

# **The Parts of the Soul: A Greek System of Chakras**

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## **Introduction**

This essay resulted from an attempt to find a Greek system of "energy centers" corresponding to the chakras of Eastern philosophy. Such a correspondence would help illuminate Greek mysticism and reveal some of the foundations of the Western Magical Tradition. This goal might seem to be a shallow exercise in analogies, but there are reasons to expect a substantial correspondence. First, the Eastern and Greek systems evolved out of a common Indo-European culture, so one would expect genetic correspondences; these connections were likely maintained over the millennia, since we know the Middle East mediated continual cultural transfer with both the West and East. Second, there is a certain degree of objectivity in the system of chakras, as reflected in the physical body, which would lead to correspondences even in the absence of cultural contact. The consequence of these two factors is a significant uniformity in ideas about the Spirit and its connection to the Body across the Eurasian continent, and even beyond, as documented, for example, in Onians's *Origins of European Thought*.

How would we know a Greek system of chakras if we saw it? The standard I have used is that (1) they should be approximately seven energy centers; (2) they should be approximately located where the chakras are located; (3) they should have approximately the same "functions" as the chakras.

It's worth keeping in mind that the chakra system best known in the West, with seven chakras, is not the only system; some have more than fourteen (Eliade, 243-5; Murphy, 156). Therefore, we should not expect an exact correspondence of number, since certain energy centers might or might not be counted depending on their strength or the "kind" of energy they concentrate. Furthermore, different systems differ in their exact placement of the chakras, so likewise we should not expect an exact correspondence in a Greek system. Nevertheless, it will be apparent that the Greek system corresponds closely to the system of seven chakras.

My principal source has been Onians, especially Part I and Part II (chh. 1-7), but the overall structure is described in Plato's account of the "Parts of the Soul" in the *Timaeus* (69c-73d), which probably embodies Pythagorean doctrine. In the following I've numbered the energy centers from the top down with Roman numerals, since this accords better with Platonic doctrine; however, the chakras are conventionally numbered from the bottom up, for which I've (appropriately) used Hindu numbers

(so-called Arabic numbers).

## I

The Crown of the head (Gk. koruphe, Lat. vertex). Plato said the humans stand upright because of the connection between the Heavens and the Soul in their brains. People with especially great power in their heads were represented with a nimbus, a halo of flames, around their head (attested as early as the 3rd cent. BCE in Greece). This center corresponds to Chakra 7 (at the crown of the head), called Sahasrara, which means "thousand (-petaled)," an appropriate description of a nimbus.

## II

The Brain (Gk. enkephalos, Lat. cerebrum), which contains the psuche (Gk.) or genios (Lat.). (I use the old Latin spelling "genios" to avoid confusion with the English "genius." The genios is sometimes called the anima.) In Homeric times the psuche was taken to be the "Vital Spirit" or Life Principal (the mind or consciousness was placed in IV, the chest), corresponding to Skt. asu. The later view, which is found in Plato and corresponds better to the Eastern system (cf. Skt. atman), is that the brain is the center of rational thought, the Intellectual center. In both Homer and Plato the psuche is considered the immortal part of the Soul. The physical substance corresponding to psuche was marrow (medulla), especially the cerebrospinal fluid of the brain and spine, but also in other parts of the body (see below). For this reason departed souls were thought to appear as snakes, which are all brain and spine. Scalp and facial hair were considered physical emanations of the psuche, and so the hair, scalp and chin were considered sacred (hence the dedication of locks and the touching of the chin or beard in supplication). This center corresponds to Chakra 6 (at the brow), called Ajna, which means "authority or command," an appropriate name for the rational faculty, which Plato said "controls and restrains" the lower faculties; Onians calls it the Executive function.

## III

The Neck (Gk. trachelos, dere; Lat. collum), which Plato called the "isthmus or boundary" between the Superior, Divine or Immortal Soul and the Inferior or Mortal Soul. He said that it allows communication between the two, but prevents the Lower Soul from "polluting" the Higher. This center corresponds to Chakra 5 (in the throat), called Visuddha, which means "purgation or purity," that is, "the purging of the merely animal, physical system" (Campbell, 165).

## IV

The Heart and Lungs (Gk. phrenes, Lat. cor), which contain the thumos (Grk.) or animus (Lat.), which is the Higher part of the Mortal Soul. In Homeric times the thumos was the Conscious Spirit, the vehicle of Thought and Feeling (cf. Skt. manas). Later, it was restricted to feeling, emotion, passion and especially spirit, courage and anger - the Affective function. This center corresponds to Chakra 4 (at the heart), called Anahata, which means "not hit" (referring to the mystical sound). This chakra is associated with prana (Skt.) - vital breath, vital spirit (Campbell, 164), as are the phrenes with pneuma (Gk.) or spiritus (Lat.) - breath, spirit. Campbell (164-5) says, "This is the aspiration, then, of spiritual striving," and "the birth of the spiritual as opposed to the merely physical life," and likewise the phrenes are associated with spirit, as opposed to the lower parts, which are associated with physical needs and desires.

The "little foyer" (the Red Lotus of Eight Petals with the Kalpa Tree) below the Heart Chakra corresponds to the diaphragm, which Plato called the "midriff partition" separating the two parts of the Mortal Soul (associated with Spirit and Desire, respectively).

## V

The Belly (Gk. gaster, Lat. abdomen), between the diaphragm and navel, is the site of the Lower Part of the Mortal Soul, which is the Appetitive Soul, which we share with the lower animals and plants; its function is nutrition and it is the source of Desire (both Nutritional and, by most accounts, Sexual). This center corresponds to Chakra 3 (at the navel), called Manipura, which means "city of the shining jewel," and its function is "aggressive: to conquer, to consume, to turn everything into oneself" (Campbell, 159-60), which is a good description of the Appetitive Soul.

## VI

The Gonads (Gk. gonades, Lat. genitalia), representing the Procreative function. The "marrow," the stuff of which psuche or genius was made, was the Life Essence; Plato says that in it is made "the bonds of life which unite the Soul with the Body." This marrow or sap is passed down the spine, concentrated in the gonads, and is the source of the life of the offspring. In particular, semen was considered a kind of cerebrospinal sap. This center corresponds to Chakra 2, called Svadhithana, which means "her favorite resort," an apt name for "the cakra of sexuality" (Campbell, 144).

## VII

The Sacrum or Holy Bone (Gk. hieron osteon, Lat. os sacrum), that is, the base of the spine. Because this was a center of concentration of the Life Force, Middle Eastern people believed that the entire body could be regenerated from this bone, and Onians (p. 208) conjectures that its potency may account for "kiss of shame" (osculum infame) of the Witches and Templars (and perhaps the Cathars and Waldenses). This center corresponds to Chakra 1, called Muladhara, which means "root base," which Campbell (p. 144) associates with "hanging on to life" and a "reactive psyche," so in both cases we have the grossest form of the Life Force.

Similarly, the Spine was called the Holy Tube (hiera surinx), which recalls the Sushumna (Spine), which is likewise considered a channel (nadi). Likewise the Egyptian Ded Pillar, which represents the spine, was a symbol of Life. I have not, however, found Greeks correspondents to the Ida and Pingala nadis.

### VIII

The above are the "central" energy concentrations of Greek philosophy, and it is apparent that they correspond closely to the familiar seven chakras. The Greeks also recognized "peripheral" energy concentrations in the hands, thighs and knees (which have a large concentration of "marrow"). This explains the sacrifice of thigh bones, the use of the hand (especially the right hand) to exercise executive power, and clasping the knees when beseeching. (The knee - Gk. gonu, Lat. genu - was especially associated with the Life Force - genios - and with procreation or "generation"; cf. genital, genetic, gonad, etc.) So far as I know, corresponding chakras are not recognized in Eastern thought. As a general rule of thumb, Spirit, of one sort or another, is most concentrated where the flesh is thinnest (Timaeus 75a), thus, in the head, chest, sacrum, knees and hands.

### Summary

No.	English	Greek	Latin	Function	Chakra	No.
I	Crown	Koruphe	Vertex	Illumination	Sahasrara	7
II	Brain	Enkephalos	Cerebrum	Intellection	Ajna	6
III	Neck	Trachelos	Collum	Purification	Visuddha	5
IV	Heart/Lungs	Phrenes	Cor	Affection	Anahata	4
V	Belly	Gaster	Abdomen	Appetition	Manipura	3
VI	Gonads	Gonades	Genitalia	Procreation	Svadhithana	2
VII	Sacrum	Hieron Osteon	Os Sacrum	Basic Life	Muladhara	1

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