

Embodying the 5 Elements

A Neomodern Rendering

by John Friend



BOWSPRING[®]

Embodying the Five Elements

The purpose of this Bowspring course is to bring the 5 Elements out of metaphysical abstraction and into lived somatic experience. Through a Neomodern lens, students will explore how the Tantric, Western, and Chinese systems of the 5 Elements each illuminate different dimensions of embodiment, and how Bowspring offers a practical means of integrating them into our everyday life. In our Bowspring practice, every dynamic posture and breath is a conscious embodiment to balance body-mind-soul through the Five Elements.

In this online Bowspring course, students learn how:

Space opens the field of awareness;

Fire awakens courage, radiance, and soul-force;

Air refines breath, mind, and communication;

Water restores psychic feeling, adaptability, and relational flow;

and **Earth** grounds the whole in structure, strength, and enduring health.

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The Five Elements are foundational in both ancient Eastern and Western metaphysical systems. They represent fundamental energetical qualities of Nature in the philosophies of Tantra (India / Kashmir / Tibet yoga systems), in Wicca (Western esoteric traditions), and in Wu Xing / Gogyō (Chinese / Japanese esoteric healing systems). All 3 of these perspectives on the 5 Elements have both universal agreement and apparent contradictions in their definitions of Elemental qualities.

A Neomodern philosophical rendering of the 5 Elements across Tantra, Wicca, and Wu Xing systems recovers ancient perennial wisdom, reconciles East-West contradictions, and provides pragmatic exercises to embody their truths through living practice. A Neomodern view integrates the universal teachings of the 5 Elements through the Bowspring practice.

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The 5 Elements are living patterns of Consciousness in our posture, within our somatic awareness, psychic feelings, mental processes, and artistic inspiration. They are the 5 states of vibration along a spectrum of embodied Consciousness—quantum levels of spiritual vibration that compose our mind, emotions, and the matrix of the sacred geometry of the human body. The 5 Elements synergistically link spirit, will, mind, feeling, and body.

As Consciousness descends in vibratory density, its limitless potential differentiates into volition, thought, emotion, and embodiment. It is through the 5 Elements that a soul physically embodies on Earth, giving it capacity to experience emotions, thoughts, and spiritual inspiration.

The Elements provide the energetic capacity to weave the most subtle vibrations of consciousness into the densest forms of matter as body – the physical vessel for the ego, mind, and soul.

All of our psycho-emotional expressions including from love to hate; joy to depression; peace to terror; wisdom to stupidity; psychic ability to insensitivity; and from resilience to a lack of fortitude are possible because of the 5 Elements.

The Three Metaphysical Systems of the 5 Elements

- The Tantric metaphysical system best describes how high vibration Spirit, out of its own freedom, slows down and condenses into manifestation of mind and emotion in the orderly structure of the physical body. Spirit becomes increasingly tangible through patterned gradations or levels of embodiment. This is the vertical or ontological dimension emphasized by Tantra.
- The Wiccan system highlights the soul's archetypal relationships to mind, emotion, body, and spiritual wholeness. They shape the qualities of structure, desire, receptivity, thought, feelings, imagination, and spiritual orientation. This is the symbolic and initiatory dimension emphasized in Western esotericism.
- And the Far East view of the 5 Elements presents life force moving in cycles and rhythmic phases of transformation. Instead of focusing on levels of vibrating consciousness, the Wu Xing 5 Element theory describes the flowing process of growth, expression, integration, refinement, and restoration of life force (Chi / Ki). The 5 Elements regulate each other, flow through one another, and reveal the living process by which life maintains coherence through change. This is the process dimension emphasized by ancient Chinese cosmology.

All three systems illuminate real dimensions of existence or metaphysical reality of the 5 Elements. Each philosophical system describes a pattern of life that is simultaneously cosmic, psychological, and embodied. A Neomodern rendering of the 5 Elements reconciles these various philosophical systems into a single intelligible framework that can be embodied in practice, especially through posture, breath, movement, attention, and feeling.

The Tantric Model

This Tantric model offers a profoundly detailed map of embodiment. In the Indian Tantric tradition, the Mahābhūtas—Space, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth—describe the progressive densification of consciousness into form. Reality unfolds as a step-down process, with each layer becoming denser, slower, and more materially defined, while still preserving the subtler powers within it. In this view, the body is not separate from Consciousness, but the densest stratum of it.

Philosophically, the 5 Elements are regarded as cosmological principles: modes through which the subtle becomes gross, the invisible becomes visible, and the formless enters embodiment.

They are universal principles of lived experience:

- Soul -- vastness and resonance (Space).
- Mind -- mental movement and breath (Air)
- Will -- transformation and spiritual radiance (Fire)
- Feelings -- emotional cohesion and flow (Water)
- Body -- physicality and stability (Earth)

The 5 Elements each describe levels of vibration from the highest attunement with Spirit / Source (*Purusha*) and the light of our soul – all the way down to physical, emotional, and psychological low vibrations which are misaligned with Life, leading to pain and suffering – loss of purpose, rageful violence, sickness, and disease.

From the Tantric view, all of our personality traits, psycho-physical constitutions (the *Doshas*), emotional character (the *Rasas*), and moods (*Bhavas*) are based on the interplay of the 5 Elements.

To understand the nature of our emotions and mind, and then to ultimately know how to skillfully direct our individual mind-body (with all our unique traits of personality and character) toward freedom (*Moksha*), one must first learn the 5 Elements.

Through the Great Work with the 5 Elements, we are able to sustain health (*Artha*), magnify knowing supreme delight (*Ananda*) through the pleasure of the senses (*Kama*), develop wisdom to align with Spirit in Nature (*Dharma*), and ultimately experience freedom of mind and soul (*Moksha* / *Svatantrya*).

The 5 Elements are in hierarchical order by the degree of vibratory frequency from Space at the highest frequency all the way down to the densest, slowest frequency of the Earth. Each step down of Spirit preserves what came before while adding increasing constraint, specificity, and texture.

Every substance and every experience contains all 5 Elements in shifting ratios (think: water as ice, liquid, steam—one essence, many expressions).

Spirit (Space) and substance (the other 4 Elements) are never totally separate but mutually interpenetrate at varying degrees.

The hierarchy of the Elements is organized by the number of the 5 senses which can perceive each Element.

Space (*Ākāśa*) is the most subtle Element: the unbounded field that contains the other four Elements. It interconnects the mind, will, emotions, and body into a whole, unified spiritual embodiment.

Space is the highest frequency and is known through “sound” – “hearing” vibration. It ‘steps down’ through the other Elements until it reaches Earth, manifesting as a physical body.

Space is without physical attribute, but it is not empty. Instead, it is the container of all possibilities. It is the open, resonant field—the womb of all sound and vibration in the physical world, in which all forms arise.

When we attune to Space, we feel the vast spaciousness of being, the freedom beyond confinement. Space is immeasurable, unbounded, without dimension, non-directional, all-pervading, expansive, indestructible, and free.

From Space comes **Air**, which is known by feeling its movement through sense of touch. Air (*Vāyu*) is Space in motion: mobility, communication, signal, sensitivity, nervous responsiveness, and thought. It is the energy that helps increase sensory perception and mental discernment within the mind-body.

This energy governs the circulation of *prāṇa* and the breath in the body, the winds of thought in the mind and in the nervous system. It also helps to increase the flow of information and activity among of the other Elements.

Air does not contain Earth, Water, or Fire, so one cannot smell, taste, or see Air.

In alignment, the Air element brings lightness, mobility, quickness to respond, adaptability.

In general, the Air energy is wild and challenging to control.

When Air element is distorted the nervous system and mind become restless, anxious, and scattered.

Its sensory intelligence is associated with touch and the sense organs of the hands and the skin.

From the friction of Air, **Fire** is derived. Fire is known by hearing, touch and sight, but you can't taste (Water) or smell (Earth) Fire.

Fire (*Agni*) is the principle of illumination and transformation: the power to see, distinguish, digest, choose, and transform.

Agni is the radiant transformer — the element of light, heat, and vision. The light of Fire confers sight, not only with literal vision, but the inner illumination of understanding and the will -- purpose, selection, and direction. At its highest frequency, Fire is the flame of integrity and the willpower in the heart.

The sense of sight belongs to Fire because illumination allows directed movement and selective choice. Fire turns movement into meaning, possibility into decision—the discriminating edge of consciousness. It is light that allows for movement from place to place as we can choose where to walk and to move. Where Air moves, Fire chooses.

Fire is burning hot, deeply penetrating, and intensely bright and radiant. Fire transforms one form into another. It is the agent of transmutation, burning away the old to reveal the new. This Element is both the digestive fire in the belly and the light of fire in the eyes that clarifies truth and increases discrimination.

When Fire is imbalanced, it can become destructive, separating, and a lack of heart.

From Fire comes **Water**, which can be known by all the 5 senses except smell (Earth). Water (*Ap*) is cohesion, bonding, fluidity, nourishment, emotionality, adaptability and assimilation.

Water is the Element of liquidity, flow, cohesion, bonding, nourishment, and assimilation.

It the fluid medium that dissolves boundaries, gives capacity for ingestion, absorption, and nurture. Water is cleansing, lubricating, adhesive, and viscous.

While Air is associated with the mind, and Fire with the will, Water is the energetic matrix of feelings and emotions. In the highest frequency, the energy of this Element is sensitivity to life, flowing care, and feeling of belonging.

When distorted, Water becomes codependent, indulgent, or emotionally desensitized. Other qualities of Water include softness, smoothness, coolness, and downward-tending flow.

The sense associated with Water is taste (absorption/ingestion), and sense organ is the mouth and tongue.

Water slows down to become the most dense Element -- **Earth**, which can be perceived by all 5 senses.

Earth (*Prthivī*) is solid form, stability, endurance, density, fragrance, and grounded presence of Spirit. It is the body itself, the bones and muscles, organs and glands. It is the ground beneath the feet from which all growth arises.

Earth consolidates: heavy, steady, fragrant, magnetic—structure, endurance, and germination made tangible. It is static, fixed, dense, solid, hard, inert, gross, cohesive attraction, gravitational, mechanical energy, and downward.

Its shadow is heaviness — stagnation, fear, or submission to control. Yet when aligned, earth anchors the soul, allowing Light to manifest fully in matter.

The sense associated with Earth is smell, and the sense organ is the nose.

The Wicca Model

In Western esoteric and Wiccan traditions, the order of the Elements is as follows: Spirit, Fire, Air, Water, and Earth. In this philosophical view, the Elements are symbolic, magical, archetypal, and psychological.

- Spirit (Aether / Quintessence) – the 5th Element is the unifying and transcendent principle that pervades and harmonizes the other four Elements.
- Fire is linked to willpower, passion, courage, flame of the soul, integrity, and spiritual transformation. The soul's light is seen as prior or higher vibration to the mind's articulation.
- Air is associated with mind, language, perception, wind, perspective, and discrimination.
- Water relates to emotion, intuition, receptivity, memory, healing, and relational depth.
- Earth corresponds to materiality, stability, embodiment, fertility, and practical manifestation.

The Far East Model

The Chinese system of Wu Xing introduces different jargon for the Elements: Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Water. This system differs significantly from both Tantra and Western esotericism because it is not primarily concerned with elemental substances or a metaphysical ladder from subtle to gross. Instead, Wu Xing describes phases, seasons, rhythmic movements, and adaptive, relational processes of embodied life force.

- Wood -- growth, expansion, emergence, direction, and springing life.
- Fire -- radiance, heat, flourishing, joy, and upward expression.
- Earth -- centering, nourishment, integration, receptivity, and fertile support.
- Metal -- refinement, contraction, order, clarity, precision, and letting go.
- Water -- depth, stillness, storage, gestation, adaptability, and hidden power.

The Chinese model is therefore cyclical rather than hierarchical. It shows how forces generate, regulate, balance, express, and transform one another over time.

In Bowspring, the 5 Elements can be understood as living qualities of posture, psycho-emotional energy, and spiritual presence. The body is shaped by emotion; emotion is shaped by perception; perception is shaped by will and meaning; will is shaped by the larger spiritual field in which one lives.

Space is the field of openness and possibility that holds the whole posture. It is the sense of internal volume, spacious awareness, and circumferentially expanding presence. Without Space, the body feels compressed, the mind is narrow, and movement loses freedom. Space is not an abstraction; it is the spiritual structure that allows life to circulate and express itself in embodiment. It surrounds the whole body as the nonlinear geometric field of Spirit.

Air expresses through breath, nervous responsiveness, communication, mental clarity, lightness, and upward or outward movement. Air can be associated with the center of the head and throat as the locus of thought, speech, and signal. It gives quickness to perception and the capacity to articulate what is sensed or known. In posture and movement, Air appears as nervous system awareness and responsiveness.

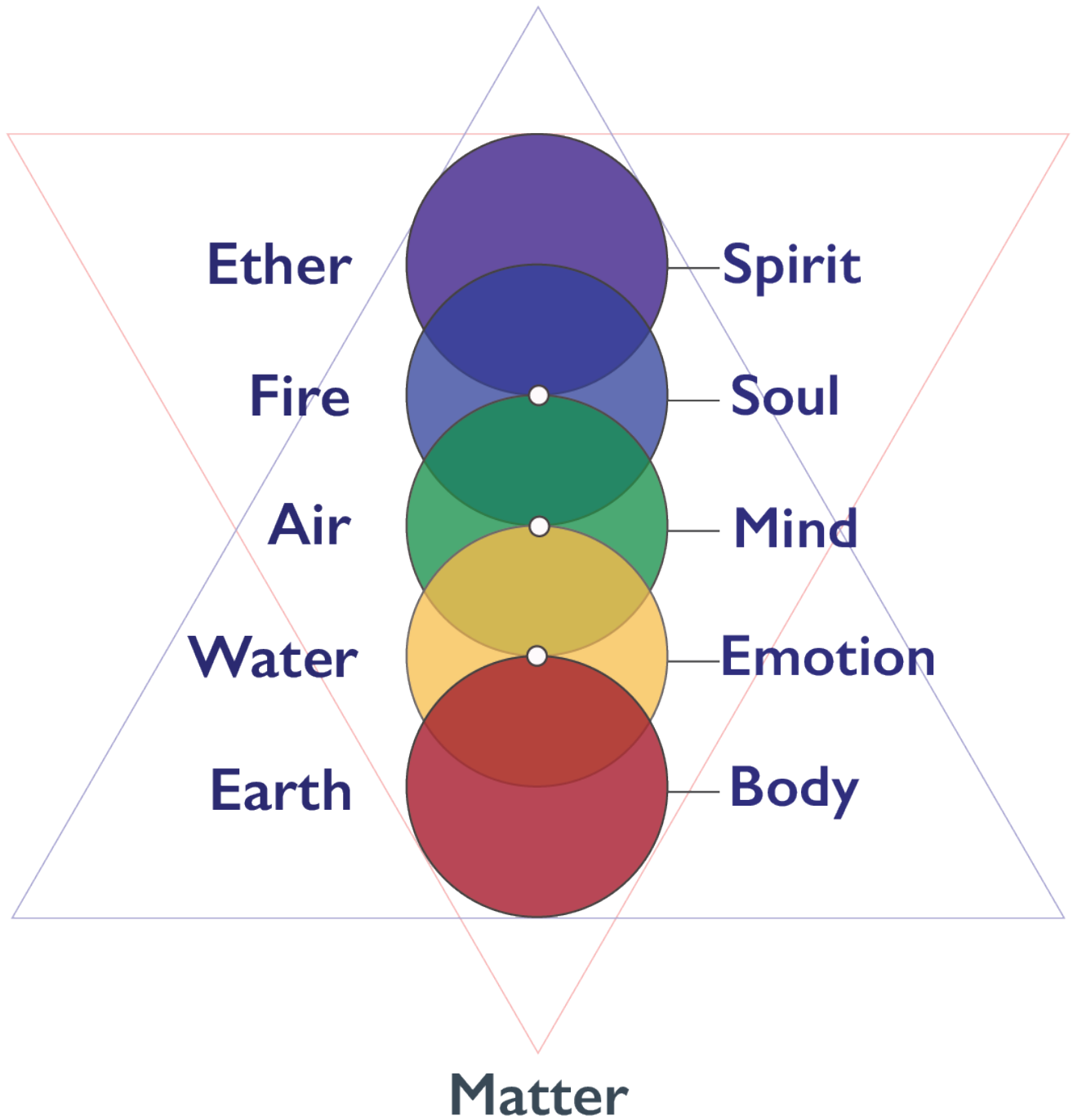
Fire in Bowspring has a double significance. On one hand, it includes the classical digestive and metabolic fire associated with physical power, physiological activation and transformation. On the other hand, and more importantly for this synthesis, it refers to the heart-fire—the soul's light – artistic radiance, courage, integrity, and purposeful intensity. This heart-fire is what energizes action, illumines the mind, and gives dignity to embodiment. Fire is therefore not only heat or effort; it is the living flame of directed consciousness.

Water appears as emotional flow, adaptability, sensuality, receptivity, and the capacity to feel. It is also reflected in the fluid matrix of the body—hydration and lubrication of the tissues and the fascia, and the soft powers of bonding and assimilation of these fluids. In Bowspring, Water helps soften rigidity without collapsing structure. It gives relatedness, empathy, and the ability to yield while remaining alive. Water in harmony allows for the freedom of spiritually infused emotional expression.

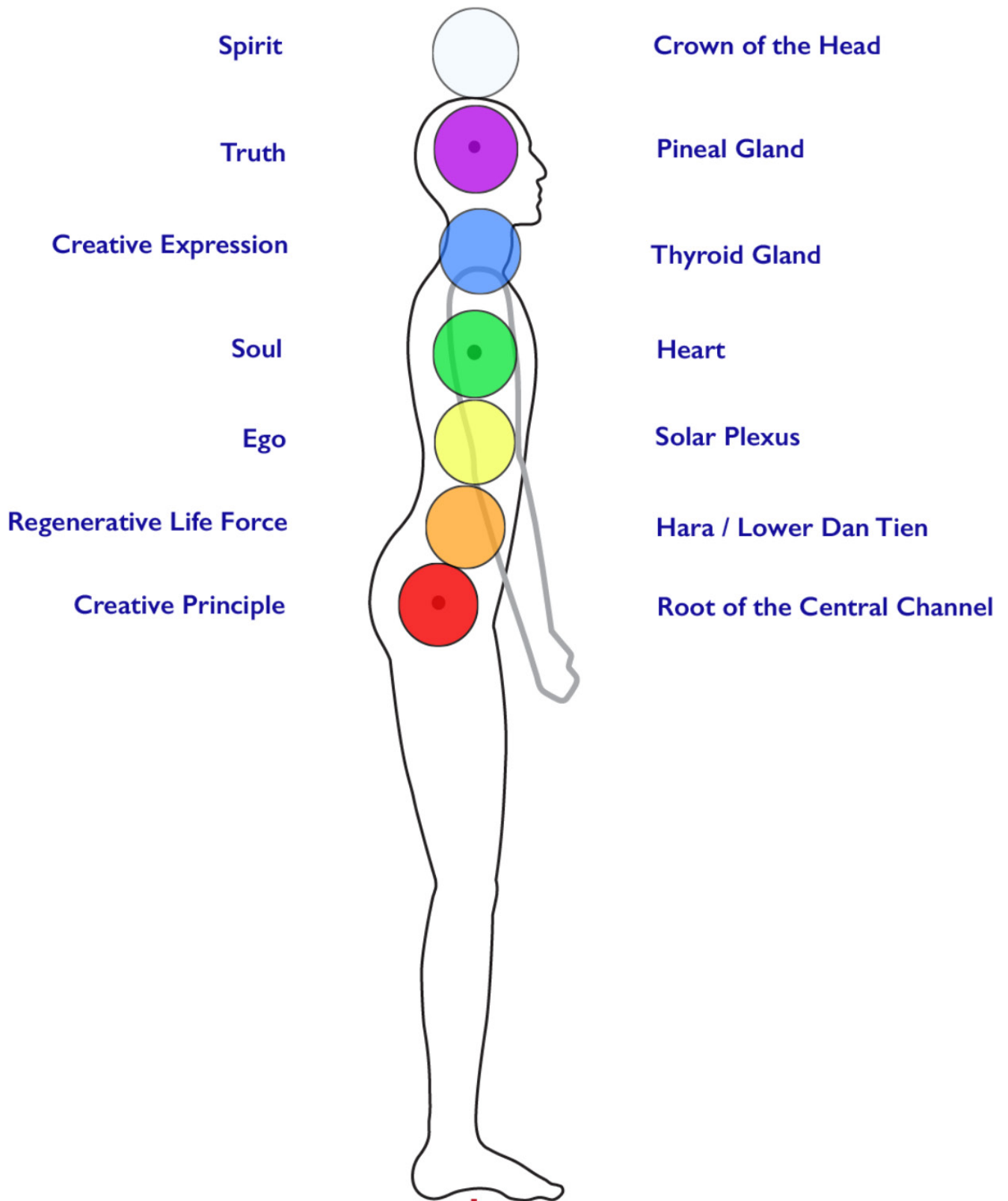
Earth is the power of grounding, building, stabilizing, and enduring. It is expressed in the pelvis, legs, feet, and the structural integrity of the whole body. Earth gives weight, support, rootedness, and dependable form. Without Earth, practice lacks containment. With too much Earth and not enough Space, Air, Fire, and Water, the body becomes dull, rigid, or inert. Earth in harmony is a living steadiness of sacred geometry embodied.

Levels of Nature

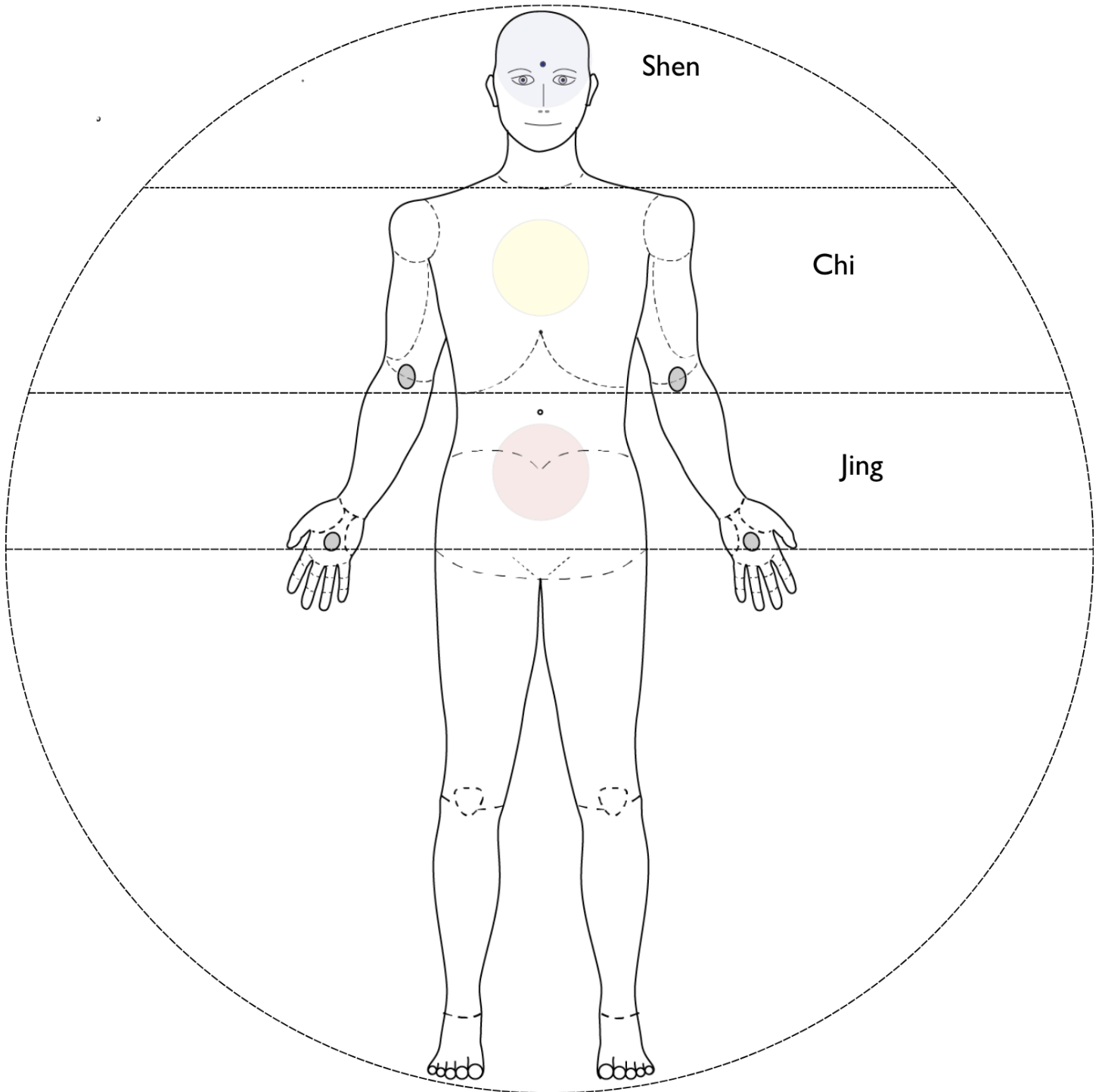
Universal Consciousness



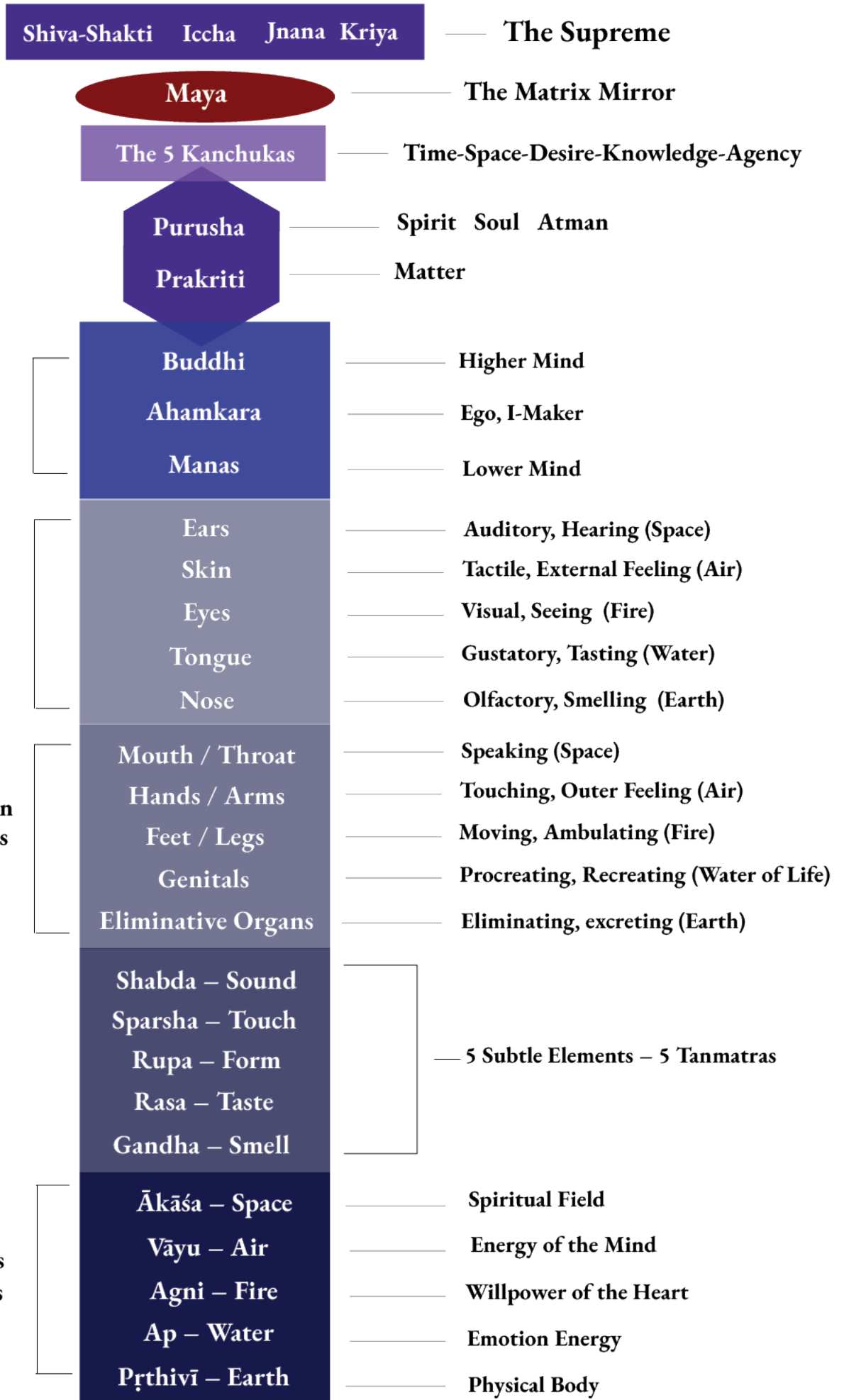
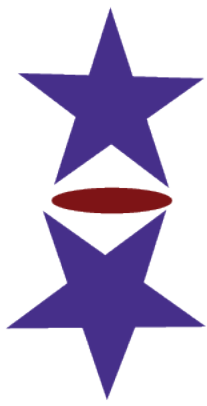
The Seven Energy Centers



The 3 Treasures of Chinese and Japanese Internal Alchemy



The Map of Manifestation – The 36 Tattvas



The Mahabhutas – The 5 Elements

Element	Faculty	Directionality	Virtue	Excess Shadow	Deficiency
Ākāśa Aether Zero-point Field	Spirit Interconnecting Wholeness	All-pervading Non-directional	truthful, full, magnanimous, free and independent, indestructible	Spiritual inflation, delusions of grandeur	Smallness, self-neglect, alienation, nihilism
Vāyu Air Electrical	Mind Communication Exchange	Upward & Outward Swirling quicker	curious, adaptable, imaginative, discerning, intelligent, witty, responsive	anxious, boorishly cynical, hypercritical, hyper-reactive, frivolous	muddled thinking, confusion, lack of imagination, buffoonery, inattentiveness
Agni Fire Thermal	Heart Willpower of Soul's Purpose	Upward & Inward Radiant	courageous, transformational	Angry, malicious, rash, violent, destructive, domineering, combative	Cowardly, lack of will, apathetic
Ap Water Chemical	Emotions Cohesive Bonding	Downward & Outward Flowing waves	Sensitive, humble, kind, nurturing, dissolves boundaries	Obsequious conformity, clingy, co-dependent, addictive	Insensitive, emotional numbness, low self-esteem
Pr̥thivī Earth gravitational	Body Stable Structure	Downward & Inward Slowing -> stillness	Temperant, steadfast	Rigid, stagnant, indulgent in comfort,	Dullness, instability, impatient

The Psycho-Emotional Energies of the 7 Chakras

Chakra	Sattvic	Rajasic	Tamasic
1. Muladhara Pelvic Floor Earth	Trust, grounding, stability, safety, connection to family, self-preservation, nurtured by Mother principle	Overly possessive, clinging, fearful “mothering,” obsession with survival, hoarding	Ungrounded, rootless, victimized, anxious, insecure, “homeless” in body or world
2. Svadhistana Genitals, Hara Water	Flow, sensual pleasure healthy emotional/sexual expression, polarity in relationship, self-enjoyment	Manipulative, controlling, lustful Emperor, indulgent, addictive patterns	Co-dependent, submissive, repressed desires, denial of pleasure
3. Manipura Solar Plexus Fire	Willpower, vitality, self-esteem, confidence, individuality, “Hero” archetype, self-identification	Egotistical, self-absorbed, ambitious, domineering warrior	Low self-worth, hypersensitive servant, martyr, fear of being disliked
4. Anahata Heart Air	Love, compassion, equilibrium, balanced emotions, self-acceptance, open-hearted “Lover”	Overly emotional, sentimental, hatred, poor boundaries, insincere actor	Ruthless, heartless, grief-bound, emotional numbness, inability to feel love
5. Vishuddha Throat, Mouth Aether	Resonance, creativity, truthful communication, harmony between Above and Below, artistic self-expression	Willful, controlling, judgmental, harsh speech, lies, verbal dominance	Fear of speaking, lack of creative expression, blocked faith, silence, withdrawal
6. Ajna Pituitary Light	Vision, wisdom, insight, unity in diversity, self-reflection, clear perception, “Seer/Channel”	Over-intellectual, hyper-analytical, cold rationalism	Illusion, delusion, unclear thought, fantasy, lack of discernment
7. Sahasrara Crown Nada–Bindu	Bliss, grace, universal connection, self-knowledge, Master/Sage archetype, pure consciousness	Cult leader, spiritual ego, power-hungry guru, attachment to authority	Disconnected from spirit, nihilism, lack of inspiration, spiritual emptiness

Divine Feminine & Divine Masculine

	Earth	Water	Air	Fire
	Feminine Static	Feminine Dynamic	Masculine Static	Masculine Dynamic
	Yin – Yin	Yin – Yang	Yang – Yin	Yang – Yang
Balanced Qualities of Nature	The dark, moist, fecund body of Life, nurturing womb, fertile matrix, undifferentiated space, ground of being, steady, quiet, receptive, reflective, feeling, sensitive, vulnerable	The mysterious power of creative imagination, heart-oriented, love, transformative, magickal, playful, novel, non-rational, altered state of consciousness, intuitive, inspirational artist	Strong, hard, rational, logical structured, systematic orderly behavior, organized hierarchy, discerning, judging, protective, defensive	The bright, active, initiatory force of Life, ambitious, assertive, goal-oriented, penetrating, catalytic, offensive, expansive, linear thinker, analytical
Excessive +	Immovable Inertia smothering devouring	chaotic, wild licentious hysterical crazy, insane	rigidity of mind dogmatic cold-hearted judgmental	aggressive violent, destructive hubristic overly ambitious despotic
Deficient –	lack of nurture lack of comfort low vitality infertile	mechanical automaton groupthink boring, unimaginative	lack of structure irrational lack of discernment	lazy, apathetic fearful, cowardice catatonic