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MOTS Chapter 49 Notes

The One Quest of All Sentient Beings

All beings are making effort in every way,
all the time, for the happiness of the Self;
in the world, this is the one faith;
pondering on this, without becoming subjected to sin, be controlled.

Free translation:

All beings, at all times, everywhere, are exerting themselves to attain happiness. This quest for happiness is the one single religion in the world, of which no one has any dispute. Knowing this, one should not be lured into the sin of fighting one's own fellow beings.

Nitya had a lovely plan for his *Meditations on the Self*, for each chapter citing an everyday experience and then showing how it demonstrated the one of Narayana Guru's precepts expressed in the Atmopadesa Satakam verse of the same number. All through he has been in the company of some friend or another. Now, at the end of the book, he uses this penultimate chapter to sit alone as an unattached observer of the human comedy, and one more as a solitary being, sitting utterly alone atop a cliff, contemplating the mysterious magnificence of the world around him. It's like he's vanishing into the empyrean, contemplating the flight of the alone to the Alone. After his poetic and enlightening efforts on our behalf, he's now standing back appreciating the grand context.

The characters in this chapter cover a wide range: spiritually-motivated pilgrims, workers, merchants, and even a row of brahmin priests to complete the four main castes—ksatriya, sudra, vaishya, brahmin—with Nitya sitting aside as an observant

sannyasin. A stately tree stands in for vegetative life, and a donkey and a leech represent vertebrate and invertebrate animals. All are seeking nourishment of one kind or another, reminiscent of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad's stipulation that hunger is the first impulse of all existence. We eat food to live, and then we consume various levels of mental stimulation to reflect our interests in life. We hunger for action and expression.

The real setting of the chapter is a well-known pilgrimage site in Kerala, Sabarimala, in the Periyar Tiger Reserve, and the Wikipedia estimate is it hosts between 17 and 50 million visitors each year now, in just over a month. In 1972, Nitya guessed half a million. How times have changed! Even then the humans hiking to the temple “were like the inseparable water particles of a flowing river.” Moni sketched some of the background for us, which you can read about here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sabarimala>.

Moni was amused how each kind of search Nitya depicts is so different, some people sitting around killing time, while others must go on a rigorous journey to get ultimate happiness. Deb was interested in the difference between the stress and anxiety of the adults with the sense of mystery and curiosity in the children—at least at the outset of their programs. Jyothi said it sometimes takes 6 to 8 hours to complete the pilgrimage, between the arduous climb and the waiting in long queues. Nonetheless, the implication is that we lose our openness and excitement as we get older. We go from being present in the moment (not excluding wondering what comes next) to doing things out of habit, or in hopes they will magically improve our circumstances. We think we know what's awaiting us over the hilltop, and we usually find something like what we expect. Occasionally wishing for divine intervention works, but Nitya's efforts were always to regenerate the mystery and curiosity directly, through openness and personal responsibility. If God wants to lend a hand, fine, but let's not wait for it.

Performing rituals rates low on the scale of transformative behaviors, but it's often better than nothing. Rituals give us the chance to reignite our sense of mystery, if done with the right attitude. At least a good walk in the wilds is very stimulating, and why not with an exotic temple smack dab in the middle of it? Moni's observation was that when the pilgrims come back to the car park they are full of excitement.

When asked if she had ever gone on one, Jyothi told us her father, one of the best-loved devotees of Narayana Guru and the Gurukula, told his children to treat their home as a temple. Why should they go out? She feels that children have a rough time in those crowds, basically standing in line doing nothing, no food, often in rain. At least at the Sabarimala temple, the message at the climax is *tat tvam asi*: That thou art. You are the Absolute. It's a powerful affirmation.

Of course Nitya is present to describe the sannyasin's position:

I climbed a few more steps and looked out into the valley in front and the ranges of hills on either side of the trail. Down below, the river shone like a streak of silver. I sat on a stone under a tree and marveled at the panorama before me. There was no search in my mind. I wondered what others were seeking. If beauty can satisfy us and bring us a sense of fulfillment, all that one had to do was sit quietly and gaze into that valley or at the mountains or the mist that was soaring up from the river. It was so very beautiful.

It's very rare to live an outwardly unmotivated life, yet that's what renunciates strive for, in the paradox of spiritual dedication. There is of course much more to an engaged life than merely admiring scenery. From his elevated perch, Nitya ponders what

differentiates a contented spiritual aspirant from a merely religious one:

In a religious search the seeker considers the here and now as valueless. The real value is projected elsewhere. Religious people have a hypostatic or celestial notion of happiness which is not of the present but is pushed into the future. In the present there is discomfort and disorder, want and poverty. To many, happiness is a dream that is yet to be found.

Moni was saddened to think that religious seekers treat the here and now as valueless. It should be the source of all values! This makes its visions look somewhat imaginary, as indeed they are. Still, imagination can be very consoling.

In the past we have decided that working for change in our lives is a valid and important endeavor, but that it needs the stability of being anchored in a full awareness of the perfection of the present as well. There is room for teleology in our epistemology. Nitya is thinking that most of the pilgrims are missing the beautiful surroundings because they are determined to push themselves to a distant goal. Yet couldn't they do both? Why not stop and smell the roses along the way? It will make the journey much more fun, and likely much more creative.

Deb worried that in any search, if you constantly posit your happiness as lying away from you, that is the distracting, killing factor. She noted that pilgrimages have two main streams: they can be just a pleasant outing, but at their best they are also a dedication to something sacred that will hopefully change you for the better. Nitya is reminding us that this can happen for each person in every moment.

Andy wondered if building our sense of the future is tied up with unrealized desires. He said he was thinking in terms of time — the phenomenon of time and our obsessions with the past and

future and our avoiding or ignoring the present. He felt it was a puzzle we need to examine.

I suggested that as we grow up, we get forced out of the present by the dissociated people we're surrounded with. They convince us we're not good enough as we are, which teaches us to desire things we don't have. We may start just desiring a return to an untrammelled life as we've been experiencing it since day one, but the process keeps snowballing.

At Gurupuja the other day, Nancy Y had quoted a line from a Shaw play to Andy: "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." He thought it meant we shouldn't worry about something except when it's right in front of us. The saying actually comes from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount:

Matt. 6:

[33] But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.

[34] Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

In a broader context, he and Bushra used to love to paraphrase Matthew's yea yea or nay nay, from the same Sermon, 5.37:

But let your communication be, Yea, yea; Nay, nay: for whatsoever is more than these cometh of evil.

Andy clarified that this is about the context of contentment with the present, the lilies of the field and so on. He felt that Christ is warning against anxiety regarding the future. I wondered if yea yea and nay nay weren't descended from asti asti and neti neti, as they mean exactly the same thing. Then the connection of Jesus with Vedanta is perfectly clear. Both mantras are a means to bring

contemplative awareness to bear, without which we stumble and miss the mark; “come to evil” as the Bible translators love to put it. Evil this and evil that, which is itself an evil. Recall that the original word means unripe.

So we march over hill and dale to the promise of mystical temples, trampling on the flowers that stand in our path and soldiering on unaware of the glories of nature around us. Who is there to pause and contemplate this scene? Atmo verse 6 reads:

One has to wake up, then go to sleep,
has to eat food and embrace; thus, in this way
many ambivalent urges arise; therefore,
who is there to comprehend reality’s one changeless form?

Contemplation is a process of reduction of the apparent many to one common principle. We all appear different in the details, but they are only window dressing. Narayana Guru famously asserted that humans share their most essential qualities: “man is of one kind, one faith, and one God.” It looks simple enough, but this is precisely where words are necessary, to show what it really means.

I recalled the frustrations of the Kochi conference I attended six years ago, featuring many of India’s best-known pundits, where I realized that words can always be taken in the wrong sense, so we have to make sure to correct potential misunderstandings. In the closing session where all presenters were gathered around a large table, the prevailing belief was that due to this very motto, Narayana Guru was an exclusivist, just like the partisans of most popular religions. My plea that he was in fact including everyone in a common understanding was rudely ignored, as it didn’t fit with anyone’s prejudices. The pundits were convinced that everyone is selfish and trying to establish the dominance of their own ideals, so that has to be the hidden motivation. They couldn’t even agree on the existence of this most basic principle of unity. To a

contemplative, however, the many ethnic types belong to one species. A species is determined by the ability to reproduce, so the Guru is completely correct from a scientific perspective, and the human genome project proved we are one family beyond any shadow of doubt.

Narayana Guru's one faith is the universal search for happiness, which splinters into the plethora of religions and anti-religions, along with individual paths not belonging to any organized format. His one god is the Absolute, the all-inclusive principle and highest of all values. Proponents of their favorite god are simply using a different name for the same thing, and getting tied in knots over semantics. Since a universal faith is a slippery concept for some, Nitya states it plainly:

Narayana Guru calls the quest for happiness the one true religion of all. Happiness is the *summum bonum* that gives meaning and significance to our conscious and unconscious search.

It takes a search because we often mistake causes of unhappiness for producers of happiness, and it needs sorting out. Happiness and pleasure are not the same thing, as we have often discussed. There is a lot to learn here, and we're all on our own recognizance.

Jyothi agreed that in this universe there is only one religion, the search for happiness. The Guru is thinking about everybody's happiness, not just one person's, and it's not only karma unfolding, it is putting in the effort to achieve your happiness. Each of us has our own way of finding it, and it can be anything. It's everyone's *atma sukham*, a phrase that Deb rendered beautifully as the joy of the soul. Because we are one in our core, making other people unhappy does not make us truly happy. Getting vengeance brings a temporary release of misery, but does not cure anything.

Unhappiness rebounds with redoubled force. It would be helpful to know this in advance.

Deb predicted the idea of a universal faith should teach us patience and acceptance of both ourselves and other people. If we really listen to the people we meet, each person is trying to express that happiness, and being aware of it is both endearing and humbling. There is also a sweet aspect: being friendly in a daily situation is an expression of our happiness, and a good way to be in the world. She shared a supporting paragraph that you can check out in Part II.

Nancy cautioned that it's easy to believe that if you find something that makes you happy then everyone else should do the same thing. It's hard to not think that way, but that's exactly where we go wrong. Jyothi thought that observing little children was a good antidote, because they so often come up with unique ways of doing things, and they're always joyful.

Bill pointed out that the "sin" mentioned in the verse is to judge other religions and other ways of fulfilling that same need we have. It produces conflict where none is needed.

Andy had an incisive idea, that we imagine joy has *qualities*, and because of that it is bound to certain forms. Once we subject joy to a form, there is room for conflict. But there is actually no limit to the joy. We're inclined to break it into discreet episodes, but here the Guru is underscoring the ubiquity of it. Accepting joy without limits is a hard challenge, hard to put in words. Andy is trying to contend with the statement that a yogi is living a life of bliss. Most of us experience bliss in temporal forms, meaning there is a certain time and certain way for us to enjoy things. So to step into joy as a boundless state seems on the one hand very simple and on the other hand unbelievable, and because of this we don't accept that we can do it or should do it.

Moni added, the jasmine vine is also doing it its own way. Every living thing is expressing its mission. Even we humans are

like roots looking for nutrients. When she rides the bus to work to get money to live on, she is doing the same thing. Her clients are like thirsty plants who come to her in need of watering.

Nancy agreed it was all about life force, about the joy of experiencing our life force.

The episode in chapter 47, where the Christian evangelist hectored Narayana Guru, is a perfect example of how this plays out in real life. Instead of taking an opposite stance and prolonging the argument, Narayana Guru recognized the deep quest for happiness that lay at the heart of the man's posturing, so instead he laughed out loud and praised him for his sincerity. We don't know the aftermath, unfortunately, but it must have reduced the tension, and possibly taught an important lesson to some of those present. As far as we know, no one was ever able to shake Narayana Guru from his all-inclusive state of mind, though they tried mightily. That's what truth does. When you really know something, it doesn't bother you if people doubt it or insult it, because grouching only reveals their ignorance. It's the people who aren't really convinced of their position who freak out when it's challenged.

Nitya was grounded in the same solid wisdom insight. Everywhere he looked he saw the identical principle being lived in myriad ways:

I think there is nothing more characteristic of life than ceaseless search. Whether man or tree or microbe, there is no sentient being that is devoid of the eternal quest for happiness. Each seeks a different path, but the aim is the same even when their paths vary. Considering this unity of everybody's quest, we can say that we are all One in our search.

Aum.

Part II

Deb is “with it” enough to be following an Instagram Tarot reader who is non-trivial. This is a very clear explanation of an important aspect of getting along on Planet Earth, relevant to all our development.

□ [thejessicadore](#)

You can learn a lot about a person by what they say when they feel threatened. Fights with loved ones can be some of the most painful, but are also some of the most potent opportunities for healing because it is when we’re in what psychologist Aaron Beck called “hot cognitions” that our oldest wounds become visible. We all have a relationship blueprint that we were given by our earliest caregivers, and these psychic maps blend pretty well into the background until some need isn’t met or an old thorn is touched & suddenly what we believe about ourselves, others & the world bubbles up to the surface through our words & behavior. When you think about how much of our dysfunctional behavior in adult relationships stems from having not been adequately listened to as children & then having had to craft elaborate ways of getting our needs met in other, pretty weird-ass ways, it strikes me as extremely important that we learn the art of using intimate relationship to heal & a great place to start is deep empathic listening. It’s probably not realistic to expect to do this kind of listening 100% of the time, so start with when someone is feeling threatened, “triggered,” afraid, agitated or angry. All of these are signs that deep listening is needed (and btw, your safety always comes before deep listening). Listen for phrases that sound like this: “You never listen to me,” “you’re so unreliable,” “you don’t even care about my x, y, or z,” “I’m so tired of trying,” “I feel so alone.” These, and generally any statement with the words “always” & “never” are keys that an old wound or relationship blueprint has been activated. If it is safe & you are able, you can

respond back with a reflection like, “I’m hearing that you don’t feel heard, and that this is something you’ve felt for a long time. That sounds really painful.” This doesn’t mean you agree or that you’re admitting to doing something to cause this feeling. It means you’re co-creating an alternative experience for someone who is most likely used to & expecting to not be listened to, punished or invalidated. Doing so, you are helping them revise their blueprint. You are doing the art of healing through relationship.