

7/30/13  
Verse 27

Sitting in the dark, that which knows is the self;  
what is known then assumes name and form,  
with the psychic dynamism, senses, agency of action and also action;  
see how it all comes as *mahendra* magic!

Free translation:

The Self is that knowledge which brings illumination to one's existence even when it is placed in the thick of darkness. This same knowledge assumes names and forms and engages in action equipped with mind and senses, for all the world like the miraculous performance of a magician.

Nataraja Guru's:

What in darkness remains aware, the Self indeed that is;  
And knowledge that which as name and form,  
As senses with inner-organ, as actor and action,  
Looms here as everything, like great Indra's magic, lo!

A magical evening underscored the magic of the verse, where Nitya's transcendental explication basked in the glow of a sunset worthy of a master artist, and found deep resonance in our inmost being. It doesn't get any better than this!

I am tempted to leave it at that—Nitya's commentary does everything it could possibly do. At least I will include highlights from the highlight reel that is the verse, and see what else I can contribute by way of trimmings.

A couple of the students in the Hall Street class had been showing Nitya their tarot decks. He was a master at working the details of his conversations into his lectures—one of the reasons they so captivated peoples' interests—and very often he included a major upgrade to his friends' interpretations in the bargain. Thus he opens with:

When we look at a deck of tarot cards, it begins with the card symbolizing the Fool and ends with the Magician. Along the way from the Fool to the Magician we come across various representations of life, including even the Judge and Death. Like that our life also begins as an untutored fool and ends in the wonder of magic, *jalam*.

In this verse, the Guru is equating the Self and the world to a grand magic. Here the magic is in the way things are experienced. When we experience things they are there; and when we do not experience them they are not there. Ultimately we cannot say whether they are or are not. They are, otherwise we would not experience them. But at the same time they are not: if they really existed they should continue, but they don't. That's a great magic.

It's one thing to say the universe is a magic show, as Narayana Guru has done, and another to clearly detail its workings. Nitya, Nataraja Guru and Narayana Guru all must be combined to get the full sense of what is meant here. As a proper teacher trying to stimulate contemplation in his admirers, Narayana Guru presented essences with little elaboration. It was the genius of his two followers that expanded it into its most important implications. Here's how Nitya explains the magical element:

Let us go to the prime source which has produced all [the aspects of the individual]. We don't know where they all came from, so all this knowledge is resting on non-knowledge. Or, as someone once described it, there is a cloud of unknowing. It is from the heart of the cloud of unknowing that all this knowing is happening. Is it total unknowing? We cannot say. If there was total ignorance, how could all these things come? We see them clearly, so the light with which we know them must have come from that cloud of unknowing. Behind the cloud of unknowing is an all-knowing principle. It is never known as itself, it is known as all this. When it spreads out in this fantastic way we experience it all, from the naive questioning of a Fool to the final elucidation of a Magician.

If you consider all this as one total effect, then it is complemented by its cause. What causes all this? Self-luminous *atman* or the Self. The self-luminous *atman* itself is not known, but its effect—all the pluralities of the phenomenal transformations and modifications that come into being—is all we see. What is, is not known; while what is not, is known. Hence it is called the grand magic....

This is highly paradoxical. The non-Self should be the not known, but it is the known. The Self, the knower of everything, is not known. It is as if it is sitting in darkness. At least once in a while you should move away from the grand magic of your life, sit quietly and ruminate, and try to penetrate beyond the cloud of unknowing. You are seeking to know what is luminous there which casts its shadows in so many ways here. This is the eternal theme for the contemplative. Occasionally he revels in the magic, but all the same he knows it is magic and so he is not fully satisfied with it. He is fully satisfied only when he knows the manager behind the curtain, who is also himself. This is the grand theme of this verse.

The “not fully satisfied” aspect is crucial. We have to remember we are always only aware of a miniscule part, even as we bring our full measure of joy to our life as best we can. Narayana Guru has already chronicled the dangers of complacency, of being cocksure of our knowledge. We could even call it a perennial theme of our classes. Recent events have made Isa 9 even more germane:

Into blinding darkness  
enter they who worship ignorance.  
And into still greater darkness, as it were,  
enter those who delight in knowledge itself.

Knowing that we don't yet know everything, we keep an open mind, eager to imbibe insights from everyone we meet. Sure, some of the insights are negative, but all are educational, if treated properly. This requires a kind of intellectual courage. As Nitya said in his Patanjali commentary, “The yogi makes every effort not to be a howler telling

untruth or a simpleton believing in something because somebody said it or it is written somewhere.” (243) It’s a delicate balancing act to preserve the meaning of what we know but also let go of it at the right speed so it doesn’t outlive its usefulness. In Part IV I’ll add some cutting edge thinking from quantum physics that is torpedoing some long-cherished, hard to relinquish concepts. For instance, it turns out that there is no such thing as a particle, it’s just another convenient fiction. The really interesting thing is that fictions *work*, in this magical universe of ours. So be careful what you believe!

By the way, and not wholly irrelevantly, some physicists have recently postulated that if our universe is actually a gigantic computer program it would have certain features, and at least one of those features has recently been detected.... This doesn’t mean that it *is* a computer program, of course, only that reality is far weirder than we imagine, even at our weirdest. Which leads to a favorite quote from Douglas Adams, in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*:

There is a theory which states that if ever anyone discovers exactly what the Universe is for and why it is here, it will instantly disappear and be replaced by something even more bizarre and inexplicable. There is another theory which states that this has already happened.

I’d add, it’s happened many times.

As if stating succinctly “the eternal theme for the contemplative” wasn’t enough, Nitya presents a very important difference between popular spirituality and Narayana Guru’s approach:

Spiritual seekers are struggling to demolish all this magic and find the Magician. But when the magic is demolished you still do not see the Magician. The Magician is. That’s a certainty; but you don’t know him as a Magician when he is not playing his role. Thus we take away the possibility of knowing the source by merely denying the phenomenal. The being is to be known in the becoming, and becoming is known because of its beingness.

For thousands of years humans have striven to minimize or annul their environment to arrive at the hypothetical realization of the divine. Hindus, Buddhists and Christians in particular have taken this to extremes, so it permeates our culture so deeply we hardly recognize it. We simply assume “all this” is not It, not the ultimate truth. But what if it is? By denying it, we create a schizophrenic break between our world and our selves. We become permanently displaced persons, psychologically speaking. That causes us to lose contact with our inner happiness and begin to seek it outside ourselves, either in amusements or in a withdrawal into a fantasy land, which is a tragic and painful loss all around. In such a state not only are we unsatisfied, we are likely to treat the world as a dumping ground ripe for exploitation instead of as our exquisite homeland to be loved and cared for. This is the common legacy of our upbringings, wherever they may have occurred.

Unfortunately, almost all humans are raised in ways that viscerally convince us that we are not acceptable as we are. Very early on we begin to believe we have to work hard to become someone else. Both religion and secular education in general amplify this schism. It becomes part of our basic mindset, and we project it everywhere. It may be “spiritual” or “hip” to disdain the world, but what do you replace it with?

The Atmo study will repeatedly counter this depression-enhancing and planet-degrading trend by affirming the value inherent in existence. There isn't anywhere else to go. It's all right here. We are learning to integrate the one and the many, being and becoming, the divine and the mundane, and in the process we reclaim our Self. Narayana Guru will present this key insight in several permutations as we proceed.

What we will be working most diligently to accomplish is to discard the false beliefs that have lodged in our neural wiring, which spoil our enjoyment and full participation in this grand mahendra magic show that is the Absolute's best attempt at manifestation. We accomplish this not by suppressing anything but by harmonizing everything, by discerning the radiant essence of awareness at the heart of all manifestation and allowing it to sweep us onward.

Part II

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

This world can be compared to a great magical performance in which the magician produces things out of nothing and makes his audience feel wonder-struck. He creates hilarious situations that make people laugh and he conjures hideous sights that make them tremble with fear. He angers them by making them feel deceived, then he evokes a sense of pity in them, and finally he satisfies them with his tricks. His audience cannot decide where to draw the line between the truth and falsehood of his show. Life is also a grand show like this. Our senses cannot discern the truth of what they perceive, and the magician behind the senses is the mind. The senses are called *indriya* and the ruler or mind is called Mahendra, the Lord of the Senses. In this verse Guru describes the world as the magic of Mahendra.

A sleeping man has no ego. He does not love or hate, nor does he feel any obligations. When he wakes up his sense of duty also wakes and he experiences a certain compulsion to engage in one activity after another. He is proud of some of his actions and ashamed of some other activities. He has moments of inspiration and of frustration. It is as if a panel of directors is behind his mind. One voice goads him to act and another sits in judgement telling him that this is good and that is bad, this should be done and that should not be done. Another conspiring voice says, "There is a loophole. You can make this acceptable by doing it a different way." Still another voice is amused by the jollities of life and occasionally its laughter can be heard. There is also a hysterical voice which again and again interrupts all activities and laments in self-pity. The handmaids of all these voices are memories of different shades of vividness.

The whole show is kept going by a procession of interrogations coming one after another: "What is next?" "What do you mean?" "How can it be?" "Which?" "When?" "Who?" "Where?" "What?" and so on. No one knows who is supposed to

answer all these questions: the same mind must labor to find the answers.

Although there is no break in the stream of consciousness, interests create temporal domains of their own dominance. Both the fulfilled and the frustrated interests are relegated to the past. What is at hand is considered all-important and it is of the present. Future possibilities may cause slight anxiety, and a sense of urgency pushes away what is currently engaging the mind. Mind has its own spatial arrangements in which to structure its thought clusters, value materials, and correlate associated memories.

What a complex thing is the consciousness that animates each individual being! A general veil of ignorance obstructs one's sight from having a total vision of the whole complex of consciousness. Behind the veil is the Self that is grounded on itself and is illuminated by its own light. The veiling shadows and the negative principle exist only in relation to the light of the Self. The Self is independent and the phenomenon of its experience is dependent. That which remains concealed in darkness shines by its own light and reveals everything that should be known as the Self of all.

All the Upanishads explain the nature of the Self, yet none give as precise a definition of the Self as this verse: "Sitting in the dark, that which knows is the Self." In other words, the Self is that which shines without the agency of a second, and also knows its illumination and what is illuminated.

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Nataraja Guru begins his commentary with an important structural insight:

WE have to recollect here the main thread of the composition left off at verse 10 for a digression in which aspects of the ego or Self with its ethical implications were examined from the wisdom-angle in passing, without, as we have pointed out, laying down any

actual code of conduct. The main thread of the wisdom-teaching is now continued by the Guru, as is the definition of the Self or the soul, which has been the subject of so much metaphysical speculation, without proper scientific or apodictic finality in the discussion, as in the case of hair-splitting Scholastic Philosophy in the West and vain Vedantic logic-chopping in India.

Here we have a scientific definition of the same Self, soul or atman finalized and presented apodictically and with experimental precision. We are asked to recapitulate the situation outlined in verse 10, and to observe introspectively the nature of the residue called the Self when outward objective-sense impressions are effectively eliminated from what the Self should properly mean in a contemplative context. Here thus we arrive at perhaps the shortest definition of the Self in all metaphysical literature. This is accomplished by the experimental procedure of science.

Vedantic method consists of first dividing the knower from knowledge. The 'subject-matter' of philosophy and the 'object-matter' of philosophy should not be promiscuously mixed up. This would result in a grave initial error in the search for wisdom about the Self or the Absolute, which cannot be properly mended when allowed to complicate further thinking. Knower, knowledge and known have first to be distinguished properly before scientific Self-realization can result without violating rules and norms of methodology and epistemology.

It is for this reason that the Guru insists here in this verse on drawing clearly the line dividing knowledge from the Self. When the knower has been demarcated properly, it will be possible to make distinguishable the further subdivision between what is known and neutral knowledge intimately connected with the central Self. The extreme multiplicity resulting from the ramifications of objective cognition is alluded to as a magical wonder because of its endlessness and variety. Mahendra is the



chief of the gods of the Hindu Olympus or *svarga*, and all that is specialized and good in the Platonic sense is supposed to belong to the hypostatic world to which great Indra, the leader of the celestial beings, himself belongs. The specialized aspect of reality is also sometimes referred to as *visesha* and the glory of Vishnu belongs to this aspect of the Absolute. The flowery ivory-tower luxury of Vedism is another example of this same aspect of the Absolute.

All this glory of specialisation and wonder has its simple origin in the Self, which has been compared in the previous verse to mere vapour. Between the pure vaporous Self at the core and its multiple manifestations, we have to think of various levels of illusion or appearance, from the most abstract limit peripherally, to the most concrete manifestation centrally, which is still an appearance only.

Name and form are the first mental elements that emerge from the nothingness of the central and neutral Absolute Self at the core of our being. Being seems to be subjected to phenomenal becoming, but there is no real change in the evolutionary sense here. All is abstraction and magical illusion through grades of ignorance, thick or thin. The rainbow colours have no material basis in the blue sky. These are mere effects or optical illusions as known to science. This kind of illusion is the most basic, perhaps, but all other appearances also belong to the same order, with differences of degree of ignorance involved.

After name and form, which condition the pure Self at the core of our being, which is one and undivided, come other conditioning factors in graded order. Next mentioned are the senses, which appraise solidity or sound and other sense-impressions, and fuse them together into what is named here as the 'inner organ', which is a kind of *organon* as Aristotle would call it, with which, as instrument, we are able to measure all things. The Sanskrit word *karana* is an instrument of understanding, which latter is a kind of

event in consciousness culminating in more overt action-and-actor sense, which may be said to have its inception in this inner organ.

### Part III

Gayatri wrote this in response to my experience at the Kochi conference, but it also applies to the subject matter of the class, yet another instance of synchronous behavior of the universe:

All these scholars love to hear themselves talk and will expound ad nauseam on an idea forgetting that less is more. I love the story that Guru Nitya told us (or I may have read it in Love and Blessings) when he was sharing a stage with Swami Chinmayananda. Swami Chinmayananda introduced Guru Nitya saying "we have a Jnyani amongst us and he will be speaking to us about Brahman." Guru went up to the stage, sat down and quietly looked at everyone for a couple of minutes and then closed his eyes and sat there silently for more than half an hour. My sister knows a gentleman who was in the audience that day, a disciple of Swami Chinmayananda, and he related this story about Guru. He said that it was one of the most profound experiences in his life sitting in that audience and experiencing Brahman first hand.

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John H turns out to have a hidden talent:

This is a great verse - but I want to add my two bits about the tarot as I paid my way through a few terms at Southern Oregon College throwing cards.

The Magician in the best interpretation is where the 'I' becomes one with both the ultimate spirit and the material world - where the 'I' can paradoxically be at once in control and controlled - almost like a relay switch. The Fool, in the best interpretation, has lost all

sense of the 'I', and is just like the Magician, a conduit between the spiritual and the material. In some ways, they are identical in their best interpretations. The primary difference is how they are perceived - the fool is almost always trustworthy and the magician is not. When we ask them "What are you doing?" - we ask in a different tone of voice.

The main thing about Tarot is a card's relationship to other cards and the placement in the throwing. It's usually a better thing to start out as the fool and go to the magician than the other way around - if you are centered on material success that is. The inverse is where you might lose your portfolio, say, and learn that you have been an idiot to be too concerned with the material. Not an easy lesson for some people - in fact, tons of people have committed suicide because they have lost "things."

The Fool-Magician combination rocks because great lessons are about to occur, or are occurring. Nitya suggests this, if I am reading it properly. But enough about Tarot. One has to be careful with the deck designed by Waite - which is why I now use only playing cards, as the images don't frighten people when I throw cards. And I don't do it much anymore because it is actually very taxing and there is a danger of planting an idea in someone's head that then becomes a reality. In that sense, spell casting - which I have no desire to do to anybody. Dangerous stuff, karmic-wise.

Great verse - I will need to read it again and again.

#### Part IV

Jake is pumped about this terrific verse, which he rates #1. He wrote: "I regret missing the Verse 27 discussion of the previous week. In his Verse 27 exploration of the manifest and the transcendent, Nitya makes the contradictory claim concerning what is and what is not. I must have read his commentary a dozen times

before the obvious message he was communicating emerged for me. I find that verse the most illuminating of the 100—but that's just me.” Well, of course, “just me” is all any of us is, and nothing to be ashamed of. In a magical universe, everything is “normal,” as far as it goes, which is much farther than we think.... Here are his insights:

A brief and *key* verse to *That Alone*, verse 27 presents Narayana Guru's portrait of our Self and its position in the world of becoming. It is in this profound picture that the mystic sinks deeply into our interior experience/awareness of knowing in order to point out our position in the Absolute. As Nitya's commentary unfolds he makes blindingly clear what in our western experience has been shut up in a box labeled “unknowable.”

In a cosmic nutshell, Nitya goes to the heart of the matter on page 194 where he presents a concluding and an apparently logical contradiction that is anything but: “What is, is not known, while what is not, is known. Hence, it is called the Grand Magic.” To arrive at this destination, Nitya follows the traditional Indian line of deductive reasoning that, as Betty Heimann points out in her *Facets of Indian Thought*, originates in perception or sense impressions. The reasoning mind then “combines and compares [the perception] with former experience, and only from this results the collective view on them and the realization of true immanent laws” (p. 148). Absent in this dialectical process is any element of moralizing or any petitioning of a removed deity. In Nitya's commentary and the Guru's vision, non-dual reality leaves no room for illusion.

Nitya opens by referring to a deck of Tarot cards which begins with *the fool* and ends with *the magician*, a metaphor for our life cycle. These two cards denote the beginning and end of life: we enter as illiterate infants requiring training and protection and then die as magicians, having created a life out of our experience. In fact, says Nitya, our senses give our minds experiences that cannot be true because none of them last.

Everything mind-made dissolves into mystery sooner or later. By the same token, if we do not sensually experience at all, we do not have any experiences (that the mind also re-configures while in its dream state). The mind and senses thus continuously manufacture an endless series of activities constantly exploring and re-exploring worlds of interest.

As we experience the experiences, the *I* for which all this is telecast is the ego-I which attaches to or alienates from whatever is going on: this I like; that I don't; this frightens me; that entertains me, etc. Upon closer examination, however, this ego-identity is anything but stationary or isolated. It is more a "stream of consciousness" that scatters among countless memories that appear and disappear as we re-collect and try to reason our way through the day. There is, then, a compulsion to judge, to compare, recollect, examine. "That compulsion is called *manas* or *mind*" (p.192).

At this point in his commentary, Nitya turns to the question of what drives our compulsion. We are, he says, like the *Fool* of the Tarot deck who knows nothing but keeps asking, interrogating (the *vasanas*). As the consciousness keeps manufacturing experiences, like bubbles in a froth, the mind keeps interrogating and placing them in sequence and position, thereby establishing a time/space continuum so they can be held stable and recognizable. (Once we grow out of infancy, we attach names to everything and fit that everything into our systems.) When we invoke a name, a form comes to the interrogating mind in time and space for the doer, known, enjoyer judging all along—out of nothing that we can identify as real. This process is common to all of us. None of us *know* where it comes from, but each of us operates in it. What *is known*, then, is this process that deals exclusively with unstable/un-real phenomenal reality.

It is out of the unknown that this mind/sense known originates, Nitya points out. This "Cloud of Unknowing" can never be perceived on its own because our senses operate on the unknown (manifest) exclusively. The unknown (Absolute) can

only be detected in that which we do know, in the grand magic taking place in us all. Our pure Self is that which resides in the Cloud out of which the phenomenal world arises; these are “the two aspects of a non-dual reality. It is not dual, and yet it contains duality” (p. 194). This Janus-faced model presents us with a known which is unreal and forever dissolving and an unknown which is the constant/real continuously manifesting the known/unreal where our *ego-I* identity manufactures memories, vasanās, saṃskaras, makes judgments, etc.

Denying one or the other of these aspects makes the knowing of its opposite impossible, and that division represents, it seems to me, the commonality between those seeking salvation in another world solely and those seeking a utopian heaven on earth. In both cases, the world of perception is a veil of tears that is to be put behind as we ascend to some ideal state that, paradoxically, can only be constructed out of materials accumulated in that world of perception. Both of these ideal states are built on the same foundation of the principles common to phenomenal reality. No other basis is possible for those who mistake the known for what is real and invest it with ultimate value. The predictable redundancy illustrated in human history and the mind’s talent for manufacturing an endless roster of failed gods—from Jim Jones and the People’s Republics of North Korea and East Germany to extra-terrestrials and a bewildering array of New Age trance-channelers—demonstrate the hypnotic force of the non-self in the world of the known and its enormous capacity to divorce itself from the Self, “the knower of everything. . . . sitting in darkness” (p. 194).

The answer to this schizophrenic madness lies within, with the Self, concludes Nitya. And it is to this Self that the contemplative turns as he/she attempts to pierce the Cloud of Unknowing. This is the very exercise that Nitya points to in his concluding comments, a meditative position we all need to assume regularly as we witness the ego-self swirl about in its manufactured, constantly dissolving/appearing world. When we

know we are both and that we participate in both without illusion or attachment to illusion, we can know the beauty and magnificence of the Non-Dual Absolute.

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Quantum theory is doing its part to dissolve our fixed conceptualizations. Here are a few excerpts from the article *What is Real?* by Meinard Kuhlmann (Scientific American magazine, August 2013):

Physicists routinely describe the universe as being made of tiny subatomic particles that push and pull on one another by means of force fields. They call their subject “particle physics” and their instruments “particle accelerators.” They hew to a Lego-like model of the world. But this view sweeps a little-known fact under the rug: the particle interpretation of quantum physics, as well as the field interpretation, stretches our conventional notions of “particle” and “field” to such an extent that ever more people think the world might be made of something else entirely....

At first glance, the content of the Standard Model appears obvious. It consists, first, of groups of elementary particles, such as quarks and electrons, and, second, of four types of force fields, which mediate the interactions among those particles. This picture appears on classroom walls and in *Scientific American* articles. However compelling it might appear, it is not at all satisfactory....

Debate has swirled over... whether quantum field theory is ultimately about particles or about fields.... Even today both concepts are still in use for illustrative purposes, although most physicists would admit that the classical conceptions do not match what the theory says. If the mental images conjured up by the words “particle” and “field” do not match what the theory says, physicists and philosophers must figure out what to put in their place.

With the two standard classical options gridlocked, some philosophers of physics have been formulating more radical alternatives. They suggest that the most basic constituents of the material world are intangible entities such as relations or properties. One particularly radical idea is that everything can be reduced to intangibles alone, without any reference to individual things. It is a counterintuitive and revolutionary idea, but some argue that physics is forcing it on us. (42)

So let us take stock. We think of particles as tiny billiard balls, but the things that modern physicists call “particles” are nothing like that. According to quantum field theory, objects cannot be localized in any finite region of space, no matter how large or fuzzy it is. Moreover, the number of the putative particles depends on the state of motion of the observer. All these results taken together sound the death knell for the idea that nature is composed of anything akin to ball-like particles.

On the basis of these and other insights, one must conclude that “particle physics” is a misnomer: despite the fact that physicists keep talking about particles, there are no such things. One may adopt the phrase “quantum particle,” but what justifies the use of the word “particle” if almost nothing of the classical notion of particles has survived? It is better to bite the bullet and abandon the concept altogether. Some take these difficulties as indirect evidence for a pure field interpretation of quantum field theory. By this reasoning, particles are ripples in a field that fills space like an invisible fluid. Yet as we will see now, quantum field theory cannot be readily interpreted in terms of fields, either. (44)

A classical field lets you envision phenomena such as light as propagation of waves across space. The quantum field takes away this picture and leaves us at a loss to say how the world works.

Clearly then, the standard picture of elementary particles and mediating force fields is not a satisfactory ontology of the physical world. It is not at all clear what a particle or field even is. (45)



A growing number of people think that what really matters are not things but the relations in which those things stand. Such a view breaks with traditional atomistic or pointillist conceptions of the material world in a more radical way than even the severest modifications of particle and field ontologies could do. (45)

Acquiring a comprehensive picture of the physical world requires the combination of physics with philosophy. The two disciplines are complementary. Metaphysics supplies various competing frameworks for the ontology of the material world, although beyond questions of internal consistency, it cannot decide among them. Physics, for its part, lacks a coherent account of fundamental issues, such as the definition of objects, the role of individuality, the status of properties, the relation of things and properties, and the significance of space and time.

The union of the two disciplines is especially important at times when physicists find themselves revisiting the very foundations of their subject. Metaphysical thinking guided Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, and it is influencing many of those who are trying to unify quantum field theory with Einstein's theory of gravitation. Philosophers have written libraries full of books and papers about quantum mechanics and gravity theory, whereas we are only beginning to explore the reality embodied in quantum field theory. The alternatives to the standard particle and field views that we are developing may inspire physicists in their struggle to achieve the grand unification. (47)