

The Seven Chakras

The following information is broken down into sections. The first section (technical information) is very technical and for that reason it may not be easy reading, but it is there to explain what the chakras are and how they work. The sections that follow are more practical.

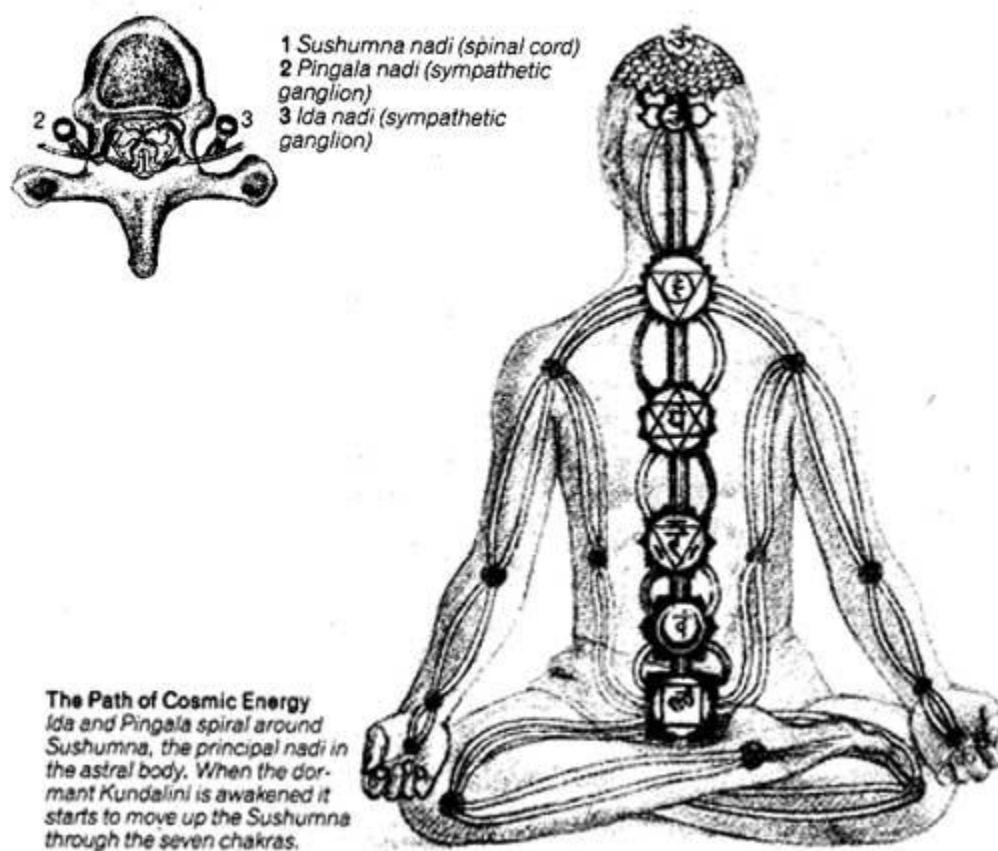
Technical Information:

The word chakra means wheel. There are seven major chakras located between the base of the spinal column and just above the crown of the head. The spinal column (cord) is the path that informational impulses travel to and from the brain to the rest of the body. The spinal column is actually an extension of the central nervous system. It is through the nerve ganglia that the informational impulses travel up and down the channel or pathway to and from every part of your body. The nerve impulses themselves are energy, and as they fire, current moves, thus information in movement. Even our thoughts are energy in movement, synapses firing and energy moves. We think and energy flows. We know that energy is alive and that all living things produce an energy field, the energy of life or life force. A human being produces a very complex, random and organized energy field. Where these energies meet or converge, a confluence is formed; a powerful energy center where the life force that pulsates inside the body corresponds to particular biological systems; mental activity and life's experiences (energy-mind-body).

In Yoga these centers are called chakras. The chakras themselves are not limited to an actual physical location on the spine itself the way Western medicine sees the body. The Eastern view is similar to looking at a light bulb, you see the light bulb but you also see its energy glowing around it. The chakras exist parallel to the spinal column and similarly glow around it, through it, and up and down it. The Eastern (yogic) view of the energy system as it pertains to the spinal cord is that energy travels through what they call Nadis (nerve channels or tubes) in the astral body. There are said to be seventy two thousand Nadis. These Nadis converge throughout the body in many locations especially where joints bend like elbows, wrists and knees, or where things come together like arms to shoulders or legs to hips and along the spine between each vertebra. The spine and nervous system provide a pathway for all information coming and going to every part of our body; similarly the largest Nadi that affects the chakras runs along this axis. When the spinal vertebra are misaligned, fused, pinched, or herniated it effects the pathways through which the energy flows (affecting nerve ganglia) and the information being sent to systems and functions in the body can be misinformed. This central Nadi that runs energetically along the spinal column is called the Sushumna Nadi, and on either side of the Sushumna are two other Nadis called Ida and Pingala which correspond to the sympathetic ganglia of the spinal cord. The Ida Nadi correlates to the parasympathetic ganglion moving downward (efferent nerve impulses) and the Pingala Nadi correlates to the sympathetic ganglion and moves upward (afferent nerve impulses).

The energy in our bodies moves like the electricity in your home (a/c or alternating current). When you turn on a light switch the electrical current is sent to the light but it also comes back from the light. Our energy from the eastern view is called prana (life force) and it is the vital link

between the astral and physical bodies (physical body-is what we see, astral body-is linked to the mind and spirit, causal body-the spirit itself). Prana moves upward and is an afferent impulse. Apana moves downward and is an efferent impulse. To simplify this think of the upward and downward flow in much the same way we look at the weather. When a high-pressure system and a low-pressure system come together the stronger one curls over or under the other one and a wave begins or a churning, causing strong winds and weather changes. Similarly, when our energies (prana or life force) pass one another this wave or churning begins to spin like a wheel with energy coming and going from everywhere but happening in a particular place; this is a chakra. From this point of view the seven chakras are all linked together through the movement of energy but they each reside in a particular place along the Sushumna Nadi. The afferent and efferent nerve impulses spiral around the Sushumna from the Pingala and Ida Nadis (see diagram below). One of the reasons the chakras are not commonly referred too, or used to restore harmony and balance is that scientifically and technically it isn't easily understood or explained. Fortunately you don't have to know anything about them to have them work, and they are working all the time to some degree. By working with them you can help to restore harmony and balance within your energy system. In fact, while practicing hatha yoga postures the poses themselves on an energetic level affect one or more of the chakras.



The Sivananda Companion to Yoga, (1982), p.70. (Used with permission from Gaia Books Ltd.)

It is shown here that both the Ida and Pingala Nadi are both sympathetic but I have found that the Pingala correlates to the sympathetic ganglion and moves upward (afferent nerve impulses) and the Ida correlates to the parasympathetic ganglion moving downward (efferent nerve impulses).

Practical Information:

The chakras have many facets like a diamond. They each have a certain number of petals that correspond to the number of Nadis emanating from them. They each have a sound (vowel) that vibrates as the energy moves through them and a Bija (seed) mantra (sound) that makes them spin (stimulates them). Beside the number of the petals each chakra is represented by a specific color. They also have an associated element and scent. Their physical locations also correlate to a particular gland and/or function within the body which also has a psychological association as well. (see chakra reference chart)

Chakras and Plexuses:

- 1, Coccygeal and Sacral Plexus
- 2, Prostatic (male) and Utero-vaginal (female) Plexuses.
- 3, Solar Plexus.
- 4, Cardiac Plexus.
- 5, Pharyngeal Plexus.
- 6, Cavernous Plexus.
- 7, Cavernous Plexus.

How do the chakras relate to one another?

To understand how each individual chakra's energy is interconnected with the others and yet exists individually I'll again use as an example a house. All the rooms together make a house a home. Walls divide the house into sections (rooms). Each room has a unique quality to it, or a different use; kitchen, living room, master bedroom, kids' rooms, guestroom, attic and basement. Each has a different design function or use, and different energy in them just like the chakras. In each room there is a way to the next (tied together). It can be through a door, pathway or a set of stairs. The flooring can be the same throughout the house even though each room is different. Each room is somehow connected even if the only similarity is the air within the house. As you walk around in the house from room to room there is flow or energy in movement. Your movement is similar to the movement of Prana and Apana (afferent and efferent impulses) through the Pingala and Ida Nadis (nerve channels or tubes) which affect the Sushumna Nadi (central channel) or in this case your energy as you go from room to room. The kitchen is where food is prepared, so you could say that the kitchen is where you would expect to find all the food in the house (designated area). However you may keep food in a pantry or have a freezer in the basement. You may eat one meal in the dining room, have a snack in the family room and eat a little something in your bedroom. So if the kitchen was a chakra, it may be in one particular place but its totality isn't limited to that place. Similarly your bedroom may not be the only place

in the house that you get dressed (bathroom) or sleep (couch). The function of each room or chakra has a connection to the others, a place where it resides but is influenced by association.

What about the colors?

Each chakra has a specific color associated with it. The colors rise from the bottom up like the spectrum of colors in a rainbow, beginning with the base chakra (chakra one) and ending with the crown chakra (chakra seven). The colors associated with each chakra run from base to crown in the following order; red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet. Each chakra is connected within the system, yet retains its own individuality, just like the rooms in a house. For example in a house you may paint certain rooms differently to create a certain look or feeling (warm, bright, calming) or to influence the overall ambiance of that room but they are all still connected, they are all just rooms in a house. It's the individuality of each room that makes a difference and it's your individuality and perceptions of reality that makes a difference in each chakra.

Associated character for each chakra (elements, psychological factor, gland, color)

The elements for each chakra progress from the bottom up and influence the nature of each chakra.

The **first chakra** is called **Muladhara**, from Mula, meaning root, and adhara meaning base or support. It is located at the base of the spine. The element is **earth**, having to do with groundedness. The solid form. It represents our stability, security, quality of our physical body (bones, teeth, nails) and survival. **I exist. Adrenal gland.** The color is **red**.

The **second chakra** is called **Svadhishthana**, meaning one's own abode or sweetness. It is located about three fingers below the bellybutton. The element is **water**, having to do with fluidity, the fluidity of life. Joint mobility. The flow of desires, emotions, impulses, urges, sensuality, sexuality, and pleasure. **I feel. Gonads and the reproductive system.** The color is **orange**.

The **third chakra** is called **Manipura**, meaning lustrous gem or filled with jewels. It is located at the solar plexus. The element is **fire**. Like a furnace ignited, a personal storehouse of energy. Creative fire, self-empowerment, energy, personality, and ego. Having to do with transformation, turning food into energy, burning desires. Making things happen. **I control. Organs of digestion** (pancreas, stomach, liver, gall bladder), **nervous system.** The color is **yellow**.

The **fourth chakra** is called **Anahata**, meaning un-struck (to hear a sound that was not created by striking), loving without needing love, having compassion without receiving it first; being open, openhearted, big-hearted or warm-hearted. It is located in the center of the chest. The element is **air**. It's everywhere, unconditional love and compassion for self and others. A connectedness to others, continuity, it's in the air. Feelings, love w/o jealousy, insecurity or fear. There is an abundance. **I love myself and I am worthy of being loved. Thymus gland, heart, blood, vagus nerve, circulatory system and lungs.** The color is **green**.

The **fifth chakra** is called **Vishuddha**, Vishuddi means purify. Purifying thoughts into communication. It is located at the throat. The element is **ether** (some say sound). It is lighter than air. It rises above to be heard. It's about communication, self-expression, being able to ask for and receive what you need. Not swallowing or choking your words. Being able to put thoughts, experiences or feelings into words. Expressive creativity. **I create and express.** **Thyroid and parathyroid gland.** The color **blue**.

The **sixth chakra** is called **Ajna**, meaning to know or to command. It is located at the third eye (forehead). The element is **mind**. Having to do with intuitive knowledge, knowing. The inner eye that sees the truth. Having insight, objective awareness, awakening intuition, foresight and imagination. Visualizing thoughts, converting thoughts into images in the mind's eye. The seat of the inner guru. Witness of mind. **I am the witness.** **Pituitary gland.** The color is **indigo**.

The **seventh chakra** is called **Sahasrara**, meaning crown, our crowning achievement. It is located at the crown of the head (fontanel) pointing upward. It is beyond element, light or sound. It is all things everywhere. It is all color and sound. The full spectrum of light, the white light of consciousness. In the beginning there was a vibration, a sound that began in the void, the sound was OM and all of creation emanates from it. It is cosmic consciousness, union with the source, pure awareness, transformation, enlightenment, self-realization and samadhi. The integration of all, total union, peace. **I am that I am** (tat twam asi-“that thou art”). **Pineal gland.** The color is **violet**.

The following will help you to understand how the chakras affect you personally and how they pertain to Yoga.

So how can you use the chakras to restore harmony and balance physically and mentally in your personal life?

In order to achieve something you have to be doing something about it. Chakra balancing, stimulating or awakening energy only requires that you're alive. Chakras can be influenced through meditation, guided imagery, yoga posturing, chanting, psychotherapy, or through energetic experience and/or environment. Because yoga is about the connection between mind and body, tying yoga to the chakras is easy. Practicing yoga will open up, stimulate and move energy (awaken the dormant kundalini energy) throughout the energy centers even without trying. Working with the chakras does not require that something be wrong with them. However if there is a particular physical function (gland or system) or a psychological issue that is characteristic of a particular chakra (or several) you can combine the use of yoga postures with bija mantras and vowel sounds to help to balance that particular area and energy. You know yourself better than anyone else, and you're the only one that really knows what your weaknesses and strengths are, therefore you are the one that knows better than anyone else what needs to be worked on from an energetic and/or physical level. All you have to do is determine what's blocked and open it, or what energy needs to move that is over or under active. Or you can just generally open and move the energies in all the chakras.

Examples of working with the chakras.

The bija mantra sounds stimulate, spin or awaken the energy in each chakra. The vowel sounds send or move the energy in each chakra. You can work with them individually or in pairs, groups or as a whole. A good place to begin is with general maintenance. Start with a grounded position like the ready position for the mountain (Tadasana) and focus on being grounded. As you begin to raise your arms out and up to shoulder height chant “lam” repeatedly, being aware of the energy at the base of your spine (first chakra). At shoulder height focus on your heart (fourth chakra), turn your hands upward and continue to raise them chanting “yam” repeatedly until your hands and arms come to shoulder width up over head facing each other. As you hold the posture chant out a long slow “om” focusing on the seventh chakra. Stay in the pose for as long as you’re comfortable and then come out in the reverse order. If you want to be more grounded, when you finish coming out of the posture you can end with a long slow “O” sound sending the energy downward.

A more individualized attunement or awakening for a particular physical problem or psychological issue could be as follows. Consider this scenario; you recently separated from a loved one either from divorce, death or factors that you were unfavorable to you. You did not want this hurt, this longing, this rejection, grief or loneliness. You become withdrawn, judgmental, feeling depressed, anti-social. Your heart hurts your chest feels sunken; your breath is short and weak. You’re tired daily, get sick easily and you can’t seem to get any better. You feel unworthy. This is a full-blown fourth chakra problem. At this extreme, one chakra attunement isn’t going to make everything better; you’ll need other help as well. But if you wanted to work this area you could use the fish (Matsyasana) pose to open the heart and move the energy out (up for mental and down for physical). From the ready position for the fish, focusing on your heart, begin to bring yourself into the pose chanting “yam” repeatedly. When you are in the full expression; with your hands in the position of choice, chant “ay” long and slow focusing on moving the energy out.

If you’re all choked up about it or have expression issues, chant in one long breath “aayyy, eeeee” and if you’re having problems dealing with it mentally add “ommm” focusing on moving the energy upward from your heart to wherever you need it to go.

For overall issues you can move the energy up from your primal self to your higher self. For example; let’s say you just moved to a new town. You feel a little insecure (first chakra) because you don’t know anyone yet. You feel drawn to someone that lives across the street but your desires aren’t as strong as your fear of rejection (second chakra). You are having difficulty coming up with enough willpower to transform you’re desires into action (third chakra). You question whether or not you are worthy of this person’s compassion (fourth chakra). Every time you have a chance to introduce yourself you swallow your words, you can’t express yourself (fifth chakra). In your mind you begin to believe that all of these things that you’re having trouble with are true (sixth chakra), so you just don’t shine anymore, you are systemically un-energized (seventh chakra).

To move the energy up throughout all of the chakras you could use the cobra (Bujangasana) posture. Even though this pose is strongly about desires, impulses, sexuality, creativity, power, fire and transformation it can also, through association, be connected to all the other chakras. From a position on your belly, engage the core muscles (#1). Press the pubic bone down (#2).

Then push your hands into the floor empowering you upward (#3). With your fingers open wide palms down; pull against the floor heaving your chest forward and up, opening you heart (#4). Then raise your chin and lengthen your neck as an extension of the spine stretching your throat opening communication (#5). Lift your head up tilting your forehead toward the sky (#6), and finally close your eyes and become aware of your cosmic consciousness, self-realization, the integration of all, total union and peace. And while you're in the pose connecting all the vowel sounds together in one long breath ("O, oo, ah, ay, ee, mm, ing) as many times as you want.

Chakra work isn't easy or simple, it requires that the practitioners be honest with themselves and be willing to deal with some deep personal, physical and psychological issues. In a group yoga class this depth isn't possible but to some degree it is helpful and working. As with anything, it is always best to have a teacher who has personal experience in whatever it is that you're learning so that their teachings are more than something that they read in a book.

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