

The Chakra System and Ancient Wisdom Traditions Worldwide

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Introduction

The chakra system offers a framework for understanding human energy in a way that integrates mind, body and spirit. “*Chakra*,” the Sanskrit word for “wheel,” refers to energy vortices in the human body first described over 4000 years ago in India. Chakras may be conceptualized as organizing centers for the reception, assimilation, and transmission of life energies (Judith, *Wheels of Life*). Most schools of yoga distinguish seven major chakras, each with a specific location in the “subtle” or nonphysical body and associated with specific physical, psychological and spiritual issues. [Other Vedic, Hindu and Tantric traditions define five, eight, nine, twelve, and more major chakras (Judith, *Wheels of Life*; Feuerstein).]

According to the chakra system, *prana*, literally “breathing forth,” is the universal life force accessed through the breath. It circulates in five different forms through a complex system of 72,000 *nadis*, or channels. The most significant of these is the central column of energy, the *sushumna*, also called the “way to liberation” (Feuerstein). The *ida* and *pingala* channels, feminine and masculine in quality, originate to the left and right, respectively, of the *sushumna nadi* and coil around it from the base of the spine to the third eye in a serpentine pattern, ending at the nostrils. The six lower chakras are located at the intersections of the *ida* and *pingala*, while the seventh is located at the crown of the head. Although the chakras exist in the “subtle” rather than physical body, they also correspond to seven major nerve ganglia of the spinal column (Feuerstein). Disturbances, imbalances and blocks in the flow of energy within and between the chakras are created by and mirror disturbances in the life of an individual. Restoration of balance and flow—whether through yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, massage, medicine, psychotherapy, or other means—leads to improved health and well-being.

The flow of energy from the base chakra up through the crown chakra is described as the Liberating Current because it represents the flow of energy from physical reality (*prakriti*) to limitless consciousness (*samadhi*) (Judith, *Wheels of Life*). In the Tantric texts, *Kundalini-shakti* refers to the “serpent

power” that resides in a state of potency at the root chakra. Through various practices, one can achieve a state of purification in which the *kundalini-shakti* ascends up to and through the crown chakra, awakening consciousness and leading to the immortal condition of “self-realization.” [An alternative interpretation is that the serpent coiled at the root chakra represents the obstacle that must be destroyed in order for *prana* to rise up the *sushumna* (Desikachar).]

In addition to the Liberating Current that flows upward from the root chakra through the crown chakra, there is a Manifesting Current that flows downward from the crown chakra through the root chakra (Judith, Wheels of Life). The latter takes us from consciousness, through inspiration, to the concrete manifestation of our unique life purpose. Together the Liberating and Manifesting Currents offer a system of energetic balance between body and spirit, or matter and consciousness. By allowing the free flow of energy through both currents, we can have a life of both presence and transcendence (Judith, Eastern Body).

The following chart summarizes key aspects of each chakra. As seven “vibrating modalities” commonly associated with the colors of the rainbow, the chakras are sometimes referred to as a “Rainbow Bridge” connecting heaven and earth (Judith, Wheels of Life).

Number	Common Name	Physical Location	Psychological Issues	Associated Color
7	Crown	Crown of the head	Awareness, spiritual consciousness	White or Violet
6	Brow	Center of lower forehead, “Third Eye”	Intuition, imagination, seeing	Indigo
5	Throat	Throat, neck region	Communication, voice, self-expression	Bright Blue
4	Heart	Heart, chest region	Connection, love, self-acceptance	Green
3	Power	Solar plexus, mid-abdomen	Intention, will, self-esteem	Yellow
2	Pleasure	Pelvic region, lower abdomen	Pleasure, sexuality, emotions, movement	Orange
1	Root	Base of the spine	Physical survival, trust, prosperity, groundedness	Red

Ancient wisdom traditions from the four corners of the globe demonstrate striking similarities to key aspects of the chakra system. Most of these traditions describe a non-physical energy body, many describe movement of energy along subtle pathways, and some describe specific energy centers that correspond to the chakras.

Ancient Goddess Religions

In the oldest known belief systems, the ancient Goddess cultures of Europe, a spiral is used to symbolize the serpent-force of the Goddess's energy as it "awakens dormant life power and moves it forward" (Gimbutas). According to Bruyere, "Every ancient mythology at some point mentions that early in the evolutionary pattern of the world God (whatever god, goddess it is) creates serpents" (118). Winding serpents appear on Irish megalithic stones, antler artifacts from northern European Mesolithic artifacts, and 5th millennial BCE ceramics of east-central Europe. Throughout Old Europe, a universal motif in Minoan, Cycladic and Mycenaean art, consists of "opposed spirals, crescents and snake heads...intended to stimulate the process of becoming" (Gimbutas).

Ancient Egypt and European Alchemy

On the continent of Africa, similarities can be found between the chakra system and the ancient texts of Egypt. In the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which originated in the Pyramid Texts of the 3rd millennium BCE, *Ka* represents the energy body (Faulkner), while *sekhem*, like *prana*, is the life force that runs through all subtle channels of the body and can be harmonized and increased through breath work (Kryder). *Heka*, the god of magic whose name means "activating the *Ka*," is depicted as holding two entwined snakes (Nation Master). Though the Egyptian texts make no reference to specific energy centers corresponding to the chakras, Egyptians frequently wore a prominent heart scarab made of green stone over their hearts throughout their lives and especially at the time of burial (Evans; Gahlin).

The Hermetica, an early alchemical text that originated around 200 CE from the ancient Egyptian texts, states that humans are the meeting place of spirit and matter (Freke and Gandy). In the Hermetic tradition, spiritual awakening is symbolized by the caduceus a staff entwined with two serpents sometimes surmounted with wings suggestive of the 6th chakra (Harris). The caduceus

first appeared in Mesopotamia on a vase dated from approximately 2100 BCE.

The Indian, Greek, Chinese, Islamic, and European schools of alchemy are all believed to have originated from ancient Egypt (Tollmann). In pre-Christian Greece the Pythagoreans wrote about the Luminous Body Light (Armstrong). The famous Swiss alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541 CE) used the term Illiaster for “the spiritual force in matter which strives towards perfection and towards the building of forms” (Cyber Mesa). He wrote: “When a child is born, its heavens are born with it and the seven organs which for themselves have the power to be seven planets and thus everything that belongs to its heavens” (Arndt). Many European alchemists used a diagram of a seven-pointed star to map a pathway for human development. In 17th century Bavaria, Gichtel laid out the seven classical planets within the framework of the human body and associated each with a vice. He then included a spiral line that, alternating up and down, maps out a pathway to transformation.

Traditional Chinese Medicine

Many correspondences are found between the chakra system and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Key elements of TCM appeared before 200 BCE (Metzger and Zhou), and its underlying concepts have changed very little in over 2000 years (Elias and Ketchum). In TCM, as in chakra theory, the life force, or *chi*, begins its journey through the human body in the lungs (Elias and Ketchum). It flows through a complex network of pathways, or meridians, designated *yin* or *yang*. All natural phenomena embody the continuous interplay between the two poles of *yin*/earth energy and *yang*/heaven energy (Metzger and Zhou). Ill health results from a disturbance or blockage of *chi*. More specifically, an imbalance in the flow of energy through one meridian often brings about imbalances in others. In addition, other factors including emotions can affect individual meridians and the meridian network as a whole, thus affecting bodily functions.

The central governor vessel meridian corresponds to the central *sushumna nadi* both in location and function. It begins at the base of the spine and ascends up to the top of the head. It is said that “*ki [chi]* is stored in this meridian like water in a lake.” Motoyama describes the Taoist practice of *shoshuten*, or “Circulation of Light,” in which “*ki (chi)* energy is raised from the tip of the coccyx to the top of the head” and compares it with the practice of Tantra yoga: “In both cases, this physiological energy is sublimated into

higher psychological or spiritual energy...thus the functions of the sushumna and the governor vessel meridian in spiritual practices of their respective traditions exhibit a high degree of correspondence” (Motoyama, 143).

Located along the meridians are points through which one can access the *chi*, redirect its flow, break through blockages and strengthen its vitality (Elias and Ketchum). These points form the basis of acupuncture and acupressure treatment. Specific acupoints correspond to specific organs or organ systems. At the same time, anything that alters or interferes with an organ system's function or structure also changes the performance of the related meridian and acupoints (Tsuei).

There are striking correspondences between the midline acupoints and the chakras, as indicated by the following examples:

- *Conception Vessel 3* in the central lower belly is associated with *yin* (fluid) energy, and *Conception Vessel 4* (“Gate at the Source”), located just above it on the midline of the lower belly, is said to connect to the kidney reserves. This point is sometimes called “Life Gate Fire” because of its ability to rekindle sexual energy (Elias and Ketchum). These two acupoints are located in the area of the second chakra, which is associated with both the urinary system and sexual energy.
- *Conception Vessel 6* (“Sea of Energy”) lies two inches below the navel and can be used to add “fire” to the system in patients with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. *Conception Vessel 8*, known as the entry point of *chi*, corresponds to the *kandasthana*, the spherical region around the navel where *prana* enters the body (Motoyama). *Conception Vessel 12* (“Sea of Nutritive Energy”) is located between the ribcage and the navel and supports digestion and the stomach, spleen, and pancreas (Elias and Ketchum). These three acupoints are in the region of the third chakra, which is associated with will and assertion, *agni* or “digestive fire,” and the same three organs—stomach, spleen and pancreas.
- *Conception Vessel 17* (“Sea of Tranquility”) is located on the breastbone and supports the lungs and the heart, while the *Dingchuan* asthma point is located at the back of the shoulders. Both are in region of the fourth chakra, which is associated with the lungs and heart.

- The energy of the cosmos is said to enter at the crown of the head through *Governing Vessel 20, Bai Hui*, which means “100 convergences” (Elias and Ketchum; Motoyama). Similarly located, the seventh or crown chakra where the individual connects with Divine energy, is named *Sahasrara*, which translates as “thousand-fold.”

As with acupuncture, the principles of Tai Chi are remarkably similar to the chakra system. Tai Chi (“great energy”) is a Chinese martial art first codified in the 13th century CE, with influences dating as far back as the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE) (Metzger and Zhou). Sometimes referred to as a moving meditation, Tai Chi is widely used to promote physical, emotional, and mental health and to achieve a heightened state of consciousness. Thus Tai Chi can be thought of as a form of “exercise acupuncture” in that the movements are designed to open up blocked channels and redirect *chi* along the meridians (Elias and Ketchum). By working with the flow of energy, one can eliminate hundreds of illnesses, increase internal power, and transform essence into energy into spirit.

One principle is the desirability of balancing *yin*/earth and *yang*/heaven energy (Li and Addison): “All over the body vital energy arises. Who can know such a marvelous experience?...All phenomena are born in the union of heaven and earth” (Zhang, quoted in Wong).

Tai Chi also involves learning to “move the pearl of energy” through meditation or by dynamic means (Metzger and Zhou). The lower *dan tian* is an energy field situated in the abdomen below the navel, associated with physical energy and sexuality and corresponding to the first and second chakras. After years of practice one may be able to “move the pearl of energy” up from the lower *dan tian* to the middle *dan tian* at the “central palace,” the heart, location of the fourth chakra. After more practice, one may be able to bring the pearl of energy to the upper *dan tian* at the third eye or pineal gland, location of the sixth chakra. Here, at the site of consciousness, the pearl of energy is transformed into spirit. After many years, the “meeting of 100 meridians” energy field at the crown (location of the seventh chakra) opens and the spirit is emancipated from the body as immortal, with the choice to return to the transcendental, infinite eternal void (Wong).

Another branch of TCM is Qigong. The term “*Qigong*” first appeared during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279 CE) and refers to a system of breathing exercises and movements to enhance the flow of *qi/chi* (Metzger and Zhou).

The ultimate purpose is to know or feel the *Tao*, the intrinsic orderliness of the cosmos. Like other branches of TCM, Qigong theory posits that all natural phenomena involve the continuous interplay between *yin*/earth and *yang*/heaven energy. A disturbance or blockage of *qi* results in malfunction of a particular organ. The “Three Treasures” refer to *jing* – the body’s essence, “*qi*” – internal energy, and “*shen*” – spirit (Li and Addison). Through Qigong one can refine *jing*, convert it to *qi*, and then further refine *qi* and convert it to *shen*, thus connecting “back into nature itself” (Li and Addison).

Native American Beliefs

Because Native American culture is transmitted primarily through oral tradition, there are no ancient texts, yet images from ancient tribes throughout the Americas indicate intriguing correspondences with the chakra system. For example, a sculpture of the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl depicts on the crown of his head a 1000-petalled sunburst of spiritual illumination and the serpent of the liberated spinal fire (Hall). Forms of this Feathered Serpent deity were important in art and religion in most of Mesoamerica for close to 2,000 years, from the Pre-Classic era until the Spanish Conquest (Wikipedia, “Quetzalcoatl”). A picture manuscript from the Mixtec tribe shows a serpent deity in a double helix resembling a modified caduceus (Bruyere). The ancient Incan deity Viracocha was depicted with a nimbus, or halo, signifying the external expression of an internal supernatural force; its light signifies intellect or mystical knowledge (Hall). More recently, a drawing of a Navajo doll shows bits of stone, coral and shell inserted into the figurine at the locations of the seven chakras (Bruyere).

Turning to living tribes of North America, we find even more striking correspondences to the chakra system. Hyemeyohsts Storm, teaching from the Cheyenne Tradition, writes the following: “How you balance your Self – Spiritually, Emotionally, Physically, and Mentally, is the challenge you must accept...while you live here on Mother Earth...” (202) He then shares detailed teaching about the “Energy Field” of the human body and the “spheres” of the body (*i.e.*, the Stomach, the Brain, the Mouth/Throat/Voice, etc.), and maps them on the Medicine Wheel (485). He also quotes one of his teachers describing the shamanic path of the “Flower Soldier: “Those who learn from you will be a rainbow. That can be their destiny if they choose it” (186).

According to *The Book of the Hopi*: "The living body of man and the living body of the earth were constructed in the same way. Through each ran an axis ... along this axis were several vibratory centers ... The first of these in man lay at the top of the head ... just below it lay the second center, the organ called the brain ... The third center lay in the throat ... The fourth center was the heart ... The last of man's important centers lay under his navel, the organ some people now call the solar plexus... The fifth center, the one under the navel was said to be "the one which directed all the functions of man."(Waters)

Robert Ghost Wolf, his own lineage Lakota and Iroquois and having had teachers from several North American tribes, discusses our energetic “light bodies” and the phenomenon of “ascension” (230), when the physical body is left behind and the light body merges with the Light. He states that there are seven rays of the rainbow each of which “influences our Hu-man consciousness and the spinning of the dream called life, the dream of temporal existence” (95). The following chart indicates possible correlations between his descriptions of the seven rays (97) and the chakras.

Ray	Color	Wolf’s Description	Chakra Correlation
First Ray	Red	...in which ...this earth is held. It is the Ray of Leadership.	<i>First Chakra</i>
Second Ray	Sky Blue	... the Ray...of Understanding...of Knowledge.	<i>Sixth Chakra</i>
Third Ray	Green	... the Healing Ray...in harmony with ...Divine Nurturing.	<i>Fourth Chakra</i>
Fourth Ray	Yellow	The Sun radiates the Yellow Ray and all life is stimulated to growth.	<i>Third Chakra</i>
Fifth Ray	Cobalt Blue	...the Ray of Scientific Understanding... understanding how thought creates all reality.	<i>Fifth Chakra</i>
Sixth Ray	Rose	...the Ray of Devotion...allows us the state of Oneness...abundant in spring skies and young flora...youth and new beginnings.	<i>Second Chakra</i>
Seventh Ray	Violet	... the Ray of Transition of the Physical and Spiritual...the Ray of Transformation	<i>Seventh Chakra</i>

Michael Drake, a ceremonial drummer of Cherokee descent, draws a direct correspondence between Native American energy centers and chakras:

“The spiritual traditions of the Hopi, Cherokee, Tibetan, Hindu, and other cultures teach us that there are vibratory centers within the human body. All describe spinning wheels of energy called chakras, lying along the spine. There are seven major chakras situated along the vertical spinal axis from the genital region to the crown of the head... Chakras function much like electrical junction boxes, mediating spiritual energy throughout the entire mind-body system. They are the interface among the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of one's being. Imbalances in chakras lead to imbalances in body, mind, and spirit.”

(Other non-Native American sources allude to other correspondences. For example, one states that the Huichol Indians of Mexico speak of energy fields which radiate from various areas of the body, while the Cuna Indians of Panama and Colombia believe that eight "spirits" inhabit the body in the chakra locations. However, these assertions could not be confirmed by Native sources.)

Indigenous of Australia

Correspondences with the chakra system are found on the continent of Australia as well. The indigenous people of Australia (commonly called “Aborigines”) migrated from somewhere in Asia to the Australian continent 30,000-40,000 years ago. Although made up of over 500 distinct groups, aboriginal people are linked by some common spiritual beliefs, among them the Rainbow Serpent, also known as the Rainbow Snake (Siasoco). A consistent theme in Aboriginal painting, the Rainbow Serpent has been found in rock art up to 6000 years old. This large, snake-like creature is the protector of the land and its people and the source of all life. However, like *Kundalini-Shakti*, the Rainbow Serpent can also be a destructive force if it is not properly respected (Australian Museum Online).

Kabbalah

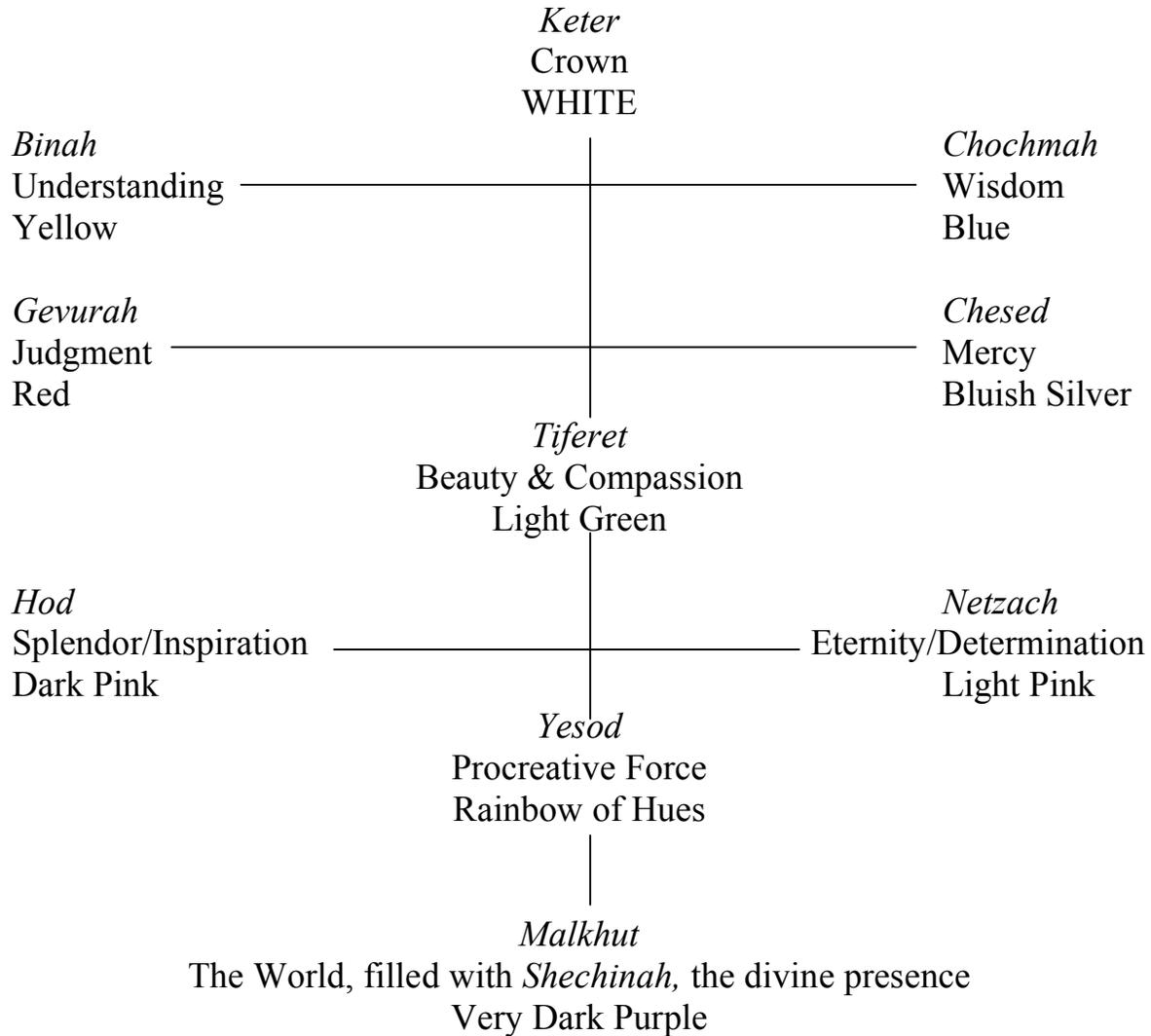
Perhaps the greatest similarity is between the chakra system and the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah. This ever-evolving tradition began with the teachings of 1st century Jewish mystics. According to the 11th century

Spanish mystic who originated the term, “*Kabbalah*” refers to the direct transmission of timeless spiritual wisdom for the purpose of achieving higher states of consciousness and oneness with the Infinite (Besserman). Its first written text was a 6th century collection of writings on meditation, the most important lesson of which is the importance of harmonizing spirituality and daily life. Kabbalah evolved to include visualization, breathing, Sufi-influenced body movements, and meditation on colors, sounds, smells and touch in order to achieve the highest meditative state.

Kabbalah teaches that there are four levels to our experience of the world – *asiyah* (action), *yetzirah* (formation), *briyah* (creation), and *atzilut* (emanation), and four souls – *nefesh* (fleshly soul), *rauch* (emotional soul), *neshamah* (intellectual soul), and *chayah* (spiritual soul), that roughly correspond to body, heart, mind, and spirit (Michaelson, Learn Kabbalah). However, as with the chakra system, the greatest spiritual achievement is found not in transcending the body but rather in joining body and spirit together: “The point is not to flee from one plane of experience to the other. It is to richly experience all four, and balance among them.”

The *sefirot* (variously translated as spheres, worlds, emanations, or stages of consciousness) are ten divine qualities that give shape and form to the world and to our human experience (Michaelson, God in Your Body). Like the chakra system, they “serve as a link between physical world and the unseen infinite source” (Gerstein). As they are traditionally mapped on the Tree of Life, they group into seven levels with remarkable correspondences to the seven chakras. Through the practice of Kabbalah, “we can learn to perceive these qualities and experience life more subtly and more consciously.”

As with the chakras, different colors are attributed to the *sefirot* according to different systems. The following graphic depicts the *sefirot* and their location on the plane of the body, along with their color according to the system of the Ramak, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (Fiftieth Gate). This system appears to have the most similarity to the most commonly assigned colors of the chakras.



The central pillar of the tree corresponds to the spine (Michaelson, Learn Kabbalah). As with *pingala* and *ida*, the right and left columns are considered to be male and female essences, respectively (Gerstein). A zig-zag path flows down from the highest point on the cosmic Tree, connecting each of the *sefirot*. The Zohar, the most famous Kabbalah text, guides the seeker along this circuitous path with detailed instructions for contemplating each *sefirah*, including its associated mental function, body part, sacred name and color.

Jay Michaelson, a living Kabbalah scholar, emphasizes the importance of not just the upper levels, but all levels of the Tree of Life. He describes the movement of energy downward through the levels of the *sefirot* in terms remarkably similar to Anodea Judith's when she describes the Manifesting Current in the chakra system:

“If we imagine the first [upper] three sefirot to be an idea arising in the mind, the second [middle] three to be the stirrings in the heart as it weighs and evaluates it, and the third [lower] three to be the qualities of action that bring it into being, then malchut is its actual being; its manifestation... the result.” (Michaelson, LearnKabbalah)

“We can think of the flow of consciousness as entering through the crown chakra and moving downward through the body... When we take thoughts and turn them into visualizations, then words, and finally into form, we are engaged in the process of manifesting.” (Judith, Eastern Body)

Michaelson notes the similarities between the tree of *sefirot* and the chakra system. At the same time, he cautions that “they are different systems with differences as well as similarities,” with no known historic links between them (Learn Kabbalah).

Conclusion

A survey of ancient wisdom traditions from around the globe indicates that there are compelling similarities between the chakra system that originated in India over 4000 years ago and ancient wisdom traditions from six different continents. Common themes include the notion of human beings as having both a physical body and a non-physical energy body, specific energy centers, the movement of energy along subtle pathways, and practices for healing and enriching one’s life through the integration of body, mind and spirit.

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