

Chakras and Shingles—Historical Fragments of the Chakra System in Contemporary Yoga

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ABSTRACT

After a few days with intense yoga training, curious red spots occurred on the back across my shoulder. Curiously, it appeared right after a period where I had been reading about the chakras. So I could not help noticing that the rash was on the left side of the back, right at the heart chakra.

With the global growth of postural yoga, various concepts connected to yoga have become more visible in the landscape of movement practices. One such concept is the chakra system. However, it can be challenging for a practitioner to fully grasp the significance of the system in a given context. In this article, I explore how a complex inheritance of ideas related to the chakra system, rooted in different cultures and periods, continues to reappear in contemporary yoga.

SAMMANFATTNING

Efter en period med inten yogapraktik, fick jag plötsligt ett konstigt rött utslag över axeln. Efter som yogapraktiken innehöll tankar om chakrasystemet, kunde jag inte låta bli att fråga: "varför just över hjärtchakrat?"

Med den globala tillväxten av postural yoga som fysisk praktik, har också chakrasystemet så som det används i yoga blivit mer synligt. Däremot kan det vara svårt för utövare att få grepp om hur systemet används, vilka ideer det har ackumulerat över tid och varifrån, och vad systemet laddas med i en given context. I denna artikel, kommer jag därför utforska hur chakrasystemet bär med sig ett komplext arv av olika ideer, praktiker, tider och kulturer – genom berättelsen om ett utslag på axeln.

Chakras and Shingles—Historical Fragments of the Chakra System in Contemporary Yoga

Camilla Damkjær

Infection

After a few days with intense yoga training, curious red spots occurred on the back across my shoulder. A serious red rash, itchy and painful. I ended up at the doctor's. "It's the shingles!", the doctor exclaimed. The memories of a publicity for the vaccine came to my mind: "Are you a climber/sportsman/marathon runner? – You can also get ill with shingles." Curiously, it appeared right after a period where I had been reading about the chakras. So I could not help noticing that the rash was on the left side of the back, right at the heart chakra.

Introduction

The global growth of postural yoga has led to the increased visibility of various concepts connected to yoga within the landscape of movement practices. One such concept is the chakra system. However, yoga practitioners may find it challenging to understand the meanings and implications of the system in different contexts. To address this issue, in this article, I explore how a complex heritage of ideas related to the chakra system, rooted in different cultures and periods, may reappear in contemporary yoga.

The research question that I explore in this article is "How might the residues of historical ideas about the chakra system continue to influence the yoga practitioner's embodied experience in contemporary yoga?"

I will approach the question methodologically through an auto-ethnographic study of my personal experience of encountering terms related to chakras within yoga practice. Specifically, I examine a period when I was ill with shingles and simultaneously reading Anodea Judith's book *Wheels of Life - The Classic Guide to the Chakra System* (Judith 2019, first published 1987). I contextualise the question within an overview of key historical shifts in the development of the chakra system and employ Diana Taylor's concept of performance

"scenarios" (Taylor 2007) to understand how historical fragments may re-appear in practice. I aim to initiate a discussion on how a historically contextualised understanding of the chakra system could contribute to the development of yoga practice.

Literature review

Many texts written for yoga and alternative health environments could be analysed to examine how chakras are presented today. However, due to space constraints, I will only analyse parts of Judith's *Wheels of Life* (Judith 2019), as it played a key role in the auto-ethnographical situation of my study.

For the purpose of this article, I focus on previous research on the chakra system in different historical contexts, from pre-modern medieval *haṭha*¹ yoga in India to the chakra system as understood in the Euro-American contemporary context. This also means that I will not address other types of research, such as research that explores whether there is any scientific evidence for the chakras (e.g. Maxwell 2009, Moga 2022). While I see such proposals as part of a historical development, discussing the scientific bearing of different biological explanations is beyond the scope of this article. Similarly, I will not discuss research that examines whether practice based on the chakra system can entail measurable healing effects (e.g. Kashyap et al. 2023).

For my discussion on medieval *haṭha* yoga, I will refer mostly to James Mallinson and Mark Singleton's overview (Mallinson and Singleton 2017). More research is available on specific *haṭha* yoga texts (Hatley 2020, Westoby 2018 and forthcoming book). However, exploring further details of the original texts is not within the scope of this article. Regarding the transition from early tantric traditions to medieval *haṭha* yoga, I will primarily reference David Gordon White (2003), as his hypothesis of internalisation is particularly relevant to this discussion.

Extensive research has been conducted on the transformation of yoga in the modern Euro-American context (e.g. de Michaelis 2005, Singleton 2010, Foxen 2020). However, as my focus is specifically on the chakra system, I will primarily refer to Kurt Leland's (2016) study on the transformation of the chakra system in the modern Euro-American context.

To understand how history is re-actualised in practice, I will refer to Diana Taylor's concept of performance scenarios as presented in *The Archive and the Repertoire – Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Taylor 2007). This concept has been developed to highlight the role of embodied and oral culture in the transmission of cultural practices (Taylor 2007, 16). A 'scenario' is an open structure that guides how a performance (broadly understood) unfolds. Through this unfolding, different elements from the 'archive' or the 'repertoire' are activated. While the 'archive' consists of documents, texts and material traces, the 'repertoire' consists of embodied practices and behaviours that 'enact embodied memory' (Taylor 2007, 20). Thus, embodied dialogues between the archive and the repertoire occur within scenarios. This process is complex, often in ways that transcend the full awareness of the participants. Indeed, the 'scenario makes visible, yet again, what is already there: the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes' (Taylor 2007, 28). This may even activate conflictual histories beyond the participants' deliberate intention. As Taylor writes, 'It also haunts our present, a form of hauntology (...) that resuscitates and reactivates old dramas' (Taylor 2007, 28). Here, I propose that the chakra system functions as such a scenario.

In the remainder of the article, I will begin by discussing some of the fundamental differences between various historical understandings of the body. I will then unfold my personal embodied encounter with fragments from the chakra system, gradually moving back through time. Finally, I will summarise how historical fragments may affect contemporary yoga practitioners.

Clashing maps of the body

The medical explanation of shingles is that the chicken pox virus stays in the body for life once you have had it as a child. Later on, it may erupt as a rash of shingles at moments when your immune system is low or in situations of stress. The rash can appear

anywhere, but the virus always follows the nerve paths and therefore the rash only appears on one side of the spine. A chain of thoughts ensued in my mind: was the yoga I had practiced a little too intense? Did something stress my immune system?

One of the difficulties within contemporary yoga practice is how to navigate between different maps of the body and their historical contexts. Today, the dominance of the bio-medical view of the body has affected the field to the extent that Mallinson and Singleton conclude that '(o)ne of the primary conceptual frameworks for the body of the yoga practitioner in today's modern, globalized yoga is the empirical, anatomical, biological and bio-medical body' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 171).

However, concepts, ideas and images from earlier yoga history also circulate. Concepts such as *nādis* (channels) and *chakras* are recuperated from pre-modern *hatha* yoga but are reactivated in ways that are specific for today. Thus, a displacement may happen 'when terms from yogic physiology are imported into modern practices of yoga and reinterpreted within cultural and hermeneutic parameters far removed from pre-modern ones' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 171). Thus, compared to pre-modern *hatha* yoga, the understanding of the body has been reinterpreted twice: first, through a bio-medical, anatomical lens, and second, through the modern reinterpretation of pre-modern concepts. The chakra system has been part of this double transformation, as it has been both compared to the biological body and used as the framework for the development of new practices.

For the contemporary yoga practitioner, this transformation may be experienced as a conflict between ideas. For instance, while the chakra system has its origin in pre-modern *hatha* yoga, in an attempt to understand it through a biological lens, one may ask what the chakras correspond to in biological terms. This effort to determine if there is a biological base for the chakras is a part of the historical development. However, while the biomedical body refers to an empirical body that can be observed by the scientist, the pre-modern yoga body was conceptualised as points of meditation meant to be experienced by the practitioner. Mallinson and Singleton (2017) describe it as follows: 'yogic bodies arise according to the particular ritual, philosophical or doctrinal requirements of the tradition at hand, and (...) they

are the expressions of these requirements, rather than descriptions of self-evident, empirical bodies common to all humans' (172).

The elements, centres and energies of the premodern yogic body thus encompass the physical, mental, ritual and metaphysical. When *haṭha* yoga was developed in medieval India, the idea was to manipulate these psycho-physical centres concretely through practice. The purpose was not simply exercise or health but 'to attain special powers (*vibhūti*, *siddhi*) or to reach liberation from embodied rebirth (*mokṣa*, *mukti*, *kaivalya*, *nirvāṇa*)' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 171). In other words, the purpose was a soteriological one—spiritual liberation. Although Hatley (2024) suggests that these premodern practices were influenced by the medical concepts of the time, these concepts remained considerably different from today's. Thus, trying to align the biomedical, anatomical understanding with the medieval chakras' position in the body involves reconciling two fundamentally different perspectives on the body.

The heart chakra, *anāhata chakra*

As I came home from the doctor's, another line of thought appeared in my head. What if I understood the situation through the chakras instead. Had I upset my heart chakra? Out of curiosity, I turned to Anodea Judith's Wheels of Life – The Classic Guide to the Chakra System (Judith 2019). It advised, among other things, heart-opening postures. She described the process of healing the heart chakra as a way of "creating affinity" between "the composite parts of the self" (Judith 2019, 208). Indeed, "All it really takes is checking in with yourself now and then. (...) See if you get a hello in return. Begin a dialogue. Are there ways you could treat yourself better?" (Judith 2019, 209)

According to Anodea Judith's presentation of the chakra system, all seven chakras must be balanced to obtain balance in life. The heart chakra is a central piece in this balancing, as its task is 'to integrate and balance the various aspects of our being. In so doing, it brings a radiant sense of wholeness to the entire organism (...) Within this sense of wholeness lie the seeds of inner peace' (Judith 2019, 192).

Judith defines chakras as '*an organizational center for the reception, assimilation, and transmission of life energy*' (Judith 2019, 24, italics

in original). She refers to a tantric and *haṭha* yogic understanding of the chakras, synthesising these ideas with other elements from yoga philosophy, psychology, physics, medical science and mythology in a poetic way. Through this, she attempts to provide guidance on balancing the chakras. Each chakra can be 'closed, excessive or deficient, or any of the various stages in between' (Judith 2019, 25). When the chakra is either too open or too closed, it 'may need healing by uncovering and removing whatever is blocking it' (Judith 2019, 25).

The method proposed for healing involves '*tuning into that area of the body*' (Judith 2019, 26, italics in original) in order to '*examine the meaning and function of that particular chakra*' (Judith 2019, 27, italics in original), and then engage with physical exercises, processes of symbolic visualisations, 'working through your feelings and values' (Judith 2019, 27). In this way, one might bring the chakras back into balance. As she writes in the chapter on the heart chakra:

'Each chakra receives its charge of energy by being in alignment with the sushumna, as the central column of energy. If we are not in balance with ourselves, our chakras fall out of alignment, much as the vertebrae in the spine call fall out of alignment. Unfortunately, there are no "chakra-practors" to put them back in place. This is something that we must do ourselves.' (Judith 2019, 205)

This idea of a 'chakra-practor' is particularly interesting, as it succinctly combines the premodern *haṭha* vocabulary of the Suṣumnā channel with a psychological framework and an anatomically influenced idea of postural alignment. This idea of postural alignment is extremely central in today's postural yoga.

The heart chakra holds special significance in Judith's system, as it is presented as an emotional centre. If it is out of balance, the system 'suffers the greatest loss, and causes the greatest damage if it should fall too far out of its place' (Judith 2019, 205). On the other hand, the heart chakra also has healing potential. As she writes:

'Opening the heart chakra and developing compassion, connection, and understanding for those around you naturally gives rise to the urge to heal (...) When our heart chakras are open and balanced, our very presence radiates

love and joy. This love is the essence of true healing.' (Judith 2019, 205)

As for all chakras, Judith recommends specific postures, referred to as 'heart-openers', to activate and balance the heart chakra. 'Heart-opening' and 'heart-openers' are common terms within contemporary yoga for postures that help to open and extend the upper thoracic region. In addition, the chapter includes breathing and meditation exercises, especially those focused on compassion. Thus, the proposed self-healing system is based on the analogical relation between a physiological space in the body and a psychological effect.

In this way, Judith's chakra system provides a system of self-diagnosis, psychological reflection and body-mind practice for obtaining a better understanding of oneself and potential healing. Thus, it also proposes to integrate ideas from premodern *hatha* yoga practice with medical ideas of diagnosis, biomechanical ideas of postural alignment and psychological ideas of well-being and personal development. Judith's text also functions as a scenario for practice, instructing practitioners on how to visualise the chakras, understand what they represent symbolically and how one can access them through physical practices; practitioners can thus employ the scenario as a tool. This scenario is built on the idea of a vertical line of centres in the body. However, as I will show in the following discussion, this basic structure of the chakra system has evolved significantly over time.

Tracing the 'Western chakra system'

Anodea Judith's model is representative of how the chakras are presented today (Leland 2016, 370). As illustrated by the passages I have analysed, many layers of discourse overlap. In addition, each chakra is presented as being connected to specific Sanskrit syllables, specific metals and gemstones, as well as different endocrine glands. This combination sparked my interest in investigating the development of the chakra system.

Tracking the history of the development of the chakra system is a complex task. Fortunately, Kurt Leland has provided insights in *Rainbow Body: A History of the Western Chakra System from Blavatsky to Brennan* (Leland 2016). According to Leland, the chakra system, as it is known today, is largely

influenced by Western movements of ideas. He speaks of the 'Western chakra system', in contrast to the earlier 'Eastern chakra system', on which it is loosely based².

As Leland shows, the Western chakra system has been influenced, especially by the Theosophical movement (Leland 2016, 91–122). The Theosophical Society was an occult, esoteric movement that had a widespread influence in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The movement sought to obtain spiritual enlightenment employing methods such as mystical experiences and clairvoyance. Theosophy developed an extensive cosmology of planes and auras, and to describe these planes, the chakras were included. In an attempt to determine 'correspondences' between these elements, the movement was, according to Leland, also influenced by Swedenborg (Leland 2016, 82). Through these correspondences, the chakra system could integrate ever more elements, including colours, gemstones, body parts and mythological systems.³

Theosophy's influence extended widely through its international branches and publications. Furthermore, with the involvement of South Asians in the organisation and its emphasis on studying 'the ancient wisdom of the Hindus as contained in known texts' (Leland 2016, 94), it functioned as a cultural bridge. Some of the earliest translations of premodern texts mentioning the chakras were disseminated in these publications (Leland 2016, 98).

In one of the first publications within the Theosophical Society, efforts were made to anatomically localise the chakras, reflecting an attempt to merge the premodern *hatha* yoga systems with modern anatomy and science. An example is Baman Das Basu's 1888 text, 'The Anatomy of the Tantras' (Leland 2016, 199), which attempted to link the chakras to a biological location; this idea has many subsequent expressions.

Through Leland's work, we can follow the development of the anatomical interpretation of the chakras in Judith's *Wheels of Life*. According to Leland, Judith follows the mapping of the chakras by Theosophist Charles Webster Leadbeater in *The Chakras: A Monograph* (1927). Leadbeater, in turn, followed an earlier mapping by the Indian medical physician Vasant G. Rele in 1927 (Leland 2017, 101). Leadbeater, writing within a Theosophist frame, envisioned the chakras as linked to different organs in the torso. This mapping was later expanded with Alice Bailey's correlation of the

chakras with different endocrine glands in *The Soul and Its Mechanism* (1930) (Leland 2017, 221). Judith continues this association of chakras with endocrine glands, for instance, by correlating the heart chakra with the thymus (Judith 2019, 190).

According to Leland, the main difference between the 'Eastern' and the 'Western' chakra systems lies in their respective purposes. As Leland writes, the Eastern system, based on tantric thinking and premodern *haṭha* yoga, is about a soteriological process, leading to spiritual liberation (Leland 2016, 42). In contrast, the Western system focuses on the possible rewards in this world (Leland 2016, 43). Anodea Judith advocates this idea of the chakras as a tool for personal development in this life. Kurt Leland interprets Judith's book as one participating in the systematisation and consolidation of the 'Western chakra system' (Leland 2016, 370), whose residues are often encountered by today's yoga practitioners. However, it is important to be aware that this syncretic system is considerably far from that of premodern *haṭha* yoga.

Premodern chakra systems in *tantra* and *haṭha* Yoga

After the doctor's diagnosis, I was given some anti-viral pills, and also tried some heart-opening postures. At the same time, I started wondering how the heart chakra was understood in the pre-modern Eastern chakra system. Given that I was on the look-out for a way to interpret an eruption of shingles, I even played with a speculative question: what would a pre-modern haṭha yogi have thought about a bothersome rash on the shoulder...

Leland's work is not dedicated to an analysis of the 'Eastern chakra system'. Instead, his description of this system functions as a background to understand to which extent the 'Western chakra system' has developed independently. Leland therefore examines the first Western scholarly account of the Eastern system—Sir John Woodroffe's (a pseudonym of Arthur Avalon) *Serpent Power* (1919), which included a translation of the 16th-century *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa*. This translation contributed to the spreading of the chakra system and became 'the end point of the Eastern system and the starting point for the development of the Western system' (Leland 2016, 47).

The history of the development of the tantric and *haṭha* yogic understanding of the chakras in

medieval India is far too complex for me to fully unfold here. However, to provide a sense of how this system has been reinterpreted, I will offer a brief overview. The Sanskrit word 'chakra' simply means circle or wheel. The idea of chakras in the body was first articulated systematically within tantric texts from around the 7th to 12th century and later developed within *haṭha* yoga during the 15th–18th century. Tantra, a movement that crossed the boundaries of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, underlined the possibility of obtaining spiritual liberation through bodily rituals, which in some traditions involved transgressing taboos. *Haṭha* yoga, a development of yoga in medieval India, viewed manipulation of the body as an important part of ritual practice, and it was thought that one could reach macrocosmic energies through the microcosm of the body.

The idea of chakras was an important element in these traditions, but they were just one element with many variations. As Mallinson and Singleton (2017) observe, 'the *chakras* were not always such a ubiquitous feature of yoga traditions and alternative or complementary schemata are common' (175). Indeed, many variations in the naming and conceptual understanding of chakras can be found. Apart from chakras, texts also mention "*padmas*" (lotuses) or "*granthis*" (knots). Furthermore, the number of chakras varied across different systems. While the most common belief was that there were six chakras (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 175), some systems included different numbers, such as four, five, nine or eleven.

As Mallinson and Singleton describe, the chakras in this tradition are 'subtle focuses for meditation distributed along the central channel of the body' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 175). However, as the chakras were part of ritual practice and not an element of the anatomical body, they do not always have a concrete location. Instead, they were 'part of a visualized installation on the body of tradition-specific metaphysics and ritual schemata' (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 175).

According to Mallinson and Singleton (2017, 177), the earliest text that builds a consistent system with six chakras is the *Netrat Tantra* (800–850 CE), and a similar system is consolidated in the *Kubjikāmatatantra* (ca.10th century). This text was part of the tantric Western transmission tradition of Kaula Śaivism. A similar idea spread in the Southern transmission and was further distributed through two of the important ascetic

yogi lineages—the *Nāths* and the *Samnyāsīs*. The chakra system began to spread across cultures following the translation of a text from the Southern Transmission, the *Ṣaṭcakranirūpaṇa* (“The Description of the Six Chakras”), by Avalon.

A reasonable question that arises is the origin of the seventh chakra, which is now present in the Western chakra system. Apparently, a seventh chakra appears in, for instance, the *Śivasamhitā* (ca.1700 CE) and the *Tirumandiram* (possibly 13th century) (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 177). However, it is unlikely that it was through these texts that the Western chakra system first incorporated a seventh chakra. As far as I can determine, the general knowledge of these texts spread after the development of the Western seven chakra system. Instead, as Leland suggests, the inclusion of a seventh chakra in the Western chakra system might be a consequence of Blavatsky’s theosophical teachings, where Blavatsky aimed to correlate different systems based on the idea of seven (Leland 2016, 125).

Chakras in the body– or what the *haṭha* yogi might have thought about a rash

I allow myself for a moment to imagine what a pre-modern haṭha yogi might have thought of a rash on the shoulder. It seems that the haṭha yogi might have thought that the yogic practices had not been carried out correctly. Indeed, the Haṭhapradīpikā is quite literal on this point: ‘All diseases are destroyed by correct pranayama. As a result of incorrect practice, any disease may arise.’ (Svātmārāma 2024, 2.16).

As previously noted, the premodern *haṭha* yogi focused on internal processes in the body as a subject of meditation within a soteriological perspective. The goal of the practice was to obtain liberation. However, there were several parallel goals—such as being free of disease, avoiding old age and death and obtaining supernatural powers known as *siddhis*⁴. In the *Netratāntra*, where the six chakra system is first seen, the goal of yoga is expressed as obtaining ‘a divine body free from all diseases’ (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 203). To reach this state, the text suggests that ‘(The yogi) should pierce all (the chakras) (...) with his spear of knowledge’ (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 203).

To understand what ‘piercing’ could signify in this context, we must analyse what Mallinson and

Singleton (2017) have called ‘the Kuṇḍalinī model’ (180). Over time, the idea developed that the yogi should raise the breath and vital fluids upwards through the different chakras using different embodied techniques. In this tantric-inspired model, it is believed that the *kuṇḍalinī* (meaning the divine feminine energy or *śakti*) lies coiled at the bottom of the spine, and through practice, she can be raised, piercing the chakras on her way, thus accessing the nectar of immortality, *amṛta*, accumulated in the head. It was thought that ‘(t)his process gives rise to special powers (*siddhis*) and ultimately (...) to liberation (*mokṣa*) or immortality’ (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, 178).

One of the most well-known places where this idea of raising the *kuṇḍalinī* is expressed is in the 15th-century compendium *Haṭhapradīpikā*. In the *Haṭhapradīpikā*, this upward movement is described as ‘an auspicious thunderbolt that raises *kuṇḍalinī*, destroys bad deeds, bestows happiness’ (Svātmārāma 2024, 2.67). This involves a ‘piercing’ too: ‘When the sleeping *kuṇḍalinī* awakens through the favour of the guru, then all the lotuses are pierced, and the knots too’ (Svātmārāma 2024, 3.2).

Chakras outside the body – Treating chicken pox with ritual

As I continued reading the symptoms of shingles in the light of the haṭha yogic understanding of the chakras, I directed my attention towards upward-going sensations in the body. However, the only one I could detect was a worrying tingling in the skin on the top of my head as the virus activated the nerves from the shoulders up to the top of my head...

To better understand the ritual background of the concept of *kuṇḍalinī*, it might be useful to look further back in history and consider the hypothesis proposed by David Gordon White. In his analysis of tantric rituals in *The Kiss of the Yogini – “Tantric Sex” in its South Asian Context* (White 2003), White proposes that *haṭha* yoga builds on an internalisation into the body of tantric rituals that had played out in external space. He proposes that earlier tantric goddess rituals were reinterpreted and now rendered internal to the body. White describes the process as follows:

‘We have already noted that Hindus have been worshipping groups of Mothers (*mātṛcakras*) since at least the sixth century. These were

circular arrays of goddesses “in the world”, that is, outside the body, circles representing mandalas of every sort, including the circular hypaethral Yoginī temples. The gradual internalization of these powerful female entities was affected by internalizing their formations into the hierarchized chakras of the yogic body”. (White 2003, 222)

Prior to this internalisation, tantric rituals, or more specifically, the *kula* or *kaula* traditions, dating from the 2nd to 10th century, played out in external spaces. These rituals often took place outside the village in burial grounds or places of worship dedicated to different goddesses associated with the ‘yoginī’. The *yoginīs* (who were known by many names) were believed to be demi-goddesses, sometimes manifested in beings such as snakes, cats, felines or birds. However, in the rituals, they were also represented by actual, living, embodied women. To master their forces, sexual fluids were extracted, mixed and drunk—concretely or symbolically—to gain the favours of the *yoginīs*. Their forces were sought after to obtain longevity, supernatural powers or control diseases (White 2003).

Though it is difficult to assess the details of White’s work, given that it reaches over vast periods and areas, the broad line of the argument of internalisation is interesting. For my understanding of how the chakras might have been used in earlier practices related to health, there is yet another compelling detail. One aspect of these various goddesses was that they were thought to be responsible for disease. As presented by White, in one of their earliest versions, they are conceived of as ‘seizers’ (*grahas*), and they are understood to be responsible for various diseases, such as ‘potentially fatal childhood conditions of chicken pox, measles, et cetera’ (White 2003, 59).

The chakra system as a scenario

As I thus return to the chicken pox virus – and its later eruption as shingles in adults - it is thought-proving to think of how the goddesses related to the Yoginīs, worshipped in circles/chakras, were thought to responsible for childhood illnesses. In this understanding, an eruption of the skin would not be interpreted as a lack of emotional balance, or a misconducted yoga practice, but a consequence of the person being “seized” by an external force.

Leland’s analysis of the historical development of the chakra system reveals how it is constantly refashioned through processes of omission and addition. Leland attributes this mainly to faulty knowledge transmission, shaped by different variations of ‘source amnesia’ such as ‘unintentional vagueness’, ‘careless scholarship’ or ‘broken transmission’ (Leland 2016, 80–81). However, if we consider the transmission of the chakra system not as a transmission of textual understanding but as that of a scenario, we can view this process as a dialogue between the archive (or whatever part of it practitioners have had access to) and the repertoire of different evolving practices.

In all the historical instances I have examined, we can understand the chakra system as a scenario that guides practice. In Judith’s contemporary system, it is a tool for self-development. In medieval *haṭha* yoga, it was part of the manuals for psycho-physical practices. In the tantric tradition, it was part of rituals played out in open spaces. In all cases, the chakras function as a structure to channel a process. The key element, especially in the medieval *haṭha* yogic system and its later translations into modern systems, is the idea of a central line with a number of centres along the body. This visual idea then becomes connected to different verbs. In the *Kuṇḍalinī* model, the key verb is ‘raising’. In the contemporary model, represented by Judith, the key verb is ‘balancing’. The combination of an image of a vertical line and a verb suggests practices that may be performed, felt or imagined.

Thus, the scenario of the chakra system can come to carry many different associations, nuances and ideas through repetition and transformation across different historical, cultural and social contexts. Therefore, the chakra system is not just a single scenario but a scenario with multiple variations. Taylor (2017) describes a scenario as something sufficiently coherent to be identified and yet malleable so that it can be reactivated, or as she writes, ‘its portable framework bears the weight of accumulative repeats’ (28). Indeed, the chakra system shows this combination of coherence and flexibility.

Full circle

The question I started with was how the residues of historical ideas about the chakra system may

continue to influence the yoga practitioner's embodied experience in contemporary yoga. As I have proposed, these residues may be activated as fragments, due to the way the chakra system functions as a scenario with multiple variations. As a prompt for practice, the system can be re-embodied, even without full access to all aspects of the chakra system's history. Thus, different elements of history resurface, sometimes hauntingly. By viewing the chakra system as a scenario, we can recognise its embodied processes and openness, allowing for its constant transformation and reimagining within new social and cultural conditions.

Engaging with the scenario of the chakra system may be a complex process for the individual practitioner. As the analysis of the auto-ethnographical situation shows, the historical fragments that resurface may give rise to cognitive dissonance. However, though the conflict between different models of the body may be experienced as confusing, the openness of the chakra system may also create curiosity. Indeed, the openness of the system allows the practitioner to choose what is the most valuable in a given situation. For some practitioners, the interest might lie in embodied sensorial or psychological discoveries. For others, it may be the way the system opens a sphere understood as spiritual. Thus, the practitioner can, to some extent, create a tool to suit their individual needs.

There is reason to believe that people are sincerely drawn to contemporary yoga's construction of ideas because it allows them to make some sense of processes in their lives—even if that sense may not correspond to earlier yoga systems in history or to biomedical research. Practitioners and teachers of yoga are constantly trying to find ways to engage with practices that make sense today. The process of reinterpreting existing practices, tools and concepts involves a process of re-creation and reimagining of meaning. The fragments of history are thus experienced in the middle of such a process of meaning-making.

Rather than seeing the historical context of the chakra system as diminishing the possibilities of evoking the chakras in practice, I see it as an opportunity to deepen yoga practitioners' relation to the chakras. Full knowledge of the chakra system's complex history is unattainable for any individual yoga practitioner, teacher or scholar. There will inevitably be omissions and lacuna in every transmission. However, in recent years, the

growing interest in yoga has also led to increased research into yoga history. This makes it possible to discuss the origins of ideas, how they might be integrated in practice, and which embodied experiences they can allow. Understanding the historical context of an idea may contribute to new ways of imaginatively employing it within practice.

Thus, I have come full circle. I never fully understood why I got ill with shingles. When trying to read the symptoms through different ideas about the chakras, mostly confusion ensued. I was invited to interpret my life situation, psychology and yoga practice, but all the answers as to what might have caused the rash were open-ended. However, the experience was invested with new meanings, as the chakras brought me on a historical and cultural journey. In the end, the virus gave way. Only the tingling feeling from the shoulder to the top of the head stayed on, as a reminder of the capacity of scenarios to pass on elements of history into today's embodied practice.

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Endnotes

- 1 Judith's table of correspondences includes Sanskrit name, meaning, location, element, energy state, psychological function, resulting in, identity, orientation to self, demon, developmental stage, glands, other body parts, malfunction, colour, seed sound, vowel sound, sephiroth, planets, metals, foods, gemstones, incense, yoga path, rights and gunas (Judith 2019, 42–44).
- 2 Leland's use of the terms 'Western chakra system' and 'Eastern chakra system' highlights the historical development of the chakras outside of India and how that has led to the chakra systems we recognise today. When referring to Leland's work, I will use his terms. Otherwise, I will use the term 'premodern' to refer to yogic practices in India before the modernisation of yoga, as it aligns with the current conventions of yoga scholarship.
- 3 Judith's table of correspondences includes Sanskrit name, meaning, location, element, energy state, psychological function, resulting in, identity, orientation to self, demon, developmental stage, glands, other body parts, malfunction, colour, seed sound, vowel sound, sephiroth, planets, metals, foods, gemstones, incense, yoga path, rights and gunas (Judith 2019, 42–44).
- 4 This idea of *siddhis* is not unique to premodern yoga philosophy and practice but is found across various systems of thought in premodern India. However, what is new in the *hatha* yogic system is how the goal of yoga (liberation and possibly *siddhis*) is obtained through a psycho-physical process that passes, among other things, through the chakras.

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