

Klesas

BKS Iyengar

Light on Life, p190

The Five Afflictions (Klesas)

The Afflictions are a particular pattern of disturbance to the human consciousness, as universal and prevalent as fruit flies to healthy apples. Our state of mind at any given moment is a wave pattern. It is incredibly complex. It is constantly modified by outside stimuli, an advertisement, an unkind word, a smile from a friend. Rising thoughts from the unconscious and memory confuse it further—a wish, a regret. But there are more enduring patterns of interference that I shall explain now. They are as inbuilt in us as fruit flies are in the life cycle of apples. They are called the polluting fluctuations of consciousness or afflictions (klesas). They corrupt our lives and vitiate our best intentions to ripen as a person.

There are five afflictions. They are natural, innate, and they afflict us all. The first of them is in effect the father of the other four. If you can overcome it, you will have turned night into day. Whereas certain schools of thought, especially in the West, make an amalgam of all the forces of evil and call it the Devil, yogic thought begs to differ. It too makes an amalgam of all the forces that lead men to perform evil and perverse deeds. The difference is that western thought ascribes the attribute of intelligence to evil. The devil is a clever devil, sophisticated in the arts of corruption and possessing an independent consciousness separate from and antithetical to the aims of man and God. This is a situation of unending conflict between two intelligent and sentient forces, one good and the other evil.

The Devil of yoga is not intelligent. He is ignorant. In fact, he is Ignorance itself. We often think that ignorance means you don't know the capital of Albania. What yoga means by Ignorance can perhaps best be translated as "nescience," which simply means not knowing. So to Hindus, the archenemy is a state of not knowing. What don't we know when we are ignorant?

The answer is this. You don't know what is real and what is not real. You don't know what is enduring and what is perishable. You don't know who you are and who you are not. Your whole world is upside down because you take the artefacts in your living room to be more real than the unity that connects us all, more real than the relations and obligations that unite us all. Perceiving the links and associations that bind the cosmos in a seamless whole is the object of yoga's journey of discovery. It is this idea that we live in a totally topsy-turvy world that gives rise to the saying that what is day for the ordinary man is night for the wise and vice versa. There is a famous phrase by a metaphysical poet who said that, "A fool who persists in his folly will become wise." The European medieval humanist Erasmus wrote a book called In Praise of Folly. From Europe to the Far East, there is a tradition that human perception is so totally flawed that frequently it is the "saintly idiot" who is wiser than all his seemingly sensible neighbours. What this means is that we are not required simply to adjust our vision, but to turn it inside out as well as outside in, a complete reversal. It means that the ultimate truth is inconceivable in normal consciousness.

These statements about Ignorance (in Sanskrit called avidya) are challenging. There are various ways to explain them. They are mostly so revolutionary that they require the use of paradox. The Lord Jesus explained it well. He said that if you build a house on sand, it will founder. If you build it on a rock, it will stand firm. This means that a life must be built on a foundation of reality that is firm. Unfortunately, what seems firm, that is to say the things of life that offer us security, wealth, possessions, prejudices,

beliefs, privilege, and position, are not solid at all. That refers back to when I said that learning to live with uncertainty is the great art of living. Jesus also means that only a life built on spiritual values (dharma) is based firmly in truth and will stand up to the shocks of life.

You could put it this way. All mankind lives unwittingly within the truth of yoga. Yoga is one. No one escapes the mechanism of “As you sow, so shall you reap.” Yet we deny the totality of our vision. We find ourselves in the position of having to portion it up, to compartmentalize it, to cherry-pick what suits us and reject what does not. Why? It is because we all misapprehend reality. Not just partially, but totally. Only the supreme renunciate (bhaktan) is capable, with one peerless gesture of surrender, of turning the Universe inside out and outside in. In the West this is exemplified by St. Francis of Assisi embracing a leper because he perceived a soul identical to his own within. We others simply cannot. We are like a man who has put his shirt on inside out and back to front. The only way he can rectify his error is to take it off, work out how it should be, and start again. Through yoga, we take off the shirt of our ignorance, study it, and put it back on correctly, as a shirt of knowledge. To do this, we examine (like the man turning out the body and each sleeve of his shirt separately) each petal of yoga as if it were separate. Just as man knows that the shirt is one but has many designs, we should not forget that yoga is only one.

Spiritual values are not the sauce on the dish of material life, perhaps only to be indulged in on Sunday. They are the main dish, that which nourishes and sustains us. Material values are the sauce, and they can help to make life extremely pleasant. In moderation and tasted with detachment, they will make this world a paradise. But they do not endure. Ignorance (avidya) prevents us from seeing the truth—what does not endure is the egoic self—ME. The undiscovered soul endures the misperception that I am ME. It is this egoic ME that does not want to die. This impersonation of soul by ego is at the base of all human woes, and this is the root of avidya (ignorance or nescience).

Ignorance is, in its essence, taking the day-to-day self we know, for the immortal Self, the true Self or Soul. If you combine that with the fifth affliction, which is Fear of Death and Clinging to Life, it means that a great deal of human activity throughout all ages is an attempt to perpetuate the existence of the ego itself, through name, fame, wealth, glory, or achievement. Yet the soul endures, and the known ego will perish, as does its outward sheath, the body. This is mankind’s horrid predicament, that what he believes himself to be, his ego and attributes, are perishable, whereas what man merely senses himself to be, transcendent consciousness and soul, will endure. We cannot endure the loss of the known. We have insufficient faith to place trust in the survival of the unknown. Yoga’s answer is to say, “Discover the unknown, and you will encounter your own immortality.” I cannot stress sufficiently that the Five Afflictions are interwoven into the fiber of all our beings. They are not like defects such as laziness or greed, which we may or may not have. They are wave patterns of interference that stem from our glorious individuality, biological, psychological, and spiritual. They are the fundamental misapprehension of the relationship that the part (our individual selves) has in relationship to the Whole (Nature and Divinity). Without a clear appreciation of what we receive from the Whole and what we contribute back to the well-being of the Whole, we are left howling in the wilderness. No lovers, servants, riches, cars, houses, or public acclaim can salve the wound of a dysfunctional relationship with our origin. “Know your Father,” said Lord Jesus. By this statement he was directly addressing the problem of not knowing (avidya). The other four afflictions are the shoots of the root, avidya. The first affliction that emerges from avidya is called Pride (asmita). Pride leads to arrogance. Arrogance leads to what the Greeks called “hubris,” that is vying with the gods for pre-eminence. Destruction is the certain result. Yogically all that it means is that the fragile and beautiful stem of individuality that resides in each one of us, pure in origin and intention, meets, as it sprouts, the phenomenon of the external world—clothes, girls, boys,

cars, position, titles, money, power, and influence—and subsequently is coloured by them. Asmita (I-ness) is pure and colourless, both in origin and when knowledge of wisdom is established. It is purity and singularity without defining attributes. But, as it meets the world, it becomes tainted, coloured, by contact, and becomes pride. It assumes the attributes that seem to cluster around it and loses its pristine beauty. That is the beauty we see in a young child, before the world has sullied his or her innocence.

So asmita, our unique and stainless individuality, can, through the saddening and obscure years of life, harden into an exclusive shell of selfishness, of me, of pride. This pride lies in difference, not in equality. You are pretty, but I am ugly. I am fierce, but you are weak. I own a house, but you are a beggar. I am right, but you are wrong. It is, in effect, ignorance (not knowing) raised to the level of a political platform. It is the insanity of individualism, when it should be the joy of singularity. Pride blinds us to the quality of others. We judge by externals and by worthless comparisons. We lose the possibility of joy in the existence of others. We expect others to perform according to our desires and expectations. We are constantly dissatisfied. To borrow a golfing metaphor, we lose the ability to play the ball where it lies. The first two afflictions, Ignorance (not knowing) and Pride, are considered to be wave patterns of interference operating at an intellectual level. The next two, Attachment (raga) and Aversion (dvesa), indirectly influence us more at an emotional level. We must be careful with language here. When we say, “I am very attached to my wife,” we mean, “I love her.” So it is only a manner of speaking. What raga really means is obsessive or perverted love, a conflation of the egoic self with the object of one’s attachment. We have all witnessed the car owner who, faced with a tiny scratch to the bodywork of his vehicle, leaps from it like a berserk warrior who has received a wound in battle.

What we witness here is a fusion and absolute identification between the ego (which does not endure) and an object in its possession (which does not endure either). We all know the phrase concerning death: You can’t take it with you. This is true. I cannot take my ego beyond the grave, and I certainly can’t take my car, my land, or my bank account. The dominant word here is “my.” You can easily see how this is the child of ignorance—one impermanent entity seeking an enduring link with another impermanent entity. It is quite insane from a logical point of view, which is why I said earlier that we must take off the shirt of ignorance and turn it inside out. There is no way to adjust it when you are still wearing it. The word raga therefore applies to the magnetic attraction between ego and the pleasant objects that surround it.

The correct attitude to our “possessions” is gratitude, not ownership. Toward our car we should feel gratitude that it conveys us safely and allows us to see places we would not otherwise have seen. I am grateful to the table I am writing on. It makes this book possible. Whether it is “my” table or not is irrelevant. In India we have a ceremony every year in which we garland our household objects and thank them for the service they render us. We borrow their services for a certain time and are grateful. But the table is a table and will probably still be doing its job long after my death but not indefinitely.

What, you must be asking, is the case when someone you love dies? You are sundered. There is a rending pain of separation. Of course there is. But this is not raga. I lost my wife suddenly, brutally, unexpectedly. I was not even there, but away teaching in Mumbai for the weekend. I could not get back in time. I did not cry at her funeral. My soul loved her soul. This is love. It is transcendental and transcends the separation of death. If my ego, my small self, had been the source of my feelings for her, then I would have cried, and mostly I would have been crying for myself. There is nothing wrong with shedding tears for ones we love, but we must know for whom they are shed—for the loss of those who remain and not for those who have departed. But, as the poet says, “Death shall have no dominion.”

Aversion (dvesa) is the opposite side of attachment. It is a repulsion that leads to enmity and hate, like the same poles of two magnets pushing away from each other. Again it is based on superficialities. My essence cannot hate your essence, because they are the same. I may deplore your behaviour, but it is a nonsense to deduce that therefore I hate you. If I, on occasion, have deplored my own behaviour, does that mean I should hate my own soul, hate the divinity within? Of course not. I should correct my behaviour. Again it is ignorance that plays the puppet master and sows confusion. If we conflate what people do with who they are in their deepest origin, we lock ourselves into an adversarial and aggressive crouch, an unending conflict. By doing so, we sign up for a permanent war between good and evil, which cannot be won. All we should seek is for evil-doers to reform their deeds. The best way to help them is to reform our own deeds, and then we may well discover that all mankind is much of a muchness, one essence common to all, and that all our woes stem from the fundamental misperception of ignorance. Ignorance here comes to mean the denial of original oneness or universal community.

The final wave pattern or affliction that influences our lives is experienced at an instinctual level. At an instinctual level, it makes good sense, as we are all animals trying to stay alive. It is when we upgrade a natural survival mechanism to inappropriate levels that trouble arises. It is called Fear of Death or Clinging to Life (abhinivesa). Naturally when you are sick, your biological body clings to life; it is supposed to. This is the struggle for existence, the reasonable desire to prolong the life of the vehicle of the soul. After all, it is not like a car. You cannot just buy another one. You have to keep your body as healthy as possible on the spiritual path.

We all identify with our bodies. This is inevitable. If an elephant charges toward us as we cross the road, we do not cry, "My God, my ego will be crushed!" At that moment we are our bodies, which jump out of the way. This is largely true when we are ill. Good health banishes body identification to a degree nothing else can.

We accept that, in the long run, we are not our bodies. Body perishes; we hope we will not. But you cannot tell that to pain. We may know that body is not our enduring identity, but that knowledge is theoretical. In health we forget our bodies; in sickness we cannot. How much simpler life would be if this were the other way round. In relation to the body, this means that we are not our body in any permanent sense, but for all practical purposes we are our bodies, because they are the vehicles through which we perceive and can discover our immortality. This is why yoga begins with the body.

Nevertheless, we accept that body will perish, lamentable though that may be. What we do, however, find intolerable is the fact that "I" shall die, that my ego is as perishable as my flesh. This brings us back to ignorance. Our ego is the most intimate and interior part of ourselves that most of us know. If ego perishes, we fear that we shall be engulfed in darkness, in an everlasting void. So we conclude that we must perpetuate ego at all costs, through dynasties, fame, great buildings, and all immortality projects aimed at cheating the Grim Reaper. What rubbish, says yoga. Ego is an important component of consciousness that you require to operate your body during its life. Beyond that it has no purpose.

But consciousness is much more than our egos. It is even, according to yoga, more than our minds. Scientists are beginning to ask the question, "How does mind give rise to consciousness?" Yoga would ask, "How does consciousness give rise to the mind?" It is its precursor and not limited by the physicality of mind. Consciousness exists at a microcosmic level, i.e. smaller than the atom. According to some scientists, cosmic intelligence exists at a quantum level. Mind, (manas) is the most physical and external part of consciousness. Being the most material or manifest, its fortunes are linked to those of the body

for good or ill, which is why a car accident can leave you “brain dead” but not consciousness dead. In near death experiences, people retain a form of awareness but without its constituent parts. Even when all neurosystems, including memory, have totally shut down, consciousness continues as a witness, though at a level that cannot yet be scientifically perceived. Because intelligence (buddhi) exists in us as a particle of a universal phenomenon, it cannot be totally eclipsed, even when we suffer physical damage. In the same way, soul cannot be killed. Only its vehicle can die.

Look for the light. Ego is not the source of light. Consciousness transmits the divine light of origin, of the soul. But it is like the moon; it reflects the light of the sun. It has no light of its own. Find the sun, says yoga, discover the soul. That is what Hatha Yoga means. Ha is the sun—the Self; Tha is the moon of consciousness. When the lens of consciousness is perfect and clean, it will be clear that its illuminating light is the innermost soul. The soul is divine, nonmaterial, perfect, and eternal. In other words, it does not die. Discover what does not die, and the illusion of death is unmasked. That is the conquest of death. That is why I did not cry for my wife, in spite of all my pain, for I will not cry for an illusion.

Because this affliction concerning the finality of death is necessarily and usefully instructive, it is the hardest to break, even if we grasp it, as I am sure you do, intellectually. We are not required to eradicate it from its appropriate biological sphere, but to repulse its invasion of “non-biological” realms. The instinctual urge for the body’s survival is one thing and very necessary. But we want to go further. We want our genes to live on in our progeny. We want our children to live in the country house our family has lived in for generations. We want our businesses to survive and prosper, even after our retirement or death. We want, if we are artists or scientists, to be enshrined in posterity. When we extend that instinct to survive to subtle areas such as the perpetuation of the ego, it can be psychologically destructive.

THE FIVE AFFLICTIONS ARE SO FUNDAMENTAL to our lives and our ability to navigate the journey of yoga that I will recap them. Avidya (ignorance, lack of knowledge, lack of understanding) is the fundamental misapprehension that material reality is more important than the spiritual one. It is not because all things material are transient, impermanent, and susceptible to constant change in the form of growth and decay. The problem is our dependence on what will not last. When asmita expresses pride, it gets confused. Yet it is an extraordinary gift of individuality with the experiences and material objects that the individual encounters in the course of his life.

Raga (attachment or desire) is an emotional bondage to any source of pleasure, manifesting in extreme forms as an inability to let go of anything, a sort of addiction to the furniture of life rather than a vibration of the joy of life itself. Dvesa (aversion) is an emotional repulsion and flight from pain, manifesting as prejudice and hatred and making it impossible for us to learn from life’s hardships and our own mistakes. Abhinivesa (fear of death) is an instinctive clinging to life, which, though appropriate at a biological level, causes perverted attitudes when transferred to aspects of life where it does not apply. Abhinivesa can easily be experienced if you over-prolong the retention at the end of exhalation. Panic sets in. It is ignorance, or the fundamental misapprehension of Reality, that underpins and feeds all the other afflictions. If you want to see the power these afflictions have over our lives and human history in general, just watch the evening news on television and identify these five destructive influences at work. That is easy. Then apply them to yourself.

Summary of the Klesas

In his commentary on the Yoga Sutras BKS Iyengar writes

Klesas (sufferings or afflictions) have 5 causes: ignorance, or lack of spiritual wisdom and understanding (avidya), pride or egoism (asmita), attachment (raga), aversion (dvesa), and fear of death and clinging to life (abhinivesa). The first two are intellectual defects, the next two emotional, and the last instinctual. They may be hidden, latent, attenuated or highly active¹.

He further writes

Patanjali addresses each type of sadhaka according to his level of intelligence and awareness. For those with **average** intellect, he explains five types of afflictions (**klesas**) and the ways in which they cause disturbances in the citta.²

Klesas	How they disturb citta	II.3 translation	Level of affliction	Spheres of the brain
Avidya (II.5)	Want of spiritual knowledge	Ignorance or lack of wisdom	Intelligence; “here lack of spiritual knowledge combined with pride or arrogance inflates the ego, causing conceit and the loss of one’s sense of balance.”	Conscious front brain and the top brain is considered the seat of ‘I’ consciousness
Asmita (II.6)	I or me or mine	Ego, pride of the ego or sense of ‘I’		
Raga (II.7)	Desire and attachment	Attachment to pleasure	Emotions/feelings; “Succumbing to excessive desires and attachments or allowing oneself to be carried away by expressions of hatred, creates disharmony between body and mind, which may lead to psychosomatic disorders.”	The base of the brain, the hypothalamus
Dvesa (II.8)	Pain and hatred	Aversion to pain		
Abhinivesa (II.9)	Fear of death	Clinging to life	Instinctive; “the desire to prolong one’s life and concern for one’s own survival.. makes one suspicious in dealings with others, and causes one to become selfish and self-centred.”	The ‘old’ brain or back brain (unconscious brain), retains samskaras .

The sadhaka must learn to locate the sources of the afflictions, in order to be able to nip them in the bud through his yogic principles and disciplines³

¹ BKS Iyengar Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Thorsons 2002 p.23

² BKS Iyengar Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Thorsons 2002 p.291

³ BKS Iyengar Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Thorsons 2002 p. 113