

2022 Patanjali Class

5/31/22

Class 20 – Sutra I:2C

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

In Deb’s opening monologue, she reported having thought a lot about the *citishakti*, the core of all awareness, in many contexts over the past week, as is much taken by how it is like “a river of spiritual energy that is the transforming medium of consciousness.” In this section, Nitya concludes with, “Citishakti (pure consciousness) is given high marks such as being infinite, immutable, untransmittable, and the illuminator of all.” In reading this final part of the commentary, she saw that despite the distracting labels we apply to the different varieties of experience, what it is really showing us here is the depth and vastness of the single consciousness that permeates all the others. It’s something we can attain when we become, generally speaking, one with the sunset, one with music or sound mantras, in one-pointed bipolarity, or as a unitive experience of our own consciousness. This occurs when all the modulations which distract us are absorbed into *dhyana* or profound unitive awareness.

What sets Nitya’s interpretation of Patanjali apart is the unitive perspective he brings to bear on it. As with most ancient scriptures, the Yoga Shastra has become more dualistic as the source receded into the past. I suspect the original spirit was unitive, and the creators didn’t make it out as all the separate states the terminology might imply. Perhaps the participants sat around saying things like: when you look at a sunset, you get high; when you listen to music you get high; when you concentrate on a brilliant idea you get high; and when you tune out all your thoughts you get high. High is high, so long as it isn’t in opposition to low. The favorite old word for it is *samadhi*, sameness. They might have labeled each of these slightly different types with its own

name, which is typical of scholars. Over time, it got taken as hierarchical, and people began to believe they had to follow certain rules to get the results described, and proceed sequentially. Doing so splits it into parts and turns it into something much shabbier. What we find in a unitive treatment of Patanjali are not orders to follow but aspects of consciousness for us to familiarize ourselves with so we can engage with them in samadhi.

Deb agreed, offering that the more we attune with the citishaki, or primal awareness, the more we can have experiences that help us stay grounded. The central point is simply to return to the Self.

All the different restraints (nirodhas) mentioned will lead us more deeply into that flow, said Bill. These are practices that can allow us to have keen insight from day to day, and keep us on the right track to establish the oneness.

Deb cited a letter to her from Nitya that speaks so beautifully of this crucial matter, I'm going to reprint it in full, including the first paragraph, which is not included in Love and Blessings. It's a perfect example of Nitya's gentle yet powerful motivational force:

Narayana Gurukula
Fernhill P. O., Ooty-4
Nilgiris, Tamilnadu
India Jan. 30, 1974

My dearest Debbie,

I received your letter. It was not a letter. It reminded me of some of those occasions when we sat together and went very deep. We could never say into whose depth we had gone. It was as if in that depth there was no 'you' and 'I' and there was no duality.

Your present state is not known to me, but I'm not puzzled or scared. You are living your life. It is entirely yours. I shouldn't

restrain you. At the same time, I am aware of the sadness that can follow what you're doing. People seldom grow young. The deep furrows you make in the depth of your sensibility will remain there for a long time, throughout this life and maybe in several lives. The scar of an experience is not relived, but it can torpedo the uniqueness of an otherwise welcome encounter.

I'm glad I could cast aside my father complex, however I still experience deep within me a concern and an anguish. It is not caused by fear that something might happen to you. Ironically the fear comes from a haunting feeling that nothing will happen to you. It is not uncommon for man to walk, but I expected to see you one day soaring high and diving deep. I told you of your potentials. With every gingerbread involvement you had you have endangered the highly potent release. You have been letting off your steam too easily, and frequently the pressure has gone down. Debbie, my precious Self, should you become so poor! You have a responsibility to the source that has so abundantly filled you with your potentials.

Wow. This one reminds me of how each of us eagerly awaited and sometimes dreaded the next letter from him, as they often landed with blast force and would stay with us vividly for years after. I can still detect some of mine, over 50 years old, continuing to resonate in the region of my heart, reminding me to not waste my time on trivialities.

Paul asked if tonight's lesson has a relationship to the limitation or expansion of your identity, which he likened to having a fenced yard to keep out unwanted neighbors. Should we be expanding our identity so it includes the universal? What role does ceasing modifications play in this? Paul figures our senses are drawn to names and forms, but if all these are part of single whole, there is nothing to restrain from.

It can't hurt to clip in an earlier paragraph of Nitya's:

Every mental modification that is invested with the performance of a *karma* (action) becomes a seed that carries the potential for future distress, infatuation, or stupefaction, restlessness, and suppression or repression. According to Vyasa, this potential can be nullified by holding the mind in a state of absorption for a long time. When, in the modification of citta, concentration on its original pure nature happens again and again, that cleanses it of subsequent modifications, which come through actions performed unwittingly, unconsciously, or with deliberation caused by ignorance.... Such absorption normally happens when you feel an at-one-ment with the identity of an object of perception, the presenting of an idea, a sense of ecstasy, or the retrospective state of being absorbed in your ego consciousness without slipping into unwholesome states of ego cathexis.

Cathexis roughly corresponds with what we call attachment. The dominant focus is on us, not on the neighbors. Can we free ourselves, or should we remain behind bars?

In answer to Paul's question, the personal identity dissolves in sameness, samadhi, and is inimical to the expansive state, to whatever extent we cling to it. The I in identity is its focal point, but the sutra is talking about diminishing that aspect and being absorbed in the generality of everything. This implies a reduced need for identity. Nonetheless, it's certainly important to first establish your identity, particularly for marginalized people who have not been barred from being themselves. Once you come to know and befriend yourself, you can begin to expand your comfort zone to include others. Since the totality is within us, we are simultaneously admitting more of ourself into our awareness. For instance, compassion to others is simultaneously compassion to ourself.

When we look at the infinitely variable world around us, all its variegations are aspects of that profound essence of consciousness. It's not that we make everything into a Paul or a Debbie—we are sinking into the deep core within us which resonates with the core of everything, just as Nitya put it in his letter to Deb, above: “It was as if in that depth there was no ‘you’ and ‘I’ and there was no duality.”

Bill offered that Patanjali is trying to give orientation to the purusha, the spark of our spirit. It's where the universal and the particular come together. Paul wondered if that meant prakriti is the manifestation of purusha? Bill replied that purusha is spirit and prakriti is nature, and the purusha is continually experiencing natures.

This is a basic concept that Narayana Guru deals with in depth in the Bhana Darsana of Darsanamala. *Bhana* resembles the fluttering of the wings of a bee, with the subject and the object (purusha and prakriti, mind and matter, metaphysics and physics, and so on) emerging as polarities within the oneness. Out of unity, a pulsation occurs where the subject and object arise together as twin aspects. Despite appearances, they are not separate, and they arise inextricably linked. When through contemplation you trace them back to their source, they have arisen out of that unitive state of being. Yoga means retaining that awareness: knowing that everything is conjoined with its opposite and is connected to us. Nitya cites bhana here:

According to Vedantins, the attention that goes to a form when we are looking at it has a back and forth movement of consciousness, now resting with the object of vision, and then centering in the subjective consciousness of the seer. This oscillation between seer and seen is called *bhana vritti*. (15)

At this point a classic Portland Gurukula nirodha took place, where our Zoom transmission quit. Happily, the rest continued the discussion and Susan took notes, so I could learn some of what went down.

Paul wondered if this meant that a unitive vision is synonymous with transparency (which we all know is Deb's favorite analogy). He sees that science is moving to understand the connectedness of things, and he's encountered the idea that reality exists even before it becomes displaced in space and time. In reality is a certain intentionality that keeps a human a human and rock a rock.

Bill noted we all have different memories, so we don't see the world in exactly the same way. We only imagine there is one definition of nature. Actually, the relationship between spirit and nature is continually arising.

Paul injected some humor, observing the nose doesn't get mad at the eyes simply because it has different qualities and is able to do different things, so it's a perfect example of the universality of things. Paul knows he loses that awareness when he thinks that he has to train himself or understand a concept. We already are what we need to be, so there is nothing more we need to learn and nothing that we can cease to do that can make us more prepared to be what we are meant to be. From this angle, the application of effort is distracting.

Bill agreed that does correspond with what Nitya's says about Vedanta: "realization is a total, in-depth experience that spells only one possibility: Self-knowledge is total. Either you know the Self or you do not. It cannot be known in parts." On the other hand, in Patanjali's Ashtanga yoga, "graded perfection through practice is recognized." Nitya then lists different ways of restraining modifications and growing through certain practices. You may already be the Buddha, but it takes work to understand

that and incorporate it into your life. We can learn to use restraints to both understand consciousness and to take us back to pure spirit.

Bill's right: a lot of that hard work is restraint—a negative effort. There are things to do here, but it's mostly about not doing things that take us out of that awareness. Due to the Zoom breakdown, I didn't get to read this out, from my commentary on the Gita's twelfth chapter:

Knowledge also has its limitations. It is meditation that puts it in context, and also stabilizes it. Individual items of knowledge can just be a burden unless they are fitted into a coherent scheme of correlation, and this is where meditation or contemplation comes in. The specialization of knowledge of the modern day alongside political propaganda has led to rampant dissociation from meaning, with a number of unfortunate aftereffects, from personal confusion to global devastation. An accelerated culture doesn't take the time to reflect. The modern world is witnessing a disintegration of meaning as the old paradigms are exposed as arbitrary, but with nothing of value being mooted to replace them, beyond slogans and sound bites. Mental chaos leads to isolation and random acts of violence. Yoga cures these ills, from the individual outward to the environment.

Paul's takeaway is that we achieve that oneness all the time, through our interactions, our concept of love, and the evaporation of the self in love. You can apply that same methodology to the entire universe or to your concept of god: knowing ultimately it's just one thing.

For Susan, it's about not being in her thinking brain, but being in her body, tuned in to her feelings and her breath. Deb added: not always giving a commentary on things.

I tried to explain that we are attempting to reconnect with the part of us that is not obsessed with figuring everything out and having a game plan for it. The free zone might feel like the body, or nature, the right brain hemisphere, or various samadhis. Restraining the left brain's obsession to analyze allows other parts of us, such as our *being*, to participate. Being is always present, waiting for its turn to take the stage, but we are so busy making plans that it rarely gets a chance. As has been said, *Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans*. Let's not miss out on our life!

Nancy offered that for her it takes place in a rhythm that is outside of ourselves. "It's like the sun is going around, and we are waking with the sun and sleeping when the sun goes down. We have so many experiences: we have to clean ourselves, feed ourselves, yet there's something also going on that we don't try to do, it just occurs, that outer rhythm. And we are also looking at our activities and our brain. The part that goes on day after day takes me out of being all caught up in my selves, analyzing and comparing everything. When we are feeling that rhythm or flow of our existence that we don't normally pay much attention to, it just happens. There are simpler things going on that we don't have control over that really impact us and that we are a part of. We need to let go and appreciate that it is happening."

This reminded Paul of when he was in the hospital for his liver transplant. He was in his own little hell he'd created, as he didn't want to die, and he didn't want to be in the hospital, either. He felt panic, until he realized he didn't have to plan his breathing or his heart beating. He realized he could override his breath, but when he passes out it kicks in automatically. The heart beats whether we put in a request or not. It brought a kind of letting go, with a bit of sacrifice to it. It was kind of restful for him to understand the awareness that each cell has that doesn't ever enter into our conscious mind. He realized his control was an illusion,

and released it to those systems outside himself.

Jan spoke in favor of repetitive practice, how by carrying moments of unity into the next exchange you have with people, it makes the interaction better. By trying to keep the thread of unity alive, she finds a way to live in her spaces more. It struck her that talking about these experiences, as we are doing now in the class, is a kind of repetitive practice, and another way to get back to that place of unity.

This was a kind comment, and something that isn't often acknowledged. I feel that appreciativeness too. After each class, I am so grateful for having had it, and feel calmed by the deep sharing. It's an archetypal situation, and one that is rarely done with such excellence, with so much consideration and erudition and openness. For hundreds of thousands of years, humanoids have sat together around a hearth fire, grunting, sharing their hearts (hearth) and their thoughts, their wisdom, their gossip and their bad advice. Ours is an egalitarian commingling, always inviting a precious return to the centrality of truth.

Jan's graciousness led Anita to share a profound sadness she had been keeping to herself, how in the past couple of months she's held her two beloved cats in her arms as they passed away, the second one only that day. They both were euthanized due to illness. Her feelings evoked the core that we are part of, including, as Anita sincerely believes, all existence. Especially all animals. She knew indelibly that they were communicating with her, just as she was communicating with them, and they were being there for her as well as she was there for them. Such caring is a core beingness that we all share.

The euthanizing vet, in trying to comfort Anita, told her "I wish we could do this for people." Anita wondered why we can't make it less anxiety-driven for people when we pass from this world? Oregon is one of the few US states where that can happen, certainly a compassionate option. (Anita lives in Idaho.)

Paul assured Anita, from his own experience, that it takes great strength and compassion to let your dear pets go. It is a very hard thing!

Anita spoke about this at the class because she had had a change of heart earlier that day. She was feeling very sorry for herself, crying and carrying on, but then she took herself in hand. She told herself to think of all the sweet moments and love she had shared with her kitties, instead of feeling sorry for herself. She wanted to turn that around, by recognizing that we are already in a perfect state.

That was right: we should mourn while our dear ones are still with us, and a lingering illness gives us the chance to share more time with them. Then when they die we have already expressed most of our healing lamentations, and can recall the beauty of the relationship that much sooner. Surely tears are restorative, and justified, however.

Penelope Diebold unconsciously followed this pattern, for decades crying and whining that Nitya was going to die, begging him never to, holding him tightly, as if that could keep him with her forever. By the time he finally did die, it didn't bother her at all. In any case, he was no longer around to listen to her.

Paul talked about how much of life we miss by creating narratives that distract us, particularly in our relationships with dog and family. He had read in a science book about the emerald, or green, flash from the sun as it was setting, but he had never seen it. (It's truly rare, and very short-lived.) For his daughter's 10th birthday party, he took a bunch of girls to the beach. They had fire going, and the girls were sitting around it on the beach at sunset. All of a sudden he saw the emerald flash, almost a turquoise color, lasting incredibly for five or six seconds. He called to the girls to look out there quick! It was the chance of a lifetime! The girls wouldn't turn their heads. "Leave us alone, Dad!" They were busy

warming their feet by the fire, talking. What could be better than that? Gingerbread?

Paul's lesson was to realize how much he, and we, get distracted by the ordinary, and miss out on the extraordinary.

Deb, aiming to lighten Anita's mood while still honoring the wisdom of all creatures great and small, cited the questionnaire shared during our 50th anniversary of the Portland Gurukula celebration, from [Tim Conway](#):

HOW ENLIGHTENED ARE YOU?

IF....

If you can live without caffeine,

If you can be cheerful, ignoring aches and pains,

If you can resist complaining,

If you can understand when your loved ones are too busy to give you any time,

If you can take criticism and blame without resentment,

If you can ignore a friend's limited education and never correct him or her,

If you can resist treating a rich friend better than a poor friend,

If you can face the world without lies and deceit,

If you can conquer tension without medical help,

If you can relax without liquor,

If you can sleep without the aid of drugs,

If you can honestly say that deep in your heart you have no prejudice against creed, color, religion, gender preference, or politics,

--Then you have almost reached the same level of spiritual development as your dog!

Another Nitya gem we didn't have time for would have made an ideal closing meditation about samadhi:

In the Yoga Vāsiṣṭha, there is a story. There was an Ahalyā who fell in love with an Indra. This is not the same story of Ahalyā and Gautama. This Ahalyā was also the wife of a Gautama, and a youngster called Indra fell in love with her. The husband reported this to the king. The king asked them to be brought to the court, and they were asked to be whipped. This man and woman got into an embrace and then they were whipped. But they both only laughed. They did not feel any pain. Then they were asked to be thrown in the water. They were still clinging on to each other. They did not drown. So many such kinds of persecutions were done to them. The king became so puzzled. He wanted to find out why none of these persecutions had any effect on them. They said, in our love, we have forgotten our body, our senses, our mind, our separate identity. We know only one thing here, that is this ecstasy, this *nirvṛtti*. So that stage of *nirvṛtti* is what we may call *ānanda ghanam*. When you have a *kevalānandam*, you forget everything else. That is a union of *svarūpa yoga* or *brahma sāyujya* that one gets, and is spoken of here.

Every time we experience this oneness, this ecstasy, that is a time for thanksgiving. We should be very grateful that the Supreme is so considerate, the Divine is so considerate, that He presides in our heart and He lights this lamp of wisdom, by which our darkness is dispelled at least for a little while, and we see His own glory there. (Nitya Gita video X, v. 10 & 11)

Part II

From the old Notes:

11/25/8

Sutra I:2 - Part III

Nitya puts his finger squarely on the chief difference between Patanjali's Yoga and Advaita Vedanta, a distinction it will be helpful to keep in mind through this study. In a nutshell (and who other than a nut would want to know?) Yoga admits a graded path of progressive attainments, while Vedanta insists that all steps are equally irrelevant. You either get it or you don't. The Self cannot be known in parts.

Alternatively, Patanjali's Yoga, which I will most of the time simply call Yoga in these notes, teaches graded perfection through sadhana or practice. Both standpoints have merit and are not as mutually exclusive as they seem on the face of it. Life itself is a sadhana to every caring person. As the class explored, there are many states of consciousness and many degrees of perception, and all of them are worthy of our attention when we're in them. We don't just discard everything that isn't total realization; in nondual vision we are learning to see the Absolute within the ordinary. "Ordinary reality" thus stands revealed for the astounding, miraculous occurrence that it is. We aren't going to throw it out.

Moreover, we want to minimize the dichotomy that creeps into Vedanta as much as other places between us "normal folks" and the rare beings who are enlightened. There is a streak of hero worship in us, and we find the stories of great sages and saints exciting and stimulating. As we go deeper into Yoga, though, we have to set aside all forms of defense that the ego uses to keep itself separate from what Anita called oneness with all. We lament our separateness because it makes us feel lonely, and yet we cling to it with a vengeance. Thinking of the great saints, poets and scientists as special, heightens the gulf between our conception of ourself and our conception of what enlightenment is. We unconsciously demean ourselves by projecting enlightenment and brilliance onto the other.

It doesn't matter what we think we will be like as an enlightened being before enlightenment. That's like charting a

course through unknown territory before we know what the territory is. We will find our way as we go along, and each decision will open up numerous undreamed of possibilities. One joy of life is in being free to make good decisions as we proceed. Thus the Gita concludes by setting us free to scrutinize every encounter and then make the best decision we can about it.

Patanjali will soon make a distinction between being in the groove and being with the vritti, the modulations. He knows we become somewhat centered in meditation and then are more horizontalized in our everyday activities. In the horizontal we can admire the (mostly fictitious or at least highly embroidered) stories of great men and women, but when we sit in the class to focus our consciousness or take time out for meditation at home, all that is extraneous. The sadhana is a gradual process of bringing the unitive awareness into the horizontal, of verticalizing it to the point where the horizontal and the vertical are fused.

Deb told an important story about an instruction Nitya gave to Peter O. When you're sitting at ease in meditation, you can pass off some of the urges that come along and remain there. But sooner or later one comes that makes you get up and start some program, even if it begins with only making tea. We should look closely at where that motivation comes from.

Our egos are masters of disguise. We think to ourselves, "I want to make tea or have lunch," or "time to clean the apartment," or "I've got to call my friend," and all these are true to an extent. But below the surface disturbance, the real disquiet that propels us is hiding. We can learn a lot by peering down into ourselves to try to see what urges are masquerading as simple bodily needs. We are in fact addicted to habitual responses to maintain the disguises we clothe ourselves in.

The idea of addiction struck a nerve, and the class explored it further. Our Puritanical society is horrified by addiction and tries to smash it wherever it rears its head, not realizing it is a symptom

of the underlying dissatisfaction and not the primary problem. Because of this, the cause is not addressed, and the addict will be driven from one craving to another. The only real cure is happiness or satisfaction, which comes from connection to the Absolute. Not a theoretical connection or any hypothetical belief, but a real soul-stirring merger. Puritans believe that *unhappiness* is Godly, and it blossoms under their touch. They want to spread it to everyone. The repression of happiness becomes an art form, with pleasure deferred to a putative afterlife and thus permanently out of reach. So we experience a profound disconnect between our true nature as blissful beings and the cold, harsh world in which we marinate.

In some sense we are all addicts. Whether or not we have a drug habit, we all have habitual behaviors that keep us bound. So the example of the addict can be taken to heart by everyone. The game isn't about crafting a persona to keep life at bay, but about quitting the charade once and for all, because that is exactly what is keeping us from our native joy. Breaking our habit calls for a measure of seriousness that we are reluctant to exercise, because we are also hiding from ourselves. *Citta vritti nirodha* means stopping the flow of associations we are addicted to, first with the surface mind, and as we progress in our meditative skills, quelling the tidal urges erupting from our *vasanas*.

As Paul reminded us, we can't simply repress the eruptions. We have to find the bliss, and then the *vasanas* don't have as much hold on us. We dispel darkness by bringing in light, not by trying valiantly to push it into a corner. Or as Nitya once said, we can't hold back the ocean with our fingers.

Most of the rest of Nitya's commentary is a progressive list of *samadhis*, or depths of unified consciousness that are consequent to the progressive stilling of mental modifications. The primary distinction is between the seeded and unseeded states. The urges we're speaking of come from the seeds of unsatisfied desires in the psyche. These underlie four stages of restraint or *nirodha*.

A preliminary restraint is to focus on a single item, as in the classic meditation on a flower or a flame. This brings us to an identification with the Self, but the effect is temporary. Next is to focus on an idea, which is similar but more difficult. Beyond that we begin to experience a core identification with the Self and its bliss, true dhyana or contemplation, at which point the seeds start to die off. The fourth nirodha is to hold on to the core identification so that the identity of self and Self can become more and more total. Minimizing the impact of rajas and tamas and allowing sattva to predominate helps the psyche to remain in this pure state of samadhi.

The first two nirodhas may sound exotic—wow, meditating on a candle!—but they don't have to be. When we are absorbed in watching a sports event or a simple task like washing dishes, we are experiencing nirodha naturally. The act of reading is taken for granted, but it is in fact very complicated. Most people in Patanjali's day couldn't do it, but we've all had the absorbing experience of struggling to “get into” a book and then suddenly being actually in it, undistracted, fighting the battle or raising the deer or trekking the Gobi or whatever. This is a tremendous meditative achievement. Maryanne Wolf, in *Proust and the Squid*, describes what MRI studies are revealing about the reading mind, and what an amazing, coordinated achievement it is. She details several stages in learning to read as an expert that are reminiscent of Patanjali. One key difference is that we have no reading vasanas, no genetic predilection for it. It is too new a skill. Wolf includes a quote from Sir Edmund Huey, calling reading “the most remarkable specific performance that civilization has learned in all its history.” So in some respects we are all yogis already, and when we understand what that means it will demystify our study to a significant degree. If we don't add stumbling blocks or waste our time in self-sabotage, we are naturally evolving into wise mystics.