

The Causes of Pain and the Five Kleshas

Linda Munro investigates the causes of suffering and what we can do to lessen them as outlined in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

The ancient sages recognized that suffering sprouts from the mind and affects all levels of our human existence – physical, mental and spiritual. In fact suffering doesn't come from the outside; it is a response that we produce ourselves in our mind. This is reassuring because it means that if we can find the strength within we can do something about it!

Under similar circumstances two people can have entirely different responses. A simple example: two people in pretty much the same economical situations lose their jobs. One can take it as an opportunity to do something new and exciting; the other becomes depressed, unable to leave the house. Why?



Why we suffer and can we do something about it?

The ancient sages also asked themselves this question. And whether they could do anything about it? The sage Patanjali (author of the Yoga Sutras) gives us insight into the core causes of suffering and the yogic tools to apply to lessen this suffering. It is inevitable in life that there will be pain and sorrow, however with yoga one can lessen causes and avoid future suffering! Patanjali was a master of the mind, or a better description may be a master of the consciousness.

The Five Kleshas

So what are the five causes-of-affliction or 'kleshas' that Patanjali speaks of? They are spiritual ignorance (avidya), I-am-ness (asmita), attraction (raga), aversion (dvesha) and clinging to life (abhinivesha).

Each of these is firmly anchored in each and every one of us. They come with us when we are born. They may be latent and take time to show themselves but they will eventually.

As Swami Satyananada Saraswati says: 'Kleshas are a kind of agony that are inside our very being. Everyone feels subconscious pain, but our superficial daily activities do not allow us to be aware of it, otherwise we would see pain in all its vividness.'

Avidya: Ignorance – Lack of Awareness

Avidya or 'ignorance' is the base of all affliction. Because we don't truly know the self we get tangled in the ego (asmita), which then attaches itself to pleasures (raga), revolts against dislikes (dvesha) and clings to the life in the physical body (abhinivesha), resulting in dukkha (suffering).

When Patanjali speaks of ignorance, he doesn't mean the lack of worldly knowledge. In fact it could be argued that if we are too caught up in acquiring knowledge of the material world (science, politics, history) that this is avidya! This knowledge can sometimes blind us to who we really are; our essence, our true self, our spirit, soul, purusha, atman, or whichever name you connect with. We misperceive who we really are due to avidya, which is closely related to the next klesha: asmita.

Asmita: The Sense of 'I'

When one asks 'Who am I?' What comes to mind?

First we point to our body and think: 'I am Linda. I am a yoga teacher. I am a mother...a wife...' But in reality I am none of those. None of us are truly the labels we or others give us. They are useful for getting around and communicating in this world but we must cultivate a practice in order to lessen the ties of avidya, asmita and the other kleshas.

When you start to analyze these labels or judgments you will see that they are never permanently true. The only real truth is that truth which exists beyond time and place: that which exists always and is changeless. This is the purusha/soul. No matter the outer covering, the purusha exists in its pureness.

Raga & Dvesha: Attraction & Aversion

Raga or 'attraction' is one of the causes-of-afflictions not only because we identify with the qualities of our body/mind that we like, but because we tend to be attracted to sensual pleasures. Our eyes are attracted to beautiful things, our taste buds to sumptuous foods, our nose to the scent of those foods, our ears to stimulating sounds and our skin to stimulating touch.

These are difficult to accept as components of an affliction because our body and mind are part of the material world and they say 'but I am here and I should enjoy this life and reap as much pleasure as possible.'

However, only the discerning mind recognizes that the joy of worldly pleasures will never lead to true happiness.



True happiness can only come from within. It's so clear that stuff, experiences, situations, or another person can never bring everlasting happiness. It's always temporary, limited to a certain situation or tinged with suffering (from the fear of losing it). One yummy piece of chocolate leads us to another, and another and another, which leads to a bellyache.

The opposite of raga is dvesha (aversion). We want to avoid things, people and situations that we don't like. We must not love things so much but we also must not hate them. They are two sides of the same coin.

'When the water in a pot is agitated, the moving water disturbs any reflected object. Similarly, when the calm waters of a man's heart are stirred by likes and dislikes, he is unable to solve his problems and to make wise decisions.'

- from *God Talks with Arjuna in Autobiography of a Yogi* by Paramahansa Yogananda. Solving our problems and learning to make wise decisions is definitely a way to reduce our conflicts within and without – a skill worth the effort!

Abhinivesha: Clinging to Life

The last of the kleshas is abhinivesha, or 'clinging to life'. This is the most difficult one to overcome. It is said to exist even in the sages. When a car is coming towards you it is the instinct to jump out of the way. The sages say that it is proof of re-incarnation, karma and samskāras because each of us has had a taste of death, which lingers and this imprint is the seed of fear, which we are born with.

The clinging is evident in the contemporary Western society with the masses of people obsessed with looking young, to the point of surgery or taking pills. Aging is a natural process and if one can manage to grow spiritually and interiorly the external appearance will not affect their happiness or contentedness.

Which is your most stubborn klesha? And what are your techniques for countering its influence over your life?

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