

11/16/21

In the Stream of Consciousness – Part Two

Chapter 17L – Judging a Gift by its Wrapping, and Sink or Swim

On our final round of this gem of a book, the old guard did not suppress our profound enthusiasm for the author, whose stream of consciousness still flows in our veins. It was a fitting end to the first half century of the Portland Gurukula. (A second half is proposed to start early in 2022.)

Since both remaining stories are quite short, I'll include them in the main essay. The first is a well-known event. Part II features a more substantial account of it, and ties it in to the main theme of the class.

Judging a Gift by its Wrapping

When the great poet of India, Rabindranath Tagore, came to pay homage to Narayana Guru, the poet was overjoyed by the great changes brought about by Narayana Guru in the socioeconomic setup of the country. Commenting on that, the poet complimented the Guru on the “great work” he was doing for the people.

The Guru's reply was not delayed, “Neither have we done anything in the past, nor is it possible to do anything in the future. Powerlessness fills us with sorrow.”ⁱ

After a lengthy period of stillness, the poet bowed low and took leave of the Guru. The Guru sat quietly, looking on in silence. Afterwards some journalist reported that Narayana Guru did not respond to the reverential salute of the poet-saint. When this was brought to his attention, Narayana Guru said, “Our act of reverence, concealed by the wrap, is invisible.”

At a casual glance, the Guru's response appears humble, even self-deprecating. Yet everything about him demands a closer look.

First off, Narayana Guru lived utterly in a hyper-aware present. In such a state, neither the past or the future is available

for action; only what's going on *now* has meaning. In an absolute, centered orientation, feeling proud of one's past actions is vainglorious, and imagining what you want to accomplish in the future merely another kind of distraction. The Guru was inviting Tagore to commune with him *in the moment*, and I believe the famous poet understood this, because that's exactly what he did. We'll never know what impulses were communicated between them, because they were invisible, and never made explicit.

While Narayana Guru was a lightning rod that inspired tremendous bolts of energy in those who interacted with him, he sat peaceably as an Unmoved Mover most of the time. A more complete portrayal of his style will be found in the Part II excerpt.

Being truly centered means the Guru did not conceive of "doing something" for the people, and acting without that type of externalized motivation is difficult for Westerners to grasp. Nonetheless, it is the essence of the mystical attitude. Badly wanting to "fix the world" has led to the serial disasters of humanity, so the premise warrants skeptical consideration. Narayana Guru was well aware of how much wasn't right, how miserable people on the planet were, but he knew that lasting change comes from within, and that's where he sought it. Happily, the class is convincingly grounded in Vedantic perspectives, proving that we have learned something over the years, so we can agree.

The story reinforced that our feelings can be expressed silently, and perhaps only the onlookers missed it. We can only imagine what transpired between the two seers. They may have been in close consultation, though silence by itself is profound communication. Tagore surely felt reverence for Narayana Guru, and was in no way offended. The reporter didn't get the message, but India's first Nobel laureate undoubtedly did.

Deb reminded us that Narayana Guru also met with Ramana Maharshi, and they didn't say anything to each other, either: they just sat together in a beatific state. There was no pressing need to talk, so they shared an ecstatic silence. Tagore would have

understood it implicitly.

Narayana Guru's feeling of powerlessness, despite all that was accomplished under his influence, was at least partly because he didn't see himself as the agent of action. Karen found his sadness surprising, since he did so much, but taking credit for what happened wasn't his style. He never boasted, even in jest. Deb felt he was like a guiding star, shining his light but not seeing himself as an implementer of changes. He was very aware how much suffering there still was in the world, and how little difference any particular individual could make. He had a strong streak of humility, but more than that, he knew that what could be called the Absolute was the true force for change, and we humans are but one infinitesimal aspect in the flow of the universe.

Moni shared her personal experience of growing up under Narayana Guru's light, how the Guru knew that samsara is deep-rooted, very hard to tear away in a short period of time. He was a yogi, so his method of helping was to keep to a neutral place, simply advising other leaders who came forth to implement their great ideas, and encourage people to participate in rejuvenating themselves and their societies.

Deb agreed his intent was to precipitate changes in people's *understanding* of themselves and others—his life and his teachings were to know who you are first, and then beneficial changes come naturally. The Guru continuously took refuge in knowledge and wisdom, rather than forceful action, though he did voice his support for nonviolent revolutionary activities. He didn't push much, knowing that people have to act at their own level of understanding.

Nancy underscored that in reality no one does anything by pure intent, it's the knowledge of how things work that brings them about. The Guru realized you have to elevate yourself up to the point that you know you are part of the process, but you are not intentionally making it happen one way or another.

Moni put in that in his time, most people didn't have a voice at all, and he inspired them to go to school, be industrious, and

know they were of equal value to anyone else.

The Guru's position was a standing challenge to all the dualistic, wishful thinking that pretends to agitate for change but is ultimately ineffective, if not debilitating—especially, perhaps, in revolutionary times, where violence becomes nearly irresistible. He was well aware we are not in charge of how things unfold, and feeling disappointed in the course of events would not be in any way helpful. He was one of the most powerful people who has ever lived in terms of impact, but he didn't take credit for it: he was too busy inspiring people to become better than they ever thought they could be. He gave them permission to try out their ideas, and in India the word of the Guru is seriously empowering, nearly identical with the word of God.

Mysteriously, yogic neutrality is life's most powerful force, and you can unequivocally feel it from an enlightened being. In the West we believe we have to *do* everything, that our job is thinking stuff up and making it happen. We are driven to plan what we're going to build and how we're going to accomplish it. What recent neuroscience has revealed is that the part of us that thinks we are the doer is like the foam on top of the wave on top of the ocean. Our waking consciousness can be compared to a floating island in a vast sea, or a stowaway on an ocean liner. Our ego is the embarrassingly phony toupee that our full psyche is wearing as a disguise, so tawdry no one dares to criticize it.

By contrast, guru-energy motivates us to get off the island and swim in the entirety of oceanic tidal and wave formations. That's where lasting evolution happens, as in the period when Kerala leapt from a feudal state to a democracy, from caste oppression to the presumption of equality. Like that, Ramana Maharshi affected the entire planet without leaving his home or, for that matter, wearing any clothes. The idea is to tune into that higher tide and trust in it enough, so that we don't feel we have to make everything happen, we don't have to save the world. By fixing yourself and being in tune with your whole being instead of doggedly following a predetermined program, rare achievements

become possible that couldn't have happened any other way.

It isn't all that hard to restrain the ego's urge to take credit for natural unfoldment. Narayana Guru was deeply committed to something much deeper than personal glory. Sadly, our public sphere doesn't feature those types. It's filled with people boasting and bragging, clamoring for attention, like [Bozo the Button Buster](#) in the amazing, hilarious story by Carl Sandberg. Bozo's string is reminiscent of the puppet strings animating our politicians, is it not?

Don't get me wrong—doing stuff is important. Narayana Guru supported industrious people, pumping them up if they were on the right track. He spoke as a powerful, loving, caring force, and his words inspired some very positive developments. Sure, sattvic visions engender rajasic activity that eventually degenerates into tamasic stasis, but that doesn't mean we should abandon all our efforts. In the process many essential improvements can be enabled. And no one is preventing us from reenergizing the sattvic stage, replacing the tired old with the new. That's also nature's program.

Nancy reminisced about the many times people would ask Nitya a direct question and he would tell a story that didn't seem at all related. Despite the bafflement, it acted to recalibrate your interior in a way that gave you a feeling for the direction that should be taken. It took you deeper inside, to your intuition, back to the neutral place that is in harmony with everything. In that way it influences your actions without the imposition of a rigid program. Nancy was not one of those who interacted with Nitya verbally, but she would come to the meetings with some situation in her life that was uncomfortable, not knowing what to do, and somehow during the course of the general conversation a thought would come into her mind, and later she would leave with a new sense of direction. Just being in that zone with the Guru, where the things being spoken of are in a more expansive level, she found her answers had been within her all along. And there they were.

That happened a lot! Nitya would counter a person's selfish

urges and thoughts, somehow balancing that by telling a story that nobody could figure out how it related. But it made you try very hard to get the point, and then you would actually get it. An added benefit was it humorously terminated the unnecessary part of the conversation.

Karen joyfully remembered how Nitya used to come to the commune in La Center to do retreats. Everyone would be bustling around doing chores and preparing food, but as soon as he sat down to start a lecture, everyone stopped just like magic and came together in stillness, the atmosphere suddenly peaceful. They sat there not understanding a word he was saying, yet afterwards they would just be glowing. Karen couldn't put such deep feelings into words—that might spoil them.

Anita wanted to know why the gurus were such enlightened, special people—what was it about them that could open people's understanding like that?

I offered that at least the three Gurukula Gurus were passionately dedicated to a lifetime of understanding, in a culture that seriously supported that sort of lifestyle. Most of us pursue a range of interests at a modest level, and given the chance, we fritter away a lot of our time. Those gurus weren't satisfied unless they got to the bottom of things, like the meaning of life, and how and why people acted as they did. It's something not so many people actually commit to, and they did it in open-minded, creatively constructive ways. We are fortunate we don't have to be that intense, since we can glean trustworthy nuggets of wisdom from them by reading their autobiographies and philosophical works.

Deb added there is a core in all of us that is the same, but mostly we operate separately, within our persona. All those teachers and a number of less obvious people we meet, are attuned more deeply to that core that is the same in every person. Someone like Nitya recognizes the core in you, and speaks to it or simply recognizes it, and then you begin to recognize it in them, too. You get the same feeling when you're with a baby or a toddler: you are in *beingness* with them. Deb admitted it's bizarre to say neutrality

has power, but that is where they operate. People like Jesus and Mohammed are more than just delimited personas. (Nor were they quite so neutral as Narayana Guru—ed.) Even when you travel or are not in your usual situation, you can connect with somebody, some commonality, beyond you as a person. All of us have some of it, but a teacher lives in that place.

Anita was still wondering—perhaps wishing one of those special types was sitting in class with us—so I suggested she could picture her newborn great-grandchildren as middle-aged adults, still with that same feeling to them, the kind of purity of beingness that the baby hasn't yet lost. Their joy is infectious, contagious.

Deb lamented how we're all taking credit for things, mostly on surface level, where we might be talking about subjects more powerful and beneath the surface.

From there the conversation naturally segued to the book's final story:

Sink or Swim

Two friends and I were sailing a boat on a lake in India. The particular part of the lake we were on was notorious for being tricky. When we took a certain turn, the boat capsized and all three of us were thrown overboard.

None of us knew anything about the hazards of that lake. When I came up, I saw my friends thrashing about and gulping mouthfuls of water. They were in a panic and seemed to be drowning. Cautiously I put my legs down, feeling for the bottom. It turned out that the boat had capsized in shallow water, and when I stood up it was only up to my shoulders. I rushed to my friends and showed them that they could stand on their own feet, and together we waded out of the lake.

Today when I see many of my friends struggling, I am very much reminded of this incident.

Deb commented we have all these images of failure and disaster in

our minds, and we're gulping water, spasming, when all we have to do is put our feet down and touch bottom. We can reach the place gurus inhabit. We make up a lot of our problems, and we could just let them go.

I'd say we can also admit that most of us have a hard time casting off our problems, and that oversimplification is more likely to cause us to simply repress them. Erasing them for real is complicated, though it can happen instantaneously, when the stars are correctly aligned. Adepts can do it, but our classes are put on by and meant for those who aren't already enlightened.

In this story, Nitya wanted to reassure those of us who are flailing that there is a solid footing nearby if we care to reach for it. It helps to know it's there, and it's well worth having some faith in. Being with someone like Nitya gets the gist across nonverbally, as well.

Nitya had had his own flailings, early on, so his compassion was genuine. He'd been accidentally inducted into the British army, wandered for ten years as a homeless mendicant, been repeatedly roasted by his Guru, and after all that, even been through hell as a well-respected guru/therapist who gave himself freely to all who sought him out. Along with his steady stream of respectful visitors, random people would show up to rag on him, treating him generically as a worthless drain on society. He endured it and was unruffled by it because he stood on the solidity of the ineffable light within him. It couldn't be blown out by any misfortune. That solidity is what we flailers are missing, that sense of connection to something internal, lasting, solid, and beautiful.

Anita was curious about the person in the story who stood up and found their footing. What was going through their mind? She needed to know how she could actually use that example: "What do I say to myself when I'm drowning and full of anxiety? How can I put my feet down on something that will hold me up?" She is familiar with the greater picture, the core, eternity, and all that, but the things that cause her anxiety or worry are contemporary. Local events. In other words, she wanted practical advice. Real panic is

not trivial, not easy to shrug off, and it rapidly becomes a self-reinforcing negative state, because it generates panicky chemicals to be released.

In addition to trying to hold to a balanced mental framework, I suggested deep, regular breathing, something we can't easily do when we are feeling panicky. It definitely does have a calming effect, if we are able to. I've been having spells of shortness of breath recently that generate those feelings, and Anita has been diagnosed with a chronic breathing problem that does the same. It helps to know that our brain hits the panic button very quickly when our breathing is less than optimal. We likely still have plenty of oxygen in our cells, but the brain considers it an extreme emergency, and switches on the chemical signals to get our attention immediately. We can reassure ourselves that it's a chemical reaction and not as terrible as it feels, and that can calm us some. Just keep up the deep, even breathing, which is itself relaxing. If it's really worrisome, of course, call for help first, and then try to carry out your breath meditations.

I recall learning to float as a young child. If you can't swim, you panic in the water, and the more you flail the faster you go under. Floating requires counterintuitive behavior, relaxing in a threatening environment, and then you naturally float and it feels amazing. You can visualize this state working in air as well as water: don't flail, float! To me it's the ultimate spiritual metaphor.

So, we have a few options. We can do intentional deep breathing, we can hold somebody's hand (or paw), which is calming and reassuring, and we can read consoling literature. I find reading Nitya's books, opened at random, to almost always lead me to a steadier state of mind. I have needed and used them that way many times. Nancy reinforced that the deep breathing has to go right down to the diaphragm—we need to feel the diaphragm pulling the air, the prana, all through the torso.

Ending the class and the book after ten and a half months of scrutiny reminded us how much power and light was hiding in the slim volume of *In the Stream of Consciousness*, and how much

more you can get from a work like it by bouncing ideas around with a small group of interested participants. It's been fabulous, and with any luck, we'll start in on another project soon. Meanwhile, our love goes out to all who made the journey with us, and all who didn't. Aum.

Part II

We revisited the ineffable excerpt from the Introduction to Nitya's *Psychology of Darsanamala*, where it is referring to the last darsana, Nirvana. It reveals why Narayana Guru was so sad about his powerlessness regarding the tragic side of human existence:

Nataraja Guru points out: "Here it is the inner enjoyment of the high value implied in the notion of the Absolute that serves as the diagnostic factor. The outer evidence of such enjoyment might be feeble in the eyes of an onlooker who is not conscious of the Bliss of contemplation of the Absolute." As stated earlier, Narayana Guru's highest ideal is closest to that given in the fifth verse, where the knower of the Absolute retains his realization while interacting with the world for its own benefit. This is poetically presented in verses 11 and 12 of his Subrahmanya Kirtanam, in a free English translation by Guru Nitya:

All discernible forms disappear where light is not paired with shadows, and all imaginations cease where beatitude reigns supreme. Such is the resplendence of your supreme state. It is as if your brilliance has swallowed the sun and the moon. Your lotus feet rest in the brilliant fire of the wisdom of the third eye. Oh Lord, reposed on the colorful wings of the phenomenal peacock, my supplication to you is not to disappear.

The moon has gone beyond the horizon. With it also have gone the fantasizing dreams of the night. The sun has risen in the firmament. The moon and the shimmering stars are no more to

be seen. It is a good time to immerse deeply into the depth of beatitude. Alas! That does not befit the occasion. It is not the time to be lost in spiritual absorption. Look, here is the world drowning in the dark ocean of misery. In body and mind millions are diseased. By drinking they have increased their torpor. These unfortunate wretches are to be roused from their drunken madness. Oh ye people, wake up now! It is time for you to enter into the cleansing river of eternal wisdom and perennial joy.

* * *

Chapter 7 of *Word of the Guru*, Nataraja Guru's priceless and essential biography of Narayana Guru, fleshes out a few of the ideas we batted around in class, including a longer version of Tagore's visit:

A stranger would have thought that the Guru was inactive, or that he was resting without much work. A longer or shorter stay at the *àshrama* soon changed that notion. It was true that at early dawn, before even the contour of the hills became visible, the Guru, who had finished his morning ablutions, sat still on a raised couch while one of the *brahmacàris* read, in musical tones, parts from an elevating scripture. His long staff and lantern with half-raised wick, and his sandals which he left on the threshold of his little dwelling room, seemed to add to the still picture of meditation. So did the morning shadows at the foot of the mango-grove. . . . It was true that most of the day he spent talking to various kinds of visitors, young and old, on topics that made a hasty man impatient while he stood listening to him. It was true that after his midday meal he shut himself up or sat under the shade of the mango tree. It was true that he retired soon after nightfall and lay down on his couch while someone read or sang to him. But the Guru was still wakeful. His voice would come unmistakably when the reader made a mistake that had to be corrected. Grammar and

pronunciation were not neglected. The style was not left uncriticised. No sublime height was left unappreciated, while still he appeared to be lazy. Separate days mingled, thus, their boundaries, in a Peace that was ever active within him. It was a state of continued Yoga. It was a life of dedication to a principle which he shared with the sun and stars. The world of actions was only an outer zone of shadow compared to the brilliance of the light that burnt within him.

It was not that he did not engage in activity. The attitude of strenuous activity was a natural counterpart of the Yoga which he practised day and night. As a result of this ever-wakeful attitude, he always did what others forgot to do, and even this kind of activity generally kept him more occupied than most people. On a rainy morning, when all the inmates liked to stay longer indoors, he was already getting the waterways clear of the obstructing earth that the flood overnight had deposited. In the midday heat when the building-overseer who volunteered to supervise the erection of the new school building, was absent, he was there present himself to direct the stone-breaking and carting operations. He was at the timberyard at night to put away valuable timber that the workmen had neglected to store away in safety. The poor boys of the Sanskrit school had helped to wash the mossy greenness of the parapet wall that surrounded the temple of Sàradà, and he was there helping to make and distribute to the children milk-pudding with his own hands. It was a peaceful routine of activity, some strenuous, some calm, which the continuous Principle that he stood for, made him engage in without ado. Life was to him a continuous day of harmonised activity. It was not that he believed that all must work hard, but it was rather that man could not remain without activity. 'What can one do?' he used to say. 'Our hands and feet and finger-tips are all asking for work. They are like restless horses. We should be ill if we did not give enough work to them'. He would therefore stubbornly insist, saying he would cook his own food or wash his own clothes, when a devotee tried to deprive

him of the chance. He would walk miles and miles to escape from some of the helpful attentions of his devotees.

Occasionally there came a visitor who was a knight-errant in some frontier cause connected with the principles that the Guru symbolised. Perhaps it was one coming from the ancient temple-city of Madurai, where, since the time of his breaking away from the leader, in the fashion we have referred to, several years before, he fought the slow but winning battle against popular superstition and darkness. Or he came from the island of Ceylon or from the Kanarese-speaking country of Mangalore on the coast towards Bombay (now Mumbai). Some others returned to the Master with fruits and flowers from Kàshi (modern Benàres), or, farther still, from Haridvár. They touched the feet of the Leader and remained with him imbibing afresh his Message before they travelled back to their chosen frontier. The spirit of reconciliation filled the atmosphere in the *ashrama* when any such came, and the inmates, young and old, rejoiced in the sense of life that came from the alternation of separation and return of the members of the great family of the Guru. The frontier was the real seat of activity. The Guru himself appeared inactive, and unconcerned with affairs as such.

Once came the poet Rabindranath Tagore, on one of his southern tours, to visit the Guru. In honour of the great poet of Bengal the people in the vicinity of the hermitage arranged a kingly reception. Elephants were requisitioned. He was to be brought in procession as far as the foot of the hill of the *àshrama*. Musical accompaniments were arranged. The Guru stood in the verandah of his rest-house and himself ordered the best carpets that the hermitage possessed, to be brought out to adorn the foot of the seat of the honoured guest. The people thronged with the guest, anxious to hear the conversation between the Guru and the seer of Santiniketan. Each of the crowd thought himself the chosen follower of the Guru, and as space was limited, it took some time to establish silence for the conversation. The two veteran leaders greeted with joined palms, and sat down facing one another. The

seer of Bengal broke the deep silence that marked their meeting, and complimented the Guru on the 'great work' he was doing for the people. The Guru's reply was not delayed, 'Neither have we done anything in the past nor is it possible to do anything in the future. Powerlessness fills us with sorrow.' His words sounded an enigma to some. Others thought he was just joking. Still others examined the logic of the statement. A characteristic silence followed the remark. The crowd looked at one another for a meaning, but it was the Guru's face itself that gave the silent commentary to the words. Deep silence and earnestness sat on his features. Smiles of curiosity and the rival expectations of the people were drawn into the neutral depths of silence by the suggestion that was expressed on the features of the Guru. All was silent for a minute or two. The climax of the interview was reached in silence where all met in equality. Usual conversation followed and the poet and the crowd retired.

The apparently unproductive Principle which the Guru stood for, was all the time ripening fruitful results all round. Some were merely seasonal expressions of his message. Others had continuity beyond the limit of seasonal cycles. They began in the shape of reading rooms in the name of the Guru, which later developed into places of worship. The social and economic institutions were spontaneously aggregated round this central nucleus. Humble individuals, trained in persistent effort, once touched by the Guru, were at the bottom of each such new sprout. They carried the pictures of the Guru in procession. They arranged popular conferences in which men and women took part, and searched for the direction of progress at which the Guru pointed. Those who had special political or social disabilities, answered the rallying-call of the leaders more than others. Soon, hundreds of little nuclei of institutions were scattered all over the country in Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Later, they spread into Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Madras Presidency (now Tamilnàd). (34-6)

ⁱ Nataraja Guru. *The Word of the Guru*, (Cochin, India: PAICO Publishing House, 1968) p.34.