Embodying Design Practice.
Designers' Experience and the Chakra Model

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Experience Design means crafting any form of devices as conditions for and supports to human experience, rather than isolated artefacts. For designers, embodying such approach entails deploying deep sensitivity at all project stages (observation, immersion, experimentation, scenario modelling). This study proposes a practical framework based on a dialog between a phenomenological approach to designers' experience and the metaphoric model of Chakras, coming from the Tantric Buddhist tradition. Notably drawing on pragmatist philosophy and social psychology, it has been applied in an *Experience Design* educational program involving French Masters students. In the article, each of the seven chakras is linked to attitudes and tools used in class, which all work together as an integrative framework to support designers' self-questioning in practice. This crossed investigation aims at drawing a few guidelines to feed designers' approach to *Experience Design* over and above a methodological perspective, putting a strong emphasis on the emotional and bodily dimensions.

Keywords: design practice; experience design; embodiment; chakras

> "[In a state of *flow*] the ego falls away. Time flies.
> Every action, movement, and thought follows inevitably from the previous one.
> Your whole being is involved, and you're using your skills to the utmost."
> (Csikszentmihalyi in Geirland, 1996)

Conceptual frame

The Chakra model

Coming from the Tantric tradition, the Chakra model was first described by a Bengali yogi, Purnanda-Swami, in the 16th century text *Sat-Cakra-Nirupana*. Though this chapter was the subject of numerous commentaries through centuries, it was translated only in the early 1900s by a British judge living in India (Woodroffe, 1919/1974). It provides an integrative model describing canals of energy running through the human body, punctuated by six *chakras* that can be viewed as wheels of energy concentration situated along the spine. Nowadays, the popularized map highlights seven chakras, each of them being associated with an area of our mental being and its baggage of stored ideas, experiences and symbols. Chakras may also be linked to physical elements, colours or body organs, symbolizing the attributes of related faculties and emotions. Though the model deploys vertically, no

hierarchy is involved between chakras. They function as a whole system, all states of consciousness conditioning each other. In the Buddhist culture inspired by Tantra, the practice of yoga aims at fine-tuning the chakras and balancing the energy flow in the body. It is not at stake here to discuss the tangible existence of chakras, nor to adopt a mystical viewpoint on the theory and practices attached. The model will rather be used for its holistic and metaphoric properties in a dialog with designers' embodiment in practice.

From experiencing…

It is now widely acknowledged that the "designerly way of thinking" (Archer, 1979) involves a way of tackling complex issues that is not only cognitive but also sensitive, narrative and affective. Most discourses in design research have been focusing on the rational side, for instance by formalizing processes and methods. In contrast with a sequential approach to design based on project staging, this research focuses on *experiencing*, which remains under-investigated. In this line, the experience lived by designers in practice is studied in a phenomenological perspective, notably building on pragmatist philosophy and social psychology, and rooted in the *affective turn* (Clough & Halley, 2007; Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). The approach is not limited to emotional states, rather considering relational modes of being-in-the-world. Experience is hence like "a three notes chord where moves of the body, the mind and the environment momentarily converge" (Rosa, 2016).

In the early 20th century, John Dewey described *aesthetic experience* as full absorption in activity, which intensifies the sense of immediate living. An experience develops over time, in a global movement toward its own consummation. Though determined by a single pervasive quality, it is never exclusively emotional, practical nor intellectual. Consequently, not only artists but also scientists or craftsmen proceeding with care may be equally engaged in such way (Dewey, 1934/2005). Through *emersion,* environmental effects are voluntarily or involuntarily activated in the body, creating sensations that are able to modify self-awareness, during and after experience (Andrieu & Bernard, 2014). The experiencer is hence not reduced to her self but engaged in a relationship blurring the lines between the inside and the outside. This is in line with the concept of *Stimmung* brought by Martin Heidegger to characterize moods arising from ecstatic engagement with the world (Arjakovsky & al., 2013). In the same vein, contemporary sociologist Hartmut Rosa describes *resonance* as interplay between perceiving and receiving. "First, af←fection: we feel truly touched or moved by someone or something we encounter. Affection has an emotional, but also a cognitive and certainly a bodily element. Second, e→motion: we feel that we answer this 'call', we react to it with body and mind, we reach out and touch the other side as well." (Rosa, 2016).

… to *Experience Design*

These theories and concepts provide several teachings for *Experience Design* education. Our research team has built the program described below for Masters students at Strate School of Design (France). We argue for a sensitive approach integrating emotional, affective and relational dimensions over time (Dewey, 1934/2005; Kahneman, 2013; Korzybski, 2007; Schaeffer, 2015), beyond a deterministic perspective to design.

Firstly, since "experiencing like breathing is a rhythm of intakings and outgivings" (Dewey, 1934/2005), an *aesthetic* or *resonant* relation to the world involves conciliating openness and ability to respond. In other words, experiencers would be vibrating as senders and recipients

at the same time (Rosa, 2016). However, people respond to external stimuli in various ways depending on past experience, disposition and life situation. This is a double concern for designers, on the one hand as professionals of "shaping things", on the other hand as humans, themselves potentially affected by any situation. Our educational approach hence builds on symmetry between designers' experience in practice and the one they craft for others.

Secondly, since nothing that is experienced can be isolated from its context, "an experience" cannot be an outcome of the design process, rather a consequence left to experiencers. In this line, artefacts are no ends in themselves but conditions for and supports to human experience. Thus, our project methodology first invites to reformulate the design brief through the filter of people's needs, aspirations and imaginaries (Musso, 2005). An emphasis is then put on analogical thinking (Hofstadter & Sander, 2013) and the investigation of emotional tensions and paradoxes. Contrarily to the classical design process, the outcomes are no "solutions" but *experiential prototypes* given to perform, share and reflect on.

Lastly, design is neither an individualistic practice nor an attempt to master the world, but a means of engaging with oneself and with others. More precisely, *Experience Design* focuses more on posing relevant questions than on finding the right answer. Hence, we argue that design education should less aim at training skilled technicians than at nurturing a mode of being-in-the-world characterized by a deep interest for people and things of the world. In this line, we believe like Hartmut Rosa that "axes of resonance are more likely to appear when departing from established programs to make way for heterodox and unexpected approaches" (Rosa, 2016). The following sections present attitudes and tools used in the *Experience Design* program, in a dialog with the Chakra model. Its metaphoric and holistic properties allow for a non-linear and embodied approach to designers' experience in practice. Though each chakra is studied successively, it should be noted again that there is no hierarchical or sequential relationship between them. In the same way, the attitudes and methodological tools presented all work together as an integrative framework to support designers' self-questioning in practice. The paragraphs below may hence be read in any order, and naturally refer to each other.

1 Root chakra – *"I am"*
Muladhara in Sanskrit. Represents foundation, basic trust and feeling of being grounded.

Research in social sciences and neurophenomenology brought the concept of *blind spot* of psychological experience, the inner place "from which our attention, intention, and action originate when we engage with others and with ourselves" (Flowers & al., 2005). Our actions and interactions are hence never fully determined by rationality but partly shaped by emotional and affective provisions. Designers' choices themselves are subject to irrationality, involving so much that is personal like creativity, personal history, culture, learning style and view of the world (Lawson & Dorst, 2009). This implies that design practice is inevitably subjective. There is no single global vision of a situation, no matter how talented or experienced a designer is.

Leaving behind the comfortable illusion of objective choice is often the first challenge for students. From the early key moment of problem framing until the final defence of a proposition, designers need to dare take stance while showing certain distance from their

own point of view. Projects stemming from highly personal approaches are hence particularly delicate to handle. As the content becomes too emotional, it becomes more and more difficult for designers to make well-considered choices. Combining decision-making ability and sense of being-in-the-world is an exercise which falls within the scope of ethics: *"I act"* means positioning oneself in the professional force field.

Indeed, balancing implication and hindsight is learned through experience – understood as *Erfahrung* or knowledge built from practice, on the long run. Besides, we believe it is an educational duty to accompany the students' self-learning process with reading and questioning grids. To this end, our *Experience Design* curriculum refers to inspirational figures in areas such as radical, critical or speculative design, science, conceptual or performing arts… all bearing strong stance in the profession. By comparison and through critical thinking, students are stimulated to reflect on their own positioning, engagement and potential biases.

2   Sacral chakra – *"I feel"*
Svadhishthana in Sanskrit. Represents creativity, ability to accept others and new experiences.

This reflects the most sensitive side of designers' experience – understood here as *Erlebnis* or phenomenological event. The design process is experiential because rooted in the reality of "third persons", namely the project stakeholders, potential users and direct or indirect audience. But at the same time, designers adopt a "first person" approach that is both cognitive and affective, involving their own imaginary, emotions and intuition. This subjective engagement is not a bias to overcome – since as noted in *"I am"*, the ideal of rational agent is unreachable. The challenge is rather to use sensitivity as a resource in understanding complex situations from inside.

"Becoming sensitive requires taking account of the everyday experience of being. You need to imagine how you circulate yourself "naturally" – with the necessary quotes around that word. […] Things can come to you, but if you don't render yourself sensitive to them, you just don't get it." (Latour, 2016). Though, full immersion in experience is not natural to adults trained to reflect and rationalize. It is hence a challenge in design education to overcome prejudice and self-censorship and dare to venture in the search of peak moments of *flow* as described by Csikszentmihalyi (epitaph). To enhance students' perceptive attention, we included a dance workshop in the *Experience Design* program. They are invited to embody, therefore prototype with their own bodies, concepts like "engaging with", "taking care", "feeling a presence"… Dancing requires letting go of the rational mind to refer directly to the bodily sense. This was called *focusing* by psychotherapist Eugene Gendlin. "Neither in life nor in design we are limited to rearranging the existing, already-formed things and concepts. We can engage the experiential meanings [to] expand the vital roles which they perform." (Gendlin, 1997). In creative practices as well, feeling from inside is a source of knowledge and inspiration, through which happen *insights*. Suddenly, *"I see"*, perceive a situation in a novel way.

Dancing, crafting or drawing are such ways in which "you become what you draw: not in shape but in affect (Berger, 2005)". However, immersion should not become submersion. As noted earlier, a visceral issue – engaging *"I am"*, is particularly tricky to handle as a designer. Sensitive projection requires empathy without falling into the trap of hyper emotional

identification, which makes one unable to act with detachment and discernment. The aim is rather to suspend judgment and become "the one who observes, the silent watcher" (Tolle, 1997) as in meditative praxis. Such attitude leads to *"I understand"*.

3   Solar plexus chakra – *"I act"*
Manipura in Sanskrit. Represents power, ability to be confident and in control of our lives.

Since the pragmatic turn, it is acknowledged that thinking, feeling and acting are all in the same manner moments of human activity. Hannah Arendt's position on political philosophy enables a parallel with design. She defines *action* as the highest form of our being-in-the-world, characterized by freedom and plurality. Freedom means capacity to take initiative, to start something new, which cannot be expected from what happened before. This is precisely enabled by our plurality. Each individual is capable of acting and relating to others in ways that are unique and distinctive, consequently contributing to a network of actions and relationships that is infinitely complex and unpredictable. According to Arendt (1988), power is the outcome of collective engagement, as human creation expressing a potential, which always remains available to actors. This meets design practice in its embodied and performative dimensions. Designers step in with ideas that must be adapted to both the context (acknowledging plurality) and themselves (exercising freedom). In particular, *Experience Design* has expressly been defined as "oscillating across the axes of critical design, theatrical practices, existential philosophy and the performance of politics" (University of the Underground). Consequently, designers do not deliver self-supporting artefacts but take into account how their propositions will enter into and eventually transform people's life.

More important, there is no independent individual act in design. *Agency* is not a unilateral strategy but a relation of interdependencies – an "experience of resonant effectiveness" (Rosa, 2016). Action is more determined by energies, processes and relations than by any expected result. This is why, before even acting, identifying the stakeholders involved, their respective role, responsibilities and expectations, is required at the start of any project. Trained to systemic thinking, designers are able to map complex systems and force fields, in a manner that is "entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980). In this line, designerly ways are more *tactical* than strategic (De Certeau, 1984). Action does never completely follow the rules and processes, leaving space for adaptation and "response-ability" (Haraway, 2008). Tools, be they material or conceptual, are not simply transferable from one project to another. They must be tailor-made, appropriated, adapted, combined or invented case by case. Whereas most classical design methods claim iterations, this is more accurately *itineration* as defined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1990). Such designers are itinerants, preferring step after step anticipation to deterministic prevision. Rather than imposing form on matter, this approach is based on "bringing together materials and combining or redirecting their flow in the anticipation of what might emerge" (Ingold, 2012). Experimentation and prototyping are key means in the process – as detailed in *"I speak"*.

4   Heart chakra – *"I love"*
Anahata in Sanskrit. Represents compassion, sincerity and healing.

Whereas *"I act"* had political implications, *"I love"* represents poetic attributes. Whereas politics means engaging in power relationships, poetics means gathering anyway. Design precisely aims at connecting with people, starting by understanding how they make sense of their world. Human and social sciences, in particular ethnographic research, provide observation and revelation tools that are able to inform design. But "meaningful insights don't come quickly. The process involves slowing down, taking everything in, using all five senses and being curious." (AIGA).

Indeed, several levels of knowledge about human experience may be accessed through different techniques. Following the categories of the empathy map (a tool developed in the agile community to gain insight on customers' expectations), what people say, think, do and feel are as many layers to reveal. On top of the iceberg is explicit knowledge, easily accessed to by interviews or observation. On the contrary, tacit knowledge cannot readily be expressed in words (Polanyi, 1964), though it strongly determines what people experience. Designers can use several tools to build a better understanding and open new spaces, which will then be used for design purposes. For instance, devices such as notebooks, recorders, cameras… may be left to the subjects of study as respectful gifts, in order for them to share personal details in a warm and informal manner. These *cultural probes* help establish a conversation and bring out new perspectives for designers on people's everyday life, their desires and needs. The inventor of the method Bill Gaver recounts a project aiming at increasing the presence of the elderly in their local communities: "The artist–designer approach is openly subjective, only partly guided by any "objective" problem statement. Thus, we were after "inspirational data" with the probes, to stimulate our imaginations rather than define a set of problems. We weren't trying to reach an objective view of the elders' needs through the probes, but instead a more impressionistic account of their beliefs and desires, their aesthetic preferences and cultural concerns." (Gaver & al., 1999).

Probes may add purpose to projects where the presence of designers might have been downplayed or misunderstood. *Experience Design* students used them for instance to better understand the perceived corporate culture of a luxury brand. The organizational context, characterized by a high level of hierarchy and structure, did not really allow for employees to express their views freely. Designers proposed devices such as a palaver tree, an exchange of correspondence, and even a goldfish, to help releasing the voices with respect and sensitivity. They gained insights on existing rituals and communication issues in the company, as well as on employees' motivation and aspirations.

5   Throat chakra – *"I speak"*
Vishuddha in Sanskrit. Represents ability to communicate and create.

Though design is basically not self-expression, designers share with artists similar sensorial and sensitive expression and communication tools. Whatever the outcome, designing means shaping ideas into tangible forms. In multidisciplinary teams, designers naturally play a translator role, transposing different stakeholders' thoughts into tangible representations functioning as *boundary objects* able to intersect social worlds. In this line, design artefacts perform twofold mediation, both cognitive and social (Star & Griesemer, 1989). This happens through direct experience bringing together perceptive subjects and mediums. Given that different forms can accomplish different feelings, ways of sensitizing (Latour, 2016), designing means fine-tuning the attachment points supporting human experience. Designers

don't write stories but the conditions under which they can begin, as expressed in Marc Hassenzahl's slogan "design *for* experience" (2010). Ultimately, a large part of people's actual experience escapes design intentions. "There is an irreducible gap between the programs and the ways in which they are ultimately received, activated, transformed or simply ignored." (Dominguez Rubio & Fogué, 2014). This humbles designers, who need to receive demonstrations such as opposition, misuse or even hacking of rules as legitimate and significant. For instance, a group of *Experience Design* students working on smart vehicles noticed a paradoxical behaviour, which allowed them to reframe their understanding: though all interviewees systematically used their GPS when driving, most of them admitted (or were caught in the act of) disobeying route suggestions. The effect of presence provided by the device proved to be more valued than its efficiency. This insight provided rich material to experiment new types of interaction.

In an experience-oriented approach, multiple prototypes are necessary to bring complementary perspectives on human experience. Each one is specific, able to enlighten the sensory, spatial, cognitive, social, temporal… qualities of experience. The type we call *experiential prototyping* is especially designed to capture the dynamics and tacit aspects of an interaction, which is difficult in static or inflexible representations. Enactment allows for instance to choreography and explore what "moving" and "being moved" mean to people. Different mediums can be used such as Wizard of Oz systems, spontaneous role-playing, scenes or full-scale environments… They all involve interplay between a "first" and "third person" – described in *"I feel"*, and aim at creating meaning through experiencing – towards *"I understand"*.

6   Third eye chakra – *"I see"*
Ajna in Sanskrit. Represents awareness, ability to focus on and see the big picture.

Making sense of things, integrating disparate elements in a consistent whole are parts of designers' mission. They are expected to deliver propositions that are consistent, both per se and in relation to a context. Following a well-known principle, the sum is greater than its constituent parts. As a corollary, the Gestalt approach also suggests that designerly thinking "originates in holistic sensory-motor-affective experience", not only in the cognitive system. Abstract ideas underlying design originate in "perception, action, the body, and affect" (Lindgaard & Wesselius, 2017).

Metaphors are a source of knowledge developed through physical interaction with the world. They make our experience interpretive and structure our understanding of situations by reference to other phenomena (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Donald Schön (1983) highlighted the generative power of metaphors. "Seeing as" opens up novel perspectives on an issue, inviting to reframe or formulate relevant questions rather than to directly answer them. In the same way, *insights* and *analogies* are central to designers' inspiration – the former perceived, the latter rather formed. Many discoveries, inventions and innovations draw on metaphors or analogies. More specifically, they are helpful in *Experience Design* to communicate a meaning, a quality of experience. For example, studying nomadic people and backpackers' relationship to travelling led students to offbeat and engaging propositions for an urban mobility operator. Another example was "seeing" an MRI as a dive or space travel, which allowed another group to understand the key role of preparation and transpose the "instructor" duty in hospitals.

Training to this way of thinking is not simply technical, for instance through the use of matrix. Analogical tools work through subtle transformation in order to capture the essence of inspirational content. Mastering them hence involves sensitivity to feel the deep sense of a metaphor and let insights emerge. Suddenly perceiving a situation in a new way happens when intuition meets a latent potential. By way of metaphor, this is precisely like waiting for Kairos, the ancient Greek figure personifying luck and favourable moments. A tuft of hair hanging over his face allows seizing him when arriving. But the back of his head is bald, meaning when an opportunity is gone it cannot be re-captured (Berger, 2018).

7   Crown chakra – *"I understand"*
Sahasrara in Sanskrit. Represents spirituality and mindfulness.

"I see" inherently conditions *"I understand".* The value of a design proposition is not only rational but also akin to alchemy. In this line, "understanding" doesn't necessarily imply "knowing": it relates to perceiving deep meaning rather than truth. This brings back to inevitable subjectivity in practice – *"I am".* "Seek[ing] to address human aspirations rather than technical problems" (Findeli, 2000), designers are above all concerned by relevance, usefulness and meaning – knowing that this is all relative, never absolute. Therefore, understanding represents the highest level of *experiencing*, a subjective process described in a philosophical perspective about psychology (Gendlin, 1961). It is a flow of feeling occurring in the immediate present and carrying strong implicit meaning. Though experiencing is concrete awareness, it is felt rather than conceptually thought, known or verbalized. This achievement of experiencing is characterized by *felt-sense,* which differs from logic in that it is more intricate and can be conceptualized in a variety of ways: theoretical, creative or narrative… Such meaning is embedded in design projects. Like artists, designers "sensationalize in the strongest sense of the term, transposing in the register of sensation […] analyses which, in the cold rigour of concept and demonstration, would leave the audience indifferent" (Bourdieu, 1994).

If *Experience Design* outcomes preferentially take interactive forms, like performance or role-playing, it is precisely because these mediums open a poetic space blurring the lines between designers and experiencers. Since in a state of *flow* "skills are used to their utmost", experiencing it in practice is a true vehicle for understanding and engaging with others – demonstrating interdependency between *"I feel"*, *"I love"*, and the other areas represented by each chakra. While nearly all aspects of human experience are today unravelled by cognitive psychology, semiology, sensory metrology or neurosciences… a mysterious part of emergence remains. Designers create areas and conditions for experience, leaving space for infinite and polysemous possibilities.
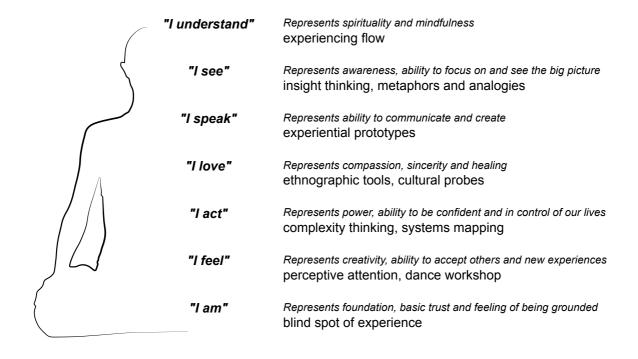
"I understand" *Represents spirituality and mindfulness*
experiencing flow

"I see" *Represents awareness, ability to focus on and see the big picture*
insight thinking, metaphors and analogies

"I speak" *Represents ability to communicate and create*
experiential prototypes

"I love" *Represents compassion, sincerity and healing*
ethnographic tools, cultural probes

"I act" *Represents power, ability to be confident and in control of our lives*
complexity thinking, systems mapping

"I feel" *Represents creativity, ability to accept others and new experiences*
perceptive attention, dance workshop

"I am" *Represents foundation, basic trust and feeling of being grounded*
blind spot of experience

Figure 1. Embodying Design Practice – Experience Design tools in the Chakra model framework

Concluding reflections

"An experience is something that one comes out of transformed.
I am an experimenter in the sense that I write in order to change myself
and in order not to think the same thing as before.
An experience is always a fiction: it is something that someone fabricates oneself,
that doesn't exist before and will exist afterward. […]
The aim [of my work] is […] to experience something that permits a change,
a transformation of the relationship we have with […] our knowledge."
(Foucault, 2016).

Though lived in the moment, an *experience* has a transformative power on practitioners. Designers use phenomenological *Erlebnis* to express "what [their] individuality records, like a seismograph, from human phenomenon" (Mendini, [1984] 2014). Over time, *Erfahrung* stratifies expertise that is soft and contextual. Although philosopher, Michel Foucault's intellectual attitude quoted above exemplifies an embodied design approach, characterized by considering work as constantly evolving experience, an extreme relativity of methods, and a reluctance to think of oneself as a knowing subject.

Similarly, the attitudes and tools presented above have no ambition of being exhaustive, and may not be detailed enough for direct pedagogic purposes. The ambition was not to settle any process or method, rather to propose a holistic view of designers' experience in practice, acknowledging its embodied and affective dimensions. The framework drafted here is hence subject to be read, appropriated, refined or contradicted in many ways. We only hope it

stimulates designers' self-questioning. *Cogito*, the experience of thought, "would literally mean to co-agitate, to lead and be led, stir up and be stirred, care and be cared for." (Ingold, 2012). And so would mean the experience of designing, through subtle balance between moving and being moved.

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