

2/12/13

Verse 9 continued.

Growing on both sides, in a blossoming state,
is the one vine which has come, spread out and risen to the top of a
tree;
remember that hell does not come
to the man dwelling in contemplation beneath it.

The second half of Verse 9 begins with a guided meditation that is one of the most valuable moments in all of the study. If it is simply read, it is interesting enough, but if it is practiced—really dived into—it establishes the witness as an authentic grounding place of our mind. It is well worth taking a chunk of time to really sink into this section, because we routinely mistake our ego for the witness. Nitya takes us in several directions into the unconscious and unknown, helping us to bring our awareness to a neutral position that is at once dynamic and steady. He guides us through the horizontal and vertical parameters of our individuality, converting them from abstract ideas into vibrant realities, something we should have done already but probably haven't. He tells us that the main thrust of the study up till now has been to reveal this place of witness, which tends to get lost in the chaos of life, so that we can bring our full attention there as we go forward.

Because of its critical importance, I read out the material slowly and with some brief pauses. At home you could take even more time with it.

As we sank into the peace of being guided by Nitya's words, an interesting thing happened, almost as if it was a staged demonstration. He begins by saying, "Now turn inward and watch the silent depth of the unconscious. See how from that depth, into which we cannot penetrate, ideas spring up, concepts come as mental pictures." With the spreading quiet, I heard the faint whirring of the fan upstairs. I excused myself to go turn it off. Everyone present experienced some sort of mental image of me

getting up, mounting the stairs, flipping the switch, a fan slowing down and stopping, and me returning to my seat. All very plausible. The only problem was that it was all supplied by their mind making a sequence of educated guesses. No one could watch me, and most people had their eyes closed anyway.

Our life is like that all day long. We register a tiny amount of information and create a world out of it. For the most part it works well enough. But if we're not careful, the falsity of our speculation can lead us to base our existence on all sorts of hazardous fictions. These are the clinging vines of Verse 9, that are reaching out to hold us fast and squeeze the life out of us. Only with a rigorous questioning and regular self-examination can we avoid being tightly bound by our mental outlook.

Image production is merely the first of a long list of binding factors that Nitya leads us to observe. Despite a fascinating and penetrating class, we barely touched on the full import of the chapter. Anyone serious about this project of heightened self-awareness should spend some time reviewing these ideas. As we proceeded it became clear that the reverse of Narayana Guru's proposition is also true: while a committed contemplative can steer clear of the vines, hell does indeed come to those who, willfully or not, ignore them, or prefer to pretend they don't matter. The Guru knew well the pain and suffering that we humans inflict on each other, and his motive was to keep us from being caught up in it and destroyed. His imagery is much more than a pretty fairytale. I want to quote Nitya at length about this, because it recapitulates the whole point of what we are about:

There is an element of fakery and deception when a preconceived, prefabricated version of life is presented to us. It disguises the essential true nature behind it. Freud and people like him did great service to humanity by pointing out that both situations and the people who are confronted by situations wear masks, and we should tear them away in order to be fully alive. When you are centered in the witnessing consciousness you can

clearly see the painted masks worn by people and events. Very few people, however, know the nature of the reality hidden behind them.

We are here in a search to see what is behind the masks. What is immediately behind them are the very many urges which we call incipient memories, or *vasanas*. For these forces defense is absolutely necessary, and the mask itself is the defense mechanism. Unfortunately, while these masks protect society, they also blindfold the individual from seeing his own reality.

In the present verse, Narayana Guru implores us to come out of this deluding situation, to sit outside it and then watch the game. Once your mask is gone, it is easy for the witnessing consciousness to establish itself on the ground of an absolutist norm, such as universal truth, universal goodness, universal beauty. That's why he said the person sitting under that terrible tree can do *tapas*. The need to be austere was already suggested in verse 8; here that austerity is made a permanent feature and not just a single action. The act of bringing down the birds progresses to a habitual performance of *tapas*.

Deb's opening idea was that by turning toward the nebulous unknown of our unconscious, it's a kind of invitation for it to communicate with us, marooned as we are in our conscious mind. Ideas and images start to speak to us, and they can teach us a new way of looking. She of course has been blessed to have acres of beneficial seeds planted in her good soil, and they have had many, many years to grow. She's a walking advertisement for the value of starting your garden early in life: eventually we can come to trust our inner voice, because we have confirmed its authenticity by a process of trial and error.

I added that we tend to think of the flow as a one way stream from the vast unconscious into our severely limited conscious, and for the most part that's how it works, but the reason spiritual effort matters is that our own conscious thoughts are also like seeds

planted in the depths. The more intensely we hold them, the deeper they are inserted. Buried in fertile loam, they sprout and grow leaves and branches, making their way back into awareness or shaping the topography just beneath the surface. Our task as conscious beings is to distinguish between the valuable ones and the toxic regurgitation of negative input, but the least we can do is take care to only plant good seeds. In a world where good and bad are casually intermixed and often outright inverted, that in itself is a challenge.

Nitya was very conscious of planting beneficial seeds in the hearts of all who listened to him, hoping they would fall on well prepared soil so they would take root and grow strong. It seems the more we attend, the more we will get out of it. I want to clip in the closing paragraphs of Verse 65, which I excerpted for the front flap of the book, to show how this works. Nitya was summing up what we had done so far, because he was preparing to go on a short trip:

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.

Along with the good seeds, we have also been the recipients of many seeds guaranteed to grow poisonous plants and noxious weeds. Some were inculcated in us with the best intentions; others were delivered with hostility. The sad fact is that their voices sound nearly identical in our mind, so we can't be sure which is which. We have to have what Nataraja Guru called a normative notion, a solid basis for distinguishing what is valuable and what isn't. Social norms are seriously flawed nowadays, as I'm sure everyone realizes. We have been weaned away from our commonsense and fed on a diet of official policy: what is useful to someone else instead of what is true. Our natural intuition is smacked out of us as kids — there is an authentic voice but we substitute the voice of authority and then eventually we don't know if we are hearing the true voice or the fake voice.

Mick reminded us that if we take our study seriously, it means we will understand and forgive everyone their trespasses. They have all become bound to harsh attitudes because of their environmental influences. We should get over our deep-seated urge to blame others. It's true. I have often wondered where we draw the line between innocent children as victims and when they become guilty perpetrators. Where is the conversion point? Abused children grow up to be abusers, but they don't choose it, it is foisted on them. The real question is how do we interrupt the continuum of misery and despair we—often with honorable intent—uphold? That is one thing we as yogis are resolved to do. But having even the slightest impact seems impossible. We wonder how does a Narayana Guru somehow manage to transform an entire region of the world, when we share his ideals but accomplish nothing or very nearly nothing?

It may be that the unconscious is in fact a collective proposition, as Jung theorized, and all our yearning finds an outlet in a single exemplary person who fortune favors at the right time

and place. Then the collective unconscious is like the manifested Absolute: a total conglomeration of all potentials, and each individual is a unique “face” or facet, peering out of the mass from its own perspective.

The class talked about some of the implications, how we are all then related to each other, and what that means for how we treat our family. Guy Murchie, in *The Seven Mysteries of Life*, calculated that the most disparate two people on earth are no farther apart than 50th cousins. Most of us are in the 4-10th cousin range. (Indians know they are all cousins, and manage to stay in contact with many of them.) Murchie also pointed out that sexual reproduction has been around for about 2/3 of a billion years, and each living being is a product of 100% successful reproduction over that time! It makes it seem like each of us is impossibly miraculous. Which we are, we are.

Given the miracle of existence and our close kinship in it, how is it we are so awful to each other? Mick told his tale of narakam, hell, and it is indeed epic. I think I’ll skip the lengthy details. Suffice to say his world nearly totally collapsed, due to societal standards that few of us agree with. The legal system is a polite mask on a gaping maw of greed and exploitation that is devouring hapless souls at a shocking rate. Mick was fortunate to emerge relatively intact—he acknowledged that many suffer much more than he has, especially people of color.

The universal side of Mick’s story is that most of us have touched hell in some form, and avoiding it is a prime mover in our lives. Many strategies are faulty; Narayana Guru is offering us a method that actually works. It’s not so much a method as a heightened awareness of the context. Staying awake in a soporific world. What has galled Mick ever since the incident twenty-one years ago is that he intuited that trouble was brewing and ignored his own inner voice. Like most of us, he had learned to override his intuition with conscious deliberation. Those clinging vines are invisible, unfortunately: we only become aware of them when they have encircled us and hold us fast. So Mick knows beyond a

shadow of a doubt that we should pay attention to our inner voice, and regrets that he didn't. The problem is sorting the true voice from the lying, deceptive tracks laid down by selfish and deranged fellow beings. This is not a job for the faint of heart or mind. We have all caught a deadly serious disease, whether we realize it or not.

Narayana Guru's compassion is woven into the very fabric of the hundred verses of Self-instruction. Discriminating between our true and false instincts is a perennial challenge, and this is some of the best help to be found anywhere. There are several more obvious impediments we can remove fairly easily. Then there are the advanced levels of challenges that we will get some indication about, but it's a tossup whether we can break free of them or not. In any case we are being offered a helping hand where few are qualified to reach out. There is every chance of a significant upgrade to our capabilities. If we can disentangle ourselves from the vines that have already gotten hold of us, we can begin to heal the wounds they have imparted.

Several people recalled Jill Bolte's Taylor's advice from *My Stroke of Insight*. Anger is a normal chemical reaction to threat, but after 90 seconds the chemicals have been metabolized. After that it is our choice whether to hold the anger or let it go. If we are wounded, we tend to hold on tight to the anger, as if it will protect us from future harm. In fact, it makes us more prone to injury. Like attracts like: anger attracts anger, misery attracts misery. We need to let it all go.

Several people acknowledged the veiled blessing of traumas in their lives. If we don't get a whiff of brimstone (the scent of hell) we may remain blissful unaware of the twists and kinks that oppress our system. We need a wakeup call. Only when our masks fail us do we begin to look for something better. It was gratifying to see that so many in the class have gained enough strength to appreciate the value of their hard lessons, because many people spend a lifetime in avoidance mode—medicating themselves or

otherwise distracting themselves. Needless to say, that is not the way of the yogi.

Michael invoked a metaphor of a bit of yarn from a sweater that you pull on, and as you keep pulling the whole garment unravels. He remembered that his father died far away when he was 9, and there was no closure, no acknowledgment, no chance to deal with it. He was unable to grieve until his first acid trip at 18. That pointed him toward the wisdom traditions, and he began moving forward instead of remaining frozen at the edge of an abyss.

Deb lamented that unfortunately we have been taught not to trust our inner voice. Adults didn't want to listen to us. We made mistakes and were smacked for them, or humiliated some other way. We learned early on to bottle up our impulses, to hold ourselves back. That has become a chronic, crippling posture. We are beginning to try to straighten up.

Interestingly, Susan is doing bodywork that links actual posture with mental posture, and she feels significantly liberated by it. It's called the Alexander Technique. Here's what she told us last night:

My teacher and I work on different movements of the body in order to allow the most natural way of moving to happen. My teacher was having me turn my head and she said my eyes needed to lead the movement; I needed to be looking for something over my shoulder in order to turn my head. She demonstrated this kind of movement and then asked me to try it. I got the image of her movement and imitated it because that is what I am used to doing when I learn. She redirected me to use my eyes and not think about how she had done it. So I really put myself in *my* eyes and I imagined something over my shoulder and I tried to see it and Voila! I turned my head in a way that was naturally good for me, rather than harmful. I see how much this is related to our Vedanta study — again I am learning to start in my core. Instead of first seeing what

others are doing or what the rules are, I am inhibiting and restraining the conditioned voices and images, which allows the truth of the body and the mind to surface, flourish, emerge.

As Nitya concluded, there are many ways to reclaim our authenticity, or as he puts it, “to achieve detachment from the ensnaring creepers of the world tree, and to cultivate an absolutist vision which can turn individuation into a tool to serve the purpose of higher truth, goodness and beauty.” It all depends on what appeals to us, but then we have to give our choice a decent try. What we prefer most of the time, unless we are discontent, is to just have fun and forget about it. That works fine, until it doesn’t. But a little progress also makes us feel pretty darn good. So it’s worth retaining some dedication to keep up the tapas, because there is much more freedom we can attain if we keep at it. Perhaps it’s simply a matter of redefining fun as something more serious than the trivial and escapist entertainment commonly and commercially associated with it.

Again, my apologies for all the shared wisdom I couldn’t fit into these notes. Several wonderful contributions have had to be left out. When Jan paints her recent vision, we will speak of it again. And any of you who feels slighted can send me a prompt or write something yourself. Thanks to everyone for a most delightful evening, and Happy Valentine’s Day to all you lovable souls around the globe!

Part II

A new friend from New Delhi, Rajen, has been looking into That Alone and sent a Basic Doubt about the effectiveness of working on oneself, which I think is widely held. John H also wanted to know more about tapas, or austerity. Certainly, if one doesn’t see the point of self-correction, one will never make the necessary effort it requires. In an attempt to clear this question up, I sent them fragments of my Gita XVII commentary dealing with

austerity. If the issue bothers you too, you may want to dip into the long selection below, otherwise Party On! Rajen wrote:

The entity that goes with the name of Rajen has been studying the Class-material as also the book, 'That Alone'. This entity, as would appear, consists of a conglomerate of the mind and the body. The mind-body mechanism transacts with the outside, as also the inside, world through the five senses. All formulations are constructed and concepts conceived by the mind with the help of the senses employing the inner faculty. It would imply that the mind-body mechanism cannot know the Truth of both the Knower as also the Known.

No effort of any kind – *tapas* or mediation of one kind or the other, 'witnessing' included - whether undertaken by the individual himself or under guidance of a Guru, can, seemingly, lead to knowing the Knower. Realization cannot be made to happen. It would seem, whatever happens just happens.

In short, there appears to be no path that can be charted to the core of Being. One knows not, if the the conclusion has been rightly drawn. One needs to understand, then, the need for study of 'That Alone' through the class or through the book.

Prey, please share your enlightened response.

Dear Rajen,

That is indeed a basic and even essential doubt. Let's see if I can say anything pertinent. My commentary on Gita Chapter XVII covers the subject in depth. You can read the whole thing here: <http://scotteitsworth.tripod.com/id50.html> . I take on many of the popular notions of spirituality in it.

I agree, charting a course is a distracting idea, a typically human mania. A study such as That Alone is to correct a number of false assumptions that we carry, often without realizing it. If we don't

take a close look at ourselves, we retain some prejudices and distortions that spoil the joy of life. I'm sure you're familiar with Gita chapter V, which expresses this idea thus:

15) The all-pervading One takes cognizance neither of the sinful nor the meritorious actions of anyone; wisdom is veiled by unwisdom; beings are deluded thereby.

16) To those, however, in whom that unwisdom in the Self has been destroyed, wisdom shines sunlike as the Ultimate.

We destroy unwisdom by turning to the Absolute (That Alone) and shedding the veil. There's no course involved.

From Ch. XVII:

7) Even the food which is dear to everyone is of three kinds, as also the sacrifices, austerities and gifts. Hear you of the distinction between them.

If there was any doubt before, this verse makes it clear that the rainbow arch of the Gita is coming back down to address the basics once again, as practical matters begin to predominate over the theoretical. The Gita is like a sonata-form work where we return at the end to the original ideas, but they have been subtly transformed by the profundity of the development that has been going on since their introduction. Or like the famous Zen saying “Before enlightenment, chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water.” Nothing is different, and yet everything is different.

The four categories listed here (food, sacrifices, austerities and gifts) comprise the bulk of this chapter, and each will be closely examined in turn. Taken together in the broadest sense they cover the full range of life values. Krishna wants to demonstrate

how the spiritual experience we have undergone percolates into every aspect of existence, infusing it with new energy and wisdom.

Generally speaking, food is what you take in; gifts are what you dispense outward. There should be a balance in these two factors. That's why a disciple is expected to do something tangible in return for a guru's instruction, to give something back for the feast they have been served. At the very least they should ask a cogent question to show they have been paying attention. Those who merely show up for classes and slip away into the night are a kind of spiritual voyeur. Reciprocation provides opportunities to practice what has been heard. The Computer Age slogan "Garbage in, garbage out" reflects this idea. Systems, whether living or mechanical, respond in kind to their input. Therefore we are enjoined by the very structure of Reality to be wise and kind and thoughtful, and keep things circulating. The aim is "high quality in, high quality out."

Sacrifices and austerities form another pair of twin concepts. Here in the chapter about religion they can be thought of as outwardly and inwardly directed efforts toward union with the Absolute, respectively. Tapas is the word used here for austerity; later I have converted it to discipline, which is a more suitably up-to-date term. Nowadays spiritual efforts are less austere than in the old days, but hopefully, guided by intelligence, good discipline can be just as efficacious in bringing about a state of dynamic equipoise.

Lastly, it is important for us to recall verse VIII, 28:

Whatever meritorious result is found implied in the Vedas, in sacrifices, austerities and in gifts, the contemplative who is unitively established, having understood this (teaching), transcends all these and attains to the supreme primal state.

Krishna also tells Arjuna in XI, 53, after he comes down from his trip:

Not by worship, nor by austerity, nor by gifts, nor by sacrifice, can I be seen in this form as you have seen Me.

The Gita does not consider religious performances in themselves as being conducive to or productive of realization. They are to be performed without reference to any merit, according to the scale of values that is about to be enunciated. Sattvic practices naturally lead to positive outcomes, rajasic ones to mixed benefits, and tamasic activities to negative results. Therefore, for a scripture that advocates relinquishment of benefits, the gunas have to be transcended.

Verses 16-19 are also on the subject (see website). For instance, in 16:

The very major idea here is that the proper restraint for the ego is to keep it from spinning its own self-serving tales to justify its absurdities, so that we can pay attention instead to the flow of genuine inspiration from the center of the universe inside our being. The cheesy story we are telling the world to justify ourselves sells our soul short, very short. Disciplining the mind to be honest with itself promotes psychic expansion.

I later added:

Dear Rajen,

Sorry--I had to run out for an errand. I thought that verse 9, which we have just completed, was all the rationale anyone needed for study. We live in a world of entanglements, equipped with brains that when they aren't functioning optimally are inclined to become addicted and attached to those entanglements. That Alone is a textbook for keeping free of them, so we can enjoy our personal integrity and remain able to pursue our best instincts. Of course, if you don't feel it serves that purpose for you, you are perfectly free to discard it. It's up to you.

As to your specific question, the Knower is not limited to what is known (fortunately for us, since we know so little!). It is not to be sought as an aspect of the known. It is already complete in itself. But you have supplied an axiom: the knower is not knowable, and then drawn the logical conclusion that then there is no point in trying to know. It's another instance of a false (or arbitrary) premise leading to a false (or arbitrary) conclusion. I agree that your conclusion is "rightly drawn," only from a wrong basis, and that can be corrected if you wish. That Alone study can reveal this type of distorting premise hidden in our habitual modes of thinking.

All the best,
Scott

From my Chapter XVII Gita commentary, the long version:

14) Worship offered to the gods, to wisdom-initiates, to spiritual teachers, and the wise generally, cleanliness, straightforwardness, the chaste ways of a wisdom novice, and non-hurting, are said to constitute discipline of the body.

Krishna next elucidates the practice of discipline, broken down into three categories of efforts related to the body, speech and mind. Later he will assess them in terms of sattva, rajas and tamas. I have used the less intense word *discipline* here. Nataraja Guru uses the term austerity, which is most common; Radhakrishnan has it as penance; and Mitchell says control (again more of a Buddhistic take). All these words tend to have negative connotations that strike me as alien to Krishna's teaching.

The Gita is gracious enough to define austerity or discipline in detail for us, as it covers a lot of territory. The Gita was composed when people did grotesque and bizarre things in hopes of achieving a higher state of mind, or simply to attract attention. Self-torture and mutilation were not uncommon. Still, the three

categories are relevant even regarding the comfortable “austerities” of today.

The discipline of the body listed here includes worship, cleanliness, honesty or uprightness, brahmacharya, and ahimsa or non-hurting. Worship is discussed here and in Chapter IX; the rest are covered in depth in XIII, 7, except for brahmacharya in VI, 14. While they are all primarily mental, here they are related to the body, in other words, to active behaviors. Earlier they were discussed in general terms, but here we need to examine them as modes of action.

Worship, then, is not only one-pointed attention to gods, gurus and fellow disciples, active interaction has to take place with them. All three are to be treated with respect, and also intelligently responded to. The Gita never advocates lying on the floor and trembling, but a certain amount of deference is important. We need to remember we are learning and not swagger around as know-it-alls. For those of us who don't care for gods as they appear in the popular imagination, they can stand for ideals, archetypes, essentials. As an example, if music is one of your gods, you don't just listen when fate bring music to you, you go to concerts, support your friends who are musicians, perhaps even learn an instrument. You actively meditate on pieces that move you, going deeper into their meaning by careful listening. Worshipping music in this way sets you apart from the casual listeners who don't know much, but they know what they like.

Tagore has written a sweet line about worship of the dualistic stripe: “God waits to win back his own flowers as gifts from man's hands.” The universe is pouring wonders down upon us all the time. What is it that you will do to reciprocate? Whatever you decide, if done with sincere dedication, is your worship.

Saucha, purity or cleanliness, especially in relation to this chapter, means not holding on to fixed ideas which impede the natural flow of life. We have to scrub ourselves free of the clinging dirt of ignorance. Cherished beliefs direct us according to the ego's preferences, with consequent disasters great and small, but spiritual

life is only free when this type of habitual behavior is abandoned in favor of direct inspiration of the Absolute. Call it a deeper level of the mind than the ego if you wish. In a sense we must become transparent to the impetus of the Absolute. This does not mean just being a puppet on the divine hand, but it should energize a creative interaction between our highest abilities and the perceived inspiration from “within” or “beyond.” Above all, we must be free from our own prejudices in order to respond appropriately to every new situation. This is the antidote to the problem of verse 3, where we learned we are what we believe, and what we believe makes us who we are. Self-description is stultifying, constricting. Give it up, and leave room for “an imagination of creative transparency” which will be put forward in verse 16 as a discipline of the mind.

Arjavam means not only “straightforwardness” but honesty and sincerity. Even if we pretend to inner honesty, we often assume a pose to convince other people that we are something other than what we are. That's because we have learned to not accept ourselves as good enough, and that needs to be rectified. Aligning our inner and outer self-images is *arjavam*. It's a tricky business. Being honest with ourselves is famously difficult, so a trusted advisor can be a big help in weaning us from our meticulously selected deceptions, and even some of our unconscious ones.

“The chaste ways of a wisdom novice” is a poetic description of *brahmacharya*, more literally “walking in the path of the Absolute.” If our spiritual transformation only takes place in our mind, it isn't “real.” It has to be real-ized. Our relation to the Absolute should have an impact on how we act, such as by being more environmentally conscious and more loving toward our fellow creatures. Awareness of the feelings of other people and the coherence of their preferred systems enlarges our spiritual capacity, and what we do for them enlarges the space we inhabit, in a positive feedback loop.

As far as chastity goes, Guru Nitya has written that purity of intent is chasteness. Prostitution, then, occurs when we trade our

innocent motivations for temporal gains. Life continually forces us to decide between staying true to our ideals or compromising them for convenience. If our ideals are valid, we should wear them without shame. This is the most central vow a brahmachari makes.

If there is a path of the Absolute for us to walk it implies there are other paths that lead away from it. If we are insecure or poorly informed, we may walk into bondage instead of freedom. Many binding factors masquerade as tools of liberation, convincingly praised by ardent proponents. A yogi has to examine them carefully to see how they might catch you. Careful examination means listening with the heart as well as applying the intelligence.

Non-hurting, ahimsa, ranges from the simplest physical restraint from causing harm to the subtleties of optimal interpersonal interaction. One overlooked aspect of ahimsa is that we should include ourselves in those who we refuse to hurt. Many people, because of the way they were raised, believe it is their duty to suffer so that others can have their way. Learning to love and respect ourselves means both being kind toward our own feelings and resistance to the abuses some people feel justified in heaping on us.

A number of the categories here overlap Patanjali's Yoga, in his section on restraints and observances (*yamas* and *niyamas*).

15) Inoffensive speech, which is truthful, pleasant and beneficial, and contemplative self-study, are named the discipline of speech.

A casual reading of instructions like this may inspire us to carefully craft our words, but that type of over-management is egoistic rather than spiritual, even if it is done with the best of intentions. That's not what is meant here. Truly inspiring speech comes as evidence of our inner state of union. Brain observations have shown that thoughts coalesce in secret for a long time before they burst into conscious awareness. Sure, we can do some last minute editing, biting our tongue to avoid uttering some “zinger,”

but the yogic way is to harmonize our psyche first, so that what comes out of our mouths is like a flower fragrance from our well-tended garden and not the stench of an uncomposted manure pile.

To help insure we fully understand, Krishna qualifies inoffensive speech with three important adjectives: it must be truthful, pleasant and beneficial. Non-contemplatives stop at pleasant and call it good, but it is even more important that what we say is truthful and beneficial. If there is no benefit, we might as well keep our mouths shut.

Inoffensive speech isn't quite what it sounds like, that we are not supposed to say anything controversial or confrontational. For those who cherish wisdom, merely pleasant chatter itself is highly offensive, as they don't want to waste time on meaningless conversation. What is implied here is that since what we say has an impact, often a surprisingly large one, we need to take care not only that our communication doesn't inadvertently cause harm, but that it is a positive force, an essential part of the wisdom sacrifice.

As we mature we begin to realize just how powerful words are, so we restrain ourselves from flinging them around as wantonly as we did in our younger days. An ill-begotten sentence can send someone into a tailspin, while a well-chosen one can lift another out of the dumps. Pretty much everyone attains that much wisdom. But there is another dimension here which is often overlooked, that words are a key to explore the inner kingdom.

Self-study, *svadhyaya*, is the flip side of well-chosen speech, and they very much go together. What we say is incisive thought directed outwards, self-study is incisive thought directed inward. In both cases it is a flexible vehicle for exploring the terrain, not a bulldozer to level it.

There are some shocking translations of *svadhyaya*, taking it to mean chanting the Vedas, which is utterly alien to the spirit of the Gita. *Svadhyaya* is also one of Patanjali's observances, forming part of the second of his eight limbs of yoga. It is a critical enquiry into the nature of the self. Many ritualistic practices have been introduced over the centuries that purport to further self-awareness

but actually divert attention from it. George Thompson even changes 'beneficial' to 'kind', further sapping the pungency of Krishna's instruction. We wind up with kindly and pleasant cheeriness interspersed with bouts of chanting, in place of a dedicated and intense search for truth. In the Sixties we called that selling out.

I'm tempted to change the translation of priya from 'pleasant' to 'endearing', which is a better indicator of the piquancy intended. The words we hear or say should make us passionately fall in love, not just smile and nod and go about our business.

Rather than repress our negativity with pleasantries we should look at it directly. On the other hand, saying nasty things to people isn't only harmful to them, it's an indicator of our own problems, like a Freudian slip. Speech is paired with self-study for this reason: we can trace back who we are through what we say. Once we have mastered our inner malformations, our upgraded state will be reflected in the way we talk.

As far as consciously editing our speech goes, we have to know ourself even better than we know the person we are addressing, to be certain what we say is appropriate. The more we know about our inner mechanisms, the better decisions we will make in our communications.

It being difficult to monitor ourselves when we are speaking, the feedback of others is very valuable in letting us know when we have said something hurtful or idiotic. You've probably noticed how people who say mean things are in the grip of some powerful emotion and are hardly aware of what they are doing. Our ability to communicate will be normalized only if the underlying trauma is healed. If we try to pretend to normalcy while still suffering, our slips will surely show.

Studying ourselves through what we say means that we have to sit in meditation and recall our conversations, taking critical comments especially to heart. In ordinary interactions, we hardly give a second thought to what we've said. But when we suffer the misery of a cleavage between a friend and us, it makes us ponder

what went wrong. It's a real opportunity to dig deep into our souls. Non-yogis search for clever ways to make excuses and defend their faults, but yogis are brave enough to accept their shortcomings. Doing so heals the rift as it reveals hidden areas of the psyche.

A master guru who has achieved self-realization utters words of such enchanting beauty that they bring healing. Gurus address the listener's situation intimately, because there is no extra weight attached to their own interests. They are like a conduit for the Absolute to shower its grace into the world. That's the kind of beneficial inoffensiveness Krishna is speaking of here.

16) Mental happiness, gentleness, silence, self-restraint, and an imagination of creative transparency, are named the discipline of the mind.

The three pronged discipline given in verses 14-16 expresses the baseline attitude of the realized seer that Arjuna is learning to be. Disciplining the mind means wrestling it into the shape described, as always from the inside out, by changing our beliefs, our sraddha. We have gone through the entire Gita with the conviction that attunement with the Absolute brings about all beneficial states in direct consequence, and that is the sure way. Still, there are times when we have to work at it, when our attention slips. If we are to fall back on mechanical corrections, it doesn't hurt to have a blueprint of what an enlightened state of mind looks like.

Krishna gives a classic description of a peaceable wise person here, gentle, quiet and happy. When aggressive types assert that the Gita is the scripture that advocates and legitimizes war, they are missing almost the whole point of Krishna's teaching. It's hard to see where belligerence might fit into this verse. Yes, there are rare instances where fighting is called for in life, but they are very much the exception, and they are to be met with the unitive attitude presented here, not with anger and hostility.

The verse is perfectly straightforward, except Nataraja Guru has a unique take on *bhava samshuddhi*, rendering it as “an imagination of creative transparency.” The dictionary gives it as “purity of mind.” Since the Guru does not explain in his commentary, we have to bring what we've learned so far to bear.

“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.

Self-restraint is a very interesting topic. To many people, “effacing the ego” means suppressing the capacity and inclination to make judgments. But judging is one of the most essential contributions of the frontal cortex, the most “human” part of the brain, so suppressing it is a serious mistake. It's true that wrestling your judging capacity down will give you a heavy workout, as your natural good sense repeatedly tries to stand up and be counted and you struggle to squelch it, but this is an excellent example of how effort alone is not the measure of spiritual worth. Even more importantly, allowing our impulses to run wild, free of judicious restraints, is not the same as being harmonized with the Absolute, the yearnings of youthful folly notwithstanding.

What really needs to be minimized if not effaced by self-restraint is our egoistic talent for making excuses and rationalizing

what we do, and this is something we seldom feel guilty about. We are more likely to hotly defend it, in fact. Here's how it works. An action propensity is activated deep in the unconscious, in what we collectively refer to as the seedbed of vasanas, and various parts of the brain begin to arrange the local environment to make the propensity's expression not only possible but fruitful. The action gestalt becomes seasoned with samskaras-the neurological “shape” the brain has been trained into-as it moves toward consciousness. When it is as fully prepared as possible, it begins to actually unfold, and as it does our conscious mind witnesses it and at the same time invents a plausible explanation for it. If the action itself is called into question by someone, the ego defends it tooth and claw, employing various strategies to depose the challenge, even changing its cover story at will to oppose the challenge. We defend most sanctimoniously the aspects of ourself we least want anyone else to be aware of. If we are comfortable with something, we have no need to defend it. Knowing this, we can overcome our inner traumas if we are brave enough to stand up to them.

Douglas Adams had a lot of fun with this propensity of the ego in his masterful novel, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*. To demonstrate how the mind excels at making excuses for the most inexcusable actions, which is a major subtheme of the book, Dirk makes a post-hypnotic suggestion to a client to jump into a filthy canal and then find himself unable to swim, when he hears a certain code word when they go out walking later on. When Dirk fishes him out, the client has perfectly rational explanations for all of his actions, only we as readers know they have nothing at all to do with the real motivation, which was the hypnotic suggestion. And as Steven Heller maintains in *Monsters and Magical Sticks*, we are all hypnotizing others and being hypnotized pretty much all the time. That means we are also defending ourselves with invented rationalizations pretty much all the time.

The very major idea here is that the proper restraint for the ego is to keep it from spinning its own self-serving tales to justify

its absurdities, so that we can pay attention instead to the flow of genuine inspiration from the center of the universe inside our being. The cheesy story we are telling the world to justify ourselves sells our soul short, very short. Disciplining the mind to be honest with itself promotes psychic expansion.

17) This threefold discipline, practiced with transcendent faith by unitively balanced yogis, without desire of gain, is named sattvic.

The sattvic mentality minimizes selfish motivation. Things are done because they are beautiful in themselves. The disciplines of body, speech and mind are a most fulfilling way to live, because they go a long way in freeing us from our ailments.

It's a curious paradox that by seeking rewards, life becomes less and less rewarding. Honing in on the essence of every act, free from the anxiety of hoping for a payback, opens the door to blissful existence at every moment.

The only addition this verse adds to the previous three is that they are to be practiced with transcendent faith, *paraya sraddha*. This is not the simple one-to-one faith that doing certain actions brings predictable results, automatically turning us into realized beings. Conversion remains mysterious and unpredictable. It's the faith of the seers in XI, 21, where “bands of great rishis and Perfected Ones hail You [the Absolute] with the cry 'May it be well!' and praise You with resounding hymns.” Transcendent faith means we acquiesce in the unfolding magical mystery tour of the Absolute, and don't feel like we have to make anything happen. It's already happening; all we have to do is join in.

18) That discipline which is practiced for gaining respect, honor, reverence, and for the sake of show, is named rajasic, changeful and insecure.

When we do what we do with others' opinions in mind we lose the sense of security that comes from being grounded in our

deepest Self. There is always some doubt as to how other people are reacting to us. Are they buying our act, or do we need to lay it on more thickly? Is their reaction sincere or are they merely feigning interest? Can I do more to win them over? And so on. When we rely on others to ratify and guide our existence, our life is always “changeable and insecure” no matter how good the performance.

I'm afraid what we have here is an incisive description of the human mentality, pretty much summing up the baseline angst of the isolated individuals we have all become. So sad!

Leaving aside the legitimate worries of those inhabiting the world of political intrigue, who quite rightly fear for their bartered lives, very few of us have established a sense of ultimate security based on the beneficence of the Absolute. Yogis are directed to cultivate confidence based on the continuous support that comes to them, but this is hard to learn. In its place we scheme and calculate, measure and compare, and always imagine we come up short in the deals we negotiate. Krishna has been doing his best to convince Arjuna that he can go forth in full assurance of his support, that if he stops flailing in the river of life he will float quite naturally. This is the great mental leap that sannyasa, subject of the next and final chapter, requires us to make.

We have examined the root causes of insecurity in depth already: how when children are not taken seriously and treated with respect they decide they must invent substitutes that will command the admiration and cooperation of those around them. Regardless of whether these artificial personas work well or poorly, we who wield them always feel anxious, because we well know that they are false even as we insist on their veracity. Unlike the Absolute, our creations are bound to be less than perfect, tailored as they are to limited circumstances, and when conditions change they no longer fit as well as they once did. We are eternally struggling to readjust our persona to fit new situations, or else bluffing harder and harder to convince our associates that nothing is the matter, that there is no disconnect between appearance and

reality. The only way to slide out from under the cloud of anxiety this generates is to become ourselves again, jettisoning the persona and accepting ourselves with all our flaws, bravely prepared to accept the inevitable criticism we will get for doing so.

This doesn't mean we have to become uncivilized to be ourselves. That popular *sradha* has caused oceans of barbaric behavior in hopes that rebellion itself brings liberation. But while rejection of conformity has some value, it is only a first step, because it's still tied to the original deadness. After breaking free of it we still have to turn to our own truth, and any posturing we adopt will be just as false as the contortions society demands. The yogic ideal is to strip away all affectations.

We can maintain a decent persona to placate the world's blissful ignorance, just so long as we give up the ego's attachment to it. It's our *identity* with a fake image that causes us harm, not so much the image itself. A great many people are afraid of honesty, and will hurt you if you are honest with them. At the same time they are easy to satisfy if you simply keep quiet and smile. You can be yourself while those around you are sure you are someone else, and you can even be amused by how far off the mark they are.

The commercial world of cutthroat competitiveness is another perfect breeding ground for the rajasic charade described in this verse. If you are not securely grounded in your self, you can easily be swayed to the advantage of others. Overwhelmed by too much disparate information, everyday worries become magnified. Advertisers reinforce those anxieties and then prey on them, providing expensive and even harmful “solutions” to an ever-expanding array of invented problems. Where rishis of the past faced their challenges directly, modern day lemmings are more likely to think of themselves as helpless victims, and seek “expert” help. The syndrome is elucidated in the article *What's Normal?* by Jerome Groopman, (The New Yorker, April 9, 2007):

Phillip Blumberg, a psychotherapist in Manhattan, told me, “Psychological diagnosis is, in essence, a story. If you have a

mood disorder, there is the fear, the shame, and the confusion-the stigma-associated with it, so you want to grab on to the most concrete and clear story you can. There is something about the clarity of bipolar disease, particularly its biological basis, which is incredibly soothing and seductive.”

Blumberg... believes that advertising by pharmaceutical companies has influenced the public's view of bipolar disorder.... [He] described recent ads, for drugs like Zyprexa, that include a list of symptoms characteristic of the disorder. “But, of course, we all have these symptoms,” he said. “Sometimes we're irritable. Sometimes we're excited and elated, and we don't know why. With every form of advertising, the first goal is to make people feel insecure. Usually, they are made to feel insecure about their smell or their looks. Now we are beginning to see this in psychiatric advertising. The advertisements make frenetic, driven parents feel insecure about the behavior of their children.”

Blumberg noted that he had seen instances of the disorder in some children, and that it was a real and serious diagnosis. But he also cited the mounting pressure on children, particularly in the middle and upper classes, to succeed, first at private or selective public schools, and then at exclusive colleges and universities. “These kids become very well turned-out products,” he said. “They live to have resumes. They don't have resumes because they live.” Parents may fear that children who behave in an eccentric way are at a disadvantage, and in turn pressure the pediatrician or the psychiatrist to come up with a diagnosis and offer a treatment. “Then an industry grows up around it. This, then, enters as truth in the popular imagination.”

Rajas is a hall of broken funhouse mirrors, home to endless wandering in confusion and doubt. The only escape is to turn away from the mirrors and into your self, where you can reconnect with the solid values of the Absolute. And we should offer our kids that option, instead of simply medicating them to conform.

19) That discipline which is practiced out of foolish obstinacy, with self-torture, or for the detriment of another, is named tamasic.

According to the ancient Laws of Manu, the interpretation of austerity for brahmins was teaching and studying. For kshatriyas it was protecting the people and avoiding sensual indulgence. The bizarre austerities like those later practiced by Christian hermits and Hindu ascetics are nowhere mentioned.

At least we don't hang ourselves upside down from trees for twenty years too often these days, though India still has a smattering of gory practitioners. What are the austerities or disciplines of the present? Whatever one does in the faith that they will lead to happiness may be called austerities. People work out at the gym to become healthy and attractive. Going to school is a very long term austerity. Food obsessions, including anorexia, were already mentioned. Having a job is both a sacrifice and an austerity for many people. Going to church can be an austerity designed to prise you into heaven.

In all these you are paying dues now for gain later. When your focus is more on the actual activity, you are in sattva. If you love being in church, it's a wonderful thing. When your focus is displaced to far in the future it is more rajasic. You don't really enjoy church, but it's your ticket to eternal salvation. And when there is no connection between what you're doing and what will come of it, it is tamasic. You've sneaked into the back pew to avoid the cops.

The Gita offers these categories with the idea that each person will be making up their own mind in their own way. Indeed, as in the example above, what is tamasic for me may well be sattvic for you, and vice versa. None of this is fixed or obligatory; it is for us to find our own freedom, and that is guaranteed to be an individual proposition.

Foolish obstinacy! Who hasn't known something important and yet been unable to get it across to a stubborn opponent? You can recall your own examples to illustrate this verse. It seems the

more warped the belief, the more tenaciously it is clung to. We can use the stubbornness itself as a diagnostic tool.

I remember talking to a highly intelligent friend who exercised daily for an hour, about a recent study that the optimum amount of exercise was twenty minutes, three times a week, and that the benefits tailed off beyond that amount. He just kept saying no, no, no and shaking his head. In the US, we are saturated in a society that puts physical culture ahead of the life of the mind. This should have been great news, freeing up more time for other interests, but my friend took it as a threat to his ongoing program and rejected it out of hand.

Likewise, yoga has come to mean calisthenics and stretching exercises, and people look at you as if you're crazy if you suggest that it is anything else.

These are relatively trivial instances of unnecessary mule-headedness. Delving into more serious matters, how about the unshakable prejudices that draw nations into war, or that tempt politicians to dismantle their country's infrastructure based on dogmatic beliefs? Once upon a time the US built itself up into an economic and cultural powerhouse with community projects described as democratic. Then some clever ideologues started describing the same projects as socialist (a dirty word in the US) and those programs were dismantled with alacrity.

There are a thousand “spiritual” techniques guaranteed to bring enlightenment or levitation or wealth, and partisans spend countless hours chanting or gazing at this or that. Most of it is self-hypnosis or delirium, but they cling to it with full conviction.

We have talked at length elsewhere about child-rearing techniques that are punitive and crushing to the child, but which parents, often inspired by scriptural injunctions, inflict with a vengeance. The damaged children then grow up to similarly abuse their own offspring, keeping the vicious cycle in motion. There is plenty of good information available that would help, but until foolish obstinacy is given up, such tragic scenarios will persist.

All these tamasic sraddhas call to mind Schiller's proclamation that "Against stupidity even the gods struggle in vain."

Jonah Lehrer, introduced earlier, describes how one of the brain's most debilitating faults is that an attitude of certainty causes it to block out alternative possibilities. This type of tamasic thinking is common to everyone, and needs to be consciously countermanded or we will find ourselves trapped in a behavioral sink, a mental black hole.

Not only does the frontal cortex overlay its prejudices on the conflicting opinions of different parts of the brain, once it has done so the reward circuits kick in, flooding the brain with pleasurable sensations. This kind of tamas is "sticky" precisely because it feels so good! And doubt and uncertainty make us feel anxious, as a stimulus for resolving them. Our neural circuitry can easily tempt us to jump to foolish conclusions and doggedly hold onto them. Psychopaths are especially prone to this, because they don't even have many of the circuits that present contradictory information. They are literally wired to be tamasic, and yet they are far from stupid. Non-psychopaths have the neurologic option to at least consider alternatives, and they most definitely should.

It's interesting that Krishna includes discipline practiced "for the detriment of another" here. Much of tamasic behavior is self-defeating, but some of it eagerly cultivates hatred and enmity, with elaborate plans for causing harm to others. There is black magic here and there, but that's something few Gita readers are guilty of. More common to the average person is something akin to the gleeful sabotage of enlightened values that motivates the sociopathic personality. The lust with which public figures are torn apart when their personal shortcomings are held up to view is a perfect example. Often the rending is done by those who have piously read the parable of Jesus and the woman caught in adultery, where he tells the angry crowd, ready to stone her to death, "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her." (John 8.7) Tamasic people seek to hide their own faults by

becoming enraged at the transgressions of others, and they often find themselves with plenty of company.

A subconscious urge for vengeance may very well color the ego. It is frequently seen in love relationships, where the surface is all sweetness and light, but behind the scenes there is backstabbing and undermining of the other's happiness. In a perverse way the ego is begging for appreciation, opening a wound and then longing for the partner to soothe it. It can work either direction. The wound has to be kept open, so it is always being worried, and this keeps sucking the partner back into an unhealthy dependency.

I know we all read these verses on the gunas as: sattva is me, rajas is about the average person, and tamas is totally about other people. If that's true, these late chapters are a waste of time. This is exactly the kind of certitude we have to avoid. With a little insight, we can see how we are caught in all the gunas. Then the true value of these verses will shine for us.

Part III

Sujit has supplied an alternate interpretation of the ninth verse. We welcome a variety of ideas, and don't insist on any being the only right one.

It's nice to have a report of the eminent Professor Nair's take on this work. I would maintain, however, that the Gurukula interpretation is not something other than yoga; rather it is the essence of yoga as a psychospiritual practice. There are many techniques lumped under the blanket term yoga. Per Nataraja Guru and Nitya, harmonizing opposites and avoiding entanglements is yoga at its best, opening the door for all other experiences.

Narayana Guru did write a poem called The Song of the Kundalini Snake, though kundalini is not especially prominent in his philosophy. I would add that this interpretation, while plausible, is somewhat at odds with the second half of the verse, where the contemplative sits separate from the tree and thus avoids hell. Perhaps others will weigh in on this subject. Sujit writes:

Over the last 3 weeks I was caught up in some deadline based work, and so have not been able to catch up fully with the verses discussed. Two days ago I jumped to Verse 9, but realized the interpretations varied significantly between authors.

Since you have an interest in Yoga, an interpretation of Verse 9 from a yoga perspective might be of interest. It is particularly the interpretation of the first part:

*irupuravum varumaravasthayepu-
ttoru kotivannu patarnnuyarnnumevum*

That Alone - the Gurukula's book interpretation being:

*Growing on both sides, in a blossoming state,
is the one vine which has come, spread out and risen to the
top of a tree;*

Prof. G. Balakrishnan Nair, the well known interpreter of all of Narayana Guru's works, however explains the vine climbing on both sides, as a figurative expression of the experience of *Kundalini-prana-prasara*.

The Malayalam words in the verse could be taken with differing literary meanings, as some of the words have multiple meanings anyway. So if I restate the Malayalam (in this sense) it would be transliterated as:

*Blossoming, on both sides of the back, experiencing 'the six states',
like a vine that spreads and rises to the top of the tree;*

Here *varumaravastha* is read differently, as *varum ar avasta*, i.e. 6 *avastas* that come. The experience of 6 *avasthas* or six states, as the *prana* energy passes upward via the two nadis (*ida* and *pingala*) on either side of the back (*iru-puram* could also mean the two backs). The vine here is climbing either side of the *Sushumna nadi* (symbolized as the tree) that links the *Kundalini* via both sides of the back upwards to the *Broomadhyam* (centre of eyebrows) and *Sahasrara*.

In short, Balakrishnan Nair explains this as the experience of *prana's* upward movement (entry, resting and transit) via each of the 6 *adharams* or *Sad-adhara chakras*.

An other view of the verse.

Kind regards

Sujit

Part IV

Sujit kindly added more of Professor Nair's interpretation. This sounds more like Narayana Guru's intent, that a kundalini experience is a diversion from truth rather than something to be sought. I still prefer to take the verse in the more general context, but this now coheres. Narayana Guru intended his instruction for all types of seekers. Sujit's letter:

As a rejoinder, maybe I should have also mentioned how the first half flows into the second half of Verse 9 (in G. Balakrishnan Nair's version). You are right, both versions fall under the broader definition of yoga.

The second half of 9 is also explained by GBN as the *sadhana* based on (i.e. 'under') the figurative *taru* (tree). The base of the *taru* being the *muladhara* (seat of *Kundalini*), the tree itself

being the *Sushumna nadi* going upward along the vertebral line (including branches) toward the *Broomadhyam* (centre of eyebrows) and crowning at the *Sahasrara*.

GBN says that the word '*tapas*' is the keyword or pointer from Narayana Guru, who forewarns that even if the seeker experiences *Kundalini-prana-prasara** he/she should continue *tapas* (focused meditation towards seeking *Paramasatyam* - Truth) without being prematurely carried away - or turning egoistic - by the *Kundalini-prana-prasara* experiences. That, *tapas* is the continued control of the senses and the mind in *ekagratha* or concentration on one - the *Paramasatyam*.

Tapas effectively should end with the final realisation of Truth, after which no *tapas* is needed. So until then, the way forward for the seeker is continuing with *tapas*, in order to be unaffected by misfortunes or failures (again figuratively *naragam* or hell) - it should be borne in mind.

I hope the above connects backward to complete GBN's viewpoint on 9.

P.S. [typo fixed in previous message]* The word *prasara* means flow and spreading.

Part V

Michael sent a very nice excerpt from the Atmo short version, more about the tree:

From Nitya's NTNTBA commentary on Atmo 9, page 20, last 2 paragraphs:

□ □ The cosmic play of the sportive Absolute is compared to a tree which is entirely covered by a creeper that has branched into two and has entwined the tree all over, covering the original form with

its own flowers and leaves. The creeper referred to is the world of phenomenality. What is enshrouded by the vine is the numinous. The changeless witness of eternity is analogically referred to as a contemplative sitting in the shade of this tree, passively witnessing both the art and the science of phenomenality. There is a spark of the all-witnessing Self in us as well. Sometimes it alternates with our existential ego. The self-luminous and transcendent witness is fully aware of the changeless reality that appears to be changing into the birth, growth, old age and death of a nebula or a sperm in the biological stream.

□□ If our personal and existential ego is allowed to merge with the transcendental witness through a process of osmosis, it can also attain the transparency of vision that unveils all the secrets of life. Guru refers to this process as doing tapas. The realization that comes through such a vision will save a person from all the snares of the temptation of the phenomenal.

Part VI

Thanks to everyone for helping sear Verse 9 into our consciousness, as it's a most liberating image. These two responses should about wrap it up. From Dipika:

brilliant class notes...am catching up

one thing that stuck in my head is your note on Jill Bolte Taylors note...learnt something new...and it will forever stick now

now i will make it a point to pull myself out of anything negative which lasts more than 90seconds...

and also know that anything positive too gives the same amount of pleasure....therefore in the long run how hard are you going to run after that new dress or new car or maybe even the new boyfriend ;) the actual spark for which finishes in a little more than a minute

no wonder people get so addictive with substances....as the body needs that constant stimuli ..cokeheads in particular n alcoholics too

i suppose this would be a way to start 'tapas' to be aware n conscious n make sure one is constantly eradicating the negative

have to come back to re-read this slowly again

[She ended with]:

staying in the now at all times is the answer....easier said then done with this constant flickering mind

Yesterday was history
Tomorrows a mystery
But Today is a gift
Thats why its called
'The Present'

I sent her my commentary on Gita II, 57, with some fine tuning of the idea of living in the now, including "The popular catchword is "live in the now." That's fine, so long as the now contains the past and the future. The now taken in isolation, detached from memories, is a kind of living death." She responded beautifully:

this is really sweet....
helping me not be a zombie
i do know that not feeling makes me a robot
and youre right my dilemma...after all these endless readings is to not long for anything too much
but hell...i do have my times when loneliness comes a -
creeping...and i do acknowledge that fully and wish that i do find a soulmate...however twerpy that sounds

the thing is that am no longer...ummm...unhappy...i really reached rock bottom during that very stressful job with that Production House

and before that i was heading downhill with depression (a lot to do with my thyroid misbehaving)

but after that and for the last year...ive suddenly become really positive n resilient again

im amazed at myself...cause nothing has really changed...but my thinking

i decided (when i found out that the thyroid was to blame) to stop the anxiety... that im going to do everything possible in my pysche to never let myself go that low again

so sometimes its good to know abt the 90 second charge...for when ur being foolish u can pull yourself out..

yet somewhere am pushing myself to be a yogin

* * *

Susan sent a long meditation on the witness that exemplifies how questioning and doubting leads to understanding:

Thanks for sending out the quotes that Michael sent from NTNTBA. They are wonderful but also confusing for me. I think it was one or two classes ago that you said that we sometimes confuse the ego with the witness and that the witness is not the ego but Nitya says, "There is a spark of the all-witnessing Self in us as well. Sometimes it alternates with our existential ego." Then he goes on to say:

If our personal and existential ego is allowed to merge with the transcendental witness through a process of osmosis, it can also attain the transparency of vision that unveils all the secrets of life. Guru refers to this process as doing tapas. The realization

that comes through such a vision will save a person from all the snares of the temptation of the phenomenal.

From this, I gather that the ego can meld into the witness which makes more sense to me. Otherwise, I imagine the kind of good angel/bad angel thing with the two of them sitting on my shoulders and arguing about what I should do, though I know that the witness is NOT the good angel. However, it is odd to think of two entities inside me — the witness and the manifested self with the small "s." I suppose the witness, as represented by the person sitting under the tree, is not to really be thought of as an entity at all but rather like the ocean — vast, connecting all, detached from the manifested form. The ego is the conglomeration of the self — our conditionings, vasanas, dualities.

What is the difference between the personal and the existential ego? I think I have been thinking that it is through Tapas that we become the witness — wouldn't that be enlightenment? But now I'm thinking that we aren't trying to become the witness but only be more aware of it and this is done through Tapas. If the person under the tree is the witness, then why does he/she need to be doing Tapas? Gosh, this symbolism confusion is starting to feel like the creeper closing in on me. Now that I've gotten all tangled up, I think I'll just see it all as meaning that the witness is the absolute — it is not some entity inside my consciousness, as my ego is inside my consciousness. Instead, it is the eternal Absolute that is also me but not a manifesting me, though it is the cause of the manifestation. I can become the witness in a sense by doing tapas so that the conditioning of my ego is not allowed to take me on the roller coaster that can be the drama of life.

I like Nataraja's perspective:

The contemplative has to participate thus in the attitude of the poet before he can establish

himself and be initiated into the reality symmetrically viewed in this manner. Like the man in the famous statue of Augustus Rodin (1840-1917) called 'The Thinker' (Le Penseur), the man sitting under the tree in the Guru's verse should be understood, not as living in a vacuum of abstraction but as having for his content of consciousness all the other possible grades of truth or reality implied. Tree, creeper and the two orders of blossoms must be viewed globally with that degree of detachment which belongs to real living man in truly human contemplation. (Nataraja 53)

The witness doesn't live in a vacuum. All the parts of creation are legitimate and real. The work is in getting things into the right perspective. We don't live on a mountaintop with the angels and enlightened beings. We live here in this beautiful (and sometimes ugly and violent) world and the task is to figure out how to live the best life — not getting bowled over by the drama, finding a deep connection to the divine, making the most of our dharma, appreciating all the gifts of this life especially by seeing their connection to the Absolute, feeling and sharing the love from deep within.