

Understanding our Suffering from a Vedantic Perspective

Before I write about the 4 Paths of Yoga I think it would be appropriate to discuss the Yogic perspective on our suffering.

In general, the Eastern view holds that the fundamental basis for our suffering is that you think you are separate from me. I am not you and therefore your beliefs come from you, mine from me, and since I want to be right then all of you are not. And what happens when I am not right, then all of you are! Imagine being the only person in the world with our thoughts, points of view and beliefs and then assuming what goes on in my head is the right path. How fundamental of me! Below are the 5 Kleshas, or obstacles, found in the Vedanta as well as in the Yoga Sutras (II, 3-17).

Causes of Suffering:

1. Ignorance of our true nature
2. egoism
3. attachment to the temporary, illusory, unreal
4. aversion from things that cause pain, the temporary, illusory and unreal
5. clinging to life and fear of death

1. Our true nature is Divine, is the highest consciousness, and is Brahma itself.
Here I would like to offer a reflection on one process to open the Heart to this truth, that I too am a part of God.

12/21/05 (an email back home from Thailand)

I was laying in bed with a wave of thoughts, about my girlfriend, the American government, my family, my feelings of loneliness and longing to be back at home during the time when most people go inward and hibernate, so to speak, from the cold and shortening days. I long to see lights reflected in snow and even, God forbid, hear some Christmas music coming from stores. As I reflect this morning I realized I was no longer attaching my sadness to any of the stories that washed upon the mind's shore. I was seeing all the stories for what they were, just stories from my mind, and seeing my sadness for what it is, simply, an emotion. The two didn't need a direct relationship, as I have understood falsely in the past, that when I'm sad, any thought that enters my mind is the consequence of my sadness, therefore blaming whoever or whatever lived in those thoughts.

After further reflection I realized what I had done is a normal part of the spiritual/religious process that most religions offer through meditation and contemplative prayer, to take off the lenses of perception and really see our lives for what they are, at any given moment. For so many years I wore the glasses of sadness and all I saw through the lens was colored by this emotion. And now after years of meditation, I actually can take off and study these glasses, and see sadness for what it is. Realizing this, I can take off these next pair, the reflective, analytic mind, and study the source of

the intellect. Over and over I take off glasses that mirror deeper aspects of my self until, as almost all religions espouse, we see clearly, through the eyes of God, or Brahman, or our Buddha Nature the true essence of life. As it is said, underneath all our human faculties and traits lies the Source of our life energy and senses, beyond the thinking is the source of our thoughts, beyond the eyes is the source of our seeing, and so too, beyond our beings is the source of our being. And each religion offers us this unique experience of union through meditation, study of the Self, and contemplative prayer.

When all the teachers and prophets exclaim aloud from their mountain tops, “I too am all things, I am God,” why are we frightened and cry blasphemy? Isn’t this exactly what God wants, for all people to find joyous reunion with their Source? When Jesus offered his followers the way to be one with their Father, why did they shrink and content themselves with imitation? Why do millions and millions of people ignore this noble truth that we are offered the gift of realization, to see without eyes, and think without thoughts and know clearly with a clear heart? Why are we obsessed with the rules and dogma that govern our minds and trap the voice of our hearts in our chests?

2. Egoism is the belief that the Light of the Divine, that shines inward and reflects off the mirror of our small self, comes from us. Our egos assume the making of this Light and through sheer ignorance fails to realize its own nature, which is of a reflecting mirror. The Ego’s function is to help create order within ourselves of the world we see around us, help to maintain equilibrium within our bodies in contrast to the outside environment, and help make good decisions and choices. As it does this job it considers itself the creator of what it sees and we get caught in its self promoting concepts, thus thinking ourselves to be the only one in the world who experiences the world this way. Yoga helps us use the Ego for its intended function and while the mind is working away at prescribed tasks we can then begin our investigation of our deeper selves.

“The Self is indeed Brahman, but through ignorance people identify it with intellect, mind, senses, passions, and the elements of earth, water, air, space, and fire. This is why Self is said to consist of this or that, and appears to be everything.

As a person acts, so he becomes in life. Those who do good become good; those who do harm become bad. Good deeds make one pure; bad deeds make one impure. So we are said to be what our desire is. As our desire is, so is our will. As our will is, so are our acts. As we act, so we become.” (Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.5)

3. Attachment to things pleasurable brings us suffering, because like a new mustang convertible, all things rust and fall apart. We suffer when we cling to the temporary world, our beauty needs cosmetics, our breasts need lifting, our wallets need filling, and there is no end to the strategies for band-aid-ing temporary pains. This Klesha tells us that running after pleasures will leave us unhappy, lost in the unreal fiction written by Desire, Greed and Ignorance. We have these authors embedded in our minds, and they have written the most luscious novel of all time and we believe every word.

4. Aversion to things painful also causes our suffering. How many times have we tripped over roots and fallen logs running through the dark forest of our fears? We ultimately fail to realize happiness is our birth right, our gift. We are generally so busy creating a life that averts from pain that we fail to realize its inherent teachings, which lead us back to our own inherent wisdom. If we run from temporary and illusory things we give them power to deceive us again and again. If we use medication to deal with emotional pain we begin to believe we are separate from this causes of the pain and that we have the power to avoid the pain. Eventually we depend on the medication to feel happy, and without it we feel more pain than if we just owned and purposefully explored the original emotional pain. Circle and circles of avoidance. Let us use our pain to learn the secrets of a greater life. Learn that with practice not only do we see the real in the unreal, the truth behind the temporary, but we are no longer controlled by our impulses.

I would like to offer a poem I wrote for a friend who turned 16.

The End of a Circle

Sprung,
like Spring,
like a bud
from Earth 16 years deep
you grow gently
into your self,
a thorn-less rose.

Scent and Beauty
nourishes more
than noses and eyes,
touches more
than Souls.

But Time will exhaust
your youth.
Your petals will fall,
The color fade.

Do you have courage to be
the Love you came from?
Do you have faith
in your return?

5. Clinging to life and fear of death enters the realm of the Mystic. When a fallen leaf turns to soil and nourishes the tree, there is no death. When the organs stop working and the brain shuts off “we” do not die. However, we will leave this

concept for later exploration. For purposes of this Klesha, we fear death because we do not have a strong enough faith in our transcendence. We are trained to think of our own importance and the ego is responsible for this train of thought. It makes sense that the supposed center of our lives would not want to not exist. And so our constant fear of non-existence creates our suffering as well. When we find union with our small self in the Greater Self, we do not fear the loss of our body but look forward to the bliss of rejoining the Source of our lives. This state does not need death to happen first, we can find our happiness and bliss in our union any moment we want!

“The Self is realized in a higher state of consciousness when you have broken through the wrong identification that you are the body, subject to birth and death. To be the Self is to go beyond death. Realize the Self, the shining goal of life! If you do not, there is only darkness. See the Self in all, and go beyond death.” (Kena Upanishad 2.4-5)