

1/28/14  
Verse 46

By fighting it is impossible to win;  
by fighting one another no faith is destroyed;  
one who argues against another's faith, not recognizing this,  
fights in vain and perishes; this should be understood.

Free translation:

It is not possible to vanquish any religion by fighting it. By becoming competitive and fighting each other's religion, the zeal of the members of the persecuted religion only increases. By promoting religious feuds one is only destroying one's own integrity and succumbing to the evils of hatred. This should never be forgotten.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

To vanquish (a religion) by fighting is not possible; no religion  
Can be abolished by mutual attack; the opponent of another faith  
Not remembering this and persisting in his fight,  
His own doom shall he in vain fight for, beware!

The class did an admirable job of homing in on the practical implications of this crucial verse, one that turns the arrow of intentionality back 180 degrees to focus on ourselves as the source of our relationship to the world. In a way it's a kind of final exam on sama and anya: can they be more than abstractions? Can we put the principle into practice in our everyday life? How?

Nitya recounts two primary threads of Indian philosophy, Jaimini's study of dharma and Badarayana's study of brahman, the Absolute. In essence, the first differentiates while the second unites, and the clash between these positions goes to the heart of our class focus on how to optimally live our lives.

There is a subtle distinction about this issue made at the beginning of Nitya's comments:

Those who see only difference and do not see unity cannot agree with one another. Those who see only unity do not see another to agree or disagree with. The *Dharma Sutras* of Jaimini presented the development of the ritualistic aspect of life, while Badarayana's darsana gave rise to the doctrine of renunciation. Thus, these schools have two totally different outlooks on life. The householder stood by one and the *sannyasi* or renunciate stood by the other. In India they have been arguing over these ideas since the beginning, and their implications are pondered by people all over the world.

If these are treated as countervailing sides of an argument, then both are dualistic. A unitive position doesn't conflict with a non-unitive one, but a dualistic take on it does. If you really see unity, there is no other, no *anya*, to fight with. But I think Nitya meant to draw another distinction, one that Paul perceived, that ritualists are dualists who must endlessly argue their position, whereas renunciates (ideally at least) do not stand in opposition to anything. By embracing everything, they have no need to come into conflict with anything.

Nitya often quoted the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, about how in the beginning the first man was afraid of the unknown. Then he realized that fear is about some other causing you harm, and so if there is no other, there is nothing to fear. Since he was first, there wasn't any other. When he realized that, he was no longer afraid. That is the essential principle here, the path we are trying to make out in the dimness. Our first learning in life is about otherness, which provides a sound basis for living safely in a dangerous world. Taken in isolation, though, we can become paranoiac and miserable about all the threats to our well-being and the uncertainty of our position. So we can take a further step, to reenter the primary state of unity, which assuages all the misery

based on partial understandings. It isn't simply a theoretical change, it's an supreme achievement of expanding our consciousness far beyond its accustomed boundaries. Unless that happens it remains a conceit, nice but perhaps vaguely ridiculous.

I highly recommend rereading Verse 44, which presents the unified aspect so beautifully. I'll recall the heart of it here: "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." Religion, as Nitya means it, is the total matrix of our world view, the belief system that both structures and truncates our vision into narrow channels.

Speaking of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, while looking for those verses on the first man in Nitya's commentary, I uncovered this tidbit bearing on the subject:

As we are used to accomplishing things and obtaining desirable ends by our actions, we entertain the false impression that for the self to become *brahman* there has to be some kind of process by which the part can evolve into the whole. Mantras seventeen and eighteen [of IV.4] remind us this is not so. We are always the whole. All that we need to do is forget the false notion that we are anything other than *brahman*. Realization is not accomplished by a forward march but by a regressive dissolution. Up to the last moment you have a choice to skip the whole process of samsara merely by accepting the fact that you are the Absolute. (II.583)

The bottom line is if you are arguing, it is about *anya*, or from the perspective of *anya*. Deb put it well: by arguing and attacking you aren't allowing the other person space to be who they are. We all want to convince people that we are right, but in doing so we actually defeat ourselves. We need to develop a bigger vision. She

recalled Nitya's advice that if you are afraid or jealous of someone, the cure is to make them your friend.

In a culture thoroughly grounded in contentiousness and hostility, this is a rare, even revolutionary attitude. It always amazes me how marginalized peacemakers are in our society, how all the attention is always drawn to conflict. Humans love fighting, and we are compelled to breathlessly join—or at least watch—battles. The kind of balm the gurus offer remains even now almost like a non-lunatic fringe, something few consider taking seriously. Can it be that just being alive isn't exciting enough, so getting into hot water is preferable?

Jake figured that almost 100% of people take the point of view that they are right and they don't want to listen. They set the boundaries of their world, and meaningful interaction is excluded. He felt it was pointless to try to participate and listen to them. He may be right, yet Vedanta is based on the belief that that position is a psychological defense, and it can be overcome by anyone sincere enough to try. Yet getting up the resolve to make the effort is not something that can be vouchsafed by another: it is the onus of the individual.

I'm sure most of us have occasionally been able to bring a spiritual attitude to conflicts in our lives. We need to share these stories so that we are encouraged to remain available as inspirational guides, and not abandon the field to the loudest louts. I solicited stories of people's success (or lack of it) in replacing *anya* with *sama* in interpersonal relations. All of you experienced seekers of truth have been peacemakers, nurses, healers, emergency responders, and all that. Please share a story or two of your successes. Susan has a terrific one appearing in my upcoming book, *The Path to the Guru*, and I think I can safely reprint it below. Some of you may remember it. She's referred to anonymously as Z. I'll add a couple of my classic adventures there too.

Joan, our Circle of Truth facilitator, who I expected to have plenty of success stories, led off with a notable (and familiar)

failure. I'm sure we've all had her experience: she offered her time and effort to a woman who really needed a friend, but found herself being used and manipulated and taken for granted. When she made an awkward effort to bring up the injustice of the situation, the woman became furious, and Joan realized she should just get away from her. Some people just can't be helped. They are "spring loaded in the pissed off position," as a friend of hers put it.

There was a lot of enthusiasm in the class for getting away from impossible people, and sometimes that is the only option. Only we shouldn't be premature in abandoning the field. I always think of one of Nitya's letters to Debbie (L&B, p. 379): "You should not be saddened about anyone unless your sadness has a positive or negative impact on him to jolt him out of the impasse and set him right. I may observe a fast, or cry, scream, slap myself and roll on the floor like a mad dog if only I see the ghost of a chance to pull the other to the right track. If that is not possible, I prefer to walk away with a prayer in my heart."

Paul thought of Arjuna, how he wanted to slip away from the battle but Krishna urged him to stay and fight. This is a great point, and as you know I consider the Gita to be the last word on the subject. When we are offended, insulted, or our feelings are hurt, our first impulse is to get away. But if we are grounded in unity, we won't be offended, and the impulse to run won't even arise. Then we can hang in there and offer our best responses. Fighting in this context doesn't mean punching back, it means engaging intelligently with the other person; more like a battle of wits. Dealing with the situation constructively. Krishna identifies the enemies in the battle as desire and anger. If we desire a certain outcome, we will be offended when the interplay goes in an unexpected direction. Our response then is anger, the bluster of ego defense. Those twin addictions, desire and anger, spoil the game every time.

Nitya himself was a fine example of someone who didn't have an agenda and so didn't get ruffled when people unloaded on him. Not being upset, he was wide awake to respond appropriately,

and even trenchantly. He could say a single sentence that would utterly collapse the other person's hostility, or divert them into a pacifying fog. Bill mentioned how Nitya believed in righteous indignation, and he certainly was no pushover, politically as savvy as anyone. If it was called for, he would blast hypocrites with a fury. But he wasn't furious: he remained grounded in a clear vision of the entire situation, and his words had all the more impact because of it.

One of the oldest military tactics in the book is provoking the other side to respond, and then using the response as a pretext to legitimize an assault. It allows an offensive thrust to be portrayed as defensive, and then no holds are barred. It works like a charm every time, sadly. A yogi learns to take in the whole picture before responding, and so does not take the bait of provocation. Yet they remain on alert to act appropriately. This is not about escaping fate, but meeting it with our full awareness.

We are left with two crucial and closely related issues to sum up our first half of Atmopadesa Satakam. One is how to bring unity into the fractured house of mirrors of embodied life without getting sucked into taking a fixed defensive position. The other is how to distinguish a universal norm from a personal predilection. I'll be holding my essay on the second problem for awhile longer, until one or two more responses trickle in.

Part II:

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

A religion cannot be brushed away as just somebody's mere opinion. When we look at the followers, we see that major religions are giving them the inspiration to live meaningful lives. Religion consoles many aching hearts. It encourages people to organize themselves into becoming productive corporations. It promotes art and culture. Over centuries it grows into a tradition that shapes the destiny of millions of people. All this is possible

only because religion has within it the fountain source of perennial values. We do not know how deep the roots of our personal beliefs are. We are only vaguely aware of the goal to which we are moving, and our potentials are not fully assessed or estimated. In short, what we know about ourselves is only very little.

The religion of a people is certainly greater than the wishes, convictions and dreams of a single individual. To estimate the magnitude of religion in general, let us turn our attention to two major religions which have been going strongly through millennia in spite of many adverse forces that tried to crush them; these are Judaism and Vedic Hinduism. The inner structure of the Kabbalah, which contains the mystical essence of Judaism, is represented by the sacred tree of Sephiroth. Judaism rests on the ever adorable values of wisdom, reason, knowledge, greatness, strength, beauty, eternity, majesty, principle and sovereignty (Chokmah, Binah, Daath, Gedulah, Geburah, Tiphereth, Netzach, Hod, Yesod, Malkuth).

This can be compared to the Vedic tree described in chapter 15 of the Bhagavad Gita. Its roots are above and the branches grow downward and sideways. The leaves sprouting on these branches are the meters of the Vedic chants. Its branches are the proliferations of the three modalities of nature. The lower branches produce roots which go down into the ground and keep the tree steadfast. The intertwining of these roots is the karma of the collective masses which makes mankind an interrelated matrix. This tree has no form, no beginning or end, and no one knows its real formations. This tree can be transcended only with detachment.

The values glorified in Judaism and the symbolic picture presented of Hinduism appear in every major religion in one form or other. If someone fancies that these religions could be blotched away by sheer force, he would be attempting the impossible. Marx, Freud and Nietzsche dreamt of the possibility of the withering away of religion, but instead of bringing about the death of the

present religions, they only added three new offshoots. The more you fight religion, the more virile and invigorated it becomes. In India religion is called dharma because it sustains all the traditionally preserved essential values of life. Motivation to act comes from the embedded seeds of value aspirations. An individual, who is on his march from his cradle to his grave, has within his biologic, psychologic and moral ingenuity several long-tried devices implanted by Mother Nature to protect him from all possible dangers through which he has to wend his way. When several such individuals become a closely knit social organism they develop a culture and tradition that becomes unassailable. For this reason religion can never be annihilated, though it has been overpowered for short periods in history.

The way of the Absolute is all-encompassing. By accepting the validity of another person's faith, we can avoid the exaggeration of its emotional impact and any defensive reactions. By appreciating and imbibing the essentials of another religion we will only discover the greater hidden truths of our own religion, hence it is foolish to promote exclusiveness in religious attitudes. Unitive understanding enables one to appreciate that the essence of all religions is the same.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

THE roots of any religious growth are not in its outer expressions. Just as the partial pruning of a tree only helps the tree to grow all the more strong, a mere mechanistic overt attack fails when directed against established religious growths. There are deep-seated value-factors that make any religion flourish in any country. These are like the roots or the invisible stem of a great tree. Religion has its subtle *raison d'être* which is not overtly evident to the view or even subject to the attack of wordy polemics. If this were so, many old religions would have been exterminated by this



time. All religions satisfy the needs or console the spiritual hankerings of those who seek refuge under them. When the benefit is spent out and a religion has no succour or consolation to offer to its adherents, it might shrink or even die a natural death. Overt fighting only strengthens all the more the root aspects of a religious growth by a strange law of opposites.

Religions have two sides which might be distinguished broadly as the hierophantic and the hypostatic. These have been alluded to in the Bhagavad Gita through the metaphor of the great banyan tree with roots up and branches down. The branches, while tending downwards, have two opposing ambivalent directions in which they are described as spreading (XV.2). Whatever may be the way that we adopt to distinguish the two aspects, these positive and negative aspects are found in all religious expressions or growths. The positive note in the attack of an outsider is meant to discredit the same pole in the other religious growth. The two positives tend to cancel each other out, just as the like poles of a magnet tend to repel rather than attract. To make magnetism grow stronger one has to match the positive and negative sides in a manner so that they do not repel, but help the normal circulation of magnetic forces.

Some similar subtle law may be said to be implied when a religion claims superiority over another religion in certain matters, forgetting that in the items on the other pole of the same religion there are compensatory factors for the apparent drawbacks that one might point out on the overt side. The evils of idolatry could thus be balanced by greater toleration in respect of overt doctrines of faith.

While each religion can have its proper *raison d'être*, the *raison d'être* of another religion has only absurdity with reference to the first. A mango tree or a coconut palm are good by their own inner standards, and by the fruit that men like. One cannot legitimately

condemn one tree by extraneous standards that have no relevance to it. If one should ask which is the better game, cricket or football, we are obliged to say that each has to be judged from its own inner standards. They are both good, each in its particular way. The man who actively engages himself in attacking other peoples' religions finds that, to the extent that he stresses extraneous matters in such an attack, he is hurting the cause of his own religion. If, for example, he should say that his religion is more empirical than the other which tends to be idealistic, he will be by that very token discrediting the idealistic elements which must necessarily be present in his own, though in a different form. In any case, the attacker, by a strange law, tends to get discredited.

That no amount of religious teaching finally succeeds in eliminating rival elements is proved by the historical fact that even to this day in the in the very core or heart of Christendom, say in Belgium, there are still people who say they are not Christians, and use the Church only for the indispensable utilitarian needs of daily life, and pride themselves in being pagan, or at least ranged against the Church, under such labels as 'Socialist' or 'Rationalist'. Even to-day Jews, Christians and Arabs thrive side-by-side. The Egyptian Coptic religion persists in spite of the rise of Islam. There are said to be Buddhists to this day in Swedish Lapland. Idolatry persists in India in spite of the Christian missionaries and Muslims who have tried in vain to eliminate it. The outward pattern might change but the essential content remains unchanged.

One who pins his faith on the externals comes up against people who do the same in the name of some other camp. The two factors cancel each other out. The original pattern objected to continues to persist in its essential aspects. Sometimes it so happens that those who oppose a religion vehemently from outer standards get converted inwardly to the stranger religion that they unjustly revile. Sudden conversions take place in this manner. In any case it is certain that overt attack is not the successful or correct method.

The subtle dialectical interdependence and independence of religious growths is a matter that should be respected if the vain self-destruction of humans is to be avoided. A complex phenomenon of double loss and double gain is involved here, and since no one religious formation can claim the sole prerogative of being totally right for all time, the attack must recoil on the attacker himself. The difference of collective opinion and individual opposition is also a factor that goes against the attacker of another's religion. Protestants have not killed off Catholicism to the present day and are unlikely to succeed in the future. Changes may, however, come about by inner deficiency in either or in both. Christianity still survives in spite of the persecution of the early Christians by the Roman emperors. Some advertised products sell better when rivals decry them. Religions have an inner two-sided personality which make many of the living ones invulnerable. Unilateral attack only makes them stronger, to the dismay of the attacker who often only spells his own utter failure.

### Part III

The gurus don't have exclusive claims on wisdom, as John's offering demonstrates:

My Great Aunt Lummy, from Shreveport, Louisiana, used to say: "You become what you fight." So, in short, in order not to become what you fight, don't fight, but accept. She was a "Southern Belle" in the Gilded Age and lived into her 110th year, clear as can be. She died in 1975 - and I just loved her phone calls. (I was just a kid) One of her observations about what the white class that ruled her society was: "All the effort they have put in to keeping the black man down - what a waste. We don't gain a thing - the blacks can't contribute the wonderful things here like they do up North, and the whites don't get anything constructive done because they are too busy holding the black man back." Granted - her message is not stated so sublimely as our gurus speak it here, but it

is spoken with the wisdom that can come with extreme old age, a good mind, and perspective. Lummy was full of perspective.

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And now for a few success stories of replacing anya with sama in actual situations. This first one is taken from my Chapter II Gita commentary as it appears in *The Path to the Guru*, soon to be released. It recounts Susan's story from 2009, originally in the class notes:

A friend who has been studying yoga for some time related an opportunity to put "reason in action" into practice. Let's call her Z. Briefly, an old friend pulled her aside one day and accused her of betraying their friendship. She was furious with Z. Like Arjuna, Z's initial impulse was to recoil in horror and prepare to flee. She first assumed she was guilty as charged, and she began to give herself a lecture about what a horrible person she was. Then she thought, wait a minute, I don't think I betrayed anyone. She mastered her reaction and stood her ground. First she asked if their friendship could be salvaged. Her friend said she didn't think so. Then Z asked her to explain what was the matter. All the time she was struggling to calm herself down. As she became calmer, she began to be able to respond in helpful ways and to present her side of the story more clearly, not to mention to see her friend's point of view dispassionately. Her friend has some personality quirks that were exaggerating the problem, and Z didn't feel she needed to take responsibility for those. But she did take cognizance of them and worked with and around them. After a difficult half hour, Z was able to restore peace and her friend's trust.

This is exactly how to put the Gita's teaching into daily practice. An uninstructed person might have started a war by hurling back defensive accusations, or else retreated with hurt feelings. The friendship might well have been broken. Z had what she described as a rare opportunity to make peace by uniting their

two sides of the story. Right in the midst of “ordinary” life, such an opportunity had unexpectedly appeared. Those who become skilled in yoga will find their talents at resolving problematic situations called upon more and more, and in the bargain they can turn an initially miserable encounter into a beneficial one.

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Joan told the class about a boss she had in her department who was a real bully, a huge man who lorded it over her. One time he even got her in a headlock, the kind of physical intimidation that is illegal but apparently still acceptable many places.

One day she was at the hospital and saw her boss coming toward her. She tensed up, but he was there because his daughter was being born. He was so excited he was miles away from his boss role, and telling her about it birthed a feeling of connectedness that was afterwards always in the background of their relationship.

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Lastly, I’ll retell my two most salient stories. The first took place early in adulthood and was based more on instinct than philosophy, and the second was after I had intentionally adopted a change of attitude some fifteen years later:

I was driving my battered little Volkswagen at a good clip out of New York City heading north on one of the highways, when a huge Oldsmobile roared up behind me about five feet from my bumper and revved its engine. There was a clear lane next to me, so it was obviously harassment. Since I was young and unafraid, I flipped off the driver, who then whipped around next to me and started lurching toward me, swerving back and forth and threatening to run me off the road into the forest. The driver, a classic tough guy hoodlum, furiously gave me the finger back and

shouted, “How would you like me to make you eat that!” I began to dawn on me that I was in serious danger.

With no time to consider any sane course of action, I smiled back and yelled over the road noise, “Why can’t we just be friends?” The hood gave me an astonished look, and it was clear his utter surprise overrode his anger for a second. Possibly no one had ever said anything like that to him in his life. His mind was blown. He floored the accelerator and sped off, disappearing from view in no time.

Now it was my turn to be amazed. And relieved.

When I first worked in the fire department, we took our job seriously but also enjoyed relaxing whenever possible. Being on duty for 24 hours at a time, and often 48 on extra shifts, resting, watching TV, and playing games were part of the routine. An easygoing camaraderie pervaded the atmosphere.

About halfway through my career, we got a new chief who was a holy terror. He didn’t believe in anything other than working every minute, and he put the fear of retribution in everyone. Right at the outset he made appointments to interview every one of the sixty-some-odd officers, where he grilled them on obedience and his new no-nonsense policy. Each one came back from their session white as a sheet and chastened, prepared for an inevitable reign of terror that was supposed to include absolute subservience to the new headman. The crucial lesson was that he was in charge and everyone else in the “chain of command” had better act accordingly, or else.

The whole thing struck me as ridiculous. Though I was not an officer, having stayed on the bottom of the totem pole my whole career, I announced to my crew I was going to request an interview myself. I still remember the looks I got—everyone was sure I had gone insane. Why would anyone subject themselves to torture voluntarily? I was asking for trouble.

My thinking was, the chief is just a man, an ordinary man exactly like the rest of us, and I would meet him on that basis. I did not acknowledge any superiority or inferiority for either of us.

To everyone's surprise I was granted an "audience." It turned out to be quite enjoyable. Because I rejected any pretence about rank, we met as equals, and the chief accorded me a fair measure of respect. I could see he was trying to manipulate me and convince me of his position, but I didn't allow myself to be sucked in, and I stated my case openly and without fear. It was a long and frank exchange. Although we were worlds apart in our views, he remained on friendly terms with me, and on a few occasions he did my crew favors I asked him for, bypassing routine channels, something that was considered impossible by everyone else. It showed me that while people learn to crave and demand authority to compensate for their feelings of inadequacy, they don't necessarily lose their core of humanity. If you relate to that rather than the trumped up martinet they have dressed themselves up as, it feels good to them. Their lost humanity is still begging to be set free. Since then I have used the approach with police and other petty authoritarians, and have been generally rewarded with reasonable responses and even implicit gratitude.

#### Part IV

Okay. The question before us is how to distinguish a universal truth from a personal preference, and in practice, how do we express that wisdom in our everyday lives?

A few kindly souls have responded to the challenge—thank you! I think Deb's sets us off on the right footing:

When I first thought of this question, and found myself without any ready answer, I thought: all these years, all this study and I don't really have an answer to this?!

Yes, that's true, no ready answer. It's a very difficult question and when you start to think of an answer it cleverly slips away into contradiction or nothingness. So, first, I'll acknowledge what a difficult problem it is to separate our own personal experiences and prejudices from a universal norm, to use Nataraja Guru's favorite term. A universal norm. The Catholic Church, among so many other religious institutions, has always been sure that their norm is universal. Which is exactly the problem we all (individuals and institutions) run into when we accept our personal norm as universal, taking it to pertain to everyone everywhere. How do we get out of this?

And to further complicate this, any real knowledge has to have a deep basis in personal experience, it has to be part of the weave of one's life to be true. How do we keep from finding ourselves on that strange, confusing ground where we proclaim our delusions as truth? For a beginning I think that the aspects that have to make up a real universal norm have to incorporate each and all of these:

1. We find it true to our own experience. And what we believe accords with our reason.
2. It also has to find a resonance in others' experiences. This is not to say this is crowd sourced or crowd approved but that we are not simply standing in a psychological closet repeating words to ourselves.
3. When those criteria of #1 and #2 are put together, you find an understanding, a norm, which arises out of one's own experience and contemplation AND does not exclude any one else or other visions. This is what I understand from Narayana Guru's works that state if a truth is truly good and universal, it has to be good for all people. So there is both a grounding and an inclusion.



4. And, strangely, if it is a universal norm, it still has an inherent flexibility in it. It is like the river...always water, always different and adapting. So this norm both has a solidity to it and it isn't afraid of making changes to its outer configurations.

So, does this make any sense? Or ring true?

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Susan sent this, including an amazingly apt poem:

In answer to your question about the "universal essence."

From the time I was a young girl, I have been fascinated with things spiritual. Remember those nuns who were kneeling and singing the Latin music in the chapel in one of the opening scenes of *The Sound of Music*? I was completely smitten with the idea of the divine when I saw those nuns. There was something in that scene – the music and the reverence and joy of the nuns – that I wanted in my life. I was five at the time. Since then, I have found the divine in my life at various times. I grew up Episcopalian, dabbled in Christian Science, and even became Catholic for a spell. In all those instances, there were spiritual moments. I enjoyed the opportunities for prayer and community and stillness. But these forays into the beyond never were fully satisfying. In these organized religions, God has definite characteristics and an adherent's conduct has very specific rules and expectations. One is not encouraged to start from inside oneself to understand the divine. In each case, I was left feeling empty. There was a God I imagined and I prayed to but my spirituality felt mechanical, not authentic. There were of course many glimmers of light but I have felt such glimmers of light from just walking outside into nature or spending time with those I love. Organized religion felt like an imposed template and it had no roots in my soul. What a balm it was then to read *Atmo 3* and to

understand about “the treasury of the watery deep,” and how we are like waves coming out of that treasury. I just happened to be at the ocean when I read that verse so it really made an impression on me. It was so different. The divine was no longer something separate but rather something intertwined with my being. I was part of the divinity. The divine was in me. I was no longer the sinner who needed to lean on Jesus for forgiveness, guidance, and legitimacy, but rather a spark of the divine connected to all the other sparks and the great ocean itself. My study of Nitya and my work with Scott have been going along for almost 13 years now. It took me awhile to let go of the idea of praying to a bearded man in the sky. He was a great comfort for many years. There was some guilt involved in letting that go. There was some trepidation. But now I am very comfortable with a whole new way of thinking and feeling about the divine. It doesn't feel contrived (as the religions felt) because I have made it my own. Yes, I use the word Absolute and I refer to the Gunas and many other Hindu words and concepts but these do not feel confining to me. The words help my understanding but they do not hinder it because I start with my own experience and impressions and feelings. Then I am relating these to what I am learning, about not meeting anger with anger and about how we are connected to one another, and about trying to do away with our habitual ways of reacting to people and situations. I can learn these things but to really take them in and have them become part of me, there has to be an understanding that there is divinity in me and that there is divinity all around me, in everyone and everything. It is when I let go of myself (my self with a small “s” – the self that is skin and bones and ego) that I understand and feel creativity and serenity and understanding. If it were all a matter of just my own little mind, I could never have learned or changed the way I have. Instead of being inside my habit-infested brain, I am letting go of some well worn instincts. I am opening and I have come to think of it as the “Absolute,” not because I am trying to take on a new pattern or belief system but just for lack of another word. It could be God or the Divine or the

Great Spirit or the All but I don't mind calling it the Absolute. I don't mind because for me, this just means something divine and something that cannot be pinned down. Once pinned down, such a divinity is no longer divine. It is elusive and meant to be so. Incidentally, I still go occasionally to hear the Latin mass on Saturday nights because of the singing that is like angels (and like those nuns!). I even go through the motions of the service and for me, it feels very divine and very spiritual but not because of any dogma or any particular words. Very satisfying and Life and Self affirming for me.

From *The Hut Beneath the Pine*

by Daniel Skach-Mills

There's no convincing water in a bucket  
that there really is an ocean.  
There's no illuminating sunlight  
to a stone hidden in a cave.

The terms fall, winter, spring  
hold no meaning for an insect  
that lives and dies in summer.  
Its life is bound to a single season.

What words can capture  
the joy I feel sweeping the front stairs?  
slicing celery? brewing a pot of tea?

How do you talk  
about the Great Oneness  
to a mind that's like a broom  
always raising a cloud of dust?  
a knife slicing everything in two?  
a mesh screen straining life

through a thousand thoughts?

\* \* \*

Paul took my assignment seriously, at least after I caught him on the way out and begged.... The Jail experience he refers to is a verbal altercation he had with authorities, which has come up often in class, but I don't think has been retold in the notes. It has become a symbol of how we exaggerate out of fear and ignorance, making them much more problematic than they should be. It is appropriately called making a mountain out of a molehill:

**Regarding:**

**Ephemeral Differentiation & the Singularity of Consciousness**  
*How does one differentiate a transcendence established within a 'Unified Vision of the Absolute' from the 'isolated transience of the sheer phenomenal'?*

Other than Susan thwarting my attempt at a final chocolate chip cookie, it was an amazing class last night! Thank you everyone, you are friends of great worth. Your value has shown me the meaning of the concept, "...to get to know yourself, you must first get to know others...for within others, is the Knowledge of the One-Self...". The following is my response to Scott's assignment:  
**How does one differentiate a transcendence established by a 'Unified Vision of the Absolute' from the 'isolated transience of the sheer phenomenal'?**

As Guru Nitya's succinctly instructs, "*Your position is rigid to precisely the extent that your vision is limited*". When our understandings are incomplete, un-whole, or partial in nature, we utilize an illusion of separation (maya) in defining our relative realities. The part of our individual realities residing in this 'illusion of separation' does not have a firm foundation to stand independently; it needs us (as separated individuals) to defend it.

Since that ‘illusion of separation’ is a fundamental part of my identity, I become both rigid and defensive in my relationship to everyday experience. My everyday experience becomes a formation march in ‘other-ness’. A belief in the concept of ‘other-ness’ gives birth to the principle of self-individualized separateness. The difference between ‘my other-ness’ and ‘your other-ness’ creates a division between you and me. From the perspective of this self-divisive separation, life becomes an experience of either the ‘me’ or ‘not-me’. It is the concept of ‘otherness’ that provides both the birth, and the illusion, of the existence of the ‘small self’. Identification with the small self subjects one’s ego to terrifying illusions. May I suggest that I host a class field trip to the Washington County Jail: there I will show you specifically how I frequent my identity with the illusion of ‘otherness’...it should be fun (but probably not). A conceptual understanding remains just a concept until actually applied as an experience. Maybe it’s wise to postpone the field trip until I can stabilize my identity a bit more.

Disagreement is separation...if there is no separation...there is no disagreement. Love is a Unifying factor...fears are a separating factor. Love is the unconditioned displacement of fear’s self-appointed lordship of a severed ego. In Guru’s example, “*This is a pot*”, the ‘**pot-ness**’ of transient experience differentiates the Whole-ness of the Transcendent ‘**This-ness**’ into isolated fragments. ‘**Pot-ness**’ fragments (or differentiates) the One into the Many. ‘**This-ness**’ is a Grand Re-Association of the fragments as being a manifested Potential of the Absolute Whole. ‘This-ness’ is the Brahman concept of All-Inclusiveness...there is no ‘other’. As Guru Nitya understood, “*Those who see only unity do not see another to agree or disagree with*”. That alone is a Unified Vision. That alone is Love. That Alone is the vision of an Absolutist experiencing Transcendence.

Wait a second...what was the assignment again...oh yah: ***How does one differentiate a transcendence established by a 'Unified Vision of the Absolute' from the 'isolated transience of the sheer phenomenal'?*** Well...by an awakening from the illusion of separation and applying the Truth of That Oneness as our sole (or soul's) experience of Reality.

- Otherness is Nature
- Oneness is Spirit
- Separation is a Nature of Spirit
- Unification is the Spirit of Nature
- Spirit actualizes as Nature
- Nature is Self-Realized in Spirit
- There is Spirit's Nature
- There is Nature's Spirit
- Spirit and Nature are not two

## Part V

Jake's commentary cites one of my all-time favorite films:

In the mid-1950s, the science fiction film *Forbidden Planet* was a hit, and the US occupied a uniquely powerful position in the world. The Second World War victory had been absolute and the revealed atrocities of Hitler's Nazis had left no doubt in the popular American imagination about just how righteous our cause had been. Treblinka, Dachau, and the rest of the death camps

testified to the Reich's innate evil, our justification for hating that evil, and our determination to overcome it. Unfortunately—or as Nitya and the guru might have pointed out—inevitably, the seeds of our own ruin lie in that total victory we had sent so many to die for. This contradictory condition is at the heart of verse 46 and in the theme of that now caricatured mid-20<sup>th</sup> century film. In the long run, fighting and warring simply beget more of the same and all parties lose. At the same time, in our transactional world people exist who intend to do harm to others and will do so if they are not met with resistance—in the short run. In verse 46 and in the comment on it, the Guru and Nitya take the long view in parsing this dilemma, a point of view shared (on a much more limited scale) by the producers of that science fiction classic, a film which was essentially a warning to a population then caught up in a post-war short view so limited that it guaranteed more of the same and has done so for the last 65 years.

Although the Guru's verse appears fairly straightforward, says Nitya, it is not. On the surface, the simple message is one common to the Wisdom Traditions: fighting leads to both parties losing. As Nitya adds in his commentary, in struggles of belief one cannot win. One can, however, overcome the opposition but even in such cases the other's faith remains as strong as ever. The homely adage “a man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still” is here phrased differently, but in his discussion of it Nitya drills down into the truism, locating the fundamentals at work in it, the most essential of which is his notion of *religion*: the “total value matrix (most of which is out of awareness) that rules one's life. Much more than opinion, one's religion consists of those values one holds as a result of the *vasanas* and *samskaras* one has carved out of life experience, in the present or otherwise. This bedrock on which a person directs his or her life is the most carefully defended of all conceptions and when it is attacked those “dormant underlying traits become vigorous” (p. 310) and will narrow one's energies into a laser-like weapon; arguing with or continuing to attack a person perceiving such an assault intensifies

his or her efforts that can be overcome but never defeated, a point he illustrates by reference to ethology: “a dog, a cat, a rat, anything will become an absolute, total whole if you try to strike at the very centre or keynote of its life” (p. 311).

As Nitya continues his discussion of the foregoing point, he applies it to human history by citing the Jewish experience of persecution during the ascendancy of the Roman Empire, the Crusades, and the more recent US aggression in Viet Nam. In all three cases, the stronger party used military force to settle abstract political/ideological issues that were, for the weaker party, concerns at the very center of their identity: faith systems, attachment to homeland, and ancient social customs reaching back through the generations. In all three cases, military violence did little more than to kill people and break things.

In the Viet Nam example, Adds Nitya, those soldiers sent to do the killing were conscripts and largely unenthusiastic about the enterprise (as any history of the practice will bear out is universally the case). That dimension, when combined with the over-all misunderstanding of the conditions on the ground pretty much guaranteed US military failure—short of completely overcoming the Vietnamese through genocide.

One could say it is to the credit of the American war machine that it did not follow through on that dark alternative, but our history since the early 70s suggests that the lessons we’ve learned aren’t all that encouraging. The conscript “problem” has been addressed by our creating a standing mercenary army in our midst (a mortal danger to the republic clearly perceived and warned against by the Founders) that we continue to use as a weapon in combating an endless parade of what are at base religious foes. The Roman model was never far from the view of those who wrote the documents founding the American experiment, but the wisdom that study generated seems to have been lost since the last true citizen-soldiers of the mid-twentieth century (of WW II) defended the homeland from forces actively striking at the “keynote” of our collective life, a fact borne out by the national voluntary effort it



took to be successful—as was true for the Vietnamese decades later.

In the last section of his commentary, Nitya considers what he calls “the inner structure” of religion, a complex that helps explain its enduring, irresistible attraction and its indestructible nature. He uses the Jewish and Vedic traditions as examples and begins by describing the symbolic tree metaphor common to both. The knower of the tree is the true knower regardless of tradition. This tree of Jewish life—with Wisdom, Reason, and Knowledge at the top, Greatness, Strength, Eternity, and Majesty on the sides, Sovereignty at the bottom, and Beauty at its center—says, ‘When you come to us, understand that we care for wisdom, we have reason and know-how’” (p. 313). Moreover, this great tradition belongs to no one person but to the Absolute; its power is beauty rather than brute force and stands outside history in eternity.

These same principles, writes Nitya, are common to all wisdom traditions. In the Vedic presentation, an eternal symbolic tree once again appears with the roots in the karmic Absolute and branches in the world endlessly responding to the guna’s triple influences coming into constant contact with those extending through time and space: “Our karmas bind us” (p. 314). It is in the unfathomable depth that these infinite connections are unbreakable and constitute, says Nitya, the dharma. In realizing and practicing the principle of non-attachment we overcome all these connections and put ourselves in a position to accept all of them and everyone, to accept and include thereby dissolving all boundaries and eliminating the possibility of conflict.

In 1954, the French military disaster at Dien Bien Phu marked the end of French hegemony in Viet Nam, a role then assumed by the US at roughly the same time the French agreed to the establishment of NATO bases on its soil. Two years after this quid pro quo *Forbidden Planet* opened, a film that re-worked an old Indian myth that Nitya uses to close his commentary. In the Indian tale, Krishna’s brother, Balarama, is challenged by a demon, accepts the dare, and then begins to do battle with it more

and more ferociously. As Balarama escalates his energies, the demon's power grows and when Balarama is no longer a match for the now monstrous-sized spirit he enlists Krishna's help. Krishna immediately reverses course, meets the demon's enmity with kindness and in the process reduces it to a hand-held pet.

The filmmakers of *Forbidden Planet* refashion this same plot on an other-worldly setting. These space travellers encounter a similar force still at work on a planet now absent its original inhabitants who had presumably fallen prey to the demon (never shown on the screen). In the final scenes as the spacemen are at each other's throats about how to do battle with the monster (indicated by sound effects and its invisible influence on material objects) they realize that their fear and hate is feeding its energy and size, manage to realize that connection, and change their behavior (and all is well).

The timing of this film-lesson for our newly empowered mid-twentieth century world empire could not have been more appropriate—or less understood.

\* \* \*

The question I have once again posed on the nature of reality is a perennial challenge, not something with a ready answer, unless you are contentedly deluded. The essay on the Absolute I've included in the introduction to my next book is a pretty good summary of the subject, but I'm not going to post it here. You can check it out in June when the book is released. I'll just add some recent thoughts I've had to the nice work of the three earlier offerings from Deb, Susan and Paul.

It never hurts to reiterate that the Absolute is not a thing; it is more of a principle. However, it is an *active* principle, one that spews out all this without becoming modified in the least by what it has created. Nataraja Guru further refined the term Absolute to *normative notion*, which is almost impossible to

anthropomorphize. So the question boils down to how do we access something that isn't really anything... and yet it is?

A norm is the hub on which every coherent philosophy turns, in the case of Vedanta it is called *brahman*, the Absolute. In Atmo, Narayana Guru calls it the *karu*, the core. Nataraja Guru analyzes norms in depth in Part III of his *Unitive Philosophy*, titled The Search for a Norm in Western Thought. Don't miss the chapters on The Absolute as the Normative Reference for Philosophy and A Normative Methodology for All Philosophy. Deborah Buchanan begins her introduction to it in a notable fashion:

As it emerged from the theological dogma of the Middle Ages, Western philosophy inherited the unresolved paradox that lay at the core of Greek tragedy, where the twin worlds of immanence and transcendence find themselves tantalizingly close yet never meshed. Greek drama gave voice to the problem: the alternately dynamic and faltering footsteps of humankind are out of synchronicity with the divine rhythm that gives them sustenance. Plato and his rebellious student Aristotle spoke of this conflict most clearly in the world of philosophical discourse. And though their voices were muffled for many centuries by the Church, the argument was re-awakened by the European Renaissance. The dialogue then was no longer phrased by choruses or defined by the ethos of tragedy. Rationality took the lead and the paradox was seen in the pull between a priori and a posteriori.

On this stage of conflict, Nataraja Guru begins to trace the search for certitude that has underlain the various philosophical schools. (321)

Personal norms deviate to a greater or lesser extent from universal norms, depending on the relative importance of self-interest against the general good. Narayana Guru makes this explicit in verses 23 and 24 of Atmopadesa Satakam. While he understands that self interest is one essential aspect of the general

good, his philosophy is pretty much the exact opposite of the dominating modern corporate philosophies (such as Ayn Rand's) that define self interest as the highest good and even as the source of the general good. What they crucially leave out is the transcendental unity and interconnectedness of the biosphere. They amount to fancified excuses for ruthless exploitation. Narayana Guru's revolutionary idea (or better, his realization) is that since we are all one, the other is equally a part of our self-interest, and by injuring it we injure ourselves.

Why is a numinous core or hub of life so hard to accept? What we loosely call "union with the Absolute" is an experience that as an adult you have either had or you haven't. If you haven't, it is unimaginable. If you have, you know it to be the most familiar place, your psychic home. It is exactly where you belong. It is the self you have known all along, because it *is* you. Moreover, it is so intense and delightful as to be undeniable. The problem for those who have not had the experience is that they've learned to operate as if it does not exist.

Yet once you've had the experience, you can't help but think that everyone on earth would love to have it too. They *deserve* it. You know it would make people happier, kinder, more creative, full of the zest for living. And you can only laugh in frustration that so very few are even interested in such a possibility. It should be a universally accepted rite of passage to adulthood.

Inevitably, however, this state of being is almost impossible to communicate. It can only be experienced; words must fall short. Intense bodily stresses seldom come close, but occasionally offer hints. Only psychedelic medicines reliably produce a short-term dip in the oasis. For most people, psychedelics have been successfully demonized, so they're out, and it's hard for them not to be utterly skeptical about the seemingly utopian claims made about the state of union they highlight. It's not just hard to believe, it's impossible to believe.

A few of those who have had the experience are charismatic enough to convince some people to poke around and see if there's

anything to the claims. They radiate good will and peace, so they impart a sense that there just might be something real in this business after all. Unfortunately this pose can be faked, too, and often is. False assurances abound. So the doubts mount. The whole thing is just a waste of time and effort. Poof. Forget about it.

Still, kind-hearted people like Narayana Guru, Nataraja Guru, and Nitya see communicating the value of self-realization as the most noble enterprise, the best thing they have to offer a troubled species. In the present study, the gurus literally try a hundred different ways to get through to us, and it's a valiant and exceptional effort. It's so good we may be drawn along even though we can't quite accept the premise. We can still benefit from it, and it doesn't insult our intelligence too often.

I wish I knew how to communicate the mystery easily. I've guided a few trippers, and had a high rate of success, say 50%, but that was mostly ages ago. Those medicines are hard to come by, and I certainly have no access at all to them any more. I think we get faint whiffs of the mystery from our combined class efforts, but I don't suppose those are carried very far through the internet. But I can't give up either, so I keep trying to explain it just right, amplifying what the gurus have laid down. I have been in that place that feels utterly authentic, my true self. I know how curative it is, how paradisiacal. I also am well aware that it's not believable, that this oceanic world of hubbub and glamour easily takes precedence. I guess it can't be helped. That's life.

The fact is, no one can find this for anyone else—recovering your self is a personal struggle. Most of the advice given is only to remove impediments and give encouragement. In a culture disabled by the belief in saviors like Christ, Krishna, Buddha and Mohammad, we naturally expect someone else to carry the load for us. But it doesn't work that way. I'm not being critical: this is a subtle factor, barely noticed, but we really have lost our initiative in regard to self discovery. And there are plenty of vested interests dedicated to keeping us in the dark.

The question is more than does unity exist, it broadens out into how do we recognize the social mask we wear, and how does it differ from our authentic nature? Shouldn't we just accept that the mask is our best effort and leave it at that? What is lost, after all, when we trade in our soul for an image? In a world where everyone plays up to the image and rejects the spirit, what is the advantage of going the other way? It is decidedly the case that, lacking that rush of self-reunification, playing out our designated role is much more immediately rewarding than seeking for our true nature.

Pretty much everyone agrees there's something mysterious afoot, and if left at that there's no problem. When we define that something, we necessarily limit it and transform it into something less than what it must be. That's when the battles begin over which partial definition is the right one—a sure losing proposition. We are instructed to retain the openness that transcends our ability to comprehend or define ultimate reality, which is always going to be a process rather than a finished product. Only then do we have a ghost of a chance of regaining our authentic self.

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I'm going to add a few excerpts from *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False*, by respected professor of philosophy Thomas Nagel, which the universe was kind enough to direct my attention to this week. While taking a little while to get started, Nagel eventually hones his dialectical argument, seeking a unifying or synthesizing element midway between materialism and theology:

Our own existence presents us with the fact that somehow the world generates conscious beings capable of recognizing reasons for action and belief, distinguishing some necessary truths, and evaluating the evidence for alternative hypotheses about the natural order. We don't know how this happens, but it is hard not to

believe that there is some explanation of a systematic kind—an expanded account of the order of the world.

If we find it undeniable, as we should, that our clearest moral and logical reasonings are objectively valid, we are on the first rung of the ladder. It does not commit us to any particular interpretation of the normative, but I believe it demands something more. We cannot maintain the kind of resistance to any further explanation that is sometimes called quietism. The confidence we feel within our own point of view demands completion by a more comprehensive view of our containment in the world....

The existence of conscious minds and their access to the evident truths of ethics and mathematics are among the data that a theory of the world and our place in it has yet to explain. They are clearly part of what is the case, just as much as the data about the physical world provided by perception and the conclusions of scientific reasoning about what would best explain those data. We cannot just assume that the latter category of thought has priority over the others, so that what it cannot explain is not real. (31)

The inescapable fact that has to be accommodated in any complete conception of the universe is that the appearance of living organisms has eventually given rise to consciousness, perception, desire, action, and the formation of both beliefs and intentions on the basis of reasons. If all this has a natural explanation, the possibilities were inherent in the universe long before there was life, and inherent in early life long before the appearance of animals. A satisfying explanation would show that the realization of these possibilities was not vanishingly improbable but a significant likelihood given the laws of nature and the composition of the universe. It would reveal mind and reason as basic aspects of a nonmaterialistic natural order....

However much we come to understand, as we are in the process of doing, the chemical basis of life and of its evolution, the phenomenon still calls for a greatly expanded basis for intelligibility.

To sum up: the respective inadequacies of materialism and theism as transcendent conceptions, and the impossibility of abandoning the search for a transcendent view of our place in the universe, leads us to hope for an expanded but still naturalistic understanding that avoids psychophysical reductionism. The essential character of such an understanding would be to explain the appearance of life, consciousness, reason, and knowledge neither as accidental side effects of the physical laws of nature nor as the result of intentional intervention in nature from without but as an unsurprising if not inevitable consequence of the order that governs the natural world from within. That order would have to include physical law, but if life is not just a physical phenomenon, the origin and evolution of life and mind will not be explainable by physics and chemistry alone. An expanded, but still unified, form of explanation will be needed, and I suspect it will have to include teleological elements. (32-3)

Consciousness is the most conspicuous obstacle to a comprehensive naturalism that relies only on the resources of physical science. The existence of consciousness seems to imply that the physical description of the universe, in spite of its richness and explanatory power, is only part of the truth, and that the natural order is far less austere than it would be if physics and chemistry accounted for everything. If we take this problem seriously, and follow out its implications, it threatens to unravel the entire naturalistic world picture. Yet it is very difficult to imagine viable alternatives. (35)

After reviewing the main materialist theories, Nagel concludes:

I have given only a brief sketch of the territory. A voluminous and intricate literature has grown up around these problems, but it serves mainly to confirm how intractable they are. The multiple dead ends in the forward march of materialism suggest that the... dualism introduced at the birth of modern



science may be harder to get out of than many people have imagined. It has even led some philosophers to eliminative materialism—the suggestion that mental events, like ghosts and Santa Claus, don't exist at all. But if we don't regard that as an option, and still want to pursue a unified world picture, I believe we will have to leave materialism behind. Conscious subjects and their mental lives are inescapable components of reality not describable by the physical sciences.

I suspect that the appearance of contingency in the relation between mind and brain is probably an illusion, and that it is in fact a necessary but nonconceptual connection, concealed from us by the inadequacy of our present concepts. Major scientific advances often require the creation of new concepts, postulating unobservable elements of reality that are needed to explain how natural regularities that initially appear accidental are in fact necessary. The evidence for the existence of such things is precisely that if they existed, they would explain what was otherwise incomprehensible.

Certainly the mind-body problem is difficult enough that we should be suspicious of attempts to solve it with the concepts and methods developed to account for very different kinds of things. Instead, we should expect theoretical progress in this area to require a major conceptual revolution at least as radical as relativity theory, and the introduction of electromagnetic fields into physics—or the original scientific revolution itself, which, because of its built-in restrictions, can't result in a “theory of everything,” but must be seen as a stage on the way to a more general form of understanding. We ourselves are large-scale, complex instances of something both objectively physical from outside and subjectively mental from inside. Perhaps the basis for this identity pervades the world. (41-2)