The Sanskrit word “Swadhyaya” means “to see clearly one’s own nature”. It can mean “self-study”, self knowledge. Until we have a true, clear picture of our own individual nature, we will be unable to “see reality” (Sat, truth).

Maharishi Patanjali lists “Swadhyaya” as the very first step on the path, because “if we do not know ourselves, how can we know anything else”. I think Swadhyaya is so important I would have listed it as “the first step”!

Still, I bow to the wisdom of the sage. Perhaps he thinks. “Swadhyaya” is too strong a medicine for the infant soul. The medicine may be potent, but the patient must have the strength to digest it, else the medicine which cures, may also kill! So, perhaps this is why he put “Swadhyaya” as the “ninth” conscious step –along the path!

Swadhyaya is painful. How so? Why so? What - who - feels the pain of self-knowledge when we know that self-knowledge will set us free?

Why is it so painful? What feels the pain when someone points out we have made a mistake, possess a character flaw?

If we analyze this, we will find that it is the Ahamkara, the Ego - sense of “I am” which feels the pain when it becomes aware of a deficiency in itself.

The ego has a strong survival instinct. Not only does it “want to survive”, it wants to the best! It wants to be the “top dog”.

It wants to be “king of the mountain”. It wants to be the star of the latest television reality show! Not only does it want to be the “best one”, it wants to be “the only one!”
The ego wants to enlarge itself to encompass everything, like a rubber stretching itself over an object. “All should bow to me! All should acknowledge my greatness!” This is the “core” of all ego – fuelled thinking.

When the “ego” thinks it has “succeeded” in “becoming the best” it gets a wonderful adrenaline, endomorphine “kick”, a “high” which thrills and which is addictive.

The ego divides and rules. It “divides” itself from every thing else and seeks thus “to rule”.

So, essentially, in Swadhyaya, one must face squarely the ego and understand its structure and its role in the evolving spirit.

To know the ego, one must “pit its strength” against “other egos”. This is called “relationship!” Relationship can only occur when there are “two or more”.

It cannot exists when there is “only one” or when “one is alone”

The ancient Rishis taught that the evolving soul must enter into several “relationship structures” which are like a “playing field of sports” The parent - child; the sibling - sibling; the child - parents; the teacher - taught. The helper - helped, the husband- wife etc.

Each relationship is a different “game” in which certain skills are developed and certain self - knowledge is gained.

For all these relationships to be effective tools for evolutionary growth, one must make a commitment to “playing the game to the end” as well as “playing the game by the rules!”