

2022 Patanjali Class 70

10/31/23

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

Part C: Asteya, non-stealing

Community efforts are a fine thing, and the Gurukula stalwarts create an unparalleled group consciousness. That was on display last night, as the class did a fine job of prizing out some worthwhile implications of the topic. Asteya literally means refraining from stealing, and I found it translated as fairness and generosity. Nitya's translation I'm sure is unique. Searching the sutra online I was surprised to find, among a limited number of results, a reference to Nataraja Guru and the equalization of opposites to bring samadhi, before realizing it was from our own class notes on [my old site](#).

I believe Nitya uses non-appropriateness to insure we go deeper into the meaning than any simple moral exhortation. I pondered it throughout the day, and came up with not taking credit for the work of others, a common enough practice in workplaces, notably academia and politics, but during the opening meditation a more general interpretation presented itself. Before sharing it, I invited the class to give their thoughts, so my idea didn't coopt their contributions. What came up was most edifying.

Anita spoke of a friend who underwent chemotherapy for uterine stage 4 cancer, and a month ago she was told she was cancer free. Today she found out it has come back in 7 locations. Despite her setbacks, she works hard at keeping positive, and today when Anita called her, she was maintaining her positivity. Anita found herself walking a fine line between sympathy for her very

serious condition and not disparaging her need to stay positive by saying anything that hinted at how bad things were. She felt that would have been a way of stealing or undermining her resolve to not give up.

That struck me as a keen insight, and it made me think of a related asteya: the way people sometimes sugar-coat a dire situation, mentally minimizing it, as if that would make it better. When you are really facing something, it could well be hurtful and demeaning to be given false assurances.

Anita affirmed you have to listen carefully to decipher what a friend in trouble needs. Susan added that sometimes we will make mistakes at those times, and we should also forgive ourselves, because getting it just right is hard. It might be the caring is most important. Both these threads are clearly of value, and by no means contradictory.

Jan reviewed the Jungian idea that our projections or reactions are an indicator of our own internal disturbances. The criticism or disagreement we feel toward another is originating from some imbalance in us. For instance, if we are jealous of a fun-loving person, we can look within ourselves to see why we are holding back and not having fun. She was touched by Nitya's last paragraph:

A holistic vision makes a double correction so that you neither feel alienated from a wealth of values that you see manifested elsewhere nor do you feel the internal hankering to possess what is wrongly identified as an external factor.

Jan feels it is so important to realize that what you appreciate out in the world arises within you. The beauty outside is your own beauty. Not knowing this, we have a tendency to look outwards for what we feel is missing.

It's true. We have been raised and acculturated to see something we like and then to want to own it. Not only physical items, but ideas, belief systems, identity, art, companionship, all of it. When something really grabs us, we feel a burning need to make it our personal possession. Every day, Nitya effortlessly demonstrated that the admirable things he encountered were already his. The fact that he was perceiving them was possession enough, so he could enjoy them and then move along. He shunned having a fixed identity, and was not amused by the way so many people treated him as a guru and not just a cool friend. More on this from the old notes, below:

I've mentioned before how Nitya would look at a flower or a sunset sometimes and say, "Aren't I beautiful?" Usually we would be shocked and confused, wondering if he wasn't an egomaniac in disguise. It turns out he was practicing asteya. Saying "Isn't *it* beautiful?" subtly reinforces the assumption that the object in question is separate from us. Instead he was intentionally including it in his definition of himself. Asteya is a very practical yama, then. We can continually correct our separatist fantasies by adding unitive thoughts, reminding ourselves that all our universe is a play in our consciousness, and making every bit of it dear to our heart. It is an uplifting corrective to expand our psyche to include everything instead of shrinking back behind an entrenched line of defenses.

Susan bemoaned that possessive cravings made us into true consumers, which they surely do, and this connected with my modestly-withheld insight about asteya from the opening meditation: we even steal our *persona* from the world, and cobble it together out of what seem to us, as not-necessarily wise children, to be the most valuable parts. When you—comfortably or uncomfortably— inhabit a construction of external notions and

laws, where do you go to find your true self? Your identity is an edifice built of stuff that you have learned and admired, but it will never be quite you. This seems to me to resonate very much with Patanjali—we are working to craft our persona to fit demands, instead of just allowing it to be what it is. The third of five yamas invites us to restrain our external conformities.

Susan admitted she went to the new Taylor Swift movie and loved it, and she feels like she is now a Swiftie. She also knows she can also sit back and think about what in her resonated with the movie and made it so enjoyable. It's a double victory (my observation). Joy without entanglement, without generating cravings.

It appears this gets easier and easier with age, even without consciously practicing yoga.

Paul ruefully noted how strongly we identify with what we know and what we have. We become addicted to a rationalization of what we call ourselves, to the individualized self-image. He figures by doing that, he is asking to possess something he doesn't have any capability of possessing, because he is possessed by the Absolute. He was bemused how much energy it takes to justify the existence of something other than the greater Self. That's true stealing: if the individual is absolute, they're only projecting that they possess, yet they usually get away with it.

I observed that we hardly ever in human history had to worry about gluttony before, but now we are gorged on consumer goods, and we have become habituated to gobbling. The gobbling of goblins—a perfect Halloween metaphor. Karen thought Amazon was a perfect example of extreme consumerism, since you can have anything you want delivered to your door almost instantly. It takes virtually no effort on our part to get what we want.

We didn't all think this could be a trap. It's also a blessing! Yet it does play into the misappropriation business, since what takes no effort does not feel like it has consequences. But it does,

and a yogi will have those ripples in mind simultaneously with being freed of much drudgery.

That also applies to the *steya* Linda referenced last week: the conquest of land and the persistence of colonization in our day, with its overtones of genocide. Or, we can buy cheap gas and never think of the way it is stolen from the countries where it lies in the ground, at tremendous environmental cost. Such considerations are by no means dismissed by Patanjali. And so we end with a double negative to complement his in the yama *asteya*: we must restrain by not mis-possessing.

Part II

1/25/11

A retroactive class on the third restraint: *asteya*, non-misappropriateness or not stealing.

Steya not only means stealing, but can also refer to something clandestine or private. Nitya attributes the former fault to the latter mindset in his brief but pithy comments on *asteya*, non-stealing. We disrupt the prevailing harmony in various ways because we have learned to see ourselves as separate, broken off, and therefore adrift in a private shell.

Here the translation of *asteya* is rendered as non-misappropriateness, which seems to have raised the ire of the class, Deb in particular. Clunky as it is, it does have a valid reason for being. Stealing is far too limited a context, one that converts a spiritual instruction into a moral exhortation. The real sense is that you shouldn't feel alienated from the totality, and if you do you will feel impelled to redistribute the part you are in contact with in your behalf. In that case you are wrongfully appropriating what rightfully belongs to a larger context. It is appropriate to not appropriate pieces of the universe, but simply to appreciate it.

Asteya, then, is viewing everything as naturally in accord with the Absolute, and realizing we “have” it even when it is someone else’s. By being aware of it we are sharing in it too. In that sense everything is “ours” and so we are rich beyond anything we can imagine; rich “beyond the dreams of avarice” because we are liberated from the very attitude that produces avarice.

I had never thought about the two shades of meaning in the word ‘appropriate’ before. As an adjective it means a thing is in its rightful place, but as a verb it means almost the opposite, that something is being taken, commandeered. And misappropriation and appropriation are essentially the same thing. Curious. So we are trying to come to an appropriate state by not coveting—not appropriating—anything that appears to be outside of us.

I’ve mentioned before how Nitya would look at a flower or a sunset sometimes and say, “Aren’t I beautiful?” Usually we would be shocked and confused, wondering if he wasn’t an egomaniac in disguise. It turns out he was practicing asteya. Saying “Isn’t *it* beautiful?” subtly reinforces the assumption that the object in question is separate from us. Instead he was intentionally including it in his definition of himself. Asteya is a very practical yama, then. We can continually correct our separatist fantasies by adding unitive thoughts, reminding ourselves that all our universe is a play in our consciousness, and making every bit of it dear to our heart. It is an uplifting corrective to expand our psyche to include everything instead of shrinking back behind an entrenched line of defenses.

The class used music as an example. When you hear someone play beautifully, you can be jealous and want to possess their talent, or you can simply appreciate what they do as part of your world, something that enriches and inspires you. You are grateful that they are providing you with something you would not have had otherwise.

A complicating factor here is that in one sense we are possessed of everything, and in another sense we cannot subsist on someone else's eating or breathing for us, for example. Nataraja Guru counseled us to keep our frames of reference straight, in particular not confusing the horizontal with the vertical. Universal participation is a vertical truth; individual needs lie in the horizontal parameter. If we mix them up we get in trouble.

Deb recalled a humorous remark Peter O. made in 1971 about this. He and Deb had been listening to Nitya wax rhapsodic about how everyone is everything. This was in Varkala in 1971, which was a Spartan place indeed. The hard wooden beds were especially uncomfortable, not to mention the survivalist cuisine. Longing for a soft bed, Peter asked Deb after the talk, "Do you really think you are a comfortable mattress?" Poor Peter was trying to get over the feeling that he didn't have something, but still found himself very much wanting the comfort, which was painfully absent. The horizontal can definitely pinch us hard, and it hurts. It is constantly drawing our attention away from universal truths and into painful, or pleasurable, immanent events.

There is a famous Arab proverb regarding the frames of reference: "Trust in Allah, but tie up your camel." You are going to need it to carry you to the next oasis, no matter how much you love God.

Susan wrote a bit about the class in a note to me, which I gratefully share:

We talked about how a person disturbs the balance of nature (in the words of the sutra: does violence to the harmonious setting of the world order) when they covet something that another has or can do. They also disturb this harmony when they do not realize that they already possess what another has because we are all one. It's great when Nitya says, "if you think that you are void of any value that belongs to yourself

that is a blindness of truth from which you suffer.” I didn’t understand this sentence at first and asked about it in class but now it seems a very important one. When you feel sad or mad or frustrated that you can’t do or have something, actually it is a blindness to truth. When I sit at the piano and feel frustrated that I can’t play like Angela Hewitt and why am I even bothering, this is looking at things in a very contorted way. But it is a way that our culture encourages. When a child sees something that his sister has, he wants that thing, even if it isn’t pleasant. How do you teach children about non-misappropriating? Or I guess it is unteaching them what they knew when they were born. In the womb children feel one with everything of course. Another way to think about a person’s putting up walls and being blind to truth is when they are very humble or self-deprecating. We have talked about this before. When I say that my piano playing is very bad or that I’m not doing anything with my life, I am not seeing the truth of being exactly where I am. Putting oneself down or wishing to be someone or something else is denying the divine in oneself. It is a self-consciousness that seems stuck once again in the ego.

So true! Our deferential attitudes are just as egotistical as those of the swaggering buffoons among us, only quieter and more socially acceptable. We need to “uphold the self by the self” by realizing our unitive nature, by not always trying to be someone or something else, greater or lesser. Becoming and being ourselves is a triumph of spiritual development. It means finding the balance between aggressively pushing out or self-effacingly pulling back. Such a neutral state is perfectly appropriate.