

5/27/14
Verse 61

External objects appear to be different from one another;
it is the function of the senses to posit for each a distinct dimension;
nescience rises as sets of names, like sky and so on,
and changes into knowledge.

Free translation:

Objects of perception appear to be of diverse attributes, in
accordance with the innate quality of each sense organ. Gross
objects of even faulty perception, such as the blue of the sky, when
identified with a name, become part of the conceptual matrix and
transform into knowledge.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

Outside objects hold the field, each distinct from each,
With the sense that measures, whose function is nescience,
And these in turn with many sets of names, such as that
of directions,
Or the sky, keep rising up and into awareness change.

Yet another verse brimming with potent ideas led us into a
deep penetration of the liberating aspects of Narayana Guru's
philosophy. This must have been one of the places where Nataraja
Guru discerned the fourfold structure he elaborated in much of his
writing using the Cartesian coordinates. I'll assume the
horizontal/vertical structure is familiar enough to any readers of
these notes by now, so let's tease it out of its hiding place.

The verse begins with "external objects" that all appear to be
distinct and different, exemplifying the horizontal positive. Their
negative counterpart is how we conceived them. Here Narayana
Guru tells us "it is the function of the senses to posit for each a

distinct dimension.” In other words, the senses register each object, and the coordinating mind assigns them a unique place in its overall orientation.

The reason we are taught this is that very often our concepts are out of joint with our percepts, so our ordinary orientation is apt to be highly disoriented. The first part of the process of normalization is to rectify our concepts to free them to accurately register our surroundings. Otherwise we tend to be content with the inadequate framing we learned in the past, and, like Procrustes, mangle reality so we can squeeze it into our narrow bed of expectations. The process of opening up we so often speak of is to dare to let go of our narrow but comfortably familiar frames to become more acutely attuned to the panoply of life around us.

Once the horizontal pole is normalized, we naturally live and breathe within the region of balance, which is referred to as the vertical pole. When we glibly speak of truth, our true nature, and so on, we aren't referring to some monumental fixed block of fact sitting somewhere in space, we are speaking of attunement with our vertical (often called spiritual) essence. Bergson's *elan vital* refers to the impetus of the upwelling energy of our life that begins at the vertical negative or alpha of our inception and presses upward into the manifold expressions we bring to the world. Andy simplified the last two lines of the verse for us, to clarify the idea. Their essence is “nescience changes into knowledge.” The unknown becomes known. The unexpressed becomes expressed. The potential becomes actual. When people wonder what the meaning of life is, that's it. When they insist life has no meaning, it is because their channels of expression have been stopped up.

We tend to wonder about the meaning of life when we've successfully managed—diligently instructed by those around us—to suppress our creative expression. Living life as free beings who are naturally actualizing our potentials is so blissful that there is no need to wonder what's missing. It's only when we've dammed up the flow that we begin to feel out of sorts and wonder what it's all about. That's our spirit's way of coaxing us back on track. The

social world coaxes us differently, unfortunately, offering medications and other distractions to subsume the urge to become ourselves so we can continue to fit in to the hallucinatory constructs it desperately wants us to believe in.

The implications of this radical reorientation are vast and important, and we barely scratched the surface in the class. But not to worry: this scheme underlies everything we do in our studies, so we'll have plenty of opportunities to tease out more as we go along.

With this quaternion scheme in mind, when you read Nitya's commentary you will see how he based his talk around the fourfold aspects of the psyche. He gives a clear hint when he passes from the horizontal to the vertical:

Now we have to think of a vertical parameter. At the base of it is darkness. From out of that darkness rises experience after experience. When each experience comes to the level of conscious awareness, it changes into whatever we are capable of appreciating.

It's "whatever we are capable of appreciating" where our experience gets switched either to a healthy or unhealthy direction. This is an area with a huge upside.

Before tipping us off to this implicit scheme, Nitya describes the horizontal world around us as a fair or carnival, with endless goods and performances on display. Our reactions to them cover the full range of emotions. As Mick pointed out, we tend to believe that only having good experiences at the fair will make us happy, but that's a false happiness because the fair is sure to have plenty of horrors in store for us too. He's right of course: we naively believe that manipulating the horizontal aspects of life is all that matters, and our score or grade of happiness comes from how we manage to evade pain and retain pleasures. But that can easily become a fool's paradise, or what the Bible refers to as building our house on sand, because the world is very fickle. It's filled with

changeable things that come and go, live and die, so its basis is constantly shifting. The rock of a firm foundation is obtained by balancing the horizontal to come more in line with our vertical urge to express. It's not that we must ignore or try to eradicate the horizontal—we have to work hard to keep it in balance—but we put our primary energies into what that balance frees up: the ability to evolve and express at least some measure of our immense capabilities.

A lot of what passes for spirituality is just a repackaged form of conditioning, where the practitioner tries valiantly to continue the socially induced program of suppressing themselves. It's very patriotic. We even continue to hear echoes of it in the Gurukula class. Certainly if you go to some of the Gurukula centers in India, you can see how it has seeped back in to the mentality, after being driven off by the three gurus. It's very pernicious. It never goes very far away, and most of the input we meet from hither and yon is a variation on it. Nitya describes with great clarity how we convert the truth of our being into a pale imitation that we cling to:

From this it becomes clear that we are not really seeing anything as itself. The thing is first of all transformed into a sensory experience. In order for us to know anything, we have to fit it into our own sensory system. So, when an unknown thing rises from the alpha of our consciousness, it is dressed up in our own familiar world of sensation. After it is made acceptable to our senses, we pass it on to yet another sphere, the nominal.

A lot of noise has been made that by naming something we assume control over it. I think it works the other way round: by naming things we cede control of ourselves to them. When we assign a name, which is essentially a fiction, we pigeonhole the new event into an old storage compartment; in other words we take what's new and anesthetize it. At least when it's dead we don't have to cope with anything unexpected.

So the mania about resolving anything by simply naming it is seriously misplaced. The point of naming is to know the subject accurately. If we just assign it a name we may feel satisfied, but nothing is really changed or cured. This attitude about names peaked in the 1970s, but is still around. Back then lots of people took the names of Hindu deities or spiritual principles in the hope that doing so would raise them to the level of gods.

I recalled a time when Deb was on the phone, I think to her mother, and she looked out the window and said, “Brahman and Shiva are working on my car right now.” We both agreed there was something out of joint about it. That particular fad has subsided, and Brahman and Shiva have gone back to being good old Brian and Bob again. But names of all sorts remain brim full of our hopes and expectations, our half baked theories and partial perceptions.

Joanne related how she worked with a grade school in Hawaii to reframe its self image. There was a widespread feeling that the traditional way they were teaching wasn't working. Joanne led a brainstorming session to compare how everyone would like the school's image to change. The result was to conceive of the school as being like a contemporary art museum where each child was a bright new picture on the wall, a flamboyantly unique expression created from the interaction of parents, teachers and, most importantly the child itself.

As she described this utopian vision, we heard a gasp from Eugene. He taught for seven years in New York City, and described his experience as being as close to the exact opposite of Joanne's school as possible, all regimentation and conformity. Most everywhere there is a mania for standardization and conventionality, more like a cobwebbed ancient history museum where every child is an identical carbon copy of some brain dead politician's fantasy. It's no wonder so many adult products of the education process are severely challenged to simply feel alive.

As a way to reclaim our aliveness, Nitya offers a threefold meditation in his talk, which it is helpful to condense for clarity.

The first part is to see how we identify most of our world based on memories and speculations. He often used to give the example of Indian materialists, who were very thorough in excising all imaginary beliefs from their perceptions, and it revealed how wishy-washy Western materialists are in taking so many of their assumptions for granted. Stage one is major: to see how we're deluding ourselves and stop doing it.

The second stage is to realize that if we're building our world from our own mare's nest of partially understood previous experiences and chemical imbalances, we have a handle on changing it. We are by no means helpless. We can introduce a much better understanding and learn to harmonize our chaotic secretions. Our current conglomeration of memories has been fashioned by interaction with static and stale concepts and aggravated by various kinds of indigestion, so we can easily make them far more expansive. Why we don't is one of the great mysteries of life, since it is such a relief to do it. And yet, few dare take even tentative steps toward freeing up their conceptual basis. There is a lot of resistance even within the class, though it is thankfully growing less as we forge ahead. Nitya urges us to work not only to cure our physical systems but our mental ones as well:

In your psyche also are various kinds of positive and negative stimulations: jealousy and hatred and all such kinds of emotional disturbances. It is good to work there. You can moderate these emotions without repressing them.

The third stage of meditation Nitya delineates is to settle into the homogenous calm that ensues on settling our travails. The three stages do not have to be sequential. The calm of deep meditation can infuse our mental and physical upsets and ameliorate them. But the order Nitya presents is essential and often omitted by neophytes who innocently believe that rearranging nomenclature will fix everything. The solid groundwork is laid when we take a

clear look at how our psyche has been splintered and scattered and work to repair it.

As an instance of such schismatic thinking, we had a vivid demonstration in class of how people use their mind to denigrate their mind as inferior and inadequate. It is a palpably corrosive belief, but widely held, since it's how most of us were treated as children. People somehow imagine they are leaving all their troubles behind by running themselves down, but it breeds the very repression the gurus often refer to that causes terrible psychic distress. The Gurukula vision is to uplift and honor every part of who we are. Admittedly it only works for those who have enough control of themselves to implement it. For those who don't, other techniques are a much better bet. Physical practices like martial arts or hatha yoga, or spiritual ones like psychedelic explorations, come to mind. The Gita's Chapter XII lists a number of options.

Gratefully there was a thoughtful and heartfelt rejection from all quarters of the statement, "The masters don't live in their heads," with the clear implication that thinking is unspiritual. Our entire psyches are constructed around thoughts, so to revile thoughts is to revile our self. Thinking on some level is revealed by the new tools of science to be continuously present as long as we are alive. Most of us in the class have understood that integrating all aspects of our being is what we're about here, and with a little practice it reveals its efficacy.

Scotty talked about how he has overcome doubts about the validity of his creative side to become much more focused and happy with the art he is lovingly creating, a very important step. Paul took on the imbalance of a one-sided approach and brought in the metaphor of riding a bicycle. Once you take off the training wheels, you learn to stay upright in a very subtle way. If you start to lean too much to one side you will fall off, but if you overreact and jerk too much the other way you will also crash. We are working to merge both sides in just the right blend to make for a joyful ride through our beautiful world.

One key is not to suppress our expressivity as a terrible mistake of the cosmos, but to know we are its very reason for being. Our shame and guilt for daring to exist is the imprint of the terrible forces of oppression we are working to break free from. Each of us has our personal hoard of them, which like a nuclear stockpile can go off at any moment. We have to defuse and dismantle our bombs before we can truly live in peace. The deranged attitude that bombs insure peace is an extension of our wounded ego's defensive posturing.

Nitya is giving his huge heart to lifting us out of the morass we find ourselves in when we dare to look closely. His talk is actually a guided meditation, and if you read it as one the impact is greater than with a quick read through. He concludes in this way:

If we put it all together in one picture, what we see is that from the alpha point to the omega there is a continuous rising of all the variegated forms, names, ideas and reactions, which change into one pure consciousness. It is all very peaceful.

Reorienting our psyche 180 degrees differently is no small matter, but the validity of doing so is in the process of being scientifically confirmed. What we observe is a confection staged in our mind's eye, not the external world it is made to appear. The initial discomfiture of realizing this can be replaced by a confident enjoyment of being alive, of being what Nitya liked to call a co-creator with the divine. He puts it very beautifully here, in what will be our closing meditation:

Between what is yet to be known—which remains in the unconscious—and that which is already known and has once and forever become a name, all the happenings of experience take place. We can visualize it as an ever-flowing stream that never ceases, continuously rising from the alpha of nescience into the world of names. If you meditate on this verse, the impact of it on your judgment, your personal behavior, your interpersonal relationships,

and your reaction to situations is very dramatic. The world which is out there and very substantial to you suddenly changes into a configuration of mental images. In a sense, the mind detaches from the body. Where stimuli from things “out there” are believed to enter into the system called the body through the eyes and ears and so on, now the situation is reversed: “This thing called my personal life is always flowing out through my eyes and other senses into the external world. I am seeing only me—‘me’ flowing and extending itself into the sky, the green forest, the mountains and the clouds.”

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

Each moment comes with a new message and seems to say: “Enjoy me to the full.” “I will shatter your dreams today.” “Wait for me, it is not yet time.” “See my beauty.” “I am ugly, aren't you scared?” “Sit near me, I shall sing a song for you.” This is how the passing moments whisper or shriek or signal to us. In these messages we hear promises, threats, cautions and alluring invitations. Each moment is reciprocally greeted or encountered by our mind, and it passes judgements: “This situation is unpleasant.” “That is fine.” “Here is a beautiful person.” “Oh, how clever you are.” “This is frustrating.” Thus, every passing experience is weighted, measured, compared, contrasted and evaluated with some hypothetical norm. The world of the visibles and the calculables is pluralistic.

There is a unitive way of comprehending all form within. For example, the pure vibration of energy in space and the rising symphony of sound in the ear are not two phenomena. When we are delighted by a gentle breeze, the air we breathe, the lungs that heave in respiration, the heart that pulsates, the neurons that carry the message of sensation and the soul that rejoices, all register their kinship with the one prana, the vital energy that is both within and without. Who can say what is strictly inside or outside?

Once, an unfortunate Russian scientist said that a whole range of historical events has been governed, not by the march of dialectical materialism, but by the incidence of sunspots. He was sent to Siberia in exile, but that did not stop the sun from spitting fire and from rocking the glandular stability of the sensitive mammals on earth. What was the crime of the Russian scientist? He saw the relatedness of things, the unbroken chain of events that range from sunspots to human celebration.

The Guru sees a more fundamental oneness than the one recognized by the cosmologist. Wasn't it Kipling who said, "East is east and west is west, and never the twain shall meet . . ."? But Narayana Guru says that the east is not the east and the west is not the west because they are notions and they only meet in the world of names. As we are in the habit of counting and contrasting all sense impressions in terms of our own preferences, we force ourselves to live in a divided world. The hard facts comprehended by the software of the mind are always spiralling upwards from the dark depth of the alpha—first as sensations, then as perceived objects, situations of love and hate or painful and pleasurable encounters—and finally, at the omega point, they vanish as mere names.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

THE events that fill consciousness in a state of contemplative flux or change or becoming are vividly pictured in this verse in neutral psycho-physical terms.

The objects that we see objectively, as if outside consciousness, are focal points of interest which engage our attention in succession both in time and in space. This the world of multiple interests in which the self lives and moves, selecting its satisfactions here and there in a changeful and light-hearted manner. The measuring-rod

with which all interests are appraised has its source in the five senses. These however, insofar as they give us a partial picture of the reality, deal with the world of appearance rather than with reality and therefore function on the side of ignorance rather than on the side of science.

When we pass from the outer objects of interest to deeper-seated conceptual factors in consciousness we come to items which refer to entities which are neither physical in the full sense nor merely mental. They belong to the psycho-physical framework of reality as conceptually understood.

There is actual space which is filled with things, and conceptual space which is independent of things. Aristotle's 'Physics' (Book IV) brings out this distinction when it defines space as 'that without which bodies could not exist, but itself (space) continuing to exist when bodies cease to exist'.

Modern mathematical notions of space grade imperceptibly from actual space into non-metric space of different orders in the context of the Absolute. Quadric and vectorial spaces are now known to scientists and mathematicians and are in practical everyday use. The sense of direction that each person carries within him refers to his ego which is at the core of his consciousness with which, as locus, he is able to point to the points of the compass and to overhead or below, giving rise to sets referred to by names which cluster into different classes which grade into the world of imperceptibles. The sky refers to space, which is independent of the notion of directions and comes near to a purer notion than that of a direction. Cantor's theory of ensembles and the post-Hilbertian geometry of algebra are modern disciplines which could be appealed to here for supporting this vision of rising sets of value entities.

The change and becoming that is always in progress within psycho-physical consciousness, viewed in living and contemplative terms, has an ascent and a circulation which are under reference in the last line. When we see that modern physics admits of a physical world in which galaxies advance, recede or keep expanding or contracting within the limits of outer space, it should not be considered too far-fetched for a contemplative to visualise the neutral psycho-physical world as in a state of flux. Bergsonian philosophy, while retaining a scientific status, has succeeded in describing reality in a manner that would be acceptable to the physicist and metaphysician at one and the same time. Pragmatism and mysticism find place together in such a philosophical outlook, which may be said to agree in its main lines with the standpoint adopted here by the Guru. Knowledge however gains primacy above all material or practical considerations here.

Part III

Joanne kindly sent a more complete version of her contribution noted earlier:

Last night's discussion reminded me of my experience working with a group of teachers from the same school. It was a school on a military base that had a 75% annual turnover rate. They said their school reminded them of a ship with the anchor dragging. I asked them what they would like their school to be like...they said like a contemporary art museum. Each child is a work of art that has been co-constructed by the artist and the person viewing the art. Much like our discussion, the artist and the viewer are seamless. Both inside and outside are one, merged in the artwork on the wall. In the course of our discussion I discovered that some of the teachers had never been to the art museum, despite having lived in Hawaii for 25 years. I said, "You need a field trip!" So I took the entire class to the Contemporary Art Museum. They loved it and I loved that they considered each child a work of art.

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The ideas about naming we kicked around reminded me of a riddle attributed to Abraham Lincoln that goes like this:

Q: How many legs does a sheep have if I call a tail a leg?

A: Five? No, four. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it one.

* * *

In doing a final edit of my Chapter XII Gita commentary, I came across this refutation of the idea that “the masters don't live in their head,” as well as an adumbration of the next verse, and thought I'd pass it along:

Our best defense against all forms of unhealthy exaggeration is to train ourselves to examine situations coolly and intelligently, and not to give in to impulsive reactions. Opening ourselves to the onrushing internal wave of the Absolute requires a relinquishment that is curiously similar to abandoning ourselves to outside influences. It is quite possible that a lot of the histrionics of the modern political battlefields at least began as attempts to become instruments of a higher power. The Gita has been carefully instructing us how to avoid making this disastrous mix-up of frames of reference, but it's a very tricky business. Because intelligence has become a dirty word thanks to a number of factors, including the horrific excesses of rationalists in denying many truths that are perfectly obvious to the less well educated, there is a pervasive belief that intelligence has to be subtracted from the picture to permit spirituality to fill the void. The Gita, of course, extols intelligence wielded with expertise, which would include not erecting arbitrary barricades to common sense. The present chapter follows the same blueprint. It is about bringing intelligence

to bear on the whole range of the problems of life, not at all about disconnecting the intellect via excessive emotionalism.

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Joanne's husband is Jake, and here's his commentary:

A student teacher for special needs children was trying to help a second grader learn how to count by two's. In an American grade school, he had learned to count in the first place largely through repetitive drill, but this new task was proving resistant. This teacher also knew that the child liked to use crayons and had established for himself, however, a most definite hierarchy of those colors he favored more than others. By having the child associate pairs of colors, the teacher was finally able to move the child to "count by two's."

In contemporary American education, this principle of connecting some object of study with some thing each student already knows has become the common coin of the progressive pedagogical realm (often to the disparagement of educators burdened with far too many students and a now larding-on of the parenting responsibilities abdicated by those unable to meet their traditional biological/social mandates). In any event, although this connecting approach is common knowledge that principle itself is rarely examined beyond its functional utility in a social setting. The inquiry, that is, runs in one direction only. It is the genius of the Guru and Nitya that in the present verse they reverse the common logical trajectory; they point to what the principle indicates about each of us and how that awareness can change our lives.

With our senses, we experience the world, and, as Nitya pointed out in earlier verses, that pure perception is always accurate but the duration of that purity is as brief as a nano-second. It instantaneously becomes the property of the mind, which names and conceptualizes all of it. This triad of object-name-concept

occurs continuously and we then “substitute the name for the reality” (p. 417). As Nitya writes, most of what we entertain in the form of names has no content at all behind it. Words such as *sky*, *space*, or *god* are essentially entries in a dictionary with no measurable or objective identification beyond more words themselves. What we are really sensually experiencing constitutes very little; we *know* next to nothing and what we claim to know is always limited by our position in space and our personal norms established on the basis of our categorized individual experiences.

As Nitya points out, our experiences continuously arise to conscious awareness through the mind’s object-name-concept process, the foundation on which we then categorize by way of abstract names. People become *students* for teachers or *patients* for doctors, for instance, and these categories erase distinctions among the individuals placed in them.

It is here that Nitya brings together the two processes and by so doing offers us an alternative way of being in the world. We constantly experience experience that arises out of the unconscious and usually call this process “living.” We reflect on it as not-knowable or predictable: “shit happens.” As it does, we attach the elements of it to that which we already have named and conceptualized. It is between these two processes that our stream of existence takes place. Out of the unknowable pre-conscious comes experience, which we identify according to what we already know. As Nitya writes, without a familiarity with light itself, we would never have been able to re-cognize it. Viewed in this way, we reverse our “common sense” awareness of being in the world. Objects “out there” are now creations of my personal life existing beforehand and therefore also flowing out into the world rather than exclusively in one direction. As Nitya points out, “we are endlessly creating a huge painting where the artist is part of the work itself” (p. 419).

Maintaining this point of view while functioning in the world of necessity present us the challenge of merging the subjective with the objective but disqualifies/privileges neither one. This

vision, that is, enhances our awareness of our awareness of the endless flow of change in which we exist. The world is not the inert reality our senses lie about—nor is it a changeless place we visit temporarily for a brief lifespan, most of which is spent in dream or deep sleep states or in egoic/infantile pursuits. Like physical death, these transitory experiences come and go as we evolve in the Absolute: “it [this vision] serves to shake you out of the morbid establishment of a stagnant world” (p.419).

In the market, in the cloister—only God I saw.

In the valley and on the mountain

—only God I saw.

Him I have seen beside me oft in tribulation;

In favor and in fortune—only God I saw.

In prayer and fasting, in praise and contemplation,

In the religion of the Prophet—only God I saw.

Neither soul nor body, accident nor substance,

Qualities nor causes—only God I saw.

I oped my eyes and by the light of his face

around me

In all the eye discovered—only God I saw.

Like a candle I was melting in his fire:

Amidst the flames outslashing—only God I saw.

Myself with mine own eyes I saw most clearly,

But when I looked with God’s eyes—

only god I saw.

I passed away into nothingness, I vanished,

And lo, I was the All-living—only God I saw.

(Baba Kuhi of Shiraz, “Only God I saw”)

Ekhnath Eswaran, “Meditation,” p. 226.)

Part IV

Jean was “inspired by Joanne’s art museum story”:

How do you insert more content into the lives of the very elderly, many with problems of dementia and Alzheimer's? I saw a report on TV where small groups were being invited into art museums, along with their nearest of kin or caregiver, to sit and view three chosen paintings. A curator had selected the paintings and set them up before chairs where all could be seated. She didn't say much. Everything went in a slow and relaxed fashion. A sense of peace and quietness prevailed. After saying hello, they were all invited to view the first painting, just let it sink in, until someone had something they wanted to say about it. "It is so light!" was the first comment, about the portrait of a young girl from another age, in a yellow dress, with a golden complexion and peculiar facial expression. Time was given for seer and seen to merge. I thought of Susan's visit at an art museum that she described for us once, where she stood and looked, long, refraining from reading the title, just to see and feel the picture itself, in herself.

I've been guilty more than once of speeding through art museums-- "two hours to see this whole whole lot of pictures, that's so many minutes in each section." You know, when you're a tourist in Paris or Sydney or somewhere, and there's lots to pack into a few short hours. So I was enchanted at watching this group of old people sitting, quietly, absorbing the pictures they were looking at, letting memories and feelings and intellect combine.

Bring on the Alzheimer's!