

The Kleshas or the Obstacles to Happiness

According to the ancient teachings from India, Nepal, and Tibet, Kleshas (meaning obstacles or hindrances) contribute to everyday suffering, big and small. When we can identify what is making us unhappy, we can always link it back to one of these “obstacles.” The first step is to become aware of our thoughts, take a step back from our emotional reactions, and try to see one of these root causes – with compassion and kindness for ourselves in the process.

1. Not Knowing your True Self

“I am not my feelings or thoughts.”

Most of us believe we are the same as our feelings and thoughts. That’s all there is. In truth, we are not our feelings or thoughts. There is still another part of us; the Self, that remains. This Self observes our feelings, thoughts, and perceptions of the world around us.

A primary obstacle to happiness is identifying with and clinging to our emotions and thoughts. We often define who we are by what we think and feel. To “know” the True Self means to be able to see that thoughts and feelings are impermanent, always changing. Instead of clinging to these, we are more likely to be happy if we simply watch them move and let them go. We can realize that, at the core, we are something deeper than what passes in front of the mind, and that something is non-changing, perfect, and completely free. That is the True Self.

2. “I am-ness”

“The way I see things is unique and a result of my filters.”

We all see our “reality” through the filters of our lifetime of experiences, our residual feelings, relationships, and our DNA. Moving past “I am-ness” means seeing the filters you unconsciously apply to every experience you have, and trying to see things instead as they really are. (For example, 30 people in the same classroom experience the class completely differently based on their own emotional responses, feelings, and unique filters. One person is happy, one is sad, one is attentively listening, one is bored, one is frustrated, one is elated, etc.) Everyone’s filter is different and overcoming this obstacle is also recognizing that someone else might see the same situation completely differently. Ultimately, we’d like to have compassion and respect for their perspective, too.

3. Attachment – Grasping or Clinging

“Things have to be as I want them to be or I’ll be unhappy.”

Expectation will always lead disappointment. If we are only okay with things being a certain way, then we are allowing external circumstances to determine our happiness. Unfortunately, we usually think, “If this happens I’ll be happy.” However, nothing external can ever change our happiness, it must come from inside us. Attachment means clinging to what we want as the only option and not allowing things to be okay as they are, regardless of our preferences. We constantly work to get what we want, and in doing so our happiness depends on those external accomplishments. Nonattachment, then, is being okay with what happens and not clinging or grasping to a particular outcome.



4. Aversion – Pushing Away

“If things go this way, I will be miserable.”

The other side of attachment is aversion, pushing away from the things we don't want in order to get to the things/feelings/relationships/material gains we do want. These two obstacles are always intertwined and can't exist without each other. When I must have the thing I desire, I intentionally avoid the opposite. Often, this means avoiding or reacting to what makes us uncomfortable or what is unknown. Try just being okay with new experiences and learning to be content with what is.

We are constantly in a dance of attachment-aversion, or pushing and pulling on what life brings us. We could be much happier if we just watched life unfold and responded fluidly to the situation instead of being upset and trying to change it. This doesn't mean we are the victims of life. Instead, this release of clinging and pushing frees us up to be more attentive to our internal happiness and attentive to those we care about

5. Fear of Death

“I am not enough and I will not accomplish enough in this life.”

The only thing we know for sure in this life is that we will die. We signed that contract before we were born. We don't know when or how, but death is inevitable. If we can embrace this, we will become free from the thought of “what if” and instead seize every moment as if it were our last. When we overcome this obstacle, we will be grateful for whatever life throws at us and take more time to smell the flowers, hug our family, and watch our children play and grow.

To overcome the fear of death, we can begin to look at the root of all our fears instead of getting wrapped up in the reactions they bring. We can realize that our lives are uniquely ours and we cannot fail as long as we choose to be honest and be the best we can be. Ultimately, we all want to look back at our life and genuinely believe we did the best we could without regret.

