

11/9/21

In the Stream of Consciousness – Part Two

Chapter 17K – Idols Have No Teeth, and Custom Binds; Wisdom Frees

Next week we'll hold the final session on *In the Stream of Consciousness*, the last of Nitya's major books in English for us to have studied. We will pause classes for December and resume them in January, Grid willing, beginning with Nitya's Patanjali exegesis, *Living the Science of Harmonious Union*. Our previous study took from May 2008 to August 2011, so this should keep us going for a while. (There was a substantial break around my brain injury of February 2010.)

December is also the overlap for me of three Gita classes, with one ending and one starting up, each taking the rough equivalent of class notes writing. I'm ready for a break, too. There's still room for a few more spelunkers in Gita 2022—if you know anyone who might be interested, I'll resend the class invitation and you can pass it along.

The very lovely vignette *Idols Have No Teeth* is a conceptual continuation of last week's *Images of Truth*. Deb talked about how it makes the same point, how we invest a sculpture with particular ideas and ideals that are not innate in it. In a way that's a projection, but it could be an opportunity to project positive values, in a kind of wisdom conversation. The devout couple envisioned many of their ideals in the deity, engendering a sense of love and reverence, which are not crazy and inane beliefs, but varieties of understanding. She was charmed by Nataraja Guru's sweet graceful acceptance in recognizing what this couple wanted to do was worthwhile.

It's also a fine way of dodging the ego's penchant for taking credit for everything—why not attribute our best intentions to a goddess “out there”?

The word ‘symbol’ came to instantly mind for Anita, meaning something material that we can identify with that

represents something immaterial. It helps us to communicate, in the sense of relating to tangible ideas. We do the same with all kinds of things: we look at a sunset or a flower or a tree, and are prompted to think of beautiful, spiritual concepts. So the idol is simply a medium for us to communicate with or relate to bigger ideas. She loved Nataraja Guru's comment that it is just stone, but he's not afraid stones can hurt him.

Deb likened the idol to a door, allowing us to enter into a transcendent experience, to morph from everyday concerns into something more vast and connected.

Implied in the Guru's standing up for statue worship is the worry that some people take idols in a different, much more negative way. So many tragedies have occurred due to idolatry, and not only the religious type. I've put some powerful thoughts about this from Thomas Merton in Part II—read them if you're brave enough. His point is *we* are the chief idolators, we self-satisfied modern materialists, who imagine idolatry is limited to superstitious people bowing before visible symbols, like a cross or a Saraswati. More than ever, we humans believe in the irreligious images that are presented to us, and we are willing to do anything on their behalf. While idol-admiring can be beautiful and positive, it's important to be clear what you're doing with it so it doesn't bare its fangs.

Deb got that the scholars in the story, who were atheists, were nonetheless idolizing their own way of thinking. The Guru was standing up against their more subtle but less tolerant idolatry.

Andy admired how Nataraja Guru does it without being condescending. He has respect for their beliefs, which is very beautiful. You can say it's second best, but in the context of their lives it is first best, and he's honoring that.

Andy has been struck lately by one of the verses in Gita class (he's in Gita 2021), where Krishna is talking about different kinds of seekers, and he's continued to meditate on it. He could see how it was related to tonight's topic:

Among doers of the good, four kinds are intent on Me: the distressed, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of the goods of life, and the wise. (VII.16)

Krishna is saying these are the kinds of people who seek the Absolute, the full meaning. Most dear to him is a wise person, but their business is finished. In reading this verse, Andy sees he is of the lesser type of seeker, really all of them: at times he's distressed, other times he's seeking wisdom, or else trying to get something, to make something happen. Only the truly wise person is no longer seeking. Andy feels it's important to recognize those types of seekers because they include all of us—we're striving for something or we're trying to escape something.

Deb agreed we all believe wise is best, and we are sure we're like that, but in reality we are fluctuating through various ways of seeking. In other words, we idolize our own supposed wisdom.

Paul had a discussion with his daughter Amie about the idea of the wise being finished. They wondered if that means wisdom is a static process with a fixed end point, or can it be dynamic? Paul's only comparison is his family, holding tightly to a very rigid belief system. If anything challenges their beliefs, they have a tendency to push it away, which is practically the definition of ignorance. He answered his rhetorical question: wisdom must be something dynamic, and that includes the understanding that we don't know everything yet.

That's right: if you believe in a static form of wisdom, then you are truly finished, in the opposite way Andy meant it. You are finished evolving if you think the answer is a fixed notion. Science *seeks* certitude; if it decides it's found it, it recedes into the past and becomes absurd, like phrenology. It goes from a dynamic interaction with reality to an idol to be kowtowed to.

That's why debased religions tend toward oversimplification, like whether or not you believe in God or Jesus: an on/off switch which is essentially meaningless.

Deb recalled a comment from somewhere, where Nitya

says you can learn tennis or get a PhD, but every day the wise person wakes up and uses that day's opportunity to express their wisdom. It's a dynamic, fluid thing that they participate in every day.

Earlier in the day I had run across a definitive statement about this from Nitya, that if you're doing somebody else's program you are a slave to them. We should be discarding our need for right answers and instead asking better questions of ourselves:

The Absolute that we speak of here is not a person. It is the whole meaning of your life. Life is that you see the meaning of life, the wholeness of it. That comes only when you give a purpose to it. You are the one who is giving the purpose. If another person is giving a purpose and you are trying to reach it, you make yourself a slave and you are enslaved by somebody's system, somebody's program. You should not allow yourself to be programmed by another. (Gita video IX.3)

As Deb expressed it, we are eternally going from not knowing to knowing, then back to not knowing. We should come to that moment of openness and non-judgment, where simply being an alive presence is really the embodiment of wisdom.

Paul finds it scary how ignorance carries with it an illusion of control, which apparently is so comforting unless you really take a look at it, and then it becomes fearful. The real choice is whether to face the unknown without reducing it to a slogan: then you can see the magic and majesty and design behind both the immune system and the solar system.

Anita wondered why we are so driven by our emotions. Fear is much the strongest, and underlies so many of our motivations. Fear of the unknown is a shock everyone experiences from time to time, even if we think we are beyond it. Fear is the driving force.

I suggested fear isn't all bad. Our emotions are the way our

greater mind communicates with the surface mind we identify with. If you're in immanent danger, the mind doesn't make debatable postulates, there is not time for it. Fear zaps you with terror and you leap to safety. It's a good feature. Definitely survival-related.

Nitya's practical definition of spirituality is fearlessness, but we don't want to be fearless of truly dangerous situations. Humans, however, can be afraid of all sorts of abstractions that are vastly exaggerated and badly reacted to, and those should be defeated with forthrightness. Whether we are consigned to hell, whether we'll be rejected by our peers, whether we'll fail to make the grade—these are fears that stifle us for little or no reason. We fit into society based largely on soul-killing ways of thinking. Truly spiritual people, who are admittedly rare, do not let such fears dictate their lives. At least that's the premise.

Anita offered that idolatry, even religion itself, is a way to deal with fear, of not knowing, by giving people a pattern of reassurance. Deb added acknowledging our fear in the face of the unknown is an amazing thing. More often we do our best to suppress and ignore it, and it eats into us.

As a seeker of truth, that's what you should get from this study: how important it is to go to the root of your motivations and see what they are all about. We carry a lot of unspoken terrors along with us, many from early in life, before we had even rudimentary explanations for what was happening to us. If you can locate those and bring a mature awareness to them, sometimes you can make an irrational fear stop.

Because of our cultural grounding in harsh Semitic religions (I accidentally typed vultural grounding), we are all too aware of the devastation of idolatry via Inquisitions and so forth, but Indian idol worship is very loving, an opportunity to meditate on the highest, most refined values. Many then put those high values into practice, which is always a challenge no matter what you believe. As keen a skeptic as Nataraja Guru was, he was well aware of, and deeply honored, that aspect of religious life.

Deb read out the next story, about false scruples, how we are often worried about factors that aren't true in a given situation. The example is a classic Indian one: as soon as you taste a food dish it is instantly a leftover, unfit to serve guests or gurus. Those of us without that rule—which included Narayana Guru, obviously—see it as ridiculous. We don't get it. Karen indignantly asked who made the rules? That's right. We should undo the binding ones, as the title suggests. But Westerners can imagine the plight of the server, caught in other people's rules and having no easy way out. Those bonds are almost like physical restraints, like a gyroscope that forces you into a certain trajectory. We don't realize they're there, but there are legions of them.

Paul grew up in a very small town, mainly a religious community, and was jolted by going away to college, because he hadn't been exposed to the norms outside his sect, not even through TV, which was not allowed. He felt uncouth, out of place, not yet adequately aware of the social customs at work around him, and he may still have a touch of that. It made him realize how even aspects of socialization itself are a form of idolatry. There is nothing absolutely wrong with socialization, since it helps us to get along together. Yet all of it is utilitarian, just for us to survive. Perhaps because of this, he still finds himself worrying too much about the social aspect, instead of the content.

Narayana Guru was a fully alive human being, and it must have driven him crazy that he couldn't just get a bowl of rice when he was sick and hungry. At all times he was handled with kid gloves, all sorts of proprieties and deferences that he neither wanted nor needed. I'm sure it was maddening. At least when he wasn't sick he would meet it with good cheer and kind words that could excuse the banalities.

Early on, we were like that with Nitya. We were tripping over ourselves to behave “correctly,” even though we had little sense of what that meant in his world. Our actions just interfered with clear and open conversation, which is what he wanted. Get rid

of all the fluff! Anyway, this little story speaks to me, because I've been there. I'm a perp.

Gurus preach truth and liberation all day long and people bow and nod, and then go on the way they always have, untouched. Or touched by something completely different than they meant. Do you imagine gurus are happy about it?

Andy, thinking of Narayana Guru's normal "good cheer and kind words," sympathized with the server, who only wanted to do his simple task in the right way. The Guru was a tiny bit gruff with him. It reminded Andy of a book of everyday stories about Narayana Guru. I must have mentioned it to him once, but it isn't published in English, as far as I know. I won't mass mail it, but I will share it with anyone who requests it. (Vinaya, if you read this, let me know the status.) It was compiled by Shyam, in Malayalam, and translated by Vinaya Chaitanya. I edited it in 2017, and I don't even know if the edits were entered in the copy I have. I just grabbed a typical example, illustrative of another side of the Guru, who is speaking:

6. Never believe that caste really exists. The assumption that there are high and low castes is a story fabricated by people of selfish motives. Never should you agree with this. Never should you follow or submit to such an assumption in thought, word or deed. It is foolish to accept something that does not exist, as if it did. The belief that there is a higher caste, hinders the free-flow of the self, destroys progress and makes life unkind and useless. To believe that there is lower caste caters to pretentiousness and false pride in the mind, haunts life and pollutes it.

That's true guru talk: "It is foolish to accept something that does not exist, as if it did." Which is idol worship at its core. I'll close with a reprise of Atmo 88, dealing with what does or does not exist, easy to find because I put it in the last notes, too:

Everything is real in itself; one who grasps the basic truth

will understand all this as one;
if not known introspectively,
maya's great enmity certainly creates much confusion.

Part II

Idols Have No Teeth

An elderly couple came to Nataraja Guru with a request that he install a devi temple for them. Guru agreed to it. The couple belonged to a family of which it was well known that some of its scholarly members were pronounced atheists. In their eyes, installing such a deity would be seen as supporting the superstition of idolatry.

When one such scholar confronted Guru and asked him if he believed in idol worship, Guru said, "I was a physics teacher in Europe. Still, I do not want to snatch away from any Indian priest the privileges of his priestcraft.

"A couple from this family wanted me to install the idol of a female deity. If a man has a sore tooth and he goes to a dentist asking for a filling or extraction of the tooth, the dentist won't give him an admonition for having a bad tooth. Neither will he reject it as an irrelevant case. He will attend to it.

"My main interest is the happiness of each and every person. Everyone has a right to believe in whatever they are convinced of. This couple believes they can have peace by prayerfully relating to what they call a devi, symbolized by this idol. I am obliging them. Tomorrow they may find out that what is real in the image is only stone, and what they have projected on to it has arisen out of their own mind. Then they may discard the stone. Why should I stop anyone from following their own way of arriving at truth?

"I am not afraid of an idol. I know that it is a stone, and it will not bite me. But it seems that you believe in it, because it is disturbing you."

Custom Binds; Wisdom Frees

Once Narayana Guru was sick in bed. He was served some rice gruel, and he asked the man who brought it if it had been salted already. There is a custom observed in India that one should never taste food prepared for a guru, because it is believed to instantly become leftover food, unfit to serve. As the cook was not readily available, the man could not say yes or no. Seeing his confusion, the Guru said, “Give it to the dog. It has no false scruples.”

* * *

My reading after class included an update on idolatry. The New York Review of Books, October 21, 2021, has a review of several new books on AI, artificial intelligence: *The Human Cost of AI*, by Sue Halpern. After detailing the way AI is being trained to encode bias in every walk of life, the conclusion refers to the cost of idolatry:

The danger ahead, then, is not that artificially intelligent systems will get smarter than their human creators. It's that by valorizing these systems without reservation, humans will voluntarily cede the very essence of ourselves—our curiosity, our compassion, our autonomy, our creativity—to a narrow, algorithmically driven vision of what counts.

* * *

I've clipped this in before, but it remains the most outstanding assessment of the topic I've ever encountered, searingly true to

life. To be frank, it's fucking brilliant. From Thomas Merton's *Faith and Violence*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.):

Reading the Vulgate [the Roman Catholic Bible in Latin] I run across the Latin word *simulacrum* which has implications of a mask-like deceptiveness, of intellectual cheating, of an ideological shell-game. The word *simulacrum*, it seems to me, presents itself as a very suggestive one to describe an advertisement, or an over-inflated political presence, or that face on the TV screen. The word shimmers, grins, cajoles. It is a fine word for something monumentally phony. It occurs for instance in the last line of the First Epistle of John. But there it is usually translated as "idols"... "Little Children, watch out for the simulacra!"—watch out for the national, the regional, the institutional images!

Does it occur to us that if, in fact, we live in society which is par excellence that of the *simulacrum*, we are the champion idolaters of all history? No, it does not occur to us, because for us an idol is nothing more than a harmless Greek statue, complete with a figleaf, in the corner of the museum. We have given up worrying about idols—as well as devils. And we are living in the age of science. How could we, the most emancipated of men, be guilty of superstition? Could science itself be our number one superstition?

You see where my rambling has brought me. To this: we are under judgment. And what for? For the primal sin. We are idolaters. We make simulacra and we hypnotize ourselves with our skill in creating these mental movies that do not appear as idols because they are so alive! Because we are idolaters, because we have "exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the semblance of the likeness of mortal man, of birds, of quadrupeds, of reptiles..." we fulfill all the other requirements of those who are under God's wrath, as catalogued by Paul in Romans 1: 24-32.

Our idols are by no means dumb and powerless. The sardonic diatribes of the prophets against images of wood and stone do not

apply to our images that live, and speak, and smile, and dance, and allure us and lead us off to kill. Not only are we idolaters, but we are likely to carry out point by point the harlotries of the Apocalypse. And if we do, we will do so innocently, decently, with clean hands, for the blood is always shed somewhere else! The smoke of the victims is always justified by some clean sociological explanation, and of course it is not superstition because we are by definition the most enlightened people that ever happened.

The things that we do, the things that make our news, the things that are contemporary, are abominations of superstition, of idolatry, proceeding from minds that are full of myths, distortions, half-truths, prejudices, evasions, illusions, lies: in a word—*simulacra*. Ideas and conceptions that look good but aren't. Ideals that claim to be humane but prove themselves, in their effects, to be callous, cruel, cynical, sometimes even criminal.

We have no trouble at all detecting all this in the ideologies of *other* nations, other social groups. That is at least something! But it is not enough. We cannot begin to face our real problems until we admit that these evils are universal. We see them in others because they are in ourselves. Until we admit that we are subject to the same risks and the same follies, the same evils and the same fanaticisms, only in different forms, under different appearances (*simulacra*) we will continue to propose solutions that make our problems insoluble. We will continue to be deadlocked with adversaries who happen to be our own mirror image.

* * *

My thesis is now clear: in my opinion the root of our trouble is that our habits of thought and the drives that proceed from them are basically idolatrous and mythical. We are all the more inclined to idolatry because we imagine that we are of all generations the most enlightened, the most objective, the most scientific, the most progressive and the most humane. This, in fact, is an “image” of ourselves—an image which is false and is also the object of a cult.

We worship ourselves in this image. The nature of our acts is determined in large measure by the demands of our worship. Because we have an image (*simulacrum*) of ourselves as fair, objective, practical and humane, we actually make it more difficult for ourselves to be what we think we are. Since our “objectivity” for instance is in fact an image of ourselves as “objective” we soon take our objectivity for granted, and instead of checking the facts, we simply manipulate the facts to fit our pious conviction. In other words, instead of taking care to examine the realities of our political or social problems, we simply bring out the idols in solemn procession. “We are the ones who are right, *they* are the ones who are wrong. We are the good guys, *they* are the bad guys. We are honest, *they* are crooks.” In this confrontation of images, “objectivity” ceases to be a consistent attention to fact and becomes a devout and blind fidelity to myth. If the adversary is by definition wicked, then objectivity consists simply in refusing to believe that he can possibly be honest in any circumstances whatever. If facts seem to conflict with images, then we feel that we are being tempted by the devil, and we determine that we will be all the more blindly loyal to our images. To debate with the devil would be to yield! Thus in support of realism and objectivity we simply determine beforehand that we will be swayed by no fact whatever that does not accord perfectly with our own preconceived judgment. Objectivity becomes simple dogmatism.

As I say, we can see this mechanism at work in the Communists. We cannot see it in ourselves. True, of course, our dogmatism is not as blatant, as rigid, as bureaucratically dense, as monolithic. It is nonetheless real. That is to say, it is based on *refusals* that are just as categorical and just as absolute.

These refusals are made necessary by a primary commitment to a false image which is the object of superstitious worship. The fact that the image is not made of stone or metal, but of ideas, slogans and pseudo-events only makes it all the more dangerous. (pp. 152-155)

Part III

My first page reading Iain McGilchrist's *The Master and His Emissary* today, after writing the notes this morning, is as though he was submitting it for the class:

The problem with the Reformation was, according to [Joseph] Koerner, one of 'either/or', a 'hatred based on the absolute distinction between truth and falsehood'. Because of the inability to accept the ambiguous or metaphorical, and because of a fear of the power of the imagination, images were objects of terror. Statues had to be reduced to 'mere wood'. In fact the supposed 'idolators' never had believed they were worshipping statues—that self-serving fiction existed only in the minds of the iconoclasts, who could not understand that divinity could find its place *between* one 'thing' (the statue) and another (the beholder), rather than having to reside, fixed, in the 'thing' itself. Luther himself said as much: 'I believe that there is no person, or certainly very few, who does not understand that the crucifix that stands over there is not my God—for my God is in Heaven—but rather only a sign.

Decapitation of statues by the Reformers took place because of the confounding of the animate and the inanimate, and the impossibility of seeing that one can live in the other metaphorically. In a world where metaphoric understanding is lost we are reduced to either/or, as Koerner says. *Either* the statue is God *or* it is a thing: since it is 'obviously' not God, it must be a thing, and therefore 'mere wood', in which case it has no place in worship. To see that 'mere' wood can partake of the divine requires seeing it as a *metaphor*, and being able to see that, precisely because it is a metaphor rather than a representation, it *is* itself divine. It is not just something non-divine *representing* the divine, it is something divine. (316)

* * *

Another, from Nitya:

We are afraid of altering a tradition. People say, “Oh, Guru did it like that and so now if I don't do it like that, people will say I have no faith or loyalty to my Guru.” I say, this is all trash. Make a break. If you find that it's becoming mechanical and if it provides no help to you, no vigor to you, and no inspiration to you, it is time that you should break it off and start something new. But we are afraid to break an idol. We become idolatrous. The idolatry we are talking about has nothing to do with an image. I am not saying that there should be an image or that there should not be an image. But we create mechanical images in our mind and then succumb to it. In such a case, it is necessary to break it and to allow fresh blood into the veins of your search. (Gita video IX.12)

* * *

Dipika wrote, after:

Yes yes many ideas concur...

True the bit... about irrational fears, one needs to face them squarely and see if they have any relevant bite...

I hang my head in shame at the truth of Mr. Merton's upbraid.

Yes indeed we need to have sense to distinguish between projecting hope and faith and getting superstitious. Though sometimes very deep wishes are shown the way...

I remember going through a very restless and negative phase and needed desperately to calm my mind... & I placed this little buddha

statuette in front of me and tried to do 'tratak'... all the time asking from the heart to show me a way.

Very shortly thereafter I came upon a vipassana course 🙏

I do not pray to the statuette but it does hold a special place.

Sitting out in the quiet night surrounded by earth sounds... swishing palms, crashing waves, the wind rustling the leaves and the cool white moon shining luminously down.

Chattering thoughts subdued and some thought through...