

2022 Patanjali Class 72

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 E: Aparigraha, non-possessiveness

Aparigraha is an interesting word. *A* means not. *Pari* means universally, round, about (in space and time), in the direction of. *Graha* means to seize or grasp for. So aparigraha means non-grasping, not always trying to seize everything around in the space-time continuum. Not trying to make everything your own. As the Isa Upanishad says, “Whose is wealth? Renounce and enjoy.” We participate even in the enjoyment of our neighbors having something we might otherwise covet. If we’re all in this together, why not?

Aparigraha is universally translated as giving up all possessions, but Nataraja Guru translates it as giving up all possessiveness. What a world of difference in that slight alteration! For thousands of years sincere seekers have been giving up their possessions, imagining it opened some magical doorway to realization. But the possessions themselves are by and large irrelevant. It’s the sense of wanting to possess that needs to be overcome—a far more profound and complex matter.

It is nearly impossible to do away with possessiveness by merely giving up possessions, many of which might even make the process simpler. Religious cults often collect all the material (and monetary) goods of their participants, using this (mis)translation as their scriptural justification. Refugees from these cults frequently discover that the poverty they have embraced has thrown them into

a basic struggle for existence that makes finding peace much more difficult.

Deb was able to join us for an in-person class at long last, and it was apparent that friendship among the classmates is a possession of the highest value, easy to share, salubrious, and nothing anyone wishes to hoard.

After the reading, Deb talked about the fifth yama being of the highest importance: non-grabbing acting like a doorway into what Patanjali's teaching means. It's about acceptance and generosity. If you don't feel you have a boundary, there is a flow that goes with you as you move through the world. Nitya speaks of a "universal benevolence in nature," at the same time so natural and easy, and an incredible challenge.

Bill recalled someone asking Nitya if non-possessiveness meant they had to let go of enjoying sunsets, or nature. Nitya responded that joy is important, but just don't hang onto it: accept the joy and then move on.

As usual, I felt we should take this teaching as personally as possible, and I had an example. Earlier in the day I noticed I still harbor vestiges of selfishness from when I was quite young, from being in competition with my brother, who was highly competitive and usually managed to get a better deal in food apportionment, allowance, chores and so on. (I remembered later my first allowance, around 1958, was a nickel a week, rising to a quarter by 1960.) Anyway, I was making "nuts and bolts," a holiday favorite, and was thinking of giving it away to friends, and a tiny chemical twinge came up, with the message "I want all this for me." I've always been generous, and I hardly have to wrestle with selfishness, but its chemical signature is still there, sparking a primal self-interest that is not only unnecessary, it is detrimental to ourselves and others. What if you just took those feelings as marching orders, and the grabbing your personal right? You would daily grow smaller and more pinched.

Since the death of his wife, Andy has felt similar palpitations regarding ownership of their possessions. They each had their own domain, having purposefully bought a duplex home where her stuff was upstairs and his was downstairs. When she passed away, it all suddenly became his. Consequently, his understanding of ownership has radically shifted. What used to be happily hers became his, and much of it felt absurd to him, like the entire drawers full of undistinguished little rocks she had collected wherever she traveled. Now he looks at ownership in a different way: he's traveling through life with a halo of things that seem to be traveling along with him, and at a certain point they will go off into the universe and have a continued existence or not. They likely will be destroyed. His job as their owner is to be a good caretaker, making sure they have happy lives, or if they would be happier with someone else, they should go to them.

We talked at length about giving away our stuff, which is something old people do, in consideration of the next generations not having to deal with our accumulations. Important as it may be, I'm pretty sure this is not quite what Patanjali was after.

Andy has come to believe non-grasping has a lot to do with impermanence—to be cognizant of the impermanence of all things. He mused on Nitya's style, where he would get money in the mail and gave it away to the next needy kid who came to the door.

I noted that Nitya specifically mentions anxiety, an attitude that arises naturally from our presumed isolation in wrestling with our needs. Yoga includes how to get over being anxious about the future, which is something to confront and be aware of. Nitya summarizes:

If you identify yourself with the self of all and see yourself as indivisible from the Absolute, you enjoy the sharing of your bounty even when it is as small as the proverbial coin that an old woman gave to Jesus. When you understand that there is no

need for any anxiety, many negative feelings will go away. You will see only friendship and charity coming from everyone and will feel like reciprocating the graceful behavior of all. This is aparigraha.

Jan resonated with the invitation to be nurturing of everything around us. It is natural to the state of oneness. Being indivisible from the world and the Absolute, you are more loving toward everything. Nitya's "universal benevolence" means us, too. Life flows when we are in that place. Jan felt especially now, as we head into the holidays, it's something worth thinking about.

Deb cited Jacob Needleman's elegant Introduction to the Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English *Tao Te Ching*, this being its conclusion:

To be a warrior in the outer life, one must be a warrior in the inner life. To govern in the outer life, one must govern in the inner life. To be wise in the outer life, one must be wise in the inner life.

Thus, when the *Tao Te Ching* cautions the ruler against imposing concepts of good and evil onto the people, it is also cautioning us not to cut ourselves off from the vital forces within through attachment to mental or emotional judging of ourselves. To read anything in the *Tao Te Ching* as merely advice for the outer life is to distort it, that is, to pack it into our own store of illusions. But to apply it simultaneously to the outer life and to our own inner life is to embark on a search that will be supported, we are told, by the strongest and greatest energies in the universe.

It made Deb wonder how to recognize all the varying tendencies we have, and what kind of resolution and balance might we find around us, as well as in ourselves?

Moni talked about the Zen story Nitya included, adding more tension to it. Its moral is about achieving a balance between getting and spending, having and giving away. Paul added that the symbolic closed and open fists were both deformities, neither of them natural, both polar opposites. A hand needs to move freely in many positions. In thinking of non-acquisitiveness, which is to acquire what is not yours or use something not yours for your own personal good, he thought how it is also related to the personal self, the way we “steal” an individualized self from the Absolute. When the ego tries to defend its theft, it becomes self-destructive.

In that regard, I always flash on Nitya’s That Alone, verse 88: “How to get, how to get”:

This otherness is the beginning of trouble in the world of the many. Any number of things we don’t think are ours haunt our minds. The mind keeps on saying “How to get, how to get.” We want to get things, people, and put them in our pocket. Then alone will we be happy. We want to be able to pull them out and say “You are mine. Jump around.” Or walk around or sit around. “See. This is *mine*.” Then we put them back in our pocket. It is so very comforting.

You want to possess. Then you want to dominate. You want to master. There is a powerful joy in all of this.

But to your dismay the other person wriggles away. It causes you great upset, heartburn even. You want to capture and hold on to that fellow, but they won’t play along. It is just like when some silly cat almost comes to you, and then suddenly it turns and runs away. It’s so soft and cuddly, but it never allows you to quite catch it.

We desire things only as long as we know they are not ours. Once something is in our possession there is no more desire for it. (573-4)

Nitya insists the universe is blessing us with so much already, and if we would only stop obsessing about getting the next desire fulfilled, perhaps more beneficial harmonious things would arrive. Plotting our life out intentionally interferes with the yoga of nature, in a certain way. To some extent it is necessary, yet it's likely we overdo it.

There are so many spiritual schools that teach that the power of desire achieves realization, you need to want and try very, very hard, and follow the rules, and then you'll get it. Insisting we need to put all our energy into achieving a putative goal. Yoga is nothing like that. Wanting and scheming throw up obfuscations of what is already present. When we think we need to go and achieve the Absolute, we are thinking of something other than what it might be—if we knew what it was, we would already be there. It's like what Paul was implying about stealing our soul from the Absolute: somehow we have to go get it from its hidden repository. Merton blames the Crusades on this common human trait, imagining that God-realization could be taken away from you by other people, and you have to go and kill them to get it back.

Deb was at last coaxed into telling her all-time best teaching story, which we have heard many times, but always bears repeating. The chocolate story.

When she was first traveling with Nitya, in 1971, and they were at the Aurobindo Ashram in New Delhi, a dear friend of Nitya's came to see him. Nitya had told Deb that he was the most realized yogi he had ever met, and he had met hundreds, if not thousands. Nitya called him The Owl, as he looked like one, and he wore exactly the clothes Deb disdained as straight and unhip: loafers, slacks and a golf sweater. He did not look like a yogi! He and Nitya sat together on a little divan, and for a while the yogi laid his head in Nitya's lap, and laughed. He obviously loved Nitya tremendously.

Deb had gone out and stocked up on Cadbury chocolate bars for their upcoming sojourn into the wilds of India, and she had them sequestered in her pockets.

Out of nowhere, the yogi asked her, “Do you have any chocolate?” She admitted she did. “May I have some?” he asked. She reluctantly passed him a bar, expecting he would break off a piece and hand it back to her. Slowly he nibbled up the entire bar, wrapper, foil and all. “Do you have any more?” She surrendered another. Nitya sat by without expression. The yogi ate the next, and the next, all unopened, until all Deb’s precious stash was gone. She could not imagine how he knew she had bought the chocolates.

He had effortlessly seen her attachment and her very Western expectation of personal privacy. He laughed, not exactly at her. He laughed often. She had recently read Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, and was struck by its phrase the laughter of the immortals. This fellow laughed as an immortal. She never forgot her lesson.

Winding up, I read out an obscure paragraph with immense implications for the study of Patanjali, addressing an extremely popular misunderstanding. I’ve also back-loaded it into the sutra 2 notes:

Nataraja Guru’s *Integrated Science of the Absolute* Vol. II has a very important clarification for us, referring to Patanjali’s Yoga:

Besides the idea of peace, the most important single condition for Yoga is mentioned in the second verse of chapter I:

yogas-cittavritti-nirodhah

Yoga is restraining (the outgoing) activities of the mind.

This sutra is meant to define Yoga as a whole. The keyword is *nirodha* (to hinder, obstruct or control). Many people fall into the error of thinking that one must control all psychic activities, because *citta-vritti* means ‘the activity of the mind’. Here a subtle distinction and a clarification have to be made. Narayana Guru makes this in the first verse of the Yoga-Darsanam. The verticalized activities of the mind should not be obstructed but instead must be allowed free scope, with *vitarka* (criticism) and *vichara* (inquiry) as functions. It is the outgoing tendencies or horizontal activities of the mind that produce dissipation of interest. It is only on the horizontal level that control is necessary. Mere brute unilateral control is not to be thought of either. One has to respect the reciprocity of counterparts, whereby an ascending effort to unite with the higher Self is reciprocally understood as being met by the descent of the soul, from the opposite pole of the total Yoga situation. This delicate distinction is also clarified by Narayana Guru in the Yoga-Darsanam. Yoga is a bilateral and not a unilateral process. (103)

Bill aptly compared this to the Gita verse Nitya cites in the commentary: “Satisfied with chance gains, unaffected by conflicting pairs of interests, non-competitive, remaining the same in gain or no gain, he remains unbound in spite of having been active.” (IV.22)

Salvaging rare wisdom such as this is why I have made highlights documents for most of Nitya’s books, plus the ISOA. I suggested we might do classes in the future going over a portion of them one idea at a time. In the meantime, they are all posted on Nitya’s website.

Part II

2/8/11

The fifth restraint: *aparigraha* – non-acquisitiveness.

Bodily back from India, but not yet mentally, I joined a lovely class featuring everyone who's still on board—a rarity!—plus Eugene's friend Elliot. The best part of many good parts was the ease with which most everyone offered their thoughts. Because of the efforts we have made over the years, “inhibitions to creative catharsis” are less pronounced than ever.

Due to my fuzzy-mindedness, I can only present a vague recapitulation of our dialogue. An important aspect was that we become acquisitive because our egos take on the role of protector and supplier of our bodily needs. In the process we lose sight of the benign nurturing of the universe. The competitive stress of society further undermines our faith in a sustaining harmony, and impels us to join in a bitter struggle for existence.

Non-acquisitiveness, then, is the letting go of our anxiety about, and nervous planning for, the future. We replace the fear with a confidence grounded in our personal experience and our connection with the Absolute. As Narayana Guru assures us in his Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction, verse 66: “Food and all such [necessities] always come again as a matter of course.” Hasn't it been true for our whole lives so far?

Jan hit the nail right on the head, wondering how this fits in with striving. Does it mean we shouldn't try, or what? Not at all, but this is truly a subtle aspect of yoga study. I can't do better than pull out a few paragraphs from *That Alone*, Nitya's commentary on the selfsame verse 66:

We have to keep in mind the imperativeness of the need for food. There is no concession made here. Whether it is the little ant, the bird, the fisherman or the executive of a big industry, the imperative is the same for all. Each needs its own daily

nourishment. We also have to take into account the chance factor governing the fulfillment of that need. The necessity which initiates action is almost mechanically rigid, and we cannot bargain with it. The world where fulfillment is to be found is very unpredictable. No one can say exactly where the ant will find the crumb of bread, where the bird will find the worm or where the fisherman will catch his fish. Yet while these are all unpredictable, the net result is that every day nearly everyone is eating three, four or even more times a day.

There are three elements here for us to take into consideration. One is the area of absolute necessity, where there is no concession. The second is the field of the operation of chance, and the third is the fulfillment that needs to be attained. A chance has to come in a way that is favorable for a link with another chance and then another and another, until fulfillment is reached. The net result of the fulfillment is satisfaction, but in between is panic and anguish—the pain and frustration of the search. Here Narayana Guru uses the term *ira*, which conveys the idea that one has the dire necessity to eat and then finds the counterpart: whatever is to be eaten....

The paradox or dichotomy involved only comes up when we conceive of transcendence as separate from phenomenal existence, but he doesn't see it that way. In the third verse he showed us that we have to conceive of the whole thing as a treasury of oceanic depth from which waves of phenomenality arise. The waves are not different from the ocean. In this verse he says the world of necessity that makes you pass through all these phenomenal bumps—the imperative need, the search and the fulfillment—is an eternal game that goes on and on. It has always been like that, and it will always be like that. But there is also a changeless reality which does not come and go, and it is the same as the knowledge in which the whole game takes place. They are not in any way separate things. It is within your knowledge you feel a need, within it you make your calculations as you go in search. The knowledge itself

makes you gamble, take risks and have faith that what you seek will be provided and that somehow you will find it. The whole process, including its fulfillment, is all happening within knowledge.

The Guru says that that which is constant in all moods and changes is knowledge, *arivu*. The variables are the need, the search and the fulfillment; the constant is knowledge. He has already described knowledge as the Self: that knowledge which resides in the dark and knows by its own light is the Self, and not anything other than that. This is the constant, *arivu*.

He goes on to say we are That. He maintains we don't have to draw a line between ourselves and someone else, carefully delineating each one's territory....

How does this verse help us? We are subjected to various kinds of necessities in life. When we focus our attention on the world of necessity, there is a time factor which comes in between the beginning of our search and the moment of its fulfillment. The interim period is filled with a lot of effort and anticipation. Anticipation is not lived in a vacuum, it is filled with anxiety since we are not sure of the results. We are uncertain of the possibility, because probability and improbability are always vying with each other.

All our living moments are crowded with the intentionality of our consciousness. If we are always attached to intentionality, the peace, serenity and joy we look for are constantly being pushed away. In a sense, then, meaning is being transferred from the present to the future. We often speak of living here and now, but we don't realize the almost impossible pressure on us to not live in the present. We are always being made to wait, to look for, to expect, to anticipate. Half the time of our life is wasted in looking for and waiting for something to happen. If we can only establish a firm stand on the constant ground the Guru speaks of—the *arivu* or knowledge—our attachment and intentionality

regarding the phenomenal world becomes a secondary interest. Our primary interest then becomes witnessing the game of life in the present moment.

To enjoy the game of life we don't just have to act out plans.... This is a very subtle thing. If you understand it, it makes a real difference in your life. You do and you do not do. You perform everything you are doing now and yet, at the same time, you do not do anything.

Having already written about non-possessiveness in my Gita commentary (IV, 21), I boldly reproduce it here:

One of the key points that makes Nataraja Guru's translation superior to all others is found in this verse. The word *aparigraha* is universally translated as giving up all possessions, but he translates it as giving up all possessiveness. What a world of difference in that slight alteration! For thousands of years sincere seekers have been giving up their possessions, imagining it opened some magical doorway to realization. But the possessions themselves are by and large irrelevant. It's the sense of wanting to possess that needs to be overcome, which is a far more profound and complex matter.

Aparigraha is an interesting word. *A* means not. *Pari* means universally, round, about (in space and time), in the direction of. *Graha* means to seize or grasp for. So *aparigraha* means non-grasping, not always trying to seize everything around in the space-time continuum. Not trying to make everything your own. As the Isa Upanishad says, "Whose is wealth? Renounce and enjoy." We participate even in the enjoyment of our neighbors having something we might otherwise covet. If we're all in this together, why not?

Nataraja Guru calls practices like giving up possessions to achieve a nongrasping mentality “opening the door from the hinge side,” in other words, using physical means to bring about psychological changes. It is nearly impossible to do away with possessiveness by merely giving up possessions, many of which might even make the process simpler.

Religious cults often collect all the material (and monetary) goods of their participants, using this (mis)translation as their scriptural justification. Refugees from these cults frequently discover that the poverty they have embraced has thrown them into a basic struggle for existence that makes finding peace much more difficult.

On page 403 of *Love and Blessings*, Nitya Chaitanya Yati offers guidelines for living in an ashram as a dedicated seeker. The last entry gives a clear sense of the meaning of *aparigraha*: “Let one have no material possession which is too dear to part with, especially in a situation where sharing is more beautiful than possessing. However, let one not be deprived of anything for which one has a natural right simply because one is weak or insensitive to its value.”

Taking scriptures literally is perilous. Words take on different meanings over time, and there are often many ways to translate the same word. One needs to dig down to the meaning the words are attempting to convey. This is one of the valuable aspects of “searching questioning,” as recommended in verse 34 below. By contrast, many religions consider questioning to be a sign of loss of faith and a threat to their domination.

Possessiveness is an extension of wanting to manipulate circumstances for one’s own benefit. When the advice of this section is put into practice, when we aim for the good of the whole world rather than exclusively our own, the pressure

eases off of its own accord, nearly effortlessly, like opening a door by the handle in Nataraja Guru's analogy.

Coincidentally, I finish this verse commentary with some relevant advice about striving:

Lastly, this verse suggests we should engage "merely bodily" in actions. It's easy to take this wrong and think we should act mindlessly, like automatons, and all the time no less. A recipe for God's Zombie Army. What the Gita is trying to say in its cryptic language is that our minds and hearts should be directed toward contemplative matters, and that action is primarily used to support the needs of the body. The body is viewed as a platform for meditation and union with the divine, and as such it should be maintained in good order. But it is not to be considered an end in itself, since that draws energy away from more subtle and rewarding pursuits.

Again, this advice is best applied to periods of contemplation. There is no reason to hold back on artistic engagement with mundane matters, which beautifies and embroiders life. Delicate cooking, decorative environments, spine-tingling lovemaking, and enlightening conversation, among many other things, are not to be ruled out. A very few people are happiest with fulltime contemplation, but for most of us it is just one part of a well-rounded life. Engagement with the divine infuses our everyday activities with intensity and expertise, while in turn horizontal activities provide the field of expression for those very qualities. Arjuna is a case in point. When he wanted to chuck it all and become a hermit, Krishna called him back to his life, in which he is a stalwart upholder of solid, everyday values.

Deb looked for a poem which she couldn't find, tackling the same subtle sense of our motivations. Here it is:

AN HORATIAN NOTION - Thomas Lux

The thing gets made, gets built, and you're the slave
who rolls the log beneath the block, then another,
then pushes the block, then pulls a log
from the rear back to the front
again and then again it goes beneath the block,
and so on. It's how a thing gets made — not
because you're sensitive, or you get genetic-lucky,
or God says: Here's a nice family,
seven children, let's see: this one in charge
of the village dunghill, these two die of buboes, this one
Kierkegaard, this one a drooling

nincompoop, this one clerk, this one cooper.
You need to love the thing you do — birdhouse building,
painting tulips exclusively, whatever — and then
you do it
so consciously driven
by your unconscious
that the thing becomes a wedge
that splits a stone and between the halves
the wedge then grows, i.e., the thing
is solid but with a soul,
a life of its own. Inspiration, the *donnée*,

the gift, the bolt of fire
down the arm that makes the art?
Grow up! Give me, please, a break!
You make the thing because you love the thing

and you love the thing because someone else loved it
enough to make you love it.

And with that your heart like a tent peg pounded
toward the earth's core.

And with that your heart on a beam burns
through the ionosphere.

And with that you go to work.

I do apologize for not including more of our discussions, though they ran parallel to what I've pasted in here. In my mind I can see everyone talking, but I'm not confident I could reproduce their words with any accuracy. It is very gratifying to take these seedlike Sanskrit terms and flesh them out with real understanding, for which I extend to everyone my heartfelt appreciation. Aum.

Part III

From Paul, an original poem—

Thank you for your insightful class notes on non-possessiveness.

Your teaching notes on non-possessiveness reminded me
of: Sharecropping

I do not hold the land I pace.
I am simply a tenant granted agency
- to till, plant and harvest.
The crops I tender bestow intention
onto my feet I assume as agency...

* * *

And from Jay:

She is my womb.
She holds me in her bosoms,
She has unyielding patience,
She is my mother!

* * *

Jan wrote:

I read the class notes finally and liked them. Thank you. I also appreciated your old notes and the idea of the constant variable of *arivu* in our phenomenal lives. I loved how you wrote about it in the old notes. You said “If we can only establish a firm stand on the constant ground the Guru speaks of—the *arivu* or knowledge—our attachment and intentionality regarding the phenomenal world becomes a secondary interest. Our primary interest then becomes witnessing the game of life in the present moment.”

I think my grounding in the Absolute works this way in my life, giving my daily life, my activities and thoughts, a firm foundation in meaning and beauty and vastness. I am so grateful for that. You also wrote: “A very few people are happiest with fulltime contemplation, but for most of us it is just one part of a well-rounded life. Engagement with the divine infuses our everyday activities with intensity and expertise, while in turn horizontal activities provide the field of expression for those very qualities.”

I also reflected how with my law work, I am always being challenged to work at the edge of my skill level and that can be anxiety producing. Yet this philosophy helps me by allowing me to be grounded in something deeper that gives me confidence, and

takes away the need to win or succeed because this is only the game of life. Engaging with the divine, as you say, gives me clarity and more calm in how I orient myself with work and all of life. Part of that orientation is non-grasping.

I appreciate your hard work in bringing these beautiful words and ideas to our mailboxes! :) Jan