



# The Seven Planes of Consciousness

## Course Handout

### Introduction

This handout introduces the Theosophical understanding of the Energetic aspects of the human nature as expressed at the various levels of reality, from Spiritual, Soul and to the Personality (psychological).

### Human beings



Our personal Inner Nature, which we all have in common, is something we need to understand if we are serious about brotherhood. The common notion that a person is a physical body and has a soul might be better reversed. Thinking that the physical body is the real person is like mistaking a house for the person who lives inside it. Theosophy teaches that we are really the “monad” or inner unity, a fragment of divinity, a spark of the divine flame, which, over time, lives in many houses.

A body is our interface with the environment around us. And in fact we have as many interfaces or bodies as we have environments.

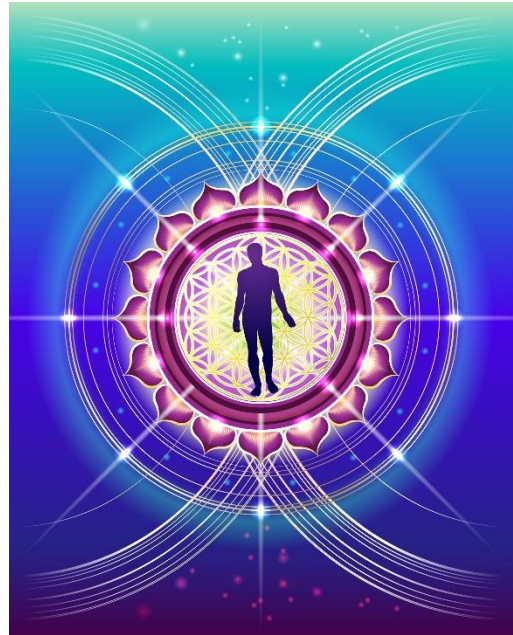
In addition to the dense physical environment, we have environments of vital energy, feelings, thoughts, and intuitions. Our interface with each environment performs two functions. On the one hand, it is the channel through which we experience and influence that environment. On the other hand, the kind of interface we have with an environment also limits how much of that environment we can experience and respond to.

For example, our physical senses are like windows. Windows let us see out of a house, but the number of windows in the house and the direction they face determine what we can see of the neighbourhood around. Similarly, what senses we have and the range of their sensitivity determine what we can perceive of the world. There is more to reality than we can observe through our usual sense-windows. And that is true of all of our bodies—all of our interfaces with the many environments in which we live. As Hamlet told his friend,



“There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Limitations, however, are not necessarily bad things. They both protect us and challenge us. First, limitations are a protection. If we had no limitations on what we can perceive in all the environments around us, we would be overcome by the sensations, energies, emotions, concepts, and suggestive intuitions that we would be exposed to. In the physical world alone, we are surrounded by colours we cannot see, sounds we cannot hear, odours we cannot smell, and sensations we cannot feel. Everywhere about us are radio waves, X-rays, gamma rays, and other electromagnetic phenomena that we cannot perceive with our physical senses. If all of those impinged on our awareness, our confusion would be paralyzing. As T. S. Eliot said, “Human kind cannot bear very much reality.” We need protection from too much reality.



Second, limitations are a challenge. Our awareness develops only through limitations. And it is for the purpose of developing awareness that the monad has clothed itself in matter of varying degrees of limitation and density—or, to put it differently, has surrounded itself with fields of various energies, the densest being the physical body. Matter and energy are in some sense interchangeable; what we call solid matter is a pattern of energy, however solid and impenetrable it may seem to us. The hardness of a stone is not in its solidity, but is due to the intensity with which its constituent atoms cling to each other.

## Energy fields

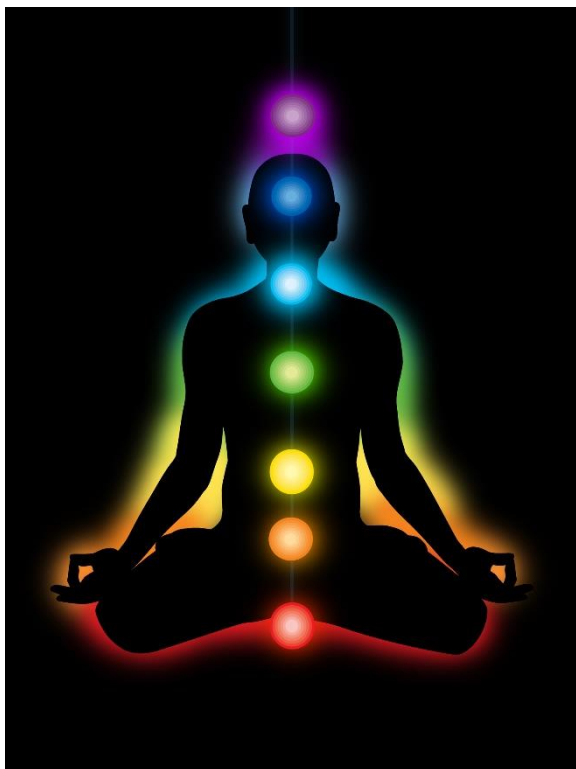
Theosophy teaches that our solar system includes seven interpenetrating planes of matter or fields of energy. Three of these are directly involved in our personal evolution—the physical, the emotional, and the mental. The physical plane has two main subdivisions, the dense physical and a subtler physical level often called “etheric.” Similarly, the mental plane also has two main subdivisions, often called “lower” and “higher,” but here the lower mental will be called simply “mental” and the higher will be called “causal,” for reasons explained later. These various grades of matter furnish the stuff of our several bodies.



The term “bodies” is used for our interface with the energies of these fields, but these “bodies” should not be thought of as fixed and static. We know that, even though our dense physical body appears to be the same from day to day, it is constantly changing, although at a much slower rate than our subtler bodies because of its lower rate of vibrations.

Our subtler bodies may be thought of as flowing lines of force that generally follow a certain pattern, modified in each instance by our characteristic thoughts and emotions, attitudes toward life and the world, and manner of reacting to experience. All bodies are really localized fields of force or concentrations, individual foci, of the energies of the larger fields in which they operate. Each of the bodies has around it a radiating energy field of which it is the centre; these surrounding energy fields are called “auras.”

For purposes of discussion, we speak of our bodies as distinct from one another— terming them physical (dense and etheric), emotional, mental, and causal—but they are not really separate. They are interdependent and function as a whole. We know that we never feel emotion without thought, nor do we think without feeling some emotion. And it is well known in medical science that thoughts and emotions affect our physical bodies and vice versa.



The connections between our various bodies are the chakras, a Sanskrit word that means “wheel” or “circle.” They are seven major energy centres (and a number of minor ones) distributed over our subtle bodies at points where channels of energy converge, each having the appearance of a wheel or a lotus flower. They concentrate the energies flowing through the bodies and communicate them from one plane of reality to another. With respect to the dense physical body, the major chakras are located approximately at the base of the spine, the root of the reproductive organs, the navel, the heart, the throat, the forehead between the eyebrows, and the crown of the head.

Although the emotional body or energy field interpenetrates the physical, it extends somewhat beyond it. Similarly, the mental

body interpenetrates both the physical and emotional bodies and extends beyond the latter. These subtle bodies are beyond the range of our normal vision but are nonetheless real. Those who have the faculty of clairvoyant vision have described them, and we each experience their energies, whether or not we can “see” them in some more objective way.

The causal body is more permanent than the others; it is what St. Paul alluded to as an “incorruptible body.” It is composed of the still more tenuous matter—or higher- frequency energies—of the higher mental plane or field. Our consciousness functioning on that plane is the real “us,” the aspect of ourselves that incarnates in lower bodies to gain experience



through them. It is the body of our permanent individuality, as distinct from the temporary personality that expresses itself through our physical, emotional, and (lower) mental bodies.

That higher-frequency environment and our bodily interface with it are called “causal” because they are where causes are stored that sooner or later become effects in the outer, visible world. Again, we must not think of this “storage” in terms of space; the causes are not things, but vibratory possibilities. The causal body is the permanent repository of that treasure we have laid up out of our experiences of thought, feeling, and action in our three lower bodies; it is the “heaven” mentioned by St. Matthew (6:19-21) as the place where treasures are not corrupted. We will deal with it more fully later.

3	Mental	Formless	ATOMIC	INTELLIGENCE
				CAUSAL
		Form		
				MENTAL
2	Emotions (Astral)		ATOMIC	
				ASTRAL
1	Physical		ATOMIC	
			SUB-ATOMIC	ETHERIC
			Etheric	DOUBLE
			Air	
			Fire	
			Water	DENSE
	Earth			

Relationship between the physical, emotional and mental bodies

## Etheric field

As remarked earlier, our physical body has two “parts” or aspects. One is the dense body composed of solids, liquids and gases, which is described in textbooks on physiology and anatomy. The other is a largely invisible aspect not mentioned in textbooks. It is called the “etheric double” or “vital body,” and it serves several important functions, such as being the pattern by which the dense physical body is built.

Not only the outer frame, but every cell of the dense physical body has this ethereal or vital counterpart, formed of finer matter and ordinarily—although not always— invisible to the human eye. Since the etheric double cannot sustain consciousness separated from its dense counterpart, it is not a body distinct from the dense part of the physical. It is, however, the carrier of physical sensation and acts as a bridge between the dense physical body and the more subtle aspects of our being—another of its important functions.





The etheric double absorbs energy from the sun and transmits it as vitality, sending it streaming along the energy lines of the body and emitting the surplus in every direction as a bluish-white light. It is sometimes called the “health aura” because its colours and vibrations indicate the individual’s state of physical vitality and health. Healers who practice a technique called Therapeutic Touch work with the health aura to facilitate the body’s own powers of recuperation.

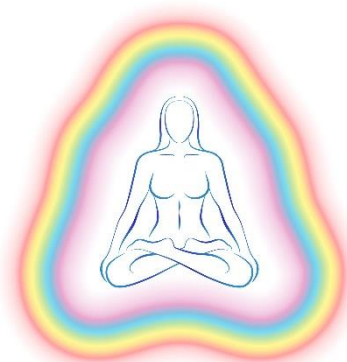
The etheric double can be temporarily separated from the dense physical body by shock, anaesthetics, or certain other effects that produce trance states. However, it remains attached to the dense body by a thread of its own matter—the “silver cord” spoken of in Ecclesiastes (12:6–7): “Or ever the silver cord be loosed . . . the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.” When this “silver cord” breaks and the etheric double is finally withdrawn from the body, vitality ceases to flow and the event of “death”

ensues. The etheric double then quietly disintegrates in the vicinity of the dense body, its function for the incarnation having ended.

## Emotional field

The emotional body, extending slightly beyond both the physical form and the etheric double, is the vehicle of feeling and desire, ranging all the way from earthy passions to inspiring emotions. Clairvoyants have described it as in constant motion, radiant and luminous in appearance. It is because of this luminous appearance that it is sometimes called the “astral” or star-like body (from the Greek word for “star,” astron). The term astral, however, has been used in several different senses in Theosophical writings, sometimes for what is here called “etheric” and sometimes in a general sense of “subtle.” It is not used here (except in quotations) because of that potential confusion.

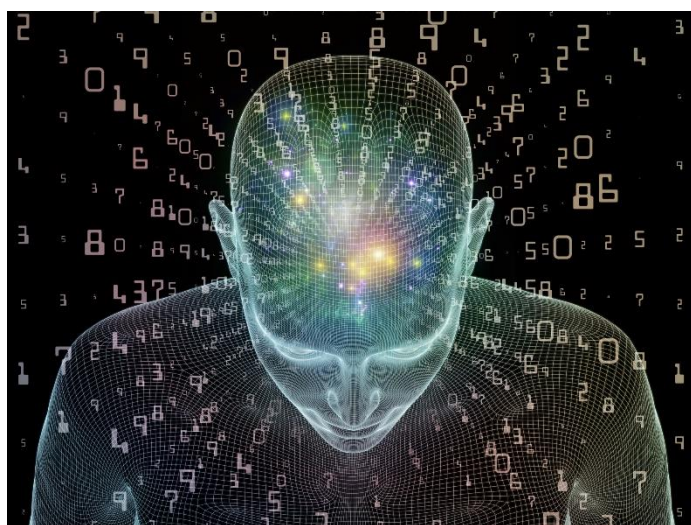
When the physical body sleeps, the consciousness continues to function in the emotional body (memories of the experiences in this body sometimes come through to the physical brain in the form of remembered dreams or other impressions). The greater part of the matter composing the emotional body is concentrated within the limits of the physical frame, and since during waking hours most of the lines of force in the emotional body follow the outlines of the physical body, it tends to maintain the same shape and appearance during sleep, so that the person’s emotional-world form is recognisable. There is also a larger energy field or aura that extends around the body and reflects the emotions that dominate at any given time.





## Mind fields

Theosophy describes each of the planes or fields of the universe as having seven subdivisions of matter or frequency. The “lower” mental body is composed of the four denser subdivisions of the mental plane; the causal body, on the other hand, is the vehicle of consciousness in the three subtler or “higher” subdivisions. When they are thought of as aspects of, or vehicles for, consciousness rather than as material bodies, the mental body is sometimes called the “lower mind,” and the causal body the “higher mind.” The mental body, which penetrates and extends beyond the emotional and physical bodies, is our mental interface with the world. It is our vehicle for thinking about experience.



When the mental body is in use, it vibrates rapidly and temporarily increases in size. Prolonged thought makes the increase permanent, so the mental body is built day by day through the right use of thought power. As the quality of the emotional body is dependent on our habitual emotional attitudes, so the quality and clarity of the mental body depend on our characteristic patterns of thinking.

Because emotion and thought are interrelated, each affecting the other, these two bodies are closely linked. The mental together with the emotional is called by a Sanskrit term, *kama-manas*, which means “desire mind.” Functioning in coordination, they produce types of “thought-emotion,” each of which reflects its own special colour in the aura. Clairvoyants see pride as orange, fear as livid grey, and irritability as scarlet. Thought-feelings of unselfish affection glow with a pale rose colour; intellectual endeavour, pure yellow; devotion, clear blue; sympathy, bright green; and spirituality, lilac blue or lavender.

## Causal field

The causal body is the vehicle through which the human individuality or soul expresses itself as a series of personalities in the world. It does so by functioning through temporary bodies—mental, emotional, and physical—on the denser planes. Only the good, the true, and the beautiful enter into the causal body because its vibrations are so subtle that they do not respond to that which is coarse, false, or ugly.

Since the causal body is at the level of abstract and universal thought (the so-called higher mind), it is the repository of our innate knowledge and capabilities. At the beginning of human evolution, it is small and almost colourless, resembling a bubble or a delicate film.



As we evolve, however, and the effects of our good thoughts, feelings, and actions gradually are registered there, it takes on greater colour and grows in size, but very slowly until we reach the stage of unselfish or impersonal views of the world. Then its vibrations show themselves to clairvoyant sight as brilliant colours, so that the causal body becomes a shining globe of light, full of radiating rays of love and wisdom.



Elements of the causal, subtle and gross physical bodies

The causal body continues life after life, whereas the mental, emotional, and physical bodies are renewed in each incarnation. The latter are the temporary vehicles of one lifetime only. The former is our permanent embodiment. It preserves the fruits of every lifetime as capacities, which are absorbed into it after the death of the physical body and the dissolution of our emotional and mental vehicles.