



Fundamentals Of Prthyahara Of Astanga Yoga - A Holistic Approach

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“YOGA” is a physical, mental, and spiritual discipline. Goals of yoga are varied and range from improving health to achieving salvation. But, in day to day life its implementation is more towards to tackle mental ailments which are the retribution of stressful life. Equilibrium of mental health is possible when person adopt Yoga as daily routine. Sage Patanjali is recognized as the prime pioneer of the Astanga Yoga, which is incorporated with 8 Anga’s(stages), these are broadly divided in to Bahiranga Yoga and Antaranga Yoga. Bahiranga Yoga has the specialty of developing the social and physical equilibrium by attaining control over physical body and breathing, where as Antaranga Yoga for mental and spiritual wellness by gaining mastery over the senses and mind. Between these two Anag’s there is bridge which transcends one to other stage that is Prathyahara. Sage Patanjali failed to explain in detail about it. Without the core knowledge and practicing tools of Prathyahara, person cannot make a journey towards inner growth. So here an attempt is made to bring most of the information and practicing methods of Prathyahara like Ajapa japa, Trataka, Antar mouna etc, under single roof by compiling references from various texts.

Key words: Astanga Yoga, Bahiranga Yoga, Antaranga Yoga, Prathyahara.

Introduction:

Yoga is an ancient science of spiritual practices for Spiritual health. Patanjali’s Yoga incorporates eight limbs. Yama is to achieve Social health, Niyama, Pranayama and Asana are to attain Physical health, Pratyahara is to get mental health and Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi to gain spiritual health.

It is not possible to jump directly from Asana to Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. So 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 senses - both are prerequisites for successful meditation. As the fifth of the eight limbs, Pratyahara occupies a central place. Some yogis considered as Bahiranga yoga and other as Antaranga yoga, 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. Unfortunately Patanjali does not provide many details about how to practice this limb.

Pratyahara is probably the least known Anga among the Astanga Yoga. How many people know about Prathyahara? Have you ever taken a class of Pratyahara? Have you ever seen a book on Pratyahara? 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.

Etymology

Pratyahara is derived from two Sanskrit words^{1,2}: *Prati* and *Ahara*, with *Ahara* meaning food, or anything taken into ourselves from outsides, and *Prati*, a preposition meaning away or against. Together they mean "weaning away from 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.

*sva vishaya asamprayoge chitta svarupa anukarah iva Indriyanam Pratyaharah ||*³
(Patanjali Yoga Sutra 2/54)

Pratyahara is of 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.

Before knowing the concept of Pratyahara we should know about Indriya. Indriya's concept exists only in Indian spiritual culture. Westerners with their complicated, and degraded religious ideas usually are not capable of grasping this kind of knowledge and also most of the yoga teachers fails to explain detail about Indriyas instead of that, they frequently use the word of sense which create the rumble in the mind of aspirants by this, word *senses* that has lost its original meaning; by doing this they completely reject the immense methodological significance of Pratyahara concept and of principles of work at this stage.

Krishna presented fundamental knowledge about Indriyas in the Bhagavad Gita. He taught about the Indriyas of vision, audition, smell, touch, taste, and about those of the mind. And indeed concentration on an object through any sense organ or with the mind is very similar to extending a tentacle to it from the body. When we switch concentration to another object, we detach and move our Indriyas to it.

Europeans translate the term *Pratyahara* as "control over the senses". But senses are not everything that is denoted by the term *Indriyas*, since the Indriyas include the mind as well. It is also essential that the image of "tentacles" evoked by the word *Indriyas* provides profound understanding of the principles of functioning of the mind and consciousness, as well as of methods of controlling them

The Indriyas – the Sense Organs

By its nature, the mind is in permanent motion and is affected in every moment by images, sounds and other messages, which it perceives through the senses.

According to yoga, the Indriyas, or sense organs are 11 in number — comprised of 5 *jnanendriyas*, 5 *karmendriyas*, and manas (mind).

Pancha Jnanendriyas

Jnanendriya comes from the roots *Jnana* (wisdom), and Indra who was the God of the 'sensory' heaven in Hinduism. These are the 5 lower sense organs — those which allows one to perceive the world around them. They are:

Shotra (ears),Chakshu (eyes),Grahna (nose),Jivha (tongue),Tvak (skin)

Pancha Karmendriyas

Literally translated, *Karmendriya* means 'organ of action' – that which facilitates our sensory contact with the outer world — or that which enables us to interact with the material objects of the world. These 5 organs of action are:Pada (feet) for locomotion, Pani (hands) for dexterity,Payu (rectum) for excretion,Upastha (genitals) for re-production,Vak (mouth) for speech

Types of Pratyahara

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.

Indriya Pratyahara - Withdrawal of Senses

This involves withdrawal of senses / sensory inputs into our physical being, coming from our five senses, Most of us suffer from sensory overload, the result of constant bombardment from television, radio, computers, newspapers, magazines, books etc. Our commercial society functions stimulating our interest through the senses. We are constantly distracted with bright colors, loud noises and dramatic sensations.

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. 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.

Prana Pratyahara⁴ - Withdrawal of Prana

chale vate chalam chittam nichale nichalam bhavet /

yoge sthanutwamaapnoti tato vaayu: nirodhaeth // Hata Yoga Pradepika 2/2

Control of our senses requires mastery over the flow of Prana. To stop the scattering of valuable vital energy of the body or Prana, we need to seek control over its flow, and harmonize it. This is done through various practices like Pranayama and also it includes the bringing of the entire focus to a single point in the body. Prana Pratyahara suggests Withdrawal Prana (vital energy of the body). To stop the dispersion of Prana, we are required to control its flow and

Karma Pratyahara: implies Control of Action, which actually entails not just control of motor organs, but also right action or work.

Practices in Pratyahara

Before going to actual practice of Pratyahara, it's very important to know about the Pratyaya. Word meaning of Pratyaya is Karana(cause), that is, cause of destruction of the sense and mind or which causes the fluctuation in the senses and mind. If there is fluctuation, it is difficult to achieve mastery over the senses and limbs of Astanga yoga viz Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. So these Pratyaya are removed first by following practices, these are also considered as the preparatory techniques for practice of Pratyahara

Sight can easily be restrained by closing the eyes.

The sense of smell can be tapered by slow and controlled breathing, whereby the air/odor does not reach the upper nasal passages which contain the olfactory sensors.

Taste can be inhibited by cleaning the mouth and keeping it closed while breathing.

Tactile sense of touch can be muted by settling oneself into a comfortable and steady position.

Even the faculty of hearing can be greatly mitigated by preparing a quiet place, free as much as possible from external sounds.

Likewise, the Karmendriyas can be controlled:

- Employment of Hasta Mudras helps to bring conscious control over the hands.
- Asanas which lock up the legs, such as *Padma asana*, or certain other sitting positions restrain the urge to move the feet (to wander).
- The practice of Mauna, or silence restrains the speech.
- Cultivation of a healthy, restrained diet and avoidance of alcohol, smoking, junk food and other indulgences can ease the cravings of the *Karmendriyas* from mouth to anus.
- Control of the sexual urge can be attained by removing oneself from sexual stimulating external factors by practicing within a spiritual centre or community, or creating a special place/room within your abode that is reserved only for spiritual practice and thus becomes infused with pure energies.

One of the most common practices for Pratyahara is Pranayama, wherein we automatically withdraw from the external and bring our focus inwards towards our breath, as connection with the external senses and stimuli are all severed gradually

TOOL'S TO PRACTICE PRATHYAHARA

Common technique for inducing Pratyahara is to first reduce physical stimuli, then concentrates on one sense, such as hearing. The mind has a natural tendency to roam between the sensory inputs. In this situation, as there are no longer any other significant sensory inputs, when the mind gets tired of hearing, it is forced to turn inward. Reduction of physical stimuli is possible by following methods.

Ajapa japa^{5,6}:

Japa normally translated as repetition or remembrance where as Ajapa japa refers to constant repetition or awareness of mantra, but principles involved in it to be considered first in the beginning, after you complete the preparatory stages of body awareness there is awareness of the breath, which is a process of going within. Initially the breath is experienced as a flow in the nasal passages, next as flow in the frontal psychic passage between the navel and throat and then as flow in psychic passage, extending from mooladhara to ajna chakra. Here the external movement, the external awareness of breath is internalized and experienced in the psychic passage. Later mantra which is a sound or vibration of power is added to stop the self induced dissipation of concentration, of the mind running after this thought or that sound or this sensory experience of the body. So ajapajapa covers the gross, external aspect using physical activity, the breathing process, to internalize the awareness. The mantra is added to stop the self induced mental fluctuation.

Yoga-nidra:

Yoga nidra refers to the conscious awareness of the deep sleep state, referred to as "prajna" in Mandukya Upanishad⁷. Some says this technique as the yoga nidra as a state of conscious deep sleep⁸ or that induces deep relaxation, is another practice we will describe briefly from the Pratyahar point of view. Although there are many stags in Yoga-nidra, generally few are thought because Yoga-nidra belongs to the Pratyahara group, the Dharana and Dhayana group .the Pratyahara group of Yoga-nidra practices includes awareness of the body, rotation of the mind through the various parts of the body, breath awareness and the awakening of different physical and psychological sensation and feelings, such heaviness/lightness, heat/cold, pleasure/pain.

In Yoga sutras such impressions are termed as Pratyaya. Even in the highest of meditative state or in the state of Samadhi, Pratyaya continuous to exist. The three divisions of Yoga-nidra aim to removal of Pratyaya from the conscious / external plane, subconscious/subtle plane and the unconscious or causal plane. In Pratyahar state of Yoga-nidra there is mainly a release of stored impressions of sensory or mental experiences.

Trataka⁹:

The practice of gazing steadily at one point is Trataka. Trataka falls in to two groups: Pratyahar and Dharana. Pratyahara Trataka is a gazing at an external point, whether a candle, symbol, Yantra or Mandala or the different forms of Trataka which are explained in Hata yoga pradeepika, Gheranda samhita. Trataka aims to control the dissipation that occurs when we become aware of forms. Form is seen by everyone and that form is recognized as something that is visible to every one. That form symbolizes the state of mental dissipation.

Antar mouna¹⁰:

it is translated as inner silence, this technique is related to thought awareness; observations of thought, stopping the thoughts, bringing a thought to a mind, following an external thought and going to its source. The practice of Antar mouna is related to the awareness of the idea field, just as Trataka is related to the form of image field. by following a thought we try to go to the source and ultimately remove the Pratyaya

which creates that thought. Thought is like an onion with many layers stuck to each other. The onion seems very solid, hard and strong but as you peel off one layer at a time the onion becomes smaller and smaller until nothing remains.

Bramhari Pranayama¹¹:

Sit in a suitable relaxed posture like Padmasana (lotus pose) or Vajrasana (thunderbolt pose) and adopt Shambhavi Mudra i.e over your ears by pressing tragus with the help of thumbs of your hands. Place your index fingers on the forehead and let the remaining 3 fingers close your eyes. Inhale through both the nostrils, taking a real slow deep breath. Keep your mouth closed and begin slowly exhaling, making humming sound of a bee like “hmmmm”.

Conclusion:

Pratyahara itself is termed as Yoga, as it is the most important limb in Yoga Sadhana. It is a forgotten limb of yoga. Prathyahara is very important limb which controls mind and senses and enable us to move further it to the spiritual limbs of Astanga yoga. It is a transition limb of Antaranga Yoga. To practice Prathyahara Mantra Japa, Ajapajapa, Antar Mouna , Antar Trataka , Yoga Nidra and Bramhari Pranayama are considered as very important tools.

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