

2022 Patanjali Class 28

9/13/22

Sutra I:9 – Knowledge arising from words and devoid of objective reality is imaginary cognition (*vikalpa*).

We had a half-dozen people in class for the first time in ages, paired with another half dozen on TV. It felt hopeful, a throwback to the ancient world where electromagnetic fields regularly overlapped. Our efforts showed once again the value of mounting a communal examination of the text. The old Notes, in Part II, are quite good, but our discussion took us to another level entirely. It felt like we finally got near to what Patanjali was really trying to get across.

After the reading, a Sanskrit word came to Deb's mind, *sphota*, that refers to the power of words to explode with meaning in the listener's mind. There are words spoken from a depth of understanding, that convey truth to the listeners heart and mind, and there are the opposite kind, exploding destructively. Then there are the fizzles: Deb was taken by Nitya's sentence, "Like straw and waste paper that are abundantly used in packing cases to hold fragile things in position, people use a lot of meaningless word-garbage to ensure certain relationships and to accomplish deep interests of their own." She noted how most of the time we live with words that are like junk mail, to project our fantasies, and to cover up our real aims that we don't like to admit.

Bill made the point that the sutra is not only giving us a definition but also a warning about the false images that abound in our transactional reality. For him, it is also a call to yoga practice, to not only learn how we get manipulated, but how you need to stay conscious and present to not have your own illusory images take over.

The class took due note of the ocean of *vikalpa* exploding all over the planet, thanks to speed-of-light communication, taking

over the imaginations of vast minions of non-yogis. It's a good time to include another of the Splendid Sentences pending in this book:

The yogi makes every effort not to be a howler telling untruth or a simpleton believing in something because somebody said it or it is written somewhere. (243)

Deb suggested an alternative, beautifully described in Brian Doyle's essay *His Listening*. Doyle's father always listened attentively and carefully to everything, waited a moment, allowing time for processing and reflection, and then responded thoughtfully. That way of communicating lovingly and directly helps dissipate the illusory imagination.

Jan wondered if the last story in the commentary, about the Tibetan charlatans, made vikalpa out as positive, since the guru praises the disciple for his deceptions. Nitya is quite clear about it:

Such stories can be told about every religion of this world. Nothing is more handy for exploitation than colorful lies. So it is absolutely necessary that people should be spared from the evils of vikalpa.

Rating vikalpa inevitably elusive. Almost everything has an element of imagination in it, and some is useful and important and some is a way of manipulating others for one's own gain. That's why it's a paradoxical story, demonstrating falsehood in operation, along with its attractiveness. When you don't know, you can only believe. We discussed this at length, especially that last phrase, "people should be spared from the evils of vikalpa." That wasn't meant to imply all vikalpa is evil, only that the evil aspects are what we want to shy away from. Our classful of artists and lovers stood up for creative imagination, and its value in communicating

truths, and I mentioned that elsewhere Nitya honored fictional imagination as creative. The distinction hinges on what you use it for. Are you teaching and inspiring, for the common good, or instilling fear and confusion, for selfish reasons?

Karen was astonished how this ancient sutra was all about what we are living through today: every time we walk out of the house or turn on a radio or TV, we are bombarded by manipulative words. She is trying to understand why people are so ready to believe what they are hearing about conspiracies, and it makes her wonder if she is falling for things that may not be true either. It takes diligence to understand what's going on in our world right now. Deb agreed that it's a lesson for this era— how to evaluate what is said. Andy's for-instance was that the whole universe of advertising is *vikalpa*. He didn't need to mention propaganda.

I borrowed the opening lines from the old Class Notes, which are wholly reprinted in Part II:

Wow. Imaginary cognition seems like it covers just about everything. It would be easier to try and find an example of something that *wasn't* imaginary.

In the last year or two in particular, I have thought of every assertion I've made, "Is that really true? Not necessarily. I've just heard it from someone, and I'm repeating it as though it's a fact." Somehow, if I verbalize something it *seems* true just by me saying it. But when I stop and think about it, I can see it doesn't go all the way to any bedrock of truth, it's just a handy idea.

Andy recalled Narayana Guru asking Nataraja Guru to meditate on the room he was in as all that exists. Like the Charvakas, India's true materialists, you don't assume anything, even that your wife is in the other room. If you think she is, everything you know about her comes from your own memory banks. It's a most relevant

exercise for outing vikalpa. Deb added glumly that if you limit yourself to only what you know for sure, there isn't a lot to say.

To Charles, this sounds Calvinistic or Lutheran, sober and grim. He contrasted vikalpa, delusory imagination, with sankalpa, enlightening creative imagination. A grim moralist finds vikalpa in what another would call sankalpa, and vice versa. He finds imaginative truths to be a kind of counter to that, in a world of lies. He didn't want us to regard imagination as vicious and illusory, and that's right. Some is, some isn't. We are in charge of our own decision-making in these matters. That's why we need to sort it out. Jan worried that idealists over time could have been accused of having vikalpa, so it's important to not be overly judgmental because you might not understand the vision of someone else.

Deb could see that Charles's examples, borrowed from Nitya's commentary, are imaginations grounded in truth. What we are concerned with, and are living in now, is craziness that doesn't have any grounding.

It is important, though, to have enough reasoning power to recognize dangerous ground here. One of the best places for conspiracies to hide is behind an orgy of false claims of conspiracy. There are innumerable conspiracies, which means anything attempted by two or more people acting together for criminal purposes, but the internet is the perfect vehicle for propounding outlandish fictions. The wildest are far more lurid than the real, nuts and bolts conspiracies, like outlawing abortion or suppressing democracy. If you are bizarre enough, in an hour you can become like a god, worshipped by millions. The more outlandish the tale, the more attractive it is. It's a perfect trap.

Susan wondered where that puts Santa Claus? He's a fine example of a fictional character that can be either uplifting or degrading, depending on how the story is handled. Better, it's an example of how a lovely and spiritual idea gets perverted into a way to pressure children to follow orders and relinquish their self-

respect. As Susan experienced it: if you're not good you won't get presents. Or, like the song: better watch out, better not cry! L. Frank Baum's gentle and moving book, *The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus*, exemplifies the opposite.

As Deb mused, if we try to eliminate vikalpa, there won't be much left, and I requested examples—none were offered—of something with no imaginary content. We could only imagine! What we can easily accomplish is to beautify our communications and share loving kindness, while avoiding leading others into blind alleys. Bill added, we need to get educated and then take responsibility.

I'm someone who has an affinity for magical stories, and I believe children being blessed with that type of experience lays the groundwork for ecstatic adulthood. If we don't feel joy as children, will we ever discover it in our dotage? I doubt it. In support, I read out the conclusion of Brian Doyle's utterly joyous essay, *The Daoine Sidhe*. They are the "little people" of Ireland, and he wrote fictional notes from them to his daughter and hid them around the house and yard. She woke every morning in excitement, to go rushing around searching for them, and she wrote back to them. Eventually she outgrew the game, but, Doyle concludes:

Until the day I die I will remember the headlong eager way she ran, thrilled and anticipatory and delighted, with a warm secret in her face, because the people of peace were her friends, and wrote her name on the skins of this world, and left her little gifts and presents, and asked her questions about her people and her dreams, and the bushes and hedges and thickets and branches for her were alive with mystery and affection. And to those who would say I misled our daughter, I filled her head with airy nonsense, I soaked her in useless legend and fable and myth, I lied to her about what is present and absent in the world, I would answer, And how do you know what is possible

and impossible in this world of wonders beyond our ken? Are you really so sure there is not far more than you can see, living in the half-seen half-noticed places all around us? And how is it a bad thing to fill a child's heart with joy for any reason whatsoever, on any excuse whatsoever, for as long as howsoever possible, before the world builds fences and walls around her thrilled and fervid imagination, how is that a bad thing at all?

Karen decided that what is being said matters more than how factual it is: "If a lie is promoting peace and kindness, I'm all for it. If it's meant to hurt other people and promote hate, that's my boundary." I'd add, automatically equating imagination with lying is not justified. Spirituality isn't about getting our facts straight. Fact truth is one thing, experiential truth, another. As Karen said, the important part is whether we are communicating love or hate. How we characterize things is always fluid and transforming, depending on the circumstances. When religions and moral codes make fixed rules, they eliminate individual judgment that takes circumstances into account. In the same way, scientists hamper themselves by only allowing "what really exists" to be on the table. Are we always going to base our vision on what has so far been discovered? Can't we imagine there is more to be unearthed? Or, with Doyle, "Are you really so sure there is not far more than you can see?"

Paul concurred that science—the empirical world of measurement and its repeatable and observable attributes—tends to erode magic. The vertical side of life, where much magic resides, finds expressions through what's called fiction. Where the material world has closed-in borders, poetry and art bring in the spirit of imagination beyond the walls.

It's true: many scientists get hung up on facts, but truth isn't a compendium of facts. We will never have all the facts! What

affects the heart isn't how many pages are in the New Testament or how many stars are in the Milky Way or grains of sand on the beach. We all have different quantities of factual knowledge, and the possibilities are truly infinite. What Patanjali is suggesting is for us to learn how our imagination plays a role in our experience. If it's even possible, we might try to find areas where we aren't relying on imagination at all. The point is, we each are different in amounts and accuracy of knowledge, but that's not where we come together. Where do we agree? How do we get along? Amity is still something we have to *experience*, not simply talk about.

Patanjali bases our imaginary cognition on words. The reality is indicated by words, but they aren't the reality. Humans are prone to substituting a false argument for living experience. We dress up our sow's ears realities as silk purse imaginations. This sutra implicitly asks us, how do we invest our words with meaning and sense? And how do we connect them with what we truly are?

Andy didn't see that the sutra *condemns* imaginary cognition as not grounded in objective reality—it's just being pointed out that it exists. It's up to us what to do about it.

Great point, Andy. Could it be that the "Calvinist" attitude about *vikalpa* is something we bring with us to the discussion? Does Nitya lean that way? I don't think so. He's mainly describing the condition neutrally, but does say that we erect family units (not to mention personas) on a false foundation, because of it. Calvinism runs deep in our culture, and most materialists and atheists have it bad, while protesting way too much. Deb reiterated that those imaginings often speak to reality and truth. They are speaking to a greater truth. So the idea ranges between Calvin and Tim Leary: find your own region on the spectrum.

The crux is, when we say 'love' do we feel it, or is it just an idea? Do we "believe in" compassion, or are we compassionate? Do we like to think we are filled with truth, but our truth is made up of empty words? Paraphrasing Nataraja Guru, if you say "God"

and you don't fall to your knees in ecstasy, does it have any meaning? This is something to ponder....

Do we have to discard Santa Claus, or can we upgrade the imagery?

Earlier in the day I stumbled on a charming interview with cartoonist Lynda Barry, in the New York Times Magazine. It includes a perfect contribution to this class, that I typed up for Part III, bringing the topic fully up to date. It's a hit.

In preparing for the class, I reread the material and noticed even more Patanjali's stress on *words* as the basis for imaginary cognition. Without words, can we even indicate anything that isn't present? I'm not sure. Nitya defines vikalpa as "imaginary cognition, confused cognition, verbal delusion." Words only convey abstract reality, and have plenty of room for delusion. Yogis need to somehow attend to the reality behind the words. In our parlance, words are left hemisphere, direct experience is right hemisphere. They are two distinct faculties, and the closer they are brought together, the more cogent the thinking. Uniting them is another name for yoga.

Our closing meditation was therefore directed to spend five minutes without words. It's not easy! They continually pop up, but still, you can get the sense there's more to life than words.

Part II

Charles recalled a playground doggerel reminiscent of the absurd Yoga Vashistha story Nitya related:

One dark night in broad daylight
Two dead boys got up to fight

Back to back they faced each other
Drew their swords and shot each other

A deaf policeman hearing the noise
Went and arrested those two dead boys

* * *

For some reason I was not in this particular class, so I just wrote a summary:

2/17/9

Sutra I:9

Knowledge arising from words and devoid of objective reality is imaginary cognition (vikalpa).

Even more dissociated than unreal cognition is imaginary cognition. Where the former bears some relation, however inaccurate, to some aspect of reality or actuality, imaginary cognition does not. Unfortunately that type of “knowledge” covers a vast desert of consciousness, from advertising and political propaganda to religious imagery. Extricating ourselves from the thrall of wishful thinking is a primary task of the seeker of truth.

With vikalpa all contact between objective reality and our ideation is lost. This covers the extreme end of the spectrum of dissociation. Nitya’s comments remind us of how far afield we may drift once we become unmoored from reality. Our world abounds with examples, and hopefully the class discussed several of them. Since they didn’t pass any on, though, we shall have to think of our own. Doing so is far easier than it should be, because vikalpa abounds on all sides, not to mention within.

I think we can skirt around a negative interpretation of what Nitya says. "It is absolutely necessary that people should be spared from the evils of vikalpa," does not mean that all vikalpas are evil, but only that we should steer clear of those that are. Fairy tales

have a beautiful and inspirational aspect. I suppose religious exaggeration does too. The difference is that with one we accept its imaginary nature, while with the other we insist on its unquestionable veracity. Thus fairy tales are unlikely to lead us into delusion, but religious and political imagery can and frequently do. So as adults we need to be cognizant of the truth of any proposition in which we fervently believe before we go charging up the hill.

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In Nancy Y's first class, 5/15/10, around the time of the great Gulf of Mexico oil spill

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What we utter doesn't just fool us, it has a similar impact on those who hear it. Dr. Steven Heller, in his book *Monsters and Magical Sticks*, proposes that we are busily hypnotizing each other all the time, that that is the norm, not the exception. It really is a sticky, sticky web we weave, and as Nitya points out it is often used for selfish purposes that "adversely affect" the world around.

We are all very clever to speak with an emphasis that lends a veneer of authority to what we say. Inflection has a lot to do with it. Citing statistics is one of many techniques. Somehow a statement seems more likely if there is a scientific-sounding

number appended to it, no matter how ridiculous the whole idea might be. One of the responses I've invented for this is "92 percent of all statistics are made up on the spot." I pick the percentage out of thin air to demonstrate my point. I wonder if anyone's yet done a scientific experiment to determine the exact percentage....

Regardless, if I didn't take the risk of asserting something, I'd just have to keep quiet. There is little that I know for sure, but luckily there are a few things. Like the Charvakas, the true materialists of ancient India, would claim, even my wife sitting in the next room is a kind of assumption based on memory. I think this may be why I like psychology so much: Psychological truths don't depend as much on hearsay as sociological ones.

Speaking of the social realm, I have it on good authority (I think) that "experts" employed by BP assured the Federal regulatory agency in charge that an accident was "unlikely" and so the company was granted exemptions from oversight and safety requirements in their drilling program. That's not even false testimony, but it was persuasively misleading enough to open the door to what may well turn out to be the worst disaster ever unleashed by humankind to date: the Deepwater Horizon oil release into the Gulf of Mexico, well on its way to producing mass extinctions and permanent regional if not global devastation.

In my relationships with people I see more and more how we are all living in a dream woven out of our best guesses and imaginary planks of hopeful meaning. Most of the time it doesn't matter too much, not unless we unleash some poison into the physical or mental environment. Because of this, not too many people are interested in waking up; it's more about protecting their fragile dreamscape from erosion by contrary dreamscapes. Living in a dream is weird, and yet if you play along it's kind of like having a mysterious adventure in a legendary fictional world. It can be fun, in other words. It doesn't have to bum you out, because how could it be otherwise? It's the best that God can do:

fashioning something absolutely real out of nothing has got to be impossible. But it's not so hard to make it convincing enough for everyday use.

This realization can even be empowering to an extent, because we then realize we can craft ourselves to be all that we imagine we should be. We are not stuck in cement, but fluid. Nor do we have to acquiesce to other people's opinion that we are worthless or whatever, because they don't know any more about us than we do, and possibly less. I'm not suggesting we spend all our time building a dream persona for ourselves, but that if we want to be something we can make it happen. Hopefully it will be something reasonably solid, and not simply a false mask to fool other people with. We can change and evolve. Those of us who have worked at this have undoubtedly seen that over a lifetime you really can become more skillful and possibly even wiser. Transformative studies like this one of Patanjali's Yoga Shastra are a big help, too, because if you don't try, nothing in fact *will* happen.

I guess my point is that we shouldn't be undone by the fact that so much of our cognition is imaginary. Knowing it is should make us bold and brave to imagine a world of exceptional beauty, and to do our best to highlight that side of life. At the same time, we have to be very careful not to abuse our hypnotic abilities to disrupt the natural harmony in our favor. Any short-term gain obtained will be outweighed by long-term loss.

Part III

Lynda Barry was interviewed in NYT Magazine, 9/11/22. I'm taking it as the Absolute's contribution to the class, as you'll see. (This excerpt goes beyond fair use, so please buy the Times occasionally, to compensate—journalists are our last line of defense against vikalpa.) A cartoonist, Barry is now associate

professor of interdisciplinary creativity at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. The interviewer wondered about creativity in relation to the demands and uncertainties of life for young people these days. Barry agreed, then went on:

Here's the big difference I've seen over the last few years in the people I work with: They don't have a big relationship to their hands.... There's so much dexterity that they, by and large, do not have. [The interviewer asks if that's because of phones?] Yeah, and kids start keyboarding in kindergarten. Handwriting, that thing we think is no big deal, there's so much dexterity in it. Not just in the hand you're writing with, but the nondominant hand is always in action, moving the paper, paying attention. I mean, there's a reason people gesture while they talk. If somebody is trying to explain something complicated, and they have to sit on their hands, it's much harder for them to explain it.

Interviewer: But is something important being lost if students lack a certain kind of manual dexterity, or is that just a change in how they move through the world? Maybe it's not bad, just different.

Barry: No! It's really sad! The main thing about the phone is that you're no longer where you are. You're no longer in the room. You're no longer anywhere. The opportunities to have an interaction with the things around you are taken away. I just see the world as richer without the phone. I have a friend who's a writer. No matter what we're doing or whom he's around, he's on his phone. We were sitting out in a parking lot, and there was a guy who came out who was in this full orc costume. I thought, Let's see if my friend looks up. The guy passed right by him and—it was outside a hotel—tried to get through a

revolving door. There's all this *bump ba bump ba bump*, and if my friend would have looked up, he would have seen an orc go by. But he never looked up! Then later I told him, and he's like, "That didn't happen!" It totally *did* happen! But something that takes you out of your environment, you pay a high price. You miss the orc.

The next interchange is worthy of inclusion:

Interviewer: I know that you've done work on pairing Ph. D. students with kindergartners so that the children can help the graduate students with problem-solving. What does that look like in practice?

Barry: When I started teaching at the university, I couldn't understand why all the grad students were so miserable. I could pick out the grad students just by the way they walked in the room, you know? I was trying to figure out what the misery was. Then I thought, it is the laser focus on getting one particular thing done. That kind of focus doesn't set the conditions for insight or discovery. It's like somebody yelling: "Relax! Relax!" It's never going to work. But the kids could shift the students' perspectives in really helpful ways. I had my students copy what the kids were doing, or I got the kids to draw the answer to questions like, "What are microbes?" And my students had to be on the floor with them working together. They had to try to get into their mind-set. After you spend about 90 minutes with them, you find that something has loosened up. You get away from that laser-focused, worrisome way of being.