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# A Chakra System Model of Lifespan Development

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# A Chakra System Model of Lifespan Development

**Cover Page Footnote**

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# A Chakra System Model of Lifespan Development

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This article presents a model of lifespan development based upon the tantric chakra system. It begins with a survey of the evolution of transpersonal psychology and its alignment with eastern philosophies as previously espoused by William James, Carl Jung and others. The chakras are defined in relation to their potential influence on psychological functioning with a focus on development beyond the level of ego stability and functioning. Building upon prior work integrating the chakra system with developmental processes, this article presents an interpretation of the chakras as a model that defines a pathway for growth-oriented development.

All humans follow a developmental sequence as they mature from infancy through adulthood. Barring significant trauma, this sequence can be expected to follow a predictable pattern and to be relatively consistent across cultures (see Broderick & Blewitt, 2006). Over the course of several decades, volumes of research have been conducted on human development resulting in the emergence of discrete categories that organize these theories according to specific schools of thought. They include behavioral, cognitive, interpersonal, object-relations, and evolutionist paradigms among others. Each ontological model has provided a unique perspective on what it means to develop as a person. Among the more recent paradigms to be explored among Western psychologists is the transpersonal, which evolved from the humanistic tradition (Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996).

William James has been credited with being the first Western psychologist to use the term “transpersonal” in relation to the field of psychology (Ryan, 2008). From James to Jung, and up through the late 1960s when an actual field of transpersonal psychology was ostensibly chartered with the publication of the first issue of the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, a dynamic tension has existed concerning the extent to which the field of psychology is an appropriate venue for exploring matters that are essentially spiritual (Cunningham, 2007; Scotton & Hiatt, 1996). This tension can also be viewed as what Walsh and Vaughan (1996) termed a “paradigm clash” wherein adherents with extensive knowledge of or an epistemological preference for one school of thought are unable to objectively critique theories from

other related yet distinct schools (e.g., existentialism vs. transpersonalism).

Nonetheless, as the body of literature and research in transpersonal psychology has grown over the past several decades, the relationship between transpersonal philosophy and the psychological discipline has defined itself more clearly. Transpersonal psychology is based upon the premise that human function potentiates along a continuum that can be divided into three sections: pre-personal (prior to the formation of a separate ego), personal (ego formation), and transpersonal (superseding a fully functional ego; Nelson, 1994; Rama, Ballentine, & Ajaya, 1976; Scotton & Hiatt, 1996; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). As a consequence, transpersonal psychology has firmly rooted itself as an anchor on the continuum of human development.

Just as the cognitive, evolutionary, and behavioral schools have produced their own theories and perspectives on development, the transpersonal school has also reached a point where discrete theories of development can be proffered for critique and analysis. This article presents a theory and model of development that is drawn from one of the transpersonal movement's earliest sources of inspiration—Hindu (or yoga) psychology.

## **Western Psychology/Eastern Influences**

While William James is generally regarded as the father of transpersonal psychology, Carl Jung is credited with being the first Western psychologist of note to embrace a cross-cultural perspective in the development of his theories (Scotton, Chinen, & Battista, 1996). He is known to have solicited opportunities for his students

to learn about Kundalini Yoga albeit with cautionary caveats due to his belief that Western perspectives were ill-suited for assimilation of tantric approaches (Coward, 1985). Nonetheless, Jung to his credit allowed Eastern philosophies reflective of both Hindu and Buddhist belief systems, to emboss some of his most popular theories.

Jung's interest in Indian psychology was not an isolated example of the nexus between Eastern and Western views on human psychology. In 1946, noted psychologist and member of the Harvard University Department of Psychology, Gordon Allport, wrote the introduction to a book on Hindu psychology that had as a stated aim the identification of synergies between these two seemingly disparate approaches to evaluating the human psyche (Akhilananda, 1946).

Traditional views of psychological development are predicated upon the construction of stable psychological structures that can support a healthy ego. Transpersonally oriented developmental theory follows the "two great arcs" premise advanced by Wilber, Engler, and Brown (1986) in which the first major phase of development leads to the personality and the second major phase leads beyond it. It is this notion that healthy human functioning requires development *beyond* the formation and stability of the ego that most clearly has its origins in Eastern philosophy.

Neumann's (1954) exhaustive review of the origins and evolution of consciousness on both the individual and collective level made repeated references to Indian and Egyptian mythological scripts. Neumann referred to these scripts to illustrate how the concept of an unfolding collective unconscious manifested itself in the literature and art of antiquity. Both Hindu and Buddhist precepts identify attachment to ego-philic pursuits as the source of misery and discontent. According to the Hindu tradition, this is referred to as *samsara*. Yoga, which is a word most appropriately used to describe a spiritual course of development, is pursued as a path to the only source of lasting contentment because it has as its goal the transcending of egoic concerns in pursuit of reunion with divine consciousness. However, it cannot be overstated that one must have an ego before it can be transcended.

The unanimity of agreement on this issue is what made it possible for transpersonal psychology to move beyond merely asserting the existence of a tripartite developmental structure to actually describing developmental frameworks that might exist within

it. Ken Wilber, as perhaps one of the most prolific theorists in the field, has offered and refined a theory of development based upon the pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal structure (Wilber, 1977, 1980, 2001; Wilber, Engler, & Brown, 1986). Aurobindo's (1993) theories are more directly linked to Hindu yoga practice than psychology, but have also influenced developmental models based on the tripartite structure.

The chakra system model described in this article builds upon this and other related bodies of work by presenting this ancient system in the tantric tradition of Hinduism as a self-contained framework of ontogenic markers indicative of healthy development through to the transpersonal level. One of the enduring strengths of Eastern philosophies is their accommodating stance, which acknowledges that there are multiple paths to the same, or related, destinations.

### The Chakras

Chakra is the Sanskrit word for wheel. Within the Indian tradition, the chakras represent centers of energy located vertically along the spine. These centers of energy are also believed to serve as seats of consciousness. Rama, Ballentine, and Ajaya (1976) refer to the chakras as an "inner playroom" where the individual explores experiences with consciousness during the course of growth and development. This conceptualization is a perfect starting point for considering the chakra system as a developmental model. However, first a summary description of the chakra system is in order.

The concept of a chakra system of energy or consciousness centers exists in many forms in different indigenous systems including Egyptian, Chinese, Native American, Sufi, and Kabbalah (Williams, 2008). In addition, even according to the Hindu tradition upon which the present model is based, there are by some estimates more than twenty major and minor chakras (Brennen, 1988). However, most discussions of the chakra system center on the seven major chakras and this is the view upon which the chakra system model is based.

The first is the *Muladhara* (root) chakra which is located at the base of the spine. It is identified with basic survival and self-preservation. The second is the *Svadhithana* (sacral) chakra which is located in the genital area. It is identified with sensuality and procreation. The third is the *Manipura* (navel) chakra. It is located in the abdominal or "gut" area of the solar plexus and is identified with the assertion of will. The fourth is the

*Anahata* (heart) chakra located in the upper chest. It is associated with the expression of unconditional love. The fifth is the *Visuddha* (throat) chakra. Located in the throat, it is associated with creativity and expression. The sixth is the *Ajna* (brow) chakra and is located in the center of the head behind the eyes. This chakra is associated with intuition and wisdom. Finally, the *Sahasrara* (crown) chakra is located just above the crown of the head and symbolizes not only the highest state of consciousness but complete and total union with the source of all creation (Rama, Ballentine, & Ajaya, 1976; Scotton & Hiatt, 1996). Much more will be said about each of these “centers of consciousness” as this model is described in more detail. However, it would first be prudent to establish how and why this system is appropriate for use as a self-contained developmental framework.

Gilchrist and Mikulas (1993) used the chakra system as the basis for a model of group development by aligning the seven chakras with other recognized stages of group development. In the course of establishing the synchronicity of the chakra system with developmental progression, the authors noted that individual development progressed along a sequential path within the chakra system as well. Prior to Gilchrist and Mikaulis, Wilber (1986) described a similar alignment between the chakra system and other theories of human development that included his own, as well as the theories of Sri Aurobindo, Albert Maslow and Jane Loevinger. Finally, Judith (2009, 2004) has written extensively about the chakra system and provided a detailed synthesis of how the chakra system maps to the developmental sequence of the individual according to Western systems of lifespan psychology. However, it is Nelson’s (1994) interpretation of the chakra system as a diagnostic tool for personality disorders that is most similar to and has been most influential on the present model.

In *Healing the Split* and a related journal article published the same year, Nelson’s (1994), primary objective was to present the chakra system as a transpersonal diagnostic system. The properties of each chakra were presented first with attention to their correlations to recognized patterns of individual development, followed by a detailed explication of how regressions in each chakra might present as conditions of psychological maladaptation. The richness in detail offered by Nelson concerning the connection between psychotic, neurotic, and borderline levels of personality

### **Chakra Model of Development**

disorder and their corresponding chakra centers is made plausible by first outlining how the chakra system aligns with individual development as it is currently appraised within the field. For the purposes of this article, this nexus will be demonstrated by discussing each chakra in relationship to its corresponding phase of human development as well as related developmental theories (see Table 1).

#### **The Root Chakra and the Infant (Unborn Fetus to First 16 Months of Life)**

As mentioned earlier, the root chakra governs security and survival. In this way it is similar to the first motivational need of Maslow’s hierarchy (1968) as well as the sensoriphysical stages identified by a variety of theorists including Piaget, Aurobindo, and Wilber (Wilber, 1986). From a developmental perspective, the root chakra represents those most rudimentary needs that must be confronted and satisfied before attention can be turned to other developmental tasks. For this reason, the status of a newborn infant is an ideal starting point both, literally and metaphorically, for evaluating the position and purpose of the root chakra in a chakra based system of development.

From a purely physiological perspective, a healthy infant is a self-contained but not yet self-sufficient organism. While it possesses all of the functional capacities that it will require to mature, it is completely dependent on its environment in order for these capacities to be activated in a manner that will enable it to thrive. From a psychological perspective, its introduction into this new and foreign environment is jarring and potentially debilitating. Here again, it is dependent on external support in the form of its primary caregiver to create a sense of order and orientation. In this way, this level also conforms with Erikson’s (1968) first stage of development which is characterized by basic trust versus mistrust. Trust or mistrust will be established based upon how well needs for safety, security, and stable orientation are met by others. The root chakra also aligns with Kegan’s (1982) Stage 0/Incorporative stage, where the infant functions purely at the subjective level, and has not yet achieved a level of individuation that allows for the perception of objects outside of him or herself.

Nelson (1994) added that the birth experience serves as an initiation into individualized consciousness. This necessitates the development of “psychic membranes,” the veiled partition separating the corporeal reality into which infants are born from the pre-sensate state out

of which they emerged. The root chakra represents the initial stage of formation for these membranes and, as would be expected at the beginning of any developmental process, they are relatively undifferentiated. According to Nelson, their role at this stage is to create a stable base of consciousness that will support “human emotions, reason and the consensual reality of society” (p. 173). Thus, the root chakra establishes a line of demarcation between the collective consciousnesses (perceived as unconsciousness at this stage) and the nascent stages of an individual and personal consciousness. It also initiates the construction of a framework that will house the self-system which will be defined in greater detail shortly. By virtue of the narrowly defined parameters of its functionality, however, the root chakra represents a crucial but nonetheless transitional stage of development. By virtue of its relentless focus on the survival instinct, its defining feature can be described as the challenge to move from fear to fearlessness.

#### **The Sacral Chakra and Early Childhood (12 to 24 Months)**

During the first stage of development as represented by the chakra system, the fledgling individual is consumed with its own survival. While theorists debate the extent to which this stage is aptly characterized by primary narcissism as proposed by Margaret Mahler (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975) or reflects a greater awareness and receptivity to interpersonal response (Reddy, 2008), there is little doubt that one of the distinguishing features of an infant’s transition to early childhood is the emergence of a separate identity. In the chakra system, the sacral stage marks the point of embarkation for this individuation process as well. According to Nelson (1994) among the eight characteristics of the sacral stage resides the emergence of self-boundaries that, while still shared to a certain extent with parents, will nonetheless come to delineate a sense of “I-ness.” However, this stage involves more than a period of experimentation with separateness in relationship to caregivers. Here, individual consciousness is also beginning to differentiate itself from the collective consciousness; what Nelson referred to as “the Spiritual Ground.” The significance of this pre-egoic level of consciousness for transpersonal psychology as well as the model proposed here is crucial.

Jung was the first Western psychologist to identify this level of consciousness in relation to the development of the individual psyche (Scotton, 1996).

His use of the term “collective unconscious” was intended to represent a source of psychic influence that did not originate within the individual but rather was shared with all human beings. However, for Jung this consciousness was inherited and he refrained, at least in his earlier writings, from ascribing a spiritual component to it. Nonetheless, Jung did allow his views to be influenced by indigenous spiritual beliefs and practices. Hindu philosophy was most certainly among them (Coward, 1985). Accordingly, Jungian psychology can be seen as establishing one of the earliest bridges between Western psychology and Hindu psychology in two important respects. First, it introduced the concept of a shared consciousness that is pre-existent to an individuated identity. Second, through the dichotomous orientations of introversion and extroversion—which would later evolve into personality types (Briggs Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 2003)—it explored energy as a psychosocial dynamic rather than a purely biophysical phenomenon.

As it pertains to the chakra system model of development, the individual’s relationship to this collective consciousness (which for the sake of clarity will be referred to hereafter as “universal consciousness”) functions as a navigational marker throughout the life cycle. For the remainder of this article, the term “universal consciousness” will be used to distinguish it from Jung’s collective consciousness which, while similar, should not be considered parallel to the model presented here. During the first three chakra stages, ego formation emerges in direct proportion to the minimization and ultimate cessation (albeit temporarily) of contact with universal consciousness. Nelson (1994) described this process as a choice between the external world of material reality with the attendant forfeiture of access to the fount of creativity and intuition that universal consciousness provides, and regression to that consciousness. However, regression to universal consciousness can only result in the arrest of the developing ego because of how overwhelming a constant stream of energies would be at such a fragile stage of development. As a result, healthy psychological development must direct Nelson’s choice toward the external world.

For Kegan (1982) whose developmental theory also refers to orders of consciousness (but from an object-relations rather than a transpersonal theory perspective), this next stage which he called Impulsive, marks the beginning of decentration. Decentration refers to the

evolutionary process of meaning-construction that is central to the process of development. It causes the individual to move from embeddedness in her subjective reality to relationship with a more objective view of reality. Kegan's subject-object theory of development will provide heuristic insights into this model at later stages of this discussion as well. For purposes of describing the transition from root to sacral chakra, the individual moves from being fully consumed by the "reflexes" experienced primarily as alternations of fear and relief, to having "perceptions" by virtue of his first opportunity to practice disembedding from these experiences.

One of the consequences of this first disembedding as reflected in Nelson's depiction of this transition is that the subtle energies of universal consciousness increasingly become unavailable as a mechanism for processing experiences. As a result, the senses take over this function. Not surprisingly, a preoccupation with sensual pleasures at this stage of development is precisely what Freudian psychology predicts. As it happens, the sacral chakra is identified primarily with sensuality, sexuality, and the genital area (Rama, Ballentine, & Ajaya, 1976). So simultaneous with a child's experimentation with autonomy and a stable sense of self in relation to others, he or she is also learning to rely on sensual responses to stimuli to make meaning of the external world.

This shift in focus brings with it both a redirection and intensification of energy that, for both Western and Hindu psychology, is localized in the genital area. However, Hindu psychology as expressed through the chakra system, views the developmental process as facilitating the redirection of this energy upward. In this way, development involves the introduction to and mastery of energies that have specific functions but are expected to eventually be integrated into a stable self. At the sacral stage, however, the individual is tasked with consolidating a flood of sensations while learning to do so with increasing independence from caregivers. With no prior experience to draw upon, and now with rapidly diminishing input from universal consciousness, the individual must increase its reliance on cues from the external world, which during the earliest stages takes the form of imitation.

Children begin to imitate what they see during infancy (Reddy, 2008). However, imitation cannot be regarded as a scaffolding strategy for purposes of personality formation until a child possesses the

capacity for object constancy and the ability to form representational models of self and others. There is little disagreement that this process begins in early childhood. Therefore, the sacral stage can be regarded as the period where identity formation is concerned with refining the boundaries of self, but is also heavily influenced by external referents in determining how to construct those boundaries. Sensual experiences provide feedback that is internalized to determine which external referents to adopt or adapt and which to discard. However, the self is ultimately expected to be experienced as unique and independent. Thus the defining feature of the sacral stage can be viewed as the challenge of moving from imitation to independence.

### **The Navel Chakra and Early Childhood Through Adulthood (18 Months to 4 Years and Beyond)**

Every bit of knowledge and experience that has been acquired through the transitions to and through the first two stages is consolidated and then purposefully directed during the navel chakra stage. The third chakra is identified with the will or personal power. Several important developmental markers are characteristic of this stage. First, the individual is firmly committed to the task of individuation. Chiefly concerned with defining a self-concept that supports healthy self-esteem, she or he will become preoccupied with this task if its accomplishment is perceived to be unsuccessful in any respect. Here the hallmarks of the first two stages are not only evident but instrumental to the task of creating and maintaining a positive self-concept.

Second, during adolescence peer groups replace caregivers as the primary reference sources and imitation as a vehicle for acceptance is at its zenith. Exploration of sensuality and sexuality is also intensified as a result of a rapid surge in hormones. As the individual moves from adolescence to adulthood, vocational choices, mate selection and the acquisition of symbols of success become an integral part of the self-concept. A functional will is central to the achievement of all of these tasks. Furthermore, all other developmental resources previously acquired and the extent to which they are successfully mastered, influence how the individual exercises his or her will.

For example, the man who has emerged from the first chakra stage fearful and unsure of whether his security concerns will be met and who proceeds through the second stage by over-identifying with the

power of sexuality and sensual experiences, may elect to exercise his will in adulthood through the acquisition of material wealth by dominating others and viewing them as objects for exploitation. There are many possible permutations of how personality develops up to and through the third chakra stage. Nonetheless, the exercise of the will (aggressively or passively) is the focus. If the energies of this stage are not directed upward toward further evolution, this focus becomes a preoccupation with maintaining the symbols of status that support the individual's self-concept.

This is at the heart of the Hindu and Buddhist admonitions about the ultimate sources of suffering. The first three stages provide ever increasing and complex sources of attachment that the will becomes preoccupied with either adding to or maintaining. Therefore, the defining feature of the third chakra stage is the challenge of moving from a preoccupation with current ego-based attachments to the surrender of subjective attachments so that the process of ego transcendence can begin.

The navel chakra stage is a uniquely pivotal one in the chakra system model of development for this reason. Barring any major life trauma, it is the last stage that one is presumed to be able to reach automatically. In fact, Hindu psychology and many complementary Eastern philosophies assert that, for most people in the West, this is the highest stage of development that they will ever reach (Akhilananda, 1946; Aurobindo, 1993).

This also marks an important point of departure between this model (Nelson's [1994] model) and Judith's (2004) schema. Judith's chakra based developmental framework aligns each chakra with Western equivalents of stage development across the lifespan. Judith's view suggests that all individuals evolve through all seven chakras during their lifetime, which facilitates alignment with Erikson's (1997) widely accepted lifespan model as well. Under the chakra system model this is not assumed to be the case. To the contrary, this model asserts that for most individuals, after reaching the navel chakra stage for the first time by the age of 4, they recycle (for many, indefinitely) through the first three chakra domains. The primary challenges of fear, imitation, and preoccupation are worked through as these challenges *re-present* themselves with ever-increasing complexity in the form of life experiences that correspond with successive phases of biopsychosocial maturity (e.g., adolescence, young adulthood, etc.).

### Heart Chakra and Middle Adulthood Through Old Age

The heart chakra stage represents a pivotal transition point. It is the gateway to the second of the "two great arcs." The heart chakra represents a selfless form of love and compassion for others. Its place within the chakra system model of development, however, reveals a shift in how love is regarded and experienced. As Nelson (1994) noted, ascending to the heart chakra stage means that love is no longer manifested as a need or craving that involves the acquisition or control of the affection of others. In this sense, it becomes a proving ground for the individual in establishing whether one is really prepared to transcend the ego-oriented preoccupations of the first three stages. Therefore, it should be viewed as no coincidence that this stage spans the period of life when most adults are navigating the myriad challenges of parenthood.

For most new parents, the birth of a child is likely the first true experience of selfless love. In his seminal work on attachment theory, Bowlby (1988) described patterns of mother-child interactions that ensue immediately after birth with specific attention to the manner in which a mother's selfless nature of responsiveness to the child leads invariably to the development of secure attachment patterns and healthy development for that child later on. More recent studies on the disruptive effects of maternal intrusiveness during early childhood and the potentially moderating effects of maternal warmth (Ispa et al., 2004) lend credence to the notion that parenthood offers orienting glimpses of the heart chakra stage.

On the other hand, becoming a parent also provides a whole new set of preoccupations, security concerns, and imitative triggers. A child's safety is the exclusive province of its parents for the first decade of life and beyond. During that time and through adolescence, parents will tend to gauge their success or failure by measuring their child's progress against the children of other parents. A child's perceived success or failure on any number of measures from academic achievement, to athletic prowess to physical attractiveness and popularity can become their parents' nearly obsessive concern until the child becomes adult.

Thus, middle adulthood becomes the earliest opportunity for most adults to reflect upon their own life's activities and to decide on the kind of meaning they will attach to what they see. The heart chakra stage



will be entered and subsequently mastered only by those adults who upon reflection, see their lives as stable yet incomplete, being thereby motivated to seek completion not through the acquisition of more external objects but by turning within. Hindu psychology regards this as the last of the five primary urges and credits this urge with being the reason why the overwhelming majority of individuals seek out religion at some point during their adult lives (Akhilananda, 1946). However, from a purely developmental perspective an interest in religion is one possible indication, among several, of engagement with the heart chakra stage.

Kegan's (1982) Stage 2 Imperial and Stage 3 Interpersonal phases bear many of the hallmarks of the navel to heart chakra transition. In fact, Kegan encapsulated the primary challenge of moving from Stage 2 Imperial to Stage 3 Interpersonal as relating to the individual's inability at Stage 2 to step outside of his or her subjective attachments. Such attachments represent precisely the type of anchors that can impede progress from the Navel to (and ultimately through) the Heart stage. This constriction limits the individual's ability to take the kind of broad, objective view of both the world and all of the diverse concerns within it, that can accommodate the possibility of a shared reality within which personal needs and demands give way to a mutuality of concerns.

The key difference between Western views of psychological development and those espoused by the chakra system, is that from the Western point of view healthy development is seen as complete upon attainment of a fully functioning ego, even when the ego is still bound by subject-object attachments. This, however, neither suggests nor explains an internal drive to find meaning in one's life and work, a drive that remains unsated for many at precisely this stage of adulthood. The heart chakra explains this as the impetus to continue to develop and only transpersonally oriented developmental models such as the chakra system model offer additional stages to pursue that align with this purpose. The chakra system model positions this stage as one in which ego-based pursuits will either be relinquished in favor of higher chakra stage attainment or result in stagnating behavior in which no further development is possible.

If, as Rama, Ballantine, and Ajaya (1979) suggested, the chakras represent a "playroom" or "laboratory" in which life experiences are used as tests and experiments in the service of self development, the

heart chakra is the capstone exercise. Most individuals will continue to confront and revisit their self-concept in relationship to the impulses, desires, and preoccupations of earlier chakras. If they are unable to transcend them, they will find themselves bobbing up and down between this stage and the navel stage as the currents of their lives dictate.

### **The Throat Chakra Stage**

Stable ascent through the Heart chakra stage is achieved only by those whose self-concept and broader worldview is steeped in the embrace of the underlying unity of all things (cf. Wilber, 2000, 2001). Here again, the selfless love and compassion which is attributed to the heart chakra and the openness to experience which accompanies it has one other important consequence. It reintroduces the individual to universal consciousness in a way that allows the individual to experience it as an intrinsic part of the self. A byproduct of this reunion is an increase in creativity and the need to express that creativity in ways that benefit others.

Nelson (1994) stated that "there is a call to service as the self prepares to ascend to the fifth chakra" (p. 275). He further defined the throat chakra stage as a "fine balance of reason and intuition, self-control and surrender, discipline and freedom, individuality and unity" (p. 284). These descriptors are often used to depict those who have approached their later years with grace and dignity. However, the chakra system does not view ascendancy to this stage as an automatic inheritance of aging nor is it the exclusive province of the elderly.

Erikson's (1997) stages of development offer many parallels to the chakra system, including his description of the concerns that correspond to the transition to higher order chakra stages of development. Specifically, according to Erikson, mid-adulthood marks a stage where the individual will either remain self-absorbed or turn his focus outward toward society and an interest in leaving a legacy of creativity and productivity. His corresponding stage to the throat chakra is described as a challenge of intimacy versus isolation.

For most, middle adulthood represents a decade or more of experiences upon which to reflect and act. The consequences of the life choices accumulated during that time highlight opportunities for intimacy in the form of a growing extended family (e.g., marriage, child birth, inlaws, grandchildren). At the same time one's social and professional network will likely have grown during this time span. By contrast, if these opportunities were

missed or avoided, it will be at this period in life that the absence may be felt most keenly, leading to feelings of isolation.

This depiction may initially appear to align itself more appropriately with the heart chakra than the throat chakra stage. However, Rama, Ballantine, and Ajaya (1979) helped to clarify this discrepancy by noting that the throat chakra is aligned with nurturance as well as creativity. It moderates the other-directed focus of the heart chakra by teaching the individual to accept and receive love as well as guidance from the universal consciousness with which it has now been reacquainted. Thus it redefines intimacy as a psychospiritual rather than a sensual construct. Notably, it is at this stage that it becomes possible to refer to the “Self” with a capital “S” because it is no longer the self that has heretofore been exclusively identified with the ego.

### **The Brow Chakra**

Liberated from the obsessions of the ego and experiencing free communication with universal consciousness, the Self is now the embodiment of wisdom. The interesting corollary for this discussion is that just as Erikson labelled his corresponding stage as the choice between stagnation and generativity, the chakra system model positions this stage as one in which access to the higher order chakras liberates an unprecedented level of intuition that would likely manifest itself as a wisdom that has a beneficent influence on others.

In their article on wisdom, Baltes and Staudinger (2000) grouped the then-existing theories on wisdom into three categories: personal dispositions, expositions of post-formal thought, and expert systems concerning the meaning of life. The approach of that article, and others like it, attempts to empirically validate the correlates of wisdom, something that might appear to be folly to the intuitive aspects of wisdom as experienced at this level. Nonetheless, they do provide objective measures by which to consider how a person who has ascended to the brow stage would appear to others, although it should be noted that the Baltes and Staudinger model was not designed to validate transpersonally oriented stages of development.

Wisdom has been broadly classified as demonstrated expertise in and a capacity to successfully navigate what Baltes and Staudinger (2000) referred to as the “fundamental pragmatics of life” (p. 125). These pragmatics are translated into a model of personal wisdom by Mickler and Staudinger (2008) in which its

constructs are purported to include personal maturity, self mastery in the form of subjective well-being, functional levels of fluid and crystallized intelligences (i.e., both cognitive capacity for problem solving and knowledge acquired through past experience), and demonstrated self-reflection based upon life events. The results of their study revealed several patterns that align with the brow chakra stage.

First, personal wisdom was positively correlated with an intermediate number of life events that stimulated reflective thinking. Second, the relationship between personal wisdom and intelligence was curvilinear suggesting that individuals of higher intelligence and presumably higher status have a harder time incorporating non-intellect related facets of wisdom (Mickler & Staudinger, 2008). In particular, the authors noted that lower scores on the domain of universalism suggested a more ego-oriented value system which may tend to devalue issues of social concern that are an intrinsic element of wisdom. It should be noted that wisdom was also found to be correlated with high levels of moral reasoning (Pasupathi & Staudinger, 2001). It should go without saying that by the time a person ascends to this chakra stage, they would evidence among other virtues a discernable and unimpeachable moral perspective.

These observations illustrate a central feature of the brow chakra, which refines the intellect in a way that integrates the emotions, relational concerns, and drives of the lower order chakras into a more intuitive form of interaction with the external world (Rama, Ballentine, & Ajaya, 1976). It involves a mastery of detachment from the objects that serve as barriers to growth because they operate as tethers to egoic concerns. By rising above these concerns, individuals who have ascended to the brow chakra stage not only evidence the hallmarks of wisdom, but they have balanced their feminine and masculine aspects and enlarged the opening to universal consciousness which prepares their ascent to the seventh and final chakra stage.

### **The Crown Chakra**

With the ascent to the Crown chakra, the boundaries of the psychic membranes that were fortified during the transition through the first three chakras and then gradually deconstructed during the next three chakras are finally and completely dissolved. Having first fully experienced and stabilized an ego structure, the transpersonal or post-egoic self can relinquish these

structures because they are no longer needed for support or reference. The unity with all things that is concomitant with universal consciousness no longer threatens the self-concept because the concept of Self has been enlarged and integrated through the developmental process.

Here again, Erikson's lifecycle provides insight by analogy. His final stage of integrity versus despair forecasts the psychological and emotional state that ensues when individuals fail to progress to this stage by later life. The use of the term "integrity" is consistent with ascent to the highest chakra stage which affirms one's true Self identity.

Nelson (1994) referred to this stage as *sage consciousness*. Because this stage contains all of the prior stages, it also possesses access to all of the knowledge gained through them. The "sage" is free of attachments and is thus fearless, independent, and unfettered by preoccupations of any sort. She or he has mastered what Hindu scholars referred to as affectionate detachment, which mimics the activating agent of the Agape form of love. But most notably, it symbolizes direct communion with universal consciousness and thus completes the cycle of development by returning the Self to its source.

### The Model

The significance of any developmental model can be evaluated by how well it explains human functioning relative to three criteria: *progress*, *productivity*, and *positivity*. The central feature of all developmental models, regardless of their ontological underpinnings, is that they purport to delineate human progress. Life span models such as Erickson's predict human progress over time; cognitively oriented models such as those of Piaget and Chomsky describe progress relative to the mechanisms of the intellect or the development of language; biologically oriented models focus on the progress made or not made along physiologic lines; Kohlberg's model charts progress relative to moral development. That they are termed "developmental" makes the progress element of these models self-evident.

However, to qualify as developmental models from a psychological perspective, these theories must also be anchored both subjectively and objectively. The subjective anchors can be found in the particular paradigms through which they are crafted. The objective anchor is the standard they all have in common which, in the field of psychology, is linked to the degree of individual functionality demonstrated. In other words, as individuals develop are they able to be productive within

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the settings and according to the expectations of their stage of developmental attainment? Finally, progress and productivity are both measured against a scale that seeks to determine what is developmentally positive. This may be defined by using terms such as healthy, normal, or functional.

Proceeding from this rubric, the chakra system model, to be classified as a developmental model, must also address progress, productivity, and positivity in its depiction of human functioning. As previously identified, the seven chakras have already been presented in a stage sequence by other authors (Judith, 2004; Nelson, 1994). However, viewing the chakras purely from a stage perspective only avails of the more superficial elements of its architecture because it bypasses the most central tenets of the system. It bears restating that the chakras also represent centers of energy. The field of energy medicine, proceeds on the premise that energy is a life promoting and sustaining force (Srinivasan, 2010). Thus, the chakras are not and cannot be conceived of only as stages to be reached, but must also be viewed as domains through which their corresponding energy fields operate to engage and influence individuals as they move from stage to stage.

### The Self-System

Wilber (1986) described the self as a self-system with six constituent functions: *identification*, *organization*, *will*, *defense*, *metabolism*, and *navigation*. Identification is the source of the self-concept; organization unifies the mind to frame experiences with the outside world; will is the exercise of agency and choice; defense consists of mechanisms of self protection from perceived threats; metabolism is the assimilation of past experiences; and navigation is movement from one developmental stage to another. For purposes of the chakra system model, the self-system is perhaps best visualized as a *sphere* that is constructed by the individual as he or she proceeds through life (Figure 1). The chakra *stages* represent the layers of the sphere which are constructed from the bottom up. However, as with any structure, the building process has many phases. First a foundation must be laid, then a skeletal structure is erected, followed by the external surfaces and finally the internal structures and components.

This order is crucial for several reasons. The foundation must be laid first because its stability determines how high the skeletal form can reach while still maintaining its structural soundness. As previously

stated, an individual must have a fully formed and stable ego before it can be transcended. This begins with a secure transition from the root chakra, without which the individual may question their very existence (Nelson, 1994). The skeletal form must precede the application of the external surfaces for these surfaces to have anchoring points. This is the function of the sacral stage during which the individual begins to explore both their individuation and the definition of the self-concept that they will project to others. Finally, the external surfaces must be affixed before significant work is done to the interior so that the internal fixtures are adequately protected from the corrosive effects of the external environment. The assertion of personal will characteristic of the navel stage serves among other functions, to protect the developing psyche and ego based attachments through the deployment of defense mechanisms. Each of these steps must be taken in this order and with attention to detail. Otherwise, deviations will emerge as tectonic defects once the structure is subjected to uses such as the daily life activities each individual experiences and the concomitant variations of excitement and stress that accompany them.

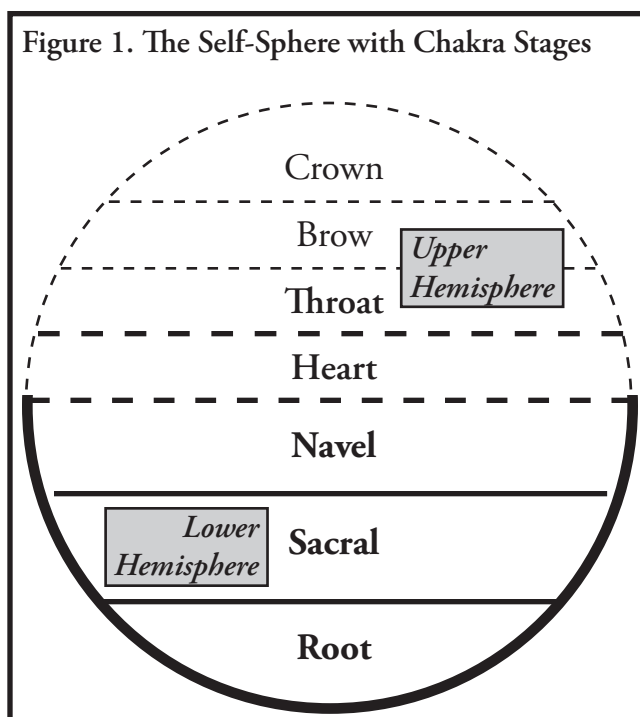
As Eastern views of human development meet West, the former might depict the latter's conceptualization of the self-sphere as half complete. According to the chakra system model the skeletal structure of the sphere is constructed in two hemispheres. Individuals construct

the bottom half up to a point that would support the first three chakra stages—root, sacral and navel—which typically takes until middle adulthood to achieve. Then and only then, depending upon the life of the individual, is one capable of constructing the skeletal structure that will support the second hemisphere that will complete the Self and contain the four remaining chakra stages. As with any hierarchical structure, the skeletal form of this spherical model of the Self is erected vertically, thus creating latitude and longitude effects. The latitudes mark the chakra stages. The longitudes represent developmental paths as the individual moves up through the potential influences of the chakra domains.

Recall that each chakra is distinguished from the others by several defining characteristics: the root chakra by its focus on security and survival, sacral by sensations and individuation, navel by will and initiative, heart by love and affection, throat by creativity and nurturance, brow by intuition and wisdom, and crown by oneness with creation. Each of these characteristics also manifests as energies that influence perception and behavior. When functioning as domains (as opposed to stages), the chakras signal the individual energies or schematic frames that predominate in an individual as he or she engages in the tasks and requirements of life.

It is at this point that a return to the six functions of Wilber's (1986) self-system is particularly illuminating. The metabolism function refers to the self-system function of "ingesting" experiences and converting that material into components that will be accepted, internalized, and manifested as the building blocks of the self. Alternatively, the self will sometimes reject some of the experiences it "tastes," by exercising its *defense* function. These defenses serve as the outer wall that protects the self from the elements that appear as a threat to the evolving self-concept. Under the chakra system model, the chakra domains serve as metabolizing agents as well as agents of defense that filter experiences based upon the characteristics identified with that specific chakra (e.g., fear, survival, sensual pleasure, will, etc.). This model accommodates the biological, social and environmental factors deemed influential by other developmental models and rubricizes them.

As Wilber (1986) noted, development involves attaining and identifying with a stage until it is mastered and then transitioning to the next stage. This transition, however, can be difficult as it involves detaching from the stage that has just been mastered and engaging in



the uncertainty of a stage not yet experienced. It is not uncommon for individuals to become rooted or stuck at a stage of development for any number of reasons. The chakra system model affords an alternate nomenclature that permits evaluation of how arrested stages become operationalized. However, its utility lies in the fact that it extends the developmental paradigm in ways that afford a therapeutic pathway even for those who would be deemed healthy according to Western psychology.

In making the case for a spiritually-oriented branch of personality psychology, Emmons (1999) noted that spirituality facilitates adaptive functioning because it supports goal attainment, self-congruence, and self-regulation. He went on to argue for the existence of a “spiritual intelligence” and supports this hypothesis by arguing that spiritually-influenced behavior meets Ford’s (1994) pre-requisites for effective functioning—motivation, skills, biological architecture, and supportive environment. In other words, spiritually-influenced lives involve goal directed activity (motivation), deliberate action requiring the application of skillful conduct, and the biological capacity to support motivated action along with an environment that will not hinder its progress.

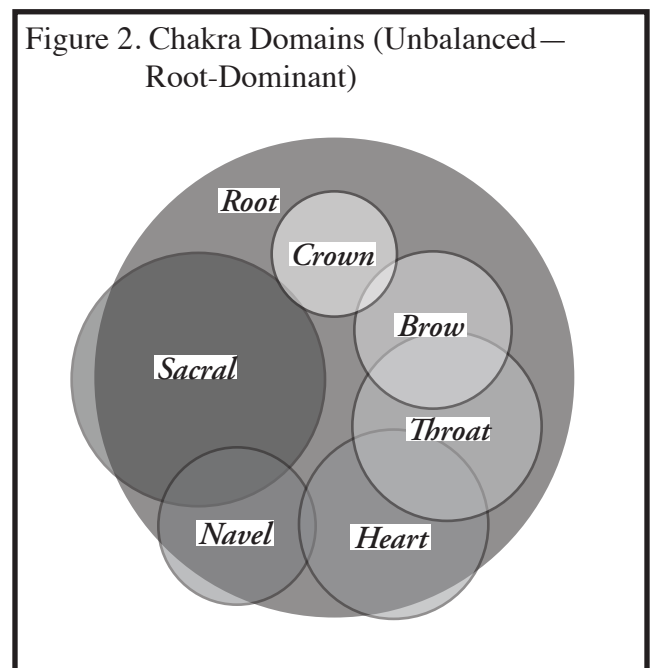
The chakra system model puts this spiritual intelligence in context. Specifically, it provides a developmental sequence for the individual such that goal directed activity is evaluated in light of both chakra stage attainment and the chakra domains which predominate an individual’s perceptions at a given time. For example, chakra stage attainment would place the typical 25 year old male at the navel stage. However, if he were still overly focused on materialism to define his self-concept, the sacral domain would suggest that the energies of the sacral domain were still a dominant influence over his choices. Additionally, this framework serves as a reference point for measuring both the skillfulness of the conduct and the adequacy of the supporting environment. However, on a more practical level, chakra domains offer guidance for investigating all levels of development in both healthy individuals and those experiencing varying levels of psychological dysfunction. Even the most narcissistic or aggressive individual can be found to demonstrate isolated gestures of selfless compassion, while the popular press is replete with examples of pious figures succumbing to their sensual urgings. The mediating influences of the chakra domains offer an explanation for these patterns of seemingly incongruent behavior, because the chakra stages and domains interact independently. Universal

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consciousness is comprised of the energy represented by all seven chakra domains. Its existence is constant as is its availability. What varies is the individual’s ability to control the lower order domains and access higher order domains without being overwhelmed by them. Grof and Grof (1989) suggested that behaviors sometimes diagnosed as psychiatric disorders actually represent the premature accessing of higher order psychic functions that correspond with the higher order chakra domains, something they called “spiritual emergencies.”

The chakra system model explains development as a process by which the individual begins life experience navigating upward from the root chakra with a primary focus on security and survival. Accordingly, all experiences are also metabolized through the prism of the root chakra domain. The remaining six chakras, while present, are undifferentiated and thus unavailable for use (Figure 2). As the individual matures, however, if safety and security needs are met adequately through appropriate interactions with caregivers, additional chakra domains become accessible (Figure 3) and assist the nascent being with the transition to the sacral chakra stage followed by higher chakra stages that will rest on the secure foundation of the chakra stages already mastered.

What is most important to note, however, is that the construction of the bottom hemisphere of the self-sphere reflects an autonomic progression through



the first three stages. That is, progression through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (corresponding to the root, sacral, and navel chakra stages respectively) is generally dictated by physiological, cognitive, and behavioral markers that assume stage attainment unless major structural deficits are noted.

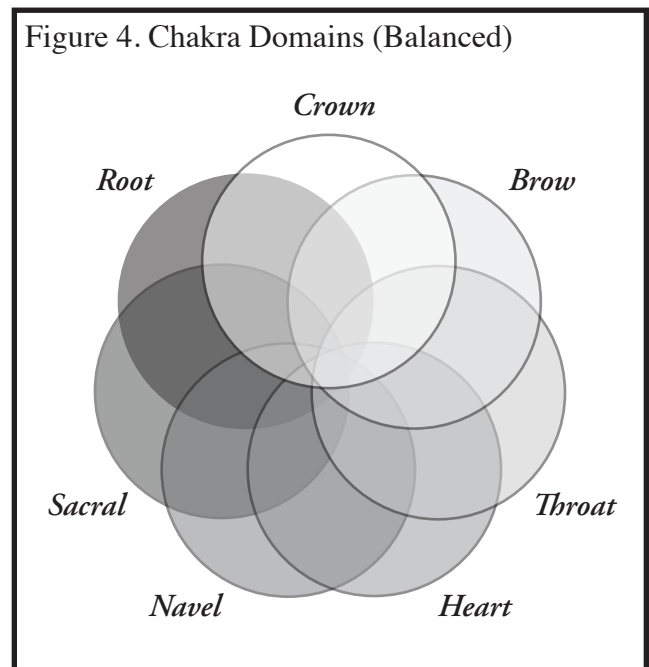
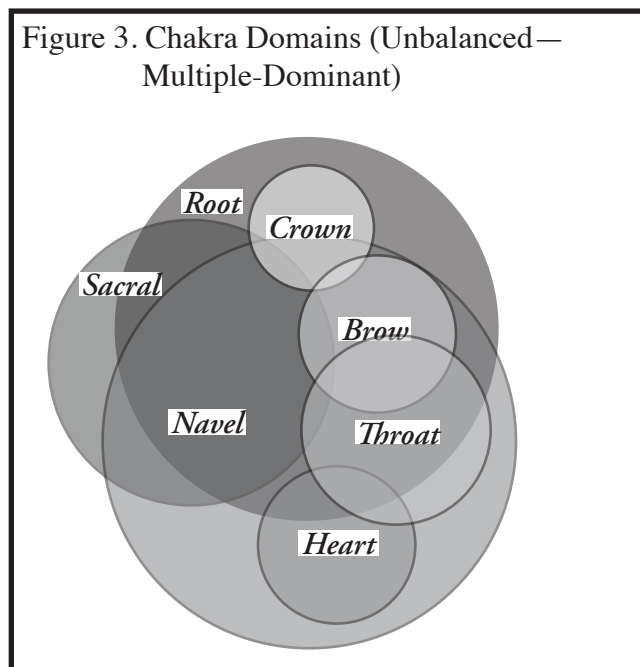
Therefore, the chakra system model does not determine positive, productive progress to be achieved based upon attainment of the third stage, as this is presumed. To the contrary, progress is determined by how well these stages have been supported as indicated by unobstructed access to all seven chakra domains (Figure 4), so that experiences can be metabolized in an appropriately balanced manner. In this way, access to fully balanced chakra domains helps the individual produce the building material that forms the skeletal supports and internal fixtures of the self-sphere. The quality of the interior, particularly in the lower hemisphere of the self-sphere, is thus determinative of whether and to what extent development will continue into the upper hemisphere. Premature access to higher order chakras before an individual has become sufficiently grounded by full and stable access to the lower order chakras can lead to a destabilization of the ego structures (Grof & Grof, 1989; Nelson, 1994). Alternatively, fixation on the lower order chakra domains without progression to the moderating effects of the higher order chakra domains leads to stagnation.

Thus, what has heretofore been described as “regressions” under other paradigms (Washburn, 1990) is regarded here as a continual reliance on the influence of the root, sacral and/or navel chakra domains. Access to higher domains as a result, is either sporadic or not experienced at all depending upon the extent to which reliance upon lower order chakra domains inhibits the individual’s ability to differentiate higher order chakra domains. This differentiation of higher order chakras is a necessary precursor to their exploration, use and ultimately to higher order chakra stage attainment.

### Chakra System Theory

All models must be supported by an underlying theory. The chakras have been discussed both from religious and psycho-spiritual perspectives for several thousand years (Akhilananda, 1946). Neither is their relationship to the psychological discipline within the Western worldview a novel concept. However, it is necessary nonetheless, to frame the chakra system as an independent theory if it is to support a model as is intended in this article.

Feist and Feist (2009) identified three characteristics of a theory that can serve as a useful framework for presenting a chakra system theory. The theory must present (1) a set of related assumptions; (2) that can support logical deductive reasoning; (3) from which testable hypotheses can emerge. Thus to qualify as a legitimate theory, the assumptions supporting the



chakra system model, must be readily identifiable and able to support a variety of hypotheses in the form of not only the model itself, but also for example, diagnostic strategies, measurement instruments, and therapeutic interventions as well.

Earlier in this article, one set of assumptions advanced was that under this theory, developmental progression from infancy to adulthood was characterized as the challenge to move from a state of fear, imitation, and preoccupation to a state of fearlessness, independence, and surrender of subjective attachments. These assumptions were based upon the presumed existence of lower order chakras that must be mastered before higher order chakras can be realized. To master the selfless affection, creativity, intuitiveness, and wisdom that serve as the defining characteristics of higher order chakra stages, it is reasonable to deduce that one would have to overcome worries about having security needs met, possessing the affections of others, or preoccupations with the egoic concerns that can characterize adulthood, a period when the lower order chakra domains predominate.

Maslow (1968) described this transition in terms of a dichotomy comparing *deficiency* motivations to *growth* motivations. Deficiency motivations are directly linked to the individual's dependence on the environment. For Maslow, these motivations could be linked to the first four levels of his hierarchy of needs (safety, security, belongingness, and esteem); however, they map just as effectively to the first three chakra stages. Just as Maslow identified ego transcendence as representing the transition from the dependency stage created by deficiency motivations to the independence attendant with growth, the line of demarcation for the two hemispheres of the self-sphere divide the dependency that characterizes the fear, imitation and preoccupation of the lower order chakras from all that the higher order chakras represent.

Moreover, it is only through how one uses the filters of the chakra domains to interpret life experiences that growth is possible. This is illustrated in the wisdom research done by Mickler and Staudinger (2008) which identified how one manages life events as a defining characteristic of personal wisdom. Therefore, in returning to the self-sphere, the individual capable of transition to and through the heart chakra to the higher order chakras will be the individual who has fully metabolized life experiences through the first three chakras in a manner that leaves little to no undigested bits such as residual

neuroses, complexes, or ego-based preoccupations. Following Guntrip (1971), Wilber (1986) described psychopathology as “failed metabolism—the self fails to digest and assimilate significant past experiences and these remain lodged, like a bit of undigested meat, in the self-system, generating psychological indigestion” (p. 79).

Security concerns no longer serve as a motivation to operate out of fear. Mastery of sensual impulses and the need to imitate others free the individual from the overwhelming influence of desire and ego-based concerns. Otherwise, the individual interprets the will as a tool for dominating or being dominated by others as insurance that dependency needs will be met. This process facilitates *navigation* through the chakra stages, defines the *organization* function of the self-system and activates the *identification* function in a manner that either releases the individual from external dependencies and ultimately from the ego itself or keeps the individual perpetually bound to ego-based concerns. In this way, the chakra domains function as heuristic devices through which higher level stage attainment is made possible.

#### **Implications for Future Research**

What does the chakra system model add to the developmental literature that is not already addressed by other models? In proposing a grand theory of development based upon dynamic systems theory, Spencer et al. (2006) identified four central tenets of development: behavior is both of the moment and consequential; it is “softly assembled” from varied causes and subsystems deriving from and merging with nonlinear interactions; perception, cognition, and action are embodied in behavior as an integrated component; and these experiences combine in idiosyncratic and personalized ways.

Such a view would suggest a chaotic view of development that should defy attempts to predict the emergence of coherent stages. Yet such a coherence does exist. The chakra system model asserts that an unlimited variety of individual experiences are softly assembled through a finite number of prisms—the chakra domains. The domains encase these nonlinear interactions of living in ways that explain why progress can appear to be regression (e.g., struggling with sacral domain impulses while working to master heart chakra stage attainment; intuitive creativity appearing spontaneously in the midst of self-indulgent and destructive behavior). Additionally, the concept of chakra domains explains how perceptions, cognitions

and actions are filtered and ultimately influenced such that observed behavior can be explained in a systematic way while still accommodating the idiosyncratic nature of individual development.

More importantly, however, this model provides a therapeutic course for those who have met the requirements and expectations of a satisfactory and well-functioning adulthood, yet still feel unfulfilled. The chakra system model explains that what has heretofore been viewed as complete is only the first half of one's developmental journey, as has also been advanced by Erikson (1997), Washburn (1990), and Wilber (1986, 2000, 2001). It can also provide support for developmentally focused psychotherapy, which has been argued for as a necessary alternative to problem focused approaches (Sperry, 2002).

The disciplines of counseling, education, leadership, and even divinity all posit theories aimed at aiding individuals toward the development of improved functionality within their respective purviews. Yet, each struggles to find a definitive approach upon which universally accepted and invariably successful models can be based. The limitation more often than not can be traced to the individual as the unit of analysis. Therapeutic interventions, educational strategies, leadership styles and religious inspiration are all predicated upon stability in the mode of delivery, which in every instance is traced back to the individual. Transcendent individuals will become more intuitive counselors, provide more effective instruction, function more consistently as holistic leaders and inspire the spiritual development of more people through the examples they set.

The chakra system model presents a paradigm to support these and other discipline-specific approaches. In keeping with other transpersonal theories, it extends the range of human development and adds depth and context to the upper strata of stages to which the healthy psyche aspires. By regarding this model as a developmental model, it like other developmental models, offers a scaffolding structure upon which to build growth-oriented strategies both for neurotic and pathologic levels of human functioning in need of therapeutic invention as well as healthy individuals looking to continue the development of their potential in all areas of life.

Specifically, further areas of research that would test the efficacy of this model could include the creation of validated instruments to identify both chakra stage attainment and the over or underutilization of specific

chakra domains; the development of counseling strategies and coaching techniques based upon a differentiation of lower versus upper hemisphere stage attainment; implications for the refinement of differential diagnoses of neurotic and pathologic behaviors that may in the alternative represent the premature accessing of higher order chakra domains (Cortright, 2000); and leader and leadership development models based upon the chakra system model stage descriptions. That said, this list is just a first step toward many potential uses and applications for this model. Limitations include constraints on identifying measurable constructs related to higher order chakras (e.g., Brow & Crown). However, research based on this theory could build upon the research designs used for wisdom-related studies as well as those previously conducted to validated theories of transcendence (Thomas, Brewer, Kraus, & Rosen, 1993).

### Conclusion

Returning to Kegan (1982), evolution from lower to higher order chakras (viewed as moving from "subject to object" according to his orders of consciousness model), represents a recursive process of meaning making applied to our personalized view of reality. He wrote:

Subject-object relations emerge out of a lifelong process of development: a succession of qualitative differentiations of the self from the world, with a qualitatively more extensive object with which to be in relation created each time; a natural history of qualitatively better guarantees to the world of its distinctness; successive triumphs of "relationship to" rather than "embeddedness in." ... What is taken as fundamental is the activity of meaning-constitutive evolution. It is true that infancy marks the beginning in the history of this activity. As such, infancy initiates themes that can be traced through the lifespan and inaugurates a disposition on the part of the person toward the activity of evolution. The first years of life do indeed have great salience. But it is a not a salience *sui generis*; the distinctive features of infancy, it is suggested, are to be understood in the context of that same activity which is the person's fate throughout his or her life. The recurrence of these distinctive features in new forms later on in development are not understood as later manifestations of infancy issues, but contemporary manifestations of meaning-making. (pp. 77-78)



In the foregoing quote, Kegan (1982) articulated the core function and purpose of the chakra domains and their relationship to chakra stage transitions. It is through the defining characteristics of each chakra domain that individuals work through the process of shifting from subject to object relative to that corresponding stage. That is, the developmental process of the chakra system model finds the individual working from a position of being so immersed in the tasks, challenges, and identifying features of a stage so as to be embedded in and thus unable to distinguish him or herself from the those features—to objectifying and thus transcending that stage such that she is able to relate to, learn from and incorporate these features into a newly evolved self that begins the process anew at the next stage.

However, Kegan's orders of consciousness model offers even more insight relative to the crucial transition from the lower to the upper hemispheres of the Self-sphere. As the heart chakra is defined as a "proving ground" for the surrender of subjective attachments, this stage transition also represents the very mastery of the subject-object transition itself. Beyond the heart chakra, the Self emerges as a form that no longer needs to create objects to make meaning but internalizes experiences as a reflection of the undifferentiated whole to which all individuals belong—universal consciousness. When viewed in this fashion, the line of demarcation between the lower and upper hemispheres of the Self can be visualized as delineating the epic battle between defining our experiences of self by our knowledge of the world and defining our experiences of the world by our knowledge of Self. In so doing, the perspective offered by the chakra system model extends the accepted sequence of lifespan development by augmenting the present conceptual understanding of when, how, and under what circumstances healthy adult development can truly be achieved, and complements them with a model organized around the chakra system.

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### **About the Journal**

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