I see people trying to prove their point with blusterous arguments, I peer beneath the surface for the doubts driving them. It's possible they want to convince me so that we can mutually ignore the flaws in their thinking. No matter what the hidden motivation, I try not to get drawn in.

Susan found Nitya's point a relief. She used to work as a journalist, for which she naturally maintained a neutral attitude. She had a friend who was always urging her to hold strong opinions, but that wasn't her style. She admitted she was never one to state an opinion and be able to back it up with five facts. She has always worried she didn't measure up because of this, but now it looks like she may not have been so far off after all.

Whether we are fully convinced of our posture or secretly doubt it, the ego feels duty bound to proclaim full confidence. It's most definitely a defense mechanism brought forward from childhood. It takes an advanced measure of adult self-confidence to admit we aren't all-knowing. We are more likely to cling to seemingly incontrovertible facts, which on analysis are merely trumped-up fictions. Nitya adroitly sums up this process:

To understand this phenomenon, Narayana Guru calls our attention to an ambivalent operation of the mind in which it alternates between taking things as bits and fragments of an analytical view and seeing things meaningfully adhering to each other as a unified ensemble. Although the mind is capable of both these views, a person feels more comfortable when his mind centralizes its attention and affectivity in favor of a single doubt or isolated factor. In the vision of the unified generality there is very little scope for the polarization of the individual self with its non-self counterpart. It's easier to see in the other fellow a stranger or a friend or a foe than to see one's own Self or God.

Deb felt we can talk about it theoretically but how do you reconcile differences that are utterly opposed? How do we find

common ground? Susan brought up the recent debates of the Democratic candidates for replacing the current President. Why do they have to be tearing each other down? Why can't they all come together and figure out something good? It's a great point, and would likely inspire more of the electorate than tediously debating more or less abstract "issues."

I mused that argumentation and debate were inculcated into our early education systems, all the ones stemming from the British model, because disagreement definitely can stimulate creative thinking. It's an important element in avoiding mental stagnation. The problem is that those debates originally took place within the context of social acceptance. Everyone was part of the social network, and therefore you weren't ostracized for having a contrary opinion. It was a welcome challenge, on friendly ground. Nowadays, exclusivity is more the norm. You are saved if you get the right answer or hold the right opinion or belong to the right tribe, and damned if you don't. Literally damned: headed for hell, here or hereafter. The inclusive notion of fellowship has been shredded, for all sorts of nefarious purposes.

Bill enthused that Tibetan monks were always holding serious debates—it's a major part of their culture—but they still have that inclusive attitude that winners and losers are nonetheless part of the same overarching context. They are on the same team, and they know that debates make their knowledge more thoroughgoing.

I agreed that we badly need the inclusive context, knowing that we're disagreeing as friends. We keep to that in our Gurukula class too. People are welcome to express their opinion, and remain within the loving atmosphere no matter what we think of their opinions.

Andy admired how Nitya takes each of the examples he's chosen and shows that both friends are behaving essentially like the other. One of the things we can do, then, is look within and see that we contain the other in a profound way, that the seeds of all

those things we may disagree with are present in us. If we turn the gaze inward, at our core we are everyone.

Nancy exulted that you listen to everyone, so that you can include the perspective of how they're seeing things. You put your own view aside for the moment, because what they think doesn't have to be compared to your way all the time. She finds it interesting to see that everyone is going different directions. Deb agreed that if you can accept that, it enlarges your understanding or world view.

Jan talked about how taking other peoples' beliefs and letting go of her own has been really good for her, allowing her to expand her comfort zone. She's been working on that a lot this summer, resisting her old belief systems coming up, realizing that being open to the Absolute means you keep evolving.

I too like to think of the Absolute speaking to us through the voices of other people and even nonhuman sources, and have worked for years to drop my guard over criticisms and "zingers" directed at me. Yet this is only half the battle—we also have learned to tune out our own best inner impulses, losing contact with the reservoir of wisdom we are already in possession of. We identify with the fixed part of ourselves and eschew the flowing spirit. I substituted a new metaphor for the old tip of the iceberg bromide: we focus on the protective skin that forms on the mug of hot chocolate, and forget the delicious drink just under it. Our ego is like that weird skin that we may pull off and discard, a thin veneer hiding the sweet nourishment beneath it.

Jan added a nice corollary that all the other people we know are also working to access their own inner intelligence, so we should be compassionate about their process of changing. Change can be imperfect and even frightening at first, so we should gently leave them room to discover their own ways without our criticism to inhibit them.

This is a tricky problem, especially with those directly under our care. We are trying to guide our own children, for instance, but there is a point when they need to take over that role and we need

to relinquish it. There is no clear dividing line either, for the transfer of guidance. It's a lot like when the infant ego takes over from the inner guide that has overseen its development from conception to a few months after birth: there is a back and forth dance of the transfer of dominance that can be observed with modern imaging techniques. Like that, the guiding parent has to let go, yet be ready to step in if a fatal mistake is impending, and we also have to take care that what may seem fatal to us as a parent might only be a valuable and educational slip up. The class all agreed that we learn best from our mistakes, an attitude out of step with twenty-first century bulldozer parenting, for sure.

Deb admitted that even after our kids are definitely adults, there are times you can see they are making mistakes and you would love to clue them in about them, but you can't. She went on, "I look back now and I can see where my parents were watching me and were surely worried about me, yet they mostly kept their opinions to themselves. That's not always easy to do as a parent!" Andy dryly put in that our long-suffering parents had already had a similar experience in their childhoods. Meaning this is a perennial problem. Having attained solid ground, it's tough to watch our loved ones thrashing about in the wild waves, but it's often very much for their benefit.

Deb conceded there is a higher level of anxiety between parents and children, but it's just another case of people accepting their experiences and working out how they see the world. It's a healthy business. If they don't fail and make mistakes, they're not going to grow. We have all learned by now that failing brings deeper understanding, if you can take it as a lesson.

Jan concurred that someone might be adhering to a dogmatic position that isn't very wholesome, but they need to go through it and face up to its consequences.

I thought this meant we should adopt a new motto: Fail for Success!

This principle is addressed by Nitya in a subtle way here, mentioning how we are compulsively attracted to order at the

expense of creativity. First off he wants us to simply recognize we have such an attraction:

Our mind is the collective expression of a well-organized system. It becomes disturbed when it is turned to something which is not neatly arranged, categorized, labeled, and set aside with a value tag on it.

To me, this is why Buddhism, with its well-organized systems and lists, has a greater appeal to Westerners than chaotic Hinduism. Vedanta is a carefully systematized version of Hinduism that tends to be even more boring than Buddhism. Regardless, systems can make us feel like we understand something when we really don't—we've just memorized the names for things in the system. This is a holdover from our school days: regurgitate what you've been taught, ideally word for word. We get a jolt of chemical satisfaction from it. Yet it's an ersatz high, and not creative at all.

So, we humans like to have lists of how to become more enlightened, and we memorize steps but don't always take them. The nice thing about not knowing what the plan is, is that you have to keep wondering What's going on here? It peels back the layer of complacency that we tend toward. An insightful teacher also continually offers that incentive to really get it, and not rely on pretence.

Chaotic, unscripted presentations force us to think in fresh ways. Nitya implicitly sides with a flexible attitude:

Those who want to grow and move with the ever-changing flux of life, don't want to be riveted to a closed faith or a hidebound dogma. They keep their minds open and sensitive to catch on to the secret of creativity implied in the changing and expanding universes of spirit as well as matter.

Bill loved the sense of this, the way Nitya stresses our creative nature. He could see how those who don't cling to dogma are

catching a free ride in a sense, whenever they maintain openness to spirit. Deb added it invites an openness to change, to letting go.

Moni made a great point that everyday activities are a repository of creativity. She spoke of how much war she's had to encounter in her life, and how much order she's had to make of it. Even this is a creative act, needing intelligent intervention. She reminded us that our creative side is making changes in our lives every day.

It isn't just that the great artists and musicians are creative: as long as we don't follow old ruts but seek new paths, we can be creative in everything we do. We tend to think of creativity as being a product of genius, yet we are all creative just by not following rigid guidelines, but bringing our best game to whatever we're doing. Deep down we are all geniuses.

Moni was likely referring to Nitya's invoking war in the sense of a battle between opposing sides of an issue:

Life is the history of a never-ceasing war that is going on between chance and order, matter and form, the prius and the nous, and entropy and negentropy.

Deb recently ran across a quote by author F. Scott Fitzgerald, that the ability to hold contradictory ideas in one's mind, treating them as equally true, was a sign of superior intelligence. It's also a good definition of yoga. Deb also cited the opening dichotomy of the chapter, the war between science and spirituality, and how they look awfully similar from a slight remove.

Andy was reminded by this of the nature of maya generally, how something looks solid when in fact it's not. We can easily hold both of those views simultaneously. Since the world is shot through with contradictions, we need to reconcile these dualities by letting maya dissolve.

I promised to link a TED talk by a gentle scientist, Tom Chi, who presents the spiritual side of science in very down-to-earth

terms. Youtube has two versions, both titled Everything is Connected:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPh3c8Sa37M>

Here's a longer version with better graphics, where he's more confident speaking:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zYr4qORDu2A>

The Portland Gurukula has a row of cosmos flowers along the front that continuously produces new buds. Every day Deb goes down the row and carefully plucks off the dead ones, yet she knows that no matter how hard she tries, she is going to miss some. So she goes back the other way, and is always amazed to find many that had eluded her. She has expanded this image to remind herself that no matter how sure she is of being right, she is bound to overlook something. It keeps her open to new ideas and humble about her own proclamations.

Nitya wraps up his lesson by bringing Narayana Guru's keen wisdom back to center stage:

Exclusive dogmas and inclusive visions are seemingly at odds, but to the all-seeing eye, all religions are acceptable as flowers blossoming on the self-same tree of wisdom. This is why Sri Ramakrishna said that all jackals howl alike.

Part II

The Fable of a Yati is Nitya's first essay into autobiography in English. It's a fascinating document, with a very different tone than his later work, where he downplayed seemingly miraculous elements of his life. Harvey Freeman wrote the brief introduction, playing those up. The woodcut illustrations, while unattributed, are likely Nitya's artwork too.

Many excerpts from it were used in *Love and Blessings*, Nitya's full autobiography, and many were not. This part is likely

what the two young friends were referring to in the present chapter of *Meditations on the Self*, now appearing in the first chapter of *Love and Blessings*. First I'll include the MOTS reference, the first two paragraphs of chapter 45:

Yesterday two young friends came to see me. One was an empirical realist and the other was a pious religious type. When they came in, I was writing some childhood reminiscences for my autobiography. The book begins with two versions of my connection with the past. To link my present life with my previous lives, I gave my own version of rebirth. As for my hereditary traits or talents, which have a close resemblance to similar tastes or tendencies in my parents, I had explained them in terms of modern genetics.

The empirical realist expressed a desire to look the manuscript over. He read it with great fascination and congratulated me for writing a book in what he considered a lucid and captivating style; however, he didn't like the part about reincarnation or my reference to terms like the Self and God. He told me my autobiography would become an epoch-making book if I would just drop my spiritual views and Vedantic conclusions. This remark triggered the enthusiasm of the other friend, the religious devotee. He read my memoir with great eagerness. After a while he came to me in great excitement and congratulated me for presenting the idea of rebirth with great clarity. He advised me to drop from my book the views of geneticists, though. He thought that part was phony.

Here's the part of the Fable they were apparently discussing:

Now I shall tell you how I was born. When an animal has a vertebral column running beyond the length of its trunk, it becomes a tail. My memory also has a kind of tail, rooted far beyond the trunk of this present life in the folds of the prenatal

past. Everyone's consciousness begins from this prenatal region, though only a few can recall it to mind.

When I think of the cosmos, my mind spreads out into the infinity of what we know as space and time. From the here and now it stretches out beyond the horizon to the far fringes of outer space, lingering there in bewilderment since whatever lies beyond our known existence can never be more than a vague supposition. Similarly, as memory flows back from the present through the annals of history, plunging ever deeper into the fossils of prehistory and myth, the mind once again recoils on itself, unable to reach the beginning of time. And the imagination shoots into the future, piling possibilities upon possibilities until it too reaches a blind alley of bewilderment from an excess of complexity.

Such are the virtually immeasurable dimensions of our cosmos, the space-time continuum. But the cosmos marks only one of the poles of the axis of truth. The other pole or counterpart is marked by a point which has neither any dimension or location. This pure, spaceless, timeless, nameless aspect is the individual aspect of the all-embracing Absolute or Brahman. It throbs with a negative dynamism. In fact the movement is so subtle that it cannot even be termed a throb or a movement of any kind. Yet the negative charge precipitates the fusion of its own spiritual spark with a positive impulse from within the creative matrix of the cosmos.

Such an activated spark was the primal cause of my being. It became elongated as a mathematical line without thickness, on which were strung all my previous tendencies and talents. The pure ray which issued forth from the matrix of the cosmos and the dimensionless point became colored and split in two. One half became positively charged and attained the color of gold. The other was negatively charged and became blue. The two rays passed through the entire gamut of time and space, and through all names and forms and every kind of memory that anyone had ever had, and entered the psychophysical orbit of Earth from opposite directions. The golden ray circled the Earth clockwise and the blue

ray circled counterclockwise, and both of them entered opposite halves of a ripe pomegranate. This very fruit happened to be in the garden of the haunted house where Raghavan and Vamakshy Amma had recently taken up residence. Seeing the fascinating glow of the fruit, Raghavan plucked it, cut it in two, and gave half to his wife; both of them ate their share.

In that mystic communion the negative ray of the spirit entered Raghavan's soul, while the positive ray spread itself throughout every part of his wife's organism. They became possessed of a great love for each other and felt a strong need to cling together. During this loving consummation the two rays again united and became a fertilized ovum. The dynamic rays, before becoming a fetus, took from Raghavan twenty-three chromosomes with the qualities of becoming poetic, intelligent, kind, open, frank, gentle and sensitive, and from Vamakshy Amma the qualities of being willful, austere, forgiving, generous, and so on. The fetus began to grow in the mother's womb to eventually become the present writer.

When the time for me to come out into the open approached, my father took my mother to her family home and left her in their care. The house was located in a lush valley surrounded by four high hills. Around the house was a girdle of paddy fields with a rivulet running through them. The adjoining forests were very wild and were inhabited by elephants, tigers, leopards, antelopes and wild boars. Exotic birds, reptiles and plants abounded. In this idyllic setting I first made my appearance on November 2, 1924.

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Nataraja Guru's most succinct epitomization of modes of thought appears in his Gita:

BHAGAVAD GITA, CHAPTER VI, VERSE 46

--commentary by Nataraja Guru

The yogi is greater than men of austerity, and he is thought to be greater than men of wisdom, and greater than men of works; therefore become a yogi, O Arjuna.

Mere *tapas* (austerity) as it is known in the field of Indian spirituality, is a severe form of joyless self-discipline. The jnani is a wise man who might at best belong to the Samkhya (rationalist) or Nyaya (logical) philosophical schools, whose life is based on reasoning which generally ends up with sophistications and academic discussions, by themselves dry as dust. Likewise the ritualist tends to become ego-centered and harshly exclusive. Yoga generally understood is both a way of thinking and a way of life. The yogi is a dialectician who harmonizes old in terms of new and *vice-versa*, and is capable of giving fresh life to arguments which otherwise would be dead or stale. The breeze of a fresh life enlivens the ways of a yogi.

Each of the types of spirituality referred to here, when they are taken according to a yogic method or theory of knowledge, become, as it were, transmuted. This verse states the superiority of such a yogic way in both practical and theoretical matters.