

An evaluation of *antarayas* and their overcoming for the human well-being in view of Patanjali yoga

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Abstract

Man is born with subtle impressions and tendencies brought from previous lives and he also acquires new ones in his present life. While good tendencies help, evil ones obstruct his spiritual progress. Hence, the *sadhakas* who adopt the way of Yoga face a series of obstacles (*antarayas*) which disrupt the way. The word 'obstacle' is used with reference to both the inner and the outer world, to gross and subtle objects, and, to conditions and situations which stand in the way of our spiritual progress. The awareness of the obstacles is necessary in order to make the most out of Yoga and to get maximum benefit. There are nine recognized obstacles. These obstacles are natural and predictable, and can be challenged. There are several consequences that grow out of them. We need to remove all these difficulties to be able to fully benefit from the positive aspect of Yoga. Really speaking, the obstacles are certain cleansing processes and are also reactions setup by our inner personality. One-pointed-ness (*Eka-dharana*) of mind is the underlying principle that is the antidote for these obstacles and their consequences. Practice (*abhyasa*) and non-attachment (*viraga*) are the foundation principles of Yoga. These two are essential for spiritual life, which allow a person to pursue the subtler meditation practices. There is a solacing admonition given by the sage Patanjali that continued practice shall result in the revelation of consciousness. Even the obstacles cease after sometime. The present paper is a study of Predicable Obstacles, Companions to the Predicable Obstacles, the Antidotes of the Obstacles and their Consequences with special reference to *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali.

Key words: Patanjali yoga, well-being, *antarayas*

Article Received: 15-04-2016, **Accepted:** 22-04-2016, **Published:** 13-06-2016

Conflict of interest: None declared

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**International Journal of Science and Consciousness (IJSC): a Bio-Psycho-Spiritual approach
Published by the Research Foundation for Science & Consciousness, Uttarakhand, India**

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Introduction:

Patanjali argues that mind cannot be looked upon as self-conscious or self-luminous in so far as it too can be made an object of consciousness. It is the mind which perceives the objects of the world and also the sense-organs. General functioning of mind can be compared with that of a river¹. Just as a river comes into contact with the external objects through waves and ripples, mind also comes into contact with external objects through its modifications. In the way in which dirt and mud collected through contact with external objects, in its turn, gives its color to the waves of the river, similarly, the impurities collected through contact with external objects give their color to the mental modifications. The mental modifications colored with impurities blur the image of the self. Hence, for experience of self in its real form, mind should be made pure and clean by removing impurities. One is required to control the mental modifications. Patanjali at the very outset defined '*Yoga*' as the control of mental modifications². The self being immutable never leaves its real nature, but it appears as though colored due to the modifications of the mind³.

It is extremely difficult to arrest the mental modifications, because by their very nature they cannot remain stable. Arjuna too has raised the same doubt by saying "O, Krishna, as the mind is fickle and too much forceful, I consider its control to be extremely difficult like that of the wind"⁴. Like Lord Krishna, Patanjali, too has advocated a bi-pronged attack for namely, repeated practice and dispassionate attitude⁵. Patanjali dealt with the psychological processes most scientifically and analytically. Yet he has introduced the concept of God⁶. Patanjali assigns distinct existence for each and every self. Patanjali does not expect faith in God as a pre-requisite for Self-realization.

PART – I: Obstacles of the ascetic

Patanjali described the obstacles which a man faces while practicing Yoga or entering the

depths of mind. Also he prescribed various techniques for treating the obstacles. In general, there are obstacles of various kinds producing misery (*duhkha*) of various types. Patanjali enumerated nine obstacles which hinder the progress in

i. Sickness (*vyadhi*)

According to Patanjali sickness (*vyadhi*)⁸ is the very first of the mental obstacles. It is a fever, or the like caused by disorder of the humors. No sickness can arise, if mind remains in a perfect state of balance. The term '*vyadhi*' is diametrically opposed to *Samadhi*⁹, the property of balanced mind. If mind remains well-balanced, even contagious diseases would not arise. Body and mind form an integral whole according to Yoga. "An acute disease, though it indicates a failure on the part of body to meet the offending factor adequately, still indicates that the body is putting up a successful 'flight' to eradicate or neutralize the disturbing elements. Thus, it is only a temporary disturbance. What one could do at best is to help the body in its fight by not taxing it with further work....."¹⁰

ii. Languor (*styana*)

The next significant obstacle on the Yoga journey is an advanced state of apathy. It is the mind's inactivity which diminishes our willingness to commit our responsibilities. At times, such condition can lead to serious depression or even complete nervous breakdown. It leads to neglect and the reluctance to practice Yoga in the way it needs to be practiced in order to exploit its full potential. It is usually accompanied by rheumatic pain and distress.

iii. Doubt (*samsaya*)

Doubt is a sort of notion that leaves to both alternatives; for example, "Is Yoga practicable, or is it not?" This does not represent only a disbelief in the *Yogic* practice as such, but it may be a general doubt arising out of the inner complexes. This problem can arise especially when our own self-esteem is low which may culminate into a

serious, neurotic or even psychic disorder. In such a condition, the person starts doubting that everybody is planning something against him. His anxiety reaches to the maximum limit; and he fails to continue the practice of Yoga.

iv. Carelessness (*pramada*)

Carelessness is a habit of inattention. It occurs due to lack of persistence and out of undue anxiety. The practitioner, who is over-anxious for getting the results, gets mentally disturbed and starts neglecting the regular practice. It can culminate in a serious depression. Yoga, with its combination of arts and sciences, requires a unique approach. If you practice Yoga without proper emotional attitudes, you may turn the positive aspects of Yoga into negative ones.

v. Laziness (*alasya*)

Laziness is a heaviness of the body and mind, which causes a want of exertion in the department of abstract meditation. In pathological conditions, it culminates into a serious neurotic disorder. An empty mind is a devil's workshop. A lazy person who fails in his regular duties starts imagining everything, good and bad. He will not receive full benefits of Yoga if he has a lazy and inert state of mind and body. Many people have a hard time dealing with their own will power, and this creates the perfect conditions for this obstacle to appear. The road to success is tough most of the time, and strong will power can support us along the way. A passive approach certainly leads to a slow and ineffective advance.

vi. Addiction to Objects (*avirati*)

Addiction to objects is a greediness consisting in attachment of the mind to objects of sense. Physical objects hold a magnetic attraction to the majority of people. When, with *Yogic* practice, we try to intercept the onrush of mind towards sense-objects, it becomes all the more troublesome and creates pathological condition. The tensions in this condition become almost unbearable. The practitioner tries to resist the force of the instincts and fails completely in his attempt. Our anxiety for sense pleasures goes on increasing and we find it extremely difficult to

continue the practice. Yoga leads us to let go of these ropes that tie us to the material world and make progress in the realm of the Spirit. Removing the weight of physical things is vital while practicing Yoga.

viii. Erroneous Perception (*bhranti-darsana*)

Erroneous Perception is a 'mistaken notion' such as the notion that the thing is a snake when it is a rope. In *Yogic* practice, delusions and hallucinations usually occur when we start imagining that we have achieved the psychic powers of Extra- Sensory Perception etc., before reaching the proper stage of progress. If we misunderstand the path we are taking while practicing Yoga, it can lead to disappointment. Naturally, delusions and hallucinations indicate a serious pathological condition and create hindrance in the practice of Yoga.

viii. Failure to Attain Abstraction (*alabdha-bhumikatva*)

By 'failure to attain any stage' we mean the failing, for some reason or another, to attain to, or arrive at, the state of abstract meditation. This Yoga obstacle often arises because we are victims of our own discouragement. When a failure occurs we fall into a state of self-deprecation, accompanied by pessimism. Failing to reach a step on our road to achieving our ideal can lead to aggravated forms of this Yoga obstacle.

ix. Instability (*anavasthitatva*)

Instability is, even when the state of abstract meditation has been reached, the mind's not continuing steadily therein. The mind cannot immediately get fixed into a higher state; usually it goes on reverting to the previous stage. It is only after a good deal of practice that one can get firmly established in a higher state. But in between, the practitioner becomes impatient and over-anxious and thus, obstacle arises. Therefore, if our Yoga practice is poor, the final obstacle can result and can be accompanied by not being able to hold a higher level of consciousness. This can be frustrating and result in our disappointment.

From these Predicable Obstacles, there are four other consequences that also arise.

Components to the obstacles (*sahabhava antarayas*)

There are four companions to the obstacles of the ascetic. They are:

- i. Grief (*duhkha*)**
- ii. Distress (*daurmanasya*)**
- iii. Trembling (*angamejayatva*)**
- iv. Sighing (*svasa*)**

When, from whatever cause, distractions have arisen, then these, namely Grief etc. come on.¹¹

Among the Companions to the Obstacles, Grief is a modification of the mind, resulting from outer mental affections. It is characterized by annoyance, in consequence of which sentient creatures exert themselves for its removal. Distress is a tremulousness of mind, arising either from external or internal causes. Trembling is a shaking of the whole body which prevent steadiness either in prescribed posture or in mind. Sighing is an excessive entrance of air into the body. An excessive expiration of air from the body is *prasvasa*. Hence, the irregularities in the exhalation and inhalation of breath, is sighing.

PART-II: Therapeutic means to overcome the obstacles

Obstacles are inevitable but can be overcome. This is the ideal. But in actual life, there is no such thing as movement in a straight line. There are ups and downs, breaks or stops, in the movement. Obstacles confront us till we attain the peace and blessedness that come from divine realization. Until then, we have to persist steadily in our spiritual practices and we have to continue the struggle however insurmountable the obstacles may seem for the time being. This is a matter of actual experience for many spiritual aspirants. Patanjali¹² says that there is a revelation of the inner consciousness and an absence of all obstacles. The means to overcome or combating the obstacles given by Patanjali, are:

i. Attention to One Truth (*eka-dharana*)

The very first thing that Patanjali recommends is formation of a hobby. For the prevention, or hindrance of the distractions, one should dwell upon or again and again confine the attention, to one truth – some accepted truth – by force of which, when concentration on one point has taken place, the distractions subside¹³. One-pointedness of mind is a single underlying principle which is the antidote for the obstacles.

Repeatedly remember one aspect of truth. It may be related to our religion, an aspect of our own being, a principle, or some other pleasing object. It may be a *mantra*, short prayer, or affirmation. This is a preparation for meditation. The principle of one-pointedness of mind as the antidote to obstacles continues throughout the subtler and subtler most of the meditation practices. It is essential at the beginning to neutralize the gross level of mental obstacles. But, it remains a key tool at all of the subsequent stages of practice. The nature of the obstacles might become subtler and subtler, but of practice (*abhyasa*) and non-attachment (*vairagya*) were presented as foundation for Yoga meditation¹⁴.

ii. Amiable Habits (*sadguna-abhyasa*)

Through the practice of, benevolence (*maitri*), tenderness (*karuna*), complacency (*amadita*), and disregard towards objects (*upeksana*) i.e. persons who are respectively in possession of happiness (*sukha*), grief (*duhkha*), virtue (*punya*) and vice (*apunya*), the mind becomes purified¹⁵.

One should not be jealous of others happiness, but should try to cultivate a friendly attitude towards such people, by a repeated auto suggestion. Such an attitude requires to be corrected for purifying the mind. Likewise, one should never enjoy other's distress, but should try to cultivate a sympathetic and compassionate attitude towards such people. Hence, when people are grieved, one should show tenderness. And with regard to the vicious, one should practice simply indifference, showing neither sympathy nor aversion. That is when one comes across sins or evils in the world one should not get too much depressed and nervous about it,

but should try to cultivate indifferent attitude towards it. It should be remembered that every saint has his past and every sinner, his future.

iii. Regulation of the Breath (*pranayama*)

One may combat distractions by forcibly expelling and by restraining the breath¹⁶. For correcting the disturbed respiration during mental disturbances, Patanjali recommended the regulation of breath. The 'expelling' of the breath is the emitting it by a slow but complete expiration. The 'restraining' it is the stopping it by shutting the mouth and closing both nostrils with fingers of the right hand. This takes place after inhalation because, after expelling the breath, it is impossible to restrain it without having made a previous inhalation. Hence, the regulation of the breath (*pranayama*), being of three descriptions according to the distinction of expiration (*recaka*), inspiration (*puraka*), and restraining (*kumbhaka*), causes steadiness of the mind, and its concentration in a single direction.

iv. Mystical Sense Perception (*yogaja*)

A sensuous immediate cognition being produced may serve as a cause of the steadiness¹⁷. In the case of one who fixes his mind on the tip of the nose, arises a perception of celestial odor. If one fixes his mind on the tip of the tongue, there is a perception of savor; on the forepart of the palate, a perception of color; on the middle of the tongue, a perception of the sound. Thereby, through the organ, the perception arising of celestial sense-object becomes a cause of the mind's concentration in one direction.

v. Luminous Immediate Cognition (*jyotismati*)

A luminous immediate cognition, being produced free from sorrow may serve as a cause of the steadiness of the mind¹⁸. A luminous immediate cognition is that in which the pure element is excellent, abundant and exceeding. All sorrow, is removed by virtue of the exercise of the divine vision. That is, with the disappearance of all modifications (*vrttis*), through the beholding of perfect knowledge, steadiness takes place in the mind of one who, in the midst of the lotus-cup of

his heart, broods on the pure element of thought like the milky ocean when the waves are tilled.

The ascetic, effecting by these methods for steadiness of mind, obtains through meditation on subtle objects, un-resisted mastery as far as the Atom. In like manner no mental obstacle (*antaraya*) arises anywhere to him meditating the gross, even to the extent of infinite magnitude, as the Ether; but everywhere he is uncontrolled.

Conclusion:

Let us not imagine that life is only full of obstacles. If we come across obstacles and hindrances, we get also helps and aids both within and without. It is essential that we have a correct idea, a balanced estimate, of our conditions and environment. Never we should weaken ourselves by thinking too much of our shortcomings only. A help to our moral and spiritual life is the remembering of the Supreme Truth that we are the *Atman*.

Really speaking, the impediments to success, the obstacles to Yoga, are certain cleansing processes, like the effect of a cathartic given by a doctor leading to purging, if that is necessary for the treatment of a disease. Even the obstacles cease after sometime, and will not hounding us for all times. Every limiting condition is a temporary period of transition, and it has its day.

These obstacles are of varying categories - physical, psychological and social. We have to be prepared to meet any obstacle that comes on the way. The obstacles are external reactions produced by certain internal potentialities.

Patanjali draws our attention to the general, philosophical sides of the difficulties. We may come across personal and petty difficulties everyday, which we must tackle with intelligence, aided by the guidance of a *Guru*.

The obstacles are nothing but the peculiar relationship that we have with things outside. Conscious level is like the tip of an iceberg in the ocean, the larger portion of it being submerged

and invisible. We do not see it at all, but it is so hard that it can severely damage a ship if the ship hits it. Hence, the obstacles are not necessarily the outcome of conscious action, perception and cognition. They are the reactions set up by our deeper personality. These obstacles have to be faced with a deliberate, conscious practice of Yoga.

Rest is also a part of Yoga practice itself. One should be little bit moderate in ones approach and not go to extremes. Moderation is a great virtue, but more difficult than complete abstention.

Everybody cannot be temperamentally fit for a complete surrender to God. Particularly in modern times, faith in God and religion has been completely shaken due to scientific and technological advancements. Man of today is badly in need of the practice of Yoga and the Yoga path is very much applicable and appreciable for the well-being of modern man.

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7. *vyadhityanasamsayapramadalasyavirati bhrantidarsanalabdha bhumikatvasthanitvani cittaviksepastentarayah// Ibid*. I. 30.
8. The term 'vyadhi' is derived from *vi+a+dha* which means to put out, to disconcert.
9. The term 'samadhi' is derived from *sam+a+dha* which means to put together as one whole.
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Cite this paper as: Kolla, C. (2016). An evaluation of antarayas and their overcoming for the human well-being in view of Patanjali yoga. *International Journal of Science and Consciousness*; 2(2): 11- 16.