

YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI

A Guide to Self-knowledge

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5. vṛttayahpañcatayyahkliṣṭa-akliṣṭāḥ

vṛtti – Change, modification of consciousness

pañcatayya – Five types

kliṣṭa – painful, tormenting, inhibiting, disturbing, negative (adjective form of kleśa - suffering or cause of suffering, obstacle, disturbance).

akliṣṭa – the opposite of kliṣṭa, favorable, promoting, positive

There are five types of vrittis, which are either obstructive or beneficial.

The number of chitta-vrittis is infinite. Patanjali grouped them into five types or groups. He explains how each vritti can impact us in an unfavourable and harmful or favourable and beneficial way.

KLISHTA means unfavourable in a sense that such vrittis inhibit spiritual development. Klishtavrittis arise through other people, objects, events, impressions, or qualities which present an obstacle to the spiritual path. They arise from ignorance, and they nourish other similar vrittis, which create negative karma and through that bring painful consequences as well as problems and obstacles to spiritual progress.

Patanjali repeatedly warns us to avoid any kind of company, reading, conversation, or thought that can lead us away from our spiritual path. The resulting vrittis nest in the brain like viruses, which can become the cause of a serious disease. Just as cancer cells multiply imperceptibly at first, and by the time they are discovered, an entire organ is already infected by the deadly tumour, in the same way gets multiplied each negative thought that penetrated deep into the subconscious mind, and it can finally become so overpowering that it escapes any kind control.

Suppose someone reports something detrimental about a friend or about yoga. At first you push the thought away: "No, I can't believe that." But the thought comes back and settles in, doubts arise, and you may end up leaving the friend or the yoga group.

The opposite of this is AKLISHTA VRITTIS, the thoughts, impressions, sensations, influences, and actions that are beneficial for spiritual development. Through them positive karma is generated. Positive qualities such as understanding, kindness, and readiness to help, can dissolve negative imprints and vibrations and remove obstacles on the spiritual path.

A central and important principle for every spiritual aspirant is VAIRĀGYA. It means renunciation, non-attachment, detachment from worldly desire. Aklishtavrittis awaken vairāgya and bring us closer to the spiritual goal.

Always awaken and nurture uplifting and nurturing thoughts and feelings in your consciousness, and with their help dissolve the "negative" klišhtavrittis that penetrate from outside or rise from the subconscious. The next step is to gain control over the "positive" aklishtavrittis as well, and to anchor the consciousness in the true Self (see sūtra 3).

These are the two aspects of each vritti: klišhta - not beneficial and aklishta - beneficial for spiritual development and the yoga path.

I would like to pre-empt a possible misunderstanding here. By "yoga" it does not mean a particular doctrine, religion, dogma, or exercise technique. Yoga is not a religion - rather, yoga is the root of all religions. Yoga means union and signifies the merging of the individual self (jīvātma) with the cosmic self (Paramātma). Every path, every technique or practice, every belief and prayer, whereby God-realization can be achieved, is yoga.

"Yoga" is that moment when human consciousness meets divine consciousness. The light of realization that arises in this connection is the so-called "enlightenment" experienced by the aspirant. Yoga path is any path that leads to the unity of the individual with the true self and the realization of reality.

Now follows the description of the five types of vrittis.

6. pramāṇa-viparyaya-vikalpa-nidrā-smṛtayaḥ

The five types of vrittis are:

- pramāṇa – valid knowledge, correct knowledge (derived from: proven)
- viparyaya – erroneous perception, error (derived from: inverted, wrong)
- vikalpa– imagination (derived from: alternative, possible, optional)
- nidrā – sleep
- smṛiti – memory

PRAMĀṆA refers to knowledge acquired through observation and experience or from reliable sources. For example, we have seen an event with our own eyes, or we saw evidence of it in the form of a photo or video, this is a pramānavritti.

It should be noted that Patanjali only ever speaks of vrittis, that is, of appearances and ideas within our space of consciousness, and not about reality itself!

The opposite of pramānavrittis are VIPARYAYA VRITTIS: errors and mistakes that arise from wrong or inaccurate observation, from misunderstandings or wrong conclusions.

VIKALPA VRITTIS are restless, wavering thoughts. Like a monkey jumping from branch to branch, tasting this fruit and that, and never sits still, our mind never comes to rest and constantly changes opinions and moods. The opposite of vikalpa is sankalpa - a firm resolution, a clear decision that is consistently maintained.

NIDRĀ, sleep, is also called a vritti by Patanjali. How is this to be understood? When we wake up from a deep, dreamless sleep, we spontaneously think: "Today I had truly good and deep sleep." How do we know this or who is it that has observed this? The ātma is the observer who transmits this knowledge to us. For Patanjali sleep is also only a modification of consciousness.

SMRITI, the fifth type of vrittis, are memories - not just the conscious memories, but also the memories of the past experiences from this life and previous existences that lie in the unconscious and subconscious. We may be able to close our eyes and ears to external impressions, but we cannot close the door of the subconscious. The imprints in the subconscious define the life stronger than conscious sensations.

Some people or institutes offer "regressions", to make memories of past lives conscious. I am not of the opinion that this is useful and helpful. It may uncover some of the causes of present problems, but it may also be the cause of stronger problems and even mental confusion. Therefore, such attempts should always be considered with great caution.

It is different when spontaneously, in deep meditation, memories from previous lives rise and with the technique of self-inquiry these can then be objectively observed, examined, and finally resolved.

Memories do not have to be bad at all. Everybody has had also happy and beautiful times. Don't think badly about your past, and don't be worried about the future.

Do not be shaken by emotions. Always remain confident. You are ātma - be like the ocean where deep down it is totally by the waves on the surface.

In the following sūtras, Patanjali explains in detail each type of vrittis.