

## SELF - REALIZATION THROUGH VEDANTA AND YOGA

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**ABSTRACT:** The seeker of ultimate truth needs the understanding of the practical side of Vedanta philosophy, the five Koshas or Sheaths beyond which the Atman, the Self remains. Through Vedanta and Yoga one can transcend these layers in a systematic manner to attain self realization - ultimate Reality.

Self-realization is one's becoming aware of one's true Self and abiding in it. It is realizing that one is not the psycho physical entity consisting of the body, mind, intellect and ego, but rather, one is the Self—all-pervading, birthless and deathless. This Self is described in Yogic parlance as *Atman*, *Brahman*, Ultimate Reality and Truth. It is not enough to understand this theoretically or intellectually, but one must actually experience it.

It is important at this stage to dilate on the term Vedānta. Properly interpreted, Vedānta is a systematic search for the ultimate Reality. Vedānta maintains that man's nature is divine, that it is the aim of man's life to unfold this divine nature. This basic truth is universal—that is, every religion that has inspired mankind has been trying to state these same facts. Vedānta offers that system of thought and way of life for which men have been eternally looking; the universal religion, "which will have no location in place or time; which will be infinite, like the God it will preach, and whose sun will shine upon the followers of Kṛṣṇa and Christ, on saints and sinners alike; which will not be Brahmanic or Buddhist, Christian or Mohammedan, but the sum total of all these, and still have infinite space for development; which in its catholicity will embrace in its infinite arms, and find a place for every human being". (Swāmi Vivekānanda)

According to Vedānta, Truth is universal and all mankind and all existence are one. The philosophy of Vedānta preaches the unity of God as Ultimate Reality and accepts every faith as a valid means for its own followers to realize the Truth.

On closer scrutiny, we find that the Vedānta philosophy is one of the oldest systems and has provided the highest ideals of life as well as the best explanation of the phenomenal world. According to Vedānta, the phenomenal universe is the expression of one Supreme Being, the Eternal Existence. That Eternal Existence or Ultimate Reality is called by various names, and is worshipped under various forms. The main thesis of the Vedānta philosophy is: "Truth is one, Sages call it by different names".

When we recall that Truth is one and that Truth is true all through eternity, it is a truism to say that the same truths that were realized and discovered by the ancient seers of India are the truths of today—and will remain truths throughout eternity.

Far from being a purely speculative philosophy, Vedānta is a very practical philosophy and has given the world the most solid foundation for a system of religion which is nameless, creedless and without dogma. It is the universal religion which underlies all the religions of the world—various religions being so many expressions of this universal religion.

Vedānta maintains that the practical side of philosophy is religion and the theoretical side of religion is philosophy. According to Vedānta Philosophy, that which is unscientific and unphilosophical, cannot be called religious. It must appeal to our reason, and that which appeals to our reason must be based upon truth. Vedānta embraces various systems or branches of science which are described in Sanskrit under different names. The Sanskrit name for each of these systems is Yoga. On diving deep into the method by which this science of Yoga was developed, it is fascinating to find that, even in those ancient times, observation and experimentation were employed as tools of research in discovering the secret truths of nature and the laws that govern our lives. The finer forces of nature and the description of their laws, are embodied in the various branches of the science of Yoga.

According to Vedānta Philosophy, there are five layers, called *Kosas* or sheaths (coverings) enveloping the *Atman*. Due to ignorance, we identify the *Atman* or Ultimate Reality (the true Self) with the non-*Atman*, the sheaths or coverings of the Self. These five layers are: 1) the Physical Sheath, or the Food Sheath, 2) the Vital Sheath, 3) the Mental Sheath, 4) the Intellectual Sheath, and 5) the Blissful Sheath. When all the Sheaths have been transcended, the *Atman* alone remains. Shankara, the foremost exponent of Vedānta philosophy, sums it up beautifully in *Viveka Cudamani*: "When all the five Sheaths have been eliminated, (discerned or discriminated as being other than the Self), the Self of man appears pure, the essence of everlasting and unalloyed bliss, indwelling, supreme and self-effulgent."

#### THE PHYSICAL SHEATH

The first or outermost sheath is the *Annamaya Kosa* or gross, Physical Sheath, the physical body. The yogis say that it is made of and sustained by food. It comprises the material sheath. The gross, physical Sheath is also termed the "Food Sheath." It is so called because it arises from the essence of the food taken by the eater. It exists because of the food regu-

larly taken in and, ultimately after death, it must decompose to become food again. The substance of physical structure rising from food, existing in food and going back to food, is naturally, and most appropriately termed, "Food Sheath." It is a mass of skin, flesh, blood, bones, etc., and can never be the eternally pure, self-existent *Atman*. Any intelligent and discriminating man knows that he is not this physical body, for the body is subject to change. The body, consisting of arms, legs, etc., cannot be *Atman* for one continues to live even after its particular limbs are gone. Moreover, the body, which is subject to the rule of Self, cannot be the Self which is the Ruler of all. And yet, ignorance is so deep and universal that we identify ourselves with the body in our day-to-day activities in the empirical world. Vedānta believes that all bodies die. The self cannot die. Therefore the body cannot be the self.

#### THE VITAL SHEATH

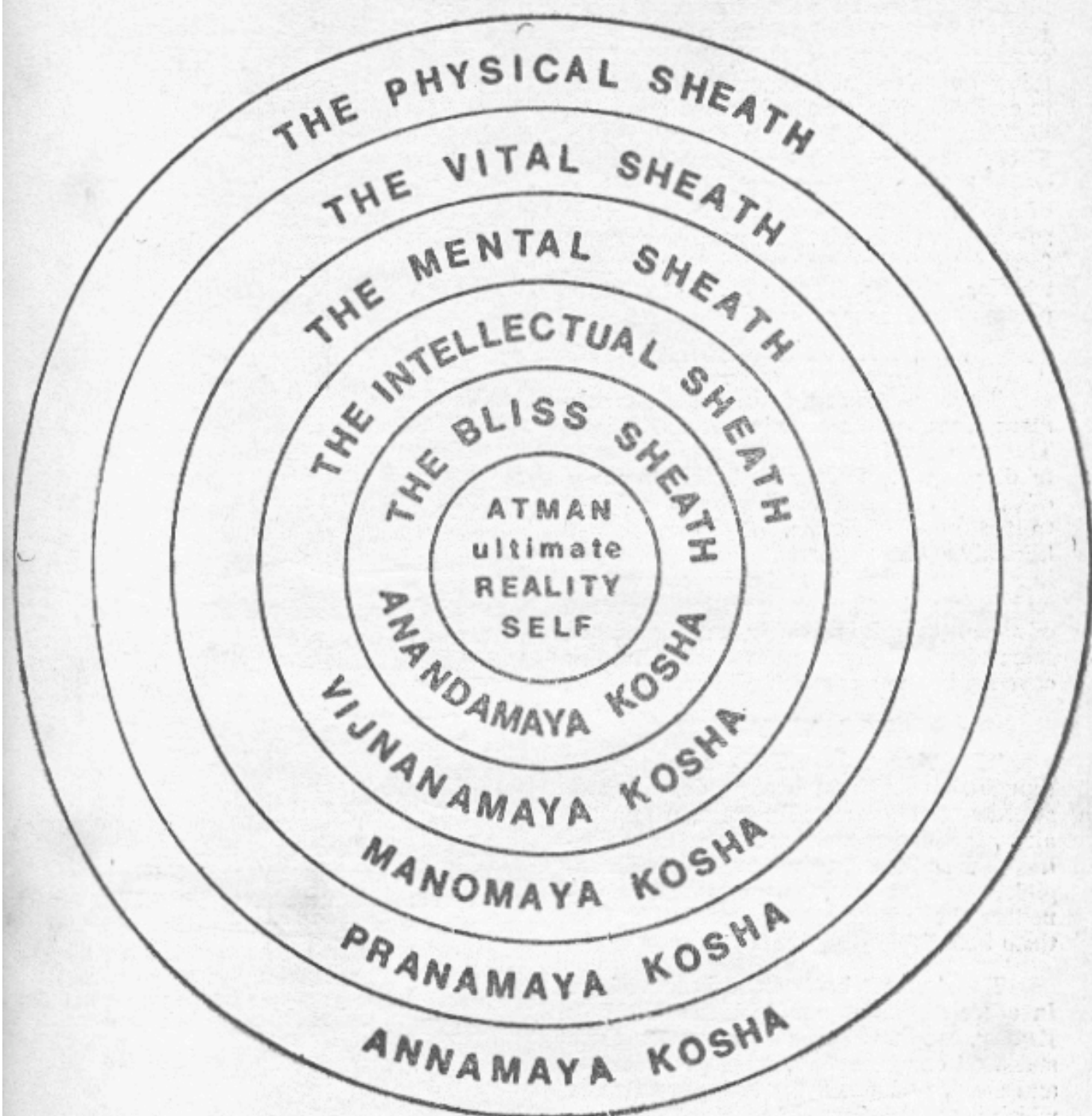
The second covering of the *Atman* is called "*Pranamayn Kosa*" or the Vital Sheath. It is made up of the vital forces and organs by which bodily actions are performed. The Vital Sheath controls all the organs of action, and it is five-fold with its five different functions. The vital forces are called the *pranas*. They consist of *prana* (breathing), *apana* (elimination), *samana* (digestion), *vyāna* (circulation) and *udana* (nerve currents). From experience, we have found that if we eat, these vital forces remain strong. But, if we starve, they become weak. Since these Vital Sheaths are also perishable, they also are not the Self.

#### THE MENTAL SHEATH

The third is *Manomaya Kosa* or the Mental Sheath, the sheath of the mundane mind. It consists of *manas* (faculty of perception), *buddhi* (intellect) and *ahankara* (ego). The mind cannot be the self because it manifests through thought and thoughts are extremely variable—now good—now bad. The mind is too changeable to be the self.

#### THE INTELLECTUAL SHEATH

The fourth sheath is *Vijnanamaya Kosa* or the Sheath of Higher Intelligence. Yogis



believe that, when one has penetrated his own nature to this sheath, he gains knowledge of the universe as a manifestation of Ultimate Reality.

It is important to point out here that the term "mind" is not used in the same sense as it is used in western psychology. What is known as mind in western psycho-

logy is described in eastern psychology by the various functions of the mind -- such as "mind" (the receiving faculty - *manas*), "intellect" (the discriminating faculty - *buddhi*), and "ego" (the knower or experiencer - *ahamkara*).

There is a subtle difference between mind and intellect in Vedanta philosophy.

Mind is that which entertains our doubts, joys, desires, etc., and which interrupts the constant flow of thought. Mind can fly to things and places seen or heard. Intellect, in each one of us, is the determining factor, whereas, the mind is the doubting one. Mind, when a determined decision or a willed judgement is required, takes the form of the intellect. However, the intellect is subtler than the mind because it ventures forth into realms unheard of or unseen, whereas, mind will only reach things or places already seen or heard.

#### THE BLISSFUL SHEATH

There is a fifth sheath, called *Anandamaya Kosa*, or the covering of the "bliss." This covering is revealed to us in the state of deep sleep. It is called the covering of the bliss because it is the covering closest to the blissful *Atman*. It is considered blissful also because, whatever the condition in which we happen to be in our waking and dream states, once we enter the portals of sleep, we all invariably experience the same undisturbed peace and bliss. But this covering is also a creation of ignorance.

#### THE ATMAN

"The *Atman* (true Self) is beyond all thought, one without birth or death, whom sword cannot pierce or fire burn, whom the air cannot dry or water melt, the beginningless and endless, the immovable, the intangible, the omniscient, the omnipotent Being—neither the body nor the mind, but beyond them both."

The *Atman* is beyond the five coverings. In order to realize our Self, the Ultimate Reality, we have to go beyond the three states of consciousness, waking, dreaming and sleep, and reach the *turiya* or fourth, which is termed *Samadhi*.

#### FIVE SHEATHS

"It is the Supreme Brahman that has become the universe and its living beings and the twenty-four cosmic principles. The process of discrimination can be compared to a deep dive into our being. Man, according to *Jñāna Yoga*, is a layered being. That which is Real in him remains covered

with five layers of matter, which are comparable to five sheaths: the physical body, the vital force, the mind, the intellect and bliss. The five sheaths obscure the light of the Self, the indwelling pure Consciousness shining ever the same in every heart. The degree of obscurity varies from one sheath to the other depending upon the density of each. The sheath of the body, which is the outermost, is the densest, while the sheath of bliss, the innermost of the five, is the thinnest. The aspirant, following the method of negation, penetrates through these layers of sheaths in search of the Self. The body, he analyzes, is made of a combination of gross elements, is dependent upon food, non-existent before birth and after death, and subject to the six-fold change of birth, growth, maturity, disease, decay and death. Such a body cannot be looked upon as the Self. The body, the *Upaniṣads* describe, is like a palace in which the Self dwells as the King; when the palace becomes dilapidated the King does not hesitate to leave it and build a new one. By following such a process of negation the aspirant reaches the next sheath and calmly observes how the vital force maintains the bodily functions of inhalation, exhalation, nourishment, excretion, and reproduction and also adjustment of the body to the changes of the environment. The presence of this sheath makes man a living creature, but does not explain his moral judgement and spiritual aspiration. Therefore, the aspirant dives deeper and discovers the sheath of the mind which makes man a thinking being with complex emotions and diverse thoughts. By carefully observing the activities of the mind the aspirant comes to the conclusion that mind has a beginning and an end, is subject to change and has no specific identity. It is a bundle of multitudinous thoughts and impulses, sense-memories and desires, of diverse character mixed together. The Self, the aspirant introspects, must be different from the mind. Thereupon he reaches the sheath of the intellect, which lies behind the mind. The sheath of intellect is known as the faculty of understanding. Identified with the mind, man doubts, but being identified with the intellect he experiences misery and

happiness both in the waking and dream states and the absence of anything in dreamless sleep. The intellect, the aspirant observes, is less mutable and more subtle than all the preceding sheaths. He goes beyond the sheath of intellect and discovers the sheath of bliss through which he experiences varying degrees of happiness. Being identified with this sheath he temporarily transcends the experiences of the waking and dream states and feels detached and relaxed. But to his surprise, he finds that this sheath too is subject to change. The feeling of withdrawal and selftranscendence which a person experiences in dreamless sleep, does not remain permanently with him. Therefore, the sheath of bliss, although it greatly reflects the Self, is not really the Self itself. At least the aspirant reaches the immutable and indivisible Self-Knowledge-Existence-Bliss Absolute. In the self there is neither thinker nor thought, neither subject nor object. At this stage all reasoning and analysis come to an end and the aspirant goes into Samadhi. The five layers of matter are likely five variously designed domes, one within the other, in the centre of which shines the light of the effulgent Self. The differences in the textures, designs and densities of each individual's set of domes make for the differences in the manifestation of the Self in each individual causing him to appear saintly or sinful. What we know to be the inner disposition of a person is really the particular pattern of his domes and not the light of the Self which shines with the same brightness in every heart." (Swami Ādisvarānanda)

According to Vedānta, the outstanding characteristics of the Ultimate Reality are:

1. It is Pure Consciousness.
2. It is never born and will never die.
3. It has no origin or end.
4. It never decays nor undergoes changes and mutations.
5. It is non-material, of the nature of Pure Existence, Pure Consciousness and Pure Bliss—*Sat-cit-Ananda*.
6. It is non-moving and actionless. It only witnesses.

The *Atman* is beyond the mind, beyond the ego. The basic ignorance of man is his identification of himself with his ego. He takes himself to be this entity and looks upon the world as real. He also goes out to the external world in search of happiness thinking that the world is separate from himself. But he finds that, try as he might, he cannot order the world and his surroundings so as to have from them joy and joy alone.

On the other hand, let us understand the position of the man of knowledge who knows that the only reality is the *Atman* or *Brahman* and that the whole universe as such is unreal, but real only as an expression of *Brahman*. He knows that he is not the ego but the *Atman*. He knows too that, as the world exists only as long as the mind exists, to trace out the origin of the whole world, he has to turn within and trace out the origin of the mind.

The ego is the primary expression of the *Atman*. It screens off its very origin and also projects itself as the mind and through the mind as the world. The mind thus projected takes itself and the world to be real. It looks to the external world for happiness. The ego derives its existence and power from the *Atman*. But, not recognizing this fact, it keeps itself attached to the intellect, the mind and the body; enjoying and suffering through them. As long as the ego is conscious of and attached to the body, mind and the intellect, it is not conscious of the *Atman*. The moment it withdraws from them and transcends itself by trying to trace out its own origin the body consciousness goes away and the *Atman* or Self-Consciousness dawns. The *Atman* is realized only when the ego disintegrates and dissolves into Pure Consciousness. Until then, any amount of theoretical knowledge one may cultivate will be useless.

To realize the *Atman*, which is beyond the mind, the mind should be stilled and transcended. The mind can act in two ways. It can either keep on engaging itself with the external world in its search for happiness, or it can withdraw itself from the outside world and try to trace out its own origin. This faculty of the mind to withdraw

should be cultivated if one is to realize the *Atman*. The mind should be trained not to dabble with worldly thoughts but to retreat within itself deeper and deeper. It should be made to remember its true nature constantly, throughout the day, in and through all its daily activities. In addition, one or two hours a day should be set aside for contemplative meditation on one's Self. By all this, one must try to transcend the mind and merge into the Pure Consciousness. In fact, Yoga psychology aims at preparing the mind to catch glimpses of the *Atman* and then, eventually, transform the mind into Pure Consciousness. The word "*Nirodha*" (suppression) is used by Patañjali and commentator Vyāsa in the sense of transformation. Swami Vivekānanda, Swami Abhedānanda, Sri Aurobindo and others have opined that we can transform the mind into its own nature, which is the Pure Consciousness.

In his Yoga aphorisms, Patañjali has disclosed the secret of bringing under control the distracted modifications of the mind and also the technique of transforming the mind stuff into higher consciousness.

In Vedānta, the path leading to Self-realization consists of three stages or steps, namely:

1. *Sravaṇa*—hearing. First, an aspirant has to hear about the Ultimate Reality from a realized soul. Unless he learns the philosophy of Vedānta and comprehends what is to be attained, he will not have a correct ideal of the goal nor the method to reach it.

2. *Manana*—cogitation. After hearing about the Ultimate Reality, the aspirant should cogitate or ponder over what he has heard. He must analyse and assess it through reasoning and then come to a firm conviction that it is the supreme goal to be achieved in life. Vedānta reveals a conscious process by which man can realize his true and immortal nature. It requires that the aspirant be convinced of its truth and practicality.

3. *Nididhyāsana*—contemplative meditation. This is the last and the most important stage leading one directly to Self-realization. Also called *Jnana Nistha*, it is a process by which man consciously seeks to realize his true Self. It is a process in which our inner equipment consisting of the ego, the subconscious, the intellect and the mind stuff plays a vital role.

In order to realize the Self, one has to listen about the Truth of Ultimate Reality from the lips of an illumined soul. Then, after contemplating upon the Self, resolve that he is determined to follow the path leading to Self-realization.

Finally, one has to meditate on a regular basis, systematically and sincerely. The importance of meditation in the life of an aspirant need hardly be overemphasized. In fact, meditation is given the greatest significance in all Yogic and Vedāntic literature. It is not the scope of this paper to expand upon the subject of meditation. Suffice it to say that one can eventually realize the Self through meditation.

It is fervently hoped that the foregoing discussion, "Self-realization through Vedānta and Yoga," will stimulate the sincere seeker to pursue the spiritual path with better understanding, dedication, devotion and a determined will until he attains *Samadhi* (Pure Consciousness).

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