

5/18/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 13A – Reaction and Review #3 – Part 1

We opened with a rereading of *The Taming of the Bull*, as it perfectly sets the tone for what follows, in this very long recapitulation of many key ideas, which looks like it may extend over four classes. The search for the mythical yet familiar beast represents the spiritual search as imagined by a neophyte, with certain well-defined concepts and programs. A bull is huge and solid, just like many an imagined spiritual quest. Deb described the story as a hundred-year-old cartoon of how we envision our spiritual life. There are clearly set goals, interactions, something to triumph over, and there's intense engagement, yet when we turn to look at it, there is nothing there. It was all ideas, linked by a hypothetical process. When we're working on our process, we forget that we are disappearing into it, as she put it.

I commented that this is exactly why if you ask any of us what the Gurukula is all about, we are speechless, or if we make a verbal attempt, incoherent. Visitors want to know all about our bull, what it looks like, how you get to it, wondering if we've seen its footprints yet? All of that is beside the point, especially in terms of being yourself.

Yet Steven correctly asked, if we are to understand the end goal or end state is a kind of disillusion, then how do we maintain the resolution and commitment to our practice? There is a paradox here, if there is no real attainment.

That's right: if you didn't search for the bull and ride it back into town, you wouldn't have changed at all. Somehow, carrying out our imaginary programs alters us, it evolves us, but it's not what you think it is. This is a true paradox: if you do nothing, you get nothing; doing imaginary things with high purpose gives that nothing a value commensurate with how we conceive of it. And the ultimate accomplishment is dis-illusion, the dispersal of our illusions.

Remember, this is a Zen story. It was one of Nitya's favorites, but I think mainly because it puts the whole business—which he was very serious about—in a lighter mood. It's *funny*. Our seriousness should not be desperate, but lighthearted. We have to do these things and we always will, but we can realize that it's a vehicle rather than what we're truly seeking, which is our own authenticity. We are not getting something we don't have, we're becoming ourselves. And that's more spectacular than any prize bull we can conjure up.

If you can't live with that sort of paradox, then Vedanta is not for you. We're dealing with imaginary things and we're striving for them, but in the meantime, we don't want to believe we're not going to contribute anything important until we have our beautiful bull tied to a tree so we can display it to the village. We are already the Absolute, we are already a sliver of the universe embodied as our unique contribution to it.

At the climax of Nitya's version of the story, the hunter finds the creature, and:

To his horror, the bull suddenly charges at him. He realizes his search will cost him his life, so he takes the bull by horns. It's a long and desperate fight, but the bull is ultimately conquered and the man climbs on its back.

The bull's horns, in Gurukula parlance, represent the polarity of every dichotomy: the horns of the dilemma. They are what we are seeking to unite in yoga. Unless you grasp them together and treat them as a single continuum, they can tear you apart. Only when you take the bull by the horns can you neutralize the paradox of siding with one horn or the other.

From a Zen perspective, you realize a successful hunt is endangering to your ego. Bill talked about how part of that image is the fear that your ego holds on to so dearly. Letting go of that goal and reaching that state of aloneness is hard for the ego to accept. In a sense it would rather be searching than finding.

In addressing a later question, Nitya elaborates on the disappearance of the disciple in the story:

A worthy seeker coming to such a guru is described as an innocent lamb falling into the mouth of a hungry tiger. The reference is to the fact that the seeker really has no idea of what's in store for him. He thinks he can just stay the same and gain some wisdom. But there is a wholesale transformation impending, and the guru may even be somewhat ferocious in catalyzing the change. Just as the tiger consumes every bit of the baby lamb, nothing will be left of the original version of the seeker. The guru will polish him off and make a clean business of it. It won't be left halfway.

Nataraja Guru was famously ferocious, by the way. Nitya gives a good example in *Love and Blessings*, page 246:

Our behavior patterns differ very much. My policy is to wait, giving a lot of opportunities for people to present themselves as they think they are, and only after establishing ties with them do I start correcting them. But Guru never wanted to waste any time. He never minced words, and in less than a minute he would cause a confrontation. Whenever he saw even the slightest exaggeration, he would tell the person right to his face that he was mad. Those with latent abnormalities would come out of their hideouts immediately with all the frenzies of really mad people. And after such an outburst they would either calm down or leave in a fury, never to return.

Deb and I are just back from a long weekend with Nancy Y, Sraddha and Peter M at the Bainbridge Gurukula, our first in-person visit there in nearly two years. We had a long discussion about how Nitya adroitly defeated our egos, mostly with compassion but occasionally with a ferocity that erased any slim hopes we might have been clinging to of not being erased. Not

everyone got such a “blessing,” only the stubborn ones.

As Deb described it, you are brought to a point where there is no way to counter or argue your way through the situation. That, in essence, is what the guru does, putting you in a position where your usual ploys of logic and personal advancement are useless. When your ego is thoroughly defeated, all you can do is let go.

To truth seekers, this is the best thing that can happen to us. We are all so clever at explaining ourselves and rationalizing our games, portraying them as functional necessities. That’s fine and even necessary within the practical confines of everyday life, yet in the context of accessing our complete being, they are serious impediments.

Steven related this to a meditation experience of his, where you are focusing on your breath to focus the mind, and the more you focus the more you control the breath. After a while you let go of the control, and it continues on its own. When that happens, it takes on a different quality, utterly calming. It feels like you have re-entered the womb. It’s a matter of letting go.

Bill is finding this in his current Patanjali study, too, where yoga is for the practice of achieving samadhi or aloneness. The goal is to get to that zero point where you no longer exist. That’s when you achieve disillusionment.

We moved on to a series of review questions about how a guru interacts with a disciple. The previous chapter mentioned the guru “seeding the mind” of the disciple, and someone asked to know more about this. Nitya responded:

“Seeding the mind” is an allegorical way of describing initiation. When a guru gives a mantra to his disciple, the mantra is supposed to have a root, a seed and a sprout. This is to be symbolically understood rather than taken literally. The root is pointing out to the seeking disciple his own nature and what can be of intrinsic value to him considering that nature. Even the best spiritual discipline can be an extraneous foreign intrusion that will be rejected by the psyche if it isn’t suitable to

the receptivity of the seeker.... The guru probes the depths of his disciple's psyche to find the dormant seed which is buried within himself. And even after cultivating the seeds of spiritual insight in the disciple, like a good farmer or a careful parent he attends to the sprouting and growth of the seed, until such time as it becomes strong enough to stand on its own.

Steven was initiated by Nitya in 1971, in the first Portland Gurukula, and he wondered if Nitya really did initiate disciples in specific ways, tailored to their specific qualities. He remembered how each inmate went into Nitya's room and received a mantra and a meditation. As far as he knew, each person's were different.

The answer is yes, Nitya worked with the actual person, not the generic. Without any formal initiation, I was led away from the fads of the dominant culture to my natural abilities, especially music and writing, for which I'm ever grateful. Nitya hints at this here:

A man who wants to proselytize and is holding out the same teaching for everyone may know of the universality of human nature but is likely to be blind to the uniqueness of the individual. A true guru does not act in haste. He studies each disciple separately, and individually leads him to his path.

Famously, the big outfits like TM that promised personal mantras, also forbade anyone to share theirs. A close friend was in a group of TM instructors who braved the taboo, and all their secret words turned out to be the same. Instant disillusionment!

Deb, who was officially initiated, said more about how each cultivation by the guru is specific and appropriate to that person. It cannot be a rigid cookie-cutter version of coming to an understanding: there is a penetrating vision that allows it to come up uniquely for each person. Nitya truly understood each person who came to him, and he worked particularly with them in a long process of searching and understanding.

I was never initiated, and for that matter, Nataraja Guru wasn't either—he initiated himself, since his own guru died before he (Natarajan) hit his stride. Nitya did initiate students for a while, mainly in the '70s, and after that period, he stopped. Yet he continued working with our true roots, and it seemed he knew them intimately, even if we didn't.

Nataraja's idea of initiation was that you put on the uniform and you became a policeman, because you learned to live up to what it represented. (“Nataraja Guru described the process as the policeman growing into his uniform to make himself worthy to wear it.” L&B 143.) It would even work for a yogi, so for a time some disciples were given the other robes and sent out to manage Gurukulas, definitely with mixed results. I think Nitya eventually realized that that sort of initiation was delusory, because he stopped. His style changed steadily all through the years I knew him.

Something he says here reminds me of the high hopes Nitya had when he first arrived in the US, in those days when the counterculture was drowning in an uproar of spiritual pretensions. He thought the hippies would surely produce another great sage, comparable to a Vivekananda, but the reality he met forced him to lower his expectations. He once said that he had formerly hoped the hippies would live up to their visions and become enlightened sages, but that they had become just another social class. In the time of writing this book, he still held to those hopes, and you can feel it here:

The living guru is a link in an unbroken hierarchy. The wisdom of the ages is handed over from generation to generation, and if a guru does not pass it on to a worthy disciple, it would be like a river getting lost in the desert. Precious wisdom should not be allowed to be lost. A master of great maturity, when he advances in age, remembers the good faith and confidence with which he was entrusted with wisdom by his own master, and he is eager to pass it on to the next competent disciple.

It was incredibly daunting, a lot to live up to, but some of us tried before we fizzled out. We were a quite ordinary lot. The US remains a spiritual desert, for the most part. Bill agreed that when he first came to Portland, Nitya had that idealized image of the guru and disciples, but realized it wasn't going to work here. Still, he quickly learned where our roots were, and adjusted to them. He would always respond accordingly to different people.

A half century later, those of us still involved in his legacy can see how wisely he instructed us, in regard to our roots. Steven spoke of a comment Nitya put in the Gurukula diary about him, that he was sensitive in a certain way and would be drawn to a path of beauty and aesthetics. Looking back, he can see that is true and it's becoming more true all the time: he agreed Nitya had a way of discerning different characters' essentials.

I for one have never gotten over the feeling of being stark naked in his presence, sure he was seeing my every flaw, throwing a brilliant but invisible light on every bit of me. There was nowhere to hide, near him.

Deb wanted us to go beyond Nitya to the guru principle itself, and read from the essay I included in Part 2 last week. Heck, I'll include it this week too, for simplicity. The guru is that feature of the universe which brings light or understanding—that removes our darkness. That is happening whether we recognize it as a guru principle or not. She was sure we all can find moments when this has happened to us, and invited us to share them.

Andy wanted to underscore Deb, agreeing that the guru principle is never absent: we are dynamically changing in our mental states and some of the changes are most problematic. He described himself, like everyone, as existing in an ocean of darkness, and yet he is the light-source itself: if there were only darkness we would not be able to communicate, would not even have a sense of ourself as a sentient being. Behind our physical eye is the eye that sees, illuminating even those problematic states. Andy realizes, as an older person now, that the skill in yoga for

mediocre types like us is to be found in the ability to hang out with our weirdness: “Ah! here it is again, our weirdness, our shit.” That moment is coming from the guru principle. Our honesty comes from the guru.

Deb agreed we are always hanging out at the center of the universe, and yet, for some reason, in all those moments we tend to think they are not moments of profound depth. She cited an absolutely germane letter excerpt to her from Nitya, from just about when SOC was being composed, found now in Love and Blessings:

November 15, 1976

Realization is deducing from every contingent instance its phenomenality and seeing in its place the lustrous sheen of the Supreme. That is a good exercise when memories whine and howl or at least whisper in disapproval.

Point taken! Deb added that having an identity outside our small ‘s’ self that has a vaster and deeper framework is really what is necessary: it moves us out of the limited identity that makes us get smaller and smaller within ourselves.

Anita was irked about us admitting our ordinariness, and told us every time we say we’re mediocre the image comes to her mind of a diamond, with all its facets. None of us is mediocre, we are each a facet of the diamond. Even with all our shit we are a facet of the Absolute.

I agreed, but added that Nitya’s attitude was nonetheless exaggerated, due to his unrealistically high hopes for us. After all, what’s the point of *realistic* hope? Might as well not have any.... When you have a fantasy that someone is going to be a saint, it sets up the fact that there are special people and then there’s everyone else. We *are* ordinary, and also most extraordinary. Uniquely extraordinary.

You can read into something like this, how a young, idealistic guy had a comeuppance when dealing with our banality.



I think he handled his rudely downgraded expectations very well, considering. And the adjustment was good for him and good for us.

Hey, cut Nitya some slack: he was so excited, exploding with energy, brilliantly insightful, able to see right into people's souls, the world was writhing in ecstasy at his feet, crowds lining up to partake of his wisdom. Of course he might imagine something would come of it. Something did, though much more quietly than the way he had once pictured it.

We finished up with two examples of weirdness on a public scale, unlike Andy's and our private manure piles: Nijinsky's and Sri Aurobindo's madness. The former was channeling the horrors of WWI into his art, the latter dreaming of the glories of God taking the reins of his life, both extremes with a tendency to draw them out of a balanced mentality. Nitya doesn't really offer any explanation (there may not be any), but supplies a hint grounded in Jung:

Carl Jung again and again points to the hidden nucleus of the dark side of the psyche, which in time can erupt and cause a pathological catastrophe. When this deep-seated discontent or fear acts only as a dormant stimulus, it produces pathos or sublime sadness tinged with a suggestion of fear, which can make one's work of art highly appealing to the critic.

Both cases display projected theories that became addictive, self-reinforcing, but again, that's the effect, not the cause. Why we become obsessed remains a mystery. One thing is certain: the obsessed person requires an outside assistant to help them emerge from the morass—the shit pile that the class invoked as our metaphor of the evening—because they cannot do it themselves. A guru, therapist, or dear friend can offer cautions, but in the history of the universe their advice has never been taken, once the mania has set in. The best bet is to evade it before it happens, and that's where a normalizing philosophy plays its part.

Steven was struck by the passage about the dormant stimulus, how this deep-seated fear produces pathos, and that can make one's work of art highly appealing. He wondered if this can serve as a model for artists, and in a sense we are all artists, self-creating our lives. Can we harness or somehow turn this dark side of our psyche to our benefit? He spoke about being in the men's movement of a while back, sharing how we all have a shadow or wounded side, and believing by admitting it we can self-heal, and make it valuable to others. He asked is there a way to use our shit more productively? Andy added it would mean we are not pushing something away, not exiling it out of our nature, but rather are transforming it.

Jan brought up the idea of parenting yourself, where that wiser guru part of yourself recognizes the wounded parts and embraces them. Just like a parent helping a child, we can do that to ourselves. She has found this most meaningful, and agreed that transforming those shadow parts of us allows us to bring more of value to other people.

Steven concurred that it's much healthier to approach one's trauma, one's wounds, with compassion. We are flawed people, but we can always approach life with love. Jan linked this happy thought with the idea of integration, where we discover diverse parts of ourselves and bring them all together, and then, less bogged down, find ways to play.

Integration is so important: in both art and life, depth comes from the interplay of positive and negative elements. Sickly sweetness and gloomy despair, the extreme polarities, are not particularly palatable, and rapidly grow cloying. Great music gets its power from tension and release alternating, making a confection. Compassion needs something to be compassionate about, else it's meaningless. The most beautiful pieces, are not about trying to cut off the inferior part of ourselves and exclusively promote the superior part. In Vedanta we are not trying to be God people but whole people. The first is dualistic, the other unitive. We aren't trying to be Vivekananda, we are trying to be Andy,

Anita, Susan etc. This is where Advaita Vedanta clashes with fundamentalist Hinduism, with its exaggerated flights of fancy: those are impediments to a yogi seeking liberation.

Deb could see that Nijinsky wasn't integrating or lightening his dark areas, but was pinned to a particular expression of them. The solution is not to push darkness away, but slowly, through engagement, friendship, merger, and so on, you bring light to bear. That makes you a whole being. The dark part has to be brought into the light.

For Steven, shedding light on the psyche is a form of service, both healing to others and transformative. It's an alchemy that loops back to your own spiritual development.

Deb advocated for more recognition of the phenomenal beauty of the world, the phrase's meaning including the beauty of the phenomenal. Contemplating it brings you to enormous reverence, an awe that we can always access.

We settled into our closing meditation before an unspectacular, quite ordinary, very calming sunset. The intense focus of the class faded into a blissful stillness that was sure to persist beyond the confines of any imaginable boundaries. Aum.

## Part II

Deb shared a lovely poem by Jacqueline Suskin she was sent the same day as the class:

### The Center of the Planet is a Star

I write down all of my  
animal encounters  
in a handmade journal.  
I hike to the oasis, go to bed  
early, wake up early,  
light a fire in the woodstove.  
I bring more color into my body.

I say the name of the sky over and over.  
I see the black feather  
on the bench, the pumpkin  
sized cloud, the fish scale in the sand,  
and the milkweed seed caught  
in my sweater since last summer.  
Every morning I envision  
the roots of myself traveling  
down into the earth.  
I remember the center  
of the planet is a star.  
I am not afraid to love it.

\* \* \*

Once again, with feeling:

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 unitively 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.

### Part III

Steven filled out his comments in class on the men's movement—

What a productive session last night!

I wanted to elaborate just a bit on the Jungian point about shadows and healing/service - not necessarily for the group as a whole but just to make clear what I was getting at.

The Mankind Project grew out of the 1980s men's movement ("Iron John", drumming naked in the forest, etc.) It was conceived by three individuals as a weekend-long initiation rite for men that drew on three sources: Jungian psychology (archetypes) and group therapy, North European myth, and North American Native ritual (Sioux, mainly.) It was a hodgepodge but the organizing idea was to recreate the male initiation rite (passage to spiritual manhood) and do so in a way that allowed the individual to uncover deep psychic wounds or blockages (usually related to some childhood experience dealing with a parental figure.) There was a group therapy session with staff members playing various roles (father, mother) and using certain trigger words to conjure up suppressed memory. For some participants, this was genuinely cathartic, for others I think the process was a bit staged or forced. What came up for me was the "wound" of my father's rejection of me as not measuring up to his expectations as a son. This was based on a story my mother told me of when I was three years old and my father had told my mother that he suspected I was going to turn out to be "one of those," in other words, homosexual. There was also a scene where my father tried to interest me in throwing a ball back and forth but I showed no interest (my dad was a star athlete in high school.) And in fact, as I grew up I felt totally estranged from my father, and he made no effort to bridge the gap. My brother came along later and he and my father had a very close relationship because they seemed to be on the same wave-length. I was forced to fend for myself.

So that was the "wound." Now, how to heal? The catharsis of uncovering the wound is in and of itself part of the healing. You have to identify the wound first. But then I realized that the estrangement from my father was really my estrangement from straight men in general. I had grown up fearful of straight men, of their rejection, of their violence, of their belittlement. At the weekend gathering many participants, themselves straight, came

up to me and acknowledged my courage in facing my “shadow,” hugged me, affirmed their love as male brothers, and I began to sense the possibility of overcoming this particular trauma and sense of fear of straight men. As I witnessed other participants do their “work on the carpet” as it was called, I also realized how wounded so many men are and I began to feel compassion rather than fear. As we were asked to come up with a “mission statement” for our lives going forward, I came up with a statement along the lines of “working to restore a healthier relationship between gay and straight men.” And that has been a guiding principle for me. To replace my fear or indeed my hatred of straight men with compassion and a sense of opportunity for a more healthy, brotherly relationship.

So this is the context for my comments on turning the “shadow” or dark side of our psyche into something that is beneficial for our spiritual healing and growth.

Steven later added in an exchange:

The point is to share one’s experience in the hope it sheds light on something....in other words....it is a channel for Guru's working his miracle of enlightening our minds. I offer it in that humble attitude.

I also feel that sharing it would at least put something on people’s radar screens about the value of healing the wounds that exist in terms of straight men relating to gay men and vice versa. So much work needs to be done there. I feel there has been tremendous progress in terms of society’s acceptance and even a strong proactive endorsement of full equality for gay people in this world. You can see it in public opinion polling and legislative and judicial decisions. This is truly not the world I grew up in, thank God.