

5/4/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 11 – Oh, What a Noble Mind is Here O'erthrown

(The title is Ophelia, in Hamlet, Act III, Scene 1)

The Portland Gurukula opened its doors to vaccinated truth-seekers for the first time in a year and a quarter, which seems more like a decade and a quarter. Having a couple of people brave the new world to come out and join us in the flesh felt uncertain at first, but quickly restored a deeper sense of familiarity. We had a semi-successful blend of zoom and presence, and plans are to continue. Since our numbers keep dwindling, this means we could possibly include one or two more from remote sites. The ease of attending from the comfort of your living room is captivating, and may soon be the default setting. While I love having real people around, I don't have to go anywhere, so I don't get a vote.

Chapter 11 surely strikes the reader as odd at first, but we managed to distill a potent beverage from it—that's the power of experienced group exploration. Before the reading, I suggested Nitya was probing the motivations some people had for mortification. After featuring model moderns in the previous two chapters, he wanted to offset them with the tragedy of excess, before exalting the guru principle and self-realization in the next chapter.

The psychological causes behind forcing oneself to undergo severe austerities are not dealt with here, but have been raised elsewhere: foremost is that children are easily convinced they are not good enough, and they must suppress themselves in order to be "good" or "godly." With prolonged exposure it can easily turn into self-hatred, where any and all personal preference is stamped out with gusto.

Medieval Christianity was a vastly horrific torture festival, and the shadow of its abuses hung over my agnostic household in my early days, which still remained unquestioned wisdom.

Children were to be “whipped into shape,” which wasn’t like whipping cream, it featured real whips. One favorite saw was “spare the rod and spoil the child,” which wasn’t intended as advice—it was a warning about what not to do. Beating children was the only way to get through to those satanic little imbeciles.

Self-hatred is the negative ego at its worst, cruelly pounding its host into the shape it imagines will give it entry into the next world, whether lucrative society or heaven, which are pretty much the same thing to the immature imagination. The outcome is the entire spectrum of spiritual and socializing practices, ranging from polite behavior to violent self-abnegation. Most of the spectrum is healthy, but at a certain remove it turns deadly.

Of course the ego is expert at legitimizing its perversions, and Nitya writes of the intractability of those beset with the need to punish themselves. He concludes the essay by connecting it to the title he chose:

I don’t know of anyone who has dealt with this problem with greater efficiency or sounder reasoning than William Shakespeare, who introduced the theme in his play Hamlet. Of course, the net result of Hamlet’s probe is wholesale death to everyone on the stage and tears to those who are in the audience.

These are dire straits indeed. Deb told us that, like the audience in Hamlet, she feels like crying when she hears these stories. Ideas like having an intellectual grasp in all possible fields or of personally promoting divine energy—they are beautiful, and yet something goes awry in their production. There is some level of imbalance in imagining you could live forever, or better, kill yourself to keep everyone else alive forever, or be immortalized in a computing machine. She asked, where is that part of us that leaks out so far from the center of gravity that our understanding is disturbed? It’s intriguing, scary, sometimes humorous, but always

sobering. This chapter is a reminder for us to find a central, centered balance point.

The implication is that here's where you need an outside friend or therapist, and Nitya will reintroduce that factor in the next chapter, *The Wonder of the Guru*. It's an especially acute need when so many are being coddled in computerized echo chambers now, where their own faulty understanding is being beamed back at them, seemingly from a wide assortment of perspectives, but at heart a mirror-image of their own. It's an easy trap to slip into without any *actual* alternative being presented.

If we think too highly of ourselves, even a trustworthy and compassionate lover of life finds the door locked. In Nitya's second example, his friend is severely mortifying himself: literally working night and day to make his sensory apparatus disappear, and Nitya writes with typical understatement:

I was somewhat horrified by the kind of experiments he was performing on himself. I tried to talk him out of it and used all kinds of methods of persuasion to stop him from hurting himself, but he seemed to be absolutely satisfied with the outcome of his experiments. He imagined he was getting nearer and nearer to the secret of how spiritual energy transforms into physical and chemical substances and organizes those materials into living organisms able to carry out performances of all kinds at the behest of the spirit. He believed that he was working on a very urgent project that was sure to benefit mankind, and that no one should stop him from making this wonderful contribution to human welfare even at the cost of his own life.

Deb lamented that his drive came from believing he was doing something beneficial for the world, and she wondered how we might see that in ourselves. Somehow the distortion is amplified by the thought that "I'm doing something remarkable, and it's really

for other people's benefit, not mine." She was thinking of this bit, from the reading:

What makes it difficult for all these great minds and those who want to believe their revelations is the good intentions they have and the grandeur of the several visions which they have experienced, which in themselves have an indisputable value.

Andy offered that we're bamboozled by our ideas, and one common idea is that our embodiment is at war with the spirit. That guy is trying to overcome his body, treating it as an enemy.

Deb thought that went along with trying to make the body last forever, which is the opposite exaggeration. Andy continued there is an enticing idea of permanence, that there's got to be something that's fixed, that's going to last. He remembers his students in one of his college drawing classes talking about how pretty soon we'll be able to download ourselves into a machine and then we'll be immortal. It's a popular idea these days. Yuvah Noah Harari's book *Homo Deus* considers it inevitable. Andy is old enough to know that even machines wear out.... Regardless, we are hopeful that somehow if we live right, we can fix it so we can last, perhaps via some meditative system. It's a hope that we've got, and maybe it even afflicts great souls like Sri Aurobindo.

Andy was referring to the longest section of the essay, on the supramental descent of Aurobindo. Nitya's best friend, Surendranath Jauhar, later became head of the main ashram, so he was intimately acquainted with the story. I've clipped a longer version in Part II, along with some intimations of immortality, from *That Alone*.

One place where we go off is imagining immortality means living forever. It can also mean simply *life*. Mortality refers to death, but spiritual texts likely mean *mental* death, which is something that can be fixed. Our minds come alive when they shrug off their unneeded conditioning and think afresh. It's an attainable immortality. I later thought of how the word

mortification is obviously related to the mortality of mortals, the opposite of immortality. Neither is infinitely prolonged.

For that matter, living forever just doing and thinking the same things over and over would be a living death. Being replicated within every computer on earth would mean you couldn't ever die, and in such a state I'm sure you would want to, since there wouldn't be anything identifiable as "you" left in the mix. Immortality as the ultimate punishment for hubris.

Deb reminded us of the children's book *Tuck Everlasting*, by Natalie Babbitt, which eloquently demonstrates how being out of joint with the flow of life and death is very soon a curse, not a blessing.

Along the same lines, Andy recommended a vampire movie, *Let Me In*, about a 12-year-old girl who is a vampire, living forever. It's scary, but poignant about immortality.

In any case, there's not enough variety in the universe to make living literally forever seem appealing. As Nitya advocates, being maximally alive for your allotted period is the better option.

I've often noted that it's young people who fantasize about immortality. With enough reflection, the idea loses its appeal.

Jan affirmed that the flip side of the danger of isolation or the echo chamber is how in the Gurukula we have community of well grounded, very conscious people who are connected to the Self. It helps us stay in our right mind, in a thriving place. She included nature too, how nourishing and nurturing being outside is.

I mentioned how nowadays there are so many people who never go outside, who are totally cut off from nature, and agreed we are most fortunate to both have that and to be in a loose-knit community of people who make subtle corrective suggestions to us if we act unusual. I find it odd that for many people wisdom is boring compared to delusion and paranoia. Our sharing helps bring wisdom alive, makes it more interesting than mere words can. To me, wisdom insights are much more thrilling than UFOs in the backyard or whatever lurid distraction is being peddled by the

media this week. And the insights last—they may not be immortal, but they're close.

Rather than obsess forever over the weird tangents some people pursue, the class happily focused on how to stay sane and self-aware in our vastly complex and splintered world. Suiting action to the word, Deb invited ideas from everyone. Perhaps you can think of your own, and even send it to Class Notes central, for sharing....

Anita started us off with a quotidian example. She began to suspect somebody had hacked her TV, since things had changed on her screen, she was losing data, and she couldn't figure out what was happening. She got madder and madder thinking a hacker was responsible, and how they screw up everything. She even suspected a neighbor, since his address mysteriously appeared on her phone, and she planned to go to his house and tell him off. Fortunately, she called the "geek squad" who came and quickly found the culprit. The YouTube channel she used had run an update and that's why some procedures had changed. Plus they told her she had to save her data, or it would disappear after a period of time. It turned out nobody had gotten into her equipment, but because she didn't understand what was happening she spiraled out of her center into anger and fear.

I figured the \$100 geek bill was cheap therapy, and Anita will not forget the lesson.

Nitya mentions the paranoia or persecution complex behind this kind of disturbance, and it's easier than ever to come by such feelings in a world where privacy has utterly vanished and hackers indeed have ready access to every feature of our lives. They might as well be sitting next to us every moment of our lives. Yet it's good to know that a disturbance *could* be something less dire, like a senior moment or simple lack of adequate information.

Susan shared a nice, positive example. Once upon a time, she and her fiancé took dancing lessons before their wedding. They couldn't dance very well at first, but in the class they both were required to dance with all the other partners, and after they came

back together, they found themselves much better dancers. She realized that having more input, more interaction, had expanded their movement-awareness. They were no longer just stuck in their own bubble, blaming each other for stumbling. The simple exposure to different people allowed them to open up and relax.

Before we shut down, I wanted to comment on the detectable flaws in a couple of the chapter's examples, to show how a reasoning person might have avoided the delusions, even without community involvement. While Sri Aurobindo was the consummate non-dualist, Advaita Vedantin, the idea that God will descend into a person and transform them is pure duality. God has to be external in order to do that. Yet in Advaita, you are God, so no further entry is needed. Somehow that dualism should have been recognized.

As far as the scientist who imagined he could program a computer with the equivalent of his total brain capacity, and then add other people's to make a super computer, even in 1976 this was an absurd idea. We are aware of only a tiny fraction of our full capacity—embarrassingly tiny—yet the programming would still be immense. The hubris of the ego is responsible for our grandiose dreams. Still, grandiose dreams do lead us somewhere, usually to unanticipated ends, but that can be a good thing. Just not what you expect.

As always, Nitya is passionate here about the shortcomings of drug-induced ecstasy, while admitting they can provide a temporary uplift into beauty:

The main ingredients in beauty are wonder and love. The sense of wonder and the intoxication of love can lead a mind from an individual sense of satisfaction and fulfillment to the catering of happiness to an ever-growing world of communion and fellowship. But when these states of mind are propelled by an aid that is unsupported by a true vision of the Self, the same wonder and love can become pathological. The worst kind of hallucination will be treasured as a divine gift when the mind

and the spirit are fed on this. The capacities to discern and to question are all wrung out of such a mind, so it makes continuous demands to feed it with more and more kicks.

We can readily think of examples. Once again, the key to staying safe is to integrate the experience into a sane outlook, for which outside assistance is essential.

Jan wondered about the meaning of Nitya's random sentence about King Tutankhamen: "The lure of the tomb of Tutankhamen is well known." Andy responded it's about the attraction of death. On further consideration, he said that mummification was a means to immortality. Obviously, immortality has to wrangle with death.

Immortality, it turns out, is the theme of the chapter, and the cause of the overthrow of noble minds.

Anita asked didn't Narayana Guru go into a cave? Yes, but it is far from a tomb, it's a beautiful scenic overlook of the jungly tip of India, where the three oceans meet. It's more like sitting on a cloud.

For that matter, Nitya spend 18 months in isolation. There is a value in withdrawing from the moil and toil of worldly business to quietly reflect on oneself. Some people have a greater taste for it than others. There is no "right" way to discover yourself. Chogyam Trungpa wrote about his Tibetan training as a 12-year-old, of spending a half year or more in the catacombs, in the dark, sitting with the skeletons, meditating on death, to fully absorb the transience of life. As always, the background is knowing transience so you will turn to permanence. The amazing thing is that permanence is a state of mind, too.

Part II

Beverley struggled to come up with her response to the chapter, and then:

This time I will tell you about Tim whose spiritual life was something I could not imagine happening or understand. I don't think the quote for Chapter 11 does apply exactly but it's an example from my own life. I have read a lot about the subject and have always been fascinated by and am attracted to people who are totally committed to their beliefs. I have never totally believed anything in my life. I am more of a Tao Te Ching type myself.

I met Tim in Devon England, when we were both in our sixties. I was married to Jeff then and we both like him very much. We met at a meditation group run on vaguely Buddhist lines that Jeff knew of. This was in 1995. Tim had just returned to England after 30 years in India. Our friendship continued to flourish via emails from Portugal after 2003 when Jeff died. It was based largely on our shared Middle Class Public School (private, fee-paying, single sex boarding schools) backgrounds, a wide range of interests and a shared long learning curve on using our computers. We scarcely mentioned spiritual matters. We exchanged emails every day for 13 years.

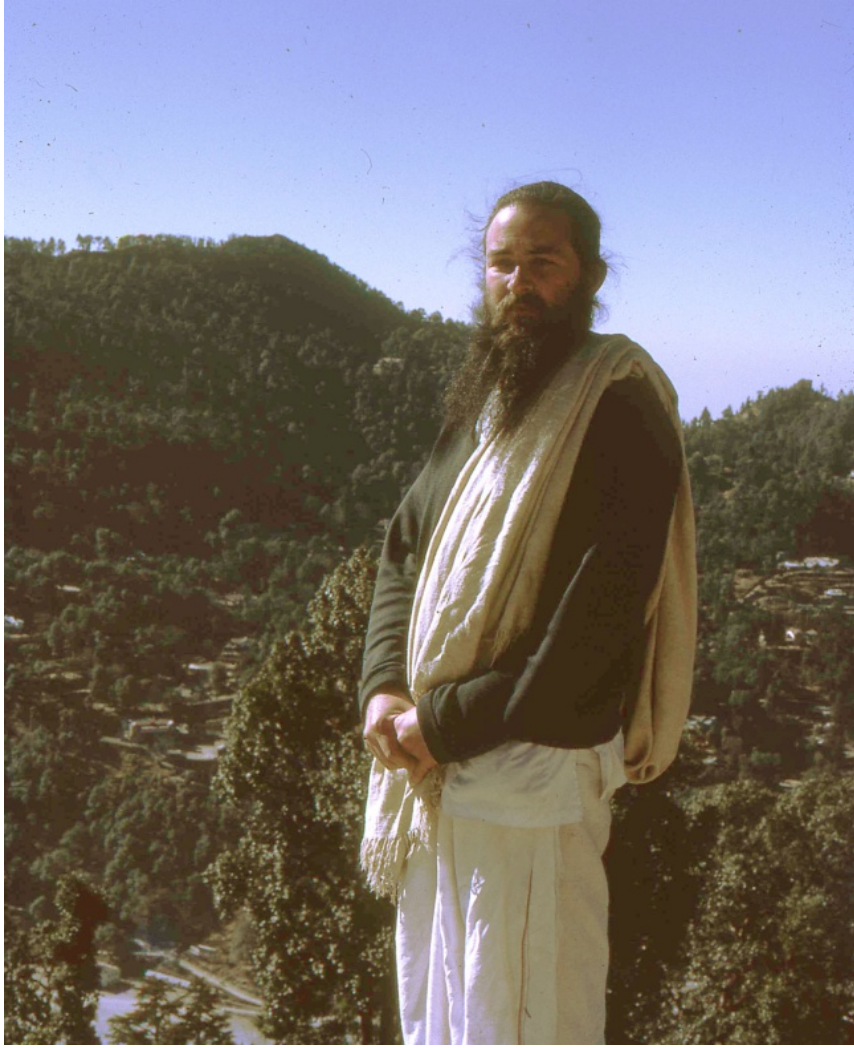
Now for Tim's history.

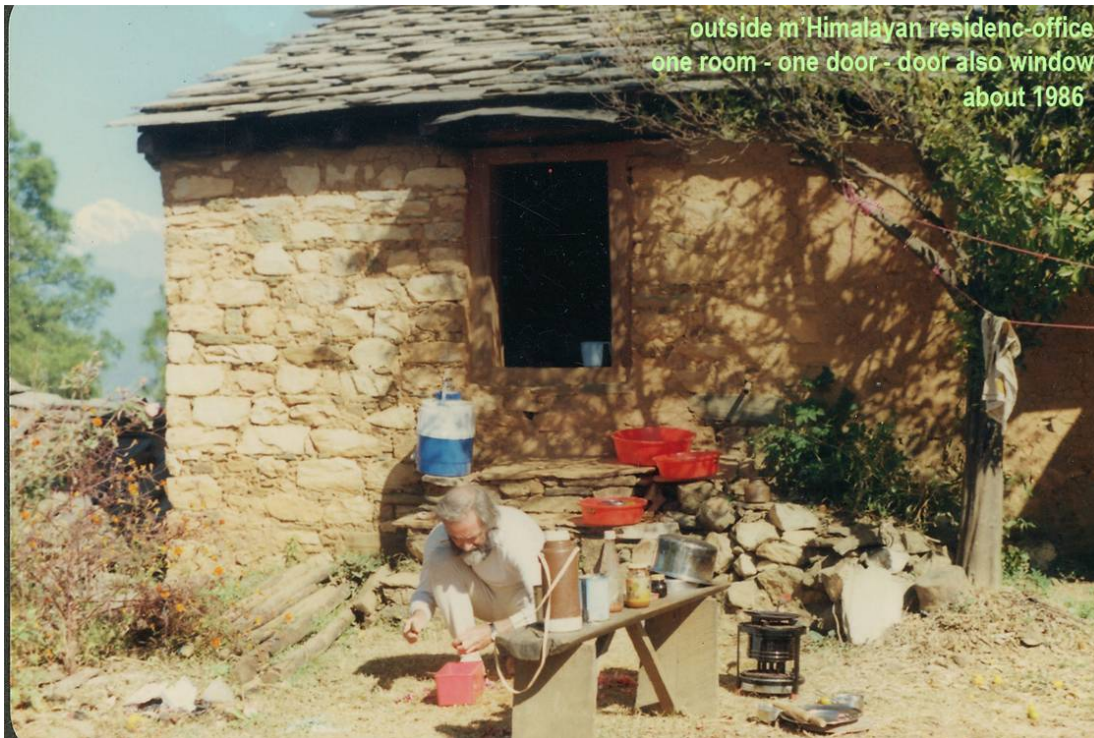
He qualified as an Engineer from the LSE London and completed his PhD at Harvard. He had a very high IQ and could see sources of water underground from the air (he had a Pilot's Licence) as well as when surveying on the ground. Then he discovered he had inherited a weak heart and his long term planned career fell through – no flying, no heavy physical activity. At Harvard he met someone who told him about Zen in Japan. He went there on a research grant. By this time he had rejected society's perceived materialistic values. He rejected an offer of a prestigious post from Stanford as he did not want to teach or be tied down. In Japan, as well as working on a promising water source, he spent much time in a Zen monastery and was accepted as a serious student, but only as a visitor.

After a year he intended to go back to England but stopped over in India at Delhi for a few weeks., but he never left India. He met a member of a small Ashram which was an offshoot of Auroville. He decided to go there as he felt some kind of inner spiritual call which compelled him to be near the Mother. For the first two years at Auroville he meditated in his little room, spoke to no one and only emerged to eat once a day and, I presume, perform his ablutions. His clever brain also admired and accepted Sri Aurobindo's written teachings. He emerged totally believing in the Mother and Sri Aurobindo's teaching about the speeding up of a "Divine Project" called "the supramental Descent." Tim had all Sri Aurobindo's books when I knew him. He said the details of integral yoga were worked out meticulously with sound logic and its understanding of human nature was perfect and that this supramental descent was achieved by the Mother. This is a rough summary as Tim hardly ever spoke of his spiritual beliefs as such. He did speak of 'Levels' starting with the mind and body at the lowest 'emotional' level then came thinking and then many more - maybe seven - until finally when the physical body is transformed into the "immortal receptacles for the divine spirit." Eventually this 'super race' will be the next true humans.

(Well this is probably inaccurate but it's the vague understanding I had.)

After his solitary time he taught English to young disciples there. After 5 years the heat was too much for his heart so he moved North to the foothills of the Himalayas and lived as a sannyasin in a small stone hut near a small village.





**This was the village shop within walking distance of the not remote village.....
Sort of basics - tomatoes - cauli - eggs - flour - rice - + teashop, and even
restaurant, those pots in the front are "today's specials" - same every day.....**

Whilst there he designed a simple method for constructing a well which local Indians could construct for themselves using almost only local resources. For a while he got a grant from a charity - Oxfam I think - and hoped to have his method of well construction developed more widely but gave up because of the bureaucratic

interference and incompetence. I assumed his helping with the wells was a part of his spiritual life because he loved humanity, but no such thing. He said that one's spiritual life was a separate thing and nothing to do with wanting to help the poor and needy or do good works or loving mankind as such.

Tim as an English man in Totnes Devon England:



He came back to England and managed to get enough from the family Trust, which had always supported with him with a small amount in India, to buy a house and live very frugally. As the years went by he received a great deal of support from the Social Services and the National Health Service. He had no qualms about this as he said he was British so of course such support was his right. He had no social life as such but got on well with people he met in town when shopping and so on. He was very interested in any eco-friendly activity. He had a heart attack in 1999 and whilst in hospital a second one. In great pain he signed the paper giving permission for a new procedure still in an experiment stage. He recovered and for a few years kept going with pills and exercises etc. The last 4 years became more and more painful. It seemed he was determined to live as long as possible. I think this was something to do with the Sri Aurobindo's "Supramental levels." He died in November 2014.

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That Alone, verse 83, includes the longer version of the Aurobindo story, along with a profound meditation on immortality. I recommend reading the whole chapter, but here's the supramental part, and a teaser more:

If you take the theory of evolution as a reality, all forms of life are parts of the biologic mainstream. We are all part of one stream of life whose history is much longer than any human life. Nothing in this theory gives us any reason to discipline ourselves or have any kind of morality or higher values. There is no need to enlarge our intellect. So for us to commit ourselves to a higher form of life there should be a possibility of somehow moving from nonexistence to existence, darkness to light, and death to immortality. Then our life can have meaning.

Of course, it is out of the question to immortalize the body. Narayana Guru agrees here with the evolutionists that the very nature of the body is to break, then for something new to come and for that to continue for a while before it also breaks. Then its place is taken by another, and this will continue on and on. So there is nothing called the immortality of the body.

When Sri Aurobindo expounded his theory of spiritual evolution and the descent of the supramental, I don't know if he meant it this way, but what his devotees understood and we are likely to think when we read his book, is that the body, which is a receptacle of the spirit, is slowly changed by the supramental spirit to become an immortal vessel to hold life. He clearly seemed to imply a physical immortality rather than any theoretical one.

During his lifetime no one in the ashram was allowed to ask the question of what would happen after Aurobindo's death. It was taboo. They all believed he would not die and that his body was immortal. When he died, the ashram people wouldn't believe it. They refused to bury him. There was a French government at that time, and they did not subscribe to that belief. They had a law that a dead person should be

buried within three days. The ashram people said “No, he is alive. He is in samadhi.” After the third day the government decided to bury him forcefully, so the ashram finally allowed it after much dispute that he was still physically immortal.

Then they changed their theory. They said, “He is continuing now in the Mother. He has transferred himself to her. He is immortalizing the Mother so she will not die.” She did live to be ninety-seven. But when she died, nobody made any dispute. She was immediately buried. It is not a feasible theory that the body can become immortal.

So, then, where do you become immortal? In the mind? How could that be? After all, what is the mind? We can’t say it is an entity by itself, because it is dependent on a biochemical system for its existence. Without the body we cannot think or know anything. You don’t even have power over the different phases of consciousness. The alternating phases of consciousness come on their own. No matter how hard you fight, in a little while you will be snoring. So you can’t immortalize the mind because you can’t immortalize the body it depends on. Then what is this thing called immortality?

We should turn again and again to the very first verse, where Narayana Guru referred to a substance, a *karu*, which has three modes. In one aspect it becomes the awareness, the knowledge, that fills the essential properties of everything and identifies them as the knowledge of a thing. The same *karu* is all this concrete manifestation as well as the individual subjective consciousness. When what is objectively out there, what is subjectively experienced, and the consciousness of things both outside and inside are all reduced or traced to one common substance, it is unbroken. There is no cleft in it anywhere. We can’t say whether it is a thing or a not-thing. It is both thing and not-thing. Basically we can say the *karu* is a law that governs everything. That law is changeless, but at the same time it governs all changes.

There is one entity in us which bears a striking similarity to this: that which detects and recognizes the law within us, the *buddhi*. (584-6)

Part III

Jay sent well wishes—

Good to know that Gurukul had meeting in person with vaccinated members! Nothing beats this.

I feel that mortality is a property of the physical world which is interwoven with the spiritual world as life. A relation that is not permanent. Now with the development of ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE, we may have more confusion about reality. A web we weave to keep ourselves busy.

I agree with Nitya's view about the shortcomings of drug-induced ecstasy. During our Gita lessons/discussion I had mentioned this as walking with crutches.

This weekend is Mother's Day: May 9th. I have some thoughts about Mother, she is immortal!

According to Saivat philosophy Shiva is the creator and is represented by a bindu that is formless or has no attributes. In the philosophy of Gita, he is GUNATIT! Shiva is an unexpressed form or Purusha, and Shakti, the divine feminine principle is his other half, a dynamic presentation of the universe. For those not familiar with the Eastern philosophy, Shakti is also called Maya.

Shakti literally means ENERGY. According to biochemical science we know that we human beings derive energy by metabolizing food through cellular processes. The end stages of this energy formation takes place in subcellular organelles called MITOCHONDRIA. These organelles in human beings are derived from mother only. Father does not contribute mitochondria at the beginning of life. Hence, no matter what we do, it is the feminine Shakti, in the dynamic form in the universe that allows us to enjoy and appreciate the world! This emphasizes our understanding of

Shakti which is so ancient! It also tells us that every day is
Mother's Day!