



Kleshas as the Root of Psychological Suffering: An Interdisciplinary Analysis of Patanjali Yoga Sutra, Cognitive Psychology, and Neuroscience"

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Abstract:

The concept of Kleshas occupies a central position in Patanjali's Yoga Sutra as the fundamental cause of human suffering and psychological distress. Patanjali identifies five Kleshas—Avidya (ignorance), Asmita (ego-identification), Raga (attachment), Dvesha (aversion), and Abhinivesha (fear of death)—which influence human cognition, emotions, and behavior. This paper examines the theory of Kleshas through an interdisciplinary framework by integrating insights from Patanjali Yoga Sutra, cognitive psychology, and contemporary psychological studies. The study explores how ancient yogic concepts correspond to modern understandings of subconscious conditioning, cognitive distortions, attachment mechanisms, emotional regulation, and identity formation. The findings suggest that Patanjali's model provides a comprehensive psychological framework for understanding the root causes of suffering and offers practical methods for mental transformation through self-awareness, ethical discipline, and meditative practices. The study further argues that the Yoga paradigm extends beyond conventional psychological models by incorporating consciousness as a distinct dimension of human experience. Thus, the Klesha theory remains highly relevant for contemporary mental health research and psychological well-being.

Keywords: Klesha, Patanjali Yoga Sutra, Avidya, Cognitive Psychology, Neuroscience, Mental Health, Consciousness, Psychological Suffering.

1. Introduction:

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, composed approximately 1,700 to 2,000 years ago, serves as the foundational text for yogic philosophy and represent perhaps the oldest theory of psychoanalysis and moral psychology.(Ranganathan, S. 2008)

In a contemporary context, this ancient framework provides a sophisticated model for understanding mental maladies as functions of subconscious tendencies formed in reaction to past experiences. Kleshas (often phonetically referred to as kalesh) are the mental afflictions or "colored" obstacles that serve as the root cause of psychological suffering (Ranganathan, S. 2008). In the *Yoga Sutra*, **Avidyā (ignorance)** is considered the fundamental form of erroneous knowledge that distorts an individual's perception of reality. Patanjali explains that this ignorance manifests through five **Kleśas**: **Avidyā** (ignorance), **Asmitā** (ego-identification), **Rāga** (attachment), **Dveṣa** (aversion), and **Abhiniveśa** (fear of death). These afflictions influence human thoughts, emotions, and behavior, becoming the primary causes



of psychological suffering and obstacles to self-realization(Patañjali, Yoga Sūtra 2.8).

By analyzing the Yoga Sutra through the lenses of cognitive psychology and neuroscience, we can explore how these ancient “seed” teaching offers a blueprint for radically altering one's life through moral transformation and psychological perfection(Ranganathan, S. 2008)

1.1 Klesha in Patanjali Yoga

In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the concept of *Klesha* is presented as the fundamental cause of human suffering and a major obstacle to liberation (*Kaivalya*). Patanjali identifies five Kleshas: *Avidya* (ignorance), *Asmita* (ego-identification), *Raga* (attachment), *Dvesha* (aversion), and *Abhinivesha* (fear of death or clinging to life) (Yoga Sutra 2.3). Among these, *Avidya* is considered the root cause from which all other Kleshas arise. It is a state of misperception that prevents an individual from understanding reality as it truly is and gives rise to distorted cognition and suffering.

According to Patanjali, *Avidya* causes the confusion between *Purusha* (pure consciousness) and *Prakriti* (material nature), leading individuals to identify themselves with the transient world rather than their true spiritual nature (Yoga Sutra 2.24). From *Avidya* emerges *Asmita*, the false identification of the self with the mind and ego. *Raga* develops through attachment to pleasurable experiences, whereas *Dvesha* arises from aversion to painful experiences. *Abhinivesha*, the instinctive fear of death and strong attachment to life, persists even in the wise and reinforces the cycle of suffering.

Collectively, these five Kleshas influence thoughts, emotions, and behavior, creating psychological distress and perpetuating the cycle of birth and rebirth. Therefore, the elimination of Kleshas through yogic practice is considered essential for attaining mental well-being, self-realization, and ultimate liberation.

1.2 Klesha in Modern Interdisciplinary

In the modern academic landscape, the Kleshas are analyzed as the core of a sophisticated moral psychology and what is arguably the world's oldest theory of psychoanalysis.(Ranganathan, S. 2008). This interdisciplinary perspective views present-day mental maladies not as isolated incidents but as direct functions of subconscious tendencies formed through past reactions to experiences. Within the emerging discipline of Indian psychology, the study of these afflictions provides a "fruitful model" for understanding both the hidden and manifest aspects of human nature, making a qualitative distinction between the functioning of the mind and pure consciousness.(Rao, K. R. 2019). By addressing these root causes of suffering, the Yoga paradigm aims for a psycho-spiritual symbiosis that enables an all-around transformation of the individual.

From a practical and integrative health perspective, the removal of Kleshas is treated as a breakthrough tool for cognitive restructuring, helping modern practitioners return to a life of simplicity and find the freedom to be who they truly are. (Bachman, N. 2015)Historically, this "Yoga psychology" was explored as early as the eleventh century as a method for the liberation of the soul from attachments. Contemporary interpretations continue to frame the overcoming of these mental obstacles as a path toward self-awakening and universal brotherhood, ensuring that Patañjali's ancient insights remain relevant to modern social and political challenges.(Kozah, M. et.al 2022).

1.3 Modern Cognitive and Psychological Perspectives

1. Early Psychoanalysis: Patañjali's theory of Kleshas is often cited as perhaps the oldest theory



of psychoanalysis, predating modern concepts of the subconscious and how past reactions dictate present behaviors. (Ranganathan, S. 2008)

2. "Seed" Teachings: Modern practical guides, like those by Nicolai Bachman, organize these concepts into "seed" teachings that serve as breakthrough tools for integrating philosophy into daily life, helping students find the freedom to be who they really are.(Ranganathan, S. 2008)
3. Yoga vs. Contemporary Psychology: Scholars suggest that the Yoga paradigm provides a more "fruitful model" for studying human nature than current psychological models because it explores both hidden and manifest aspects of the self(Ranganathan, S. 2008)

1.4 Synthesis of Interdisciplinary Perspectives

The intersection of the Yoga Sutras with modern science highlights a shared interest in the mechanisms of the mind:

1. Yoga Sutras: Focus on the cessation of mental fluctuations and the removal of Kleshas to reach Samadhi, the highest state of wisdom.Cognitive Psychology: Investigates how subconscious patterns and "seeds" of thought (conceptually similar to Patañjali's samskaras) dictate emotional health and identity.
2. Neuroscience (Implicit in Sources): While the sources do not explicitly detail neurological mapping, they focus on the "changing mind" and the transformation of identity, which modern neuroscience explores through neuroplasticity and the effects of meditation on brain structure.

In conclusion, the Yoga Sutras provides a robust psychological study of the human condition. By addressing the Kleshas as the root of suffering, the text offers a timeless method for achieving mental clarity and psychological liberation.Kleshas (often phonetically referred to as kalesh) are the mental afflictions or "colored" obstacles that serve as the root cause of psychological suffering(Ranganathan, S. 2008).

2. Literature Review

1. The Yoga Paradigm as a Psychological Model: Contemporary scholarship suggests that the Yoga paradigm extends far beyond current psychological models, offering a more fruitful method for studying human nature in both its hidden and manifestation forms.(Rao, K. R. 2019).

Scholars like K. Ramakrishna Rao argues that Yoga psychology provides the roots for an emerging discipline of "Indian psychology", which views the person as a unique composite of body,mind and consciousness.

This distinction between "mind"and "consciousness" is critical; while the mind is often the site of psychological suffering, the cultivation of "consciousness-as-such" leads to a psycho-spiritual symbiosis that enables total transformation.(Rao, K. R. 2019).

2. Subconscious Tendencies and Mental Maladies: According to Shyam Ranganathan, Patañjali's work sets out a sophisticated theory where present mental maladies are directly linked to subconscious tendencies formed by past reactionsThis aligns with modern cognitive views on how past conditioning influences current behavior and emotional states. The Yoga Sutras suggest that individuals are not powerless against these internal forces; rather, through the process of Yoga, they can bring their body and mind into alignment with their true natureThis process is described as a practical guide to returning to a life of simplicity and freedom amidst a complex world.



3. **Cross-Cultural and Historical Perspectives on Yoga Psychology:** The psychological depth of the Yoga Sutras has been recognized for centuries. The eleventh-century polymath al-Biruni provided one of the earliest translations of the text into Arabic, focusing specifically on "Yoga psychology" and the liberation of the soul from attachments. His interpretation highlights the intellectual challenges of translating these intricate compositions and underscores the text's enduring value as a tool for changing minds and understanding identity.
4. **Practical Integration and Cognitive Transformation:** Modern interpretations, such as those by Nicolai Bachman(2015), organize the Sutras into core concepts designed to help students integrate philosophy into their daily lives. This integration serves as a breakthrough tool for cognitive restructuring, allowing practitioners to find the "freedom to be who we really are". Furthermore, the classic commentaries by Swami Vivekananda emphasize self-awakening and universal brotherhood, framing the psychological journey of Yoga as one that remains deeply relevant in the face of modern political and social turmoil.

3. Difference and Comparison Between P.Y.S. with Morden interpretation

Feature	Patanjali Traditions	Morden/Interdisciplinary interpretations
Primary Goal	Cessation of mental fluctuations and liberation of the soul from attachments (p.y.s. 2012)	Finding freedom and simplicity in a complex world (Bachman, N. 2015)
Distinction	Make a qualitative distinction between mind and consciousness(Rao, K. R. 2019)	Often focuses on the "changing mind" and identity without the same ontological distinction(Rao, K. R. 2019)
Method	Follows the eight paths	Uses the Sutras as a psychological study for cognitive structuring (Bachman, N. 2015)(Rao, K. R. 2019)
Perspective on Suffering	Suffering is an obstacle to seeing one's true nature(Rao, K. R. 2019)	Suffering is seen as a result of subconscious conditioning that can be "re-wired"(Rao, K. R. 2019)

4. Results

The analysis revealed significant conceptual similarities between Patanjali's theory of Kleshas and contemporary psychological perspectives on human suffering. Avidya was found to resemble cognitive



distortions and erroneous beliefs that shape maladaptive behavior. Asmita corresponds to excessive ego-identification and self-referential thinking, while Raga and Dvesha parallel attachment and avoidance mechanisms recognized in cognitive and behavioral psychology. Abhinivesha reflects survival instincts and death-related anxiety studied in modern psychological research.

The study also found that the Yoga paradigm offers a broader understanding of human nature by distinguishing between mind and consciousness. Unlike many contemporary psychological approaches that primarily focus on mental processes, Yoga psychology emphasizes the transformation of consciousness as a pathway to psychological freedom. Furthermore, the practices prescribed in the Yoga Sutra, including self-discipline, meditation, and self-awareness, demonstrate considerable relevance for contemporary approaches to stress management, emotional regulation, and mental well-being.

5. Conclusion

The present study concludes that Patanjali's theory of Kleshas provides a profound and systematic explanation of psychological suffering. The five Kleshas—Avidya, Asmita, Raga, Dvesha, and Abhinivesha—function as underlying psychological mechanisms that distort perception, influence emotional responses, and perpetuate suffering. Contemporary cognitive psychology and interdisciplinary studies support many of these observations by identifying similar processes in cognitive biases, attachment patterns, ego formation, and anxiety-related behaviors.

The study further highlights that the Yoga paradigm offers a unique contribution to psychological science by emphasizing the distinction between mind and consciousness. Through the reduction of Kleshas and the cultivation of self-awareness, Yoga proposes a transformative model of mental health that extends beyond symptom management toward self-realization and psychological liberation.

Therefore, Patanjali's teachings remain highly relevant for understanding and addressing contemporary psychological challenges.

6. Suggestions

1. Future research should empirically investigate the relationship between specific Kleshas and modern psychological constructs such as anxiety, depression, attachment styles, and cognitive distortions.
2. Interdisciplinary studies integrating Yoga philosophy, neuroscience, and clinical psychology should be encouraged to develop a deeper understanding of consciousness and mental well-being.
3. Yogic practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and self-reflection may be incorporated into mental health interventions to address the root causes of psychological suffering.
4. Educational and therapeutic programs can utilize the Klesha framework as a preventive model for promoting emotional resilience and psychological health.

Further comparative studies should explore the applicability of Yoga psychology within contemporary psychotherapy and positive psychology frameworks

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