

5/11/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 12 – The Wonder of the Guru

Now we're talking! A full seven of us sat together in the living room before enchanting crepuscular scenery, with four more on Zoom, two of whom may be with us in person as soon as next week. (Moni is locked down in Kerala for an indefinite period.) As Jay wrote last week, there is an ineffable *something*, possibly the intermingling of electromagnetic fields, who knows? that makes the actual version of gathering far more profound than the virtual—at least for us elderlies. Probably our younger, digitalized cousins would feel vastly inhibited being in the room with us. We'll never know.

I find it interesting that the “Guru” section of the book, with its hints of spiritual rebirth, coincides with the rebirth of the class. May they continue to reflect each other!

The chapter opens with Nitya criticizing the two magnificent photographs Deb took of him with Nataraja Guru during her first visit to India in 1971. They are in a class by themselves, and are displayed (mostly without attribution) all over the world. I've put links to them in Part II, if they aren't already etched in your memory. No matter: they inspire us anew with each viewing.

Deb, who was twenty-two when she took the photos, told us that after she took them, Nataraja Guru was still sitting in his chair, and she went up to thank him. He told her, when you show them to your mother, whisper that he was a queer old man.

Another time, Nitya and she were looking at one of the photos in someone's house. He is wearing a ratty t-shirt, and he said he would never let himself be photographed looking like such a shabby person if it hadn't been for Nataraja Guru. She felt they capture the combination they both had for humor and reverence.

Steven remains fascinated by the cultural experience of the guru in Indian culture, and wondered how it differs for us non-Indians. Why did Nataraja Guru feel it was so important to renew

this archaic notion of the teacher-disciple relationship, by instituting the Gurukula? Steven honors the deeper significance of teacher-disciple relations that's invested in the Gurukula. It's more than a school (though the word *school* is obviously descended from kula—could *cool* be also?). Steven was present at the inception of the Overton Street Gurukula that is now the Skyline home of Deb and Scott. He senses something unique in it, and wondered, what is the juice there?

Steven recommended a movie, *The Disciple*, about a young man who is training to be a classical Indian vocalist. Music and dance teachers are also gurus, and from it you get a sense of the tenderness in the relationship of guru and disciple, the way the Indian performers talk about their guru, with deep emotions welling up in them. He lamented we don't have anything like it in our culture, or maybe just a very little.

Deb commented that in the popular imagination the guru is the channeler and presenter of revered wisdom, including the arts. Nitya talks about the awe and adoration accorded them, something that he felt got in the way of pure wisdom transmission. (The next chapter after the Review, *The Word of the Guru*, deals with this in detail.) At the same time, it is what draws seekers to them, so it plays a role.

I remember Nitya mentioning that in the West, the belief is that you have to form a person *into* something, squeezing them into a pre-decided template. Children have to be whipped into shape, molded into what's expected of them. In the East, education reveres and promotes the true inner person coming out and expressing itself in all its uniqueness. What people are is already in them in latent form, and that is very likely to be damaged by the molding process. In the ancient gurukulas, which were the schools of the time, you spent twelve years living with the teacher, the guru, tending the home, doing the chores, so that the guru could pay more attention to imparting wisdom than sweeping the floor. You lived with a wise person in the hope that the wisdom would leak into your system, naturally eliciting your best qualities.

In the continuing Gurukula we take seriously that education means to educe: to bring out a person's latent potentials. Western seekers always ask what they are supposed to *do* here, which is already the wrong question. Then they move on, looking for those guides who will give them a program to follow. Programs are already a style of training alien to the spirit of Vedanta. What we help with is becoming yourself, not fitting a mold.

Deb noted that Nitya describes situations where we are focused on ourselves and our own awakening, which includes breaking out of the social mode. There is a kind of guru element in the experiences of our own lives wherever we make a kind of breakthrough. She asked us to share situations that have enabled us to turn inward and look at ourselves with greater awareness, which we eventually got around to.

Appendix II in Love and Blessings is Nitya's essay on the Principle of the Guru, which I've clipped into Part II below for those who don't have it handy on their shelf. The word 'guru' literally means "remover of darkness," and whatever enlightens you is the guru principle in action. Therefore every where and every thing can be a guru to us. The universe seems to have a feature of leading us from darkness to light, which we invoke in the second element of our second opening chant: *tamaso ma jyotir gamaya*.

Nonetheless, it is easy to mistake the transmitter for the Source, and Nitya had to cope with ten million or so followers, most of whom adhered to the orthodox version, where it's the person who matters, who is easiest to worship. That was why he moved to chilly Ooty, where most of them were reluctant to go. He wanted to work, write, teach and contemplate; and being worshipped all day long would have seriously curtailed it. Here's something from my 2009 India Trip, at a talk I gave:

One man asked, in keeping with prevailing opinion, "Should we treat Narayana Guru as a God-man?" I answered that according to Advaita Vedanta we are all God. We should treat

everything as God, and if we single out one person as God we are implying that the rest of us are not God. Moreover, Nitya told us once that Indians preferred to worship their gurus, so that they wouldn't have to take their teachings to heart, which was much more difficult. It is far easier to nod to a statue than to search your soul. But only the search has value. The Guru did not want to be worshipped. He installed a mirror in a temple to remind people that they themselves are what they come to worship. The Self is all. So our task is to discover and express the unique aspect of divinity within ourselves. If we wish to honor the Guru, this is how we should do it.

Steven recalled Nitya teaching us, in that first Portland Gurukula, that the mother is everyone's first guru, and then you go through life and there are all sorts of things that take on the role of guru for you. Nitya expressed dismay that when he was gone from the earth, people would light lamps and wave them in front of his photo, that he would become just another photo image that people did puja in front of—he was really bothered by that.

I recounted the time we were driving around near Varkala one time, going past statue after statue of Narayana Guru in the center of the traffic circles, set in protective cages. Nitya said, with chagrin, “Indians like to put their gurus on pedestals so they don't have to pay attention to what they're teaching.” I knew perfectly well that Indians are not alone in this.... Nitya addresses the universality here:

Even though the word “guru” and the spiritual rites of a guru giving initiation to a disciple are looked upon as Indian in origin, seeking wisdom and finding it from a wise preceptor has been known all over the world. The spiritual reality of being initiated into the sacred center of one's own beingness has happened in one way or another to people everywhere.

Unfortunately, this most vital and wonderful experience is today very much vulgarized by having become a commercial

proposition. The “confusion of tongues” relating to this subject is now more confounding than ever, and it has become the hunting ground of charlatans. As a result, many an honest seeker is lured into the blind alley of mystical pretension.

By contrast, Steven appreciated Nitya for showing the way a guru-type person catalyzes learning in our lives. He remembers him talking about words exploding like bombshells, just like what he’s written here:

Every time a word is signaled by a script to the eye or articulated as a sound in the ear, it bursts into meaning like a bombshell in consciousness. In Sanskrit this explosion into meaning is called *sphota*. Nothing bursts in you with a more terrific blast than the word “guru.”

Another idea of the guru is that it is anything that quickens your understanding, which is an all-pervasive and unpredictable feature. Both are valid to Steven, and he senses both in his life. The explosion, the *sphota*, is the potent meaning of a word, which incites our understanding, brings it alive. He’s intrigued by the science of mantra: words that have spiritual potency, that quicken some kind of psychological alchemy.

I’ve often thought that *sphota* and *explosion* must be related etymologically. It’s an important concept that words have such intensity. In the West we don’t realize the power of our words. To an Indian, you must be very careful of what you say, because you can cause damage with your words, as much as you can uplift. I think we can see that ignorance writ large these days, with all the shouting going on, driving people mad. The secret of being quieter if you want to get something across is lost in the hubbub.

I’m sure we’ve all had the experience where somebody said something in passing that really hurt us or was especially beautiful. They might not even have meant anything, we just overheard it,

but it resonated with something in us that was primed for it. It's another way of the universe eliciting an important flash of self-awareness, if we're open to it. Our gut reaction is more likely to be closing down and defending, however.

Andy talked about occasions of telling others about Nitya and his writing, and how he was struck by the kind of people who approach the writings wondering "will I agree with this?" Andy feels a voice inside him saying that's not the right yardstick to apply, whether you're in agreement or disagreement. It's very difficult for a Western person to have a genuine reciprocity with a guru, because there is such demand for acceptance or rejection.

I concurred—one of my favorite sayings of Jesus is "judge not lest ye be judged." When we judge, we are blocking our own reception of the teaching, no matter whether we agree or disagree. It's one of the ego's classic tricks to deflect meaningful, and therefore transformative, input.

Andy agreed you have to be open as a disciple, you must open your heart and admit something into you, and that's a difficult relationship, one that we don't have in the West, even with our therapists. It's like going into the abyss.

Bill read out the sentence, "The seeker's mind should be kept open for a seeing master to fill with the spiritual seed." There is a spiritual reality being initiated in one's own being, and the guru's job is to plant that seed to find your true center. Needless to say, our job is to have ready soil for the seeds to germinate.

This is an appropriate time to re-present two favorite quotes from *The Sayings of the Ancient One*, by P.G. Bowen, 1935.

From the African School of wisdom:

Rejoice that you are the Seed from which a MAN may grow:
then turn to the Book of Nature and read this lesson there:

Behold the seed that in due time will grow into a lofty palm!
It does not, while yet a seedling, struggle up to the surface of
the ground; for there the desert sun would scorch it, and the

desert wind suck out its life sap. It does not seek the upper air until it has roots bedded deep and firm. It makes no untimely haste, but stirs into growth as the Year awakes and rests when the Year sinks to sleep. Learn from the palm and be happy to grow. Think not at all of what stature is yours. Fix no limits for your growth. It has no limits, except those you create by your own willing and thinking: therefore think only of growing, and never of being full grown.

Rejoice if your lot be happy, but if it be miserable rejoice also. Joy and sadness are your twin slaves, joined from birth, and they must serve you together, or serve you not at all.

We who are overtrained to rationality have a thousand blocks to fend off seeds of wisdom insight, yet true openness can sweep them all to the side long enough for some seeds to be planted. Here's how Nitya puts it:

Although it looks very irrational to show reverence or be in a state of adoration, several of the deep-seated instincts which make human life integral, whole, and meaningful cannot be dragged into the blatant light of reason. However profound reason may be, it is pale and shallow when compared to the depth of certain intimate experiences which bring awe and reverence to the soul. Only when man finds under his feet the plank of such experiences does he feel that he has roots.

Realization may be the final end of life, but finding one's own roots is an immediate necessity. This happens only when you are reborn. Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God." (John 3.3)

Deb thought there is a way of having a sense of, not mesmerized reverence, but a generalized reverence to people and words that

preserves the openness. She invited us to share an inner experience that wasn't just a rational schooling.

Anita offered that she has had some experiences that gave her insights into existence, and while some people think she's crazy, and some don't understand, she herself is confident in them. (I felt like interjecting that those opinions were markers she was on to something authentic, but she already knew that, so I kept mum.) Anita has had actual out of body experiences that gave her a total sense of comfort in knowing that existence doesn't just inhabit the body. She is grateful for that, and has had more than one. She knows her intelligence isn't just contained in her body, and that's been a wonderful, expansive understanding. The older she gets, the more important that understanding is to her.

Deb recalled a time when she was an undergraduate in college, sitting on some steps watching people walking by. It struck her that she *knew* a lot, but she didn't *understand* any of it. It was the moment her real search began.

Deb's image clicked with Jan, who told us how as a young girl there was something in her that wanted to come out on a spiritual level, but it took her a while to figure that out, since there was not a lot of receptiveness to it in her world. When she was in the sixth grade, about age twelve, she saw an invitation to a Christian "vacation Bible school," and something in her was piqued. She went to it, hoping it would bring her closer to understanding her life, and it opened up the world of spiritual investigation for her. It was a revelation! She definitely felt born again, and later she found she had a hidden family history of religious figures, including her great-grandfather, who was a bishop, and sensed a kinship going back generations, though not at all evidenced in her immediate family.

I retold the story of when I was driving to the Oregon beach one time, by myself—stoned of course, in my mid-twenties, but also the beneficiary of several years study with Nitya—and I suddenly realized that all the authority figures in the world were just like me: they had no idea what was going on or who they

really were. They were simply playing a role, driven by fear, intimidating other people, and enjoying their place in the pecking order—a term that really does come from chickens, by the way. I realized that they had no more idea than I did what the hell is going on, and I felt like a giant boulder lifted off my soul right there and then. I had been unconsciously kowtowing to authority since early childhood, not realizing it was wholly false, and I laughed long and loud at the relief, the lightness, of no longer carrying that weight around. I have treated people as equals ever since, and in some instances the “authorities” are happy to step out of their role and feel normal for a bit themselves. Now that I think of it, Nitya was one who would have loved that shift, as we will see in the chapter next after the Review.

This inspired Susan to share an astonishing admission. For many years in the late twentieth century, there was a bumper sticker on cars that said: Question Authority. She took it to mean that if you had any questions, you should find someone in authority to ask, and they would give you the right answers. It took her until nearly the age of thirty to get what it really meant: that much of what authorities told you was false, and you shouldn’t believe it automatically. It’s a terrific example of how deeply we are imprinted with toxic ideologies. Even though I knew what that bumper sticker meant, I was still carrying the boulder of capitulating to authority without realizing it.

It is no surprise that catching on is a tricky business. Nitya says:

Only a few are lucky enough to find their path without being confronted by impossible situations and enigmatic paradoxes. The trickiest part of the search is keeping faith alive without giving up caution and discrimination. In other words, the best guide for common sense is intuition, and the most dependable friend of intuition is common sense.

Nitya was always pleading for us to have common sense, because it was such a rare item among his fans. Then as always, there is nothing so uncommon as common sense. We were big on intuition, but it needed the discrimination common sense could provide, to weed out the rampant garbage.

Kris shared her major knock on the head story. A year after she got married, not planning to have children, she and her husband, Grant, went to India. One of the stops was Mother Theresa's orphanage, and just being there ignited her intuition: she knew they were supposed to adopt a baby. They traveled all over India and checked with orphanages, but there were no babies available. On the very last day, when they were heading off overland through Afghanistan to Europe, they went to one last orphanage and there was Asha, six months old. Something outside and inside of her told Kris to take the plunge, and they did.

The rest is history, as they say, except when they got back to Portland, Nitya said to her one day, "I wish every mother would look at their baby the way you are looking at yours." Those of us in the room could feel exactly what she meant, even if it's impossible to describe: the look of a Mother beaming down at us with all love and all care.

After a moment to soak into the bliss of the mother-guru icon, Jan shared how beautiful she found that idea of the guru cultivating the spiritual seed. Cultivating seeds—that's what our community does for each other too: we nurture each other and help protect the soil so the seeds can grow. I added one of my favorite sentences from Nitya, in L&B: "My lot is of a clumsy old gardener who cuts and prunes the bushes and hunts out the vermin and the fungus that come to destroy the delicate buds of his blossoming bushes." The full context of Jan's reflection is:

Similar to the coming together of the physical father and mother resulting in the chance entry of a spermatozoon into an ovum, the miracle of union occurs between the input of a genuine master and the receptive mind of the seeker. The

seeker's mind should be kept open for a seeing master to fill with the spiritual seed.

When it happens, it happens. No one can predict how, why, when and between whom it will take place. Men and women can lie together and mate a thousand times, but the one coupling resulting in pregnancy is mysteriously different from all the other nine hundred and ninety-nine. Like that, you can sit at the feet of several people and feel entertained, but the magic touch of transformation comes to you only from the right person by God's Grace. I say this fully aware that it may sound old fashioned to speak of grace.

We finished our lovely session with a few more accolades for the guru-context in which we bask. Andy admitted that Guru Nitya remains very present for him, even though he has been physically gone for over twenty years. He finds the meaning of him in his life is very strong, hour after hour. He knows there is a cliché that the Gurukula doesn't die, but it's true: a guru is a factor of your inner world. Surprisingly, Andy never felt any sense of sorrow when Nitya died. He hadn't seen him for four or five years when he passed away, yet he never felt anything like the pangs of losing a family member. Although we all have intense experiences of grief, he never had that with Nitya. It's as though he never lost him. Andy's paean recalls Nitya's assurance:

Finding one's guru should not be confused with the commonplace event of entering into a contract with a fellow member of your society. The only test and final proof that you have found your guru is life becoming meaningful to you, because what is happening is not at all outside you. The man or woman "out there" is only a mirror of the occasion of your birth.

We all are drawn by a heightened sense of meaning, ananda, when we engage with Nitya even through his writings. Something of him

is alive in all of us. I've reprised Jyothi's séance of him in Part II, with its message to celebrate, celebrate, celebrate!

Anita agreed the "guru" never dies, and, for that matter, consciousness itself never dies. Her experience is that our intelligence is not just connected to our body. When her mother passed away several years ago, Anita was at her memorial service, sitting next to the minister and her family. The minister got up and said he had comments all prepared, but was discarding them because he was impressed to speak about one person in the Bible. When Anita heard who it was, she "immediately lit up inside like a Christmas tree." In the Mormon Church there is a practice that every individual is given a name that you are never to share. You are going to be asked to say that name to enter heaven. That was the name that came to the minister, and Anita was quite convinced it was her mother who told it to him. She honestly felt it was her mother's way of communicating to her that we are more than the body. Clearly, mothers care for us even from the Beyond.

Part II

One of the two pictures Nitya describes may be found here, among many other places: <https://nitya-teachings.weebly.com/> . The other adorns my first website: <https://scottteitsworth.tripod.com/> .

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Jyothi's Séance

After Nitya's death in May of 1999, his longtime assistant Jyothi was inconsolable. She cried the blues from morning till night, year after year. Her fitful efforts to spark some new interests always sputtered and failed. She moved back to her parents' home, and took occasional trips to visit friends, but nothing seemed to lift her spirits for more than a few hours.

Being a single woman in India is tough enough, but being seriously depressed is even worse.

After a half dozen years or so of this, she spent a few weeks visiting her friends in Singapore. As she was reluctantly preparing to return home, her heart heavy, a messenger arrived at the door.

“My master is asking for someone named Jyothi, staying in this house,” he said. “She should come right away.”

Jyothi’s friends were baffled. They knew the man who had sent the message slightly. He was Chinese, supposed to be a medium, and lived not too far away. They had basically had no contact with him, but he had a good reputation, so they sent Jyothi back to his house with the messenger. She herself was a little bit puzzled, but not especially suspicious.

When she went in, she was amazed to see that the man’s whole body language looked exactly like Nitya. He was sitting just as Nitya used to sit, and he greeted her with a secret affectionate name that only Nitya knew. He asked her to sit near him.

“I am sorry I had to send you away,” he told her. “I needed to be alone when I died.” Part of Jyothi’s sadness was that when Nitya knew he was going to die, he sent her on a false errand to town to get her away. He didn’t want her around, distracting him from his final samadhi. She is very emotional and talkative, as well as worshipful. And they had a very loving relationship. It would have been very hard for both of them if she had been present. But she had always felt betrayed by missing the final moment.

“You have been very sad that I am gone,” he said. She nodded. He went on. “I have not gone anywhere. I am now everywhere. You should not be sad.” Jyothi looked at him in amazement. She couldn’t believe her eyes and ears. This guy even sounded like Nitya! He knew nothing about her or the Gurukula, and had never heard of Nitya, that was certain. But he *was* Nitya, in every detail.

“What is the matter with you? You should not be upset. I am everywhere. I am always with you. There is no end to life. Instead of mourning me, you should celebrate, celebrate, celebrate!” This

last was said with great joy and strong emphasis. Jyothi promised she would mend her ways, and stumbled out in a daze. When she told us about it some months later, she would still light up from within, in great relief and joy. She took a firm vow to change her attitude, and ever after felt the certainty of Nitya's presence always with her.

—as told to Scott Teitsworth

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The Principle of the Guru
by Nitya Chaitanya Yati

Physical perception is a perception in contrast. It is a contrast of light and shadow. All objects of perception are finite bodies illuminated by light. Shape and form are comprehended with the aid of light's varying shades. Where there is only pure light and nothing is illumined by it, there is no physical perception. The Guru is pure light and not an illumined object. Consequently, the Guru is invisible, although self-luminous.

For the physical eye to see, objects need to be illuminated with light, and there also has to be a light within that animates the eye and which is transfigured into the shape of the illuminated object. Thus, what actually sees is an eye behind the eye, which is also the ear behind the ear, the mind behind the mind, and the value that evaluates everything. This is the Self.

The Guru is none other than this Self which resides in the heart of all. Thus he is nearer than anything else and yet he seems to be far, difficult to be approached and hardly known to anyone. We are so much excited by what is seen that we even forget to ask who sees. Socrates rightly said that life is entering into a deep sleep and forgetting the reality of the Self. Only one who has awakened from the hypnosis of sensuous life can recall the original and eternal verity of the ever-luminous Self. That person will also

be able to arouse others from their intoxication of ignorance. One who can play this noble role among individuated beings is called a guru for the simple reason that he is a knower of the Guru.

The search for such a teacher is exhorted by the Scriptures. In fact, the closing exhortation given in the last mantra of the Chandogya Upanishad is to this effect. Brahma told Prajapati, Prajapati told Manu, and Manu told mankind to learn wisdom from a teacher according to rule, and after having learned, to teach the same in turn to their own virtuous children.

According to Sankara, the Guru is like a burning coal lying buried in ashes. To a casual on-looker, he is of no worth. Little does the on-looker know that buried in the ashes there lies a source of energy that can blow up into a conflagration and burn away all dross of ignorance. Sankara further describes the Guru as a peaceful person with such sympathy that he embraces all in his loving compassion for no reason whatsoever. Such a wise and kind Guru who goes from place to place like a rain cloud, showering his compassion on all and greening the spiritual vitality of people yearning for wisdom, is compared to the spring season that gently and silently spreads its beneficence around the globe. He brings joy to all those who have the refined sensibility to appreciate higher values.

According to Guru Nanak, the Guru is one who, having crossed over the ocean of *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, helps others to cross over.

To Narayana Guru, every word of the Guru is resplendent with the pure light of the highest certitude of wisdom. By nature he is in constant meditation. The Guru's generosity knows no bound. His judgment is always tempered with love and compassion. His vision is the best example of the attitude of sameness. His inward calm gives to his mind the dimension of dignity, just as a sense of awe is created by the vast expanse of a deep ocean. The Guru's transparent vision cuts across the scaffolds of phenomenality and he sees nothing but the blissful beatitude of the Self in everything. All the same, at the transactional level, the Guru behaves and

reacts as a person and there he lays his emphasis on being fully committed to an unlimited liability to the welfare of all. In that context, service is his watchword. He is a friend of the lone, the lost and the rejected. In his love even the most heinous sinner can easily find a haven of care and protection. He lives and symbolizes truth by being silent, and when he articulates the truth of every word that he utters bursts into a world of magnificent meaning that always inspires and elevates the heart of his listener. He sets before others an example by living his beautiful thoughts in a beautiful way. In spite of his peaceful disposition and calm nature, it takes no time for him to comprehend intuitively the inner structure of even the most complicated situations, and his decision comes with the swiftness of a thunderbolt. He urges action with the spirit of inaction and his seeming inaction can achieve in no time what action of drudgery cannot accomplish in a million lives.

Such is the glory of a true Guru. May the eternal Guru, that luminous Self of all, be ever victorious.