



Short Review Paper

Significance of Pratyahar in the management of lifestyle disorders

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Abstract

Pratyahar is the 5th limb of Ashtangas from 'Yoga Sutras' of Maharshi Patanjali. It's a practice of withdrawing the senses from external objects to be replaced by inward awareness. When the mind is withdrawn from external senses, it rests in its own natural state of tranquillity. Science of Yoga offers the most effective way to deal with various psychosomatic disabilities that contemporary medicine has just rediscovered. In today's world, lifestyle behaviours like excessive usage of smart phones, unhealthy diet, sedentary routine, and over indulgence in sensory pleasures for prolonged period results in the development of debilitating chronic diseases like heart disease, diabetes, metabolic syndrome, cancer etc. According to the recent survey by WHO, the proportion of total global deaths due to chronic diseases is expected to increase to 70 percent by 2030. Therefore, it is imperative to include the holistic and integrated approach of yogic science to face the current challenges in health care. The current paper is theoretical study of the effect of Pratyahar practice in managing the lifestyle disorders. It studies different aspects, applications and effects of Pratyahar practice on physical as well as mental health.

Keywords: Pratyahar, lifestyle behaviours, disorders, senses, chronic diseases.

Introduction

Yoga, an ancient Indian Darshan Shastra is regarded as a holistic and experiential science that integrates individual's physical, mental, emotional health as well as spiritual growth and wellbeing. Previous studies show that anxiety or different stressors contributes to the aetiology of cardiac arrest, hypertension, diabetes, cancer, and other chronic diseases¹. Patanjali Yoga Darshan, a classic text, outlines an eightfold path known as ashtanga, which literally means eight limbs. Pratyahar is the fifth and most important and least discussed limb².

Pratyahar is a combination of two words, Prati and ahar. Ahar means any type of intake or food consumed from outside. Pratyahar means control of ahar. Another classical yogic text Gheranda Samhita explains that the knowledge of *Pratyahar* destroys the six enemies of man by gaining mastery over the senses or over external stimulus. This term is compared with a turtle, as it can withdraw the limbs into its shell. Just like that, mind is a turtle's shell and limbs are the senses. It's a practice of detachment with all attachments by turning inward and moving toward the core of your being³.

Holistic approach of Pratyahar

According to yogic texts there are three levels of *aahar*.

First level - Physical food in the form of five elements.

Second level - Various different impressions on mind (Chitta Sanskaras) by way of - five sensations of taste, touch, sight, sound and smell.

Third level - Our interrelations, interaction with different people, which affects at the level of *Trigunas - Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas*.

Two dimensional technique of Pratyahar includes: withdrawing the senses from improper food habits, wrong impressions and inappropriate associations and at the same time, moving them towards proper food habits, right impressions and right associations. Following chart includes important Sutras on the concept of *Pratyahar* in various different yogic *Samhitas* with its meaning in English⁴.

Table-1: Important Sutras on the concept of *Pratyahar* in various different yogic *Samhitas*.

Sanskrit Samhitas	Sutras from	English Translation
Patanjali Yoga Sutra (2/53-54)	स्व वषया सम्प्रयोगे चतस्य स्वरूपानुकार इवेन्द्रियाणां प्रत्याहारः ॥	When the mind is withdrawn from sensory involvement without getting engaged in the experience by Dnyanedriyas and Karmendriyas it attains the state of equanimity within.
Gheranda Samhita 4(2/1-7)	यत्र यत्र गता दृष्टिर्मनस्तत्र प्रगच्छति ततः प्रत्याहरे देतदात्मन्येव वशं नयेत् ॥	Wherever the gaze goes, the mind returns to it. Then one should withdraw it and bring it under its control.

Yoga Vasishtha 3/58-61 इन्द्रियाणां निवृत्तिः यत्प्रकृत्या इन्द्रिय वषये रमन्ते। (3/58-61)	The sense organs must be withdrawn within, which are naturally indulging in their objects
Rudryamal Tantra 2.27/ 28-30 इन्द्रिया ण तेषां वषयेषु च सम्बद्धं मनः अप्रतिरोध्यं, दृढं, कठिनं नियन्त्रितुं च अनिच्छुकं च इच्छाशक्त्या तस्य निवृत्तिः प्रत्याहारस्य अभ्यासेन प्रत्याहार इति उच्यते योगी शान्तः भवति, गभीरं एकाग्रतां प्राप्तुं समर्थः भवति।	The Mind is constantly engaged in fulfilling the sensory pleasures connected with senses and can't be diverted easily. The process of withdrawing the senses from their objects is called Pratyahara. By practicing it the Yogi becomes calm and cessation of the modifications of mind and deeper state of concentration is achieved.
Yoga Chudamani Upanishad Mantra 120- 121 नेत्रादिन्द्रिया ण स्वकर्षणं प्रति आकृष्टाः भवन्ति, तस्मिन् समये इन्द्रियाणां बन्धनं वा नियन्त्रणं वा प्रत्याहारः इति उच्यते ॥	Eyes get attracted towards outwardly objects; also other senses are engaged in seeking desirables through various attractions. To bound or control of senses at that time is called Pratyahara

Types of Pratyahar

Control of Indriyas: Indriya Pratyahar: Excessive use of various different gadgets like smart phones, laptops, television etc. with increased screen time, imposes continuous external stimuli to the senses. This uncontrolled usage is associated with psychiatric, cognitive and emotionally adverse changes like impulsiveness, insecurity, impaired cognitive function, lack of emotion regulation, loneliness, poor quality sleep, lack of concentration, reduced physical fitness, unhealthy and compulsive eating habits.

Techniques of controlling the senses & right intake of impressions:

Satvik Aahar: The food that individuals eat directly influences their thoughts, character, mental well-being and health. Chandogya Upanishad mentions that, Satvik food purifies the mind, removes toxins from our body, thus cleansing both the body and mind.

Deep relaxation in *Shavasana*: This as an relaxes the body, mind and breath quickly and an effective tool to reduce the stress levels.

Yognidra with positive affirmations is very powerful technique to bring harmony at physical and mental level.

Visualisation: This technique includes a method of creating inner impressions which also brings calming, soothing effect. It involves the practice to visualise specific details by using all the five senses in a process of selective attention. For e.g. Imagining beautiful scenery, or performing rituals mentally, imaginary creation of an art piece by the artist.

Control of Prana: Prana Pratyahar

चले वाते चलं चत्तं निश्चले निश्चलं भवेत् । H.P.(2/2)⁵

chale vate chalam chittam nischale nishalam bhavet
With the control of Prana mind can be controlled.
Pranayama is a preparation for *pratyahara*.

Withdrawing the Prana or retention of breath by applying *Tribandhas* (energy locks) and fixing the attention at the centre of the eyebrows (*Shambhavi Mudra*) just like *Murcha Pranayam* which brings a state of mental tranquillity, steadiness and comfort. The swooning sensation creates a blissful state, in which the mind becomes calm and clear.

Another method of *prana-pratyahara* is to visualize the self death process, in which the *prana*, withdraws from the body, shutting off all the senses from the head to toes.

Control of Action: Karma Pratyahar: Practice of *Mauna*: Intermittent practice of *Mauna* (silence) is recommended as and when possible. It helps to calm down the mental activity.

Tratak: Focusing on a small and steady object like flame of a lamp, or at the sacred symbols like 'OM', and also visualising the same object mentally with closed eyes at the centre of the eyebrows (*bhrumadhya drishti*). Withdrawing our attention from external impressions to create inner impressions and to improve one pointed awareness

Practice of *Karmayog* as mentioned in *Bhagvadgita* by performing all the day to day duties with perfection and surrendering the rewards as a service to God or humanity. This helps to maintain positive approach and balanced state of mind in any circumstances.

Seclusion / Retreat: A state of being alone in solitude. Deliberate withdrawal from the world for spending some time in seclusion, to disengage from materialistic interactions for a specific period.

Control of mind: Mano Pratyahar: Coordination of all the senses is done by nervous system, and ultimately mind (*Chitta*)

is the main source of this sensory activity. It is a practice of disengaging the outwardly senses and directing them within, in its own formless nature⁶.

To divert the mind in positive direction is possible with:

Fasting: To control the tongue is an extremely difficult task and only possible by controlling the mind. Intermittent fasting enhances the ability of nerve cell networks to control their activities and electrochemical activity, which reduces the levels of anxiety and also protect against a number of neurological disorders. It results in increased energy levels, improved metabolism, and better gut health.

Swadhyay: Self enquiry. Thorough Study of the spiritual scriptures to understand the true nature of the ‘Self’ – which is done in 3 steps - Shraavan, Manan and Nididhyasan.

Listening to the words of wisdom by saints and masters, reading the holy books like Upanishads and Bhagavadgita and contemplate on the meaning.

Satsang: The idea of satsang is to bring positivism and awareness into one’s life. Being in the company of divine, saintly person can bring in positivity, simplicity in daily living, smoother relationships and also helps to quieten the mind. Satsang generates deep impact to transform within.

One pointed awareness: This involves the practice of maintaining focus on breath at all times, which automatically brings a relaxed state by reducing the modifications of mind. It retrains the mind to witness the present moment as it is without any judgments.

Literature Review

Review of lifestyle disorders: The changed or unhealthy lifestyle and stress is causing a rapid rise in non-communicable diseases. Lifestyle is an integrated set of practices which an individual embraces which includes food, sleep, exercise, occupation, behaviour etc. Proper food at proper and regular time and in appropriate portion along with exercise gives rise to good health. Irregularity or improper routine results in increased state of stress which leads to lifestyle diseases⁷.

Following changes can take place in the body during stress: i. Raise in blood pressure and pulse rate, ii. Unusual, fast breathing, iii. Slow functioning of digestive system, iv. Decreased immune activity, v. Unnecessary tensed muscles, vi. Disturbed sleep due to over thinking and heightened alertness.

To avoid these conditions, Pratyahar provides deliberate changes in lifestyle to achieve tranquillity of the mind, increased efficiency and overall awareness, improvement in self-confidence, and an optimistic approach towards life⁸.

Review of Pratyahar practice in retraining the mind:

Practice of Pratyahar plays an important role in managing various different lifestyle disorders. Smooth functioning of all the systems with the state of homeostasis can be attained with regular practice of yogasanas, Pranayam, and meditation. This harmony at physical, mental and emotional level leads to bring equilibrium in nervous system⁹.

The principals of *Pratyahar* for managing lifestyle disorders include: i. Mental, emotional balance by establishment in right type of attitudes, ii. Systematic rational breath–body coordination, techniques of energisation. iii. Practice of asanas, pranayan for balanced metabolic activity. iv. Overall sense of wellbeing and harmony within¹⁰.

Conclusion

Science of Yoga can largely contribute to deal with various psychosomatic disorders by suspending the fluctuations of mind. For the prevention and management of lifestyle disorders, discipline of Yoga has a great potential. Yoga implies both the process as well as the attainment of harmony and balance at psychosomatic level and therefore it provides a further scope for studies to understand the changes taking place at physical and mental level¹¹. Various different practices in daily living at individual and social level are included in lifestyle which may have impact on public health. Observance of overall discipline along with healthy eating habits, proper sleeping patterns, minimum usage of cell phone during the formative stages of life would be helpful maintain balance and smooth functioning of all the systems¹². By incorporating these simple changes in behaviour can certainly bring improvement in health of the masses and population in general. Thus, the most important limb of yoga, Pratyahar is a marvellous tool for transformation to soak into our inner core.

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