YOGA RESEARCH
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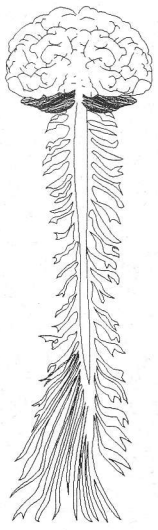
What is Health?

excerpted from Prāṇāyāma by Swami Kuvalayanandaji

The physiological value of an exercise depends upon its capacity to confer health upon the person practicing it. The greater the degree of health an exercise is calculated to induce, the more valuable it will be. But what is health?

Health may be defined as the harmonious functioning of the different systems working in the human body. The principal systems are the nervous, the endocrine, the respiratory, the circulatory and the digestive. Out of these, the nervous and the endocrine are of supreme importance, but even they have to depend upon the other systems enumerated above.

Starting with the study of the nervous system, we may compare it to a big power house generating electricity and a network of wires that distributes it to the different machines in a factory.



The brain, the spinal cord and the sympathetic cords constitute the power house. The nerves, starting from the brain, or from the spinal cord, represent the electric wires in the factory of the human body. In a regular factory every piece of machinery is set in motion by the electric current carried to it across the wires from the power house. Similarly, in the factory of the human body all physical movements depend upon the impulses carried across the nerves from the brain and the cords. Let the power house go out of order or let there be obstruction in the current of electricity flowing across the wires, the whole machinery will come to a standstill.

Similarly, if the brain and cords are damaged, or the nerves are so degenerated as not to convey the impulses, physical movements will stop. The effects of this cessation of physical movements have a deeper meaning than an ordinary reader can imagine.

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Our digestion, our blood circulation and even our respiration is controlled and carried on by the nervous impulses brought to the organs responsible for these functions, from the brain and the cords. In case the nervous impulses do not start or having started do not reach their destination, all life processes will stop, and even the spark of life may become extinct. Such is the supreme importance of the nervous system.

Now (if) the power house does generate electricity, and the wires do conduct that electricity to their terminals, but the current is not of sufficient strength, the machinery supplied by that electricity will not move. For the necessary movement, the electric current must be of the required strength. In the machinery of the human body this strength of the current depends upon the secretions of what are called the endocrine glands.

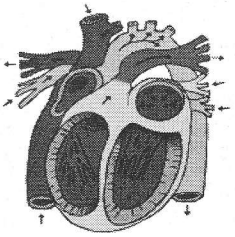
The whole nervous mechanism may be in perfect order, and yet if the endocrine secretions are not available in the necessary quantity and of the necessary quality, the strength of the nerve impulse and the nerves themselves (later on) will degenerate. Consequently, physical movements and the life processes will become dull and languid.

Let us take one of these glands for illustration. Say the thyroid. This is the most popularly known endocrine gland, although the sex glands both in males and females, the pituitary body, etc., are of no less importance.

Remove the thyroid from a healthy person and his eyes begin to pale, his cheeks sink, his muscles become flabby or lean, his hair begins to turn gray and he becomes prey to premature old age.

Restore the thyroid and the man begins to show all the signs of youthful enthusiasm. Symptoms of old age are gone, the person begins to walk erect, things brighten up and life again becomes a pleasure. Thus, the endocrine system stands on the same level of physiological importance as the nervous system.

Study of human physiology clearly indicates that these two systems have to depend upon the circulatory system for getting the necessary blood supply and upon the respiratory and the digestive systems for getting blood of the necessary quality.



The circulatory system consists of the heart, the arteries, the veins and the capillaries. It is the duty of this system to take the blood to every tissue in the human body. The nerves and the endocrine glands, if they are starved for want of the necessary blood supply, will degenerate in their functions.

It is, however, of no practical use to have the circulatory system in an efficient condition, if the quality of the blood that is being circulated is not rich.

For the blood to be rich, it must carry the necessary quantity of oxygen with it, and also contain elements of nutrition for the tissues. The blood gets oxygen from the air inhaled, and the elements of nutrition from the absorption of food-stuffs and drinks.

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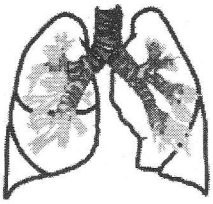
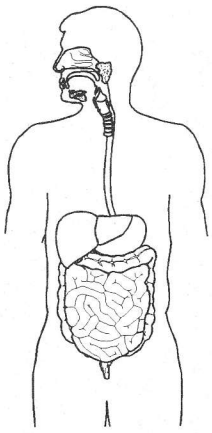
When there is affliction in any region,
caused by disease,
one should contemplate upon the Vāyu
situated in that region.

Haṭha Pradīpikā



The quantity of oxygen the blood can carry will mainly depend upon the efficiency of the respiratory system. With defective respiration, the absorption of oxygen into the blood will be insufficient and the tissues supplied by the blood (deficient in oxygen) will be starved.



So also, one may use rich food-stuffs and luxuriant drinks, but if the digestive apparatus is not in order, there will be little digestion and absorption. The result will be that the blood will contain very little nutrition.

A defective working of the respiratory and digestive systems not only keeps the blood poorer in quality for want of oxygen and nutritive elements, but it loads the blood with waste matter which is poisonous. We shall explain this point further.

Carbon dioxide is constantly manufactured in the body. The efficiently working circulatory system carries this poisonous gas to the lungs and there gets rid of it. But if the efficiency of this system suffers, this waste matter accumulates in the tissues and there produces toxic effects.

Similarly, food-stuffs leave a very large wastage that the bowels then have to throw out. The smaller the degree of digestion and absorption of food and drink, the larger is the wastage.

And if the bowels which are anatomically included in the digestive tube, do not work efficiently, this waste matter remains lodged in the colon or even in the small intestine for several days, giving rise to highly dangerous toxins.

These toxins get into the current of the blood through the walls of the bowels, and poison the blood. And the poisonous blood being circulated throughout the body leads to the degeneration of the whole organism.

We have seen how the lungs and bowels act as organs of elimination. The kidneys are also organs of the same type. Some of the waste products which are poisonous in nature are driven out of the human organism with the urine. If the kidneys do not function satisfactorily, these poisonous substances are held back and find a resting place especially in the joints of the body. People suffering from gout invariably have defective kidneys. Thus it is clear that the blood, in order to be rich in quality, has to depend upon the respiratory and digestive systems; and to be free from toxins, it has to depend upon the organs of elimination.

Thus far we have studied some of the broadest features of the most important systems of the body. Health depends upon the harmonious functioning of these systems.

...to be continued

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