

5/7/13
Verse 20

Other than this the world has no reality;
“there is”--all such that people say is without reflection;
even if to a numskull it appears to be a snake,
will a fresh flower garland ever become a serpent?

Free translation:

This world has no other reality. People who say it has are wanting
in sufficient reason. Even if a dim-wit mistakes a garland of fresh
flowers for a terrifying snake, does that make it one?

Nataraja Guru's:

Another reality this world has none; contrary assertions
Made in this world, understanding all do lack;
Though an ignorant person could mistake it for a reptile.
Could a flower-garland, beneficial, ever a snake become?

Verse 20 marks a fitting close to our randomly chosen first
semester, a kind of “whipped cream dessert” for all our hard work
and intense joyful exposure to Atmopadesa Satakam. If all goes
well we will take up the next section again in June.

I think we can all agree on the fact that Nitya's talk doesn't
need any elucidation: it's about as clear and inspiring as anything
could be. A few remarks are in order, however, and we managed
an interesting exploration based on its impact.

Those not familiar with the age-old Indian metaphor of the
rope and snake might miss the subtle revision that Narayana Guru
adds, and Moni reminded us about. In the original, someone
walking in the dim twilight sees a piece of rope lying on the
ground, but because it is dark they first think it's a snake. Because
India is full of venomous snakes, they are terrified and nearly die

of fright. But of course there's nothing to worry about. A very great deal has been made out of this image down through the millennia.

A rope on the ground might be any piece of debris; it's essentially meaningless. Narayana Guru converted it into a beautiful flower garland, embodying the most loving and artistic value sense. It is now something to be cherished. When worn it inspires others and enhances life. By seeing it as a poisonous snake we're not just misinterpreting meaninglessness, we're missing out on something terrific. This is in keeping with a major thread of the work as a whole: the life we take for granted and even scorn as a burden is in fact a stupendously magnificent divine sport, for which we have more than a ringside seat. We are the actual players in the game. There is no limit on how wonderful this could be.

The wording of the second half of the verse subtly conveys the Guru's enhanced message. It's something Philip K. Dick frequently brought into his dystopian novels, that humans become accustomed to every new miracle and treat it as old hat, before long becoming bored and cynical about it. In Narayana Guru's version, we have learned to fear life and keep it at a distance. It appears threatening to us, but that is strictly an unfortunate interpretation grounded in our genetic inheritance and faulty instruction. We need to look more closely, so we can see it as it really is.

Fortunately life remains a fabulous miracle no matter what we think of it. Our ignorance does not diminish it in any way, though it definitely curtails our enjoyment of it. Seeing it as hostile is merely a reflection on our own stupefaction. So we don't need to save the universe, we simply need to recover our enthusiasm, which resides in our own core, our karu.

This led us to recall that nature wasn't good or bad, only that we interpreted it that way. Visitor Ally is bored with describing nature as good or bad—she prefers elegant or ferocious. Her words underline the unitive aspect of nature, and everyone felt like adopting them on the spot.

Nitya's talk is a sublime example of how he reached out and lifted those sitting at his feet. It shows the value of darkness. If everything had been sweetness and light there would have been no need for what he said. You might read the verse and nod and say "That's nice," and move on. But Nitya was hearing all sorts of complaints, carping and whining by people around him, and in letters to him. We were in a sweet house with a view over the Portland rooftops of breathtaking Mt. St. Helens before it blew its top off a few years later. Kind and loving people were everywhere. There was plenty to eat. Nitya called it his Concentration Camp, because we were intensely concentrating on learning and growing together. If you were to imagine a realistic heaven, that would fit the bill. Nitya surely knew it. Instead of pretending nothing was the matter he wanted so much to impart his vision to us. You can still sense his passion even in the mere words in the book, reaching into the hearts of everyone and lifting with all his might. It was so uplifting! Yet as we left the Hall Street house we would slowly settle back down into our old habits. Transformation is almost always a gradual process when you work at it, or truly glacial when you don't. Only rarely does it blast out a new life instantly. It felt that way every morning, but then most of it would wear off.

Nitya's examples of Karl Jaspers and Friedrich Nietzsche are poignant enough, but they are also stand-ins for him. He didn't like to talk about himself, but like them he had physical problems that caused a lot of pain. He was in a strange country where people treated him rudely and thoughtlessly, or else we gushed about him but didn't really listen. He could have sulked and felt sorry for himself, but he never did. Instead he accomplished what it would normally take ten or twenty well-adjusted people to do. He didn't have any time to waste on self-pity.

Susan didn't find an entrée to tell the story she brought along the same lines last night, but she sent it to me this morning:

I have a friend named Shelley. About four years ago, this very active, wonderful woman started feeling tired and strange. She

was diagnosed with an ALS type of syndrome that is degenerative. She has been able to do less and less because she is more and more tired. She now can only get around in a wheel chair. She has an apparatus that holds her head up because she gets too tired to keep it up and she has a breathing machine that is always ready to gently pump air into her lungs when she gets too tired to breathe. This sounds really horrible and of course it is indeed horrible but you couldn't tell that from even one minute of being with this woman. I hadn't seen her for a year and we got together yesterday with a mutual friend who lives near her and could drive her special van to the place where we had tea. She looked just the same in so many ways — smiling and radiant. She was happy to be out and getting together with us. When I asked her how she was, she brushed it off with a quick “fine” and was eager to talk about other things. We had a great time talking about all sorts of topics. She reads a lot and is very much interested in learning and growing. After almost two hours, it was time to go and I asked her about her health. She said she was okay and that she was amazed by how much she was sleeping these days — 14 hours a day. She didn't seem at all frustrated. It was more like an interesting fact. Shelley is such an inspiration to me. I must say that I have been with people who have challenges and they present a cheery front to the world but it's sometimes very forced and they don't seem in touch with themselves somehow, as though they are trying to be happy for everyone else. But Shelley is really connected to herself and her world. Her attitude is so clear and sparkling. She is making the most of every minute.

All these people have found their enthusiasm, their inner guidance system. Without it they might be overwhelmed by their problems. Once again it's the Gita's “Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.” The One Beyond being the Absolute within, and the relish being the attachment to the body's insistent

clamoring. This very practical liberation is where the search for the Self is leading us.

Bobby admitted that he has been feeling morose lately, “in a funk” as he called it. This verse really clicked for him. He said it was like going to a chiropractor, like a good crack to straighten his back. He sees this verse as his mission statement: by being present and enjoying every moment, you have the opportunity to stay centered in the light, grounded. We all agreed it was a chapter worth revisiting now and again until all our neurons have been rewired properly.

Paul and Deb reminded us about Jill Bolte Taylor’s book, *My Stroke of Insight*, where she talked about how we have a visceral reaction, like snake fear for instance, but then we choose whether to sustain it or let it go. The chemical component only lasts about 90 seconds, but our clinging can keep it going forever. Deb recalled how in the book Taylor describes being in the blissful right brain place after her stroke, and consciously watching the process of being offended and realizing she didn’t have to spoil her fun by remaining upset. She could just let it go and sink back into her bliss. I’ll append a couple of paragraphs about this from her book in Part III.

Deb felt this was a reminder that spiritual life wasn’t about simply being sweet, we have to work at it. Our vasanas and samskaras will lead us into all sorts of problematic situations that will require our attention. We learn by dealing with them, not by pretending they don’t exist.

Scotty brought up Joseph Campbell, someone who really “got it.” Thanks to the internet, I’ve added some choice quotes from him also in Part III.

Paul and I made a few comments about something Nitya says almost in passing that is actually another important thread of Atmopadesa Satakam:

We have a double arrangement within our system for knowing things. From the side of the world come certain forms of

energy, such as light or sound waves, to stimulate our sensory system, while from the side of our psyche there has to be a self-luminous consciousness to lend itself to be modified by the stimulation coming from the external world. This modification does not happen haphazardly. It is manipulated by the latent urges in us.

We tend to think we are encountering a random world in which we are outsiders and misfits, but something truly amazing is going on out of our awareness. What Nitya calls our inner programmer is busily arranging our life so it can serve as a means to express our latent talents. Paul's analogy was an oak tree. No one has a problem with the idea that a tree comes from a seed that has all its potentials compressed in it, and over its lifetime different programmed events—sprouts, leaves, branches, flowers, fruits, and more seeds—take place in a carefully arranged sequence in tune with its surroundings. Fruits never come before flowers, and flowers don't come in winter. We think of animals this way too, but when it comes to humans, we don't admit it. It smacks of religion to believe that there is an intelligent program manifesting itself in us all our life. Sure, we can accept it for the womb, and a short period after. But once the ego kicks in, we imagine we're on our own. The Vedantin wants us to realize there is still a program unfolding, painstakingly setting up opportunities for our development. We would do well to honor it. We would be more likely to rise to the occasion if we did. Our world is not nearly as random as we think. More will be said on this topic in the future.

Sometimes ignorance keeps the ego from clumsily interfering, so it does have its value. Egos tend to get things mucked up, and derailing them can be to our advantage. It's just that we become depressed, in a funk, when our potentials are frustrated by the impingements of necessity, if we surrender and give up the effort to actualize who we are. The blues are a call from inside to wake up to our self. They only get bluer when we suppress them forcibly, one way or another. They want out!

Nitya's words were meant to call our attention to this wonderful dynamism within us. Treating it like a nondescript "rope" is almost as bad as imagining it's a snake, as if it might bite us and kill us, but if we treat it as a flower garland of high values we will eagerly wear it.

A theme emerged that when we are afraid or repulsed by events, we should look at them more closely. If we follow our instincts and run away, we will miss the lessons they embody. One of the Campbell quotes below is "The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek." Or as Deb put it, "what you're afraid of is exactly what would teach you the most."

Scotty talked about a repeated dream he once had, of going into a basement or tunnel and being afraid. Over time he forced himself to keep at it, and eventually was able to enter the dark place without fear and push through into the light again.

This brought a welter of memories about similar feelings. Eric remembered a dark forest he was daunted by. He had to force himself to go through it, but he kind of enjoyed the fear, because he knew it wasn't going to hurt him. Bill had had a similar experience as a child, and his uncle helped him to not be afraid. Michael carried a lifetime fear of dogs because of meeting a friendly but rambunctious one as a toddler. Living in a world filled with dogs, he slowly forced himself to adjust, and now he does just fine around them.

It can't be underestimated how important this one idea is. Fear is an indication of inner alertness, because something important is happening. If we run away, we miss our chance to learn. Right in the fear is the lesson. Of course, we need to distinguish between a real snake and a psychological one. This isn't about being reckless of danger. Stay safe. Don't get bitten. But most of our fears are not based on reality: quite the reverse. Those we need to stand our ground with, and see how they aren't what we imagine them to be.

In respect to the ubiquitous dreams of fearful tunnels, these are thought by psychologists to be birth memories, and reliving

them is believed to be one of the most powerfully freeing techniques you can tap into. Being born is stressful and often terrifying, and the fear is so deep we rarely have access to it. It drives us without our realizing it. As such it's the original snake in the rope deal.

Like Scotty, I also worked through birth trauma in my dreams, and wrote about it long ago in an article called "Growing in the Dark." If you don't have the old copy of Gurukulam it appeared in, you can read it here, along with three other nightmares decoded; <http://scottteitsworth.tripod.com/id14.html> .

Bill and Deb reminded us that the point of this verse is that this world is as real as real can be. Another perennial theme of Atmo is that there is nowhere else to escape to, so we should stop fantasizing and be fully alive right here and now. Maya and illusion and all that are poorly understood. We are full of illusions, but the world is not. Nitya is unequivocal in describing Narayana Guru's affirmation in the first line of the verse: "This is contrary to what most Vedantins say. Usually they think that this world is unreal, but Narayana Guru asserts this is the only reality. There is no other." When you stop to think about it, how could it be otherwise?

Part II:

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

Other than this the world has no reality;
"there is"--all such that people say is without reflection;
even if to a numskull it appears to be a snake,
will a fresh flower garland ever become a serpent?

Many people think that a spiritual life is not this life. It must be something very different in order to be spiritual. Many cherished things should be given up and one should get into a whole new routine and discipline. The dichotomy between spiritual life and worldly life is a prejudice perpetuated by religion. There is

only one thing here, and that is this world and our funny, crazy or wonderful minds to experience it with. Everything we see outside opens a window to experience what is inside. For instance, in the froth of a coffee cup we can see Joan of Arc furiously charging her steed in battle. Actually it is only a smudge of cream sticking to the side of the glass. Although we have never experienced Joan of Arc fighting like hell in the battlefield, our love for heroism must have created such and similar images at an impressionable age which then come back as vivid memories. In our creative power we excel the creator of the factual world by imposing on his creation a million other imaginations of our own which have no basis other than our fancy.

In our meditation on verse 17, we have already come to know how easily we substitute shadow for light. We have also seen that the verity of existence and the confirmation of values are directly related to the existence of the Self and its innate quality of being the ground of all values. As our life here is a blend of light and darkness, knowledge and ignorance and consequently also pain and pleasure, when a person to whom this world is an arid desert land of no meaning or beauty wakes up in his Self, every grain of sand will turn into a pearl of priceless worth.

There is nowhere to go from here. Don't fancy that there is some other world. Right where you are, you can create one hundred other worlds if you like. They can be delightful or dreadful to suit your state of mind. If a man has a large treasure he will delightedly estimate its worth, but the fear of burglars shooting him and running off with his treasure will also make him shudder. Thus, the same value can also make our mind go in two entirely different tangents: one ruminating on the possibility of a prosperous life and the other worrying about an imminent disaster. When a person is in the fondest embrace of his or her much longed-for beloved, out of nowhere a sudden fear or doubt can creep into the lover's mind suggesting the possibility of a rival luring the beloved away, and the very peak of happiness can become a schizophrenic disaster.

All such troubles in life arise from the Self playing hide and seek with our mind. When a man, tired after his day's work, hurriedly goes to his unlit room and settles down on his bed, should he happen to touch something moist and cool he may start with sudden fear on looking at the object he touched. If he sees it as a reptile-like thing covered by dark and bright spots, he may even give out a primal scream. Later, when he realizes that it is a garland of the finest flowers picked and strung by his beloved and sprinkled with rose water, he will return to it feeling highly honored and will wear it around his neck.

To a wise man this world is such a garland strung with the finest values man can conceive, but he needs to gain a transparency of vision which can see, through all these variegated names and forms, the wonder of the one Self that is of pure existence, subsistence and value.

* * *

Nataraja Guru's:

Another reality this world has none; contrary assertions
Made in this world, understanding all do lack;
Though an ignorant person could mistake it for a reptile.
Could a flower-garland, beneficial, ever a snake become?

THE tri-basic epistemological principle called 'triputi' in Advaita Vedanta has three distinct aspects: the 'knower' aspect of reality, the known or 'objective' aspect, and the central 'meaning' aspect which is knowledge. The last is the conceptual which is reducible to one or the other of the remaining two.

The meaning is inseparable from the world it belongs to, and should not be thought of as a third reality, although in technical epistemological terminology, it is given a name as representing knowledge.

When philosophers tend to make the idea a hypostatic reality through ascending dialectics, as in Platonic philosophy; or when they give to prime matter a status that tends to be a hierophantic presence here below, to be reached by descending dialectics; or even when they give to a percept a different status from the concept to which it belongs - they are arbitrarily putting philosophical abstractions into fresh compartments and treating them as if they were independent realities on their own.

A rose can smell as good without its conceptual aspect, and conversely, the idea of a rose need not necessarily exclude its odour. The neutral concept of the rose could combine the two ambivalent polarities that might be seen as one having primacy over the other by rival philosophers. As has already been alluded to in the previous verse, there is an error, which is natural in this world, of treating dualistically, instead of treating unitively, factors that belong together.

‘UNDERSTANDING ALL DO LACK’: In his Viveka-Chudamani (verse 16) Sankara refers to a faculty called uha-apoha, which corresponds to what Bergson and also Descartes would call intuition. This is the faculty that resolves paradoxes, as in the dialectics of Parmenides. In the same way, Advaita philosophy abolishes duality and merges difference into the sameness of the neutral Absolute.

Most schools of philosophy, insofar as they do not consciously adopt this unitive or dialectical approach to wisdom, fall short of the requirement of a philosophy which is well founded, with a methodology and epistemology of its own. As mathematics has its axioms and postulates, the philosophy of the Science of the Absolute has its particularity of methodological approach. Atma-vidya or the Science of the Self is an open book only to those who have the gift of intuition, as stated by Sankara in the above verse.

The generalization made here about other philosophers of the world is justified in this sense.

‘COULD A FLOWER-GARLAND, BENEFICIAL, EVER SNAKE BECOME?’: The example of the rope that is seen in obscurity to be a snake, by an ignorant or cowardly person whose intelligence is not properly directed to the search of truth, is an age-old and somewhat hackneyed example known to Vedantic literature. This very example is here used by the Guru with purposeful modifications, to bring out the unity of value underlying the duality tacitly implied in the classical example.

We have to imagine a man who is not quite mentally alert or awake enough to realities, especially to values, as he ought to be. He sees a broken flower-garland in a badly-lit part of his house. He takes it to be a snake because of his conditioning to fear snakes. The rope in the classical example is an article that has no practical utility. Truth is compared to this kind of valueless object. Appearance is also on the other hand exaggerated as a dangerous snake. Between truth and falsehood, or rather reality and appearance, there is thus admitted in the comparisons corresponding to each of them, a polarity or contrast which tends to be dualistically conceived, even when both are thought of in terms of pure value. As a matter of fact, what is true in everyday life has at the same time a beneficial utilitarian or cultural value. Likewise, if we think of the transcendental aspect of life, which is the ambivalent counterpart of the utilitarian, even in this pure or ideological sense, truth is a beneficial value. The classical, abstract and academic example of the rope and the snake fails to look at the natural ambivalent factors of cognition and conation in terms of value, in which emotion enters as a detrimental factor against giving it unitive interest or value.

The substitution of a sweet-smelling flower-garland, and carefully qualifying it as beneficial, is meant to draw attention to the fact

that, viewed from the standpoint of human values, the unitive link between reality and its mental, hypostatic aspect, stands revealed together in greater unitive relief. In the classical example it would seem that truth is valueless, while appearance is fraught with fear. Both tend to be negative in value. In either case the interest of man in truth is not considered important enough. In the revised version of the classical example given here, the value of truth, even in its existential aspect, is stressed; while the error of the fearful snake is mitigated by reference to it as a reptile that dwells in its burrow, not necessarily harmful, and valuable idealistically in its own way. A flower-garland represents a spiritual value instilling neither fear nor favour but fully significant to human life as a leaven.

These are fine touches of revaluation in keeping with the philosophy of the Guru, which are to be kept in mind in the study of axiology that the Guru wishes to introduce into the discussion more correctly than hitherto. In the work of the Guru entitled *Advaita Dipika* (Light of Non-dualism) verse 11, this becomes quite evident.

Part III

A few quotes from Joseph Campbell, who in so many ways is in our class:

“If the path before you is clear, you're probably on someone else's.”

“If you can see your path laid out in front of you step by step, you know it's not your path. Your own path you make with every step you take. That's why it's your path.”

“We're not on our journey to save the world but to save ourselves. But in doing that you save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalizes.”

“Life has no meaning. Each of us has meaning and we bring it to life. It is a waste to be asking the question when you are the answer.”

“If you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Follow your bliss and don't be afraid, and doors will open where you didn't know they were going to be.”

“The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are.”

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”

“People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances with our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

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From Jill Bolte Taylor's book, *My Stroke of Insight*, (New York: Viking, 2006):

Although there are certain limbic system (emotional) programs that can be triggered automatically, it takes less than 90 seconds for one of these programs to be triggered, surge through our body, and then be completely flushed out of our blood stream. My anger response, for example, is a programmed response that can be set off automatically. Once triggered, the chemical released by my brain surges through my body and I have a physiological experience. Within 90 seconds of the initial trigger, the chemical component of my anger has completely dissipated from my blood

and my automatic response is over. If, however, I remain angry after those 90 seconds have passed, then it is because I have *chosen* to let that circuit continue to run. Moment by moment, I make the choice to either hook into my neurocircuitry or move back into the present moment, allowing that reaction to melt away as fleeting physiology....

What most of us don't realize is that we are unconsciously making choices about how we respond all the time. It is so easy to get caught up in the wiring of our preprogrammed reactivity (limbic system) that we live our lives cruising along on automatic pilot. I have learned that the more attention my higher cortical cells pay to what's going on inside my limbic system, the more say I have about what I am thinking and feeling. By paying attention to the choices my automatic circuitry is making, I own my own power and make more choices consciously. In the long run, I take responsibility for what I attract into my life. (146-147)

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Part IV

One thing I should have added originally is that of course intermittent hassles are relatively easy to cope with, so Taylor's prescription may seem rather glib to those caught in chronic painful circumstances. Ongoing tragedies, which abound here on Earth, push our buttons continuously, so the 90 second rule is only minimally relevant. The oppressions are still there even after we rebalance ourselves. Isolated events are a good place to start working on them, though, if we have that luxury. We practice on the minor insults in preparation for the heavies when they arrive, as they almost always will. It sure beats pretending they won't, when the time comes.

Maintaining our equipoise during severe, long-lasting shocks means walking a razor's edge between detachment and involvement. We naturally waver back and forth, but ideally do our best to not fall off to one side or the other. The help that this verse

offers is to urge us not to add anything extra to our travails, while observing that much, if not all, of our negative experience is extra.

Practicing living with joy and caring is another buffer against sinking under the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune when they are aimed at us. Taylor does remind us that once we center in our innate ground of bliss, holding to it in rough weather is a much easier proposition than if we are unaware of it.

* * *

Hawaii Jake's thoughts:

As president, Abraham Lincoln once noted that it seemed to him that a man could be about as happy as he decided to be. Of all historical figures, he was certainly in a unique position to know. By the time he shared the executive residence with his mad wife and presided over a war the result of which would cost over 400,000 casualties, he had every reason to doubt happiness existed at all. The magnitude of his lived experience makes his observation impossible for those of us who have chosen to deny it altogether and on the basis of experiences trivial by comparison.

In this verse and commentary, the guru and Nitya offer an explanation for what appears to be impossible, one that moves the conversation beyond an appeal to mystery or blind faith, or, for that matter, beyond literal cause/effect. Deciding to live in this world and to revel in/share its transcendence as it appears and fades in immanence is an individual choice, but it is the only one that makes any sense. The alternative is to remain compelled to act rather than choosing to.

In his opening paragraphs, Nitya shows us as occupying that spirit of compulsion in mid-act, so to speak. In other words, he positions us in the "normal" ignorance and in wishing/hoping for an escape of some kind, in a rarified heaven or society in some other time or place. At work in us as we are spinning in this dull awareness are all the samskaras/vasanas constantly bubbling up

and occupying the mind, skipping it along from moment to moment. The end result of all this activity is our constant compulsion to pursue those goals defined in terms our senses/mind find gratifying, more often than not coming into focus as power, wealth, popularity, safety—those illusions so dear to the ego.

These prizes may be transitory in nature, but they are part of this world which is the only one that exists, states the guru. Future abstract utopias are mental constructs of our transitory minds that finds its verification in its own temporary nature. Clinging to its sense and idea defined concepts as its foundation, the mind/ego creates the future alternatives somewhere else, sometime else. But we need not endlessly spin fantasies and then wait for their coming into view. The Eschaton, as one example, has been a moving target for centuries as has been the Worker's paradise. The value of any given moment resides not in its relationship to some subjunctive future event but rather in its transcendent beauty as it is and as we live it. The present alone exists. Any other "time," as a product of the mind, can exist in the mind only, a fact that reveals the game we play when we associate the mind with the ego rather than the spirit of the Self. That Self, as a participant in a bipolarity with the Absolute exists in the ever-present now and continuously reveals its nature while the mind frantically spins fictions in a futile attempt to continue without change as it is in a cosmos that never ceases changing.

Nitya cites Ramana Maharshi, Karl Jaspers, and Friedrich Nietzsche as examples of those who have lived with extreme physical pains and discomforts but who also realized their transient physical nature. They lived within their limitations but held fast to the truth, thereby maintaining a positive nature for those they lived with. As a more generalized illustration of the same point, Nitya offers a personal anecdote in which he narrates his decision as a young man to end his college education because he found the experience no longer useful. Upon receipt of his resignation letter, Nitya's principal invited Nitya to lunch where he asked Nitya if he was going to take his mind with him or if he was going to leave it

at school. As in the case of an alcoholic “doing a geographical,” the mind continues doing what it does wherever one goes and until it is dealt with directly, the beauty of the moment remains a mirage, one that can become our everyday sacred if we our Self dare think so.

Part V

A nice response to Verse 20 greeted me on my return from Italy yesterday. Susan did some good analysis of a concept that is sometimes taken in an unhelpful way—just what the feedback is all about. At the end she refers to *Trask*, one of a select group of Oregon classic novels she just finished. It’s by Don Berry, who was a good friend of Nitya’s and participated in many of our classes in Portland. Susan writes:

I read the class notes and they were great. I especially liked this passage:

“We tend to think we are encountering a random world in which we are outsiders and misfits, but something truly amazing is going on out of our awareness. What Nitya calls our inner programmer is busily arranging our life so it can serve as a means to express our latent talents. Paul's analogy was an oak tree. No one has a problem with the idea that a tree comes from a seed that has all its potentials compressed in it, and over its lifetime different programmed events—sprouts, leaves, branches, flowers, fruits, and more seeds--take place in a carefully arranged sequence in tune with its surroundings. Fruits never come before flowers, and flowers don't come in winter. We think of animals this way too, but when it comes to humans, we don't admit it. It smacks of religion to believe that there is an intelligent program manifesting itself in us all our life. Sure, we can accept it for the womb, and a short period after. But once the ego kicks in, we imagine we're on our own. The Vedantin wants us to realize there is still a program unfolding, painstakingly setting up opportunities for our

development. We would do well to honor it. We would be more likely to rise to the occasion if we did. Our world is not nearly as random as we think.”

This is pretty deep stuff (in many ways). First I have to think of how I don't think this way and then I have to work up to how I would think this way. I'm wondering if, when the ego steps in, we are telling ourselves that we have total control and can make anything happen and should make all sorts of things happen. It seems that as we get older, it is easier to realize that we are not in control and to accept the program model. But thinking we are in control comes in many forms, most of which are detrimental. We want certain things to turn out — our children to thrive (having friends, intelligence, success), our partners to be perfectly compatible, our friends to understand and support us, our bodies to stay young and healthy. But instead, if one is to believe in the acorn, one has to be more accepting, more relaxed, more patient. One has to get out of the way of oneself (humble the ego) so that one's natural development can happen more easily. Our cultural models leave us in the dark about this. We think we are in control and that the control starts with the ego and mind and that outcomes are more important than the process that leads to the outcomes.

This idea about the inner programmer is also great for understanding and having empathy for others. If we can realize that we each have our own program, then we are not so impatient with others. They have their own programming and cannot always do things in a way we understand or like. We are more patient with ourselves and with others because we realize that we are all carrying out and living through our own development, as it is affected from without and within. But this is not about fate, which I like too. I was reminded of the Julius Caesar quote last week -- “The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” We are not looking to the inner programming to release us from responsibility but to connect us with our true selves.

Just finished reading *Trask* last night. Wow. Quite a book. The last few pages are filled with wise words. Trask is thinking about how he viewed his life before his “Searching” experience: “All his life had been based on this hostile kind of strength; a strength that viewed the world as a thing to master, to overcome, to fight.” (p. 344) Trask was thinking that he was in control and that controlling was desirable and even the ultimate purpose of life. This reminds me of someone who told me several years ago that life is not a puzzle to be solved. That was a real epiphany for me. I think I was thinking that it was a puzzle to be solved. I think I was thinking, much like Trask, that if I just figured out my ultimate To Do list and then actually accomplished everything on my To Do list, I would be content and all would be well and right with the universe. But contentment and life don't seem to be about that at all. If it's all a to do list and a figuring out of the puzzle and a type of mastery, then you get to the end. You get to the end and that is all. If however, life is about an unfoldment and a being in each moment and an allowing things beyond the To Do list, then you never get to the end because you always are.

Another awesome quote:

“Soon, the once eerie sense of being not separate from the world around him came to be normal and necessary. He could not imagine living without the deep sense of participation in everything he saw or heard or felt; participation in the pulse and breath and heart of the world; in the deepest center of his own existence.” (p. 344)

Part VI

I had thought we were done with venerable Verse 20, but then I read yet another classic Mary Oliver poem that fits so well, so well. So we have a Part VI. As many of you are happily aware, Nancy Y includes poems with her monthly mailing of flower

photos. The latest brought a great favorite, *Peonies*, calling to us to be fully alive:

This morning the green fists of the peonies are getting ready

to break my heart
as the sun rises,
as the sun strokes them with his old , buttery fingers

and they open -
pools of lace,
white and pink-
and all day the black ants climb over them,

boring their deep and mysterious holes
into the curls,
craving the sweet sap,
taking it away

to their dark, underground cities-
and all day
under the shifty wind,
as in a dance to the great wedding,

the flowers bend their bright bodies,
and tip their fragrance to the air,
and rise,
their red stems holding

all that dampness and recklessness
gladly and lightly,
and there it is again-
beauty the brave, the exemplary,

blazing open.
Do you love this world?

Do you cherish your humble and silky life?
Do you adore the green grass, with its terror beneath?

Do you also hurry, half-dressed and barefoot, into the
garden

and softly,
and exclaiming of their dearness,
fill your arms with the white and pink flowers,

with their honeyed heaviness, their lush trembling,
their eagerness
to be wild and perfect for a moment, before they are
nothing, forever?

~Mary Oliver, *Peonies*

Part VII

Just when I thought I could put Verse 20 away, Dipika sent the following relevant material. The first bundle is the venerable paragraph from the class notes, the same that caught Susan's attention, and I leave it in merely for convenience. Italics at the end are her important question about this, plus she highlighted one sentence from the notes:

“We tend to think we are encountering a random world in which we are outsiders and misfits, but something truly amazing is going on out of our awareness.

What Guru Nitya calls our inner programmer is busily arranging our life so it can serve as a means to express our latent talents. In the analogy of an oak tree, no one has a problem with the idea that a tree comes from a seed that has all its potentials compressed in it, and over its lifetime different programmed events--sprouts, leaves, branches, flowers, fruits, and more seeds--take place in a carefully arranged sequence in tune with its surroundings.

Fruits never come before flowers, and flowers don't come in winter.

We think of animals this way too, but when it comes to humans, we don't admit it.

It smacks of religion to believe that there is an intelligent program manifesting itself in us all our life.

Sure, we can accept it for the womb, and a short period after.

But once the ego kicks in, we imagine we're on our own.

The Vedantin wants us to realize there is still a program unfolding, painstakingly setting up opportunities for our development.

We would do well to honor it.

We would be more likely to rise to the occasion if we did.

Our world is not nearly as random as we think.”

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn13658-brain-scanner-predicts-your-future-moves.html>

By scanning the brains of test subjects as they pressed one button or another - though not a computer mouse - researchers pinpointed a signal that divulged the decision **about seven seconds before** people ever realised their choice. The discovery has implications for mind-reading, and the nature of free will.

“Our decisions are predetermined unconsciously a long time before our consciousness kicks in,” says John-Dylan Haynes, a neuroscientist at the Bernstein Center for Computational Neuroscience in Berlin, who led the study. It definitely throws our concept of free will into doubt, he adds.

This is by no means the first time scientists have cast doubt on conscious free will. In the early 1980s, the late neuroscientist Benjamin Libet uncovered a spark of brain activity three tenths of a second before subjects opted to lift a finger. The activity flickered in a region of the brain involved in planning body movement.

<http://io9.com/5975778/scientific-evidence-that-you-probably-dont-have-free-will>

German scientists Hans Helmut Kornhuber and Lüder Deecke discovered a phenomenon they dubbed “bereitschaftspotential” (BP) — a term that translates to “readiness potential.”

More recently, neuroscientists have used more advanced technologies to study this phenomenon, namely fMRIs and implanted electrodes. But if anything, these new experiments show the BP effect is even more pronounced than previously thought.

In another study, neuroscientist Itzhak Fried put aside the fMRI scanner in favor of digging directly into the brain (so to speak). To that end, he implanted electrodes into the brains of participants in order to record the status of individual neurons — a procedure that gave him an incredibly precise sense of what was going on inside the brain as decisions were being made.

His experiment showed that the neurons lit up with activity as much as 1.5 seconds before the participant made a conscious decision to press a button. And with about 700 milliseconds to go, Fried and his team could predict the timing of decisions with nearly 80% accuracy. In some scenarios, he had as much as 90% predictive accuracy.

Moreover, there's also the whole issue of how we're supposed to reconcile these findings with our day-to-day lives. Assuming we don't have free will, what does that say about the human condition? And what about taking responsibility for our actions?

My reply:

I have heard of a study that found a lead time of up to ten seconds, an eon of neurological time. These findings definitely

change our perspective about who we are! However, it is a paradox only if we identify ourselves as being nothing more than the ego. The key Vedantic—and indeed the generic spiritual—notation is that we are much more than our ego: “we” includes our unconscious as well; if not the collective unconscious at least the entire vast “steamship” our conscious minds are stowaways on. Our “free will” then is a confection of conscious and mostly unconscious proclivities, and probably the most critical role of the conscious part is inhibiting negative potentials. (We try *not* to inhibit positive potentials.) When we get in tune with ourselves as a vast wholeness, the schism of “something else” controlling our life disappears, and we are content to take responsibility for all that we are. More than content—we are delighted. We possess the middling intelligence we are aware of, plus a stupendously brilliant intelligence we only barely glimpse when we sit still in contemplation. That’s what we are trying to open ourselves up to more and more as we bring our egos down to their rightful size.

This is probably the perfect time to clip in a section of *The Psychology of Darsanamala* I just typed up. I feel like it epitomizes the spiritual quest about as well as it can be expressed. As you know, I’m preparing a presentation of Darsanamala for the Kochi conference this summer, and in the process rediscovering how fantastic Nitya’s interpretation of DM is. Here is how we merge with the depths of our being, so that our conscious awareness can become a joyous participant in the unfolding of our life, and no longer simply a hapless appendage:

By silencing our mind we can go back to our own prior absence. This is not, however, meant to be an intellectual process. It is accomplished by a process of reduction, though not a reduction in the sense in which it is suggested by Husserl or Jaspers. The type of reduction suggested here is the kind performed by a yogi. We have hands for working and legs for walking or moving. When a yogi sits quietly he does not use his legs or his hands. The hand is an instrument. If it is not

functioning, the mere structure of it alone does not make it a hand. The plastic hand of a doll is also called a hand, but is it one? Is a plastic flower a flower? No. It is a chemical substance molded into a form that bears some similarity to a hand or flower. It may look like a hand or flower, but even structurally it is not true to the original. When we go beyond it, when we reduce the function of the hand, we go from what it can do to nothingness. The same with the legs. This means we sit quietly. If we also make this happen to our mind by not feeding it with memories and by not hooking one association to another, then functionally the body and the mind come to a certain nothingness. It is in this nothingness that we find the ground. We do not see the ground, we are the ground.

This ground or nothingness is not a total nothingness: it has certain potentials. When these potentials become actual, we think of them as the cause and the actuality as the effect. Now let us again forget the tyranny of language. At what stage is there a cause and at what stage does it become an effect? We can imagine our physical growth. Could we draw a line somewhere and say that up to this point in our growth was the cause and thereafter the effect began manifesting? After the prior absence of the fetus there comes into being a single cell, the zygote, which then starts to multiply. Can we stop there and say that that was the cause and the rest is the effect? No. The replication of the cell is done as if by memory, like a habit. It is as if this organism has done it so many times before that it has become instituted in it as a habitual function. This is what is called incipient memory. The incipient memory need not necessarily be the memory of what we recall in our mind. It is a potential in the ground itself. Our meditation is to reach the ground as well as the potentials in it.

Why should we bother to seek the ground? It is because at the conscious level in which we live our life we have no control, since that level is already manifested. If we want to do something with the primeval dynamics, we should go to the

area which is still in the process of being manifested. The further we go into the unmanifested potentials, the greater is our control. How do we go about this? Let us go into our own personal experience, our own life. What problems are we confronting now? What kind of personal relationships do we have with others? What makes us cry? What makes us laugh? What inspires us to write poetry, or paint, or do any creative work? What inhibits us? What gives us courage? These are the areas that have become fully manifested. We should try to predicate the “what” in these questions. (91-2)

Richard Wilhelm, in his commentary on the I Ching, Hexagram 52, *Keeping Still*, provides us with a fitting conclusion:

When a man has thus become calm, he may turn to the outside world. He no longer sees in it the struggle and tumult of individual beings, and therefore he has that true peace of mind which is needed for understanding the great laws of the universe and for acting in harmony with them. Whoever acts from these deep levels makes no mistakes.

Part VIII

My apologies, but this is too good not to share. I’ve been working through Cosmic Projection, the amazing essay at the end of Chapter One in *Darsanamala*, typing up the highlights. DM is not yet digitalized, but if I live long enough it will be....

We began with nothingness. Then we found that nothingness is the prior absence of things that are manifesting, and that if there is a prior absence of what is manifesting then the potentiality of that which has to manifest is there. To understand ourselves we should know our ground, the nothingness, the scratch from which we began. Understanding is a complex process of comprehension where our emotions understand our emotions, our reason understands our reason, and our unconscious inner mechanism

understands the unconscious totality to which it belongs. The principle of homogeneity is to be applied at each level so as to include and interrelate the entire content of our experience. One way of doing this is to conceive of our life as a series of pulsations, and to watch the centripetal and centrifugal contractions and expansions. (93)

Life implies a binary function between our being and nothingness. What happens in between the being and the nothingness is what Sartre calls the becoming. The becoming should be the tool of our meditation, not to achieve anything but to have a comprehension of the *modus operandi* of our life process. (95)

The vital urge has its origin in incipient memory. An incipient memory is a pre-established habit, which remains in the system as a potential waiting for an opportune moment to actualize once again as a manifested reality. Conscious deliberation is not an imperative to initiate the actualization of the incipient memory. Before a person becomes conscious of an urge or need the incipient memory unlocks many hidden reservoirs of inner forces, which, for example, stimulate the glandular system and turn on the secretion of hormones. Thus only half of the story of the reaching forward from nothingness to beingness is shared with our conscious mind. If by some chance the actualizing incipient memory is stifled or repressed by a counter-memory, all that we come to experience is perhaps a muffled uneasiness, or a dark and choking depression, or even an irrational outburst of hysteria. We will never consciously know what triggered the irrational anguish of the psyche. (95)

Even at its best, no expression represents the total potential of an urge. [Which is why we have to keep striving for perfection—RST] And whether it is an outburst of an inner conflict of the

manifestation of a creative urge, all our expressions stem from our incipient memories propelled by a vital urge. (97)

What seems at first to assail a person as his darkness can be a virile source of spiritual dynamics, which can ultimately transform him from a conventional conformist into a genuine being fully committed and dedicated to a truthful life—the existential validity of which arises from the very essence of his beingness. When one is ultimately in resonance with his own vertical nature, he may emerge in the society as a dark threat to its prestructured stability and a challenge to its social norms. The truthful man makes his breakthrough and causes serious dents in the shell or crust of society. Sooner or later, others who love and aspire to the same truth turn to the voice of the rebel; they read prophecy and promise in his words. In this case what appears in the beginning as a dark force confronting the individual finally proves to be a fresh lease of life coming from the perennial fountain-source of the Eternal, the ground of all. (98-99)

The mere knowledge that there is a myth under our feet or that we are confronted with ciphers that cannot be deciphered does not help anyone.... In the matter of turning to the myth for light, resigning ourselves to intuition can lead us to fanciful imaginings and beliefs. This is dangerous. For this reason, in Plato's dialogue "Euthyphro," Socrates categorically denies his belief in the myth when it is taken literally. The appeal that Socrates makes to reason is fully upheld by the rishis of the Upanishads. The whole of the *Darsanamala* is an attempt to clearly steer our way though the fog [of languages]... so that we can obtain a transparency of vision which will put us in touch with the primal language of transcendence, the metaphysical reality realized in thought and symbols, and the language of reason that reveals, in apodictic terms, the meaning of existence. (105)