

The Coiled Serpent: Redefining the Spine

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Passages from *Autobiography of A Yogi*, by Paramahansa Yogananda (Los Angeles Self-Realization Fellowship, 1998), make interesting references to the spine:

"Genesis is deeply symbolic, and cannot be grasped by a literal interpretation ... Its 'tree of life' is the human body. The spinal cord is like an upturned tree, with man's hair as its roots, and afferent and efferent nerves as branches. The tree of the nervous system bears many enjoyable fruits, or sensations of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch ... The 'serpent' (of the Old Testament) represents the coiled-up spinal energy that stimulates the sex nerves."

The word "serpent" is a term frequently used by Eastern scholars and mystics to illustrate things that are mysterious, subtle and hidden.

To paraphrase Yogananda: Unseen forces govern the body, which are subtle, hidden and hard to control. The Hindu sages refer to an outgoing force of life energy, at the base of the spine in the coccyx, as the "serpent force," or "*kundalini*" (because it runs down through a circular passage, coiled like a snake). The Bible (Numbers 21:5) says, "Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," which the yogi has compared to withdrawing the current that stimulates the lower portions of the body into the brain.

Obviously, this means different things to different people with different religious and philosophical opinions and attitudes. It is not my intention to upset or violate anyone's beliefs; however, it is my intention to illustrate an historical (and for many, a familiar) perspective. The concept here is most important, which is at the deepest levels of penetration within what we believe we are, having a subtle and transparent coil within the spinal region. Through this coil flows an energy accepted by ancient mystics and early Christians. (Reference to invisible spinal currents also is not foreign to acupuncture beliefs.)

Amazingly, Dr. Palmer vitalized the concept of inner invisible energies, calling the inner force "innate." Westerners, especially the medical community, ridicule this concept. In the process of trying to shy away from the concept of "innate" forces and proving self-worth as being "scientific," many have distanced from these early "metaphysical" natural concepts, which have been and are tangible and identifiable. There is a long-held and deep "invisible" template view of the spine represented as a snake, serpent or coil. It is important to consider this belief.

Going from a subtle to a more gross level, the DNA and RNA within the gene are constructed as a coiled helix. Again, we have an evolutionary coiled structure acting as a template for further development. At an increasingly extended level of embryonic development, I can only paraphrase an embryology enthusiast, who related from his academic background that vertebrates in their embryonic development go through a coiling process.

I am trying to present the concept that we have historical, sociological and academic references to a coiling process within the human organism and spine. At this point, I would like you to entertain a redefinition of the spine based on motion and resistance assessments.

If you define the spine in forms of motion, you may consider the following components:

1. the spine favoring certain forces or motions;
2. the spine resisting certain forces or motions; and
3. the angles of resistance and give to applied forces.

Through many accidents, mistakes, forgivenesses, beneficial judgments and observations, I came to view the spine not only as an anatomical model, but also as being capable of redefinition. One may evaluate the spine in forms of resistance and give to applied forces. The following synopsis is a summary of my clinical observations in redefining the spine. With the exceptions of trauma, malformation, scoliosis, and significant disease or metabolic deterioration, consider the following observations:

If a patient is placed in a prone position, with applied manual force exerted posterior (P) to anterior (A), inferior (I) to superior (S); the following is observed:

- Left side from L-5 to C-1: There is resistance, with more abrupt endplay, as compared to the right side.
- Right side from L-5 to C-1: There is give, less resistance, a favoring of exerted pressure, and less endplay resistance compared to the left side.
- Left side, going from C-1 to L-5: There is more give, ease and favoring of motion P-to-A, S-to-I, with applied pressure, compared to the right side.
- Right side, going from C-1 to L-5: There is more resistance to applied pressure P-to-A, S-to-I. End play also is more abrupt compared to the left side.

If you were to imagine a circular force, invisible, following the ease of motion, you might see a coil, starting at L-5. This coil winds or leads on the right, going upward, P-to-A, I-to-S. At the occiput, it changes and goes down the spine. Applying forces P-to-A, S-to-I, one may imagine another coil descending left to right, in a coiled fashion. Interestingly, the resistance to motion at the occiput reverses. While the right side of the spine favors P-A motion going slightly inferior to superior (i.e. going up from L-5 to C-1), the occiput is more resistant to P-A rotation on the right and favors P-A rotation on the left side. It mimics the template of the brain, where the left side dominates the right side of the body and vice-versa.

This leads to a practical conclusion. The right side of the body from L-5 to C-1 seeks the anterior, and the left side seeks the posterior, with the exceptions originally noted. This should discourage aggressive adjusting on the right side of the body, which emphasizes rotation, especially at the atlas and L-5/S-1.

To make a long story short, the same applies to the ilia. The left ilium resists P-A and I-S motion, while the right ilium favors and seeks I-S, P-A motion, with the PSIS as the point of reference. The left ilium, therefore, seeks A-P and S-I motion, while the right ilium resists A-P and S-I motion, with the PSIS as the point of reference for both. These statements are made with relative comparisons of one side to the other.

The sacrum reflects the attitude of the head. On the left side, the sacral *ala* favors P-A, I-S motion. On the right side, the ala resists P-A and I-S motion. This sacral theme of motion should be carefully evaluated and correlated with the processes of sacral nutation and counternutation. (Consult Kapandji, Volume III, *Physiology of the Joints*.)

The practical outcomes of these concepts and observations can be enormous in relation to your practice, potentially allowing you to see the spine as possessing intelligent patterns, as does every other category of process within the body and nature.

Acknowledging patterns allows you to work with the body's natural tendencies and yearnings, and not have to reinvent a new complexity for each patient. A cardiologist knows that blood goes into the heart on the right side and leaves on the left side. Maybe it reverses with some exceptional people, but there is a regular and accepted pattern. And how about the patterns of tides, seasons and the sun? Life operates with efficiency in using rules and patterns. Recognizing patterns can help doctors perform their work more effectively.

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