

2022 Patanjali Class 71

11/7/23

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 D: Brahmacharya, uprightness

I mused that the fourth restraint, brahmacharya, walking the path of the Absolute, must look very different to young people, who are looking forward in time, believing they have to decide what career to pursue, what team (religious, political, social) to join or root for, which life-goal to work toward, as though there is a mysterious path laid out for them; than we elders, ranging between 60 and 80, who can examine our lives and discern a coherence in our past unfoldment, much of it unanticipated. Certainly, unprepared for. We can look back over the rewarding paths we've trod, to see the uniqueness and uprightness and functionality of how it came to be, how each of us is infinitely unique and yet a fully ratified participant in this huge universe. We have gone beyond what team to play for, how we are going to identify ourselves, to focus on how we are living our life now. As Andy put it, the stress is very much on evolution, in brahmacharya.

How lucky we are! The stress must be tremendous on young people today, with the world changing faster than ever, all moving targets, very little stability and fast-diminishing security. How are they to trust that they will get their lives even partly right? Our good wishes may not mean much, but we offer them with as much assurance as we can muster.

Karen was curious about the last sentence, specifically why Nitya referred to the peace of Islam. The whole last paragraph is relevant to her question:

The restraints given by Patanjali include brahmacharya to caution the aspirant that there are false paths and temptations from which you should recoil. One who truly understands what brahmacharya is has already attained the highest mark of discrimination that justly qualifies one to be an enlightened person. With that wisdom-insight, one confers on oneself rishi-hood, Buddha-hood, Christ-hood, and the peace of Islam. (245)

My guess is that Nitya knew the term Allah-hood would be blasphemous. In Islam, you are not supposed to talk or even conceptualize about god, and Nitya respected it. Karen further wondered if Nitya thought of himself as one of these special types? Buddhism and Christianity are focused on one supposedly divine person, while the other religions are not, (though the urge is hard to restrain in ape-descendants). As to that, Nitya identified with the All, but he was not trying to be grandiose. He's simply highlighting the unitive aspect, which defines enlightenment, and includes everyone who knows what walking in the path of the Absolute means. And no one else is going to ratify your wisdom—you have to confer it on yourself.

Susan segued to the main ideal of brahmacharya: dharma, offering that when you find your dharma you are also connected to the all.

Dharma means our authentic nature, coming from within. It's something we have to discover for ourselves, because it's not ratified by the society per se. The personal way of expressing it is your self-dharma or svadharma (swadharma). From the unitive perspective, we discover our dharma as we live it. We are in a process of discovery at all times, learning to accept ourself and our authenticity.

Andy added when you look back over your life, you see it as having a meaningful pattern that has coalesced around an authentic

interest, and it led you along a kind of path. The idea is the brahmacharya path leads from being individualistically centered to universally valued. While it is unique to everyone, it connects you to universal being, in a sense.

Bill added that dharma is translated in many other ways. So true! Sanskrit terms like dharma tend to have a wide spectrum of meanings. The web boasts a digitized version of the Monier-Williams Dictionary, (MW), which I'll clip in in Part II, after the estimable notes from 2011, which are well worth a read. A soma drinker is one notable definition of dharma I hadn't known about.... I was amused to open our dictionary to the exact page, 510, out of over 1300, evidencing some sort of divine intervention, the lettering order being totally different from English. What do you know?

Bill is fond of the Buddhist version of dharma, to wit, the teachings of the Buddha, in that case being the main ideas stressed during the early period of learning and instruction, that sustains life and all its potentials. Basically, a way that guides the student.

Dharma comes from a root meaning the earth, a solid foundation, that which supports, and of course that means many things to many types people. Andy's sense is that to Nitya, dharma means the proper functioning of an inherent structure. All kinds of things have dharmas. There is the dharma of a table, to put things on; or the ability of a cup to hold water. Imbedded in the term is that it is the proper functioning in you. Andy added with a wry smile that our path is often crooked, yet it is productive of something great.

Speaking of crooked paths and oddball connections, Paul told us about once being on the Dive Team, our Fire Department's water rescue squad. At inception there wasn't much equipment, mostly borrowed from the sheriff's office, who supplied the team with weight belts. Humans are naturally buoyant, so they need to strap on weights in order to dive down. One of the team was a very

big fellow, nicknamed Snackly, for his extra-buoyant rotundity. He needed a lot of weight to get him to sink.

One thing to know is that water compresses things. For instance, a balloon will be reduced to half its size at 22 feet down.

The same thing goes for people. On his first dive, Snackly went down pretty deep, and he was compressed enough that all the weight belts fell off, and consequently he shot to the surface like a rocket. He even beat his bubbles to the surface, and came up so fast he leapt out of the water, for all the world like a happy whale.

It showed Paul that dharma is like how our bodies want to float on the surface, but we put on extra weights and sink lower and lower. Our natural place is up on the surface, and yoga is the release of all those excess weights we carry around with us. The class teaches him how to find those weights and release them so he too can shoot back to the surface.

Once we stopped laughing, we all agreed on releasing the excess weight we are carrying. It's keeping us in an early stage of personal focus, when we should be much farther along the trajectory Nitya describes:

Movement from the small world of little knowledge to the infinite world of omniscience is a logarithmic spiral in which the microcosm and the macrocosm become harmonized. The unbroken growth of persistently relating the individual to the Absolute is indicated by the word brahmacharya. Many have missed this point.

By setting up imaginary goals, you can keep going back to the beginning and never get to an all-expansive state. While there's a lot to be said for "beginner's mind," and it's great for maintaining humility, we might also learn that the things we once relied on or believed in are unnecessary. This is from the notes on Darsanamala

(7/24/7) addressing where we should be now, after decades of study:

Nitya's introduction to the Bhakti Darsana briefly summarizes the journey we have undergone to arrive at this stage. His opening sentence is "Love, devotion, compassion, empathy, and consequent rapture of mind come spontaneously rather than as the result of mechanically practiced discipline." One of the greatest, if not the greatest, struggles we have had is to stop thinking in terms of our relationship to divine love or realization or the Absolute as being the end product of a chain of actions or behaviors. Ends and means are to become fused, not separated. Horizontal and vertical factors, distinguished for purposes of examination, are to be rejoined in an amalgam merging into a transcendent unity. Even the thought "I just have to clear the irrelevant details away from my life in order to have time for this" is a stumbling block to be discarded.

I added that you don't have to create gravity and its consequent buoyancy. We can't make it work, because it's already working. And we don't have to believe we should create it.

Bill averred that all that we have studied and learned teaches us we are part of the Absolute. There is a continual process of bringing that knowledge into your everyday life, getting closer to your connection to the Self. That means there is practice required in knowledge and learning. It happens in meditation, contemplation, and work like in these classes. The small glimpses you get of the wholeness of the universe, where you feel you are connected, leads you to an upright life.

I protested that Vedanta posits first and foremost *tat tvam asi*: you are already That. By not accepting we are the Absolute, we feel separate, different, bad or good — all of this is the weight of unripe thinking. Infusing your life with the continuous

contemplation on the self—the very definition of bhakti— is a matter of accepting that your entire life and everything in it is already the “goal,” in a sense.

Andy felt that both perspectives can be united. Because we are set up the way we are, we have lives that are paradoxical in many respects. There is an already-founded reality we don't need to engineer, but paradoxically we practice for it. It's our lot as embodied people. There are even Zen people who talk about “practiced realization.” It's some activity that you do, Andy didn't know what. He did affirm that mountains and rivers are practicing.

Jan spoke up for the values of “Love, devotion, compassion, empathy, and consequent rapture of mind,” having a place in our discussion. As we contemplate walking the path of the Absolute, we become aware that those values are immediately present in what we are choosing.

Moni talked about how the four stages of life, the Indian ashramas, fit in with brahmacharya, which is considered the first stage. (Actually, the short [Wikipedia article about the ashramas](#) is very succinct, including attending a gurukula for the brahmacharya stage.) The second stage is as a householder, the supporter of civilization, and, in Moni's framing, the third is when you prepare yourself to understand more of the Absolute, and when you finally do you become a sannyasin, the last stage. Nitya's summation is:

The first stage of life is designated as *brahmacarya*. That is a time when a person is to be fully instructed in the normative notion of life. The norms are spiritual, moral, social, obligatory, and transcendent. *Dharma* is the main ideal stressed during this period of self-discipline and instruction in the science of life. Dharma is that which sustains life and all its potentials in the here and now. Hence it is specific. As years pass, the horizon of value interests expands from the here and now consideration to the eternal. The expansion intends to bring within it the good of

all.... Movement from the small world of little knowledge to the infinite world of omniscience is a logarithmic spiral in which the microcosm and the macrocosm become harmonized.

Moni went on that at each stage, its particular dharma rules the mind. As knowledge is gained and circumstances change, a person might make mistakes and their attentions may not be fully complete or fruitful, but it is still the unfoldment of their wisdom seeking. The more their knowledge gets expanded, always in the path, it takes them beyond their native value and places, expanding existence to join a larger world. Moni affirmed we have to have student-hood because we need a reference place, and then you grow from there.

It is telling that Nitya worked in a non-dual perspective: “The intrinsic values of life are such that the four aspects cannot be completely distinguished or separated from each other.” I also pointed out that Nitya’s list of norms corresponds to the four castes plus sannyasa, the transcendent state. That is, obligatory is sudra; social is vaisya; moral is kshatriya; and spiritual is brahmin. As I’ve often remarked, every life contains all these aspects: maintaining its physical foundation, managing financial affairs, upholding morality, and pondering the meaning of life.

Bill reiterated, as a kind of amen, “The unbroken growth of persistently relating the individual to the Absolute is... brahmacharya.”

Paul commented how, as the concept of *the other* takes over, we start to identify with the illusion of separation. Wisdom’s role is to reconnect us with the things we have spent a lifetime dividing.

Having had a premonition that Deb would not be able to attend the class again, her leg pain still excruciating, I read out some of her trenchant comments from the old notes, mingled with my thoughts:

This led the class to the notion of dharma, which we also [like brahmacharya] take in the original, uncorrupted sense. Where it has come to mean duty, the glorified following of rules, the Gurukula treats it as the “living and expression of our innate nature,” as Deb put it in her note to me. She goes on, “Our nature is that of the Absolute, but for each of us the manifestation is different. The tree’s dharma is to grow like a tree. Each of us ‘flowers’ in our own beautiful, particular way to express the ultimate universality. Dharma is the structure, the law, the unfolding of each of us.”

Elsewhere Nitya speaks of brahmacharya as chastity, in the sense of purity of intent. Its opposite, *vyabhicharya*, prostitution, we may take in the way we say “selling out,” or trading in your ideals for practicalities. Chastity and prostitution are to be understood in a much larger sense than merely referring to sex, more in relation to truth or honesty. That’s why Deb said, “Brahmacharya is an attitude and practice for everyone, throughout our entire lives. A constant practice of recognition and rededication.”

Vyabhicharya, then, covers our juvenile needs to be protected and guided by someone else. Adulthood is only achieved when we take over the reins of our life and step out on our own. As Nitya suggests, there are many, many forms of continuing bondage, many of them masquerading as tools of liberation, that we cling to in our insecurity. The yogi is advised to see them as traps. Snares. Snares and delusions, even.

Anita meets with a group discussing Buddhism on Wednesdays, and they had just listened to a lecture by Pema Chodron, where she touted giving up all hope of fruition. Hoping for fruition implies that you want to be different than you are now, and Anita was having trouble with giving that up. Her example

was pain: when she is in pain, she wants to find a way to get out of it. She requested an explanation.

This is an important question, and involves plenty of misunderstanding. Vedanta also advises us to not have expectations. Note that Chodron advises against “hope of fruition,” not fruition itself. Fruition is normal and natural, and we want it and sometimes need to make it happen by tugging at our own bootstraps. The key is this is spiritual advice, about attaining liberation or enlightenment, and not so much about everyday practices. We need to be careful not to confuse spiritual advice with practical advice. If we are doing all our practices in hope of becoming wise, we won’t be. It will infinitely recede.

There’s nothing wrong with having goals in terms of the horizontal plane, though it’s best to not feel sure of the exact outcome, because many forces will intervene. Still, if you work at a job all week, you may expect to cash the fruit in the form of a check at week’s end. Not having expectations is spiritual advice, meaning don’t think “I’m going to be realized in the future.” If you knew what realization was, you would already be realized.

Every moment of our life is the fruition of a million threads of meaning and evolution. If we’re unhappy with the present fruition, we will do something about it. That’s an Absolute act too. This is not about doing nothing and bearing the unpleasant consequences. Be alive, and engage with life. Love with gusto! Just don’t imagine there is some ideal world you are going to attain through doing certain behaviors. Every moment of your life is precious, not building toward some magic triumph that you don’t already have access to.

Anita understood: wanting to go to nirvana is denying the beauty of the moment. Sure. And it’s not so horrible: trying to figure out what nirvana means is an amusing pastime. It’s just that at the moment, Patanjali is listing some restraints for us, and

restraining our imagination about a future glory is important to the learning process.

Since it is elusive and probably not read in the previous notes, let me close with Nitya's take on practice, from his interview with Psychic Magazine:

Psychic Magazine: Then how do you practice your spiritual beliefs?

Swami 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. It is better to refer to my beliefs as my philosophy of life, rather than as my religion.

Part II

2/1/11

A retroactive class on the fourth restraint: brahmacharya, walking in the path of the Absolute.

Brahmacharya means "walking the path of the Absolute." Over the years it has taken on many stereotyped connotations as a kind of monkish life, but in the Gurukula we have a more open interpretation. To us, a life lived in reference to a central normative principle, a.k.a. the Absolute, is the real idea of the term.

This led the class to the notion of dharma, which we also take in the original, uncorrupted sense. Where it has come to mean

duty, the glorified following of rules, the Gurukula treats it as the “living and expression of our innate nature,” as Deb put it in her note to me. She goes on, “Our nature is that of the Absolute, but for each of us the manifestation is different. The tree’s dharma is to grow like a tree. Each of us ‘flowers’ in our own beautiful, particular way to express the ultimate universality. Dharma is the structure, the law, the unfolding of each of us.”

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Nitya describes our lives as beginning with immediate concerns and gradually evolving to a cosmic perspective: “As years pass, the horizon of value interests expands from the here and now consideration to the eternal. The expansion intends to bring within it the good of all.” If there is such a thing as a path in spirituality, it is by no means linear. The “path” is a multidimensional one of evolution in many directions at once.

One thing that is often overlooked in relation to brahmacharya is the idea that spiritual “failure,” if such is even conceivable, means prostituting your inner self. Or say, failing to remain in tune with your inner self, and so allowing it to wither from disuse. This happens when we are drawn away from it by superficial attractions. As Nitya says, “The restraints given by Patanjali include brahmacharya to caution the aspirant that there are false paths and temptations from which you should recoil.”

I don’t know if the class explored this, but it’s worth a look now. If we visualize life as a continuous expansion to the infinite,

whatever causes us to stop growing, or worse yet shrink, is vyabhicharya. I'm not talking about plateaus or minor dips, where we consolidate a growth spurt and prepare for the next ascent, but real dead ends and retreats that don't further our development at all. We could provide thousands of examples, but the essential exercise is for each yogi to examine their own life and figure out which impediments they are giving in to. Freeing ourselves from impediments is what makes the yogi's life worth living.

As we grow, we are surrounded with a cloud of unknowing. Unless we have full faith in some enlightened teacher or viable system—and that is rare enough in the modern world, with most of them falling into the category of “false paths and temptations”—we have to admit that we are unsure of our way forward. If we are fearful in our uncertainty, we will quite naturally hold back and keep up our guard. Instead we have to develop a cheerful bravery that dares to go forward into the unknown, so that we won't be afraid to question and learn. That's the practical meaning of brahmacharya.

Vyabhicharya, then, covers our juvenile needs to be protected and guided by someone else. Adulthood is only achieved when we take over the reins of our life and step out on our own. As Nitya suggests, there are many, many forms of continuing bondage, many of them masquerading as tools of liberation, that we cling to in our insecurity. The yogi is advised to see them as traps. Snares. Snares and delusions, even.

Nitya likens brahmacharya to the chant from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad that we now use in the Portland Gurukula: “Lead me from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, and from death to immortality.” What we are calling on for this transformation is unspecified, so as not to be limited in any way. It is both an inner resourcefulness and an invitation to whatever external influences are available to us. Having fixed notions

invariably excludes more than it includes. The outside of any circle or sphere is infinite, while the inside must be finite. Our sphere should continually pulsate from finite to infinite and back again. We use the term 'Absolute' precisely because it is not limited. "Walking in the way of the Absolute" or brahmacharya is an unlimited proposition.

For anyone interested in more on the subject of brahmacharya, particularly in relation to sex, check out [my Gita commentary](#), VI, 14.

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[MW definition of dharma](#). The Buddhist definitions are near the bottom, along with religion, sacrifice and so on. Some irrelevant names in the middle.

Definition: noun (masculine neuter) a bow; a particular ceremony; a Soma-drinker; an Upanishad; associating with the virtuous; character; customary observance or prescribed conduct; devotion; duty; justice (often as a synonym of punishment); Law or Justice personified (as Indra); law; mark; morality; name of a king of Kaśmīra; name of a lexicographer; name of a son of Anu and father of Ghṛta; name of a son of Citrakaname of a son of Dīrghatapas; name of a son of Gāndhāra and father of Dhṛta; name of a son of Haihaya and father of Netra; name of a son of Pṛthuśravas and of Uśanas; name of a son of Suvrata; name of the 15th Arhat of the present Avasarpiṇī; nature; ordinance; peculiar condition or essential quality; peculiarity; practice; property; religion; religious abstraction; religious merit; right; sacrifice; statute; steadfast decree; that which is established or firm; the ethical precepts of Buddhism (or the principal dharma called sūsra); the law of Northern Buddhism (in 9 canonical scriptures);

the law or doctrine of Buddhism; the ninth mansion; usage;
virtue;