

8/14/18

## MOTS Chapter 6: Comprehending the Incomprehensible

One has to wake up, then go to sleep,  
has to eat food and embrace;  
thus, in this way, many life urges come;  
therefore, who realizes the one changeless form?

That Alone has:

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?

Free translation:

Alas! Who is there to know the one unchanging Reality, when all are subjected to the frequent rise of latent urges which ceaselessly compel them to wake and sleep, to eat, and to caress the objects of their desires.

Deb opened the class invoking prana as the embodiment of the mystery we have been given the impossible task to comprehend in the title. I noted it is the integrating aspect of prana that gives meaning to the disparate elements of our life. Its mysterious presence is hinted at by how quickly we die when the breath stops. It seems that the cells have plenty of the needed chemicals, but in four minutes without respiration we are brain dead. It's like some supporting structure is excised in that brief period of time, rather than starvation from lost supply.

The sixth chapter of MOTS follows a subtle pattern of tracing the course of a dedicated life guided by prana, which expands from a solitary point to become aware, refines its understanding, learns how to interact with its surroundings, and

ultimately confronts the meaning of life. For ready reference Nitya lists the six stages of life of Vedanta:

Prana causes all the stages of individual life. The six transformations caused by prana are the individuation of the physical being, birth, growth, change, decay and final extinction. These transformations are called vikaras.

Nitya elaborates on them somewhat:

Prana is the general term assigned to a group of vital forces functioning in the body with a coordinated scheme, which are responsible for the proliferation of the body cells, the engineering and preservation of body metabolism, the automation of all involuntary functions of the glands and nerves, the generation of sensitivity and awareness, and finally the disintegration and decomposition of the entire organism.

Nitya begins his intimation of the pranic development we all undertake with a literally Biblical reference to our inception: “I feel like equating the mind of the fetus to the indistinct Spirit of God that was said in the Bible to be dwelling on the waters of darkness before the beginning of creation.” Lovely. This is followed in Genesis by the famous account of creation of the universe—or is it the dawn of consciousness?—in six symbolic days. Nitya highlights the mysterious developmental urge that is at first totally veiled from the light of consciousness:

I can say that when I was in my mother's womb, there was only darkness. It was a darkness that had concealed from me even the fact of my being. But it was not a darkness of negation. There was something very positive going on behind the veil of obscurity, namely the hundred and one secret manipulations Nature was performing to provide me with a well structured psychophysical organism.

The parallel between the creation of a universe and the creation of a sentient being is uncanny, and in some sense is more than parallel, it is identical. Is this not the ultimate mystery? Don't sentience and universe have to arrive on the scene simultaneously, in some sense? Nitya gives us just a hint:

Would it be merely a fantasy if I were to conjecture that for some unknown reason, an unknown force had initiated in the primeval darkness of the beginningless beginning a purposive stir? That first throb of energy might have culminated in the forging of a physical universe which was to be used both as a vehicle and an instrument of the Spirit.

This is followed immediately by a declamation that drew a cheer from Deb, who is on a lifelong personal campaign to root out and emasculate all time-worn clichés:

Spirit. I hate that term. It bears many loathsome associations and taken-for-granted assumptions. What I mean here by Spirit is a big X, wrapped in mystery and enthroned on the chair of the primal cause.

The problem with this term, which is nearly as handy as 'God' and we are compelled to keep using, is that it is often a signboard covering over any content—in other words, it makes us think we know something when we don't. The capital X mystery of the creative urge is unknowable, even as we are swept along by it. It is the incomprehensible pole of the chapter's dialectical title:

Comprehending the Incomprehensible. Nitya concludes the chapter affirming this is the true challenge of spiritual life, the challenge being that we think we comprehend when we most definitely don't. The incomprehensibility forces us to renounce all our false comprehensions, which are swathed in the cotton wool of popular terms, but only if we are willing. Authentic mystery is protected by

an iron curtain of simplistic definitions and adages. Isn't this the baffling yet comforting barrier that causes Narayana Guru to lament the rarity of a truly dedicated seeker?

Baiju, in Part II, has written eloquently about the Guru's feelings as conveyed by this Atmopadesa Satakam verse. It's very poignant, as Narayana Guru almost never admits a personal feeling, so it serves as a plea for us to look harder, to not be satisfied by mediocrity.

I repeated something I've said before in the That Alone class: when Narayana Guru asks who is there to know the Self, the changeless aspect of the totality, we should eagerly raise our hands and shout, "I am! I can do it! Sign me up!" First we have to know we'll not be simply joining a team or enlisting in a course of instruction: it requires calling into question all our clichés, all our complacent assumptions that we use to breeze through the social environment.

I just reread in *Love and Blessings* of the moment when Nitya hesitated to commit himself to Nataraja Guru after several years of dithering, and the moving account of his conversion:

He abruptly asked me if I came prepared to join him as his disciple, to which he added, "You have been preparing yourself to be a sannyasi all these years. Are you ready now?"

This was a moment I had long been dreading. I was not at all prepared. Nataraja Guru was ferocious and uncompromising, and I had always had a horror of him. My powerful attraction to his wisdom was counterbalanced by my repulsion of his personal idiosyncrasies. The way he had always thought of me as his disciple was very irritating. In every way he was an absolute contrast to Dr. Mees, who was an ideal, loving Guru. With hesitation I said, "I have to think."

Nataraja Guru looked very offended. Shaking with anger, he said, "I knew this. I knew this. Narayana Guru told me he would have nobody and I would have nobody. So all the

enthusiasm you showed these several years was only a bluff. You have no pressure. Your engine is at Runneymede.”

It was an insult. Runneymede is a station on the steep mountain railway up into the Nilgiris. Engines usually stop there for an hour to get up a head of steam. So I understood the sarcasm in the analogy. I was furious. In the white heat of anger I slammed the cup and saucer down on the table. Instead of running out of the kitchen, though, I bent down and touched both his feet and said, “Take me. I am giving myself to the Guru for whatever it’s worth.”

He laughed uproariously. Then he became suddenly calm and said, “That is right.” Thus my surrender to the Guru’s cause and my initiation all happened in a comic manner. Now many years later I understand that the gravity of my gesture and all its implications were a million times greater and more profound than I realized. Suddenly it occurred to me that Ramana Maharshi had probably advised me to read about the Great Tibetan Yogi Milarepa in order to prepare me to be the disciple of Nataraja Guru, who in so many ways resembled Marpa, Milarepa’s fiercely absolutist guru.

There is no one like this around anymore—it’s a vestige of an ancient world that we are blessed to have a tiny inkling of, if that. Yet even the echo can inspire us to dig beneath the surface. Please don’t treat that as a cliché!

The motivation of the present time is more negative: humans are avidly destroying the planet and simultaneously smashing the underpinnings of civilization. It’s going to seem a flimsy support to cling to bubbles that no longer exist when the hurricanes rage. Indian philosophy has always kept dissolution in mind as the necessary counterpart of creation. Speaking of the physical universe, Nitya writes:

It seems that the all-designing, sportive Spirit uses this instrument and vehicle to actualize its fecund dreams with an

existential bias. The articulation of Spirit in matter in phased degrees of animation, sensitivity and awareness is spelled out in terms of logically correct and mathematically exact laws of structural designs, ingenious compositions, and purposive and meaningful syntheses, followed by their ruthless disintegration. All this for the purpose of creating and annihilating world after world out of the inexhaustible possibilities of the mysteriously self-founded, self-preserving, and self-willed Word-Mind-Matter.

Annihilation doesn't seem quite the cliché it used to be these days. It seems very immanent, and we are going to have to deal with it. It is hardly ignorable. Western culture, in contrast to Eastern and older cultures, has been very effective in masking the destruction complement of creation. Consequently it is likely to be harder to cope with in the West.

Similarly, *change* is another cliché we talk about and hope it never happens. We prefer sameness; it's the outcome our brains have evolved to seek. It's not easy to feel at home in a fast-changing, fast-paced world. Prana is in charge, ultimately, yet in temporal terms we struggle to fit in. Nitya puts it this way:

Within this matrix of the ever-changing Word, which is at once both mind and matter, I should find a niche for my individual existence and its self-luminous glow of consciousness.

Remember, Word does not mean verbiage but logos, the primal impulse, like the Biblical Word of God. Or Shakespeare's tide in the affairs of man.

Paul was drawn to ponder the "existential bias" of the sportive Spirit, leading to a discussion of the meaning of a term I don't recall Nitya ever using anywhere else. My computer search agrees. Paul felt we humans are the existential bias in action, that it consists of the five senses and the intellect, and therefore to know is paradoxically to unknow the parallel aspect of the unmanifest

Absolute. I offered that there are two forms of knowledge (vijñana and jñana), the first relating to horizontal factors, while the latter draws us into the vertical essence of truth, if you will. They have their uses, and do not have to be treated as impediments.

While it's true that our ideas, no matter how open-ended, condense the total into concepts, they serve us well in harmonizing our psyche and attuning with the greater reality in which we are bundled. As I've said before, it wasn't a mistake to create the universe, however it came about. Something is the inevitable complement of nothing. What I think Nitya meant with the bias is that perceivable reality is naturally going to stand out over unperceivable reality, so if we aren't careful we will forget the subtler context, which imparts meaning and direction to our existence. We will only be aware of it if we pay attention to it. Fortunately however, prana or Spirit operates with or without our consent, just somewhat more successfully with it.

Nancy likened spirit to the energy or vibration within the world: in a sense it is the heartbeat of the universe. She meant to tell us how important it is. What would it be like to live without a heartbeat?

I've recently been reading Iris Murdoch's philosophical essays, which are quite something, and a new discovery for me. The very first point that struck me was her take on mysticism. Where rationalists and existentialists treat mysticism as "other worldly" and pie-in-the-sky, she turns the tables, describing mysticism as the attempt to be fully present, to enter into reality to the maximum degree. She dismissed existentialism (though she admired it) and rationalism as the very abstractions mystics are routinely accused of indulging in. From the Foreword by George Steiner:

After intense study, and despite Sartre's *La Nausée* which she ardently prizes, Murdoch came to feel that the existentialist commitment to the actual world was, in some deep sense, spurious. Existentialist ontology and models of consciousness

were abstractions, dogmatic mythologies of closure (*No Exit*). Equally to be rejected was Bertrand Russell's celebrated opposition between 'Mysticism' and 'Logic'. Properly grasped, the 'mystical' pursuit of the Good, of perfect unison with moral truths, arises out of a rootedness in common humanity, in 'ordinary' being, far more concrete than either the 'language-games' of analytic-academic philosophers or the ideologies of the existentialist. For Iris Murdoch, there is in 'mysticism', when it is attached to life, a deep-lying utilitarianism. (xiii)

While being grounded in the core emptiness of the *karu*, Atmo likewise teaches us to meditate on existential reality as a way to access it. Mysticism is clearly shown to be reality-oriented in the venerable cliché Be Here Now.

Speaking of utilitarianism, Paul is frustrated by the tools we have in hand, namely our senses and organs of action. The more closely he observes them, the less efficacious they are in revealing the inner reality to him. Nitya's delightful Upanishad paraphrase goes along with this, pointing out that each of our senses is a partial—tool is a good word—interpretation, and only the prana is central enough to be completely necessary.

Deb reminded us that those tools are beautifully effective here, in our worldly endeavors, but are not much use in ascertaining the cause. We are learning to expand our perception (and surely our intellect) by redirecting our tools to reach beyond their imagined limits.

Bushra marveled that the mind can go away, as in Alzheimer's disease, but the breath remains, showing that breath can exist outside the mind. It is not within us: it comes into us and goes out of us. It's like the universe is breathing as one huge organism. We all got a kick out of Guy Murchie's statistical idea that with each breath, on average, we inhale six atoms breathed by every other person who's ever lived. I have fortunately already typed up a very cool section about breath from Murchie's book, which I will tuck into Part II. Way cool, and a great meditation.

Speaking of Alzheimer's, Bushra told us about a movie she saw about the disease. She couldn't remember the name, but loved that when the woman finally became completely out of touch, her culminating words were "The joy of me." It implies what Vedantins believe: the reductive essence of our being is joy immortal, as in Atmo's last verse:

Neither that, nor this, nor the meaning of existence am I,  
but existence, consciousness, joy immortal; thus attaining  
clarity, emboldened,  
discarding attachment to being and non-being,  
one should gently, gently merge in *SAT-AUM*.

Nitya's conclusion clearly specifies the challenge we face in developing independent thought:

The Absolute or Supreme Self is said to have no vikara [transformation]. On the other hand, the body and mind are always in a process of transformation. It is an irony of fate that the ever-transforming organism has to function as the instrument of the self to seek and realize that it is none other than the never transforming Self—the atman. This implies an enigma that can spell confusion and agony. To comprehend the incomprehensible is the true challenge of spiritual life.

I think we can acknowledge plenty of confusion and agony in the present historical moment, with plenty more impending. Deb invoked the ancient Chinese, who saw the seed of the opposite in every moment. When one pole reaches its peak it inevitably slides into a contrary mode. I noted how the world's largest-ever empire is now riddled with so much corruption that it can't possibly be sustained, though I admitted that in my entire life of 2/3 of a century I have never accurately predicted anything. It has taught me to withhold my expectations, and this eases the anxiety somewhat. It's pretty much guaranteed that what comes next will

be different than what we imagine, though this idea does not excuse us from doing our best to uphold the dharma, as the Buddhists put it.

A hundred years ago the Christian churches were bastions of fairness, opposing corporate greed and standing up for the downtrodden. The slave is our brother, and all that. In the blink of an eye many of them have swung to opposite positions, though not all, thank God! Loving hearts have been converted to cruel criticism and even violence. Slavery is somehow Biblically endorsed. Those of us who continue support loving kindness are the repositories of high moral values, and it is our task to keep them alive in a demonic era.

This does not necessarily mean doing good to others, which is inherently dualistic. In the Indian context it means striving to hold to your own best principles, according to your (properly educated) lights. This description of Nataraja Guru immediately follows the earlier excerpt from *Love and Blessings*, and is a good model of the unitive ideal:

Nataraja Guru had no inside or outside. His anger, humor, and compassion all manifested spontaneously. He was never apologetic or regretful. He certainly didn't believe in the conventional Christian philosophy of "do good, be good," nor in entertaining people with pleasantries and well-mannered behavior. On the other hand, he welcomed encounters that opened up areas of vital interest in a philosophical point or problem, as in the case of Socrates and his group of young followers like Plato. (150)

The other day, deep in meditation, Deb was reminded of a favorite E.E. Cummings' poem, that can serve to close these proceedings:

the Cambridge ladies who live in furnished souls  
are unbeautiful and have comfortable minds  
(also, with the church's protestant blessings

daughters, unscented shapeless spirited)  
they believe in Christ and Longfellow, both dead,  
are invariably interested in so many things-  
at the present writing one still finds  
delighted fingers knitting for the is it Poles?  
perhaps. While permanent faces coyly bandy  
scandal of Mrs. N and Professor D  
....the Cambridge ladies do not care, above  
Cambridge if sometimes in its box of  
sky lavender and cornerless, the  
moon rattles like a fragment of angry candy

## Part II

Baiju once again was able to make the time to write up his meditations on the chapter, offering a terrific addition you should be sure to read:

In verse #6 of *Atmopadesa Satakam*, a discerning seeker who follows Narayana Guru's visions can sense a mute lamentation coming from deep within from the Guru—who will wake to the ever unchanging (eternal, everlasting, omnipresent and omniscient) Absolute when the human mind is flooded by the constant flow of biological needs and material interests (*vikalpas*)? Even during his time, it is very clear, he did not find enough people who were awakened, at the least, to the awareness that one's life-goal should be to seek and attain the oneness with the eternal Truth, let alone becoming serious seekers. So he wrote such works as *Atmopadesa Satakam* and *Darsana Mala*.

All great *rishis* must have had moments when they despaired of the ignorance-afflicted people of their times. Sage Valmiki composed Ramayana, the very first poetic creation in the world, having pained by a jungle tribesman's infringing upon the lives of a pair of birds in love by shooting down the male bird, an action of

biological cum material interest of that time. The *rishi* heard the heart-rending lament of the female bird when her companion was killed, and the compassionate Valmiki's surging emotions got translated involuntarily in the form of a couplet of a perfect metrical form. Only a little later he realized, to his own surprise, that he had uttered the words as a couplet in a metrical form which he could employ in the creation of a work of art. He wanted to write about the righteous way of life for humans, how a perfect man should conduct his life, and in the same metre that had occurred to him wrote the story of Rama, the great epic.

Although we hear a subtle tone of despair in the present verse, Narayana Guru does not despise the vital urges or the latent tendencies of the humans. But he is certainly hinting at the fact that the constant gush of the *vikalpas* does have a negative bearing on the higher goals of man to realize his true Self; therefore there is a need to have effective control on them. If we can take a firm resolution and strive constantly to have that effective control on the *vikalpas* by adhering to the necessary discipline while gradually progressing through the steps of self-instruction as contained in *Atmopadesa Satakam*, that will be a fitting tribute to the Guru and to ourselves—*guru sakshat param Brahmah*.

I chanted the verse a few times, and suddenly I happened to notice that the presence of a small word (*Ul*) in the Malayalam original, if we word-split accordingly, will possibly turn the import of the verse to be even more profound to the seekers. The verse ends: *Aarunaruvatulloru nirvikara roopam*.

*Aarunaruvatulloru* can be word-split as:

*Aarunaruvalu* = who will wake to

*Ul* = inside (is)

*Oru* = one

Then the last phrase *nirvikara roopam* = form that is ever unchanging (free from the six transformations, as Guru Nitya explains in Meditation #6)

Thus the last part of the verse could mean: our inside (*chittam*) is of the real nature of one ever unchanging form (stuff); who is there to wake to that unchanging stuff (because all have their minds flooded by the continuous inflow of *vikalpas*)? The implied vedantic principle is that the radiance of the *Atman* will be visible within if the ceaseless inflow of *vikalpas* into the mind is effectively checked. In *That Alone* (page 41), Guru Nitya explains, “Whether we are wakeful or sleeping, there is in us an essence that does not change. The Upanishads call it *brahman*....” He further elucidates, “Our basic nature is this changeless essence....”

Guru Nitya concludes Meditation #6 with this brilliant thoughtful observation: “It is an irony of fate that the ever-transforming organism has to function as the instrument of the self to seek and realize that it is none other than the never transforming Self—the *atman*. ”

I would like to append another known vedantic fact, as a reminder to ourselves, to the thought: the never transforming Self is there, as Narayana Guru affirms in the last line, within every ever-transforming organism. To seek and realize the Self one need not search anywhere else but within himself while he remains an ever-transforming entity. The microcosm is modelled in the same way as the macrocosm, and so the Guru keeps reminding us to look inward, for there you have the never transforming Self.

*Aum tat sat.*

I wrote Baiju back: “This is really terrific! Having insights into the subtleties of the Malayalam is something we can’t manage here. Thanks also for managing to get it here before class time, so I can share your insights. Glad you could find the time for this.” He responded with a feeling I hope we can generate for our remote participants:

Pranam. Reading your message, I felt I was part of the class.  
Nice feeling.

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Paisley also joined us from afar, invoking she of the most amazing voice, Aretha Franklin, who is near death:

I can't make the party tonight but here is my contribution.

...the inexhaustible possibilities of the mysteriously self-founded, self-preserving, and self-willed Word-Mind-Matter.

I'm sitting here playing everything I can find, praying for the beautiful, the wonderful, queen of The Soul. Talk about the inexhaustible possibilities! If her presence doesn't make you adore That...

Just watch this recording and, for a moment, you will experience the Absolute.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diwF1-xJwZM>

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It turns out the six atoms, though it’s close, is from somewhere else. This is even more spectacular, a lovely example of Murchie’s inimitable style. No wonder Nitya loved his book!

## Murchie – Seven Mysteries of Life

I tried to define the physical boundaries of the body and began to realize they are virtually indefinable, for the air around any air-breathing creature from a weed to a whale is obviously a vital part of it even while it is also part of other creatures. The atmosphere in fact binds together all life on Earth, including life in the deep sea, which “breathes” oxygen (and some air) constantly. And the water of the sea is another of life’s common denominators noticeable in the salty flavor of our blood, sweat and tears, as are the solid Earth and its molecules present in our protoplasm....

Yes, life as a whole breathes and owns the common sky and drinks the mutual rain and we are all embodied in the sea and the clouds and in fire and forest and earth alike. As the God of Egypt was quoted as saying about the year 2000 BC, “I made the four winds that every man might breathe thereof like his fellow in his time....” And thus, He might have added, I made sure that all life mingles and shares the most vital elements. Indeed oxygen (then unknowable to man) is the leading substance of life as it is presently known, making up some 60 percent of the weight of the human body, surging and blowing through it in the rhythmic torrent that Sir Charles Sherrington called “a draft of something invisible” to fuel life’s flame. It is plain to see that we all breathe the same sky and we are becoming aware that it pours through our lungs and blood in a few minutes, then out again to mix and refresh itself in the world. But it is still easy to overlook the completeness of airy suffusion throughout the planet, so easy in fact that I would like to offer a few quantitative statistics to point up some of the significances.

Did you know the average breath you breathe contains about 10 sextillion atoms...? And, since the entire atmosphere of Earth is voluminous enough to hold about the same number of breaths, each breath turns out, like man himself, to be about midway in size between an atom and the world.... This means of course that each

time you inhale you are drawing into yourself an average of about one atom from each of the breaths contained in the whole sky.

Also every time you exhale you are sending back the same average of an atom to each of these breaths, as is every other living person, and this exchange, repeated twenty thousand times a day by some four billion people, has the surprising consequence that each breath you breathe must contain a quadrillion atoms breathed by the rest of mankind within the past few weeks and more than a million atoms breathed personally sometime by each and any person on Earth. (319-320)