

OBSTACLES ON THE PATH OF YOGA

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The *yoga marga* the path of righteous living is not a bed of roses for it requires *shraddha* (trust, faith), *veerya* (strength and valour), *smriti* (keen and attentive memory), *samadhi* (attainment of a deep state of equilibrium) and *prajna* (preparedness for the highest wisdom) - PYS-I:20).

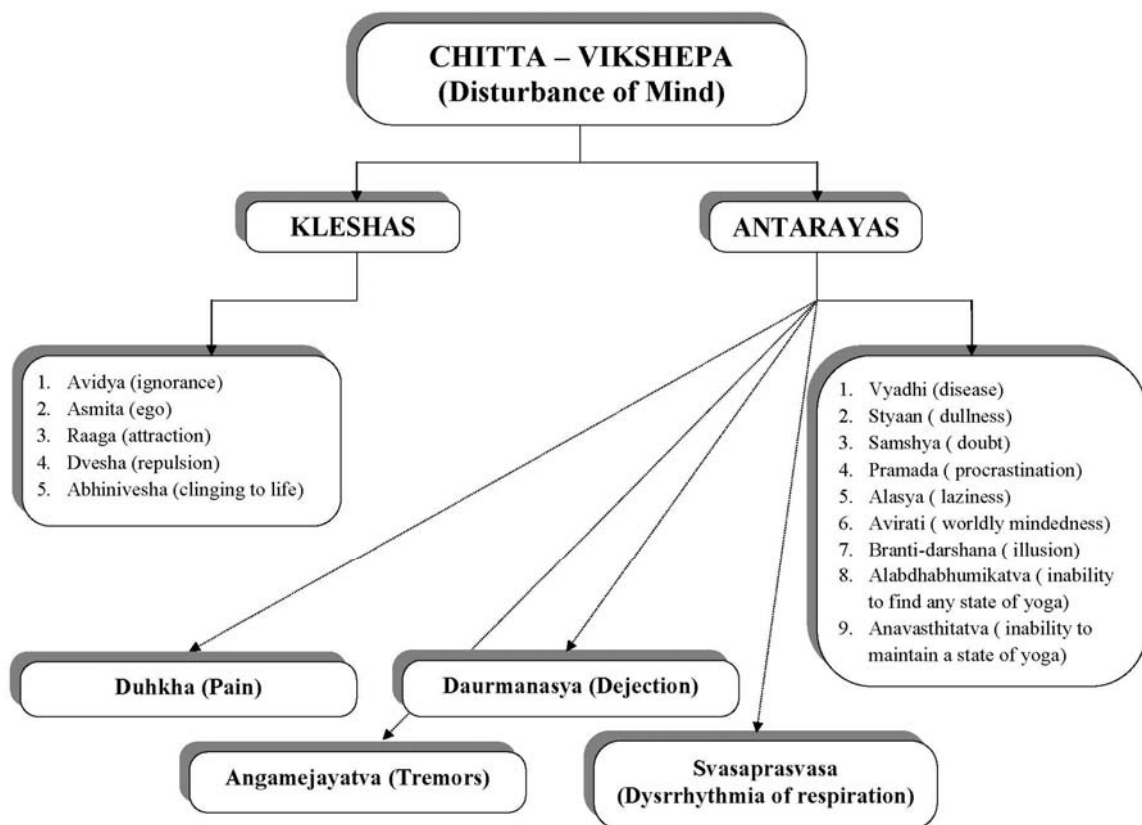
Yogamaharishi Patañjali is blessed with foresight and cautions the *sadhaka* that there are many obstacles on the *yogic* path to *kaivalya* and offers the solutions to them. In I.30 - I.32 he describes the nine obstacles faced by a *sadhaka* in their *sadhana* and enumerates these *antaraya* or *chitta vikshepa* as well as the four-fold external manifestations of these internal obstacles. In verse I: 30 he says, “*vyadhi styana samshaya pramada alasya avirati bhrantidarshanaalabdha bhoomikatwa anavasthitatwani chitta vikshepate antaraya*” meaning thereby that illness, mental laziness, doubt, procrastination, sloth, sensual craving, false perception, inability to attain and maintain the higher states are the mental obstacles.

In the science of *yantra*, the number nine is an overview number. In this list, we have an extensive overview of the nine *antaraya*. Let's try to understand the psychology of Maharishi Patañjali. Why is it important to enumerate the obstacles? He points out each obstacle one by one, when he could have easily just mentioned one as an example. It is a wonderful analytical work he has done for us. The nine obstacles, the *antaraya*, also known as *chitta vikshepa*, are mainly created by the mind. The task of *yoga* is mainly the work of tackling the mind. *Yoga* uses mind to transcend mind. If *yoga* is the "cessation of the whirlpools of the mind", it follows that the mind will literally cease to exist in the process. This situation is a threat to the very survival of mind, especially the subconscious mind. When its survival is at stake, the sub-consciousness will put up a good fight. Naturally, as a defense mechanism, the subconscious mind throws up obstacle after obstacle. The strategy is to make the *sadhaka* give up efforts on this *yoga* path.

For example, the root cause of illness, the first *antaraya*, is found in the sub-conscious mind. The sub-conscious mind causes even what appears as an accident. What is the nature of this first obstacle *vyadhi* or disease according to Maharishi Patañjali? The fact that we are born in a body is already a disease, according to the *Laghu Yoga Vasishtha* which considers the process of birth and rebirth as the basic psychosomatic disease (*sara adija vyadhi*). We suffer the sickness of imprisonment in the cycle of birth and rebirth. This disease can only be cured by self-realization or the knowledge of the Self (*atma jnana*). The *guru* is the guide, a mentor who helps the *chela* find the way to cure this eternal disease. To be born in a human body on this planet is not a coincidence. It is rather an incidence. We are born into physical unconsciousness. This is why *yoga* uses consciousness to create awareness at the physical level through proper use of *hatha yoga* practices. You get to know where your toes are and what your ankles or hands are feeling. When you stretch, you become aware of your muscles and joints. *Hatha yoga* practices are tremendous anatomy lessons of an inner nature. However, one cannot stop with *asana*. *Yoga* is not *asana* alone. Disease creates awareness of the body in a negative sense. When illness occurs the patient becomes focused on the infirm body, to the exclusion of anything else. The *Vedantic* view is "I am not the body". Yet, the

body is also the temple where God resides, so it should be kept as beautiful, as clean, and as nicely decorated as possible. Tirumoolar says that the body needs to be made fit to host the Divine as it is the temple of the Divine. Health is not only wealth; it is the coin of the spiritual realm as well.

Styana is laziness of a mental type. Many are physically active but mentally, very few are capable of truly thoughtful and energetic action. It is also dullness of the mind, *mudha*. A destructive mind is inert and incapable of positive focus. *Samshaya* is doubt. This doubt or indecision is often related to one's *sadhana*: "Am I fit for this? Maybe this is not the right path for me. Maybe this is too much for me. It is too tough or too easy" and so on... These are the tricks that the sub-conscious mind plays to lure the *sadhak* away from *sadhana*. Maharishi Patañjali advises seekers to use the mind in order to transcend mind.



Pramada is procrastination and negligence. A story which illustrates this in Hindu tradition is the tale of Lord Ganesha. Shanishwar or Saturn causes torment and bad luck for those who fall prey to his spell. He once tried to catch Ganesha in his net of doom. Ganesha, being not only intelligent but also clever, asked Saturn to come the next day, as he was busy. Shanishwar made Ganesha write down this appointment on a piece of paper. Ganesha wrote "Come back tomorrow". When Saturn came back the next day, the Lord read "Come back tomorrow" and so, with his skillful lateral out-of-the-box thinking, Ganesha escaped Saturn's influence forever. This is a good trick to get out of the unnecessary trouble. In *sadhana*, however, procrastination is a major obstacle. What is put off today will never get done tomorrow. The mind plays this old trick so well, that one keeps delaying effort towards spiritual growth, thinking, "I'll do it tomorrow". But of course, tomorrow never comes.

Alasya is sloth. If you are so lazy that you cannot even move, your mind also becomes lazy. Growth is hindered, even retarded. *Alasya* also implies a certain level of indifference and carelessness which is dangerous to all spiritual aspirations. *Avirati* is indulgence in

illusionary, temporal and sensual aspects of life. The mind becomes attached to such things and experiences which impede further progress. *Virati* implies a mind that is detached, whereas *avirati* is the opposite. The sub-conscious mind detests "non-detachment". The mind rather feeds itself on attachment. The mind loves indulgence in the sensual moment. This is the opposite of *pratyahara* where the sensory apparatus is brought under the control of the higher nature through a dispassionate withdrawal of the mind from the senses. Here in *avirati* the mind is totally lost in insatiable craving.

Bhrantidarshana are false perceptions and delusions. In epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* there are several examples of elaborate illusions created to dishearten the main characters, such as Rama or Krishna, or Arjuna. One must always maintain objectivity, especially in spiritual practice. During what seems to be a spiritual experience, one must stand back and ask, "Is this a real experience? Am I really having this 'spiritual' experience?" Or is it a fantasy, an illusion of ego?" A common human frailty is to be caught up in unreal temporal situations. This fantasy world may be magnified in the spiritual path. So many deluded people believe they have had "*kundalini* arousal" or "*chakra* opening" experiences. Most of these are not real! How to determine if an experience is truly a spiritual one? There is a test. Every time an experience makes one a better human being – less self-centered, less egotistic, more open, serene, friendly – then the soul is progressing and the experience is one oriented towards growth. If the experience has an after-effect of negativity, then it was not a very high experience.

Alabdhahumikatwa is the inability to reach a higher state through one's practice. Each state of growth will be higher than the previous and the practice and focus will also change in an appropriate manner. If one stagnates, then the urge to grow will also die a slow death. All cells have a "death wish" which limits the lifespan. As well there are patterns of biorhythms throughout the life. This ties into the concept of *alabdhahumikatwa* in the sense that all have a subconscious wish not to progress. If this is too strong, it creates an inability to attain a higher state in our *sadhana*.

Anavasthitatwani is the inability to maintain the one-pointed higher state that has been previously attained. This is a continuation of the previous obstacle in that the *sadhaka* reaches a higher state, but then slips back due to inability to maintain the intensity of *sadhana*. Many sports-persons rise to "No.1" position but then find it too hot at the top to handle and slip back into obscurity. It is hard to attain the higher states, but even tougher to maintain oneself in them!

These are the *chitta vikshepa*, the hindrances of the *chitta*, the lower mind, which prevent progress on the evolutionary path of *yoga*. These nine obstacles are barriers to evolutionary transformation. They are a series of last ditch efforts made by the lower mind in its battle for survival. The *antaraya* prevent the destruction of the lower mind tendencies, blocking further growth in *sadhana*.

The *vikshepa* are accompanied by manifest symptoms, manifest accompaniments of their existence such as suffering, depression, tremors and irregular respiration (*duhkha daurmanasya angamejayatva swasa-praswasa vikshepa sahabhuvah*- I:31). These four *vikshepa sahabhuvah* are symptomatic manifestations due to the *antaraya*. The first of these is *duhkha*, painful suffering at the physical level that can drive one to despair. Suffering is an excellent trick the mind plays, as few can overcome the moment of suffering. Of course, very few are capable of realizing what is actually happening in the process of their evolutionary journey. The moment suffering is felt, most people stop, give up. The lower mind survives to fight for existence yet another day.

The second is *daurmanasya*, dejection and despair. Depression is not just in the mind, but has many physical aspects as well. Creating a state of depression is another weapon of the lower mind to halt the *sadhaka's* spiritual progress. The greatest teachings are often given and received in moments of great despair. The teachings of both the *Yoga Vasishtha* and the *Bhagavad Gita* are perhaps the first and second historically recorded "psychological counseling" sessions. These profound wisdom-instructions were delivered when both Lord Rama and Arjuna respectively were in the very depths of depression. If we can understand that depression is a window of opportunity for growth, success will surely come. If this golden chance is missed, even the Divine may not struggle further to pull us out of our own deep pit of self-pity.

The third is *angamejayatva* which are tremors of the bodily limbs (*anga*). The practice of *asana* produces physical control over the body, which enables transcendence of *dwandwa*, the pair of opposites that cause these tremors. Tremors are an externalized manifestation of the internal emotional and mental imbalance. Imbalance at the higher level causes imbalance in the neuro-chemical transmitters and psycho-physiological pathways of the body, resulting in these physical tremors. When confronted with such a frightening manifestation, many aspirants fear whether they may be harming themselves. They then stop their *sadhana*.

The fourth is *swasa-praswasa* which is irregularity in breathing patterns. The main physical manifestation of mental and emotional upset is the haphazardness of respiration. Ancient *yogi* contemplated this deeply and found that mental disturbances cause irregularity and instability of respiration. Through their *jnana drishti* (perspective of wisdom) they realized that by stabilizing the breath, they could conversely produce a stability of emotions and mind. This knowledge is used even today in the practice of *pranayama* as a means of altering the higher (the mind) through the lower (the body). This is an example of the numerous somato-psychic applications of *hatha yoga*, the science of balancing equal and opposite energies physically.

We must realize that we are our own worst enemy. Not only are all of these *antaraya* present within us, they actually are us! When faced with a challenge, the first reaction of most human beings is denial. Please be aware of this tendency! To be aware is to be well prepared. "Forewarned is forearmed". The first step in *sadhana* is the conscious decision to take total responsibility for oneself. Everyone must extricate themselves from the deep pit of false excuses which they have dug for themselves as a result of their *samskara* and *vasana*. Everyone may be given a rope or a ladder, but all must get out of the hole themselves. One must choose to get out. Otherwise all higher teachings and advice will just be useless. It is the *dharma* of all sincere *yoga* guides to make this point clear to their students.

All this confusion rises from the sense of "I", the *ahamkara*, the ego, that wants to preserve itself at any cost. Hence, the *ahamkara* tries to find fault everywhere except within its own field of action. Mahatma Gandhi rightly said, "Be the change you want to see in the world". In order to see ourselves properly, and know the change that needs to occur, we must delve deep within. For that we need the introspective self-analysis of *swadhyaya*.

Maharishi Patañjali then goes on to suggest different methods to stabilize and clear the mind in *sutra* I.32 - I.39. Focused practice of one principle (*ekatatwa abhyasa* – I.32) is stated to be the best method to prevent and deal with the obstacles and their manifestations. How do we deal with these obstacles, the *antaraya*, and their manifestations? "Make the mind one-pointed and follow one path", says Maharishi Patañjali. In order to deal with the nine *antaraya* and the four accompanying manifestations, *vikshepa*, we need to focus on our practice with single-minded and dedicated effort. These obstacles will be dissolved naturally by *abhyasa*, regular, rhythmic, repetitive, single-minded and dedicated effort. One must follow one principle and work on it relentlessly, never giving up! *Sadhak* must be gold

miners. To mine gold, one must dig deep, go through obstacles, face trials and tribulations until the treasure is found. Most are "puddle diggers"! They dig a little bit here and a little there, never satisfied, never staying in one place, never digging deep. "Puddle diggers" can never achieve the spiritual heights. Constant self-analysis is required to know what we are and where we are going on our chosen path. Once the path has been chosen with awareness and consciousness, there should be no hesitation in digging deep, deep and deeper. Most self-styled aspirants do not have discernment in choosing their path. They jump from one teacher to the next, leap from one path to the other, focusing here and there and everywhere. They end up nibbling on everything without getting the real taste of anything. In this they mimic the nature of the rat, which takes a small bite of everything it encounters, leaving a trail of destruction wherever it goes.

The mind must be crystal-clear to enjoy the highest experience. How to reach that state? "Make the mind one-pointed". This is the short, succinct advice of Maharishi Patañjali. Many shallow wells will not yield water. Dig in one place and go deep. This common metaphor is found in many Indian stories. Take one thing and do it well. Do not lose focus despite any challenge. Maintain a balanced state of mind with focus even when multitasking.

The path chooses us. *Yoga* has chosen us and not the other way around. We should realize the amazing opportunity we have been given in this lifetime to evolve because we were chosen by this path. Do not run away even in the face of the nine ferocious and cunning obstacles. If you run away this time, you will just have to come back over, and over, and over again. Do you want to be a frog again? Or a lizard? A squirrel? Or a rat? In this human incarnation we have a chance to experience Eternity. Why waste this golden opportunity for Ultimate Bliss! Why sell our birth-right for a bowl of porridge or our Christ consciousness for thirty pieces of silver!

Interestingly he advocates the adoption of positive attitudes (I.33) such as *maitri* (friendliness towards those who are at ease with themselves); *karuna* (compassion towards the suffering); *mudita* (cheerfulness towards the virtuous) and *upekshanam* (avoidance and indifference towards the non-virtuous). In today's world, there is a total confusion of all these attitudes. People are good towards the bad and bad towards the good. The natural human feelings are being mixed up. People end up sending each other wrong signals. Later, God is blamed for being so cruel! Who is really responsible for our misery? A real introspective search will produce a clear answer: we ourselves bring our own miseries upon us! If we can bring misery upon ourselves, why not bring instead the greatest bliss to ourselves and others! This is the path that Maharishi Patañjali has given through such clear teachings. These magnificent ideas clarify the mind and produce equanimity and peace. These attitudes also aid the *sadhak* in avoiding many problems which otherwise rise from wrong relationships.

He also gives us numerous other methods to weaken and get rid of the obstacles including single-minded concentration on the *prana* (I.34), the sensory experiences (I.35) and the inner light (I.36) are also mentioned while he recommends a detached attitude (I.37) with deepening of one's knowledge through an understanding of the dream (I.38) and meditative states (I.39).

Once we stabilize our restless mind, it attains the highest clarity and becomes crystal-like (*abhijatasyeva maneh*) in its ability to truthfully transmit the highest experiences (I.41). By weakening the *vritti*, one purifies the mind. Then it becomes as clear as a crystal. In the highest state, the mind has attained that absolute purity where there is no longer any distinction amongst the three components. One is totally absorbed into the object of contemplation. In this state there is the utmost stability of being. The unreal sense of two-ness (*dwaitam*) ceases to exist, once and forever.