

2022 Patanjali Class 54

5/30/23

Sutra II:4 – Nescience (avidya) is the field for the other [affliction]s, whether they are dormant, attenuated, alternating, or expanded.

Sutra II:5 – Nescience is taking the non-eternal, impure, painful, and the non-Self to be the eternal, pure, pleasurable, and the Self.

In these two sutras, according to Deb, Patanjali underlines the most essential confluence of Vedanta and Yoga, that understanding does not mean the comparison of relative factors like good and evil, and supporting one over the other; it is understanding the total knowledge situation, being absorbed into the unity. They are ways to reconcile both our natural absorption in knowledge and to live in the world. The question is how do we exist in that world of oneness, with all the stray paths of affliction that take us into world of ignorance? She thought nescience meant being alive to individuality, without that inner connectedness.

Deb's personal experience along those lines comes from toward the end of college. She was sitting outside after her Buddhist History class, feeling convinced she knew a lot of *stuff* but she didn't understand anything. It was a huge moment for her, realizing the importance of doing more than just accruing knowledge. She felt certain the individual items that relate to us as embodied individual beings are not the ultimate accounting of who we are. I shared similar lifelong feelings as my second example, in Part 1A, below.

Andy mused how interesting it is, in moments when you have clearly strayed, to look at just how that situation is based on avidya. If you get really mad, really angry, the structure of avidya becomes obvious. Your confusion has the effect of highlighting that avidya is a foundational mistake. You couldn't be angry unless it had the foundation of avidya. Avidya is the root. Unfortunately,

he didn't elaborate, but it can be related to Nitya's plant analogy in sutra 4, where an affliction grows from the foundation of a seed to full flowering:

Nescience is like a breeding ground. Egoism, passionate attachment, hatred, and infatuation grow in the field of nescience. Each of these afflictions has four states: dormant, attenuated, alternating, and expanded. The dormant condition is that in which the obstacle is present in a latent form. It is like a seed waiting for a favorable environment to express itself. The attenuated condition is similar to a sprout coming out of the seed, which has little strength to assert itself. It gets strengthened according to the stimulus it gets, gaining or losing momentum as the situation becomes more or less favorable. The alternating aspect is very much like ambivalence where two forces such as attraction and repulsion are alternately dormant and active. The fourth aspect is a fully operative stage where egoism, attachment, hatred, and infatuation become fully assertive.

Clearly, without a seed planted in nescience none of this would happen. Deb explained we have to have a sense of our self as separate in order to become either angry or wildly attracted.

Andy noticed how Patanjali is spelling out oppositional pairs here, but Nitya's commentary is to undermine the pairness. In using the example of the glowworm, it is clearly anitya, brief and perishable, but the effect is nitya, eternal. Nitya is subverting Patanjali's vision in the way he is commenting. Deb held that Nitya wasn't saying you shouldn't have these transient experiences, but that the eternal one is right in the heart of what is transient.

This approach highlights the minimal difference between Vedanta, where the One is within all; and Yoga, at least Patanjali's

Yoga, where you opt for the unitive aspect over duality, and work toward it. Yoga emphasizes effortful attainment of Isvara, while the Gita recommends primary affiliation with the ever-present Absolute, causing all irrelevancies to fall away naturally.

It's a kind of dualism to distinguish between unitive knowledge or taking care of the details of your life. Just that day I had read a part of *A Gentleman in Moscow*, by Amor Towles, (a wonderful easy read, with plenty of humor mixed into the tragedies), where the Count and his student are discussing de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, citing the very first line: "There is not, I think, a single country in the civilized world where less attention is paid to philosophy than in the United States." The student goes on "And here. A few chapters later, he singles out their unusual passion for material well-being. The minds of Americans, he says, *are universally preoccupied with meeting the body's every need and attending to life's little comforts*. And that was in 1840. Imagine if he had visited them in the 1920s!"

Deb recalled the paragraph from sutra I:50, where the actors act, but once they're done, they have no pretense of identification with their roles in the drama. She felt it perfectly exemplified the relation between unity and duality. She gave her own example of hating her town during high school, possibly because she missed her previous residence so much. She could always come up with another fault it had and slather it on, and it took her years to get over it.

Andy could relate, how she had the sense of herself then as a hating person. She had a powerful identity that projected those feelings. He realizes we have that powerful sense of ourselves as an actor who is commissioned to feel certain ways and do certain things as an isolated specific person wielding those kinds of emotions.

I wondered if I was the only person whose friends in the teen years were the ones who hated the same things I did? We identified

ourselves by what we hated. It seemed ubiquitous, but apparently it wasn't, as no one knew what I was talking about. Maybe because I went through that stage, I see it everywhere—how people are drawn to those who hate like they do. They form cliques, bands, teams, where they don't have to reveal anything genuine about themselves, so it's a highly effective defense mechanism, though it plays into the mob mentality. I wasn't in any group as such, but I do recall that feeling of kinship and easing of tension with people who were bitching about the same things I was. There's seldom any shortage of injustice to carry on about.

Paul asked if the unified state gives definition to the duality? It seems to him that unity and oneness find their *expression* through duality, and one cannot exist without the other. The mind operates on a stage of duality, so he isn't sure how to think of the Absolute as the other side of the coin to multiplicity.

I suggested that, while Paul's points are valid, actually it's more that duality defines unity: it gives shape to the unity, and at the same time it's made out of the unity. They depend on each other to exist. You need both of them, both unity and duality, to have a whole. I reread Nitya's unequivocal last paragraph of this section, a reassurance we don't have to sweat the details overmuch:

Discerning the Self is as difficult as discerning the eternal. As long as you live in a body and have to maintain bodily function with socially approved programs of action, conditionings—from autonomous reflex actions to biologic habits of all kinds—are to be accepted as part of your life. Only when you ultimately gain total absorption in the transcendence of Self will you cease to experience the reality of the conditioned self.
(162)

This brought an old saying to Paul's mind, about how knowledge separates unity into many small parts, and it is wisdom that takes all those parts and pulls them back together again. That's right, and it's a perennial translation glitch here, with avidya. Vidya is generally translated as knowledge, but it means the knowledge that we call wisdom, that unites, is all-encompassing. Avidya, non-knowledge, is the type Paul is referring to as mere knowledge, those encyclopedic piles of individual items.

In keeping with Nitya's suggested exercise, to sit quietly without using names or forms, Deb cited the first verse of the Tao Te Ching, which magnificently expresses how these two aspects go together:

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.
The name that can be named is not the eternal name.
The nameless is the beginning of heaven and earth.
The named is the mother of ten thousand things.
Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.
Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations.
These two spring from the same source but differ in name;
this appears as darkness.
Darkness within darkness.
The gate to all mystery. (trans. Gia-fu Feng)

I then read out my first example in Part 1A, underlining how the woman was ultimately disappointed in how well enclosing yourself in barricades works, turning into an inviolable prison. I recalled as a child putting on similar acts of rejection when my feelings were hurt, and desperately hoping someone would try to drag me out of my isolation. Mostly it didn't happen, and then you're stuck with it, because you've pushed the people who care about you away.

Jan is well aware how eternal and fleeting feelings mix together in the heart. This time of year, spring, brings all that up

for her, with such bountiful life force and all the beauty. She's been in a reverie appreciating its glories but noticing how fast they fly.

Susan wrote up her example for us:

I was enjoying my exercise class this morning with a friend and a teacher I like. Then part way through the teacher pointed out that I wasn't putting my foot in the right position. I really thought I was doing it correctly so I argued about it a bit. It felt as though a part of me had intruded on the pleasant session I was having — definitely a younger part that doesn't like to be corrected. I apologized to the teacher afterward for arguing with her corrections. She was understanding and kind. Usually, I would just go along but it felt good to acknowledge that part's intrusion, mostly for my own understanding. It felt like a good place to dive in and work and discover how this issue with disliking corrections got started.

This is an excellent example of how our defenses pop up in totally ordinary situations, and we might easily miss the chance of examining them. Susan clearly saw there was no real reason to protest, yet the old habit had its way with her. She did all the right things to not nurture the attenuated weed, discountenancing it and letting it shrivel. None dare call it Yoga, but that's what it is, at heart.

Paul empathized with Susan, yet oddly equated it with children having toys they shouldn't have, like when one of his children picked up a knife in the kitchen. Paul was wondering if he should not have intervened with the child's natural impulse, since in a unified state you can't get angry, so it meant he wasn't in one. In the individuated state, he gets upset, but how can he live without it? The individualized state helps us function, and the unified state ties everything together. He wondered how much power he should

give either of them, when he doesn't want to give lordship to one over the other.

So yes, the anger is extra, likely some conditioning there, but taking a knife away from a young child is simply good sense. No need to assume they did it with evil intent. Probably it was curiosity, so it's a teaching moment, not a disciplinary one.

This gets to a most important issue in this study—the two parts are together, in fact they are one part seen in two different perspectives. Reality is one, interpretation is all over the map. Neither is something that has to be suppressed. We have to accept of the necessity of engaging in the horizontal world, and not try to shut it off or cut it off. The horizontal is the expression of our vertical nature, its shape. What's being taught here is how certain afflictions rise up in us, and how to take them into consideration and change their trajectory—as Deb put it, to stop feeding them.

We used Nitya's stillness exercise for the closing meditation, bringing a deep peace to our communal gathering. Then we took Nitya's admonition to *Leave it when you can no longer remain in the quiet of your consciousness*. While the shaping returned, the stillness persisted.

Part 1A

My two examples, from the old notes:

Recently I had a talk with a young woman who had been hurt in love and so decided that she was not only unfit for a satisfactory relationship, but that there was no hope, so she was giving up. Actually, she wasn't just giving up, she was erecting tough barricades against any repeat of the experience. If Prince Charming came knocking, she would have him thrown out. I have met a significant number of people who have followed this pattern, and

all were very disappointed at how well it worked. Sadly, it's much harder to undo after the barriers are up.

It was amazing to me how hard the young woman argued for the barricades, yet pain drives us to it, and it drives us with a vengeance. If she could be convinced to work half as valiantly for openness and purity of heart, the results would be palpable if not stunning. This is where mistaking the painful for the pleasurable really impacts us and deforms our life. Nitya brings the point home: "The very reasoning and cogitating faculty on which a person depends for discerning truth is vitiated by its own imperfections." He then conjures up Kant's image of a soul that is isolated in a prisonlike castle, with only stained glass windows to look out of. Some of us even decide to nail plywood over the stained glass so that no light can get in or out.

This example touches on purity as well as pain. Erecting barricades is the definition of impurity; conversely, purity means living without them. This is very different from the cheap moralistic version puritans are fond of pontificating about.

I cited my Gita commentary's discussion of purity, from XIII, 7, which I hereby reprint:

Purity, *saucham*, is usually associated with so-called moral behavior. Striving to always be good and pure feeds the spiritual ego like nothing else, leading to intractable problems. Spiritual purity is actually a totally different matter. When we latch on to certain static states, such as when we feel ashamed or upset or guilty, then we aren't open to the next thing that comes along. Our vision becomes clouded whenever we cling to the familiar, because we are not free to be open to the next moment. To stay in the flow we have to release our hang-ups and fixations. Whenever we get stuck, particularly in emotionally-charged states, that is precisely where we need to do our work, to restore our fluidity.

When purity becomes a part of us, we will see life as *lila*, a divine sportive play, where all meaning occurs within the unfoldment of events just as the tree develops from the seed. Such an attitude allows for easy detachment and the flexibility to let go when the flow sweeps you away from what you cherish or cling to.

Early Christian scholar Elaine Pagels had the lost and unorthodox Nag Hammadi scrolls fall in her lap, certainly an “act of God” if ever there was one—and was unsullied enough to realize their value and bring them to the attention of the public, starting with her book *The Gnostic Gospels*. If Pagels had had a stake in the status quo of the Christian Church, she might have done what others have often done before her and buried the scrolls in some musty college basement. But she was unattached, and so able to act with purity of intent. Her work has led to an avalanche of fresh and valuable perspectives on the human history of the planet.

If you are pure you can set aside your egoistic desires and act for the greatest common good, which includes your own enjoyment. This is very different from the aptly named Puritanical notion that purity means not breaking social rules, or not having any fun, such as enjoying sex or imbibing psychotropic substances. Dr. G.H. Mees puts this succinctly in *The Key to Genesis*:

In Europe and America there is a strong tendency to identify morality and spirituality. But anyone who has common sense and looks around, is aware that there are a great many people who are moral saints, but lack inner peace and do not know true happiness. In the East the identification of morality and spirituality is as a rule avoided.

Speaking of soma, anyone who has taken psychedelic medicine has almost certainly learned the importance of *saucham*, purity. Any and all extraneous thoughts are like catching a wave wrong in surfing: you instantly wipe out and get rolled under in the churn. Worse, what you think or fear manifests instantly as a vision, so if you conceive of something awful, that something will immediately become your experience. As far as you can tell, it is just as real as any other “normal” experience. You really believe you’re dying, or being cut in pieces, or being raped, or what have you. So it is absolutely incumbent that you remain in the neutral zone and don’t let your mind wander into projections. This is the source of the certitude that what you think becomes your reality sooner or later, “what you see is what you get” as the old song goes. Ordinarily there is a time lag so it’s much harder to notice that what we imagine is unfolding as our experience, but during the soma trip the feedback is instantaneous. Purity means not initiating such chains of events by cooking up harebrained schemes.

Secondly:

Of the four pairs of dual factors, we spent the most time on eternal versus transient values. The basic example I offered was of how our sense of ‘I’ stays steady through our entire life, even as our bodies and minds change shape. Other people insist that we are nothing more than our external, perceptible characteristics, and we may eventually buy into it. Then we spend time crafting what we look like and trying to learn things that will impress others. By focusing on externals we become hollow, and as the modern world with all its peacock feathers shows all too plainly, we have to go to extremes to impress

people who don't really care anyway. We become more and more desperate, until we give up.

I well remember my feeling of outrage as a child when my friends and family insisted I was my externals. I knew perfectly well that those were tangential at best, but if I tried to talk about it I was scorched with scorn. I was accused of denying the truth of who I was. Despite my initial good sense, I too became preoccupied with crafting a well-camouflaged persona so I could mingle with other humans and not draw their ire. Because I never forgot completely though, when Vedanta came along and turned the whole game upside down, I welcomed it eagerly. Vedanta insists that your core is eternal and your body and mind are destined to disintegrate, so identifying with your core is a key issue. My recent near-death experience reinforced that truth big time, with the perceived environment being hyper-transient while my sense of self remained intact, although stressed.

The amount of pain we experience because we identify with our flawed exteriors is astronomical. With a healthy conception about what is more important, we can disown that garbage and be much happier and stronger.

Part II

Happily, Eugene sent a response:

Wow! What notes!! Scott, I became best friends with my recently departed Elliott of Santa Barbara because we hated the same things, people, books, and words. When we were in Santa Barbara, at home, we shared what we really loved. In college, every Sunday, my clique of ruffians would gather at Campus Diner and literally make a list of things we were Through With! I am through with those guys who wear white sports socks and

loafers. I am through with fake meat! One Sunday, we had over 600 items listed on our So Through List. We stopped the ritual after that. That was much too close to acknowledging things in ourselves that we simply could not yet present amongst such lovely, angry folks.

You were not alone.

Part III

1/22/12 – Nancy Y’s Yoga Shastra class:

The suggested exercise was very refreshing. It reminded me how, without realizing it, we guide our life with snippets of information from surface interactions instead of letting less “ignorant” impulses rise up from the depths of our being. Life is a challenging tightrope walk where we have to strike a balance between our more or less flawed transactional consciousness and our unitive inner Self. All our “ordinary” training serves to exaggerate the surface dictatorship of the ego and screen out the rest; yoga asks us to restore the valuable contribution of what we routinely leave out.

As an example, I’ve been struggling to set up a promotional program for my new book, which is very much a surface activity. In doing so I have felt like a duck out of water. Meditating as the exercise directs, it felt wonderfully peaceful to sit still and tune out my self-image for a while. Very soon a bright zone of light absorbed my mental focus, and I could feel all the accumulated stress of trying to make things happen melting away. A nice relief.

The stress of trying to steer our life with minimal awareness is the true “dirt” we need to purify ourselves of. Consciousness is like looking at a weathered fragment of a map with only a few hazards noted and most of the roads left off. The pure inner light

that could potentially guide us well is *suci*. Only a little of it gets through to consciousness, and as we interpret it, it inevitably becomes colored or darkened, *asuci*, making it even less effective. If we clumsily try to scrape away the tarnish, it may become darker still, which is a trap many yogis have fallen into. They get hung up on “mirror polishing” for purity and become petty and intolerant, or else obsessive. Nitya gives a good example of those who think women are “impure” because their very existence threatens the shrunken imaginary world they believe they should live in. Sadly, it is not a hypothetical example. Far from it.

Pure light *has* to be modified in order to interact with the world. There’s no getting around it. But we must not lose touch with the original pure light that initiates the game. Staying connected to it requires opening without polishing, because polishing is an ego-based activity. When we are able to mystically affiliate with that light, however briefly, it purifies us, so to speak. Of its own it refines our interaction with actuality, which is absolutely necessary. Yoga is not about severing our contact with the world—a temptingly simple proposition with immensely challenging implications—but allowing our inner excellence to shine forth. If we can do it, or better yet allow it to happen, both we and the world will benefit.

And we should never forget that the same colored and filtered light shines in everyone around us, hinting at the inner brilliance that remains invisible to our physical eyes. If we do forget, it becomes tempting to judge people more harshly than is warranted. We are all in the same condition of relative ignorance, struggling to express ourselves well and be helpful, and having only modest success on our best days. Some days we don’t do very well at all.

What distinguishes yogis, though, is that we don’t stay stuck in any flawed course we find ourselves on: dedicated to constantly improving our maps, we are free to continually reawaken our best

impulses while discarding our anger, hatred and fear. We can watch the inner process of concepts arising and prompting action, and try our best to align them with an inspiring ideal. At the same time we subtract all the sullyng pressures of society, which endeavor to cut us off from our true nature and convert us into servile human beings. Some days it's pure drudgery, but on others it's really a delightful dance!

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4/20/10

Sutra II: 4

Nescience (avidya) is the field for the others, whether they are dormant, attenuated, alternating, or expanded.

Linda was unfamiliar with the term nescience, which is a favorite of the Gurukula gurus because it perfectly matches avidya. Just as avidya or ignorance is the opposite of vidya, meaning knowledge or science, nescience (NEH-see-ence) means 'not science'. Ignorance. Here Patanjali acknowledges what we discussed last week, that ego identity, attachment, hatred, and lust for life are specific examples of ignorance. Further, ignorance is accompanied—consciously or not—by the sense of fear, which is an all-pervasive emotional partner to it.

The emergent urges under consideration are important vasanas that a yogi must attend to make his or her sadhana worthwhile. The four stages enunciated by Patanjali in this sutra paint a picture of how vasanas in general develop, from a potential seed state to full-blown raging expression. Nitya cleverly compares them to the genie in a bottle of The Arabian Nights. Until we know better, we imagine we have dredged a treasure up from the depths, but when we let them loose they threaten to kill us, psychologically at least.

The sutra holds an important secret for our confrontation with vasanas. When they are in a dormant state they are pure potential. We might speculate on their existence, having read about them or heard about them from a teacher, but they are nonetheless out of conscious reach. As they “attenuate” the faintest whiff begins to tickle the back of our mind. We have an inkling, an intimation. This would be a great time to be paying attention and catch them before they have gathered momentum, but let’s face it, we seldom do. Even if an advisor points them out to us, they seem so innocent and harmless it’s hard to take them seriously.

Then suddenly they are upon us! The alternating state listed by Patanjali refers to the struggle we have when we have been caught by a vasana, but we still have the good sense to resist. We go back and forth, sometimes giving in and indulging and sometimes standing firm. Nitya describes this stage as resembling a two-headed monster. Westerners have the classic cartoon of a miniature angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other, each one prevailing in convincing the poor confused soul to obey them. But once we have gotten to this stage, the battle is already lost. It’s like the old principle of rhetoric: if you can frame the debate in your own terms, you have already won the argument. Here is where we fail over and over again, while feeling heroic and even spiritual. But all we can succeed in doing is repressing the urge for a period of time. We can trick the genie back into the bottle, but there is plenty of pressure for it to come back out.

Of course, when we lose the battle, the vasana is fully expanded and we no longer resist, we promote it. We *believe* in our hatred, our lust for life, our favorite attachment, or the shape of our ego. We are prepared to defend it, and are very clever in doing so. If a wise teacher tells us that our attachments are blocking our freedom, we will nod and smile, but as soon as we are alone we worship at their altar once again. Our best shot, then is to address

vasanas when they are still attenuated, before they have gotten their claws buried deep in us.

Speaking of claws, Nitya likens the vasanas of our afflictions to a hungry beast:

If a tiger is exposed to starvation for a long time and has no power even to get up, it may look at its prey with a sort of indifference. But if it is given a little more time, it will gather all its strength and pounce. Similarly, a man may starve his sensuous appetites for some time, causing his urges to become weak. But by merely starving one's appetites, deep-seated urges will not leave. When the environment becomes favorable, they will return with added vigor. Based on this theme, Rabindranath Tagore wrote the story of a sannyasin who thought he had transcended all of Nature's allure during his solitary meditations but found he had no taste for solitude after his hand and heart were touched by a young woman seeking his solace and protection from a cruel world.

So repressing our urges is destined to fail, and it often fails spectacularly, like a steam boiler without a pressure relief valve, which when it goes off it destroys the whole house as it rockets through the roof. Nitya recalls the beautiful verse of the Bhagavad Gita that tells us how to overcome our evil genies: "Objective interests revert without the relish for them on starving the embodied of them. Even the residual relish reverts on the One Beyond being sighted." (II, 59).

There was some grumbling from the crowd that this was old fashioned and hard to understand, which I suppose it is. That's why people write commentaries.... Here's part of mine on this verse:

Krishna is saying, sure you can starve yourself of pleasures as a way to get over an obsession with objects, but this is a hard road. Paradoxically, pushing something away can make it grow in importance, become secretly more desirable. The better way is to come to know the Absolute, which is so absorbingly interesting that mere objects no longer convey the thrill they once did. We extinguish the torch we are using once the sun comes up. The bliss of the Absolute puts mere transitory enjoyments to shame; more, it infuses everything with meaning and joy so that they are even more fun....

For this reason the Gita recommends seeking the One Beyond first, and all else becomes perfectly simple and natural. The Bible teaches the same thing, though with a more materialistic cast: “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:33, also Luke 12:31.)

Susan has been pondering the notion of dharma recently, and she wondered how it fits in with this teaching. This led to an excellent discussion. The popular notion of dharma is that it is all about following rules and doing your duty, but that is the opposite of the Vedantic view. Dharma means living in tune with your true nature, your native talents and interests, the Absolute, or whatever you like to call it. Rules and duties stifle our dharma.

We have all kinds of propensities, good and bad, laudable and horrible. We also have the opportunity to promote the best of them and repress the worst, and outside advice can be helpful here. But we need to not micromanage our life, much less allow other people to manage it for us. There is a beneficent flow to our life that we should allow ourselves to float in. Too much manipulation will take us toward Calvinism or some other form of Puritanism, which will squeeze the life out of us. Still, as Linda reminded us, once we have decided on a course of action there is nothing wrong

with feeling duty bound to stick to it, lest we get lazy or give up prematurely.

Moni gave the classic analogy of the banyan tree. It grows in a certain way, and provides shade to grateful people in the hot climates where it flourishes. But it doesn't think, "I have to grow like this so that X number of people can sit under me." It just is like that. Because it doesn't warp itself by conscious design, it is perfect as it is. So its dharma is to give shade, but it doesn't have to figure out how to give it, or be instructed.

Deb thought Moni's work with the difficult client she told us about last week was a perfect example of living her dharma. Moni has a propensity to make tough situations better, and life offered her one more opportunity to express her abilities. She not only helped a troubled soul but gained self-esteem in the process, not to mention the esteem of her co-workers and friends. But she could never have planned it to happen that way.

We concluded with a beautiful and relevant poem by Oregon's eternal poet laureate, William Stafford. Anne sent it to us just in time for it to be a fitting close to our class. You can see how our mutual musing has added more depth to an already perfect expression:

Ask Me

Some time when the river is ice ask me
mistakes I have made. Ask me whether
what I have done is my life. Others
have come in their slow way into
my thought, and some have tried to help
or to hurt: ask me what difference
their strongest love or hate has made.

I will listen to what you say.

You and I can turn and look
at the silent river and wait. We know
the current is there, hidden; and there
are comings and goings from miles away
that hold the stillness exactly before us.
What the river says, that is what I say.

William Stafford

4/27/10

Sutra II: 5

Nescience is taking the non-eternal, impure, painful, and the non-Self to be the eternal, pure, pleasurable, and the Self.

This is one of those sutras that “says it all.” If you look into it far enough, you can comprehend the whole scheme of the practice.

It's readily apparent that Nitya was feeling frisky when he dictated his commentary, with its mix of humor and potent critique. His best classes were often like this.

The fifth sutra is rich with potential for personal transformation. We discussed each of the four pairs of polar opposites in turn, and the door is wide open to do more work on them. Our examples should be jumping off points, not in any way the last word. Before our discussion we did the suggested exercise, ten minutes of examining our minds without recourse to name and form. The meditation attempts to lead us to a unitive state where our familiar surroundings are discarded for a brief period. Powered by the group setting, we all felt a measure of success in the endeavor.

The idea, of course, is that name and form and all our conceptualizations based on them are the non-Self, and they go very deep in our self-image. We are not only to intelligently struggle to convert from nescience to science, from the non-Self to

the Self, but the whole process is simplified if we can simply sight the Self at all. A meditation that merely sifts through different ideas is fine but limited. At least some of the time we should try to go beyond everything that pops into our head. Surprisingly, it works, if you actually do it. After a while the brain stops throwing up concepts and sits quietly in an open space, where it seems as if we are “dissolved away in an infinite consciousness.” Most of the time, though, we are content to think about it and not really do it. There is a world of difference there.

Of the four pairs of dual factors, we spent the most time on eternal versus transient values. The basic example I offered was of how our sense of ‘I’ stays steady through our entire life, even as our bodies and minds change shape. Other people insist that we are nothing more than our external, perceptible characteristics, and we may eventually buy into it. Then we spend time crafting what we look like and trying to learn things that will impress others. By focusing on externals we become hollow, and as the modern world with all its peacock feathers shows all too plainly, we have to go to extremes to impress people who don’t really care anyway. We become more and more desperate, until we give up.

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time, with the perceived environment being hyper-transient while my sense of self remained intact, although stressed.

The amount of pain we experience because we identify with our flawed exteriors is astronomical. With a healthy conception about what is more important, we can disown that garbage and be much happier and stronger.

Anita offered a nice example from a very different perspective. The other day she was looking up at the clouds and had a reverie about the Earth's water cycle: how those clouds had risen from the ocean heated by the sun, and they would pour their rain onto some mountain, where it would form streams to nourish plants and animals and eventually return to the ocean to continue the cycle. All she could see was a cloud, unique and rapidly changing shape, but Anita was able to philosophically locate it within its greater system. Here there is no right or wrong about how you look at a cloud. It's just that one version is limited and one is complete. Understanding whole systems can add a dimension of appreciation that isn't available if you only look at the surface of things. This is personally satisfying, but it also can have important practical applications as well. The water cycle, for instance, is taking center stage as the human race depletes its resources and casts around for new supplies.

Scotty and Paul surmised that anything could be viewed in terms of nitya/anitya, eternal and temporary, and that's right. Nataraja Guru felt this was one of the most important theoretical issues for us to examine in our studies, bringing it to bear on every aspect of our lives.

The next pair, pain and pleasure, can be misleading, so we have to be a bit careful. Nitya points out that both pain and pleasure are neural agitations, and that sukham, transcendental pleasure, is not a form of agitation at all. He continues:

It seems humans excel in their ability to cultivate masochistic tendencies. When a person smokes for the first time, it is far from being pleasurable. But many people cultivate pleasure in torturing themselves with agitation. Similarly, every so-called pleasure, when closely looked at, is a pain cultivated as a specialized form of pleasure. When masochism is complemented with sadism, personal agitations and disturbances are shared with the community and it is even eulogized as “culture.”

Apropos of this, I told the tale of my first night of getting seriously drunk, and how the social pressure and fantasy liberation outweighed the horrible misery of the event, revolting tastes followed by incredible sickness and stupidity. Yet I couldn't wait to do it again. No amount of wise philosophy is going to keep teenagers from investigating the mostly false claims about the wonders of alcohol, however, and vast numbers learn to treat the body's rejection of the poison as a rare pleasure.

Scotty had a unique example for us. This past Valentine's Day he got a job delivering flowers from secret lovers and admirers. He was looking forward to it, and had even thought that it might be a great job to have. His expectations were high as he went out on his first run, the day before Valentine's Day. But to his amazement it turned out to be a horrible job. Instead of the wonder and delight he thought people would evince, they were suspicious, hostile and unfriendly. That night, emotionally stung, he swore he would never do it again. But the next day he gave it one more try. That day he had no false expectations, so while it was unfun, it didn't knock him for a loop. Basically he had been reminded to not expect the external world to fulfill his hopes and desires for happiness. Luckily, Scotty has a strong inner stability that weathered his close look at the vagaries of pain and pleasure.

You can see from this example that all four pairs of values can be perceived in every instance. While the pain/pleasure dichotomy was strongest, it could also be described as mistaking the non-Self for the Self, the impure for the pure, and the fleeting for the lasting. Regardless, there is really only one thing happening. Often called ignorance, which is an overused term that has become a cliché, the Gurukula Gurus have substituted nescience, which is a more neutral and less pejorative term.

Recently I had a talk with a young woman who had been hurt in love and so decided that she was not only unfit for a satisfactory relationship, but that there was no hope, so she was giving up. Actually, she wasn't just giving up, she was erecting tough barricades against any repeat of the experience. If Prince Charming came knocking, she would have him thrown out. I have met a significant number of people who have followed this pattern, and all were very disappointed at how well it worked. Sadly, it's much harder to undo after the barriers are up.

It was amazing to me how hard the young woman argued for the barricades, yet pain drives us to it, and it drives us with a vengeance. If she could be convinced to work half as valiantly for openness and purity of heart, the results would be palpable if not stunning. This is where mistaking the painful for the pleasurable really impacts us and deforms our life. Nitya brings the point home: "The very reasoning and cogitating faculty on which a person depends for discerning truth is vitiated by its own imperfections." He then conjures up Kant's image of a soul that is isolated in a prisonlike castle, with only stained glass windows to look out of. Some of us even decide to nail plywood over the stained glass so that no light can get in or out.

This example touches on purity as well as pain. Erecting barricades is the definition of impurity; conversely, purity means living without them. This is very different from the cheap moralistic version puritans are fond of pontificating about.

I cited my Gita commentary's discussion of purity, from XIII, 7, which I hereby reprint:

Purity, *saucham*, is usually associated with so-called moral behavior. Striving to always be good and pure feeds the spiritual ego like nothing else, leading to intractable problems. Spiritual purity is actually a totally different matter. When we latch on to certain static states, such as when we feel ashamed or upset or guilty, then we aren't open to the next thing that comes along. Our vision becomes clouded whenever we cling to the familiar, because we are not free to be open to the next moment. To stay in the flow we have to release our hang-ups and fixations. Whenever we get stuck, particularly in emotionally-charged states, that is precisely where we need to do our work, to restore our fluidity.

When purity becomes a part of us, we will see life as *lila*, a divine sportive play, where all meaning occurs within the unfoldment of events just as the tree develops from the seed. Such an attitude allows for easy detachment and the flexibility to let go when the flow sweeps you away from what you cherish or cling to.

Early Christian scholar Elaine Pagels had the lost and unorthodox Nag Hammadi scrolls fall in her lap, certainly an "act of God" if ever there was one—and was unsullied enough to realize their value and bring them to the attention of the public, starting with her book *The Gnostic Gospels*. If Pagels had had a stake in the status quo of the Christian Church, she might have done what others have often done before her and buried the scrolls in some musty college basement. But she was unattached, and so able to act with purity of intent. Her work has led to an avalanche of fresh and valuable perspectives on the human history of the planet.

If you are pure you can set aside your egoistic desires and act for the greatest common good, which includes your own enjoyment. This is very different from the aptly named Puritanical notion that purity means not breaking social rules, or not having any fun, such as enjoying sex or imbibing psychotropic substances. Dr. G.H. Mees puts this succinctly in *The Key to Genesis*:

In Europe and America there is a strong tendency to identify morality and spirituality. But anyone who has common sense and looks around, is aware that there are a great many people who are moral saints, but lack inner peace and do not know true happiness. In the East the identification of morality and spirituality is as a rule avoided.

Speaking of soma, anyone who has taken psychedelic medicine has almost certainly learned the importance of *saucham*, purity. Any and all extraneous thoughts are like catching a wave wrong in surfing: you instantly wipe out and get rolled under in the churn. Worse, what you think or fear manifests instantly as a vision, so if you conceive of something awful, that something will immediately become your experience. As far as you can tell, it is just as real as any other “normal” experience. You really believe you’re dying, or being cut in pieces, or being raped, or what have you. So it is absolutely incumbent that you remain in the neutral zone and don’t let your mind wander into projections. This is the source of the certitude that what you think becomes your reality sooner or later, “what you see is what you get” as the old song goes. Ordinarily there is a time lag so it’s much harder to notice that what we imagine is unfolding as our experience, but during the soma trip the feedback is instantaneous. Purity means not

initiating such chains of events by cooking up harebrained schemes.

There was little discussion of the Self and the non-Self. The exercise we began with was an implicit training session in the subject, and people often referred vaguely to “that ten minute thing” we did at the outset. It’s hard not to be vague when you can’t reference name and form! Deb did point out that as long as we are embodied we will always be conditioned, so it’s not that we are supposed to throw it all away in advance. We are learning to live well here and now, and cope with our limitations. All these subtle suggestions by Patanjali are intended to help us to have a better life. He wants us to stop magnifying our limitations, is all. They are potent enough without us adding anything to them.