

The Spinal Column

“ We are made up of the respiratory, circulatory, digestive, nervous, glandular, and genito-excretory systems. Each one is dependent upon the other for healthy rhythmic functions. The secretions of the hormonal system are considered to be an essential factor for the tranquillity of the mind. The house of all these various systems is the spinal column (*merudaṇḍa*). The spine, its muscles, its nerves, and its fluid keep all these systems functioning in concord. The science of yoga was aptly discovered by yogis in order to culture the *merudaṇḍa* or *viṇḍaṇḍa* so that the shoots of the spine like the fibres, sinews, cells, nerves, senses, mind intelligence, ego, and consciousness are kept healthy.

The spinal column has different parts such as the coccyx, sacral, lumbar, dorsal, and cervical regions. Networks of plexuses and ductless glands are situated in contact with the various parts of the spinal column, and they can either cause disturbances in health and poise or help to build up good physical health and mental poise. Yogis studied the human body in their own ways, particularly the spinal column. Through their intuitive capacity they studied the energy centres within the spinal cord and named them *cakra*.

Cakra means a wheel, a diagram, a cycle, or a circle. As the wheel of a gigantic machine is connected to a flywheel, around which the entire machine moves like a chain, similarly the rhythmic discharge of the *cakra* affects the functioning of physical, physiological, mental, mystical and spiritual depressions or elations. *Cakra* is the store house of power; they are seven in number.... Because of the location of various *cakra* as explained in yoga texts, many authors hold them to represent the plexuses or ductless glands. The *cakra* may or may not be these, though their situation corresponds very closely. If plexuses and glands work on psycho-physiological levels, *cakra* work at the level of spiritual enlightenment.... In order to know the functions of the plexuses, glands, or *cakra*, one should



Practice of yoga keeps the fluid of the spine in a steady state, without fluctuations, says Guruji. The observant practitioner may feel the fluid rising while sitting erect, as here in Padmasana.

know something about the nervous system. This system in the human body has three tiers. They are the peripheral nervous system, autonomous nervous system and central nervous system. The peripheral nervous system gets its feedback from the senses of perception and organs of action. The autonomous nervous system is semi-voluntary, as it functions on its own as well as through the volition of the mind. The central nervous system is electrifying, dynamic, and functions with the help of judicial intelligence.

The *cakra* are hidden in the core of the spinal canal, which is said to be thinner than a hair, and have access to the entire functioning of the body.... The cord being exactly in the centre of the body, the yogis named it *madhyama nāḍī* or middle nerves. Thus, the middle nerves represent the central nervous system of modern medicine. We are all aware that with all of the modern scientific equipments, very little is known about this central nervous system. According to the yogis, the energy discharged from the *cakra* is known as life force (*prāṇa śakti* or *jīva śakti*), while the autonomous nervous system is said to be on the right and left sides of the spinal column as an inner part of the nerves (*antaraṅga bhāga*); the peripheral nerves are external part of the nerves (*bahiraṅga bhāga*). Though the functioning of the central nervous system still eludes modern science, it was known and understood by the yogis through their intuition and deep study.

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From "Physiology and Cakra", talk by B.K.S. Iyengar on his 70th birthday.