

2022 Patanjali Class

1/25/22

4 – Yoga Letter Three

The third Yoga Letter includes a long list of qualities a proper Guru should exemplify, which for all of us hapless mortals amount to impossible requirements. I also read out the more compact list Narayana Guru himself provided, in the Introduction to the American edition of Love and Blessings:

Before his death, Narayana Guru specified the requirements for a guru in his ashram. He or she must be a scholar, a hermit, broadminded, possessed of equanimity, a profound thinker, an ascetic, a speaker of truths, efficient and energetic, having good morals, and not idle or lazy. Although only three years old when Narayana Guru passed away, Nitya Chaitanya Yati, who came to embody all these qualities, was clearly the perfect man for the job.

People like this are hard to come by. Presumably, Nitya included the long list in his Letter because he was aware of the many charlatans in the game, who could get away with a lot of mischief by according themselves the title. It served as a warning to not be duped by them.

That said, in lieu of a guru there is much that can be gained by pondering and investigating the wise words found in books focused on high values. Our class is anchored by a group of people who for many years sat at the feet of Guru Nitya in deepest admiration, and were never let down by him. His philosophy is solid and generous at every level. We do the best we can to draw transformational lessons from what he left behind, buttressed with personal experiences of the edifying, occasionally electrifying personal interactions we were fortunate to have with him.

With that preamble, I invited everyone to speak to the main theme of Letter Three, the role of the gunas in their life, and how meaningful that has been to them.

Bill reminded us that sattva should be the guide of our search for truth, how Nitya says right off the bat that when rajas takes the lead over sattva, it brings egotism and selfishness. In Nitya's words, "The only way to keep the superiority of the leadership of sattva is by making it intimately loyal to the pure light of the Absolute."

That's true, and lesser loyalties bring greater conflicts, but the point here is that all the gunas are part of us, three intrinsic aspects of our karma. Whatever our intention, which is the sattvic aspect, we need to put energy into it (rajas) and stabilize the result (tamas), or we are building castles in the air. The pure light of the Absolute includes our intentions toward not only light, but for compassion, universal justice, and the rest.

While I was looking for the directive from Narayana Guru in the L&B Intro, I was drawn to this beautiful description of just what Nitya was talking about as the light of the Absolute, plus a very helpful letter excerpt that neatly reflects his philosophy:

Near the end of his life Nitya described the unitive state of a guru to those gathered in his evening class. "Every time I sit in prayer, there is an overwhelming experience where there is no sun or any lamp lit, and where there are no objects to be illuminated. There is an indescribable effulgence which does not permit any inside or outside, where there are no temporal dualities of before or hereafter. If it does not bear any fragmented ego to say 'I am,' this experiential imperience and imperiential experience can be poetically described only as a word of supplication."

Such realization brings with it a sense of lightness. Nitya epitomized a substantial portion of his delightful philosophy in a letter to Sraddha in 1981. It is well worth previewing here:

“Who am I? That is the great question. Go within. Find out.” So clamor all the masters. Take a break from being so serious. What is the point of knowing who you are? You are just you, a plain and simple you, like the plain and simple “I am” among a multitude of I’s and you’s and he’s and she’s. What’s more important is to watch the traffic and note the light signals at the crossroad and to understand the moods of the people and the markets you deal with. You will be a lot better off if you cultivate good taste for forms, shapes, designs and colors, a good ear for music, sound logic to think correctly, good ethical norms to conduct yourself amicably and cheerfully with others, and a sensibility to appreciate all the finer nuances of life’s music, which has a wide variety ranging from the Sama Veda to disco.

Everyone is as important and unique as I am. So let me re-frame the question “Who am I?” as “Who are all these wonderful people including me?” Why go within? Why not be friends with this tangible world, this unending feast of colors and music in which the grand drama of life is always in full swing. Why should anyone dampen one’s spirit with a cynical philosophy of rumination on death and disease? That will be taken care of anyway.

Your self does not belong to any caste. You cannot be perceived by the senses. Unattached, formless and witness of all are you. Be happy. This suggests a drastic reduction of the solid person of flesh and bones into a rarefied abstraction. I do not have to write off the legitimate use of my senses and mind to be happy. I know caste is a barbarian prejudice, just as race is a regional scruple that can be dismissed as a

pettiness of mind. We are mini systems intrinsically fabricated into the microcosmic system of the macrocosmic system. I can be genuinely happy by functioning as best I can within the frame of reference to which I legitimately belong without either exaggerating or obliterating my role and identity.

Moving on to the gunas, Steven told us he finds them to be helpful in monitoring his state of mind. In the course of a single day, he witnesses their shifts between periods of calm, frenetic activity, and eventually, lethargy, with no sense of direction. Also, in his dreams there are times when he feels elation and other times when he seems to be working through his neuroses. He lamented that we don't have a living Guru to work with.

I asked Steven if he also noticed the several combinations of gunas that Nitya describes in this Letter. It's good to study each of them separately, to help identify them, but they don't exist in isolation. All three work together to produce your artistic achievements, for instance. There is a vision of what you want to happen, the bringing it about through actual work, and the sense of completion afterwards. How could you leave any of it out?

Steven likened the gunas to the three primary colors, how when they are mixed together they create other colors, though the primary one will still be dominant over the others.

Paul related the idea to the neurology of our excitatory and inhibitory responses. Healthy functioning only happens when there is a balance between them. Like that, even though one is the initiator of the others, the conditions of transparency, translucency and opacity all need to be in balance.

Anita made the important point that the Buddha is not embodied, Christ is not embodied, and for us the Guru is not embodied now, so it's no different. Their spirits are definitely with

us and their teachings are just as potent and strong, real and alive, as we can perceive them to be.

That's right. And the more ancient the preceptor is, the more their words are likely to have been recast by "helpful" scribes when they were recopied. Keeping this in mind, it is ultimately up to each individual to make use of the recorded wisdom in an optimal way for them. In the Portland Gurukula, we are blessed to have a small group of sincerely dedicated seekers to generate valuable feedback for each other, amplifying and providing practical outlets for the beneficial ideas we regularly address.

Andy related that it was the profound hope of the Guru that you discover the guru inside yourself. When you seek outside, you run into a mirror, made up of the gunas, of nature. The true discovery is at home, in you. There are fairy tales about people who wander around looking for treasure, and then they come home and find it buried in their back yard. Andy doesn't think the message of Jesus was any different: he said to look inside. There's a skill in the human being in directing us, without intermediaries. The core of the matter lies within.

Bill spoke in support of Andy, and quoted the Letter that all the admirable characteristics of a guru are of no use if you can't find in your heart a golden link with the Light with which you want to become united. As Anita suspected, this makes our inner connection primary, not dependent on a guru's largesse.

We have noted before how the sattvic vision of a guru is made permanent as a movement by the rajasic efforts of their disciples, and eventually at least some of it becomes static and even oppressive as it ossifies into tamas. Vedanta is a reaction to the tyranny of the priesthood of its time, as is Islam. Our personal quest includes throwing off the tyranny of our own burdensome conditioning to reattend to the light of the Absolute in our hearts and minds. We are not meant to divide ourselves against ourselves. Nitya puts this succinctly in the Introduction to his Gita:

Most people think of ends and means dualistically. When taken separately, “means” can become a painful anticipation, and can lead one ultimately even to frustration. When ends and means are unitively conceived there is a continuous and progressive realization of the end in the application of the means. For instance, when a child runs after a ball, its game is a “means” to gain the “end” of happiness. Here, ends and means have no real dichotomy between them. Happiness is not an award given at the end of the game. Right from the beginning, when the child kicks as well as misses the ball, it is in a state of happiness which is the natural end of the game. In other words, the game provides to the child a yoga of ends and means.

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

Steven is drawn to the idea of surrender, thinking “I can’t do this on my own, please show me your mercy,” as his inner prayer. He acknowledges the guru may exist even as a living principle, providing a way to connect on a mystical level.

Prayer is a way to surrender to the higher being inside yourself, even if it’s directed to a seemingly outer entity. And it’s true: sometimes you have to be miserable about yourself before you can surrender your self. Paradoxically, knowing where it’s going obviates the surrender.

Steven thought the act of surrender means setting your ego aside, since relying on it is not working. It’s a simple act that seems to allow a different flow. He feels that’s what Christians mean when they talk about prayer — the humbleness.

Paul said that's also what baptism is for Christians: you surrender to the water and you are born again. The idea is to put to death everything you have previously experienced and then live by spirit alone. From that perspective, we're simply God looking at herself in a mirror—we are that perception the Creator uses for looking through us.

One difference between Christianity and Vedanta is it's not just a matter of being dunked. There is a lot of work to be done after you make the commitment. Once you make the decision you have baggage to unload and a heart to open larger and larger. Several people pointed out that many Christians also realize this. There are many similarities, for the careful observer.

Nancy doesn't want us to think we have to work hard at these things. All of life is just an experience, and being aware of the three states of mind gives her a way of understanding what she is experiencing each day. Being more aware of how her consciousness is going, is what this teaching means to her. Most days she'll wake up and know from the moment she opens her eyes she's feeling a certain way, and she'll have to conduct herself accordingly. She tries to balance and work with it rather than let it color everything. She lets things come at her, knowing there is enough stability in her life that will move her back into a balanced place.

Sometimes it's heavier, and she has to be consciously aware that she's not feeling very good, and she can adjust herself with effort. What matters to Nancy is watching and knowing there are these things in her everyday experiences, and the more conscious she is of it, the easier it is for her not to get stuck, to let it flow. There is a flow to life, and if you don't think too hard on it, it can carry you more easily than if you struggle.

Pratibha agreed the gunas are very helpful tools, giving us the ability to change what's in our mind.

Steven figured that you are taking a step back, rather than getting entrapped with identifying yourself with these states of mind. For him, it's a key insight in Eastern wisdom that liberation comes from not identifying yourself with the horizontal world. He feels he doesn't have to identify with it.

I stipulated that following your joy is how to do this work. It's not a misery proposition. Joy is the key to how we find our way: finding and following what our interests are, what makes us joyful. And like the gunas, the horizontal and vertical parameters of life are describing a single entity. We are trying to bring them into harmony rather than eradicating one half of our whole being.

Jan agreed with Nancy the gunas determine the flow you're in, your mood, and they help you see how you can try and balance yourself out. When she finds herself in a state of tamasic depression, she recalls a teaching of Carl Jung that sometimes you're depressed because something is needing to be born within you. She looks at tamas as a seed state, while recognizing it's good to appreciate why are you stuck in it.

Pratibha concurred that we need to accept where we are before we can move out of a stuck state. Instead of trying to jump out of it, we can accept and learn from it.

This reminded me, as it often does, of a part of a letter in L&B from July, 1973 (Nitya is not speaking of clinical depression): "Depression by itself is not a disease. It only shows that there are some kinds of air pockets in your personality that are not fully plugged-in with life interests."

Andy recalled how Nitya spoke of the gunas as being strongly emotionally flavored. Tamas has a kind of a freezing quality that is connected with memory. When you have a problem, it goes along with an emotional situation where you might be kind of stuck. You have an impression you are bothered by something, but it is connected strongly to the freezing of experience. There is something that is making a dynamic psychological experience

rigid, and maybe it has a kind of a systemic role in the way your mind works.

Bill chimed in that Nitya's stabilization of an aspect, creating a memory, is a much more positive way to look at *tamas*.

I added a take on *tamas* based on modern brain science: much of our functioning is automatic, based on the way our neurons are structured. Though they are *tamasic*, the automatic programs in our brain are very useful, freeing our mind for other things. A classic example is learning to tie your shoes when you are three years old. You start with the idea (*sattva*), and get instructed and painstakingly repeat the process over and over (*rajas*), until the neurons wire in a way that effortlessly succeeds (*tamas*). You are now freed up to proceed to the next learning task.

We use only a smidgen of our brains to move through the day, and thus are potentially liberated for participating in a flying circus of possibilities. We also find there are dark areas of stuckness, where we have conditionings we want to change. If we can link our *rajasic* energy up to a new vision, we will gradually rewire our neurons to support it, and the old habits wither away as their neurons are repurposed.

Anita added a chemical side to this story. We are embodied in a biological body, and we produce chemicals and hormones that affect our moods. She feels she has to do work to overcome some of what is going on in her body, chemically. It's really the same process: the neurons direct the production of the chemicals that drive our feelings and behaviors. The good news—and something that science has only “discovered” in the last twenty years—is that we can alter our neurochemical structure, with intentions and behaviors, and also medicines when those fall short. Our neurons are now known to be dynamic, where in the twentieth century they were not. This is a teaching that has been around for millennia, on the fringe, that we can seriously take to heart, with scientific backing.

Our class time ran out, so I didn't have a chance to read the "thought for the day" I had brought. While Nitya was speaking of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, it applies to all his philosophy:

This work is not meant to be a code of ethics, and is to be kept free from degenerating into a mere dharma shastra (textbook on right conduct) or *smriti* (remembered application of heard wisdom) which would belong more to the side of action rather than to understanding. The present work is devoted mainly to Self-realization, and should be free from the social and obligatory aspects of morality. Therefore the author contents himself with broad generalizations which have more of a wisdom interest than one of social action. (BU, Vol III.157)

Part II

The old notes are long and involved, and struck me as Too Much Information. I'll just pull out a little bit. This is part of my response to Nancy Y's Patanjali class, 2008, for Letter Three:

In the last letter we studied the gunas separately, and now we're asked to look at them in combination. This more closely resembles real life. We are usually in an admixture of states, and seldom exemplify a single one in isolation.

Since we are advised to stand outside of the influence of the gunas, striving to become sattvic seems irrelevant. I prefer to observe how they are all present in varying degrees, and by the simple process of observation strengthen the witnessing aspect that is unaffected by them. But they are also like clothes: people don't want to see me without them. I can know I am not my clothes, but the world prefers to associate me with what I wear. And that's fine. So I try to dress decently, not to mention uniquely.

An important aspect of this verse is that we need a teacher, guru, or other outside factor in order to become perfected. It is said that the Buddha was able to become enlightened on his own because he was the first, but ever since then everybody needs to recognize the helping hand of the ascended masters, because they are also a part of our universe now. In any case it is far too easy to become bogged down in a mental morass without outside input of some kind. I find that a class or study group can serve very well as a kind of guru. Other members point out aspects that we ourselves have overlooked, or help us to refine our understanding. When we change our ideas based on what we learn from others, we are living a form of yoga practice. I like to think of the guru as the principle of teaching that seems to be an integral part of the makeup of the universe. Sometimes it appears in the form of a person, but more often as something else. It is always ready to hand us our next lesson when we are ready to receive it. Thanks to Nancy, this study group can also be a part of that guru principle.

In that light, having recourse to a regular session of the Yoga Sutras or these Yoga letters is a very good way to keep the sattva focused on something sublime, in this case a learning program. The sattvic interest is the reason for the rajasic effort of writing and thinking about the lessons, so it is in the driver's seat. The rajas is yoked in service to the sattvic vision. I am not trying to prove any point or ratify myself or impress anyone, so the sattva is not subservient to rajasic impulses. If these do crop up. I can use the Delete button and you will never know!

From PG class notes:

Nitya gives a final “briefing” here before we begin our yoga practice in earnest. He correlates knowing, doing, and existing or stabilizing with sattva, rajas and tamas, and then discusses how the

gunas often operate in pairs, and also how one half of the pair tends to be dominant.

Mostly importantly, we need the knowing, sattvic part to lead our parade. When it is paired with rajas, doing, it is healthiest when the doing is at the service of the knowing. Unfortunately it is often the other way around, and we tailor our thoughts and opinions to what we either want to get done or believe we are supposed to get done. Nitya tells us, “When such a thing happens, the horizon of your personal interest shrinks from being altruistic to the sorrowful state of naiveté, conceit, and self-centeredness.” He also notes something that has always baffled me, the arrogance of intellectuals, who substitute snobbery for legitimate arguments. Nitya writes, “You might have noticed the highly aggressive and conceited nature of very intelligent people who are incorrigibly egoistic. This is the case of sattva losing its game when bracketed with rajas.”

Getting into shouting matches with bigots never changes anything. Instead we need to become wise to embody enlightened unitive behavior and lead primarily by example. All visions are energized and implemented by rajas, and when they are thwarted anger and disillusion result, which accounts for the loud aggressiveness of some idealists. Sattvic ideals are those of universal love and kindness, community, spiritual growth, and so on. The social beehive lauds mostly rajasic ideals: busyness and honey gathering. Tamasic ideals are selfish and all about building defenses and wearing blinders. Shades of all these are present in virtually everyone. Yoga teaches us to implement them harmoniously and with a minimum of conflict.