

2022 Patanjali Class

5/24/22

Class 19 – Sutra I:2B

Yoga is the restraint of mental modifications (*citta vritti nirodha*)

The middle section of Nitya’s essay on *citta vritti nirodha* covers the basic concepts of the gunas (sattva, rajas and tamas) as making up the mental modulations we are to restrain in yoga. Nitya walks a tightrope stretched between Vedanta’s exhortation to utterly transcend the gunas and the popular concept of becoming “more sattvic.” It leads to some contradictions, yet yoga is all about embracing and uniting contradictory factors. Nitya often presented opposing sides of an argument in his talks as complimentary aspects of a total comprehension, rather than limiting them as sides for us to choose between. It forces the reader or listener to not cling to simplistic rules, but to penetrate deeper into the ground of awareness.

We meet a typical example of contradiction in this section, with Nitya speaking of the gunas:

Hereafter in our study of Yoga, these three qualities are to be remembered as integral parts of nature, which is always in a state of flux. No quality stands by itself. However, there can be a predominance of one quality over the other in different proportions. Even in the confused and vague comprehension where tamas dominates, there will necessarily be a certain amount of sattva to aid cognition because cognition never occurs without sattva providing the ground. (11)

Effort is to be made from the side of the individual to steer past the corroding powers of rajas and tamas to regain the clarity of sattvic mirroring of the objects of perception and the conception of ideas.... When all the vestiges of rajas [and

tamas] are removed from the sattvic mirroring of mind, spiritual virtue becomes dynamic and acts as an elevating catalyst called *dharmamegha*. When that happens, confused cognition (*vikalpa*) and creative cognition (*sankalpa*) cease to darken consciousness. Their place is taken by pure contemplation or *dhyana*. (13)

So, can sattva stand alone, or not? As we learned in the recent *Stream of Consciousness* study, striving to become “more sattvic” feeds the ego like nothing else. Only when sattva is recognized as a state of nature rather than an accomplishment of the yogi can it serve as a truly unclouded mirror.

Deb opened the discussion with Nitya’s image of *dharmamegha*, of a conscious energy stream that cannot be changed or broken down, where images are clearly reflected. Often the images are muddied and we become agitated, due to our life experiences, which add distortions to that constantly vibrating energy. Taking sustenance from the stream reveals beautiful, absolutely clear consciousness, the light that illuminates everything for us. We inhabit the stream with various degrees of transparency, Deb’s favorite quality of all.

Bill loved Nitya’s description of how the ethical and spiritual life of a yogi comes from a clear mirroring of what’s going on in nature, and how Nitya puts it that our ethical life comes from clarity, rather than the other way around.

Deb displaced the hint of duality in this, commenting that none of the three gunas can be separated out in life or nature. They are always intermingled, intertwined. Moreover, Nitya never alludes to or characterizes yoga as a joining of separate things, but rather as an unveiling of misunderstanding or misrepresentation, clearly revealing what is there, which is a whole, undivided essence.

After a long silence, Deb asked the class about the meaning of a crucial statement:

In the definition of Yoga given in this sutra there is no mention of the total restraint of consciousness. From that we deduce that cognitive consciousness continues to operate even when restraint is exercised. (10)

In the paragraph before, Nitya affirms “The progressive step one makes [in samadhi] is that of going away from the quintuplicated phenomenal world to the pure state of one’s Self.” It seemed to Andy that he’s talking about a mind that is going away from objects and dissolving, because objects are no longer there. He was unsure how to reconcile this with the other statement about the persistence of cognitive consciousness.

I read out a helpful bit from the old notes, which are reprinted in full in Part II:

Nitya assures us here that cognitive consciousness continues even when the vritti is restrained. In other words, we don't disappear when our mental buzz disappears. Although we have become identified with our surface modulations, our true self is ever present beneath and beyond them. That’s why discarding superficial attachments is like coming home to a place we have never really left. Moreover, making efforts is a paradoxical business. At some stage they become counterproductive, despite being essential at the outset.

Deb cited a later quote: “Just as water is the flowing current of a river, psychic or spiritual energy (*citishakti*) is the transforming medium of consciousness. However, like the constancy of the basic structure of water, *citishakti* by itself never loses its nature at any time. Hence it is considered unchangeable and

untransmittable.” She wanted to emphasize that the stream of consciousness doesn’t go away. It’s a transparent rushing energetic flow that is always in us, but that we cover over with modifications, which from a neutral perspective are essentially distortions. Connecting with the citishakti requires the dropping off, or the restraint, of all those modification, desires and detours.

So this is not about the mind dissolving, unless you equate the mind only with the modulations, which is the Western and somewhat Buddhistic viewpoint. Generally in Indian philosophy, the mind is the whole self, the substratum of existence, the *karu*, which remains steady throughout all the variegations. The point of our class is to try to pay more attention to that essence, instead of always being mesmerized by attractive or repulsive vrittis—all the buzz. This whole chapter addresses various types of surface modulations, particularly the gunas, and the premise is to detach ourselves from a closed fixation on them. It’s important to keep in mind that the participants in our humble classes are not aiming for total aloneness, the absolute renunciation that is the goal of a very few totally committed people. We want to learn more about how our reactivity causes us to continually ignore the most beautiful part of ourselves, so that we can express it well, and not keep it buried or do away with it.

To that end, here is an exercise from my online Gita class, from the middle of chapter IV, including some of Nitya’s comments on Sutra II:1:

Are you able to pick out ways you unconsciously hold expectations based on religious or metaphysical ideas that might undermine your conscious intentions? What is the mechanism of action you believe in? Is it reasonable? What I mean is that most ideas about how we go about acting are linear and originate at the surface of consciousness. Imaging science and ancient wisdom give credence to actions being prepared in the depths of

the brain, at the very least, but we don't normally take this into account. It is fortunate that we don't have to, because the inner mechanisms are careful to plan with tremendous awareness. An excerpt from Nitya's Patanjali study deals with this beautifully:

When your own nature is becoming more and more evident to yourself, the imperfections of your social personality will become more and more clear. In its place *īśvara*—the universal person not afflicted with the love/hate dualities of physico-social life—can be accepted as a better model for imitation or identification.

The word *īśvara* is derived from *īś*, which literally means “ruling from within.” The life of an individual is not an amorphous chaotic structure that comes from the randomness of the physical world. It has a goal to achieve and laws to abide by. The innate law of everything that governs, controls, and maneuvers it to function for the purposeful attainment of a given goal is *īśvara*. If you know there is such a guiding principle in your life, life becomes all the more dear, and an incentive comes to live as correctly as possible. Thereafter, the lower aspect of the self will always be in resonance with *īśvara*, the higher Self. That *īśvara* is looked upon as your true teacher or preceptor. Relating always with that *īśvara* to develop insight into the meaning of your life combines both the purificatory and educative aspects. (149)

Deb again brought in the section on *dharmamegha*, showing there is no competition or contradiction between applying yourself and letting go, of trying and not trying. We can and should inject “physical and subjective effort,” but that only goes part of the way. Both grace and effort are necessary to our beautiful unfolding. Nitya waxes poetic on this:

The expression, *dharmamegha*, is an allegoric way of saying that virtues (*dharma*) come like a rain cloud (*megha*) and favor the aspirant yogi. A cloud is taken to its destination by wind. Similarly, the physical and subjective effort of the yogi can take... discipline only to a certain extent. Thereafter—like a cloud being taken by wind—the disciplined mind of the yogi transverses in the spiritual realm without any ego-oriented effort. (13)

Of course, dharma means much more than virtue, so all its nuances can be entwined in the definition. Dharma is our destiny, our path, our authentic expression, our DNA, our evolution. All of these are optimized when we set our sails wide open before the compassionate zephyrs of the inner landscape.

The raincloud image inspired Andy to tell us about some of the palaces he visited in Rajasthan, on the trip a few years ago with Bushra and Nancy. The palaces had cloud viewing rooms in the upper story, where the maharaja would take his current girlfriend, and they would gaze out the window together as the monsoon came in. It struck him as a positive, wonderful thing, and when the monsoon finally arrives, everyone dances in the street, in the pouring rain. Moni agreed, when the monsoon again comes it is a celebration there, as it's a desert country.

Andy also talked about Indian miniatures, depicting royal personages looking at clouds, with geese flying over and thunderbolts blazing. Kalidasa wrote a poem about the cloud messengers, carrying love notes. Deb sighed, “the wind is carrying clouds of love to us, revealing who we really are. The throb of it leaps off the paper, out of the paintings.” It reminded me of a flight from Chennai to Mumbai, looking down at continuous bursts of lightning far below us, near the ground, flashing across the whole countryside—it felt magical.

Compared to such magic, Paul lamented the loss of the freedom we're born into, springing from the lack of an identifying self or ego. He envied his young grandson sprinting across the lawn naked, knowing he'd be arrested if he tried it. It was easy for the child to restrain modifications that he didn't yet have, yet it's hard to avoid modifying things as we grow up.

As an adult who sometimes sprints (well, limps) naked across his own lawn, I observed that clothing is often used as a symbol for conditioning, and it's so perfect that Paul's grandson is not conditioned in that way yet. We hide in our clothes and we hide in our conditioning.

Paul was at the beach recently, watching someone trying to launch a kite without much wind. It took an immense amount of effort to get the kite a few feet off ground, but once it was high enough, the breeze was sufficient to carry it aloft. Once that happened, any effort on the ground was counterproductive, tending to drag the kite back down. Paul could see how at some point the effort that gets you started is hurting you. There is no need to run faster, you can stop and rest, let your identity or vision of the total self displace all that doesn't belong.

The class loved the metaphor, and Bill observed that yogis have to work hard at the outset, but once you do quiet your mind, it gets to a certain point and it's so clear that it becomes its own dynamic, taking you into a spiritual realm that is a blessing.

Once again we fell into a contemplative silence for a long time, trying to conjure up the moment when we could stop flailing and ride the winds. Is it still too soon? Or too late?

Since it was in any case too early to say goodnight, I read out the last section of the old notes (which can be found at the end of Part II), giving specific present-day examples of kshipta, vikshipta, mudha, nirodha and ekagra. Since it was written, in 2008, the extremes these distortions have been taken to has widened

exponentially, and the toxic crowd mentality has been radically exacerbated by social media and echo-chamber search engines.

We talked with Charles about his illustration (in last week's notes) of these five states as fingers on a hand whose palm is citta. I found it charming he labeled the thumb in upright or positive position as ekagra, the best of the lot. He contributed a search on [Eklavya](#), which at least sounds similar, a dedicated archer in the Mahabharata who is famous for giving his right thumb, when demanded, as Guru dakshina to his teacher Drona. Charles's image could symbolize that he gave his undivided attention to the guru. The epic may also have been hinting at the guru's egotism as a great archer, putting the best of the competition out of business.

There is a truly radical side to this study, for those who are willing. The message is that all of us have a shadow side, and if we understand how good and evil are closely interrelated, so closely they are not even two, then we don't need to keep stumbling over our dark side. We can do without sides. Our malaise as a species is to suffer from fear and anxiety about things that are not real. So the question is how does this sutra apply to our present state of mind? Why do we prefer to reinforce narrow viewpoints, when it's not only not necessary but inimical to our own interest?

Neuroscience has come to the conclusion of the ancients: we are not participating accurately in our life. Our brain is predicting what happens next, based on past memories rather than sensory input, and then feels satisfied when they mesh. That means the brain's incentive is to warp reality just a teeny bit to fit what it already expects.

What's much more fun than living in the past is to see the present as endlessly unfurling newness, in place of confirmation of our prejudices. Yoga makes us *more* capable of appropriate action, not less. Both psychedelics and ancient wisdom work to break the disparity between reality and the way we understand it.

Deb appreciated the point made in the old notes about all the ways we mistakenly confirm what we already believe is correct, yet as those fall and drop away there is still that stream. What's needed is a loosening of all of those pre-formed memories and assumptions. It's not so much a way of forming oneself, but of letting go.

Like many of us, Susan is growing older, and fighting it. She feels that her mind and body are contracting—losing both memory and mobility. She told us, “I find this sad and frustrating, but recently I've started to think what if I don't fight it, what if I let go of all that I believe about what this means about me? I think of Paul's metaphor of the kite and realize that sometimes if I make a certain effort to see through the worries and let go, I can feel some of the lightness and restore a connection to my true self.

Paul sympathized that he too feels the effects of aging, including the catastrophic effect of poor choices he has made in the past. Seeing how addicted we are to the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, he tries to allow himself the feeling of insecurity, knowing, at least logically, that we are all equal in doubt. That kind of honesty helps free him up, to where he feels he can “get out of God's way” and let *life* happen.

You know, all us oldies feel like we were healthier and smarter in the past, but back then we weren't satisfied either. We wanted to become better, imagined in any number of ways. Even small children, residing in what seems to be pure bliss, pure *citishakti*, are eager to grow up and be like older kids. Maybe the key is not to yearn for something excellent to change into, but to be satisfied with what we already are. Sure, we have a million flaws, more than anyone else who's ever lived on earth, but we're still not *so* bad. What if we stopped interpreting, adding layers of insulation, onto what was going on in our vicinity? Might the universe then be awesome enough to make us happy? Seers like

Nitya, and Patanjali (who I suspect was really a committee), would like us to give it a try.

We took a few minutes to meditate and give it a try, and then we opened our eyes.

Part II

From the first-ever study group at the Portland Gurukula:

11/18/8

Sutra 1:2B

In the middle third of the exposition on citta vritti nirodha, the restraint of mental modifications, Nitya surveys some of the primary pillars of Indian psychology, including purusha and prakriti and the three gunas or nature modalities, sattva, rajas and tamas. Although we are familiar with these already, there is always a new light in which to view them.

The main idea is that while there is some value in adhering to sattva, to a clear grasp of reality, as much as possible, the modalities are simply how Nature operates. Our awareness repeatedly fluctuates from clear to colored to muddy and back again. Yoga calls on us to transcend the dominating influence of Nature and its modalities to re-attain our innate freedom. This is not “mirror polishing Zen” or any incremental, puzzle-solving kind of path, but a total and absolute break with conditioned modes of thought. As such it is truly radical, going to the root of our mediocrity and hacking it off. We can give indications about this in the class, but it is up to the individual to bring the requisite intensity of purpose to the endeavor, lest it be trivialized beyond hope of resurrection.

Our surface personality is likened in the Gita to a holy fig tree, because we consider it sacred and worship it. The Gita has another recommendation, similar to citta vritti nirodha, in XV, 1-4:

They speak of an unexpended holy fig tree, with roots above and branches below, whose leaves are sacred verses; he who knows it is a Veda knower.

Below and above spread its branches, nourished by the modalities of nature, sense values its buds, and downward also there are ramified roots which bind to action in the world of men.

Nor is its form here comprehended thus (as stated), nor its end, nor its beginning, nor its foundation. Having sundered this holy fig tree, with strongly fixed roots, with the weapon of decisive nonattachment,

then alone that path is to be sought, treading which they do not return again, thinking: "I seek refuge in that Primordial Man from whom of old streamed forth active relativist manifestation."

The Gita shares Patanjali's ferocity regarding the modalities of Nature, so I'll pull up a few helpful examples of its philosophy:

II, 45) The Vedas treat of matters related to the three gunas; you should be free from these three modalities, Arjuna, free from (relative) pairs of opposites, established ever in pure being, without alternately striving and resting, (unitively) Self-possessed.

III, 5) Not even for a single instant can one ever remain engaged in no action at all. By virtue of modalities born from nature, all are made to engage in action helplessly.

III, 29) Those confounded by the modalities of nature become attached to objective modalities existing in works. Such men who are not all-wise, and are dull, should not be unsettled by those who are all-wise.

XIV, 19) When the seer beholds no other agent than the modalities of nature, and knows that which lies beyond the modalities, he attains My state of being [what Patanjali calls samadhi].

XIV, 20) The embodied, having transcended these three modalities of nature, originating in the body, is freed from the sufferings of birth, death and old age, and enjoys immortality [more samadhi].

Nitya uses the analogy of light for consciousness. Light is invisible until it contacts an object, whereupon the reflection gives it a semblance of visibility through the distortion caused by the object. Just as the eye cannot see itself, consciousness is not aware of its own nature but only knows itself via a series of reflections from without. Outer space looks dark even though it is filled with light. A spacecraft looming into our field of vision absorbs some of the light and allows certain wavelengths to bounce off. What we actually see is what the craft is not, the light that doesn't stick to it. While we are confident that we are seeing a true image of a thing, any number of distortions are possible.

Some years ago I had a similar revelation while gazing at a full moon over the Pacific Ocean. A wavering line of glorious brightness spewed directly from the moon to where I was standing, while everywhere else the ocean was black as pitch. Suddenly I realized that for anyone else out moon gazing there would be a similar bright streak. The ocean was in fact brightly lit at every point; the limitation was my own particular angle of vision. The

light of consciousness is the same: each person has their own unique angle and can only presume that others can see as well, since their view is dark to us. Seeing a brightly lit ocean as dark due to personal constraints is what is called ignorance in Vedanta.

In either case, the idea is to spend some time basking in the invisible light of unmodified consciousness instead of always seeing partial versions bounced off objects and ideas. We are highly addicted to our intelligently selected partial visions, and impatient with and even fearful of unmodified states. That's why we need to make an initial effort to get on with yoga. Our minds are easily caught by each fleeting event or idea and are helplessly drawn along by them. When we try to meditate or contemplate challenging ideas, such as nothingness, we may do it for a short time but then our minds are deflected back onto the familiar territory of somethingness. It's embarrassing how easy it is for our egos to deflect our dedication and keep us running around in our circular squirrel cages. But with dedication and a devoted effort to return to the subject again and again, it becomes progressively easier to sit in emptiness for awhile. The Gita describes this in XIV, 26:

He who also serves Me with a yoga of devotion, never deviating from the proper path, transcending these modalities of nature, is considered fit for becoming the Absolute.

We can amend 'never' to 'occasionally' for us dilettantes. The whole process is described in VI, 24-27:

Abandoning completely all desires originating in the will for particularized ends, curbing the collection of sense-functionings on every side

—slowly, slowly, activities should be brought to a standstill by reason steadily applied, establishing the mind reflexively in the Self, without thinking of anything whatever.

Whatever causes the changeful, unsteady mind to go out (again and again), from each such, restraining it (again and again), it should ever be led to the side of the Self.

Such a yogi, verily, of calmed mind, of pacified passion, who has become the Absolute, free from all dross, comes to supreme happiness.

Lest we become unnerved by this process, Nitya assures us here that cognitive consciousness continues even when the vritti is restrained. In other words, we don't disappear when our mental buzz disappears. Although we have become identified with our surface modulations, our true self is ever present beneath and beyond them. That's why discarding superficial attachments is like coming home to a place we have never really left. Moreover, making efforts is a paradoxical business. At some stage they become counterproductive, despite being essential at the outset. Nitya mentions the term *dharmamegha*, the gentle raining down of righteousness, in this context. He says:

A cloud is taken to its destination by wind. Similarly, the physical and subjective effort of the yogi can take the discipline only to a certain extent. Thereafter—like a cloud being wafted by the wind—the disciplined mind of the yogi transverses in the spiritual realm without any ego-oriented effort.

Lastly, I want to make one more attempt to bring the negative side of the citta vritti business into the vernacular. The vritti itself indicates the simultaneous appearance of a subject and an object as a vibratory phenomenon. An event is somewhat like throwing a

rock into a pond, with an initial splash followed by symmetrically expanding ripples. The ripples, as a whole are the kshipta, the aftereffects or afterimages of the event—memory sequences and real-world repercussions. If you let go of the event, the ripples eventually die down and the pond becomes quiescent again.

Vikshipta happens when you don't let it go. Something in you wants to prolong or reproduce the event, but it is more like wishful thinking than true focus, ekagra. Nitya merely describes this as a deflection, and I wish he'd elaborated what he meant. My grasp of it is that the wishing colors the situation and begins to shape it as something different than what it actually is. The text accidentally calls vikshipta a specific occurrence, which it is not. It is both a prolongation and a warping of an occurrence, the beginning of what R.D. Laing calls the mystification of experience. We mystify events by overlaying them with our stock of prejudices and ignorance, so that they become transformed in a most dangerous and delusory way. Instead of a specific occurrence, we are presented with a series of events with little coherence, hence the idea of distraction associated with vikshipta.

Mudha is an intensification of the process, where your imposed false version of reality begins to elbow truth aside. What was once only a colored interpretation now becomes set in stone. Nirodha aids the solidification of the false knowledge by warding off any and all conflicting information. The feeling of satisfaction we get from our vision of reality matching our prejudices (a circular argument if ever there was one!) makes it very difficult to combat this highly effective mental snare. We become smug and complacent about our beliefs. The ekagra that results is a fixation on arbitrary falsehood with little or no potential for samadhi in it.

Distinguishing between a false fixation and a valid samadhi is not easy, and we need to be alert and awake so as to not fall into any easy traps here.

Now for a very practical example. I hope you are thinking of others. Several technological inventions have improved human life, so once upon a time there began the belief that technology was innately good. A corollary belief arose that simply because something could be made it should be made. A particular invention is a material version of kshipta, and the belief that repeating the production of material inventions would prolong the good is vikshipta. Of course, every invention has a downside as well as an upside, and some of them have a much larger downside than upside, but the prevailing belief in the inherent goodness of technology sweeps aside the doubts. If it can be made it should be made, period. This mudha—stupidity in bald terms—has led to whole regions of the planet becoming unfit for higher life forms due to pollution of one kind or another or increased bloodshed or overuse or overpopulation or what have you. Nirodha guarantees that we will ignore the consequences or attribute them to our favorite demons, such as the very people who want to stop unbridled technology from destroying the planet. The resulting ekagra is a belief system that expects new technological improvements to cure every ill and right every wrong, so the faster we invent new things the better off we are. There is no limit to this folly no matter how lethal the materials, as with radioactivity, biological warfare, toxic chemicals and even genetic manipulation, because we already “know for certain” that technology is innately good. Actually, we are certain only of the assumption we started with, even though many facts testify eloquently to a contrary position. Citta vritti nirodha means, among other things, resisting the crowd mentality that can convince us of the inviolability of partial truths, and instead daring to think for ourselves.