

7/27/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 17B – Part Two: The Tenacious Knots of Bondage, and
The Crowning Glory of Absurdity

As usual, the two stories are reposted in Part II. After reading the first one, Deb mused that if she were the merchant, she would feel chastised and embarrassed by the whole business: imagine someone not accepting your hospitality, but coming into your home and demanding whatever they wanted! Karen offered that he had invited the yogi there, and to learn about peace, too, so he should have suspected there was a moral in the odd behavior. Deb admitted that he wanted to be taught, so that makes sense.

What stood out to Bill was where the yogi told the merchant that he had been given a gift, before leaving. It was a valuable clue. Nancy felt it was obvious that the merchant recognized the special qualities of the yogi, since he wanted to take the peace home with him. True peace usually comes with a few lessons....

Deb highlighted the humor in the way the yogi taught: he makes a series of offensive demands, needing one thing after another, and at the end gives them all back as unnecessary. It's a straightforward example of the classic teaching about attachment. Of course we make demands like that too, and not always with humor. We don't have a clue where our tightness is being held. Bill agreed that we are not very good at seeing the attachments we have—it may take a yogi to show us where they are hiding.

The yogi left it up to the merchant what to do with his lesson. He could have become freer, or gone back to clinging extra hard to his stuff. We don't know the outcome. Nancy realized if the yogi had left with everything he had been given, it would only have compounded the merchant's attachments. It wouldn't have been a comprehensible lesson at all. He was kind to make his motives explicit on the way out the door.

Kris stood up for the merchant, noting he proved his faith and respect by giving the yogi everything he asked for. He never turned him down.

I think Nitya chose a merchant, because they deal primarily with the transactions and horizontal aspects of life. They're busy calculating gain and loss, and that's what gets disrupted to attain the peace of the yogi. It's important that the yogi doesn't just act peacefully: he has to pit himself against the bondage and create enough upset to force a breakthrough. Otherwise, nothing is accomplished.

I suggested a secondary set of considerations, where we can imagine how this applies to us. The things that irritate us show us where our goat is tied, where our knots of bondage are located. A happy, trouble-free life may mask a strong disconnect with our true nature, more than if we had (miraculously) solved all of life's problems. At least the yogi's style of demonstrative teaching mirrors where there are issues to work on.

A popular conceit is if you have problems, it's because you are a failed person, and if you don't, you are exemplifying God's grace; but it's a demeaning and short-sighted idea, brimming with ego and defensiveness. Plus, by assuming we are right, we unconsciously demand a lot from other people, and when they don't comply, we look down on them, or worse.

I invited examples of a time when you had been enjoying a certain thing, and then came to realize it was a waste of time, or stupid, and you dropped it. What galvanized the change? Did someone act out something to show you the error of your ways? Such changes aren't sitting on the surface of our minds, so I asked Deb to retell a favorite incident, not yet published, except in old class notes. It is close kin to the present story, and is also quite funny.

When Deb first was in India with Nitya, and they were in fact visiting the Mr. J from last week's story, Nitya had a visitor who was the truest yogi Nitya had encountered during his time managing the Institute of Psychic and Spiritual Research, in New

Delhi. Despite an owl-like visage, he did not look like a yogi at all, wearing a perfectly dapper outfit: blue cardigan sweater, slacks and golf shoes, but he was definitely not a normal person, almost wild, not doing what you expect. He reminded her of a line from *Siddhartha* about the “laughter of the immortals”: he laughed just like that. He adored Nitya, and would lie on the couch with his head in his lap, chatting. Deb had bought herself a closely-guarded private stash of Cadbury chocolate bars, since she and Nitya were heading into the wilds where treats were nonexistent. They were cherished comfort food for her, in a most unfamiliar, unsettling adventure.

At one point the yogi (she doesn't even remember his name) looked at her and asked if she had any chocolate. Rather reluctantly, she pulled out a bar from her bag and handed it to him, expecting he would take a piece and hand it back. Instead, he delicately ate the whole bar, wrapper and all. Then he asked her if she had any more, and she gave him another. He kept asking. One by one she handed over her precious stash, and he ate every last bite. Nitya sat by quietly, as a neutral.

Susan wasn't quite sure what the lesson in this was, and Deb shot back that it is to not hoard chocolate. Well, the chocolate is only a metaphor: it's to not hoard, period, not to keep “mine” away from “yours.” Not to have a sharp division between you and the world. This is eternally a work in progress for anyone other than a realized yogi. The only magic here is that somehow the yogi knew what she was holding on to, and addressed it in an agonizingly drawn-out way that would never be forgotten.

If it was merely about chocolate, Deb would have failed, because I still find chocolate stashes all over the house.... Yet about food in general, she is the most generous person I know, regularly regaling guests with fabulous dinners. So a little self-indulgence is happily forgiven.

Bill related a story he recognized as similar. Ram Dass, in his autobiography, had driven a Land Rover for many weeks through South Asia before he met his future guru, Maharaj-ji. By then the

car was his most cherished possession, and he wasn't yet into gurus. They parked and walked a good distance from the road, to a man on a bed under a tree, surrounded by a small crowd. The scene looks to Ram Dass like "a picnic at a mental hospital." He hangs back, of course, but the man:

...turns toward me and points. He says something in Hindi. "Abba gabba gabba" is all that comes through. "You came in a big car?" someone translates in English. Everyone in the group turns toward me. I feel even more uncomfortable. I say, "Yeah." The old man says, "Will you give it to me?"

Before I can respond, Bhagavan Das jumps up. "Maharaj-ji, if you want it, it's yours!"

I freak out. Everybody in the group looks at me and laughs delightedly. They all know Maharaj-ji never asks for anything except maybe an apple. But I don't know that. I splutter, "You can't give him that car! That's not our car to give away. It's David's."

No one pays any attention. They're laughing and smiling and talking among themselves and sharing lighthearted conversation with Maharaj-ji. (169)

There's more, but Ram Dass definitely experienced the humiliation and fear Deb noted at the outset. In the end, too, he kept the car, but the lesson of possessiveness stayed with him forever.

Nancy admitted we all have our attachments, and some of them are for actual objects, but she finds she has a lot of attachments that are associated with things that she does, like setting something up and then it doesn't happen: you just spent two days preparing, and then it doesn't turn out the way you wanted, so you feel disappointed. It used to frustrate her, but now it makes her laugh at herself sympathetically. Or she'll put a pretty flower in a vase and imagine that maybe so-and-so will see it and really admire it, and she'll feel good. As Deb put it, you're arranging the

world to have appreciation of you. And it's all going on in your head.

Nancy continued that the man in the story is doing it, too: he's attached to his store and office and bedroom, making money and more money—it's a good reminder of how we do that.

The first tale is about breaking out of our comfort zone to admit more of the invisible world around us. Comfort zones are tamasic, and also what the ordinary brain seeks to forget itself in. To rise above the everyday moil and toil takes special effort. I related how my nephew Tom reacted the other day to a job offer that was perfectly suited to him. He has never had steady employment; neither parent worked, so work was not modeled at home, and he's in comfortable circumstances, doing what he wants, day after day. But he has a degree in journalism, and he always fantasized about doing newsy videos and making a living with them. He just got a job offer that is utterly perfect for him, working at a TV station in a capital city in a western state, finding his own subjects and doing short pieces on them. He was frozen with shock, finger edging toward the Delete button.

Deb and I talked at length with him, and he is going ahead and taking the job, but for a few days it was clear evidence of the ego not wanting to surrender its bailiwick. To go from the known to the unknown is terrifying, if your known is pleasant enough, and as with Paul's favorite image of the gradually boiling frog, we don't judge "pleasant" very well: the bar keeps getting lowered, due to innate human mental laziness.

Anyway, Tom's moment is like the Fool of the fairytales, the Simpleton about to set forth to seek his fortune. We are always simpletons at the outset, but if we don't set out, we won't get anywhere. Nothing will be gained. The ego protests "I don't know how to do this!" or "I'm not any good at it." Of course not—how could you be? Yet. But are you doomed to cling to only what you know and what you have? Fear keeps us corralled. We get stuck in place, but the universe keeps proposing other options. What magic ultimately launches us on our journey?

Jan admitted she has noticed she has a certain attachment to not failing, and trying to buffer herself from that possibility. Just the other day, with her work as a lawyer, she was invited to try something new, and her first thought, like Tom, was she couldn't do it. Now she is trying to uphold a better attitude, and is going to try the new situation out. She knows her work includes taking away the negative expectations, the fear that she's going to be a total loser at it. And she has to reinforce her intention routinely, because she knows it's there, holding her back.

Bill recalled a quote from Thomas Merton, that what you fear is probably what you ought to do.

Deb talked about a quote from Vonnegut, how in high school he wrote to a well-known author, describing all his various activities, including writing, and despondently confessed he wasn't good at any of them. The author wrote back to tell him how terrific it was that he was trying so many things, and it's okay not to be good at them yet. It's not about starting out as the perfect person, it's just about starting out.

Deb also recalled how, in high school and college especially, when she would meet new people, the ones she disliked invariably became a good friend later. She learned it was a sign. It's as if there is a connection, but you are afraid of it. It seems that in things that you are repelled by at first, there is something in you that is intrigued enough to have a strong reaction. It teaches us that we should not overreact to our negative impulses immediately, but look into what aspect of us is revealed by our reactions.

Nataraja Guru made a huge breakthrough on this topic in his Gita commentary, evidenced in IV.21:

One free of all expectancy and of subjugated relational self-consciousness, who has given up all possessiveness, and is engaged merely bodily in actions—he does not acquire evil.

From time immemorial, *parigraha* has been translated as possessions, and so there is a religious fervor around giving all

your possessions away, as if it confers instant enlightenment. Nataraja Guru realized the real culprit is possessiveness. If you weren't possessive about them, your possessions wouldn't be a problem, many of them would be beneficial. It's the craving and clinging that put the ego in the driver's seat. So keep your toothbrush, but notice where you close out the world to guard your turf, and ease up. Be generous of heart, but be sensible about material objects. As Deb concluded, be aware of it the minute you inordinately want to hold onto something.

With the discussion petering out, we read the second story, turning us into "second-story men." How absurd is that? Not quite the Crowning Glory of Absurdity, but that *was* our story....

This third tale harks back to the first, where a seemingly random stimulus—a newspaper-wrapped shoe—catapults a person into a new and satisfying pathway. Here it's a forced, unpremeditated blessing from Nitya. I again sought personal examples.

Deb talked more about how Nitya was an instrument of change here. He was like the cobbler from the previous story, though he eventually became aware of his impact, with which he only tangentially agreed. Somehow the need of the moment spoke convincingly through him to the suffering man. Nitya was bewildered at that moment, hardly an intentional agent of the resurrection.

One wonders if he was inspired, or simply mouthing commonly-accepted gibberish. Regardless, he came out with just the right line at the right moment, and somehow that was the thing that clicked with the terrified and distraught stranger. And Nitya looked the part, the right kind of looks and outfit to house a wise seer.

In line with that mysterious implementation, in our group each of us had a different powerful response to the story, showing that much more than mere words was being communicated. For such a meaningful interaction, there has to be an energy transfer.

The intensity of it sent Nitya scrambling out the door to escape the vortex.

For such a lonely person as the dying gentleman, anyone who communicates directly has to break through a substantial barricade of bondage and isolation. Mostly likely the recipient will have to be in extreme distress to be open to it. We might also suppose the man heard what he wanted to hear, and Nitya hadn't meant anything of the sort. We all do this routinely in communication, so let's have some sympathy for "hapless mortals" everywhere. This fellow clearly had latent beliefs that when reactivated, fueled his passion to go on living.

For Jan, the story spoke of inner wisdom, and how we are to get in touch with it. She felt Nitya was speaking from a deeper place of wisdom, in tune with what the situation needed, and that's true. The baffling part is he didn't plan it and didn't even believe it. Nitya has written elsewhere of the absurdity of thinking you will never die. (See *That Alone*, verse 83—excerpted in Part II.) In those days he was still quite young and uncommitted. He was still a Marxist, a radical rationalist, still seeking a convincing-enough truth to satisfy him. This was another situation where, if we are holding on tightly to how we think, sure that "This is how I think, this is how I act," etc. we won't be open to the successful way to go. I don't want to even call it a strategy, because it can't be schemed. It flows out, like a Stream. If you can let that occur, then a new expression in resonance with the actual situation will often arise. Nitya was already open enough to allow that to happen.

Bill thought that when you're that close to death, and you can no longer depend on money or family, you're just kind of at a loss. It's a vulnerable place. Then Nitya comes along and turns the key.

What if no one comes? Could we turn our own key?

Deb spoke of how we hold on tight to our psychological clothing in the idea of who we are, and only if we let go of that is there anything that can possibly come through to us. That means Nitya is emphasizing an inner spiritual truth rather than an outer factual causality when he speaks of not dying.

Such events don't always come from a person, but reveal the underlying guru principle alive in the universe. When daughter Emily was an infant, a woman came to visit who was not going to have kids; she was dedicated to ecology and a spiritual, artistic life. Fifteen years later, she called and told me, "You were the cause of me having my dear daughter, Rose. I'm so grateful! It was the best thing that ever happened to me." I had no idea what she was talking about. She said she had watched me play with and care for Emily that day, and she was so moved she knew she had to have one herself. No surprise, really, yet it makes me realize we are leaving all sorts of events in our wake, most of which we'll never know any details of. A few are even pretty wonderful. Nitya was blessed to have the forgotten man rush up and prostrate at his feet, and remind him of the event.

Kris felt the man was already at a crossroads, and Nitya pardoning his self-described sins changed his life. It popped into her mind as a swami t-shirt: instead of proclaiming on your chest, Fight for Your Right to Party, try Fight for Your Right to Pardon. She noted how we tend to attribute our whole experience to one person, which it really isn't. There are multiple threads.

Nitya never intended to be anyone's guru, didn't expect anyone to worship him. I gave credit to Death, that supreme guru, the great teacher of all, as energizing the man. Death ecumenically shakes people out of complacency, makes them more contact-oriented. Reality becomes undeniable, or less deniable. By itself, impending death won't do anything but scare the hell out of you, but with some intelligent shaping on your part, it can work wonders.

Nancy enthused that Nitya was always so clear that it wasn't him, it was the Absolute that accomplished things. We are simply trying to grasp the magnitude of what it all is. He never agreed with the idea that he represented it all, teaching that we shouldn't put boundaries around things, each individual is part of something greater.

Peter O's memoir of the first Portland Gurukula includes the

ideal story to wrap up the class, and we all reveled in it. I was pleased to learn everyone had actually read it. It shows how profoundly Nitya did not want to be worshipped, and how hard he tried to get us over what other people think of us, so we can become ourselves at last. It takes a real effort to stand up to the iron curtain of fear of the other's opinion we hide out in. Here's Peter's perfect Nitya story, where he is taking a mental trip through the old house [Note: a narc is a Federal Narcotics Agent—a cop. They *were* everywhere in those days. Karen and Kris said they had been visited by at least one at the Center Family commune, also.]:

I see the landing on the steps leading to the upstairs, where one of us had hung a framed picture of Nitya while he was away in India for a couple of months. Before he returned, we had a house-guest/new resident, brought home by a well-meaning gurukula inmate. This new housemate was totally disinterested in our study or routine. I remember that a couple of us more paranoid hippie types even postulated that he might be a narc.

A couple of days after Nitya's return from India, we awoke to find his portrait on the landing horribly defaced and with horns and fangs drawn on it. Suspecting the "freeloader" was the culprit, we brought it to Nitya's attention to see what we should do. He had a good laugh before telling us that he himself had done it and to please remove any other images of him from the walls.

Part II

Our two readings:

The Tenacious Knots of Bondage

A rich merchant of Bombay went on a pilgrimage to Kashi. On the banks of the Ganges he encountered a spiritual recluse sitting in a state of absorption. The merchant felt a great sense of

peace in his presence. When the yogi came out of his trance, the merchant persuaded him to go with him to Bombay as his guest. The yogi agreed.

When they arrived at the merchant's residence in a prosperous section of Bombay, the yogi insisted that he himself should be given the master bedroom. Then he directed that the merchant's office was to be converted into his private study. The newcomer was very picky about what he would eat and drink, and made a fuss over everything. He insisted on having his way, until the merchant became so annoyed and angered that he wanted to get rid of him.

The yogi said he could not go without proper clothes. In his eagerness to have him out of the house, the merchant bought him whatever clothes he wanted. Then he complained that he had no shoes or umbrella. The merchant gave him those also. Then the yogi said that he could set out to a new place only on an auspicious day. The merchant reserved a seat for him on the train back to Kashi, but the yogi complained he could not go by third class. He insisted that he should get a first class ticket for an air-conditioned coach. After a heated argument the merchant conceded to it, but the yogi pointed out that it was not an auspicious day. Nearly frantic, the merchant re-reserved the seat for a day considered auspicious by the yogi.

Finally the morning of departure arrived. When the merchant brought his car to take him to the railway station, the yogi said, "My dear son, thank you very much for your kind attention. Excuse me for all the inconveniences caused. You can donate the shoes, umbrella and the clothes to some needy person. You can get a refund for your ticket. I don't need anything in the three worlds. God was gracious to show you how strong and deluding are your several bonds. God bless you."

The yogi, once again in his semi-naked attire, walked barefoot into the street and peacefully disappeared.

The Crowning Glory of Absurdity

In the state of Punjab in North India there is a city called Patiala. I was once passing through it as a vagrant mendicant. Somebody ran up to me and asked me to come with him quickly to see a dying man. It is normal in India to call a sadhu (a spiritual mendicant) to bless the dying. Even though I myself was not convinced of my spiritual prowess, I hurriedly ascended several flights of stairs in a palatial building and entered a room where there was a goodly display of the pomp and royalty of the rich man who owned the house.

The master of the house was lying on his back on a well-cushioned bed. Standing by his bed were a number of dignitaries, of whom I could easily recognize a priest, a physician and a nurse. When my presence was announced, the patient opened his eyes and turned to me with a bewildered look. He gave vent to a primal scream, as if he were in a nightmare, and with both hands folded he implored me to pardon his sins and wish him a peaceful death.

It was not the time to dispute my right to pardon, so I told him without any thought, "All your sins are forgiven. Have no fear. You are not dying now, nor will you ever die." When I had finished my little speech, I was struck by the absurdity of what I had just said. Taking advantage of the freedom of Indian sannyasins to behave capriciously, I hurriedly left the mansion and walked away as fast as I could.

After a couple of years, as I was standing on the banks of the Ganges in the sacred city of Hardwar, I saw an old man making a beeline toward me. He prostrated at my feet and laid his forehead on them in a gesture of worship. I felt very embarrassed to see such a venerable looking gentleman falling at my feet, so I raised him from the ground and asked him who he was.

He said, "I am your follower. I follow your footsteps. I believed in wealth. I amassed plenty of it, and I had everything that money could buy. When death came to me, I lay helpless, staring

into the face of my own sin. At that time all my relations and friends had failed me. Then from out of nowhere you walked into my room. In the eyes of the world you were just a beggar, a vagrant of the street. You told me with authority that my sins were pardoned. The dark cloud of doom was lifted from me that very instant. Then with great confidence you said that I was not dying, and assured me I will never die.

“You proved to be right. I did not die. As soon as I was able to get up from my bed, I gave up my riches and my social position and have been searching for your footsteps. I came to this sacred city, where many like you live. Today I am also a vagrant. By sitting at the feet of wise men who walk on the banks of the sacred Ganges, I have verified the truth of your assurance. I am now certain that I will never die. No one ever dies.”

* * *

From That Alone, verse 83:

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.

Part III

Dipika again sheds light:

Very nicely put together....

I too see ourselves as part of a bigger tapestry

Doing our bits like colorful threads

Interweaving ourselves with each other

And never seeing the final outcome

Till our little thread peters out...

Yes had read the story of the defacement of Nitya's pic in Peter O's article, surely that is one attribute we should all keep in mind...that a true Guru never wants his ego inflated by having followers worship him

and that for true teachings there is never any payment