

2022 Patanjali Class 68

10/10/23

Sutra II:30 – The self-restraints are nonviolence, truthfulness, non-misappropriativeness, adhering to uprightness in life, and non-acquisitiveness. (The yamas: ahimsa, satya, asteya, brahmacharya, aparigraha.)

Part A: Ahimsa, nonviolence

The outbreak of declared war between Hamas and Israel gave us an unwelcome prompt to discuss nonviolence in practical terms. For a more general take on ahimsa, read the 2011 notes in Part II. I don't see any reason to repeat them.

When mass murder breaks out yet again, despite being almost continuous in our time, we can't help but feel naïve, helpless, even hopeless. I asked the class what the civilized values such as Patanjali teaches offer us as an antidote? Is our species even progressing toward ahimsa any more? It seems to me we have had a push toward uniting as a global species, and—for any number of reasons—now there is a harsh pulling back into tribalism, and even a kind of feudalism. What's the point of upholding higher values in a stampede? These questions mostly remain rhetorical. We can return to them any time.

Linda, of Palestinian ancestry, joined us, looking as glum as I felt. I mentioned that the alleged Hamas attack smelled a lot like another 9-11 event, staged to fast-forward authoritarian ends. Mossad being the premier spy agency on the planet, and all the talking heads saying exactly the right propaganda lines immediately after the attacks were allowed to happen, and supposedly democratic countries tripping over themselves to align with the bully and blame the victims, harked back to the identical playbook unveiled in 2001. Linda cut through the complexity, arguing it's in essence very simple: one nation is gradually

invading and occupying another nation, and at times the losers are fighting back. Linda was part of a collective that displayed maps of the progressive occupation on the sides of Portland buses, fifteen or twenty years ago. [Here's an example.](#)

Linda offered one answer to my rhetorical question, from Valerie Kaur, author of *Revolutionary Love*: The most important thing is to not surrender our humanity. She was speaking of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but it applies to every antagonistic situation. We have to resist the impulse to lump all members of a group together with the worst actors—another side of ahimsa. Most of them are just as upset as we are about the unfolding tragedies. Deb typed up Valerie's Instagram Post for us:

I believe our most powerful response to the horror in Israel and Palestine is to refuse to surrender our humanity.

This is demanding labor. But once your eyes are open—you can never again explain away the deaths of children again, like so many are doing right now.

And so: I stand with the Palestinian people I stand against the brutal occupation of Palestine and the ongoing subjugation, assaults, and killings of Palestinian people.

I stand against the ongoing antisemitic violence and persecution of Jews, past and present, including the vicious antisemitic attacks right now in the United States.

I have been mourning with Jewish friends who have family in Israel hiding in a bomb shelter. And I have been mourning with Palestinian friends whose family in Gaza have no shelters to hide in at all.

My mourning transcends political agendas. Your mourning can too. This is not about equivalency. The time has come to center the human cost of the conflict above all.

Can we stretch our hearts beyond what was previously imaginable? We must if there is to be a world.

Linda was intrigued that Nitya opens his comments saying we must kill (for food) or die. That's true, but he also invoked a spectrum of compassion, which I expanded on in paragraphs 5 and 6 in Part II, reading out 6 for the class. Within the constraints of living, we have many options to minimize the suffering we cause, and that does not go against yogic principles. Quite the reverse!

Rather than getting caught up in food choices, Anita brought the yama home as a personal effort. She recently received a request from a friend, sent to several people, for a ride to an early morning doctor appointment. Anita struggled with the discomfort it would entail, and soon read it as a natural inclination away from ahimsa toward personal comfort. Finally she overcame her reluctance, and then found out someone else had already volunteered. She took it as a lesson: ahimsa isn't necessarily the easy choice. We may well have to restrain our preferences and sacrifice something for the benefit of another.

Jan experienced something like that in parenting. She was raised by domineering, critical parents, so looked for different options for her children's education. Her women's group helped her find an alternative school emphasizing different models, like compassion. Child-centered. Jan has always felt supported by the Gurukula class members as well. She has learned a lot from many sources.

Most fraught is for Jan to disagree with her children, now they are adults. They are quick to criticize her, so she has decided

to not argue with them, and just be silent and loving, and it's less painful, anyway.

Paul agreed. He has found good intentions toward the family often lead to bad results. He's learned to be more sensitive about their boundaries, and is more receptive to their ideas, while offering them less.

I suggested that, while listening without reactions is a fine attitude, sometimes it's also compassionate to offer an alternative interpretation, not just letting the family members go on their merry way. You may get blowback, but it might open up other possibilities for them to consider, eventually. Our feelings are always more easily hurt by those who are closest to us, so it takes some resolve.

Our class is made up of thoughtful, compassionate people who have a lot of experience in getting along with others. Why shouldn't we leave a mark, in our passing? Sure, the other person has rights and validity, but they may miss important concepts, just as we do. They may not yet know everything. Giving them an opportunity to display a modicum of respect is also compassionate. In contrast, leaving them to their own habits and peer pressures may not be ahimsa at all.

Ahimsa takes practice. Paul and I were fortunate to have jobs based on it, giving us opportunities to practice it every day. After a while it becomes the go-to attitude, a blessing rather than a burden. Call it a good habit, if you want. There were many times that the people we helped resented it, sometimes angrily. They needed our care, needed to be hospitalized, but they didn't want it. Didn't want us to cut up their clothes to get access to their injuries, but we did it anyway.

My favorite example was the nighttime apartment fire where I found a young woman unconscious on a couch in a building full of smoke. Three different people assured us as we approached there was no one inside, because you couldn't see, but there she

was. Rescuing a person from a fire is a Big Deal, and quite rare, and they can suffocate quickly in dense smoke, so while my lieutenant struggled with his equipment and got tangled up in his radio, I picked her up in my arms, like King Kong with Fay Wray, and walked out the door into the fresh air.

I had flashes that I was going to be a hero, but I had to resuscitate her immediately. She was only wearing wearing a bra and panties, but in the glare of our lights I put her down in a bed of bark dust, the itchiest, splintery, substance on earth. We were ringed by maybe 100 people from the other apartments. I pulled off my air mask and bent down to start CPR, forgetting I still had my helmet on, and bonked her on the forehead. She woke up with a start, saw me leaning over her like a lunatic monster, and screamed, and began cursing me. The paramedics arrived and moved her into an ambulance.

So my ahimsa went against the recipient's preferences, but it was critically important nonetheless. Saved her life. She was not grateful later. With me being out of favor with the chiefs, no mention of the rescue was made, no award given, not even a hearty handshake. The point is, we have to rely on our own judgment. Almost surely, it's better than average.

Part II

1/11/11

Sutra II:30

The class was actually moved to the next day, due to snow and ice, but you don't get a chance to immortalize 1/11/11 very often, so I've kept the original date.

We will take a separate session for each of the five restraints and five observances, since they are all vitally important. I will be gone for the next four classes to India, but have hopes of finding

notes to read when I return that I can use to reconstruct the brainstorming sessions. Online readers are invited to send in their stories too. There is a lot of food for thought here!

It is interesting that *yama*, restraint, is the first of the eight limbs, and while it sounds negative, it is expressed as a positive quality. The second limb, the observances, *niyama*, are expressed as “not restrained.” Holding back, then, is positive, and going forward is negative. There is a dialectic structure right off the bat that gives us some insight as to what these mean.

Part of our makeup is a kind of primitive mentality lodged in the limbic system of the brain, the legacy of billions of years of nothing beyond considerations of survival. We have aspects in us that are brutal, unfeeling, selfish and well, stupid. The very first thing for us to learn, therefore, is to restrain these negative factors. At the same time we have innate capacities to be kind, generous, caring and intelligent. Recent paleontological discoveries have shown that even dinosaurs were communal and nurturing, and it is now accepted that mutual support within groups is an important factor in the evolution of complex species. When we hold back our faults, it gives room for the positive qualities to flourish. This means we have to start with a penetrating self-examination to highlight our faults and then discard or deemphasize them. Without that first step, everything that follows is built on shaky ground.

The first category of *yama* is *ahimsa*, nonviolence or non-hurting. Nitya additionally defines it as “observing compassion in love and serenity.” Most of his commentary relates to food, which was always an important issue for him. It makes a very good example, in that it is fairly simple to pretend there isn’t any hurting involved, even when there is a lot. I have had several friends say to me over the years, “If I had to kill animals for food I wouldn’t eat them” as they dove into a plate of pork chops or chicken. Killing aside, modern factory farming of animals means nothing but a brief lifetime of pure torture for those creatures. I don’t know at

what point mindfulness kicks in, so that you can no longer ignore that that inert object on the plate has once been alive, but sometimes it does. Nitya excuses such behavior to a degree by singling out humans as the only creatures who associate morality with their food habits. We have to kill to live, and that's the bottom line. If we don't kill we die. Barbara Kingsolver included a similar eloquent revelation in her book *The Poisonwood Bible*. For this reason, most people think moral food choices and the people who make them are ridiculous. And maybe we are.

In many of his classes Nitya used to teach a continuum of values, drawing a line and marking each end with the extreme polarities of the subject, and then marking off varying stages as one extreme transformed into the other. With food he might have cannibalism at one end and fruitarian at the other; in between would be stages of progression like vegan, vegetarian, lacto-ovo vegetarian, invertebrates, fish, birds, mammals. He was often derided by meat eaters who claimed that he was killing vegetables as surely as they killed animals. His response was that if you couldn't distinguish between a little lamb who looked up at you with pleading eyes and a carrot when you took a knife to them, there was no point in talking about it. Anyway, the continuum of values was what he had in mind when he said, "A widening circle of empathy brings more and more discrimination in the selection of foods. That means love and caring for other living beings are placed higher in the hierarchy of values than the satiation of hunger." And yes, you can rate values vertically as better and worse, for instance with maximum misery at the low end and minimal harm at the top. That's totally legitimate, yogically speaking.

A continuum can most definitely include overlapping categories, and on many of them Nitya drew, the middle was the goal, and not some extreme form of either asceticism or indulgence. It all depends.

We went around the room and each person in turn described how they practiced ahimsa in their life. This turned out to be a lot of fun, with plenty of banter back and forth. Obviously, non-hurting is something every child learns, and you don't have to study Patanjali or become a Buddhist to have wrestled with it. A full accounting of last night's class would make a small book, and when we were done Brenda suggested that we go around again. We'd barely scratched the surface, yet it was our longest class in well over a year.

There's no way I can relate everything we talked about, so I'll just touch on a couple of highlights. There was a general consensus around taking a moment before reacting to provocation in anger, and everyone was then able to substitute reasoning for confrontation. Additionally, there were several examples where a small hurt or modicum of resistance warded off much greater future difficulties, and so it could still be considered ahimsa. There are precious few black and white situations where one choice is absolutely free of negative elements. It becomes a matter of minimizing the negativity, not eliminating it. When Narayana Guru in *Atmopadesa Satakam* recommends taking a global perspective and acting on the basis of the greatest good, he is taking cognizance of the fact that virtually every course of action has some justification, but some are nonetheless much better than others.

Because of this relativity, I take umbrage over the assertion that abortion and the management of pests are contrary to ahimsa. Abortion was instigated as a compassionate solution to a perennial problem, and while it does involve killing a fetus, it protects the mother in many cases from serious injury or death, not to mention sparing an unwanted child a lifetime of misery in some cases. Doctors who perform abortions are motivated by compassion, as well as brave enough to operate under threats of their own death. And if dogs and cats weren't neutered and sometimes euthanized,

they would infest the whole world, wiping out many species and spreading disease. So their management is a way to make their lives more positive in many respects. Human intervention is certainly flawed, but nature's methods are also cruel and capricious at times. What makes the discussion of ahimsa so interesting is all the nuances and exceptions it involves. There is no monolithic absolute called ahimsa, any more than there is unalloyed truth in the next yama.

Brenda's ahimsa was of a type that is often overlooked: compassion for herself. We should learn how not to hurt ourself, even if it is socially sanctioned. Recently Brenda has been taken advantage of by some of her friends, and she has decided to stand up to them. She has been perhaps overly generous with her time and energy in the past, but now is going to reserve more for her own needs. She has learned she should care for herself, too. It is important to remember that we are also part of everything, and so should not sacrifice our own happiness solely for the benefit of others, particularly if they are black holes of psychic need, only taking in and never emitting any light. It is often the case that standing up to friends who take too much can teach them to rethink their position as well, benefitting them in the long run.

Eugene shared a great example of ahimsa. Over Christmas he visited his mother, with whom he has had a challenging relationship since early adolescence. But now he is solid enough in himself to not feel so threatened, and instead of cloaking himself in defensive armor he was able to make genuine contact with her. As is so often the case, she responded positively, and the two had a great time together, which is a major milestone. Further, when Eugene went to church with her, instead of sneering at the whole schtick as he used to do, he looked for the common ground beneath the Christian symbolism, and found lots of it. You could see what a relief it was in his smiles as he told the tale. A heavy weight had been lifted.

So ahimsa isn't only about not making war; it has an interpersonal level that is a most fertile ground for us to till, and the benefits accrue to everyone.

One of my major leaps toward vegetarianism and pacifism happened I was about 11. I was given a slingshot for my birthday by my father. I'd been raised with the typical attitude that saturates American culture exalting gunslingers as upholders of law and justice, as well as being great white hunters, so I eagerly went out hunting rabbits in the woods behind our house one day. Damned if I didn't hit one in the head with a rock! He was kinda dazed, so I crept closer and got him again! He moved off, but was wobbly, and I followed him. He was bleeding and panting hard. Finally he lay down, exhausted. I walked up to him. He was looking right at me, resignedly. We spoke to each other through our eyes. He was of course a dear cute little bunny, a young one, and I was the agent of his death. The awesome horror of killing a fellow creature was rising in my stomach, rocking my whole being. Desperate with remorse, I knew I had to put him out of his misery. I fired another rock point blank at his head. He thrashed a little, and lay still, panting harder than ever. It took four or five more direct hits before he finally stopped breathing and was quiet.

Through a cascade of tears I walked slowly back to the house and put the slingshot away forever. I spent that day and the next in self recrimination but mostly sheer sadness and misery for the beautiful life I had terminated for no reason whatsoever. I dedicated myself with intense passion to nurturing and kindness. I vowed to strive to never cause harm to anyone, anywhere, any time, and I have to say that resolve has stayed with me through my whole life. My failures all hang in my conscience even decades after they happened. The rabbit incident wasn't my first and certainly not my last connection with ahimsa (non-hurting), but it may have been the most profound of all.

As I began to get my boyish spirits back the next day, I forced the incident out of my mind. I was ready to get on with being a blissfully unaware kid again. Looking out the glass back door, I saw our dog Bridget coming out of the woods with the dead rabbit in her mouth. Its skin was hanging loose off its paws, and its raw, naked little body was covered with tooth marks. My ordeal wasn't over yet! Bridget faithfully walked up to the door and dropped the half-chewed, rotting mess on the step right in front of me. Then she looked up and wagged her tail sweetly and proudly, expecting me to come and take the treasure in to the table. In a state of near delirium I had to go for the shovel, dig a deep hole, and push the limp carcass onto the shovel for transport to the burial site. Forgetting was clearly not going to be an option. And I have never forgotten. I still cry when I retell this story.

So there you go: one of the many reasons I was a very strange character as a kid, and probably still am. But my philosophy is to try to always err on the side of kindness, so there are far worse ways to be weird.

Narayana Guru was passionate about vegetarianism, and as Moni said he was instrumental in doing away with animal sacrifices in the temples of South India. He told worshippers that sacrificing a melon instead of a chicken was perfectly acceptable to the gods, and such was his influence that the whole paradigm rapidly changed. As promised, here are a few excerpts of his poetry, translated by M.N. Prasad:

All are of one self-fraternity
Such being the dictum to avow
How could we kill living beings
And eat them without any mercy?

Non-killing vow is great indeed
But greater still is not-eating to observe....

(from Five Verses of Kindness to Life)

He who kills harmless creatures
For his own pleasure
Will have no well-being
While living or after death.

Thinking of how meat is made
Of killing living beings,
And of ill-treating them,
Give up totally meat-eating.
(verses 1 and 5 of Ahimsa, Non-Hurting)

Narayana Guru's Ten Verses on Compassion, which include his famous dictum, "He who loves is he who really lives," begins:

Such compassion that
Even to an ant
Would brook to befall
Not the least of harms,
Confer on me
O Mercy-maker
Along with the thought
That from your sacred presence
Never go astray.

He who loves is he who really lives. Wiser words were never spoken. Aum.

Part II

On a walk today I was recalling that day when the rabbit taught me the preciousness of life, and I realized I was born in the Chinese Year of the Rabbit. Not only that, but if I was twelve or

the last third of eleven when it happened, it would have been the Year of the Rabbit come round again. Curious....

Eugene wrote a very nice note back after the class notes, with some personal comments, plus these words of wisdom:

Brenda reminded me to be kind to this dude, Eugene. Practicing ahimsa is about allowing "space" in every situation. We want to cram solutions, dictum, mantras, or everything else into every uncomfortable situation. Ahimsa is allowing the situation to heal itself according to what the Source recommends. We have to ALLOW this medicine to manifest.

I watched the film GANDHI with Ben Kingsley again last night. I was reminded that the healing waters of the Source are always available to us. If we could just sit back and commune with the Source for just a few seconds, Divine guidance is readily accessible.