

Introduction to the *Chakras*

How to use what we know of the Subtle Body

I. Introduction:

Understanding yoga philosophy and engaging in its practices can help us create a life of success – a life well lived. Through an understanding of yoga’s rich history we learn rules for how to live with each other in this crowded world, even in the face of stress.

By practicing meditation, reciting *Mantra*, doing yoga poses (*Asana*), or otherwise engaging in activities that allow us to slow down each day, we learn how to get in touch with our dreams. We find our personal strengths, those gifts and talents uniquely packaged as us. We recognize how we can contribute these gifts to society and find engaging activities through which we express ourselves. We become the kind of person that others wish to spend time with, while at the same time become far more discerning in whom we wish to invest our time.

Over the last few weeks we’ve learned quite a bit about our inner selves. We’ve learned a bit about how our mind works, sometimes hijacking us into making choices that don’t serve us very well, and other times reminding us of our particular greatness and our potential. We’ve seen how we gather information, create memories, and make the choices that create our lives. We’ve discussed the structures of the subtle body.

Tonight we continue the process by discussing the *Chakras*.

II. Why Do We Study the *Chakras*?

The *Chakras* are focal points for directing our attention, our mindfulness. By understanding the energy of the *Chakras* and what each represents, we can use this knowledge to help clear up patterns of thought and behavior that get in our way and prevent us from making the choices upon which a rich, full life can be built. Tonight we discuss two reasons pertinent to our task of creating a life well lived.

First, the *Chakras* present a philosophical map that correlates with the various states of psychological growth we experience on the way to creating our life. Specifically, the *Chakras* map energies relating to sexuality, power, love, and communication. The *Chakra* system can thus be used to identify and heal particular psychological issues that blocks us from the type of life we seek.¹

Second, we study the *Chakras* for spiritual transformation, whatever that means to us. Perhaps it means a mystical connection to God or perhaps it involves a desire to

¹ See, generally, Judith, Anodea (2004 ed.). *Eastern Body Western Mind*. Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, at 4-13.

more greatly appreciate life. This means that we study an energy known as *Kundalini* and its relationship to the *Chakras*.

We've already discussed *Prana*. There is an energy associated with *Prana*, called *Prana-sakti*. *Prana-sakti*, is the “the power that supports spiritual transformation,” and exists in us in a dormant state known as *Kundalini*.² In yoga philosophy, the awakening of *Kundalini* is “the most significant event in a yogi’s life” because transformation requires that *Prana-sakti* flow.³

Prana-Sakti, as *Kundalini*, moves through the *Chakras*, which receive, assimilate, and transmit the *Prana*.⁴

Kundalini flows most effectively when the channel through the *Chakras* is unblocked. *Kundalini* can then freely flow through each *Chakra*, with each serving as a stepping-stone on the path to transformation.⁵

Thus, we study the *Chakras* to learn how to make psychological adjustments in our lives to free our ability to experience positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishments, and nurturing relationships. We also study the *Chakras* as a path to spiritual transformation. As we will see, both paths require much the same work and practices.

III. Description of a *Chakra*.

Chakras, are “swirling intersections of vital life force,” “flying wheels,” “rings,” “core centers,” “disks,” “vortexes,” or clusters” of *Prana*, vital energy, existing within each of us. These centers of subtle energy are located along the spine.⁶

A. The body is a microcosmic version of the universe. The *Chakras* pick up cosmic vibrations from outside us and distribute them throughout the body via the *Nadis*, much like a radio antenna picks up radio waves and converts them into sound.⁷ The *Chakras* are hubs for this distribution.

² Shantananda, Swami (2003). *The Splendor of Recognition*. South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, at 310.

³ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 310; *see generally*, 307-312.

⁴ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 311-312.

⁵ Judith, Anodea (2004 ed.). *Wheels of Life*. St.Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications , at 41.

⁶ Iyengar, B.K.S. (1993). *Light on Pranayama*. Uttar Pradesh, India: HarperCollins Publishers India, at 37; 266 ; *Wheels of Life*, at 4; 23; *Eastern Body Western Mind*, at 4; and *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 311.

⁷ Iyengar, B.K.S. (1993). *Light on Pranayama*. Uttar Pradesh, India: HarperCollins Publishers India, at 37.

- B. Put another way, *Chakras* are organizational centers for receiving, assimilating, and then transmitting life energy.⁸
- C. These organizational centers are a key to understand ourselves and for transforming ourselves into the type of person we seek to become. Mr. Iyengar discusses how important the *Chakras* are to our mind/ body system by comparing the physical body to a City (the city of Brahma) with nine gates: the eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, anus and the reproductive system. The ten winds (*Vayus*), five organs of perception (*Jnanendriyas*), five organs of action (*Karmendriyas*), and the seven *Chakras* control this City. Flow between all *Chakras* must be connected within us in order for a person to be fully integrated.⁹

Now that we know a bit about what *Chakras* are, I will give a brief overview of the two roles of the *Chakras* that are the subjects of tonight's talk: the psychological role of the *Chakras* and the role of the *Chakras* in our spiritual transformation through the awakening of *Kundalini*. More detailed discussion of each *Chakra* follows in the next two talks.

IV. An overview of the role of *Chakras* – psychological work.

Anodea Judith, in *Eastern Body, Western Mind* and *Wheels of Life*, sets forth in detail how we can learn to utilize the *Chakras* to identify and work through, with professional assistance if needed, issues that block or otherwise diminish our ability to recognize our own inner gifts, feel positive emotion, engage in meaningful behavior, accomplish worthwhile things in the world, and develop and maintain worthwhile relationships.

These two books are clear, easy-to-read gifts in terms of how to use the *Chakras* in our lives to create a life well lived and to connect to Spirit; i.e., be successful in life and in yoga. My series of talks is simply an introduction and overview, so I encourage you to seek our resources such as these two books, for your own personal study of the *Chakras*.

I will now provide a short summary of some of her teachings on this subject of the role of *Chakras* in our psychological work.

- A. Our human system is likened to a computer that stores our *Samskaras* (*Samsaras*), the impressions of past actions and thoughts. The *Chakras* are like the disks for storage of these impressions. In Dr. Judith's analogy, the

⁸ *Wheels of Life*, at 4.

⁹ *Light on Pranayama*, at 226.

body is the computer hardware, our programs are in these disks, *Chakras*, and we are the users.¹⁰

The programs stored in the *Chakras* relate to issues such as survival, relationships, including sexuality, power, love, communication, insight, and spiritual transformation.¹¹

The *Chakras* also store societal and cultural, archetypal “programs”—information on things such as traditional gender roles, for example.¹²

- B. Anodea Judith invites us to go on a journey through the many dimensions of our own self by studying the *Chakras*. She says that this journey is a journey of transformation, crossing a “rainbow bridge” connecting Spirit and matter.¹³
1. The seven colors of the rainbow, as depicted by the seven colors of the seven-*Chakra* system, represent seven vibratory modalities of human existence.¹⁴
 2. This rainbow bridge, the *Chakras*, is associated with various states of consciousness, archetypes, and philosophy. The *Chakras* closer to the ground are associated with day-to-day matters relating to physical and social rules, whereas the upper *Chakras* represent more of our psychological development and the ability of the mind to work symbolically.¹⁵ For example:
 - a. *Chakra* One is associated with our survival.
 - b. *Chakra* Two is associated with emotions and sexuality.
 - c. *Chakra* Three is associated with personal power, will, and self-esteem.
 - d. *Chakra* Four is associated with love.
 - e. *Chakra* Five is associated with communication and creativity.

¹⁰ *Eastern Body Western Mind*, at 8-9.

¹¹ *Eastern Body, Western Mind*, at 8-13.

¹² *Eastern Body Western Mind*, at 8-13.

¹³ *Eastern Body Western Mind*, at 2-4.

¹⁴ *Eastern Body Western Mind*, at 2.

¹⁵ *Wheels of Life*, at 28-29.

- f. *Chakra* Six is associated with clairvoyance, intuition, and imagination.
 - g. *Chakra* Seven is associated with knowledge, understanding, and transcendent consciousness.¹⁶
3. Dr. Judith also ties *Chakra* work on psychological transformation into the spiritual awakening of *Kundalini*, describing the manifesting current of energy flowing into us from the crown down to our root foundation, and the liberating current moving upwards.¹⁷

In *Eastern Body, Western Mind*, Dr. Judith offers over 450 pages of incredible information on how to use the information she has gathered about each *Chakra*, to help us understand ourselves and work through the knots of resistance that block our ability to connect to God and to each other. *Wheels of Life* is also a treasure trove of valuable information we can use through meditation and contemplation to enrich our life experience.

V. An overview of the role of *Chakras* – *Kundalini*.

Life force, *Prana*, exists in us in a dormant state known as *Kundalini*.¹⁸ *Kundalini* is the energy that is the force behind spiritual transformation.¹⁹ It must be awakened and move through the *Chakras* in order for spiritual transformation to be realized.²⁰

Kundalini flows most effectively when the channel through the *Chakras* is unblocked. *Kundalini* can then freely flow through each *Chakra*, with each serving as a stepping-stone on the path to transformation.²¹

When *Kundalini* awakens, it has the power to greatly increase our ability to love and connect with others.²² It can burn away *Samskaras*, the impressions left from a person's experience that include every feeling, image, idea, thought, remark, and action from not only this life but all past lives.²³

¹⁶ *Wheels of Life*, at 25.

¹⁷ *Eastern Body Western Mind*, at 14-15.

¹⁸ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 310.

¹⁹ Kempton, Sally (2011). *Meditation for the Love of It*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True, Inc., at 3.

²⁰ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 310; see generally, 307-312.

²¹ Judith, Anodea (2004 ed.). *Wheels of Life*. St.Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, at 41.

²² *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 3.

²³ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 137; 188.; see also, *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 129; 214-215.

While these impressions can be positive and inspiring to us, they are often negative in nature, interfering and otherwise influencing choices we make that take us away from creating a life well lived. For example, if we are distracted because of whatever negative judgment we make about the couple at the next table in a restaurant, how can we truly experience every positive emotion that might otherwise arise during the dinner? If we are afraid of taking a risk at work or with our career, how can we expect to live as meaningful and engaging life as we might otherwise create? If we tend to avoid people who don't look like us, we likely miss opportunities for deep, rich, and lasting nurturing relationships. Thus, awakening *Kundalini* is both spiritual and psychological work. As we know from our study of non-dualism, the spiritual and material world are one and the same.

- A. The word *Kundalini* means “coiled.”²⁴ A sleeping snake with three and one-half coils represents *Kundalini*. The snake lies at the base of *Susumna*, asleep and facing downward with its tail in its mouth.²⁵ According to Mr. Iyengar, the coils represent the three states of mind (*Avastha*): awake (*Jagrt*), dreaming (*Svapna*), and deep sleep (*Susupti*). The half-coil represents a transcendent state, *Turiya*, achieved in *Samadhi*, the eighth limb of the eight-limbed path of yoga taught by Patanjali.²⁶
- B. Sally Kempton provides a Tantric view of *Kundalini*, calling it one of the names for *Shakti* (*Sakti*), the creative energy of Spirit.²⁷ The entire universe consists of *Shakti*, including consciousness itself.²⁸
- C. According to the Kashmir Shaivite text, the *Pprayabhijna Hridayam*, the entire universe comes into existence when *Shakti* transforms from a formless energy into matter, contracting Herself in this process. This contraction results in *Shakti* hiding Herself in the many diverse forms on the planet, including you and me.²⁹
- D. As human beings, we are this *Shakti*, also referred to as God, the Divine, Spirit, or Consciousness. However, as part of this contraction process we associate ourselves with our own egos, our own body, and our own personal

²⁴ *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 302; *Light on Pranayama*, at 36.

²⁵ *Light on Pranayama*, at 36.

²⁶ *Light on Pranayama*, at 36.

²⁷ *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 302.

²⁸ *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 303.

²⁹ *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 303; see, generally, *Splendor of Recognition*.

experiences. We identify with these and forget that we are actually Consciousness in this contracted form.

- E. As Sally Kempton writes, we look outside ourselves due to an illusion that we are separate from everyone and everything. We thus will not experience true connection, or yoga, union with the Divine, until we turn inward to recognize our true nature.³⁰ Study of the *Chakras* is a valuable way to turn inside.
- F. As long as we continue to look outside ourselves for gratification, it is said that our *Kundalini* remains asleep. As we engage in the process of looking inside ourselves, our *Kundalini* awakens, revealing to us our nature as Consciousness, as Spirit.
- G. From a psychological perspective the movement of *Kundalini* can literally burn away those patterns of thought and behavior, such as anger, greed, and pride, that hold us back from creating a life well lived. Fire (*Agni*) has been used to represent this energy that purifies and rises up like a fire.³¹
- H. This process of *Kundalini* awakening is typically described as a rising through the *Chakras*, opening them up, removing all blockages, and eventually residing in the top *Chakra*, *Sahsrara*. At this point, the practitioner will feel *Shakti* penetrating his or her entire being, influencing the senses in such a way that there is a sense of uninterrupted connection to the Divine.³²
- I. This is the place we need to be to live fully, creating a life full of positive emotion, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and nurturing relationships. We no longer are hampered by negativity, even as unpleasant events occur in our lives. We experience and process the events but don't allow them to hijack our choices. In a life in which we seek a mystical connection to Spirit, we live in that fully connected place, sensing the Divine in everything and everyone.
- J. In addition to *Samskaras*, there are three knots (*Granthis*) along the *Susumna* that need to be dissolved before *Kundalini* can fully ascend:
 - 1. *Brahma Granthi* is located in the root *Chakra*, *Muladhara* and blocks all upward flow from that position. It involves being stuck in material desires.

³⁰ *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 303.

³¹ *Light on Pranayama*, at 36-37.

³² *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 306.

2. *Vishnu Granthi* blocks flow from the third *Chakra*, *Manipura*, near the navel, to the fourth *Chakra*, *Anahata*, at the heart. This relates to our ambition to act in the world in ways that bring credit and fame to us as opposed to acting out of a desire to serve and be meaningful.
 3. *Rudra Granthi* blocks flow beyond the sixth *Chakra*, *Ajna*, in the forehead and relates to our inability break free of the material world in terms of what we think and do.
- K. *Kundalini* awakening moves not only through the *Chakras*, but also throughout the entire body, freeing us from blockages in our subtle body as well as our physical nervous system.³³
- L. As *Kundalini* awakens, the movement is not always experienced as rising from the base of the spine. Sometimes, for example, the energy of awakening is felt first in the heart, then spreading from there.³⁴

VI. How many Chakras are there?

In my book *Finding the Midline*³⁵ I discuss a seven-*Chakra* model. These seven are:

First *Chakra*, *Muladhara Chakra* (located at the pelvis or base of the spine; constituting our very foundation); Second *Chakra*, *Svadisthana Chakra* (located below the navel, at the root of the reproductive organs; pertaining to our relationships with others); Third *Chakra*, *Manipura Chakra* (located at the solar plexus; serving as the expression of our personality); Fourth *Chakra*, *Anahata Chakra* (located in the heart; pertaining to love and self-acceptance); Fifth *Chakra*, *Vishuddha Chakra* (located in the throat and pertaining to communication); Sixth *Chakra*, *Ajna Chakra* (located between the eye brows; involving our intuition and psychic perception; wisdom); and Seventh *Chakra*, *Sahasrara Chakra* (located at the crown of the head; representing our absorption in Spirit).

- A. This seven-*Chakra* system was discussed in Sir John Woodroffe's work *The Serpent Power*, a translation of the *Sat Cakra Nirupana*, a composition about *Kundalini* and *Chakras* written around 1526 C.E. by Purnananda. (Arthur Avalon is the pseudonym for Woodroffe).³⁶ For the history of *Chakras*, also

³³ *Meditation for the Love of It*, at 304-305.

³⁴ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 312.

³⁵ Dorigan, William (2013). *Finding the Midline*. Winter Park, CO: LuHen Publications, LLC, at 205-223.

³⁶ Avalon, Arthur (Sir John Woodroffe) (1974 ed.). *The Serpent Power*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications.

consider two books by David Gordon White: 1) *Yoga in Practice*; and 2) *Kiss of the Yogini*.³⁷

- B. Swami Shantanada writes in *The Splendor of Recognition* that Kashmir Shaivism recognizes six *Chakras*—those listed above, with the seventh, *Sahasrara*, considered an independent space. He refers to Abhinavagupta’s identification of five *Chakras* in the *Tantraloka*: *Muladhara* or *Mulabhumi* at the base of the spine; *Nabbi* at the navel; *Hridaya* or *Hrt* in the heart; *Kantha* at the throat, and *Bhrumadhya* between the eyebrows.³⁸
- C. Anodea Judith points out in *Wheels of Life* that some systems propose nine or twelve *Chakras*, while others, including Vajrayana Buddhism, recognize five. She points out that because a *Chakra* is a vortex of energy, there is really no limit in their number but that the seven-*Chakra* model provides a profound way for engaging in personal growth.³⁹

VII. Conclusion.

When we consider the term “mindfulness” it is helpful to contemplate a context for where to direct our attention. With the study of the Chakras we see again how yoga philosophy helps structure our mindfulness and create specific context. I’ve suggested that we begin with paying attention to the five indicators of a life of well-being offered by Dr. Seligman: positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and positive or nurturing relationships.⁴⁰

From there we can use the *Tattvas*, for example, to help remind us to be curious, looking for the expression of life’s inspiration in the diverse material world we live in. Now, we have yet an additional context; the Chakras. As we will see over the next few talks, the Chakras provide us with a way to explore our inner world as part of creating a life well lived.

³⁷ White, Dr. David Gordon (2012). *Yoga in Practice*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; White, Dr. David Gordon (2003). *Kiss of the Yogini*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

³⁸ *The Splendor of Recognition*, at 311.

³⁹ *Wheels of Life*, at 11-12.

⁴⁰ Seligman, Dr. Martin (2011). *Flourish*. New York, NY: Free Press.