

Verse 16

A very vast wasteland suddenly
flooded by a river in spate—thus comes the sound
that fills the ears and opens the eyes of the one who is never distracted;
such should be the experience of the seer *par excellence*.

Free translation:

To one well-established in the Self, the secret of the Word comes
as a cosmic sound. It fills one's ears and drowns everything in them
like a flooded river inundating a desert. Just as it opens one's inner
ear, it also opens the eye of the inner self.

Nataraja Guru:

If an arid desert most expansive should become over-flooded
By river water all at once, such would be the rising symphony
Falling into the ears, to open then the eye; do therefore
Daily become the best of sages endowed with Self-control.

At the outset I suggested that instead of reading along as we
went through the verse, this is a particularly good commentary to
simply listen to. It is one of Nitya's master teachings, where we sat
at his feet together as a loose conglomeration of ordinary people
and with his words he gradually raised us into the most sublime
state. By the end we were shining, flooded with bliss, drenched in
delight. Listening to the Word of the Guru is uniquely powerful to
enable personal transformation, and it also happens to be a theme
of the verse itself: it is the *sound* that opens the ears and eyes. We
now know what the ancients intuited, that reading and listening
involve two very different circuits in our neurological Karu. Many
modern people are good readers, but far fewer are good listeners,
probably because it is a so much deeper experience. While we can
no longer bask in his personal radiance, Nitya's words still retain

some of the mystique of the day they were spoken, if we attend to them carefully.

However, those who are established in the Self, inundated by the floodwaters of joy, are called seers, not hearers, I think because we use the same word for both optical awareness and philosophical insight. And yet, there is something utterly compelling about seeing with our eyes. Nitya says:

When you listen to the Word and meditate, it opens your eye, the eye that is not only seeing all but has created all this for you. The Upanishads say, “What eye, that world.” What you see, that is your world. The British Scientists’ Association says, “We believe what we see.” The fact is, we see what we believe. We always try to see to establish our belief. So if you become one with the Absolute, you see the Absolute everywhere.

For now, Nitya leaves it to us to examine our beliefs and see how we are unintentionally limiting ourselves, one of the most important threads of Atmopadesa Satakam, and Vedanta generally. He figured we’d already gotten the message.

Verses 15 and 16 together form a high point of the study, describing realization of the Absolute, first in terms of time and then in terms of space. Our ordinary consciousness sees every item of our world as a spatially separate “grain of sand” spread across a vast wasteland. A flood, by contrast, has no separate objects, and it dissolves all differences.

In Indian philosophy, sound indicates vibrations, which are the fundamental structure of the universe. Listening to the hum of creation is a time-honored meditation. As Michael said, the deep interior sounds bring us deep interior illumination. Music, including chants and mantras, easily leads us into the depths of our psyche, much more easily than visual or other stimulation, which tends to be distinctive, and thus distracting of unity.

Deb lamented that there wasn't much to say about Paradise. It just is. We can talk about and resolve problems, but once they are resolved, what is there to say? Dante's paradise is much more boring than his inferno and purgatory. Bill noted that Rumi is the best poet for describing and delighting in the blissful side of life, echoing his earlier assertion that looking to the bright side is the best way to get to it. Yoga, by contrast, seeks to equalize bright and dark to arrive at a happy medium, a perfect blend. It does not shy away from the dark side, which provides interesting challenges along with balance. Paradise requires the complimentary aspects of inferno and purgatory to become a complete expression.

Because there isn't much that can be said about perfection by itself, Nataraja Guru gives an excellent survey of different types of yoga, well worth clipping into your notebooks as a separate instruction. There is also a disquisition on the four main stages of life. For the same reason, Nitya spends his time talking about the mahavakyas, the great dictums for meditation. He masterfully ties one of them together with the verse:

“All these variations which I see here are all modifications of my own *prajna*. *Prajnanam brahma*: all the variations that I see in the form of this cosmic universe are none other than the Absolute.”

This universe is not a separate thing, it is an extension of our own self. It is not something that can be rejected. It is to be endeared to us. This world is our Self.

When I see everyone here as my own self, I become many times more responsible. My responsibility is an unlimited liability: I owe everything to everyone. I am not only my brother's keeper, I am responsible to the whole universe in preserving its truth and maintaining its law, its rhythm. I am fully committed. I turn inward and meditate. I don't see any sun or moon, no vegetation, no human beings, no birds or animals. This is the subjective world of pure thoughts and feelings.

All this is coming from a light within me which is like a ceaseless spring, a fountain from which the stream of consciousness flows. This is my *atman*, my soul.

Narayana Guru's bold flood has become in Nitya's intimate presentation a spring, a fountain, and a stream. Sweet.

There will be more on the mahavakyas later on, but it's worth noting that two of them *aham brahmasmi* and *tat tvam asi*, I am the Absolute and That (Absolute) is you, indicate two opposing directions that are mutually complimentary. In the first you focus on I and expand it to its absolute limit. In the second you focus on the Absolute and bring it into the I that sees. The goal of both is to arrive at "I and the Absolute are not different. We are one." Nitya elaborates on how important it is to work our way out of the limiting 'I' we have become identified with:

A Guru says "That thou art." When a disciple hears this, he understands the purport of the Guru's words as "I am That." Before coming to this realization, though, the disciple has to give up his present concept of the 'I'. The present concept is "I am this body, I am this mind, I am these senses, I am known by such and such a name, I belong to such and such a country and such and such a family." These are all limiting conditionings of the 'I'. They are to be dropped one after the other. This false identity has betrayed us. The Guru is giving us our genuine identity, "You are That."

Like email classmate John, I am wary when people ask "What do you do?" I like to stretch their minds a bit by giving unconventional answers, like "I eat breakfast," or "I take walks." I once had a high school class in a full-scale uproar by refusing to give them a pat answer. They kept protesting, "But what do you DO?" and I'd tell them another mundane activity. Their outrage was just one of many indications of how stuck we are in habits of mind that reinforce our false identities. No one dares stand

undefined. Yet I don't actually know—in the ultimate analysis what *do* we do?

Reluctant to say too much about realization, the class spent time admiring Narayana Guru. Hey, he deserves it! We learned a lot. Moni told us many stories she grew up with and knows intimately. It's not hard to realize we're in the presence of a supreme intellect, a heart brimming with love and compassion—a generous soul in every respect. Best of all, not naïve. Narayana Guru does not fit the model of the grinning sweetheart swami. He made sure to always frown for pictures so it would be harder to make him out as one. Or else he could put some magic in the paint. I still can't look at his portrait without cringing in terror. It's like he's throwing lasers of light—his mere image is throwing light—into the hidden recesses of my psyche. I don't know of anything more intense than that. It's what gurus do, how their compassion manifests.

Charles and Moni both mentioned how the Guru kept moving. Everywhere he went, people naturally wanted to hold onto him, keep him with them. But he was soon gone, and they were forced to reform society instead of worshipping him. It worked like a charm.

He didn't have a fixed program, he just did the right thing, heedless of any opposition. There are many touching stories, and it's a shame they are known only in Kerala. Moni told us how he saw such misery and imbalance there, that one group had become overpowering. The caste system was developed to preserve their wealth. Narayana taught people to change their ways and to organize to achieve their basic rights.

Deb said that he worked his miracles as an absolutist. He didn't acknowledge any difference between people. When you see we are one, you have a hard time pushing anyone away: it's like ripping apart the fabric of life. His vision was a wholesale way of knitting together all the fragments that we've become. It's hard to even imagine how deeply engrained the ideas of caste were there, or elsewhere the parallel ideas of race. Narayana Guru intuited the

science that was to come that showed, despite appearances, that we were a single species, one big, often dysfunctional, family. In the process of becoming functional, we have to discard all our excess baggage of false identities before we can get anywhere.

Nataraja Guru wanted us to know that Narayana Guru's vision came from direct personal experience, which lends it an authentic conviction:

In the present verse the Guru gives the whole subject [of yoga] a summary treatment. The intellectual side and the physical side that are non-dually implied together in the attainment of wisdom, are brought together as close as could be. The dawn of knowledge is referred to in the language of a personal experience, and what pertains to the opposite or instinctive pole of global emotions is referred to by the example of a perfected man of self-discipline available in the traditional language of Indian thought. The sounds that open the eye of wisdom is an ideogram familiar in India, and the recluse of full self-discipline is also a model popularly understood. The main point that we have to notice here is that wisdom gets established not by laboured graded steps, but that it happens when the personal attitude and the intelligence work together to usher in the result. No staircase is needed to ascend to wisdom. The duality between ends and means is abolished. Further, speaking as he must be from his own personal experience, this view has to be given the full credit it deserves as a direct wisdom-teaching of rare value.

Like Rumi, Nitya was also a rare poetic soul. His prose touches the sky of poetic inspiration on many occasions. He closed his talk with just such a jewel, just such a pearl. He knew what he was doing: he meant to lift us as high as he possibly could. His listeners were having a direct experience of a pulsing fountain of love and blessings as he reminisced on an earlier verse and compared it to the present one:

Then we were told of the surface of the ocean and the grand treasury of values in its depths. Here, when wisdom prevails like a flood, the wasteland of your life becomes an oceanic treasure. What were previously only grains of sand are now transformed into pearls of priceless worth. Everyone you meet, everything that happens—previously it was only a grain of sand, now it's a pearl of great price. Life becomes so enriched by the change in our attitude and in our vision. What could be more wonderful, more beautiful, than this?

Part II

Neither This Nor That:

A continuous tumult is going on in our mind as several unidentified urges and clashing interests are crying at the top of their voices to catch our attention. In the clang of such confusion it is hard to listen to the silvery voice of the spirit. In his *Gitanjali*, Tagore makes an earnest appeal to the screeching dwarfs of his ego to hold their tongues so that he might listen to the sweet melody of his Lord. Even the loneliest recluse cannot get away from the procession of loud thoughts that parades through his mind. A sage par excellence is he who can silence his inner tumult so that he can become a worthy receptacle to be filled with the elixir of mystical beatitude. The Guru refers to such a sage as the noble among yatis.

When life is devoid of its greening fountain of values, the world becomes an arid desert land. In such a situation the scarcity of interest in the external world is more than matched by the unquenchable thirst of the spirit for adorable values. This causes such painful agony to the aspirant that he becomes benumbed and has no sensitivity with which to appreciate the promise of the sublime.

At some zero hour, there comes a breakthrough of the impasse caused by the revolt of the sensuousness that wants to feed

on the imaginary fodder of the transient. For the blessed one who has silenced the rebellion of his own lower self, the world suddenly becomes so immersed in a flood of delight that every grain of sand on which he treads becomes a pearl of priceless worth.

Nataraja Guru's comments, including an extremely valuable synopsis of Yoga:

If an arid desert most expansive should become over-flooded
By river water all at once, such would be the rising symphony
Falling into the ears, to open then the eye; do therefore
Daily become the best of sages endowed with Self-control.

HERE the Guru recommends a personal attitude to be constantly cultivated by one who aspires for the full attainment of wisdom or self-realization. A teacher of wisdom is constantly faced with the question of how spirituality is to be practised.

On the Indian soil there is the practice of yoga which has become, as it were, a deep-rooted idiom in the popular mind. Sitting cross-legged in various postures, with the eyes shut or gazing at the tip of the nose or concentrating at the middle of the eyebrows, and various other practices, are part and parcel of accepted popular notions in the context of self-discipline with a view to attaining the goal of spirituality, however vaguely-conceived it may be.

From Hatha Yoga to Patanjali Yoga one has a choice of self-disciplinary systems recommending various forms of physical attitudes, breathing exercises and steps to attain to the goal. Some of these place the accent on the body, while others have implicit in them a Samkhya duality between the body and the mind. Patanjali Yoga itself, which is sometimes called the most publicly acceptable of disciplines (and therefore perhaps called Raja Yoga) has its eight steps leading to kaivalya (aloneness), which pinnacle of yoga is to be reached by the aspirant through the

various intermediate steps of yama (reining-in), niyama (regulating), asana (posture), pranayama (control of vital tendencies), pratyahara (withdrawal of out-going impulses inwards), dhyana (establishing bipolar contemplation with the higher Self), dharana (maintaining such a relation), and samadhi (attaining final loneliness or peace).

It will be noticed that with the later rejection of the Samkhya duality as between means and ends, and as between prakriti (nature) and purusha (the higher Self) as implied in such a graded ascent in discipline, a revised and revalued yoga was recommended in works such as the Yoga Vasishtha, in which Vasishtha, the Guru, goes even so far as to tell his disciple Rama in so many words that the ashto-anga (eight-limbed) yoga was repugnant to him. Yoga there was conceived on the basis of sapta-bhumikas (seven world-grounds).

When we come to the Bhagavad Gita we find no reference at all to these eight steps of the popularly-called 'Raja Yoga.' In a whole chapter (the sixth) devoted to the question of self-discipline, it is the Self that is treated as the dialectical counterpart of the self, instead of nature and Self. At the end of verse 25 there, the simple injunction given is that the mind should find rest in the Self and that it should be emptied of all content. The dualistic agony of ascent of the Patanjali way is modified into a simpler merging of the self into the Self.

The Guru Narayana here brushes aside, as it were, the whole question of self-discipline, by reference to the global personal attitude implied in the context of self-realization. Elsewhere, in the Darsana Mala of the Guru in section IX, which is entirely devoted to this question of yoga, he sums up all yoga under two categories: (verse 10) that of the yoga of action (karma), and of the yoga of wisdom (jnana). Karma yoga is yoga through action dedicated to the Absolute, when a man is not able to understand the Absolute

philosophically. It is given a place because it is necessary and inevitable, but neither recommended nor discussed at any length. All yoga worth the name must be also wise. Blind yoga like blind love can be disastrous. When we remember the stress in the Bhagavad Gita on buddhi yoga (unitive understanding) and its reference to karma (action) as a discipline of a very inferior order (II. 49) and openly recommending the higher way of wisdom, the position adopted by the Guru in this matter becomes less equivocal. Taken side-by-side with the fact that every chapter of the Gita is called a 'yoga', thus making eighteen different views on yoga, ranging from the levels of necessary action to the high pure ones of self-realization, the nature of the self-discipline acceptable in the context of Advaita Vedanta must become clear to anyone.

In the present verse the Guru gives the whole subject a summary treatment. The intellectual side and the physical side that are non-dually implied together in the attainment of wisdom, are brought together as close as could be. The dawn of knowledge is referred to in the language of a personal experience, and what pertains to the opposite or instinctive pole of global emotions is referred to by the example of a perfected man of self-discipline available in the traditional language of Indian thought. The sounds that open the eye of wisdom is an ideogram familiar in India, and the recluse of full self-discipline is also a model popularly understood. The main point that we have to notice here is that wisdom gets established not by laboured graded steps, but that it happens when the personal attitude and the intelligence work together to usher in the result. No staircase is needed to ascend to wisdom. The duality between ends and means is abolished. Further, speaking as he must be from his own personal experience, this view has to be given the full credit it deserves as a direct wisdom-teaching of rare value.

‘SUCH WOULD BE THE RISING SYMPHONY, ETC.’:

Whether taken as an idiom or a personal experience, these words can have only one meaning in the fully contemplative context. The

ears have a very special and intermediate position among the senses. The eye is a window of the soul which is meant to look outward rather than inward. Distant noises coming to the ears of a sleeping dog or the cry of a child beside its mother in sleep, enter the subconscious efferently rather than afferently. Sounds and meanings come close together in alternation. The word and the meaning fuse together to become one event in consciousness. The conceptual and the perceptual come together closest through the ear.

Plato speaks often of the eye of the soul and of the limits of the visible and the intelligible. The circulation of the subtlest of contemplative thinking takes place by a kind of alternating figure-of-eight process within consciousness. When such an alternating process occurs between the poles that are horizontal and vertical at the same time, the resulting event tends to refer to the purest aspects of contemplative life when cultivated properly by self-discipline. The word and its meaning, the 'logos' and the 'nous' known in ancient Greek philosophy, would meet and merge into one meaning referring to the Absolute, which is the real subject and object of all wisdom.

'DAILY BECOME THE BEST OF SAGES ENDOWED WITH SELF-CONTROL': The terms 'monk', 'sage', 'seer' or 'pontiff' in any religious or spiritual context refer to a type of person who is dedicated to a life of spiritual value. In India we have the munis (recluses), the yatis (those of self-control), the parivrajakas (the homeless wanderers) or the swamis (heads or would-be heads of religious institutions) and a large variety of other types.

Here the Guru specially selects the word yati to describe the type of person envisaged in the present context of self-instruction. The yati resembles a sannyasin (one of correct renunciation) which is one of the four phases or ashramas normal to a spiritual aspirant

wherever he might be. The four ashramas in life according to Sanskrit and other ancient writings in India, are those of brahmacharya, grihastha, vanaprastha and sannyasa. The word yati, which we have translated here as 'sage' would correspond to the stage of natural sannyasa, not necessarily understood as having philosophical erudition or institutional affiliation.

The first stage, brahmacharya, which applies primarily to student life, and secondarily is implicit in all the other three stages that remain, indicates the basic attitude involved. 'One who moves or walks in the path of Brahman (the Absolute)' would be the etymological connotation of the word brahmachari. The grihastha or householder, who might have wife and children, is still a brahmachari in principle, while in practice he might respect practical necessity incidental to social life to a great extent. The vanaprastha (one who has gone out to the forest) has reached a stage where, while being a brahmachari still, he transcends social obligations. This third stage tends to become eliminated as civic conditions impose themselves more and more severely in modern life. The sannyasi, however, can and should survive if the absolutist way of living is to have a recognized pattern of behaviour at all. In its long history India has been a land of great sannyasis like the Buddha and Sankara. The best of sages here must conform to this last type while retaining in principle the mental, the personal, and the behaviour patterns that would belong to the three other types.

In the context of self-instruction the qualification of perfect self-control gains primacy over all others. The yati here includes in principle the yogi, the guru, the true Vedantic pandit or teacher of wisdom - those who practise quietist or active mysticism of all the varieties known to spiritual life generally, including the paramahansa or jagad-guru, which are titles given by devoted followers to most-perfected ones in the context of wisdom and self-discipline

taken together. The attitude meant here has further to be cultivated without any intermission, as implied in the word 'daily'.

The unity of this verse and its construction, which brings together the two poles of personal life recommended in the context of self-realization, will become clear when we remember that the Guru himself must have had this form of experience. One must look out for other verses in the present text where the same personal touch will help us to make the meaning clear. The unity of the thought will become clearer by looking at the verse in this way. A constant and perfectly verticalized personal attitude is what is implied.