

3/3/15  
Verse 95

This extensive playful display is *maya's* concealed energy of universal creativity; again and again she manifests here; her limbs are the ten million cosmic bodies.

Free translation:

This world of manifestation is like a sportive display of maya, who conceals her forms and creates everything with her essence. Continuously she presents one limb after another, making this grand exhibit of the cosmos with millions of luminaries.

Nataraja Guru's translation:

This expansive display of operative artifice as by Maya ordained  
The shining creative principle of the universe is she;  
And she, descending here, her limbs they are that become  
The crust of the cosmic egg, in number ten million.

Verse 95 is very moving, but one thing the book cannot adequately convey is the subtly powerful impetus Nitya was radiating as he spoke, to lift us out of the depths of doubt and despair that lurked in the hidden recesses of most of our minds. The words are lightening and enlightening enough by themselves, but sitting with him as he brought the ideas out from their inner repository made us almost giddy. Nitya was entertaining an endless string of young adults presenting our problems to him in all sincerity, and it was fitting that he should take a moment to express, in his gentle way, "Why don't you just get over it? It's not such a big deal!"

The timing of the verse near the end of the work indicates a parallel sense of Narayana Guru saying, "Okay, we've looked long

and hard at this. Now can you just let go of some of your baggage and dance a jig? This is supposed to be fun!” Nitya makes the Guru’s implication explicit:

This verse is for all people to become light-hearted. We should see the light side of life rather than becoming so grumpy about everything. If you make a mistake it’s because Mother Nature wants you to make it. So don’t have any sense of guilt, make your mistakes gladly. If you don’t make little mistakes, God will call out to you: “Fool! I gave you a chance. I sent you to the world, and you didn’t make any mistake. Stupid! Get out!”

It isn’t that we should try to make mistakes—that’s a contradictory proposition. Mistakes are the unintended consequences of our actions, otherwise we’d call them something else. But *the fear of making mistakes* paralyzes us, turning us grumpy, or worse. It stems from childhood punishments and humiliations. If we can accept that we are no longer trapped in that stage of life, we can begin to enjoy ourselves much more. Many people hypothesize a punitive God to substitute for their childhood oppressors, prolonging their misery for a whole lifetime. Hopefully, the Guru’s instruction has helped us to desist from that type of binding fantasy. We can now put our best foot forward, and if we stumble we just get back up and continue on our way.

It’s not that we can simply ignore our problems. They have to be dealt with. All of us have experienced hardships and tragedies, and we can expect more of them in the future. Spirituality is not a guarantee of a trouble free existence. But depending on our mental orientation, problems can either wipe us out or prod us to find solutions. Ideally they are growth opportunities.

Andy noted how tragedies challenge you to step out of your normal roles, and that if you can take the long view they are less painful than they otherwise might be. He said tragedies can even become funny if you’re capable of seeing yourself as a small fry, relatively unimportant in the overall scheme. We do tend to

exaggerate our importance, and blow things up out of proportion. To me, it has to do with our expectations. If they are not met we get upset—sometimes very upset—but if we can maintain an open attitude, what comes along will be fascinating and often gratifying. Bill added that if you shut yourself off from traumatic situations, you don't make mistakes and you don't get to experience the world in all its richness.

A key idea here is that lightheartedness does not mean being superficial and ignoring the dark side of life. When properly understood, the dark and the light go together to make the world, and the wonder of it is very uplifting. Lightheartedness, then, comes from knowing more rather than less about the situation. If the Absolute is knowledge, as Narayana Guru holds, this makes perfect sense.

Happily, Michael reported a recent epiphany that provides a perfect example of the value of becoming lighthearted. For the past year or so he has been getting frustrated and angry with some of his coworkers. The other day at home he was reading some wise words of Marcus Aurelius, and he suddenly felt that he could let his resentments all go. And they went! It was more like the culmination of a gradual ripening than an instantaneous conversion, but the result was a sudden freeing from oppressive emotional states. He realized that all along he could have been laughing in the face of adversity instead of being annoyed by it.

Michael understood what had happened with an interesting analogy, which should help extend his epiphany. By being upset he was carrying a chip on his shoulder (American slang for holding a grudge), and last year he developed an actual debilitating shoulder injury, for which he had to have an operation. The surgeon replaced a piece of his degenerated shoulder with a bone chip from a cadaver, and the repair healed up slowly but successfully. Michael decided the implant was enough of a chip on his shoulder he didn't need any other chips. The idea made him laugh out loud, and the laughter released the tension that he had been holding there for a very long time. He told us it wasn't just chips, but whole logs

that rolled off him. Now if he's tempted to get grumpy about something, he remembers he already has a chip on his shoulder, so he doesn't need another, and he lets it go. Now he can finally breathe easily once again. Literally.

This demonstrates that we don't always have to know the exact cause of our conundrums, though that can help. The coworkers were likely incidental manifestations of a more deep-seated trauma. The roots of these things are often buried beyond reach, but if we can change our attitude in a general way it affects everything. One major reorientation like Michael's can produce a world of benefits. He has put a lot of time into understanding his world, including in the Gurukula classes, and while any changes aren't necessarily immediately obvious, sometimes they bear fruit. As Gayathri quoted in another context, according to Zen achieving nirvana is an accident, but practice makes us more accident prone.

If you'll recall, Nitya presented the idea of gradual percolation into the psyche as a kind of hypnotic suggestion back in Verse 65, at the close of the second of three "semesters" of our study:

This was certainly a wonderful experience for all of us to gather in the mornings and sit together and commune. Not all the days were alike, and everything you heard might not have been so inspiring, but here and there something must have gone deep into you. That little bit which strikes home, that makes a flicker of recognition and continues to shimmer in us, is enough to give us some direction in life. There is no need to learn each verse and then rationally apply it in everyday life. You can even hear it and forget it. Forgetting means it only goes deeper into you. Once you have heard it, it will go and work its way by itself.

The effect will be very subtle. It comes almost without you knowing that it is something which you heard that is enabling you to see things in a new light or make resolutions in a certain more helpful way. Nothing is ever lost. Even this very peace that comes to our mind during these verses is so penetrating that we feel the depth

of the soul, the Self. It is indescribable. The indistinct part of it is as beautiful as the distinct. In a Chinese painting most of it is indistinct, but this does not make it in any way less valuable than a realistic photograph.

Now as we approach the end of our time with *Atmopadesa Satakam*, Nitya makes a similar address to the assembled multitude:

We are coming to the close of our study of the Self. If you are making an inquiry into the Self to get away from all the miseries, pains and tribulations of this world, you must first know that all these tribulations are creations of *maya*. In this sense *maya* becomes a kind of enemy. A couple of verses ago there was a reference to *maya* taking revenge when someone tries to escape the world of manifestation and turn to the transcendental. That aspect is still there. But if you are a wise person—and the Guru expects that by now, the ninety-fifth verse, you should be wise—he wants you to also participate in the grand humor.

The class recognized the joke here: we are never going to think of ourselves as wise. In some ways we are less sure of ourselves than ever, after pondering ninety-five verses of incisive philosophy. But that less-assuredness actually opens us up to the kind of epiphany that Michael reported. It produces a more transparent mental state, where our obsessions are relaxed enough so they don't impede the emergence of transformative insights.

Transparency was a catchword of Nataraja Guru, and in the *Bhagavad Gita* (XVII, 16) he uniquely and wonderfully translates *bhava samshuddhi* as “an imagination of creative transparency.” Here's what I wrote about it:

“Imagination of creative transparency” means first of all that you have cleared the garbage out of the way in your life so that

your innate creativity can come to the fore. Transparency does not impede or distort what passes through it. Distortions occur when we overlay our personal quirks onto the situation; when selfish interests are dispensed with we see things for what they are rather than what we can make from them. This brings great freedom to the mind, which then infuses every aspect of life.

The creative aspect is an important inclusion. All too often, purity is equated with emptiness. Here, the purity constitutes a liberation from obstacles, allowing enhanced freedom in contemplation and thought in general. You are not simply a ghost through which the winds of life blow, you are a participating co-creator who brings an optimized state of mind to whatever is taking place. While not distorting, you are meeting the situation with an open heart and an open mind.

Deb talked about how she once despised the idea of life as a game, a sport or *lila*. She felt it trivialized everything, and in that context laughter could be cruel and callous. Some things just can't be laughed at or laughed off.

Not everything is laughable—far from it. But a healthy philosophy should help us to cope with even the most gruesome situations we find ourselves in. Deb added that laughter is a great gift that creates a spaciousness around us. She was talking about loving laughter, not the derisive version that bears the same name.

The idea of life being a game is much more profound than watching soccer on the tele. Among other things, it invites us to participate. A game is supposed to be played, and we are its players. At our best we play creatively and compassionately. And funny does not have to mean superficial. In Nitya's words, "It is not just a joke. The joke is a meaningful game of continuing the phenomenality of the world." So keep it going, and while you're at it help make it even more interesting.

Susan mentioned how, especially when things get too dramatic for her, she imagines she is on an Elizabethan stage with everyone wearing period costumes, possibly an echo of

Shakespeare's "All the world's a stage." Not to mention, "The play's the thing, wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." (Yes, Shakespeare got it.) Meditating on the world as a stage play is very revealing. Both witnesses and participants are involved, and they must fulfill their roles or the whole pageant is pointless. Both can play well or badly, and the quality of the performance depends on how well they do. Bushra cautioned us that what appears to be good may be bad and what appears bad may be good. Which of course keeps the game especially interesting. And as Nancy said, the whole thing is balanced: in the long run it comedies and tragedies come out even.

Nitya reminds us we need to know the rules and play by them, or we may be in for a bad surprise. The trick is, the rules we believe in are mostly false, fairytales of society, and the real rules are quite different. We learn what they are mostly by making mistakes, though if we tried hard enough we could figure some of them out on our own, with a little help from our friends. The fact that the game is so complicated and baffling should make us laugh. Maya can defeat us so easily! Geez. Yet how boring would it be if the game was so simplistic we could figure it out in no time? Luckily it isn't. We will never run out of things to learn and mistakes to make. Nitya calls this the science of humor:

In the *Yoga Vasistha* and many other Indian stories, there will always be a terrible demon asking riddles. If you are wise you are rewarded, given the whole kingdom and great riches, but if you are not wise you will be eaten by the demon. In the *Vikramaditya* there is a story of a corpse and a king. The corpse puts riddle after riddle to the king, but he is capable of answering them all. These are wonderful metaphors for the science of humor maya is creating every moment.

In order to know the Absolute you should also know what is not the Absolute. If you want to know what truth is, you should also know what is not truth. Then you can exercise your *viveka*, your great discrimination.

In other words, we have to carefully discriminate between absolute and relative, eternal and transient, and so on. Not that we are supposed to only have one and not the other! They go together seamlessly. By now, the wisdom we should have picked up from Atmo is that these aspects of oneness are to be integrated, not divided. Maya is not an enemy undermining the Absolute, it is how the Absolute is expressed. Without it there is nothing. It is to be embraced as the momentary appearance of the Absolute here and now. You can't have fun if you don't exist! Nitya emphasizes this near the end:

Narayana Guru by no means personifies maya as Satan or the devil. The touch of humor with which he deals with it should brighten our minds and ease our spirits. The great secret of this is called *lila*. If you understand the world as a lila, a play or sport, it lightens all your troubles.

I'll close with the text of Verse 35, where Andy is in the online class with Nancy Y. He was greatly moved by the verse's image depicting maya in vivid terms as "the veil of transience covering knowledge," and recalled it for all of us. This is an aha! moment writ large. May it happen to everyone:

Like ten thousand suns coming all at once,  
the modulation of discrimination arises;  
the veil of transience covering knowledge is *maya*;  
tearing this away, the primal sun alone shines.

## Part II

*Neither This Nor That But . . . Aum:*

There are many dialectical pairs of opposites, such as the transcendent and the immanent, spirit and matter, the eternal and



the transient, the bright and the dark, the Self and the non-Self, the manifest and the unmanifest, wisdom and nescience, the timeless and the temporal, the vertical and the horizontal, the graceful and the obstructive. Between these pairs of opposites there is a fundamental paradox which needs to be understood by every contemplative in order to have a unitive vision of truth. This enigma or paradox that confronts the contemplative, causing confusion which inevitably leads to misery, is the common lot of all, and we see fervent prayers offered in the scriptures of all religions for the redressal of this dark and deluding force.

In the Isavasya Upanishad the prayer closes with a special request for the illuminating fire of wisdom to lead one from ignorance to wisdom and not into the crooked path of nescience. The Buddhists repeat at least five times every day their pledge of allegiance to the Buddha, the dharma, the sangha and the five pledges of restraint called *pancashila*. The Lord's Prayer says, "Lead us not into temptation," and similar prayers occur again and again in the Holy Quran.

What is treated as the devil or the dark deluding force by most religious believers is described by the Vedantins as maya. In their hands, the connotation of this term attains to a philosophical magnitude which is not conceptually derogatory or despicable, as in references like the devil, mara or ibliss.

Nataraja Guru gives the following working definition of maya in his commentary on verse 54: Maya is the principle of nescience or ignorance which is not an entity but a convenient term or mathematical factor or element with which to relate the two aspects of the Absolute which always co-exist. Like the square root of minus one and its positive counterpart in the square of the same number, understood reciprocally or ambivalently, as it enters into electro-magnetic calculations in modern physics, Maya is to be understood in terms of the philosophy of India, especially that of Sankara, as a negative vertical factor admitting contradiction horizontally but unity vertically.\*

What is to be noted here is the special mention that maya, when viewed vertically, can offer us a sense of unity and only gives us confusing multiplicity when it affects our understanding horizontally.

In verse 15, the concept of maya was introduced as a drag in time. Boredom and anxiety are two evils that centre around a person's sense of time. Man is destined to sit and wait for long hours and sometimes years in vain anticipation of the arrival of a factual or imaginary moment of delight. In verse 19, maya appears as the difference of opinion because of the possibility of the plurality of standpoints each mind can have, and it also comes as an obduracy which prevents a person from relieving himself of his vested interests and pet beliefs so as to have a more universal or catholic view. In verse 35, maya is referred to as a veiling principle, which, like an appalling failure of memory, comes again and again even to a wise man so that he may forget the reality of his true Self. In verse 51, maya is presented as the grand dichotomy which differentiates the subject from the object, and thus, in this context, it is the basis of the factual world of all transactions. In verse 54, maya is the basis of the alternating phases of consciousness, such as the wakeful and the sleeping, which affects, with the alternation of day and night, not only human beings, but the entire world. In verse 57, maya reappears as the potentials and the possibilities of a prior absence in the process of continuous actualization. As the incipient memories and the innate tendencies of man are also aspects of this process of actualization, man's destiny lies in his understanding of maya. In verse 58, maya is the most confounding confusion, which breaks up the unity of all and pushes the mind into the prison walls of fragmentary interests. In verse 71, maya is viewed vertically as a divine sport in which all beings have their assigned roles to play. The same verticalized view continues in verse 72, in which maya no longer obstructs a wise person from having the most blessed experience of unitive understanding. In verse 87, maya is given the exalted position of being as incomprehensible as the Absolute.

However, in the next verse the reader is warned that maya does not forgive even the slightest discrepancy of understanding and, in this context, it is identical with the unalterable laws of nature. In verse 94, the dark and bright aspects of maya are dialectically paired, and maya is raised to an exalted degree of wonder. It is from this appraisal that we come to the present verse, in which maya is given several bright epithets, even though it continues to be the vertical negative counterpart of the Absolute.

If liberation belongs to the science of the Absolute, our life on earth belongs to the science of the sportive humour of the cosmos. If God or the Absolute is presiding over one's liberation or emancipation, maya presides over the ludicrous situations of trial and error and hide-and-seek of truth and falsehood. Unlike the domain of the Transcendent Being, the world of maya is rich with a fecundity of manifestation. Out of nowhere, as though by magic, new bodies evolve and become animated with the most lively interests, but after playing a role which looks utterly serious, the manifested entities burst like a bubble and once again vanish into oblivion. The cause of laughter vanishes in the silence of gloom and depression, and the clouds of grief and despair are shattered by the brilliance of the beautiful display of the creative dynamics of life. Thus, on the whole, the comedy and the tragedy of life balance perfectly in maya's science of humour.

\* Nataraja Guru, *One Hundred Verses of Self Instruction*, (Varkala: Gurukula Publishing House, 1969) p. 180.

\* \* \*

Nataraja Guru's commentary:

HOW did this world come to be? This is perhaps one of the most challenging of questions that could be put to the scientist, philosopher or theologian. Various answers are found in the scriptures of the world, from the Song of Creation of the Rig-Veda

(X. 129) to the creation found in Genesis of the Bible. The Santi-Parva of the Mahabharata also gives the picture, producing water first like another darkness in darkness. Maya is the cause of creation in the Upanishadic context. This Maya is represented in mythological language as a female principle of creation or illusion.

Mind and its ignorance are attributed to this female or negative principle of nescience, and all the magical variety of the world is attributed to it. Theistic schools of philosophy, such as that of Ramanuja, prefer to give the function of creation to God, in His goodness and bounty, rather than to any evil principle. The problem of evil is not squarely faced by such schools but inclusively attributed to the Divine Principle itself. Why should God take the trouble of creation at all? Even this question is answered in various ways by giving primacy to the *upadana* (material) rather than to the *nimitta* (instrumental) agency of the Absolute Godhead. The idea of lila or the sport of God in creation is also not unknown.

The Guru here strictly adheres to this same tradition of contemplative literature. We have to note that here he is at the end of his series of verses of Self-realization. Without deflecting from the conception of Maya as a negative or female principle of creation, he lifts the concept as high as the hypostatic level of ascending dialectics, as would be consistent with the negative nature of the principle itself. The Absolute is finally neither negative nor positive.

To derive the negative Absolute from the neutral Absolute is a delicate matter if one is not to part company with the theologian on the one side or join hands with the sceptic on the other. In the present verse the Guru accomplishes this delicate and difficult task without violating the norms of any school of thought, mythological, theological, scientific or philosophical. The tacit epistemological frame of reference developed in the previous

verses is not departed from. Negative nescience is still the origin of the manifested universe.

Words like 'shining', 'sportive', 'creative', and 'expansive', which might at first not seem consistent with the darkness which is supposed to be the origin of the universe, are here justified in the light of the fact that, step by step, the duality between light and darkness has been abolished by the Guru, and by the time he arrives at the 95th verse he is able to speak of the negative principle as negative only to the Absolute conceived in ultimately philosophical and scientific terms.

The reference to the limbs of the personified negative principle materialising here below as the crust or shell of the cosmic egg has its justification both semantically and scientifically. In Sanskrit there is reference to the cosmic egg or *brahmānda* as a kind of unit of creation with an individuation for each entity that is created. The monadology of Leibniz has the same kind of unit-conception and the Nyaya-Vaisheshika schools of Indian realistic philosophy have the idea of the *paramānu* (the ultimate real particle) which has two outer sides and an inner vertical aspect which together represent reality in atomic form.

Matter is something that we touch with its properties of heaviness, inertia, impenetrability, etc. It is still something that the self experiences, as it were, from inside, and its being 'out there' in space is not valid in the strict sense. Unity and multiplicity are dialectical counterparts of reality which have to be reduced into non-dual oneness as envisaged in verse 96 below. It is thus a conceptual world in which all these speculations are to live and move.

Modern physics itself admits of this kind of conceptual approach, as we have already noticed in verse 92. Eddington actually alludes to the cosmic number 'N', which refers to the actual number of

protons and electrons in the universe. We shall not enter into this way of evaluation of the number N by modern scientists, but only say that it refers to an actual and fixed figure raised to the power of 256. When the Guru here refers to a fixed number of a 'crore' (ten million) as the units that comprise the manifested universe, he is only speaking somewhat the same language as modern physicists.

It is the outer limbs of this virile or fecund principle of creativity that thus transform or metamorphose themselves as the shell of the cosmic egg. *Brahmanda-kataha* itself is an expression in usage in Sanskrit which refers to the outer crust of the cosmos, treated as a whole and unitively. When such units are spoken of as making millions, we have to understand that the Absolute combines the one and the many at its two poles. Descending dialectics gives us the picture of multiplicity in the horizontal aspect of the universe, and the vertical unity underlying it holds them together. The one and the many are natural counterparts in the dialectical way of reasoning.

The next verse will examine this dialectical polarity at closer quarters.

### Part III

Michael added some nuances to my reporting on his epiphany about letting all the chips on his shoulder roll off, leaving him lighter on his feet:

It seems prudent to me to clarify that the spectrum of my frustration was much greater than my day job. That grouchy outlook had become pervasive throughout my everyday life and was my default reaction to anything deemed unfavorable. The chips (logs) on my shoulders were far greater than mere coworkers, in fact work was likely the least troubling - but where it most easily manifested. Those chips, logs, wood scraps and so on,

were highly charged by deep seated negative aggravations and anxieties with family members and traditionally reliable friends. The release of the log jam doesn't necessarily imply reconciliation with some of these people either, many of whom I have little desire in rekindling anything with... I'm more interested in strengthening relationships, and making new ones, that are hopefully more sympatico.

One of the tools I hope to get from professional therapy is how to properly interact with & address many of the people in which we are mutually vexed with each other. I'm not interested in grudges or permanently shutting anyone out. I'd like to learn better to respond rather than react. However in a few cases presently having some space/distance from some of them is strangely beneficial.

After 2-3 months of serious pondering, images and ideas would appear, like the drawing I attached. Or the photo of the Ganges headwaters coming together at Devprayag (because of a story Prabu told me). Eventually I figured out that I could just drop my "load" and only carry the one that's literally screwed in (the shoulder repair). The relief I feel is huge. I can breathe again and already find much more levity in my daily affairs. I know it's an ongoing process and will take work and perseverance on my part - but I'm glad for it.

\* \* \*

Last week I reread this verse in preparing it to send out, and this part must have made an unconscious impression on me:

In Jean-Paul Sartre's story *The Wall*, three political prisoners were ordered to be killed. Two of them became sick with the fear of dying. The third knew it was inevitable, that there was no way of reasoning with such people. He accepted he would be shot, and he did not want to die a mean death. He said, "I

will die, but I will die in full consciousness. It is the inevitable end: today or tomorrow I have to die. I accept it.”

Here the Guru goes one step further. It is not taken just as inevitable, it is taken as the inevitable humor of life. If you are born, you have to die. It’s part of the game, so you accept it. When you accept it as a game, a lila, the whole complexion of it changes.

A day or two later I dreamed I was going to be shot in the head by a soldier. My initial reaction was stark fear and to try to escape, and I started to run away. I could sense the deadly intent of my assailant, and knew he would not give up. He shot me in the arm as I ran, so I stopped. I knew the next bullet would go right into my brain, so I instantly switched over to a meditative state. I didn’t want to spend my last moments in terror. I thought to myself, “This is it!” I gathered myself into a profoundly focused state, tuning out everything but the sense of being immediately alive. Then I woke up.

\* \* \*

The latest issue of Scientific American Mind (March/April 2015) has an inspiring article on music therapy, featuring a story relevant to our class discussion. An 11-year-old girl named Laurel suffered a massive stroke that made her virtually unable to speak. You can imagine how paralyzing an event like that would be for the whole family. I can personally testify to the agony of not being able to speak when you are nonetheless conscious. Luckily, (presumably) lighthearted scientists have been very excited by the possibility of music helping people regain their verbal ability. They helped Laurel work to regain her speech, where in the past she would have been warehoused for her lifetime as permanently disabled. Here’s a bit from the article, The Healing Power of Music, by William Forde Thompson and Gottfried Schlaug:



Through a type of treatment called melodic intonation therapy, Laurel learned to draw on undamaged brain regions that moderate the rhythmic and tonal aspects of language, bypassing the speech pathways on the left side of her brain that were destroyed. In other words, she found her way back to language through music....

The benefits of melodic intonation therapy were dramatic for Laurel.... The stroke had destroyed much of her left hemisphere.... When she began therapy in 2008, she could not string together more than two or three words, and her speech was often ungrammatical, leaving her frustrated whenever she tried to communicate. Her treatment plan was intensive.... By the end of the 15-week treatment period, she could speak in sentences of five to eight words, sometimes more. Over the next several years she treated herself at home using the techniques she learned during the sessions. Today, eight years after her stroke, Laurel spends some of her time as a motivational speaker, giving hope and support to fellow stroke survivors. Her speech is not quite perfect but remarkable nonetheless for someone whose stroke damaged so much of her left brain. (34,36)

When we're at our best, the tragedies of life motivate us to do something constructive to alleviate them. We learn from this type of "mistake" as much or more than we do from our own foibles.

\* \* \*

Jake's commentary:

Verse 95 is a change of pace: "This verse is for all people to become light hearted," writes Nitya (p. 680). The world in which we live moves through the gunas; in it we experience "divine bright reflection, kinetic energy, and dark inertia." In the Christian interpretations, the dark dimension is associated with sin and evil

whereas in the Vedanta interpretation that element is perceived as ignorance and inertia. In both cosmologies, however, the distinction between the manifest and the transcendent remains an enigma in which both inter-weave in ways beyond human understanding.

The advantage of the Vedanta view is that the world of necessity is not a one-dimensional play over-shadowed by a moralizing ethic that assigns value to every element. Maya is what it is and functions as it does with or without our consent or approval. Nature contains the humorous or playful, those qualities seriously marginalized in the Western view. However tragic nature may appear, there remains in its inevitable cycles that continuous shifting through the gunas for every life form existing. Nitya illustrates this “playful” element by referencing the cat and the mouse. The mouse is specifically designed to sense food morsels and has the capacity to access it by gnawing through all kinds of materials. The cat, on the other hand, has an innate taste for mouse. (It is, in fact, the most nutritious and complete cat food existing.) Once the two become engaged, the outcome is uncertain until the encounter concludes. The mouse may escape or it may be lunch.

This general model Nitya applies to all life forms, including people: “Whether you are a mouse or Nixon [and his Watergate], maya makes no distinction. She says, “This is my game—the grand universal play of life” (p. 681). An inevitable consequence of our situation is our talent for making mistakes. The game, so to speak, is rigged from the get-go, and we will make errors as a method of education. The making of them is not an issue, writes Nitya. It is in the making them interesting that our future lies. Rather than bemoan the inevitable and cultivate regret, we ought to use our mistakes as opportunities to craft new pathways. In this regard, learning through our mistakes becomes an exercise in growth and change rather than contrition and inertia.

Another term Nitya reintroduces in this commentary is *Lila*, play or sport. The world certainly does present us with darkness

and death. But it also rotates into brightness and light. It is this playful rotation that distinguishes the Maya of Vedanta from the Satan of the *Old Testament*. It could be that the latter has also had influence on artistic expression in the West. The number of dramatists far exceeds the number of comedians (and many contemporary “comedians” are simply mean-spirited self-promoters). Their skewed perspective emerges especially clearly when the subject of death gets illustrated in dramatic form. The narrative generally assumes a grim, judgmental flavor and more often than not ends ominously. On the other hand are those exceptions that pop up here and there, such as Woody Allen’s short dialogue/play entitled “Death Knocks.” In it the protagonist, an everyman named Nat Ackerman, receives an uninvited guest—the Medieval Grim Reaper—to his apartment in New York. “Mr. Reaper” is there to collect Nat for his trip to the great beyond, but Nat has other ideas. As the play opens, Death has arrived through the window:

Death: (for it is no one else) “Jesus Christ. I almost broke my neck.”

Nat: (watching with bewilderment): “Who are you?”

Death: “Death.”

Nat: “Who?”

Death: “Death, listen—can I sit down? I nearly broke my neck. I’m shaking like a leaf.”

Nat: “Who *are* you?”

Death: “Death. You got a glass of water?”

Nat: “What do you mean, death?”

Death: “What is wrong with you? You see the black costume and the whitened face?”

Nat: “Yeah.”

Death: “Is it Halloween?”

Nat: “No.”

Death: “Then I’m Death. Now can I get a glass of water—or a Fresca?”

Nat: “If this is some joke—“

Death: “What kind of joke? You’re fifty-seven? Nat Ackerman? One Eighteen Pacific Street? Unless I blew it—where’s that call sheet? (*He fumbles through pocket, finally producing a card with an address on it. It seems to check.*)

Nat: “What do you want with me?”

Death: “What do I want? What do you think I want?”

Nat: “You must be kidding. I’m in perfect health.”

Death: (*unimpressed*) “Uh-huh. (*Looking around*)

This is a nice place. You do it yourself?”

Nat: “We had a decorator, but we worked with her”

Death: (*looking at the picture on the wall*) “I love those kids with the big eyes. “

Nat: “I don’t want to go yet.”

Death: “*You* don’t want to go? Please don’t start in. As it is, I’m nauseous from the climb.”

Nat: “What climb?”

Death: “I climbed up the drainpipe. I was trying to make a dramatic entrance. I see the big windows and you awake reading. I figure it’s worth a shot. I’ll climb up and enter with a little—you know . . . (*snaps fingers*). Meanwhile, I get my heel caught on some vines, the drainpipe breaks, and I’m hanging by a thread. Then my cape begins to tear. Look, let’s just go. It’s been a rough night.”

Nat: “You broke my drainpipe?”

Death: “Broke. It didn’t break. It’s a little bent. Didn’t you hear anything? I slammed into the ground.”

Nat: “I was reading.”

Death: “you must have really been engrossed. (*lifting newspaper Nat was reading*) ‘NAB COEDS IN POT ORGY.’ Can I borrow this?”

Nat: “I’m not finished.”

Death: “Er—I don’t know how to put this to you, pal . . .”

Nat: “Why didn’t you just ring downstairs?”

Death: “I’m telling you I could have, but how does it look? This way I get a little drama going. Something. Did you read *Faust*?”

Death: “And what if you had company? You’re sitting there with important people. I’m Death—I should ring the bell and traipse right in the front? Where’s your thinking?”

Nat: “Listen, Mister, it’s very late.”

Death: “Yeah, well, you want to go?”

Nat: “Go where?”

Death: “Death. It. The Thing. The Happy Hunting Grounds. (*looking at his own knee*) Y’know, that’s a pretty bad cut. My first job. I’m liable to get gangrene yet.”

Nat: “Now, wait a minute. I need time. I’m not ready to go.”

Death: “I’m sorry. I can’t help you. I’d like to, but it’s the moment.”

Nat: “How can it be the moment? I just merged with Modiste Originals.

Death: “What’s the difference, a couple of bucks more or less.”

Nat: “Sure, what do you care? You guys probably have all your expenses paid.”

Death: “You want to come along now?”

Nat: (*studying him*) I’m sorry, but I cannot believe you are Death.”

Death: Why? What’d you expect—Rock Hudson?”  
(Woody Allen, “Death Knocks,”)