

The Chakra-s

Modern science is beginning to go back to old ideas about us, that we are holistic beings, and that all the different aspects of ourselves are related, and affect each other. But for a long while our society, and particularly perhaps medicine, has tried to understand people by dividing them up into different headings, and then looking at those different headings as though they were completely discrete from each other. The yogis knew, thousands of years ago, that we were extremely complex, and that all parts of us interrelate. Two models that they used show this particularly well: the model of the five maya-s (often called by the later name of the kosha-s), and the model of the chakra-s.

The five maya-s are alluded to in the Taittiriya Upanishad. They are five different aspects of all conscious beings: the body, the breath or life-force or energy, mind, attitudes and personality, and feelings. Deeper than all these is yet another component, that of spirit or consciousness. The important thing about the term maya is that its meaning has within it the idea that each aspect affects and is affected by the others. We can take a very simple example, the emotion of anger. When we are angry, our body expresses it (differently in different people, but often in a change of skin colour, and in movements such as the clenching of fists); our breath changes, usually becoming faster; our mind becomes filled with the object of our anger; our attitudes and personality are changed, perhaps forever, and certainly in the moment of anger.

The model of the chakra-s seems to have developed rather later, probably concurrently with hatha yoga, although the idea of chakra-s is an old one, mentioned in the Yoga Sutra. Also a model which brings together all different aspects of us, it is based on the idea of us as beings of energy, with energy (prana) flowing around us through channels called nadi-s. Nadi-s flow all around the body much like nerves, arteries and veins. The three most important are Susumna, Ida and Pingala. These three come together at seven different points deep within us, and where they come together are the seven chakra-s. When energy is flowing freely, without obstacle, the chakra-s will be healthy and functioning well. When energy is blocked, then there will be problems for at least one chakra - and if this continues for a while, gradually all the others will be affected.

The lowest chakra is Muladhara, at the base of the spine, slightly above the pelvic floor. It is related to the element of earth, to issues of safety, stability, trust and confidence. Slightly above it, in the sacral area, is Svadhisthana, related to the element of water, and to issues around our ability to be open to pleasure, sexuality and sensuality, and to deep emotions and feelings. Level with the navel is Manipuraka, related to the element of fire, and to issues around individuality and ego, autonomy, power, vitality and will. Level with the heart is Anahata, related to the element of air, and to issues around relationships and the ability to love, both others and ourselves. At the throat area is Vishuddhi, related to the element of space, and to issues around expression and the ability to communicate our own truth, our own reality...but also the ability to listen to others. Level with the eyebrows is Ajna, to do with knowing, with insight and also with imagination. Finally, at the top of our head, is Sahasrara. When it functions fully, we have full awareness and are connected to the spiritual, to the Divine. Related issues are around belief systems, intelligence and information processing.

Each chakra also relates physically to the area around it: Muladhara for instance relates to the process and organs of elimination; Anahata to the heart and lungs; Sahasrara to the head, brain and nervous system.

The first two chakra-s are very much about the individual, the personal, instincts and drives. The third chakra is a gateway between these two and the next two, which are more involved with the interpersonal and experience. Vishuddhi at the throat is again a gateway, between the interpersonal and the trans-personal character of the highest two chakra-s. They are associated with wisdom and the ability to be aware of, and connect with, that which is beyond the material.

Each chakra is affected by the others, particularly those below it and next to it. Generally, yoga advocates working with the lower chakra-s first, as they are the basis for those above. The ideal of yoga is to fulfill all our potential, the potential represented at each chakra, and gradually to move towards the freedom, expression, abstraction and universality of Sahasrara. Unfortunately, sometimes we find ourselves going in the opposite direction, towards form, density, boundaries, individuality, identification and contraction.

Generally, asana practice will help prana to flow better, and therefore help the chakra-s to function better. Pranayama furthers this, refining the work and helping prana to flow more in the three main nadi-s. Mudra-s and bandha-s pinpoint the area of focus even more. However, the subtle tools of meditation can be just as effective as these physical means, if not more so, in working with the chakra-s.

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