

*Vedanta philosophy, as taught in the Vedas, the ancient scriptures of India, is a spiritual tradition based on two simple propositions. One suggests human nature is divine and our existence is that of unity and connection. And the other supports our goal as spiritual beings to discover our divine nature as one whole. The word Vedanta is a Sanskrit word translated as Veda = "knowledge" and Anta = "end or core" meaning the culmination of knowledge. It is believed in the Vedantic tradition that we are made up of five layers or sheaths called Koshas. These layers represent our physical and energetic bodies, our mind, and our ability to experience a blissful state deep within ourselves. Each layer is a temporary, fleeting aspect of our human existence. Once we discover what is at the core, we are able to connect to an ever present aspect inside ourselves. In essence, uncovering these layers gives us an understanding of who we are and invites us to recognize our divine nature.*

According to the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, the eight limbs of yoga suggest a similar path to self awareness. This path brings attention to our attitudes and choices (namas and niyamas), bodies (asana), breath and life force (pranayama), relationship to our senses (pratyahara), focus (dharana) and meditative practices (dhyana). The ultimate sensation becomes that of bliss (samadhi) to further enhance union and connection with our true Self. Setting an intention to discover our divine nature through the practice of the eight limbs of yoga will eventually guide us towards peeling back our "layers", so we may experience bliss and wake up to our Self. When we are blessed with the wisdom of who we truly are, we release the notion of separation, celebrate our unity and as a result, lessen our suffering. We become free to live and love in the light of the divine.

The first layer, the Annamaya Kosha, is made up of the physical body. Anna literally means "food". This layer represents the food we eat as the constitution of our bodies, and is the outer, most visible layer

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to the naked eye. As we practise yoga asanas, we develop a greater awareness or a heightened sensitivity to our physical bodies. This deeper understanding or connection lets us feed our bodies healthy food and stay away from that which does not support health and vitality. We become more conscious of our choices and habits and learn to take better care of ourselves. Often times we identify with this part of ourselves. Recognizing our physical body as a sheath, one of five layers, frees us from issues around body image and how we look to the outside world.

The next four layers make up what is called the subtle body, which is composed of energy, senses, thoughts and emotional states. Our energetic body, the Pranamaya Kosha, is made up of Prana, the body's incredible, intelligent life force. It has a profound effect on our physical body. We cannot exist without it. This is the vitality of our physical body that keeps us growing, healing, digesting food, etc. This kosha cannot necessarily be seen, but it can be felt in ourselves and in others. Many of us can tune into our own energy or the energy of someone close. Often times we allow ourselves to pick up the energy of those around us, whether it's beneficial or damaging. The practice of pranayama, a system of focused and intentional breathing patterns, teaches us to connect with the energetic quality within ourselves. As we become proficient in the practice of pranayama we learn to balance our energies. We become aware of what makes our energy drop or rise and we have the ability to adjust it accordingly.

Our thoughts and emotions reside in the Manomaya Kosha, the mental sheath. In this layer we process the data of our senses through our skin, eyes, ears, nose and mouth in a stimulus-response capacity. We often become attached to the pleasure our senses can provide and when we don't feel this pleasure, we suffer. When our thoughts and emotions are out of control because of a need to fulfill desire, we may experience unfavorable consequences that effect our energy and the health of our physical body.

# Seeds *Of Existence*

Pranayama and asana practice is often highlighted as the two main components of modern yoga, but these are only two out of the eight limbs of a complete system. Concentration (dharana) and meditation (dhyana) can allow us to be more mindful of our responses to what we perceive in the outside world. When we train our minds through focus and meditation, it becomes more possible to maintain a sense of clarity, open-mindedness and calm when we don't get what we want. We resist the urge to react emotionally or become physically anxious, therefore not affecting our physical or energetic body in an unhealthy way. With a dedicated practice of meditation, the trickery of our mental sheath reveals itself and as a result we become its master, rather than its slave. When we can experience *pratyahara* (sense response moderation), we lessen nagging desires and release addiction to our pleasure senses. As a result we become aware of the discerning qualities of our mind beyond the clutter and attachment to sensory impressions.

The deeper layer of the mind makes up the intellectual sheath, or *Vijnanamaya Kosha*. This is the layer of inner wisdom, creativity and intuition. It is the part of our mind that is open to what lies beyond sense interpretation. As mentioned above, our attitude and choices (*namas* and *niyamas*) are an integral part of our practice. *Yamas* represent restraints and choices such as non-violence and honesty. *Niyamas*, our observances, strengthen our attitude through the practice of purity, contentment, discipline and worship. Restraints and observances allow us to make choices that eliminate situations which may cause suffering. They give us suggestions of how to conduct ourselves in a manner that brings peace. When we follow this road map we live beyond the need to satisfy our desires or define ourselves based on what we have or do not have. Our intellect opens to see the big picture and explore a divine source of wisdom beyond mindless reaction. We become aware that we are not just a



fleeting mass of body, thoughts and emotion and we begin to inquire about our divine nature.

By understanding our *koshas* through the practice of the eight limbs of yoga, we crack open the window of enlightenment which produces a profound side effect called bliss. This peaceful state of being is the gateway to our divine nature. It is Patanjali's eighth limb of yoga called *samadhi*, which in Sanskrit means "to bring together" or "merge". It is the seed of our existence, the fifth and deepest layer of ourselves called the *Anandamaya Kosha*. By the time we peel back the layers beyond our bodies and life force, master our thoughts and emotions, we inevitably lift beyond our intellect and experience the closest connection to the divine source of creation and all that is. It is within this layer, or in this state of bliss (*Samadhi*) that we bridge the gap between the separate self and the united,

all-one Self. The *Anandamaya Kosha* surrounds the ever present center, referred to as Brahman, the absolute. According to Vedanta philosophy, inside this sheath lies the divine nature that is inside all of humankind.

We are fully respecting the practice of yoga when we come to the mat with the intention to discover our Self. Patanjali, Vedanta philosophy and many other sources and disciplines have given us tools to take steps on the path. Let us offer gratitude for those who have shared with us ways to understand our spiritual nature as human beings. Let us offer gratitude for ourselves each time we practice, on and off the mat. Let us recognize the ever present divine nature in all human beings, beyond race or religious beliefs. We are one, and we all deserve to experience the bliss that leads us to this discovery.

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