

2022 Patanjali Class 24

8/2/22

Sutra I:5 – The modifications are fivefold, some labored (painful) and others spontaneous (not painful).

Sutra I:6 – They are: real cognition, unreal cognition, imaginary cognition, deep sleep, and memory.

Sutras 5 and 6 go together. The next five sutras take on these categories of modification one at a time. They are Patanjali's comprehensive list of our way of understanding our environment.

I want to start and end the notes with another of Nitya's "splendid sentences," as Beverley called them, this time two together that conclude his commentary:

If the painful tendencies are slowly weaned off, the neutral witnessing consciousness can shine forth in its full effulgence. Such is the view of Vyasa about *vritti*, modifications.

Much of Patanjali's Yoga is about how to wean ourselves of our painful tendencies, which routinely interfere with the harmonious functioning of our psyche. It will be helpful to keep this epitome in mind, throughout.

Nitya draws a subtle distinction between spontaneous modifications and the witnessing state, which really launched our discussion, since they are almost the same:

A division can be made somewhat between the judging witness and the subject being considered by the judge. The witnessing consciousness is also the validating consciousness. It is as if the painful and the not painful streaks of consciousness are running parallel with an intermittent emphasis that is sometimes on validation and sometimes on affectivity.

Validation goes out from the witness, while affectivity enters into it. What this adds is that for our inner light to shine forth, we must wean ourselves from *both* the painful and not painful modifications. Still, we might as well start with the painful ones! If nothing else, they are more easily noticed, and they are deleterious. We *want* to wean ourselves from those. Pleasant ones, not so much. But both are *affective*, and therefore not fully at one with the validating witness.

Deb spoke of the interesting distinction between labored and spontaneous, which Nitya compares to looking (searching) and seeing (observing). Her example was, in some natural springs, the water bubbles up spontaneously. In other places we have to dig down to the water table and set up a pump system to bring the water up to us. This means we can't be in a spontaneous reverie all the time: focused intense looking is also important.

Bill was intrigued that Nitya is identifying the neutral witness here, and it is a little odd. It isn't in the sutra. Bill contrasted the witnessing with the layers of experience and memory and acculturation that cloud our focus. It is a fine distinction Nitya's making, and I invited the class to discuss how spontaneity and witnessing may differ.

Nancy wondered if you can legitimately separate the neutral witness from the modifications it witnesses. She has always struggled to define the experience of a neutral witness, and existing purely in that zone never appealed to her: a place where you don't feel pain and compassion and other peoples' needs all around you. She accepts that there is a place in us where you can go and remain balanced, so you're not going this way and that way and just reacting unconsciously. She loves reacting to her life, and finds not doing so hard to accept.

When Deb was first in India with Nitya, he told her about his aunt who had lost a child, and she was grieving and crying. His grandmother wasn't visibly affected, however, and when asked

why not, she said everyone has their own losses to deal with, and this was not hers. Deb was irate and offended by the implicit message, and agreed with Nancy: “That is not a state I want to be in!” Now she feels that the balanced state is not so much withdrawn — the neutrality allows us to see and care for the situation better, without our reactions coloring it so strongly. It’s not a stepping away from. More balance is possible when less of our own projections are added in.

Nancy admitted she’s not one of the people who always throws herself into situations that others are experiencing, but she does want to be able to acknowledge what that person is feeling. The instruction is not meant to rule that out. If you’re in a state of intense samadhi, you quite naturally aren’t affected by your surroundings, but almost no one spends their whole life in samadhi, nor do they want to.

I wondered if that grandmother had already had enough pain and suffering, and couldn’t bear any more? That would also explain her seemingly callous state. Deb’s impression at the time was it was more a neutral attitude, like a reverie, a spontaneous way of seeing.

Paul asked about the definition of reverie. According to Random House, it’s a daydream; a dreamy meditation or fanciful musing. We especially liked the American Heritage Dictionary’s “abstracted musing.” In Nitya’s commentary, reverie is contrasted with focused attention, as evolute of Patanjali’s spontaneous and labored modifications, so it’s not quite a witnessing state.

As we were beating around the bush on these labels, I suggested the left and right brain metaphor. The purported “left brain” is the laborer, measuring, interpreting and evaluating; while the “right brain” refers to our spontaneous cognition: perceiving objects and events directly, as they are, without appending judgment.

Paul realized this dichotomy fit his still-vivid hospital epiphany he has often talked about. His labored modulations as he approached the operating table were his fears of pain and his illusion of being in control. Once his doctor put him in his place as an ignorant human being, he was able to let go of his assertions and move on to acceptance. He still felt pain and fear, but he was able to release his care to people who really knew what they were doing. By sacrificing his illusion of control, he could witness more, because he wasn't panicking.

Susan offered that when she is anxious, she tries to be curious instead, to wonder what will happen next, rather than imagining all the bad things that might happen. It works well.

I added that for most of us, our labored and spontaneous aspects are out of step with each other. If they can work together, it optimizes our involvement. Our species is currently heavily biased in favor of laborious processes, while the spontaneous aspect is neglected. The left brain is running the show, paying little attention if any to the right brain's perceptions.

Jan reported the welcome relief of being able to laugh at herself lately. When she sees herself with the witnessing consciousness, it makes her laugh sometimes. It feels freeing, a way to accept who she is, and it has compassion too, because she is accepting herself without judgment. It reminded Bill of Baker Roshi, who used to say that "we are learning how to see things as it is," and people corrected him that he meant things *as they are*, but he said no, things as it is. Meaning, there aren't many things, there is only one, though it may look like many. Oneness is what the witnessing consciousness sees, so things *as it is*.

Deb shared a perfect illustration, from a teacher who changed her life in an instant. When she was a sophomore in high school, she handed in two papers to her English teacher, Curtis J. Anderson. One she dashed off in a reverie; the other she labored over. She was sure her hard work was going to produce the all-

time A++ paper of the universe. To her shock she got a B minus on her masterpiece, and the other earned the A+. When she spoke with her teacher, he told her, “How hard you work on something has nothing to do with how good it is.” This was news to Deb, who grew up believing the harder you worked the better the result was sure to be. His words have stayed with her. Even today, when she catches herself trying too hard, she steps back a bit. Her best poems are when she can listen to her inner spontaneity. She has to also have an ear. Both working together.

Susan talked about a similar way of self-exploration she’s been following, Internal Family Systems therapy, IFS. <https://ifs-institute.com/> . She later wrote out some of the key ideas for us:

In this way of thinking, we are made up of a self and many parts. The therapy is a process of recognizing and acknowledging the different parts and getting to know them. In this way you come to be more in the neutral self. I have a therapist but she is more of a facilitator. For most of the time I have my eyes closed and I am doing the work internally with her guidance. Some of the parts are exiles (parts that were created as a result of childhood conditioning or trauma) and some are protectors that developed to help us get through hard times in our lives as children. The protectors are there to keep the exiles from speaking up because they learned it was safer for you as a young child — for instance, a protector who keeps criticizing you for speaking your mind might be trying to make sure that the exile who really wants to have a voice doesn’t come up and say things that might push people away.

Ultimately, one wants to have good relationships with one’s parts and help them to feel seen and heard so that they support and encourage our being (in self) rather than undermining it.

I was just reading the interview that Johnny sent out [announcing Bushra Azzouz’s upcoming documentary, A

Midsummer Night's Dream in Prison]. I like what one of the filmmakers said about transformation:

[Bushra] would say, "We tell ourselves the story of who we are. But we can transform that story." Being able to reimagine yourself is like freedom. And that is what I carried through the whole three years working on the film.

Isn't IFS the same? (And Vedanta too) — we tell ourselves a story about who we are that is based on our conditioning and what our parts are telling us. But it's an old story, based on things that are no longer relevant. I feel as though IFS is a way to transform the story and to see it as a story.

True, yet much of our "old story" does remain relevant, and there's no reason to discard it, though some of it really retards our effectiveness at living. After all, our persona is a strategy devised by an infant. It's based on what more or less worked, once upon a time. The IFS idea is to befriend all our parts, which neutralizes them, rather than triggering their enmity. It proclaims we are definitely capable of transforming our story.

Andy resonated with Susan's talk about this in class, and agreed that every one of us has internal characters, or parts. If you are daydreaming, you can often see them show up. Susan had worried whether we all thought she was crazy for having little "parts" she talks to, and Andy assured her she is not alone. We all wonder that. In working toward neutrality, we can become more confident that we have compassion in our center, which is a role of the witness. It's very accepting. Deb likened it to saying *aum* as the word of permission and acceptance. Nitya called *aum* the word of consent. Are you crazy? *Aum*. Are you sane? *Aum*. Does it matter? *Aum*. Is your one Self full of parts? *Aum*.

And so the class came full circle, back to Nitya's last paragraph, which can easily be read with an IFS slant:

Events are not registered on a clean slate. Each time a centrifugal reverberation is created in the psychosomatic apparatus, all the latent culturings of the past are stirred and the most relevant of the potencies that have been acquired surge into dynamic operation. This, in turn, creates new potencies to come to fruition in the future. If the painful tendencies are slowly weaned off, the neutral witnessing consciousness can shine forth in its full effulgence. Such is the view of Vyasa about *vritti*, modifications. (YS 29)

Though the purport at the end is clear, Susan wasn't sure about that monstrous second sentence, and it was good she asked. The "psychosomatic apparatus" is the body/mind complex, our being. "Latent culturings" are our samskaras, the conditionings that lie around unnoticed, waiting to lend a hand, many of them outmoded. Our "parts," in IFS terminology. As we'll see in the quote below, Nitya more often used "whirlpool" instead of "centrifugal reverberation." Like any good guru, he wanted to employ fresh terminology now and again. A whirling mind was a familiar concept to those close to him. We often meditated on our psyche expanding in a centrifugal pattern, as vast as we could make it, and then drawing it back inward in a corresponding centripetal movement. It made us aware of our psyches as miniature solar systems.

Nancy added our heartbeat is centrifugal, as are the energy fields we exist in.

Bill elaborated on the meaning as when something scares you, you don't just register pain, you start to think of all the things in your memory that have influenced you in similar circumstances. A flurry of stuff comes up, that is not all necessary, especially if

you are shooting for being a neutral witness.

As Deb said, we don't just have a single emotion or concept in our responses, if we're upset or otherwise affected, it's always getting bigger, adding other memories and perspectives.

Nitya advises that if we can wean ourselves away from that whirlpool, what is left is the effulgent light we are made of, waiting for us to clam up and calm down a bit, so it can shine.

We might have closed with this excerpt from Nitya's Gita video, where he addresses these same factors, and "centrifugal reverberation" appears as a whirlpool:

Now we go into something else where there is neither the objective world nor the subjective world. It is as if suddenly everything is effaced, but then you are incapacitated. You cannot use your mind; you cannot use your intellect. Even if you watch how the vasanas come up, there is no explanation why the rotation of memory is such that at the least expected time or occasion, a strong urge comes up and something which you thought you had overcome a long time ago suddenly presents itself. On closer observation you can see that the time and space which we think we know is not exactly the time and space of the wakeful world where the segmentation is clear cut. There are shadows of the future which may have been brought into the present, and there are lingering shadows of the past that do not leave even when we are removed in time and space from that particular event. For instance, a guilt feeling haunts you long after the whole situation has vanished from public scrutiny. There is no way for someone else to detect it, but in your mind, it can wax stronger. Similarly, when a hidden desire like an ambition generated by greed or revenge comes, it does not leave by merely pushing it away. Sooner or later, you'll find that you are working yourself into its clutches, something which is making you behave in a certain way. You can see this



in the life of martyrs. Even when people are not thinking of killing a certain person for a certain cause, the person is already haunted by the feeling that he is going to be a martyr, and his thoughts and behaviors are all happening with constant interaction with the external world, that he finally becomes a martyr. He is happening to his martyrdom. This is where the mind is interacting with the external world and a whirlpool is created in that world. (Nitya Gita video, XV.intro)

## Part II

My response to this sutra for Nancy Y's first Patanjali study group came only one month after my brain injury, the one that became evident when I sent out the following class invitation, after struggling mightily to spell the words (I was able to copy and paste Tuesday and Wednesday from a previous email):

Here going to trute form Wednesday. Scott has lost kind brain, unfastunibluy, but Debby han histkend. Hus as bruge to Tuesday beck buck, and then we'll have a brake. Sorry.

3/19/10

Sutra I: 5

Wow. I've been watching my mental activity for a while now, from a very deep, oppressed place. Sometimes you just can't choose where you are! I was struggling mightily to come up to the light, but was trapped in the murk for what seemed like weeks, but was really only a few days. Now that my health has been restored I can once again feel much more positive.

As the good Dr. Bronner put it, "Health is our only real wealth."

Here's the bottom line: The witness watches the unfolding of life, and is affected by it to the degree it is not detached. In my case this is nearly 100 percent nondetachment, despite a lifetime of philosophy and contemplation. There is fabulous pain involved in becoming detached, but the restoration of the psyche into coherence offers a measure of bliss as a counterweight. The option of withdrawing into the unknown is truly that—unknown. The speculations of all history about the afterlife seem trivial and childish compared to the profound mystery of that path leading into the dark woods.

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The old class notes for this sutra were mistakenly included in the previous. I've edited it slightly:

1/5/9

We begin to dive into the “meaty” part of the study with a preliminary division, after which the five types of modification will be examined one by one. Nitya explains the division in a couple of ways. The easy or spontaneous modulations are the simple registration of sensory input, while the labored ones are efforts of volition associated with action. In other words, afferent and efferent impulses, or incoming and outgoing. He also likens the difference to that between seeing and looking, again referencing passive and active aspects of modulation, respectively. Lastly he adds a vertical element, the witness, the minimally modulated state of ease that dispassionately observes the turmoil of the active subject/object confection.

We must remember that there is no right or wrong in this division, only what is. Many spiritual theories emphasize the easy (New Age) or the difficult (Semitic) paths. In Yoga, both have

their place, and can be very helpful to temper each other's extremes. The class talked about this at length. When your life is well-adjusted it has an ease that is a ratification of its harmonious functioning. On the other hand, hard struggles are necessary to break free of conditioning, and to attain complex achievements. Gandhi didn't lead India out of serfdom by quietly contemplating his navel, but by using his contemplative insights to energize an intelligent action program that was supremely complex and strenuous.

It remains a surpassing paradox that examining the blocks to samadhi allows us to wean ourselves away from them, as Nitya puts it here. Simply attending to the "groovy" side of life often produces a saccharine superficiality, behind which thinly veiled egoistic forces run rampant. By facing the darkness, we allow the light to shine ever more brightly.

Susan gave an example of a favorite Medieval Italian painting of hers, showing the Angel Gabriel whispering in Mary's ear that she has been impregnated by God. Contrary to our expectations, Mary is not amused. The painting depicts a thousand words' worth of struggling with doubt, humiliation, even violation. Her carefully laid plans and sense of propriety have just been wiped out. Giving birth to a "savior" is not all fun and games. This struck me as the beautiful symbol it must have been intended to be once upon a time. Each of us goes about our life with a set of programs, duties, plans, but if we are blessed enough to be touched by the divine, it impregnates us with a tiny seed that begins to grow within us, mostly out of our awareness, but with a swelling sense of something supremely important going on. After a suitable gestation period, a new life bursts forth in all its radiance. When we first hear the call of spirit, the word of the guru, our superficial self is likely to rebel, to resent its loss of ego autonomy, but that too will pass.

Speaking of children, Nancy put the situation very clearly and simply. When we are young we all know the state of the neutral witness perfectly well, so when we get carried away our parent or caretaker can hug us or chide us or whatever, and quickly redirect our attention back to our native neutrality. We return to it as a matter of course, even on our own sometimes. She wanted us to know we aren't speaking of some obscure state here, but of our natural ground, something very familiar. We can re-access it any time by stopping our headlong plunge into modulations.

Nancy's idea incidentally reminds us of the value of a wise teacher. When we are embroiled in the thick of action it is not easy to find our way back to neutrality on our own. That's what 'coloration' means: that we tint our environment with our state of mind, but we have a tough time realizing we're doing it. Everything looks perfectly clear to us because the tint is in us. Dick Cheney and Charles Manson and all those crazy people firmly believe they are perfectly sane. An outside observer, especially one who knows us well, a guru, can help turn us back to our witnessing state that is the source of true clarity. If we trust them as we once trusted our parents, we will listen when they tell us we are going wrong. Which brings us back to the original message: we have to admit we are off the mark before we can get back on the mark. We must examine the chains to learn how to free ourselves. Even if we've already done a lot of that in the past.

Scotty wondered aloud if there wasn't a way to burn karma wholesale, all at once. Yes, lots of people get impatient with the seemingly plodding pace of Vedanta. We are being weaned away, not yanked away, from our foibles. Many paths that promise quick results are a snare and a delusion. But many are fine. Chanting, painting, dancing, worshipping, all those kinds of things provide surcease from sorrow, though often temporary. When the chanting is over, are you still the same? Between the bursts of artistic expression, who and where are you? Yoga is especially suited to

those who prize the intellect highly, but it also imparts permanent psychic upgrades, so it is well suited to serious seekers of lasting value. The idea is that once you recognize a detrimental state, it loses its grip on you. The next time it comes along you will say Aha! I'm not submitting to you this time! So this way is indeed deliberate, but sure. Slow and steady wins the race. There is a cumulative aspect here that Advaita Vedanta denies and transcends, but which has its place as a valuable adjunct nonetheless. Talk about paradox!

Our egos are clever to co-opt virtually every spiritual path, turning it from a technique for liberation into a conditioned habitual program. Or worse, a smug buffer for our complacency. The artist must walk the razor's edge between a new vision and its repetition as a commercial entity. Curiously, even the striving for newness can become habitual. It's how our brains have evolved. Habits are useful to free our attention to keep an eye on the underbrush, where lurks the tiger. An unfortunate side effect is that spiritual aliveness quickly dulls down to a formula if we don't intentionally challenge ourselves with contradictory information. The Patanjali Yoga class is replete with challenging contradictions that can shake us out of our stupor if we so desire. It is a powerful call to come awake once again.