

## The Klesa Asmita by Kim Schwartz

There is a classical text of yoga written by the sage Patanjali. In this text there are described the workings of the individuated mind. It describes modes of perception and cognition called *vrttis* of which there are five. It defines the purpose of yoga as establishing a sense of self that transcends these modes of perception. It also describes aspects of the mind that inhibit this process. These are called *klesas* of which there are also five.

Before we look at the klesa called *asmita*, let us first look at the individuated consciousness itself called *citta*, as a point of contrast. *Citta* is described in the yoga sutras as having three primary aspects- *manas*/ mind, *buddhi*/ discriminative thought and *ahamkara*/ sense of self. The *manas* collects information from the senses that is then organized by the *buddhi* to help create the *ahamkara* or sense of self.

Patanjali describes *asmita* as *Drk darsanasaktyoh ekatmata iva asmita*. One possible translation for this is that *asmita* is the identification of the perceiver with the vehicles of perception. With this identification come the feelings of “I am,” “I see,” “I hear,” “I have,” “I want,” etc. With this sense of identification with the vehicles of perception comes a sense of self defined by what one perceives to have relational to perception of self.

Both *asmita* and *ahamkara* describe an experience of self, but at contrasting ends of the spectrum. To help understand *asmita*, let us contrast it with *ahamkara*. *Ahamkara* refers to a sense of self that is relatively self-existent. That is to say, *ahamkara* is a sense of self that, though created by receiving information from the external environment, does not necessarily rely on its relationship to outer forms for its sense of worth or place in the world. The klesa *asmita*, on the other hand finds its sense of self and self worth in how we compare ourselves with the items of our external environment. In other words, *ahamkara* is more sense of self related to an internal experience whereas *asmita* is more self worth or self importance that is relational to external things.

We often approach this *asmita* sense of self by feeling that we are better or worse than someone or something else. To think that we are better or worse than anything else, necessitates self-importance. This quality is not categorically bad as it can help us to function with appropriately discriminative awareness in our agreed upon cultural contexts and social groups. In our day to day lives there is a hierarchy. We do need to make some things more and less important than others. This prioritization is the agreed upon reality of the social and cultural constructs in which we live.

However, the more dominant *asmita* becomes, the more we rely on our place in the world for sense of self. The more we rely on our place in the world for sense of self worth the more vulnerable becomes our sense of self. This is because the outer world changes exponentially more than our inner world; so when it changes our sense of self may feel threatened.

The more stable our internal sense of self, [*ahamkara*] the less self importance [*asmita*] we need to employ. It is only because of the self importance of *asmita* that we are able to become judgmental, angry, indignant, offended or self righteous. The primary reason we have these feelings is because our self importance feels threatened. Remember, *asmita* and *ahamkara* are both constructs of the mind. Neither is our true Self. Both are aspects of the mind that work to establish how we experience ourselves as humans.

In this process we use terms like right and wrong, better and worse, or good and bad. This discrimination can be appropriate in our daily lives because, as humans, our world is defined by duality. In our day to day lives we need to act sincerely and with thoughtful discrimination; as though our actions had purpose and relevance, at the same time knowing that, in the big reality, nothing is more important than anything else. This is part of the dance between asmita and ahamkara. This dance is part of the spiritual task we face as human beings.