

YOGATM

MAGAZINE

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GROUND • CENTRE • STRENGTHEN

ISSUE 281 / OCTOBER 2026

3 LIFE
CHANGING
QUESTION

**YOGIC
ENERGY BODY**

5 *dharma*
ARCHETYPES

**YOGA BY
DOSHA**



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Has Yoga jumped the Shark?



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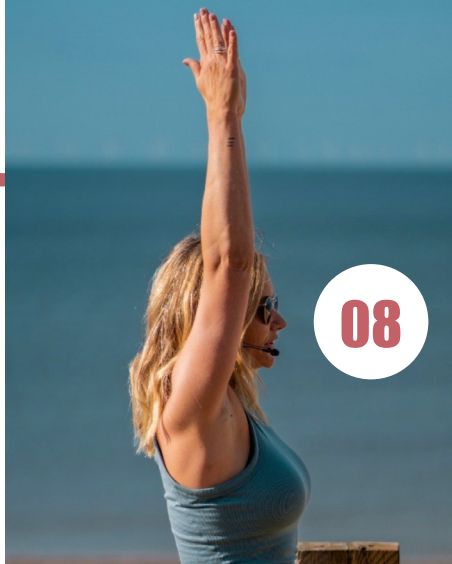


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THE ENERGY BODY

YOGA BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND EXPERIENCE

Featuring: Swami Saradananda
& Dr Marleen Thaler

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Yoga has always spoken of an “energy body” – a subtle, invisible framework said to run alongside the physical body. It includes *prāṇa* (a life force, linked to breath), *nāḍīs* (channels through which energy flows) and *chakras* (energy centres). These ideas have shaped how yoga is taught and practised for millennia, yet they sit uneasily alongside modern science’s demand for objective, measurable data.

On Saturday 31 October, the British Wheel of Yoga and SOAS University of London are hosting a Yoga Summit that brings this tension into focus with a debate asking what the energy body is and whether it can actually be measured.

Yoga developed long before modern science existed. Its maps of the subtle body guided practitioners’ inner experience centuries before anyone could track breath, heart rate or brain activity. Today, scientific studies are beginning to corroborate some of yoga’s claims about stress regulation, mood and physiological change. But the lived experience of *prāṇa* and the chakras is harder to quantify.

Two speakers at the Summit represent two different ways of approaching this question. Swami Saradananda, a well-known yoga and meditation teacher, draws on decades of personal practice. Dr Marleen Thaler, a historian of religion at the University of Graz, draws on historical texts and academic research. Together, their positions frame the debate: is the energy body something you come to know through direct experience, or something best understood by studying its history and how ideas about it have changed over time?

A voice for embodied experience: Swami Saradananda

For Swami Saradananda, the energy body is not an abstract concept but



a lived reality that unfolds through decades of practice. She frames the tension between yoga’s subtle-body models and the methods of modern science in her own words. “Scientific research relies on a systematic and logical process of collecting and interpreting data. It strives to be objective in its analysis of measurable data.

“As *prāṇa* is not a physical thing, I don’t know how it can be measured or interpreted objectively. This means that medical and academic researchers must rely, to a great extent, on the reported experience of yoga practitioners – and everyone’s experience of life is different. Even the words people use to express their experience mean different things to different people.

“Having practised yoga for about 60 years, I find that when I try to explain my experience to a medical doctor, he or she usually becomes impatient and tends to dismiss my perceptions of the world and of my own body and mind.

“As a yoga practitioner, I find it helpful to spend time observing my breath and noticing its qualities as I inhale, exhale and sometimes retain my breath. My observations have made me aware that my physical breath is moved by an

energy that comes from a more subtle layer of my being. This is the layer, or sheath, that is referred to in traditional yoga texts as the *prāṇamaya kosha*. It contains the energy flow, i.e. the *prāṇa*, but also the *nāḍīs* and chakras. This is the layer of the astral or subtle body that is closest to and moves the physical body.

“My teacher used to say ‘be a yoga teacher, not a preacher’. What he meant was that we shouldn’t simply hear or read something and then teach it. I have tried to experience the teachings within my own body and mind.

“Feeling this movement of energy can be difficult, which is why we start moving the physical body. In all traditional yoga lineages, the physical practice of yoga is designed to affect the flow of *prāṇa* within the energy body. I often tell students that practising an asana session is much like giving yourself a shiatsu treatment. While doing asanas, we put pressure on various points, hoping to break up existing blockages and strengthen the flow of *prāṇa* within the *nāḍīs*.

“When I first began teaching meditation, the course curriculum encouraged students to choose one of the higher chakras as a focus for concentration. Those who saw

themselves as more intellectual in nature were guided to use *ajñā* chakra, the energy centre between the eyebrows commonly known as the 'third eye'. Those who felt themselves to be more emotional were encouraged to focus on the heart centre. Although the other chakras were introduced in classes on the subtle body, we rarely used them as focal points for meditation.

"Over time, I noticed that concentrating only on the higher chakras in meditation could leave people feeling more 'airy' and 'in their heads'. This led me to explore meditations on all the chakras, particularly the lower ones, for their grounding effect.

"I found chakra meditations to be simple, yet powerful techniques for developing inner poise and keeping my life in balance. They proved to be most helpful when reinforced by regular self-analysis and bolstered by positive activities.

"I think an appreciation of the energy body leads to an awareness that physical and mental wellbeing are not the goal; good health is the by-product of yoga practice. Although it is important to be healthy, the goal of yoga is actually much greater. It is 'the peace that passes all understanding', as expressed in the famous Biblical verse (Philippians 4:7)."

For Swamiji, the energy body can only be known through sustained practice and self-observation. She doesn't look for proof in a textbook or under a microscope. Instead, she finds it on the mat, in the breath, and in the subtle shifts of awareness that practitioners learn to notice over time.

The evidence base: Dr Marleen Thaler

Dr Marleen Thaler approaches the question differently. As a historian of religion, she isn't trying to prove

or disprove whether the energy body exists. Instead, she studies how people have described and understood it across different cultures and periods of history, using texts, artefacts and written accounts of experience.

"The subtle body is a religious idea that has persisted across religious and philosophical traditions throughout history.

"Despite the complexity and diversity of such ideas, we can summarise the subtle body as a concept encompassing the "quasi-material" and "quasi-immaterial" strata of human embodiment. In other words, the subtle body describes body-like layers and their components, such as centres or channels, that remain hidden from our five senses.

"However, one may wonder: how can ideas that concern the body's intangible dimensions be incorporated into academic discourse? Unlike the embodied experience of practitioners, as a scholar, I rely on primary sources – including texts, scriptures and, when looking at the more recent history of the subtle body, experience reports – for the analysis and description of subtle-body models.

"Using these materials, scholars aim to illuminate how practitioners across different cultural contexts perceive and experience the subtle body, and how these perceptions have changed over time. Accordingly, as a historian of religion, I am less concerned with whether we in fact possess a subtle body and how it might be experienced than with the historical development of such ideas, and the cultural and socio-political conditions under which they emerge.





“Let us take a brief look at the history of subtle-body models, with special emphasis on South Asia, which is most relevant to discussions of the energy body at this year’s SOAS BWY Summit.

“The earliest ideas concerning subtle anatomy and physiology trace back to South and East Asia. In China, archaeological discoveries from the Mawangdui tombs (c. 2nd century BCE) yielded early manuscripts and images. These artefacts focused on biomedical and sexual practices, including descriptions of subtle channels and the circulation of substances. In South Asia, the Vedic Upaniṣads (c. 8th-5th BCE) contain minor references to subtle-body concepts, but elaborate theories and practices crystallised only in medieval Hindu and Buddhist tantric corpora (c. 7th-10th CE). Tantric texts from this period provide a detailed depiction of the subtle body and the composition of its elements.

“Broadly speaking, they suggest that the subtle body comprises channels, centres, and circulating subtle substances (endogenous winds and vital forces), among other components. The number of the

channels (*nāḍīs*) varies by tradition. While some earlier sources suggest approximately seventy-two thousand channels, later tantric sources mention only three: *suṣumnā*, *iḍā*, and *pingalā*. These three maintained a key role in subsequent subtle-body conceptions. Along the central axis of the yogic body, there are specific centres, often visualised as wheels (*cakra*), knots (*granthi*), or lotuses (*padma*). As with the *nāḍīs*, there is no consensus on the number of the centres. However, six- and seven-cakra systems prevailed for some time and continue to play key roles in yoga practices today.

“The question of what circulates through the channels and nodes likewise varies. Most commonly, it is a set of five or ten winds (*vāyus*) that move in habitual locations and directions. The most important of these winds is *prāṇa*. Through yogic practices, practitioners seek to manipulate these winds by altering their direction, position, or even suspending them.

“A special case of these endeavours relates to another component of the subtle body: the energy notion of *kuṇḍalinī*. In South Asian texts, *kuṇḍalinī* is described as a vital component of the subtle body, depicted symbolically as a dormant serpent lying coiled at the entrance of the central channel (*suṣumnā*). Yogic practices, including visualisation, breath restraint, and mantras, may trigger its awakening. In my lecture at the 2026 SOAS BWY Summit, I will explore how *kuṇḍalinī* has evolved in modern times and examine potential physical and psychological challenges practitioners may encounter.”

For Marleen, the value of the energy body lies not in whether it can be measured, but in what the idea has meant to people across time. She’s interested in how these models have shaped identities, practices and worldviews in different cultures.



Join the discussion

Swami Saradananda and Dr Marleen Thaler will share their views on the energy body through practices and talks at the SOAS BWY Summit on **Saturday 31 October from 9am to 5.30pm.** They join a line-up of leading yoga scholars and practitioners from around the world, exploring how yoga's subtle dimensions continue to shape both scholarship and practice.

Find out more and to book:

https://portal.bwy.org.uk/user/events/1135?utm_source=yoga-magazine&utm_medium=print&utm_campaign=soas2026

Swami Saradananda is an internationally renowned yoga mentor and author of the titles: *Chakra Meditation*, *The Essential Guide to Chakras*, *The Power of Breath*, *Mudras for Modern Life*, *The Cleansing Power of Yoga* and *Sitting Comfortably: preparing the mind and body for peaceful meditation*. Alongside teaching and writing, she has undertaken extensive personal practice in the Himalayas and holds an MA in Traditions of Yoga and Meditation from SOAS. Contact her via her website: <https://yogamentor.yoga> or Instagram @yoga_mentor.



Dr Marleen Thaler is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Graz and fellow at the University of Vienna, with a PhD in Religious Studies (2024). Her research spans modern yoga history, religion and technology, religious traditionalism and the history of esotericism. She is author of the forthcoming *Albion's Sage for the New Age* (Equinox, 2026) and co-editor of *Subtle Energies in Therapy, Spirituality, Arts, and Politics* (Brill, 2025). Find out more: [Marleen Thaler - Karl-Franzens-University of Graz](#)





SOAS & British Wheel of Yoga
YOGA SUMMIT 2026

THE ENERGY BODY:

yoga between evidence and experience



Internationally renowned yoga experts and practitioners explore yoga's hidden frameworks and answer the question:

Can the yoga experience be measured?

Featuring: Professor Shaman Hatley, Dr Marleen Thaler, Dr Ruth Westoby, Dr Magdalena Kraler, Dr Marissa Clarke, Swami Saradananda and British Wheel of Yoga tutor Sarah O'Connor.

SATURDAY 31
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9AM - 5.30 PM

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