

Pratyahara: What It Means To "Withdraw"

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During my first few months of yoga classes, the [teacher](#) taught us to [backbend](#) deeply during the first step of [Sun Salutation](#). Not only were we encouraged to bend backward deeply, we were also taught to drop our heads back as far as we could. Occasionally a student would pass out in the middle of the movement. Luckily, no one ever hurt themselves in their fall to the floor. I was intrigued to discover that other students in the class perceived the fainting not as a physical problem, but as some form of spiritual event.

For many years I've suspected that this sudden fainting—this withdrawal from the world—was not a spiritual event at all, but simply a physiological one. People probably fainted because taking the head back can momentarily block the vertebral arteries in the neck, reducing the supply of blood and oxygen to the brain. As I look back, however, I think my fellow students' confusion mirrors the confusion we all have about the yoga practice of *pratyahara*—about what it means to withdraw from the senses and the world.

What Is Pratyahara?

In the [Yoga Sutra](#) of [Patanjali](#)—the most ancient and revered sourcebook for yoga practice—the second chapter is filled with teachings about the ashtanga ([eight-limbed](#)) yoga system. The system is presented as a series of practices which begin with "external limbs" like ethical precepts and move toward more "internal limbs" like [meditation](#). The fifth step or limb is called *pratyahara* and is defined as "the conscious withdrawal of energy from the senses." Almost without exception yoga students are puzzled by this limb. We seem to inherently understand the basic ethical teachings like *satya* (the practice of truthfulness), and the basic physical teachings like [asana](#) (the practice of posture), and [pranayama](#) (the use of breath to affect the mind). But for most of us the practice of pratyahara remains elusive.

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One way to begin to understand pratyahara on an experiential level is to focus on a familiar yoga posture, [Savasana](#) (Corpse Pose). This pose is done lying supine on the floor and is the practice of relaxing deeply. The first stage of Savasana involves physiological relaxation. In this stage, as you become comfortable, there is first an awareness of the muscles gradually relaxing, then of the breath slowing, and finally of the body completely letting go. While delicious, this first stage is only the beginning of the practice.

The next stage of Savasana involves the mental "sheath." According to [yoga philosophy](#), each person has five levels or sheaths: the food sheath (the physical body); the vital, or prana, sheath (the level of subtle energy channels); the mental sheath (the level of most emotional reactions); the consciousness sheath (home of the ego); and the bliss, or causal, sheath (the karmic record of the soul's experiences). These sheaths can be thought of as increasingly subtle layers of consciousness. In the second stage of Savasana you are withdrawing from the external world without completely losing contact with it. This withdrawal is the experience of pratyahara. Most of us know this state; when you're in it, you feel like you're at the bottom of a well. You register the sounds that occur around you, for example, but these sounds do not create disturbance in your body or mind. It is this state of nonreaction that I am calling pratyahara. You still register input from your sense organs, but you don't react to that input. There seems to be a space between the sensory stimulus and your response. Or, in everyday language, you are in the world but not of it.

For years I interpreted the teachings I heard about pratyahara to mean that I must literally, physically withdraw from the world in order to be a true disciple of yoga. I reacted with dismay to this teaching. I was an engaged person, busy studying physical therapy in school to improve my yoga teaching. In addition, I was married and contemplating having several children. I sometimes worried that unless I separated myself from all these commitments, I was doomed to be an inferior yoga student.

Today I feel differently. I realize that life involves interactions with other people, and that often those interactions include an element of conflict. In fact, I don't even need another person to be in conflict. I can be, and occasionally am, in conflict within myself. Sometimes I'm tempted to withdraw to avoid these conflicts, but I know that this withdrawal is not what pratyahara is about.

I like to think that for Patanjali pratyahara meant something different than a simple withdrawal from life. To me, pratyahara means that even as I participate in the task at hand, I have a space between the world around me and my responses to that world. In other words, no matter how much I practice [meditation](#) and postures and breathing, there will still be many times when I act in response to people and situations. Responding to the world isn't a problem in and of itself; the problem comes when I respond with knee-jerk reactions rather than with actions that I choose.

Ultimately, the practice of pratyahara—in fact, all the practices of yoga—enable me to choose my responses instead of merely reacting. I can choose to dance with any stimulus that comes my way, or I can choose to step back and not respond to that stimulus. The variable is not what's around me, but how I choose to use my energy. If I retreat to a cave in the mountains, I can still agitate my nervous system; I can still generate thoughts and relive past reactions. To me, practicing pratyahara doesn't mean running away from stimulation (which is basically impossible). Rather, practicing pratyahara means remaining in the middle of a stimulating environment and consciously *not reacting*, but instead *choosing* how to respond.

How To Practice Pratyahara

I also incorporate the practice of pratyahara into my asana practice. When I remain still within a pose, I often have numerous thoughts. Sometimes I'm in conflict about whether to stay in the pose or come out of it. Sometimes I catch myself judging whether I'm doing the pose well or not so well. At these times, when I realize my mind is busy, I practice pratyahara by withdrawing my energy from my thoughts *about* the pose and focusing instead on the pose itself.

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Sometimes I remember to practice pratyahara in this way, and sometimes I forget. But my asana practice always provides me with an opportunity to notice my urges to withdraw from the reality at hand. This kind of withdrawal is not pratyahara; it's simply an attempt to flee from difficulty, to escape by withdrawing into thought. I find I use this tactic all day long. I escape into my thoughts during boring meetings, during unwanted phone calls, during repetitive but necessary tasks. Unlike pratyahara, this habit of withdrawing takes me further from myself—the opposite of the effect of spiritual practice, which brings me closer to my true nature.

Another way I have begun to practice pratyahara is to pay attention to my need to seek out stimulation as an escape. I try to notice when I want to escape from my life by finding highly stimulating environments. For example, sometimes I want to go to a movie to escape; sometimes I want to go to the mall. I don't think going to the mall or to a movie is in and of itself problematic. But when I use these stimulating activities to escape, it can interfere with my intention to be consciously present in every moment.

When I was a child, I loved to go on carnival rides. The stimulation of the roller coaster would shut out all other awareness. Now that I am a student of yoga, I am more aware of the urge to drown out my conflicts with overstimulation. Whenever I can notice my attempt to escape into stimulation, I am using pratyahara as a powerful tool to improve my daily life. In these moments I begin to understand the difference between withdrawing and escaping, between pratyahara and forgetting my practice. Learning to incorporate my yoga practice into my daily life in this way is a challenge, but it is a challenge that gives meaning and direction to my life.

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