

Pratyahara, its possibilities and comparisons to the anthroposophical schooling path

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Translated Lisa Winchester, 2021

Sivananda mentions the necessity of *pratyahara* for every meditation, because without this discipline, which translates as ‘withdrawal of the senses’, the meditator falls into error and ultimately becomes a plaything of worldly passions. The general understanding of meditation is known as ‘being aligned inwards, towards spirit and soul’, while sensual activity is an outwards directed activity. It is subject to physical conditions. *Pratyahara* is, therefore, like a door, which opens the perspective towards the inner and leaves behind the outer, restless drives of the world.

With the term *pratyahara*, however, the philosophical question arises, whether this withdrawal of the senses only applies for meditation and its practice, or whether one should basically also practice exact control of the sensory movements in general life. In aesthetic yoga movements this withdrawal may have a general compelling validity. If one wants, however, to live less a retreat from the world with yoga endeavors, rather than promoting a kind of synthesis between world and spirit, then the gate of *pratyahara* again becomes very essential and deserves further differentiated consideration. Neither world-arrest nor world-alienation can represent enduring goals in the Western practice of yoga. The yoga practitioner will probably strive, in a natural way, for personal stability in earthly life, that is, in the physical circumstances, while at the same time a growing universality in their self-understanding and self-experience. The successful practice of *pratyahara* opens the door both towards the inner as well as to a reasonable degree to the outer.

Pratyahara in the yoga sutra

The classic verse about *pratyahara* reads:

svavisaya – asamprayoge cittasya svarupa-anukara iva indriyanam pratyaharah
(54, Part II in Raja yoga)

‘When the senses withdraw from their objects and enter the inner nature of the mind (or their spirit), this state is called *pratyahara*.’

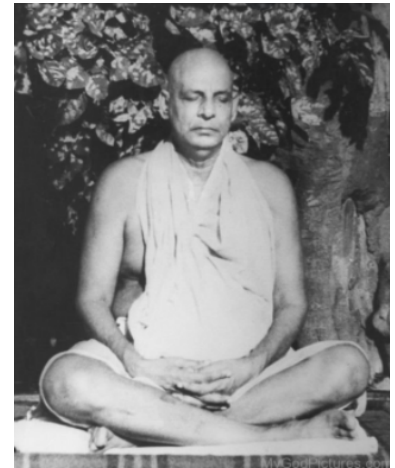
The sutra begins with the Sanskrit term *svavisaya*, or generally *visaya*. The word *sva* refers more to the individual theme, while *visaya* generally refers to ‘the theme’. Every object or theme that can be found or addressed in the world has an external meaning, an appearance in the earthly, which proves to be accessible to the ordinary five senses in the appearance of the senses, and it has, over and beyond this, a hidden reality, a dimension that is no longer accessible to the senses, which one calls the mystery of matter. An example for the handling of *pratyahara* develops, when the practitioner chooses a mantra or some kind of image of God for their meditation. The image of Shiva or Ganesh or Christ or Francis of Assisi can be sensed in the first phase. In an inner meaning, these images carry a great inner wisdom, which is no longer accessible to the outer senses. *Visaya* has, therefore, always these two dimensions, the outer and the inner. In general, yogic meditation seeks an object-related concentrated activity, which means as much as that the practitioner turns to an initially tangible theme or content in order to experience in or about this the universal and the spiritual reality, which goes beyond the physical, material dimension. Some exercises reveal in a clear way, how *pratyahara* can be used within the practice and how the practitioner on the one hand stabilizes themselves in the world and on the other hand is grounded in a universal dimension of the spirit. They take on the observation of the breath as the object for mediation, while at the same time rejecting other sensory impressions. This breath can be felt by the subtle senses and initially describes a sensual reality with the incoming and outgoing air streams.

Swami Sivananda's description of Pratyahara

Sivananda describes pratyahara in an appropriate and very humorous way:

‘Some aspirants withdraw their senses very vehemently.
This is sometimes the reason for experiencing mild headaches.’
(From Lectures on yoga and Vedanta)

One might think that Sivananda is joking, but in reality this is not the case. The headache, just mentioned, pictorially stands for a kind of one-sided excessive demand, because the practitioner cannot maintain self-stability without observing a logical order in the sensory control. They can actually get physical symptoms from improper practice. The theme *visaya* begins with attention of the senses to the outside and develops through a logical sequence, until attention reaches the non-sensual and inner mystery. As the practitioner, for example, in the silence of their soul, during meditation, asks the following question: ‘What dimension is in the breath?’, they slowly develop a view that this breath contains a connecting, energetic and moving force for the soul and they will even slowly grasp the mystery of the breath.



Anthroposophy und Pratyahara



In anthroposophy, the practitioner directs their senses in a targeted and mostly longer-lasting way to the outside, and observes, for example, a natural phenomenon, such as a plant in bloom. As the anthroposophical spirit-student observes a blooming plant, they engage in an intensive way with the world to make its phenomena comprehensible, but in the course of the exercise they do not adhere to the outer object of sensory observation. Ultimately, they try, nevertheless, to guide the observation process thoughtfully and full of subtle-feeling, further into the experiencing of the soul. The path of anthroposophical schooling is directed, in a first and rather extensive striving, towards the outside, and finally returns to the inside. They open the door to natural events on the outside, this gate closes, however, at a certain moment and discovers in the sequencing, their own soul depth related to the object. The criticism from the side of anthroposophy to yoga is, that the practitioner is too little interested in the outer world and wants to immerse themselves too early into self-realisation and an inner cosmic reason-for-being. The criticism from yoga to the anthroposophical side often suggests that it is not sufficiently spiritually oriented and that deep meditations are lacking. The anthroposophist's seek an affirmation of the world while at the same time researching the basic spiritual principles that lie as a basis under the world. Yoga seeks above all the goal of self-realization and sometimes takes a little less time, to penetrate the phenomena of the world philosophically and profoundly. In principle, however, the different forms of meditation can complement each other, because they are orientated to the objects, which initially come visibly towards the eye and seek their inner, deeper ground of being. The search for the self should generally represent nothing else than the search for the mysterious essence in one's own original-ground of existence and expands to the most diverse revelations, which the world offers.

Complementary views of anthroposophy and yoga on Pratyahara

The various forms of meditation, with a somewhat open willingness to engage in dialogue, can meet with yoga on an anthroposophical side and complement each other meaningfully. For those who intensively analyze the sensory process as an independent process of existence in life, *pratyahara* will certainly develop on a very sensitive level. *Pratyahara* does not mean world-fleeing or world-denial, but it soon develops a withdrawal of the overarching will and the emotions that are in the senses, so that the object of the outer world or the subject of the self can be grasped more clearly. From a practical point of view, the practitioner observes a concept or an object, takes it according to what is sensibly possible to grasp or imagine and finally forms a thought about this same object. The eyes usually remain open in the first phase of the observation exercise, which can eventually become meditation. At a certain moment, however, after the external observation has taken place sufficiently and relationally, the practitioner can close their eyes and direct their attention on the thought, which they connect with the object of the observation. With good concentration, the practitioner can keep their eyes open, but they do not let the senses wander to arbitrary places. The senses recede from the 'thought that is becoming more pure'. It should furthermore, all intellectualizing, every kind of emotional and wilful grasping for a hasty result, that one wants to achieve with the practice, likewise recede. One thought, however, remains in the observation, and that is the secret, while all instinctual willing and wilful emotions are to be controlled and rejected from the mind. The inner does not form an empty organic corporeality, rather, the inner becomes concrete, because it is oriented towards the light of thought, which remains in contemplation. In contrast to restless wanting, intellectual speculation and the so often rising emotions, the thought forms a spiritual calm-pole.

Pratyahara as guiding attention

The discipline of *pratyahara* does not have to describe only closing the eyes and ears. Once the practitioner begins to guide the attention, they must withdraw and control the wilful quickly-manufactured encroachments on the thought or on the ideal, that they contemplatively strive for in themselves, from the senses and even over time from the soul streams. These wilful encroachments are coming from the body's own tendencies, which are sometimes very thoughtless and unconscious. Meditation leads a chosen topic to a center. With *pratyahara*, the practitioner controls the series of all unwanted outer sensory distractions, then the more organic inner sensory reactions by controlling emotional, wilful and speculative excesses.



The thought, that remains in the contemplation, brings about a calm and with a little practice the student experiences more the light form of the thought and this in the sense of a thinking silence. The thought is not to be confused with the so-called 'habitual thinking', because the thought is in reality an existing being, a citizen of light or in other words, a *sat*, while the usual course of thinking does not perceive the thought, but even binds it with all sorts of pitfalls to the body. The movement, which the human being exercises daily in intellectually-oriented thinking, is almost always guided by a wilful desire, which veils the object of contemplation and doesn't allow the real inner meaning to come at all. Through the discipline of *pratyahara*, therefore, one does not eliminate the thought as such, but the sensual being of any digressions and finally even the inner access, so that for the further stages of concentration *Dharana*, and meditation *dyana* the inner, deeper meaning that lies behind the sensual appearance, which exists as a mystery hidden in plants, animals and people and in all subjects, *visaya*, comes into play. If a practitioner were only to close their eyes and tentatively rise up into a kind of inner unity, if they did not choose an object or a theme, the risk of deception can easily follow and they could confuse the rising up into solitude, with an undetected desire within the body. By the practitioner, however, taking up a theme, they can analyse all sensory-distracting maneuvers on this theme, reject them immediately and finally move the meaningful-content more into the center for the next stages of meditation. Sivananda viewed the work for self-actualization as a great psychological study, which requires a gradual form of asceticism. The control of sensory movements actually requires a kind of psychological analysis of the most diverse wilful, emotional and mental streams.

Links and further reading

- Sivananda: Pratyahara, in **Lectures on Yoga and Vedanta**.
- Steiner:
 - Chap 2 The stages of initiation, in the book **Knowledge of higher worlds**. Here is an example of an exercise for perceiving.
 - Series of lectures from Oct 23rd to Oct 27th, 1909 and Nov 1st to 4th, 1910, in the book **A psychology of body, soul and spirit, 1999**. About sense process and seeking higher knowledge.
- Grill:
 - ‘The threefold structuring of a soul exercise. In **Exercises for the soul**. A method for guiding consciousness to an insight.
 - ‘The Oleander’, a lecture 2000. In **Exercises for forming knowledge of the higher worlds**. Example of method for creating an insight.
 - ‘Forces of wisdom in life and the elemental sense of individual plants.’ From **Yoga and Christianity, by Heinz Grill, 1998**. Example of method for creating an insight.