

Maha Yoga - the Key to Self-Realization

Many of us wonder why we were created in the first place, why we go through the cycle of birth followed by death and being reborn again, and what can be done to end this seemingly endless cycle. This article attempts to address these questions and describes how Maha Yoga can help end the cycle of birth - death - rebirth by enabling Sadhaks to actually experience Self-Realization in their lifetimes. - Editor.

According to our scriptures, the Paramatma (Universal Soul - God - Pure Consciousness), which is the underlying energy and consciousness that powers the entire universe has three aspects/roles: creation of matter and energy, maintenance of the matter and energy that was created, and dissolution of the matter and energy. The creation aspect is called Brahma, the maintenance aspect Vishnu and the dissolution aspect Shiva. Not only do these three principles of creation, maintenance and dissolution apply to the external universe, they also apply to the creation, maintenance and the eventual dissolution of each individual Atma (soul).

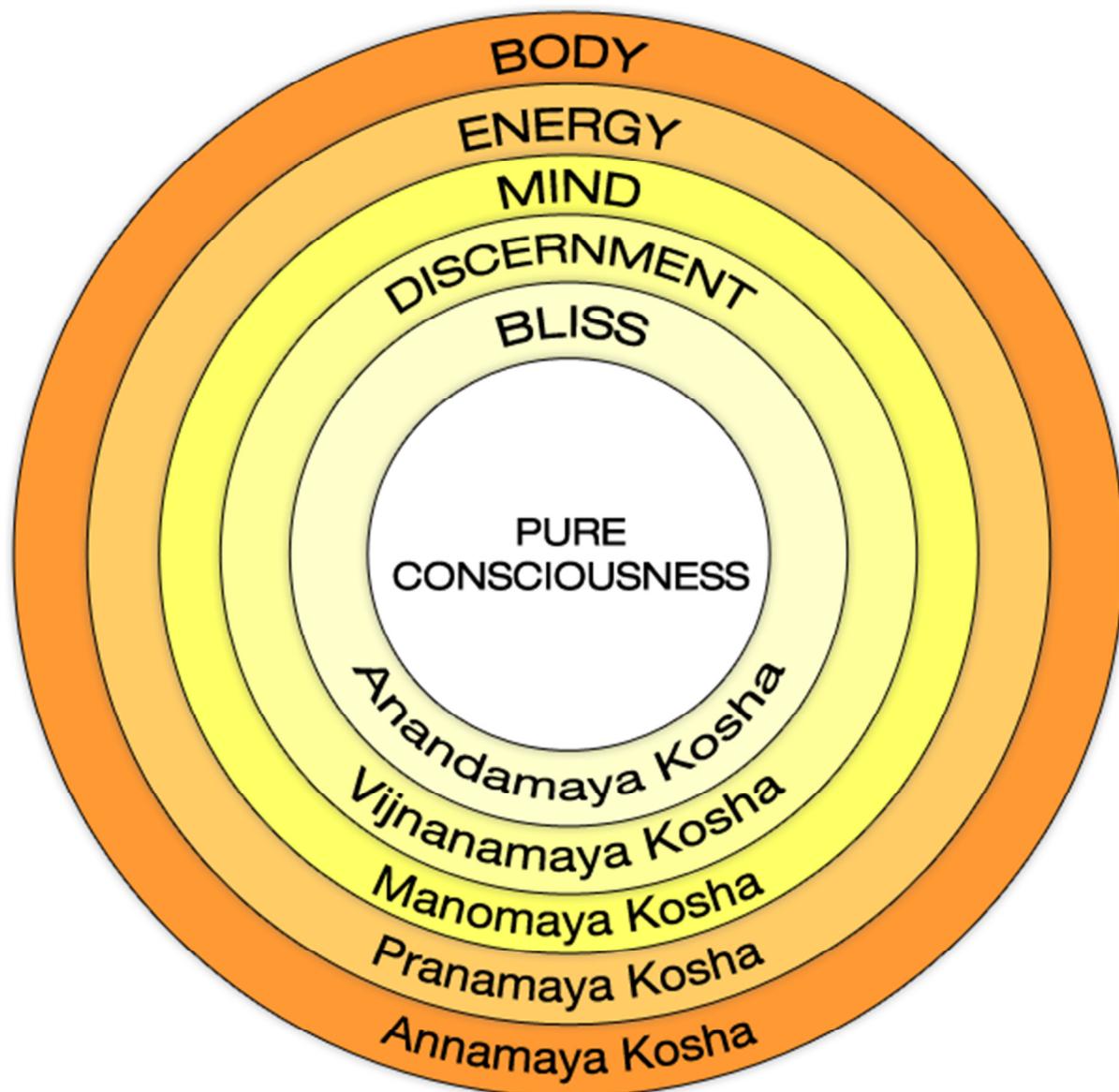
Creation

The Paramatma is all pervasive; it underlies all matter, animate or inanimate. Inanimate objects, such as rocks, sand, paper, metallic objects, etc. do not have consciousness or sentience, but the Paramatma resides in them as well. And because inanimate objects do not have consciousness, sentience or awareness, they do not have an Atma (soul). (Those of us who have not reached the state of Self Realization are unable to see and experience the presence of the Paramatma in such inanimate objects but Yogis who have reached that state see the Paramatma in all things, be they inanimate or animate.)

The Paramatma pervades animate (living) beings as well, from the lowest life forms all the way to us humans. Clearly, lower life forms that do not even have a sense of being self-aware are of course unaware of the Paramatma within, but even higher forms of life such as us humans who are self-aware, are generally not aware of the Paramatma within us. In fact, our bodies, the Prana Shakti (life energy) that animates our bodies, and our minds, constitute three of the five Koshas (layers or sheaths) that cover the ParamAtma that resides in each and every one of us, and hide its presence from our awareness.

Our body itself is called the Annamaya Kosha, or the Body Kosha, the layer/sheath that is supported by the food (Anna) we eat. The life energy (Prana) that animates our inanimate body is called the Pranamaya Kosha, or the Energy Kosha and our mind (Mana) which is made up of thoughts and which gives us the intent to act is called the Manomaya Kosha, or the Mind Kosha. Within these three Koshas reside two other Koshas. The first of these is the Vignyanamaya Kosha also called the Intellect Kosha or the Discernment Kosha; it is the "hard disk" that stores the accumulated impressions (Samskaras) from our current and past lives. The innermost Kosha is the Anandmaya Kosha, or the Bliss Kosha, which separates our Atma from the ParamAtma

of which it is a part. These five Koshas separate us from the ParamAtma thus creating for us our Atma (individual soul) from the ParamAtma. So, even though our Atma is Pure Consciousness as is the ParamAtma that pervades the universe, the five Koshas (layers/sheaths) help create the Bhram (deception) that we are separate individuals unconnected from each other and separate from the ParamAtma and the universe around us. This process of Atma creation is played by the Brahma aspect of the ParamAtma, the creator of the Bhram that our Atma is separate from the ParamAtma. There is no specific reason that Atmas get created. Their creation is in the very nature of our universe and the ParamAtma.



The Five Koshas

Maintenance - The endless cycle of birth-death-rebirth

Once the Atma (soul) gets created residing in a body animated by the Prana Shakti, with a mind of its own, a storage device (Vignyanamaya Kosha) ready to store and accumulate impressions, and separated from the ParamAtma, the being as represented by the Atma surrounded by the five Koshas begins the process of self-deception. As it lives its life with its awareness limited to thinking of itself as a separate being, identifying itself primarily with its body, and only being aware of the world outside, it develops attachments and aversions related to the external world, thus beginning the process of accumulating impressions (Samskaras) and strengthening the ego, all of which reside in the Vignyanamaya Kosha, the storage layer.

Day by day, the being (the pure Atma, a fragment of the ParamAtma, surrounded by the five Koshas) accumulates more and more impressions and reinforces the impressions that have already been accumulated, thus building long-lasting Vrittis (tendencies and predispositions to act or think) that cause it to behave in certain specific ways. The buildup of Samskaras in the Vignyanamaya Kosha of a living “being” can happen in two ways. It can happen with the being’s body reacting to an external stimulus it receives through one or more of the senses and the being either experiencing positive or negative feelings from it thus creating new impressions (Samskaras) or reinforcing existing ones. Another way it can happen is when the Samskaras and Vrittis residing in the Vignyanamaya Kosha cause thoughts to pop up in the being’s mind (Manomaya Kosha). The mind in turn directs the Prana Shakti to animate the body to react to a specific thought in a specific way, leading to pleasure/joy or disappointment/fear. These impressions of joy or disappointment create new Samskaras or reinforce already existing ones.

As a living being repeatedly behaves in ways that favor inaction, laziness, greed and fear, and in higher life forms, negative tendencies like jealousy, vengefulness, anger, avarice, etc., it builds a trove of what are called Tamasik (negative/dark) Samskaras and Vrittis. As it repeatedly behaves in a manner that favors activity for the sake of activity, and in higher life-forms, tendencies that support self-centeredness, egotism, passion, etc., it builds an accumulation of Rajasik (activity favoring) Samskaras and Vrittis. On the other hand, if the being (primarily in higher life-forms) behaves in a manner that emphasizes goodness, purity, harmony, serenity, peacefulness, etc., it builds an accumulation of Sattvik (good, pure) Samskaras and Vrittis.

In this manner, the being, with the pure Atma, residing in a body and with the Prana Shakti that is externally focused, sees itself as separate from the ParamAtma, sees itself as the doer of all its actions, be they Tamasik, Rajasik or Sattvik (in higher life forms), develops attachments and aversions related to the external world it lives in, and accumulates Tamasik, Rajasik and Sattvik Samskaras, with all these Samskaras being stored in the Vignyanamaya Kosha. As the accumulation of Samskaras keeps on increasing, especially the Tamasik and the Rajasik types, the being’s sense of ego and separateness get reinforced. It goes through its life being completely unaware that it is in fact a part of the ParamAtma itself. It sees itself as a separate entity and as the

doer of everything that matters to it. It identifies itself primarily with its body, the outermost Kosha; often being completely unaware of the Prana Shakti within it or even its mind, leave aside becoming aware of the other Koshas or the Atma within. Since the living being identifies itself primarily with its body, it develops a great fear of death, thinking that once the body dies, that is the end of it all.

But death is not the end of it all. Upon death, the Prana Shakti separates from the body and the body becomes inanimate. This happens as the Pranamaya Kosha (Energy Kosha) collapses into the Manomaya Kosha (Mind Kosha), and as the mind ceases to function the Manomaya Kosha collapses into the Vignyanamaya Kosha (Discernment/Intellect Kosha). At this point the Atma surrounded by the inner two Koshas, the Vignyanamaya Kosha into which are stored the accumulated Samskaras from the current and previous lives, and the Anandmaya Kosha which separates the Atma from the ParamAtma, departs from the dead body and eventually moves into another body, i.e. gets born again as another living being. The specific new birth it goes through, depends on that birth's **potential** for fulfilling the Atma's needs given its accumulated Samskaras, balanced by the **potential** for fulfillment of the needs of all other Atmas affected by the new birth. Here the Atma surrounded by the two Koshas occupies the new body, and the Samskaras that were accumulated during past lives, stored in the Vignyanamaya Kosha, are ready to provide intent and motivation to create thoughts and shape the mind in the new body and to fulfill the needs that were left unfulfilled in the previous life.

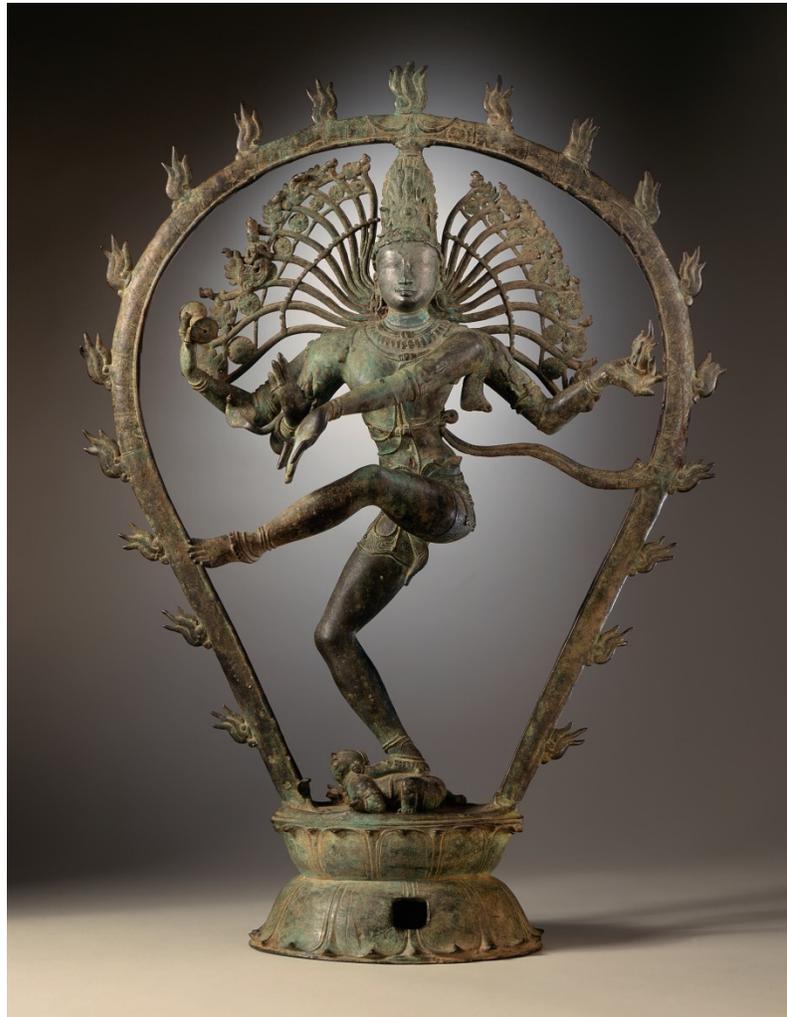
This combination of the Atma taking birth in the new body defines the Prarabdha (destiny) - the initial conditions and the future potential for the Atma's progress in the new body, given the circumstances that are likely to come from that birth. The Prarabdha defines the new-born being's potential; the new-born being's efforts (Prayatna) shape the outcomes that happen as the Atma progresses in its new life. This explains why some people are born with specific talents or tendencies at birth. What a person does with those talents and tendencies shapes his life after that birth, as well as his future births.

This process of an Atma's birth, the accumulation of new Samskaras and the reinforcing of existing Samskaras during its life as a living being, the being's death, followed by the Atma's rebirth in order to fulfill its unfulfilled needs keeps on repeating itself in an endless cycle of birth - death - rebirth ---. This is the "maintenance" aspect of the Paramatma. As long as the Prana Shakti animating a being is directed towards the outside world, the being keeps on accumulating new Samskaras and reinforcing existing Samskaras, constantly looking for fulfillment in the external world and keeps getting reborn after each death, over and over again.

Dissolution

The only way to stop this cycle is to wait for the end of the universe (Pralaya), or if we are interested in ending the cycle before Pralaya to not have any unfulfilled needs and actually experience the presence of the ParamAtma within us in this very life. Of

course, waiting for Pralaya to happen will be a very, very, very long wait, having to go through a seemingly endless cycle of births, deaths and rebirths. The other option that we, who are lucky to have been born as human beings, have is to experience Atma Sakshatkar, i.e. actually **experience** the presence of the ParamAtma within us, so upon our passing from this life there will be no need for us to be born again and our Atma, free of the Koshas covering it, can merge with the ParamAtma. This is the process of complete dissolution of the ego, the Shiva aspect of the Paramatma. It is represented in the image of the Nataraja, a serene Lord Shiva dancing on the ego (represented by a baby) to dissolve it completely.



Lord Shiva as Nataraj

So, how can we reach this state? Some of us might think that since the Atma is present within us all we need to do is just look for it by directing our Prana Shakti inward so we can use it to penetrate through the inner Koshas and find it. But lower forms of life and even most human beings are incapable of directing their Prana Shakti inwards because they aren't even aware of the separate existence of the Prana Shakti within them. We think of ourselves as our bodies and see the energy that

animates our bodies, the Prana Shakti, as being completely in our control. And with our Prana Shakti being directed outwards, to the external world, we see the external world as real and look for pleasure and joy in that world and fear the loss of that world and our current lives, giving in to the Bhram (deception) that separates our Atmas from the ParamAtma. So, even though the Atma, a fragment of the ParamAtma, resides in all living beings, most of us are incapable of actually experiencing it, because even though it is within us, we don't have the key to unlock it.

Maha Yoga - the Key to Dissolution of the Ego and Self-Realization

One way to get the key to unlock the Koshas, the sheaths/layers that hide from our awareness the Atma/ParamAtma that is within us, is to have the Prana Shakti become inward-directed by years of effort-based Yoga practices like Hatha, Laya, Japa, Raja, etc. guided by Guru's who are experts in those practices. Or it can become inward-directed in an instant through the grace of a Siddha (capable) Guru, i.e. through Maha Yoga Shaktipat Deeksha (initiation). The Deeksha instantly makes the Sadhak aware of the Prana Shakti within him, and that it is a separate entity that is capable of animating the body regardless of his trying to control it. As it is, the Prana Shakti animates various processes in our bodies (e.g. the digestive, circulatory, renal, respiratory, etc.) without us even being aware of it or the processes it animates. However, when the Prana Shakti gets directed inwards during Maha Yoga Deeksha, Kriyas (involuntary activities that can be physical, mental or related to energy flow within the body) begin to happen automatically, and the Sadhak becomes experientially aware of the Prana Shakti's presence and its capabilities.

Once the Prana Shakti has become inward-directed, either through years of effort-based Yoga practices or instantly through Maha Yoga Shaktipat Deeksha, the Sadhak has the "key" to eventually unlock the locks to the Koshas that cover up the Atma within. When the Prana Shakti was outward-directed, the thoughts arising in a Sadhak's mind caused either by external stimuli or arising from the Samskaras within, would have only served to create new Samskaras or reinforce existing ones. But when the Prana Shakti gets inward-directed (also referred to as being "awakened"), when a Sadhak sits for Sadhan and surrenders to the awakened Prana Shakti within him, the Prana Shakti enters the Vignyanamaya Kosha and causes the Samskaras that have been accumulated there to get expressed into the Sadhak's awareness as Kriyas.

Some Samskaras get expressed as movements of the body (physical Kriyas), others get expressed as movements of Prana within (Pranic Kriyas), and still others get expressed as thoughts and emotions (mental Kriyas). These expressions/Kriyas happen without the Sadhak's intent; they are the work of the awakened Prana Shakti as she begins the process of eliminating the accumulated Samskaras from the Sadhak's Vignyanamaya Kosha. This process of the inward-directed Prana Shakti causing the expression of Samskaras in the form of Kriyas is the process whereby the Kriyas get eliminated from the Sadhak's Chitta. Having surrendered to the awakened Prana Shakti within him all a Sadhak need do during Sadhan is to simply observe the Kriyas as they happen, not develop attachments to them or get afraid of them, but to just

let them happen and let them go. He should not think of himself as the “doer” (Karta) during Sadhan, but simply the “observer (Sakshi). By surrendering to the awakened Prana Shakti within him the Sadhak should let her be the “doer” and allow her to do what is right for his spiritual growth. With this process of observing the Kriyas that happen during Sadhan, not developing any attachments to them or fear of them, and by simply letting them go, the Sadhak’s Chitta gets cleansed of the Samskaras that underlie the Kriyas.

When a specific Samskara has been eliminated, the Kriya that would happen as it got expressed by the awakened Prana Shakti will not happen any longer. That is good news indeed. Many Sadhaks get attached to Kriyas they find pleasurable or develop aversions to Kriyas that they find troubling for some reason. But doing so only creates new attachments and aversions and therefore adds to the trove of Samskaras instead of eliminating them. Maha Yoga Sadhaks who have recently been initiated usually experience Kriyas related to Tamasik and Rajasik tendencies. For example they might experience a preponderance of physical Kriyas such as bodily movements, the automatic occurrences of Asanas, Mudras, Bandhas, Pranayam, etc. Or they may experience strong emotions such as anger, jealousy, grief, etc. or even falling asleep or feeling fatigued, that occur without any cause or explicit intent on part of the Sadhaks. While some of the physical and emotional Kriyas might make a Sadhak feel good that his Sadhan is progressing well, it is important to note that as a Sadhak advances and the accumulation of the Samskaras that underlie such Kriyas gets thinned out, those Kriyas will stop happening. The nature of the Kriyas that happen will get more and more subtle. This is a sign of progress, rather than the continued recurrence of the same physical Kriyas that the Sadhak might have felt was indicative of progress. Sadhaks should think of the Kriyas happening as a process of cleansing of their Chitta (mind-stuff), the removal of the “garbage” of accumulated Samskaras, the thinning out of the Vignyanamaya Kosha, the elimination of the Vrittis from the Sadhak’s Chitta. It is the manifestation of Patanjali’s definition of Yoga: Chitta Vritti Nirodhah - the elimination of all Vrittis from the Chitta. Incidentally, all Samskaras need to get eliminated eventually, whether they are Tamasik, Rajasik or even Sattvik, so the Chitta is free of all Vrittis.

With regular Sadhan, gradually the Sadhak’s accumulation of Samskaras will get reduced, the Kriyas that happen will become subtle and calming, and the Sadhak will begin to develop the detached attitude of a Karma Yogi. He may continue to participate in worldly affairs, but with a sense of having a right to action but not to the fruits of the action. This attitude will enable him to continue with his day-to-day life without accumulating new Samskaras or reinforcing ones he already had. Developing the attitude of a Karma Yogi combined with regular Sadhan will eventually result in the elimination of all Samskaras from the Sadhak’s Vignyanamaya Kosha and his awareness will then move to the Anandmaya Kosha also known as the “bliss” Kosha or the “illuminated” layer.

This is when the Sadhak begins to experience the bliss of the Samadhi state, i.e. he begins to actually experience the Atma within him. But the Samadhi he experiences

at this stage is called Savikalpa Samadhi, because even though he is experiencing the presence of the Atma within, his awareness has not merged with the ParamAtma. His mind while calm is still somewhat active; not seeking external stimuli, but still capable of being affected by the external world; and even though he experiences the blissful presence of the Atma within, he is still aware of himself as a consciousness separate from the ParamAtma. Experiencing Savikalpa Samadhi is like getting a glimpse of the ParamAtma within, a blissful experience but not true Atma Sakshatkar.

Only with continued Sadhan and a complete immersion of his consciousness into the ParamAtma, eventually the Bliss Kosha will also dissolve and he will experience the Nirvikalpa Samadhi state - the true Atma Sakshatkar or Self-Realization. At that stage, even as he is alive in his body, he will have experienced oneness with the Paramatma, eventually reaching the Nishpatti or Avdhoot state when he becomes completely indifferent to his body, his mind and to the world around him. He will be in a state of Sahaja Samadhi, entering into Samadhi effortlessly, existing in his body with complete indifference to it and after his body dies, even the physical sheath that others might have seen as keeping him separate from the Paramatma will have dissolved and he will have become one with the Paramatma. All the Koshas that separate his Atma from the ParamAtma will have dissolved and his ego and the Vrittis and Samskaras that kept him from Atma Sakshatkar will have been eliminated, freeing his Atma from the seemingly endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

This gift of Maha Yoga is available to us all at no cost, regardless of the external differences that separate us, such as religion, race, creed, caste, gender, status, age, nationality, etc. We hope all human beings partake of this gift that holds the key to freedom from the seemingly endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and puts them on a path to Self-Realization.

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