

Pratyahara, Withdrawal of the Senses

By Carolyn Reynolds

So you have been going to yoga class for several years and have even done some breath awareness. The sense of peace and calm is so wonderful that you keep going back to class for that delicious feeling again and again. It lasts until at least the next day or even into the week or until some event or person jerks you into a tizzy. Would you like to live your entire life in that sense of peace and calm and rarely or never be jerked around? Well, no? What about excitement, passion, and *joi de vivre*? Oh, yes, that too. Peace, calm, passion, excitement, fun, and authentic joy of life can be ever more present in your life when the other rungs of the yoga ladder are experienced. The word rung is a default word. It intimates that one follows after the other. Not so. There is a dance that happens on the Yoga ladder with the experience of each changing as the synergy flows.

The first four of the eight practices is listed as *yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, and *pranayama*. The five *yamas* are suggested ways of living comfortably in the world and the five *niyama* are suggested ways of living comfortably within oneself. *Asana* is what you do when you go to yoga class like Sun Salutations and the like. *Pranayama* is the science of breath that begins simply with breath awareness and then guides the student through practices that can alter the physical, mental and emotional states and prepare the practitioner for meditative states.

Now, after the above preparation and the student experiences contentment in life, strength in body and stability in mind, she is prepared for the experience of *pratyahara*. Now is the time for the focus to shift to the inner life, actually, to the authentic self. When the life force is regulated by the control of the breath the senses withdraw, no longer pulling the practitioner off balance.

Everyone has experienced a sensation of *pratyahara* at some time or other. If you are so engrossed in a book that you do not hear your name being called and you are unaware that the sky has darkened and a storm is looming, you have experienced the withdrawal of some of your senses. However, in this case, your senses are focused on something outside of yourself, the fantasy of the book you are reading. *Pratyahara* is the ability to withdraw all of the senses at your will so that all attention is focused at the point that connects you with all that is. This is not easy and may require lots of gentle pulling back of each of the senses as you become aware of their assertions. You might imagine that each of the senses is a horse pulling your chariot. You hold the reins. The reins are your mind that operates the senses. Your intelligence is holding the reins. You, in your infinite wisdom, decide to pull the horses in. After all, you are the charioteer.