

# Pratyahara: Taming the senses : The Tribune India

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Spiritually Speaking

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**Dr Satish K Kapoor**

**Pratyahara, the fifth limb of Ashtanga yoga, in sequential progression, is the purposeful withdrawal of the senses from external stimulation, so that one can internalise consciousness. It is dropping the propensity for sensate pleasures in order to focus on the self.**

**Five senses**

**The key senses with which one relates to the world are five – sense of smell, sense of taste, sense of sight, sense of touch and sense of hearing. Each is associated with a fundamental material substance – smell with the earth, taste with water, sight with fire, touch with air, and hearing with space. Millions of touch-receptors in the skin enable one to feel and identify the surroundings and perform day-to-day tasks. Together, the five senses form a single sensory system to perceive the external phenomena.**

**Senses, mind and prana**

**Pratyahara is not denying the physical world perceived through the senses but the realisation that there is something more beyond. It is not brushing aside biological needs or concerns, but of knowing the difference between basic urges and unrestrained gratification of appetites. It is the cultivation of a sattvic, pure, mind that is aware of the insatiable nature of desires, and guards the senses from going astray.**

**Sage Vyasa explained that the senses follow the enlightened mind like a swarm of bees that follow the queen-bee. What controls the mind is prana, life-force, that animates and enlivens an organism,**

and organises all perceptions through the senses. When prana is expanded, energised and regulated through right breathing, it leads to self-reflection and self control due to deeper levels of awareness. The breath is a link between body and consciousness. To breathe mindfully is to live mindfully; viewing sensory stimuli as passing waves that will subside soon.

### Practicing pratyahara

Pratyahara cannot be practiced without being firmly established in the first four limbs of Ashtanga Yoga, dealing with moral restraints, self-discipline, right posture and breath-control. Central to its application is right understanding born of viveka, the ability to discriminate between right and wrong, real and unreal, permanent and transient. Viveka leads to vairagya, the state of dispassion in which one realises the futility of material pleasures and pursuits, and opts for the life of the spirit renouncing the life revolving around the senses. By remaining in god consciousness, one can cultivate equanimity of mind and pursue the path of selfless action, advocated by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavadgita. Thereby, one realises that man is not the doer but an instrument in the hands of Supreme Being.

Observing inner silence by consciously shutting off the senses from the external stimuli— radio, television, phone, iPad, computer and from self talk or negative thoughts, helps one to abide in oneself. Alternately, one can close the eyes, ears and mouth, using the fingers of both hands, and watch the ebb and flow of thoughts without being affected by them.

A simple method to step away from bodily sensations and thoughts

is to sit comfortably and chant soham, the natural sound of breath, with open eyes, as in shambhavi mudra. Practicing shavasana 'corpse pose', yoga nidra, 'meditation-sleep' and trataka, 'steady gazing at an object', are useful for turning the senses inward.

The state of pratyahara has been traditionally compared to that of a tortoise who retracts its head and limbs inside its shell to ward off danger. The mind is like the shell of a tortoise, and senses like the human limbs. A spiritually awakened person can direct his senses inwards and outwards at will, putting them to judicious use.

(Dr Satish K Kapoor is a noted educationist, historian and spiritualist)

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