

2022 Patanjali Class 9

3/1/22

Yoga Letter Eight

This one is challenging. The old notes in Part II are quite helpful, and they include not only a good account of the underlying structure, but the first mention of Jill Bolte Taylor's *My Stroke of Insight*, a book and TED talk that rocked our socks back then, and has come up often since. Since few people read Part II, here's the most important bit:

The essence of yoga practice is given at the end of the Letter. Reference is made to the process by which we interpret sensory stimulation, the questioning, memory linking, identification and value assessment by which we convert the unknown into the known. The question is posed, what happens if we refuse to engage in the process? If we are chained to our habitual reactions by memories, what happens if we break the chain?

Deb's introduction was that what Nitya is really talking about is the spark of conscious awareness in each person, grounded in a state of undivided illumination. From there, the purusha assumes all the outward-directed states. She thought we should examine how we experience that in our daily lives. Deb recalled Nitya directing Peter O (and thus everyone present) to meditate on being in a problemless moment, with no disturbance, and then to try to observe what is it that makes you move out from that to engagement. She invited us to watch ourselves and see where our consciousness arises and how it illuminates our world. Normally we relate to our personal consciousness as if it's another object, yet instead we can sink into the illuminated core.

I underlined that the Letter leads us back from the dual world of objects and subjects in the beginning to the verge of the *karu*,

the core, at the end. Short of death, we can't reach perfect cessation of mental modifications, but we can come very close. We can get to extreme stillness, though part of us will still be operating. We understand from this perspective that there is an illuminated ground of consciousness, and we benefit from attending to it.

Prathiba talked about how we might prepare ourselves so purusha shines on us, proposing there are different qualities that can be developed that make the shine or the grace of purusha shine within us. For her, this means goodness and the qualities that we think of as more spiritual, saintly, qualities that are uplifting. We can strive to have those qualities.

Deb gently corrected this notion, asserting that for Nitya and Patanjali the purusha is not something we have to attain. It exists in all of us, but is often clouded by misunderstanding or partial knowledge. Our ideas of morality are part of the polar universe, and this is about opening ourselves to what already exists within us, in a unified state.

Deb solicited practical examples of when we have had that experience of limitless shining or clarity, which made for a fun evening. In quite ordinary situations, she has suddenly found herself illuminated by undivided beingness. As far as she knew, she didn't do anything to make it happen (though she certainly had laid the groundwork, through psychedelic excursions and dedicated work with Guru Nitya. It happens occasionally while she's writing, and she hears of it in other peoples' artistic expressions as well.

In fact, Nancy had felt that way earlier in the day. An interior designer, she accumulates long lists of things she's supposed to take care of. She stopped being endlessly busy with other things, and started in on her list, contacting past clients to see how satisfactory the work she did for them was. They were people she has spent lots of time with, but hadn't contacted for a long time. She focused on the people who had had issues, and she did it all

without anxiety or resentment. Their feedback was wonderful! Nancy was in a space where she wasn't feeling threatened or vulnerable, she just took care of reaching out, and it left her with a good feeling at the end of the day, at peace with where things are in her career.

Prathiba wanted us to be sure to distinguish between what is correct or accurate or more intelligent, versus what makes us feel good; in other words, between spiritual balance and mere pleasure. She suspected Nancy's feeling was more about ego than spirituality. Nancy admitted that ego was definitely part of it, and she did not disavow the pleasure of her valuable and valid interactions.

Certainly Vedanta distinguishes between dualistic pleasure, as the flip side of pain, and unitive goodness, but that doesn't mean if something feels good it is automatically dualistic, automatically partial. The kind of accomplished joy Nancy related is the way harmonious actions reinforce themselves in us. We are not aiming to feel nothing, after all.

I wrote earlier the same day that following your dharma is a clunky way of saying "act naturally." Unitive action is acting naturally, without expectations. I imagine most of us are aware that the more you *try* to act naturally, the farther away from it you get. So you can stop trying to measure up to some objectified ideal, and simply relax into yourself. Nancy's example was lovely in so many ways: it involved potentially problematic interactions, which she faced without fear or strategic planning; it might have made her defensive, yet it didn't; and it was an expression of her special talent, undoubtedly performed in her unique fashion.

If we obsess about our ego, it is unlikely we'll be able to use it naturally and unselfconsciously, as just another tool in the arsenal. Nitya reminds us, "paying attention to the ego or personal self is as much an objectivization as that provoked by objects."

Anyone who knows Nancy, knows she is unselfish, generous, considerate, and far from self-indulgent.

As we have often covered in the past, yoga is not about eradicating ego, but teaching it to be harmonious and unselfish. The fourfold mind (questioning, memory linking, identification and value assessment) is a divine gift, not a sin that blocks the light. Or it doesn't *necessarily* block the light. Light is an integral part of being harmonious and unselfish, and we can surely invite it into our lives more. Brain function is not something to be gotten rid of, yoga is about harmonizing it and coordinating it expertly with its surroundings.

Nancy responded that it could well be that her ego is the reason it's often hard to deal with past clients, but what she experienced on this good day, it didn't matter. It didn't intrude. She wasn't so attached to "me," acknowledging how that kind of project wouldn't work if her ego was too involved.

With a chuckle, Moni admitted Nancy needs that kind of ego to make her creations. Her artistry comes from the light of it. Moni's own experience of purusha is different, mostly problem-solving for humans. Her field is humans and their needs. Even there, there can be magic. Some problems will come, and you have plan a, plan b, plan c, but none will work. Then you approach another person and they have different ideas. Even with three or four people brainstorming, they still cannot find a solution for it. Each person comes from their own subject/object place, they all bring their own memory, their own light and shade. Then suddenly the right plan will come out—nobody thought of it, it comes like a magic wand. Somehow, invisibly, the intellect finds it. Then you think, oh my god, is it really that simple? This has happened many times in Moni's work.

Kris brought us to a practical application. Some time ago, one of her best friends found out she had leukemia, and Kris's mind was spinning, getting very upset that her dear friend could

die. Then she realized, in this moment she is here and she's alive, so I should just go with that and not spin stories about what's going to happen. It was about getting past the predictions or stories we tell ourselves, and just coming into that moment to see her friend just as she was. Then you can reinforce how the moment you're in is a beautiful moment. And, her friend is still alive, years later.

The story clicked with Susan, who like many of us is stunned by the war in Ukraine. Even by war standards, it's insane. She tries hard not to worry, yet the possibilities are truly dreadful, and terrible things are already happening. It brings us right up to the moment, where we're desperate to know what the future holds for us.

In all upsetting situations, it's well worth some self-examination. We need to ask ourselves what we are adding to the problem, what is the essence, and what good is it to freak out.

The idea of dispassion as a spiritual exercise is if you restrain your knee-jerk impulses, and instead reflect before acting, the inner wisdom can be heard. I just picked up a good line from mystery author Dick Francis: "Think before acting, if you have time." Sometimes our fast reactions are necessary and genuine, certainly if the danger is imminent, and also because the inner genius thinks much more quickly than the ego does. It's best to listen carefully to our full understanding, if we can make time for it. Ideally it gets us into a harmonious flow in between stopping and going, which feels wonderful but isn't exaggerated in any way. The creative, artistic flow.

In a way, Susan's and Kris's conundrum refers directly to the last paragraph of the Letter:

In the present meditation we have one final question: "What will happen if this emanation [of conscious light] is withdrawn or disconnected from both the sensory function and memory feedback?" What we suggest now is as hard and almost as

impossible as the stopping of respiration or the inhibiting of the heartbeat. At this stage we can only hypothetically presume that state. Until we arrive at it, we can hypothetically visualize this final state of restraint as what Patañjali calls the cessation of all modulations that are being engendered from the repository of the past registration of memories.

Paul accepts that to fully cease modifications is impossible, but just to imagine the ability to do it is enlightening for him. It helps him to surrender his fears, instead of painting worst-case scenarios based on them. He knows he often imagines the worst, but then he gets tired of it, and gives up. He tries to remain a witness to these things, instead of trying to modify them, which takes the sweetness out of life. He's pretty sure if you leave the sweetness in your life, then you don't have to artificially sweeten it.

I invited Paul to tell us about the daily practice of exactly what Nitya is talking about, in his job in the fire service. When the alarm bell goes off, the announcement provides a general category of problem, and who else is being sent, but you do not know very clearly what you will find on arrival. As you streak to the scene, your mind is filled with options, recalling protocols, imagining complications, considering dangers. Often the scene is entirely different that you were led to expect, occasionally much worse, more often less dire. People reporting alarms tend to exaggerate the minor stuff. Regardless, you are the ones who have to deal with whatever it is, and you can't do it adequately if you're not prepared.

When called out, many times a day, Paul would run through all his options, plan a, plan b, plan c; if it's a fire, I need this and this; medical call, something else; going over check sheets in his head. As he got more experience, he noticed the situation often didn't fit his plans very well, and he realized he was trying to

predict to such an extent that it made him rigid and inflexible. And that's how life is—we have all these skills to be socially acceptable and all these conditionings, and instead of using them as a tool, we make them into a kind of god and worship them, instead of really seeing the situation. Paul's job gave him a good education to negotiate life better. He realizes life is an amazing teacher, and we should give life a high priority as an educator.

Deb summed it up for us, that we arrive on the disaster scene brimming with previous experience, but even though all of it is available to us, when we get to it, we make sure we are open to what actually is, which is in a fluid state, and we have to respond differently as it changes.

If the disaster is imaginary, it's much easier to clean up after.

Another stroke of magic happened after the last class, and this little-known and unpublished bit from Nitya's Gita video came up in my transcription work, with more on the substratum idea. It's an transcript to match the video, so a bit rough. It's also quite germane to today's subject:

In the Vedanta context, when you speak of the conscious world of gross form, the world of ideas and the deep unconscious from where the gross world is being projected, the projection from the unconscious is possible because of a substratum of pure consciousness. It is that which is emerging from that deep unconscious, which becomes the pre-conscious and then animates the subjective consciousness. Only those concepts are being actualized in the wakeful. There also it is the same light which percolates through the unconscious, through the pre-conscious and then comes into the conscious. The reverse is not possible with the same faculties. You cannot turn the eyes back and look at the source from which the light comes. You cannot turn the mind back. What is mind after all? Mind is only a

number of vivified, pluralized questions, pluralized memories, pluralized judgments. Both are not possible.

But one thing is possible. Suppose these three screens – the unconscious, the subjective consciousness, and subject-object duality are dissolved and merged back into the original source or substratum and become flushed by that pure light, then the wonder of it can make every bit of this have its own quality. Or the heterogeneity of the mind is merged back into the homogeneity of your consciousness. There you are not seeing God as before (face-to-face). You are allowed to delve into and be absorbed into what may be called the unitive vision, which is God himself. The consciousness which we have... if it is pure, then it is qualityless. Qualities are black, white; big, small; good, bad – a number of qualities are possible. We have to think of all these qualities being taken away from it. That means, the vision you get is an unconditional vision of pure Being. You cannot even say “you get it”! (Nitya Gita video XI, intro)

Continuing in the way of such joyful coincidences, *The Peace of Wild Things*, by Wendell Berry, appeared on the kitchen counter right after class. What to do when nuclear war looms over the horizon. I’m sure you all know it, but just in case:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children’s lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood drake
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still waters
and I feel above me the day-blind stars

waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Part II

From the 2008 Notes:

Letter Eight is a fine example of Nitya's expertise as a teacher. Instead of baldly describing the fourfold structure of consciousness he leads us through it as a sequence of thoughts, so we can know it without knowing we know it. Although we may be daunted by the initial complexity of Vedanta, when a great teacher takes us by the hand and leads us it becomes easy and even thrilling to walk its avenues. It is impossible to overestimate the value of such a guide.

Nitya offers us yet another superb analogy here, comparing the intellect to the rays of the sun. Just as the sun radiates a vast spectrum of energy, including light as a small fraction, our nature radiates awareness in the form of intelligence. In both cases the energy travels invisibly through spacetime, only becoming manifest when it encounters an object. The object itself reveals only a tiny jot of the total potential of the intellectual radiation, from which we can begin to infer the whole if we are so inclined. Usually we are so fascinated by the part that we don't even think of the whole, but the yogi wants to know the source of the partial revelation in the same way that the physicist does not forget that we only perceive the fragment our limited senses are capable of revealing to us. The intellect is thus "the most active link between the nucleic person and the objective world."

The essence of yoga practice is given at the end of the Letter. Reference is made to the process by which we interpret sensory stimulation, the questioning, memory linking, identification and value assessment by which we convert the unknown into the

known. The question is posed, what happens if we refuse to engage in the process? If we are chained to our habitual reactions by memories, what happens if we break the chain?

When we meditate we can hold our attention on a concept or object and it's like clinging to a rock in a flood. The mind presses to do its duty and sweep the meditator along in a conceptual torrent, but the yogi holds firm and doesn't give in to it. The presumption is that when our vast subconscious potential is no longer embroiled in mundane matters, it becomes free to dive deep and soar high. Making claims about where this will lead us, as do most of the popular spiritual schools, converts the infinite potential back into a mundane object of consciousness, thus defeating the purpose in advance. We have to keep our mind open, and not be lured by any tantalizing chimeras.

The very first sentence of this Letter instructs us that any intentionality we have, even the most salutary and sublime, comes from our ego. If we want to meditate, that automatically makes meditation an object of consciousness, not a process of liberation. If we want to become enlightened, that makes enlightenment an object of consciousness. Even our sense of self is an object of consciousness, and something we can well do without, at least when we're disaffiliated with the maelstrom. We are who we are no matter what, so we don't need to continually affirm what we imagine ourselves to be. We don't need to mount any advertising campaign. As Nitya puts it, "Paying attention to the ego or personal self is as much an objectivization as that provoked by objects." The kicker is that our imaginary personal identity is very small compared to our true nature in all its glory, just as the entire energy emanating from the sun far exceeds the light that illuminates a single flower in our garden. By relinquishing our small identity our total Self becomes accessible, at least in principle.

This led to a bit of a semantic argument on whether we create the world or only create our understanding of it. Of course there is a lot of overlap between these positions, but it is generally agreed that there is actually a universe we inhabit, that not everything is solely located between one's ears. This is impossible to prove, so it remains axiomatic, but it is a safe bet. The alternative can lead us to spend vast amounts of energy trying to accomplish the impossible, like levitating or growing younger, which is a waste of our precious time in the body.

We can and do affect our surroundings, but we didn't create the whole ball of wax. The idea is that our memory linkages and value assessments color the world we encounter, and very significantly. A dog makes a fine example. It exists on its own, independent of anyone's opinion. Yet each person has a different experience of it when they meet it. One is touched with loving feelings; another gets a jolt of fear; another is indifferent. At this stage of our training we are asked to imagine what would happen if we didn't grab hold of our previous opinions, and just let it lie. That doesn't make the dog disappear, only our reactions to it. Would we then be nothing? Or Nothing? Reaction is essential in a dog-eat-dog world, but we are crafting a haven from the storm so we can safely make a voyage of discovery into strange new worlds. That means setting aside reactivity insofar as possible.

It is important to take a vow to use one's unleashed potentials—whatever they may turn out to be—for the good of all, otherwise they can do a lot of harm. Part of yoga instruction, shared by virtually all religions, is to convince the student of the supreme value of ahimsa, of non-hurting. Psychic potentials are a byproduct, not the goal of yoga. The ego stands ready to co-opt any and all powers to its glory, and this proclivity must be annulled in advance. One doesn't need to battle the ego: merely canceling the memory linkage de-energizes the chain of events that culminates in an ego.

We closed the class with a few moments of not engaging any memory links and letting them go when they spontaneously arose. A deep twilight beauty enfolded us.

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Part of my 2009 Yoga Shastra study group response:

In Letter Eight Nitya brings us to an intellectual understanding of why the cessation of mental modifications would be an interesting experiment. Arriving at such an unusual state would be like giving up all duties and obligations, permanently. It sounds attractive, especially when necessities weigh you down. But while such an ideal is often posited, I prefer to treat the cessation of mental modifications as a temporary resting place, one which permits us to actively participate in the world with some degree of expertise due to dispassionate witnessing. This is available and beneficial to everyone at any time. Ceasing all mental modifications permanently will come soon enough with our death, and I for one am not too excited about getting there prematurely.

My wife and I have been reading a very interesting book by Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight* (New York: Viking, 2006). As a brain scientist she was able to observe a major stroke she suffered from a clinical standpoint, and recall the event in detail even after she recovered her language skills (eight years later). Her dominant left brain was temporarily disabled, allowing her to access her right brain, which she experienced as a peaceful and blissful state of oneness, more or less without mental modifications. While nirvana-like, it returned her to an infantile state as far as the outside world was concerned. So you can't help but pull for her to recover her lost functions. But since that state is actually a part of all of us, once it is recalled it suffuses the

busyness of life and takes the edge off the ongoing mania. Makes all the difference.

The point is that we sometimes imagine that yoga is a permanent withdrawal into “right brain” conditions, and that the “left brain” stuff is nothing but an impediment. But the optimum is to have the halves working together. So dipping into peace and silence can be fleeting, as it is for most of us in this class, but it’s more valuable than we have been led to think. We don’t have to tune in for hours at a time.

Knowing this, you may wonder why we complain when the left-brain junk looms large. Silly, isn’t it? But it’s probably mainly subterfuge to derail hemispheric dominance and allow the right brain to seep into the mix. We can only hope!