

5 Koshas (sheaths)

5 Koshas, or levels of a person's consciousness, the 3 Bodies. These layers go from the physical body, through the astral body into the Absolute realm that is contained within the heart yet contains all things.

- a) Physical Body: Food sheath: Annamaya kosha: contains all 5 elements and is the densest form of consciousness
- b) Astral Body:
 - i) Vital Sheath: Pranamaya kosha: 5 organs of action, contains the pranic field, nadis and chakras and all disease starts here
 - ii) Mental Sheath: Manamaya kosha: 5 organs of knowledge, when balanced there is clarity and right action, when unbalanced there is egotism and greed, etc.
 - iii) Intellectual Sheath: Vijnanamaya kosha: here is the intellect, ego function and the universal consciousness.
- c) Casual Body: Bliss Sheath: Anandamaya kosha: No gain or loss of Energy, All Things contained here, Spirit, etc.

1. Physical is made of food. Inside food is our vital energy.
2. Vitality depends on breath, containing all 5 pranas or energies. Within our breath is our mentality.
3. Mind is made of thoughts, emotions, images and ideas. Underlying our small mind is true understanding and knowledge.
4. Wisdom is detachment in the form of faith, righteousness and truth. Within our wisdom lies the seed of our existence.
5. Bliss is the expression of God and is found in love, joy and delight.

To know our Self deeply is to know God. To misunderstand or be ignorant of our true Self is to lose God and our selves. We can overcome our fear of death, or our ignorance of our true nature by understanding these Koshas or sheaths of consciousness. God is contained in all aspects of our existence and to bring our awareness from the physical world into the Spiritual our practice must include devotion to God in all forms, an investigation of the qualities of our own Nature and mind, constant practice and non-attachment to the fruits of our labors and selfless service.

The five sheaths (koshas) are the layers of our existence we must practice through to experience and fully live within our Cosmic Consciousness. The three bodies, gross, astral and causal, are divided into these 5 sheaths. The gross contains the food sheath, the annamaya kosha. The astral or subtle body houses the breath, emotional/mental and intellectual sheaths; here the breath allows access to our minds, where discrimination is possible and wisdom arises. Think of the breath as the gateway between the physical realms of the body and our food and the subtle realms of the mind and our wisdom (our true intelligence.) And finally wisdom ascends the mind into silence and the heart to bliss, the causal body.

As a Yoga teacher and novice therapist I help my students delve deeper into their own beings through balancing the physical aspects of the body, controlling and expanding the breath to allow greater access to their buddhi minds and then sitting silently and calmly in the center of their joy. I do not offer classes that begin with “entering” the house of the soul without first leading thru the other sheaths. Most of us are not ready or willing to travel so deep without balancing our bodies, breath and mind first. Especially for the students who are dealing with great stress (in prison, detox or rehab centers) beginning with the physical and the breath is a gentle way to open their minds to the possibility of a deeper freedom and joy.

It is written in the ancient yogic texts that respect for the physical should not be overlooked. Most of us in the West seeking to know our selves and reunite with God have a tendency to skip past the beginning stages of their practice. “I want answers now! Why can’t I sit silently for hours on end and enjoy a deep fruitful relationship to my Creator? Is that too much to ask?” They tend to rush through meals, rush to get to work, really dislike what they have to do during work, wait for the end of the day to rush to Yoga class where the teacher makes them sit, and God, when will this meditation be over anyway, I am starving!!!” Whew! I have indigestion just writing that! What we are taught is that God can be found in the flavors, textures and smells of the food. Union can be had while preparing food for others to eat, in the absorption of nutrients during digestion, in praying and being grateful before a meal even begins. While some are skipping over this stage of practice, others are enjoying a deep fruitful relationship to God. So lets start with the food sheath, the most superficial and surface layer of our consciousness, the easiest the change. Because even here at the beginning of our life, where food and body make contact, where primal energy enters the temple of our souls, we can find what we’re looking for. And in our deeper investigation of our food sheath we find the source of its power, the breath.

The Pranamaya kosha, or the vital sheath, gives life to our food and to our body. When we begin respecting this form of life we have greater control over its movements. And with this control comes the power to influence whether or not we have disease, both physically and mentally. Because the breath is the gateway between the body and mind, it also dictates what happens in those realms. The 5 vayus working properly create a strong and balanced body in optimal health where if deranged the body can suffer discomforts and disease. And the same is true for the mind. When the breath is controlled and regulated regularly we have access to our minds. Most of you have experienced this in one form or another. When practicing pranayama it becomes clear that the mind relaxes, and we gain a sense of clarity and peace. So passing through the pranamaya kosha, or the vital sheath, we can enter the realm of the manamaya kosha, or the mental sheath.

The mind here can be best understood as consciousness and subconsciousness. It contains our emotions and thoughts and as I have written before is partly to blame for our suffering as it also houses our desires. Here we do not yet have the practice and power of discrimination. When we meditate and become aware of the nature of this sheath, the

small mind, our awareness itself takes shape and becomes concentrated. And from this point our intelligence and wisdom are accessible. To quote our manual:

“The mind does not choose what we do with our desire; it simply registers it and provides the information needed to make a choice. Here is where the intellect takes charge. I want that piece of cake, even if I’ve had enough and my belly is full and my clothes are covered in chocolate! The intellect decides what and when we do something and is responsible for our movement, whether beneficial or harmful, and thus is the birthplace of our personal karma. The outward directed intellect moves us to fulfill desires, satisfies needs and fuels our anger. The inward directed intellect, we call discerning intellect, or *Buddhi*, meaning the awakened and aware mind, is constantly aware of things as they are and directs us to move *sattvically*.

‘Therefore, Arjuna, first take control of your desire—the sinful destroyer of wisdom and self-realization.

The senses are stronger than the body. The mind is stronger than the senses; the discriminating intellect (*buddhi*) is stronger than the mind; and *Atman* is above the intellect.

Now that you know that *Atman* is beyond even the discriminating intellect (*buddhi*), you can control the (lower) self with *Atman* (the higher Self,) and, although it is difficult, utterly destroy your deadly enemy, (personal) desire.’ (3.41-43)

Controlling our body is easy—if we choose not to move, we stay still. It’s much harder to control the arising impulses that move the mind. And even harder yet is to control the intellect. But in order to reach the Highest Self within we must learn to choose the most *sattvic* movements, using the discerning intellect, or our inherent wisdom, to guide us through our daily lives. When we choose something different than what the mind suggests our discerning intellect is made stronger and brought to the forefront. Eventually this layer of the mind, our wisdom, can lead us through life. And here our Deeper self is accessible—because within wisdom is the Heart of the Truth; our Deepest Self awaits.” (Satsang YTT Manual “Bhagavad-Gita” section)

Understanding the Koshas means to practice, practice, and practice. What is the reward for all this discipline? Well, the practice itself is the reward, for in the actual experience of your practice you will gain insights into your own nature, and the nature of these sheaths will become apparent. While you are using your newfound awareness and wisdom, joy simply arises! Bliss is a natural outcome of living with awareness! God is waiting for you, every moment. Isn’t that amazing! Practice saying that, “isn’t that just amazing,” and soon your life will be!

I would like to offer another verse from the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad* about the koshas from Eknath Easwaran’s translation of *The Upanishads*:

“They have attained the goal who realize Brahman as the supreme reality, the source of truth, wisdom, and boundless joy.

They see the Lord in the cave of the heart and are granted all the blessings of life.

From Brahman came space; from space, air; from air, fire; from fire, water; from water, earth; from earth, plants; from plants, food; and from food the human body, head, arms, legs and heart.

From food are made all bodies, which become food again for others after their death. Food is the most important of all things for the body; therefore it is the best medicine for all the body's ailments. They who look upon food as the Lord's gift shall never lack life's physical comforts. From food are made all bodies. All bodies feed on food, and it feeds on all bodies.

The physical sheath is made up of food. Within it is contained the vital sheath, which has the same form, with prana as head, Vyana as right arm, apana as left, space as heart, and earth as foundation.

Man and woman, beast and bird live by breath. Breath is therefore called the true sign of life. It is the vital force in everyone that determines how long we are to live. Those who look upon breath as the Lord's gift shall live to complete the full span of life. The vital sheath is made of living breath. Within it is contained the mental sheath, which has the same form, with Yajur as head, Rig as right arm, Sama as left. The heart is the wisdom of the Upanishad, and the Artharva is the foundation.

Realize That from which all words turn back and thoughts can never reach, one knows the bliss of Brahman and fears no more.

Within the mental sheath, made up of waves of thoughts, there is contained the sheath of wisdom. It has the same form, with faith as head, righteousness as right arm and truth as left. Practice of meditation is its heart, and discrimination its foundation. Wisdom means a life of selfless service. Even the gods seek spiritual wisdom. Those who attain wisdom are freed from sin, and find all their selfless desires granted.

The wisdom sheath is made of detachment. Within it is contained the sheath of bliss, which has the same form, with joy as the head, contentment as right arm, and delight the left. Bliss is the heart, and Brahman the foundation. Those who deny the Lord deny themselves; those who affirm the Lord affirm themselves. The wise, not the unwise, realize the Lord.” (*Upanishads* pp. 142-143)

I believe healing begins when we recognize the nature of imbalance and the nature of our body and mind. Looking at the Koshas it becomes clear that to access the deeper levels of our consciousness we create a physical body and a vitality that is balanced and in harmony within/out itself. As the breath is a gateway between the bodies of our consciousness, mantra is also a medium for our body to contact and touch the soul within.

Mantra itself is a healing force of nature, as sacred vibratory sound that shakes disease in the body and mind free of its hold. Like a jackhammer breaks up pieces of concrete, mantra breaks up stagnant energy and allows for an unimpeded flow of prana. So if we are aware of the nature of our disease or ailment we can use specific mantras to aid in the whole process of healing.