

12/17/13
Verse 44

The many faiths have but one essence;
not seeing this, in this world, like the blind men and the elephant,
many kinds of reasoning are used by the unenlightened who become
distressed;
having seen this, without being disturbed, remain steadfast.

Free translation:

The normative essence of everyone's conviction is the same. Those who do not know this secret become fanatical in establishing relativistic points of view, arguing like the proverbial blind men who went to "see" an elephant and couldn't agree between them in its description. Avoid all such disputes by cultivating the all-embracing attitude of sameness.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

Not seeing that the various religions in the world
Are essentially the same, advancing various arguments
Like the blind men and the elephant, roam not like fools,
But stop wandering, and calmly settle down.

Verse 44, one of my favorites, also contains one of the key sentences in all of *That Alone*: "Once you go from the spiritual vision to religious belief, you have already strayed far from the truth." The adage applies to science as much as any other belief system, because extrapolations tend to creep in and fill up the holes in our philosophy, whatever it may be. The class explored in detail the drive humans have for certainty, for taking the approximate understanding we glean from an amalgam of our senses and conjectures and passing it off as unassailable truth. Why can't we accept that we are busily shaping reality, building it up from a bare sketch and insisting it is a completed masterpiece? Knowing why we do such things can help take the compulsion out of our

posturing, so we can relax and stand at ease. Tolerance and openness are impossible without letting go of our desperate grip on a partial vision.

Bill brought up another prime sentence of Nitya's that goes far in explaining the paradox involved: "Your position is rigid to precisely the extent that your vision is limited." Because we secretly know that we don't know, we learn to pretend that we do know, so as not to be shamed or punished for our deficiencies. Since everyone else is pretending mightily, it seems as if we are the only one who doesn't know. Our life becomes a struggle to maintain an illusion of certitude, impelled by the dread of exposure.

Somehow we have to realize we are looking at a stage show in our mind, rather than the world as it is, which is the primary magic trick of consciousness that fools us over and over again. Probably this is the most important and practical lesson we can take from the entire study. Nitya epitomizes it perfectly:

We forget that in none of our mental functions are we in direct relationship with the original, we are always only interpreting sensory images received in the mind. When we intellectualize, our mind is giving its own version, its best estimate, not a total picture of facts or data. The data is only what we presume. 'Fact' is a fiction. There is no fact. There can be only a comparative range of fictions which are more or less useful or reliable. We make an approximation, even when we loudly swear our certitude.

The paradox is we have to use our intellect to realize the limitations of the intellect, because the default setting is that everything is just as we perceive it. By disconnecting the intellect we don't do away with its limitations, we limit ourselves even more. The real mystery is why are we so afraid to admit the very truth that permits us to turn away from partiality and—intellectually at least—accept a total vision? That, you may recall, is the function of the notion of the Absolute, a uniting principle that we can compare our partial understanding to. The Absolute is the elephant we are too blind to see, and so content ourselves with imagining the part we are in touch with is the whole animal.

Speaking of the famous story, a variety of versions from different traditions are available here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blind_men_and_an_elephant . It is indeed an Indian story, but one that has “gone viral” and appears all over the place. Some of the alternatives are especially nice.

Deb summed up Narayana Guru’s point about the story by saying that we hold on so tightly because we secretly suspect our position is limited, and we don’t realize we are blind. But someone with a global vision doesn't need to defend their position. Ideally they are not even taking a position, they remain open, and so are continually expanding.

Deb had a perfect example, too. When she was young and women’s liberation was a new and socially destabilizing subject, she had an argument about it with her brother. She got really upset for a number of reasons. She wasn’t sure of herself yet, but she knew she should be treated as an equal. Plus, her brother is really good at mockery and undercutting, which threw her off on tangents. The whole argument was an unmitigated disaster. A couple of years later, however, she had a similar argument and was able to keep her cool. Because she was more confident, she didn’t feel she had to hold on to a rigid formula, and the discussion was an enjoyable learning opportunity rather than a pitched battle.

Nancy R. maintained that if your position is right, you don't have to defend it, you go beyond the feeling of needing to defend that drives you to make excuses and swear allegiances.

Susan agreed, but pointed out that we have to be careful not to close down when we are not propounding our position, but to stay open. She described a feeling we all recognized immediately. The other night she was talking with her teenage son, and he was telling her about an alternative method of generating nuclear energy that was supposedly safer than the ones currently irradiating the planet. Susan is adamantly against nuclear power, so powerful counterarguments rose up in her, but this time she let them go and just listened. She quelled her compulsion to be right and to dominate the exchange. Peter was excited about what he had learned, and because he didn’t encounter resistance from his mother, he felt free to express himself. If she had come on strong, he would have

shut down quickly and their sharing would have ended. But because she stilled her negative reactions, the floor was open for an enjoyable exchange. She felt really good about it, and after all it was only a discussion—Peter wasn't actually building a nuke in her kitchen.

Andy was reminded of Suzuki Roshi teaching that if you are very quiet you can see great virtue in everything. Several of us agreed that we go around judging other people to be beneath our standards and therefore not virtuous, but if we intellectually override that knee jerk response to whatever we disagree with, we can begin to see value where we didn't before. Ultimately when we extricate ourselves from the noise generated by our own opinions and begin to listen more closely to the present circumstances, the miraculous beauty of existence shines forth.

This further reminded Andy of reading Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* many years ago. As Huxley began to get off on mescaline he was sitting at a table with a bouquet of flowers. He was looking at the bouquet as ugly and poorly composed, noting all its faults, and then suddenly it was spectacular: it was vibrating with the full intensity of its being, and he was captivated. Huxley was astute at using his intellect to open himself up (with or without psychedelic assistance), and his ideas are a nice complement to the That Alone study. I'll clip in a couple of paragraphs in Part III, but *The Doors of Perception* can be read in an hour and is a very enjoyable booklet. Highly recommended.

Since Andy brought up psychedelics, I mentioned a thought I'd had this week, that in practically the first instant of an LSD trip the seemingly solid reality around you starts to melt and change, and you realize that what you're seeing is a product of your conscious structuring. The world is no longer a monolithic solid reality "out there." That sliver of separation makes a huge difference in your life, because the mesmerizing conviction of the scene has been stripped away. It's like what people who have been in a strong earthquake say, that you never again treat the ground as perfectly solid and dependable. In the case of the ground, it's too bad in a way, but if you can accept that the world as we know it is a confection of seer and seen, you have instantly become a philosopher, and a more tolerant one at that.

Honored visitor Nancy Y. noted that children have a strong need to understand their world; they are hungry for a satisfactory explanation of everything. In response to their desire to know what's going on, the popular position of the day is reinforced in them by their education and social interactions. This is well and good up to a point, but unfortunately the educational process seldom goes beyond subscribing to the dominant paradigm. If we are taught to question any assumptions, it is only within a very narrow range that actually reinforces the imposed limits. We are only encouraged to question the things that fall outside the acceptable range. Thus, as Bill said, our childish attachments stay with us into adulthood, but by then they are cleverly disguised. Stepping back into our true nature requires going outside our comfort zone. It is a mystery why some people are compelled to do so. But unless we do, we remain trapped in our limited world. Adding that justice requires us to break out of our rigidities, even if doing so goes against our sense of security, Nancy Y. quoted the chorus of Leonard Cohen's song, *Anthem*:

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Children have an innate sense of justice, and injustice animates their desire to make changes and access new ideas. But since injustice is inevitably built into socioeconomic systems, it tends to be disregarded by those who are "well-adjusted." Because of this, children, being weak, are unable to successfully assert their perspective, and are forced to surrender it by the perpetrators and supporters of injustice. They soon learn that it's much easier to go along than to challenge social illusions. But below the surface a desire for justice still simmers, which is why leaders of all stripes pay lip service to justice, even as they promulgate the opposite.

Nancy Y. was keen on the idea of justice and how we yearn for it. She honored Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned by truly heinous people and had every reason to violently hate his oppressors, but who

found that inner stillness and managed to transcend his personal position to embrace the universal. When he finally walked out of prison he recognized virtue in everyone, and so was able to transform his society instead of energizing the opposition. It is a secret Narayana Guru—who had a similar impact in his own region—also knew. Nancy observed that Narayana Guru realized the oppression that the oppressors themselves suffered, and so was able to have compassion for them too.

It is very easy to be whirled around in vicious circles and become distressed when we take our preferred slice of reality for the whole. We become steadfast and undisturbed only when we are mature enough to acknowledge our limitations, to admit our blind spots. Then we become eager to add to our knowledge base instead of defending our turf. It's a perfect ideal with which to welcome the winter solstice of 2013 and enter the new year with an enlightening resolution, one that is at the same time not too hard to keep.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

If we hide a pot behind a screen and ask someone to identify it, that person, unaware of the hidden object, might make a number of conjectures. To qualify “this” in the question “What is this?” Guru tells us in verse 41 that “this” is the primal cause for fabricating the ideational world of the intellect. The consciousness implied can, however, also function unitively and can easily comprehend how a universal beingness always remains as the transcendent essence of everything. To such a consciousness “this” is the unifying element of all.

The original vision and inspiration associated with the founders of all great religions can be traced to people who are fully realized masters, such as Janaka and Yajnavalkya of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Mahavira of the Jains, the Christ, Lao Tzu and the Prophet. What they have seen and experienced is beyond words and certainly beyond the comprehension of a

relativistically oriented mind. When these great masters disseminated their wisdom, whatever trickle came in the form of articulated words was half lost because of the poverty of language, and misunderstood because the recipients' minds were not as enlightened as those of their masters.

As a result of this, feuds and conflicts arose among the congregates of all masters. For the purposes of social security and political advantage, the followers of all major religions got themselves organized. Several times the world has been bathed in the blood of religious dissidents and even the word religion is now looked upon with horror and suspicion by people who care for the brotherhood of mankind.

Spiritual experience is not arrived at as a logical conclusion of inductive or deductive reasoning. It is a wholesome transformation of all the dissonance of nature in one's personality into a harmonious resonance with the truth, beauty and goodness in all. Although reason is an excellent tool for making a unitive understanding beneficial to all concerned, it has no potential of its own to make a person enlightened.

When we are confronted by a raving fanatic it causes disquiet in our minds, and, as if in a state of hypnosis, even the most liberally minded man is tempted to take up a cudgel to defend himself. Only those who are well-established in the universality of the all-embracing sameness can hold their peace and remain unruffled on such provocative occasions. When the world around us goes mad with religious factions and separatism, unitive wisdom is a panacea.

* * *

Nataraja Guru's commentary:

THE blind men of the fable who examined an elephant could not come to any agreement about it because none of them could have a clear enough or total enough direct view of the animal, and

generalized too readily on their data which were partial and lacking in clarity.

There are many religious groups in the world which have arisen to correct or wrong opinions or practices which might have prevailed in disjunct regions and at distinct times. Formulated and codified with direct reference to the actual situation and the error they were meant to correct, they tend to stress one aspect of spiritual life or to give primacy to one doctrine or commandment over others.

The total truth, which is independent of particular circumstances, and which should not be limited even to correct particular items, only tends thus to remain outside the scope of any particular formulation or codification of religious life. The total or global truth tends to be even more than the sum-total of individual points of view. Moreover, the original founder of a religion might have had a clarity of vision of the global truth which those who follow him without the same degree of original insight cannot have in the natural course of happenings in life.

Cults, creeds, codified and hidebound forms of faith or doctrine tend thus to attach more importance to the dead letter rather than to the living word. Direct global insight into the nature of the absolute or total truth that is the basic subject-matter of all religious faiths or patterns of behaviour tends thus to be overlaid or examined piecemeal and partially, giving rise to endless theological, doctrinal or other differences, around which much disturbance of life takes place. The trees can hide the forest.

To the eye of a person able to see the essential as distinct from the merely superficial aspect of religions, there is a common basic substratum of which the divergent expressions are only secondary and unimportant marginal aspects. All religions in essence answer to one central human need for spiritual consolation. They all seek happiness, and there is no religion in the world which aims at

suffering rather than happiness. This is stated in verse 49 that follows.

The one religion of mankind, to which the Guru Narayana referred in his well-known motto of ‘One race, one religion and one ideal or God for all mankind’, is to be visualized on the basis of the common end of happiness that all religions, however varied and different superficially, have as the central value implied in their teaching.

There is a tendency in the group-psychology of human beings to get influenced by mob sentiments that might come to the surface of collective life at any given moment. The excesses committed by fanatics in the history of the world are such that they have drenched the soil with human blood many times. The Guru is concerned in this verse to see that better sense or wisdom should prevail. The contemplative view here recommended is to make the man who tends to be moved by group emotions in such matters compose himself and calmly go about his normal business without adding fuel to the fire of fanatic agitations. Group contagion of horizontalized attitudes is to be guarded against. The reference to settling down calmly is to the appreciation of contemplative values in life. The whole of this discussion naturally stems out of the common ground of philosophy and religion, which is the Self.

Part III

Some quotes from *The Doors of Perception/Heaven and Hell*, by Aldous Huxley:

“In a world where education is predominantly verbal, highly educated people find it all but impossible to pay serious attention to anything but words and notions. There is always money for, there are always doctrines in, the learned foolery of research into what, for scholars, is the all-important problem: Who influenced whom to say what when? Even

in this age of technology the verbal humanities are honoured. The non-verbal humanities, the arts of being directly aware of the given facts of our existence, are almost completely ignored.”

“We can never dispense with language and the other symbol systems; for it is by means of them, and only by their means, that we have raised ourselves above the brutes, to the level of human beings. But we can easily become the victims as well as the beneficiaries of these systems. We must learn how to handle words effectively; but at the same time we must preserve and, if necessary, intensify our ability to look at the world directly and not through that half opaque medium of concepts, which distorts every given fact into the all too familiar likeness of some generic label or explanatory abstraction.”

“Literary or scientific, liberal or specialist, all our education is predominantly verbal and therefore fails to accomplish what it is supposed to do. Instead of transforming children into fully developed adults, it turns out students of the natural sciences who are completely unaware of Nature as the primary fact of experience, it inflicts upon the world students of the humanities who know nothing of humanity, their own or anyone else’s.”

* * *

Jake’s commentary brings *That Alone* to bear on the American (and beyond) culture wars:

With this verse, writes Nitya, the Guru concludes the project he has been working on since verse 20, articulating the features of our individuated mind that receives the light of our internal Karu. Up to that twentieth verse, says Nitya, he focused on the nature of that Absolute and the many forms it takes. Conversely, with the next verse (45), and the four following that one, he will deal with how we arrive at our possession of and become influenced by a social mind, a development that can lead to all varieties of horror.

These three elements—the social mind, the individual mind, and the “source from which your mind derives its light,” constitute the three essentials that we need to understand and be able to control if our life on earth is to be peaceful and constructive (p. 302).

The Guru’s verse opens with a clear affirmation of the Perennial Tradition, Plotinus’ observations concerning the One and the Many, and the all-pervading sameness of the Absolute. In other words, the mystical core at the center of universal spirituality is the same no matter who experiences it or what names they might apply to it, a truth obvious to those who have had that direct perception. It is when that truth is translated into words and concepts that are subsequently passed on to those who have had no such direct connection that all the trouble begins. The “unenlightened” of the Guru’s verse are those on the second team, so to speak, that follow someone who, for whatever reason, they infer has had access to the Infinite which is beyond the capacity of the herd—or at least them.

It is the lot of the herd that is the condition of most of us. Training ourselves to survive the world of necessity, our minds and its rational dimensions begin to learn what to learn and how to learn it as soon as the equipment becomes available. As Piaget chronicled as he observed his own children progress through stages of development and as Dewey wrote of the education process generally, the collateral effects of learning and education outweigh the nominal subjects of study themselves, a point Nitya amplifies and personalizes on page 298: “All too often, . . . having used this tool and found it efficient for solving some of the riddles and problems of your personal life, you glorify it and make it your sole crutch for ever and ever.” By so doing, we then put ourselves in a room with no view or escape because of a companion awareness that manifests along with the self-aware mind—“when you look in the mirror you might see your hair turning white or new wrinkles on your face or colourations on your skin”; the whole reasoned world will come to an un-reasoned end.

At this point, Nitya presents a marvelously succinct assessment of the faith/reason dichotomy endlessly debated in the West, especially the US, and demonstrates the essential pointlessness at the heart of it. More often than not, the skirmishes in the American culture wars erupt where the two scrape up against one another and have done so publicly since the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial. The fact that they continue and that those on either side of the squabble appear to have not learned much suggests that perhaps there is not much to learn when quarreling substitutes for understanding and the premise on which the hostilities rests doesn't exist.

Once the terror of death penetrates awareness, the mind seeks an answer and easily locates one in a promise that the body may drop away but the soul remains eternal—the siren's song of any number of exoteric religious organizations. Because the soul (or spirit or whatever) is beyond reason or the mind's capacity to locate, that same mind shifts "our bodily feeling to this so-called soul or spirit, which is only conjectural" (p. 298). As Nitya points out, it is the intellect that makes this decision, a choice it is supremely unqualified to make, but given the responsibility the ego has assigned it and the success it has demonstrated in the transactional domain, such a demand appears both reasonable and achievable, given the givens—given all the sacred books making the claim.

At this juncture, Narayana Guru, says Nitya, makes a startling but accurate observation, that such faith as this process produces is "born of your intellect" and is founded on conjecture (because it must be in order for the mind to work with it at all). Furthermore, this construction is the very *stuff* of religion, commonly understood (including Marxist atheism, and so on). It is a second-hand conviction founded on someone else's vision, an interpretation of what one never experienced firsthand. This sequence moves the "believer" further and further away from truth. As Nitya comments, when two people experiencing a spiritual vision encounter each other, there is no disagreement. Only when

the junior varsity gets involved do “religious” disputes arise, battles that require a dogmatic belief developed by a mind engineered to handle events manifesting in the transactional domain only. It, too, dies with the body.

As Nitya concludes, continuing on this “reasonable” course will lead us into circles of redundancy, and the history of the quarrel in the American experience underscores the claim. By continuing to face outward and to experience experience secondhand, we continually privilege our perceptions/interpretations and thereby accept our mind’s best efforts in evaluating what is going on. The “facts” we think we deal with are always partial and the best guesses our mind can manufacture. As a consequence, all minds deal with comparative estimates that are assumed to be whole truths containing accuracy they cannot represent.

This faith borne of intellect controlled by the ego is the battlefield of the American culture wars. Once an original spiritual vision is translated into religious belief it goes public, so to speak, and requires dogma and conformity in order to stand on its own. Once that process has begun, *religion* has replaced clear vision and defenders of the true faith—familiar with secondhand information only—monitor the frontiers. The Liberal/Conservative tensions in our public discourse make up the heart of our contemporary political entertainment and have over the last several decades become the very point of the exercise. In fact, the most rigid and doctrinaire reflect their severely constrained perspective because the position held becomes as rigid as the vision is limited as does reason which is the sole weapon in defending the indefensible. Characteristic of the True Believer are doctrinaire denial, projection, and all the other features of an ego engaged in its fierce confrontation with the inevitability of its eventual annihilation.

The solution, writes Nitya, is in re-directing the mind inward rather than accepting its normal outward-directed posture. Focused on the external, the mind naturally dichotomizes things and concepts in order to isolate, identify, and name them. From

this point of view, the mind's opinions assume the same contours: my opinion is not yours and vice versa. Nitya points out that this approach is like continuously viewing the world through the wrong end of a telescope; distortion, isolation, and frustration rule when the "facts" we work with are mental constructions of partial distortions the mind cobbles together as best it can in its mission to survive in manifestation as long as possible. The universe, I think, does not really care and is unconcerned as to whether or not "we accept" death, aging, or any of the other of the natural certainties. Using our defective telescope as a guide, we can never move beyond the limits imposed by the instrument anyway. The best we can hope for is to "learn to accept" the necessity of a mental stoicism in order to face a cyclical condition offering us endlessly the same choices. As the Guru and Nitya have outlined in previous verses, beyond dispute is the mind's power to construct great magic.