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MOTS Chapter 47 Notes

Formal Difference Strikes the Eye and Essential Unity Kisses the Heart

To become of one faith is what everyone speaks of;
this the proselytizers do not recognize;
wise men, freed of objections to another's faith,
know this secret in full.

Free translation:

In principle all are aimed at arriving at the same faith. Disputants do not realize this. Wise people who are free of sectarian exclusiveness know this secret in full.

For his practical example, Nitya starts off with a charming tale of a meeting between Narayana Guru and an American missionary. It's likely somewhat apocryphal, yet substantially true. Narayana Guru used what Susan immediately recognized as a Socratic method, where asking pertinent questions leads to an expanded perspective. The definition in Wikipedia gets the gist: the Socratic method "is a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions." Narayana Guru was a master of the technique, perfectly naturally.

I have been looking for this account of the meeting between Narayana Guru and the missionary—it's so touching! I forgot where it is retold, and there are no key words to call it up on a search. Nitya uses it to perfectly illustrate the point of the Atmo verse, and this is one of the places where having that in mind helps clarify the lesson quite a lot.

Narayana Guru in the interchange was demonstrating precisely what he meant by the secret of “one faith.” One of his most famous precepts is “one in faith, and one in God is man.” It does not mean there is one exclusive premise and all the rest are wrong, it means that taken in a general sense all beliefs have the same aim, which is happiness. From his open perspective, he could see the missionary and he were interested in exactly the same thing. From the missionary’s perspective however, with its sharply dualistic delineation, the oneness was invisible. He was intent on argument and domination, while the Guru was saturated in agreement. Their interplay shows us how to convert a closed attitude to an open one. The Guru tried diligently to draw the missionary out, on his own terms, until he could see it was useless:

When the missionary gave up reasoning and insisted on belief, the Guru turned to his own disciples and said, “Look at this good man. He has great faith in his religion. Is it not good to have such firm faith? I am pleased with him. He is asking all people to accept Christ. What is wrong with it? What he wants to say is that there is only one God and man can have one religion.”

The Guru in his gentle way was trying to show the young enthusiast a couple of logical inconsistencies that cropped up in his argument. But when he perceived his deep-rooted conviction, the Guru just left off the argument and congratulated the young man for his ardent faith.

This reminded Deb of the story from chapter 44, of the man who noisily disturbed Nitya’s concentration while he was trying to write. The man kept arguing about his right to be disruptive, and when he couldn’t get him to go away, Nitya gave him a big hug and told him he was right about everything. That’s all it took for the man to leave him in peace. Bill observed drily that the rude

man probably went away thinking that Nitya had learned a good lesson from him. That's right, that's how it works. And Nitya did. Sadly, the man was only confirmed in his own mind about his behavior, but so it goes. Deb gave him some credit: we have no idea whether he learned a lesson later or not.

The essence of yoga is to avoid taking a polarized position, to treat the subject, with all its aspects, as a whole. Sadly, this remains a little-known orientation. We are basted in oppositions all through life, and so naturally respond by agreement or difference to fixed opinions. This accounts for the almost demonic preoccupation with what you believe. Do you believe in God? In Jesus? In Krishna? In Allah? My response is: if something exists and I don't believe in it, does that make it disappear? And if something does not exist but I do believe in it, does that make it real? In other words, it's pointless to argue about our beliefs. Instead, let's look for truth together. We can share what we know. But few have been taught any alternative to factionalism. All our schooling and job performance and debate and so on, is based on choosing the right one of oppositional viewpoints. Too bad "right" is not a universal position.

Instead of taking scriptural and other tales literally, we need to admit that all thought is symbolic representation: the things we truly believe and accept are pictures we have made of an unpicturable reality. We do not need to cling tightly to our pictures, but to make them as all-encompassing as possible. And then admit there is room left over.

We are fortunate to be able to observe someone who lived in a unitive state, and was wise enough to put it into practice. Nitya also was really good at getting the underlying unity of the most hostile arguments. He writes:

The Guru held no rival stand to anyone. He knew that the path of Christ was as sure and flawless as any other true path. If it

had been another person in the place of Narayana Guru, the missionary's zeal to proselytize would have created a wordy warfare and unpleasantness.

For Deb, the ensuing “wordy warfare” is a tedious and all-too common quagmire humans charge into as a way to amplify and justify their illogical assumptions. She asserted that as long as we stay on the level of my opinion against yours, we're going to remain caught in the battle of words. The real intent of the verse is to maintain spiritual insight so we don't fall into never-ending conflicts. Moreover, it doesn't depend on a factual, rational understanding but a spiritual one—that's really what Narayana Guru wants us to find in ourselves. She marveled how the Guru never took offense from the missionary's harangue, but just kept coming back to a common ground of inclusiveness.

Bill also admired how Narayana Guru kept to his perfect loving equanimity throughout the interchange. Jyothi observed Nitya doing the same in so many confrontations. He always listened to what his confronters wanted to say, and then would take it in the widest context, how it could be applied and made acceptable to everyone.

Deb recalled that all the time she and Nitya were traveling together the year before this book, and later on in different classes, she watched Nitya in so many of those interactions. He could throw himself into the fray with both anger and laughter, but at base he preserved a deep, well-grounded solidity. I've put more of my take on this in Part II, as it didn't quite fit the direction we went in the class.

Deb read out a little of That Alone's chapter 47, as it puts this predicament in philosophically correct terms. The ‘secret’ of the verse, known to wise seers, is that we tend to continually mistake the non-Self for the Self. We think Jesus or Krishna is the Absolute, when they are but symbols. If they ever actually existed

or not is beside the point. Whether you believe in *anything* is beside the point. What matters, ultimately, is what you do. So many people justify their crazed actions with admirable principles, but that doesn't make them just.

I felt that this was a place where Nitya's genius as an elucidator shows brightest. Mistaking the non-Self for the Self, the limited for the unlimited, is our eternal failing, and the example he chose here delineates it perfectly. Narayana Guru sees the man is trying to say exactly what he himself is saying: we can have one faith and one God. But the man puts barriers around his faith and God that negate the unity. Narayana Guru could show him how to take away the barriers, but the man is committed to them. So he is doomed to go on preaching unity while fostering shards and splinters.

This is of course where the story best applies to us. We all do this, to one degree or another, and it gets us in trouble, unless we dramatically shrink our world to fit our small purview. The Gurukula game isn't going that direction, I hope you've noticed.... It's about letting go of our fixations. That's central to the secret the Guru references.

For Bill, the central point of this verse is that underlying each person's orientation to faith is one underlying principle, and it's very helpful if you can see that and react to that and talk to that.

When you put it that way, it's a very simple message. Yet we continually trip over it, which means we haven't gotten "by heart" it yet. It's so much more acceptable in our species to be divisive. That means we are only noticed when we upset the balance, when we take a stand on one side. We augment our waves, when the open psyche sees them as tiny ripples on the surface of its oceanic nature. In the face of enmity, Narayana Guru laughs and agrees in principle, because he understands that yoga is nonpolarized. Even in spiritual groups this is not adequately appreciated. An us versus them mentality creeps in almost ubiquitously.

As Andy said last week, it is a rare and relieving experience to be in the presence of someone in a balanced state, someone in whom ahimsa is alive. Our inner being craves such a state.

Nitya next takes this to another level, where those who take scripture literally are prone, even eager, to believe in absurdities. Memberships in different religions are based on a person's willingness to believe the unbelievable, so of course those with a different set of unbelievable beliefs can and do get hopping mad about them.

Nitya points out some of the notions in a couple of prominent religions that if taken literally are ridiculous. As a person of "well-founded reason," the Gita's first qualification for spiritual progress, Nitya didn't buy any of it. Fortunately he had Nataraja Guru to set him straight:

The Guru pointed out to me that I should look for another kind of reasoning which is different from logical induction and deduction. The Gita, the Bible and the Koran are all written in a mystical language. I should learn how to decipher it into a scientific language.

For me, Nitya's most exciting teachings were where he explained the mystical language of the scriptures in present-day psychological terms. It was his long suit, and it wowed me over and over in his classes. Those time-worn stories took on a liveliness I never suspected. They weren't just failed science textbooks, they were spiritual communications of the highest quality, as long as you didn't confuse the form for the content. As long as you didn't mistake the metaphor for the meaning.

Go for the meaning. That's what matters. In a way, we all describe the Absolute, the All, in metaphoric terms—it can't be helped—and then we fall in love with the metaphor. It satisfies *us*, so why shouldn't it satisfy everyone? Yet in the process the

meaningful content slips away. We have to realize we do the same thing as the proselytizers, only we don't necessarily feel we need to push our version on others. Remembering we are describing the indescribable is the key. It can only be an approximation. The door we admire needs first to be opened, and then for us to walk through it. Nitya made this leap at a certain point in his discipleship also:

With this new light gained from the Guru, I read the Bible, the Gita and the Koran once again. I began to notice the profound mystical import of every word given in those great scriptures.

This means you don't have to accept anything on faith. The imagery can be taken as a more or less scientific representation of psychological truths. They can make sense. No leap of faith is necessary. It takes only a tiny adjustment in your attitude, yet for some reason the adjustment isn't often even proposed: to see how others are trying to say the same thing you're trying to say. It's such an open door that people rigorously evade that I wonder if God just wants us to be confused and fight. Perhaps the peace thing is simply more obfuscation.

Deb agreed that what the mystical language means is a language that brings everything together. And we can read everything in it.

Nitya was the best explicator of the Bible I've ever encountered, because he went beyond the literal cover stories to reveal their purport. It was such a relief from all the misery and tension surrounding religious institutions. For example, he mentions in his essay some favorite symbols that fanatics invariably take literally: "Jesus could turn water into wine, could give sight to the blind, could call the dead Lazarus back to life." In his classes I learned that these are spiritual symbols: water into wine means he converted an ordinary substance or idea into an intoxicating "spirit": the wine of life. Bringing the dead back to life

means infusing zombie-like mortals with the enthusiasm of their divinity. Giving sight to the blind and helping the lame to walk are similar symbols of learning how to live infused with spirit, after stumbling around in the dark of unexamined lives. My favorite Nitya explication was the mystery of the loaves and fishes, where Jesus fed a multitude with just a smidgen of food. The “food” was the wisdom he shared, which does not diminish when it is passed around. It “satisfies the appetite” for substantial meaning, the hunger that drives spiritual seekers everywhere.

If we start with the presumption that the ancient rishis were trying to communicate in universal symbols that could make sense to people far removed in time and space, we can move easily toward the universal understanding contained in scripture. As long as we don’t cling to one particular metaphor, it only takes a tiny readjustment of our attitude to liberate the entire mental terrain.

Nitya closes with a very-sixties idea of all our programs in life being games. Leary was a prime exponent. It offers a little distance on the my-way-or-else attitudes still so prevalent and toxic in human affairs. In case you haven’t guessed Nitya’s take, he wanted to accept truth wherever he found it, so he took the open course of *tat tvam asi*. That (Absolute) I am:

If I agree to play the game of tennis, I cannot play badminton, football or basketball on the same field. Each game has its own rules. If I choose to play the Christ game, I will decide to look upon Christ as my only Savior. If the Krishna game suits me, I’ll pin my faith absolutely on Krishna alone. If the pure path of the Holy Koran attracts me above all, I’ll declare there is no one but Allah. If I choose to follow the lotus feet of the Blessed One, I’ll take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. If I take my resolve to walk my path alone, I will turn to my own center and unhesitatingly declare “I am That.”

The fanatic says, “Christ is the only way.”

The seer of peerless wisdom says, “Christ is the only way—for me.”

Gurukula students resolve to fulfill their own motivations, and let others find their own ways to fulfill theirs. Where’s the problem?

Part II

There’s a thread here that I thought was important, but it seemed to lie outside the class’ momentum. *Meditations on the Self* was written right after Nitya’s first stint of the Portland Gurukula of 1971-72. A substantial number of the inmates peeled off and became born-again Christians, who then tried to convert him to “the true faith.” It was deeply insulting and horrifically egotistical: mediocre minds, dazed by God knows what, arguing that they knew better than this fellow who had given them so much, and had spent his whole life in an enthusiastic and humble quest for knowledge. It wasn’t just the Christies. In later years several left to sit at the feet of the Sat-guru, a child who was touted as the next avatar, and then more became Moonies. Thuglike ISKCON Krishna worshipers took it upon themselves to straighten out this upstart in their midst, even though they knew nothing about him other than he taught the Gita—how dare he!

So Nitya had plenty of chances to interact with people convinced only their way was acceptable, and he kept his cool amazingly. Still, it was disappointing on some level. The ones that were most pathetic to me were the kids who had taken so much from Nitya, and then turned around and swaggered with superiority, telling him where he went wrong. Ego writ large.

I got the sense that Nitya wrote this chapter with those types of sessions in mind, as a plea than none of them probably saw for understanding and tolerance. To show them how they were unwittingly violating their own premises.

In class, some people got upset that I suggested Nitya took offense, as if he never would. He was indeed amazingly accepting of those insults, but it did sting that he was offering his sublime philosophy freely and with full dedication, and then was treated as dirt. Possibly it helped him retain his humility in a culture where hero worship is the norm. He wasn't heroic enough for America, apparently. He didn't claim to be anything special.

Nitya was passionate in some of his talks about how disappointed he was that people not only walked away, but sometimes turned into enemies. That doesn't mean he was depressed or vengeful. He was giving his very best, a full-time dedication of so much he had learned from great masters and wide travels. Some of his critics were just plain stupid, putting down a brilliant and gentle philosopher because his door was always open. It killed me, partly because I was learning to get over just that kind of smug self-satisfaction. It looked even uglier to me on someone else, out in plain sight!

A guru has to find a balance between teaching unpalatable truths to people and allowing them to caterwaul around under their own misguided apprehensions. Nitya knew that Vedanta isn't assimilated in a day or a week, so he advocated for people to stick with it. If they did, they would get a lot. If not, well at least they were free to go with their own version of God, growing, hopefully, in their own ways.

As a teacher you can't cling to disadopted students, but you are right to maintain that what you're teaching is worth pondering, and worth a commitment. It's important to stick to something if it's going to be transformative. This message also didn't resonate with the take a pill and go to heaven mentality of the time. It requires a yogic balance: how to encourage people to go deeper into something without demanding that they stay with you. Now we know that neurons are slow to realign, but they will if directed with diligence. It's the same thing. If you run from one beginning

state to another, you don't get anywhere. You don't change your thinking for the better.

Ultimately, most people prefer an easy answer to a thoughtful one. Unless you are willing to face unpleasant information about yourself, Indian wisdom is a hard sell. Americans are a pleasure-based culture, and don't have much of the work ethic regarding spiritual matters. Physical exercise, yes: no pain no gain is a popular cliché. But leave our delicate egos out of it!