

Chapter 7. The Five Sheaths

Q. How then can this delusion disappear?

A. Why, discrimination (*viveka*) and spiritual wisdom (*vijnana*) will make it disappear.

Q. For the individual soul (*jivi*) reflected in the intellect (*buddhi*) and the Changeless—does one of them superimpose on the other?

A. Though there may appear to be no superimposition, the superimposition exists.

Q. How is that?

A. The Changeless is unattached, unmoved, unaffected, and ever-free. Still, due to the superimposition, it appears differently. This is the result of their coexistence.

Q. Some elders say that “That (*Thath*)” and “you (*thwam*)” are the same, identical. How is that? What does it all mean? Please enlighten me.

A. Take the pot, house, and a pitcher. They are distinct, right? They are not identical. But the space (*akasa*) that is in all of them is the same. When the condition or limitation is removed, the space in the pot, hut, and pitcher all merge with the space that is unconditioned, unlimited. Light is also like this. The light inside and the light outside merge.

Q. Well, Swami, You have said that the human being in this body, which is composed of the five elements, has to realise the *Atma* encased in the five sheaths. What is a sheath (*kosa*), exactly?

A. A sheath is a case, a cover. A sword is put into a scabbard. Money is kept in a treasury. You must realise that the thing kept in this five-fold case is the real “I”. To see one’s own truth, one has to remove the five cases.

Q. What are these five, Swami?

A. They are called the food, vital breath, mind, spiritual intelligence, and bliss sheaths (*anna-maya, prana-maya, manomaya, vijnana-maya, ananda-maya kosas*).

Q. What does food sheath mean?

A. This body grew in the womb of the mother with the help of the food (*anna*) taken by the mother. Even after birth, it has grown and is being sustained by food. After death, it becomes part of the Earth, which produces food. So it is called food sheath.

Q. Of what importance is this food sheath?

A. It is the gross body, which suffers grief and exults in joy.

Q. Is that its only name? Or does it have another name?

A. It does. It is also called “place of enjoyment”.

Q. The sheath of vital breath, what does that mean?

A. The sphere of the five senses, the five vital airs (*pranas*); they form this cover.

Q. Swami! It seems there are not only vital airs but other subsidiary vital airs as well.

A. Yes. They are: belching, blinking, sneezing, yawning, and one that fills the body and causes it to grow fat. Even after death, these affect the body and cause changes in the corpse. (In Sanskrit, these vital airs are *naga, kurma, krukara, devadatta, and dhananjaya*).

Q. What does mental sheath mean?

A. The sphere of the five organs of perception (*jnanendriyas*), plus the mind, of which they have become the instruments. It is inside the sheath of vital air.

Q. You often say “mind, mind”; please explain what that mind is.

A. That which makes you feel you are the body and feel all things related to the body as “mine”; that which runs out through the senses to the objects in order to experience the pleasure therefrom. It is thus rendered very unsteady, always flitting from one object to another.

Q. Swami! How is one to realise that one is separate from, beyond, and above the food sheath?

A. The body is not evident before birth or after death. It is seen only during the intervening period of time. The body has a beginning and an end, a growth and decay. Such things are “products” or “effects”, and effects are conditioned. So the body is also a limited, conditioned thing.

The wise one tells himself, “I exist always; I am not material; I have no cause and effect; I am separate from this gross body. Therefore, I cannot be this food sheath. I am the knower of the food sheath; I am the witness.” When this knowledge is well established, one knows the truth. One must realise that one is beyond the food sheath.

Q. How is one to realise that one is beyond the vital air sheath?

A. At night, when the individual is asleep, the vital airs (*pranas*) are moving; but the individual doesn’t know what is happening in them or around them. The individual doesn’t fight if enemies come during sleep. The individual is inert, inactive, like a log. But “My nature is not this inertness. I am the ever-conscious witness. I am separate from all the sheaths” —thus the individual must discriminate, reflect, and know.