

# i can see clearly now

*Understanding the ways your mind works can bring you closer to knowing your true Self.*

## Vrttayah pancatayyah klistaklistah

There are five functions or activities of the mind, which can either cause us problems or not.

*Yoga Sutra I.5*

## Pramana viparyaya vikalpa nidra smrtayah

They are: correct perception, misunderstanding, imagination, deep sleep, and memory.

*Yoga Sutra I.6*

**For as long** as we have lived together in San Francisco, my husband has ridden his bike to and from his downtown office every day. Years ago, whenever he was late coming home, I would worry. Did he have a flat tire? Had he fallen or, worse, been hit by a car or a bus? My worry would escalate as the minutes passed, until I was sure that every siren I heard in the distance was an ambulance on its way to him as he lay unconscious on the roadside. I would be just about to get in the car and go out searching for him when he would arrive home safely.

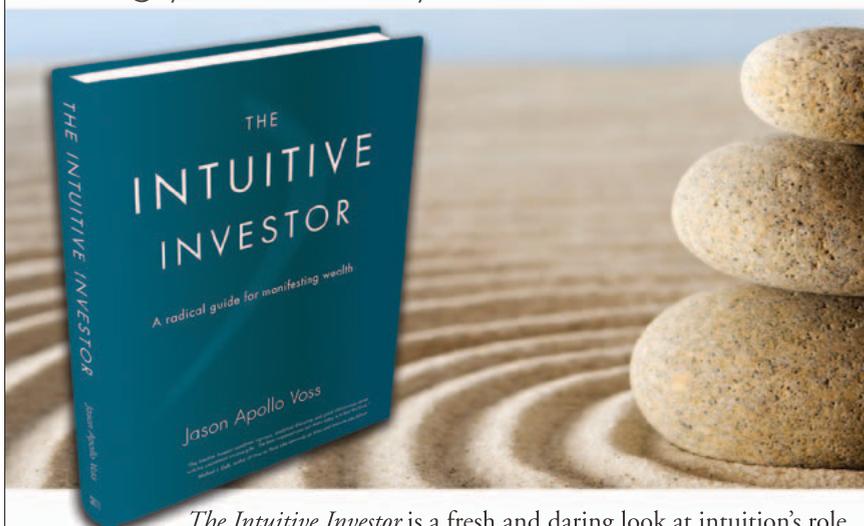
As the years passed and I studied Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, I learned to notice the point at which my mind started imagining every possible worst-case scenario. I became able to stop and remind myself that the worrying was just my imagination at work, that I wasn't upset about anything that had actually happened but about something I was making up in my head, which meant that I had a choice: I could just as easily imagine that my husband was late because he had run into an old friend or had stopped to pick up flowers. The fact that he was late could not be changed, but how I responded to that fact was up to me. I could respond with fear and worry, resulting in an agitated mind, or I could calmly remind myself that until I had

other facts to go on, everything else was just my imagination, and I could wait for him peacefully.

In Yoga Sutra I.5 and I.6, Patanjali introduces the five functions or **activities of the mind** and explains that each has the potential to either cause us suffering, or not. The first, *pramana*, or correct perception, is seeing something correctly, whether it's directly with your own eyes, through inference (such as when you see smoke and infer that there is a fire), or through a reliable source, such as a credible person, teacher, or text. *Viparyaya*, which means incorrect understanding or misperception, occurs when



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## living yoga

you think something is true and act as if you have perceived it correctly, when in fact you haven't. *Vikalpa*, or imagination, happens on a more subtle level, as an idea that we create in our minds. In *nidra*, or deep sleep, which is notable as the activity defined by "nonactivity," the mind is directed inward, operating at a very subtle level. Finally, *smrti*, or memory, is the recollection of our past experiences.

Understanding the functions of the mind is important for two reasons. First, identifying which function of the mind is working in a given moment allows you to differentiate unavoidable agitation due to facts you cannot change from agitation born of misperception, imagination, or memory, and thus allows you to avoid unnecessary suffering.

Second, these two sutras are important because they are a reminder that yoga is ultimately about working with the mind. Understanding how the mind works is the first step in a process that eventually leads to knowing the Self as distinct from the mind and its fluctuations, thereby reducing our suffering.

## NEUTRAL TOOLS

You might think of correct perception as good and misperception as bad, but Patanjali describes the functions of the mind as neither positive nor negative. Rather, he points out that each has the potential to either cause us agitation and suffering, or not. Correct perception can be very painful if you see evidence of a friend's dishonesty, or get a diagnosis of serious illness—just because you're seeing it correctly doesn't mean it's not upsetting. And incorrect perception might lead you to avoid suffering or even to feel good. As the saying goes, "Ignorance is bliss."

If you are hiking in the woods and there is a snake on the trail, you might see it correctly (*pramana*) and carefully go around it, thus avoiding harm. Or perhaps you misperceive it (*viparyaya*) as a stick and therefore step right on it and suffer a bad bite. But depending on the circumstances and your personality, the opposite could just as easily occur. If you mistake the snake for a stick, your misperception might allow you to walk calmly

## check yourself

Do this simple practice throughout your day to ease agitation and get to know the ways in which your mind operates.

Particularly when you notice you are feeling triggered, take a moment to stop and examine which activity of the mind is actually operating or dominant in a given moment. This might seem obvious, but consider how many times you have acted as though you were operating from *pramana*, or correct perception, when in reality you were acting from *viparyaya*, or imagination, memory, or incorrect perception!

First, take a couple of breaths to quiet your mind. Next, see if you can practice stepping back a little, as if observing yourself from the outside, and try to determine which function of the mind is at

work. Are you bothered over something that has actually happened, or over something you fear might happen? Are you upset because of something that happened in the past, or something you are imagining could happen in the future? Can you get another opinion to check your perception—by asking your friend if she's really mad at you, or going to the doctor to find out if that cough is cause for alarm?

In the short term, this practice can help you reduce agitation by first helping you to see if you truly have anything to be upset about! Practiced over time, just checking in with yourself can be an important step in learning to differentiate the mind and all of its fluctuations from your true Self.

past it without fear and agitation. Or, you might see the snake correctly and panic, startling the snake and getting bitten.

The other functions of the mind are similarly potential agents of suffering, or not. Hypochondria is a good example of a way in which the imagination causes agitation, while creative expression, inventions, and positive visualizations are all ways in which the imagination can be of great value. Deep sleep leaves you feeling refreshed, while a night of fitful, disturbed sleep (or simply not enough of it) can negatively impact your mood and ability to concentrate the following day.

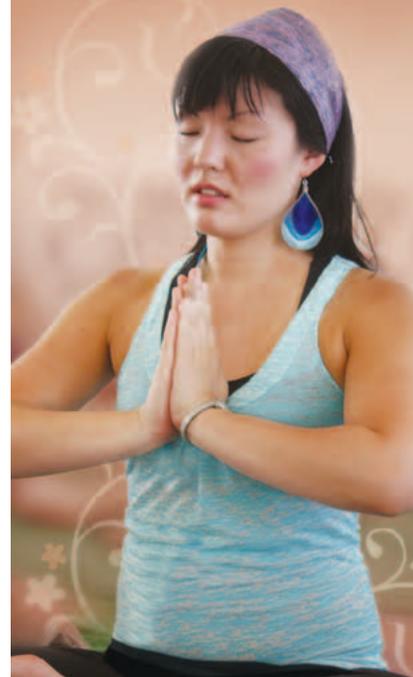
On the most obvious level, memories can bring you pleasure or cause you agitation. But on a deeper level, memory can influence your present situation more than you might realize. The memory of a bad experience might keep you from starting a new relationship or living fully in the present moment. Memory's influence also shows up in some of our closest relationships. Think of the last time you said about a friend, "He's always late," or "She can handle anything," based on the memory of your experiences with that person. The parent of an exuberant five-year-old who offers to bring a dish to the

table may call out, "Be careful, don't drop it," making the child suddenly fearful and self-conscious (which may in fact lead to her dropping the dish!). In these cases, operating from memory can get in the way of experiencing the person in that moment as a unique individual entitled to try new things.

Patanjali's point in describing the functions of the mind in this way is that, while of course you want to have correct perception as often as possible, this alone isn't what ultimately reduces your suffering. What reduces your suffering is being able to see that your mind and your Self are two separate entities, and to discern between the two so that you can act from the Self. When you can do that, you can see even unpleasant or painful truths correctly without being devastated by them. Learning how the mind works is the first step to building this foundation, to seeing your Self as separate from the workings of your mind, and—ultimately—to abiding in and acting from the Self, rather than from the mind. ✨

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