

2022 Patanjali Class 78

1/9/24

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.)

E – Isvara pranidhana, continuous contemplation on Isvara

As class ended, snow began showering, and this morning we have several inches, with every branch coated. It's glorious! A reminder of winters past, when our hill was full of shouting children sledding and building snowmen. The woods are lovely, dark and deep, and my promise is to wrestle Susan's notes into a readable form. My Tuesday morning Covid test was negative, and I feel top notch for someone this far over the hill.

Deb was back in the driver's seat, and admitted to a state she found herself in many times, where whatever reasoning or argument she makes in support of her position, soon all her self-justifications come up against a wall where they don't work any more. Now she advocates for the necessity of allowing that inner knowledge to simply arise on its own, helping her to understand, and ideally, let down the walls. The various observances we are going through are all based on an openness that is not defined by our rationality. It's more something we are being welcomed into.

Paul wondered if this could be taken as a leap of faith?

Deb agreed it took a leap of faith past her individuated experience, where you give up those smaller explanations and open yourself to something much more profound and vast. You are welcoming what is really there, rather than what you are trying to construct on top of it.

The need to explain oneself in favorable terms comes out of the lamentable tactic where the ego is always defending itself. We

are expert at advocating for what we'd like to be true, in the process drawing a cocoon around ourselves of acceptable configurations that others will buy into. It requires a kind of leap of faith to accept that what we keep upholding in our lives is a built-up imaginary, myopic persona. It gets quite obvious after the leap is taken, and it's very freeing to stop feeling you always have to defend yourself to the world.

Deb related her leap of faith to Nitya's earlier comments on self-study:

“Who am I?” is not a question that can be replied to with an answer that will remain intact throughout one's life. We live in a world of transient names and forms. What we know at this moment disappears in the next.

Nitya also talked about the oscillation of awareness between our subjective consciousness and the objects of interest we are attracted to. Deb is thinking that *isvara pranidhana* means giving up of the oscillation between subject and object, replacing it with an immersion in the ground of everything.

Andy emphasized that cultivating awareness of the back-and-forth movement was important, so you realize it's going on. Deb replied that instead of being caught up in the thunder cloud of rajas and tamas, you realize *this* is what is happening now, *this* is what I'm getting caught up in. It gives you a space. Nitya highlights the Yoga aspect for us:

You are expected to cultivate a transparency of vision that can cut across the illusions created by the nature modalities so that you do not take them for reality. The Yoga aspirant continuously forgoes all the ramifications of what is perceptually presented in the phenomenal world and adheres only to the truth represented by the true spirit, Isvara.

That means you have to keep vigil over the three states of consciousness that cyclically present as waking, dream, and deep sleep, ever seeing Isvara as their ground, known as the fourth (turiya). Usually there is a compulsiveness to validate the objectivized world of the wakeful as a reality “out there.”

We “validate the objectivized world” in prejudicial terms favorable to us, effortlessly shaping it without cognizance of the deception, which is ultimately self-deception. Only when we admit that the conception of what’s “out there” comes from our own angle of vision can we learn to accept our role in coloring the sketch, and move toward a true transparency of vision.

Anita, though unsure of its connection with this niyama, gave us a fine practical example. Lately she’s been wondering if she’s especially attractive to people who are troubled. She has two neighbors with serious issues, who keep reaching out to her. Her daughter advised her to not respond to them, but Anita is a compassionate person, and she very much wants to help. Then she realized that whatever they are experiencing is part of the everything that we all are. She thought, “of course I’m going to feel concerned, because that’s me.” She realized it isn’t *they* who are having problems: no, it’s *we* who are having problems.

I assured Anita that a strong, together person like her is bound to attract desperate people who need help. Early on in my very minimal teaching career there were several people with serious problems who I tried to help. I put in a lot of time and never got anywhere. They needed other kinds of serious assistance. Happily, the Tao has distanced me from that type of situation. We have to understand the limitations of what we can offer, and it’s essential to also care for yourself, to make room for yourself. We don’t have to be completely dismissive, yet we have our own sanity to preserve. In the terms we’re using, you are the subject and

they are the objects, a typical horizontal duality that we try to harmonize.

Andy suggested the wellspring of her compassion is also a vertical thing, the idea that she is feeling for them. In linking to the Absolute, compassion is precious evidence that you are connected.

Deb told her the deep insight she has can be offered, but not to abandon herself in the process.

Anita does know it's important to have self-compassion, to know what she can and can't do for those people.

I pointed out that Western religions especially emphasize self-abnegation in service to others, and it's not part of Indian spirituality, though in modern times it has been influenced by those beliefs. Nitya often insisted that thinking in terms of otherness is inimical to spirituality, and it's important to also have compassion for ourselves.

In the same vein, Susan spoke about being frustrated in recent weeks, with all her holiday activities, by not being able to meditate or write. She's been in what she calls distraction mode. Her therapist reminded Susan of the Winter Garden, which they have talked about before. The garden this time of year looks dead, yet so much is happening under the bleak surface of the ground: fungi growing and creatures moving. Roots spreading. The Earth holding the life essence in trust for the coming of spring. Susan realizes this cycle is unfolding in her too. Though she may not be working on things in her outward life, much is being processed internally. It's good for us to remember this.

Deb gushed that while all the plants are meditating, their life force is still there, biding its time. She wonders why humans don't hibernate, too.

This prompted me to propose another leap of faith: realizing that when you are distracted by other people, you are likely processing *more* on the inner level. We actually may disrupt the inner learning process when we are working on it, unintentionally

shrinking it. If you have faith that your immense brain is processing at its best while you sleep and while you attend to friends and quotidian demands—which has been demonstrated by a number of scientific studies, you won't feel so off-center while taking care of business. It's a kind of faith to know that growth is taking place even when you aren't paying attention to it.

Jan's favorite idea was the spark. After all, she's a fire sign. Nitya writes:

The individuated purusha should be looked upon as a spark of Isvara. That spark undergoes certain transformations, at least superficially, to accommodate whatever the purusha is witnessing because of the three modalities of nature, sattva, rajas, and tamas.

Sometimes Jan feels like that, that you are in the horizontal world and the modalities of nature and something reveals itself, a sense of Isvara expanding and showing itself. A spark.

Paul wanted to know how Isvara is compared with the concept of dharma. He sees Isvara as an all-extensive light of being, of the Absolute, while dharma is a particular structure that every individual being unfolds in itself. It's not a duty but an expression of your innate nature. In that sense, Isvara is a vast light that contains all dharmas.

While dharma has a range of meanings, we in the Gurukula think of it primarily as individual authenticity. There is also a generic level, where all people are constructed the same way, as are all dogs and all trees, and the differences within those dharmas are vanishingly minor to a philosopher: dogs are dogs and trees are trees. Continuous contemplation on the Self implies the more you are in tune with Isvara, the more you are in tune with your dharma. Conversely, when you actively manipulate your dharma, it emphasizes the non-Self aspect of your existence.

Karen asked if Isvara and atman were the same thing? Atman ranges from the individual self to the all-encompassing Self, so at the latter end of the spectrum it is another term for the Absolute. If atman and Isvara (or Brahman) appear together, it's a tipoff that that atman is referencing the individual self. Nitya describes Isvara here as fully unitive, beyond evil, good only in the sense of universally good, not by contrast with evil. We are sparks of That, and sparks come in various sizes, up to a point. Beyond that they are conflagrations.

I figured it was a good time to review a basic concept, and wondered if everyone knew the difference between a sutra and a shastra. We should know this before the end of our study, and there was clearly a need. A sutra is a verse, and shastra means a study—the whole collection of sutras, in this case. We lazily refer to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras all the time, but Nancy Y wishes we would occasionally use the more proper Yoga Shastra. (Look on the front cover of your copy of the book.)

Deb told us that sutra means a thread, and each verse is one thread in the whole stitching together of the tapestry of a study. The main English word derived from sutra is suture. Andy added that a sutra is a literary form that is extremely compressed, very brief. As thin as a thread.

Paul remains perplexed about what we're up to in this Shastra, since Isvara is the point at which our logic, understanding, and past experience inevitably falls short of what we are talking about. Paul doesn't know how far upstream or downstream to go. He imagines if you go all the way upstream, you are nothing but energy vibrations, while downstream is his daily consciousness, and things like grass or his coffee cup. He's convinced there needs to be another step beyond our understanding.

I reassured him that that step is already in us all—it's not foreign to us, yet we are foreign to it. We don't need to go retrieve

it from somewhere else, hoping to bring it to life in ourselves, because it's already here. That's a modest leap of faith that will serve us very well: being confident the All is within us, even though we can't define it or nail it down. Our contemplation of Isvara is continuous, whether we know it or not. Defining and understanding the Absolute shrinks the infinite to a small bubble, while our contemplation allows for that unreduced aspect to also thrive within us, even while we're blowing bubbles.

Waxing poetic, Deb voiced that the original source of the stream Paul is visualizing is the Absolute, and along the course of the stream, various aspects become individuated into fish or frogs or trickles. The oscillation between subject and object is where the Absolute becomes expressed. When the stream pours into the ocean, it becomes absolute again.

Paul acknowledged he has known this since his birth, and he merely has to release what he thinks he knows, because it is holding him back.

Including that conviction.... I told him he could keep all his other ideas, it's just that we can't have the Absolute all to ourselves. It's just there, in everyone and everything. Ideas can both release and hold us back, and we are free to choose.

Anita has just joined a group that is going through a 14 week study of silence. Its premise is often the best gift you can give to others is silence. We look forward to hearing more about it (if that's even possible) as Anita becomes quieter and quieter.

Deb had a last word for Paul, of a time when we were with Nitya over at Bishop's Close, a beautiful Portland garden, in the height of summer. A spectacular flowering cherry tree was in full bloom, a stunning sight. Nitya looking at it, and proclaimed it the transcendence of immanence and the immanence of transcendence. In beauty, immanence and transcendence, the two ends of the stream of consciousness, are joined together.

More Class Notes about continuous contemplation of the Absolute, known as bhakti, made for a lovely closing meditation:

12/5/17

Bhakti Darsana verse 8

Thus the wise man sees everywhere
nothing but the joy of the Self –
not even a little of anything else.
His *bhakti* indeed is the highest.

Narayana Guru simplifies the essence of wisdom to its minimum requirements here: the best contemplative sees nothing but the Self, everywhere. There isn't much you could add to that, so Nitya once again sketches the ways we deviate from such an awareness. His job was to remind us to get back to the essence, over and over, until it happened to happen. His task never ended, as simplicity remains remarkably elusive!

The verse says that the highest form of bhakti is when you see only joy everywhere. The reaction of the typical human to this is, "But... but... but..." It's so hard to accept, because it isn't merely a belief, it has to be a realization. With our habitual divisive thinking we just don't get it. We are attuned to perceive areas of possible joy and vast stretches of joylessness, particularly in chaotic times such as the one we find ourselves in now, and aim for the one and reject the other.

In the hope we will learn a yogic orientation to supplant our inherited transactional expertise of separating everything, Nitya runs us through the basic picture again and again.

Part II

3/29/11

The fifth niyama is isvara pranidhana, continuous contemplation on the Absolute.

A delicious potluck dinner to celebrate the Absolute in several of its endless unique expressions (namely Jean, Cathy, Scotty, Michael, Linda, Debbie, Bill, Susan, Nancy, Jan, Paul, Moni, Brenda and Scott) set a cheerful mood for the gathering. A few regulars and irregulars (Charles, Eugene, Ann, John, and Anita) were absent, but we felt they were with us in spirit, wherever they may have been physically.

Isvara (pronounced EESH-warrah) is Patanjali's term for the Absolute. He reminds us once again to see the connection of all with all, to lift our eyes from the appearance of separateness to its underlying unity. This is of course very familiar territory, but that in no way denigrates the pleasure of revisiting it in the company of friends, and of sharing the insights and resolution it provides. Which was just what we did.

The only caveat necessary to continuous contemplation of the Self (Isvara, Absolute, God) is that the continuous part sounds daunting, because we tend to assume it means we should do nothing else but contemplate the Absolute as a distinctly separate entity. Not at all! We are invited to contemplate our world as the perfect and enjoyable ongoing expression of the Absolute, dealing with it in whatever guise it appears to us. The Absolute is not other than what there is, and we only become strained when we think of it that way. Such a dualistic attitude actually enhances the very schism we are trying to ameliorate.

In practice, contemplation of the Absolute follows a sine wave curve, oscillating between rarified abstractions and solid practicalities. The continuous part is not an eternal struggle to eliminate all distractions to remain at the very top of the curve, but remaining aware of the entire figure as an endless series of expressions of the Absolute's infinite potential. The real effort we

are called upon to make is to resist getting caught in the lowest, most concrete part of the curve, where *tamas* can catch us and freeze us in place. When we find ourselves mired in the thick of some muddle, working to see that this too is the Absolute helps get us unstuck, freeing us to continue along life's path as it unreels beneath our feet. Or better yet, ride the rollercoaster.

Regularly we forget that all this is the Absolute, and take it as what it appears to be. This has its own validity, certainly, because (after subtracting our misapprehensions) everything *is* what it is, but we overreact precisely to the degree that we are sucked into seeing the environment as consisting only of objects. Then we scheme and struggle and manipulate, and get nowhere.

Speaking of paths, Scotty mentioned Joseph Campbell's admonition that when you clearly see your life's path laid out before you, rest assured that it is not your path.

Scotty related the fifth *niyama* to his Aikido practice, where instead of seeing the objects you encounter as separate from you, you bring them into yourself and dance with them. That's a perfect way to put it, because this is all about lightening up, not being so heavy about the comedies and tragedies we move through. Whenever you can, dance, don't crawl! Shake off the death rattle. Seeing the Absolute in everything should bring us great joy and relief, and if it doesn't it is a tip off that we are actually perceiving falsely, tripping on our own projections instead.

Scotty has put this into practice recently by transcending his previous hostile attitude about his father, who he once blamed for being the cause of all his problems. He decided to discard his negative fixation and instead appreciate and love his father for whatever time they had left together. It turns out his dad is pretty cool! There has been a palpable lifting of Scotty's spirits, and their relationship has experienced a true resurrection. It was mainly a matter of letting go of his resentments. Even if all those terrible things we remember are true, we keep them alive by holding onto

them, but they blow away in the wind when we release them. Learning how to let go and fully live in the present is isvara pranidhana at its best.

Susan offered a more modest example, which was just as important in its own way. We can't always make epochal decisions; sometimes the little things are almost as profound. Susan sometimes in the past got upset when her breakfast was disrupted, which it often was with two teenagers and a husband sharing her morning kitchen with her. The other day before anyone else was around she made a delicious bowl of oatmeal for herself, adding lots of fresh nuts from the farmer's market, some maple syrup, everything just as she likes. This time she added one more ingredient: she told herself that it would be okay if she was interrupted, that she would still get to eat her food eventually. Shortly after, her son came downstairs and asked for his breakfast, her husband returned with wet dogs she had to dry off, one thing after another happened to keep her from her own breakfast for a half hour. But because she had prepared herself in advance to accept it, instead of being frustrated and having her resentment and anger build, it was all okay. She stayed serene, and when everyone had been taken care of, she still had her delicious oatmeal waiting for her. This is actually a first rate allegory.

I mentioned that both our girls had had amazing transformative moments in the last twenty-four hours, thousands of miles apart. There is an inexplicable connection between them. As Harmony said, "We are really one person." Here's a dab of what she wrote to us about her revelation:

It literally changed my life and helped cure the depressed mood I've been in since starting work. It made me happy and see the good in everything, it took every negative feeling out of my life, made me think clearly and helped me evaluate what was important to me in my life.... It reminded me how important it is to do things

you love and do things in your life - I could even see the good in my job now - and that there is nothing more important than family and friends. And instead of anger towards people who are mean (like the woman I work with), it helped me feel compassionate and understand that people are only like that because they are unhappy, whether they realize it or not. These insights seem so small, and yet it is so easy to get caught up in negativity these felt like huge realizations for me, or more like "remembering" what it's like to really live, without the added mental "baggage" life can bring.

This from a girl who made a career out of ridiculing her parents' Vedanta studies and our suggestions to her about those very ideas. It proves that wonders never do cease. Harmony's "small insights" are some of the logical corollaries of perceiving the unity within the world.

So the class examples ranged from the most profound to the most seemingly trivial, but any breakthrough in relation to family members is very important, and each one opens the doors to more progress. Once we encounter the Absolute in one place, we can't help but see it everywhere. Continuous contemplation teaches us that the small things are just as valuable as the grand ones.

The recognition that Isvara, the Absolute, is in everything is not just an intellectual understanding, though that's where it usually begins. Gathering together reveals at least one more dimension. We arrive at class as ostensibly separate individuals, coming from every direction, and as we sit together and contemplate the mysteries around us, without any conscious effort we merge together into a harmonious group entity. The inner experience of oneness is responsible for the inexplicable feeling of contentment we take home with us. Regular renewal of that condition helps us to extend it to every aspect of our lives. It's a blissful feeling, and wonderful to solidify into a familiar state. We are yanked out of it now and then by our acquired sense of

separation, but we are gradually becoming able to treat that as the anomaly, and the unified condition as the norm. Aum.