

Harmonising emotions with Yoga

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The 20th century yogi, P.R. Sarkar, incorporated asanas into his revitalized tantra-based system of practice. Sarkar clearly gave meditation, rather than physical posture, the priority in his system. Nevertheless, he considered asanas an essential complement to the meditation practice and explained the important role asanas have in helping to balance the body-mind. He called the practice "bio-psychology";

"By performing asanas regularly," said Sarkar, "human beings can control the propensities attached to each cakra, and hence the thoughts which arise in their minds and their behaviours."
 What is the basis of Sarkar's biopsychology? To begin this explanation, some Sanskrit words need to be explained. Let's start with one most people have heard: cakra (often spelled "chakra"). Cakra means "wheel" in Sanskrit. According to the yogis, we have seven main cakras in the body.

Research has confirmed the existence of energy fields at the areas of the body the yogis have called cakras. Valerie Hunt, a researcher at UCLA, found that there are high frequency vibrations emanating from these seven areas. Another researcher, Hiroshi Motoyama in Japan, found that when people directed their mental focus to individual cakras, they could increase the frequency of that particular area. Candace Pert, a leader in the field of psychoneuroimmunology, discovered a high concentration of a specific neuropeptide at the location of the classical cakras. This neuropeptide, called VIP (vasoactive intestinal peptide), is critical in regulating the neural immune switches between the brain and the immune system.

Sarkar said that cakras are related to nerve plexi - networks in the autonomic nervous system that run near the spine. These are places where nerves converge and form a network, allowing for complex communication between nerve cells and the generation of more complex functional activity. These nerve plexi are the physiologic counterpart which help create the subtle energy of the cakras.

Sarkar and other teachers have said that cakras are also associated with endocrine glands. The yogis called these glands "nodal points". Science has recently recognized the close functional relationships between the endocrine system and the nervous system - so much so that both systems together are now referred to as the neuro-endocrine system. The relationship between mood and the nervous system has long been understood and has even entered the vernacular with expressions like, "It gets on my nerves" or "You have some nerve". Hormones secreted by the endocrine glands also have a profound effect on our moods - as any woman who's experienced PMS or low thyroid function can attest. The yogis understood when the nerve plexi and endocrine glands functioned properly, the mind was balanced, the body felt better and meditation became easier - in other words, balanced cakras equal a balanced mind.

Balancing the cakras through yoga postures is the key to balancing mental/emotional states. Excessive or inadequate secretion from the endocrine glands results in triggering receptors in centers in the brain which exaggerate emotional states. Similarly, a weak nervous system can cause a variety of imbalanced mental/emotional state. By doing specific yoga postures regularly, we can regulate the function of the neuroendocrine system and thereby balance the cakras. The tantric yogis taught that each cakra was like a lotus flower surrounded by a specific number of petals. They called these petals the vrttis (also spelled "vritti"). A vritti is a mental tendency or propensity - a potential state of mind. You have probably seen drawings of yogis sitting in lotus position with their many-petaled cakras. This image gives us a symbolic idea of the energy patterns the cakras and vrttis create.

The six lower cakras have a total of 50 petals. These petals represent the 50 main vrttis or vortices of psychic energy. Some of the 50 Sanskrit terms can be roughly translated as "fear", "irritability", "greed", "hypocrisy", "hope", "affection", "surrender." The four petals of the first cakra represent all the desires of human life: physical, mental, psycho-spiritual and spiritual (kama, artha, dharma and moksa in Sanskrit). The second cakra's vrttis express the darker side of human nature such as pitilessness, indifference, self-indulgence and cruelty. The third cakra's vrttis, such as irritability, shame, lethargy and craving, are perhaps the biggest challenge to our human potential. The fourth cakra's vrttis reflect our higher capacities for both beauty and destruction such as hope, love, and effort and conversely greed, arrogance and hypocrisy. The fifth cakra contains vrttis which elevate us to the sublime, such as altruism, universality and surrender to a higher power. The sixth cakra's vrttis speak to our capacity for limitless knowledge.

These cakras, with their distinct vritti petals, create specific patterns of psychic energy. A person with a problem with depression, for example, would manifest a specific distorted pattern of energy within different cakras, depending on which vrttis contribute to their specific state of depression. Since different people manifest depression in different ways, each person would have a distortion in their energy pattern based on his/her own specific way of manifesting that imbalance.

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These is a posture that can help the third cakra. There are many others. In addition to asanas, meditation is highly beneficial for relieving stress and controlling third cakra vrittis (propensity)