

2022 Patanjali Class 69

10/24/23

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 B: Satya, truth

Deb was able to join us for the first time in quite a while, resuming her leading role as initiator and guide of the conversation. She had to laugh at Nitya's opening example of bus meets rock, a common enough occurrence all over the world:

Suppose a bus, traveling through a gorge between two cliffs, comes to a landslide that has left a huge boulder blocking the road. The passengers may have all sorts of differences in their religious faiths, political ideologies, personal prejudices, and so on. But they will all agree to one thing — they cannot continue their journey until the road is cleared. This is an irrefutable fact that does not depend on anyone's opinion. Such an encounter is an existential encounter. (241-2)

Despite the irrefutable metaphor, Deb continued, this yama hints at the whole world of what constitutes a truthful statement. If a baby cries in the night, you have to get up and take care of it. Only when it becomes an opinion, a matter of convenience, can truth shift around. It's important for all of us to recognize that truth is not political, and the ways we cheat on it. We need to realize how we keep ourselves from seeing things as they are. Deb invited us to give an example of where we believed one thing and then something else happened that caused us to understand it in a different way. She was sure of so many things in her twenties, and

their truth changed as she saw them more deeply as she got older. For instance, over the course of time her understanding of her mother changed a great deal, so she could see how different layers of perception and empathy create a new understanding of people, especially those you are close to.

I put in that we live in a time when even if there is an actual rock in the road blocking forward progress, there are howling crowds that insist it's not true. It's a plot. Every honorable action is treated as dishonorable, beset with howling contradictions, and truth has gone into hiding. There are few situations with simple answers. It's as if we are living in a permanent hurricane.

An irrefutable boulder is one thing, but a yogic approach to truth addresses the many layers outside of physics and mathematics, though even these disciplines have progressed over time to new and unimagined levels of truth. Truth is most flexibly nuanced in relationships, and we are not always honest even with ourself about it, though we almost always believe we are. Our judgment has to be keen to explore what the best option is, which choice is the kindest and most sensible to the broadest coalition of participants.

Bill shared a dramatic example of this, having earlier in the day talked to a young man who is the adult son of lifelong friend. He had been involved for seven years in a purportedly spiritual Christian community, finally realizing it was a cult and made his escape a year ago. He realized the charismatic leader was just in it for himself, weaving fantasies to develop his own brand of religion and keep its community bound together. Now both the young man and his wife are dealing with the damage of being manipulated.

Bill emphasized that Nitya is talking about the damage we do to our fellow beings by being untruthful. You care for those around you by being as truthful as you can, and you don't manipulate people for your own ends. It's an important skill very much lacking in our political climate.

My take on this is that unalloyed, bald-faced truth isn't always the kindest or most sensible option, and it may well be impossible. The story I told last week about rescuing the woman from the burning apartment is a good example. The bare truth is that I saved her life, yet when she came to, she felt humiliated and embarrassed, and it came out as anger and hatred toward me. Her truth was ignorant of her brush with death, and only cognizant of her immediate discomfort. Maybe later she came to realize that truth, but not then. The truth was that I was not going to leave her on the burning couch to protect her self-image, though that's what she wanted at that moment.

I often had to play fast and loose with facts at work. I recalled a car wreck involving a young couple. I rode in the ambulance with the woman, who was seriously injured and very distraught. She didn't realize her partner was dead, and I didn't want to tell her, as the truth would have been disabling. I reassured her we were doing everything we could, reminded her she had been in an accident, but shaped what I said avoiding the grim truth that she would have to face later, during her recovery.

With her mother suffering from senility, Jan is constantly dealing with a somewhat similar problem: how much does she have to tell her what's really going on. Her mom gets very confused, but wants to be in control. It's an impossible situation. Jan tries to honor her and support her wishes as much as she can, yet she asks for the impossible and wants it so badly. The last thing she wants to hear is the truth that she has dementia and cannot safely manage her affairs.

This is an excellent example where the most important truth is Jan's relationship with her mother. All the facts lying around are potentially disruptive to it, and her wisdom is brought to bear to decide what will work and what won't.

It reminded Deb of the poem Peggy Grace wrote about her mother's dementia, which I've clipped in to Part II, though you

must already know it. She and her mother learned to participate in the truth of being together, sharing a new relationship.

Paul mused how hard it is to draw the line between representing truth and contributing to distortion or engaging in distortion for a higher purpose. He remembered when his dad was having issues, seeing imaginary children he needed to put to bed, and was very concerned that kids weren't warm enough, so they needed more blankets. It was all in his head. His mother would argue with him and get nowhere, but eventually Paul gave her the advice to just help his dad put those kids to bed. It worked like a charm, so Paul decided it was okay, under the heading of compassion, to share in the delusion. In other cases as well, Paul has shared in family members' delusions in order to get along, and it has worked well.

Deb commented that really being truthful is predicated on being truthful with ourselves. When we aren't, that's where the darkness comes in. We should all be trying to see that.

"Trying to see" includes realizing our waking mind can be effortlessly deluded by an inner judging faculty we cannot see or hear.

Nancy agreed that on a personal basis truth isn't always on a straight path and easy. It keeps revealing itself in new ways, twisting and turning, and you have to be conscious of that. You don't really know where it's going.

Anita's revelation from the commentary came from the idea that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but space has a curve, so there are no straight lines if you go far enough. In all the examples we'd been discussing, there's no straight line. She found this very helpful to understand the concept of truth, how our understanding can change, evolve, can entail being compassionate for a higher purpose. She was referring to this part:

Pure truth never manifests in total clarity to a human mind. Suppose we say that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. There is a logical compulsion to believe the truth of it. But suppose the two points are as far apart as two stars at two extremes of the galaxy. If a line is drawn from one to the other, it can never be a straight line because space itself has curvature. So even a mathematical truth can become falsified. (242)

Anita's point reminded me of fractal geometry. We used to imagine the world was built up out of simple shapes like triangles, squares and cylinders, but Benoit Mandelbrot made their truth obsolete in the 1960s with his fractal geometry, which better models nature. His initial premise was those shapes do not truly exist in nature.

Anita has two granddaughters, both raised as conservative Mormons, who have come out as differently-gendered—Anita wasn't sure which. Perhaps they aren't sure either, which needs to be okay. Gender is another subject that was once simple and clearly defined, and has turned out to be inadequate to people's needs: boys and girls are like squares and circles in a fractal universe. Anita wondered about the truth of who a person is, what is it based on? Is it biological? Conceptual? Who they want to have sex with? There are layers in complexity in the truth for them. Deb acknowledged their courage in standing up for who they believe they are. There are huge religio-political movements in America to prohibit just this type of truth-seeking, energized by the ignorant hatred of thwarted souls.

Nancy agreed it's mind boggling, because there is so much there that we haven't been aware of until recently. A person's true gender may have never been acknowledged. It's a whole new expression of being, and it keeps expanding all the layers.

Paul added that even with the rock business, if you're coming from one direction, the rock fell down from the right, while from the other direction it fell from the left, meaning the same event is not quite the same from different perspectives. Making it a reasonable question to ask how much of our arrogance is responsible for our own ignorance. Along these lines, Deb remembered how Gandhi taught Nitya that truth has many facets.

This is from the Darsanamala Notes of 6/12/7:

As Anita reminded us the other night, we shouldn't presume everyone is our enemy based on generalizations. We should look at the other side and see our brethren standing there, with our same motivations and desires. More than half the problem is between our own ears. We should at least do away with the made up part so we can address the real issues more honestly. Ultimately, the wise person knows to do what is possible, to teach and demonstrate peace, and is prepared to retreat to the periphery when the public sphere goes mad, as it regularly does. For this we have to stay awake and alive to the enveloping situation, and not pretend that we live in a fairytale.

How often has the public sphere gone mad since 2007?

Anita asserted in the present that we are all connected but there is nevertheless a layer that is separate. For sure. The other day, regarding the latest Arab-Israeli war, Deb wrote: "At every moment, we humans take sides, throw our deepest emotions and thoughts into those divisions and hold them close as absolute truths. Kindness can result, so can peace. More often it is killing and despair." For sure. Nitya was passionate about this:

Nobody wants to have factionalism, but even as you are attempting to bring unity, you become part of a faction. It is in

the name of unity that you are creating all these factions in the first place....

So the true knower of this secret withholds from all disputes. Narayana Guru made this so central to his teaching because it is in the name of this one dispute that we have been killing each other since the dawn of human history. There has been more blood shed in the name of religion than there is water in the seven oceans put together. It is such an important question for all mankind. If the dignity of man is to be enhanced, we need to find a solution to this eternal riddle of man killing man in the name of an opinion. (That Alone, 322)

I read out a helpful paragraph from the old Notes:

Yoga study differs from most religious practice in accepting that ignorance is an unavoidable part of our lives. In place of accepting the “word of God,” as it is interpreted by powerful figures, we are called upon to dig down and discover it for ourselves. Blasphemy to a yogi is not the refusal to accept the common wisdom and kowtow to its imaginary tenets but the insistence on the validity of false assumptions.

That means there isn't some absolutely determined truth in all of these issues: what's important is how we arrive *at what matters* in them. It isn't by accepting the word of authority in whatever form it's presented; it has to be real and alive and we have to question it for ourselves. It brought to Deb's mind Merton's rage against simulacra (simulations) we have often referenced to, how in place of reality we make up images and identify with them, and then they lead us off to kill. The message of Yoga is to pull back from those images, settle into own hearts, and listen.

The satya commentary includes the best sentence (in my estimation) in the entire book: “The yogi makes every effort not to

be a howler telling untruth or a simpleton believing in something because somebody said it or it is written somewhere.”

I was concerned that we had been talking much more about falsehood than truth, which is the restraint in question. That’s because falsehood is much easier to identify. Safer, too. Yes, we restrain our falsehoods to arrive at certain truths, yet we have already agreed we are ignorant, and that it’s okay. It can’t be helped. Truth is not absolute in the relative sense, and we aren’t negated if we don’t know all of it. Nor is truth merely a moral perspective. It’s a grounding. So where do we seek it? I offered some excerpts from Nitya’s [Psychic Magazine interview of 1970](#), surely one of the best sources of all to understand who he was. Here he expresses a positive attitude toward truth, most worthy of emulation:

If I accept the term “Yogi,” it will be in a very wide sense.

I treat the whole of life as a theme for Yoga, since “Yoga” means a harmonized life where your mind is in harmony with a universal mind—a mind that operates behind the mind of all. In that sense, if I relate myself continuously and consistently to a universal mind, never losing the grip of it, then I am a Yogi.

If I see human beings and other living beings around me participating in the life of which I am also a participant, and if I am living in harmony with them and helping them in their pursuits, never obstructing their ways of happiness, then I can call myself a Yogi. And if I am given an environment and I am able to make it more congenial to my mind and the minds of others for a more harmonious life, then my enduring for that purpose is also the life of a Yogi.

So I do not search for any kind of a special program such as Yoga exercises or Yoga meditation. I always wake up with the feeling of how wonderful it is that another day has come, and I hold my life in a state of continuous contemplation of the

significance of life. I do not have any special prayer, except a feeling that there should be well-being among all with whom I live in this world—whether it is a little ant, a bird or a human. My heart goes to all these equally. I make my whole life a life of prayer because I do not think of a personal God. (PM)

Most classmates are irritated that I downplay practice in our Gurukula class, yet it's due to this prompt in the same interview:

Q: How do you practice your spiritual beliefs?

Nitya: Here again, we should qualify the question because of certain implications.

The word “practice” has a connotation which does not suit my attitude. When you say “practice,” it is different from living. You practice something to gain a certain proficiency—then you utilize that proficiency. A plant just grows and brings forth the flowers, and every moment of its life is an unfoldment. Likewise, I consider life has to be a natural, spontaneous unfoldment all the time. So I do not practice anything, I just live.

Let me add: It's heartening to think that while we have our weeds to pull and plenty of other tasks to perform, through it all a natural unfolding of our innate being is taking place. We are like flowers gracing our moment in the sun with color and beauty. We learn more of who we are as it appears before us, already well developed and brimming with promise. More Nitya:

Life is not after all for gain or loss. It will anyway flow with whatever formation it runs into. You and I are no exception to this. So I should not say whether you're doing the right thing or the wrong. When I was officially a student I was delighted to teach, and now when I am officially branded as a guru I want to

hide my head in shame and admit that there is nothing to teach other than what life brings with it and flowers forth. (L&B 406)

Susan believes it does help to work on things—of course it does—and she has gained much from her reading, from classes, and therapy. Because of her efforts she is feeling more space opening up for her. She told us, “Usually I get too worried about things happening to characters in books and movies, and especially worry when my children are on airplanes. But lately I am more aware that I am doing this and I am able to let go and not take things on so much. Peter was flying back from Thailand last week — traveling for 24 hours in total. I started worrying about the flight and wanting him to be home safely but then I was able to let it be his journey and not get so tied up in knots about it.”

Here’s another shade of Nitya’s ideas about expression versus practice, from the Gita:

A kind of definition is given here of *sukha*, happiness. That is, when you go on practicing, and you start taking delight in it, that is *sukha*. There is not a very big distinction, but some distinction can be drawn between *sukha* and *ananda*. It is a very appropriate thing to say that *sukha* is cultivated through practice, that when you again and again do it, more and more interest comes, and then it becomes *sukha*. (Nitya Gita video, XVIII, 36)

Our closing meditation was on mud pies:

While in Ooty in 2011, I read through some of the amazing and voluminous correspondence between Edda Walker and Nitya. One bit I copied out bears on our exploration of *satyam*, of which “innocence and honesty” are important features:

July 8, 1974:

Dear Edda,

Today I was narrating to my students the generous hospitality of Emma when she invited me to eat mud pies, made specially for me and served in the garden. The most important lesson I learned from her is that I had the freedom to pretend to be eating rather than actually eating the mud pie. When spiritual children play the same game of baking pretentious “spiritual pies” in the garden of make-believe, they insist we should eat their pies. I wish we all had the innocence and honesty of Emma. (Nitya)

July 16, 1974:

Dear Swamiji,

Thank you for hushing your VOICE low enough to send me your July 8th lesson. It arrived just as the pretentious spiritual pies I had been baking lately started weighing me down. I found your letter in the mail box when I came home from picking up the girls at school. I started reading it, and as I was trying to concentrate on it, Kathryn started annoying me. I told her to go away and leave me in peace. She looked at me and asked, “Is Swamiji's letter stirring you up, Mummy?” I too wish I had Emma's and Kathryn's honesty and innocence, and no doubt I once had it, but a large amount of garbage has piled up from then to now, and the trouble is that instead of unloading that garbage in the open sea, I have been spreading it around right under people's noses and have expected people to say, “What a beautiful smell!” One strange thing is that some people actually like the smell!

With my love, Edda

Part II

Linda emailed her contribution to the class, addressing all five yamas:

yes to non-violence, truthfulness, non-misappropriateness (and mis-appropriation!), and
non-acquisitiveness (non-land grabbing!)

yes to JUST PEACE!
ENDING APARTHEID
ENDING OCCUPATION
ENDING GENOCIDE

YES TO LOVE AND BLESSINGS TO ALL!



going to see joan baez documentary at cinema 21 tonight so won't
be with you on zoom,
but will be saying yes to all the self-restraints!!! AND TRUTH
BEING REVEALED!

BRING IN THE LIGHT on this DARKNESS!

transforming the darkness into light: ANISHA

* * *

Peggy's poem:

Self and Memory
Peggy Grace Chun

As my mother's Alzheimer's disease slowly melded her brain and
melted her ability to orient via identity,
I suffered after each visit, sitting in my car weeping.
She suffered deeply also, grasping at flickers of fond memories,
panicking when she'd look in a mirror,
drawing maps of relationships, losing them.
We grasped and flailed together,
until one day I came for a visit and she said,
"I have no idea who you are but you're just lovely." And I said,
"Shall we walk in the garden?"
From that day forth, our suffering ceased, no longer orienting via
identity
but rather connecting via our deeper selves in the present moment.
of course, she could no longer safely or freely interface in the
broader world,
so I'm not recommending Alzheimer's disease as a path to "Be
Here Now."

But that remarkable shift we shared
remains my sacred foundational axis...
in life, in love, in art, in the grocery check out line... in standing
side by side
quietly peering at the garden's beauty
where only that delicate purple iris exists.

(Gurukulam Magazine, Fall 2013)

* * *

1/18/11

A retroactive class on the second restraint: satya, truth.
(Retroactive meant it was prepared from Deb's notes, after I
returned from India.)

Nitya encapsulates satyam in a nutshell with a perfect short summary. In a world where truth is being willfully undermined on all sides, manipulated for personal and collective gain, it would seem that not much should have a higher priority. Yet all too often truth's features have become matters of argument where the loudest or most persistent faction wins. The losing sides are often willing to give up because they are reluctantly aware of the elusiveness of truth. As Nitya says, "There are subtle situations where the pros and cons of everything involved or implied cannot be easily traced. Then it is possible to hoodwink another or tell blatant lies, pretending one is more in the know than others. This is a clear case of deception. Untruth is passed on for truth in many situations that are elusive and subtle."

In a global world we are dependent on distant voices to supply us with much of our information, and so we have to gauge who to trust using a combination of wishful thinking and blind faith. We no longer live in extended families where everything can

be more or less verified in person. Yet as parents of teenagers in particular are unable to deny, even our nearest relatives can remain an impenetrable mystery to us.

The faith we cultivate in our sources of information and their validity is similar to much religious belief in being unverifiable. While frustrating, the alternative is to live in an infinitesimal world shrunken down to include only our immediate surroundings, with even those in constant doubt. It seems that something in our nature calls for more than this: we want to know, and we want to be sure. Nitya reminds us of the bottom line in our relation to truth:

To compensate for [the elusiveness of truth], the yogi is not expected to learn the intricacies of physics and mathematical logic. You are simply advised not to distort the truth for convenience. Throughout the religious world of belief and dogma, uncouth lies are precipitated and perpetuated by people for vested interests. Hence this warning that, even unintentionally, out of sheer ignorance, you may lead another to wrong consequences by distorting truth. The yogi makes every effort not to be a howler telling untruth or a simpleton believing in something because somebody said it or it is written somewhere. (242-3)

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it around right under people's noses and have expected people to say, "What a beautiful smell!" One strange thing is that some people actually like the smell!

With my love,
Edda

As requested, Deb made some notes for me from the actual classes I missed. She felt they had gone very well. "We started off with talking of the meaning of restraint and observance in relation to all the specific characteristics, especially ahimsa and truthfulness... what is being restrained? what is observed? Our conclusion was that it is the smaller, ego assertion that is being restrained... and the existence of a larger unity that is being observed."

The class appreciated Nitya's final paragraph in particular:

In the last days of Lord Buddha, he told his disciples: "Do not believe in a statement because it came from an ancient tradition. Do not believe because many believe. Do not believe because it is said by someone far more aged than you. Do not believe because somebody is threatening to kill you unless you believe. Diligently inquire, deeply ponder, and, if after careful examination, you are convinced of the irrefutability of the truth before you, accept it and stand by it." This is probably what Patañjali also means: that you should adhere to truth at all costs. (243)

Bill commented that Nitya's quote of the Buddha's last instructions are a kind of restraint/observance which direct all of us to become/be aware of truth in our lives. Mindfulness is a way to be open to truth, a practice where we are exposed to a larger view than merely our egoistic projections.

Paul noted that there was a problem with the “apparent” duality between irrefutable existential truth of concrete aspects of our world, and the much less obvious absolute truth. Don’t we all wish that metaphysical truths were as plain as the berry sitting in the palm of our hand, about to be eaten? The rishis used just that analogy to highlight the bedrock certainty we are taught to uncover beneath the garbage strewn about on the surface of things.

In the same vein, Eugene talked about his sister who is focused on “getting things done,” but “for Jesus.” In such situations there is a practical, existential aspect being directed by fantasies, though perhaps healthy ones in this case. This is extremely dangerous ground, however, wide open to manipulation by demagogues or our own half-baked thinking. Nitya’s advice to make “every effort” to penetrate potential falsehoods is especially critical in these cases, but doing so is contrary to religious convention, which insists on unquestioning acceptance. Because of the monumental pressures on us to conform, typically little or no effort is made to sift out the real pearls amid the muddy swill, and the results can be disastrous. I’m speaking in general, as I don’t know Eugene’s sister and I don’t know what more he said about her. Knowing him, we can guess she is likewise bright enough to not be easily fooled.

The class agreed that our daily, transactional life is where we can realize and express truth, but the catch is we can get so caught up in doing we lose sight of truth. We need to be at a place of receptivity and openness, so that truth is visible to us and we are open to its reality, not just our personal, petty desires. Deb brought in Nataraja Guru's frames of reference: there is a smaller “truth” in many daily aspects of our lives, but there is a deeper, more encompassing absolute truth that is important to also be aware of, that is more unifying.

I’ll close with one of the haikus I wrote in Nancy’s class in Ooty last week. Truth is not existence (sat or satyam) alone; we

also have to be aware of it (chit) and it has to have some significance or value (ananda). So here is that classic definition in the shape of a haiku:

Something exists, you know
that it does, it has meaning—
saccidananda!