

The subtle system of the chakras

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The subtle body is a notion that can be associated concretely with the bodily experience, different from the anatomy strictly speaking. It is important to understand from the start that the physical anatomy and the subtle one are not in opposition but are complementary. Let us begin by examining the meaning of the term chakra (pronounced tchakra in Sanskrit and Hindi). It comes from the same root as the English word *circle*. The chakra is a typically solar symbol which was developed by both Vaishnavism and Buddhism. Before statues came into use, in ancient times before our era, both Vishnu and Buddha were represented by footprints (often merely small natural depressions in a rock, interpreted as footprints) and by the chakra. *Padam*, the foot in Sanskrit, also means the path taken by a spiritual master leading us to the level of inner experience we seek. The chakras are levels of rising energy inside us that can be harnessed if we work on opening them up. They are like the footholds used by climbers, and their round shape also evokes the shape of the head, which can explain the very ancient association between the two notions, indicating the upward rush of energy from feet to head.

In Buddhism, the dharma, that body of right understanding and ethical teachings that sustains the world – both the inner and outer one – is represented by the *dharmachakra*, and the teaching which corresponds to it sets the wheel of the dharma in motion, *dharmachakra-parivartana* symbolized by the gesture of the Buddha of Sarnath, whose name means” Lord of the deer”. In this context the Buddha is associated with Yoga and Shiva. Sarvanganath which became the name of the place “Sarnath” was originally the name of a temple dedicated to Shiva at that spot. Shiva or Buddha are therefore yogis who have a certain power over deer, that is, the ability to make the right and left channels converge into one chakra, for example the third eye. This is one meaning given to the two golden deer looking at the wheel, or the third eye. The Buddha is compared to a spiritual emperor, *Chakravarti*,” he who makes the Dharma wheel turn”. The capacity of deep absorption in the chakras prepares us to gain control over ourselves and enables us to deal with the restless undisciplined realm of our thoughts and emotions more skillfully.

There is no mention of the chakras in Patanjali. The description of them came about later during the Middle- Ages in the tantric teachings of Hinduism and Buddhism. According to Norbu Namkhai who for years taught the history of that period at the University of Naples, the first text in which the chakras and the nâdis are clearly evoked is Buddhist and dates to the VIIIth century. In Hinduism, the *Maitreya Upanishad* which dates back to a time before the modern era mentions a canal between the heart and the top of the head through which energy rises at the time of death, but this idea is not developed in detail.

Shatchakra nirupanam (a description of the six chakras) is one of the most ancient and precise texts on the subject, the *Goraksha shatakam* (The Centuries of Gorakshnath) is more succinct. In modern times, Arthur Avalon (John Woodrofe) has written *The Power of the Serpent* with the help of a Bengali pundit, and refers to the *Satchakranirupanam* among other writings. Swami Satyananda of Mongyr spread these notions in the West.ⁱ A key work which has been useful for the writing of this article is that of Hiroshi Motoyama, in which he associates a clear presentation of the traditional side of the practice with original scientific research, presenting, for example, the electromagnetic emissions coming from the chakras among subjects having a regular practice of focalizing on them.ⁱⁱ More recently, Shyam Bhatnagar, an Indian living in New York who from time to time gives seminars in France, has developed a system of healing through work on the chakras by associating this with work on sounds. His works are often referred to on Internetⁱⁱⁱ. The work on Tantra Yoga in English is linked to the teachings of Norbu Namkhai.^{iv}

The practice of the chakras is beneficial in two ways. The first is general: a person who becomes absorbed in this type of meditation avoids the usual negative pitfalls of the workings of the mind because the mind, being thus absorbed has no time to produce thoughts. The second benefit stems from the associations coming from the location of the chakras in the body. Even if the placement of the chakras in visualizations is a convention to some degree, there are pre-conscious associations that are directly related to the way we perceive different zones in the body. For most people, the heart remains the heart, the belly the belly, and the head the head. The association of the chakras to different levels of the plexus nerve centers is a path to be explored. However, in my opinion it would be naïve to think for example that merely concentrating on the *vishuddhi* chakra might be enough to cure thyroid diseases. Indeed, there are two types of disturbances in a gland, which can be under-active or over-active and there are several kinds of regulating mechanisms whose function is to restore a normal balance. Therefore, the idea of “stimulating a gland to do it some good” by directly concentrating on it is somewhat simplistic. It would be like trying to fix a computer by shaking it, which seldom works. On the other hand, we can say that as in other types of concentration, becoming absorbed in a given chakra will lower levels of cortisone and other stress hormones in both the short and long term if practiced regularly. We must be careful not to draw hasty conclusions as regards simplified associations, for example believing that concentrating on the heart chakra we will intensify our emotions or that working on *âjna* will increase our ability to acquire knowledge. The path of devotion, for example, recommends visualizing the chosen divinity on one’s forehead, and Rāmana Mahāqrshi who followed the path of knowledge, greatly emphasized concentrating on the subtle heart on the lower right of the chest.

When we get into the more precise visualizations traditionally recommended for the chakras we tap into the power of archetypes. This will be further discussed in the following part in which the chakras are described one by one. It can be said that they generate the creative imagination. Furthermore, the opening of the energy channels enables us to direct energy away from zones where it is found in excess, often due to stress, to zones where it is lacking, for example the chest or the middle of the forehead. The chakras corresponding to

these “dry” zones need to be irrigated via new channels. Certain zones might be compared to swamps drained by canals that carry the water further on towards areas where it will be more useful.

The subtle body can be compared to a mandala, the projection of which is found at the top of the head. It is as if there were four rivers flowing into the entrance doors of the mandala and going down the central axis, then resurging at each chakra. The resurgences can fertilize the zones around them, energizing them and making them “bloom”. If we think about it, we realize that each of the seven chakras is in zones of low stress. For example, in the face, most stress is located in the jaw and between the eyebrows. If we meditate on the chakra in the middle of the forehead, we get away from the stress zones, and even more so if we concentrate our attention on the top of the head.

The channels are situated deep within the middle of the frontal median that separates the front and the back of the body. When we try to move away from the surface of things, to go inward, we move away from nervous agitation. This association is felt when we speak for instance of “ being a bundle of nerves” or feeling “on edge”. It is true that when the chakras are represented on a flat image of the human body there is no depth perception and therefore many people have the idea that the chakras are at the surface. This is true however in the case of *ajñā* at the center of the forehead, and Satyananda tends to place *svādhīsthāna* chakra at the level of the coccyx. As a conclusion, we might consider that one of the paradoxes of the chakra is that when you are completely absorbed in it, there is no more chakra.

The series of chakras considered as a “ladder to the sky”

	location	Element	Seed Mantra	Geometric shape	Animal	Sense
<i>Mûlādhâra</i>	center of the perineum	earth	Lam	yellow square	white elephant	smell
<i>Svādhīsthāna</i>	root of the sexual organs	water	Vam	grey-golden half moon	crocodile	taste
<i>Manipura</i>	navel	fire	Ram	red triangle pointing down	goat	sight

Anâhata	heart	Air	Yam	grey hexagon containing 2 interlocked triangles	black antelope	touch
Vishuddhi	base of the throat	ether	Ham	Circle and down-turned triangle	White elephant	hearing
AJNÂ	CENTER OF THE FOREHEAD	SPIRITUAL	om	TRIANGLE POINTING DOWN	ÂJNÂ IS BEYOND THE ANIMAL REALM	EXTRASENSOR Y, CLAIRVOYANC E AND SUBTLE HEARING
<u>Sahasrâra</u>	<u>top of the head</u>	<u>Spiritual</u>	<u>sound of silence</u>	<u>LOTUS WITH A THOUSAND PETALS</u>	Beyond animal realm	<u>BEYOND THE CREATED</u>

Mulâdhâra

This term means the “root at the base”, but can also be interpreted otherwise by shortening the middle *a* as in *mûla-dhâra* “the current coming from the root”. Indeed, the three ascending currents *idâ*, *pingala* and *sushumnâ* come from this root.

This chakra is represented by a white elephant with seven trunks: this may evoke the yogi’s ability to harmoniously distribute energy among the seven chakras. It can also evoke the origin of the world during the churning of the sea of milk, when the white elephant with seven trunks emerged from the waves and put himself at the service of Indra, prince of the gods. Among the Jains, when the white elephant appears in the dreams of a pregnant woman it announces the coming of a new *thirthankâra*, the Jain equivalent of the avatar. The dream of a white elephant also announced the coming of Buddha to his mother during her pregnancy. In medieval Hinduism, the elephant Ganesh became the sign of auspicious beginnings and the work on the rising of energy in the chakras starts precisely in *muladhâra*.

Buddha, during the first rainy season after his realization gave his first teachings at Sarnath, he lived in a small cottage known as *mulagandha kuti* “little house of the fundamental perfume”. During the rainy season, the earth and the roots in the forest give off a very subtle special scent, a fundamental one which is perceived especially when the closed nostril dilates, that is when we reach stability in the opening of the channels. We experience the direct link between *mûlâdhâra* and the sense of smell according to Yoga, through the association of both to the earth element. In acupuncture, a needle planted in *mûlâdhâra* provokes tingling in the nose and frees not only the nostrils but also the head. Here is how Motoyama develops this point:

This information suggests that before trying to awaken a given chakra, it is helpful to first concentrate on the complementary chakra at the opposite end of the channel connecting them. This is like the method used in acupuncture which treats one zone in order to help a problem zone situated at the other extremity of the body, but closely linked through the network of meridians. For example, hemorrhoids can be treated by planting a needle at the top of the head (Paî-roua, 20th point of the governor meridian).

The techniques based on this principle – both in acupuncture and in yoga– lead to a better functioning of the internal organs and increase the flow of prâna. In the case of yoga this flow is greatly enhanced by reinforcing the interaction between specific chakras.^v

The geometric shape associated with this chakra is a yellow square, yellow being the color of the earth element. If we associate the symbols, the square is linked to the earth like the circle to the sky. Also, *mûlâdhâra* is the seat of vital energy whose outlets are anger and desire. We must know how to deal with this “square” in our subtle body by addressing it “squarely” to discipline it.

It is said that the *deva*, the protecting deity in *mûlâdhâra* has the shape of a whirlwind. Vital energy is, in any case, movement which is either ascending or descending. The energy of the *mûla-prakriti*, of the fundamental nature, is nestled in the perineum. *Para*, the supreme energy is also said to reside there. In a way, it is as if the zones at the base of the trunk and the head were connected. There exists some symmetry between the head and the pelvis, osteopaths use it in their treatments. This symmetry between above and below has a mirror effect. The human mind loves to find symmetry, that is, mirror images. It is said for example that *mûlâdhâra* is the receptacle of a continuous flow that originates in eternal joy, that is, in the head region. He who wakes it is described as a “god of the word”. Well mastered concentration on *mûlâdhâra* brings a release of deep-seated blockages known in psychiatry as the obsessional retention tendency or the inclination towards a sadist-anal temperament.

In this zone, we also place *Brahma-granthi*, the knot of Brahma, the god at the origin of all.

This knot is an interesting image, as when one unties a knot, there is no loss of matter. It is the same as undoing a knot of energy to allow it to ascend. It is not wasted but on the contrary, completely recycled. As is often the case in meditation, we can discover and apply the laws of inner ecology for a more efficient use of our energy whose quantity remains fairly constant. Generally speaking, *mûlâdhâra* is linked to the vitality that reveals itself through sexuality and anger. In this sense, it is a storehouse of karma. Taking that into account we often advise people to begin work with the chakras first by concentrating on *âjnâ*, so that the descending light will then flow downwards naturally, so to speak, to the chakras below.

There are said to be seven secondary chakras in the legs. Six of them have names ending in tara: *atara, vitara, sutara*.^{vi} Tara is the mother goddess whose name comes from the same root as the word *trans* in Latin which means to traverse. Even the seventh of these secondary chakras, *patala*, meaning the lower world, is designated with a word resonant with *tara*, since the l and the r are phonetically very close, being two liquid consonants. The meaning seeming to emerge from all this is that energy must go through and traverse a series of levels without lingering there, to start its ascent from the soles of the feet to the base of the pelvis in order to become that Shakti which will then begin its ascent of the central axis.

Svâdhîsthâna, or the grounding of the self

This center is generally situated by the texts in the central axis at the level of the root of the sexual organs. Satyananda places it at coccyx level. It corresponds more or less to the *hara* region in Zen Buddhist meditation. When it is awakened it enhances grounding and fearlessness. This is fairly easily explained from a physiological point of view. We know that basic human functions are founded on agonistic and antagonistic (push & pull) muscle groups: for example, the muscles of the lumbar region encourage a posterior flexion of the back, that is, a posture of courage, and the muscles of the abdomen create a forward tilt expressing an attitude of fear. Both cannot work at the same time. Therefore, it is important in daily meditation to work on the curve of the lower back, keeping the small of the back strong and energized.

The *svâdhîsthâna* is like the center of gravity of the body. If we are well rooted there we become like one of those toy soldiers standing on a half sphere of lead and no matter to which side he is pushed, he comes right back to his vertical axis. The name of the chakra means “to be stable”, *sthân*, fundamentally, *ahdi*, in the Self or the self, *sva*. The word evokes health which in Sanskrit and Hindi is *svastha*; to be stable in the self or in other words feel just right.....The *shat-chakra-nirupanam* affirms: “He who meditates on the immaculate lotus we call *sadhîsthâna* is immediately liberated of all enemies such as intense desire, anger and greed, etc. He becomes the lord of all yogis, like a sun illuminating ignorance. His words flow from him abundantly like a nectar, revealing themselves in the form of prose and poetry in a well- structured discourse.”^{vii}

Svâdhîsthâna can also be interpreted as *svara-dhîsthâna*, the fundamental place of the sound of silence. Indeed, the continuous perception of this stream of silence truly stabilizes us. The

animal of this chakra is the crocodile which corresponds to strength and greed which is brought by the current of the ascending river and becomes a spiritual force. The crocodile in its mythical form, the *makara*, is the animal mounted by the goddess Ganges, and in this sense the central axis is often compared to Ganges.

Hakuin gives a method of self-treatment using the *hara* chakra or *svâdhisthâna*:

This best of all milky nectars, the size of a quail's egg, which I stabilized at the top of the head, has a refined taste. It fills the head and the zones below it, descending gently and all parts along the way down to the coccyx are made better by this descent. It is like water flowing downward. One can clearly hear it. This nectar fills the entire body as it descends, soaking in everywhere. It warms the legs and stops at the soles of the feet."...This current that slowly descends, soaks through the body builds it up, fills it, warms and bathes it. It is like a good doctor who gathers up all sorts of remedies and magnificent perfumes then fills containers with potions of these remedies in order then to bathe that part of the body below the navel.... This method is the key to nourishing the essence and a superb technique for attaining longevity. I, an old monk learned it from Master Hakuyu (*Haku* in Japanese means "light", and *yu*, "dark") a man who followed the Path. Whether healing is fast or slow depends on the zeal or the laziness of he who practices. If he is not lazy he will enjoy a long life.

Here Hakuin explains the relation between *svâdhisthâna* and health, *sva-sthâ*, that is actually strong due to the similarity of the terms used in Sanskrit,. This descent of energy is very important also in the Tibetan tradition under the name of *vajrasattva*. In a modern holistic approach, this corresponds to reduction of stress and a great deal of contemporary research in the neurosciences shows that reducing stress is a factor in promoting longevity.

Because so many fears manifest themselves in the form of irregularities in the flow of abdominal breathing (inhaling and exhaling) the seat of *svâdhisthâna* can be used to evacuate these fears. This is the essential meaning of this koan that Hakuin was particularly fond of.

If you ask me how you might summon forth the great question, simply concentrate on the following question, abandoning all passion and thoughts, neither preferring to find a place of calm, nor leaving a place of agitation :

Navel and Sea-of-Spiritual Energy

(Ki-Kai, situated about 4,5 cm below the navel) are the Emptiness of Tchao-Tchéou (Japanese Joshu)

What does that mean?^{viii}

Fayen of Wou-Tsou (in Japanese Goso-Hôen, died in 1104) composed this stanza:

“The void of Tchao-Tchéou

Is like the blade of a naked sword! It is icy cold.

Searching for more explanations

Will cause your body to be cut in two”^{ix}

Hakuin continues : Ultimately, the essential point of the search is in the concentration on the question, which is why it is said that: “With a great interrogation, one will attain great enlightenment” and with sufficient questioning, sufficient enlightenment.”

Here now is the conclusion of Hakuin’s letter : “Finally I, the old monk will add a remark that will serve as a cordial. My lord, I shall present it to you quite frankly. Do not blindly cry out “Khât”!” the way aspiring Zen monks often do. Don’t expect either to experience a magical state of enchantment as if by charm. (*dhârahî*) after you comprehend my words. Above all don’t swallow it whole as if you were swallowing a jujube without tasting it. What is this sentence that will be like a cordial? Here it is: a monk asked Thao-Tchéou: *Does a dog also have a Buddha nature?*” He replied: *“Emptiness!”*

Manipura, or the city of the pear

This chakra is situated at the navel. However certain modern descriptions place it at the solar plexus. But this seems doubtful, because one of the main functions of a chakra is to lighten up zones charged with stress. Stress zones in the abdominal area are precisely the solar plexus and the genital area. Let us note, for instance, that *mûlâdhâra* lies just behind the genital zone and *svâdhistâna* is above it. This helps to relieve the stress for instance of oversensitivity gathered there.

It is interesting to note the animal associated with *manipura* is the ram, a symbol of obstinacy. This trait is a fault in everyday life, but becomes a quality applied to spiritual life, that is, when energy is able to rise from this center and expand into the consciousness of the third eye.

Anâhata, or the awakening of spontaneous sound

We know that this term is usually associated with sound not (an-) produced by striking (ahata), but Abhinavagupta gave it a lovely interpretation as the “sound that cannot be taken away” (âhata). This evokes soundless spontaneous flutter of silence that can be heard deep that within the heart. This means awakening the music of joy and awareness and amplifying it, so that it becomes perceptible to others, so to speak. Then they too will become our intimate friends. Besides, the center of the chest, the *anâhata chakra* also serves to release the energies of stress that build up not only at the base of the throat and in the solar plexus, but also in the nipples of the breast, two highly sensitive zones, which thus are also linked in one way or another to stress. In EFT (Emotional Freedom Therapy), you cannot tap the center of the chest directly of course, but you can use the finger, tapping certain points arranged in a square, two in the middle of a line going from the nipples to the collarbone and two directly underneath them going downward to the 10th rib on each side.

For Buddha, the blossoming of that lotus which opens under the lake’s surface is the very image of the joy of detachment. The flower’s opening signifies joy, and the expanse of the lake’s surface evokes expansion with no limits, like that of the void. The sense of joy that rises from the pelvis is based on sexual energy and the opening of the heart corresponds to a space without obstacles like that of a great lake. He who knows how to be like the wind, sweeps through the leaves of every plant in the countryside and every tree in the forest, yet becomes attached to none.

The animal emblem of *ânahata chakra* is the black antelope; it embodies both vivaciousness and fear of the world, two qualities that enable us to quickly reach the center of the mind. The symbol is associated to that of the deer, *mrig*, a creature so fascinated by music that hunters play melodies to lure it into a trap. In the same way, when we know how to hypnotize our mind by absorbing it in the sound of silence, it becomes entrapped, so to speak, and has to remain in the heart center. This allows us to directly enter another state of consciousness, one of total absorption almost like an epileptic trance. That is why the word designating these sudden changes of level of consciousness which is epilepsy, in both Sanskrit and Hindi is *mrig-avasthâ*, “the state of the deer”. Of course, this comparison has its limits since a generalized state of epilepsy means a complete loss of consciousness, whereas here what is involved is a deeper state of consciousness.

At the level of the heart chakra, we can visualize an upward pointing triangle, the sign of Shiva. When we feel sad or depressed, our back slumps and our heart droops. We must then visualize “poking” the heart, as if with the point of an arrow of light, to stimulate it back into shape. We can also repeat the well-known medieval formula: “Lift up the heart!”... To enhance this practice, one method is to press the tips of thumbs together upwards and forward. The central axis is often likened to the lingam which is represented in several chakras. It is gray in *mulâdhâra*, appearing and disappearing with the rhythm of the breath. It is black at the level of the third eye, representing the depth of what we experience there, and it is brilliant at the level of *shasrâra*, illuminating the space surrounding it.

The representation of the heart chakra includes an empty circle, representing the extension of the subtle field in the center to the surrounding area. When that happens, the chakra becomes like the bindû radiating *nâda*, the subtle sound.

The chakra of the heart is also represented with a wishing tree; for at the level of the heart we have access to more discernment. We can see that things we feel strongly about come true. It is important to distinguish between right feelings and wishes and those that are less so. The deity of this zone is Vishnu, the god of harmony, both emotional and familial, that is, the opening of the heart in our daily relationships. We call the heart *Vishnu-granthi*, in other words Vishnu's knot, which must be undone both by rising energy and practicing altruism.

Vishuddhi chakra

Vishuddhi has the meaning of complete purification. The Vedas say "May your thoughts be in your words and your words in your thoughts!" We can also find purification of stress-related anxiety. Indeed, stress and anxiety contract the base of the throat. Becoming aware of this fact enables us to send waves of relaxation and fundamental purification to the zone. It also helps people with eating disorders to heal, since they tend to be anxious and anxiety blocks the throat and therefore the passage of food. This can cause cycles of anorexia followed by eating binges or even chronic bulimia.

There is story in which Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu were on the shore next to the Sea of milk at the time of the beginning of the world. Vishnu took for himself everything pleasant coming from the sea, including his wife Lakshmi, but then poison began to rise to the surface. Vishnu and Brahma instantly fled and only Shiva, the god of yoga was able to swallow it all up. He didn't die from it. His throat merely turned blue and this episode gave him one of his most popular names; *Nîlkanth* or "he whose throat, "*kanth*", is blue, "*nil*". Anxiety tends to tighten the throat, but if we can visualize it as being relaxed, open and vast as the sky, this will uproot anxiety and make it disappear.

The *vishuddhichakra* corresponds to ether, placing it at the top of the pyramid of elements. It also acts as a purifier of poison. It is interesting to note what yogis say about it: there is at the back of the top of the head a sort of mountain cave, a vacuole that is one of the main locations of *bindhû*, the focalization point in meditation. From this source stems a current that passes through *lalana*, a secondary chakra situated above the palate. Then this nectar continues to descend, going through *vishuddhi* where it is purified before it spreads throughout the body. Otherwise it would be poisonous and there is a play on words in Sanskrit between *vish*, poison, and *vishuddhi*, purification (the two "sh" are slightly different still). This description may seem fanciful but there is a down to earth psychological interpretation. If tension blocks our throat, the energy of thoughts descending into the body will be contaminated by anxiety which will then spread the poison of chronic stress to the rest of our organism.

The animal for this chakra is also the white elephant, as in *mulâdhâra*. There is a mirror effect here, and the most material of the chakras has the same fundamental quality as the subtlest one. However, to move a white elephant from the ground floor up to the “fourth floor” takes a lot of energy and skill. The work of sublimation is not easy. Even *ham*, the seed mantra associated with this chakra has a consonance that is subtle as it evokes the breath we are hardly aware of, were it not for the fog it creates on a pane of glass. It also evokes the self which at that level is moving out and going towards the supreme Self that overarches and protects all.

The goddess of the middle of the throat is *Girijâ*, the mountain girl. She is at the summit of the ascension of the five elements through the chakra. The god associated with *vishuddhi* chakra is Sada-Shiva, a name that can be translated as “eternally good”. When emotions caused by anxiety cease to tighten our throats, the obstacles to goodness have been removed. At the level of *svâdhisthâna* we find the image of a half moon, and in *Vishuddhi*, it becomes a full moon. Here again there is a symbolism much like the one involving the two elephants, evoking the power of sublimation. The zone below the navel and the throat itself are linked to respiratory blockages and if one is open, the other will be freed too. It is nearly impossible to rid ourselves of stress without relaxing the abdomen below the navel. Let us note the alliteration in Sanskrit between *vishuddhi* and *visha*, meaning poison. The body we inhabit must become emptiness filled with pure light, unpolluted by this anxiety lodged in the throat.

The *âjnâ* or the knowledge that returns to the self

Usually; we interpret *âjnâ* as “instructions”. Just as a guru instructs a disciple, *âjnâ* directs the other chakras. Another interpretation can be found if we understand the long *â* in *âjnâ* as a prefix signifying the return to the self, meaning knowledge that goes back into the interior. In the same way, meditation is defined in one of the Upanishads as *antarchakshu*, the eye that looks inward. This ambiguity in defining the chakra is represented by a horizontal moon crescent with a dot above it, a symbol also found among Tibetans. This sign evokes the vocalization of the vowel transcribed by a final m. A small thunderbolt appears above both shapes, representing the expansion of sound and light in empty space. In yoga, we learn to listen to the sound of silence behind the middle of the forehead just as we contemplate fundamental light there.

Certain yogic texts make an interesting and important distinction about *âjnâ*. There are two poles in this chakra which is described with an egg-like shape. The lower pole is linked to the lower regions, which means individuality, the ego and the earth. The upper pole is linked to the sublime. In practice, the space between the eyebrows is related to the one found in the middle of the forehead.

In the center of the forehead resides *Paramâtma* Shiva, who is in resonance with Sada-Shiva in *vishuddhi* chakra. Sada-Shiva is defined as a stabilizer of goodness (*Sada*, as we have seen, means eternal and Shiva means good.)

In books we often see *âjnâ* placed between the eyebrows, but the translation of the Sanskrit has its pitfalls. The ancient texts speak of *bhru-madhya*, which means the middle of the forehead, and therefore not the space between the eyebrows, but area two or three centimeters above.

Sahasrâra, the flame and the Vajra

Here we are speaking of upward expansion and flowering into empty space as well as of passing through the intermediary stages before our reincarnation. For ordinary people, we know that at the moment of the death energy moves from the heart to the top of the head. There it will reach the space above and meet the divinity chosen to help the passing of one body to another in the process of reincarnation. In the case of the sage, however, there is no real ascension and this is evoked in the Upanishads: *tasya prâna mâ utkramati*” meaning he ” whose energy does not move upwards “

The space above the head is often evoked in Hindu sculpture by an aura, a flame with millions of rays of light fanning out towards the top or a half *vajra*. This is a common form of trident but the tips of this one curve in towards each other. We can see here a weapon being put to a nobler use : this is the Tibetan dorge, ritual object associated to the thunderbolt which has teeth that close on themselves, unlike the weapon. This one has open teeth on both sides of the handle in order to wound the adversary in whatever position the weapon happens to be. Thereby, it evokes the mastery over anger and the recycling, so to speak, of basic energy towards the spiritual.

To use another familiar image, we can compare the rising of energy to a show of fireworks with the lotus of a thousand petals as the final display. The text below is a description of the six chakras, *Shat-chakra-nirupanam*, found in verse 39 :

When the actions of a yogi are good in every way, in the service of his guru's lotus from its roots upward, he will see above *âjnâ* chakra the form of Mahânâda holding the lotus of his hand the power of the word, *vak-siddhi*. *Mahânâda* is the place of the dissolution of the great Sound and will forever more hold energy currents. It is a place of tranquility, spreading grace and dispelling fears, manifesting pure intelligence, *buddhi*.....^x

Regarding the symbolism of Buddha with his chignon (or top knot) or a flame or an upward pointing thunderbolt at the top of the head, we could point out a particular form of this symbolism from Tibet called *ushnisha bhadra*, the Noble One with a chignon. The meditator concentrates on this spot for contemplating emptiness. He can hear the sound of the

subtle “a” and see the radiance of the morning sun. It is as if he were floating above the other chakras, resonating and radiating.

In Gorakshnath’s writings, the meditator is trained to visualize the chakras as being identical to the Atma, meaning that which is pure and all pervading, much like space, and appears as brilliance, something like a mirage^{xi}. The idea developed in the following stanzas of the same text is that if too much importance is given to the colors of the chakras and their seed mantras, this will orient the mind towards material results such as power over others, etc. This is a trap, and the text concludes in stanza 92 by saying “Those who know the Principle, the Atmâ, know that it is free of pain, has no support, is free of multiplicity, has no substrate, is free of suffering and devoid of all form.^{xii} The entire functions of the chakras can be summed up, as in Tibetan *tumo*, as the rising upwards of felicity from its source in *mûlâdhâra* towards the vacuity which extends above and beyond *sahasrâra*. Finding felicity is the motivation behind spiritual practice and life. However, this joy can lead to attachment and become a kind of addiction. Therefore, it must be balanced with emptiness which brings detachment and freedom. This is an important underlying message expressed by Gorakshnath in his conclusion concerning the chakra system.

The nâdis

Let us begin by mentioning an illustration from the time of Mohenjo-Daro which is very interesting. It dates back to 3500 years before our era, and we find one of the earliest allusions to the subtle anatomy in yoga tradition. Indeed, there is an inscription above the head of a yogi in meditation and the letter in the axis is a line resembling the letter i which can be seen as a vertical extension of the body’s axis. Down at foot level, the ankles are crossed as in *sukhâsana*, the easy pose in Yoga, and there is a vertical line prolonging the axis downwards.

Furthermore, the head is ornamented with two cow horns which rise above the head with a tendency to curve inwards at the tips, in other words, returning to the central axis. The ancient yogi wears a garment covering his arms that is rendered by the artist as an ascending spiral. It seems we have here the manifestation of a conception of classical yoga in which the body parts are associated with *udâna*, meaning “that which rises”, *ud*. From the subtle viewpoint, this energy rising from the extremities is there to repair the disunity and disruption caused by stress— even the syndrome of bodily fragmentation often observed in psychosis— by means of redirecting energy towards the central axis, whence the ascending whirlwind that goes up from the hands to the nape of the neck.

In the classical texts, there is no mention of energy ascending in a double spiral up the lateral channels. Yet, kundalini whirling movement, *ghurni*, induces dizziness, is said to be a sign of awakening. It is not hard to imagine that a visualization in which one identifies with an ascending double spiral, might lead to dizziness.

It can be said that the exercise of *khecharî*, pointing the tongue upwards so it touches the palate, represents a culmination point of rising energy. We can also see if we meditate on it,

an inner marriage, the tongue becoming a *lingam*, that is, the organ of Shiva, and the cavity of the pharynx that the yogi penetrates by pushing the uvula becoming the *yoni*, the feminine organ.

The interior sheath enveloping the *sushumnâ* is called *chitrinî*, “the marvelous one”. It will open like a flower at the center of the forehead. Furthermore, the central axis can be stimulated by the sounds of *so ham*. In the Upanishads of yoga, two ways of doing this are described. Either *so* is pronounced on the in breath and *ham* on the out breath, or the opposite. We must remember that in Sanskrit, the short “a” is pronounced rather like the u in hum.

Our usual perception of the central axis of the body is rather unclear, as we dimly perceive it as a sort of gray well. Then little by little through focalization it gathers light, becoming luminous column lighting up our whole interior. In another image, we can compare this central axis to an artesian well and tapping into it opens it up allowing the energy to rise to the surface, that is, to the head. Whatever the images we use, we can also keep in mind the remark of a Tibetan master who had worked for months intensely focalizing on awakening the central axis. When asked what the best technique for doing this was, he smiled and replied “Feeling it”.

One of the interpretations of the term *sushumnâ* is to consider it as a grammatical intensive form of the root word *shan*, which means peace, therefore, intense peace. Another interpretation which is more mystical and poetic is *shu-shu-mana*, the mind, *mana*, which is absorbed in the whispering sound *shu-shu-* when energy rises up the central axis. The energy moving up this axis seems to correspond to the practice called *shoshûten* in Taoism, sometimes also called “circulation of light”. Both in the Chinese term and in the Sanskrit we find the onomatopoeia of a swishing sound in *shôshu* or *shushsu*.

The energy usually found in the subtle body is linked to stress; that is to say, to the acceleration of heartbeats of the heart on the left. Therefore, the basic tactic to bring things into balance is to concentrate on the subtle heart on the right. Let’s imagine a cardboard sheet which is slightly crushed and bent on the left. To straighten it out we need to push and bend it to the right to its normal shape. Visualizing our heart and subtle heart in this way can help balance the heart chakra. In turn, this enables energy to rise to the third eye. Another archetypal image is that of bringing the two sides of a weighing scale into perfect balance; the beam will then become perfectly vertical.

Motoyama draws interesting parallels between the energy channels of Yoga and acupuncture. The right and left channels, *îda* and *pingala*, which are described in traditional texts as being close to the central axis could correspond to the interior meridian of the bladder which is the location of a series of important acupuncture points corresponding to the major organs of the body.

We often read in the Yoga texts that the chakras before their awakening are like lotuses turned upside-down. We can see here an image of our own basic hypochondria. Our moods tend to evoke a withered flower beginning to droop. We are like babies ready to cry over the least little pain, even if we have learned enough social graces not to do it in public. Turning

the lotus upwards will correspond to transforming the bumps and scratches of babyhood into beatitude, orienting our sufferings both big and small towards the Self, that “sun beyond all” that is evoked in the first chapter of the Chandogya-Upanishad.

We might say that with people who haven’t worked on themselves, the central axis is shaped like an hourglass. Anger often explodes in them resulting in a release of energy upwards above the head. In moments like this we often exclaim drawing an imaginary line just above our head with the hand, “I’m up to here with all that!”

Anger also causes a downward movement of energy, a diarrhea of *prâna* so to speak. Conversely, when we learn to exercise better control, we can summon back our energies both from above and below and gather them at the heart, which has a natural tendency towards expansion. When we do this, the hourglass shape becomes more like a spindle.

To conclude these thoughts on the three channels, here is an ancient tale from Tamil Nadu:

An errant monk arrived in a city on a pilgrimage the day before the annual event. There was no place to stay, but finally he found a sort of corridor where there was just enough room to lie down. He lay down and begin to meditate in that position to rest from the fatigue of his journey on foot, but at dusk he heard a knock on the door: it was another wandering monk trying to find a place to stay. He explained to him, “There is not enough room for us of both lie down, but we can sit in meditation and talk of God!” which they did. A while later there was a new knock on the door. It was a third wandering monk who also wanted shelter. He said, ” There is not enough room for the 3 of us to sit in this tiny space but we could meditate standing up and speak of God.” That is what they did. At midnight sharp, they heard three knocks at the door. They opened and found themselves

face to face with God himself. He said to them: “ I’ve been able to observe your sense of altruism and meditation, and so to reward you, I will grant you whatever you wish!” At first, they were taken aback, but finally they asked for the favor of staying together in order to practice. God gladly granted them that, and together the three wrote a book that is with us even today, *Jnâna dpipikâ*, or “The little light of knowledge/knowing”.

The three wandering monks who finally get up to meet God can evoke the three channels that rise toward the subtle heart and come together in the light of the third eye. The result of this union is knowledge which opens up this, so that we can access it like an open book.

A word about research on the chakras

To begin with a general approach, Sedlemeier in 2012 did a meta-analysis, that is a study of the studies concerning yoga and different forms of meditation including transcendental meditation centered on a mantra well as mindfulness meditation centered on body scanning. The simple fact that he found 595 publications on the subject at the time reveals the keen

interest of scientists today for this type of study. He then selected 133 of them for which he felt the methodology was scientifically satisfactory.^{xiii} He found that the overall effect of the practices was the reduction of stress which as a consequence brought about an improvement in a number of psychological parameters thus providing protection against a number of illnesses. Curiously enough one of the most remarkable effects he observed as regards this meditation, which in general people practice alone, was somewhat paradoxically a marked improvement in human relations among meditators.

As for Hiroshi Motoyama, he did some precise research on the slowing down of the metabolism among yogis, a fact that he objectively established.^{xiv} Working with the chakras, he found that the study group having training in meditation on them showed both a higher level of sympathetic activity before a given stimulus as well as a higher level of calming parasympathetic activity afterwards. This would suggest that the subjects of this group have a larger spectrum of dynamic equilibrium between the two opposing functions of the sympathetic and parasympathetic. These subjects can arouse the functions more readily. When they are attentive, they are really so and the same when they relax. It seems therefore that meditation stimulates the neuro vegetative system rendering it more responsive and giving it a wider spectrum of activity.

It can also be observed that a person who knows how to concentrate on the chakra of the navel for example, feels a surge of energy from that chakra. Then we can observe that the electric potential on the skin at the location of the chakra, which measured a positive charge, has disappeared.^{xv} This type of concentration brings about a modification of the electric energy in a given part of the body. In other experiments researchers have noted the modification of electromagnetic activity in the chakras.

For additional recent research on the chakras, there is the body of work done by Shyam Bhatnagar in New York.

By way of conclusion

A certain number of Yoga texts such as the *Shiva Samhitâ* for example, clearly explain from the beginning that the level to be attained is that of the non-duality of the vedânta, and that yoga offers methods that can lead there. There have been several exchanges between the two paths that have been well described in a book by Christian Bouy (de Boccard editions, Paris)ⁱ on Yoga and Vedanta in the medieval Indian tradition. The two approaches can be observed in a story involving Gorakshnath and Brahmânanda.

Gorakshnath was very proud of having attained vajrakâya "the diamond body", through intensive practice of yoga. One day he met the old Vedanta devotee Brahmânanda and he handed him his sword, asking the Vedantin to strike him to see for himself just how invulnerable his body was. At first Brahmânanda refused to lend himself to this little game, but since Gorakshnath was so insistent, he finally struck him a blow of the sword, which sure

enough bounced right off of his body leaving no wound. With a smile, he gave the sword back to Gorakshnath saying, “Now it is your turn to strike me!” Gorakshnath objected saying, “Old and frail as you are, the first blow will probably kill you!” However, since Barhamânanda insisted he struck a blow with his sword. He was completely stupefied to see the sword cut through the body as if it had no substance and was made up of emptiness. Brahmânanda concluded the encounter with just two memorable words: “*kâya chaya*”. “The body is a shadow”.

The opening of the energy channels tends at first to stimulate disturbing emotions such as desire, anger or fear. In this sense Swami Vijayânanda with whom I spent 25 years of study used to say that it was far preferable to engage in this type of intensive practice alone limiting to oneself its difficulties and not inconveniencing others. This way only we are perturbed by these emotions and others are not affected by all this. The same is true in the Tibetan tradition: in certain schools for example, the real work on the opening of the channels takes place, for example, only in the second year of the three-year retreat, after multiple preparations. It happens that I recently had a discussion with Tenzin Palmo, the Englishwoman who is the oldest nun from the western world in the Tibetan tradition. She is 70 years old today and pronounced her vows half a century ago. She also spent 11 years and a half in a hermit’s cave.

--**Me:** I am finishing up an article on the chakras. What should I tell the public in the western world on this subject?

--**Tenzin Palmo:** Most people don’t have the preparation to withstand the Kundalini energies when they really awaken. You need to already have a disciplined life, understand the doctrinal framework of yoga practice, whether it be Hindu or Tibetan, and have a Master who closely follows your progress. It’s a very gradual process. In the western world, anyone who proposes instant realization always attracts crowds to his programs and makes big money. These are like supermarkets of spiritual consumerism. People think they have found the best method by choosing the fastest one, but it doesn’t work that way. The fact that there is so much information available on Internet makes things even more confusing. Scratching the surface here and there cannot replace digging deeply into the same spot to make a well and reach water. In most fields, reaching professional status, whether in technological pursuits or artistic ones, requires long years of study. Why should it be any different in the training of the mind and spirit? I once met a musician who played a sort of didgeridoo. However, it was a different instrument which did not come from Australia but from tribes in South America. It was a long tube. The music from it had something fascinating about it; it haunted you after you heard it. I asked him how long it had taken to master his instrument. He said that in the beginning it took him 6 months to merely get a sound from it. Even in so simple a case, perseverance was necessary.

Often people who practice are incapable of spending two minutes sitting calmly and paying attention to their breath. They want to move on right away to more advanced practices and more rapid results. Think about yourself. You’ve been working on these meditation practices

for dozens of years. They don't come overnight. With advanced practices like *dzogchen*, Tibetan non-duality, or the *nâdis*, the channels are like nectar, and you must have a good receptacle and cleanse it thoroughly. If you don't, either the nectar will be polluted or the vessel itself will break.

The work on the chakras is one of concentration. It enables the who practices to develop an internal experience of peace. In Buddhism, this is called *shamathâ*. *Shâmatha* must be accompanied by and followed by *vipassana*, or insight practice. We might compare the first type of meditation to soap and the second type to identification of the stains. The soap or detergent must come into contact with the stain so that the cleansing process can take place. For the sake of simplicity, we might say that the place of *vipassana* in the Hindu system is occupied by the Vedanta, and one observes the power of the mind from the outside without intervening. The chakras have their importance in a system of meditation but have no absolute value in themselves. Along this line of thinking, one of the greatest Buddhist sages, Nagarjuna, pointed out that one of the greatest mistakes made by human beings was attributing an absolute value to things having only a purely relative existence. This could be applied to the chakra system. Of course, working in the relative world with bodily sensations also evokes an awakening to the experience of the absolute. This can be found also in the symbolism of three, which surpasses itself becoming the three and a half, or the four of the Absolute. The three energy channels meet in the center of the forehead where the divine light comes forth, and when we undo the three knots: the base of the pelvis, the heart center and the middle of the head we can emerge into the light of the Self.

¹ In particular the book *The Tantra of Kundalini Yoga* Bihar School of Yoga, 2007 edited in French under the title of *Méditations tantriques*

ⁱⁱ [Under the title Kundalini Tantra in satyananda ashram editions](#)

Motoyama Hiroshi, *Theories of the Chakras-Bridge to Higher Consciousness*, 1981,2001, New Age Books for the Indian edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ For example www.innertuning.com/about-shyamji.php or www.chakra institute.com/

[Microchakras : Pour une évolution psychologique et spirituelle](#)(1CD audio)

2014 by Sri Shyamji Bhatnagar and Isaacs David, PhD.

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^{iv} Fabio Andrico and Chogyal Namkhai Norbu, Tibetan Yoga of Movement : Art and Practice of Yantra Yoga 2013

^v Motoyama, op. cit. p. 113

^{vi} Id., p. 218

^{vii} Stanza 18 quoted by Motoyama, op.cit., p. 170

^{viii} Hakuin, *Lâcher les mains au bord du précipice*, L' Originel, 2013 p.4

^{ix} Id. p. 40

^x Motoyama, op. cit., p. 170

^{xi} Id., 187, stanza 86-87

^{xii} Id., p.188

^{xii} Sedlmeier & alias *The Psychological Effects of Meditation – A Meta-analysis*, Psychological Bulletin 138 (6) 1139-1171)

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