

*Thus the seer with vision clear, see forms appear and disappear,  
In the perpetual round of strange mysterious change,  
From birth to death, from death to birth, from earth to heaven, from heaven to earth.  
'Till glimpses more sublime, of things unseen before unto wondering eyes reveal  
The Universe, as an immeasurable wheel, turning forevermore  
In the rapid and rushing river of time.*

*Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

## **The Chakras and Other Variations on the Theme of Seven**

Brian McPherson

The idea that the human body contains seven energy centers called chakras entered western consciousness around one hundred years ago when Sir John Woodworth, writing under the pen name of Arthur Avalon, published *Serpent Power* in 1919. Since then much has been written on the topic, especially since the 1960s, some of it complementary and some contradictory. In this essay/post I don't want to wade too deep into the controversy on what exactly are the things we call charkas and how we should use them. Instead I wish to give just a broad overview of how some folks approach the topic. My real purpose here focuses on exploring the metaphysical origin of chakras and why they appear in the manner and number that they do. So while chakras can have a very practical application, for the purpose of this writing I'm more interested in the mystical aspects of them.

The word chakra is Sanskrit for wheel. A popular way of thinking about chakras invokes the image of a vortex of psychic energy in the body, perhaps a wheel of energy that keeps turning. People ascribe different names to this energy, depending upon the cultural context. Some know it as prana, others refer to it as chi, or shakti. Practices varying from Chinese medicine, Tibetan Buddhism, Jewish Kabbalism, to Islamic Sufism have utilized chakras. Many other lesser known traditions find worth in techniques that involve chakra work.

A near universal agreement on the number of chakras located within the body points to seven as the correct count. Although I have seen at least one source that lists only six. People also appear to agree on where these energy centers reside in the body and to a lesser extent agree on what comprises them. Some cite their origin as arising from nerve ganglia, while others refer to nerve centers, or simply centers of consciousness. The term "nerve ganglia" refers to a specific configuration of nerves, which, in fact do not exist in all seven of the locations where people using the term believe chakras exist, making that term suspect. However, quibbling over terms doesn't serve a purpose here, so let's leave the understanding of what a chakra consists of as psychic energy.



The figure on the left shows the approximate location of the seven chakras. The picture also illustrates a commonly held belief that connects each chakra to a color. Some people also ascribe a particular shape to the individual chakras, too.

My description of the chakras will begin from the lowest and proceed up toward the top. Many traditions site the flow of energy in the body as rising from the base of the spine, the location of the Root chakra, to the Crown chakra at the top of the head. I will give only a brief description of the function of each chakra and problems associated with improper energy flow or energy blocks. Please understand that interpretations of the chakras vary quite a bit from one source to the next. I am only trying to give a general view, not a definitive one.

According to most traditions, the Root chakra, located at the base of the spine, connects us to our physical worldly existence. Our survival instincts operate through this energy center. Disturbances in this chakra manifest as fear and paranoia. Work involving this chakra has the aim of generating a grounded, secure feeling.

The second chakra, often called the sacral chakra, gets pegged as the center for feeling, pleasure, sensuality, intimacy, and sometimes creativity. This interpretation derives from its connection to the energy supporting the genitals. Poor relationships show up as energy blockages here that can get resolved through work involving the chakra.

The solar plexus houses the third chakra. People attribute one's will power and self-perception to this energy center. Energy flowing smoothly around this chakra indicates a confident, reliable individual who meets challenges and moves forward. Someone who lacks these traits can benefit from working on making the energy of this chakra more harmonious.

We find the energy responsible for love, warmth, and compassion in the heart chakra. The energy here brings recognition that we share our existence with something larger in the universe. People lacking warmth and compassion will find working with this chakra beneficial.

When functioning smoothly the fifth chakra, located in the throat, allows you to find truth and communicate it to others. It also promotes attentive listening. Some refer to this chakra as the first of the three spiritual chakras. This belief casts the lower three chakras as dealing with physical existence and the heart chakra as the center that unites the physical with the spiritual.

Most people call the sixth chakra the third eye, as its location places it between the eyes at the level of the eyebrows. This center serves as our source of intuitive knowledge. It allows us to see beyond words and become mindful of our existence in a nonverbal, emotional fashion. It houses our conscious and generates wisdom and understanding.

The final energy center, the crown chakra, connects us to the ultimate source of consciousness of the universe. The experience of energy at this level invokes a sense of oneness with everything. This happens not on an intellectual level but rather through awareness of deep serene peace and joyful understanding. Through this experience one transcends the ego as one realizes the fundamental interconnectedness of all things.

Knowing something about the nature of chakras gets us to the starting point for making practical use of the concept. I will mention a few of these uses to give you an idea about what's out there. Some folks advocate meditation on specific chakras, some use special breathing techniques in association with individual chakras. Another popular use of chakras involves affirmations. The figure below shows a series of such affirmations found at [www.healingartforms.com](http://www.healingartforms.com). (The affirmation for the Throat Chakra written in the difficult to read blue type says: "I own my power and feel fully alive.") Additional more-detailed affirmations appear on [www.chakra-anatomy.com](http://www.chakra-anatomy.com).



These approaches reflect only a few of the ways that people use chakras. Do a search of your own if you want to explore the multitude of applications out there.

## Why Seven?

A simple answer to the question of “Why do we have exactly seven chakras?” would be “Because that is how many nerve ganglia we have.” Although to be clear that answer not only over-simplifies but it is simply wrong. We have more nerve ganglia than seven, and besides the chakras in the head are not near any of them, if you stick to the definition of ganglia. I find two better answers to the question of “Why seven?” One comes from looking at the cosmos and applying the maxim of “As above so below.” The other involves looking at the basic components of the human psychic and how they interact. I will explore this second avenue first.

I see the basic components of the human psyche as physical, emotional, and mental. (See my post at [www.holisticemotivepractices.com/Docs/The Trinity as Metaphor for the Universe.pdf](http://www.holisticemotivepractices.com/Docs/The Trinity as Metaphor for the Universe.pdf)) for details concerning my argument for this position. We can comprise these three elements, physical, emotional, and mental, either separately or individually in exactly seven ways. To understand what I mean by this statement take a look at the chart below, where P stands for the physical aspect of the psyche, E for emotional, and M for mental.

Psychic Component				Chakra	
			M	Mental only	Crown
		E	+ M	Emotional and Mental	Third Eye
		E		Emotional only	Throat
P	+	E	+ M	All three	Heart
P			+ M	Physical and Mental	Solar Plexus
P	+	E		Physical and Emotional	Sacral
P				Physical only	Root

I have displayed these seven in a specific order, one that corresponds to the order of the chakras to which each of these seven corresponds. In other words the M (Mental only) at the top of the chart corresponds to the highest chakra of the body the Crown chakra, and the P (Physical only) at the bottom of the chart corresponds to the Root chakra. The connections between the psychic component(s) and the related chakra should appear straightforward.

The pure consciousness of the Crown chakra gets associated only with our mental energies. No physical or emotional energies mingle with this center. (I believe that the serene joy experienced via this center results from our inherent nature and not from emotional involvement of the psyche. The energy experienced here can bring one to the conclusion that God, i.e., the consciousness to which you merge in this state, is love.)

The Third Eye has not only mental energy, but some emotional energy as well due to the involvement of our recognition of our place in the world and the necessity for a conscious to guide our actions. The Throat chakra gets tied to the emotional portion of the psyche. This connection can be difficult to understand, however research shows that speech communication, that the Throat chakra promotes, has

inherent emotional value. That is, individual speech sounds carry emotional impact. (See details about my research on this topic at <http://www.holisticemotivepractices.com/science.html>.)

The Heart chakra stands at the center of the being in many ways. As such it makes sense that all three psychic components reside in this center. The Solar Plexus unites the physical and mental aspects of the self. Will power that operates through this chakra involves using your mind to control and manipulate pieces of your world.

The Sacral chakra fuses the physical forces within with the emotional ones. The most intensely physical sensations that evoke strong emotional response work through this center. Finally, the Root chakra stands alone with our physical energies. Although one can see the emotion of fear operating through this chakra, this emotion comes through in a very raw, basic manner. This bleed over of emotion emphasizes the point that we cannot entirely separate the psychic forces in the ideal manner that I have presented. Every part of us has a physical component; as does every part invoke emotions and mental processes. The connection of the seven chakras to the seven aspects of our psyche makes sense only in the broadest interpretation. However, I believe that this broad interpretation of the chakras yields much food for thought.

Now, on to the adage “as above, so below” and the second way to answer the question of “Why seven chakras?” The “above” in this context that I find interesting comes from P.D. Ouspensky’s book *The Fourth Way*, which details G.I. Gurdjieff’s teachings. Gurdjieff spoke about the “Ray of Creation.”

Gravitational Influence	Chakra	Musical Note
Super Group of Galaxies	Crown	Ti
Local Group of Galaxies	Third Eye	La
Milky Way Galaxy	Throat	So
Planets in the Milky Way	Heart	Fa
Our Sun	Solar Plexus	Mi
Our Moon	Sacral	Re
The Earth	Root	Do

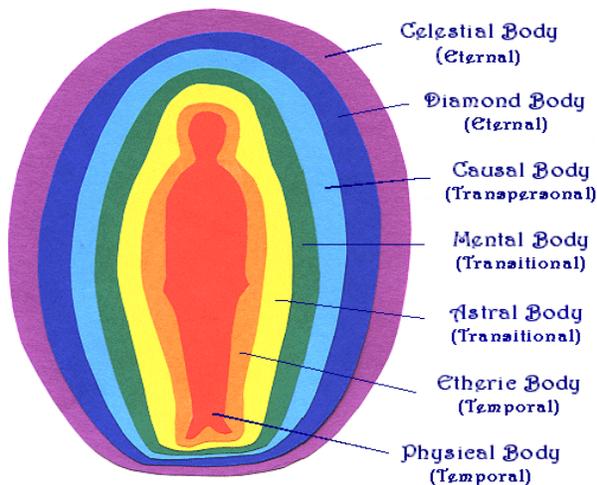
table to the left illustrates the core of this idea. The first column lists the gravitational forces that surround us. Gurdjieff claimed that the reason for seven in such things as the scale of a musical octave (third column) and the number of chakras (second column) comes from these gravitational fields.

Gurdjieff reasoned that the way the universe unfolded, this “Ray of Creation” impacts many of the manifestations of creation. If you have ever explored fractals, you should have a sense of this concept. A fractal consists of a geometric figure that repeats a basic pattern that you first observe at a higher point of view. Zooming in for a closer look reveals the same pattern repeated on a smaller scale.

Further zooming in finds the same pattern again on a still smaller scale. This process repeats for as often you have the computing power to repeat the process of zooming in.

Does the manner in which gravitational fields developed as the Universe expanded from the initial Big Bang play a role in or simply establish the way things organize on a much smaller scale? We see other examples of seven levels in other areas besides chakras and the musical scale. The periodic table has seven rows. The electron rings around the nucleus of an atom number seven. Are these simply coincidences or has the Ray of Creation impacted each of these phenomena?

The idea of subtle bodies illustrates another popular subject where the number seven pops up. The Theosophy website <http://www.theosophical.org> provides information about this controversial topic. The existence of subtle or higher bodies associated with our gross physical body lacks easily verified proof, but many claim to have experienced them in some fashion. Carlos Castaneda spoke of the “other” or phantom body. Yogis, e.g., Paramahansa Yogananda, retell their experiences while existing in astral form. People who study reincarnation suggest that reincarnation results when a subtle body leaves a dying person and enters into a new physical body.



*The Seven Subtle, Interfacing  
Bodies of Multidimensional  
Human Consciousness*

The figure to the left, found at [http://www.intentblog.com/archives/2007/02/integrating\\_com.html](http://www.intentblog.com/archives/2007/02/integrating_com.html) provides one examples of the names for the seven bodies. You will not find much information that explains the nature of the subtle bodies or why these bodies exist. Some argue that they exist in a different dimension (or plane); others say they vibrate at a different frequency, one that we cannot perceive. I submit, as with the chakras, the seven gravitational fields that surround us makes the most sense in explaining their existence. As for their nature I believe that energy explains it.

The naming of the subtle bodies does vary, with the Etheric body shown here often referred to as the Phantom body, or simply the “Other.” Numerous other differences in naming systems abound. I could write much more on the nature of these bodies, why some get called temporal, other transitional, etc., but I will save that for another post/essay. I bring up the topic of subtle bodies because some people claim that each chakra has a corresponding body starting with the physical body corresponding to the Root chakra and going up through the chakras to the Crown chakra which some say pairs with the Celestial body (as named in this figure but also called the Atma or pure consciousness).

I have one final point to convey and it again brings together the Trinity and the number seven. If you take a look at the Trinity of the Universe, that is, space-time, matter/energy, and consciousness, you will find the number seven at work (see [www.holisticemotivepractices.com/Docs/The Trinity as Metaphor for the Universe.pdf](http://www.holisticemotivepractices.com/Docs/The Trinity as Metaphor for the Universe.pdf) for an understanding of why I call space-time, matter/energy, and consciousness the Trinity of the Universe). In each of the three components of the Trinity of the Universe the number seven plays a significant role. In space-time you have seven layers of gravitational fields. In

matter/energy you have seven electron rings. In consciousness you have seven bodies. Is it any wonder that across cultures the numbers three and seven hold a special significance as “lucky” numbers?

I welcome comments on this essay. Please send them to [brian@holisticmotivepractices.com](mailto:brian@holisticmotivepractices.com). In the future I will make it so you can comment directly on the page without needing to email, but for now please email me the comments. I will post your comments, as long as they are relevant.