

2022 Patanjali Class
2/8/22
6 – Yoga Letter Five

Yesterday I started a web page for the new Patanjali Class Notes [here](#), including the place to order the book, [here](#). Buying one is likely to be difficult if you live outside India, though the publisher may make it easier one of these days.

In the fifth Letter, Nitya presents five norms of a well-attuned life, which are spectrums of adult awareness that we are more or less familiar with already. Nitya suggests we measure ourselves by these parameters, which are: how easily we regain tranquility after an upset; how alert we are in advance to be prepared for an upset; how well our knowledge and volition are coordinated, so that our talents can be well expressed and utilized; having a nourishing learning program in place, ideally with the support of a wise teacher; and, most importantly, knowing the numinous center of our being as our true nature.

My take on these norms is given in Part II, along with some eminently practical advice.

Deb assured us that we all experience the norms in different times, and they are not in a linear order. The first one reminded her of Arjuna, beset by a million different oppositions. Situations like them arise continually as challenges for us to balance parts of our lives. Our journey is to arrive at truth, beauty and goodness, and all the norms are focused on just exactly that.

One of the greatest paradoxes we face is that we are perfect beings at all times, and yet we are also flawed, with plenty of room for improvement. It reminded me of a line in the Tony Hoagland poem, Address to the Beloved: “When you say I leave a lot to be desired / is that a good thing?”

Anita brought up a current challenge, friction in her family, with its four living generations. Her daughter Amanda got really

upset the other day, because a close relative was nasty to her. Anita sent her a letter:

Your family is in such a state of transition, and people can react to that pressure in different ways. Some advice I'm trying to take myself is when you see someone you love in need, do what you can and then let it go. Finding and then nurturing your own peace of mind is essential.

Anita realizes you have to make your knowledge personal, more than directing it at your loved ones, and until you work yourself into getting back into norms like these, life can be challenging and frustrating. She wonders why she's still dealing with the same issues of hurt feelings and lack of caring. It's an ongoing process and it takes a lot of dedication, since staying stuck in the old patterns is so much easier.

Anita also told her daughter that as a mother, it's always hard to watch your child suffer. She resolved to try to be a better friend to her and less of a mother, trying to fix things. Instead of giving advice, she would try to listen better.

Listening is a powerful tool, and good listening a severely underdeveloped talent of our species, for sure.

Nitya is very clear that yoga isn't about erasing your reactions to life, which is a popular "spiritual" idea in some circles. You react because you care, because you're present, and shutting that off is not a healthy option. It's worth reposting the paragraph where this is baldly set forth, as the first norm:

One norm of the well-attuned is the capacity for regaining tranquility and perfect balance after every incident of disturbance. Life is a flux and therefore there will be a repeated knocking around and tossing caused by the randomness of several things pulled or pushed by circumstances. In your

personal case, objects of interest make impact on your senses. Your sense of duty dictates that you do the chores of life and also meet several contingent states. You are exposed to heat and cold and to pain and pleasure. The people with whom you associate are not always thoughtful or cooperative. This can cause strains. Thus, innumerable are the occasions for you to lose the poise of your body and mind. Each gives you an opportunity to apply the norms of sameness in your life. One test is how easily you can regain your tranquility when assailed by pairs of opposites.

So we allow ourselves to experience the problems that come along, to feel them, and that includes being hurt by hurtful parts or thrilled by upbeat ones. There's a natural tendency to endlessly perpetuate our reactions by holding on to them though force of will, but the well-established yogi regains equipoise reasonably quickly, because they know they are at their best when calm and collected. They do this by not hanging on exclusively to their side of the issue, but including the other perspectives involved. They feel and acknowledge their loss or gain, but then don't stay there.

Humans tend to want to get other people over their upsets as fast as possible, but allowing them to feel miserable and unhappy, when appropriate, often helps their healing. And we should allow that for ourselves, as well.

Paul finds it interesting that equipoise, or balance, loses definition if it's not being opposed by other voices. When you're sad, you should allow yourself to admit there are also legitimate reasons not to cry, even reasons to laugh, on the other side. He thought our underlying motives are that we are terrified with the fear of pain, so we perform all sorts of self-guarding behaviors that turn into traps.

Deb admitted she's been in situations where normally she would react really intensely, but if she can maintain a larger

perspective, her circle is not so tight, and she doesn't react so strongly. This is the third, the positive norm — coordination between our knowledge and our volition. She gave a nod to Moni, who calmly meets so many provocations in her work, while trying to help desperate people in need.

Moni laughingly admitted her steadiness is not anything magical—she's been practicing it over and over all these years. By the third time an insult happened, she knew it was going to happen again, and that's when she began limiting her reactions to attackers. Plus, being her job, she knew she couldn't respond rudely to attacks, she just had to suppress her feelings and go with the flow.

Deb was taken by Nitya's term *psychogenic parasites*, for how our false beliefs eat away at us. We think we're having all these bad thoughts buffeting us from outside, yet much of it is arising from within us. The same is true of our congenital defects: "I could be upset that I can't play tennis, or surf, or I could just realize I am capable of doing other things," she said. She invited the class to confess if any of these things bother us, also.

Susan brought up aging as a congenital issue for her. As we age, there are fewer and fewer things we can do, but we come to accept that more, and are content with what's still available. We move from resistance to acceptance, and what might have been frightening becomes a new adventure.

I know it's because we're older that we forget the oft-shared article from the NY Times in 2008 by Sara Reistad-Long: Older Brain Really May Be a Wiser Brain. If you have forgotten it, check it out again. [Here](#).

Susan also wondered if the third norm Nitya mentioned could be related to dharma? Tapping into your capabilities is more about svadharma—personal dharma—than pure dharma, which is more akin to our genetic structuring. Dharma provides us our potentials, and svadharma is what we make of them in our actual life. The

cliché of “following your dharma” as finding your bliss is really shorthand for svadharma. Ultimately, we can’t alter our dharma, but we can engage with and develop our svadharma.

Nancy offered that there’s a phrase for an artist or writer or anyone creative, who is forming new things: they found their voice. That sort of personally true “voice” is close to svadharma.

Jan has felt the stirrings of the third norm lately, in her law work more than as a visual artist. She has to figure out how to handle each new situation, often with intentionally antagonistic opponents. At first she senses she doesn’t yet have the right strategy, but knows the problem is simmering in the back of her mind. She has learned that she isn’t in control of how the simmering goes, but she anticipates the wise integration of everything from a deeper place. She had one of those moments the previous night, realizing how to handle a difficult person for her client. The solution was a way of bringing their opposing requirements together, and it felt easy and holistic.

Andy commented it’s a subtle thing to find out what your limitations actually are, so you can work with them. His dear friend, the artist Jim Hibbard, told him one of the greatest things that an artist can achieve is to know what they do well and really embrace that. Andy realized that to get that you have to look carefully at yourself, finding out what you’re good at, peering into what is really the case with you.

I’d been talking earlier with Andy about his legacy of teaching art in colleges. “Studying” art is a mixed blessing, since when we are directed to the greatest art treasures we start to mentally lean in their direction, and lose a measure of the naively authentic ability that we started out with. Our attention gets focused, for better or worse, so our natural openness is abandoned, and we may spend the rest of our life trying to recover it. It seems to be a necessary part of our development—you have to be

educated out of your innate capacities and later have to struggle to bring them back.

Andy supposed the Biblical concept of the Fall and the Return to Grace encodes that aspect of life, and he read out a related poem by William Stafford that had just found its way to his lap:

When I Met My Muse

I glanced at her and took my glasses off—they were still singing. They buzzed like a locust on the coffee table and then ceased. Her voice belled forth, and the sunlight bent. I felt the ceiling arch, and knew that nails up there took a new grip on whatever they touched. “I am your own way of looking at things,” she said. “When you allow me to live with you, every glance at the world around you will be a sort of salvation.” And I took her hand.

from the book *The Way It Is*

For Andy, this topic brings up questions of knowledge and volition, which he feels is more of a deal when you are living on your own—as a majority of the class does, by the way. For the solo traveler, the day presents you with many choices, some of which are invitations to be in a clear state, while others are invitations to become muffled or confused. There are karmic choices involved, about how attuned you are to yourself.

Frankly, people who share habitations with others have to make the same choices; they just don’t have to make them 100% of the time. And they can just as easily make poor choices as anyone

else! I'd guess in the end it's a tie. Making choices is a creative act in itself, worthy of our full dedication, whatever our lifestyle.

A wise preceptor is a boon to all seekers, but is especially important if there is no one else around to contradict you. We need to be accused, rightly *and* wrongly, to develop a balanced ego. As an example, Nitya the lone sannyasin had the equivalent of ten touchy spouses armed with rolling pins, in Nataraja Guru.

Karen weighed in that her daily life is so full and wonderful that she doesn't have any problem with it, but she could relate to what Anita said in terms of her family. Her two sons are on a very different path than hers, or what she would have chosen for them. It's difficult for her to fully accept that their lives are their lives and they have a right to choose their own path, even if it's totally against everything she believes. She struggles to let them be who they are and still retain the abundant love of being their mother.

Andy sympathized that many people have hang-ups their whole life over some point of tension between them and their parents. At certain points in his life he did, too, suffering terribly growing up in a family where everyone did the same thing. They were all artists, so it was natural to believe that was what you were to be. Only after he realized how little we actually know about each other, and why we follow the paths we choose, was he able to accept it, and get along with them. He sympathizes that a lot of people feel tortured, imagining they don't measure up to the world they grew up in, and on the other hand, how parents feel they have failed because they couldn't drill common sense into their kids.

We grow up believing we are supposed to live in a certain way, but our parents may not have meant the advice they were imparting to be confining. They thought they were teaching us how to be free and happy, and they would be sorry to learn we got so bogged down in it. We needed guidance as kids, but the essential omission was how to stop kowtowing to it all our life.

My kids have let me know many of the ways in which I ruined their lives, so I know what I'm talking about. I meant well. I did.

Anita, despite serious problems in her family when she was young, is now full of gratitude for her parents, who loved her enough to do their best, despite their problems. What more can we ask of anyone? She regained her independent strength when "My life is my responsibility," burst into her mind, and she wrote it down and lived by it ever after.

This is an example of yoga in action: you could be horrified that people are mean to each other in a family, and pull away; or you could see it as an invitation to work with the problems and resolve them—a healing process. Nitya is directing us how to see those kinds of opportunities in everything, good and bad.

Anita agreed: if we didn't have all the polarities, we wouldn't be able to identify them every time we're in another painful situation. She's grateful for every chance that has come to her, wanting to discover what she can learn from it.

Deb pointed out that this takes us into the fourth norm, the need for nourishment and learning. We need to understand how to balance how we act with what we take in. It requires two or even more opposing forces that we learn to skillfully move through.

Paul admitted that in the past he's given opposition a bad rap, but he now realizes that coping with opposed beliefs has gone a long way in freeing him up, by energizing his thinking. What Andy said is vivid for him: living under the expectations of family members, how easy it is to adopt what we believe to be the common consensus. There is always a part of us we need to bury in order to get along. Is now the time to dig it back up?

I read Nitya's quote of the day, which goes right to this matter:

When we think of our outgoing consciousness and the sublime consciousness that is being absorbed into the Self, each one has different kinds of freedom. One is the freedom to go by one's own will into the electromagnetic field of being, subjected to the continuous push and pull of psychosomatic urges. By our own free will, we barter our freedom forever. The other is losing our identity in the freedom of pure Being. In spite of the polemics between the outer and the inner, both are necessary and complementary to arrive at the final step of transcendence of the outwardly conditioned world and the inwardly conditioned states of mind. (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, III.201)

In yoga we don't have to choose between the outer and the inner life: we can have both simultaneously. We *need* both simultaneously. In our culture we were brought up under dire oppositional thinking: believe in God or die, succeed in school or fail at life, do what we say or else. Belong to the world or hide yourself away from it. Turn or Burn, as the fundamentalists used to say. We need to peel the echoes of that dualism out of our souls, so we can both abandon our freedom and dissolve into pure freedom.

Deb read out the commentary on the Image for the I Ching hexagram 60, Limitation, which combines these two elements in its inimitable way:

A lake is something limited. Water is inexhaustible. A lake can contain only a definite amount of the infinite quantity of water; this is its peculiarity. In human life too the individual achieves significance through discrimination and the setting of limits. Therefore what concerns us here is the problem of clearly defining these discriminations, which are, so to speak, the backbone of morality. Unlimited possibilities are not suited to man; if they existed, his life would only dissolve in the

boundless. To become strong, a man's life needs the limitations ordained by duty and voluntarily accepted. The individual attains significance as a free spirit only by surrounding himself with these limitations and by determining for himself what his duty is.

That kind of duty is dharma, arising from within. Deb appended that we each have our own limitations, and it's only natural that each of us expresses it in a different way. Bill said that Nitya gave us these norms to measure how we're doing, but he agreed you can only be yourself, and there are different limitations for each of us. In the end, there is just the journey to truth, and that's what Patanjali will lead us through in our study.

Several of us loved the Letter's concluding with a journey to excellence, like the one we are embarking on, yet again. It's interesting that Nitya refers to the last norm as a test, as something that we measure ourselves against. Too much measuring is inhibiting, but a touch of it now and again helps us remain normalized. It's worth quoting it in full:

The fifth and last test is the most important. It is to know the very source from which your life flows and your intelligence radiates. In fact, you are that. Everything else is an aggregate of transforming incidents that are happening in the mere presence of this numinous center. It is not necessary to name it. Know it to be your truth. The final attunement is with this truth, as in "I am That." Your journey is to arrive at that adorable, precious truth that makes everything truthful, good, and beautiful.

Part II

My Yoga Shastra study group response, from 2008:

Oh my, Letter Five is so beautiful! It covers all we have to know to live a happy and constructive life. One wonders what else needs to be said? And yet, Nitya has so many essays like this, that say it all, but in very different and delightful ways.

Thinking about the five norms listed in the Letter helps me to feel like I've gotten at least *somewhere* in my life. As a child, shocks to my ego would send me reeling for days on end. As a young adult, the really stiff blows would unhinge me for years, even. But very, very slowly the time of recovery has shrunk. It takes a severe blast to set me back for a few days now, and most things only last a few hours, which is probably their fair share. Best of all, many unpleasant events which used to upset me a lot don't bother me much at all. That's because I no longer take personally those things which I'm not responsible for in the first place.

My mother taught me that if something went wrong, it was my fault, period. It took almost a lifetime to get out from under that tyrannical notion. My wife and I have taught our children a better way: to look and see to what extent they are the cause of a problem, but to also realize that very often they aren't. There is a lot of projection going on out there!

I believe that if you simply let time heal your wounds, they can go deep into the unconscious and warp behaviors there. It is far superior to consciously address them. Some good news or penetrating insight will often take away the sting and its lingering aftereffects, and usually you have to work at obtaining those benefits. Insight takes dispassionate contemplation, obviously, but good news is often the result of careful investigation. It isn't merely accidental. When we probe to the bottom of a problem, it is usually very much mitigated. We find that our enemies aren't enemies after all, or that the other person never even particularly noticed what we feared was a terrible business.

The second norm is a corollary of the work I'm referring to. When you study a problem it should prepare you for a similar event in the future. When you grow old, as I have, you have already done a lot of this kind of preparation. And it really does help to anticipate an impending blow, though it will still hurt, most likely.

The last three norms seem to actually be three aspects of one overarching norm. Knowing the numinous source of your life allows for the maximum unfoldment of your talents, and their expression simultaneously meets your needs for inner nourishment and creative growth.

I have been very lucky to have had a vast amount of time to develop my interests. I had a job (firefighter) with huge chunks of free time, during which I read widely, interacted with a variety of people very different from me, practiced piano (electric, with headphones), and edited some of Nitya's books. The Psychology of Darsanamala and That Alone gestated extensively in the Jenkins Road firehouse. I have been blessed to have strong interests from early on—music and transcendental psychology especially—so by now I've spent so much time on them even a dope like me would have to be a little accomplished with them. And one of the best things about firefighting is that because firefighters live on average ten years less than the general population, we get to retire earlier. Retirement really frees up the time!

Speaking of firefighting, that was a job that gave me plenty of chances to deal with shocking situations, while knowing that I wasn't responsible for them in the slightest. Kind of automatic training in detachment.

When I think back on the millions of hours of struggling and rueful pondering I've done after what Nitya politely calls "instances of disturbance" I have to conclude I am the slowest learner on the planet. But Fate was kind to give me all the time I

needed, and I'm very grateful that with the help of many kind and wise friends, I actually did learn something.

* * *

Old Class Notes:

6/24/8

Letter Five

A beautiful, peaceful evening filled with birdsong, gentle meditations, rich sharing, and a tangible measure of healing of wounds characterized our fifth gathering around the Yoga Letters. It's odd that these wisdom gems have been so neglected, while we've busied ourselves with other studies, but their inclusion in the Patanjali book is the perfect way to bring them back into the light. It makes one wonder what other treasures languish in our files, awaiting someone with the time and energy to dig them up....

Letter Five is wholly practical, and deals with what could be called the essence of sanity. The universality of our situation is indicated with a measure of humor right at the outset, in that each of us is "placed in a world of facts, figures, and fictions, which are either ludicrous or appalling." The fairytale world of our childhoods has given way to a so-called "reality," with its severe challenges of coping with demented interpretations of life and interpersonal aberrations. Life is very often ridiculous or else full of misery-creating disasters in all its dimensions. Naturally we want to come to grips with this miasma and not just be buffeted by the winds of Fate. Our common desire to evolve to be better able to handle the ups and downs of existence is fostered in different ways by science, religion, philosophy, psychology, and plain common sense.

Nitya never insisted that his way was better than anyone else's. Whatever suits you is the way for you to go. Here he offers five broad norms against which anyone can measure themselves to see how successful their chosen method of coping is. A norm, or what Nataraja Guru liked to call a normative notion, is like a beacon in the wilderness from which you can always take your bearings. Without some kind of stable referent it is easy to get lost, or at least to feel lost. Unlike many other paths, yoga does not have recourse to any saint or hero or god, but instead relates to intangibles like light, love, unity or spirit. These are by no means empty concepts, as shown by the relevance of the five norms we're given here.

The first is how quickly you regain your composure after being crunched by one of the blasts of the flux. In the wilderness analogy, perhaps you have tripped over a root and fallen. Do you look to the beacon to get your bearings so you can continue on, or do you waste a lot of time kicking the root, fuming and cursing and bemoaning your bad luck? Do you sulk like a victim or can you smile at the accidental quirkiness of your situation?

Anita wondered if the sameness that is used to describe inner balance is boring and monotone. It's true that meditation is often made out to be a turning off of interests, but that is an unfortunate interpretation by what I call damaged human beings. Their psyches are injured and so they want to escape the world. That's a free choice, but for many of us life is to be lived in all its richness. Learning balance and equanimity helps us to be much more available to engage in life than if we are occupied nursing and nurturing (and often exaggerating) our wounds. The sameness spoken of is a grounding in happiness—what we think of as being at our best all the time. Probably we should substitute “being at our best” for “sameness” and then no one will have any problem with it.

The second is how alert are you to be ready to deal with the many predictable encounters you will have as you proceed. Is your religion preparing you to meet your enemy with love so you can optimize the encounter, or training you to get revenge so you stay embroiled in hatred as long as possible? Does your science teach you to look down on others who don't share your value vision, or show you how to find common ground with them? Do you know yourself well enough so you can recognize your typical reactions and wean yourself away from the detrimental ones while accentuating your positive responses? All our study and learning feeds into this norm, which demands a highly active and even proactive use of our intelligence. There is a strong push in the ambient propaganda for us to believe in fantasies and ignore reality. Many ostensibly spiritual people believe that will make us happier. Sure, you can overdo focusing on negative realities and omitting positive aspects, but the cure is to bring them into dialectic relationship, not to bury one's head in the sand. The second norm holds a real challenge to our complacency.

The third norm is to see to what degree you have actualized your talents and interests. As Scotty pointed out, society has little or no stake in you being you: it wants an obedient cog in the gears of its machinery. Until we wise up, we tend to docilely acquiesce in such a "reasonable" program. Soldiers, the most deluded of all of us, imagine they will be honored for their sacrifice, but a name on a stone monument turns out to be poor compensation for bottling up your "God-given" abilities. However we may cope with society's demands, our genetic seeds, vasanas or proclivities need to find healthy channels of expression for us to be happy and fulfilled. As Nitya wrote in a letter in L&B in July, 1973, "Depression by itself is not a disease. It only shows that there are some kinds of air pockets in your personality that are not fully plugged-in with life interests." Depression is common in societies that stifle freedom of expression, and is often treated with

medication to quiet the (very legitimate) resistance. Those vasanas will just have to wait for another life later to bring their joy! Yoga on the other hand—at least the Gurukula version more akin to the Gita than to Patanjali—encourages a dynamic lifestyle full of real fun. Enjoyment is in fact the measure of your talents and inclinations. If something feels like drudgery, it's an indication that some outside force is driving you. If you love it, and it grows more interesting as you get deeper in, that's a sign that you have found one of your svadharms. Every person has at least one long suit, and usually a large number of them.

Nitya's advice here is summed up in one pithy sentence: “The ultimate attunement is to establish a maximum coordination between your knowledge and your volition, so that your total unfoldment can be effected with perfect poise and efficiency.” A major task of ours is to root out the false beliefs and identities and redirect the wrong programming with which we have arrived in adulthood, plus to make allowances for our natural limitations, and then to cut loose.

The fourth norm is to nourish our intelligence with learning. A personal growth program should be in place, preferably under the tutelage of some wise teacher, who can help you overcome your blind spots. Subtle depression also comes from under use of our minds, which have a vast capacity that is not often utilized. Anti-intelligent attitudes are one of the sad legacies of inflexible education. Learning is fun when it is keyed to unleashing hidden potentials and allowed to roam widely prospecting for them. Simply plugging into “adult education” without a meaningful connection to one's soul is likely to be a waste of time.

The fifth norm is the norm of all norms. It is to know who you are, or to know the source from which you spring. After lively discussions on the first four categories, we had a blissful group meditation to dive into the silence. Even the songbirds quieted down and tucked their bills under their wings, the midsummer

evening light grew dim, and a vast emptiness pervaded our shared space. The void felt more loving and full than all the partial interpretations that had preceded it, valuable as they were.