

2022 Patanjali Class 37

11/29/22

Sutra I:17 – Cognitive absorption is accompanied by the appearance of perceptual confrontation, presentation of an idea, experience of value, or identification with the center of one’s consciousness.

The detachment of sutra 16 brings about cognitive absorption, *samprajnatah*, here. Parsing sutra 17, “the appearance of perceptual confrontation,” is what we more commonly call the objective aspect: the positive pole of the horizontal axis. “Presentation of an idea,” is the subjective, negative pole, where we define and name what is perceived. “Value” refers to the vertical essence of an experience, which is the core of our self-consciousness or ego, here labeled *asmita*.

Cognitive absorption reminded Andy of the way artists get absorbed in making a picture. It starts by being absorbed in a perception, and becomes an enduring state for a while. He felt we all experience it to some degree, and conceded that non-artistic absorption in ordinary tasks was essentially the same.

While you are in a state of concentration, you don’t question it, you’re just in it, whatever it might be. Patanjali is asking us to notice and honor the state, which can absorption in our actions as well as our thoughts.

Andy affirmed this isn’t complicated: you can get absorbed in pure beauty, a set of ideas, one idea to the exclusion of everything else, or feelings of pleasure, pain or neutrality, which are the ananda, value, aspect. There are many different ways you can appreciate a value. Sometimes it knocks you out!

The class was absorbed in quiet stillness all evening, and we might have stopped there. Annoyingly, I brought up another feature of Nitya’s commentary, how our mind manipulates the world to enable our evolution and the development of our deeper

aspirations. We don't realize how much of our surroundings is being screened out, so that we can concentrate on what matters most to us. Nitya claimed our self actually *shapes* the world around us to promote our programs, and sometimes we can notice that, too. I invited those present to recall a seemingly miraculous happenstance that coincided with their life path, looking back at their history to pick out an unnoticed decision that turned out to have a lifelong impact. I admitted it's an abstract idea, but once you get absorbed in it, it makes you grateful for all of that inner work that's being done on your behalf—by you.

Charles's version happens when he wakes at 3 or 4 AM. He has insomnia, but it's not unpleasant, as he's not on a strict schedule, and he can take naps whenever he likes. He'll be up for a couple of hours, and then go back to sleep around 6:00. Those predawn hours are his best time of the day, where his mind is fresh, and his thoughts come almost as a lecture. He sees himself painting outside the outlines of his concepts, not thinking, just curled up under blankets and watching the lecture going on, with its changing topics. If he comes fully awake, it dissipates, but while it lasts it's fun, and he doesn't care if it's true or not. Sometimes he makes notations or drawings from it. It's all loosely connected, part of a larger pattern that has often been going on for several days. He said, "It's like a podcast, but I don't choose it, it's running in my mind from somewhere, using familiar materials, but it's new and that makes it interesting."

Cognitive absorption for Paul means we see what we're looking for, but mainly what we are looking for is survival. We have a survival instinct that hungers for food or acceptance, and we look outward to find fulfillment of those things. He believes there's no way around that: perception is the looking out for the satisfaction of our various hungers. Instead of serving the small self, our perceptions need to be redirected to the larger self, where those distinctions aren't there anymore. When you embrace the

larger self, the unity, your perception is more inclusive, and synchronicity is seen more often.

According to Vedanta and neuroscience, we see what we're *directed to see* by our inner organ. We only *think* we're looking for it when we find it. There's a presumption that it's worthwhile to know this inversion is taking place, but I believe it's uncommon. Fortunately, it works whether we are aware of it or not, most of the time. More about the science side is in Part II.

I suggested that Patanjali's Yoga Shastra is more about fostering our creative and developmental self. Meeting basic needs isn't all that interesting, once they're met. In our era, we get what we need with relative ease. The question is are we evolving or developing, or are we static beings, content with what we already know? We have an opportunity to learn new means of communication and self-awareness. Nitya peddles this idea on the very first page of his Gita commentary:

When a person does not know what their innate tendencies are, what their natural talents are, and what their basic drive is, they are likely to miss the mark in life. For such a person the rediscovery of their true Self brings a joy they have never experienced before. (1)

We have been assiduously trained by our culture to block out our true self as unimportant or selfish or sinful. We can choose to detach ourselves from that harmful training and become absorbed in a more joyous and kindly version of who we are.

As my example, I recounted Nitya's graduation exercise from his first Guru, Dr. Mees, from the Love and Blessings chapter *Delivered into the Arms of Providence*, where he surrendered the security of an ashram post and became a free agent, open to whatever came along. No one in our class wants to abandon their present life as completely as he did, but it isn't a necessity: each of

us is already infinitely unique, and we do not need to demonstrate this through any specific behaviors.

Another important idea we didn't discuss is based on this part of the commentary:

In modern psychology, for the purpose of scientific brevity, only observable and measurable physiologic changes are given primacy in the study of sensory perception and consequent physical and mental reactions to environmental demands. This limitation has considerably affected the validity of the results. The sense organs are like the doors of perception and they are not to be considered as the real percipient in a living organism. (79)

Nitya contrasts this with where reality lies with the Vedantin:

The purpose and meaning of one's life is felt most strongly within the bounds of this consciousness, which is kept ever alive, vigilant, scheming, planning, and operative for all the general and specific purposes for which the individual lives. The consciousness of that area presides over a treasure chest of memory bits that have been accumulated through several life forms in the passage of the genes or the persona from body to body.

Most psychological experiments are done with college undergraduates about superficial registrations, via surveys, which severely limits their depth. We don't need to constrain ourselves to that level of insight. Eudora Welty expresses this beautifully, in Brian Doyle's one-page essay in *One Long River of Song*, which ends:

And my memory is my dearest treasure. She thinks of the young

Interviewer who was here this morning from the college newspaper.
The girl who asked, what was it like to have led such a sheltered life?
And Miss Welty smiles and shivers her ice one last time and says aloud
To the mockingbirds and owls and reporters and readers and scholars
A sheltered life can be a daring life, as a daring life comes from within,
And steps inside and closes the door and, humming, heads to bed.

Whether we know it or not, we live by the beneficence of the universe. Within the many constraints of the world, you can be free in your heart. It's easy. Kinda. From the old notes, in Part II, I read out a version of Nitya's cup metaphor:

In the matter of grace, I always remember Nitya's response to a fellow who was upset that he wasn't getting any. He told him, you are crying and holding out your cup to catch the grace, but you're holding it upside down. Grace is pouring down all the time. All you have to do is turn your cup right side up.

So don't make the mistake of imagining that someone or something outside is supposed to turn the cup over for you. That's your role, and it isn't too much to ask. Similarly, don't imagine that there is no cup, and then wonder why it isn't filled. Both these are failures of the buddhi, the intellect, and Patanjali and Nitya are offering us correction for it.

Both Susan and Linda gave examples of how detaching from their boundaries played out on the physical plane, Susan with Gyrotonics movements, and Linda with yoga. Both courses asked them to perform what they thought were impossible movements, but they were able to let go of their self-imagined limits and do them successfully. Afterwards, they felt a lasting release of their blockages.

Anita was inspired by their examples of physiologically discovering new ways of moving, to talk about it in mental terms.

That very morning she was having a bad day. She had woken in the night from a nightmare, fearful of her future, and reviewing all the things she was not happy with. When she got herself out of bed, some part of her said, aren't you tired of all that? Stop thinking about yourself and wondering what can you do about this or that. Instead of worrying that your friends are tired of helping you, why don't you reach out to them and remind them that you think about them and care about their crises, too? Anita sent out messages to all of them, and their warm responses felt almost miraculous. Her mood changed immediately, and she realized it's so much about a positive mental shift. She felt really good afterwards, and resolved to reach out more to her friends.

In keeping with Anita's resolution, (along with mine of 1991, when I converted from criticism to caregiving, in a single decision), I read out a poem, *Butter*, by Tony Hoagland. It's in his newest book, *Turn Up the Ocean*, so I didn't type it up, but Susan found an audio version:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00AeYmo7AqY>

We benefit from the openness and consideration that we allow ourselves, as do those we have interactions with.

Susan told us of her recent epiphany, and was kind enough to write up a more complete version for the notes:

I was walking with a dear old friend a few weeks ago and for some reason she was in a mood to be critical of me. I had been talking about some way in which I was trying to get better health wise. Instead of her usual curiosity and compassion, she lit into me. She asked why I couldn't just be happy and why I was always having to try to figure out what was wrong. I was very surprised and hurt because she went on for quite awhile. In addition to being hurt, I was also thinking that if this friend thought I was so pathetic, that must mean that everyone thought I was pathetic. When she tried to apologize to me later, I was so

reluctant to forgive her and let go. I couldn't quite figure out what was going on but I felt a huge block about it. Then suddenly as I was sitting thinking about the whole incident I saw (almost like it was resting in my open hands) my Wounded Pride. It was like an entity, blocking me. As soon as I realized that it was there and that it had me in its grip, I was able to release it entirely. Then I could also see how the stories I was telling myself were just stories that were keeping me from my true self. I realized that even if people did indeed think I was pathetic, that did not mean that I had to take that on or have it affect me. I called my friend right away and told her that I appreciated her apology and that I had had this great epiphany. It was such a relief. In the days that have passed since, it has been interesting to see other stories come up that can be let go and I feel distinctly lighter. This does not of course mean that I have reached nirvana or constant equipoise. I am still struggling with stories and various challenges. But what a gift it was to allow enough space to see the dynamics that can cause such a clouding of reality and the light.

Here's Nitya, on "reaching nirvana":

Realization is not a static event; it is a continuous process. In all states and stages of life, the higher Self is to be realized in the lower self, and the lower self is to be seen as an expression of the higher Self. (Gita, 9)

Paul really related to Susan's story, admitting he's amazed at the length of time he hangs on to bad feelings. He remembers that emotions are metabolized out of body after 90 seconds, so since he suffers for much longer than that, he knows he's holding on to his wounds. Why does he believe those mean things about himself?

He realizes his wounds are already sensitive, so it only takes a little touch to set them off again. But still....

Andy commented that wounding is also a form of absorption, which is good to consider, since we've mostly been talking about positive absorptions. The truly egregious ones are negative, since we tend to cling to them for some odd reason.

Paul continued, "Physically, when I put my hand on a hot burner, I instantly take my hand off. If I step on a nail, I pull my foot off it right now. But when I'm hurt emotionally, it's like I step on a nail and keep it there. Even wriggle it around. It's so great if we can recognize that in ourselves, realizing I don't have to do this. We don't need a hell, but we create our own sometimes."

This is working in the vertical. Our experiential history is vertical, so repairing things in the horizontal present, like stepping off the nail, doesn't have the same value resonance. Until resolved, problems that are historically related to the topic will keep coming up.

This week's "mystery contribution" to the class comes from the end of *Down in My Heart*, Oregon Poet-Laureate William Stafford's memoir of his time in a prison camp for Conscientious Objectors (CO's) during WWII. One of the most outspoken and dedicated CO's in with him was "George," who summed up for Stafford what he had noticed about society, concluding with a metaphor of students in a library. Detachment comes in at the end:

The girl at the desk in the library is waiting. She tosses out the cards without looking up. Her suit is all right angles, and her walk is on a marked line. Someone is watching her.

No one is watching you. You are the person beside the aisle. People who are waving are waving at another person, someone behind you. On the street no one calls your name; but in spite of not talking to anyone you are learning everyone's language—more than ever before. You are going to a big school, with halls

that go everywhere. It costs everything you have to attend it. Its books are all over the world. (87)

This is reminiscent of a line in Nitya's Gita:

A botanist examining a flower to derive detailed information about its calyx, petals, ovary, and mode of pollination is different from a lover, moved by its beauty, offering it as a precious token of love to the beloved. The kind of knowledge recommended here is not the punditry of a scholar but the intimations of immortality that grow between an aspirant and God. (448)

Our closing meditation was a few moments of abandoning our self-defining labels and stories, to sit free and unfettered.

Coincidentally, one of my Gita lessons was on the very topic, and I paraphrased Ash's response to an exercise, which he has agreed I may repost in full:

Do you carry around a label of any kind that describes you? Explore what it would mean if you didn't have to think of yourself as belonging to a specific type, caste, religion, or any other identifying group.

I'm trying to shed the labels. I used to go around with a lot of labels plastered on, many of them self imposed: Addict, artist, damaged, broken, evil, self-destructive, rebel, genius, beautiful, British, the self-involved list goes on and on. Some things fade, some turn on you, some fall away or morph into something else (ex. I'm SPIRITUAL, I'm a MYSTIC). I'd like to strip away all labels altogether - all ideas of what I THINK I AM other than the Absolute fundamental principle. It's too much effort to maintain a persona while simultaneously trying to walk the spiritual path of

dropping the labels. I think that dropping all these labels, dropping attachment to them, to ego, to a persona would mean total freedom. If I am not boxed in by what I think I am, what I am told I am, then I am truly limitless with no boundary of form, in the prison of my psyche or otherwise. I can have no attachment to form, constructed or material. I'd like that very much. There's a looseness and playfulness in my conceptual visualization of this goal that is very appealing.

Part II

Ye Olde Class Notes, of 4/20/09

A chaotic class, simmered in a warm spring evening and seasoned with black bottom cupcakes, looking for all the world like a herding of cats, wound up reaffirming some basic truths of Vedanta.

The verse itself is fairly straightforward, presenting Patanjali's terminology for the fourfold function of consciousness and implying a preliminary practice. Whereas the ordinary person cycles through perception, access of matching memories, identification of value, and ego assessment, the yogi can examine each of these functions in isolation, becoming "cognitively absorbed" in them for a period of time. As we well know, pondering aspects of mind makes them emerge out of the shadows and come into our conscious awareness, mitigating their impact as unconscious motivators.

Moreover, we all know people who have become stuck on one aspect, who would benefit from having an overall scheme. Here an intelligent understanding can break us free from stasis with minimal effort. First we should examine each of the four aspects of mind one at a time, to try and discern possible hangups.

Younger people tend to be more obsessed with perceptual confrontation, since their experience is more likely to be new. They are driven to question everything to try to ascertain its importance to them. A few decide to question everything as a permanent technique, and this prevents them from developing a dharma, a satisfying means of expression. Doubting becomes an end in itself. It is possible to become obsessed with doubt.

Older people can become snagged in the memory recall, or what's called here the presentation of an idea. Memories overwhelm consciousness to the point where there is almost no new experience possible. A tiny amount of input touches off a storm of associations, obliterating the self beneath them. Those who like to believe that they are their memories often abet this process.

Intellectuals prefer to live in the third aspect of mind, the analysis of the amalgam of sensory input and linked memory tags. Experience becomes immediately abstracted and "pinned to a board" for study. Fresh input is blocked so that thoughts can be mulled over.

Finally, egotists care most about how everything affects them. They want to register their opinion on everything, and may have a hard time accepting alternative notions to their own.

I have provided only the barest sketch here, because the class didn't discuss it. Hopefully these matters will be addressed at home, in our spare time. Obviously, though, all four aspects of the mental process are essential, and when our mind is functioning well there is a sense of well-being and easy expertise. But as Adam and others pointed out, identifying with our mind is a limiting condition. In our yoga study we intend to drop our identifications to try to sit in the emptiness of our true unconditioned nature. The first technique Patanjali offers for our repetitive practice is to examine each aspect in isolation, to get a little distance on them.

Early samadhis are absorption in aspects of our world; later on we become increasingly absorbed in unmanifest aspects.

Jan talked about how she liked to meditate on specific items of beauty, like a candle flame or bright colors, even though her yoga teacher insisted she meditate on nothingness. The Gita assures us that meditating on either somethingness or nothingness takes us to the same place, but the first is easier. The gist is that we practice yoga to stabilize our awareness, and however that comes about is just fine. A yoga teacher is not necessarily a guru, and their prescriptions may not be appropriate to anyone's particular predilections. It's too bad that confusion can be sown with the best of intentions. But even with the advice of a wise guru, each of us has to decide for ourselves where our path lies.

The Yoga Sutras are a "how to" manual for bringing about union with the Absolute. There is nothing slipshod or accidental about them. Like taming a wild horse, one must first rope the mind, speak to it soothingly, stroke it and feed it, make friends with it before climbing aboard for a ride. As such it is not like Christianity that defers all possible benefits to an unpredictable grace, or Buddhism that insists on the supremacy of nothingness. It is eminently practical and level-headed. The only indisputable certainty is that we exist, and all else is built upon that firm foundation. As was mentioned, we meditate on doubt not to exalt it but to tame it and allow it its proper dimension. We meditate on the ego not to crush it but to harmonize it in the proper balance of a healthy, happy and intrepid individual.

In the matter of grace, I always remember Nitya's response to a fellow who was upset that he wasn't getting any. He told him, you are crying and holding out your cup to catch the grace, but you're holding it upside down. Grace is pouring down all the time. All you have to do is turn your cup right side up.

So don't make the mistake of imagining that someone or something outside is supposed to turn the cup over for you. That's

your role, and it isn't too much to ask. Similarly, don't imagine that there is no cup, and then wonder why it isn't filled. Both these are failures of the buddhi, the intellect, and Patanjali and Nitya are offering us correction for it.

Anita brought us another example of yoga in action. She recently paid in advance for a promised service, but then was riddled with doubts about it. She really felt bad. Instead of prolonging her anxiety, she decided to get to the bottom of why she felt the way she did. First she thought it was about the money, but she realized she didn't care about that too much. Money was a means to an end, not an end in itself. Then she thought it might be about social disapproval, especially from her adult children, but she was old enough to not worry about that either. So what was it? As she dug deeper, she began to realize that it was about trust. She had trusted someone, and now was worried that her trust might be betrayed. She realized that past violations of trust were coloring her feelings about the present instance, and she strove to separate the one from the other. She wound up having a fine meditation on trust issues, and in the bargain relieved her anxiety about the specific trigger in the present.

While excellent in every respect, this shows the importance of making a well-directed effort. If Anita had just waited for grace or tried to convince herself that her feelings weren't real, they would have continued to bother her for her whole life, cropping up when similar circumstances called them forth. Unconscious motivators don't go away of their own accord, they have to be rooted out, brought into the light. Because she made an examination, Anita has taken the edge off this particular vestige of her past. The feelings will undoubtedly come up again, but she will recognize them sooner and they will have less sting each time.

We don't have to identify with our accumulated garbage, we can compost it or burn it up. But just because we no longer think of ourselves as garbage doesn't mean we don't exist. In essence we

are the Absolute. We can throw everything away but that core truth. It's wonderful that some who have dedicated themselves to this learning process are coming to see that that is an enlightening, uplifting, freeing way of life, not an erasure. Initially there are always fears that discarding the rubbish is discarding ourselves, but with time the confidence grows that our central reality is undiscardable. What remains after the cleanup process is the supreme beauty of existence for its own sake.

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From my response to Nancy Y's class, or 2010:

I've been thinking a lot lately about what the ancients described as vitarka, apparently. Let me recap what Nitya says about it:

When a person has the intense inner need for a certain environmental factor, that need gives priority to the reception of certain stimuli that are sure to be found in the vicinity where the organism experiences urgency. The spatial and temporal summation of stimuli that would normally be expected in a given circumstance are overridden by an intense inner need. Thus the perceptual confrontation that an individual experiences is not always a static witnessing but involves many topological factors of high emotional or intuitive significance. In any case, out of the millions of stimuli that come to the organs of perception, only those which contribute to the gestaltation of one particular value configuration are given attention at a time. This is what is called vitarka.

The primary consideration in this paragraph seems to be our brain's selectivity as to what it gives its attention to, but a

secondary factor is that before our vasanas surface they are busy arranging our mental orientation to promote them. This has lately been observed in fMRI, and especially CT scans of infants. It seems we have a very wise guidance system in our oldest and deepest brain parts, where our thoughts arise. They go through many modifications passing through different parts of the brain, and eventually appear in consciousness, where we have been trained to believe that we have just “thought them up” using only our conscious mind. Talk about the tail wagging the dog!

In the infant studies, scientists have observed a period around two months of age where the deep brain and the cortex (conscious mind) battle for dominance, or as I would put it, they make a complicated exchange of dominance, with some back and forth practice. In the exchange, the archetypal mind bequeaths control of the organism to consciousness, and wishes it luck in negotiating the hazards of earthly life. There are several false starts, followed by regrouping. The “guru” of the deep brain must sense that the conscious mind will lose touch with it as it wades into the field of experience. Even so, impulses keep surging up from the unconscious depths, and our life is “in tune” to the extent that we heed and foster the best of them, while discarding all the unhelpful ones.

I’m even tempted to read Patanjali’s “cessation of modulation” as meaning we should stop manipulating these deep urges and take them at their purest face value. It isn’t about stopping everything, just not tampering with perfection.

Both the exercises fit in with this idea, in that they train us to focus on one thing and so stop the conscious manipulation of the pure flow that surges up as a fountain within. I find it very liberating to place my trust in an instinctual level of my own being, now that I’ve learned that it is a benign thing, grounded in the Absolute, and not, as is often thought in the West especially, an inherently evil thing, willfully separated from and opposed to God.

The belief that people are inherently evil is a self-fulfilling prophecy, and the yogis are right to throw it away, substituting the chant “I am the Absolute,” and so on. That’s a much better prophecy for us to fulfill.