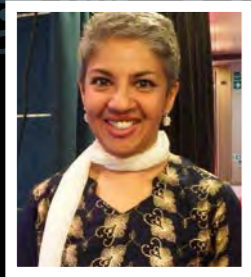


DECODING CHAKRAS

a contemporary challenge to ancient thinking



WRITTEN BY LINA MOOKERJEE
BEng (BSc) MA
BWY Dip FCT DCT

After a decade as a professional electrical engineer, Lina spent much of the following 17 years as a yoga teacher,

trainer of yoga teachers, BACP Accredited psychotherapist and an expert in energy practice. Her wide interests and variety of work roles are reflected in her fascination for study. Lina has a first degree in Engineering, a postgrad Diploma in Management Studies, an MA in Jungian Psychotherapy and Healing, and two qualifications in training and teaching. Lina will be starting her new BWY Module 'Chakras and the Human Energy System' in January 2017

Visit: www.praxis-yoga.com for more information.

Email: enquiries@praxis-ppd.com

When you see or hear the word 'chakra' – what immediately comes into your awareness?

Such words as energy, chakras, auras and subtle bodies have become relatively commonplace within our everyday vocabularies and conversations. An ever-growing population want to know about energy and spirituality. Those yearning for something more than a routine daily existence have reached 'critical mass' – they are prompted by a desire for inner fulfilment, for a reconnection with a sense of the sacred in life.

It is no wonder that the chakra system appeals to western 'seekers after truth'. Yet this raises the intriguing question: How can this ancient chakric wisdom (from an eastern culture) 'make sense' and be appropriate to those living a modern western-centric life?

My aim for this article is to invite you to engage with this scrutiny through a contemporary exploration of the ancient wisdom of Chakras. I will offer two paradoxes to challenge established thinking.

My frame of reference

You might ask what authority do I have that entitles me to question such an established philosophical framework. Well, I believe that my life experience combined with my professional trainings and practice equip me quite well.

My start point could be considered somewhat paradoxical. I was born into a Hindu Brahmin lineage steeped in Tantra and Vedanta philosophy and practice. My British/Birmingham birth roots provide a cultural consciousness fed by the industrial revolution of change that gave birth to science and engineering on a global scale. My birth year was when the world was pushing to extend its boundaries of life beyond earth by setting foot on the moon. A powerful set of influences offering ancient and modern wisdoms, norms, choices and perspectives.

This challenging need to learn to negotiate living with opposing polarities – with my eastern (oriental) and western (occidental) influences – has served me well. I have learned to appreciate where worlds meet and when they are literally, and metaphorically, poles apart. It is from the wisdom of Carl Jung that I draw understanding. He viewed the balancing of opposites as basic to the structure of the psyche – the soul – and that acquiring good health, and eventually enlightenment, is a process of navigation, which enables the reclaiming of all parts of self i.e. a sense of body-wholeness.

My professional worlds embrace science, electrical engineering, yoga teaching/training, humanistic psychotherapy and Jungian depth psychology and offer me a range of valuable perspectives.

How can this ancient chakric wisdom (from an eastern culture) 'make sense' and be appropriate to those living a modern western-centric life?

My prompt to question the established order

Although my engineering life required questioning the world around me, I had not consciously applied this to my inner-life. I did not have permission to do so until I was ready to give it to myself – and so began the journey of self-exploration. Travelling within my deep psychological labyrinth, I eventually discovered the many layers of my introjected cultural, religious and social beliefs – that I had simply accepted as truths and therefore not questioned. I also recognised how many of these beliefs were fed by a dominant and patriarchal society that limited my life as a woman. So began a process of understanding the very frameworks that had shaped so much of my life to that point. This included questioning the principles of Tantra Yoga philosophy upon which the chakra system has been based and which I had been taught to respect as underpinning my spiritual infrastructure. As a fusion of two cultures – ancient Indian-yogic and post-modern British – I was living in two opposing philosophical systems of thinking that I will now explain in context.

Eastern philosophy – Indian chakra system.

The chakras are linked with the science and practice of yoga in India, for man to 'yoke' the mortal self with his inner divine consciousness. The chakra systems evolved predominantly from within the tantric tradition around 500CE, weaving together many of the Indian spiritual traditions at the time. Tantra challenged the status quo by asserting that to find oneself, one needed to be in the world, rather than being separated from it.

Evolution of western consciousness

In the west, the belief that mind and body were separate began during the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. It was Descartes, a 17th century French philosopher and anatomist, who famously said: "I think, therefore I am" – now referred to as the "Cartesian Split". The story goes, that Descartes needed human bodies for dissection purposes and struck a deal with the Pope. Descartes would have nothing to do with the soul, the mind or the emotions – which remained under the Church's jurisdiction – and modern medicine would take the physical body as its domain, thus dividing human beings into two separate parts – a specious disconnection, which was to continue for centuries! Yet, through recent work started by Dr Candace Pert, things are changing and the mind-body connection is no longer being viewed with suspicion, but now with curiosity.

The search for meaning through the chakras can be viewed as a conceptual attempt to 'heal' this consciousness split. How might this look?

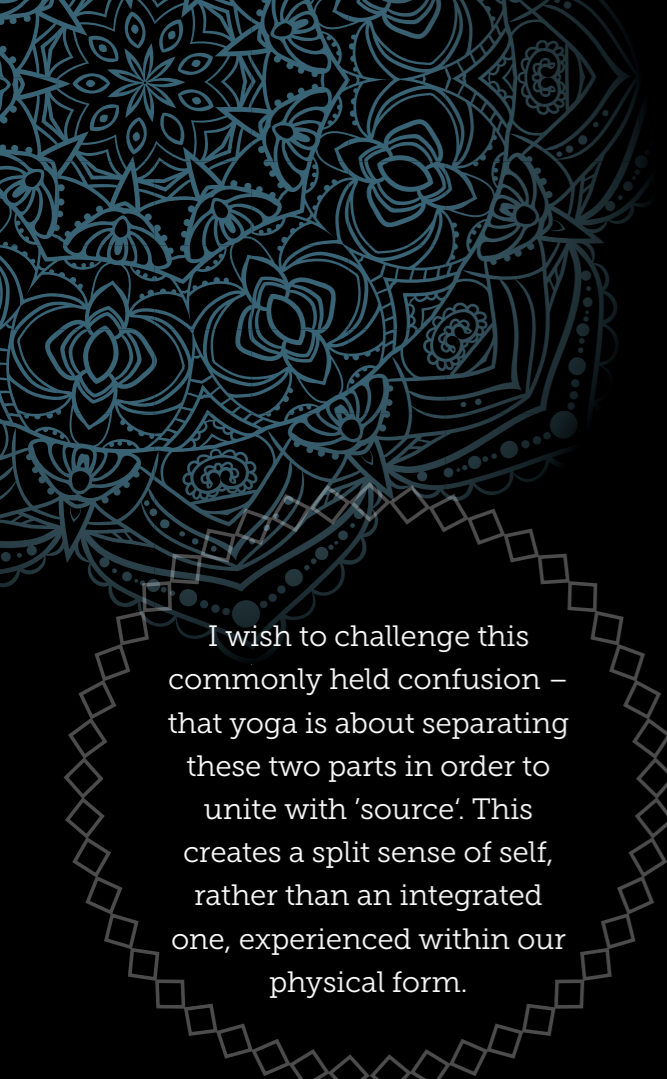
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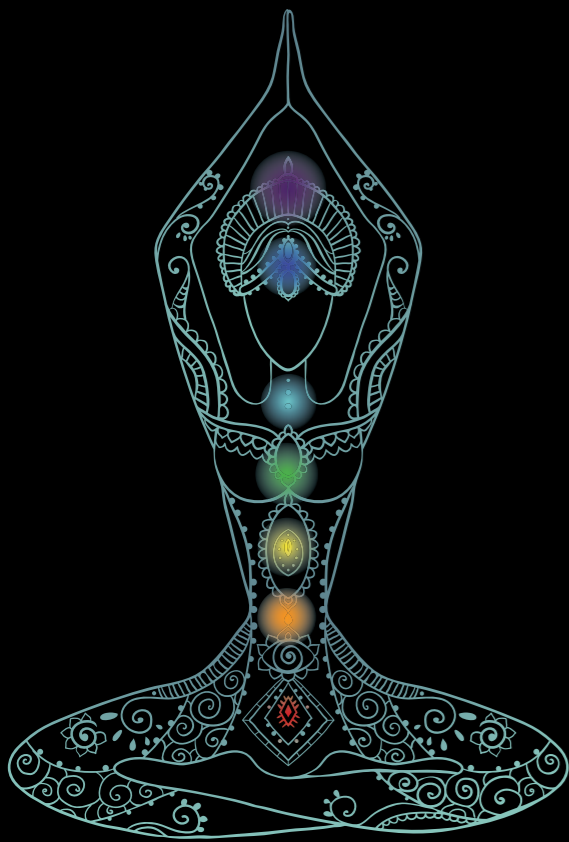
¹ Harris (1999), pg 20

² Pert (1999)

³ Judith (1996)



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Chakras: metaphors for seven levels of consciousness.

Anodea Judith describes the chakras as gateways for integration, a way of healing this consciousness-split. As metaphors they offer accessibility to connecting with seven levels of consciousness, which span the entire spectrum of an individual's potential. These can be abbreviated as:

- a sense of a secure existence
- respect for emotional experience and expression
- an awareness of 'I' and responsibly owning one's power
- capacity to love, empathise and not judge
- valuing of honesty and clear communication
- capacity to perceive one's own motives and prejudices
- a willingness to reflect and exercise wisdom

The chakra system could also be considered as the body's way to experience pure consciousness in a grounded, material way – just as prana needs to have a tangible system and structure that allows access to process and metabolise this energy. This is similar to electricity, which also needs a safe system for its use (including its means of transportation and distribution). I view these systems to be identical – whereby the chakras fulfil the same function as electrical transformers – to be able to safely access different levels of consciousness or electrical voltages respectively across the whole energy spectrum. While there are significant similarities, there are some important differences too.

The meaning of yoga – to integrate or split?

Indian spirituality required that the ultimate goal of yoga was to rise above nature (physicality) for the realisation of pure consciousness (enlightenment) – to be freed from the fluctuations of the mind and emotions. Yet “yoga” means yoke, union or integration.

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Paradox 1: current chakra focus supports splitting not integrating

Many interpretations of the chakras advise ‘transcending’ the lower chakras (which are viewed as mundane) in favour of the upper ‘spiritual’ ones. I question this long-accepted prejudiced view that the ‘personal chakras’ are in some way inferior and therefore to be avoided.

As a psychotherapist, I am aware of ‘splitting’ – a defence mechanism subconsciously employed to avoid experiencing distress and so reduce anxiety arising from unacceptable or potentially harmful impulses. Klein posited that infant life experiences are crudely judged as all good or all bad – a habit that continues into later life, triggering defences when one's psychological equilibrium is threatened. Consider it as a form of nature's self-protection, often referred to as black and white (or all-or-nothing thinking), which can create psychological instability.

⁴ Wikipedia 2016

70 years of extensive research carried out by John Bowlby et al, emphasised the need for good early attachments and a secure base for healthy psychological functioning. Lower chakra consciousness provides the necessary foundations to support spiritual growth – akin to a good base for the self to grow where the roots have a firm anchor. “Detachment” is frequently and unthinkingly encouraged without awareness of the consequences – it can be unsafe if there is no secure relationship to a sense of one's own ego, the mediating centre of consciousness. Often confused with ego-centricity (and similar ego-inflationary terms, which are its adverse aspects), a strong and regulated ego equips us with a healthy sense of 'I' to support a healthy processing of life experiences.

I question how chakra consciousness is being presented and explained within the yoga field. If the meaning of yoga is to integrate and not split, then this is being contradicted by placing greater importance on the higher chakras – instead of enabling the development of all seven layers of consciousness.

The consequential impact? The human energy system becomes compromised – ungrounded, off-centre and vulnerable to external negative influences.

Paradox 2: balancing the chakras is misleading – and impossible!

I question another confusion – the notion of ‘balancing chakras’. Within the field of energy dynamics, ‘balance’ is an impossible state – as this would mean inertia i.e. inactivity – no movement (a pathological condition for us humans). There needs to be two poles, holding different energy charges, in order for movement to happen.

With electrical energy (electricity), a current flows because electrons move from the more replete (positive) pole to the deficient (negative) pole. Within movement along the sushumna axis, energy flows between muladhara and sahasrara depending on the creative process.

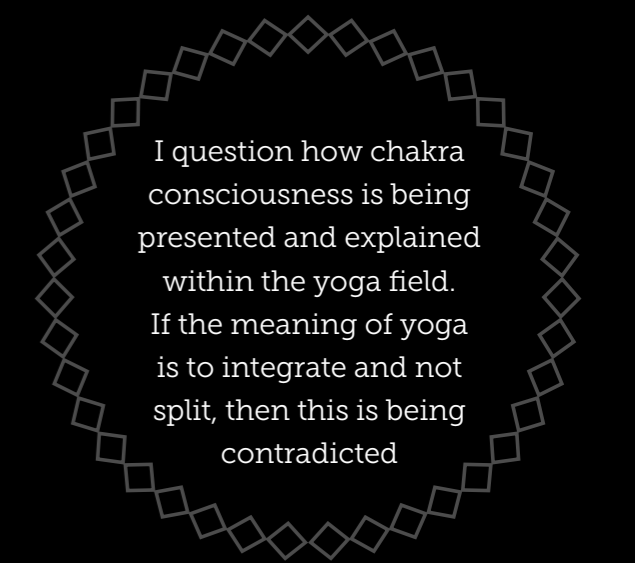
A more direct example is to consider how chakras become excessive or deficient states. I would then argue that it's the ability to self-regulate, as opposed to balance, that provides a more stable and sustainable system.

Conclusion

I believe that my enquiry raises important questions concerning the beliefs, thinking and practices that currently exist in relation to chakra consciousness – and how these create confusion through contradiction. With the wonders of recent research in mind, I am suggesting that a contribution from contemporary psychology could bring light and add value to this ancient, still relevant and fascinatingly complex paradigm – whose evolution is far from ending. And I hope you will feel enthused to explore more about this phenomenal ‘subtle engineering’ system.

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