

THE KLESHAS

*EXPLORING THE ELUSIVENESS
OF HAPPINESS*

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THE KLESHAS: *EXPLORING THE ELUSIVENESS OF HAPPINESS*
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Introduction

We want to be happy. We want to feel good. We want our lives to mean something. Yet, happiness seems elusive at best. Sometimes it is unattainable, other times just out of reach. When we do find it, we eventually feel the sting of its impermanence.

Intent on seeking happiness, we find ourselves accompanied by nagging voices of self-doubt, disillusionment, and worry. At times these voices are momentarily silenced; other times they torment us. Something is not right. While seeking to feel good, we experience some form of mild discontent or all out misery. Why? What is it that keeps the happiness and fulfillment we seek so elusive?

Yoga philosophy answers this question in one word: *kleshas*. The *kleshas* form a framework for understanding the discord between our desires and our lived experience. They define the anatomy of what binds us, and they keep us from what we long for. The cause of the discord, according to this philosophy, is a fundamental misunderstanding of who we are, a misunderstanding which in turn cascades into a myriad of misunderstandings causing misery within and around us.

Unaware of the *kleshas*, we continue to ride the waves of life's ups and downs, all the while trying to make the world satisfy our needs for security and happiness. It is as if we go through life seeking, striving, and growing our capacity to have all the things, experiences, and relationships we desire; instead, we become unconscious wardens of our own imprisonment.

Yet the *kleshas* are not all bad news. Understanding what binds us is also what informs us. Knowledge sheds light. When we know how things are, we can make them work for us and eventually, through practice and grace, break free from them, finding the lasting happiness and fulfillment we seek.

The book you hold in your hands is my search for a deeper understanding of the *kleshas*. My focus is on exploring the binding force of the *kleshas* and the practice that frees us from this force. As such, it is not a scholarly commentary, nor does it pretend to be exhaustive in its exploration. It is an attempt to unpack the relevancy of this particular topic in a life as it might be experienced today.

Like the *yamas* and *niyamas*, a description of the *kleshas* is found in chapter two of the Yoga Sutras, authored by the sage Patanjali. Although there is some speculation that Patanjali was a number of contributors or perhaps the name of the school that authored this book, my trips to India to study the Yoga Sutras have shown me a different view of Patanjali than scholarly postulation.

In these settings, Patanjali assumes a role of mythic proportions. Born fully grown, he descended from the sky with a cobra's hood sheltering him, down into his mother's arms. In those quiet studies I participated in in India, Patanjali was invoked with great reverence and devotion, a presence invited to fill the room and teach each of us waiting with open minds and ready hearts. I have sat in the sacred grove in India where Patanjali did his practice and visited the nearby temple built in honor of Patanjali himself.

The Yoga Sutras itself is a unique book if for no other reason than it is the uncontested yoga go-to book. Of all the magnificent ancient texts on yoga and all the current books written on yoga, nothing touches the status of the Yoga Sutras. Made up of 195 short, pithy statements or *sutras*, this is a bold book, an intimate science, a complete step-by-step plan to start where you are and end in the arms of the Divine.

It had to be short because the wisdom was handed down orally. Every word was carefully crafted to explode into timeless, unending wisdom. Disciples would gather at Patanjali's feet to listen to him expand, interpret, and bring to light each verse of the Yoga Sutras. Today we have thick commentaries on this small book to help us unpack the vast knowledge contained in so few words; we could spend our whole lives exploring, reflecting on, and practicing these timeless understandings and their relevancy for our lives.

It is important to note that Patanjali wasn't putting forth a new vision of yoga. Instead, he distilled the experiential wisdom that had preceded him. He synthesized the heart and soul of yoga's timeless tradition. With the authority of those who had gone before him, in conjunction with his own lived experience, Patanjali related the essence of yoga.

In exploring some of these timeless concepts, I have divided this book into four sections. **Section 1, The Problem**, looks at the *kleshas*, the underlying misperceptions of ourselves that we assume to be true. The *kleshas* form a narrative, the conditioning of thought and belief, that is invisible because it is

taken as the norm. They limit our happiness, hijack our minds, and promote the very suffering we try so hard to prevent.

I don't start here to be depressive and gloomy, but rather just the opposite. I relish getting at the problem because it gives understanding and guidance, and for me that produces hope. I like to know what is in the way, i.e., what is keeping me from experiencing the fullness of my capabilities. I want to bring the *kleshas* out into the open where they can be seen and examined.

Making visible what has been invisible is often painful, but is also freeing. Knowledge of something previously unknown opens the possibility of scrutiny and choice previously unavailable. It is my hope that understanding our entanglement in the *kleshas* will act as inspiration and incentive to engage in a practice that unbinds our minds and opens us to more than we ever thought possible for ourselves and our world. It is also my hope that we will love ourselves enough to make this effort.

Seeing, as a critical factor in itself, is hard for most of our Western minds. We have been conditioned to fix, analyze, set goals, accomplish...and seeing doesn't feel like we are doing much. Yet as we see, i.e., become aware of, what we have previously not noticed, we gain the power of choice and the desire to engage in a practice that will bring us freedom.

Section 2, The Platform, looks at the mind, how the thinking mind works, and how the *kleshas* interfere with the innate peaceful state of the mind, causing a mind that is scattered,

dull, and most often not under our control. The mind is the platform where the battle of bondage to the *kleshas*, or freedom from them, occurs.

Gaining knowledge of the *kleshas* and the role of the mind does not solve the problem of bondage; it helps us understand it. To free ourselves, we need to take action, and for that we turn to **Section 3, The Power**, where we'll explore the process that liberates us from our misunderstanding and places us on the path to lasting happiness and fulfillment.

Section 4, The Peace, looks at what the experience of finding freedom from the *kleshas*, as well as what living with a clear, peaceful mind, begins to look like. What are the lived benefits of freedom on both a personal and collective level? What is on the “other side” of bondage?

Each section of the book is populated with reflection questions. My intention is that these questions support your digestion of the material and deepen the ways you understand the role of the *kleshas* and the importance of practice in your personal life. Reflecting on these questions is a way to take conceptual knowledge into a lived experience. Use them in the way you find helpful.

Writing a book in these times of staggering change, uncertainty, and growing cultural awareness is challenging at best. I am increasingly aware of the “ism's” – sexism, racism, ableism, classism, etc. from which the keen insights of other writers continue to make visible these oppressive “norms.” My attempt is not to add to the discussion of any particular “ism,”

but to explore some of the ways these “ism’s” come “ready made” to us, ready to be carried out without thought. My focus is on what is happening in the human mind that seems to accept the status quo of oppression so easily.

I am aware of language and the opportunities and limits that come with it. As more inclusive pronouns insert themselves into awareness, I am choosing to write in the third person “we.” I am aware that what I am writing does not always apply to all of us, and that by choosing to use “we,” I am also not bringing other pronouns into use. My intention is not to ignore, but to focus on the conditioning itself which undergirds what we accept as the norm.

It seems important to acknowledge that I am writing a book about limited thinking from my own limited thinking, i.e., the limits of my own experience and knowledge. I am white, female, heterosexual, a Midwesterner, middle class, wife, mother, grandmother, in my older years, educated with two masters degrees, and have traveled in Central America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. These give rise to how I see and participate in the world. They also give rise to what I am blind to.

Lastly, I am imbued with a deep belief that by examining the *kleshas*, our children, our earth, the animals, and all those who are forgotten, marginalized, and exploited will not experience further suffering caused from our own failings in reflection, understanding, and discipline.