

Pratyâhâra – Control of the Senses

*Based on Foundations of Yoga by Basile Catoméris and Advanced Hatha Yoga by Sri S.S. Goswami
(Inner Traditions)*

For the rishi, each of us is only a wave in a vast ocean, a limited manifestation of an immanent, eternal, immeasurable Power-Reality that is consequently imperceptible by ordinary consciousness. The doctrine of Yoga is trivalent – vision, method, and realization all at the same time. It assumes the union of self, by immersion of one's identity, with an impenetrable Reality. Without denying its purpose as a pathway for the person of action, Yoga has revealed, and today still teaches, the secret of inaction within a continual movement of the mind.

While it is relatively easy to control the body, the control of the mind is decidedly more difficult. The mind is constantly on the watch for *vrittis* – sensory images, feelings, and emotions, which unceasingly monopolize the waking state. At times, however, we withdraw our attention from the objects that surround us, for example when we are deeply absorbed in an activity, a problem, or during a telephone conversation.

In the waking state, we are directly conscious of the sensory world through our five senses – hearing, sight, smell, taste, and touch – and the organs corresponding to these faculties of perception. With our cognitive senses, we experience the thousands of impressions, feelings, and emotions that relentlessly solicit our attention. These various sensory impressions are first conveyed by an electrochemical biological process, and then they are transformed automatically into precise mental images, and finally selected and synthesized on the basis of genetic, cultural, or aesthetic criteria, which are unique to the individual. Thus, for a very brief moment we retain a particular object in the objective field of our consciousness, which will be replaced at once by another object of our choice. These sensations are manifold and non-specific in character. This non-specificity is then transformed into a specific sensation by a power of the mind called *manas* through its functions of attention, selection, and synthesis.

However, according to the doctrine of Yoga, the control of the mind makes it effectively possible to cut the bond that connects the senses to the external objects of the sensory world. This is precisely the meaning of the root *hri* of the Sanskrit word *pratyâhâra*: “to move away”; in other words, to keep the senses away from their object and thus prevent the formation of new sensory images within a mental vacuum. Sense-withdrawal produces a sensory void. This method implies mental immersion, withdrawal within (into) the mind,

which temporarily separates a person from the external world.

Unlike during sleep – where, in particular, the organs of hearing, smell, and touch (and sometimes even sight, in the case of people who sleep with half-opened eyes) are potentially receptive to the perception of sensory objects – in *pratyāhāra*, the yogi does not sleep but is perfectly awake and is sometimes even in an intense state of awareness.

This fifth discipline of the eightfold path of Yoga, *pratyāhāra*, does not appear in the Vedic Samhītās or in the Brāhman. as. The process is mentioned in several Upanishads, sometimes in allegorical form, for example when Goraksha Paddhati reminds the yogi that he must withdraw his senses into himself, following the example of the tortoise, which folds up its limbs inside its carapace. But references in the Upanishads also can be technical, as in their advice to associate *pratyāhāra* with the practice of *kumbhaka* (apnea) (Yogatattvopanis.ad 69) or with mental concentration, in particular on eighteen vital centers of the body (Triśikhibrāmanopanis.ad 2.129-130 and Śāndilya, 1.8.1-2.).

The introspective method of *pratyāhāra* is conveyed to us in a pithy presentation of two of Patanjali's sutras, which designate a mind emptied of the external object of the senses, a state where consciousness withdraws from the external world that unceasingly solicits it.

The special feature of the process of *pratyāhāra* is that it has no goal other than the suspension of the external flood of mental images, abandoning to mental concentration the task of surmounting the obstacle created by all the other images, memorized or projected in anticipation.

The practitioner of Hatha Yoga will remember that the success of this discipline – an unavoidable path for climbing the steps of *samyama* (the various phases of mental concentration) – is closely related to the preliminary exercises, that is, the practice of the ten ethical rules of *yama* and *niyama*, as well as control of the body using *āsanas* and of the breath using *prānāyāma*.