

2022 Patanjali Class 46

3/7/23

Sutra I:35 – When absolute interest is shown to a sensory experience or activity, that will bring the mind to a steady state.

Sutra I:36 – Also by meditating on the sorrowless state of inner joy one can attain luminosity of intelligence.

The list of straightforward means to steadiness of mind continues, reminding us we aren't pursuing anything exotic or mystical here, that we can connect with all our hidden powers in reference to normal activities. Presuming that realization resides somewhere else is the primary obstacle to realization. As we are the Absolute, Isvara in essence, there just isn't anywhere else.

The basis of both these sutras is that despite a widespread belief that we are victims of our bodily and mental conditioning, and are therefore helpless to do anything meaningful about them, this philosophy cheerfully assumes we can have a hand in revivifying our predicaments and making ourselves happier and more cogent. It invites us to throw off doubts, and abandon the belief system that we are solely produced by our previous history, assuring us we can make all the difference in a life well lived. Admittedly, it's not as easy as it sounds....

I wondered if Anita noticed how closely Nitya's comments in the last paragraph aligned with what she had been talking about before class. He writes:

You are being tortured from within through no one's fault, yet you feel so helpless to wriggle out of that state. Depression crushes your entire psyche in its steel claws. If you take care to look at one bright spot such as a beautiful poem, a melodious music, a wonderful episode in your own life or another's, and keep attuned to it with the intention of purging away the blues and increasing the inner state of joy, the spark can turn into a

glow, the glow into a flame, and the flame can ultimately become a conflagration of joy. (121)

Anita has become more aware of habitually saying negative things to herself, and she has begun challenging them. After first learning to notice it, she is amazed how mean she has been to herself. It takes practice to ease off, but now she counteracts those habits by being more appreciative of her body, and sympathizing with all the things it has gone through. She's even been literally patting herself, telling her body you did just fine—you're amazing. It's interesting to observe how it makes a difference, making her feel better both physically and mentally. She feels the kindheartedness originates in her higher self.

Because it gets regurgitated nearly every day, most of us don't realize how hard we are on ourselves, yet if we look out for it, we can identify it as an unnecessary burden held over from childhood, where it acted as a protective feint. We can discontinue demeaning ourselves, which quickly produces a much better outcome. It's a repetitive practice worth following, and as such, it's the type of positive habit Aquinas is speaking of, in this excerpt from DeLillo's *Underworld*:

If you're low-willed, you see, you end up living in the shallowest turns and bends of your own preoccupations.... Aquinas said only intense actions will strengthen a habit. Not mere repetition. Intensity makes for moral accomplishment. An intense and persevering will. This is an element of seriousness. Constancy. This is an element. A sense of purpose. A self-chosen goal. (539)

Nitya's presentation reminded Nancy of growing up in a big, extended family, where the kids were always reminded that if you were in a bad mood, you were affecting everyone, and it disrupted

the harmony in their home. So you couldn't just grump around, you had to be thoughtful of others, and it makes you more conscious of how your mind is working and how your thoughts are acting inside of you. In any train of thought, if you can catch it, you can change the inner dialogue.

Anita laughed ruefully, since her family was much more dysfunctional; their home was more like a free-for-all. She wished she'd have heard those kinds of thoughts sooner.

Nancy's siblings were enjoined to always be good to each other, and it has continued into their old age. The way she interacts with her brother and sister was developed through practice: many years of consideration, instead of being unmindful of them. Both her parents directed this—they didn't tolerate acting out in bad ways.

Andy reads these verses as a kind of lovely invitation to pay attention aesthetically to the flow of your experience, just appreciate it to the fullest dimension that you can. He is happy that life can be rich even on a sensory level; like when he's reading a book, he can savor the quality of paper and know that it came from plants, and how the thoughts of the author have gone through an incredible journey of being produced and printed, to arrive in his hands.

There's nothing fancy in these sutras, just a call to being awake. Andy quoted William Blake:

To see a World in a grain of sand,
and a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.

While “mindfulness” is all the rage nowadays, and sutra 36 bears some resemblance to it, I spoke on behalf of the value of not overdoing it, for instance disappearing into the story in a book,

forgetting all the external details around you. When I was young I easily lost myself in books, was totally absorbed in them: what I was reading was more real than the room I sat in, the weather outside, the moods of my family. I was gone. I'm not as absorbable as I once was, getting distracted and going on tangents more easily, but there still are stretches when I'm not aware of anything but the storyline, and it becomes its own World. The arts make engrossment easy, because we are naturally attracted to beautiful and interesting things.

Music does this for Anita. She's been struggling with sleep for a long time. Her biorhythms are all out of whack, but she's found that music helps calm her monkey mind — she is awed by the tenor Andrea Bocelli, and listening to him lulls her toward sleep. Musical absorption makes it easy to focus and compose herself for sleep.

Several of us heard a radio program this week on Dr. Dacher Keltner, at U-Cal Berkeley, who has a new book out: *"Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life."* In case you missed it, here's the article on him Jan shared in the last Class Notes:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/03/well/live/awe-wonder-dacher-keltner.html> . One brief excerpt:

In his book, Dr. Keltner writes that awe is critical to our well-being — just like joy, contentment and love. His research suggests it has tremendous health benefits that include [calming down our nervous system](#) and triggering the release of oxytocin, the “love” hormone that promotes trust and bonding.

“Awe is on the cutting edge” of emotion research, said Judith T. Moskowitz, a professor of medical social sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in Chicago. Dr. Moskowitz, who has studied how positive

emotions help people cope with stress, wrote in an email that “intentional awe experiences, like walks in nature, collective movement, like dance or ceremony, even use of psychedelics improve psychological well-being.”

Part of the emphasis of the article is that joy and awe can be generated pretty much everywhere—witnessing an act of kindness by someone else registers surprisingly highly on whatever diabolic instruments they use to measure such things.

While mindfulness is an admirable skill to practice occasionally, it’s very often ego-driven, and too much of it diminishes our connection with the parts of our being that are beyond our awareness. In driving a car as well as reading, we do better when we engage our whole being and don’t closely examine every detail of the environment. By letting go we allow for the release of ego, and of waking up. Some of our best states come when we aren’t paying attention. Patanjali recommends this in the next couple of sutras, which we’ll examine next week.

Anita wondered just what Patanjali meant by “meditating on the sorrowless state of inner joy one can attain luminosity of intelligence.” Karen connected it with Nitya’s reference to the moon, which is currently full, so at its most luminous. The more light we have, the more joy we feel.

Luminous means radiating or emitting light, as well as intellectually lucid or brilliant. Joy radiates and affects the world around. It’s being broadcast, in that sense, so it isn’t just an awareness isolated in the black box of your head. It brings light, enlightenment.

Bill was intrigued that Nitya refers to the intellect as the brightest of the inner organs, and that: “As human nature is not so fixed as the cyclic changes of the heavenly bodies, it is possible for a person to take therapeutic measures to redress psychic

malfunctions. Of the four inner organs, intellect is the brightest and can be used as a handle to rectify inner discordance.” (121)

For review, the inner organs are questioning, memory recall, intellect and ego, (*manas, cittam, buddhi* and *ahamkara*). Together they make up the *karanam*, the dynamism of the psyche. A good place to review them in somewhat more depth is *That Alone*, pages 8 and 9.

Questioning and recall are almost totally unconscious, and much of our ego is like the invisible elephant in the room (forgetting to be mindful), so intellect is by far the brightest of the four, the region where we can put our effort and our practice to best use. The ego, of course, would rather take all the credit, and so tends to denigrate the intellect, until it is taught better manners.

Susan perceived that what Anita was talking about earlier was related to these inner organs, and she offered her own recent example. She was driving some friends to their book group and made a wrong turn. “We were late and by the time I got there I was very frustrated with myself. I took the time to turn inward and talk to my self-critical part and listen to its criticism about getting old and being inept. As I was acknowledging that part, I could see underneath it the sadness peeking out —sadness about growing older and not being as capable as I once was. As soon as I saw these parts and acknowledged them and gave them some empathy, I felt much better. As Anita pointed out, it was my (true/deep) self that was communicating with those inner parts.” The key for both Anita and Susan is that as soon as they brought their intelligence to bear, a chronic detrimental feeling was dissipated quite rapidly. The trick is simply remembering to do it, it isn’t hard. Everyone is capable of it.

Anita thinks of this now as self-reflection, and she knows that she, like Susan, is at times overly concerned with what people might be thinking about her. She reveled at how this new attitude allows us to see so much about what is, who we are, and take in a

bigger picture. Now she routinely questions the validity of her self-talk.

Our self-criticism is intended to be beneficial, and spare us from the painful criticisms of others, so we could assure that protective part of us that we appreciate its good intentions, but right now they aren't needed. We're already okay, thank you.

Andy cited part of a section of the Gita in support of this positive attitude, from chapter VI:

5) By the Self the Self must be upheld; the Self should not be let down; the Self indeed is its own dear relative; the Self indeed is the enemy of the Self.

6) The Self is dear to one (possessed) of Self, by whom even the Self by the Self has been won; for one not (possessed) of Self, the Self would be in conflict with the very Self, as if an enemy.

7) To one of conquered Self, who rests in peace, the Supreme is in a state of neutral balance in heat-cold, happiness-suffering, honor-disgrace.

Paul has been reading Emerson recently (a brain-straining exercise if ever there was one), and he was struck by a phrase that within an acorn there are generations upon generations of forests. It got him thinking that a person's life experience from birth to this moment, compared to their true identity, is just the tip of the iceberg of who they are. We have within us that completeness, that all-inclusive unified beingness. Paul's early upbringing in the church was so limiting, so confining, he's starting to believe he's much more expansive now, which tells him that what is unknown is far more vast and important than what we think we know. He's

realizing there's a lot of power in self-reflections, and it adds luminosity or value to what we are, almost without trying.

Moni was charmed by Nitya's comparing the mind to the phases of the moon, and agreed that when everything goes well, the luminosity of the intelligence is very bright, but when things don't go well, it diminishes. Still, there is always a spark, and before we get lost in negativity, if we can rekindle that spark, then we can gain happiness again.

I wondered if Moni's favorite technique was to cook a delicious meal and give it to her friends or invite them over to share it, and she smiled. She had just done that very thing. She practices it a lot. Moni told us how she puts all her effort and her enjoyment into preparing food, and that gives her joy. There are times when she doesn't make something well, from not paying attention, talking on the phone too long, brooding, or something, and she won't give that away.

We took a moment to meditate on luminous intelligence, and then shared our exultation with Karen over the miraculous and awesome return of her long-lost cat, Tommy. Hearts bubble over.

Part II

From Nancy Y's class:

July 31, 2011

At last a simple couple of sutras! That means I can write a short response and head out into the (rare) sunshine. This is one of those perfect days we do get here every so often, when you can't imagine anything better this side of paradise, or there either!

I really enjoyed everyone's input from the last session. Very insightful—thanks to all of you. When we get back to asana near the end of the study, Nitya will describe it as pretty much the whole point of the work we're doing. I feel like sutra I:33 is a

tremendously high high spot, going right to the crux of yoga. This is what it's all about, the hokey pokey notwithstanding.

Reading the current sutras, I think it's hilarious that Nitya, because he didn't drive a car, treated driving as a kind of mystical experience, and his descriptions of it sound like he is paying homage to an occult act. I don't mean that he's naïve—he never was. But he brought a freshness bordering on naivety to many of life's “ordinary” events that always lifted them to a prominence we tend to belittle with daily exposure.

I feel like a small measure Nitya's attitude has seeped into my life over many years, and now my default state is to be focused and joyful. When I look back at how chaotic my mind was earlier in life, it is a huge relief to be free of all that. Studying Vedanta and piano playing have contributed greatly: you can't even read a book without keeping focused. And hey, driving, especially in India, is in fact a very advanced skill which definitely demands one-pointed attention. All over the globe, those who didn't adequately keep their focus are all dead now....

Probably the only subtlety in this lesson that might get overlooked is that meditating on joy is said to light up the intellect. The norm is to bludgeon the intellect with lots of joyless information, and when a person gets dull enough from the beating to sound like everybody else, they are pronounced “intelligent.” Patanjali's version of intelligence is alive to direct experience, and is primed by the excited interest generated by enjoyment. Now that I think about it, this is a radical departure from the status quo, really a revolutionary ideal. We are enjoined to pursue our bliss, and that takes us toward profound understanding. So many of the great geniuses of history exemplify this type of learning, and yet we use our schools to inculcate the exact opposite. It's a testament to the resilience of the human spirit that a fair number of people emerge from the schooling process with some of their creative sparks still glowing.

As for [Nancy's] two admirable exercises, I feel that something like them has become a permanent way of life for me. I'm sure I've already mentioned the instant feedback of playing an instrument, where the slightest swerving from concentration causes audible mistakes. It teaches you how to focus from the inside out. And especially now I'm retired, but also before, all through my long life, I have insisted on following my most passionate interests, often against plenty of resistance. From society's standpoint I am probably a failure, not a very good cog in the wheel, but from a larger perspective, encouraged by instruction like this, I have made a passable contribution to the world while having a lot of fun and growing the way I wanted. So all I can say is yes, take these exercises to heart, theoretically or actually, and, in the words of Ken Kesey, be a lightning rod rather than a seismograph.

Love to all, Scott

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From the original class:

10/13/9

Sutra I:35

When absolute interest is shown to a sensory experience or activity, that will bring the mind to a steady state.

Once again I sit before the eye of the computer, trying to conjure up the vastness of our class experience, and hoping for a thread to lead us in to at least a few of the significant moments we shared. We had our largest group in decades, and unlike most big groups, which tend to be inhibitory, everyone contributed substantially in one of our most democratic discussions ever.

Patanjali continues in a most practical and unsuperstitious vein, assuring us that we don't have to do anything exotic, or

change into someone else in any misguided striving for holiness. All we have to do is follow our interests, using them to ratchet up our attention. Because the Absolute is omnipresent, attending to whatever is presented to our senses is a perfectly good way to begin the transcendence of obstacles that leads to clarity and steadiness of mind. The interest can be supported by an awareness of calm, deep breathing, and the two together form a powerful tool of orientation.

So what does this mean in practice? We all know friends who are struggling with addiction. They painfully extricate themselves for a short while, only to slip back time and time again. Unfortunately, addiction is usually addressed as something to escape *from*, but without a strong interest to aim *toward* the effort is almost always in vain. We all crave interest and excitement, and cannot bear to sit in limbo for very long. So in the absence of a creative interest the attraction of the addictive activity seeps in to fill the vacuum, and away we go.

The perfectibility of our being is the summum bonum of interests, one which demands all our attention and expertise at every moment. Philosophies that posit humans as hopeless sinners transfer this expertise to a hypothetical other, and we are left as beggars crying out for salvation. There is no expertise of our own to develop. These techniques will either fail or reduce the practitioner to a vestigial state from which the lure of addiction is never far off. Not only certain religions, but pharmaceutical and other industries thrive on such unhealthy beliefs. As we have noted before, the huge upswing in sales of medications has been fueled by “scientific” studies proving we are helpless victims of our chemistry. Happily for them, drug companies can now play God, and bestow salvation in the form of expensive pills.

When children are excited to grow up as fast as possible, what can they be thinking? They imagine they will be able to make

their own choices and have as much fun as possible. How sad that those interests are beaten out of us long before we attain adulthood.

Extending the practical implications of this sutra, I gave the example of having a struggle with a family member, a loved one who is pitted against you in some fashion. We all have these experiences, and they hurt a lot. When we're hurt we want to run away and hide or else fight back with accentuated viciousness, but these are merely gut reactions. Patanjali encourages us to use our powerful interest in making peace with our friend as a means to shrug off our personal reactions and stand our ground. We will likely have to regulate our breath, along with actively restraining our hardwired reactions. But when we make this kind of effort, we can view the situation more or less dispassionately, and gauge the feelings and desires behind the anger, jealousy or what have you, on both sides. Doing so offers us the best chance to resolve the situation to everyone's advantage.

Needless to say, Patanjali's advice works for large-scale conflicts as well as the local ones we more typically find ourselves in. Governments have ostensibly been instituted to bring this kind of wisdom to international relations, and obviate the urge to fight that surges in patriotic breasts in response to every provocation. The UN certainly has that mandate. It's too bad that fighting and dominating are still prominent interests that often subvert the civilizing trend.

We also used the example of the class itself to demonstrate the practicality of the present sutra. Those in attendance often have various inhibitions and projections that block their participation. It is less a factor without a guru physically present in the house, but it is still an important consideration. Those who succumb to such feelings don't stay involved long. But when the value of the material catches their imagination, it is much easier to let go of the negative feelings and listen to the message within the message.

Gradually a sense of comfort and acceptance spreads in to dispel the resistance, and a great deal may be gained.

So the bottom line is: engage with the Absolute at every moment. Yoga is not about trying to go elsewhere. It means being present and available to every situation. What we have to work on is delivered to our senses regularly and without fail, so long as we are alert. This is the entry point of the universe, guarded by the demons of our own obstacles with frustrating efficiency, but standing wide open if we can but find our way past them.

Carleen steered us into a discussion of sacrifice, which relates to the sutra in being a kind of interest that takes many forms, from the crudest animal sacrifice to the most sublime wisdom sacrifice. The Upanishads put an end to animal sacrifice 3000 years ago, just as Buddha and others made warfare obsolete 2500 years ago. That both continue to be practiced is a testament to the human resistance to change via intelligence. One interest many of us in fact share is how to try to implement these improvements against entrenched resistance, both internal and external.

It's not that religious practices can be considered wrong, and religion is out of the purview of Vedanta anyway, but when a spiritual practice is substituted for an appropriate physical one the mixing of frameworks can be disastrous. Cathy and Deb had read the book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, by Anne Fadiman, portraying the conflict between Hmong immigrants to Los Angeles and the medical establishment. Oregon just had another case of parents using prayer instead of medicine for their child, who subsequently died. There are many ways that wishful thinking trumps rationality, often with tragic results. Vedanta does not endorse it, except to recognize that the placebo effect is still the most powerful medical force, much more powerful than most medicines. Unfortunately it doesn't work very predictably in reference to a third party who may not share the belief as

thoroughly as the parent would want. It remains mysterious exactly how the magic of placebo is activated, so sometimes it works like magic and sometimes it fails to work at all.

Animal sacrifice as a religious practice is relatively rare these days, but if you include backyard barbecues as a modern religion it is quite common. There the religious aspect is toned down in favor of the social aspect, but on examination they aren't so very different. Consumption of food is the first principle of religion, after all. Only a hundred years ago, as Moni pointed out, Narayana Guru revised the widespread practice of animal sacrifice in South India. He told people if they had to do it, they should sacrifice a watermelon. He also revised the fire sacrifice to a symbolic version using grains and flowers in place of goats and chickens.

We recalled that sacrifice means "to make sacred," which can take place at any level of consciousness. Sometimes it is simply called "doing good." Deb generalized the idea, saying that whenever we substitute a higher vision for a lesser one we are performing a sacrifice. Overcoming our desire to fight or flee to stand firm is a type of sacrifice. The Gita lists the main categories of sacrifice in Chapter VII, verses 16-18:

Among doers of the good, four kinds are intent on Me: the distressed, the seeker of knowledge, the seeker of the goods of life, and the wise.

Of these, the wise man, forever united and unitively affiliated with the Absolute, excels, for dear to the utmost limit am I to the wise one, and he is dear to Me.

Honorable are all these, but My firm opinion is that the wise one is the Self itself. He of unitively established Self indeed remains in My path, which has nothing higher.

When we are sick or miserable, we try all sorts of strategies to get well, as is only natural. It is impossible to predict what will work

until we know what the disease is. Moreover, the cure will very likely have to be related to the awareness of the sufferer. Krishna calls this perfectly honorable. The second and third types, also honorable, are struggling to understand their place in space, and may pore over books or take classes in an effort to become sufficiently expert in some field so that they can be employed. They hope that living a comfortable life will bring them happiness. Various rituals may or may not have any impact, again depending on the person in question and their beliefs. Most people fall under these first three categories. The last type includes those who seek wisdom for its own sake, without any ulterior motive. They want to know life directly, and seek to cast away interpreted versions in favor of reality, whatever that might turn out to be.

There is no reason that a person wouldn't fall under multiple categories in the course of a life, or even simultaneously.

After surveying a wide range of then-current sacrificial practices, and giving passing approval to them all, the Gita summarizes its conclusion in Chapter IV, verses 32-34:

Thus, many and varied are the sacrifices spread in front of the Absolute. Know them all as originating in action. Thus understanding them, you shall gain release.

Superior to any sacrifice with (valuable) objects is the wisdom sacrifice; all actions have their culmination in wisdom, Arjuna.

Learn this by prostration, by searching questioning, and by service; they will instruct you (duly) in wisdom—those wise ones who can see the basic principles.

There was so much more to our class that I'm embarrassed to even send out these notes. Yet it will have to do for now. We enjoyed some good laughs and an overarching sense of community; there was some very intense opening up; even a bit of secret

communication that transpired without the communicators even being aware of it. Our closing meditation resembled pressing the lid onto a boiling pot of delicious soup, more than letting the air out of a tire. It seemed that everyone passed back out into the dark and rain afterwards possessed with an inner assurance, a gentle inner flame that will staunchly resist going out.

10/20/9

Sutra I:36

Also by meditating on the sorrowless state of inner joy one can attain luminosity of intelligence.

Once again a seemingly simple sutra supplied several searing suppositions. It is most delightful to sit at the inception of a class and have little or no idea what will come up, but to feel confident based on experience that some real insights will blossom forth. This is a far cry from many years ago, when the comments made were all over the map, and it was an art form to decipher how they were in any way related to the subject at hand. Nowadays our focus is excellent.

Nitya's commentary emphasizes that our depressed states are very real and painful, but that meditating on a joyful idea is an effective technique for extricating ourselves and bringing ourselves back to a happy state of mind. We don't have to supply joy itself, but only counteract our negativity with a positive idea, and we will float back to the surface to rejoin our real joy.

Deb started us off by reprising a favorite image in her mind, of the two Upanishadic birds sitting on a tree branch in the jungle, one avidly eating fruits while the other looks on dispassionately. She likened the witnessing bird to the sorrowless state of inner joy, which is always present even as we gobble the fruits and nuts of our worldly experience. A number of these fruits give us a tummy ache or leave us with a hangover, but we don't seem to remember

this when they are temptingly hanging on a bush right in front of us. The bird analogy reminds us that we always have the option of returning to our core, because it is always a part of us. We don't have to attain any mystical state to find happiness.

Later Deb reminded us of the similarity of the two birds to our left and right brain. Jill Taylor's advice is when we become bogged down in misery, we should just "step to the right," and readjust into our right brains. This should never be taken as political advice, by the way! Because the brain controls the opposite side of the body, our left arm or wing is connected to the inclusive right brain, while our right wing is directed by the discriminatory and calculating left brain. And as we have often noted, you need both aspects working in concert for optimum health and expertise. We can't fly with only one wing.

In any case, we study and practice Patanjali's advice because we agree that we are capable of having an impact on our state of mind. We are not merely helpless victims of fate and chemistry, we embody some measure of freedom, and we are experimenting with yoga to see just how much freedom we can obtain. So the question arises, why do we fail? Why do we give up? From where does the certainty come that we are ineffectual at running our own lives?

Anita mentioned the fact that drug companies have managed to convince whole segments of the populace that we are at the mercy of our chemistry, and only they can offer us adjustments via oral medication. But there is no money in promoting self-healing through mental exercises. Yoga is based on the premise that consciousness is primary, and science is beginning to agree. The brain determines what chemicals are manufactured and when. Sure, you can tinker with them using drugs, but you can also alter them using the intellect, and the side effects are much less. The key is that you have to sustain your intention through both the good times and the bad. The norm is to be content when times are good

and seek medication when times are bad. Too bad the meds are engineered to have unpleasant aftereffects so that you wind up taking them as a matter of course.

We talked about how as children we learn to make excuses as a protective shield against the incursions of adult authority. While these may start out as guarding our sense of personal integrity, they can become chronic, and before too long they will be enlisted in the defense of the ego in its willful resistance to anything outside itself. The inner voice of most people is a litany of lame excuses and pretentious self-ratification, because contact with the sorrowless state of inner joy has been lost.

I know I for one make excuses to myself all day long. At least I have learned not to use them to delude others or myself. I shrug them off. But even after a lifetime of yoga apprenticeship, I can still hear that inner voice explaining everything I do in public to some imaginary outside authority. It's a very debilitating frame of mind. I would like to dare to be myself, but with all the resistance afforded by the world around, it is much easier to have a cover story. I don't use these prevarications, but the habit of such insane chatter still persists even without my active support.

Paul summed it up psychologically by noting that we make excuses based on the perceived gap between our superego and ego, in other words, between what we think we should be and what we recognize ourselves to be. The sorrowless state of inner joy isn't dependent on any kind of adjustment between these factors.

Because we come to live in a world of make-believe, we imagine that pretending to be something is the same as being it. Unfortunately we are often unable to hypnotize ourselves into ignoring the gap. Then we look for a way to make ourselves real once again. Those who study yoga see it as a sound and sober way to effect meaningful positive changes in their lives. Since it is a "fringe" activity (except for hatha yoga exercises) it is not performed to impress other people and throw them off the scent of

how lost we are. It's done by us simply to rectify our state of mind, which turns out to be beneficial to our environment as well as to us.

Ann told several stories about how she decided to not indulge in harmful attitudes, because she realized they were all in her mind. When her troubled son went away to Spain she would worry about him all day long. Then she determined the time difference so she only had to worry at certain hours. She honed it down to a single hour when he was most likely to be out on the town, and she concentrated all her crying into that hour. Then she thought, this is ridiculous! Her state of mind was based on nothing at all, and had no possible influence on what her son was doing. So she quit worrying. Once she decided to stop, she just stopped. It wasn't an agonizing process, just a simple decision.

Another time a friend of hers was entertaining a person who had had a very tough life, and that person turned on the radio to a right wing rant station. She could see her friend getting more and more depressed, struggling to think of ways to fix the problems the "pundit" was raving about. So she told her, "Just change the channel." There was no need to filter all that crap through her psyche. Just change the channel. That's what Patanjali is offering here, too.

We forget that we started life as neutral, blissful beings, and it took many years of meditating on a series of depressing thoughts before we got to the miserable state that passes for normal. The depression we would like to overcome is the end product of a lot of effort on our part, aided and abetted by social pressures. If we put even a modicum of energy into going the other way, we will begin to recover. So what is holding us back? Why do we think that depression is our birthright and that joy is an impossible dream?

It does take serious determination to counteract the normal mendaciousness of our ego, which has a lot of inertia behind it. When we take a determination to change for the better, it whispers

in our ear that we aren't capable of lifting ourselves, we're not worthy, we are valueless. Materialistic science, at its zenith during the first half of the twentieth century, imparted the conviction that we are machines run by our physiology and chemistry, and that these are fixed for all time in early childhood. Such a castrating philosophy! Under its quasi-logical spell we learned to live as eunuchs, quietly attending to the throne and being no threat whatsoever to either the king's power or the queen's virginity. We missed the boat before we even graduated from diapers.

As we have often pointed out, modern religions have also striven to emasculate and effeminate their proponents. The idea of salvation by God or a stand-in for Him means we are helpless of our own accord. Our only task is to step out of the way so He can work without interference. As long as such beliefs trump reality, they can sustain a complaisant ego. But we see how the illusions can lose their grip and the votaries descend into hatred and hostility, becoming swamped in despair as ever greater injections of raw faith are required to paper over their aching hearts.

Happily, more recent science based on actual observation accords with yoga in demonstrating the plasticity of the human brain, meaning we are capable of changing for the better at any age and in great measure. As I told my friend who is attending college after several years off due to illness, and who is struggling to get his mind back into gear, it's like sliding a cement block across the floor. At first there is so much friction that it takes a huge amount of force to start it moving, but then it gains momentum and becomes easier the faster you can push it. It's easier still if a friend or friends chip in and help, which they will be happy to do once they see you making the effort. Every success contributes to heighten our confidence too.

Our voluntary homework is to examine all the ways we sabotage our own potential for happiness. Why is it so hard to keep our minds focused on bright and beautiful aspects of life, and so

much easier to dwell on the downside? We're not after any Pollyannaish superficiality that ignores half of the coin. We already suffer from its opposite that only embraces unhappiness. Inner joy is neutrally poised between good and bad, after all. It doesn't require us to grasp just half of the picture. We want to use specific examples of goodness to counterbalance the darkness, and so achieve transcendent equipoise. But we have decided in advance that we can't do it, that it's too hard, that only special people succeed. So what is it that is holding us back? By seeing that, we can free ourselves to make genuine progress.