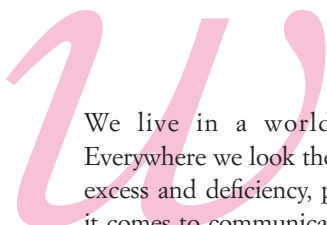




# more words less truth?

How to cope with information overload. Swamped by emails? Befuddled by advertisements? In this age of information excess, Jane Wiesner suggests yoga helps us discern the real message.



We live in a world of extremes. Everywhere we look there is evidence of excess and deficiency, particularly when it comes to communication. On the one hand, advanced forms of communication create an excess of information. Yet on the other hand, there is often a deficiency in the quality of this information. Ironically, the word 'communicate' means 'to hold something in common' (French *communier*). Yet in Western society, communication is not just a simple understanding between people, it is a much more complicated process. Nowadays, communication can take place through hard wires and magnetic waves – personal contact is not always necessary. More often than not, commonness of purpose is overshadowed by the process of consumerism. Today's communication is designed to entice; it often focuses on selling a product. Our sensory world is over-stimulated by promises and seductions. It's hard to know what to believe – what is real and what isn't.

**FOR CENTURIES, PHILOSOPHERS FROM BOTH** the East and the West have questioned the concept of 'knowing'. Some say the only thing we can rely on is our senses, yet others argue that the intellect holds the true path to knowledge. Whatever the source of our knowledge or information, today more than ever we are compelled to question its *truth*. According to the Yoga Sutras, we need to discern between right knowledge and wrong knowledge. To Patanjali, awareness is the key. Unfortunately, human insight can be clouded by a veil of impressions, worldly distractions and promised experiences – distractions like escapism (movies, video and computer games, gambling...) and promises of a better future (financial gains, physical makeovers...). We are lured by media influences into thinking that what we have and what we are is just not good enough.

Western philosopher René Descartes claims that human essence is found in our ability to think. Descartes is known for the philosophical statement "I think, therefore I am". While Descartes separates the mind from the body, Patanjali connects the body and mind, suggesting that through the

physical action of yoga, the mind can transcend spiritually and attain a higher form of intellect. This union between the mind and the body – thought, feeling and action – allows us to touch the wisdom within, to see a truth that can be expressed as "I think, I feel, I act, therefore I am".

Patanjali teaches that inner wisdom comes from *buddhi*, our higher mind. The seat of wisdom or discernment, *buddhi* is the feminine form of *buddha* 'the awakened one'. *Buddhi* is one of the three levels of the mind (*chittam*). The other two levels are the sensory mind (*manas*) and the ego identity (*ahamkara*). The sensory mind receives stimulation (information) from the external world

## The lens of judgement colours what you see based on your experiences.

and the *buddhi* qualifies its validity; sifting the real from the unreal. The ego identity (*ahamkara*) is associated with the personality and is made up of millions of experiences and social imprints. It is the storehouse of memories: the culmination of our cultural, religious and social views and values. *Ahamkara* is subjective by nature. It creates the interpretative filters through which we see our world. For instance, if we believe that we can achieve, we have much more chance of doing so because the barriers of negativity dissolve. Alternatively, if we have grown up thinking of ourselves as poor, ugly, hopeless, incompetent or weak, our decisions are likely to be coloured by the negative barriers these thoughts present.

**YOGA IS ABOUT GOING BEYOND SUBJECTIVE** views. The role of the guru is echoed by Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet* when he writes: "If he [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind." The purpose of yoga practice is to touch this threshold in order to control ideas in the mind. Ideas equal 'information'. The

trick is to distinguish between right and wrong information – right or wrong in respect to what's best for you (what is helpful or unhelpful to you). For example, if you receive an email suggesting that you make a financial investment you need to stop and consider what the sender stands to gain. Is what they are offering in your best interest? Or is the email just seducing you into thoughts of dissatisfaction with life as it is now?

**MODERN SOCIETY PRESENTS A DILEMMA.** Where once information or communication came in the form of one-on-one conversations that gave us the time and space to connect with our own inner resources, nowadays we are

bombarded with an excess of words, sounds and signs – newspapers, television, the internet, magazines, mobile phones, radio. So, how do we discern between the advertorial and the editorial? Is what is being said true or is there something to be gained by the person saying it? For instance, our emails are often unsolicited and sales orientated. We cannot always rely on this form of communication to be real and honest because it comes with a price tag. With the internet we see more evidence of deception. Although its information is vast, again we can't rely on its accuracy. Without becoming paranoid, you and I must somehow make sense of our world. We must avoid the risk of being brainwashed by deception, hearsay and sensationalism. But how do we sift through the rubble to qualify and decipher what is said, written or implied? How do we judge the information we hear, see or experience?

Firstly, we have to take the time to examine the information. Secondly, we have to conclude whether it is right or wrong, helpful or unhelpful. For instance, imagine the eyes of the seer (you) looking out into the world through

a range of interpretive filters. This lens of judgement colours what you see based on your experiences. For example, to secure an audience, the media tends to sensationalise what it presents to you. Your experience of the

said? Who is saying it? What are their motives? Consider whether you are accepting this information without prejudice. Take the time to validate your assessment. All too often we find ourselves pressured to make instant

to trust. This brings us to the one of the biggest side effects of the information overload: a reluctance to trust. Effective communication requires trust, but the information we are given does not always deserve our trust. In *Your Mythic Journey* Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox suggest that we find meaning in our lives by story telling, yet sometimes the stories we accept as reality are based on myth. Consequently, our ability to trust is tested by false information, too much information and a lack of time to analyse the information's legitimacy.

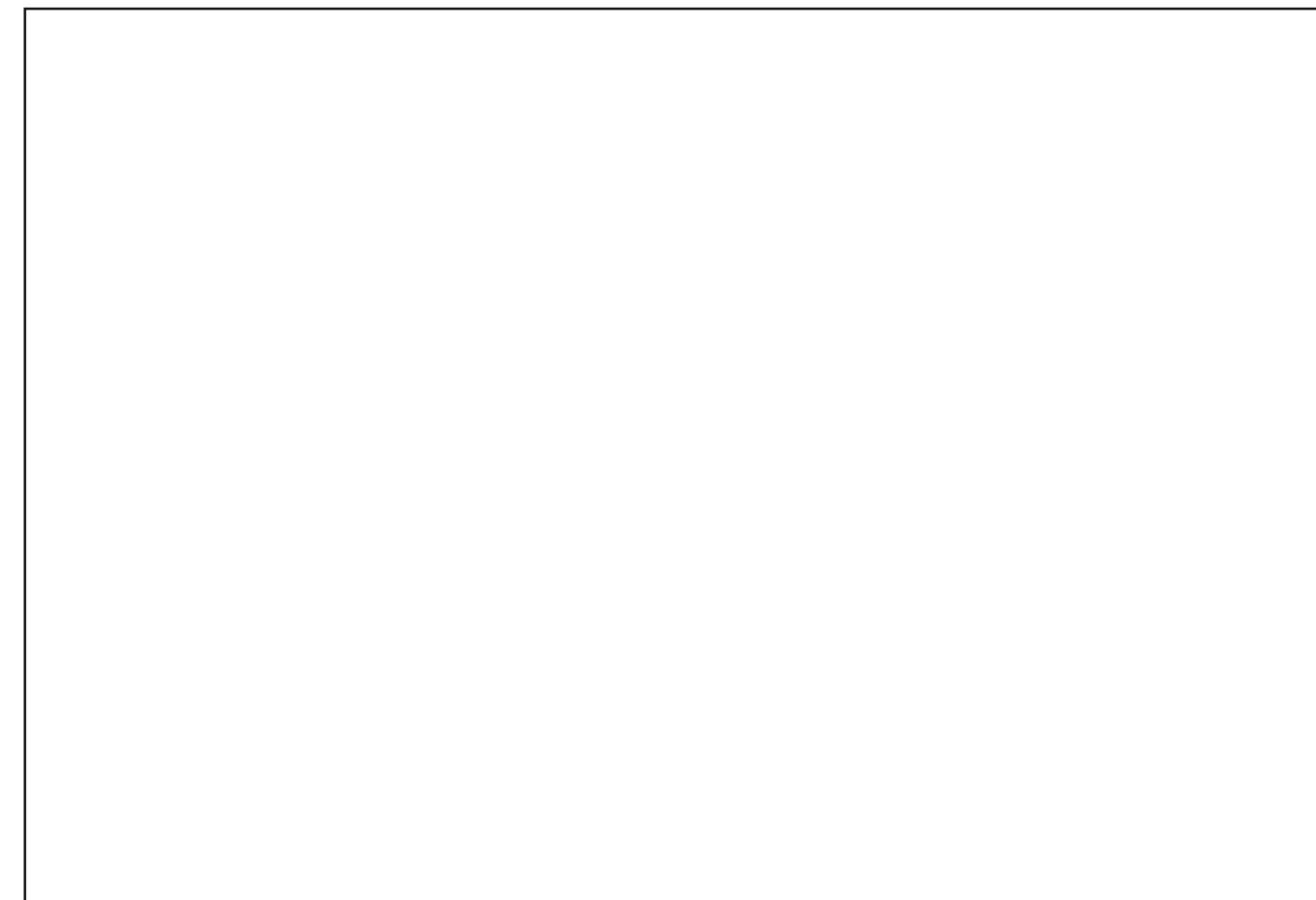
Joseph Campbell, author of *Creative Mythology*, suggests that communication is "...the individual in contact with his own interior life, communicating through his art with those 'out there'." The art of communication is the way you and I link our internal reality with the external world. But clearly, this is not always simple, especially when we see through our own individual interpretive filters. Yogic tradition agrees that our impression of the world is often 'afflicted': there are obstacles to our

## Yoga is primarily about freeing ourselves from the restraints imposed by negative thinking.

information is therefore coloured by an interpretation of events. Now, take a step backwards and ask yourself whether you see someone or something as it really is or whether your views are influenced by opinions, impressions or assumptions based on your past. According to yogic philosophy we need to evaluate information in the present, without bias. Hence, when information is given, ask yourself: What is being

decisions. How can we possibly tap into our inner resources and touch our intuition under pressure? As the saying goes: be present. The best way to make a true assessment of any given situation is to systematically unscatter your thoughts – learn to be in the moment.

**IN REALITY, WE HAVE NO GUARANTEE THAT** anything we hear is the truth. So we need to have faith in our instinct, but to have this kind of faith we need to be able





### Five ways to avoid information overload:

**1. Take Time**

Don't allow yourself to be pressured into decision making – take the time to carefully examine the information you receive.

**2. Question**

Never assume anything – question the information you receive (without prejudice) rather than accepting it blindly.

**3. Trust**

Trust in your own instincts. You have an innate wisdom within you – intuition is the most reliable information available.

**4. Be Present**

Live in the present. Make sure all of your decisions are made free of bias. Don't dwell on the past or live for the future. Enjoy your life now.

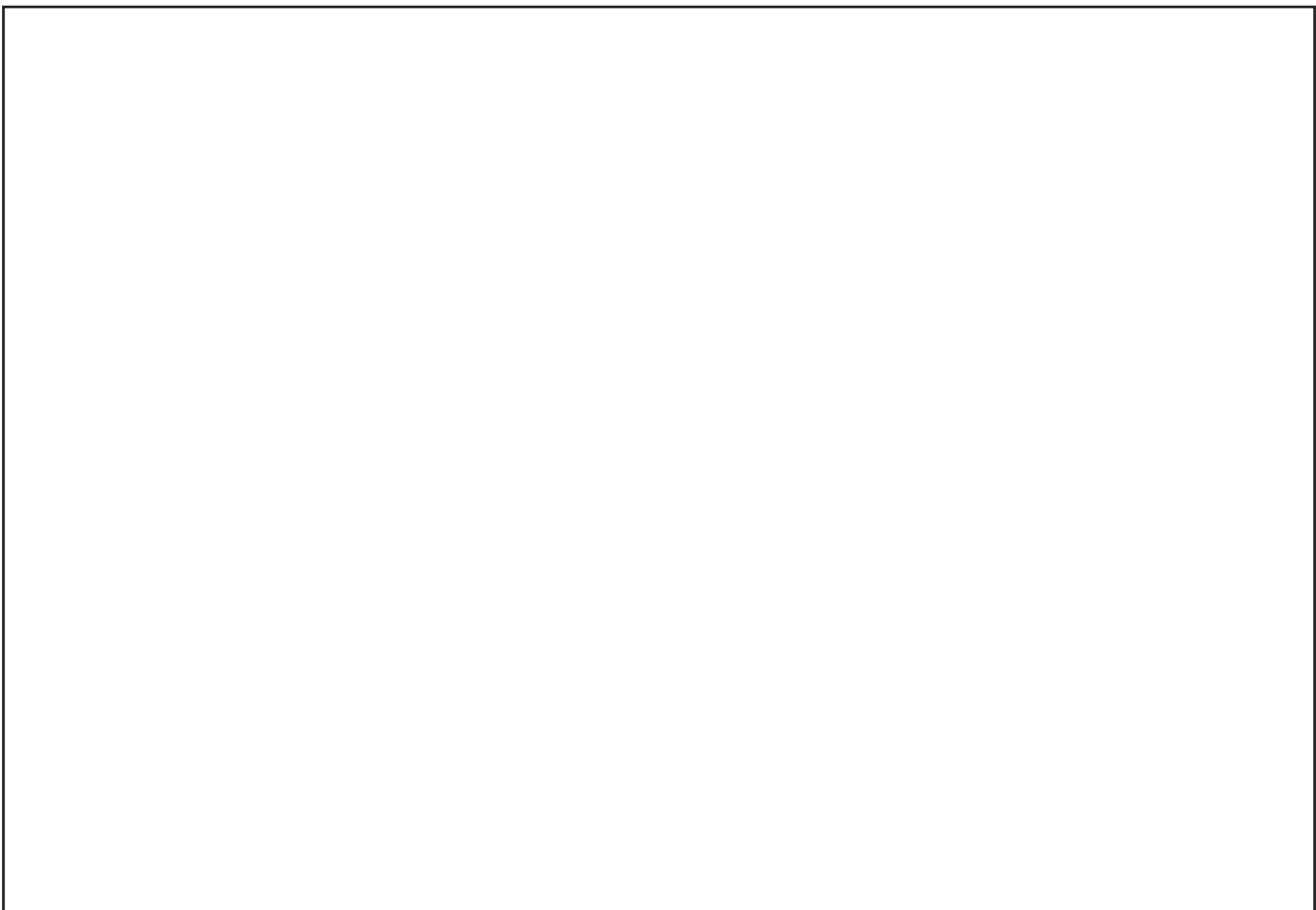
**5. Find the mean**

Avoid excess. Even too much of a good thing can cause problems. So take the Buddha's advice and follow the middle way.

perception. These obstacles or afflictions are called *kleshas* (false beliefs) and these obstacles to our clarity of mind can be subliminal or unconscious (e.g. Freud's repression).

The yoga sutras suggest that when someone is 'afflicted' they are "enmeshed in a conditional existence". 'Conditionality' (a Buddhist term) describes conditional thoughts that arise from events that then condition further events. In other words, our views are

clouded by false opinion, judgement and assumption, and these impressions of the world then determine further opinions, judgements and assumptions. We become caught up in a cycle of reaction. For instance, you may have had a negative experience with a particular person and then meet someone else who seems very similar. A bell of caution rings. But is it fair to judge a person by association? Holding on to negative experiences from the past creates a



barrier to our psychological freedom. Sure, it's important to listen to our intuition about another person, but we can't afford to let it control us. Wisdom makes an allowance for error and Hindu philosophy teaches that kleshas need to be 'burnt by the seeds of wisdom'.

Yoga is a science of the mind. The hatha (physical) yoga that is so familiar and popular in the West is a relatively new

war continually makes its presence felt.

3. False doctrines or teachings: there will be a constant propounding of false teaching or information.

**KALI-YUGA IS FUELLED BY HUMAN** insensitivity to *dharmā* (right action). Demonstrations of this insensitivity are shown by our intolerance towards each other and our inability to connect on a

## Meditation is an effective way to dissolve negative conditioning by temporarily resting the mind from the constant stream of thoughts that consume it.

aspect of yogic tradition. Yoga is primarily about freeing ourselves from the restraints imposed by negative thinking. Psychological liberation is one of the goals of meditation. Meditation is an effective way to dissolve negative conditioning by temporarily resting the mind from the constant stream of thoughts that consume it. Meditation allows us to tap into our inner wisdom – the peace and clarity of silence, the gaps between thoughts.

Philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey claims that we can only understand something in its entirety if we understand each part. Buddhi – our higher mind facilitates this understanding. But when we are given so much disjointed information, true knowledge of the whole becomes illusive. The quietening processes of yoga help us to learn to trust ourselves. This, in turn, helps us to choose wisely.

**ACCORDING TO HINDU CHRONOLOGY WE** are now in the age of *kali-yuga* – the age of a spiritual and moral decline. According to Gregor Maehle, director of The 8 Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga, *kali-yuga* is the final stage of four ages. It is the age of corruption. The *Bhagavad Gita* dates *kali-yuga* from the death of Krishna (circa 1350BCE) and associates this age with three significant influences:

1. Materialism: it is an age where we identify with our bodies and our wallets.
2. Warfare: there will be a lack of peace as

profound level. Today, our false beliefs create a dissatisfaction with the self that is compounded by the lack of time we make for our intuitive self.

Have we lost the knack of being human? The word 'human' can be traced back to the Latin words *humus* and *homo*, meaning 'a servant of the earth'. Eastern philosophy centres around a respect for the earth and the creatures of the earth. But the age of *kali-yuga* suggests that instead of serving the earth, we have made it serve us. More than ever it is important that we focus on balance, perhaps even giving more than we take. Sociologist Anthony Giddens points out that we live in a global environment: a worldwide technological, economic, social and cultural exchange. Again, how do we know what's real within this exchange? How do we make the right life choices?

The *Catalyst* program screened on ABC television on 13th April 2006 suggested that "choice is the mantra of our modern economy". *Catalyst* detailed experiments by Professor Barry Schwartz which concluded that having too many choices obstructs our ability to commit to one choice. The report states:

Our entire market economy is based on one idea, the more choice you have the happier you get. But science suggests we're going against human nature. In fact, too much choice can actually make you sick... Barry Schwartz

has worked out that a certain increase in choice does make us more satisfied but once you get beyond that, satisfaction declines sharply.

Schwartz tested 3,000 people and found that there is such a thing as too much choice. There is a limit to the information the brain can handle. According to Schwartz, extensive choice can lead to feelings of dissatisfaction; we feel regret and remorse about our choices, and we are reluctant to choose for fear of error. Schwartz suggests that there are two extreme personality types: maximisers and sacrificers. He claims that depression, obsessive-compulsive tendencies and anxiety reflect a maximiser personality. Schwartz suggests that you and I should avoid both extremes. As maximisers we risk becoming focused on control, while as sacrificers we risk serving ourselves up as sacrificial lambs. Once again, this scale of extremes indicates that it is in our best interest to avoid an 'all or nothing' mentality. Again, yoga is a great tool for creating balance – asana and pranayama are excellent equalising influences.

**MANY OF THE WORLD'S PHILOSOPHIES ARE** wary of extremes. For instance, Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet* suggests we should "rest in reason and move in passion." Reason and passion can be translated as intellect and desire. This links us to Aristotle. Aristotle believed that for us to find the 'mean' the place where virtue sits between two extremes we need to use rational thought (intellect) and we need to want (desire) to do the right thing. Aristotle's notion of wisdom parallels Patanjali's. They both understand the power of conscious thought. They both appreciate that consciousness is the key to discernment and wisdom: these are the tools we need to separate the truth from illusion and to find our way through a maze of excessive information. This concept is also akin to the Buddha's 'middle way' which suggests that we need to find a balance between the material and the spiritual.

Leigh Blashki from the Australian Institute of Yoga tells a lovely story of a guru and a student sharing a pot of tea. The student voices her concerns about whether she knows enough to reach

enlightenment. As the guru pours the tea he allows it to overflow. The guru explains that the mind is like the cup of tea: to find the truth and avoid an

determine whether we can trust the information presented to us. Perhaps we should reflect once more on the words of *The Prophet*: “No man can reveal to you

## There is a limit to the information the brain can handle.

information overflow we must either drink in or discard information. We must let go of wrong knowledge to make room for right knowledge.

Undoubtedly, we need to learn from the past, but at the same time, we need to let it go. In yogic terms, the truth is found in clarity of thought, and clarity of thought is not possible if we are consumed by the past – hanging on to an excess of information. In an age where the extremes of excess and deficiency constantly test us, it is important that we distance ourselves from the information overload and allow ourselves the space we need for our own wisdom or intuition to shine through. First, we need to trust ourselves. Then we can

ought but that which already lies half asleep in the dawning of your knowledge.” In other words, the truth is inside us. All we need to know is how to touch it. Yoga can show us how.

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