

2022 Patanjali Class 79

1/16/24

Sutra II:33 – When disturbed by confrontation, cultivate the opposites.

Patanjali finally squeezes Yoga into a nutshell! It took us a mere two years to get here.... We've definitely been properly prepared, several times over, just within the Shastra itself, not to mention the rest of our lives. The old notes clearly summarize the seriously focused intent of the sutra:

As we know, continuous contemplation of Isvara doesn't mean that we are always in perfect equipoise. Events throw us off, because we have to react to them. But the non-yogi continues to react, whereas the yogi reestablishes balance as quickly as possible. Cultivating opposites is a dynamic, active process to regain balance, and the more we are familiar with our own equilibrium, the easier it is to regain it. In this, physical balancing is almost identical with mental balancing. When we move through our day we are constantly in different positions, and we intuitively maintain our poise with little effort. We could sit all day in one place, if that was our true nature, but many of us prefer to walk, swim, ski or ride a bike, because it's so much fun to lose our balance and then regain it, over and over. The yogic state that is so exalted in flowery language is actually one we regularly experience as perfectly ordinary or normal.

Nataraja Guru, in his Bhagavad Gita commentary for verse XIII.24, also spells out the gist of yoga:

Yoga implies a certain method of equalization or cancellation of counterparts which we have tried to explain. It is as when

two factors are cancelled one against the other, that we come to something which is unitive. Whether in the world of values that might belong to the field of necessary action or of rational life, or of Self-realization, the unitive value which results from the cancellation of counterparts is the same. Thus it is stated here that some attain to the supreme value of the Absolute Self by cancelling the subjective aspect of the Self against the objective aspect of the same. In other words, as in verse 17, there is an all-inclusive wisdom representing both these aspects. (563)

Andy felt it is important to understand that the sutra doesn't imply squashing down confrontation, either with external factors or internal factors. There is a permissive spirit in applying the opposites: the antidote is to welcome the confrontation—not to crush it, but to work with it.

That's right: the opposites are added to the picture to attain unity, not to incur defeat or stand in monolithic opposition to something inferior, like good against evil. I invited the class to share examples from their lives, and brought a couple from the old Notes, where we really caught the spirit. In preparing for the class, I also found worthy support from the very first study to be supported by daily writeups, the Darsanamala class of 2005-7:

(4/3/6) One key point of the introduction to the third darsana is “It is paradoxical that the mind which brings all kinds of bondage and suffering can also lend itself to be the most efficient weapon to prove, analyze, scrutinize, and lay bare the truth of itself.” (159) We have unburdened ourselves from the commonplace prejudice that to break free of mental conditioning we have only to stand still, like a frightened rabbit, and it will go away. Nor are we interested in self-hypnosis through ritual to produce a semblance of no-mind. We want to really look closely at the process of the mind's

transformations, so that when we dive deep into intuitive states we won't be misled by any egoistic trickery. We know at the start that what appears to be real is just that: appearance. Narayana Guru is going to teach us to see through appearances by recognizing them for what they are, not for what they seem to be or we would like them to be.

Nancy knows that when you are confronted with something that makes you feel irritated or offended, you can take steps to alleviate your feelings, but it's better when there is something more already there so the disruption doesn't cause that feeling in the first place. You don't want to feel any ego response.

I brought in a report on a scientific experiment addressing this very idea, showing how contemplation is at least one of the steps that alleviates negative reactions, supporting the idea that yoga is a conscious attempt to heal by trying to assess the motivating elements below the surface of conflict. This is from Scientific American Mind magazine, the May/June 2010 issue, by Molly Webster, sandwiched between my summations:

Research by Liz Phelps and her team at NYU has shown that contemplation allows the deactivation of unwanted memories. Most therapy adds a benign memory link to a certain stimulus, but the original persists, and it isn't possible to predict which will be activated by the next stimulus. But when subjects contemplated the fear for ten minutes before being given the new stimulus, it opens a window wherein the memories can be erased. Webster describes one experiment:

Using a mild electric shock, Phelps's team taught 65 participants to fear certain colored squares as they appeared on a screen. Normally, to overcome this type of fear, researchers would show participants the feared squares again

without being given a shock, in an effort to create a safe memory of the squares. Phelps's group did that, but in some cases investigators asked subjects to contemplate their fearful memory for at least 10 minutes before they saw the squares again. These participants actually replaced their old fearful memory with a new, safe memory. When they saw the squares again paired with shocks up to a year later, they were slow to relearn their fear of the squares. In contrast, subjects who created a safe memory of the squares without first contemplating their fearful memory for 10 minutes immediately reactivated their older, fearful memory when they saw a square and got a shock.

Obviously, from a survival standpoint, reactivating fearful memories no matter what has happened is a protective strategy. But from a spiritual standpoint, where acting on the basis of fear is the prime impediment, de-energizing the memory association is highly desirable. That contemplation followed by redirecting the mind is an effective technique is actually astounding information. It means we really can control our impulses, that we are not merely hapless pawns in a neurological chessboard, and that the ancient rishis have been right all along.

Bill's first reaction to the sutra was that we need to determine what the opposite of confrontation is, and provide an equal response in the other direction. He was enamored of Nitya's explanation that it is instead understanding the mind of God, the universal mind, giving you a compassionate, egoless understanding of the other person. It's not oppositional at all: "When we are identified with this universal mind, God's mind, the person who is spitting venom or kicking at us is seen only as a patient with a malady."

Nitya himself was a fine example of exactly what we are talking about. Mixed in with all the reverent souls in India are plenty of people who despise spiritual beggars and their greedy gurus, and every so often one would come by to read Nitya the riot act, pointing out how wrong, how selfish and stupid he was. I don't ever recall Nitya feeling or acting defensively. He would be initially generous to the person, readily admitting all his faults or simply smiling in a motherly way. Very often it would quiet the person, and they would move toward a meaningful discussion. I'm sure Nitya was confident that the person was bringing their chronic unhappiness along with them, and it didn't actually come from what he, Nitya, was doing at all.

Nancy well remembers his loving attitude, as in the example in the commentary of the mother taking care of her child. It's the same feeling you can apply to difficult adult situations, truly feeling it's okay, so you don't have to react in a negative or hard way. Nitya writes:

Suppose a mother is watching over her child who has a high fever. If, in his delirium, he speaks evil words and curses his mother, she doesn't react. Her compassion only increases and she gives even greater care to her child to bring him to normalcy. This is how we can change the world by changing ourselves.

I commented on this in a past class:

I understand Nitya's analogy of relating to the other person like a mother to an unruly child, but you'd better not make it visible! It would be seen as patronizing and aggravate the situation immensely. I suppose being a guru he could get away with such a pose. The better outward display for me is of the repentant child resolved to do better next time. That invites the

restoration of the relationship by both disarming the other person and dousing my reactionary inclination toward self-righteousness. (12/3/12)

Paul is convinced that none of the rishis or seers have ever had a sister like his: it's really difficult when you have grown up with somebody who knows how to push all your buttons, and you have a belief about yourself that you have outgrown childish responses only to find you have not. Paul knows he's got more to work on, as his anger comes to a boil whenever they talk, mostly by phone.

Andy told Paul that one of the things that's confronting him is his own reaction, so be gentle with that. It's important to have compassion with your reaction to external provocations.

I encouraged Paul to see how he was already bringing Patanjali's contrary positions to ameliorate his perspective, supplying a variety of thoughtful interpretations. He responded that his sister was like Sri Ramakrishna's hissing cobra that is highly inadvisable to kiss. Her vicious hiss causes him to jump instantly into flight or fight mode. On further examination, he does realize that if the Absolute includes everything, it includes his sister and even Donald Trump, and that he is open to that or a new understanding in his future, and it's enough to quiet his soul.

That kind of understanding is not to be trivialized, even as we freak out yet again. It shows Paul is not diametrically opposed to his sister herself, which would be hostile and forbidding as she is. We are already doing a lot of what is being asked of us here—bringing in light and contemplative awareness. We don't kiss the hissing snake, but instead of fearing and hating it, we can stand a safe distance away and know it hisses because it is afraid and defending itself, and the behavior is essential to the snake's survival. The snake is naturally that way, so leaving it alone is a

preeminent option. There is always more to consider when we want to maintain a friendship, and that's our continuing education.

The class spent some time musing on what the underground issues could be between them, such as hangovers from childhood, with jealousy, humiliation and disappointment built in. Paul complained that his sister plays a zero-sum game, that needs a winner and loser, and he does not. Yet he has often recalled the Indian wrestling game they used to play, where he figured out how to win against his much older sister, and I'm betting that game is still being fought out in their inner being. It might even be an entrée for them to talk about some of those unresolved anxieties, and forgive each other, and that would make for less hissing. I wondered, too, if the sister might have resented Paul's intelligence, and it's certain that after having her parent's full love and care for seven years before Paul came along and took it away—100% unintentionally, by the way—she could still be holding an unconscious grudge. So we need to probe the motives behind the surface play, and looking at contrary propositions is a key yogic technique. There are some things we can heal, and many things we don't need to take umbrage over.

Jan has been cultivating opposites with her sibling issues also, and agreed the acceptance of others' self-interest is a challenge. Optimistically, she sees it as another way to get to a place of transformation. When her ego is upset, she looks at how to accept the situation and come to peace with it, and it leads her back to compassion and neutrality.

I asked her if the acceptance meant she was able to come to a compassionate understanding, or if it was simple resignation, like avoiding the cobra, the less dynamic alternative. She replied, instead of feeding your thoughts that someone's position is bad, which is a reactionary attitude, she can let go of that and accept the other person without her ego getting in the way.

For Bill this was like the child ranting in fever, and as Nitya says, it is how we change the world. There is real skill and practice involved in being able to be in a confrontational situation and still being able to wish them good will. You disagree, yet you wish them well.

Jan agreed that our judgments and attitudes feed the ego, so being aware of that inner dialogue is helpful to accomplish what we are trying to here: cultivate the opposite.

The opposite of hanging on tightly to our position is to accept and be open. In that sense, listening closely is the opposite of fighting for our side. Listening runs contrary to ego thrusts. It may turn out that the other person is saying something different than we thought when we were busy preparing our next rejoinder and not really paying attention.

These are the premises. For specific examples, proceed to Part II. I read out Brenda's for our closing meditation.

## **Part II**

12/3/12, for Nancy Y's class—

Possibly yesterday's confrontation was generated just so I'd have material for this week's response. Gee, thanks, Universe!

I'll have to describe this in a general way. Hmmm. A dear friend who I've been spending a lot of time with got really mad at me for not spending enough time with them. There was a cluster of harsh accusations. Details aren't important. Suffice to say it was a surprise and shock, and reactivated a number of very painful memories. My normal reaction is to both push the other person away (psychologically) and feel very sad and hurt that all my honorable efforts at loving friendship seem to have had no effect.

I do know this person gets SAD (seasonal affective disorder) this time of year, and so feels pretty depressed at times, and I



suspect that was a factor. I took that into account, and also countered the accusations in my mind with some memories of recent times spent together. Fortunately, the past week has been particularly rich in sharing. The main thing was that I didn't identify with my feelings and get into opposition. Because of that I was able to fairly quickly ease the pain and treat the situation dispassionately. It made it much easier to diffuse the bad feelings and return to what passes for normal in my life.

Cultivating the opposites means instead of flying off the handle, I observed my reactions and countered them with an ameliorating idea. Instead of treating the attack as unfair and hostile, I realized it was a symptom of a sense of loneliness that was probably independent of my friend's actual circumstances, and I had subjective "proof" in our recent happy times together. Instead of feeling hurt, I observed my pain and thought about its historical background, and saw how that was adding some negative feelings into the mix. As a younger person, I was an expert at amplifying my pain and drawing it out, for weeks sometimes. It is a great relief to be able to heal a wound in only an hour or two, thanks to yoga.

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4/5/11

Sutra II:33

When disturbed by confrontation, cultivate the opposites.

There are days in high summer when you can hear the corn grow, and almost see it zoom up toward the sun. Life bursts forth in rampant exuberance. Last night's class was an indoor analogue, where our hard labors of psychologically tilling the soil, pulling weeds, and fertilizing and watering have produced strong, healthy plants, primed to grow with all due speed.

Gentle teasing combined with intent listening made for a happy atmosphere, where the teaching could instantaneously be put into practice. Amicably we prodded each other to cultivate the opposites and much was accomplished on the spot. The class was one of the rare ones where the group's potential was optimized. To even have such a session is an impressive achievement.

Nitya's very moving commentary focused primarily on opposition from outside, though there are plenty of hints as to how to apply the principles of yoga within the mind as well. It has been made clear by now that these are not really two separate categories. Our inner attitudes and changes both mirror and impel outer situations, and vice versa.

Several people pointed out that we most definitely grow through conflict, and so we should welcome challenges rather than flee them, as our ego would usually prefer to do. As Nitya says, "Our personalities unfold in our life situations." Our task is to resolve the conflict or cure the ailment, and then prepare ourselves for the next one, rather than find a means of avoidance. Good stories and fine music, among other art forms, depend on some kind of tension in which the suspense is maintained and only resolved after much drama. Like art, life without conflict or tension tends to be insipid and boring. But we don't have to go out of our way to create conflict: there's plenty enough around already. All we have to do is pay attention.

Nitya tells us how to make this real in our lives:

Krishna asked Arjuna to be of his mind—not the social mind of an individual in confrontation—but the mind of all. In that, friends and foes are all merged into the one fantasy of a universal dream. There is no anger or attachment there. When we are identified with this universal mind, God’s mind, the person who is spitting venom or kicking at us is seen only as a patient with a malady. (264)

He continues:

Suppose a mother is watching over her child who has a high fever. If, in his delirium, he speaks evil words and curses his mother, she doesn't react. Her compassion only increases and she gives even greater care to her child to bring him to normalcy. This is how we can change the world by changing ourselves. You change yourself by establishing yourself in a spiritual position and becoming equipped with God’s vision. The yogi who is ever engaged in isvara pranidhana (contemplating the Absolute) has no other identity and thus transforms himself to transform the world.

As we know, continuous contemplation of Isvara doesn’t mean that we are always in perfect equipoise. Events throw us off, because we have to react to them. But the non-yogi continues to react, whereas the yogi reestablishes balance as quickly as possible. Cultivating opposites is a dynamic, active process to regain balance, and the more we are familiar with our own equilibrium, the easier it is to regain it. In this, physical balancing is almost identical with mental balancing. When we move through our day we are constantly in different positions, and we intuitively maintain our poise with little effort. We could sit all day in one place, if that was our true nature, but many of us prefer to walk,

swim, ski or ride a bike, because it's so much fun to lose our balance and then regain it, over and over. The yogic state that is so exalted in flowery language is actually one we regularly experience as perfectly ordinary or normal.

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The “supreme value of the Absolute” thus includes our state of mind when we are awake but poised.

Paul said that we use templates in our relations with other people, and those templates are the cause of conflicts, because each person's is tailored to their limited understanding. People thrust their template onto friends and family, while the other person parries with their template, and there is inevitably a clash. Paul is experimenting with setting aside his template, allowing the other person to be just as they like, and permitting many new possibilities to arise. In using this approach with his kids, he sees that it has encouraged their independence and mature decision making.

Scotty countered that you can err both ways, by being too rigid or too lenient, and kids especially need guidance. Again, this

is a balancing act where getting it just right is a dance, a high art form.

Bill added that the word translated as ‘cultivate’ also means to ponder. We should ponder the opposites. Without pondering we miss so much.

We practiced opposition all through the class. There was a lot of contrarianism, presenting the opposite idea to what someone had just said, but it was done in a loving, supportive way, so no one took offense. Instead we laughed. Here was where you could sense the crackle of growth, with everyone feeling confident that there were no hidden knives being flexed. More like hidden hugs.

We also opposed the widespread tendency to begin a statement with an apology or some other self-denigrating remark. A yogi should catch themselves thinking those things and cancel them out in advance. We often hear, “This is probably stupid, but...” “I know this is a dumb question, but...” “I don’t know if this has anything to do with what we are talking about, but...” Let it be stipulated once and for all that no honest question is stupid, and everything is related to what we are talking about, even if the connection isn’t obvious. So relax and be confident, please!

I am asking for all you experienced yogis to write or bring to class one or more stories of how you have practiced the equalization or cultivation of opposites in your life. We want to share as many real-life examples as we can, because this is one of the most essential secrets of the whole study. Please, take some time to recall a teaching story to share with us. Everyone who has come this far in the Patanjali study must have several good ones at least. We have already printed a number in the past, inspiring examples of triumphs in compassion and conflict resolution.

Not waiting for next week but wading right in, Deb offered an account of how she once failed utterly to cultivate a healthy opposition, and missed a series of golden opportunities to improve a difficult situation. It happened nearly forty years ago, so

hopefully she will have a success story for the upcoming classes, because she has learned a fair amount in the interim.... She was a new teacher in a new school outside Denver, Colorado, teaming with another woman in the third grade. 1973 was a high point of the laissez faire teaching style: give kids free rein and see where they go. A total lack of materials in the new school abetted the theory. The other teacher, however, was of the older, very rigid persuasion, where you made kids sit still and be quiet, line up in straight rows to go anywhere, and bribed them to do what you couldn't outright force them to do. Deb was so stunned that she completely shut out the other teacher, and had nothing to do with her. All those third graders have probably become great yogis, because they had the most polarized education imaginable, half the time running wild and the other half in a straitjacket. Deb could not even remember the other teacher's name, or what she looked like, or if she ever even spoke to her. Now she suspects that if she had transcended her shock and hostility and actually communicated with her, they probably would have come to a healthier compromise where each mitigated their extreme positions, and everyone would have been better off.

Happily, Brenda had a success story to end with. Yogically cultivating opposites will almost always bring a happy, or at least improved, outcome. She was at an athletic club and ran into a neighbor she recognized. After her pilates class, as she was heading for the door, the woman came angrily toward her, pointing her finger and saying "I know you! I know you! You lived with the woman who stole my husband!" Brenda confessed that, with her fundamentalist upbringing, in the past she would have felt a stab of pain and guilt, hung her head, and allowed the woman to harangue her. But this is the yogi Brenda now. She stood her ground and the shame and guilt didn't surface at all. Boldly she stood in opposition to the unjust attack and replied, "No, you don't know me. You don't know me at all." The woman stopped in surprise, and they

began to talk about the event in question, which had happened fifteen years before, and which Brenda was a casual witness of. All those years the woman had blamed her and held a serious grudge about it. Brenda's strong stand finally allowed the true story to come out, and permitted the woman to relinquish her hostility. They became friends right there and then, and as they live a block apart now, they see each other occasionally, and hugs have replaced resentment. If Brenda had shot back an angry reply instead, or seized up in shock, the pain would have continued. Instead a wound was healed. So cultivating the opposites is not the same as simply opposing, it is a way to resolve opposition. Brenda had put into practice what Nitya describes here in this way:

If you put yourself in the position of Isvara and look at things with a neutral mind and no vested interest, you will perceive them from a catholic, altruistic, and compassionate ground. As you then have no ego, your counterpart can also loosen their grip on the ego. This is just like disarming a rival. The Zen Buddhists call this “listening to the clap of one hand.”

You don't have to have been raised fundamentalist to have damaged responses to conflict. I was raised agnostic, for which I'm eternally grateful, but I was similarly inculcated with the idea that if someone accused me or was angry about something, it was my fault. Like any fundamentalist child, I was a born sinner. I learned to take responsibility for everything bad that happened in my vicinity, which was incredibly damaging. Kids have a much more nuanced sense of justice than that, and that kind of blanket condemnation teaches them to be devious and defensive in the face of injustice instead of becoming fearless champions of the truth. Yes, we should take responsibility if we are in fact the perpetrator, but we should also know that people carry their own miseries and blindnesses, and their past burdens are the most likely cause of any

psychic indigestion they have. Thanks to an amazing bouquet of guru, wife and friends, I got over that particular toxic part of my upbringing in only about forty years. By upholding positive values of respect and justice, and cultivating opposites as they appear, we can help ourselves and others make a much more rapid transition.