

Ascending and Descending Dialectics  
According to Nataraja Guru and Nitya Chaitanya Yati  
compiled by Scott Teitsworth

Below are significant comments by Nitya Chaitanya Yati and Nataraja Guru on ascending and descending dialectics, which is often referred to only in a vague way. There are some very helpful indications in these gurus' work, but I was unable to find what I was most looking for: a detailed, step-by-step explanation. Western philosophy is likewise wholly theoretical, apparently, at least prior to Marx, who limited himself to the material side. As Nitya has pointed out, isolating a thesis from its antithesis (in Marx's case matter from spirit) violates the symmetry of the dialectic, leading to false conclusions. It only works properly when the full range of possibilities are taken into account.

In reading up on Western dialectics I discovered many implicit question marks, as the outlines of it are simple enough, but no one has actually spelled out how it works in real life, or else their speculations are so far off the mark as to be easily discredited.

It turns out, however, that yoga dialectics are eminently practical in helping us discover the central balancing point within confusing conditions, and so steadying our minds and our thinking. Practical dialectics is presented brilliantly in the Bhagavad Gita and elsewhere in Vedanta, and especially by these two gurus, who, bucking the modern trend of narrow linear analysis, have taken its global vision to heart.

As you will see, the directional aspect is somewhat arbitrary, and thus of secondary importance, if any. The main idea seems to be to indicate movement from one state of mind to another. As Nitya notes in the last excerpt, going down is easy, up is hard. Some kind of spiritual gravity must be involved. The directions might better be thought of as spiritual progress and regress. Progress always takes more effort than coasting. Most of the time, up is equated with progress, yet sinking into the core of our being

can also appear as up, and certainly is the most positive impetus in the Indian perspective.

Before deferring to Nitya and Nataraja Guru, here's what I wrote on the subject for the Introduction to Nataraja Guru's *Saundarya Lahari*:

First and foremost, Nataraja Guru thought dialectically. While dialectics has many definitions, the kind he employed is similar to a type that occurs in the West from Plato to Hegel, where polar opposites—a thesis and antithesis—are combined to effect a synthesis. The actual source for the Guru was the yoga of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, but he found it explicitly or implicitly present in Western philosophy also. Yoga is another name for the process by which opposite poles are viewed synthetically, to be united in a common scheme of understanding.

To Nataraja Guru, dialectics springs out of the notions of complementarity, reciprocity, compensation and cancellation. In logical terms, *a* immediately implies *not a*. When they are taken together, there is a balance, which in a sense produces a virtual zero that embraces the entire picture. The formula is simply:  $a + (-a) = 0$ . This zero factor is another name for the Absolute. By the use of dialectics to balance life elements, the Absolute is brought in as a unifying factor in each and every situation. Therefore, the task of the yogi is to constantly seek out the element not *a* or not this to add to whatever situation presents itself, and in so doing restore a state of harmonious balance. “The verity that is thus neutral and central between two terms of reciprocal propositions may be said to represent the Absolute norm of that context. . .” is how the Guru puts it in *Dialectical Methodology* (p. 7).

Because dialectic thought is dynamic, it tends to move upwards towards more sublime and uplifting insights, or downwards into more static and constraining states. Nataraja Guru's use of the terms ascending and descending dialectics refers to these movements.

Where linear thinking follows a one dimensional line of thought, dialectical thinking expands into two and three dimensions through the triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. These imply a triangular shape, which rotated becomes a cone.

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Here's what I found in Nataraja Guru's writings, which, like Nitya's, are mainly an exegesis of Narayana Guru's core works:

Nataraja Guru's Bhagavad Gita exegesis has many references to ascent and descent. The following excerpts are found in his commentary for VII.4, 5 and 7, and give a good overall sense of the subject. The text of verse 4 presents a list of the essential elements of our universe: "Earth, water, fire, air, sky, mind, reason, and also consciousness of individuality—thus, here is divided My eightfold nature." The Guru notes, in part:

Ascending and descending dialectics move, as it were, simultaneously in inverse directions, so as to transmute these divided and separate entities into pearls of value strung on the thread of the Absolute, and with the Absolute as the final source-value as stated in verse 7. (320)

To treat matter and mind as two distinct entities is against the spirit of Vedanta, and consequently of the Gita. Instead of graded distinctions between matter and mind, Vedanta speaks of concentric inner and outer zones or *koshas* (sheaths, shells), which refer to the spiritual aspects of the personality of man. Cosmology itself is included side by side with subjective factors such as wisdom and knowledge. Some asymmetry is bound to persist when cosmology and psychology are treated together, as here. However, one can ascend from cosmology to psychology or descend downwards from consciousness to the tangible realities of life.

In this particular verse, the author has chosen the ascending method. The reverse method, of descent, may be noted in XV, 7. A more neutral position, is implied in X, 42.

The asymmetry tends to be abolished, and when we attain to the innermost *vijnana-maya-kosha* (zone of pure consciousness), even the suggestion of a difference is absent. (321-2)

How the Absolute is related to the visible or invisible entities filling the consciousness of mankind, whether in the Platonic world of the Intelligibles or in the world of actualities, is attempted to be brought out here by an analogy whose import is vague. This has given rise to alternative speculations on the part of commentators, such as Sankara who thinks it better to change the analogy to the weaving of cloth instead of the stringing of beads.

This relation between the Absolute and the manifested is understood by such commentators as causal, the Absolute being traced backwards and identified with a first cause.

But this analogy of beads on a string is deeper than mere philosophical speculation. To understand the Absolute merely as a first cause does not reveal its character in that wholesale manner mentioned in verses 1 and 2.

If we are ever to understand what is in the mind of the author we must therefore go back to similar analogies lying buried in the Upanishads. From the list of items dealt within the verses that immediately follow, it is clear that each bead corresponds to a system or cluster of realities which adhere together to form a compact unit in a world of its own. These units may touch the actual, or enter into consciousness through concepts or percepts, or may even rise to the purer world of the Intelligibles.

Whatever level they may belong to, earthy, human or celestial, when they are regarded as representing closed groups of human values, the bead analogy becomes understandable. There is a relation uniting all beads and running through them, and each bead, at whatever level it may be considered, has its value depending upon this relationship.

We can imagine an ascending scale of values ranging from the most actual to the most theoretical or sublime, at the highest point of which the Absolute itself may be considered as a brilliant pearl of great price. This presiding value is what gives coherence and correlation to all the other values at the different levels of human consciousness.

This concept is justified by the expression *mattah parataram na'nyat* (nothing whatever, is higher than Me). The Absolute is thus understood as a supreme value. At the same time it should be understood as a correlational principle or as a norm which sets the standard for all other values whatsoever. (323-4)

Thumbing through Nataraja Guru's Gita, we find this on Arjuna's despair, as he prepares to ask Krishna for instruction in Chapter II. From verse 5:

Arjuna may be said to resemble a man who has a telescope, but who looks at it through the wrong end. Instead of ascending from the necessary to the contingent, he descends from factors which are not strictly of a necessary order to imaginary and conflicting necessities. He is simply overwhelmed by a logic of emotions which goes always contrary to the logic of pure reason, spoiling both natural spontaneity in emotion and purity of reason. (112-3)

From Chapter III, on Karma or action:

Pure, free or contingent action arises out of merely necessary action in the form of worship, which naturally belongs to the context of ritualistic sacrifice in the Indian mind, and hence the graded references to (1) Prajapati (the Lord of Progeny) in verse 10 here, and to (2) *devas* (gods) in verse 11, to (3) burnt sacrifice in verse 13, to (4) Brahma in verse 15, to (5) the cosmological and psychological wheel in verse 16, all with a certain ascending order of value or superiority, culminating in the reference to "the Self content in the Self" in verse 17.

These follow a graded sequence consistent with the cosmology and epistemology of the Vedanta, ranging from creation to Self-realization. This series of verses implies a secret mystical doctrine which has been the fecund cause of differences between Vedantins such as Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva, the duality between *prajah* (progeny) and *yajnah* (sacrifice) being resolved in different ways by these three great *acharyas* (teachers).

Regarding VI.3:

The spiritual life is often mechanistically imagined to be of a uniformly steady progress. Such a view leaves out of account the organic, reciprocal and ambivalent factors which make up the human personality. Instinct and intelligence, emotion and reason, action and renunciation, like Samkhya and Yoga, are reciprocal aspects of the alternating process called spiritual progress.

At a certain phase the pressures of necessity are strong, at another time they become weak. Then contingent factors supersede. The child, for example, has need for activity for self-expression and for the development of its personality. Games are natural for youth, while old age is immersed in pensive moods rather than overt activities.

These tendencies which alternate and change over time may be said to operate in the biological or at best in a psychophysical field, referred to as the libido or psyche. Personality and the soul are terms applying to deeper seats of consciousness, where the ambivalence is less evident, though in principle still there. Verses 3 and 4 imply this theory, verse 3 referring to more outward factors and verse 4 to more internal ones.

The present verse deals with the yogi aspirant who, like a cyclist going uphill, has to keep pedaling. The same yogi, when he has passed the highest point of the ascending road of yoga, changes over to quieter ways. (283-4)

IV.6:

The same subject is viewed here from a different angle, as when a man when lying under water would look at the sunlight above. It is in the blurred light of relativism that manifestations of the Absolute are here viewed. The difference between the two standpoints of verses 5 and 6 will become clearer in the two verses 7 and 8 which follow. There could be a “descent” (*avatarana*) of the divine, or manifestation could take the form of an “ascent into existence,” as implied in the phrase *sambhavam* (I become) used here. The distinction is rather subtle and one has to be familiar with the epistemology of Vedanta, where inorganic nature (elements) and organic nature (souls) have two different or even opposite origins.

Under VI.45:

The reference to evil and the general teleological approach justifies the treatment of the same subject in another way. But even making due allowance for all these considerations, there is to be noted a distinct contrast between the quick emancipation mentioned in verse 44 and the plodding progress towards emancipation here. The contrast perhaps refers to the two types of emancipation known in Vedanta, *krama mukti* (gradual liberation) and *sadyah mukti* (immediate liberation), and therefore justifies this verse. We have to infer two distinct kinds of yogic contemplation—one ascending and one descending, as implied in vi, 3. The present verse refers to that kind in which an effort is implied.

VII.27 is especially important:

Understanding (the basic nature of) these two paths, O Partha (Arjuna), one of contemplation is not confounded at all; therefore at all times, O Arjuna, be unitively established in yoga.

The duality that seemed to be finalized as everlasting in this world is not so rigidly dualistic when comprehended in terms of wisdom. This wisdom consists of unitive understanding, otherwise known here as yoga.

These paths, though everlastingly different as mentioned in the last verse, can still, it is here suggested, be brought under unitive vision by the yogi, and when thus brought to union, all confusion and perplexity is abolished by the one who understands their true nature. Though different they belong to the same principle of light, the dark side being only less bright.

Relativism, though it is opposed to absolutism in a certain sense, is capable of being absorbed into the Absolute by the ascending dialectics of yoga. Such a yoga is here recommended as being worthy of cultivation at all times.

We can recognize that a dream is different from waking reality, but the knowledge of dream and waking reality as being comprehended in one global consciousness gives the yogic view which abolishes conflict. Similarly the recommendation here is that of knowing the nature of the higher and the lower paths properly, both becoming unitively comprehended in the wisdom which results from yoga, and which Arjuna is asked to cultivate for all time.

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Atmopadesa Satakam

VERSE 50

With earth and water, air and fire likewise,  
Also the great void, the ego, cognition and mind,  
All worlds including the waves and ocean too  
Do they all arise and to awareness change.

[Excerpts]:



Vedantic epistemology is thus familiar with this unitive treatment of categories. Other philosophers like Aristotle, Kant and Spinoza have, in the categories they enumerate, this same time-honoured methodology and epistemology. The Guru here follows the same perennial contemplative approach, which is in keeping with the Science of the Absolute known both in India and outside.

Contemplative method first reduces these factors into a series that, even when the order is reversed, still refers to the norm of the Absolute. Ascending and descending dialectics meet in the neutral Absolute. This verse marks the beginning of ascending dialectics.

After visualizing these factors contemplatively, it would be necessary to fit them into a 'being' in terms of a never-ending process of 'becoming'. 'Being' and 'becoming' have to yield together a unitive and living picture of the Absolute. The same circulation of various psycho-physical entities finds mention in the Bhagavad Gita (III.14-16) where there is reference to a wheel that goes round eternally as between items such as food, rain, sacrifice and the absolute value implied in sacrifice. The rising of the various worlds, understood in serial and graded order, and finally their transformation into terms of one absolute value as pure consciousness, is a matter already recognized, and one for contemplative vision to grasp both schematically, symbolically as well as dynamically. (172-3)

When endowed with this type of reasoning through relationships, the intelligence of man will be able to see that all factors, ranging from the grossest to the subtlest, arrange themselves and constitute the cycle of change and becoming in terms of pure consciousness. A great deal of research and thought has, however, to proceed before such a vision of the rise of thought through ramified sets of psycho-physical factors into absolutist awareness can be witnessed as taking place in oneself. (173)

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In discussing semantic importance and Shankara, Nataraja Guru hints that dialectics descends into the core of the Absolute from the periphery, and ascends back up into immanence, a reversal of the typical Western orientation. This is from Chapter 4 of Vedanta Revalued and Restated, now in Unitive Philosophy, p. 60, in a most crucial section:

The notion of the Absolute in Vedanta recedes from the concrete actual facts of the pluralistic, phenomenal world presented to the senses, by distinct stages of perceptualism, conceptualism and nominalism, into the core where it can meet its own counterpart of the pure noumenal aspect on common homogeneous ground.

Thus when negatively focused through these stages, it reaches the world of the word and its meaning, where “the meaning of meaning” gains full reality. And so, when we take the leap from the empirical to the transcendental, we cross a deep chasm separating aspects of word meaning to where the neutral notion of Absolute Reality abides as the common ground of the physical and mental worlds.

The semantic polyvalency of words thus gains primacy when we begin to analyse the notion at this inner subtle core, where the Absolute thinking substance, with its accidents and attributes, makes existence and essence meet eminently in its status of pure philosophical relationship.

After reaching the core by this kind of negative abstraction and generalization, we can travel along a deflected direction of the same light that has taken us to the core of the substance, and follow up positively and analytically the conceptual and nominalistic attributes of the thinking substance in its process of *becoming* and not merely *being*.

That ascending and descending dialectics are possible in this circulation is evident in many parts of Shankara’s commentaries on the Gita, the Brahma Sutras and the Upanishads.

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Nataraja Guru wrote a book on *Dialectical Methodology*, which has been reissued simply as *Dialectics*. In chapter 2 there is a subsection called Ascending and Descending Dialectics Implied in Myths, which includes these paragraphs:

Initiation ritual into the mysteries of the gods has made it evident that what is true of the gods is also true of the soul of man in its ascent or descent from bondage or freedom. Hints which are plentiful in the mystical literature of the day are unmistakable in regard to the ascent and descent of the soul of man. The various gods woven into the antique mythological fabric enable the thinker, endowed with even a small degree of imaginative intuition, to see clearly spiritual progress as understood then.

Dialectics has always to be understood in living terms like an ever-flowing stream of wisdom in its course of ever-creative becoming. Whole epics like Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* have been found necessary to work out the details of the ascent or descent of the soul or of spiritual progress generally. The same dialectical frame of reference is to be discerned in modified forms in works like Goethe's *Faust* where a range of worlds of value systems, piled one over the other in a vertical series, is to be found.

We can see that in the Guru's thought there is a mixing up of ascent and descent: sometimes we ascend to the Absolute heights; at other times we descend to the Absolute depths. The central verity is a change of level between transcendental and immanent values. Chapter 3, in the subsection *Unitive Treatment of Action and Actor*, adds:

The hero and his action here have to be understood against the drama's own background of myth and allegory which conforms to an interplay of value factors which must be understood in the light of both ascending and descending dialectics. The wrath of Zeus on high and the degradation in which mankind lived without fire, are the dialectical value counterparts within whose range the agony of Prometheus is depicted masterfully. No overt action, however ingeniously conceived, could ever be an effective substitute to this movement of the spirit in its intensity of tragic suffering, which is a form of action in inaction.

In the subsection Wisdom Inspired both Philosophy and Art, we read:

Philosophy itself in turn tended to become analytical, and the first bifurcation of its scope took place quite early in the history of thought when Aristotle had to part company with his teacher Plato on the issue of the world of the intelligibles of the latter and the world of actualities or prime realities of the former. Ascending and descending dialectics, instead of being considered as applying to one and the same central notion of the Absolute, were understood to refer to two distinct realities.

In the subsection The Vertical Series of Worlds in Heroic Poetry, there is this:

In every case a careful reader will be able to distinguish a vertical and a horizontal scale of values involved. There is an ascent and a descent. If this is not in cosmological terms it would be implied in psychological terms. Gods and men and the subhuman world come into dialectical interplay. Romance and Tragedy could be said to belong to the same context as heroic poetry, implying the same conflicts or trials of heroes. In Romance and Tragedy the conflict is only brought into greater relief and

amplified, and the drama as a whole is built round the central conflict.

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*Wisdom*, p. 40:

We can now clearly distinguish two distinct trends in philosophy. To use Prof. Lacombe's expression, they are turning their backs on each other. Plato's ascending dialectics led him into the thin air of the world of the intelligibles; while Aristotle, by an opposite tendency or trend in the progress of philosophic thought, went beyond matter and prior to it into another world of unique existential factors basic to matter and form.

The notion of substance was meant as an intermediate link between these two poles to which thought was drawn. Modern analytic or pragmatic philosophers who tended to discredit the idealism of Plato, did so because Plato's concept of Ideas, though sound from the point of view of abstract philosophy, could not lend itself as the foundation of a scientific or progressive civilisation which believes in action rather than in calm contemplation.

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From the Introduction to Part II of *An Integrated Science of the Absolute* (ISOA), a similar point:

Knowledge as a central personal experience of the human being is related to the Platonic world of the intelligibles on the one hand, and to the material world of prime matter or the *entelechia* of Aristotle on the other. There is an ascending and descending dialectics alternatively, very deftly employed by the author, making this composition [ISOA] a masterpiece of contemplative workmanship, unrivalled in literature anywhere.

Later:

Heavens, hells and purgatories of great variety are mentioned in various religions. They are too numerous to be referred to exhaustively. They have, however, one and the same structuralism whether understood in a verticalised positive series of worlds of favourable values or in a similar unfavourable negative series. Mahayana Buddhism has this series. Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* accept similar gradations of value-worlds. Goethe's *Faust* also has a similar hierarchy of value-worlds. The Parsi heavens resemble the Vedic ones in certain respects. Ascending and descending angels representing scales of values are found in the Biblical Ladder of Jacob. The extremity of such a scale has feeble or pronounced antinomies meant to be purified in a central fire implying death as a generalised principle of control.

The word *yama* in Sanskrit not only means gathering together or controlling, but also death as a trial for the soul. Passing through death is a fire-test purifying the soul both in its ascent and descent. Horizontal aspects are conferred on the soul afresh by death as implying life. Vertical aspects get more pronounced in their ascent. In an ambivalent scale of values, the alternate goings and comings of the soul take place along a vertical axis or in certain feeble cases of alternation it follows a figure-of-eight where the upward and downward paths have a gyroscopically regulated points of participation or non-participation of matter or mind factors. No quantitative factor must be attributed to such a process conceived only in pure schematic terms. When we use the word "point" we should not think of an actual stoppage but only of fluid points in a process of flux or pure becoming. As the process becomes further purified the verticalisation becomes thinner and more pronounced. Approximating to more absolutist values even the pure vertical parameter is abolished and when their mutual absorption is perfect all duality between subject and object vanishes. Such are some of the guiding thoughts to keep in mind trying to follow some of the

subtler implications relating to the subject of alternating pleasure or pain, rewards or punishments. When the equation of the Self with the non-Self is complete the question of reward and punishment does not arise. Even the gods are abolished. The question of reincarnation also does not arise. Before such a culmination is supposed it is still legitimate to think of a value-circulation between two poles representing good and evil in the context of the Absolute.

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Nitya Chaitanya Yati mentions ascending and descending dialectics only a few times:

Darsanamala 10.3 (Nirvana Darsana)

The ascending and descending dialectics of union with the Absolute is conceived schematically without having any reference to the spatial format of ascension or descension. In this scheme the immanence and transcendence are so poised that the progression from immanence to transcendence can be said to be one of ascension, and progression within transcendence as descending to the inestimable depth of the Absolute.

[ed – The directional thing seems to be somewhat arbitrary, as might be expected. Plato, and Western philosophy and religion in general, visualize ascending to the highest ideals and descending to manifestation with all its gross aspects. In Vedanta, ascension is more likely to mean rising out of the core or seed state of the Absolute and expanding toward the periphery, so it would be the opposite of here: an ascension from transcendence to immanence.]

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In *Living the Science of Harmonious Union*, Nitya expresses how ascent and descent refer to a vertical axis representative of core values such as time and liberation:

II.42:

From the time of birth to the ultimate termination of the psychophysical organism, life is both polarized and torn between two values that are like two sides of the same coin. They are necessity and freedom. If necessity can be marked at the negative pole of a vertical parameter, freedom comes on the plus side at the omega point. Necessity binds us to the body and the physical basis of life whereas freedom allows us to soar very high into the sublime. Life is a perpetual theme of ascending and descending dialectics.

In II.49, the dialectical aspect is only implied:

Practical guidance is to be received to coordinate the physical body and the mind in regulating the prana. The meditation of *Gayatri* at eight points within the body and two points outside it is recommended as one device. Such a device is given with the intention of circulating even the grossest aspect of prana in an ascending and descending manner. Our common experience is bringing the breath upward and then expiring, then bringing the breath inward, taking it down to fill the lungs. In the yogic discipline, prana (the ascending vital breath) is taken upward all the way from the toes to the crown and the apana (the descending vital breath) is taken downward from the crown to the toes. This and similar practices are to be directly learned from a preceptor.

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The closest to an overt practical description appears in *That Alone*, verse 77. This includes an introduction from the class notes of the Portland study group, with the first part by Scott Teitsworth:

[Nitya's] description makes for a peaceful and meditative ending to the verse. It's also an essential stance for a life worth living. I should point out that the "ascending and descending movement" he mentions is called by Nataraja Guru ascending and descending dialectics. Basically we can either build up or break down our mental fabric, depending on how dialectics is employed. It roughly parallels the *asti asti* (and this and this) and *neti neti* (not this not this) methods of meditation. Both are meant to reveal the inherent oneness at the core of existence:

The first thing to meditate on is the beyond, the farthest to which you can go. Then bring yourself to the ground. Now you have a whole field to experience. If you consider the whole field as the total reality of the one who experiences, without creating a duality between the experiencer and the experienced, you get the idea of the One. This can be apprehended by an ascending and descending movement of consciousness, which also spreads out in all directions. This automatically brings you to all the horizontal forces which operate to fill the field.

Now give it a nucleus as the knowledge that knows, both in general and in all the special applications. Give tools to that central consciousness by allowing it to animate the senses. 'The senses' here means action as well as perception. They need counterparts for the eyes to see, the hands to work, the legs to walk, the tongue to taste, the nose to smell and breathe, and the ears to hear. When you put all these counterparts together, nothing is left outside. It is one compact whole.

When you look at it in this way, you become humble. You are filled with reverence, with a sense of adoration for all this which is happening. Something that is more than a cosmic function is operating within you, a tiny individual. The individual transforms into the totality, and the totality becomes epitomized in the

individual. Both of these are happening side by side. This gives a sense of unity, the idea of the One.

*That Alone* also earns the right of closing this paper. Here is the end of verse 48, with the preceding unrelated but essential paragraph:

Your realization is to be lived here and now in society where you touch and are touched by other people. Let us bring our realization to the marketplace. But you think realization is so holy and sacred that it must be kept separate, kept apart. That means you cannot live it. If you want to live it, it should be lived everywhere, at all times. Your perfection is a perfection for all time, not just for the church on Sunday. If you are perfect now you should be perfect in everyday life, too.

After the next verse there is a major change. If the whole one hundred verses is viewed as a garland, the first forty-nine present a kind of descending dialectics. From verse fifty onwards, an ascending dialectics is used. It is easy to go down, difficult to go up.