

Humanities Reading 3: Classical Teachings

Imaginary Chakras

Excerpted from *The Truth of Yoga* by Daniel Simpson*

The best-known parts of the yogic body are often the most misunderstood. **Chakras** are subtle “wheels” along the spine, originally used as concentration points. They only really exist if imagined into being. Some teachings on yoga neglect them completely.

There are many different systems of *chakras*, with varying numbers and locations. The predominant model today, with six along the spine and a seventh at the crown, is a mix of tradition and recent invention. The earliest reference comes from the tenth-century *Kubjikamata Tantra* (11.34–35), describing the anus as the **adhara**, a “base” or “support,” to which **mula**, or “root,” is later added as a prefix. The **svadhishthana** is located above it at the penis, **manipuraka** (or **manipura**) at the navel, and **anahata** in the heart. **Vishuddhi** is in the throat, and **ajna** between the eyes.

Generally, *chakras* are meant to be templates for visualization. They are presented in *Tantras* as ways to transform a practitioner’s body, installing symbols connected to gods. Some texts list more than a dozen, others fewer than five. They are sometimes called **adharas**, or “supports” for meditation—or alternatively **padmas**, or “lotuses,” on account of the petals that frame their designs. Either way, they are said to be hubs in a network of channels for vital energy, and focusing on their positions refines perception.

Another early list gives different names: *nadi*, *maya*, *yogi*, *bhedana*, *dipti*, and *hanta*. “Now I will tell you about the excellent, supreme, subtle visualizing meditation,” says the *Netra Tantra* (7.1–2), describing the body as comprising “six chakras, the supporting vowels, the three objects, and the five voids, the twelve knots, the three powers, the path of the three abodes, and the three channels.” This bewildering array of locations is common in *Tantras*, whose maps of inner realms often sound contradictory.

A few centuries later, the seven-chakra version became more established. This adds the **sahasrara**—a “thousand-spoked” wheel, or “thousand-petaled” lotus—at the top of the head (or sometimes above it, as in the *Shiva Samhita*). Another yogic text lists the same seven points without mentioning chakras:

“The penis, the anus, the navel, the heart and above that the place of the uvula, the space between the brows and the aperture into space: these are said to be the locations of the yogi’s meditation” (Viveka Martanda 154–55).

However, the points are defined, they function as markers for raising awareness.

The triumph of this model is the work of Sir John Woodroffe, a British judge in colonial India, who used the pen name Arthur Avalon. In 1919, he wrote a book called *The Serpent Power*, which included a translation of the sixteenth-century *Shat Chakra Nirupana*, or “Description Of the Six Chakras.” Other Western writers shared Avalon’s interest in tantric ideas. The occultist Charles Leadbeater also wrote about chakras in the 1920s. The two men’s books remain influential, along with the theories of Carl Gustav Jung, who incorporated chakras in his system of symbols.

New Age authors have blurred the distinction between mental creations and physical fact, presenting chakras as if they exist, as opposed to being visualized. They are often depicted with rainbow colors not found in original Sanskrit sources. They are also given attributes that link them to gemstones, planets, ailments, endocrine glands, suits of the Tarot, and Christian archangels, among other details.

Some mentions of mantras are also misleading. Tantric rituals connect them to elements pictured in chakras, not the chakras themselves. So reciting a “seed”—or **bija—mantra** linked to air is unlikely to do much to open the heart, except via placebo effects.

However, focusing attention on such things can make them real, at least in the realm of subjective experience. And since this is how Tantras say deities are summoned, perhaps the use of chakras by modern practitioners is not all that different.

Raising Kundalini

Excerpted from *The Truth of Yoga* by Daniel Simpson*

The practice of yoga aims to trigger transformation. The potential to do so is symbolized in texts as the serpent goddess **Kundalini**, meaning “she who is coiled” at the base of the spine. She is said to lie dormant until her shakti, or “power,” is unleashed. Yogic methods help to elevate this energy, dissolving the mind in awakened consciousness.

Like the *chakras* through which she ascends, *Kundalini* was first named in *Tantras*, and later adopted by physical yoga. Her location is “two fingers above the anus, two fingers below the penis,” states the fifteenth-century *Shiva Samhita* (2.21–23). “There, in the form

of a creeping vine of lightning, is the great goddess, *Kundalini*. Coiled three and a half times, subtle, resembling a snake.”

Another yogic description counts eight coils, saying the serpent is straightened by practicing breath control, propelling it up the body’s central axis. “The fire kindled by the breath continually burns Kundalini. Heated by the fire, that goddess of the channel, who entrances the three worlds, enters into the mouth of the Sushumna channel in the spine [and] together with the breath and the fire pierces the knot of Brahma” (*Yoga Bija* 96–97).

This is one of three obstacles blocking the path of *Kundalini*. These knots, or *granthis*, are named after gods: Brahma near the base of the spine, Vishnu in the middle, and Rudra (a synonym for Shiva) at the top. Older texts such as the Mahabharata refer to a “heart-knot” created by doubt, which when untied results in happiness. *Kundalini* is even more powerful.

“When the sleeping Kundalini is awakened by the grace of the guru,” says the fifteenth-century *Hatha Pradipika* (3.2), “then all the lotuses and even the knots are split open,” so prana can ascend the central channel and empty the mind. This state is timeless and yields “supreme bliss, sprinkling the body of the yogi from the soles of his feet to his head with the dewy, unctuous, cool nectar [of immortality],” adds the *Khechari Vidya* (3.11–13).

However, the experience is not always pleasant, or easy to integrate. “Suddenly, with a roar like that of a waterfall, I felt a stream of liquid light entering my brain through the spinal cord,” reports the Indian mystic Gopi Krishna, who used to sit for many hours “contemplating an imaginary lotus in full bloom.” One day, he became it. “I experienced a rocking sensation and then felt myself slipping out of my body, entirely enveloped in a halo of light.” A blazing heat overwhelmed him, and he lurched between joy and despair for the following decade.

“The torture I suffered in the beginning was caused by the unexpected release of the powerful vital energy through a wrong nerve,” he concludes. Instead of climbing the central channel as expected, Kundalini misfired up the *Pingala nadi*, the solar connection to the right nostril. He was only saved from dying when “with all the will-power left at my command I brought my attention to bear on the left side of the seat of Kundalini, and tried to force an imaginary cold current upward” through the lunar channel, *Ida*.

Although some techniques might be “imaginary” in nature, their results feel alarmingly real to the central nervous system. As with psychedelic drugs, an experience occurs. Whatever its cause, the effects are intense. Yet they also fade, so they are not the timeless

goal of yoga. Regardless, they offer a glimpse beyond the mind. “As one opens a door with a key, so the yogi opens the door of liberation with Kundalini,” says the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.105). However, there are also other pathways to freedom.

What is Hatha Yoga?

Excerpted from *The Truth of Yoga* by Daniel Simpson*

Although physical yoga borrows from *Tantra*, it also has roots in ascetic traditions. Many ***hatha yogic*** techniques were adapted from earlier forms of austerities, which became less intense and more appealing to householders.

This distinction was lost on colonial authors, who often demonized yogis as freakish degenerates. In the *Monier-Williams Sanskrit Dictionary*—the standard reference book for scholars—the physical practice known as hatha is defined as: “A kind of forced yoga or abstract meditation (forcing the mind to withdraw from external objects) [that is] performed with much self-torture, such as standing on one leg, holding up the arms, inhaling smoke with the head inverted etc.”

This confuses yoga with intense self-discipline, or ***tapas***, which ascetics use to generate power. Although the two are related, their methods are different. The Sanskrit word ***hatha*** (pronounced “huh-tuh”) translates as “force,” and thus a “forceful” form of yoga. However, texts that instruct it say it should be practiced “*shanaih, shanaih,*” which means “gradually,” “slowly,” or “gently.”

Another literal meaning of ***hatha*** is “obstinacy,” which sheds more light on how it works. Its techniques are dynamic, requiring strong will, but this has to be balanced with restraint. Brute force is explicitly ruled out. Both “overexertion” and “actions that hurt the body” are named as impediments to yogic success (*Hatha Pradipika* 1.15, 1.61).

In modern yoga marketing, the word “***hatha***” is often used to indicate a gentler approach, perhaps in contrast to “flow.” However, if hatha is really a style, it includes all postural forms of yoga. Its innovation of non-seated asana marks a departure from *tantric* rituals. Unlike ascetic austerities, these new positions could not be maintained for years on end. It would be difficult to hold an arm balance for hours, no matter how obstinate the practitioner.

Texts on ***hatha*** yoga include new objectives. Although the goal is still spiritual freedom, postures are used to cultivate the body, making it easier to sit for long periods and

manipulating breathing. The result is a practical hybrid of previous ideas. Drawing from tantric ritual, hatha uses bodily effort to move subtle energies up the spine, with the aim of dissolving the mind in meditation.

Yoga for All

Excerpted from *The Truth of Yoga* by Daniel Simpson*

Texts on hatha yoga democratize practice. They are composed in straightforward Sanskrit, with minimal philosophy. Although it seems unlikely that they would have replaced a teacher's guidance, their instructions are clearer than secretive Tantras. Generally speaking, hatha is a practical method, not a rarefied doctrine.

One of the earliest texts to describe hatha yoga says anyone can try it, whatever their background or belief. "Whether Brahmin, ascetic, Buddhist, Jain, skull-bearing tantric or materialist, the wise man endowed with faith, who is constantly devoted to his practice obtains complete success," says the thirteenth-century Dattatreya Yoga Shastra (41–42). "Success happens for he who performs the practices—how could it happen for one who does not?"

The focus is on physical techniques, by which "everyone, even the young or the old or the diseased, gradually obtains success" (Dattatreya Yoga Shastra 40). The sage Dattatreya, who presents these ideas, seems less impressed by tantric rituals. Calling chanting a practice "which can be mastered by all and sundry," he says: "The lowest aspirant, he of little wisdom, resorts to this yoga, for this yoga of mantras is said to be the lowest" (12–14). Even ways of dissolving the mind, some of which come from Tantras, get short shrift. As Dattatreya explains, there is a hierarchy of practices. "Yoga has many forms," he tells his student. "I shall explain all that to you: the yoga of *mantras* (mantra yoga), the yoga of dissolution (laya yoga) and the yoga of force (hatha yoga). The fourth is the royal yoga (raja yoga); it is the best" (9–10).

Other texts list the same four yogas, generally agreeing that the last is superior. Dattatreya says little about it, except that it results from success in hatha. "[The yogi] should practice using these [techniques] that have been taught, each at the proper time," he says at the end of his detailed instructions on physical methods. "Then the royal yoga will arise. Without them it definitely will not happen" (160).

This message is echoed in later texts. The fifteenth-century *Hatha Pradipika* defines hatha yoga as a "stairway to the heights of raja yoga," and says it was composed out of

compassion “for those who are unaware of raja yoga, through wandering in the darkness of too many different opinions” (Hatha Pradipika 1.1–3). The interdependence of both is often mentioned: “Without hatha, raja yoga does not succeed, nor does hatha succeed without raja yoga. So the yogi should practice both until they are complete”(Shiva Samhita 5.22).

In practice, *raja yoga* is *samadhi*, the ultimate absorption in deep meditation. The innovation of Hatha is to make this accessible by physical methods, which are said to still the mind if performed correctly. Conversely, warns the compiler of the *Hatha Pradipika* (4.79), “I consider those practitioners who only do hatha, without knowing *raja yoga*, to be laboring fruitlessly.”

Potent Mudras

Excerpted from *The Truth of Yoga* by Daniel Simpson*

[Read before Sex and Yoga]

The three “locks” used to channel the breath are part of a broader range of “seals,” for which the Sanskrit term is *mudras*. In Tantric ritual, most of these are hand gestures, but ascetics had different approaches that moved subtle forces in the body. As such, they are important dimensions of physical yoga.

Early texts on hatha define its practice in terms of mudras. As described in the Dattatreya Yoga Shastra(30-1): “It is as follows: *maha mudra* and *maha bandha*; then there is *khechari mudra* and *jalandhara bandha*; *uddiyana*, *mula bandha* and *viparita karani*; *vajroli* is considered to be threefold [comprising also] *amaroli* and *sahajoli*.” Each of these elevates energy in some way.

The first two, whose names mean “great seal” and “great lock,” are usually taught with *maha vedha*, or “great piercing.” Precise instructions vary, but *maha mudra* means applying the chin lock in a seated position: “Pressing the perineum with the left heel and stretching out the right leg, take firm hold of the toes of the right foot with the hands. Contract the throat and hold the breath,” explain the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.10-12).

“The *Kundalini* force becomes at once straight, just as a coiled snake when struck by a rod straightens itself out like a stick.” In *maha bandha*, all three locks are engaged at once, sometimes pressing a foot against the perineum. In the earliest description of *maha vedha*, the body is lifted from this position and dropped on the heel to force the breath up the spine’s central channel. Other texts do something similar in the lotus pose. “While in the

great lock, [the yogi] should gently tap his buttocks on the ground,” says the *Dattatreya Yoga Shastra* (136). “This is the great piercing; it is practiced by perfected men.”

Such techniques have impressive results. “These are the ten mudras which together destroy old age and death,” says the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.6-7). This amounts to mastery over the elements, as in traditional yogic powers. Combining All three locks in *maha bandha* is especially effective. “This triad of bandhas is the best,” says the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.76). “Yogis know it accomplishes all hatha practices.”

Other seals are based on enigmatic theories. In *khechari mudra*, the tongue is turned backward across the soft palate to enter the nasal cavity. This is said to prevent leaks from a store of the nectar of immortality in the head. Learning it takes serious commitment. “The yogi should gradually pull upwards the tip of the tongue” and “cut away a hair’s breadth” from the base every week, stretching it daily until after six months “it reaches [up] between the eyebrows” (*Khecari Vidya* 1.47-50). Another practice, less often taught, is *shakti chalana*, or “stimulation of the goddess.” One version of this pulls the tongue to raise *Kundalini*.

The remaining *mudras* target a different vital essence: *bindu*, or semen. Again, this was thought to be stored within the head, from where it dripped until discharged. To reverse its descent, celibate ascetics used breathing and locks, which forced it upward. They also turned upside down in *viparita karani*, an “inverted action” known in Buddhist sources as the “bat penance.” No instructions are given apart from placing the navel above the head—it is not until later that texts teach a shoulder stand and headstand. The focus is on what is manipulated by inverting. “One who has knowledge of yoga can preserve his semen and triumph over death,” says the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.88). “Death comes as a result of discharging semen and life is maintained through its preservation.”

Sex and Yoga

Excerpted from *The Truth of Yoga* by Daniel Simpson*

Why do yogis turn upside down?

Believing that semen has spiritual power, yogis seek to conserve it. The Sanskrit term for restraining its flow is *bindu dharana*. The most obvious method is not to have sex but to avoid accidental emissions, techniques were devised to stop ejaculation.

Yogic texts rarely talk about women. Postural guidelines describe male anatomy, positioning feet “above the penis” or “below the scrotum” (*Hatha Pradipika* 1.36, 1.53). Although female practitioners sometimes appear, such as Gargi in the *Yoga Yajnavalkya*, men are urged to avoid them for fear of being tempted to give up their celibacy.

One exception is briefly discussed in the *Dattatreya Yoga Shastra* (155-56): “A man should strive to find a woman devoted to the practice of yoga. Either a man or a woman can obtain success if they have no regard for one another’s gender and practice with only their own ends in mind.” This is followed by a reference to *vajroli mudra*, a physical “seal” of *hatha-yoga*: “If the semen moves, then [the yogi] should draw it upwards and preserve it.” No other instructions are provided.

Other texts are less cryptic. “Through regular practice, one should then draw these men back upwards as it is about to pass into the vulva of the woman,” says the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.87). “One should also preserve any of one’s semen that has already passed into the woman by drawing it back up into one’s body.”

Most accounts of *vajroli* involve sexual intercourse. This seems at odds with the usual focus on restraint, but it reflects a general aim of hatha texts: to make the benefits of yogic discipline more widely accessible. “Through the practice of *vajroli*, even a householder living according to his desires, and without the restrictions taught in yoga, can be liberated,” says the *Shiva Samhita* (4.79).

Even so, it is questionable how many people learned *vajroli*. Preparations sound arduous. A pipe has to be inserted up the urethra to the bladder, desensitizing nerves that control the impulse to ejaculate. Eventually, once this is mastered, pools of liquid can be siphoned through the penis, although the pipe has to be in place to keep a valve open.

Texts imply that this occurs in the midst of intercourse. “The wise yogi should carefully and correctly draw up through his urethra the generative fluid from a woman’s vagina and make it enter his body,” says the *Shiva Samhita* (4.81). This appears to be inspired by Tantric rites in which mixed sexual fluids were consumed as an offering to powerful deities. However, that originally required their production, removing the need for *vajroli mudra*, whose primary function is retention.

Ejaculation can also be stopped using other techniques. Some of these are taught today as “tantric sex,” which is almost a synonym for withholding semen, despite it being involved in traditional rituals. Some Indian ascetics take a cruder approach to ensuring restraint, using physical force to disable their genitals. They display their indifference in public, dangling rocks from an impotent penis, or rolling its shaft around a stick.

Sex is not in itself a yogic practice. Despite teaching *vajroli*, the *Hatha Pradipika* (3.121)

highlights celibacy, saying: “Only one who delights in *brahmacharya* will see success.” Other texts are less strict. “Living in a house full of children and a wife and so forth, internally abandoning attachment, and then seeing success on the path of yoga, the householder has fun having mastered my teaching,” says the *Shiva Samhita*(5.260). Either way, sexual enjoyment is not the main goal.

It is therefore unclear whether vajroli mudra is any more relevant to modern practitioners than contraceptive tips in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad* (6.4.10): “If he does not want her to become pregnant,” it notes, “he should slip his penis into her, press his mouth against hers, blow into her mouth and suck back the breath, as he says: ‘I take back the semen from you with my virility and semen.’ And she is sure to become bereft of semen.”

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*Excerpted from [The Truth of Yoga: A Comprehensive Guide to Yoga's History, Texts, Philosophy, and Practices.](#) Copyright© 2021 by Daniel Simpson.