

## Developing awareness of our true self

In a fascinating video, Swami Sarvapriyananda, a scholar monk of the Ramakrishna order explains to us the meaning of atman or the true self. Watch the video to watch Swamiji's amazing presentation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPtHCCT1SZM>

Swamiji begins by referring to the Taittiriya Upanishad, which gets us to think deeply about who we are. This Upanishad starts off by saying: "The knower of the Brahman attains the highest." Meaning the person who understands himself or herself achieves the most. This small sentence captures the essence of all religions. The path towards gaining knowledge about our self is not a journey in space or time but a spiritual journey. It is not about going to a religious town or a place of worship. It is not about postponing for old age or waiting for the right moment. It is about embarking on the journey from ignorance to knowledge right away.

We actually do not now who we are. If only we knew ourselves as we are, truly Swami Vivekananda once mentioned!

There are five sheaths in the human body-mind complex:

- The physical sheath (annamaya kosha)
- The sheath of prana (pranamaya kosha)
- The sheath of the mind (manomaya kosha)
- The sheath of the intellect (vijnanamaya kosha)
- The sheath of bliss (anandamaya kosha)

We need to go beyond these sheaths to discover the truth.

### **Annamaya sheath**

We are most familiar with our physical body. Essentially our body, the result of consuming food is "food rearranged". But we are not the same as the body. The

body changes as we grow older but we remain what we are. We can see, hear, touch, feel and smell the body. We experience the body. So we must be different from the body. We are the seer (Dhrashta) and the body is the seen (Dhrishyam). The body is insentient but we are sentient. If we believe in the karma theory (Outcomes are the consequences of our past deeds.), the outcomes we see today are a result of the past. Some of these causes existed before our birth and some of the outcomes will be released after our death. So we are not the body. There must be some post mortem existence for our true self or the atman.

### **Pranamaya sheath**

If we go deeper, below our body, we will feel the life forces and life processes. We breathe in and out, blood flows through our veins, oxygen is carried across our body, and chemicals are produced. We are healthy and alive because of Prana. But the Prana is always changing. We may be healthy now, sick later, hungry now, full later, energetic now, tired later and so on. But we remain the same. Prana is insentient but we are sentient. We can feel the Prana even though we cannot see it. We can experience the Prana. So we must be different from the Prana.

### **Manomaya Sheath**

If we go deeper beyond the life processes, we come to the mind. The mind includes our thoughts, memories, feelings, ideas, thoughts, etc. We are essentially talking about our personality. But we are aware of our mind, how happy or unhappy we are, etc. Moreover, personality is only a mask that we put on when we face the world. So clearly the atman is not the mind.

### **Vigyanamaya Sheath**

If we go deeper still, we will find our intellect. Intellect and mind are essentially the same instruments but they perform different functions. The intellect tries to understand what is going on around us. Thus we know when we understand something and when we don't understand it. The intellect keeps changing but we do not change. We are the seer of the intellect. The intellect shines in the presence of the atman.

## **Anandamaya Sheath**

This refers to the bliss we feel when we are in deep, dreamless sleep. We forget the body completely. And the mind and intellect are shut down. But when we wake up, we say that we slept peacefully and were completely unaware of anything. So, even though we are in a state of bliss, this is still not our true self. There is an experiencer who is the true self.

## **Who are we?**

The Upanishad actually is silent on this point. Does it mean there is no self? Swami Sarvapriyananda turns to Vidyananda, a philosopher who lived about 700 years back. In his Panchadashi, he makes 5 powerful points to prove that we have a self which is different from the 5 sheaths.

- If we have experienced the 5 sheaths, there must be an experiencer. The mistake we make is that we look for an object. But if we look for a subject, we will find the true self.
- We equate the universe with the known and knower. But there is also the knower. Atman is the knower, not an object of knowledge.
- By adding consciousness, we become aware of an object. In every act of knowledge, the self is revealed. Sugar has inherent sweetness which lends its sweetness to other things. We do not have to add sugar to sugar to make it sweet. We do not have to become conscious of consciousness. Consciousness is self-luminous.
- If we say there is no atman, the very statement is a lie. It is like saying we do not have a tongue. We can say something only when we have a tongue! When we say we do not have an atman, we are admitting awareness of our atman.
- In a debate, we need an opponent. But if the opponent by saying there is no self, admits he does not exist and dissolves himself, to whom do we reply? We have already won the debate!

## **Conclusion**

The consciousness is not separate from the sheaths. It is illuminating all the 5 sheaths. These sheaths arise in our consciousness. The body, the life, the mind, the intellect and the bliss arise and subside like waves in our consciousness. The body is mortal. Mortality is in the body. Disease and decay are in the prana. Happiness, unhappiness, desire and frustration are in the mind. Ignorance and knowledge are in the intellect. But there is an immortal unchanging reality that is pure and infinite. We can find it right now.

So what is the practical significance of these abstract philosophical concepts? My own interpretation is that we cannot be attached to our body or physical condition or personality or intellect. We have to transcend all this. If we can peel through the layers which hide our true self, we will become egoless, stress free and ready to move forward and achieve our goals. We will not have any vested interests. We will not have a feeling of insecurity. Our credibility and authenticity will increase. We will become transformational leaders.