

## 2022 Patanjali Class 75

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.)

### B – Santosha, contentment

I added the first two paragraphs from Part II (below) to the brief reading, and after the opening meditation invited the class to consider discontent along with contentment, something we had discussed in our first journey through Living the Science, summed up in the old notes from 2011:

Discontent, while central to modern society, has its pitfalls. Conversely, if we force ourselves to be content all the time, there is a tendency to remain static. Change and newness challenge us to relinquish our comfortable contentment in favor of our own development. We need to be brave enough to meet such challenges, and we need to be grounded enough to take risks.

The irritations of life, rather than being taken as hostile forces, can be considered by the yogi as stimulating change, pressing us to improve, work harder and ponder more deeply. Patanjali did not necessarily mean for us to limit ourselves to contentment, and perhaps we can also nurture an attitude of being content with discontent. I invited the class to share how we distinguish between contentment and discontentment, and to address what yoga suggests we do about the discrepancy.

Charles offered that we are living in more crowded conditions than Patanjali did, and it's hard to be contented if you are surrounded by discontented people. He quoted Wordsworth,

“The world is too much with us,” and proposed we don’t have enough time as atomized individuals to make other people content. In Patanjali’s time, people were living in villages in extended families, meaning if you’re going to be contented, others have to be also.

Extending his ideas, Charles acknowledged his privileged and fortunate circumstances, but when he walks the streets, he doesn’t see much santosha, much contentment. People look really unhappy in ways he didn’t notice when he was younger, maybe because the world is falling apart around our ears, so it’s hard for him to be happy. And maybe that’s a chronic condition.

He first heard the word santosha when he was new to India, traveling with Mogappa Swami in Karnataka. The Swami was doing what village swamis do, speaking to small groups in a different place every night, and Charles felt he was showing him how the simple villagers were content with their lot. Charles was very miserable in those days, and it was like a lab on happiness. The people in those places were the happiest he had ever seen, and he felt it must have had something to do with normal human community life, traditional agricultural, religion that works for people, things like that. Things he never had. Charles admits he was a tough case. Where he came from, everyone was pretending to be happy in Jesus, so he was determined to be unhappy. He was miserable and spreading misery, and figures the Swami wasted his time on him, yet after more than forty years, he feels he is finally acquiring some of this santosha.

I countered that while the US has apparently become a lunatic asylum filled with desperate, lost souls, many of us are closely affiliated with interesting, pleasant people. While some of us feel more content when we are alone, many others are more content with other humans even if they are chaotic, and those types are discontented if they don’t have other people to socialize with.

We are a gregarious species, after all. Both these preferences can be present in anyone, at different times.

Nitya meets this paradox head on, right away bringing up sama and dama:

Sama is not succumbing to disturbances coming from within; dama is restraining provocations from outside. Santosha is a state of mind that comes only when sama and dama are properly exercised and the mind is freed of all its agitations.

I'm convinced the inside influences are more important than our environment in establishing equipoise, except where survival is a pressing issue. We are most fortunate on that account. Yoga includes adeptly evading being drawn in to other people's states of mind, unless they are sublime. There is an intellectual process in yoga, because you have to think your way into balance. We are in dire straits in this country, so you have to make an effort to not allow the popular manias to coopt your peace of mind. Nitya realized this, certainly:

There is a more positive aspect to santosha than just being tranquil or contented. It is also being cheerful and creating around yourself an atmosphere that is pleasant to yourself and to others who join you in that environment....

Although santosha is a cheerful state, maintaining it is difficult. You have to cultivate a very high sensibility to preserve your santosha in the right spirit and enable it to be a harmonizing catalyst in maintaining equipoise in society.

Andy suspects santosha may be self-founded, that is, not dependent on any external or internal talent you acquire that makes you happy. He admitted there is a mental component, yet the times or periods when his own santosha felt strong, he associated it with

a physical balance. He directed his thoughts to our master massage therapist, Karen: one experience he's had with body work is being restored to an equilibrium. It feels right, and he senses you could have real internal peace that doesn't depend on anything, with just a physical theme.

Not surprisingly, Karen agreed. She's treated lots of people who had allowed extreme tensions to influence their bodies: through work, family life, or whatever, something physical had happened to them, and they lost their tranquility. She liked what Nitya said at the beginning, comparing the mind to a pool of water disturbed by ripples and pollution. It's a good analogy. When people allow the ripples to disturb the balance in their brain, it causes physical problems in the body, and the more ripples and pollution are in the brain, the more physical problems and disease in the body. Some have problems and yet they keep their mind calm and they are cheerful and happy. They haven't allowed the outside to come in and upset them.

There was some banter about attaining santosha through peak meditation, which contradicted its being "self-founded," but I noted that contentment, like the good health we take for granted, is our baseline condition, and we all have lots of it, no one more than Karen herself, who is a walking embodiment of santosha. That's why she can press contentment into her clients' flesh so wonderfully. Andy likewise praised her for helping people get closer to that state — it's what she does for a living, and yet she feels she isn't giving people something they don't already have.

Karen concurred she was allowing people to relax and let go of their tension so they can feel santosha in themselves, admitting it sometimes takes a lifetime to learn how to relax well enough for your body to heal. It's about making friends with your body, loving it. Andy added to Karen: you aren't giving them something, you're just clearing a space for what they already have.

Karen is impressed how Anita, whenever she was feeling unwell, would go sit by her favorite river and feel restored. It's really the same thing as body work, the way she was finding her santosha so she could deal with her pain and afflictions. She was finding that space. Anita nodded, knowing she didn't need afflictions to feel healed by contemplating the river—it was uplifting any time.

Speaking of restoration, Jan has been doing “restorative yoga” lately. Coming out of a session she feels like a whole layer of preoccupation, worry and stress has dissipated, and she feels balanced and joyful. It makes her want to share her contentment with others. When we asked what it was, she told us it's a category of yoga poses that don't require exertion. She finds it transformative, feeling completely opened up. She's also felt it was a wake-up call, realizing she's not always in that state.

Andy liked my idea of being content with discontent, and told us about how he used to go to Opal Creek, with its epic stand of old growth firs, before it was burned up a few years ago. There was a 200-year-old fir tree that had been hit by lightning multiple times, with branches hanging every which way, which he now resembles at his amusingly advanced age. Due to the damage to his body from a lifetime of thrills and spills, he's doing PT, where the therapist would like to transform him and arrest his aging process. He supposes instead that he could have a physical santosha that would acknowledge all his aging, and also allow him to be authentically who he physically is, without holding onto a lot of junk about it. We are not ideal people as we go through this life, we get knocked around internally and externally. So many things that we have picked up, yet still we are children of the Absolute, bearing all those packages.

Paul mused there must be a state in which contentment becomes the only option, because of the way you identify yourself. He remembers his quarterly evaluations as a fireground officer,

with categories like “approaches satisfactory” and “falls short of expectations,” how devastating it was to him to be labeled like that, because he was trying so hard to measure up. He wondered, what else do you want from me? Another time he heard the new chief addressing a group of firefighters with many years of experience, risking their lives on nearly a daily basis, telling them, “I would like to see more of a commitment from you.” Those kinds of insults are really disturbing, and yet they taught Paul about the outside coming in and the inside going out, and how we cope with the same things in life, all the time trying to decide if this hand we’ve been dealt is meeting our expectations or not. Possibly we are expecting too much, because our value and our worth embraces both victories and failures. If we view the Absolute as including everything, it must include both.

As I’m sure is obvious, I take a more active approach to yoga than most of the class, and Paul’s ideas gave me an entrée to say something about them. Despite looking a lot like a battered old-growth tree myself, I am sensitive person, and having people criticize me—rightly or wrongly—is very painful. I can’t just shrug it off. I have to analyze the situation in order to restore my balance. Over a lifetime I have come to respect and admire myself, without, I trust, conceit, and I need that solid grounding to offset the criticism. I lose my santosha when someone kicks it out from under me, but I know how to gradually recover it, whether in an hour or a month.

I too remember the ineptitude of the fire chiefs, who didn’t have any idea what they were doing to people with their over-simple evaluations, though I eventually learned how difficult situations are a high road to contentment, if we give ourselves support along the way.

When I can accept things as they are, Bill said, I’m most contented, with no external or internal waves on the surface. I try to just be present with it, and don’t have thoughts about the future

or the past but just being right there. When I get to that place I can be content, even when things are difficult. He was thinking of the health issues that some of us have gone through, how important it was just being aware and accepting what is going on. In some cases there is nothing we can do about it.

I thought of those times as learning to accept the unacceptable. Similarly, Susan has realized how disturbances and equipoise can exist together: we can have difficulties but still be the ocean.

No matter how big the agitation on the surface, figured Paul, there is so much ocean that goes far deeper, and so is unaffected by it. It isn't the difficulty that defines you, but your entire width and breadth. We get a glimpse of this truth only if we realize we don't need to go down the path of identifying with the agitations. We are deeper than a week's experience or a few days stormy weather.

Santosha is clearly an observance that grows and strengthens over time, and as it does, it supplies solid support in a state that is not so easy to muddy or ripple with confusion. We need to accept ourselves, affirming we are a legitimate part of the game of life, and we have meaningful values to share.

Looking at our ten faces on the screen—eleven as Brenda joins us near the end—the deep contentment of each one is tangible. We have been feeding our understanding with the weekly class for decades, and each person has multiple other outlets and recourses to build and support their character. We don't have to posit that santosha is a future goal—it is right here with us, and we can share it. With all our numerous faults, we know how to create “an atmosphere that is pleasant to yourself and to others who join you in that environment.” Not just superficially pleasant, but cosmically pleasant.

## **Part II**

11/11/12 – For Nancy Y’s study group:

Contentment. It’s the wrong kind of contentment that contaminates our natural purity. Nitya elucidates the right kind, thankfully, and Nancy quoted his best sentence in the lesson: true contentment is interest in values that make a person rejoice both in heart and mind.

The latest Scientific American Mind magazine issue is on genius, and it turns out (surprise!) to have a lot to do with sustaining a passionate interest in values that you rejoice in. Modern studies are tiptoeing toward what the rishis have taught for millennia: everyone has genius-potential in them, but somehow it is routinely suppressed, or at least screened away from consciousness. Vedanta is all about unleashing our creativity by removing the suppression, so it’s still way out in front, but some scientists are trying to find ways to do it on their own terms. My point at the moment, though, is that geniuses are characterized by *enthusiasm*. They are excited about what they are into, and that impels them to become highly proficient in their chosen field. I have always wondered why many people are not excited about their lives—it seems so... necessary... right... intrinsic? Somewhere along the line our contentment with the excitement of living and growing has been supplanted by contentment with routine and an absence of threats. It’s the same tragedy mentioned before, of dullness being mistaken for enlightenment.

I know this is partly due to the human race being medicated, one way or another. When we are not comfortable, we take drugs that provide contentment, only all too often it’s a deathly version. We want to stay put, stay quiet. Patanjali’s contentment is the contentment of genius, continually thrilled by one discovery after another, one insight after another, one performance after another.

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From the first Portland Gurukula class:

3/8/11

The second niyama is santosha, contentment.

At first blush, simple contentment seems a rather trivial observance next to the other four, all of which are much more “yoga-like,” but as we delved into its implications the class began to appreciate its importance, raising its status to a full partnership with the rest. Spiritual contentment goes far beyond mere creature comfortableness.

Right off the bat several of us intuitively compared contentment with balanced weighing scales, which turned out to be the perfect analogy. Nitya uses one of the favorite Gurukula terms in his commentary, equipoise, and a scale in balance is the protolinguistic symbol for it.

The process of weighing, which until very recently was performed exclusively on a balance scale, is at the root of equipoise, poise, and ponder, among other words, and our conclusions miss the mark precisely to the degree that two sides of any equation are out of balance. The image is an excellent one for any meditation in which we weigh our options.

The efficiency with which the group homed in on scales as a defining image was reminiscent of the democratic decision-making championed in the book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, by James Surowiecki, where he amply demonstrates the ability of a diverse group to arrive at an insight collectively, where each individual in the group is far less able to. (Also ruled out are groups where the herd instinct prevails, in which the members are subject to manipulation by a leader; and also groups of “experts,” who tend to clump together around a particular preselected viewpoint. The evidence Surowiecki presents against experts ratifies the Isha

Upanishad's claim that those who worship knowledge live in the greatest darkness.) The book's conclusion supports the Bhagavad Gita's emphasis on becoming independent in order to be optimally beneficial to both yourself and others:

Diversity and independence are important because the best collective decisions are the product of disagreement and contest, not consensus and compromise. An intelligent group, especially when confronted with cognition problems, does not ask its members to modify their positions in order to let the group reach a decision everyone can be happy with. Instead, it figures out how to use mechanisms—like market prices, or intelligent voting systems—to aggregate and produce collective judgments that represent not what any one person in the group thinks but rather, in some sense, what they all think.

*Paradoxically, the best way for a group to be smart is for each person in it to think and act as independently as possible. (xix-xx) (emphasis mine)*

To a yogi this isn't as paradoxical as it might appear to someone conditioned to conformity. The more independent of conditioning we are, the more we are alive to our inner vision or our ability to comprehend. And when we try to please others through imitation, we are loading up on a form of conditioning, training ourselves to be obedient rather than creative.

So, back to our balance scales. Yogic contentment is resistant to the battering of outer and inner turmoil alike. Not that the scales don't ever tip, but that they are brought back as quickly as possible into equipoise. The Gurus and Patanjali agree that equalizing opposites mentally brings a steady state, samadhi. Nataraja Guru goes so far as to claim that doing so "reveals the Absolute." Contentment occurs when the scales are balanced, and discontent or dissatisfaction is an indicator of imbalance or injustice. Santosha

is thus a result of a dynamic synthesis, and is not a mere pose. Posing is usually fake, forced; and false cheerfulness is readily detected by others, especially those who are suffering. What's worse, our hearts can easily distinguish between true contentment and a hopeful veneer of it. What we long for is genuine contentment, true balance.

Several people argued, however, that by adopting and radiating an attitude of contentment it not only was nice for other people, but it helped you to learn it yourself, and this is true. Most of the related psychological experiments have been done with smiling and frowning, but they aren't too far from contentment and discontent. Smiling has been shown to produce a state of happiness, and frowning the reverse, as if our bodies were the causal origin and the emotion merely the effect. Some recent studies used botox to temporarily paralyze the forehead muscles that are activated by frowning, and the subjects then literally could not comprehend negative ideas. Being unable to frown made them much less capable of negative thinking. So sure, you can adopt a pose of contentment and it will have many benefits. But yoga is something else again. It aims for a relation to truth that is wholly satisfying, and so produces contentment almost as a byproduct. There is no reason we can't use both approaches, either, as long as we keep them separate and don't mistake the false projection for the real. In any case, our primary aim is not for contentment by itself, it is for realization of the Absolute, Isvara. In the meantime, smile a lot and be kind.

Modern societies cultivate discontent as everyone's baseline attitude, and again this has some benefits. When we are discontented we seek ways to move toward contentment, and that can be very constructive. And yet, as Paul said, we can easily become permanently discontented and then we will no longer see the beauty around us. Or we explore one way after another to stimulate a temporary contentment, and accept that as good

enough. As Nitya says, “Santosha requires moderation in accepting the pleasures of the world so that they are not followed by the hangover or aftermath of hedonistic indulgence.” And he’s not just talking about the DTs. Deb mentioned the general case: actions that embroil us in further karmic bondage produce “hangovers” of obligation that take a lot more than a morning to recover from. Yogic contentment, then, does not rely on externals but goes to the root of the issue, and thus does not produce any negative after-effect, either.

Discontent, while central to modern society, has its pitfalls. Conversely, if we force ourselves to be content all the time, there is a tendency to remain static. Change and newness challenge us to relinquish our comfortable contentment in favor of our own development, and we need to be brave enough to meet such challenges. We need to be grounded enough to take risks; otherwise we might just as well hide in a cave all our life.

The notion of contentment, then, begins to take on a dialectical structure, reminiscent of the Gita’s IV, 18: “One who is able to see action in inaction and inaction in action—he among men is intelligent; he is one of unitive attitude, while still engaged in every (possible) kind of work.” We can apply this principle anywhere. How about, “The one who is able to see contentment in discontent, and discontent in contentment, is especially intelligent, and will be able to maintain a unitive attitude in all things.”

Bringing the thesis and antithesis together dynamically is yoga.

Yoga is primarily a mental practice. I have given a favorite practical example of Nitya’s before, but it doesn’t hurt to repeat it. If someone praised him—which they often did—he would simultaneously remind himself of his faults, and remember that the person doing the praising didn’t know him very well anyway. Or if someone criticized him—also not uncommon for an outspoken and unorthodox guru like he was—he would remind himself that he had many good qualities too. Supplying the opposite side of any

situation allows you to remain in a balanced state of neutrality, without exaggeration positively or negatively. The synthesis of the dialectic is that we are always vastly more than any of our partial assessments, and that that kind of “beyondness” is our true nature. Nitya even used the technique, spelled out as “neither this nor that but... aum,” for one of his book titles.

Deb made an excellent point about a central truth of the Gita, which occurs (among other places) right next to the previously cited one: “Relinquishing attachment for the benefit of works, ever happy and independent, though such a man be engaged in work, (in principle) he does nothing at all.” (IV, 20) She realized that attachment to results is the basis for discontent, and so letting go of results-oriented action allows us to relax into our natural state of contentment. I suppose that is why discontent is ubiquitous in any society that bases its assessment of human value not on happiness but on successful accomplishments, even though it is common knowledge that worldly success does not lead to happiness.

I again mentioned the many exceptional people I know who are chronically dissatisfied with themselves. Surely dissatisfaction has had a role in pushing them to be exceptional, but they often get caught in a permanent state of unhappiness because they can never satisfy themselves. Patanjali and Nitya are counseling us that while we pressure ourselves and work hard to become wise or whatever, we should be sure to enjoy ourselves while we are doing it. We are so fortunate to have a million opportunities to grow and learn, more than ever in planetary history! A modicum of gratitude for our infinite potentials, and guiding ourselves to appreciate life now instead of postponing our contentment to the distant future—even to the afterlife for many people—could make life much more fun. The rishis have finally been caught up with by today’s scientists, who can now measure the electromagnetic field we each generate, and speculate about how it affects those around us. We contribute to world peace and universal fellowship by learning how to be

content, deep down in our core, because we are all intimately connected there.

## **Part II**

Pondering and investigating the relation of scales to yoga, I found some fascinating history on the web. It turns out, balance scales of one kind or another have a 6000 year history, and only began to be replaced with electronic devices beginning in the mid-twentieth century. A couple of clips from a now-defunct site:

Weights and measures are undoubtedly one of man's greatest and most important inventions, ranking alongside the wheel in the evolution of civilisation. Commerce would not have progressed beyond the barter system without the invention of a system of weights and measures.

Accuracy in the electronic age means time and distance can now be measured by light, but weight still has to be measured against a known or reference weight, or mass.

My favorite example of “souls hanging in the balance” is from ancient Egypt, where Anubis weighs the dead person’s heart on a scale, with a feather on the other side. Only if the heart was lighter than the feather was the soul promoted to the afterlife. And in at least one account the feather stands for truth.

Of course, a yogi would opt for a heart that is exactly balanced with the feather of truth, neither lighter or heavier....