

2022 Patanjali Class 36

11/22/22

Sutra I:16 – That is the highest *vairagya*: through awareness of the Self, there is freedom from the least desire for the three qualities of nature.

Vairagya is detachment. In respect of the topic, I proposed that we could listen to the reading of the commentaries in a new way. Ordinarily, we look closely at how the instruction applies to us in specific terms. Yet we also have the opportunity to listen (or read) without reference to ourselves at all. Save making connections for later. Attentive listening can take us beyond self-definition, as a kind of respite from it, and can be as restorative as a short vacation.

For those who cling to the sattva guna as the spiritual ideal, the sutra offers definitive evidence that awareness of the self precludes the least desire for it. The Gita agrees, as early as II.45:

The Vedas treat of matters related to the three gunas; you should be free from these three modalities, Arjuna, free from (relative) pairs of opposites, established ever in pure being, without alternately acquiring and enjoying, (unitively) Self-possessed.

II.59 has the same message as sutra 16:

Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.

Deb opened the discussion by recalling Nitya's maxim that right in the heart of being a paradox resides, and for her this highlights the effortless effort we must make. She was enthralled by the naturalistic way it's expressed here:

It is not by resorting to artificial means that this rare feat is accomplished, but by merging yourself closer and closer to the inner texture of nature's ingenuity. When you can forget the carrying out of your private and vested interests and be in full attunement or rather at-one-ment with the higher intentions of nature, you automatically come to a state of oneness or aloneness (kaivalya). (77)

Aloneness is a contraction of all-oneness, and is the opposite of the dualistic aloneness of feeling separate. When there is oneness, there is no second, no other, and therefore no possibility of feeling displaced or out of joint. Deb noted that here Nitya is showing us that oneness doesn't come from adopting any outside structure, but is a matter of inner unfoldment. Enlightenment is not the replication of a pattern, but an inner flowering.

Nitya's commentary is a scathing indictment of subservient attitudes to religious and social norms, arguing instead for openness and dynamism. I compared those programs to a way that dancing was once taught, with patterns of feet taped to the floor: you had to put your soles on them in sequence, and eventually your body would learn to follow the steps by itself. You learned a constrained form, with much more wrong than right. But why not just shake your booty however it wants? Why not let go, get wild?

Because of this constrained approach, sin and evil arrive as counterparts to the joy of living, and Nitya lambastes it: "Such outright stupidity is enshrined in the most adorable scriptures of all religions." Not to mention all social codes. We talked about how pervasive those attitudes are, with almost all cultures being saturated in good versus evil. I was a bit shocked that Nitya later uses these very terms in his comments, and found this about it in my 2009 notes:

Even Nitya's vision is sometimes colored by this ubiquitous propaganda, which we can see in his sentence, "Having a proper perspective on the horizontal principles of the phenomenal world and the vertical unfoldment of the spirit helps a person to pursue the path of righteousness with all earnestness and to eschew the path of evil with determination." As Deb pointed out, the real dichotomy is between knowledge and ignorance, which are only metaphorically symbolized by the path of righteousness and the path of evil. Because of the lifelong brainwashing we have been exposed to, these latter terms are very hazardous and should be avoided. Nitya was right to have exposed such thinking as venal at the beginning of his comments, but because of its ubiquity it can creep up on us without our realizing it.

Jan liked Nitya's intricate description of how the body works, and how the light of knowledge should be the guiding force for it. As we learn, we integrate knowledge, helping us to maintain our inner balance. The more we're attuned to oneness, the less we feel threatened, so we don't release all those defensive hormones.

Deb grew up going to church, and believes there was no evil or sin in it (it was a liberal denomination), and she doesn't sweat it. Apparently, some lucky people manage to escape the wages of sin. She did admit we bring memory traces into the present that impart threatened feelings, and react to those, so they overwrite our experience.

That's the whole idea of ignorance here: the past disguises itself as the present, and it knows exactly how to fool us into buying the deception. That's why substantial effort is required to minimize its influence.

I didn't have church growing up, yet religious attitudes were inculcated in me, with the best intent, at home and at school. The dualism of good versus evil is a constant theme of social life, and

for those of us who lost our divine innocence, we have to make efforts toward an alternative. As Paul said, the illusion of separateness is a very natural response for humans, and learning to discriminate is our primary work, early on. To change over from that is like swimming upstream, and it takes an act of faith to persist in it.

Deb brought in the paradox, maintaining we're already there, so no swimming is necessary. Well, we are and we aren't.

Anita shared a "message from the universe" she found in her inbox recently. It includes some astrological advice she found similar to Nitya's commentary:

#### Trust Your Intuition

Hurdles appearing in your physical reality are not indicating that you're not going to receive or get to experience what you want. This is [the] universe clearing off your path and asking you to just surrender to the universal forces working in your favour. Let go of the overthinking or over-analysing of things. The mind or the ego exaggerates everything and creates scenarios that aren't necessarily true because the ego is always governed by fear. But the spirit relaxes because it's aligned with the divine order. Don't question your intuition. All your confusion is arising due to your resistance to follow your inner knowing and second guessing the divine guidance. Just let go and let flow. When you just drop everything and surrender your ego to your higher self, you align your life.

Anita has been accused by some of her friends of over-thinking things, which she finds hurtful and baffling. She wonders why her life has been so painful lately, and what it means about her. Is she a bad person? Have hidden faults come home to roost? What is the meaning of all the suffering?

I assured Anita that, while we will never know the whole context of anything, she should take care not to blame herself for her lamentable physical condition. All of us are getting older a year at a time, and suffering is part of it. Nitya even cites Buddha's First Noble Truth, here: "life is miserable on five counts: birth is painful, ignorance is painful, disease is painful, separation from those whom one loves is painful, and death is painful." It isn't that if we follow the right path we won't suffer—we will all suffer. The modern world has a lot of pain relief available, but it's soul pain too, and it always sucks. Often enough, people with dualistic attitudes condemn others for causing their own problems, even if it's plainly undeserved. In a culture based on sin, we are all viewed as sinners. One thing you can do is make sure you don't play into it. Don't accuse yourself of causing your suffering. It's just suffering. Don't add guilt and shame to the misery, either: it's already miserable enough.

As far as over-thinking is concerned, I suggested that most people are content with the familiar simple stories of their belief systems, so a person wanting to *know* is bound to make them uncomfortable. Really, the shortcoming is more on their side. Religion builds reassuring boxes and seals people in them. Anita wants to break out of her box and discover what else the universe holds for her. She's *been* out, so she knows it isn't a fantasy, or a sin. Yet it remains a mystery, and she struggles to communicate her beliefs.

Deb suggested that with people like that, it's better to listen to them and not press your case. If you have tolerance for their limitations, sometimes you can find a way to get through to them. Or not. Assuring Anita that the Mystery is a gift, and that believing cuts us off from it, she shared a favorite quote from Nataraja Guru:

Such meditation has the final result, not of solving mysteries, but rather of making the sense of the mysterious live in the heart of man forever. (Word of the Guru, 95.)

While locating the quote's source today, I unearthed more relevant and spectacular ones in my compilation of Nataraja Guru's miscellaneous quotes. Like this one:

Enthusiasm for the Absolute to prevail is the only medicine for states of depression. The human mind is so constituted that its instructive dispositions need a strong numerator interest: a passion for Truth, Justice or Beauty. When one supplies this element all blues and troubles vanish. (L&B, 234)

Our troubles may not quite “vanish,” but if we focus on the ailments, they will become more prominent, while if we focus on higher values, we can tune out at least a measure of the misery. And, unless you're doing a specific thought-restraining meditation, having interesting things to do makes for a happier, less worried brain/body synchrony.

Focusing on the mystery of life is endlessly absorbing. It's not that we need to solve all life's riddles and then we'll be okay. No one ever has. Deb shared another quote about this:

We are bathing in mystery and confusion. That will always be our destiny. The universe will always be much richer than our ability to understand it. Carl Sagan

Paul attributes a favorite quote of his to Nitya, roughly: Knowing is not-knowing, and not knowing is knowing. That means, knowing is a fixed state. Religious people know everything. Not knowing is mysterious, open-ended, magical. Knowing takes away the magic.

Charles cited Robert Frost: “We sit in a circle and suppose, while the secret sits in the middle and knows.” He added there isn’t any purpose to suffering, it just is. The Christian belief is that God is making us suffer, punishing us for our own good. By contrast, Nitya writes: “All forms of Yoga arise from a conviction that nobody is lost, totally and forever. There is hope of reaching the highest perfection that is possible for each to attain.”

Jan added that when we’re suffering, a community of support is one of the best things, and she includes the Gurukula gathering as one of them. Paul agreed that our class and the related books have helped him get through his tough times.

Andy summed it all up for us: Detachment is embracing the mystery.

Anita tends to worry that some of us don’t like the term God, so I offer these two quotes in closing. This is more Nataraja Guru, from Bennington’s Journal:

The element of chance in life is called God. The element of chance is still operating in life, so God works even today in the modern world. (BJ)

Don’t make rules without allowing chance to have its free play. Don’t make rules so rigid as to exclude God from it. (BJ)

Detachment and chance are more closely related than I at first imagined. Taking chances means relying on the Unknown. The Mystery. Detachment also takes recourse in the Unknown. Krishna, as the Absolute, identifies with Chance or Luck, in the Gita, X.36:

I am the chance-risk of (irresponsible) gamblers; I am the brilliance of the brilliant people; I am victory; I am decisiveness; I am the goodness of those established in the real.

Nataraja Guru added “irresponsible,” but I wonder, now. He must have meant not responsible, in the way of a rigidly responsible citizen, rather than careless, thoughtless or unwise. What do you think?

## Part II

My response in Nancy Y’s first class (I’m rather proud of this one):

12/19/10

Reading the beautiful commentary once again, a couple of things struck me. The first was the line “Hope in life should not be the false hope of a fool.” Hope is something we usually don’t examine very closely; we take for granted that it is a benign or at least harmless attitude.

Hopes can either be helpful stimuli to intelligent action, or they can undermine necessary action by transferring it to a hypothetical outside agency. Once the connection between our thoughts and our actions is divided up in that way, possibilities recede and our energies are spent trying to bolster false hopes instead of taking the needed steps in confidence. The resulting impotence leads to despair.

When hope is desperate, it becomes something else entirely, more like a panic attack. That state of mind is the flip side of fear, and so the more it is exaggerated, the more profound is the commensurate upset that is sure to follow. Nitya leaves it unsaid that such false hopes can be very destructive.

Other people’s hopes are easily seen to be either naïve or just downright hopeless, but we may irrationally cherish our own. The “mature” attitude then becomes the rejection of hopefulness, which can be just as damaging to the psyche as excessive hope. It leads us



to close ourselves off from what our inner guru is trying to tell us, and instead follow the light of raw reasoning based on partial knowledge, and tinged with negativity.

The yogic attitude, as always, is to balance hope and despair and discover a dynamic, progressive mindset that emerges from their synthesis.

Nitya enunciates this idea by saying, “Having a proper perspective on the horizontal principles of the phenomenal world and the vertical unfoldment of the spirit helps a person to pursue the path of righteousness with all earnestness and to eschew the path of evil with determination. Such a seeker is not in any state of frenzy. Earnestness keeps the enthusiasm unflagging and consistently steady.”

I know I feel confident deep down that events in my life—while they may not always seem promising—are generally leading me to greener pastures. This baseline sensibility could probably be called hopefulness, but I like to think it’s based on something real, something I have verified. There is an overall pattern of unfoldment in my life that seems to be taking place despite all my efforts to crash into walls. I suppose this is what Nancy is referring to when she mentions “the ever-radiating illumination of your own pure consciousness, your Self.” We definitely do have an inner guidance system, which luckily is much more intelligent than we are.

While the first exercise asks us to weed out unhelpful aspects of irrationality, the sutra itself calls us to embrace irrationality as an important part of our mentality. Rationality and irrationality are another dialectic pair to be harmonized. Nitya puts this in the context of glandular secretions, which influence our thinking perhaps even more than our ideation stimulates their output: “The reciprocal relationship between the nervous system and intra-glandular reactions includes a very peculiar device through which the rational is guided, governed, and controlled by the irrational.

The irrational is not, however, chaotic. It responds to the slightest suggestion from your conscious mind about the ultimate purpose or goal to which your life is attuned.”

It’s fairly easy, once the chaos of youth has settled out and the hormones are less powerful, to see how we have been led by chemical stimulations even as we seemed to be in rational control. I’m more looking at it in reverse these days: something in us guides our life harmoniously, and the rational, conscious part of us may imagine it is in charge, but it is mainly going along for the ride. I think of it as being like riding a horse while lost in a mountain wilderness. By steering the horse where we think we should be going we may become even more lost, but if we give the horse its head—allow it to lead—it will take us back home on its own. It is exhilarating to take the horse out into new territory, knowing we can be guided home again by our inner “horse sense.”

When you develop confidence that your inner horse knows its way back to the barn, your hope is no longer the false hope of a fool, but the brimming optimism to participate in a meaningful course through your own life.

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4/14/9

Sutra I:16

That is the highest vairagya [detachment]: through awareness of the Self, there is freedom from the least desire for the three qualities of nature.

This time through Patanjali, I’m seeing the correspondences with the Bhagavad Gita. This sutra is the same as the oft-quoted II, 59: “Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted.” Relish is all about our attachment

to the gunas, the three qualities of nature. The One Beyond being sighted is identical with awareness of the Self. When we attune with the Absolute, superficial matters lose their attractiveness, because the Absolute is blissful through and through, and not just a promise of future bliss.

Nitya spends a lot of time denigrating the trashy beliefs that many people grasp to try and cobble together a feeling of worthwhileness. We are taught that we are incapable of accomplishing anything of value without the intercession of divine power. We are lost souls, in need of a savior and salvation, and we need to follow certain rules to ensure that salvation.

The alternative is what yoga proclaims: that we are not lost, not losable, in fact. “Your choices should be based on right knowledge, which you can find manifesting in your own innermost soul... [recognizing] that the brightest light you can have to guide a harmonious life that blossoms with higher values is already your heritage.” The Self, the One Beyond, is our own guiding light within. Only it is capable of being dynamic, while external directives are static and therefore poorly coordinated with actual situations.

We are trained to remain simpletons, dependent on authority figures for direction. Yoga seeks to counteract this lethal form of bondage by liberating individuals to become self-empowered. It takes determination and a willingness to think for yourself in the face of daunting disincentives. We are taught that we will go to hell if we think for ourselves, and gangs of thugs will deliver that hell state right to our faces if we openly dare to do it.

Deb mentioned how when she had her first baby, she had these instinctual ideas about how to care for her, but there was this little imaginary figure sitting on her shoulder that kept saying, “No, you can’t do that. No, that’s not right. Do it *this* way.” Very often our own innate sense of truth finds itself derailed by the superego,

the epitome of social opinion that sits metaphorically on our shoulder and issues orders.

Jan led us into a discussion of just how self-knowledge brings light to life. She has faced many terrible problems with the medical community, trying to have her son's illness diagnosed and treated correctly. In such a trial, we begin with pure ignorance, which we are trying to overcome with knowledge. The vertical aspects of the problem can be illuminated by attaining equipoise in consciousness. But the horizontal aspects are only resolved by the kind of linear struggle we are more familiar with: adding together bits and pieces of information until a critical mass is reached that throws light on the problem and allows it to be solved. The illness won't go away if Jan just grins and bears it, but her unhappiness can be managed with some kind of mental or spiritual exercise. The distinction between horizontal and vertical factors needs to be clearly kept in mind.

Many people imagine that horizontal problems can be dealt with spiritually, and they delude themselves to their cost. As Nitya says, "Hope in life should not be the false hope of a fool." There is a related belief that if someone is ill they have brought it on themselves. At the very least this reveals a lack of understanding of germ theory, substituting it with superstition. Then instead of offering succor, we ostracize sick people along with other "evil" types who have succumbed to diabolical influences.

Superstition goes very deep in our supposedly scientific society. The fairy tales of religion are drilled into us from early in life, and our social viewpoint is a veiled echo of those fairy tales. We literally endure a lifetime of saturation in official lies. The core belief in an implacable enemy "out there" trying to "get us" stems from the Christian fantasy of a satanic force dedicated to poisoning the souls of the Elect. We are the good and They are the evil ones. Round and round spins the wheel of karma, trying to disguise such false projections as real truths, and many innocents are crushed in

the process. The Pentagon alone spent over a billion dollars last year (2008) on propaganda, not counting the purchasing of politicians (euphemistically called lobbying), to ensure that war hysteria doesn't go away.

Even Nitya's vision is sometimes colored by this ubiquitous propaganda, which we can see in his sentence, "Having a proper perspective on the horizontal principles of the phenomenal world and the vertical unfoldment of the spirit helps a person to pursue the path of righteousness with all earnestness and to eschew the path of evil with determination." As Deb pointed out, the real dichotomy is between knowledge and ignorance, which are only metaphorically symbolized by the path of righteousness and the path of evil. Because of the lifelong brainwashing we have been exposed to, these latter terms are very hazardous and should be avoided. Nitya was right to have exposed such thinking as venal at the beginning of his comments, but because of its ubiquity it can creep up on us without our realizing it.

So there is a mass of disinformation enforcing willful ignorance both within and without us. The yogi strives to break through this sedimentary crust to achieve enlightened knowledge. It takes bravery and intensity. We must be willing to question our assumptions. Jan's quest has been to not only break through medical conformity and stasis, but to also overcome her own mental indoctrination to accept what those "authorities" were falsely alleging. We should all take heart from her instructive example.

Unitive action outwardly looks similar to duplicitous action. As Anita said, why do we have to have a selfish reason for doing what we do, like getting into heaven? Why can't we simply act because it's the beautiful thing to do? Our actions should make life beautiful and enjoyable, and that is a good enough motivation for any yogi. Only children need the added incentive of black and white choices between good and evil, heaven and hell.

Susan related a recent opportunity to put yoga, or “reason in action,” into practice. Briefly, an old friend pulled her aside one day and accused her of betraying their friendship. She was furious with Susan. Like Arjuna, or most of us for that matter, Susan’s initial impulse was to recoil in horror and prepare to flee. She first figured she was guilty as charged, and she began to give herself a lecture about how horrible a person she was. Then she thought, wait a minute, I don’t think I betrayed anyone. She mastered her reaction and stood her ground. First she asked if their friendship could be salvaged. Her friend said she didn’t think so. Then Susan asked her to explain what was the matter. All the time she was struggling to calm herself down. As she became calmer, she began to be able to respond in helpful ways and to explain clearly her side of the story, not to mention to see her friend’s point of view dispassionately. Her friend has some personality quirks that were exaggerating the problem, and Susan didn’t feel she needed to take responsibility for those. But she did take cognizance of them and worked with and around them. After a difficult half hour, Susan was able to restore peace and her friend’s trust.

This is exactly how to put yoga into daily practice. An uninstructed person might have started a war by hurling back defensive accusations, or else retreated with hurt feelings. The friendship might well have been broken. Susan had what she described as a rare opportunity to make peace by uniting their two sides of the story. Right in the midst of “ordinary” life, such a rare opportunity had unexpectedly appeared. Those who become skilled in yoga will find their talents at resolving problematic situations called upon more and more, and in the bargain they can turn what might be a miserable event into a happy one.

It has been very gratifying to hear several stories recently of how the Gurukula studies have made a real positive impact on people’s lives. This is a long, slow, unglamorous, sometimes tedious process, but the hard work pays off eventually. The

successes open the floodgates of mutual joy for all to experience. Salvaging a friendship is deeply satisfying, and no scorecard can measure its value. We are proving ourselves to no one but ourselves, and that is the best thing we can do.