

Pandit Rajmani Tigunait's Commentaries on Sutras 2:15 & 2:16 from *The Practice of the Yoga Sutra*

SUTRA 2:15

परिणामतापसंस्कारदुःखैर्गुणवृत्तिविरोधाच्च दुःखमेव सर्वं विवेकिनः ॥१५॥

pariṇāmatāpasamskāraduḥkhaigunaṣvṛttivirodhācca duḥkhameva sarvam
vivekinaḥ || 15 ||

From the vantage point of a wise person, all is pain because everything is subject to change, distress, karmic impressions, and mutually contradicting forces of nature.

pariṇāma, change or effect; *tāpa*, distress or heat; *samskāra*, subtle karmic impression; *duḥkhaiḥ*, pain or sorrow; *guṇa*, intrinsic attribute of primordial nature; *vṛtti*, that which revolves; thought construct; *virodhāt*, because of contradiction or from opposition; *ca*, and; *duḥkham*, pain, sorrow, or suffering; *eva*, definitely or invariably; *sarvam*, everything; *vivekinaḥ*, a wise person

From the vantage point of a wise person, all is pain because everything is subject to change, distress, karmic impressions, and mutually contradicting forces of nature.

This sutra provides the key to comprehending the message of the *Yoga Sutra* and embracing yoga sadhana without deviation. Vyasa, who is known for his succinct and cryptic commentary, elaborates on this sutra at greater length than on any other sutra except 3:13 (which is an elaboration of *parinama*, the first word in this sutra).

Because Patanjali and Vyasa have spent so much time discussing the afflictions and the suffering originating from them, it may seem as if they are expounding the doctrine of suffering. They are not. In this sutra, both masters clarify the reasons for detailing the dynamics of suffering and explain how the knowledge of these dynamics can help us attain freedom from suffering once and for all.

Humans are amazing creatures. We have the capacity to train ourselves to perform incredible feats, one of which is to experience happiness when we are suffering. As a result, we manage to remain relatively oblivious to the pain and sorrow that fill our lives. We have adjusted ourselves to the experience of relative happiness—we are happy when painful conditions are relatively mild or when those around us are more miserable than we are. Seen through the lens of wisdom, this relative happiness is a delusion—it is actually sheer pain. Our shortsighted adjustment to relative happiness has impaired our desire to eliminate pain and its root cause. As a result, we search for quick fixes rather than a lasting solution.

In this sutra, Patanjali offers a contemplative tool for lifting the veil that blocks our awareness of the pervasiveness of pain. When this veil is lifted, we see we have been living in illusion—throughout life we have been defending pain itself, rather than defending ourselves from pain. This realization replaces our avidya, ignorance, with vidya,

true understanding, impelling us to find permanent freedom from suffering and become established in our self-luminous and joyful essential nature.

The contemplative technique described in this sutra has four focal points: how everything is constantly changing (*parinama*); how our distress level (*tapa*) increases and habit (*samskara*) strengthens as we grow older; and how the forces of nature governing our internal ecology in a mutually supportive manner begin opposing each other as we move through life (*guna-vritti-virodha*).

Change (*parinama*) is the law of nature, yet we resist accepting its law. In early childhood we go with the flow. We are happy wherever we are—when we move to a new place it quickly becomes home. We are prepared to embrace change because deep within we are comfortable with the ever-changing ecosystem of our mind. The *samskaras* of our prejudices, preoccupations, likes and dislikes, and ideas of good and bad, vice and virtue, honor and insult, and success and failure have not yet manifested fully.

As we mature, our *asmita*, the sense of self-identity, also matures and our *samskaras*, coupled with *avidya*, feed our self-identity. As we begin to identify with our prejudices, preoccupations, likes, and dislikes, our understanding of vice and virtue gradually becomes inflexible. This inner rigidity prevents us from changing our ideas of honor and insult, success and failure. Internally we are frozen in time, while the external world continues to change. This leaves us with two options: renounce our ever-stiffening mental world and welcome change, or keep a tight grip on our rigid mental world and oppose change. Both are painful.

When changes occur against our will, it fuels the fire of anger (*tapa*). As we age, we become weaker, both physically and mentally. We no longer have the vitality, strength, stamina, and agility that were ours in youth. At some point, this reality hits us hard and it hurts. We feel entitled to enjoy the objects we earned through our hard work but our ever-weakening body and senses do not cooperate. That is painful. As we age, our patience declines. Our physical and emotional needs grow, while the relationships we counted on for support, love, and companionship disintegrate. That is painful.

Meanwhile, we continue performing actions, which are heavily influenced by habit (*samskara*), and so reinforce the *samskaras* that fueled them. In this way, *karma samskara chakra*—the cycle of action, to subtle impression, back to action—gains momentum. Through our current actions and habits, we are creating an environment conducive to the fruition of the *karmas* lying dormant in our *karmashaya*. With the exception of the *karmas* that are fully awakened and serving as a direct cause for our life span and the major course of our pleasant and unpleasant experiences, the fruition of *karmas* stored in our mind can be altered or even nullified to some extent. But most of us lack the vigilance that makes this possible. Our internal functions are programmed by our *samskaras*. We are like robots, engaged in thought, speech, and action in compliance with our programming. We invest our precious resources—our physical, mental, and spiritual energy—in reinforcing the power of *samskaras*, and thereby lose our opportunity to attain freedom here and now.

As long as the sap of life supports the normal functions of our body and mind, we comply with the inner calling of our *samskaras*. We engage in sensory activities and fulfill the cravings of our self-identity. We accumulate and consume. In our ignorance, we do not realize these charms and temptations are themselves consuming the sap of life. Eventually, our physical vitality and mental sharpness decline, but the call of our *samskaras* becomes louder because they have been continually reinforced. The senses demand more gratification, and our self-identity demands more recognition. But we are perpetually frustrated because neither our internal world nor the external world is supporting these demands. That is painful.

The fourth and last point of contemplation described in this sutra is the mutually opposing tendency of the *gunas* (*gunavritti-virodha*). In sutra 2:3, Vyasa describes how karmic impressions buried in our mind are led to bear fruit. He tells us that the subtle pulsations of our *karmas* awaken and strengthen the intrinsic power of primordial nature. Nature's three forces become active, and their activity lays the foundation for change and connects the currents of cause and effect.

Our *karmas* mature only when the forces of nature begin to function in a mutually supportive manner. This occurs when we are awakening from the slumber of death. The force of *sattva*, illumination, enables us to become aware of ourselves as a distinct being. *Rajas*, the force of activity, motivates us to experience ourselves. *Tamas*, the power of inertia, puts a veil over our self-awareness. These three forces working together enable us to draw a boundary around our self-identity and inspire us to be born into the *jati*, species, most suitable to the fruition of our principal *karmas*. Furthermore, through their mutual cooperation, these forces determine *ayu*, the length of our life, and *bhoga*, the major course of our experiences.

A highly regulated mechanism ensures that the building blocks of our personality—*sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*—function in a well-balanced manner. When *rajas* is dominant, for example, we become active. If we do not slow down, we become depleted. To prevent this, *tamas*, the force contrary to *rajas*, becomes active. The dominance of *tamas* results in weariness, forcing us to slow down. But if *tamas* remains dominant for too long, we become inert and sluggish. In order to counter the negative effects of *tamas*, *sattva* awakens. This force of illumination and alertness pulls us out of inertia, thus again setting the stage for *rajas*.

An example will help us comprehend how these intrinsic forces of nature lead our *karmas* to fruition. When food reaches our stomach, enzymes rush to digest it. The heavier, more *tamasic* the food, the longer it remains in the stomach and the more bile—a fiery *sattvic* substance—is released by the liver. This cooperative interplay of *sattva* and *tamas* breaks down the molecules, making the nutrients available to our body. To use another example: In an emergency our sympathetic nervous system is triggered, accelerating the activities of the adrenal gland. This is a function of *rajas*. To control the adrenal rush, the sympathetic response is tempered by the parasympathetic nervous system. This is the function of *tamas*. The balancing act between *rajas* and *tamas* is due to *sattva*.

As we move through life, the mutual support of *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* declines. For example, we are hungry but have no appetite. We are exhausted but cannot fall asleep. We are burdened by worrisome thoughts but cannot drop them. We are suffering from loneliness but cannot stand the company of others. Our intrinsic forces are no longer friendly with each other. The forces of light and darkness, stability and inertia are not cooperating. They are no longer comfortable with each other and that is making us uncomfortable with ourselves. That is painful.

As we have seen in sutra 2:9, the powerful urge for self-preservation—fear of death and clinging to life—forces us to believe that our familiar world is the only reality (Katha Upanishad 1:2:6). We are so preoccupied with the acquisition and preservation of short-lived objects that we have no time and energy for introspection: Where do we come from? Where do we go? What is the purpose of this endless cycle of coming and going? Living with pain and sorrow appears normal. Lack of knowledge regarding higher reality, and our long-cherished familiarity with our known world, have rendered us insensitive to the pervasiveness of sorrow and pain, so it never occurs to us to seek a permanent cure. We are comfortable with our relative happiness and have adjusted ourselves to the ongoing struggle. We accept mixed elements of love and hatred, cruelty and compassion, anger and tranquility as normal. Sickness is as integral to us as health. Our world is composed of this reality. We are born into this world, live in this world, and die in this world. Most of us do not see a reality beyond it.

According to Vyasa, yogis are highly sensitive to their own afflictions as well as to those of others. In fact, as Vyasa states, yogis are much more sensitive to afflictions than ordinary people. Due to their high degree of purity, they are acutely aware of the subtle causes of pain and sorrow. They have *samyag-drishti*, right vision. They are able to see things correctly and completely. This correct and complete understanding is called *samyag-darshana*.

When they see an unwholesome karma stored in their *karmashaya*, yogis do not grieve or feel regret, nor do they feel a sense of pride upon seeing a good and auspicious karma. They acknowledge what they are and use their power of discernment to put their knowledge to good use. They make an effort to attenuate the potency of their unwholesome karmas and to further intensify the effects of their good karmas. Their pain arises from their inability to avert the forces of karmas that have already started bearing fruit. They know these karmas determine their life span and the overall course of their pleasant and unpleasant experiences. They know they must ride their karmic roller coaster until these karmas run their course.

These yogis have another source of pain. Through their purified mind, they are able to see why there is suffering in the world. They know that much of it can be eliminated. But they also see how adamantly people are engaged in defending their pain instead of defending themselves from pain. They recognize that people have little or no trust in themselves and completely lack an understanding of higher reality. They see people continually reinforcing their unshakeable belief that the world of intermingled sorrow and joy is the only reality. These yogis know that the same principles that granted them freedom from the long chain of sorrow can help others escape the torrent of pain, but

they also know that most people have no interest in those principles. Yogis find it painful to see their fellow beings suffering from their deeply rooted afflictions when a cure is readily available.

The more purified the body and mind, the more attenuated our afflictions. The more attenuated the afflictions, the thinner the veil of avidya. The thinner the veil of avidya, the more radiant the inner luminosity. The more luminous the mind, the greater the chance of having *samyag-darshana*, the complete vision and understanding of reality. *Samyag-darshana* demolishes the wall that stands between one's self-identity and the identity of others, and so the pain of others becomes the yogis' pain. The yogis have attained freedom from all forms of pain and its causes except those that ground them in their current physical body. They know they will be free even from those once they drop their body, and they wish for their fellow beings to experience the same freedom.

Long-forgotten actions, the subtle impressions of those actions stored in our mind, and the dynamic forces that govern and guide our destiny are almost impossible to comprehend. We know so little about the mysteries of our body, and even less about the deeper mysteries of our mind, karma, and rebirth. When generations of dedicated researchers cannot discover many of the secrets of our physical world, how can we discover a particular form of sorrow and its subtle cause and eliminate it once and for all? This is the subject of the next sutra.

SUTRA 2:16

हेयं दुःखमनागतम् ॥ १६ ॥

heyam duḥkhamanāgatam || 16 ||

Pain that has not yet come can be abandoned.

In sutras 2:12 and 2:13, Patanjali and Vyasa tell us our current life is the result of karmas performed in previous lives. In other words, our present is the product of our past—our current pleasant and unpleasant circumstances are the result of our previous actions. Some of these current circumstances are avoidable while others are not. Our *adrishta-janma-vedaniya karmashaya*, the reservoir of karmas to be experienced in unseen lives, guides us to take birth in a particular place at a particular time. These karmas are the building blocks of our destiny—the pain or pleasure resulting from them is unavoidable. When we are in our mother's womb, for example, we cannot avoid being affected by her habits.

But we do have a choice in regard to other experiences and circumstances. Patanjali calls these experiences *heyam*, avoidable. Actions that have not begun bearing fruit can—with effort and wisdom—be nullified. A simple example is avoiding the ill effects of poisonous food with a quickly administered antidote; the longer we wait, the less likely it is we will avoid being harmed. Or to give a more complex example: some of us are predominately vatic—nervous, unstable, and easily stressed—and therefore prone to hypertension, high blood pressure, and heart failure. These conditions can be avoided by adopting a vata-calming lifestyle: eating nourishing food, balancing the functions of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system, and calming the autonomic nervous

system with regular breathing exercises. These practices can be further strengthened with meditation and contemplative techniques, thereby avoiding many of the deleterious effects of a *vata imbalance*.

According to yoga, most of our sorrowful conditions are due to sheer carelessness. When an afflicting condition gains so much momentum that it becomes overtly painful, we look for a cure. At other times, we are so preoccupied by the demands of our self-identity, attachment, aversion, and fear that we fail to notice we have a problem. Pain warns us that the sap of life is draining away and we must do something to stop it. If we heed this warning, we can overcome the pain and eliminate the subtle conditions that are causing it. The subtle cause of suffering is the subject of the next sutra.