

11/11/14
Verse 83

To break, to exist and to come into being is the nature of bodies
here—
one goes, another takes its place;
remaining in the highest, the Self that knows all these three,
the indivisible one, is free of modifications.

Free translation:

The changeless Self, from its vertical height, witnesses the flux of
becoming, noticing how bodies exist and perish and come into
being again, and how one is substituted by another.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

It breaks up, stays on, rises or changes over,
Again to continue, such is the nature
Of the body here; watching these three from on high
The Self, the unleft one, it ever changeless remains.

Here we have a fine example of a master teacher in action. Nitya uses the brief mantra from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Lead me from untruth to truth; lead me from darkness to light; lead me from death to immortality) to explicate the verse, and in the process conveys an explosion of meaning. He often spoke of the Vedantic idea of *sphota*, how the meaning of words goes off like a bomb in the mind of the hearer, and here we get a spectacular demonstration of it. And too, the more intently you listen, the bigger the impact.

This was another class where it was tempting to just read out the commentary and leave it at that. What more need be said? Yet the evening gradually developed into some meaningful discussions based on the ideas, and extended them even farther. That's the

delight of gathering together: each of us is an entire universe of original perspectives, and the interaction of all of them creates new modalities that couldn't happen any other way. In modern terminology, a class like this one is the basis for an emergent phenomenon: a collective entity that is more intelligent than any part taken in isolation. At times its existence is almost palpable.

At the outset, Deb talked about how as individuals we pursue program after program throughout our life, and they all have a well-defined end. Naturally we come to think of everything as conforming to that model. So we have to look in another way to see the continuity that permeates all the transitory events we are constantly immersed in. Such inner continuity is not immediately perceptible, it is only revealed by intelligent contemplation. Nitya urges us to ponder it, since it is the source of meaning in life:

If you take the theory of evolution as a reality, all forms of life are parts of the biologic mainstream. We are all part of one stream of life whose history is much longer than any human life. Nothing in this theory gives us any reason to discipline ourselves or have any kind of morality or higher values. There is no need to enlarge our intellect. So for us to commit ourselves to a higher form of life there should be a possibility of somehow moving from nonexistence to existence, darkness to light, and death to immortality. Then our life can have meaning.

Even knowing we are part of a gigantic, onrushing flood of life is an abstraction; one that could lend meaning to the things we do. But what Nitya is hinting at is our own empowerment to be a full participant. How often do we feel helpless in the face of events, many of which are negative, threatening, and appear to be leading us to disaster? Or, like evolution, conforming to laws beyond our reach? Being swept up in the flow at such times can convince us to abandon hope, and to doubt our ability to creatively respond to the needs of the hour. Creative involvement is precisely where a sense

of meaning can be nurtured. At first our authentic participation may seem like a flickering spark on the verge of being extinguished, but with care and protection from wind and rain it can be coaxed into a merry blaze.

Narayana Guru well knew that on the surface, life doesn't seem to have a pervasive unity, so we can easily get caught up in the chaos and despair. In verse after verse he tries new strategies to beckon us to enter into the *karu*, the dynamic yet peaceful substratum on which the play of events takes place, so as to restore our sense of connectedness. Attuning with it is not an escape, it's a way to complete the picture, and in so doing we discover our inner meaning, our *dharma*, and begin to live it. It opens up the possibility of having a meaningful participation with life, instead of the semi-detached, disjunct, dissatisfying trajectory we imagine we are supposed to follow.

Paul offered an amusing analogy for human narrow-mindedness. He grew up on a farm, and remembered a way the lambs would play together. One would jump over an imaginary obstacle in an open field, and pretty soon all the rest would line up and jump over the same place, even though there was nothing there at all. Paul thought that much of what we humans do in our relationships is a lot like that: going through various energetic contortions to avoid imaginary obstacles. If we see someone else do something, we are convinced we have to do it too.

If we just read the words of the guru's interpretation, they don't necessarily move us the way they are meant to. We have to ponder them, really listen to them, and then—miracle of miracles—they begin to come to life. We are experts at reading without being changed, but these are words of transformation, if we only allow them. As Nitya points out, we are coming to the close of the study, so we should really understand what Self-realization means. It's time to let it all sink in, and our diligence will certainly be rewarded. Nitya gives a succinct summary to keep us on track:

We should turn again and again to the very first verse, where Narayana Guru referred to a substance, a *karu*, which has three modes. In one aspect it becomes the awareness, the knowledge, that fills the essential properties of everything and identifies them as the knowledge of a thing. The same *karu* is all this concrete manifestation as well as the individual subjective consciousness. When what is objectively out there, what is subjectively experienced, and the consciousness of things both outside and inside are all reduced or traced to one common substance, it is unbroken. There is no cleft in it anywhere. We can't say whether it is a thing or a not-thing. It is both thing and not-thing. Basically we can say the *karu* is a law that governs everything. That law is changeless, but at the same time it governs all changes.

There is one entity in us which bears a striking similarity to this: that which detects and recognizes the law within us, the *buddhi*.

Buddhi, the preeminent quality of the Buddha, is often undervalued, because the intellect is ordinarily attuned only to surface details. Intellect in the Indian sense penetrates to the essence, integrating ground and surface. The ground imparts meaning to the surface, so the *buddhi* connects us with meaning. Limiting its purview to only the meaningless side of the equation ensures that we will find life meaningless.

The class wrestled with the limitation we impose on the *karu* by locating it spatially or temporally. Prabu, recalling a retelling of the conversation between Yajnavalkya and Maitreyi he found in Nitya's commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (Volume I, 313-20), suggested we tend to wrongly think of the Self as entering or leaving a room, just as the body does. When it's in the room with us, we know it as an object of cognition, but when it's out of the room we don't know it, because we can't see it anywhere. Moni agreed that we keep trying to fix its location. As Andy railed, we seem desperate to impose spatial metaphors on a living reality

that is not a metaphor. After all, it's the limited way we've been taught to think since early on, so we don't have much practice leaving time and space out of our cogitations. This is a very important point. Our ruminations here are supposed to lead us to relax into a state that is not limited in any way, and this requires a new orientation that doesn't come quickly or easily. We have to practice letting go. The kind of thinking we are doing in class is meant to show us how we are holding on without realizing it, so we can stop doing it. The resistance to the idea is so entrenched that most of the initial class have already dropped out, correctly intuiting that the beliefs they cling to are not going to hold up in true Self-realization. To the ego, it's a terrifying prospect.

Yet this is too bad, because it's meant to be an inviting prospect. As an example, Paul found the description of how the many different cells of the body work together to function as a unit, almost certainly without any knowledge of how they all fit together to create an amazingly complex whole, renewed his sense of the body as a divine mystery. As he phrased it, it restored a sense of sacredness to what would otherwise be boring facts, the kind we routinely take for granted. Nitya, in parallel with biologist Teilhard de Chardin, shifts the analogy to the next higher level of complexity. Like cells in the body, sentient beings are the component building blocks of the noosphere, the body of living substance enveloping our planet. The analogy can take us all the way to That alone. In Nitya's words:

Change takes place within the system, but the system as such doesn't change. As we are already That, there is no reason for us to become immortal. We are part of an immortal system. When you know this from a peak state of consciousness you are only amused by the changes, not threatened by them, even though part of the amusement is regarding your own dissolution. You can just look at it and smile.

After a few profound points people would sigh, “If only we could remember that all the time!” showing how sure we are that the subject is something specifically identifiable. But the Absolute isn’t anything that has to be remembered, or that can be. We are trying to gain the confidence to know we are That deep in our core, and that whatever happens takes place within That. The ground is not the one below us we walk on, it is everywhere. It is not an entity or a system, so the very effort of trying to remember a specific aspect of it subtly turns us away from it. This is one of the most essential paradoxes in spiritual life.

Moreover, there is no need to despair that we don't “get it,” since our true nature is not something we can ever lose. On top of that, our limitations are what make life interesting. Ultimate perfection would be static, so instead we have perfection within imperfection. The imperfections make for variety, the ever-famous spice of life. Nitya’s closing words have always driven me wild with tender affection for his wisdom in communicating this:

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. To live in grace and die in grace, one should have a vision of this great symphony of life, in which mortality brings so much variegation on an immortal stage.

Nataraja Guru, in his commentary on this verse, wants us to especially notice the ontological richness of life. Although this body is a decaying and perishing one and this mind is an ephemeral experience, within it is also placed this grand scheme of universal truth shining in all its resplendence. You have a mortal body to introduce you to the immortal theme, a stupid mind to lead you to the highest of all wisdom, and deep darkness to become the backdrop for the brightest of all lights. For all this you need a body, a life, a mind. When you see this it is not a paradox that frightens you but a paradox that surprises you and brings you so much beauty.

Paul summed this up very nicely: what Nitya has said makes the ephemeral our guru.

Part II

Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:

We are now entering the last phase of our meditation on the Self. In this verse we are instructed to accept the reality of our physical limitations. Man's eternal prayer is to be led from nonexistence to existence, from darkness to light and from death to immortality. Nonexistence, darkness and death surround our physical existence in the body. Although the body looks whole and well integrated, it is made up of billions of semi-autonomous units which are dying incessantly and are constantly replaced by similar units. As this process is going on in an unconscious state, we do not know anything about either the growth or the deterioration of the body. Eventually when the dead and decomposed cells or similar units are no longer being replenished, we begin to recognize the aging process. Finally it comes to a breaking point and the whole physical system collapses.

The physical body is a biochemical modulation in the on-flowing stream of life on earth. It is entirely subject to natural laws. Nature makes short-term provisions for the continuation of life in the body and long-term provisions for the continuation of a species through the serialization of proliferated life units. In both the short-term and the long-term prolongations of life, the systems adopted by nature have the triple principle of origination, sustenance and dissolution. In the long-term series, the living essence of one body is transmitted to another in the form of progeny. Children continue the life of their parents. If in some sense the theory of evolution has validity, we have to admit that all forms of life are modifications of the one biologic principle. The continuity of life on earth can be understood only in terms of incessant birth,

existence and dissolution, and the same organic stuff is then consumed in the generation of another life. Our physical growth and sustenance are derived from the nourishment we get from food, and the food on our table was a living organism a couple of hours, days or weeks before it was processed into food. In one form or another we will also change into food for other beings, or into manure for the vegetative world. If this is all that happens, life has only little meaning and we don't need to uphold our morale or to dedicate our life to any high purpose.

Not everything in our life happens in the dark recesses of the unconscious. All through life we experience and enjoy the self-luminous glow of our consciousness. Like the fire that remains latent in firewood, and the detailed plan of a tree that hides as a potential in its seed, the Self is enveloped by the veil of the non-Self. It does not originate or dissolve. Nature, which is subject to transformation, derives its intelligence and its laws from the imperishable light of the Self. True immortality is not achieved by perpetuating the physical body or by producing a progeny, it is attained by knowing the Self. The potter who handles a lump of clay to make a pot is conscious of the breaking and kneading of the sod, of its transformation into a pot, of the aesthetic value of the pot he makes, and he recognizes the same clay even when the pot breaks into pieces. The apparent transformations of the clay that the potter observes are called *vikàra*. Although the clay is transformed and has a new name and form when it is temporarily recognized as a pot, the new name and form do not affect the substantial nature of the clay. So we can say that the clay continues to be in a *nirvikàra* state, or a state of non-becoming.

In the present verse, the Self is qualified as *nirvikàra* and it is further described as *viñararum*, which means “without any cleavage.” The consciousness that animates a living body is very elusive and hard to understand. Physical ailments such as brain diseases and nervous debilities can cause serious aberrations in the normal and healthy functioning of consciousness. Physiologically it can easily be shown that consciousness cannot prevail without a

biochemical and biophysical basis. For that reason, immortality cannot be achieved by any fancied perpetuation of consciousness. Consciousness of the mind is as ephemeral as the body. There is an astounding ontologic reality of consciousness, however, which can be seen implied in the origin and function of all bodies, ranging from a subatomic particle to a galactic system. The mind of man must be a participant in the cosmic intelligence which rules the entire universe if it is capable of calculating, of deriving equations, of mathematically conceiving the distance between the earth and other planets, of jettisoning a spaceship across hurdles like the breaking away from earth's orbit and the entering into the orbit of another planet to finally land on it, and capable of making contrivances for the spaceship to flash back to earth its physical data as accurately as it can be done in a laboratory on earth.

It is this intelligent Self that is the imperishable reality. We are that, so there are no fresh problems of immortalization. As we recognize our oneness with this rich ontologic verity of the intelligent being in us, it becomes easy for us to remain in that peak position as impassive witnesses of all that goes on at the physical level of nature and not get carried away by the sentiments roused by the triple states of birth, existence and death. Realization is a matter of knowing and not of becoming.

* * *

Nataraja Guru's commentary:

THE living body, viewed in its proper psycho-physical perspective, is an entity subject to a cyclic process which alternates and completes itself, somewhat on the lines of the beating of the heart. We have to think of an organism in the abstract if we are to visualize this process of becoming in respect of the living body or entity. Modern medical men like Dr. Alexis Carrel have themselves distinguished between the dead body viewed, as it were, on the dissection table, and the living body which has its full

function as a unity. The philosophy of Bergson again affords us a living picture of how organisms follow a cyclic alternating course in their growth, multiplication and development (cf. Bergson's 'Creative Evolution'). Life is viewed there as a tendency in the abstract, and the organism, schematically conceived, is what is subject to the tendencies of the vital urge.

A somewhat similar point of view must be adopted here in order to be able to see how there are three main stages in the cyclic repetition of life in the body. The process is not unlike what we can watch in a pool of water where big drops of rainwater make bubbles that last for some time to burst again. All bodies are the same in their contemplative, essential content so that the change-over is merely nominal. Elsewhere in verse 56 of the same composition the Guru compares the rise and fall of bodies to the incessant rise and fall of waves on the ocean. In verse 75 again the same waves have been understood in terms of inner consciousness as the basis of the 'I' sense that keeps repeating itself within each individual consciousness.

Here the three stages of making and breaking, together with the intervening concept of staying or enduring, are subtly referred to in order to contrast this living, psycho-physically-conceived picture of the body - both with that of its own vertical component, which is something apart and knows no change, and with the fully horizontal version. Here the vision is neutral between the transcendental and the immanent.

The wheel of life or samsara, as known in the Sanskritic lore, as well as the wheel mentioned in the Gita (III, 16) and the dharmachakra known to the Buddhists, all imply the same revolving and alternating movement whose phases pass from the actual to the virtual or the more deep-seated levels of consciousness - which refer to the consciousness of deep sleep (karana) and the 'fourth' (turiya), which is the most abstract and most generalized aspect of

consciousness. This four-fold frame of reference within which human consciousness lives and moves is known to the Mandukya Upanishad and to other writings. When the Guru here refers to the breaking up, the staying and the rising, etc. - all aspects of this subtle, cyclic, double alternation have to be kept in mind.

As in a bulbous plant, life repeats itself season after season - alternately dormant or actively unfolding itself, and then dying out again. It is not altogether a flight of philosophical fancy to say that there is a similar alternation to which life tendencies in the body are subject. Besides the heartbeat, the quantum-pulsations and the diastole and systole phases of circulatory nervous or other systems of the body, especially evident in the sex life of the individual, all indicate the outlines of these alternating phases to which allusion has been made in verse 68. A complete picture of this alternating process has to be built up by the reader by fitting different life contexts together.

Here the general purpose of the reference to this alternation is to draw the contrast between relative life, subject to the alternation of tendencies that belong to the body and the other absolutist counterpart of the same which has no such alternating gaps. The Absolute is a terminal limit to this alternating or circulating lower process. It witnesses all from a positive rather than a central position, as in keeping with the position of this verse in relation to the total structure of the work as a whole.

The expression, 'cleftless', is a strict translation of the original 'vidar-arum'; vidar meaning 'gap', 'inter-space' or 'cleavage', as found in rocks that are not fully compact. The self in its extreme positive aspect is spoken of in Vedanta as rock-firm (kutastha). The notion of such a self; firm, compact and of a substance fully itself with nothing extraneous to its own pure, rich being or sat, is natural to Vedanta, where the notion of ontological existence is given full importance together with what is real in the world of

ideological values. The term ‘watching’ in the third line is not to detract from the ontological self, because knowing substance as ‘sat’ and ‘chit’ could be attributes of the same Absolute.

The reference to ‘on high’ in the same line is a translation of the original expression ‘mudi’ which could also mean ‘peak’, ‘top’ or ‘tip’. The plus limit of a vertical axis which is referred to sometimes as an omega point is what is meant.

Part III

We received a nice note from Susan:

In the days since the class I’ve had several encounters that have made me better understand that little prayer that Nitya mentions at the beginning of 83:

“Lead me from untruth to truth; lead me from darkness to light; lead me from death to immortality.”

There was the confrontation I had with a friend, which felt initially horrible. I said something that made my friend very upset and it was something I shouldn’t have said. This created a darkness and murkiness that in the past would have made me want to run from the room. I don’t like confrontations, I don’t like disharmony. It feels awful and messy and part of me is sure it will never end or that talking about it will make the darkness even darker. Happily, I was able to see the basic truth that I really cared about my friend and I wanted to figure this out so that we could still be friends.

What I didn’t anticipate at that time was that I think we understood each other better afterward. It strengthened our bond. It’s good to be reminded each time I go through this kind of dialectic that there is always a coming out into the light. I have to keep pushing myself through the self-deprecating feelings and the messiness.

When I look back on these incidents, they seem not so monumental

as they felt at the time. There is just a sweet lingering light about them and my feeling of surprise for that light.

Your quote from the class notes reminded me of this also:

"Creative involvement is precisely where a sense of meaning can be nurtured. At first our authentic participation may seem like a flickering spark on the verge of being extinguished, but with care and protection from wind and rain it can be coaxed into a merry blaze."

I really think of these confrontations as a form of "creative involvement." I have to be creative in these discussions because it always feels like foreign territory. There is no manual and I am thwarted constantly by the inner voice in my head that is running me into the ground and making excuses for the other person. The most helpful thing is to keep trying to find the truth of the situation -- What is really happening here? What are we really discussing? It's okay if this person is mad at me. It does not mean that I am a bad or unworthy.

Which leads me to this sweet quote from the verse: "Thus, knowing is realization, not any becoming. You don't have to become anything."

Another good example of moving from untruth to truth in the last few days is a driving example (always makes me think of Anita — Hello Anita!!). I was driving back to my house after a walk with a friend last week when another car came up from behind and was tailgating me rather severely. As I often do in these situations, I pulled over to the side of the road so that the car could pass. As the car sped off ahead of me, I was struck by all the thoughts I had had from my first sighting of this vehicle. I imagined a male driver with a frowny mouth and an angry crease in his eyebrows. I imagined all the profane words he was flinging at my vehicle. I

even imagined his stress about being late somewhere – – a stress with which I am very familiar. As the car passed, I imagined him so relieved to get by me and the lingering disgust that I should have been going so slowly (5 miles over the speed limit). But I caught myself in the midst of these imaginings. I asked myself what actually happened. A car drove up behind me. It was so close to my back bumper that it made me uncomfortable. I pulled over to the right. The car drove past me. That is all that really happened and I was amazed to think about the pile of untruth that I had managed to load on top of this incident. Amazing how one’s mind can work.

Now on to the idea of going from death to immortality. Nitya spoke a lot in the commentary about the meaning of immortality. Wonderful words that made even more sense to me after reading Alan Watts' book called, “The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are.” Here’s one of many great ways that Watts speaks of immortality and how we are all connected:

“This feeling of being lonely and very temporary visitors in the universe is in flat contradiction to everything known about man (and all other living organisms) in the sciences. We do not “come into” this world; we come *out* of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean “waves,” the universe “peoples.” Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe. This fact is rarely, if ever, experienced by most individuals. Even those who know it to be true in theory do not sense or feel it, but continue to be aware of themselves as isolated “egos” inside bags of skin.” (The Book, pp. 8-9)

He goes on to say that we don’t die because we are never born. This is a tough thing to accept because all of our senses and cultural conditioning tell us otherwise. But how much more

comforting and less scary to think about death in this immortal and holistic way, directing our attention to the whole, to the eternal.

I also loved this from the end of Nitya's commentary:

"Nataraja Guru, in his commentary on this verse, wants us to especially notice the ontological richness of life. Although this body is a decaying and perishing one and this mind is an ephemeral experience, within it is also placed this grand scheme of universal truth shining in all its resplendence. You have a mortal body to introduce you to the immortal theme, a stupid mind to lead you to the highest of all wisdom, and deep darkness to become the backdrop for the brightest of all lights. For all this you need a body, a life, a mind. When you see this it is not a paradox that frightens you but a paradox that surprises you and brings you so much beauty."

If that isn't one for the bathroom mirror, I don't know what is...

* * *

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;

