

## CHAPTER 8

### *DHARANA* AND ITS OBSTACLES

#### 1. The Internal Aspect of Yoga

Patanjali, in *Yogadarsana*, discusses two main aspects of yoga: the means or techniques of yoga and the manifestations or attainments of yoga. The former is discussed in *Sadhanapada*<sup>1</sup> and the latter in *Vibhutipada*<sup>2</sup>. *Sadhanapada* includes *yama* and *niyama*, *asanas*, *pranayama*, and *pratyahara*—these five embodiments of yoga are considered external. *Vibhutipada* includes *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*—these are the internal aspects of yoga, and these alone enable one to enter into the important spheres of yoga. However, only through the mastery of the techniques of yoga is the mind fit for the attainments of yoga. The body is the medium for *asana*, *pranayama*, and *pratyahara*, while the mind is the medium for *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*. Only after the purification of the body does the purification of the mind really begin. In *Goraksa-Paddhati* it is said, “A seeker should practice *dharana* only after mastering *asana*, *pranayama*, and *pratyahara*.<sup>3</sup>”

#### 2. Concept of *Dharana*

In *Yogadarsana*, Patanjali describes *dharana* thus: “When the pure mind is kept focused in the desired *desa* (region) by the seeker, it is called *dharana*.”<sup>4</sup>

One must meditate in order to decrease the fluctuations of the mind, which result in ignorance, inability, and misery. Through meditation, one can attain knowledge, ability, and happiness. However, just as there cannot be a tree without a seed, so there cannot be meditation without *dharana*. In order to meditate, one must first practice *dharana*.

A seeker practices *dharana* in order to focus many divergent thoughts towards a single region of contemplation. Out of the trio of meditator, meditation, and the object or the goal of meditation, the last one can be called the region of *dharana*. The seeker must focus his mind on such an object or goal.

#### 3. The Three Regions of *Dharana*

There are three regions of *dharana*: *adhibhautika* (relating to matter), *adhyatmika* (relating to spirit) and *adhidaivika* (relating to celestial objects—sun, moon, etc.). The seeker may choose any one of these three regions on which to focus his mind. Focusing

---

<sup>1</sup> Chapter on “Manifestations or Attainments of Yoga.”

<sup>2</sup> Chapter on “Means or Techniques of Yoga.”

<sup>3</sup> Goraksa-Paddhati, Part II, stanza 52.

<sup>4</sup> Patanjali’s *Yogadarsana*; Vibhutipada, Aphorism 1

the mind on the idol of a chosen deity, a picture of the guru, a diamond, a jewel, a lamp, a flame, etc. is known as *adhibhautik dharana*. The mind becomes automatically fixed on an object or a goal if one has a great liking for it. In this type of *dharana*, the predisposition of one's feelings and intellect play an important part.

When a seeker, favored with the grace of the Lord or of a guru, reaches the stage of *dharana*, his mind is automatically focused or fixed on various *cakras* in the body and on the respective deities controlling these *cakras*. This is known as *adhyatmika dharana*. Of course, the seeker practices *dharana* in its subsidiary form even when he does *asanas*, *pranayamas*, and *pratyahara*.

#### **4. Spontaneous Occurrence of Dharana**

In the initial stages of *pranotthana* (release of *prana*), *prana* moves very quickly. As a result, it is not able to remain stable in any *cakra* or nerve center for long. Later on, as the seeker advances in his spiritual practice, the activity of *prana* is reduced and gradually it becomes capable of remaining steady in the area of its activity for a longer period of time. However, real stability is attained only when one is firmly established in the stage of *pratyahara*, which itself assumes the form of *dharana*. Thereafter it becomes stabilized in any region which it chooses for purification. The mind is automatically attracted towards the regions in which the *prana* is localized. Hence, *dharana* begins to occur automatically in the center where the *prana* has become stable.

#### **5. Results of Mastering Dharana**

*Dharana* is considered to have been mastered when one's mental focus remains steady for two hours. No sooner is *dharana* perfected than the yogi becomes revered by the people. He may have visions of the great *siddhas* (adepts or realized *yogis*) and also he gains understanding about the secrets of all religions. It is through *dharana* that one conquers the mind and becomes fit to practice *dhyana*, or real meditation. Moreover, it is only through *dharana* that the *cakras* and the *granthis* are penetrated and various *siddhis* (miraculous powers) are attained. But the true seeker reaching this stage does not become the slave of these *siddhis*, and, remaining unconcerned about them, proceeds further on the path of yoga.

#### **6. The Initial Stages of Dharana in Various Cakras**

When *dharana* is centered in *muladhara cakra* (basal plexus), *asanas* like *mulabandhasana*, *virasana*, *ardha matsyendrasana*, *vrsasana*, *parsvasana*, etc., in which the anus is pressed or contracted, are automatically performed. When *dharana* is centered in *svadhisthana cakra* (sacral plexus), *siddhasana* and its associated *asanas*, in which the portion between the anus and the genitals is pressed, occur automatically. *Yoni mudra* also occurs in natural course. When *dharana* is centered in *manipura cakra* (solar plexus) either the belly gets completely filled with air or *uddiyana bandha* (stomach lock) occurs frequently. *Asanas* like *pascimottanasana*, *bhunamanasana* may also be performed automatically. When *dharana* is centered in *anahata cakra* (cardial plexus), various

*pranayamas* occur automatically, the chest gets completely filled with air, and *asanas* like *dhirasana*, *khanjanasana*, *kurmasana*, and *bhujangasana* are performed automatically. During *dharana* of *visuddhakhya cakra* (pharyngeal plexus) *anahata nada* (spontaneous sound) is generated in the form of chanting *Rama* or *aum* mantras, singing *vedic* hymns, roaring, making sounds like various beasts, or singing classical Indian music. *Asanas* like *sarvangasana*, *halasana*, and other *asanas* in which the throat is pressed, are performed automatically. When the *prana* is stabilized in this *cakra*, *khecari mudra* is also practiced. When *dharana* is centered in *ajna cakra* (frontal nerve center), *asanas* like *padmasana*, *swastikasana*, *siddhasana*, *mulabhandhasana*, *vajrasana*, or *sthirasana* are automatically performed and meditation in *bhrucakra* (between the eyebrows) becomes natural. During *dharana* of *sahasradala padma* (thousand-petalled lotus or the crown of the head), *sirsasana*, *vrksasana*, and associated *asanas* are automatically performed and the subtle sounds of drums, cymbals, conches, *veena* (stringed instrument), flute and bell or thundering (as in lightning) are heard. All these *dharanas* go on ascending and descending until they become stable in any one center for five *ghadis*<sup>5</sup> (two hours). These are all *adhyatmik dharanas*.

## 7. Various Elemental Dharanas

From the feet to the thighs is the region of *prthvi tattva* (the earthy element), from the thighs to the navel is the region of *jala tattva* (the watery element), from the navel to the heart is the region of *agni tattva* (the fiery element), from the heart to the frontal region is the seat of *vayu tattva* (the airy element), and from the frontal region to *brahmarandhra* (the crown of the head) is the seat of *akasa tattva* (the ethereal element). One performs *dharana* spontaneously on the four-armed form of Lord *Brahma*, along with the *bija*<sup>6</sup> (seed) sound ‘*lam*’ in the earthy region, on the four-armed form of Lord *Narayana* along with the sound ‘*vam*’ in the watery region, on the three-eyed form of Lord *Maharudra* with the sound ‘*ram*’ in the fiery region, on the all-powerful, omniscient, Lord of all, *Satcitananda Iswara* (Lord in the form of ‘existence-consciousness-bliss’) with the sound ‘*yam*’ in the airy region, and on the cosmic form of Lord *Sadasiva* with the sound ‘*ham*’ in the region of the ether element for five *ghadis* (two hours). By such practice one can gradually attain command over the earthy, watery, fiery, airy, and ethereal elements in turn.

## 8. Obstacles Arising During Initial States of Dharana

As soon as a seeker begins to be steady in *dharana*, many obstacles spring upon his path. Due to the fear of these dangers, many seekers prefer to tread the easier paths of yoga. The first obstacle is that *yaksinis* (demigoddesses from the other world known as *Yaksaloka*) adopt beautiful forms and come to tempt the seeker away, or they adopt the forms of snakes, lions, tigers, etc. to frighten him. Of course, all these can be seen only through inner vision. Under such circumstances, only if the seeker is neither tempted by the beauty of the *yaksinis* nor frightened by the dangerous animals does his yoga practice remain undisturbed. Some famous portraits of the Buddha show him surrounded by

<sup>5</sup> A *ghadis* is equal to 24 minutes.

<sup>6</sup> There are different *bija* (seed) *mantras* connected with different centers in the body.

monstrous figures or a *Kama Sena* (a large group of cupids). This depicts the difficulties arising at this stage of *dharana*.

### **9. The Menace of *Kundalini* during *Dharana***

Another major difficulty that a seeker must face during *dharana* is the menace of the awakened *kundalini*. A seeker does not, in fact, enter the stage of *dharana* without the *kundalini* having been awakened. *Dharana* is usually performed in various *cakras*, so it presupposes the penetration of the *cakras*, which does not happen until the *kundalini* is awakened and moves upward into the passage of the *susumna*.

Although *asanas*, *mudras*, *pranayamas*, etc., are performed automatically when the *prana* is released, *prana* does not itself penetrate the *cakras*. Such penetration begins only when the *kundalini* power is awakened, and with it begins *dharana*. Since it is difficult to handle the awakened *kundalini*, the seeker has to face many difficulties during *dharana*.

The seeker who dares to awaken the *kundalini* power without the grace and guidance of a guru might become insane, succumb to diseases or even die. This is because he does not possess the necessary knowledge, steadiness of mind, or patience required for this difficult undertaking.

Many seekers are found wandering here and there in search of a guru who will awaken their *kundalini*. However, their search ends in despair because they do not have genuine faith in the guru. In order to get the *kundalini* awakened through the grace of a guru, one must have full faith and surrender completely. Although thousands may claim that they know *kundalini* and that their *kundalini* is awakened, it is doubtful if even one of them really has such knowledge or experience.

To awaken the *kundalini* power is one thing, but to make it move upward into the passage of the *susumna* is something else. In the beginning, as the *kundalini* is awakened, the seeker feels a lot of enthusiasm. But as he advances in *dharana*, he begins to encounter various menaces of *kundalini*. Only one with great courage can cope with these menaces; it is simply not possible for all to do so. This is where those who are attracted by *siddhis* (miraculous powers) retreat from the awakened *kundalini* and bow down to her from a distance.

### **10. The Obstacle of Sensuality**

One of the stumbling blocks which the seeker faces during *dharana* is that of sensuality. There are seven major *cakras* and three *granthis* in the body and only through the correct practice of *dharana* will they be known. When *dharana* occurs spontaneously in the region of *svadhithana cakra*, strong sensual feelings develop. This could be tolerated if it were to occur only once in a while, but it is encountered frequently.

One may ask here: why does sensuality become intense through *dharana*? Should it not decrease through the practice of yoga? This problem can be explained in the following manner.

*Prana* energy is the soul of yoga. At no time can the mind be controlled without controlling the *prana*. In the same way, *prana* cannot be controlled without controlling the mind. As a long-handled fork is used for catching a snake, so is the *prana* energy used for controlling the mind. The mind is thus conquered by conquering the *prana* energy.

The seeker, whose *prana* energy is released through the grace of God or a guru, begins to establish control over *prana* automatically during meditation. Due to this automatic process, the blood in the body of the seeker is purified. As the blood is purified, it produces a large quantity of sexual fluid, and with this increased production of sexual fluid, sensuality is intensified. As a result, the seeker faces a stumbling block in his or her spiritual practice.

The Jain Preceptor Hemacandra Suriiji pointed out: “*Pranayama* is useless. Peace of mind cannot be preserved by it. On the contrary, it generates unrest and the mind becomes depressed.” This statement must have been the result of experiencing such obstacles.

Due to such dangers there seems to be everywhere the tendency to avoid *Hatha Yoga* and go directly to the practice of *Raja Yoga*. But the real seeker must not be impeded by these difficulties. Only then can he obtain true knowledge of everything or become omniscient. All other remedies are common, and the power of omniscience cannot be attained through them.

Because they are so puzzled by this difficult aspect of yoga, particularly during *dharana*, even those seekers making the most progress stop. They are simply overwhelmed by the whole phenomenon. Once more the need for the wisdom, experience and grace of a true guru arises.

This is where the paths of *krama mukti* (liberation by stages or after many births) and *sadyo mukti* (liberation in the present lifetime) become separate. Only the brave *Hanumana* (the monkey God of the *Ramayana* and the deity of *Brahmacarya* or the perfect celibate) can cross the sea of sensuality with one leap. An ordinary monkey cannot do that. Therefore, for their own protection, many seekers will be directed or diverted into the path of *krama mukti*. Those seekers who cannot meet these obstacles with patience and full faith cannot tread the path of *sadyo mukti*.

## **11. Encountering Diseases**

Another difficulty arising from the practice of *dharana* is disease. Often, in the lower stages of *dharana*, bodily impurities create obstructions. One may ask: why should a practitioner of yoga succumb to disease? The answer is that the active life of the seeker promotes a continuous flow of *rajoguna* in the body and mind; consequently, the

proportion of passion, intolerance, anger, egoism, etc., greatly increases. Through the practice of *dharana*, however, the process of physical purification takes place very quickly. As a result, the unhealthy elements in the body are generated in large proportion and, in order to be eliminated quickly from the body, they may assume the nature of a disease which was previously lying dormant.

When diseases are manifested in the body in this way, that is, as a result of the process of *prana*, the seeker need not be afraid. Such diseases subside automatically through the process of *prana* itself. Therefore, the seeker should not abandon the practice of *dharana* but continue it. However, under such circumstances he should avoid taking any medicine, and should abstain from rich food. He may maintain either a simple and light diet or take only milk and fruits.

It is a popular belief that a yogi should not suffer from disease. This is true, but during the initial stages of *dharana*, one is merely an ordinary seeker and not an evolved yogi. When the yogic scriptures mention that a yogi does not suffer from disease, they refer to a highly evolved yogi and not to an ordinary seeker. On the contrary, an ordinary seeker frequently has to put up a tough fight against disease, and sometimes he may even encounter death during the practice of yoga. If he undergoes defeat in such encounters, he falls victim to various diseases, and if the disease turns out to be incurable, the seeker may eventually die.

Only when the yogi realizes the stage of *samadhi* does his body become completely purified by the fire of yogic penance and is he rid of disease. At that stage of his spiritual evolution, disease has no hold on the yogi, but before reaching that level, he has to tread a long and difficult path. As a matter of fact, the path of yoga is so full of difficulties that a seeker who cannot meet these challenges with enthusiasm, faith, patience, and courage will never tread the path of yoga to the end.

## **12. The Obstacle of Illusions**

Yet another difficulty which arises during the stages of *dharana* is that the seeker does not correctly recognize the level of his progress. Often, out of over-enthusiasm, he begins to evaluate his attainments in a liberal way. This is because of his illusory understanding about the attainment of various aspects of yoga. At first, he considers yoga to be only a small ditch which can be very easily crossed over by a single jump. However, as he advances, he becomes disillusioned and finds that it is neither a ditch nor a small pond nor even a big lake, but a vast ocean, which cannot be so easily crossed.

For instance, when the frenum under the seeker's tongue is cut automatically during meditation, he begins to think that now, within a couple of months, his tongue will be elongated enough to be able to stand in the tenth gate above the palate. But as he strives hard in meditation to attain khecari mudra (in which the tongue is locked in the cavity of the skull) month after month without success, he begins to feel uneasy about his progress. Further, when he finally succeeds in making the tongue stand in the tenth door, he again becomes overjoyed, thinking that he has now approached the stage of *samadhi*. At that

time, he feels that he will be able to master the highest *nirvikalpa samadhi* very soon. However, when year after year passes without such an attainment, his illusion vanishes.

In fact, in the whole path of yoga there are many steps which often generate illusions making the seeker elated at one time and dejected at another time. Only that seeker who no longer worries about such illusions but continues the practice with full patience and faith succeeds in overcoming all obstacles

### **13. Viparyaya Vrtti or Illusory Thoughts**

During the stages of dharana the seeker undergoes many experiences which cause illusory thoughts to occur in his mind. Hence, he is continually being disillusioned about some old experience or succumbing to a new illusion based on fresh experiences. Thoughts which nourish such illusions are called *viparyaya vrttis* (illusory thoughts). These are caused by inadequate or incomplete experiences. Because of such illusory thoughts, the seeker is often either joyful or sorrowful about his attainment or progress on the spiritual path.

In *Yoga Darsana*, Maharsi Patanjali has divided the *vrttis* (thoughts) into five types: 1) *pramana*, 2) *viparyaya*, 3) *vikalpa*, 4) *smrti*, and 5) *nidra*. So the seeker has to know which thought belongs to which category according to its characteristics.

*Pramana* are those thoughts which are based on experience and are devoid of doubt or illusion. For example, one knows gold as gold and brass as brass on the basis of experience. This *pramana vrtti* is the first type and we shall call it 'truth'.

*Viparyaya* are those thoughts in which, due to lack of experience, there is the illusion that untruth is truth. For example, one mistakes gold for brass and brass for gold, for want of experience. This *viparyaya vrtti* is the second type and we shall call it 'untruth'.

*Vikalpa* are those thoughts which, due to incomplete experience, cannot stay fixed on any decision. For example, one remains indecisive about whether this is gold or brass. This *vikalpa vrtti* is the third type and we shall call it 'doubt'.

It can also be said that the seeker, as he or she progress in yoga, first crosses the 'untruth' and then enters the arena of 'doubt'. Previously, the seeker was seeing only 'untruth' but now sees both 'truth' and 'untruth', and due to their lack of experience they are unable to decide what is 'truth' and what is 'untruth' out of the two. When, through further yoga practice, they cross the second arena, their experience becomes complete and they face only 'truth'. This is the explanation of *viparyaya*, *vikalpa*, and *pramana vrttis*, which can be called, for practical purposes, untruth, doubt, and truth, respectively.

The knowledge which enables us to recognize the subject of our experience is called *smrti*. It relates to the past. For example, 'I have seen this person'; 'I have read this book', etc. is the knowledge impressing previous experiences on the mind and the senses. This is called '*smrti*'.

The *vrtti* in which all four *vrttis* mentioned above (i.e. *pramana*, *viparyaya*, *vikalpa* and *smrti*) are absent is known as *nidra*.

The seeker treading the path of yoga is often waylaid by these different *vrttis*, but as he progresses from ignorance to knowledge, he once again finds the main path.