

## 1. Understanding

What is Yoga? — “*Yogas citta vrtti nirodhah.*” “*Yoga is the control of the activities of the mind.*” (YS 1.2 translation by Georg Feuerstein). This is the definition given by Patanjali at the beginning of his Yoga Sutras.

Vritti literally means ‘whirlpool’; they are the whirls of the consciousness. All the mental activities of the mind are called vrittis.

The citta is, as Swami Vivekananda describes it, ‘*the instrument through which you catch the external world.*’ It can also be translated as consciousness, which contains the functions of the mind (manas), intellect (buddhi) and ego (ahamkara). The citta itself is not intelligent; the true Self or universal consciousness (cosmic energy) is intelligent; it is the light behind the citta.

A traditional image to describe the mind is that of a lake. If the top of the lake is covered by ripples, or the water is muddy one will not be able to see the bottom of the lake. However, if the water is still and clear, we can easily see the bottom. The bottom represents our true Self, the lake the citta and the ripples and mud the vrittis. As yoga is “*The settling of the mind into silence*”(PYS, 1.2, translation A.S), in other words to suspend the activities of the mind, stop the ripples and get rid of the mud; there is obviously good reason to commit ourselves to yoga just to change our perception of the world and how we live in it! Yoga allows us to take a seat back, and gives us the power to make positive changes at our own level. It doesn’t mean that we have the power to solve the problems of the world. These *vrittis* (activities of the mind) may be painful or non-painful. As yoga aims to reduce human suffering, it helps us to use our discrimination to decide what sort of vrittis causes us suffering or not.

Pramana or Understanding is the first vritti, and is divided into 3 modes of mental grasps:

*Understanding is correct knowledge based on direct perception (1), inference (2), or the reliable testimony of others (3) (PYS, 1.7, translation by Alistair Shearer).*

In our Hatha Yoga sessions, our senses become more alert through concentration and focus. It is important to pause and assess not only the state of our body at different point of the session; but also the state of our mind. Through our senses we can appreciate the benefit of a posture, our limitations for it (1) and use our inference skill to decide how to progress or

modify the posture to the best effect for ourselves (2). For this to happen we need to take our time, progress in the posture in steps and hold the posture, deepening it, to appreciate its full power. My experience as a teacher may guide you, so you eventually may come out of a session more knowledgeable than you were before it! (3). This is indirect knowledge. However, I am only a guide and only you have the ultimate power to decide what you can or cannot do (going back to 2). This is your power of discrimination.

In daily life it is a reminder to use discernment when obtaining any information. In other words do not believe everything you hear or read! This is even more significant now-a-days with so much availability of information, especially through the internet. Anyone can write anything and claim to be an authority on whatever subject. Anyone can record a

video of themselves and assert that they are qualified Yoga teachers and/or “grand meditator” with all the right gimmicks.

My own aim in yoga is to develop through direct perception a correct mental grasp (inference). In order to achieve this I need to keep refreshing my own practice and knowledge, and seek guidance. It is difficult to conceive one of the three modes of understanding apart from the 2 others. This is an interactive process: we develop and evolve through our own direct perception and inference. I am only able to act as a guide because using “indirect understanding” (reading, studying books, textbooks and philosophy) is what I chose to do for a substantial part of my time. Not everybody is that privileged!



## 2. Misunderstanding

*Misunderstanding is the delusion that stems from a false impression of reality (PYS 1.8, translation A.Shearer).*

*Error is incorrect knowledge based on misinterpretation of reality (PYS 1.8, translation B.Bouanchaud)*

So already, depending on the translators, meanings start to get distorted:

- *Misunderstanding* becomes *error*
- *Delusion* becomes *incorrect knowledge*
- *Impression* becomes *misinterpretation*

The only word that does not change is “*Reality*”. I feel that Shearer’s translation leaves more space to the individuals’ emotions and perceptions, where Bouanchaud’s translation assume that there is such a thing as “correct knowledge” that is sometimes misinterpreted, and gives birth to error. So, in his view, there is an objective reality and we are able to perceive it.

*“As soon as we start putting our thoughts into words and sentences everything gets distorted, language is just no damn good—I use it because I have to, but I don’t put any trust in it. We never understand each other.” — Marcel Duchamp*

Marcel Duchamp is well-known for bringing a new dimension to Art by exhibiting unmodified manufactured objects (the most famous one being a urinal) with no explanation whatsoever as for why he would choose that particular object ... In a similar way, possibly, as when we meditate on an object and we try to perceive the essence of the object, its inner reality?

Bouanchaud also says that these misinterpretations come from factual circumstances, not just from misleading emotions: an object is too far or too near, our senses are impaired, inattention, an object is too small, hidden, overshadowed by, or mingled with other similar objects. As for our perception of our relationship with ourselves and others, it is often rooted in automatism and prejudices. On the other hand, truth and the understanding of it is often a succession of corrected mistakes. So goes the formula: *“We learn from our mistakes”*.

There are various examples that can help illustrate that concept of *“Misunderstanding”*. One well-known story is the story of a man who mistook a rope for a snake. In his panic he jumped into a ditch, got bitten by a scorpio and died!

In yoga we are told that the mind (*antakharana, citta* in the Vedanta) is divided into 4 elements:

- The mind (*manas*), that thinks and doubts
- The intellect (*buddhi*), that analyses and decides on the true nature of objects
- The subconscious (*citta*), that stores our experiences in this life and before
- The Ego (*ahankara*), that asserts who we are and works with the senses

The activity of the mind is a constant inter-relation with all these elements. Our eyes allow us to see an object. This is transmitted to the brain; and through the brain to the mind (*manas*). From a distance *manas* cannot decide what it is (thinks and doubts). It uses the intellect (*Buddhi*) to analyse the object (a rope or a snake?). In order to do that it needs to consult with our store of experiences (*Citta*, the subconscious). The intellect in the best scenario will be able to compare the data, and reach a conclusion (it is a rope). The ego (*ahankara*) can then proceed to affirmation: *“This is a rope, not a snake”*. However, our experiences can also mislead us and our ego then asserts: *“This is a snake! Fight or Fly!”*. In this analysis, our brain is a tool, nothing else. Our whole body is just a tool and we can only proceed information through our accumulated experiences. Yoga is mainly that: producing new experiences and ways of apprehending reality. Descartes, a French philosopher, came to the conclusion that the only proof of our reality is the fact that we THINK: *“Cogito, ergo sum”* (I think, therefore I am). However, I see this as limiting, as it seems to me that he only considered the Ego, the conscious part of ourselves. Yoga shows that we are much more than that.

When we get absorbed into an activity, we often miss what is around us. Somebody did this experiment. They set an act pretending that a woman was being attacked by a man. A runner wearing earphones passed by not that far, even looked at them ... but he did not do anything. So surely, he noticed them; but his intellect did not proceed what he saw

accurately. Therefore his ego did not allow him to perceive Reality; just as much as the man who thought that the rope was a snake.

A neuroscientist called Jill Bolt Taylor had an accident that erased all (most of?) the data from her left brain hemisphere. This is the part where our ego is, and it governs our inter-personal relationships. She did not lose Language and was left with data from the right side of the brain, more concerned with the “big picture”. Astonishingly, she acquired this incredible ability where, having lost her ego, she felt that she was part of everything else! It is something that we are trying to achieve through yoga, and in meditation! In an interview, she said that the person she was before the accident has died that day. But eventually she was able to re-construct the missing data, albeit in a totally different way. This is quite mind-boggling.

Finally, I was told of another example that proves that perception is a matter of “points of view” (*Darshanas*). When asked to describe a room, most people would describe its content (colours, furniture etc). If you think about it more objectively, what is a room? It is a space; but we cannot see it or give it a shape, apart from the fact that this space (in our view) is limited by walls. Actually a room is space, but this space does not stop at a specific room. Our body is “full” of space (so quantum physics tells us) and so is the universe (and beyond??). This is limitless, infinite. The only thing we can say is that we are aware of it: it is a presence; we somehow know that it is there. It is the beginning of a process towards “*supreme consciousness*” and liberation (Moksha). The experience of that neuroscientist tends to prove that we can improve, re-build and change our body and mind through our practice by varying and expanding our field of experiences. In the meantime, we tend to be limited to expressing our reality through words and concepts. So it is worth keeping in mind that:

*“We cannot control the way people interpret our ideas or thoughts, but we can control the words and tones we choose to convey them. Peace is built on understanding, and wars are built on misunderstandings. Never underestimate the power of a single word, and never recklessly throw around words. One wrong word, or misinterpreted word, can change the meaning of an entire sentence and start a war. And one right word, or one kind word, can grant you the heavens and open doors.”*

— Suzy Kassem, *Rise Up and Salute the Sun: The Writings of Suzy Kassem*



### 3. Imagination

*Imagination is thought based on an image conjured up by words, and is without substance (A. Shearer translation)*

*Imagination is knowledge based on words that have no real, corresponding object (B. Bouanchaud translation)*

PYS, 1.9

Everyone possesses a certain degree of imagination ability. The imagination manifests in various degrees in various people. In some, it is highly developed, and in others, it manifests in a weaker form. According to Remez Sasson, Imagination is the ability to form a mental image of something that is not perceived through the five senses. It is the ability of the mind to build mental scenes, objects or events that do not exist, are not present, or have happened in the past. So does imagination make us see things that are unreal?

Plato's allegory of the cave, told by Socrates, illustrates the answer to that question. People are imprisoned from birth in a dark cave. Behind them is a fire and various shadows are projected constantly on the wall in front of them. The prisoners have been chained around their feet and necks, so they cannot look around or see each other; they can only see the shadows. So for them the shadows are their reality. One prisoner escapes and starts adapting to the "real" reality. At first he wants to return to his prison because this "real" reality is too frightening for him. Eventually he values the outside world as better than his previous condition. He decides to liberate his companions .... But they refused to be liberated ...

In that story, the prisoners cannot "imagine" anything beyond what their senses tell them. In this case, their perception is fooling them and get them to go along with a reality that does not exist. What happens is that they cannot perceive reality .... Because they have no experience of it. They live in complete delusion. This somehow contradicts the definition of imagination in Patanjali's verse. It raises important questions about the relation between a subject's experience of the world and the reality of the world itself.

I found another definition of imagination by a researcher called Vygotsky. He describes imagination as central to human cognitive processes. He characterises imagination as a process of image-making that resolves "gaps" arising from our education and cultural background.

For example, I take a course in drawing and painting. I was told that when you draw you have to take in account not only the shapes; but also the "gaps" in between the shapes, the space. In other words, the shapes are defined by the gaps.

Having said that, creative activity (the positive side of imagination) is not just about seeing things as they are. This is why when you look at a picture you can generally make the difference between artists. The versions of "Las meninas" painted by Picasso look radically different from the one painted by Velazquez (Look it up!). At my very humble level, I generally end up with a picture that is far from perfect. However, my teacher said something that cheered me up quite considerably and encouraged me to pursue my effort:

people when they look at a picture use their experience and knowledge to fill in the gaps. So even if the plate I drew is not that realistic, as long as I have enabled people to complete the work with their imagination (this is a plate), I have achieved my short term goal (to represent a plate). The emphasis is on the process of image formation, which is thought of as a dynamic process of “gap” filling from which emerges what we might call “the world as experienced.”

Imagination can also be expressed through stories such as fairy tales or fantasies. Children (and sometimes adults) often use such narratives and pretend play in order to exercise their imaginations. When children develop fantasy they play at two levels: first, they use role-playing to act out what they have developed with their imagination, and at the second level they play again with their make-believe situation by acting as if what they have developed is an actual reality. I believe this is to protect themselves from a harsher reality. This is a process generally accepted from children ... but considered as delusional from adults.

In yoga, there is a belief that the world as we see it is veiled by Maya (illusion). Through yoga asanas and breathing exercises, we quieten the mind and slow down the activities of the mind; so we may leave some working space for the brain to apprehend the ultimate reality beyond the “shadows”. Imagination is a process through which the world is made and, at the same time, through which the self emerges to experience that world. The restriction of imagination to “situations not actually present to the senses” would limit it to pure fantasy. I would agree with the idea that imagination is more a “gap-filling” process. Through our education, culture, experiences we develop our consciousness: imagination helps us to “imagine” what we cannot apprehend directly through our senses, to fill in the gaps.

So, in conclusion, imagination helps us to see the “bigger picture”, to think “outside the box”. However, the product of our imagination needs to be tested against reality, therefore shared and acknowledged, or it would for ever remain a fantasy. I suppose this is why any artist/scientist/philosopher have this need to share with others the product of their imagination: a painting needs to be exhibited, a book needs to be read, music needs to be heard, a scientific discovery needs to be verified, published and acknowledged. Philosophies need to be practised and experienced.



## 4. What is sleep?

Everybody agrees to say that it is important to sleep and to sleep well. It is common knowledge that it repairs you, helps you to restore yourself physiologically and emotionally. Scientists still do not have a definitive explanation for why humans have a need for sleep. Is it just a passive process, a "switching off" of body functions? Sleep is believed to be important in many physiologic processes including the processing of experiences and the consolidation of memories. It is also clear that sleep is essential, not only for humans but for almost all animals. It is a complex process of restoration and renewal for the body.

There are two general states of sleep: rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep. People who are awakened during REM sleep often report that they were dreaming at the time. About 20% to 25% of sleep time is REM sleep; in infants it can comprise about 40%.

NREM sleep is further subdivided into 3 other stages:

- Stage N1 sleep, or the transition from wakefulness to deeper sleep. This is the lightest stage of sleep, and people may not always perceive they are asleep when in this stage.
- Stage N2 sleep is a true sleep state, and accounts for 40% to 50% of sleep time.
- Stage N3 sleep has been called deep sleep, delta sleep, or slow wave sleep. This stage accounts for about 20% of sleep in young adults.

The importance of sleep is emphasised by the symptoms experienced by those suffering from sleep problems. People who are suffering from sleep disorders and do not get adequate or restorative sleep show a number of both physical and emotional disturbances, such as high blood pressure, stroke, difficulty concentrating and focussing, memory loss, depression. This list is not exhaustive.

Several of the Upanishads (Vedic texts) describe sleep, and include it in the different states of consciousness. The Mandukya Upanishad describes three states of consciousness, namely waking, dreaming, and deep sleep, which correspond to the three body doctrine. In Yoga the three bodies are the gross body or "physical body" (A), the subtle body or "energy body"(U) and the causal or "spiritual body" (M). These states are contained in the three syllables of OM or AUM.

- The first state is that of waking consciousness, in which we are aware of our daily world.
- The second state is that of the dreaming mind. It is described as inward-knowing, subtle, and burning.
- The third state is the state of deep sleep. In this state, the underlying ground of consciousness is undistracted.

In the waking consciousness there is a sense of "I"(self identity) and awareness of thoughts. In the sleep/dream state there is no or little sense of 'I'; however, there are thoughts and the awareness of thoughts. We dream about "something"; we remember our dreams and we can formulate them in words. Waking and dreaming are not true experiences of Absolute Reality, because of their dualistic natures of subject and object, self and not-self, ego, and non-ego.

So, in yoga terms, sleep is not only restorative. It is a way to reach a deeper level of consciousness, to access our spiritual body in state 3 of consciousness, beyond perception through our senses. In 1962, Swami Satyananda, founder of the Bihar School of Yoga in Southern India, developed Yoga Nidra. Yoga Nidra originates from a tantric practice known as Nyasa, which literally means “to place”. Sanskrit mantras (sounds/vibrations) are placed or felt on specific parts of the body. Satyananda omitted the mantras to make it available to those not understanding Sanskrit. Now the placement of the mantras is called ROA or Rotation Of Awareness. So, although devoid of mantras and rituals, Yoga Nidra has the power to induce deep relaxation, and to work and transform the personality as it reaches the deepest layers of our being. It is sometimes referred to as hypnogenic sleep.

In Yoga Nidra, internalisation prepares our body to go beyond perception through our senses (“Pratyahara” the 5th limb of yoga). Then through the control of the breath, we come to control the energy flow in the body. Then comes the “Sankalpa”, a short affirmation in the present tense to express our deepest aspiration and what we want to achieve. This is followed by focusing on the breath and channeling our energy to enable us to handle our sensations. Visualisation comes next, to booster positive thinking and help us to reach your “citta” or subconscious. At that point we can repeat our sankalpa. Finally externalisation allows us to come back gently into consciousness. The central piece of the Yoga Nidra is the sankalpa. Contrary to hypnosis the seed to change or achievement is planted by ourselves; not imposed from an outside source. This is also made possible because, although we sometimes may feel that we fell asleep during the practice, we actually remain aware and awake. It takes time and training of the mind to appreciate the full benefits of Yoga Nidra. On a one off practice, it is said to be the equivalent of 4 hours sleep. So if nothing else, it does help to remove tension and stress and induce well-being. It is also useful to enhance learning and memory. For the next two sessions, we will practise Yoga Nidra (between 20 and 40 minutes relaxation). It would be a good idea to bring a light blanket and layers of clothing, so you can remain warm and comfortable during the practice.





## 5. Memory

*....and memory is the returning of the mind of past experience (PYS, 1.11, A.Shearer)*

*Memory retains living experience (PYS, 1.11, B. Bouanchaud)*

*... faith engenders energy that reinforces the memory, allowing concentration on wisdom. (PYS, 1.20, B. Bouanchaud)*

Memory recaptures living experience or prevents it from escaping often assisted by the 4 other mental activities. Very often our memories are shaped by our initial perception, analysis and/or modified by our imagination. Our cultural conditioning, prejudice and our own desires modify the content of our memories. We only need to compare our childhood memories with those of our siblings to realise how the same fact can be seen in a completely different light.

Ayurvedic medicine tells us that memory roots itself in the heart. The more one loves, the more one remembers. We say “learn by heart”. The loving confidence of a parent or a teacher will encourage a child to have the energy, the focus, the vitality and the courage to learn. When a child does not have that support, he/she will lack concentration and her/his memory will fail. We need that initial energy to avoid repeating the same mistakes and steer a steady course.

However, learning and the quality of our memory are also challenged by degeneration and ageing. In 2016, BKS Iyengar wrote this on yoga practice and ageing:

*You may have no problems at all up to the age of fifty or sixty. After that, the real problem arises when the tissues of the body do not bear the load. What I practise now is more difficult than what I did when I was young or struggled to learn. Though today, I did not consider those practices as very hard although I practised ten hours a day then. Today, it is a big fight between the body and the mind. The body says, “I can’t do it.” The mind says, “Do not force me.”*

A study, conducted by the Alzheimer's Association in America, projects that as many as 10 million baby boomers will be diagnosed with the disease in the coming years.

*It's shocking," says Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD, the author of [Brain Longevity](#) and the president and medical director of the Alzheimer's Research and Prevention Foundation. About 15 years ago, there were 4 million people with Alzheimer's; today that number is 5.2 million, and we're going to see it skyrocket. I think stress and lifestyle are leading causes. Right now in America we're being told to be afraid, be very afraid. There's so much stress and pressure in our society, it's creating an epidemic of memory loss.*

Are you at risk? If so, don't fret. There's good news, too: Scientists have come a long way in understanding what works to improve brain function. And some of them say that yoga—with its unique combination of exercise, meditation, relaxation and focus—might be a great

antidote to what is weighing on your mind. Yoga offers tools to enhance memory and focus and transform the way you think.

Now I have suffered a bad back for over a year, and I had various issues with my knees for years . However, despite this, I have continued to practise asanas and pranayama as much as I could, sometimes adapting the postures. Halasana or the “plow” does not feel that comfortable for my lower back! Nevertheless I stopped painkillers as they do not seem to make much difference; and I also felt that they affected my memory and concentration. In the mean time, I also went to a chiropractor who did acupuncture and some manipulation. Together with continued exercise, this treatment is working. The pain has lessened and my body feels stronger and more supple. I also feel clearer in my mind.

Iyengar is offering this view on the matter:

*Believe me, after a certain age, to practise āsana and prānāyāma is going to be very hard. I am doing it because of this reason only. The body ages. It descends towards deterioration. The rate of catabolism increases more than anabolism. The bones become brittle. The blood vessels get hardened. All these are known facts. I do not want to fall prey to these. If I surrender to the will of the body, then I am no more a yogic practitioner. When I practise, I watch how to stop this deteriorating process. **That is the will over matter.***

*Then you say, “Iyengar doesn’t need anything because he has practised earlier”. But that is not the right way of thinking. In fact, I see how at this age I need to practise. I have to avoid the constriction of the sternum. I have to see how the diaphragm remains free. If I look at the possible deteriorations and maintain my practice of āsana.*

**So do not give up !**