



ANAHATA CHAKRA SATSANGA
Nine Gates Course Lessons
Manavaka / Student / First Degree

Introduction to the Rank

In lessons 1.1-1.3, you will be developing the strong foundation that you will need over the nine degrees. You will be letting go of bitterness from the past, learning to step away from negative reactions, and holding closely to the path of duty and ethics (dharma). The marks for this rank, the qualities that you will want to cultivate, are equanimity and the absence of greed and anger. The gemstone for this rank is ruby.

Lesson 1.1: Equanimity

Without thinking, we often take it for granted that life is a roller coaster ride, full of ups and downs, disappointments and victories. The dark places can get scary, so scary, in fact, that people contemplate or even commit suicide in the midst of the turmoil. The upswings can feel so exhilarating, whether the “high” is a new love, a chemically-induced experience, or even spiritual bliss. Everyone would like a little more bliss and a lot less heartache, a little more Doctor Feelgood and a little less Mr. Hyde. This desire for more happiness represents a great vulnerability and a great opportunity. We would all like to be on the upswing, the graph trending upward when it comes to feeling self-confident, calm, collected, and together. Advertisers take advantage of this tendency to want to keep it all under control: thousands of advertisements each and every day promise that elusive happiness just around the bend. In our heart of hearts, we know that a new breakfast cereal or underarm deodorant will not make us any happier, but we buy into the game anyway without even realizing it. The desire for a better way of life is so strong and pervasive that it goes unnoticed most of the time, and corporations constantly try to tap into that impulse with consumer messages.

Notice right away that every “high” comes with a downside and that every downside comes with a hidden reward. Suppose your afternoon coffee break includes an allowance of web surfing. You take thirty or forty minutes to hit your favorite social media or news site. The internet time probably has some benefit: you keep acquainted with friends and events in the world. Maybe you find a new book that you want to read or an organization that you would like to join. On the downside, your quick

web surfing can easily turn into hours of lost productivity. You may lose focus on important personal or professional tasks because of the time spent with distraction. No judgment needs to come into the picture here: the fact is that every choice, no matter how noble or sordid, has positives and negatives. No amount of second-guessing your choices will lead you to escape this inevitable law. To do one thing, you must necessarily avoid something else. You find yourself sitting down to do some devotional chanting or meditation and feel guilty because you should be working. You decide to forego meditation and work instead and feel guilty because you have let your spiritual practices lapse. Notice that the guilt emotion arises either way. This should be a clue that the emotional response in this case has no foundation. Emotional responses can sometimes be good clues for changes that need to be made, but they have no intrinsic connection to external events.

Thinking in a common sense sort of way, it would be easy to assume that happiness results from the proper arrangement of external circumstances: a challenging job with good pay, a loving partner and well-behaved children, a nice house and car, etc. Notice that the *et cetera* can be extended indefinitely based on myriad factors, and further notice that these factors need not be materialistic or shallow. We can just as easily say that happiness stems from having a fulfilling spiritual tradition, a habit of giving to charity, a strong sense of purpose and meaning. Either way, we formulate a “happiness plan” and then try to execute it. All such schemes have the same characteristic, of saying, “I need x in order to be happy.” No blame should be attached to this tendency: having goals to achieve simply arises as part of our material existence. We need goals in order to arrange our affairs, and goal-setting has its proper place. The problem occurs when goal-setting becomes an obsession, a mental tic that keeps occurring again and again. Some goals get in the way of living a full life and become a sort of mental wallpaper that never goes away. Everyone probably has a single friend obsessed with finding a mate, an alcoholic friend obsessed with the bottle, or the like. Again, no blame should attach here: everyone does this to some degree or another, and the objects of obsession are limitless. The strategic question that we should all ask is how to prevent such obsessive thoughts from robbing ourselves of natural happiness. External events will come and go, for better or worse: the transitory plane of existence doesn’t care about our plans. A lot of New Age thinking goes wrong on this score, because it assumes that obsessive thinking or wishing will yield the designated result.

The world has harsh aspects, cold aspects that don’t necessarily align with our view of how things should go. Sometimes bad people win and good people lose. The law of cause and effect has not misfired in such cases: some karmas take a long time to mature. Some teachers have made millions by saying, “wish hard enough and it will happen.” They neglect to say that larger forces are at work in the

world: the position of humanity in the cosmos, the social landscape at that place and time, and each individual's unfolding against the backdrop of previous incarnations. Every event has a cause, but the network of interrelations that make a given event happen can be incredibly vast, taking up vast amounts of space and time. America, for example, still has not dealt with its legacy of the enslavement of Africans and slaughter of Native people. The events of the not-so-remote past will continue to affect the nation until every single ill deed has been repaid. This social layer of karma often gets neglected in the New Age literature, which is hampered by thinking of people only in individual terms, which the traditional sources do not assume. Karma has multiple layers, from the individual to the family to the society to the species to the planet. The law of karma is truly immutable: while it may seem that no good deed goes unpunished, this is only true in the short term. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "the arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Justice in this sense can be defined as every action reaping its natural results. Those who sow peace will reap peace, and those who sow war will reap war.

I recently heard about a survivalist who stockpiled weapons and food in a hidden bunker in Washington State. With such people, it can be difficult to say whether they developed a paranoid belief system and then stockpiled weapons or whether the stockpiled weapons led to the belief system. Professor Kant said in his essay, "To Eternal Peace," that stockpiling weapons leads to the search for an occasion to use them. The mental action of being afraid of the government, non-white people, etc., leads to the real-world action of buying machine guns, gas masks, and hand grenades. The militia member creates a bubble of paranoia that can be all-consuming. This particular survivalist eventually shot his wife and eighteen-year-old daughter before killing himself, because his paranoid mindset taught him that the world would no longer be a good place to live. As Jesus said, those who live by the sword die by the sword. Most cases are not this pronounced, but I have never met a gun owner who did not live in perpetual fear of mugging and burglary. Regardless of your views on gun ownership, the example illustrates the general principle that the style of living reinforces mindset and vice versa. A distorted mindset leads to false beliefs about the world. We are all condemned to live in the world that we fashion for ourselves. We believe our own propaganda, the messages that our minds impose on reality. We cast ourselves in a favorable light and blame others for our problems. We excuse our own prejudices while condemning the prejudices of others. This condition cannot be overcome completely, no matter how hard we try to be fair and open-minded. We are all like that survivalist to one degree or another. We all live in a bubble: that bubble may be small or capacious, but it is there all the same.

The New Age movement often fails because it tells people to craft a better bubble for themselves instead of getting outside it completely. But then I have just said that no one can completely escape the bubble, and that is true. We all perceive the world through lenses inherited from the past, our personal histories as well as the histories of our nation and family. But we can choose how much to invest in the mental games which we must play by virtue of our incarnate nature. All of the spiritual traditions of the world teach detachment to some degree, as a remedy against the vicissitudes of fate. We may be the authors of our own destiny, but many seeds of karma have been planted in the past that must come to their full fruition. These seeds can only be destroyed through renunciation. A few souls will be able to pursue renunciation through a monastic path, but most will have to practice renunciation while living within the world. The monastic has no advantage over the householder (grihasta) devotee, provided that renunciation has been understood properly. The most sublime philosophy for understanding renunciation is the *Bhagavad Gita*, which has been read profitably by religious and non-religious seekers for millennia.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is a selection from the much larger epic poem, the *Mahabharata*, which recounts the battle between the sons of Pandu and the sons of Dhritarashtra for accession to the throne of the ancient North Indian kingdom of Kurukshetra. Although the story has many twists and turns, the Pandu brothers rightfully claim the throne against their cousins, and the *Gita* protagonist, Arjuna, has a warrior's duty to fight against the usurpers. His divine charioteer, Krishna, who turns out to be none other than Vishnu, the great Preserver deity, gives Arjuna counsel in his moment of spiritual crisis. Students of these lessons will want to read the entire text for themselves as soon as possible, but I will present a few highlights here. Arjuna has a sacred duty (*dharma*) as a member of the warrior caste to fight against his cousins, but he fears the moral stain of his actions, as he believes many of his relatives on the other side to be good people. Krishna shows him a way to act without acting, to renounce the world while living within it. This amounts to a loophole within the inexorable law of karma, as those who have no expectation of reward or fear of blame pass through the world more easily. As Krishna says, "brooding about sensuous objects makes attachment to them grow" (II. 62). If Arjuna is to perform his duty without accruing negative karma, he must boldly fight in the battle without regard to winning or losing.

Right away, the power of the concept of duty becomes apparent. Kids teaching their children how to play baseball can be heard again and again saying, "Keep your eye on the ball." If the child misses, the parent will say, "Good swing," even if the bat doesn't connect. The world doesn't always give an 'E' for 'Effort,' but, beneath the surface of opinion and circumstance, a throughway runs for

those who keep their 'eye' on the 'ball' of duty. If baseball players listened only to the cheers and boos of the crowd, they would never be able to perform successfully. If they focus only on trying to hit the ball, they have a much greater chance of success. Paradoxically, because they don't make success their goal, they are more likely to reach it. The best batter in the Major Leagues still does not get on base every time, but simply goes out on the field and does a good job. In the same way, holding fast to duty, not only according to the letter but to the spirit as well, relieves the mind of an array of damaging thoughts and concerns, the "what ifs" of a thousand different mental scenarios.

To give just one more example, suppose someone, call her Karen, sets out to write a novel. If she says to herself, "I am going to be a Pulitzer Prize-winning *Author*," she will face a great deal of pressure when she first stares at that blank page. Likewise, if Karen begins to scrutinize her work, saying, "I don't know if this is good enough," or "maybe I should just change this character's name...," the progress of the work will grind to a halt. The standard advice to writers to "banish the internal critic" applies to other areas of life as well. Whether the mental scenarios are positive or negative, they run the risk of derailing the main effort, which should just be to hold to the duty, the *dharma*, of the undertaking concerned. The word dharma has many meanings: right conduct, natural law, or cause and effect. Observe the fact that all actions produce results. Further observe that action becomes least complicated, and therefore *easier*, when it is undertaken for no other motivation than duty alone.

Krishna teaches Arjuna that even abstaining from action is a kind of action. Sitting still is also an action that has its results, so no one can escape from action completely. Those beginning on the spiritual path will be tempted to do nothing but pray and meditate, thinking that if they stick only to spiritual disciplines, they will be quickly liberated. Unless they get to an ashram or monastery at a young age, this strategy will fail. Work goes undone, the house goes un-cleaned, friends go ignored. Unless something is done to reverse this pattern, it will result in failure before reaching liberation. Spiritual pursuits can and do end marriages and careers. The desire to make something happen quickly often derails spiritual practice. The erstwhile devotee will abandon spirituality completely if they do not understand the principle of duty. Students who are interested in spirituality should by all means pray and meditate, but they must continue with secular learning and the demands of job and family. Notice that even monks must clean floors, balance bank accounts, and, yes, even pay bills. The proficient person will begin to infuse secular concerns with divinity, seeing in the most ordinary task an expression of spirituality. Duties performed halfway or not at all only return again and again, and liberation can only be reached by completing everything to the last. "Good to the last drop," went the old coffee

commercial, and drink to the last we must. A few may take the cloth of the monastic path, but they can legitimately do so only if they have left no major outstanding claims on their lives.

Spiritual aspirants can and should visit temples and places of pilgrimage, recite prayers and meditate silently, decorate shrines and idols, offer incense and ghee, and distribute food to holy people and the needy. These practices do lead to liberation and should not be abandoned, but they will not produce the proper fruit if some other duty must be neglected in order to pursue them. Think about paying for something with a credit card versus paying with cash. If you “rob Peter to pay Paul” by skimping on one area of life in order to pursue spirituality, you have not put forward an honest effort. The person who pays with credit has not truly paid for the desired object but has simply pushed the payment forward into the future at a greater cost. True devotees must “pay cash” by continuing to maintain their worldly lives while pursuing spirituality at a sustainable level. Just imagine trying to meditate while thinking that your boss might become angry, that your check might bounce, that the dog needs a bath and the roof is leaking. There will *always, always, always* be some distraction to overcome, but why multiply such distractions unnecessarily? The dutiful person will have fewer distractions and will therefore be able to advance more quickly. Think about the freedom of schoolchildren during the summer vacation: they have a seemingly endless supply of days to ride bikes, play in streams, climb trees, and build forts. The dutiful person reaches this free and limitless state of mind more easily than a reckless person.

At the same time, we must discriminate between true duties and a kind of overcompensation. The workaholic undoubtedly thinks that he or she merely focuses on the duty at hand, but paid labor only counts for one part of a dutiful life. Everyone has a duty to live a healthy lifestyle, to take care of family, and to leave a better world for the next generation. Hinduism teaches the concept of the *pancha rina*—the five debts—to the gods, to ancestors, to the guru, to society, and to the next generation. Ignoring any one of these comes at a cost that will have to be paid later, either in this incarnation or in a future incarnation. We honor each of the five by living our best possible life, by striving each day to living according to our best standards of behavior. A nagging voice, the voice of the quality of *tamas*, lethargy and injury, will say, “But I don’t feel like going to work today...,” or, “What’s the point in continuing to be a responsible member of society?” This tamasic tendency neglects the fact that work can actually bring excellence. As we combine our efforts with those of others, our own good qualities shine. On the other side, the person with a rajasic, or aggressive, makeup will pursue his or her own ends to the point of overdoing it. It can be hard to know where the line between duty and overcompensation lies, but it can be seen in obsessive tendencies. A dutiful worker proofreads the

annual report of the company for errors before releasing it. The rajasic employee proofreads it five times, changes the font size twelve times, and has it printed on three different types of paper to gauge the proper “feel.” In other words, the rajasic person overdoes things, resulting in an exhausting way of life that diminishes effectiveness over the long haul. The rajasic person is like someone who lifts too much weight at the gym, resulting in muscle strain. The injury will take weeks or months to heal, so that the person who has a more moderate exercise regimen will surpass the person of rajasic constitution.

Duty belongs to the *guna*, the quality, of *sattva*, or clarity. Of the three gunas, which actually reside in all of nature, *sattva* most quickly brings the aspirant to spiritual liberation. The dutiful person sees what needs to be done and completes it without hesitation or complication. The path of duty will be more streamlined, and therefore more efficient, than the path of *rajas* or *tamas*. Because the person of sattvic constitution cares nothing for rewards and accolades, he or she will continue progressing over time while others wait for some recognition from their peers before proceeding. The person who lives according to duty escapes from future bondage, because all debts from this present time are paid. Mindfulness of duty creates a solid foundation for spiritual practice: the spiritual adept knows how to take care of worldly things without neglecting the divine. As Ramakrishna said, we should hold onto the world with one hand and hold onto God with the other, so that one day we only have to hold onto God. Focusing on spirituality to the exclusion of all else will spell disaster for those who do not have the support of a monastic community or temple. One must not make the beginner’s mistake of neglecting the bills, housework, and career, for the gains to be gotten in this manner will be short-lived. Better to keep a daily discipline of meditation, combined with periodic days of retreat. In this manner, the aspirant attends to daily details and still has time for spiritual advancement.

Assignments. Complete these activities on your own. You need not submit any written feedback.

1. Is there some area of your life where you have been neglecting your duty? Take a small step *today* towards remediating the situation.
2. Have you been asking God, the gods, or the universe for something on a repetitive basis? Is there some dream that you want to fulfill, something that has been nagging you for months or years? *Do* something *today* to get the ball rolling.

Questions for self-reflection. If you are interested in moving through the formal system of ranks of the Satsanga, please submit written answers to the General Secretary of the Society.

1. What situations cause you to easily lose your composure? Is it something that a difficult colleague at work does? Is it sitting in traffic at rush hour? Is it balancing your checkbook or doing your taxes? The next time the situation in question arises, try to avoid a negative internal dialogue (e.g. thoughts such as “Why is this happening to me?,” “I hate [so-and-so, such-and-such],” “My life sucks,” etc.). Instead, practice deep breathing. As a simple exercise that can be done anywhere, inhale for two counts, hold for eight counts, and exhale for four counts. Repeat this process until the feeling of anxiety subsides. Compare this response with the negative internal monologue. Which approach works better to get you through the situation?

2. Make a list of the areas of responsibility in your life. You may have headings like “parent,” “employee,” “friend,” “mentor,” and so forth. Do not neglect areas of self-care, like “exercise” and “diet.” Then list four duties that belong to each category. Instead of experiencing each of these as a burden, what would it be like if you saw each of them as a blessing? How does this shift in emphasis differ from your usual approach to life?

3. Of the three qualities of *rajas*, *tamas*, and *sattva*, which one predominates in your life? What can you do to move yourself closer to *sattva*?

4. Pick a chapter from the *Bhagavad Gita* and read it. Which verses speak to you and why?