

4/16/13
Verse 17

Having two tiers of five petals, whence pain arises,
rotating, beginningless, hangs the lamp of the self,
burning as the shadow (of true being), with the oil
of latent urges and mental modifications as the wicks.

Free translation:

The Self is like a hanging oil lamp with two tiers, each with five wicks. It is of timeless origin and is always rotating. Its wicks are modes of the mind, and they are fed with the oil of preconditioned urges or vasanas. It burns as a shadow of the Self.

Nataraja Guru's:

Suffering-filled, with petals five and tiers two
Rotating beginningless, such a lamp hanging
The Self in shadow form, it burns, with prior habit traits
For oil, and function verily for wick.

In addition to Nitya's classic and essential commentary, both the short version and Nataraja Guru's are most excellent. Don't miss especially Nataraja's comments under "suffering filled." (In Part II.)

Nitya describes the source of the verse's analogy for those who have not had the pleasure of witnessing it firsthand:

In ancient India they used to hang an oil lamp, with tiers of petal-shaped wick holders, in the middle of the room. With the wicks lit it resembled a simple candelabra, which would swing gently and rotate with the movement of air in the room, casting fantastic shadows over the walls and furniture. Our life is here compared to such a rotating light with five burning petals of

the senses. The burning brings a kind of pain, but our attention is focused more on the play of light and shadows on the walls.

We humans as depicted in this holistic image are a reservoir of genetic potentials and stored memories that are wicked up into awareness, where they meet with the environment to produce a kind of artificial light. What's more, the light itself isn't the end of the process: it becomes the medium for observing the interplay of shadows on the walls, which are a secondary or even tertiary byproduct of the whole mechanism. By and large we are unaware of anything but the shadows, and take the lamp for granted.

The image of the verse makes even better sense in the light of fMRI brain studies, which reveal what the rishis intuited: the light of our consciousness is the final stage of a lengthy process, and not the center of our being, as it appears. Realizing this converts a desperate and often aggressive or recalcitrant ego into a harmonious participant in the expression of our true nature. Moreover redirecting the arrow of intention from the outside in to the inside out converts the sense of victimhood into what Nitya sometimes called being a co-creator with God: someone who knows that they belong where they are and have a vital role to play in expressing the potentials of a fecund universe.

That this is not an easy or instantaneous conversion is demonstrated by the very slow acceptance of it even by those who believe in it. We continue to be mesmerized by the very convincing display mounted by the burning wicks of our brain, as if it was reality itself and not a cosmic projection. In Part III I'll clip in some of the recent scientific observations that accord well with the venerable imagery of this verse. Here's a blunt example, from David Eagleman: "You're not perceiving what's out there. You're perceiving whatever your brain tells you." It's gratifying that science is at last catching up.

The point of knowing this is not to utterly distrust our observations and dismiss them as mere maya, but to refine them while taking this important information into account. Anything

constructed is bound to be artificial in some sense, but it's as good as it can possibly be—for now. We can cherish it as easily as we can despise it. This is one place where our choices have a major impact on our quality of life. It's too bad that cherishing has gotten a bad name, and the dominant paradigm is cynical derision. It's just a fad, but one that can make us miserable.

We believe we have to make our life from scratch, but it is already made. We should appreciate it more. The oil of our superlative genetic inheritance is continuously seeping up and feeding the flames with fuel. It is a highly intelligent process, and it's tragic that we have become convinced of its parsimoniousness. The Guru will be working to impress upon us the divinity of the whole thing, and that we can rely on it. It does not in fact rely on us. But we can do a number of things to keep our part of it in good working order, mostly by removing the impediments we have accrued during the unexamined periods of our life.

One important implication of the image is that oil lamps aren't maintenance-free the way electric lights are. They have to be carefully managed to work well. Sometimes it's hard to keep them lit. Too much or too little oil affects the flame; imperfections in the wick or impurities in the oil make it smoke; wind in the room makes it flicker and grow dim. The wick has to be trimmed periodically to keep it free of residue. Nataraja Guru's concluding comments, where he contemplates how well the lamp burns, are well worth reading. Here's a preview:

A dull or sluggish functioning of the higher centres of the personality tends to make the ascent of the oil weak, and to that extent the lamp becomes inferior. The structure of the psyche in its psycho-physical setting has to be visualized with all these implications. They have to be imagined intuitively before the seeker of self-instruction can make his own person adapt itself progressively to his own self-affiliation to the full light of bright wisdom. At the lower physiological levels, as in the higher psychological ones, it is important that the normal

functions are kept up to keep the machine from degenerating through disuse. Cybernetically the wick represents the basis for both action and retroaction. The way of such functioning without error, socially or personally, is the art of the Yogi. Without entering into the details of how to practise such a two-sided discipline, the Guru indicates schematically the structure of the Self, and stresses the need for a harmonised routine of activity for a sane spiritual life. The inner and outer tendencies have to be kept in the pure vertical light of right functioning.

So there's more to this business than meets the eye. Deb pointed out that our ideas of what is pleasurable or painful to us sculpt the light too. Attraction and repulsion are essentially the same process, conditioned reactions to stimuli, but we learn to favor one and disfavor the other, and you might say our selections tip the lamp so the oil runs more to one side. What she said caused me to remember being a young kid at school, liking something but hearing all the other kids agree they hated it, and immediately suppressing my feelings and adopting theirs. There's a short period when you're aware you're doing it, but then it quickly becomes second nature. I'm sure I did it the other way round too, pretending to enjoy what I secretly loathed. Like everyone else, I was desperately trying to model my persona on what everyone else thought. Hmmm. Quite a tangle. Thanks to the class, I got a really clear look at how arbitrary my preferences were, many based solely on my desire as a child to fit in with society.

Paul noted that there is a clear dualism in this verse, that consciousness is created by a dual process. We have noted before that the problem is not duality per se, but that we forget its underlying unity. We like some shadows and despise others, and are willing to fight over our preferences. Referring them to a unitive basis reveals their arbitrariness, so instead of fighting we can laugh and revel in our differences. We can live without this awareness, but why would we want to?

Nitya draws a connection between Plato's famous cave analogy and Narayana Guru's lamp of the Self. Both feature a light that throws shadows on the wall that we take as the whole of reality. Susan and Michael talked about how television and video games were like the shadows on the wall, ever more mesmerizing and captivating. Many of us now have friends and family who are so absorbed in them that they tune out virtually everything else. As new email member Suz insightfully observed, "Addiction seems the search for ecstasy as a means to cope and understand that goes unfulfilled." Unfortunately we have somehow decided that scrutinizing the shadows is a way to become ecstatic, or at least less un-ecstatic. Meanwhile the viable paths to ecstasy are denigrated and marginalized by the shadow worshippers, which serves to keep them hooked.

It's as if when people start to turn away to discover their true self, maya makes its display even more attractive. We are to be drawn in: maya fails if we see the shadows for what they are. But it is very clever to provide exactly what we want in a highly enticing form. And if that's all you're after, fine. Vedanta is for those who aren't wholly satisfied by the illusion.

Paul talked about the turning back to the source of the light as a dialectical struggle, but wasn't sure how to define it. The essence, though it can be modeled several ways, is that we learn to identify the shadow play we are observing with our freedom, as our most desirable free choice. Only when we try to turn around and see the source of the projection do we begin to realize we are bound. We are strapped in our seats and our necks only swivel part way, so we are forced to look outward. Another part of the bondage is peer pressure: we are considered mad if we try to turn away from the shadows. So the dialectical conflict is between bondage and liberation, and it takes directed contemplation to bring in the antithesis of what we have learned to accept without question. These contradictory ideas have to be brought together in a clash of values in order to achieve the synthesis of enlightened understanding, which ultimately breaks the fetters and allows us

more freedom of movement. This is expressed most famously in the Bhagavad Gita, II, 69: “What is night for all creatures, the one of self-control keeps awake therein; wherein all creatures are wakeful, that is night for the sage-recluse who sees.”

Narayana Guru is explicit that this complicated lamp is our beginningless self, which as we have learned earlier is the Absolute itself. Turning to our Self is turning to the Absolute. Yet the shadows clamor for our attention, and almost always get it and keep it. The Guru is only a little dismayed. He knows it is a hard habit to break, the hardest of all habits to break. Maybe we can, or maybe not. But he will continue to offer his hand to us, so that when we're ready we'll have his help if we want it.

Scotty had several epiphanies while reading the verse, and one of them recalled a favorite poem from one of our greatest poets, Mary Oliver. It is a fitting close to our class, which likewise undertakes the return journey to our self, which is the Self of all.

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,

though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.

Part II

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

Having two tiers of five petals, whence pain arises,
rotating, beginningless, hangs the lamp of the self,
burning as the shadow (of true being), with the oil
of latent urges and mental modifications as the wicks.

Our first experience in life is the irritation of our nervous system, and our first lesson on earth is to formulate out of that irritation patterns of pain and pleasure. Pain-pleasure is a twin experience born of the same stuff which causes agitation of the nervous system. Very early in our life a wedge is driven into that

experience so that pleasure becomes acceptable while pain is to be avoided at all cost.

We never get tired of looking at the petals of a rose, especially when it is illuminated from a favourable angle. In our old age, if cataracts come to deprive us of such pleasures, we think our very soul is sinking into a quagmire of depression. We love light so much. In the summer when the sun is blazing and the sky gives too much glare, we drape our windows with heavy curtains. Similarly, if our eyes become sensitive due to some disease, we protect them with dark glasses. Our eyes are such neatly made devices that we can effortlessly drop our eyelids when we do not want to see something. Compared to our eyes, our ears are at a great disadvantage. We would plug them permanently if we were to listen only to the screeching traffic of our noise polluted cities. There are other tickling treats, however, for our ears: a beautiful symphony for instance, or the whispering of a beloved person telling us something that our soul craves to hear. The main traffic between two souls passes through their organs of hearing. In a metaphorical sense we can say that all our five senses have their own favourite kinds of light. They are pleasurable only at a certain pitch. When the input is below that pitch we complain of inadequacy and when the stimulation climbs above that pitch it becomes acutely painful. Thus, our doors of perception can give us a choice of either heaven or hell.

What is it that pleases us when we look at a rose? We never even give a thought to the light that is reflected from it. The stimulation that particular light causes to our supersensitive optic nerves has a certain quality of agitation. This agitation comes between two real entities. On one side is the knowing consciousness; its pure state is mutilated and modified by the nervous stimulation. On the other side is the pure light that travels from one object to another. The energy of light is made part of a relay race. Some indescribable quality of the flower, which alters the frequencies of the light that falls on it, brings the message of the flower by way of the reflected rays that are delivered to the

retina. At this point, the message is decoded and deciphered into a totally different language, that of a nerve impulse instead of sunlight. The light of the soul and the light of earth coming from opposite sides are now fused into one single entity called the visual experience. Thus, in every experience of pain as well as pleasure we are forfeiting our right to know what is inside and what is outside.

Without hesitation we call a shadow the light. All the five senses are thus manufacturing for us countless patterns of shadows with which to structure a perceptual world. We even transform ourselves into a perceptually and conceptually structured shadow. It is no wonder that Plato caricatured our life on earth as shadows living a shadowy life in the dark cellar of a cave.

We presume that there is an external world constituted of five basic elements: the earth which smells, water which has taste, fire which reveals forms, air which gives the experience of touch and the ether which produces sound. We also presume that there is a person in us who can smell, taste, see, touch and hear. Who is that person? No one knows. And what is that world? No one knows. The two put together make perfect counterparts of deception. It is like an imaginary lamp of two tiers, one representing the physical and the other the psychic.

The wicks are the five senses, the oil that burns is the incipient memory of this mythical being called the individuated self, and the flames are the painful agitations that are accepted as pleasure, much the same way as the thorns of the cactus are appreciated by camels as the delicacy of the desert.

Nataraja Guru's:

VERSE 17

Suffering-filled, with petals five and tiers two
Rotating beginningless, such a lamp hanging
The Self in shadow form, it burns, with prior habit traits

For oil, and function verily for wick.

HERE we have one of the magnificent global visions of the psycho-physical reality which we often call the soul or more correctly the Self in man.

From the previous verse it is to be understood that the Guru is not here building up the Self in any graded or piecemeal fashion but, as is natural and inevitable with such a subject belonging to the context of the Absolute, plunges into the heart of the problem of the Self by way of a global vision here presented.

A preliminary, experimentally conceived indication of the nature of the Self was given by him in verses 10 and 11. Now its content is more closely viewed. It is compared to a lamp hung from high, as it were, from the regions of the Absolute, which are beyond all definite conception. The chain by which it might be imagined to hang gets lost, as it were, in the high regions of the Platonic Intelligibles. The sensible aspect of the same abstraction is the lamp, conceived not as an object but as an objective or schematic abstraction, with the actual and conceptual aspects coming together under the presiding concept of the Absolute which, by itself, is something about which we can form no definite notion.

The image employed here belongs to a schematic representation of a psychological and philosophical verity pertaining to the Self under the presiding normative notion of the Absolute which, by itself is not, strictly speaking, either a concept or a percept. It is both at the same time. The lamp with two stages or tiers is meant to suggest this ambivalence implied in the Self, correctly treated as an abstraction, as it should be, by the mind which is capable by its mathematical faculty of making degrees of approximation to the purest notion of the Absolute, through an exactly conceived language. If mathematics can be allowed to say that minus multiplied by minus gives a plus; and plus multiplied by a plus

remains a plus; and that one factor being minus the multiplication gives minus always, thus giving two negative and two positive of four possible operations of arithmetic - we can see that some kind of scheme of relations is implied therein. In logic we have the four syllogistic forms which correspond to the same four-fold way of conceiving reality. The mystery of the quaternion was known to the poet Milton who wrote:

‘Ye elements, the eldest birth
Of Nature’s womb, that in quaternion run.’

This four-limbed Self is further known in the context of the well-known Mandukya Upanishad which says that this atman (Self) is chatuspad (four-limbed).

In the language of modern mathematics such terms as ‘the integration of the quaternion’ and the existence of the ‘quaternion units’ come nearest to the kind of schematic imagery of the Absolute here presented by the Guru as a methodological and epistemological abstraction. We cannot go into the merits of this view here. All we have to say here is that this image of a revolving lamp, as an analogy, has implicit in it a correctly conceived scheme of correlation of conceptual and perceptual factors belonging to the psycho-physical self as conceived in the context of a Science of the Absolute. (See later work on this subject) Instead of four limbs, the Guru here contents himself with reference to two of the main ambivalent polarities implied in the concept of the Self. There is the negative or the dark side which is here the shadow. The outline of the lamp is made visible, not by the principle of light but by the principle of darkness. All negation is specificatory. Light being the positive aspect where reason prevails, it cannot have any limiting outlines. All colours and forms become visible to us because pure sunlight is refracted or reflected partially. Even the sensation of light is its effect on the cells of the eye and has nothing to do with pure light as such,

which reaches us from the Sun, millions of miles away. Purest light is invisible when absolute, and all that is visible must belong to the shadow side rather than to the side of light. This justifies the statement in the verse that the soul burns in shadow form, which statement, though it appears in the form of paradox, has to be positively understood, by double negation or double assertion dialectically, without contradiction. The psycho-physical implications derived from the main postulate of this verse are contained in the other phrases which we shall presently examine.

‘SUFFERING FILLED’: The doctrine of human suffering (dukkha-satya) as found in the vulgarised version of Buddhistic belief, like original sin in Christianity, has perhaps been overstressed. Apart from such a context, it is possible to see the place of evil, sin or suffering, as characteristic of the necessary aspect of life, as opposed to the contingent.

This initial reference to suffering applies to life when viewed from a pragmatic and ontological here-and-now point of view. Among European philosophers Schopenhauer represents in his writings this attitude commonly attributed to eastern religions and philosophies.

It is true that in the Bacchanalian European context of wine and women there is to the present day evidence of a love of the bright side of life. In India too the Vedic Aryans were also hedonists who drank wine and ate meat. To love the good things of life and participate in them with intelligence and sobriety, never violating the spirit of kindness for all living beings, would of course be normal. A philosopher, however, who is a realist and is not carried away by the superficial vanity and gaiety that is a thin superficial veneer on life merely, will be able to see that life with its multifarious wants and the need for much labour in connection with them, is one of ‘getting and spending’ and ‘laying waste our

powers.’ Adversity has its ‘sweet uses’ in teaching us to seek happiness instead of mere pleasures.

All these considerations have to be recognized and kept in mind when we read here that the Self is filled with suffering. This epithet has to be understood in the way it is meant to be by the Guru in the given context. Life is a joy in the Absolute, but when steeped in the relativistic morass of common human existence the horizontal factors prevail instead of the vertical. At the point of insertion of the two aspects there is a conflict. The eternal problem of ‘to be or not to be’ faces everyone from the moment of birth to the day of death and even beyond, if some sort of survival is visualized, even theoretically. There is no recommendation to be a pessimist for ever in this phrase. It only represents life in its most real, pragmatic and empirical angle where the philosopher is able to recognize the factor of necessity which can mean self-suffering. The content of life is nearer to suffering than to gaiety. A wistful sense of suffering remains as an undertone in life, whatever major notes might be played overtly. The contemplative who starts to understand the nature of the Self has to recognize this substratum on which he could later, through wisdom, build the superstructure of happiness in the Absolute.

‘WITH PETALS FIVE AND TIERS TWO’: The five senses of perception are what are meant. Whether this five-petalled nature is applicable to the two tiers of the lamp or only to the top one, is left vague. The usual division in Vedantic literature is the jnana-indriyas (organs of perception) and the karma-indriyas (organs of action), each referred to separately.

The psycho-physical correlation here adopted is still vague in the light of modern psycho-physical notions of the relation between the mind and the bodily functions corresponding with it. The exact relation of mind with body, whether through interaction, parallelism or both; whether through Cartesian occasionalism, or

through the Spinozian ‘thinking substance’ or the Leibnizian ‘monad’, is one that would take us far into subtle discussions which we shall not undertake here. Mind and body do participate on neutral ground, as seen in common experience when a man can bend his arm at will.

The relation depending on the meeting of two ambivalent, reciprocal and polarized aspects of life, has to be a subtle, vague and indeterminate one - as Heisenberg has recognized with conjugates in physics. There are certain matters where definitions become impossible, and to recognize them as such is as far as we can go with our intelligence. Intuition has to step in and guide the philosopher from this point onwards. Even when intuition steps in there are laws of dialectical reasoning which have to be respected. Possibility, probability and provability meet and merge in this region of thought. The petals represent the positive side of conscious intelligent perception, while the subconscious counterpart of the same is to be sought in the lower tier mentioned in this same verse.

In strict psycho-physical language the two tiers may be said to be respectively those dependent on efferent and on afferent nervous impulses. Psycho-physics has still to develop a terminology for its use which is neither physical nor mental. Meanwhile, the imagery or schematic picture of a two-storied lamp would be sufficient. (The five petals have also to be compared to the five birds eating five fruits, in verse 8.)

‘ROTATING BEGINNINGLESS...’: Perpetual motion is not a proper concept of empirical physics, except perhaps in the context of thermodynamics or the conservation of energy in the universe. Gravitational and electromagnetic theories have attained to the status of physical laws that speak in terms of billions of years. The velocity of light is also treated as a unit. The methodology of physics is at present in the melting-pot. Here in the

present phrase, rotation and beginninglessness both belong to the unitive domain of contemplation where physics meets metaphysics, as it were, on neutral ground. When the mind thinks of a duration that is indefinitely continuous, such a notion is no more quantitative but becomes qualitative. In the latter context eternal motion is epistemologically as valid as very long-enduring motion. Rotating or circular motion consisting of revolutions is natural to celestial bodies, and when translated into conceptual terms can be imagined as applying to the world of the Intelligibles as well as to the sensible world. The circulation of thought as a process covering the inductive and the deductive, the qualitative and the quantitative, or the psychic and the physical, the conceptual or the actual, is a matter which the man of intuition (or uha-poha as Sankara would call it) has to understand by a certain mental awareness, rather than by reasoning. The image of a revolving lamp may have, as its further implication, a bilateral symmetry along two different axes, the vertical and the horizontal. The quaternion that we have referred to above would then become evident. This has to be studied separately, as we have said. Meanwhile this rotating two-storied lamp image must be understood here with all the secondary implications that accompany it when seen through intuitive imagination.

‘PRIOR HABIT TRAITS ETC.’: Corresponding to the chain from which the lamp might be said to be suspended from a kind of Platonic world of the Intelligibles, as it were, from above hypostatically, there is the corresponding opposite pole of the soul which refers retrospectively to the past habits and associations which give meaning to percepts through memory or instinctive dispositions.

These vague urges or tendencies are called vasanas or samskaras in Sanskrit. These may have their primary and secondary causes as the various priores of Aristotelian philosophy, culminating in the prius nobis, the anterior factor to all perception or even conception.

A series of hierophantic values may be thought of as marking stages in this negatively vertical retrospective series of factors. The Guru here refers to them by comparing them to the oil and the wick of a lamp. The wick is the functional aspect, while the oil is the thinking substance which enters into and feeds consciousness with a continuously flowing set of associations based on interests and instincts which unravel themselves. Bergsonian metaphysics offers to the modern reader a picture almost as good as what the Guru gives here summarily in passing on to his subject proper. (Bergson's 'Essay on Consciousness' and his works on 'Thought and the Moving', 'Matter and Memory' and the more complete treatise 'Creative Evolution' may be considered as containing a fully elaborated modern version of this same image that the Guru is using here to explain the nature of the Self.)

'FUNCTION VERILY FOR ITS WICK': The wick of an oil lamp, when it has fallen into the oil completely, cannot burn and give proper light. The brightest incandescence results when the liquid fuel gets completely burnt and changed into gas and water most effectively. A sluggishly burning smoky lamp is so because the upward capillary attraction of the wick is weak. As soon as the hot oil reaches the tip of the wick it becomes inflammable and the carbonisation has to be most complete if the best or hottest flame is to result.

These are all true in the analogy drawn here. A dull or sluggish functioning of the higher centres of the personality tends to make the ascent of the oil weak, and to that extent the lamp becomes inferior. The structure of the psyche in its psychophysical setting has to be visualized with all these implications. They have to be imagined intuitively before the seeker of self-instruction can make his own person adapt itself progressively to his own self-affiliation to the full light of bright wisdom. At the lower physiological levels, as in the higher psychological ones, it is

important that the normal functions are kept up to keep the machine from degenerating through disuse. Cybernetically the wick represents the basis for both action and retroaction. The way of such functioning without error, socially or personally, is the art of the Yogi. Without entering into the details of how to practise such a two-sided discipline, the Guru indicates schematically the structure of the Self, and stresses the need for a harmonised routine of activity for a sane spiritual life. The inner and outer tendencies have to be kept in the pure vertical light of right functioning. In the next verse he goes on to examine purer and subtler aspects of Self-instruction.

Part III

I promised to pass along some of the recent science that substantiates Narayana Guru's and other rishis' insights. A couple of these have appeared in these pages already, but are well worth rereading. You can see that because of time constraints I stopped typing up excerpts, but there was plenty more of interest here:

David Eagleman, *Incognito*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011)

There are as many connections in a single cubic centimeter of brain tissue as there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy. [Roughly 100 billion] (2)

If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you're the busiest, brightest thing on the planet. (2)

The first thing we learn from studying our own circuitry is a simple lesson: most of what we do and think and feel is not under our conscious control. The vast jungles of neurons operate their own programs. The conscious you—the I that flickers to life when you wake up in the morning—is the smallest bit of what's transpiring in your brain. Although we are dependent on the functioning of the

brain for our inner lives, it runs its own show. Most of its operations are above the security clearance of the conscious mind. The *I* simply has no right of entry.

Your consciousness is like a tiny stowaway on a transatlantic steamship, taking credit for the journey without acknowledging the massive engineering underfoot. (4)

You're not perceiving what's out there. You're perceiving whatever your brain tells you. (33)

In the traditionally taught view of perception, data from the sensorium pours into the brain, works its way up the sensory hierarchy, and makes itself seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt—"perceived." But a closer examination of the data suggests this is incorrect. The brain is properly thought of as a mostly closed system that runs on its own internally generated activity. We already have many examples of this sort of activity: for example, breathing, digestion, and walking are controlled by autonomously running activity generators in your brain stem and spinal cord. During dream sleep the brain is isolated from its normal input, so internal activation is the only source of cortical stimulation. In the awake state, internal activity is the basis for imagination and hallucinations.

The more surprising aspect of this framework is that the internal data is not *generated* by the external sensory data but merely *modulated* by it....

The deep secret of the brain is that not only the spinal cord but the entire central nervous system works this way: internally generated activity is modulated by sensory input. (44-5)

The first lesson about trusting your senses is: don't. Just because you *believe* something to be true, just because you *know* it's true, that doesn't mean it *is* true.... This is because your senses will tell you the most inglorious lies....

After all, we're aware of very little of what is "out there." The brain makes time-saving and resource-saving assumptions and tries to see the world only as well as it needs to. And as we realize that we are not conscious of most things until we ask ourselves questions about them, we have taken the first step in the journey of self-excavation. We see that what we perceive in the outside world is generated by parts of the brain to which we do not have access.

These principles of inaccessible machinery and rich illusion do not apply only to basic perceptions of vision and time. They also apply at higher levels—to what we think and feel and believe. (53-4)

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One way the unconscious supplies the conscious with direction is through serendipitous "coincidences." I almost always find that something I encounter during the week before relates directly to the subject matter of our class. The latest issue of *Scientific American Mind* (May / June 2013) has a short article called *Taking the Bad with the Good*, by psychotherapist Tori Rodriguez. The value of a balanced attitude toward life is nicely elucidated, echoing Verse 17. It begins:

A client sits before me, seeking help untangling his relationship problems. As a psychotherapist, I strive to be warm, nonjudgmental and encouraging. I am a bit unsettled, then, when in the midst of describing his painful experiences, he says, "I'm sorry for being so negative."

A crucial goal of therapy is to learn to acknowledge and express a full range of emotions, and here was a client apologizing for doing just that. In my psychotherapy practice, many of my clients struggle with highly distressing emotions, such as extreme anger, or with suicidal thoughts. In recent years I have noticed an increase in the number of people who also feel guilty or ashamed about what they perceive to be negativity. Such reactions

undoubtedly stem from our culture's overriding bias toward positive thinking. Although positive emotions are worth cultivating, problems arise when people start believing they must be upbeat all the time.

In fact, anger and sadness are an important part of life, and new research shows that experiencing and accepting such emotions are vital to our mental health....

[Holistic approaches as opposed to accentuating the positive] emphasize a sense of meaning, personal growth, and understanding of the self—goals that require confronting life's adversities. Unpleasant feelings are just as crucial as the enjoyable ones in helping you make sense of life's ups and downs.... "Taking the good and bad together may detoxify the bad experiences, allowing you to make meaning out of them in a way that supports psychological well-being," the researchers found.

Part IV

Although he intends to review the entire work, Jake has only commented so far up to Verse 25, so enjoy it while you can:

Verse 17:

Having two tiers of five petals, whence pain arises,
rotating, beginningless, hangs the lamp of the self,
burning as the shadow (of true being), with the oil
of latent urges and mental modifications as the wicks.

Nitya's commentary on this verse ends with a summation of its point: "In this verse we are brought back from the high state of spiritual ecstasy to where we fit into this world." (p. 127) As we go about our lives in the present, however much that experience manifests out of the Infinite, we are constantly grappling with our everyday condition in order to survive in this transactional world. Nitya outlines the particulars of that work and how it comes together to create our lives.

The first category of experiences Nitya reviews concerns our sense organs and how they distinguish form. Light and dark constitute the foundation on which our senses begin that process. In Nitya's view, any form identified through our senses is essentially made recognizable only by reference to what it is not—the darkness or shadow. The thing itself, as Kant made so clear, cannot be directly perceived, so what we identify as that thing is what remains when the light is screened off. The world as a shadow play is thereby produced, and because it is sense-defined it harbors both pain and pleasure. Any sense delight, if taken to its extreme, transforms into a painful experience and this general axiom applies equally to all five senses.

Drilling down still further, Nitya goes on to note that the agitation of our systems produces our physical experiences, so the agitation producing pain and pleasure is a necessary step in our “knowing” anything of this world. Disturbance leads to knowledge, and without it we do not experience at all. Pain/pleasure, light/dark—duality is a fundamental character of the knowledge and experience we participate in while existing in the world of becoming.

This kind of “information” we make available to our consciousness via our psychic *tier*, our interior psychological awareness which produces interpretations and values. It is here that Western and Indian psychologies part company in a fundamental way. In the West, the common understanding is that the physical system animates the psychic one (Skinner's Behaviorism being a clear paradigm) while in the Indian model the psychic animates the physical and the potential for that animation pre-exists in the psychic. Any physical sensation touches that which already exists within. In that correspondence resides any “sense” to the impulse. Nitya uses the example of a person in deep sleep and how we cannot communicate with that person while he is in this state in spite of his normal-functioning body and mind. Because the psychic dimension is elsewhere, the body is left on its own, unanimated.

Moving still further, Nitya then takes up the issue of the nature of that which is within to which the external corresponds. Where does that internal element come from? In the West, writes Nitya, and especially in contemporary American culture I would say, the traditional explanation can be found in Biblical references that center sooner or later on the concept of Original Sin. Human kind's divine core was corrupted at the get-go, so humanity's fundamental good/evil duality explains our state of affairs. More recently, a scientific atheism (such as the one proselytized by Richard Dawkins) has managed to replace Original Sin with measurements of physical phenomena and a belief that in knowing enough of those measurements is the road to ultimate enlightenment. But, as Nitya wryly comments, in this shift we've managed to replace our one big threat for a bewildering assortment of new ones—from genetic disorder to colliding planets and super novas. In the end, he concludes, both the Biblical and science-based explanations are faith-based constructs founded on the premise that the physical precedes the psychic, and because of this cause/effect direction the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent will remain intact.

The Indian system with its psychic-physical direction of cause/effect as a foundation, locates internal receptivity in the samskara/vasana psychological model. Samskaras are those patterns of memory condensed and retained (largely out of awareness) as we move through life. Home of origin issues and behaviors we retain throughout our lives because of them represent a common form they take. As they are carried genetically and otherwise through successive lives they form the essence of the vasanas we carry through time. Infants do not enter the world as blank slates, as any mother will tell you. It is the vasanas or incipient memories that connect with the impressions we receive and thereby give those impressions meaning. Otherwise, the input is meaningless; the psychic connects with the physical. As Samskaras are formed, they are added to the existing vasanas which are “being burned through the five senses” (p127) as we live

our lives. If we can operate daily with this general understanding, we have an opportunity to live in what *is* rather than what *ought* to be, in reality rather than in the illusion of Plato's Cave.

* * *

Deb felt there was an obvious connection between this verse and her prose poem. It includes an image I'll send separately, as I know not all of you can receive them:

A Thin Sliver at the Door
by Deborah Buchanan

All he ever needed was the one sliver of air that hovered between the door and the frame. That small space was a persistent invitation. He would look around and make sure no one was in the room, then quietly get up from his chair, turn sideways, and slip through the crack between the heavy oak door and its sash. The room left behind was dark and immobile, everything inert, waiting without expectation or possibility. But once through the door the air changed. It expanded in the light, vibrating. The world was hushed, but with a kind of openness and readiness—something was just about to happen. When he went out, when he slipped through that crack, the world changed and so did he. The resonant hum of the air struck a note of movement in his body and he became more lithe, more supple. And the light—of course, the light—that made all the difference. In the trees the leaves moved gently, dappled by the light. The ground seemed alive, as if it too would burst into motion—iridescent green, chocolate brown, gray-blue in the stones. He heard his own low humming but there were other songs as well, perhaps birds or even insects in the fields, perhaps the echo of a bell from the far buildings. When he was out here he didn't need anything. Everything felt inviting and reassuring. He never knew how long he was outside, how much time had passed,

since he never felt any tug of memory when he was there. He moved and listened and watched. That was all. And that was more than enough. But eventually in the back of his mind a small cloud would begin to gather, pulling him back into its shaded heaviness. The cloud would become bigger and more compelling than the trees or the air and he would turn toward it reluctantly. The cloud became more and more of his vision, what his world was, and he found himself looking for the door, the way back through the crack into the dark, static room. He was never sure how he actually got back in but would suddenly look around, groggily, and realize here he was again. Everything felt heavy. The world was dense. This last time, though, he remembered something—just as he was following the cloud, just as it grew to include him, he held his hand out to the nearest tree and touched the leaves. He pulled some from the lowest branch and held them in his hands. Even back in the room he had them. He looked down and saw their glittering green and inhaled their unnamable smell. He held them and remembered. And he looked up to see that small sliver of air between the door and its frame.