

Pratyahara: The Door to the Inner World

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Abstract – *The realms of the mind have always fascinated psychologists and philosophers. A great deal of work has been done in the west to unravel the mysteries of the mind. In India the yoga sutras of Patanjali have dealt in depth towards understanding the mind. The present paper deals with the characteristics of the mind. In doing so yoga explains the importance of pratyahara. It is the technique of shutting off the external world thus stopping the entire input to the mind. Various methods are given of how pratyahara is to be accomplished according to one's bent of mind. Once achieved it opens the gate to the inner world leading and guiding to the antaranga yoga of dhyana, dharana and finally Samadhi.*

Key Words:

Pratyahara; *The withdrawing of the mind unto itself*

Antaranga yoga : *The last three parts of yoga*

Angas : *limbs of yoga*

Dharana: *The focussing of the mind on an object*

Dhyana: *A steady state of concentration*

Samadhi: *A deep state of meditation*

Tanmatra: *Micro fine elements*

Bhuta: *Macro gross elements*

Abhyasa: *Study*

Prakriya: *Action*

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The Sutra “Sva visayasamprayoge citta svarupanukara ivendriyanam pratyaharah”[1] explains pratyahara.

According to Hindu cosmology when Brahma created the Tattva or the mind stuff during the course of evolution, it was endowed with three characteristics: Bahirmukhatva, vishayakara and Nanatva (i.e. externalization, objectification and diversification). These three characteristics of the mind are responsible for the infinite number of mental images that are formed in the mind. If we examine the contents of the mind we will find that the mental images that fill up the mind every moment can be divided into 3 categories:-

(1) Ever changing images produced by the outer world.

(2) Images produced by memory of past experiences

(3) Mental images connected with anticipation of the future.

The purpose of pratyahara is to eliminate images of category (1). Pratyahara interposes as it were a shutter between the sense organs and the mind and isolates the latter completely from the external world.

This can be schematically represented in the following way:[2]



In order to understand pratyahara we must understand how perceptions take place. There is a world outside, a world of objects. Our external sense organs come in contact with the external world. The data gathered is carried by the nerve currents to the internal organ which is situated at a specific centre in the brain. That is the real organ of perception. Then there is the mind. All actions internal and external occur when the mind joins itself to these sense perception centres. The mind then presents the perceptions to the discriminating organ i.e. the intellect (Buddhi) and it is through the light and power of the soul that a decision is taken which is sent back through the agency of the mind again to the motor organs and action takes place. The mind thus plays a very important role, that of a coordinator between perception from the external world to the individual human being and action from the individual human being to the world. The sense organs are the outposts of the mind to get perception from the external world. It is only when the mind connects itself with the sense organs that perception is possible. If the mind withdraws from a particular sense organ (e.g. the constant ticking of the clock in our room but we rarely hear the ticking) the sense organ will still receive the data but there will not be any perception. At a given movement the mind is connected to all sense organs. While watching a movie one can see, the images on the screen, hear the dialogues, taste the sandwich, feel whether the sandwich is hot or cold with our hands and at the same time smell the aroma of the ingredients. One may feel very proud that we are able to operate all five sense organs simultaneously. Now let us try to withdraw the mind from each sense organ and make only four operative, or three or two or finally one. What one finds that one is helpless in doing so. The human mind is famously compared to a maddened monkey. *Markatasya surapānam tasya.....*

The human mind is like a monkey incessantly active by its own nature, then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire, thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession comes the sting of the scorpion of jealousy of the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all importance. How hard it is to control such a mind and make it voluntarily withdraw from the senses. The question is : Is it possible ? Swami Vivekananda replies that it is not only possible but absolutely necessary if the stages of Yoga are to be realized. He gives us two examples. The faith healers use some part of Pratyahara in which they teach people to deny misery and pain and evil. They succeed in making a person throw off suffering by denying it, as they make the mind of the person immune to ignore the senses. The hypnotists in a similar manner by their suggestion

excite in the patient a sort of morbid pratyahara for the time being by means of a fixed gaze or otherwise. There is an important difference between the pratyahara in yoga on one side and the pratyahara of the faith healers and hypnotist on the other. The pratyahara of yoga is voluntary. It is possible only after a strong ethical foundation and the long and arduous training of asana and pranayama. It is consumed with the desire to control, strengthen and achieve mastery over the mind. While in the case of faith healers and hypnotists it is not really controlling the mind but stunning the mind of the person by sudden blows which are delivered by the will of an external person. People visiting faith healers and hypnotists are not sadhakas but ignorant, sick and miserable people who somehow want to be cured or get rid of their painful and miserable existence. At each one of these processes the man operated upon loses a part of his mental energies, till at last the mind instead of gaining the power of perfect control becomes a shapeless powerless mass and the only goal of the person is the lunatic asylum.”[3]

The human mind functions at three levels: the conscious, the sub-conscious and the unconscious. The conscious is the surface mind, containing thoughts we have fully realized. Unfinished thoughts, undigested experiences, mutilated ideas, crushed emotions suffocated desires, thoughts that have met with conflict – sink into our personality are held in suspension in the sub conscious mind. The unconscious is constituted of impulses, instincts and emotions that are unknown to us but that come up and express themselves under favourable or unfavourable circumstances. Any one level of mind is active at a given moment whereas the other two are forever jostling for expression. As a consequence the mind is continuously bubbling up all the time. The first lesson then is to sit in meditation and let the mind run on. With a little goading the floodgates of the mind will open. Numerous thoughts will flow and numerous kinds of thoughts will flow. Many hideous thoughts will come and one will be astonished and shocked that it was possible for one to think such thoughts. When the procession of thoughts begins one has to assume the role of an interested but unattached observer. One has to wait and watch and let the procession pass by. No attempt should be made to attach oneself to any thought. Some of them will very tempting and entice us to join the procession. Once that happens one never knows where the mind will take us for a ride. In the beginning one may begin by observing the procession. In no time one may find oneself as the king of the procession! The important thing is not to get dismayed and give up the effort, continue doing it day after day and slowly one will be able to increase the time to being an observer. One will realize that thought process is one thing and getting involved into a thought and adding emotion to it is another and it depends upon ones will. Slowly but surely the two get separated and the flow of thought is allowed to pass own its own. This exercise has two main advantages. Firstly one comes to know

what the mind is doing to us i.e. the nature of the mind is exposed. The kind of thought process that one has is revealed. It is only when the nature of the mind is known that there emerges and a possibility of controlling it. Secondly one soon realizes that the momentum to the thought flow is provided by the emotion i.e. by attaching oneself to that thought. The mind merely presents the thoughts. It is we who identify ourselves with a particular thought set up the sail and our ship starts sailing. Then we jump to another thought and another movement is created. Thus we create small little whirlpools in the ocean of the mind. Just short, frantic, furious, activities. The process may be compared to the making of jalebis in a container of hot oil. Each one has a few favourite thought processes to which one attaches oneself again and again. The process goes on day in and day out as soon as the mind becomes vacant. New images are created and added and vividly decorated but the emotive whirlpool is the same.

If this is the condition of the mind during meditation what happens when one steps out of the meditation room? One has to engage oneself in the daily chores. As soon as we start receiving multiple perceptions the mind starts getting emotionally attached why? Because the very nature of mind is Asha and Trishna (Hope & Desire). So when we sit for meditation, the next day new whirlpools will be created. So one is caught in this vicious circle and no progress can be made. Swami Chidananda says "Pratyahara, it may be noted is both an Abhyasa(practice) as well as Prakriya(process). Abhyasa means a practice that you do at a given time, in a given place, in a particular asana, in the form of an exercise. Here it is when you sit for Meditation. Meditation can succeed only if it has the full cooperation of the remaining part of your life i.e. your life outside the meditating hours Your normal life you cannot ignore. You cannot make it disappear. There is no magic wand to do that. Day after day one has to cope with a certain pattern of external life.... Each one of you has preoccupations in the Udyogic kshetra, in the samajik kshetra, in the Parivarik kshetra & in the Griha kshetra. In all these places you have to practice Prakriya. Therefore Pratyahara has to be practiced 24 hours, 365 days a year"[4] Just as one takes the position of a witness in meditation, similarly one has to take the position of witness of all the events that occur in daily life. One is involved and occupied in various activities because it is one's duty, one's kartavya karma which is a part of one's Dharma. Yet in the midst of all activities you know you have nothing to do with it. It is not because of your personal desire that you are involved in these things, it does not have any fascination or attraction but it is done because it is part of duty, of Dharma. In a particular place, location and context one has a certain Dharma to fulfill. With such an attitude the mind is not affected by the external world even though the perceptions are continuously on. Now when one sits for Meditation the agitations will be much lessened because one is not allowing the problem to take root in

the mind. In this way Abhyasa and Prakriya go hand in hand. Mahatma Gandhi named his translation of Srimad Bhagwad Gita as Anasakti Yoga or the yoga of Detachment and he said that this was the message of the Gita. In the midst of the world be detached from it like the lotus in a muddy lake. The method is most suitable for those who are action oriented following the path of karma yoga.

Second method to practice pratyahara is to bring God in the centre of life. We have already discussed Isvara Pranidhana so we do not go into the details. Suffice to say that if everything that happens in life is decided by God then the mind is purged of Asha and Trishna. The world no longer affects us. In fact it becomes a veritable heaven and every interaction is an opportunity to utter the sweet name of God. For e.g. seeing a beautiful girl one will say Glory to the God for making such a beautiful girl and He who can make such beauty how beautiful He must be! If the spectacles of devotion are worn the world loses its sting, nay it becomes a creation of God and pratyahara is practiced automatically. This method is most suitable for those who are emotionally inclined following the path of Bhakti yoga.

The third way to practice pratyahara is snapping the link between oneself and the outer world. One has to completely isolate oneself from the world go to a place like Gangotri or Gomukh, live in a cave where there is nothing but mountain and trees, rocks and water. In such a case the question of Pratyahara does not arise.

The fourth way to practice pratyahara is the psychological and philosophical analysis of perception. The moment one makes contact with the external world one is surrounded by Prakriti (here the word Prakriti means objects, people, everything other than I) that has its own fascination for us. This fascination is due to long association with objects in dreams, reality or memory. This fascination needs to be analysed. This object is attracting me what is the anatomy of involvement? The very nature of sense is object centered and through the senses the mind is also dragged out and through the mind the Purusha gets completely involved in the objects i.e. in Prakriti. The Purusha is in a state of total identification with the mind and so the Purusha gets completely entangled in Prakriti. Now the question is : Is this attraction going to bring me any good? Will I get happiness out of it? It does bring happiness but this happiness is alloyed or impure. Association and attraction with objects has a small part of joy and a large part of suffering. This is because the experience of objects increases ones craving. A desire in the mind never subsides with the enjoyment of the object, on the contrary satisfying the desire makes it want it again and again. Then one becomes addicted to it. If one does not find it, one suffers intense pain. Finally one becomes a slave of that desire. The desire drives

the man with full force to fulfil it. It becomes a source of great agitation and mental restlessness. Whenever it is satisfied it brings momentary happiness. At all other times it is the intensity to want it again and again that causes ceaseless wanting, incompleteness and mental peace is lost. Pain and suffering become the dominant emotions of mind, when one sees others enjoying the very objects that one wanted, one is filled with jealousy, hatred and all the negative emotions flare up. And why all this? Just for a momentary enjoyment of object? Then give it up then with it all the baggage of pain and suffering will be gone. Peace will descend in the mind and the eternal spring of happiness will begin to flow from within. This thought must be driven into the mind again and again till it gets rooted in the mind to bring psychological awareness.

This psychological awareness must also be supported by metaphysical awareness. One must realize that without pratyahara life is but a process of adding new vasanas and samskaras. The moment one comes in contact with the external world and interacts with the objects with a desiring mind newer vasanas and samskaras are continuously added. By the time life is over the load of vasanas has piled up manifold times. The opportunity to free the Purusha has been lost and one is hurled back into the endless cycle of birth and death which yields nothing but pain and misery. A person says to himself "I have enough problems with all the baggage of my previous births eradicating them is a task by itself. I do not want to make my task all the more difficult. The aim of human life is to free the Purusha from the clutches of prakrti and put an end to suffering." This constant metaphysical awareness keeps one unwavering in the achievement of the goal and it is only pratyahara that aids in taking a decisive step towards the goal.

Swami Chidananda has recommended a few practical exercises for the inculcation of Pratyahara. "As a discipline and as a practice, various exercises are suggested in the light of the practical experience of the Yogis. For instance, try to sit in your study, take up a book and start reading. At the same time keep a timepiece a few feet away to your right. Close your book and concentrate upon the ticking sound of the clock for some minutes until you are fully aware of the continuous ticking of the clock. Then, say to yourself: "I shall not be disturbed by it. I am going to take my mind away from it. I shall give my mind entirely to the study". Then, open your book and start reading and strongly order the mind that it shall no longer pay any attention to the ticking of the clock; withdraw your attention from there and fix it upon the reading. Practice this till you become totally oblivious to the ticking of the timepiece. Then, proceed even further into a still more difficult aspect of the same exercise. Close the book, close your eyes, sit straight and try to concentrate upon an inner focal point; it may even be an idea from the book itself. Try to fix your mind upon that and tell your mind, "You are now no longer aware of that clock; your mind is now going to be fixed upon this". And try practicing Dharana or concentration, completely ignoring the previous sound. The sound is

there, but you are not aware of it. You are completely successful in fixing your mind within.

Here is another exercise. Put a soft piece of a candy like a piece of a chocolate or a toffee in your mouth. Do you know what will happen? Immediately the teeth will want to chew upon it; immediately the tongue will want to start tasting it. And normally the very fact of your having put the piece of tasty candy inside your mouth instantaneously makes the entire mouth start working, and within half a minute, the whole thing is finished. But you put the candy in your mouth as a yogi and say "I am not going to touch it, I am not going to interfere with it. I am not going to chew upon it. I am not going to pass my tongue over it. Let it dissolve by itself if it wants". So, sit with your candy and start repeating your Bhagavad Gita mentally or start repeating your Japa mentally or start recollecting some passage from some scripture and do not allow the mind to pay attention to the candy in your mouth. Take the mind away from your Rasa, from your sense of taste, and try to engage in some process other than tasting. This is practice in Pratyahara.

Third exercise is as you move along the road, because of the inveterate habit of the mind, the gaze will not be fixed in one place; it will always be roving about. And simultaneously with this, it has also the tendency to go searching after pleasant sights, sights that please or tempt or stimulate the sense of seeing. The Pratyahara exercise is that you must withdraw this gaze. Gurudev used to say that the yogi, when he walks along the bazaar, will have his gaze fixed on the ground, just two and a half yards ahead of him. He will not like be looking hither and thither like a monkey. He will walk in a dignified way, with his gaze fixed upon the ground only. He will have his head straight. A yogi will have to practice this. Like that one should walk in the most crowded and attractive bazaar. These are practices in Pratyahara. You can devise similar Sadhanas for yourself according to your facility, you need, your nature. Sabda, Sparsa, Rupa, Rasa and Gandha—they are the factors that take the mind out and make it scattered and get caught in the outside universe. Counter them, make your own devices and practice Pratyahara in a variety of ways."[5]

To conclude, Pratyahara is the withdrawal or gathering of the mind unto itself. This ability gives one the freedom to attach or detach the mind from the sense organs at will. Attachment is natural but detachment is the fruit of pratyahara. This means the function and working of every sense organ is in control. One becomes a master of sense organs switching them on and off as we switch on and off the electric light in our room. When the organs are in control every muscle and nerve will be under control since the organs are the centers of all the sensations and of all actions. As Swami Vivekananda says "When the organs are controlled the Yogi can control all feeling and doing, the whole of the body comes under his control. When that control of the organs is obtained, we feel how wonderful this body really is.

Then alone one begins to feel joy in being born, then one can truthfully say, "Blessed am I that I was born"[6]

8 Relation between Yama, Niyama and Pratyahara

Most of the Yoga centres focus primarily on Asanas and Pranayamas. The treatment given to Yama and Niyama if at all is superficial. The question is : Can one achieve the end results of Asana and Pranayama without Yama and Niyama. The answer is in the affirmative. All the benefit and powers of Asana and Pranayama can be obtained without them. The important point here is that without them the sadhaka cannot move to the stage of pratyahara. The reason is Yama, Niyama and Pratyahara are intimately connected. It is impossible to break the connection of the sense organs with the external world unless the sense organ is defective or one lives in isolation. What pratyahara aims is breaking the connection of the mind with the perception of the external world. But if Yama and Niyama have not been practiced, it is impossible to break the connection! Take for example a thousand rupee note lying on the road. If santosa and Aparigraha are not practiced the mind will get involved in the perception the emotion of greed will be activated and the action of picking up the money will automatically take place. Let us take another example of the sight of a beautiful woman. Without Brahmacharya sexual thoughts will be aroused, the equanimity of the mind will be disturbed and sexual feelings will take complete control of the mind. Pratyahara therefore becomes an impossibility and further progress is halted. Across India one comes across numerous yogis and sanyasis who have amassed wealth, fame and women by their powers of asana and pranayama. The different elements of Astanga yoga are not merely eight essential and independent parts which can be practiced irrespective of one another. They should be taken in the light of progressive stages each state preparing for the succeeding ones and requiring an adequate degree of perfection in the preceding ones.

The following paragraph by I.K. Taimni aptly concludes what we have discussed uptill now "It is interesting to note how the first five angas of yoga eliminate one after another different sources of disturbance to the mind and prepare it for the final struggle with its own vrittis. First to be eliminated by Yama-Niyama are the emotional disturbances due to moral defects in one's nature. Next to be eliminated by the practice of Asana are the disturbances which arise in the physical body. Then come the disturbances caused by the irregular or insufficient flow of vital forces in the pranic sheath. All these are removed completely by the practice of pranayama. And lastly through pratyahara is removed the major source of disturbances coming through sense organs. Thus is accomplished Bahiranga Yoga and the sadhaka becomes capable of treading the further stages of Antaranga Yoga."[7]

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