

PATHS PART 3**Paths & Physiology**

The examples given at meetings last week of physical activities ranged from walking through fly-fishing to Tai Chi and there is a lot we can learn from them:

One group of examples was concerned with moderately exhausting exercise, which athletes say gets them 'in the zone' or gives them 'runner's high'. Some people use strenuous exercise to overcome chronic depression or mental stress. Even a modest amount of swimming achieves a delightful feeling of relaxation. The effect is explained by the release of chemicals in the brain and elsewhere in the body: endorphins ('endo + 'morphine'; natural pain-killers) and anandamide ('ananda' = 'bliss'; natural analogue of cannabis).

Walking, particularly in the countryside was recommended as a means of achieving a calm state in which one can think properly (the latest edition of *Contact* has some good walking stories), and the kind of physical attention and skill needed in fly-fishing brought a feeling of oneness with the surroundings.

Another group of examples came from what might be called 'conscious' exercises: yoga, Tai Chi, the Alexander technique, Movements and Mevlevi Turning. In these, mental attention is a requirement in order to maintain the correct movement, and the combination of mental and physical attention leads to a flow of energy, though with marked differences between the different techniques.

Is there anything in common between these examples? To what extent do they justify the Shankaracharya's statement that 'you have to begin with the body. Make body attentive and then you will be able to make the mind attentive'. Can we learn anything for ourselves from them?

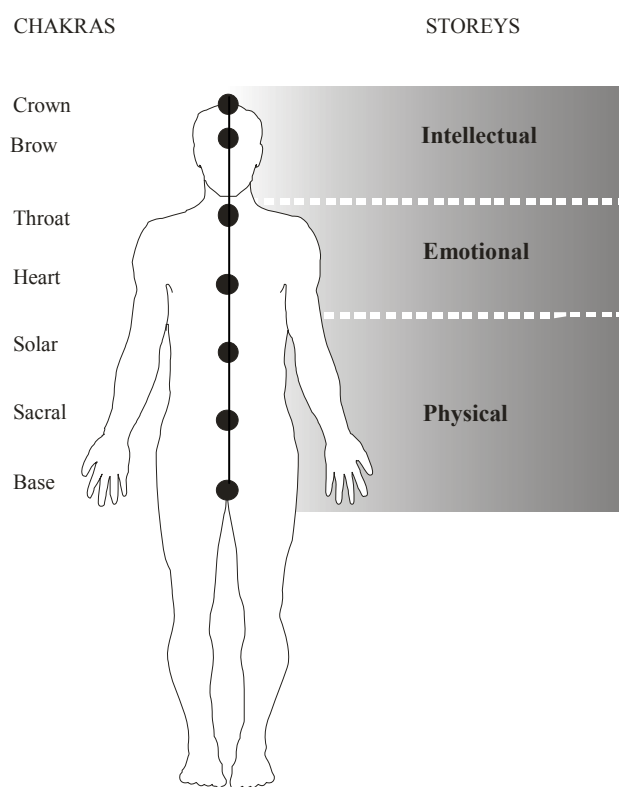
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At this stage in studying different approaches we need some kind of framework and as we are mainly using the Indian teaching at present we will use the 'Chakras'. These are centres of energy featured in Eastern physiology and medicine. Later we will use the System approach which gives somewhat more precision.

There are seven chakras, or energy centres, six of them located in the body¹ along the spinal cord from the sacrum to the head, and the other one just above the head (see diagram). The chakras are connected together by channels, through which energy flows. It is an interruption to the energy flow, or a reduced amount of energy that explains why our consciousness is often at a low level.

¹ There is little evidence in western science for the existence of neural centres at the supposed physical locations of the chakras, with a few exceptions, though there may be associations with endocrine glands.

In some forms of yoga the aim is to awaken and control all of the centres one by one, so that energy can flow from the base chakra through the whole chain resulting in the crown chakra being awakened, and through this enlightenment is achieved. Physical methods are associated with awakening and controlling the lower chakras.



In our approach we do not try to control or activate chakras. However, if one feels a lack of (or abundance of) a particular kind of energy it is relevant to take note and possibly do something about it. The chain of chakras is a bit like those infuriating fairy lights that all go out when one bulb is defective!

We also shy away from methods to control the breathing except for very brief periods – a few deep breaths before meditating can be highly beneficial. Work on the lower storey chakras by yogis is in part intended to gain control over the sex function, but sexual abstinence is not necessary for us. We do not discuss our sex lives, as they are personal; however, the source of energy that flows through the chakras is supposedly from the same source as sex energy, so the two are not unrelated.

Diet may play a part. Ascetics usually endure a bland diet to avoid enflaming the senses. The Shankaracharya spoke little about diet, but on one occasion he did say:

Meat creates Tamas [heaviness, lack of energy]. It is now reported that eating meat creates certain elements in body rendering people more prone to disease. Try seven days of each. Lighter, more energetic, on vegetables. Every man decides, but he can recognise meat eaters. [*Record* 16.8.64]

(Incidentally he did not rule out alcohol)

Any experiences with fasting or change of diet?

This remark of the Shankaracharya has a general implication there is a dark side to physical life: that there may be customary habits of movement or physical lifestyle that result in bad thoughts and emotions. How should we deal with this?

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Physical awareness. For those trying this exercise, continue to find a time or times in the day, becoming conscious of your body gradually from your toes to your head. Try to sit or lie down with the spine straight. This week increase the period to 5 minutes. You might note briefly the character of your breathing at the beginning and end of the exercise. For older hands, are you making a regular practice of finding still times during the day?

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