

The Klesa Avidya by Kim Schwartz

There is an old joke in which a person is receiving a job promotion. The voice on the telephone is saying, "Congratulations! You have been promoted. You are now completely responsible for all manner of things over which you have no control whatsoever." This is a somewhat cynical but reasonably accurate description of our incarnation into the human experience. We are indeed completely responsible for how we experience the world in which we live, yet because of the relatively attenuated and biased nature of our perception we really have only limited awareness or control over what we actually do.

In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, five perceptual obstructions are listed that can inhibit self awareness; these are called *klesas*. The first klesa is called *avidya*. When the word *avidya* is broken apart, the root word *vidya* could be defined as insightful wisdom or knowledge. When combined with the prefix *a*, the word becomes negative; so *avidya* would be a lack of insightful wisdom or knowledge. It is suggested that *avidya* is the source of all the other *klesas*.

Wisdom could be defined as seeing life with insight, as it truly is; without the overlay of a subjective or biased perception. As this unbiased state is rarely achieved and even only occasionally visited, we can assume that we perceive most of our lives in some degree of *avidya*.

Because our perception is commonly biased, we can easily mistake the unknown for the known, the unreal for the real and the temporal for the eternal. These are some primary perceptual constructs that can define *avidya*.

The confusion we experience is typically the result of these misperceptions. We see things as only a small part of what they really are and only a small part of how they interrelate with all other things. For example, many of us believe we will find lasting happiness, pleasure or fulfillment in things defined by change. Even if we intellectually acknowledge the temporality of life experiences, emotionally we behave as though some things, including this incarnation, will last forever; we are sometimes even surprised when they do not.

We are in the position of participating in an interactive and dynamic life based on a view of reality based on incomplete and subjective perception. In so doing we create a sense of what we believe our world looks like, how we should behave in that world and what we think we should be able to accomplish. We need to do this in order to function in the world. The accuracy of our world view or construct depends upon the accuracy of our perceptions.

We may go through life making concrete plans for the future, as though we know what the future holds; when there are no guarantees there will be any future at all. This is not to say that we shouldn't make plans; it just suggests we become as fluid and detached about the results of those plans as we can be.

Kriya yoga sometimes defines avidya as *forgetfulness*. This implies that even though we on some level know this is all temporary and there are no guarantees, we often forget and get caught up in the momentum of our experience and attach to this incarnation as though it was infinite rather than one finite incarnation; even if one believes it is one life in a string of many.

It could be said that avidya asks the question: “How can we live in the present without influence from the past or projection into the future, while at the same time realizing that the present is the result of all that has gone before and the seed of all that will follow?”

Somehow we need to live life sincerely embracing the temporal reality, yet at the same time knowing that all of it can and ultimately will dissolve at any time. Superficially this may sound like a contradiction. It isn't. It is a balance.

So the question may arise, how do we deal with this avidya in our daily lives? Perhaps the first step would be to acknowledge that it is a very real part of how we experience our world. In this way we may not be so locked into our world view. Perhaps then we can begin to employ some sort of mindfulness technique to begin to slow the momentum of our thoughts and begin to pay attention to our interactions. Then we may employ compassion and freedom from judgement for ourselves and others in this process of self realization.