THE FIVE LAYERS OF EXISTENCE IN ADVAITA VEDĀNTA

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In the tradition of Upaniṣads, the concept of five sheaths (pañcakośas) is elaborated in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad. Human life is a composite of five sheaths and the self. The five sheaths are the physical, energy, mental, wisdom and bliss. The physical includes skin, blood, flesh, bone marrow and ligaments and is composed of the five gross elements. It is called the food sheath. This is the grossest and outer most veil of the soul. The next is the prana or energy sheath that is more subtle. The gross manifestation of the energy sheath in us is breath. The mental sheath consists of manas, ahamkāra, buddhi and citta. Beyond this is the sheath of wisdom through which knowledge from eternity transmits into the intellect. The last sheath is that of bliss.

These five sheaths are also studied in terms of three types of bodies: gross (sthūlaśarīra), subtle (sūkṣmaśarīra) and causal (kāraṇaśarīra). The gross body is the same as the food sheath. Consciousness engrossed in this body corresponds to objects in the waking state. The subtle body is a combined state of the energy, mental and wisdom sheath. Consciousness engrossed in the body corresponds to the world of ideas and dreams. The causal body is the same as the bliss sheath. In the Upaniṣads consciousness enveloped in these three types of bodies in termed as Vaiśvānara, Taijasa and Prājña respectively.

The five sheaths are as follows:

1. Annamayakośa

In Taittirīya Upaniṣad where in the teacher Varuṇa, the father is guiding the student Bhṛgu in his search for reality. The Son asks the father to tell him what is the most fundamental stuff of the universe from which all creation has come. The father leads him on through hints to perform tapas (internal search) to find out an experimental answer to the question. The Son goes into silence and comes back to the father with an answer that all this universe is made up of Anna (matter). Everything in the universe is made of Anna, everything comes out of Anna, everything is sustained by Anna and everything dissolves into Anna. Father is very happy that the son has been able to arrive at one common principle of the external universe. This matter (Anna) based aspect of our physical personality is called Annamayakośa. Annamayakośa consists of five elements (pañcabhūtas) namely the earth

(Pṛthvī), water (ap), fire (Agni), Air (Vāyu) and space (Ākāśa). This is normally nourished by the gross food that is consumed. In his search towards reality or the unchanging fundamental unit of the universe, a scientist started with the external gross world of solid matter which is simple and easy to see, divide and do experiments with it. This search led him through steps of understanding of the entire world of matter starting from elements, molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons and electrons. He further understood that it is all packets of energy. The atoms conglomerate together to form various chemicals; our body is therefore a permutation and combination of various chemicals. When they join together they form molecules, cells, tissues, organs, etc. these follow certain well defined laws of nature and are controlled by nervous and chemical mechanisms to bring about movement and action in each and every cell. Thus Annamayakośa is the physical frame which is the grossest of the five kosas.

2. Prāṇamayakośa

Father Varuṇa says: My dear son, there is something more subtle than what you have discovered, please go on and carry on with your search. Bhṛgu after a long research comes back and says: Oh father, it is the Prāṇa-the life energy, from which even the gross Annamayakośa comes out. It is described as-svayameva tanavam yāti svayameva pīnatām yāti. That which can increase and decrease by itself without any external agency. The body may be there but without life or Prāṇa it is gross, useless. This Prāṇa is the fabric of this universe both inside and outside our body. A uniform harmonious flow of Prāṇa to each and every cell of the Annamayakośa keeps them alive and bealthy. Prāṇa has the capacity to move into different areas of the body (Annamayakośa) depending on demand. For example, when we perform more brain work we need more Prāṇa in the head region. When you walk, you need more Prāṇa in the lower limbs, etc. If the Prāṇa flow to any organ increases inadvertently and without control, it can lead to function of that organ at the Annamayakośa.

Prāṇa flows through subtle channel called Nāḍis. The five dimensions of this mukhya Prāṇa flow resulting in activities in these areas are called Pañcaprāṇa. The downward force called Apāna is responsible for function like defecation, urination, menstruation, ejaculation, parturition, etc. The Prāṇa responsible for breathing movement is called Prāṇa. Udāna is responsible for upward activities like vomiting. Samāna is responsible for proper digestion and balancing Prāṇa and Apāna. Vyāna is that which is responsible for all activities in the periphery like nerve impulses, blood articulation, cellular

activity in all cells. A balance between all these five Prāṇa is health and imbalance is ill health.

3. Manomayakośa

Bhṛgu is now guided by his father to go back for tapas. He returns after a long penance and says: Oh my Guru, I realize that Mind is the source of everything. This is called Manomayakosa. This is the concept of one's personality wherein the mind carries on its different functions such as perception (Manaḥ), memory (Citta) and ego (Ahaṅkāra).

Mind which is defined as a conglomeration of thoughts responds to the input through sense organs. For example, you see a big red flower, eyes send the image to the brain and the mind perceives it as a beautiful rose. Within the next fraction of a second your memory (Citta) deciphers that it as a very rare variety of rose which you wanted to see badly. The thoughts circulates in mind and Citta which soon goes on to make you feel. Oh! it is so beautiful, I like it, I love it, I want it. The component of the Manomayakośa in which this rapid recycling takes place and gathers momentum is called the emotions (bhāvanā). This is characterized by feelings such as 'likes or dislikes' or 'love or hate', backed by the heavy I (the ego). It is this emotion that is the root cause of all human joys and distress when the emotions become powerful, they start governing our action against what is right. This going against the cosmic laws leads to imbalances called Ādhi or stress. Long standing Ādhis get pushed into Prāṇamaya and Annamayakośa causing vyādhis. Manomayakośa is our mental and emotional library, the subtler layer of our existence. Hence the statement 'you are what you think you are' which Bhṛgu realized as the basis of not only his own individual but also as the basis of the entire creation.

4. Vijñānamayakośa

As Bhṛgu reports to Varuṇa about this wonderful discovery, the master is happy but he says: 'please move on, you have just a few steps to go ahead, you are in the right direction.' 'Now through intense long tapas, Bhṛgu realizes that it is all the Vijñāna (knowledge) from which the entire creation has happened and that could be the final reality.'

Vijñānamayakośa is the fourth layer of our existence. We all have two minds. For eg., When the Manomayakośa said that "It is a beautiful rose, I want to have it" and you started instructing your hands to pick up the flower, the inner mind said 'Sorry, you cannot pluck that flower, it does not belong to you: it is from neighbours gardern' and you stopped the action. The consciousness within that continuously guides us to do a thing or not to do a

thing is the Vijñānamayakośa. It is this component of the mind and has developed in human race greatly that differentiates man from animals. Bhartṛhari says:

Āhāranidrābhayamaithunam ca
Sāmānyametatpaśubhirnarāṇām.
Buddhirhi teṣāmadhiko viśeṣaḥ
Buddhirvihīnaḥ paśubhiḥ samānaḥ.

(Hunger, sleep, procreative instinct are common to man and animals. It is the Buddhi discriminating faculty that is special for man. A person who does not have this Buddhi is equal to an animal.) Bhartṛhari brings out the point as to how the higher faculty, the Vijñānamaya, continuously guides the Manomayakośa to get mastery over the basic instincts. Hence in man we know that even these basic instincts are all psychological. For example we have lost the cyclical behaviour as in animals who get into reflex ostrus cycles (heat) for sexual behaviour. This freedom element which is inbuilt in all human beings, guides them to discriminate what is good and bad, right and wrong, useful and not useful, to move towards long term sukha (happiness). Thus Vijnanamayakośa is the discriminating faculty.

5. Ānandamayakośa

Varuṇa now directs the son to go back to tapas and this time Bhṛgu never returns. The master goes to check why the son has not returned. He was surprised to see that Bhṛgu is completely engrossed in deep Ānanda (bliss). There is no individual 'I' of the Vijñāna or Manomayakośa, that can report to the father about his realization. Bhṛgu is now established in the knowledge of the final truth that Ānanda is the basic stuff of this universe from which everything has been created.

This is called Ānandamayakośa-the bliss layer of our existence. This is the most subtle aspect of our existence which is devoid of any form of emotion, a state of total silence-a state of complete harmony.

While in Manomayakośa the creative power predominates, in Vijñānamayakośa, it is the power to discern and discriminate. Bliss is embodied in Ānandamayakośa, the highest stage of evolution in the manifested existence. In his journey towards the ultimate man transgresses these kośas of existence one by one. Through an analysis called Pancakosaviveka (knowing through experience, one's five kosas of existence) and the associated practices called tapas, man gradually gets relieved from bondage and constrictions of each kosa. This is one method of reaching the ultimate goal enumerated and described in the Upaniṣads.

According to Śaṅkara, in the series of the sheaths, beginning from the Annamaya, the Ānandamaya comes the fifth and last in the series. This self is experienced in context of the soul, mind and body. Hence it can have its share of the pleasures of varying like priya, moda, pramoda, ānanda and Brahma. But this Ānandamaya sheath itself is but the one all encompassing universal Ānanda or Brahman, behind the whole universe and behind the Vijñānamaya. The Vijñānamaya is simply a wave in the ocean of the Ānandamayakośa.

According to Nimbārka, Ānandamaya is paramātmā. He is referred to as the śārīra ātmā of the Vijñānamaya, not because he is Jīvātmā but because he is the controller of the Jīvātmā: He will attain Brahmabhāva when oneness with Brahman is had.

Tasya eṣaiva śārīra ātmā yaḥ pūrvasya.

From the semen is born the person who is embodied by head, wings, terse and the bone. He is called Annamaya. This Annamaya is the body of the Prāṇamaya; Prāṇamaya is the body of the Manomaya; Manomaya is of the Vijñānamaya and Vijñānamaya is of the Ānandamaya.

While describing the five sheaths, the Ānandamaya is declared to be the self of the Vijñānamaya; Vijñānamaya is the self of Manomaya; Manomaya is the self of the Prāṇamaya and Prāṇamaya is the self of Annamaya. This is the theory of five sheaths. One and the same person assumes the five different names on account of his being conditioned by five different sheaths. This analytical theory is evolved to bring home the true nature of the self and the universal self.

Rāmānuja and Nimbārka are in accord with what Śaṅkara observes. Vijñāna i.e. consciousness is the essential quality of Ātman. So Vijñāna is Ātmā.

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