

Anahata Chakra (Heart)

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

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

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

Asanas that enliven the heart chakra include passive chest openers in which we arch gently over a blanket or bolster, shoulder stretches such as the arm positions of Gomukhasana (cow’s face pose) and Garudasana (eagle pose), and backbends. Being an even-numbered, feminine chakra, the heart center naturally yearns to release and let go. Doing backbends develops the trust and surrender we need to open the heart fully. When we feel fearful, there is no room for love, and our bodies show contraction. When we choose love, the fear melts away, and our practice takes on a joyful quality. In many back bending poses, the heart is positioned higher than the head. It’s wonderfully refreshing to let the mind drop away from the top position and instead lead with the heart.

Some signs that the heart chakra is overpowering your life can include co-dependency, possessiveness, jealousy, heart disease, and high blood pressure. For these symptoms, forward bends are the best antidote, because they are grounding and foster introspection. While people with deficient heart chakra energy need to open to receive love more fully, those with excessive heart chakra energy find healing by slowing down to discover inside themselves, the nourishment they have been seeking from others.