



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 to sustain you through the journey of liberation. 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 1.2: Letting go of Anger

In the spiritual battles that we undergo in this world, we face very subtle demons that can be difficult to recognize, much less combat and defeat. The same troubling emotions re-occur time and time again, despite our best efforts to bring them under control. The dharmic traditions emphasize cyclical time and the recurrence of patterns on the smaller and larger scales of life. The very largest cycle is a day of Brahman, encompassing billions of human years! The next largest cycles are called Yugas, and we currently live in the fourth age, the Kali Yuga or “Age of Darkness,” in which the ethics on earth devolve and the gods become more remote from humankind. Then there are also smaller cycles, like lifetimes, of which each person will have many before reaching final liberation from rebirth. Most of us live on a much smaller scale than that, thinking about no more than the next week or two and the dramas of the passing moment. Typically the same situations cause us distress over and over again, and we can reduce this friction by taking inventory of the typical triggers that provoke the response of anger.

Before going any further, we should note that anger, in itself, is not a sin. The Pandava brothers of the *Mahabharata* were certainly very angry when the sons of blind Dhritarashtra attempted to steal their wife, Draupadi, from them, with much violence and abuse. They were rightly angry when Duryodhana tried to burn them alive and when he attempted the murder of Bheema. There is also a certain righteous anger in the world today when people are treated unfairly, when the environment is degraded, or when animals are abused. But most anger doesn't have a great principle at work behind it and is simply a defense mechanism used to protect the ego from the sense that it has somehow been

violated. Verse three of the Buddha's discourse, the *Dhammapada*, says, "He abused me, he beat me, he defeated me, he robbed me': the hatred of those who harbour such thoughts is not appeased." We commonly try to rid ourselves of anger by physically destroying the perceived enemy or getting some sort of actual revenge. More subtle is the mental destruction of the perceived other by internally rehashing the perceived grievance or by fantasizing about revenge and restitution.

Of course, the person who actually committed the injury goes along like nothing has happened: the anger only amounts to a form of self-torture. The resentful person cannot get out of this cycle of mentally replaying grievances from the past. Just as a small stream can eventually carve a canyon out of solid rock, repetitive thoughts "carve" our mental landscape in such a way that it exhibits features that seem quite permanent. But the permanence is only an illusion: thought patterns that have been held for decades can give way to something new. People do change. This is not to say that the work of transformation is ever easy. The true spiritual seeker must possess the very rare quality of self-exertion, of stopping at nothing to create more positive patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world. A disciple who has boundless energy for the task of the Great Work of transformation will always strive to turn the vicious cycle of doubt, anger, and resentment into the virtuous cycle of faith, love, and encouragement.

Begin by noticing the melodramatic quality of deceptive thoughts. The faults of others are magnified and distorted while our own faults are hidden from view. A bit of impolite speech becomes a tirade unleashed against innocent "me." The landlord who failed to return a security deposit becomes a cruel tyrant. The police officer who writes a speeding ticket becomes evil incarnate. The egoistic mind magnifies perceptions of fault in others while minimizing misdeeds that "I" have done to others. In order to clarify these perceptions, we must stop taking every little hiccup so personally. Only very rarely does one person single out another for some sort of harsh treatment. Usually misdeeds are much more careless and impersonal. Someone who cuts me off in traffic is just in a hurry: that person doesn't hate me. In my mind, I may see myself as the lead character in some sort of cosmic drama, but I'm really a bit player. In fact, I'm not a player at all, since God alone is the doer! I will not advance in the universal drama of realization until I take these myriad challenges as tests, to not let them ruffle me, to not let them disturb my peace of mind. I must say "aum" in traffic. I must say "aum" in line at the supermarket. I must say "aum" when someone insults me. I must say "aum" when I am treated like a nobody.

Of course, there are real evils in the world, and there are times to express anger, especially when a genuine principle is at stake. If I see someone being cheated, particularly someone who is socially disadvantaged, through race, gender, caste, creed, or sexual orientation, I must use my voice and my actions to help that person. Dharma will not abide an innocent person being wronged, and, if I stand on the sidelines and allow that victimization to take place, I am guilty. If I try to help that person and fail, I have still done my duty. This same principle applies to nature and to non-human animals. The earth is Mother, and the other animals are siblings. When I see Earth and animals being cruelly harmed, I am duty bound to act in a way appropriate to my abilities and position in life. I must use my position to make the world a little bit better for all, including non-human creatures and even “inanimate” nature. I must learn to see what does require my indignation and what does not. Righteous anger fills me with energy and enthusiasm, while superfluous anger saps my spirit and destroys me from the inside out. I must pick my battles wisely, for those battles define me. If there is no great principle at stake, let go of the anger. If there is a great principle at work, channel anger into action.

Letting go of anger can be more easily said than done. Confronting anger directly often does not work. It just results in the same loop being played over and over again. The mind must be tricked into letting go of that loop that it loves so much. Think about a dog fetching a tennis ball. A poorly trained dog will not let go of the tennis ball unless, say, a stick or another tennis ball is presented to it. If it is better trained, the dog will let go of the tennis ball immediately with a small hand signal or verbal command. We can train our own minds in the same way through meditation. In the beginning, some distraction may be appropriate. It would be better to read a novel than to stew in anger. It would be better to go for a run or paint a picture. As we advance further, we can head off the anger even before it fully appears. And there are spiritual techniques for disciplining the mind. Chances are you have practiced some of them. You might repeat the names of God or read some scripture, like *Ramayana* or *Bhagavad Gita*. You may simply pray in your native tongue, “I’m having trouble letting go of X, please help me.” Keeping a spiritual journal may help if it is done carefully. If you simply rehash the perceived wrongdoing in written form, you may be exacerbating feelings of resentment and anger. It is better to perhaps write very quickly and briefly and then burn the pages in an unconsecrated fire or simply shred them and discard. The mind magnifies what it perceives, and we have some degree of control over what enters into consciousness. Better to stop the negative thoughts from arising in the first place, but, once they have arisen, try not to dwell on them.

Another aspect of negative thoughts is that they vacillate wildly and contain their opposites. Did you ever notice that the bully in elementary school was secretly very insecure? Have you noticed that the person who seems obsessive/compulsive in the office is secretly afraid of being perceived as disorganized and unprepared? Negative thoughts come in pairs, what might be termed dualities (as opposed to dualisms). Each thought has its counterpart which it presumes and contains. Indeed, making distinctions would be impossible without these dualisms. The *Tao Te Ching* is quite instructive here:

When people see some things as beautiful,
other things become ugly.
When people see some things as good,
other things become bad.
Being and non-being create each other.
Difficult and easy support each other.
Long and short define each other.
High and low depend on each other.
Before and after follow each other (from chapter 2, trans. Stephen Mitchell).

These seeming opposites are actually intrinsically related to one another, located not just on a continuum but circling around the same center, balancing on the same fulcrum. I go from thinking I am the most amazing person alive to thinking I am worthless. I am on top of the world, one little thing happens, and I want to die. Hinduism deals with afflictive, dark mental states by labeling them as demons. We can personify these demons as horned beasts if we want, but they are really just bad states of mind. In the *Chandi or Devi Mahatmyam*, an ancient hymn to the Divine Mother, the goddess Durga battles these demons, representing negative aspects of consciousness. Two of these demons are called Passion and Anger. Another pairing is Too Much and Too Little. Still another is Self-Deprecation and Self-Conceit. Passion and anger may seem like opposites, but they really are not. For every anger that arises, there is some “should” behind it, some way that I think the world ought to be, something that I think the world owes me. And that something is called passion, or what in Buddhism is called *tanha*, or selfish desire. Take away the passion and take away the anger. Take away the desire for the object, and it no longer has any power to cause anger. In fact, nothing external can really cause anger, since it is an internal state. Remove the presumptions that give rise to anger, and remove the anger.

The next pairing of demons or of negative states of mind, Too Much and Too Little, is quite vexing and can ruin lives. I buy a house so I have someplace to live, but I quickly fill it with possessions, and it becomes Too Little. I then want a bigger house in which to put all of my things, which seems like

Too Much, but then I also fill that house with possessions, and so forth. This is the sort of Goldilocks scenario in which we can't find that midpoint in which everything is just okay, just right. And of course, we have all sorts of advertisers telling us that we always need more of this and more of that. And this phenomenon can be spiritualized as well, so we think we can only meditate at Rishikesh or Machu Picchu or wherever. We need six figure salaries so we can travel to all the best destinations in the world to meditate. Or we think we need an antique silk meditation cushion from Tibet that costs two thousand dollars in order to meditate. Too much and too little. Only the discipline, the hard work of contentment can defeat Too Much and Too Little. We must work at making do with what we have, work at appreciating what we have, in order to make this pair of demons go away. In a mental or interior sense, this means renouncing the ever-present desires and working to give thanks for the good things already present in our lives. In an exterior sense, it means planning how we will spend our money and spend our time. It means giving ourselves small luxuries so we can do without the large ones. Giving is useful here, too. In giving to others, we find that we have enough to spare.

Another pair of very deceitful demons is called Self-Deprecation and Self-Conceit. Notice how often we cycle through these two kinds of thought. I make myself a new resume for a job application, and I feel like I am the most capable and accomplished person on the whole planet. Self-Conceit. The deadline passes. A week passes. Another week passes. I finally discover that I have not gotten the job, and I move into self-deprecation mode. "I'm such an idiot. Why didn't I spend more time on the cover letter? I should have mentioned this or that," and so forth. Unless I get hold of this cycle, it will keep repeating again and again. I must find a way to think of myself and my resources and capabilities in simple, realistic ways. I must avoid overly positive and overly negative mental scenarios. I must cultivate an attitude of "We'll see." I make my beautiful piece of poetry or artwork or whatever I create, and then I send it out into the world, defenseless. I don't know whether I will receive praise or blame, reward or punishment, and I endeavor to become indifferent to the results of my actions. This indifference, this inner renunciation, paradoxically leads to greater productivity, to increased effectiveness, so that I can shut down the engine of self-deprecation and self-conceit for good.

As devotees, we want to put out the bad fires of anger, resentment, and jealousy so that the good fires of love and hope and compassion can become larger and brighter. We have to starve the bad fire of fuel and give that fuel to the good fire. The ego consciousness must not have any material to work with. As the mature devotee begins to give up his or her expectations of reward, the occasions for resentment and anger become fewer and fewer. The scripture called the *Guru Gita* states, "Abandon or

renounce all thoughts of your status in life, the nobility of your birth, your own fame and increase in this world. Deeply intuit the attitude of the Guru and no other” (20). We expect less out of life, but we do not then convert these lowered expectations into laziness—quite the opposite. We put intense effort into understanding the teachings and serving the teacher. Instead of practicing in a lazy, slovenly way, we make every minute, every hour, every day count. We take thinking and our emotions seriously. We stop being the victims of our thoughts and emotions and take responsibility for them. Thoughts and emotions do not happen to us. No one can make me angry or make me jealous. Thoughts and emotions are choices that are made for strategic reasons somewhere deep inside ourselves. No change happens unless we intervene in that process to switch to a new mode of being.

Perhaps the most disturbing things about negative states of mind is that they eventually become part of our identity as people. We think of ourselves as brooding artists, as hot-headed fighters, as melancholic mothers. Once a pattern of thinking and feeling has been established over the decades, it likely has many strong connections extending into social relationships and even the places where we choose to live and work. We choose to be around people who confirm our beliefs about the world rather than those who would challenge those beliefs. We read books that tell us what we already know rather than books that might tell us something different. What begins as a passing mental phase takes concrete expression in the real world. To change to a new way of thinking can be very threatening, because it amounts to a new way of organizing our reality. It means perhaps no longer associating with that person with whom you share depressing water cooler conversations at work. It means maybe taking a break from that violent television show or video game. It means forging a new set of connections that does not lend itself so well to the old narratives. It means cultivating relationships that allow for greater peace and contentment rather than reinforcing the old negative beliefs. There will be a sense of loss associated with this transformation, but also a sense of possibility as the old ties no longer bind. The world emerging on the horizon will seem more exciting than the world that has already faded. The new dream will just be better than the old dream, and a great sense of expectation will accompany its birth. The truth of the matter is that we are all dreamers, so we might as well create the good dream rather than the bad one.

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

1. Of the pairs of demons mentioned in this lesson, which ones sound the most familiar to you? What do you need to do to stop the cycle of duality from recurring? Think to yourself of a concrete strategy that you can follow the next time these disturbing thoughts enter your mind.

2. Think of a time when you felt a level of appropriate or righteous anger. How did it feel? Think of a time when you felt selfish anger. How did it feel? Write down your responses.

Questions for Self-Reflection. If you are interested in moving through the formal system of ranks of the Satsanga, please forward your answers to the General Secretary of the Society.

1. What events in your life still cause you passion and anger? Write a description of the grievance that has you tied to the past. Burn the written description in an unconsecrated fire, and then mentally release the attachment to the past. Write a one page description of the feeling that you have *after* completing this ritual.

2. Make a list numbered one through ten. For each number on the list, very quickly write one thing that you could do to make the world a better place. This could be anything from forgiving a family member to volunteering at a soup kitchen to donating to a non-profit. Make a plan for completing at least a few of the items as soon as possible.

For Further Reading

Byrom, Thomas, Trans. *The Dhammapada*. Boston: Shambhala, 1976

Menon, Ramesh, Trans. *The Mahabharata: A Modern Rendering*. New Delhi: Rupa, 1999.

Also available in an Amazon Kindle electronic edition. Abridged, but contains a good portion of the original material.

Mitchell, Stephen, Trans. *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Harper, 2000.

The notion of Tao has parallels in the Indian philosophical notions of *prana* (energy) and *Rta* (cosmic order).

Satyananda Saraswati, Swami. *Chandi Path*. Napa, CA: Devi Mandir, 2002.

Swamiji makes available the Sanskrit mantras of this goddess-based prayer in the Devanagari script, in transliteration, and in translation.

Satyananda Saraswati, Swami. *Shree Maa: The Guru and the Goddess*. Napa, CA: Devi Mandir, 1998.

Contains full text and commentary on the *Kashyapa Sutras*, *Guru Gita*, and *Shri Lalita Trishati*.