



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

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Spiritual Upliftment #7

Delving Inward

By Swami Nirmalananda & Vidyadevi Stillman

You're lying in Shavasana, cradled by fuzzy blankets, following your teacher's Guided Awareness, "Be aware of your toes... feet... ankles..." Then you don't hear the words any more, nor a nearby cell phone or the outside traffic noise. But you're still aware. You haven't gone unconscious but you're not tracking anything around you.

This can happen when you listen to music or sit in a beautiful nature scene. After a while you aren't even aware of where you are. You might say you're "zoning out" but you're actually "zoning in." It's called "pratyahaara," the turning inward of your attention.

You can space out, be daydreaming, half-asleep, exhausted or even thinking so hard that you lose track of your surroundings. Someone calls your name but you don't hear them. You can have your eyes on the page of a book but you don't see a word any more. Research shows that this happens several times during a conversation and may happen while you read this article. It makes you more creative, increasing your "aha moments." Pratyahara is deeply restful, even a precursor to sleep, though it is not meditation. It gives you a respite from the sensory overload which we call modern life.

Your senses flow outward from your mind whether you're passive (like watching television) or you're active (like exercising or talking). This outward flow drains you, regardless of which of your ten senses are involved:

J~nanendriyas — organs of perception. By these energies, you have the ability to hear, feel sensations, see, taste and smell.

Karmendriyas — organs of action. These energies give you the ability to initiate action through speaking, handling, locomotion, sexuality and excretion.

Each organ of action is related to an organ of perception. Speaking is an active form of hearing. When you hear someone say something, most of the time you speak in response. Talking a lot drains you. Even listening a lot drains you.

Vision is related to locomotion. If you see a chocolate chip cookie, a beautiful flower or anything else you want, you will locomote yourself right over to it. Locomotion exhausts you. Even looking at a lot of stuff drains you; just go window shopping at the mall. Or do a TV marathon.

The energy flowing outward through your senses is your own prana, your own life force. Having your senses turned outward depletes your prana, so you need a nap or to go to bed early. While sleep is beneficial, it is not pratyahara. In dreams, your senses are working: you hear, feel and see that bear chasing you. You're running. You can wake up exhausted from having a night full of dreams. Even in sleep, your mind is still busy, yogis warned millennia ago, with research recently discovering this as well. Your mind and senses need a rest, which pratyahara provides.

Swami Nirmalananda says, "In Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga, pratyahara is pivotally positioned between the outer and inner practices. The first four limbs are about how you live in the world as well as how you handle your body and breath. With pratyahara, your attention turns inward, so the next three limbs can give you progressively deeper experiences of your own Divinity. True meditation is done in deepening stillness."

Moving meditation is beneficial, but it is pratyahara, not what Patanjali calls meditation. You can use repetitive movement to zone in, which is blissful though it is not an experience of Consciousness. Watch dancers and you'll see their focus is inward. At first, they're tracking their body movements, but when they really get in the zone, they're in a different zone. It is pratyahara, not meditation. After the dance, if they would sit in stillness to continue their inward exploration, they'd discover more. This is why asana precedes pranayama. There is more to you than you think there is.

Patanjali describes what you get from the practice of pratyahara, by turning your attention inward:

tata.h paramaa va"syatendriyaa.naam — Yoga Sutras 2.55

When you withdraw your senses, you gain mastery over your senses.¹

When your senses turn inward, they become more powerful. You may have had this experience in Shavasana. Someone tiptoes across the room and you can hear their steps on the carpet, or your teacher shifts position a little and you hear it. Your hearing is more powerful. When you sit up, your peripheral vision is wider, the room is brighter or the edges of things are clearer. Your vision is more powerful.

Give it a try. Eat a piece of fruit before your Ujjayi practice and then afterward. Afterwards it will taste better than ever before because your senses are clearer, more powerful and more acute. Your senses are empowered by resting in their own source.

Every time you pursue your senses, you are looking outside yourself for happiness. Reinforcing this repetitive behavior causes your pain and sorrow. It is painful because depending on something external for happiness doesn't reliably work. Not even food, a particular location or special person always works for you. For example, you have a favorite comfort food, but you find that someone ate it, now you will be angry. Cravings come but they also go. Have you noticed? When a desire arises, don't indulge it. Channel that energy into your quest for Consciousness. Consciousness is reliable.

Pratyahara is not about being well disciplined. If it were, how many yogis would succeed? Pratyahara is about the inner quest. The inner experience that your yoga provides is more fulfilling than any outer craving can give. This is why every *Svaroopa*[®] yoga class begins and ends with Shavasana and our Guided Awareness. Meditating is taking the next step, deeper inward. With your deepening exploration of your own Beingness, desire ceases to have any hold over you.

Vidyadevi says, "I was near one of my favorite convenience stores and decided to stop for coffee and an apple fritter. As I was getting close, it was very strange. I had no desire for it. I wasn't suppressing the desire, it simply wasn't there. I felt very strange. I realized I had not been stopping there for quite some time. I contemplated this change in me. I found I was already full and satisfied from the inside, and nothing was going to make me feel more complete. Such a freedom!"

Svaroopa[®] yoga poses excel at quieting your mind while unraveling your physical tensions. Deepening inward, you experience your own Self; your mind is scintillating with consciousness. A mind like this does not harass you. It serves you, making you able to see your life clearly, make your decisions from an inner knowingness and serving others while never losing track of your purpose. How do you attain a mind like this? You align your mind with consciousness.

Currently, your mind is always outward-turned, looking for something or someone outside of you to fix the way you feel. You need a fix because you are not experiencing your inherent Beingness. Thus all yoga's practices are designed to turn your attention inward. In that inner expanse, you find your Self. Once you have experienced your own Self, your only desire is to know your own Self all the time. Do more *Svaroopa*[®] yoga.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "SPIRITUAL UPLIFTMENT," OUR THEME FOR 2018, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI, VIDYADEVI STILLMAN & RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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¹ Rendered by Swami Nirmalananda