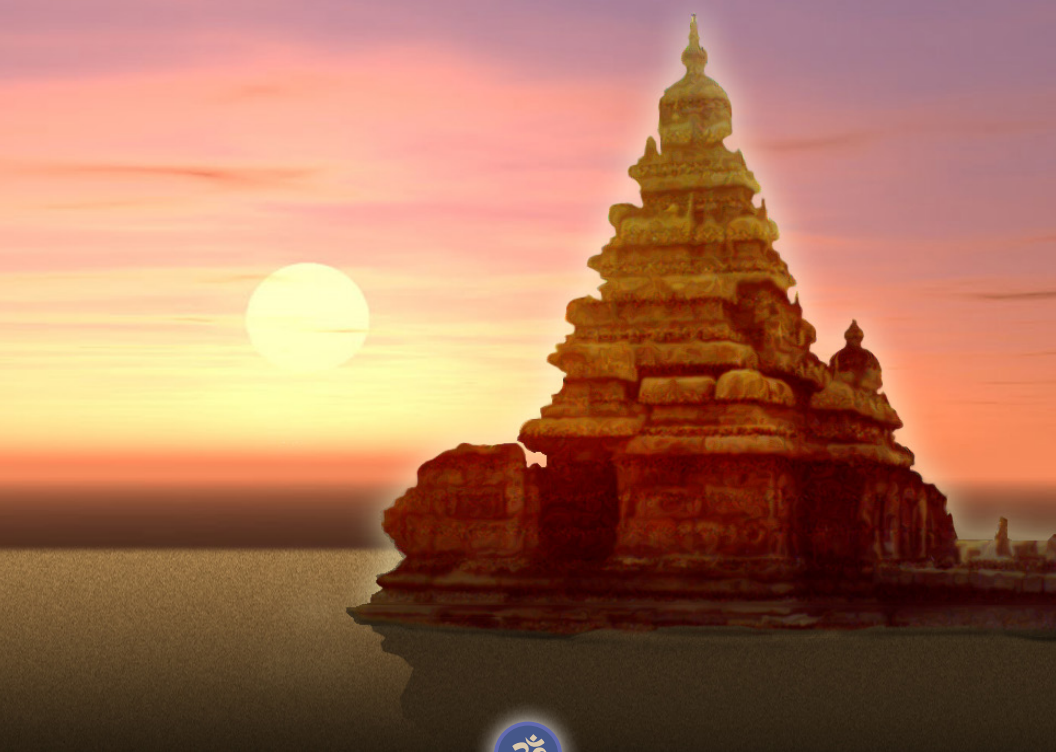


Vedanta

The BIG PICTURE



Swami Paramarthananda
of
CHENNAI

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Introduction

SHININGWORLD PRESENTS the following simple, logical overview of Vedanta, the Science of the Self. Vedanta is a proven way to remove the sense of limitation that bedevils all human beings. It discusses the primary and secondary Vedic scriptural solutions to the successful pursuit of our goals, worldly and spiritual. It asks if we want to live a dependent or an independent life and proceeds to clearly explain the teachings that lead to freedom: (1) *karma yoga*, (2) *upasana yoga*, a series of disciplines that lead to a quiet mind, and (3) the stages of Vedantic self-inquiry. It then proceeds to unfold the topic of devotional love, followed by a clear definition of God, the object of devotion.

Next, it explains the qualifications for success in self-inquiry, followed by an analysis of the three states of experience, the three bodies and the five sheaths. It then unfolds the knowledge of the self, the creation and the relationship of the individual to the limitless self, winding up with a discussion of *karma* and liberation.

This overview was given by Swami Paramarthanada of Chennai, one of India's foremost Vedanta teachers. It was transcribed by one of the *swami's* students, and rendered into clear, simple English by Rory MacKay.

James Swartz
Amsterdam, Netherlands
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1. Human Pursuits

HUMAN BEINGS SHARE a number of things in common with other living beings. All beings must eat and sleep in order to survive. Along with the need for food and rest, fear is also common to animals and humans alike, and the desire for self-preservation. All forms of life, from humans to dogs to houseplants, want to survive and to perpetuate their species.

However, if other living beings are similar to us in these respects, in what ways do we differ? Why are humans considered “the roof and crown of creation”?

One thing that sets human beings apart is the faculty of speech. While animals can communicate by making sounds, humans possess sophisticated methods of communication in the form of speech and language. We also possess a complex intellect capable of thinking, analysing, imagining and discriminating. Animals are also intelligent and have a rudimentary intellect, but are clearly incapable of reading the newspaper, much less creating literature and building and sustaining civilisations.

We See the Big Picture

BECAUSE OF THIS unique faculty for thinking, a human being is capable of seeing his or her life clearly. Animals have an instinctive ability to store food, but they lack self-reflection and the ability to think and plan ahead, and would never worry about things such as saving money or dealing with life insurance.

On the other hand, far-sighted thinking and setting specific goals and working toward their fulfilment are unique features of human beings. These human goals are known as *purushartha* in Sanskrit. *Purusha* means a human being. *Artha* means a goal, that which is desired and sought after.

There are as many goals as there are human beings. One person might want his name to appear in *Guinness World Records* for eating the most hot dogs. Another may want to free fall from an airplane and only open his parachute at 200 feet. If he succeeds, he might try to break his own record

and wait to open his parachute at 100 feet, and so on until one unfortunate day he splats on the ground. Others might set the goal of climbing Mount Everest with oxygen and, if successful, will then try to make it to the top without oxygen. Some may set the goal of becoming a scientist or a politician, while others want to be actors, athletes and so on.

As we go through life we have many, ever-changing goals. As a child, you might want a tricycle, and then as a boy, you want a bicycle. Teenagers want cars, and adults may want their own planes or yachts. The elderly, on the other hand, may be quite content with a mobility walker.

Four Universal Human Goals

SO WHAT IS it that motivates human behaviour and our various desires and goals? Vedanta outlines four types of human goal, common to all people.

1. Wealth and Security (*Artha*)

ALL HUMAN BEINGS have basic survival needs that must be met, such as the need for adequate food, clothing and shelter. In pursuing goals related to wealth and security (*artha*), we seek to protect ourselves against disease, suffering, hunger and death.

This is the primary goal, upon which all the others depend. This may include finding a good job, making enough money to provide a roof over our heads and food and necessities for our family. We may also put money aside for retirement and old age. So we are not only concerned with our wealth and security in the present, but also the future.

2. Enjoyment (*Kama*)

ONCE THE BASICS are in place, we next focus on how to enjoy life (*kama*). Depending on our preferences, we might spend time listening to music, watching television, reading books or going to the opera. In the affluent Western world, where the basic requirements of survival and security are already in place for most people, there is an inordinate amount of focus on recreation and pleasure-seeking. It is for this reason that the entertainment industry is one of the biggest industries on the planet.

3. Invisible Wealth (*Dharma*)

THE THIRD HUMAN pursuit relates to what might be defined as

invisible wealth (*dharma*). This includes the notion of good *karma*, good fortune, or merit. It is the basis of most religions and is sought to enhance one's enjoyment of this life and perhaps the next life as well.

In Indian culture, there is a prevalent belief in reincarnation. People believe that by following the scriptures, living a righteous life and performing certain actions, they will accumulate good *karma* (*punyam*), which will carry into the next life and provide a favourable rebirth. Buddhists believe that by accruing enough "merit" they can break free of the cycle of rebirth. Christians believe that by praying and going to church every Sunday they will go to heaven. Even among people with no spiritual or religious beliefs, there is a widespread belief that by performing good actions good results will come back to us.

Limitations of the First Three Goals

IF YOU ANALYSE human behaviour, you will find that almost everyone is working towards any one of these first three goals. At any time they may be seeking security, wealth, pleasure or trying to ensure that they go to heaven or get a good future rebirth. However, after pursuing these goals for any length of time, an intelligent individual capable of learning from experience will realise that these three goals all come with certain limitations.

Pain

EVERY ACTION INEVITABLY has both positive and negative consequences. We are well aware of the positive aspects of each goal. If we acquire money, buy a house, get married or go travelling, we experience great pleasure. The upside is clearly evident, whereas the downside may not be immediately apparent. The sad truth is that all the pleasures we seek are mixed with an equal amount of pain.

Firstly, acquiring them often involves a lot of struggle, effort and competition. That amazing holiday to Florida may necessitate gruelling hours of overtime and sleepless nights stressing about the bank balance. That new BMW might feel wonderful to drive on the open road, but the loan I had to take out to finance it is a constant source of stress, and the latest repayment is overdue.

Sadly, in life there is no gain without a corresponding loss. In fact the higher the gain, the greater the price must be paid. Acquisition always involves loss, whether in terms of money, energy, time and so on.

Even once the acquisition is attained, the struggle is still not over, for we must then preserve and maintain it. As well as repaying the loan, we must pay for the fuel and the upkeep of the car; and the more the mechanic repairs it, the more he finds to repair! Maintenance always involves some kind of pain.

There is worse news to come. In spite of our best efforts, in the end we are going to lose all that we have acquired. We realise that nothing lasts forever, and in the end it was a downward spiral. The acquisition was painful, the maintenance was even more painful and the eventual loss was the most painful of all. Thus there is no escaping the fact that the pleasure we derive in life is always mixed with pain.

Dissatisfaction

NO MATTER HOW much we acquire in life, we will never be fully satisfied. It doesn't matter if I have \$100 or \$100,000 in the bank, I will still feel insecure. In fact the more I have, the more I may feel insecure. If I have a grand marble mansion filled with priceless artefacts, I'm going to be a lot more concerned about security and potential robbery than if I had a small apartment with very few possessions. We keep chasing objects in search of satisfaction, but that satisfaction is never quite attained. As a child, you may think you will be satisfied when you are a young man. As a young man, you decide that you will be satisfied when you get married. As a married man, you figure that satisfaction may come when you have children. As a father, you find that parenthood is stressful and your children will not settle down. And so it goes, on and on. We never quite achieve that lasting satisfaction. It always seems some way off in the distance.

Dependence

ANOTHER DANGER IS becoming dependent on the objects of our pursuit. For security we depend upon our salary, mortgage and pension; for entertainment and pleasure we depend upon our favourite restaurant

and opera house. For enjoyment in the next life we may think we are dependent upon good *karma*.

These are all external factors, and by becoming dependent upon them, as an addict becomes dependent upon his substance of choice, we find that we become slaves to the very things we love. Without these things we cannot feel comfortable, happy and secure. This is a real problem because anything that can be gained in life can, and inevitably will, be lost. This again leads to the first two limitations of human pursuit: pain and dissatisfaction.

But from there we discover another final human pursuit.

4. Inner freedom (*Moksa*)

THE FINAL HUMAN goal is the pursuit of freedom, in this case freedom from dependence upon external objects. Whereas before we were a slave to money, people, situations and even good *karma* for our happiness, security and pleasure, we now discover that happiness is actually within ourselves and can never be taken away.

This realisation is called *moksa*. With this understanding, we are no longer dependent upon a certain set of external factors, and there is nothing more for us to pursue. Things may come and go in life, but we no longer need to chase after them in a misplaced search for happiness.

The first three goals, regardless of their outcome, involve an element of bondage to external factors and are related to immediate benefit (*preyas*). Only the fourth, the pursuit of *moksa*, brings ultimate freedom (*sreyas*). For this reason, it is considered the highest human goal (*parama-purushartha*).

2. The Scriptures

HUMAN GOALS CAN be categorized according to immediate, worldly benefit (*preyas*) and ultimate, lasting benefit (*sreyas*). The scriptures of Sanatana Dharma are a body of literature that aims to help a person in the fulfilment of both types of goal. It is the intent of the scripture to help us achieve freedom and happiness. These scriptures are vast, but can be divided into two broad types.

The Vedas: The Primary Literature

THE VEDAS ARE the primary and most important of the scriptures. There are four Vedas: the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda* and the *Artharvana Veda*. It is believed that portions of the Vedas have been lost over time. Tradition holds that the four Vedas originally had more than a thousand branches, of which only a few are available today. Even so, the existing branches are so voluminous that it is rare to be able to study even one Veda fully.

According to tradition, the Vedas were not invented by the human intellect. That is why they are referred to as *apauruseya*, which means “not of human effort.” Instead, the Vedas are considered revealed knowledge, or *sruti*, “that which is heard.” The sages (*rishis*) were the intermediaries who received the Vedic *mantras*. In a sense they functioned as receiving centres, like a radio tuned to a particular frequency. These *rishis* received the Vedas and then were able to share them with the rest of humanity.

The Secondary Literature

TO SUPPORT AND elaborate upon the Vedas there are many secondary scriptures. These are not revealed knowledge as the Vedas are, but were written by great teachers (*acharyas*). These secondary teachings are important for elaborating upon the Vedic teachings and dealing with many concepts that may seem abstract and difficult to comprehend. They present the teachings of the Vedas in a more concrete form, often using examples, stories and metaphors. Another reason the secondary teachings are helpful is that they arrange the subject matter in a more systematic way.

1. The *Sutras*

AMONG THE SECONDARY scriptures, the first and foremost are the *sutras*. The *sutras* lay out the teachings of the four *Vedas* in a clear fashion, presented in the form of short aphorisms. Profound ideas are conveyed in short statements that can be easily understood and memorized. As with the *Vedas*, the *sutras* were not initially put into written form. They were instead memorized and chanted in the form of Sanskrit *mantras*.

2. The *Smrtis*

THE WORD *SMRTI* means “remembered wisdom.” When the teachings are presented in terse form, as in the *sutras*, there is the possibility of missing elements, which may lead to confusion. Having studied the *Vedas*, the authors systematically presented the teaching in a clear and comprehensive way. Comprising well-arranged chapters and verses, it made the teachings of the *Vedas* easily accessible. If you want to learn about a certain topic, you simply need to find and read the relevant chapter.

3. The *Puranas*

THE *PURANAS* PRESENT Vedic teaching in yet another form: the form of stories. There are 18 “great *Puranas*” and 18 “minor *Puranas*,” most attributable to the scribe Vyasa. The *Puranas* form a vast and voluminous literature, consisting of up to 80,000 verses. This is because for a single Vedic *mantra*, such as *satya vada* (“speak the truth”), there is an entire story. The *puranas* show the importance of following the right values and the dangers of temptation and straying from one’s true path. Some of the stories are clearly fiction, while others might be factual or contain a mixture of the two.

Whether fictitious or not, these stories convey eternal truths, knowledge and wisdom that is ever valid and meaningful. Even though society changes, these truths will never change. These stories appeal to children and adults alike, providing the child with entertainment and the adult with ideas to reflect upon, including notions of ethics, sociology and psychology.

4. The *Itihasa*

THE FINAL RANGE of literature is historical in nature, the *Itihasa*. This includes the well-known *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which

are believed to deal with actual events that took place long ago. A few fictitious elements may have been incorporated for the sake of story value, but the word *itihasa* itself means “thus it happened.”

The Two Portions of the Vedas

THE VEDAS POSE an important question. *They ask us whether we want to live a life of dependence or independence.* We generally favour dependence because we are used to it, much like the rat that got used to being in a box and is hesitant to come back out. This dependence relates to our reliance on other people, objects, money and various other things for our security and enjoyment. We spend our lives chasing after such things. If that’s what we want, then the *Vedas* can help us.

If, however, we are tired of dependence upon objects and are wise enough to seek independence, then the *Vedas* also provide us with the method for that. The *Vedas* never impose anything. It is for us to decide and choose.

Based on this, the *Vedas* are broadly classified into two portions. The first, *Vedapurva*, deals with the fulfilment of the first three human pursuits, such as security and pleasure, each of which leads to a dependent life. It talks about earning wealth and becoming prosperous, having a family, travelling, having material education and so on.

Once a person matures and realises the limitation of these pursuits, he or she is ready to pursue the fourth goal: inner freedom (*moksa*). That is what the second section of the *Vedas*, Vedanta, is for.

3. Society and the Stages of Life

A SIGNIFICANT PORTION of the *Vedas* deals with lifestyle. Certain lifestyles are advocated for achieving one's goals, whether these relate to security, pleasure and virtue or the ultimate goal of liberation. The *Vedas* teach that our lifestyle should be balanced and in accordance with certain factors to ensure both social harmony and individual progress.

The Three *Gunas*

THE CONCEPT OF the *gunas*, three qualities of energy that affect the entire created universe, originates in Samkhya philosophy and is a key understanding in Vedanta. These three qualities shape and influence all beings, objects and forces in nature, from the gross physical level to the subtler levels of mind, emotions and intellect.

The *gunas* are present in all things but exist in different proportions; and it is these proportions that determine the character and qualities of that particular object. It is very helpful to have an understanding of these qualities and the ways in which they colour our experience of life at any given time.

The three *gunas* are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

1. **Sattva:** The word *sattva* is derived from *sat*, meaning the self, or pure awareness. *Sattva* reflects harmony, equanimity, openness and peace. When *sattva* predominates in the mind, we feel peaceful, happy, at ease and free of desire and fear. This is the state of mind to which *yogis* and seekers of spiritual liberation aspire, for it enables us to think and discriminate clearly and without obstruction. With certain lifestyle measures in place, such as living a peaceful, virtuous life and eating a pure and simple diet, it is possible to cultivate a predominantly *sattvic* mind.

2. **Rajas:** Whereas *sattva* is reflective in nature, *rajas* is a projecting power. It is the mode of passion, action, extroversion and agitation. *Rajas* is necessary to create action and make things happen. It prompts desire and the compulsion to do and acquire. When there is a predominance of *rajas* in the mind, one is constantly agitated, restless, gripped by desires

and fears, always feeling the need to be busy, and possibly prone to anger and aggression.

The activities that we engage in, the environment in which we find ourselves, the food that we eat and the thoughts that we think all influence the *gunas* at play in our bodies and minds. A certain degree of *rajas* can be healthy to cultivate a balance, but excessive *rajas* is a source of great suffering.

3. **Tamas:** Inert and heavy, *tamas* is the densest of the three energies. Whereas *sattva* is reflective and *rajas* is projecting, *tamas* has an obscuring, veiling power. *Tamas* is required for us to rest and sleep, and can be experienced in the body and mind as dullness, lethargy and sloth. Whereas a *rajasic* mind is active and full of desire, a *tamasic* mind tends to be lazy, indolent and ignorant. It can be very hard to think clearly with a *tamasic* mind. Instead, all we are likely going to want to do is laze on the sofa watching TV, with a slice of pizza in one hand and a beer in the other.

It is clear that if we really want to achieve our goals in life, whether they are worldly or spiritual, the quality of our mind is highly important. Happiness, peace of mind and clear thinking is simply not possible when the mind is obscured by *tamas* and *rajas*. Therefore the cultivation of a *sattvic* mind is highly recommended.

The Four Classes

BASED UPON THE interplay of these *gunas*, Vedic culture outlines Varnashrama, a classification based on the division of society into four distinct orders. While this caste (*varna*) system may be seen as peculiar to Indian culture, it is in fact a universal division that occurs in all nations and societies. This division is based upon naturally occurring human archetypes and personality types and how they function together to create social cohesion.

These classes are:

1. **The spiritual class (*Brahmana*):** By nature these people have a *sattvic* nature, backed up with *rajo guna*. Naturally contemplative and devotional, their duty lies in scriptural education, serving as seekers, priests, teachers and educators.

2. **The administration class (*Ksatriya*):** The next-highest *varna* in society is the class of rulership, administration and defence. These people have a selflessly active nature caused by a predominance of *rajas*, as well as some *sattva guna*.

3. **The merchant class (*Vaisya*):** Next, we have the class of commerce and agriculture. Selfishly active by nature, these people have a primarily *rajasic* nature backed by *tamas*. These people generally make good farmers, merchants and artisans.

4. **The service class (*Sudra*):** The final class is the service class, those with a predominance of *tamas* mixed with *rajo guna*. Such people tend to be idle and their activities mechanical, unskilled and routine, making them best suited for unskilled labour.

These divisions are seen in all societies and cultures, for they are based upon universal configurations of the *gunas*, the forces that define how an individual lives, thinks and functions in the material world.

Dharma and the Natural Order of Life

ONE OF THE key understandings in Vedic teaching is called *dharma*, which relates to following the natural order of life with reference to action, duties, responsibilities and conduct.

All things in life have a natural *dharma*, which is rooted in the essential nature of that particular object or being. It is the *dharma* of fire to burn, water to flow and the earth to spin around the sun. It is the *dharma* of birds to fly, snakes to slither and flowers to bloom. All beings, including human beings, must follow their nature and make the appropriate contribution to life in order to support the entirety of creation.

Dharma also relates to universal values, such as non-injury to self and others, truthfulness and living in accordance with one's own nature. Without *dharma*, life would be a state of chaos in which no meaningful action could be taken or progress of any kind made.

On a situational level, every situation has the appropriate *dharma*, or right action. You are expected to show up at the doctor's office in time for an appointment. At the movie theatre you are expected to remain in your seat and keep quiet while the movie is playing. Violating such *dharma* leads to repercussions, such as missing your appointment and remaining sick or being thrown out of the theatre and missing the end of the movie.

Much of the Vedic literature deals with living in alignment with *dharma*, which must override one's own personal likes and dislikes. Transgressing *dharma* always leads to problems and undesirable consequences.

In order to live a happy life, one must balance universal and situational *dharma* (following the rules that support life and society) with one's own personal *dharma* (*svadharma*). It is for this reason that the Vedic system teaches the *varnashrama* classification of society, in which all people play their part according to their nature as determined by the *gunas*. This also led to the outlining of a four-stage life-path model for all human beings, known as the four *ashramas*.

The Four Stages of Life

THE SCRIPTURES TALK of four stages of life that everyone must go through, either externally or at least internally. These stages are the student stage (*brahmachari*), the householder stage (*grhastha*), the retirement and ascetic stage (*vanaprastha*) and the renunciant stage (*sannyasa*). These stages reflect the natural progression of one's life as a human being.

Life begins with learning, and the student phase continues for many years through childhood and adolescence. Even after school, the individual may embark upon professional and vocational training, as well as spiritual learning, such as study of the scriptures. The next stage of life is the householder stage. Reaching maturity, the individual now maintains their job, pursuing worldly goals as well as getting married and starting a family.

Gradually over time, as the person's career winds down and the kids leave home, the retirement stage of life begins. This is a stage of withdrawal from worldly life, in which the individual places less emphasis on security, wealth and pleasure, and begins to contemplate the fourth and final human goal: liberation from worldly attachments (*moksa*). In the final stage of life, the person has fully dedicated his or herself to inner freedom, leaving behind society and social obligations to become a renunciant.

Following this life-stage model, which is based upon a *dharmaic* understanding of life, the individual can enjoy not only worldly success,

but will also contribute to society by producing offspring, and eventually attain *moksa* by turning their attention from worldly to spiritual pursuits. According to the scriptures, all human accomplishments should culminate in *moksa*. Without *moksa*, the human life is incomplete. That is why the scriptures keep the material accomplishments as incidental goals, and the spiritual accomplishment as the ultimate and primary goal of life.

With regard to *moksa* and the four stages, there is the option for an individual to skip the householder and retirement stages altogether and jump straight into the renunciation stage. These renunciants (*sannyasis*) have little desire for worldly goods and a strong desire for spiritual truth and liberation.

The question arises, however, as to how *moksa* is to be attained. For this, Vedanta outlines a threefold discipline (*sadhana*) that will ultimately lead the person to liberation: *karma yoga*, *upasana yoga* and *jnana yoga*. All three are important and necessary for all people. Just as you cannot skip any step when climbing a staircase, we cannot skip any step if we want to comfortably reach our goal. Therefore it is necessary to know, understand and practise all three *yogas* to attain *moksa*.

4. Karma Yoga

“**KARMA**” IS A Sanskrit word that simply means “action.” In the context of *karma yoga*, *karma* means “proper action,” and *yoga* means “proper attitude.” Thus doing proper action with the proper attitude is the essence of *karma yoga*. In understanding *karma yoga*, it is helpful to first consider the nature of action and then elaborate upon the attitude with which that action is taken.

Action can be broadly divided into three categories: good actions (*sattvika karma*), middling actions (*rajasa karma*) and bad actions (*tamasa karma*). This division is based upon their alignment with the three *gunas* and the effects and influence that these actions have upon the individual.

Good Actions

THE FIRST CATEGORY of action is known as *sattvika karma*. These actions are not intended to generate material wealth, fame, fortune and status, but contribute to the inner growth of the individual. Their benefits are subtle, enabling us to cultivate the peaceful, *sattvic* mind that is necessary for discrimination in the later stages of Vedanta.

The Five Sacred Actions

WITH REFERENCE TO *sattvika karma*, the scriptures recommend five sacred actions. These are:

1. **Worship of the Divine (*devayajna*):** The Lord can be worshipped in any form. This worship may take the form of prayer, reciting the Lord’s name (*japa*), studying the teachings of scripture, visiting temples and sacred places, providing offerings or giving our time and energy to a noble cause.

2. **Worship of our parents (*pityajna*):** At the heart of each of these actions is a sense of gratitude. We express gratitude for what has been given to us as we in turn contribute to the creation. This second sacred action means respecting and caring for our parents and elders. Unconditional regard and respect for our parents is necessary, as demonstrated

in the *Ramayana* epic, where Rama offers daily prostrations to his father, even though his father is responsible for his exile.

3. **Worship of the scriptures (*brahmayaajna*):** This means regular study of the teachings and reflection upon their meaning.

4. **Service to humanity (*manusyayaajna*):** All types of social service come into this category, such as helping at care homes and shelters, donating to food banks, helping the elderly and sick, and so on.

5. **Service to all other living beings (*bhutayaajna*):** This action involves service to non-human beings, such as animals, plants, forests and the natural world in general. It means respecting all life and not permitting cruelty to and suffering of animals for the sake of our own appetites and whims. Nature is delicately balanced and should be revered and protected.

All these actions contribute to a pure and *sattvic* mind, qualifying the seeker for *moksa*. How big or small these actions should be will depend upon the time and resources of the individual.

Middling Actions

WHEREAS *SATTVIKA KARMA* has nothing to do with our own personal likes and dislikes, *rajasa karma* is entirely based upon our own desires. The scriptures do permit desire-prompted actions and indeed provide many rituals for the fulfilment of those desires. Desire-based actions contribute to our material well-being, but their contribution to our spiritual growth is minimal.

Bad Actions

THE FINAL CATEGORY of action, *tamasa karma*, relates to actions that actively hinder our pursuit of *moksa*. These are actions that are in violation of *dharma*, such as committing violence, lying, cheating, stealing and so on. Such actions inevitably have negative consequences for the individual perpetrating them, as well as for others and society in general.

Increasing *sattvika karma*, reducing *rajasa karma* and avoiding *tamasa karma* should be the aim of all seekers of liberation.

The Karma Yoga Attitude

THE ESSENCE OF *karma yoga* is cultivating the proper attitude with

regard to our actions and their results. It is a mental state of equanimity and balance. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna outlines this approach to life in great detail.

Action is unavoidable in life. Every single day we undertake countless actions in the pursuit of various goals. But rather than getting emotionally invested in these actions and anxious about the results, *karma yoga* enables us to see that the results of our actions are determined by factors outside of our control.

Devotion and Acceptance

DEVOTION IS PERHAPS the most important aspect of *karma yoga*. Every single action we do should be done with a spirit of devotion. We offer our actions as a gift to the Lord, grateful for all that we have been given and happy to contribute back to life.

We no longer do what we do for ourselves, but as a blessing to the force that created, nourishes and sustains us. Rather than living in a grasping, extractive manner, we live with an expansive, contributory mindset. Our focus is no longer what we can get out of life, but what we can give back to life. Living in such a way, with humility and devotion, automatically calms and purifies the mind.

The second step of *karma yoga* is to recognise that the results of our actions are outside of our control. As Krishna states in the *Gita*, we have the right to act, but no right to the results of those actions. The results are determined not by us, but by the Lord, in the form of the *dharma* field.

Recognising this, we relax and endeavour to accept the result, whether good or bad, as a divine gift (*prasad*). Rather than judging and resisting what comes our way, we recognise that even if the results are not as we might have intended or wanted, there are greater forces at work and in all things there are hidden blessings.

The Benefit of *Karma Yoga*

KARMA YOGA IS the primary discipline of all seekers of *moksa*. It should form the basis of one's approach to life and living. By performing the right actions with the right attitude (one of devotion and acceptance), our mind becomes pure, balanced and refined. We are no longer help-

lessly pushed and pulled by our desires and fears, and instead perform the right actions with a noble mindset.

Karma yoga also neutralizes the anxiety we feel about the results of our actions and dispels the depression, despair and resistance we may otherwise encounter when presented with less-than-favoured results. Accordingly, we experience less stress and far greater peace of mind. In many ways *karma yoga*, based on a simple understanding of how life actually works, is the antidote to the stresses and strains of life.

By practising *karma yoga*, our priorities naturally change. Our desire for liberation will increase and, with an increasingly clear, even mind, we will also be better qualified to attain it. The desire for something is not enough; one must also be qualified to achieve it. As the foundation of the seeker's spiritual practice (*sadhana*), *karma yoga* is a necessary prerequisite for preparing the mind for *moksa*.

5. Upasana Yoga

THE NEXT BRANCH of the *sadhana* is called *upasana yoga*. *Upasana yoga* is the art of disciplining, refining and integrating the personality.

To discipline the personality is akin to constructing a dam across a river. The dam is built to conserve water that would otherwise flow back into the ocean. Once conserved, this water can be utilized for constructive purposes, such as irrigation and the production of electricity.

This is also true of the human personality. We all possess a certain amount of power (*shakti*), and with this we are capable of achieving any number of things. However, there are many ways in which this power is squandered and lost. It is not until we learn to cultivate this power that we can use it for constructive purposes. Discipline is therefore necessary for conserving and channelling this energy.

These powers might be classified as the power to desire (*ichha shakti*), the power to know (*jnana shakti*) and the power to act (*kriya shakti*). Contrary to the widespread spiritual notion that desire is bad, the power to desire is actually highly necessary. It is only through desire that we can seek the highest goal in life. A dog cannot desire *moksa*, but a human being can. We then need a way of actualising that desire, and for that we have the power to know and reason, and the power to act. It is through discipline of the mind that these three powers can be properly utilized.

Discipline is the principle of both quality and quantity control. This applies to every action that we undertake. The scriptures speak of four levels of discipline: discipline of the body, discipline of speech, discipline of the sense organs and discipline of the mind.

Physical Discipline

IT IS IMPORTANT to pay attention to the physical body because a healthy body is a basic requirement for any achievement, including *moksa*. Without our health, we cannot accomplish anything. Even if we do happen to achieve something, without our health we will be unable to enjoy the fruits of our labour.

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna states that for the sake of health one must observe discipline in eating, both in terms of quality and quantity. Eating too much is as dangerous as fasting too much. Similarly, too much activity is as bad as an excess of inactivity. Activity and inactivity should be balanced. All these things require balance so that the physical body is fit for the pursuit of *moksa*. *Yoga*, physical exercise and a good diet are some of the methods recommended for keeping the body fit.

Verbal Discipline

THE PRINCIPLE OF quality and quantity control also applies to one's speech. The teachings give a lot of importance to verbal discipline. It is recommended that we avoid argument, as this saves us a lot of time, energy and stress. We should also avoid gossiping and talking about others. Finally, we are advised to avoid worthless chatter, talk that is neither useful to the speaker or the listener.

Talking too much about the past or future is generally a waste of time, unless it can be used with reference to the present. Many people lose a lot of their energy dwelling on the past and future, robbing them of the ability to enjoy their life in the present moment. By avoiding arguments, gossip and worthless talk, we find that the quantity of our speech decreases significantly, freeing up a lot of energy for other things. In terms of quality control, our speech should be non-hurtful, polite, useful and truthful.

Sensory Discipline

THE SENSE ORGANS are like open doors, gateways through which the world enters our mind in the form of sound, touch, colour, taste and smell. These sense organs automatically operate whenever we are in the external world. Whether we like it or not, their input streams into our mind. When the world takes shape in the mind via the senses, it then has the capacity to disturb and pollute our mind. That's why discipline is necessary to prevent the world from agitating the mind.

Staying away from unhealthy atmospheres is a primary sensory discipline, as is avoiding the tendency to overdo even so-called healthy things. Avoidance of excess and unhealthy exposure is necessary because the sense organs are open gates that must be guarded. Swami Chinma-

yananda advised us to “Put up a board: ‘No admission without permission.’ Don’t make your mind a public toilet to get dirty.” This sense discipline is achieved through a life of alert discrimination.

Mental Discipline

DISCIPLINE OF THE mind is the most important aspect. There are four aspects of the mind that should be taken care of.

1. **Relaxation:** These days stress has reached pandemic proportions in our society. The mind should be protected against this, for a relaxed mind is capable of accomplishing anything in life, from material to spiritual goals. The ability to cultivate a tranquil, relaxed mind is essential.

2. **Concentration:** We need the ability to focus the mind. In our fast-paced culture, attention deficit is almost becoming the norm. The ability to focus the mind on a particular topic for a given length of time is essential for Vedanta to work.

3. **Expansion:** The mind should be able to expand to accommodate all aspects of the creation. This means that one needs an open, expansive and inquiring mind, and not be prisoner to narrow, limited mindsets.

4. **Refinement:** A refined mind occurs with the cultivation of ethical values.

These critical faculties can be developed by the practise of meditation (*upasanam*). Based on each of these four faculties, meditation can be classified into four varieties.

Relaxation Meditation

ONE OF THE primary reasons that many people practise meditation is for its well-documented relaxation effects. With this type of meditation, the aim is to cultivate a deep sense of physical and mental relaxation. There are different methods for achieving this, such as following the inflow and outflow of one’s breath or visualizing beautiful surroundings, such as gardens, mountains, the sky or the ocean. Nature is always relaxed and free from tension, which is why its visualization is an effective method of relaxation.

Concentration Meditation

WITH CONCENTRATION MEDITATION, the mind is focused on a particular task, such as reciting or visualizing the names and forms of the Lord, offering certain prayers or reflecting on verses of scripture. The use of *mantra* is an excellent form of concentration meditation, and has been used for thousands of years. The chanting is usually done mentally as the mind repeats a single *mantra*, such as *Om Namah Shivaya* or *Om Namo Narayanaya*. The act of concentration focuses the mind and generates a peaceful yet alert and one-pointed state of mind.

Expansion Meditation

THIS FORM OF meditation is about changing our perspective. When we stand in front of a tree, the tree looks very big due to its height, but when viewed from a mountaintop it looks very small. The tree hasn't changed at all of course; it simply appears different because our perspective has changed.

Similarly, when we are rooted in our ego, our problems often seem immense and all-consuming. After practising expansion meditation, our problems seem a lot less important and significant. A relationship break-up or the loss of a job might seem like the end of the world, but when viewed from a wider perspective, it is actually just part of the flow of life. Things come and go, and when one thing doesn't work out something else comes along. By looking at things from an expanded, universal perspective, we can accept events, circumstances and other people as they are and learn to relax into the flow of life.

This expansion of the mind, in which we learn to see from the perspective of the totality, is beautifully described in the eleventh chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, in which Krishna appears to Arjuna, not as a person, but as the entire universe. This is what is meant by universal vision.

Value Meditation

IN VALUE MEDITATION, we contemplate positive virtues, recognizing their importance to our spiritual development. These values include truth, compassion, kindness and patience. We also take negative qualities, such as impatience, hurting others, jealousy and hatred, and reflect

upon how damaging they are. Such qualities create a form of mental sickness that hinders our growth.

Having determined the effects of these qualities and values, we then consciously adopt and affirm the positive ones. Even if we do not currently possess them in abundance, we keep mentally affirming that we embody patience, love, compassion and so on. Even the mere act of mechanical repetition and focus will bring about a gradual change. It is said that when an ant moves a rock, even though the rock is hard and the ant is light, the ant will slowly and gradually erode the rock. Similarly, by constantly focusing on and affirming positive values, they will begin to replace the negative traits. Such change, the result of sustained value meditation, is called refinement of the mind.

These forms of meditation help create a disciplined mind that is ready for the next stage of the *sadhana*. The *Katha Upanishad* gives a beautiful analogy in which life is compared to a journey. The physical body is the chariot in which the journey is undertaken. The sense organs are the horses, the mind is akin to the reins, and the intellect is the driver. If the vehicle or any other of these factors is not in good condition, there is a high risk of an accident. Therefore it is necessary to have a healthy vehicle, a disciplined mind and an intelligent driver in order to successfully reach the destination of *moksa*.

6. Jnana Yoga

WHILE THE PREVIOUS steps have been preparatory in nature, the *yoga* of knowledge, *jnana yoga*, is the essence of Vedanta. As a person becomes more refined and disciplined in mind and temperament, he or she begins to question the nature of existence and the purpose of life.

With a growing introspection, the individual begins questioning the things they have been chasing thus far in life. Eventually they come to see that these pursuits are ultimately meaningless. Wealth, security, pleasure and virtue were not really what they were ultimately looking for, and anything sought externally brings with it an inherent dependence.

The enquirer begins to question whether they should really be seeking things that cause dependence or whether the ultimate goal of life should be independence.

The instinctive urge of every living being is freedom. A bird can never be happy in a cage, for all beings are driven by the desire to be free. Even a child holding her mother's hand will decide to become free the moment she realises she is strong enough to be on her own.

This desire to be independent is inherent in every human being. A person may cling to objects, not because he loves those things, but because he believes he cannot be happy without them. This is a notion that is drilled into us from a young age by our materialistic, capitalist society. But the moment the person realises he can be just as happy without such things, he will give them up. This is because dependence on anything external binds us and limits our freedom – and freedom is our number-one driving goal.

As the seeker practises *karma yoga* and refines the mind and personality, he or she develops clear vision and realises that dependence on external factors is in fact bondage. What all people really seek, whether they know it or not, is freedom, or *moksa*.

Until now, by practising *karma yoga* and *upasana yoga*, the seeker has been preparing their mind for *moksa* and become clear about their priorities. Now comes the question of how to actually attain *moksa*.

Moksa is not about “becoming” something other than we are. The problem is simply one of ignorance – ignorance of our true nature. This ignorance, according to Vedanta, does not die a natural death. As one progresses with one’s *sadhana*, grace is earned and help arrives from the outside. When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

Seek Within

A MIND, ONCE purified by the practise of *karma yoga* and *upasana yoga*, is ready to hear the truth. The first thing Vedanta teaches is that true security and happiness can never be attained outside of oneself. Any mature, honest person will already have found this to be true in their experience. There is no lasting happiness and satisfaction in the things of the world, because the moment something is gained it will inevitably be lost.

Once we have accepted this fact, Vedanta tells us that the security and happiness can never be found in the world, because they are the essence of our very nature. What is within us we can never find outside. If I forget I have a key in my pocket, it doesn’t matter how far and wide I search, I will never be able to find it anywhere. My failure to find it is not due to any lack of effort on my part, but simply because the entire search was misplaced.

If what Vedanta says is true, that security and happiness are my essential nature, I understand that I need not depend on anything else for that security and happiness. My very nature is freedom and independence. Since independence is my nature, dependence is uncomfortable to me. If it was the other way around and dependence was my nature, I would feel comfortable being dependent, but I clearly do not.

Whatever is unnatural to us makes us feel uncomfortable or sick. We can see this clearly with the physical body. The moment the body has to deal with something that isn’t natural to our system, such as a virus, for instance, we experience pain and discomfort as the body struggles to eject that foreign body. Therefore the struggle to rid ourselves of an unnatural situation is natural. As dependence is unnatural to us, we naturally strive for independence. The scriptures point out that our nature is freedom. Due to ignorance, we have disowned our own nature and taken ourselves for granted.

Human beings have studied and catalogued just about everything in the perceivable universe. We have studied plants, animals, atoms, rivers, mountains, stars and galaxies. We live in an age of information and knowledge, all readily accessible through Google. But how many have enquired into the most basic of questions: Who am I?

Without knowledge of who we truly are, we have concluded that we are miserable conglomerations of body and mind, limited and entirely dependent on the external world for our happiness. This is not knowledge; it is simply unquestioned assumptions we have made about ourselves by taking appearance to be reality.

Vedanta tells us that to achieve *moksa* what we require is knowledge (*jnanam*). This isn't knowledge of objects, or "things," but is the ultimate knowledge: knowledge of our own true nature. The student, who was until now a seeker of freedom (*mumuksu*), now becomes a seeker of knowledge (*jinasu*), an enquirer into the nature of self and existence. The seeker now knows that the problem is ignorance of one's true nature, and such ignorance can only be dispelled by knowledge.

Means of Knowledge

IN ORDER TO acquire any kind of knowledge, we require a proper instrument, or means of knowledge. To see colours, shape and form we have the instrument of the eyes; to hear sounds we make use of the instrument of the ears; to know taste we use the instrument called the tongue. Without an instrument, we cannot gain knowledge. This means of knowledge is called a *pramanam*.

There are many *pramanams*, of which we can divide into two categories. A primary *pramanam* is direct perception, and a secondary *pramanam* is an analysis of direct perception. It is from this analysis that we can derive information. For instance, a doctor arrives at his diagnosis through analysis, the secondary *pramanam*.

The instruments spoken of above are meant for knowing the objective world; none are adequate for knowing oneself. This is because the sense organs are extroverted in nature, hooked up to various objects, and therefore cannot help us in knowing the subject, which is our self.

According to the scripture, there can only be one means by which we can know the self, and that is the scriptural teachings themselves.

Vedanta serves as a mirror to reveal our true nature. The eyes cannot see themselves, so in order to see our eyes we must look into a mirror. Similarly, the teaching of Vedanta serves as the mirror enabling us to see our true nature.

The Necessity of a Teacher

IF SOMEONE WERE to jump headlong into the study of Vedanta, there would inevitably be problems or at the very least some confusion. Without proper understanding, the scriptures can appear to be riddled with contradiction. In one place it might say that our true nature cannot be known by the mind, and elsewhere it claims that the mind alone knows. In order to make sense of this, one must have the key to opening the scriptures – and that key is a teacher, or *guru*, one who dispels the darkness of ignorance.

Attempting to understand Vedanta without the aid of a teacher will not work. This is not only because of the subtle and seemingly contradictory, counter-intuitive nature of the teaching, but because the teaching will be filtered through a screen of the student's existing ignorance and biases.

In order to avoid wasting precious time, one should seek a qualified teacher of Vedanta and humbly ask that teacher for help. The only method of gaining self-knowledge is study and assimilation of the teaching of Vedanta with the aid of a teacher. That is the essence of *jnana yoga*.

Some people object, believing that studying these ancient scriptures with or without the aid of a teacher can only bring about a second-hand, drily intellectual knowledge. They cannot see how such knowledge can lead to the discovery of the self. The answer is that it can, for a skilled teacher gives first-hand knowledge. If this knowledge is properly received, assuming both teacher and student are suitably qualified, then the very act of communication will lead to instantaneous self-discovery.

Direct and Indirect Knowledge

SUPPOSE I WANT to know about the Himalayas. As I am unable to travel there, I might instead read a book about them. By reading this book I will gain knowledge of the Himalayas, but it is clearly not first-hand

knowledge, because I have never been there. Any mere description of a remote thing will give only second-hand, indirect knowledge.

If the self were also something remote, then the study of the scriptures would yield only indirect knowledge. In that case, the self could be spoken about, and we would have to find some way to connect with and experience it. Fortunately, the self is not some distant object like the Himalayas. Rather it is our own intrinsic nature. Therefore when words are used to describe something that is intimately and immediately available, then the knowledge can be considered direct knowledge.

Let's say you are due for an appointment with someone. You might be sitting waiting for this person, and they enter the room. They see you, but have no idea that you are the person they are waiting for. They have indirect knowledge: they know that you will be meeting you. However, it is not until you introduce yourself that they realise you are the person they were expecting. By telling them your name, you suddenly convert their indirect knowledge to direct knowledge. Of course they were experiencing you the whole time – for you were there all along – but it is not until direct knowledge is given that they realise it is you.

So it is clear that words can give direct knowledge when the object of knowledge is already present. When Vedanta speaks of the self, it does not mean some external factor that must be sought and found. The self is ever-present as our own innate nature and essence. It cannot be “found” and it can never be lost. The only thing that can be “lost” is the ignorance we have about our identity: the ignorance that causes us to suffer, misidentify with what we are not and erroneously seek fulfilment in the world of objects.

Direct knowledge of the self can be gained through *jnana yoga*, which involves three stages: listening (*sravanam*), reflection (*mananam*) and integration (*nididhyasana*).

Listening

THE FIRST STAGE involves listening to the teachings of Vedanta with the help of a qualified teacher. This listening, *sravanam*, is not a passive hearing, but involves the full participation of the student as he or she listens to the teaching. The teaching is presented in a precise and systematic

manner, and the student must understand each part of the teaching before moving on to the next.

This can be challenging, for it is common for many doubts to arise in the initial stages. In spite of this, it is advisable not to ask questions at this stage. As the teaching is unfolded, all questions tend to be answered. The student requires a certain amount of faith in the teachings and the teacher. One must be open to receiving the vision of Vedanta as it is revealed bit by bit. A painter cannot paint the whole picture in a single stroke. The painting can only be completed gradually, and until it is complete, one should not disturb the artist. Similarly, with Vedanta one should sit back and listen clearly as the teaching is unfolded.

Reflection

FOLLOWING THE *SRAVANA* stage, the student may have some lingering questions. It is during the second stage, reflection (*mananam*), that the student can share these doubts and allow the teacher to resolve them. It is not enough to simply hear the truth, but one must take time to reflect upon it and consider things from all angles.

The student is advised to spend considerable time exposing their mind to the teachings and ruminating upon them. Even subtle doubts can affect the outcome, so eventually all doubts and misunderstanding must be resolved. It is only then that the words of the teaching become a living, breathing reality for the enquirer.

Integration

ONCE THE TEACHING has been understood and doubts resolved, the final stage is called *nididhyasana*, and this continues indefinitely. It is here that we learn to integrate the knowledge we have been given. This can take considerable time. From a young age we were taught to identify with our bodies and minds (both of which are objects appearing in our awareness) rather than the awareness that perceives and experiences all. This misidentification is the root of our bondage to external objects as a means to satisfy and fulfil us.

Vedanta tells us that we are already whole and complete, that happiness and limitlessness are the essence of our nature. Nothing in the external world is capable of giving to us what we already innately pos-

sess. With its time-tested logic, Vedanta proves to us that we are already whole and lack nothing. At this stage we have no remaining doubts; we now know the truth. However, it takes time to shift our entire world view. We have identified ourselves as limited individuals (*jivas*) for so long and spent a lifetime looking to external objects to fulfil us. This ignorance is deeply rooted and will not disappear overnight.

The momentum of our past mindset will continue to exert an influence. A smoker may see the necessity of quitting smoking, but the sheer force of this addiction means it will take time to truly be free of the addiction. There may be withdrawal symptoms and a continued compulsion to keep smoking. He or she must learn to retrain the mind. It is no use simply having the knowledge that smoking is bad; that knowledge must be actualised and integrated. Only then can he or she be free.

In a similar way, *nididhyasanam* is the stage in which we learn to actualise the knowledge we have gained. We know that we are the self and that, as pure awareness, there is nothing in this world that can add to or subtract from what we are. Our dependency on external objects must be dropped bit by bit. This is achieved by consistent self-enquiry: observing the thoughts, patterns and compulsions that continue to arise in the mind due to past momentum, and measuring these against our new-found self-knowledge.

The knowledge then gradually permeates the mind, lessens entrenched likes and dislikes, binding desires and fears, and the individual becomes a *jivanmukta*, a liberated person. As pure awareness, the self is always free, but it is not until the knowledge is integrated and assimilated that the individual becomes free. This is *moksa*.

7. Bhakti

DEVOTION, OR *BHAKTI*, is an important topic in Sanatana Dharma. *Bhakti* is commonly defined as love of and devotion to a higher principle, especially love of God.

Three Directions of Love

ACCORDING TO THE scriptures, all forms of love are directed to three things. The first is the love of a goal. We love whatever it is we want to achieve, accomplish or acquire in life. This might be thought of as “ends-love” because we love the end result of whatever it is we are pursuing. If we didn’t love it, we wouldn’t put the time and energy into acquiring it.

We then need various means to achieve our goals, and these we love also because they enable us to accomplish the end result. So the second direction of our love is “means-love.” The third object of love is one’s own self. Everyone loves himself or herself. This is “self-love.” Even suicidal people who think they hate themselves actually love themselves. They love themselves because they do not enjoy their suffering and want it to end. It is because of self-love that they dislike their misery. So, according to the scriptures, all forms of love can be categorized as “ends-love,” “means-love” or “self-love.”

Degrees of Love

THESE FORMS OF love are not equal in their intensity. We love the means the least because we do not love it for its own sake. Once we accomplish the end result, the means is often forgotten altogether. Most of the time our love for other people is because they are a means to some end, whether that end is companionship, security, validation or money.

The strongest love is always the love of oneself. We love the various ends we pursue because we hope they will bring us comfort, security and happiness. The moment it becomes evident that a particular object does not bring us joy, the goalposts are changed and some other object is sought. That is why relationships and marriages so readily break down. What maybe started as the most passionate romance will be swept aside

when it becomes clear that our significant other is failing to make us as happy as we expected.

In the *Upanishads* it is said: “Nobody loves one’s spouse for the spouse’s sake. Everyone loves the spouse for one’s own sake.” We love our loved ones, not for them, but because it pleases us to love them.

Devotion

IN TERMS OF *bhakti*, the intensity of love one feels for God will depend upon how one views God because people see the Divine in different ways.

For a lot of people, love of God is conditional. They look upon God only as a means of achieving worldly ends. They might pray, chant and visit temples in the hopes of getting a promotion at work, a new girlfriend or a new sports car. When that fails to happen, they throw away their prayer books and become angry that their wishes failed to materialise.

The second form of devotion is a more mature one. These devotees are the seekers who look upon God as the ultimate goal of life, the attainment of which will bring peace, security and lasting joy. Naturally, their love towards God is more intense and consistent than people who only look upon God as a means of getting “stuff.”

There is another category of devotion to God. This can be found among the rare few who see God as neither the means nor the end in life. Instead they view the Divine and the self as being identical. For such people, loving God equates to self-love. Because the self is loved above all else, love of God is the greatest to those with a non-dual understanding of existence.

Bhakti Yoga

BHAKTI YOGA IS NOT a separate *yoga* as such, but might be seen as the combination of the threefold discipline of *karma yoga*, *upasana yoga* and *jnana yoga*. This is because *bhakti* is the common attitude and approach with which all three are undertaken. All three are based on an attitude of devotion.

Karma yoga involves dedicating all actions to the Lord and accepting the results of those actions with grace and equanimity. *Upasana yoga* is

about meditating upon the Lord for mental discipline and integration, which, again, necessitates a degree of devotion in attitude. *Jnana yoga* is perhaps the highest form of *bhakti* because we study the teachings of Vedanta and come to realise our non-separation from God. Hence the path to self-discovery is actually the path to God-discovery.

The Object of Devotion

ONE CANNOT TALK of loving God without having a clear idea of what God is. The teachings provide three definitions of God, each based on the maturity and intellectual capacity of the seeker.

The First Definition of God

GOD IS THE creator of the universe, referred to in Sanskrit as *Ishvara*. Any well-designed creation must, by virtue of its existence, have an intelligent creative aspect behind it. Something cannot come out of nothing. The universe in which we live is purposeful, intricate and impeccably designed.

Once we have identified *Ishvara* as the creator of the universe, we may first imagine Him in a very anthropomorphic manner. We ascribe human traits to this universal Creator because the only intelligent being known to us is the human being. This conception of a personal deity, omniscient and omnipresent, cannot be seen, so we place Him above the clouds. This personal Creator is personified in many forms, such as Shiva, Krishna, Vishnu and so on.

The Second Definition of God

WHEN ONE IS capable of progressing one's understanding, the scriptures present a higher understanding of *Ishvara*. First of all, we are told that *Ishvara* is the creative intelligence out of which the universe was born, and now we are asked to consider the raw material out of which the universe is shaped.

Any creator can only create something with a raw material. A carpenter requires wood as raw material, while a builder requires iron, wood, bricks and mortar. So if I understand God to be the builder of the universe, out of what material did He build? Before the creation of the universe, nothing else existed. Scientists say that prior to the Big Bang,

we cannot even conceive of time, space and matter. Prior to the creation of time and space, when *Isvara* alone existed, what was the raw material out of which the creation was made?

According to Vedanta, God itself is the material out of which the creation is shaped. The example is given of a spider creating its web out of material from its own body. The spider does not take material from elsewhere; it creates out of itself. Similarly, God is both the intelligence that shapes the creation and the substance out of which it is fashioned.

Since the whole universe is created out of God, this means that the whole universe is God alone, that God is in every form and aspect of creation. There can be no division, just as no part of the ocean can be separated from its essence, water. At this higher level of understanding, *Isvara* is no longer a personal God, but a universal God. There is no place I need go to seek God, because It is already everywhere, in everything.

The Third Definition of God

MANY PEOPLE STRUGGLE to reconcile the notion that God is everything. We can see divinity in the beautiful things in life: in nature, forests, waterfalls, in the rising sun and the twinkling stars at night. But what of the ugly things in life, such as diseases, criminals and violence? Are these also God? If the teacher says yes, then how can the student accept evil as being God? When this question arises, the third and highest definition must be taught.

God appears *as* the world, but does not *become* the world. *Isvara* is not affected by any form in which It appears. To put it another way, God is the substratum of all forms, but transcends the entire creation. In the same way, the spider's web comes from the spider and is the spider, but the spider does not become the web and is unaffected by whatever might happen to the web. Since *Isvara* transcends all the forms of creation, no particular form belongs to *Isvara*.

To summarise the three stages of understanding the nature of God, in the first stage God creates the world, in the second stage God is the world, and in the third and highest understanding we see that God appears as the world in its many forms, but does not become them. We need to understand these definitions gradually and systematically until we can see the full vision.

The way in which I define God will determine my *bhakti*. In the first level of understanding, my devotion will be to a personified deity: a personal God. In the second level of understanding, I will worship the Lord in everything, including nature. In the final stage of understanding, I see God as the formless essence of all, both manifest and unmanifest.

The final stage does not negate the previous two; it simply completes the full picture. When we appreciate *Isvara* as both form and formless, we can happily worship the Lord as a personified deity, as the totality of nature and as the formless essence of all things. Just as quantum physics does not displace Newtonian physics, both understandings are valid at their respective levels.

8. Qualifications for Liberation

THE TEXT *Tattva Bodha* is an excellent preliminary Vedantic text, as it introduces and explains a number of important Vedantic concepts and terminology. Just as the sciences of medicine, biology and economics have their own technical terms, so too does Vedanta.

Tattva Bodha first talks about the qualifications required for a student of Vedanta. In the modern spiritual world there is a notion that anyone can get enlightened at any time. Although it seems horribly undemocratic to state otherwise, this is clearly not the case. For the countless numbers of spiritual seekers out there, only a few will ever become “finders.” This is not because some people are favoured more by *Isvara* than others. It is simply because they have an adequately prepared mind, adhering to what Shankara called the fourfold qualification (*sadhana catustayam*).

These qualifications are the four “D”s:

1. discrimination (*viveka*)
2. dispassion (*vairagya*)
3. discipline, specifically the sixfold discipline (*saktasampatti*)
4. desire for freedom (*mumukshutva*).

The student who has all these qualities in abundance is called an *adhikari*, and is qualified to hear and assimilate the teachings of Vedanta.

Discrimination

DISCRIMINATION, OR *VIVEKA*, enables us to see the limitation of pursuing worldly goals as a means of fulfilment and the necessity of instead pursuing *moksa*. With discrimination we can differentiate between passing worldly pleasures and lasting spiritual liberation, between illusion and truth, between ignorance and knowledge. *Viveka* keeps us on the right path, enabling us to see with clarity and to be clear about our true goal.

This *viveka* can only be developed by intelligently analysing our life experience. We should examine every experience and determine whether our problems are caused by the external world or by our dependence

upon it for our happiness. External factors can only cause problems if we are dependent upon them. Therefore the problem is actually always with us.

This realisation does not dawn immediately for most people. Perpetually rearranging the circumstances of our lives to make us happy is a stopgap measure at best. True liberation can only be achieved by realising that happiness comes from within and not from without. When this discrimination is clear, our goal also becomes clear. We cease our relentless pursuit of external objects, and instead commit to the pursuit of *moksa*.

Dispassion

ONCE DISCRIMINATION IS in place, this leads to a natural dispassion towards worldly objects (*vairagya*). Realising that our attachment to worldly objects is only a form of bondage, we no longer make that the top priority in our life. Certain things are still needed for our survival and health, such as money, food and shelter. But our main pursuit is now liberation from dependence upon objects, and that is achieved only by the self-knowledge that leads to *moksa*.

With proper dispassion, our attachment to external objects lessens. Just as it is said that money is a good servant but a terrible master, so too worldly pursuits have a necessary place but should not be given undue importance and priority. Dispassion is aided by adopting the *karma yoga* attitude in all things: doing our best and accepting whatever results come without resistance and undue grief.

Desire for freedom

DESIRE FOR FREEDOM (*mumukshutva*) is also a consequence of developing discrimination. Upon realising that liberation offers a more lasting satisfaction than the pursuit of worldly gains, we make *moksa* our primary goal. Our values become realigned and our objective made clear.

If a young child holding a \$5 note is offered a \$100 note in exchange, the child will probably want to keep the \$5 note because she does not know the difference in value between the two notes. Only upon growing up and developing discrimination will the child learn that the \$100 note

is of far greater value than the \$5 note, and then she will be only too happy to exchange it.

Similarly, with *viveka* we come to see that *moksa* has far greater value to us than worldly gains. From this comes *vairagya*, in which our attachment to worldly objects diminishes, and from that arises *mumukshutvam*, in which our commitment to *moksa* grows. This desire is necessary to give us the motivation and commitment to continue to enquire and work with the teaching until the knowledge is finally assimilated, resulting in liberation for the individual. Intelligent living, based on *karma yoga*, naturally leads to *viveka*, *vairagya* and *mumukshutvam*.

The Sixfold Discipline

DISCIPLINE OF THE senses is achieved by the practise of *upasana yoga*. Shankara outlines this sixfold discipline (*jamadisatka sampatti*) as:

1. control of the mind (*sama*)
2. control of the senses (*dama*)
3. the ability to withdraw from sense objects (*uparama*)
4. forbearance (*titiksha*)
5. faith in the teaching and the teacher (*shradda*)
6. concentration (*samadhana*).

Control of the Mind

TO CONTROL THE mind (*sama*) is to regulate and direct our mental energy. This is done to avoid wasting our precious mental and physical energy. It is likened to damming a river and channelling the water so it can be usefully utilized. Without control of the water, there may be floods in some areas and droughts in others. The human mind is much the same. Controlling the mind does not mean suppression, but learning to consciously regulate, channel and direct our thoughts to avoid anxiety, stress and depression. We are not our mind, but the driver of our mind, with the ability to steer it down particular roads as we would a car.

Control of the Senses

IT IS UP TO US to decide what we wish to experience via our senses. Again, this enables us to channel our energy wisely, avoiding wastage and unnecessary stress. Gandhi advised that we watch the “three monkeys” and

see, hear and speak only what is proper in a given situation. Again, this is not a suppressive mindset, but simply the ability to direct our focus by paying attention to where we put our energy. There are hundreds of television channels available these days, so it is wise to have a clear idea of what we want to watch and what we don't want to watch, otherwise we will waste a lot of time and energy. Similarly, it is for this reason that control of the senses (*dama*) is a valuable qualification.

Withdrawal from Sense Objects

THE ABILITY TO withdraw from sense objects (*uparama*) is to avoid being too much of an extrovert. Extroversion is a huge obstacle because extroverts, being constantly busy and distracted, will never find any time for the higher pursuits of life. The extrovert will be so focused on pursuing wealth and pleasure that *moksa* will never occur to him. Therefore an extroverted person may enjoy life, but he cannot grow in life.

True success comes, not from enjoyment, but from growth. A certain degree of withdrawal is needed for this. This doesn't have to be an absolute withdrawal. If the average person abandoned his or her life and ran off to live in a cave in the Himalayas, the solitude would probably drive them insane. Therefore for most of us it is sufficient that withdrawal simply allows us time to pursue *upasana yoga* and *jnana yoga* while living with the *karma yoga* attitude.

This withdrawal is not merely physical, but is also a mental and psychological withdrawal. When we sit to listen to Vedanta, we are expected to be completely focused upon that, completely letting go of all concerns and issues regarding family, work, responsibilities and future plans. We should not sit listening to Vedanta while mentally compiling a shopping list or "to-do" list! That is why Shankara stresses the importance of the ability to withdraw and focus on the teaching.

Forbearance

FORBEARANCE, OR *TITIKSHA*, means the ability to cope with life and its stresses and strains without being unduly affected by them. Rather than being agitated and upset, we learn to endure the veritable "pinpricks" of life. The austerities prescribed by the scriptures, such as fasting and pilgrimages to remote places, are designed to strengthen our resolve and

make us better able to cope with the stresses of life. This increases our dispassion and helps create a meditation-ready mind.

faith

THIS FAITH (*SHRADDHA*) refers to faith in both the teaching and the teacher. This is part of the reason India has such a devotional culture. Faith in something is cultivated by worship. Children are brought up to worship God, the scriptures and the great sages and teachers. Growing up with this reverential attitude builds a degree of faith so that when the child grows up they automatically have trust in the teacher and the teaching.

These days, many grow up without faith in such things. A degree of faith must therefore be cultivated. This faith is necessary to give us the determination to stick with the teaching until it begins to bear fruit. It is not a blind faith, but a faith we must adopt pending the results of our own investigation. In other words, we agree to listen to the teacher and to examine the truth of the scriptures for ourselves. Without that initial faith and willingness to trust, we would not stick with the teaching long enough for it to lead us to our goal.

Concentration

CONCENTRATION (*SAMADHANA*) RELATES to both short-term and long-term focusing. We should be able to spend certain amounts of time focusing on the teaching without distraction. Some people lack the ability to concentrate for any length of time. A child can get fed up with a new toy after only a few minutes, and an adult may be unable to watch the same TV programme without “channel-hopping” every few minutes. Vedanta requires a mind that is capable of concentrating upon a given topic for a reasonable amount of time.

The second component of *samadhana* is long-term focusing. In and through our various pursuits, we should not lose sight of the ultimate goal of *moksa*. This should always be at the back of our mind. On a train journey there may be many stops along the way, but we need to keep our ultimate destination in mind lest we inadvertently get off at the wrong station.

In the same way, we may raise a family, start businesses, earn money, build houses and travel abroad. None of these things is our ultimate goal in life, however.

The only true success in life is to find complete fullness in our self. According to the scriptures, such a person who finds fulfilment in themselves is a true success, and one who has not is to be pitied, for they have wasted this wonderful life. This body has been borrowed from *Isvara* to cross the ocean of *samsara*. Before the boat disintegrates, we must reach the other side of the ocean. This goal, true liberation, should always be foremost in our mind.

These qualifications are acquired by living a life of *karma yoga*, as well as practising meditation and *upasana yoga*. Their attainment prepares the mind for *moksa*, enabling us to fully assimilate and integrate the teachings of Vedanta.

9. The Three Bodies and Three States

WHILE PEOPLE ARE generally aware of having only one body (a physical body), the scriptures speak of three bodies. They tell us we each possess not only a physical body (the gross body, or *sthula sariram*), but also a subtle body (*suksma sariram*) and a causal body (*karana sariram*).

In understanding each of these it is helpful to consider the raw material out of which each is created, the constituent parts of that body, as well as its function and its nature. The following chart details each of these in turn.

Body	Material	Constituent Parts	Function	Nature
Gross body (<i>sthula sariram</i>)	Gross matter	Head, trunk, arms, hands, legs and feet	Abode or the residence of the experienter	Visible and experienceable to self and others
Subtle body (<i>suksma sariram</i>)	Subtle matter, consisting of five subtle elements	Five sense organs of knowledge; five sense organs of action; five components of physiological system; four inner organs	Instrument of interaction with the world	Invisible to others and experienceable to self
Causal body (<i>karana sariram</i>)	Subtle form of matter, called <i>avidya</i>	Physical and subtle in unmanifest form	Resolution of gross and subtle bodies	Unmanifest; invisible to self and others

The Gross Body

THE GROSS BODY, or *sthula sariram*, is the densest of the three, being composed of physical matter consisting of the five elements: space, air, fire, water and earth. Encompassing the entire physical form, the scriptures refer to the gross body as the abode or residence of the experienter. It is a temporary house that will at some point have to be vacated. Sometimes notice will be given, but sometimes, without much warning, the tenant will be evicted.

The gross body provides the experiencer with the operational means of transacting with the world of objects. Being gross, this body is obviously experienceable to both oneself and others. It is also subject to change, such as birth, growth, decay and finally death. Finite, it has a short lifespan, a maximum of a hundred years at best.

The Subtle Body

UNLIKE THE GROSS body, which is composed of gross matter, the subtle body (*suksma sariram*) is made of subtle matter. Being invisible to us, it takes a little more analysis to understand it. This body is made up of numerous parts:

Five sense organs of knowledge (*jnanedriyas*):

- ✦ the ear: the sense organ that perceives sound
- ✦ the skin: the organ that perceives touch
- ✦ the eye: the organ that perceives colour and form
- ✦ the tongue: with which we perceive taste
- ✦ the nose: the organ with which we perceive smell.

These are the five organs that enable us to perceive five types of objects. In addition, we have:

Five sense organs of action (*karmendriyas*):

- ✦ the mouth: the organ of speech
- ✦ the hands: capable of actions such as carrying, lifting, etc.
- ✦ the legs: the organs capable to moving us from one place to another
- ✦ organs of excretion: these organs remove waste from the body
- ✦ organs of reproduction: with which we propagate the species.

In comparing the organs of knowledge and the organs of action, it is clear that the former are designed for receiving experience and information from the world. They function as entry gates, while the organs of action are like exit gates, enabling our contribution to the world.

When I listen to someone, I am using an organ of knowledge (the ear), with which I am receiving information. When I speak to that person, I am using the organ of speech, which is not receiving but giving information in the form of words and ideas. All transactions involve an element of give-and-take, and it is for this reason that we are given one set of organs for giving and another for taking.

The next set of organs is the physiological system (*pancapranas*), which produces energy and supports the sense organs. Just as a car needs fuel to run, so too does the body. Accordingly, we shovel food into our mouth, and this food is converted to nutrition and energy. A system of pipelines carries this energy throughout the body, and the waste products are removed via the exhaust pipe.

The physiological system has five functions:

- ✦ respiration (*prana*): the respiratory system enables us to breathe, taking in oxygen and expelling carbon dioxide, purifying the blood
- ✦ excretory (*apana*): the excretory system does the work of an exhaust pipe
- ✦ digestion (*samana*): this converts food into nutrition and energy
- ✦ circulation (*vyana*): the circulatory system circulates the energy and nutrients provided by food through the body to the various organs and cells
- ✦ expulsion (*udana*): this is a means of protecting the body from unwanted, extraneous things; sneezing and vomiting are examples of this, and they are the body's attempts to expel toxic or foreign elements from the body; the *udana* becomes active at the time of death also.

The last four organs are the inner organs, called the *antahkaranam*. In actuality, they represent four facets of a single organ, what we might think of as mind. These are:

- ✦ the mind (*mana*): in Vedanta, the mind is associated with emotion, desire and doubt; it is our emotional faculty
- ✦ the intellect (*buddhi*): the intellect is associated with analysis, judgment, decision-making and so on; this is our rational faculty
- ✦ the memory (*cittam*): this faculty enables us to store and access all the past information we require to function
- ✦ the ego (*ahamkara*): the ego, or "I-sense," is associated with self-identification; it is through the faculty of ego that "I" claim the body-mind complex as "myself."

Together, the subtle body is comprised of these nineteen subtle organs. The subtle body serves as our means of interacting with the external world. The experiencer can only contact the world through the subtle body, as each organ helps in connecting with a certain aspect of the world. Contact with the world is possible because of this linking medium, which acts like a telephone. The moment the telephone stops functioning, our contact with that part of the world is gone. The sense organ of the eye, for example, enables us to perceive sights, colours and form. For the blind person, this particular sense organ is non-functioning, and one-fifth of the world is non-existent to them.

While the gross body is the abode of the experiencer, the subtle body is the instrument of connecting with the world. The gross body is “gross” because it is composed of gross matter, and the subtle body is “subtle” because it is composed of subtle matter. The gross body is readily visible and experienceable by myself and others. The subtle body is subtler because, although I can experience it, it is invisible and other people cannot experience it. The gross body is fully manifest, but the subtle body is only partially manifest.

A final important difference between the gross and subtle bodies relates to lifespan. The subtle body has a longer life than the gross body. When the gross body dies, the subtle body survives and takes on another gross body. It continues to take on a succession of physical bodies until the resolution of the manifest universe (*pralaya*).

Death and the Subtle Body

DEATH CAN BE defined as dissociation of the subtle body from the gross body. Rebirth is the association of the subtle body with a new gross body.

The subtle body is locked into this cycle of death and rebirth by the momentum of one’s *karma*. This *karma* is the conglomeration of ingrained likes and dislikes and accumulated tendencies (*vasanas*) that compel the subtle body to continue associating with gross bodies in order to work through this *karma*. This will be explained in greater detail in the section on *karma*.

The Causal Body

THE LAST OF the three bodies is called the *karana sariram*, or causal

body. *Tattva Bodha* refers to the causal body as *avidya*, a technical term ordinarily translated as “ignorance.” But *avidya* also refers to causal matter, the subtlest form of matter, out of which the causal body is composed.

Science tells us that matter is indestructible, and yet we often talk of the destruction of some particular thing. What we actually mean is that this object has gone back to its original unmanifest form. This is similar to the “destruction” of a wave on the ocean. When the wave is seemingly lost, the material of the wave has merged back into the ocean. Having returned to the unmanifest state, it will again come back into manifestation as another wave, and so the process goes on.

The scriptures say that during *pralaya*, the total dissolution of the universe, all the gross and subtle bodies are resolved back into the invisible, unmanifest seed form. This unmanifest form is called the causal body.

Once a gold ring has been melted down, it no longer exists in the form of a ring, but as pure gold. Similarly, because matter can be neither created nor destroyed, prior to the creation and after the destruction of the world, the physical and subtle bodies exist in the causal body. The causal body functions as the source of all forms and also the ground of their resolution, much as gold is the origination of all gold ornaments and also their resolution.

Unlike the gross and physical bodies, the causal body is not experienceable to either myself or others. This is because the transacting organs are dormant. Thinking and perception take place in the subtle body alone, but the causal body is that into which the physical and subtle bodies have been resolved. It is a state of blankness, a transactionless state in which body, mind and perception have ceased, making discrete experience impossible. Although the causal body cannot be experienced as an object, it must exist because of the law that matter can be neither created nor destroyed.

The causal body is fully unmanifest. In Sanskrit it is called *nirvikalpa*, which means a state in which all distinctions between subject and object are resolved. When all the different rivers have merged into the ocean, we cannot say which is which. We know that all the rivers are there, but cannot say which is the Ganges or the Amazon, etc. The distinctions are

unclear, whereas before they merged with the ocean they were clearly evident. In the same way, the gross and subtle bodies are distinguishable, but owing to the *nirvikalpa* nature of the causal bodies, distinctions become impossible.

The Three States

THE NEXT TOPIC presented in *Tattva Bodha* is called *avasthatrayam*, which means the three states of experience. These are common to all beings and are experienced in constant succession. These states are the waking state, the dreaming state and the deep sleep state.

The Waking State

FUNCTIONING THROUGH THE physical body and the sense organs, the waking state allows the experiencer to contact and transact with the external world. In the waking state, we function as waking state entities, called *viswas*.

As we interact with the external world, the mind records and stores all our experiences in the form of *vasanas*, or impressions. This recording mechanism is like a video recorder, recording every single action, experience, thought and impression. The more an experience is repeated, the stronger the *vasana* becomes and the more we are likely to continue repeating that behaviour, action or pattern. *Vasanas* are the grooves in consciousness that influence and shape our interactions with the world. They are at the root of our desires, fears, likes, dislikes and various proclivities.

The Dreaming State

WHEN WE GO TO sleep, *viswa*, the waking state entity, disappears and becomes *tajjasa*, the dreamer. Our identification with the physical body ceases, and the external world disappears. What we experience in this state is an internal world with its own forms and experiences. This personal dream world, unlike the objective external world, is born out of the *vasanas* accumulated in the waking state.

The dream world may be very similar to the external world, with roads, buildings, people, the sky, sun and moon. We will also have a dream body that may engage in various projected activities. This internal

dream world will seem very real to us. It is not until we awaken that we realise it was only just a dream, a projection inside our mind.

According to the scriptures, certain dreams have their root in *vasanas* gathered from previous births. Between this birth and the previous birth, only the physical body is different. The subtle body remains the same, which is why the *Bhagavad Gita* says that rebirth is like changing one's clothes. Therefore it is possible for old *vasanas* to come into play, and not just in sleep. Sometimes we develop a liking or hatred for a particular thing for no reason. For instance, a child may develop a great love for music when they are very young and become a prodigy. That would be a *vasana* from a previous birth coming into play. It is the activation of previous *vasanas* that attract some people to spirituality. So the *vasanas* can play a contributory role in the waking state and a significant role in the dreaming state.

The Deep Sleep State

IN THE THIRD state of experience, the experiencer (now known as *prajna*) no longer experiences either an external objective world or an internal subjective world. This is because we are not functioning through the gross body and sense organs, and the mind is also dormant, so the *vasanas* are not activated. Involuntary actions, such as blood circulation, respiration and digestion, still continue in the physical body, but there is no conscious, wilful functioning through the body or mind. There is total blankness in which experience of either the external world or inner world is absent. The state of dreamless sleep is one of relaxation without any strain, which is why it is highly refreshing and healing for both body and mind.

The teaching of the three states is an important one in Vedanta. Because the physical, subtle and causal bodies function together, it is not easy to understand them distinctly. It is easier to isolate them when we understand in which state each of them functions predominantly.

The waking state is an ideal state in which to get a clear understanding of the gross body because that is our primary focus and means of contact with the world. In the dreaming state, the subtle body plays a predominant role as the various *vasanas* play out in our dreams. In this state we can understand the functioning of the subtle body.

The deep sleep state helps us understand the causal body. In this state, all the functions of the gross and subtle bodies are resolved back into the causal body. The organs of action and knowledge do not function. There is an absence of thinking and feeling, and even the “I-sense” is no longer present. Although the physical and gross bodies are not resolved, they are as good as resolved because they are without voluntary function, making the deep sleep state serve as a model for dissolution (*pralayam*).

Understanding the three states, and the fact the experiencer changes from one state to another during the course of a single day, is an important line of self-enquiry. If I am forever changing from waker to dreamer to deep sleeper, then I cannot be any one of those entities. There must be another factor involved, an unchanging element by which I am able to witness this continual change as it takes place. That factor is simply awareness, the self. This will be discussed in the chapter on the self.

10. The Five Sheaths

WE HAVE EXPLORED the three bodies in some detail. Vedanta also provides another model for understanding the functioning of the body-mind-sense complex. This is a way of elaborating upon the functions of the gross, causal and subtle bodies. Based upon the standpoint of their functions, the three bodies are divided into five sheaths (*koshas*). These are the food sheath, the vital sheath, the mind sheath, the intellect sheath and the bliss sheath.

The Food Sheath

THE GROSS BODY is known as the food sheath (*anamaya-kosha*). It is called the food sheath because it is created from food (the food consumed by our parents), is sustained by food (the food that we eat) and, following its death, it decays and returns to the elements, being recycled as food for the life around it.

The Vital Sheath

THE SUBTLE BODY, consisting of the nineteen sense organs, is subdivided into three sheaths, based upon three functions. Each sheath represents one power, or faculty. These are the power of action (*kriya shakti*), the power of desire (*iccha shakti*) and the power of knowledge (*jnana shakti*). Our entire life is an expression of this threefold set of faculties. When reading the newspaper to gain knowledge of various things, *jnana shakti* is operating. Becoming interested in a particular topic and wanting to know more, *iccha shakti*, the faculty of desire, kicks in. When I decide to attend a particular discourse about it, *kriya shakti*, the power of action, enables this. As I listen to the speech, *jnana shakti* is again functioning. Knowledge precedes desire because we cannot desire what we do not know. Desire is therefore produced because of knowledge.

Thus human life is driven by these three factors. What sets human beings apart from other creatures is the sheer power and scope of these three faculties. A hedgehog has no interest in reading the newspaper or attending lectures, and a cow has no desire to set foot on the moon. Hu-

man accomplishments are all down to the power of these three powers of action.

The vital sheath (*pranamaya-kosha*) is comprised of the five physiological systems and the five sense organs of action. The physiological system (*prana*) serves as the fuel tank for the individual. Once food is consumed, it converts it into raw energy. Fuelled by this energy, the organs of action are then able to express their *kriya shakti*, which enables us to act.

The Mind Sheath

THE NEXT SHEATH, called the *manomaya-kosha*, or mind sheath, relates to the faculty of desire. This desire is represented by the five sense organs of knowledge and the mind. Desire can only arise once information has been gathered through the sense organs, and it is needed for prompting us to act and experience the external world through the sense organs.

The Intellect Sheath

THE NEXT OF the three powers is *jnana shakti*, which is represented by the five sense organs of knowledge and the faculty of intellect (*buddhi*). The intellect is required for gaining knowledge, but it requires the sense organs to report information from the external world. In combination, we are able to receive information and make sense of it, allowing us to know and understand, which is the essence of *jnana shakti*.

The Bliss Sheath

THE GROSS BODY is the food sheath; the subtle body comprises the vital, mind and intellect sheaths; which means the final sheath, the bliss sheath (*anandamaya-kosha*), represents the causal body.

The causal body plays a prominent role in the deep sleep state because in this state all is resolved into the causal body. It is a state of total relaxation in which we experience neither division nor limitation. Because of this state of limitlessness, everyone experiences happiness and bliss in the deep sleep state. We cannot say we always experience this in the waking state. Even in the dream state we may be plagued by nightmares. The deep sleep state alone enables us to experience happiness in a uniform manner. Sleep is a universally loved phenomenon, and it is for

this reason that nobody is happy at being woken up in the middle of the night. Therefore the causal body is known as the “bliss sheath.”

Collectively, the three bodies, the three states and the five sheaths are called *anatma*, which literally means “not-self.” These bodies and states are *anatma* because they are objects known to us. We can be aware of them, therefore they cannot be the self. Once we have established this, and looked at the objective realm in some detail, we come to realise that there has to be another factor involved. For any object to exist, there must be a subject, and that is called *atma*, the self, the awareness in which all objects arise and subside, the substratum of existence.

11. *The Self*

WE HAVE ESTABLISHED that the three bodies and five sheaths are composed of matter, whether gross, subtle or causal matter. We know from experience that matter is an inert principle. The standpoint of modern science concurs: the body is made up of various elements, such as carbon, iron, calcium and so on. These elements are inert in nature. The scriptures and science both agree that the body is composed of inert elements, and by reasoning it should therefore also be inert in nature.

If the body is made up of inert matter, in the same way as rocks, metal and plants are made of inert matter, how is it then different from the external world of matter? What is the principle that makes the body alive, sentient and conscious?

Consciousness has remained the biggest mystery throughout time. Theories have been put forth from the earliest philosophers to the most renowned modern-day scientists, but none have satisfactorily answered this age-old question. Vedanta teaches that consciousness is not in fact a property of the body, because matter is intrinsically inert in nature. How can something inert produce something that is not inert? Neither is consciousness a part of the body. Vedanta states that consciousness is a factor that is independent of the body, but which pervades the body, lending it life and sentience. This consciousness is called *atma*, or simply “the self.”

The Light that Illumines

THE SELF IS ever-present because without it nothing could be perceived or experienced. If I hold an object in my hand, such as a book, and ask you what you see, you will immediately respond that there is a book. But there is something else present, which is very much evident but which everyone takes for granted. It is the light in which the book is visible. The book is pervaded by the light; without it there would be no experience of “book” possible.

Sticking with this metaphor, it is important to note the following points. The light is not a part, property or product of the book. Light is an independent factor that pervades the book and makes it visible. The light is not limited by the boundaries of the book. I could take the book and tear it to pieces or burn it, but the light will not be affected when the book is destroyed. The light existed before the book appeared and it will continue to exist after the book is destroyed. Finally, and most importantly, when the book is removed, the light continues to be there, but is not visible when there is no reflecting medium.

The scriptures point out that consciousness is comparable to light in many ways. Hence what we have said above also applies to consciousness. Consciousness is not a part, property or product of the body. It is an independent factor that pervades the body and makes it sentient. Consciousness is not affected or limited by the boundaries of the body. Consciousness will therefore survive the death of the body, as it exists prior to, during and after the appearance of the body. This surviving consciousness will not be perceivable, however, because the reflecting medium of the body is not there.

Sat-Chit-Ananda

SINCE CONSCIOUSNESS IS NOT dependent on the body and survives after the death of the body, it is immortal and unlimited by time. Ever changeless, it exists in the past, present and future. There is no point in time when it does not exist, either in the past or the future.

In Vedanta it is referred to as *sat*, meaning existence/being/reality. This consciousness is the very ground of existence, the substratum of the manifest and unmanifest, the visible and invisible. In spite of the illusion that our body is somehow a receptacle that “contains” consciousness, deeper enquiry reveals that consciousness is not restricted by the boundaries of the body. This means that it is not limited by space. That which is not limited by time and space is called *ananta*, which means limitless.

This limitlessness, when experienced in the mind, is a sense of fulfilment and bliss (*ananda*). Bliss comes from limitlessness. When a goal is left incomplete, the mind lacks fulfilment, whereas the completion of the goal and the resultant sense of fulfilment expresses in the mind as *ananda*. On the other hand, a sense of limitation is experienced in the

mind as sorrow (*dukkham*). This is one of the predominant states experienced by one who lacks self-knowledge. Ignorance robs the person of the satisfaction and bliss that comes from recognition of one's limitless nature as pure consciousness.

The nature of the self is therefore *sat-chit-ananda*, which means being-consciousness-bliss. This self, *atma*, pervades completely the three bodies, which are themselves inert and insentient *anatma*. Every being we encounter might be seen as a mixture of the two: consciousness and matter.

Generally when we use the word "I" we refer to the reflecting medium, *anatma*. At any given time "I" may refer to the gross body ("I am thin" or "I am fat"), the subtle body ("I am happy" or "I am sad") or any one of the five sheaths. Whenever anyone asks anything about us, we will tend to reel off biographical data relating to the physical or subtle bodies. This identification with *anatma*, the matter component, and ignorance of our true nature as *atma*, consciousness, is the very root of our existential suffering (*samsara*).

Shifting Identification

HAVING IDENTIFIED THE cause of our suffering (taking ourselves to be *anatma*, the body-mind-sense complex), we need to shift our vision to *atma*, the self, which is pure consciousness. Identifying with that which is limited causes a binding sense of limitation and sorrow. By instead realising the limitless nature of the consciousness that we are, we transcend the limitations and sorrows of the body. Being other than the body, we are unaffected by whatever happens to it – including its death. By identifying with consciousness and not form, we instantly go from mortality to immortality.

This shift of identification from *anatma* to *atma* is not instantaneous. It takes persistent effort and enquiry because of the deep-seated notion that "I am the body." This ignorance, born of taking appearance to be reality, is hardwired into us and reinforced by the culture we live in. It colours our entire perspective on life. Swami Dayananda points out that the conclusions we come to about ourselves determine our personality and pursuits. Since our whole life has been governed by an erroneous notion of self, this shift of perspective will not happen overnight.

Once we have verified the truth of the teaching of Vedanta and shifted our vision from *anatma* to *atma*, we need to apply persistent self-enquiry to the mind, examining our sense of identification in any given moment. We need to become very clear in our mind that we are pure consciousness. The self is not some abstract notion, but the essence of our being.

Where is our sense of identification? Who are we? We are not a part, product or property of the body. We are other than the body because the body is an object that appears in us, the subject. We pervade and enliven the body. A time will come when the body will perish, but as consciousness we will survive its death. When the body does die, this surviving “I” will not be able to transact with the world nor will the world be able to interact with us. This is not because we are non-existent, but because we have no medium of transaction.

Subject and Object

THIS KNOWLEDGE MUST become cemented in the mind. We must “own” our identity as pure consciousness. Continued reflection on the teaching helps achieve this. The basic logic is that whatever we experience must be different from us, as the experiencer.

For example, the eyes can see anything in the world except themselves. We cannot see our own eyes. The subject is always different from the object. Extending the same principle, we realise that we, as the experiencer of everything, are different from everything that we experience.

The entire world can be negated in this way because it is clearly experienced by me, the experiencer. It’s clear that I am not this book, table, ornament, tree or cat. They are objects perceivable to me. What of the body? The body is also an object experienced by me, in a most intimate way. The body’s moment-to-moment condition is known to me, as is the mind, which is also an object perceived by me. Every thought and emotion is intensely experienced by me. Both body and mind are therefore objects of my experience.

The objects of the external world are all phenomena that arise and subside. They appear and disappear, and the body and mind are no different. The body is accessible to me in the waking state only, and not in the dreaming and deep sleep states. Similarly, the mind is accessible in

the waking and dream states, but not in deep sleep. Thus the body and mind are objects of our experience like anything in the external world. They are all *anatma* – which is to say they are different from us.

However, because our body and mind are intimately connected to us, unlike, say, this table, that tree or that other person's body, we mistake them as being "us." They are invested with an "I-sense." Due to our intimate association with the body and mind, they are mistakenly included as being the "subject" when in fact they are actually objects appearing to the true subject, pure awareness.

Sustained self-enquiry is needed to overcome this deep-rooted misidentification. The method of discriminating between subject and object, experiencer and experienced, observer and observed, is a fundamental practice for learning to shift identification from the body-mind back to the self.

12. Creation

VEDANTA TALKS NOT only of the nature of the *jiva* and the self, but also explores the creation and constitution of the universe.

Before the world came into existence, consciousness alone existed, for its nature is eternal and all-pervading. In this context, consciousness is called *Brahman*, which means infinite, or limitless. The words *Brahman* and *atma* both point to the same thing, and are used depending upon the context of the discussion. When the individual is discussed, consciousness is given the name *atma*. The same consciousness is referred to as *Brahman* from the universal, macrocosmic standpoint.

Depending upon context, the same place can be given different names. When abroad, I might say that I live in England. When I'm back in England, I will say I live in London. When in London, I will specify that I live in Bloomsbury. Similarly, the self can be referred to by different names depending upon the standpoint, but it all points to the same one consciousness.

The Seed State

BEFORE CREATION, THE universe existed in seed form. As matter can be neither created nor destroyed, it always exists in some form. Prior to becoming a desk, the desk existed in wood form. Prior to that it existed in tree form, and before that the tree existed in seed form.

Nothing is created anew. Creation simply manifests what already exists in potentiality. Prior to manifestation, the entire cosmos existed in the causal body in an invisible, dormant, unmanifest state. This potential state of existence is called *karanaavastha*, the causal state of the universe.

This *karanaavastha* state can be divided into two aspects. The first is the causal body (known as *avidya*). The second factor is the potential form of the entire world of experience (known as *maya*). Together, *maya* and *avidya* form the unmanifest (*avyaktam*). Before creation we have *Brahman*, pure consciousness, and *avyaktam*, the unmanifest. Both are beginningless and uncreated. However, *Brahman* is the unchanging

factor of consciousness, and the unmanifest, *avyaktam*, is the changing matter principle.

Of the two principles, it is *avyaktam* that evolves to become the body and universe. This evolution is a gradual process. Just as the seed in time becomes a sprout, in a similar manner the causal state gradually evolves into a subtle state, consisting of the five subtle elements of space, air, fire, water and earth. From these subtle elements arise the subtle body and the subtle universe. Later this subtle state evolves further into a gross state, consisting of the five gross elements, which are all visible. These in turn produce the gross body and the gross universe.

Original Consciousness and Reflected Consciousness

WE HAVE ALREADY established that the three bodies (the gross, subtle and causal bodies) are made of matter, and as such are known as *anatma*. Even though they are inert matter, these bodies are pervaded and enlivened by consciousness, which makes them conscious or sentient.

This consciousness does not belong to the bodies. The bodies themselves function as a mirror. A mirror has no light of its own. If the mirror is kept under sunlight, the sunlight will reflect upon the mirror's surface and it will shine. By virtue of this reflected light, the mirror can illumine other things, not by its original light, but by its borrowed light. Thus the non-luminous becomes luminous. In a similar way, the insentient becomes sentient because of reflected consciousness. Each body has no life of its own, but is made sentient by the reflected light of consciousness.

This all-pervading consciousness enlivens the entire universe. It is the reason the cosmos functions in an orderly manner, like a vast macrocosmic organism. Just as the cells and organs of our bodies function in a harmonious manner, so too does the universe. If we disturb this natural harmony, it offsets the balance and results in undesirable consequences. The universe is not a chaotic mass of inert matter. Pervaded and enlivened by pure consciousness, it functions intelligently. Just as there are three bodies, there are three universes: the gross universe, the subtle universe and the causal universe.

The Microcosmic Levels

THE ONE ORIGINAL consciousness animates the three bodies at both

the microcosmic (individual) and macrocosmic (universal) levels. On the microcosmic level, when consciousness shines upon the causal body, this reflected consciousness is known as *prajna* (the sleeper). The same consciousness enlivening the subtle body is called *taijasa* (the dreamer). Consciousness animating the gross body is called *viswa* (the waker). Together, these three states of reflected consciousness comprise the *jiva*, or individual. The *jiva* cycles through these states of waking, dreaming and sleeping every single day.

The Macrocosmic Levels

AT THE UNIVERSAL level, when consciousness shines upon the causal body, it is known as *antaryami*, the causal universe. Consciousness enlivening the subtle universe is called *hiranyagarbha*, and enlivening the gross universe is known as *virat*. These three levels, as a whole, are called *Isvara*.

In short, *jiva* and *Isvara* are reflections of the one original consciousness, obtaining in the microcosmic and macrocosmic mediums respectively.

While scientists continue to study the universe and argue over its origin, this is the analysis of creation given by Vedanta.

13. The Oneness of Jiva and Isvara

ONE OF THE most important topics in Vedanta is the essential oneness of *jiva* and *Isvara*. We have established that *jiva* represents the individual, microcosmic level, and *Isvara* the universal, macrocosmic level. The consciousness that pervades and enlivens both is one and the same. The differences we perceive belong only to the reflecting medium. To help us understand the unity of the individual and the totality, the scriptures contain many “*mahavakyas*.” A *mahavakya* is a Vedantic statement that reveals the ultimate unity of *jiva* and *Isvara*.

Jiva is an expression of pure consciousness obtaining in the microcosmic three bodies, while *Isvara* is an expression of that same consciousness obtaining in the macrocosmic gross, subtle and causal bodies. Although the expression differs according to the composition of the reflecting medium, it is the same consciousness that animates and pervades both. Therefore the essential nature of *jiva* and *Isvara* is the same.

One Light, Many Reflections

IMAGINE A DARK room in which all the windows and doors are shut, leaving not a trace of light. I want to illuminate the room, but all I have is a mirror in my hand. The mirror does not have any illuminating capacity, for it is not a source of light. However, if I open a window or a door, I can keep the mirror at a particular angle so that the sun, which is shining outside, can be reflected in the mirror.

As the sunlight strikes the mirror, the mirror is lit up and becomes a source of light in the room. The mirror, previously non-luminous, now becomes a luminous mirror. What is the difference between the sun’s light and the light in the mirror? The sun’s light is original and natural, while the mirror has only borrowed light.

This idea of original light and borrowed light is crucial in Vedanta. With its borrowed light, the mirror becomes the illuminator of the dark room. This reflected light is called *pratibimba surya*, and the original sunlight is called *bimba surya*. Similarly, it is with reflected light that the moon appears to glow in the sky. The moon actually has no light of its

own, for it simply reflects the light of the sun. There are three factors involved in this process of illumination: the original light, the reflecting medium and the reflected light. There can be as many reflected suns as there are reflecting mediums, but only one original sun.

If there are many reflected suns, there will be differences in the reflection, depending upon the quality of the medium. A small medium will produce a small reflection, a big medium will produce a big reflection and a dull medium will produce a dull reflection. An apparent multitude of suns, appearing differently due to the nature of each medium, are in fact only reflections of the one original sun.

This is a helpful metaphor for understanding the relationship between *jiva*, *Isvara* and the self. The original sun is analogous to the all-pervading consciousness that is the self. We have two reflecting mediums. One is the three-body system of the *jiva*: the microcosmic gross, subtle and causal bodies. These three bodies reflect consciousness and can be compared to the small mirror reflecting sunlight. The second reflecting medium is the macrocosmic gross, subtle and causal bodies, which can be compared to the large mirror. The reflected consciousness that enlivens and unifies the microcosmic three bodies is called *jiva*. The reflected consciousness that enlivens and unifies the macrocosmic three bodies is called *Isvara*.

<– BRAHMAN, THE ORIGINAL CONSCIOUSNESS –>

JIVA (reflected consciousness)	ISVARA (reflected consciousness)
CAUSAL BODY sleeper (<i>prajna</i>)	CAUSAL WORLD unmanifest (<i>antaryami</i>)
SUBTLE BODY dreamer (<i>tajasa</i>)	SUBTLE WORLD subtle universe (<i>hiranyagarbha</i>)
GROSS BODY waker (<i>visva</i>)	GROSS UNIVERSE physical universe (<i>virat</i>)

There appear to be differences between *jiva* and *Isvara* because the reflecting mediums are different, and because of this the reflections also appear different. The *jiva*, functioning through the microcosmic gross,

subtle and causal bodies, has limited power. *Jiva* has limited knowledge, limited power and occupies limited space. On the other hand, *Ishvara*, functioning through the macrocosmic gross, subtle and causal bodies, is omniscient (*sarvajna*), omnipotent (*sarvasaktiman*) and omnipresent (*sarvayapi*).

The difference between *jiva* and *Ishvara* is in many ways diametrically opposite, with *Ishvara* the Creator and *jiva* the creation. Perhaps the core teaching of Vedanta is that in spite of these superficial differences (due only to the differences in the reflecting mediums) *jiva* and *Ishvara* are essentially the same consciousness appearing in different expressions. This is the essence of non-duality. Duality is an appearance only. Any statement that reveals this unity is called a *mahavakya*. There are many *mahavakyas* in the *Upanishads*, but generally there are four primary examples, chosen from each *Veda*.

VEDA	UPANISHAD	MAHAVAKYA
Rig Veda	Aitareya Upanishad	“Consciousness is the self.” (<i>Prajnanam Brahma</i>)
Yajur Veda	Brihadaranyaka Upanishad	“I am the self.” (<i>Aham Brahmasmi</i>)
Sama Veda	Chandogya Upanishad	“That thou art.” (<i>Tat Tvam Asi</i>)
Atharvana Veda	Mandukya Upanishad	“This limited self is the universal self.” (<i>Ayam Atma Brahma</i>)

Reflection upon these concise, powerful statements is essential to understanding the teaching of Vedanta. This knowledge alone, the vision of non-duality as revealed by the *Vedas*, liberates a person from *samsara*. All the other practices of spiritual life, such as prayer, meditation and chanting, may bring temporary relief from the sorrows of life. A permanent solution can only be found by assimilating the knowledge of the essential unity of life: of subject and object; experiencer and experience; *jiva* and *Ishvara*. In spite of the multiplicity of reflections appearing in different shapes and forms, the original light is always one and the same.

14. Liberation *and* Karma

THE RESULTS OF self-knowledge (*jnana phalam*) are considered twofold in the teachings. There are the fruits gained in this lifetime as a result of self-knowledge (*jivanmukti*), and the fruits obtained after death (*videhamukti*).

Liberation While Living

JIVANMUKTI MEANS FREEDOM while living. It refers to the benefits of self-knowledge enjoyed at the mental level. *Moksa* will not gift the individual with superpowers, inhuman strength and eternal physical health. The *jivanmukta* will not be able to walk on water or turn water into wine. This has nothing to do with freedom anyway. The limitations and suffering of *samsara* were always purely mental. Self-knowledge remedies this on the level of the problem – the mind.

The first and most important benefit obtained by self-knowledge is a sense of fulfilment in life (*purvatvam*). When we truly know that our nature is eternal, limitless consciousness and not the temporary body-mind-sense complex, we realise that we are free from limitation. Everything belongs to us. We are free from isolation and rejection because we are the all-pervading self. Just as space cannot be rejected by anyone due to its all-pervading nature, so too can the self never be rejected by anyone.

The second benefit is a sense of independence. The presence or absence of objects will not affect us emotionally. It is only when we are dependent upon external factors that their presence or absence will cause distress. Obviously, while in the body we still depend upon food, clothing and shelter, so a certain degree of physical dependence is unavoidable.

However, emotional dependence is neutralized by self-knowledge. Things come and go, and our attachment to these objects is lessened, for we know that we are the ever-present and ever-full, eternal self. Fullness is our nature, and the need to chase objects for fulfilment simply drops away.

This leads to the third benefit of self-knowledge, which is emotional balance or stability (*samatvam*). This is our enhanced capacity to face the

ups and downs of life. Knowledge of who we truly are acts like the shock absorber of a vehicle. The roads may be bumpy and full of potholes, but the shock absorbers prevent the vehicle from getting damaged.

Similarly, self-knowledge enables us to face and accept life's upheavals and prevents excessive emotional disturbance. We see things for what they are: an interplay of objects in the field of existence, a dancing show that in no way affects who we are as awareness. We may find ourselves slightly affected by the more turbulent moments of life, but we are no longer overpowered. Such is the blessing of assimilated self-knowledge for the *jivanmukta*.

Liberation After Death

SELF-KNOWLEDGE NOT ONLY frees up the *jiva* to enjoy life, but also brings about freedom after death (*videhamukti*).

In the case of one who is ignorant of one's own nature (an *ajnani*), the physical body is dropped at the time of death. In fact death is defined as separation from the physical body. While the gross body decays and merges back into the five elements, the subtle and causal bodies continue to exist. The subtle body seeks out another physical body with which to continue its journey and work out its *karma* and *vasanas*. Thus for an *ajnani* death is the dropping of the physical form, and rebirth is the acquiring of another body.

In the case of the *jnani*, all three bodies merge back into the total at the time of death. Thus a *jnani* does not survive as an individual, but survives as the total (*samasti*). The *jnani* will no longer remain a *jiva*. The subtle and causal bodies are resolved back into the unmanifest and, just as a river loses its individuality when it merges back into the ocean, so too does the *jiva*.

Hence there is no question of further rebirth for the *jiva*. The liberated *jnani* no longer has a subtle body with which to acquire a new physical body. This is what the teachings mean when they speak of liberation from rebirth. This liberation comes about because self-knowledge destroys the notion of doership and ownership, neutralizing all *karmas*.

The Law of Karma

IN ORDER TO understand how a *jnani* becomes free of *karma*, it is nec-

essary to have a clear understanding of how *karma* works. The teachings point out that every action (or *karma*), small or big, produces results (*phalam*). No action goes without a *phalam*. The *karma phalam* is divided into two types: visible results (*drista phalam*) and unseen results (*adrasta phalam*).

We usually have a good idea what the visible results of our actions will be. The unseen results can be more of a challenge, and often only become evident after some time. These results can either be good (*punyam*) or bad (*papam*). As we have seen, the scriptures prescribe actions that result in *punyam* and warn against actions that will produce *papam*. *Punyam* will in time become happiness, whereas *papam* will generate suffering.

Certain actions may be favourable from the standpoint of *drista phalam*, the visible level, but may be unfavourable from the standpoint of *adrasta phalam*, the long-term result. Doctors might say that drinking a little bit of alcohol may be good for the health, but the scriptures advise against this from the standpoint of unfavourable *adrasta phalam*. The scriptures suggest a holistic lifestyle that takes into account both the seen and unseen results of action.

In terms of how long it takes the unseen result of an action to fructify, the duration is never fixed and will vary depending upon the action. Certain types of *punyam* and *papam* fructify almost immediately, and others take much longer. One seed may sprout and become a tree very quickly, whereas other seeds grow at a much slower rate.

Karma and the Three Bodies

WHEN A PERSON dies, there are many *karmas* yet to fructify which remain in seed potential in the causal body. At the time of death, only the gross body is lost; the subtle and causal bodies live on. In that nucleus called the individual are embedded all the unfructified *karmas*. It is these unresolved *karmas* that generate the need for another physical body in which they can be worked out. There can be no interaction with the world without the physical body, which is why there is a cycle of constant rebirth, driven by unresolved *karma*.

Rebirth is the subtle body and causal body getting associated with another physical body, which depends upon unfructified *karma*. While

in this new body, various pleasures and pains are experienced, and the *jiva* acquires yet more *punyam* and *papam*, much of which remains unfructified at death, necessitating the need for yet another body. Thus the cycle of birth and death is perpetuated by the *punya* and *papa karmas*, which are regularly replenished.

It is wrong to think that God determines the type of birth and death the individual experiences. Both are determined by the *karmas* acquired by the *jiva* itself.

This cycle, which originates in beginningless time, can only be broken by self-knowledge (*jnanam*). This is the law of *karma*, which is one of the most important aspects of Vedic teaching.

Understanding Karma

THERE ARE MANY advantages to understanding the law of *karma* and its implications.

1. The law of *karma* explains the differences and disparities between beings from birth. We often wonder why some people experience disadvantages from a young age, such as being born with a disability or health defect. The law of *karma* reveals that this is a result of *papam*. Life is no mere accident, but the result of fructifying past *karmas*.

2. Understanding *karma* enables us to accept our suffering even though we have committed no bad actions in this lifetime. Often people question why they suffer and tend to blame life, God or the universe. The law of *karma* leads us to accept our problems without placing blame, because they have roots in the unseen results of past *karma*.

3. If our present situation is determined by our past, then our present actions will determine our future. This enables us to take charge of our life. As a doer, we can direct the course of our lives. The world does not determine our future, only our actions in the here and now does. Therefore we can exercise free will.

4. Often people wonder why good people suffer, while bad people can enjoy immense wealth and success. Only by understanding the law of *karma* can this be answered. Corrupt people are enjoying wealth and power today as a result of their past *punyam*. But they are definitely going to pay the price in the future for their present corrupt actions. Similarly, good people are suffering on account of previous *papam*. Their

present actions will, however, accrue *punyam* to their account, which will fructify in the fullness of time.

Without the law of *karma*, society would have no moral order and people would be at full liberty to discard *dharma* and live by *adharmic* actions alone. Life only makes sense when the law of *karma* is understood. We see that God can never be unjust. If a judge acquits one person in a case and convicts another, it is not because of his own personal viewpoint and partiality. The decision is based on the actions committed by the defendants. The Lord, the universal judge, can never do injustice. If someone suffers, it is owing to past actions. In the present moment, *punya karmas* will help create a better future.

Seeing our sufferings as an exhausting of *papam*, we learn to view our circumstances and life more positively and objectively. Our sufferings are actually the removal of *papam*, which purifies us and clears our *karmic* account. Thus acceptance of the law of *karma* reinforces our faith, strengthens our respect for *dharma*, explains our difficult situations and gives us hope for the future.

Nothing is accidental in life. Everything is based upon an invisible moral order. Without a cause, there can be no effect. Sometimes this cause is visible, but often it isn't. Doctors talk about idiopathic diseases, the origins of which are unknown. The causes may be unknown, but this does not mean they are non-existent. All medical research is based on the conviction that without a cause there can be no effect. This is the essential core of the law of *karma*.

Three Types of *Karma*

KARMA CAN BE divided into three basic types:

1. *Sanchita karma*: All the unfructified *punya/papa karma* accumulated from previous lifetimes is called *sanchita karma*. This is a vast store of past *karma* in seed form.

2. *Prarabdha karma*: Of this huge amount of stored *sanchita karma* a certain portion fructifies during a given lifetime. This is called *prarabdha karma*, and it determines the type of body that is adopted, the parentage, duration of life, key experiences and so on. While working out *prarabdha*, new *karmas* are added to the store of *sanchita karma*.

3. *Agami karma*: The new *karmas* that are accumulated in this lifetime are called *agami karma*. *Agami* means “arriving.”

Thus we can say that accumulated *karmas* are *sanchita*, fructifying *karmas* are *prarabdha*, and arriving *karmas* are *agami*.

In this lifetime, while we are gradually outworking our *prarabdha karma*, we are earning new *agami karma*. Some of this *agami karma* will fructify during this lifetime and some will carry through to *sanchita karma*. When the *prarabdha* is finally exhausted, this life comes to an end. Then, out of the storehouse of *sanchita karma*, another portion becomes *prarabdha*, leading to the next birth. This cycle of *karma* goes on and on.

Karma of the Jnani

THE SCRIPTURES SAY that self-knowledge, *jnanam*, is so powerful that it is capable of destroying all the *sanchita karma*. *Jnanam* burns away the *sanchita karma* like radiation therapy burns cancerous cells in the body. Thus, for the *jnani*, *sanchita karma* gets eradicated by the power of *jnanam*.

The *prarabdha karma* of the liberated soul is exhausted through experience. The *jnani* accepts the *prarabdha* as God’s will and allows the body to go through those *karmas*. We take care of the body and protect it because we need the body to help us achieve our goals. A *jnani* has already attained the highest goal in life and does not require the body for achieving anything. Therefore the *jnani* allows the body to experience its *prarabdha* until all such *karmas* are exhausted and the body expires. *Agami karma* does not accrue to a *jnani*, because his or her actions are henceforth done without a sense of ego, doership or ownership (in other words, without identification with not-self, *anatma*).

Therefore, at the time of death, there is no *karma* remaining for the *jnani*. *Sanchita* is burnt, *prarabdha* is exhausted and *agami* is avoided. There is therefore no question of rebirth. And so all three bodies (gross, subtle and causal) merge into the macrocosmic gross, subtle and causal worlds respectively. While living, the *jnani* enjoys *jivanmukti*, and after death becomes one with the totality, attaining *videhamukti*. This is the fruit of self-knowledge. The liberated *jnani* is free from all forms of bondage forever more.