

8/27/13
Verse 29

For the man who offers his mind-flowers to worship God
there is no other work to do;
pick flowers of the forest; or, if not that,
by ever-repeating the *maya*-formula *maya* will disappear.

Free translation:

For one who sacrifices the blossoms of the mind to the Supreme Lord,
there is no other duty to perform. Otherwise one can do overt action, such
as gathering flowers from the forest and engaging in ritualistic propitiation.
A third alternative is to be a contemplative who steadily avoids all snares of
phenomenal illusion by exercising proper discernment.

Nataraja Guru's

The mind-blossom plucking, who offers to the Great Master,
No need has he, other works to perform;
Else, let him pluck blossom wild, and if none is there,
The Maya spell let him repeat; the Maya goes.

This is one of those verses that seem to advocate a style of worship radically at variance with where the Guru has been taking us, and so it benefits more than most from the light that Nitya throws on it. There is a similar passage in the Bhagavad Gita, and I'll append my own comments on it in Part III. The gist is that it's all well and good to aim for the highest, but we also have to take into consideration that we are caught in some unhelpful attitudes that need to be cured before we can assume a fully absolutist stance. That means there has to be a wide open range of possibilities for stumbling mortals. The Gita notes this in IV, 11: "As each chooses to approach Me, even accordingly do I have regard for him. My very path it is, O Arjuna, that all men do tread from every (possible)

approach.” Many of those paths are bound to seem inferior and even ridiculous to us, unless we adopt Krishna’s open attitude.

Both Narayana Guru and the Gita refer to offering flowers as a unitive gesture, and over the centuries that kind of act has come to epitomize a spiritual attitude. It’s no wonder that highly educated people look down on such simple acts, which are instantly spoiled by any attempt to legitimize them with an explanation. If I may quote myself, from the excerpt in Part III:

Amusingly, a religious sect or denomination has grown up at many points where the symbolic language of the Gita has been taken literally. This is one such verse. Placing a flower on an altar dedicated to the God Krishna has a widespread currency. If done with perfection it is a unitive act, which automatically puts the devotee in contact with the Absolute in whatever form is most dear to them. Accompanying thoughts such as “This is a statement of my faith,” “I am worshipping Krishna now,” or “Krishna says this is the thing to do,” all vitiate the immaculate beauty of the gesture.

So it isn’t the flower, but the purity of the offering that matters. It could be anything, which is what the term “mind flower” implies. Whatever we do can be referred to a greater reality, which lifts it out of the ego’s grasp. Articles of faith are symbols to help us dig deeper into ourselves. All forms of worship are techniques for accessing the greater reality, whether of our own being or the universe’s. In the final analysis these are not two. The idea is not to limit ourselves to an occasional act of worship, but to convert our entire existence onto a unitive footing.

A gardener may grow her flowers with loving care and with her eye ever directed to the invisible forces that pulsate around the plants. She carefully selects the most perfect of them, arranges them harmoniously to show off their best features, and places them in a vase or perhaps on an altar in hopes that others may be uplifted by their beauty just as she is. From her simple gesture she teaches herself how to live every moment in an exalted state. If we sneer at her or pity her, it is we who experience an

ugly state of mind, not she. What she does may not suit us, but we can easily recognize it fits her exactly right.

Some of us saw the news item about a doctor who became a crusader against superstition in India. He gave up his career in medicine and went around the country exposing religious charlatans. Last week he was assassinated by two men. Pradeep sent a link:

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/25/world/asia/battling-superstition-indian-paid-with-his-life.html?pagewanted=1&_r=0 .

Nitya used to say if you take away someone's beliefs you should be prepared to replace them with something else. Apparently the doctor did not realize how important their beliefs are to people. He aggressively stripped away the magic show they loved, and left them with only the impoverished existence of their physical surroundings. While no one should condone his or anyone's murder, his impact was to take the joy and mystery out of life, which is a very cruel legacy. We should be more tolerant of provisional beliefs, so long as they aren't used to abuse people, which of course they often are. Nitya describes this eloquently, using one of his favorite literary references:

You should learn to cultivate beauty, love, service-mindedness in yourself. If a man has an idol or a picture of someone he adores, it is not only meaningless superstition. At least his mind is drawn to that thing as the central focus of his life. In *Les Miserables*, Jean Valjean always kept a candlestick with him which was given to him by the bishop, who was the first light to come into his life. For him the candlestick was the symbol of that light: Christian charity, the love of Christ, and the fearlessness of one who has turned to God for his guidance. He always kept the candlestick on the mantle, which he looked upon as an altar. He needed an object there. It possessed the magic to correct him.

To a person who is fully trained it may appear to be just a fetish, but to a beginner it is not a fetish, it is a spiritual necessity. You need a church to go to, a spiritual master to talk to, or something to adore and worship and revere as sacred, different from the rest of the world. You actually go and gather flowers and make an offering there. It may look ridiculous, childish, to go and stand before a picture, fold one's hands

and say “aum.” But it is not ridiculous when you are getting into this new mode of relating yourself to the Unknown. Certainly in the picture there is no one, but when you stand before it you are not thinking that God is in the picture, or that the brass piece or the stone idol actually contains the deity.

Yes, this is all about “relating yourself to the Unknown.” Some rationalists believe they already know everything, and there cannot be a more impoverished attitude than that. We should always remember—it should be utterly obvious—that we know almost nothing. We have a faint glimmer of light at our disposal, in the midst of an encircling darkness that has proved to be filled with potency. Apparently unlimited potential. What is the source of our arrogance that we and our chosen group are knowers, while the rest are ignorant? Narayana Guru and the Upanishadic rishis know that such beliefs are the real superstitions, the ones that do the most damage, that start wars and throw innocents into jails, that spread hatred and discomfort. Elsewhere Nitya reveals their origin in ego fears and obedience training from childhood. They are the very bondage we seek to free ourselves from. So now we know why Narayana Guru mentions flower offerings in his 29th verse, well along in this monumental study. There is much more everywhere than meets the eye.

The bottom line is we need some way to relate to a greater reality, or we will stay stuck in a lesser reality. The gurus are not asking us to adopt a humiliating program beneath our dignity, but simply to align what we love—the flowers of our mind—with the general welfare. It’s all too easy to see the faults in other people’s beliefs, but we shouldn’t correct them until we have repaired our own faults first. As Deb put it, to the extent that Narayana Guru details practice, he’s helping each of us construct a pathway to open ourselves up. There are only the barest suggestions, hints really, given here, and it’s up to us to flesh them out in accordance with our own predilections.

Bobby introduced a theme that wove through the evening, that dichotomies make things resonate. Entities need their opposite to be complete. This is the maya-formula that resolves the tyranny of maya. Maya is nothing more or less than existence, the inevitable limitations of

things that exist. Of course, we make matters worse by interpreting those limitations in paranoid or superstitious ways, and that's something we can certainly improve on. When our vision is obscured by maya, we can scrutinize it, look for the complementary aspects and the hidden motivations. Once we perceive the flip side of the coin, maya loosens its hold on us.

Nancy Y sent a "random interesting fact" recently. Eminent scientist Niels Bohr (1885-1962) received many high honors late in his life. Because of this:

Bohr designed his own coat of arms which featured a taijitu (symbol of yin and yang) and the motto in Latin: *contraria sunt complementa*: "opposites are complementary."

Paul and Mick discussed Descartes and Sartre, who Nitya had brought into the discussion. Mick turned Descartes' famous mantra around, asserting "I am, therefore I think." Paul noticed that Sartre also reversed the traditional belief that essence precedes existence (as in God created man), asserting that existence is the prerequisite for essence (man creates God). Many twentieth century philosophers took the opposite stand of the received wisdom of the day, and many important—dare we say essential—insights resulted. In order to question ourselves effectively, we have to apply an opposing force to our habitual momentum. While not too many have the fortitude to do it rigorously enough to really inaugurate transformations, the option is always being mooted by the gurus, and it was heartening that the class took it seriously.

As to "I am, therefore I think," or its contrary, "I think, therefore I am," the linkage of existence with thought is an interesting field. Depending on how you define it, thinking *is* existence. If we don't think, we don't exist. Ideas about stopping thought are aimed at *conscious* thought, which we now know is the thinnest veneer on our total being. We halt conscious thinking to allow subconscious inspiration to come to the surface. But no living being yet observed emits no electrical activity at all: the brain is still humming away even during periods of total unconsciousness, coma, or complete absorption.

So stopping thinking is not an effective technique for evolving. Maya includes all the ridiculous constructs of thought we have developed since conception, and liberation includes freeing ourselves from their hold on us. If we simply stop thinking, all those constructs remain unchanged. The active spirituality of the Gurukula and Vedanta in general aims to counteract false beliefs by introducing their opposite and thereby neutralizing them. Last week I quoted George Thadathil's book, *Vision from the Margin*, about Nitya's philosophy, and here it is again. This paragraph is based on Nitya's ideas from his biography of Narayana Guru:

[In the Narayana Gurukula tradition] Advaita is not pure monism, rather a holding of tension of the available polarities, as if in search of a midway; this is what the notion of nonduality adds as a qualification. Despite textual evidence to delineate his philosophy it should be noted that [Narayana Guru] was unique in being non-aligned to any then-existing religious, sectarian or caste communities. He did not preach and promote nondualism as a creed, nor did he consider any school of philosophy should be polemically decried or outwitted to propagate his. Similarly, he is unique in that he was not tainted or coloured in the least by patriotism, pride in Indian culture or Hinduism. In contemporary rating of socially conscious philosophers of modern India this is a factor not sufficiently stressed. (134)

It's a wonderful paradox, isn't it: we hold a tension of opposites, and by so doing we don't need to combat anyone or anything. Narayana Guru was simply being who he was. He didn't have to compete or otherwise debase himself to prove himself. It was not naivety on his part, he was intelligently attuned to all aspects of the situation, but because of his neutrality he never threw his weight around. His position was weighty enough to have its own gravity.

Paul had talked to an osteopath about his degenerating hip bones, and one of the things the doctor told him was that bones grow stronger when they are under stress. With little or no stress, bones degenerate. Paul noted

that Nitya teaches that perception itself is a kind of agitation, of stress induction, but that doesn't mean we should do away with it. We all agreed (or most of us, anyway) that the brain tends to putrefy when it doesn't have challenges to meet. The key is, as Nataraja Guru says in his commentary, "This constant conflict of interests, in which we are caught each moment of our lives, has to be made fluid and flexible in the light of higher contemplative wisdom."

Mick brought up a perfect example of how this plays out in real life. Once again in America, a disturbed young man recently went to a school with an assault rifle and 500 rounds of ammunition, planning to kill children. A school clerk drew him into a conversation, told him about her own troubles, and sympathized with him. Eventually she was able to get him to put down the gun and surrender. Like Arjuna in the Gita, she didn't fight him and didn't run away, though she might have wanted to. "I'm not the hero, I was terrified," she said. She held her ground and treated the man like a fellow human being, and it worked. The local police chief said "this is a woman who just kept her calm, kept her wits about herself, maintained her composure in this very dangerous situation." It didn't just happen: the woman brought everything she knew to bear, including her religious training and experience in various kinds of difficult relationships. She was calm and terrified at the same time. Digging deep inside to act impeccably under stress is the mark of a yogi, or as she would put it, a mark of God's grace. Whatever you call it, it's an inspiring example for everyone.

As a side note, the woman is black. Because she did something good, her race is not mentioned in any news story I saw. I finally found a video interview that provided indisputable evidence. If it had been a negative news story, her race would have been the first thing mentioned. A yogi keeps these matters even; propagandists emphasize polarities in ways to further their agenda. It's wise to keep these matters in mind so we can neutralize them. After all, that's how maya grabs us. If we don't oppose prejudice and propaganda, it affects us without our realizing it.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

To most people the world is bifurcated into the external and the internal. The internal is the breeding ground of imagination. Imagination can come in the form of worries, regrets and remorse, revivals of memory, anxiety for the future and the creation of fantasies of future possibilities. The mind enters the external through the organs of perception, and stimulates the urge to act. Like the waves of the ocean, mind is always restless. The subject and the object stand apart as two different fields. In the wakeful state and in the dream state, different kinds of interests engage the mind; it is as if mind has an obsession to be confronted with problems. Like green grass sprouting the day after a summer rain, new thoughts, desires and worries pop up in the mind after every interlude of peace. Hardly anyone remembers that his true being is the pure existence of an ever-substantiating value that is perennially dear to him.

As the flowering phenomenality again and again offers distraction to the mind, one forgets the goal of one's life. Although the consciousness of the Self is a pure effulgence of the Absolute, it shimmers like a dying spark in the darkness of nescience, and even that little spark is clothed in one's own ego and is mistaken for a personal self. The imperishable cannot be held for long in a perishable receptacle. When the vessel breaks, the wine flows out. The modalities of nature, sattva, rajas and tamas, come again and again to cause different states of consciousness.

Some people are fortunate to know that life has a meaning and that it can be lived by readjusting one's thoughts and by walking in a disciplined way. Even though these people commit themselves to such a life, the beauty or grandeur of it gives them a sense of self-righteousness which tempts them to show off their virtues. In their enthusiasm, they become salesmen of a new creed and are no longer in touch with the spirit that initially moved them. To most other people life is like a bleak desert; it has no goal, no path and no assurance of protection. Occasionally they see a mirage and become fascinated by it, but after having been disillusioned a couple of times they resort to fate. Some people think that society is at fault and all ills of the mind can be rectified by reorganizing the society. In the name of this, many utopian ideas are put forward and people get into

squabbles, street fights, or even wholesale war. What is the way of getting out of these anomalies of maya?

Life should be considered a sacred gift to be consecrated for the good of all. The symbolic ritual of consecration implies a supreme principle, to which its own counterpart makes a wholesale surrender, so as to gain reunion with the whole. One way of offering is to think of one's own inner moods of mind as the fresh flowers of the garden of consciousness, which can be offered to the Absolute. This is what a seer does when composing hymns of praise such as the psalms of the Bible, the hymns of the Upanishads, and epics like the Ramayana or the Mahabharata, or when recording the highest allegiance that man can give to the Absolute as presented in the Holy Quran and the Talmud. A person of such dedication knows no greater value than that of the Absolute.

If such an all-out dedication does not come as a spontaneous and natural expression, one should cultivate reverence for the Divine by gathering actual flowers from a garden and performing ritualistic worship. If this is done with sincerity, it might catch on and change one's life radically. It is like setting into motion a seemingly immobile flywheel. After some laborious initial rotations, when the wheel gains momentum it goes so fast that the physical weight of the wheel becomes negligible. This is the example set before others by Sri Ramakrishna.

The minds of certain people can find meaning only by gaining certitude at every step. They employ their minds diligently so as to penetrate deeper and deeper into the secrets of the phenomenal world of appearance to unravel the deep significance of life. Their aim is the visualization of ultimate truth. When they achieve this goal, they attain immortality.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

A SERIES of intermediate forms of meditative self-discipline are passed in quick review here so that the Guru could pass on to subjects of more seriously contemplative import. There is the

constant question put by spiritual aspirants about the regimes or disciplines to get rid of error and arrive at wisdom. The Gita refers to them as sacrifice, after the model of the fire-sacrifice. Here the Guru adopts the analogy of the idol-worship of South Indian temples where, instead of graded sacrifices leading up to the culminating wisdom sacrifice, there is the flower-offering. The flowers represent the blossomings of the mind which are impediments to real wisdom. The mind is defined by Sankara as the seat of representative functionings (samkalpa) and wrong resolves (vikalpa). The mind-functionings have to be sublimated from the lower to the higher levels by graded self-disciplines, before wisdom could abolish the possibility of errors of judgement in respect of values or realities that affect our lives by their attractions and repulsions. This constant conflict of interests, in which we are caught each moment of our lives, has to be made fluid and flexible in the light of higher contemplative wisdom. When the possibility of error weakens, wisdom prevails more and more. Ritualistic requirements for self-discipline can be overlooked in such a case.

The reference to flower-gathering (or rather plucking with some effort) is an inner event corresponding to an outer one, beginning with the first degree of self-discipline. We have to imagine an aspirant who, as may be usually expected in South India, is going in the morning to the temple in the city where he lives, to offer flowers gathered from his garden; perhaps, if he is one who happens to have arrived at his third stage of self-discipline, in which he has already left behind his home in favour of a forest habitation, then he cannot have garden flowers, but must content himself with wild flowers. The more removed he is from society, the less available become the garden flowers. He might, so that he could avoid the crowded competitive world altogether, prefer to live at a seaside or in a desert where even flowers that are wild may not be available. In proportion to his aloofness the need for ritualistic or necessary action weakens, and finally he comes to a

stage when the mere mental exercise of repeating words of wisdom-content would have the effect of conquering the forces of illusion.

Part III

One of my most exciting insights in my Gita study came in the ninth chapter, near the most rarified aspect of the teachings. There is a pair of verses that resemble Verse 29 of Atmo, having a commonly misunderstood image sheltering a profound mystical symbolism. I'm happy to share it:

26) He who offers to Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water, that do I accept as being offered with devotion by one who makes the right effort.

All scriptures are filled with symbols. Part of the pleasure of studying them is in decoding the symbols and making them relevant and meaningful to our present life. Unknown to most casual readers, another graded series is presented here in veiled form, offering an arboreal image of increasing maturity in the devotee. Its significance is universally missed, a literal reading being the norm. We are given a botanical symbol for brahmacharya, for walking the path of the Absolute, which is traditionally depicted as having four distinct stages.

This is a perfect example of a sublime teaching that is obscured by the accretion of puerile interpretation and practice. Because it has been taken literally for centuries, if not millennia, commentators look at the parade of simple folk trustingly placing a flower on the altar as being endorsed by the Upanishadic rishis. So they need look no further for the meaning of this verse. After all, it's a common practice to put devotional objects on altars! But to the wise, any effort to understand intelligently is just as or more meaningful than placing a banana in front of a statue, which has to be the most basic and perfunctory relation with the Absolute

possible. Let's take a look at what Krishna is really conveying, in a superlative metaphor.

Reproduction is an eternal, vertical factor in living beings. A leaf has no reproductive elements per se, but it takes in nourishment that leads to the development of the ability. So the leaf is a very early—call it virginal—stage in the reproductive process. Next the flower, the explosion of intricate beauty that inspires hearts everywhere. The sexual or erotic aspects of life are symbolized by the flower. Out of such youthful exuberance comes the mature fruit bearing the seeds of immortality, a blueprint for the next generation. When the essence of the fruit is extracted from the pulp, the final refinement is known as juice or water. This symbolizes wisdom stripped of all its material trappings and extraneous factors, in other words, its ideal or essential meaning. To put it baldly, the reproduction in question is the reanimation of wisdom through a well-examined life. We begin life in ignorance and develop wisdom during its course, as in Bergson's reversal of Newton: "The universe is a machine for making Gods." Four broad stages of the development are poetically epitomized here as leaf, flower, fruit and juice.

A brahmachari is initially like a leaf, taking in nourishment in the form of wisdom from the preceptor and storing it in their tissues. When enough of this stimulating energy has been taken in, the student begins to "flower." Like a civilization in flower or the flowering of an art form, this means an outburst of creative enthusiasm combined with a dedicated effort to actualize the new forms. When the flower of burgeoning awareness is pollinated with inspiration, it begins to develop into a fruit, which is the stage when other beings can begin to take nourishment from the brahmachari. All the hard work is coming to fruition or culmination, and "by their fruits ye shall know them." (Matt. 7.20. Actually, Matthew 7 is a worthwhile companion read to this verse.) When the fruits are perfectly ripe, their natural tendency is to fall on the ground and spread their seeds, to start the process anew. Here in this symbol, the seeds are gathered and pressed for their

juice, where they can ferment into the “wine” of spirit. Others can sip the nectar for many years after, and so partake of the same spirit directly themselves. In other words, the student must become the teacher, so that the wisdom lineage can continue.

Krishna is not asking for simple offerings to be made at religious altars, he is saying that in whatever stage of maturization the seeker may be, he accepts the sincerity of their feelings over their degree of advancement. A simple child is endeared to the Absolute exactly to the same extent as an enthusiastic neophyte or a wizened pundit. What matters is their attitude, not their sophistication. It’s beautiful to put a flower on the altar, but right understanding gives it meaning.

This is the correct attitude for the Absolute to have, since it is always neutral. Each person receives out of it what they put into it, plus the mysterious blessing of divine beneficence to add some negentropy to the system. It’s a harmonious feedback loop.

Rabindranath Tagore might have had the symbolism of this verse in mind when he penned, “The leaf becomes flower when it loves / The flower becomes fruit when it worships.”

Amusingly, a religious sect or denomination has grown up at many points where the symbolic language of the Gita has been taken literally. This is one such verse. Placing a flower on an altar dedicated to the God Krishna has a widespread currency. If done with perfection it is a unitive act, which automatically puts the devotee in contact with the Absolute in whatever form is most dear to them. Accompanying thoughts such as “This is a statement of my faith,” “I am worshipping Krishna now,” or “Krishna says this is the thing to do,” all vitiate the immaculate beauty of the gesture.

We might laugh at such foibles as taking symbols literally, except that it is widespread and vehemently defended by the “faithful” everywhere. For instance, many people insist that the Bible must be taken literally. Even though doing so means Jesus literally said that he spoke in parables, the parables are to be taken at face value. Therefore the image of seeds being strewn around, with some landing on rocky, unfertile soil where they wither and

die, while others land on well-prepared, fertile soil and flourish, is really just about agriculture. It does not, it cannot imply, because the Bible doesn't literally say it, that words of wisdom, which are the seeds of intelligence and are spread by spiritual teachers, are comprehended by those who have prepared their minds to understand, but they fall on deaf ears in those who have more limited interests. Literalists are one more version of the rocky soil where words of wisdom expire unheeded.

We should not be surprised that ancient texts rely more heavily on nature-based metaphors than is the practice today, since people lived much closer to nature in those days. Neil Douglas-Klotz, in his book *The Hidden Gospel*, examines the Aramaic roots of Biblical language, which relies heavily on agricultural allusions. The original word used for *good* means ripe, and the word translated as *evil* means unripe. This takes the heavy sting out of Biblical diatribes as they have come down to us, with their thick barricade between the saved and the damned. So-called evil just needs more time to ripen. It is in no way barred from becoming good, given enough sunlight and nourishment. Viewing life like this teaches us to be patient with the unripe people among us, instead of blasting them literally or figuratively. We should lend them a hand rather than offering them a fist. This Biblical ideal bears a close resemblance to the present verse, where the Absolute is endeared by whoever approaches it, in whatever stage of development they may be.

As an interesting side study, the English words 'offer' and 'offering' occur several times in this chapter, but they come from different Sanskrit terms in every case. Back in verse 16 the word used referred simply to an offering in the fire sacrifice. Here there is more subtlety. "He who offers to Me with devotion a leaf," etc. carries the sense of asking or begging for, requesting. There is a note of condescension, an apparent reference to seekers of boons from their religiously-inspired offerings. The second instance within the verse implies the more straightforward "brought near,

presented.” The words thus imply a conversion from a selfish or ill considered act into a pure one, changing duality into unity.

27) What you do, what you eat, what you offer, what you give, what austerity you practice—let that be done as an offering to Me.

Right away we have another verse widely cited to uphold a trite attitude toward spirituality. The difficult and expert practice of unitive action is watered down to a tip of the hat to a deity. Just mentally offer whatever you are doing to your favorite god and then carry on, and you have done your duty.

By contrast, the mystical attitude presented here strives to see the Absolute as infusing, inspiring and energizing every action. We “give back” to the creative source by living fully, by expressing the divine energies in artistic and meaningful ways. We already know that yoga is reason in action (II, 50) and will soon be told the yogi is expert (XII, 16). A simplistic reading of this verse, while not totally uncalled for, certainly sells Krishna’s teachings short. Sometimes the Way is easy and sometimes it is difficult. Here we are called to embody unitive action, which is a tremendous challenge involving all our intelligence and talents. Chapter XVIII, verse 37 reminds us “that happiness which is like gall at first, ambrosial at the end, born of lucid self-understanding, is called sattvic.” There is always difficulty at the beginning, but by now we should have passed the beginning.

Once again, what you eat means more broadly what you consume: your intake of stimuli. The whole being is under consideration here, not just one aspect of it. What you give goes outward, and what you consume goes inward. These of course should be in some form of yogic balance, input and output equalized and moderate.

Krishna is not finished with his discourse on the subtleties of making offerings. The first occurrence of “offering” here has a straightforward sacrificial sense and undoubtedly refers to the image of the previous verse, but the second instance means

“consigning, entrusting, delivering or giving back.” This underlines the reciprocal nature of all the actions mentioned. The Absolute inspires, and we perspire. At first this could be dualistically imagined as being like a master musician and their instrument, but with yogic expertise the two sides move ever closer together, until musician and instrument are one unified expression of glorious music.

We can do no better to sum up this revaluation of sacrifice than to quote Nataraja Guru, from his *Integrated Science of the Absolute*, Vol. II:

All spiritual striving anywhere in the world is meant to be comprised under this master notion of sacrifice.... Everything with good as an end has to involve some kind of sacrifice as a means. Nothing is gained without risk of some sort, and sometimes one risks all to gain all. These are basic notions in spirituality.

When man undertakes sacrificial works of various kinds to attain high or low ends in the world of values, some sacrifices are superior to others and imply an intelligent understanding of both the phenomenal and noumenal counterparts in the world of the elementals or the gods. Both the elementals and the gods, however, should be understood as implicit in the Self of man who projects these worlds of value from within himself. It is in the Self where ends and means are finally cancelled out in terms of final liberation or emancipation. (12-13)

And lastly, Nataraja Guru again on the important secret implied here, from his Gita commentary:

The sense of value and wisdom are both brought together and the path merges with the goal, as we shall presently see more clearly. Salvation is not something for which we wait at the end of meritorious conduct, but the conduct itself when

surrendered to the Absolute is virtually a form of emancipation.

In this cancelling out of ends and means, the path and the goal, of the meritorious actions and the resultant emancipation, consists the secret of the yoga as presented in the Gita. (405)

Part IV

John sent a treasure of a story:

I have wrestled with what some of my friends have referred to as “idolatry” for a good many years and the jury is out. Even if it was in, I’m not sure I’d believe my own committee. Like the bumper sticker says, don’t believe everything you think.

But I do have a story about the things that we keep and how they help us get to a higher spiritual place. I catalogued and appraised the papers and books of Senator Mark O. Hatfield. It took years to do this. I would arrive at his home very early in the morning and the housekeeper would let me in and I’d get to work. I’d be gone by the time the Senator would get up - as in those days I ran the Great Northwest Bookstore (now totally gone) - and I’d need to be at the shop to deal with book scouts, customers, orders, and the usual bookstore business. But veering back to the Senator - every morning, at dawn, the Senator would come out in his night shirt and go to his study, open a closet, bow his head, sometimes wiping his eyes and muttering “forgive me.” He would then go back to his bedroom and I could hear him getting ready to rise and shine.

About a year into the project, he actually noticed me in the corner cataloging and appraising his books and papers. He said in that deep voice of his: “John, good morning. What are you doing here?” I told him that this was the only time of the day I could work for him, as I had to run a bookstore and then I had responsibilities with my autistic son at home in the afternoon and

evening. He smiled and said: “You have probably wondered what I am doing every morning.” I told him that it was none of my business, but he insisted on showing me his closet.

He opened the closet door. There was a lacquered box and a plain little hour glass like object - both had sand in them. Every morning the Senator would study these, and ask for forgiveness. You may not know, but the Senator had participated as a landing craft operator during the bloody battle of Iwo Jima - and the sand in the hour glass was from the shores where so many young men perished in terrible fighting. The Senator had also been among the first American troops to occupy Hiroshima. The sand in the lacquered box was from Ground Zero. The things that the young Mark Hatfield experienced shaped his every decision until the end of his life. With tears welling in his eyes he explained: “You see, I must never, never forget. I must never forget. Never.”

It is interesting that objects can hold what the mind cannot. Not unlike the pages of a book.

* * *

Jake’s take:

In this verse, the Guru presents three ways we can live in the immanent while maintaining our focus on the transcendent. These practical suggestions are broad in scope, can overlap, and in the final analysis become customized for each of us. The road to enlightenment is a solitary one no matter how communal we try to make it.

We forget our divine origins, write Nitya in his opening paragraphs, because the distractions that Maya creates out of our endless acting out of our samskaras/vasana provoked worlds of interest. Projected onto phenomenon, those so identified objects of interest are mistaken for the source of desire, and conflict with

everyone else follows as we pursue our desires in the world of illusion. Escaping this samsaric wheel is the subject of the twelfth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, says Nitya, a section in which Krishna offers Arjuna a series of suggestions that are in the present verse boiled down to three: the route for the advanced student, the first path for the beginner, and the second path for the rationally-minded beginner. In these three alternatives I think Nitya has essentially created three broad procedures for those of us in the West, especially in contemporary America, where our cultural history and current condition combine to erase in us any trace of our divine memory. In a culture thoroughly embedded in fear and projection—in an existential terror of being “found out” and thereby exposed by our own true Selves—the reality of our divine source is our greatest enemy. Indeed, psychologists teach us as a matter of common knowledge that we fear what has already happened. We fight today’s battles by projecting past conditions on present ones and, in the process, are compelled to viscerally defend that which enslaves (and no longer exists).

Nitya writes that those closest to waking-up have the advantage of knowing their divine source and therefore have the capacity to rest in the bi-polarity of that source in the Absolute. In that position, these spiritual seekers are able to perceive the passing world of necessity for what it is (or not) as their lives unfold. Haunted by fears, however, most seekers find the first path impossible, and for them Nitya offers a second: “starting from scratch” (p. 205). For this discipline, beauty, service, mindlessness must be deliberately cultivated by way of a church, guru, discipline and/or “something to adore and worship and revere as sacred.” Starting with any number of overt practices and symbols does not mean forever staying with them; they offer the beginner tools to work with.

As Nitya suggests, that same beginner may find such formality too contrived or obvious to be of use, and it is in his third alternative that he discusses what I perceive as the most practical and useful route for contemporary Americans—for those who can

still re-member the fundamental value of individual intellectual inquiry while having been so thoroughly propagandized during the last half century by ignorance from all directions—(a Vedantin route if there ever was one) as laid out by Nataraja Guru in his commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita*: “free philosophical criticism and exegesis” (p. 634), the dialectics of knowledge. Nitya suggests we begin the journey by our asking ourselves what is true about phenomenal manifestation. It is with the answer that more penetrating questions arise. Each phenomenal event or object disappears eventually, thereby putting us in the situation of contemplating the nature of this constant motion while occupying one true position of stability. That position is nameless, but what we experience in the world is named and changing. True beauty, joy, and so on, are beyond the notions of *pretty, ugly, happy, sad*—names denoting transient conditions which illuminate transcendent values however fleeting.

Because the original question opens such a huge “can of transcendent worms,” Nitya offers some practical advice for our moving forward: “the guidance of some basic dictum” (206). Bringing this point to our conscious awareness is, in my estimation, Nitya’s most insightful contribution in this commentary. In following any kind of questioning, we follow a line of thought more often than not largely out of awareness. We seek answers that lead to more questions. Having in mind some dictum to begin with can give that questioning a coherence otherwise lacking. In this suggestion, Nitya is offering us the standard Indian procedure of reacting first to phenomenon, then to our sense interpretations of them and our mental constructions arising from the combination: once combined with memory, the process moves forward. If we can maintain a focus on our essential dictum (that will itself evolve), we can use our mind as a tool for waking up.

In his discussion of dictums, Nitya presents a variety of them, making the case finally that philosophers, East and West, essentially follow this process of exploring a specific dictum but

do so often through thousands of pages of published work. Sartre, for example, follows his exploration of “existence precedes essence” while Karl Jaspers continually explores his dictum that “the seeming world before us is the only world that we live in.” Spiritual leaders, likewise, writes Nitya, practice this same procedure. Jesus points out, “seek ye first the kingdom of heaven and all else shall be added unto you” (206) while the Vedantins note, “thou art that.” In each dictum is the fundamental basis on which to begin questioning and by so doing present ourselves with new insights.

Part V

Susan brought up an important issue via email:

I feel that I am not well enough educated in philosophy to fully understand the tension between opposites, let alone the resonance. My understanding of this seems just at my fingertips but fading out of my grasp as I turn my attention toward it.

Is it like the story of the white horse?

[<http://scotteitsworth.tripod.com/id41.html>] One can't say that something is good or bad, only that it exists or has happened or hasn't happened, etc. That story has helped me many times when I jump to some rash conclusion. If I can pull myself back from being swept up in the sadness, madness, jubilation, I do feel that place of neutrality where my emotions are not in charge. I become more the observer. This is not to say that I do not feel sadness when things are sad or joy when something wonderful happens, but rather that I keep my two feet on the ground. In the past I sometimes was so sad or mad about something that my world was shrouded in black clouds for days. I know I found this to be a place of comfort at times, despite its misery, but this was a false comfort. My life and peace were almost completely sidetracked and hijacked by these times. I couldn't see how my emotions and senses were running the show. Since beginning my study of Nitya's works and coming

to the Gurukula, I have found a way to get some distance on my drama and to see it more clearly. Wonderful! I can see that there is a neutral place and that it is between opposites. This is non-duality, right? This is unitive? I know I'm asking for precise definitions and that this is sometimes counterproductive. But it helps to have some concrete language so that this quasi-conception doesn't swirl around in my head.

But is this the tension of opposites that leads to resonance?

Dear Susan,

Thanks for your thoughtful musings, which are by no means rudimentary [she had protested they were]. Your question about the tension of opposites is very important.

Monism or simple unity does not have any actual referent in the universe; it just is. While that may be beautiful enough, it is quiescent, peaceful. It doesn't move. The horse parable is directing us to this neutral state, because our interpretation of events in terms of good and evil is so limiting. The dynamic tension I wrote about in the notes is somewhat different: when opposites are brought together they not only neutralize each other, there is a lot of energy generated. If the like poles of two magnets are brought near each other, they wriggle and twist every which way to try to remain apart. We have to force them together with a greater effort than their own inherent resistance. Our response to events and the events themselves are just like that. Ideally they are on the same magnetic pole. If we have an opposite understanding to what the situation actually is, the opposing poles just bang together and come to rest. Then nothing more happens. The result is static. That might explain why ignorant interpretations are so attractive—they bring us to a state of rest, of apparent ease. “It was good enough for grandpa, and it's good enough for me.” Or “I'm on vacation.” Ignore it and it will go away, in other words.

If you are having an argument with a spouse or friend, the differing interpretations are pressing toward each other and

generating heat by friction. It's one situation, but it has two (or more) opposing factions. The force of the opposition can spark a lot of insights—new ways to comprehend aspects of the relationship. Understood in this way, the conflict changes from being painful and hostile to being exciting and revelatory. It is dynamic. If we simply acquiesce or otherwise give up, no friction is generated, so we don't learn anything. That's the "normal" way: give up, accept the predicament as it is, surrender to the other. Then the energy drains away. We may be relieved, but we are no longer gleaning insights.

This is a rather extreme example. I'll try to find time to think of some others. So that is itself an example. If I gave you a pat answer and felt I had done my duty, the subject would be dropped. But because there is a dynamism in my interest in addressing your thoughts, I am open to new insights coming. I expect them to come along, if we keep the subject alive. We should have a conversation where ideas go back and forth, mutually augmenting each other. That's far more interesting than if you treat me as a wise person and simply accept what I write to you, which amounts to dropping the subject. If we're just two ordinary people, we can keep the tennis match going, and occasionally come up with a shot we've never made before.

Oh yes, and I don't suppose the tension of opposites is well known to philosophy, it's mainly with the ancient Greeks and in the yoga philosophy of the Gurukula and its sources in Vedanta.

Now, you are really thinking about being in a state of darkness and coming out of it through equalization of opposites. That's what we're all seeking, first of all. When we are in darkness, we tend to cling to one aspect of the situation, the "false comfort" of misery, often enough. I think we all know the state. We don't come out of it simply by turning to its opposite, but by opposing our state of mind as it truly exists with its contrary. I'm not saying this very well. It's not "I'm here and the right state is over there." It's "Here's where I am, and I'm going to add this other thing that will help me get unstuck from this place." It's an

active, not passive, process. It's not about going elsewhere, but making here more expansive and thus more comfortable.

Bohr's motto again: *contraria sunt complementa*: "opposites are complementary." It's not that one pole is right and the other wrong, but that they are related aspects of the total situation. For us to know the total situation, we can't eliminate half of it. That's a mistake we keep making until we become somewhat stabilized in dynamic yoga.

Please let me know if this helps at all, or if I'm just blowing smoke.

Peace and chaos,
Scott

More:

I went on a jog and thought of a couple more aspects, including that this is a very central and important question. Why do you think your questions are out of line? You should be proud of them!

If we sit in a cloud of misery (or anything else!) and simply assume it will go away, sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't. Clouds have a tendency to gather and reinforce themselves. If we look into the cause of the cloud, we see we are generating it, it's an outgrowth of our own state of mind. It's our spit bug spit. That means that doing nothing will only prolong the misery. If we could *really* do nothing, that would be very healing, but we aren't really doing nothing. We are unconsciously generating the clouds. Thus the norm is that our cloud production proceeds unchecked. It is coming from deep down in us, so wishful thinking doesn't have much effect. To be effective we have to intelligently oppose the quirk of mind that is spinning the storm. The tension of opposites is the actual pressure of counteracting our

negative tendencies, once we recognize them. It is not, for instance, thinking, “I’ve been bad and now I’ll be good.” That’s merely changing the interpretation we overlay onto the situation. We have to dig deeper than that.

You have emerged to a great extent from your cloud of misery because together we have actively thrown light into the darkness. You are in the process of transcending the polarity of happy/sad, want/don’t want, to stand grounded in your own strength. I once warned you it wasn’t going to be easy or quick, but I think you are beginning to see that what emerging now is very much more satisfactory than simply redirecting your self-delusion to a less egregious version.

Here’s another take:

I have a couple of good friends who oppose me in every statement I make. (One of them will appear in the next verse notes.) How I would love to have them agree with me! They do occasionally, and it feels great. But if they agreed with me more often, I would just feel satisfied and maybe a bit egotistical. Pleased with myself. My friends’ dynamic opposition forces me to dig deeper and find a true justification for my opinions—they don’t hold up simply because I believe in them any more. Most of the time I’m extremely grateful for this, after the initial angry reaction simmers down. Our ego wants to be right all the time, and tries to craft an environment where that’s the case, truth be damned. In the process it sabotages our freedom and openness. So it needs to be consciously counteracted. It is a blessing of the guru principle of the universe when this happens to us. Invite it in, if you dare. Watch the ego’s burst of defensiveness, and let it die down. Sooth yourself with kind, supportive words, then look clearly at what produced the reaction. We really can cure ourselves, dispel the clouds and let the sun shine in.

Enough for now,
Scott

Susan wrote back:

When you talk about the argument with a spouse or friend, immediately I am thinking how I dislike arguments in the first place. I can't stand disagreeing, first because of that ego problem (of course I like to be right!) but also because I have a lingering-from-childhood problem with arguments. In my family, such things were handled badly. My parents argued almost every night, behind closed doors. It was loud and mean. I never saw any resolution or peace resulting from these arguments. As children, my brother and I were encouraged to be obedient and not rock the boat. If we didn't follow this line, there was anger and unhappiness and again no way to resolve or discuss it. My first inclination that arguments could be healthful was when I visited my friend Su's home after graduating from college. I ate dinner with her large family and they argued loudly and happily throughout. Wow! From then on I realized that arguments didn't need to be something to avoid at all costs but it wasn't until about 10 years ago that I learned how important disagreements were. It's that dialectical thing. I just looked dialectics up for kicks—kind of fun. Here's what it includes:

1. logic
2. : discussion and reasoning by dialogue as a method of intellectual investigation; specifically : the Socratic techniques of exposing false beliefs and eliciting truth: the Platonic investigation of the eternal ideas
3. the logic of fallacy
4. : the Hegelian process of change in which a concept or its realization passes over into and is preserved and fulfilled by its opposite; also : the critical investigation of this process (1) usually

plural but singular or plural in construction :development through the stages of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis in accordance with the laws of dialectical (2) : the investigation of this process (3) : the theoretical application of this process especially in the social sciences

5. usually plural but singular or plural in construction: any systematic reasoning, exposition, or argument that juxtaposes opposed or contradictory ideas and usually seeks to resolve their conflict : an intellectual exchange of ideas

6. the dialectical tension or opposition between two interacting forces or elements

The one I'm thinking of in our discussion is number 5 but 4 is very interesting, isn't it? Anyway, I was very excited when I first learned about dialectics. It was interesting too that both Sarah and Peter at different times in Middle School had to present the word dialectic as their word of the day so I got to talk to both of them about it. So anyway, I suppose dialectics is another way of describing the tension of opposites. When going into an argument or disagreement, I have seen how it is hard for me to remember about the potential revelations that can come from the friction. At first I may be so tied to my side of an issue that I forget about dialectics. But more often now, I can step back at a certain point and see an opportunity for both sides. It's amazing. When this happens, it feels great. Of course it seems too rare to run into someone (family, friend, or foe) who is also able to get to that healthy place of engagement. I'm thinking that our culture is not so great at this.

I liked the way you explained getting out of the darkness:

It's not "I'm here and the right state is over there." It's "Here's where I am, and I'm going to add this other thing that will help

me get unstuck from this place.” In other words, it's an active, not passive, process. It's not about going elsewhere, but making here more expansive and thus more comfortable.

I've never thought about it in just this way and it's a nice mind stretcher. It's like finding a door that you didn't know existed. It helps to have confidence that a door exists, that it's possible to find a way out of the darkness. It's interesting how we have our rote ways of solving problems. I'm thinking it's usually in a very linear (cause and effect) way. I'm thinking of the way I barrel through things at times. Part of the hamster wheel perhaps. Get it done, push on, go on to the next thing. This can become a passive process because I am no longer getting to any creativity or potential. I am blind to these. What you are talking about is really non linear. It is a kind of opening, isn't it?

Aum,
Susan

* * *

There's not an awful lot on the internet about the tension of opposites, but I did find one very good paper. I've left in the whole bit about Heraclitus; the specific reference is in the fourth paragraph. Then there's a cute thing to wrap it all up:

PSYCHOLOGY IN GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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(<http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/Greeks.html>. 9/3/13)

HERACLITUS OF EPHEBUS

Another city in the same region, Ephesus, which had been founded about 400 years before by colonists from Athens, also became a rich trading center. Its art had a strong Eastern influence,

and around 540 BC the largest temple Greek temple yet was raised there. Before long it came to be called one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Ephesus was a city of poetry and high fashion, yet its most famous son was the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (c540-480 B.C.) His pithy work *On Nature* holds passages which are still quoted today. He lived at about the same time Buddha was teaching in India and Lao-tsu in China.

Heraclitus' work combines the principles of order and change. "All things are one," he said. To the question, "What is this one?" he answered "Fire," but by fire he appears to have meant something more like "energy" than fire per se, for he talks of fire's frequent transformation through many different forms. In any case, he was speaking on a metaphysical rather than a strictly material level.

The best-known aspect of Heraclitus' ideas is the omnipresence of change. There is, he says, nothing static in the universe, the mind, or the soul. Everything is ceasing to be what it was and becoming what it will be. This was a new idea. He went beyond asking what things are to ask how they became what they are. "All things flow; nothing abides," he wrote. and "we are and we are not." His best known passage is, "You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are ever flowing on to you." This appears to be a misquotation by later philosophers, his actual statement apparently having been, "Over those who step into the same river, different and again different waters flow." In Heraclitus' view, you and I are changing and becoming just as is the universe. "In change one finds rest;" he wrote; "it is weariness to be always toiling at the same things."

A third theme in his work is the unity of opposites. Contraries are interdependent. Conflict is harmony. Surfeit and hunger require each other. So do winter and summer, good and bad, life and death, waking and sleeping, youth and age. All things and beings exist somewhere between polar opposites, and each polarity partakes of the nature of the other. "Beginning and end are common on the circumference of a circle," he wrote, and "They

would not know the name of Justice if [injustices] did not exist.” Reality arises out of strife, tension, the alternation between opposites, and the tension between them. “That which is at variance with itself agrees with itself. There sits attunement of the opposite tensions, like that of the bow of the harp.... From things that differ comes the fairest attunement.” This unity that comes from the tension of opposites applies to the struggles between man and woman, between social classes, and among ideas. You will no doubt notice a resemblance among this conception, the yin/yang of Chinese philosophy, and between Hegel’s statement that, “Everything carries within itself its own negation.” Heraclitus summarizes, “Things taken together are wholes and not wholes; being brought together is being parted; concord is dissonance; and out of all things, one; and out of one, all things.”(MacGill 13) Amid all this, he stressed the ordered and eternal pattern that intelligence could discern in the flux of existence.(MacGill 16)

Heraclitus often compares “the many” to sleepers. “For men awake there is one common cosmos, but men asleep turn away, each one into a private world.” He added, “A man’s character is his destiny.”

Heraclitus left an enduring legacy of ideas. Some still seem fresh today. Although he left no “school,” the Stoics later found enough in common with him to adopt him as their intellectual ancestor.

References: MacGill, Frank, and Ian P. McGreal (eds).
Heraclitus: “Fragments”. In: Masterpieces of World Philosophy.
New York: Harper & Row, 1961.

* * *

Lastly:

From *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom

“Have I told you about the tension of opposites?”, he says.

The tension of opposites?

“Life is a series of pulls back and forth. You want to do one thing, but you are bound to do something else. Something hurts you, yet you know it shouldn't. You take certain things for granted, even when you know you should never take anything for granted.

A tension of opposites, like a pull on a rubber band. And most of us live somewhere in the middle.”

Sounds like a wrestling match, I say.

“A wrestling match.” He laughs. “Yes, you could describe life that way.”

So, which side wins, I ask?

“Which side wins?”

He smiles at me, the crinkled eyes, the crooked teeth.

“Love wins. Love always wins.”