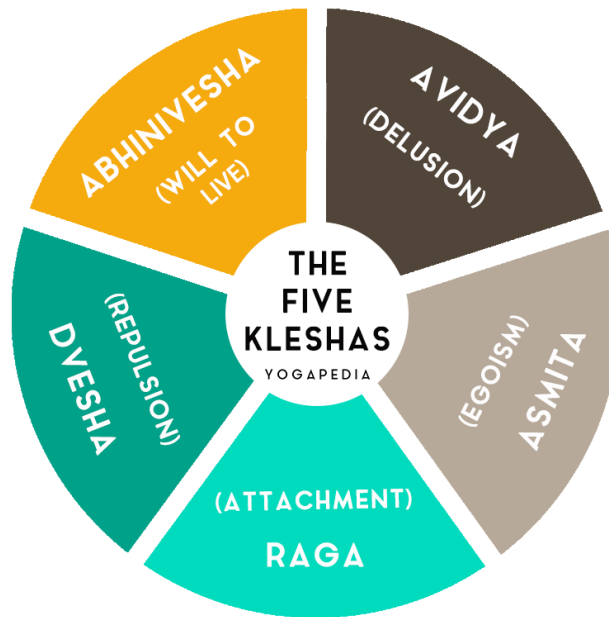


THE KLESHAS



According to the Yoga Sutra (Book II), there are five kleshas, or afflictions, that can stop us reaching our full spiritual evolution.

Suffering is an inherent aspect of human life. Yet, with great skill and awareness, we can choose how much and how deeply we suffer. Both the ancient yogis and the Buddhists point to the kleshas, the five poisons or afflictions, as the cause of our suffering. These “afflictions” distort our minds and our perceptions affecting how we think, act, and feel. The five main kleshas vary in intensity on our psyche, from being trivial in their effect to utter blindness. The kleshas not only create suffering, but the ancient yogis tell us that they bind us to the endless cycle of birth and rebirth, and thus preventing us from achieving enlightenment.

What are the 5 kleshas?

The Sanskrit word klesha translates to “poison” or “affliction.” This term is used to denote specific negative mental patterns that obscure our true nature. The kleshas are considered the cause of suffering in yogic and Buddhist philosophy and are to be actively overcome.

1. **Avidya** (ignorance) is the misconception of our true reality, believing that the temporary is eternal, the impure is the pure, and pleasure to be painful. This false and distorted representation of reality is the primary klesha. From avidya the four other kleshas emerge.
2. **Asmita** (I-am-ness) is the identification of ourselves with our ego. We create a self-image of ourselves that we believe is us, but it is not us. This self-image can contain both external (I am poor) and internal (I am a bad person) false projections. We become trapped within the projections we have created of our life.

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3. **Raga** (attachment) is the attraction for things that bring satisfaction to oneself. Our desire for pleasurable experiences creates mindless actions and blind-sighted vision. When we cannot obtain what we desire, we suffer. When we do obtain what we desire, our feelings of pleasure soon fade and we begin our search for pleasure again, becoming trapped in an endless cycle.
4. **Dvesha** (repulsion) is the opposite of raga, aversion towards things that produce unpleasant experiences. If we cannot avoid the things we dislike, we suffer. Even thinking about unpleasant experiences produces suffering.
5. **Abhinivesha** (will to live) is the deepest and most universal klesha, remaining with us until our deaths. We know that one day we will indeed die, yet our fear of death is deeply buried in our unconsciousness.

Overcoming the Kleshas

The first stage of working with the kleshas is to simply acknowledge them. Reflection promotes self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-knowledge to uncover and see the kleshas and their roots as well as how they create suffering. By simply shining the light of your awareness to these dark places will lesson their powers of suffering.

The focused use of basic yogic techniques can counteract simple kleshas. Gross kleshas are overcome with meditation, [tapas](#) and seeking wisdom. Yogic techniques are said to burn away the impurities of the kleshas to purify the mind. Cultivating Pramana Vritti (the mental state of right knowledge through direct perception, inference, and trustworthy testimony) is a powerful tool to overcome more potent kleshas.

As you work with overcoming your kleshas, make mental or written notes on what you find to be the best methods. Then when you next encounter the same or similar mental poison you will already have the antidote.

Yogis believe that there is a calm, peaceful, and pure awareness residing deep within all beings. By ridding ourselves of our kleshas, we are able to clearly see the reality of the world and to let our true nature shine brightly.

The following transcript I have included as a means of helping us to think about this subject in real terms:

I believe I am absolutely consciously aware of these things (kleshas and the reasons we suffer) yet I do not know how to stop submitting to them. For instance, I think of my life and the time I have wasted and how much I wish to accomplish and how I might never be able to. I think of my situation and try to figure out how to change it because I am not satisfied with my life, even though I know that just sitting here thinking of how to change it will change nothing and only cause more suffering on top of my unsatisfying life. I never come up with any answers. So why do I waste so much time trying to THINK of how I can change my life? I am well aware that my thoughts about these things are the main reason I am suffering. If I could only live my days in the moment, simply doing what needs to be done at that moment, instead of thinking about what could have been or what I can do to change what IS, and the pain I feel when I realise I don't have much of a choice or the ability to change anything about my current situation, I realise that I would experience less

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suffering, regardless of how grim my circumstances may seem. I also realise that the times when I DO let go of the thoughts that cause so much suffering, it is when I have many things to do that take up my time. I am happiest when I am busy with things I enjoy doing. The worst times are when I have nothing to do and too much time to think and dwell on my circumstances. This sometimes makes it very difficult to clear my mind for meditation. Anyway, my point is that even though I am well aware of what I must do in order to avoid or at least lessen the suffering, I can't seem to make myself do it. I continue to have this uncontrollable urge to sit in silence and try to come up with a solution to change my circumstances even though I have been trying to come up with a solution for a long enough time to realise that there is nothing I can do to change my situation at this time. Unless I constantly keep my mind occupied on other things, things I enjoy, my mind immediately returns to thinking about things I cannot change and I begin to suffer. As soon as my mind has a minute of idle time in which to think about my situation I begin suffering. I am torturing myself and making life seem worse than it is. How can I train myself to stop this?

<https://www.yogabasics.com/learn/the-cause-of-suffering-the-kleshas/>

Using your yoga practice to help.

Avidya, Ignorance

We are embodiments of divine consciousness. When we forget who we really are, we suffer disconnection from the atman (soul). The more that we can let go of our own ignorance by connecting with our true nature—by practicing asana, pranayama, and meditation—the more we can liberate ourselves from misunderstanding reality and holding false beliefs. Yoga philosophy tells us that if we can overcome ignorance, we can automatically overcome the other four kleshas.

Try This: Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance Pose)

This pose, which is both a balancing pose and a backbend, requires concentration and determination. It represents the power of Lord Shiva to destroy ignorance and ignite the flame of knowledge.

Asmita, Ego

Everyone has an ego—it's necessary to survive with confidence in the world. However, when we live at its mercy, it starts acting like a tyrant. This is where suffering happens. To overcome ego, we must remind ourselves that individual liberation is intimately connected to collective liberation. Karma yoga allows us to control the ego by practicing selfless service and relinquishing the fruits of our actions to divine consciousness.

Try This: Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

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In this inversion, the head is below the heart and we look at ourselves and the world from a different perspective. In this pose, practice being an impartial observer of your mind, training your ego to be less reactive. Try it outside too...especially if there's a view.

Raga, Attachment

Attachment to pleasures causes more grief than we realise. The taste of chocolate, the embrace of a lover—once it's over, we feel what is known in Buddhism as a craving. We want more. But when we're caught up in thinking about what we had in the past or worrying about the future, we don't live fully in the present moment.

Try This: Nadi Shodhana Pranayama (Alternate-Nostril Breathing)

Practicing breath work brings the body and mind together; alternate-nostril breathing in particular balances the right and left sides of the body to create a greater sense of balance and equanimity.

Dvesha, Aversion

Dvesha is an emotional response that judges things as good or bad, creating division and disharmony with what we've decided is no good. When we live in a state of imbalance, we fail to realise that true happiness can only be found within.

Try This: The Mantra Om

Use sound as a vehicle to quieten your mind and move away from fixating on your likes and dislikes. This can help you create equanimity within, develop resilience, and open up to your own personal growth. By chanting OM daily, we develop resilience and receptivity to areas of personal growth and evolution. Or sing...or play an instrument.

Abhinivesha, Fear of Death

Life is impermanent, and yet so much of our mental suffering comes from clinging to our physical body. In yoga, we understand that the physical body is simply a vehicle for the soul. Death is inevitable. Ultimate peace can only come through recognising mortality and working toward the ultimate goal of yoga, samadhi (enlightenment).

Try This: Savasana (Corpse Pose)

In this resting pose, practice detachment. Focus on enjoying the time that you have in your physical body, accepting impermanence. Visualise yourself merging with divine consciousness, feeling the release that comes with this awakening within.

“Obstacles (kleshas) are the breeding ground for tendencies (samskaras) that give rise to actions and the consequences (karma) thereof. Such obstacles are experienced as visible or invisible obstacles.” ~ Yoga Sutra 2.12

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This sutra asks you to take a close look at the kleshas (personal obstacles) that shape your intentions—and eventually your karma. It asks you to look at the driving force of your actions. Once you begin to identify your kleshas through a mindful yoga practice, you'll be able to set better intentions and reset your karmic path.

Your yoga practice can help you become more aware of your patterns—both physical and psychological. Notice where you hold tension, and pay attention to thoughts that keep emerging. When you know what your priorities are, it can give you the strength to make life choices that are more true to you.

Try this now: Stand in Tadasana (The Mountain Pose) and observe how your body is held and how it is grounded on your feet. Pay close attention to the exact regions of the feet that carry the load of your body. Make a mental map in which regions that carry more load are coloured with darker colours. Then observe how this map changes over time. Initially, you may not notice any change, but if you pay close attention, and keep observing this, you will surely feel that the load distribution on your feet shifts and changes all the time. You will start to notice the change as it happens and not only in retrospect!

Two aspects of the practice allow a glimpse into change; the first is the fact that we encounter ourselves differently in practice every day. Anyone who practices regularly knows that no two practices are alike.

B.K.S Iyengar in *The Tree of Yoga* writes: “I don't want yesterday's experience. I want to see what new understanding may come in addition to what I had felt up to now. In this quest, my body is my bow, my intelligence is my arrow, and my target is my self. I am aware inside and I am aware outside. We must learn to stretch the bow well before we can hit the target, so go on extending the bow of your body. Then the arrow of your intelligence will become sharp, and when you release the arrow, it will hit the target, which is your soul. Don't worry about the target. When the bow is stretched well and the arrow is sharp, you will hit it.”

Come to your practice with beginners mind. A mind that is curious, fresh eyed. Then, you will be able to see that your experience is changing from day to day. Some days the practice flows smoothly and our body responds to us, while other days we experience stiffness and resistance. Even if we want to repeat a sequence of asanas we have practiced in the past, we will not be able to fully recreate that experience. The very fact that we have already done this sequence, makes the experience different. It is important to be aware of these differences and try to understand why on a certain day we feel light and open while on other days we feel closed and contracted. What could be the reasons for this?

It is important to pay attention to our mental state as we begin our practice; do we begin our practice in a rajasic (enthusiastic, energetic, passionate), a tamasic (heavy, lazy, resistant, inert), or a sattvic (peaceful, balanced, pure) state?

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Practice is also a wonderful opportunity to learn to pay attention to changes as they take place. Our sense of body and our state of consciousness changes constantly and significantly during practice. Often we begin our practice in a tamasic state, feeling resistance and heaviness, looking for excuses for how we can postpone our practice. But as we begin our practice (to the extent that we actually brought ourselves to begin...) even after the first Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog Pose), we will immediately feel a change in our physical sensation, the quality of our breath, and the state of our mind. We can notice these changes as they arise.

Later on in our practice, if carried out correctly, we will move towards a more sattvic state, in which we will sense more flow, as well as responsiveness, and our consciousness will quieten and empty itself of unnecessary thoughts and narratives. If we pay attention to these changes, we will cultivate the ability and the sensitivity to really witness anitya – the ephemerality, temporality, and transience of all phenomena. Then we won't hold on to anything and live with greater freedom and joy!