

10/21/14

Verses 79 & 80

At the time of birth there is no existence; the one who is born is not in another moment; how can such a state be?
Death is also like this, and there is no birth;
everything is of the power of pure consciousness.

Like rest and motion, how can contraries such as creation, existence and dissolution coexist in one place?
There is no validity for these three anywhere; when this is considered,
earth and such are mere words.

Free translation:

On the eve of birth there is no existence. The emergence from the womb is not a factual reality in a posterior moment. How can it be?
Death is also like this. Everything seems to be only by the glorious presence of consciousness.

Rest and motion cannot happen in the same place at the same time. Similarly, creation, existence and dissolution cannot take place concurrently. When critically examined, these concepts have no substantial validity. They are only words.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

At birth-time there is no being, and who is born
Is not there at another moment; how ever does this have existence?
Death too is even likewise, and thus birth too is nought;
All is a flux and a becoming within the mind-stuff pure!

Contraries, like being and becoming, how could they
As creation, endurance, dissolution in one place co-exist?

For these three to pass into, there is nothing either;
Thus viewed, earth and other things are mere word alone.

Nitya has given us yet another commentary that “says it all.” How many ways can it be done? Of course, the preparations we have made along the way add a lot to what we get out of each talk, and yet I can’t help feeling that there is much essential here that must not be left out, no matter how prepared we are. Words and their purport are dialectically lodged on the exact fulcrum they deserve, and this is the subtlest of secrets.

Verse 78 shocks us because it reduces everything we hold dear to constructs of name and form. Verse 79 consoles us with the assertion that consciousness in the absolute sense is the basis for “all that is made.” Unalloyed consciousness, then, is the reality we crave when the apparent solidity of objects disintegrates. Verse 80 reminds us not to forget that this ground of consciousness takes many forms we name variously, and these verbalizations have only a borrowed reality. Consciousness is real; all else is its evolute. Even our conception of consciousness is merely fictional. Nitya epitomizes the evolutionary process in this way:

We are taking these two verses together because they deal with one picture of the world. It begins with the wonder of *caitanya*, which projects from the vertical into the horizontal, becomes fully horizontalized and truncated, and finally reaches its maximum extension, beyond which it cannot go. Then it perishes and returns to the vertical. This recycling is going on all the time.

Each unit of horizontal expression, then, is one more wave of an endless series pulsing through the ocean of consciousness. They are simultaneously glorious and distressingly evanescent.

So is there any legitimate place for our reasoned participation in our own life? Yes, sure. We are inheritors of creative tidal forces sweeping across the ocean of our being, but we have lost touch

with them. The jetties and shoals of existing forms have broken our impetus into chaotic bits lacking direction. All our energy is now focused on obtaining and tending to horizontal necessities. We need to reclaim our authentic nature so we can allow our internal dharma-wave to regroup and uplift our expression. Nitya puts this succinctly, reminding us that—ideally at least—horizontal needs are just the supporting structures for our vertical expression, which is a cumulative accomplishment over time:

When you take the vertical view, the emphasis is not on necessity but on the achievement of values which are considered to be desirable, values which lead to the highest good, the highest beauty, the highest truth. Compared to that, whatever you do on a daily basis is only incidental to the main pursuit of life, which is realization, either as it is philosophically conceived or just generally felt within as a sense of the purposiveness of life.

The ubiquitous depression and despair of modern life comes from the stymieing of any sense of purpose we may intuitively feel. We have been carefully steered away from our dharma by our teachers, and we have learned well how to suppress it. We are given sanitized substitutes for internal inspiration, and struggle vainly to content ourselves with them. Philosophy and religion are all too often made into tools to merely reconcile us to our state of socialized bondage. As usual, Nitya puts this elegantly:

You get sidetracked in your search either in the name of philosophy or by the actuality of the immediate pragmatic possibilities. You err on both sides, either looking at abstractions of things theoretically or rejecting the philosophic approach to seek immediate validation through an interaction with the world of concrete actuality. By examining relative points in isolation, you ignore both the concomitant factors that caused those situations to emerge as well as how they

interrelate with the total nature of things. Because of this, when you try to correct one thing, three other problems crop up.

Instead of going with the inner flow, we are always trying to direct it in acceptable ways, which of course is deadly to it. The only “acceptable flow” is one that doesn’t flow. It’s static, stagnant. Stationary items are facts we can begin to describe. They are for all the world like beautiful butterflies we kill and pin in a display case. No wonder so many of us are creatively blocked!

The Gurus urge us to cut to the chase:

You have only to recognize that this is a wonder, this is a *cit prabhavam*. You are unnecessarily kicking up the dust of skepticism, going from one possibility to the next and forgetting the issue at hand. The issue at hand is how to be happy, how to be at one with the totality of the situation with which you are presented. You keep forgetting that and getting sidetracked into the unnecessary fields of logic and philosophy.

Nitya was very fond of Bishop Berkeley’s most famous quote about philosophers: “we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see.” I’ll append its relevant context in Part III. Nitya expands on the idea here as he valiantly strives to wake us up: “You tamper with your life, not knowing the full secret, and make a mess of it. You can make a mess on the side of the necessary aspects of life, or on the side of philosophic abstractions by clouding your intellect with more and more conceptualizations.”

Often this is as far as we take the concept of the dust of skepticism, but it is elaborated brilliantly in Nitya’s commentary:

Our consciousness is so structured that it can present through the senses a certain quantitative picture of dimensions, such as measurement, color, form and gross attributes. Our logic can reduce those quantitative aspects into qualities and more subtle

attributes, which then get another kind of structuring in terms of subject/predicate.

So ultimately no one can say what is right. We can only say the senses that perceive are also using consciousness. The mind that reasons is also using consciousness. The linear way of thinking is also consciousness. The dialectical way of thinking is also consciousness. In spite of the many similarities and contradictions we see, we know they are all within the field of consciousness. You only struggle because you want to look at parts taken away from the whole. If you see each as an integrated part of the whole you won't have this problem.

The two verses together reduce reality to a single binary principle, first as an assertion of the wonder of consciousness and then by underlining the emptiness of words. Because of the unique way they are presented I recall both as having a searing impact on me in the original class, and we dissected them in depth last night.

Sat-cit-ananda is going to play a significant role in the upcoming classes. As noted before, it is a unity with three aspects, somewhat like the Christian Trinity. Nitya uses it to memorably describe the essence of our awareness:

Narayana Guru says about this *cit prabhavam ellam* [everything is of the power of pure consciousness].

Understanding this concept is very important. The Absolute is defined as *sat-cit-ananda*, existence-awareness-value. You can think of it as the existence of a value in terms of pure awareness, or you can say it is the awareness of the existence of the value, or you can say it is the value of an awareness which exists. It's all up to you; you have your own choice in structuring the meaning. But you cannot take away any one of the three elements. A value that doesn't exist cannot be a value. A value which you do not know is not a value. A knowledge which has no value—you don't want to know it.

Paul really homed in on the point that awareness is the crucial link between existence and value or meaning. Awareness is precisely what gives meaning to existence. One fault of the scientific method is that it has always tried to divorce awareness and meaning from existence, aiming to treat the latter in isolation. This has epitomized how one tentative solution inevitably brings at least three consequent problems along with it.

Paul is very appreciative that scientific reasoning has made great strides in lifting humanity out of a morass of religious barbarism and brutality, and to a small but significant extent that's true. But we still have just as much or more brutality around today. It's just expressed differently. We feel relief largely because we are fortunate enough to live in islands of sanity. I prefer to think that it isn't science or any other ism that pries back the darkness, but the intrepidity of brave souls who have confronted the paradoxes of existence with fresh minds. Many of them have been religious enthusiasts. Reasoning has its value, but it can also be as binding as anything else. A glance at the world stage should easily confirm this. As a species we are being led off a giant cliff of mindless exploitation, coaxed along by reasonable arguments.

Mysteriously we have surrendered our grounded awareness to abstract ideas about existence. This has allowed mere words to eclipse common sense. Clever prevaricators hold center stage in politics and entertainment, including in popular spiritual practices.

The main class focus was on the role of words. Narayana Guru insists that everything we think we experience is nothing more than words, the pungency of words. Where is true experience in all this verbiage? We cannot say. Because of our bondage to words based on abstract and half-baked thinking, we have to reduce their grip on us before we can seek truth. The main thrust of our study is to break down the fictional fool's paradise we live in at the behest of verbal abstractions and see what's left.

Only if we can recover the shining core of consciousness that sustains us will our words be meaningful. Nitya was a spectacular example of someone whose words uplifted, consoled, and educated

in a transformative way. You felt his authenticity because he was in tune with his core. Nitya knew that religious imagery was some of the most toxic in perpetuating falsehoods, so he attacked the core assumption of the country he found himself in:

“Jesus Christ”—is that not just two words? Have you ever seen him? No, you’ve just heard those words. The word ‘Christ’ was told to you, and now you love it and accept it. You have seen light and life in it, consolation in it. It’s only a word, but saying that doesn’t take away any of its psychodynamics. All that power still remains. If you whisper in someone’s ear that you love them, it gives them a feeling of elation. If you whisper you hate them it can make them miserable. Some people smile outwardly, but inside they are repeating the negative mantra “I hate you,” over and over. Words can have tremendous power, so you should use them carefully.

You may not feel that way about Jesus Christ, but the principle is the same with whatever you tacitly admire. Examine how your affections are directed to word concepts instead of something more substantial. For Gurukula types, see how the living reality of our gurus has been transformed into endearing ideas about them, which we then manipulate for our convenience. There is no guru here, but we pretend there is. Our gurus are touchstones we use to keep our fears and doubts at bay, or, worse, to impress others. If they were present they would be rattling our cages. *That Alone* is a record of a previous cage-rattling session. If we don’t reanimate the rattle in our psyche, our philosophy will remain just as dead as the rest.

This was brought home to me as I sat in my alert but blissed out state in that first class, when Nitya concluded:

It is not the earth specifically which is under reference here, but the meaning we assign to words like earth. We do not know earth. We do not know anything.

Can we dare to admit we don't know anything? We have spent a lifetime protesting we know a lot. Much more than we do, generally speaking. When examined, it melts away. It's an uncomfortably naked feeling, knowing that everything you imagine you know is a mere supposition.

Nitya once said to a carload of us, as we drove past yet another statue of Narayana Guru sitting in a cage next to a roadway intersection, that Indians love to put their gurus on pedestals to worship so they don't have to pay attention to their words. Of course, every human does this in one way or another. Usually we try not to make it quite so obvious.

We are by no means meant to take this instruction as denigrating words, only as assigning them their proper value. Our universe is made of words, but there is another universe nearby we can access by piercing through their veil to reveal their source. It may be just like the physics hypothesis related last week, that our universe is a three-dimensional mirage projected from a higher-dimensional universe. In any case, the naïve interpretation is to try to shut out words as leading us astray. The intelligent interpretation is to use enlightened words to recover our essence from the desert of incomprehension we have wandered into.

Nitya relates from a slightly different perspective the wonderful story of breaking away from Nataraja Guru early in their relationship, and being told that words were just vibrations of air so they shouldn't make him unhappy. It's a perfect example of words being used to cure the malaise of words.

Meditating on such stories can show us how deeply we are intertwined with words. Can they be the substance of the creeping vine of Verse 9, reaching out to ensnare the unwary and lead them into a hellish state? The class pondered to what extent thinking is inextricably linked with the words in which it is expressed. A lot of studies have looked at the subject, with mostly tautological results, as far as I can tell. No surprise there. The consensus is that thinking is distinct and is a precursor to word formation. If so,

there is a level below verbal thought patterns that could be accessible to anyone who takes the trouble to enter into it. My feeling is that what we ordinarily think of as our thoughts is basically the verbal and/or sensory level, and what are often called the spiritual layers of consciousness are those that prefigure them. We can at least imagine womb-time, with few if any sensory stimuli and no distinct words yet, only the roaring and beating of the mother's internal organs and occasional vague noises from without once our ears have formed.

It may seem like a waste of time to contemplate such depths, but lit up humans speak glowingly of them, and so some of us are drawn to investigate.

Our ineffable group contemplation led us to end with a profound meditation on Nitya's closing words, which it seemed sacrilegious to terminate:

There is a mantra contained in this verse, *guru matram akum*, meaning it's only an articulated word. The whole edifice of life is built with the bricks of words. Universities are nothing more than places to cater these bricks and structures of words to you. You live in a house of words gathered from your teachers, your priest, your books, your friends, along with those of your own fabrication. If you really know this you are already saved.

In these two verses the Guru gives us two great mantras: *cit prabhavam ellam* and *guru matram akum*, everything is the wonder of consciousness and everything is only a vibration of a word. These should be enough to bring you total peace.

Part II

There is some terrific new material in *Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum*:

Verse 79

What is time? We see the sun appearing in the east, crossing the sky over our heads, and disappearing in the west. The locations of the sun on the eastern horizon and on the western horizon are imaginary. As many mathematical points can be marked on the surface of the earth, there can be as many points of location for a sunrise or a sunset. Nobody has ever bothered to watch the entire course of this movement. Occasionally people look up at the sky and notice a change in the position of the sun. We have, however, only an imaginary picture of this movement, which is not even one day long, but can be called to mind in a flash. Thus, an instantaneously presented image is our conceptual token of time. In this token, which we treat as real time, the seeming linear movement of the sun is deciphered and reconceived as a circular rotation of the earth on its imaginary axis without causing the slightest inconvenience to our mind for converting a perceptual imagery into a conceptual computerizing in order to arrive at a working postulate of time. Of course we do not think all these thoughts!

St. Augustine asks this question in *The Confessions*:
I heard once from a learned man that the motions of the sun, moon and stars constituted time, and I assented not. For why should not the motions of all bodies rather be times? Or, if the lights of heaven should cease, and a potter's wheel run round, should there be no time by which we might measure those whirlings, and say, that either it moved with equal pauses.... Or, while we were saying this, should we not also be speaking in time?*

Why not? Is a potter's wheel too inefficient to mould time? If time is the motion of things, what is the scale by which motion is measured? If we say that time is measured by motion and motion is measured by time, it is nothing short of begging the question. If a day is an abstraction of the picture of the sun's movement across the sky, what is night? How is it that we have juxtaposed day with night when our visual images of the two are contrary, and why do we bracket day and night into "one day"? If seeing the sun at

different locations in the sky is essential to conceive the day, why is that requirement waived in order to conceive night?

Where should a man stand to notice the very first ray of the rising sun? If one man stands on the North Pole, one on the equator and another on the South Pole and all three stand on the same meridian, do they all see the sunrise simultaneously? If there is no simultaneity, which would be the ideal location on which to mark a standardized sunrise? It is well known that the earth's surface is irregular, with mountains, valleys and oceans; if we are going to neglect these facts and just have a mathematical approximation of time, why should we want to give it a seeming objectivity?

What should we consider now: time, motion, an event, or a state of existence? If we agree to consider motion, then the motion of what? Is it the motion in space of the whole solar system along with the motions of other constellations and systems; or is it the motion of the earth around the sun, or the rotation of the earth on its imaginary axis; or is it the terrestrial or aerial movement of bodies from one location of space on earth to another; or is it the motion of the molecules with a static body, such as a rock in which the patterns of bumps, repulsions and attractions are so well-harmonized that for all practical purposes the stuff of the rock will remain uniform; or is it the motion of the electrons in their precisely ordained orbits around the nucleus; or is it the linear rush of a subatomic particle to bump on a similar subatomic particle so as to transform itself into a different category; or is it the wave of quantum mechanics? In other words, do we have any count of the systems we include, one within another ad infinitum, to conceive our notion of motion? The sensory perception of motion in the above-mentioned models is negligible. First of all, we conceive motion spatially and then, magically with a single stroke of imagination, we convert that into a non-spatial concept of relative duration. In this context, what is the physical or objective content of the word "time"?

Narayana Guru begins this verse with a reference to the time of birth. In this case birth can be seen as an event, an occurrence of

something which was absent, or as the motion of a thing from an invisible area to a visible one, or it can be considered as a duration imagined by the mind in which a mathematical point is mentally marked to understand the continuity of motion in terms of discontinuous marks. All these three concepts are contrary to the notion of a static state of existence. What does exist for any duration of time if the galaxies, the solar system, the earth, bodies, molecules, and subatomic particles do not stay at any point of time and there is no discontinuity of motion at all?

In such a world of flux, we are trying to set up permanent, secure riches [niches?—ed.] for ourselves at physical, biological, psychological and social levels. The result is constant upheavals. Origin, existence and death are equally imaginary. To avoid tragic frustrations and to have a well-balanced appreciation of the total perspective, the Guru, in this verse, gives us a secret key, which is to look at the whole picture as an adorable wonder, *cit prabhàvam ellàm*. As the Bhagavad Gita (II, 29) says:

A certain person sees This as a wonder, Likewise another speaks about this as a wonder. Another hears of It even as a wonder, but even hearing no one understands This at all.

* The Confessions of St. Augustine, Cardinal Edition, 1952, p. 230.

Verse 80

From the very first day of our recollection, we are aware of the constant sky which has always existed over our heads. Our good earth has not changed; we have the same sun, the same mountains and the same oceans. Each night the same constellations of stars reappear.

How can we say it is the same sky? When the earth is rotating on its axis and flying at great speed around the sun, how can we say that from our position on this space ship we are looking

at the same sky? The sun and the other stars are supposed to be burning gases and leaping flames radiating energy. Is it the same light that falls into our eyes in two successive moments? Is there such a thing as a beam of light? Is it not just a collective expression referring to the bombardment of millions of photons? Has a photon any mass? No. Then how does it become a substance? According to physicists, it is just a plain electromagnetic wave, $h\nu$, of which h stands for Planck's constant and ν for frequency. When such photons kick up the energy of 125,000,000 receptors, the impact is converged to 100,000 fibres of the *fovea centralis*, processed in an area of 1.5 square millimeters, and is then distributed into the relatively large area of the synapses of the visual brain. The resultant tumult, in which hundreds of thousands of molecules jump and dance around, is the awareness of seeing a ray of light. So when do we see the sun or the stars, or anything for that matter?

The Isavasya Upanishad says:

Unmoving, the One is swifter than the mind.
The sense-powers reached not It, speeding on before,
Past others running, This goes standing.
In It Matarisvan places action.

Robert Oppenheimer describes the probability pattern of the particle in the following words:

If we ask for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say 'No'; if we ask whether the electron's position changes with time, we must say 'No'; if we ask whether the electron is at rest, we must say 'No'; if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say 'No'.*

If this which describes the universe as a whole and a single particle in isolation is the truth, it can only be described as the indescribable. Hence Narayana Guru says, "earth and such are mere words." The term used here for earth is *kshiti*. Earth is also

called *dhara*. Dhara means “that which gives everything its status to exist”; Kshiti means “that which destroys everything.” Thus, this very earth is a meeting ground of creation and destruction. In the fictitious world of facts or the factual world of fiction, all shades of meaning burst into reality only as a conceptual awareness. If this is remembered, much of the mind’s unnecessary fuss and fume can be avoided.

* J. Robert Oppenheimer, *Science and the Common Understanding*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), pp. 42-43.

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Nataraja Guru’s commentary:

VERSE 79

At birth-time there is no being, and who is born
Is not there at another moment; how ever does this have existence?
Death too is even likewise, and thus birth too is nought;
All is a flux and a becoming within the mind-stuff pure!

HERE we have a verse highly reminiscent of the Eleatic philosophy of Parmenides and Zeno, which was later restated by Plato in the words of Socrates. It was given to Henri Bergson in recent years to revert after centuries to this way of thinking which boldly attempts to face and solve the innate paradox of life and existence. The expression ‘*chit-prabhava*’, which we have rendered as the ‘flux and becoming within the mind-stuff pure’, finds full corroboration in Bergson’s idea of change and becoming in pure terms of a ‘motor scheme’ of events in the flux of consciousness.

Birth is an event, but as it is a process coming under the idea of becoming it cannot be understood in the static terms of a still or a cross-section. If we want to study the growing point of plants we

have to take several cross-sections and put them together, and imagine the growth as a pure movement in becoming, linking all the individual events considered as stills. It is the intuition of man that is alone capable of seeing the continuity implied in the process.

Non-mechanistic or creative thought has this cinematographic function through its ability to piece together single events that are stills or cross-sections into a continuous whole. Bergson excels in showing this through almost all his writings.

The entity or organism that is subject to birth is in the process of becoming, and it would be wrong to fix one moment in the process which would statically fix the process and view it as a single event called birth. It is in this sense that it is stated here that there is no being at birth-time nor at another moment. One cannot enter the same river twice, as Heraclitus said. Here Narayana Guru reveals a fully modern scientific attitude.

If we should take a complementary or converse position and think of what is born as a spiritual soul or entity, there is another paradox that presents itself. Seen from its own inside, the moment of birth exists in what is called the eternal present or moment. An extraneous moment in which life that is born could have its being, is unthinkable. The lengthened picture of the duration of time, according to the ticking of a clock, is a product of defective, conditioned, mechanistic thinking. There is what is called pure time, which does not depend on the ticking of the clock or the rotation of the earth, which latter are mere physical events, extraneous to the essence of time as such. Spiritually speaking, one has to find living possible in unconditioned pure or eternal time, which cannot find a moment external to itself. Physically speaking, the process of birth and becoming cannot be fitted into a static moment.

Existence, which is referred to in Vedanta as the second item of the series *srishti* (creation), *sthiti* (duration or existence), and *laya* (reabsorption into the original matrix) cannot be understood to refer to a static state disjunct and distinct from the two others, although in popular parlance this seems to be vaguely admitted by these three words being loosely applied to one and the same indivisible flux in consciousness. The corresponding term in Vedantic terminology is the '*dhara-vahika-chitta-vritti*' or 'flowing-oil-streak-continuity'. The Vedanta Paribhasha of Dharmaraj Adhvarya deals with this kind of stream in consciousness in his introductory section where he treats of Vedantic epistemological principles.

Pure consciousness - when free from extraneous conditionings (*upadhi*) and from conceptual attributes (*adhyasa*) that have their origin in the inner organs of knowing called *karana* (the instrument of knowledge or the organ of consciousness) - comes to have its own status identical with the highest notion of the Absolute, in the light of which ultimate Vedantic verity all events in consciousness, whether inner or outer (i.e., conceptual or perceptual), are reabsorbed into the transparent richness and glory of the Absolute itself.

VERSE 80

Contraries, like being and becoming, how could they
As creation, endurance, dissolution in one place co-exist?
For these three to pass into, there is nothing either;
Thus viewed, earth and other things are mere word alone.

THERE is a subtle paradox implied in being and becoming as applied to reality. The idea of creation, the endurance of such creation for some time, and its passing into another stage as the process of becoming is pushed further, (which are respectively the three aspects of *srishti*, *sthithi* and *laya* known to Indian philosophical lore) - these three have implied between them a

paradox, just in the same way as a paradox is implied between Pure Motion, to be thought of independently of the static state, and its own dynamism. The Zeno paradoxes have stated and examined this philosophical puzzle in detail from the times of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Movement has its contrary in standing still; and between the two the resulting notion of Pure Motion has to be derived, which is to be understood in terms of neither one of the two. While brute movement and immobility are horizontal, pure movement is vertical.

We know that the philosophy of Bergson in more recent years further elaborated and worked upon the paradoxes of Zeno and Parmenides and gave to the world a fully scientific point of view by which reality is conceived as in an eternal flux in terms of vital energy. Between these contraries one has to arrive at a pure notion of motion or becoming. This can be done by abstracting and generalizing to arrive at the essence of movement conceived dialectically in the context of the Absolute, whereby mere tautologies and contradictions are transcended. Motion has to be understood schematically and in the abstract, as in mathematics where symbols or lines would represent the pure idea.

In the Indian philosophical context the ultimate point of reduction of reality into its philosophical components is by the term *nama-rupa* (name-form combinations); when we say that the wave is only water with a certain outline and form with a name given to it, we only reduce it into its ultimate terms to dissolve and merge both name and form into the matrix of the Absolute.

The continuous process of pure becoming - which constitutes the creative evolution of life in terms of the vital energy (*élan vital*), as known to the philosophy of Bergson - admits of no static cross-section which could be conceived as a stable basis of reality, as when we say that the earth and other things have been created and will endure some time and pass beyond into some unknown state

of existence. Although popular religions may hold such a view there is no 'beyond' into which the states could pass on. Even as we see or imagine the process as taking place in a fully scientific sense here, these three have at their core a paradox which cannot be explained away.

As opposites cannot co-exist without contradicting or cancelling the verity of each into nothingness, we are obliged to resort to the absolutist approach if any residue of reality is to be left at all. The earth has a certain outline shape which has first to be recognized schematically or in mathematical abstraction. Then we have to recognize this entity by a name so that we can communicate with one another about it. Name and form have no actual content in themselves, but are conceptual abstractions. Conceptualisation leads finally to nominalism.

Such a nominalistic view of reality is not unknown in Western philosophy. The philosophy of Peter Abelard and his followers represent just this school. Phenomenology and nominalism in the West touch precisely those levels of abstract speculation which the Indian mind has attained in the Vedanta, which equates all phenomenal appearances to name and form, of which name by itself implies form. The simplest of mental events, without any tangible content, is all that may be said to remain when we think of birth, creation or death, as has already been stated in a previous verse (79).

Part III

I didn't write earlier about the little dog analogy, "the queer dog of idiosyncrasy," but I should have. It's a great and valuable lesson. To recapitulate:

I once visited a friend's home in Delhi. He had a small dog. It was only a little bigger than a squirrel, but it barked like hell. I thought of showing my

love to it, so when it came close I patted its head. It bit my fingers! Then my friend said, “I am so sorry! I should have told you that he can be fondled, picked up, caught by his tail, taken by his legs, put in your lap. He does all those things. But he doesn’t like to be touched on his head.” Once you know that, you have no more hatred for that dog. You just leave his head alone. But if you don’t know it you think, “How can you keep a pet which bites you? It’s a contradiction—a pet that bites. That’s not a pet at all!” You can be reconciled to it once you know it acts like a pet as long as you don’t touch its head. The contradiction even becomes amusing once you know it. Then you understand it is just the miraculous way in which this particular dog is made.

If you know this kind of information about your wife or husband, your child or your neighbor, you won’t have trouble. You need to know where you shouldn’t touch them.

It was amazing how Nitya would routinely derive profound truths out of commonplace examples from the world around him, and often lace them with humor. This one really stuck with me, but it has never been easy for me to put it into practice. When a friend bites you, the normal response is to reel away and nurse your wounds. You may feel resentment or anger, furious anger. All this clouds your ability to see how you may have accidentally touched a trigger spot. The quicker you can let go of your hurt feelings, the quicker you can begin to assess the hidden cause of the clash. Then you can either avoid touching the tender spot in the future or, if the friend has invited you to do so, begin to help them make a substantive correction. Most people are not interested in healing their traumatic wounds, only in avoiding letting them surface. So unless we have been asked to weigh in, this instruction is only for our own benefit. I have found it takes the sting out fairly quickly, and at least prevents me from exacerbating the situation with an unfortunate response. Even more important, it helps me reflect on the ways I respond as a wounded or otherwise conditioned person, so I can begin to heal those myself.

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Bishop Berkeley's *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, pertains well to the subject at hand. This is the beginning of the Introduction. The dust quote is at the end of section 3:

1. Philosophy being nothing else but the study of wisdom and truth, it may with reason be expected that those who have spent most time and pains in it should enjoy a greater calm and serenity of mind, a greater clearness and evidence of knowledge, and be less disturbed with doubts and difficulties than other men. Yet so it is, we see the illiterate bulk of mankind that walk the high-road of plain common sense, and are governed by the dictates of nature, for the most part easy and undisturbed. To them nothing that is familiar appears unaccountable or difficult to comprehend. They complain not of any want of evidence in their senses, and are out of all danger of becoming Sceptics. But no sooner do we depart from sense and instinct to follow the light of a superior principle, to reason, meditate, and reflect on the nature of things, but a thousand scruples spring up in our minds concerning those things which before we seemed fully to comprehend. Prejudices and errors of sense do from all parts discover themselves to our view; and, endeavouring to correct these by reason, we are insensibly drawn into uncouth paradoxes, difficulties, and inconsistencies, which multiply and grow upon us as we advance in speculation, till at length, having wandered through many intricate mazes, we find ourselves just where we were, or, which is worse, sit down in a forlorn Scepticism.

2. The cause of this is thought to be the obscurity of things, or the natural weakness and imperfection of our understandings. It is said, the faculties we have are few, and those designed by nature for the support and comfort of life, and not to penetrate into the

inward essence and constitution of things. Besides, the mind of man being finite, when it treats of things which partake of infinity, it is not to be wondered at if it run into absurdities and contradictions, out of which it is impossible it should ever extricate itself, it being of the nature of infinite not to be comprehended by that which is finite.

3. But, perhaps, we may be too partial to ourselves in placing the fault originally in our faculties, and not rather in the wrong use we make of them. It is a hard thing to suppose that right deductions from true principles should ever end in consequences which cannot be maintained or made consistent. We should believe that God has dealt more bountifully with the sons of men than to give them a strong desire for that knowledge which he had placed quite out of their reach. This were not agreeable to the wonted indulgent methods of Providence, which, whatever appetites it may have implanted in the creatures, doth usually furnish them with such means as, if rightly made use of, will not fail to satisfy them. Upon the whole, I am inclined to think that the far greater part, if not all, of those difficulties which have hitherto amused philosophers, and blocked up the way to knowledge, are entirely owing to ourselves—that we have first raised a dust and then complain we cannot see.

4. My purpose therefore is, to try if I can discover what those Principles are which have introduced all that doubtfulness and uncertainty, those absurdities and contradictions, into the several sects of philosophy; insomuch that the wisest men have thought our ignorance incurable, conceiving it to arise from the natural dulness and limitation of our faculties. And surely it is a work well deserving our pains to make a strict inquiry concerning the First Principles of Human Knowledge, to sift and examine them on all sides, especially since there may be some grounds to suspect that those lets and difficulties, which stay and embarrass the mind in its search after truth, do not spring from any darkness and intricacy in the objects, or natural defect in the understanding, so much as from

false Principles which have been insisted on, and might have been avoided.

5. How difficult and discouraging soever this attempt may seem, when I consider how many great and extraordinary men have gone before me in the like designs, yet I am not without some hopes—upon the consideration that the largest views are not always the clearest, and that he who is short-sighted will be obliged to draw the object nearer, and may, perhaps, by a close and narrow survey, discern that which had escaped far better eyes.

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Jake's commentary:

“Rest and motion cannot happen in the same place at the same time. Similarly, creation, existence, and dissolution cannot take place concurrently. When critically examined, these concepts have no substantial validity. They are only words.” (p. 722-23)

In verses 79 and 80 is a straightforward description of our lives as we live them in our everyday worlds. Established in that balanced position the Guru outlined in the previous verse, in these two he and Nitya move on to “explicate the obvious” for those ready to listen (especially in the contemporary American context), that “fit audience though few” John Milton spoke to centuries ago.

Nitya opens his commentary by narrating our shared ontological understanding that can be cognized in two different ways. We can follow our waking experience through the day by paying attention to our changing situations as they transform as we move along. We continuously make decisions, plans, and so on as the day progresses and just dealing with this flow of events can come to pre-occupy our awareness.

A second way of viewing our wakeful involvement is to take the long-term point of view and consider the entire span of our

physical lives as carrying a more profound value than is explicit in those day-to-day concerns. This latter “vertical perspective” places the former “horizontal perspective” in a secondary category. Values trump incidentals and thereby assume a superior hierarchical position. Purpose matters more than does mechanics.

Both of these points of view, continues Nitya, require some kind of knowledge in order to function. For the horizontal dimension, we rely on our senses and mind, both of which can and do selectively edit perceptions. As Nitya points out, in addition to disregarding much sensual input, we face the inevitable reality that they don’t begin to include what is possible in the totality. The horizon fades out in front of us, what goes on behind us—or if anything at all does go on—is taken on faith, and even dogs hear what we cannot: “We circumscribe our outlook by using only limited aspects of our senses at any time” (p. 556).

In American education, much is made of the distinction between vocational training and abstract philosophizing. However impractical the latter, it is generally prized as the superior of the two, a distinction Nitya points out that is essentially without difference as far as the use of either. Quantifying things, our minds use the senses to navigate the world of necessity while those of a more philosophical bent tend to seek out the “qualitative generalizations” of sense input thereby manipulating the abstract property of the thing. The mind half of the mind/sense duality we all function in is privileged and our lives made somewhat more comfortable than they would otherwise be as a result. Both propensities come about as a result of our dealing with our horizontal manifest world, and emphasizing either leads us to contradictions that cannot be explained. Nitya cites Zeno’s paradoxes as a classic example of philosophy run amok. Logically evaluated, Zeno points out, a tortoise will always best Achilles in a race if the animal is given a head start to begin with. Half the distance between the two will always remain with the tortoise in the lead as Achilles paradoxically overtakes it. Philosophical logic fails because where we use it, it, too, enters a structuring process

that mimics the senses' processes. Contradictions are structurally built into the system.

Struggling with either or both systems constitutes our attempt to “understand” reality, and we mistake the forest for the trees (or vice versa). Unable to examine single details within single holons at any one time, we miss the larger holonic operation and constantly run up against the contradictions when one system interfaces with the next one, which either contains the former or is contained by it. (As a gross example, we insist on a difference between inert matter and living tissue but fail to identify the precise dividing moment or point at which one becomes the other.) “You get sidetracked in your search either in the name of philosophy or by the actuality of the immediate pragmatic possibilities,” writes Nitya (p. 558), a piecemeal strategy that inevitably leads to creating more problems that can be solved.¹

[Footnote: A marvelous account of this dilemma can be found in *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences*, (1997) by Edward Tenner.]

Nitya's foregoing model pretty much reveals by way of contrast the dysfunction at the heart of the American educational system and the resulting cultural nonsense it generates. Firmly entrenched in the horizontal and the honoring of the abstract, words come to tyrannize with magical powers thereby privileging those who control them. Completely eliminated in this circular misery are two fundamentals that chart a way out: the Absolute and our purpose in the first place—“how to be happy” (p. 558).

The Absolute is that which does not change and offers us the ground on which to stand as the pragmatic and the logical worlds spin around us. Defined as *sat-cit-ananda* (existence-awareness-value), our awareness, says Nitya, sits in the center as the ground for the other two and, in and of itself, contains no duality. It is, I think, akin to that on which perceptions and thoughts are carried

¹ A marvelous account of this dilemma can be found in *Why Things Bite Back: Technology and the Revenge of Unintended Consequences*, (1997) by Edward Tenner.

and out of which they continuously appear. That awareness contains no duality. It comes as the other two elements interact with it, constantly developing that horizontal manifest dimension Nitya discussed in the first half of his commentary. As our ground, we “know” nothing and only think we do as we move on from that point to recognize dualities, forms, and so on. As Nitya writes, “If you examine any aspect of what is presented in consciousness, it will show within it contradictions like existence and non-existence” (p. 560). If we can accept this position and live in it, we have no problems. Because everything is a contradiction, we can’t be surprised or annoyed when consistency inevitably breaks down: “If you know this kind of information about your wife or husband, your child or your neighbor, you won’t have trouble.”

But trouble we have, especially in our outward/other-directed culture on its march to replace what *is* with what *ought*, and the ultimate weapon of the crusade is words. “All that you think and believe is words,” writes Nitya citing Narayana Guru. In our mistaken drive to “be happy” via the mind and senses, we privilege our powers of abstraction/philosophizing as the royal highway to waking up, a teleology which is made up of the same materials. We seek in words that which cannot be found there but do locate enough solace to come back to it again and again. We consume words and live in a world in which they come to control us because we have granted them the power to do so. Others can thus (magically) “make us” afraid, desperate, hurt, elated, in love, rejected, enraged, and so on because of what they say about us. Having given away our power over ourselves and granted it to others’ words, we come to judge them by the words they use and the institutions that are dedicated to their manufacture such as universities, the media, and government.

In these verses, concludes Nitya, the Guru is telling us that the supreme consciousness out of which all manifests is the real and that those irritations we feel are merely words that we have made into tools with which to torture ourselves. We can take them or leave them.

