

THE POLYVAGAL THEORY AND THE THREE GUNAS

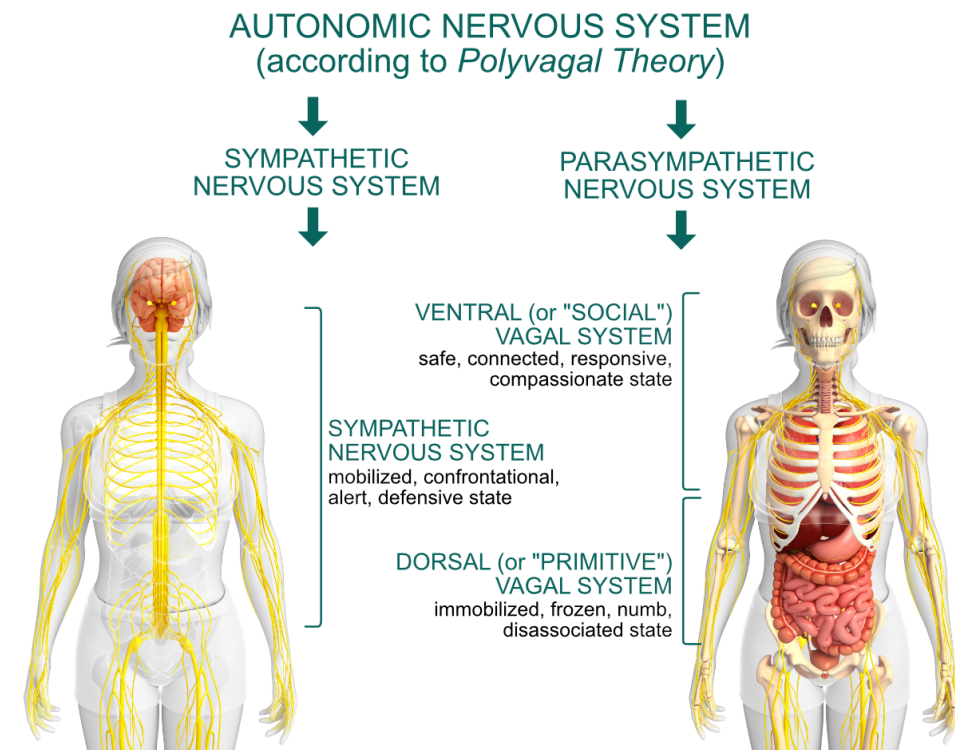
Your autonomic nervous system (ANS) is concerned with your survival during the times of danger and thriving during the times of safety. It is constantly evaluating your external and internal environment for signs of danger and jumps to your defense before those signs even rise to the level of your conscious awareness.

The autonomic nervous system is made up of two branches: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic.

SYMPATHETIC fight-and-flight response	PARASYMPATHETIC rest-and-digest response
A bundle of nerves that is found in the middle of the spinal cord and connect to every major organ	Essentially made up of the vagus nerve
Gas pedal that gets you going	Foot brake to slow down and regroup

The **Polyvagal Theory** pioneered by Dr. Porges looks at the entire autonomic nervous system through the lens of our essential needs for safety and connection to other human beings. The Polyvagal Theory stipulates that there are actually two kinds of “brakes” we have built into our systems – a regular “foot brake”, and an “emergency brake”, and both of those breaks get activated by the vagus nerve under different conditions.

PARASYMPATHETIC BRANCH Two pathways of the vagus nerve serve two very different functions	
Dorsal (“primitive”) vagus travels downward and affects the organs underneath the diaphragm, especially those regulating digestion	Ventral (“social”) vagus travels upwards and influences the heart rate and breathing rate, as well as regulates connections with facial nerves
Emergency brake that shuts you down	Foot brake that slows you down and puts you in the state of safety and connection.



Dorsal (or “primitive”) vagus activation (*emergency brake*) stops you dead in your tracks and makes you feel frozen, numb, or “not here”. Your system is drained and your energetic resources are being conserved through collapse and total shutdown. This happens when there is a major trauma or life threat (and in the aftermath of those), and when you feel completely exhausted or lost. This can be a consequence of illness, injury or medical procedure on any organ below the diaphragm; it can manifest through impaired immune function, a chronic lack of energy, digestive issues, depression and general withdrawal from social connection. This is a hypoaroused state (in yoga we would call it *a tamasic state*).

The sympathetic system (*gas pedal*) gets activated when you need to take action. You are still searching for protection and safety, but in this state, you do it through mobilization of your resources. Your entire body is on high alert and ready for action, which also means that you see, hear and sense danger everywhere. When you are in the sympathetic state, you are more likely to initiate confrontation, to misread facial clues and less likely to connect to other people. This state can manifest as frenetic movement, busyness, fidgeting, and overall defensiveness. This is a hyperaroused state (in yoga we would call it *a rajasic state*).

Ventral (or “social”) vagus activation (*foot brake*) encourages you to slow down and puts you in the state of safety and connection. Deb A. Dana in her book “The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy” writes: “In the ventral vagal state, we have access to a range of responses including calm, happy, meditative, engaged, attentive, active, interested, excited, passionate, alert, ready, relaxed, savoring, and joyful.” In this state you are most open to connection with others, the world seems like a welcoming place full of possibility, and you are able to feel compassion both toward yourself and others. “In the ventral vagal state, hope arises and change happens.” In this state, you feel safe and open to social connection (in yoga we would call it *a sattvic state*).

According to Sankhya philosophy, there are three universal qualities that all of creation is made out of:
sattva, rajas and tamas (three gunas)

	SATTVA	RAJAS	TAMAS
Guiding principle	Pure essence of light, right action, spiritual purpose	Movement, change, excitability	Inertia, darkness, confusion
Universal level	Vast, clear space	Atmosphere	Solid substance
Energetic level	Light of consciousness, potential energy	Kinetic energy	Inertia
Level of creation	Creative	Sustaining	Destructive

All three elements are present to some degree in all objects of creation. Sattva and tamas are inactive energies that require the active, kinetic force of rajas. On the level of the mind the qualities of gunas usually manifest in the following way: “Tamas is the state of heaviness, lack of movement, of metaphorically being stuck. The kind of depression where a person sleeps excessively would be considered tamasic. Rajas implies movement, and a rajasic mental state is characterized by restlessness, agitation, and even panic. Sattva is the state of clarity, peace and balance.” (from the book *The Principles and Practice of Yoga in Health Care*)

The Polyvagal Theory closely resembles the yogic idea of the three gunas and demonstrates how gunas are reflected in your autonomic nervous system.