



Yoga and the nervous system

KUNDALINI RISING
SHAZIA OMAR

Writer, activist and yogini
www.shaziaomar.com



Yoga is relevant in our age. Far from being mystical and otherworldly, it is a teaching firmly grounded in the physiological realities of science. Our experience of the world depends entirely on the state of our nervous system. This, in turn, is influenced by a host of factors – genes, diet, environment, and lifestyle. If the nervous system is fresh and rested, the body is healthy and the mind is alert. As a result, our thoughts are powerful and clear, our actions, which are manifested thoughts, are successful and rewarding.

Conversely, if our system is tired or strained, because of trauma, overactivity or poor food, then our outlook becomes restricted, the mind dull, our actions ineffectual. Our life becomes shallow and unsatisfactory, prey to negativity.

The techniques of yoga purify the nervous system so that it reflects a greater degree of consciousness and our lives become an increasingly positive force in the world. Yoga revitalises the nervous system so the body enjoys better health and more energy. The rested mind is freed from the burden of past experience, and perception is restored to its primal freshness.

Stress is the biggest threat to our health and wellbeing. When stressed, we release adrenaline. This causes our body to go into a

'fight, flight or freeze mode.' We are on high alert, muscles tense and ready for action, rest of the body and blood vessels constricted. In this state of tension, our bodies are susceptible to injury and illness. Chronic stress does not only cause ulcers, migraines and irritable bowel syndrome. It contributes to all illnesses, including heart attacks, diabetes and autoimmune diseases.

The adrenal glands are part of our sympathetic nervous system (SNS). This system helps us react quickly when there is a threat or danger. The problem arises when we cannot turn it back down from hyper-arousal. Symptoms of hyper-arousal are anxiety, panic, agitation, and hyper-vigilance. Consequences are, among other things, heightened levels of cortisol and chronic stress.

To be sustainably healthy, we need to learn to cope with stress, to reduce anxiety levels, to stay calm and undisturbed. Yoga helps us do this by showing us how to relax. Yoga techniques of breath and deep relaxation help us settle our minds into stillness.

Opposite to the sympathetic nervous system is the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). This brings about the 'rest and digest mode.' When the parasympathetic

nervous system is active, we feel calm, collected and relaxed. It creates that feeling of peace, happiness and bliss that you get after a yoga class.

Ideally, we want to be in a state where both PNS and SNS are balanced. We want to be calm and alert. Yoga helps regulate the nervous system so our bodies can find that balance or homeostasis.

The vagal nerves are the main pathway of the PNS. Overactive SNS and underactive PNS that underlies stress-related disorders

can be corrected by yoga practices. This has far-reaching implications for the treatment of disorders exacerbated by stress, which is all disorders.

Shazia Omar is an activist, a writer and a yogini. www.shaziaomar.com. [YouTube.com/ShazzyOm](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCShazzyOm). [Instagram: ShazzyOm](https://www.instagram.com/ShazzyOm). [Facebook: yogilatesindhaka](https://www.facebook.com/yogilatesindhaka).

By Shazia Omar

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