

SEVEN CHAKRAS

Essay by Dr. David White, PhD

With the vivid images of her cakra series, Linda Saccoccio makes her own unique contribution to a history of images, ideas, and practices that extends back over a thousand years. Here, of course, I am speaking of the set of circles or wheels that has occupied a central place in Indian representations of the subtle body. While it is impossible for us to know when people first began to experience the subtle body as a configuration of cakras, channels, knots, and so forth, one can date the earliest expressions of that experience to some time around the year 800. For the most part, those earliest expressions are found in a class of medieval texts known as the Tantras. The earliest among these to mention the cakras is the Buddhist *Hevajra Tantra*, which lists a set of four. An important ninth or tenth-century Hindu Tantra, the *Kaulajnananirnaya*, is likely the earliest source of all to describe seven cakras, assign them specific subtle body locations (genitals, navel, heart, throat, mouth, forehead, and crown of the head), and link them to groups of divine “maidens” with characteristic colors. Apart from the heart, which this text calls a “lotus,” none of these cakras are said to have petals: rather, they have “spokes” (like wheels) or “leaves” (like trees), which are 5, 8, 10, 12, 16, 100, and 1000 in number. The “standard” system of seven cakras as we know it, with the classical names of *muladhara*, *svadhithana*, and so on, first appears in two later Hindu Tantras, the *Kubjikamata* and the *Rudrayamala*, which date from about the twelfth century.



7 Chakras Series #4, 47.5 x 32 inches, Oil on paper

Wheels, leaves, petals, and brightly colored divine maidens: these are lovely images to contemplate, which is what we see Linda doing in her cakra series. A chromatic ascent from the (infra-)red to the (ultra-)violet, it plays across the entire range of the visible spectrum, while also following the arc of the subtle sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet from the *lam* of the root cakra up to the *om* in the cakra behind the third eye. But each of the cakras has a dynamic quality as well, which Linda has captured in the brilliant red arabesques that leap across the solid backgrounds of each image. When one recalls that the “maidens” of the cakras are internalized forms of the *yoginis*, the powerful and mysterious Tantric goddesses whose boundless energy concentrated in their sexual fluids propelled them across the sky, one can imagine these as so many cosmic vapor trails or the “signatures” left behind by subatomic particles in a Tantric particle collider.

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In fact, the full representation of the seven cakras that so many modern-day yoga practitioners take as their standard—each with its specific number of petals, seed mantra (*bija*), color, and *shakti*—is based on a much younger text. It is serendipitous that this, a sixteenth-century work entitled the *Shat-cakra-nirupana* (“Appearance of the Six Cakras”), should have come to enjoy the canonical status that it has as the authoritative source on the cakras of the subtle body. In 1919, John Woodroffe, then the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Calcutta, published a work entitled *The Serpent Power*, which contained a Sanskrit edition and English translation of the *Shat-cakra-nirupana*, which included a set of seven color plates representing the cakras. It is the images on those plates that have since become burned, as it were, into the minds of yoga enthusiasts around the world.

This burning, if I may mix my metaphors, has had the effect of freezing modern-day conceptualizations of the cakras. In fact, in addition to the early four-cakra grouping of the *Hevajra Tantra*, one finds cakra systems comprising five, six, eight, nine, eleven, and as many as thirty-six cakras. Different texts, different schools, and different guru-disciple lineages have portrayed the cakras in different ways; and it is not uncommon to even find alternative numbering, ordering, naming, and coloring of cakras within a single tradition. But this is as it should be. For while it is true that the cakra system with which we are familiar today can be traced back through a series of texts, there can be no doubt that the cakras were being visualized well before there were texts. And while a disciple’s vision of the cakras would have been—and continues to be—influenced by his guru’s teachings, a principal goal of practice is the expansion of consciousness, a consciousness that is not subject to the limits of custom or convention. In this respect, Linda Saccoccio’s sublime cakra images remain authentic and true to the yoga tradition precisely because they *play* with that tradition, just as hundreds of practitioners and visionaries have done for a millennium and more.

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