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## **What is the Mind, How Does it Create Depression, and What Can We do About it?**

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To a materialist, the mind is simply a construct of physicality; as life evolves on a planet, self-awareness arises as a product of increasing complexity and efficiency of biochemical and neuronal structures in the central knowledge-processing organ, the brain. This self-awareness, along with the accompanying capacities for reflection and acquisition and processing of knowledge is called "mind." Physicality is the precursor of mind, in this view, and therefore something more "real," or substantial than mind itself.

To some followers of new age philosophy as well as for some Vedantists, this viewpoint is entirely backwards. While neither physicality nor mind have any "real" or independent identity; the physical universe is, either largely or completely, a projection of mind and thought. The commonly heard phrase "You create your own reality" to some thinkers refers not only to our own inner interpretive process, but to our entire experience of the external world as well.

Sāmkhya, the philosophy in which both Āyurveda and Patanjali's Yoga are rooted, takes something of an intermediate stance on this issue. As in Vedānta, the Absolute nondual awareness (*Brahman, Puruṣa*) is real, eternal, indestructible, and unchanging. *Prakṛti* (nature) is however, also real and eternal, having a separate existence from Puruṣa. But *Prakṛti*'s creation, and all of the entities within it, are impermanent, or "unreal."

*Prakṛti*'s existence has two phases. In her inert phase, the forces of creation lie dormant, and there is neither mind, nor thought, nor individual beings. In the active phase of *Prakṛti*, the forces of nature become active and their activity begins to manifest the universe. The most subtle constituents emerge first, and the more gross, or physical elements appear only after the subtle underlay is completed.

The first creation of these forces is the *Mahat*, the Cosmic Mind, or the Mind of God. But to understand mind, we must first understand what creates it. In this school of thought, the *Mahat* is the first creation of *Prakṛti*. It is created by the action of the *gunas*, the qualities or energies of creation, which are unleashed when *Prakṛti* becomes active. There are three *gunas*, and they act at every level of creation, from the creation of the Cosmic mind to how the food we eat affects our moods. Their activation propels the origination of the Cosmic Mind, the universe, and all of the processes occurring within them. From a certain perspective, the Cosmic Mind can be said to be the origin of all individual minds.

## The Gunas

The three gunas are *sattva*, the quality of equanimity, clarity and peace; *rajas*, or activity and movement; and *tamas*, dullness, heaviness, contraction. Living beings have awareness due to *sattva*; process, passion, movement, and change due to *rajas*; and individuation and the density of physical bodies due to the influence of *tamas*. While the Mahat is *sattvic* in nature, the individual minds that are its derivatives are plagued by excess *rajas* or *tamas*, as well as disturbed by the ever-shifting nature of the gunas.

Spiritually, yogis seek through their practices to remove excess *rajas* and *tamas*, and enhance and purify *sattva* until it is on a par with that of the Cosmic Mind. This is why Yoga practices have often found to be helpful in dealing with depression and anxiety. When excess *rajas* and *tamas* are removed, the inner light of higher consciousness shines in our minds, and the mind is capable of one-pointedness and equanimity.

According to both Yoga and Āyurveda, the gunas play an important role in depression, which is characterised by too little *sattva* guna, and too much *rajas* and *tamas*. When dominated by *tamas*, our minds are locked into our own physical existence and we are overly preoccupied with our own sensory pleasures or pains. In *tamasic* depression, *tamas* guna increases beyond the level socially considered as normal, and signs of clinical depression are seen: lethargy, negativity, hopelessness, dullness, and lack of motivation and the will to live. *Tamas* also creates a mind that is too dull or sleepy to meditate correctly, and either too lacking in will force or too attached to inactivity to make the necessary effort.

### Treatment for Excess Tamas

Activating āsanās (especially sun salutation) and prāṇayāmas, gayatri mantra, and meditation, should be done. Exercise is essential. *Shat karmas* (the six cleansing practices which constitute the first limb of the Hatha Yoga system) are extremely effective where appropriate, and all *tamasic* foods such as meat, eggs, mushrooms, onions, garlic, old and stale foods and sedatives of all types should be avoided. Limited juice fasting can also be helpful, and overeating should be strictly forbidden. Normally the dominance of the nostrils should switch every one to two hours; if one side dominates too long the guna and the prevailing emotion gets stuck. If the right nostril is dominant for longer, it should be plugged with cotton to force more air to flow through the left nostril to stimulate the *rajas* guna. Or the left nostril can be opened with *sutra neti* or by placing a ball of cloth under the right armpit, placed so as to press upward. *Sattvic* Āyurvedic herbs such as *vacha*, *gin*Āyurvedger, *sage*, *tulsi*, *pippali*, *cardamon*, etc. are helpful in such cases, and can be combined with *brahmi* in an appropriately balanced formula.

When *rajas* dominates in our minds, we are obsessively active or distracted; driven to action, fame, completion of tasks, and social achievements. We can't seem to calm down physically or mentally. In cases of *rajasic* depression, which often corresponds to the Western diagnosis of agitated depression, the nervousness and irregular breathing, described in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* I-31, become even more evident. Insomnia, racing thoughts, and reliving painful events and playing out imagined solutions to these events often characterise such depression.

### Treatment for Excess Rajas

Slow *vinyasas* followed by guided meditation in relaxation pose and a lot of calming prāṇayāmas should be done in order to quiet the mind before attempting to meditate. Chanting and listening to soothing music is helpful. It is important to refrain not only from the *tamasic* foods listed previously, but also from stimulants of all kinds, especially *caffeine*, *soda pop*, *white sugar*, and *excessively pungent* foods. One should eat regular satisfying meals, and not snack. One should check the dominance of the nostrils. If the left nostril has been dominating for more than two hours, creating an increase in *rajas* guna, plug it with cotton or open the right nostril by inserting the little finger coated with *ghee* or by pressing a ball of cloth under the left armpit. In an Āyurvedic formula to be taken internally, *brahmi* can be combined with mainly *sattvic* herbs of a particularly soothing nature, such as *shankapushpi*, *sandalwood*, *jatamansi*, *ashwagandha*, *bala*, etc., as appropriate to the patient.

Having discussed the role of the three gunas in depression, it is important to pause for a moment to note a critical difference between the Āyurvedic treatments for depression and those of many commonly

prescribed Western medicines. Āyurvedic herbs prescribed for depression work because they intentionally increase sattva guna in the mind, not because they suppress affect. Over and over again I hear comments from my patients like: “The difference between the Āyurvedic herbs and the Western medicines I was taking is that the Western medicines made me feel functional, but the Āyurvedic herbs made me feel alive,” and “ Well, it is really nice to be able to feel happiness again. I wasn’t depressed any more on the Western medicines, but I didn’t really feel positive emotions either.” It is interesting to note that several of the herbs used in the treatment of depression are also considered ritually sacred herbs, like tulsi and sandalwood. And the word brahmi, comes of course from the same root as Brahman, one of the names for God.

### **The Ahamkar and the Kleṣas; Samskara and Desire**

Depression is not only a consequence of imbalanced gunas, however. Desire, attachment, and the structure of individual mind itself, also play a role. For this, it is useful to consider books I and II of the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, which offer a clear explanation of the nature of mind and its limitations. The cause of individualised existence is called Ahamkāra, or “I-maker.” It is only a single vṛtti, or thought-wave “I exist as an individual”, but it is so enormously convincing because it pervades the entire field of the body-mind complex. It is the nature of this individual ‘I-am’ sense, or ego, to identify with something and become attached to it. And because most of us do not easily perceive the existence of the divine Self, Puruṣa, the Ahamkāra identifies with some sort of limited self-concept, usually our body-mind complex, our social identity, the chain of our individual existences through many lives, our individual attributes of personality or experience, etc. This sets the stage for the experience of all types of non-physical pain.

The result of this ignorance (*avidya*) of our true nature is thus our mis-identification with some aspect of limited existence (*asmita*), which is, by definition, inherently painful because it is incomplete. Once this mis-identification occurs, our whole perception of reality is altered, so that the entire universe is divided into “me” vs. “ not-me,” and the objects of our experience are divided into “mine” and “not-mine.”

However, because the identification of ahamkar was false to begin with, and because what is “me” is relatively small compared to the rather large surrounding universe mostly composed of “not me,” a sort of existential terror and insecurity results. We don’t want to face the overwhelming feeling of this terror, so we develop various strategies for distracting ourselves from it—for enlarging “me” and for buttressing and preserving our individual and continually threatened small existences. Thus, ignorance (loss of awareness) of our true, universal, and eternal nature is followed by the condition of “I-ness” or identification with our individual nature. Avidya and asmita are the first two of five *kleṣas*, or universal afflictions, which underlie the individual neuroses of all human minds.

This leads to the third kleṣa, *raga*, attraction, which creates in us a pattern of acquisition. We begin to pursue human relationships, control strategies, material possessions, knowledge, wealth, status, power, etc., anything which might be capable of enlarging and protecting our weak and frail individualised existence. But because change is the nature of creation, all objects within it are impermanent, and thus subject to loss at any moment. In experiencing an object that gives us pleasure, we become attached to that pleasure, and desire to experience it again. When the experience becomes unavailable to us, we feel pain. Our spouse or partner whom we loved and enjoyed leaves us for another. We try to persuade him or her to return, or we try to find another like him or her. If after repeated efforts we are not successful, but our attachment remains strong, our pain and anger turns to depression, helplessness, and finally hatred of ourselves and of the world. This is the fourth kleṣa, called *dvesha*, “the hate which follows after experiencing pain” (Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* II-8).

Because of raga and dvesha, a tremendous, continual, and habitual outflowing of our energies and attention through our senses to the objects of the external world has been created. This outflow of all our attention and energies can only increase our identification with our physical bodies and our present physical existence, making it even harder for us to perceive or identify with our spiritual nature. Not only do we fear death because it represents an ending of our ability to fulfill our desires, but we have also emotionally identified with our body-mind complex and thus (at least subconsciously, if not consciously), fear that our existence will terminate with the death of our physical bodies. We want to live forever, preferably in comfort, in our same bodies, but this is not how the material universe works. This is the fifth kleṣa, *abhivinesha*, the clinging to life, which “ dominates even the wise”. Or, as Anand Dass (1) words it in reference to *Yoga Sutra* II:9:

*The kleṣas are imprinted on the chitta , the individual consciousness, from time immemorial and create and perpetuate the illusion that existence is limited to the mind-body complex. Even after death the chitta retains the kleṣas in seed form and they sprout to full fruition in the next incarnation. As long as the individual thinks that consciousness is limited to bodily existence, he is forever at the mercy of forces beyond his control, snatching a little happiness here and there but always aware, even if it is on a subconscious level, that sooner or later the body will die and the vehicle of experience will be no more.*

Although the hold of the kleṣas on our minds is not destroyed until liberation, Patanjali tells us in sutra II:11 that “the gross forms of the kleṣas are reducible by meditation.” The kleṣas are universal human mental constructs. They form a platform upon which our individual saṃskaras are constructed through many lives, out of our desires, habits, attachments, achievements, and experiences. The seeds of these saṃskaras, or tendencies, grow into plants as we water and cultivate them by repetition of events, thought patterns, habits, desires , actions, and by our emotional intensity surrounding them. In this phase of saṃskaric development, we play a role in shaping our experience. At some later time, often in a different life altogether, the plants which have grown up from the seeds we have nourished bear the finished fruit, and then we re-experience the same type of events in some form, but this time, events relating to the saṃskaras appear without our having much power to shape them. We may try very hard to change a situation, but with little success.

The ease or difficulty of working with a mental or emotional disturbance tied to a saṃskaric cause thus depends on the stage of development and maturation of the saṃskara. In the growth phase, resolution may be easy—prayer, counseling, rituals, affirmations, making positive changes in our lives, etc. can be highly effective. But in the fruition stage, we may find it very difficult to effect change, and practicing nonattachment, patience, surrender to God, meditation, mantra, and seeking the intervention of a spiritual master are often advised.

### **The human predicament**

According to Hindu cosmology, we are presently living in the Kali Yuga, the age of darkness, in which the world is three-fourths nonvirtuous and only one fourth virtuous. The Kali Yuga is marked by illness, greed, poverty, quarreling, and emotional pain. In the Vaishnava tradition it is said that Kali Yuga began with the Mahabharata war. Certainly, Yoga texts written after this time, such as the *Yoga Vasishtha*, the teachings of the Buddha, and the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, give increasing emphasis to the ever-present experience of suffering in human life. And while Yoga has much to offer to those of us who suffer from depression, its views about the causes of pain, as well as the cures, are quite different from those of Western therapy.

Āyurveda focuses on lifestyle or life events, or genetically and karmically inherent factors that may have caused imbalances in the present body-mind complex. Using Yoga practices and ritual, as well as medicines and diet, it tries to correct the imbalances in the brain and mind that encourage and support depression, and rebuild ojas, our vital energy and resiliency. It focuses on teaching us how to live a long, healthy, and happy balanced life in accordance with nature’s laws. Āyurveda is thus more similar to Western therapeutic approaches than yoga is, and easier for most of us to understand. In both Western medicine and Āyurveda, when we do not dwell overmuch on the painful aspects of our lives, we are “normal.” But when we are unable to withdraw our awareness from painful thoughts or emotions, to the point where we lose our energy, our will power, and our enthusiasm for life, we are ‘depressed’.

Yoga, on the other hand, attempts the more difficult but complete cure—the ultimate removal of the ultimate cause of mental pain—separation from the Absolute and its consequences, as described above. In Yoga, depression is seen not as a separate or definable condition that we sometimes have and sometimes do not, but rather as a visible and unmanageable eruption of an underlying unconscious but continual problem. Because the problem is unconscious, most of us require help to uncover it. That is why spiritual teachers and texts from ancient South Asian traditions give so much emphasis to explaining the concepts of

attachment and desire, which may initially feel obscure, abstract, or irrelevant because all we wanted was an easy way to feel better; Yoga's approach is a long-term strategy.

Baba Hari Dass once remarked: "When we don't have enough prāna, we are in pain physically and emotionally." Prāna is nourishment. We receive it through the breath, from the sun and the stars, from the earth, and through our food. Yogis dramatically increase their prāna and their reservoir of ojas through the regular practice of prānayāma and bandha. Prānayāma also calms and quiets the mind, interrupting the cycle of pain, distraction, depression, nervousness, and irregular breathing referred to by Patanjali. Regular meditation teaches us through stages to gradually dis-identify with the thought waves in our minds and instead identify with universal consciousness. When we practice certain prānayāmas and meditation together regularly, prānayāma provides sufficient energy to carry our concentration deep enough to attain samadhi. Through practicing samadhi, nonattachment develops gradually and naturally. Through the regular practice of yoga āsanās, we assist the prāna created during sitting practice to flow in an unobstructed way through the physical body, where it acts to maintain the health and balance of the physical structure.

The two approaches of Yoga and Āyurveda are not mutually exclusive, and in practice are usually used together. Beginning-level Yoga practices can be used therapeutically to alleviate many mental disorders, and research has documented their effectiveness as treatments for anxiety and depression. Āyurvedic treatments are also highly effective. Deciding which approach should receive the most emphasis in our treatments is often a matter of our assessment of which will be best received by and adhered to by the patient.

In Part II of this article, we will cover the stresses faced by our clients in today's world and treatment of mental disorders from the doshic perspective.

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