

11/26/13
Verse 41

“This is a pot;” in that, what comes first, “this,” is the difficult to discern; “pot” is its qualifying predicate; for intellect and such *mahendra* magic to manifest, this itself becomes the *karu*, thus one should see.

Free translation:

When one says, “This is a pot,” what comes first as ‘this’ is difficult to discern, while ‘pot’ is its qualifying attribute. When the endless sense-oriented cogitations proliferate, one should bear in mind that the indicative pronoun ‘this’ is the fountainhead.

Nataraja Guru’s translation:

In ‘this is a pot’ the initial ‘this’ is the harsh
While ‘pot’ is what makes its specific attribute;
For the mind with its myriad magic of Great Indra to come to be,
Understand, this to be the nucleus.

Two challenging verses that epitomize the functioning of the mind form the climax to the close examination of awareness that has been a dominant feature of the first half of the Hundred Verses. The remainder of the first half addresses the implications of a revalued orientation, in what I think of as the whipped cream section, light and delicious. With Nitya’s guidance we can penetrate this forbidding territory with confidence, before passing on to the dessert course.

Though I am somewhat leery of these verses, I have to admit, while listening closely to Deb read out the commentary, I could see how Nitya had done a brilliant job of elucidating the subject. Once again I was filled with gratitude and admiration for his superb teaching skills. Yes sure, I always feel that way at the end of a

lecture of his, but this performance stands out even among its fellows, because it really is a tough subject.

First off, this and the next verse are a matched pair, so it's very helpful to have the second one in mind too. Verse 42 basically converts "this is a pot" to "this is knowledge" in the first part, and then closes with: "for intellect and all such to vanish, and for the true path to come, this should be meditated on." The free translation concludes: "For all mentations like discursive cogitation to cease, and to gain the path of liberation, one should contemplate on 'this', which inheres in the universal identity." There is a probably deliberate ambiguity in 'this' being both with and without quotation marks. With quotation marks it means we should meditate on This as the fountain source, the Absolute. Without them it means we should meditate on the whole subject. Both angles of vision are important to a full understanding. When "cogitations cease" we open the door for our inner resources to pour out. This is a major key to creative involvement with the world.

Nitya often teased us that our concept of time was backwards. He would say, "You think of time as flowing from the past to the present and producing the future, but it actually goes the other way." It seemed baffling, if not downright contrarian, and he didn't always explain what he meant. We were sure we were right, that time began in the past and was headed toward the future. As far as I know, the present commentary is his best attempt to make what he meant clear:

When a potter intends to make a pot, the pot is in the future. He has not yet made it, but the possibility of the future pot impels him to act toward it so that as the final realization he can accomplish the pot. The *abhava*, the absence of a thing, is present in our mind as a possibility which is taking us from the future to the present. Usually we think that we are moving from the past through the present to the future. But it doesn't happen that way. The future is dynamic. It makes you move from a possibility to an actualization. That which is

actualized thereafter remains frozen as an eternal event, an accomplished fact.

If you can see that this whole process is happening to you moment after moment, day after day, you will understand your inside and outside a little more clearly.

Nitya then establishes the concreteness of objects. I'll add some interesting takes on a current debate on this that Michael has been following, in Part III. The fact that you and I both experience the solid reality of objects means they have a transactional existence if not an actual one. Our agreement means they are universal. Nitya goes on:

Once you hit upon a universal concrete you have not only made a present, you have also made a past, because that experience will remain with you for the rest of your life as a recorded event. It is frozen and kept forever.

Thus, the whole of the past is generated at this very moment by the promises and potentialities of the future. Is it not a great miracle? Is it not happening like a great magician's magic? You are the magician. 'You' doesn't mean your ego. Your poor ego is only one of the tools used by this marvelous magician who is sitting inside you. That same magician is in an ant, a fly, a bee, a bird, in an idiot as well as a genius, continuously making things manifest.

His conclusion is dynamic, with profound implications:

In the next verse, the Guru is going to ask us to turn to that 'this'-ness with more clarity. It is adorable, a wonder within you. In this type of understanding you become more intimate with your God than when you relate to Him in the situation of a church, where you are analogically putting Him outside you as a foreign entity. Here it's you, the very process that is going on within you from moment to moment. You can never get nearer or closer than this to the very Creator, because the process of creation is going on here and now in

what you call your mind, your intellect, your understanding and your affectivity.

Now we can understand what Narayana Guru is aiming at here. By meditating on the process in which words and their attendant concepts shape our perception of the world, we are attuning to the Karu, as the central verity of our life, the pre-conceptual part. In doing so, we reclaim our lost powers of creativity. Where we have been meticulously trained by society to think of ourselves as victims of circumstance whose role is to hear and obey orders, we now know we have a definitive role in shaping our own life. We can see, for example, how fear closes us down, and how confidence opens us up. Our mental framing determines how we interpret events. We can either accept life's challenges and insults as opportunities to learn and grow, or as unfair assaults on our integrity that we use as an excuse to give up. How we conceive of the world is therefore critical to our well-being. This is no joke. We have boxed ourselves in to very small spaces, and now the Guru is inviting us to reimagine ourselves as co-creators with unlimited power to accomplish meaningful things. We can keep our boxes on the shelf rather than wearing them around.

In our study of sama and anya in the previous five verses, we began the process of expanding our "safe zone" to include more and more territory. The next two (41 and 42) make the leap of introducing the benign impulse that drives the expansion, converting the course of our life from an ineffective ego endeavor to the expression of a universal urge toward liberty and justice for all.

If we think of ourselves as products of the past, we are rooted in place, because the past cannot be changed, at least not very easily. If we are products of the future, though, anything is possible. We are not yet finalized. We can see how a magnificent world has evolved for billions of years, with creatures developing into ever more complex and capable beings. Why should we suppose that the tide has turned? If anything, it has accelerated. Infinite possibilities abound on all sides. The only thing holding us back is our faulty framing. Vedanta in its fresh take offered

by Narayana Guru provides a non-trivial, non-absurd reorientation to reconnect us with our vast potential.

Narayana Guru began this study by inviting us to incline in gratitude and admiration to the karu. Nitya here reminds us that karu is “that causal factor from which this cosmos and its psychological counterpart have both emanated.” In a time-oriented view, it is the essence of the future that is becoming all this. So we aren’t talking about religious kowtowing, but simply opening our hearts to the ocean of possibilities. As a matter of fact, we are the very means for the ocean to become manifest.

Paul talked about how our vasanas and samskaras (genetic predilections and memory conditionings) limit our field of expression, yet we take our perceptions for granted, not realizing what we are leaving out by doing so. One technique he uses to stay open is to say “I don’t know,” instead of allowing himself to pretend to know, or to fantasize about what comes next. Our expectations can be terrifying or at least highly exaggerated, and when they are they prevent us from following our guiding star.

Admitting we don’t know what’s ahead goes against a lifetime of training. We learn to affirm “I know,” or at least “I know I don’t know.” That’s how our performance is judged in school, job, relationships even. We have become experts at assigning every new presentation of “this” to its allotted conceptual box, so we can confidently affirm “I know what it is.” Spiritual life begins when we realize the poverty of reducing the new to an iteration of the old. We want to experience the new again, the ever-new joy of life at its best. We want to welcome the future instead of performing CPR on the corpse of the past.

So Paul’s technique is to remind himself he no longer knows what “this” is. This next event, this Disneyland ride that disappears into a tunnel as soon as you take your seat and the clutch is engaged, might carry him anywhere. All he knows is that it’s going to be a thrill a minute. That’s much more honest than claiming that what he imagines is going to happen constitutes knowing, in any meaningful sense of the term. Or worse, that he knows it won’t be anything of value.

Susan talked about how early in her adult life she was extremely anxious about being alone at home. She had learned to expect something terrible might happen to her, and it permeated her psyche, especially when no one else was around to distract her from it. In the last ten years or so (congruent with her Gurukula studies) she has learned to stop projecting her fears into the future and then worrying that they will come true. Regaining that sense of normalcy is a great relief to her.

Jake noted how we have a trick up our sleeves, in not admitting the full picture. We leave out the beginning and the end of events and select only what suits us. We don't dare explore beyond the limited definition we allow ourselves. The problem is that this keeps us closed off to the universe's evolutionary urge, and we become stuck, static. But it doesn't bother us because we have learned how to force ourselves to be content with just the obvious bit.

I feel that we become confused and unhappy because our natural inclination toward creative activities is thwarted by the torrential flow of suppression we encounter in our surroundings, by the insistence on doing just what we're expected to do. It's even worse once we buy into it. Sure, there is a kind of basic satisfaction to be gained by regurgitating the right answer or meeting someone's expectations, but we are much more than programmed response machines. We are immensely potent beings for whom those simple routines are not satisfying enough. Our *elan vital* asserts itself. Robert Frost felt its pressure when he wrote, "Something there is that doesn't love a wall, /That wants it down." That mysterious force tumbles the boulders of the rock wall down and rolls them aside to leave a passage through.

We had the honor of our daughter Emily joining us last night. It's curious how the verse is often very appropriate for visitors. I had been thinking this was a tough one for her to drop in on, but it turned out to be quite germane to her current state. She has been doing fine and meaningful work in a subservient capacity at her job promoting justice for young women in oppressive countries, but lately she has been feeling stifled. The job is wonderful, but the subservient position is not. She is a dynamic person with fresh ideas that deserve to be played with. Everyone else is thinking, "Gad, you have a great, well-paying job doing

terrific things for people who really need your help.” But for her, this has merely served as a training ground for the next possibility. She isn’t going to stay stuck there forever. This verse encourages us to dare to be independent, to actualize what is latent within us, and offers some very helpful advice on how to bring it about, along with a revised structural scheme that is remarkably empowering.

Emily has already learned that we bring our own reality to the table depending on how we frame things, and she sees ways she can expand young people’s consciousness even more dramatically, especially those who seldom have the chance. Teenagers are at the zenith of internalizing the illusion that we all see the world exactly the same way, and if we don’t, it’s because the other person is wrong. Finding out that people with widely divergent world-views are also very nice, as well as interesting, is a major breakthrough for kids who have been consigned to “safe” ruts. Emily wants to be a kind of conductor to guide young adults to that type of enlarging experience.

During the reading Emily was thinking about how different languages express concepts differently, and so promote or prevent certain ways of seeing. She has an article in the upcoming issue of Gurukulam about *tat tvam asi*, That thou art, or That is what you are. She admits that That in English has such heavy connotations of otherness that it has always spoiled her appreciation of the great dictum. It makes it seem like the opposite of what is intended, separating instead of uniting. She wondered if the Sanskrit original had a different impact—it must have. And she wondered if we could get beyond the limitations of language to have a better understanding of what was meant by the words we had to use to communicate.

Emily could see that this type of insight—like most of them—wasn’t self-evident, that it took some kind of assistance to come to realize it. That’s rather astute, if I do say so myself, because it isn’t spelled out anywhere in the text. But it’s a curious paradox that after we’ve been properly stifled that we somehow come to think that we know everything we need to know. Being a know-it-all is a highly effective ego ploy to deflect awareness of our inadequacies. Plus, society is full of diversionary typhoons, and we imagine we’ll stave them off by

holding to a rigid posture. Anyway, it seems like it should be obvious that we benefit from outside assistance, but it isn't. We can learn so much from everything, not just a wise teacher or a brilliant book.

Accepting outside input is one of the most essential ways we can begin to reorient our attitudes. Instead of feeling victimized and put upon by the insults and jostling of the madding crowd, we can choose to welcome everything as a learning experience. Once we decide that the guru is everywhere, we can learn from everything. It's the opposite of picturing god or guru as unique and far off.

This is exactly what Narayana Guru is presenting here. We are to meditate on "This" as being right here, right inside us. It is a fountain source of insight, of learning and evolving. It isn't what we know or expect—we should rule that out in advance. We have already learned to do that. So what is it? What could it be? If we listen carefully we will find out. It reminds me of Arthur C. Clark's refrain from *2001: A Space Odyssey*. After each evolutionary stage in the protagonist's development, he paused, "For though he was master of the world, he was not quite sure what he was going to do next. But he would think of something." And then the next thing came along, as if by magic.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

Mind always begins to function with questions such as "What is this?" "How is this?" etcetera. These questions open the door to the world of the unknown and the unconscious. We have already pointed out that this questioning aspect of consciousness is called manas. These questions are followed by the emergence of several associated memories. Memories are basically of a conceptual order. Every form that we see and every word we hear becomes related to a concept. We do not notice any lapse between the occurrence of a perception and its corresponding conception. The emergence of a concept that relates to a name or form is instantaneous and spontaneous. Concepts remain hidden in the unconscious even before they illuminate a percept. The question

that arises in the mind is an occasion to relate a concept to a percept, or to interrelate two concepts so as to make a complete inferential judgement. When a person says, “This is a pot,” it already implies a question such as “What is this?” When it is instantaneously answered as “This is a pot,” it is automatically accompanied by an evaluation of that pot from a pragmatic point of view.

When it occurs to the mind, “This is a pot” is no longer a thing outside or inside. Mind locates a thing by psychologically conceiving time and space. The idea of the concrete has its corresponding concepts in the mind. As an alchemy, the sensory stimulus undergoes a transformation by which the physical reality of the pot and the psychological awareness of it are fused into a transactional verity. It is impossible to say how much of it is physical or non-physical.

“This,” which is found both in the question “What is this?” and in the answer “This is a pot,” does not give any idea until it is qualified, and hence it is called indiscernible. It is the common source of all variants. In the present verse it is called karu, which can be translated as “substance,” “yolk,” or “mould.” This occurs in the very first verse of this book. Then we were instructed to turn to this primordial substance with an attitude of adoration and know it to be the divine source of everything. In the present verse we come into a greater intimacy with “this” as both the revealing and the illuminating exponent of all knowledge. When we do not have the consistent recognition of its divine nature, the translucency of our ego comes between the illuminating source and the illuminated knowledge. As a result of this veiling principle of the ego’s ignorance every item of knowledge becomes a magical transfiguration.

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Nataraja Guru’s translation is surprisingly different from Nitya’s this time:

THE syntactical analysis of a simple prepositional statement, here adopted by the Guru to reveal the structure and composition of thought, follows the lines of ancient thinkers of the time of the Mimamsakas in the history of Indian thought, culminating in the well-recognized methodology and epistemology of the Advaita Vedanta.

Modern semantics, with its logical syntax and its recognition of the semiotic structure of sentences, although far from being perfected yet, comes very near to this ancient way. After distinguishing the two main tendencies within the movement of thought or within the totality of the stream of consciousness, the Guru here relies on a semantic, or rather syntactic, analysis of a simple atomic proposition as representing a type of mental event which could be said to reveal the inner structure of one of the two primary movements or categories of the thinking process implicit in language.

All language must convey thought and correspond to it in one way or another. Thought-communicability through language proves this. How all thought, communicated or merely communicable, conforms to two main types of atomic propositions, has already been stated. The first type, referring to objective realities that are horizontal in content, is here further examined and further analytically scrutinized. What is referred to as 'harsh' is the 'other' of the previous verse. Moving semiotically, as thought does, from the virtual and generic syntactical element represented by 'this', which could apply to any object, to the actual and specific aspect of the same thought represented by 'pot', we have a pure psycho-physical, neutral, atomic event which we have to recognize as the subtle-to-gross horizontal movement. As actuality limits freedom by its space-time finiteness and its specificity of character, it is the harsh obdurate 'other' of the previous classification. Actuality and virtuality, as also specificity and generic abstraction, may be said to be the ambivalent poles within whose limits thought may be said

to have one of its primary alternating oscillations or movements. The movement is quantitative here and has to be understood in contrast with qualitative intensity within pure tendencies in the second category examined in the next verse.

The ‘myriad magic of Great Indra’ is the world of pluralistic and disjunct rival values related to sense-realities of the actual, or its virtual aspect – both understood ‘objectively’ with ramified sets of secondary or tertiary derivatives. In Kantian terminology, this would refer to the phenomenal. Practical immanent reason would find within the amplitude of this movement its natural habitat.

Part III

Nitya’s commentary on Yoga Sutra III: 1 is relevant to the verse. Here’s part of it. Dharana is holding focus in the mind:

Between appearance and reality there is an enigmatic or paradoxical middle ground. We cannot conceive of appearance without an experiencer to whom a certain phenomenon occurs. We can view the ground from a physical point of view or from a metaphysical point of view. When we try to examine the phenomena of the world, we have to make many reductions and abstractions to delimit the field of cognition. Spatially we limit the field to that which we can measure in terms of physical dimensions such as length, breadth, height, and weight. We detach ourselves from the bodies in question and limit ourselves to certain qualities that can be rationally conceived and formulated.

The result is that we come to a notion of measurement that is far different from the original stuff that we were assessing. Instead of arriving at reality we only arrive at approximate measures of quantifiable entities. Hence the physical view of things alienates the subjective agent of knowledge from what is being assessed in terms of objectivity. There, the aloneness we arrive at is the aloneness of a fictitious notion generated in the world of

fluctuating energies. To hold on to this is even worse than being deluded by appearance.

There is another way of making an assessment of reality. That is to seek from within the truth of the perceiving stuff that is derived from the subject. If we go into cerebration about the physical nature of appearances, we will not arrive at any better angle of vision than that of the physicist or physiologist.

There is another way to understand dharana. From the very start, human beings have a purposive consciousness wanting to direct their lives, consciously as well as unconsciously, to arrive at a steady situation in which inner calm can be maintained for short durations or even longer durations. Thus the dharana that is seeded in consciousness is a program for the whole life. However, to bring consciousness to its aloneness or to an absolute steady state is totally opposed to nature. Nature is a continuously proliferating phenomenon. This world in Sanskrit is called jagat, a cosmic flux that does not permit any reversibility or any holiday. In this continuous automation of motion, the consciousness implied in it needs to be taught or organized to keep to a certain rhythm in which the motion is annealed by the rhythmic pattern in which the motion occurs.

A confused mind is like the flooding turmoil of a river with many rapids. By plunging into the middle of it, no one can generate any harmony in it. Each individual needs to chart a course whereby the navigation of life can be made a smooth sailing. The challenge is to live through the misery and joy of life in which we are exposed to a million encounters, continuously recognizing the imagery and returning again and again to the essential. Patañjali responds to that challenge by showing us how to become one with the essence. Between a hearty laughter and a heart-rending primal cry, there is a meeting point that cannot be adequately expressed in words. If we do not get to its essence, every hour can be an hour of turbulence, uneasiness, and anguish. Yet an unexplainable order of beauty and goodness enters into the mainstream of life.

From the first formation of cause, a future harmony is to be envisaged. This is where our parents, society, and governments all fail. Effects cannot be corrected without conceiving a cause that will harmoniously elaborate itself, with bright reasoning prevailing between a volatile will and a frenzied action program.

Patañjali forewarns us that only with a continuous and consistent vision of the purpose of life maintained for a long time, with several inner corrections carried out from day to day, sometimes from moment to moment, can the inner and outer match in their beauty, meaning, and goodness. We should begin from the least illumination of consciousness and go through its evolution in life up to this day; then we will have a transparency of vision of ourselves through time and space, and through all the interactions that we had to come through.

Even in repairing a machine—a watch, an automobile, or an airplane—one needs hours of concentration to understand all the correlations that go into its smooth functioning. Compared to that, the human system is far more elaborate. But we can direct the little spark of consciousness in us to go on a meaningful reconnoitering. Then the inside design of the entire structure will reveal to us the functional purpose for which every bit of us is put together. Then alone does dharana become an accomplished reality.

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This came from Pradeep, who remembers an email conversation he and I had about these two verses once upon a time:

Since you are discussing the verse 41 and 42, the following communication I had with Swami Sudhi (<http://gurudhaamam.org/swamimuktananda.html>) in 2009 come to my mind.

Pradeep

Tue, Mar 24, 2009 at 11:32 PM, sudhi chaitanya
oneworldcommunion@gmail.com wrote:

THIS IS A POT,

THIS IS AWARENESS:

These are two statements mentioned for exemplification. In these two statements 'THIS' is a common word. Here THIS is a general term (saamaanya). When you speak THIS IS, that makes the sentence a little ambiguous. We long for the clarity of the statement. Then the sentence is completely spelt out as THIS IS A POT. POT is a more concrete word, which you can see and measure. It has a well defined form. Pot is an object. We can speak like this many statements, namely, THIS IS HAT, THIS IS CLOTH, THIS IS HOUSE and so on ... Here in all these examples the word THIS has the potentiality to contain many objects. So here THIS is like a womb that can carry innumerable objects. Out of this womb we have to take out a clear cut form like pot or hat in order to satiate our curiosity. Here POT is a specific word (visesha). That means, a saamaanya contains many viseshaas. This is the power of anya, the power of otherness. Our mundane knowledge lies in this category.

THIS IS AWARENESS is sama statement, a statement of sameness, a meditative statement. Here AWARENESS is specific and THIS is generic. The word awareness is not like a word pot. Pot is more concrete while awareness is more abstract. AWARENESS is the ultimate reality that we have to realize in our life. When we meditate on this statement the distinction between generic and specific disappears, and in place a blissful certitude emerges. This is a simple explanation. Email can not convey the clarity of understanding. Let us talk this subject when we meet. Thanks a lot for your inquisitiveness.

Love – Swami Sudhi

I'm not sure if my (Scott's) contribution was helpful or not, but here it is:

Dear Pradeep,

Here's my initial assessment of this pair of verses. Please let me know if the Malayalam gives a different sense that I'm unaware of.
Fun. Scott

In both cases 'this' corresponds to sama and 'pot' (object; concept) or 'knowledge' (subject; percept) is the predication or anya.

The two verses offer us the two principle forms of contemplation: we either meditate on everything as matter or we meditate on it as consciousness. In both cases, 'this' represents the direction of our attention toward the unknown, into the sama. The anya each brings us to is either matter or consciousness. The Guru is telling us that to meditate on matter will embroil us in endless theoretical cogitations, while meditation on consciousness leads to freedom from bondage to the same limited outlook.

Put in another way:

In the statement "This is a pot," 'this' is the sama (or karu), and pot is the anya. Actually, 'That' is the karu, and when it converts to 'this' it is a sameness that impends towards anya. 'That' is pure and 'this' is a little bit colored by its potential for otherness. It might sound like splitting hairs, but it isn't. We are led to That by our meditation on This.

The Guru is teaching us that when we ask "What is this?", instead of looking for a concrete specification of "this' we are focusing on the general nature of 'this' itself. Nitya describes it as the fountainhead of our endless sense-oriented cogitations. We go into the mystery of 'this' to comprehend "That alone."

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Finally, here are Michael's links to a recent argument about reality that amplifies our subject in a certain direction. For me, it's mainly a good exercise to discern how most theories, even "scientific" ones, are little more than the promulgation of someone's beliefs. Still, the respectable aim is to determine a "universal concrete," which is a slippery business.

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2503370/Quantum-physics-proves-IS-afterlife-claims-scientist.html>

The rebuke dances all around the issue—at least as far as I read. Am I missing something farther down? Anyway, it appears to ratify my statement above that "The Guru is telling us that to meditate on matter will embroil us in endless theoretical cogitations, while meditation on consciousness leads to freedom from bondage to the same limited outlook." It really demonstrates how germane Nitya's thoughts from his Patanjali book are!

<http://nirmukta.com/2009/12/14/biocentrism-demystified-a-response-to-deepak-chopra-and-robert-lanzas-notion-of-a-conscious-universe/>

Part IV

Susan wrote us a nice long letter:

These ideas about reframing perception and not clinging to the idea of already knowing are most welcome this week. I am especially vulnerable to the idea that I really should know so much at this point in my life and I'm not always good at admitting that I know less every day. It was great to hear Paul talk about how he has been saying, "I don't know." It is a freeing starting point. But feeling that I *should* know really sneaks up on me constantly and

that ego of mine hates to have my ignorance exposed. Ugh. What is that about? As you mentioned, there is that time in one's life -- the teenage years -- when one says one knows everything. This is especially true when one's parent is trying to explain something. I still wonder why teens have such a hard time with that? Is it because they are trying to assert their individuality or because they are feeling more and more that their parents aren't meeting them where they are because they (the teens) are becoming more themselves? For whatever reason, I have carried from that time a deep hatred of failure and of being exposed as not knowing. I want to be a person who knows lots of things and is really good and talented at something. But although my life has many blessings (foremost being that I am here at all), I am somewhat of a bumbler. I don't learn things quickly and I fail a lot. Sometimes it's pretty demoralizing. I'm trying to learn to play bridge and I am lucky to have friends who are learning to play also. I love the game and can never get enough of it. Some days, my friend Kathleen and I go to the duplicate club on the day when there is a lesson and then a round of duplicate bridge -- about 21 games usually. The people who come on this day are usually pretty great because it is not the higher level of playing. But still, some of them are really frustrated when I make mistakes in my bidding or in my play. And of course I hate to make the mistakes -- which I do over and over sometimes! But then if I look back over the years since I started, I realize that I am learning and improving. It's just so raw and exposing. Hate that! But I guess I need to love it too. If I could learn to be less hard on myself and also not think that I need to be some particular way (knowledgeable, for instance), then it does seem to free some part of my mind, not to mention my psyche.

I should also mention that because of the things I have learned from the Gurukula, I am more and more able to see my obsession for knowing and being good at something as an obsession of the ego. Yes, it is great to have goals and intentions and dreams but it is even more important to feel the satisfaction of the moment. I

love each game of bridge and the opportunity to commune with others in a shared activity -- so many opportunities and possibilities! To get stuck in the ego sludge that wants no mistakes is just so unhelpful.

I realize now that Paul's comment was more about not anticipating than about admitting ignorance but it led me to think about all that anyway. Yet another illustration of how our minds take off in their own directions. But I guess the two are related. We tend to cling to ideas about how things are going to go or how we wish they would go. When we stop doing that, we are more open to the divine in us and around us. I think of this as listening, opening. The Disneyland ride is such a great example.

In a conversation the other day with my friend, Marcella, who makes amazing wedding cakes, she said that whenever she starts the process of making a cake, she has big doubts and misgivings. She has no idea how it's going to go or how she is going to make it happen. But she has that future idea of the cake and the intention. Then she makes the cake and it's almost always out of this world in design and taste. Marcella says she is astounded that the process is always this way but she said that in conversations with her friends who are artists, they all have the same experience. They feel somewhat amateurish and in the dark when they start a new project and yet they create wonderful things.

I dipped into a book yesterday and found a bit of wisdom that seemed related. The book is *Moonwalking with Einstein* by Joshua Foer. It's mostly about memory (see? I read books about how to learn better!) and in this excerpt, he talks about how to get past the plateaus in our learning by thinking of the future possibilities and getting feedback. Interesting stuff:

When people first learn to use a keyboard, they improve very quickly from sloppy single-finger pecking to careful two-handed

typing, until eventually the fingers move effortlessly and the whole process becomes unconscious. At this point, most people's typing skills stop progressing. They reach a plateau. If you think about it, it's strange. We've always been told that practice makes perfect, and yet many people sit behind a keyboard for hours a day. So why don't they just keep getting better and better?

In the 1960s, the psychologists Paul Fitts and Michael Posner tried to answer this question by describing the three stages of acquiring a new skill. During the first phase, known as the cognitive phase, we intellectualize the task and discover new strategies to accomplish it more proficiently. During the second, the associative phase, we concentrate less, making fewer major errors, and become more efficient. Finally we reach what Fitts and Posner called the autonomous phase, when we're as good as we need to be at the task and we basically run on autopilot. Most of the time that's a good thing. The less we have to focus on the repetitive tasks of everyday life, the more we can concentrate on the stuff that really matters. You can actually see this phase shift take place in f.M.R.I.'s of subjects as they learn new tasks: the parts of the brain involved in conscious reasoning become less active, and other parts of the brain take over. You could call it the O.K. plateau.

Psychologists used to think that O.K. plateaus marked the upper bounds of innate ability. In his 1869 book "Hereditary Genius," Sir Francis Galton argued that a person could improve at mental and physical activities until he hit a wall, which "he cannot by any education or exertion overpass." In other words, the best we can do is simply the best we can do. But Ericsson and his colleagues have found over and over again that with the right kind of effort, that's rarely the case. They believe that Galton's wall often has much less to do with our innate limits than with what we consider an acceptable level of performance. They've found that top achievers typically follow the same general pattern. They develop

strategies for keeping out of the autonomous stage by doing three things: focusing on their technique, staying goal-oriented and getting immediate feedback on their performance.

Amateur musicians, for example, tend to spend their practice time playing music, whereas pros tend to work through tedious exercises or focus on difficult parts of pieces. Similarly, the best ice skaters spend more of their practice time trying jumps that they land less often, while lesser skaters work more on jumps they've already mastered. In other words, regular practice simply isn't enough. For all of our griping over our failing memories — the misplaced keys, the forgotten name, the factoid stuck on the tip of the tongue — our biggest failing may be that we forget how rarely we forget. To improve, we have to be constantly pushing ourselves beyond where we think our limits lie and then pay attention to how and why we fail. That's what I needed to do if I was going to improve my memory.

* * *

Jake's commentary:

As Nitya pointed out in his preceding commentary, the mind works through a specific procedure as it constantly explains to itself “what is this?” In his present commentary, he follows the Guru as he builds on that original mental process (renaming the steps as he, Nitya, does so) in order to describe where the mind proceeds once it has addressed its question. The mind, says Nitya, is working to apply names to forms and then to transform those words into “the” concept which can henceforth be applied to answer questions as they arise in future like circumstances. The concept is not an unbiased bystander but is, rather, “marked with a certain colouration indicating a value” (p. 285). It is the value attached to the sound of the words in the concept that determine one's reaction that can take any number of possible routes. Nitya

gives the example of a piece of paper. If that piece of paper is a dollar bill, it can take on a completely different significance than it would if it were not. In short, through the value assigned to the concept one reacts in one way or another and once a concept becomes a value, it is bracketed off as a separate one, apart from the rest of our knowledge and fracturing our world. Through this itemizing we come to perceive it in “vivid” terms. The process goes on continuously, linking “this” to the ego through the intellect impelling us to follow these worlds of interest as they constantly arise one after the other: “the specifying of)

The source for all knowledge is the one knowledge of the eternal Absolute, but the mind can’t name it, place it in a concept, and apply a value to it. In this respect, it seems to me that the mind is taking an alternative route in its prime directive to encourage physical survival in a world of necessity. It is doing what it was designed to do. Left to its own devices, it continues on manufacturing concepts out of words with which we then use to “shoot” each other: “our world of conscious activity is caused by the bullets of words” (p. 287). As long as we continue to allow the mind to operate autonomously as it endlessly answers the question of “what is this” in terms of individual specification, we are essentially contained in its samsaric universe, the domain of common sense as commonly understood we would be hard pressed to survive in if it were *not* for the mind.

In this verse, writes Nitya, the Guru is offering us a technique through which we can withdraw and observe ourselves creating all this activity. Rather than manufacturing a world and then getting caught up in it, Nitya follows the Guru’s advice to transform the original question “what is this?” into “what is this-ness?” The pronoun “this” indicates a specificity that “this-ness” includes and transcends. “This-ness” is the state of universal oneness that is each one of us, the Absolute knowledge out of which all specificity arises. Drilling down into this question we arrive at the answer—“That thou art.” “This-ness” is the individual person (the *I*) and “that” (the *what*) is the Absolute—they are the same. Nitya here

points out that the Guru is offering us a way of “arriving at the meaning of two of the great dictums of the Upanishads: ‘That thou art,’ and ‘This self is the Absolute’” (p. 287).

Caught up in a world of particulars, the mind spins its stories and enacts its plays on a stage of our own making. On the other hand is the Absolute out of which all the particulars are isolated and privileged with names and concepts. By escaping wholly into either domain, we split off that portion necessary for us to be complete, and it is that condition that is encouraged today, especially in the US. The results of this polarization are evident in just about every corner of the culture and speak to a mind well trained to deny anything not conforming to its demands. In order to continue, the division between the Absolute and the immanent must remain complete, a demand that cannot stand on its own if we finally realize who we are and the games we are playing. In this universal denial on both sides of the political divide is the core sameness of them and the secret to their continuing influence, superficial differences notwithstanding.