

## Exploring Raga & Dvesha: Attraction and Aversion

In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras we are told the five Kleshas, or afflictions, are the underlying causes of suffering in our lives, basically being the underlying beliefs from which thoughts and actions arise; of these five it is the 'Terrible Twins' of raga and dvesha which together help to create our conditioning.

Simply stated:

1. The first klesha is **avidya** translating as ignorance where we do not know who or what we more truly are, this being the root cause upon which all other kleshas are built.
2. As we do not realise who we really are the second klesha is **asmita** where we believe ourselves to be a separate self, sometimes called the ego.
3. The sense of a separate self or ego creates the need to have things a certain way where we will have things we are attracted to i.e. **raga**
4. and things we must avoid i.e. **dvesha**.
5. And finally, as the last klesha we find **abhinivesah** the fear of death where we are told that even the sages possess this, and it is the final klesha to be released.

So to return to the pivotal kleshas of attraction & aversion, as a separate self we intrinsically feel there is a need for things to be a certain way to feel comfortable and happy in life, meaning we are continually judging our inner and outer circumstances to determine if they are acceptable, and we are looking for a particular outcome. These are the push-pull of our lives, creating disturbance inside and ultimately outside.

They are the 'I wanna haves' and the 'I don't wanna haves' and we can all fill in the blanks for ourselves I am sure.

These have been created by the circumstances we have encountered from the very beginning of our lives, based on the values of our family, our peers, our schools, our society determining what must be measured and then either sought or rejected. Overtime these build up into our unique conditioning possessing a kind of electrical charge that consciously or usually unconsciously informs our thoughts, emotions, moods, and actions, creating the potential for suffering. This is suffering largely of a mental and emotional level where we feel we cannot easily be with or engage with (i.e. accept) what transpires in our lives and as the mind directly affects the pranic levels of our being this also becomes reflected in the physical.

The medicine is ultimately the overall aim of yoga where we experience direct knowledge of what we are, from which experience all other kleshas fall away. However from everything I have seen and experienced if there is a glimpse of this or even a lived experience of this for however long, in truth we still have to attend to raga and dvesha, our conditioning where attachments remain. I think we have seen this in action too many times over the last years where so many well-known teachers who have no doubt received revelations and deep knowing still act in unconscionable ways. Attending to our conditioning is an ongoing process for all of us, and the contemplation of attraction and aversion is central.

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In everyday life if there is enough sattva, where we are steady and calm, as Patanjali says we can observe thoughts, feelings and moods as they arise and simply extinguish them if we choose...

Meantime what to do? We can seek more sattva through our diet, our environment, our activities and our practice, all of which can be highly recommended. Indeed, it is wonderful in a yoga class to see that point in the practice where having practiced asana, pranayama, mantra, and so forth we see our students or feel ourselves poised in sattva with that perfect balance of steadiness and wakefulness. And whenever the waters have calmed and stilled, there is always a greater opportunity to be aware of what is arising within and without and the ability to respond rather than react becomes more possible.

Our yoga practice and also our teaching of yoga really do mirror how we live our life and as such are excellent opportunities to better know ourselves. You could say that even the way we breathe in the simplest of basic breathing techniques shows us what we are grasping and what are moving away from. So simply noticing what arises for us can be so very transformative when held with ease.

In particular, meditation is a great place to start to know ourselves, even short mindfulness type meditations where we learn to simply be with what arises, a kind of deep listening without judgment or the need for a particular outcome, all held with compassion.

So it is always worth moving into meditation where we can raise an awareness of the subtle sensations of raga and dvesa which may or may not be present for us, helping us to meet them and experience their subtle or not so subtle signatures. It is always worth being aware of these two possibilities whilst in any kind of meditation so we can become more intimate with them. So, we can see how they can subtly influence our approach to practice and how they play out in our daily lives.

Whilst attraction and aversion are two different concepts they are really very closely connected, as if two side of the same coin, where the coin can flip at any moment for instance, we may have a thought or feeling of wanting to be the best in class, so there is grasping or attraction, and yet immediately we push away or reject that thought so moving into aversion. So ultimately, we can say they are both more essentially attachment to needing things to be a certain way. Hence the focus we find in yoga on the term non-attachment.

This is not a detachment where we can hide with a closed heart where we become more indifferent and withdraw from life, rather it is allowing the unfolding and expression of everything inside whilst held in the space of the heart. It can take courage to allow this and we may need to return to uncomfortable feelings and thoughts many times. Raga and Dvesha then become the not so terrible twins we possess all possibilities within us, and are just getting to know how they play out within us and become more whole.

As Jack Kornfield a well know meditation teacher says:

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“The near enemy of equanimity is indifference or callousness. We may appear serene if we say, “I’m not attached. It doesn’t matter what happens anyway, because it’s all transitory.” We feel a certain peaceful relief because we withdraw from experience and from the energies of life. But indifference is based on fear. True equanimity is not a withdrawal; it is a balanced engagement with all aspects of life. It is opening to the whole of life with composure and ease of mind, accepting the beautiful and terrifying nature of all things. Equanimity embraces the loved and the unloved, the agreeable and the disagreeable, the pleasure and pain. It eliminates clinging and aversion.

Although everything is temporary and dreamlike, with equanimity we nevertheless honor the reality of form. As Zen master Dogen says, “Flowers fall with our attachment, and weeds spring up with our aversion.” Knowing that all will change and that the world of conditioned phenomena is insubstantial, with equanimity we are able to be fully present and in harmony with it.”

This process is fascinating and as we encounter our inner world in an open and compassionate way we are becoming more whole where we no longer need to judge ourselves. In a way we are digesting what has previously been undigested, in Ayurveda this would be termed mental ama -where ama is everything that has not been digested, absorbed and assimilated but rather sits within our system, like rocks within a stream inhibiting the free flow of water.

I think in yoga sometimes there is such a desire to be good, to be kind, which is a very worthy goal, and we find there are a bewildering number of ways to go about transforming ourselves, however it can mean we do not know what to do with our black moods, our unkind thoughts and may tuck them away from the light, creating more raga and dvesha. Consequently we may find we are unmercifully judging ourselves, and consequently others, projecting our own stuff outwards on to others and circumstances, that reflect these qualities; in fact we can usually know there is something inside being triggered by the intensity of our own response and therefore need to look inwardly.

Here again the heart can help us, the greater heart can come to our aid. Here the viewpoint of the great heart is one of non-dualism where all is one. So If all is God, i.e. every manifestation is an expression of spirit, pure consciousness, the source or the Divine then we too are that, each one of us being a unique embodiment through which the divine can experience. So whilst there is a universal drive for us to transcend there is also a universal drive for us to be embodied where each of us provides a viewpoint. This means everything including ourselves and all of our stuff is sacred so **As one of my teachers says ‘its all as god as it gets.’** As such our conditioning is part of that uniqueness it is what we bring to the table so to speak, and our discovery of ourselves, our gradual clearing and deepening is also part of that uniqueness. And I feel with this viewpoint things change where we are not harshly pushing and pulling but instead accepting and surrendering, relaxing into life.

A very well known poem by the Sufi poet Rumi speaks of this:

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## The Guest House

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

By Jalaluddin Rumi

To find a better relationship with non-attachment is such a significant journey for us the word for non-attachment is vairagya meaning without colour, pointing to the fact that with non-attachment we become able to see more clearly without the colouring of our conditioning.

As one famous saying by Marcel Proust tells us a "journey of discovery is not seeking new landscapes but seeing with new eyes"

And finally remember the ancient texts tell us the universe is vibration, which means just like the beating of our heart it is all pulsation, there is constant change, this then that, this then that. Life is ever moving, it is ever changing. There must be expansion and contraction, poles of hot and cold, light and dark, like and dislike, and this is echoed at every level of reality so the question becomes can we be with these cycles of expansion and contraction inside, and indeed outside? Can we stay open to the difficult and well as the joyous with more and more equanimity? Holding all in the heart of compassion with good humour. And in this way flow with Life's richness, opening to Life's Grace.

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