

Obstacles to Meditation

According to the Yoga Sutras

In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali describes nine common obstacles (Antarayas) that arise on the path of practice:

1. Illness
2. Mental dullness
3. Doubt
4. Carelessness
5. Laziness
6. Sensory distraction
7. False perception
8. Failure to progress
9. Instability in practice

These are not signs of failure.

They are natural experiences of the human body and mind.

When obstacles arise, we may also notice:

- Distress
- Frustration
- Restlessness
- Irregular breathing

The practice is not to eliminate obstacles, but to observe them with steadiness and compassion.

Secondary Symptoms (Resulting from the 9 Obstacles):

These obstacles cause four additional symptoms, according to Yoga Sutra 1.31:

1. **Duhkha:** Sorrow, pain, or misery.
2. **Daurmanasya:** Despair, despondency, or frustration.
3. **Angamejayatva:** Trembling of the body, instability.
4. **Shvasa-prashvasa:** Unsettled or irregular breathing.

The Remedy (Yoga Sutra 1.32)

In Yoga Sutra 1.32, Patanjali offers a simple and powerful antidote:

“Tat-pratishedhartham eka-tattva-abhyasah.”

“To prevent these obstacles, practice steady focus on one principle.”

Eka = one

Tattva = truth, essence, principle

Abhyasa = consistent practice

When the mind becomes scattered, doubtful, restless or discouraged, the instruction is not to fight the obstacle — but to gently return to one steady anchor.

This “one principle” may be:

- The breath
- A mantra
- A felt sense in the body
- Loving awareness
- A simple witnessing presence

The power is not in intensity.

The power is in returning.

Again and again.

Over time, this steady returning stabilises the mind and soothes the nervous system.

The Five Hindrances (Buddhist Teaching)

In early Buddhist teachings, the *Siddhartha Gautama* described five hindrances:

- Desire
- Aversion
- Sloth & torpor
- Restlessness & worry
- Doubt

Across traditions, the message is consistent:

Obstacles are part of the path.

Reflection Practice for the Week

If an obstacle arises in meditation:

1. Gently name it.
2. Notice where it shows up in the body.
3. Allow it to be there, without trying to fix it.
4. Then softly return to your chosen anchor (breath, mantra, sensation).

Ask yourself:

- What happens if I allow this?
- What changes when I return?

Meditation is not the absence of obstacles.

It is the practice of returning.