

CHAKRA PSYCHOLOGY

fulfilling the dream of becoming whole

Delcia McNeil

Introduction

'Your Chakras are integral to every part of your Being'
(Ambika Wauters, The Book of Chakras)

In this article I want to share with you how I work with the Chakra System. I will give the background to how I came to develop the title 'Chakra Psychology' as the name for courses that I run. I will give some explanation of the Chakra system and some history of its origins. I will then describe what Chakra Psychology includes and make an attempt to give some definition of a developing theory. I include a case study and describe how Chakra Psychology works in practice.

Some background

In 2006 I was mentoring a group of professional healers and was sharing what I missed about teaching healing - I had run a healer training school with a colleague throughout the 1990s.

One of the main things was just how much I had enjoyed teaching about the chakras. For me the chakras are a set of friends that happen to reside within my own body! Throughout my therapeutic healing career I had found that the theories of association with each chakra, eg. root and financial difficulties; heart and unresolved grief, bore out in reality. And in my work as a healer I would pick up, or sense, the emotion or thoughts relevant to my client as I focussed on specific chakras. It was like having a diagnostic tool – subjective, yes - but when the information given by the chakras resonates with the actual experience of the client over and over again, it becomes a tool to take seriously.

I had been working with my own chakra system since 1981 and continue to do so. I was also taken with the fact that there are several excellent and interesting contemporary writers and teachers on this subject, all of which have a slightly different take on what the chakras are about.

"Wouldn't it be great if there was a course that compared these different approaches and supported people to try them out and develop their own knowledge, skills and personal experience of working with the chakra system," I said to my supervisees. "Why don't you run it?" was the response – "we would like to attend a course like that!"

That was the conception of my Chakra Psychology course, the birth taking place the following year in 2007. I chose that name because the emphasis I

wanted to create and offer people was a focus on a psychological approach. I already knew how empowering it is to explore and become aware of:

- what may be lying outside our conscious awareness
- what aspects of our development, for whatever reason, have got stuck or wounded
- how our bodies hold within them clues and information about how we truly are, and how we can heal whatever needs healing and move on
- how our thinking, and core beliefs, can consistently destroy or hinder the growth of a healthy sense of self
- how cutting ourselves off from any possibility of a greater, loving intelligence in the universe defeats our desire to feel more whole and at one with ourselves and those we love

My background training had been in humanistic and integrative psychotherapy as well as energy/spiritual healing and I'd always wanted to bring those two ways of working together. I also wanted to teach professional healers, holistic therapists, counsellors & psychotherapists, yoga teachers etc. – people who already had some notion of what the chakras may be about. In other words I wanted to go into this topic deeply and with a conviction that it could be an extremely valuable experience for personal and professional development.

What is the Chakra system?

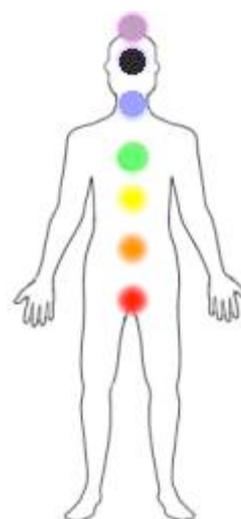
Many people, especially holistic therapists, have heard of chakras. There are many books describing them, as well as lots of information on line.

Chakra is a Sanskrit (ancient Hindu) word meaning wheel. They can be seen by clairvoyants as spinning wheels of light, each with different intensity and speed, and they are part of the human energy field (aura). Chakras are considered to be organizing centres for the reception, assimilation, and transmission of life energies.

In the Hindu system there are seven major chakras along the spine: Root (red), Sacral (orange), Solar Plexus (yellow), Heart (green), Throat (sky blue), Brow (indigo) and Crown (violet). There are also several minor ones, including ones in the hands and feet.

There are now additional chakras being worked with (above, below and within the body), but for now Chakra Psychology remains primarily focussed on the seven primary chakras. In my experience there is enough healing and developmental work to do here for most people to deal with.

Each of the chakras has a Sanskrit (ancient Hindu) name and a set of associations eg. colour, sound, physical organ and endocrine gland, to name but a few. However, the two most relevant associations for each chakra within the field of Chakra Psychology are:



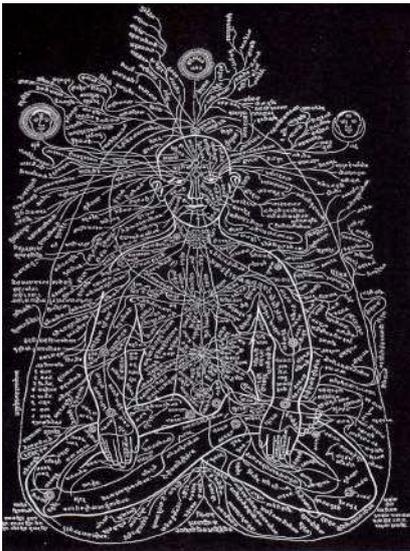
- i. main life issues eg physical survival, developing a healthy self esteem, being true to ourselves, and so on, and
- ii. developmental stages - gestation & confinement, babyhood, childhood, early and late adolescence, young and maturing adulthood.

In my teaching we use the chakra system as a model, a structure, for understanding human growth and development.

It's a long story ...

Chakra Psychology may sound contemporary but the chakra system itself has a long heritage involving complex spiritual practices and study. I believe it is important to know and honour this.

The history is complex with a weaving together of many spiritual traditions originating in India. The chakra system has its roots in the Tantric and Yogic



traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism (and later especially Tibetan Buddhism). The ancient Hindu and Yogic teachings of the Upanishads (wisdom teachings) in the 7th century BC, on which the philosophy of yoga is based, referred to a vital force, named prana, flowing through energy pathways called nadis. The system is said to have 72,000 nadis or energy pathways. The chakras are junction points in this energetic system and are first referenced around the 2nd century BC.

Historic depiction of a Chakra & nadis chart from Tibet

The concept of chakras, or something similar, is also found in many other cultures. For example, the Hesychastic tradition in the Eastern Orthodox or Byzantine church is one of the very few movements in Christianity to develop a meditation practise comparable to that of the tantric and yogic traditions. Here these centres are points of attention for concentration on different parts of the body.

In the Jewish religion the Kabbalah involves the ten Sefirot and 22 paths called the 'Tree of Life'. The Sefirot constitute psychic powers, divine qualities or archetypes, which are cosmic in nature but are also located within the human body. This too is a stylised map of consciousness and can be compared with tantric and yogic chakras.

So how did the chakras eventually come to Europe and to the United States? Well, in the early 1900s an Englishman by the name of John Woodroffe was a lawyer in India. He became Chief Justice at the Calcutta High Court in 1915. He took a great interest in Sanskrit philosophy, studied it deeply, and translated some key texts on the study of chakras. Sanskrit is an ancient language of India, in which the Hindu scriptures and classical Indian epic poems are written and from which many northern Indian languages are derived. In 1919, under

the pseudonym Arthur Avalon, Woodroffe published a book entitled '*The Serpent Power*'. This was the first time this kind of information was available in English. Following on from '*The Serpent Power*', another Englishman, Charles Leadbeater published '*The Chakras*' in 1927.

In Tantra (especially Tibetan) the yogi "creates" the chakras as part of his mental exercises. They are subtle centres of consciousness, but have no energy status of their own. However in Theosophical thought - and later New Age beliefs, clairvoyance implies that the chakras have an independent objective existence. Theosophy is a movement which involves the study of philosophical or religious thought based on a mystical insight into divine nature. Charles Leadbeater, who was a theosophist, was the first to suggest that chakras are receivers and transformers, linking the various subtle bodies of the human energy field (eg. etheric, astral, and mental) by stepping down energetic frequencies. Another famous theosophist, Alice Bailey, wrote in great technical detail about the existence of the subtle bodies of the human being, including the chakras ('*Esoteric Healing*').

So now, in the West, we had an emphasis placed on the health of the chakras, eg. are they open/closed, blocked/clear, how does their energy spin or rotate? Associations with endocrine glands and the sympathetic nervous system were developed eg. the work on light and colour by Theo Gimbel ('*The Book of Colour Healing*').

Later in the mid-20th century, the other significant figure in the bringing of Eastern philosophy to the Western mind is Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung who viewed the practice of yoga as a model for the development of higher consciousness. To him the study of chakras was a study of symbols that we encounter as we further develop our individuality and awareness of the unconscious mind. Jung is referred to as the grandfather of today's transpersonal psychotherapies.

In the 1970s Christopher Hills published a book called '*Nuclear Evolution*' – this was one of the first 'New Age' examples of each chakra being associated with a colour of the spectrum and a personality type. This was referred to as *Rainbow Theory*. Since this time there has been a host of New Age descriptions which often combine different teachers' theories. Today the associations with each chakra have expanded and include crystals, aromas, power animals, planets, archetypes, gods and goddesses, as well as those already mentioned as particularly relevant to Chakra Psychology ie. specific emotional and mental health issues, and the stages of human growth and development.

The present day

Nowadays the chakras are used for 'diagnosing' imbalances in the body and dis-ease, and today practically all complementary and alternative therapists will have some knowledge or awareness of the chakras. Some will be working very specifically with them such as crystal healers, hands-on contact and aura healers, sound therapists, as well as, of course, yoga teachers.

There are now also many healers and therapists, writing about chakras, bringing together Eastern traditional philosophy and Western psychological thinking. Within the field of Chakra Psychology I draw upon the work of Anodea Judith, Barbara Ann Brennan, Roslyn Bruyere, Caroline Myss, Dr. Brenda Davies, Ruth White, Ambika Wauters, and others such as Dr. Christine Page, Liz Simpson, Rosalyn Bruyere, Swami Saradanada, and Arnold Bittinger (see bibliography).



my own chakra drawing

I believe that in the West we must take care not to distort or minimise the origins of the chakras, or commercialise them in some way to suit our materialistic society. On the other hand we can free them up from tight doctrines and combine our appreciation of their energetic intelligence with the great strides we have made in understanding the human mind and soul.

So what is Chakra Psychology?

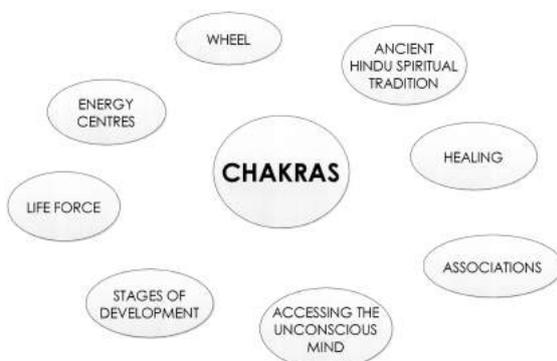
The word psychology means the study of the human mind and soul. For many today psychology is about developing ourselves to be rounded human beings. A psychological approach can refer to our behaviour, our beliefs and

attitudes, how we think and how we give meaning to our lives. It can refer to what we may be experiencing unconsciously – that is our behaviours and thoughts and feelings which arise without our conscious awareness of why or how we are thinking or doing something. We can identify where we feel strong and at ease as well as where we may feel stuck, anxious or uncomfortable.

Using the chakra system as a model to engage with the stages of human growth and development also involves us in trying to grasp the development of consciousness. For me consciousness refers to my awareness of my own unique thoughts, emotions, memories, feelings, physical sensations and environment, as well as my intuition and 'sixth sense'.

In my experience mindfully focussing on one or more of my chakra centres inevitably carries me into an inner journey of discovery and insight. A sensation within a chakra centre will be an indicator of, for example, the level of anxiety or excitement I may be feeling at any given time in my solar plexus or sacral chakra, or the degree of pressure or stimulation I may feel in my brow (third eye) centre.

Meditating on or focussing on chakra centres can bring us insights, sometimes memories, often images that are symbolic, archetypal and full of meaning. They can be like a dream-world, an inner computer database full of information that we can access and reflect upon.



The seven major chakras can be viewed as seven stages relating to our growth – confinement and babyhood, pre-school age, school age, pre-adolescent, adolescence, young adulthood, and mature adulthood. We are deeply

influenced by what was happening in our lives at the different developmental stages of our childhood and young adulthood. Family relational patterns, traumas, culture and many more influences, both positive and negative, are deeply buried in our bodies and minds.

Each of the seven major chakras is therefore associated with specific psychological states. These can indicate our strengths such as being a good communicator, or being in touch with our creativity. But we also can uncover issues that need healing. For example we may be fearful of not belonging, or being intimate, or never finding love or our purpose in life, and so on. Once we have become conscious of what is troubling us and can reflect upon it, we can find ways to help us feel better.

Developing a theory of Chakra Psychology

Since being introduced to the chakras in 1981 I have found that many writers have developed their own models relating to psychology and the chakras. Each model is different yet has cross-over similarities, and each writer describes the chakras as wheels or vortices of energy which are within the individual aura or - to use a more contemporary term - universal energy field.

In my experience different chakra models are not necessarily in opposition to each other but need to be seen as complementary or amplificatory. By taking in different perspectives we can aim to arrive at our own personal truth that resonates with our real experience. Using modern terminology the chakra system can be viewed as offering evolutionary software and data through which we can reprogram our lives.

Anodea Judith (*'Eastern Body Western Mind'*) views the chakras as a map, a set of 'energy portals' between the inner and outer worlds'. 'A chakra is a centre of organisation that receives, assimilates, and expresses life force energy.' The chakra system is a model that integrates body, mind and spirit. In the western world we have somatic therapies that connect mind and body, but perhaps ignore the spiritual. We have spiritually oriented psychologies that connect psyche and spirit but leave out the body. And we have disciplines, eg. yoga, that connect spirit and body, but don't necessarily address the wounds of the psyche. Judith has clearly documented that the chakra system is a model for the integration of all these aspects. The seven chakra centres correlate with basic states of consciousness and their patterns are programmed deep in the core of the mind-body interface.

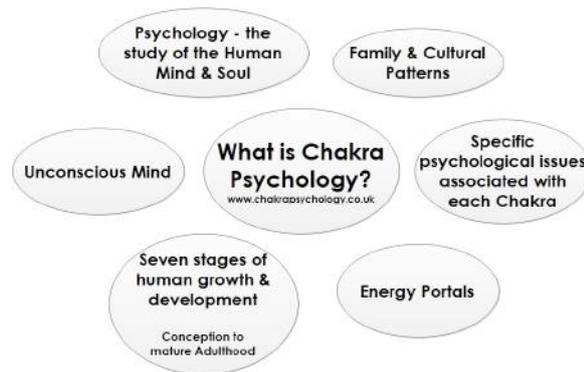
Most contemporary writers refer to 'blocks' in the chakras, places where energy has become stuck or stagnant. *'If we block an experience we block our chakras'*, states Barbara Ann Brennan (*'Hands of Light'*). She views the chakras as metabolizers of energy and devices that sense energy. They serve to tell us about the world around us.

Dr. Brenda Davies (*'The Rainbow Journey – Seven Steps to Self Healing'*) also refers to blocks in the chakras and cites different types of 'block' (we often have a combination) that relate to types of psychological defence mechanisms, eg. freezing, denial, suppression. She takes the developmental

stages further by introducing the idea that each chakra is a primary focus not only during childhood, adolescence and early adulthood, but also in later adulthood.

Another very well known writer on the chakras is Caroline Myss. In her original book on the chakras, 'Anatomy of the Spirit' she synthesizes three spiritual traditions – the traditional chakras (Hindu), the Christian sacraments, and the Jewish Kabbalah's Tree of Life (the ten sefirot or qualities of Divine nature already mentioned). For her the chakras symbolise seven levels of evolution through perceptions of power.

The chakras, as part of the energy system, contain data and a history of how we invest our life energy. She equates life energy with personal power - how we use that power is an investment that produces a positive or negative dividend.



Transpersonal psychotherapist, Ruth White, also views the chakras as a map of consciousness that charts a spiritual and evolutionary journey, not only for the individual but also for the whole of humanity ('Using your Chakras'). Connecting with the chakras enables us to become more conscious and aware of ourselves and others.

How does Chakra Psychology work in practice?

Case Study:

Sally was in her late 40s. She had been working as an aromatherapist, reflexologist and energy healer for ten years. She had received counselling in her late 20s and early 30s because at that time she was in an abusive relationship and was struggling with an eating disorder. These days her life was stable – she was in a loving relationship and was enjoying her work. However, she still felt something wasn't quite right for her, something was missing and it felt out of reach. She couldn't really articulate it any better than this.

She decided to join a Chakra Psychology course as a way of developing her knowledge of the chakras and relate this to her client work, but also, and probably primarily, for her own self healing journey that she had begun in her late 20s. Either way she was ready for something different that would take her deeper into herself.

At the beginning of the course Sally was asked to keep a journal for the duration and she feared she wouldn't keep it up. She knew she was good at starting things but not good at maintaining them. She found that after the session when they had worked with the first chakra, the Root, she felt disorientated. She had discovered that she was rather cut off emotionally and energetically from her Root chakra and her whole pelvic area. When invited to focus on that area she had felt emotionally numb, and couldn't experience any energetic tinglings or sensations at the base of her spine. More significantly

she wanted the focussing exercise to be over so she could get back to talking and thinking, rather than being in and with her own physical body.

Although at the time she found this discovery distressing, she realised that this must be some of the reason that, even with the work she had already done on herself, she still had difficulties keeping herself grounded and on track in her life. Something was missing. She began to explore more deeply the circumstances of her conception, gestation and birth. Her mother had been a teenager, only 17 years old when Sally was born. Clearly the pregnancy was unplanned. Sally decided to talk more with her mother about how that time was for her. She was able to tell Sally now just how frightened she had been. She didn't know if she would have to give Sally up for adoption, but in fact was really pleased that, with support, she had been able to keep her. Sally also got more detailed information about having been born 6 weeks prematurely – she hadn't realised she had been in an incubator for 3 weeks.

These discoveries helped Sally to connect with her deep fears of danger, isolation and abandonment; she came to realise that she was ambivalent about being incarnate. "I have one foot on the planet and the other foot off it," she said. It must have been very frightening to be separated from her anxious and overwhelmed young mother at birth. Gradually through the course and drawing on strengths that she found in her other chakra centres eg. she had a beautifully open heart chakra, was empathic and able to connect well with other people, she was able to face her fears, work through her ambivalence and begin to build a stronger sense of her place in the world and within her family of origin.

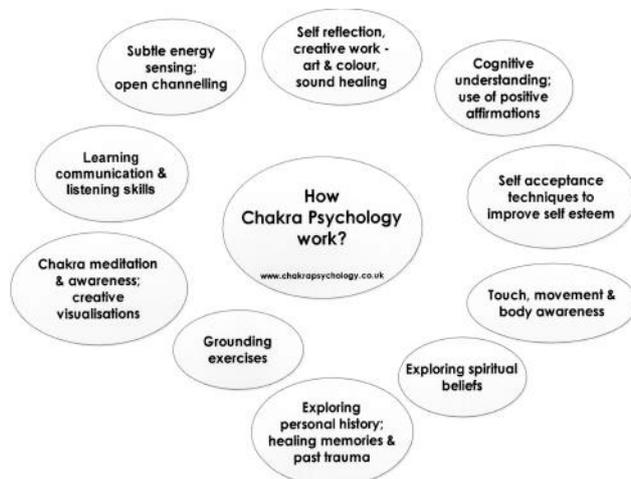
What do we actually do in Chakra Psychology?

Chakra Psychology includes both energy work and cognitive understanding. In order to heal herself Sally needed to work on several levels of her being. Chakra meditation is used to focus the mind on the parts of the body where the chakras are located. In this way we can get a felt sense of how that chakra is functioning, eg. how comfortable or not it may feel for us to be holding our attention here, how its energy is eg. do we experience it flowing or feeling blocked? Just by focussing and becoming aware we often find the energetic vibration of that chakra changes, eases, or shifts, thus affecting the whole system.

We may start to feel release or relief, or we may begin to have thoughts – memories, ideas, remember a dream, and so on. If we feel uncomfortable, chances are there are issues associated with that chakra that need our attention. Any thoughts that come to us can be important information that the intelligence of that chakra is giving us. It's a bit like going to a website to research something. What we are doing is touching in on another level of our being, a deeper level of consciousness. It's subtle, yet potentially powerful.

Within Chakra Psychology, as well as relaxation and meditation, I draw upon a number of healing and therapeutic activities as we focus on each chakra centre. These include:

- Various chakra visualisation processes to help to heal past situations in which we may have felt powerless, insecure, frightened, angry and so on
- Grounding exercises to centre and connect with the earth
- The use of body awareness and focus; using the imagination within the body - sensing or visualising through the physical body
- Movement – using the body to express itself non-verbally
- Different ways of working with affirmative statements
- Techniques to help improve self esteem
- Healing touch – for oneself and for another person within the group
- Drawing - therapeutic art to help describe the energy state of a chakra
- Sound healing – working with the 'seed sounds' of the chakras
- Colour therapy – using colour as a means to alter our vibrational state and mood
- Open channelling - allowing a stream of consciousness to flow; an intuitive activity of the mind through which a wider wisdom than normal can be accessed
- Exploring general and spiritual beliefs and becoming aware of which ones may no longer work for us and which ones we need to strengthen
- Sharing through talking and listening with others and having one's personal experience accepted, witnessed, and reflected back to us in a safe, confidential and non-judgemental environment.
- Using group members as a supportive resource between group sessions



From a psychological perspective we focus on the functioning of a chakra in respect of its associated issues and its stage of development. For instance if you feel very disconnected from your Root chakra you could explore, as in the case of Sally, the nature of your own birth and early bonding with your mother. Maybe your self esteem is low. This solar plexus issue tends to start showing itself during our primary school years, when we are trying to establish an identity outside the

home. If a strong self esteem did not get established in childhood it is something that can be built in adulthood. Maybe you feel blocked in your Throat chakra - it's likely you have difficulties expressing yourself. You can discover what the cause of this may be. You can learn communication skills to help you overcome this, or free up your voice in different ways. In this way the chakras give us clues as to where we need to pay attention in order to heal ourselves and become more whole as human beings.

Conclusion

The development of this work is ongoing, especially in its application in one to one work. Although primarily course participants focus on their own personal development, the material from the courses is transferable to individual practice. The aim is for this to be appropriately relevant and effective for the

therapist to integrate with their existing skills. I also offer the course on a one to one basis, which means to some extent it can be tailor made to the individual.

As an approach Chakra Psychology is both pragmatic and visionary. It offers us a wide range of resources to work with. Through experiencing first hand the subtle energies of the different chakra energy centres we can become more aware of our own inner energetic and emotional processes. What was unconscious becomes much more conscious. We begin to think differently, to have greater self understanding and to accept ourselves more. When we start to feel better on the inside we can begin to experience ourselves as having more choices, helping us feel more energised and experiencing a more fulfilling and joyful life.

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Delcia McNeil is a qualified psychotherapist and an energy healer with over thirty years experience. She is also an artist. She has been a member of the Association for Therapeutic Healers for twenty eight years. She has a private counselling & therapeutic healing practise in Storth, near Kendal, Cumbria and in Muswell Hill, North London. She runs Chakra Psychology courses in both London and Cumbria. These are primarily continued professional development courses for holistic therapists, healers, psychotherapists & counsellors, and those involved in the complementary therapy world. The courses are validated by The Association for Therapeutic Healers and the Confederation of Healing Organisations.



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