

## **The Concept of Pratyahara in practice of Yoga**

**Pradeep Kumar Sahoo & Dr. Ajit Kumar Behura**

*Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology (Indian School of Mines), Dhanbad, Jharkhand, India*

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Yoga is a vast system of spiritual practices that provides tools for inner growth. It teaches us how to understand the different aspects of our nature and how to harmonize these with the greater universe within and around us. This wonderful inner science shows us how to realize our highest evolutionary potential.

The classical yoga system (ashtanga yoga) incorporates eight limbs, each with its own place and function. Together they form a complete system for spiritual unfoldment. The eight limbs are: yama (observances), niyama (disciplines), asana (postures), pranayama (breath control), pratyahara (control of senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation), and samadhi (absorption). 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 this aspect the system cannot work.

Yoga has an outer aspect, which consists of right living, right care of the body, and enhancement of vital energy. This is what yama, niyama, asana, and pranayama are all about. Yama and niyama build a foundation of right behavior through such values as nonviolence and truthfulness and such practices as cleanliness and contentment. Asana makes the body strong and flexible, and pranayama develops our vital energy.

Yoga also has an inner dimension—meditation or the development of higher consciousness. This is the real purpose of yoga, the focus of dharana, dhyana, and samadhi, which together form a single process—samyama, or meditation in the broadest sense.

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

It is not possible for most of us 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, first need to 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.

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 has been compared to a turtle withdrawing into its shell—the turtle’s shell is the mind and the turtle’s limbs are the senses. 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—earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The second is impressions, which bring in the subtle substances necessary to nourish the mind—the sensations of sound, touch, sight, taste, and smell that constitute the subtle elements: sound/ether, touch/air, sight/fire, taste/water, and smell/earth. 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 (the prime qualities of harmony, distraction, or inertia).

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 relationships, but pratyahara’s primary importance lies in withdrawal from or 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 resists toxins and pathogens, a healthy mind resists the negative sensory

influences around it. If you are easily disturbed by the noise and turmoil of the environment around you, you need to practice pratyahara. Without it, you will not be able to meditate. There are four main forms of pratyahara: indriya-pratyahara—control of the senses; karma-pratyahara—control of action; prana-pratyahara—control of prana; and mano-pratyahara—withdrawal of mind from the senses. Each has its special methods.

Indriya-pratyahara, or control of the senses, is the most important form of pratyahara, although this is not something that we like to hear 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. The 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, largely instinctual in nature. They tell the mind what to do. If we don't discipline them they dominate and disturb 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 us 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.

Pratyahara is about 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!

The background of our mental field consists of 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. 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. Pratyahara gives us many practical tools for managing them properly. Perhaps the simplest way to control our impressions is 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 a mountain cabin.

Yoni mudra (*shanmukhi-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—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. 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. 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 in the normal course of the day.

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. 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 other places of pilgrimage, which are repositories of positive impressions and thoughts. Still 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 a deity 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.

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.

In addition to sense organs (like the eyes and ears), we also possess motor organs (like the hands and tongue). 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 involvements. But because desire is endless, happiness consists not of getting what we want, but of no longer needing anything from the external world. Just as 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—doing the actions necessary to life and avoiding those based on desire and self-gratification. Karma yoga has two parts: outer action or service (seva), and inner action, which consists of various forms of rituals (puja).

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.

The yogis tell 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. The mind also coordinates the sensory and motor organs, for example by linking what the eyes see with the movements of the hand when we pick up a cup from the table. 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.

According to the Yoga Sutra, “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 like 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. One 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.

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 nonviolence 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.

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. Pratyahara offers many methods of preparing the mind for meditation. It also helps us avoid environmental disturbances that are the source of psychological pain. Some great yogis have called Pratyahara as the most important limb of yoga.