

## Reflections on Guru—Finding Freedom’s Firm Foundation by Nancy Yeilding

When I met Guru Nitya in the early 1970s I was, without knowing it, in the traditional state of a seeker of truth, described in India as being frighteningly tossed about by the waves of the ocean or being like a deer caught in the conflagration of a forest fire, not knowing which way to turn. My state was one that I shared with many young people of that time, and many people of all time. Although blessed with many good fortunes—loving care in my childhood, an excellent education, free from having to face the extreme deprivations of hunger, poverty, abuse, or slavery, or to live in the midst of war, which still afflict many millions of human beings—I was miserable. Every place I had looked for meaning and purpose in life had turned to ashes.

In high school I became happily involved with a local church, which offered good companionship, the opportunity to participate in good works, and the chance to sing beautiful music. However, as I learned more about the organization and the required set of beliefs, the first of which demonstrated some pettiness of spirit and the second of which began to affront my intellect and sense of reality, I slowly drew back, disappointed.

As I came to learn of the Civil Rights movement, of what made it necessary, and of the brutality that was often directed at the courageous people standing up for equal rights, the governmental and social institutions of this land I had been taught to regard as the world’s “knight in shining armor” began to look suspect. Then US involvement in the Vietnam war—which led to the killing of civilians, the wholesale destruction of the land of Vietnam itself as

well as of its neighbors, the death, wounding, and soul-torture of many young men forced to fight, to die, to kill, or to face prison or exile and being branded as cowards and traitors—shattered any sense of pride I'd had about the nation and undermined hope for the future. Along with many others I felt compelled to oppose these actions by letters and petitions, and by non-violent protests and demonstrations. Although these actions had more positive impact than is usually acknowledged, still the government continued to perpetrate violent crimes against humanity, such as through CIA support of the coup to assassinate and overthrow the government of fairly elected Salvador Allende in Chile, which was replaced with a reign of terror, along with indications that this was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of immoral and heinous activities covertly conducted around the world.

At Stanford, students discovered that the grand university that had opened so many doors for us—to the bounty of human culture in art, music, literature, to deep insights offered by psychology, anthropology, sociology, the latest in scientific discovery, and so much more—was deeply implicated in the war “machine,” through research on campus and through links to the companies that were making the bombs and Agent Orange. We protested, we brought about some changes, but our hearts were sad as our eyes remained open to the links that expanded the “military-industrial complex” to the “military-industrial-educational complex.”

During university years I fell in love with a fellow student, who, like every other healthy young man at the time, lived with the threat of being drafted to fight in a war he felt was immoral, so upon graduation we took two steps to provide some protection: by marrying and joining the Teacher Corps, which offered its

participants a degree in education and a teaching credential and the opportunity to contribute by working in underserved inner city schools (and a draft deferment!). We were posted to Kentucky, where I discovered that I was ill-suited to early childhood education (the program we were placed in) and that the social environment was like stepping back in time fifty years. Skills I had honed at Stanford—of thinking for myself, of speaking up and speaking out—served only to alienate me from most everyone, who wanted no rocking of the boat, especially by a woman. I left the program and began to flail about, trying out many different ways to contribute to alleviating injustice, poverty, discrimination, and violence, unsuccessfully seeking meaningful work and community. Under the weight of my increasing distress, our marriage disintegrated.

I often became aware that the refrain of a popular song at the time was singing within: “any day now, any day now, I shall be released.” It was one expression of my deep yearning for freedom, though at the time I would not have been able to articulate freedom from what or freedom for what. After returning to California I worked in various jobs, and explored many possible avenues to meaning and happiness, none of which proved lasting or deeply fulfilling. My life had the freedom of a will-o-the wisp: I went where the wind carried me. Although will-o-the wisps are delightful to see, sparkling in the sun as they waft through the air, and though living as one had many charms, real freedom was elusive, as I was also living on an emotional roller coaster and often felt adrift. Once or twice my path crossed that of an old Stanford friend, Peter Oppenheimer, who each time told me about the teacher he had met in India and his strong feelings that I should

meet him too. Then, on a spring day in 1973, he invited me for lunch at the San Francisco apartment where he and Guru were staying, hosted by some friends.

In those days, teachers from India often passed through the Bay Area, where they typically appeared at huge gatherings, treated with a good deal of reverence and fanfare, rarely approachable by those not in the inner circle. So the first thing that struck me about Guru was that he was unassuming and available. He was even one of the cooks of the lunch! When we sat down he pleasantly engaged in conversation with everyone, all of whom made me feel welcome. He had a way of making everyone laugh often. The whole afternoon had a relaxed flow. It was so pleasant that when I was invited to return the next day I readily agreed.

That day the invitation also was extended to come along to hear a talk he was giving to a group at a friend's house. During the talk Guru began to speak about the universal Self that was also the most intimate core self of each of us:

“Inexhaustible qualities of consciousness can be experienced as “I” in me and as “I” in you. It is the same cosmic “I,” the Word, the Logos, that is expressed as the boundless universe—boundless both in time and in space. The transient “I” has the same substance as the eternal Self. What is here and what is yonder there cancel out in the silence of the unutterable and the unthinkable.”

It was like a bell ringing within as I resonated with what he described. Finally, here was someone saying what I had always sensed to be true and, importantly, doing so in a way that did not offend my intellect. I wanted to know more.

As I was being welcomed, I drove each day to spend time in the apartment on California Street, and to go along to whatever talks

were happening. After some days Guru pointed out that his time in the US would soon be over and he invited me to stay with them for the rest of the time. I happily agreed. I made several new friends, some of whom are dear friends to this day. There were delicious meals, lovely outings to parks and beaches, deeply meaningful classes . . . and at the core of it all was this remarkable person who—besides being wise and brilliant and funny and creative and loving—was happy, happy in a way that was different from what I had ever encountered before.

He was happy and complete in himself, not looking to any thing or any one to meet some need, which would then make him happy. The image came to me of a fountain that continuously circulates. He was like a continuously circulating fountain of happiness, with plenty to share. That engendered a deep feeling of trust, trust that I need have no concerns about being manipulated or “used” in any way, for here—amazingly—was a person who needed nothing from me! It gave me a freedom I had never experienced in a human relationship before. Unsought and unanticipated, a surety of dedication to the wisdom and love embodied by Guru arose within me right from those early days.

For the next eight years, to the extent possible given limited finances, I oriented my life around Guru’s teaching visits to the United States. I increasingly traveled, lived, and studied with him whenever he was in the US, and eventually joined him in circumnavigating the world: with stays in California, Oregon, Hawaii, Australia, Singapore, India, and Europe. In order to have money to support myself, I worked at a graduate department of a university in San Francisco, I cared for an elderly woman in Palo Alto, I worked as a typesetter and printer in Portland, as a

landscape gardener in Hawaii, as a receptionist in an alternative health clinic in Australia, and as a secretary at Stanford's Learning Assistance Center.

Through those years a dynamic inner and outer process was taking place. Slowly, bit by bit, Guru exposed the falsity of the props that held up my faltering though intransigent ego, whether based on background, education, intellectual equipment and attainment, companions, appearance. At the same time, through his university classes (Portland State, UC Sonoma, Stanford, University of Hawaii, University of New South Wales), his public lectures, his books and articles, and informally and privately, he spread before all of us a vision of the vast panorama of the cultural, philosophical, and spiritual heritage of humanity, giving us maps and keys to find and unlock the treasures. He revealed the profound gifts of the Bhagavad Gita and the Bible, of the Upanishads and the Tao Te Ching, Heidegger and Sartres, the Buddha and Ramana Maharshi, Shakespeare and Kalidasa, Einstein and Eddington, Spinoza and Kant, Jayadeva and St. John of the Cross, Van Gogh and Beethoven, Basho and Rumi, and so much more, vividly helping us to see the links between wisdom-teaching and the creation of beauty and our own lives. Even more, his own living example of love for each moment, each being, and every aspect of life created an atmosphere in which we had the opportunity to attune ourselves to that vision and those possibilities.

His vision was vast and the spotlight of his teaching highlighted a myriad of insights. At the same time it was clear that the philosophical vision and life example of Narayana Guru, as profoundly manifested in his life through his relationship with his

Guru, Nataraja Guru, was central. The teaching stories he told of his experiences as a disciple of Nataraja Guru were heart-touching and deeply stirring, setting off inner reverberations that continue to echo with profound meaning. They inspired me to read everything of Nataraja Guru's that I could get my hands on: *The Word of the Guru (The Life and Teachings of Narayana Guru)*, *Autobiography of an Absolutist*, *One World Education*, *One World Economics*, his unparalleled commentary on the Gita, his commentary on *Saundaryalahari*, and even his magnum opus, *An Integrated Science of the Absolute*. Each such encounter was like entering a new world and, at the same time, having the opportunity to examine my own past, my experiences, my assessment of them, my conditioning, my thought patterns, and to throw out superstition, prejudice, confusion, and replace it with clearer thinking and openness.

I soaked deep into Guru's own writing as well, especially once I started taking dictation of his books, articles, and letters, and beginning to edit his books. Most profound was the opportunity to devote a hundred days to an in-depth contemplation and application of Narayana Guru's *One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction (Atmopadesa Satakam)*, which took place in Portland in 1977-78. In the course of those classes, Guru spoke about freedom in ways that articulated not only my inner yearning, but the way I could feel my life blossoming. These following paragraphs are some excerpts from those classes.

The passing moments of our lives are to be made lively and rich. One thing I have learned in my life is that the moment that comes will not come again. It's gone. You can see the

moment approaching. Receive it with open arms. Glorify it by enriching it with your joy, finding a new value, a new sense of direction in life. Have a renewed sense of wonder. Thus, that moment becomes eternalized in your life, it is a moment to be remembered and to be proud that you could live it so well..

The only thing is that you shouldn't drift into darkness. Don't look at the world as something horrid, but as beautiful, divine. Every bit of it. Then we know we are the creators of our own fate. Not through this individual ego with all its vagaries, but through a full affiliation with the eternal, supernatural light that enriches everything. Only then will we have the strength to become masters of the situation, the whole beauty of creation, the beauty that has painted the petals of the flowers, which has given shape to the butterflies and birds, which makes the mountains look awe-inspiring and the oceans look vast, which makes the clouds float so gracefully overhead. This is where we find our true freedom.

You belong to the same overmind of beauty. Not with your ego but with your spirit. Participation in it will reveal to you the divine artist in you, the divine musician in you, the divine intelligence, the divine creator, the divine lover, the divine unifier, the divine peacemaker within you. It's such a blessing to be in this world, to be born here and to live here.

I can go from the physical world of experience to a dream experience to a deep sleep experience. If I go still farther I won't be able to make any distinction at all between the subject and object. The world of the seer and the world of the seen come together until both are canceled out and effaced. One comes to a neutral area of unity. Once we know that there



is an aspect of knowledge which effaces or cancels out the physical world, the heaviness of phenomenality is not felt any more.

From this you gain a new freedom. The freedom is to relate yourself to the phenomenal world, with all the laws which operate in it, and yet to keep within a calm repose by which you can sit on your own seat of absolute certitude as a witness.

Guru made it very clear that certain kinds of freedom were dead ends for those seeking lasting happiness and meaning in life, such as the freedom of rejecting all that had come before, the freedom of nihilism, the freedom of pursuing lifestyles based on self-destructive behaviors, the freedom of amassing wealth and property. At the same time he was not encouraging a withdrawal from participation in life. His own life abundantly demonstrated the freedom of relating to the phenomenal world, with all the laws that operate in it, and yet keeping within the calm repose of a witness, resting on absolute certitude, even when the passage through that world presented inevitable bumps.

He inspired all who came to him to learn more about the phenomenal world, to uncover its secrets through science, history, anthropology, sociology, literature, art, music, and through paying close attention to and peering beneath the surface of what presented itself to us right where we were, wherever we were placed in life. At the same time, his classes, his instruction in meditation, his illumination of the mystical truths revealed by seers and poets, and, above all, his silence, glowing with serenity and fullness, led us inward to our own essential nature.

We all encounter, to greater and lesser degrees, the obstructions

to freedom presented by concrete reality, ranging from natural forces to our own nature, from the behavior of others in our work places and families to economic constrictions, and especially the terrifying dynamics resulting from injustice, oppression, war, and natural catastrophe. The great wisdom of Guru's approach lay in not denying such dynamics, but in making it clear that we each play a significant role in either exaggerating or minimizing their impact, as well as revealing our capacity to understand them more deeply and deal with them more effectively.

His own life offered daily evidence, in the form of writing articles, convening meetings, and giving talks to expose and combat injustice and temper political and religious clashes, writing popular books that revealed the world's cultural treasures as well as profound philosophical expositions, counseling thousands of people, with deep psychological acuity and profound spiritual guidance, taking action himself such as by sweeping a village road in need of cleaning or planting potatoes to provide needed employment as well as food or advocating for women's health care or sponsoring celebrations of art, music, drama, and poetry. At the same time, how he dealt with his own physical suffering and disability provided a living example of what is possible when our identity is with the witness and not the suffering body.

I learned that the firm foundation created by insightful participation in the transactional realm, paired with imperiencing our identity with the limitless light of consciousness, supports freedom of ever-expanding dimensions: the freedom to wholeheartedly commit to manifesting our highest values; the freedom to explore widely and deeply as a blessed lover of life; the freedom to create unhampered by internal and external messages

of inadequacy; the freedom to give open-heartedly without being stifled by fears of being taken advantage of; the freedom to be aware of ourselves as part of the ocean of all-pervading love.

The gift of such freedom is a priceless treasure for which words are an inadequate expression of the gratitude that continually arises in response. Life itself becomes the manifestation of gratitude and the celebration of love.