

## 2022 Patanjali Class 74

Sutra II:32 – Purity, contentment, self-purification, self-study, and continuous contemplation on Isvara are the observances. (The niyamas: sauca, santosa, tapas, svadhyaya, isvara pranidhana.)

A – Sauca, purity.

Nitya's commentary is quite short, with much of it taken up in lecturing the perhaps not very clean folks in the room to take a bath and wash their clothes, so I added a couple of other paragraphs to the reading. The first is from earlier in the same book:

As an aspirant yogi you have to take initiative with unflagging interest, to have a critical examination of your preformed habits, and then scrape or modify the behavioral pattern in such a manner that it is cleansed of ignorant adherence to evil or superficial modes. Instead of a static view of an effect or a cause, you are expected to develop a transparency of vision by which you can clearly see the manifested effect and the entire process through which, from the primeval cause to the present effect, the manifestation came. You should also have the sagacity to unhook all expectations of the future from the performances in which you are presently engaged. (YS 59)

The second is from verse 98 of That Alone:

When you come to the niyama, the first one is cleanliness. It's hard to know exactly how to become clean. An American bathroom is practically the cleanest spot on earth. The toilets are very well kept, but the people who use them cannot claim to

be as clean in their minds. The concept of cleanliness, like that of nonviolence, is a very difficult one with many ramifications.

When can you say someone is clean? When nothing is misplaced. When your words are not misplaced, your thoughts are not misplaced, your spirit is not misplaced, your attitude is not misplaced and your appreciation is not misplaced, then you can say you are clean. (TA 704)

Of all spiritual practices, purity is just about the most prone to being taken literally, with much of its spiritual value lost in the process. A beginner might think if you diligently kept your home and clothes spotless, you would automatically become wiser, yet it's easy to observe that none of those sorts of activities contribute to realization. Excessive cleanliness is more of a distractive obsession, a holdover from the days of "the clothes make the man," or anyway, "Clean up your room, child!" It's important in a social context, but that isn't where Patanjali is directing our energy.

Nitya asks us to ponder what it means to have transparency of vision in place of an occluded outlook? Taken in this sense, saucha is a widely inclusive observance undergirding the rest of Patanjali's yoga.

For us in this class, being adults, issues of physical cleanliness are mostly old hat, but if we examine the way our thinking is clouded or muddied by our habits of thought, purity becomes a centrally important issue for all ages. Our twisted ideas and beliefs are our impurities, and straightening them out is the restoration of purity. It's not that we should repress our "unsocial" thoughts and deeds, but by thinking about our life and trying to bring in an enlightened perspective we can more easily dispense with unnecessary or idiotic aspects of who we pretend to be. Ideally we can dispense with pretenses entirely, to reside in exactly who we are. That's the true cleanliness of Yoga.

Andy appreciated the Yoga Sutras excerpt above, especially “Instead of a static view of an effect or a cause, you are expected to develop a transparency of vision by which you can clearly see the manifested effect and the entire process...” As Andy maintained, the yogic project is to return to the purity of aloneness, and we are constantly confused by the challenges of phenomenal life that come at us in forms and thoughts. Saucha is meant to cleanse William Blake’s “doors of perception,” his best-known quote being: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”

As cleansing is clearly a progressive act, a practice if you will, this gets many seekers excited, but there is more here than meets the eye. What leap of consciousness opens the doors, cleanses our perceptions? Patanjali doesn’t openly admit to soma experience, but that is surely what made Blake’s quote a living part of twentieth century culture. Regardless, “Self-realization does not come as a cumulative effect of action. It comes only with the clear comprehension of Truth.” (Nitya’s Isa Upanishad Commentary)

In our previous Patanjali class, when we started to look into saucha as an intellectual observance, it began to look a lot like satya, truth. It turns out impurity and falsehood are pretty much the same thing.

Andy thought of the cleansing operation as pertaining to when you are around troublesome people, those who are interpersonally mean or have the habit of provoking others. If you can see the woundedness that is making them be that way, you can learn a compassionate attitude. And you can be doing it for yourself, also. Taking responsibility for our own provoking behavior is a way of becoming cleaner.

Thinking of my long hours at work, 24-hour shifts elbow to elbow with some very provoking people, I appreciated Andy’s angle. Humans have almost infinite energy, for good or ill. So you

can't make them stop provoking you, you have to find a way to accommodate them without sacrificing your soul. You have to find shelter from the storm, which often includes putting distance between you. I think people get a lot of welcome attention from being irritants, which means they are lonely underneath the blather. It's a perhaps repugnant call for help. Knowing this might stimulate us to examine our own reclusive needs for attention and admiration.

Andy's invocation of aloneness is related. I translate aloneness as all-oneness, the source of the term. We are all in this together, as one, so it's a very full aloneness. Everything is present, and caring for and about that oneness helps us clean up our relationship with others. There's nothing lonely about it.

Andy felt this was only one example of the much larger phenomenon of being confused by your own attractions and repulsions. You have to look at your own conditioning, what you might call your karmic inheritance. Saucha includes gracefully accepting what's come down to you, and coping with it. In dealing with so-called exterior manifestations, we have all been handed conditionings that we didn't choose. We definitely did not arrive on this planet with a tabula rasa. It takes a long time to understand it and just say yes to it — yes, there is this inheritance. Don't beat yourself up or accuse yourself of being bad, only see yourself clearly. You have this inheritance, and you should say yes, I accept it.

Humans are prone to use being a victim of malformation as an excuse not to correct the problem, but blame a hypothetical source. By displacing what is wrong with us to an external cause, we get mired in it, helplessly. It's like being stuck in mud, so it's very much an impediment.

With a smile, Andy cited Ramana Maharshi as telling someone who claimed he didn't understand: "the biggest impediment to not understanding is saying you believe yourself to

be someone who has not understood.”

Nancy exulted that she’s known the people on the screen—our class—for a good share of her life, and she is filled with all the different interactions and thoughts we have shared over the years. As Andy had been saying, we each have certain inherent characteristics, and by growing and sharing with other people, you get to know them well. You accept and love them for their idiosyncrasies, how they handle them or don’t handle them. Each life is a book that we can read of each other. We are not so much human beings as expressions of human *beingness*. She finished up: “It’s a gift that I’ve known so many people really deeply, and I treasure their good *and* bad parts.”

Andy appreciatively agreed we have a relative existence, with a specific phenomenal form, ways we react, ways we think. From the perspective of saucha that is a kind of covering.

I felt like saying we don’t need to scrub that covering off us—it’s the lather that comprises our soap bar. At least in yoga we are not trying to dispense with our individuality, but to honor what we are and unshackle our abilities.

Jan was pondering how purifying our attitudes relates to a violent incident on her street earlier that day. As related to her by a friend, there was a fight where a neighbor with a knife threatened a gardener, who went to his car and pulled out a gun and threatened him right back. The police came and arrested the gardener. Jan wonders how it’s going to be on her peaceful street after the disruption, worrying about how highly armed and fearful our country has become. Also, how addicted. How do we express saucha in terms of people who are difficult and make our life unstable or painful? Having a safe environment is important to spiritual growth, but some of these people are in our life, and she cares for them as human beings, wanting to be generous and compassionate with them. How do we set boundaries? And how do we treat people after an incident like that?

I insisted that spiritual practice relied on being alive, first and foremost. Despite a flood of deranged Americans bulging with automatic weaponry, we have to carry on with a sense of personal freedom. We are rarely going to help by intervening in fights. As a firefighter who was called to many types of disaster scene, our first rule was Do Not Become Part of the Problem. That means, ensure your safety first, and don't risk your life unless you know the risks.

I'd say it's impure to walk into a dangerous situation imagining that your good intentions will correct it, but there are times when it's truly called for. Sometimes it works. You have to really mean it.

Paul mused about the role of conditioning in our perception and experience of the world. Many years ago someone asked Nancy how she designs the interiors for Elephants Deli, and her reply was there is a time in the morning when you aren't quite awake and your creativity is stronger than at other times. Lots of ideas come then. Because of hearing this, Paul now recognizes a brief interlude upon waking—he calls it his pre-coffee mode—though he isn't sure if it will ever take over enough for him to let go of “managing Paul” nearly full time. The managing thing gets an early hold on him as soon as he wakes up.

During one of those recent “grace periods” he got a vivid peek at his conditioning as someone with religious scars from a strict childhood. His negative feelings about religion come as reactions to his bruises, making him instinctively want to hit back as hard as he was hit. Anita, who has many dear friends of a religious bent, rightfully called him on it, last week. There are toxic religions and healthy ones, and most often a mixture of both. As in any other category. Narayana Guru knew the hub of the wheel: a religion is good if it makes a better person.

For someone like Paul, pulling out those poisoned arrows as he stumbles upon them, is bound to affect his wellbeing. He has learned to recognize the conditioned aspect of how we interpret our

current experience. The way to step outside that impurity is to realize you will be biased in certain areas, so do not grant yourself a blanket authority to condemn. As Paul was waking up that morning, he realized he was pushing out a defensive attitude to protect himself, and it was a great insight for him to see it. He no longer needs the protection, now that he's a grown man. It's likely also true that it won't serve him well in dealing with oppressive religious types—it would just make them more determined than before to “cure” him.

Andy assured us we have a fundamental foundation of sanity. Which is our true nature, and it interfaces with our insight. We also have conditioned fences, but we have our original unfenced nature, and it's part of the practice to remember that.

Paul admitted that sometimes he has an issue with learning, having a hard time getting out of his own way. When the opportunity arises, he muddles it up, and is no longer able to step back and see the big picture. He has tried to let the wisdom teachers paint a picture of what this should look like, but still the pre-morning time, without definition, scares him. On the one hand, before he actually takes possession of himself, there is an ease of looking at life. Yet it's unnerving. He's still working on how to incorporate the teachings he so admires into his experience.

It was a perfect time to bring up the last part of the old notes:

We live in an impure world where we know only a little about the events that engulf us, and even less about events on the periphery. The yogi acknowledges that there is always more to know, that our program of life is never a finished product. And Vedanta dares to admit that this is not only okay, it is essential. There is no cowering before an angry god, intolerant of our impurity. Instead we laugh at the cosmic joke of being partially aware beings in an unknowable universe. Then we can help each other make our way, instead of carrying out an imaginary

god's punishment.

It's an excellent practice to not put on the coat of ourself, if only for an early-morning moment, as an integral part of the process of unbinding from a rigid definition of what our name means to us. Unbinding is always in process; it's not fixed, unless we have no self-definition at all. If we loosen up on trying to be an *idea* of ourselves, we are more present to what is actually going on instead of what our memory thinks is going on. Yet even the rare beings who have achieved this liberation evidence very distinctive personalities....

Nitya used to remind us that when you wake up in the morning, you can decide to be different, right then. You don't have to be affixed to your old self, you can refashion, rebuild.

We had a bit of a scuffle over rebuilding, or practicing, versus being already complete. Curiously, these are not mutually exclusive propositions. We work diligently to improve our skills and knowledge in the so-called horizontal world, but we don't have to imagine it will produce our vertical essence, which is evolving according to a bundle of natural laws and potentials, and has been since day one—literally. If not before.

## **Part II**

From my commentary on the Gita, chapter XIII:

Purity, *saucham*, is usually associated with so-called moral behavior. But striving to always be good and pure feeds the spiritual ego like nothing else, leading to intractable problems. Spiritual purity is actually a totally different matter. When we latch on to certain static states, such as when we feel ashamed or upset or guilty, and especially when we think we have solved all our problems and are right where we're supposed to be, then we aren't open to the next thing that comes along. Our vision becomes



clouded whenever we cling to the familiar, because we are not free to be open to the next moment. To stay in the flow we have to release our hang-ups and fixations. Whenever we get stuck, particularly in emotionally charged states, that is precisely where we need to do our work, to restore our fluidity.

When purity becomes a part of us, we will see life as *lila*, a divine sport, where all meaning occurs within the unfoldment of events just as the tree develops from the seed. Such an attitude allows for easy detachment and the flexibility to let go when the flow threatens to sweep you away from what you cherish or cling to.

Early Christian scholar Elaine Pagels had the lost and unorthodox Nag Hammadi scrolls fall in her lap, certainly an “act of God” if ever there was one—and was unsullied enough to realize their value and bring them to the attention of the public, starting with her book *The Gnostic Gospels*. If Pagels had had a stake in the status quo of the Christian Church, she might have done what others have often done before her and buried the scrolls in some musty college basement, or even destroy them. But she was unattached, and so able to act with purity of intent. Her courageous work has led to an avalanche of fresh and valuable perspectives on the human history of the planet.

If you are pure you can set aside your egoistic desires and act for the greatest common good, which includes your own part in it. This is very different from the Puritanical notion that purity means not breaking social rules, or not having any fun, such as enjoying sex or imbibing psychotropic substances. Dr. G.H. Mees succinctly corrects this in *The Key to Genesis*:

In Europe and America there is a strong tendency to identify morality and spirituality. But anyone who has common sense and looks around, is aware that there are a great many people who are moral saints, but lack inner peace and do not know

true happiness. In the East the identification of morality and spirituality is as a rule avoided.

Speaking of soma, anyone who has taken psychedelic medicine has almost certainly learned the importance of *saucham*, purity. On a trip, any and all extraneous thoughts are like catching a wave wrong in surfing: you instantly wipe out and get rolled under in the churn. Worse, what you imagine or fear manifests instantly as a palpable vision, so if you conceive of something awful, that something will immediately become your experience. As far as you can tell, it is just as real as any other “normal” experience. You really believe you’re dying, or being cut in pieces, or being raped, or what have you. So it is absolutely incumbent that you remain in the neutral zone and don’t let your mind wander into projections. As soon as you become pure in that way the trip becomes ecstatic, effortless. This typical experience is the source of the certitude that what you think becomes your reality sooner or later, “what you see is what you get” as the old song goes. Ordinarily there is a time lag so it’s much harder to notice that what we imagine is being played back to us as our experience, but during the soma trip the feedback is instantaneous. Purity includes not initiating such negative chains of events by cooking up harebrained schemes.

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11/11/12 – For Nancy Y’s study group:

I have written vast amounts about these categories already, as they are mostly listed also in the Gita’s Chapter XIII, as aspects of wisdom. Nitya generally has the same take as I do, which is gratifying, if not surprising. I must have picked up *something* from him along the way.... Let’s see if I can add some new thoughts.

Purity. For adults, issues of physical cleanliness are mostly old hat, but if we look at the way our thinking is clouded or muddied by our laziness it becomes a centrally important issue. Our twisted ideas and beliefs are our impurities, and straightening them out is the restoration of purity. It's not that we should repress our "unsocial" thoughts and deeds, but by thinking about our life and trying to bring in an enlightened perspective we can more easily dispense with unnecessary or idiotic aspects of who we pretend to be. Ideally we can dispense with the pretense entirely, to be exactly who we are. That's true cleanliness.

Thanks to a long study with a great teacher, the sloppy thinking that excuses all sorts of ridiculous beliefs often stands out quite clearly to me. (Then I have to do the tapas of keeping my mouth shut, since it doesn't do any good to challenge people about it, and comes off as arrogant. Likewise, complaining about it is futile and corrosive.) Having what the Gurus call a normative notion makes the vague and wishful claims of my peers stand out starkly. But instead of getting into an argument or mounting a disquisition, I practice connecting the dots between vagueness and clarity, for my own edification. Sometimes this illuminates a key transitional idea that occasionally does prove helpful to someone else also. But I find I still have enough confusion of my own remaining I don't really have to bother anyone else about purity. Purification is an unending process, a way of being, actually. There is no monolithic state of perfect purity awaiting discovery. Mental dirt accumulates just like physical dirt, so we have to take a cleansing bath regularly.

I have to say, it's a little claustrophobia-inducing to be aware of how thick the layers are of behaving like sheep in following the tried and true. It seems most of us have a brief burst of independence early in adulthood, and then gradually shut down, becoming ever more docile and content with the status quo. Dullness is mistaken for enlightenment. It's tragic, really. Perhaps

it's a good thing that it creeps up so undetectably that we hardly notice, but I don't want to give in.... It's like the Invasion of the Body Snatchers—really the Mind Snatchers—only they aren't aliens, they are our own stultifying tendencies.

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2/22/11

Sutra II:32

Purity, contentment, self-purification, self-study, and continuous contemplation on Isvara are the observances (niyama).

A rollicking class fueled by three delicious desserts launched us into the first of the niyamas, sauca or purity, though we remain hazy on the difference between restraints and observances. Our conclusion is that the exact classification is not particularly important, since every one of the ten categories has both an inwardly-directed aspect and an outwardly-directed one, and both should be contemplated on.

Suiting action to the word, we followed Nitya's example and first talked about the external side of purity. My feeling was that in this commentary Nitya was talking to a roomful of young men, and laying down the basics of hygiene for those who felt that the Gurukula atmosphere was a great excuse to ignore cleanliness. Most of us in the class, being older, have for a long time been scrupulous in cleaning up, so this was old hat. Still, we unearthed some revelations.

Jan related how in her family the kitchen was considered sterile and off-limits except for strictly regimented occasions. This may explain why as an adult she has been leery of kitchen cleanup, treating it almost as a kind of punishment. It isn't so much the tasks as the hangover of dread about the place. As I think it was Susan pointed out, her childhood kitchen was treated as though it

was unclean, even though it was sterile and immaculate, since it was forbidden territory.

Some of us remembered that because of our upbringing, we had deep-seated beliefs that cleaning up, folding our laundry and so on, was almost like a technique for salvation. We were endlessly praised for doing cleanup jobs and scolded for messiness, and so as adults we unconsciously feel like we are being spiritual by doing our mundane chores. Actually, those feelings do make the work more pleasant, and shouldn't be considered faults, unless (and this does often happen) they become compulsive. If we are anxious or neurotic we may feel that keeping things clean is the high road to happiness, and we set ourselves an endless series of tasks to try to produce an exalted state of mind. The class admitted that cleaning and straightening did have a small but noticeably positive effect on our state of mind. There is certainly some satisfaction in a job well done. But Patanjali must have had something more profound in mind when he included *sauca* as one of the observances, in the rarified company of *tapas* and continuous contemplation on *Isvara*!

Patanjali calls us to look to our inner impurities and see how we can purify them. But before presenting examples, I want to repeat Deb's important caveat. An excessive attention to purity can easily become a "holier than thou" attitude, one more excuse to separate and divide, and a prime example of spiritual snobbery. There is little that is more off-putting in spiritual life than someone who has withdrawn into isolation because contact with the outside world would pollute their delicate mental state, but then who is willing to come out of isolation to point out your failings. Sure, we want to arrange our lives to allow quiet, peaceful stretches for contemplation, but we also have to be able to thrive in what Nitya always called the marketplace. Too much sterility makes us vulnerable to infections we haven't developed immunities to.

The height of the folly of excessive purity—well, one of the heights anyway—is the longstanding brahminic separation from other castes in India, where non-brahmins are treated as unclean, and therefore untouchable. Such segregation happens under many guises all over the world, and is a tremendous source of pain and misery. And of course it cuts both ways. So like pretty much everything, moderation in respect to purity is what is called for. If we see our fellow beings as a threat or even simply as foreign to us, that is an impurity we should deal with immediately. Sequestering ourselves is not a form of purity, it is a symptom of impurity.

So, some examples. When we started to look into sauca as an intellectual observance, it began to look a lot like satya, truth. It turns out impurity and falsehood are pretty much the same thing.

As with all of this study, we welcome examples sent in by anyone at any time. The class itself was just warming to the idea when we brought it to a close, so I'm sure there are more out there.

I started off borrowing the example I use in my Gita commentary, where purity is an aspect of wisdom listed in XIII, 7. Elaine Pagels was part of a team studying the unorthodox Nag Hammadi scrolls found in Egypt. Discoveries like the scrolls were often hushed up or quietly shelved by those with a stake in Christianity as they imagined it to be. In other words, religious beliefs are an impurity that can block scholarship. But Pagels was pure enough, unattached enough, to recognize and promote the finds, with the result that a vast field of new appreciation has opened up. To quote myself, “Her work has led to an avalanche of fresh and valuable perspectives on the human history of the planet.”

Another example is, you go to a therapist for help with a problem. If the therapist is pure, they will be fully present to listen to your complaints and offer advice based on your needs. But therapists have impurities, like everyone else. They may be

thinking of an argument they had with their spouse earlier, or an issue with their teenage son or daughter. They could be inwardly fuming, or conversely, they may want very much to save the world one patient at a time. They undoubtedly have training that places different kinds of people in distinct categories, that may or may not match anyone exactly. All those “impurities” have an effect on how accurately they address your complaint.

Therapists, like scientists and religious people, and I suppose all of us, have our accustomed perspectives and beliefs, and these are all forms of impurity to a yogi. Because we are accustomed to them, we don't even notice them unless we stop and do a careful self-assessment.

Charles talked about James Joyce's idea of pure and impure art. Joyce felt that art should be neutral, above being used to manipulate people. He divided impure art into two, propaganda and pornography. The first attempts to manipulate the intellect and the second the emotions. Charles added in a note today, “In the classic German film from the Weimar Republic era, *The Blue Angel*, the professor and the show girl personify the two types of impure art: the didactic and the pornographic.”

Of course, the notion of “pure art,” like pure anything, is fraught with serious problems, unless we think of it as a goal rather than a *fait accompli*. Everything manifested is ineluctably impure to some extent. Even Ivory Soap is only 99 44/100 percent pure. One of the paradoxes here, at least as far as *advaita* (nondualism) is concerned is that *trying* to be pure is an impure motivation. Yes, we can try to keep our car repaired and our house clean, but in the more subtle realms there has to be a different approach. Art is the perfect example: whatever you try for pollutes the project, by interposing an abstract idea into the middle of the pure act, and yet without some motivation nothing will happen. There won't even be any bad art. Art is a case where our knowledge and state of mind

naturally infuse what we do, and all the more so if we don't add any intentional pressure to it one way or another.

One more very important thing to remember is that purity is a process. It is how we clear the junk out of our way on a regular basis. We should never imagine that we have become pure and that's the end of it. That would be a perfect example of the pride that cometh before a fall. Nothing could be less pure than imagining that we are pure, unless it's being satisfied with or proud of our impurities. Anne recalled the Isa Upanishad's teaching that ignorant people live in darkness, but knowledgeable people live in even greater darkness. That's because if you think you already know, your mind will be closed to new input. If you think you're pure, you won't bother to scrub off your impurities.

We get stuck in attitudes like that because we unconsciously believe that we have to be perfect in order to be acceptable to our parents or our gods. This is again a hangover from childhood: the only safe place is to not screw up, else we'll be punished. So we desperately want to be pure, to be above criticism. And pretty soon we define ourselves that way, regardless of the facts.

Which brings up the last example, for now anyway. As parents we have certain fixed notions on how to raise our kids. For most of recent history it has been "spare the rod and spoil the child," in other words, whack 'em for their own good. Then there was "kids can do no wrong," so indulge their every whim. Neither of these covers all the possibilities, and they are impure to the extent that they place a framework over a situation instead of seeing it for what it is. I well remember being shocked that my darling girls had actually been horrible in school, so my attitude that all faults belonged to someone else turned out to have been impure. I learned to accept that even my little angels could be devils. And I definitely recall the flip side, when I was beaten for things I had not done, because my father was programmed to hit instead of investigate. Or I was severely chastised when a gentle



word of correction would have been enough. Every incidence, positive or negative, leaves a wound.

We live in an impure world where we know only a little about the events that engulf us, and even less about events on the periphery. The yogi acknowledges that there is always more to know, that our program of life is never a finished product. And Vedanta dares to admit that this is not only okay, it is essential. There is no cowering before an angry god, intolerant of our impurity. Instead we laugh at the cosmic joke of being partially aware beings in an unknowable universe. Then we can help each other make our way instead of helping an imaginary angry god inflict actual punishment.