

Chapter 6: VISION

“Rachel. Rachel!”

I’m at my desk.

My co-worker Larissa is laughing at me, “Where were you honey, you were miles away.”

I shake off my fuzzies. I had just had my second date with Steve – champagne Steve. In my fantasy, Steve and I were getting married on a beach in Hawaii. And I was pregnant.

“Oh my God. I was in Hawaii.”

“Well, that sounds nice. Why do you sound so freaked out?”

“I was planning my wedding.”

“To who? I didn’t know you were serious about someone.”

“That’s the thing, I’m not!” I shake my head, and lower my tone to a whisper so no one else can hear. “Larissa, I was planning my wedding to this guy that I went on a date with last night. Our *second* date. I am insane.”

Larissa laughs. “You, my friend, are a girl,” She waves me off. “So what? You want a wedding.”

“To a guy I just met?”

She raises an eyebrow. “You may not want to marry *him*, but clearly part of you wants to get married. Otherwise, why would you think about it?”

“I don’t want to get married.”

“Uh huh.”

“I don’t!”

Larissa raises an eyebrow, “Right. Because those kinds of fantasies happen when you don’t want to get married. Whatever you say, my friend. Whatever you say.”

I turn back to my work, baffled. I don’t want to get married, do I?

I stop and hold my hand over my eyes.

Oh yes. I do.

Imagination

To imagine is to be human. In fact, our ability to make stuff up is one of our special super powers. Imagination allows us to:

- Dream
- Invent
- Create
- Plan
- Empathize
- Communicate
- Envision

Imagination is essential to healthy cognition. We need it to fill in the blanks of our knowledge so that we can operate in the world. Consider your optic nerve. Did you know that you actually have a big ol' dark spot in your vision where the optic nerve connects to the back of your eye? However, your brain smartly fills in the dark spot with what it presumes will be there and “creates” Reality for you. Your brain is constantly filling in the blanks and creating a whole story when you really only know a *part* of the story.

Yogis consider imagination a kind of “mind stuff.”

Vrtti - Vikalpa

We have already been introduced to two kinds of thought patterns: true perception and false perception. Imagination (*vikalpa vritti*) is the third. It is not the same as false perception. If you'll recall, false perception is mistaking a rope for a snake. Even though our mind has interpreted the sensory information incorrectly, we're still basing our thoughts on something that is in the world. Imagination is when we think that there is a snake when there's no rope there at all. We are making up reality entirely out of our own head.

It's human nature – and one of our gifts - to create stories and imagine new possibilities. We see a bird and fantasize about the possibility of flight. We taste peanut butter and chocolate and come up with a Reese's Peanut Butter cup. We meet a guy and fantasize about a wedding.

However, our Imagination can take us down a dark path as well. When we don't recognize that Imagination isn't Reality, it can lead to:

- Projection
- Unfounded expectations
- Missing present, real-world opportunities
- Unfounded fears
- Anxiety
- Delusion
- Paranoia

Ajna Chakra

Located at our “third eye,” between the eyebrows, ajna is the energy center for vision and imagination. When this energy center is balanced, we can use it to create a viable, exciting, and realizable vision for our future. When we don't tether this energy in reality, we can get swept up in delusion or fantasy.

Fantasy and Fear

When we start dating someone, our Imagination rolls out the red carpet and starts putting on a film festival. We don't know this person, we don't know the future, and we certainly don't know what is going to happen next. The future is like the spot where the optic nerve connects at the back of the eye: blank.

Rather than sit in uncertainty, our brain creates stories to help us control our expectations and fears.

When I started fantasizing about marriage with Steve, I had no idea who he really was as a person—or if I even liked him. (And as you know, within a few weeks I would get more information about Steve that would dismantle my wishful thinking.) However, my imagination, eager to run away with my hopes, fabricated a delightful future scenario awash in rose-coloured light.

When we start fantasizing, it's a good opportunity to take a look at what the heck is going on in our minds. These crazy daydreams are like little messenger balloons that have floated up from our subconscious to tell us our secret desires, fears, and dreams.

Because we may not be aware of these desires consciously, our imagination may sometimes surprise us. If we're not comfortable with what they're saying about us, our fantasies may seem infantile, irrelevant, or even embarrassing.

When Larissa called me out, I immediately wanted to dismiss my marriage fantasy to Steve because I recognized its irrationality. But the truth was, part of me did want to be married again! Meeting Steve had trip-wired my own deeply held (and hidden) desire.

Owning our Imagination has two parts:

- We recognize that the fantasy is not Reality.
- We acknowledge the kernels of truth it contains.

Getting friendly with our subconscious signals is a good idea. After all, what do you think is really running the show: your superficial thoughts or your deeper unconscious?

Every fantasy that we concoct contains a golden thread of truth. If we ignore this thread, we miss the opportunity to see ourselves more clearly and to separate truth from fiction. Had I not taken the time to look at my Steve fantasy, I may have walked around with the uneasy feeling that my fantasy was *actually about* Steve, rather than about something that I wanted. I might have mistakenly thought that I was falling in love *with him*. Then I would subconsciously superimpose the veil of “You’re the guy that I fantasized would be my future baby daddy husband” onto Steve every time I saw him. This superimposition would limit my ability to be in Reality and see him for who he actually was.

Vikalpa

A vikalpa is a mental construct that describes the stories that we make up about an experience. Creating stories is normal. The problem comes when we decide that the stories that we’ve conjured are facts.

Sometimes our fantasies are joyful and positive. Like my Steve fantasy, they might reveal a great dream that we’ve had for a career, relationship, adventure or family.

But sometimes our imagination isn’t quite so nice. When our “imagination of shadows” raises its head, we instead conjure up our fears, anxieties, and worries.

If the prospect of finding someone who is a good match terrifies us, we may dwell on all the ways a relationship could end. Rather than fantasize about the good stuff, we may imagine scenarios of betrayal and abandonment. When our new person doesn’t respond instantly to our text messages, we default to, “He was using me!” “He got back together with his ex!” or “He has a secret wife out of state!”

“Worry is hoping for something bad to happen.” – Anonymous

Our subconscious – fearful of being hurt – can create a fantasy in which our fears play out. By peremptorily creating a worst-case scenario in our heads, we are trying to control the future and protect our hearts. While the intention of our subconscious may

be self-protective in nature, left unquestioned it may thwart romance and undermine trust.

Alex and I had one of those first dates that kept getting extended because we were enjoying each other's company so much. After an afternoon of lollygagging on the beach, we started planning for dinner.

"Margaritas!" I sigh happily, "I could go for one of those."

"Ah, sounds good!" He pauses, "But I don't drink."

My Spidey senses start tingling, "Why not?"

"I'm a recovering alcoholic."

I smack my leg, "Nooooo!" I collapsed back on the beach and close my eyes. Just when I like someone.

"What, what?" he laughs.

"Oh, no, Alex." I take a big breath. Then another. I am suddenly really sad. I sit up, "My dad is an alcoholic, my ex-husband, my ex-boyfriend... I don't know."

"Is that a problem?"

I speak slowly, "Obviously, I've got a pattern here. I gotta be honest. I just don't know if that's okay with me. I don't know if I can do it. I mean, I really like you, we've had a great time, but I'm not sure if I should go down that road."

He takes a big breath and looks away, "You know, I understand."

The silence grows.

"Do you mind if I think about it?" I finally say, "I think I need to think about it."

"Of course."

Despite my anxiety about his drinking, I wanted to see Alex again. Clearly we were attracted to each other. However, I was too scared that bad things would happen to allow the relationship to move further.

My mind kept creating and re-playing scary fantasies of a future where I was embroiled in a dysfunctional relationship like my marriage (more on that in chapter twelve). I caught myself thinking up worst-case scenarios:

- I'd come home and find the empty liquor bottle under the sink,
- He'd say, "I don't think I really have a problem," before cracking open a beer,
- It'd be ten years into the future and I'd be a single mom while he was in rehab.

I was making up a lot of scenarios in my head as a way of protecting myself from an uncertain future. I was so scared that I would re-create my relationship with my ex-husband that I couldn't see Alex for who he was.

If I wanted to give this relationship a shot, then I had to own my fears.

“If you ever started drinking again, I couldn't deal with it. I didn't leave my marriage. I stayed way too long and it was awful.” I blurt this out.

He looks at me quizzically, then nods as if it were a no-brainer, “Yeah. You should. I'd tell you that. You should go running in the other direction.”

I stare at him for a moment, “Oh.” I am surprised. He's not hurt. There is no “stand by your man” kind of speech, no accusations that I am being selfish or uncaring. He actually agrees with me.

I take another breath. My worst fears had been aired and I am still standing.

I nod back, “Well. Okay, then.”

Once I voiced my anxieties to Alex, a weight lifted. I couldn't prevent something bad from happening, but I could be clear that I would take responsibility for my own wellbeing. Although it is always a good idea to listen to warning signals, we don't have to treat them as facts. When I started to take responsibility for my own “dark fantasy,” I began to see Alex for who he was, rather than through the foggy veil of my own worry. While it would still be awhile before we moved past friendship, our conversation cracked open a door of possibility for something more.

Imagination is a precious part of our human experience. As we practice recognizing its influence in our everyday thoughts and feelings, we can begin to see our assumptions and ourselves more clearly. Rather than either discarding or fully believing everything we imagine, we can cultivate compassionate curiosity about our process.

Imagination and intuition are close sisters.

Intuition is the strong gut feeling that we may have about a situation. When we experience intuition, our feeling and emotional body is piping up, even though we can't consciously identify why we feel a certain way. Intuition could be based on subconscious information. If you'll recall, we are only conscious of 5-9 pieces of information out of 2,000,000. Intuition could be based on the 1,900,011 bits of information that lie beneath our conscious radar.

However, it's challenging for us to separate imagination from intuition. Again, we are confronted with the limitation of our human understanding. Listening to our intuition – but also being willing to question our stories – is one of the grand dances of dating.

Practices

Journal: Fantasies

For the next week, write down all your wonderful fantasies. These fantasies can be related to dating, or can be from any area in your life.

- What is the kernel of truth in each of them?
- What does the fantasy give you (comfort, hope, control)? Is there a consistent theme?
- What do your fantasies reveal about you and what you want or fear?

Dating Practice: Assumptions

Practice separating imagination from intuition. For example, let's say that you "get a feeling" that the person you're seeing isn't totally honest. When they don't text back, the fantasy in your head may be, "They're dating someone else!"

Rather than wholly dismissing or believing this thought, step back and ask yourself where this belief may be coming from. Have you been getting actual information that supports this scenario? Or is this conclusion an assumption that is based on your hopes or your fears?

Meditation Practice: Imagination

- Find your meditation seat (see chapter two for more detailed instructions if needed).
- Focus on your inhalation and exhalation.
- As thoughts come up, notice them and label them: "Thinking" or – if you notice that your thoughts are clearly fabrication, label them "Imagination."
- Be curious.
- Observe how much your mind fabricates, and about what.
- After your meditation, reflect: where did your mind tend to go?

Yoga practice: Vision

- Warrior II
- Side Angle Pose

Do a virtual yoga practice.

Rather than do the poses physically, first lie in Savasana (prone on your back) and imagine that you are doing the whole thing. Can you feel the practice in your body? Can you visualize yourself doing the practice beautifully? After you have imagined the practice, then do the actual poses. How was what you imagined different than what you are actually experiencing? Are there any surprises?

Before you do a challenging pose, pause and visualize yourself doing the pose with grace and ease. Did using your imagination change your experience of the pose?

