

The First Chakra: Muladhara—the Root Chakra



Muladhara, the first chakra, is also known as the root, or base, chakra. It is associated with the Earth element and with our sense of smell. It symbolizes the most gross, dense aspect of our being, our physical existence in our bodies here on Earth. *Muladhara* means, “support of the root,” (*mula* meaning “root”, and *dhara*, “support”). This chakra represents and is connected to our most basic needs of survival, safety, and security, including our biological needs for food, water, shelter, and procreation, the very things that make life here on this Earthly plane possible and sustainable, those things which keep us rooted and grounded, secure and safe. It is also associated with the sense of safety that comes with knowing we belong to a community, a tribe, a place, and a planet.

Within our physical body, *Muladhara* is associated with and connected to the groin area and corresponds to the base of the spine and the perineum, the space between the genitals and the anus. It is also associated with the soles of the feet. The root chakra is our direct connection with our home, the Earth. In terms of survival here on the physical plane of Earth, the physical body, *annamaya kosha*, is our root, the part of us that we know and experience most concretely and

frequently, our vehicle and tangible source of our identity. Our physicality is the way we first know ourselves and others. That physicality and the preservation of the same is the most basic, essential and necessary mode of being. The root chakra function is all about survival of the physical body. Of our own survival as well as that of generations to come, whether the realization of the impulse for survival is conscious or not.

Muladhara's main function is to channel energy upward from the Earth into our feet, legs and spine to help us remain grounded, stable and connected. A sort of energetic umbilical cord, it allows us to be attached to our Mother Earth, our source of sustenance and sanctuary. Associated with our reproductive systems, the endocrine glands related to Muladhara are the ovaries in women, and the testes in men.

The specific physical location associated with Muladhara is the perineum, as well as the base of the spine. It is also connected to the soles of the feet. The minor chakras at our knee joints and hip flexors are also intimately connected to our root chakra energy. The color of the root chakra is blood red, the color of life and passion. Its symbol is a four-petaled lotus. Muladhara is associated with the physical sense of smell, the sense that is directly connected to the oldest part of our brain, the limbic system. Linked to emotion, memory and instinct, the limbic system governs our sense of safety and security.

Our sense of smell is primal. Newly born infants rely on their sense of smell to crawl toward the breast to feed. We rely on our sense of smell to determine whether food is safe. Body smells of other people are processed in different areas of the brain, helping us determine whether they are friendly or if we should be fearful. The olfactory receptors are located in the nasal cavity and send information directly to the limbic system at the center of the brain. When we smell something, the recognition that we have smelled, or knowing what the scent may be, happens

only after the deepest, most primal part of our brain has already been activated by the scent. Deep emotional reactions are activated by a smell before we even know that we have smelled anything at all. In trauma or grief, an olfactory trigger can set off any number of recollections and connections, including intrusive ones that can be startling or fear-inducing. A smell can induce this kind of fear-based reaction whether you recognize you have smelled a smell or not.

This makes sense in terms of trauma reactions: sensory reminders of a traumatic incident can cause our nervous systems to immediately react, without our having to think about it consciously. We may never consciously recognize that a particular scent is activating the trauma response. Conversely, we may also be soothed and calmed by scents that are connected to positive emotional connections. In grief, these can also be difficult. Memories associated with the intimate scent of the one we love who is missing may bring an immediate sense of longed-for connection and also, because we know their physical being is out of our reach, it also brings pain and heartache. With their scents, deep love and deep yearning are co-mingled. We can feel connected and at the same time undone. Smells can bring us unwittingly back to myriad moments of trauma—the smells of hospital antiseptic, bandages, funeral home flowers, the muddy dirt of a freshly turned grave, any specific scent connected to our loved one, our time with them, or with any moment our brains and memories recorded during a traumatic incident. The sense of smell holds a powerful connection with our sense of safety and survival.

When Muladhara is functioning optimally, we feel rooted, grounded, secure, safe and able to trust our own experiences and other people appropriately as we move about the world. We feel that we have enough—enough material goods, enough emotional support, enough of what we need, and that we are connected to the Earth. Even if we are unaware of this connection consciously, we have a sense of feeling “at home” in our bodies, wherever we happen to be. We

are able to accept and enjoy sensual experiences of all kinds—taste, touch, hearing, sight, smell—in balanced and healthy ways. We feel confident and safe in our experiences of the senses and the expression of those experiences.

In grief, our ability to enjoy basic sensory pleasures is deeply diminished. We may feel a sense of guilt when we find ourselves enjoying life, that we may somehow betray the memory of our loved one who can no longer experience these sensations or pleasures. We can feel that we should not enjoy life or anything that feels good, tastes good, smells good, if we are in deep grief. And we may find it difficult to reconcile those feelings. Or, we may wish to be able to enjoy those things and feel unable to do so. I remember vividly the first time I genuinely laughed after my son's death. I was appalled at myself. Did this make me a bad mother? Had I forgotten him? How could I laugh and have fun, enjoy anything when my son was dead? What would other people think? It was awful. And almost immediately after that flood of feelings—guilt, shame, insecurity, confusion—came a different kind of sadness. The thought of living the rest of my life without laughter or enjoyment brought its own despondency, in addition to the deep grief I felt, despite a brief moment of levity.

Those who are trauma survivors may also experience this kind of guilt. Survivor's guilt may occur, the sense of guilt that you have survived a traumatic incident when others did not. Feeling that somehow you do not deserve to be alive. This can include all kinds of experiences such as the obvious ones like a natural disaster, an act of violence, war, or a horrible accident. It may also occur after other events, including surviving a difficult illness when others have not, not having been able to save someone else who died, whether you were present at the time of their death or not, after the death of a sibling, after receiving an organ transplant. These people may also experience guilt at the pleasures of the senses—eating good food, smelling good

smells, enjoying the feel of the sun on the skin, watching the seasons change, witnessing beauty, laughing. These kinds of feelings can potentially be soothed through actions that support the root chakra.

The poet Mary Oliver writes in her poem “Wild Geese” of letting the “soft animal” of your body love what it loves. This sentiment finds expression in a safe, connected and balanced experiences of Muladhara. Taking comfort and pleasure in fulfillment of our biological needs, including human sexuality and the instinctive enjoyment of sensual experiences of all kinds, are the root chakra’s primary physical manifestations, with concerns for safety, security, and connectedness as its mental, emotional and spiritual expressions.

Muladhara’s aspect of sexuality and its expression—or lack of—can be a particularly painful source of frustration and difficulty in grief. For many, sex can be difficult to talk about at the best of times, and the subject of sex in grief can seem even more taboo. It is rare that sexual expression is not impacted in some way by grief. For many bereaved, finding the energy or the courage to talk about it with your partner or even a trusted friend or therapist can be hugely challenging. In the midst of the pain of grief, it can seem so much easier to ignore something that seems to pale in importance compared to the pain of the loss, or that can feel next to impossible to broach.

For those who have been through sexual trauma, this chakra is greatly impacted. The Muladhara aspect of sex has to do with tribal, primal bonds and expression of the biological urge to affirm and assure the continuity of life. Issues of sexuality also expand into the second chakra Svadisthana and include emotional attachments and relationships with others, as well as your own personal history of relationships and sexuality. Sexuality in the chakras generally is fluid and involves all of the lower three chakras as well as the heart and throat chakras. Each chakra

has its own specific sphere of focus and management, but they also all work together, moving always toward balance.

For couples where one or both of the pair are grieving, the topic of sexuality can become complicated and uncomfortable. This is almost universally true for bereaved parents faced with the deep pain of how to manage the intense experience of individual grief, let alone as a couple. Everything changes after the death of a child. For bereaved parents, the challenges of finding ways to cope together can be daunting. Some couples find the need to cling to each other as comforting ports through grief's chaotic storms, and this may or may not include sex, while others find themselves withdrawing, unable to be part of an energetic or emotional exchange of any kind with their partner. Some may vacillate between extremes, needing desperately to have an intimate connection and then wanting to be alone with very little ability to share intimacy or genuine emotional interaction with the other. Finding ways to manage the complexity of emotion and energy inherent in a sexual exchange can be incredibly difficult. Nothing seems to come easy in grief except for the pain of grief itself.

It is important to understand that intimacy and sex are not the same things. While sex is certainly an act of intimacy, intimacy includes much more than sex. When one person feels unsupported, as can often happen with couples in grief, it can be difficult to feel open and giving of intimate aspects of the self. If one half of a couple feels unable to relate to how the other is grieving, if he or she feels misunderstood, rejected, or unwanted—even if this is not the intent of the other partner—intimacy can be difficult to cultivate. Grief and trauma generally cause us to feel unsafe in our world. When we feel unsafe, it can be very difficult to surrender to the process of being intimate with another person. Intimacy includes sexual and non-sexual touch, hugs,

kisses, physical and emotional closeness and the sharing of experience and emotion, as well as sex.

Some bereaved parents may desire intimacy, but the act of sex itself may seem too daunting, painful, and the conflicting emotions surrounding sexuality can be confusing. For many bereaved parents, the act of sex can itself be a painful reminder that this is how our children were created—and now that child is dead. Many women in particular report this experience. For men, who may often feel unable to adequately support their partners in grief, unable to protect them from pain, from the reality of the death of their precious child, withdrawing and turning inward, suppressing their own hurt occurs all too commonly. Some bereaved report crying through, during, or after sex and feeling ashamed and confused about such displays of emotion. Sometimes they feel unable to express exactly what the tears are about or why sexual intimacy triggers such reactions. Partners may be left feeling bewildered, unable to help, rejected, or even angry. When these issues of intimacy and sexuality in grief are not addressed, over time, partners can experience increasing emotional distance. We can feel ungrounded and profoundly disconnected from our partners, from our support systems in general, from the world around us, and even from the core of our selves.

For widows and widowers, anyone whose beloved life partner has died, being without your beloved as your sexual partner is painful beyond words. Not simply for the lack of sex, but the groundedness we can find in the physical presence of the one we love; the lack of touch, of the small daily intimacies of hand holding, a shoulder to lay your head upon, cuddling, hugs, conversation, laughter, and the affection inherent in those things. Finding sex itself, if you're motivated to look for it, may not be a problem, but finding someone to share love and intimacy in a physical and emotional way is something entirely different. Early on, this may not be an

issue, as you may not even think of sex, but for nearly all whose beloved life partners die, it can become a great source of pain. Feeling that you may never be loved or held again, that the love and intimacy you once shared can never be regained or replaced, even if the marriage or partnership was not always the best, is a painful and lonely experience.

The absence of the daily intimacies, of which sex is part, is one of the most painful experiences a grieving person can have when their life partner has died. This impacts the safety aspect as well as the sexual aspect of Muladhara. The deprivation of touch is a deeply painful aspect of being widowed and living without your life partner. Holding hands as you cross the street, pecks on the cheek, hugs upon arrivals and departures, shoulder squeezes, playful swats on the behind, mischievous and good humored gropes, help with tying a tie, or zipping a dress, fingers lingering on the nape of the neck, caresses on the arms or the back, a head leaned on a shoulder, a hand resting on a knee while driving, rubbing the feet while watching Netflix—there are so many ways couples touch each other multiple times daily and all of these indicate safety and security with this person as part of your intimate tribe. Sexuality is an extension of this and for those whose life partners have died, they are suddenly bereft of these safety-making touches as well as sex. Touch is a biological need that bereaved partners long for and of which they are especially deprived. Human touch is necessary for healthy development and good mental health. The lack of it can contribute even further to a grieving person's depth of pain, isolation and loneliness.

For those whose partners have not died but are grieving a loss that your partner is not, or even when you are both grieving the same loss, it can be hard to explain or express to your partner how the loss may affect your sex drive, your interest in sex, or your ability to be intimate in other ways. One partner may feel closed off, alone in the loss, while the partner can feel

pushed aside, unimportant, disregarded, even jealous, especially if there is little understanding of the impact of grief and its multi-layered effects on the body, mind, and spirit of the more deeply affected partner. Additionally, individual issues, thoughts and conceptions about sexuality also play a part. Feelings such as shame, guilt, countless social and cultural messages, personal ideas that sex should only be for mutual pleasure, or something that should happen only when we are happy or content, can create even more difficulties surrounding grief and sexuality.

Sex with another person can be an act of extreme vulnerability. Our most profound emotions of longing, love, fear and desire are laid bare. Grief also leaves us incredibly vulnerable. Vulnerability is an emotional state in which we feel completely exposed, totally uncertain, with no idea what will happen next. In grief, this is a near constant state, particularly in early grief. And please know that “early grief” can mean days, weeks, months, or for some, a year or two or three, or even more, into the loss. There is truly no time table for grief or for how you move through it. When dealing with trauma, whether related to grief or not, feeling vulnerable and exposed is also completely normal. Similarly, there is no time table for moving through post-traumatic stress. Untended traumatic memories can surface years after an incident. When this is reality, our sense of safety is compromised, and our root chakra functions are all about safety and survival. This includes the most fundamental biological survival needs—food, shelter, procreation. Because of this, sex, sex drive, and sexuality can all be impacted in grief and trauma.

In the incredibly complex web of issues surrounding sexuality and grief, there is no one answer. Each person is different; each person in a partnership is different. The way each individual person’s sexuality is impacted is completely unique. Communication about difficult feelings surrounding sex and being open with each other is necessary to move toward a solution,

or at least, toward understanding. Even if sex itself is difficult, or at any point seems to not even be a possibility, continuing to be intimate in other ways can be helpful and nourishing. Finding ways to let your partner know that he or she is significant and needed, even if you currently have difficulty fully expressing sexuality, can benefit you both. A hug, a touch, holding hands, cuddling—these can be ways to continue intimacy and attachment. Communicate regularly about how grief is affecting you both, with each of you being honest about feelings while respecting the other's space and experiences. These things can help both of you to feel connected, even in the disconnection inherent in deep grief.

For those who have lost beloved partners, being able to express your feelings to another trusted person, to write them down, or find creative outlets for the pain and confusion can be very helpful. Finding ways to be in physical contact with others can be vitally important—get massages, make the effort to be around others you love and trust with whom you can share touches and hugs. None of these things take away the pain of missing and touching your beloved. Some may find the practices in this chapter and the rest of the book help alleviate a sense of disconnection. Tantrik energy practices are about awakening and remaining awake to the energy and prana that moves through us and being present to experiences of our senses in the natural world. Allowing and giving ourselves permission to enjoy the pleasures of all our senses and our experiences in mindful ways is part of Tantrik practice. Observing, engaging, honoring, and appreciating the senses, as well as sensory and sensual experiences is a spiritual act and transmutes energy. In tantra, energy of all kinds can be transmuted into spiritual energy.

Sex can be very restorative and many grieving people do find solace in sexuality as life affirming. The creative impulse includes acts of creation of all kinds—making art, sculpting, dancing, cooking, gardening. Comforting the senses with food, drink, or other sensory

experiences that help us feel good or safe can be okay and is certainly common in grief and in other stressful life experiences. Paying attention to imbalance and actions that can be harmful requires being in touch with our deeper selves. Being aware of your behavior, your choices and the emotional or physical impulses which may be driving them can help you move toward a balanced and healthy way of managing grief and post-traumatic reactions.

For some in grief and trauma, Muladhara can become overactive. Or the chakra can move from a state of underactivity (tamas) to over-activity (rajas). A rajasic or overactive Muladhara chakra can mean overindulgence in any areas that are governed by Muladhara—overeating, over use, or dependence on alcohol or drugs (prescription or non-prescription), risky or impulsive behavior, such as sexual behaviors, hoarding, overspending, excessive shopping, feeling the need to have increasing amounts of material items, a sense of scarcity in all things, of never having or being enough. These experiences are also not unusual in grief.

After a traumatic loss, our sense of stability and safety in all realms—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual—can be severely compromised. Our ability to feel connected to anything or anyone can be greatly diminished. Bereaved and traumatized people often feel disconnected from their social or familial group; misunderstood, ashamed, rejected, unsupported by those whom they previously considered the most accepting and supportive of their tribe. As our foundation, our root supports us. When it is shaken, we can feel unmoored.

There's a saying in the grief community that grief will re-write your address book. This is often true. Many grieving and traumatized people suffer secondary losses from changes in their support systems. Those they would have thought would be steadfastly present through grief often are not. Conversely, those in grief are often surprised by those who are able to be present. This has primarily to do with the ability, or inability, of others to be comfortable with your

overwhelming pain and discomfort. In our culture, the bereaved are asked implicitly and explicitly to put away pain, experiences, remembrances, treasured pictures of loved ones, and even tears. I regularly ask in support groups that no one give a tissue to a tearful person. If a crying person wants one, they can get one for themselves, as they are readily available. So often when we are crying and someone gives us a tissue, the message is “you’re making me uncomfortable, I don’t like to see you in pain, this is not the time, big girls/ boys don’t cry, clean yourself up, dry your tears.” Even if the tissue giver does not overtly mean any of those things, the message is often undeniably to do something other than just go ahead and cry. Crying is a valid and healthy expression of what is going on inside.

We often feel shame and guilt in carrying grief. This also impacts our ability to feel safely rooted. At about three weeks post-funeral, we begin to feel unwelcome and unable to openly mourn or express our experience of grief. When we speak of our beloveds and a hush falls across the room, we begin to feel self-conscious and ungrounded. When others say careless things that trigger deep pain or cause us to feel that everyone else has forgotten the memory of the one we hold so dearly, we feel angry, ashamed, or both. When professionals routinely hand out diagnoses of major depressive disorder, anxiety and panic disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, or physical illnesses and conditions, which are codified and specified to include time limits on how long we are supposed to grieve, we start to believe that there must be something wrong with us, and as a result we do not feel safe. When we are given pills, told to take this, see someone, go here, do this, do that, but don’t put it out in public where we can all see it, we feel even more hurt, lost, confused and alone than we already did. These things impact our ability to feel safely rooted and grounded and cause us to feel more disconnected from our tribe.

Muladhara often reacts by contracting. Strengthening our root chakra during grief and trauma is the foundational support for finding safe ground once more.

Finding your tribe, your group, your people is central to growth and a return to wholeness. Seeking support is a form of self-care. Those who are able to find good help and support are far better able to manage the pain of grief. Seek out those who are non-judgmental and compassionate; people who will not tell you what you should do, or shouldn't do, or what you need to do, or what you need to stop doing. Find a friend or family member who can be there for you. Attend a support group. Support groups can be very helpful for grieving and traumatized people and can provide the kind of non-judgmental listening support grieving people need. Remember, though, that not all support groups are for all people. Find a place where you feel you belong. You might also seek out online groups for your particular loss or trauma. Those who have shared similar experiences can have an understanding that others cannot. Online communities can be extremely helpful sources of support and life-long connections can be made. Feeling connected to a tribe where you feel understood and accepted helps to strengthen Muladhara.