

Relating through the Chakras

Maxine Linnell

The chakra system has been a guide for a long time in my life. Placing experience in seven different areas in the body (five in some systems), the map is helpful in working with the body's experience and awareness in psychotherapy and in looking at my own experiences. It offers a multi-level model with a value inherent in balance, in movement and flow, and in integration.

When I read Frances Vaughan's book *The Inward Arc* it also became a developmental map: we move up the chakra system as we mature in humanity, yet still we need to maintain that essential balance. We cannot have a healthy spiritual life (the fifth, sixth and seventh chakras) without our basic needs for survival and relationship being met in the lowest chakras. There is no need for a hierarchy of experience here; there is an equality of awareness, a humbling and levelling recognition of our humanness at all levels, in all dimensions.

More recently I have been looking at levels, or channels, of relationship as they exist between therapist and client, and in wider relationships. We can relate through many channels of our being, and that in full awareness we will relate with

all of them, moving between and around them flexibly. Therapies which focus on the transferential relationship, the relationship whose language is of need and hunger, of anger and survival, focus principally on the lower three chakras in their energetic relationship. Therapies which offer a transpersonal perspective focus on the heart and the crown chakras, look at the spiritual relationship in whatever form or language it is expressed, the Higher Self or Wise Mind, at psychic awareness of the other, of auras and energy systems.

It seems to me that we hold in our bodies the form which contains and holds all these energies in constant flux, and in constant relationship to others and to our own experience. In our bodies that relationship of chakra to chakra can happen energetically at every moment if we can free it up, if we can learn to move easily and with equanimity and compassion from one to another. It also seems that if we can assist others to do the same through relating with them at all the different levels we are offering a powerful tool for allowing change to happen and for the natural flow of healing to take place.

Maxine Linnell has been a psychotherapist and trainer in Bristol for over seven years. She is a staff member of the Karuna Institute.

The First Chakra (Muladhara)

The first chakra is placed physically in the perineum, and means 'root support'. It is the place of basic survival, of focus on the 'me' before all else. Here there is fear, fear of death and of loss, and a clinging onto supports. The language is of hunger and need, possession, anger and chaos. It relates to very early experience of a feeding and mothering relationship where we need the help of others for survival and support, and there is a desperation in our need for contact and love. It is a place where we are attracted to gurus and are likely to make heroes of others — we need them to be heroes for us, need to believe that they are immune to the struggles for survival which we experience. A therapist in relationship to somebody working with the material of this chakra may feel protective and motherly, but also unseen and clung to, helpless in the face of such need. Here it matters that we as therapists are aware of the presence of the other chakras

and relationship levels in the person we are working with in order not to create an ongoing dependency which does not move towards health. If we become hooked into this system we may risk getting stuck in this chakra with our clients, without their discovering how they can offer support and nourishment to this place in themselves from further up the chakra scale, perhaps especially from the heart.

Being alive to this area is essential. We cannot leave it behind in our path without a danger of using others to fulfil our unaware needs for nourishment. Living only in the heart can lead us to neglect ourselves and our basic needs. We cannot love without attending to these in some form; if we try to our love may be distorted and manipulative. Energy in this chakra keeps us safe and alive, fed and nourished emotionally, keeps our 'inner' baby content.

The Second Chakra (Svadhithana)

Physically in the sexual centre a few inches below the navel, here relationship is all-important in a different way. There is a need for love and approval, an investment in relationship for its own sake and a merging of self into another. Co-dependency probably exists here, the feeling that we depend on the other's relationship to us for our own identity. Sexual relationships usually start here and it is the place of sexual desire. There is a need for contact and engagement for us to know we exist, and sometimes a tendency to want to be the same as the other, to follow their path or copy their style of dress and lifestyle, a

quite young emulation of the other. It can be quite devastating if its object turns out to be less than perfect, or leaves or dies.

In the interests of ethical behaviour and to avoid 'sexualising' the therapeutic relationship we may sometimes avoid this area as therapists. Meeting the other's sexuality at this level is volatile, involved as it is with dependency and lack of boundaries. On the other hand, it is an area where people are usually hungry and when this hunger is not met it remains unsatisfied, and can become a place of shame and repression — as it has in our society — bubbling up in distorted forms

like pornography and the over-sexualising of relationships. Where it is not attended to the energy of a chakra will leak into others.

Recent reports of the level of child abuse among Catholic priests is an example of this; the denial of sexuality in the priesthood seems to have led the church into

The Third Chakra (Manipura)

The third chakra is located at the solar plexus and has to do with power, will and intentionality. Learning to assert ourselves in the world, here we leave behind the dependency of the first two chakras. We have a fully-formed ego, know our difference from others and are in control of our world. There is an equality in relationship — the need for approval and closeness is not so strong, though there may be a need to control, to have our will enacted by others around us.

Relating at this level to a therapist, we may not allow him/her in, and need to keep control of the relationship. Anger may be a strong emotion; strong emotions are flowing in this chakra, and the element it relates to is fire. We may fear that our power will destroy others around us and so mask it in compliance and manipulation.

Taking on this power is a scary process; the first two chakras come into play, in

The Fourth Chakra (Anahata)

The energy of the heart chakra has a quality distinct from the previous three. Separated from the three ego-based chakras by the diaphragm, it is a moving beyond the focus of the self into an awareness that the energies of those chakras, self and emo-

colluding with abuse over long periods. Because in our society most of us have been brought up with shame around this area we therapists are prone to confusion, and may find it hard to find a comfortable relationship with our clients at this level, to acknowledge its power and existence without crossing an ethical boundary.

the fear that exerting power in the world will lose them the nourishment and support of others. Moving into this chakra is a powerful stage in our lives and it is important not to leave the other, earlier vulnerable chakra energies behind, or we may become dictators, leaders without emotional contact and denying our own human fallibilities.

In some western psychologies working with this energy in relationship to the other two will complete the work of psychotherapy. We go out into the world able to fend for ourselves and get our needs met, able to voice our feelings and engage with others. We may be left wondering about the meaning of all this if we leave the journey of awareness here, and do not enter the mystery of the higher chakras. Something is complete — the development of the ego — but I often hear people saying 'is this all there is?' when they reach this place.

tionality, are not all there is. Relationship here moves into a more subtle place where we can experience the kind of love called 'agape' as distinct from the 'eros' love of the second two chakras. It is a love which moves beyond the conditional relation-

ship, which can empathise, and offer compassion and sympathetic joy to another, two of the qualities of the Bodhisatva in buddhism. It is relationship which is not dependent on how someone behaves, which is less entangled in needing the other to be a particular way for us.

It can get distorted where it is not built upon the solid ground of the previous three chakras. I know there have been times when I have given and accepted from my heart the actions of another, knowing that for that moment I could completely do so, only to find later that my other energies were growling away hungrily refusing to play ball. If we use this model we do not need to deny the reality of the heart energy, but do need to attend to the needs of the other centres concurrently, and not to overbalance into heart energy — which makes us feel very 'good' — but can lead to us starving ourselves of what we need. For a therapist, confluence with clients can be the result if they base all their work in this area, as well as fuzzy boundaries and a lack of clear holding. In this place comes our vocation to heal, so many therapists will recognise it as a starting point. I wonder, though, if many of us have needed to over-develop this chakra as a way of bypassing our early needs in childhood, becoming therapists almost from birth. This has certainly been a strong factor in my own life, and the transformation of that energy has been a painful but life-changing experience. There is no need to throw out this impulse and vocation, only to balance it and integrate it into our whole being, returning to basics often, and attending with consciousness to

our needs where that is not done automatically through early good-enough parenting.

In this area the earlier energies are transformed into a less personal focus, a focus which can hold the wider vision both in time and space. Here we know that there is always more than what we are aware of, though we may not always know what that 'more' is. There is wisdom and the possibility of peaceful transformative states. There is care for the world as well as for the individuals around us; where our will needs to be exerted it is done with clarity and compassion and an awareness of needs other than ours. The place of the heart is central in developing the qualities of bodhicitta in the buddhist framework. It also needs the spiritual awareness of the higher chakras if it is to reach its full potential.

As therapists, this place in our clients needs honouring and respecting. Sometimes we may feel that we own this place, that it doesn't belong to the client, and we don't allow them the possibility of seeing our own humanness, of caring for us, of offering us gifts or gratitude. We may want them to stay in the less equal place of the first three chakras and feel afraid of their meeting us. We need to be clear where the caring is coming from, but there can be magical transformative moments in therapy when contact is made at this level between two human beings working together at their relationship. They are too precious to be destroyed by placing them always at a lower, needy level. This energy is vulnerable to humiliation; it is where we may feel our true goodness is not seen by others.

The Fifth Chakra (Visuddha)

The fifth chakra is located at the throat. At this level there is control of mind and emotions, internal chatter is stilled, and there is an inner listening to the sound of our being, our process as it unfolds. We should not interfere with process at this level, but treat whatever comes into our awareness with equanimity and compassion. At this level subtle energies are available, the material world is no longer the focus, and the transitory, illusory nature of the world and existence is evident. We know we create our world with our own minds and can therefore change it with our minds.

Relationship to outer experience and to other people takes on a new meaning here, a subtle and more refined sense. There are few boundaries, and a sense of limitlessness. Entering this energy state with a therapy client is entering the sacred relationship, being willing to go into the place of not-knowing where neither can know or control and neither needs to. It needs the safety of boundaries if we are not to get lost in it. It is a state reached in meditation, but I believe there is a place for it in therapy too. It is a place of archetypes too, of going beyond the personal into the transpersonal relationship. We can only go into it with our clients if they choose, we cannot take them there, or even hold it out as a place they need to go to. If it comes it will do so in its own time and in the place most open to it, which

The Sixth Chakra (Ajna)

The chakra of the 'third eye', located just above and between the eyebrows, is the place of ideal perception. Here there is

may be in therapy, but may equally be on a mountain top or in retreat.

In intimate relationship this place can be reached in sexual union at a spiritual level, and here there is the possibility of transforming sexual energy into spiritual experience. Tantric spiritual art forms sometimes take the shape of sexual union, and there are elaborate spiritual practices relating sexuality and spirituality.

Many people who have experienced early trauma know this place, but know it in a way that gives it no meaning, without the safety of a formed ego to hold it in place. Here it is a place of terror, of formlessness and emptiness where there is nothing to hold onto. It is a place of death of the ego and of identity — a powerful place to enter consciously, which can be totally overwhelming for a damaged child. I believe it is a place most of us know at some level, and many of us are frightened of. We fill it with our attachments and addictions to food, to television, to stimulus, to drugs and alcohol, because we do not know how to have a relationship with it anchored in a firm base. Again, the chakra system gives us a way of understanding this process, and of knowing what we may need in order to place this experience — its enormous value and its terror. People I have worked with who know this place from terror, also know at a deep level its fundamental importance and truth.

union with 'God-ness'. This is subtle mind, essential mind uncluttered by conditioning. Fear is no longer an issue, as we move

beyond the clinging to the self. Relationship here is with the deity, and has moved entirely beyond the personal. The Tantric intention to see the deity in those we relate to brings this chakra into daily relationship at a profound level. This is a place of mystic experience, seen in some Western

psychologies as a place of madness — and of course unless grounded in the other chakras it can be just that.

At some level this energy is available to us, we 'know' it even though it is hard to find access to it except through images and metaphors.

The Seventh Chakra (Sahasrara)

The sense of self disappears altogether at the seventh chakra, located at or just above the crown of the head. This is the area of pure spirit, non-duality, a transcendent realm where the interconnectedness of all things becomes a reality. Most of us can only have rare glimpses of this state, yet knowing its truth and its existence allows it to be worked through the other chakras, allows the possibility of all experience to take on transcendent qualities at each moment if we can only hold this vision alive.

Like the sixth chakra, unheld it is close to madness, and certainly the sense of non-duality and lack of self is often experienced in psychotic states. One of the appeals of drug-induced altered states of consciousness is that we can have access to this state. This relates to the attraction of psychosis which Edward Podvoll writes about in *The Seduction of Madness*. In this fascinating book he relates stories of psychosis from the point of view that we can discover something relevant about life from these states, and proposes a kind of care for people in a state of psychosis

which precisely grounds them into relationship and into the basic needs of living and environment. Again, he works to bring this chakra into balance with the others, knowing that harmony and balance are the keys to emotional, physical and spiritual health.

It is not easy to hold all these channels of energy and of relationship in vision at once. Different relationships may draw out particular chakra energies, or we may be drawn towards people who fulfil our needs for relationship in one deprived energy state. The chakras may remain stuck open, or closed, instead of free to relate appropriately, leaving relationships confused and unhelpful. But I believe we may need to explore all of them at some level, in ourselves and in others, to discover the full potential of being alive and in relationship to our worlds. We can be inclusive, rather than exclusive, stay in the place of 'yes, and . . .' and leave the 'yes, but . . .' as each moment arises.

If we ask for the meaning in life, maybe all we are looking for is more depth of living.

Further Reading

Frances Vaughan, *The Inward Arc*, Shambala, 1985

E. Podvoll, *The Seduction of Madness*, Random Century, 1991