

2022 Patanjali Class 43

1/31/23

Sutra I:28 – By its constant repetition and dwelling upon its meaning in the mind.

Sutra I:29 – Also, from the repetition of the pranava mantra, the attainment of the disappearance of obstacles and the turning inward of consciousness.

For reading out in class, we leave out the less common Sanskrit words to keep the flow. Studying those terms is a separate endeavor in itself, and only a few of us are interested. For the rest they are a distraction. I find the commentary comes across better without them, though it's important they are present in the text.

After the reading, we used the attached exercise for our opening meditation. It brought a unifying peacefulness across the Zoom barrier—for once we had more on site than on the air: seven and five. It reminded us that, although it is likely to become rare, gathering together adds a special tone of clarity and affinity, not least because our shaky internet often fails us.

Nitya's exercise, after he relates some general information about mantras, gave us an opportunity to practice:

Breathe as gently as possible, silently chanting AU with each in breath and M with each out breath. After breathing in, hold the breath inside for a short while, without straining. After breathing out, gently hold the breath outside for a short while. As you do so, note the functioning of three kinds of energy: your will, your action, and your knowledge.

Continue breathing gently, silently chanting AU with each in breath and M with each out breath, holding the breath inside after each in breath and outside after each out breath.

Because of Nitya's suggestion about the three kinds of energy, it was easy to notice the separate aspects of will, action and knowledge involved: intending to chant the mantra, actually doing it, and visualizing its meaning. The meaning part adds a great deal to the mantra's power, so I summarized the bare minimum before we started. A and U stand for the wakeful and dream states: the objective and subjective aspects of the horizontal pole. While chanting them we draw our breath in from the horizontal "outside" world, and hold it briefly in our vertical essence, which we then exhale as M tapering to silence. M and silence symbolize the vertical negative and positive, respectively. Merging the outside into the inside and the inside into the outside brings about unification.

Chanting aum usually starts out robustly and gently merges into silence. In this case we did it all silently, yet could still sense a group dynamic. It made for a very quiet class afterward, as no one wanted to emerge from the blissful quiet state we attained.

Yet we had to end it! Deb gently noted how interesting it is that when we do something quietly and focus on a single word or concept, the world seems vast. When we are busy with sensory experience, the world gets crowded and busy and seems smaller.

This brought up the problem of distractions. We tend to visualize our distractions outside, but by chanting the pranava, AUM, that distinction is let go of. Bill jested that even if we don't have any physical distractions, we make them up. Of course, those would be *mental* distractions....

The old notes, in Part II, are very helpful, and I'll bring in some of them. First, on distractions:

A perennial truth is lived and experienced directly, in the present moment. So we are only working on ourself with our self here, free of supplied imagery. We cast off all distracting

thoughts, both good and bad, so that we can penetrate deeper into the mystery.

Distractions always come, and are not to be thought of as unspiritual per se. It's not that wise yogis are miraculously cured of experiencing distractions, it's just that they don't follow them off the track. They recognize them for what they are, ephemera. There is a lot of pretense in spiritual life due to people believing that they have to project a faultless image. Only if all such imaginary projections are discarded can the meditation be fruitful.

And yes, Patanjali's Yoga admits to fruition. The Gita's apparently subsequent suggestion is to avoid dwelling on the fruits, because they will wind up being yet another clever distraction of the ego. But here we can provisionally speak of fruits, though only in a general way. There are to be no false promises! Nitya concludes by delineating the goal and describing the method used to obtain it: "The establishment of coordination between the cogitating mind and the so-called mindless state of samadhi is achieved by repeating the experience." In other words, the more we dip in the river, the sooner we learn to swim.

Jan was impressed by the splendid paragraph on japa, making it clear to her what the four main steps are, and why we want to be in tune with this philosophy all the time:

Japa is "continuous repetition" of the mantra, in the present case, AUM. Japa is intended to include the burning away of the dross of the mind (*tapas*), becoming intimate with the true nature of oneself (*svadhyaya*), mentally suggesting the general direction in which the revelation of the Absolute can be expected (*bhavana*), and establishing coordination between the conscious

mind and the unconscious from where an archetypal revelation is believed to be arising (abhyasa). (104)

Andy enthused that we are always doing japa, and to do it consciously is to come to nucleus of your experience. We are thinking and acting, and all of those things are preceding out of a center in us. Usually we go far from the center into complex thinking and doing—but thinking and doing originates in the core of ourselves.

Bill talked about his vision quests in his younger days, a Native American tradition where you go out for three days to sit on a mountain and fast. He remembers watching his thoughts diminish to almost nothing by the third day. He could see how the aim was quieting the mind and getting absorbed back into nature.

Paul wanted know more about what it means to get absorbed in nature, and Bill said it was a way for young people to find their calling. He was 22 years old and never had any discipline like that before, but he went out with a high motivation. When you're first doing it you think a thousand thoughts. What he found was that the sequence of one thought after another, if you slow it down, the thoughts just gradually recede. When you are undisturbed by what's outside, your mind runs out of thoughts, and you get a connection with that core of your being. When you get to that point, it is still you, but it is being free from mental modifications.

Andy likened that to the previous sutra, where Isvara is a purusha that is not afflicted: it's a different way of saying the same thing. The act of doing japa on pranava is connecting you to the purusha that is not afflicted by those hungry mental modifications. He went on that part of Nitya's meditation exercise is that it's connected to breathing. Our first act when we're born is to inhale, and by doing so we are creating our world, and with each exhale we are returning to ourselves. Each breath is a pranava mantra.

Nancy resonated with the power of our first breath at birth,

and we carry that mantra with us constantly. We have it with us for our whole life, until our last breath, and it's still going on within us even when we are distracted.

Susan read out a section of the 2009 notes I had shared with her earlier:

Susan related a beautiful story about attending a bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage into adulthood, over the weekend. In the main event, all the relatives of the budding adult gather around him on the altar. At this bar mitzvah, there were actually two great-grandfathers present. Both had come great distances and endured daunting difficulties to honor their great-grandson. With a helper at each arm, they painstakingly rolled their walkers up onto the *bimah* platform to stand with their family.

At the climax of the ceremony, the rabbi hands the Torah, the sacred book, to each family member in attendance. As it was passed around, Susan noticed that most of the relatives took it and handed it back perfunctorily, but when it came to one of the great-grandfathers, he held it with great reverence. It was clearly much more than a routine act for him. His emotion was palpable to the entire assembly. He treated the huge tome so lovingly and with such passion that it moved Susan to tears. She could feel a lifetime, even many generations of lifetimes, compressed in the embrace. Love of life and depth of experience were wordlessly passed along to all present in the way he treasured that symbol of his religion and culture. Looking around, she could see that every eye was glistening.

Susan felt this scene exemplified the positive side of bhavana, the dwelling upon the meaning within every situation. Having something concrete and perennially present, like a sacred volume or a favorite chant, is a touchstone to return to again and again with your finest thoughts and emotions, and the

power of it grows with the repetition. Even we who were two steps removed from the ceremony were affected, by way of Susan's passionate recounting of the experience. So the blessing radiates outward, rippling beyond its unitive source, sometimes visibly but most often invisibly.

It sounds like everyone but the great-grandfather was distracted. Deb drew the connection that the way he held the Torah implies the same type of repetition as focusing on a mantra. In it is identity and respect and a return to the source, and you are evoking that love and reverence in each object or person you meet.

For the great-grandfather, the Torah had presumably been a sustaining force through the ghastly obstacles Jewish people had met in his lifetime. The Torah for him was a symbol of persistence and continuity in the face of struggle. It must have felt profound that it was still alive in the ceremony as a unifying icon. It brought to mind the Gita's chapter XII, where Arjuna wants to know how the Absolute should be conceived—is it tangible or intangible? Krishna told him that it's much easier to love the tangible, but ultimately either way has the same result. Most of us prefer a tangible symbol or lodestone, an idea we can call to mind to focus our intentions, actions and knowledge upon.

Deb brought it back to the constant breathing that is always with us. In a way it's an object like the Torah, and a way of meditation. In the end, imagination is both helpful and not helpful, depending on what we make of it. Speaking of religious imagery, Nitya says:

This kind of imagination only brings distraction. Even so, there has to be some direction in the mind that symbolically suggests what you are looking for. Thus bhavana is both helpful and not helpful. Obsessive imagination can only bring a caricature-like notion of the Absolute to the mind. Instead, your imagination

needs to be supported by the substantiality of a perennial truth. Having the right bhavana or imagination is essential in the experiencing of pranava. (105)

Deb went on that while we are trying to conceive of a genuine representation, we can't get carried away by alien spaceships or other fantasies, we need to repeatedly keep coming back to the silent, quiet, but very solid perennial understanding of what the Absolute is. Whether you are on a vision quest or another meditation practice, just become involved in an activity that is an expression of you. She was moved by Nitya's concluding thought, that we regulate our breathing to lessen the outflow of our consciousness:

By repeatedly thwarting the outward-flowing consciousness, the hindrances to imperiential empathy with the core aspect of the Self become weaker and weaker. Because of the salutary effect of continuously repeating pranava, the outward-going tendency of consciousness is arrested. This enables the twofold benefit of dissipating all obstacles in the path of Yoga and making the aspirant yogi spirit-oriented. (107)

A lot more on distractions and obstacles can be found in Part II.

Part II

6/25/11 My response to Nancy's class exercise:

Aum for me now is the perfect neutral statement. Anything else we say contains some degree of positive or negative spin. Aum, though, has the exact same very slight positivity as the universe as a whole, of the reason there is *something* rather than *nothing*. That makes it the perfect thing to say.

In ordinary life, most people need a boost, so I try to pass on a supportive blessing in the words I share with them. But in meditative moments, nothing feels better than neutrality. I silently chant aum to bring myself to the balanced state I much admire but don't always reside in.

I like to remind myself that any mantra, even aum, fails to be helpful when we mistake the form for the content. Nitya says:

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Because of this, I always try to stay alert even as I sink into the bliss of the neutrality of aum.

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The Portland Gurukula class notes are much longer.

8/24/9

Sutra I:28

By its constant repetition and dwelling upon its meaning in the mind.

It was nearly dark at the outset of the class, a reminder of how the year flies by. Only a few sessions back we were finishing in daylight. Hard to believe that the first decade of the twenty-first century is speeding to a close. To someone my age, 1984 still stands for the far-off future....

We opened with a brief dip into the exercise Nitya offers at the end of his comments, a meditation on a simple linkage of breath and aum. The class agreed it was useful to have a structure to return to whenever the mind wanders off. We know we should treat all of life as a meditation, but so often we forget, and instead treat it as a series of isolated incidents. Having a simple format of some sort trains us to conserve Isvara (in this case) as the core of everything. Once we get the hang of it, we can apply what we've learned throughout our everyday life. Thus, intelligent chanting of a mantra can be tremendously "useful," as well as restorative for the psyche.

The mantra fails to be helpful when we mistake the form for the content. We might think Aum is like a deity to be worshipped. Then our pseudo-compassion leads us to evangelize on behalf of it. We are sure that if everyone bowed down before Aum they would all be saved, and so on. Such types of seemingly religious behavior are nothing more than clever and devious ways that the ego derails the efficacy of the mantra, and they lead to tragedies great and small. Speaking of the anthropomorphizing of the empyrean, after citing the classic cases of Krishna and Christ, Nitya counsels us:

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Repeatedly chanting a word or phrase rapidly becomes boring and lulls the mind to stupor. To counteract this, Nitya instructs us to always maintain an intelligent assessment of the process. We are never to allow the practice to become mechanical. If we were to set a goal of chanting aum a hundred times, for instance, we would likely just be focused on the number: we would in reality be meditating on the numbers 1 to 100. Numbers appeal to our "left brain," so numerical meditations appeal to the modern, exteriorized mentality. But the so-called left brain is already overfed nowadays. We bring the "right brain" into the equation by abandoning all hard edges and strict formulas. Chanting aum is just a simple expression of being alive! Don't make a big deal about it.

Aum is known as the word of acceptance or acquiescence. It is perfectly neutral, like the English phrase "So be it." Thus it can

be used to bring us back to neutrality when we find ourself going off kilter. Just say aum!

The class went over some of the ways in which we can rewrite our narratives of everyday life to make them inspiring rather than deadening. We see on all hands how perverted notions can lead well-intentioned people far afield. Casting those chains from us is an essential task of our intelligence. Anita has been really learning how negative imaginings serve no purpose whatever, and how they can just as easily be framed in ways that inspire joy rather than dread.

Brenda discovered a rare three-minute newsreel on Youtube of Helen Keller and her mentor Anne Sullivan, exemplifying the power of repetition to accomplish even miraculous and seemingly impossible feats. Their story, now ebbing out of the popular imagination, is among the greatest achievements of the human race. Among many other things, it reminds us to cherish our manifold gifts that we so casually take for granted. Look it up!

We closed with another silent chanting of aum. The group experience lends extra energy to the one-pointed concentration which opens into vast inner fields of abundantly full emptiness. Aum.

Part II

Susan related a beautiful story about attending a bar mitzvah, the Jewish rite of passage into adulthood, over the weekend. In the main event, all the relatives of the budding adult gather around him on the altar. At this bar mitzvah, there were actually two great-grandfathers present. Both had come great distances and endured daunting difficulties to honor their great-grandson. With a helper at each arm, they painstakingly rolled their walkers up onto the *bimah* platform to stand with their family.

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The gentleman's reverence for a cherished symbol is a far cry from the projected divine beings that attract those who prefer fantasy to substantiality. We have several friends these days who are immersed in imaginary worlds teeming with gods and goddesses and fairy sprites, which look to the outsider as the product of wishful thinking. There is an undercurrent of despair in these superficially charming fantasies. Such delusions can sway others, and might even be able to make their lives more tolerable in the way children are charmed by fairytales, but they run the risk of being drawn into psychic backwaters to circle about endlessly in self-propelled eddies. It is very tricky to correctly discriminate a true meaning from a false one. But the great-grandfather's simple

gesture is to me many times more profound and real than an entire menagerie of celestial entities.

9/8/9

Sutra I:29

Also, from the repetition of the pranava mantra, the attainment of the disappearance of obstacles and the turning inward of consciousness.

The present sutra introduces a short section addressing obstacles. It is of inordinate value to share our thoughts on these in a group, because each person's obstacles reside in their blind spots: that's what blind spots are, basically. Since it's much easier to see other people's faults than our own, there is every hope that, even without any of the direct accusations and confrontation of classical techniques, we can nonetheless dislodge some grasp of our own blind spots.

We began by considering what obstacles are, as we must know them before we can ameliorate them. Charles had recently been reading Elaine Pagel's book, *The Origin of Satan*. The original concept of Satan was as an aspect of God that supplied impediments, something you could attribute your misfortune to. Pagels, one of the greatest Biblical scholars of any era, writes:

As he first appears in the Hebrew Bible, Satan is not necessarily evil, much less opposed to God. On the contrary, he appears... as one of God's obedient servants.... In Biblical sources the Hebrew term the *satan* describes an adversarial role. It is not the name of a particular character.... What [the Hebrew storytellers] meant was any one of the angels sent by God for the specific purpose of blocking or obstructing human activity. The root *stn* means "one who opposes, obstructs, or acts as an adversary." (The Greek term

diabolos, later translated “devil,” literally means “one who throws something across one’s path.”)... The *satan*’s presence in a story could help account for unexpected obstacles or reversals of fortune.

But this messenger is not necessarily malevolent. God sends him, like the angel of death, to perform a certain task, although one that human beings may not appreciate; as the literary scholar Neil Forsyth says of the *satan*, “If the path is bad, an obstruction is good.” Thus the *satan* may simply have been sent by the Lord to protect a person from worse harm. (39-40)

Clearly, Judaism is a close kin in this matter with Vedanta. The paranoia and otherness of the devil came later, and these are impediments in their own right. If you attribute your faults to an implacable enemy, you have no need to work on yourself, and it reinforces all the worst features of the ego to view the world that way.

Deb linked this early idea of Satan with Vedanta’s concept of ignorance, more like a shadow where light is reduced. Obstacles therefore are removed by wisdom.

Anita felt that obstacles provide what she called a trigger. They call our attention to problems that need attention, and so wake us up in a way. It’s true that we may go through life without a care until something goes haywire, and then we start to wonder what’s going on. Anita likened her idea to a watercolor painting. You wash a surface with the paint, but any roughness or other texturing causes variations in its uniformity, and these provide interest.

Fred had a similar analogy, where life is like floating down a river. The obstacles are like rocks in the stream, and we just flow around them and go on. Some may cause eddies or force us into backwaters for a period, but eventually we continue along. Like a

painting's underlayment, it is the obstacles that give the river its variations and thus its interest. Without them a river is more like a canal, featureless and uninteresting.

These ideas point out a basic sanity in the group. While we are more or less free of them, Patanjali has some real serious obstacles in mind, things that throw us utterly off the track, that thwart us from living a fulfilling life. Things that need to be overcome before we can proceed. And that's a good way to consider the problem of obstacles. The class began with the typical ill-considered idea that the point was to just chant aum all day long, and whatever prevented us from doing that was an obstacle. Not at all! Wasting your life chanting or carrying out meaningless rituals is one of the biggest obstacles for those who consider themselves on a spiritual path. These are means to the end of a life worth living, not ends in themselves, as Bill reminded us.

So what is it that prevents us from being all we can be, from a life of excellence? Some impediments may respond to chanting aum, and some may not. We have to identify our "hangups" before we know what to do about them, which is why this section of the study is particularly important.

The efficacy of aum is to take us to a neutral mental state. Our initial reaction to stress is to oppose it head on, but we have learned that doing so prolongs and even increases the tension. To deal optimally with problems we need to access a transcendently neutral poise. Aum gathers the oscillating consciousness and centers it in the turiya, where we can witness the passing show with dispassion.

Yet again, the point is not to go into the turiya and disappear. Instead, most of us want to bring our best wisdom to bear on our whole life. Moni told the story of one Amma, who followed Nitya during the period Moni was his personal assistant. Amma was very upset that she couldn't meditate peacefully because thoughts kept coming, and asked Nitya for advice. He told her to not resist the

thoughts, but to just watch them without reacting to them. That didn't satisfy her, so she went to guru after guru trying to get her mind to stop working.

Amma was a typical neophyte who imagined that becoming free of her mind was the goal of meditation. A healthy mind hums right along, however, doing what it's supposed to do. Suppressing it or otherwise reacting to it only makes the mind press ahead ever more energetically. That's exactly why spiritual techniques are valuable: they redirect that dynamic energy in creative and unitive modes of expression. So instead of rejecting yourself, you have to learn to be comfortable with yourself. You become your own best friend. This game is not about doing away with "you." It's about promoting you to a heightened state of expertise.

Anita felt confused about the distinction between going with the flow and overcoming obstacles. When do we take things as they come, and when do we knock them aside? This is a crucial paradox, and one where we are prone to make plenty of mistakes. By going with the flow of events, are we allowing our life to be determined solely by obstacles? And how is it that we know who we are and what we should be doing anyway?

The world has its own agenda, and a lot of the people in it would like to use other people's energy for their own benefit. On top of that, life is filled with necessary duties that suck up our time and attention. So if we simply respond to life's demands, our dharma, our natural inclination to develop as unique individuals, could be completely squelched. We have to chart a course to maximize our freedom so that we can grow as our natural gifts are inclined to grow. In a world gone mad with busywork, it's a real art form to pry out anything like freedom.

Moni explained that we have to make a sincere effort to keep functioning at our best, that it is no accident. If we don't try we don't accomplish anything.

Charles agreed that the Protestant ethic, which is very much in the driver's seat these days, is a kind of mania to keep people busy. It is rife with an unacknowledged fear of anything below the surface in life, coupled with a monumental disdain for those who are content to relax and enjoy their time on Earth. Suspicion of others is rampant among the holier-than-thou crowd, and God is visualized as a stern managerial type looking over your shoulder with a frown. Look busy or you're fired! As in fired in the fires of hell.

To all this horse shit we say aum. We drop out of those types of games, in search of peace. We discover who we are, and foster our talents, and fill our hearts with joy and love. We share whatever we have to offer with those around us. When we are accused, we say aum. When we are praised, we say aum. When there is nothing, we say aum. Many obstacles melt away of their own accord. For the rest we cinch up our belts and wade in.

We will have a couple of more classes on obstacles, and I'm sure the specific examples in the text will dislodge some ideas in everyone. I really hope this can be a fruitful part of the work, where we honestly and bravely assess our favorite blockages and share them amongst ourselves, because to know them is to overcome them, in large measure. Clothe them in an imaginary person if you prefer, like Rumi's Mullah Nasruddin, to avoid any embarrassment, but please do give it your best thoughts. Those who write from afar, be sure to say if we can share your contributions or not. Aum.

Part II

Charles also mentioned that the elephant-headed god Ganesha was, like the early Satan, a placer of obstacles. He is well known as the remover of obstacles but little known as a source of impediments, so Deb and I looked him up later and found these two entries for your amusement and edification:

from *Hindu Art*, by T. Richard Blurton (Harvard University Press, 1993):

Unlike Skanda, who was born only to Shiva, Ganesha was born from Parvati. Throughout the myths of the two sons, this opposition continues. Skanda is the god of hasty and unconsidered action, while Ganesha has a reputation for being wily and acting only after thought. Especially propitiated as the Remover of Obstacles, Ganesha is also, when angered or ignored, the Placer of Obstacles. (104)

from *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*, by George M. Williams (Oxford University Press, 2008):

An account in the *Linga Purana* gave one version of [Ganesha's] origin. The *asuras* and the *rakshashas* [demons] performed sacrifices and austerities and received a boon from Siva by which they were able to defeat the *devas* (gods) in battle. Indra and the other gods complained to Siva and prayed that he would create an obstacle for the *asuras* and *rakshashas*. Siva created from himself a being, Vighneshvara, the lord of obstacles, who would place all sorts of objects in the way of the *asuras* and *rakshashas* and frustrate their attempts to gain merit from their sacrifices and austerities, thereby decreasing the effectiveness of their boon. Vighneshvara came from Siva's *amshas*, a part of his power, that was placed in the womb of Parvati. As soon as Vighneshvara was born, he obstructed the wicked and aided the righteous. (133)