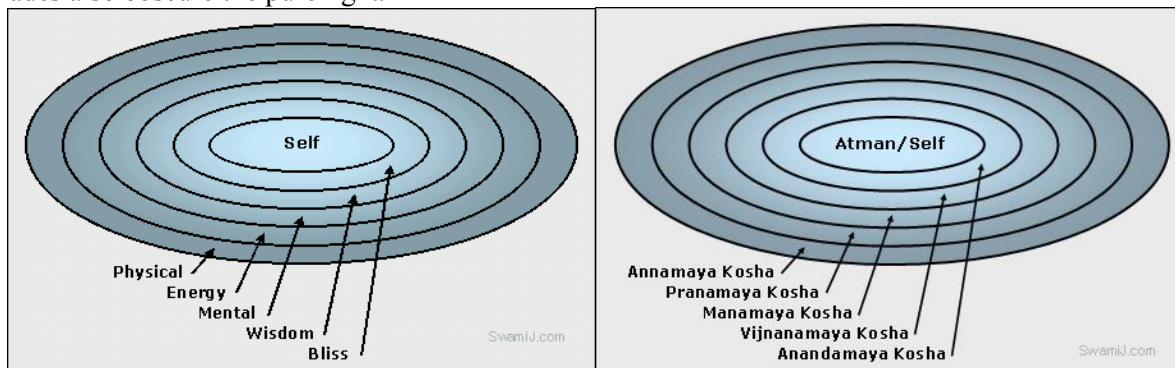


The Mental Sheaths

Derived from: **The Five Sheaths or Koshas of Yoga, and Coordinating the Four Functions of Mind** by Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati www.swamij.com

We humans are like a lamp that has five lampshades over our light. Each of the lampshades is a different color and density. As the light shines through the lampshades, it is progressively changed in color and nature. It is a bitter-sweet coloring. On the one hand, the shades provide the individualized beauty of each lamp. Yet, the lampshades also obscure the pure light.



The Yoga path of Self-realization is one of progressively moving inward, through each of those lampshades, so as to experience the purity at the eternal center of consciousness, while at the same time allowing that purity to animate through our individuality. These five levels are called *koshas*, which literally means *sheaths*.

Kosha means *sheath*, like the lampshades covering the light, or like the series of wooden dolls pictured below. *Maya* means *appearance*, as if something *appears* to be one way, but is really another. Advaita Vedanta suggests that you imagine a dark night in which you think you see a man, only to find that it was an old fence post that was hard to see at first; that is *maya*.



Here, it means that each of the *sheaths* or *koshas* is only an *appearance*. In truth, all of the levels, layers, koshas, or sheaths of our reality is only *appearance*, or *maya* (while also very real in the sense of dealing with the external world), and that underneath all of those appearances, we are pure, divine, eternal consciousness, or whatever name you prefer to call it. This is one of the fundamental principles of Advaita Vedanta meditation.

While some view *maya* as meaning that nothing is real, and turn this into a cold-hearted intellectual practice, others view the illusion of *maya* as being *shakti*, the creative force of the universe. In this way, the *maya* of the *koshas* is experienced both as unreal and, at the same time, as the beautiful manifestations of the universal oneness.

The Koshas

Physical - Annamaya kosha

Anna means *food*. All of the physical aspects of life come and go and are consumed by another aspect of external reality. Thus, the outermost of the koshas is called the sheath of food, or Annamaya kosha. In Vedanta practice,

we train this aspect of ourselves, take care of it, nurture it, so that we can both enjoy our external lives and go inward without it being an obstacle during meditation time. In meditation, we become aware of Annamaya kosha, explore it, and then go inward, to and through the other koshas.

Energy - Pranamaya kosha

The next of the koshas is Pranamaya kosha. *Prana* means *energy*. It is the vital force that produces the subtle vibrations related to breath, and which are the driving force behind the physical aspect of the senses and the operation of the physical body. It allows the invisible indweller, our True Self to be able to animate in the external world. At the same time, however, it allows the eternally still, silent center of consciousness to be mistakenly identified as the moving, visible physical body. For both a healthy life and the practice of meditation, Vedanta says that it is very useful, or essential that this level of our being be trained, regulated, and directed, so that it flows smoothly. In meditation, we become aware of Pranamaya kosha, explore it, and then go inward, to and through the other koshas.

Mental - Manamaya kosha

The next of the koshas is Manamaya kosha. *Mana* means *mind*. It is the level of processing thoughts and emotions. It is in direct control of the operation, through the prana, of the physical body and senses. It is like a supervisor in a factory, in that it gives instructions, but is not supposed to be the manager of the factory of life. Because of this, it naturally has doubts, and created illusions. When it receives clear instructions from the deeper level, it functions quite well. However, when it is clouded over by its illusions, the deeper wisdom is clouded over. After taking care of the physical body and training the energy flow of prana, the most important part to be trained in positive ways is this level of mind. In meditation, we become aware of Manomaya kosha, explore it, and then go inward, to and through the remaining koshas.

Wisdom - Vijnanamaya kosha

The next of the koshas is Vijnanamaya kosha. *Vijnana* means *knowing*. It is the sheath of wisdom that is underneath the processing, thinking aspect of mind. It knows, decides, judges, and discriminates between this and that, between useful and not useful. It is also the level of ego consciousness, meaning the powerful wave of I-am-ness. This I-am-ness itself is a positive influence, but when it gets co-mingled with the memories, and is clouded over by the manas, it loses its positive strength. A major part of sadhana (spiritual practice) is gaining ever increasing access to this level of our being. It is the level that has the higher wisdom to seek Truth, to go within, in search of the eternal center of consciousness.

Bliss - Anandamaya kosha

Anandamaya kosha is the most interior of the koshas, the first of the koshas surrounding the Atman, the eternal center of consciousness. *Ananda* means *bliss*. However, it is not bliss as a mere emotion experienced at the level of the sheath of mind. *Ananda* is a whole different order of reality from that of the mind. It is peace, joy, and love that is underneath, beyond the mind, independent of any reason or stimulus to cause a happy mental reaction. It is simply *being*, resting in bliss called *ananda*. Yet, even this bliss, however wonderful it is, is still a covering, a sheath, a lampshade covering the pure light of consciousness. It is the subtle most of the five koshas. In the silence of deep meditation, this too is let go of, so as to experience the center.

Atman - Self

Atman is the *Self*, the eternal center of consciousness, which was never born and never dies. In the metaphor of the lamp and the lampshades, Atman is the light itself, though to even describe it as that is incomplete and incorrect. The deepest light shines through the koshas, and takes on their colorings. *Atman*, the *Self*, has been best described as indescribable. The realization of that, in direct experience, is the goal of Yoga meditation, Advaita Vedanta, and Tantra practices taught in the Himalayan tradition.

The Four Functions of Mind or the Inner Instrument (Antah Karana)

There are Four Functions of Mind:

- Manas = sensory, processing mind
- Chitta = storage of impressions

- Ahamkara = "I-maker" or Ego
- Buddhi = knows, decides, judges, and discriminates.

These four functions are like spokes on a wheel. The wheel engages the world, while the center remains still.

Exploring the Four Spokes of Mind

Manas is the lower mind, through which the mind interacts with the external world and takes in sensory impressions and data. Manas questions and doubts, which can cause great difficulties if this tendency becomes excessive. Manas is the direct supervisor of the senses in the inner factory.

Manas is like the supervisor in the factory of life and directs the ten senses or Indriyas. Manas does a wonderful job of carrying out directions, but it is not supposed to be the key decision maker in the factory. That is the job of Buddhi. If Buddhi is clouded, then Manas has a habit of continuing to question, seeking good instruction. Then it often listens to whoever is speaking the loudest in the factory, which is the wants, wishes, desires, attractions, and aversions stored in the memory bank of Chitta.

A good way to cultivate the witnessing of Manas is to be mindful of actions and speech, as well as your senses of smelling, tasting, seeing, touching, and hearing. By observing these, you come to see how Manas is the one behind these actions and senses. Thus, Manas is like the supervisor of the employees in a factory. Manas is not the boss, but the supervisor, who is giving the direct orders to the active and cognitive senses.

Chitta is the memory bank, which stores impressions and experiences, and while it can be very useful, Chitta can also cause difficulties if its functioning is not coordinated with the others. Chitta is the storage place of the countless latent impressions. If Chitta is not coordinated with the other functions of mind, then the thousands, millions, or countless impressions in this bed of the lake of mind start to stir and arise. It is as if these many latent impressions, coming to life are all competing for the attention of Manas to carry out their wants in the external world. In the absence of a clear Buddhi, the competing voices of Chitta often drive Manas to take actions in the world that are really not so useful.

A good way to cultivate the witnessing of Chitta is to simply be aware of the streams of thoughts, emotions, images, and impressions that arise in front of Manas (on which Manas may or may not act). Notice how the stream of thoughts comes from somewhere, and then recedes back into that same place. This place is Chitta. One can also observe one's actions and speech. Motions and words reflect what is going on in the mind as well. We can watch gestures and body language, done consciously and unconsciously. While all of this can take some time to learn, it is extremely fruitful when practiced for a while. It becomes very easy and natural to observe these various revealers of thoughts and can allow us to get to the bottom of life questions and issues with which we may be struggling.

Ahamkara is the sense of "I-am-ness," the individual Ego, which feels itself to be a distinct, separate entity. It provides identity to our functioning, but Ahamkara also creates our feelings of separation, pain, and alienation as well. Ahamkara is the strong wave that declares "I am".

This wave of "I-am-ness" called Ahamkara then aligns itself or forms partnerships with the data or impressions in Chitta (causing them to be colored, or klishtha), and, in turn, with Manas, which then responds to the desires being sought by this "individuality." Meanwhile, Buddhi, the deep aspect, which knows, decides, and discriminates, remains clouded. Thus, it is said that purifying (or un-clouding) buddhi is a most important task in the path of meditation and Self-realization.

A good way to cultivate the witnessing of Ahamkara is to be aware of the fact that rising thoughts and emotions are often colored with either attraction or aversion. The attraction or aversion may be strong, or it may be so weak that it is barely noticeable. Noticing the weak ones can be very insightful as to the subtlety of Ahamkara's coloring (It's much easier to neutrally witness the weak ones at first).

Buddhi is the higher aspect of mind, the door-way to inner wisdom. The word Buddhi itself comes from the root budh, which means one who has awakened. Buddhi has the capacity to decide, judge, and make cognitive discriminations and differentiations. It can determine the wiser of two courses of action if it functions clearly and if Manas will accept its guidance. In the factory of life, we want Buddhi to be making the choices for the factory. Otherwise, Manas gets its instructions from the habit patterns stored in Chitta, that are colored by Ahamkara, the Ego. Often, Buddhi is clouded over by all of the coloring and impressions in the Chitta. Thus, a major task of sadhana, spiritual practices, is to un-cloud the clouded Buddhi. Then, with clear choice one can ever improve the choices that lead to the fruits of spiritual practices.

On the more gross or surface levels of living and meditation, Buddhi is used as a tool for discrimination, as just described. However, when we get deep enough in meditation, we discover that it was the subtlest aspect of Buddhi that first started to see division in ourselves and the universe. In other words, although Buddhi is used as a tool for deepening experience in meditation, it was Buddhi who carved up the universe in the first place, seeing division where there is unity. To discriminate between Buddhi and pure consciousness is one of the final stages in the meditative journey.

Working with Buddhi and Ahamkara

Who is it that "wants" or "does not want"? We usually say, "I want this or that," or "I don't want this or that." When we understand the way the four functions of mind interact, we come to see that it is not "I" who has attractions or aversions. The memory trace in the chitta, colored with attraction or aversion itself is doing the wanting. Thus, we can say, "It wants this or that," or "It doesn't want this or that." It is the thought pattern itself that is wanting or not wanting, not I. This shift is extremely useful in witnessing the thought patterns so that colorings of attachment and aversion might be attenuated. The Ahamkara (literally "I-maker") makes a sort of mistake, by associating or identifying itself with some of those impressions in Chitta.

Yoga philosophy generally posits that the entire cause of our mental and emotional suffering is the false identification between Ahamkara and the data that is stored in Chitta. By witnessing the Four Functions of Mind, while they are functioning, we increasingly come to see this mistaken identity, which leads to freedom overall. Most of us, however, must do the daily work of whittling away at the various impressions attachments and aversions that are all part of the pageant of this life.

Conclusion and Advice

All sadhanas (spiritual practices), techniques, and disciplines are actually means to train the mind (all of the Four Functions of Mind).

The most important part of mental training is to make the mind aware that Reality lies beyond itself, and that this Reality is the eternal aspect of the Self or Soul. The mind is the finest instrument that we possess. If it is understood well, the mind can be helpful in our spiritual practices (sadhana). However, the mind must be well-ordered and disciplined. Otherwise, the mind can distract and dissipate all of our potentials. The Four Functions of Mind operate at the various levels of consciousness. In the waking state of consciousness, the four operate. In the dreaming state, the four operate. In the deep sleep state, the four functions become less active, as if they are partially receding back into the latent part of mind, the Chitta from which all of the activity arises in the dreaming and waking states. It is necessary that one learn to observe, understand, and train the functions of mind at the various levels of consciousness. Then, eventually, one can experience that Truth which is beyond all of the functions of mind and beyond the levels of waking, dreaming, and deep sleep.