

2022 Patanjali Class 66

9/19/23

Sutra II:26 – The unbroken discrimination between the Self and the non-Self is the means of eliminating nescience.

Sutra II:27 – Wisdom is the final stage of its sevenfold way.

Sutra II:28 – By the practice of the limbs of Yoga, the impurities are destroyed, and knowledge arises, which leads to discrimination between the Self and the non-Self.

Sutra 26 ends the section on The Task of the Seer; 27 begins The Eight Limbs of Yoga. The Task was to become prepared and dispense with avidya, ignorance. Only then can we properly engage the eight limbs.

There is a tendency to think of the limbs as stages in a sequence, but do you number your arms and legs sequentially? Certainly not. You use them all in various combinations, all the time. The gist of Yoga is reasonably simple: ignorance takes our mind off the present and carries it elsewhere, and so we miss what's right in front of us. We may never be able to take in everything that's happening around us, but we can certainly upgrade from one percent to five or even ten percent, and that will make our lives five or ten times more interesting. All we have to do is discriminate between what matters and what doesn't, and why. To accomplish this, we will focus on the principles of yoga, reining in our wandering mind to train it to stand with us.

In Deb's opening monologue she admired Patanjali and Nitya for making the requisite discrimination between the Self and the non-Self clear and simple, inaugurating a flow that is the path of wisdom.

Deb doesn't like the idea of getting rid of impurities, which can bring about a frankly dualistic, judgmental stance, but the commentary defines impurity as what keeps you from realizing the

inherent oneness. Call it what distracts you. That she can run with.
From the old notes:

The key idea here is to remember that “destroying impurities” doesn’t mean polishing the mirror or becoming sattvic. It sounds like it, so we have to know in advance that the three gunas—the essence of prakriti—are the so-called impurities in question. This is not exactly a program of refinement or purification. Patanjali states that practicing the limbs of yoga leads us back to our true nature as a purusha, and the impurities are destroyed as a result. That is not the same as destroying impurities and hoping their absence will reveal our true nature, because there’s no end to them. As Narayana Guru used to say, you cannot wash the lather out of soap, so don’t bother trying. It is the nature of soap to produce lather. If you don’t want lather, just put the soap away on the shelf and leave it alone.

Deb invited us to talk about our experience with discrimination in our lives, and assured us the eight limbs (or, per sutra 27, seven limbs plus wisdom, which can hardly be called a limb) if practiced, are beautiful, natural and welcome.

Bill thought Nitya had nicely expressed the relationship of purusha and prakriti, on page 232:

When individuation happens and purusha is in conjunction with prakriti, the body/mind complex becomes contaminated with the projected qualities of nature. This happens to such an extent that the purusha forgets its pure nature.

So, the impurity is nature itself, something we’ve tried very hard to change our attitude about. To try and get around this, Deb added a subsequent excerpt:

When all the impurities are washed away with the discipline, consciousness becomes clear. Consequently the purusha becomes capable of clearly seeing the pure as distinct from the impure and what pertains to the Self as distinct from the non-Self. This inner awakening is the beginning of realization.

She figures the goal is to realize who and what we are now. When we are in chaos, discrimination comes and clarifies it.

I reminded the class of the major difference between Patanjali's Yoga, with its individual purushas, and Advaita Vedanta, with its more sophisticated concept of universal oneness in a holistic purusha. By only detaching from prakriti, the purusha still is personal, and we still run the risk of being manipulative and biased. Releasing our dictatorial instincts to an all-encompassing unity expands our purview dramatically, by transcending the I-sense. We will continue to include Nitya's broader interpretations, representing a quantum leap in awareness.

In that light, Nitya clarifies an important issue: we eliminate ignorance by engaging with our experiences and not running away from them. Being fully involved in our life doesn't mean losing ourselves in prakriti or impurity, much less losing ourselves in trying to escape from it, but rather retaining our discriminative wisdom so that we can relate to everything with expertise.

There is a widespread belief that retreating from prakriti is the spiritual high road, but yoga means engaging in it intelligently. Everyone and everything is the Absolute, so our picky attitudes of "this is okay" and "this isn't" just wrap us every deeper in a self-imposed bondage. Decisions like that close many doors. I read out from the old notes:

Deb recalled something Andy said about his father at his recent gallery talk. His father taught him that an artist often makes mistakes, but when they happen you should work with them.

They are a way that serendipity emerges into our plans, and so are a blessing rather than a curse. There aren't really any "accidents," they are ways the unconscious joins forces with our conscious intentions, and the amalgam can be very artful.

The whole discussion reminded me of a favorite quote from Anthony Doerr, in *Cloud Cuckoo Land*: "What you already have is better than what you so desperately seek."

Bill used to always be uncertain if the Self is connected to him, and he felt reassured by these sutras that it was. He is able to look at nature as projections that muddy the water, and by withdrawing them from the water, the clarity is restored.

Deb agreed that an open mind allows consciousness to come to a more unified state, making discrimination a tool of understanding.

One of the miracles of life is that the Absolute continually presents itself to us as the world we live in. Yoga does not mean rejecting the invitation, and turning away to find some other, better reality. This is it. There is no greater blessing. But we shouldn't just be passive reactionaries, either. We are invited to discriminate the real meaning below the surface play, and to engage dynamically with it.

Deb started off the example sharing. After the death of our baby, Nate, she was deeply distraught. The next spring she was out weeding in the garden, and the activity reminded her of the omnipresent process of death and renewal. It felt like a foundational force that held everything together, clarifying her tragedy as not only personal. Universal. It helped her.

Moni's example came from working with her difficult clients as a caseworker securing them access to government assistance. They often arrive angry and fearful, blaming her for their inability to get help. As she discusses their options with them, they become more gentle. They are less frustrated, and even begin to show some

kindness. They no longer blame her for causing their problems. As Bill put it, she's helping them to establish clarity.

Coincidentally I had brought this from the notes of 2016, seven years ago:

As Moni pointed out, she picked up a few principles from the study, but she put them into practice at work, and that was where the real transformation took place for her. That's how it works. Ideas that aren't practiced are little more than smoke. Moni has made huge strides in the past couple of years especially, and most of it has been through rising to the challenges of her work situation. It is yet another paradox that we learn detachment through involvement, and not from severing ties to the world or scrubbing away all its imperfections.

Moni added that it works both ways: the caseworkers also attain clarity by working with their clients, and the tasks become easier as they do. She is now considered a "seasoned worker," and sees the new employees struggling with the same issues she once had.

Moni didn't become expert in her very complicated job by sitting still and trying not to have mental modulations. That might have helped her relax and be strong, yes, but the improvement has to be learned in actual situations. She has a higher value-vision, and the conflicts with clients are worked out on that basis, rather than by getting caught in bickering and sniping. Paul thought of it as recognizing the transcendental within the phenomenal, and that can happen anywhere, any time.

In prepping for the class, Paul looked into the word *discrimination*, as he'd always thought of it in terms of racial prejudice, and so a bad thing. Here it means telling the difference between things, and, as Deb said, evaluating the true characteristics. Spiritually speaking, it means knowing when you

are in a neutral state or when you are actively judging, and to what degree. In engaging with prakriti, we are always being pulled out of neutrality, and we need to keep our heads, our balance, by continually checking back in with an unsullied state. Positive discrimination a very important part of a well-lived life.

For instance, I well remember from back in my school days, how we teenagers all felt we were defined by our beliefs, our likes and dislikes. We believed we were nothing other than our ideas, and the more sharply held and disdainfully expressed they were, the more real we were. Our beliefs also defined our cliques, the people we hung out with. Looking back, it seems like a travesty, the opposite of yoga, where everyone isolates themselves from everyone else and prepares to butt heads, mainly over ideas that are transparently fictional. No wonder we were all so miserable in school!

These days, it seems like we are imprisoned in a global high school, where everyone clings to their petty preferences and hates anyone who dares to propose another perspective. The more you hate, the more likely you are to be adored on the internet or elected to political office. And it's no wonder misery remains the common denominator.

Speaking of outmoded but essential thinking, Nitya's sentence under sutra 26, "the transactional world is full of restrictions and every member of the community is expected to exercise discrimination," reminded me of a story he told once or twice. When he became enlightened, he realized his intimate connection to everyone all in a flash. He went around hugging people on the street in great joy, as though they were long lost brothers and sisters. Soon he noticed that his ecstasy was not being transmitted, in fact, most people were very uncomfortable being hugged by a weird stranger. He learned to keep his feelings within himself and not offend others. I can add to his tale that he learned to communicate love in the most discrete and dignified fashion to

many, many people of all types and degrees of desire for physical distance, simply broadcasting his “radiant inner awareness.”

We used the exercise included in the sutra 28 commentary for our closing meditation, as a way to actualize what we had been discussing. Practicing what you preach marks the transition from preparation to actuality, after all, doesn't it? Here's the exercise, in case you want to try it now:

The first indication of impurity is I-consciousness. To remove that dirt, consciousness is to be neutralized so that it does not oscillate between the subject and the object. Then both object-consciousness and subject-consciousness leave. To bring about that neutralization, the distance between the knower and the known is reduced by focusing on the neutral zero between the incoming and outgoing breath. Physically the mind is kept at the throat plex (visuddhi), the purificatory center.

Part II

9/25/12

Amazingly (or not) our present class on the Isa Upanishad here in Portland included a lot of discussion on the exact type of meditation described Nancy's exercise here, on breathing. It provided a vivid insight into yoga dialectics for a new class participant, who had done a similar exercise in a Ki class.

When I have meditated like this in the past, as I moved into the center my breathing quieted and grew less “hungry.” The pause between ingoing and outgoing breaths expanded dramatically, and I went very deep into silence. It appeared that on occasion I would stop breathing entirely for a long time, but unlike what you would expect, the prana increased during the pauses rather than depleted. Really a blissful place to hang out! It makes me eager to do this again. I'll have a good shot tonight in class, but I can't report on it,

as I'm heading out of town for a while. Everybody seems to want to get married before the world ends in December.... [[Refers to this](#)]

I've taken up moderate distance running in the last couple of years, and it's a little like the breath meditation. I could never run far before because gasping for air was just too painful. After I became inspired to run to counter the effects of serious aging (not to mention an overlarge tummy), I've gradually found breathing while running easier. There is often some stress at first, but as the body settles into a rhythm, the breath eases up and no longer presents an impediment. If I didn't get plain tired and achy, I could run a long time with plenty of oxygen on board. It's really quite surprising.

Anyway, I've written up some stuff here and there about breath, but I don't want to be tedious and rehash it now. This is a simple exercise that doesn't need much added to it.

As for the other exercise, keeping attentive is always a major key to a fulfilling life, isn't it?

Nitya's sentence under sutra 26 reading "the transactional world is full of restrictions and every member of the community is expected to exercise discrimination," reminded me of a story he told once or twice. When he became enlightened, he realized his intimate connection to everyone all in a flash. He went around hugging people on the street in great joy, as though they were long lost brothers and sisters. Soon he noticed that his ecstasy was not being transmitted, in fact, most people were very uncomfortable being hugged by a weird stranger. He learned to keep his feelings within himself and not offend others. I can add to his tale that he learned to communicate love in the most discrete and dignified fashion to many, many people of all types and degrees of desire for physical distance, simply broadcasting his "radiant inner awareness." (Atmo v. 8)

I have often felt pulled outward by compassion with people who have lost the thrill of living, while realizing that I cannot supply what they most need in terms of love and affection. But just being a supportive presence in the middle distance, as it were, can sometimes inspire them to feel better and even to let go of a few chains of mental bondage. This is certainly behind my strong urge to explicate Vedanta in modern terms, since its philosophy is as uplifting as anything a non-religious person is ever likely to encounter.

I have noted that restraint in expressing love is in some ways more intense than gushing about it, and, because words are so often inadequate, less maudlin. In Nitya's case it is a little like compressing an atomic pile together to ignite a nuclear explosion, or in my case more like the I Ching image of the lake: without edges the water spreads out across the land and dries up. The boundaries keep the water of the lake together so it can simply exist. That way it is available for a few souls to have a picnic on its shores if they wish, or even take a swim.

Love to all!

Post script:

The state of neuroscience has really begun to come up to Vedanta and Patanjali recently. I've copied a few key ideas from David Eagleman's book, *Incognito*, (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011). Eagleman is hot stuff these days, and I've quoted him in respect to time in the class notes not too long ago. Check out the last selection especially, relating to good old *citta vritti nirodha*, modulations of consciousness:

There are as many connections in a single cubic centimeter of brain tissue as there are stars in the Milky Way galaxy. [Roughly 100 billion] (2)

If you ever feel lazy or dull, take heart: you're the busiest, brightest thing on the planet. (2)

The first thing we learn from studying our own circuitry is a simple lesson: most of what we do and think and feel is not under our conscious control. The vast jungles of neurons operate their own programs. The conscious you—the I that flickers to life when you wake up in the morning—is the smallest bit of what's transpiring in your brain. Although we are dependent on the functioning of the brain for our inner lives, it runs its own show. Most of its operations are above the security clearance of the conscious mind. The *I* simply has no right of entry.

Your consciousness is like a tiny stowaway on a transatlantic steamship, taking credit for the journey without acknowledging the massive engineering underfoot. (4)

You're not perceiving what's out there. You're perceiving whatever your brain tells you. (33)

In the traditionally taught view of perception, data from the sensorium pours into the brain, works its way up the sensory hierarchy, and makes itself seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt—"perceived." But a closer examination of the data suggests this is incorrect. The brain is properly thought of as a mostly closed system that runs on its own internally generated activity. We already have many examples of this sort of activity: for example, breathing, digestion, and walking are controlled by autonomously running activity generators in your brain stem and spinal cord. During dream sleep the brain is isolated from its normal input, so internal activation is the only source of cortical stimulation. In the awake state, internal activity is the basis for imagination and hallucinations.

The more surprising aspect of this framework is that the internal data is not *generated* by the external sensory data but merely *modulated* by it....

The deep secret of the brain is that not only the spinal cord but the entire central nervous system works this way: internally generated activity is modulated by sensory input. (44-5)

* * *

12/7/10

Sutra II: 26

The unbroken discrimination between the Self and the non-Self is the means of eliminating nescience.

One last session on ignorance presaged our promotion to the grand finale.

Nitya clarifies an important issue: that we eliminate ignorance by engaging with our life and not running away from it. Being fully involved in our life doesn't mean losing ourselves in prakriti, much less losing ourselves in escape, but rather retaining our discriminative wisdom so that we can relate to everything with expertise. The idea made for a lively discussion, with some excellent insights into how it can be put into practice.

Nitya did not drive a car, so he uses the analogy of driving to indicate the heightened awareness a yogi needs to live an expert life. To a non-driver, it seems like you are always on the edge of some fatal disaster, so you must be almost hysterically wide awake to survive on the highways. Real drivers know that most of what you do is semiconscious at best, and those at the wheel, being the normal people they are, have to struggle to stay alert, with the stupor of an automatic pilot never far off. But we have to forgive Nitya's misapprehension as being perfectly understandable.

The point Nitya makes is well taken, though. There is a widespread belief that retreating from prakriti is the spiritual high road, but yoga means engaging in it intelligently. Everyone and everything is the Absolute, so our picky attitudes of “this is okay” and “this isn’t” just wrap us every deeper in a self-imposed bondage.

One of the miracles of life is that the Absolute continually presents itself to us as the world we live in. Yoga does not mean rejecting the invitation, and turning away to find some other, better reality. This is it. There is no greater blessing. But we shouldn’t just be passive reactionaries, either. We are invited to discriminate the real meaning below the surface play, and to engage dynamically with it.

I well remember from back in my school days, that you were defined by your beliefs, your likes and dislikes. We all felt like we were nothing other than our ideas, and the more sharply held and disdainfully expressed they were, the more real we were. Our beliefs also defined our cliques, who we hung out with. Looking back, it seems like a travesty, the opposite of yoga, where everyone isolates themselves from everyone else and prepares to butt heads, mainly over ideas that are transparently fictional. No wonder we were all so miserable in school!

Susan was moved by the excerpts from Jung in last week’s notes, and talked about how we cling to childhood, afraid to accept the terrifying prospect becoming actually free and making our own decisions. She was particularly affected by the last bit, which bears repeating:

Whoever protects himself against what is new and strange and regresses into the past falls into the same neurotic condition as the man who identifies himself with the new and runs away from the past. The only difference is that the one has estranged himself from the past and the other from the future. In principle

both are doing the same thing: they are reinforcing their narrow range of consciousness instead of shattering it in the tension of opposites and building up a state of wider and higher consciousness.

I suppose this is the psychological subtext of why we clung to all those poses as we struggled with whether to become adults or remain children.

We talked about how much of society provides ways for us to relinquish our sovereignty and so remain in a perpetual childhood, perpetual witnesses of someone else's drama. Everything is prepackaged for our "convenience," not only consumer goods but jobs, attitudes, politics, even art. We can check out as independent thinkers and simply react to the passing show of prakriti, which permits us to remain wrapped in our womblike baby blanket until we can exchange it for a funeral shroud. But Patanjali is begging us to step out into the open air and come to life. Life wasn't invented so we could simply sleepwalk through it.

The kind of spiritual program that withdraws from the world is in many cases merely tamas in sattvic clothing, a static and self-ratifying dead end. We need the continual buffeting of life to jolt us awake. Problems are thus seen as blessings and not as anti-spiritual impediments.

In that regard, Deb recalled something Andy said about his father at his recent gallery talk. His father taught him that an artist often makes mistakes, but when they happen you should work with them. They are a way that serendipity emerges into our plans, and so are a blessing rather than a curse. There aren't really any "accidents," they are ways the unconscious joins forces with our conscious intentions, and the amalgam can be very artful.

One thought I had on reading Nitya's comments is that they are germane enough as they stand, but there is an additional aspect that those who didn't sit in on his classes probably wouldn't pick

up on. Almost all of Nitya's books were dictated as darsanas—wisdom classes—to a live audience of truth seekers. We'd be sitting there on cushions in what was called the prayer hall, wrapped in sweaters and blankets, and Nitya would go into a deep meditation and begin talking. He spoke slowly enough that one or several people could take down his every word, which would later be transcribed and collected into a book.

Nitya was a master at explaining a verse of text to a roomful of students while subtly weaving in helpful suggestions aimed at certain individuals, who if they were awake enough could take the hint. The subtext here is Nitya teaching people how to act like dignified yogis instead of cooped up wild animals enjoying a temporary holiday from a rigid society, by coming to the Gurukula.

John wondered if going to a guru wasn't a rite of passage for Indian kids, a way to add a spiritual aspect to their grueling academic and moralistic upbringing. That's true, and you can imagine that spending time in a relaxed atmosphere like the Gurukula's would be an immense relief for many of them. It was especially a time when you could commune with members of the opposite sex without the evil eye boring into you, and for young adults that's too rare a chance to pass up. Here we can sense that Nitya was gently redirecting some of that unleashed energy toward yoga study, while not being in any way dictatorial. He was an expert at walking a fine line between guidance and constraint, well knowing that for real change to happen it had to spring from within a person rather than being codified for them by any authority figure. The gist of his veiled explanation is given in the second paragraph:

In relating with other things in the wakeful world, the yogi exercises two complementary aspects of discrimination. On the one hand the yogi recognizes the unity of all things in the Absolute and that he or she is not different from others. What is

seen as beneficial to the self is seen as being beneficial to others also. Consequently, the yogi will not deny another's access to what he or she aspires to. Secondly, the yogi will also recognize that, as physical entities, all bodies are distinct and each person is a sovereign principle enshrined in a particular body with likes, dislikes, and preferences that should not be overridden. (229-30)

How much of our energy is spent in criticizing other people's preferences, which are so obviously inferior to our own! Nitya always held that such an attitude was pure egoism, as well as a way to avoid confronting our own prejudices, and he stood against it wherever it raised its ugly head.

It's a real art form for a preceptor to know how to advocate a radical change in orientation while simultaneously respecting the present condition of everyone. His practice in counseling thousands and thousands of seekers over many years made him a rare paragon who knew just the right pressure to apply. I know he felt that early in his teaching career he maybe pushed too hard for the untrained modern sensibility, and later on he pushed much less. His measuring rod was to respond in commensurate intensity to the legitimate desires of the seeker. Sometimes that can resemble a mental bullfight, with the toreador deftly stepping aside from the charge of the enraged beast while keeping its attention fixed on a diversionary red flag. Anyway, we aren't going into all that here. I only want to point out that if you read the commentary with that aspect in mind, as practical advice for those present at the time, it adds a whole extra dimension. We can imagine one or two students shifting uncomfortably in their seats, while some others gaze on with fixed smiles, their minds preoccupied with last night's rendezvous....

And that's the point of nescience: it takes our mind off the present and carries it elsewhere, and so we miss what's right in

front of us. We may never appreciate everything that's happening around us, but we can certainly upgrade from one percent to five or even ten percent, and that will make our lives five or ten times more interesting. All we have to do is discriminate between what matters and what doesn't, and why.

12/14/10

Sutras II: 27 & 28

Wisdom is the final stage of its sevenfold way.

By the practice of the limbs of Yoga, the impurities are destroyed, and knowledge arises, which leads to discrimination between the Self and the non-Self.

FINALLY we have wrapped up our study of ignorance and are now fully prepared to enter the eight-limbed path, the familiar part of Patanjali's Yoga Shastra. Lip-served in "yoga" gymnasiums everywhere, the eight steps will be getting a significantly revised reading from the Guru.

Having concluded a major thrust of the work, we shared our thoughts of what we have learned in the more than two years of the study, which began on October 21, 2008. Interestingly, most everyone felt that they had changed only a little bit, mainly in the direction of reacting less intensely to provocations and having ready recourse to their inner strength. A couple of people expressed it as having increased faith in themselves. This is testimony to the subtlety of the course of study, because those are very powerful transformations, but no one felt like the earth trembled or volcanoes erupted, so they didn't realize the immensity of what they have accomplished.

From my perspective, it is easy to see that this group is the most centered and advanced we have ever had since we began holding classes in 1978. Together we have grappled with a quite

radical perspective, and it has seeped into our bones without blowing our minds. An interesting journey indeed.

For the most part, assessing ourselves isn't something we should do much of. It has the potential to freeze us in place, make what we have learned more static. But it is good to occasionally acknowledge the value of what we've gathered, because this is not a "sexy" program—no "beautiful people" stretching in spandex, no levitation, no spirit knockings. It's very basic in a way, and yet it produces genuine spiritual progress.

One common theme of what people described was that in problematic situations they were immediately able to access the strength they have developed in the classes. Where before there was often doubt that impelled them into a defensive posture, with consequent upset, they had more confidence, more faith in themselves, and so did not need to prove or defend their position. This allowed them to deal with the situation in a most balanced fashion. As we will see, Patanjali will continue to harp on this as a major achievement of yoga. So although everyone felt but little changed, they have actually been brought farther than they imagine by Patanjali's incremental program of unfoldment.

I well recall how important it was as a child to defend myself against just and unjust accusations alike, not only to avoid punishment but to uphold my honor. Kids are always called into question when anything goes wrong, and many of us suffered painful retributions at times. So we learned to defend ourselves, and if we were indefensible we could still see the benefit of inventing a plausible denial. It seems we carry that talent into adulthood, and are always ready to prove ourselves before our accusers. Several of us in the class came from that type of background.

When I was unjustly accused as a child, I knew very well that I hadn't stolen the cookies or taught my neighbor to smoke cigarettes or what have you, but no one else could be sure. In those

cases I could have faith in myself even when the whole world was against me. Now it is good to see class members reclaiming the same kind of faith in themselves. As Nitya concludes: “When such a clarity is established, the yogi is considered to be stabilized on the irrefutable foundation of Yoga.” From that solid foundation, we don’t need to be either offensive or defensive; we can deal with things as they really are, from a neutral pose. Honestly, if we gain nothing else from the study, this is a superior achievement, and one that is attained only with great effort and trials. Good job, everyone!

As Moni pointed out, she picked up a few principles from the study, but she put them into practice at work, and that was where the real transformation took place for her. That’s how it works. Ideas that aren’t practiced are little more than smoke. Moni has made huge strides in the past couple of years especially, and most of it has been through rising to the challenges of her work situation. It is yet another paradox that we learn detachment through involvement, and not from severing ties to the world or scrubbing away all its imperfections.

The key idea here is to remember that “destroying impurities” doesn’t mean polishing the mirror or becoming sattvic. It sounds like it, so we have to know in advance that the three gunas—the essence of prakriti—are the so-called impurities in question. This is not exactly a program of refinement or purification. Patanjali states that practicing the limbs of yoga leads us back to our true nature as a purusha, and the impurities are destroyed as a result. That is not the same as destroying impurities and hoping their absence will reveal our true nature. As Narayana Guru used to say, you cannot wash the lather out of soap, so don’t bother trying. It is the nature of soap to produce lather. If you don’t want lather, just put the soap away on the shelf and leave it alone.

We began and ended the class with the suggested exercise, of locating consciousness in the vishuddhi (throat chakra) and maintaining a neutral witness there while observing the ingoing and outgoing breath. It makes for a deep and calming meditation. Linda wondered why the fifth chakra was dubbed the purificatory center, and Deb said that it is the place where the Word emanates, and words are the messengers of spiritual transformation. I added that the first four chakras are associated with earth, water, fire and air—material substances—but the fifth is connected to akasha, space. Space is non-material, but it bears a relation to material elements by providing the space for them to exist. As such it is the essence of the material world, and thus a kind of purified version of it.

It strikes me that limbs are referenced instead of a path to reduce the linear orientation. Limbs radiate from a central focal point, while a path is often conceived as progressing stepwise. A linear progression thus pushes most stages away into a hypothetical future, allowing the ego to postpone reckoning with them and wallow in its present condition.

The word translated as “limbs” has several shades of meaning, though it primarily means limbs of the body, or “a woman with well-rounded limbs.” There is also a sense of walking and a place for taking a walk, which brings it closer to a path. An implication in rhetoric highlights the secondary nature of limbs, supporting as they do the core of the head and torso. This tells us the eight limbs should be treated not as ends in themselves but as means to the end of samadhi. The most accurate definition for our purposes is simply “division or department.”

Due to the Christmas holiday, we will initiate the eight limbs beginning next year. The ancient Greeks and others saw the movement of the sun through the year as resembling a golden, celestial swing. The swing has almost reached its southernmost point of its arc, and will begin swinging back one week from

today. The ancients viewed this as a momentous occasion to celebrate the potential of the whole cycle. May yours be rich in insights and bountiful in possibilities. Aum.