

# The Wheel of the Navel and Lotus of the Heart: Metaphor, Medical Knowledge, and the Early Tantric Body

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The cakras of yoga have fascinated interpreters ever since the tantric body entered Anglophone discourse and scholarship in the late nineteenth century. While multiple authors in this period advanced biomedical interpretations of the tantric body, the consensus of modern scholarship is that the tantric body is a 'visionary' body or mental construct without empirical basis. This essay seeks an interpretive space between these two views: interpretations of the tantric body couched in the idiom of science, and the view that it is purely an idealized product of visualization or imagination. Through a close reading of the early Śaiva tantra corpus, focusing on circa 7th–9th century sources, I argue that the tantric body was, in fact, closely aligned with the early-medieval medical body. This becomes apparent in tracing the history of two key concepts: the 'lotus of the heart' (*hṛdaya-puṇḍarika*) and 'wheel of the navel' (*nābhicakra*), which feature in religious, philosophical, and medical literatures prior to their appearance in the tantra corpus. Close attention to this context reveals that discourse on the body in early Śaivism is rooted in widely-shared conceptions of the body, many stemming directly from medical traditions. This paper will also trace some of the developments which led to more esoteric and visionary conceptions of the tantric body in the second millennium.

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