Asanas for the Chakra System

A prescription of asanas to help balance the subtle energies of the chakra system.

By Barbara Kaplan Herring

Seventh Heaven

There are seven chakras, or energy centers, in the body that become blocked by longheld tension and low self-esteem. But practicing poses that correspond to each chakra can release these blocks and clear the path to higher consciousness.

The chakra system provides a theoretical base for fine-tuning our yoga practice to suit our unique personality and circumstances. Traditionally, Indians saw the body as containing seven main chakras, arranged vertically from the base of the spine to the top of the head. Chakra is the Sanskrit word for wheel, and these "wheels" were thought of as spinning vortexes of energy.

Each chakra is associated with particular functions within the body and with specific life issues and the way we handle them, both inside ourselves and in our interactions with the world. As centers of force, chakras can be thought of as sites where we receive, absorb, and distribute life energies. Through external situations and internal habits, such as long-held physical tension and limiting self-concepts, a chakra can become either deficient or excessive—and therefore imbalanced.

These imbalances may develop temporarily with situational challenges, or they may be chronic. A chronic imbalance can come from childhood experiences, past pain or stress, and internalized cultural values. For instance, a child whose family moves every year to a different state may not learn what it's like to feel rooted in a location, and she can grow up with a deficient first chakra.

A deficient chakra neither receives appropriate energy nor easily manifests that chakra's energy in the world. There's a sense of being physically and emotionally closed down in the area of a deficient chakra. Think of the slumped shoulders of someone who is depressed and lonely, their heart chakra receding into their chest. The deficient chakra needs to open.

When a chakra is excessive, it is too overloaded to operate in a healthy way and becomes a dominating force in a person's life. Someone with an excessive fifth (throat) chakra, for example, might talk too much and be unable to listen well. If the chakra
were deficient, she might experience restraint and difficulty when communicating.

**Next: Muladhara Chakra (Root)**

Muladhara Chakra (Root)

My student Anne recently called me to schedule a private yoga session. A few months ago, she'd moved from Georgia to the Bay Area for her husband's work, and she was having difficulty finding a new job as a graphic designer. While she felt good about their relocation, her house was unfamiliar, she missed her relatives in Atlanta, she worried about finding work, and she was feeling tired and worried about coming down with a cold.

If Anne had consulted a job counselor, a therapist, and a doctor, each of her problems might have been treated as separate—and certainly she could successfully tackle them in this way. But because for years I have looked at life using the lens of the chakra system, a way of understanding human life that is woven into both yoga and traditional Indian medicine, I was able to see the common ground in all of Anne's issues. Even more important, I was able to suggest yoga poses and other practices I was fairly sure would support her in facing each of her challenges.

Anne's symptoms sounded to me like a first chakra deficiency. That was hardly surprising, as the recent changes in her life presented her with classic first chakra challenges. Centered at the perineum and the base of the spine and called Muladhara Chakra (Root Chakra), this energy vortex is involved in tending to our survival needs, establishing a healthy sense of groundedness, taking good basic care of the body, and purging the body of wastes. The associated body parts include the base of the spine, the legs, feet, and the large intestine.

Circumstances that pull up our roots and cause a first chakra deficiency (like Anne's) include traveling, relocation, feeling fearful, and big changes in our body, family, finances, and business. Some people, often those with busy minds and active imaginations, don't need special challenges to become deficient in this chakra; they feel ungrounded most of the time, living more in the head than in the body.

We experience deficiencies in this chakra as "survival crises." However mild or severe—whether you've been evicted, gone bankrupt, or just have the flu—these crises usually demand a lot of immediate attention. On the other hand, signs of excessiveness in the first chakra include greed, hoarding of possessions or money, or attempting to ground yourself by gaining a lot of excess weight.

There are many yoga poses that correct first chakra imbalances, bringing us back to our body and the earth and helping us experience safety, security, and stillness. Muladhara Chakra is
associated with the element earth, representing physical and emotional grounding, and with the color red, which has a slower vibration than the colors that symbolize the other chakras.

To help her ground, Anne and I began by focusing on her feet, for all poses that stretch and strengthen the legs and feet help the first chakra. She rolled a tennis ball underneath one foot and then the other, pressing into it to help awaken the soles (a mini acupressure treatment) and open the "doors" of the feet. To stimulate the toes and encourage them to spread for standing poses, she sat cross-legged and laced her fingers in between her toes, reaching from the sole to the top of the foot. Then she knelt, curled her toes under, and sat on them for a minute. Following these warm-ups, we did an hour of calf openers, hamstring stretches, and standing poses to help her open and strengthen her lower body and root her attention downward.

When our hamstrings are tight, the contraction creates a sense that we're constantly prepared to run away. As Anne slowly stretched the backs of her legs in Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) and Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-Knee Pose), she received some of the gifts of the first chakra: calmness, patience, and a willingness to slow down and stay in one place. As she strengthened her quadriceps and opened her hamstrings, she renewed her confidence and commitment to the next steps on her life's journey. Her fears eased as she allowed herself to trust the earth and her body.

Anne and I ended our session with peaceful restorative poses, like Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining Bound Angle Pose), Salamba Savasana (Supported Corpse Pose), and Salamba Balasana (Supported Child's Pose), all of which settle an overactive mind and encourage us to surrender to gravity. By the end of our session, she no longer felt so worried. At home in her body, she was more prepared for the challenges she faced.

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Svadisthana Chakra (Hips, Sacrum, Genitals)

In Sanskrit, the second chakra is called Svadisthana, which translates as "one's own place or base," indicating just how crucial this chakra is in our lives. A student who is facing second chakra issues would experience very different concerns than Anne. Getting things in order was the work of the first chakra. The tasks of the second chakra include allowing for emotional and sensual movement in our life, opening to pleasure, and learning how to "go with the flow." Associated with the hips, sacrum, lower back, genitals, womb, bladder, and kidneys, this chakra is involved with sensuality, sexuality, emotions, intimacy, and desire. All watery things about us have to do with this chakra: circulation, urination, menstruation, orgasm, tears. Water flows, moves, and changes, and a healthy second chakra
allows us to do so too.

Trying to influence the outer world is not the province of the second chakra. Instead of demanding that our body or a relationship be different, the second chakra encourages us to feel the feelings that arise as we open to life just as it is. As we allow ourselves to accept what is, we taste the sweetness (and bittersweetness) of life. When we relax our resistance to life, our hips let go, our reproductive organs become less tense, and we're open to experiencing our sensuality and sexuality.

Along with the second chakra at the pelvis, the other even-numbered chakras (the fourth, at the heart, and the sixth, at the third eye) are concerned with the "feminine" qualities of relaxation and openness. These chakras exercise our rights to feel, to love, and to see. Odd-numbered chakras, found in the legs and feet, solar plexus, throat, and crown of the head, are concerned with the "masculine" endeavor of applying our will in the world, asserting our rights to have, to ask, to speak, and to know. The odd-numbered, masculine chakras tend to move energy through our systems, pushing it out into the world and creating warmth and heat. The even-numbered, feminine chakras cool things down, attracting energy inward.

In the modern world, the masculine and feminine principles of life are out of balance: The masculine energy of action and expression too often overrules the feminine energy of wisdom and acceptance, causing increased stress in our lives. So many people have taken on an imbalanced work ethic that scoffs at pleasure and affords little time for enjoyment or relaxation. After focusing on her second chakra in a recent workshop, a student confided to me how hard it was to allow pleasure in her workaholic life. We created a plan for her to give herself 20 minutes each day devoted just to the healing power of pleasure: listening to music, doing gentle yoga, getting a massage. Our lives give us plenty of opportunities to express ourselves and be active; in our yoga practice and elsewhere, we need to make sure we complement this with relaxation and receptivity. Harmony requires balance. In yoga, that means creating a practice that combines strength and flexibility, effort and surrender. Any imbalance in your yoga practice will be mirrored in your chakras.

In a culture as confused as ours is about sexuality, pleasure, and emotional expression, there are an infinite number of pathways to an imbalanced second chakra. For example, people who were raised in an environment where emotions were repressed or pleasure denied will be more likely to lack energy in the second chakra. Symptoms of a second chakra deficiency include fear of pleasure, being out of touch with feelings, and resistance to change. Sexual problems and discomfort in the lower back, hips, and reproductive organs can also signify that this chakra needs some kind attention. Sexual abuse during childhood can lead to feeling closed down in this chakra or may result in making sexual energy the most dominant part of the personality. An excessively charged second chakra may reveal itself through overly emotional behavior, sexual addiction, or poor boundaries. Excessiveness may also result from a family environment where there's a constant need for pleasurable stimulation (entertainment, partying) or frequent emotional drama.

Second chakra asanas help us with adaptability and receptivity. The leg position in Gomukhasana (Cow Face Pose), forward bending with the legs in the first stage of Eka Pada...
Rajakapotasana (Pigeon Pose), Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose), Upavistha Konasana (Open Angle Pose), and other hip and groin openers all provide freedom of movement in the pelvis. These hip and groin openers should never be forced, for they require the subtle feminine touch of sensitivity and surrender.

Manipura Chakra (Navel, Solar Plexus)
Located in the area of the solar plexus, navel, and the digestive system, the fiery third chakra is called Manipura, the “lustrous gem.”
Associated with the color yellow, this chakra is involved in self-esteem, warrior energy, and the power of transformation; it also governs digestion and metabolism. A healthy, spirited third chakra supports us in overcoming inertia, jump-starting our “get-up-and-go” attitude so that we can take risks, assert our will, and assume responsibility for our life. This chakra is also the place of our deep belly laughter, warmth, ease, and the vitality we receive from performing selfless service.

Sensible risk-taking is one way of gaining confidence and flexing your third chakra power muscles. For some people, a risk is dropping back from Tadasana (Mountain Pose) into Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward Bow Pose); for others, it might simply be getting to their first yoga class. Risks may involve confrontation, setting limits, or asking for what we need—all ways of reclaiming our power.

Digestive problems, eating disorders, feeling like a victim, or experiencing low self-esteem can all be indications of a deficient third chakra. When you feel disempowered or in need of re-energizing, third chakra poses fan the flames of your inner fire and restore vitality so that you can move from the strength of your core. Practice Suryanamaskar (Sun Salutation), abdominal strengtheners like Navasana (Boat Pose), Ardha Navasana (Half Boat Pose), and Urdhva Prasarita Padasana (Leg Lifts), Warrior poses, twists, and Bhastrika Pranayama (Bellows Breath or Breath of Fire).

Perfectionism, anger, hatred, and too much emphasis on power, status, and recognition reveal an excessive third chakra. In addition, taking in more of anything than you can assimilate and use also indicates excessiveness. Restorative, passive backbends that cool off the belly’s fire act as calming agents for third chakra excess.

We live in a time where there is little encouragement for paying attention to our body’s natural energy levels and giving it what it needs. So often when we are really tired, we ignore our longing for rest and manipulate our bodies with caffeine, sugar, and other stimulants to create a false sense of energy. When we’re overstimulated and want to relax or draw inward, many people turn to overeating, alcohol, or drugs to slow down. Yoga offers us a different choice: to
listen to what our body requires and to truly nourish ourselves, using appropriate asanas and pranayama practices to create more energy or relaxation. Once we’ve done that, we can get a taste of our true personal power.

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Anahata Chakra (Heart)

The fourth chakra, the heart chakra, rests in the center of the chakra system, at the core of our spirit. Its physical location is the heart, upper chest, and upper back. The fourth is the balance point, integrating the world of matter (the lower three chakras) with the world of spirit (the upper three chakras). Through the heart chakra, we open to and connect with harmony and peace. The health of our heart center registers the quality and power of love in our life. In Sanskrit, the heart chakra is called Anahata, which means “unstruck” or “unhurt.” Its name implies that deep beneath our personal stories of brokenness and the pain in our heart, wholeness, boundless love, and a wellspring of compassion reside.

This chakra’s element is air. Air spreads and energizes. Like water, air assumes the shape of whatever it fills, yet it is less subject to gravity than water. When you feel swept up in love, you often need to replant your first chakra in order to stay grounded. Air permeates breath, so pranayama practice helps balance and tone this chakra. All forms of pranayama can help you use more air, more prana, thereby increasing your vitality and enthusiasm for life.

If you notice that you are sitting with your head forward, shoulders rounded and your chest collapsed, it’s a good time to start practicing fourth chakra poses to give your heart some breathing space. When we lead with our head and not with the heart, we may be overly focused on thought and tend to cut ourselves off from the emotions and the body. When the heart chakra is deficient, you may experience feelings of shyness and loneliness, an inability to forgive, or a lack of empathy. Physical symptoms can include shallow breathing, asthma, and other lung diseases.

Asanas that enliven the heart chakra include passive chest openers in which we arch gently over a blanket or bolster, shoulder stretches such as the arm positions of Gomukhasana and Garudasana (Eagle Pose), and backbends. Being an even-numbered, feminine chakra, the heart center naturally yearns to release and let go. Doing backbends develops the trust and surrender we need to open the heart fully. When we feel fearful, there is no room for love, and our bodies show contraction. When we choose love, the fear melts away, and our practice takes on a joyful quality. In many backbending poses, the heart is positioned higher than the head. It's wonderfully refreshing to let the mind drop away from the top position and instead lead with the heart.
Some signs that the heart chakra is overpowering your life can include co-dependency, possessiveness, jealousy, heart disease, and high blood pressure. For these symptoms, forward bends are the best antidote, because they are grounding and foster introspection. While people with deficient heart chakras need to open to receive love more fully, those with excessive heart chakras find healing by slowing down to discover inside themselves the nourishment they have been seeking from others.

The most powerful way to open, energize, and balance not just the heart chakra but all of our chakras is to love ourselves and others. Love is the greatest healer. In our hatha yoga practice, remembering what we love and appreciate as we practice fourth chakra asanas enhances the power of the poses and our general well-being.

Visuddha Chakra (Throat)

Since the heart chakra is the bridge between the lower, more physical energy centers and the upper, more metaphysical ones, as we ascend through the chakras, the fifth is the first primarily focused on the spiritual plane. The throat chakra, Visuddha, is associated with the color turquoise blue and with the elements sound and ether, the field of subtle vibrations ancient Indians believed pervaded the universe. Located in the neck, throat, jaw, and mouth, the Visuddha chakra resonates with our inner truth and helps us find a personal way to convey our voice to the outside world. The rhythm of music, creativity of dance, the vibration of singing, and the communication we make through writing and speaking are all fifth chakra ways to express ourselves.

Visuddha means "pure" or "purification." Purification of the body through attention to diet, yoga, meditation, and exercise opens us to experience the subtler aspects of the upper chakras. Some yogis notice that drinking more water and letting go of products such as tobacco and dairy helps to loosen up the neck and shoulders and clear the voice. In addition, sound itself is purifying. If you think of the way you feel after chanting Indian kirtans, reading poetry aloud, or simply singing along with your favorite music, you'll recognize how the vibrations and rhythms positively affect your body, right down to the cellular level.

Deficient energy in this chakra leads to neck stiffness, shoulder tension, teeth grinding, jaw disorders, throat ailments, an underactive thyroid, and a fear of speaking. Excessive talking, an inability to listen, hearing difficulties, stuttering, and an overactive thyroid are all related to excessiveness in this chakra. Depending on the ailments, different neck stretches and shoulder openers, including Ustrasana (Camel Pose), Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand), and Halasana (Plow Pose), can aid the fifth chakra.
Ajna Chakra (Third Eye)

Can you recall last night's dream? Can you imagine how you would like your body to feel tomorrow? These imaginative abilities—visualizing the past, creating positive pictures of the future, and fantasizing—are all aspects of Ajna Chakra, whose Sanskrit name means both "the perception center" and "the command center." Associated with the element light and the color indigo blue, the sixth chakra is located between and just above the physical eyes, creating the spiritual third eye. While our two eyes see the material world, our sixth chakra sees beyond the physical. This vision includes clairvoyance, telepathy, intuition, dreaming, imagination, and visualization.

The sixth chakra is involved in both the creation and perception of art and in the recognition that what we see has a powerful impact on us. Even when we're not aware of it, we're all sensitive to the images we find in our environment. I remember growing up in Los Angeles as a teen and seeing hoards of billboards advertising liquor and cigarettes. Looking at them didn't make me feel healthy or happy; instead, it gave me the message that I needed drugs to feel complete. Then I went to Thailand as a high school foreign-exchange student. I saw Buddha statues on the streets instead of billboards, and those serene, majestic figures awakened my connection to inner peace.

When the third eye is excessively abuzz with energy, we experience headaches, hallucinations, nightmares, and difficulty concentrating. When this chakra is deficient, we have a poor memory, experience eye problems, have difficulty recognizing patterns, and can't visualize well.

As a yoga teacher, I occasionally like to work with this chakra by having my students wear blindfolds during an entire class. Temporarily deprived of sight, which provides such a huge percentage of our sensory input, students have a very fresh experience of yoga. They can't be distracted by the room, by other students, or by looking critically at their own bodies. Instead, they experience pratyahara, the drawing inward of the senses. After these classes, students have shared with me profound insights about their bodies and lives that came up because their vision was directed more deeply inside themselves. Another yogic approach to supporting the health of the Ajna Chakra is to do supported forward bends, adding an extra bolster or blanket to press upon and stimulate the third eye area. Also, creating positive images and visualizations is a practice that helps create a healthy sixth chakra. Such affirmative visions act as natural magnets, drawing the imagined situation into your life.
Sahasrara Chakra (Crown)

The Sanskrit name of the seventh chakra is Sahasrara, which means "thousandfold." Although this chakra is represented by a thousand-petaled lotus (the symbol of purity and spirituality), the number 1000 is not meant literally; instead, it implies the infinite nature of this chakra, which provides us with our most direct connection with the Divine. Although some teachers associate this chakra with the color violet, it is usually associated with white, a combination of all colors, just as this chakra synthesizes all the other chakras.

The seventh chakra is located at the crown of the head and serves as the crown of the chakra system, symbolizing the highest state of enlightenment and facilitating our spiritual development. The seventh chakra is like a halo atop the head. In art, Christ is often depicted with a golden light surrounding his head, and the Buddha shown with a lofty projection on the top of his head. In both cases, these images represent the awakened spirituality of the Sahasrara Chakra.

The element of the seventh chakra is thought, and this chakra is associated with the highest functions of the mind. Even though the mind cannot be seen or felt concretely, it creates the belief systems that control our thoughts and actions. To give one small example, my student George had a bad fall out of a bunk bed when he was a child. Now a fit, athletic man in his 40s, he is still frightened to do inversions. His early trauma helped create the belief that being upside down was always dangerous. Even though he now has the ability to safely and easily learn inversions, his fear paralyzes him and his belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the mind thinks, so we create our lives.

Excessiveness in this chakra appears as being overly intellectual or feeling yourself to be a member of a spiritual or intellectual elite. Deficient energy manifests as difficulty thinking for yourself, apathy, spiritual skepticism, and materialism.

Meditation is the yogic practice best suited for bringing this chakra into balance. Just as our body needs a shower frequently, the busy mind filled with so many thoughts and concerns also needs a cleansing. Why tackle today's problems with yesterday's muddled mind? Furthermore, the energy of this chakra helps us to experience the Divine, to open to a higher or deeper power. All the various forms of meditation, including both concentration and insight practices, allow the mind to become more present, clear, and insightful.

The ancient Hindus associated the chakras with the sleeping serpent goddess, Kundalini. She coils around the base of the first chakra and, when awakened, spirals up the energy channels (nadis) and pierces each chakra, bringing successively higher states of awareness that culminate in enlightenment at the crown chakra.
Focused on transcendence, many people seeking higher consciousness have disregarded the importance of the lower chakras. Yet we all need strong and solid support of our base chakras in order to open to the spiritual in a healthy and integrated way. The lower chakras focus on details such as our home, family, and feelings, while the upper chakras develop synthesizing views and wisdom that help us understand the grander order of things. All of our chakras affect one another and ultimately work together. As we learn to use this ancient Indian system to understand our lives, we can gain insight into personal issues that require our attention—and we can use the techniques of hatha yoga to bring our chakras and lives back into harmony.

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