

10/26/21

In the Stream of Consciousness – Part Two

Chapter 17H – Knowledge is Virtue, and The Eye of the Beholder

The two stories, depicting pronounced aspects of Nataraja Guru's personality, were read out together. The first presents his critical side, where he offered corrections to anyone, disciples or chance encounters, whether they welcomed them or not. The second is a talent he shared with Nitya, of focusing on mundane events and directing everyone's attention to the high values implicit in them. I've added an additional story from L&B, in Part II, amplifying the first story.

Deb felt that, more than knowledge being virtuous, Nitya was revaluing knowledge as the way valuable insights are shared for the common good. Nataraja Guru's intent was always to present his clear understanding, to lead people to a wider comprehension and show how knowing was open to all. Wisdom is always present, not necessarily in rarified forms. He wasn't *always* obstreperous: it was so touching to Deb the way he honored special qualities of the three people in the second story.

We got Charles talking about what he remembered of being with Nataraja Guru. He wanted us to know he doesn't think about him much, and can't remember details, but we had fun anyway. Usually after a disclaimer like that, the memory cells crack open.

Charles and Deb were both present at the World Parliament of Religions, held in Shasthamkotta in 1971. She remembers the speeches all day long, and being exhausted by the end of the day, ready to hit the hay. Walking to her hut, she would see Nataraja Guru sitting outside in a circle of admirers, chatting away full of energy, as if he was completely refreshed. She suspected it was because he was always himself, never a social being, which is tiring—just free.

Charles said that Mogappa Swami described his bearing as *atma shakti*, driven by the energy of the Self.

The World Parliament was ostensibly aimed at interfaith accord, but there were ulterior motives all over the place, with different sects and mainstream religions vying for dominance. T was ever thus.

It was hoped that the disciples of Chattampi Swami and Narayana Guru would join forces, but at that stage it was unlikely, with Nataraja Guru's group of Western stoned freaks in the limelight.

The second story implies the value Nataraja Guru placed on India's respect for wisdom and the people who embodied it. Being unorthodox, societal respect for the embodiments of wisdom was often an issue for him. Charles talked about a couple of incidents where Nataraja Guru was not being properly appreciated as a guru, in reaching out to Sikhs and the Iskcon (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) cult.

Iskcon was ubiquitous in Portland for a long time, and Karen remembers her Center Family dancing with them and attending their banquets. Steven was interested in them, back in the 1970s, and recalled Nitya "outing" him as a closet Hari Krishna devotee. We all agreed Nitya was impossible to fool, and the more you tried to hide something, the faster he spotted it. Nitya, while enthusiastic about bhakti in principle, was not a fan of the cult. Steven remembers him talking to an Iskcon group loudly chanting in Portland's Park Blocks, near Portland State University, asking them why they made so much noise. Didn't they have respect for people who might need peace and quiet? A couple of them used to stop in the first Portland Gurukula to tell Nitya he was a lost soul because he didn't accept that their guru was God. They had no idea how outclassed they were.

Nataraja Guru's attitude regarding their bountiful predecessors is expressed in his Gita commentary, in the leadup to the chapter on Bhakti, verse 54 of chapter XI, about true attainment of the Absolute:

The attaining here referred to has implications of an absolutist nature which it would be wrong to overlook. There is always implied in such instances an identity or unity of a very thorough character as between the seeker and the wisdom of the Absolute. Such references by no means suggest the weak variety of *bhakti* (devotion) which mostly consists of clashing cymbals, bell-rings and parrot-like muttering of *mantrams* (sacred syllables). But of course such practices have their justification, in so far as they displace worse practices!

Charles noted that while Nitya had a high aesthetic sense, Nataraja Guru did not; he was more of a pure intellectual. He also described him as both timid and ferocious.

For a time, Steven also followed the popular boy guru, Maharaji, who claimed to be God incarnate. Nitya merely said to him, “You have no idea how many people in India claim to be God.”

Next I read out the third story, below, with its recounting of Nataraja Guru admonishing his fellow bus-riders “that the world was going from bad to worse because people lie down and take every insult without protest, adding that somehow people in India think they will be looked upon as generous and well bred when they silently put up with injustice and disgrace.” It led to a discussion of the ways we are reluctant to publicly stand up for justice or even plain common sense.

Deb characterized Nitya and Nataraja Guru as epitomizing knowledge in action. They offered their corrections to demonstrate a dynamic engagement with the world and to clarify misunderstandings. Nataraja Guru wasn't trying to be obnoxious or bullying, his aim was to uplift the general ideals of those around him, which he firmly believed was what a guru was supposed to provide, in exchange for being “fed and clothed” by the populace.

Steven was put in mind of a group meditation in a house in Palo Alto. They were all sitting around a candle (probably on grass mats) and there was a toddler wandering around. Nobody dared

restrain him, and they were all sitting in a daze, as the child wandered toward the flame. At the last moment Nitya grabbed the candle and set it out of harm's way, chastising them for their passivity. He told them being "in harmony" did not mean you weren't supposed to act. Rather, you act in tune with the needs of the moment.

Jan held that being lectured like the hotel manager can be overdone, and there should be room for tolerance of different styles or opinions. She was thinking about her nosy neighbors who have criticized her yard and boldly asked her to fix what they didn't like. It's true that the hotel manager was not very likely to have become enlightened from Nataraja Guru's complaints, and probably had little or nothing to do with why the hotel was as ridiculous as it was.

Steven agreed the hotel critique was a waste of time, and it made him wonder how to distinguish useful and useless criticism. He revisited what he talked about last week, about the American deification of the individual, where no one is allowed to impose their morality on anyone else, even if it's a matter of life or death. There is clearly an area where we need to speak up, and areas where we should mind our own business. Where do we draw the line?

Last winter a couple of kids were sledding on the street by his house, after one of our rare snowstorms, with their dad watching. Their course ended in the middle of a somewhat dangerous intersection, and Steven realized he should warn them. In a typical American move, the dad argued with him, and told him to mind his own business. Even such an obvious gesture of goodwill can get you in trouble here. Fortunately the kids realized Steven was right, and told their dad they were done sledding and ready to go home.

Andy mused about Gandhi, and the coercive way he would impose his virtues on everyone, often by fasting. He believed that people were innately revulsed by cruelty, to the extent of practically inviting it in some of his confrontations.

While not mentioned in class, those incidents did shock the global community into supporting the Indian independence movement.

In summation, acting harmoniously in concert with the true needs of the moment is the essence of yoga. The more complete the understanding, the more valuable one's contribution will be. Some occasions call for intervention; some don't, and it cannot be spelled out, as every situation is unique. We should be willing to make well-intentioned mistakes in a just cause. That's why most States have Good Samaritan laws on the books, protecting caregivers from prosecution if they make a plausible error in rendering aid.

In the modern, chaotic, zombie-filled world, it takes real bravery to stick your nose in where it might not be welcome. That's why yogis have to Be Prepared, as much or more than Scouts do. It's good to know that even gurus can make fools of themselves. We can too.

## Part II

### Knowledge is Virtue

When we arrived in Madras, a friend arranged for our stay in a brand new hotel. When Guru was shown to his room, he walked around and had a good look at the room, its furniture, and the conveniences of the bathroom, and asked us to call the manager of the hotel.

When the manager arrived, Guru pointed out the odd way in which the room was furnished, the defect in the choice of colors for the carpet, bedspread and window curtain, the lack of imagination in the switchboard fixture for the lights and fans, and the absence of any clothes racks or clothes lines in the bathroom. He was not merely satisfied with offering criticism, he even started giving details for remodeling the whole thing. Taking the manager with him, he walked outside and had a look at the details of the

building and told him of some of the latest innovations in hotel architecture.

I secretly thought in my mind that there was no need for Guru to waste his time on the oddities of the hotel.

I think Guru read my thoughts. He said, “What do you think is the state of a *mukta*, a released soul? From what do you think he is released? The only thing to be freed from is the absurdity of life. God gave us the wonderful light of reason to make our life on earth pleasant and beautiful. Absurdity can come to us from any direction. Wherever you see it, push it away.

“I am not employed by anyone, but I am fed and clothed. I owe a responsibility to the world which supports me. So I take pleasure in sharing the light of my understanding with my fellow men.

“You think I wasted my time. Even though the defects of the room remain, the darkness which perpetuated those defects is no longer in that man’s mind. He is happy about it. Only knowledge can bring us happiness. That is why Socrates said that knowledge is virtue.”

## The Eye of the Beholder

Once the Maharani of Gwalior organized a Bhagavad Gita Conference in Bombay for seven days. Nataraja Guru was invited to preside on the last day. That morning Guru went for his customary walk. He always combined teaching with his morning walk, and the best lessons I had from him were often when I followed along on such occasions.

Morning hours in Bombay are the peak time of traffic. Guru was totally engrossed in a subtle point of metaphysics when he came to a signal light. He did not notice the signal turning red, he just walked on. Fortunately there was a policeman in the traffic island. He gave a long whistle and held the traffic to a complete

stop. Oblivious of what was happening, Guru kept on going. When he came to the traffic island, the policeman greeted him with a verbal salutation, and Guru realized that on all sides cars were impatiently waiting for him to pass.

On our way back we saw a beggar sitting on the pavement. Being a leper, he had no fingers, and the stumps that were left behind were really horrid to see. All that he had gotten that day was a banana. As we passed by, I felt guilty that we had nothing to offer him. Then to our amazement, he greeted Guru by politely mentioning the name of God, and with great reverence he picked up the banana with the stumps of his hands and offered it to him. Guru accepted it with great love and blessed him. As is customary in India, he returned half of the banana to the beggar. Guru immediately continued the teaching, in which he was fully engrossed.

We came to the site of the conference. The Maharani came and prostrated at Guru's feet. Guru turned to me and said, "What a beautiful woman. Don't you think so?" Nobody makes such a remark in India, so I was very much embarrassed, if not shocked. But Guru insisted that I should answer his question. "Isn't she beautiful?" he prodded.

In India sannyasis are not supposed to even look at the face of a woman. I did not know what to answer or how to save everyone from embarrassment.

Then Guru addressed everyone in the room. "Today is a great day," he said. "I saw three beautiful children of India. I am not a man of wealth, and I have no authority over anyone. I am only a beggar, but a policeman on duty stopped traffic in my honor, and leaving everything behind, he even came forward to pay homage to a Guru. This can happen only in India. A beggar should know nothing but his need, but today a beggar offered me the only fruit he had. He wanted nothing in return. This Maharani was educated in England. She is a powerful woman of modern political India, but she leaves aside her pride of social position to take the dust of the feet of a wayfarer. It is in this attitude of the Maharani, the

beggar, and the policeman that I see the true beauty that is taught by the Upanishads.”

I looked at him and marveled, “How beautiful is my Guru.”

\* \* \*

An excerpt from *Love and Blessings*. Nataraja Guru, Paul Gaevart and Nitya were riding a bus up to the hill town of Mussoorie, in northern India:

When we reached Mussoorie all the passengers were asked to pay a city tax, but Guru refused. “Boarding a bus or a train is a contract between the passengers and the transport company. The passengers are to be told in advance if they have to pay a tax,” he argued. The people in the bus thought Guru was just being a trouble-maker, and the conductor didn’t know what to do with him. Guru said, “I am the president of the world government. I cannot allow injustice to pass unnoticed.” He refused to get off the bus unless the authorities came and recorded his complaint.

Then he turned to the passengers and called them pretenders who had no self-respect. He lectured them that the world was going from bad to worse because people lie down and take every insult without protest, adding that somehow people in India think they will be looked upon as generous and well bred when they silently put up with injustice and disgrace. Finally a complaint book was brought from the city office, and Guru wrote that passengers should be notified of the tax before the commencement of the journey.

I thought Guru was going to extremes and exaggerating the irregularities of the authorities, but after two days a letter came from city hall thanking him for his complaint and agreeing to put a notice where the bus started, clearly informing passengers how much they would be charged. It was a good lesson to me on how to educate the public as well as the government. (224-5)



There is a footnote about the World Government:

Nataraja Guru was perhaps indulging in a bit of hyperbole. For a short time prior to holding elections he may have been referred to as president, but he was in fact the philosophical and spiritual advisor to the World Service Authority, an attempt to legitimize the holistic notion of One World through world government initiated by Garry Davis. That advisory post was later held by Guru Nitya as well.

Part III

Thank you, Dipika:

*I really love all the Gurus...such a no nonsense approach...and saying it as it is !!!*

the weak variety of *bhakti* (devotion) which mostly consists of clashing cymbals, bell-rings and parrot-like muttering of *mantrams* (sacred syllables). But of course such practices have their justification, **in so far as they displace worse practices!**

*CHONK!!! in one fell swoop! ☺*

Nataraja Guru admonishing his fellow bus-riders “that the world was going from bad to worse because people lie down and take every insult without protest, adding that somehow people in India think they will be looked upon as generous and well bred when they silently put up with injustice and disgrace.” It led to a discussion of the ways we are reluctant to publicly stand up for justice or even plain common sense.

*Nothing seems to have changed...50 -70 years later...we are still looking the other way....hoping someone else will save the day for us!!! Such a ridiculous circus happening in India today...and sadly anyone speaking up is ...well... jailed!*

