

2022 Patanjali Class

5/10/22

17 – Sutra I:1

Now, yoga instruction; or, more poetically.

Now, the instruction for contemplative union in harmony.

‘Now’ is a powerful premise, meaning we are offering our full attention to the study. In our case, after years and years of preparation, including the previous study of this very book beginning in 2008, we are bringing a tremendous amount of pondering and processing, life experience, doubts and confusion, and so much more, to bear on these koan-like sutras.

Deb hears that *atha*, that Now, as proclaiming “Here we are!” We have arrived at a major starting point, and this is *our* story. We could call it a trumpet fanfare or drumroll: ATHA!!!! She suggested we give Patanjali a cheer for what he has bequeathed the world.

Andy characterized the sutras as kernels, meant to be expanded as we read more and more into them. Deb added that sutra means thread, (sutra is the source, via Latin, of the English word suture), and they all have to work as one whole to bind up the meaning. Like a single loop of sewing, they aren’t complete when they stand alone. They have to be taken together. The continuity is emphasized in another of Nitya’s splendid sentences:

According to Vyasa, [the first commentator of Patanjali’s Yoga] Yoga is *samadhi*, “equipoise in consciousness.” It is not the steady state of inert matter in its stagnation of evolution, but the continuous rebalancing of a poise that is kept up in and through the flux of a cosmic order of continuous transformation and transvaluation. (YS 3)

Meaning, Yoga is not a goal but a way of life. A way of being.
And the thread extends through time, more than space.

The excerpt above is now nestled next to two closely related ones in Nitya's Selected Quotes:

Yoga is not just sitting cross-legged and freezing into a static corpse of the past, it is a conscious participation in the scheme of life. By constantly pulling ourselves out of the tendency to freeze, to become morbid, numb or inertial, and lose awareness, we make ourselves available to the meaningful vitality of the moment. (SOC, 31)

Yoga is the union of ends and means, the cancellation of opposites, expectation and fulfillment. Tension and release cancel out into a neutral silence, and ambivalence is resolved. (Gayatri mantra meditation, Hawaii, 1978)

This morning Paul wrote about what he called Andy's Perspective of Unity:

I guess I needed some time to think about what Andy said last night in class. If I understood correctly, Andy was expressing how a sutra could feel differently from the perspectives of our individualized self. If the essence of truth existed as a pure breeze coming from the north; the bird flying south feels the wind as tail wind, while the bird flying north feels the same breeze a head wind. Perspective allows a sutra to provide meaning to both 'those coming' as well as 'those going'. The effect on each witness differs; while the essence of the experience remains one-and-the-same.

Deb noted happily that Nitya gives a positive spin on *tamas* (darkness), *mudha* (forgetting) and *nirodha* (restraint or

inhibition), all most taken in the way he does in the above *Stream of Consciousness* quote as part of our tendency to freeze up and become “morbid, numb or inertial, and lose awareness.” Here they are part of centering the mind, of screening out distractions and delusions, for our benefit. Nitya writes: “When obscuration and inhibition play their proper role and a highlighted interest is allowed to prevail as an undisputed life interest, that gives a sense of satisfaction to the entire organism.”

Deb called for examples from everyone’s life experiences, of how “Flickering consciousness pauses for a split second, characterized by the veiling of consciousness in between one focus of consciousness and another. The shift of focus also implies the illumination of a new interest.” and examples can be submitted at any time during the study. She acknowledged that often we are multitasking and skimming over surfaces, so not truly getting very far in to anything. The question is, how do these negative factors work together to produce one-pointed attention (*ekagra*)?

Andy finds it amazing that you simply cannot catch the moment of obscuration, almost by definition. It’s invisible, happening in the very moment we aren’t paying attention.

Paul wondered why we do that? Why does our mind skip from one thing to another, when satisfaction comes more from being steadily engaged? He noted that due to his religious upbringing, he was raised to ignore what was happening around him and “move right along.” Now he’s learned there’s something important here, in what’s going on, and he finds it satisfying to attend to it. He’s decided that epiphanies require more of his attention.

Deb agreed with Andy that we are attuned to sensory stimulation, always attracted to look at this or that. It comes from our historical need for defensive attention to protect ourselves from danger. We have to step outside that in order to center, to cohere around an interest we love.

Jan believes, in relation to that, yoga helps us to feel secure, by becoming balanced and integrated, so that we can be less flighty in our attention. Her Hatha Yoga teacher always helps her class to settle in, to access what the teacher calls the lower levels of the brain. It's calming, almost like being hypnotized.

In answer to Paul's question, I wondered who remembers Marvin the Paranoid Android, from Douglas Adams' *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*? He's always depressed because he has "a brain the size of a planet," but all people want him to do is open the door or fetch them a soda. We too have gigantic, infinitely capable brains that we tend to under-employ, so our scatterbrained behavior is like our vast inner dynamo twiddling its thumbs, waiting for us to get engaged in something challenging and interesting enough for it to bother with. It is nudging us to express and fulfill ourselves. This class itself is an opportunity to do just that: to really thinking about meaningful, relevant and complex ideas, and share them among friends.

Nitya's commentary is leading up to the next sutra, with its preliminary definition of yoga as *citta vritti nirodha*, which means banishing extraneous thoughts so our attention becomes steady. This applies not only to meditation, but to every action or our lives, whether it's making art, taking a walk, or cleaning the kitchen.

I offered an offbeat example, as we've often used things like painting or musical performance, but haven't taken on the quotidian aspects, much. In the fire station, every morning we dedicated at least a couple of hours to "House Duties": cleaning and maintaining everything, making sure supplies were not depleted, running motors, reading log books, planning drills. It could be a dull routine, and some of us resented it and complained, and so our jobs less than well. Others loved it and stayed positive, taking care to do a really good job every day. They were engaged, while the complainers were disjoined. Those engaged enjoyed it,

and the grouseurs did not, though there is a small joy in pretending you're above your assigned tasks.

Deb has noticed that for her, it takes a while to get into it, but once you do you get carried along. First you have to work at it, but then you become part of it. Maybe you even have to grouse, until the wheels get rolling.

Nancy, who does big, complicated design projects, well knew when Deb meant. She is helped by what she called her internal threads of consciousness that continue the work even while she is engaged in other things. That way, her duties have rhythms, with peacefulness always flowing through them.

It's well-established by brain imaging that continuous focus on a topic is not the optimal way to learn it. It's better to study or engage for a while, then take a nap or turn to something else. While we're resting, the memories are processed as long-term ones and their relationships examined by the unconscious. So yes, our continuous contemplation is more like a sine wave. If we stayed stuck on any single thing all the time, no matter how stupendous, we would be static, and it would be boring.

It's true that we often start a project with effort against resistance, and gradually move to engagement and joy. A classic example, "[Mr. Natural Does the Dishes](#)" is now available on Youtube, with a Crumb-like banjo accompaniment.

During the closing meditation, I thought of another example for Deb's prompt. As a child, when I read a book, I would enter the story and be alive in it. I literally was in a total environment, utterly focused, and I could go in and out of it effortlessly. Now I'm more easily distracted, and lose concentration frequently. I have short periods where I'm "in" the story, separated by straining to get back to it as distractions scroll past my mind's eye. I don't think I ever get as lost in a book as I once did, though it's surely the reason I love books and reading as much as I do.

So yeah, I'm backsliding in one-pointedness, in a way, yet I can get back into a book with some effort. I have to not follow the distracting trains of thought when they intervene, and as soon as I let them go, there I am again. The same is true in my piano playing. Happily, with my writing and interesting one-on-one conversations, I can bring my full attention, conscious and unconscious, effortlessly to bear, and that is the most satisfying thing of all.

Two people sent this poem after the last class, so expressive of the unitive spirit:

From Blossoms
By Li-Young Lee

From blossoms comes
this brown paper bag of peaches
we bought from the boy
at the bend in the road where we turned toward
signs painted Peaches.

From laden boughs, from hands,
from sweet fellowship in the bins,
comes nectar at the roadside, succulent
peaches we devour, dusty skin and all,
comes the familiar dust of summer, dust we eat.

O, to take what we love inside,
to carry within us an orchard, to eat
not only the skin, but the shade,
not only the sugar, but the days, to hold
the fruit in our hands, adore it, then bite into
the round jubilation of peach.

There are days we live
as if death were nowhere
in the background; from joy
to joy to joy, from wing to wing,
from blossom to blossom to
impossible blossom, to sweet impossible blossom.

Part II

Jay sent a video introduction for us (takes a half hour). It's presentation is different than ours, but it's worth knowing there are many ways to interpret these ideas, and the terms are defined in a typical fashion. I found the early going especially amusing. Here's Jay's note:

As I know that you have been sharing the wisdom of Patanjali with several of the devout students, I thought of sending you the video showing,

Who is PATANJALI & What is YOGA?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bc5UHKO3wWc&ab_channel=ProjectShivoham.....

Project SHIVOHAM is a micro documentary channel about the distant, forgotten and most importantly glorious past of India. There is another project called Vishuddhi Films which also has produced several videos on the same line. These are very informative videos.

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The Old Notes, in full:

11/3/8

Sutra 1:1

Now, yoga instruction; or, more poetically.

Now, the instruction for contemplative union in harmony.

Much of the evening's discussion centered on the word 'now'. Atha has a similar range of meanings as the English word now, including 'then' and 'moreover'. Most importantly, since it implies a time sequence, it indicates that we are at last properly prepared to begin our study. In our case, that means having contemplated and discussed the Gita, That Alone, Darsanamala, and most recently the Yoga Letters that form the appendix to the present book by Nitya Chaitanya Yati. We have dismissed many false notions and reoriented our awareness holistically. We have learned how to sit quietly and allow our deepest wisdom to bubble to the surface. We are patient enough to bring our wandering mind back to a subject repeatedly, shrugging off sabotaging imaginations. We are even familiar with many of the terms we will encounter. Now we are primed to get the most we can out of what the Guru is going to say to us.

MRI studies show that the more effort we make, the more the brain comes alive. Thus, study that demands our complete attention and commitment energizes that organ, among other benefits. Yoga study is not about going to sleep as the preacher drones on with comforting platitudes, it's about waking up. Nor should we be daunted by any initial failure to understand. Deb told us last week how her college philosophy professor directed his classes to read everything five times: only then would it begin to make sense. Paul admitted to reading this sutra three times already. Our mind processes its input unconsciously for a long time, so any such preparation will be very helpful in getting the most out of the class.

The pith of Nitya's commentary is the Samkhyan series of kshipta, vikshipta, mudha, nirodha and ekagra, another thing we

are ‘now’ supposed to know. The first two are descriptions of the scattered mind, kshipta indicating a single attraction of consciousness and vikshipta a series of attractions. The root here means thrown, tossed around. Our untrained mind is often “tempest-tossed.” We are bouncing from idea to idea, at the mercy of the impressions each one makes on us. We get “strung out” when we identify who we are with these transient impressions, forgetting our core nature. The definition of vikshipta takes us all the way to “bewildered, distraught.”

In between each momentary arrangement of awareness is a transition through a period of non-awareness, called mudha. Although mudha, forgetfulness, can be pathological when excessive, in proper measure it allows us to move on through our life. If vikshipta is like a sine wave, the highs are the kshiptas and the lows are the mudhas. They really go together. Nitya has highlighted the positive side of mudha, but the word generally refers to the dissociation caused by not having or remembering the connection between one thing and the next, what we tend to call insanity. MW describes mudha as “stupefied, bewildered, confused,” etc. It is extremely important that this veiling aspect of mind be balanced, and even more important that we retain our self-awareness at the level below or beyond the sine wave function of consciousness. This core, being invisible and intangible, is given short shrift by current attitudes. If we believe the popular version of who we are and identify only with our superficial aspect, its chaotic, mercurial character can be totally disorienting. The practice of Yoga a la Patanjali is primarily aimed at detaching ourselves from this surface identity so we can come to know our core reality.

Diving into our core can provide a real break in continuity. Mudha is a hiatus within a patterned flow, and it doesn’t usually bring dramatic differences, but samadhi, the merger with the emptiness of our true nature, can impel explosive change. If for

even a single instant you could be without any conditioning at all, the next instant could be anything. It would not be dependent on the previous compilation of impressions in any way. History records occasional examples of such far-reaching transformative events. Professor Rajan has written a lengthy article linking the rapid evolution of Kerala society in the past century to Narayana Guru's attainment of emptiness, and envisions a point-source at a specific time and place. The Guru's impact is wholly disproportional to any actual act or event, yet because he was able to step out of time and space and into Nothing, he became the hub of a vast new spinning wheel of dharma. The door is open to any and all who are brave enough to "stop the world" for a moment. Short of such a wholesale dedication, we are merely tinkering with our personal rocket's guidance system, fine tuning the direction we are already flying in. Samadhi is like Douglas Adams' infinite improbability drive, from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, where after you switch it on you could pop up absolutely anywhere in the universe. I must add that the discussion of the reasons for Kerala's uniqueness has been immensely enriched by Prof. Rajan's contribution, not to mention his valuable insights into philosophy in general.

We are familiar with the idea of vasanas, the genetic seeds that continually effervesce into kshiptas. Undisciplined humans experience a continual series of quasi-random expressions of their previous impressions, both genetic and experiential, and believe that's all there is to life. Disciplined ones concentrate their attention and direct their energies into consciously chosen areas of interest. One-pointed attention or concentration on an item of interest is ekagra, and the pruning back of irrelevant or interfering factors is called nirodha. Nitya notes that ekagra is the most powerful and useful role of consciousness, and its exercise brings a sense of deep satisfaction. Anita noted that some of her most

enchanting moments came when she was able to step out of her habitual state of mind to look on the world with fresh eyes.

A centered mind is the prerequisite for samadhi, the “goal” of Yoga, if you will. Samadhi is sameness or equipoise, the part outside or beyond the sine waves. Nitya cautions us that it is by no means a state of stagnation, “but the continuous rebalancing of a poise that is kept up in and through the flux of a cosmic order of continuous transformation and transvaluation.”

Eugene was happy to know that others had observed and named the nirodha aspect, which he was personally aware of but didn't think anyone else had the concept. It is indeed delightful to discover tracks in the snow: that other intrepid travelers have been this way before. It encourages us to walk confidently where once we tiptoed ahead with caution. Nirodha covers a range of inhibitions, the most positive being the selective process already described that allows us to concentrate on our favorite subject. When we are absorbed in a book, nirodha blocks outside interference from disturbing us. When we are acting in a play or other performance, it pushes our bodily needs into the background so the show can go on. Nitya describes it as an undetectable aspect of consciousness that restrains irrelevant urges, but this doesn't mean that it is totally beyond conscious direction. True, in the gifted it functions effortlessly and harmoniously, but in those of us with, shall we say, lesser gifts, it can be trained and fine tuned. The best way to do this is to heighten the ekagra, the concentration on our chosen activity, because if we focus directly on the disruptive factors in order to suppress them we are asking for trouble. It's better to screen them out by default through greater concentration. Nirodha can be very negative when we actively repress our true nature in favor of socially selected “proper” vasanas. As the Gita puts it: “Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.” (II, 59)

Ann insisted that she loved to get fully into a subject, learn it to the full, but then leave it and go on to something else. She was talking about years of involvement, not minutes, but somehow she thought that ekagra meant you had to stick to one thing forever. Yoga is not meant to encourage stasis, by any means. Remaining poised is a dynamic, living experience, calling for our best efforts whenever we can give them. Of course we should evolve and change. We cannot allow ourselves to be dictated to by the past, and we should break free when its chains become a drag on our psyche. But as Deb pointed out, the Now is in one sense an extension of the past, otherwise it would be completely dissociated. It moves ahead but doesn't lose anything it has ever been.

In any case, I'd like to reiterate what I say to Gita students. If something strikes you as binding, restrictive or otherwise confusing, you have to reassess the meaning you are drawing from it. Yoga study is about becoming free, so ask yourself how this will free you. Give the sutras the benefit of the doubt, since they've held up for a long time. Don't presume you will be losing any freedom. Instead bring your best vision of freedom to bear on these roughly translated approximations of extremely concentrated language. This is for liberation from oppression. But that doesn't mean it is effortless. Effortless moments for most of us come out of a lot of hard work. Again, gifted people sometimes have the knack of being effortlessly in samadhi most of the time. Great for them, and probably they don't need to study Yoga at all, except for the fun of it. Not everything in the science will apply to everybody, but sometimes it's nice to know the whole picture even if it extends beyond who you are. It might help you to understand your friend (or foe) better. The rishis who conceived this didn't know who might be the beneficiaries, so they put it all in just in case.

Now, I think we are ready to begin.

* * *

From Nancy Y's first class:

I am leery of creating a self-portrait. One of my mottoes is "Self-description is stultifying," which means that you risk creating fixed boundaries every time you define yourself. For this reason I never ask kids what they want to be when they grow up. I'd rather ask them what they'd enjoy doing Now. Maybe I'll start asking adults what they'd like to be when they grow up.... Anyway, I do know that it can be helpful to have a good idea who you are before you begin yogic deconstruction. And it will be fun for us to see who we're in the study group with. Therefore I include a recent photo of me in a pensive mood.

I suppose the idea was to let the representation speak for itself and not actually write about our "significant aberrations." But in case it might not be too far off to make a comment along those lines—like waving back to someone who is waving to their friend behind me—I could say this much. Due to many factors, I know I have had low self-esteem for most of my life, with a consequent fear of abandonment. Perhaps this is one reason I identify with dogs so much. My low esteem has been brought to an approximation of neutrality through a long struggle. I would say that my references to ekagra through repeated rededication to high ideals in the form of Nitya's teachings and a pool of musical masterpieces, have enabled and supported my normalization process.

I have had a deep love of the piano for my whole life, and whenever I feel blue I can spend time with the gurus of that instrument, who have left great wisdom in nonverbal form in the shape of their beautiful sonatas and shorter musical sketches. Though I'm not very good as a performer, just trying to recapture some of the beauty that I can sense is contained in the music lifts

my spirits. Sometimes, it's true, I lament the gulf between the vision and my mediocre realization of it, but eventually I return to the pleasures of the quest. Because of the complexity of the challenge, it is much easier to become absorbed than with more trivial pursuits.

Editing Nitya's books for 30 years was a similarly challenging endeavor, calling for extreme concentration for long periods. No matter how upset I might be to start with, after an hour or two of hanging out with his inimitable writings, striving to fathom their exact intent, I would regain my normal spirits. I use the word normal in the sense of "very high." Normalcy is extremely blissful, and the emptiness that is often called normalcy is something else indeed. Apprenticeship to a master like Nitya is a great way to gravitate to the vicinity of the joy and wisdom that form our core and which tend to be knocked aside or covered over by life's tragedies.

I'll just offer one example of the kind of insight that frees the psyche to regain its normalcy. During my last trip to India I had some really good contemplative time on my hands, when not much was happening externally but the spirit of Mother India was energizing some insights. I recalled my mother telling me that she believed it was good for babies to be left to cry, that it "strengthens their lungs." My wife and I had always thought that was a horrible attitude, and we consoled our kids at every moment. But I got to thinking that any baby would feel abandoned if no one responded to their cries for love and affection, not to mention lunch. Then I realized that this was a likely a big factor in my own feelings of worthlessness, that I don't matter even to my mother. Once I made that perhaps obvious connection between my infancy and my adult mentality, albeit one that took me nearly sixty years to come to, a whole series of revelations leapt to mind about how I project those feelings onto situations where they don't actually exist, other than me bringing them with me. Life is possibly not as unjust as it

appears, because we have injustice woven into our very makeup. The revelations were painful to a degree, but mainly exhilaratingly liberating. As with any good revelation, a lot of walls came crashing down.

It's almost funny how an arbitrary belief like that one of my mother's can transmit so much misery without the partisan of the belief even realizing how much damage they are inflicting! I know my mother never gave it a thought, and like most parents she took credit for the good outcomes with her kids and blamed the negative ones on our own personal failings. (She did many things right, by the way. This is merely one aspect of a "happy childhood.")

Anyway, the point of all this autobiography is that yoga helps us to get over significant aberrations like the aforementioned that go way deep in our psyches. If we wallow in the misery of what life hands us we will never be able to leave it behind, but having an unbiased ideal to measure ourselves against is like a Good Samaritan holding out a life preserver to someone floundering in a raging sea. When we pop up for a moment we can try to grab hold of it, and if we ever are successful we can use it to pull ourselves ashore. Then if we jump back into the maelstrom it is our own damn fault!

Part III

Synchronicity strikes again:

Regarding the idea of *sutra* as a thread stitching a garland of visions together, I just finished rereading *Warlight*, by Michael Ondaatje, which ends with two references on the last two pages that combine to match the earlier entry in these Notes. The narrator Nathaniel, nicknamed Stitch, who has a sister nicknamed Wren, has recently spoken of the sea pea, almost extinct until humans avoided the mined coast of Britain, allowing it to recover:

Thus the resurrection of the sea pea, “a happy vegetable of peace.” I am attracted to these surprising liaisons, such sutras of cause and effect.

[...]

We order our lives with barely held stories. As if we have been lost in a confusing landscape, gathering what was invisible and unspoken—Rachel, the Wren, and I, a Stitch—sewing it all together in order to survive, incomplete, ignored like the sea pea on those mined beaches during the war.