

The Atman and the Five Sheaths

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THE WORD *VEDA* COMES from the root *vid*, to know. The concluding portions of the Vedas are called Upanishads or Vedanta. Vedic literature conveys, in a poetic way, a wide spectrum of metaphysical knowledge. At the most sublime end of the spectrum is Advaita Vedanta, which discusses the nature of the *jagat*, universe; *jivas*, living beings; and Brahman. The *Muktika Upanishad* states: ‘*Tilashu tailavat-veda vedantah supratishthitah*; as oil is well established in the sesame seeds, so is Vedanta in the Vedas.’¹ Advaita Vedanta, as systematized by Acharya Shankara, is a comprehensive science of spirituality, universally realizable and open to rational investigation.

The most important challenge in Advaita Vedanta is to understand the relationship between the Atman and Brahman. A true perception of this relationship can be acquired only by removing the veil of ignorance caused by the *upadhis*, limiting adjuncts, created by the inscrutable *maya*. The *upadhis* manifest as the *pancha-koshas*, five sheaths, which hide the real nature of the Atman. The realization of the Atman removes all afflictions, brings eternal knowledge, and eradicates the ego, lust, anger, attachment, hatred, and the like. When the *upadhis* are removed, the distinction between knowledge, knower, and known is dissolved and only the Atman shines as the supreme Existence. According to Advaita Vedanta, the realization of non-duality is the true knowledge of the Atman, or Brahman. Acharya Shankara says: ‘*Brahma satyam jaganmithya jivo brahmaiva naparah*; Brahman is real, the world is unreal, the *jiva* is non-different from Brahman.’²

The Atman

The Upanishads declare that perfection is within each and every *jiva*. This perfection has to become manifest in oneself. The method is by removing *ajnana*, ignorance, through *jnana*, knowledge. *Jnana* is knowledge that is not derivative, partial, and subject to any qualifications; it is original, complete, unlimited, and true. The Atman is the ultimate universal Existence: ‘*Ayam-atma brahma*; this Atman is Brahman.’³ Other Upanishads declare: ‘This Atman is the ruler of all beings and the king of all beings. Just as all the spokes are fixed in the nave and the felloe of a chariot-wheel, so are all beings, all gods, all worlds, all organs, and all these (individual) selves fixed in this Atman.’⁴ It is supreme bliss, light, love, boundless consciousness, and knowledge. It is not in time, but time arises from it; it is not in space, as space also is created from it. ‘The Atman, which is subtler than the subtle and greater than the great, is lodged in the heart of (every) creature. A desireless person sees that glory of the Atman through the serenity of the organs and (thereby) becomes free from sorrow.’⁵ ‘This is the Ishvara of all; this one is omniscient; this is the internal ruler; this one is the source of all; this one is verily the place of origin and dissolution of all beings.’⁶

Over and over the glory of the Atman is described from various angles in the Upanishads. As oil is hidden in a sesame seed, butter in yogurt, fire in wood, so does the Atman reside in oneself in its fullness. It is to be discovered by one who searches for it through truth and

austerity. ‘The intelligent person gives up happiness and sorrow by developing concentration of mind on the Atman and thereby meditating on the old deity who is inscrutable, lodged inaccessibly, located in the intellect, and seated in the midst of misery (the organs).’⁷

The knowledge of the Atman is eternally existent and available to everyone. All the efforts of sadhakas, in the form of assiduous meditation and intense devotion, are directed towards the removal of *avidya*, ignorance. And as soon as the veil of ignorance is lifted, the self-luminous Atman shines forth. This is the state of enlightenment or moksha, freedom.

The Pancha-koshas

According to Vedanta, the Atman inside the body is apparently conditioned by the *pancha-koshas*, five sheaths or vestures. The word *kosha* means ‘sheath’ or ‘covering.’ Like a scabbard that covers a sword, the *pancha-koshas* form a series of layers, as it were, one over the other. The *annamaya-kosha*, food sheath is the outermost; inside it is the *pranamaya-kosha*, sheath of *prana* or life-force; inside this sheath is the *manomaya-kosha*, sheath of mind; then comes the *vijnanamaya-kosha*, sheath of intelligence; and finally the *anandamaya-kosha*, sheath of bliss. The *anandamaya-kosha* is subtler and more pervasive than all the others and is the cause of the *vijnanamaya-kosha*; the *vijnanamaya-kosha* is, in turn, subtler and more pervasive than the following three and is the cause of the *manomaya-kosha*; and so on successively.

Each sheath interacts with the others, and since they all are under the law of cause and effect, they are ultimately unreal. The Atman, enveloped by these *pancha-koshas*, is beyond all *desha*, space, *kala*, time, and *nimitta*, causation. The creation of these *pancha-koshas* is the work of *maya*, which has the power to hide the reality

by covering it and projecting something else. This projection is like an illusion which is taken for real and which binds us.

All these sheaths that condition the Atman are called the non-Atman. These sheaths become the *upadhis* of the Atman that completely limit its knowledge. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* teaches the process of peeling off one layer, sheath, after another.⁸ As we peel off layer after layer, we come closer and closer to the Atman. One has to carefully separate the Atman from the non-Atman. ‘One should unerringly separate him (the Purusha) from one’s body, like a stalk from the *munja* grass. One should know him as pure and immortal’ (2.3.16).

The *pancha-koshas* are connected to the three bodies—gross, subtle, and causal—of the *jiva*. The sheath of food is identified with the *sthula-sharira*, gross body, which is subject to birth and death. The sheaths of *prana*, mind, and intellect, constitute the *sukshma-sharira*, subtle body, which is the nucleus for the birth of another gross body and is associated with the *jiva* throughout its transmigratory existence. This subtle body consists of seventeen factors: the five sensory organs, the five motor organs, the five *pranas*, the mind, and intelligence. The *karana-sharira*, causal body, is made up of the *anandamaya-kosha*.

From the relative or empirical point, there are three entities called Ishvara, *jiva*, and *jagat*; from the absolute standpoint, there is only Brahman-Atman, which is ‘*ekameva-advitiam*; one only without a second.’⁹ The pluralism we experience, from where we start our philosophical enquiry, is not the final Truth. The one Reality appears to be plural due to *avidya*. In Brahman there is absolutely no differentiation: ‘There is no diversity here whatsoever. He who sees as though there is difference here, goes from death to death.’¹⁰

So far we have considered the objective approach to the Reality. The subjective approach centres round the jiva. It is maya that makes the one Brahman appear as many jivas. This apparent creation conjures up the *pancha-koshas* and makes jivas think of themselves as individual beings. Therefore, the subjective approach takes into consideration the constituents, the *pancha-koshas*, of the jiva as well as the three states of experience—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep—for the purpose of unravelling the Reality behind them. The process starts with the Vedantic discernment of ‘*neti, neti*; not this, not this’.

Annamaya-kosha • It is the physical body made of bones, marrow, skin, flesh, blood, and nerves. The body receives external stimuli through the sense organs and responds through the motor organs. As the body is produced out of food and is dependent on it for survival, this sheath is also called the food sheath. It does not exist prior to conception and after death. It is constantly changing and is an object like a jar. The body is subject to external influences. Only a foolish person identifies with this bundle of



filthy perishable things that go by the name of body. Yet the delusion of having a body is so strong that we cannot let it go and consequently try to do everything to keep it comfortable. ‘A stupid person thinks he is the body; the book-learned person identifies himself with the mixture of body and soul; the sage possessed of realization, due to discernment looks upon the eternal Atman as his Self and thinks “I am Brahman”.’¹¹ The *annamaya-kosha* is the densest form *avidya* can take and hence it is the most delusive. The most beautiful body is shunned if there is no life in it.

Pranamaya-kosha • It is the second sheath and enlivens the first one. This sheath made of *prana*, life or vital force, comprises the five physiological systems of the body that control many functions connected to living. The first of the five is also called *prana*; it is engaged in breathing and perception and its movement is upwards. The next one is *apana* and, taking care of excretion, has its movement downwards. This is followed by *samana*, which governs digestion and the assimilation of food. Next is *vyana*, which controls blood circulation and supplies the digested nutrients to different parts of the body. Finally comes *udana*, which is the energy that propels the jiva from the body at the time of death. Some authors on Vedanta also speak of subsidiary *pranas* that control lesser functions like yawning, opening and closing the eyelids, and so on. But these are actually modifications of the five *pranas*. ‘Neither is the *pranamaya-kosha* the Self because it is a modification of *vayu*, air, and like the air it enters into and comes out of the body, and because it never knows in the least its own weal and woe or those of others’ (166).

Manomaya-kosha • The living body becomes useless if there is no mind in it. We see

people in a coma and similar states in which the body is immovable and life just hangs on tenuously. It is the mind that brings consciousness to both the body and the vital energy; that is why it is important. The organs of knowledge, together with the mind, form the *manomaya-kosha*. It is the cause of the diversity of such things as 'I and mine'. Since it is conscious, it is powerful and creates attachment to the body and the sense objects. It is the repository of innumerable impressions. A person's existence is the creation of the mind, which waxes and wanes and is subject to many influences. In the state of dream, it creates a world of its own. 'There is no *avidya* outside the mind. The mind alone is *avidya*, the cause of the bondage of transmigration. When that is destroyed, all else is destroyed, and when it is manifested, everything else is manifested' (161). The *manomaya-kosha* cannot be the Atman because it has a beginning and an end and is subject to pain and suffering; it creates the diversity of qualifications, actions, means, and results.

Vijnanamaya-kosha • The fourth sheath is that of intelligence, also a modification of maya, and is endowed with the function of knowledge; it wholly identifies with the previous sheaths. 'It is without beginning, characterized by egoism, is called the jiva, and carries on the activities on the relative plane. Through previous desires it performs good and evil actions and experiences their results. Being born in various bodies, it comes and goes, up and down. It is this sheath of knowledge that has the waking, dream, and other states and experiences joy and grief' (171). The mental and intellectual sheaths differ in their nature and qualities: while the mind receives the stimuli generated by the sense organs, the intellect controls the thought processes. The *vijnanamaya-kosha* is effulgent due to its proximity to the

Atman and therefore one may wrongly believe that it is the Atman.

Anandamaya-kosha • The sheath of bliss is a reflection of the blissfulness of the Atman. It has its fullest play during profound sleep. This sheath is also a modification of maya. It is the basis of all our happiness. 'It appears in view when some object agreeable to oneself presents itself. It makes itself spontaneously felt by the fortunate during the fruition of their virtuous deeds, from which every corporeal being derives great joy without the least effort' (207). The *anandamaya-kosha* is not the Atman because it is also changeful and the effect of past good deeds. It is embedded in the other sheaths, which are also modifications of maya.

Seeing the reflection of the sun mirrored in the water a foolish person thinks it is the sun itself. Similarly, we identify ourselves with the Atman caught in the *vijnanamaya-kosha*. We then superimpose the attributes of the *vijnanamaya* and the other *koshas* on the Atman and are thus deluded. When the *pancha-koshas* are eliminated by the process of '*neti, neti*' what remains at the culmination is the Atman, the witness of the *pancha-koshas*. 'This self-effulgent Atman, which is distinct from the five sheaths, the witness of the three states, the real, the changeless, the untainted, the everlasting bliss—is to be realized by the wise person as his own Self' (211).^{PB}

References

1. *Muktika Upanishad*, 1.9.
2. Acharya Shankara, *Brahma-jnanavali-mala*, 20.
3. *Mandukya Upanishad*, 2.
4. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.5.15.
5. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.20.
6. *Mandukya Upanishad*, 6.
7. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.12.
8. See *Taittiriya Upanishad*, 3.10.6.
9. *Chhandogya Upanishad*, 6.2.1.
10. *Katha Upanishad*, 2.1.11.
11. Acharya Shankara, *Vivekachudamani*, 160.