

# Doorways to Deeper Experience

## Exploring the Koshas

by Denise Benitez

Every human being is a complex and beautiful tapestry of body, emotion, thought, energy, feeling, memory, imagination, and soul. In the last year, I have been intrigued by the yoga idea that these levels of our being can be accessed, experienced, and influenced. These various levels of our being, called koshas (usually translated as “sheath”) in Sanskrit, are rich avenues of exploration for deepening our yoga practice. In an article she wrote in *Yoga Journal*, Shiva Rea called the koshas “a template for exploring the mystery of being alive.” “Koshas,” she said, “help describe what it’s like to do yoga from the inside.”

Most systems of yoga consider five koshas, but I have been inspired by BKS Iyengar’s presentation of seven koshas. In my exploration of these ideas, I have been influenced by yogic thought as well as many other resources, such as poetry, nature, Buddhism, and my own experience of this life. What I offer here is not a scholarly treatise on the koshas, but one person’s weaving of life experience, learning, and curiosity around some potent ideas in the yoga tradition.

The seven koshas are: Annamaya Kosha; the physical body, Pranamaya Kosha; the body of energy, Manomaya Kosha; the emotional body, Vijnanamaya Kosha; the wisdom body, Anandamaya Kosha; the body of joy, Cittamaya Kosha; the body of consciousness, and Atmamaya Kosha; the body of pure spirit.

In any yoga practice, it is skillful to start with the body, Annamaya Kosha. We can take a comfortable seat and begin to notice the felt experiences of our bodies. This observation tends to be very grounding and calming. Even though we may have practiced yoga for years, it’s entirely possible that we’ve gone through a whole day or even a whole week without noticing the sensations in our bodies at all. Exploring the Annamaya Kosha involves the desire to become more knowledgeable about our bodies, which naturally will evolve into a sense of awe and gratitude at the miraculous nature of our bodies. To delve into the Annamaya Kosha, try doing an entire yoga practice and simply watch the felt experience of your body, without adding anything extra, such as evaluative inner commentary on your performance.

When we turn toward the Pranamaya Kosha, we enter the realm of energy and its’ very real and mysterious influence on our bodies and minds. The energy body is particularly receptive to imagery. Certain thoughts can make you physically stronger and others can make you physically weaker. Energy will tend to follow thought; where your thoughts go, your energy will follow. When you sit at the beginning of your asana practice, let your inner energy body relax out into the space around you, so you feel that, energetically, you take up more space. Give yourself the image that you are energetically expansive. You will then begin your practice in a state of deep relaxation; your breath will naturally slow and become more steady. Your breath then becomes the bridge between your energy body and your physical body. As you move into asana practice, even though your muscles may be contracting and working, let your energy body remain expansive.

Manomaya Kosha can be seen as experiencing ourselves through our emotional selves. This kosha has to do with the entire field of emotion, memory, dreaming, imagery, and the experience of pleasure and pain. Where the energy body does not create commentary, the emotional body can become very opinionated, especially during a deep backbend! Asana practice creates an opportunity to place ourselves in challenging physical situations and then to skillfully navigate the emotional responses that occur. Each of us knows our own emotional tendencies; when you are unbalanced emotionally, where do you go? Anger? Depression? Anxiety? These states can arise during asana practice, as we are pushed toward our edges. I like the practice of using an emotional antidote as a way of becoming more emotionally skillful. For example, if your imbalance tendency is anger, try doing a whole asana practice with the quality of kindness or softness. If your imbalance tendency is anxiety, try practicing with steadiness or earthiness.

The Vijnanamaya Kosha brings us to the concept that we each have a place of innate wisdom, the wisdom body. The Sanskrit word “vijnana” means “knowing,” and it refers to deep knowing--that place inside us of intuition, discrimination, discernment. The part of ourselves that absolutely knows what is useful and what is not useful, what to keep and what to let go of. You can think of the Vijnanamaya Kosha as the witness consciousness we sometimes fall into in a good yoga or meditation practice; that inner observer that is always benevolent. There are two great images for working with the Vijnanamaya kosha during your asana practice. One is to place your awareness in your third eye point, located between your eyebrows, about one inch up your forehead, and about 1/2 inch back into your skull. (Coincidentally, this is the location of your pineal gland, which in Western medicine is known to be related to the perception of light, production of melatonin, and the regulation of sleeping and waking.) As you practice, watch your experience from this location, keeping the benevolent inner witness awake. Another lovely way to practice is to imagine that you are expanding your vision so that you have the vision of an eagle soaring in the sky. Watch yourself and your experience from this eagle eye vision, the eye of wisdom.

The Sanskrit word ananda means bliss or joy. The Anandamaya Kosha, sometimes called the Body of Joy, reveals a gateway to an experience of inner contentment. Many spiritual traditions have a foundation philosophy that says humans are not intrinsically ag-

gressive, but are inherently peaceful; that the human mind, when it rests in its natural state, is by nature joyous, calm, and clear. This experience of a natural peaceful state of mind can often arise out of meditation. And it can also arise out of an asana practice when one can allow the mind to be as it is. Try doing an asana practice where you allow yourself to really feel an unqualified innate delight in what you are doing.

Cittamaya Kosha, the Body of Consciousness, can be seen as the highest, deepest aspect of the human psyche. Because breath and consciousness are so intimately entwined, breath is a powerful avenue to contact this vast terrain of intelligence. As you practice, imagine that your breath is touching everywhere, even into the inner terrain of your cells, where a great intelligence resides. Think about it--your cells have an intelligence that keeps your heart beating, your body healing, your breath moving. Let this awareness of the free movement of your breath and a recognition of the mysterious intelligence within you bring you to a clear connection to this living moment of your life.

Atmamaya Kosha is often called "a state beyond words." So how to describe it? Sometimes just dropping words into our consciousness, or into the collective space we share as you read what I have written can propel one into an experience of expansion. Atmamaya Kosha is the Body of Spirit. It is pure consciousness. It is an absolute knowledge of the self. It is an experience of being self-illuminated, lit from within. It is the integration of the soul. Try cultivating a deep inner and outer silence in your asana practice to connect with this kosha.

Even though the koshas are often presented as a step by step process, I invite you to delve into whatever speaks to you most strongly, whatever is most compelling and juicy. In this way, you will bring light to many more layers of your experience in your yoga practice, enhancing this profound journey we call life.