

PHILOSOPHY OF YOGA PRACTICE - PART III

In Book I of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali defines yoga as the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind (*chitta vritti nirodha*). But when all of the movements, when all of the energies of the mind are stilled through the practice of concentration and meditation, there still remains a state of direct realization called *samadhi*. *Samadhi* is an objective, non-distorted superconscious state wherein spirit perceives its true form, free of the *vrittis*. Patanjali calls his first book *Samadhi Pada* because it defines these fluctuations or variations of the mind that are to be restrained in order to experience *samadhi*—one of the two goals of yoga. Thus the definition of yoga is the self-regulation (*nirodha*) of the fluctuations (*vrittis*) of the mind (*chitta*) which leads to *samadhi*.

Last month we discussed these fluctuations or *vrittis*. According to the Yoga Sutras, it is our identification with the *vrittis* which interferes with a clear, objective perception of the nature of mind, Self, and Life. If the mind is stilled, we will see within it a clear, undistorted reflection of our true nature, which is pure consciousness. Like looking into a calm, quiet lake, we will see that which is within it as well as that which is above it. To be established in a state of *samadhi* is to perceive Self and Life as they are—an integrated whole, a state of yoga.

The Five Klesas

There are five hindrances to *samadhi* or five emotional qualities that scatter the mind and give rise to the *vrittis*. These hindrances or obstacles to *samadhi* are called *klesas*. These five *klesas* are lack of discriminative knowledge (*avidya*), ego (*asmita*), attraction to pleasure (*raga*), aversion to pain (*dvesa*), and attachment to one's physical form (*abhinivesa*). The *klesas* are defined as obstacles or hindrances (to *vritti nirodha*) and are sometimes translated as the source of pain and suffering. It is the *klesas* that make it difficult to pacify the *vrittis*.

Book II of the Sutras is titled *Sadhana Pada*. *Sadhana* means the spiritual practices or methods that help one attain the goals of yoga. This second book describes these goals and the methods by which they can be attained. The first sutra of Book II very concisely explains the techniques that will remove the *klesas* and therefore yield the state of *vritti nirodha*, which leads to *samadhi*. Because this method is a volitional process, it is referred to as *Kriya Yoga*.



The second sutra of Book II goes on to define the goals of Kriya Yoga. Book II, Sutra I reads: *Tapah svadhyaya Isvara pranidhani kriyayogah*, which translates “Kriya Yoga is self-discipline (tapas), self-study (svadhyaya), and attunement to the divine (Isvara pranidhani).” Here Patanjali is referring to three of the niyamas which you have already studied. In the second sutra, Patanjali relates the goals of Kriya Yoga: *Samadhi bhavanarthah klesa tanukaranarthascha*, which translates: “The goals [of Kriya Yoga] are to remove the klesas (the obstacles to vritti nirodha) and to bring about samadhi.”

The Method and Goals of Kriya Yoga

Like many Sanskrit words, *kriya* can be understood on multiple levels. It is derived from the root *kri*, meaning to do. At its most essential level, *kriya* can be defined as an action or a verb. (It is important to recognize that these actions are clearly understood to be volitional and conscious.) In Sanskrit grammar, verbs are actually referred to as *kriyas*. When *kriya* is used as a modifier for the word *yoga*, it refers specifically to actions or rituals which are consciously performed for the purpose of attaining the goals of yoga.

In the broadest context, Kriya Yoga can be understood as a method or system of techniques that leads to vritti nirodha. Patanjali is very clear about his definition of Kriya Yoga, which is the only type of yoga that he specifically defines in the Sutras. Most of what Kriya Yoga is classically understood to be comes from the sutras. However, like most esoteric traditions, many of its specific techniques are not written down but have been transmitted verbally from Guru to disciple. This is done because the techniques produce profound effects and should therefore be practiced only with personal guidance and supervision.

Kriya Yoga encompasses the practice of all eight limbs of Patanjali’s system. It is a system which deals directly with the mind—its structure and dynamics. Kriya Yoga is a method of self-study and meditative attunement which develops a direct perception or insight into the nature of consciousness, the pattern of the mind, and Life itself.

The goals of Kriya Yoga are to remove the root cause of pain and suffering (the klesas) and to attain a state of samadhi. This is accomplished by restraining the fluctuations of the mind unto pure consciousness. Samadhi is perceiving life without a subjective interpretation of it. It is direct experience. Consciousness, as we normally experience it, is modified by our samskaras and filtered through the biases of our thoughts and emotions. The effect of samadhi is to become conscious of one’s true nature rather than identifying with the contents of one’s mind. Samadhi is attained by constant practice

and continual detachment. Constant practice is the repetitious concentration and restraint of the mind. Continual detachment is the progressive detachment from the klesas and vrittis.

Identifying oneself with the fluctuations of the mind is called avidya. Patanjali describes avidya as the field within which all the other klesas grow. Avidya means without wisdom or lacking in discriminative knowledge. It is forgetting one's true nature and mistaking that which is temporal (the physical body, thoughts, and emotions) for that which is eternal (spirit). Avidya causes one to think they are the vrittis: "I" am happy, "I" am sad, "I" am in pain, and the ultimate avidya, "I" am separate from Life. When the fluctuations of the mind are stopped, one "abides in one's true nature" and avidya is removed. Then one experiences the Self and Life as they are, unaffected by the vrittis and klesas.

Samskaras, Klesas, and Karma

In life all is change. What we are attracted to in our youth may be a source of aversion to us in our maturity. The wisdom we think we have today may reveal itself to be folly tomorrow. The timing and sequence of events are critical factors in this world; each human life contains a unique timing mechanism which creates an individual set of experiences. For example, a person who is denied love in childhood will tend to have a very difficult time if love is denied to him as an adult. However, a person who is not denied love in childhood will tend not to have trouble if love is denied to him later in life. This is called an individual's karmic pattern of experience. *Karma* is the law of causation. What causes one person to get upset will have a different effect on someone else. What causes pleasure for one person may cause dissatisfaction for another.

We are the result not only of our past actions but of our thoughts and emotions. These experiences have produced our samskaras—the permanent impressions stored in the unconscious parts of our minds. Mystically, these samskaras are stored in the petals of the chakras. Whether we are aware of them or not, like seeds, they are waiting for the right conditions, stimulus, or time to activate.

As prana enters the chakric system, it provides the potential energy to activate the samskaras that reside in the five lower chakras. Therefore, simply breathing creates a momentum behind the mental and emotional patterns of our consciousness. In other words, if we change our breathing pattern, we can change the emotional pattern and the intensity with which the samskaras activate. This is one of the reasons why pranayama is such a powerful technique.



Karma is misunderstood by most people; they think of it as a law of punishment. Karma, however, is simply the causal force of a strong, active samskara that we (usually) do not have enough self-awareness to control. Like the klesas, karma can be active or dormant, weak or strong. Karma can be activated by people, places, and events. But ultimately, it is triggered by our responses to life—by our interpretations of events and by our attitudes.

Our karmic momentum holds us within a limited field of experiences and perceptions. If we think we are only our body, mind, and emotions, we will act as if we are. This lack of discriminative knowledge (avidya) leads to an attraction or desire for that which is pleasurable (raga) and an aversion or hatred (dvesa) for that which is painful. This alternating fear and desire produces attachment; we desire that which we do not have or fear we will lose that which we already possess. Both attraction and aversion are based on the perception of our ego, which has a very limited horizon of awareness.

The force of the samskaras within us is our karma, and it is karma that activates the klesas. But if a klesa or the samskara that produces it can be weakened, then it can be dissolved by the use of mystical methods. Yoga is such a method. The practice of the eight limbs softens karma, weakening and dissolving the samskaras and the klesas they activate.

Yoga Sutras Book II - Sadhana Pada

Sutra 1: *Tapah svadhyaya Isvapurpranidhani kriyayogah*

Tapah = the heat created by austerity / ardor / fervency

Svadhyaya = self study / reflection on one's experience of life

Isvara = concept of the divine

Pranidhani = devote / offer to

Kriyayogah = the yoga of volitional action

Austerity, self-study and seeing one's actions as offerings toward one's concept of the Divine are the actions which lead to the volitional integration of the Self (Kriya Yoga).

Sutra 2: *Samadhi bhavanarthah klesa tanukaranarthascha*

Samadhi = absorption

Bhavana = creating or bringing forth

Arthah = object / purpose of

Klesa = obstacle / affliction

Tanu = thinned / reduced / attenuated

Karana = making

Artha = object/purpose of

Cha = and

The purpose [of Kriya Yoga] is to remove the obstacles [to vritti nirodha] and bring about absorption in integrated consciousness.

Sutra 3: *Avidyasmita - raga-dvesabhinivesah klesah*

Avidya = mistaking the eternal for the temporal/ignorance

Asmita = literally "I am-ness" experienced as self-importance

Raga = attraction to pleasure

Dvesa = aversion to pain

Abhinivesa = attachment to life/non-acknowledgement of death

Klesa = obstacle/affliction

The obstacles [klesas] are lack of discriminative knowledge, self importance, attraction to pleasure, aversion to pain, and attachment to physical life.

Sutra 4: *Avidya ksetram uttaresam prasupta-tanu-vicchinnodaranam*

Avidya = mistaking the eternal for the temporal/ignorance

Ksetra = field/region

Uttara = other

Prasupta = the state of rest/dormant

Tanu = thinned/reduced/attenuated

Vicchinna = interrupted/diminished momentum

Udaranam = full momentum/heightened/aroused

Lack of discriminative knowledge [avidya] is the field on which all of the other [klesas] reside, whether they are in full force, diminishing, dormant, or attenuated.

Avidya

(Lack of Discriminative Knowledge)

Avidya is the source of all the other klesas. It is the lack of discriminative knowledge and is sometimes translated as ignorance. Perhaps a better translation is forgetfulness; we have forgotten who and what we are and therefore our relationship to life. Avidya is the inability to differentiate between the eternal and the temporal; the inability to discriminate between our subjective interpretation of life, colored by the samskaras, and life as it is. We confuse our thoughts and emotions for reality; we confuse our body and mind for spirit. This leads to an attachment to physical embodiment and the pleasures of the physical senses because we believe that this is all there is. This in turn creates an



aversion to physical and emotional pain. If we forget who we are, and if we believe that we are merely a physical body with its five senses, we become separate from life. We then come to believe that *we* are the center of the universe, the most important thing in our world. This produces the final klesa of ego or self-importance.

There is an old joke in which a person is receiving a job promotion. The voice on the telephone says, “Congratulations! You have been promoted. You are now completely responsible for all manner of things over which you have no control whatsoever.” This is somewhat cynical but is an accurate description of the human experience. We go through life making plans for the future as though we know precisely what the future holds (avidya), when in fact there are no guarantees that there will be a future at all. This is not to say that we should not make plans. However it suggests that we need to become as fluid and detached about the results of those plans as we can be.

Avidya implies that even though on some level of awareness we know that everything in this world is temporary and without guarantees, we forget and get caught up in the momentum of our experience. We become attached to this life as though it were infinite rather than a single, finite incarnation. We need to learn to live our lives sincerely and consciously, embracing the temporal nature of the earth life, while at the same time remembering that all of it can and will dissolve away at some time.

The mind is in a constant state of fluctuation (vrittis) from waking perception to sleep, from imagination to memory. Like the changing contents of the mind, pleasure, pain, and physical embodiment are all temporal. Patanjali explains that the klesas are removed by constant practice and continual detachment. Fear and confusion are two of the most crucial things from which we need to detach ourselves. They arise from our lack of understanding and acceptance of the changing nature of life, whether that change is internal or external, day to day, or lifetime to lifetime. We need to become aware of that which is unchanging—our true nature, spirit.

Most of us go through life seeking happiness or fulfillment in things that are defined by change. Even if we intellectually acknowledge the impermanent nature of life, emotionally we behave as though the circumstances we are experiencing, good or bad, will last forever. This is especially true of our pain and suffering. The repetitious problems we experience in life are caused by our lack of awareness. This is avidya on its most insidious level. If we do not learn from our experiences and take action (kriya) based on that awareness, we are trapped on what the Hindus and Buddhists call *samsara*, the wheel of repetitious births and deaths. But it is not just a rebirth of the physical body that they are referring to; it is the rebirth of thoughts and emotions which are the source of the pain and suffering we experience.



Asmita (Ego)

Perhaps one of the greatest manifestations of avidya is the inability to recognize that we are not separate from life. Life is rooted in reciprocity, and we are connected to it with every breath we breathe. To better understand asmita, it is helpful to contrast it with another Sanskrit term for ego, *ahamkara*. Both describe an experience of self, but at opposite ends of the spectrum. Ahamkara refers to a sense of self that is relatively self-existent. That is to say, ahamkara is a sense of self that does not rely on outer forms to define itself. The klesa of asmita, on the other hand, occurs when we establish our sense of self by identifying with the “objects” in our life and the vrittis in our mind.

Me, me, I, I, mine, mine: these are the mantras of asmita. We say, “My spouse, my children, my car.” When referring to where we have parked our car, we often say, “I’m parked over there,” implying that “I” and “my car” are one and the same. We also very inaccurately say that we are angry or sad, rather than being aware that we are experiencing anger or sadness. There is a very important distinction between our thoughts and emotions (which are temporal forms), and consciousness which is aware of our thoughts and emotions. Identification with our thoughts and emotions is one of the greatest sources of confusion and lack of clarity in our lives.

Asmita implies that in order for us to know who we are, we need to define ourselves in contrast with the outer world. We often try to accomplish this by feeling that we are better or worse than someone or something else. Thinking that we are better or worse than someone or something else is based on our self-importance. Ahamkara, on the other hand, is a sense of self without self-importance and without the need to reference oneself to anything in the outer world. The greater our sense of self (ahamkara), the less self-importance (asmita) we need. It is only because of the self-importance of asmita that we become judgmental, angry, indignant, offended or self-righteous. The only reason we have these feelings is that our self-importance is challenged.

To function in the world effectively, we need to make decisions that are based on our own relative importance and self-judgment. We have developed concepts like right and wrong, better or worse, and good or bad. After all, this is a world defined by duality. We need to act with sincerity because our actions have purpose and relevance. Yet at the same time, we need to diminish the degree of self-importance that we place on our decisions. We need to recognize that the horizon of our awareness is subjective and limited. We need to understand that other people have needs different from our own.



Our spiritual task is to recognize that what is meaningful or desirable to us may not be meaningful or desirable to someone else. Therefore we need to make decisions with wisdom and clarity and with a healthy detachment from our own self-interest.

Raga (Attraction to Pleasure)

Referring to raga as a klesa implies that our attraction to pleasure needs to be weakened. When Patanjali talks about attraction to pleasure, he is not referring to our basic needs for food, clothing or shelter. There is no problem with seeking pleasures that are not destructive to us or to others if we do not become attached to those pleasures—and if they do not control us. A brief self-reflection will reveal the truth. Do we become unhappy or upset when something pleasurable is taken away from us? If we do, we have formed an attachment. Can we control the desire? If we cannot, we have lost control of our body and mind.

Pleasure and pain are highly subjective; what one person finds pleasurable, another will not. What Patanjali is trying to express is not that pleasure in and of itself is bad, but that the emotional force behind the attraction is an obstacle to vritti nirodha. Attraction to pleasure is a strong motivating force in our lives. In the final analysis, like all the klesas, we need to use raga appropriately and then progressively detach from it.

Another way of looking at raga is that we seek pleasure in the hope that it will bring us happiness. One way happiness can be differentiated from pleasure is to consider happiness as something we can experience without having to have an external form to provide it. Pleasure, on the other hand, is derived from an external source. That is to say, we can be happy just for the sake of being happy, but we usually relate our pleasure to an external source. Happiness is more difficult to acquire than pleasure, but it also has greater longevity. Pleasure is just a small step towards happiness. Problems arise when we think that pleasure is a goal in itself rather than merely a step along the way.

If taken to an extreme, all pleasures (like eating chocolate) create an excess in one area and by necessity a deficiency in another. This ultimately leads to pain and suffering. The greater the imbalance becomes, the greater the resulting discomfort. On the other hand, there is no such thing as an excess of happiness. Increasing happiness will only expand and create more happiness in everyone it touches. Perhaps the ancient Greeks said it best: "Happiness is a by-product of a life well lived."



Dvesa
(Aversion to Pain)

Aversion to pain is also a great influence on our behavioral choices. When the klesas are described as the sources of pain and suffering, it is important to understand the distinction between these two terms. Pain is traditionally used in reference to physical pain. Suffering is normally considered to be an emotional or mental experience. Both are real, but what causes pain or suffering in one person will not cause it in another. Like the attraction to pleasure, aversion is very subjective; and like attraction, what we need to be conscious of is the emotional force of the aversion.

It is the anticipation or possibility of pain and suffering, real or imaginary, that creates most of our fears. Most of us respond to fear in one of two ways: We either let fear inhibit our actions, or we are motivated to respond in ways which are above and beyond our ordinary understanding of what we think we are capable of. In the first response, we avoid what we believe to be a possible source of dissatisfaction (*duhkham*). The greater this reaction becomes, the narrower we make the parameters of our lives. Thus we limit the possibilities of our experiences in order to avoid the possibility of pain and suffering.

Though on a physical level, dvesa is a valuable survival tool, mentally and emotionally it can be one of the most inhibiting influences in our lives. It can prevent us from looking at those parts of ourselves that are too painful to acknowledge or look at without distortion. This is why a healthy balanced ego needs to be cultivated and why it is important that we develop detachment along with our practice. The more stable we are in our sense of self (*ahamkara*), the less self-importance (*asmita*) we need, and the less threatened we become.

When pain or suffering does occur, this experience can be valuable only if we learn from it. Everyone is on the path. The whole purpose of this world is to learn and to unfold. Sometimes pain or suffering can be a wake up call. It can make us aware that something is wrong either physically, emotionally, or with our attitude. It points out where we need to place our focus. Every experience in life offers an opportunity to awaken further. Svadhyaya (self-study) is expressed best in accepting all life experiences as opportunities for acquiring self-knowledge.

The other way we can respond to fear is like a warrior. The energy of fear, if properly harnessed, can help us to accomplish extraordinary deeds. Each time we use fear in this way, we increase our capacity to use it positively in the future. When we face our fears

and harness them, we acquire a stronger sense of self (ahamkara) and need to rely less on our external environment for self-importance (asmita). In time, even the inevitable end of this particular incarnation will not be an aversion.

Abhinivesa

(Attachment to Physical Embodiment)

Abhinivesa is usually translated as attachment to life. In order to overcome abhinivesa, we need to accept our death as a reference point for how to live. If we see all of our actions in light of our death, they will be more naturally placed into a proper perspective. We would have a difficult time indulging in any of the klesas if we were aware that the present moment was our last in this life. With death as the standard for our actions, making a decision is much clearer. We are much less likely to indulge in petty self-importance, desires, or fears. The awareness of our death helps us to experience each and every moment of our life as unique and precious.

To be fully present in one's life and at the same time remain compassionately detached is not an easy task. The only way most people are motivated in life is by desire or aversion, but these are usually motivated by ego and create heavy attachments. Rather than being motivated by attraction and aversion, the goal in yoga is to act without attachment. In the East this is called *dharma*. It is interesting to note that in the West we do not have a good word for non-attachment.

Dharma has many meanings. It can be translated as "that which sustains and upholds." It symbolizes the nature or order of things, whether that is the nature of a person or a system. Dharma means universal law and universal order. It is also translated as duty—duty to one's civilization as well as duty to one's own self. It is a code of conduct that keeps one in harmony with the environment in which one finds oneself. Dharma is said to be established on the four pillars of truth, purity, compassion, and charity.

Abhinivesa is the subtlest of all the klesas and is present in even the wisest of souls. It is not just the will to live but the will to live in one's present form. Patanjali is referring not only to the will to live in our current physical form but within the mental forms and images of ourselves which we are attached to. Abhinivesa is not a fear of death; it is the desire to maintain the life-form we currently experience. To weaken abhinivesa, we need to recognize that we are spirit, and spirit is immortal. Recognizing this we come to understand that it is only we who are responsible for the circumstances of our life. We have created the forms that we embody, and only we can dissolve or recreate them.



Removing the Klesas

This world is a school for the soul, the garden of God. The whole purpose of life is to learn. The physical body is a vehicle or tool for experiencing, focusing and learning about the consciousness which dwells within it.

The samskaras stored within our chakras affect the way we create our experiences of the world. We have spent the last five months studying these biases and the proclivities they produce in our bodies and minds. These cumulative forces create our karma, the causal force within our life. The karma of each soul is unique and creates its individual pattern of experience. This karmic proclivity activates the klesas, which in turn scatter the mind and churn the vrittis.

The klesas have their genesis in the samskaras or subliminal impressions and biases of the mind. Patanjali points out that the klesas can be strong or weak, active or latent. In other words, the emotional force behind a particular klesa can vary in intensity and duration. To attain vritti nirodha and samadhi, we first need to remove or weaken the klesas. Klesas that are weak or dormant are easier to remove. Kriya Yoga is the means by which we can remove them. It is the conscious practice of self-discipline, self-study, and attunement.

The Yoga Sutras indicate that the best time to work on removing a klesa is when it is weak or dormant. For example, the best time to weaken the samskara to eat chocolate is before you purchase it, while the klesa that creates the desire for pleasure is dormant. Once you bring the chocolate into your home, it is difficult to resist. This takes continual self-discipline (tapas) and self-awareness (svadhyaya). The home that we all live in is our mind. Like the attraction to the pleasure of chocolate, the thoughts we hold both consciously and unconsciously have specific effects upon us. We need to be aware of how different people, places, and things affect us. But more importantly, we should develop an awareness of how the thoughts we think and the emotions behind those thoughts affect us. The main objective in practicing the eight limbs of yoga is to develop an overriding samskara of greater self-awareness. This requires constant practice. It also requires continual detachment from the klesas. A great sage said it best: "The secret of learning to walk is to get up one more time than you fall down."

