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The Chakras: An ancient model

The chakra system arose in India several thousand years ago. In it, there are 7 basic drives, or motivations, or levels of identity. They are:

1. Security, the Will to Live

2. Sexual desire and other basic pleasures, including a desire for comfort

3. Power, Fame, Wealth

4. Love, connection to others, meaningful relationships, service to others

5. Speaking and acting from a level beyond the purely personal; creativity that includes an awareness of a picture larger than the narrow view of the self-centered ego

6. Wisdom, insight, intuition, deep understanding, seeing the truth, knowing Reality

7. Union with, loving wholeheartedly, or merging into something greater, resulting in profound joy, bliss, enlightenment, salvation

Thousands of descriptions of the chakra system have been elucidated through the millennia. Below is a brief outline of one way to think about the 7 levels, written from a modern, western point of view. Such a summary cannot begin to capture this complex system, but it can serve to convey that we humans have several levels of awareness, several ways of understanding who we are that have been with us for thousands of years.

The fact that this system has been used and adapted so many times for so long suggests that it captures an underlying truth about human beings. Having read and studied several different models over many years, the following is my contribution for how to use this system in the 21st century to understand ourselves.

Each chakra has a location in the body, sometimes considered symbolic, sometimes literal:

1. The Base of the Spine

In this system there is an energy, the kundalini, that, at the beginning, lies dormant at the base of the spine. This is the 1st chakra location, and life energy is concentrated here when life begins. At this first level, the primary motivation is for security—to take care of one's basic needs for food, shelter, comfort, and conveniences. The 1st chakra is where we are closest to the earth, so it is where we

are most grounded. As this energy awakens, it becomes the basic drive to survive, to do whatever it takes to stay alive. The associated emotions that lead to action are often fear, greed, or a fixation on being comfortable—or avoiding discomfort. There is often fear of getting sick, losing what one has, or of having an accident.

Fearful thoughts that arise at this level might be:

* I will I run out of money, become a bag lady, have nothing to live on in my old age

* What if I lose my job, my property value is destroyed, the economy collapses, or I lose all my savings

* I can see everyone is out only for themselves, so everyone I deal with is trying to cheat me, trying to get all they can from me

People severely wounded by early deprivations, or those who suffered through a very difficult time like the great depression, can become stuck here—always afraid they will lose everything, even if they are wealthy. When someone dies and it is discovered they had a lot of money hidden away, perhaps even in the mattress, it is a sign they were stuck in the 1st chakra.

It must be understood, though, that to begin to move into life in a healthy way, each individual needs in some way to take care of the issues centered in this chakra—one has to deal with security issues in order to move into adulthood in a functional way. Those not stuck in this chakra can deal with security issues in a straightforward, matter-of-fact way, taking care of their basic needs without being overly fearful or obsessed by them. They have learned to live without spending too much time and attention focused on security, or obsessively worrying about it.

The branch of western psychology that focuses mostly on this chakra is behaviorism.

2. Below the Navel

When the kundalini energy begins to rise, it moves up through the genital area, and sexual energy is aroused, along with all kinds of desires for immediate pleasure and gratification. The first stirrings of the desire for procreation emerge. This happens very naturally as we move into our pre-teen and teenage years, as our hormones start flowing. There arises a desire, sometimes very strong, for sex. Not love, but sex. Just pay attention to animals in heat to see the most basic level of this energy at play. A person in thrall to this urge wants another person to satisfy this craving, with very little concern for what is best for the other person. The 2nd chakra has little to do with real love, although it is often characterized as young love, and sometimes even confused with true romantic love.

When this energy first awakens in us, it is easy to be taken over by it, to begin to organize one's whole life around it. This can be a positive thing, this first blossoming of young desire, the beauty and the innocence of it, for it is often the force that propels a teenager out into the wider world, beyond the family. But although the object of this love seems to be another person, this is usually a very self-centered experience. When you are motivated by the 2nd chakra, you mostly notice others because they are a potential object of sexual or relational fulfillment. When you go into a room, all your attention is drawn to the person that attracts your sexual focus, or someone who might fulfill your urge to have a romantic partner—and you hardly register anyone who doesn't turn you on in one of these ways.

The western psychology that has focused on this chakra is Freudian psychology, with Freud himself saying sexual energies provide the primary life force. It can manifest as action in the world to gain attention, as creativity to win admiration. Freud went so far as to suggest that religion and culture are sublimated expressions of this energy.

3. The Solar Plexus

The 3rd chakra represents the drive to power, both in the positive and negative sense. It has to do with establishing your place in the world. In the positive sense, it is the desire to take charge of your own life and to use power for something worthwhile. But this energy often boils over into a desire to dominate others, to be king of the hill or the queen bee, to be able to force others to do what you want.

This energy has driven some famous figures to try to rule the world, or at least their corner of it. And this drive is at the heart of the struggle in many families over who will be in charge, who will exercise control. This is the energy of all those who ruthlessly try to get their own way—by physical force or by emotional or psychological manipulation.

Being fixated on the 3rd chakra destroys kindness, compassion, human warmth, and love. It fosters deceit, ruthlessness, and the tendency to use fear to manipulate others. A person driven by the 3rd chakra can hurt a lot of people by trying to get and keep power, causing conflicts of all kinds—psychological as well as physical. Many unnecessary wars have been fought as a result of this drive.

Still, it is important to recognize the positive aspects of this energy, which have to do with taking control of your own life. Here lies the drive to gain personal freedom, control one's own destiny, become your own person, rather than looking to someone else to make decisions or solve problems for you. To master the 3rd chakra is to develop confidence, self-motivation, and self-assurance. It is to feel you can affect

your own life, your world, and your destiny (a feeling that is essential before you will make an effort to try).

The western psychology that has had a special focus on this chakra is that of Alfred Adler and his followers. Earlier, western thought and history were deeply impacted by the writings of the philosopher Frederick Nietzsche, whose primary focus was on "The Will to Power."

The Balance Point, The Place of Turning

The first 3 levels are sometimes considered bad, or the "ego," when thinking of the ego in a negative way: "He is so egotistic." "She is so self-centered." But these first 3 levels are best understood as natural parts of us that need to be dealt with in a healthy way, and integrated into a healthy, whole self. Simultaneously, it is crucial to realize that there is much more to life than simply fulfilling the first 3 chakra urges and desires. But when the kundalini energy is concentrated in these chakras, one's focus is inevitably on these basic urges and desires.

There is nothing wrong with this—in one's early life. A lot of growing up is about learning to live in a healthy way with these energies, and anyone who doesn't learn to deal with these issues, either by getting their needs met or by letting them go in a skillful way, will see their lives dominated by the first 3 chakras throughout adulthood. Their focus will be solely on getting what they want, without regard for others. In fact, others will just be objects to them, useful for fulfilling their basic urges and desires.

4. The Heart

At the 4th chakra, however, something profound begins to happen. At the heart chakra we begin to expand our focus beyond the purely self-centered self; we begin to recognize the reality of other people as truly "other" and begin to learn to care about their needs and concerns as separate from our own. This is the place a person begins to shift focus from seeing everything as being primarily about "me" into a growing awareness of and concern for "we."

Of course, much of the motivation at the heart level can still be about "me," about doing for others to get from them something that you want for yourself. But if you can begin to authentically expand into the heart chakra, something begins to open, and you can begin to feel true care and concern for other people—as they are in themselves. This is the necessary first step for getting outside the purely self-centered ego.

One way to think about the heart chakra is that it has two tiers. At the first level, we experience care and concern for another, but the motivation is mostly about ourselves. We feel we are madly in love with someone, without recognizing that we

are still caught in getting something we want: sex, someone to make us feel accepted and valued, someone to take care of us. If, however, our feelings for another begin to deepen, we might find that we are beginning to truly think about what they want and need, and we might even begin to feel we would be willing to sacrifice something we want if it would make that person feel happy, or safe, or cared for. This is the turning of the heart from the self-centeredness that characterizes the first 3 chakras toward true love, which is the sign of the emergence of the higher tier of the heart chakra.

If these feelings of real love continue to grow, some people then turn their attention to the sufferings and needs of the wider world, becoming involved in service projects or organizations that help others. Some might simply help a person who crosses their path, because they recognize that other person needs help. Of course, many people begin service projects because they think doing so will bring recognition, or that it will make them feel good about themselves. But somewhere along the way, if you begin to focus more and more on those you are serving—taking in and feeling their cares, needs, and concerns—you will be moving into the second tier of the heart chakra.

Several branches of western psychology have emerged in the past decades that focus attention on this chakra, such as those of Carl Jung and Viktor Frankl. Others who have followed in their footsteps are Abraham Maslow, Erich Fromm, Carl Rogers, and numerous figures in the positive psychology movement.

5. The Throat

The 5th chakra starts to open when we begin to become more aware of the larger picture in which we exist, as we begin to develop an understanding that our ego self is not the center of world—nor should it be. Then, we can begin to develop true discrimination about our own motives, which allows us to better understand and speak from our own inner truth, to speak clearly and purely. (Until we have opened into this chakra, we will be constantly deluding ourselves about who we are and what our motives are, so it is impossible to speak purely, even if we want to.) As we enter the 5th level, however, we are more able to see clearly and therefore give clear and honest expression to deep currents of thought and feeling within us (to give them voice—this is the throat chakra, after all).

As we open further into this chakra, we move into a rich, deep relationship with our own true self, as well as with the truth of others, as well as with the larger mystery. In fact, we begin to see that all three are intimately connected, when our understanding of who we think we are expands beyond the self-centered self.

It is common that those who experience this larger perspective (even for a moment) feel an urge to express what they are experiencing. Many who speak, write,

or create from this place are able to tap into profound currents of thought and feeling that touch others deeply. Most great art comes from individuals who have accessed the 5th chakra and are able to create images, write, or speak from this experience of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. We also begin to recognize that we are all connected in some way, which allows us to tap into and express deep springs of love and compassion.

Of course, the throat is the place where air moves into and out of the rest of the body, the place through which breath comes and goes continually. At the symbolic level, then, this is the place at which we open to both giving and receiving, taking in from other people, and giving to them as well, learning to interact with others in a life-supporting and life-sustaining way.

Those who have begun to open into the 5th chakra, however, are seldom beyond connection to and concern for their ego selves. Rather, their lives involve a dynamic tension in which they have one foot in the higher stages of the path, and one still in the lower. This, in fact, is exactly why those who have touched something greater than their small egos—but have not left them completely behind—can speak and create in a way that touches the rest of us. Great speakers, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., when delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech, and Lincoln at Gettysburg were communicating thoughts and feelings from a higher plane. The same has been true of many, many other great religious, spiritual, and political speakers, writers, poets, and artists of all kinds through the ages. They were giving expression to higher values and meanings in a way that the rest of us can grasp, if we will open to receiving their visions.

Importantly, such moments can happen to any one of us as we go through our lives—any time we see a broader perspective, beyond our own narrow self-interest, and are able to speak or act or create from that glimpse beyond our small ego perspective. Countless teachers, counselors, spiritual guides, and grandparents have done this through the ages—have been able to share wise words and loving counsel with those who needed help and guidance. Most crucial of all, perhaps, is to recognize that you and I can do this too, if we will just get our small selves out of the way for a moment.

The modern western psychologist who pioneered the exploration of the higher levels was William James.

6. The Third Eye

Chakra 6 is located midway between the eyebrows. As the kundalini energy rises to this level, we begin to see the deepest truths; this is the level of deep intuition, the place at which we "know" beyond the intellectual mind, the stage where

we “see” in a completely different way. In other words, this chakra involves seeing with the eye of wisdom, rather than the physical eyes. Throughout history there have been those who came to a place of great wisdom, those who seemed to see far beyond what most people could see. Interestingly, a significant number were physically blind, leading to the adage, “only the blind can truly see.”

This is the level of the “seer” Teiresias in the Odyssey. Ancient Greeks had many seers, none greater than the Pythia at Delphi. There are also many prophets and seers in the Hebrew Bible such as Samuel, Elijah, and Amos. This level of seeing is also reported in the story of the Buddha’s awakening, when he recounted later that he “saw,” during his night under the bodhi tree, all his past lives (and much more). Many Buddhist masters and teachers have been described as having this ability to “see,” as have many Christian mystics, Hindu holy men and women, Jewish mystics (such as the Hasidic Jewish Rebbe in 19th century Poland known as the "Seer of Lublin”), Taoist masters, and Sufi teachers. Jesus had many moments of “seeing” what was in peoples’ hearts, as well as what he himself was called to do. Joan of Arc had a vision that changed the history of France, and the scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg had visions that had a dramatic impact on many important people in the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries including William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Abraham Lincoln, Immanuel Kant, Helen Keller, and Zen Buddhist scholar D. T. Suzuki. History has, in fact, been filled with influential people who responded to visions, and there have been many “seers” in modern America, such as Edgar Cayce.

It is also important to recognize that many scientific and intellectual breakthroughs have come from visions or deep intuitions beyond the rational mind, as reported by the visionaries themselves (Einstein, Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, Niels Bohr, Nikola Tesla, August Kekule von Stradonitz, and Jules Henri Poincare, to name of few). And, of course, much great art has been inspired at this level, when artists “saw” and were able to capture what they had seen in their art, expressing a vision experienced at the 6th chakra. This is exactly the reason their art has had such a great impact—they saw a vision of something beyond the veil and were able to give us a glimpse of what they had seen. (In a sense, great artists and scientists are taking what they have seen at the 6th chakra level and giving it expression through skills developed at the 5th chakra.)

There are many more names that could be given as examples of famous people accessing the 6th chakra, but it is equally important to emphasize the experience of the many individuals who were not historic figures, normal people like you and me, who have had moments when they caught a glimpse of the larger picture in which we all exist. Sometimes were able to see the role they were called to play to fulfill that vision.

The psychologists William James**,** Carl Jung, and Roberto Assagioli explored this dimension, especially in their later years, and a growing number are doing so today.

7. The Crown of the Head

The 7th chakra is at the very top of the head. This is where many spiritual traditions say we merge with that which is greater than our individual self. Some systems think of it as slightly above the crown, and others understand it as being located at the "soft spot" that is the last part of the skull to grow hard as we mature. Symbolically, at the 7th chakra we no longer identify with the physical body, with our personal emotions, or with any role we have in the world. At this place we merge into or become one with the All, the Absolute, the Infinite, the Tao, God. When Jesus said, "I and the Father are One,"[1] he was speaking from this identity. When the great English mystic Julian of Norwich said, "See! I am God; See! I am in all things; See! I do all things,"[2] she was speaking from this stage of realization. The same is true for Saint Catherine of Genoa when she said, "my me is God…my being is God, not by simple participation, but by a true transformation of my Being."[3] The German mystic and teacher Meister Eckhart had his identity centered in the 7th chakra when he said, "The eye wherein I see God is the same eye wherein God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love."[4]

Switching traditions, when the Buddha was asked why he seemed so totally different from everyone else, he replied, "I am awake." He had awakened to the highest identity, was resting in the 7th chakra. The 20th century Indian sage Ramana Maharshi, when close to death, was implored by his followers, "Don't leave us." He replied, "I am not going away. Where would I go?[5] With those words he was conveying that he was dwelling in the highest chakra, which, as the Buddha said, is "deathless." If you have completely ceased to identify with your body, your instinctual urges and desires, your ego goals and images, your emotions, and all your concepts and thoughts, nothing you identify with is left to die. You have ascended to the 7th chakra and are resting there.

Through the long history of the chakra tradition, the message has always been that to reach the 7th chakra and be able to dwell there permanently is the ultimate goal of life. Very few people, however, are able to do this. But many can have an experience of this level. And to have even a momentary experience can permanently change a person's life. Such moments create new ways of seeing and understanding oneself, others, and the world. To have such an experience usually makes one kinder, more loving, more compassionate.

Such was the case with the head of the Canadian Psychiatric Association, R. M. Bucke, who reported a moment in which he saw "that the universe is not composed of

dead matter, but is, on the contrary, a living Presence." He said that he saw "the foundation principle of the world, of all the worlds, is what we call love." Continuing, he said, "The vision lasted a few seconds and was gone,"[6] but this moment was so powerful that it brought about a great change in his life.

The memory of it, and the sense of the reality of what it taught has remained for the quarter of a century which has since elapsed. I knew that what the vision showed was true. I had attained to a point of view from which I saw that it must be true. That view, that conviction, I may say that consciousness, has never, even during periods of the deepest depression, been lost.

I have read thousands of accounts of such experiences, in many cultures and various times, right through into our world today. This is one given a few years ago by Allan Smith, a 38-year-old scientist living in Oakland, California:

> There was no separation between myself and the rest of the universe. In fact, to say that there was a universe, a self, or any 'thing" would be misleading … there was neither 'subject' nor 'object.' All words and discursive thinking had stopped, and there was no sense of an 'observer' to categorize what was 'happening.' In fact, there were no discrete events to 'happen,' just a timeless, unitary state of being.[7]

Of Crucial Importance

The above brief summary in no way captures the richness and complexity of the chakra tradition. Millions of people have spent their lives trying to understand it. More importantly, millions have used it to move up through the levels, trying to live into its highest dimensions. Even today, all over the world, a significant number among us have recognized the possibility and felt the call, the inner pull to awaken to the higher dimensions the chakra system, and all the world's wisdom traditions, say is possible for us.

Each of the wisdom traditions also has provided various methods for doing this, and each has said that any one of us can shift our identity to higher levels, move up through the stages the system describes, until we have opened fully and allowed the highest level to come alive in us.

The great wisdom traditions have different ways of talking about this journey, and define the levels in different ways. Crucially, however, all share these three fundamental points: 1) we each are made up of several levels of consciousness, or awareness, or identity, whether we have recognized this or not; 2) the most important aspect of life's journey involves moving our identity—who we think we are—up from the lower levels to the higher ones and 3) complete fulfillment only comes when our

identity has come to rest at the highest level, whether this be called reaching the 7th chakra, awakening, merging with the Divine, discovering and becoming one with Buddha-nature, moving into complete harmony with the Tao, or loving God with all one's heart, soul, and might.

The message of all the wisdom traditions, then, is that by doing all we can to move into the highest levels of our being, each of us has the capacity to become one with Being itself, the single most important goal of life.

[1] John 10:30 (English Standard version of the *Bible*).

[2] Stephen Mitchell, ed., *The Enlightened Mind: An Anthology of Sacred Prose* (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), 127.

[3] Baron Friedrich von Hugel, *The Mystical Element of Religion as Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (New York, New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1909), 265.

[4] Franz Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. de B. Evans, (London, United Kingdom: John M. Watkins, 1924), 240, Sermon XCVI Riddance.

[5] Arthur Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and The Path of Self-Knowledge: A Biography* (San Rafael, California: Sophia Perennis, 2006), 151.

[6] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature: Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902* (New York, New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1920), 399. James says that his quotation follows the privately printed pamphlet which preceded Dr. Bucke's larger work and differs verbally a little from the text of the latter: Richard Maurice Bucke, ed., *Cosmic Consciousness: A Study in the Evolution of the Human Mind* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Innes & Sons, 1901).

[7] Charles T. Tart, Ph.D., *The End of Materialism: How Evidence of the Paranormal is Bringing Science and Spirit Together* (Oakland, California: New Harbinger Publications and Noetic Books, 2009), 333.