

## life happens | Sometimes things don't go your way. But understanding the causes of suffering can help you meet life's challenges with equanimity.

**Parinama tapa samskara dukkhaih  
guna vrtti virodhaccha dukkham evam  
sarvam vivekinah**

Change, longing, habits, and the activity of the *gunas* can all cause us suffering. In fact, even the wise suffer, for suffering is everywhere.

Yoga Sutra II.15

**heyam dukkham anagamam**

Prevent the suffering that is yet to come.

Yoga Sutra II.16

**WATCHING CHILDREN** on the playground, I am struck by how clearly the scene before me demonstrates Patanjali's Yoga Sutra II.15, which introduces the causes of suffering. A little girl begins to wail as her mother pulls her away from the sandbox. A boy cries as he chases another little boy who has a toy truck that he desperately wants for himself. My own toddler is weepy as he shows me the sore spot caused by sucking his thumb, but he brushes me away irritably each time I gently remove his thumb from his mouth to try to break him of the habit.

The word *dukkham*, most commonly translated as "suffering," literally means "tightness or constriction in the chest or the heart area." If you think about a time you were upset and what that felt like in your body, you'll probably recognize the feeling. In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali uses *dukkham* to encompass all the disturbances in our equilibrium, from feelings of disquiet or unhappiness to all-out heartbreak. When you're upset, angry, anxious, sad, unhappy, or devastated, that's *dukkham*.

In Sutra II.15, Patanjali outlines the causes of *dukkham*, or suffering. The first



**>> Understanding the teaching of Yoga Sutra II.15 will help you cultivate compassion for the suffering of others.**

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is *parinama*, or change: You suffer when your circumstances change in a way that negatively affects you, whether it's leaving the park sooner than you want to or losing a job. The second is *tapas/tapah*, or longing: You suffer when you want something you don't have; it might be a toy, a promotion, or anything else you long for. The third cause is *samskara*, or habit: You suffer when you knowingly or unknowingly repeat patterns or behaviors that don't serve you or that cause you harm.

The fourth cause of suffering mentioned in this sutra is a little more complicated. In essence, it is the ever-fluctuating balance of the energies in the body, which are known as the *gunas*. You can see this balance tipping when a child misses her nap and becomes overtired and hysterical or when you find yourself wide awake in the middle of the night and yawning at noon.

### EASING SUFFERING

Throughout the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali offers multiple tools for developing a clearer perception so that you can suffer

## tough time? THIS REFLECTIVE PRACTICE CAN HELP.

Bring your attention to your breath and try to regulate it so that it feels even and smooth. Allow yourself to reflect on the situation that has caused you to feel disturbed or has agitated you, and experience the range of feelings around it. Are you angry, sad, scared?

Once you are able to pinpoint what you are feeling, ask yourself if this feeling is something you have control over or not. You can't change being devastated by the fact that your dog was hit by a car, but can you let go of your guilt for having let him get out? Patanjali emphasizes that instead of focusing on the past, you should focus on how you choose to move forward.

When you recognize feelings that you do have some control over, take note. They are only adding to your challenge or hardship, so imagine what it might feel like to let them go.

This practice is just that—a practice. It takes time to cultivate self-awareness and even more time to make changes. Throughout the process, remind yourself that you are not alone: Everyone experiences suffering of some kind.

Above all, be patient with yourself. Awareness is an important first step. In time, this practice can help you to reduce unnecessary suffering and to move through the suffering you cannot change with grace and compassion.

less from all causes. The clearer your perception—and the more connected you are with the quiet, inner place of the Self—the better poised you are to respond with equanimity to changing circumstances, unmet longing, and patterns that may not be serving you.

But no matter how diligently you apply yourself to this endeavor, says Patanjali, you can't escape suffering altogether—no one can. For one thing, the fluctuations of the *gunas* are an unavoidable part of living in a body, so even those who have reached the highest states of yoga suffer



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on account of the gunas, at the very least. In short, this sutra teaches that there is no avoiding suffering, that no one is immune, and that suffering is everywhere.

This isn't as grim as it might sound. While the whole of the Yoga Sutra might be thought of as a guide to suffering less, Sutra II.15 offers a hopeful perspective on the human condition: It's easier to cultivate compassion when you know that someone else's loss, unhappiness, or difficulty might just as easily be your own.

Also, Patanjali says, the experience of suffering is often the first step toward positive change. When your discomfort becomes so acute that it disrupts your life, you're more likely to seek a solution.

### WHY ME?

In the next sutra, Yoga Sutra II.16 (*beyam dukkham anagamam*), Patanjali says that if you can accept that no one is immune from suffering and you understand the causes of suffering, then you can be prepared for the suffering that is yet to come and avoid unnecessary suffering.

You can't change the fact of difficulty, loss, and heartbreak, and you can't change that those things may cause you mental, physical, and emotional pain. But, with effort, you can change your reactions and your responses when life takes these turns. You can avoid destructive responses such as blame, guilt, and regret—the shoulda-coulda-woulda and the why me. ("Why not you?" Patanjali might answer; challenges, difficulties, and tragedies happen every day to undeserving people.) These responses don't relieve your suffering; they only add to it.

Inherent in Yoga Sutra II.16 is the idea that there is no hierarchy of suffering. No one person's suffering or difficulty is any less legitimate than another's or any less deserving of empathy. Case in point: At the same time that the mother of one of my friends was dying, another friend lost her dog and was devastated. Some in our circle of friends felt irritated that our friend with the lost dog was so distraught in the face of our other friend who was losing her mother. But Patanjali would

say that each person's suffering is her own experience and that each is equally valid.

Suffering is universal, but each experience is unique to that person. When you accept this, you can avoid the unnecessary suffering that comes from comparing or judging yourself or others with thoughts like, "I should just get over myself—look how bad she has it!" or "Why is he so upset? I have much more of a reason to be upset than he does!"

When you understand and embrace the message of these two sutras, it's easier to let go of judgment and have compassion and empathy for the discomfort and troubles of everyone, including yourself. And, if you use your suffering as an opportunity to begin a process of inquiry and self-connection, you'll cultivate insights and tools to prepare you for whatever may come—and ideally avoid the additional suffering that often goes with it. ❖

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