

3/23/21

In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 7 – A Knock on the Door

We have another heavyweight chapter, dense enough to divide into two sessions. I don't know of another place where Nitya reveals such intimate details of his teaching style. He had been in Portland long enough—six or seven years—to have brought together a dedicated group that had both begun to understand the new philosophy he lived and breathed, and experienced its effect in our lives. Perhaps he hoped a few of us might even become teachers ourselves, and would need to be addressed as possible realizers of that potential.

As a charismatic Indian Guru, people brought their problems to him by the armload, expecting him to magically fix them, making the kinds of disasters he writes about an everyday challenge for him. He was under no illusions about his magical powers to intervene in Fate, and refused to promote himself by professing any. Undoubtedly this was a factor in his remaining relatively obscure (and available!), while those who claimed divine powers amassed empires, most of which evanesced quickly, like the mirages they were.

I read out the first two-thirds of the chapter, as subsequent exposures allow for a better grasp of the intent. I must have read it at least a couple of dozen times over the years, plus editing it for the second edition, and it still has more to teach me. It has grown more exciting, not less, with the added familiarity.

Nitya recounts three tragic yet typical life-episodes as a basis for enunciating his methods of dealing with them. Deb opened our discussion noting that in each of these situations there are two levels: the fateful situation and how he responds to it, and addressing the reader about how we understand ourselves and our tragedies. How do we realize we are hiding something from ourselves? Nitya asks a crucial question: How is it that we come to

live a life in which the part we have a measure of control over seems to be so trifling?

Steven brought up a corollary he bumps into whenever he reads Nitya's works or other Vedanta theory: is there any way to bridge the perspective that we create our own karma through our own individual actions and sociological perspective? How inextricably are we enmeshed in world not of our own making? It isn't as if Nitya ignores that perspective, but it remains a philosophical dilemma for him. We all face tragedy at times, and we all wonder how we might have brought it upon ourselves. Is there any way to avoid this karmically?

Nitya deals with this more in the part we left for next week, but as there are several popular misapprehensions about karma, we took it on. Deb said how often, when people talk about karma, it is a truncated, simplified idea. The whole world has its own karma that includes all interrelated actions. As there are millions of threads in every action, Nitya's not just talking about the individual's karma but also their placement within a social and spiritual context. The reason we have so little control is we are focused on our small ego. To really understand the situation demands a larger scope.

I added that Nitya mentions absolutism and social conventionalism because they are the two poles of the continuum of how we deal with our bondage, telling us: "The volitional pattern of emphasizing values as a romanticized ideal may well look alike in different people, but there is a marked difference between the will of an individual who is deeply loyal to a society and the will of an absolutist." The absolutist stands for maximized freedom, the socially-constrained one hopes to have the options laid out for them, so they don't have to choose. The socially conventional person's actions are predetermined by their obligations to peers and society. They might cherish the pretense that they are wholly free, but it's simply the freedom to not think—a sordid boon, per Wordsworth, since it means we have given our hearts away. Nitya epitomizes socially-constrained types neatly:

Those who are minding their own business and who don't come for any counseling and sharing are mostly of conforming types who take the path of least resistance and simply adjust to the demands of utility or pragmatic requirements as they arise.

It does make life simple, if it suits you.

Bill brought us back to the role of the teacher in these problem situations, reading again about Visanti:

I can also venture to introduce more and more freedom from social obligations into her psyche so that she can retreat with dignity from her self-awarded destruction. If chance favors, I can then open up a side window to show her some avenues of interest through which she can enter into hitherto unknown facets of life's never-ceasing wonder.

Bill noted how he can at least offer some light: perspective, joy, a positive outlook that can ease suffering, and as friends we can offer that kind of insight too.

I insisted that in a real tragedy, friends speaking about the wonders of life is beside the point, if not insulting. You have to face the music, and you don't want to be distracted while the disaster is unfolding—at first, anyway. To get across what Nitya means, without offense, is not easy. The more important thing he wants to do is “introduce more freedom from social obligations” in her mind, so she can face things more honestly. I recalled the great tragedy of my life, how it was like facing a God of Tragedy, who was totally invincible, towering over me. Even though we were trying every possible option, ultimately there was nothing that could be done. I wanted to focus 100% on the situation, not see the bright side of life. All that was valid was the suffering. People asked what they could do, but I knew there was nothing. I realized most people are uncomfortable if you are upset, and they want to feel better, in a way, to defend their own weaknesses. They're

helpless, and the ego doesn't want to ever be helpless.

A Jewish friend of Deb's told her about their tradition that when someone dies, you pin a piece of ripped cloth to your shirt, to show people you are suffering, so they let you be. They know you are focuses on your vanished loved one. It's not an invitation to intervene. Quite the reverse. For Deb, there always comes a point in your suffering, if you remain open, when something else appears and rises up and allows you to move forward. We can sometimes do that for others, out of friendship, naturally, not trying to give a lesson.

Jan thought about that sort of neutrality when Nitya wrote about projected indifference, and of being either a teacher or a friend, depending on what the person needed. Thanks to the second reading she noticed how he more actively helped the first woman, whereas with the second, he was just trying to hold a steady place for her because she was surrounded by panic. He wasn't talking about opening windows to a spiritual way of thinking, as he did with the other.

While the class didn't go too far into Nitya's teaching secrets, I agreed that his mention of indifference was a fascinating topic for discussion, and invited us to look into it. Here's what he says about people who come to him for counseling:

Those who are troubled and sit withdrawn or want to be counseled are not to be taken as just plain simple folks. Their outwardly calm or withdrawn look is not to be trusted. They have in their minds their own yardstick or normative notion of values. They carefully sort out all the data available to them and structure the presentable facts with all the cunning of a salesman, while throwing a big carpet of seeming indifference over all subjects related to their sore spots.

I'm in no hurry to sneak in through the back door or peep through the keyhole. More and more I create a counter-indifference to their projected indifference, until there arises an automatic polarization created by our unconscious trust. This

causes a critical situation in which you can miss the whole game by generating such a cold and bizarre attitude of negativity on the part of your friend that you turn out to be unfit to be admitted into their inner circle. The strategy I use is “causing a minor offense,” which can create panic and confusion in the mind of my associate. Before I do that I make sure that we can both run into another avenue of deeper sharing. Mostly it works. I know of a couple of occasions when it misfired.

Jan has had several therapists during her life, and felt if a person was talking to a teacher or a friend about their life and they had areas that they were indifferent about, if the teacher puts too much energy into it, that means they are projecting their own stuff. Indifference is therefore the proper attitude. If you let the other person’s indifference set the stage, in the larger context of being deeply caring they will find a way to break through.

Steven was curious if in certain forms of mainstream therapy there are techniques where you try to generate a relationship with the patient that involves moving from indifference to trust. The sense that he had with Nitya when he was in his presence was that for a man of his level of detachment there wasn’t the kind of engagement with the constantly changing emotional qualities of a person’s personality. There was always some distance. Usually we get entrapped in a dialectic, where our ego and their ego are dancing with one another. The distance that he mentions gave him a different approach that was perhaps more effective.

I characterized Nitya’s detachment in his early days in America as rampant. He was facing a super-intense reception everywhere, and it was never in his wheelhouse to act excited. He had a very peaceful, restrained mien. For myself, I was so eager to be “merged” with him it must have been very disconcerting for him. Okay, offensive. Many of us had read *The Autobiography of a Yogi*, with its assurances that once you found your Guru, you were all set for life. I soon found out my troubles were just

beginning! I mention it because the more eager I became, the more distant he would be. Of course he always had plenty of other people jostling to grab his attention, and at least I'm not a jostler, but his coolness even in our interchanges was somehow extra provoking to me. I kept trying to figure out what was going on (I still am, 50 years later, though I've filled in a few blanks in the interim). Anyway, as Steven said, we seekers worked from the model that you got high together, and just kept going up. Balance and middle ground were not in the culture, though the theories of them were beginning to trickle in.

Nitya mentions one of the factors he was well aware of, something we youngsters were not: "The treasured secrets of even the most trusted friend are so much guarded by fantasizing and imaginative myth-making that the story given to you is no more true than a suggestive or symbolic dream." We still thought the world was exactly as we perceived it. From Nitya's perspective, we were utterly deranged.

Here he talks about the pulsation of intense engagement and indifference, back and forth, which I found made you more alert and desirous of sustaining the relationship. It's actually a healthy way to maintain any friendship, keeping the fulcrum within reach at all times. My childhood was more a series of intense friendships that were overdone to satiation, when they exploded and collapsed.

I added a nuance to our discussion, that to a Vedantin, indifference has a secondary meaning that Americans, at least, would never think of. Maintaining indifference can mean maintaining a state of non-difference: you are not different from the other. Unenlightened pulsation can go from feeling united to feeling very separate, especially when there is a tragedy—I am not having that problem, *they* are. Nitya maintained a sense that everything happening was happening to him also. It was never separate. That was what he meant by admitting unlimited liability, and it amplified the compassion that radiated from him as his normal condition. Nitya truly practiced his pulsation model,

because he cared deeply, but knew that caring, like everything else, had a negative, shadow side. He writes:

We can make our interest pulsate by initially becoming wholeheartedly interested in the friend and then minimizing the interest to near zero. Those who know how to pulsate their interest can also begin to perceive a complementary rhythm arising in the responsive pulsation of their associate. The whole process can become a relationship of infinite value in both rendering and receiving help if the person handling the situation has no ulterior motive other than altruistically assisting their friend or associate.

Altruism was central to the success of Nitya's interventions, and the ugly tales from other spiritual scenes testify to why. Later he reiterates an ideal that is rarely achieved in therapeutic situations: "This necessitates that the teacher who is probing and helping the mind of the pupil remains one hundred percent genuine, sincere and honest."

Original thinker Anita had a somewhat different reading of the patient or the friend feigning indifference, as in not wanting to look too closely at their issues. In support of that person's need to project indifference, perhaps Nitya then projected indifference himself in *support* of that person's handling at the moment. (Yes, definitely it's supportive.) Not being an indifferent sort, Anita has found biting her tongue when talking to her adult children works well, in place of struggling to find the right, polite words. Before that, she tried all the things Nitya was not doing, because she wanted then to feel good so she could feel good.

Anita has learned the intrusiveness of asking them "What can I do for you?" or "Can I help?" when her family might not want her help, so she now affirms her support for them, so they know when they are ready they can call on her. They're relieved she's not going to be telling them what to do or how to feel. That's just about right, a good balance.

Deb echoed that if you step backward you allow the other person to move forward, and Bill agreed that the reason for Nitya's indifference was creating trust with person who was trying not to acknowledge their pain. Karen sympathized that no matter what, we feel empathy for each other, even though the other person might not want it.

For me, Nitya's indifference could really push my buttons—it actually made me more aggressive in trying to contact him. I felt I needed to overcome his reluctance.... I had (have) a lot to learn.

Bill made the point that once he's established that trust, then he can push that button and hope it doesn't backfire. True, but due to the chaos of the time, Nitya and I hadn't gotten far with trust yet. I brought a tin-plated version learned from books, but I hardly knew Nitya at all. Plus, I was afraid of him, which is tough on trust. His mystery was central to the intrigue, yet even a mystery takes shape if played with long enough. Anita kindly mentioned that if a *patient* was showing indifference, it was because of their sore spot. For me, being indifferent would have been an impossible achievement. My youthful excess could only be counterbalanced with painful withdrawal, which was my takeaway for years after the initial encounters. I can't help but wonder if I wasn't one of the misfires he mentions.

After almost seven years of coping with Americans, Nitya had mellowed considerably by the time of composing this book, writing here:

Sharing is very valuable both for therapy and for teaching. Since my role is of a teacher and not of a therapist, I don't make any fuss about the defensive attitudes or the unconscious precautions taken by my associate.

Actually, he made some major fusses over some of us in the early going, possibly because a gentle approach would have gone right over our heads. And he was fresh from Nataraja Guru's ego batterings, which he had been the main recipient of. They are

hinted at in the sentence: “In the Yoga Vasishtha there is mention of a method which is similar to the proverbial idiom ‘hit and run.’ While this may have success in certain rare occasions, I prefer a gentler approach.” He did try it out for a while, though, but it wasn’t really his style. Nitya’s letter to Debbie in L&B, September 24, 1971, gets closer to how he was at first. It ends:

You should not be saddened about anyone unless your sadness has a positive or negative impact on him to jolt him out of the impasse and set him right. I may observe a fast, or cry, scream, slap myself and roll on the floor like a mad dog if only I see the ghost of a chance to pull the other to the right track. If that is not possible, I prefer to walk away with a prayer in my heart.

Jan brought us full circle, back to the original question: How is it that we come to live a life in which the part we have a measure of control over seems to be so trifling? We are always trying to achieve certain things by controlling them, and tragedies remind us we don’t have that control. When you look back on your life and see the surprising turns it has taken, it emphasizes we can’t be so attached to our ego and its plans for the way things should go. It’s a constant struggle to know how much we can contribute. Jan harked back fondly to last year’s Taoism studies, which gave her a new way to look at her life and allow herself to sink into a deeper place where she has found a more harmonious way forward.

To be honest, all of us resisted our natural development, preferring popular fantasies, yet luckily we kept shedding layers of ignorance all along. We couldn’t imagine what our life would be like, and thank heaven we didn’t stay constrained to what we imagined it was going to be. Who would want to get stuck in their socially-constrained ideas picked up in middle school? Life has a way of breaking through our tamasic barriers. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall, / that wants it down.” It “sends the frozen-ground-swell under it, / and spills the upper boulders in the sun.” (Frost’s Mending Wall, of course.) “It’s not elves, exactly.” ☺

Karen, feeling springy, exulted “when I get really stuck, I go big! You have to get yourself out of your own self.” She knows there are so many amazing ways to view the universe, to take your mind out of the littleness of what you are experiencing, take it out to where you progressively see all your family, your city, your state, your planet, your galaxy.... She concluded, “We are all working at trying to be better people, no matter who you are, even if you are a Republican.” Hard to believe, but she may have a point....

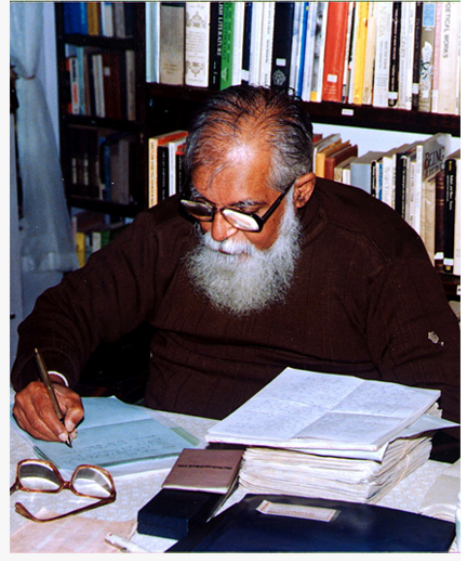
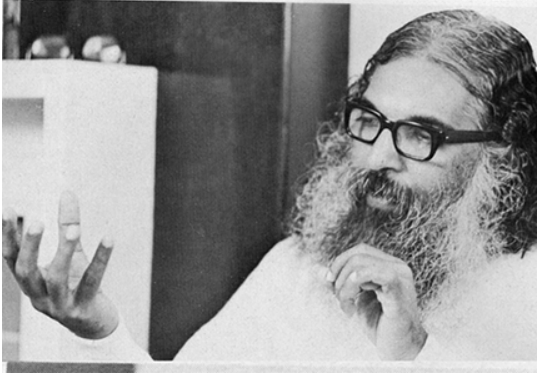
Deb added how important it is to improvise. All these things happen to us, and we can't change them, but we can dance with them. She is so glad she was disabused of the ideas she had in high school. They once looked like “the way things are,” but they are long gone, thankfully.

Bill once asked Nitya: what is fate? He answered, your life is like a river or a stream and you are going along drifting with the current, but then you come to a rock and it is your personal decision which side of the rock you go around on. That's your personal responsibility. our participation with fate in a nutshell.

Part II

From Beverley:

As I read A Knock on the Door I kept seeing photos of Guru in my mind as I paused at the end of a paragraph to mull over what was written there. Scotts' anecdote about when Guru was in Australia, also added to this vivid feeling I had of connection with Guru as a person as well as a teacher and writer.



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An excerpt from Nitya's letter to John Goodman in *Love and Blessings*, July 1, 1977, from right around the time of this chapter, adds more light to the Knock on the Door:

I'm a star that guides some people's destiny. In the same breath I can also say that those very persons appear to me from time to time as my guardian angels and infallible lights to lead me from one meaning of

divine destiny to another. This is a secret which you must have learned from the Gita, that no one is wholly above-board in the realm of God's creation. Knowing this, if we live in patience and in humility, we will not lose anything. How rightly Jesus said that the grain that allows itself to perish comes back to life in tenfolds and hundredfolds.

During the past year you have given up many of your fixed notions and conditioned judgments. I know you do not regret it. The *I Ching* has an ideogram called "Biting Through." In some sense there is a region left before you which you will have to bite through. Enlightenment of a spirit cannot be measured or demonstrated. A man who walks in darkness does not know if he is walking in a circle or has already come to the last lap of his journey, until he is filled with the total assurance of the light of his release.