

The Ātmā and the Gross and Subtle Covers

(Sthūla- and sūkṣma-deha)

by Svāmī Sadānanda Dāsa

From German into English and
notes and comments in square brackets:

Kid Samuelsson

© Kid Samuelsson & Katrin Stamm 2011

Last modified 8.11.2012

The ātmā in every living being has two deha-s or śarīram-s (bodies, covers). The sthūla-deha (gross cover) consists of gross matter, “physical”; the sūkṣma or liṅga-deha (subtle cover) consists of subtle matter, “psychic”.

Both consist of the material of prakṛti – māyā distinguished by the guṇa-s – in which the three qualities, sattvam, rajaḥ and tamaḥ are combined in different proportions. Sattvam is still, bright, light, transparent, “white”. Rajaḥ is active, restless, heavier, somewhat opaque, “red”. Tamaḥ is slow, heavy, completely inert and opaque, “black”. All three are matter, but of different denseness and gravity.

In itself, the material of prakṛti is jaḍa, lifeless and motionless, dead; a-cit, non-consciousness, or a-cetanam, without life. The two covers become alive only through their connection with the ātmā. Without the ātmā, body and mind would be dead matter. The ātmā is in itself pure light of knowledge or consciousness, i.e. sva-prakāśa, shining by itself. It lights up, illuminates, gives life to that which in itself is dark, inert and inanimate. Because the ātmā gives life to that which in itself is dead, inanimate, i.e. the covers of mind and body, it is also called jīva (√jīv, jīvayati, animate). A tādātmyam follows, i.e. literally “to be of, have the nature of something else”, as in a red-hot iron bar, for instance, where the iron assumes the nature of the fire. The covers and the ātmā

become a seeming unity, which proves to be illusory as soon as the ātmā leaves the two covers: the inanimate matter of prakṛti remains, like the cold iron bar, from which the fire has withdrawn.

In relation to the ātmā, the covers are like upādhi-s, foreign elements, which change the natural functioning of the ātmā's own nature, as soon as the ātmā identifies himself with the covers, erroneously considers himself to be the covers, i.e. thinks: I am the body, I am the mind. The upādhi thus has a similar function as the moistness in a piece of firewood – instead of burning with a steady flame, the piece of wood burns with (dense) smoke. The ātmā loses its direct power of knowledge and experiences the reality indirectly, i.e. with the aid of the covers, into which he has infused life. The content of this experience is not the cit-reality of his own nature or the processes within himself, but the processes within the outer, physical or inner, psychic covering, which he identifies with. The ignorance of the ātmā is caused by māyā's power of [evoking] illusion. As such, māyā has a double function: she is āvaraṇātmikā, i.e. she covers the awareness of the ātmā, that he is ātmā, and she is vikṣepātmikā, i.e. she hurls away, gives him the illusion that he is something fundamentally different from what he actually is, making him believe that he is the covers.

The word māyā thus has a double meaning:

- 1) māyā = prakṛiti distinguished by the guṇa-s, of which the real, material covers consist.
- 2) māyā = ajñānam, i.e. unreal knowledge, illusion.

The sthūla-deha

The sthūla-deha consists of matter from *the five mahābhūtam-s*, the gross “elements”. These are not elements of chemical-physical nature, but fundamental principles, of which our world, perceived by the senses, consist. They are products of prakṛiti and her guṇa-s, in which tamaḥ by far predominates over the other two guṇa-s.

The five fundamental principles are:

ākāśa = space

vāyu = wind

tejaḥ = light, heat, fire

jalam = water

ṛthivī = solid substance, “earth”

In our natural world, perceived by the senses, these five mahābhūtam-s do not appear isolated from each other, only mixed with each other in certain proportions. Each of the five fundamental principles consists of a half of its own nature plus an eighth of the four others. Ākāśa, space, for instance, is permeated by vāyu, i.e. air, ether, it has a certain degree of heat and light, contains a certain percentage of humidity, and small particles of solid substance, as for instance particles of dust etc.

Each of these five fundamental principles has certain functions:

The principle of *ākāśa* makes it possible for things consisting of the other four fundamental principles to find space, a place where they can be on the whole. It gives these things their boundaries and constitutes their inner and outer.¹

The principle of *vāyu* is the form of *prāṇa* distinguished by *tamaḥ*, i.e. vitality in the form of the lifebreath, i.e. pulsation, and as such it gives life to the physical and psychic body. As wind it combines homogeneous and heterogeneous substances, causes the movement of the air, transports scent-carrying substances to the nose, and leads heat, cold, softness, hardness etc. to the organ perceiving touch in skin and nerves (the tactile sense).

As light, the principle of *tejaḥ* makes the *rūpam*, i.e. the colour or the form of an object, visible, it leads the *rūpam* to the organ of sight. As fire it heats, melts, dries, burns, causes hunger and thirst.

¹ Concerning *ākāśa*; in Svāmī Sadānanda Dāsa’s translation of parts of *Prīti Sandarbha*: “Space is what is empty, the vacuum. Bhagavān has no inner and outer”.

The principle of *jalam* moistens, masses other substances together, dissolves them, animates, removes fatigue, quenches thirst, leads the taste of a substance to the organ of taste and replenishes itself again and again, anew.

The principle of *prthivī* lends ākāśa its limitations, constitutes the material of all things consisting of solid substances, carries fragrances to the organ of smell. As the solid material of the physical cover it gives the indirect indication of the presence of an ātmā in it. If there were no solid substance on the whole, we could not see any living being. The fact that something lives, is an indirect indication of the presence of an ātmā in it.

The gross physical body, consisting of these five mahābhūtam-s, can have the form of a crystal, a river, mountain, star, seed, a plant, an animal, a ghost, a deva or a human being. The sthūla deha of man is distinguished by sense organs, which are:

- 1) the five sense organs of perception,
- 2) the five sense organs of action,
- 3) the *organs* for the cittaṃ (consciousness), the ahaṃkāra (I-concept), the manaḥ (thinking), and the buddhi (discerning).

1) The five *jñāna-indriyam-s*, i.e. sense organs of perception, are the organ of hearing in form of the ears, the organ of touch, consisting of skin and nerves, the organ of vision in the form of the eyes, the organ of taste, consisting of tongue and palate, and the nose as the organ of smell.

2) The five *karma-indriyam-s*, i.e. sense organs of action, are the mouth as the organ of speech and the organ of ingestion, the hands as the organs for performing work, the feet as the organs for locomotion, the anus as the organ of excretion, and the sexual organ.

3) Sattvam, ahaṃkāra, hṛdayam and buddhi are the *organs* for the four mental senses (cittaṃ, ahaṃkāra, manaḥ and buddhi).

These sense *organs* are not to be mistaken for the senses, which belong to the sūkṣma- or līṅga-deha. i.e. the psychic cover. It is well known that a sense organ can be destroyed or annihilated while the sense in itself remains. The organ is only the instrument for actualizing or realizing the sense.

As the sthūla-deha obviously is subjected to the six kinds of change² and – as everyone knows – after death is doomed to destruction, i.e. disintegration and change into other groupings of the five mahābhūtam-s, no one – and under no circumstances a paṇḍit or a wise man – should actually grieve when the sthūla-deha of a living being is destroyed.

The sūkṣma-deha

To the sūkṣma- or līṅga-deha, i.e. the subtle cover of the ātmā, belong:

- A) *the five tanmātram-s*
- B) *the antaḥkaraṇam*
- C) *the five jñāna-indriyam-s and the five karma-indriyam-s and*
- D) *the sūtram*

Every ātmā has this sūkṣma- or līṅga-deha, whether he has the sthūla-deha of a human or not. But it is only in connection with the human sthūla-deha that the potential of the sūkṣma-deha can develop fully.

A) *The five tanmātram-s* are the subtle substrata of the five mahābhūtam-s, i.e. fundamental principles, in their unmixed states:

śabda = sound vibration

sparśa = touch

² The six different forms of *vikāra* are:

1. janma; to become visible, “birth”
2. sattā; momentary existence
3. vṛddhi; growth
4. vipariṇāma; alteration, deformation
5. kṣaya; decline
6. nāśa; annihilation, to become invisible, “dead”.

rūpam = colour, form

rasa = taste

gandha = scent

Śabda is the phonetic expression of an idea, a meaning the sound indicates. It indicates what has not yet been seen by the faculty of vision with the aid of the organ of vision.

Sparśa has the qualities of softness, roughness, coldness, heat etc.

Rūpam is the means to perceive an object through the eye, it provides its structure, its qualities, its state and its changes; furthermore, it makes the brightness of the *tejaḥ*, light, perceptible.

Rasa is astringent, sweet, bitter, sour, pungent or salty.

Gandha is lovely, delicate, unpleasant, penetrating or a mixture of these four.

The *tanmātram*-s are just as the *mahābhūtam*-s products of the *guṇa*-s of *prakṛti*, in which the *tamaḥ* dominates over the other *guṇa*-s. Compared to the *mahābhūtam*-s, however, the *tanmātram*-s are much subtler.

B) The *antaḥkaraṇam*, i.e. the inner [mental] faculty, is a unity, consisting of four different layers, each having its special qualities and functions:

I. *Cittam*

II. *Manah*

III. *Buddhi*

IV. *Ahaṁkāra*

I. *Cittam* is the ability to experience something, generally, without clear details, consciously or unconsciously. Its seat or organ in the *sthūla-deha* is the *sattvam*. The qualities of the *cittam* are:

1. *Steadiness* or *continuity*, as its function does not cease either during dreamless sleep, deep sleep or in the state of samādhi.

2. *Receptivity*, as it receives impressions without being active in any way.

3. It is compared with the calm surface of a lake, which reflects reality mediated through the manaḥ, the buddhi and the organs of perception and action. In principle, the cittaṃ is pure and calm, dispassionate, and theoretically, it has the capacity to reflect the ātmā and God, i.e to receive the impression of the true nature of the ātmā and God. But in practice it is like a pond, covered with waves and foam, contaminated by mud and earth etc. This uncleanliness consists of the vāsanā-s, the seeds of lust and hate, stemming from the experience of pleasure and pain in this life or former lives, and the saṃskāra-s, the impressions from earlier experiences, which make us think and feel along habitual tracks. It is not possible to become aware of these vāsanā-s and saṃskāra-s in the cittaṃ through introspection and they are always ready to unfold into action. The presence of the vāsanā-s and saṃskāra-s in the cittaṃ causes a distorted reflection of the outer world and precludes any kind of reflection of the ātmā and God.

4. Cittaṃ is the receptive foundation of manaḥ and buddhi and it is influenced by the content and the processes in them.

II. *Manaḥ* is somewhat more active than the cittaṃ. It has the capacity to think, imagine, visualize, and then, more or less intensively, to dwell on details; it has the readiness to wish to experience something on the whole. Its seat or organ in the sthūla-deha is the hṛdayam. Its qualities and functions are versatile:

a) *It notices* the perceived sense-impressions, which proceed through the sense-organs to the senses, localizes them and causes the instinctive reaction to them.

b) *It is eager* to receive thought objects and outer objects of experience.

c) The thinking on objects gives rise to kāma, i.e. lust; to enjoy them anew and in better ways. By continuous thinking on the objects this lust grows into passion.

d) This *thinking on objects with hate or lust* is caused by the vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s, which are the results of earlier experiences of the same or similar objects. These vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s are permanent dirt in the cittam. In the manaḥ they become dynamic and cause the functions of the manaḥ to turn to the desired objects. The manaḥ for its part, then urges the senses to devote themselves to experiencing these objects.

e) In contrast to the cittam, which is more receptive, the manaḥ is somewhat *more active*. It reaches out for the objects.

f) The manaḥ becomes strongly affected by the objects it thinks of. This is called the *viṣaya-ākāratā* of the manaḥ, which means that it adopts the ākāratā (the form) of the viṣaya-s (the objects). These things are either objects of the outer world, as they are perceived by the manaḥ, or thoughts arising within it.

In deep sleep and samādhi the functions of the manaḥ become temporarily suspended. The vāsanā-s and the saṁskāra-s that are present in the manaḥ can be made conscious with the aid of intellectual introspection by the buddhi.

III. *Bodha*, normally named *buddhi* after its seat or organ, is the most active part of the antaḥkaraṇam. The buddhi has the capacity to discern the degree of reality and value of a thought or an outer object. Its qualities are conscious consideration and conscious direction of the senses, the manaḥ and the cittam – and as a result of this the vāsanā-s and the saṁskāra-s present in the manaḥ, in the cittam and in itself turn towards the objects.

Its functions are:

Samśaya

or *vikalpa* = doubt

viparyaya = mistake, error

pramāṇam = valid knowledge

smṛti = recollection of what has been thought of or experienced before.

nidrā = dreams

The nature and content of these five functions of the buddhi are influenced by the *vāsanā*-s and *saṁskāra*-s in the *cittam* and the *manaḥ* and their development to *kāma*, i.e. desire, in the *manaḥ*. In the event of an increase of *pramāṇam*, i.e. valid knowledge, the buddhi can become aware of the *vāsanā*-s and *saṁskāra*-s that influence the *manaḥ* and itself.

The buddhi corresponds to something like the lantern of the intellect, which points the way to the satisfaction of the impulses of *rāga* (affection, love) and *dveṣa* (aversion, hate) that arise from the *vāsanā*-s and *saṁskāra*-s.

In deep sleep and *samādhi* the functions of the buddhi are suspended.

Two of these functions of the buddhi must be taken into special consideration, as the knowledge of them is required for understanding the *Gītā*, viz. *viparyaya* and *pramāṇam*:

Viparyayam, i.e. mistake, error, which comprises the five *kleśas* (stains, tribulations):

a) *Avidyā*, i.e. ignorance, which consists in the tendency to consider what is transitory, ugly, dirty, morally bad and leading to suffering, to be eternal, beautiful, pure, morally good, leading to happiness, and the reverse.

b) *Asmitā*, i.e. the false “I-concept”, which consists in the erroneous inference that the buddhi considers itself, the *sthūla*- and the *liṅga*-*deha* to be the true I, the *ātmā*.

c) *Rāga*, i.e. passionate desire, arisen from former experiences of joy, because attracting, promising qualities are invested in the factually neutral objects of knowledge and experience, although in fact they do not possess them at all.

d) *Dveṣa*, i.e. aversion and hatred, arisen from former experiences of pain, because repellent, depreciating qualities are invested in the factually neutral objects of knowledge and experience, although in fact they do not possess them at all.

e) *Abhiniveśa*, i.e. to be so engrossed in the thoughts of the continuity of one's existence that one clings to one's *sthūla-* and *liṅga-deha*, in spite of one's own former experiences of the fact that one must die.

These five *kleśas* are interdependent.

Pramāṇam = valid knowledge, has ten sources:

1. The most prominent is *śabda*, i.e. the communicated word. The value and the authority of the *śabda* depends on the person communicating it. The Vedas, i.e. God's revelation in the form of sound vibrations, is the highest authority.
2. *Pratyakṣa-anubhava* is one's own direct knowledge and experience.
3. *Anumānam* is argument by logical analogy.
4. *Ārṣa* is the statement of a ṛṣi, i.e. a wise man, or a *devatā*, i.e. Divinity.
5. *Upamānam* is argument by comparison.
6. *Arthāpatti* is a logical inference, without which two contradictory insights (knowledge), experiences or statements would be meaningless.
7. *Abhāva*, i.e. the inference that an object does not exist, because it is not perceived.
8. *Samābhava* is inference based on probability.
9. *Aitihiyam* is knowledge based on ancient tradition, although the origin of this traditional knowledge cannot be established.
10. *Ceṣṭa* is knowledge produced by a symbolic gesture of another person.

In principle, the correct assessment of these ten sources of knowledge and the functions and contents of the *buddhi* are subject to *four* fundamental

deficiencies that follow from the structure of the senses and the sense organs and the influence of the *vāsanā-s* and the *saṁskāra-s*:

1. *Bhrama*, i.e. an error, that consists in, for instance, considering a rope, resembling a snake, to be a snake.
2. *Pramāda*, i.e. a state of confusion that arises from the tendency to be overly influenced by certain aspects of an object, causing other aspects of the same object to be pushed into the background, ignored, because they are not paid any attention.
3. *Karaṇāpātavam* is the total incapability of the senses, the sense organs, *cittam*, *manaḥ* and *buddhi*, to perceive any objects beyond their field of perception. The senses and the sense organs cannot perceive all objects as their structure is not subtle enough. The senses and the sense organs cannot pass on some of the experiences, either because the *manaḥ* is absent-minded, so that this part of the experience is not noticed by the *manaḥ* because it is busy elsewhere, or because a sense or sense organ is temporarily overstrained. The most important part of the *karaṇāpātavam* is the fundamental inadequacy of the sense organs, the senses, the *cittam*, *manaḥ* and *buddhi* to perceive what is not formed of the *guṇa-s* of *prakṛti*, what is unbounded by time and space – and this is where one's *ātmā* and God belong. Within the world of the *guṇa-s* of *prakṛti* and within time and space it is not possible to perceive either the totality of all objects or many objects simultaneously. And in addition to this, the perception is more or less distorted by *vāsanā-s* and *saṁskāra-s*.
4. *Vipralipsā* is the proneness to deception. This means the inclination, influenced by affection and aversion (the *vāsanā-s* and *saṁskāra-s*), subjectively to change what is experienced so that it pleases oneself, because one wants to prove right, to oneself or to others.

IV. *Ahaṁbhāva*. After its seat or organ in the *sthūla-deha* it is also called *ahaṁkāra*. It is the I-principle, I-sense, I-consciousness.

Vikṣepātmikā-māyā provides the *ātmā* with the awareness, the impression that he is something else than himself. But in order to be able to really experience the world, the *ātmā* needs a new I-sense, a new I-principle, so that the unity of the *sūkṣma-* and *sthūla-deha* can perceive itself as an I and the objects can be experienced as related to an experiencing I. As the other layers of the *antaḥkaraṇam*, this I-principle is a product of *māyā* distinguished by the *guṇa-s*, i.e. an objective reality. As the other layers of the *antaḥkaraṇam*, the I-principle is inert matter as well, which becomes illuminated, conscious, animate through the connection with the *ātmā*.

Due to the mistake of the *buddhi* called *viparyaya* (mentioned above) the *abhimāna*, i.e. delusion, arises that the *ātmā* considers the I-principle of the *guṇa-s* to be his own I-principle and thinks that he is an independent acting and experiencing subject identical with the *deha-s*. The *viparyaya* (mistake) of the *buddhi* is *asmitā*, i.e. the false notion that the *buddhi* considers itself and the two *deha-s* to be the true I, the *ātmā*. From this *asmitā* the *mamatā*, i.e. the sense of my and mine, follows: the mistake that one relates, in a personal way, other objects and individuals to this delusive I – related to the two *deha-s* – and, for instance, thinks like: my parents, my children, my house, my property, my relatives, etc.

Note that the term *ahaṁkāra*, which actually denotes the I-principle consisting of the *guṇa-s*, in the *Śāstram-s* often is used for the *asmitā*, the delusive mistake of the *buddhi*. In the same way the terms *manaḥ*, *cittam* and *buddhi* are used for the *antaḥkaraṇam* as a whole. *Hṛdaya-granthi*, i.e. the knot of the heart, denotes *ahaṁkāra*, consisting in ignorance, in the sense of *asmitā*, because it binds the *ātmā* to the covers in an almost inseparable unity.

To the *ātmā*, who wants to enjoy the world and its objects, *ahaṁkāra* is a very enticing principle, as without the awareness of oneself as an experiencing subject – in which the unity of the *deha-s* consists – neither the interaction of

the functions of the covers and their biological maintenance, nor the experience of the world and its objects are possible.

In deep sleep and samādhi the function of the ahaṁkāra, as well as of the buddhi and the manaḥ, become temporarily suspended, and the ahaṁkāra regains its activity only by the awakening to the awareness of the outer world. Then the buddhi says: “I have slept well; I have slept so well that I didn’t know anything of myself.” Naturally, this statement is only possible due to the fact that the ātmā has his own I-principle, related to which, the inner stillness – caused by the suspension of the function of the manaḥ, the buddhi and the ahaṁkāra – was experienced as a state of happiness.

The four layers of the antaḥkaraṇam, i.e. the cittam, the manaḥ, the buddhi and the ahaṁkāra, form an organic whole, i.e. four functions of the one antaḥkaraṇam or inner sense. The ahaṁkāra keeps the whole sthūla- and liṅga-deha together like a clamp, forming a seeming organic unity. Its existence guarantees the possibility of experiencing on the whole. Because the vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s perpetually urge to experiencing objects – i.e. to intensify, to heighten themselves – they make the buddhi think in terms of asmitā, so that the ahaṁkāra in all future can use the I-principle, which the ātmā now considers his own, but in reality only assumed through ignorance of himself. This explains man’s endeavours to preserve himself as a whole, his tendency to regard himself as so important, and the error of the buddhi to postulate individual immortality for man, i.e. to consider even a resurrection of the physical body to be true or plausible, or at least to believe in the continued existence of a personal soul. The vāsanā-s and saṁskāra-s cause the buddhi to defend itself against the statements that body and mind or soul in reality are only gross and subtle covers, alien to the nature of the ātmā and animated by his presence. According to the statements of the Vedas, however, what we consider as mind and soul is nothing but the totality of the processes in the antaḥkaraṇam.

C) To the sūkṣma-deha belong the *five jñāna-indriyam-s* (i.e. senses of knowledge; as the sense of hearing, the sense of touch, the sense of vision, the sense of taste and the sense of smell), the *five karma-indriyam-s* (i.e. senses of

action; as the sense of speech, the sense of shaping, the sense of moving, the sense of excretion and the sense of procreation) and

D) the *sūtram* or *mukhya-prāṇa*, the main principle of *prāṇa*, which is the power of pulsation, the lifebreath, through which the *antaḥkaraṇam*, the senses and the *sthūla-deha* are supplied with their own powers *sahaḥ*, *ojaḥ* and *balam* (from the *mukhya-prāṇa* develop the five principles of the five *prāṇa-s*, which become grosser materialized in the *sthūla-deha* through the *mahābhūtam vāyu*).

At the time of death the *ātmā* together with the complete *sūkṣma-deha* leaves the *sthūla-deha* and receives, in accordance with his own *karma*, i.e. his own behaviour in this and earlier *sthūla-deha-s*, a new *sthūla-deha*, which rarely is a human one. The *sūkṣma-deha* is so minute and subtle that it cannot be seen when it leaves the body. It follows the *ātmā* in his wanderings through the world of the *guṇa-s* of *prakṛti* until the *ātmā* is freed from the illusion to consider himself to be the *sūkṣma-deha*.

All that a living being experiences is experienced in the *antaḥkaraṇam* and the impressions of these experiences are stored in it in the form of *vāsanā-s* and *saṁkāra-s*, and the consequences of its actions follow it. The *mukhya-prāṇa* and the *prāṇa-s* are contained in the *sūkṣma-deha* and leave the *sthūla-deha* together with the *sūkṣma-deha*.

As *mukti* – i.e. the release of the *ātmā* from his ignorance, from the attachment to the covers and the covers themselves – normally is not achieved, there is no cause for a wise man to grieve for the *sūkṣma-deha* of the deceased, as it follows the *ātmā* for an indefinite period of time.

