

10/12/21

In the Stream of Consciousness – Part Two
Chapter 17F – Sex is Vertical, and
Love that Glistens in a Teardrop

Deb reprised her opening comment from the last class: here are two men who are yogis and celibates, speaking of the vertical quality of sex. She asked us, what are they trying to say here, how do we read this?

Although I realized there was a bigger question at the heart of it, I offered some background. For a long time before the incident recounted in the story, Nataraja Guru had been criticizing Nitya for his puritanical posturing, and he used the sexually-charged moment to help nudge him toward a more neutral attitude. In repressed cultures (aren't they all?) people get so absorbed in morality that they tune out spirituality. There is nothing said about this better than the words Nitya attributes to his Guru, at the end:

“To see obscenity in sex, to vulgarize it by reading immorality into it and to think of it as a sinful act shows that we have lost the innocence of our heart. Bhoga, the conditional enjoyment of happiness in the physical body, has for its nucleus the blissful nature which unites all embodied beings in the Absolute.”

The point is that the Absolute is expressed in every particle of the manifested world, without exception. It isn't found in some places and not others. For that matter, reproduction based on sex is the essence of vertical movement: growth and continuity over time. Without it the game of evolution comes to an end, as Kris pointed out. The idea that yoga is only “deep certitude, peace, and absorption,” posits it as removed from life and sets it apart, whereas the Guru is arguing that what it reveals is the core of existence. Bhoga and yoga are two aspects of the same thing, two horns of our ongoing dilemma. I just added this line to Nitya's

Selected Quotes doc: “The Absolute and the relative are the same – it’s only a matter of how you know it.”

Nor, for that matter, are horizontal and vertical separate. They are also two aspects of a unitive expression.

Bill agreed that we do experience, in both our transactional life and in the world, feelings that link us to the Absolute, and right in the midst of all that is something beautiful, which is our spiritual experience. In a way the Guru is demystifying the act of sexual union to make it part of the pleasurable experiences the world contains and that connect us to the Absolute.

Deb felt Nataraja Guru is focusing on the thrust of life to procreate and to live, how each animal sees that in their own union and that of other animals’. The vertical thrust, rising up from the turiya, is beyond any individual act, yet it is an aspect of life in everyone, one expression of it. Kris concurred that all life comes from sexual union, making it central to all existence.

Deb did not want to give up her dualistic take, arguing here are two men who dedicated themselves to the Absolute and have moved past particular acts so they can be channels for something more general and sustaining. That’s why they have chosen yoga over bhoga: they are dedicated to something vaster and more encompassing.

On the other hand, it seems to me they are upgrading bhoga to be on a par with yoga instead of denigrating it, as is often done. It is something honorable. I guess it’s an open question after all.

Anita admitted she was only married for eight years, but nonetheless she believes sex can be so many things, it can be casual, pleasurable for the body, and she does believe it can be spiritual, especially for two people who have gotten to a certain level of intimacy, where there is a longing to unite their spirits. She decidedly believes spirit is involved.

Deb didn’t disagree, so long as we are talking about people who have spiritual intimacy, and that that is what Nataraja Guru means.

Bill wondered if in Indian culture, people turn sex into

something bad or immoral, and the Guru is saying no, the union of two people should not be considered immoral. Moni mentioned the erotic art in Indian temples, usually in the innermost heart of them. Sex is accepted there as a symbol of heavenly bliss.

Bill wanted to take bhoga out of the limited case we had been focused on: “I don’t think that anyone loved a sunset or a rose as much as Nitya. They were physical pleasures that brought him to the divine, and he never advised people not to have those experiences.” (Quite the reverse!)

At this point, Deb read out two selections from her Foreword to Nitya’s commentary on *Saundaryalahari*, Shankara’s erotic masterpiece that captivated Nataraja Guru toward the end of his life. They are placed in Part II, along with another related excerpt.

Anita has always imagined that when other embodied beings (like animals) copulated, it wasn’t only instinctive. It surely isn’t out of a desire to procreate. So how can we think we perceive what sex is like for other animals? Deb was sure they also have affection and desire.

Steven is a new dog owner, and in only a month he has developed a strong bond with him. He figures if a dog is able to establish a bond with a human, he would assume they were capable of doing that with one another. It’s true that through domestication we bring out certain qualities that they might not have in the wild, but still. They must have the aptitude. He was struck by the passage that essentially the pleasure of sex is at its core connected to the same blissfulness that we associate with a mystical experience, a union with God or the Absolute. Throughout his life he has been pondering the difference between Eros as an expression of emotional qualities that bind you with another person, as opposed to a mere act of stimulation of body parts, physical pleasure only, with no lasting bonding. We are living in the wake of the Sixties, with its sexual revolution, yet in our society there continues to be a disconnect between sex and anything more meaningful. He agrees with an article he read recently that there is a certain amount of harm done to the psyche

that occurs when sex is divorced from something more than the act itself. The author of the article said this kind of sex without bonding is like spiritual suicide: you're doing something that harms the psyche, which makes it difficult to get in touch with the spirit. Steven feels a need to differentiate between physical pleasure and the kind of erotic experience where all of our faculties are connected to the experience.

I agreed there are many ways to relate to sex, but even for animals it is much more than a simply physical act. For that matter, present day science understands the physical world as a quality of projection of the mind's suppositions. We should credit other people and animals with having all the faculties we do, which is at least potentially true. The human brain develops longer than most other animals' brains, but the same basic capacities are present in even much more rudimentary ones. The class agreed that we are learning more every day about the complexities of animal experience and ability, with no end in sight.

I mentioned a couple of Nitya's statements I recently came across, predating the new science that reality is far less solid than we might imagine:

You can say that the world is nothing other than the light that we see. All the colors that we see are only the light that we see. Because of our eyes and a certain specific chemistry of our brain, we see a colorful world. Whether it has colors or not, nobody knows. It's only light we see, nothing falls into our eyes. The table does not come, the book does not come. Only the light that falls here, comes to our eyes. With that *sphuraṇam* we are creating a world by structuring all the color possibilities. (Gita video VIII.10)

Andy was struck by the last sentence of the chapter (Bhoga, the conditional enjoyment of happiness in the physical body, has for its nucleus the blissful nature which unites all embodied beings in the Absolute). He saw you could really expand that to ask if this

essence is ever gone or missing? Isn't that core of the Absolute always present? Are the gurus condemning us, forever? He didn't think so, since they say God is omnipresent.... This appears to Andy as a line of reasoning that attempts to raise our awareness that sex is included in that. He keeps reflecting back on "God is right when you are wrong," and his repeated experience is to wonder if he even has the capacity to question right and wrong. Since it's all one, it's very hard to get his head around.

Steven agreed that he has always been puzzled by the centrality of bliss in Indian philosophy. In *saccidananda*, *ananda* is one of the three basic principles, meaning it's something you would have to experience in the embodied state. If you can have a mind existing out of an embodied state—if you accept a universal mind—then you can accept the notion of bliss being a quality of that, and then it makes perfect sense that what we experience in the material vein is a reflection of a higher state of bliss. It makes him wonder what is the relationship of material reality to spiritual truth. Possibly material reality is more dense or refracted, and in a purer state would still be *sat-cit-ananda*?

I commented that material reality *is* *saccidananda*, and cited this, from Nitya:

To this whole thing Krishna gives one name, just as a physicist reduces everything to a common name called 'matter', What is matter? In Latin '*mater*' means 'mother' – the mother of things. Everything is reduced to the mother of things, to matter.

Last year I got an encyclopedia of science, and I looked for the word 'matter'. There was no word called matter. Spirit was there, but matter was not there. They could not say what matter is. Anyway, it's all reduced into matter like that. Here everything is reduced to *prakriti*. (Gita video VII.4)

Deb quoted the French poet Paul Éluard: "There is another world, but it is in this one." She went on: In *saccidananda*, existence, truth and bliss (or value) all go together, whether

physically or outside it, as an expanded situation. That means it's not a matter of mini bliss or big bliss, it's just existence that has this value of beingness and connection.

That's right: we're spiritual beings living spiritual lives and imagining physical things as part of the art of what we are doing. We can only presume a physical world. We can't nail it down, and undoubtedly shouldn't. If you can divorce what you do from higher values, you *are* committing suicide, in a way. All we are trying to do as spiritual seekers is expand our conceptions to include the full, bountiful world we live in, where the physical trails along as a very valuable idea.

Anita agreed we now have a concept of different dimensions, where we are imagining the material world. When she was growing up, she was taught heaven was up in the sky, a place where people were happy all the time, and had wings. Then you grow up and wonder, where did heaven go? Where does it fit up there? All we can see are galaxies. Yet the Bible says there are many mansions, many dimensions, and maybe one of those is where we go when we are not embodied. She is convinced that whatever the afterlife is, it's not going to be the same experience as when you are embodied, unless you are simply imagining the whole thing.

Anita's thoughts inspired Andy to share what he did the last few days, which occasioned a profound experience of ananda-value in relation to sorting through the possessions of his late wife, Bushra. An old friend, Lisa, flew up from the Bay Area to help process the extensive archives of Bushra's films. It turned out to be a processing of emotions as well. Lisa became very melancholy and tearful, yet Andy found himself experiencing the presence of his wife, sweetly. He realized he has gotten over his own bitterness and melancholy, and was once again savoring the playfulness of his wife, remembering his great affiliation with her "inner 8-year-old," seldom far from the surface.

Andy lamented the trite things people say about the departed: oh they're not really gone, airy comforts, and the like, but he feels

that actually those dear ones were a brief embodiment in physical form of a quality that persists. It even exists in Bushra's artifacts, which are characteristic of her personality. So, ananda, value, is a possibility that can manifest in brief transitory form, but afterwards there is a reverberation of the possibility of that quality persisting. Ananda can still play out at the mundane level, not requiring full-bodied embodiment.

I suggested 'mundane' could follow 'matter' and 'physical reality' as no longer valid terms. If the Absolute lies at the heart of everything, how mundane can anything be? Referring to persistence, I again quoted Nitya:

Does perennial mean that it continues in time or continues in space? No, it need not be. When Keats says, "a thing of beauty is a joy forever," it's a joy today to see something beautiful, it will be a joy after a million years for someone, and it was so in ancient days. It's the quality of beauty which is a joy forever, and that is perennial. What is true of today if it was true of the rishis thousands of years ago and if it can stand on its own feet after so many years, then it is perennial; not that it should never disappear from somebody's observation. (Gita video VIII.5)

To conclude our discussion of the first story, I read out a favorite section from *Love and Blessings*, the one that bears on why Nataraja Guru was further instructing Nitya about the verticality of sex. In my mind I can see Nitya laughing while retelling it, but at the time it was heavy stuff indeed. Nitya was then at Varkala as a disciple:

A girl from the neighborhood used to come and help in the Gurukula kitchen. One day I saw her crying. When I asked the reason, she spoke of the other man's misbehavior. In those days I had an exaggerated sense of morality and thought a person drawn to passion should have no place in an ashram. So I went and promptly reported the matter to Guru.

I expected him to get annoyed and reprimand the man then and there. Contrary as always, Guru laughed heartily. He took my interest in correcting the other man as evidence of sexual jealousy. As I prided myself in my moral behavior, the allegation was too harsh for me to accept. To my mind I had been maintaining a high degree of purity and was beyond blemish. Not only was Guru not seeing my virtuousness, he was bracketing me with an evil man. He was characterizing me as a cheap person with a mean outlook. I felt very hurt.

That night I was fretting and fuming about the injustice of it all. Guru lost his temper and said, “How can you ever understand the true meaning of sex and have a healthy view of it when you yourself are the son of a repressed schoolteacher?” The more I tried to explain myself, the more he found reasons to disbelieve me. I thought, “What’s the use of speech if words cannot convey truth, even to your Guru?”

In the evening talk he maintained that all Kerala was a society of repressed people with an exaggerated notion of sex, and stressed that only a mentally healthy person could appreciate sex and be proud of it. Guru’s sermon not only sounded radical, it struck me as being downright perverted. I thought of leaving the place at once. (171-2)

By now it should be obvious that repression isn’t limited to the southern tip of India....

Deb next read out the highly contrasting second story, and Steven was struck by the juxtaposition in it of truth and upholding truth, asserting no one following the current political situation can avoid the sense of how difficult is to uphold truth. The ancient wisdom from the Ramayana seems appropriate to our political condition—there is still this sense of a titanic battle between those who uphold truth and those who discard it for wealth and power. It’s very distressing, though inspiring to see people who still stand up to it, as there’s so much at stake.

Deb was equally touched, commenting there's truth, but then there's the living of the truth, upholding the truth. She observed a kind of verticality in the tears from the listeners in the story and those Rama shed, and it is so strong, it erases time and space. There is an enormous love and clarity there, simultaneously political and deeply personal, and how we understand and live it is a lifelong journey of expression.

I added we mustn't forget that this truth comes out of the cave of the heart. We have to start from there, and reconcile ourselves to the challenges from there. If we aren't acquainted with the cave of the heart, our actions tend to warp into selfishness and unforeseen consequences. Truth being a principle, like the Absolute, we don't want to fly it like a flag, claiming my truth is better than yours, any more than my God is better than yours. We want to uphold something real and essential. As Nitya said in the abovementioned Gita video, "There is no such thing as an absolutely honest Marxist or Vedantin." We don't own truth or honesty or any other principle, even if we adore them in principle.

On an especially positive note, the story reminded Anita of times when your whole being is filled, and bursts forth with unimaginable joy. She was trying to define that feeling, and found it difficult. Yet it's a common experience, like the first time she saw her newborn child, and she was flooded with incredible happiness and joy. The story's beauty made her think of those moments in her life when she rediscovered her cave of the heart, the spiritual side of life, which has nothing to do with where the heart is in the body. It's our soul, essence, spirit.

As to the political arena, and how truth is being so abused, Anita felt we needed to turn the focus back on ourselves, that ultimately we are where all this comes from. There has been a bastardization of our morality, and it is much more widespread than the political stage: there's something amiss in our whole society.

Steven responded that there has been lots of analysis about how we got to this place. Obviously there is a profound disease in

our society, and fear about where we are headed. We are at the mercy of clever entrepreneurs who offer snake oil as solutions to problems, making them even more difficult to overcome. He realizes it's true that in the end our own lives are what we have to work with, and it's a real test to see to what extent we can make our lives an expression of what is truthful and meaningful. Regardless, we have to engage as citizens, to share our fate as citizens of a polity, and there's a responsibility that goes along with that. Democracy only works if we engage in it.

As we prepared for our final meditation, Steven mused that in the kind of conversation we have in our class, there is a certain tone to it; if you participate in a conversation like this your mind vibrates at a different frequency, different from ordinary conversations, a kind of alchemy, a group alchemy. At end of every class, when we go back to our lives, he senses a subtle change that is still reverberating.

I told him that was why we do what we do in our most humble Gurukula, because that sort of conversion is our best hope. The exploiters have all the money, all the computing power, all the armaments—we are exactly like Arjuna on the battlefield of Kuruksetra, facing an unbeatable army. All we can realistically accomplish is to help tip the playing field toward the spirit of love and justice. That “frequency” we take home with us (which I would characterize as significantly tangible, rather than merely subtle, and a high compliment from Steven) stays with us, and touches everyone we come in contact with. Many others are touching us with their wisdom and compassion as we go through the day. Welcome it in, and pass it along, in joy. Aum.

Part II

Sex is Vertical

As we were passing by the side of the racecourse grounds in Ooty, a horse there became amorous and started mating with a

mare. The cows that were grazing nearby stopped eating grass and looked at the couple.

Nataraja Guru called my attention to the behavior of the cows and said, “Here is an excellent proof to understand the verticality of sex. Sex, in its pure and spontaneous manifestation, has the stamp of the Absolute on it. The cows show great interest in the horses mating. Don’t you see here the registry of the interspecies interest in sex? Men, horses and cows are all united by their interest in copulation.

“To see obscenity in sex, to vulgarize it by reading immorality into it and to think of it as a sinful act shows that we have lost the innocence of our heart. Bhoga, the conditional enjoyment of happiness in the physical body, has for its nucleus the blissful nature which unites all embodied beings in the Absolute.”

Love that Glistens in a Teardrop

There was an interesting bunch of fellow passengers on the train we had boarded. One of them introduced himself as a Sanskrit professor. Guru asked him if he had any Sanskrit classics with him. He said that he had, and he produced out of his briefcase a copy of Valmiki’s Ramayana.

Guru was very much delighted to see the one book that has most touched the soul of India in its depths and said, “Do you know what unites India? From Kanya Kumari to Kashmir and from Surat to Howrah, in every home you can hear the chant, ‘Rama, Rama.’

“How does Rama go to the core of India’s psyche? He embodies truth. Truth is not only to be known, it is also to be upheld. Truth that is known is satya. Truth that is upheld is rita. In Rama there is a coming together of the lux and the lex, the Light and the Law.”

The Guru asked the professor to read out a passage from the Ramayana. He chose the portion where Rama abdicates his throne

and departs into the wilderness with his wife and brother to live a life of self-imposed exile, in order to uphold the truth of his father. When he entered the ferryboat, Guha the ferryman, who was the chief of an aborigine tribe, greeted Rama with great affection and lamented the misfortune of the valiant and virtuous prince.

In all earnestness Guha said, “Oh Great Prince, do not go away. I have a small kingdom. It may be absolutely worthless in your eyes, but I entreat you to accept it as my humble gift to you. Be our king. I will serve you with my life.” Here it can be noted that Guha means cave, and that the kingdom under reference is the kingdom in the cave of the heart.

Hearing these words, Rama became tearful. He held Guha to his heart. The love of Rama overwhelmed Guha. Tears of joy and gratitude rolled down his cheeks.

At this point the professor’s voice cracked. He stopped reading to wipe away his tears. We who were listening to him also became tearful. Guru said, “The eternal glory of Valmiki’s victory as a Guru of all time lives on in this teardrop that comes alike from every eye, Rama’s and Guha’s of the past, and yours and mine of today.”

For a long time no one spoke. It was a silence in which we all felt we were going deep into the cave of our own heart.

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Deb read out two parts of her Foreword to Nitya’s *Saundaryalahari*, which he had worked closely on with her. Below that I’ll add the one other excerpt I’ve typed up, which is quite relevant:

Implicit in a discussion of Tantra is an understanding of yoga, which is the dialectical pairing of polarities in such a manner that they can, through practice and concentration, be united in a meaningful whole. In the *Saundaryalahari*, there are two essential and recurring polarities: Shiva and Shakti, the masculine ground of

being from which feminine becoming arises and to which she gives power and meaning; the goddess and the devotee, where the goddess is that great universal circumference which the devotee relates to as an individual point and into which he eventually merges.

The splendid and alluring Shakti emerges from the mute, ash-covered Shiva. As the dancing goddess, Shakti rains down art, music, mystical vision and, in fact, the essence of our very life upon us. This poetic allegory is descriptive of both cosmic functions and psychological processes. In the imagery of the goddess which Shankara employs, her body is used in a manner of traditional Indian aesthetics: as a canvas upon which to paint spiritual insights. It is through the palpability of her body that the devotee begins to apprehend what is non-manifested. And it is through her beauty—its sound, sight, touch and smell—that the source of all creation is seen and eventually merged with.

As Guru Nitya writes in *Love and Devotion*: “The archetypal mother image in the *Saundaryalahari* is used as an edifice on which to sculpt the intricacies of man-woman dialectics, the virtues and paradoxes of the female psyche, and the semantic possibilities and even impossibilities that highlight shades of bliss ranging from simple sensuality to the all-consuming conflagration of Beauty that is interchangeable with terms like Love, Total Awareness, Wonder, and Absolute Transcendence.” (15-6)

Erotics is an inescapable topic in a work related to Tantra, and Tantra has often been perceived as a yoga of sex, where sexual intercourse is the ultimate method for realizing reality and power. This is too narrow an understanding of the erotics which suffuse the *Saundaryalahari*. In the *Saundaryalahari* the erotic pull is that of the god Eros. It is an erotic mysticism, spoken of by both Plotinus and St. Augustine in the Western tradition, and which is the attraction of the individual toward God or the Good. The act of sex is the final, extroverted manifestation of Eros in the physical realm, one way of actualizing the erotic sensation, but not its

source. In both the Christian Catholic Church and in Hindu Vaishnavism, the individual aspirant, whether male or female, is likened to the lover of God, either as the bride of Christ or as Radha to Krishna's cowherd. Sensual imagery and male-female attractions are forms used to describe the relationship between the individual person and the all-encompassing divine reality. Similar literary and philosophical methods can be seen in St. John of the Cross's *Dark Night of the Soul* and Jayadeva's *Gita Govindam*. This relationship can be put in a more secular language: conscient and articulating spirit is in constant dialectical interplay with taming and transforming matter, as is beautifully elaborated by Sri Aurobindo in his poem *Savitri*. This is not to say there is no sex in erotics, but we need to rephrase our language and understanding: sex is not the ultimate union but is rather the functional dynamics of the Word of God. (16)

From Verse 5, Nitya:

The *Saundaryalahari*, composed to glorify beauty as the highest form of truth and goodness, treats beauty as a deluding force as well as an emancipating one, and in doing so refers to one of the most difficult epistemological stumbling blocks in the field of philosophy. This is the paradox around which center problems like the One and the many, being and becoming, and the transcendental and the immanent. Here *tripurantaka*, the god of destruction, is allegorically said to be in love with the manifestation of *tripurasundari*, the goddess of beauty, which is not possible without causing violation to his own nature. This paradox is really the hardest crux of philosophy. Ramanuja overcomes it with a revision of Shankara's *anirvacaniya khyati*, the error of indeterminism. According to Shankara, this paradox is like the assumption that the wave has a reality other than the water or that the blue color of the sky has a reality other than that of the sky itself. These, according to him, are transitory projections which are neither real nor unreal. In the above-mentioned story, the

exciting beauty of the illusory seductress was only a momentary phenomenon superimposed on the reality of Vishnu, who was never a female. Similarly, the universe is a phenomenal superimposition in the form of Nature, on Shiva, the eternal principle of transcendence, who is free of all the triple qualities of Nature, sattva, rajas and tamas. The Real is unchanging. The water is real, making the wave unreal. By the same token, the world is unreal and only Siva is real.

This position of Shankara is reviewed, criticized and rejected by Ramanuja. So long as water remains, one wave will be replaced by another wave, and the nature of water causing a wave is as real as the water itself. Therefore the principle of waves has a reality in which the reality of the water itself participates. We find this same position stated in this verse of Shankara, who must have corrected his earlier position in this book of hymns which he wrote after completing all of his major commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, and the Brahma Sutras. In this revised sense it is Shiva, the burner of the three cities, providing the ground for the manifestation of beauty in all the three cities. (35-6)