

Spring Term, Part 2

The causes of suffering

Session1: Ignorance

The state of Yoga is a state of Unity, a state of coherence within ourselves and in harmony with the rest of the world: animal, vegetal, mineral, and cosmic.

There are obstacles to that state of yoga:

1.30- These obstacles are:

Illness, fatigue, doubt, carelessness, laziness, attachment, delusion, the failure to achieve Samadhi, the failure to maintain Samadhi. They are distractions to the path of yoga.

1.31- Such distractions make the body restless, the breathing coarse, and the mind agitated. They result in suffering.

1.32- The persevering practice of a single principle keeps obstacles at distance.

Patanjali, The Yoga Sutras

Suffering hits the nervous system and can translate itself into various symptoms: depression, ticks and uncontrolled movements, lack of harmony and ease with breathing, or even inability to function in daily life. There are 3 different sources of suffering:

- ... that originates in oneself
- on account of others
- ... that arises from natural disasters (or unnatural ones: war for example)

Suffering that has its source in oneself is the most susceptible to change, and that is the kind of suffering yoga addresses first. However, we can also lessen suffering from external causes by **acting** upon them rather than **reacting** to them.

Patanjali identifies 5 causes of suffering. **Ignorance** or false certitudes is the first one and also the source of the other 4 causes of suffering, which are **egoism, attachment, repulsion and fear**. Prejudices and conditioning often lead to erroneous impulses and actions. This is a fundamental aspect of yoga: casting light on human psychology by analysing the impulses that lead to confusion and trauma.

He proposes 3 practical steps that support the path of Yoga:

- The first support is the discipline (tapas) of caring for ourselves physically: we must eliminate negative factors, which prevent good physical, mental and emotional health. This can be achieved by following the 5 principles of yoga, consistently practising moderate exercise to eliminate tensions (regular practice of yoga postures and breath control), and following a balanced diet, light on the digestion (Sattva), neither too stimulating (raja) or too heavy (tamas).
- The second support, self-reflection (svadhyaya) is helped through the study of the sacred yoga texts (vedas). These are texts of reference that help to understand our self and our actions.
- The third support is surrender to a higher power. This is the result of the first two. A disciplined practice and self-study lead to a relativisation of our own importance and ego. The meaning of our own temporary life is only of value if we are able to perceive it in relation to the meaning of "Life" as a cosmic and dynamic force. Some people call this force "God" or their "highest principle" and develop a life ethic around these concepts.

Session 2: egoism

In previous sessions, I have mentioned that the Yoga system does not allocate us only one body; but 3 bodies, subdivided in 5 koshas or layers. We looked at the prāṇayama kosha or energy layer that gives life to the physical body, the anamaya kosha. The Prāṇamaya kosha is composed by the 5 major vital energies or Vāyus, which allow the body to be animated, alive.

This is a quick reminder on how these 3 bodies interact and work together:

1. **The physical body or food body:** *Anamaya kosha* composed of the 5 elements: ether, air, fire, water, earth
2. **The astral body:**
 - a. The vital layer: *Pranamaya kosha* with the 5 *vayus* and the 5 organs of action (mouth, hands, feet, anus and genitals).
 - b. The mental layer: *Manomaya kosha* with *manas* (the mind), *citta* (the subconscious mind) and the 5 organs of senses: eyes (sight), ears (hearing), nose (sense of smell), the tongue (taste), the skin (touch).
 - c. The intellect layer: *Vijñāmaya kosha* with *Buddhi* (the intellect) and *ahankara* (the ego).
3. Finally, **the causal body** composed of the bliss layer or *Anandamaya kosha* with *Avidya* or “incorrect understanding/ignorance”, the main cause of suffering, which once eliminated brings peace, happiness and tranquility.
The astral and the causal body stay together and are eternal: only the physical body dies. This is the belief in re-incarnation.

When talking about the second cause of suffering, “egoism”, we are talking about the Ego. Before we can understand why this might be a cause of suffering, we need to understand what IS the EGO.

Anything to do with the mind is in the astral body. There are several levels and to understand how these different levels interact, let's look at an example.

Imagine that it is cold and you are seeing a white substance on the ground and your eyes, through the retina and the optic nerve transmit that information to your brain. So first of all you would need your senses to acquire knowledge.

This information is then transmitted to “manas”, the mind that thinks and doubts: “is this substance frost, snow, ice ... ?”

In order to answer that question, you then need the intellect (*buddhi*) to analyse the data. However, the intellect cannot come to a conclusion before it gets to question and compare the experiences accumulated in the subconscious mind (*citta*). Eventually, the intellect has to come backwards and forwards to “manas”, which evaluates the validity of the experiences in the subconscious mind (*citta*): “What might this white substance be? Let's look at its texture, look, even taste?”. At one point the intellect (*buddhi*) decides on an answer and the Ego can say: “this is not ice, not snow ... it looks a bit like chalk; but the texture and smell are different: I know, it is salt that people put on ice to stop sliding around.” However, if there is no valid experience, the ego will say: “I don't know what it is”.

Our ego is our conscious mind. It allows us to be self-sufficient. It is the space where we experiment freedom of choice. We need that ego, using reason and logic, to go about our daily life; but also to go beyond this survival existence to accomplish our “dharma” or destiny. However, this conscious mind is influenced by all sort of ideologies and can be easily manipulated (for example

by adverts and the media generally). The Ego is a very powerful force that can have repercussions on the whole planet; and from this point of view can cause suffering at a large scale.

When the ego embraces Yoga, it acts as a waking-up call. It helps us to evolve by helping us to come out of this tamasic (heavy and resistant) state. It enriches our physical, emotional and spiritual experience and stops the mind becoming passive and disconnected from our heart and our intuition.

An inflated ego manifests itself by a display of arrogance. In a yoga practice, it can do a lot of damage by creating unnecessary and unhealthy physical and emotional competition (better or worse look with clothes, performance), which hinders progress and peace of mind. It may also lead to abuse and bullying.

The motor for action then becomes power, greed, or desperation (to be good, loved etc). It creates this feeling that “things” or “people” belong or should belong to us; therefore it breaks our unity with others. Because of the ego we keep comparing ourselves to others (am I better, worse, acceptable?); and with it come desire, anger, greed, jealousy, delusion and hatred. It is the most difficult aspect of our mind to control. At a more global level, **Egoism** breeds racism, sexism, xenophobia, and many other plagues in “ism” that cloud our judgement.

Marianne, March 2017

Session 3: Attachment

1.12: Control over the mind's fluctuations comes from persevering practice and non-attachment

2.8: Attachment is clinging to pleasure

2.12: The impressions of the past action, stored deep in the mind, are the seeds of desire.

They ripen into action in seen and unseen ways__if not in this life, then in a future one.

(Patanjali, Yoga Sutras)

It is in the nature of pleasure to want to renew it. When desire progressively invades the mind and leads it to take action, it becomes a source of conflicts and difficulty: accumulation of useless possessions, broken relationships, sickness ...

You can become a victim of your own pursuit of pleasure with regards to material possessions (food, sex, honours, alcohol, wealth generally), but to spiritual ones as well. Badly digested beliefs and excessive attachment to the spiritual endeavour in question might lead to fanaticism and intolerance.

Although interest is positive, since nothing can be done without interest; passion in excess however is one of the principal causes of suffering.

The opposite of attachment is not necessarily detachment. I prefer to call it non-attachment. For example, a lot of people say that one glass of red wine a day is good for your health. However, this one glass can become a habit difficult to control in terms of how much one drinks (a small or a large glass of wine), and also how often that one glass is consumed. What is then the best course of action: total detachment (abstinence) or non-attachment (free from addiction)?

One can also be attached to the past: memories and objects that can cause regrets and impair the ability to enjoy the present moment fully. The idea here is not to reject pleasure; but not to cling to

it. By using one's ability to discriminate (viveka) and being able to assess situations from an objective, non-emotional perspective, one can become free: free from all passion.

Marianne, March 2017

Session 4: Aversion

Aversion is clinging to pain (Patanjali, 2.8)

There are different versions of this verse. Bernard Bouanchaud translate it as:

Aversion is the consequence of displeasure

If we experience something negatively we tend not to want to repeat it. This is a healthy reaction. However, it can sometimes get us to become less adventurous, to the point that we end up stuck in our ways of life and that stops us to develop. In that sense, it is a cause of suffering, or at best a cause of dullness and passivity.

However, it is sometimes the opposite: we had this bad experience and somehow we keep repeating it. For example, in personal relationships, we tend to be attracted to people that are "bad news". If we have experienced emotional starvation as a child, we tend to be attracted to people similar to the people responsible for this starvation, maybe in an attempt to correct the original "error". We become clingy, despite the fact that the experience has been painful.

It is the same mechanism as attachment, though it can be seen as its opposite. Aversion may lead to isolation or conflict. It is an active negative attitude of rejection and is one of the chief causes of failure in family, professional, and personal relationships.

Finally, we may also develop an attitude of aversion to ourselves, and this is a chief source of suffering. After years of having to push ourselves, perform to "our best", being assessed or "appraised", we come to a point where somehow we are feeling "fake", even when we are actually successful.

Marianne, March 2017

Session 5: Fear (of death)

... and the fear (of death) is a spontaneous feeling, deeply rooted in us all, no matter how learned we may be. (Patanjali, YS, 2.9)

Attachment and aversion (pleasure and displeasure) are caused by external elements of attraction and repulsion. However, fear or feeling of insecurity is inherent in a human being, even though it also has acquired elements. At a physical level it is part of our instinctive make up: if we feel threatened, our sympathetic nervous system tells us to "fight or flee". Essentially, the response prepares the body to either fight or flee the threat. It is important to note that the response can be triggered due to both real and imaginary threats.

So the stress created by a threatening situation can actually be helpful, making it more likely that you will cope effectively with that threat. The fight-or-flight response can actually play a critical role in your survival. One thing to remember is that while the fight-or-flight response happens

automatically, that does not mean that it is always accurate. Sometimes we respond in this way even when there is no real threat. Phobias are good examples of how the fight-or-flight response might be triggered in the face of a perceived threat. Our mind can amplify and distort our perception of danger. So we are not talking only about physical fear but about existential fear as well. Fear of the unknown (ignorance) might stem from our attachments and aversions, and trigger a fear of changes at various levels: changes in body, personality, health, emotional relationships, or material possessions.

Patanjali proposes two ways of reducing suffering:

- Recognise your impulses (patterns of fear) to eliminate them: use positive thought and “Think twice before you do anything” (The story of the rope and the snake). So when you notice that you are becoming tense, you can start looking for ways to calm down and relax your body.
- Meditation: when disturbances invade your thoughts and actions, take a step back and reconsider. Divert your focus (taking your attention to something else), or discuss your problems or fears with someone external to them.

With asanas, being focused and mindful of every step leading to a posture will help you to overcome your fears. Postures like headstand, handstand and balances generally do not necessarily require that much strength and flexibility. To be able to achieve these postures, you need to practise and “to know how”. If you can quieten your mind (through breathing and preparatory postures), and do not get disheartened if you do not achieve that posture fully immediately, there might be a point where this will “happen”. However, it might also be that for your own health and safety you ought not to do them at all: use your common sense and find alternatives to achieve the same benefit through lower risk postures.

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