The Layers of Life

According to the ancient Vedic tradition from which Primordial Sound Meditation is derived, we are multidimensional beings. In the eighth century, one of the most influential teachers of Vedic science and yoga philosophy, Adi Shankara, categorized these dimensions or layers of life into three primary divisions: our physical body, our subtle body, and our causal body. We could also call these layers our body, mind, and soul. We live simultaneously on all these different levels, and meditation benefits them all.

Let’s explore each of these primary layers and their three secondary layers.

The Physical Body

The physical body is made up of matter and energy. Within your physical domain, you have an extended body, a personal body, and an energetic body. Becoming more conscious of the choices you make to engage the world by minimizing toxicity and maximizing nourishment is the key to a healthy physical body.

Your extended body is the environment, containing the never-ending supply of energy and information that is available to you. Although your senses may tell you otherwise, there is no distinct boundary between your personal and extended bodies, which are in constant and dynamic exchange. Each breath that you inhale and exhale is a reminder of the continuous conversation taking place between your physical body and your environment. This recognition requires you to become an environmentalist and take responsibility for what is happening in your environment.

Of course, you do have a personal body that consists of the molecules that temporarily comprise your cells, tissues, and organs. We say temporarily because although it appears that your body is solid and constant, it is actually continuously transforming. The vast majority of the cells in your body are derived from the food you eat. Recognizing the intimate relationship between our personal body and the food we eat, Shankara named the physical body annamaya kosha, meaning “the covering made of food.” To create and maintain a healthy body, pay attention to the food you consume, minimizing the toxicity you ingest while maximizing the nourishment you receive.

Shankara called the third layer of the physical body pranamaya kosha, meaning “the sheath made of vital energy.” This organizing principle that breathes life into biochemicals is called prana. When prana is moving freely throughout the cells and tissues, vitality and creativity are abundant. Breathing exercises, known as pranayama techniques, are designed to awaken and purify the vital energy layer of the body.
Ultimately, meditation is our most efficient tool to help us make better choices by enhancing our ability to listen to the needs of our bodies.

**The Subtle Body**

Most people identify themselves with their mind, intellect, and ego, which are the three components of the subtle body. While it is easy to think that we are our mind and our thoughts, Shankara encourages us to recognize that the components of our subtle body are simply coverings of the soul and spirit.

According to this framework, the mind is the repository of sensory impressions. When you hear a sound, feel a sensation, see a sight, taste a flavor, or smell a fragrance, the sensory experience registers in your consciousness at the level of your mind. These experiences create your sense of reality. The mind cycles through different states of consciousness, and your sensory experiences change with these changing states. Reality also changes as you experience different states of consciousness.

The second layer of the subtle body is the intellect. This is the aspect of the mind that discriminates. Whether you are trying to decide what kind of toothpaste to purchase or choosing a partner, your intellect is at work, attempting to calculate the advantages and disadvantages of every choice you make. Your intellect integrates information based upon your beliefs and feelings and comes to a decision. The fundamental purpose of this intellectual layer is to distinguish the real from the unreal. The real is that which cannot be lost whereas the unreal is anything that has a beginning and an end. Knowing the difference is the essence of life.

The third layer of the subtle body is the ego or self-image. The ego is that aspect of your being that identifies with the positions and possessions of your life. It represents the way you want to project who you are to yourself and to the world around you. The ego is the boundary maker that attempts to assert ownership through the concepts of *I, me, my, and mine*. The ego seeks security and control and often has a deep need for approval. Most emotional pain is the result of your ego being offended because it believed it had control over something that was outside your jurisdiction.

It is easy to become lost in the subtle body, with its attachments to roles, relationships, and objects. Meditation helps reduce the mental and emotional turbulence that stand in the way of success and fulfillment. Relinquishing ownership of the body and mind will help you experience an aspect of your being that is beyond your usual conditioned limitations. This is the realm of spirit, which Shankara called the causal body.
The Causal Body – The Field of Pure Potentiality

According to Vedic wisdom, underlying the field of molecules that we call the physical body and the field of thoughts called the subtle body is a realm of life known as the causal body or the domain of spirit. Although we cannot perceive or measure this sphere of life, it gives rise to our thoughts, memories, feelings, dreams, and desires. This domain of spirit supports our physical body and is the creative force behind the material world. Like the physical body and the subtle body, the causal body has three layers.

The personal domain of spirit is the layer where the seeds of memory and desire are sown. Given the right environment, the seeds sprout, and you become capable of expressing your gifts in the world. Although the modern material model of life suggests that genes determine people’s individual talents, we only have to look at identical twins to realize that the molecular structure does not determine an individual’s nature. According to Shankara, every individual has a personal soul with unique memories and desires. These memories and desires guide the course of your life. When you nurture the seeds of your innate gifts with your attention and intention, they sprout, and your personal soul finds fulfillment.

The second sheath of the causal body is the collective domain. This realm impels you to live a life of mythical proportions. The mythic gods and goddesses are alive and well within the collective domain. They reside within your soul and have one desire—to express their creative power through you. You are a living story. Become aware of the stories you tell about yourself and your world. Participate consciously in writing the next chapter of your life. Meditation encourages you to expand your sense of self to embrace the collective domain of your soul. This is where the deepest aspirations of humanity find fulfillment through the perennial stories we tell ourselves and our children.

Shankara taught that the deepest aspect of our being is beyond time, space, and causality, yet gives rise to the manifest universe. This is the universal domain of spirit, where all distinctions merge in unity. The universal domain is an unbounded ocean of being disguised in the sheaths of the causal, subtle, and physical realms. This non-local, unbounded realm is the source and goal of life. Meditation encourages you to bring your attention to this universal domain so that you become imbued with the deep stillness and creativity it represents. Then, even as you are engaged in dynamic activity, you retain the silence and centered awareness of universal spirit.

The causal body is our underlying field of consciousness, which includes our soul and spirit. When we experience life from the level of spirit, our choices bring us greater
happiness, peace, love, meaning, and purpose. Through meditation we experience progressively expanded states of awareness, enabling us to travel deeper into the field of pure silence.

The Journey

The vision of life elaborated by Adi Shankara is as useful today as it was centuries ago. We live in a turbulent world where peace is sometimes difficult to find. The silence we experience in meditation is in the space between our thoughts where the potential for any other thought resides. Glimpsing this field of quiet expanded awareness allows you to recognize that your essential self is not the perpetual traffic of thoughts that fill your mind and reflect the world around you. When you quiet your inner turbulence in meditation and connect to the creative power of the universe, your intentions for peace, health, love, and meaning are spontaneously fulfilled. You find the thinker of your thoughts, the real you. The real you, being non-local, cannot be found in the body. It is spaceless, timeless, and unborn and therefore it can never die. Meditation allows you to explore your essential nature, restoring the memory of wholeness in your life.

For seekers of greater well-being, vitality, and wisdom, Shankara offers a map that ultimately leads to the field of pure potential where our spirit and soul reside. Our Primordial Sound Meditation course provides the technology to support this journey. We intend for these teachings to shift your awareness. Marcel Proust wrote, “The real journey of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes, but in seeing with new eyes.” Primordial Sound Meditation will enable you to witness your environment, body, and mind from a new perspective.