

Pratyahara - the Forgotten Limb of Yoga by David Frawley

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Pratyahara: the Forgotten Limb of Yoga
by David Frawley, from Yoga and Ayurveda

Pratyahara itself is termed as Yoga, as it is the most important limb in Yoga Sadhana
-Swami Shivananda

Yoga is a vast system of spiritual practices for inner growth. To this end, the classical yoga system incorporates eight limbs, each with its own place and function. Of these, pratyahara is probably the least known. How many people, even yoga teachers, can define pratyahara? Have you ever taken a class in pratyahara? Have you ever seen a book on pratyahara? Can you think of several important pratyahara techniques? Do you perform pratyahara as part of your yogic practices? Yet unless we understand pratyahara, we are missing an integral aspect of yoga without which the system cannot work.

As the fifth of the eight limbs, pratyahara occupies a central place. Some yogis include it among the outer aspects of yoga, others with the inner aspects. Both classifications are correct, for pratyahara is the key between the outer and inner aspects of yoga; it shows us how to move from one to the other.

It is not possible to move directly from asana to meditation. This requires jumping from the body to the mind, forgetting what lies between. To make this transition, the breath and senses, which link the body and mind, must be brought under control and developed properly. This is where pranayama and pratyahara come in. With pranayama we control our vital energies and impulses and with pratyahara we gain mastery over the unruly senses --- both prerequisites to successful meditation.

What is Pratyahara?

The term pratyahara is composed of two Sanskrit words, prati and ahara. Ahara means "food," or "anything we take into ourselves from the outside." Prati is a preposition meaning "against" or "away." Pratyahara means literally "control of ahara," or "gaining mastery over external influences." It is compared to a turtle withdrawing its limbs into its shell --- the turtle's shell is the mind and the senses are the limbs. The term is usually translated as "withdrawal from the senses," but much more is implied.

In yogic thought there are three levels of ahara, or food. The first is physical food that brings in the five elements necessary to nourish the body. The second is impressions, which bring in the subtle substances necessary to nourish the mind --- the sensations of sound, touch, sight, taste, and smell. The third level of ahara is our associations, the people we hold at heart level who serve to nourish the soul and affect us with the gunas of sattva, rajas, and tamas.

Pratyahara is twofold. It involves withdrawal from wrong food, wrong

impressions and wrong associations, while simultaneously opening up to right food, right impressions and right associations. We cannot control our mental impressions without right diet and right relationship, but pratyahara's primary importance lies in control of sensory impressions which frees the mind to move within.

By withdrawing our awareness from negative impressions, pratyahara strengthens the mind's powers of immunity. Just as a healthy body can resist toxins and pathogens, a healthy mind can ward off the negative sensory influences around it. If you are easily disturbed by the noise and turmoil of the environment around you, practice pratyahara. Without it, you will not be able to meditate.

There are four main forms of pratyahara: indriya-pratyahara --- control of the senses; prana- pratyahara --- control of prana; karma-pratyahara --- control of action; and mano-pratyahara --- withdrawal of mind from the senses. Each has its special methods.

1. Control of the Senses (Indriya-pratyahara)

Indriya-pratyahara, or control of the senses, is the most important form of pratyahara, although this is not something that we like to hear about in our mass media-oriented culture. Most of us suffer from sensory overload, the result of constant bombardment from television, radio, computers, newspapers, magazines, books --- you name it. Our commercial society functions by stimulating our interest through the senses. We are constantly confronted with bright colors, loud noises and dramatic sensations. We have been raised on every sort of sensory indulgence; it is the main form of entertainment in our society.

The problem is that the senses, like untrained children, have their own will, which is largely instinctual in nature. They tell the mind what to do. If we don't discipline them, they dominate us with their endless demands. We are so accustomed to ongoing sensory activity that we don't know how to keep our minds quiet; we have become hostages of the world of the senses and its allurements. We run after what is appealing to the senses and forget the higher goals of life. For this reason, pratyahara is probably the most important limb of yoga for people today.

The old saying "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak" applies to those of us who have not learned how to properly control our senses. Indriya-pratyahara gives us the tools to strengthen the spirit and reduce its dependency on the body. Such control is not suppression (which causes eventual revolt), but proper coordination and motivation.

Right Intake of Impressions

Pratyahara centers on the right intake of impressions. Most of us are careful about the food we eat and the company we keep, but we may not exercise the same discrimination about the impressions we take in from the senses. We accept impressions via the mass media that we would never allow in our personal lives. We let people into our houses through television and movies that we would never allow into our homes in real life! What kind of impressions do we take in every day? Can we expect that they will not have an effect on us? Strong sensations dull the mind, and a dull mind makes us act in ways that are insensitive, careless, or even violent.

According to Ayurveda, sensory impressions are the main food for the mind. The background of our mental field consists of our predominant sensory impressions. We see this when our mind reverts to the impressions of the last song we heard or the last movie we saw. Just as junk food makes the body toxic, junk impressions make the mind toxic. Junk food requires a lot of salt, sugar, or spices to make it palatable because it is largely dead food; similarly junk impressions require powerful dramatic impressions --- sex and violence --- to make us feel that they are real, because they are actually just colors projected on a

screen.

We cannot ignore the role sensory impressions play in making us who we are, for they build up the subconscious and strengthen the tendencies latent within it. Trying to meditate without controlling our impressions pits our subconscious against us and prevents the development of inner peace and clarity.

Sensory Withdrawal

Fortunately we are not helpless before the barrage of sensory impressions. Pratyahara provides us many tools for managing them properly. Perhaps the simplest way to control our impressions is simply to cut them off, to spend some time apart from all sensory inputs. Just as the body benefits by fasting from food, so the mind benefits by fasting from impressions. This can be as simple as sitting to meditate with our eyes closed or taking a retreat somewhere free from the normal sensory bombardments, like at a mountain cabin. Also a "media fast," abstaining from television, radio, etc. can be a good practice to cleanse and rejuvenate the mind.

Yoni mudra is one of the most important pratyahara techniques for closing the senses. It involves using the fingers to block the sensory openings in the head --- the eyes, ears, nostrils, and mouth --- and allowing the attention and energy to move within. It is done for short periods of time when our prana is energized, such as immediately after practicing pranayama. (Naturally we should avoid closing the mouth and nose to the point at which we starve ourselves of oxygen.)

Another method of sense withdrawal is to keep our sense organs open but withdraw our attention from them. In this way we cease taking in impressions without actually closing off our sense organs. The most common method, shambhavi mudra, consists of sitting with the eyes open while directing the attention within, a technique used in several Buddhist systems of meditation as well. This redirection of the senses inward can be done with the other senses as well, particularly with the sense of hearing. It helps us control our mind even when the senses are functioning, as they are during the normal course of the day.

Focusing on Uniform Impressions

Another way to cleanse the mind and control the senses is to put our attention on a source of uniform impressions, such as gazing at the ocean or the blue sky. Just as the digestive system gets short-circuited by irregular eating habits and contrary food qualities, our ability to digest impressions can be deranged by jarring or excessive impressions. And just as improving our digestion may require going on a mono-diet, like the ayurvedic use of rice and mung beans (kicharee), so our mental digestion may require a diet of natural but homogeneous impressions. This technique is often helpful after a period of fasting from impressions.

Creating Positive Impressions

Another means of controlling the senses is to create positive, natural impressions. There are a number of ways to do this: meditating upon aspects of nature such as trees, flowers, or rocks, as well as visiting temples or other places of pilgrimage which are repositories of positive impressions and thoughts. Positive impressions can also be created by using incense, flowers, ghee lamps, altars, statues, and other artifacts of devotional worship.

Creating Inner Impressions

Another sensory withdrawal technique is to focus the mind on inner impressions, thus removing attention from external impressions. We can create our own inner impressions through the imagination or we can

contact the subtle senses that come into play when the physical senses are quiet.

Visualization is the simplest means of creating inner impressions. In fact, most yogic meditation practices begin with some type of visualization, such as "seeing" a deity, a guru, or a beautiful setting in nature. More elaborate visualizations involve imagining deities and their worlds, or mentally performing rituals, such as offering imaginary flowers or gems to imagined deities. The artist absorbed in an inner landscape or the musician creating music are also performing inner visualizations. These are all forms of pratyahara because they clear the mental field of external impressions and create a positive inner impression to serve as the foundation of meditation. Preliminary visualizations are helpful for most forms of meditation and can be integrated into other spiritual practices as well.

Laya Yoga is the yoga of the inner sound and light current, in which we focus on subtle senses to withdraw us from the gross senses. This withdrawal into inner sound and light is a means of transforming the mind and is another form of indriya-pratyahara.

2. Control of the Prana (Prana-Pratyahara)

Control of the senses requires the development and control of prana because the senses follow prana (our vital energy). Unless our prana is strong we will not have the power to control the senses. If our prana is scattered or disturbed, our senses will also be scattered and disturbed.

Pranayama is a preparation for pratyahara. Prana is gathered in pranayama and withdrawn in pratyahara. Yogic texts describe methods of withdrawing prana from different parts of the body, starting with the toes and ending wherever we wish to fix our attention --- the top of the head, the third eye, the heart or one of the other chakras.

Perhaps the best method of prana-pratyahara is to visualize the death process, in which the prana, or the life-force, withdraws from the body, shutting off all the senses from the feet to the head. Ramana Maharshi achieved Self-realization by doing this when he was a mere boy of seventeen. Before inquiring into the Self, he visualized his body as dead, withdrawing his prana into the mind and the mind into the heart. Without such complete and intense pratyahara, his meditative process would not have been successful.

3. Control of Action (Karma-Pratyahara)

We cannot control the sense organs without also controlling the motor organs. In fact the motor organs involve us directly in the external world. The impulses coming in through the senses get expressed through the motor organs and this drives us to further sensory involvement. Because desire is endless, happiness consists not in getting what we want, but in no longer needing anything from the external world.

Just as the right intake of impressions gives control of the sense organs, right work and right action gives control of the motor organs. This involves karma yoga --- performing selfless service and making our life a sacred ritual. Karma-pratyahara can be performed by surrendering any thought of personal rewards for what we do, doing everything as service to God or to humanity. The Bhagavad Gita says, "Your duty is to act, not to seek a reward for what you do." This is one kind of pratyahara. It also includes the practice of austerities that lead to control of the motor organs. For example, asana can be used to control the hands and feet, control which is needed when we sit quietly for extended periods of time.

4. Withdrawal of the Mind (Mano-Pratyahara)

The yogis tell us that mind is the sixth sense organ and that it is

responsible for coordinating all the other sense organs. We take in sensory impressions only where we place our mind's attention. In a way we are always practicing pratyahara. The mind's attention is limited and we give attention to one sensory impression by withdrawing the mind from other impressions. Wherever we place our attention, we naturally overlook other things.

We control our senses by withdrawing our mind's attention from them. According to the Yoga Sutras II.54: "When the senses do not conform with their own objects but imitate the nature of the mind, that is pratyahara." More specifically, it is mano-pratyahara --- withdrawing the senses from their objects and directing them inward to the nature of the mind, which is formless. Vyasa's commentary on the Yoga Sutra notes that the mind is like the queen bee and the senses are the worker bees. Wherever the queen bee goes, all the other bees must follow. Thus mano-pratyahara is less about controlling the senses than about controlling the mind, for when the mind is controlled, the senses are automatically controlled.

We can practice mano-pratyahara by consciously withdrawing our attention from unwholesome impressions whenever they arise. This is the highest form of pratyahara and the most difficult; if we have not gained proficiency in controlling the senses, motor organs, and pranas, it is unlikely to work. Like wild animals, prana and the senses can easily overcome a weak mind, so it is usually better to start first with more practical methods of pratyahara.

Pratyahara and the Other Limbs of Yoga

Pratyahara is related to all the limbs of yoga. All of the other limbs --- from asana to samadhi --- contain aspects of pratyahara. For example, in the sitting poses, which are the most important aspect of asana, both the sensory and motor organs are controlled. Pranayama contains an element of pratyahara as we draw our attention inward through the breath. Yama and niyama contain various principles and practices, like non-violence and contentment, that help us control the senses. In other words, pratyahara provides the foundation for the higher practices of yoga and is the basis for meditation. It follows pranayama (or control of prana) and, by linking prana with the mind, takes it out of the sphere of the body.

Pratyahara is also linked with dharana. In pratyahara we withdraw our attention from ordinary distractions. In dharana we consciously focus that attention on a particular object, such as a mantra. Pratyahara is the negative and dharana the positive aspect of the same basic function.

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Pratyahara offers many methods of preparing the mind for meditation. It also helps us avoid environmental disturbances that are the source of psychological pain. Pratyahara is a marvelous tool for taking control of our lives and opening up to our inner being. It is no wonder some great yogis have called it "the most important limb of yoga." We should all remember to include it in our practice.

Pratyahara and Ayurveda

Pratyahara, as right management of the mind and senses, is essential and good for all constitutional types. It is the most important factor for mental nutrition. However, it is most essential for those with a vata

constitution who tend towards imbalanced or excessive sensory and mental activity. All vata types should practice some form of pratyahara daily. Their restless vata distracts the senses, disturbs the motor organs and prana, and makes the mind restless. Pratyahara reverse harmful vata and turns it into a positive force of prana.

Kapha types, on the other hand, generally suffer from too little activity, including on a sensory level. They may slip into tamasic patterns of being lazy, watching television or sitting around the house. They need more mental stimulation and benefit from sensory activity of a higher nature, like visualizations of various types.

Pitta types generally have more control of the senses than the others and incline toward martial-type activities in which they discipline the body and the senses. They need to practice pratyahara as a means of relaxing the personal will and letting the divine will work through them.

Pratyahara and Disease

Ayurveda recognizes that the inappropriate use of the senses is one of the main causes of disease. All mental disease is connected with the intake of unwholesome impressions. Pratyahara therefore is an important first step in treating all mental disorders. Similarly it is very helpful in treating nervous system disorders, particularly those that arise through hyperactivity. Most of the time we overly express our emotions, which loses tremendous energy. Pratyahara teaches us to hold our energy within and not disperse it unnecessarily. This conserved energy can be drawn upon for creative, spiritual or healing purposes as needed and can provide the extra power to do the things that are really important to us.

Physical disease mainly arises from taking in unwholesome food. Pratyahara affords us control of the senses so that we do not crave wrong food. When the senses are controlled, everything is controlled and no wrong or artificial cravings can arise. That is why Ayurveda emphasizes right use of the senses as one of the most important factors in right living and disease prevention.
