

7/15/14
Verse 68

Like snake-rope form,
the I-consciousness enters both knowledge and the body;
on one occasion the understanding is true, on another untrue;
thus one who can discern should understand.

Free translation:

Like the presentiment of a snake evoked by a rope, the reality of the ego sense shifts from the body to the Self and back again. On one occasion it is experienced as profound, and when it alternates it is felt as profane. Only one who can discern this knows the Truth.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

As the ego sense enters into the double snake-rope-like scheme
Now as knowledge and now as the limited body agent,
It becomes sacred at one time or profane again
Thus, should he understand, the intuitive man.

Our last session before a vacation period was once again held outside in the balmy evening air, a rare opportunity. It is a good verse to wrap up with, as it directly addresses some very common misunderstandings, which bedevilmments have spoiled millions of lives over thousands of years by convincing sincere seekers of truth that they should reject the very paradise they dwell in.

Once we are convinced that where we live is not a divine state, anything goes: cruelty, selfishness, violence, insanity; you name it. We are led to believe the reckoning may or may not come later, but for now we can get away with anything. Mainly we are convinced that, rather than being God's greatest achievement, we

live in a purgatory we need to find a means to escape from. Any way at all.

Narayana Guru's politico-social success in transforming South India was grounded in the awareness that this is it, there is no other world. Earth Day and the environmental movement were born of a similar realization that sprang from psychedelically-inspired insights about the preciousness of the world we live in. Here in *Atmopadesa Satakam*, the wasteland of our psyche is being painstakingly reconstructed into a Garden of Eden by reconnecting it back with its ineffable surroundings.

Even having understood this intellectually, the schism between nature and spirit is so thoroughly instilled in the culture that most of us have to struggle valiantly to overcome it. The excellence of *Atmo* is in leading us to seriously address the subterranean aspects that continue to subvert our noble efforts, so that we can begin to heal for real.

Deb mused that simply sitting outside together we were in the perfect middle point. The scene was beautiful yet distracting, filled with ambient sounds and sights, yet even as we acknowledge the distractions we are dedicated to remaining in communion with the inner light. Her thoughts reflected the imagery of the verse that Nitya presents as a linear diagram in which our ego is connected by mind to the body and by intellect to the Absolute. In our minds I suggested we could make the diagram three-dimensional, with the Absolute represented as a dimensionless point, pulsing sequentially outward into the intellect, ego, mind and body, and then ricocheting back into the central point. We imagine it happening slowly, but in reality the pulsation is so fast as to be unnoticeable. Or better: it is one thing that is being viewed as a sequence. The viewing moves, but the subject does not. Our minds evolved to divide and analyze everything. What we have yet to learn is an integrated vision that puts it all back together. Deb agreed, describing reality more as a self-evident intuition that needs no intellectual evaluation.

Nitya accords the intellect the highest value in the machinery of the psyche, as the aspect that connects our sense of 'I' with the Absolute. An important corollary is that if we denigrate the intellect, we are severing our avenue of contact with the Absolute.

We enter a period in the study where the intensity is being ramped up, with the intention of bringing about a breakthrough. Nitya sets the stage by delineating the dichotomy we face:

This is a very crucial verse. It very correctly presents the kind of life most of us lead.

In our life there is an ambivalent pull. At one moment we conform to the requirements of this world, identifying ourselves with our bodies, our bodily needs, and the world of necessity. In this world we also look for pleasure, and get more or less satisfaction. Then a shift comes and we swing to the other side. We start questioning the validity of whatever we were just conforming to. The body seems to be unreal, and our identity with it is now shifted to an identity with the Unknown, the Absolute, the Ground, the Incomprehensible. If we look at what we have been doing with our mind, it appears absolutely meaningless, a sheer waste of time. Then the only meaningful value seems to be to turn to that unknown, secret beginning and try to understand it more. But you don't remain there long; you come back to the world of ordinary events and again join the fray.

If we accept this as the common lot, then all are schizophrenics. There is not one person who is not split in this fashion. Schizophrenia is natural to all people.

The psychologist R.D. Laing maintained that schizophrenia is the way the psyche heals itself: that it is crucial to our recovery. What I think he meant was that we have become "well adjusted" (as Jake put it) to our confinement in ordinary transactional reality, what is called in this verse the side of the body, or elsewhere the materialist perspective. We function adequately within the severely

limited parameters of definable actuality, but we long for the freedom of the more than 99 percent of the universe that beckons from outside those parameters. A schizophrenic is attuned to the whole as well as the part, and creative genius springs from a natural integration of the two aspects. Mental distress, often manifesting as insanity, occurs when the whole cannot be squeezed back into the confines of the part.

It's a common feature of a psychedelic trip to pass through dimension after dimension in the blink of an eye, and become anxious about how to ever get back to "normal reality." It can't be accomplished by the conscious mind, but naturally happens to a well-adjusted psyche as the medicine wears off. It makes you supremely grateful that somehow our brains are capable of modeling such a welter of input in a comprehensible form so that we can easily cope with it. Our whole brain is not only a reducing valve, it is a highly *intelligent* reducing valve, presenting only what is most essential for our well being. If we always had to process everything anew, we would be so inundated that we couldn't function.

Nitya very much admired the scientific attitude that is firmly grounded in materialism, while knowing full well there is more to the story, and he gives it a fair airing in his comments. All three gurus of his lineage strove to unite the dual aspects of our consciousness. Because virtually every seeker of truth disdains the material aspect, Nitya made its importance eminently clear once again here:

Your attitude swings like the proverbial pendulum. For half the time you are with what is called *aryya*. I equate that with what the Isavasya Upanishad calls *vidya*. It is the side of the Self. Is Narayana Guru asking us to be only on this side, and to avoid the side of the body or *anaryya*? No, not at all. It is here that his revaluation comes as a corrected form of Vedanta. Everyone else, except the ancient rishis, say to leave the body, leave the state of avidya.

But the Guru tells us we should know this is the way the whole thing operates. When the body functions have priority, we should see that as how nature operates. When the spiritual insight predominates, we should see that is how the supreme ground of everything lends its light, power, energy, sense of wonder, and truthfulness to infuse everything. These come again and again as a kind of pulsation. Like the alternation of light and dark, vidya and avidya always operate, but one who knows the secret of both rises above them. One who holds a central position, watching with an evenness of mind, can accept both.

Jan and others asked for clarification about vidya and avidya. We often translate them as science and nescience, or more prosaically, knowledge and ignorance. Since knowledge and ignorance have become clichés, the former version is preferable in a philosophic investigation. Knowledge as used here is the greater knowledge, but the word is often used to indicate simply the identification of separate items, and then it is contrasted with wisdom. So the dual implications of the word 'knowledge' can be confusing. *Brahma vidya* is the science of the Absolute, or knowledge directed to understanding the whole.

Avidya, the opposite of vidya, means taking everything in isolation, which is sometimes necessary, but it often leads to misunderstanding, as in the classic analogy of the snake seen in the rope employed by Narayana Guru here. He also takes us farther than usual with the image: now it is a snake-rope form. A materialist insists that there is only a rope, but that's not quite true. Our perception of it is also important, even though it is only more or less accurate. A rope is inert and boring, though it might prove useful in certain cases. A snake is very exciting, even if only a projection. It's actually the snakesness of the rope that gives that ordinary strand of twisted hemp fibers eternal life, at least in Vedanta.

It sounds like I'm making a joke, but it's also an important idea. Life devoid of our interpretation is as dead as a rope moldering on the ground. What we see in it brings it to life. This is precisely where materialism fails: in working to take the meaning out of life, it leaves us feeling empty and depressed. Perhaps we can say that the gurus are giving us a new snake, a new way to relate to the ropeness of material reality, one that doesn't need gods and goddesses, but that sees a more scientific form of divinity in every speck of dust. We don't have to worship an ancient analogue, though that's okay for some. But why not directly worship our friends, the animals and plants, the weather, the symmetry of manifestation, the preservation and restoration of the natural world? So many possibilities, right here in front of our noses. Displacing divinity far outside ourselves is where we lose the thread.

The question still floated on the evening air: isn't the pure Absolute better than this world? By no means. "Earth's the right place for love. I don't know where it's likely to go better." (Robert Frost, Birches.)

See, it goes very deep in us. The remoteness of divinity is our baseline assumption. An analogy I have used before is if we go to a music concert, should we sit there and try to shut out the music, presuming there is something else that's better? No, of course not. The music is the absolute event of that moment. We are there to absorb and be uplifted and enlightened and delighted: to have a meaningful experience. It would be absurd to tune it out. And yet that's how we relate to the ongoing symphony of values of the universe: tune it out so we can discover something better. Hey, this *is* the something better! It's already here. Just get into it!

Well sure, we tune out the bird sounds to concentrate on the sharing of ideas in the class, but not because they are bad. We're just attending to something else at the moment.

Bill put it very nicely: once you gain equilibrium you can accept things for what they are and enjoy what the world offers.

Settling in to this perspective requires a transparency of vision, a neutrality in respect to events that is not at all easy to accomplish. The class mulled over how we are easily hurt by people's negative opinions of us and lose our balance. This very week I advised three or four people how critical this was. They were confronting close friends and family members who were battling demons of their past and lashing out in the present. It was fairly easy to see that the attacks were not really about them, but still the words hurt very much. They have the power to sever longstanding relationships. We have to let the pain go through us and not hold onto it, and then we can regain our neutral state. Only from a position of neutrality can we act wisely and possibly be of help. Nitya's advice on this is beautifully put, though from a slightly different angle:

You should take this as an invitation to intuitively keep yourself at a neutral zero in orientation. You are not asked to run away from home or commitments. You have a body, and until it drops away everything pertaining to it is relevant. The complaint here is about the lopsidedness that comes when you exaggerate the value of one side and become blind to the other, as is often the case. You should never be blind. When your bodily needs are to be met you should still be aware of your spiritual side. And when you are experiencing spiritual ecstasy or joy, don't forget you have a body and that many important laws pertain to it.

To have this fully balanced state is true wisdom. In this you do not give an exaggerated importance to your bodily comforts or your bodily pains. You don't exaggerate spiritual gains, nor do you negatively condemn the spirit as nonfactual or dreamy. This brings great peace to your mind. It is a peace that makes you efficient on both sides.

We can be effective only as long as we aren't busy defending our position. We have to give up having a defensible position at all.

Why do we need it? It was built long ago, to protect us from pains we felt then. Our maturation process has lifted us out of the need to defend ourselves, but the ramparts are still in place. An ancient, crumbling fortress. Unnecessary. Nitya wants us to come out.

Jan also wondered if we were supposed to find a single ideal place and stay there, which is another popular fantasy. Nancy answered well, that things are always in motion, and that we bring our state of harmony along everywhere we go. We recalled some of Nitya's instruction about the figure of eight movement of the psyche, and I promised to add some of it in Part III. One thing I wrote in my Gita XIV commentary seems especially germane:

It really does help to know that the psyche is not static, it cycles through a figure eight pattern between high and low, sattva and tamas, powered throughout by rajasic energy. Many people become depressed when tamas holds sway. If they realized that this is not a permanent condition but part of a continuum, they would be less inclined to panic. The negative mental states associated with tamas can be easily enlarged, causing the psyche to spend most of its time in that state. We are also capable of minimizing them if we so choose. The "immortality" spoken of here is that tremendous feeling of relief when all sufferings are at bay and our native bliss surges to the fore. If we can manage to avoid getting caught up in the ups and downs of daily life, it is much easier to remain in that enjoyable condition.

Nancy mentioned how as we cycle through our experiences, many themes are repeated, and these are areas we should pay close attention to. As you recognize them it mitigates their hold on you. Moni agreed, and gave the example of mourning a loved one. It is not healthy to stay stuck in the sadness. Eventually you have to move on, and then you are no longer dying with the person.

Stan and Jake also noted a number of the broader effects in society of the blindness we have been taught to wear. Many of

them we have touched on before, so I won't go into details. Suffice to say that by changing our own orientation we influence the outer world in the most optimal fashion. We can observe social evils, but then we should use that information to help us look for their doppelgangers within our own habits of thought, where we can conveniently work on them.

Nitya loved the Paul Rebs story of the Zen master who exemplifies a neutral attitude under great duress. A similar story from his own experience is appended in Part III. The important thing is that just *wanting* to be neutral doesn't work very well, though it helps. We have to be *established* in neutrality. If we feel any twinge of guilt or culpability we won't be able to remain balanced. The Zen master knew perfectly well he was not the father of the child, so he didn't have any subterranean currents to suppress. This is where most of us have much work to do. Our culture has treated us as guilty sinners from birth, and it is a deep assumption we don't even notice. So as a matter of course we parry every innuendo with a plea of innocence or some other kind of diversion. We feel guilty even if we're not. We are busy protecting ourselves, even if there is no reason to. The rope of our innocence looks like a poisonous snake to our social mind. Overcoming this conditioning takes a serious commitment, but the rewards are astonishing. At least it is an arena that life places us in regularly, if we are in contact with friends and family members. We learn to grow right in the midst of everyday life.

Do you see how this is one of the tightest knots we are wrapped up in? Life could be so simple and beautiful, but we are busy parrying and counterthrusting all the currents, both real and imagined, that surround us. No wonder Narayana Guru so often laments that there is no one who sees this unitive truth. Nitya urges us to boldly commit to a true presumption of innocence:

This is where you have to stand. No matter what happens, no matter what anyone thinks, you can just say "Is that so? Fine."
To be able to do this you have to be at a neutral zero, neither on

the body side or the other side. This is the most central teaching of the Isavasya Upanishad. When you know the secret of avidya, you cross over death. When you know the secret of vidya, you enjoy immortality.

Now we have a one-month break in the class. We ended on an excellent note, making deep inroads into areas of perennial confusion. I am humbled at barely being able to convey the least part of it, but hopefully that will be enough to justify your attention. Have fun out there!

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

If we look at our individuation from an analytical point of view, we find that it is constituted of a body, a mind, an ego and an intellect. When the body is animated, its sensations, its experiences of pain and pleasure, and the plethora of thoughts and memories that arise commingled and that flow as a stream of consciousness can be looked upon as mind. That mind is placed on the side of the “possessor” of the body and in this verse is called *angi*. This body/mind complex was described in the previous verse as the “ordinary” and what was termed there as “beyond all measure” is given here as knowledge, *arivu*. Although this supreme knowledge, which is identical to the Self and the Absolute, is beyond the reach of mind and words, it is accessible to the intellect. The Bhagavad Gita (VI, 21) calls it:

That in which one cognizes the ultimate limit of happiness which can be grasped by reason and goes beyond the senses, and established wherein there is no more swerving from the true principle.

A yogi who identifies his self with the unalloyed bliss of the transcendental being and whose intellect is freed from the taints of the senses and mind remains stable in his inner happiness. The figure overleaf [not reproduced here] shows the approximation of the scheme implied in this verse.

Without the body there cannot be an individual, and without the mind the body does not function. According to the physiological psychologists and the neurophysiologists, mind is an epiphenomenon produced by the complex effect of highly organized bodily functions, such as the sensory system, the motor functions and the intensive molecular activities of the brain. So it is hard to say whether the mind monitors the body or the body monitors the mind.

A body, with its animation called mind, will only vegetate if its individuation is not consciously felt and directed by the personal identity of an ego. All goal-oriented actions are motivated and carried out by the ego. Experiences such as heat and cold, pain and pleasure, success and failure, and praise and shame intensify the ego identity.

According to the present verse, the primary interest of the ego can alternate and change the sense of belongingness of the I-consciousness. For a while it can be one with the body identity and can crave the pleasures of the senses or look for the gratification of several latent desires. Sooner or later, however, it reaches a saturation point and flings itself in the opposite direction where it identifies itself with the unknown, the transcendent, which in this verse is called knowledge.

The ego, the mind, the senses and the body have no light of their own. The only conductor of the illuminating reason of the Self is the intellect. So the ego must hire the services of the intellect to carry out the actualization of its motives in the transactional world. When intellect operates as a tool of the ego, the mind takes an upper hand and colours the intellect with all its pre-conditionings of love and hate, pain and pleasure, and all attraction/repulsion dualities. As reason truly belongs to the Self, it

occasionally jerks away from the clutch of ego to return to its own natural habitat, described here as knowledge. This automatically also turns the ego to the Self.

The ego is like a shadow. Sometimes it resembles the shadow of the Self, and at other times of the embodied finite person. It is like a form which alternately looks like a rope and then like a snake.

The Guru's suggestion here is not to become fully identified with any one of these alternatives. So long as the body persists, the alternation is inevitable. What he teaches is how to raise one's consciousness above these alternations and remain in a neutral zero witnessing the ceaseless sport.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary is particularly excellent this week:

THERE is a subtle form of dichotomy or ambivalence to which the 'I' sense which each man can feel in himself tends to be subjected alternately, while still remaining basically the same. As a magnet could have two poles while still belonging to the order of magnetism, this subtle polarity has to be first fully visualised by the contemplative who aspires to self-realization beyond its two-sided limitations. Duality in all its aspects, gross or subtle, has to be taken into account before it can be correctly merged in the notion of the non-dual Absolute. With the present verse the Guru enters into a series of verses dealing with the inner structure of contemplative consciousness, viewed both cosmologically and psychologically. Many subtle problems and correlations are established so as to reveal the structure of the Self in the context of the Absolute.

Here the Guru makes use of the classical Vedantic example of the superimposition in consciousness of the illusion of the snake on the

reality of the pure thing-in-itself represented by the rope. This example has been worked upon by Vedantists over and over in their literature and it has become such a favourite that Vedanta can no more do without it. The reason for this is to be sought in the fact that this particular example has much proto-linguistic value attached to it.

Our consciousness is really unitary or unitive in its content and structure but where it participates with the relational world of appearances it presents this elusive, ambivalent phenomenon when viewed from the side of appearance rather than that of reality itself. The ego-sense may be said to oscillate within the amplitude of the two poles characterised by the snake-rope analogy which the Guru resorts to with great advantage for explaining his own scientific philosophical standpoint.

In oscillating between the poles, the ego-sense gets filled with two different contents: one of these has the status of a mental presentation only, on an existent basis. This is the snake superimposed on the other simple reality of the rope. When consciousness swings as it were to the other extreme negative pole, the content is not a mental presentation but tends to be existent, and touches, as it were, the ontological limits of the actual or the physical.

Knowledge helps presentiments, while fact tends to abolish this tendency in favour of actuality. Knowledge is the pole of subsistence, while the ego-sense conditioned by the physical body (here referred to as the 'limbed-agent', a translation of the Sanskrit word 'angi') is the pole of existence. The alternating states of consciousness refer to the psychic and the physical aspects of reality. These two poles have their common ground in the same individual consciousness.

Spirituality in the religious context is permeated by the twin considerations of merit or demerit, saintly or sinful, sacred and profane. In the context of Sanskritist religion the corresponding expressions are 'arya' (good or honourable) and 'anarya' (evil or dishonourable). The racial implications may be said to have been completely effaced from these expressions as used at present. An Aryan is known for gentlemanly qualities whatever his race. Thus 'arya' and 'anarya', which we could have translated as 'sacred' and 'profane', refer to twin ambivalent aspects of personal spiritual life. One feels holy or sinful according as his ego consciousness is coloured or conditioned by one or the other of these poles that have been distinguished above. Sin and saintliness have both to be transcended in favour of a unitive state which abolishes effectually the duality that might persist as between either of them. This is the way of absolutist self-realization or contemplation which is recommended here. To be able to recognize the duality of the aspects is good, but it is better to go further in the same direction to abolish it and merge it in the unitive vision of the Absolute. Before one can deal with or work a machine it is necessary to have a clear idea of its mechanism, at least in broad outline. Contemplation, to be correctly practised or accomplished, must be fully informed of the way of transcending duality through an understanding of the nature of the duality itself. It is for this reason that the Guru concludes with the suggestion that intuition, which is a higher form of reasoning than the merely mechanistic one, must be applied here for one to be able to appraise the dual aspects together as the underlying unity, without contradiction.

The awareness or wakefulness of the intuitive man should be such that, while it is fully aware of the duality, it is able to see unity in it, in the brighter light of a more focussed attention. Only a man gifted with this kind of intuition is regarded by Sankara and others as fit for the study of Vedanta or 'Atma Vidya' (Cf. Viveka Chudamani verse 16). Bergsonian intuition also belongs to the same Absolutist contemplative context.

Part III

Nitya was very fond of the Paul Reps story retold in this verse, in part because he had a history with a similar concept. Here's the story as it appeared in Love and Blessings. Among other things, it shows that we don't have to be some heavyweight Zen master to act wisely. Fernandez is an ordinary screw-up, just like us:

In one section I had to deal with, the British were receiving new battalions into the transit camp from overseas, arranging meals for them, posting them to war fronts, and notifying their families in case they were injured or killed. One day I received a message that a convoy of 160 soldiers was coming in that night, and they should be given hot meals. I passed the message on to my good friend Fernandez, the steward, and he promised to feed them.

When the convoy arrived I received them, showed them their tents, and directed them to the mess hall. When I called over, I was told that Fernandez had gone home and there hadn't been any instructions to make dinner for the new arrivals. The hungry men in the convoy were furious. They had to make do with bread and canned fish.

There was no possibility of avoiding a court martial. It was painful for me to join the proceedings against my friend, but I hid my conscience behind the regulations. When the charge sheet was handed over to him and read before the presiding officer, Fernandez smiled in his gentle way and said, "That's okay." When the officer asked him why he neglected his duty he said, "I didn't do it on purpose. I just forgot and went home." The officer told him that forgetfulness was not a valid plea, and that he was liable to be punished with a pay cut and a stint in the army prison. He answered, "It's all right. I don't mind." When the officer went on that it would adversely affect his ability to be promoted, he said "What of it?" He was awarded a three week pay cut and five days

in prison. When I nervously took his hand and told him how sorry I was, he consoled me with the reply, “I don’t care.”

Many years later when I was with Nataraja Guru, he took me aside and told me four great dictums to live by. They were to say “It’s okay,” whenever you were in trouble. If the situation persisted in bugging you, you should say “What of that?” When you are convinced of the imperativeness of the situation, say “Never mind.” If worst comes to worst, say “I don’t care.” I had already learned this from Fernandez, but when the Guru endorsed it I finally realized just how important it was. (81-2)

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A section from my recent response in Nancy Yeilding’s Brihadaranyaka Upanishad study group highlights how a unitive attitude affects our experience, by turning grains of what could be thought of as desert sand into pearls of great price, which then lend their luster to us:

The second exercise highlights a key idea I like very much. The attitude of “me, me, mine,” cuts us away from the rich totality of humanity. I used to feel very small when I observed talented people doing what they do. It seems that envy exaggerates the other at our expense, causing us to shrink commensurately. Nitya subtly taught us how to realize those geniuses were also a part of us. Now I am unrestrainedly joyful in admiring the wondrous talents of my fellow beings. Because I am no longer envious, I am expanded by their performances, rather than diminished.

Examples abound. Last night we went to a chamber music concert with some friends, sharing a delicious picnic in the sun beforehand. We sat in comfortable seats in a magnificent hall with excellent acoustics and listened to people who have dedicated their lives to making beautiful music. They played impeccably on spectacular instruments that sounded like the voice of heaven itself, both well-known and unknown pieces composed by some

sublime geniuses. We had driven in a well-designed car on decent roads to the setting on a college campus where the highest aspirations of young minds are continuously nurtured. It's possible to take the whole thing for granted, but every bit of it was a rare miracle if you stop to appreciate it.

Opportunities like this happen all the time. On the drive home I pondered how here I am, a mediocre intellect, a nobody, yet I had just imbibed a rich feast of the highest expressions of humanity, and they were in me as surely as the awareness of my own smallness. My identification with the greater world kept it vibrant and simultaneously expanded who I was. Quite literally I was—I am—all this.

We are enriched by more than the geniuses of history. Our dear friends are special too, and afford us infinite delight and possibilities for learning and caring. We have been invited to take the positive attitude Nitya spells out into every corner of our life.

This could also be taken as a response to this snippet from the text, when Nitya says:

You know that some day the body will drop off, but until that time it is to be treated as an excellent instrument. It is magnificently equipped with both senses and a sensory interpretation system. When all is working harmoniously you have a healthy mind, a wonderful gift through which the great joy of the Absolute can be lived in a million ways and can be understood and appreciated in a million forms.

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Some of Nitya's thoughts on the figure eight movement of the psyche:

The end of Verse 33:

One key characteristic of consciousness is that it alternates. At one moment it goes back into the darkness; there is nothing, it just remains there. In the very next moment it becomes many subjective fantasies in the world of dreams. Then it wakes up and comes into the outer world of transactional awareness. Here it interacts as if it is separate from everything else. It goes into flights of imagination and thought, experiencing all sorts of moods. Then again it enters the stillness.

The Guru is here comparing the wonder of what we are to a person taking a burning twig and swirling it around in the darkness, making a figure eight movement representative of the movement of consciousness through its various states. There is just the one burning point where it glows, luminous, but when it is brandished about it looks like many fiery lines and shapes. It is like writing with a pen: there is only one tiny point from which a little ink is coming, but as you write the ink makes different formations, and each formation has a meaning of its own.

What is the difference between your writing and your thinking? Your own mind is a point of consciousness which moves like the tip of a pen. If you turn inward in your own mind, the point of your consciousness is just a glow. If that glow is allowed to operate and unfold, it is like the pen writing. It is more than just putting ink on paper, though. The ink can become a Ramayana, a Mahabharata, an Odyssey, a Divine Comedy--the magnum opus of a great writer.

All our philosophy, history, poetry and even art have passed through the tip of a pen. Like that, this whole universe which we see, with all its vastness, is the composition and organization coming from our own individual consciousness. No one else sees for us or knows for us. Even what are considered to be the experiences of other people have to be recycled and made our own before we can truly know them. The vastness we see is what we have created out of something so small: a tiny spark.

This is one of the greatest miracles of life, that the very creator whom we praise for having made all this universe is still

sitting here and creating the very nucleus of our own being. Your nucleus and the nucleus of the universe are not two. When you attain that identity in every moment of your daily life, you become the centerpiece of the universe; your actions, your ideas and your thoughts become the very thoughts, ideas and variegations in the composition of your universe. This brings you to an ultimate identity with the creating faculty. You are at once the Absolute and the very many relatives within it. You are the one unconditional Being who is also causing the many conditional states.

In the Introduction to Nataraja Guru's Saundarya Lahari I presented Nitya's ideas in their most complete form that I know of. Mostly they weren't written in any of his books. The diagrams in the book are very helpful, but if you don't have a copy, you can read the text here: <http://scotteitsworth.tripod.com/id24.html> .

From Darsanamala 6 class notes of Scott:

We all have our infatuations, loves, desires, and we all get carried away by them. Nancy and Deb talked about the figure eight cycling of consciousness around the pivot of a neutral balance point. Nancy knows that when she soars upward she better be prepared for a countervailing downturn. But it's okay because the center is always there no matter what. Deb talked about what Nitya once taught us, that you can minimize the downside and gently boost the upside without throwing things off kilter. Even just being aware that consciousness cycles is helpful, offering solace during the inevitable down periods.

Part IV

In the notes I gave Jan short shrift, and I was kind of hoping she wouldn't read them, and more importantly, if she did that I hadn't hurt her feelings.

Turns out she read the notes right away. But I'm glad of my poor reporting, because it got Jan to clarify her own thinking and pass it along to all of us in refined form. This is important stuff:

Thanks for the wonderful class notes. I did enjoy them and the class so much. As Debbie said, it was the perfect setting to pull into actuality much of the verse's ideas.

I think my second question in class was *more* whether we should *aim* to stay in a central place between the poles of body and vidya as I know we cannot in reality stay there consistently (our bodies and egos pull us toward the transactional too much). It still seems to me that the verse is holding out a central place as the optimal place of wisdom and balance, for example, with the ending quote, which says to strive to "be at a neutral zero, neither on the body side or the other side." It also says, "This is where you have to stand." Earlier in the notes Nitya is quoted as also inviting us to "keep yourself at a neutral zero in orientation," neither siding with the body or the spiritual side. Thus, to me, a key issue is reconciling those ideas with the oscillation we talked about in class.

Then your discussion of Paul Reps also raises the idea of the difference between wanting to be in neutrality and actually being established in neutrality.

Trying to grapple with these ideas this morning, I see the central place might be more about our attachment, our attitude, and how we process things inside us. Ideally, we could intuitively stay grounded in both realms simultaneously, and thereby become as Nitya says, "one who holds a central position, watching with an evenness of mind, [who] can accept both."

Is the reconciliation simply that many of us cannot stay there in this place of neutrality all the time? So, Nitya knows that

oscillating is what we do, and so long as we connect our situation again to the Absolute, and living our transactional lives fully, we are doing the best we can. Plus, since both realms have equal value (the neutrality discussed above), so long as we keep contemplating this truth and knowledge, we can more easily integrate the two realms within us. I almost see it as giant arms (I know this is corny) but arms that reach out to connect with the physical when we are filled with the unity, and that reach for the Absolute in all directions, including deep within us, when we are too groundless, floating or bouncing around in the transactional, or being a jerk. Is the oscillation talking about interest more and the neutrality about how we value things. What can you make of all of this?

One other idea I have been playing with lately in the loveliness of summer is how these realms of body/the physical and spirit/unity pass through us. I love this idea. I've been seeing how we can be vessels, or meeting places, for these two realms. When we are open and receptive, the flow and conversation of both realms continues. When we are quiet inside, a lot can happen that is beautiful and letting the flow speak to us brings joy. In that place, it feels less like oscillating, and more like being the sand on the beach under the wave, or the tree in the breeze.

When you are back from your trip or have time, please let me know what I am missing or confused about, and what makes sense here. Enjoy France and thanks for everything! Jan

Dear Jan,

It is a large morning to be thoughtful of! (Carl Sandburg)

You have clarified your confusion of the other night very well, which in a way exemplifies what is going on here. You are looking closely at the horns of the dilemma, and it makes you wonder. That's meditation at its best. Wonder grounded in real life breeds openness.

I should hasten to assure you that pretty much the whole of Atmo is aimed to helping us reconcile the factors you speak of, so I don't feel I need to write a tome about it. We'll be thinking about the subject a lot in the time ahead.

The trick is, *vidya* and *avidya*, spirit and body, are not really two separate entities: we are simply viewing one thing from two different angles. It's not really a place, either—that's just a word we promiscuously throw around—so it isn't exactly that we have to locate it and go there. We are already in the midst of it.

In fact, in rereading your note several times, I can see that you began by analyzing the problem, made it real in terms of your life (*realized* it), and then came to a luscious sense of beauty in resolution. So you have worked through it all on your own. The “answer” that is not really an answer is to be like a tree in the breeze or beach sand gently caressed by lapping waves. Paradoxically we get there by first splitting our understanding in two and then bringing it back together, making it greater than the sum of the parts: yoga dialectics in action.

It is perfectly natural for the mind to oscillate, rove, bump up against other minds, and so on. Yoga is not about making all this stop happening, it's more like enjoying the ride. The more we know, the less excess baggage we'll add and the more available we'll be to resolve any confusion, both inner and outer. The non-place of neutrality is where we have withdrawn from tipping the scales one way or another. Until we are *established* in neutrality—a rare and unusual state—we will react more or less abnormally, but then we can nudge ourself back into the most neutral place we've come to know. That's the essence of the work we do.

If we are getting down on ourself for reacting badly (a typical throb of the ego), it reflects previous training that has instigated self-censorship. Why shouldn't we laugh about our follies instead? Or relax about them? The tensions we feel are the areas to examine next. Tensions can be released and cured, if we put our mind to it. They are clever enough to subvert our efforts first, so they may stay on board forever if we don't know how to deal with them. If

we view them as opportunities to become released, they are the teachings of the Guru being handed to us.

In summary, and I know this is all too brief, we are riding a natural oscillation and getting upset about it, but we could convert to an attitude of enthusiastic engagement. You are a wise woman who brings insight and compassion to your encounters. That is a much better self-image than the bad girl who deserves a spanking, or whatever other samskaras are lurking in the background. Many of us are sensitive souls who are afraid something bad is about to happen to us. Yet something very good is happening all the time: we are alive, having rare and unrepeatable experiences. We are invited every day to play our best game. So pick up your tennis racket and wade right in! You can hit the ball back to me when you feel like it.

* * *

Jean wrote an important caveat:

I'm "caught up" on everything, Scott, you'll be happy to know. Have much enjoyed meeting Japanese fireflies, Ecclesiastes the Preacher, Rumi poem, **both/and** (instead of *either/or*), and numerous other precious pearls in your notes. But in the very most recent ones, I couldn't help hoping that prisoners at Guantanamo might have mastered the four great dictums just to survive: *It's okay, What of that? Never mind, and I don't care*. A deep injustice is being perpetrated, and it's hard to be nonchalant, easy to go insane.

My all too brief reply:

There are billions of victims of injustice suffering mightily on this planet, and we can never ask them to act like Zen masters and just transcend. We can try it ourselves, but placed in a similar situation to the Guantanamo detainees, for instance, we would likely go

insane or otherwise give up. Hell on earth. It reminds me how the thwarted psyche is so much like a nuclear weapon, and when it detonates.... The collective psyche is like a whole nuclear arsenal. So we keep advocating for the opposite of thwarting, in hopes that someday the madness will stop. Recall Nitya's words from the previous verse:

Everything in the ordinary world is relative. It can change or be changed. If you want happiness in the ordinary world, you should harmonize your life to its norms. If some of the norms are spurious and made by people only for the purpose of exploitation, you should question and correct them. Then the ordinary world will be improved.

* * *

Stan again kept his thoughts to himself:

Still chipping away on a compact summary of the, again, overwhelming flood of responses that N's treatment of verse 68 has generated for me, in written form and otherwise.

* * *

Jake's commentary wraps it up until mid-August:

Several years ago I was having problems dealing with a younger relative who had decided to become pregnant on her own without any visible means of support or employment. The issues this decision raised for me centered on individual responsibility, dependence, and my obligations to "support" the position she had chosen. I took the issue to my therapist. He suggested I assume a neutral posture and let go of my egoic demands about responsibility and authority. I had neither in this case, a condition I suspect many face as they deal with adult children. He advised

that I answer any comments about the situation I might encounter with “oh.”

In his commentary on this verse, Nitya uses the phrase “is that so?” in the same vein and offers an anecdote in his conclusion that illustrates this kind of “oh” therapy about as clearly as I’ve seen done. He borrows the story of the grain dealer’s daughter from Paul Reps and his *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. The tale concerns a single young girl who becomes pregnant and is afraid to tell her father with whom she lives. Necessity soon intercedes, and she is then faced with his demand for the identity of the father. She lies in order to protect a local fisherman and tells her father that the young Zen master living next door was the culprit. The irate father confronts the young man, demanding he assume responsibility for his deed. The Zen master answers with “Is that so?” Throughout the girl’s pregnancy, he works to provide the girl with food and shelter, caring for her as if he were the father of her unborn child. When she delivers, she is overcome with guilt and confesses to her father, who in turn is struck by his own. Apologizing to the young master, the father comes clean and so does the Zen master:

“Sir, you are not the person who fathered that child.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah, I’m taking my daughter back home.”

“Fine.” (p. 470)

Earlier in his commentary, Nitya writes, “to have this fully balanced state is to have true wisdom” (p. 469). And it is in the pages leading up to that conclusion that Nitya articulates how that insight—the last idea presented in the Guru’s verse—applies to each of us as we oscillate between the immanent and the transcendent, between the rough and tumble of our sensual lives and the peace and knowledge of our blending into the Absolute.

As Nitya and the Guru have reinforced throughout *That Alone*, our common experience is essentially schizophrenic. In this commentary, Nitya moves even deeper into that condition “natural to all people” (p. 465). As we shift our attention from the physical world to the transcendent and back again in our see-saw lives, we

follow our I-consciousness as it assumes the two dimensions. During our waking lives, it attaches to our mind, body, and ego, and our interests are focused on doing in the world of necessity. On the other hand are our I-consciousness and its connection with the Absolute. Visited during deep sleep and on occasion during our awake state, this perspective speaks to our innate realization that our world of things and senses are all, in the final analysis, meaningless and transitory. The homely truism, “you can’t take it with you” captures that awareness as well as any explanation I know of.

Nitya then spends several pages of commentary diving into the consequences of our disqualifying the latter I-consciousness and in prizing the former. Along the way, he clarifies for us the dead-end of materialism and the circular misery this flatland philosophy generates. Isolated in the I-ego, atheist apologists do, however, make a valid point as a starting place by posing the following question: “where is the individual without the body? (p. 465). Indeed, remarks, Nitya, without the body we cannot be distinguished from anyone else. Our individuality is a function of our incarnation, so to speak.

The next logical issue has to do with the source through which the body is animated. Evolutionary atheists claim the animation is the result of a natural chemical process out of which mind evolves: “it is not that the body is animated by the mind, but the body’s animation is called mind” (p. 466). This arrangement, unfortunately (for materialists) still begs the question of motivation. The body/mind has no purpose if the *I* is not present, a condition that becomes obvious in cases of severe stroke or coma. In these cases, the body continues on in spite of its purposelessness. (This situation, broadly speaking, constitutes a major ethical AMA conundrum today. In point of fact, “pulling the plug” is now the subject of even casual American conversation.)

At this point, writes Nitya, our scientific community remains silent. In terms of the often used computer analogy as a

description of the mind (and humans generally), the place of the computer programmer is left vacant and unexplored because it is beyond the physical and our mind's capacity to quantify. As Nitya writes, something close to that source of truth, light, intelligence, and understanding has come. We call it the intellect" (p. 467).

This motivating intelligence, continues Nitya, functions in both of our dimensions. The mind and ego, he points out, "in a sense . . . hires the ego." And as the ego goes on endlessly desiring whatever comes along on the manifest plane, the intellect is there to help as the samskaras and vasanas emerge in half light to be played out again and again blinding us to the content of the forms we encounter and becoming infatuated with their color or shape. But we don't stay satisfied with the world. Even the dullest of wits encounter doubt as to the meaning of the samsaric life, and it is here that the intellect again assists the ego-mind in turning its focus to the transcendent, however fleeting. Nitya concludes, "your attitude swings like the proverbial pendulum" (p. 468).

These two conditions, writes Nitya, are termed in the *Upanishads* as *Vidya*, knowledge of the Absolute, and *Avidya*, knowledge of ignorance. In Western religious orthodoxy, embracing *Vidya* and avoiding *Avidya* (a condition stated in very different terms) is generally accepted as desirable as far as one's spiritual progress goes. It is this error, writes Nitya, that the Guru here observes in his "corrected form of Vedanta" (p. 468). Both kinds of knowledge operate in the two dimensions we inhabit, and knowing that fact affords us the opportunity to balance our lives in the world and the transcendent. To live otherwise is to cling to our fear of death and our fear of our egos being assaulted. The transitory world of *Avidya* is real and requires our participation. By the same token, its ending can come as no surprise and is certainly not tragic. It is every bit as much important as the Absolute, which is always with us: "when you know the secret of *Avidya*, you cross over death. When you know the secret of *Vidya*, you enjoy immortality" (p. 471)'

If death is a tragedy, birth is a disaster.

