

Chapter 5: CLARITY

My ex-boyfriend sent me an email to let me know that he was seeing someone. A month after our six-year relationship ended. Over the issue of kids.

I sit, staring stupidly at my computer, trying to register the polite words on the screen, “*I don’t know how to come out and say it, so I guess I’ll just tell you: I’m seeing someone.*”

The flood of unexpected feelings is fast and hot. I am outraged, hurt, abandoned, destroyed. My mind spins with stories. Why couldn’t he wait? Did our relationship mean so little to him? And who the hell is *she*?

He is with someone else.
He loves someone else.

And now, suddenly, I feel truly alone. The illusion that we were still somehow connected is broken.

As I start to cry over my keyboard, a surprising thought surfaces: “Well, I guess you weren’t quite as over that as you thought, were you?”

Reality Bites. And Wins.

Reality checks are hard.

When the way that I want the world to be and the way that the world actually *is* collide, life does not feel good. My version of the way things *should* be is so much better. So when Reality (and we’ll use capitalized “Reality” here to indicate that it’s the real thing rather than the stories in our heads) finally knocks at my door, I want to fight defiantly for my version of events: “My ex should be mourning our break up, not dating again so soon!”

We fight Reality constantly, burying our heads in the sand and practicing denial. “I shouldn’t have gotten that parking ticket!” you might lament, even though you didn’t feed the meter. “My bank account should be higher,” you may say, even though you took that delicious trip to Bali. We turn off the TV (or turn on the TV) to avoid dealing with what makes us uncomfortable. “I’m happier not knowing,” you might declare, putting a big blindfold over your eyes.

But the problem is that once you start putting a blindfold on, it becomes harder to take it off. The blindfold isn't hiding Reality; Reality is always there. The blindfold simply hides your own uncomfortable reaction to the truth. When you selectively ignore parts of the world, you are depriving yourself of the opportunity to be in the world as it actually is.

And ultimately, Reality will always win.

No matter how much we try to shove it down, deny it, or cover it with pretty blankies, Reality is our benevolent and relentless teacher.

The Reality for me? My ex-boyfriend was dating someone else. Full stop. No getting around it. The ties were cut, the relationship was over.

And even though I felt awful about it, knowing the truth put me more in touch with Reality. I had a fuller understanding of the truth of his life. And through witnessing my own reaction, I had a deeper understanding of my own feelings as well.

Reality is the stern mama bear who hugs us while growling the truth in our ears. Reality provides a mirror where we can experience our reactions and see who we are. And while Reality may be dishing out some tough love, it's love all the same.

What's Real?

To understand our relationship with Reality, let's consider for a moment how much we can know about it.

Think about your five senses: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell.

We can't perceive everything that's really out there because — quite literally — our senses are not wired to take it all in. For example, our sight is limited to perceiving wavelengths that are detectable only by the human eye; we can't see ultraviolet or infrared light, even though they surround us all the time. Similarly, we can't smell or hear the world anywhere near as well as our canine friends.

Manas

Sometimes called the “lower mind,” manas pulls together the sensory information that we can perceive and compiles it to create our experience of the world. Through manas, we experience the environment of our virtual reality game.

And yet despite the limitations of our senses, we continue to believe that everything we perceive is the “truth.”

Not only are we *physically* limited in our ability to perceive the world, we are limited by our mind's ability to consciously process the information as well. In a famous 1956

paper, psychologist George Miller proposed that two *million* bits of information come through our senses at any given moment.

Out of those two million bits, how many do you think that we are able to consciously perceive?

Seven, plus or minus two.

Take that in for a moment. That's **5-9** bits of information out of **2,000,000**.

Humbling, no?

Samkhya philosophy

Samkhya is a sister philosophy of yoga that created a map to describe the human experience of reality. According to Samkhya philosophy, the elements (earth, air, water, fire, ether) are at the bottom of the map. The human mind perceives these elements through our senses. We put all this information together in our heads, which gets filtered through our ego, memory, and higher mind. The map of Samkhya describes the limitations of human perception, and invites us to keep an open space for possibility when we are deciding what is true.

The tiny amount of information that does manage to make it into our consciousness is then filtered by our egos, expectations, memories, desires, and fears. In other words, we tend to see what we want or expect to see, whether that means we're wearing rose-coloured glasses or preparing for the worst. We filter out information that doesn't match our version of what we expect or want. Ask two people to describe a situation (or god forbid, a relationship), and the two narratives might be wildly different.

Before my ex-boyfriend emailed me, I had been assuming that he was still languishing over our failed relationship. Even though we had officially broken up, part of me wanted to hold onto the idea that he was continuing to love me from afar. His email exposed the distance between my assumptions and Reality.

You say Tomato, I say Tomahto

"Together or separate?" the waitress asks. She's so darn perky.

"Oh, we'll get separate checks," Ethan says as he peers up at the waitress from his glasses. Remember Ethan? My first Tinder date? I look down at my hands. Separate checks, huh. Well, that's a sign. Ethan is clearly not interested in dating. A guy who is interested in dating pays for the date, like a sign of intent. Some modern caveman version of: "I can provide for you and for our offspring, here is the brunch that I have hunted and killed."

I like Ethan a lot, but clearly this is going to be a friendship kind of thing. I pull out my credit card. Ah well. My first ever-online date was complete.

“I’ll give you a call,” he says.

“Great,” I say. “Sure, I’d like that.” And I would. He’s a good conversationalist, an interesting guy, and super smart. So what if there’s a not a spark? Hug, hug, see you later.

Ethan and I start hanging out casually. We hit the art museum and see an interesting film at a festival. Ethan becomes a new member of my buddy circle.

“You know, I remember when we met,” he says from the kitchen. “Who knew we’d be here now.”

“Right? So crazy!” I call back from the living room. He’s making popcorn while I scroll through movies to watch, “First dates are the worst. Figuring out the signals is so freakin’ confusing.” I pause the mouse over an old Star Trek movie. I’m such a nerd. “But *you* were totally clear at least.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know: the whole check litmus test. If he pays, he’s interested. If he’s not, we split. I mean,” I add hastily, “it all works out eventually you know. I mean, I do start paying for things. But the first date? That’s one of the basic signs. That’s like, 101.”

There’s a long pause. A growing pause. An uncomfortable pause.

“Uh, no,” Ethan says. “Uh, that’s not how I do it. That’s good to know.”

My jaw drops. I suddenly realize that Ethan and I have been in living in two different Realities.

In Ethan’s world, we have been dating for two weeks.

And I had had no idea.

[“Don’t believe everything you think.” - Anonymous](#)

Understanding the limitations of our perceptions allows us to stay flexible about what we think is true. If we can recognize our tendencies to fix and solidify our version of the facts, then we can be more available to compassionately lean into the scary uncertainty that don’t actually know everything that is going on. Had I not been so assumptive about

my version of Reality, I may have noticed sooner that Ethan and I weren't on the same page.

Getting Clear: True and False

If you recall from chapter three, yoga takes this view of the human mind:

- We have a lot of stuff in our heads.
- When we pause, we can stop identifying with all that stuff.
- Then we experience our Big Self.
- This is yoga.

Now, if we could just smack ourselves on the forehead at this point and “get it,” we'd all reach enlightenment and could call it a day.

However, it usually takes more than that.

Our mind chatter isn't going to magically go away. Nor do we want it to. While we are living in our human virtual reality suit, we need our minds to drive cars, make enchiladas, sail boats, and – generally - live our lives. The mind is like a houseguest that won't leave. But since it's a houseguest that happens to make the food, pay the bills, and do all the chores, we're pretty happy to have it around. And while we're living together, we want to have a good relationship.

Part of your work as a yogi is to get friendlier with your mind so that it can properly do its job: be a magnificent tool for helping your soul to have an experience of itself and the world. When we recognize the limitation of our perceptions, then we can be more compassionate with ourselves and others. We can also stay open to the fact that Reality could be far different (and perhaps even better) than we thought.

True Perception

The yoga tradition identifies a few different categories of “mind stuff” (*vritti*) to help us recognize what's going on. Over the next few chapters, we'll take a look at these different kinds of mind stuff in order and get friendly with how they shape our reality.

The first kind of mind stuff is called True Perception. True Perception is when our virtual reality game accurately reflects Reality. Or at least as much as it can. Although we can never be completely sure that we're correct, we are usually experiencing True Perception if one of the following conditions is met:

- I see my date steal some tableware. I perceive it directly.
- My best friend tells me that my date stole tableware. I have heard about it from someone I trust.
- I come back to the dining table, the tableware is gone, and I see it in his purse. I've made a sensible inference based on information.

Vrttis – Pramana:

Vrttis are thought patterns, aka mind stuff. These are what I lovingly call our hamsters. Basically, it's the stuff in our heads. Understanding the different kinds of stuff in our heads helps us stay open to not believing everything that we think.

One of the thought patterns that we can experience is called "true perception" (*pramana vrtti*). Perception is "true" (or accurate) when it is based on our direct experience, a trustworthy source, or sensible and consistent deduction.

Michael was a tall, handsome man in his mid-forties. We had exchanged a few pleasantries over Plenty of Fish before deciding to meet up for dinner near my work.

He was dressed smartly in standard business casual (for which he charmingly apologized, "Sorry to look so formal, straight from a work meeting!"). Since I'm a yoga teacher, I am impressed when someone isn't wearing spandex.

Michael had a steady, upper management job with an accounting company that he had worked with for nearly twenty years. He was a great listener, asked good questions, and seemed genuinely interested in my responses (which is not to be taken for granted!).

However, he seemed a bit too...well, straight and narrow for my tastes. Stable, centered, no surprises.

Having walked a not-so straight path myself, I tend to connect with people who are a little off centre. Michael, while charming and sweet, didn't seem like the kind of guy who would jaywalk, let alone break out a tin of kinky cocoa butter. However, he was a dreamboat: stable, handsome, and attentive. My mother would have loved him. So why was he single?

"Okay, are you just out of a relationship? Why are you online? What's the deal." I ask bluntly.

He laughs, "Forthright, aren't you?"

I shrug, "Well, otherwise, what's the point? There are a lot of people out there who say they want a relationship, but they don't really want to commit. So they date a bunch of people, but don't really want to settle down. Nothing wrong with that," I say quickly, "but not what I'm looking for."

"Ah," he says, "the Peter Pan syndrome."

“Yes, exactly. Never grow up.”

“Right. They want to be intimate with different people, but they’re not honest about it.”

Something in his tone clicks for me, and I sit back. My eyes narrow. “Wait a second. So...tell me what you think about monogamy.”

He is startled into laughter and puts his fork down, “Well, oh man. Yeah, you caught me. Um... okay.” He blushes, just a little. “Usually this doesn’t come out on a first meet, but...yeah. I don’t think much of it.”

“Don’t like monogamy.”

“No, not really.”

“But you do like being committed?”

“Yes. I enjoy commitment. I like loving relationships.” He pauses, “I’m a polyamorist.”

My eyes widen. Ah ha!

Like the reclusive unicorn, I had managed to find – and in the shape of a conservatively dressed, take-home-to-your-mama businessman, no less - a polyamorist. Someone who believes that you can love and be in a relationship with more than one person at the same time.

“Wow!” I am impressed. “Polyamorist!” Turns out my mother wouldn’t have approved of Michael after all.

“Yes.”

“You know, honestly,” I say candidly, “I wouldn’t have thought. You seem so straight-laced.”

He is sincere, “It took me a long time to come to this decision, but it really does feel like the right thing for me. Allowing yourself to only love one person seems limited.”

“Wellll,” I clarify, and tilt my head, “I think you can love as many people as you like. I think it’s the having sex with more than one person that gets people into trouble.”

“But isn’t sex part of intimacy?” he counters.

He’s got me there. I consider his words, “Okay. I can see that. It makes sense in a certain way. I haven’t gone down that road...but I can see it.” And I can. If you could just love people and not let boundaries or insecurities run the show, polyamory could make a lot of sense.

“How’s the time management?” I ask. I barely have time for my cat. The logistics are boggling.

He smiles ruefully, “Occasionally challenging.”

“So...” I venture, “it’s been...working for you?”

He is open. "It's great. I love it. It's not for everybody, but I feel really blessed to have some great women in my life who share their time with me. It's wonderful." He smiles, "You should try it."

Funny man.

Michael had defied my expectations completely. If I had taken him at face value and not been paying close attention, I would have assumed that he was looking for a wife and 2.5 kids. However, by staying open to new information and keeping an open mind, I was able to more clearly understand who he was as a person.

Questioning our assumptions is the first step in discerning the true from the false. By resisting the urge to immortalize our opinions as fact, we can stay malleable to what is being revealed.

Chakra

Energy centers in the body that run along the spine; each chakra is associated with a different element (earth, air, fire, water, ether). A modern interpretation of the chakra system is that each chakra governs different aspects of our human experience: the lower centers govern our relationship to the material world while the higher centers become increasingly etheric.

Muladhara Chakra

The "root" energy center, muladhara is the most earthy of the chakras is situated in the base of the pelvis. The element associated with muladhara is earth; this chakra governs our relationships to security, stability, our bodies, and the physical world. When this chakra is deficient, we can become ungrounded, "spacey," and out of Reality. When this chakra is well balanced, we are "grounded" in the Reality of the material world.

I wound up seeing Michael a few more times. He intrigued me and I wanted to see what it would be like to go on a date with someone who was also seeing several other women. Being a bit of a relationship adventurer, I thought that the polyamory might rub on off me.

Michael was a true gentleman, taking me out to dinner and talking about his experience of polyamory openly. However, I ultimately had to concede that it wasn't for me. Despite my occasional wildish streak, it turns that out that I am a traditionalist at heart. However, if I hadn't walked down the road a ways with Michael, I may never have confirmed that I'm a one-man only kinda of gal.

False Perception

Steve liked me. I mean, he *really* liked me. The night we met, he took down his Plenty of Fish profile, which is a very serious sign of intent. On our second date, he took me out for a gorgeous dinner and shared some personal news with me. Things were getting intimate!

The following weekend, he surprises me again.

“This is from Steven,” the waiter is holding a bottle of pink champagne. My roommate and I are in Whistler, celebrating her birthday.

“What?” I am agog. “You are kidding me.”

My roommate laughs, “Who is this from?”

“Oh my god, this...this is from Steve.”

“Steve, Steve? Plenty of Fish Steve? The guy you’ve seen twice?”

“Yes. He just sent us champagne. That’s insane.”

“No, it’s my birthday, he sent *me* champagne,” she says tartly. “Sooooo,” she considers, “He’s got very good sense. The way to every woman’s heart is through the goodwill of her girlfriends.” She narrows her eyes at me, “So, do you like him?”

“Yeah...sure. I mean, wow, this is great.”

“No, no, not just for the champagne,” she flaps her hand at me, “but you know, do you *like* him?”

I pause, and nod, “I don’t know him well yet, but yeah. So far, I do.”

“Well,” she nods at the waiter as he pops the cork, “it looks like he likes you.”

Then Steve disappears.

He calls a few days later, apologizing, “Family emergency. I had to go out of town. So sorry, it’s all happened so fast.”

“Oh, no, how terrible!” I’m dismayed by the news. “My goodness, of course, do what you need to do!”

Two weeks go by, though, and there is still no sign of him. I send him a few encouraging texts. They go unanswered. Boy, I think, things with his family must be really tough.

After three weeks and no news, I start browsing around Plenty of Fish again. And wouldn’t you know: there’s Steve, with a new profile up, under a new name.

Ruh-roh.

“Oh my god,” I say.

“What, what?” My roommate hurries over.

“Look!” I point at the screen.
She peers, “That’s what’s his name.”
“Yes, it’s Steve.”
“Steve...champagne Steve?”
“Yes.”
“Huh. I thought he was out of town?”
“I did too!” I pause, “There must be an explanation.”
“Yeah, like, he wants to meet other women.”
“Oh c’mon,” I stammer, “You don’t think the profile could mean something else...like, he’s putting it up for a friend, or...” I trail off.
“No.”
“Or maybe he’s just—“
“No.”
“Huh.” I say, getting angry, “I don’t get it. I thought he really liked me. That is weird.”
She shrugs. “Maybe he did like you. Apparently not enough. But,” she says, squeezing my shoulder with affection, “You had excellent timing. We did get some very nice champagne.”

False perception occurs when we experience the outside world and interpret it in a way that doesn’t align with how things really are.

Vrttis –Viparyaya

One kind of thought pattern that we experience is False Perception” (*viparyaya vrtti*) or “misconception.” False Perception occurs when we misperceive Reality. Understanding that we are making assumptions is the first step in disentangling our own agendas from our experiences. Are we perceiving Reality as it is, or are we distorting our experience based on our own desires?

Similar to my experience with Ethan, I had been creating a version of Reality that wasn’t true. In my Steve experience: attentive Steve + making an effort with the champagne = he really likes me! So what the heck happened? I wanted there to be an explanation for his behaviour that didn’t involve me being so dead wrong. But it was hard to fight with the reality of the profile of “MrBlueEyes1971.”

Why was I so resistant to the truth that he had moved on?

Because I had liked him.
Or more accurately, I’d liked the idea of him.

I did not want the obvious version of events to be true. I wanted the implausible, magical, unicorn version of reality where he still liked me and something crazy had somehow gotten in the way of our inevitable nuptials. His account had been hacked!

Someone was masquerading as him! He'd reposted his account to do a favour for a friend!

I didn't want to give up my happy story where I had a suitor and an exciting, blossoming romance. Steve – for a few weeks at least – had covered up my Missing Piece.

But in order to be in Reality, I was going to have to recognize that I had been misperceiving the signs. Steve had ghosted on me. It was time to put on my big girl pants and accept the truth.

I wanted some closure on the experience, so I sent him an email:

"I don't mind if you didn't want to pursue a relationship, but I would have appreciated it if you had been more direct with me." To his credit, he responded, "You're right. I wish you the best."

While his answer wasn't entirely satisfying, at least I felt that I was now clearly in Reality.

Lead me from the Unreal to the Real.
Lead me from Darkness to Light.
Lead me from Death to Immortality.
- Classical yoga chant, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Here is the iconic Indian story of true and false perception:

A man is walking back to his village at night, when he sees a huge snake coiled by the side of the road. He races to the village, sounding the alarm. A snake, a snake! When the villagers bring a lamp, it turns out that the snake was really a rope. In the light of wisdom, the truth is revealed.

Here's the problem with perception in general: we can't always tell the difference between what is true and what is false. When Ethan and I went out on our date, I didn't realize that we were in different Realities. It didn't even occur to me to question my assumptions. Similarly, when Steve gave all the signs of being interested, I couldn't fathom a reality where he was being a flake.

The villager who saw the rope *truly* mistook it for a snake.

When we recognize that everything is a hypothesis, we can increase our ability to be flexible and question our assumptions. When we go on a date, we can stay open to new information about the person that we are meeting. And when we find ourselves fighting for a particular version of events, we can dig into why we are so invested in that story being true.

Use your dating adventures to get to know your mind. Practice your true and false reality checks. Notice when you want to gloss over or embellish stories. Instead of turning your assumptions into facts, treat the present moment as a grand hypothesis.

How can this change in perspective help you to open your mind?

Practices

Journal: Expectations

- Before you meet your date, take a few moments to jot down some of your expectations.
- After your date, look back at your expectations. Which were true? Which were false? Why may you have been mistaken? What did you want?

Dating Practice: Listening

- Practicing listening to what your date is saying, particularly if it's not what you want to hear (ie: I live with my mom, I'm not interested in something serious, I hate cats, etc.)
- Don't assume you know what your date means. Question your assumptions and ask when you're unsure. Test your fact versus fiction skills.

Meditation practice: Reality

- Find your meditation seat (see chapter two for more detailed instructions if needed).
- Keeping your eyes and ears open, take in the Reality of the world through your senses.
- What do you really see?
- What do you really hear?
- Does anything surprise you?

Yoga Practice for Clarity

- Low lunge
- High lunge

In these lunges, test your understanding of Reality. You perceive that your hips are square; are they really? You think that your knee is over your ankle; is it?

In your physical practice, listen to everything that your body tells you. Practice non-habitual listening and allow yourself to be surprised by what you find. Rather than hearing only the loudest voices in your body (your hamstrings in a forward fold, for example), listen to the other whispers, such as your shoulders, your shins, and your back. What do you hear?

