

2022 Patanjali Class 38

12/13/22

Sutra I:18 – The cessation of cognition preceded by repetitive practice is the other (*asamprajnata samadhi*) in which the residue of registered and preserved impressions remains.

Last night's class was the final gathering of 2022 here, ending the hundredth year of the Narayana Gurukula, founded by Nataraja Guru in 1923. It was the fifty-first year of the Portland branch, meaning we've been at it just over half its lifetime. The anniversary will be celebrated throughout 2023, as somewhere in there is the actual instant of the centennial. The Guru was thinking about it for a long time, so it more or less *came about*. I doubt if there's an accurate date, so we can just reckon by round numbers. Guru Prasad has agreed to write a Gurukula history, which has not been attended to before, to be included in the souvenir books to be published next year, one in Malayalam and one in English. Several of us will make contributions, and the Portland Gurukula will mount a modest event in the year ahead, likely in conjunction with Bainbridge's Gurupuja in early September.

Present in person for our fin de siècle, were Karen, Moni, Jan and Susan; with Anita, Paul, Charles, Andy and Linda Zooming. Bill and Nancy were ill.

Nitya characterizes Patanjali's "cessation of cognition... with residue" in the sutra as meaning absorption into vanishing points. The camaraderie and warmth of togetherness in our class, focused on a single topic, provided a vivid example of a non-static absorption in a community of hearts, with the residue being the many dear ones peripherally connected to our hub. We definitely don't want to leave them out of our samadhi!

After her initial words of invitation, Deb read a lovely Letter to Thich Nhất Hanh, by friend-on-the-periphery Joe Lamb, which

appeared in the latest issue of Nostos (Number 8, 2022). The kernel, for us, was:

At one [lecture] you made fun of encounter groups where people beat a pillow with a tennis racket while screaming at their mothers. Pillow beating was once considered a therapeutic act, a release of unresolved feelings. You said the beater wasn't really in touch with their mother, that they weren't even really in touch with the pillow.

As someone who, back in the 70s, was in one of those groups, I want to thank you. Thank you for the reminder that microaggressions build up in the unconscious where they can radiate out into the world. More importantly, I want to thank you for the many reminders that micro kindnesses also build up and radiate out into the world, that micro acts of compassion can heal and nourish people we may never meet.

The letter inspired Anita to tell us about some kindly strangers, just passersby, who helped her out recently. She was moved that in the bustle of the holidays they took the time to make sure her needs were met, out of pure kindness. It warmed her heart, and helped her balance the negative side of needing assistance. Deb emphasized that these are exactly the kinds of micro kindnesses that have reverberations that we hardly realize. They accumulate sweetly in the same way that micro aggressions build up negatively.

I just read about some psychological studies about the same kind of minimal interactions with strangers, and how they measurably increase people's sense of wellbeing. If you are brave enough to reach out, it lifts both of your moods: it turns out other people are happy to exchange a few words with you. It's a mood-lifting article, and you can read it [here](#).

Kurt Vonnegut understood this well. There's the story where he tells his wife he's going out to buy an envelope:

“Oh, she says, well, you're not a poor man. You know, why don't you go online and buy a hundred envelopes and put them in the closet?” And so I pretend not to hear her. And go out to get an envelope because I'm going to have a hell of a good time in the process of buying one envelope. I meet a lot of people. And see some great looking babies. And a fire engine goes by. And I give them the thumbs up. And I'll ask a woman what kind of dog that is. And, and I don't know. The moral of the story is – we're here on Earth to fart around. And, of course, the computers will do us out of that. And what the computer people don't realize, or they don't care, is we're dancing animals. You know, we love to move around. And it's like we're not supposed to dance at all anymore.” (From *A Man Without a Country*)

I thought we should cover the four types of focus that Nitya talks about in his commentary:

Where a cognition disappears into a state of oblivion, the entire stream of consciousness can also vanish. Perception, recall of conception, and affectivity are all transcended and the yogi remains in a state of absorption. For such absorption there can be four leads: absorption into the vanishing point of a perceptual encounter, absorption into the vanishing point of a conceptual or intuitive insight, absorption into the vanishing point of the cessation of pleasure or affectivity, and finally, absorption into the vanishing point of the conscious self merging into the cosmic or universal self.

Part II starts off with my specific examples for each of these four limbs, which I'm sure you immediately recognized as the horizontal and vertical axes of Nataraja Guru's scheme of correlation. In addition to taking one at a time, there can be a sequence to how they are developed: first we have a perception, then match it with a conception. Soon it's internalized and ultimately, universalized. At each step we can focus and achieve an absorbed state of mind, while the whole continues to creatively evolve. In each case we are reducing all the extraneous factors we normally bring into the picture.

I find it interesting that Nitya defines the vertical negative pole here as "the cessation of pleasure or affectivity." Affectivity includes both pain and pleasure, and is inevitably a horizontal attraction. The premise is that when horizontal interests approach the vanishing point, what remains is the vertical essence. Then, as you ripen, your conscious self expands and merges into universal self, where consciousness enlarges to complete acceptance.

Deb talked about the first of these stages of contemplation as easy to remember, things that all of us have done so many times. Being absorbed in our perceptions is one of the ways to begin to still the constant jitteriness that we feel with our ideas and perceptions. We're not forcing anything; it's a way of following the vanishing of perception into quiet non-specification. If we're sitting on a beach watching the waves, mesmerized, our whole series of cognition is focused on that one perception, cognition, or emotion, and doesn't move from a steady state.

Anita told us about sitting by her window and communing with a shrub outside, covered with snow (the shrub, not Anita). As she grew more absorbed in contemplating it, she felt a growing kinship. Like her, the solitary bush is enduring the winter, just as she is entering the winter of her life. She hoped its roots were warm enough. We hope hers are too.

With this being the holiday season, Jan is rekindling another form of absorption: losing herself in connecting with people she loves. How beautiful it is, she said, that we can find meaning and a greater sense of self through love. She eagerly anticipates her son and daughter being with her during the season.

The last time Deb saw Nitya was at the Ooty Gurukula in 1997. One evening she went out in the back field to sit, and became deeply absorbed. She has no idea how long she was there. She was not thinking of anything, just being in a non-specific state. Eventually she came back inside. The dinner had ended long before. Nitya didn't say a word to her, but just had Jyothi bring her some food. Then she went to bed, still in a beautiful state of non-modulation. Hers was a vertical contemplation, with no objective or subjective participation.

Linda wondered what to call the state of flow she gets in with her clay sculpting? I suggested naming itself stands outside the flow, so not to worry about it. Your art expresses you. Creativity is a vertical quality that is expressed through the horizontal. Art is the elaboration of the evolutionary flow from seed state to full consciousness. And all life is art.

Andy remembers when he was staying in a youth hostel in Amsterdam, while traveling with Nitya, he went every day to the Rijksmuseum, which has a fine collection of Rembrandts. One time he went around a corner and was seized by the image of The Jewish Bride, a portrait of a betrothal showing a man and a woman standing together; one of the most inward images he has ever seen. It's his experience of *asamprajnata samadhi*, a contemplation in that instance of being in love. Rembrandt made it easy for him to identify with that state. Andy was pushed into silence, immediately enveloped by the value he had depicted so incredibly well. He gazed at the painting for several minutes, not thinking of anything else, just looking at the image and resonating with it. Afterwards, Andy tried to tell people about his experience, and they didn't get

what he was trying to communicate. He realizes that when you see something like that, it's not reproducible, there's some inexplicable magic chemistry that got you into that samadhi state.

We used a Nitya quote from another source for our closing meditation. Sannyasa is renunciation, and here it is moving toward the vanishing point of motivations:

Sannyasa is the giving up of the personal agency which can make the center of consciousness change from self to ego. When that tendency is given up, you find, instead of a personal agency, a cosmic order functioning, of which you are an integral part. When your program of life is identical with the general system to which it belongs, then you are a sannyasin. Sannyasa does not mean you should have a beard or a shaven head or a colored cloth or anything. Those are all superficial things.

Ultimately, what is renounced here? You renounce only your personal motivations and your personal sense of agency. You make yourself part of the whole. This is how the entire process is worked out. (*Therapy and Realization in the Bhagavad Gita*)

Part II

My response for Nancy Y's class, 2/19/11, starts with good examples of the four states of absorption, elicited by an exercise of Nancy's:

The gist of this sutra is such a crucial idea! Normally, life bumps us along from one thing to the next, and our whole time is taken up with coping with numerous mundane requirements. If nothing else, yoga, meditation and the rest mean carving out some time free of the clutches of necessity. Nitya further encourages us to dive deeply into that freedom and see where it leads, into what's

called absorption. I'll use the second exercise for my jumping off point.

The first person who taught me anything about meditation, my roommate at Stanford University, instructed me to fix my gaze on a candle flame, in other words, I was aiming for "absorption into the vanishing point of a perceptual encounter." Then for most of my life I have listened to or read Nitya's discourses on wisdom. Focused intently on such things, the mind goes into a neutral state where the words register in unfamiliar ways. Nitya likened it to seeds being planted in a garden, and I suppose too much interpretive analysis would be like pulling up the seeds prematurely to see how they were developing. It's best to let them lie. This would fall under "absorption into the vanishing point of a conceptual or intuitive insight."

Then I was frequently instructed by Nitya to resist the impulse to indulge in trivial pleasures, and the equanimity that sometimes came after holding fast to non-indulgence could be described as "absorption into the vanishing point of the cessation of pleasure or affectivity." I have to admit to not being very good at this, but over a long trajectory it came about to some extent, maybe as a natural consequence of aging and having the internal chemical factory shut down, or at least cut back on production.

For the fourth option, "absorption into the vanishing point of the conscious self merging into the cosmic or universal self," this is not too common, but there have been moments. I try not to call them anything, as that would instantaneously convert the experience into category one or two above. But they are very special memories nonetheless.

In my life I have two recurring "vanishing points." One happens occasionally when I'm playing music, and the complexity gets ahead of my ability to grasp it in ordinary terms, which kind of seems to include all four types of absorption at once. At those moments I play very well. The other is when I'm writing.

Sometimes I struggle and manipulate and try to coax words out of their strongbox and force them into a sensible arrangement, but once in awhile if I'm in just the right state they come pouring out of their own accord. This is probably mainly category two absorption, relating to intuitive insights (which by the way I would place as category three, emerging from the unconscious, but that wouldn't fit with the instruction here, at least). Anyway, it isn't anything particularly mystical or even unusual, but it is gratifying to think that there is a treasury of ideas buried out of sight in my mind, and the writing process gives them a chance to come to the surface. Those days the writing arrives with its own coherency, and all I do as a conscious participant is touch up some of the grammar and punctuation. Oddly, it is satisfying pretty much in inverse proportion to how much conscious manipulation I provide. But then again, if I didn't do anything, nothing would happen. So it's another one of those balancing acts.

As for synchronicity, I have just acquired the little gem of Rene Daumal's entitled *A Fundamental Experience*. Thanks to this assignment I discovered the essay had at last been translated and published. In it he describes his experiments with carbon tet, where he carefully observed the disappearance of consciousness. (Don't try this yourself!) The experiment infused him with the certitude that we are all seeking, and it never left him. He opens the little book by saying,

The simple fact of the matter is beyond telling. In the eighteen years since it happened, I have often tried to put it in words. Now, once and for all, I should like to employ every resource of language I know in giving an account of at least the outward and inward circumstances. The 'fact' consists of a certainty I acquired by accident at the age of sixteen or seventeen; ever since then, the memory of it has directed the best part of me toward seeking a means of finding it again, and for good.

For those who enjoy reading, here are a couple more paragraphs, one by Daumal and the other by his biographer and translator, Roger Shattuck. From *Mount Analogue*, by Rene Daumal:

When I was around six I heard something about flies which sting you when you're asleep. And naturally someone dragged in the old joke: "when you wake up you're dead." The words haunted me. That evening in bed with the light out, I tried to picture death, the "no more of anything". In my imagination I did away with all the outward circumstances of my life and felt myself confined in ever tightening circles of anguish: there was no longer any "I"... What does it mean, "I"? I couldn't succeed in grasping it. "I" slipped out of my thoughts like a fish out of the hands of a blind man, and I couldn't sleep. For three years these nights of questioning in the dark recurred fairly frequently. Then, one particular night, a marvelous idea came to me: instead of just enduring this agony, try to observe it, to see where it comes from and what it is. I perceived that it all seemed to come from a tightening of something in my stomach, as well as under my ribs and in my throat. I remembered that I was subject to angina and forced myself to relax, especially in my abdomen. The anguish disappeared. When I tried again in this new condition to think about death, instead of being clawed by anxiety, I was filled with an entirely new feeling. I knew no name for it—a feeling between mystery and hope.

Quoted in the Introduction by Roger Shattuck:

From 15 to 17, at Reims. I began to have doubts, to question the basis of everything. Without giving up my naturally healthy liking for nature, the open air, etc., I began to perform all kinds of experiments 'in order to see'. Along with a few friends

(some of the brightest pupils in the *lycee* but all a little wild) I tried alcohol, tobacco, night life, etc. I tried knocking myself out (with Cl4 or benzene) in order to study just how consciousness disappears and what power I had over it. I became interested in poetry... and philosophy.... At 17 1/2, for lack of any good reason to go on living, I attempted suicide. Immediately I felt the ties to my family and my responsibility toward my younger brother.

All these words are simply to reinforce the excellence of finding absorption whenever and wherever we have the opportunity. And we are truly blessed to have the free time to bring this type of experience into our lives. Aum.

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4/28/9

Sutra I:18

The cessation of cognition preceded by repetitive practice is the other (*asamprajñāta samādhi*) in which the residue of registered and preserved impressions remains.

The first rhubarb pie of the season, several weeks late due to our cold spring, contributed to happy taste buds, and armed us to try to brainstorm a difficult and elusive verse, which is to be paired with the previous one.

Before relating what I can recall of our discussion, I want to pass on a trio of pithy sentences from Eknath Easwaran describing the Yoga Sutras. He writes (Gita Vol. II, p. 22):

The heart of this program is meditation, which Patanjali, a great spiritual teacher in ancient India, divides conveniently into three stages, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*. Patanjali's

exposition is so precise and so free of dogma that I don't think it can ever be improved on in these qualities. But it is written in a kind of lecture note style, in the expectation that other teachers will elaborate on these notes in their own way on the basis of their experience.

Perfect. The sutras are more dense than koans even, often being simply a list of terms organized to remind the "lecturer" what to cover and when. Some of Easvaran's Gita commentary is not to my taste, but he gets off some great stuff here and there. This comes from his commentary on VII, 1, which is a really commendable one.

Okay, so on to the verse. I can't put it off any longer.

The gist of what Nitya teaches is that, whereas in the last verse we were sustaining our contemplation of the four stages of mental modification, one at a time, here we are watching them vanish. By doing so we are meditating on their absence instead of their presence. Our united attempts to do it together as a class were continually deflected into tangential issues, demonstrating the difficulty of dealing with "nothingness." We slide off into something we can grasp, something tangible or conceivable. This is where the repetitive practice comes in. We have to bring ourselves back over and over to the vanishing point of our mental modifications and hold tight for as long as we can. The torrential blast of all creation is trying to sweep us back into the flow, and we struggle to buck the tide for even a moment. We all agreed this is hard work, and success is ephemeral at best.

The closest we came in our grappling started with classic beginning meditation techniques, which employ "a positive experience as a plank for yogic discipline and consequent achievement of contemplative balance." Last week Jan mentioned her favorites of gazing at a candle flame or some brilliantly colored jewel. Bill mentioned watching a sunset, and I held out for

listening to music. As focuses for meditation, we are naturally drawn to such experiences, in which the beauty temporarily arrests our descriptive narrative of mental modifications, or vritti. In our one-pointed concentration, thoughts like, “What a beautiful sunset!” “I am watching a sunset,” “That’s orange,” “Here we are,” etc. are readily seen to interfere with the pure experience, to be one step removed from a perfect esthetic appreciation. They are the experience of the critic, the judge, and we must push them aside to try to remain in the pure, unmediated experience as long as possible. In this way we occasionally achieve contemplative balance. The secondary pleasures of describing the event to our friends or recalling the beauty afterwards are of a different order, though not without value as well.

Next we are asked to shift our attention to the vanishing point. Nitya sums up the meaning of the verse in his final paragraph:

In the same manner the yogi can use the negative counterpart, the cessation of an experience, for another discipline. Where a cognition disappears into a state of oblivion, the entire stream of consciousness can also vanish. Perception, recall of conception, and affectivity are all transcended and the yogi remains in a state of absorption. For such absorption there can be four leads: absorption into the vanishing point of a perceptual encounter, absorption into the vanishing point of a conceptual or intuitive insight, absorption into the vanishing point of the cessation of pleasure or affectivity, and finally, absorption into the vanishing point of the conscious self merging into the cosmic or universal self. While such absorptions hold fresh conditionings at bay, they do not terminate any experience that has already been registered. Registered experiences still remain as potentials for future

life. They are technically called samskaras, processed and conditioned experiences.

Susan definitely wanted us to acknowledge the difference between watching a perception vanish and trying valiantly to make conceptions vanish. The vanishing of the former seems inevitable, the latter almost impossible. She is often up at night unable to get back to sleep as she battles her powerful stream of mental modifications. Scotty had a number of cogent suggestions of how to quiet the mind using mantras and mental imagery, which are very helpful at inducing the vanishing of anxiety and obsessive complexes. The old saw of counting sheep is one pagan version, though a bit prosaic for modern tastes.

[...]

The key is to use some technique, any technique, to try to build a small shelter from the storm of synaptical firings by which our brains are regularly wracked. Imagine sending loving or compassionate thoughts to someone in need, or watching your breathing, playing mental chess, anything to anchor the chaos. As you are swept away, bring yourself back to the anchor time and time again. Eventually the storm will relent at least a little bit, and your incremental gains from the practice are cumulative, as Susan admitted.

Precisely here is a significant difference between Advaita Vedanta and the yoga of the Yoga Sutras. What we're doing now admits of incremental growth stages, while in Advaita it's all or nothing. In Advaita you have to accept the storm as your present reality, as one aspect of the Absolute. In Yoga you can push it out of the way. It's good exercise for your brain muscle, and much easier to understand for us modern souls conditioned to dualism.

Jan related an experience of esthetic arrest she had recently. She was doing some spring planting, and looking inside a pot with three withered old leaves, when her mental associations were

interrupted by the beauty of the moment. Well, beauty might be overstating it. The scene itself was totally prosaic, and yet circumstances came together to sweep Jan into a moment of ecstasy. Somehow these moments emerge from a combination of effort and non-effort, stress and release, that for an instant find a point of balance.

Scotty gave a great example of where all this is headed. He was talking with his therapist about why he couldn't get in to his favorite gallery to display his very excellent paintings. The therapist had him sit in a different chair and play the role of the gallery owner, and it took two tries to produce a revelation. "Her" verdict was, "I need you to be more confident about your ability." Then he returned to his original seat and took in the advice. He felt something shift inside, and realized that he had been unconsciously casting himself in a negative light, feeling that he really *wasn't* quite good enough. A cascade of release accompanied the realization, which brought Scotty up to a much more neutral, and thus positive and supportive, self-assessment. He felt empowered and encouraged.

Such realization doesn't cure old habits overnight, but it goes a long way toward it by bringing the syndrome into awareness and beginning the correction process. It will need to be revisited occasionally to reinforce it, through abhyasa or repetitive practice.

Dr. Stanley Krippner's dream workshop that some of us attended uses a similar gestalt therapy type of yoga exercise. He had us stand up and move around a bit, then take one step back into each of our parents in turn, followed by two steps back into two of our grandparents, and lastly one step back into imagining ourselves as someone of inordinate importance in our life. (In the no-brainer of the year, Bill, Deb and I all chose Nitya for this last person. Who else could it have been?) As each "alter ego" we gave advice to ourself, and then stepped back into our former place and thought about how that advice had affected our lives for good or

ill. Somehow the physical movement in tandem with the mental shift helped a lot of memories and fixations break loose. And it revealed what we already knew but didn't really fully appreciate, that there is a vast amount driving us from the past that we have habituated to and so fail to notice in the present.

If we imagine that we are nothing or that we know it all already, those poisoned arrows will not be removed. We have to be brave enough to admit they are there, to ourselves at least, and then suffer the agony of pulling them out. The wounds will heal, leaving only a scar of greater wisdom, and we will be much freer in our movements after the therapy.

Before signing off, I want to take a stab at what Nitya's invitation would look like in practice. First we are asked to watch as our need to identify an object or concept goes away. In one exercise in art classes "back in my day" the teacher would have the students pair up. One person would be blindfolded, and their partner would lead them around and have them touch different surfaces. The idea wasn't to try to identify what you were touching, but to have a direct experience of touch unmediated by the identifying faculty, which in most of us is closely wired up with visual perception. In other words, we practiced dropping the "What is this?" aspect of our minds to simply feel pure sensation, and it was dramatically different from our usual experience, like being a child again without a huge stockpile of identity tags. This is something that is worth trying for real, as its very different from anything you imagine.

The second faculty of mind is memory association. When we name something, we have gone into our "archive stacks" to compare the present experience with previous ones, and chosen the (hopefully) correct name, at the same time warping the present experience to conform to the Procrustean requirements of our past compilation. In the case of watching a sunset, we can be entranced by the beauty of it, but then we allow descriptive words to

intervene such as those mentioned earlier. When we allow the memory mechanism to vanish, we can bring ourselves back to a pure appreciation of the esthetic. It's a subtle process, all of it taking place in the transparent clarity of mental modifications, with no bugaboo standing out we can identify as our albatross.

In the third instance we add a value assessment with our judicial faculty. "Isn't this great!" "I love sunsets," and so on. Again, we can practice dispassion by allowing ourselves to be reabsorbed into the experience every time we tilt ourselves out with such sentiments. It's another abhyasa, where we have to repeatedly re-center ourselves every time we feel compelled to issue a judgment on the situation.

Watching the ego, the fourth faculty of mind, vanish is a good exercise too. Pure esthetics probably doesn't give us an adequate opportunity to do much; I'm not sure. For me, the easiest (and most ready to hand) is to endure criticism without reacting in my own favor. There is nothing like criticism to bring the ego into full flower. You can feel it surge up in your own defense, ready to combat the attack by any means possible. Even truth, though that can languish a ways down the line sometimes. Anyway, I've had hundreds if not thousands of opportunities to sit still while being called to task for my failings, and I have learned a little to accept it and not mount a defense, especially immediately, in the heat of reactivity. The ego is at least more visible than the judging faculty, at times like those. It usually gushes in bright colors, like the red of embarrassment. Anyway, allowing it to vanish unsupported by self defense is tough but rewarding. You are much better able to handle the situation calmly and judiciously. The Gita recommends such an attitude too, as in Chapter XIV, where he "who regards his being blamed or praised equally, the same in honor and disgrace, taking no sides as between friends or foes," is extolled.

Needless to say, the ego will be back, along with the rest. These preliminary exercises disrupt and highlight but do not break

the association with samskaras, conditioned memory impulses. I invite you to submit other suggestions as they occur to you.