Portals of Perception
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Opening up the chakra world

It's not a topic you will ever learn in school, nor is it likely to be part of a soul-searching confabulation around the office coffee machine. Yet the chakras are of profound importance to those seriously exploring the nature of consciousness-their own spiritual quest, a friend's uncommon perceptions or the expanding mind of an entire human race. To make up for the deficit, and to make this highly esoteric subject approachable for those not having the time to learn Sanskrit or trek to a lofty Himalayan cave, the Hinduism Today staff has assembled in the next four pages the simplified essentials of these mysterious centers within you.

The modern Hindu renaissance figure Swami Vivekananda was also a great yogi. One day at 1,000 Island Park, USA, outside a summer cottage, buttoned up in a quaint trench coat, he shared some of India's deepest mysticism with a small group of Western ladies: "The sun and moon currents [the pingala and ida] bring energy to all parts of the body. While meditating at the Baranagore Math, I saw the nerves, ida and pingala. The surplus energy is stored at certain points, plexuses, along the spinal column commonly known as nerve centers. A third, the sushumna, is a very fine, very brilliant thread, a living passage through the spinal cord, through which we have to make the kundalini rise. The yogi is able not only to feel them but actually see them."

Chakras, or "plexuses of consciousness," form the major nerve ganglia of an extraordinary circuitry of nadis, energy channels that link together our animal body with our subtler bodies and their higher functions such as intelligence and love. It is because of these chakras and nadis that our five koshas,"sheaths"-function so smoothly and integrally as a one organism and awareness can move through all bodies, transiting from physical to emotional, to intuition to spiritual, instantaneously. In computer language, these chakras could be considered cosmic network hubs and the nadis as multi-gigabyte-per-second optical fiber wiring. Except, this wiring extends inside and outside the computer.

Our five "sheaths," koshas -physical, vital/pranic, emotional/mental, intuitive/ cognitive and superconscious-are not disjointed, but beautifully and inextricably interlocked like layers of an onion. Each one is encased by the next subtler as they function together in daily consciousness. For example, when we feel the embarrassing hot flush of anger or riveting cool current of the intellect, we are aware in the astral body, not the physical body. When a wave of boundless love surges from within, we are accessing the intuitive and soul sheaths.

Hindu, Chinese Taoist and Tibetan Buddhist scriptures refer to an electrical human infrastructure of 72,000 sukshma prana nadis or "subtle channels of vital force." The Shiva Samhita lists fourteen major currents. Of these, three are the super information highways-ida, pingala and sushumna-running interwoven around and within, respectively, the spinal cord. Where the nadis most intensely converge, yogis have pinpointed the chakras-88,000 according to the most extensive yogic explorations.

The most important are the seven above the base of the spine-muladhara, svadishthana, manipura, anahata, vishuddha, ajna and sahasrara-and seven below that come into power in the Kali Yuga-atala, vitala, sutala, talatala, rasatala, mahatala and patala. As giant electrical transformers govern and regulate the flow and dispersion of power through a community, so do these whirlpools of light receive, filter, focus and funnel the vital life force, prana, that flows through us from the Source of Life.

Though of gross form, the body maintains a connection to each of the chakras through nerve ganglia along the spinal cord and in the cranium. But unlike these physical nerves, which are measured in millimeters, the subtle nerve and the chakras are measured by vibration, similar to am, fm, short-wave radio frequencies. Although regionalized to various parts of each sheath, or body, the chakras are more accurately regions of mind power-vast fields of collective, related and interrelated thought realms, like vast cities, or energy fields, or like portals of consciousness.

From the base muladhara to the crown sahasrara, each of the seven higher chakras governs an aspect of the inner man-memory, reason, willpower, cognition, love, divine sight and superconsciousness. When inwardly perceived, these centers are vividly colorful and can be heard. The seven lower chakras are fear and lust; raging anger; retaliatory jealousy; prolonged mental confusion; selfishness; absence

of conscience; and murder and malicious violence. These constitute the lower or hellish world, called Naraka or patala.

Chakras do not awaken, in the sense of being a seed, dormant until germinated. They are already awake in everyone. Though each individual is generally aware and consciously functioning in one or two of the first three higher centers, all the chakras are awake and playing important roles at the deepest levels of the soul. As we flow our energy, our awareness, through them, our experience of reality is totally colored by their vibration. Most people who gather together are flowing through the same chakra, or several of them collectively. Those eager to cogitate, debate, argue, prove and persuade are predominantly in the reason chakra and easily befriend one another. Those who live in the intuitional heart-chakra energies associate naturally. Each group harmonizes like two shades of one color or two swaras of the same raga, classifying themselves by the spiritual caste system of the chakras. Similarly those living in the instinctive consciousness of the lower seven chakras seek out and maliciously interact with one another as they accumulate karma and veil the soul's natural light and goodness.

Beyond India's Borders

Knowledge of the chakras so exhaustively recorded by India's yogis, permeates Hindu culture, its dance tradition and its sacred architecture. The Hindu temple is segmented to mirror the human body's seven chakra design. Beyond India, this knowledge was inspirational to the flowering of tantric Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibet, manipadma "jeweled lotus," is the name of the manipura chakra enshrined in the mantra Om Mani Padme Hum. Buddha called his first sermon Dhammachakkappavattana Sutta. Chakka is the Pali word for chakra. "Turning the Wheel of Truth" can also be interpreted as spinning the higher chakras.

Chakra/nadi knowledge has surfaced in every society that nurtured a mystical tradition. "The chakra unmistakably appears in the religious art of the three Americas," notes metaphysical scholar Manley P. Hall. The Mayan God Quetzalcoatl is often portrayed with a plumage around his head to represent the emanating rays of the sahasrara. In Polynesia, the Hawaiians constructed seven temples on the island of Kauai representing each of the chakras along a trail called Ku-a-moo, "spine of the dragon," (sushumna nadi) from the ocean to a central volcanic peak. Mystical Sikh, Sufi and Christian sects each possess chakra-nadi teachings. The Chinese acupuncture system is completely based on this knowledge. By releasing

obstructions in the flow of chi, or vital prana, that runs through the nadis, illness conditions are treated and averted.

Literature on chakras, our inner bodies and their make-up continues to proliferate in a Hindu context and in other cultural and ideological frameworks. The self-healing movement has logged onto chakra knowledge, and more and more mainstream allopathic medical practitioners are finding themselves referring to "that other nervous system." As cognizance of the chakras grows, not only will people better comprehend their own mental/emotional orientation and be inspired by higher portals of perception, but also finally fathom how someone could kill another, or how a soul could forgive and still love a murderer.

Before exploring the intricacies of the chakras in our color poster of the month, we offer this engaging observation by the German linguist and Indologist Max Muller [1823-1900]: "But if it seems strange to you that the old Indian philosophers should have known more about the soul than Greeks or medieval or modern philosophers, let us remember that however much the telescopes for observing the stars of heaven have been improved, the observatories of the soul have remained much the same."

chakras,"wheels" of consciousness and energy which define our state of mind, our view of life, from the lowest awareness to the highest intuition.