

Camp Utopia: Subtle Anatomy



Study of the chakras is the study of your whole self.

The balance of subtle energies in the chakras affects everything you think and do, refining your personality and how you present yourself to the world, having a definite influence on your physical appearance and character traits.

We treat chakras as distinct, but they aren't – each is a wheel on a united spoke. They communicate with and support each other.

Together, the open chakras create a person balanced in all aspects of life, and a channel for the powerful Kundalini energy to rise. Although blissful, Kundalini is said to be like a hurricane. Perhaps there is an inbuilt safety net that protects us from opening Kundalini energy too soon. The chakras were once held to be secret, sacred knowledge, because of their power. Working with them can help you focus on the many aspects of creating the happiest, best life possible for yourself, and trust that they will open fully when you are ready to apply them for the greater good. How do you think your experience through training has been impacted by the study and focus on the chakras in your training?

Manifesting and Liberating Currents

Notice and remember the alternating and complementary energies flowing upward (liberating current) and downward (manifesting current). Working on the upward current leads to life-long contentment, working on the downward current leads to fulfillment.

Yoga is one of the best ways to balance the subtle energies of the body. Many people experience the powerful effect yoga has beyond the physical – more energy throughout the day, more calm and cheerfulness in one's approach to life, a sense of wellbeing and

connectedness. This is a sign that the physical practice of asana is working to rebalance the chakras, whether we focus on it or not.



Meditation, yoga, and working on your life issues are all great ways to heal and rebalance the chakra system to give you a body and life that is longer and lighter and more joyful.

Secondary, but still impactful ways to keep the energy harmonized, or to help you bring more balance to life events that challenge and change us include surrounding yourself with the colors, foods, scents, stones, tones, mudras and elements of the chakras as you need them.

Subtle Anatomy: beyond the colors

All forms of yoga strive toward the same goal: liberation or enlightenment.

First we have Prana

Prana is not breath, but it moves in and out of the body with the breath. Rather, Prana is the life force, derived from the sun. In order to achieve enlightenment, we must control the Prana in our bodies. The collection of Prana in the body brings about peace and true understanding.

On a bright sunny day, Prana is abundant and can be seen in the atmosphere as tiny particles of brilliant white light. When Prana is absorbed into the body, it is refracted into the 7 colors of the spectrum and the vibrational energy of each color is absorbed into the Chakra that vibrates to that frequency. It is through an extensive network of subtle channels, moving prana in and out of the subtle body, that the Chakras are connected to the physical body.

Remember the 5 Major pranās: Prana = inbreath, Apana = outbreath, Samana = mid breath, Udana – up breath, Vyana – through breath

Then, Chakras

Each Chakra is a spinning wheel of energy, where Prana is held and organized.

How do they tie together? Nadis.

Nadis are the energy pathways that channel Prana through the body. Nadi comes from the root word Nada, which means flow. Nada is a resonating and subtle flow, so Nadis are subtle flows of vibration.

The Upanishads explain that the Nadis penetrate the body from the soles of the feet to the crown of the head, carrying Prana, the breath of life.

From there, we get a lot of variation in the ancient yoga texts, so it is impossible to be 100% certain in our definitions of Nadis. Some modern scientists want to equate Nadis with the physical body, defining their function and position with the nervous system, but ancient Chinese acupuncturists and Ayurvedic practitioners “felt” the energy of the body in their practice, and they believe the Nadis are not a physically manifested structure but instead constitute our “subtle” – or invisible anatomy. They are not channels for blood or breath to flow, but energy. Nadis are psycho-spiritual pathways.

Some texts describe Ida and Pingala, two of the 3 most important Nadis, as running up the sides of Shushumna, the most important Nadi, which runs parallel and within the spinal column. Others describe them as intersecting and crossing Shushumna and the Chakras, but some say they cross through the Chakras, and some say they cross between. There are different descriptions of where they originate and terminate in the body. Texts also differ on the numbers of Nadis – some say 72,000, some say as many as 350,000. Complicated, but

everyone agrees on describing them as thin, thread-like strands, similar to those of the lotus stem, which emanate from the spinal column. And most texts have all Nadis originating at the navel and emanating out through the rest of the body.

We also know there are many Chakras in the body, although 12 – 14 are considered most important, and in general, we focus on only the major 7 Chakras that line up through the center of the body. It is said that a major Chakra is found where 21 Nadis intersect, and a minor Chakra is formed where 14 Nadis cross. The intersection of 21 Nadis in the formation of a major Chakra is similar to a nerve ganglion (large bundle of nerves) in the physical body.

It's good to know the 3 main Nadis that correspond with and intersect the Chakras: Ida, Pingala, and Shushumna.

Pingala is on the right side of the spine and left side of the brain. It represents the hot energy of the sun. Pingala originates on the right side of the root Chakra and terminates in the right nostril and third eye (6th) Chakra. In relation to western physiology, Pingala, similar to the afferent (or sympathetic) nervous system, carries messages to the brain and is responsible for stimulation. Pingala is male, energizing, heating and extroverting.

Ida, female, is on the left side of the body and right side of the brain. It represents the cool energy of the moon. Ida originates on the left side of the root Chakra and terminates in the left nostril and third eye (6th) Chakra. In relation to western physiology, Ida, similar to the parasympathetic nervous system, carries messages from the brain to the rest of the body, and is responsible for relaxation. Ida is the negative channel, bringing consciousness into every part of the body, sending impulses to the visceral organs to stimulate the internal processes. This creates a general state of relaxation in the superficial muscles, cooling the body.

Both get their Prana from breathing. Yogis have taught that when the right nostril (leading to Pingala) is dominant, it is time to eat and do something active, and when the left nostril (leading to Ida) is dominant, it is time to rest, sleep and pursue creative activities.

Between Ida and Pingala is the **Shushumna**, which runs parallel to and through the spinal column. In Western physiology, the spinal cord controls the currents that move through the body's nervous system. Likewise, the Shushumna energy is yang and controls the whole body. However, Shushumna, for most of us, is blocked, and our goal is to move the block and allow Prana to flow freely.

The block exists at the bottom of the spinal column, in the root Chakra, and is called **Kundalini**. In yoga philosophy she is represented as a snake, lying coiled and dormant and waiting for the energy of Prana to free her and allow her to rise up the Shushumna, where she will manifest as Shakti, and meet her divine lover, Shiva, in the crown Chakra.

By forcing the life force up and down the Shushumna, the yoga practitioner can stimulate the dormant Kundalini energy until it rushes up, flooding the crown center with a blissful sensation (ecstasy).

Why a snake?

The serpent is an archetypal symbol throughout the world, representing enlightenment, immortality and a path to the gods. In Genesis, the serpent leads Adam and Eve to taste the fruit from the tree of knowledge. This symbolizes the beginning of Kundalini – creating an unceasing desire for understanding, yet grounded in the material world (apple tree). In Egypt, the Pharaohs wore crowns with serpent symbols over the third eye. Today, the double serpent wraps around the staff of healing, clearly imitating the winding path of Ida and Pingala, and symbolic of the double helix pattern of our DNA, the basic information carrier of all life.

How does this knowledge apply?

Alternate names for Ida and Pingala are HA and THA – the same 2 syllables that make Hatha yoga. Ideally, Prana flows unhindered along all 3 nadis, but this can only happen when they are not blocked by impurities. If the Nadis become blocked with stagnant energy that has accumulated from negative thoughts, emotions, unhealthy foods, etc., the physical body becomes deprived of energy. Left alone, it ultimately manifests as disease.

If we can make the system healthy and clear, the Prana of HA and THA unite, which is why we call the process of getting there Hatha yoga. If we can successfully achieve the goal of sending Prana through Shushumna, Prana is retained in the body in an ideal way; none is lost outside the body. Until we achieve this, Prana is not distributed as efficiently; it dissipates outside the body and results in the mind becoming dark and restless, while, the collection of Prana in the body brings about peace and true understanding.

How can you work with it?

1. Alternate nostril (Nadi Shodhana) breathing activates and harmonizes Ida and Pingala. Shodhana means to purify.

Place your right thumb over your right nostril, first finger in between the brows, and second or third finger lightly on the left nostril. In a ratio of 1:4:2, or 1:2:2, inhale through one nostril, retain the breath, and exhale through the alternate nostril. So inhale through the left nostril for a count of 3. Close off the left nostril with your finger and hold the breath in for a count of 12 (or 6), then release the thumb and exhale evenly through the right nostril for a count of 6. Then immediately inhale through the right nostril for a count of 3, close it off with the thumb, retain the breath for a count of 12 (or 6), and release the finger to exhale from the left nostril for a count of 6. It is best to do your neti cleansing of the nasal passages before you practice Nadi Shodhana. Work your way up to a 4:16:8 or 4:8:8 count, then 6:24:12, or 6:12:12, and so on.

2. Activate your Chakras. Use visualization, deep breathing, and specific asana to keep the Chakras open and spinning in a healthy, balanced way.

3. Practice Bandhas and Mudras – locking and sealing in prana to manifest more abundant, clear energy.

The 5 Koshas (sheaths, or realms of existence).

“Our familiar universe is like a dream. Dreams exist, but are not real. They evaporate when we wake up, and similarly, the world exists but it is not real. And when we are enlightened, when we have woken up, the world as we know it ceases to exist.” Georg Feuerstein goes on to say that the whole process of yoga is dedicated to discovering this truth. Why? Because even though the world seems very solid and real to us as we are dreaming, everything we sense also appears separate and distinct from us. Because we can’t see the universe as it really is, it is natural to want to understand how it connects, so we pursue philosophical study and the hard and soft sciences. We want to get a clear picture of the universe. Some of what we learn is useful to us because “it allows us to maneuver in the world, to move around in the stream, but this sort of understanding is less helpful when we want to wake up from this dream.”

Through yoga we learn that we don’t inhabit a purely material universe. Yoga insists that this universe has many layers, and the material universe is just the outermost layer. It is embedded and sustained by the more subtle levels. At the core, under all the layers, is our true nature, the ultimate singularity. The subtle realms are vast and much more goes on than we can perceive. We see only the results as they are expressed at the material level. Yoga wants to point the way to the core.

“Maya” means appearance, implying that each of the sheaths is only an appearance, and that beneath them, we are pure, divine, eternal consciousness. Maya implies that nothing is real, but some yogis view the illusion of maya as being the same as Shakti, (Kundalini), the creative force of the universe. In this view, maya can be experienced as both unreal, and at the same time, the beautiful manifestations of the universal oneness.

1. Physical Body (Annamaya Kosha): our body, the material universe, all that we can experience through the senses. In yogic practice, as this sheath refers to our own physical body, we must nurture and care for it so we can enjoy our physical experience of life and also be able to go inward – the healthy body is not an obstacle during meditation. Through meditation, we explore and understand the physical sheath, and then go inward to discover the other layers.
2. Energy (Pranayama Kosha): Prana is the energetic link between body and mind. This is the dimension where we find the chakras and nadis, the subtle energy channels. Prana is the energetic force that operates the body, and allows the true self to be animated in the physical realm.
3. Mental (Manamaya Kosha – the lower mind): The mind processes input from the senses, giving us our thoughts and emotions; it is closely connected to the brain and nervous system. It usually runs on auto, and as yogis we learn to control and see the difference between this and the higher mind.
4. Wisdom (Vijnanamaya Kosha): Vijnana means knowing. This is higher mind, the sheath that is underneath the processing mind. It knows, decides, judges and discriminates, and is also the level of our ego consciousness – the “I am” state. This is the level of higher wisdom, the ability to go within, seeking truth. Through spiritual practice we get control over the outer sheaths so we can focus more on this one.
5. Bliss (Anandamaya Kosha): Some say this is enlightenment, some say it is preliminary to enlightenment, part of the experience possible in the subtle sheath. In this view, bliss is yet another veil preventing us from seeing reality as it really is. In order to get to Atman, the Universal Self, we must pierce the sheaths to see the ultimate reality, and yoga is the means.