

10/7/14
Verse 77

The one beyond is sky, the all-pervasive energy is wind,
knowledge is fire, senses are water, objects of interest
are earth: thus, as five principles,
this is ever blazing; the secret of this is one.

Free translation:

The Self and the world are not two. The transcendental is the sky.
The horizontal blast of energy is the wind. Knowledge is fire. The
senses are water. Objects of interest are earth. That which shines
forth as the quintessence of these five principles is in truth only
One.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

The transcendental ultimate is the sky, that power
Expansive is the wind, consciousness fire, and the sense-organs
Water, the object of perception the earth; thus as principles five,
What keeps ever burning, has its secret in One alone.

Nitya quite correctly treats this verse as the basis of a grand
meditation rather than a disquisition. Its value lies in converting
the text into an inner exploration. Just reading it doesn't add
anything new to speak of.

Jan was somewhat confused about the role of meditation.
She's been thinking that it meant stopping all thought processes to
soak into and reflect reality without distortion. In the Gurukula
there is a clear distinction between contemplation and meditation,
terms that are used promiscuously in many places. For us, what Jan
is thinking of is called contemplation. Meditation is an active
process of self-examination intended to lead to a neutral state of
contemplation. The ancients devised some good practical

meditations, for instance chanting mantras or going into the sequence of chakras. The Gurukula uses the deconstructive analysis of Vedanta to peel off layers of bondage. Pretty much everything we've covered in the study so far can serve as an active meditation, and the quiet at the end of our classes—lead up to masterfully by Nitya—is ideally a contemplative moment that allows the learning to soak in.

Meditation is then a preliminary step toward contemplation. Jan is right that first off we have to still the surface mind, running on as it does with all the trivia it has been invested with throughout our whole life, and obscuring the more worthwhile ideas in us like a blanket. But just trying valiantly to quell the chatter is a hard struggle: the effort to stop quickly becomes a new “spiritual” form of narration. It is easier in some respects to have a coherent train of thought to lead us away from our habits. Otherwise we're just substituting one form of tediousness with another.

Since it is not at all easy to sit quietly and have grand visions come to us, we are extremely fortunate to have a master to flesh out one general possibility for us. Nitya elsewhere likens such visions to a shy deer that only approaches cautiously if we sit very still, with all our offenses and defenses down. We can take Nitya's erudite examples and make them our own; in fact, we are bound to just by listening to them. Everything we hear is colored by who we are, and we are all different. In any case listening is an active process leading to a state of quiescence, where the reverberations of the ideas sink down into the depths of our being. Neurologically we are establishing a connection between our depths and our surface mind that will serve us well in any and all adventures.

We call the surface and depth by many names, including the immanent and transcendent, the particular and the universal, the many and the One, and so on. Our problems are aggravated, if not caused, by the clashes between these poles when they are out of synch. One of the primary techniques used in *That Alone* is to integrate these two central aspects of our self. In this verse Nitya

explains how the five great elements of existence fit together in our structural setup:

So in these five principles we have the sense object, the sense interest, the experiencing of that interest, the knowledge of experiencing the interest, the energy by which all these can be spread out within the limits of the beyond, and the ground. This gives a total picture, with nothing left out of the scheme. Nothing is either rejected or given an exaggerated prominence. Life and all its experiences are accepted, and are put together in such a beautiful way that they all fit in. Knowing this integrated scheme brings you great peace by unifying all the seemingly disjunct experiences. You are in the transactional world simultaneously with being in the highest meditative state, since you understand that one is not opposed to the other.

This idea prompted Jean to bring up a problem she is currently facing, trying to deal with an elderly, headstrong mother. This is a problem most of us will face sooner or later, in some form, or like Paul may already have. As senility becomes more pronounced, poor decisions are made. They can even be dangerous to the loved one or those around them. At what point and in what way do you intervene? And how can you succeed, if you are contradicting someone who has been independent for a whole lifetime? They naturally insist on doing things their own way, no matter what. Their stance is utterly frustrating and resistant of amelioration. People cling to their decision-making abilities like an addict craves an abused substance. If we try to help, they are likely to resent it and may even hate us for it. And yet, abandoning them to their skewed inclinations is intolerable.

As Deb said, there is no formula we can apply, we have to be alive to every nuance and do the best we can. The promises of religions that we can be absolved of all suffering is not to be taken as an invitation to turn our backs, but rather that there is a healthy attitude that can be brought to bear that will minimize the misery.

Accepting that the situation is impossible actually helps: the deeply ingrained urge to be able to fix everything convinces us that we are a failure if we can't resolve every problem, just as we did in algebra in school. Yet we are bound to fail, and that's okay, because we can refine our contribution based on what didn't work. The real failure is to give up trying.

Part of the lesson here is that this may happen to us one day. We may be out of control and not realize it, and treat the helpful efforts of our friends with hostility. It is going to demand a kind of surrender not much entertained in spiritual texts. Bill recalled Nitya saying once that our parents put up with us when we were two years old, stood the tantrums and the dirty diapers, and some day we could be called to repay them. They may be like aged two-year-olds, but we are in their debt, and we shouldn't walk away from it. We can only hope our own kids will have a similar attitude toward us.

The assistance philosophy can render is that we are more effective if we aren't upset by circumstances. Our compulsion to ignore the problem is also ineffective. In a way, the entire Bhagavad Gita is a meditation on how to deal with this perennial condition, by accessing a dialectical solution. Spiritual conundrums, however immediate, demand a yogic or dialectic treatment. Nitya epitomized the Gita's technique thusly:

On the battlefield Arjuna was asked to meditate on the Absolute and also to fight. Fighting on a battlefield is the most immediate activity possible in the transactional world, with swinging clubs, shooting arrows and ruthless killing all around. Meditating means to be in a state of beatitude, of transcendence. These two look absolutely contradictory, but there is no such paradox existing in the mind of one who has a unitive understanding.

So the trick is to meditate on—contemplate—the Absolute, and also fight. Fighting means dealing directly with life's demands. Some people imagine the Gita wants us to wage war, but that's just

an image of how it feels when we are in a true struggle. We all have periods in our lives when heartbreakingly tragic things happen to us, or to our loved ones. It's normal and inevitable. We are not bad people because they crop up. All such emotional gyrations are to be calmed so we can focus clearly on the dilemma's horns, and see how they can be united. If we can get into that focused state of mind, intuitive inklings appear, and we can grope our way forward. The impossible becomes possible if we apply ourselves without bringing in extraneous nonsense.

The key here as elsewhere is oneness. I know many people are confused by what that means. Misunderstanding was evidenced in the class, even. The Gita's Chapter XV describes three Absolutes: the utterly transcendent Absolute, which paradoxically contains an unmanifested and a manifest Absolute. These roughly correspond to the Holy Trinity of Christianity, with its transcendent Father containing an unmanifest Holy Spirit and a manifest Son. So oneness can mean several things. But Nitya is trying to indicate the transcendent One, despite its being indescribable. He does a really good job with it here, bringing the two lesser Absolutes together dialectically to reveal the beyond:

Thus we have transcendence and immanence coexisting in one single principle. The beyond has the force of transcendence, and the One spoken of here inheres within it all the immanent principles as well as this transcendence. It is transcendent and not transcendent, immanent and not immanent, all at once.

How do we conceive of the transcendent and the immanent as one and the same? Immanence suggests a content which is pervasive. It can be viewed as consciousness, or the content of consciousness, or consciousness itself can be the quality of what is immanent. There is a togetherness, a sense of closeness—very much of an identification with it. When you say transcendence, on the other hand, your consciousness is pushed to the farthest point to which it can go, beyond which it recoils upon itself. You have no grasp of it. "Is it that or not that?" is a question that cannot be answered. All you can

say is “I do not know.” But remember there is still a certitude in saying you don’t know.

You have to somehow conceive of a totality and then subtract from it all you are aware of, not only that which you are consciously aware of but also that which you have the possibility of somehow knowing. The known and the knowable are put together and subtracted from a conceived totality. What is left is an indescribable state, called the transcendent. Here the transcendent is considered to be just one aspect of the unnamable One.

Deb commented that the mark of being an adult is being able to hold contradictory ideas in your mind, knowing both are true. This is most crucial in the fact that we are fully involved in life and are also transcendent beings. In the middle of all the action we have this luminous brilliant point we bring to bear—and if we can stay with that point it informs everything we do.

The oneness we feel when we are at our best is actually a composite of many factors being knit together by an inner intelligence. Our bodies consist of thousands if not millions of distinct parts, only 11% of which are truly “us” by current reckoning, and our brains also have perhaps many hundreds of separate areas contributing to the creation of a unitive picture of the world. Somehow, by a great miracle, all these work coherently to make us who we feel we are. Out of many, one. We are even permitted to take all this innate integration for granted: the inner controller does not rely on our gratitude or even our complicity. It may be confident that we are “fat, dumb and happy” in remaining ignorant of its workings. Yet our consciousness does have a role to play in the decision-making process. The inner guidance system lines up possibilities for us, but ultimately we have to consciously throw the switch to engage in actions. It turns out our sense of self is an integral part of the whole functioning of our being.

Nitya and his predecessors are elegant examples of how to remain mentally steady in challenging conditions, but that is a rare ability garnered from long, dedicated application. It can be learned,

and we see that many of us are making great strides, thanks to the wisdom teachings we are sitting with. Jean reported receiving a rare and exceptional compliment from one of her boys, now an adult, who noticed her keeping calm over something that once would have thrown her into a tizzy. It's rewarding enough to simply gain steadiness, but to have our children appreciate it is spectacular!

I am always amazed at how easily I can be knocked out of balance. I think most of my friends consider me an even-tempered fellow who can keep his cool in trying environments, and this is true. I've had a lot of practice! But I am also sensitive to the turbulence in people around me, and so I find myself getting uptight in tense situations. Even if I can explain things clearly to myself, I still tense up, and it feels awful. I'm pretty sure this is normal for ordinarily sensitive human beings, so the idea is not to be untouched by the world's miseries, but to be able to regain our balance quickly. Staying in a perfectly neutral place is virtually impossible, but counterbalancing our tilts to come back to equanimity is fairly easily learned.

As the class agreed, stepping away from the conflict to gather ourselves together is essential. The more time we spend in balance, the easier it is to regain it when we are thrown off by the chaos of the battlefield. Once we do regain it, though, we have to wade back in, because we are truly needed. Like a cell in our own body, we are like cells in the body of the noosphere, the living web of the Earth's subtle body. Our cells are useless or worse when they cease functioning. Their contribution is critically important, as is our contribution to the totality around us.

Nitya is urging us to imbibe the philosophy and put it into practice, assuring us: "Narayana Guru is giving us a scheme with the help of certain analogies. When you piece all the analogies together you get a unitive picture, at least schematically. That unitive picture can then be used as a base for meditation, and it can be lived."

In his commentary, Nitya not only leads us through a profound meditation, he explains it to us. We might not have seen the point of his meandering through the elements right away, though we might have felt the energizing vividness of it deep in our core. Although no book was planned from these talks, and it wouldn't be born for over 25 years, his explanation was eminently suitable for the literary project that was to come. His description makes for a peaceful and meditative ending to the verse. I should point out that the "ascending and descending movement" he mentions is called by Nataraja Guru ascending and descending dialectics. Basically we can either build up or break down our mental fabric, depending on how dialectics is employed. It roughly parallels the *asti asti* (and this and this) and *neti neti* (not this not this) methods of meditation. Both are meant to reveal the inherent oneness at the core of existence:

The first thing to meditate on is the beyond, the farthest to which you can go. Then bring yourself to the ground. Now you have a whole field to experience. If you consider the whole field as the total reality of the one who experiences, without creating a duality between the experiencer and the experienced, you get the idea of the One. This can be apprehended by an ascending and descending movement of consciousness, which also spreads out in all directions. This automatically brings you to all the horizontal forces which operate to fill the field.

Now give it a nucleus as the knowledge that knows, both in general and in all the special applications. Give tools to that central consciousness by allowing it to animate the senses. 'The senses' here means action as well as perception. They need counterparts for the eyes to see, the hands to work, the legs to walk, the tongue to taste, the nose to smell and breathe, and the ears to hear. When you put all these counterparts together, nothing is left outside. It is one compact whole.

When you look at it in this way, you become humble. You are filled with reverence, with a sense of adoration for all this which is happening. Something that is more than a cosmic function is

operating within you, a tiny individual. The individual transforms into the totality, and the totality becomes epitomized in the individual. Both of these are happening side by side. This gives a sense of unity, the idea of the One.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum is particularly excellent this week:

We have a beginning and an end. The beginning is not an event in time. It is a source like that of a fountain, causing our existence, growth and change as a resourceful basis. It is our ground, our substance. In the same manner, the end is also not an event that marks our extinction. It is the goal, the great magnet of life which is ever inspiring us to rise, to reach forward and to aspire, and it spells infinite possibilities.

In the present verse, the Guru presents the ground as the One which is the ground as well as the field, the scope as well as the function, and also the past, the present and the future. He refers to the sky as the ultimate, the beyond, the final cause which has the substance of transcendence. Like the inseparable beginning and end of a circle, the first and the final causes cancel out each other in the silence of the disappearance of enigmas and paradoxes when the meditator and the meditation blend and become one with the void of the unknown.

Between the first emergence of experience to this world and the final exit from it there are a thousand and one chores to attend to, koans to solve, roles to play, tragedies and comedies to enact, conceptual worlds to create, and boundaries to erect and smash. That is the world of energy, call it what you like: electromagnetism, thermodynamics, hydraulics, soul force, psychodynamics, libido or love-energy. From the small wisp of air that we breathe to the hurricane that can blow away a whole city, there are so many possibilities for air, which actualizes as mind. If

the verticality of perennial creation ranges between the ground and the sky beyond, it is horizontally filled with this energy to make the flux manifest.

The stuff of experience is like the warmth that keeps things going in hibernation, the gentle glow that reveals the contours of the mountain and the skyline at dusk or dawn, like the sparks that fly when the hammer beats against the anvil, the steady radiation of light from a spotlight, the leaping flames of fire that are eager to consume anything that comes their way, the all-embracing resplendence of the midday sun, and the fire that cooks, tempers, transforms and has the secret power of alchemy. The various shades of our knowledge can be compared to all these similes of fire. Therefore, Narayana Guru equates fire with knowledge. Like earth and water, our sensual interests and objects of interest intermingle. When we appreciate the glory of morning hues in the eastern sky the objectivity of the light cannot be disputed. A Vedic rishi, Blake, Pasternak or Tagore will forget everything before such a sight, while for many people there is “no time to stand and stare” at such glorious sights in this busy world of “getting and spending.” Mere objectivity alone will not tickle the senses. There should be innate disposition that can seep into the object, as water penetrates sod, to impregnate the object with the soul's delight or anguish. For this reason the Guru compares the senses to the element water and the objects of interest to earth.

After carefully assigning every limb of our experience its rightful place in the total sphere of the world of perennial becoming, the Guru asks us to share with him his unitive vision of the whole flux as a five-fold attribute of the One that is beyond all attributes.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

THE same unitive scheme of correlation of aspects of reality from the contemplative point of view is considered again here from another perspective at a more central level of the personality. The two previous verses viewed the same factors of correlation from a more hypostatic level. Here there is a descending dialectics which finally puts the senses and sense-perception as close as possible, with the element called earth as the object.

When the elements are referred to in the context of Indian philosophical tradition we have to remember that it is a monadological version of it, vertically conceived, before horizontalization by the churning activity of nature takes place. Such horizontalization of the tendencies that turn externally and centripetally into particularized manifestations in distinct and solid objects, as in terra firma, attains to the term of such a process, and the contrast between the object and subject then becomes more fully marked. The earth has a direct bipolar subject-object relation clearly marked as between our subjective perception and its objective counterpart.

With this double aspect of the simple phenomenon of knowing the earth in the visible sense, we can think of a series of upward gradations which relate the subject- and object-factors, which are five in number, ranging from the earth to the sky. Consciousness, like fire, occupies a central place in the dialectical relation which links one pole of this series with the others, ranging downward from sky to the earth.

The process of horizontalization of the elements from their pure to their derived form, involves, according to Sankara and others, a complicated mathematical rearrangement, making of each of them five-fold ensembles, rather than pure abstract principles or entities. We have in their actualising process of pure elements a division and growth as in the typical biological egg that has been fertilised. Division and proliferation set in together, with growth both in

number and size. In Vedanta such a process of actualisation in space follows an organic order or method called panchikarana.

An authoritative account of panchikarana is given in Prof. O. Lacombe's *L'Absolu selon le Vedanta*, p. 325, which we cannot do better than translate and quote below:

'Each one of the grand elements is divided by the Creator in two parts, and one of these two halves again into four parts. Each one of these quarters is then mixed with half that has been left intact of each of the four other elements. It thus results that each element composes itself thereafter as follows: $\frac{1}{2}$ element pure plus $\frac{1}{8}$ of each of the four other elements. It is these composite elements which serve for the constitution of individual things. The dominant proportion of the primary element safeguards its authenticity. But the adjunction of the other elements explains the participation of things with all other things and explain certain anomalies of perception'.

The Guru does not enter into discussion of those fractions of elements in this process of actualisation into the primary elements, to give them the anomalous appearances that are not their own but borrowed from others.

The solid earth appears so, because, besides its original half of its own totality, it has mixed with it four $\frac{1}{8}$ parts of each of the other four primary elements.

If we take the case of the sky, we have to imagine that one part of earth forms an eighth part entering into its composition to make it have that degree of materiality, though only ethereal, which the sky implies, as it is not empty of all matter-content. It is easy for us to see the truth of the difference between the elements and difficult to undo the effects of the panchikarana to see behind the elements the

equal essence of reality that traverses all of them like a string through coloured pearls.

What is extraneous to each element is what makes it different as between each successive member of the series. Although, as suggested in this verse, there are five different flames which have differences between them, we have to understand them in terms of the pure incandescence that underlies all and each of them as a common factor. An ambivalent polarity with a neutral fire in the centre, ascending to the sky or descending to earth, is also to be fitted into this scheme of correlation.

The common principle is no other than the character of absolute existence. Whether the Guru accepts this theory of 'panchikarana' or not does not arise here, but in the light of his other writings where the theory is alluded to, it is justified to believe that he gave support to it at least in its broad outline.

The schema implied in verses 77, 76 and 75 justifies this view. What is more important than the 'panchikarana' theory that we have to notice in this verse is the correlation established between these elements and other cosmological and metaphysical aspects of the Absolute Reality treated as a whole. When in philosophy we distinguish the transcendental from the immanent, ontological or empirical aspect of reality or existence, we have to bear in mind that the difference is not fundamental and that one and the same contemplative value relates and strings all of them together in an ambivalent or polarized series. Just as the elements can present differences in appearance between them, due to the mixing up with extraneous elements of different levels of reality, the vertical difference as between the transcendental and the immanent could be reconciled with the central fire of consciousness in a certain way. The totality must yield the neutral Absolute that knows no difference, whether vertical or horizontal.

Part III

Jake's commentary:

To contemporary Americans, Verse 77 can appear both foreign and obsolete. The terms—fire, water, and so on—carry alchemical/medieval baggage for western readers steeped in a dismissal of anything not scientifically certified for our New Age. As Nitya sorts out the elements of this verse, however, the relevance of the Guru's words become self-evident and compelling. They offer anyone paying attention a practical method for living in our Absolute as we simultaneously participate in the immanent and transcendent.

In Nitya's commentary, he breaks down the Guru's message into three large pieces by beginning with the cosmological point of view, then moving to our ontological perspective, and finally bringing both of them together in practical/meditative exercise that allows us an elevated or awakened point of view in the here and now, a final destination both timeless and beyond culture or history.

Indian cosmology occupies the first third of Nitya's explanation. Employing the Sankhyan principles of parusha/prakriti, he introduces the creative dualities Vedantists "tentatively" accept within the totality of oneness encompassing all that can be. Out of the spirit, Purusha, comes Prakriti, the creative function from which all manifestation emerges. Nitya then goes on to note that "Prakriti or nature" consists of eight basic principles, the earth, water, fire, and so on the guru mentions in his verse. Prakriti, adds Nitya, exists in the form of the three gunas before assuming any shape. In other words, the moods of sattva, tamas, and rajas are all causes not effects. The five gross elements of prakriti—earth, fire, water, air, and ether—continuously function on the one principle validated by their very functioning and the fact of their eternal persistence. They are, and the cosmos is.

Nitya next goes into the subject of where we stand vis-à-vis this over-arching structure as we go about isolated in our individual bodies and our separate I-sense. From an ontological point of view, we face the obstacles of space and sense. Wherever we stand, the horizon limits our perspective. Beyond our ability to perceive is the infinite unknowable for our senses. This infinite, says Nitya, the Guru refers to as *ekam* or one and stands as that which includes both the immanent and transcendent. It is here that the Guru and Nitya locate us (in our isolated state) within the cosmic One we are all part of as one. We can become somewhat familiar with materiality through our senses, and scientific/technological advances speak to that connection rather loudly. The transcendent, on the other hand, taxes the sense/mind to the point of dumbness. We “don’t know.” But this admission, adds Nitya, implies a certitude of its own. By putting together all that we know or can know of the immanent with all that we don’t know of the transcendent, we are still left with an incomplete picture of the totality, the One, because both the manifest and the transcendent (Purusha and Prakriti) are dualities of the One.

With this setting established, Nitya writes, “we have marked a ground for us to sit and meditate upon, as well as the farthest limit” (p. 541). As he begins his exploration originating from this ground, he points out the dual nature of our body-bound point of view: the witnessing and the functional characters. He illustrates what he means by presenting the occasion of uncontrolled laughter. While we laugh, we are also aware of that laughter. Something there is observing and witnessing. It is this steady consciousness that leads us to the awareness of the manifest and transcendent. In turn, that witnessing element, the knowing, is knowledge that “manifests in many ways, from unconscious reflex actions to the most profound thoughts and the highest forms of meditative awareness. Its nature cannot be fixed” (p. 542).

This complete cosmology/ontology includes everything and places us squarely in both the world of necessity and the transcendent at the same time. It is in his last few paragraphs that

Nitya moves a step further and offers us some practical advice on how to begin the process of realizing that always-true position. In meditation, he counsels, the first element to focus on is “the beyond, the farthest to which you can go. Then bring yourself to the ground. Now you have a whole field of experience” (p 547). Making no distinction between the two, you will note that the principle of oneness automatically emerges. The next step is to privilege your knowledge as it animates and energizes your senses and mind, to experience the immanent while maintaining your original focus on that which is beyond. In this complete state, nothing is left out or isolated by boundary: “the individual transforms into the totality, and the totality becomes epitomized in the individual” (p.547). The thoughts constantly streaming through the mind are carried by that which is—the not known. And all of everything takes place in a cosmos working through each one of us. “Hence, it is called the grand magic” (verse 27, p. 194).