

PRATYAHARA

Pratyahara, drawing inward, is something we experience as part of the 8-fold path, rather than something we do. It is a transitional phase between the outer and inner limbs of yoga. *Yamas*, *niyamas*, *asana*, and *pranayama* are all outward practices intended to prepare us for meditation. *Pratyahara* is the state of tuning in to ourselves that naturally occurs with those outward practices.

Pratyahara is a difficult state to sustain, especially in the beginning. That's why it gets its own step. We are, by our nature, inclined to seek out information using our senses. For this reason, B.K.S. Iyengar favors the literal definition "to draw toward the opposite." Like a tortoise drawing in its limbs, we have to pull in our otherwise useful feelers, so we are not distracted by the busy outer world.

Georg Feurstein describes *pratyahara* as "neutralizing" the ever-increasing attraction of outer sights and sounds. By subduing external disturbances, we are able to look for answers within the heart-mind or conscience (*citta*), rather than outside ourselves. We may think of being overwhelmed by external stimuli as a modern problem, but the tendency to seek outer answers is simply a human one. Arjuna didn't have an iPhone, and yet the *Bhagavad Gita* is an ancient epic about the struggle between spiritual work and sensory indulgence. *Pratyahara* was in high demand long before we carried instant access to our friends, family, games, photos, shopping, news, videos, and music in our pockets.

So what's the deal? How do we do it, and why do we bother?

Physical yoga practice (*asana*), breath work (*pranayama*), and ethical behaviors (*yamas* and *niyamas*) all work in concert to prepare us for the deep work on the 8-fold path. Our practice on the mat trains us to quiet all the chatter in our minds -- "I'm hungry. I hate this pose. I need to stop for kale on my way home. . ." -- and listen to the calm that abides beneath. Breath (*prana*) is key for directing the attention away from outer distractions and desires. If it is the dominant energy in the body, it can keep the senses and the mind in check. Try a few rounds of bee breath (*bhamari pranayama*) if you're not sure whether this works. The ethical practice of non-grasping (*aparigraha*) is an outward expression of the inner sensory experience of *pratyahara*. It trains us to be discerning about our needs and our wants. Self-study (*svadyaya*) prepares us to see things as they really are when the quiet finally arrives and the deep inner work of meditation begins. There's no sense diving in if we're not willing to see what 's there.

While this state of quiet is a side-effect of other practices, it is also a struggle to remain in it. Rolf Gates writes poignantly about this struggle:

"It takes the mind a while to figure out that we are no longer moving and that we are serious about being still. A tussle then ensues as to who will be in charge of the time spent in meditation -- the restless mind, or the one who has decided to sit. This tussle is the domain of *pratyahara*."

So it's a choice. It starts with the initial inclination to sit, and continues with each intentional breath, directing our attention inward. It is, in Iyengar's words, a choice to "make the mind shut up so we can concentrate." The quiet is always within us. Our work is in choosing to find it.

This is just a summary of enormous and powerful concepts. For more in-depth study, read Nicolai Bachman's *The Yoga Sutras*, Georg Feuerstein's *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, Rolf Gates's *Meditations from the Mat*, and B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga & Light on Life*.