

# Meditation on the Upanishads

Swami Shraddhananda

(Continued from the previous issue)

## Class 4: The Five Koshas, Walls of the Self

**T**HIS CREATED UNIVERSE brings so many questions to our mind. The Upanishads are trying to give us an explanation, but really there is only one reality and that is Brahman.

For the time being, let us say that creation is real, but it is all coming from Brahman. Time and again the Upanishad says that for a spiritual aspirant seeking freedom, do not take this story of creation too seriously. This story is only to satisfy the mind. The mind is a tool of maya, the power of delusion, and it always wants to know, ‘What is this? What is that?’ One day the mind will die, and the fire of knowledge will burn the mind.

In the *Chhandogya Upanishad*, Brahman became *akasha*, space-time. Brahman permeates *akasha*. Brahman is so clever and has entered into every fragment of this universe. Due to our ignorance, we do not find Brahman. We should never lose sight of this fundamental proposition: Brahman is reality. If we remember this, then it will be easy for us to find Brahman anywhere. *Adhyasa*, superimposition, is like mistaking the rope for the snake or the water mirage on the highway. Everything is superimposed on Brahman. This is the outlook of Vedanta and a spiritual seeker has to remember it.

*Srishthi*, *sthiti*, *laya*—creation, preservation, and dissolution—are three processes that are constantly going on. When we reach Brahman, we will say, ‘There was never anything but Brahman,’ just as the snake disappears into the rope

or the mirage blends into the road. We are seeking the truth and we must remember that our problems are not real. Let us remember that all this is Brahman.

Now in this verse, man has come. Man is important because we have to start from where we stand. *Adhyasa*, superimposition, is one part, and the other is the return process, *apavada*, dissolution—the removal of that mistake. Step by step through Vedantic reasoning, we reduce the gross into the fine. Man has five coverings—the *panchamaya kosha*—the five walls of the Self: body, life force, mind, ego, and bliss. The innermost core is the pure Self, but due to ignorance that maya is there. Through Vedantic analysis, these five gross sheaths will be removed. This solid body will merge into prana, the life force. Then prana merges into mind. The mind is merged into the ego and that into bliss.

On the cosmic scale, the gross earth has to be liquefied into water, and then vapour into space, and then finally, the *akasha* has to merge into that pure consciousness, namely Brahman. *Brahmagni*, the fire of knowledge, can step by step melt this vast universe into pure consciousness. In the same way, this body has to merge into subtler and subtler ideas.

The Sankhya philosophy, one of the six systems of Indian thought, says that *prakriti*, nature, is binding us, but also is ready to liberate us. This living body is a lump of *prakriti*. This body is continually binding, frightening, and covering us. It is called *annamaya kosha* because

it is made and sustained by *anna*, food and *rasa*, drink, from Mother Earth.

The first kosha or sheath—this body—is a great granite wall. We have to break this wall. We have to get out. Try to remember that it is Brahman that is appearing as the body. Brahman is a very clever player and has entered into this body. Go to the spiritual truth of the body and remember that Brahman has penetrated this body and is inside. There are many spiritual practices to assist us. The fire of knowledge will burn this body. This body is a superimposition on that infinite consciousness. Remember this. We have to discover the pure consciousness within this body.

This body is a food sheath coming from Mother Earth. Think of the millions of bodies—all kinds of creatures, all the living bodies—and think of their composition. Each body is made up of food from Mother Earth. Indeed, this earth is our mother. When we think of this, the idea of unity comes. Our body-consciousness is no longer related to just this one body. In this Vedantic contemplation we cannot ignore this basic truth: this body is made of Mother Earth, as are all bodies. Normally we think only of our little body. That idea will lead us to bondage and attachment. We need to find the way to be liberated from this body. So it is true to say that we are part of all bodies. It is an understatement to say we are only this little body.

In Vedantic contemplation, we have to extend our body to *all* living bodies. Be one with the totality of all bodies. Some bodies are eating dog food, some are sleeping, some are sick. We must try to extend our body further and further, all the way to Kansas, to Europe, to the depths of the oceans. Do this at the time of meditation. We are going to affect this miracle of liberation by knowledge. In this cosmic meditation, we must feel our identity with all living bodies. We have a right to say, 'I am one with Mother

Earth.' This is enlarging our body sense. We have to know that even as a gross body, we are universal. This gives us the capacity of grasping the truth of the Self.

When our mind is totally caught by this little body, it is difficult to reach that vast Brahman. We must tell ourselves, 'I am the totality of all the gross bodies. All living beings come from Mother Earth and eventually go to Mother Earth.' When our body-consciousness is thus expanded, it becomes a means of higher knowledge. This is one technique.

There are times when we do not enjoy our body. Sometimes there is sickness. When we grow old and the teeth shake, when the digestion is slow, the joints are aching, we think, 'Oh, this body is not a means of joy any more.' Still we cling to our body. If one knows that the basic existence is our existence, then we know Brahman. If we are too much attached to our body, then this truth is not for us. There are and have been so many bodies. The attachment to the little has to go. Then we can go to the vast. In this way, we feel the burden of our body.

The second meditation technique is to think that we are a small part of this material universe, not merely of Mother Earth, but a part of this whole cosmos. Above our head there is the vast space and all the stars. Feel that the body is just one speck of all the matter and energy combined into the universe. We have the right to assert our claim and say, 'I am a part of this universe.'

Next, we say, 'I am home.' This little body is trying to feel that the whole universe is its home. Think that the body is the whole cosmos. Bring the sun to our right eye and the moon to our head. Our arms have been stretched to the heavens and Mother Earth is our feet. Imagine a cosmic body. Our body-consciousness has to be transferred into a cosmic consciousness. The physical sheath has become the whole universe.

We must try to find the continuity from our body to the sun and the moon. Raise your body-consciousness to the cosmic level.

The purpose of these contemplations is to expand our body sense. If we allow ourselves to remain inside this little body, it is too much bondage. These are techniques to try to break down this first wall. The final wall will be broken when knowledge comes. Even though we function in ignorance, it is not difficult to practise these contemplations.

### **Class 5: The Annamaya Kosha**

The first covering of the Self, namely the *annamaya kosha*—the covering that consists of food—is our gross body. In order to remove this covering we must consider our body as just one unit among millions of bodies. This awareness itself will bring down the body-consciousness. If there is one professor who is a Nobel Laureate, then everyone thinks it is something special. But if there are seven of them on campus, then being a Nobel Laureate is not so outstanding.

Another technique to lessen our body-consciousness is to consider that the material of our body is made of Mother Earth. All the food we eat and that all bodies eat comes from Mother Earth.

In the Upanishads, there are meditations to help us in this understanding. One such meditation is to think that a wave in the ocean could say, ‘Oh, I am a wave’. Or instead, one could think, ‘I am a part of this vast ocean’. To think we are a part of Mother Earth broadens our sense of identity.

There are other more difficult techniques. First, contemplate on the body and think, ‘What is happening?’ In other words, be aware that the eyes are seeing, the ears are hearing, the heart is beating, the stomach is digesting. Watch and observe. Do not say, ‘I am seeing’. Say instead,

‘The eyes are seeing’. Transfer the actions to the different parts of the body. This analysis becomes more meaningful as we proceed and begin to have a glimpse of ourselves as the soul. In other words, this analysis is leading us to the knowledge that the Self as consciousness is the true perceiver. In the Bhagavadgita, it is said that the knower of truth should think that, ‘whatever is happening with this body is separate from my true Self’.<sup>1</sup> In these Gita verses, it is said that the different organs are functioning, but only the senses are in contact with their objects. A seeker of Self-knowledge should practise this technique by thinking: ‘I shall examine this first wall that is covering my true Self.’ These thoughts lead to a sense of detachment.

In the next technique we must have some faith in our true nature. Namely, we need to think, ‘My true nature is really the unbroken, undying core of existence. Somehow, I have been captured in and captivated by this body. So, let this body be a friend.’

The Upanishads begin with invocations—verses that give the idea of each organ in the body being governed by the cosmic deities, such as the sun and the moon. This is a concept from the Vedic time and creates a harmony of the universe, which is then extended to our body and mind. We can think of our body as a miniature universe. In these prayers, we ask that our mind be calm, that we see only that which is auspicious and to hear only those things that are noble and helpful to our spiritual life. Let these different organs cooperate in this search for the core of our existence. Let all the senses be helpful in the spiritual quest for our Self. When we are trying to practise contemplation, let all these organs be calm and helpful. Let us feel the body is a friend and not an enemy.

The opposite technique is that of Saint Francis of Assisi who called his body ‘Brother Ass’. In

early Christianity it is said that followers would go to the desert and punish their bodies. In Jainism, also, the followers practised extreme austerity. The Buddha came in contact with the Jains and he followed their practices for six years. Then he said goodbye to them. In his teachings, Lord Buddha said not to go to extremes—not luxury nor austerity. His way was the middle path. We do not find extreme austerity in the Upanishads. The sages say, rather, ‘Let my body be a friend to me. See that these organs do not obstruct my spiritual search.’ After even one-half hour of these contemplations, we will feel calm. When we leave these meditations, we feel a harmony that permeates our whole being. These organs are happy to be our friends and not our enemies.

In this process, we need to feel ourselves as a conscious entity, a conscious principle that is separate from our body. We must remember the verse from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* that tells us not even a pinpoint of matter can be separate from Brahman. Brahman is filling this body from the crown of the head to the tip of the toenail. Atman, consciousness, is permeating every pore of the body. This embodied being is not just material, but is filled with consciousness and consciousness is Brahman.

We are so busy in our little life that we do not have the time nor do we usually have the inclination to find consciousness. Our consciousness is mixed up with prana, the life principle. At this stage, one has to try to be conscious of consciousness and try to feel, ‘I am really a conscious principle.’ We can then scratch our head and say, ‘Yes, I am feeling that consciousness is here. The heart is beating; I am conscious of that.’ Practise being conscious of consciousness. It seems to be something very funny, but it has to be done seriously.

At this stage, one has to feel that consciousness is pervading the whole body. ‘A nasty feeling is coming towards someone I do not like and I

am conscious of that. A friendly feeling is coming towards someone I do like and I am conscious of that. I am conscious all the time, but now I will try to pay special attention. I will make my basic identity with consciousness.’ Usually, we think consciousness is identified with the body. That is why we say, ‘My body, my life’. Soon, we will find that this body is something outside, just like a table. Our real identity is with consciousness. The body, the organs and the mind are related as consciousness. Through this analysis, we are trying to find our Self.

Each of these practices is helping us toward our goal. Suicide won’t help, nor extreme austerities. Killing or torturing the body will not free us from the body-consciousness. These meditations try to bring us insight so that we can slowly rise above body-consciousness. Finally, the body says, ‘Okay, I give you permission to go to the next wall’. It is really not necessary to have so much body-consciousness. It is a big lie to have so much identity with this body because one day this body will say, ‘Goodbye’.

Later devotional scriptures have developed another technique, which is from the Upanishads. It is essentially the love of God. Devotees of God do not find their body an enemy because the body is helping them to love God. The feet take them to the temple, the hands light and offer the incense, and the eyes see the beautiful image of God. A lover of God tries to establish friendship with this body. ‘You must be a temple and within the heart I will place the image of God.’ The devotee tries to look upon the body as something very holy and sacred; caring for the body is the same as caring for the temple. When eating, the devotee says, ‘I am offering this food to the divine in the temple of my heart.’

With that kind of feeling, our body can no longer be an obstruction to our spiritual life. In this way, we have broken the wall of this first

sheath, the *annamaya kosha* and this body can no longer be an obstruction to our spiritual life. It is possible to break through this body. Even though we are functioning in this body, we do not need to be a slave to it.

### **Class 6: The Pranamaya Kosha**

The second sheath that covers our true Self is the *pranamaya kosha*, the life force covering, the vital sheath. It is not our true home. We are infinitely more than life, but we identify ourselves with life because we do not want to die.

We have to find out how to overcome the covering of the life force. The ultimate knowledge is that Brahman is everything. When we know that, then there is no such thing as the delusion of maya. Really speaking, this body is nothing but consciousness.

But what if we begin to adore this body as Brahman? Then it would be like the gods Indra and Prajapati and the *asuras*, demonic creatures, in the *Chhandogya Upanishad*. The asuras misunderstood their teacher, got the wrong idea, and mistakenly practised that their material body was God. This error, their narcissism, led them astray. Know that bodily beauty comes from Brahman. Rethinking and retraining of the mind is necessary. The body asserts itself and does not want to be left behind. The devotee thinks of the body as the temple of Brahman, thus spiritualising the body.

For the knower of the Self, this whole universe is nothing but consciousness. Everything—past, present, and future—is consciousness. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* prescribes these meditations in order to rise above the coverings of the Self.

One meditation is to look upon the *pranamaya kosha*, the life force covering, as the object of meditation. That means to imagine that the prana is really God. Currently, we look upon our prana as just what is within this body, our

breathing and other vital processes. But this prana is not such a small, limited thing. There is a cosmic life animating everything. The same life principle is everywhere. We must identify ourselves with the cosmic life of all living beings, cosmic prana. Be one with all breathing things. Feel we are all breathing in unison.

The Upanishad tells us to look upon the *real* prana, to expand our consciousness of the life force. We have to separate the body *kosha*, the physical sheath, from the prana or vital sheath. Our ideas are mixed up. We have to concentrate and separate them. When we can do that, they lose their power over us and cannot bind us.

From our text, a summary of the original Sanskrit is given: ‘Different from the physical sheath is the vital sheath. This is encased in the physical sheath and has the same form. Through this the senses perform their office. From this men and beasts derive their life. This determines the length of life of all creatures. He who worships the vital sheath as Brahman lives to complete his span of life. This sheath is the living self of the physical sheath.’<sup>2</sup>

‘Through this the senses perform their office.’ It is prana that is supporting all the senses. Prana is necessary for us to see and to hear. ‘From this men and beasts derive their lives.’ There is a cosmic prana and each living creature has its individual prana. ‘This determines the length of life of all creatures.’ The prana is not always going to stay here. When the prana leaves the body, then we burn that body or bury it. Prana is such a wonderful power, so adore that life force. Adore that prana as Brahman. Meditate on this vital life force as a kind of deity. This meditation is prescribed: ‘He who worships the vital sheath as Brahman lives to complete his span of life.’

When we adore something, even a little pebble on the beach, we say, ‘Oh, you beautiful little pebble.’ The pebble will respond and say, ‘Love

me, pick me up, take me to your home.' The text continues: 'This sheath is the living self of the physical sheath.' The physical sheath, the *annamaya kosha*, adores the life force because without it the physical sheath is nothing. Prana is the self of the physical sheath. In different Upanishads, meditations are given so that we can rise above the prana-consciousness. Our identification with the body is strong, but we love the vital sheath more because we do not like to think of ourselves as a dead body. Vedantic analysis is necessary to separate the prana from the body.

Just as one technique to rise above the body-consciousness is to watch the body, in the same way we must be conscious of the prana. This needs leisure. This needs time. It is a spiritual practice. When sitting quietly, try to think of the prana as separate. A bit of physiology and anatomy will be a wonderful help in this meditation. We can visualise all the little air sacs in the lungs exchanging oxygen as we inhale and exhale. In our mind, we watch this wonderful drama going on in the body. We must watch this prana, feel the presence of this prana in our body, and it is beautiful. The pictures we see in the anatomy books are here within this body. Imagine the energy that is the blood circulation, the blood cells are absorbing oxygen with the inhaling and exhaling of the breath. When we watch these processes, we are not identifying with the prana. Our attachment to the life force becomes more and more impersonal and we admire dispassionately, just as when we gaze at the sky and the stars. This technique is helpful. By simply watching this prana it will begin to slow down and become more harmonised.

Another technique is to meditate on the cosmic prana. Just as with the meditation on our body where we try to see the body as a piece of the whole earth, we have to realise this little prana in our body is one with the cosmic prana,

the *vishvaprana*. If we take an early morning walk, we will see that prana is in the cat, in the vines, in the birds. Each little body is enjoying prana and is sustained by prana. This little prana in our body is one with *vishvaprana*, the cosmic prana. This will expand our consciousness and bring detachment from our little prana. The irrational clinging to life is clinging to this prana. We try to hold it. We say, 'I won't let you go!' Meditate on this cosmic prana. A feeling of compassion and unity with all life will come, as correspondently the attachment we feel with our little body will go. We want to reach the goal of the Self, so we must not fall in love with things which are not our own. Slowly we have to rise above all attachments.

In our individual meditations on prana, we try to feel the presence of our prana concentrated on the life principle that is operating in our hand, our head, and our heart. This brings the consciousness of prana and the control of prana. We feel we are different from prana. We are the conscious principle within.

In this way we get a feeling of separateness from prana. When we are at our death we will not be so attached to our prana. By these techniques we are trying to rise above the torture and grip of prana. We should feel that we are the masters of prana. We have to be free from prana. Normally we are not even aware of prana. So we must tell our prana, 'You are not the master. Prana is everywhere.' We will keep the prana as our slave. This helps us to bring detachment from prana.

(To be continued)

### References

1. Gita, 5.8–9.
2. *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal*, translated by Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1975), 83.

# BALABODHA

*Ancient Wisdom Made Easy*

## Rishi

**R**ISHI IS a commonly used Sanskrit word. It is used by people, who do not even know Sanskrit, as it is present in almost every Indian language. The word 'rishi' means sage, but it is necessary to see the origins of this word. This is a Sanskrit word. Sanskrit is a classical language like Greek, Latin, and Persian. And in Sanskrit, as in most classical languages, most words are derived from a stem or root.

The word 'rishi' has been derived from the root *rish*, which means to flow, flow quickly, glide, move with a quick motion, go, move, push, thrust, stab, or kill. The sense of going has to be taken in the context of the word 'rishi'. A suffix is added to the root *rish* following the *unadi* sutra, 'Igupadhat kit; if the penultimate letter of a verb is an *ik* letter, then the suffix *kit* will be added.' The *t* and *i* of the suffix get dropped. The word *rish* becomes 'rishi', which means a person, who has attained all that is worth attaining. A rishi attains knowledge of the Self, using a mantra and also authors a mantra. A rishi sees the truth everywhere and crosses the transmigratory cycle

of repeated births and deaths called the *samsara*. 'Rishi' also denotes a person, who has attained mastery in a field of knowledge. The word 'rishi' could also mean the author of any scripture. Any person expert in any subject is

also called a 'rishi'. This word denotes a person, who speaks only the truth. A 'rishi' is also one, who has curse as one's weapon.

The word 'rishi' denotes a person, who has seen a mantra. Though, generally seeing a mantra means realising the essence of a mantra, there are accounts of rishis even physically seeing mantras. There are seven kinds of rishis: *maharishi*, *paramarishi*, *devarishi*, *brahmarishi*, *shrutarishi*, *rajarishi*, and *kandarishi*. There are seven rishis, who form a group, and those belonging to this group change in every *manvantara*, aeon. The word 'rishi' can also denote the Vedas. It can also mean rays of light. The meaning of going of the root word *rish* can give the meaning of a person engaged in practising truthfulness, austerities, and trying to attain knowledge. A person who has the qualities of truthfulness, knowledge, scriptural studies, and austerities can be called a 'rishi'. One, who leads a life of renunciation and seeks Self-knowledge, can be also called a 'rishi'. A 'rishi' is one who is moving towards the Supreme.

The Vedas contain numerous references to women rishis. In the Rig Veda, more than twenty-five women rishis are mentioned. 'Rishi' can thus mean any of the many rishis talked of in the Vedas, Puranas, and other texts. A child of a rishi cannot automatically become a rishi by birth, but can become a rishi only by performing austerities. Rishis might live for hundreds or thousands of years. They can dwell in any world they wish. An advent of a rishi is preceded by the birth of many sincere spiritual aspirants. 

