

## V. Pratyahara

### So far, so near

So far, we have looked briefly into four of the eight limbs of yoga. Let us refresh the mind with some of what we have looked into and keep it near, rather than far.

Yama is the intelligent avoidance of all that is not conducive to aspiration—and niyama, its counterpart, is better choices in place of habit. These are very different from virtues as they are means to expand consciousness from individual or self-centered living to a broader, more universal way of living. The mind is gradually purified as we learn to act or respond to life based on what actually is instead of being rooted on self-centeredness.

Through asana one brings firmness to the posture and mind and at the same time, removes the lethargy of the body and mind as well. All through asana practice, one discovers the presence of chit-shakti or intelligence-energy that sustains this body very well without any need for the ego-personality. Pranayama is its counterpart, and through regulation of prana (life-force) it removes tossing of the mind. Asana and pranayama thus bring stability and fixity to the body and mind and at the same time, give insight into chit-shakti which sustains the body.

These four limbs bring us to the fifth—pratyahara, which is usually translated as abstraction from objects. Let us try to understand pratyahara in a broader way and for this, let us use the word object for all things external including people, conditions and things to make it easier.

### The need or benefit for pratyahara

We do not usually associate with objects (and I'm using this in the widest sense of externality to include people, conditions and things) but with our ideas of them. So, there is an idea of the object and there is a tendency based on that idea—both these in the space of the one mind. Say I eat an apple for the first time and find that it is very juicy and sweet—these qualities get associated with the apple in my mind indistinguishably. Now, I find this to be very tasty and have a feeling to repeat the experience of juicy and sweet for which I must naturally have the apple.

Already, the apple becomes secondary to the 'very juicy, sweet and tasty' qualities which I have superimposed on the apple. This does not mean that apples are not 'juicy, sweet and tasty' but all apples are not this way—some apples are tart. So, when we eat a tart apple, we find it to be not quite as tasty, as the sweetness we expected is not experienced. There is absolutely nothing wrong with a slightly tart apple, it is delicious in its own way but ... not what we expected. The object does not correspond to the *idea* of the object and so the experience is not as good. The fault is never in the object but in the collision of the object—what actually is and as it is—with our ideas, hopes and expectations.

### **Self-control to Sense-control**

All our problems are because of this inner collision of ideas, hopes and expectations with reality or things as they are. In pratyahara, the entire mind is included into the field of observation along with objects or all things external. This fire of observation keeps existing concepts from interfering with perception or seeing things as they are and action, or our response, without standing outside all things.

Direct perception is the flow of attention to what actually is and this is also called dharana or concentration where the rays of the mind flow unimpeded or unscattered to *what actually is* and we will look into this more deeply a little later. Pratyahara is abstraction which results when there is a fire of observation which ignites dharana or concentration to see what is, while pratyahara includes the mind into the field of observation and this keeps 'what is not' out—ideas, hopes and expectation or concepts from interfering with perception and response.

### **The mind becomes calm**

When you realize that it is not only possible but better to let the inner intelligence directly see and respond to situations, the mind—which is not at all efficient as it is heavily laden with so many hopes and desires—is unburdened. The energy that was all along being expended to try and fulfill our hopes and desires was being done to bring about satisfaction and peace, and one sees that this comes not by trying to make the outer world correspond to the inner world but in *adjusting the inner world* to what actually is and as it happens.

Pratyahara is in this way the release of the load of desires, hopes and expectations and also results in the emptying of the mind of all these hidden triggers of action. Static memory happens automatically and this just comprises images, names or data—and this is very useful as it helps recalling information without interfering with the object, as such. Dynamic memory however is purely subjective, and its energy is called rajas or passion which gets infused as it were into the object itself, making it difficult to see things as they are.

When the entire activity of the mind is included in the field of perception, things are seen as they are without adulteration or interference of conditioning, and rajas or blind passion is gradually thinned by disuse. When the inner intelligence is used, existing notions, concepts and ideas are starved of their energy—and static memory or images and names, which help in distinguishing one from the other, alone remain.

The calm and peace that results as the scattered rays of the mind once again return give rise to a sense of inner fullness and completeness. Renunciation of desires is no loss—it is at once peace and gain only. Objects will still be there and can be enjoyed as they come naturally, but the torment of hope that craves for the outer to correspond with the inner is abandoned. When desires are abandoned, one enjoys all things better—contrary to the notion that fulfillment of desires is satisfaction, as it is desire that is a wanting that does not satisfy even during appeasement.

Pratyahara and dharana go together just as the earlier pairs of limbs of yoga we have covered. There must be dharana or direct perception of things as they are and at the same time, the mind must be included in the observation. Pratyahara or abstraction makes sure that the senses do not associate with objects wrongly, based on existing notions in the mind that have nothing at all to do with things as they are. The mind thus gets purified of its dross—the conditioning it has carried for so long, and it now becomes stable and fit for concentration and meditation to follow. A mind filled with hopes, desires and expectations is not fit for concentration or meditation.

### **Bringing about pratyahara**

Before going any further, it is important to realize that pratyahara or any step in yoga is not a technique, though it may involve technique or practice. It is not possible to be the same old person with the same old mind that functions in the same old way and hope that yoga will bring about improved experiences—don't delude yourself in this.

Yoga calls for a radical transformation by living in a different way that requires and results in a new person—renewed by returning to the natural state. For this, *we must see all things as they are*, ourselves included, and respond to situations by doing what needs to be done and not what we would like to do or what would please us or 'our people'. If there is no enthusiastic willingness to let go of limitation—the gates to wider expanses will stay closed by our own choice.

To bring about pratyahara, one must first see the futility and absurdness of all limitation, not selective limitation, and be passionate about change as much as one submerged underwater is passionate about surfacing to breathe—but our great desire to change without any desperation at all.

## **Pratyahara in japa practice**

Japa is repetition of a mantra or name of God and is the best way to begin understanding and changing the inner mechanism. I have covered this in an earlier writing so let's look at how japa can help in pratyahara or abstraction.

When you repeat and listen to the mantra mentally, you soon experience the rise of other thoughts we call distraction. Almost immediately, one is either distracted by identifying with the thoughts or one experiences dissatisfaction by the presence of 'these other thoughts' which one had hoped not to experience.

Both the rise of another thought and the feeling about that rising thought are taking place in the same mind and you are aware of both. Continue repeating and listening to the mantra within you, seeing the rise and fall of both distractions and feelings about distractions as well in the same mind and you will understand that you are quite different from even these feelings, which have a big hand in throwing up the distractions. The direct observation and understanding of this will bring great peace and melt into concentration and meditation.

## **Pratyahara in life**

Yoga practices are not relegated to the mat or prayer area—they must enter life. When yoga enters life, life enters yoga. The understanding by your *direct awareness* must enter all of life and relationships. You must be able to see things as they are and respond to what needs to be done without the interference of thought or conditioning.

There is no suppression or any such thing in avoiding thought—just a choice to use the intelligence which is beyond thought and always awake and ready. Thought has gained far too much importance in our lives by excessive reliance—it will regain its place as a function of awareness or consciousness by using awareness or consciousness itself.

Just as you are fresh in attention to the mantra each time, you have to be inwardly fresh to each and every situation as it happens and once it is over—let it go, don't continue juggling with it mentally or you will increase conditioning. There should not be any struggle in this, as once a situation is over, another is right in its place and it should have your full attention—even if it be sweeping the floor.

## **Practice on the mat and in life**

If you practice japa diligently, with heart, mind, body and non-mechanically—you will discover you are quite different from these images and feelings towards them or conditioning and how to continue doing what needs to be done without getting mixed-up with them. Practice on the mat will sharpen the ability to function in a healthier way amidst all the stimulus of life. Being

able to see things as they are and doing what needs to be done will sever the reliance on thought or existing conditioning; and not dwelling on it mentally once the action is over will prevent the build-up of new conditioning.

Thus, practice on the mat will sharpen the ability to respond to life better and life lived expertly will deepen your practice. Both these avenues will feed on each other and purify the mind of the heavy load it has carried for too long. Your health and energy levels will improve very significantly, as energy wasted earlier is returned to the body for repair and other functions.

### **The qualifications of the seeker**

The first five limbs of the yoga system are the qualifications of the seeker, and ignoring or taking any lightly will create a soft-spot or vulnerability. These five limbs of yoga—yama, niyama, asana, pranayama and pratyahara—correspond to the fourfold qualifications of the seeker of jnana yoga or sadhana chatushtaya.

1. Viveka or proper discernment between the unreal and the real.
2. Vairagya or absence of passion
3. Shadsampat or the six virtues which include (1) sama or tranquility; (2) dama or intelligent control of the organs of sense and action; (3) uparati or movement from self-centeredness to universality (pratyahara here); (4) titiksha or fortitude and power of endurance; (5) shraddha or unmistakable faith in God; and; (6) samadhana or one-pointedness of mind.
4. Mumukshutva or intense yearning for liberation from samsara, the never ending cycle of birth, existence and death.

### **Before moving on to dharana**

The sincere seeker must give up all ideas of separation which manifest in the feelings of 'I' and 'mine' and then burst forth into 'you' and 'yours'; 'this' and 'that' and so on. This is the loom on which the fabric of conditioning weaves itself and all resulting limitation is therefore self-sought and self-imposed. You alone can dismantle and abandon this machinery, and though it is a very difficult task—it is not one that will daunt the sincere seeker.

## **VI. Dharana**

Pratyahara is conservation of psychic energy and one gets mental strength, inner peace and a healthy inner life. Dharana or concentration is a steady flow of attention in one direction, object or idea.

The practice of dharana increases inner strength by reducing distractedness and increased efficiency from perception to action. The depth dharana or concentration increases sattva or inner clarity and balance.

### **Beginning the practice**

In the beginning, it is good to fix the mind on something external like a picture of one's deity, a candle flame, a rose or anything that you feel will hold your interest and awareness. It is good not to change the object of meditation, though you may experiment a little initially. The important point is that you must be very interested in the object or else the rise of distractions which you are interested in will carry away your attention. The object of meditation becomes a target to steady the flow of attention and the mind's habit to scatter thoughts lessens.

Some prefer to concentrate on something abstract from the start instead of something tangible and feel best to concentrate with their eyes closed. There is nothing wrong with this except the choice must be because you feel you can do this and not as a bold ambitious move. You can always start with something tangible and then shift to the abstract by abstract ideas associated with the picture and concentrate with your eyes closed. Proceed slowly but with firm steps and you will lay a good foundation for meditation. Missed steps will demand a return to the basics, and backtracking in practice is not a good way to tread. Proceed in concentration with firm footing and understanding and soon you will know when you are able to concentrate on subtler objects and themes.

### **The practice of concentration**

Make sure that neither cell phones, land-line phones or other devices enter the room if you wish to practice; otherwise, this is not for you.

Sit in any cross-legged position with or without a cushion, however you feel comfortable. If you cannot sit cross-legged, sit on a chair, keeping your back straight and feet uncrossed, flat on the floor. Use a timer for the duration you select—it is good to start with 12-15 minutes as it takes a little time to get settled in initially.

The object of concentration should be at eye level so the neck can be kept straight without tilting. Gaze at the object of concentration and let your attention form a steady link in its flow to the object.

Become aware of every detail in the object while watching within also, as thoughts about it will try to interfere and color the perception or assessment. Take an interest in discovery by observation but without allowing a concept to form about it. This is possible if you continue to observe keenly.

More and more detail will become observable and the mind will get saturated by the object. You will be able to close your eyes momentarily and not lose the flow of attention as the object will be seen within quite clearly.

Try to keep the eyes open for as long as possible, initially; the eyes will start watering anywhere from the 6-8 minute mark. Let them close gently a little before and continue to concentrate on the object within. As the image within starts losing clarity, open the eyes and there should be seamless observation where you do not feel the outside or inside as being any different.

The mind will try to connect observation with all kinds of thoughts; be steady and feel that with every breath, you are observing afresh. Let the thoughts rise and they will fall on their own accord. You will discover a great secret—if you leave these other thoughts and feelings about them as well alone, they will leave you alone too. They just come and go and do no harm.

The important thing is to not break the ray of attention on the object of meditation till the timer sounds. Say some prayers and leave the area gracefully.

### **Understanding distractions**

We have already discussed a little of this earlier under pratyahara but let's relook at some important points. During concentration, other thoughts will rise in the mind and almost instantly, an urge will be felt to think about them, to dwell on them or participate in the thoughts. *This is a very important point*—you must be aware of the rise of other thoughts and of the urge to think of them. Often, we see the other thought rise but we are not aware of the urge to think on that thought and when the urge rises, we get swept away, getting ourselves mixed up with the urge. The image or thought is static memory and harmless. Often, it is used as an avenue for the strong feeling or dynamic memory which craves repetition. Examples of this are experienced in our daily life: if you are angry with someone, the anger may vent on others though they have nothing to do with why you are angry.

### **Going beyond distractions**

As we have noted, we are concentrating on the object of meditation, and both the other thought and the surging urge to dwell on it are not us but something rising in us like waves in an ocean. The urge may still hold the image for a short while but will fall fast, as the urge and image or other thought exhaust each other by lack of fresh energy by you not identifying being with them.

The interest you take in the object of meditation will raise the quality of the flow of attention towards it and make the urge a little more distinguishable. It is here many seekers struggle, as the mind wants to flow towards what they call 'distractions' which are just other thoughts of interest that seem a little more interesting than their object of concentration.

The rise and fall of other thoughts or what we call distraction is not the problem, neither is the urge to dwell on them—but to slip in attention, get mixed-up with the urge and start expanding the thought is distraction. When you are distracted, you shift from the tract intended to another tract—never having become aware. As long as you feel you are *doing* something in concentrating, you are susceptible to this dislodging. If you feel it is not just something you are doing but looking directly within which is 'being'—you will hold steadier, as being is not just existence, it is also *awareness of existence* at the same time. Doing need not always be connected with being, but being is capable of doing as part of being itself. When a mother sees her child in some danger, it is not her physical frame that responds but being, the very existence in her sees a danger that must be addressed, and all of her rises into action.

I'm discussing this here because with dharana, we are entering the inner court of yoga (there are some different opinions about the what constitutes the inner court). The first five limbs also have their inner elements but work on the developing the seeker for this inner adventure—which is an act of *being*, and this *being* does what is needed. The ego cannot do yoga.

### **Single action of pratyahara and dharana**

Pratyahara arouses and awakens the inner intelligence, as the mind is brought into the field of observation along with 'things outside'. The direct observation of the mind is abstraction or withdrawal from concepts, ideas, habit or conditioning. The same intelligence also directly perceives what is outside and this flow of attention is called dharana or concentration.

Interruption or distraction is not the rise and fall of other thoughts or urges, but an interruption or shift in your own attention—from what you intend to observe to something else due to inability to concentrate. When the inner intelligence watches the mind or within and at the same time flows uninterruptedly towards the object of attention or outside, there is a single movement of pratyahara and dharana or abstraction and concentration.

### **Benefits of pratyahara and dharana**

Meditation will come naturally to one who practices concentration. A distracted mind is a breeding ground for all kinds of physical and mental illnesses. A concentrated mind will manifest itself in good physical health, abundant energy and will never cause worry, suspicion or be anxious, as it will extend its best effort when any situation presents itself. One becomes very efficient in all things and has high output as wastage of all sorts is eliminated. Newer skills

will be learnt more easily as the concentrated mind does not have inner resistance. The most difficult and trying of situations will be handled with calm, equipoise and finesse and one will walk lightly where others tread heavy.

### **Some practical hints**

Do one thing at one time and do it with full concentration and heart. Once done, don't continue to dwell on it—done means done mentally too.

All action has equal value, nothing is secular or mundane, as actions are a mirror in which we see our motives and have an opportunity to do what needs to be done best, as part of the situation itself, without trying to stand outside things with a personal motive.

Yama and niyama lay the foundation for a healthy arrangement with people, things and conditions outside as well as within, in the inner world. It brings order to the mind and this ordered mind can start building positively.

Asana and pranayama not only purify the body and energy pathways, they renew healthy connections in the subtle pathways and increase the psychic energy which will be needed for pratyahara and dharana to follow.

The base of the first four will eliminate any soft-spots or areas one is most likely to fall. It does not mean that one should not or cannot practice concentration from the beginning, but that the fundamentals should not be brushed over casually and over-confidently.

To increase sattva or clarity and balance, one has to decrease tamas and rajas. The practice of asanas and pranayama will help but only if one consciously thins desires and passions that will always ignite the embers of rajas. Practicing asana and pranayama and still living a life filled with desires, hopes and expectations is like walking far each day to get water with a bucket full of holes.

Be wise and know where to start, proceed gradually but with sure footing and you will not have to backtrack. Backtracking in all ways and regrets of all sorts are two serious obstacles for the seeker that must be avoided.

These first six limbs of yoga seem difficult and perhaps even boring at first because we are always used to doing something to in order to get something good, pleasant and better. If you approach yoga with this attitude, you will find it quite unappetizing, unpleasant and even distasteful or painful. Yoga is a journey that seeks to know the truth at every stage. In the initial stages, you will see the truth about your own self, the condition of your mind and the force of habit, and this may not be pleasant if you came in order to feel good. If however you came to yoga to know the truth, to see your mind, inner world and feelings as they are—however

turbulent—will be a good thing, as you know what needs to be done next. A seeker of truth must embrace the truth from the very beginning in his or her heart—and if this has been done, one will never have regrets or any use for a rear-view mirror. One will march forward boldly and confidently but gently, with humility.

Next, we look at meditation where we will spend quite some time and study a few series of writings, notes and more. The mat or field of practice includes all life. Be diligent in your practice.

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