Science of Meditation
Swami Kripalu

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\(^1\) and the latter in Vibhutipada\(^2\). 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.”\(^3\)

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.”\(^4\)

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

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\(^1\) Chapter on “Manifestations or Attainments of Yoga.”
\(^2\) Chapter on “Means or Techniques of Yoga.”
\(^3\) Goraksa-Paddhati, Part II, stanza 52.
\(^4\) 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, ardhha matsyendrasana, vrkasana, 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 shirasana 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 (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 (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 from of Lord Maharudra with the sound ‘ram’ in the fiery region, on the all-powerful, omniscient, Lord of all, Satchitananda 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

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5 A ghadis is equal to 24 minutes.
6 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 svadhisthana 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 Suriji 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 *viparayaya 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.