

Kundalini, Chakras, and Jung

As the “yoga of awareness,” the purpose of kundalini is to awaken one’s Higher Self*. The written teachings of kundalini yoga date back to the fifth century BC in India, and likely longer ago in oral traditions. In the Western world, this yoga only took root in isolated pockets before 1969, when Sikh teacher Yogi Bhajan brought yoga in earnest to the United States. Bhajan wrote, “I am sharing these teachings to create a science of the Total Self.... It is the birthright of every human being to be healthy, happy and holy.” He called this “3H.”

What is Kundalini Yoga Like?

What do kundalini practices look like? Imagine sitting comfortably, mostly closing your eyes and focusing on your breathing. There are various ways to breathe. You might breathe rapidly and deeply down into the bottom of your lungs as you do gentle exercises. This process oxygenates the blood and soon relaxes you. You forget your cares. This alone is beneficial.

During a typical busy and stressful day, we all tend to get “tightly wound” or we close up to steel ourselves against challenges. We get preoccupied and stiff, mentally and physically, and we may get reactive, close-minded, or hard-hearted. Over time, we may even get accustomed to this constricted state. In contrast, kundalini relaxes, stretches, and opens us. It uncoils us.

Along with breathing, the practice includes stretching, poses, movements, chanting, and maybe visualizing a symbol or scene such as the ocean, a great tree, a holy flame, or gentle clouds. As we try these, we keep refocusing on breathing and the sensations that brings.

With practice, a yoga initiate comes to feel an unmistakable sensation at the base of the spine that pulses its way upward until it reaches the crown of the head, opening the person like a budding flower to an altered state of awareness that diffuses the ego’s chatter and defenses.

The Chakras are Energy Centers

As part of its practice, kundalini focuses on *chakras*—psychological energy centers—that run from the bottom of the spine to the crown of the head. The term is pronounced as it is spelled: “chahk-rah” (not “shaka-rah”). The diagram on the opposite page shows the names and locations of the seven major chakras. You will also find a pronunciation guide. You can imagine the chakras as vortices, spinning wheels, or whirlpools that draw us in. Often we can get caught up in a particular chakra, such as getting overly intellectual (all talk) in the 5th chakra. In contrast, kundalini helps us stay flexible and free.

A metaphor for the chakras is the color spectrum. Moving through the chakras is like moving along the colors of the rainbow—from red and orange at one end to blue and purple at the other. Like shifts in color, shifts in consciousness are gradual and yet each chakra has its unique themes, just as different colors matter. Thus, as you read about the chakras in the coming pages, going from the first to last, the themes will shift gradually, and within each are meaningful differences.

* *Introduction to Kundalini Yoga and Meditation: Volume 1* by Guru Rattana. Yoga Technology LLC, 2015.

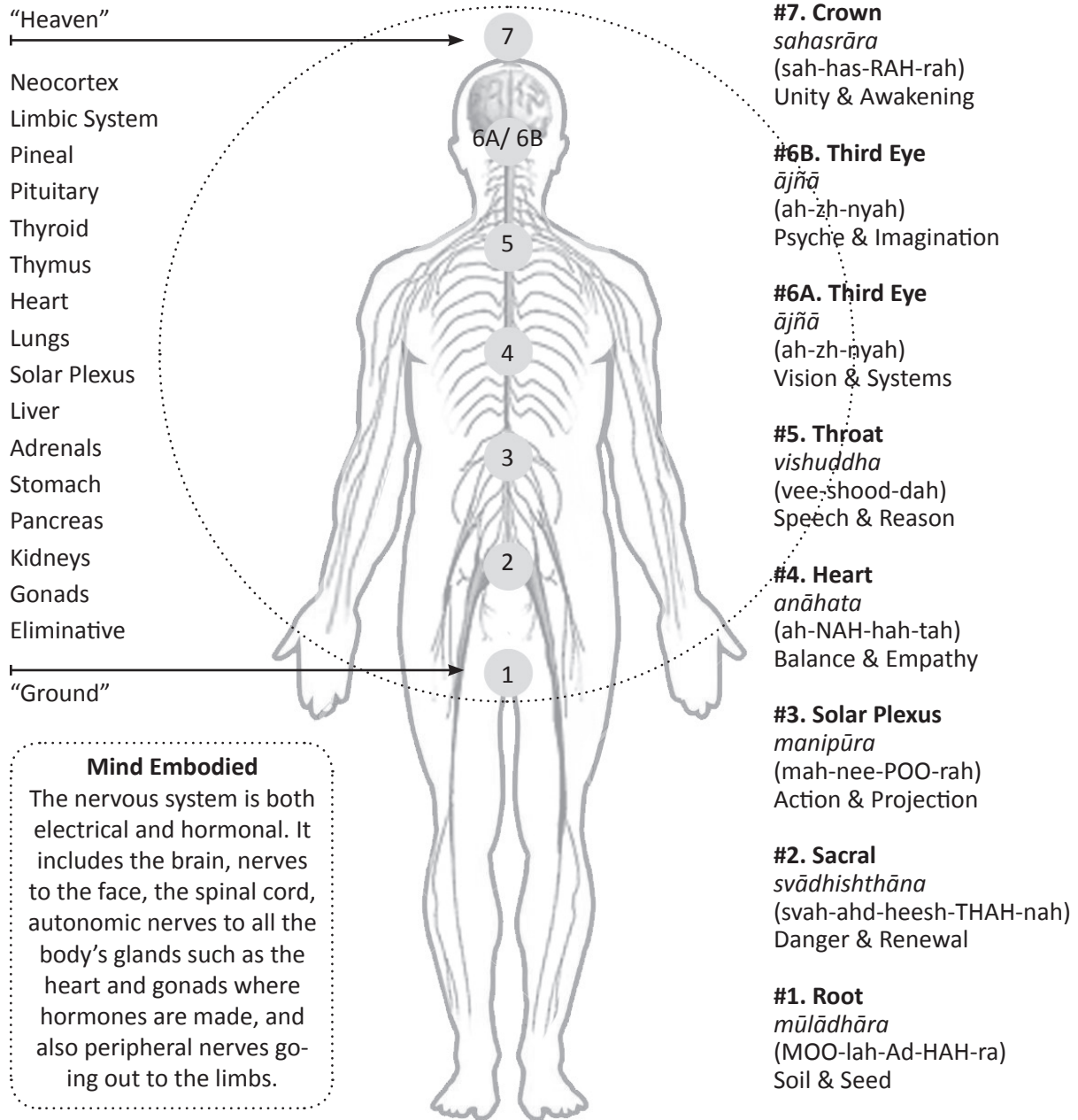


Figure 1: The chakras mirror activity along the entire nervous system

Chakras as Biological Centers

Various traditions describe the chakras in their own ways, but they roughly map to physiological centers in the body*. For example, the sacral chakra usually corresponds to the kidneys and gut—the element of water—and to digestion, cleansing, purging, and so forth in literal and metaphorical senses. In modern medical terms, the chakras likely mirror the activity of the autonomic nervous system, or ANS. The ANS runs throughout the torso, suffusing our organs (heart, lungs, etc.) and endocrine glands (gonads, adrenals, thyroid, etc.). Thus, chakras may correspond to biology.

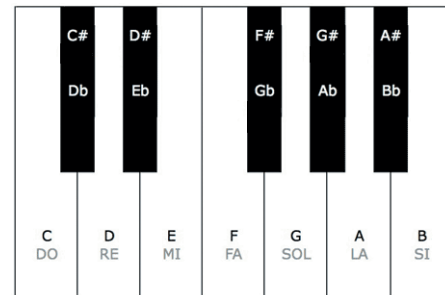
We can adjust our own bodily activity. For example, we can shift our breathing to alter our heart rate and thus calm or excite ourselves. This can impact the whole ANS. We can hone our awareness of body sensations, such as what parts of us tighten or relax when we focus on certain thoughts. In these ways, we can tune in to our chakras. Kundalini yoga is a systematic way to do this.

With patience, we may further learn to unblock chakras, proactively tap them as resources, and ideally bring them into alignment with each other and one's core self, to live life fully and awake. Thus, chakra work via yoga is a daily practice toward spiritual growth. It differs from prayer but serves the same purpose to nurture a daily link to ourselves, other people, Nature, and the Divine.

Major and Minor Chakras as Vibrational Levels

Most presentations cover seven chakras. Jung covered six in depth. Some who work with chakras cover eight to fifteen chakras, maybe more. Their reason: There are seven major chakras plus five minor ones for twelve total along the body, plus one above and one below the body and one within— as abstract energy centers—for fifteen chakras total. Our palms and soles, plus other points, can also be treated as chakras.

Some people describe the chakras as vibrational levels, like a progression of notes on a piano. You can think of white keys as major chakras, as notes C, D, E, F, G, A, and B. In contrast, black keys are minor chakras. Of course, the notes have a sound such as *Do*, *Re*, and *Mi* for notes C, D, and E. In the same way, kundalini uses traditional sounds, such as *LAM* for the 1st chakra and *OM* for the 7th chakra, to help a person get into experiencing each one.



Chakras as Gateways

Chakras tend to sit between major organs rather than map one-to-one. For example, the 2nd chakra sits between the sex organs and the gut, while the 6th chakra sits between the pituitary and pineal glands. Perhaps each chakra is a midpoint on a path? A path is where energy flows in the nervous system between organs. Thus, the chakra is like a gateway. If the gateway is pinched then energy flows poorly and a person feels discomfort or cut off below that point. A goal, then, of kundalini exercises is to fully open gateways and pump energy along the path. Since our nervous system has two modes—fight-or-flight versus eat-or-sleep—each chakra might really be two gates.

* *The 8 Biotypes* by Laura Power. <http://www.biotype.net/types>

Your Core Self

Various traditions, including kundalini yoga, describe an extra, all-encompassing chakra that surrounds a person like a bubble. You can see it as the big dotted circle in Figure 1 on page 9. This “aura” is more than a metaphor; it has a biological and psychological basis.

Consider how you have a sense of personal social space. This space determines how close someone can get to you comfortably in casual conversation and such. You also have a perceptual field—sight and sound—within which the brain is quietly alert to dangers; you become aware of disturbances only when something atypical is happening.

You also radiate a purely physical field produced by your heart. This may surprise some people, but it is easily measured even with a smart phone app. The body’s systems—namely the heart and brain—generate an electromagnetic (EM) field. The heart’s power varies from 1 to 5 millivolts. About 1 meter out, your heart’s field will still measure 0.1 to 0.5 millivolts*. A sensitive device can pick up 1/100th that amount, and other peoples’ nervous systems can register it unconsciously.

Some yoga masters as well as martial artists train to become aware of and actively direct this core energy by adjusting their breathing, heart rate, focus, and such. More typically, a kundalini student is generally aware of this field and does exercises to feel more harmonious.

Your Turn: *Breath of Fire*

Let’s try a common kundalini breathing exercise called *Breath of Fire*. Start by sitting comfortably on the floor with your legs crossed. Sit on a cushion if you like. Close your eyes and mouth and keeping them closed, focus your attention on your nose and navel. You may wish to place a hand on your navel as a reference, at least at the start. Otherwise, rest your hands comfortably on your knees, palms up, with each index finger and thumb touching.

Now, breathe in deeply through your nose until your gut (around your navel) distends. Then let your gut “pop” back into place as you release your breath, emptying your lungs through your nose. Forcefully push out the air, from the navel, drawing your navel toward your spine

Repeat until you find a rhythm, and continue doing this for two minutes. You might use a timer. Ideally, you want to get to one breath per second—quick and forceful. You may need to work up to that goal starting with just thirty rapid, deep breaths. With practice, you can go longer.

During the exercise, you may briefly feel urges to stop. You may even feel slight panic. Assuming you are of at least average health, this feeling is mostly psychological. Your mind is unused to breathing this way. If you feel this urge, just note it and continue breathing, slowing down if needed, then speeding up again when you can. You will be fine.

When you finish, assuming you worked up to a good speed, you will likely feel a rush, tingling, or pulsing in your head. You can focus on this feeling to enhance it. Also, your inner voice will likely be quiet for a time. Just sit and enjoy the sensation, perhaps noticing when your mind starts to get active again, and what that feels like. Or, pose a question to yourself and explore whatever comes up.

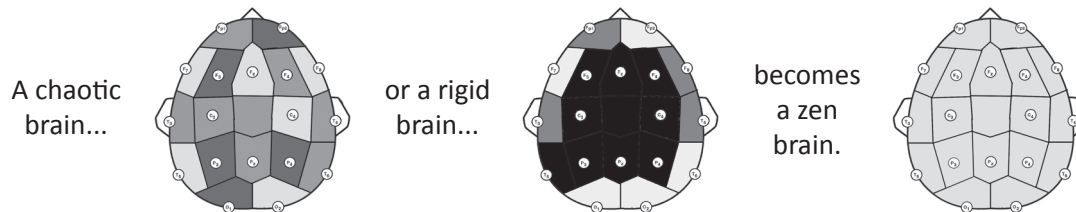
* Field Intensity = Power divided by 4 times 3.14 * the distance squared

Kundalini Impacts the Body and Brain

We can measure the impact of kundalini yoga. Neuroscientists have monitored heart rate, brain activity, and such while people meditate. During a simple generic meditation to clear the mind and relax, heart rate and brain activity also relax. Moreover, people who are experienced meditators see greater reductions than those without experience.

People who practice kundalini yoga tend to enjoy extra benefits because they focus on moving energy. After just a few weeks of daily practice, they can show a brainwave pattern normally associated with a strong body connection. More than an empty mind, they show strong mind-body awareness. Body-mind awareness is important to notice and release stress, identify our emotions, and alter habitual behavior. Movement in kundalini helps change our actions as well as thinking and feelings.

During kundalini, when energy reaches the crown of the head, what happens? Is it special? Yes it is!* I asked a friend to help me find out. I used an EEG machine to observe his brain activity. Within a few minutes, he got into a strange trance-like state. From the outside, he was unresponsive. However, his brain activity said otherwise. His brain was active yet also even, like synchronized dancers.



What was happening? His brain regions were in synch, working as one. Importantly, a brain network associated with the ego was quiet. Also, brainwaves associated with body connection and high-level learning dominated. Other brainwaves linked to habitual activity and reward-and-punishment behavior were suppressed. This was not his normal baseline brain. Nor did it look like creative flow or simple meditation. When he “woke up,” he was relaxed yet also talkative as he recounted lessons he had gleaned. He was unusually peaceful and joyous for quite a while after.

With practice, people learn to carry kundalini’s benefits into everyday life. As part of this, their scope of consciousness, psychology, and behavior also start to shift. How is this possible?

Yoga works because the body and mind link together. Rather than go into all the details now, here is an example. Imagine, when you spot an attractive face, your visual system gets active to process that face a little differently than other faces. Older and newer brain regions activate. Consciously, you may focus on the person’s words or such. Unconsciously your ancient animal brain stays hooked for more primal reasons that arouse you. Signals go down through your whole nervous system to your organs. Your heart quickens and your stomach flutters. Moreover, when you daydream later, you can visualize that attractive person again in your mind’s eye to get much of the same effect. Thus, both experience and imagination are powerful. Because yoga exercises tap both of these, yoga is powerful too. Part 3 explores the science of yoga in more detail.

* *Your Brain in Altered States* [PDF PowerPoint] by Dario Nardi. <http://www.Facebook.com/NeuroTypes>

Enter Dr. Jung

Dr. Carl Gustav Jung (1875—1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist. Over his lifetime, he made many contributions to psychology and other disciplines, including anthropology and religious studies. He elaborated on many concepts you may have heard. There are archetypes, the collective unconscious, complexes, the persona, and the shadow, to name a few. In addition to a private practice, he visited and studied many cultures in search of universal themes and processes. From all that, he offered deep insights into human development. His insights continue to resonate with many people today.

Of interest here, in the Fall of 1932 he gave four lectures on kundalini yoga. Likely, he also practiced some yoga for himself. That was highly unusual in his era. His insights are particularly relevant because of his sophisticated approach that places kundalini within a broad cross-cultural context.

Jung Explored the Chakras

What did Dr. Carl Jung say? His lectures focused mainly on the chakras. He had a lot to say about their impact on a person's consciousness and psychology. He delved into the history, mythology, sociology, physiology, and of course psychology of the chakras. For example, as you will find out, he described how each chakra comes with a seal—an integrated set of symbols. He explained how each symbol acts as a learning aid to deduce and recall that chakra's meaning. He illustrated their Hindu meanings with Biblical examples, many of which you will find in the coming pages. Jung also described how other cultures have located consciousness within different areas of the body other than the head, such as locating the self in the heart or diaphragm. Chakra work can even evoke *numinous* (spiritual) experiences. Mostly, Jung focused on the psychology of the chakras, which I will focus on here too.

Chakras are Resources and Spiritual Levels

Historically, there are two basic approaches to work with chakras. One approach treats the chakras as resource centers. The other approach treats the chakras as levels of consciousness.

In the first approach, chakras are resource centers. Each center has a theme that generally corresponds to its place in the body, such as *love* in the heart chakra or *communication* in the throat chakra. For each person, chakras are more or less functional and express in personal ways. Chakra-based practices can help us better tap these resources and we can work on them in any order. This approach is accessible to most people and is typical of many current yoga practices.

In the second approach, chakras are levels of consciousness. Each level builds upon the others. Ideally, when we engage in practices like kundalini yoga, we start with the basics at ground level and move upward, progressively awakening, facing and processing each chakra's themes. This approach finds most people in lower chakras, a minority in middle chakras, and very few in synch with higher chakras. Jung focused on this second approach*.

Both of these approaches have value and neither is “truer.” Consider what we know from physics: light travels both as a particle and a wave. Both descriptions of light are valid and complement each other. In the same way, you can keep both approaches in mind as you work with the chakras.

* “Carl Jung and the Kundalini” by John Henshaw in *Knowledge of Reality*, Issue 12-2, 2006.

We Move Through the Chakras

Over the course of a day, we all move in and out of the chakras. As Jung says, “We begin in the head; we identify with our eyes and our consciousness: quite detached and objective, we survey the world. That is *ājñā*.” We may also use our imagination to interpret what we see. And as a practical matter, since we “cannot linger forever in the pure spheres of detached observation, we must bring our thoughts into reality.” So, “we voice them and so trust them to the air. When we clothe our knowledge in words, we are in the region of *vishuddha*, or the throat center. But as soon as we say something that is especially difficult, or that causes us positive or negative feelings, we have a throbbing of the heart, and then the *anāhata* center begins to be activated. And still another step further, when for example a dispute with someone starts up, when we have become irritable and angry and get beside ourselves, then we are in *manipūra*.” If this dispute is highly impactful, it may even stick with us deep down in our gut, in the *svādhishtāna* chakra.

In this example, we started at the top, from a place of calm awareness, and dropped down into “lower levels” of consciousness, where we are less detached and more enmeshed in a situation. We can also take the opposite view—that life is mostly dull as we walk through our days asleep in our lowest chakra, *mūlādhāra*. Then sometimes we get roaring drunk or do yoga, find religion or fall in love, and we ascend briefly to higher chakras. Thus there are many ways to apply the chakras as a guide to understanding shifts in consciousness.

From Material to Spiritual Experience

Spiritual teacher Ram Dass also describes how we move through the chakras. He asks us to imagine noticing someone on the street. We might simply notice the person’s physical attributes and actions, such as height and direction of walking, without carefully analyzing. We attend to what’s on the outside. That is the material perspective of the 1st chakra. Then we can analyze: What does the person’s facial expressions, clothing style, gait, and so forth suggest about his or her situation? And do we find them attractive? This is how we often interact with people as we get to know them on a day-to-day basis. That’s the 2nd chakra. Next, we can project onto people some mythic qualities: heroism or villainy. Maybe we learn that a person’s ideology differs from our own, and we get oppositional with him. Or maybe we see a person rescue a child and treat her as a hero. Whatever the details, we start projecting all sorts of things, as if we were interacting in a dramatic stageplay. Even if we uplift others as paragons, we dehumanize them, and our projecting says more about us than them. That’s the 3rd chakra. Ram Dass concludes his example with the 4th chakra. He describes two people in spacesuits. The suits are just costumes. Inside, we notice each other as conscious souls, and we say, “Hi there!” This is a deep authentic place where we treat others as spiritual beings who are having a human experience.

Consciousness, Ego, and Baggage

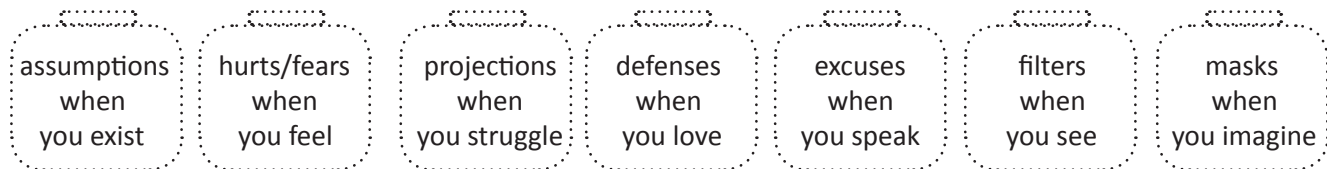
Jung links the chakras to stages of spiritual awakening or levels of consciousness, so we might want to know what consciousness is. Scientists lack agreement on an answer. But we all know how it

feels to gain or lose consciousness, such as when we wake in the morning. We can be half-conscious, too, or have impaired consciousness from alcohol or drugs, or act mindlessly, such as while driving to a familiar place. In short, consciousness isn't one thing. There are gradations and facets.

Jung observed that a major facet of our psyche is the *ego*. Ego seeks to sustain a coherent sense of oneself in the world. It bridges our inner and outer worlds as a “central command center” and is responsible for reality testing and a sense of personal identity. To do its job, the ego forms goals, set boundaries, and deploys defenses. In neuroscience, the ego likely maps to our brain’s executive centers in the prefrontal cortex and to the *default network*, a brain loop that helps to direct our attention, drive our inner monologue, and maintain our sense of self. Moreover, the ego is highly resilient, adapting to whatever might subvert our established sense of self. Jung proposes that our ego may be the “only truly solid piece of ourselves” that we possess! The table below puts the ego in context.

	More Private (Self)	More Public (Society)
More Conscious	Ego = “I” or “me.” Your heroic sense of self. Feels self-defined. Maintains itself.	Persona = Masks you wear. Acceptable behaviors and appearances for others.
More Unconscious	Shadow = Rejected parts that may bring you distress or you project onto others.	Archetypes = Universal images, roles, and themes rooted in biology and history.

In kundalini, everything in the table above is a masquerade. For example, we may easily confuse the ego for our *only* real self and mistake its biases, games, scripted lines, and props as the ultimate reality. It is perfectly fun and often fruitful to take on an identity like a stage actor, but we may forget we are playing and get lost in a role, like children playing house or playing war. Fortunately, kundalini helps us take off masks, drop baggage, and soften the boundaries between ego and other aspects of ourselves. This “soften and clear” process may feel confusing or hard, particularly when we feel invested, hurt or afraid. Thus, the ego tends to resist practices such as yoga that quiet it and reawaken us. Fortunately, we have choices. Consider the baggage below. Where might you want to lighten your load?



Beyond ego and baggage, chakra work addresses many facets of consciousness, such as being self-conscious, exerting willpower, and listening to one’s conscience. Jung used the chakras as a framework to better understand how we develop. He also viewed the chakras as a therapeutic tool that goes beyond talk and analysis to get in touch with the whole person, which includes the body. The table on the next page offers a summary of the chakras with facets of consciousness.