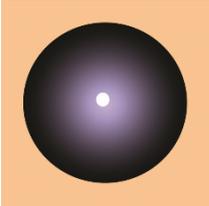


The Chakras: the inner transformative keys



The chakras offer us a profound and very practical paradigm of human nature and evolution. It is a paradigm that illuminates the inner space of our being and gives us a map of how we function as embodied beings. Pertinently, the chakras also point beyond the personal into the Universal. In this way, the paradigm of the chakras can be used as an excellent tool of deepening our self-understanding and inner awakening.



They are not found on the physical level but exist in the energy body. We can however use physical body reference points in yoga practice as gateways through which we can access the more subtle level of the chakras.



This handout is designed to be a brief guide to the chakras. There are countless books on this subject which can be used to deepen your understanding. It needs to be emphasised however that there is absolutely no substitute for personal experience arising through sincere practice and skilled guidance.



The chakras are constantly functioning in each and every person, on one level or another. Otherwise the body would simply be a corpse. 'Working on the chakras' simply means using yogic practices to further energise and balance them thereby refining their level of functioning. Although this handout focuses on selected yoga practices for each of the individual chakras in turn, the chakras function interdependently - working on one automatically affects others in the system.



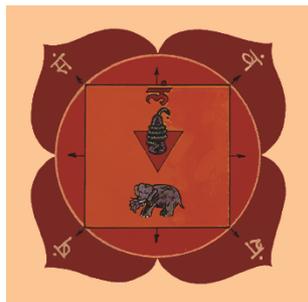
The main emphasis of this handout is on the six spinal chakras, although a brief explanation of bindu and sahasrara follows at the end.



Mooladhara Chakra or the root centre

Definition: *Moola* is root, and *adhara* is foundation or base

Position: this is the only chakra whose position is different in the male versus the female body. For males, the mooladhara chakra is at the perineum, between the sexual organ and anus. For females it is a little higher, in the cervix, between the vagina and uterus. For women who have experienced a hysterectomy, where the cervix and uterus may no longer be physically present, it can be helpful to visualise mooladhara as a lotus bud in the same location.



Mooladhara chakra represents our physical foundation, our connection with earth, and the root of our physical embodiment. It is concerned with physical survival and security. Its four petals represent the four primary amnesias which keep us bound to the physical and thereby asleep to our deeper spiritual roots: sleep or complacency, hunger/ thirst, procreation, and fear (of change).

Over identification with mooladhara limits us to an excessive yet narrow focus on the physical body and physical objects around us. We become possessive of things in a bid to feel secure and ward off the fear of loss. We also can feel a terror at the prospect of the loss of the physical body at death. Life, instead of being our friend, becomes uncertain, even dangerous - something we always have to protect ourselves against. Yet intrinsically we can't – the things of this world are transient only and our physical body is bound to age and die. Hence there is an abiding anxiety which can never be fully eased despite accumulating more and more possessions.

Those of us who are easily lost in our heads benefit from a greater connection with the physical body and earth. Conversely, those who are mainly focused on physical or material gain/comfort/security, benefit from refining mooladhara by the awakening of the chakras above, especially from anahata upwards.

To awaken mooladhara chakra, we need to balance our material needs – quality rest, nutritious food, shelter and balanced family life - with our spiritual needs and aspirations.

Common problems associated with mooladhara imbalance: vulnerability in feet, legs and knees, constipation, varicose veins, fear of change.

Practices to awaken: moola bandha, earth breathing, visualisation of yellow square or cube, nasikagra drishti, walking barefoot on the earth, physical grounding asana, visualisation of symbol (see below).

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Symbols: earthy red colour, elephant, lotus with 4 petals.

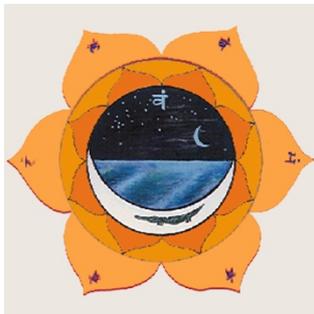
Sensory connection; sense of smell, hence the nose.

Bija mantra: LAM (pronounced 'lum').

Swadisthana Chakra or the sacral centre

Definition: *swa* is one's own, and *adhithana* is abode

Position: in the pelvic area, behind the pubic bone at the front of the body, and in front of the coccyx at the back.



This chakra is primarily concerned with sexuality and sensuality. Whilst the mooladhara is concerned with sexual procreation – survival of the individual through continuation of the species – swadisthana is concerned with sexual pleasure and gratification. Sexuality can be one of the strongest energies we experience and is extensively used in contemporary advertising.

Swadisthana is also concerned with sensuality - seeking bodily comfort and gratification. We seek out sensual pleasure through for example tasty, often sweet, food, and through our choice of clothes, furniture and so forth. This chakra is connected with the subconscious mind, the storehouse of our deeper instinctive drives and habitual patterns.

Over identification with swadisthana can manifest as an over active sex drive in which one's own pleasure is primary, irrespective of that of your partner or series of partners. Personal sensual gratification and comfort is also fundamental, causing us to always seek out forms of sensual pleasure in which to indulge. Our dreams can often be sensual and we see others through the specific prism of gender/ sexuality – whether they are sexually or sensually attractive or not. The suppression of the energies of swadisthana leads in turn to sexual suppression which creates significant psychosomatic tension which can express in multifarious challenging ways.

The balancing and awakening of swadisthana means channeling our sexual energies via healthy and mature intimate relationships (which draw upon the energies of the higher chakras); and/or channeling them through creative endeavours that are also aligned with the chakras above. By balancing this chakra we rediscover the

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sacredness in the energy of swadisthana, which can then become a tool of transformation and creativity.

Common problems associated with swadisthana imbalance: sexual problems, lower back or pelvic issues, urinary problems.

Practices to awaken: vajroli/ sahajoli mudra, ashwini mudra, yoni mudra, visualization of symbols, selected asanas including PMA 3 (from Bihar school of yoga tradition).

Symbols: orange or vermillion colour, lotus with six petals, crescent moon over the ocean, alligator or dolphin.

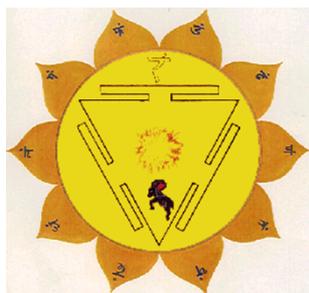
Sensory connection; sense of taste, hence the tongue.

Bija mantra: VAM (pronounced 'vum').

Manipura Chakra or the navel centre

Definition: *mani* is jewel, and *pura* is city. The city of jewels represents the manifold system of nerve impulses that originate from the navel and extend through the whole body.

Position: in the navel, behind the belly button.



Manipura chakra is the centre of personal energy or dynamism, will power and ambition. It is where we push out into the world, developing self-confidence to forge our own place within it. It is the seat of personal empowerment giving us the capacity to stand on our own two feet with our head held high, with an inner self confidence and personal direction in life. It helps govern our personal self-image. Manipura chakra is also the centre of strong emotions such as anger, frustration, anxiety, and exhilaration.

In combination with the chakras below, manipura is often dominant in today's society, and plays out in excess competition, obsessive working, one-up-man-ship, and/or the seeking of personal power or influence to gain a certain status. The underlying rationale can be that, as the cake is only so big, I need to get as big a slice as possible, often regardless of the needs of others. It is easy to see this expressing in

society - whether in politics, business, neighbourhoods or the family unit – creating frustration, discord and so forth.

Conversely, when manipura is too passive, it manifests as shyness, meekness, the inability to make decisions or start/complete projects. At its core is often a lack of self-belief which undermines our capacity to live life fully and creatively.

Working on manipura, in concert with the other chakras, through yoga, exercise, meditation and so forth, empowers us to act and utilise our energy and personal power creatively. Whilst we may still be ‘works in progress’, we have a healthy self-image and the capacity to ‘walk our talk’. We also allow emotions to move through us, honouring their energy yet without the need to always identify with, or feed, them. Finally, and importantly, a balanced manipura enables us to find a balance between effective activity and quality rest.

Common problems associated with manipura imbalance: stress and anxiety, poor or erratic digestion, weak eyesight, obsessively driven, high blood pressure, lacking direction/ purpose.

Practices to awaken: Agnisar kriya, uddiyana bandha, bhastrika pranayama, PMA 3 or Shakti Bandha series, visualisation of symbol.

Symbols: sun, yellow colour, lotus with ten petals, inner sun, red triangle, ram.

Sensory connection; sense of sight, hence the eye.

Bija mantra: RAM (pronounced ‘rum’).

Operating at the level of the first three chakras only ties us down in an egocentric perspective: limited to a narrow horizon of ‘I, me and mine’, which in turn breeds loneliness, disconnection and an abiding sense of ‘lack’. The chakras that follow help to open our awareness to a wider and more profound experience of who we are and the purpose of this embodied life.

Anahata Chakra or the heart centre

Definition: *anahata* means unstruck or non-vibrational sound.

Position: in the chest behind the base of the sternum.



The anahata chakra is where we start to reach out beyond ourselves (at least, beyond our egocentric self) to a wider experience of life and humanity.

The anahata chakra is often seen as our centre. It is at the midpoint of the chakra system (if we include Sahasrara (crown) in addition to the six spinal chakras) and the midpoint of the torso. Furthermore we often place a hand on our heart space, not our head, when referring to ourselves. Anahata is certainly the centre of our finer sentiments such as tolerance, compassion, kinship and love.

What we take to be love is often attachment, based on unresolved neediness, dependency and possessiveness. This form of 'love' is linked to expectation: if you meet my expectations, then I will love you. Inherently selfish, such love binds us – we fall in love! Genuine love by contrast is more all-inclusive, giving without necessarily expecting much in return. It is like a rose which simply shares its fragrance unconditionally. The heart blossoms through this quality of love – we rise in love!

The awakening of anahata empowers us to care and respect others just as much as we care and respect ourselves. The realization dawns that our own needs are no more or no less important than those of others. A greater trust can also develop; a trust in our own authentic 'goodness', and/or a trust in the Intelligence of Life itself. Furthermore, anahata is associated with being more alert to the present moment (see the symbol of the deer/ antelope below), less caught in obsessive thinking and more present to the actual experience of life in the moment.

If anahata chakra is blocked, we often lack warmth for others, meaning that others in turn withhold warmth from us. We can become detached from feelings and thereby distanced from ourselves, and disconnected from life. Loneliness and a sense of estrangement can ensue.

If anahata is not connected with the chakras above, especially agya chakra, then we can become overly emotional and sentimental. We are easily carried away by strong emotional energy, at the mercy of these emotional waves.

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Common problems associated with anahata imbalance: breathing issues e.g. asthma, heart conditions, upper spinal issues and infectious diseases (weakening of thymus gland and lymphatic system), weak immune system.

Practices to awaken: heart space meditations, brahmari pranayama, generosity, gratitude, letting go, visualisation of symbol.

Symbols: a lotus with 12 petals, often spring green in colour although sometimes given as pink or blue, antelope or deer, a still steady candle flame (akhanda jyoti or eternal flame), six pointed star - the 'Star of David'.

Sensory connection; sense of touch, hence the skin.

Bija mantra: YAM (pronounced 'yum').

Vishuddhi Chakra or the throat centre

Definition: *vishuddhi* means purification

Position: in the throat behind the adam's apple.

Vishuddhi chakra is the centre of communication, discrimination and purification.



It governs our capacity to communicate. Honest and clear communication, characteristic of an awakening vishuddhi, leads to greater levels of integrity or wholeness within our mind and energy body. Such integrity is essential in the realisation of the innate Oneness of Being. Dishonesty by contrast, often caused by fear or similar inner blockages, creates fragmentation within our being, leading in turn to discord and restlessness. Vishuddhi enables our capacity to clearly and confidently speak our truth, and to sing or chant with a resonant voice.

Living in such a way that aligns with our authentic wholeness is also the essence of purification or healing in its wider sense. Physical purification no doubt helps, but it is psychological purification that is key. For instance, nipping excessive criticism in the bud, and letting go of old ways of thinking and reacting, so that our mind and energy body resemble more a garden than a wild jungle!

Discrimination (Sanskrit: *viveka*) is also governed by vishuddhi, as symbolised by the swan who is mythically able to separate milk from water. Modern life offers us a

multitude of ways to spend our time and energies and we need the capacity to clearly discern what serves our deeper unfolding and what simply distracts. It is not always easy to know the difference but becomes easier if we learn to listen within to the quiet inner voice of knowing. Listening also becomes easier the more we can develop present moment spaciousness - characteristic of vishuddhi and agya - in which insight and intuition more naturally arise.

Common problems associated with vishuddhi imbalance: coughs, colds, neck or throat issues, thyroid imbalance, inability to communicate or excess meaningless talking.

Practices to awaken: ujjayi pranayama; khechari mudra; jalandhara bandha; inverted asana such as sarvangasana (shoulderstand), simhasana (roaring lion), mantra chanting, visualization of symbol.

Symbols: a lotus with 16 petals, often sky blue in colour, white swan (sometimes alongside a black swan), a drop of nectar.

Sensory connection; sense of hearing, hence the ears.

Bija mantra: HAM (pronounced 'hum').

Agya Chakra or the third eye centre

Definition: *agya* means command, meaning therefore the command centre. It is also called 'the third eye'. Whereas the two fleshy eyes enable us to see the outer material world, the third eye opens up perception on an inner or more subtle level.

Position: in the centre of the head, at the top of the spinal column



Agya is the centre, or eye, of wisdom, clarity, insight and intuition. When open, we are more in touch with the sky-like nature of mind in which thoughts come and go like transient clouds, and insight and intuition arise like flashes from beyond.

When working on the chakras, we generally start with agya chakra initially because this chakra gives us a sense of spaciousness and clarity. When we are more spacious we can more easily open to the more challenging emotions/ feelings/ memories stored in the lower chakras, without becoming overwhelmed.

Its two petals, on which are the sun and the moon, represent the onset of duality – day/night; man/woman; I/you etc. – which pervades the whole of the manifest world. Beyond agya, duality merges into the Unitary experience characteristic of bindu and sahasrara.

Thoughts and concepts are a gift; they allow us to live life on a practical level, to interact, to make sense of the world around us and so forth. Yet if agya is relatively closed, they can also tie us down in stereotypical and limiting notions, creating a cage of individuality. We give the status of reality to our thoughts and become entirely identified by them. On this level, agya chakra expresses as dry intellectual thinking, obsession with dogmatic concepts and intolerance to the promptings of intuition. Thereby we completely forget our true universal nature.

Used judiciously however, as in contemplation and reflection (Gyana Yoga), discerning thoughts point beyond themselves, as in the classical finger pointing to the moon. We have to use the finger to go beyond and 'see' – i.e. intuit – the moon. Such direct seeing, free of the trammels of everyday thinking, is characteristic of the wisdom that arises from an awakened agya chakra.

The stirrings of this wisdom touch the ground of our Being enabling us to perceive a sense of wonder in everyday situations. We gain a deeper and saner perspective behind the transient joys and pains of daily life, and are thereby able to respond to life more effectively and compassionately.

Such wisdom allows us to embrace the sacred playing into the whole of life, and also realise our potential which lies through bindu and sahasrara (see below).

Common problems associated with agya imbalance: rigid and obsessive thinking, dogmatic concepts, intellectual intolerance, anxiety, restless distracted mind.

Practices to awaken: meditation, shambhavi mudra, nadi shodhana pranayama, sirshana (headstand), visualization of symbol.

Symbols: an eagle or kite flying high and free, a lotus with 2 petals, often mauve or indigo in colour, on which is the sun and the moon representing duality; black shiva lingam.

Bija mantra: OM

Although often considered to be chakras, both bindu and sahasrara lie beyond the six spinal chakras and are more accurately seen as symbols of our deeper existential nature.

Bindu or the point

Definition: *bindu* means point or drop

Position: symbolically placed at the top and back of the head

The bindu is the point, or gateway, through which the universal flows into the personal. It is where we as embodied beings touch the ineffable. It represents that mystical point which is referred to in the Hermetic statement:

Reality is a circle, of which the centre (bindu) is everywhere, and the circumference nowhere¹

As the drop, the bindu indicates that, as individuals, we are a drop in the Universal Ocean of Being, symbolized by Sahasrara.

Sahasrara or thousand petalled lotus

Definition: *sahasrara* means thousand, which in turn represents the infinite. It is also called the crown.

Position: symbolically at the top, or just above, the head.

The sahasrara lies beyond all words and concepts. It is an experience that can arise in deep states of meditation, whereby the individual merges into the transcendental. It represents the crowning fulfilment of spiritual awakening; that state where there is nothing left to be known or experienced - the ineffable fullness.

Acknowledgements: To Swami Nishchalananda, spiritual director of Mandala Yoga Ashram, whose teachings and inspiration has informed much of this handout.

¹ Attributed to the Greek philosopher Empedocles