

# THE PANCHA KOSHA

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*"The different sheaths – the Pancha Kosha – give us an overall perspective of the human individual, the vast potential of each of us".<sup>1</sup>*

**Dr Rishi Vivekananda**

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During the 5,000 years or so that man has been engaging in philosophical contemplation, many paradigms and concepts have been put forward to try to explain our human existence. Within the Yogic framework, there are many systems or paradigms that attempt to shed light on who and what we really are.

The Pancha Kosha, or Five Human Energy Fields are a philosophical paradigm that aims to help us to understand the nature and functioning of our human existence. The Five Sheaths describe how we function on an energetic level through different layers of the subtle body. Each of the Koshas exist within the same energy field, but at an ever increasing subtlety or vibrational frequency. They are a systemised exploration of the fullest experience of our human potential, from physical to spiritual. In this system, the body/mind/spirit complex is divided into five parts, layers or sheaths:

1. **Annamaya kosha** – physical or material layer
2. **Pranamaya kosha** – energetic/subtle or vital layer
3. **Manomaya kosha** – mind or mental layer
4. **Vijnanamaya kosha** – insight/wisdom or intellectual layer
5. **Anandamaya kosha** – bliss or spiritual layer

**panch** = five

**kosha** = sheath

**maya** = made up of, consisting of, full of

Each of these layers obscures our awareness of the one beneath it. The different sheaths consist of: physical, energetic, mental, intuitive and spiritual 'bodies' and help to give us

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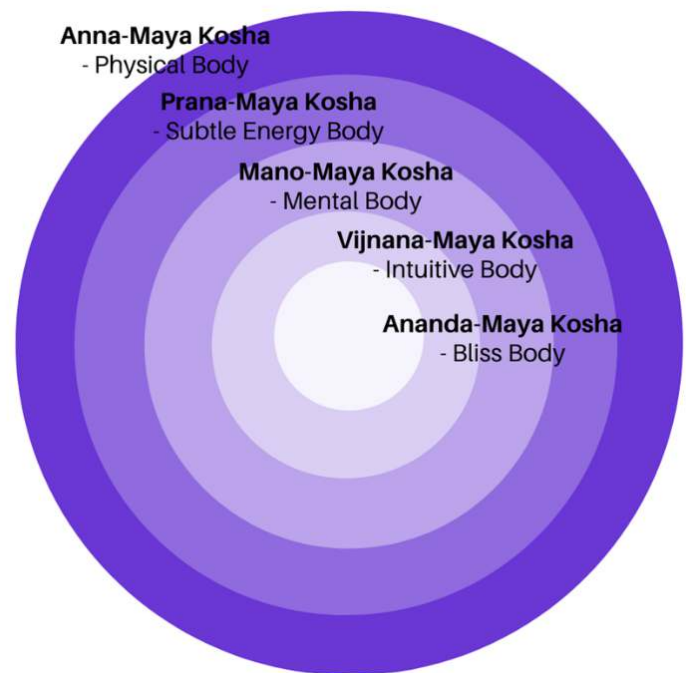
<sup>1</sup> Dr Rishi Vivekananda, 'Practical Yoga Psychology' page 34

an overall perspective of all that we are, what we are made up of, and how we can gain access to the deeper layers.

The soul/spirit/pure being of existence is considered in this paradigm to be the centre of our self, and each of the sheaths is an expression of our soul consciousness on the various plains of existence.

The sheaths or layers are depicted as moving inwards, into ever more subtle realms. Each sheath is perceived to envelope the soul like concentric rings, with every layer becoming more subtle than the succeeding one.

Each kosha affects or controls the activity of the preceding sheath, as well as having an impact on all the others. We can also envisage the sheaths as expanding outwards, extending from the physical body into more expansive layers.



Although separate in their conceptualisation, what happens in one sheath will impact the others. These five layers encompass the whole spectrum of human nature and give us a roadmap for our potential evolution towards greater levels of understanding and consciousness.

*"The limiting concept of man as Eka Kosha (one body) has lead to all of the limitations of Western science, whether that science be medical or philosophical."*

**Swami Gitananda**

## The Five Sheaths

### 1. Annamaya Kosha – The Physical Sheath

Literally translated as the 'food' sheath, this is the most dense of the koshas, comprising of the solid matter of our physical body – tissues and cells. It is called the food sheath because food (anna) creates and maintains life. The physical body is the material sheath of our existence, the physical structure that allows us to take part in life.

We directly influence this kosha with our diet and physical movements/exercise. This layer is subject to birth, growth, disease, decay and death.

## 2. Pranamaya Kosha – The Vital/Energy Sheath

This is the sheath that is made up of energy – prana. Also known as the bio-plasmic field, the etheric body, the subtle body, the dwadashanta and vital energy field. The pranic body energises, animates and vitalises the physical body. We access prana or vital energy from our food, water, breath and also the universal life force (maha prana). Without the vitalising power of pranayamaya kosha, the material/physical body would be lifeless.

Prana, or our life-force energy, is sub-divided into the Pancha Vayus – the Five Pranas (prana, apada, udana, samana and vyana). Energy in the pranamaya kosha is distributed through the network of nadis. There are several plexuses or junctions of Nadis along Sushumna called Chakras (wheels). We can directly influence, and become more sensitive to it, through the breathing practices of pranayama. This kosha is more subtle than the annamaya kosha. Once we have harnessed the energy of pranamaya, we gain entry to the next kosha.

## 3. Manomaya Kosha – The Mind Sheath

Mano = mind, and this kosha deals with our individual mental functioning. It is more subtle than the preceding koshas. Manomaya kosha consists of our working, volitional mind (*manas*), the ego (*ahamkara*), memory (*chitta*), and our five senses (*sight, touch, smell, taste and hearing*). This is our reactive, instinctive, basic functioning of mind.

It influences the annamaya and pranamaya koshas, and consists of our patterns of thinking and conditioning that we have been exposed to throughout our lives. We often identify with this sheath as being who we are, how we identify ourselves. However, yoga and meditation help us to discover the bigger picture. Once we master the quieter states of being through mindfulness practices, we gain access to the higher wisdom of the next kosha.

## 4. Vigyanamaya Kosha – The Wisdom Sheath

Vigyana/vijnana = insight, intuitive, wisdom, knowledge. This is known as the wisdom or intuitive sheath. This kosha is not limited to the confines of the physical body as are the

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first three. We move into more liberated mental states, and more subtle energetic realms. This is the world of inspiration, intuition and clairvoyance, where we tap into a more shared experience of understanding that isn't just our own personal thought processes (c/f morphic resonance or collective consciousness).

Vigyanamaya kosha is the knower and the doer, the higher level of our mind, the *buddhi*. We move away from everyday survival functioning into more evolved states of one-ness. Our internal awareness grows and we develop faith and all-knowing truths that cannot be invalidated by reasoning (which is the domain of the manomaya kosha).

Through our unveiling of the vijnanamaya kosha, we start to realise that we are far more than we previously thought. All mystical and spiritual practices are aiming to connect us with the vijnanamaya kosha, tuning in to deeper levels of consciousness, and awakening us to the potential vast expanse of universal understanding. We see the bigger picture of what life is all about.

## **5. Anandamaya Kosha – The Spiritual Sheath**

Ananda = bliss. This kosha is the centre of our being, the prize after the unwrapping of the first four veils (like a spiritual version of 'pass the parcel'). Our inherent state of being is pure, expanded joy. We get occasional glimpses or experiences of *ananda*, when the mind is at peace and our energies are harmoniously balanced. In meditation, connection to anandamaya kosha takes us into the depths of transcendence or super-consciousness. *"Knowing and experiencing this kosha gives meaning to our life and to existence"*<sup>2</sup>.

This layer is often considered to not be a sheath in the same way as the other four, but to be the centre of our being, our Soul or Spirit. *"The bliss that is ananda is not just an emotion; it is the ineffable experience of peace, love and ecstasy from being in contact with the ultimate consciousness"*<sup>3</sup>. This is the true reality of all of us, we just have yet to see it, to be aware of it. To move beyond the dramas of our everyday lives and experience the bliss, to gain access to our true spirit.

## **Self Inquiry**

We may have tendencies towards living in one or more of these sheaths. Do we identify with one sheath more than another? Are we body conscious, an over-thinker, a spiritual seeker?

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<sup>2</sup> Swami Nischalananda 'Insight into Reality' page 450

<sup>3</sup> Dr Rishi Vivekananda, 'Practical Yoga Psychology' page 33