

2022 Patanjali Class 77

1/3/24

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.)

D – Svadhyaya, self-study

I started the day with a positive Covid test, so it was fortunate to have an all-Zoom class, most of which I was muted for. I'm going to try to get the old Mojo working for writing, but I'm a bit cloudy today. I'm reassured that the old Notes, found in Part II, are a reliable accounting for the present niyama. Over the years, we've done very well by svadhyaya!

The “Self” of self-study is one of Sanskrit's most elusive terms, ranging inclusively between referring to the individual and the Absolute. The *sva* version does indicate an emphasis on the person, yet the fact remains that in Vedanta the individual is the Absolute. In yoga, the self we mostly study is atman, equally coextensive with the Absolute.

We Westerners have been trained that when we finished a project in school, we were free to do self-study, meaning our homework. With books and paper. With Patanjali, we have to turn away from that type of conditioning. The discussion opened with the prompt: What does self-study mean to you?

Andy got the ball rolling, how we are given certain concepts by yoga that we can use to study ourselves, our psychological behavior. We can study how we relate to sense perceptions and memories, and we can study how there is this construct of an individual self that is arising because we are reacting to them. The profit we get from it is that we can stabilize ourselves; when we

understand our mind, our reactions are more harmonized. There is also a form of transacting that the term implies, where we are relating to a wisdom teacher or a text, some sort of suggestion about what our self might be. This is preliminary to diving deeper into the matter, which is what the next niyama, isvara pranidhana (continuous contemplation on the Absolute, Isvara) does. The last three niyamas—tapas, savdhyaya and isvara pranidhana—are the components of kriya yoga. As Andy sees it, it all begins first on a thought level.

I joked that in that sense svadhyaya deals with the ya-yas of the swa, the self. While that is important, we have been working through those ya-yas for two years now. The observances, the niyamas, rise from them to a more sublime level. Nitya is leading us from our associations developed in childhood to an inclusive “aleness,” or all-oneness that overcomes those learned definitions, and resides in the self. While admitting svadhyaya “is generally recognized as the study of words passed on by seekers who have gone before,” he directs us to ponder who we are and what we own, not to idealize those categories, but to transcend them. He wants us to realize that “a single answer does not solve the problem of samsara (the phenomenal world). The vision of the Absolute is not static so that you can hold on to it. Only when the vision of the Absolute is continuous and contiguous is the merger into the eternal of any use.”

Jan could see that not holding on to specific definitions frees us to merge into the place where everything is connected, whether it's the 'I' or the not-'I'. As all are part of the Absolute, constantly being open to it brings us a new (lightly held) vision of unity.

Bill emphasized the mystery how the 'I' works, and how we look at our world because of it. While we can't hold on to the Absolute with it, our 'I' remains how we relate to the world. He felt the practical level was being emphasized in this niyama: that studying how you respond to the world gives you a better

capability, both with the world and with the study of the larger Self. He had just been listening to Pema Chodron on taking the bodhisattva vow: how you must know yourself thoroughly so you can help other people.

Nitya clarifies the time-honored Indian idea of the Self in his comments on verse 30 of *Atmopadesa Satakam*:

Narayana Guru's suggestion is that we turn our affiliation from the physical body and the social ego to a third possibility, our own pure Self. He begins this verse by reminding us that the pure Self does not speak or even think: *jadamarivilarivinnu cintayilla*, "know that the discursive thought going on in your mind is not your Self." When people like R. D. Laing say self, they are referring to this cogitating, thinking mind. This is what Narayana Guru refers to as the not-Self. Not-Self is recognized in the Western world as self. Buddhists call it *anatman*, that which is not *atman*. (That Alone, 212)

Nitya doesn't want us to get hung up on our physically-oriented, sensory self. In a way, the Self is beyond any conversation we are having with ourself about the Self.

Nancy, citing Nitya's "relativistic conditions continuously change and move," agreed that things are changing every moment, and you are having interactions all around you, all the time. Within the activities, encounters, things you experience physically and mentally, there is a constant that watches everything. The bigger Self is constant in you in spite of the layer of relations that are always going on.

Karen knew what she meant: the witness. "There is a lot of me in there — lots of I's in me, yet only one witness who is watching. The watcher is like the soul, the connection to my higher self. When I get crazy with the little I's, I can always stop and get in touch with that inner self, that witness, and it is the stable part,

where I'm in touch with the vertical self that witnesses everything. You can go to it any time to feel peace and love that those other I's aren't conducting.

Nancy chimed in, "It's the non-thinking part of me, but I can't define it other than experiencing it." Bill expressed it as the one who can watch and not be involved.

Paul heard somewhere if you can see it, touch it or smell it, it's not the Self. He gets that the concept of the greater Self is a reflection of the conditioned small self that he has become: his personality, his identity. Knowing something exists beyond his conditioning allows him to put conditions in the position of servant. Conditions like being bound or feeling inferior make us into less than we are, and they can be displaced by seeing the small self as a prison we have allowed to grow around us.

Charles recalled there are several Upanishadic references where the self, the atman, pervades the body like a razor in its case. It fits snugly right up to the edges, with no gaps left over. It's one way of saying the atman is the central consciousness: the peripheral awareness is inside you, except—he added with a laugh—it's the outside of the inside.

Andy averred we use language when talking about this indescribable event, talking about the absolute 'I' being a witness, but Nitya often spoke about it as a workman working in the workshop, meaning that the self is thoroughly in the relative. At the same time, it *is* a witness. Andy concluded, we can only talk about these things with a maya-like dialogue.

Nancy stated she doesn't think we are anything other than what we do. The experience of life is what goes on with all of the mechanisms that we have. If those mechanisms aren't there, we are out.

Nothing airy-fairy here!

Nonetheless, Jan exulted that it seems endlessly mysterious and beautiful how we are living just naturally, and it leads us back

to the Absolute. It doesn't mean we are always finding the central 'I', because we are living so much of our time in this world, with all the temporal stuff and conditioning we keep coming up against. Yoga is not asking us to reject it, but to embrace our life and go deeper into it. She loved the line, "You have only to know who you are, what you are not, and how you are connected with what you are not." It means we really are connected to our conditionings, and deep within those, yoga leads us back to our absolute Core.

It's so true! Why would we want to work hard to become empty, disconnected people? Why is that the ideal of so many spiritual disciplines? We want to enrich our lives and those around us, to become *more* connected. Our discontent is rooted in our lack of meaningful contact, with the world and with our friends, and most of all, with our self. Reaching for the heavens allows us to come back to earth.

We are the Absolute, and we are not the Absolute. How can these propositions be simultaneously true?

It doesn't seem to Paul that anything can happen solely as the pure Absolute, it needs a mirror to reflect itself in, and that also provides us the ability to observe what we have conditioned ourselves to become. To remember both at same time is the complete version of what we are, showing us how to establish and maintain spiritual and physical equanimity. He finds being connected to what we are not, to be a freeing idea, a way to step back from his conditionings.

Andy has learned that being compassionate with yourself includes admitting the occasional eruption of your phenomenal condition. He wryly talked about Zen Buddhists, how ritualistic their practice is, including being very into chanting. One chant goes, "My endless twisted karma, I now fully avow!" Andy chuckled knowingly, and commented, "It's a really beautiful thing — saying yes to whatever is coming up, good or bad. It takes inner vision to hold it honestly." I'd add we don't need to proclaim it to

others, only to our self.

One of the classic Indian examples of mixing up the Self and the non-Self is found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, and I've added some thoughts about it to lead off Part II. Below that, in the Notes from the Patanjali class in 2011, are several concrete examples of how people relate to different objects of enjoyment: the same source can be most inspiring for some, while in others it causes revulsion, showing that those objects themselves do not contain those qualities, they touch off each person's interpretive framework. It's a good way of learning to be much more open than we are, and to turn the arrow of interest inward.

That's exactly where the witness comes in, said Karen. The witness watches, knowing everything is true love. When we get carried away with our reactions, with talking brains making sense of stuff, the love is lost. We can stay connected to the witness, and feel the love that is generated from that witness place. Karen can tap into it when she gets carried away by all her senses, by what we see and hear in our daily lives, as she put it. She always knows there is that place in her heart she can go.

As I've said before, when we meditate on our most essential sense of self, we discover a state that remains as a stable witness through all the changes that unfold in our outer life. Our horizontal identity oscillates between the extremes of great beauty and stark terror, although most of it is much more bland than those extremes. Our vertical experience cannot be so easily categorized, but is generally described as being filled with ananda. Distinguishing the two aspects of our self isn't too hard. If it changes, it is horizontal; if it naturally stands firm, it may be treated as vertical. Yet the witness does not get hung up on the distinction.

Ultimately, we are the source of joy and realization in our self, so the teaching encourages us to radiate all that we are. The Absolute is both spectacular and elusive. Acting with expertise is a central aspect of yoga. Purity, contentment, self-purification, self-

study, and continuous contemplation on Isvara, are called *observances* because they are high aspirations and rare understandings. Ideals to live within.

Nitya concludes his comments with a nod to the ordinary conception of svadhyaya as book learning, which is valid enough, yet we have already spent two years stretching ourselves out from the ordinary to the effulgent. Seeing the Absolute in the ordinary does not make us ordinary, it makes us spectacular, in ways that may well remain invisible in the world of sensory stimulation.

For the closing meditation I read out from earlier Notes, from 11/11/12:

Self-study and continuous contemplation of the Absolute (the fourth and fifth niyamas) are two sides of one coin. The flow of our unchoked river is to discover who we are and how this universe is constituted. The river itself is the Absolute; it's not that we are going somewhere to link up with it, though that's often how we think of it. We don't have to be scientists unearthing first principles. We can just be ordinary people meeting ordinary circumstances, and discovering the delight of being where we are and perhaps even lightening someone else's load for a moment. We needn't presume that who we are and what the Absolute is are foreign, strange worlds to conquer. They are simply us. Being us and paying attention to our world is spiritual practice at its best. This is the down to earth way I like to take these exotic-sounding suggestions of Patanjali. It is all-inclusive, energizing, dynamic, fun. Absolutely.

I woke up from my Paxlovid-tainted nap today, realizing *A Life is Long, Giving Us Plenty of Time to Make a Few Good Mistakes*. Diving into the Gurukula philosophy with Nitya's help was my best mistake of all.

Part II

I read out some very helpful ideas from previous Bhakti Darsana Class Notes. Narayana Guru quotes Shankara in defining bhakti as continuous contemplation on the Absolute or the Self, the same concept that Patanjali calls his fifth niyama, isvara pranidhana. While the entire Bhakti Darsana is relevant to svadhyaya, these notes are from verse 7:

Verse 7

The wife does not merely worship the husband, nor the husband, the wife. By all, their ananda alone is worshipped, which resides in the sense interests.

9/11/7

Narayana Guru makes reference to the famous saying of the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad (II.4.5) that begins with the Guru Yajnavalkya instructing his wife and disciple Maitreyi “Verily the husband is dear (to the wife) not for the sake of the husband, my dear, but it is for the sake of the Self that the husband is dear. Verily the wife is dear (to the husband) not for the sake of the wife, my dear, but it is for the sake of the Self that the husband is dear.” He goes on repeating the same mantra, substituting children for the parents, wealth, intellect, activity, worlds, gods, beings, and finally, all. He concludes with “The Self (atman), my dear Maitreyi, should verily be realized: should be heard of, reflected on and meditated upon. Atman is that which is heard, reflected on and meditated upon.” This is the essence of an important realization of Vedanta. We associate our feelings of love or veneration with objects surrounding us, but they are merely exterior reflections of

the love and veneration and other qualities of the Self of which we are constituted.

The second half of Darsanamala is a progressive restoration of our innate “be-ness” in the Self as the guiding light of our life, which requires the simultaneous retraction of our accustomed projections onto outer objects such as those listed by Yajnavalkya above.

The Bhakti Darsana has already equated brahman, ananda and atman; the Absolute, joy and the Self. Here the reference is to ananda as accessed via the sensory side of life. We are in territory almost unique to Narayana Guru and a few of the Upanishadic rishis. While the common notion is that all these sources of wonder are elsewhere, detached, beyond, Narayana Guru asserts that they are right here in the midst of everything we see and do. He agrees though that they are not exactly “in” the objects worshipped, but rather that the experience of objects touches us in our core of ananda. The more we enjoy blissful experiences with a proper understanding, the more familiar we will become with the abiding state of eternal happiness that is our very nature, and that is in no way dependent on external events.

Star-crossed lovers are the abiding example of misplaced projection, so it is no wonder they are cited here. It is so Obvious that the other person is the cause of the love we feel. When they are present we are ecstatic, and when they ignore us or are elsewhere we are miserable. If they permanently leave us, we may be inconsolable for a very long time. The very thought that they might abandon us, steals the joy we would otherwise be experiencing. So we have to adopt all sorts of complicated strategies to preserve what we imagine to be the source of our joy. Complaining about our spouse, for instance, is a convoluted way of reaching out for happiness. We should keep in mind the flip side of this Upanishadic wisdom. The Other is not the source of our joy,

but neither is it the source of our anguish. Both are experienced within and projected without. As long as we blame the other for our woes as well as our happiness, we will continue to be “tempest-tossed.” Our study is intended to retract us from our doomed fixation on the surging waves to the unshakable happiness of the depths.

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Portland Gurukula, 3/22/11

The fourth niyama is svadhyaya, self study.

For the first gathering of spring we had half a dozen absences due to illness and travel, but a welcome compensation in the shape of Anita, Cathy and Jean, old hands yet rare attendees who do not suffer from the inhibitions that often bother newcomers.

Nitya relates svadhyaya to the instruction to penetrate deeply into the question “Who am I?” He describes it as a horizontal activity, but Deb pointed out that there is a vertical aspect also. The horizontal examination of our temporary identifications, our wants and needs, and all the things we do, is valuable enough, because mostly we take those I-identifications for granted. As beginners we are sure that we *are* what we do, where we work, what we wear, how we play, what we eat. When we start to meditate on these things, we begin to see that we are much more than just a compilation of horizontal involvements. The additional element is our vertical nature. Just like the letter I, our inner ‘I’ can be represented as a vertical line.

When we meditate on our most essential sense of self, we discover a state that remains as a stable witness through all the changes that unfold in our outer life. Our horizontal identity oscillates between the extremes of great beauty and stark terror, although most of it is much more bland. Our vertical experience

cannot be so easily categorized, but is generally described as being filled with ananda. Distinguishing the two aspects of our self isn't hard. If it changes, it is horizontal; if it naturally stands firm, it is vertical.

There is a widespread and unfortunate belief that we should vacate the 'I', crush the ego and throw it away. No matter how much we honor the ego in our classes, there remains a persistent notion that the ego is bad and needs to be eradicated. Vedanta counsels keeping the ego in balance, neither too strong or too weak. The more you try to crush it the stronger it grows; likewise, the more you pander to it the stronger it grows. It becomes, like Goldilocks' oatmeal, just right, when it is not exaggerated either way. We are trying to straighten out the kinks and heal the wounds in the ego, reduce the swelling, not do away with it. Meditating on 'I' as a core value accomplishes exactly this. When it is healed, our sense of self is no longer bound in a morbid preoccupation with itself, it can expand into its full connectivity with the rest of the universe.

The class shared a number of examples of how this plays out in real life. Jean talked about her brother, who she interviewed forty years ago, as a sixteen-year-old. Recently she remembered the interview, and realized that he had lived his whole life in accord with his youthful vision. She also wondered if her own children would ever attain that kind of conviction. She knows they are trying to figure out who they are, but they lack at least some of whatever her brother is blessed with. While it would be wonderful for everyone to be as confident as Jean's brother, truly knowing who we are is a real challenge and a rare accomplishment.

What this tells us is that most people try to define themselves in terms of the world around them, the horizontal world, and as it continually changes shape, it is impossible to attain stability that way. The old world of steady employment sometimes gave a credible imitation of spiritual samadhi, but the current political

paradigm has smashed all that. Now we can either become wise yogis or confront unending uncertainty served up by the obsession with profits and battles for increasingly scarce resources. “What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36) is the Christian version of the same idea. We must not preen ourselves in the cracked mirror of the world around us, but first know who we truly are, and then “all these things shall be added unto” us. (Matt. 6:33) Much easier said than done, but nonetheless doable.

Brenda related a recent night when she awoke and felt herself dissolving. All of her body was expanding, letting go, floating away. It felt ecstatic, uplifting. After a while she drifted back to sleep. The phone rang early and she answered it definitively, “It was Aunt Jeanne!” Her cousin confirmed that yes, Aunt Jeanne, who was very close to Brenda, died at exactly the time when Brenda was having her amazing sensations.

It seems that many people have some kind of transcendent, connective experience like Brenda’s at some point in their lives. Deb told of a time when she had a similar experience when my mother died, only more involving cherished thoughts than a physical sensation. Jean talked about walking down to her little town and feeling detached from her body, as if it was merely a vehicle for her soul to ride around in. Deb later told us about how thinking of other people as divine beings instead of ordinary ones helped her bring her high blood pressure under control.

Anita related being at her mother’s funeral. The minister said that while he had prepared a reading, he felt compelled to read something different. The “compelled” reading included her mother’s secret name, an obscure one that nobody else knew. Anita had a strong conviction that her mother had commanded the reading to let Anita know that she was still present, for which she has been eternally grateful.

The point of all this is that the answer to who we are is “everything.” At least it is far greater than our limited identification with a body and a personality. After class I was reading a new psychology book, *Psychedelic Healing*, by Neal M. Goldsmith, who said “It is crucially important to remember that personality is a strategy devised by a baby!” It’s true. We revise our personality mask as we grow up, but the original need for it is to accommodate social demands, and it begins in infancy. To really know who we are, we have to jettison all such superficial identifications. Yes, identity is important up to a point, especially for those whose identities are beaten down with hostility. But then to go beyond that to our true identity is even more important. Otherwise, the hostility will have won: it will have forced us to shrink into our limited identity as a person of a certain race, gender, sexual orientation, religion or what have you. We are so much more than any of those! And svadhyaya, self study, is the process by which we discover just how tremendous we actually are.

Nitya concludes his talk by reviewing the standard ideas about svadhyaya, that we are supposed to listen to the words and silences of wise teachers, study their behavior, and read wise words in scriptures. Where sudden big breakthroughs make for exciting stories, Nitya tells us that wisdom comes incrementally, a little bit at a time. It is a long, slow process. Maybe it was those amazing psychedelic pills that made us believe that enlightenment was an instantaneous happening. But the real deal is slow and steady.

The advent of wisdom is not unlike a subduction zone earthquake, where two of the earth’s tectonic plates are sliding one over the other. Their actual movement is glacially slow, but if the plates stick together, the pressure builds up and up, to be finally released in a huge blast. Less devastating shakeups occur if the pressure is released regularly in smaller shocks. The resulting

configuration is the same, but the path leading to it is very different. Detailed self-examination lets off the pressure frequently, while ignoring who we are allows the pressure to build to explosive levels.

Nitya sums up the standard model of svadhyaya:

When what you experience, what you hear from great people, and what is recorded in the scriptures from time immemorial all come in one line, then you can be sure that your svadhyaya has been profitable. Such is the royal path in which you are confirmed that whatever you have been doing as sadhana (practice) is ultimately successful. (259)

The continuity he speaks of is a vertical, I-shaped line, with our individual experience in the middle, written words at the bottom, and the living transmissions of the wise at the top. It's a very beautiful image, and if we are out of line with what the world is telling us, we'd better check up on ourselves pretty quickly. But even if we are well aligned, we still have to be careful. Our own common sense must be located right in the middle of the line, because there are shockingly insane scriptures and other self-ratifying arguments, and plenty of deranged but charismatic demagogues to tout those dangerous assertions. A great many people feel obliged to align themselves with these deadly yet popular belief systems. If we know who we are, however, we won't fall for any of it. We have to be confident in ourselves and dedicated to standing behind who we are, resistive of all the social pressures on us, and then the input from above and below will not grind us down but open us up further.