

2022 Patanjali Class 27

8/30/22

Sutra I:8 – Unreal cognition is misconception, not established on essential nature.

Unreal cognition is the second category of mental modifications, *vritti*. Such a broad category sometimes seems as if it includes all the others.

During the opening meditation, Deb had an epiphany that being mindful is not a picky, minute attending but a deep and large awareness, where we are mindfully aware of inner reality and what is happening around us. It's a total awareness of how we *see* and *are* in a situation.

Anita lamented that she is not often in that state. She gets flashes when she has a clearer understanding, but it doesn't stay with her. I reminded her of Mojo Sam's observation that it's not hard to be mindful, it's *remembering* to be mindful that's hard. Joking aside, like most of us, Anita is selling herself short. Doing it occasionally and being familiar with that way of thinking helps us to be more aware whenever we slip into a jittery mindset, and we all do. People who are really caught in outwardness don't realize they are hopping from surface to surface and not settling in. So we're not far off from it, but for some reason we imagine mindfulness is something you should think about all the time. Just do it when you miss it, when you realize you're not centered in yourself. Otherwise, it's a bit OCD to be overly focused on your life's details, which has the opposite effect from what's meant, by tuning out input from other sources. Just stay open.

I offered that such techniques require "practice," repetitive efforts to establish new neuron pathways, while draining energy from old ones in the process. This is what we're doing all the time: it's otherwise known as learning and growing. So long as we aren't

terrified by life, we make room for it. This “practice” is well under way, and it shows.

Recently I ran across a quote on the topic, by author Gail Godwin, in an article on aging, titled Losing Ground: “In Buddhism... the practice of ‘mindfulness,’ of bringing your mind completely to bear on whatever confronts it, is considered a form of prayer.”

Deb said, as we begin to recognize what our core assumptions or patterns are, that in itself is a way of expanding our awareness. “I used to make a lot of snap judgments about people. Now I catch myself and say to myself, ‘there it goes again.’ Then it’s easier to settle into my center.” She realizes those kinds of attitudes make you small-minded, as if you’re always focused on the shadows, and we can cultivate patterns of returning to the neutral state that turn us toward the light. She has also found that not always trying too hard to solve a problem allows new ways of understanding to arise.

Susan finds that meditation and journal writing when she first gets up in the morning, help her to get into that state. Those kinds of habits are beneficial to pull us away from obsessing over irritating details.

Susan, like many of us, found this class particularly exciting, and she sent along her day-after thoughts about the resonance of her new therapy with Vedanta:

I was thinking a lot during class about how much my work with Internal Family Systems Therapy helps me to understand this sutra. In this therapy I am learning to recognize my self (my true nature) by working with the many parts that I find inside. In the past it has been hard for me to distinguish a self inside of me because that self has been so blended with parts such as fear, anger, regret, sadness, wishing to be loved, wanting to take up space, holding on to comfort. The IFS model is a

different way of looking at things but it has really resonated with me. I take time during my day to sit and listen to the various parts of me — whatever is coming up at that time. Usually, I decide to do this when I'm feeling strong emotions. At first it might be hard for me to feel into my self because of the parts taking up so much room but I try to open conversation with them — I recognize them and have compassion for them (as Jan said). I try to understand why they are the way they are. This is all about the conditionings that we talked about in class. Having compassion for these parts helps on so many levels — it makes it easier to separate from the conditionings so I have a greater awareness (as Debbie talked about). There is more space and the feeling of being in self is more possible. With the compassion also comes a trusting of self — the parts feel seen and accepted for just who and what they are in a way that perhaps we ourselves were never seen and accepted as children. This eventually means that I am able to go beyond the limitations of the parts/conditionings (as Paul and Andy said) because I have explored them and grappled with them and accepted them. The more work I can do in this way, the more I feel self. It may not be the exact self of Narayana's Vedanta but I am finding it elucidating of Vedanta. I also like the IFS idea about self — you can recognize when you are there because you may have one or more of these: curiosity, compassion, confidence, calmness, clarity, creativity, courage, confidence. Pretty great list of words starting with C!

It's easy to see how IFS doubles one's confidence. ☺

Speaking about parts, Bill, Andy and Deb are all in Nancy Y's current Darsanamala class, and Bill noticed their current section of the Apovada Darsana matches what we're discussing here. Verses 7 and 8 are:

When all parts are separated
one by one, then one sees
everything as consciousness alone –
far from *maya* – and not any other.

Consciousness alone, not another, shines;
therefore, there is nothing other than consciousness;
what does not shine—that is unreal;
and what is unreal—that does not shine.

In this part of commenting on verse 7, Nitya goes to the heart of the matter:

A serious penetration of the meaning and workings of the external world must inevitably take us step by step into the sources of our own subjective causes. What may at first appear to be infinite and immeasurable shrinks into a point of acute awareness, and it is located as the center of consciousness. Without knowing the pulsation of this consciousness, which can converge or contract to a point of awareness that is infinitesimally smaller than a conceivable mathematical point, and which can also expand with variegated forms, shapes, colors and names into an infinite universe, one will be unable to wipe off the misery of life in a wholesale manner. Piecemeal techniques or shortcuts are of little help, though they may give a momentary respite.

Narayana Guru did not begin his spiritual life as an evangelist of wisdom. First he withdrew himself from everyone and everything. For more than a decade he examined the lifestyle of his fellow men. Then he withdrew from the world. After that he withdrew from the physical body. Finally he withdrew from the tumult and feverishness of the mind. Eventually came the experience of the realization that his own

being was none other than Being itself, which is the One manifested as the All. Only after the actualization of this experience had saturated and transformed his emotions, thought, volitions and specific identity did the Guru begin to reveal his gospel of love and unitive understanding.

This morning I sent out lesson 19 for one of my Gita classes, on Dhyana Yoga, chapter VI, that begins:

The whole technique of meditation according to Krishna is spelled out from verses 10 through 14, giving the chapter its name. Here we have as succinct a definition of meditation as you'll find anywhere: just sit somewhere quietly and gather your many parts into one whole. Of course, the whole is much more than the sum of its parts. We know "the many" very well; we just have to add awareness of the mysterious "one" to transform our knowledge into wisdom. Unity is the essence of meditation.

The clearly delineated intent is to attain "transparent Self-consciousness," meaning to attend to the Absolute without adding any distortion based on ideology or self-indulgence.

Bill said that according to the sutra, when your conceptions are not established in your essential nature, they become misconceptions, so a return to the source is most important. When you look at the pieces of transactional world and see what things are influencing them, you can get back to that source, and all can be brought into context with what is real.

While that's certainly true, as a species, we seem to have foregone a general agreement about what reality is, so I wondered if there was anything that could replace common consent, based on traditional wisdom, as a guide? If you were not raised with moral grounding and the ratification of sane thinking, how would you

even know it was missing? And what is it that makes us long for and seek unity?

Deb told us that many churches and schools have realized that the mass killers in our country are those who have become disaffiliated and are completely isolated from a healthy community. Those organizations are making efforts to bring them into more contact with others, and it is often healing. She mentioned a poignant example from Bushra's new movie, *A Midsummer Night's Dream in Prison*. All the men she's met in Two Rivers Prison, where it was filmed, were once disaffiliated types, and the normal prison atmosphere only aggravated their disconnectedness. Working with people who care about them in dialogue groups and theater has had an enormous transformative effect on them. One of the main characters talks about how all his life, when something bothered him, he just said screw it, I'm leaving, and walked away. As the performance of the play loomed, he got mad about something and told the cast he was quitting. One of the other actors took him aside and told him he couldn't do that—he was crucial to the play, and there was no one available to replace him. Thinking it over, he realized how he mattered to his friends, and that changed his whole attitude. He overcame his habitual reaction and stayed on, for his friends' benefit, and it was a major success, for him and everyone else.

Jan was moved by the story, and agreed that trying to be aware of our judgments and let go of them is crucial. Once we see how they are interfering with our connections with others, it motivates us to change. Jan believes we are meant to learn from each other, and everyone has a place at the table.

Inspired by Jan's emphasis on awareness, Paul shared an amusing take on it. As a teenager, he learned how to drive on a 1950 Chevy with holes in the floorboards, lots of play in the steering wheel, and brakes you had to pump to get them to work. It was a hard car to drive, but Paul learned its idiosyncrasies and was

aware of how it was going to behave in various conditions, so he could handle it. His takeaway was that like that unrepairable car, he doesn't have to change that much, but only be aware how he'll react in certain situations. When he starts to go off the road, he's ready for it, and holds back his anger, or other rusty mechanism. So yeah, he admits parts of his personality are dysfunctional, yet it's okay to accept them and even be forgiving about them. He can admit their inadequacy, and then go beyond the limitations of his conditionings.

When you have a very tenacious conditioning, mused Andy, it's important to see that you've got it and to hang in there with it. It's a compassionate activity—our “sticky parts” have the greatest potential for teaching us to be compassionate to ourselves and others. Jan echoed that once you've looked at your stuckness, accepting what you see in yourself is next step. You have to get peaceful with it. Acceptance and compassion are necessary for healing. Fighting our faults makes them bigger.

According to Andy, humans have a tendency to idolize a spiritual ideal, and in consequence we believe our faults are unspiritual. He advocated for accepting all the parts of ourself we find problematic.

Anita was stunned by another of Nitya's “splendid sentences”:

This natural ability of the defense mechanism to shift from one psychological set to another is not merely an incident of erroneous cognition but a wantonly-held bigoted position used to push away a threatening situation and aggressively support an indefensible stand. (41)

While catching ourselves doing this is a way of moving toward real cognition, the un-self-aware ego distorts situations in its favor, which not only reinforces self-denial but also blocks out contrary

positions that could be educative. I wondered what our motivation for this is, and Anita surmised it was things like fear of rejection. I suspect it's because deep down we know we are "faking it, not really making it," and we want to prevent our weakness being exposed at all costs. Since everyone feels that way, it is a rare soul who can take a step back from the brink, away from the basic need for camouflage. That's why Nitya would poke hard at our egos with comments like this, and if you took them to heart, they were supremely beneficial.

It's curious how easily Nitya's thrusts could be ignored by the undedicated, as well. Cats use gestures called displacement activity, such as innocently licking their paws after being scolded for eating the canary. Due to our core fear of getting punished or criticized, humans have by far the most clever and strongly-held displacement activities. We have to look closely at this behavior; it doesn't resolve if you pretend you're not fearful. Once you are aware of it, you see it everywhere.

The debilitating fear we are oppressed by is baggage from long ago, and is not inherent in the present situation. It is not a fearful state to be yourself or be grounded, and compassion is a natural outgrowth of realizing this. Realizing fear is an illusion based in memory helps you to let it go, converting the present moment from misery to joy.

Kris has found it helps to laugh at her misconceptions, when she spots them. They are funny! On top of that, as you get older you learn the advantage of staying quiet and not blurting out everything that goes through your head, and this helps you not misconstrue things.

Deb claimed that we act this way not just for defense: we are trying to assert that I am a person, I am taking my rightful place. We take a contrary stance to confirm who we are, which is often a fiction, yet it can also be true. She recalled Nitya's wish for her,

after a stormy period, “I hope in the future you will have less need to defend yourself.”

One of the Absolute’s contributions to the class was a segment from Brian Doyle’s essay, *Were You Lonely When You Were a Freshman?* He started out timid and anxious at college, and chronicles his gradual recovery, concluding:

Whatever it is we mean when we use the word *maturity* probably means the moment, if it ever comes, when you finally tire of capering and performing, and stop doing so.... I finally understood that everyone else was afraid of being lonely, too, and once you understand that, you can try to speak all the languages that people are, behind their masks and disguises and performances.

Deb cited Chogyam Trungpa, that you have to befriend yourself and accept all your problems and difficulties, and only then can you get past them and grow. Hating them and pushing them away keeps you caught. Andy agreed that the deeper awareness of the witnessing consciousness allows you to accomplish that.

We are most fortunate to be part of kindly-motivated communities that help us keep our sanity, for the most part. Achieving valid cognition is an active, give-and-take process, and no one can do it alone. Still, Anita wasn’t convinced of the validity, arguing when we speak about our true self and true perception, we are all talking about it and we have to agree with each other. What we perceive seems like it’s real because we all say it’s real, yet how do we know that it is?

We also test it in our experience, said Deb, it’s not just that we’re saying it but we are a testing ground for its validity. We come to consensus based on experience and observation, too.

Nitya often wondered how amazing it was that we understand

each other at all. We are functional, and act as if we are in accord, but scientifically speaking there is no way to judge our comparative experiences. There is an immense gulf between each person. Still, there is something ineffable in us that makes us feel connected at a deep level. We are not consciously aware of it, yet we are generally in agreement, and that's okay because it works. It gives us enough confidence to interact with our world. Anita's fears are clearly justified, however. There are hate-filled people with automatic weapons who feel they're part of a superior community, so there has to be more than simple agreement with others. That might have been true in tribal times, but now every purveyor of a crackpot scheme or lunatic proposition can get a million followers in twenty-four hours.

A book I'm reading, *The Immense World*, by Ed Yong, clearly demonstrates that while we can measure the ways sentient creatures perceive different aspects of their environment, it is utterly impossible to know what even other humans are experiencing, much less other species. This is good to keep in mind, because spiritual realization is put forward as total awareness of the outside universe, and such claims are easily debunked, as if that proves all morality and religious ideals are invalid. We can only know for certain about our own individual life, and deal with how we live it. We can make our life radiant.

In the spirit of the Tao, Bill characterized our essential nature as a dream arising of the ten-thousand things. Although there are a lot of things in our world, we all see them a little differently based on conditioning. He always goes back to the point of the world arising from the one, from emptiness.

Paul is fond of the proposition: to know is a form of unknowing, and unknowing is a form of knowing. I suggested that yoga takes knowing and unknowing together, leading us to a still center of synthesis. This is why we have short meditations at the beginning and the end of our class. And then we did.

Part II

Ye olde Notes, first from 2009:

Sutra 8 is a fecund ground for self-exploration. Yogis should pretty much always assess and reassess where their ideas have gestated, and take great care to not become deluded by their previously held notions. A group setting is especially valuable for sharing insights on these matters.

Nitya lists some handy touchstones to get us into the practice, including the venerable rope/snake adrenaline rush. Then there is the child who is taught to never talk to strangers. Since I love to talk to children, I have watched the conflict they feel when they very much want to communicate with this friendly person right under their nose, but the superego voice is barring it absolutely. I am seen as a threat instead of a friend. For what it's worth, the improved version is to teach kids to never go anywhere with strangers. Friendliness is okay though. That way they can grow up to be more relaxed, instead of guarded and suspicious. Anyway, the point is that because of a blanket teaching, people are not free to follow their intuition in relating to the world around them. As Nitya says, "In our own lives we can see that we are fed not with three but three million occasions of such conditionings. The human biocomputer can, in most cases, pull the wrong tag of memory and a vaguely presented complex can be easily complemented with an inappropriate concept."

Another touchstone is religious symbolism. The symbol is only wood or metal, but it connects to powerfully held beliefs. Yet if you insist it is not the deity it represents, worshippers might kill you for the sacrilege.

In marital or other relational squabbles, the two participants will have very different interpretations of a single situation.

Usually, the problem itself is only a façade for an underlying schism, and fixing the problem by itself has little or no impact on the real issue. The schism will call forth another incident soon enough.

We could go on listing examples, but the yogi is expected to take this instruction to heart and do their own work. Every problem is an opportunity to uncover truth, as long as you don't run away. It is critical to realize that you are part of the problem, and that it isn't simply someone else's fault. Such an egotistical notion dissociates us more and more from our solid ground.

Once your mental activity loses touch with the world around, called here "essential nature," it begins to wander. While this can be salubrious, it more often produces dissociation leading to derangement and depression. For this reason, traditional gurus were approached first through physical activities like cooking, gathering firewood, and cleaning. Abstract instruction grew out of a solid, actual relationship and was not based on wild fantasies. Present-day studies have shown that work reduces depression to a significant degree. Even having a pet helps keep you grounded, and has been shown to lower stress levels. TV on the other hand, is a perfect dissociation machine. While it is "entertaining" to astral travel through the different channels, what gets lost in the bargain is your connection to your essential Self.

Nitya lists some classic situations where our pernicious wishful thinking and ego protection devices take precedence over the clear perceptions of less biased observers. He relates a case of a child who refuses to be satisfied no matter what is offered her:

The child's mind is immediately tuned to a contradictory situation. The posture of the child is the same as that taken by opposition parties in parliaments, politicians who counter their rivals, and in the case of super-powers who hold out menacing threats to each other in a cold war situation. Not agreeing with

the adversary is a defense tactic for self-existence. A hooded cobra can easily twist its neck to the right or left, to bite and discharge its venom. This natural ability of the defense mechanism to shift from one psychological set to another is not merely an incident of erroneous cognition but a wantonly-held bigoted position used to push away a threatening situation and aggressively support an indefensible stand. (p. 41)

The class discussed how we like to fight, to take an opposing stand. We feel as if we define ourselves through what we fight over, and the implication is we will be nobody if we don't clash with an opponent. It brings the walls of our fortress into sharp definition. Only a yogi comes to know that in the ultimate analysis there is nothing in us to defend, nor is there anyone for us to defend ourselves from.

Charles talked at length about how the mal-perception or misconception is not as innocent as we would like to believe: underneath our prevarication is some toxic emotional state or guna that is energizing the deception.

The tragedy is that as we drift farther and farther away from our solid ground, we become disoriented. Soon we are saturated in darkness. If the condition is not rectified it can become a permanent state of psychosis or psychic catatonia. At this point yoga can be a life raft, providing us the tools to rescue ourselves.

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From Nancy's first class, in 2010, shortly after my brain injury:

Hello to everyone!! It's great to be back, and it's especially nice to have so many friends in so many venues around the world, thanks in large measure to the Gurukula and Guru Nitya. With

such excellent connections, there is no compulsion for me to check out prematurely.

And thank you Nancy for supplying a positive side to shifting our attention—it's always good to have both the plus and minus poles in mind!

Now we're getting down to the nitty-gritty in this study. 'Misconception' seems like an awfully gentle word for the nightmarish dreams we habitually choose to dwell within. Not only have we substituted our own prejudiced version for anything resembling reality, but then we defend it with tooth and claw. More than defend, we offend, and go on the attack in many cases. If there was ever a place where our intelligence should be brought to bear to relieve our own and others' suffering, this is it.

The gurus recommend we bring in more light to our darkness, but we first have to realize that we are in a state of darkness. That darkness is precisely what we pretend is a great light, and we can cite scripture to prove it.

Sutra I:8 contains one of Nitya's best sentences in the whole book: "This natural ability of the defense mechanism to shift from one psychological set to another is not merely an incident of erroneous cognition but a wantonly-held bigoted position used to push away a threatening situation and aggressively support an indefensible stand." This is the negative side of shifting attention, by the way. Nitya almost in passing describes it as a defense mechanism, but defense mechanisms are heavy business. In this case it is a mental dust storm kicked up to defend our accustomed ignorance and divert the imagined blame onto our enemies. Lacking real enemies, we can just choose some different ethnic or political group.

If you can keep your cool in a hostile encounter, you can see how the other person throws up whatever dust comes to mind, it doesn't have to be logical or even relevant. Then you can see how you yourself have similar irrational urges to throw back anything at

all, on topic or not, to defeat the other. It's a lot like hurling rocks, sand, mud: you grab whatever is handy and fling. It doesn't matter what size or shape it is, as long as it's not too heavy to seize.

If you can get past the aggressive urge to counterattack and simply observe, though, you can learn an awful lot about yourself. Unlike the current fad of stretching in a warm room, this is what should be called Hot Yoga, yoga performed in the heat of battle. It's not easy and it may take a long time to take hold of yourself, but ultimately it's very rewarding. Like working out with weights, you get stronger with practice, and you don't develop strength by merely thinking about it, you've got to actually do it....

I won't say too much about this business, except that it is virtually impossible to self-correct for our psychological blindness. We desperately need the help and support of our friends, and if we're especially blessed, the support of a good teacher or therapist. Someone has to let us know us when we're wrong, because it's very hard for us to see it. Unfortunately, we often seek the approval of those with similar prejudices to our own, and then we don't learn anything. In fact, we can then build up power trips and join cliques that only reinforce our ignorance. So we need to be willing to be proved wrong by someone, preferably our counselor, but maybe even by our enemy. We have a tough time with that.

The flip side implies that we should also be brave to gently and carefully offer a helping hand to our friends, all the while knowing that we might set off a fierce reaction at the outset. Few have the courage to do this these days it seems, and it's sad when you are having a tough time and everyone you know flees for the exits. Evading problems is the norm, I'm afraid. I for one have resolved not to do that, if it appears that my help is at all welcome. It usually takes a while to overcome the projected animosity, but it's worth the hassle.

Most importantly, part of ourselves resists even our own help. When we try to bring our intelligence to bear, we find

ourselves getting mad at someone else, or thinking about something irrelevant. If we don't persist at getting back to the subject, pretty soon we have forgotten it and are going about our merry way. Too bad the problem has not been attended to, has not been "studied in its origin, formation, and maintenance," as the guru puts it. Like a bad actor, it will be back.