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CHAKRAS GUIDE

THE SEVEN CHAKRAS - YOGA POSES - SELF-CARE TIPS

WOMEN'S WELLNESS
optimyz

THE SEVEN (HAKRAS) pg.3

(CROWN (HAKRA) pg. 12

THIRD EYE (HAKRA) pg. 11

THROAT (HAKRA) pg. 10

HEART (HAKRA) pg. 9

SOLAR PLEXUS (HAKRA) pg. 8

SACRAL (HAKRA) pg. 7

ROOT (HAKRA) pg. 5

THE SEVEN (HAK)RAS

The chakra system described in the ancient philosophy of yoga correlates—to a point—with the nervous system described in modern medicine. Here's how it relates to a yoga practice.

BY LISA GREENBAUM



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The word chakra refers to a spinning wheel or disk. In yoga philosophy, it is an energetic system based in tantric yoga that is thousands of years old. The chakra system has long been used by yogis, Reiki masters and in Thai yoga massage for energy healing and to help create a sense of balance.

In this system, there are seven chakras that travel the length of our spine. The chakras are connected to “nadis” or energy currents that move throughout the entire body, running in similar patterns to our nervous system. The sushumna nadi, the central nadi, runs along the spine, similar to our brain and spinal column and connecting each chakra.

The two other main nadis, the ida and pingala, reflect both Yin (ida) and Yang (pingala) tendencies of feminine-masculine, cold-heat and calming-energetic. These two nadis start in the base of the spine or Root Chakra and interweave through each chakra.

From a western perspective, the chakras line up with our peripheral nervous system where our nerves bunch together or where we have the most sensation in our body: sexual organs, stomach, heart and lungs and throat and head. This ties in to the physical sensations we experience through emotionally charged events, such as first love

and heartbreak, butterflies in our tummy and lumps in our throat.

Chakras come in and out of balance continuously. Certain events can misalign the energy of specific chakras for a few days or create blockages that last months or years. Movement in general is important for the balance of the chakras—yoga in particular because we use all planes of our spine in every practice.

If we have a generally good disposition and strong vitality, then most likely we are also aligned in what yoga calls our “subtle body.” When we are feeling stuck, drained or suffering from chronic conditions, by focusing on the chakra affiliated with this area we can begin to heal holistically.

Root chakra: survival

Located at the base of the spine and connected to the earth element. Practice: establishing a sense of routine, making our homes comfortable and taking time in nature.

Sacral chakra: emotions and creativity

Located in the lower belly and sexual organs, connected to the element of water. Practice: listening to music or dancing and spending time in or near water.

Solar plexus chakra: personal power

Located in the upper belly, involving organs of digestion

and the fire element. Practice: stimulating the core muscles with a strong workout.

Heart chakra: love

Located in the centre of the chest, involving the lungs and the element of air. Practice: deep breathing such as yoga’s three-part breath, breathing fully into the belly, rib cage then top of the chest.

Throat chakra: communication

Located in the throat and focused on the element of sound, this chakra is about speaking our truth. Practice: singing or chanting in yoga class.

Third eye chakra: intuition

Located between the eyes, the third eye looks within and is our ability to see truth. Practice: writing in a journal can be a powerful way to process thoughts and emotions.

Crown chakra: spiritual connection

Located at the top of the head—the soft spot on a newborn. Practice: meditation. Time to focus on stillness and breath, to truly be in the present moment. 

NOTE: SEE THE GUIDANCE OF A HEALTH CARE PRACTITIONER FOR PHYSICAL ISSUES THAT ARISE BEFORE, DURING OR AFTER YOGA PRACTICE.

SAFE AT HOME

The root chakra is our foundation. When grounded and working well, it provides our sense of security in the world.

BY LISA GREENBAUM



Yoga is not just a series of physical postures. A philosophy of life, it was developed over a long period of time in ancient India. While some of the practices may seem esoteric, at its core it is systematic and practical—and more relevant than ever.

Chakra, meaning wheel or disk in Sanskrit, is a key concept in yoga, where it is understood as a wheel of energy in the body. In the ancient traditions of yoga, chakras correspond to psychological, emotional and spiritual states of being. There are seven main chakras, which align along the spine, starting from the base of the spine to the crown of the head.

In western medicine, the seven main chakras correspond generally to bundles of nerves and major organs.

The root chakra is located at the base of the spine. It is the first chakra and the support for the other six. In this way, the root chakra is considered the most important—the foundation. The root chakra is the base: the home base, the profession, what we need in society to survive.

This chakra will become imbalanced when we find ourselves between homes or jobs, when the very things we rely on in the life are taken away. It represents safety and security and is connected to feelings of

being grounded and connected to the earth.

Today, we are seeing root chakra work begin to seep into health practices, in particular in the field of mental health, addictions and trauma-based work. Buzz words such as “bottom-up processing” refer to somatic work that is centered around balancing the first chakra. Grounding and mindfulness practices lead this charge, as outlined by trauma experts like Bessel Van Der Kolk and Peter Levine. The founding principles of this work are rooted in a sense of safety and in particular the ability to feel safe in our own bodies.

This is one reason why more and more people are attracted to the practice of yoga. While most of us begin a yoga practice because we want to stretch and de-stress, we stay because of how we feel, essentially grounded and connected. The very act of coming to the mat, feeling our bare feet pressing down as one of the first things we do in class, is also a fundamental aspect of the first chakra. Here are some suggestions for grounding practices that you can do to help bring balance to the root chakra.

Grounding practices

Walk barefoot in the grass or sand, or just get outside. Taking a walk and breathing in fresh air is a great reminder of what’s

important. When we are in tune with the rhythms of nature, we feel more in tune with our own natural rhythms, promoting clarity of mind and better sleep.

Yoga poses such as mountain pose, chair pose or warrior one are strong and stable and bring a sense of heaviness to the legs. Alternatively, restorative poses like shavasana (relaxation pose) also offer a sense of grounding with a calm and steady focus.

Taking care of the home, cleaning or repairs and setting up the space so that it’s comfortable, nurturing and safe. We can include spending time with family, loved ones and in particular children, or cuddling up with pets. There is a reason why Sunday family dinners continues to be a mainstay, despite our busy lives. It is grounding to be among people who make you feel safe.

Other practices include:

- » Yoga Nidra or body-based guided meditations.
- » EFT Tapping exercises to reduce stress and anxiety (check out *The Tapping Solution* by Nick Ortner).
- » The colour red and use of stones or crystals such as garnet, jade or lava.
- » Gardening or working with potted plants. 

FOCUS ON WHAT MATTERS

Governed by our emotions, creativity and sexuality, the sacral chakra is powerful when in tune—and self-destructive when not.

BY LISA GREENBAUM

Our sacral chakra is located between our navel and pubic bone. It is our second chakra and in combination with the chakra below (root) and above (solar plexus), it gives us our sense of self and identity. Governed by our emotions, creativity and sexuality, the sacral chakra is powerful when in tune and self-destructive when not.

Balance is what we are looking for in all our chakras and each chakra has the capacity to be either deficient or excessive. Deficiency in the second chakra shows up as rigidity, fear of intimacy or lack of emotion, whereas excessive characteristics are seen in codependency, emotional outbursts or even self-sabotaging behaviours such as promiscuity.

The element is water, reminding us that everything is change. As they say, you can't step in the same river twice. With a balanced sacral chakra you can go with the flow. Life happens so quickly around us that getting stuck behind resistance or conflict can easily cause roadblocks to our overall emotional health and in particular this chakra.

However, the ability to go with the flow is a practice. We can't simply snap our fingers and be okay with everything—life is just not that easy. This is also not about accepting what is without questioning or challenging, but rather being able to focus on what matters without getting caught up in what doesn't.

Yoga can help us find more ease through life's challenges by asking us to step back and view our practice as the witness, or objectively. To allow us to observe where we are adding undue stress or tension in our poses, like setting our jaw in a balance pose or hiking our shoulders in a hip release, the following tips can help us bring more balance to our sacral chakra. This helps us find more ease physically, energetically and emotionally.

Hip openers Yoga-based stretches that open up the hips such as pigeon, frog and lunges all help us find more mobility through the lower part of our body. When this area starts to soften, our whole body feels better, releasing tension and allowing ourselves to relax.

Be near water The simple act of watching water flow has immense power on our psyche, bringing us back to natural elements and reminding us of what is truly important. Go down to the beach, get out on a boat or purchase a small decorative fountain for your home.

Release guilt Guilt is the demon of the second chakra and a certain roadblock to emotional ease. If you have done something wrong, then own that and make amends. If the guilt is self-created over time, you must find a way to make peace with yourself. Affirmations or mantras can be powerful here, in particular if used during a physical practice or meditation. "I am enough" or "I deserve my happiness" are just two of many great examples. 

INNER POWER

The element of this chakra is fire. When overstimulated, it can mirror a dangerous forest fire. Blowing off steam is essential.

BY LISA GREENBAUM

To understand the third chakra, think of the sensations felt during intense abdominal work—that sudden rush of strength and empowerment. That feeling of total inner power of “Yes, I got this!” Energetically, this is what the third chakra represents: sense of self, inner power and inner strength.

Located in the space between diaphragm and navel, when stimulated this area creates heat and is often represented by inner fire, the fueling of Tapas (discipline) and resolve. A chakra (the Sanskrit word for spinning disk) requires balance; think of a spinning top. With too much stimulation, it can become wobbly and tip; with too little, it barely makes it through its first spin.

The element of the solar plexus chakra is fire. When overstimulated, it’s like an out of control forest fire. This comes through as anger, frustration and resentment. It could be acted out through unnecessary arguments or even violence, or it could happen internally.

The fire resembles burning embers when you hold the rage

within. An under stimulated third chakra is evident in one who feels they have no power. They allow others—bosses, managers, partners—to hold power over them. They feel trapped in the life they are leading, as if there is no way out.

In modern terms, the third chakra represents digestive process and adrenals. Problems here can lead to a series of physical issues from stomach unease to constipation, IBS and fatigue. Emotional eating or disorders like anorexia and bulimia may also be present.

So how do you break free? The best way is through physical exercise. To “blow off steam,” remove excess heat from the body and sweat it out. This works in both extremes, when you feel either the need for action or the shame surrounding action, whether taken or not. In both cases, stimulating the core helps to find the inner fire of confidence, purpose and connection.

Anything that gets you moving is great. Yoga in particular, because of all the twists that we do through class. Keep in mind, a

balanced first and second chakra will help greatly in stimulating the healthy fire for the third chakra.

Reset your third/solar plexus chakra whether in excess or deficient:

Meditate: A regular meditation practice of 10–15 minutes a day helps promote mental clarity and connection to the self. This helps to stay present, keeps the body calm and allows you to focus on what is important.

Take action: You have the power to change anything in your lives. If something is making you uneasy or ill, you owe it to yourself and those around you to change your circumstances.

Release shame: Shame is the demon of the third chakra, one that is triggered by past trauma and guilt. If this is something you are struggling with, find someone you can talk to—this will help you process these feelings. Journaling can assist greatly to help release the stories. You can even have a fire burning ceremony with your notes afterwards (just do it safely)! 

LOVE FOR LOVE'S SAKE

This powerful chakra is the centre of all other chakras.

When it is out of balance, so are the others.

BY LISA GREENBAUM

This installment of the Yoga Corner series brings us to the centre of the body—our fourth chakra, the heart. The heart chakra is love for love's sake. It is considered the centre point for all the chakras. Similar to the safety our root chakra provides, when out of balance it throws off all the others. This is not hard to understand.

When we are in a period of grief or out of touch with the love within us, all areas of our life will feel affected. We will be out of touch with our three higher chakras (heaven) and our three lower ones (earth).

Anahata, the Sanskrit word for the fourth chakra, means "un-struck," as in unhurt, unbeaten. My interpretation of this is to live from our hearts as though we have never been hurt before.

'WHEN OUR HEARTS ARE OPEN, LIKE BEING NEWLY IN LOVE, WE FEEL ENERGIZED AND JOYFUL.'

The idea of a heart that has been struck represents grief, heartbreak, or being jaded for fear of being hurt again. Granted,

at times in our life we will need to grieve, to spend time in mourning to process the pain of losing someone close. Yet, we often find ourselves slipping in to this same sensation for no good reason.

Our hearts are the element of air. When our hearts are in pain, it is difficult to breathe. When our hearts are open, like being newly in love, we feel energized and joyful. We have the capacity to cultivate this sensation all on our own. We just need to practice.

Heart meditations can be strong daily affirmations to promote the boundless love we have within us. To connect us to all living creatures and for us to feel empathy and compassion for all those we come in contact with. Sitting in meditation can help us uncover blocks or feelings of vulnerability in our heart centre. Without analyzing why they came to be, we can simply move to clear the energy through breath and a general feeling of lightness. Further tips to open our heart chakra include:

BREATHING As this is the air element, all breath practices (pranayama) will be beneficial. Three-part breath is one of my

favourites. With hands on the belly and chest, breathe in to feel the breath expand in the belly, then ribs, then chest. Then reverse the order. Exhale slowly from the chest, ribs and belly. Increase the capacity of the breath a little more each time.

BACKBENDS When practicing yoga, or simply when taking the time to stretch, make sure to open up the front of the body. This can be done with a simple chest expansion. For more intensity, try Camel Pose: place your fist at the top of your buttocks, stretching up first and then bending back. Make sure to squeeze your buttocks and engage your core to support the pose. Other back extensions include Bow Pose, Dancer and even Wheel Pose.

JOURNALLING This can be both empowering and therapeutic. Step off that hamster wheel and get your thoughts out of your head and onto paper. Don't worry if it doesn't make sense, if it's too negative or even if it's legible. Writing is a cathartic way to uncover buried emotions. It frees you to create positive change. The best part is, you can always rip it up or burn it (safely) afterwards. 

SPEAK YOUR TRUTH

That feeling of having a “lump stuck in your throat” isn't something to be ignored. Try these tips to unblock your throat chakra.

BY LISA GREENBAUM

Our throat, or fifth chakra governs communication and the ability to speak our truth. For many people, this chakra is challenged by swallowing our words or feelings as if we don't have the ability to express who we really are. The sensation of the lump in our throat is the best representation of a block in our throat chakra. Or, others may experience the excessive characteristics of continuous talking or noise to fill the silence or block out our thoughts.

This powerful chakra is represented by the colour blue and the element of ether or space. It is closely aligned to our Heart Chakra, when we are unable to speak our truth, we will also feel blocked in our heart. Likewise, our intuition and spiritual path are compromised as represented in our sixth and seventh chakras. It is often said that chronic throat conditions and issues surrounding our voice are the result of an imbalance in our throat chakra.

From a physiological standpoint, the vagus nerve runs down the back of our throat. The vagus nerve is responsible for bringing us into our parasympathetic

nervous system, or the ability to be calm and relaxed. It is part of our autonomic system, working automatically without thought similar to heart beat or digestion. It also acts as a two-way street receiving messages from our brain, and receiving messages viscerally (literally the ability to sense in our guts) and sending those messages back to our brain.

When it comes to balancing chakras, we are looking at a physical reference point to focus our work like backbends open our hearts and hip openers cater to our sacral chakra. Here, we look at the ability to train or tone our vagus nerve as a means to both relax us and also find our voice.

Finding and expressing this truth doesn't need to involve shouting from rooftops or oversharing on social media. Though it may require having those hard conversations we've been trying to avoid, often it is a quiet place within us. It is about understanding that our truth is reflected through our inner dialogue as much as it is aloud. The following are tips to open our throat chakra:

CHANTING OR SINGING

Sing in the shower, sing in the car—let your voice be heard! Chanting traditional mantras in sanskrit such as *Om Mani Padme Hum* (may the jewel of the lotus in our hearts unite us all), or *Om Nama Shivaya* (I bow to my true self) connect directly to our vagus nerve sending vibrations from our throat to our head and down through our body.

UJJAYI OR WHISPER BREATH

Often used in yoga practice, *Ujjayi* or whisper breath offers vagal toning as the breath creates vibrations through a gentle hum as we breathe in and out. Begin by imagining you are breathing steam against glass. Now, make the same sound from your nose, and then repeat the same sound on your inhale. It takes a little bit of a practice but is extremely helpful in bringing us into a calm state of mind. 

BE STILL AND FIND YOU

The third eye chakra allows us to live our truth and gives us the ability to look within—not only at what’s in front of us.

BY LISA GREENBAUM

The third eye chakra is located right at the brow point between our eyes. This is the place of our intuition and our personal truth. When in balance, we have clarity of mind, can easily make decisions, and trust that we are on the right path. Living our truth is the ability to look within and not only at what is in front of us.

In many ancient cultures, the power of the third eye has been revered for its ability to see what others can't—the objective eye, the true witness. The demon of this chakra is illusion (*Anodea Judith*)—living in a dream world or living a lie. The very thing we get caught up in all the time when scrolling through social media, like Facebook and Instagram.

When everything becomes silent and still, we find our third eye chakra. It is a chakra often out of balance as it relies on the rest of the system below it to be in balance. However, by focussing specifically on this chakra we can also help to align our subtle body, increasing vitality and the overall feeling of peace within.

The very best way to practice this is through a calm and steady yoga practice and most importantly meditation. We have

to slow down. The more we fill our minds, and add to our to-do lists and calendars the further we take ourselves from this space of truth and intuition. When we are busy doing all the things we need to do, we lose touch with who we are and what we really need.

You may have heard the saying, “We’ve become human doings, no longer human beings,” which feels more true now than ever before. Our eyes focussing instead on all the things in front of us that we want. A new pair of shoes over a really big hug, filling up the famous Starbucks cup over a short power nap. There isn't a quick fix for a balanced sixth chakra, this will only come with a dedicated daily practice. We have to do the work to get there.

How can we draw upon this super power? Essentially two ways: aligning all our chakras below, and then (though this is also a product of balancing our chakras) quieting our mind. So, you can dig through your past collection of *OptiMYz* issues that talked about each chakra individually, or in simplest forms practice the following:

- Grounding and feeling safe: Root chakra
- Being creative: Sacral chakra
- Finding inner strength: Solar plexus chakra
- Gratitude: Heart chakra
- Speaking our truth: Throat chakra

Look within

Practice meditation. Find space everyday (preferably at the same time) where you can sit and just be. Set your alarm or use one of the many meditation apps available.

Listen to relaxing or an inspiring piece of music or mantra. Listen to your breath. Every time you catch yourself outside of the present moment, which will happen often, come back to your breath. Soften your eyes. Perhaps move into child's pose and rest your forehead on a block or bolster. Be quiet, be still and find *you*. The most amazing discovery of all.

NAMASTE

(which means, the light in me sees and honours that same light in you.) 

WEAR YOUR CROWN

‘Through consistent practice—poses, breath work, and meditation—we find a deeper connection to Self.’

BY LISA GREENBAUM

Probably the most elusive of all seven chakras. The crown chakra is our spiritual connection. Located at the crown of our head, the soft spot on a newborn's head. If you touch this area now you will find a pressure point that invokes almost immediate relaxation. When this chakra is aligned it is said to awaken our kundalini energy and true enlightenment.

In yoga, we activate this chakra through inversions which is essentially anything upside down from forward fold to headstand, or cat-cow which creates a release for our entire spine, deep meditation, and chanting. The crown chakra also relies on all the chakras below it to be balanced before it can come into its full harmony. Much of the work for the crown chakra is placed here:

● **1st chakra (root)**

Safety

● **2nd chakra (sacral)**

Emotional health

● **3rd chakra (solar plexus)**

Inner strength

● **4th chakra (heart)**

Openness to love

● **5th chakra (throat)**

Speaking our truth

● **6th chakra (third eye)**

Trust in our intuition

Yoga recognizes the need for spirituality—the belief in a power greater than ourselves. Whether that is in the form of an organized religion, the universe at large or simply the unknown, that is your truth and that is what is important. There is great power in that. Anything that brings us closer to our heart, our truth, and slows us down should be deeply honoured.

Yoga is a Sanskrit word meaning to yoke or union and describes our connection between mind and body. Connection being the key word here. Through consistent practice: poses, breath work, and meditation we find a deeper connection to Self. The “S” in “Self” is considered our true self, the light within, that which doesn't change. When we are connected to Self, we also feel a deeper connection to the world around us. We see the world as an inherently good place and others around us as a manifestation of love and light.

This isn't always easy—but that is the work of enlightenment and opening the crown chakra.

Other tips to open the crown chakra include:

- » Going for a walk in nature or simply being outside
- » Meditate or sit quietly listening to your breath
- » Volunteer in your community
- » Release stress and get a good night's sleep to help gain new perspective.
- » When we feel overwhelmed, we are pulled further away from a spiritual connection. Working with a therapist, exercising, or taking a hot bath can help too—whatever helps you.

Ultimately being true to your heart and to yourself, slowing down enough to appreciate the world around you, and being present are the best ways to feel the connection of the crown chakra. 



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lisa Greenbaum, E-RYT 500 and C-IAYT yoga therapist, has worked with countless individuals by using yoga to release trauma, find ease from chronic pain and tension and develop a deeper connection to Self: mind, body and spirit. She has over 750 hours of yoga education and logged 4000+ teaching hours. She is also a certified fitness instructor and personal trainer with canfitpro, and a Women in Fitness Association (WIFA) Global Ambassador.

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