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CHAKRAS**

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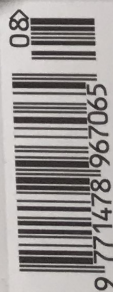


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WORKING WITH THE
Chakras



Once the language of yoga practitioners only, the term 'chakras' is now fairly commonly known among many people, even if it is not fully understood what a chakra is, it is not a completely new term to most. There has in recent times, been an association with new age philosophies which may have impacted the experiential truth behind chakras and the ability to recognise chakras as something that are tangible and experiential and not flaky or weird! So let's see how we can work with chakras in our yoga practice from the tradition of yoga.

Chakra, a Sanskrit word meaning 'wheel' (in this case) is a representation of a locus of energy within the subtle body system of the yoga tradition. The concept of chakras has its roots in the tantra tradition and although today we mostly recognise a 7-chakra system, there are many different systems ranging from a 5-chakra system up to a 26-chakra system. For the purposes of accessibility and ease we will look at the system of 7-chakras as currently favoured by modern postural yoga practitioners.

This 7-chakra system is taught as points of energy from the base chakra of the perineum (muladhara) with chakras located at points up through the spine up to the highest chakra at the crown of the head (sahasrara). These points of energy are areas where currents (nadis – akin to meridians in Chinese medicine) of energy (prana) converge within the subtle body system as powerful centres of energy. They are also the points through which the Kundalini shakti energy; a form of potential energy within the subtle body that has profound awakening effects when this energy is aroused, moves through from the base, to the 6th chakra (ajna).

Many of the practices we are doing in yoga are a means of allowing these energy systems to flow freely. This is important on many levels as we will see! Many modern teachings tell us that there are various conditions of existence associated with each chakra, psychology, physiology, character and health which may be true on one level but is not the whole picture as the traditional system is much more fluid and energy centred. Although we may have real experiences on these other levels associated with each chakra, ultimately if we treat working with the chakras as a means to allowing prana to flow, then we are effectively treating ourselves on all levels of being as when prana is flowing freely we are free on other planes of existence too.

Each chakra has an element that is associated with it (see chakra on page 19) and a seed mantra of the element associated with the chakra. Although these elements are generally allocated to each chakra individually, the elements can be shifted around (for example if we have a tendency towards mental spaciness we may need to bring more earth to our ajna chakra (centre of the eyebrows)

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and we may use the seed mantra associated with the muladhara (root chakra) to focus in the ajna chakra area. Mantra practice is one of the main original practices from the tantra tradition associated with the chakras. The seed syllables can be chanted with a focus on each chakra and also as a means of invoking a particular deity energy there if this practice appeals to you. If you are drawn to chakra mantra as a practice, I recommend bringing this into a meditation practice (seated or reclined) and with feeling and fine-tuning your awareness (simply listening and responding to what you feel in each given moment). You may chant the seed mantras of the chakras and move from the base towards the crown, resting awareness in the location of the chakra as you chant the particular seed mantra for that chakra. You may find that you are particularly drawn to work with a specific chakra area for a while and that's fine, as long as you stay attuned to the effects of the practice and you always give yourself time for grounding post chanting (sitting a little longer in a more simple meditation with a breath focus is a good way to settle).

Another way we can use the chakras to encourage pranic flow is through pranayama breathing practices. Pranayama practices are listed within the Hatha Yoga Pradipika as a specific method to nadi and chakra purification, which basically translates as a free flow of energy in the body without blockage. If you are beginning a pranayama practice I highly recommend you do this with an experienced teacher. Although we are essentially just breathing we should not underestimate the power of pranayama and using tried and tested methods will allow you to experience the benefits of the practice without over-stimulation. Although pranayama techniques don't generally hone in directly to the chakras, they are working within the pranic system of nadis and chakras and are thus bringing balance to our energy centres, these practices may also stimulate the rising of the Kundalini energy (as taught as the purpose of yoga within the Kundalini yoga school).

We may even bring awareness to the chakras within our asana (yoga posture) practice. Why not have a focus that is within the subtle body rather than just the physical body and see how this affects your practice? For example, in a posture such as Trikonasana we may focus on the alignment along the spine as a means of bringing the chakras into alignment, perhaps we may focus particularly on sensations of opening around the solar plexus area (manipura chakra) and the heart centre area (anahata chakra). You may notice that this brings a particular lightness or aliveness to your practice and this can be done in any yoga posture. Play with it and see where you are drawn to focussing in

SAHASRARA

The seventh chakra

ANJA

The sixth chakra
aum

WISHUDDHA

The fifth chakra
ham
ether

ANAHATA

The fourth chakra
yam
air

MANIPURA

The third chakra
ram
fire

SWADHISHTHANA

The second chakra
vam
water

MULADHARA

The first chakra
lam
earth

Cosmic consciousness
interior peace

JNANA YOGA

Recognising and accepting destiny,
confidence in one's own intuition

MANTRA YOGA

Transformation of energy
through words and images

BHAKTI YOGA

Love, vitality, being
one with nature

HATHA, KARMA AND RAJA YOGAS

Firmness and organisational talent

TANTRA YOGA

Ease in relationship, pleasure
in physical contact

HATHA AND KUNDALINI YOGA

Vitality, stability and strength

name
order
root mantra
element

typical yoga characteristics

your body! The more we can begin to draw our attention to that which is subtle rather than just focussing on the gross, the more profound our yoga practice will become as we take it out of the realms of simply physical exercise or gymnastics and bring it into a practice that is integrating or unifying as we are participating on all levels of our being. This is essentially what makes it yoga!

One of the most powerful and more obvious practices that I have found directs me straight to particular chakras (and it's different one each time) is a Hatha yoga practice known as 'navli'. This is a practice that begins with uddiyana bandha, which is the drawing in and up of the abdomen after expelling the breath. Nauli follows this with a forwards contraction of the rectus abdominus muscles of the abdomen which pushes forwards as the sides of the abdomen are contracted backwards and inwards. I find when I practise this I will often experience a rushing of energy sensation in a location of one of the chakras, commonly my heart, throat or forehead areas. It's a very powerful practice which again you should seek the guidance of an experienced teacher. It is a great way to start the day and will definitely wake you up! It's also a great practice to aid digestion and movement of the digestive system.

Although this is a very brief introduction to working with the chakras and some of these practices are working with the chakras indirectly or subtly, try them, get to know your subtle body from your experience which means being open to whatever arises rather than looking for a particular type of experience or a manipulation of what we think this work should do. Just enjoy tuning into energy and the harmonious relationship of the gross and subtle, and you will begin to know the chakras and your subtle energy body and you will develop the confidence to trust your intuition as you work with these fascinating subtle and powerful experiences of energy.

KHADINE MORCOM

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