



# Exploring The Chakras



## Exploring the Chakras: Path to Self Knowledge

As Winter begins to fade into Spring we begin to feel as if a heavy load has been lifted from our hearts. Our mood becomes lighter – our hearts become freer. Gone is the need to protect ourselves from the bitter cold, heavy winds, ice and snow. We no longer dread the short walk from our car to the warmth of our homes. We begin to spend more time outdoors in total appreciation of nature.

As the morning sun rises and the birds begin to sing, we feel a sense of renewal as we ponder the possibilities and the potential of each new day. The ice has finally melted and the rivers and streams are once again flowing. A

chorus of birds is singing outside our window as we go about our daily chores.

Spring is traditionally a time of rebirth and renewal. What better time to begin to explore the intricate web of nadis (channels of energy) flowing throughout our physical and subtle bodies? As the rivers outside begin to flow, perhaps the prana that flows within finds a newfound freedom, release and liberation and we renew our intention to begin to cultivate this energy in new ways, becoming aware of it's inherent power to transform our lives.

Let's begin with an exploration of the 3 Bodies and the 5 layers or sheaths. Yoga philosophy teaches us that our physical body is actually composed of 3 bodies and that within these 3 bodies there are 5 layers. The 3 bodies are named: The Physical Body, The Astral Body and the Causal Body.

**The Physical Body** – Composed of just one layer: The Annamaya kosha.

1. Annamaya Kosha – This is literally the “food sheath” or the physical body. It is composed of muscles, bones, skin, our organs and the entire physical manifestation of our being. It is what we see and feel physically, it is tangible and can be measured and has a 3 dimensional existence in time and space. Food is required to sustain the physical body. Eventually the body will decompose and return to the earth.

**The Astral Body** - Composed of 3 sheaths – The Pranamaya Kosha, Manomaya Kosha and the Vijñanamaya Kosha.

2. Pranamaya Kosha – This pranic sheath is more subtle than the food sheath and contains the 72,000 nadis or astral tubes through which the prana or vital energy flows. The flow of your breath resides in this layer. It is in the pranic sheath that we experience heat, cold, hunger and thirst.

3. Manomaya Kosha – Mental sheath – This sheath houses our thoughts including the logical mind and also our subconscious minds. It is where we process input from the outside world that we take in through the 5 senses. The working of this mind is automatic in nature. The central nervous system resides here.

4. Vijnanamaya Kosha –The Wisdom Self or Intuitive Sheath. This is our higher consciousness or higher intelligence. It is here that we can cultivate the power of discrimination and can begin to overcome some of the automatic tendencies of the Mental Sheath. This intelligence houses our ego and is more subtle than the Mental Sheath. It is through the practice of yoga and meditation that we gain access to this higher intelligence.

### **The Causal Body or Seed Body -**

5. Anandamaya Kosha – This is the bliss sheath – the most subtle sheath of all. The karmic impressions are stored here and are said to control the formation and growth of the other two bodies. It is through this body that we experience deep joy and bliss. It is through the practice of yoga and meditation that we gain access to this bliss.

### **The Chakras**

The nadis are housed in the Astral Body. Like the central nervous system and the blood stream the nadis transport energy from one part of the body to other parts of the body. The places where many nadis intersect are called chakras. A chakra is a center of energy. We are mainly concerned with the 7 basic chakras that run along the spinal column.



1. Muladhara Chakra – This is the Root Chakra located at the base of the spine or tailbone. When this chakra is open and balanced we are centered. When we feel off center and agitated it is because of a block here at the root. Think of the root chakra as the foundation of a house or the trunk of a tree. Everything else is dependent on stability here. How do we cultivate this stability? Breathwork is essential – steady, slow deep breathing especially

Ujayi and Nadi Shodana (alternate nostril breathing.) There is no better way to get grounded than by engaging in alternate nostril breathing. Without this basic sense of being grounded, all of the other chakras will suffer. Bridge posture (setubandhasana) is very grounding in nature as well as shoulder stand and headstand. Any meditation practice strongly engages energy at the root. Any gentle restorative yoga practice will enhance this chakra, such as lying prone and taking the knees to the chest or child's pose. The mantra for this chakra is Lam. Issues of survival, stability and self-sufficiency are related to this chakra.



2. Swadhishtana Chakra – Located at the genitals in the area of the pelvis. Sexual energy resides here as well as our joyous, playful nature. This chakra is associated with spontaneity, playfulness and the ability to experience pleasure in the moment. Dancing, laughing and singing can help to cultivate energy at this chakra. To open this chakra, practice deep hip openers in your yoga practice.

Any posture that creates mobility in the hips will free this energy. I especially like upavistha konasana (wide angle seated forward fold) for this purpose. Other postures are deep lunges, pigeon and gomukhasana (cow face) legs. The mantra is Vam. This chakra corresponds to sexuality, creativity, relationships and emotions.



3. Manipura Chakra – Located at the solar plexus (between navel and bottom of rib cage.) Manipura Chakra is associated with the fire element, digestion and transformation. This chakra cultivates our will and determination. The vast storehouse of prana is housed here. This chakra is responsible for achievement of goals and satisfaction from life. Our ego lives here. It is from this chakra that we get our sense of empowerment and self esteem. Kapalabati (skull shining breath) and Breath of Fire will stimulate energy here. Other practices are Uddiyana Bandha, Agni Sara and having a strong fire element within your yoga practice as a result of cultivating energy at the core by strengthening the abdominals. Three part breath can also go a long way towards freeing energy at the navel. The mantra is Ram.



4. Anahata Chakra – Heart Chakra, located at the center of the chest. Energy at this chakra cultivates feelings of love, the ability to give and receive and generosity of spirit. It is from the heart that we are able to feel compassion for others and an open heart allows us to take risks without feeling vulnerable. Our ability to nurture, accept and trust others and ourselves resides at this chakra. Most backbending postures in yoga will strongly stimulate energy at the heart center. Examples are Ustrasana (Camel), Dhanurasana (Bow) and Urdhva

Dhanurasana (Upward Bow or Wheel.) It is also very healing to simply meditate on the heart. A simple heart opening meditation: As you sit with eyes closed and focus on your breath, on each inhale visualize the upward current of energy rising from the base of the spine up into the heart center, infusing the heart with healing love and light. On the exhale allow warmth and radiance to radiate out from the heart in all directions. Practice this for a minimum of 5 minutes every day for a week and you will begin to notice a shift in your awareness. The mantra for this chakra is Yam.



5. Vishuddha Chakra – Located at the throat. The ability to communicate comes from this chakra as well as creative self expression. Talking, singing, laughing, whispering are all born at the throat chakra. Fish posture, Lion and Cobra will open the throat. To immediately open the chakra in any posture, simply stick your tongue out and stretch it as far as possible. Chanting keeps this chakra open and clear. The mantra is Ham.



6. Ajna Chakra – Located at the Third Eye (space between eyebrows) – This chakra connects us to the Wisdom Self – the seat of our intuition. It is from this chakra that we gain the ability to practice discrimination and mindfulness.

When this chakra is open we are awake, with clear vision and living in the present moment. Emotional intelligence resides here. By stimulating the marma point at the Third Eye, you gain access to this energy. Slow, deep breathing and meditation can connect us to Ajna Chakra. Meditating on the Third Eye and directing the breath there is a very powerful practice. The mantra is Om. Here is a simple meditation to open the Third Eye. Sitting with eyes closed and practicing Ujayi Breath, on the inhale breathe directly into the Third Eye. On the exhale mentally chant the mantra Om. After 5 minutes of this, you will be in the bliss state.



7. Sahasrara Chakra – The symbol for Sahasrara is the thousand petaled lotus and it is located at the crown of the head. Our connection to God resides here. When this chakra is open we become devoted, inspired and spiritually awake leading to selfless actions and transcendence of the ego. Our sense of connection to the Universal Flow of Life is dependent on this chakra. Essentially opening this chakra connects us to God. There is no higher state than this. In order for this transcendence to take place, we must first clear the blocks from the first 6 chakras.

### **Utilizing the Chakras in Daily Life**

An understanding of the relationship between the 5 koshas (layers) and the chakras can be a powerful tool on the path to self knowledge. As you move through your daily activities, make an intention to stay connected to the subtle energy by remaining conscious of the flow of the breath. The simple practice of breath awareness will go a long way towards becoming conscious of the subtle energy. In addition to simply observing the breath, you can attempt to slow down and deepen the breath as much as possible during the day. This simple practice will calm the nervous system and keep you centered in the present moment. This is the first step towards opening the chakras

As you encounter problems in your life, use knowledge of the chakras to put those problems in perspective. There is an intentional hierarchy to the position of the chakras. Ideally we start at the beginning by gaining balance and steadiness at the root. All of the other chakras are dependent on this balance at the root. If the root is not stable, all of the other chakras will be imbalanced. There are no shortcuts to gaining this balance in your life. You must start at the root.

Most emotional problems stem from imbalance at the first 2 chakras. As a rule of thumb, when you encounter difficulty – start by balancing the root chakra. The easiest way to do this is to practice deep breathing such as Ujayi or Nadi Shodana. This will give you immediate relief. If there are physical blocks in your body (if you feel muscular tightness or tenseness) then engaging in slow supported stretches will begin to relieve the physical blocks.

Here are some examples of how we create discord at the root chakra. The root chakra is associated with basic survival. On the most basic level this means eating, sleeping, drinking water, moving our bowels and breathing. These are the necessary components of staying alive. If you are sleep deprived – this is a 1<sup>st</sup> chakra issue. This may cause irritability and a feeling of instability. Until you correct this problem everything else in your life will suffer. If you are eating the wrong foods (foods that lack nutritional value) if you are over eating or eating too often or not often enough or under eating – these are all first chakra issues. Basically in order to balance this chakra, you must learn to eat in a balanced, healthy way for your constitution. Rushing your meals and eating on the run are all going to keep you totally stuck at this chakra. If you are not cooking for yourself, chances are you are stuck at this chakra.

In summary the root chakra is basic survival. Our home must be in order, clean, orderly, warm and safe. Our home life must be in order. This means we must have good relationships with the people who share our home and also with our neighbors. So basically we need that safe, secure roof over our head and the rent must be paid. We need a steady source of income that will cover our basic needs, food, clothing and shelter. Additionally we must learn to nurture ourselves



with proper food. We need to eat healthy meals, that taste good and are satisfying and we need to eat these meals in a serene, calm environment. Learning to practice conscious eating will go a long way towards balancing energy at the root chakra. All food issues are first chakra issues.

You see many highly driven, successful business people who are overweight and eating on the run. I find this whole scenario a bit humorous. People are spending inordinate amounts of time working hard to make a lot of money so they can have a high standard of living for themselves and their families. But unfortunately if there is no balance at the root chakra, all their striving is for naught. Eventually the house of cards will come tumbling down. If you are not paying attention to diet and the quality of your relationship with food, eventually your health will fail and all of the money on the planet will not save you.

We have very few role models to guide us on the path to a balanced, fulfilled life. I feel incredibly lucky and blessed to have encountered my teacher and mentor Shiva Rea who is a shining example of someone who clearly has opened the chakras from the ground up. She is living proof that this system works. She has mastered the art of living from the heart.

Let's talk about the heart chakra for a moment. There is so much talk these days in New Age circles about "opening the heart." But by simply focusing on opening the heart you may just as well be spinning your wheels. The heart remains like a stone until there is clarity through the first 3 chakras.

Everyone wants more love in their life. Everyone wants to be able to freely give and receive love with spontaneity and grace. Is this not the essence of life? Unfortunately there are so many lonely people out there substituting sex for love, or substituting food for love or working long hours to squelch loneliness. This time would be better spent by focusing on the first chakra.

Here is what we need in order to balance the first chakra:

1. Ability to nurture ourselves physically with the right food and also with proper and balanced exercise to keep our bodies healthy and free of disease, pain and injury. For example if we are suffering from migraine headaches or any other chronic health issue, this is a first chakra issue.
2. We need meaningful work that is both stimulating and rewarding and that will also pay the bills.
3. We need a stable home environment and good relationships with those who share our home.
4. We need to get the proper amount of sleep on a regular basis to keep our minds functioning optimally.
5. We need to balance our emotions by learning to stay calm in all situations and by practicing contentment and acceptance in the present moment.

Once you have these basics in order you are ready to progress to the second chakra.

1. Meaningful sexual relationships.
2. Ability to enjoy the company of others.

3. Playfulness, creativity, the ability to experience deep pleasure and joy in any moment.

Basically this chakra is about openness, spontaneity and the ability to stay in the flow of life with a deep enjoyment of every moment.

The third chakra is where we cultivate our will and determination to continue striving and accomplishing. Healthy self esteem is imperative in order to open this chakra. This healthy self esteem is dependent on balance at the first 2 chakras.

With healthy self esteem we are able to focus clearly on our goals, prioritize our time and set clear boundaries as far as what behaviors are acceptable or unacceptable from others.

This chakra feeds our will and determination and we gain the capacity to accomplish our goals without sacrificing self esteem and without sacrificing our health. This is the opposite of the overweight businessperson who may be accomplishing a lot in the corporate world but clearly there are problems on the home front.

Many Type “A” personalities have a lot of strong will and determination in business matters (making money, ego satisfaction) but have totally skipped over finding balance at the first 2 chakras. Therefore all the achievement is basically meaningless without a firm foundation to build a balanced life.

As Americans, we are a society of 3<sup>rd</sup> chakra overachievers - - everyone is busting themselves to rise up the corporate ladder but their lives lack substance and their health is problematic due to scant attention paid to the first two chakras. The result is a booming pharmaceutical industry, fast food and junk food industries and a booming over the counter drug industry. This is all evidence of our lack of balance as a society.

So now onto the fourth chakra - -

If there is balance on the home front and you have learned to practice the art of unconditional self love – then you will be in a position to experience deep pleasure and joy from relationships with friends and family. With this strong foundation, your will and determination will flourish and you will find deep meaning from your work and accomplishments and you will be comfortable with your position in the world and in society. At this point – the heart is ready to open to give and receive love and you will begin to spontaneously express the love that is in your heart.

This leads us to the fifth chakra -- the throat. Once we are open to love, our self expression comes naturally. The heart is intimately connected to the vocal chords. What we feel in our hearts can be easily expressed in words and we can engage in honest, open communication.

As effective communicators we begin to gain insight into ourselves and others and there is a steady give and take that comes from sharing ourselves with others.

This gives us clarity of vision and we begin to trust our intuition (6<sup>th</sup> chakra.)

Acting on this clarity of vision (intuition) becomes second nature and we are able to act with discrimination (making the right decisions for ourselves.)

This gives us self confidence and with self confidence comes the ability to surrender.  
The ability to surrender leads to a God centered life.

This is the essence of yoga. There are no shortcuts.

For every problem you encounter you can use the chakras to gain perspective.  
Start at the root and ask yourself the following questions:

1. Did I get enough sleep?
2. Is my diet leading to health and energy or are my food habits depleting me?
3. Is my home life in order?
4. Are my immediate relationships in order? (husband, wife, kids, boss)
5. Am I independent with the ability to take care of my health and my immediate emotional needs?

Tackle these problems first before expecting a gratifying, deep, pleasurable, sexual relationship.  
If you are seeking fun and pleasure without first learning unconditional self love, you will eventually hit a brick wall and the wall will come tumbling down.

As I write this paper, I am looking out my window at the tall, tall trees with delicate branches that are dancing and swaying in the breeze, green leaves pulsating and reflecting the beautiful shimmering rays of the sun. I can't help but remember that those dancing leaves, that playfully dance with the wind are totally dependent on the swaying branches beneath them and those branches are dependent on the strong, heavy tree trunk below. The tree trunk has roots that grow deep down into the earth and those roots are necessary to give the tree the proper combination of water and nutrients so that the tiny leaves that we see when we gaze upward at the branches can continue to dance with the blue sky, clouds and sun, dancing with the wind dancing with other trees. Without the foundation there would be no dance, just fallen trees and lots of dead wood.







## Om City Soap Box: Free E-Zine published and edited by yogini Dee Greenberg.

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**Your Feedback Is Encouraged!** – I welcome your comments, ideas and creative expression.

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