

# TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF SUBTLE ENERGIES

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## PART ONE. INTRODUCTION: FROM THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING TO POSTMODERNISM IN THREE EASY STEPS

### Overview

Before we look at what modern science has brought to the picture of subtle energies, let's look at what the great wisdom traditions have to tell us. We will then attempt to bring both of them together in an integral theory of subtle energies. Also, let me say now that what I mean by "subtle energy" will not be completely apparent until toward the end of this attempted synthesis, so please don't prematurely identify it with meanings that could be expected to be stretched by any integration.

The traditional "Great Chain of Being," or levels of reality ascribed to by the majority of the world's great wisdom traditions is usually given as something like *matter*, *body*, *mind*, *soul*, and *spirit*. In the Vedanta, one of India's oldest religious traditions, for example, these are, respectively, the 5 sheaths or levels of Spirit: *annamayakosha* (the sheath or level made of physical food), the *pranamayakosha* (the level made of élan vital), the *manomayakosha* (the level made of mind), the *vijnanamayakosha* (the level made of higher mind or soul), and *anandamayakosha* (the level made of transcendental bliss or causal spirit). Vedanta, of course, adds *turiya*, or the transcendental ever-present Self, and *turiyatita*, or the nondual, ever-present, unqualifiable Spirit-as-such, but the simpler five-level scheme will work for our introductory purposes. We will return to the more "complete" version later.

This five-level Great Chain of Being can be represented schematically as in Figure 1. Although we have to be very careful with cross-cultural comparisons, interpretive schemes similar to this Great Chain or "Great Nest of Being" can be found in most of the wisdom traditions of the "premodern" world, as indicated in Figure 2 and Table 1, which are derived from diagrams used by Huston Smith to indicate the general similarities (or family resemblances) among these traditions.

With reference to Figure 1, notice that the Great Chain, as conceived by its proponents (from Plotinus to Aurobindo), is indeed more of a Great Nest—or what is often called a "holarchy"—because each senior level goes beyond its junior levels but envelopes them (or "nests" them)—what Plotinus called "a development that is envelopment." Each higher level, however, also radically transcends its juniors and can neither be reduced to its juniors nor explained by them. This is indicated in Figure 1 as (A), (A + B), (A + B + C), and so on, which means that each senior level contains elements or qualities that are emergent and nonreducible.

For example, when life (A + B) emerges "out of" matter (A), it contains certain qualities (such as sexual reproduction, interior emotions, autopoiesis, élan vital, and others—all represented by

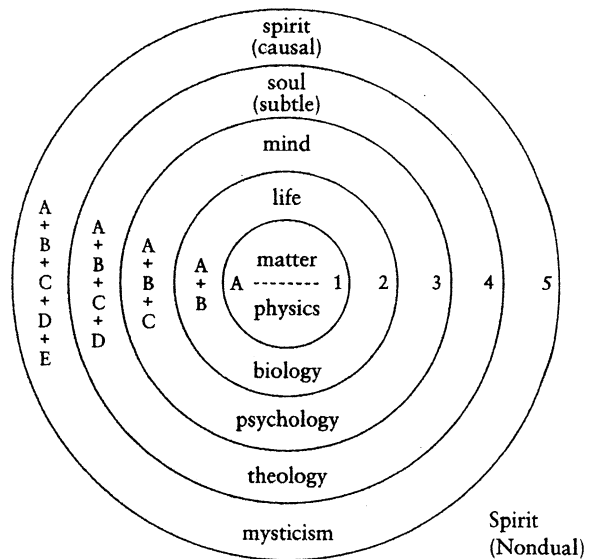


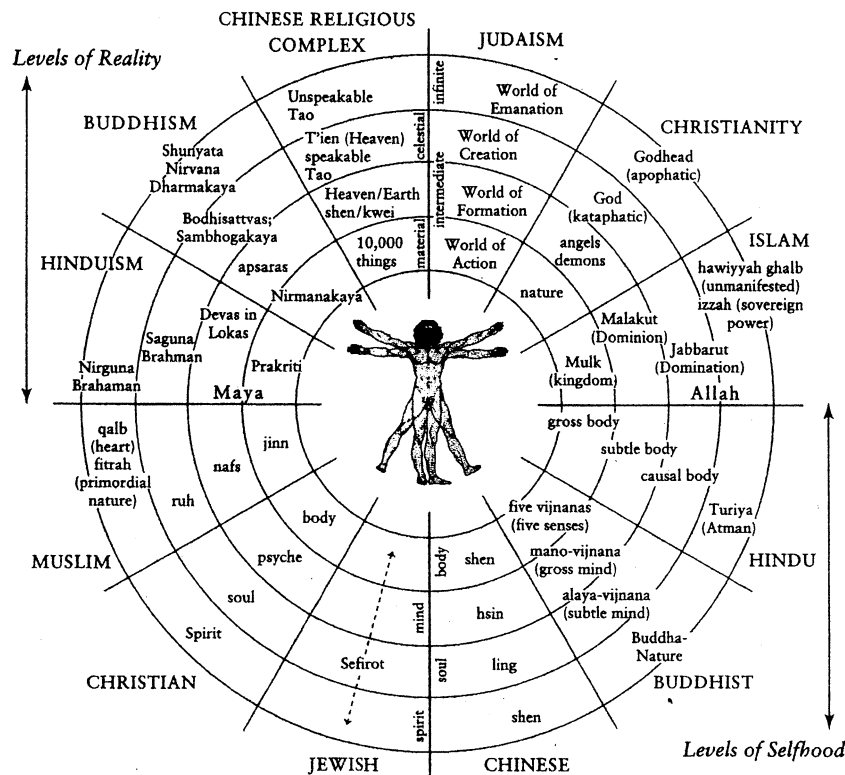
Figure 1. The Traditional Great Chain of Being.

"B") that cannot be accounted for in strictly the material terms of "A." Likewise, when mind ("A + B + C") emerges out of life, mind contains emergent characteristics ("C") that cannot be reduced to, nor explained by, life and matter alone. When soul ("A + B + C + D") emerges, it transcends mind and life and body. Evolution, then, is this "unfolding" of Spirit from matter to body to mind to soul to Spirit itself or the realization of the absolute Spirit that was the Goal and Ground of the entire sequence.

The best introduction to this traditional notion remains Schumacher's classic *A Guide for the Perplexed*, a title borrowed from Maimonides's great exposition on the same topic.<sup>1</sup> The general idea is of a great holarchy of being and knowing, with the levels of reality in the "outer" world reflected in the levels of self (or levels of "interior" knowing and being), which is particularly suggested by Table 1.

However, according to the traditions, this entire process of *evolution* or "un-folding" could never occur without a prior process of *involution* or "in-folding." Not only can the higher not be explained in terms of the lower, and not only does the higher not actually emerge "out of" the lower, but the reverse of both of those is true, according to the traditions. That is, the lower dimensions or levels are actually sediments or deposits of the higher dimensions, and they find their meaning because of the higher dimensions of which they are a stepped-down or diluted version. This sedimentation process is called "involution" or "emanation." According to the traditions, before evolution or the unfolding of Spirit can occur, involution or the infolding of Spirit must occur: the higher successively steps down into the

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**Figure 2.** *The Great Chain in Various Wisdom Traditions*, compiled by Huston Smith (graphic layout courtesy of Brad Reynolds).

lower. Thus, the higher levels appear to emerge “out of” the lower levels during evolution—for example, life appears to emerge out of matter—because, and only because, they were first deposited there by involution. You cannot get the higher out of the lower unless the higher were already there, in potential—sleeping, as it were—waiting to emerge. The “miracle of emergence” is simply Spirit’s creative play in the fields of its own manifestation.

Thus, for the traditions, the great cosmic game begins when Spirit throws itself outward, in sport and play (*lila*, *kenosis*), to create a manifest universe. Spirit “loses” itself, “forgets” itself, takes on a magical façade of manyness (*maya*) in order to have a grand game of hide-and-seek with itself. Spirit first throws itself outward to create soul, which is a stepped-down and diluted reflection of Spirit; soul then steps down into mind, a paler reflection yet of Spirit’s radiant glory; mind then steps down into

life, and life steps down into matter, which is the densest, lowest, least conscious form of Spirit. We might represent this as follows: Spirit-as-spirit steps down into Spirit-as-soul, which steps down into Spirit-as-mind, which steps down into Spirit-as-body, which steps down into Spirit-as-matter. These levels in the Great Nest are all *forms of Spirit*, but the forms become less and less conscious, less and less aware of their Source and Suchness, less and less alive to their ever-present Ground, even though they are all nevertheless nothing but Spirit-at-play.

If we can represent the major emergent stages in evolution as (A), (A + B), (A + B + C), and so on—where the addition signs mean that something is emerging or being *added* to manifestation—then we could represent involution as the prior *subtraction* process: Spirit starts out full and complete, with all of manifestation contained as potential in itself, which we can represent in brackets: [A + B + C + D + E]. Spirit first steps down into manifestation—and begins to “lose” itself in manifestation—by shedding its pure spiritual nature and assuming a manifest, finite, limited form—namely, the *soul* [A + B + C + D]. The soul has now forgotten “E,” or its radical identity with and as Spirit, and, in the ensuing confusion and angst, the soul flees this terror by stepping down into mind [A + B + C], which has forgotten “D,” its soul radiance; and mind flees into life, forgetting “C,” or its intelligence; and, finally, life sheds even its vegetative vitality “B” and appears as inert, insentient, lifeless matter, “A”—at which point something like the Big Bang occurs, whereupon matter blows into concrete existence, and it appears that in the entire

**Table 1.** “As Above, So Below” (Listed From “Highest” to “Lowest”)

Levels of Reality	Levels of Selfhood
Infinite	Spirit
Celestial	Soul
Intermediate	Mind
Terrestrial	Body

Data from Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth*.

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