

## Digressions - One

### Imaging India पारलौकिक

When asked about the beginning,  
The Great Sage said that nothing is known of it.  
Cyclic existence is without end and beginning.  
So there is no beginning or end.

( Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XI.1 )

1984, I'm standing in my third-floor ABC office, William Street, Sydney, looking out over the city and not quite knowing who I am, where I am, or why I'm there doing what it is I'm doing. In point of fact, I'm doing very little. Indeed, almost nothing. The truth of the matter: I'm incapable of doing much more than eat, defecate, and sleep; that is, when I'm able to turn off the horror of being home.

Third floor, second floor, fourth floor. I don't really remember exactly and it doesn't matter anyway. It *certainly* didn't matter then. Sydney ... that wonderful, marginally cosmopolitan town I'd been born into and grew up in. Like most of us immediately post-WW II souls of primarily British decent, I'd been indoctrinated by an often not-so-soft school master's hand, proffering his one-eyed historical view, thus seeing the might of white and the all-so-ran-ness of the other. As I recall, there was one, or it may have been two, Italian kids in our primary school who were, of course, referred to as dagos (usually without affection). Everybody around me, in our all-white, pretentiously stiff upper lip return-soldier's christian paradise, condoned this without question. There were more dagos in the area but most of them went to catholic schools so us protestant kids were, for the most part, spared their close proximity. In reality, our christian paradise was divided and the borderlines were pretty clear. To put it mildly, I was considerably confused by all this and, generally, not all that popular. Being a 'trouble maker' in the eyes of the adults I was usually excluded from invites to other kids' birthday parties. And, in those days, I had no inkling as to why. But somewhere between those childhood educational experiences and the present, otherness, 'the Other', widely became a matter for hot debate. The debate rages on.

My ABC office was an occasional space where I worked on a four-part radio series I'd been commissioned to make. The subject matter, Music of the Indian Sub-Continent. When the series finally went to air in 1988 it was entitled, *Intersections*. At the time, I'd have preferred the subject matter to function as its title though, in hindsight, neither seems to fit all that well. The producer with whom I worked, Andrew McLennan, provided invaluable guidance, a matter I was grateful for then and remain so to this day. Given the state of my very distressed mind in 1984, without Andrew's supportive, often humorous, interventions, I'd have become as rigid as a stone statue, staring ablink, out at the city, in the utter disbelief and shame at being one of its progeny.



Together with bassist, Steve Elphick, and guitarist, Guy Strazzullo, I'd gone to the Indian environs with Roger Frampton's *Intersection*. We'd been momentarily recruited by the Department of Foreign Affairs to engage Cultural Exchange on the Subcontinent. This included a number of concerts in India as well as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The tour (as tours can be!) was interesting to say the very least. We shared a concert with Daniel Humair, in Delhi and, in Bombay, with that wonderfully-worldly wanderer, Don Cherry. And, in the garden of a home attached to the embassy, we shared in a bountiful steak B-B-Q and a case of beer. That was in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Can you imagine? I seem to recall we didn't eat much! Despite the various temptations, we were pretty well behaved boys, especially when one considers our sundry predilections round that time. Of course, our behavior was, to some considerable extent, held in check by the dreaded Delhi Belly, attacking us more than once at unexpected, inappropriate moments. All things considered though, we got to make some quite extraordinary, and at times, very beautiful, music. Most who know Roger's work, know his quirky, off-the-beaten-track ways to finding beauty, *and* adventure, intertwined. Roger was, I'm sure, *born* defiant. And saying this reminds me that one of the pieces Roger had included in our Indian Subcontinent repertoire was the very beautiful and sensitive, 'Mother Margaret's Mood', written for his Mum and loved by those who heard it.

I've digressed! Yes. Disbelief! And shame! I had always assumed that so called culture shock happened when one went 'there' and that one became un-shocked upon returning home. Not so! After our *Intersection* tour I stayed on in Colombo for a month to do some research and recuperate from the tour. Having seen during this period how some people of our planet are forced to live; the conditions and physical states they battle with on a daily, hourly, basis, I began to realize that there was a lot more to consider in life and in 'otherness' than my own pathetic, whimsical, white-and-west grievances. I returned to Delhi where I'd decided to dedicate the following six months to an introductory study – more like a foreword to a preface to an introduction – to the Khayal vocal music of Nth. India. In Delhi, especially Old Delhi, I regularly found myself face-to-face with realities that, initially, rendered me utterly deplete. But unexpectedly, and quite quickly, I found myself coping with these confronting experiences in a way that was quite surprising to me. Outside of 'my-self' I realized that it wasn't about me (as in *me*) at all. An enlightening moment? Perhaps. Probably more about survival. Yet, at the same time, some semblance of order juxtaposed with genuine compassion found a home in my being. And this found confluence with another experience.

Shortly after my arrival in Delhi, I had the good fortune to share a few hours over lunch with a British woman who'd been working as a writer with *India Today*. Myself, being a jazz musician and she, being a jazz fan, we had no trouble finding topics for a mutually interesting discussion. However, putting to one side our common theme, I was far more interested to hear her talk about India and so most of my questions to her concerned her life there. At that stage she'd been living in India for twenty years or so. Her usual attire was the traditional sari, her usual food the traditional curry. To me, she seemed almost Indian. I told her I thought as much and suggested that she must know a great deal about India. She gave me an answer I then, at best, understood only in part but one which remains with me. Nowadays, myself having lived in Japan for about eighteen years, I have an inkling as to what she may have meant. She said something like this: "After living here twelve months I thought I was beginning to know and to understand India and Indians. After ten years I was beginning to doubt the validity of my supposed knowledge. And now, after twenty years, I realize I know nothing." Of course, her meaning was not



'nothing' in the *tabula rasa* sense. Hers was a relative nothing. A kind of nothing that makes all the difference. A kind of 'no-thing'. You think you glance knowledge. Look again,... it's gone. Or at best, transformed.

In Delhi I studied with Madhup Maudgalaya at Gandharva Mahavidyalaya. On a couple of occasions he took me to his father; indeed, another kind of lesson. Madhup and his lovely wife invited me for dinner on more than one occasion. His family welcomed me into their home and their hearts. Madhup managed, somehow, to understand my demand to look into his music from a compositional/structural perspective rather than as performance practice, the usual route. His sister, Mardhavi, spent time with me looking at rhythm and dance. A close family friend, the renowned tabla player, Shafat Ahmed Khan, spent time with me, took me to concerts in which he performed and, outside of public observation, we sang through rhythmic complexes together (much to his delight and no doubt, his amusement too!). Shafat, in expressing excitement with my predilection toward polyrhythms, particularly as these contrasted with the additive rhythmic structures more familiar to him, supported my attempts to understand his/their music. And while all this was going on Madhup had organized for me to have in my modest abode, a beautiful, large tanpūra with which I could work and experiment – this, aimed at gaining some familiarity regarding overtones and natural tuning. We met two or three times each week. He was always curious and wanted to be informed of my self-imposed aural progress (such as it was!). He never made judgement. He never once told me what I *should* be hearing. He left that up to me. With each discovery, and these always seemed to me, amazing!, when told, he'd smile gently. He invited me to attend classes with other students, some of whom were, it seemed to me, quite advanced, and he'd encourage us to share in conversational exchange. It was during one of these sessions that a student passionately introduced me to the crucially anti-creative word, 'ossify', expressing in no uncertain terms that, in her view, it should be avoided at all costs. We all knew that six months of study was no time at all, yet Madhup's generosity, kindness, and sincerity of intent, was as relentless as it was unbelievable. This is a feeling I live with. Their generosity is a daily reminder. It increases with passing time. It's the real thing. Love! Devotion! Sincerity! Patience! And, perseverance!

1984, standing there, in my occasional ABC office, with the sound of India, literally, in my ears, the feeling of India so alive in my heart, and the smell of India so alive in my consciousness. The obscene overindulgence and excesses of my birthplace rendered me with a greater, more overwhelming feeling of hopelessness than I'd ever have believed possible. The process of making that four-part radio series was more painful than words could ever imply. For at least six months I felt as though I'd been ripped in two. Gradually, my heart, head, and body, found themselves at home again, in Sydney, my place of birth ... (or was it?). Yet I'd been filled with a kind of inner power and commitment, together with confirmation, from my intercourse with India. I've often wondered what they, the Others, got out of it(?). Perhaps 'unconditionality!' should be added to the above list of exclamations. They never asked for, nor expected, anything. Perhaps they felt my unequivocal respect. I lay no claims to knowing.

I heard Madhup's teacher, the Khayal vocalist, Kumar Gandharva, live! It was a huge concert in Delhi celebrating his 60th birthday. Kumarji, as Madhup would affectionately refer to him, passed away in 1992. I'm left wondering many things. There are many questions that will never find answers. I often find myself crying as



I listen to Kumarji singing folk songs from Malwa, Central India; his wife singing and playing tanpūra with him. These, however, are not tears of pathos, nor of nostalgia. In conversation, Madhup *always* deferred to Kumarji. Humility! These people, both collectively and individually, opened up utterly my heart and my spirit. Concurrently they encouraged me to face the unknown. No matter how penetrating and profound, or otherwise, might be my insights, they are indelibly stamped with my own cultural background and experience. What this means in the here-and-now may depend to some extent on one's religious leanings, if indeed, 'religious' is the correct word. Whatever the case though, even with a choice, I'd not want to change this. Fortunately, that choice is not mine to make. We each have our journey to travel. And we each have a responsibility.

To extend tradition, one has to *be* tradition ... at the inside, at its heart, embracing it with unconditional love. It is from there that the cultural circle can have innumerable centers and be felt with compassion, *as if* unbound. But being human, limits are, it seems, inevitable.

Where there is no beginning or end,  
How could there be a middle?  
It follows that thinking about this in terms of  
Prior, posterior, and simultaneous is not appropriate.

( Nāgārjuna, *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, XI.2 )

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**NOTES:** The Nagari script included with the title embraces the meaning, "relating to the next world" (Apte, Vaman Shivram, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary*. [2nd. ed. 1912] rev. 1965, rep. 2006. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Ltd.)

Nāgārjuna is widely acknowledged as a key figure in the development of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He lived during, or around, the 2nd century of our present era. He is generally accredited with being the founder of the Madhyamaka, or Middle-Way (also referred to as *mādhyaṃika* or 'Centrist School') tradition of Buddhist thought.

The two quotes by Nāgārjuna are from Jay L. Garfield, *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.

The 'Great Sage' referred to by Nāgārjuna in the first quote is Shākyamuni Buddha, also known as Siddhārtha Gautama, the historical Buddha.

The 'tanpūra' (or tambūra) is a four-stringed instrument, its resonator fashioned from a gourd, and tuned in accord with the notes, *pa* (roughly equivalent to the dominant of the western diatonic scale) or, *ma* (equiv. to sub-dom.) then *sa*, *sa* (upper-tonic), *sa* (tonic). Although it is a drone instrument, its function is crucially fundamental to the music; the performance reference to the entire operative tonal/micro-tonal spectrum.

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