

How to overcome the Obstacles to Enlightenment

Patanjali book one Samadhi Pada – Note that my reference has been Patanjali's Yogasutras Translation and Commentary by T K V Desikachar. Direct quotes from the translation are shaded in grey, quotes from Desikachar's translation are italicised and are in speech marks and the answers that specifically address the question are shaded in green.

According to Patanjali, how are we to overcome these obstacles and find our true nature?

It is first necessary to state that Patanjali first describes what yoga is and then goes on to outline the obstacles for each individual in his/her attempt to attain the state of yoga.

In Sutra 1-2 Patanjali states that

Yoga is the ability to direct the mind exclusively towards an object and sustain that direction without any distractions.

Desikachar explains that the 'object' can be outside of or a part of us, a concept, an interest or *"something beyond the level of the senses, such as God."*

In Sutra 1-4, Patanjali is already telling us that when we are *not* in a state of yoga, the true understanding of 'the object' is replaced by the mind's conception (misconception) of that object and *"by a total lack of comprehension."* However, this misunderstanding (when *not* in a state of yoga) is not as specific an obstacle as those cited in Sutra 1-30, in which Patanjali tells us of nine 'interruptions' to reaching the state of yoga.

However, it would seem sensible to describe the obstacles in chronological order and thus move back to Sutra 1-5/1-6. At this stage, Patanjali – having outlined 5 activities of the mind – tells us that these activities – comprehension, misapprehension, imagination, deep sleep and memory – can be beneficial but that they can cause us problems.

The problems caused by miscomprehension and misapprehension are referred to above. In Sutra 1-8 however, Patanjali explains the cause of misapprehension – *"often as a result of past experiences and conditioning"*. Misapprehension is a very significant obstacle to a state of yoga and errors in understanding *"may be recognised later or never at all."* At this point, Desikachar refers to chapter two as containing information about how to control this misapprehension.

Patanjali also warns that imagination can be coloured by past experiences, that sleep can occur out of boredom or exhaustion and that memory can be distorted.

At the point of Sutra 1-12, Patanjali is ready to tell us how to arrive at a state of yoga and transcend the obstacles to that state.

The answer, Patanjali tells us, is through practice and detachment.

And he says that a competent teacher is needed, as well as long term practice, without interruptions and a positive attitude, perseverance and eagerness. All of these factors will

ensure eventual success. Patanjali explains that as we develop in the practice, an absence of any cravings will result (detachment) but warns that this state of detachment and heightened awareness can be misused and in the event that it is, we will lose sight of the path to yoga.

In Sutra 1-16, Patanjali recaps on the purpose of yoga, describes 'detachment' and comprehension at the deepest level:

When an individual has achieved complete understanding of his true self, he will no longer be disturbed by the distracting influences within and around him.

Patanjali cautions that those born in a state of yoga should avoid any temptation to *"succumb to worldly influences"* lest they lose their superior qualities.

In Sutra 1-20, Patanjali makes it clear that he understands the human condition well as he revisits the matter of countering obstacles and says that we must not be discouraged by any failure in our quest.

Through faith, which will give sufficient energy to achieve success against all odds, direction will be maintained. The realisation of the goal of yoga is a matter of time.

Simply put, sutra 1-21 says:

The more intense the faith and the effort, the closer the goal.

but Patanjali adds that the depth of faith can vary and waiver and that an *"individual's cultural background and capability"* will cause variations in success over time.

Sutra 1-23 is significant as the term *"Isvarapranidhanadva"* is introduced. This is Patanjali's first allusion to God. He says that praying to the Godhead and submitting to his power will enable the individual to achieve a state of yoga. He then goes on to describe God and states the importance of expressing him with the greatest respect, regardless of religious allegiance, without any conflicts. Any obstacles in this area of honouring God, Patanjali tells us can be overcome by:

Recitation of God's name and conscious thought, prayer, contemplation, consideration and deep respect for God. This action will enable the individual to find his true nature.

At this point – Sutra 1-30 – Patanjali cites the nine interruptions (referred to on previous page), to developing mental clarity and finding one's true nature. These are:

"Illness, mental stagnation, doubts, lack of foresight, fatigue, over-indulgence, illusions about one's true state of mind, lack of perseverance and regression."

Happily, Patanjali immediately follows with **eight** sutras that give suggestions for controlling these interruptions.

The first solution is to steady the mind so that the interruptions cannot take root.

and we can do this, he tells us, in our *dealings* with other people. To attain peace of mind, we are advised to:

“be pleased with others who are happier than ourselves, compassionate towards those who are unhappy, joyful with those doing praiseworthy things and remain undisturbed by the errors of others”

Secondly, we can overcome interruptions by practising breathing exercises and extending our exhalation. (these techniques must be correctly taught).

The translation of sutra 1-35 tells us that:

“By regular enquiry into the role of the senses we can reduce mental distortions.”
Desikachar describes the senses as the doors of perception and suggests we aim to sharpen them and have them “at our disposal.”

The next solution involves the consideration of what life is and a directed focus on things greater than our individual selves in order to put things into perspective.

Patanjali tells us that we don’t always have to be alone in our quest to find a state of yoga and that we can confide in someone who has mastered similar problems. This can but does not have to involve first hand communication as we can the study the life of someone alive or dead such as Christ, the Buddha, a great Saint, etc.

We can enquire into our dreams and sleep and examine the experiences that we have when in these states and this may help clarify some of our problems.

We can enquire into something outside of ourselves in order to calm the mind.

Desikachar gives examples such as absorbing the first cry of an infant or making a complex enquiry into a mathematical hypothesis but reminds us that these must aid direction rather than become a distraction.

From Sutra 1-40 onwards, Patanjali moves further to describing self-realisation and the attainment of the true state of yoga. He states that the mind can now understand everything, the perceptible and seemingly imperceptible – nothing is beyond

comprehension. Sutra 1-41 refers back to the first sutra as Patanjali describes being immersed in the object of enquiry and states that the mind reflects only the features of the object and nothing else. However, he is still warning that this process is a gradual one and reiterates that our past experiences and misconceptions get in the way.

Sutra 1-43 could be seen as another solution to the obstacles in the mind as Desikachar's translation states:

"When the direction of the mind towards the object is sustained, the ideas and memories of the past gradually recede."

This solution is reiterating the need for persistence in practice so that all threats to understanding start to *lose their power* and are diminished. And again the need for persistence and gradual progression is reiterated in Sutra 1-46.

The conclusion of Book one of the sutras now outlines Samadhi. The final sutras talk of the individual beginning to know his true self and states that what he sees is *"free from error."*

The obstacles of memory and inference have been transcended and his knowledge is now *"beyond the ordinary"*. The mind can reflect the object of enquiry "like a clear and perfect mirror". The final sutra describes Samadhi and the transparency of the mind in that state and the fact that the state cannot be described in words.