

Raga and Dvesha

Definitional Essay

Theosophy Trust

We often call a choice free because no one has forced it upon us. Yet a closer look may reveal how strongly the wish for pleasure and the avoidance of discomfort have determined it. *Raga* and *dvesha* name attachment and aversion, the paired movements through which consciousness becomes bound to its preferences. In Professor Iyer's interpretation of Patanjali, they are two of the five *kleshas*. Their study asks whether our responses arise from a clear understanding of what is needed, or from the demand to secure one experience and escape another.

Raga reaches toward what is taken to be pleasurable; *dvesha* withdraws from what is believed to be painful. The apparent object may be a possession, a sensation, a relationship, or an idea of ourselves. The important question is how the mind apprehends it. A useful correction may be rejected because it hurts pride. An unhealthy dependence may be defended because it feels familiar. The immediate feeling does not reliably disclose the value of what has aroused it.

The pair belongs within a larger account of misidentification. *Avidya* mistakes the changing field of Nature for the spiritual Self. *Asmita* supplies the personal claimant around whom experience is organized. Attachment and aversion then pursue or defend that claimant's interests, while *abhinivesha* seeks its continued existence. Professor Iyer calls *raga* and *dvesha* the primary psychological pair of opposites within ignorance. Their relation explains why a life can remain inwardly constrained while its outward objects and opportunities continually change.

Attachment is often accompanied by anxiety about loss. The more our worth depends on praise, the more threatening criticism becomes. Aversion can also preserve an attachment in a reversed form: resenting another's success may keep us bound to the very comparison we claim to reject. We need not infer the same hidden cause behind every dislike. The teaching invites specific observation. What is being protected in this response, and does the strength of the response correspond to the actual situation?

Professor Iyer describes the *kleshas* as a coloring of consciousness which creates and reinforces mental deposits. A remembered pleasure becomes a reason to seek repetition; a remembered pain prepares a defensive response. These *samskaras* shape expectation, and expectation influences perception. Thus, the same suggestion may sound generous when offered by a friend and offensive when offered by someone we dislike. Studying this difference can reveal how much our judgment depends on its source rather than on its content.

The doctrine does not require indifference to pleasure, suffering, or danger. Love can value another's presence without demanding possession. Discrimination can recognize harmful conduct without being driven by hatred. A refusal may be necessary, and a pleasure may be received gratefully. The inquiry concerns bondage to the feeling and the distortion that follows from it. When pleasure and pain become our final authorities, they displace questions of truth, duty, proportion, and the welfare of others.

Karma gives these inward movements an ethical setting. Choices motivated by grasping and recoil become causes, whose effects enter relationships and future experience. Blavatsky's answer in *The Key to Theosophy* directs the student toward the Higher Self and karma in the effort to subdue selfishness. The appeal is to inward responsibility and lawful consequence. Reorganizing the environment may solve a practical problem, but it cannot by itself remove the tendency to make each new condition serve an unchanged demand.

Vairagya, detachment, is the corresponding discipline. Professor Iyer distinguishes it from passive disinterest and connects it with a lucid recognition of the relative significance of objects. Its clarity allows care to become less possessive and judgment less reactive. *Abhyasa* supplies the continuity of effort needed to sustain this orientation. We learn through repeated occasions, some easy and some difficult, to act without making personal attraction or repulsion the sole measure of the action.

Consider a family conversation about how to share an ordinary responsibility. One person wants the arrangement that feels convenient; another rejects a proposal because it resembles an earlier disappointment. The discussion can become an exchange of attractions and aversions, while the actual task remains unsettled. A more discerning approach names the practical need, the time available, and what each person can reasonably undertake. Feelings are heard, but they are placed beside other relevant facts rather than being asked to settle everything.

Drawing a Larger Circle of Conception means including those facts and the people who will bear the consequences. Perhaps the least attractive task is also the one that would most relieve another's burden. Perhaps an apparently generous plan would quietly transfer too much work to someone already tired. The wider view does not guarantee a painless decision. It makes the decision more answerable to reality. A person can accept some inconvenience because a common need has become clearer than the wish for immediate ease.

Human Solidarity is strengthened when sympathy reaches beyond the people and tasks we already find agreeable. Selective kindness can remain closely tied to *raga*. Equally, a commitment to justice can be distorted by *dvesha* when it becomes satisfaction in another's humiliation. The spiritual discipline asks us to examine both possibilities. We can sustain a firm judgment about

conduct while seeking a remedy that reduces harm. Concern then gains a more dependable basis than fluctuating liking and dislike.

Meditation supports this freedom by making the movements more visible and less commanding. In “Sadhana Pada,” Professor Iyer joins *dhyana* with detachment and patient endurance in the gradual dissolution of mental deposits. Seeing a tendency once does not remove all of its momentum. The recurring occasion offers further work: recognize the pull, consider its basis, and act with as much clarity as is available. The attitude is steady and exact, without turning each recurrence into an occasion for self-reproach.

There is room for gratitude within this discipline. A pleasant experience can be received fully without requiring it to continue forever. Releasing that demand may make us more attentive to what is actually given, and more willing to acknowledge the people and conditions through which it became possible.

The same discipline extends to the fruits of action. Professor Iyer’s discussion of *The Diamond Sutra* connects spiritual practice with freedom from mental and emotional attachment to results. This does not excuse careless work. An undertaking deserves preparation, attention, and correction. Releasing appropriation means that success need not establish superiority and failure need not destroy the willingness to serve. The task remains worthy of care even when its result does not supply the satisfaction we anticipated.

The image of a pendulum helps us contemplate the alternation. A desired object draws the mind one way; an unwelcome possibility draws it another. Much energy can be spent in motion which never examines its own governing forces. Detachment introduces a different relation to the movement. We become able to notice the swing without immediately adding to it. The image concerns inward balance, while actual life still calls for intelligent action and the exercise of moral judgment.

As grasping and recoil lose some of their authority, affection has more room to become generous. We can enjoy without demanding permanence, refuse without cultivating hatred, and work without requiring every outcome to confirm us. This is a practical beginning, not a claim that the afflictions have ended. Each choice grounded in a wider understanding makes the next such choice more conceivable. Between the pressure to possess and the urgency to escape, a steadier concern for life can gradually find expression.

Glossary

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

Abhyasa — Steady, repeated practice; the effort to maintain a chosen state of attention.

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.

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.

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

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

Parinama — Change or transformation; in the cited passage, the changing consequences associated with karma.

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.

Tapa — Anxious brooding in the quoted passage; distinct there from *tapas* as spiritual discipline.

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

Vairagya — Detachment or dispassion, joined to discriminative understanding.

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: Give attraction and aversion a practical discipline through restraint, study, and devotion. Understanding becomes steadier when all three support it.

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: Locate the pair within the wider pattern of affliction. Their recurrence may reveal an identification beneath the immediate preference.

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: Ask whether the pleasant has been confused with the enduring good. Let the inquiry include consequences beyond the first feeling.

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 both the reach toward satisfaction and the recoil from discomfort. What personal claim gives these movements their force?

5. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 272.

“*Vairagya* cannot be merely passive disinterest in the content of experience any more than sleep can substitute for wakeful serenity. It is true detachment whilst being fully aware of the relative significance of objects, and this element of self-conscious maintenance of calm detachment is exactly what makes it real *vairagya*.”

Meditation thought: Let detachment become clearer perception. It should leave the mind more capable of care and proportion.

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: Consider how a repeated preference becomes a coloring. The present person or task deserves to be seen beyond that inheritance.

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: Join the work of meditation with patience about habit. Neither impatient force nor passive repetition completes the discipline.

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

“Elation and depression are the inevitable effects of such embodiment. Since these are the product of egoism and the polarity of attraction and aversion, rooted in ignorance and resulting in the tenacious clinging to mundane existence, the discerning *yogin* comes to see that the truth of spiritual freedom and the rapture of limitless love transcend the *kleshas* entirely.”

Meditation thought: Notice how elation and disappointment depend on the same demanded outcome. What purpose remains worthy through both conditions?

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

“Karma means *parinama*, change, and this invariably induces the longing to recover what is receding, to enhance what is emerging, or to sustain a static balance where no thing can endure. To be drawn to some objects and conditions and to be disinclined towards others is indeed to foster *tapa*, anxious brooding over what might be lost or what one might be forced to encounter.”

Meditation thought: Observe anxious brooding about what may be lost or encountered. Return to the responsibility that can actually be met now.

10. R.N. Iyer — “Samadhi Pada”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. III, p. 271.

“Patanjali taught that deliverance can only come through *abhyasa*, assiduous practice, and *vairagya*, dispassionate detachment. *Abhyasa* is the active opposite of passive sleep, and *vairagya* frees one from all attachments, including the *kleshas*, which induce misconceptions. Together, these two mirror in the world of change that which is changeless beyond it.”

Meditation thought: Return attention to a chosen steadiness and loosen its claim upon passing objects. Practice and detachment make one another more effective.

11. R.N. Iyer — “The Diamond Sutra”, *The Gupta Vidya*, Vol. II, p. 128.

“In the practice of this yoga, there must be, as *the Diamond Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita* make clear, no mental or emotional attachment to the results of our actions. In this system of yoga, the Gita points out, no effort is lost and even a little of this practice delivers a man from great risk.”

Meditation thought: Give the action full care while releasing the demand for a personally gratifying result. Let usefulness remain its measure.

12. H.P. Blavatsky — *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 42.

“To his Higher Self, the divine spirit, or the God in him, and to his Karma. How long shall we have to repeat over and over again that the tree is known by its fruit, the nature of the cause by its effects?”

Meditation thought: Look to inward responsibility and the effects of conduct. A worthy intention must become recognizable in its fruits.