

1/19/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 3 – The Meaning of Life

Nitya now begins the question-and-answer dialogue central to the book, a reflection of the dominant pattern within his local community at the time, which a number of us were part of. Mornings he gave talks followed by silent meditations, while in the evenings we would meet again to entice him with questions that he would spontaneously respond to. He was really good at it! His classes at the University also wound up with Q and A. I've clipped the brief part of the Preface describing this in Part II.

Anita, logically enough, searched “the meaning of life” on the internet, and came up with author Douglas Adams' top-rated selection from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.

I'll save Nitya's pronouncement about the meaning of life for later. First he provides some serious self-examination, in the question-and-answer, call-and-response format.

An answer without a question is meaningless, as Adams aptly demonstrated, when the supercomputer Deep Thought, after running for 7 ½ million years to find the answer to The Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything. After first clearing its Throat and suggesting, “You're not going to like this,” the computer gave its answer: 42. Everyone realized they really hadn't known what the question was, so the earth was constructed, to run on a ten-million-year program to come up with the actual question.

Well, the rishis of a mere few thousand years ago knew perfectly well the importance of the question in giving meaning to

the answer, and we continued their method in our interactions with the Guru in those halcyon times.

Nitya first establishes awareness, without which nothing matters, not even questions. To have meaning, you must be aware. In her opening comments, Deb connected our nascent awareness with how it gradually becomes a person with a personality, which is Nitya's next step. He writes:

The awareness of the I-consciousness as such does not imply a person. It is only the central point of reference for all aspects of consciousness.

Who, then, is the person in me?

When the consciousness of 'I' is treated as its own object of awareness, and that awareness is clothed with pride, elation, depression and a thousand and one changing patterns of emotional, cogitational, and volitional instrumentality, the 'I' takes on the appearance of a distinct person.

Deb mused that when we think of who we are, we come up with a role and a name, an objective something out there. But is this really us? Parsing this became the class's primary thrust.

I ran with Nitya's emphasis on how we treat the 'I' as its own *object* of awareness, and that brings the *persona* into being. Seeing this requires a kind of stepping back. Ordinarily we are so convinced by what we perceive that we don't question that it's our life. Of course it is! Or is it? We have to observe ourselves, which allows us to not be hooked onto things that grab our attention. It's a valuable skill to remember that you are not bound to respond instantly to what you perceive, as if you are tied to it. It works well with sabertoothed tigers, but isn't so worthwhile in philosophy, in self-awareness. The meaning of life is after all a philosophical topic.

Shortly before class Deb and I had a practical example. We were watching a beautiful sunset out of the same window, yet her sunset had different colors than mine. The scene looked so real you

can't help thinking reality is just like that, but the next person isn't perceiving exactly what you are, so it diminishes the reality just a smidgen. Being aware of this reduces the ego's arrogance that it is in possession of the right interpretation, and anyone who doesn't con-cur is a dog. (Bad pun here.)

Our daughter Harmony taught us this when she was quite young. Sometimes when we made a gentle suggestion, she would bark out: "You're not the ruler of me!" True, though a little touchy.

Anyway, the point is, in meditation you can observe how you function and it makes you more functional. It doesn't have to be inhibiting. As a counterbalance, Nitya emphasizes loving your life wholeheartedly. In other words, don't let the philosophical distance separate you from the joy of your own experience. We are capable of having it both ways.

Deb reiterated how Nitya, after going over the complexities and mistakes of our experience and making us wonder who we are, then quietly focuses on the sense of joy and how we share it with those around us. This is what gives meaning to our life, not any specific identity tag. He's saying the meaning of life is really very simple. We have all these extraneous descriptions, but the meaning is right there in the joy of your heart. We can look for explanations and validations—all those levels exist—but when you're sharing the joy, that's it.

Nitya talks about what it is that impels our search for meaning:

We have in our system past conditionings along with conscious expectations for the recurrence of situations which were favorable in the past. In the same manner, we have dreams of the future and legitimate expectations based on inferences or statistically plausible imaginings. Occasionally there arise, in some of us, irrational hopes or threats based on wild speculations born of paranoiac fear or wishful thinking.

With all these, our immediate present alternates between being light and heavy, bright and dark, and from being hopeful

to feeling frustrated. It is in this context that we seek the meaning of life.

Jan liked how Nitya acknowledges the alternating way we experience all these factors, light and heavy, bright and dark, and so on. How wonderful it is to be in a place where you feel deep connection and integration, but we don't always feel that way and it's okay. Her world alternates between those polarities, and it's reassuring that the meaning persists even when we're not aware of it.

That's exactly Nitya's point: life includes all sorts of ups and downs, and all are aspects of the meaning of life. The meaning is the steadiness that runs through all the vagaries, the ever-breaking waves on the ocean of life, allowing us to accept them rather than try to eradicate them.

Nitya mentions how "Awareness alternates from the center to the periphery and the periphery back to the center in rapid succession." Rapid is an understatement. It happens at such a speed that we are unaware of it, it's invisible, more like the 60 cycles per second of alternating electrical current. Narayana Guru likens it to the fluttering wings of bees, in the Bhana Darsana of Darsanamala. Knowing that this is what's happening helps you to not be glued on so firmly to what you perceive. Occasionally you can even cease the fluttering, as in Patanjali's opening premise, *chitta vritti nirodha*, the restraint of mental modifications.

Bill is deep into Patanjali right now, and felt it relates to one important aspect at the beginning: how you experience the I. For Patanjali, the conjunction of spirit and nature is the cause of everything, including the apprehension of our essential nature. He is describing how we experience an I-consciousness. When we interact with nature, with our experience, there is a core being that experiences nature, but it's done through the spirit. It's a subtle description, and it takes you back to pure consciousness, to the essential spirit that experiences the self before the layers that happen to an individual color things.

I reaffirmed that the meaning is in the neutrality, not just spirit or just nature, as partisans are wont to argue over. All that disagreement is just waves on the ocean's surface. We don't get true meaning from anything that comes and goes—the meaning is what contains all those changes and variations. Nitya's lovely conclusion puts it this way:

As a living being, man is part of the biological order, and his personality has a depth which cuts across the characteristics of life, ranging from vegetative wants to the sublime heights of poetic vision. The natural, social, psychological and aesthetic faculties—both innate and environmental—that are available to a person, extend throughout the entire depth and dimension of his personality.

When a person makes habitual choices among these faculties, and has a conscious appreciation of them in such a way as to make him glow with an inner sense of fulfillment and radiate his joy in sharing his fulfillment with beings of like nature, we can say he has discovered the meaning of his life.

All this ocean talk reminded Andy of verse 57 in *Atmopadesa Satakam*:

In the waveless ocean, endless traits of *maya* remain
as potent and beginningless effects;
water's taste and so on make a configuration,
and with such embodied forms world upon world comes to be.

We all paused for a moment of reflection on this cosmic poem, then Deb sighed about how we give all those worlds names and histories and stories and we forget about that nameless, formless ocean. Andy told us he thinks of the ocean as a dimensionless point, and it stimulates his visual memory. I agreed that Narayana Guru's verse evokes vivid imagery, like how the astral part of the new movie *Soul* (which you all would love) was reminiscent of the

kinds of psychedelic pictures verse 57 stimulates in me. I visualize a black ocean of infinite space highlighted with white lines of mathematical patterns, the “endless traits of maya” wriggling through it. I[‘m not normally very visual, but this mantra lights me up.

Deb wondered if we realized that here is all this nameless faceless neutrality: we come out of it for a moment and then disappear back into it. It means we must love the moment for everything it’s worth. There’s such great beauty awaiting us in every moment.

We posed a few popular perspectives on ‘purpose’, yet Nitya never proclaimed it, he just lived it. Purpose and meaning are similar, but different. It got Karen wondering how that relates to a newborn baby—do we consider an infant a person if it doesn’t have all those identities attached to it? We all agreed it has sensation and awareness, but it isn’t turning it into “me” yet. The “person” starts coming when it begins watching all the things it can do, like say a name or move its arm. Likes and dislikes all coalesce to its definition as a person. The sense of self kicks in from the eighth to twelfth month of the second year, apparently. Before that is a vast neutrality not unlike the meditative state all the sages wax rhapsodic over.

Andy was wondering if there is a point where consciousness is not localized, if the categories or descriptions of consciousness fall away and get weak. People who’ve been revived from death report seeing stuff that isn’t there with their bodies. He read about a woman who came back to life and told the doctor that there is a tennis shoe on a ledge outside the building, and when they checked, there it was. He wondered if in the prenatal state maybe there is a time when consciousness is no longer identified in a location.

Nancy is utterly convinced there’s consciousness way beyond her body. It’s quite clear to her admirers, too, that she’s often not inhabiting her physical form, and no one can say where she might be. Consciousness is unlimited if we allow it to be. She related

how when a baby starts from the first two cells, that organism is soon able to experience *something*, and it grows in its ability of conscious registration. It keeps unfolding, but it's way beyond what our physical beings are. We just don't have the capacity yet to comprehend it, much less express it. For that matter, it's incredible that we are able to experience all that we do, the sounds, smells, and everything.

Anita brought in other forms of consciousness, like trees, and Bill spoke of David Bohm, the physicist who was captivated by the infinite potential of consciousness. I reprised the theory that the earth itself is one total consciousness, in which beings are constantly being born and dying, coming into manifestation and dropping out again. The more we learn about consciousness the more plausible the idea becomes.

Deb brought us back to babies, with their genius abilities, claiming the limitations of their consciousness are more flexible and wider than we normally think of. They're not as screwed down. (Andy commented that anything screwed down was screwed up.) That's why people are so attracted to babies—they're not yet defined. Of course, I've observed how most concerned caregivers work very hard to force them to become defined in just the way they themselves are, but it's too bad they aren't permitted more freedom to grow into their true dharma, which would happen naturally, without any prodding.

Bill exulted how infants have so much to learn, and so many memories to create. They are aware but they don't have all the features that Nitya lists (pride, elation, depression, etc). Nancy sighed that you can stare at them forever, like waves on the ocean. You can almost sense that Bill and Nancy must be grandparents of young children, and they are, they are.

We wound up on a topic Anita introduced that touches on left and right brain definitions. She's been playing a pattern-recognition game with her grandson, and he's so much better than she is. He can instantly spot the patterns, almost before she gets started.

Young children are more tuned in to their right hemisphere dominance, where the whole context is apprehended, and only develop left brain strengths later. Adults rely on the left hemisphere more, putting things together bit by bit. We see the parts and work to assemble them into the “answer,” while a right hemisphere person is already residing at the end of the process. “Learning” means to disassemble and reassemble the whole as parts, which brings about the self-awareness we began the class with.

When Nitya uses the terms wholesale and piecemeal, he’s referring to these two approaches. And per Bergson, no pile of pieces will ever quite equal the whole entity.

Anita recognized this immediately, because we all are capable of holistic awareness. She saw it even in her own puzzle solving. She does word puzzles in the newspaper, and really struggles to work them out most days, but then there are other days when she immediately sees the solution. Those are the times when the right brain deigns to participate, or more likely when we allow it to. It made Anita think of the stream of consciousness, how some people jump in here and some there. We get in and out of this stream and we have different experiences based on how we’re relating to them.

I generalized the spiritual search as getting back to the holistic grasp of life as a magnificent ocean of bliss instead of something tediously built up from scratch. Both have their role, but what most of us are most missing is the holistic embrace.

We bathed silently in the ocean of bliss for a few minutes, before bidding each other adieu in the joy of knowing tomorrow will truly be a new day.

Part II

From Dipika, two poems, a tacit invitation to everyone to contribute such things:

My attempts at understanding through verse...

A little fruit A little grain
Love with less pain
Poetry Song Strife
Are the meaning of Life.

and a small haiku...

Myriad emotions
Countless memories tame
To keep a balanced frame

* * *

Beverley Beyond Words

Introduction.

I am enjoying Guru's Stream of Consciousness very much and it has stimulated my intuition and imagination a lot. My inner responses are now coming in the form of images - pictures and photos, and graphics I have created. Over the last few years I notice that I have been moving away from words as the main form of communication with my inner life. First there were the short Haikus with very few words and now I seem to be going beyond words.

I have been missing the feeling of being part of the Class Notes activity, so I will try offering an image each week which feels – for me – like the essence of the selected text, and see how that goes.

Thinking about The Meaning of Life (my life).



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From the Preface, how the book is structured, now that we're getting to the meat of it:

Nitya's style is often to give a talk to a class that is simultaneously transcribed by one or more students. Later he goes over it to correct errors and make further comments. In addition, during the period that this book was being written, he would hold a session for the students to ask questions about the

material. In the classic format of a guru/disciple dialogue, he would answer the questions extemporaneously. The incisive querying of disciples is the time-honored method of eliciting wisdom from a guru, in whom insights tend to be retained unless they are called upon to be brought forth. The four Reaction and Review sections of the book are the record of these encounters.

As is often the case in such situations, the answers the guru presents bear on the spiritual problems of the questioner that may or may not have been directly implied by the actual question. It is a real mystery that the couple dozen of us who had the good fortune to sit in on the dictations and question and answer sessions each felt that the message contained was speaking directly and personally to us.

The talks and interchanges contained herein took place in 1975, in and around Portland State University in Oregon, United States.