

Staying the Course

Swami Suryadevananda

For your practice to be successful, you have to gain depth and for this – you have to stay the course. This staying the course does not mean there won't be adjustments.



For example: navigation comes into play when you hike in the great outdoors. Let's specifically look at navigating with a map and compass – the simpler way. You plot your course on the map and get an understanding for certain milestones on the way. Yoga is a little different in that each will encounter different milestones at different moments in their practice. But, in hiking and yoga, you may come to moments of adjustments when you see obstacles or the path as planned untenable. In hiking, you simply plot an alternate route or 'box-off' – which means mark a way around and then resume the original course of travel. In yoga, you may also come to obstacles or the feel the need to veer a little but keep the same general direction of travel towards the goal.

In both hiking and yoga, you do not see these obstacles or distractions till you stay the course. If your practice is always in the comfort zone – you will always turn around in that zone and feel that you had a good practice but the purpose of practice is not to have a 'good practice' or otherwise – 'to remove all impurities so one's true nature can be seen'. Both in practice and life – our own impurities or limited ways are experienced.

The Yoga Sutra¹ tell us:

'The obstacles we may encounter are: disease, dullness, doubt, carelessness, laziness, inability to turn the attention away from the obstacles, perverted or distorted vision, inability to find a firm ground for the spiritual investigation, and even when such a ground is found, unsteadiness of mind and attention in the pursuit of the enquiry – these are the obstacles and distractions, for they bring about and constitute the apparent fragmentation of the mind-stuff.

It also tells us that by the presence of the following symptoms can be understood the extent to which the mind is disturbed and distracted: sorrowful mood, psychological despair, the motions of the body, and inhalation and exhalation. By being attentive to these factors, it is possible to

¹ From the book, 'Enlightened Living - A New Interpretative Translation of the Yoga Sutra of Mahaṛṣhi Patanjali' by Swami Venkatesananda, published by The Chiltern Yoga Trust, 1975.

arrive at an understanding of the degree of seriousness of the obstacles: for they coexist with the distractions of the mind.'

The Yoga Sutra suggests several methods for overcoming these obstacles including: adjusting our attitude towards all that seems uncondusive, pranayama, rousing intense vigilance, changing the point of attention, increasing the fire of devotion towards the indwelling presence of God or by several other techniques including different types of inquiry.

What is important is to steadily adhere to the practice of one method to gain depth and then use any of the adjustments to overcome distractions. We are warned that frequent changes in the main method adopted in one's practice will aggravate the distractions. If your vigilance is steady, you will see these obstacles or distractions before they gain momentum just like clouds forming before the rain and know what adjustments are to be made while staying the course. Each obstacle or distraction will be of help in that it will sharpen and increase vigilance, increase inner strength, resolve and faith and take a few of the impurities with them as they leave.

Deepening your practice does not just mean increasing the time or quantity of your practice but the quality as well the quality which is your sincerity and also making practice enter life and life's lessons enter your practice till the lines between practice and life are blurred and practice is life and life is practice. All else will come to pass.

suryadevananda.org