



THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF PANCHKOSHAS (FIVE SHEATHS): THE VEDIC WAY TO BE AWARE OF ONE'S OWN EXISTENCE

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Abstract: The Vedic tradition is deeply rooted in human life whether we talk about traditional, cultural, social, intellectual or spiritual spheres. It provides the visionary power to realise the truth of human life that the body made of matter has existence till the divine flame is enkindled. All the happenings that occur at the physical level are witnessed by the jivatma as a result nothing can be hidden from the life forces (air, fire, sky, ten directions). Due to the lack of vision, senses are generally limited to grossness at the physical level. The logistic support which is generated by the time being is confined in the cobweb of illusion and delusion. In that case, the presence of the pure self is covered in a layer of darkness. A person is fastened in such a negative wave that both mission and vision dwindle. Life is bestowed by God to realize the precious platform and to take action to march from Annamaya Kosha (Physical Consciousness) to Anandmaya Kosha (Celestial Consciousness). This paper aims to study the Panchkosha and how these five sheathes are enshrined with the different kundalinis and further, they lead the Pran Vayu to transcend from the physical energy to the cosmic energy. Human behaviour is much more formed and deformed as the life force transcends from one to another kosha. The body is not only the prison but the means to salvation. Bhagavad-Gita, Taitriya Upanishad, Panchkosha by Swami Yogananda and other texts are sources to develop the hypothesis, dive into the Vedic epistemology, and justify the facts.

Keywords: *Panhkoshas, Yajurveda, the gross body, celestial body, sachiddananda.*

The term *Panchkoshas* is made of two words ‘panch’ means five and *kosha* means sheath. The concept of *Panhkoshas* was first discussed in the second part of the *Taittriya Upanishad*, a Vedic era text embedded within the *Ayurveda*. Which is highly symbolic. The detailed exposition taught in the yoga philosophy comes from later Vedantic texts such as Sankara’s *Vivekacudamani* or *Vedantasara* of Sadananda. Human eyes visualize

only the physical body due to its limitations but there are subtle eyes which visualize the astral body, and that is very practical which everyone feels but meditation and sacrifice are required to penetrate the turtle cell of grossness. The *Vedantic* philosophy of Brahman and Ataman lies behind the development of this thought. All objects, living, non-living; all beings, movable or stationary are made of five elements and take a specific identity ‘*namah* and *rupah*’ (name and shape) in the gross form which can be visualized and struggles to complete the life journey under this nameplate. In this way, we can say that all visible things are corporeal. But those which are invisible are immortal, perhaps it may be one of the logic that the dweller of the physical body never dies only the garb is changed as we find in the following lines of the Second Chapter, verse 22 of the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

वासांसि जीर्णानि यथा विहाय, नवानि गृह्णाति नरोऽपराणि ।

तथा शरीराणि विहाय जीर्णा, न्यन्यानि संयाति नवानि देही ॥

*vāsānsi jīrnāni yathā vihāya, navāni grihṇāti naro 'parāṇi
tathā śarīrāṇi vihāya jīrnānya, anyāni sanyāti navāni dehī*

(Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so, does the embodied soul cast off worn-out bodies and take on others that are new.

Translated by Dr S. Radha Krishnan).

This justifies that *sthul sarira* (gross body) is subject to decay whether that is terrestrial or aquatic or aerial. There is one more fact behind this discourse that the dweller and the sheath are two different things, but at the same time, matter (moveable or stationary) can never exist without that invisible spirit.

Let us shift our focus to *koshas* (Sheathes), in the second part of the second chapter of *Taittriya Upanishad* the five different sheathes or *kosha* of living beings have been discussed. They are Annamaya Kosha, Pranamaya Kosha, Vijnanamaya Kosha, Manomaya Kosha and Anandamaya Kosha. So, under this discourse, there are five layers of the body (sheathes) of moveable and non-moveable beings. And as per the nature of beings different sheathes are dominant. Each sheath has its own range of grasping power for example in animals which are made of five elements but they are completely different from humans because the beginning two *koshas* are dominant in them. Their bodies are made of food and their desires are also limited. But humans are completely different types of God’s creation. The sheaths bestowed to human beings provide the proper platform to go beyond *Annamaya kosha* and *Pranamaya kosha*.

All five sheathes are covered by three *gunas* (aspects) *Rajas* (passion), *Tamas* (dullness) and *Sattva* (goodness). Dr S. Radhakrishnan writes in the translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, “What leads to the appearance of the immortal soul in the cycle of birth and death is the power of the *gunas* or modes”. The trilogy of the *gunas* allure the senses and pull back whenever the life force wants to shift from one *Koshas* to another. But these

three aspects can't be negated from the beings because they are the base to preserve the universe. According to the dominant flavour of *gunas*, *Koshas* illumine or attain dullness. The cosmic trinity reflects the dominance of one of the three aspects, *Sattva* in Vishnu the preserver, *rajas* in Brahma, the creator and *tamas* in Siva the destructor. *Sattva* contributes to the stability of the universe, *rajas* to its creative aspects and *tamas* represents the tendency of things to decay. In this way, *Kalchakra* (time cycle) moves ceaselessly making, breaking and remaking the universe. The Soul is cladded in such a way in this process that it forgets the real goal of attainment of Moksha. This has been clarified in the following Figure -1:

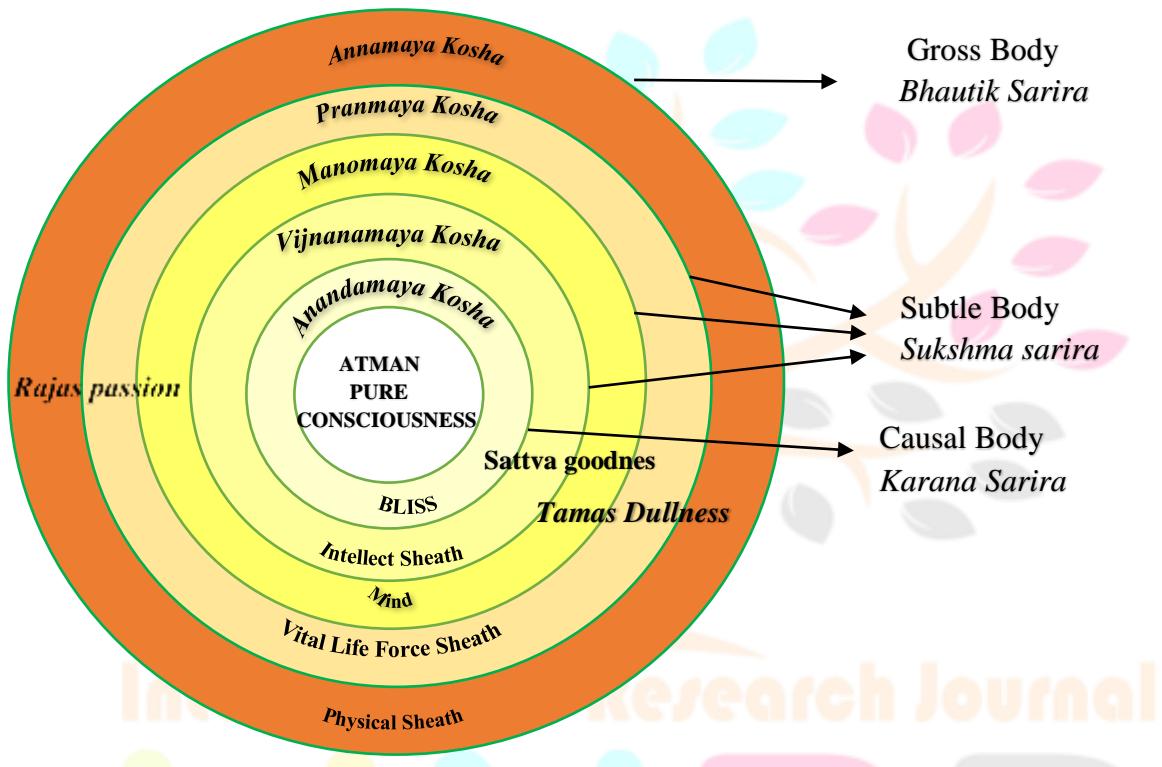


Figure 1.

Advaita philosophy also has focused on the fact that *Atma* and *Parmatma* are the same, which means there is only one Brahma. Here the question arises how do we experience the manifold world? The straightforward answer is "Avidya-led Maya "covers" the One and "projects" the Many". These are spoken of as the veiling power (*avarnasakti*) and the projecting power (*vikshepasakti*) of the Cosmic Grand illusion called Maya. The realization of the truth requires transcending the life force from one to another and ultimately inter in the subtle body and then in the causal body. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, taken from *The Life Divine*, Chapter 26:

Even within the formula of the physical cosmos, there is an ascending series in the scale of Matter which leads us from the more to the less dense, from the less to the more subtle. Where we reach the highest term of that series, the most supra-ethereal subtlety of material substance or formulation of Force, what lies beyond? Not a Nihil, not a void; for there is no such thing as absolute void or real nullity and what we call by that name is simply something beyond the grasp of our sense, our mind or our most subtle consciousness. Nor is it true that there is nothing beyond, or that some ethereal substance of Matter is the eternal beginning; for we know that Matter and material Force are only a last result of a pure Substance and pure Force in which consciousness is luminously self-aware and self-possessing and not as in Matter lost to itself in an inconsistent sleep and an inert motion. What then is there between this material substance and that pure substance? For we do not leap from the one to the other, we do not pass at once from the inconscient to absolute consciousness. There must be and there are grades between inconscient substance and utterly self-conscious self-extension, as between the principle of Matter and the principle of Spirit.

The quest for cosmic rays and absolute negation is possible only in the human form as the journey starts from the gross substance in ascending order and gradually enters in less dense, from where the divine light begins to bloom. How the life force moves towards the centre is very clearly visible in the above figure.

These gradations of substance, in one important aspect of their formulation in series, can be seen to correspond to the ascending series of *Annamaya Kosha* (Matter), *Pranamaya Kosha* (Life), *Manomaya Kosha* (Mind), *Vijnanamaya Kosha* (Supermind), *Anandamaya Kosha* (Bliss) and that other higher divine triplicity of *Sachchidananda* in the following the following figure.

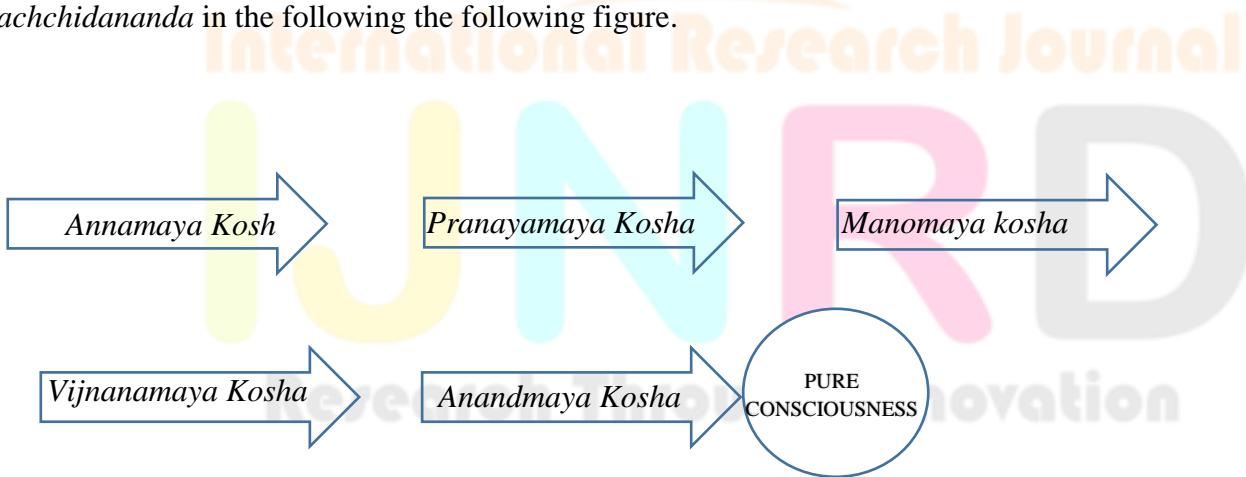


Figure 2.

In other words, we find that substance in its ascension bases itself upon each of these principles and makes itself successively a characteristic vehicle for the dominating cosmic self-expression of each in their ascending series. Simply stated, the journey of self is not confined to only five *Koshas*, it enters the triplicity

Sachchidananda which is the pure consciousness which is clear in the above figure. This is the highest position where the self becomes part of the creator and comes out from the life cycle. Heaven light forever shines and earth shadows fly such sphere.

Now the preceding paragraphs will discuss each *Kosha* separately and their relevance in our practical life. The five Koshas as mentioned in the *Taittiriya Upanishad* are as follows:

1. *Annayamaya Kosha* (Physical Sheath)
2. *Pranmaya Kosha* (Vital Life Force Sheath)
3. *Manomaya kosha* (Psychological Wellness Sheath)
4. *Vijnanamaya Kosha* (Intellect Sheath)
5. *Anandmaya Kosha* (Happiness and Blissfulness Seath)

Annayamaya Kosha (Physical Body/ Sheath)

The first sheath is referred to as the physical body or gross body which is made of five elements survived by food. Since this is the first cell of the subtle body, it plays a crucial role in the journey of the self, so its importance can't be negated. It provides the protection and habitant of Atman who dwells in it. Its wellness is highly appreciated. Swami Vivekananda told, "a healthy mind lies in a healthy body". The fitness of the physical body has prime importance because it stands as the gatekeeper of next all the sheaths. *Anna* (food) is the sustainable substance of this *kosha*. *Taittriya Upanishad* clearly states:

अन्नादौ प्रजाः प्रजायन्ते। याः काशं पृथ्वी श्रिताः।

अथो अन्नेनैव जीवन्ति। अथैनदपि यन्त्यन्तः।

अन्नं हि भूतानां जयेषां तस्मात् सर्वेशधमुच्यते।

सर्वं वै येऽन्नम् मनुवन्ति। येऽन्नम् ब्रह्मोपास्त।

Annadvai prajah prajayante, yah kasch prithvishritah.

Atho annenaij jivanti, athaiadapi yantyantah.

Anna hi bhutanam jyestham, tasmat sarvaushdhamuchyate

Sarva vai teanna mapnuvanti, yeannam brahmopaste.

All beings that rest on the earth are born verily from food. Besides they live on food and in the end they get merged into food. Food was verily born before all creatures; therefore it is called the medicine for all. Creatures are born of food: being born they grow by food, since it is eaten and it eats creatures, therefore it is called food and the substance prepared by it is called *Annamaya Kosha*. It is already stated above that there is one Brahma

so here *Annam Brahma* means ‘food is Brahma’. Here a very strong message is delivered that to respect food is to respect the Brahma. Food is the creator of the physical body and food is the creation of the Brahma. Food and Brahma, one is identical to the other. Even today in Indian culture it can be noticed that as food is served, first of all, prayer is offered to the goddess Annapurna for providing food.

अन्नपूर्णि सदपुर्णि शङ्करा प्राणा वल्लभे

ज्ञान वैराग्ये सिद्ध्यर्थं भिक्षां देहि च पार्वति।

Annapuran sadapurne shankara prana vallabhe

Jnana vairagye siddhartham bhiksham dehi ca parvati

(‘O’ Annapurna, who is always complete! ‘O’ Parvati, the consort of Lord Shiva! Thank you for giving us food for the purpose of gaining dispassion and knowledge.)

In all cultures, there is a tradition to offer a prayer before having food because it is a very sacred thing, it gives us life and strength to perform our duties. For example, in Christianity, people offer prayer to the divinity, “Lord God, Heavenly Father, bless us and these / Thy gifts which we receive from / Thy bountiful goodness, through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.” If we respect food, food will respect us and shower the blessings of health and strength since this is Brahman.

Pranamaya Kosha (Vital Life Force Sheath)

The gross body is only material as it is made of food which exists prior to it and merges as in food after death. But a question arises what is the symptom of death? The answer we get is that *prana* comes out from the body. The power which decides the life and death of beings is well discussed in the scriptures, “The breath (swas) is the first symptom or deciding factor to declare someone dead or alive.” As compared with the first ‘Self’ made of the essence of food which provides the first layer of subtle bodies as mentioned above, the second inner layer is constituted by the vital force, which is the transformation of air that is called the *Pranamaya kosha*. The scripture describes,

तस्माद्वा एतस्मादननरस्मया। अन्योन्तरं आत्मा प्राणमयः।

तेनैषः पूर्णः। स वा एष पुरुषविध एव। तस्य पुरुषविधातां।

अन्वयं पुरुषविधः। तस्य प्राण एव शिरः

tasmadva etasmadnarasmya anayntarayah atma pranamayah

Tenaishah purnah. Sa wa esh purushavid eva. Tasya purush vidhatam.

According to the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, the *pranamaya kosha* is the vital life force that determines the physical body's life and death. This constitutes the human form as it is discussed earlier. At this stage *prana* is indeed the head, *vyana* (pervading the whole body) is the right side, *apana* (the function of inhaling) is the left side, space is the self, and the earth is the tail that stabilizes this kosha.

In the Hindu tradition, the five elements - fire, earth, water, air and sky - are represented as *vayus*. The *vyana vayu* is connected with the element of water. It has no specific seat or location, but runs through all the veins (*nadis*) of the body (of which there are more than 72,000 pathways), thereby connecting all functions of the body. When *vyana* is unhealthy or imbalanced in the body, one may feel physically or mentally clumsy, disjointed and/or otherwise altered. The other, *Apana* is the second-most important of the five *vayus* (prana, *apana*, *samana*, *udana*, *vyana*), or types of prana in Hatha yoga and Ayurveda. *Apana vayu* is responsible for regulating the outward flow of *prana* from the body and governs the elimination of physical wastes and toxins from the body. At the time of childbirth, *Apana Vayu* helps to create a smooth passageway for the delivery of the child. Other than this, *Apana Vayu* is also responsible for sexual stimulation, ejaculation & monthly menstrual cycle for women. Located in the pelvic floor, it spreads upward into the lower abdomen, helping to regulate digestion and reproductive functions. If the flow of *apana vayu* is weak, the body becomes more susceptible to disease, low mood, doubt and other negative emotional states. *Apana vayu* can be strengthened and balanced through various asana practices of yoga. Learning to regulate it can help avoid needless energy loss. The following beginner-friendly asanas also stimulate and strengthen the flow of *apana vayu*:

- *Prasarita padottanasana* (spread-legged standing forward bend)
- *Vrikshasana* (tree pose)
- *Baddha konasana* (bound angle pose)
- *Shalabhasana* (locust pose)

Manomaya Kosha (Psychological Wellness Sheath)

In ascending order, the next position goes to *Manomaya Kosha*. The position of this sheath is centred between two subtle bodies (*Vijnanamaya Kosha* and *Anandamaya Kosha*) and two gross bodies (*Annamaya Kosha* and *Pranmaya Kosha*). It means *Manomaya Kosha* plays the role of mediator between the gross body and the subtle body. This is made of the mind and five sense organs which work as the transferring centre of subtle bodies. At this level, the sense organs grasp perceptions from the outer world, and imaginations take place. Afterwards, it is converted into *sankalp* (resolutions) and resolutions are replaced by *vikalpa* (choices). In this way, the process of emerging and merging *Sankalp* and *Vikalp* continues in the *Manomaya Kosha*. Further, According

to the dominant impressions of different *gunas* (modes), the body is either fastened in the attachments or gets released and marches towards the next sheath. According to Swami Paramhans Yogananda, the five sense organs - ear, skin, eyes, tongue and nose, receive words, touch, image, taste, and smell respectively and transfer them to *Manomaya Kosha* for actions. In brief, it may be noted that this is the primary stage of the formation and deformation of the seeds of transcendental and non-transcendental knowledge. The primary gateways to receive the signals are *Annamaya* and *Pranamaya* and these are made of grossness, as a result, the impressions coming through these ways are more polluted and they require special check post. According to Swami Paramhans Yogananda, the Chandra (Moon) is the deity of *Manomaya Kosha*. As the moon shines with the light of the sun, the *Manomaya kosha* shines with the divine flame of the Bahaman. And the Brahman is identified as *Sachidanand* that is *sat*, *chit* and *anand*. All these three are one (Brahma) in the same way the flame of *Sat*, *Chit* and *Anand* culminated from the Paramatma enlighten the subtle body.

In the text entitled *Panchkosha Vivek* the action of man has been explained with the metaphor of Hawan. The five senses are performers, grossness is the fuel and the mind is the fire. The flame is ignited as more and more fuels are poured into the fire and this flame can never be cooled down until the water of *Jnana* (intellect) controls it. It is very clear that a person suffers due to the uncontrolled flame of passion flares up ceaselessly throughout life in the absence of the water of intellect. He is unable to break the barrier between the gross body and the subtle body. So, it is suggested that the tiger of *Manomaya* should not wander in the wood of grossness because its five bodyguards (five senses) grasp the subjects and strengthens the burning flame of hawan *kund* (fire pit). Due to this reason all types of discrimination, for example, caste, creed, race, gender, and colour, take place in mind which create hurdles in the journey of Self towards oneness.

Generally, we think that the mind ends with the end of the physical body but according to the scriptures this self is immortal; it never dies; since it is Brahma. This kosha is the deciding factor to differentiate humans and animals. Beginning two sheaths *Annamaya* and *Pranamaya* exist in all the moveable and immovable creatures. They live and die by virtue of their merits. In the third chapter of *Taittriya Upanishad* it is written,

तस्यैष एव सरीर आत्मा/ अन्योऽन्तर आत्मा मनोमया।

तेनैष पूर्णा/ स वा एष पुरुषविदः ए/ तस्य पुरुषिधता।

Tasyaish eva sarira atma. Anyoantar atma manomayah.

Tenaisha purnah. Sa wa esh purushvidah eva. Tasya purushvidhata.

This kosha, like two other koshas, has a human shape. Of that mental body, the *Yajur mantras* are head. The *Rig-mantras* are the right side, the *Sama-mantras* are the left side, the *Brahmana* portion is the self (trunk), and the mantras seen by the *Atharvabhangiras* are the stabilizing tail. Here, *yajur* denotes a kind of mantra in which letters, feet and length are not restricted. The word, *yajur* denotes prose sentences of that class. Since it is a constituent of the mental sheath, *yajur* is that state of mind which is related to the vocal organs (of

utterance), and the effort involve in an utterance like sound, innovation, letters, and sentences; which consists of volition which is preoccupied with the thought. This is the way when the mantras are considered mental states, then their mental repetition (*japa*) is possible. In short, we can say that *manomaya kosha* is the storehouse of rough material of thought process. It is very relevant to humans because in its absence thought processes, perceptions, and ponderation can't be possible.

Vijnanamaya Kosha (Intellect Sheath)

The other subtle body behind the *Manomaya* is the *Vijnanamaya kosha* constituted by valid knowledge. In the Indian knowledge system, *jnana* is something different from Western perceptions of knowledge. According to *Taittriya Upanishad*, this *Kosha* too has a human shape as mentioned above in the case of others. Faith constitutes the head; righteousness right side; truth is the left side; concentration is the self; and Mahat is the stabilizing tail. To quote,

तस्यैष एव शरीर आत्मन। यः पूर्वस्य। तस्माद्वा एतस्मान्मनोमया। अन्योन्तर आत्मा
विज्ञानमयः। तेनैष पूर्णः।.....तस्य श्रद्धैव शिरः। ऋतं दक्षिणः पक्षः। तस्यमुक्तरः पक्षः।
योग आत्मा। महः पुक्षं प्रतिष्ठाः। (II.IV.1)

*Tasyaish eva sharirah atmna. Yah purvasya. Tasmadava etsmanmanomaya. Anyontra atman
vijnanamayah. Tenaishah purnah.....tasya shradhaiva shirah. Ritam dakshinah pakshah.
Tasyamuktarah pakshah. Mahah puksham pratishtthah.*

This storehouse of wisdom helps a person to grow up into maturity and he becomes able to bifurcate between right and wrong. Mental and psychic growth is possible if this sheathe is sound and leaning towards the right side of the center. In the absence of this self, a person is just like an animal. This category of self imbibes the well-ascertained knowledge that is authoritative by nature. One who has awakened this state of Self there arises *shraddha*, faith, with regard to the things to be performed. The work done without Shraddha is meaningless and monotonous. Success is possible in the personal or professional life of a person if duties are performed with faith and dedication. In short, “this sheath is the seat of the intuition, connected to inner wisdom and a deeper state of consciousness. It is also responsible for inner growth and authenticity and is impacted by all aspects of yoga”.

Anandmaya kosha (Happiness and blissfulness Sheath)

This is the last sheath of the subtle body and it is always associated with five sense organs. When the sense organs are accompanied by the mind it is counted as *Manomaya Kosha* in the same way when the sense organs are companied with intellect, they constitute the *Vijnanamaya Kosha*. To quite *Taittiriya Upanisad*,

तस्यैष एव शरीर आत्मन। यः पूर्वस्य । तस्माद्वा एतस्मद्विज्ञानमयात् । अन्योन्तर आत्मा
 आनन्दमयः । तेनैष पूर्णः। तस्य प्रियमेव शरीरः। मोदो दक्षिणः पक्षः । प्रमोद उत्तर पक्षः।
 आनन्द आत्मा। ब्रह्म पुक्षं प्रतिष्ठा। (II.v. 1)

Tasyaish eva sharirah atmna. Yah purvasya. Tasmadava etasmadvijnanmayat. Anyontra atma anandamayah. Tenaish purnah. Tasya priyamev sharirah. Modo dakshinah pakshah. Prmoda uttar pakshah. Anand atma. Brahaman puksham pratishtah.

Of that preceding (mental) one this (cognitive) one is verily the embodied self. As compared with this cognitive body, there is another internal self which is constituted by bliss. This too has a human shape. Of him joy is verily the head, enjoyment is the right side hilarity is the left side; bliss is the self. Brahman is the tail that stabilizes. *Anandamaya Kosha* is considered to be part of a being responsible for unconditional love, oneness and complete unity with all beings. Also responsible for peace, love and joy in its purest and most absolute form, it is said to go beyond any emotional or physical experience. *Anandamaya Kosha*, like all the koshas, is interactive and dependent upon the other layers of the body. In *Anandamaya Kosha*, the sense of oneness, as opposed to a sense of separation from other beings, is truly realized. Within *Anandamaya Kosha* lies the understanding that separation and ego are just an illusion. This recognition is said to have total compassion, love and happiness, hence *Anandamaya kosha* is referred to as the bliss body. This is the centre from where the seeds of *vaisudhaivakutumbkam* sprout and grow into the lofty and exalted banyan tree where everyone irrespective of caste, creed, race, or gender can sit and feel the bliss. Such a type of self creates a heaven of happiness and enjoyment.

Conclusion

The five sheaths are well reflected in the above figures. It is very clear that these five sheaths always accompany everyone as shadows they can never be separated. The first two koshas end with death since they are dominated by gross material but the last three never die. They are balanced by different yogic activities then it is possible to spend happy life. For those who focus on subtle bodies, it is easy for them to transcend their energy in Brahma where there is everlasting bliss. This state of self is *moksha* (liberation). Liberation is required at each level so that we can ascend to the next. For the realisation of eternity, it is important to know one's own existence. The Vedic scriptures are well ascertained with the way to be aware of the absolute truth.

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