

4/2/13

Verse 15

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

To those fortunate ones who are enjoying the cream of absolute
wisdom, ten thousand years appears no more than a fleeting
instant. But to those who are caught in the snare of relativism, even
a split second can seem an eternity.

Nataraja Guru's:

Ten thousand years do a moment make for the favoured ones
Suckled in the milk of the Absolute beyond; but when knowledge
Is caught in the power of the nature that is relative here,
Half a second, ten thousand years long would seem.

As Deb said, it's hard to say anything about a masterpiece
like Nitya's Verse 15 commentary. We all sat breathlessly still for
some time simply soaking it up, taking it in. But lo and behold, we
rose to the occasion once again. It's something like going to a great
ballet or a stunning concert. Afterwards you walk out onto the
plaza filled to the brim with the experience, unable to speak.
Sitting by the fountain, you and your friends start to mention this
or that detail, first just a word or two, but pretty soon you are
caught up in an animated discussion fueled by the excitement the
performance generated. You head to a bar or a park bench where
you can plumb the depths together. Insight after insight arrives in a
gentle flood, and when you finally head home there is a lingering
sense of contentment that wraps you like a warm blanket.

Para and apara are the Absolute and the relative. From the
standpoint of the Self they are our true nature and our outward
attention, respectively. Bill reminded us that finding the tiny spark

of the absolute Self within is the key, rather than choosing to get caught up in the transactional world of necessity. Nitya details the way people are snared by what seems to be outside and lose their sanity. They exaggerate, adding all sorts of projections and fears onto the benign reality around them. His teaching—specifically directed at the people in the room, not toward any abstraction—is to take things as they are and not exaggerate them. Then we will remain sane. The Hundred Verses is a program to reestablish our sanity so we can reclaim our true nature as a spark of the Absolute.

Mick put it that the world is in the eye of the beholder, and it became the keynote phrase of the class. We are projecting our predetermined mentality onto events, and in the process missing just about everything. Narayana Guru is trying to give us a normative notion to rebalance our point of view. This is not some idle academic exercise. In Nitya’s words, “You can make your world a real heaven. This is the paradise; there is no other. This is a happy world, right in the palm of your hand, every day. But you throw it away.”

The context of the commentary is interesting, and may not be obvious. We had been having a “concentration camp” at the Hall Street house in Portland for quite some time, concentrating on personal spiritual development in the light of Narayana Guru’s wisdom and compassion. Many of us were young, in our twenties. In the midst of this ideal environment hosted by a superb guru, our egos were beginning to reveal their shadow side. It’s astonishing how a kind of hierarchy develops in social situations, and then people either push to the front and demand the teacher’s attention or pull to the back and feel excluded. Soon many were coming to Nitya’s room to complain about this person or that trivial matter as a way of getting attention. Here he was, sharing the finest cream of Indian wisdom, a shining vision of universal love and beneficence, and the result was conflict and petty irritations. Such moments call for a blast of absolutism, and he gave it to us here. Another famous one is in Verse 23.

Nitya's point was that we could look at what was going on either positively or negatively. It was our choice. For at least some of us, the message hit home. We had been imagining our lives were determined by what happened to us; he was teaching us the opposite: that we were what happened to our lives. His examples were taken from the real world turmoil that he was observing right in the room. He could have just continued teaching about uplifting beauty, and we would have continued to prattle and squeak. But he brought us up short, shocked us into temporary sanity. Our egos were temporarily humbled. Unfortunately it rarely lasts. Like a knockout blow in the boxing ring, the effect wears off, and the ego contestant gets back on their feet, ready for another round, in this case only eight verses later.

In those days we were doing a verse a day, so that means in a little over a week we needed another, stronger dose. I'm sure Nitya would have taught with sweetness and gentleness always, if we had been model students. Perhaps one or two were, but the rest of us needed an occasional kick in the pants to break through our habitual attitudes. We were carrying a lot of unnecessary baggage without even realizing it. That was definitely one of those instances where humiliation is a blessing in disguise. Many of us vowed to reform, and redoubled our efforts to take the teachings to heart.

Paul talked about how he sometimes felt victimized by the necessities of life, but that these teachings had shown him how to recover from victimhood and take charge of his state of mind. He recalled one of Nitya's lessons about two scraps of paper, one blank and one with a dollar sign on it. One we consider meaningless and the other is filled with meaning, but they are in essence the same, mere scraps of paper. It taught him where the value resided: not in the scraps themselves, but in what they meant to him. He learned from this that the scraps were not the cause of his mental state, he was imputing the value from his mentality onto the scraps.

Michael gave another excellent example. Last week he met an elderly relative, who went on and on about his many faults. That can often be very hurtful to endure, but Michael really saw how these were the other person's issues, not his. People go around laying heavy trips on each other all the time. We can either be brought low by them, or hold to our sparkling center and take them for only what they are worth—primarily an indicator of our friend's state of mind, not our own.

Deb added that it disarms the situation if you don't polarize with the other person. There is no one for them to fight against, and the negative energy drains away. Being a master dialectician she wanted to add that often the other person is an important indicator of our state as well as their own. We should use their advice to take a good look at ourselves, as see what is true and what isn't. But it is nevertheless extremely valuable to maintain the detached perspective that Michael was talking about.

Mick added that our own impurities are the very things that catch on to the projections laid on us. If we are pure, it's like we are transparent, and they pass right through us.

It recalled a story Nitya once told. Early in his guruhood, he was very compassionate and indulgent of everyone who came to him. Of course he had a long line of people bringing their problems to him in hopes that simply telling them to a guru would cure them. Over time Nitya became weak and sick. He developed a heart condition he almost died from. Then he realized he was unconsciously holding onto all the problems that people were bringing to him. He decided they were God's problems, not his. He adopted the attitude that whatever anyone brought to him, he would pass it on to God. People treated him like God, but he knew he wasn't what they imagined. Still, it was okay to be God's mailbox. Outwardly he was the same to people: a compassionate listener who made helpful suggestions. Inwardly he was passing the weight of their problems on to God, letting them go, essentially. Not holding on. And his health slowly and steadily improved.

If that isn't a premier role for God, I don't know what is. As Nitya has said, God is one of the best words around. If you throw it out, you have to bring in dozens of terms to substitute. So "God" is very valuable.

I summed up that the ego is the part of us that wants to defend itself. If we can get over the need to defend, we can keep our beholding eye in a neutral balance. Our defensiveness is what skews things, ostensibly to our advantage but actually to our ultimate disadvantage. Most of our defenses were put in place so early in life that we don't even notice them anymore. We have to infer them by observing the ways we distort our relationships. As Nitya points out, there are two main ways to do this, taking down the defenses intelligently, and also being coaxed out of them by the attraction of absolute beauty. He goes on:

We need to be doing two things simultaneously. One is going inward and befriending our own spirit, our dear friend that is the Divine. We are realizing the Self within; in other words, seeking the kingdom of God within ourselves. The other is in regard to the outer world, the world of necessity: we need to give up all exaggerations and become more matter-of-fact. We are still sympathetic, but we are changing the mode of our sympathy. Perhaps your most beloved friend is in a state of crisis. He or she is in great darkness. Instead of adding your own darkness to theirs, you should try to bring them to your joy. Share your joy with them and not your sadness.

This last bit sparked an animated discussion, because as several people noted, if someone is sad or miserable and you are simply cheerful, it puts them off and they'll pull away from you. We have to meet our friends where they are caught, if we want to offer them a hand. This could be anywhere, and it's a measure of our compassion how well we are able to intuit an appropriate meeting place.

Don gave a great example. Lately he's been up and down in his moods. He works with a close friend, and sometimes when he's

complaining his friend gives him a mental slap in the face: “I don't want to hear it. Just pick up your tools and let's get to work!” For Don that's just right, and it gets him going. For someone else it might be just wrong, but his friend knows him. I might add, having a constructive project to work on is undervalued as a curative medicine. Perhaps it has been devalued by all those romantic fantasies about saints meditating in caves for thirty years. Having something interesting to do, even simple exercise, has been shown to be one of the strongest antidepressants around.

What Nitya meant is that we have to be grounded in wisdom before we can offer real help. Mutually whining and complaining about stuff is a very popular activity of humans, and we love to do it, but it doesn't get us out of the morass. The pleasure it brings is temporary. If we really want to help we have to cure ourselves first, and then what we have to offer is substantial and long lasting. Nitya makes this explicit later in his comments:

If I want to make you happy, I myself should be a happy person. If I am sad, how can I make you happy? To make you smile, I should first of all know how to smile. I should know what peace is to bring peace to you. We have to discover the peace within ourselves, the joy within ourselves. This can be done only if the friendship that we cultivate with the spirit within becomes continuous, unbroken.

This is like magic: your world tomorrow won't be the same. You live in exaggeration. This world is not as bad as you paint it. What is madness? Madness is a positive or a negative exaggeration of the mind. If you see a thing in its natural value or worth, not more or less, it is a sane attitude. But we tend to exaggerate.

That's the understatement of the year: we tend to exaggerate. Fly off the handle is more like it. Freak out.

Nitya was a Scorpio. He didn't mollycoddle his disciples. I never saw him tearfully sympathizing with anyone—his tears were reserved for flights of aesthetic wonder. He brought the light of

reason and balance into the chaos, and his own joy was thoroughly infectious. He definitely crafted a fitting program for each of those he cared for. You could tell how deeply he cared—he often proclaimed his unlimited liability—but he wasn't about to join us in the mud. He would stand on the shore and throw us a rope. Or I often recall the story he ends *In the Stream of Consciousness* with:

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.

Because of the “back story” of correcting the disciples sitting at his feet, Nitya doesn't directly address the sense of time that is the central theme of the verse. It's fairly simple, so focusing on the “why” aspect proved much more interesting. But he would have said that our sense of time is a good indicator of how attuned we are to that inner spark of our absolute beingness. If we are bored, distracted, or lost, time drags; and if we are in tune with our interests time flies. We don't discover our true self by speeding up time—our time sense is merely the indicator. Sometimes it's nice to know. Actually, Nitya rectified the omission in the short version, NTNTBA, which is all about time.

Paul recalled an incident when he was the officer on a fire engine that got lost while it was en route to a remote location for coverage. He called in for directions, and the dispatcher radioed back “Where are you now?” That stopped him. If Paul had known where they were he wouldn’t have been lost. *Obviously*. He contemplated radioing back that the sun was directly overhead... now! but kept his cool. His point was that he couldn’t tell them where he was, because he didn’t know. By contrast, the philosophy we’re studying has demonstrated to him that he is not lost, and never was. He’s been thinking of himself as lost, but he isn’t. He is always exactly where he is, which is a wonderful place.

That’s the wholly radical basis of Vedanta: we are in essence the Absolute. We have been convinced that we are not the Absolute, that we are mere sinners in need of redemption. We are not important and don’t matter. Everyone else is equally convinced we’re lost, and reinforces the belief in us, so we really have become lost, in a sense. We have substituted a fake being for our authentic self, and we are lost to the exact degree that we identify with the persona and not the *karu*, our absolute core being. With That Alone we have embarked upon a process of correction, brilliantly designed to restore us to ourselves.

Part II

VERSE 15

From *Neither This Nor That... But Aum*:

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

The calendar and the clock play a vital role in the life of many people. Some people carry a diary or an engagement pad filled with their hour to hour and minute to minute programme

which runs into several months. It is as if there was a hard taskmaster, a programmer who sits in a corner of our minds dictating what we should do until our limbs are tired and our eyelids become heavy with sleep. For a busy man time passes quickly, but each moment comes to him with such heaviness that he groans under the weight of it. He does not have the problem of killing time, time kills him. There are others for whom time is always on the other side of the great waters. They sit and wait endlessly with nothing to engage their minds or to please their hearts; they are waiting for the realization of a future expectation. For them time drags and their clocks and calendars are slower than slugs.

Physical diseases, social pressures, maladjustments in interpersonal relationships, irrational depressions, unaccountable fears and a host of other troubles weigh on most people so much that only sleep can bring relief to their aching bodies and listless minds. When things are really bad sleep does not come easily, and when it comes it brings such horrid kinds of nightmares that one is afraid of going to sleep. This is what the Guru marks here as the lamentable fate of the one who succumbs to *apara prakriti*. *Apara* is that which is not of an absolute order. *Prakriti* is the fecund nature that goes on replicating and varying its modes endlessly. Even in a person who is always tormented by one disaster or another, sometimes the spark of a joyous moment flickers in his mind; it has no content other than its own brightness. It lingers only for a split second and will only reappear after a long while. Some other people, even when their surface mind attends to various routines and is exposed to the eventualities of day to day living, have within them a calm centre in which the unflickering flame of the consciousness of their beingness is always burning like a temple lamp in the serene atmosphere of its sanctum. Occasionally, in the course of centuries, there comes one among millions who experiences an all-filling glory of indescribable resplendence that shines both within and without and transforms everything he sees and hears into a hymn of praise for the one

Absolute, which for him is both the transcendent and the immanent reality of the Self. Guru refers to such a blessed person as one who sucks the milk of *para*. *Para* is that which goes beyond all states of duality. It is the indescribable one arrives at where the duality of the transcendent and the immanent are both cancelled out. It is the state which is no state, and in it the union of existence and knowledge is undifferentiated from ananda, which can never be adequately explained. For him who sucks the milk of *para* ten thousand years are as fleeting as a single moment. This is what Plato calls the eternal present. When we have no access to the true light of our own Self, life becomes a big drag.

Nataraja Guru's commentary:

Ten thousand years do a moment make for the favoured ones
Suckled in the milk of the Absolute beyond; but when knowledge
Is caught in the power of the nature that is relative here,
Half a second, ten thousand years long would seem.

A FUNDAMENTAL epistemological distinction is made here by way of comparing the two kinds of knowledge that the human mind is capable of having or of aspiring after. The knowledge of the Absolute which is beyond, unconditioned by the multiplicity of attractions here in relativistic nature with which we are related every day, refers to the supreme aspect of the Absolute. The ordinary everyday world of life here in the biological sense involves values that are multiple and relativistic. Vedantic literature makes use of two terms applied to Nature. One of these is called 'para' which has the quality of otherness. The second is called 'apara' which has the quality of non-otherness, or that which is familiar to us here. We have translated the two terms as 'the Absolute beyond' and 'the relative here' to indicate the reciprocity of the distinction implied.

Between these two aspects of Nature (one with a capital

letter and the other without the capital), much epistemological theorisation is implicit, which it is hardly possible to dispose of at one stroke. The Guru therefore refers to them here only in their broader aspects, contrasting them with reference to the factor of time and without referring to space for the present.

Time is related to eternity and reveals a dimension which is abstract and given to the philosophical insight with which human nature is endowed. More ordinarily, however, what man can appreciate refers to interests which have very little span of time involved in their attainment or enjoyment. In the domain of interests therefore, there are two broad divisions: some that lure us to eternal values and the other binding us to transient interests. The Guru suggests here that those who seek eternal values, which refer to the Absolute that is beyond, are more intelligent than those who are caught by the necessary and binding items of everyday interests belonging, as it were, to the opposite pole of reality. The Viveka-Chudamani of Sankara would refer to the same distinction as nitya-anitya (lasting and transient).

By his method of exposition here, the Guru goes beyond making the contrast merely academic. He relates it to the ambivalent or opposing states which each one of the attitudes involves for the subject. When the three worlds have been transcended and the aspirant has abolished the three prejudicial conditionings referred to in the previous verse, there is revealed, as it were, a world without time's limitations, in eternity or the eternal present, wherein he can feel a profound happiness. When subject to the opposing state of mind, the implied suffering tends to make the sense of duration of unendurable length.

‘SUCKLED IN THE MILK OF THE ABSOLUTE’: The pure Absolute is referred to here, though figuratively, in anthropomorphic terms. The image of a mother suckling her child is introduced. One has to remember here that the pure

Absolute should not even be named, as the Tao Teh Khing would put it. (In the same Tao Teh Khing the wise man is likened to the child sucking the Mother, to Nature or the Absolute - section 20). The supreme Absolute is that about which nothing can be predicated. The Mandukya Upanishad (verse 7) describes such an Absolute, and this is about as far as epithets can go to help in the matter of appraising the notion of the Absolute. The verse (Hume's translation) reads:

‘Not inwardly cognitive (antah-prajna), not outwardly cognitive (bahih-prajna), not both-wise cognitive (ubhayatah-prajna), not a cognition-mass (prajnana-ghana) not cognitive (prajna), not non-cognitive (a-prajna), unseen (a-drishta), with which there can be no dealing (a-vyavaharya), ungraspable (a-grahya), having no distinctive mark (a-lakshana), non-thinkable (a-chintya), that cannot be designated (a-vyapadesya), the essence of the assurance of which is the state of being one with the Self (ekatma-pratyaya-sara), the cessation of development (prapanchopasama), tranquil (santa), benign (shiva), without a second (advaita) - (such) they think is the fourth (state). He is the Self (atman). He should be discerned.’

The Absolute in its most ultimate aspect is indescribable but it is usual to try by words to help the seeker of wisdom to think of it as far as thoughts can take us. It is usual also in this linguistic or poetic context to describe the Absolute as a feminine principle. Sophia (or Wisdom) is represented in the West also as a feminine figure, as a foster-mother of wisdom whom Boethius saw consoling him in prison. The image of the consoling mother has persisted in many forms and the Guru here resorts to the same time-hallowed language. The highest notion of Maya identifies this principle of nescience with the Absolute in, as it were, a penultimate form, also as a feminine principle. When we remember that the Guru in these preliminary verses is still labouring to lay down norms of reference for the better

understanding of the Self in all its aspects, the imagery that he resorts to here can be easily understood.

‘NATURE THAT IS RELATIVE HERE, ETC.’: A perfectly symmetrical picture is built round the notion of Time, half a second in duration, which is the central and neutral reality that is here postulated for the comparison of two aspects of the same Absolute, as seen in Nature, whether taken to be within or without. The inner Nature is related to pure Time with no events; while the outer nature is so full of events that duration feels heavy and unpleasant.

In the Scholastic philosophy of Europe and as distinguished in the philosophy of Spinoza, we have the same two natures: the ‘natura naturans’ (nature that is ‘naturing’) and the ‘natura naturata’ (nature that is ‘natured’). In the first the subject is sufficient to itself, while in the latter there is duality as between subject and object. In the scheme of correlation employed by us in this commentary, and based on discussions elsewhere, we could refer to the Absolute Nature as the vertical, and the relative nature as the horizontal.

As between these two aspects contrasted here, the reader has to notice the symmetry which is implied between them. The right and the wrong attitudes are not only different but reciprocally ambivalent or opposite. Instead of one being given primacy over the other, the two poles are given an equal status in the context of the Absolute. Good and bad have to be understood as aspects of the central Absolute which inclusively contains them both with an equal status for each of them. Wisdom triumphs dialectically by the vertical conquest of values over the horizontal aspects of natural interests.

Part III

This came from Sujit:

Verse 15 is one of my all-time favourites in Atmo. The Malayalam verse is rather simple to comprehend, as long as one knows the concepts behind the key words 'para' and 'apara'. What I am reading in Verse 15 is that time and space is compressed in the Absolute; whereas time and space expands and dominates in the experience of 'apara', or the materialistic world, the further one moves away from the Absolute. I wish point to the parallels in Narayana Guru's words and the famous quotation on relativity attributed to Albert Einstein:

"Put your hand on a hot stove for a minute, and it seems like an hour. Sit with a pretty girl for an hour, and it seems like a minute. That's relativity."

The Malayalam interpretations are broadly in line with the Gurukula book. One of the interpreters, Prof. M. H. Sashtrikal goes on to analyse the phases of time as present, past and future. He says, what is considered as the present is the duration of a 'kriya' (action) in which one is engaged, and that the timelines before and after the 'kriya' are the past and future respectively. So if the fortunate (or realized) one is engaged in the Absolute, the time for that 'kriya' is not realized in the same terms as the passage of normal time, or worse the abnormal drag, that is felt when engaged in 'apara', or the world of matter and objects of perception.

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Jake's comments are trenchant as usual, and include a lovely excerpt from T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets:

This verse is a plain and direct description of the distinction between two life experiences, that of the person in a bi-polarity with the Absolute and that of a person caught in the samsaric wheel of ignorance and completely controlled by ego.

In the opening section of the commentary, Nitya describes the lot of the masses of humanity, the nominal features of which are true for everyone enlightened or not. In the relative world of ever-present arising and continuous change, many people are thrown from one calamity to the next and no measure of assistance from anyone can remedy their condition. Caught in a world of necessity, they suffer an endless series of disasters created largely by their minds which then create regret in retrospect and fear in prospect. In darkness and depression, they—we—are surrounded by this regret and fear both of which exist in time which is itself a basic and necessary mental product. Unaware of the true Self, the Absolute within, those caught in this cycle (and unlike those who are awake) continuously seek a way out of the darkness by endlessly reviewing and analyzing the darkness. But as applies to the *light* metaphor generally, this darkness cannot exist on its own and requires light in order to exist at all. Light precedes shadow, and one's Self, one's light, underlies all mental constructions that are synthetic and secondary.

Nitya observes that Jesus meant to express this fundamental reality when he said, "The kingdom of God is within." If we take this admonition seriously and begin our search by securing ourselves on that foundation and its greater source—the Absolute, God, whatever—we can then perceive the essential illusory content of what our egos and minds manufacture and let go of that which serves no practical purpose and contributes solely to regret and fear: "Let the dead bury the dead or you can say what is done is done; I can't do anything about it." And, "if it has no value, I won't repeat it" (p. 109).

Regarding the future, Nitya counsels us to face it with positive expectation and an open mind. Here, he is asking us to live with a practical attitude in our transactional domain. He wants us to hold fast to our Self/Absolute while going about our daily business with the common sense to discern the difference between what *is* from what *ought* to be. To illustrate his point, he gives several examples, one of which concerns a child engrossed in

imaginative play. While that child is so occupied, time ceases and the world disappears. Once the spell is broken, the child is once again thrown back into the world of necessity. The same is true for the rest of us, says Nitya, when we are carried away by music, art, sports, our work—just about any activity that we immerse ourselves in totally. Again, with the conclusion of that world of interest, the world of necessity once again takes center stage and the death's head smiles in at the banquet. But by perceiving nature as it is and not as our minds determine it ought to be, we can live our transcendence while participating in the immanent cycle of birth-growth-decay-death-birth-growth-decay-death:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea.
Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.
(T.S. Eliot, "Little Giddings,"—final stanza)

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