

Doctrine of Sheaths and the Astral Body

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In Indian thought the sheaths are sometimes considered to be earlier formations. Thus we find that the ananda, vijnana, mana, prana and anna sheaths are said to be present in the individual. The last annamayakosa is the physical. Each kosa requires to be discerned and transcended.

In another sense it was considered that the subtle sheaths produced the less subtle sheaths. This is similar to the Samkhyan conception of evolution (or what Sri. Aurobindo calls the involution). The Avyakta or subtlest matter produces the Mahat or Buddhi (vijnanamaya kosa - this is the alayavijnana of the Buddhists and dhi of the Upanisad - Veda gayatri). This Buddhi is the effect of Avyakta but the cause of ahamkara. This ahamkara is the effect of Buddhi but the cause of the manas and the sense-organs and motor-organs, and also of the tanmatras. The tan-matras are the causes of the panchabhutas or the gross elements. This manas-cum sense-organs and motor-organs in their subtle condition obviously form the mental body and the gross annamaya

sarira is formed from the tanmatras and the ahamkara. The close linkage between the manomayakosa and the tanmatras resulted in the discovery of the pranamayakosa which is to be the cause of the annamaya kosa or physical organic body. The non-organic nature is due to the still further grossening of the material elements ceasing to have contact with the mental and vital. Though perhaps difficult to stretch it to the inorganic the theory of kosas seems to have formed the back-ground of the samkhyan evolution or involution. Sri Aurobindo has clearly expounded this in his Life Divine by showing how the several levels of being are formed in the Cosmic Organic scheme.

In Yoga Psychology the gross is said to be the effect of the subtle causal sheaths. Therefore in Yoga what is attempted is the recovery of the activity of the causal in the place of the effect-activity, the replacement of the causal activity in the place of the gross effectual activity. This integrative recovery of activity of the higher sheaths in practice makes the gross not separate itself from the earlier but work in harmony with the higher. Secondly it is to gain for the effect the continuity with the consciousness of the higher and vaster and wider functions which tended to be lost in the absorption with the lower. Unconsciousness developed as mechanicalness increased.

Once it was conceded that unconsciousness develops out of consciousness it becomes imperative that to recover consciousness is to gain the causal state. And secondly they are convertible. One is the degradation of the other. Monism of consciousness was accepted in the field of involution-evolution. The only question that has arisen is whether this consciousness-unconsciousness monism is identical with the notion of the Self, which would become something different from the unconsciousness-consciousness.

The astral body is held to be intermediary between the physical and the mental, and obviously must refer to the pranamayasarira. This pranamaya sarira is what one handles in certain yogas. The hathayoga though relying on the control of the physical (carnal or natural) yet uses the prana for control of the physical. The pranamaya sarira is sought to be controlled by mind (manas) and that is emotional centre also for manas is said to be the organ of perception of pleasure and pain. The thought element in this manas is much less than in the Ahamkara and Buddhi, the ahamkara may be considered to be the activity-centre and the buddhi to be the intellectual centre.

Thus manomayasarira is capable of being considered to be the mental body, and the vijnanamaya sarira as the intellectual body. The prana operates only in the astral level and one must in every case build up the vital or astral body if it is needed for any special work. It follows the soul in its migrations.

Sri Ramchandraji considers that this astral body can be taken out and projected and dealt with by the spiritual process of pranahuti (transmission of prana). Undoubtedly this prana of the transcendent person or Master is different from the individual prana, but has some sort of identity, because it is also of the nature of vibrations.

The conception that we have to build these bodies by conscious effort by developing the subtle and subtler matter called by Ouspensky Hydrogens has to be considered seriously. Those in whom the higher bodies of astral and mental and overmental kind have not come into being, remain physical and follow the laws of mechanical repetition. In a sense they do not transmigrate. But those in whom the astral has been developed owing to some desire that goes beyond physical and seeks survival after death does not bring about the mechanical repetition but an interval which

prolongs the desire into another life. The mental body is due to more conscious desire to live a vaster life and imagination plays an important part in its formation. These are developed by the amplitude of desire and the expansion of the area of active desire. Thus mechanicalness is momentary, it does not look forward. Astralism is futurative in a small measure, it already becomes aware of the possibility of life beyond the immediate; it becomes time conscious. Even in a greater measure the mental body is formed by the consciousness of the past – and the anticipated moulding of the future in and through the immediate. Thus an independent experience and existence are foreboded in the mental. So too the high vijnana body and the ananda-body are to be formed slowly by the particular kinds of training that one makes for their building.

One view inclined to the conception of dualism and held that Nature is essentially not self but object. The object consciousness is reflected consciousness, and this reflection of the self in objects is gradually lost till it appears to be entirely void of even the reflected consciousness. In subtler states the self is recognized as in its reflected form (this reflection itself being an inversion, vivarta), and that leads on to the discovery of the self as different from Nature.

Another view has maintained that through some innate power the true Self or Consciousness (which is entirely different from the objective nature-reflected consciousness, buddhi, ahamkara, manas and etc.) desires that there is the Consciousness which has become the Nature which has evolved in all its forms. Consciousness as Nature has been the matrix of all evolution and involution. This consciousness is different in kind from the Self that sustains. That is Absolute, but these are non-absolutes.

The fact remains that we have to assume the dualism of the transcendent self and the phenomenal consciousness which operates at once as the organ of the Self and as the object of that organized Self in all the levels of subjective knowing, willing, and feeling, as buddhi, ahamkara, and manas and prana.

The causal chain of the several sheaths led to the concept on of the karana and karya sariras. The ultimate Causal body is undoubtedly Avyakta. This however cannot be equated with the Ananda, but perhaps may be equated with the anandamaya sarira which is said to belong to the body higher than vijnana (of the Upanisads).

According to Sri Ramchandraji the Ultimate can be called only That (Tam), and it is possibly capable of being considered to be the cause of all ananda, cit and sat, which are all that we consider to be the characteristics of the Self, that is not undergoing any change. Upanisads consider the Ultimate to be Saccidananda, but the Nirguna concept goes beyond these too since they are for all practical purposes objects of cognition, even if it be supercognition.

Thus we have to consider that the astral and other bodies must be recognized and built up by conscious acceptance of their causal nature. The integrity of the self thus becomes established and higher levels of consciousness open up to the vision of the physical man and the vital and the mental man.

Our true nature is spiritual and it is seen that these are but effectual inversions of the same when operated by the cosmic propulsion into involution and evolution.