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Ayurveda and the Chakras by Scott Gerson, M.D., M.Phil. (Ayurveda), Ph.D. (Ayurveda)

JANUARY 13, 2019 • [CHAKRAS \(/GIAM-BLOG/TAG/CHAKRAS\)](#), [AYURVEDA \(/GIAM-BLOG/TAG/AYURVEDA\)](#), [CARL JUNG \(/GIAM-BLOG/TAG/CARL+JUNG\)](#), [ELEMENTS \(/GIAM-BLOG/TAG/ELEMENTS\)](#)



Pañca Mahabhuta Siddhanta: The Five Great Elements

The concept of the human body as a microcosm of the Universe is one of the most fundamental concepts of Ayurveda. This concept is known as *loka-purusha sāmīya siddhanta* (*loka*-universe; *purusha*-human being; *sāmīya*-sameness; *siddhanta*-teaching). Ayurveda views the entire creation, including the human body, to be constituted from five fundamental elements (*pañca mahabhutas*). The uniquely balanced configuration of these five elements in each unique individual creates normalcy or health and deviations from this normalcy in any direction causes disease. Thus the knowledge and restoration of normalcy of these five fundamental elements is the cornerstone of treatment in Ayurveda.

Sophisticated theories based on this and other fundamental concepts give Ayurvedic physicians insight as to the different variations of many disease conditions and a holistic approach to the management of even some of the most complex permutations and combinations of disease processes. Through this knowledge the *vaidya* (wise physician) seeks to cure the diseases of the diseased and preserve the health of the healthy (*swasthasya swasthya rakshanam aturasya vikar pranamanam cha*).

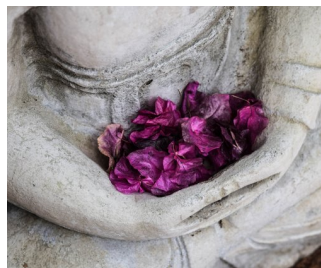
In order to serve this noble role, it is mandatory for the *vaidya* to have a full understanding of the human body, which is the substratum (*asraya*) for treatment (*cikitsa*).

The understanding of the human body as a five-element construct as described in Ayurvedic texts was not the domain of Ayurveda alone. In fact the *pañca mahabhuta* theory of creation has its roots in an even more ancient pool of philosophical knowledge which was known by the seer priest-physicians at the time

of Ayurveda's inception. From this common pool of metaphysical insight, different traditions assimilated those concepts which were consistent with each particular tradition. Thus, this concept of *pañca mahabhutas* can be seen in many other streams of knowledge which were co-contemporary to Ayurveda and they each used this same concept in their own way as part of the foundation for their particular *darshan* (philosophy). The two traditions which were most related to Ayurveda were the Yogic and Tantric shastras (the latter arose around 500 AD). Thus we can say that the concept of *pañca mahabhutas* is an example of *sarvatantra siddhanta* or a theory applicable for all branches of knowledge.

Ayurveda, Yoga, and Tantra

In case of Ayurveda, the ancient seers modified the *pañca mahabhuta siddhanta* with respect to the human body into the brilliant auxiliary theory of Tridosha which made it easier to comprehend and manage the various diseases afflicting the human body and mind.



Whereas *pañca mahabhuta siddhanta* was a more structural classification, the Tridosha explains the functional aspects of that matrix. As it happened, Ayurveda was the only science that developed the tridoshic theory because it was uniquely useful for only that discipline and not any of the others. The difference in the ways the various co-contemporary sciences interpreted ancient insights about the nature of reality was based on their respective intentions and fields of understanding. Of the three streams of thought mentioned above, Ayurveda focused more on the gross human body, Yoga was focused more on the mind (*manas*), and Tantra was more concerned with *kundalini* (*prana*). But even though the focus areas were different, the ultimate aim of all three was to use their respective knowledge as a path to attain liberation. There was tremendous overlap in the *weltanschauung* of these sister sciences despite each having its own specific aims. For example, despite Ayurveda clearly defining the human being as the inseparable union of gross body, senses, mind and self (*sharirendriyasatvātmasamyoga* | | CS,Sa,1/42) in its treatment protocols, it emphasizes diseases of the gross physical body. There are no Ayurvedic writings mentioning the *chakras*.

In contrast, Yoga Shastra makes cursory mention of the physical body and focuses on the gradual quieting of the fluctuations of the mind so that one can realize the true Self (*yoga chitta vritti nirodha* | | Yoga Sutras 1/2). The substance of the mind is thought and thoughts can be of many different categories, e.g. desires, fears, opinions, etc. Yoga is a method for purifying the mind and ascending into the purity of the absolute perfection that is the true natural state of all human beings. Though it borrows from Ayurveda and Tantra, and although there are different schools of Yoga, the main emphasis is on cultivating a calm, serene, one-pointed mind, free from negative emotions and the distractions created by cravings, obsessions, and desires. While the ancient yogis no doubt knew about method of activating *prana* and *kundalini*, they regarded the mystical powers (*siddhis*) which could be developed to be distractions, best avoided.

Tantra is exceeding difficult to even begin to define or describe. In the present context, we could say its jurisdiction is more in the realm of *prana* than the other two (Ayurveda or Yoga). Tantra is the quest to achieve enlightenment by realizing and fostering divinity within one's own tantric body. The tantric "body" is not something that ordinarily exists and is waiting to be discovered but rather it is a process that is constructed through years of dedicated practice of magical visualizations and installations of goddesses, mantras, and yantras into the practitioner's "tantric body." In essence, through Tantra an individual becomes divine by merging with the energies of various deities. This tradition has very little to do with the corporeal or even the mental realms, but rather involves *prana*.

Prana is the fundamental life force which holds the body and mind together. When the flow of *prana* is disrupted or contaminated, we become ill; when it is completely disconnected, we die. The human body is a living temple, the repository of boundless energy, most of which remains dormant. This dormant energy is called *kundalini shakti*, and the relatively small amount of available active energy is *prana*. *Kundalini* is described as a sleeping coiled female serpent at the base of the spine (*mūlādhāra chakra*). Both practitioners of Tantra and those of certain schools of Yoga (i.e. *kundalini yoga*) use their active pranic energy to awaken this dormant storehouse of *kundalini* energy using techniques of meditation, pranayama, visualization (*bhāvanā*), *nyāsa* (placement of mental images), asanas, bandhas, mudras and other techniques including, in Tantra, unorthodox sexual rituals. Tantra also utilizes practices of recollection (*anusmaraṇa*), memory (*smaraṇa*), and imagination (*kalpanā*) which are beyond the scope of this article.

The concept of the *chakra system* is central to many Tantric practices. According to ancient scriptures, the physical body is superimposed on a subtle body (and a causal body), and the *chakras* are located in this subtle body. *Chakras* are energy centers, connecting hubs where the major *nadis* (energy channels) of the subtle body come together. The word "chakra" means "wheel"; each *chakra* is a wheel of the life-force. The energy concentrated at these *chakras* nourishes both the physical body and the mind.

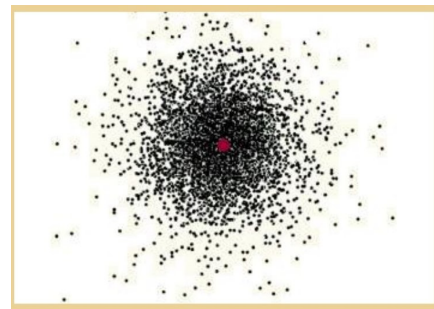
In our physical paradigm, there is nothing that describes the characteristics and functions of the *chakras*, and so to communicate their knowledge and experience yogis had to resort to some sort of depiction that could be understood. Consequently, in the scriptures each *chakra* is depicted as a concentrated field of energy which manifests in a unique form of sound and light—both aspects associated with the sacred. Experientially these original yogis may have known the *chakras* in an entirely different way, but to communicate this experience they ascribed to them shape, color and sound and the *chakras* came to be depicted in their present popularized forms. In reality, however, there is no fixed shape, color or sound inherent in any *chakra* because those are all attributes of physical bodies and *chakras* belong to the subtle body.

Sūkshma-sharīra (The Subtle Body): The Abode of the Chakras

The concept of the subtle body (*sūkshma-sharīra*) first appeared in the Taittiriya Upanishad (c. 500 BC) but the elucidation of its energy centers called *chakras* ("wheels") comes from the later tradition of Tantric Yoga, which flourished from 500-1300 CE, and is still alive today. We must first understand that the subtle

body is non-physical, incorporeal and insensible and is an extraordinarily *fluid* entity. It follows then that the chakras within this fluid reality are also not fixed in location, size or even *number*. They are not anything remotely like the physical organs or structures of the body (i.e. pituitary gland or sacral plexus) which can be located and studied by doctors. On the contrary, the *sīkshma-sharīra* can manifest any number of chakras. How many depends on the specific individual and the intention of the yogic practice they are implementing.

An analogy is the “electron cloud” model of atomic structure. According to this (currently accepted) model, electrons are never in a single point location and do not orbit the nucleus like planets orbiting the sun. Rather, they are smeared out in space in an often oddly-shaped “atmosphere,” commonly dubbed an electron cloud. The location of any electron is described as a “zone of probability” determined by quantum mechanical states.



Electron Cloud

Similarly, chakras can appear anywhere within the subtle energy body. In fact, there are tantric teachings with three-chakra systems, five-chakra systems, six-chakra systems, seven, nine, ten, twenty-one, twenty-four and more! However, there are several chakras which are consistently found in all systems, although they sometimes have different nomenclatures: in the lower third of the abdomen, in the heart region, in the throat region, and in the crown of the head region. Interestingly, these are anatomical areas where people experience sensations related to emotions (“a feeling in the pit of my stomach,” “my heart swelled with joy,” “a knot in my throat,” etc.). But other than these four, there’s a great variety in the number and locations of chakras in different systems, depending on the practice you are doing. If you are internalizing the energy of ten different deities you’ll use a ten-chakra system; to internalize 21 deities, a 21-chakra system.

The descriptions of the colors, shapes and sounds of each chakra in the original Sanskrit writings were given as specific visualization practices that are meant to be *performed*, not just read about as fixed preexisting entities. Tantric and Ayurvedic texts were written in cryptic grammar that often omitted words implied from the context but nevertheless understood—if you are a Sanskrit scholar. If you’re not, you will miss the intention of many passages—which is what has definitely happened with many modern Sanskrit to English translations of both Ayurvedic and Tantric texts. So, when in typical ambiguous fashion the Sanskrit text explaining Anahata Chakra (the heart chakra) simply states: “two intersecting triangles forming a six-pointed star in a circle of twelve-petaled green lotus in the chest region” we are being exhorted to *visualize* that and *place* it there.

Furthermore, letters of the Sanskrit alphabet are inscribed on each lotus petal of every chakra image. Each letter of the alphabet has its own uniquely powerful vibration which is used to activate the qualities of the goddess of each petal. There is no escaping the fact that chakra systems were intended to help bring about spiritual release and/or worldly effects **through magical means**. You can see how to properly use a chakra system as originally intended—invoking and installing the images and energies of Hindi deities into each chakra and intoning Sanskrit sounds—is perhaps difficult to embrace for Westerners. Whereas Indians have grown up with these cultural sounds and images entrenched in their subconscious, Western yogis have not. But if Western yogis were to acquire full knowledge of what these deities represent and learn Sanskrit, the use of a chakra system could be equally effective. To illustrate the difficulty though, below is a *partial* list (representing approximately 20%) of the names of the deities, each with their own mantra, which must be worshipped as part of a similar tantric tool, the Sri Yantra puja:

Bhagamalini nityamba, Nityaklinna nityamba, Bherunda nytyamba, Vahnivasini nityamba, Mahavajreswari nityamba, Shivaduti nityamba, Twarita nityamba, Kulasundari nityamba, Nitya nityamba, Neelapataka nityamba, Sarvamangala nityamba, Jwalamalini nityamba, Chitra nityamba, Mahanitya nityamba, Parameswara parameswari devi, Mitreshamayi devi, Shastisamayayi devi, Uddisamayayi devi, Charyanathamayi devi, Lopamudramayi devi, Agastyamayayi devi, Kalatapanamayayi devi, Dharmacharyamayayi devi, Muktakeliswaramayi devi, Deepakalanathamayi devi, Vishnudevamayayi devi, Prabhakaradevamayayi devi, Tejodevamayayi devi, Kalyanadevamayayi devi, Vasudevamayayi devi, Ratnadevamayayi devi, Shriramanandamayayi devi, Anima Sidhyamba, Laghima Sidhyamba, Mahima Sidhyamba, Ishvita Sidhyamba, Vasitva Sidhyamba, Prakama Sidhyamba, Bhukti Sidhyamba, Ichha Sidhyamba, Prapti Sidhyamba, Sarvakama Sidhyamba, Shree Brahmi Matruka, Shree Maheswari Matruka, Shree Koumari Matruka, Shree Vishnavi Matruka, Shree Varahi Matruka, Shree Mahendri Matruka, Shree Chamunda Matruka, Shree Mahalakshmi Matruka.

Each one must be understood, visualized and honored with their own mantra. So you can see how daunting this might be for a novice Western yogi. The authentic use of any chakra system is quite similar.

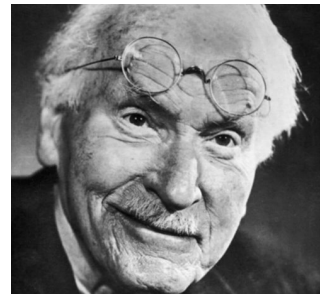
A Few Misconceptions About the Chakras

The chakra system which has become familiar to us here in the West is the seven-chakra system. Its more accurately a six-chakra system because the chakra at the crown of the head (Sahasrara) is not technically a chakra, but rather a receptacle for the kundalini which has risen through the preceding six energy centers. This system was codified in a chapter of a 16th century Sanskrit text known as the Sat Chakra Nirupana (Examination of the Six Chakras). Though it’s the earliest source of chakra teachings, this text was not an authoritative, nor scriptural work. It was later translated into English in a somewhat flawed and imperfect manner by John Woodroffe in 1919 and hurled the seven-chakra version into preeminence where it has remained ever since. The Woodroffe translation has become the primary source reference for the thousands of books and now countless websites around the world describing the chakras. However, we should understand that every single one of these is a modern person’s interpretation of a flawed translation of a non-authoritative text! What I have found in my thirty-plus years of Ayurvedic scholarship is also true regarding Yogic and Tantric writings: virtually nothing written in English is authoritative. This state of affairs doesn’t necessarily invalidate all these modern interpretations, but certainly alerts reader to not accept every word as absolute scriptural truth.

Which brings us to the next point. Almost NONE of the beautiful and seemingly esoteric associations of the chakras



with emotional states, endocrine glands, body parts, planets, diseases, essential oils, crystals, etc, etc. have any basis in any original Tantric sources. They are ALL imagined and created by modern authors. Regarding the chakras association with specific emotional states (i.e. *mūlādhāra* chakra associated with survival and safety, *svādhiṣṭhāna* chakra with connection and acceptance, *maṇipūra* chakra with confidence and self-esteem, etc.) this started with the famous psychoanalyst Carl Jung (who didn't know Sanskrit), 1875-1961, along with his contemporary German scholars of Indian thought (Count Hermann Keyserling, Richard Wilhelm and others). From Jung's extrapolations, published in 1932, arose a wellspring of later embellishments on the emotional states associated with the chakras. Once again, my object in pointing this out is not to invalidate the experiences and writings of these authors, but only to state that this information—which is ubiquitous today—is not derived from any original Sanskrit sources.



Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology. Jung's work was influential in the fields of psychiatry, anthropology, archaeology, literature, philosophy, and religious studies.

Also, it may surprise you that the *bija* mantras ("seed mantras") we find associated with the lower five chakras in truth belong *not* to those chakras but rather to the Five Elements (mahabhutas) placed in them. So we've been taught that LAM is the bija mantra for the *mūlādhāra* chakra, VAM for *svādhiṣṭhāna* chakra, RAM for *maṇipūra* chakra, YAM for *anāhata* chakra, and HAM for *visuddha* chakra.

But in reality:

LAM is the bija mantra for Earth Element, which is installed in the *mūlādhāra* chakra
 VAM is the bija mantra for Water Element, which is installed in the *svādhiṣṭhāna* chakra
 RAM is the bija mantra for Fire Element, which is installed in the *maṇipūra* chakra
 YAM is the bija mantra for Air Element, which is installed in the *anāhata* chakra
 HAM is the bija mantra for Space Element, which is installed in the *visuddha* chakra

Unlike their use in meditation, in Tantric rituals mantras are not just simply "heard" internally or "remembered," but rather they are placed or installed in specific regions of the body and seen as images. Thus speech and vision merge into a single cognitive process.

In addition to specific bija mantras belonging to specific Elements, the same is true of the colored geometric shapes. These too belong to the Elements, and *not* the chakra:

- Earth: (yellow) square
- Water: (silvery) crescent moon
- Fire: (red) downward-pointing triangle
- Air: (green) hexagon or six-pointed star
- Space: (blue) circle.

So when you see those figures inscribed in illustrations of the chakras, you now know that they actually are representations of those respective Elements, not of a geometry inherent in the chakra itself. In practice, any bija mantra and its associated Element can be installed in any chakra. Predictably, in different Tantric lineages we find differences from these classic placements listed above.

Conclusion



So today we have millions of people throughout the planet searching for knowledge about the *chakras* and thousands of authors and teachers trying to meet that need. But almost no one is versed in the original and correct usage of chakras. So what was their intended specific purpose? As I've stated above, the original purpose of all the chakra systems was to act as a map for the ritual practice of *nyāsa*: the placement of mantras and diety energies at specific locations in the subtle body. In the practice of *nyāsa* (*ni*, under, below; *as*, to throw, project), one invokes a diety, mantra, or sacred text to occupy a region of the body through concentrated visualization (*bhāvanā*) or in the case of chakra practice by silently also sounding the associated installed elemental bija mantra.

This is a subject which is admittedly tangential to my area of expertise (Ayurveda) and so I hope I haven't sounded condescending or arrogant when I state that most Westerners know very little about chakras. I too know very little and hope to keep learning about this fascinating part of the Hindu pantheon of esoteric wisdom. What I'm trying to communicate is that I've learned to take with a large

grain of salt (or even completely ignore) the simplistic writings of inexperienced people posing as authorities on these subjects. Even a lot of the so-called academic literature on the chakras is highly questionable. Most of these writings will lead you in the wrong direction. When it comes to acquiring true knowledge about the chakras and the *sīkshma-shāstra*, there is no shortcut and learning to precisely, honestly, and clearly observe your own inner experience is the way.