

1/21/14
Verse 45

One faith is despicable to another;
the *karu* described in one is defective in another's estimation;
in the world the secret of this is one alone;
know that confusion prevails until it is known to be thus.

Free translation:

One person's faith will appear as unworthy to another. A basic tenet of another's religion is often rated unsatisfactory and looked upon with disdain. Such confusion is born of irrational prejudices, and continues in the minds of people as long as the secret of universal sameness remains unknown.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

One faith in another's view is low, and the doctrine
Cardinal as taught in one, in another's measure, lacks;
Know, confusion in the world shall prevail so long
As the unitive secret herein remains unknown.

It felt wonderful to sit together once again in a dedicated group, mutually lifting each other to inspiring and transformative insights. These classes have become the peak of the week for many or most of us. As we head off in our separate directions afterward it's as though we are walking on air.

I also appreciate the several people who wrote recently to say how valuable the class notes were for them. Although I would write these in a vacuum, since they are a great exercise and learning tool for me, it is nonetheless helpful to know that they don't exist in a vacuum. Thank you all for being by far the most important part of the trip.

We are firmly in the “whipped cream” section of Atmopadesa Satakam, as far as I’m concerned. Verses 43-49, the conclusion of the first half of this masterwork, are a paean call to universal harmony, grounded in a psychology that is anything but naïve. I find myself perusing this section more than any other, and especially my favorite paragraph, from Verse 44:

Once you go from the spiritual vision to religious belief, you have already strayed far from the truth. When we fight, the discord is about religion and not any spiritual vision. In two people who have a spiritual vision there is no difference of opinion: they melt into each other. But when you have only heard something and then you or a priest interpret it for yourself, you take a stand. Your position is rigid to precisely the extent that your vision is limited. You have to think of your loyalty to the man from whom you heard. He can express only one millionth of his total experience through his words or example, and your sole authority is that one little fragment. As it is not in any way yours, you are always afraid to move a little this way or that way from what you have heard. You don’t want to blaspheme. You want to hold onto it, but you do not know either its intention or extension. The result is that we become victims of narrow religious thinking. In order to support our religion we know only argument. We go on reasoning endlessly, but reason is absolutely useless and meaningless, if not destructive, in this matter. (300-1)

Included here is the pithy sentence that is my motto for the entire study: “Your position is rigid to precisely the extent that your vision is limited.” Knowing this turns the whole world upside down, inverting the disgruntlement with the “other” into a personal defect of vision that can readily be corrected. Verse 45 elaborates this principle spectacularly, tracing its roots in social conformity and tantalizing us with the possibility of actually freeing ourselves to make the change.

Deb and I began the discussion reminiscing about our younger days, when pigeonholing and mocking anyone outside our

circle of friends was de rigueur. While we had little clue who we were, it was easy to see what we were not: all those stupid, mean, selfish people who weren't like us. Because of that, Nitya's words always hit home, as if they are aimed right at me: "When we hold this key in our hand we no longer mock the ways of others. Otherwise, we are all the time estimating others and inwardly laughing at them. We want to suggest to them what the right thing to do is."

Laughing at others, mocking them, hating them, and making suggestions, were all part of our repertoire. As Nitya says, we had decided to fight even before we came together. This is because we were on unfamiliar ground, not knowing who we were, though fervently believing we did. In the absence of self-awareness, it is very handy to have an enemy, a "not-I." When we don't know what we are, we define ourselves by what we are not. Even though it breeds conflict, it is by far the easier road.

We have learned that in the sentence "This is a pot," the subject, This, is difficult to discern, while the predicate, pot, is perfectly obvious. Because of this, we routinely ignore the subject and cling to the predicate, the aftermath, the fixed definition. "This" is our true nature; "pot" stands for all the ways we define and therefore limit it. Limiting our true nature inevitably leads to clashes with those who define themselves differently. If that isn't enough, we *presume* the other is different, and clash with them even though they are almost identical with us.

The famous experiment in which a group of American boys, as homogenous as possible, was divided into two and let loose in a parkland demonstrates how desperate we are for a perceptible sense of self. Within a short time the groups developed identities and pitted themselves against each other. If you search the "Robber's Cave experiment" you can read all about it.

One of the possible reasons the human race keeps spawning disastrous conflicts is that our true nature is indefinable and imperceptible, and so it gets ignored in favor of existing social structures. Accepting who we are is the hard road; fitting into what

we see and hear is the default setting. Unfortunately, we are not yet philosophically evolved enough to bring universal peace and harmony. The class pondered how to get this liberating set of concepts across to others. Or more accurately, we pondered how challenging it is to communicate these simple but elusive ideas. My thought is that wanting to teach others is a variation on “We want to suggest to them what the right thing to do is.” Instead, we should put the principle into practice in our own lives—a lifetime work in progress—and not be in a hurry to fix up other people. When we embody the thisness, we naturally teach by example. It is an understandable urge to change the world for the better, but it is often used as a substitute for working on oneself, one of the ego’s best tricks for keeping us comfortable with our conditioning. *We’re* okay; it’s the other guy who needs to change.

Nitya’s whole thrust in the commentary was to outline the process by which we become conditioned as we grow up, and he does it brilliantly. He was speaking to a roomful of mostly 20-year-olds, who were all convinced we were the first free thinkers the world had ever known, and who had already overcome our conditioning to blaze new paths. I remember the impact of his words about being *conditioned* to free thinking, as it dawned on me how truly elusive freedom actually was, how I was cleverly substituting a static image of liberty for the static image of conformity I had recently discarded. I realized the bait and switch was a triumph of the ego, and even more binding in its way than simple conformity. Believing we were liberated tended to be satisfying enough that the process of actually liberating ourselves could come to a close.

In case there was any doubt what’s going on here, Nitya slips in a reminder unobtrusively: “This verse is mainly aimed at a deconditioning of our behavioral patterns.” He assures us that if we truly know our dharma, our universal support, we will have no impulse to fight, because the solid ground of it prefigures our conditioned state. In other words, knowing oneself brings about the

confidence we need to not respond to provocations, which is measurably freer than always taking the bait.

I think Nitya's presentation of the forty-fifth verse goes even deeper because he doesn't aim it directly at us, but reveals our foibles in ways we are comfortable rejecting. A frontal assault on our well-guarded domain engenders resistance and defensiveness, so he uses a good trick, mixing the historical record with the incisive psychological insights of the verse. Everyone is sick at heart about religious intolerance and the devastation it has wrought. Nitya gives the example of burning the great Library of Alexandria, and only afterward slips in "In a small way we all do the same thing all the time." He leaves it up to us to go as far as we dare to see the connection between the tragic burning and our own outlook.

Nitya puts his finger on an essential idea, that the key knowing the "This" is to have a neutral attitude. We all have our personal perspectives, and how could it be otherwise? And we can easily accept that they will all vary. While humans the world over accept many of the same things, we nevertheless find plenty of grounds for disagreement. We can have our preferences, but we shouldn't consider them the only right ones, or else we'll come to blows. Neutrality is a way to take things for exactly what they are, without overlaying our personal colorations onto them. It takes some time before we can distinguish the uprising reactions that we have learned to take for granted as delusionary forces. Once we know they are opposed to our best interests, we can let them die out instead of pouring fuel on the flames. This could well be the most important step in spiritual life.

In our closing meditation, the class focused on the neutral state in which our knee-jerk reactions could be observed and left alone. The silence became extremely intense. All of us know well the feeling in the gut or chest of the defensive response of the ego rising up. We were quietly resolving to not let those sensations run our lives any more.

This is one of those verses that are so well presented as to seem utterly life changing. And yet I know that many of you can see the flaws that I habitually gloss over. It would be wonderful if you would point them out to the rest of us, to help us refine our understanding. Aum.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

It is not compulsory that everyone should have a religion. Many people think they have no religious convictions or are indifferent to religion, but on closer scrutiny it can be seen that each person has his own personal convictions, preferences and habitual choices. Although these are not necessarily religious, the essence of all this implies one's way of seeking and finding his or her personal notion of happiness. Only part of this personal style is regulated by any rational thinking. Prejudices, instinctive urges, unconscious defense mechanisms and even pathological traits can be part of one's built-in personal attitude. However structured or haphazard this personal lifestyle might be, it affects one's mode of dressing, food habits, behavioural patterns, social affiliations, conformity to customs, goal motivations and mode of thinking.

Among the conformists we see organized groups like Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, Vaishnavites, Saivites, Sikhs, freethinkers and communists. They indoctrinate their children at an early age. It is almost impossible for a child to grow up in the human society without being adversely or favourably affected by both the vertical and the horizontal pressures of a continuing society. As Henri Bergson puts it, the parent is an office which has the authority to regulate the child. Most children prefer to take the path of least resistance and thus they easily succumb to traditional prejudices. In all fairness one should admit, however, that it is also possible for a child to learn from its parents the traditional wisdom of its forefathers. Whichever way the mind is fashioned and bent, it

becomes mature and somewhat consolidated for all time well before they come to adulthood. The individual upbringing gives to everyone a yardstick which is practically of no use when it is to be applied to a life situation not familiar to one's own accepted pattern. In the mind of most people this creates an attitude of, "I am OK and you are not OK."

If a turtle goes for a walk on dry land, when he returns to his pool to share his experience with the friendly fish of the pond they will laugh at his stupidity for saying he was walking on land instead of swimming. The greatest curse of mankind is its confusion of terms. Even people speaking the same language have difficulties in understanding each other because each person uses the private metaphors of his own religious convictions.

Controversy arises between doctrinists of religion in defining the highest truth each wants to uphold. The Guru uses the term *karu* in a most comprehensive sense, which can cover several aspects of the Absolute such as the all-transcendent, the primeval cause, the substance that evolves into all moulds, the archetypes, and the overall norm of all evaluations.

Only a wise man sees that the essence of all search is the love for happiness. Those who know this transcendental essence remain calm and smile with compassion when their fellow men brandish weapons of threat in the confused clang of endless rivalry and competition.

Wherever the word "this" (*itu*) comes it should be specially looked into to see if it is used in the sense of "the difficult." The *karu* spoken of above is the Absolute, which at no time is fully discernible. "This," which refers directly to the *karu*, offers the greatest challenge to any seeker to comprehend its meaning clearly. The term *dhara* used in this verse stands in marked contrast with *ulaku* in the previous verse. The roots of *dhara* and *dharma* are the same. Discerning meaning correctly is a must in a world of consistent meaning (*dhara*) and it is only optional in a world of opinions (*ulaku*).

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

RIVALRIES and feuds between followers of different faiths, religions or creeds, big or small in number, can never come to an end when approached in the usual way of relativistic or mechanistic reasoning. There will be no lack of sentiment or argument to support separatist tendencies, which are natural, as there is something corresponding to the struggle for existence in the Darwinian sense, which tends to divide man from man on the basis of ideologies - which are in effect more real than the geographical or actual barriers that divide one man's domain from that of another.

What is here referred to as the unitive approach is known to the absolutist as dialectical wisdom which, instead of tending to add to the intensity of dilemmas or paradoxical conflicts in life, solves them by a contemplative way known to the ancient wisdom context. In the terminology that we have already started to use in this commentary, there is a vertical and a horizontal approach to problems. The horizontal, when stressed, divides and differentiates, while the same problem approached vertically or unitively finds a solution to conflicts and spells reconciliation.

The Guru expressly refers to this way of wisdom as a 'secret' as, strangely enough, to this day it has remained without full recognition in the public eye, although those who are gifted with mystic, contemplative or dialectical vision have always stood for it in one form or another. Art and literature based on this very secret have flourished in various parts of the world, giving rise to the flowerings of special cultures that belong to various geographical or historical contexts. This secret has one day to be raised to the status of a science and taught in public schools with a definite

methodology, epistemology and a scale of values that properly belong to it.

In India, this has been known as the Advaita approach, which is unitive and non-dual in character. If this could be taught scientifically, then we could expect a universally tolerant attitude to develop in the mind even of the common man, which will tend to minimise or at least mitigate the rivalries and rub their edges off.

With a slight touch of sadness the Guru here deplores the lack of this kind of unitive wisdom of which he is the teacher and the Guru, because in his vision of the future of the lot of humanity the solution for conflicts between religions and allied ideologies that are closed and static can come only when the open, dynamic and unitive, contemplative or universal way becomes evident to the minds of the generality of men.

Part III

Some really good discussions didn't seem to me to fit the flow of the earlier notes, so I wanted to add it here.

Michael and Jake mused about how we can best respond when we are actually under attack, without exaggerating on our own behalf. Jan offered that it was important to realize it isn't necessarily about you. You should ask yourself why a person is acting the way they are, what forces are driving them. Sometimes you can figure it out, or if not, at least you don't react as negatively if you know it is a problem being brought from elsewhere. Her term was to go to the place of commonality, where you can work together on the problem.

If we don't react as a partisan, but listen hard from a basic posture of neutrality, we can be available to respond appropriately at the proper moment. It takes real listening, a rare commodity. Most of what passes for listening in a conversation is biding your time to say what you have planned to say. That means you are

holding onto your own ideas rather than putting them aside to attend to the other person's complaints. Real listening means you have to be fully present. It often reassures the other person that the door is open to them, and progress can be made. Then again, when a person is "on a tear," there may be nothing you can do, and retreat is warranted. Psyches have nuclear blast capability, and when it's unleashed you are advised to take cover until the radiation level diminishes.

Speaking of listening, Jake talked about classes his wife Joan facilitates, the Circle of Trust, popularized by Parker Palmer. Originally a Quaker idea, they involve small groups with one person talking for a long time and everyone else listening closely. You are instructed to only ask open, honest questions without any hidden agenda. In Jake's experience that was nearly impossible, yet every session brought about a breakthrough. There is a real parallel between the open kind of meditation we practice in the Gurukula and the Circle of Trust. Both involve stilling the surface mind to permit the deep (and wise) unconscious to blossom forth. Aligning ourselves to be more in tune with our unconscious wisdom is a healing and positively stimulating technique. Take this quote from Palmer: "Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am." Or, "Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world." Other friends have done these workshops, and are very enthusiastic. I can see why.

More quotes can be found at http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/55813.Parker_J_Palmer .

Okay, that should do for today. In the words of Garrison Keeler, "Be well, do good work, and stay in touch."

Part IV

An anonymous donor made a great point, in reference to the following paragraph in Nitya's commentary:

There is another possibility, another measuring rod which is not privately manufactured in one's individual mind. It belongs to sat cit ananda, the existential verity of knowledge. Sat means existence; cit, verity; and ananda, value; so it is the existential verity of a value that is enshrined in one's very heart. In all experiences these three aspects are bound to be there: an existential factor, a knowledge of that existence, and the essence of that existence, which is a value.

This is fine, except Nitya doesn't adequately explain here how we distinguish our personal measuring rod from the universal, and it is pretty clear that we humans routinely mistake the one for the other. We always want to claim that our personal *mati*, our carefully constructed intellectual framing, is really right. What else can we do? We have made substantial efforts throughout our life to refine our understanding. Can we accept that we are no better off than if we hadn't bothered? Unfortunately, from an absolutist perspective, we may have to. So what exactly are we missing?

Nitya is invoking a universal essence, the Karu, that the writer does not see any evidence of. Especially in our deconstruction-happy post-modern state of minds, everyone has their own perspective and dwells in an isolated bubble of perception. So how do we access this purported universal essence, and isn't that the whole thrust of the teaching? Otherwise, while intelligent enough to be reasonably worthwhile, what is there to set this study apart from any other harangue?

For now I'm going to leave this provocative question out there as an invitation for everyone to home in on the essence of our study, and hopefully share your thoughts. I don't want this golden opportunity to turn into just another belief system, a slightly subtler version of all the storefronts in Kerala proudly displaying the same picture of Narayana Guru as a sort of loyalty pledge. Like

the anonymous writer, worried about being scorned for holding unorthodox ideas, I can't accept a secondhand interpretation as valid enough. Those who insist on relying on one have already dropped out of the study anyway, so those of us who remain can bring the white heat of intensity to bear, to try and melt the steel bars of our psychological prison. Thank you, Anonymous, for a stimulating poke in the derriere.

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Jean used the solstice break to catch up on reading the notes. She implies an important idea, that deconditioning is not the whole story, as it is often taken to be. It is important for us to retain the valid aspects of our conditioning, which make us who we are, while discarding those aspects that hold us back from expanding and evolving. Here are some selected excerpts of what she wrote:

Your class notes always widen my horizons. I'm finding it difficult to remember all the details anymore, but it all builds up to a critical mass pushing in the same direction. I did make a mental note, while catching up on your class notes, that I especially liked verses 33 and 34. And I have a memory of Susan's raft story and metaphor [v. 37] which has stuck.

The issues you raise in Atmo discussions merge with everything that I'm always reading otherwise. It becomes a holistic mishmash. Presently it includes current events, the last section of Sacks' *Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (finally), Google dips into Theodosius and the Alexandrian Library and Robber's Cave Experiment, and a book at the hospital library which I read while waiting for Lasse, a book on the thin membrane between the life-giving and the destructive elements in our characters. I hardly know how to start. Sacks writes of poor souls lost in the details and intellectually unable to conceptualize. I know that I have a strong predilection for the concrete, for real examples. I sometimes feel

the risk of drowning in details, which I'm also forgetting, yet I am always trying to put it all together to form one Karu.

On deconditioning our behavioral patterns and recognizing a common ground—At Robber's Cave Scout Camp, the Rattlers and the Eagles each had a week to bond separately, 4-6 days to compete for desired resources, and a short cool-off period. What finally worked to reduce the friction? Introduction of The Outside Enemy, in this case, (1) a screw-up in the water supply, and (2) a stalled truck. The guys in both groups had to work together to solve these problems. As one commenter quipped, the two greatest needs of mankind are sufficient food and a Supervillain.

Two days ago a RyanAir plane was plundered by its angry passengers. It had started in Spain, bound for Paris, but had to land en route for a sick passenger. Delayed, the plane lost its slot at the Beauvais airport near Paris and had to land 500 km away, in Nantes. It took awhile before the passengers got the word that they would have to overnight in Nantes, and then all hell broke loose apparently. They plundered the food supply, detained the cabin personnel, and tore around. Baggage unloaders viewed the scene as almost "bestial." As a passenger later explained, "I am not a terrorist, and not a kidnapper. But we were all very tired, hungry, thirsty, irritated, we got no information, and things just got out of control." My first thought is that it's best to keep your passengers fed and informed at all times. Second, that there really IS a very thin membrane between the life-giving and the destructive in our characters.

"If you know the situation, you can predict how a certain person is going to react." Let's break this down. "If you know the situation": NSA and its metadata gathering prides itself on knowing the situation. "You can predict how a person is going to act": their Quantum program is partly geared to predict future (terrorist)

actions, based on what has been swept up in Internet and phone communiqués.

To predict is, in fact, to “pre-judge.” We do it all the time, often to positive effect, using the incomplete information we have at hand to make the most sensible decisions possible and act accordingly.

Character—what creates it? Nitya points out consistency in habitual choices, and also conviction of values which evidence in an inner nonresistance and exercise of will. Character becomes the underpinning of our behavior and personality. And so we can also get set in our ways, which can also be a bad thing. So let’s look at brain plasticity for a moment. Because the brain is plastic, we can make changes, even here by exerting will and making consistent choices. But brain plasticity is greatest in children up to age 7. Now make a little jump here, to a related topic. In early January, text-TV came with this news: “Pop a pill for perfect pitch,” or in other words, pills can make you more musical. I’ll translate a little below:

“There is a medicine that today is used for treatment of epilepsy and depression but can even give effect with people who have no song-voice, says Takao Hensch, professor in molecular cell biology. The medicine recreates the brain state as it was before 7 years old, that is, when the brain was most plastic and receptive to new information.... The question is if one can expect this medicine... to give a general rejuvenation of the brain. Could it, for example, become easier to learn new languages?...There are risks. Man’s brain develops, not without reason, in periods during life. It is not risk free to disturb this process. ‘Our identity forms through the brain’s development during different periods, when we adapt ourselves to the environment we grow up in. We have learned a language and created ourselves and identity. If we should erase this

by going back to a decisive period in the brain's development, yes, then we take a risk.'"

All this coincided so beautifully with what I was reading in Sacks at the time about the temporal lobe, music, and anomalies.

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Jake's commentary is a welcome addition, emphasizing facets of this profoundly import verse that got short shrift in the earlier notes:

In this verse, the Guru connects the various elements of our individual internal training and illustrates how that early discipline comes to shape our social condition. In Nitya's commentary, he fills in the details of this procedure and explains where the distortions and fears turn the process into one large circular exercise that guarantees our continual occupation of a fractured social setting characterized by strife and conflict.

Because our desire to maximize happiness—in all its forms from the most trivial to the most abstract—drives us to act, the choices we make (or are compelled to make) as soon as we are capable of making them conform to that mandate. Survival qualifies as the first goal of happiness and arises in the home of origin where we make choices to act that, in turn, form our basic character. As the smallest and weakest members of the group, children learn before they know they learn which actions will lead to happiness in one form or another and which actions meet with resistance or downright hostility on the part of parents (usually) who can and do impose their values and have the power to enforce them. Nitya calls this early childhood training a Pavlovian kind of conditioning in which the child, as was the case with Pavlov's dogs, learns which actions produce rewards and which lead to punishment.

With this universal training, Writes Nitya, the child enters the world of *religion*, generally speaking, an arena that includes all belief systems such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Marxism—”it can be anything” (p. 305). By young adulthood, this individual is well indoctrinated and uses that doctrinaire conformity as a measuring rod for belief systems he encounters. Each person develops his or her own peculiar standards, and those holding values too far removed from the one true faith are seen as not thinking straight.

This outwardly-directed or other-directed point of view (as David Reisman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney identified it in their groundbreaking mid-twentieth century critique of American culture, *The Lonely Crowd*) requires that we limit our awareness so that this trajectory for understanding the world remains intact and out of consciousness while our minds address the repetitive question of “What is this?” as phenomenon continues to manifest all around us. (In his commentary on Verse 41, Nitya offers a more thorough discussion of the foregoing question and the mind’s efforts to address it.)

In his present commentary, Nitya works with the example “this is a pot” and the other-directed individual’s penchant for concentrating on the “pot” and thereby privileging the rational mind’s talent for quantifying and labeling. This design works marvelously well in separating one organized religion from another. On the other hand, writes Nitya, are those who are capable of reversing the order of inquiry and can focus on the “this” of “This is a pot,” a point of view that locates the one commonality within that is the same in all cases of pots of all kinds. The same principle applies to religions or faiths—the many variations all condense to the one same Absolute core of which all the manifestations are merely epiphenomenon, that, one could say, add the color and variety to what is an essential sameness without form.

Because “happiness is the common denominator of all religions,” concludes Nitya, holding to that consistent realness

opens the way for us to become inner-directed and inclusive rather than outer-directed and exclusive. From such a standpoint, “group religion, which is a political affiliation for the sake of social privilege and for applying pressure tactics” is exposed for what it truly is (p. 307).