

BODY & ENERGY

Chakras, from the Sources

What the Sanskrit texts really say about the subtle body, and what was added in the twentieth century



चक्र

cakra

YOGIDE

Free sample

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Contents

Before you begin	4
What you will find here	4
Our principles	4
How to read Sanskrit words in this book	5
Chapter I. The word cakra	6
A wheel, a circle, a disc	6
Wheel or lotus?	6
Seat, support, place	6
What a cakra is, in the texts	6

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Before you begin

Few yoga words have travelled as far as chakra. You will find it on posters with seven rainbow-coloured circles, on bottles of essential oil, in apps that promise to "balance" or "unblock" your energy, and in crystal shops. Behind all of this lies a real tradition: a set of Sanskrit texts, written over many centuries in India, that describe centres within the body as lotuses, with petals, letters, colours, geometric figures, deities and seed-syllables, to be visualised in meditation.

This book goes back to those texts. It tells you what they say, in their own terms, and it tells you clearly what was added later, mostly in Europe and America in the twentieth century. Both stories are interesting. The aim is not to mock the modern versions, but to give you firm ground: when you meditate on a centre, chant a seed-syllable or read a book on the subject, you will know where each idea comes from.

What you will find here

- **The meaning of the word चक्र (cakra)** and its history, from the Vedas to the tantras.
- **The real diversity of the systems:** some texts count four centres, others five, six, nine, twelve or more. The famous system of six centres plus the thousand-petalled lotus is one system among many, which became dominant later.
- **A centre-by-centre description** according to the *Ṣaṭ-cakra-nirūpaṇa* (षट्चक्रनिरूपण), "the description of the six centres", composed in Bengal by Pūrṇānanda in the sixteenth century and made famous in the West by Arthur Avalon's *The Serpent Power* (1919).
- **The subtle body around the chakras:** the *nāḍīs* (channels), the three *granthis* (knots), the five *kośas* (sheaths) of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, *prāṇa* and the five *vāyus*, and *Kuṇḍalinī*.
- **A chapter that separates text from modern additions:** rainbow colours, endocrine glands, psychological profiles, crystals, "blocked chakras". Where they come from, according to historians.
- **A traditional way to practise:** meditation (*dhyāna*) on the centres and repetition (*japa*) of the seed-syllables, with the precautions the tradition itself insists on.

Our principles

Every translation is our own, made from the Sanskrit, unless we quote Arthur Avalon's 1919 translation, which is in the public domain; in that case, we say so and give the verse number. We checked the Sanskrit passages we quote against the electronic texts published by GRETIL (Göttingen Register of Electronic Texts in Indian Languages) and against Avalon's edition. The full list is in the Sources.

When the texts disagree, we say so. They often do: on the number of centres, their colours, their petals, the place of the knots, even the number of coils of *Kuṇḍalinī*. We present the disagreement rather than inventing a single "correct" system.

No health promises. The texts were written for spiritual practice, within a teacher-student relationship. This book makes no claim that meditating on chakras treats or prevents any illness, and it does not replace

medical or psychological care.

A note of caution.

The practices described in this book are contemplative. Some traditions associate intensive work on Kuṇḍalinī with strong physical and emotional experiences, and they insist on the guidance of an experienced teacher. If you live with a psychiatric condition, a history of trauma, epilepsy or a heart condition, talk to your doctor and to a qualified teacher before beginning any intensive breathing or meditation practice. If a practice leaves you anxious, disoriented or unwell, stop it.

How to read Sanskrit words in this book

Each important word is given in Devanagari and in IAST transliteration, for example चक्र (cakra). In IAST, c is pronounced "ch", ś and ṣ are "sh" sounds, a dot under ṭ, ḍ, ṇ means the tongue is curled back, and a line over a vowel (ā, ī, ū) means it is long. Cakra is said "chuk-ruh". The usual English spelling (chakra, nadi, kundalini) is given where it helps.

Chapter 1. The word cakra

A wheel, a circle, a disc

In ordinary Sanskrit, चक्र (cakra) means a wheel, first of all the wheel of a chariot. The word is very old: it appears already in the Ṛgveda, where the sun is imagined as a wheel and where chariot wheels carry the gods. From this first meaning, the word extends to anything circular: a potter's wheel, a discus (the weapon of Viṣṇu is the sudarśana-cakra), a circle of people, a cycle of time, a kingdom or a sphere of influence (the cakravartin is the "wheel-turner", the universal king).

In ritual and tantric language, a cakra can also be a circle of deities, or a gathering of initiates seated in a circle for worship. In the yoga texts, finally, the word designates centres located along the central axis of the body, where channels meet and where the practitioner fixes attention.

Wheel or lotus?

Here is a first surprise. In the texts we will read, the centres are described much more often as lotuses (पद्म padma, कमल kamala, सरोज saroja, अम्बुज ambuja) than as wheels. The Śaṭ-cakra-nirūpaṇa constantly speaks of the lotus of the base, the lotus of the navel, the lotus of the heart. Each one has a pericarp (the central part, karṇikā), petals (dala) and filaments. The image of the wheel, with its hub and spokes, and the image of the lotus, with its heart and its petals, describe the same structure: a centre from which lines radiate.

Seat, support, place

Other words are used for these centres in the texts, and it is useful to recognise them:

Word	IAST	Meaning
चक्र	cakra	wheel, circle
पद्म	padma	lotus
आधार	ādhāra	support, base
स्थान	sthāna	place, seat
ग्रन्थि	granthi	knot
लक्ष्य	lakṣya	target, object of attention

What a cakra is, in the texts

It is important to see what kind of reality the texts are describing. The centres of the Śaṭ-cakra-nirūpaṇa are not described as organs to be found on a dissection table. They are described to be visualised: the text

gives the colour of the petals, the letters to be placed on them, the shape at the centre, the deity seated there, so that the practitioner can build an inner image and dissolve it, step by step. The text itself is a manual of meditation, not a treatise of anatomy. This will matter a great deal when we come to modern comparisons with glands and nerve plexuses.

End of the sample

Thank you for reading this far. We hope these first pages already help your practice, and that they show how the rest of the book is built: clear steps, texts quoted with their source, nothing invented.

The full book has 33 pages.

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