

YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI

A Guide to Self-knowledge

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29. tataḥpratyak-cetana-adhigamo`py-antarāya-abhāvaś-ca

tataḥ – by this, through that.

pratyak-cetana-adhigama – knowledge of the inner self

api – also

antarāya – from obstacles

abhāva – absence, disappearance, removal

ca – and

Thus, the obstacles are overcome, and the realisation of the inner self is attained.

The highest stage and realisation of this practice consists in kaivalya or nirbīja-samādhi.

kaivalya = means absolute unity, nondualism.

nirbīja = "without seed" – all seeds of karma are dissolved or "roasted", and therefore cannot "germinate" anymore.

In the previous *sūtras*, Patanjali explained how we can master the obstacles that

arise on our spiritual path in order to achieve realisation. Now he enumerates the various obstacles and begins with those nine types of difficulties that almost every sādha encounters on their yoga path.

These nine vikshepas (disturbances, distractions) are:

Vyādhī-styāna-saṁśaya-pramāda-alasya-avirātī-bhrānti-darśana-alabdha-bhūmikatva-anavasthi-tatvānīcitta-vikṣepās-te-antārāyaḥ .30.

30. vyādhī-styāna-saṁśaya-pramāda-alasya-avirātī-bhrānti-darśana-alabdha-bhūmikatva-anavasthi-tatvānīcitta-vikṣepās-te-antārāyaḥ

These are the nine disturbances (vikshepas) and hindrances (antārāya) in consciousness (citta):

- *vyādhī* – disease
- *styāna* – mental sluggishness, dullness
- *saṁśaya* – doubt, indecision
- *pramāda* – carelessness, inattention
- *alasya* – laziness, weakness
- *avirātī* – worldly pleasure, sense pleasures, loss of vairāgya
- *bhrānti-darśana* – confused thoughts, uncertainty
- *alabdha-bhūmika* – slackening in practice and aspiration
- *anavasthi-tatva* – inconstancy, inability to concentrate

The first thing we encounter is VYĀDHĪ – physical or mental illness, or more generally any annoying and distressing disturbance that interferes with and hinders our exercise. This may equally consist of an external noise, a family quarrel or a gnawing

worry.

Next, we are threatened by STYĀNA – mental sluggishness and dullness. When these qualities get the upper hand, we feel tired, dull, and unable to think clearly. This disturbance can often be remedied by a change in diet. Food affects the balance of energies and gunas within us. The gunas are the three elemental properties or qualities of nature:

tamas-guna = inertia, ignorance;

rajas-guna = drive, creativity, restlessness;

sattva-guna = purity, clarity, harmony.

To reiterate, according to the principle of ahimsā (non-harming), the "sattvic", that is, a lacto-vegetarian diet is best for mankind. Sattvic food consists of vegetables, salad, fruits, grains, pulses, milk and fresh dairy products, honey and nuts. The food should be eaten freshly prepared. Contrary to the spiritual path is the consumption of meat, fish, "seafood" and eggs, and this should be rejected. Likewise, alcohol, nicotine and other addictive substances as well as canned, "fast food" and reheated food do not belong to the sattvic diet. Do not allow your effort on the spiritual path to be destroyed by the craving of your tongue!

Some choose a vegan diet without any "animal products" such as milk, dairy products or honey for the special protection of animals and nature. However, this must be handled with exact knowledge of the nutritional values so that no deficiency symptoms arise.

An even stronger disturbance is SAMSHAYA: the feeling of inner weakness, which leads to the doubt whether we will ever reach the goal. This means that shraddhā, faith, has been lost. Doubt weakens willpower (whether we are aware of it or not) and

strengthens a negative mindset. Thus, it is through doubt that our chances begin to decline.

Just as a young seed has to be protected against wind and weather to keep it alive, so also, must we. For as long as we are not sufficiently established inwardly, we should avoid persons or books that spread destructive views and criticism about yoga, spirituality or the Master. They weaken the mind and prepare the ground for doubt.

PRAMĀDA here refers to the loss of discipline and allowing irregularities in the exercises. When we begin to readily accept distractions, put off practice, and fail to adhere to the principles, we have fallen into the pramādatrap. We become careless and have quick excuses ready. But no movie or book, no hobby or sport, no study or profession can give us what we can attain through the sādhana! Remember that you have made a promise to yourselves. Combine this resolution with love, and you are sure to succeed.

ALASYA, weakness of will and laziness, inhibits even more. The aspirant is under the illusion that they can reach the goal even without discipline and practice. Through sattvic nourishment, willpower, right discrimination and decision (viveka) we can overcome states of physical and mental inertia.

AVIRATI is the pursuit of sense pleasures and worldly enjoyment – the opposite of vairāgya, renunciation. Here, in particular, it means clinging to bad qualities and habits. Be mindful that time does not wait for you. Missed time cannot be retrieved. A true seeker does not stray from their path and does not give up until they have found what they are looking for.

But this does not mean to neglect or reject your fellow human beings and social relationships! Live your life with your family, with your partner, with your friends – but

do not forget your true goal. Worldly duties are not an obstacle, but if they are fulfilled with care and love, can even be helpful and conducive to reach the goal.

BRĀNTHI DARSHANA – uncertainty and brooding about whether the exercises are effective enough, whether the mantra is the right one – is also an obstacle. Thoughts such as "Now I have been practicing for several years and still have not achieved anything..." represent a serious disturbance that significantly inhibits further development. We can overcome such adverse thoughts and inner confusions through mantra and prayer.

If you keep turning back to follow a different path because you are unsure whether you are on the right path, you will never reach your goal. Let neither external nor internal events influence you. Follow the path you have chosen with firm faith and trust. There will always be disturbances and problems, that is earthly nature.

ALABDHA-BHŪMIKA means slackening of zeal. Almost every seeker has to struggle with this difficulty. Many start the yoga exercises full of enthusiasm, but if they do not feel any quick success, the initial striving soon wanes, and they lose interest. Unfortunately, I experience this very often with my students. Their enthusiasm flares up like a "flash in the pan", but soon dies out if no new incentives come. Perseverance and stamina are important qualities of a spiritual aspirant and necessary to complete the path.

The last disturbance Patanjali mentions is ANAVASTHI-TATTVA – restlessness and inconstancy of mind. This obstacle is also known to every practitioner: while practicing prānāyāma, concentration, and meditation, the mind becomes restless, and thoughts continually wander. However, by continuing the practice unwaveringly, this disturbance is surely overcome – just as the steady drip eventually erodes the hard stone.

In the Yoga Sūtras, Patanjali gives us systematic guidance on how to progress successfully on the spiritual path. On this path there are many disturbances that we should know about in order not to meet them unprepared. Patanjali also refers to these disturbances as "diseases". He does not mean physical infections, but "unhealed" thoughts and feelings. Physical diseases are easier to treat and cure than invisible, mental disorders. To make matters worse, we often think of those thoughts and feelings as pleasant. Unfortunately, however, when indulged, they lead to a bad end.

The nine "diseases" that Patanjali lists in the 30th sūtra only bring the disciple down when they lose confidence and abandon their practices. Do not lose heart if you do not think you can see any development. If you practice and strive continuously, you will certainly reach your goal. In this world everything has to be worked for – success in studies and profession, harmony and constancy in friendship and marriage. The path is not easy and if the effort slackens, soon a "cancer" nests, which quickly spreads and subsequently attacks and destroys even the healthy parts. Cancerous disease is not confined to the body; there are similar conditions in the spiritual field also. These "diseases" affect not only the individual, but also those persons with whom they have a relationship.

It is not easy for the seeker on the spiritual path to keep their "track" and maintain positive feelings and thoughts in every situation of life. It may take several lifetimes to gradually become aware of one's mistakes and to grasp what is really at stake and what one is supposed to achieve.

The following picture should clarify the situation in which a spiritual seeker finds themselves. They are like a non-swimmer who has fallen into deep water and is desperately calling for help. They will seize any opportunity that promises to save them. Even if someone holds out a piece of barbed wire to them, they will cling to it, heedless of the spikes that bore into their hands. They know that the only hope of saving their life lies

in holding on. In the same way, a true seeker who seeks self-knowledge and God-realisation will cling to their path, however painful and difficult it may be.

For the spiritual aspirant it is very important to live consciously. Just sitting down, closing your eyes and pretending to meditate, but letting your thoughts run free and perhaps not even being aware of it, is a sign of laziness, not spirituality. Watch carefully what and with whom you speak, examine what you are doing and whether you are doing what you should be doing. If this important self-analysis is neglected, the ground is prepared for that disease which Patanjali describes – the disease of the restless mind. The mind is then restless when the antahkarana are not purified. Impure here means that there are still unfulfilled desires, longings and emotions that have been suppressed until now, as well as negative impressions that have entered the subconscious from outside.

In life we are always confronted with disturbances and temptations. Often, we fall victim to them, but with perseverance we find our way back to the right path.

Patanjali prepares us for what obstacles we should expect. When we encounter them, we should be able to judge them correctly and counteract them. Patience and perseverance and confident repetition of the mantra eventually conquer all disturbances.

However, there are a number of other obstacles which Patanjali lists in the following sūtra.

