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Duḥkha in Indian Philosophy: A Yogic Perspective on Its Nature, Causes & Resolution

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Abstract

The concept of *duḥkha* occupies a central position in Indian philosophical thought. Although the term is commonly translated as “suffering,” its philosophical meaning extends beyond physical pain or mental sorrow. It includes dissatisfaction, instability, psychological disturbance, attachment, fear, frustration and the existential limitation inherent in conditioned life. Different Indian philosophical traditions analyse *duḥkha* according to their own understanding of the individual, the world and liberation. Sāṅkhya speaks of the threefold affliction, Buddhism makes *duḥkha* the starting point of its analysis of conditioned existence, while the Bhagavad Gītā examines the transient nature of sense-derived pleasure and the suffering associated with worldly attachment. Pātañjala Yoga provides a particularly systematic analysis by identifying *duḥkha* as that which is to be avoided, examining its causes and prescribing discriminative knowledge and yogic discipline as the means for its cessation.

This article examines the concept of *duḥkha* through important Sanskrit references from Sāṅkhya, Yoga, the Bhagavad Gītā and the Upaniṣads, with special emphasis on the yogic understanding of suffering and the movement from *duḥkha* towards *kaivalya*.

Keywords

Duḥkha, Yoga Darśana, Pātañjala Yoga, Sāṅkhya, Bhagavad Gītā, Kleśa, Avidyā, Viveka, Kaivalya, Liberation

Introduction

Human life inevitably encounters experiences of pain, loss, change, disappointment, fear, separation and uncertainty. Yet Indian philosophy does not regard these experiences merely as isolated psychological events. It asks a deeper question: **Why does human existence become a source of suffering, even when a person obtains objects that are apparently pleasurable?** This question forms one of the important foundations of Indian philosophical inquiry.

The Sanskrit word दुःख (*duḥkha*) is generally translated as suffering, pain, sorrow, distress or unsatisfactoriness. However, its philosophical significance is much wider. It can refer both to obvious suffering and to the deeper instability of conditioned experience. Pleasure itself may become associated with suffering when it is impermanent, when it generates attachment, or when its loss produces grief.

Indian philosophical systems therefore do not merely ask how suffering can be temporarily reduced. They investigate whether its **fundamental cause can be removed**.

This distinction is particularly important in Yoga Darśana. Patañjali does not teach that suffering is an unavoidable destiny. Instead, he declares:

हेयं दुःखमनागतम् ॥

— योगसूत्रम् २.१६

“Future suffering is to be avoided.”

Thus, Yoga begins with recognition but does not end with recognition. It proceeds towards diagnosis, practice, discriminative knowledge and liberation.

Ordinary suffering may arise from physical illness, emotional loss, failure, conflict or adverse circumstances. Yoga philosophy, however, looks beneath these immediate causes.

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A person may obtain something desired and experience pleasure. Yet the object may change, disappear or become a source of attachment. Even while enjoying it, there may be fear of losing it. Consequently, the very experience that initially appears pleasurable may contain the possibility of future distress.

This philosophical insight is expressed beautifully in the *Bhagavad Gītā*:

ये हि संस्पर्शजा भोगा दुःखयोनय एव ते ।

आद्यन्तवन्तः कौन्तेय न तेषु रमते बुधः ॥

— भगवद्गीता ५.२२

“The pleasures that arise from contact with the senses are indeed sources of suffering; they have a beginning and an end. Therefore, the wise person does not become attached to them.”

The *Gītā* does not suggest that every ordinary experience must be rejected. Rather, it points to the limitation of seeking lasting fulfillment from impermanent sense experiences.

The wise person recognises their आद्यन्तवत्त्वम् — **beginning and end** and therefore does not mistake temporary pleasure for permanent fulfilment.

● Duḥkha in Sāṅkhya Philosophy:

The relationship between Sāṅkhya and Yoga is particularly significant because Pātañjala Yoga adopts much of the Sāṅkhyan philosophical framework.

The very first kārikā of Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* begins with the problem of suffering:

दुःखत्रयाभिघाताज्जिज्ञासा तदपघातकं हेतौ ।

दृष्टे सापार्था चेन्नैकान्तात्यन्ततोऽभावात् ॥१॥

— साङ्ख्यकारिका १

Meaning: Because of being afflicted by the three kinds of suffering, there arises the desire to know the means of their complete removal. If ordinary means were sufficient, such inquiry would not be necessary, because they do not provide a certain and absolute cessation of suffering.

Sāṅkhya identifies three broad forms of suffering:

1. आध्यात्मिक दुःख — **Ādhyātmika Duḥkha**: Suffering arising in relation to oneself, including bodily and mental afflictions.
2. आधिभौतिक दुःख — **Ādhibhautika Duḥkha**: Suffering arising from other beings and external physical circumstances.
3. आधिदैविक दुःख — **Ādhidaivika Duḥkha**: Suffering arising from forces or circumstances beyond ordinary human control.

The important philosophical point is that Sāṅkhya does not stop at treating individual symptoms. It asks for a means by which suffering can be **completely and ultimately overcome**. This movement from the experience of suffering to the search for its ultimate cessation becomes even more systematic in Yoga Darśana.

● The Yogic Analysis of Duḥkha:

Patañjali presents one of the most profound analyses of suffering in the second chapter of the *Yoga Sūtra*. He states:

परिणामतापसंस्कारदुःखैर्गुणवृत्तिविरोधाच्चदुःखमेव सर्वं विवेकिनः ॥

— योगसूत्रम् २.१५

It means for the person endowed with discrimination, all conditioned experience is recognised as suffering because of the suffering associated with change, anxiety, latent impressions and the conflicting movements of the guṇas. Four important ideas appear here:

1. परिणामदुःख — **suffering through change**: Everything conditioned is subject to transformation. What gives pleasure today may change tomorrow. Youth becomes old age; health may become illness; relationships change; possessions are acquired and lost. Thus, impermanence creates the possibility of suffering.

2. तापदुःख — **suffering through inner distress**: Attachment to desirable experiences and aversion towards undesirable experiences create psychological agitation. The mind becomes disturbed by desire, fear, expectation and disappointment.

3. संस्कारदुःख — **suffering through latent impressions**: Past experiences leave impressions in the mind. These impressions influence future thoughts, desires and behaviour. Thus, suffering can continue through patterns that have already become established within consciousness.

4. गुणवृत्तिविरोध — **conflict of the guṇas**: According to Sāṅkhya-Yoga, the phenomenal world operates through **sattva, rajas and tamas**. Their continual interaction produces changing mental and material conditions. The discriminating person recognises that identification with these changing processes cannot provide permanent freedom.

The importance of this sūtra is that Patañjali is not simply saying, **“Everything is painful.”** Rather, he is presenting a sophisticated philosophical argument: **what is impermanent, conditioned and dependent cannot provide permanent security to the discriminating consciousness.**

Patañjali next states to avoid or prevent the dukha which is yet to come.:

हेयं दुःखमनागतम् ॥— योगसूत्रम् २.१६

“That suffering which has not yet come is to be avoided.”

This short sūtra contains a profound practical principle.

Yoga does not ask a person to remain helpless before suffering. Nor does it promise to erase everything that has already happened. Instead, it teaches prevention at the level of its **root causes**. This is similar to the structure of a physician’s approach:

दुःख → कारण → निवृत्ति → उपाय

Suffering → Cause → Cessation → Means

Thus, Yoga may be understood as a philosophical and practical discipline for the prevention of future suffering through the transformation of consciousness.

The Root Cause of Duḥkha:

Patañjali identifies the immediate philosophical cause:

द्रष्टृदृश्ययोः संयोगो हेयहेतुः ॥— योगसूत्रम् २.१७

“The conjunction of the Seer and the seen is the cause of that which is to be avoided.” Here, द्रष्टा — **the Seer** refers to *puruṣa*, pure consciousness, while दृश्य — **the seen** refers to the field of experience, including nature, body, senses and mind.

The problem is not simply that the body, mind or world exists. The deeper problem is **misidentification**. The consciousness that merely witnesses experience becomes identified with the changing contents of experiences of “I am unhappy.”, “I am successful.”, “I have failed.”, “I am afraid.”, “I am this body.”, “I am this mind.”

From the yogic perspective, such identification confuses the **Seer** with the **seen**.

Avidyā and the Five Kleśas

Patañjali identifies the deeper psychological mechanism through the five *kleśas*:

अविद्यास्मितारागद्वेषाभिनिवेशाः क्लेशाः ॥— योगसूत्रम् २.३

These are:

1. अविद्या — **Avidyā** — fundamental ignorance
2. अस्मिता — **Asmitā** — egoic identification
3. राग — **Rāga** — attachment
4. द्वेष — **Dveṣa** — aversion
5. अभिनिवेश — **Abhiniveśa** — clinging to life / deep fear of cessation

Among these, अविद्या is the fundamental source from which the others arise.

Patañjali explains:

अविद्या क्षेत्रमुत्तरेषां प्रसुप्ततनुविच्छिन्नोदाराणाम् ॥— योगसूत्रम् २.४

“Avidyā is the field in which the other kleśas exist, whether dormant, attenuated, interrupted or fully manifest.”

Thus the yogic analysis proceeds deeper:

अविद्या → अस्मिता → राग / द्वेष → अभिनिवेश → कर्म → दुःख

This is one of the most important philosophical contributions of Yoga: suffering is not regarded merely as an external problem. Its roots are embedded in **the way consciousness misunderstands itself and its experience**.

Concept of Duḥkha in the Bhagavad Gītā:

The *Bhagavad Gītā* presents the problem of suffering from several complementary perspectives. In Chapter 13, Kṛṣṇa includes contemplation of the difficult conditions of embodied existence among the qualities associated with knowledge:

जन्ममृत्युजराव्याधिदुःखदोषानुदर्शने ॥— भगवद्गीता १३.९

The contemplation of birth, death, old age, disease and their associated suffering is presented as a form of philosophical insight. The purpose is not pessimism. Rather, it is **realistic discrimination**. A person who recognises the limitations of conditioned existence begins to search for that which is beyond those limitations. The Gītā therefore transforms the contemplation of suffering into a doorway to spiritual inquiry.

The Upaniṣads shift the inquiry from external experience to the nature of the Self.

The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* states:

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत् स्वयम्भूस्तस्मात्पराङ्पश्यति नान्तरात्मन् ॥

कश्चिद्धीरः प्रत्यगात्मानमैक्षदावृत्तचक्षुस्मृतत्वमिच्छन् ॥— कठोपनिषत् २.१.१

The senses naturally move outward, and therefore ordinary human attention is directed towards external objects. The wise person, seeking immortality, turns inward and perceives the inner Self. This teaching has an important connection with the yogic understanding of *duḥkha*.

When fulfilment is continually sought in external objects, the mind becomes dependent upon circumstances that are constantly changing. Yoga therefore encourages **pratyāhāra**, concentration and meditation as methods of turning consciousness inward.

The movement may be expressed as:

बहिर्मुखता → विषयासक्ति → अस्थिरता → दुःख
and:

अन्तर्मुखता → विवेक → आत्मबोध → शान्ति

Thus, the Upaniṣadic vision provides a philosophical foundation for the yogic movement from external dependence to inner awareness.

Buddhist Understanding of Duḥkha: The concept of *duḥkha* is also central to Buddhist philosophy. The Buddha begins his analysis with the recognition of *duḥkha* and examines its origin, cessation and the path leading to its cessation.

There is therefore a significant methodological similarity between Buddhist thought and Yoga:

Problem → Cause → Cessation → Path

However, their philosophical conclusions are not identical. Pātañjala Yoga understands liberation in terms of discrimination between **puruṣa and prakṛti**, ultimately culminating in **kaivalya**. Buddhist traditions develop their analysis through concepts such as impermanence, dependent origination and non-self. Therefore, *duḥkha* provides an important point of comparison, but the respective philosophical explanations of the individual and liberation must not be treated as identical.

The journey of From Duḥkha to Kaivalya: The most remarkable feature of Yoga philosophy is that it does not regard *duḥkha* as the final truth of human existence.

Patañjali provides a clear philosophical sequence:

दुःख — recognition of suffering-> हेय — that which is to be avoided-> हेयहेतु — identification of its cause-> क्लेश — afflictive patterns-> अविद्या — fundamental misapprehension-> विवेक — discriminative knowledge-> कैवल्य — liberation

The culmination is expressed in the famous statement:

तस्य हेतुविद्या ॥— योगसूत्रम् २.२४ : The cause of this conjunction is *avidyā*.

Patañjali then states:

तदभावात्संयोगाभावो हानं तद्दुःशेः कैवल्यम् ॥— योगसूत्रम् २.२५

“With the disappearance of avidyā, the conjunction disappears; this is the cessation, and for the Seer it is kaivalya.”

Therefore, the ultimate solution to *duḥkha* is not simply a change in external circumstances. It is the removal of the ignorance that produces mistaken identification.

The Role of Yoga Practice in overcoming Duḥkha:

Yoga philosophy does not remain theoretical. It gives a practical discipline for transforming the causes of suffering. Patañjali defines Yoga as:

योगश्चित्तवृत्तिनिरोधः ॥— योगसूत्रम् १.२

When the fluctuations of the mind are brought under control, the true nature of the Seer can be recognised.

The practical path is then presented through अष्टाङ्गयोगः

यमनियमासनप्राणायामप्रत्याहारधारणाध्यानसमाधयोऽष्टावङ्गानि ॥

— योगसूत्रम् २.२९

The eight limbs provide a progressive discipline:

यम → नियम → आसन → प्राणायाम → प्रत्याहार → धारणा → ध्यान → समाधि

These practices address different dimensions of human suffering.

- **Yama** regulates one's relationship with others.
- **Niyama** disciplines one's relationship with oneself.
- **Āsana** develops steadiness and bodily integration.
- **Prāṇāyāma** regulates the vital-energy and breath dimension.
- **Pratyāhāra** reduces dependence on external sensory stimulation.
- **Dhāraṇā** develops concentration.
- **Dhyāna** deepens sustained awareness.
- **Samādhi** culminates in profound absorption and discriminative insight.

Thus, Yoga is not merely a philosophy **about** suffering. It is a discipline designed to transform the conditions that produce suffering.

From a yogic perspective, suffering can also become a catalyst for discrimination. When a person repeatedly discovers that external pleasures are temporary, that attachment produces fear, and that identification with changing circumstances produces instability, a deeper question arises: **“What is truly permanent?”**

This question transforms suffering from merely a negative experience into a stimulus for philosophical inquiry. The movement can therefore be understood as:

अनुभव → चिन्तन → विवेक → वैराग्य → साधना → ज्ञान → कैवल्य

Experience gives rise to reflection; reflection gives rise to discrimination; discrimination supports dispassion; dispassion supports practice; practice matures into knowledge; and knowledge culminates in liberation.

Contemporary Relevance of the Yogic Understanding of Duḥkha

The yogic understanding of *duḥkha* remains relevant in contemporary life. Modern human beings may possess greater technological comfort, communication facilities and material conveniences than earlier generations, yet psychological dissatisfaction has not disappeared. Constant comparison, excessive expectations, fear of failure, attachment to recognition, dependence upon external approval and inability to accept change can generate mental disturbance.

Yoga offers a different approach. Instead of asking only: **“How can I change the world so that I will never suffer?”**

Yoga encourages the deeper question: **“Why does my mind become disturbed by changing circumstances?”**

This shift is fundamental. The yogic response is not passive acceptance of suffering. It is the cultivation of:

विवेक — **discrimination**

वैराग्य — **non-attachment**

अभ्यास — **sustained practice**

ध्यान — **meditation**

स्वाध्याय — self-study and

ईश्वरप्रणिधान — surrender to Īśvara

Through these disciplines, the individual gradually develops the capacity to respond to life's changing circumstances without becoming completely dominated by them.

Conclusion:

The concept of *duḥkha* provides one of the most profound entrances into Indian philosophical thought. Sāṅkhya begins its philosophical inquiry with the experience of threefold suffering. The Bhagavad Gītā analyses the limitations of sense-derived pleasure and encourages discrimination. The Upaniṣads direct the seeker inward towards the Self. Buddhism places *duḥkha* at the centre of its analysis of conditioned existence. Pātañjala Yoga develops a particularly systematic diagnosis of suffering by examining its psychological and metaphysical causes. For Patañjali, *duḥkha* is not merely an unfortunate circumstance. It is connected with **pariṇāma, tāpa, saṃskāra, the activity of the guṇas and, ultimately, avidyā and mistaken identification**. The most significant message of Yoga is therefore hopeful: **future suffering can be avoided**.

The purpose of Yoga is not simply to make life comfortable. Its ultimate aim is much deeper—the recognition of the distinction between the Seer and the seen and the freedom that arises when ignorance is removed.

Thus, the journey of Yoga may be expressed in a single philosophical movement:

दुःखस्य दर्शनम् → दुःखहेतोः विवेचनम् → दुःखनिवृत्तेः उपायः → विवेकख्यातिः → कैवल्यम्

Recognition of suffering → investigation of its cause → means for its cessation → discriminative knowledge → liberation.

In this sense, *duḥkha* is not the conclusion of Yoga philosophy. It is the **starting point of the quest for freedom**.

The central insight of Yoga may therefore be summarised as that **Yoga does not merely teach us how to endure duḥkha; it teaches us how to understand its roots, prevent its recurrence and ultimately transcend the ignorance through which suffering is perpetuated**. That is what makes the yogic philosophy of *duḥkha* not merely a philosophy of suffering, but a **philosophy of liberation**.

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