

2022 Patanjali Class

4/12/22

13 – Yoga Letter Twelve

Some foreknowledge is helpful with this Letter, which is a peek at *dharana*, Patanjali's sixth limb, defined in sutra III:1 as "holding the focus of the mind." In his Preface, Nitya groups the limbs in pairs, and it should be revisited whenever there is need for orientation about the eight limbs. He pairs *dharana* with *pratyahara*:

The fifth limb occurs when the mind has been withdrawn from distractions (*pratyahara*); this enables you to clearly see the beneficial norms of life. A normative notion comes in the form of a harmonized hierarchy of values. When all values of interest are structured around the peak or crowning value, life has a central principle to regulate thoughts, words, and actions. This inner principle is *dharana*. *Dhar* means "to support." *Dharana*, the sixth limb, is the supporting principle that keeps you always clear-headed and provides a stable basis for your programs of life.

Deb drew our attention to two main themes in the Letter: first, Narayana Guru's image in *Atmopadesa Satakam*, verse 34, where he "compares a living organism to a chariot of the libido, yoked to the five senses; the reins are controlled by the mind on behalf of the representative Self identified with the individual." The other theme is the function of memory, and how it affects us, and how memories continue to affect every subsequent experience we have. Deb asserted that knowing how we use memory is essential to understanding yoga.

I felt it was important to recognize Nitya's subtle reference to the horizontal axis, where there is a complementarity of subject

and object, the subject (the perceiver) visualized as the horizontal negative, with the object the horizontal positive. The farther they are out of joint, the more deranged our mentation. Dharana is the normalization of how we understand what we perceive, which brings about the stabilization of consciousness. Accuracy is crucial. Nitya sketches the process:

The twofold functions of acceptance and avoidance are done with the exercising of the recall of previous memories and the use of them as the nuclei for molding a new experience with the given data of sensory stimuli and the emotional impact that arises out of a total reaction of the whole person in each instance.

From this, it's easy to see how our psychological disconnection is magnified each time a false memory is brought to bear on present circumstances, both positively and negatively.

We can easily notice how serious the consequences are: modern humans are losing our grip on the relation between subject and object, feeling free to characterize ordinary objects with bizarre conspiracy-type fantasies, while worshipping demagogues: the less tethered to reality our fantasies are, the more amusing and impelling they are. It's super-entertaining, as we roar off to make war in our libido-driven chariots. It's no wonder the horizontal world is losing its stability, when the most impactful species no longer pays heed to the reality of how it functions.

The crucial question here is how do we become confident that what we see and understand is based in truth and supportive of our psyche's sanity, not to mention the health of the environment? For dharana (and us) to flourish, the subject and its objects, the horizontal negative and positive, need to be in a mutually-supportive relationship. So says the ancient wisdom, at least.

Deb pointed out that this is not solely about political identity; all over the world that contact is being broken down, the gap magnified by a “them against us” ideology. It makes the subject and object polarize so badly that they rupture. Yoga is a balance, where realization, action, and fantasy are tied together. She was referring to the opening paragraph:

When we are passive we fantasize. When we are active we actualize. Our main goal orientation is to realize. In all these three pursuits, re-envisioning a previous experience is necessary.

This is where the recall of actual memories plays an essential role. For anything else, they are unnecessary.

Anita hit the pause button for a moment, asking, “When I read these chapters, the goal is realization, and to me realization is knowing our true selves, including learning how memory affects our functioning and our experiences. What good is it to know your true form if being is the only goal? It seems contradictory to *experiencing* your life—how can you live in this world without actualizing? My question is about the whole purpose of yoga: why is it so important that we know our true self?”

Anita’s question could take a full class to cover adequately, and it’s good to check in on it now and again. While she presented it apologetically, which is polite, it needs to be asked. Otherwise, Yoga is just another way of playing make-believe.

Nitya has a specific intent, here, of clarifying how we focus our minds. He’s not ruling out fantasizing and actualizing in order to realize, only pointing out that they are distinct aspects of our life. What a yogi is trying to do is rediscover and realize their self, which promotes healthy mental conditions. Yoga itself makes a perfect example. What most people think yoga is, is pure fantasy, wishful thinking. You do certain exercises and you become

enlightened. You breathe a certain way and you are realized. You act with certain predetermined guidelines and everything will fall into place. Meditate 30 minutes a day, and voila! By accepting this, you are making up an imaginary world and inhabiting it. Then you work to actualize the fantasy, and you can cobble it together as a rough approximation of your fantasy, and even make a living off it, yet it isn't realization. In a serious study like this, extraneous indulgences are meant to be done away with. It's not that you are meant to stop trying to think of something new: creativity and newness come from realization. What's meant to be abolished here is delusory thinking that leads us up a blind alley. The role of imagination and creativity is another subject entirely.

Deb simplified Anita's question as why should we try for realization rather than action? Her answer was because we are trying for the realizing of Being, and that Being is the same in every living creature on earth. When we touch that, it allows us to be in the world in a wider, less narrow way, not molded by painful and pleasurable memories. Being is like a fountain that is continuously nourishing every living thing.

I added that Being is similar to what we've characterized as the right hemisphere of the brain: the creative, intuitive, part where our vertical development unfolds. The left hemisphere handles the horizontal details. The yogi is trying to detach from horizontal demands so they don't impede the freedom to be fully present. I pictured it as being like dogs, who can run through a blackberry thicket at full speed and come out without a scratch, while humans, trying to carefully pick our way through, get caught by a hundred barbs.

It's important to know that all of these things—fantasizing, actualizing and realizing—are intrinsic parts of us, and they are all what we have to work on. Our memory gives us our uniqueness, and is not to be discarded. In a healthy mind it doesn't go away, and we all agreed that memory was crucial to our wellbeing. Deb

affirmed that while memory is essential, if we become nothing but our past conditionings, then we are not alive in the moment.

Susan read a poem in the spirit of the Twelfth Letter, from her meditation session that morning with Gayathri Narayanan. The full poem is [here](#). Gayathri selected the best part, the first four stanzas:

A Garden Beyond Paradise
by Rumi

Everything you see has its roots
in the unseen world.
The forms may change,
yet the essence remains the same.

Every wondrous sight will vanish,
every sweet word will fade.
But do not be disheartened,
The Source they come from is eternal
growing, branching out,
giving new life and new joy.

Why do you weep?
That Source is within you,
and this whole world
is springing up from it.

The Source is full,
its waters are everflowing;
Do not grieve,
drink your fill!
Don't think it will ever run dry
This is the endless Ocean!

Deb invited the class to share memories, positive or negative, that have substantially guided your daily life. She offered two, for starters. When she was three or four, out back, near the woods, there was a hollow tree with a fence around it, and her mother told her not to go into it, it's dangerous! So of course Deb found a way to get through the fence, and she would sneak in and sit alone inside the tree. It was a profound experience to be in that silent, hidden place in nature, and she believes it is one reason she loves to meditate in secluded places to this day.

Deb has also realized how the many times she moved as a child growing up, having to leave her friends and start again, is crucial to the person she became. She can watch their lingering effects on her, and make adjustments if necessary. One of the things Patanjali points out, she added, is if you don't see how memory is affecting what you are doing, you will be driven by an unknown compulsion, and it keeps altering what your immediate experience could be. So much suffering happened due to the memories she refused to look at. Patanjali helps us see those effects, and brings us back to live in the experience of now, free of those undue influences and memories.

Jan told us how the other day, she was recalling the blissful feelings of being a young girl, so very free and joyful and uninhibited, and she was trying to bring that spirit into a painting she was doing. It felt really good to do that. Later that day she was taking a sauna at her club, and heard a little girl outside laughing and speaking in such a joyful, free way, and her thoughts and experience all felt connected. It reminded her of her own daughter, now grown, as well as herself. She was working to express that innocence in her painting: the softness, femininity, freedom, and joy that her adult self tries to put aside. Another symbol of it for Jan is the fluidity of scarves. She laughingly recalled how on drives to the beach when she was a child, she would hang her

grandmother's precious silk scarf out the window and watch it flutter.

Ah, children! Our grandson Jai, age 14 months, was with us last week. He laughs a lot, and it's the laughter of pure merriment, while as adults we have these less lighthearted types of mirth, like ironic laughs, embarrassed chuckles, smirks of disdain. Young children laugh for the pure joy of being alive, and it makes everyone else laugh too. The joy of it touches on the experience of just being present, of a true alignment between subject and object.

During Jai's stay, I discovered another great essay by Brian Doyle, on this very topic, *Except Ye See Signs and Wonders*. It begins with:

Highlight at church yesterday: a small boy, age four or so, crawling ever so deftly and silently out of the front rows, and getting all the way to the edge of the proscenium, and then getting both arms and one leg up on the ceremonial ledge, before he was hauled back to base, giggling so infectiously that everyone in the front rows and the celebrant started laughing too. Even the piano player was snickering, and she is usually the soul of stern decorum.

That the perambulator had, I kid you not, a bright blue Mohawk haircut, and was wearing blue pajamas with black cowboy boots, added to the pleasure of the moment, because you hardly ever see anyone at church wearing pajamas with cowboy boots, not to mention such a rakish haircut. But it was his giggle that got to me, and has stayed with me happily this morning. His giggles were utterly and completely and totally artless. They were not wry comments, or default nervous tics, or conscious efforts to deflate tension, or even the evidence of skepticism suddenly flushed out into the open, as giggles sometimes are. No: they were pure merriment, and they pealed, they rang, they

chimed, they pierced the moment and peeled away the normal for an instant, and everyone burst out laughing, and I am fascinated and moved by this, and wish to explore it a bit with you, because isn't his giggling somehow a more naked holy thing than a church service? Isn't it? Somehow, in ways that are hard to articulate?

Farther on, he adds:

Did [Jesus] mean that all the things we mean by accomplishment, and maturity, and reason, and progress, are actually small niggling things that we must finally shuck and lay aside, in order to again be like children, spiritually open and emotionally naked and constantly liable to giggling?

So memory makes us who we are, and also tarnishes the purity of experience. Can we become skillful enough to embody both freedom and stability?

Anita experienced a trauma when she was young that she didn't deal with for 30 years, and now she can see how it affected her life, giving her claustrophobia. It took a long time before she was able to look back at that experience and realize its impact. (See, Anita, you *are* working toward realization here.)

Deb's tree hideout (a nearly universal theme, I'm betting) reminded Anita that when she was little there was a place a few blocks from where she lived, a trail through a thicket. She had to crawl through a tunnel to get in, and it was a bit scary, but inside she found a secret meadow, with a beautiful tree that became her best buddy. Her love of trees started right there, in communion with nature.

Next I read out a portion of Nitya's commentary on III:1, where dharana is defined as holding the focus of the mind:

All perceptions are supported by corresponding conceptions, the formulated impressions we have within us of everything with which we are familiar in some manner. They are based on the conviction of the verity of whatever impressions we have of the things we deal with. The yogi also has basic postulates and conceptions. They are his or her dharana.

A dharana can be real or unreal. Whether we are able to act efficiently or clumsily depends on the amount of discrepancy between the world “out there” and our conceptualization of things, ideas, and theories. The more definite and valid our concepts are, the greater is the chance of our applying our knowledge in any field. In other words, we live on our dharana. (314-5)

Even in repairing a machine—a watch, an automobile, or an airplane—one needs hours of concentration to understand all the correlations that go into its smooth functioning. Compared to that, the human system is far more elaborate. But we can direct the little spark of consciousness in us to go on a meaningful reconnoitering. Then the inside design of the entire structure will reveal to us the functional purpose for which every bit of us is put together. Then alone does dharana become an accomplished reality. (320)

Sutra III:2 tells us this skill promotes the seventh limb: “In that, the continuous flow of consciousness in unitiveness is *dhyanam*, contemplation.”

Paul lamented that we always carry the powers of association and discrimination when we experience the present moment. Particularly with negative experiences, what happened back then has nothing to do with what’s going on now, so when he paints with those former colors, he becomes dysfunctional. On the positive side, Anita’s secret garden reminded him of the times he

would go outside in the frigid Minnesota winter, lie down, make a small depression in the snow, and put his head in it. He could spend forever admiring the individual snowflakes. Now he likes applying that same sense of wonder to present experiences, where it helps him to look with the eyes of a child.

I couldn't help inferring that his "snow gazing" primed him for his powerfully positive reaction to the little boy gazing at the grass he was lying on, a story Paul has related many times. It's a clear case of a good memory adding extra pleasure to a simple event in the present.

These wonderful examples of abiding memory that were shared illuminate dharana, and its relation to the horizontal and vertical aspects of life. When we perceive an object, we can't help but bring along a lifetime of memories and associations and projections of things that coincidentally look like it. In all that welter there is only a small kernel of what that object actually is, while we are projecting a more or less plausible fantasy of it. That means, by concentrating on subtracting our associations, we are trying to transparently perceive the present moment as it is. At least, knowing that we are adding a lot to what's around us, is a healthy and humbling realization.

Jan took issue with the drastic nature of "terminating the association of ideas," in the last paragraph. The relevant part is:

While a diseased mind indulges in fantasy, a person of average normalcy engages himself in the pursuit of actualization. A yogi is careful to avoid both these realms, that of fantasizing and that of actualizing. The yogi's goal is to realize. In a negative sense, realization is the avoidance of the unreal that is perpetuated through the composition and retention of various imageries that cannot be validated as real. Hence the yogi terminates associations of ideas whenever an unprofitable memory is seeking a chance to reenter the focus of

consciousness. Here the witnessing element assumes the role of the grand discriminator.

Jan protested that there are different ways to deal with our memories, and some aren't by completely terminating them, but rather by processing them. It's important how we handle those moments in our lives, really looking at our old memories coming up, especially memory that has emotional content. We need to hold both past and present, and try to integrate them. Over time this helps you deal with their emotional content. It can be a problematic memory that has a lesson, and you see "there it is again," and repeat the lesson. The question is, do you just sever it each time, or do you sit with it a bit in your wise mind?

This is a fruitful topic we could pursue another time, because there really is value in terminating some unprofitable ideas, but we don't want to dismiss important sources of thought-provoking contemplation, either, and mistake Nitya's sentence as cutting us off from them. As he says, the witnessing element is the grand discriminator in this. I suggested it was worth pondering what constitutes an unprofitable memory or notion. It's by no means a cut-and-dried matter. Deb commented that the whole point of Being is that you can be in the moment and still recognize the deleterious effects of memories. We do a lot of what Jan is saying, we can see a memory and sit with it.

Pratibha said our best concentration comes when we have been trying to hold distractions to the side. It's like driving a car—we have to keep our attention on the road or it can be dangerous. We need to be able to hold all those memories in abeyance, the thoughts that come, in order to give full attention to the present. We cannot be in the present if we have crowded stuff in our mind, and we can see that pretty easily.

Deb added that when you are meditating, you don't try and force things away because just by the very act of forcing you give them energy. Instead of that, focus on the illuminating light.

I suggested we close by meditating on dharana, and then everyone could go home. Someone shouted, "We're home already!" Perhaps they were right, but I had imagined all along we were gathered together in a Zoom cloud, a place more like Anita's secret garden, Deb's tree, Paul's snow bowl, or Jan's studio. Home is where the heart is, and it was a heartfelt class.

Susan sent additional thoughts afterwards:

Those memories that Jan, Debbie, and Anita mentioned of being in nature are memories that helped each of them connect with their true selves. They were truly in the moment at those times, and remembering can help us to find our way back to that place, which is often obscured by the memories that take us away from the moment (such as those producing guilt or shame, for instance). I loved Jan's example of using her memory to bring her into the present moment of her painting. When I was young, some of my happiest times were going to the beach with my brother and my grandparents — every evening after dinner we would go on long walks down the beach. So wonderful. Just thinking about this now, I realize that this may be why I love after dinner walks even today. For me, there is something magical about them and maybe my memories are the reason. I always feel very present during those walks and not weighed down or distracted. Such a gift.

Part II

From the first Patanjali Yoga study group:

This lesson [of Nancy's] and Nitya's Letter 12 parallels the work we have been doing in our Portland Gurukula class, centering on the afflictions. We are afflicted by memories lodged in our bodies and minds that shape our very world. Most often they darken it and kill our joy, yet we become used to them and treat them as reality itself. We instinctively resist any attempts to break free of these strictures, either by our own efforts or those of our sympathetic friends. Freud once likened this well known reaction to the patient with a terrible toothache who pushes the dentist away as he approaches holding pliers that will remove the painful tooth and put an end to his misery.

When we enter the path of yoga or take on some other therapeutic program, we have to learn how to recognize and neutralize our own inner resistance. In II: 13 Nitya recommends "right knowledge" to effect the cure, which implies a great deal. In the case of the dental patient, this means the knowledge that "yanking out the tooth will cure the pain" has to be pitted against the instinctive urge to not suffer greater pain, however temporary. A dog doesn't realize this, but a human can understand the future payoff.

Here Nitya warns us "This motive [to be realized] is again and again sabotaged by the seeping in of memories, either from the threshold of factual retentions or from the threshold of the phantom-weaving mind." This means we are frozen by our beliefs in both the so-called factual world and the world as we imagine it. Finding a happy medium between these poles is a central challenge of yoga. I must admit that most of what passes for yoga or other spirituality in my local universe at least is mainly a trite form of fantasy, of phantom-weaving minds doing a lot of wishful thinking. Of course, that is eminently marketable and readily attracts the gullible, while true realization isn't accompanied with much hype.

As we look more deeply into the generally accepted “facts” of our world, we begin to realize they are more fantastic than factual. I’ve always cherished a quote by Nitya on page 65 of his *Psychology of Darsanamala*; “The world we think to be real has in fact very little objective reality. It is padded out in all directions with half-baked conceptual notions and hidebound prejudices.” Knowing this impels us to dig down to try and see if there is any truth at all in our existence, and if so, what it consists of.

The wisdom of the ancient rishis is revealed by insights like those in Nitya’s elucidations to be an exceptionally well-reasoned science of the mind. It has been colored down through the ages by religious blankets thrown over it by superstitious people who didn’t fully understand it. I suppose we shouldn’t be surprised, since Patanjali left an awful lot to the imagination with his terse sutras. Happily, Nitya is lifting the veil for us, restoring a very effective scientific tool for enabling our onward progress.

Speaking of science, my most recent issue of *Scientific American* is on parallel universes, which are now regarded as a virtual certainty by the physics community, apparently. How times change and progress! Most of cutting edge physics sounds more like metaphysics, and the mainstream today seems right out of an acid trip fantasy. Yet it’s all supported by “hard facts” and mathematics.

This gelling of the community vision around a new level of understanding is a kind of realization. Minds that are opened up to new theoretical frontiers soon come to realize that the impending paradigm is as real or more real than its predecessor. In physics at least, what was once considered to be reality with a high degree of certitude is now a dingy relic, only clung to by tamasic mental dinosaurs. I suppose this is why yogis refuse to consider Realization as a kind of singular finalized position, but rather an ongoing process of openness. What it reveals is never static, but totally dynamic.

Such dynamism is beckoning to us from the hoary pages of the Yoga Shastra. Dare we embrace it?

* * *

8/26/8, first Portland Gurukula class:

Nitya begins by distinguishing cognition from re-cognition. Cognition is the assimilation of new knowledge, primarily during the early years of life when the brain is building memory and functional connections, but continuing through life. Anita and Fred wanted us to know that every input is new until it is recognized, or re-cognized, as an identifiable correspondent of memory. Much of our Gurukula study is aimed at enhancing the appreciation of the newness of every experience. Recognition is largely automatic in a healthy brain, and is a very useful function unless it is allowed to overwhelm and substitute for cognition.

The main point of the Letter is to distinguish the horizontal from the vertical, though as Deb asserted, when we are living an artistic, flowing life these are integrated and invisible. It's only when we're seeking to understand that they are useful, like the concept of the Absolute itself. As Nataraja Guru admitted in his Integrated Science, these concepts don't exist as such. They are normative notions that help us to balance our psyche.

Regardless, in the model we have recourse to, fantasy or subjectivity is considered the negative horizontal pole, while actuality or objectivity is assigned the positive pole. Realization is the vertical essence where these are normalized. Without realization, the horizontal can and does careen all over the map. It is unduly influenced by outside forces and inside memories in the shape of samskaras and vasanas. The vertical is thus like the eye of the hurricane, an oasis of calm in which we can take stock and prepare for the next blast.

Fred took issue with Nitya's phrasing that a diseased mind fantasizes while the ordinary mind actualizes. He felt it was normal for all of us to do both, and that's right. Indian gurus tend to have a severe attitude about fantasy because of its discrepancy with actuality. They believe the subjective should correspond to the objective or madness results, and they have a point. But Nitya himself put it much more gently at the beginning of the Letter, saying only that when we are passive we fantasize and when we are active we actualize. As long as these remain in rough correspondence we live a healthy life. Yogic realization does not happen in a vacuum, as is sometimes imagined, it occurs in relation to horizontal actuality.

Sometimes the passive, fantasy life far outpaces any actualization, though, and this tends to cause pain to the psyche. Instead of pain-reducing drug medication, the happy choice of the brave new world, the best solution is to temper one's fantasies on the anvil of actuality. The pain comes from the futility of our inner urges to find expressive outlets, because we're too lazy to put them into practice. Their dynamism just fizzles out, and we have a profound feeling of dissatisfaction and unfulfillment. We need to *do* things, real things, and not just at random but in keeping with our value visions, and the act of doing relieves the pain.

There is a third option, that of the yogi. The yogi opts for realizing over fantasizing or actualizing. This means performing the "wisdom sacrifice" of examining the situation and coming to a neutral comprehension. While we stop and look, the inspiration of realization comes mysteriously as if by grace. Whether it is imagined to come from a recondite part of the brain or a quantum field or a god, it comes from beyond consciousness to shed light on our dilemmas.

Both Fred and Anita wondered if artistic inspiration didn't come from personal fantasy and then get actualized, as is commonly thought. There is a subtle distinction here. Inspiration is

vertical. It may be promoted by fantasy but is distinct from it. Great artists hone their skills, certainly, but their inspiration pours out of the depths, often unbidden, and floods consciousness with its beauty. Their job is to actualize the inspiration. No amount of fantasizing will produce great art, though it produces commercial art in great heaps. It may be hard to distinguish them from the outside, but inwardly we know there is a difference. The two books I'm reading about music right now, *Musicophilia* by Oliver Sacks and *This is your Brain on Music* by David Leavitt, are filled with vernacular and scientific tales of oceanic inspiration that dwarfs the pools of consciousness of the artists that experience them.

In *Timequake*, the writer Kurt Vonnegut joked that some people, him included, had radio receivers in their brains to pick up broadcasts from somewhere else. He wrote a story about a mad scientist who studied brain after brain, and finally found the little blob of matter that must have been the receiver, because only scientific and artistic geniuses, great writers and poets and so on, had it. He got ready to present his findings, which he was sure would garner him a Nobel Prize. Then he realized that he couldn't take credit for the discovery, because by his own theory he must have one of those radio receivers himself, and committed suicide instead. The implication being that although we all want to take credit for what we do, we should temper our self-importance by admitting that our ideas come from the depths of pure consciousness and are not as much our own creations as we might wish.

Nitya traces inspiration from said pure consciousness, *cit*, through the actualizing consciousness, *caitanya*, and into the mouths of poets and philosophers, as exemplars of inspired living. Without the transformative efforts of an individual being, however, the unlimited potential of *cit* remains untapped. The minute we acknowledge an inspirational Source, we can turn to it and become inspired according to our own predilections and abilities.

Anita had a typical (if I may use the term) yogic inspiration during a music lesson with Eugene. She suddenly realized that her lifelong reticence and self-consciousness about singing was due to wanting to please her father as a little girl. He was difficult and often AWOL, and sometimes she could attract his attention and sometimes not. But she tried hard to reach out to him through performance, one of the few avenues children have to do so in many cases. The fact that at times it drew praise and other times had no effect was deeply confusing to Anita, again typically of children. The deep memory of that confusion continued to color Anita's ability to make music for her whole life, until the combination of contemplation and musical release provided the flash of realization. This will have a positive impact on her self-confidence in performance.

We can't make revelations like this come at our beck and call, but we can be more open to them and accepting of them, which should increase their frequency. Contemplation invites them in, and quiet times like meditation allow their whispers to be heard. Treat them like wild birds, be very still and quiet, and they will sometimes come near enough to eat out of your hand. Yogic realization sounds like a big brass band event, but often means just what Anita experienced, insights that liberate our psyches, and in turn lead to new insights.

It is well worth repeating the bulk of the last paragraph of the Letter, as it holds the most valuable instruction for the yogi and artist:

A yogi is careful to avoid both these realms, that of fantasizing and that of actualizing. The yogi's goal is to realize. In a negative sense, realization is the avoidance of the unreal that is perpetuated through the composition and retention of various imageries that cannot be validated as real. Hence the yogi terminates associations of ideas

whenever an unprofitable memory is seeking a chance to reenter the focus of consciousness. Here the witnessing element assumes the role of the grand discriminator. The incentive for this grand discriminator is nothing other than to visualize one's own true form. This motive is again and again sabotaged by the seeping in of memories, either from the threshold of factual retentions or from the threshold of the phantom-weaving mind. The experiential essence of realization is Being.

Bill returned us to the essential teaching here again and again: to visualize or realize our true form. We are trained to think of ourselves as this or that, and doing so puts limits, sometimes severe limits, on our true form, which is unlimited. Scotty offered his own response to the limiting question "Who are you?" to wit "A being in continual transformation." He also shared Rumi's answer: "A soul within a soul within a soul." My motto puts it, "Self-description is stultifying." The thrust of the teaching is to stop feeling obligated to shrink ourselves to fit the mold of the current paradigm. No matter how wonderful our self-definition, it is a horizontal confabulation of wishful thinking and actualized behaviors in a historical format. No horizontal package, however attractive we make it, adequately embodies our true form. Sure, it's "us" but only for the moment. We don't want to get stuck on it. Nitya tells us in no uncertain terms that our memories are saboteurs of this liberating motivation. We don't have to carry them around like Santa's pack to be who we are already. They can serve us rather than dictate and truncate our life.

The latest brain-imaging studies of the frontiers of neuroscience are confirming the wisdom of the ancient rishis garnered through contemplation. Just as physics has undermined the absolute nature of appearance, neuroscience has discovered that our sense of self is a mysterious, nonmaterial entity,

influenced by all sorts of programmed behaviors. Everything they can study about the brain seems to be a conditioned factor, so the question is what is it in us that feels free to choose? Who are we, really? Are “we” in charge, or are we nothing more than an endless recombination of recycled information? Is our certitude about our existence illusory? If nothing else, it shows the importance of striving to wriggle out of the grasp of preconditioned states. Science won’t speculate whether there is any “true form” beyond the confines of our historical nervous system. That should always remain beyond the grasp of material perception, though one never knows. But these studies inspire us yet again to go beyond all limits. In the words of Krishna in the Gita (VI, 46): “The yogi is greater than men of austerity, and he is thought to be greater than men of wisdom, and greater than men of works; therefore become a yogi, Arjuna.”

Part II

WOW! So fluidly this song is sung,
artistically realizing everyone.
We cultivate lost and we are found,
like "losing myself" in the river's sound.

Invisible wind that moves the leaves,
the wind is real though we cannot see.
We know it's there, and so are we...
by losing our selves we're free to Be.

From here the baby lives and breathes.
From here the artist paints with ease.
From here illusion falls away--
and this is "Livin'!", if I do so say!

Thanks for singing, Everyone!

xoxo Peg

Part III

Marginalia arrived today, with a contribution to our class. The full essay, including a reading of the poem, is [here](#).

SINGULARITY

by Marie Howe

(after Stephen Hawking)

Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity
we once were?

so compact nobody
needed a bed, or food or money —

nobody hiding in the school bathroom
or home alone

pulling open the drawer
where the pills are kept.

*For every atom belonging to me as good
Belongs to you. Remember?*

There was no *Nature*. No
them. No tests

to determine if the elephant
grieves her calf or if

the coral reef feels pain. Trashed
oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;

would that we could wake up to what we were
— when we *were* ocean and before that

to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock was
liquid and stars were space and space was not

at all — nothing

before we came to believe humans were so important
before this awful loneliness.

Can molecules recall it?
what once was? before anything happened?

No I, no We, no one. No was
No verb no noun
only a tiny tiny dot brimming with

is is is is is

All everything home

Part IV

For the real enthusiasts, this set of old notes throws light on our
discussion of Letter Twelve:

12/8/9

Sutra I:43

In unobstructed consciousness, the memory is purified, as if devoid
of its own form, and the object alone is illuminated.

Once again a seemingly simple sutra yielded a surprising and edifying bouquet of meaning as we prized our way into it, a testament to group exploration for sure. With bitter cold outside, we encircled the altar of the wood stove, basking in its radiant warmth. It was like being inside a sphere of protection, where openness and curiosity flowed effortlessly between us.

The phrasing of this sutra is a little misleading, as we've already learned about "purifying our memories" earlier on. Purifying memories is a process of revisiting them and throwing the light of adult intelligence into the dark recesses where terrifying or twisted fantasies persist based on partial perception. Here, we are sitting in contemplation and allowing the normal process of memory association to pass through us or slide off of us without grabbing on to any tag that comes up. It is actually *we* who are being purified, of the influence of memories on our consciousness, and not the memories themselves.

Ordinary awareness is fairly choked with associations, which tend to drag it into the past and make it fuzzy. As we stand firm in not linking with them as they appear, it is like a clarifying process where a pollutant precipitates out of a beaker of water. Afterwards we are able to perceive whatever object is presented to us more clearly, more as it actually is. Holding onto our associations is like stirring the beaker again and again, so that clarity is never possible. This is reminiscent of Bishop Berkeley's famous assertion that philosophers kick up dust and then complain they cannot see.

Remaining detached from memories is a meditation experienced by everyone at some time. Do you recall as a child when you would "zone out" and stare uncomprehendingly at something, lost in reverie, with no descriptive commentary taking place? Though usually called daydreaming, it is a kind of samadhi. Then when your young brain had completed the complicated process of conscious registration, suddenly you realized you were

looking at a flower or an anthill or whatever, as though the flower had simply appeared out of nowhere. Somehow, identifying it consciously made it spring into existence in a sense. The present meditation reverses this process. We are un-associating, easing back into that state before memories clogged our minds with so much knowledge. As we have often noted, while memories are useful and even essential, they can take the thrill out of life by dulling the sharp edge of experience, converting it from “brand spanking new” to “old hat.” We are not abandoning memories completely, but only learning the skill of disconnecting the automatic associative process, which Patanjali assures us allows our consciousness to be unobstructed so the object alone is illuminated. In other words, the object is what it is, not what we want it to be.

Nitya describes this process in some detail:

The yogi adopts the discipline of letting go of all irrelevant aspects such as any personal relationship with that idea and with things that are unrelated to the particular gestalt taken for contemplation.... One by one, distractions are dropped. The external object and the internal contemplation become identified into a single entity. Then consciousness is filled with what is presented without being dragged into any tangent of association. Therefore, there is no experiencing of confrontation, because the duality of the perceiver and the perceived comes to an end.... In the yogi's sadhana (practice) this is a major crossing over.

The idea of dropping distractions is that as the various memories appear, they are released back into the vault from whence they came. You don't fight them or otherwise resist, nor do you pointedly ignore them. You simply attend to the presence of the object with renewed intensity and they go back into storage. It does

take some practice to get the hang of this, which is why it is a classic form of meditation.

The object-image often used for meditation is a candle flame or some other religious icon. As you contemplate it, you discard the normal urges to identify and describe the object as they arise, along with the more tangential thoughts that like to tag along. This is the opposite of religion, by the way, where the associations are the main point. Worshippers are required to agree to the preferred body of beliefs that have been attached to the object by previous members of their religion, and the promise is that doing so will lead them to enlightenment or heaven. In yoga though, this is a major, indeed fatal, impediment. If you aren't willing to discard everything that is not germane to the experience of the present, there is really no point to it at all.

It is also unfortunate that such a static notion as meditating on an object has taken root as if it was the whole point. In fact it's merely preliminary training, like hatha yoga. Meditating on a candle is fine for practicing the relinquishment of memory attachments, but all too often the blessings of yoga are confined to a meditation period separate from everyday life, and the yogi believes that that's good enough, that's the practice. But this is a technique that should be brought to bear regularly right in the marketplace, and its importance follows closely on what we discussed last week about how to relate to your child.

Any dear friend, and especially a close family member, is swathed by us in more memories than any other aspect of our world except ourselves. We don't really see our child any more for what they are, we see an amalgam of the child smothered in our hopes and fears, demands and disappointments. All that mental garbage chokes them, our dearest loves, the very ones we most want to be free and happy. It chokes our joy as well. What's worse, the child or the friend easily senses the memory cloud we are shrouded in, and feels it deep down as a disruption in the

relationship. A child in particular feels they are being constantly judged (as they are), and so they have to guard their tender soul from the harsh judgments that are cloaked in what passes for love in the allegedly civilized world. The open connection of the early relationship becomes ruptured by the ever-increasing mound of memories, to be replaced by a martial game of thrust and parry. Unless we can find a way to release the grip of memories, they continue to pile up until some kind of explosion beats them back.

As Deb pointed out, it isn't just one person whose vision is clouded with memories, it's everyone. It would be hard enough to untangle the ensuing snarls if they were only coming from one place, but they are coming from every direction at once. Every person is trapped in their own mindset. It's no wonder that as a species we have become enmeshed in a colossal backlash affecting every level of our lives.

The yogi's contribution to world peace, as well as interpersonal peace, is to continually set aside the memory associations that poison the present with prejudices of the past. These associations include, by the way, expectations, demands, thwarted hopes, festering wounds, and all the rest of the junk that causes us to walk around all the time in a state of frustration with the other. This doesn't mean that the yogi walks incautiously into the line of fire, but only that they see with clarity what their options are.

Yogis heal themselves first, and only then are they capable of possibly providing a curative influence on the whole situation. If you rush off half-cocked to repair the world, your memories will taint the purity of your motivations and make the problems worse, not better. You will only add to the confusion. But once you can see clearly without the intervention of your expectations and prejudices, you tacitly offer to others the opportunity to let go of theirs too. Some will respond by opening up, and some may want

to kill you over it, but it is still the best contribution you can make to world and local peace.

Another important lesson we can take from this is the way we relate to a guru or other person we hold in high esteem. Nitya liked to say that Indians placed their gurus on pedestals so they wouldn't have to pay attention to their teachings. If you treat them as wise and enlightened beings, you can just bow as you go past their statue, and pat yourself on the back that you are in their camp. This is by no means limited to Indians, but that's who he was talking to at the time. We are all guilty of this. Belief and practice are two different things, but if we're lazy or timid we may be eager to substitute the former for the latter.

When you sit at the guru's feet you should be listening as intently as possible, but instead you may think "Oh, what a great guru. Aren't I lucky to have this great teacher here! I will be saved just by being associated with such a wise one." And on and on, endlessly. All that worshipful chatter is throwing up a defensive barrier to ward off the impact of the guru's words. A yogi must set aside all those thoughts, however valid they may seem to be, so they can really listen to the preceptor. It is not uncommon to walk away from a darshana with a sense of smug satisfaction but without a drop of new information having penetrated your comfortable cloud (or fog) of memories. Equally commonly, you listen carefully for a few minutes, but then the guru says something that you catch on to, and you are carried away by it. For many minutes you mull over those immortal words, only to realize with a start that you've lost the train of thought and are far away from what is being taught. You may not ever catch the thread—the sutra—of the argument again. Your ego has just tricked you one more time! These are not great crimes, but an adept yogi will listen closely to the whole lecture, and only after the talk is over go back to recall the highlights they want to ponder over in more depth.

Listening closely is an excellent meditation as well as an opportunity to expand your horizons.

Because our brains normally work to attach memory tags to every situation, it is a perennial task to set them aside to take a good hard look from a fresh perspective. We cannot disconnect the normal brain function, but we can certainly rise above it to a new level of liberated awareness. Therefore this is one of those essential abhyasas, repetitive practices. We can become expert at this type of detachment, but we cannot predict if or when we will ever become so enlightened that all memories have been permanently disconnected. Nor do most of us seek such a state, either.

These are a few typical examples relevant to spiritual seekers, friends and parents, all of whom should be—and are—yogis to some degree. There is no slice of life that cannot benefit from an unclouded examination, and luckily this way of looking around can fairly quickly become habitual if you keep at it for a while. It is reinforced by the sheer pleasure of being more alive and more responsive, and seeing how far the world reciprocates your loving consideration.

We are called by this verse to surrender our small self-interest, based as it is on outdated information, and merge into the greatness of reality as it is. No wonder Nitya describes this as a major crossing over!