

2022 Patanjali Class

2/22/22

8 – Yoga Letter Seven

A once-a-century barrel of twos in the date, not to mention being Twos-day, set the tone for a two-rific get two-gether two-night. Well, okay, it was last night already, but at the time it *was* two-night.

Two get to the point, I read out a pithy quote from Nitya that succinctly sums up the crux of Letter Seven:

Yoga is the union of ends and means, the cancellation of opposites, [like] expectation and fulfillment. Tension and release cancel out into a neutral silence, and ambivalence is resolved. (Gayatri mantra meditation, Hawaii, 1978)

Deb felt the Letter was pregnant with meaning and silence, and it brought up two images for her. A fellow teacher in Denver once told how her father and another rancher would often stand out on the range leaning on a fence, not talking, just standing there staring into the distance. They could abide in silence easily for half an hour. The woman lamented how none of us younger folk ever do that. It stayed with Deb her whole life, that image of not doing, simply being there, ever present. On the range. Her story reminded Anita how her dad could stand like that, alone in his garden, and sometimes she'd be out with him and they would share long silences. The garden was one of his favorite places to be, and she cherished those times with him.

Deb's second image came from Nitya's thought experiment:

If you put on a piece of paper ten rows of dots lengthwise and breadthwise to form a square, this will give you a pattern that has the magical power of altering your vision. You can see in it

several squares made up of vertically and horizontally arranged dots, or you can see diagonal patterns. Any one way of looking at it automatically blinds you from seeing the other way.

There's a lot about this in Part II, but the gist is we get completely distracted from the unifying ground they appear on by the arrangement of the dots. We mentally fashion a variety of images out of the dots, and we become fixated, albeit briefly, on the images we have made. We fixate on real life dots much longer. Deb cautioned us how easy it is to get caught in those little boxes of partiality, yet this awareness is fertile territory for expanding our range of vision out of its narrow confines.

I cited a clever bit from the old Notes, reprinted here in Part II also:

Scotty had just heard a similar analogy given in a recorded talk by Chogyam Trungpa. He drew a V on a large sheet of paper and asked those assembled what it was. First they said it was a V. Then some realized it could be a flying bird. Chogyam Trungpa then told them no, it was a bird flying in the sky.

The blank paper, or the sky, stands for what Nitya calls here the universal substratum, which is the part we seldom notice, yet without which nothing is possible. We need to learn to include it.

In getting ready for the class, Anita actually put a field of dots on a piece of paper, and scrutinized it. It reminded her of similar puzzles, and how they can make you see things differently. She recalled a real-life example, from some years ago, when she was down at the beach by herself. She sat up against the sand dunes and as she looked out over the scene of the ocean waves and the strolling people with their dogs, it fragmented into a jigsaw puzzle or kaleidoscope, where everything fit together but

clearly was an assemblage. It was surreal the way everything was still there, but it was no longer her everyday reality.

Our brains work hard to present the world to us as a familiar, coherent pattern, and if you allow it to relax, your interpretation of reality can soften, like Anita's did at the beach. It's nice to give all that effort a vacation occasionally, and beaches are an excellent choice. We don't have to rigidly hold onto our opinions all the time. Nitya writes:

In this peaceful watching, inferential thinking and all argumentative reasoning can be laid to rest for a while. There is no need to worry about how you can sink into the depth of your being without making positive attempts to attain your release.... It is not projective. Its function is analogically equivalent to the reemergence of the individual existence, which loses its identity in universal existence

The original has 'reemergence', which is an easy error to make, and you may encounter it elsewhere. Nitya often spoke of reemergence, of reemerging in the totality, like the drop diffusing in the ocean. Curiously, the meaning is exactly the opposite from *reemergence*. I've probably read this sentence twenty times over the years, not quite noticing but having a vague sense of something being slightly off. Because of our class on noticing, I consciously noticed this instance for the first time, despite encountering this problem already, several times.

Deb likened the pattern recognition to paintings like Pierre Bonnard's, where up close all you see is splashes of color, but as you get farther away the paintings cohere into very realistic images. The technique allows us to notice how our brains assemble sensory input into meaningful, identifiable pictures, often even more beautiful than realistically detailed ones.

Andy told us about a book his dad wrote, called *Design: The*

*Search for Unity*, addressing topics like gestalt psychology and how people are hard wired to visually group visual patterns. His dad used a field of hexagons to demonstrate the same brainwork, with his students seeing lines of the hexagons going in one direction, and then they flip and go in a different direction, then change into flowers. It's compulsive, you see these things because you want to make sense of the visual environment, and people tend to understand the visual aspect through grouping principles. Since it's part of your perceptual wiring, unless you are aware of it, you are forced to see things a certain way. It's an internal mechanism that wants that, that goes looking to be satisfied by it.

It's worth reprising some bits from *7 1/2 Lessons About the Brain*, by Lisa Feldman Barrett, because it's most helpful to be aware of the fact we are co-creating the world we perceive—it's not a monolithic, pre-existing, exterior entity:

How does your brain decipher the sense data so it knows how to proceed? If it used only the ambiguous information that is immediately present, then you'd be swimming in a sea of uncertainty, flailing around until you figured out the best response. Luckily, your brain has an additional source of information at its disposal: memory.... In the blink of an eye, your brain reconstructs bits and pieces of past experience as your neurons pass electrochemical information back and forth in an ever-shifting, complex network. Your brain assembles these bits into memories to infer the meaning of the sense data and guess what to do about it. (66-7)

This whole constructive process happens *predictively*. Scientists are now fairly certain that your brain actually begins to sense the moment-to-moment changes in the world around you *before* those light waves, chemicals, and other sense data hit your brain. The same is true for moment-to-moment

changes in your body—your brain begins to sense them before the relevant data arrives from your organs, hormones, and various bodily systems. (72)

Predictions transform flashes of light into the objects you see. They turn changes in air pressure into recognizable sounds, and traces of chemicals into smells and tastes. (72)

If your brain has predicted well, then your neurons are *already firing* in a pattern that matches the incoming sense data. That means this sense data itself has no further use beyond confirming your brain's predictions. What you see, hear, smell, and taste in the world and feel in your body in that moment are *completely constructed in your head*. By prediction, your brain has efficiently prepared you to act. (75)

If we had minds, they would be blown by this information....

It might seem that we should lose faith in our senses because of this, but no, they are still essential to the whole business. What we need to realize is personal preferences are part of what we see, which is warped with our prejudices and limitations. As Barrett describes, an incredibly complex, expert process is continually underway in the brain. Still, the brain works from memory, and another part of the question is how do we ever incorporate new knowledge, because the brain views the new in terms of what it has already put together. This is where being conscious of the process and learning how to turn it off—or turn it down, since it never goes completely off—is the key to creative engagement. The philosophy is, after all, not about erasing your life, it's about enhancing it. Nitya, who I'm sure would have been ecstatic about the new neurological findings, hints at this conundrum in his first paragraph:

One of the greatest paradoxes that confronts us at every moment is the forgetfulness of the whole with the recall of the part. Partial memory is a snare that can only produce the dual states of pain and pleasure. This seeming recognition of any particular experience is to be understood as a veil woven out of the threads of time and space.

Bill, speaking of these veiling principles, alerted us that Patanjali will be teaching us about the elements that cloud our perception and keep us from getting to a quiet place where we can experience the substratum. It's about learning to see how we are influenced by our veils.

Nancy understands that yoga is about witnessing the veiling, but not engaging with it. Since the veiling is going on all the time, the more you pay attention to it, the push and pull of it, the more you can keep going deeper into your understanding. We are always trying to put things in certain categories, maintain a certain order, and once you realize that's going on behind the scenes, you don't take it so seriously.

Deb added that we are projecting out and seeing those projections coming back at us, and as a balance, we should remerge to the extent we can in the universal, in order to understand how we are manipulating. Only then can we be in situations without doing that. Just the other day, Susan and she were talking about how you can stand back from projection and activity, and if you can rest in that ground, you can see more clearly, less impeded by your projections.

Pratibha said the awareness of time and space is different for each person, although the substratum is the same. She noted that Nitya mentions kinetics and inertia, rajas and tamas, as the dynamics of action, but wondered where sattva fit in to his scheme. Here's the paragraph:

You can also see the mystery of a veiling principle that is even more transparent than a transparency. Here the quality of observation is very subtle. No one can tell you how to discern for yourself the obscuring principle of inertia and the projective principle of kinetics. But on the strength of the above analogy, by repeatedly witnessing the veiling and projecting complementarity operating in a given situation, you can enter into deeper and deeper realms, which are always there as a substratum of all forms of consciousness.

Sattva is the transparent veil, which requires very subtle observation to detect. One has to detach from manifest nature, which consists of all three gunas, to be able to go deeper into the substratum, into the unmanifest. This is, of course, widely misunderstood. The Gita begins its defining of yoga with breaking free of the bondage of nature. Krishna tells Arjuna, in II.45:

The Vedas treat of matters related to the three gunas; you should be free from these three modalities, Arjuna, free from (relative) pairs of opposites, established ever in pure being, without alternately acquiring and enjoying, (unitively) Self-possessed.

Krishna comes back to the subject in VII.14:

Verily this divine illusion of Mine, made up of the manifestations of value (gunas), is hard to surmount. Those who seek Me alone pass over this illusion.

Deb summed up that this is a meditation where we don't deal with the surface play of the mind, and all argumentative reasoning can be laid to rest.

Paul talked about the importance of his realizing he has an "addiction" to the five senses. They may well have allowed him to

survive, but he also wants to investigate things the five senses cannot perceive. He has realized that what he chooses to look at justifies his own insanities, his conditionings. Judging by history, Paul figures pretty much everything we think is true now will be proved false, so he's looking forward to attaining a substratum that supports his self-worth, by not simply clinging to his memory banks.

The idea of meditating and stilling the mind is a paradoxical issue, and it's not helpful if we're always in doubt about our own value because of it. Once we accept that we are supplying some part of our own reality, that's where we can do the work. The most essential part of the work is to convert from a negative and oppositional mentality encouraged by the environment to a unified and loving attitude, even toward oneself, emanating from the heart. We can't stop having sensory experiences, but we can be aware they aren't showing us exactly what's going on.

I can't help adding another classic quote from the Master:

But then there are certain impossible situations. When you think of the Divine, you think it is peaceful, beautiful, generous, glorious. Then you see this sham, the stupid things of life, something very cruel, very nasty. How do you relate that? So, religious people have drawn a line and they say, this side is divine, and the other side is satanic. In the next chapter we will see that this idea is totally abolished by the Gita. If you make a dichotomy of the Absolute into God and Satan, then the Absolute is not absolute. Darkness and light – both are to be given a place in your total vision. We'll come to that slowly as we proceed. (Gita video X, intro)

The brief quote I added at the outset, about unifying expectations and fulfillments is also a key feature. Until recently I have taken it only in a broad sense: we have fistfuls of long-term goals and work to achieve them, and then we get a sense of fulfillment. Yoga recommends we don't rely on that type of fulfillment, because it can easily fail—there is a more direct one available in our own core. Regardless, I now realize we also do this dance on a micro level. Our brain is anticipating what is going to happen, and we feel fulfilled from moment to moment when what we expect actually happens, most of it below the surface of awareness. That means we twist fate to fit our preconceptions, often violently. Taking this on is even more of a challenge than the longer versions, but it is surely related to our ongoing state of mind. I suspect we routinely resist the wise choices of our unconscious mind, so it ups the pressure to do what it wants. In a loving, compassionate context, this is safe and excusable. In a fearful, pressured situation, not so much. Being aware we are prejudiced in our own favor and working to balance that can steady the mind and lower the anxiety.

This clicked with Anita, who admitted when you get to a certain age you realize you only know an image of yourself. You've lost yourself in your self-image. She, like many of us, has had a tendency to look for the worst in her day-to-day, moment-to-moment experiences. In the long run, it's a protective posture. She has learned to reexamine her immediate reactions, especially when she has a negative take. At first she felt embarrassed or ashamed of herself, wondering why she thought such negative thoughts that were not true to what was happening. She fumed, how has that developed in my personality? Yet since she's finally aware of it, and consequently upgrading her responses to be more generous to others, on the occasions when she succeeds, she thinks how lovely, that's what life can be like! It feels great.

This is eminently practical yoga in action: the balancing of opposites. When you have negative feelings about someone, you add in a countervailing opinion, and often you feel better right away. It's a basic yoga technique, and it should also be applied to our positive feelings, only it isn't so critical. As long as you cling to reactivity, you don't get to the unlimited realms, and we live in a world where the entire economy seems to be based on provoking reactions and tabulating them. You can practice this yoga in simple situations as well as fraught ones. For instance, I used to get upset when a furious driver roared up behind me, tailgating, and then lurched around me and sped off like a rocket. Or like a bat out of hell, as my mother would say. This happens a lot these days, in our highly-agitated country. Now I tell myself they are having a baby or other emergency, and trying to get to the hospital before it's too late, and then I can quickly let it go. Hey, it might be true, and there's no way for me to know. If I cling to the upset, that possible madman has scored a victory over my peace of mind.

Nitya says: "This is a meditation in which the meditator does not meddle with the seemingly ludicrous game that is going on as a surface play of the mind." Ludicrous is right!

Jan feels the truth of this in Gayathri's meditation group, how before it starts, you are full of ideas and conflicts, and after half an hour you are balanced and able to let go of so much.

That morning's session was a nice guided meditation, where you think of a difficult situation or relationship, and then imagine some friend or a wise being coming to your door. You greet them and let them in, where they become part of you, and then you observe how they deal with the situation. The other being is really part of you that you are meeting up with, so Jan has found it's a beautiful way of accessing more of that unmodulated part of the universal.

Susan reported an epiphany that felt related to the class. She always wanted to know her children, to be sure of what they are thinking and feeling. She's known them all their lives, of course,

and they're now in their twenties, so it makes sense that she would know a lot about them. But she has been very focused on knowing all about them and thinking that she knows them well. She recognizes this is somewhat driven by fear, because she doesn't want anything bad to happen to them. She figures if she knows them and can advise them, she can help them avoid tragedies.

She supposes it's obvious that this isn't about knowing that they like rhubarb pie or their first word was ball. That stuff is kind of important in the way they have shared their lives: filled with memories of precious times together. But the constant effort to dive into her children's narratives and minds and analyze, make assumptions, find issues, is so much work!

Connecting it to Letter Seven, when she's thinking she knows her kids from the inside out — their every thought and experience — that is her being very much confined within the grid of dots. When she allows that she cannot be in their minds and cannot be very much aware of them, she expands into the substratum, where she is actually more connected to all.

Susan has just come to realize she doesn't really know her children's experiences or how they feel, and that's okay. It felt really good to realize this, and to realize that her own mother didn't know her experience either. In a way she has known that for a long time, but looking at it in this way helped her forgive her mother more. Thanks to her epiphany she's less anxious about her family now. Knowing you don't know can be a much better way of life than thinking you can know everything.

For the closing meditation, Bill called our attention to Nitya's poetic conclusion:

Modulated consciousness becomes unmodulated. The quest for happiness becomes irrelevant to one who has crossed over the dual states of pain and pleasure. The yogis refer to this with poetic imagery such as the fragrance in the wind that attracts

bees to flowers and the cloud of virtues that conducts a yogi's mind to its primeval state of aloneness.... This is a meditation in which the aspirant is not required to do anything other than witnessing and being intensively vigilant.

## Part II

The old Notes demonstrate how different a class can be on the same topic. From 7/15/8:

A perfect, tight presentation by the Guru led to a beautiful evening of togetherness, washed by a scintillating sunset and blessed with the presence of a distinguished visitor, Jean from Sweden.

Bill reminded us several times that the gist of the Letter is expressed in the first sentence: "One of the greatest paradoxes that confronts us at every moment is the forgetfulness of the whole with the recall of the part." Nitya illustrates this with the analogy of a ten by ten grid of dots on a page. As we look at this mandala, sometimes we see squares of various sizes, sometimes we see horizontal or vertical lines, sometimes diagonal lines, and occasionally we can "see through" the grid to take note of the paper ground on which they appear. No matter how we mentally group the dots, when we focus on them the ground goes out of awareness. The converse is not so true: we can remain cognizant of the dots when we look at the paper, and even attain a more generalized, global perception of them.

Scotty had just heard a similar analogy given in a recorded talk by Chogyam Trungpa. He drew a V on a large sheet of paper and asked those assembled what it was. First they said it was a V. Then some realized it could be a flying bird. Chogyam Trungpa then told them no, it was a bird flying in the sky.

The grid analogy, of course, is that each dot stands for a concept or an object or a gestalt. As we “mature” we tend to choose a configuration of such dots that we identify with, that we feel best represents us. If we are able to substitute a preferred set of dots for the one bequeathed us by fate, we may become satisfied that we have accomplished a “spiritual” transformation, and call it good. All religions, sciences and philosophies have their signature patterns of dots that distinguish them from their rivals, which is fine as far as it goes. The problems arise when we insist that one pattern is the right interpretation of the whole, and downgrade the others.

From the perspective of this analogy it is easy to see that no amount or permutation of dots can ever adequately indicate the paper they are printed on, which stands for the Absolute. The immanent and the transcendent are intrinsically and inexplicably different. However, it is a nearly universal pretense that our favorite configuration is the most accurate model, and anyone who doesn't accept it is deluded or foolish. A yogi has to acknowledge that both the whole and all the parts are essential to a holistic vision. This isn't a game where we discard the parts and disappear into the whole. One tricky paradoxical fact is that this would be partial in its own way. We have to integrate every aspect, to live as an expert in the here and now while simultaneously floating on the bliss of eternity.

People who think of themselves as spiritual may well have as many fixed notions as other people. To be a guru you should look a certain way, talk a certain way, act a certain way. This is what Nitya dismisses here as inferential thinking: she looks like a Divine Mother, so she must be one. At this stage of our yoga preparation, we are actively dismantling all such misconceptions, while assuring ourselves we have plenty to work with. To do this we must actively remember the sky in which the birds are flying.

Rivalry and partisanship automatically polarize us into a tight configuration of conceptual dots, which is a prison of our own making. Instead, we are called to peacefully watch the endlessly beautiful and tragic play of the dots, laying aside all inferential thinking and argumentative reasoning. We are “not required to do anything other than witnessing and being intensively vigilant.” Scotty thought this last was contradictory, and it does bear some elaboration.

Most of us do not spend our entire lives at peace in ease. Certain of the dots command our attention and it is as though they have grabbed us by the lapels and pulled us out of our seat. We “rise to the occasion.” These are precisely the moments when we need to examine ourselves to see if the call is legitimate or not. Are we responding to outmoded vasanas that hold us under a spell of enchantment? Or is this an opportunity to express our dharma in a felicitous and beneficial manner? If our vigilance is slipshod, we will go along with what arrests our attention more or less unconsciously, crafting a plausible excuse after the fact for what we are doing. And while all roads may lead to enlightenment, the yogi seeks to bring as much awareness as possible to the journey, playing up the good parts and zipping past the traps and sidetracks. There is definitely an element of intelligent willing involved in such an endeavor.

One configuration that is the darling of the modern mind is our self-identity. We have learned to identify with our family, locale, sub-species, country, gang, political party, sex preference, general tenor of opinion, and so on, to the extent of becoming enraged and belligerent when these identities are challenged. Identities serve a valid purpose for the youthful mind, and are important to healthy growth up to a point, but the problem is that they obscure the Absolute ground and become a poor substitute for it. Lots of mental gymnastics are required to maintain the pretence that our identity matches the optimal configuration, (or really that

which transcends configurations), and once we start to manage the process we can be carried far afield by our wishful thinking. Anyone exposing the imposture may be nailed to a cross or otherwise eradicated.

Identity is an important issue among gays and lesbians, for example. It is certainly necessary to acknowledge who you are and contrast that with the reality of the hostile forces in society. Would that we lived in a world where society was all knowing and all caring! But people need to protect themselves, and not by the old way of pretending to be someone they aren't. That said, if you come to be satisfied that all you are is gay, then the Absolute ground—that which gives meaningful relationships to all the parts—remains hidden, and many of your potentials will lie dormant. This engenders a pervasive sense of isolation, no pun intended. Whether this is the common lot of mankind or not, spiritual inquiry seeks to ameliorate its pain through global awareness and understanding, not through us-against-them strategies.

Identity is also important to minority members of the human race, who of course are only minorities in certain places and not in others. Again, the ideal would be for everyone to be equal, with liberty and justice for all, just as we are supposedly created. But the actual situation is far more cruel. It isn't safe for a dark-skinned person to exercise even nominal freedom in public in many parts of the world. They must live behind a veil as far as the society is concerned. No matter how spiritually enlightened such a person might be, they must not lose the sense of identity that protects them from small-minded and well-armed citizens.

So our yoga study is not about abandoning all sense of identity and wandering the streets naked and unashamed. It is about being who we are in the limited context of society while remembering and incorporating the wholeness of our being.

Susan noted how parents often think of themselves as being nothing, while their children are everything, and so the parents draw their sense of identity from them. This can be generalized. A very common configuration of conceptual dots is to see yourself as nothing, as valueless, and to derive whatever meaning can be derived from the environment. This is just as true for extroverts as well as introverts. “I belong to a church,” “I’m a social democrat,” “My child is on the honor role,” are some of the ways we express this. Because my team is a winner, I must be a winner too. The sad part is that with children especially we then—largely unconsciously—try to manipulate them into fulfilling certain desires of our own. As Bill said, it can be a noble and wonderful exchange between parent and child, so long as the adult is only offering their expertise without conditions. But one must be vigilant here especially, to look for hidden motivations that lay invisible chains on the offspring. The most helpful factor is for the parent to realize their full value in themselves, and not try to confirm their existence via outside factors. Only if they know they are infinitely worthwhile, even if no one else will ever suspect it, can they give freely to their children without any strings of neediness.

This is the essence of the study of the Yoga Sutras. We have become mesmerized by and defensive about the dots of our world and forgotten their ground, which is our selves, which are none other than the Absolute. We will be learning to turn our attention from the outer play to the inner panoply. The world offers us a splintered and fragmentary view of who we are. It is much easier to see ourselves when we look directly at ourselves.

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My study group response adds a bit:

We are all taught to respond to what happens to us, and when we do we get caught up in our reactions. It has taken me years to be able to let things alone when they have seemed to grab me by the throat. And there have been plenty of chances to practice! Life is like that. Our natural fight-or-flight mechanism is activated by actual or potential conflicts, but in intelligence-moderated situations neither is appropriate. Non-engagement is often the perfect way to cope with problems, if one can resist those ingrained impulses. We need to stand firm and study every aspect, before offering a well-considered response, which may well include silence.

Humans love to pin blame on someone else. Dropping that game is a first restraint that every yogi should practice. Looking at underlying causes tends to erase the need to accuse in most cases, because the apparent cause is merely an effect of something else beyond anyone's control. Blame is then easily replaced by compassion.

It is harder, but equally important, to not blame ourselves or permit others to blame us either, unless we happen to deserve it. (Which we do, on occasion.) If we had perfect information we might act fairly decently, but much of the time we are casting about in the dark. We find out about our errors only after the fact, when someone is hurt by them. So we should be just as compassionate and forgiving towards ourself as we are toward others.

By not blaming either ourself or the other, we can remain poised in a neutral state. It takes courage and steadfastness, particularly because it often transpires that no one else is supportive. But it permits the negative energy to dissipate to whatever extent that is possible. And while much harder than giving in to fight-or-flight, you are likely to be accused of cowardice for not fighting or fleeing. You have to be your own

best friend and supporter, to stand fast in the face of hostile accusations.

This to me is the essence of practical yoga. Nitya reminds us that there is an underlying unfoldment taking place, over and above the chaotic vagaries of life, so we can relax and enjoy our brief flash of being alive!