

# AN END TO SUFFERING?

“Future suffering can and should be avoided.”

“Painful effects that are likely to occur should be anticipated and avoided.” ~ TKV Desikachar  
~ Yoga Sutra 2.16

The assertion that suffering should be avoided is already pretty bold, but the assertion that it can be avoided is a real head-spinner! We tend to think of suffering as an unfortunate, but inescapable part of life. This may be true to a certain extent, but this sutra implies that we also have some degree of choice and responsibility in the matter. Is that really possible? There are, of course, many degrees of suffering... from mild agitation to chronic anxiety, from paper cuts to chronic physical pain. There are some sources of suffering that we bring upon ourselves (consciously or not), and others that seem to be beyond our realm of control.

When faced with something painful, unfortunate, or saddening, we have many different options. We can complain, we can silently absorb the pain, we can dwell on our misfortune, we can avoid recognizing the situation, we can redefine our identities in accordance with our misfortune... None of these choices are likely to help us reduce the amount of suffering we experience.

In his commentary on Yoga Sutra 2.16, TKV Desikachar writes that we should do what we can “to develop within ourselves the capacity to anticipate, prevent, reduce or accept” causes of painful effects. This reminds me of the powerful “Serenity Prayer” (popularized by Alcoholics Anonymous):

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;  
Courage to change the things I can;  
and wisdom to know the difference.

Over the course of time, life will inevitably present us with a diverse array of experiences – some of which we are bound to find more pleasing than others. We will encounter physical discomforts, our bodies will age, people we love will experience pain, and there will be bad news in the paper each morning. We can’t necessarily change these facts, but we can – at least to some degree – change our response to such hardships. If we could perceive all experiences with equanimity and interest, then we would spare ourselves the enormous burden of hoping for certain outcomes, dreading others, and then coping with disappointment and fear when circumstances shift away from our desired plan.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali discuss five specific causes for suffering (kleshas). They are: misunderstanding / seeing incorrectly (avidya), ego / identification with non-self (asmita), excessive attachment (raga), aversion or avoidance (dvesha), and fear of loss / fear of dying (abhinivesha). These powerful forces are present in all of our lives ...

sometimes certain of these are very active, and at other times they are less pronounced. The kleshas exert a strong influence, and can often cause us to act in ways that only lead to further misunderstanding and unhappiness.

When we do find ourselves suffering, it is important that we look closely at the true cause of our unhappiness, as honestly as we are able to perceive it. Perhaps we have become over-invested in our identity or status such that any change threatens our very sense of self (asmita). Perhaps we continually seek out short-term indulgences that result in long-term unhappiness (raga). Perhaps we persistently avoid something because of fear or past experiences (dvesha). Have our previous experiences and impressions clouded our ability to accurately perceive the current situation (avidya)?

During my first few months away at college, I was quite a procrastinator... always waiting until the last possible night to write an essay or do a homework assignment. It didn't take long for me to see that this system was causing me a lot of stress and anxiety. So, soon enough, I started working on assignments at least a week before they were due. I was much more relaxed, and I'm sure the quality of my work was better too. This is a fairly simple example, but the same process works for everything from mundane to profound applications. These days, when I find myself whipped up into a state of anxiety or distress about something, I try to catch myself as soon as possible. Even if it's not until the next day, I look back at how I got so upset. Did I make choices leading up to this state of mind that I could avoid making again in the future? Did I make choices that I could have anticipated would lead to suffering? I try to recall Desikachar's guidance to look for the opportunity to "anticipate, prevent, reduce, or accept" those circumstances that cause suffering.

A regular asana practice is likely to reduce overall physical discomfort, but it also helps build up behavioral patterns of awareness and inquiry that can help reduce mental and emotional discomfort. Just as we summon courage to do postures that we are apprehensive of, we find courage to face situations in other parts of our lives. Just as we learn to breath and maintain our grace during challenging postures, we learn to take a deep breath and maintain our sense of self during other challenging times. When we find a joint or muscle aching, we learn to look for causes and solutions... Then, when we find mental or emotional disturbances, we already have a predisposition to seek out causes and solutions. We look for the ways in which our own choices are contributing to our discomfort... as well as the ways in which our response to external circumstances may be causing us unnecessary distress. In this way, our perception of suffering is gradually reduced. It's not so much that yoga will transform each day into a paradise of roses and cookies... but rather that yoga will transform our minds such that we are increasingly able to perceive difficult moments with interest, grace, and wisdom.

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