

3/9/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 5 – Reaction and Review - #1

We welcomed Steven Stoltenberg, a fellow inmate of the first Portland Gurukula in 1971, who just recently got back in touch, after a lacuna of nearly 50 years. His enthusiasm for Nitya's brilliance animated the evening, giving new impetus to Nataraja Guru's classic line, "The breeze of a fresh life enlivens the ways of a yogi." (I'll add the longer, spectacular quote to Part II.)

This is the first of four review chapters spaced throughout the book, this one consisting of five terse questions with Nitya's response to each. As I recall, at least some of the questions came from the attendees of the classes we were having. If you think it's tough to grasp the meaning of some of this, imagine hearing it only once, in a thick Indian accent—you had to be listening *really hard*.

I'm pretty sure I forgot to send the chapter last week, so I'll include it today. You need to read it side by side with these notes, I imagine. We did send it to Steven, who told us that he noticed it was only two pages, so dedicated a future 15 minutes to looking it over. Later, as he read the text, every single sentence opened up vast horizons for him. He felt like he was stepping into a conversation of philosophy that includes east and west, Bergson, many schools of philosophical thought. It was like bouncing back and forth between something that sounds like Vedanta and from there to Western metaphysics. He worried that this was going to be an academic approach, and that he might not be up to the task. He *knew* 15 minutes wasn't going to do it. He said he was trying to attune himself to all the philosophical voices that flow together in Nitya's power-packed discourse, but....

I assured him, to his relief, that all of us felt that way, and while there is a background of philosophical knowledge that's very helpful, our thrust in the Gurukula is to figure out how it pertains to *us*, what it means in terms of how we live our lives. As with all philosophy, we're trying to find out who we are, and ours is a very

non-academic tack. Be sure to read the Natarajan quote at the bottom.

After chanting, and meditating on the first question, Deb mused that because we have a body, we're sitting here, and because we have a mind, we can be aware of sitting here. If it was empty space with no one that would be nothing. We're in the yoga asana posture of sitting and being aware. We're creating existence, busy being existent. Everything moves through us to become a spent form, while we are moving in a different direction as aware and existent selves.

It seemed to me that Nitya is first setting the absolute ground, and then introducing *movement*. The book is the *stream* of consciousness; it's not the ocean or pool of consciousness, which are more sedentary images. Everything is in motion, while we're sitting somewhat still in the midst of it. We begin to see how both unmovings and motion are mental constructs. The question that struck me in this first section is: are we sitting still through the whole thing or does the motion have a meaning? Is *that* what we are? What role does it play in our lives? More, are we on a "conveyor belt," or do we have a role to play in our own evolution?

Steven adroitly spotted the background of the gunas in Nitya's sentence implying *tamas*, and was surprised by it:

Paradoxically, what is accomplished is the morbidity and death of existence, because what is accomplished becomes worn out and exhausted and so is to be discarded.

I reviewed the horizontal cycle of the gunas: the fresh inspiration of *sattva*, the energy of *rajas* that goes to actualize the vision, and the static, *tamasic* form that it eventually takes, which eventually goes out of date and has to be revitalized with a fresh dose of *sattva*, initiating a new cycle.

Andy wanted us to know that in a sense, morbidity is a part of our normal psychological function. We have an experience and

then process it in terms of our likes or dislikes. Most of what we have experienced is currently invisible—where did it go? The tamasic thing about memory is that it is a conditioning, it conditions your awareness. If you have a new experience, it's drafted into helping you interpret that experience, and so there's some element of memory in every new moment.

Steven brought this right to the present, sharing that his experience this evening was coming full circle to something he was doing 50 years ago: living in the Gurukula, engaging in philosophical reflection. Fifty years later, here he is again. What is that cyclical experience, the coming back, reworking, reintegrating? he wondered. What have I done to make it happen? He was pondering how to bring different strings of his life together in a whole, how not to be morbid, but co-creative? He asked, "What can I can draw upon as a resource as I continue to create myself and my future? That what I was must be discarded seems morbid and one-sided. Could both perspectives be valid?"

I was struck by Steven's use of a very Nitya term, co-creative. He always taught us we were co-creators with God—could Steven still have that term lurking in his memory? He might. I spoke about the two directions of time Nitya was presenting us with. There is the future to the past direction, where what is done dies and disappears behind us, but he also always said he was planting seeds in us with his ideas. Over time, seeds sprout and develop and turn into some expression in the future, so there are two directions of time he is playing with—one grows up into a beautiful bush, one passes out of existence, yet both are present.

Nitya was intentionally and unintentionally planting seeds in us 50 years ago. After he returned to India for a period and the Gurukula was on pause, Steven got into other spiritual movements, then got a university education followed by an absorbing job in diplomacy, so he wasn't consciously tending the seeds he had picked up, but his subconscious did. It works with them and develops them, out of sight and out of mind. It seems clear that Steven was very ready for them to reappear in his conscious mind,

which accounts for his aha! feelings. He was recognizing it as a reconnection with his dharma, which is a great feeling.

Nitya felt that our inner guide was continuously arranging our world to foster our development, so we should be alert for the opportunities it provided. We might call it luck or chance, but that's okay, as the impetus is shy of being handled in public. Nitya concludes his second Response with a unique way of putting it:

Anything once formulated can subsequently be a model to be varied or improved upon. In that sense the past is the eternal substance that is endlessly being refashioned by the future to give an ever-new look to the present.

Steven was awestruck about the mystery and wonder of how this ideology works. He feels emergent, intuitive connections welling up from within, reminding him how important it is to listen to that aspect of himself. How you need to let it carry you without over-analyzing and blocking it. That intuitive flow seems to come out of nowhere.

I added that there is a dialectic between intelligent analysis and artistic coolness, and they both are important. They can work together.

Steven continued, earnestly, how 50 years is a long time to wait for this conversation (true). Speaking of intuitive promptings, he had a dream five years ago that he was painting a large abstract painting on a wall. Though he had never painted before, he listened to the dream and started doing it, and it has put him in touch with a creative side of himself. He now feels an artistic process is so essential in terms of exploring one's being.

Deb read out the third section of the Review, which includes this fantastic summation, immediately moved into Nitya's selected quotes doc:

Yoga is not just sitting cross-legged and freezing into a static corpse of the past, it is a conscious participation in the scheme

of life. By constantly pulling ourselves out of the tendency to freeze, to become morbid, numb or inertial, and lose awareness, we make ourselves available to the meaningful vitality of the moment.

Nitya compares true yoga with several creative endeavors, starting with sculpting, so Deb invited Nancy to tell us about her work in the medium.

Nancy recalled how years ago she translated her brief experience with clay and sculpture into her interior design career, which for her was a three-dimensional version of sculpting, where you can physically be inside of your creation. That process is such an ongoing experience of pleasure for her to watch each project evolve and become something real. In keeping with the class topic, she said it's very much a process of taking something from past, something existing, and moving through a reconfiguring process into the future. She hopes to bring it back to a reasonable scale in her late life, where only *she* has to be happy with it. That's another aspect: having to relate to someone outside of yourself as far as the process goes, you have to be involved with other people's minds and feelings when you're doing a job for them. Battling with clients is hard work!

Steven was struck in this section how Nitya is describing the meditation of the yogi and the creative process of sculpting and writing as if they were all similar or the same. To him, it's such a bracing and refreshing way of thinking about spiritual practice, instead of thinking about how to cram yourselves into a rigid routine of orthodoxy. (Music to all ears.)

I affirmed, *that's* your "practice." There's no commercial hook here, the impetus is simply to help set people free to discover the best level they can attain, doing what they love. We need to learn how to listen to our dreams, as it's put, because something in us is trying to talk to us, often in a nonverbal language, so we should remain always open to non-doctrinal interpretations. The feeling of a good fit, the thrill of being at home with what you're

doing, is the indicator of being on the right path, of being in tune with your *svadharma*, your personal dharma.

It brings to mind the well-known verse from the Gita, chapter III, referring to *svadharma*:

35) Better is activity rightly conforming to one's own nature, though lacking in superior quality, than activity foreign to one's own nature, although it may be well done (otherwise). (Even) death by the performance of what fits one properly has merit. Activity foreign to oneself is fraught with danger.

Deb exalted how this state is the offspring of wonder and awareness: wonder, beauty, and the joys of sharing. Steven reiterated his awe that in these key questions, Nitya compressed a lucid explanation into only a few pages, with poetry thrown in. He couldn't think of any other wisdom lineage in India that has engaged the Western philosophical tradition so robustly. I agreed: it's usually one or the other, and never the twain shall meet.

In response to the next question: "Are disciplines like Hatha Yoga and Pranayama then only morbid corpses of the dead past?" Nitya gets another entry in his highlights reel:

Our reference to death is mainly aimed at a state of mind that refuses to grow, refuses to change, and refuses to flow. Such a misfortune can happen to anyone if they bottle themselves up, even though it might be through a legitimate discipline or technique.

Andy led us into a discussion of time as we experience it by wondering if science has nailed it down yet. The answer is no, beyond the general agreement that it's utterly inexplicable. There's no "substance" there. Like Bergson, physics perceives a clear distinction between mechanical time and pure duration, the former being clearly a construct of our mentality. The subjectivity of our experience of time covers the terrain we discussed, from Bill's

complete unawareness of it during meditation to my hyperawareness in meditations during Malayalam-language lectures by Nitya in South India, beset by heat, humidity and mosquitoes. Andy noted our different feelings were epitomized in Narayana Guru's verse 15 of Atmo:

To the blessed ones who have sucked the milk of *para*  
ten thousand years is but a moment;  
but if knowledge succumbs to *apara prakriti*  
half a second seems like a thousand years.

Those mosquitoes are the true spirit of *apara prakriti* all right!  
Immanence.

The subjectivity of time, space and self are delightfully portrayed in Guy Murchie's *The Seven Mysteries of Life*, not included here due to length. I'll send a copy to those who ask for it. The pandemic has had an interesting role in time-experience, with many reporting simultaneous fleeting and dragging time. Andy compared his infinitely-long days of childhood with a near-fatal road accident, where time was compressed to super slow-motion. Jan remembered giving birth as being like that, a never-ending endurance contest.

It is well-established scientifically that the mind bends time to its needs. The best, of course, is what Steven described: being so wrapped up in a creative process that you lose track of time in your euphoria. Bill does that easily in his meditations.

I'd say a main direction of our study is to learn to have that kind of engagement with anything, so whatever you're doing becomes a heightened experience. As Nitya puts it in his Gita exegesis:

Every possible value in the contemplative context is so rich with the presence of the Absolute that it is not necessary to idealize or idolize any one of them particularly. (Gita, 220)

Steven enthused about the way Nitya talks about dharma and the joy of exploring those unique qualities that make you who you are. When dharmic powers come from within, it's an entirely different experience than when you fight them off to obtain some specified goal, no matter how spiritual, where you have to suppress your creative desires, even bringing about the cessation of the mind, per Patanjali. He has found almost a totalitarian aspect sometimes of quashing yourself. How much more wholesome to allow those dharmic properties to manifest themselves through natural activity.

Bill agreed in the importance of not freezing yourself, of keeping up a constant participation in the scheme of life. He defended Patanjali's cessation of mental modifications (there's never a complete cessation of the mind, that we know of), saying that his techniques allow him, Bill, to be more aware of the impediments—how we encounter the world, our memories, social considerations like thinking about making someone more comfortable with our words—if he's embracing the moment and being aware of all the influences as to how you react, it helps him to be more clear, open and mindful of the present.

The central fact that's always seemed so miraculous to Andy is that we are aware at all, that standing behind all our mental states is a deeper awareness, no matter the discipline and how awful or strenuous it can be. The miracle that all of this is being created out of this little light that we seem to have, like Bergson's narrow torch beam in a dark tunnel. You couldn't have a thought without that brilliance shining behind it.

And you can recognize it in other beings and you can share it, Deb added.

As we wound down, Steven again spoke appreciatively of the sense of wonder and awe in everything Nitya writes: it never wears out. Little does he know! He has a stack of fresh books to dig into, and it really does not wear out. From the other end of that continuum, I envy the delight of discovery awaiting him.

Andy spoke for us all, at the end: Our nature—it's something



you could spend a lifetime overlooking. And that's what we're doing most of the time.

In honor of this sad fact, I invoked a departed Portland god, crewcut Tom Peterson, who would open his midnight appliance ads on TV shaking his fist and shouting Wake up! Wake up!

## Part II

Beverley has done a fantastic graphic for the next actual chapter—an illustrated “Reaction and Review” would be puzzling to imagine. Check in next week.

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Deb sent a related poem:

### I Hear You Breathing

Tick of the clock  
in my ears,  
the door's finality  
as it shuts,  
life compresses  
at each movement  
saying too small, too short.

In each turn of time  
the long road rushes ahead  
and wind rains down  
whitened blossoms,  
scattered clouds.

Sitting underneath  
weaving stories

a world of unending length  
in your breath.  
Inhale:  
it expands forever.

\* \* \*

BHAGAVAD GITA, CHAPTER VI, VERSE 46  
--commentary by Nataraja Guru

The yogi is greater than men of austerity, and he is thought to be greater than men of wisdom, and greater than men of works; therefore become a yogi, O Arjuna.

Mere *tapas* (austerity) as it is known in the field of Indian spirituality, is a severe form of joyless self-discipline. The jnani is a wise man who might at best belong to the Samkhya (rationalist) or Nyaya (logical) philosophical schools, whose life is based on reasoning which generally ends up with sophistications and academic discussions, by themselves dry as dust. Likewise the ritualist tends to become ego-centered and harshly exclusive. Yoga generally understood is both a way of thinking and a way of life. The yogi is a dialectician who harmonizes old in terms of new and *vice-versa*, and is capable of giving fresh life to arguments which otherwise would be dead or stale. The breeze of a fresh life enlivens the ways of a yogi.

Each of the types of spirituality referred to here, when they are taken according to a yogic method or theory of knowledge, become, as it were, transmuted. This verse states the superiority of such a yogic way in both practical and theoretical matters.

Part III

Dipika sent us a note—

Great dialectics...

Lovely poem on Time by Deb

and a nice explanation of the Gita verse by Nataraja Guru

I have worked on my own understanding of Time....

I have put them down as 2 kinds

**Man made**

duration...mins/hrs/ weeks/ months/years.. required to calculate the boiling of an Egg - to the interest calculated on your money lying in the Bank and such like

**Now**

always....we never experience anything except in the Now  
you contemplate the Past...now...or dream the Future...now (it's only memories/fantasies that take you away from the Present but that too always NOW)

so this moment is always with you....if one can be Aware we can understand as Ram Dass said - BeHereNow

Aum