

Kleshas

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

The same outward event can awaken very different responses. A correction may be received as help, or felt as a threat to everything we believe ourselves to be. Yoga asks us to study the inward causes of such differences. *Kleshas* are afflictions that obscure consciousness and bind it to mistaken identification. In Professor Iyer's exposition of Patanjali, they form an interconnected account of ignorance, self-appropriation, attraction, aversion, and clinging. Understanding their relation gives spiritual practice a more exact purpose than the wish to feel better.

The five are *avidya*, ignorance; *asmita*, egoism; *raga*, attachment; *dvesha*, aversion; and *abhinivesha*, tenacious clinging to mundane existence. They appear in innumerable forms, yet their variety grows from a common ground. *Avidya* is the field in which the other four arise. This means that the afflictions cannot be understood fully as independent defects. Each expresses, in a particular way, the underlying confusion between the spiritual source of awareness and the changing conditions through which awareness operates.

Avidya is therefore deeper than missing information. Professor Iyer describes it as an inversion which mistakes *prakriti* for *purusha*, the false for the true, and the painful for the pleasurable. *Prakriti* is the field of Nature and its transformations; *purusha* is the Seer. When the changing instrument is taken to be the enduring Self, a fragile basis of identity is established. More information can coexist with that error. The fundamental question concerns the standpoint from which information is received and used.

Asmita gives the inversion a personal center. The power of the Seer is confused with the instrument of seeing, even with *buddhi* in its subtle cognitive function. In ordinary life, an opinion, achievement, or remembered wound may then be treated as the self whose existence must be defended. This is more precise than calling someone vain. A humble appearance can conceal a strong attachment to being recognized as humble. The study concerns a relation of identification, not the social attractiveness of a personality.

Raga and *dvesha* organize movement around that center. Attachment reaches toward what promises pleasure or security; aversion retreats from what seems painful. Both can distort the object they approach or avoid. Something useful may be rejected because it carries discomfort, while something harmful may be protected because it is familiar or flattering. Pleasure and pain remain facts of experience, but they are unreliable as the final measure of what deserves to guide a life.

Abhinivesha gathers the movement into clinging to conditioned existence. The familiar self wishes to continue in the forms by which it knows itself. Professor Iyer describes this clinging as self-sustaining through the inertia of habit. The teaching includes the fear associated with mortality, while reaching more broadly into attachment to a particular way of being. Its study should increase sympathy for human vulnerability. It does not make care for the body, prudent action, or grief into evidence of spiritual failure.

The *kleshas* differ from the five *chittavrittis*, or types of mental modification. Memory, for example, is a mental activity; attachment can color the way memory is used. *Samskaras* are residual impressions which help explain how a response acquires momentum. Professor Iyer describes the afflictions as creating deposits that channel mental energy back into their own reinforcement. These distinctions let us separate the present movement, the conditioning behind it, and the error of identification that gives the pattern its deeper hold.

A shared undertaking provides a useful illustration. Someone suggests changing a plan we developed. The proposal is heard as a judgment on our worth; we search for objections before considering its merits. There may be attachment to praise, aversion to embarrassment, and a wish to preserve a familiar role. We need not claim to have identified every hidden cause. It is enough to notice that the actual needs of the undertaking have disappeared behind a defense of personal importance.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception restores those needs to attention. We can ask who will use the work, what the proposal would improve, and what responsibilities others are carrying. The original plan may still be sound, or it may need revision. Either conclusion becomes more trustworthy when the inquiry is less governed by self-protection. The wider circle does not dissolve accountability. It lets accountability answer to the common purpose rather than to the preservation of an image.

Patanjali's discipline begins with *tapas*, *svadhyaya*, and *ishvarapranidhana*: self-discipline, self-study, and surrender to the divine. Together they address the afflictions through conduct, understanding, and orientation of will. Restraint prevents a harmful impulse from immediately becoming action. Study examines its assumptions. Devotion releases the demand that spiritual effort must enhance the personal claimant. In Professor Iyer's interpretation, these practices prepare and support meditation, through which the underlying confusion is met more directly.

Dhyana, or meditation, is described as the fundamental correction, accompanied by mental and moral exercises. It develops *vairagya*, detachment, and *kshanti*, patient endurance, while the accumulated matrix of habit and karma is worked through. A recognized error may continue to have consequences. Professor Iyer explicitly distinguishes the destruction of the causes of future bondage from avoiding consequences already set in motion. This distinction keeps practice

honest: insight brings responsibility for repair, without a promise that all difficulty will immediately disappear.

Blavatsky's glossary connects ignorance with the production of merit and demerit, placing the discussion within ethical causation. This gives the teaching a horizon larger than personal mood. Our motives and choices become conditions in a shared world. Human Solidarity asks us to recognize that others also struggle with inherited habits, fear, and mistaken identification. The recognition can soften contempt while strengthening responsibility. We can interrupt harmful conduct and still refuse to treat an affliction as the whole truth about a human being.

The field of Nature also has an educational purpose. Professor Iyer explains that *prakriti* supplies the experiences through which the soul can move toward emancipation. A difficult encounter need not be interpreted as meaningless punishment, nor must its pain be glorified. It can disclose a binding identification and summon a more responsible choice. The same circumstances that once supplied material for resentment may become occasions for patience, truthfulness, or repair. Their value depends partly on how they are met, while the welfare of those affected remains a real consideration.

A helpful image is light passing through colored glass. The coloring alters what appears without creating the source of illumination. In the same way, the afflictions obscure and distort the operation of consciousness; they do not establish its spiritual essence. This image encourages both patience and discrimination. A bright color may still be a distortion, and a familiar one may be difficult to notice. The task is to understand the medium and its effects, rather than worship or condemn the image it produces.

The culmination is *vivekakhyati*, sustained discernment of the Seer, and the freedom described in the account of *dharmamegha samadhi*. Such fulfillment belongs to the profound scope of yoga. Our present responsibility is more immediate: to recognize a binding response before strengthening it, to consider another's need, and to return to practice after a lapse. A clearer relation to truth gradually becomes a clearer relation to people. The study of the *kleshas* then helps relieve the very suffering it has taught us to understand.

Glossary

Abhinivesha — Clinging to conditioned existence; one of the five afflictions in Patanjali's yoga.

Arhat — One who has attained spiritual liberation; the glossary passage associates this attainment with illumination and self-mastery.

Asmita — Egoism or identification of the power of seeing with its instrument.

Avidya — Fundamental ignorance or mistaken identification, from which the other afflictions arise.

Buddhi — Spiritual intuition or wisdom; the principle through which higher discernment illumines mind.

Chittavritti — A modification or movement of the mind-field; *chittavrittis* is the plural.

Dharmamegha — The “rain cloud of righteousness”; a culminating state associated with continuous discernment.

Dhyana — Sustained meditation or contemplation.

Dvesha — Aversion or repulsion; one of the five afflictions.

Ishvarapranidhana — Surrender or devotion to the divine Lord within; one of the yogic observances.

Kaivalya — Emancipation or spiritual freedom; in Patanjali, the Seer’s release from mistaken identification.

Klesha — An affliction that binds consciousness; *kleshas* is the plural.

Kshanti — Patience, forbearance, or endurance, joined here to detachment in spiritual practice.

Prakriti — Nature or the field of manifestation, distinguished from *Purusha* in Patanjali’s yoga.

Purusha — The Seer or spiritual consciousness, distinguished from the changing field of *Prakriti*.

Raga — Attachment or attraction that binds consciousness to its objects.

Sadhana — Sustained spiritual practice integrating discipline, study, and devotion.

Samadhi — Meditative absorption; a discipline with gradations culminating in spiritual cognition.

Samskara — An impression or tendency formed through experience; *samskaras* is the plural.

Svadyaya — Sacred study and self-examination, deepening toward contemplation of the Self.

Tapas — The concentrated effort of contemplation, self-discipline, and purification.

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

Vidya — Knowledge or wisdom; in these passages, spiritual illumination contrasted with *avidya*.

Vivekakhyaati — Unbroken discriminative cognition; the continuous discernment of the Seer from the seen.

Yogin — A practitioner of yoga; *yogins* and *yogi* are related forms.

Quotes for Meditation and Self Study

1. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“Patanjali initiated his teaching concerning praxis by calling attention to the three chief elements in the discipline of yoga: *tapas*, austerity, self-restraint and eventually self-mastery; *svadhyaya*, self-study, self-examination, including calm contemplation of *purusha*, the Supreme Self; and *ishvarapranidhana*, self-surrender to the Lord, the omnipresent divine spirit within the secret heart. The threefold practice or *sadhana* can remove the *kleshas* or afflictions which imprison *purusha* and thus facilitate *samadhi* or meditative absorption.”

Meditation thought: Bring restraint, study, and devotion into one practice. Which of these would most strengthen the others in the difficulty before you?

2. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“The *kleshas*, though varied in their myriad manifestations, are essentially five: *avidya*, ignorance; *asmita*, egoism; *raga*, attachment; *dvesha*, aversion; and *abhinivesha*, tenacious clinging to mundane existence. Ignorance, however, is the broad field in which all the other *kleshas* arise, because they are no more than distinct specializations of ignorance.”

Meditation thought: Study the afflictions as related expressions of ignorance. This prevents a single symptom from being mistaken for the whole cause.

3. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“Ignorance is a fundamental inverted confusion which mistakes *prakriti* for *purusha*, the false for the true, the impure for the pure, and the painful for the pleasurable – a persisting malaise which might have been difficult to comprehend in the past but which is now a familiar condition in contemporary psychology.”

Meditation thought: Examine what has been asked to provide lasting security. Can a changing condition bear the meaning placed upon it?

4. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 277.

“Springing from fundamental ignorance, egoism (*asmita*) confuses the potency of the Seer (*purusha*) with the power of sight (*buddhi*). Attachment (*raga*) is the pursuit of what is mistaken to be pleasurable, whilst aversion (*dvesha*) flees from what is believed to be painful.”

Meditation thought: Observe the personal claim around which attraction and aversion gather. A clearer identity changes how experience is valued.

5. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“Since the *kleshas* are engendered by a persistent error, at root mistaking *prakriti* for *purusha*, or attributing the essential characteristics of *purusha* to one or another aspect of *prakriti*, they can be eliminated only by a radical reversal of the downward tendency of alienation and retreat from truth. This fundamental correction, as far-reaching as the entrenched habit of inversion which necessitates it, is *dhyana*, meditation, together with the mental and moral exercises which strengthen it.”

Meditation thought: Let meditation be supported by honest moral effort. The correction of misidentification must enter the way we act.

6. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“In the graphic language of spiritual physiology, the *kleshas* constitute a psychic colouring or peculiar obsession which forms a persisting matrix of karma, the results of which must eventually be experienced, and also creates mental deposits which channel mental energies into repeatedly reinforcing the *kleshas*.”

Meditation thought: Recognize the reinforcing movement between affliction and impression. Interrupting one repetition can reveal where further work is needed.

7. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“*Dhyana* alone can effectively eradicate these mental deposits while providing the clear detachment (*vairagya*) and cool patience (*kshanti*) to exhaust and dissolve the karmic matrix over time. As long as the *kleshas* remain, involuntary incarnation into bodies captive to the pleasure-pain principle is inescapable.”

Meditation thought: Give the accumulated pattern time to lose its support. Patience and detachment help make the work steady.

8. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 278.

“Through yoga, it is not possible to avoid consequences already set in motion, but it is feasible to destroy the *kleshas* and thereby remove the causal chain of suffering.”

Meditation thought: Accept responsibility for consequences already released. A new understanding can change future causes without erasing the need for repair.

9. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 280.

“For Patanjali, *prakriti* must necessarily exist, for it is through experience – conjunction with *prakriti* – that *purusha* knows itself as it is. But when *purusha* wrongly apprehends *prakriti*, as it must until it knows itself truly as it is, ignorance and all the entangling *kleshas* arise.”

Meditation thought: Consider experience as an occasion for education. What can be learned without denying the reality of another’s suffering?

10. R.N. Iyer — “Sadhana Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 280.

“From the standpoint of any individual involved in *prakriti*, unbroken discriminative cognition (*vivekakhyati*) is the sole means to emancipation, for it releases the abiding sense of reality (*purusha*) in him. The dual process of removing the *kleshas* and reflecting on the Self (*purusha*) assures the progressive and climactic attainment of emancipation (*kaivalya*) such that ignorance does not arise again.”

Meditation thought: Let discrimination concern the enduring ground of consciousness. Keep its distant fulfillment distinct from a useful present insight.

11. R.N. Iyer — “Kaivalya Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 298.

“All the residues of the afflictions (*kleshas*) simply drop away as water runs off an impervious surface, and the *yogin* finds self-emancipation even in embodied life. *Dharmamegha samadhi* destroys the residuum of karma and the *kleshas* at the root, so that they can never arise again.”

Meditation thought: Contemplate this culmination with humility. Allow its scope to give practice direction without making an ordinary quiet interval into a claim of attainment.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Theosophical Glossary*, entry “Demerit”, p. 100.

“Demerit. In Occult and Buddhistic parlance, a constituent of Karma. It is through *avidya* or ignorance of *vidya*, divine illumination, that merit and demerit are produced. Once an *Arhat* obtains full illumination and perfect control over his personality and lower nature, he ceases to create merit and demerit.”

Meditation thought: Read the glossary statement within its spiritual context. Ethical causation calls for care in motive, not indifference to the consequences of action.