

BODIES & SHEATHS

In the forest-tract of sense-pleasures there prowls a huge tiger called the mind. Let good people who have a longing for liberation never go there. *Crest Jewel of Wisdom*

We continue with the Advaita view of the construction of the mind and the soul and of 'what's wrong'. To recapitulate: the soul, Antakharana, is unified in the causal body and is manifested in the subtle body as four components: Manas, Buddhi, Chitta & Ahankar. The causal body is the home of the Absolute, the Param Atman.

What prevents us from seeing the Param Atman normally? The Advaita view is that the 'light', the power, of the Param Atman illuminates the causal and subtle bodies but little penetrates because of an accumulation of dirt and because of 'sheaths' or coverings. Even the causal body is not immune. Dr Roles put it this way:

If we lived in a glass house with transparent walls, the light of Consciousness would, like the sun, illuminate all the rooms; but the walls have been covered with dirt and delusion, and in the majority of people have become solid matter (like hard-board or bricks and mortar). If he wants to see himself and the world as they really are, he must successively remove the five layers of this delusion. [FCR 78/28]

These five layers, sheaths or coverings, one within the other are described in the *Crest Jewel of Wisdom*¹ (Viveka Chudamani), often ascribed to the first Shankaracharya, Adi Shankara:

The Atman wrapped up in the 5 sheaths ... does not shine forth, just as the water in the pond is covered by a veil of green scum. When the scum is removed, immediately the water shines pure, taking away thirst and heat, and straightway becoming a source of great joy to man.

When all the five sheaths have been eliminated, the pure Atman is revealed – pure, of the essence of everlasting and unalloyed bliss, supreme and self-luminous.

To remove his bondage the wise man should discriminate between the Atman and the non-Atman. By that alone he comes to know his own Self as Infinite Being, Infinite Wisdom, Infinite Love. Then he finds happiness.

Brief excerpts from the *Crest Jewel* about the sheaths follow:

1. ANNAMAYA The food-formed sheath is this body, which lives by food and perishes without food — regarding the body and its powers as 'I'. (Sheath of the physical body)
2. PRANAMAYA The breath-formed sheath is formed by the life-breath determined by the five powers of action, ... coming and going like the wind can in no wise discern

¹ The quotations are taken from a number of different translations.

between right and wrong, between oneself and another, but is ever dependent. (Sheath of vital force)

3. MANOMAYA The mind formed sheath is formed of the powers of perception and the mind; it is the cause of the sense of 'mine' and 'I'; it has the power of distinguishing objects and naming them. (Sheath of Manas)
4. VIJNANAMAYA The intelligence formed sheath, ... possesses wisdom and creative power yet views itself as separate from the Self. (Sheath of Buddhi).
5. ANANDAMAYA The bliss formed sheath is a form lit up by a reflection of the Eternal bliss, but not yet completely free from darkness, but subject to limitation. (Sheath of bliss).

The main idea here is that at different times we identify ourselves with the body, the mind and so on. This creates a barrier, a sheath to seeing the Real Self. The sheaths can be removed and there are a number of approaches to this, but it is first necessary to identify in oneself what they are.

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Here is a practical way of experiencing the sheaths and trying to transcend them. It should be done after a full five minutes of stillness.

- 1st DAY The body of flesh and bones. Look at your hand and imagine it deprived of its circulation at the moment of death, but before disintegration has set in. It is white and cold like marble and consists only of its physical elements endowed with a certain structure. To the first limitation which confines the attitude of absolute materialism, the name of Anna-maya (literally "food" sheath) is given.
- 2nd DAY Now look at your hand as it is, warm and glowing with colour due to the circulation of oxygen in the arterial blood – the Life Principle or Prana. The Pranamaya sheath confines our attitude to ourselves and the world to the physical rhythms which we share with all organic life (moment to moment, heartbeat and breathing; twenty-four hour "Arcadian" rhythms of sleeping and waking; monthly, seasonal, annual and reproductive rhythms) which underlie our vitality.
- 3rd DAY Those two sheaths together keep our consciousness on the physical or material level. Now attend to the sensations arising from your hand and to its restless movements: though its cells and tissues are being continuously renewed, your hand with its shape and lines and finger-prints remain recognizably your own from birth to death, unlike any other person's hand. This "individual essence" is confined by the Manomaya sheath, for Manas is the mechanical part of the mind which converts sensation into reflex or indiscriminate action. At this level we respond to pull from outside desires arising from the body as a moving automation.
- 4th DAY Now clench and extend your hand, for we possess a discriminative mind (the Buddhi) which gives us the power of choice according to what we consider to be right and wrong. This is limited by the Vijnana-maya sheath (Vijnana meaning pure

Reason or secular knowledge). A man whose consciousness remains at this level is governed by reason and intellectual knowledge.

5th DAY But a moment's inspiration could (through heightened emotion) take man's consciousness this sheath to the Causal level where the direct influence of the Conscious Self is felt as ecstatic emotion culminating in Samadhi from which the adept receives guidance and energy during his life and by which he prepares himself for physical death. But even this state of "abundance" is confined by the Ananda-maya (or sheath of Bliss). [FCR 78/28]

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