

# YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI

## A Guide to Self-knowledge

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### 7. pratyakṣa-anumāna-āgamāḥ pramāṇāni

*pratyakṣa – direct perception, own experience*

*anumāna – logical inference, conclusion*

*āgama – Knowledge from reliable sources*

*pramāṇa – correct perception or realization*

**Valid knowledge can be acquired in three ways, through**

- direct perception, own experience,
- correct reasoning,
- reports and testimonies from reliable sources

PRATYAKSHA means that knowledge which has been transmitted by the mind or the senses and, if it agrees with previous experiences and insights, is accepted by the mind without doubt or contradiction. Such certainty evokes pramāna vrittis: doubtless conviction.

As follows from the 5th sūtra, there are two types of pramāna vrittis: unfavorable (klišhta) and favorable (aklišhta).

If an experience brings us to the realization that all worldly things are impermanent and that ultimately everything in life leads to disappointment and if through that realization the spiritual striving is intensified, that is an aklišhta vritti.

One day we must accept the fact that earthly life does not last forever. To put it in the words of poets:

Oh man, your skin is truly good for nothing,  
it can only be burned to ashes.

The skin of an animal is useful for many things,  
but the skin of a human being is completely worthless.

Or:

Life is like morning dew  
which shines like pearls on the grass.

But as soon as the sun rises,  
it evaporates instantly.

At some point, our life on earth will come to an end. Then we have to say goodbye to everything. Time does not stand still, and no moment returns to us. The past has passed and what is lost is lost. If we are aware of this, we will make the best use of the time we have been given to advance on the spiritual path.

If, however, through the realization of our impermanence the desires and cravings for worldly things are increased and the effort on the yoga path is diminished, they act as inauspicious vrittis.

As we can see, Patanjali is not concerned with the categories of true = positive and good or false = negative and bad; he is exclusively concerned with the subjective effect of a vritti on our spirituality. A completely correct insight that proves to be inhibiting or harmful to the spiritual path is a negative - klishta vritti, whereas an erroneous belief that helps us on the yoga path, can be a positive one - aklishta vritti.

ANUMĀNA PRAMĀNA VRITTIS are logical train of thought by which we infer the cause of an event based on observation or direct perception. For example, at the sight of smoke, one concludes that the cause of it is a fire. Or based on the flood, one draws the conclusion that it has recently rained heavily. If such conclusions are helpful for the spiritual

path, they are called *aklishta*. But if they disturb the tranquillity of our mind and cause anxiety, worry, etc., they are *klishta vrittis*.

ĀGAMA PRAMĀNA VRITTIS is knowledge that has been obtained through reliable and trustworthy sources and it has not previously been perceived by the listener or reader as his own knowledge nor a conclusion, an idea, or a conception. Patanjali means by this the transmission of hitherto unknown knowledge and new insights, for example, from sacred scriptures or through the words and teachings of saints and spiritual masters.

If we attain spiritual knowledge through such teachings, we are dealing with *aklishta vrittis*. However, if the teaching calls for fanaticism, hatred, violence, etc. against those who think differently, they become *klishta vrittis*.

The effect of such ideas and teachings is often tremendous, and survive for thousands of years, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Bible and other sacred scriptures being positive examples. However, religious conceits can also have extremely negative effects, such as the religious wars or the persecution of heretics and witches in the Middle Ages.

## 8. *viparyaya mithyā-jnānam-atad-rūpa-pratiṣṭham*

*viparyaya* – Error, mistake

*mithyā-jnāna* – Ignorance

*atad-rūpa* – not this form

*pratiṣṭham* – based on, founded upon, established

**Error arises from false knowledge, which is based on an incorrect opinion.**

VIPARYAYA VRITTIS are caused by error, confusion, misconception, misunderstanding - if, for example, you mistake a piece of mother-of-pearl (nacre) for silver or a rope for a snake. This leads to wrong conclusions and reactions. Such misconceptions give rise to the legends and ghost stories, in which, for example, a lonely, bare tree is taken for a ghost, the howling of the wind is taken for ghostly voices or the creaking of the wooden floor for the footsteps of an intruder.

If through these vrittis - although it is an false (incorrect) conception - vairāgya is awakened as a help on the yoga path, in that case this is an aklishta vritti, otherwise it is a klishta vritti.

The senses can give us correct knowledge, but they can also mislead us. As explained before, Patanjali does not examine the objective correctness of our experience - it is always vrittis, that is, movements of our mind, and not a true vision of reality. Patanjali only analyses the effect that these vrittis produce in us. Mistakes can also have positive effects. If we by mistake assume that worldly pleasures, money, and possessions are "real" and permanent, and we finally turn to the spiritual path after disappointment and suffering, this mistake was aklishta or "positive" according to Patanjali.

## 9. śabda-jnāna-anupātī vastu-śūnyo vikalpaḥ

*śabda-jnāna-anupātī – Knowledge conveyed through words*

*vastu-śūnya – nonexistent*

*vikalpa – Variety, variation, also: imagination, conceit*

**Imaginations result from ideas that are based only on words without reference to reality.**

Sometimes a very insignificant event or word can trigger a flood of thoughts and ideas in us, and it becomes - as the saying goes - "a mosquito becomes an elephant". Like all types of vrittis, vikalpa vrittis can be either favourable or unfavourable, having a positive or negative effect on our spirituality. In the favourable case, they strengthen faith and impart inner help, such as the bīja mantra (bīja = "seed," essence). In the sacred letter or sacred syllable of bīja mantra there is a seed from which grows a powerful tree of perfection and God-realization. However, if such ideas cause doubt, anger, envy, jealousy, etc., they belong to the category of unfavourable, aklishta vrittis. Everyone has experienced how a thoughtless, foolish, or unfounded word, can become the cause of great calamity.

Once in a village there was a madman. Someone said to him: "You are really totally crazy. I hope you don't burn the whole village down one day." The madman clapped his hands with joy and shouted, "That's really an excellent idea, I'll do it right away!"