

Coordinating the Four Functions of Mind

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Q: What is the one stance from which one can [witness](#) all of the Four Functions of Mind and the way in which senses, body, breath, and mind operate together?

A: It is the Self, the Atman. To know that Self is the reason the Yogi does self-awareness and self-training. That Self is like the still center of a wheel, where the four spokes are the Four Functions of Mind that operate the external wheel in the world.



The four functions of mind are like spokes on a wheel. The wheel engages the world, while the center remains still.

There are Four Functions of Mind:

- [Manas](#) = sensory, processing mind
- [Chitta](#) = storage of impressions
- [Ahamkara](#) = "I-maker" or Ego ([2 Egos](#))
- [Buddhi](#) = knows, decides, judges, and discriminates

The aspirant should:

- [Understand](#) each function individually.
- [Coordinate](#) them all with one another.

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Discrimination and Self-Realization

An important part of meditation: When reading about the Four Functions of Mind, it can sound like this is merely an intellectual study. It is not. Witnessing the Four Functions of Mind is an important part of Yoga meditation.

Observing and discriminating between
the Four Functions of Mind
is a key to Self-realization.

Discriminating between the four functions: This is one of the most profound self-awareness practices of the ancient Himalayan sages. This Yoga practice is just as profoundly useful today as it was thousands of years ago. The process is one of self-observation, and gradually discriminating between these four aspects of the inner instrument, so as to attain the direct experience of the Center of Consciousness from which all of our thoughts, emotions, and experiences arise on various degrees and grades.

Actively observe the four as they are operating: That Center is the Witness of these Four Functions of Mind. Ultimately, one comes to know that the only stance from which these can be fully observed is that of the Center itself. In Yoga meditation, the simple act of attempting to observe these Four Functions, *as they function*, is the key to the practice.

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Mind is like Four Spokes on a Wheel

Like four spokes of a wheel: The Four Functions of Mind are like four spokes that drive the wheel to operate in the external road of life.

The hub remains still: While the wheel turns, the center hub remains still, like the center of consciousness, the Self, which remains still. While the hub is the source of the energy driving the wheel of life, the very center of the hub does not

itself move.

Go through the spokes to get to the hub: To know the center or hub (the Self), one must go through the spokes. The only vantage point from which one may fully be witness to the spokes is the Self. One who knows that center hub through Yoga meditation knows the Self, which is called Self-Realization. Thus, the process of observation of the Four Functions of Mind is an extremely useful aspect of the path of Self-Realization.

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Understanding the Four Functions of Mind

To understand the Four Functions of Mind, one needs to:

- 1) **Observe** each of the Four Functions of Mind.
- 2) **Accept** the nature of each of the Four Functions of Mind.

Train each of the four functions: One must not only observe, accept, and understand the functions of mind, but also *train* the four functions. To know and train the four functions, or spokes is essential for one to get to the center of the wheel. This is done systematically in the process of Yoga meditation.

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Coordinating the Four Functions of Mind

To establish coordination among those functions of mind, one needs to:

- 1) **Actions and speech:** Watch the mind's functioning *through* actions and speech.
- 2) **Thinking process within:** At the same time, observe the thinking process *within*.

Observing your actions and speech
reveals the *underlying* thought
process in the mind.

Observing mind *through* actions and speech: To watch the mind's functioning *through* actions and speech means that the motions and words give a mirror reflection of what is going on in one's own mind. Often, we watch the gestures and body language of other people, and infer what is going on inside that person. Though we might not always be exactly correct, we all do this with some degree of accuracy.

Observing gestures and body language: We can do the same thing with ourselves, learning of our inner mental and emotional states by observing our own gestures and body language, our own actions and speech.

While observing actions and speech,
directly *observe* the inner process
of mind, at the same time.

Observe the thinking process *within*: While we are observing our actions and speech so as to understand our inner states, we also can literally observe the thinking process *within*. For a Yoga meditator, this means

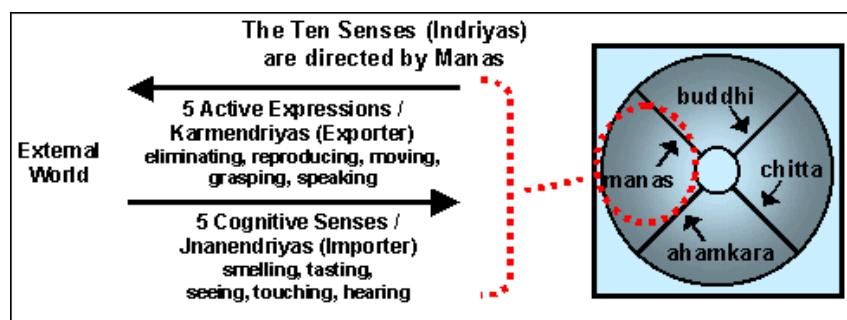
- **At the moment operating:** Observe the Four Functions of Mind at the *moment* they are operating.
- **Independently:** Observe the Four Functions of Mind *independently* of one another.
- **As they interact:** Observe the Four Functions of Mind as they *interact* with one another.

While this can take some time to learn, it is extremely fruitful when practiced for a while. It becomes very easy and natural to observe our actions, speech, and thoughts. It brings heightened awareness and a sense of inner peace.

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Exploring the Four Spokes of Mind

Manas



Manas, the lower mind: *Manas* is the lower mind, through which the mind interacts with the external world and takes in sensory impressions and data. *Manas* questions and doubts, which can cause great difficulties if this tendency becomes

excessive.

Manas is the direct supervisor
of the senses
in the inner factory.

Manas is supervisor of the senses: *Manas* is like the supervisor in the factory of life, and directs the [ten senses or Indriyas](#). *Manas* does a wonderful job of carrying out directions, but it is not supposed to be the key decision maker in the factory. That is the job of *Buddhi*. If *Buddhi* is clouded, then *Manas* has a habit of continuing to question, seeking good instruction. Then it often listens to whoever is speaking the loudest in the factory, which is the wants, wishes, desires, attractions, and aversions stored in the memory bank of *Chitta*.

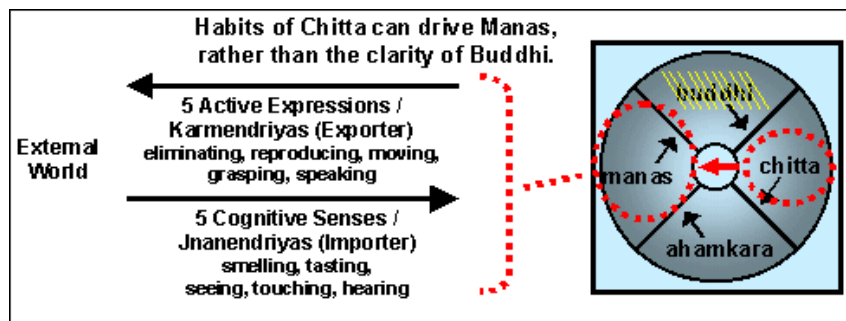
Be mindful of actions and speech: A good way to cultivate the witnessing of *Manas* is to be mindful of actions and speech, as well as your senses of smelling, tasting, seeing, touching, and hearing. By observing these, you come to see how *Manas* is the one *behind* these actions and senses. Thus, *Manas* is like the supervisor of the employees in a factory. *Manas* is not the boss, but the supervisor, who is giving the direct orders to the active and cognitive senses.

Chitta

Chitta is the memory bank: *Chitta* is the memory bank, which stores impressions and experiences, and while it can be very useful, *Chitta* can also cause difficulties if its functioning is not coordinated with the others.

Chitta is the storage place
of the countless latent impressions.

Coordinating Chitta: If *Chitta* is not coordinated with the other functions of mind, then the thousands, millions, or countless impressions in this bed of the lake of mind start to stir and arise. It is as if these many latent impressions, coming to life are all competing for the attention of *Manas* to carry out their wants in the external world. In the absence of a clear *Buddhi*, the competing voices of *Chitta* often drive *Manas* to take actions in the world that are really not so useful.



Witnessing Chitta: A good way to cultivate the witnessing of *Chitta* is to simply be aware of the streams of thoughts, emotions, images, and impressions that arise in front of *Manas* (on which *Manas* may or may not act). Notice how the stream of thoughts comes from somewhere, and then recedes back into that same place. This place is *Chitta*.

Yoga Sutras: In the Yoga Sutras, the term *Yoga* is defined with inclusion of the word *Chitta*, as *Yogash chitta vritti nirodhah* (See Yoga Sutra [1.2](#)). Throughout the Yoga Sutras, the word *chitta* is used many times. By taking a quick look at those usages, the meaning of *chitta* becomes clearer.

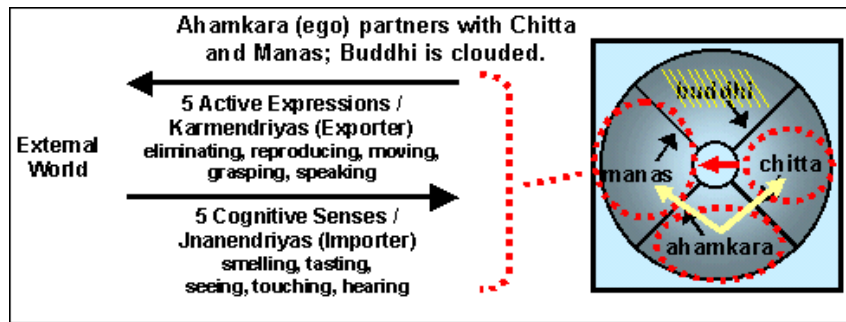
- Here are links to some of the sutras that contain the word *chitta*: [1.2](#), [1.30](#), [1.33](#), [1.37](#), [3.9](#), [3.11](#), [3.12](#), [3.19](#), [3.35](#), [4.4](#), [4.5](#), [4.15](#), [4.16](#), [4.17](#), [4.18](#), [4.22](#), [4.23](#), [4.24](#), [4.26](#).

Ahamkara

Ahamkara is "I-am-ness,": *Ahamkara* is the sense of "I-am-ness," the individual Ego, which feels itself to be a distinct, separate entity. It provides identity to our functioning, but *Ahamkara* also creates our feelings of separation, pain, and alienation as well.

Ahamkara is the strong wave
that declares "I am"

Ahamkara takes on partners: This wave of "I-am-ness" called *Ahamkara* then aligns itself or forms partnerships with the data or impressions in *Chitta* (causing them to be colored, or [klisha](#)), and, in turn, with *Manas*, which then responds to the desires being sought by this "individuality." Meanwhile, *Buddhi*, the deep aspect, which knows, decides, and discriminates, remains [clouded](#). Thus, it is said that purifying (or [un-clouding](#)) *buddhi* is a most important task in the path of meditation and Self-realization.



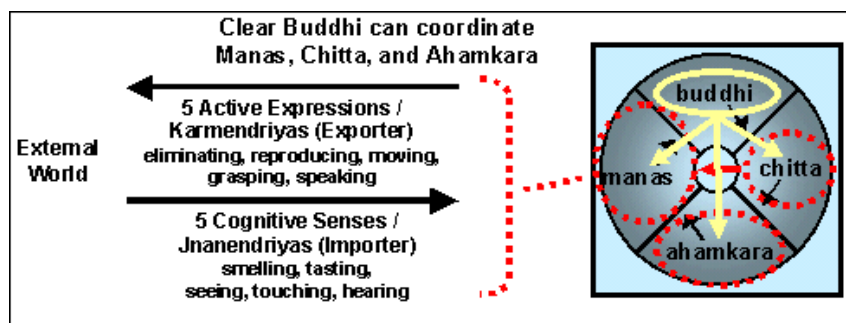
Witnessing the coloring by Ahamkara: A good way to cultivate the witnessing of *Ahamkara* is to be aware of the fact that rising thoughts and emotions are often colored with either attraction or aversion. The attraction or aversion may be strong, or it may be so weak that it is barely noticeable. Noticing the weak ones can be very insightful as to the subtlety of *Ahamkara*'s coloring (It's much easier to neutrally witness the weak ones at first).

Buddhi

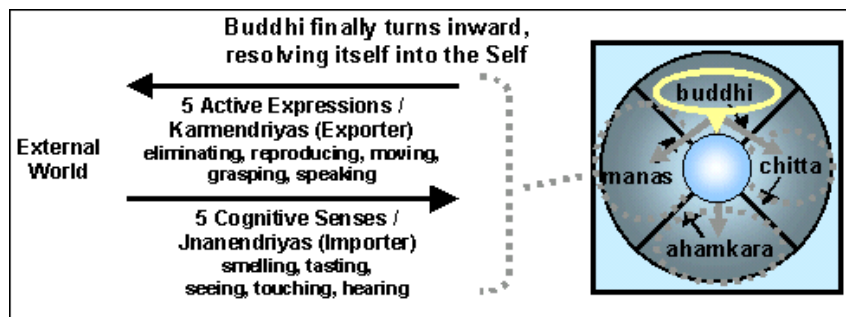
Buddhi is higher mind: *Buddhi* is the higher aspect of mind, the door-way to inner wisdom. The word *Buddhi* itself comes from the root *budh*, which means *one who has awakened*. *Buddhi* has the capacity to decide, judge, and make cognitive discriminations and differentiations. It can determine the wiser of two courses of action, if it functions clearly and if *Manas* will accept its guidance.

Buddhi is cultivated as the
decision maker
in the factory of life.

Buddhi should be the decision maker: In the factory of life, we want *Buddhi* to be making the choices for the factory. Otherwise, *Manas* gets its instructions from the habit patterns stored in *Chitta*, that are colored by *Ahamkara*, the Ego. Often, *Buddhi* is clouded over by all of the coloring and impressions in the *Chitta*. Thus, a major task of sadhana, spiritual practices, is to un-cloud the clouded Buddhi. Then, with clear choice one can ever improve the choices that lead to the fruits of spiritual practices.



Depth of Buddhi: On the more gross or surface levels of living and meditation, *Buddhi* is used as a tool for discrimination, as just described. However, when we get deep enough in meditation, we discover that it was the subtlest aspect of *Buddhi* that first started to see division in ourselves and the universe. In other words, although *Buddhi* is used as a tool for deepening experience in meditation, it was *Buddhi* who carved up the universe in the first place, seeing division where there is unity. To discriminate between *Buddhi* and pure consciousness is one of the final stages in the meditative journey.



Yoga Sutras: The principle of *Buddhi* is one of the most important principles and tools of Yoga, as presented in the Yoga Sutras. The term *Buddhi* itself is only used a couple times in the Yoga Sutra, although *Buddhi* has to do with discrimination, or *viveka*, and that term is used several times. By reviewing those few sutras, it will become clear how the entire process is founded on discrimination and *Buddhi*.

- Here are links to the sutras using the word *Buddhi*: [4.21](#), [4.22](#).
- Here are links to the sutras using the word *viveka*: [2.26](#), [2.28](#), [3.53](#), [4.26](#), [4.29](#).
- It will also be useful to read all of these five sections: [2.26-2.29](#), [3.1-3.3](#), [3.4-3.6](#), [3.53-3.56](#), [4.22-4.26](#).

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Two uses of the word "Ego"

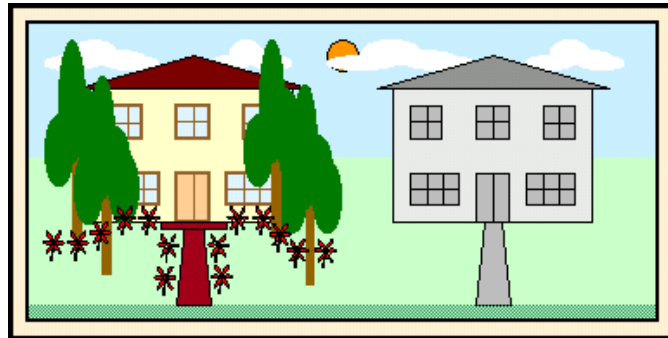
"Ego" is used in two ways: To understand and effectively use the practice of witnessing the Four Functions of Mind (see the rest of this paper), it is important to note that there are two different ways of using the word *Ego*. To do this, we will use the metaphor of two houses.

Does "Ego" refer to
the *decorations* or the *house*?

Two houses: Imagine two houses that are exactly the same, except for the paint and the decorations.

- If we *like* the color of the paint on the house and the nature of the decorations, we say the house is *pretty*.
- If we do *not* like the color of the paint and the nature of the decorations, then we say the house is *ugly*.

Both are the same: However, both houses are actually the same as one another, underneath all of the surface appearances of paint and decorations.



- **The paint and the decorations:** In our common language and in the field of modern psychology, the word *Ego* generally refers to our personality structure. Thus, in our house metaphor, the *Ego* of psychology refers to the paint and decorations, with less regard for the existence of the house itself.
- **The underlying house itself:** In Yoga psychology, the word *Ahamkara* means the *I-maker* and refers to the powerful wave of individuated existence that declares "*I am!*" When the word *Ahamkara* is translated into English, we use the word *Ego*. Thus, in our house metaphor, the *Ego* of Yoga psychology, or *Ahamkara*, refers to the house itself, not to the paint and decorations, which are considered to be false identities.

Not just semantics: This important principle is not just semantics. When most of us hear the word *Ego* used to represent the word *Ahamkara*, we automatically, out of habit, project the wrong meaning onto the word *Ego*. If we only hear the word *Ego*, and have never previously encountered the word *Ahamkara*, we are even more blinded.

Both uses of the word are valid and useful: This is not a claim that one meaning of *Ego* is right and the other wrong. Both uses of the word *Ego* are valid within their own spheres. The principle of *Ego* in psychology is useful, and the principle of *Ahamkara* in Yoga psychology is useful. Also, using the word *Ego* for *Ahamkara* is also useful, so long as we remember the way the word is being used.

(The significance of this misuse of *Ego* for *Ahamkara* is further explained in the next section, on purifying *Buddhi*.)

Change
"I want"
to
"It wants"

Who is it that "wants" or "does not want"? We usually say, "*I* want this or that," or "*I* don't want this or that." When we understand the way the four functions of mind interact, we come to see that it is not "*I*" who has attractions or aversions. That "*I*" is like the decorations on the house. It is the false identity aspect of "*I*" who is doing the *wanting*. The memory trace in the chitta, colored with attraction or aversion is, itself, the one who is doing the *wanting*. Thus, we can say, "*It* wants this or that," or "*It* doesn't want this or that." It is the thought pattern *itself* that is *wanting* or *not wanting*, not *I*. This shift is extremely useful in witnessing the thought patterns so that colorings of attachment and aversion might be attenuated.

Change your Inner Dialogue from "I want" to "It wants"

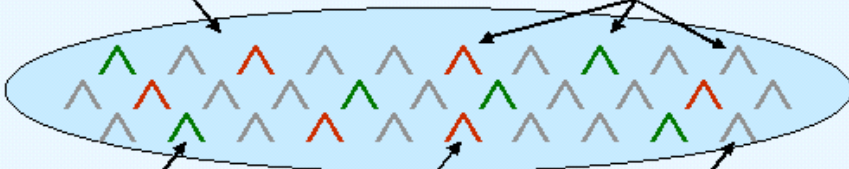
When likes or dislikes arise from the lake of the mind, we may say or think words like, "I want this or that," or "I don't like this or that." However:

It is not the **"I"** who wants this or that.
It is the **"It"** that wants this or that.

It is the individual thought pattern **itself**, the deep impression or habit pattern in the mind field, which desires to fulfill its attraction or aversion.

The "Lake" of the mind, "Chitta"

Thought patterns (Vrittis) are like Waves or Whirlpools in the Lake of Mind called "Chitta"



Some of the Vrittis are colored with attraction or attachment.

Some of the Vrittis are colored with dislike or aversion.

Some of the Vrittis are neutral, not colored, and are just memories.

Yoga explains that the reason for not experiencing the state of Self-realization is that pure consciousness identifies itself with the deep thought patterns (Vrittis) of the mind-field (Chitta; see Yoga Sutras 1.2-1.4):

The problem is that **"I"** identifies with all the Vrittis (thought patterns),
and each of them is an **"It"** that is not really who **"I"** am.

To see that it is the Vrittis (not "I") that are colored with attraction, aversion, and fear is a crucial step in the path of Self-realization. One of the easiest, most straightforward ways to begin to correct this misunderstanding is:

Stop saying, **"I"** want,
Start saying, **"It"** wants.

We are definitely responsible for those many individual thoughts, and their resulting speech and actions, but those thoughts are not "who I am." As meditation progresses, the colorings of attractions and aversions gradually weaken, as the real "I," the True Self more clearly shines through.

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Purifying Buddhi is the most important task

Like the memories in Chitta: In Yoga psychology, the paint and decorations are like all of the impressions or memories stored in *Chitta* (in the house metaphor above).

Ahamkara makes a mistake: The *Ahamkara* (literally "I-maker") makes a sort of mistake, by associating or identifying itself with some of those impressions in *Chitta*. (At a deeper level, it is the *Self* that makes this mistake, as [described Yoga Sutra #4](#).)

The association between Ahamkara
and the memories in Chitta
is the root problem.

The association is the problem: This association between *Ahamkara* (*Ego* in Yoga science) and the data in *Chitta*, in turn, allows the emergence of the apparent individual personality (*Ego* in psychology). In this association, the impressions in *Chitta* are "colored" ([Klishta](#) / [5 colorings](#)) by *Ahamkara* with attractions and aversions. These colored impressions then compete for attention. In the absence of clear choice by *Buddhi* (knows, decides, judges, discriminates), the colored impressions drive *Manas* (sensory-motor mind) to take actions purely out of habit. (See also the article [Uncoloring your Colored Thoughts](#))

The cause of our suffering: The entire cause of our mental and emotional suffering is the false identification between *Ahamkara* and the data that is stored in *Chitta*. (Eventually, at a deeper level, the *Self* is seen to have falsely identified itself with the Four Functions of Mind themselves). By [witnessing](#) the Four Functions of Mind, while they are functioning, we increasingly come to see this mistaken identity, which leads to freedom.

Buddhi becomes witness to this mistaken identity: It is the function of mind called *Buddhi*, which, once again, knows, decides, adjudges, and discriminates. In other words, *Buddhi* is the part that sees the situation clearly. Eventually, the *Self* or *Atman* is seen as witness to all of the Four Functions of Mind, including *Buddhi* itself.

Purifying Buddhi is the most important goal: How does this clarity come? It happens by [removing the clouds](#) of spiritual ignorance ([avidya](#)) that are blocking the wisdom of *Buddhi*. Thus, the most important goal of all practices is purifying *Buddhi*.

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Killing or befriending the ego

Learn to be friends: In many systems of psychological or spiritual growth, there is the suggestion that one must "kill the ego." In light of the two descriptions of ego above, and the process of purifying Buddhi, dealing with ego is done in a very different way. Rather than killing the ego, it is more like befriending the ego.

Ego needs to be trained: Remember, ego, as *Ahamkara*, is the "I-maker," which allows for our very existence as individuals. The problem, as described above, is that ego mistakenly takes on false identities. It is not that ego is somehow *bad*, and needs to be punished by a death sentence. Rather, it needs to be trained, along with the other of the four functions of mind, particularly *Manas*.

Letting go of the associations: If there is to be a death at all, it is more like the letting go of the *associations* that have been made between the memories stored in *Chitta* and the I-ness of *Ahamkara*. This association is the coloring process known as [klisha](#), as distinct from the un-coloring process known as [aklishta](#).

Ahamkara becomes stronger: This "death" of association does not mean the death of *Ahamkara*. In fact, if anything, *Ahamkara* becomes stronger. People practicing Yoga often speak of [kundalini awakening](#), which is an outpouring of kundalini shakti, with [shakti](#) being the primordial spiritual energy. However, there is a form of shakti that comes first, before kundalini shakti, and that is *sankalpa* shakti, which is the shakti of *determination*. It is that strong commitment on the spiritual journey that says, "I can do it! I will do it! I have to do it!" This is none other than the positive application of the force of *Ahamkara*, or ego. It is not a negative thing, which needs to die. Rather, it is a positive, essential tool, which needs to be trained, cultivated, and utilized on the inner journey.

This mistaken identity, and the process of un-coloring is a foundation principle of Yoga, and is the core of the practices described in the first few sutras of the [Yoga Sutras \(1.1-1.4\)](#).

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Three freedoms

There are three freedoms that come sequentially over time through this purifying or clarity of *Buddhi*:

- **Actions:** First is freedom from the bondage of actions. As *Ahamkara* and *Chitta* become less associated through the colorings such as attachment and aversions ([kleshas](#)), there is greater freedom in actions.
- **Thoughts:** Second is freedom from the bondage of thoughts. The degree of the coloring further further [attenuates](#) through the process of un-clouding the *Buddhi*.
- **Ignorance:** Third is freedom from the bondage of ignorance ([avidya](#)). In this final stage, *Buddhi* has become so completely clear that it is able to see through all of the process of false identity.

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Going Beyond the Mind

Mind directs, influences, and goes outward:

It is imperative that one become aware of the facts that:

- **Mind controls:** It is the mind that is in direct control of the senses, breath, and body.
- **Mind goes outward:** It is the mind that influences the senses and causes them to go out into the external world.
- **Mind desires:** It is the mind that desires to perceive the world through the senses and then to conceptualize and categorize those sense perceptions.

It's all about training the mind: All *sadhanas* (spiritual practices), techniques, and disciplines are actually means to train the mind (all of the Four Functions of Mind).

Train mind to go beyond itself: The most important part of the training is to make the mind aware that Reality lies beyond itself, and that this Reality is the eternal aspect of the Self or Soul.

Mind is the finest instrument: The mind is the finest instrument that we possess. If it is understood well, the mind can be helpful in our spiritual practices (*sadhana*). However, the mind must be well-ordered and disciplined. Otherwise, the mind can distract and dissipate all of our potentials.

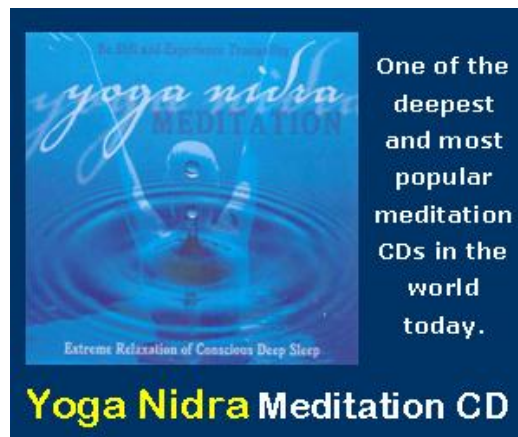
Levels of consciousness: The Four Functions of Mind operate at the [various levels](#) of consciousness. In the [waking state](#) of consciousness, the four operate. In the [dreaming state](#), the four operate. In the [deep sleep](#) state, the four functions become less active, as if they are partially receding back into the latent part of mind, the *Chitta* from which all of the activity arises in the dreaming and waking states.

Experience the truth beyond the four functions: It is necessary that one learn to [observe](#), [understand](#), and [train](#) the functions of mind at the various levels of consciousness. Then, eventually, one can experience that Truth which is beyond all

of the functions of mind and beyond the levels of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.



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This site is devoted to presenting the ancient Self-Realization path of the Tradition of the Himalayan masters in simple, understandable and beneficial ways, while not compromising quality or depth. The goal of our sadhana or practices is the highest Joy that comes from the Realization in direct experience of the center of consciousness, the Self, the Atman or Purusha, which is one and the same with the Absolute Reality. This Self-Realization comes through Yoga meditation of the Yoga Sutras, the contemplative insight of Advaita Vedanta, and the intense devotion of Samaya Sri Vidya Tantra, the three of which complement one another like fingers on a hand. We employ the classical approaches of Raja, Jnana, Karma, and Bhakti Yoga, as well as Hatha, Kriya, Kundalini, Laya, Mantra, Nada, Siddha, and Tantra Yoga. Meditation, contemplation, mantra and prayer finally converge into a unified force directed towards the final stage, piercing the pearl of wisdom called bindu, leading to the Absolute.