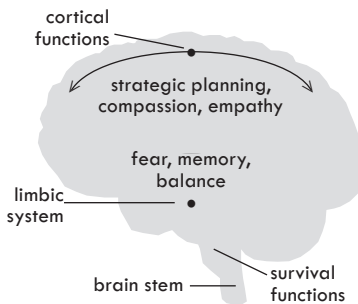


functions are controlled by the autonomic nervous system, which is housed largely in the brain stem. The brain stem is the root of the brain, the gateway of the central nervous system. It sits between the body and the brain, transmitting messages back and forth. Many of the practices that yogis do, including postures, breathing practices, fasting, continence, and controlling sleep, are aimed at transcending the survival functions. The term *survival functions* is descriptive: if we stop breathing for even a few minutes, or if our heart stops beating, if we cannot digest our food, we will soon cease to live. These functions keep us alive. So why would the yogis want to mess with that? It is because intimately tied to these functions is *asmita*, or the stories we tell about ourselves. Our physiology holds on to “I-ness” as much as our mind does. The idea of transcendence, however, means that we step outside ourselves in order to know who we are on a deeper level. It is not escapism; rather, it is the opposite. If these automatic processes keep me alive, they also are keeping me tied to a narrative. But who am I beyond that narrative? What happens if I restrain my breathing for a little while each day? What happens if I can consciously and willfully slow my heart, resist the desire or need for food or sex—who will I be then? Just as we looked at the yamas as restrictions that create a healthy boundary that acts as a groundwork for internal freedom, the practices that are aimed at the brain stem functions are also the practice of restrictions.

Survival functions are the root of many of our worries and of all of our attachments. As we discussed in the preceding chapter, our attachments stem from a false sense of self, the stories we tell about ourselves instead of searching for true



Brain stem survival functions include respiration, heartbeat, blood pressure, digestion, sexual reproduction, and sleep.

knowledge of who we are. Worries, fear, and attachment generate many of our thought patterns. Our mind is filled with them during the day, and at night they fill our dreams. Then there are our negative, repetitive thought patterns, the scenarios our mind concocts: imaginary arguments, imaginary disaster scenarios, imaginary romances. These patterns are rooted in the survival functions, because the thing we are trying to hold on to, the thing that we do not want to have die, is our false, limited sense of self. That is our greatest bind, our greatest identification, and our greatest attachment. Who would we be if we were not our idea of who we are? What would be left?

Yoga says that what is left over is pure consciousness, which has no location but is ever-present and all-pervasive existence. In identifying with our personal narratives, we are not ever-present or all-pervasive. We exist only where we place our mind. The mind is just a field of thought. It holds images, feelings, ideas, and fantasies, but it doesn't hold awareness, because awareness is the light that allows something to be experienced in the first place. The mind becomes a problem when it is all that we know. When we believe everything that happens in our mind is