

2022 Patanjali Class – 1/11/22

Letters to an Aspiring Yogi
2 – Yoga Letter One

Just as the Letters we're starting with are located in the back of the book, Part II below has the introductory material for today's class, reprinted from the old class notes of 2008-11, and so would also be a good place to start your reading. (The present Part II thus has the old Parts II, III and IV within it, confusingly.) It includes Susan's excited musings, which she wants me to let you know are so 14-years-ago! She's learned so much since then. I'd say they're still quite pertinent, to all of us.

We read out the Letter and did the five exercises, this time chanting aum silently, as group chanting doesn't work so well on Zoom. Deb then opened the conversation, referring to the opening paragraph:

There is an implied benevolence in this universe. It comes to each living being in a million forms of grace. By cultivating a consciousness of such grace, you can enter into a reciprocal dialogue with the unknown from which the known is being presented from moment to moment. This dialogue is a path to growth, to understanding, and to the meaning of your ultimate fulfillment.

Deb said when we sit with the last exercise, (*Allow the beauty and serenity of your joyous inside to sit with you as your greatest friend, your truly beloved*), just being there in love in all its intensity and beauty, that is one form of the conversation that Nitya mentioned as constantly having a dialogue with the unknown. This is a practice, if you want to call it that, though it is unfolding spontaneously. A sense of grace is a great way to describe yoga.

Deb invited everyone to share their reactions, and Miki immediately chimed in: “I can’t do exercise 4 because I don’t love one person more than another—they are equally loved by me.” The fourth exercise is:

Think of whom you love most. Each time the mind moves away from your mental vision of the dear one, bring it back to the same subject by recalling a loveable incident.

Miki’s is a welcome attitude, and I apologized for Nitya because these letters were written to young people, who were all clamoring to him about their boyfriends or girlfriends, and whether or not they were THE ONE. So who to love most was at the forefront. Yoga for a mature person includes universal love.

I didn’t get a chance to say it, but my experience of the exercises was there was no break anywhere, no division between ideas, just a continuous flow, including regarding “loved ones.” Others found definite “walls” between categories.

Deb loved the first exercise, where we watched the flow of the mind and compared it to the flow of time. In a way, we are counting time by what we are thinking of. Time all but stops when you are fully engaged in something.

Paul found that in the last two exercises, with their focus on the beloved, his mind slowed down, and that was only because of his attachment to the object of his love. He was interested in how the mind relaxes when you focus on your beloved.

Bill’s favorite was the last, where Nitya reminds us that we can always go back to that place of joy. When the mind is really quiet you begin to feel that unknown, the beauty and serenity at the source of your being, and it’s really joyous. For Bill, the exercise directs him to come back to that place whenever he can.

Paul finds that when he gets a glimpse of the unknown, his mind wants to put it into a pigeonhole of what he knows. Bill

responded that for him, it only happens when the mind is quiet enough, then he can feel that place in himself. Throughout this course, Nitya brings the unknown back again and again: how you can't compartmentalize it, can't articulate a rational image or put a definitive label on it. You just have to feel it. When you do, it brings Bill a joy that carries into his day. Paul recalled Nitya directing us to allow the unknown to remain the unknown, because to know it is to convert it into something else.

For Nancy, if you experience the unknown in a quiet moment you became more aware of it, and then within the flow of time and your activities you can carry that dialogue with grace with you through your other activities. It can be there always, not just at one moment, and become a bigger part of your consciousness.

I thought we should turn to some of the other ideas of the Letter, and asked how much is universal, implied benevolence a concept you agree with, and how does it affect you? Is it anything you can have a continuous dialog with?

Steven appreciated the prompt, since that opening passage about implied benevolence irked him as pie in the sky thinking. One could just as easily talk about the implied malevolence of the universe. (This would be an excellent topic for another time, but Steven had other ideas to bring up.) As he went through the exercises, the first three were frustrating. He finds meditation difficult because he feels as though he's always wrestling with his mind. When he finally got to the last one, focusing on the beloved, his feelings came full circle. The loving part of his being started to surge, and it was potent enough to soften his mental barriers. It wasn't just rational. He realized implied benevolence can be found within. It's not a cosmological principle, doesn't mean a dharmapermeated universe, it's something he can connect with from within. A softening was happening, and he took it as a kind of dialog with grace. He envisioned a practice of focusing on positive

emotions within, bringing them to the fore and letting them saturate the mind, so the mind becomes quiet.

Deb wholeheartedly agreed: we think of a benevolent or malevolent world outside, but the world of grace is within us. Bill reminded us of the subtitle of the Letter: Obeisance to the supreme light that dwells in all hearts. The text also includes: “The world is so structured that happiness comes from your own core and it can be communicated and shared with whomever you choose.”

Miki asked Steven why he felt tension in the first exercises, since love can be in everything we do. She waxed rhapsodic: By thinking of love now and then, we can expand that to every activity. Why the fragmenting? Why not *being* love? Why not living love in everything?

Steven had found that by concentrating, centering in Nitya’s terminology, it triggered something within him that became real. He admitted that lately he’s being too harsh on himself. Nitya’s list of negativities — he nailed it. Steven is overwhelmed with those negativities. They amount to the implied malevolence he mentioned earlier, and also are internal as much as external. Nitya mentions this right up front:

Just as there is an implied benevolence present everywhere, there is also a challenging and obstructing counter force on which you stumble almost every day. This comes in the form of confusion, doubt, lethargy, frustration, a sense of being deceived or rejected, blocks, self-pity, or the need to wait in anxiety and impatience. A gentle, constant and faithful dialogue with grace has the miraculous power to wear away or dispel the dark forebodings of negativity.

I think we all recognize these obstructions, and can empathize with the pain and immobility they cause. We will be working to subvert

their influence in a variety of ways, throughout the course. Nitya sets out the parameters right here in the first Letter:

Now the science of union. By union we mean the union of the discerning and judging faculty of the mind with the universal law that governs the physical world and the realms of consciousness. Such a union brings clarity of vision, certitude of meaning, decisiveness of action, and stabilization of emotions. When you progressively achieve it you will experience great inner calm, serenity, a natural warmth of life that is ever glowing in your mind, and an easy flow of compassion from you to all around you.

I've been working on the Highlights of Nitya's third volume of commentary on the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and this asked me to bring it to class:

You cannot disentangle yourself from your karma without knowing [its] binding and unbinding tendencies.... Books like the Bhagavad Gita assure us that all karmas leading to bondage can be burnt away with the flames of knowledge (*vidya*). Thus, meditating on [prana as sacrifice] is a process by which all conditionings which came into this body/mind matrix are to be deconditioned by careful scrutiny. Everything colored is to be decolored. That which has become complicated is to be reduced to its simple basis. The Gita recommends dexterity in action as a means to be established in yoga. (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Vol III. 134)

I also was presented a short, relevant article by AI, on "mood follows action." We don't wait for the right attitude, we do what we think is best, and our improved mood is the result. The author, Brad Stulberg, even calls "doing" a practice. In that utterly general

sense, yoga is certainly a practice. It's the open-endedness that counts, however. Our inner drive is required, not a specific set of steps. Check it out:

https://getpocket.com/explore/item/show-up-mood-follows-action?utm_source=pocket-newtab .

Steven mentioned one more thing. Initially in the exercises, he made an effort to focus his mind, and that got him caught, but then the process where the beloved welled up, that was not willed. It was spontaneous. It happened because he stepped aside, in a sense.

I also got excellent rushes when I did that 'beloved' exercise, reminding me it doesn't have to be complicated by ideology. When you are feeling miserable, intentionally pulling yourself back to something you are familiar with, simple stability, or a sense of loving kindness, will help. Bill made a really good point, that these first exercises are simple in a way, but they really show us how hard it is to center ourselves, how much your mind can keep you from grace, and that is part of what yoga is about. We can't even chant aum without our thoughts intruding, and that's the kind of thing we'll be improving as we go along.

Andy, who along with Bill has just finished an online Yoga Shastra class with Nancy Y, and so is eager to go through it again immediately, told us that Nitya is preparing us to hear sutra four, where Patanjali says your mind is unstable, and these are the ways it operates. The point is to show us what the mind is doing, which is a very useful, actual bit of information, these impulses are all manifesting in relation to each other. You can take them individually as being rather sinister, like not being able to pay attention, yet seen from another angle, it's actually a positive thing that the mind is volatile, that it's going somewhere else. Sure, some qualities can become rigid, like obsessive focus, and Yoga is about how to harmonize them.

This is a good time to peek ahead at the first 5 sutras:

- 1: Now, the instruction for contemplative union in harmony.
(yoga)
- 2: Yoga is the restraint of mental modifications.
- 3: Then the seer remains in its own essential nature.
- 4: At other times, the identification is with the modifications.
- 5: The modifications are fivefold, some labored (painful) and others spontaneous (not painful). (klishta and akliṣṭa)

So even Patanjali admits we are sometimes in yoga and sometimes not, and that's okay. Sometimes we're meditating and sometimes we're patting the dog. He does not say you'll go to hell if you have a modulation, that you'll be fallen out of yoga and sent packing. This is going to be fun, and loving, and a little bit painful when we encounter our tedious foibles.

Pratibha has just joined us onscreen, after receiving the class notes for years. Her main focus is breathing practices, and she wondered if any of us followed special practices. Most of us are familiar with the popular versions floating around, and have experienced their efficacy.

We talked about breathing, a practice Pratibha advocates, and then moved to transmitting peace through touch, in massage especially. Karen is an adept masseuse who instills deep calm in her clients. She was fortunate to have a mother who meditated and taught her about it, including breathing properly, starting at age 11. Andy asked her if she took on the negative energy of the people she massaged, since she is removing from them.

Karen said that at first she would pick up too much tension from her clients, but she learned quite early that she didn't have to

do that. She passes their negativity right on to the universe, partly as she's working, and after she's done she always washes her hands, washing all the negativity down the drain, and it's gone. She doesn't carry anyone else's negativity around.

To Andy, it seems almost magical, that it's got to be some kind of prana or chi activation. Karen talked about how she loves her clients, and when she's working she gets connected to them right away, and then she's with that person energetically for an hour and a half. They share on different levels: she is sending that person love the whole time, trying to bring healing energy in from the universe and from the earth, into that person's body.

Several of us can attest how successful she is at this. Deb said for her it works the opposite way: when she tries to help agitated people calm down, she gets agitated too.

Karen told us it's something you have to practice every day. She's found it's easy with clients, and not at all easy with family members.

Pratibha wondered about Nitya's yoga and breath practices. While he did translate, with Deb's help, a rare book on Pranayama, he always warned that it was powerful and dangerous to try out without the guidance of a guru. His uncle was a tantric yogi with some siddhis, and it had made him very cautious. Siddhis, of course, are discountenanced by *advaitans*, non-dualists. His philosophy does not rely on anything other than direct experience, accomplished through careful scrutiny of mental processes and the consequent regulation of vital forces.

Steven recalled how Nitya guided morning Hatha yoga in the first Portland Gurukula, but also that he had been severely injured doing it, and no longer practiced it at all. Nitya thought it was good for us youngsters to do something like it, but not to take it to extremes.

I assured the group that we were not going to delve into any niche practices, but they would be mentioned as we went along.

The way Nitya teaches will open our hearts and minds through the delight of learning how to unbind the psyche. Steven assured us that Nitya's take on Yoga was unique and special, and impeccably communicated.

So, we're off!

Part II

From the old class notes, 2008:

Yoga isn't about eradicating negativity, it's about disaffiliating from the context of suffering, which is both positive and negative together. This class will definitely train the psyche to identify with its steady, blissful core, which simultaneously makes it easier to address the ups and downs of life intelligently and harmoniously. Detachment from suffering is a natural corollary to identification with the Absolute, that Nitya calls in this first letter "the supreme light that dwells in all hearts."

* * *

Well, here we are again! Just when I think I'm approaching the end of my life's work, more intriguing projects drop onto the pile. I imagined that the Yoga Letters would be an interim study, without much to be said about them beyond their own cogency, but last night's class was brimful of excellent sharing, which hopefully I can reconstruct in part in resurrecting the class notes. In addition, over last weekend I volunteered to complete the index to the forthcoming book in which these will appear, Nitya's commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The immensity of that undertaking is just beginning to sink in.... Luckily, I finished proofing Nataraja Guru's Integrated Science of the Absolute on Monday. Funny in a way, how little I anticipated all this back in 1975, when I offered to

do any tasks Nitya would like some help with. Anyway, it's a great joy to still be helping disseminate the wisdom of that top notch teacher!

The Yoga Letters are a perfect example of pulling on the udder of the wisdom cow, the most fitting task of the disciple. I believe it was an Australian woman, just some casual acquaintance, somewhere in the mid-1970s, who wrote to ask Nitya for an introduction to yoga. He responded with a series of fifteen letters, one a week, that are spectacular, simple and practical, and seem after the fact to be an essential preparatory course. You of the "old guard" probably have xeroxes of this in your Nitya drawer, but Nancy Yeilding has edited these nicely. Since the volume may not appear in print until awhile after we finish this study, I can send an electronic version to anyone who wishes one. You will still want to buy the book, I'm sure. (Remember, that's the main way people can help support the Gurukula—we're not ready to go fully virtual just yet!)

The first letter could be a complete study all its own. Nitya addresses the Unknown as that which is full of grace. While enjoyed outside, grace springs from our own core, and there is a reciprocity between our inner and outer worlds. This familiar idea is put very beautifully here. It is followed by a series of simple exercises that anyone can easily practice. Taking time to do them in a group once again demonstrated the power of community endeavor.

The first is simply to watch the flow of the mind and equate it with the flow of time, or better yet pure duration, taking note of the irreversibility of both. Then we chanted aum together and watched to see when stray thoughts broke our concentration. Chanting in a group is especially cosmic in any case. Three further exercises played with directing our attention, progressing from randomness

to loveability to joy and serenity. In all cases we were looking for the transition from one item of interest to another.

We imagine we are in charge of the flux of consciousness, and to a small degree we are. But it quickly became clear that most of what percolates into our awareness has a vastness that dwarfs our conscious participation. The relation between our volition and the “grace” of what transpires is worthy of very close examination.

Having these specific suggestions for how to watch the mind is very helpful to keep us alert. When we hear the cliché “watch the mind” we can rapidly become dull and mesmerized by the process. We want to get up and do something interesting instead, like watch TV. Just kidding! But having a directive to follow makes it much easier to stay awake, and also to bring the attention back when it wanders. For a stretch it’s actually kinda fun.

* * *

The added parts are wonderful:

Part II

Happily, Susan responded even before the notes hit the streets, so part two is out early. I forward her note with the assurance that she has spoken for all of us:

Thanks for class last night. It was really thought provoking. Jan, Moni, and I talked about it all the way home and then I thought about it all through the night. One thing that occurred to me is that for many years I have thought that my mental parade of stuff is not such a good thing. Maybe that is what I was trying to say at the beginning of class about not being able to think of the “beauty and serenity” of my mind. Rather, I think of it as a tumultuous, stormy sea. I am standing on a tiny boat, feeling tossed around by huge,

threatening waves, trying to stay dry and safe. But some of the big waves (worries and obsessions) reach onto the deck of my boat and pull me under and I am being pulled down and down, drowning, wishing for breath. Eventually I am released somehow and I swim back to my boat, weary and miserable. Sometimes the choppy seas don't bother me but I mostly think of them in a negative way and not something to be enjoyed. When I am focused on something -- reading, playing piano, gardening, talking to a friend -- I can forget about the sea, though it continues to intrude occasionally in unwelcome ways. How interesting to think of befriending the raging waves. I like this idea! Maybe someday I'll jump off the boat and learn to swim or float on my back. Peace, Susan

It is so true that treating that stormy sea as an ocean of grace and serenity is easier said than done! The trick is that when something (especially the Absolute or God) is objectified—made an object of consciousness—it is no longer what we wish to reconnect with. And suffering is by no means a figment of our imagination, as often glibly supposed by those who are having a temporary and accidental reprieve from chaos. All the suffering is real, but it is also not the core. The study we are embarking upon (pun intended) will help redirect our awareness to that which is unwashed by the waves. Sorry to report, the waves don't go away, they just are on a different plane from where we are at home. The Gita (II, 23 and 24) says:

Weapons do not cut This, fire does not burn This, and water does not wet This; wind does not dry This:

Indeed it is uncleavable; It is non-inflammable; It is unwettable and non-dryable also—everlasting, all-pervading, stable, immobile; It is eternal.

The kernel of bliss in the things we enjoy—reading, gardening and all that Susan mentioned—can grow to infuse our whole life. Nitya has taught this expertly, and I believe those who come along on this journey will find that the commonplace “siege mentality” we all are trained to have will give way to an openness and optimism that overcomes the barricades and lets in the sunlight.

Part III

Baird reblessed us with the following, which seems eminently appropriate.

Susan’s response reminded me of one of my favorites:

The Avowal by Denise Levertov

As swimmers dare
to lie face to the sky
and water bears them,
as hawks rest upon air
and air sustains them,
so would I learn to attain
freefall, and float
into Creator Spirit’s deep embrace,
knowing no effort earns
that all-surrounding grace.

Part IV

Sometimes you just HAVE to have a third addendum! Right on! Susan writes, under the heading Wow:

Chapter One has been simmering in my mind for the last few days and the effect has been wonderful. This morning I woke up too early (as usual) and was trying to go back to sleep. Instead of just

leaving it to chance, which usually doesn't work, I decided to try a variation of the first exercise from Chapter One. I said to myself that I would just notice what came to my mind. This was like an invitation to just let it all be and not analyze or get caught up in anything. In a way, it felt as though I was allowing myself to just be amused. Things started coming up and I just looked at them. Some tried to catch hold of me until I noticed this and just let them slide away because I remembered that I was just going to let things come up, but not do anything about them. After a few times of letting go of things, there were some really beautiful things that surfaced -- lovely wooded settings dappled in sunlight, creative solutions to little things I'd been considering yesterday, and even some smooth as glass seas (because I did think about being on the boat again and looking out on the sea). I thought about what Scott talked about the other day when he said his friend had taught a class that was nothing but questions and how the class had to get used to this. It occurs to me that this exercise of letting things just slide by (which I now realize is not an exercise but a way of being with one's mind, of befriending one's mind), is just like allowing questions and not trying to find answers. This is such a revelation to me! It's so exciting that I never did get back to sleep because I couldn't wait to write to you about it. It's funny that I've tried to meditate for years and now I realize that my concept of meditation was all contorted by my way of looking at my thoughts. I would sit quietly and something would come up. I would see it as something to get rid of -- very much like something that pops up at a shooting gallery at a fair. I would look at it (as I had been instructed) and then let it slide away, but really I was tossing it away, trying to get rid of it (trying to shoot it out of existence). No wonder I've had so much trouble! It is amazing to think of the things that come up in my mind as a wonder, even when they are negative. Instead of seeing the negative things as menacing and the whole parade of

visions as a disease, I can for the first time in many years (45 at least) see them as a gift.

Thank you, thank you!
Susan

And after:

Hi again. I wanted to add that I just realized that I did one other thing this morning when those grasping thoughts would come up. If they wouldn't let go and I couldn't let them go, I would do that other exercise where you move your mind around. I would gently push off to something completely different, thinking about a tree or an apple and a whole new world would open up from there. This is different from how I used to try to think positive or try to think of something else. Effortless and very freeing.