

# Obstacles on the Path According to Patanjali

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

## General

The yogic process, running counter to the externalizing tendency of the ordinary human mind, does not necessarily unfold smoothly. As already the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (6.6) recognizes, the self can be the Self's worst enemy.\*1 Patanjali, in his *Yoga-Sûtra* (1.30), mentions no fewer than nine hindrances (*antarâya*) that may arise in the course of the yogic discipline:

Sickness, apathy, doubt, heedlessness, sloth, dissipation, false vision, nonattainment of the stages [of Yoga] and instability [in those stages] are the distractions of consciousness; these are the obstacles.

These can all be understood as self-inflicted limitations, which retard or even negate the yogic process. They also can be seen as expressions of the unconscious, foiling the great yogic opus and thereby preserving the status quo of the unenlightened personality, the unredeemed self. Even when the desire for liberation (*mumukshutva*) is present, an aspirant is still subject to the antithetical forces of Nature (*prakriti*) governing his or her psyche. Seemingly accidental occurrences, like illness, that frustrate yogic progress are, in the final analysis, due to the fruition of the karmic deposits (*karma-âshaya*) and are thus self-induced.

It is significant that Patanjali characterizes the nine hindrances as "distractions of consciousness" (*citta-vikshepa*). They are disturbances, or dysfunctions, as is well captured in the word *vikshepa*, which derives from the prefix *vi-* ("dis-") and the verbal root *kship* meaning "to throw" or "to cast." The *vikshepas* scatter the *yogin's* mental focus and hence stand in the way of his sustained effort to cultivate single-mindedness or "one-pointedness" (*ekâgratâ*).

According to the *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.1), the stages or levels (*bhûmi*) of mental activity are the following five:

- restless (*kshipta*) — or agitated, because of an overwhelming preponderance of *rajas*, the dynamic psychocosmic principle; in Shankara Bhagavatpâda's *Yoga-Bhâshya-Vivarana* it is compared to an overfull granary that bursts open
- deluded (*mûdha*) — or infatuated, because of a surfeit of *tamas*, the psychocosmic principle of inertia, which ousts the important faculty of discernment (*viveka*)
- distracted (*vikshipta*) — or merely intermittently stable, because *sattva*, the psychocosmic principle of lucidity, is periodically present

- one-pointed (*ekâgra*) — or focused, as a result of the growing presence of *sattva* over *rajas* and *tamas*
- restricted (*niruddha*) — or controlled, as a result of a preeminence of *sattva*, which is explained by Shankara Bhâgavatpâda as a thought-free state

The first three levels are typical of the state of mind that the ordinary individual experiences. Only the last two describe the quality of the *yogin's* consciousness.

The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) explains that the distractions can occur only so long as one of the five types of mental “fluctuations” (*vritti*) is present. In other words, the mind must either perceive, misperceive, imagine, remember, or be asleep. However, when these mental activities have been restricted (*niruddha*), then the obstacles mentioned by Patanjali can obviously not be effective. That is to say, a *yogin* may be ill but be quite undisturbed by his illness, as was the case with the well-known twentieth-century sage Ramana Maharshi of Tiruvannamalai, who, toward the end of his life, suffered from cancer. The disease must have caused him considerable pain, yet he remained serene and occasionally even joked about his pain-wrecked body and the doctor’s concern about him.

So, it could be said that the obstacles are hindrances only so long as they affect the activities of the mind. In his *Yoga-Bhâshya-Vivarana* (1.30), Shankara Bhagavatpâda, explains the word *antarâya* thus: “They move toward or create an interval, gap, or break—hence [they are called] obstacles.” An “interval” (*antara*) is a disruption of the natural continuity of apperception by the Self (*purusha*), which is a mere witness (*sâkshin*). In other words, it is a moment in which the Self is eclipsed, and a person loses himself or herself in the stream of arising thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Hence in the *Tattva-Vaishârâdî* (1.30), Vâcaspati Mishra states that the obstacles are specifically “obstacles to Yoga” (*yoga-antarâya*) and “distractions relative to the consciousness checked by Yoga.”

In his *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30), Vyâsa speaks of “opponents of Yoga” (*yoga-pratipaksha*), “obstacles to Yoga” (*yoga-antarâya*), and “blemishes of Yoga” (*yoga-mala*). Shankara Bhagavatpâda’s *Vivarana* (1.30) states that they are equally injurious (*tulya-pratyanîka*), because they engender states of mind (rather than help transcend the mind itself). According to Nâgojî Bhatta’s *Vritti*, these nine are produced by *rajas* and *tamas* and lead to a “state of multiple fluctuations” (*aneka-vrittitva*) of consciousness. The *Mani-Prabhâ* declares: “They distract the mind and make it fall from Yoga.” This is echoed in the *Yoga-Sudhâkara-Candrikâ*, which speaks of them as “obstructions” (*vighna*).

What are the nine obstacles in detail? In the following, I will use the statements found in the various Sanskrit commentaries on the *Yoga-Sûtra* to shed light on this question.

### **Illness (*vyâdhi*)**

*Vyâdhi* is left undefined by the author of the *Yoga-Sûtra*, but the word has the simple meaning of “disease,” “illness,” “sickness,” or “disorder.” It is derived from the prefixes *vi* and *â* and the verbal root *dhâ*, meaning “to stand apart,” or “be scattered.” Vyâsa

explains the word as “an imbalance of the ‘instruments’ [i.e., the sense organs], the secretions, or the humors.” Vâcaspati explains: “The humors—wind, bile, and phlegm—are [so called] because of their sustaining the body. Secretion is a special modification of food that is eaten or drunk. The ‘instruments’ are the senses. An imbalance in them is a condition of deficiency or excess.” The *Bhoja-Vritti* gives “fever, etc.” as an example of a cause for such imbalance, as do the *Candrikâ* and the *Yoga-Sudhâkara*. Bhâva Ganesha has *kapha* instead of *shleshma*—both meaning “phlegm”—and explains *karana* (“instrument”) as “skin, eyes, etc.” He paraphrases *vaishamya* (“imbalance”) as “loss of essence” (*svabhâva-pracyava*), that is, forfeiture of the natural balance or health of the body. The *Yoga-Sudhâkara* likewise speaks of the three *doshas* (i.e., the humors or *dhâtus*).

Shankara Bhagavatpâda has “imbalance is the condition of inequity (*vishama-bhâva*).” He further explains that the imbalance is due to “the excessive employment of one or the other substance, etc.” He adds that a *dhâtu* may increase of its own accord or by outside factors. Shankara Bhagavatpâda speaks of seven kinds of *rasa*: plasma (also called *rasa*), blood (*lohita*), fat (*medas*), flesh (*mâmsa*), bone (*asthi*), marrow (*majjâ*), and semen (*shukla*). “Imbalance of the [sensory] instruments,” according to him, refers to blindness, deafness, and so forth. Vijnâna Bhikshu, again, states that when Vyâsa has *saha iti* (“together with [the mental fluctuations]),” then it should be understood that there is no complete simultaneity, but that Vyâsa has ignored the very small fraction of time between the presentation of an obstacle and its disturbing effects on the mind.

### **Apathy (*styâna*)**

*Styâna* (from the verbal root *styâ* meaning “to grow dense”) is mental apathy. The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) defines it as “inactivity of the mind.” Vâcaspati has “incapacity for action.” Vijnâna Bhikshu explains *akarmanyatâ* or inactivity as follows: “Inactivity is an inability to perform Yoga. Even though [there may be] inactivity of the body [due to] constipation, etc., [there is] no obstruction to Yoga relative to the mind. Hence [Vyâsa] stated ‘for the mind.’” Shankara Bhagavatpâda simply quotes the *Yoga-Bhâshya* and so does Bhoja, while Bhâva Ganesha and Nâgoji Bhatta follow Vâcaspati Mishra’s exegesis. The *Mani-Prabhâ* has “laziness is an incapacity for action even when there is longing [for it] in the mind.” The *Candrikâ* has simply “laziness is inactivity,” while the *Yoga-Sudhâkara* has more specifically “laziness is inactivity of the mind.” This could be interpreted as procrastination, a form of mental inertia by which action is postponed.

### **Doubt (*samshaya*)**

From earliest times, doubt has been named one of the major obstacles to spiritual realization. We can only come to know Reality, declares the *Brihad-Âranyaka-Upanishad* (4.4.23), when we are free from doubt. The *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (4.40) states that doubt afflicts the person who lacks faith (*shraddhâ*). Its effect can be devastating and ultimately even self-destructive. The *Matsya-Purâna* (110.10) notes that the doubting individual reaps suffering rather than Yoga.

The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) explains: “Doubt is knowledge touching on both extremes [of a dilemma] such as “this might be so, this might not be so.” Vâcaspati Mishra has “Even though there is this by means of staying in the form, doubt and error there being nondifference both extremes touching and nontouching.” Shankara Bhagavatpâda states: “Doubt is the notion touching on the two extremes of the dilemma whether there is a post or a man.” This is a classic Vedânta example to illustrate the vacillation experienced in the mental state of doubt: We see something at a remote distance and are not sure of its identity. It could be a wooden post or a human being. Our life is filled with such perceptual uncertainties, but more important are those uncertainties that are not merely perceptual but cognitive: Is there an eternal Self or not? Am I identical with the body or not? And so forth.

### **Heedlessness (*pramâda*)**

The yogic path depends on mindfulness and is thwarted by heedlessness, or carelessness. The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) explains this fault as “not cultivating the means of ecstasy,” which can be understood as a lack of self-application. Shankara Bhagavatpâda glosses this with “a lack of persistence.”

### **Sloth (*âlasya*)**

If *styâna* is mental apathy, *âlasya* is laziness due to physical heaviness (such as from overeating). According to the *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30), it is lack of effort owing to heaviness of the body and the mind, which, Vâcaspati Mishra informs us, respectively spring from a preponderance of phlegm and the presence of *tamas*, Nature’s principle of inertia. This interpretation, however, does not allow us to adequately distinguish *âlasya* from *styâna*. Unfortunately, none of the commentaries is very helpful on this point.

### **Dissipation (*avirati*)**

*Virati* stems from the verbal root *ram* meaning “to stop” but also “to delight in.” It means “cessation,” often in the sense of “renunciation,” but at the same time it is closely related to *rati* meaning “sexual pleasure.” *Avirati* is here intended as the opposite of “cessation,” and many translators have chosen “dissipation” to convey the meaning of this Sanskrit term. James Houghton Woods, however, translated it as “worldliness,” on the strength of the *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30), which defines the word as “the mind’s greed in the form of attachment to things.” The mechanism of attachment and greed was articulated long ago in the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (2.62-63):

When a man contemplates objects, attachment to them is produced. Attachment creates desire, and desire leads to anger.

Anger gives rise to confusion. Confusion results in loss of mindfulness. Loss of mindfulness destroys wisdom. As a result of the destruction of wisdom, he perishes.

The *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (2.64) also provides a counter-measure: to roam among the sense objects with the mind and senses under control. In the Vedânta tradition, the term *uparati* (“quiescence”) is often used to indicate the kind of nonattachment that the sage is asked to cultivate in order to overcome negative emotions and attitudes, not least the penchant for dissipation (*avirati*).

### **False vision (*bhrânti-darshana*)**

Even though doubt is a significant block on the yogic path and brings with it a certain emotional distress (unsettledness), it is potentially a jumping board for a deeper vision and certainty. By contrast, false vision involves a (premature) sense of certainty and therefore does not share doubt’s agony; yet it is potentially more seriously damaging. For false vision is basically an error (*viparyaya*). The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) explains that if a Yoga practitioner were to mistakenly think of a particular stage of yogic attainment as adequate or sufficient, he or she would automatically cease to grow spiritually. Only clear understanding, or what is called “discernment” (*viveka*), can serve as a reliable guide on the razor-edge path to liberation.

### **Nonattainment of the stages (*alabdha-bhûmikatva*)**

Progress on the yogic path varies from person to person and depends on the individual’s psychological capacity and, at a deeper level, his or her *karma*. Whatever we represent at the present moment is because of our past volitions (whether or not expressed at the physical level). Our DNA is the product of the sum total of our karmic past, and so, according to Yoga, are our life circumstance and the experiences that we have and that impinge on us. Since much of what we call “mind” depends on brain functions and since our brain is DNA driven, our mental life too is largely determined by our *karma*. Were it not for our essential nature (i.e., the Self or *purusha*), which is transcendental and eternally free, we would be complete robots. By consistently choosing the Self, or pure Consciousness, we can overcome our karmic baggage. Choosing the Self translates as cultivating mindfulness and deactivating negative thoughts, emotions, and attitudes.

This is a gradual process that, according to Yoga philosophy, extends over many lifetimes and involves many instances of apparent failure. Life is a school, and unless we learn from our mistakes we must repeat the same lesson over and over again. Persistence is key to success in Yoga. As the *Yoga-Sûtra* (1.13) states:

. . . [practice] is firmly grounded [only after it has been] cultivated properly and for a long time uninterruptedly.

Those who have not yet acquired the necessary stamina and determination are unable to reach the next higher stage or level in the unfolding spiritual process. Also a sudden irruption of *karma*—perhaps in the form of sickness or other adversity—can prevent the Yoga practitioner from moving onward.

The *Yoga-Sûtra* (1.30) recognizes the inability to attain the next stage of inner growth as one of the nine obstacles. The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) tells us that by “stages” (*bhûmi*) are here meant the four stages that Vyâsa describes later in his commentary (3.51):

1. *prathama-kalpika* (“initial phase”)
2. *madhu-bhûmika*, which the *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30) also calls *madhu-matî* (“honeyed”)
3. *prajnâ-jyotis* (“wisdom-light”)
4. *atîkrânta-bhâvanîya* (“in the process of transcending [everything]”)

The *prathama-kalpika-yogin* is the practitioner (*abhyâsin*) for whom the inner light is just dawning. The *madhu-bhûmika-yogin* has the truth-bearing wisdom (*ritam-bharâ prajnâ*) mentioned in the *Yoga-Sûtra* (1.48), which is as sweet or precious as honey. The *prajnâ-jyotir-yogin* is in full control of the bodily organs and the elements and is completely capable of realizing the remaining stage. The *atîkrânta-bhâvanîya-yogin* transcends everything, and has as his only purpose the resolution (*pratisarga*) of the mind back into the transcendental core of Nature (*prakriti*).

To complicate matters, the *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.1) also applies, as noted above, the term *bhûmi* to the levels of mental activity, and hence the legitimate question poses itself, which set of stages is intended. Since Patanjali is not specific, nonattainment of a given stage or instability in it may be taken to refer to any stage whatsoever. The author of the *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.30), however, clearly has the above four levels in mind.

### **Instability (*anavasthitatva*)**

If attaining a particular stage of Yoga is difficult, stably remaining in it is an even greater challenge for most practitioners. The higher the stage (*bhûmi*), the more energy (commitment, one-pointedness, etc.) it takes to attain and maintain it. Yogic folklore (especially as found in the *Purânas*) is filled with stories of *yogins* who, after reaching great spiritual heights, took a steep fall out of attachment or pride. There is no real safe stage until liberation is attained. *Anavasthitatva* is the negative of *avasthitatva* (“stability”), which is formed of the prefix *ava*, the verbal root *sthâ* (“to stand, abide”), and the suffix *tva* (“-ness/-ty”). All of Yoga can be looked upon as an effort to achieve stability in the midst of the unending fluctuations (*vritti*) and transformations (*parinâma*) of Nature. Ultimate stability is found only in the transcendental Self, which is considered to possess *aparinâmitva* or “immobility” or constancy.

Patanjali is not content with listing the nine obstacles; he makes the following additional statement in his *Yoga-Sûtra* (1.31):

Pain, depression, tremor of the limbs, [faulty] inhalation and exhalation are accompanying [symptoms] of the distractions.

When, through inattention or the fructification of karma, one or more of the nine obstacles are encountered, these often have unpleasant repercussions. Patanjali names the following four: pain, depression, tremor of the limbs, and faulty breathing.

## **Pain (*duhkha*)**

Yoga is designed to help the practitioner overcome suffering (*duhkha*). Yet when he or she falls prey to any of the obstacles, the practitioner exacerbates rather than reduces his or her experience of suffering, or pain. The word *duhkha* is composed of *dur* (“bad”) and *kha* (“space/axle hole”) and literally means “having a bad axle-hole,” that is, having or being a wheel that is out of balance. The opposite of *duhkha* is *sukha*, which is derived from *su* (“good”) and *kha*. A contemporary English rendering would be “good space.” The dictionary meaning of *sukha* is “joy,” “ease,” or “pleasure.” All nine obstacles are apt to lead to pain or suffering. In fact, they are associated with a mind that is experiencing limitation and thus suffering. In sickness, *duhkha* might be on the physical level but more likely also on the mental level. Or a Yoga practitioner might experience doubt, which brings its own form of suffering. Languor, again, often has painful consequences, as does heedlessness, sloth, and dissipation. It is also easy to see how not attaining a particular stage or losing one’s hold on it is attendant with pain.

The *Yoga-Bhâshya* (1.31) describes pain or suffering (*duhkha*) as being threefold:

- *âdhyâtmika* — self-caused
- *âdhibhautika* — caused by other beings
- *âdhidaivika* — caused by deities or natural forces (“acts of God”)

## **Depression (*daurmanasya*)**

When obstacles visit a practitioner, it is difficult for him or her to cultivate a positive attitude. Often the *yogin* or *yoginî* becomes discouraged, which leads to emotional collapse, as Arjuna experienced it on the battlefield in the company of his *guru*, Lord Krishna (see the description in the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*). Arjuna was overcome with compassion (*kripâ*) for his kinsfolk and grieved for them at the prospect of their imminent slaughter. Krishna admonished the prince to shed his grief (*shoka*) and not to succumb to attachment (*râga*), faint-heartedness (*hridaya-daurbalya*), or the “state of a eunuch” (*klaibya*). In the final analysis, dejection (*vishâda*) or what Patanjali calls depression (*daurmanasya*) is a form of self-indulgence and a failure to practice self-transcendence.

## **Tremor of the limbs (*angam-ejayatva*)**

The *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (1.29) describes Arjuna as trembling in the face of his dilemma. We also tremble out of anger, or really whenever our nervous system is overstimulated. Thus, tremor of the limbs is the external manifestation of mental agitation (*kshobha*).

## **Faulty inhalation and exhalation (*shvâsa-prashvâsa*)**

The traditional commentaries seem to understand the compound *shvâsa-prashvâsa* simply as the involuntary breathing that happens unless we practice deliberate breath control (*prânâyâma*). It would seem, however, that Patanjali had something more in mind: the kind of irregular breathing pattern that comes with mental agitation, which we can characterize as “faulty.” This word cannot be found in the *Yoga-Sûtra* but, from the context, seems implied in the compound *shvâsa-prashvâsa*.

The nine obstacles can be directly tackled at the level of the mind. Yet undoubtedly body-based interventions—such as proper diet and exercise—can help as well. But to acknowledge and make use of such physical remedies, we must already have a certain degree of correct view (*samyag-darshana*). All the many practices of Yoga form an integrated whole, but we must begin somewhere. Fortunately, the Yoga tradition offers many options for taking the first step and then steadfastly cultivating our spiritual practice.

#### Note

1. In Sanskrit the word *âtman* can refer to either the ego-self (*ahamkâra*) or the transcendental Self, or Spirit. Thus, this *Gîtâ* statement could also be interpreted in a more conventional sense: We can be our own worst enemy or our best friend.

A more detailed account of obstacles in Yoga is given in TYS's 250-hour course on [Classical Yoga](#).

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