

2/4/14
Verse 47

To become of one faith is what everyone speaks of;
this the proselytizers do not recognize;
wise men, freed of objections to another's faith,
know this secret in full.

Free translation:

In principle all are aimed at arriving at the same faith. Disputants do not realize this. Wise people who are free of sectarian exclusiveness know this secret in full.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

All men do even plead for a single faith to prevail
Which no disputant owns to himself withal;
Those wise ones free from other-faith-dispute
Alone can know here wholly, the secret here implied,

Verse 47 is one of a dozen or so commentaries in Atmo that to my mind are utterly transformative: open, welcoming invitations to change ourselves *right now* and enjoy a vastly improved life from the first minute we take the resolve. And it's mainly a chatty lecture, a wry man telling profound stories with whimsical detachment. What a joy to spend an evening with it!

The class did an admirable job of teasing out the implications of the two main threads, or really the main thread and a prime implication of it. Nitya impeccably presents a very practical way to convert ourselves from polar adversaries into friends, thus opening up worlds of possibilities for communication and evolution. Thinking about it, we pondered why it was so difficult for humans to let go of our fixed position: our default setting seems to be to take a stand in opposition. Why? And more, why do we do it even

after years of wise gurus demonstrating how all such posturing is grounded in ignorance? What is our compulsion? This is really worth pondering over.

Nitya's anecdote of how Gandhi showed him the limitations of a polarized position and invited him to try out another angle of vision sums up all the theory we have been struggling with for the last dozen or so verses. Because of its value, I'll reprint the same story as it appears in *Love and Blessings* in Part III below. Both versions are great reads.

Can such a simple change of attitude really make a meaningful difference? Nataraja Guru, in his most excellent comments, sums up its importance: "In terms of inner life in this kind of coupling of inner with outer (or negative with positive) value-factors, we have implicit the basis of self-realization itself." Is it possible that simply reorienting our attitude lays the groundwork for self-realization? Hard to believe. And yet, he may be right! Is it possible? In referring to his interchange with Gandhi, Nitya says this:

This simple incident was a great turning point in my life. It completely silenced me. Thereafter, when I talked with another person it always occurred to me that there could be one more way of looking at truth. I learned to step down from my pedestal and walk over to the other person's, to sympathetically get into his way of seeing. To me, this was the beginning of a great discovery of what a wonderful world we live in and how rich our human heritage is.

Anyone who can do this will find themselves overcoming obstacles, converting enemies into friends and teachers, and being much more effective in their interactions with everyone. It is indeed highly enriching. So once again, what is holding us back?

One major impediment is that we base our idea of our self on what other people think. We have forgotten our true nature, so in a sense we are afraid it doesn't exist, that we don't exist. We see nothing inside that can be identified as us. So we contrive to build

a “Frankenstein’s monster” to represent who we wish we were, conjured out of this or that spare part cobbled together. Because the whole edifice is on very shaky ground, we have to defend it ferociously. We are afraid if our position is denied, we will cease to exist, so like a cornered animal we will spit and claw to uphold the pretence. But it’s only our posture, our false beliefs that put us in such a dire predicament.

Richard Alpert, better known as Ram Das, tells a great story about learning to let go of his personality constructs, and I read out the version that appears in *The Harvard Psychedelic Club*, by Don Lattin (New York: Harper One, 2010). This is Alpert’s first trip, and it describes how we can pare down our personality constructs to grant ourselves freedom, aided by soma or not:

Alpert really started coming on to the psilocybin. There was too much talking in the kitchen, so he walked into the living room, a darker and more peaceful setting. He sat down on the sofa and tried to collect himself. Looking up, he saw some people over in the corner. *Who are they? Were they real?* Then he started to see them as images of himself in his various roles. They were hallucinations, but they seemed so real. There was the professor with a cap and gown. There was a pilot in a pilot’s hat. There was the lover. At first, he was a bit amused by the vision. *Those are just my roles. That role can go. That role can go. I’ve had it with that role.* Then he saw himself as his father’s son. The feeling changed. *Wait a minute. This drug is giving me amnesia! I’ll wake up and I won’t know who I am!* That was terrifying, but Alpert reminded himself that those roles weren’t really important. *Stop worrying. It’s fine. At least I have a body.* Then Alpert looked down on the couch at his body. *There’s no body! Where’s my body? There’s no-body. There’s nobody.* That was terrifying. He started to call out for Tim [Leary]. *Wait a minute. How can I call out to Tim? Who was going to call for Tim? The minder of the store, me would be calling for Tim. But who is me?* It was terrifying at first, but

all of a sudden Alpert started watching the whole show with a kind of calm compassion.

At that moment Richard Alpert met his own soul, his true soul. He jumped off the couch, ran out the door, and rolled down a snow-covered hill behind Leary's house. It was bliss. Pure bliss. (54-5)

You can hear an early recording of Ram Das telling the story very nicely, here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQ77tIV72Bk> . He was a terrific public speaker in those heady days of the 1960s. He faced the exact same question we are mulling over today: do you dare to let go of your own constructs? It seems terrifying, but if you can pull it off the terror melts away, leaving you in bliss.

Deb's advice was in conversation to ask yourself how am I listening? Or, even, am I listening? We so often do what young Nitya did with Gandhi: listen to ourself and plan our counterattack, paying little heed to what the other person is actually saying. Opening up in calmness changes the whole dynamic.

I reiterated how our entire educational system is geared to having us come up with the one right answer to test questions. There is some value to this in terms of physical science and math, but when it comes to emotional and spiritual issues it is devastating. We need to take care not to mix up our contexts. Spiritual oneness is inclusive, not exclusive, as the one right answer would be. As Deb put it, we feel that if our opinion is wrong then we are wrong. Paul added "When I put my identity in the small self then I have a responsibility to defend myself. My need is to defend a false self."

We also have to surrender our fear of disintegrating if we confront an unsavory opinion, otherwise we will never be able to listen properly. Jan talked about how she has a dialogue with herself. She starts out feeling (as we all do) that she wants her position to be right. But then she says to herself that the other person's position might have something to commend it, so she can allow a little bit. When she concedes a small measure to the other

person, she grows that much bigger herself, and she loses nothing. It helps her to relax and enjoy the exchange.

Susan brought up a subject where progressives and fundamentalists regularly come into conflict, over the issue of abortion. She wanted to hold to her assurance that she was right and those who protested were wrong. The thing is, that may be true. It's certainly true when crimes are involved. Listening to the other person and tolerating their opinion doesn't mean you endorse their position, however. That's a red herring. What happens is that in such situations we usually supply our position *and* the other person's position. Why couldn't we try to find out what they think their position is? As Nitya asserts, then we will discover worlds of value that we hadn't imagined before. Yes, there are some people who are dangerous or so obnoxious it is reasonable to avoid them, but there are plenty of good souls with different ideas than ours, and if we let them in to our life we will find we have more room in our own being. Once we actually know where the other person stands, we can act intelligently toward them. Until then, we are acting only according to our predetermined ideas, otherwise known as our prejudices.

This requires a fine balance, as Nancy talked about. If we set out to influence the other person, the effort rebounds and their defenses will be reinforced. We may very much want to influence them, but to do so we have to rein ourselves in. Only then does mutual enrichment become possible. It's one of those devilish paradoxes. Nancy added cogently that the unhelpful cycle is the result of layers of mistakes, of forcing when we should let go.

Mick figured it's always our *wanting* that is the problem. Wanting it my way: desire. We are born wanting. When we mature we realize that wanting is selfish and causes trouble. It produces obstacles. He wins the prize for the best sentence of the night: "When you remove the obstacles, reality rushes in."

A few times in my life I have been able to stop my immediate reaction to people who elicit a negative gut response from me. I tell myself I'm not going to consider them my arch enemy from

birth, but treat them as just another human being. I decide I'm not going to presume this person is part of the dark forces out to get me. When I have been able to do it, the person usually responds in kind—they seem pleased to be taken for who they think they are rather than demonized, and they usually turn out to be all right. It can be very exciting. When I haven't been able to do it, weird feelings course through my system and I make a big mess out of what might have been a pleasant or at least trivial moment, as in Paul's famous jailhouse experiment. I know I will almost always have a reactive impulse first, but now I'm confident I have an opportunity to upgrade it, if I can catch myself in time. Often it's the best contribution I can make. The Gandhis and Nityas of the world may never be ruffled by conflict, and good on them. But the rest of us can accept our weaknesses and compensate for them with the excellent advice we have been blessed to receive, because it really does work.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

“Hear what I say.” “This is the whole truth.” “What is your opinion?” We often hear such remarks in the course of conversations. Conversations, letters, books, magazine articles and public speeches are all intended to bring about unity of ideas. During the Conference of World Religions convened by Narayana Guru, he gave the delegates the following watchword: “We are here to know and to let know, not to argue and win.” A person wanting to know envisages the value of another man's vision. His preparedness to listen paves the way for acceptance, and consequently unity arises. When a person wants to share his knowledge or spiritual experience he already desires the well-being of another. The essence of all religions is equally precious to those who have no hang-ups such as “my religion” and “your religion.”

Until recently, if a Hindu went to a restaurant in North India the waiter would ask the cook to supply a “beautiful tea,” but if a Muslim should go to the same restaurant, the same waiter would ask the same cook to supply a “plain tea.” In both instances the cook would produce the same tea, but in a cup and saucer of floral design for the Hindu and in a plain cup and saucer for the Muslim. This was to assure the Hindu that he was not using the same utensils as the Muslim and vice versa. This is only one of the mildest idiosyncrasies born of separatism. The most grotesque and catastrophic versions are the eruptions of war between India and Pakistan, Israel and Arab countries, and the constant clash between the Catholics and the Protestants in Northern Ireland, to mention only a few well-known examples.

Bertrand Russell puts his finger right on the crux of the whole issue when he says that all differences are born of the semantic ambiguity which does not make clear a word meaning. A recent catastrophe, which erupted from such a semantic issue, happened because of the lack of clarity in defining democracy and communism. The Marxists called themselves social democrats until Lenin decided to call his creed communism. To decide the operational meaning of these two words, the United States of America sent at least half a million young men to the marshy fields of Vietnam to kill or get killed. Ultimately the whole of Vietnam came under the label of communism and the semantic issue continues unresolved.

Religion or ideology becomes more than a curse to people when politicians offer themselves to be the efficient interpreters of high ideals.

The Christian proselytizer thinks that if all people are brought under the banner of one church this would be equivalent to establishing the Kingdom of God on earth. No one could question his sincerity or the unity he aims at. Unfortunately the Muslim, also aiming at unity, thinks that the final revelation came much after Christ and that the prophet Muhammad was the last person appointed by God to bring about human fraternity. These

enthusiastic bigots forget the fact that there is a distinction between the universal and the particular. The universality is the essence, and the particular mood is substantiated by its existential uniqueness. One who knows the organic correlation between the universal and the particular will never attempt to make regimentations to cut everyone down to the same size for the sake of uniformity as Procrustes did.

In verses 41, 42 and 45, the Guru calls our attention to meditate on the true significance of the unifying and indiscernible aspect of the Absolute implied in the word “this.” Here he repeats that only those who visualize the all-embracing unity of “this” know the exact rotation between the universal sameness and the individual uniqueness of each formation. Those seers alone escape the confounding confusion caused by the enigmatic juxtaposition of the universal and the particular, which comes again and again in the context of our life situation. Mankind is already one, and its search for happiness points to the same value. There is no other uniformity to be effected than what already exists. All we need is a constant remembrance of our natural unity in the universality of Being.

* * *

Nataraja Guru’s commentary:

IN the three verses that follow we have a section which happens to occupy the core or almost the central place in the whole composition, and which pertains to an all-important topic. When we remember the number of times in human history that the earth has been drenched with human blood caused by feuds, whether arising out of fanaticism, patriotism, or through love of ideologies or idolatrous infatuations by which men are willing to give up or to take others’ lives, the importance of the teaching contained in this central section will become evident to anyone.

There is thus a subtle element of tragedy, as between the values that enter into interplay in human affairs. Favourite objects or even ideological preferences become linked up with the Self in the form of bipolar attachments. The Self or the non-Self might prevail or loom large in consciousness at a given moment in such two-sided affinities, tending to give one or the other an absolute or relative status.

In terms of inner life in this kind of coupling of inner with outer (or negative with positive) value-factors, we have implicit the basis of self-realization itself. Verses 47, 48 and 49 have to be carefully scrutinized with these theoretical considerations in mind if the full lesson from this section is to be derived.

The subtle secret here is the paradoxical position delicately stated in the first two lines. The situation is comparable to a man in a meeting with many others who shouts for silence without remembering that his own shouting adds to the noise rather than taking away from the evil meant to be eliminated. The very zeal of the faithful who might want unity in world faith could, by a strange travesty of circumstance, be the major hindrance to its attainment.

When the Christians took up arms against the Saracens, both were right and both were wrong, which is the same as saying that neither were right nor wholly wrong without any justification. To get round this double-edged situation a new yet time-honoured kind of unitive approach in reasoning is required, which is the secret of the wise man here referred to.

In respect of the desire to see fellowship or unity of faiths, both the parties involved in this delicately balanced dialectical situation may be said to be sailing in the same boat. The tragedy of the situation has to be located in the fact that, while a zealous follower of a certain faith is highly conscious of the importance of his own mission, his tendency to find fault with the honest faith of another

acts itself, at the same time, as a subtle veil. The full recognition of the fact that the other man is just like himself in his own zeal for the particular religion that he prefers to call his own is absent. There is easy vertical adoption and difficult horizontal recognition of the values involved in 'rival' faiths which could be reconciled only when looked at unitively.

What is more, there is a disproportionate degree of absolutism that might mentally be attributed to one of the values involved as between what refers to the Self and the non-Self. Egotism might colour one's judgement and put an accent on the one or the other of the personal or impersonal values involved in this doubly complicated mix-up. There is inter-physical or trans-personal complexity of possible relational attitudes. Orthodoxy and heterodoxy can mix into highly explosive or poisonous compounds. To visualize all such dangers in clear terms requires a subtle dialectical insight which it is the prerogative only of rare human beings to possess. This is the reason why the Guru in the second half of the above verse refers to the wise man, so rare on earth, who can see through the intricate tangle that such a socio-religious problem can present. In fact this one point of non-recognition by a wise man of the difference between the mechanistic view in this matter and the dialectical view of the same, explains the reason for all the disasters and failures in the attempts that well-intentioned persons have made to avoid religious conflicts in the course of what constitutes the history of humanity till now.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the Guru takes care in the above verse to underline that no piecemeal approach to this secret will do. The solution does not depend on place, culture or time. It is one secret known that will solve paradox and reconcile conflict anywhere and at any time.

Part III

I'm going on the road for two weeks or so, which means any additional feedback will come at the end of February. I want to get this off before I go.

Here's how Nitya retold his crucial moment with Gandhi in *Love and Blessings*:

Every time I looked at Gandhi he raised two fingers as if he was admonishing me and stopping me from speaking my mind. Once, though, when I was able to look straight into his eyes, I thought he might be willing to listen to me. I burst out, "Babuji, your Ramarajya will never save India. Only class war will bring India true liberation. There are two classes: people who have and people who have not. Those who have are the exploiters, and those who have not are the exploited. The interests of these two classes are diametrically opposed. A class war is inevitable between them. You should support the rights of the exploited."

On hearing this, the Mahatma looked at me with compassion and said, "Do you think I have had no occasion in my life to read Karl Marx and to consider his theory of liberation?" I was most surprised that he was speaking in English. I lowered my voice and said, "You might have read it, but have you given any consideration to it?" He went on, "If Marx is right, am I wrong?" I immediately replied, "Yes, of course."

After a pause he looked into my face like a doctor looking at a patient suffering from an incurable disease and said, "You have certainly moved out of your own shoes to stand in Marx's to look at truth from his angle of vision. Can you not be generous with me also? Will you take the trouble to understand my viewpoint? How many facets does truth have?" Brashly I said "One." Gandhi said, "No, truth is like a diamond. It is many-faceted."

This was the first time I had thought of such a possibility. Doubts leapt into my mind. I murmured to myself, "Truth has many facets! Then which is the right vision of truth?" Seeing my confusion the Mahatma explained how a rational view is always

relative and only a partial consideration. The more he spoke, the more eloquent he became.

“You seem to be sincere in your convictions. Are you sincere?” I didn’t like my sincerity being questioned. “Of course.” “Do you think I am also sincere and speaking with conviction?” I felt embarrassed. “I think so,” I replied.

On hearing this Gandhi smiled and said, “Look here. We hold two contradictory views. But both of us are sincere, and we have conviction in what we say. You think only one of us can be correct, but I think truth has many facets. You are seeing truth from your own point of view, or rather that of a Marxist. I see it from the angle of an Indian who is steeped in his country’s traditions and treasured values. I can appreciate your view. Can’t you shift your stand and appreciate mine?”

While the Mahatma was arguing he did not raise his voice or show any impatience. The spell of his magnetic personality, logical persuasiveness, and appeal to my instinctive emotional loyalty to my grassroots, silenced my tongue. What he said was not anything particularly profound, but it served to turn me away from the exclusiveness of my doctrinaire fanaticism. My previous convictions were shattered. I was unable to even open my mouth. Suddenly I felt I should just give myself to him. Putting penitence and humility in my words, I implored him, “Babuji, will you allow me to serve you by joining your Harijan Seva Dal?” He smiled and said, “Yes, of course, from this very moment.”

Suddenly the commotion in my mind transformed into peaceful silence. It was as if I had crossed over to another shore. I immediately went to the office and registered as a volunteer.

By evening when I attended Gandhi’s prayer meeting I had acquired a copy of the Gita and followed along as he recited the lines. Over the next few days I went deep into silence, giving up all argumentation. I started really listening to people, without constantly creating counter-thoughts and counter-arguments in my mind. In this way I finally learned to be a worthy student, a student of anyone who cared to speak words of wisdom to me.

This simple incident marked a milestone in my search, and served me as a point of departure from subscribing to totalitarian views. Even today I may not agree with another man's arbitrary beliefs, but I am willing to listen and respect his stand, provided he doesn't insist on imposing them on me. (88-9)

Part IV

Jake's comments are somewhat exaggerated, probably needing revision, but he plans to do that at some point:

In the opening sentence of his commentary on this verse, Nitya identifies the word *secret* as the key to the verse's message. The wise recognize the oneness of religion while the ignorant do not and as a consequence go about enforcing their partial beliefs as if they were a totality, thereby becoming more rigid and doctrinaire in the process. Eric Hoffer's *True Believer*, Jacques Ellul's *Mass Man*, and Hannah Arendt's purveyor's of the "Banality of Evil"¹ all examine this mob mentality that has played such an influential role in modern history and has become more and more attractive as the social remedy for the human condition.

As a way of illustrating this very development, Nitya presents his personal history as an object lesson. He writes that in his mid-teens he made a project of gaining admittance to Mahatma Gandhi's inner circle because of his work at the time in removing the British from India, at least as the ruling power. Gandhi's use of non-violent resistance in the face of overwhelming military power is now legendary, but it was that technique itself that the young Nitya saw as the Mahatma's major error. Nitya was bent on "correcting" Gandhi's thinking so that it would be in line with Nitya's juvenile and total commitment to Marxism. Only through violent revolution made necessary because of the eternal class conflict between the haves and the have-nots could the Workers

¹ Footnote on the three books needed here

Paradise be realized and the shackles of capitalism be broken, he reasoned. Nitya waited for the right opportunity when he and Gandhi were alone together to begin his lesson (an event that the mature Nitya subsequently remembered with more than a little embarrassment). Gandhi quietly listened until Nitya had made all his remarks and then asked, “Are you sincere?”, a question Nitya answered with an incredulous shout. With the follow-up question, “You are speaking with conviction?” Nitya began to put the pieces together—in order to hold a position, he makes clear, one must have conviction. Sincerity ought to follow. The fact that Gandhi did not hold the same position as the young Nitya but that both held convictions denoted that the two contradictory views existed simultaneously because of the conviction and both sincerely held their views. Both were partially correct. Only by occupying the other’s position, Gandhi points out, could one come to understand that alternative point of view, and it is only in that openness that legitimate understanding can take place. Gandhi noted that he had done just that with Nitya and that he (Gandhi) was already familiar with Marxism (after having spent many years in London). Up to that point, however, (as he notes) Nitya had not listened to Gandhi at all and had been determined to proselytize his faith, which he at that moment let go of. “The truth,” continued Gandhi, “is many faceted. You can look at it from a number of points of view, and from each angle you get a different perspective. . . .What I see you have no patience to consider” (p. 318).

Nitya later notes that when Narayana Guru “arranged for the Parliament of Religions,” he saw its major purpose as being universal understanding, or as he phrased his intent, “It is not to argue and win, but to know and let know” (p. 320). In this construction the Guru had summed up the meaning of Nitya’s early encounter with Mahatma Gandhi.

When abstract moral value systems encounter conditions in the world of necessity, it is, more often than not, the value systems that are compromised, especially in American culture. This literary theme, a staple in film and print, could easily constitute a

genre of its own as writers and visual arts manipulators go about re-working the human anguish of characters as they make Sophie's choice or have their professional male lead-characters find a way to have their mistresses killed, hide the fact, and then go on living an upper-middle class American life embedded in the Jewish tradition (that Woody Allan was, for example, so adept at characterizing in his film *Crimes and Misdemeanors*).

It seems to be a western tradition, or at least an American one, to leave these fictionalized compromises in air as they stand in contrast to the infinite question of life's meaning, but Nitya directly faces the conundrum in his commentary. When he encounters Mahatma Gandhi, he (Gandhi) is leading a broad social movement based on a universal moral theory of inclusion rather than confrontation. Non-violent resistance *is resistance*, however passive it may be. The British military had demonstrated its character again and again, so attempting to include them in an open-ended dialectic was not possible because they had no intention of participating. Thoroughly embedded in a "win" ethic, the un-self aware British occupiers had to be resisted but doing so on their terms would solve nothing—the *character* of the British was the key element identifying them. These true believers mistook the non-self for the Self, and their behavior clearly illustrated their ignorance.

It is this common universal condition spoken of by the Guru in the present verse that constitutes the backdrop for our moral compass in this world. The mystery of ethical ambiguity tirelessly re-worked in American entertainment and literature is, according to the guru, no mystery at all. The conditions giving rise to it are contained in that original identity confusion. Our inability to identify and name this duality as we encounter its inevitable development in proselytizers demanding that we honor the rules of their game sanctions their use and narrows our responses to those in kind if we don't pay attention. As Gandhi demonstrated, once such a point has been reached in our social setting, resistance is required, but participating in the ignorance is not.

