

11/4/14
Verse 82

Like fire that emerges from churning sticks,
the boundless discrimination that arises from contemplatives
burns as the sun that has attained the firmament of supreme
consciousness;
to this everything is fuel.

Free translation:

Like the fire that comes from rubbing sticks together, a wisdom of
great discrimination arises from the minds of discerning
contemplatives. It flames in the sky of consciousness, burning
everything as fuel.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

Like the fire that emerges out of churning sticks
That boundless wisdom that from within those who seek prevails
As the Sun ascendant in pure reason's firmament supreme.
It stays burning and to its flames consuming, fuel everything
becomes.

This verse is yet another embarrassment of riches, one that
lays out the parameters of spirituality so clearly and beautifully
that you can't imagine anything else being necessary.

At the same time, the content goes against the grain of the
popular imagination, where effort is viewed as a block to
realization. While it's true that most ill-considered efforts lead us
up blind alleys, not all do. The most important discrimination is to
distinguish between valuable and worthless striving, and the
irrefutable indicator of success is the development of a passionate
interest, what we often call a consuming interest in English.

The “wisdom of great discrimination” here is what we usually term enthusiasm. How much of spirituality is supposed to be about doing what we don’t enjoy? Here we are instructed to see our innate resistance as an indicator that we are forcing ourselves into an inappropriate context. This has to be distinguished from our aversion to facing up to reality, otherwise known as laziness. A little focused reflection should make the difference clear.

Nitya makes a number of references to the effort required to energize our enthusiasm, knowing that it is a natural effort we willingly contribute so long as we’re doing what makes sense to us. Ananda is the bliss of things making sense to us. It is every individual’s choice whether to live engaged or disengaged with their surroundings, yet it is much easier to engage with what makes sense. In Nitya’s words:

This can be true of anyone’s life. When you do something half-heartedly, as a customary thing, a convention or a habit, you sink more and more into the morass of life’s darkness. When you kindle a meaningful interest, light shines forth to illuminate the whole world.

We bring the heat (tapas) of our intentionality to bear on our circumstances, and after a period of effort we begin to glow. Like sticks catching fire, we may note a poof! of brightness when the ignition temperature is reached. The kindled flame begins to emit light and warmth. Then we don’t need to churn any more in the way we were. Now we just have to feed the flames, feed the interest. The idea that everything is fuel means that whatever happens throughout the day is seen in the new light you are generating, so it stimulates you to greater heights of insight. Nothing is left out; it all fits together. There is no need to stay cordoned off from reality. This can produce a truly spectacular breakthrough. As Deb phrased it, rising to the challenge to perceive and understand things correctly reveals our inner being to us.

Many of us labored long under the delusion that permeates our culture that there is a rare state far more refined than what we normally encounter, and our task is to make our way there. The belief produces a schism between our daily activity and our ideals, where we come to dread all the supposed boring, draining, ridiculous demands on our sovereignty, and we develop a finely-honed attitude of rejection of everything that doesn't fit our narrow definition of what is acceptable. This may well be an essential early stage of development, like an egg or chrysalis. If we can manage to emerge into the next stage, however, where we are strong enough to directly interact with the world around us, everything becomes an educational opportunity. Not just positive stimulations, but hostile ones as well, are melted down in the crucible of our understanding, coaxing us to grow and expand. In humanity's intensely chaotic social milieu, it is very helpful to have wise associates around to buoy us up, so that we aren't tempted to retreat back into our shell. Our world abounds in not just hostility, but wise and sympathetic souls willing and eager to lend a hand. We could easily take or give a hand ourselves.

I talked about the change it made in my life when I finally decided to give up the cynical attitude about everything I had adopted in my teens and replace it with an undefended openness. Quite a few toads turned into princes right on the spot! Jan told us about having that same kind of experience herself this past weekend. She had to drive with two strangers to a distant city where their teenagers were participating in a debate competition. Dreading the tedium and anticipating deprivation from anything interesting, she brought along all sorts of things to amuse herself with. To her surprise, the other parents were fun to talk to, and they quickly became friends. By the end of the weekend she was sorry to have to go back home; they all wanted to keep doing what they were doing.

In Vedanta this joy of the ordinary is spiritual experience. It isn't about finding ways to not interact so you can revel in otherness or nothingness. Life is brimming with possibilities.

Depression comes when our inner promptings to enjoy are suppressed and given no outlets. It is fairly easy to allow them, but we have been mesmerized to not go there. I recently came across a relevant fragment in *Love and Blessings*, from when Paul Gaevvert was traveling with Nitya and Nataraja Guru:

During our time in Hardwar Paul became more despondent day by day. While we were walking along the banks of the Ganges, Guru said, “Paul is in depression. This is because he was spoiled by all his sisters when he was a child.”

It was very painful for Paul to listen to Guru’s remarks. Guru went on, “Nobody will admit anything that is deeply lodged in their ego. The vulnerable part of your ego is putting up a defense. If somebody touches that place, your soul will wriggle like a worm. To bring you back to the tranquility of the Self, you have to take your life seriously.

“Enthusiasm for the Absolute to prevail is the only medicine for states of depression. The human mind is so constituted that its instructive dispositions need a strong numerator interest: a passion for Truth, Justice or Beauty. When one supplies this element all blues and troubles vanish.” (234)

Nitya concurs in his commentary:

Whatever pursuit you engage in—art, literature, science, anything that is your first love or your dearest value in life—when that overpowers you and you are given to it entirely, your sticks catch fire. Your interest flares up until you become like a great ball of fire. Half of the world becomes your fuel and the other half is the flaming fire. Though this consumption can be described as a great enjoyment, everything in you is consumed.

Consumed in a consuming interest, that is.

Of course, in accessing our authentic self-expression we can’t just so berserk and run wild, we have to learn to open up

artistically and discretely. Enthusiasm often starts off with a bang, but it should mellow into a steady state instead of a jet-propelled up. Nitya once told us about one of his major revelations, the one recounted in the chapter *The Light of the World and the Life of All Beings*, in *Love and Blessings*, when he suddenly realized his oneness with everyone. He was so excited to know in his heart that all beings are united in the core of truth, that he went around hugging everyone he met. Pretty soon he noticed that all those dear dignified people were horrified to be hugged by a wild-haired, grinning stranger. He learned to restrain himself, to keep the fire inside where it wouldn't embarrass anyone. In a way, doing so made it burn all the brighter, and people could decide for themselves whether to bask in its glow or not.

Prabhu was reminded of Leo Tolstoy, who wrote much about the futility of renunciation as opposed to dedicated participation in the world. Prabhu was very moved by *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, where a prosperous judge undergoes a deathbed conversion, realizing how he lived selfishly his whole life, while under the pretense of being a useful member of society. Apparently the work goes into the subtleties of how we delude ourselves, maintaining our distance while pretending to be involved. An act of surrender of our guarded mentality is necessary for a genuine transformation to take place, which Ivan was able to accomplish at the last moment before his death. Andrew recognized this as a perennial theme of Tolstoy's, and recalled the short story, *Father Sergius*, about a penitent hermit who cannot overcome his desires simply by isolating himself in a hermitage, and eventually finds salvation in worldly service.

A rare few have denied themselves absolutely, and managed to burst into flames in spectacular fashion. Their stories are dominant in the popular imagination. But theirs is not the only way. Narayana Guru invites every single one of us to be fully involved, emphasizing the tremendous value of every moment, of every being, of every event, if we dare to join in. Total

participation turns out to be almost as rare as complete withdrawal. Most of us fall somewhere in between.

Many people have a lazy streak, and imagine that not doing is bound to be easier than doing. It may actually be much harder, though, because restraining our dharma demands unceasing strain, like holding back a flood. The way of a yogi is easy, according to the Gita, because once we are in harmony with our natural abilities our expression becomes effortless. We go with the flow. Or here, once the sticks catch fire we can leave off trying to light them. Nitya describes the apparent contradiction this way:

You churn your mind, and when you do there comes the fire of discrimination. Narayana Guru says the fire of discrimination can become boundless. It can shine forth in the firmament of consciousness as a great sun. In the light of that sun all inertia, all darkness, all ignorance, is burned away....

There is a paradox in this. Our two “sticks” are a world of ignorance and an ignorant person who is seeking to enjoy that world. The paradox is when the ignorant person and the object of his ignorance are rubbed together, what is produced is not more ignorance but science, knowledge, awareness, even wisdom. Two mistakes are not making a greater confusion, but a bright light. It’s very paradoxical.

Because we both begin and carry on in ignorance, all we need is a smidgen of confidence. We don’t have to have everything laid out and properly prepared, as if we were building a house or solving a math problem. Nitya continues:

This is hard to understand, but then, as is said in the verse itself, one should churn one’s own mind to arrive at the meaning of this paradox.

What does this really mean to each one of you? It is common knowledge that when you don’t have an answer to a question, when you encounter a puzzling situation, or when you meet one

of life's challenges, you gather yourself together, you go in to the very core of your being and look for light. You do not know how to produce that light, so you struggle. As you go on struggling, you find new steps suggesting themselves to your mind. Perhaps you adopt them. There may be a lot of trial and error, but eventually, out of the many things that turn out to be successful and the few mistakes you make, you gain a wisdom which enables you to avoid making those mistakes. It is as if the seemingly random steps you are taking in the darkness are all being guided from within.

This doesn't happen of its own accord. There has to be a tremendous effort, an intensity, a yearning, a desire to find a way. You are always approaching the goal, the end you seek, with increasing confidence. Finally you emerge successful.

One of the major impediments is our egoistic mania for always being right, which forces us to try to figure things out in advance. Often the true way in is to admit to being wrong, which goes against all our intense determination. The minute we feel we're wrong we seek to avoid the situation, and in doing so we avoid learning what it is offering to teach us. Contrary to our expectation, we are maintaining our own mediocrity. Nitya instructs us how to compensate for our incorrect alignment by facing up to the situation:

[Vedantins view] knowledge as a kind of lever with which to pry themselves out of bondage. The solution is sought not in some unknown place but in the everyday world of experience, which itself is seen as coming into being as a result of our ignorance. Both the incentive to act and the object that attracts us arise in us as our agency to be an enjoyer or knower of what is outside as this experience.

There is a wrong identification in your agency as a knower and a wrong identification in your agency as an enjoyer. You go into meditation about it, into a search for it. The search has

to be in the very field where the action is going on: you can't seek something by going away from it. It's in the experiential world in which everything is happening, so you go there. It is the so-called wrong identification of the interest in the object that reveals to you that the projection of the Self's happiness was made on it in the first place. And it is the apparently wrong urge you think of as coming out of ignorance that opens to you the truth that it is the Self's nature to be by itself. Its nature is happiness, so it has to seek happiness. So through these two mistaken identities you come to the right identification, which shows you your true Self, both within your enjoyment and in the object you are enjoying. The only difference is the ignorance which had been surrounding it is no longer there.

In the process you don't run away from anything, nor is the world consumed in any fire of wisdom. The world remains as it is; you remain as you are. But you no longer have a smoldering problem in your mind—it has become a bright light. Another person may perform the same action or follow the same track with a sense of anguish, guilt and sadness, but now you walk that path as a ray of light, as happy as ever, unaffected by anything. Unscathed. That's all the difference.

We often think that finding our dharma means becoming a great artist or philosopher, or successful in business, sports or politics. Sometimes that does happen, but for most of us, our lack of any one outstanding quality can lead to low self-esteem if we hold that view. Plus, we then think we are following our dharma some of the time and not at others. Why not posit our whole life as our dharma? After all, simply being alive is the most miraculous of all criteria. We can always be living our dharma. Then it's no longer an intermittent thing, reserved for special occasions.

Another mania of well-tutored humans is to think of religion or spirituality as having a fixed form. Christianity even has images like "fighting in God's army," conjuring up images of marching troops in formation carrying bayoneted rifles, spreading the "good

news.” Mathematics orders all its ideas in a row, in neat patterns, and in so doing may leave out something essential. But Vedanta is more like a cloud blowing across the sky: despite numerous efforts to pin it down, it nebulously floats along, constantly shifting and churning. As you fix your attention on one wisp, it becomes something else. Such an open structure or antistructure allows us to relax into our beingness, instead of frantically trying to locate it in the midst of the madding crowd.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

Narayana Guru defines the Self as that which knows while remaining in the dark. When we are in deep sleep we do not know anything, but as soon as we wake up we experience consciousness pervading our body. Consciousness does not come from outside, it is always inside, even when we are asleep. As a person is aroused from deep sleep to wakeful consciousness, so can the wakeful mind be aroused to another degree of clarity. The Guru compares this to the churning of fire sticks to make a fire. Firewood is cold and inert, but when two sticks are rubbed against each other with force they emit fire, and this fire can ultimately burn away both sticks.

There are two factors in us which can be compared to two pieces of firewood in the churning process; they are the ego that enjoys and the world that is enjoyed. When a person enjoys something, he is unconsciously reducing his enjoying self and the object of his enjoyment to the homogenous principle of a conscious appreciation of value. In that value-appreciation both the “I” and the “other” vanish and their place is taken by a pure sense of happiness. In the previous verse, the Guru divided nature into two halves, the enjoyer and the enjoyed. In that division he conceived the enjoyer as inseparable from the enjoyed and as

pervasive as the “other.” In the present verse, he recommends that these two aspects should be critically scrutinized.

The ego is born of ignorance and so is the object of enjoyment. When an object is egoistically desired, this very desire obstructs the ego from seeing its own ground, which is nothing but pure happiness. The temporal, spatial and concrete specificity of the object provides a false ground for the projection of the Self's own happiness and perpetuates the consciousness of “otherness.” The inquiry into the truth of both the self and the “other” is likened in this verse to the churning of fire sticks. When one submits oneself to the rigorous discipline of reflection, there emerges from such a person the bright light of discrimination which can dispel the ignorance that creates the false division of Self and non-Self. The emergence of wisdom in such unbounded measure has already been mentioned in earlier verses as the flaming sky of consciousness, or the rising of ten thousand suns in the sky of consciousness. In the present verse, Narayana Guru considers both the conditional self and its adjuncts of conditioning as the fuel for the great fire of unitive discrimination.

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Nataraja Guru's commentary:

THE Upanishadic analogy of two sticks rubbing together to produce fire (see Katha Upanishad IV. 8.) is resorted to by the Guru to bring out the twin aspect of Nature as referred to in the previous verse, and the notion of the Absolute which is altogether beyond all relativistic considerations. The man who is engaged in the incessant search for Absolute Truth does not arrive at his prize in slow graded installments or degrees. Wisdom is a flame that bursts out in its brilliance when the required intensity of thought is arrived at. The analogy is meant to underline the need for persistent and relentless research in the pursuit of wisdom, and to stress the emergent nature of the resulting wisdom with the full

white light of the Absolute, which is not to be expected in any slow gradations. One has to wait for the bridegroom to arrive without blinking a minute, as the Biblical parable puts it.

Merit or virtue in the religious or ethical context is one thing and the boundless wisdom here under reference is quite another. The two should not be mixed up directly, as with ends and means. When textbooks on meditation indicate that one attains perfection after much practice, this same verity is viewed from the relativistic side. Either one has Absolute Wisdom or one does not have it. The middle ground is abolished here. The fire of wisdom is referred to in the Gita as being capable of burning up all dross of karma (action) (Cf. IV. 37).

The light of wisdom is qualitatively different from that innate negative factor which is at the basis of manifestation or creation. These two aspects in nature have been brought into their paradoxical perspective in this and in the previous verses. If we should consider one aspect of nature as positive, and the other aspect as negative, we can, by a simple mathematical operation, explain how all manifested things become absorbed and burnt in the conflagration of the fire of wisdom that is here described. All duality vanishes in the unitive Absolute.

Besides the Upanishads and the Gita we have the testimony of generations of mystics, sages and seers, like the author of the present set of verses himself, whose words have to be respected in such matters. Such visions depend on a priori and not on a posteriori reasoning, and this is why the Brahma Sutras start off boldly and categorically by asserting that the proof of the Absolute is in its having its source in the sastras (canonical scriptures). Sabda or the 'word' is also recognized in Vedanta as a pramana (basis of certitude). Wisdom is an emergent factor and the cause of it is prior to inferential reasoning, as Sankara explains in three verses quoted by him at the end of the Chatussutri.

If we should be permitted to use the terminology developed in these comments and elsewhere, the horizontal version of truth is effaced when the vertical version of the same prevails. The vertical needs no proof but proves itself. Like an equation in physics the two limbs prove each other. Relativistic nescience thus gets absorbed and cancelled out when absolutist knowledge or full wisdom prevails.

Part III

Jan sent a lovely poem that fits the balance between silence and verbiage we're exploring in these verses:

Accept what comes from silence.
Make the best you can of it.
Of the little words that come
out of the silence, like prayers
prayed back to the one who prays,
make a poem that does not disturb
the silence from which it came.

How To Be a Poet.

by Wendell Berry

* * *

Prabu also wrote:

You never identify yourself with the shadow cast by your body, or with its reflection, or with the body you see in your imagination . Therefore you should not identify yourself with the living body, either.

-Shankara

This is the quote that I mentioned in our class

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Jake's commentary:

As Nitya and the Guru have repeated throughout *That Alone*, our Self seeks to know itself, and it is “that consciousness that animates the physical body” (p. 581). This inexorable drive to realize the Self as it goes on operating in an environment of ignorance, darkness, and alternating dualities—our world of life and death—positions that Self so that it continuously and directly confronts those three barriers. They require attention, and in his commentary on this verse, Nitya penetrates their true nature and places it in a cosmic totality of which we are both part and whole. The very fact of our inclusion in that one grand plan—the wave and the water are not two—means that our Self (the Karu of the first verse) is both immortal and continuously evolving. Out of ignorance comes wisdom.

While we are embedded in our cyclical world of necessity, however, the barriers to waking up present difficulties. Maya, the duality-driven character of our work-a-day world daily present itself to our senses as real and enduring, despite the self-evident evidence to the contrary. No form endures, but our senses systematically tell us the opposite so they can return as often as possible before the body gives out. The mind/body operates on its own schedule and is marvelously equipped to prize physical survival and endurance. But as Nitya counseled us in his commentary on the 27th verse, “The Self-luminous Atman itself is not known, but its effect—all the pluralities of the phenomenal transformations and modifications that come into being—is all we see. What is, is not known; while what is not, is known. Hence it is called the grand magic” (p. 194).

As Nitya continues with his commentary on verse 83, he extends his previous observation on the impermanence of manifestation by focusing on how the body we live in presents to us continuous lessons on the subject of constant change. After about 30 years, it begins its inevitable decline despite our (or Ponce De Leon's) best efforts. In fact, writes, Nitya, we know almost nothing about why the body operates as it does. It salivates when eating, for example, but we don't have any idea why. We can only connect the two in a descriptive process when we notice them. Nitya calls this ignorance *darkness* and thereby pretty much locates our position vis-à-vis the body. Limited by its perspective and ignorant of its internal functions, "our awareness is like a small island floating in an ocean of darkness" (p. 582).

Continuing with his lesson on our condition as tethered to the body, Nitya then points out that the body is not just one thing or system. It is comprised of a countless number of them operating in harmony as they repeatedly replace dying cells with new ones—until they don't. When the system collapses, he goes on to say, it is buried or burned but "nothing is lost." As with any material form, the body eventually becomes the nourishment out of which new forms are then fashioned, "a continuous transformation of birth, growth, and decay" (p. 583).

This holonic, constantly changing, and unstable system reflects an indisputable picture of life as we live it day to day. Select atheist-evolutionary theory roughly describes this set of circumstances but then walks away from it as being pointless *because* of its cyclical redundancy. Taken as a complete explanation for everything unto itself and as not part of any larger one—split off as free-standing and completely autonomous and not as part of a system within a system in a cosmic holonic dance—evolutionary theory as commonly understood (in contemporary American culture at any rate) fails to explain its value. As a stand-alone process, it does indeed spin on mindlessly in its eternal dumb show without a purpose that cannot be inferred through any isolated evaluation process. The error in this dead end method is

in its narrow focus and its insistence that the manifest ever-present arising exists wholly on its own (in spite of all the facts of the matter).

The very same fallacy presents itself in literal Christian interpretations (and echoed in contemporary politically correct atheist ones) where this kind of separation from the whole is sometimes personified in Satan's apostasy, at least as John Milton would have it when he presents the "Arch-Fiend" of the poet's Calvinist Epic going public with his manipulation of this misinterpretation as he challenges the angel *Abdiel* to carry his (Satan's) message as to who created what:

That we were form'd then say'st thou? And the work
Of secondary hands, by task transferr'd
From Father to the Son? Strange point and new!
Doctrine which we would know whence learnt: who
saw

When this creation was? Remember'st thou
Thy making, while the Maker gave thee being?
We know no time when we were not as now;
Know none before us, self-begot, self-rais'd
By our own quick'ning power, . . .

the birth mature

Of this our native Heav'n, ethereal sons.
Our puissance is our own, our own right hand
Shall teach us highest deeds, by proof to try
Who is our equal: then thou shalt behold
Whether by supplication we intend
Address, and to begirt th' Almighty Throne
Beseeching or besieging. This report,
These tidings carry to th' anointed king;
And fly, ere evil intercept thy flight.

(Lines 853-871, Book V,

Paradise Lost)

The totality of the system, writes Nitya, includes and transcends the immanent, a principle that if we can come to

comprehend will enable us to place Maya where she belongs: “Our body is an object lesson when we see how it changes and perishes day by day, it prepares us for its final dissolution. Dying with grace is as beautiful as living with grace” (p. 586).