

9/2/18

MOTS Chapter 9: The Indifferent Recluse in Me

Growing on both sides, in a blossoming state,
is the one vine which has come, spread out and risen to the top
of a tree;
remember that hell does not come
to the man dwelling in contemplation beneath it.

Free translation:

The phenomenal world is like a tree whose truth is concealed
by a mysterious creeper, spread out in two directions and
overladen with flowers. Living in the shade of this tree, a
disciplined contemplative escapes the temptations that might
otherwise lead to tragic consequences.

Jan has requested a longer meditation in conjunction with each chapter, and last night we were able to wind down early enough to give it a try. The group setting, prepared as it was by a critical-thought session, was ideal for a profound communion with our communal Self. Afterwards for those who could stay longer, Fred previewed his almost finished album of kirtan-style songs, also very nice for meditation. The contemplative meditating under the tree of the image was thus given its full due last night.

During the class Jan had told us about expanding her own meditation practice, which we don't overly emphasize in our weekly classes. After returning from the annual Gurupuja at the Bainbridge Island Aranya, she felt renewed and blissful, and spent some time letting it all sink in, sitting by the lovely pool and fountain in her secluded backyard.

Several of us now feel well enough instructed to want to spend a bit more time in a unitive state of mind. It's important to have both an active practice and a quiet one, which begin as

different approaches yet ideally become merged, as the core connection is able to be present at all times.

In the present chapter, Nitya continues his presentation of the kind of distressed mentality that we all can identify with, a real strength of the *Meditations on the Self*. Here he is provoked by a pair of wheedlers trying to pry something out of him, and loses his cool—perhaps this has happened to you? He sniffed out their collusion, and:

At once my mind became alert. I prepared myself to uncover their game, and began tearing down their pretensions. The conversation turned into a heated controversy. Our relationship became very much strained.

Well, a few of us could relate, anyway. Then the instruction comes into play. If we hold on to our upset and blame it on the other person, it continues to burn inside us, not to mention possibly being unjust. A better option is to turn the “arrow of interest” inward and examine the sore points that have come up. As the class readily conceded, conflicts highlight our own faults and weaknesses, and working with these is potentially transformative. Nitya succinctly describes the process:

When they left and I was alone with myself, I turned inward to have a look at my mind. There were feelings of dejection and sadness. I could also see, along with the negative emotions, the direction in which I love to move. I always try to notice the distractions that have come upon me from sources that are beyond my control, and contrast them with the peace and harmony I normally maintain.

He goes on:

When I was arguing and asserting and making seething attacks in my conversation, I was very much identified with all those

experiences. Now when I turn in and look at the state of my mind, I find the same sadness still in me. Along with that I can also see the numinous goal that I always visualize, as well as how the distractions came upon me like a plague.

Notice the sly inclusion of “turn in” from the last chapter, maintaining the continuity.

Deb emphasized that it wasn't necessarily that the two friends were the problem in themselves, it was Nitya's propensity to combat them that led him to lose his cool. He was a hotheaded youth, and never accepted that he was holy and above human emotions. He thought believing that was nothing more than a superstitious attitude. To Deb, the whole conflict sprang from his own doubting and suspicions. This is very often the case, though I countered that Nitya was astute as well as respectful, and chances are that he was legitimately provoked. In the end it doesn't matter: we're always going to think we're legitimate and the other person isn't, or the other way round if you were raised like I was to shoulder all blame, which comes from an outmoded Christian attitude. My family was agnostic, but many Christian ideals permeated all Western society until the religion's shriveling after WWII in favor of raw materialism.

From my vantage point then, there was some definite conflict Nitya was drawn into, and he was able to restore his sense of peace by turning inward and examining his reactions. That's the key either way, but if we presume the other person is blameless, we may miss some of their toxic effects on us. Nitya was not naïve by any means, but he had a well-worn path to his calm center he knew to take whenever he was upset. Because of this he was maximally available to all who came to him, provoking or otherwise, and we're talking many, many thousands of supplicants. He always greeted them as friends and gave them a compassionate hearing, before (occasionally) turning off his hearing aids or going back to work.

I reprised the brief moment after Nitya's death when I sat at his desk and received some visitors. I was approached by just a few sincerely needy people, who pleaded for various kinds of help, along with specifying what they wanted from our organization. One glimpse of that role was enough for me! It was misery-making for me to be the responsible party, and it seared into my mind what a generous, unselfish soul Nitya had been. I couldn't handle his job at all. When he spoke of "unlimited liability" he really meant it. I think you have to be completely identified with the Absolute to make that work, and I can only bow inwardly to those—and there are more than a few—who can bear those kinds of burdens and not be crushed by them.

Moni recalled how Nitya was so sensitive that when he visited sick people he would often show signs of their illness afterwards. Nataraja Guru worked hard to correct his over-sensitivity. I'll add one famous example of this from *Love and Blessings* in Part II.

Several of us (Nancy, Deb, Bushra) talked about the indifferent recluse as an antidote to excessive drama in life. They admitted we often play things up for dramatic effect, until, as Nancy put it, the chaos seems so apparent that it's silly to even talk about. Many of the things we get tied in a knot about are just plain ridiculous. I should add that simply realizing that much is far from trivial.

Deb wanted us to own that we create those feelings of duality, that the winding creeper comes from our being lost in phenomenality. The deeply grounded contemplative is something more than that. Yet, as Jan said, Nitya did succumb to the provocation at first. He was plagued by what had transpired. I agree with her that we shouldn't imagine that we aren't supposed to react or be involved unless the person is a perfect saint. There is always something rotten in Denmark, or elsewhere, and our reactions are normal and even essential to our well-being. It's just that we shouldn't hang on to our upsets, or unfairly condemn

others for theirs. That doesn't resolve situations, but finding balance does.

Jan quoted Lao Tzu as making the same point, that we should abide at the center of our being, and marveled how magical it is that we have this other option to abide in, and it's even right there where we are! Knowing this is available is rare enough by itself, so Jan is thrilled at how it's upholding and encouraging her sense of personal integrity. The whole poem is in Part II.

Paul added that the tree provides the support for the vines to cling to it. They cover it over, but just because we can't see it does not mean it doesn't exist. He went on that it is helpful to be challenged, especially the challenge of learning that the numinous reality abides in the center of your being. That means the recluse doesn't push anything away, any more than the opposite. After all, the vines are what bring the flowers, which are beautiful. We call some of the flowers love and art and joy and sharing. Friends and family. Beast of the field and fowl of the air. They deserve to be cherished.

Deb told us about sharing a key idea along these lines with her nephew, about how to deal with family members who draw you into anger and confusion. She scored a hit with Nitya's dog tale (see Part II), though she exaggerated it to a pink Chihuahua for best effect. He loved it! There's nothing like a laugh to blast the blues away. Bushra summed up that the idea is to not stay injured or upset, but to recover quickly after the pink dog bites you.

Fred brought his Florida perspective to bear, analyzing the image in terms of the three gunas, which are all to be overcome by the recluse. That kind of negativity was indeed implied in verse 8, but here an overall neutrality provides the starting point for the adventure of living life in tune with its harmonious origin. We aren't so much retreating from something as embracing the all.

There is a subtle distinction to be made here between acting out based on gut intuition and restraining action through contemplation. As spiritually alive people we are inviting spontaneous action, unmediated by social constraints, and yet these

are not guaranteed to be in anyone's best interest. Nitya was unrestrained when he became enraged at his visitors, who he always called "friends," by the way. He might never have met those people before, but he worked to treat everyone as a friend—his default setting, and an excellent one. It goes along with the universal ideal of justice: we are all innocent until proven guilty. That's a radical enough attitude, as its rapid erosion in the present era clearly attests. But he didn't start out there: he had to bring himself back to it after he had fought the duel.

So at the same time as we open the door to some of our inner promptings, we also reserve time to check in with them, analyze them, and make intelligent adjustments. We don't want to end up as either overly inhibited brooders or out of control impulsives. There is a yogic balance to be struck. Narayana Guru's powerful image in verse 9 is one of the most outstanding in the entire *Atmopadesa Satakam*, and it holds out the secret of proper mental posture to us. It has often been described as detached yet present. There is action in inaction and inaction in action. Dynamism and stability perfectly matched.

Nitya reminds us that if we believe in its value, contemplation is easy enough to carry out. To quote Mojo Sam again, "It's not difficult to be mindful—what's difficult is to *remember* to be mindful." Mindfulness is a huge cliché these days, so contemplative is the word we prefer, but it's basically the same thing. Nitya wants us to know this isn't anything foreign, though it has been suppressed in most of us. It's a very natural process:

Our mind can turn outward and establish identity with external factors, and can turn inward with the same ease to identify with our thoughts, feelings, volitions, anxieties and hopes. Right from childhood our minds have been moving outward and inward and have been weaving several patterns of life with varying external designs and equally varied internal texture.

This hints at the “both sides” or the “two directions” mentioned in the verse, something that should be familiar to class participants. The tree rising straight up from where the contemplative is sitting indicates the vertical impetus, while the flowery creepers manifest the horizontal actualities. While the vertical is unitive, the horizontal is dualistically divided between objective percepts and subjective concepts, and these are the two sides. A non-contemplative person hardly realizes the mismatch between their concepts and percepts: they believe what they see, and so are not much inclined to refine their concepts to more closely match their percepts. It takes a neuroscientist or yogi to notice the prejudicial conditioning that taints their thinking and damages their relationship with externalities, requiring corrective action.

Andy alertly cited Atmo 51 as a cognate of verse 9:

Having existed in knowledge, an I-ness, in the beginning, emerges;
coming as a counterpart to this is a thisness;
like two vines, these spread over the tree of *maya*,
completely concealing it.

Unless we are philosophers we don't think of subjective and objective realities, we call them 'I' or 'me' and 'this world'. I and this are the natural poles of the horizontal. Bushra added the simplification as inside and outside, which works fine also. Here in verse 51 the tree is named maya, but we must remember that maya is the way the Absolute becomes perceptible. Maya is the very expression of the Absolute. We screw it up, and then we complain about our private version of maya, but at its best it is the process of unfolding of the true meaning of who we are. Which is exactly what Nataraja Guru summed up as the vertical. The Absolute can't be depicted as a tree: it's what makes the existence of the tree possible. Only as maya can we truly say the Absolute is “all this.”

The task of the contemplative is to relate all horizontal aspects to the central vertical core. Bushra noted that the contemplative is indifferent to both, yet based on what we know, it

is not a callous or heartless indifference. It is a loving and caring indifference. The contemplative doesn't take one side over the other, but sees what unites them, the common ground they inhabit, and that gives an indication of how to act with expertise.

For Bushra, the way to not get drawn into conflict is to see that the other person is deeply suffering. It's hard to fight with someone who is suffering, and you should know that they are confronting you because of their suffering. Deb added that when you see someone in pain, your sense of caring is automatically brought in. She recently has been reading a book on psychedelic psychology, and loved the advice that if something is painful or frightening or bad, sit with it, don't turn away. Staying there and looking at it frees you, the longer you are with it. Fred added that in reality there is no us or them anyway.

Jan noted that the examples we'd so far given were about conflict and drama external to you, but she realized that it's super helpful to be tapping into that deeper place without a conflict at hand, as peace can also guide and orient you. Her positive experience of being at Gurupuja with so many kind and thoughtful souls was like practicing this verse without even knowing it. It took her beyond feeling like an isolated ego.

I wholeheartedly agree: we learn how to stay centered by practicing it when there aren't conflicts oppressing us. It's hard to learn anything under stress, but if we've practiced and become familiar with the centered place in us, we can find it more readily when we need it.

Paul led us into thinking about how we defend ourselves all the time, even when it isn't necessary. Our defensive feints exacerbate any conflict brought by a friend.

Just when we're starting to feel like we might have a handle on dealing with provocations, Nitya reminds us that each separate incident amounts to a simplified practice session: "What I have stated here is only a two-phase picture of a single encounter. Life in its wholeness is far more complex." Yet we prepare for the wholeness by successfully dealing with individual moments.

The core of all this is the “recluse” mentioned in the title. I was a little thrown off by the word, as it usually refers to a person living withdrawn from the world, but Nitya makes it clear he is speaking of the Karu, our simultaneously miniscule and vast contact point with the Absolute:

In my search for the Self, when I have gone deep into the mystery of the unfoldment of my varying patterns of thoughts, volitions and feelings, I have clearly visualized an unchanging factor. It stays on, deep down in my consciousness, like an all-seeing and yet indifferent recluse, unaffected by the grand drama of my external life or the deliriums of my internal turmoil.

Lucky for us our core isn't compromised by our mental caterwauling! Nitya affirms that a close contact with our inner “recluse” is the saving element within the chaos of manifestation:

It is the discovery of this recluse, which is not truly ‘I’, ‘you’, ‘he’ or ‘it’, that saves me from the vagaries of this illusory world and its chaotic life. Just as my truer self is an indifferent recluse, the Real that remains veiled behind the apparent phenomenality of the world is the transcendent Absolute, which is also indifferent to all pairs of opposites.

Having adequately analyzed the chapter, we were able to settle into an extended meditation visualizing the clear protolanguage of the image of the alert contemplative sitting indifferently under the tree of life, whose parasitical vines are always seeking to bind the careless. It was easy to feel the extra boost of the group setting, especially after really bringing our full intelligence to bear on the subject. Once that is switched off, when we collectively contemplate any subject there is an extra intensity that is most satisfying. It really does make it easy, or at least easier.

Part II

Baiju wrote, “My little note this week follows. What a learning opportunity this class is!!”

I found verse #9 highly enigmatic, except for its plain literal meaning, and way beyond my reach. Nataraja Guru’s commentary confirmed my observation. Meditations on the Self, as I expect from the title, is more of meditative appreciation of the *Atmopadesa Satakam*; reading the meditations, more often, I as well recognize and adore the poet in Guru Nitya whom I have known since my childhood. In That Alone, Guru Nitya is at his best as a teacher when he writes on the present verse; his fairly long exposition has taught me a lot many new things and I was convinced that whatever anyone could think of this verse had already been said. I was happy to conclude that I wouldn’t write anything this week but keep meditating on the enigma of the verse.

Narayana Guru wouldn’t permit me to just give it up like that! As usual I kept chanting the verse in my mind focusing on every word the Guru had chosen in its composing. All of a sudden it struck me:

The Guru here writes about a tree and a vine that creeps all the way up the tree and spreads on all its branches, and covers the entire tree. I got a glimpse of the poetic genius of the Guru. In Advaita Vedanta, *Brahman* and *Maya* go together – they are often represented respectively by the pairs such as Siva and his consort Sakti, *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, etc. And let’s remember that *Maya* is almost always represented as female. For centuries, poets in India (if I am right Kalidasa was the first among them) have been using an image in which the vine that climbs the tree is portrayed as its consort. It was a blissful relief that the mystery of the tree and the vine was resolved in my mind. When the tree is covered by the vine and its leaves and flowers, the true form of the tree is not recognizable. Thus the

tree represents *Brahman* which is veiled by the power of *Maya*, the vine, giving an appearance of the world or the universe.

The vine-clad tree is the phenomenal world (*Brahman* veiled by *Maya*). The seeker who unwaveringly stuck to the Guru's stipulations in the previous verse has now chosen once and for all to tread the path that leads to absolute freedom, and begins to take the complete support of the radiant Self within to get the senses withdrawn from their objects. He wants a place to sit peacefully, far away from all the attractions and temptations of the ever-enticing sense objects of this phenomenal world. Alas! One who looks for such a location in this world has not understood the power of *Maya* and her all-pervasiveness.

The Guru, through the picture of the tree and the contemplative underneath as he depicts in this verse, reveals the secret that all who successfully freed themselves from the bondage of the world (*samsara*) did so living in the very same world, represented by the vine-wedded tree – no other choice. Such people maintained perfect equanimity, unaffected by their surroundings. They were able to engage themselves in *tapas* sitting under the same world-tree in spite of the relentless distractions of *Maya* who always delusively envelops the eternal Truth. Should you succeed in doing *tapas* the same way, hell dare not touch you.

Guru Nitya, in *That Alone*, has written an elaborate description of *tapas*. There are different descriptions that we would come across in other texts as to what *tapas* is. Nataraja Guru reminds us that the word *tapas* is related to the Sanskrit word *taapa*, means heat; so *tapas* has to do with heat. Taking the Guru's cue we can infer that *tapas* is the process that heats up the inside of the seeker. For what? Let's think of the general process of refinement, or as an example the process of extracting gold from its ore. When the gold ore along with all the mixture of impurities it contains is refined in

the presence of heat, brilliantly shining pure gold gets extracted. Our inside is a gold mine of inestimable value but obscured by enormous amount of impurities such as the *vasanas* (the latent tendencies) and the *vikalpas* (thoughts involving biological needs and material interests) that emerge from the *vasanas*. A heating process called *tapas* will refine the inner organ and make it free from the *vasanas* and *vikalpas*; then, as Narayana Guru has already indicated in the previous verse, the wondrous brilliance of the Self will fill the inside of the seeker. He will then stay untouched by the woes of life in this world.

Still there is an unanswered question about *tapas*. Where is the fuel to build up the heat inside to get the process initiated? Remember the energy inversion process Guru Nitya explains in his commentary to the previous verse (That Alone)? The energy that usually flows outward to the sense objects gets effectively redirected to the inner organ for those who have successfully withdrawn the senses from their objects. That's a lot of energy! It has all the heat to evaporate the formidable temptations that *Maya* cajoles us with, and *Maya* herself gracefully gives way for the ever-shining Brahman to reveal itself.

Narayana Guru has also included yet another enigmatic modifier to the climbing vine; in fact the verse begins with it:

Iru puravum varum aravasthaye poottoru koti

Iru puravum = On both sides

varum = that comes or appears

aravasthaye = the six states

poottoru koti = vine that blossoms

Thus the vine is modified as: a vine that produces the six states as its flowers which appear on both sides.

The vine grows onto two sides, and on each side it produces the six states as its flowers. The six states, as Guru Nitya lists out in *That Alone*, are 1) the state of being before birth 2) birth 3) growth 4) transformation 5) degeneration and 6) extinction. Narayana Guru says that the vine produces these six states (as its flowers) on two sides – in the waking side and in the dream side. These six states can occur and be visible to a person only in the waking and in the dream states, and the six states are indeed the ‘display’ of *Maya*, the vine!

That is a simple explanation of the mystical tree with a contemplative seeker sitting beneath, as portrayed by Narayana Guru in the present verse.

The Guru has now set the stage to go onto the core of the instructions on the Self that follows.

Aum tat sat.

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From the chapter Heart Pangs, in *Love and Blessings*, about Nitya’s sensitivity and Nataraja Guru’s correction:

I went back to Singapore with the intention of bringing a rapprochement between the Gurukula and the Mission. This time I succeeded, but the emotional strain of mediating between different groups with intractable vested interests caused me to lose my stamina, and I fainted while giving a talk. I was rushed to the hospital, where the doctor surmised I had had a heart attack. There

was no foundation for the diagnosis; even so, I was initiated into the mystery of myocardial ischemia by being given all the worst drugs that are administered to heart patients.

After sixty-five days in the hospital, the doctors gave up on me. It was a remarkable night. Several nurses spent the entire night in my room, kneeling by my bed and praying to the Good Lord Jesus to save my life. I think God must have listened to their prayers. Next day, I was flown to Kuala Lumpur where a doctor consoled me, saying that there was a good chance I would live for at least six more months. I just wanted to hold out ten more days so that I could get back to Varkala and pay my last respects to Guru.

My sister was a pathologist and her husband was a cardiologist. They met me at the Trivandrum airport with a stretcher, a wheel chair and bags full of medicine, and took me up to the Gurukula, where Nataraja Guru insisted that I be accommodated in his room. After the doctors had left, Guru came in and looked disdainfully at all the pills and capsules and tonics. He insisted that I throw them all away as part of my therapy. In the morning he expected me to get up at half-past four and take down notes as I had always done. He thought that lying in bed would only worsen an ailing heart. Later he took me by the hand and made me walk around the hill a bit.

Under Guru's care I slowly started improving. Little by little he gave me small assignments to do, and in the morning and evening he took me out for short walks. His theory was that we die when the plus side of our life is robbed of its vital interests. A good remedy for seemingly fatal diseases is to cultivate enormous interest in accomplishing something worthwhile.

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Here's the dog story in context, from That Alone verse 80:

If you examine any aspect of what is presented in consciousness it will show within it contradictions like existence and nonexistence. The Guru

says if you recognize that it is in such a wonderful way that this has come into being, then there is nothing to worry about. There is no problem.

I once visited a friend's home in Delhi. He had a small dog. It was only a little bigger than a squirrel, but it barked like hell. I thought of showing my love to it, so when it came close I patted its head. It bit my fingers! Then my friend said, "I am so sorry! I should have told you that he can be fondled, picked up, caught by his tail, taken by his legs, put in your lap. He does all those things. But he doesn't like to be touched on his head." Once you know that, you have no more hatred for that dog. You just leave his head alone. But if you don't know it you think, "How can you keep a pet which bites you? It's a contradiction—a pet that bites. That's not a pet at all!" You can be reconciled to it once you know it acts like a pet as long as you don't touch its head. The contradiction even becomes amusing once you know it. Then you understand it is just the miraculous way in which this particular dog is made.

If you know this kind of information about your wife or husband, your child or your neighbor, you won't have trouble. You need to know where you shouldn't touch them. For instance, my grandmother was a very willful, strong woman who could stand anything, but we couldn't say "muslin" in front of her. When she heard that particular word she would get nauseated and feel like vomiting. It seems she was once given some muslin cloth, and the day she was given it she had some sickness. The illness became psychologically associated with the sound "muslin." So if we wanted to provoke her we would just say "muslin" and she would behave in a funny way. She shouldn't have—it's only a word. But after all, as Narayana Guru says, all that you think and believe is only words.

"Jesus Christ"—is that not just two words? Have you ever seen him? No, you've just heard those words. The word 'Christ' was told to you, and now you love it and accept it. You have seen light and life in it, consolation in it. It's only a word, but saying that doesn't take away any of its psychodynamics. All that power still remains. If you whisper in someone's ear that you love them, it gives them a feeling of elation. If you whisper you hate them it can make them miserable. Some people

smile outwardly, but inside they are repeating the negative mantra “I hate you,” over and over. Words can have tremendous power, so you should use them carefully.

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This must be from the Tao de Ching, but it can stand alone.
Perfect:

Always we hope
someone else has the answer,
some other place will be better,
some other time,
it will all turn out.

This is it.

No one else has the answer,
no other place will be better,
and it has already turned out.

At the center of your being,
you have the answer:
you know who you are and
you know what you want.

There is no need to run outside
for better seeing,
nor to peer from a window.
Rather abide at the center of your being:
for the more you leave it,
the less you learn.

Search your heart and see
the way to do is to be.

Abide at the center of your being.

~Lao Tzu