WHY I BOTHER

Certainly the Gita is one of the most commented on works in all of history, so it’s fair to ask why some hippie from Portland, Oregon feels like he should add anything to the pile. I will tell you.

It is more than obvious than I’m not worthy of standing in the same time zone as my guru, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, or his guru, Nataraja. They were brilliant teachers and masters of Vedanta, especially the Gita, for which they had a revolutionary understanding. This is not to even mention the guy who started the whole ball rolling, Narayana Guru, who was one of the human race’s brightest lights. Just thinking about him puts me in a state of reverent panic.

Nitya’s classes on the Gita enthralled audiences all over the globe. A great many of them were held in my home town, beginning in 1970 and continuing through that decade, and I never missed a single session if I could help it. They were the kind of classes that you floated away from in a state of ecstasy, filled to the brim with exciting and enlightening ideas, not to mention the nonverbal boost of being in the same room with a spiritual dynamo. To describe Nitya as a master teacher would be a very modest compliment indeed.

When I began my career of service to the guru via editing his books, our first project together was none other than this foremost masterpiece of Indian wisdom science, the Bhagavad Gita.

Our collaboration began with high hopes of issuing a book that would be a fair reflection of Nitya’s insights from his classes, but as time went on he became swamped with so many projects and so many avid seekers were clamoring for his attention that it lost its momentum. The comments grew shorter, and occasionally were even lifted verbatim from Nataraja Guru’s own work. The final product had some definite virtues, but overall it turned out to be far less than its potential.

Still, producing the Gita commentary was a labor of love, and Nitya also used it as a kind of Milarepa-style task to discipline me.
It was painstakingly produced on an old-fashioned electric typewriter, with the Sanskrit diacritic marks added by moving the platen around manually to properly locate the periods, apostrophes, and hyphens. We were able to procure a Spanish element to supply the tilde. It was very easy to miss the correct spot for the diacritics, and Nitya insisted that there be no errors whatsoever. Absolutely no errors. Many’s the time when I would near the end of a page that had taken several hours to carefully type and add the diacritics, only to make a mistake or notice one farther back. There was nothing for it but to rip the paper out and start over, muttering curses under my breath. My part of the whole project took two years of from one to several hours per day. Over the next thirty years my service projects became more like traditional editing, correctable on the computer, and with other assistants to add the diacritic marks prior to publication.

After the Guru’s death, I urged a number of his disciples to keep his light alive by sharing the wealth they had garnered from him. As Lewis Hyde realized in his book *The Gift*, what has been gifted to us loses its value if it is held onto. Its worth is maintained and perhaps even enhanced by its essence, if not its physical makeup, being passed along to others. I thought we should all recycle the riches Nitya had bequeathed us over the years by teaching about them, but the sad fact is that studying with a genius is often debilitating in terms of initiative. No one feels that they are remotely adequate to fill their teacher’s shoes. The abyss between who you know you are and who you thought they were is utterly daunting. It began to look like the Guru’s wisdom would persist in his wonderful books, but that no one would carry the torch in everyday life.

In the military, there is a special way to volunteer for duty. The officer lines up your platoon and calls for a volunteer for some dirty or dangerous work. You stand your ground, knowing you want no part of it. Meanwhile everyone else takes one step backward, and there you are, alone out in front. The officer tries to
suppress a sardonic grin as he walks up to you saying, “You’re my man. Now get moving!”

And so I started to hold classes, using the Gita as a template. We’d been having regular meetings in the Portland Gurukula for decades, but those are more a democratic group effort of exploration. I had never taught much as a standup comedian in front of a classroom, and my first moments were among the strangest in my life, a little like sitting in the electric chair as they prepared to throw the switch. But I quickly relaxed and began to have fun with it. After more than thirty years of study, I knew the subject pretty well. I was pinching hitting for Babe Ruth and I wasn’t striking out! Not too many homers, but a few decent hits.

The Gita is a naturally perfect course to teach, because it is essentially a well-organized textbook of how to achieve enlightenment. I took it up for my first classes, and I purchased an armload of other commentaries to both check what other people were saying and to broaden my understanding. Up to that point, almost all of my learning had been from the two closely related sources in the Gurukula. As I dipped into the literature, I was shocked and embarrassed by some of the cheap sentiments being purveyed. There are plenty of accolades out there for the Gita, but the commentaries themselves are in the main partial and inadequate. Nataraja Guru cites a famous example in S. Radhakrishnan’s opening line: “The Bhagavadgita is more a religious classic than a philosophical treatise.” Where we come from, them’s fighting words!

I started my own Gita commentary partly in response to the misleading—and even, flat out wrong—assertions I found in other books. I’ve made a note of some of them in the body of the text. One that always gets my goat is the toss-off that the Gita is the scripture that says war is okay, that it’s a book about war. I guess it’s true that a scripture can mean anything to anybody, but a close reading puts the lie to a lot of the personal projections the field is overburdened with. The Gita is in fact about the battle of
our life, in whatever form it takes, and its recommended weapons are compassion, non-hurting, intelligence, forbearance, and so on.

As I worked painstakingly through the Gita, I began to suspect that my own guru had left a door open for me to bring his vision to full fruition. I felt that he was looking over my shoulder with a critical eye, and I should be as careful with my own thoughts as I had been with editing his books. And then, toward the end of Nitya’s massive, three volume commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, I ran across this:

In India, tradition allows a disciple to complement the writings of his guru by supplementing the guru’s writing with what the guru should have said but did not say. Secondly, the disciple has the permission of tradition to rephrase the argument of his guru if the latter’s words do not properly serve to establish and arrive at the conclusion intended by the guru. (440)

What a relief, a tacit blessing! It allowed me to relax, to stop writing my commentary like a thief in the night. Certainly Nitya’s words always led luminously to his conclusions, but I definitely did feel I was recording what he meant to say but hadn’t gotten around to.

Combined with the following blessing from a letter Nitya sent me in the summer of 1971, my doubts were swept away:

All these months you were so far and yet were very close to my silent thoughts and prayers. Your growth and unfoldment are of great importance to me for more than one reason. The flowers that bloom and wither away in the hidden bushes of obscurity secretly proclaim the inherent potential of this good earth to conceive and generate beauty and goodness. How much more would you be a promise as a man and not a flower, in human society and not in the bush, in the wake of a new age and not in obscurity? How much I wish your
youthful blood will pulse with my inarticulate prayers, and my spiritual visions find a home in your thoughts.

Well, after many, many years those spiritual visions have most definitely found a home in my thoughts!

With a mind brimming with decades of studies around the Gita’s subject, as I went along teaching the classes I began to realize the incredible richness of each verse. So many subtleties of discipleship were implied throughout, more or less hidden in plain sight. To squeeze one chapter into a single evening became nearly impossible. I began to keep notes, and before long I typed up the verses themselves and began to organize the most interesting ideas that would come up into their proper location. I worked randomly for several years, waiting for inspiration, and then later I began at the front and worked more systematically, filling in the blanks and refining the expression.

Soon I started a website so that others could partake of my Gita commentary if they happened to stumble upon it. I don’t have any illusions about it ever being properly published, but it definitely has some value. If nothing else, most commentators only touch on the highlights and breeze past ideas that seem obvious. The problem is, they aren’t obvious. I think the reader will find that some of the most interesting things in my commentary have to do with the deeper implications of the “obvious” parts.

I was happy to note too that it was the first writing of my life that really satisfied my critical nature. It was pretty darn good! And, reading through Nitya’s books, it was especially gratifying to see that what I have written is very much in agreement with his philosophy. Sure, my version is more modern and American, but the gist of it is what he would have written if he had had the time. It’s a lot like his classes. And so a hippie from Portland, Oregon has acted like a midwife to bring to birth a soaring vision that restores the Gita’s stature as a philosophical classic, free of clinging vines of religious falderal. It stands as it should, as a
textbook of freedom, an invitation to discard mental bondage and step into the light.

(2011, slight revisions 2019)