

VEDĀNTA 20/20
INTRODUCTION TO *VEDĀNTA*
ŚARĪRA TRAYAM

वासुदेवेन्द्र-योगीन्द्रं, नत्वा ज्ञानप्रदं गुरुम् ।

मुमुक्षूणां हितार्थाय, तत्त्वबोधोभिधीयते ॥

vāsudevendra-yogīndram, natvā jñānapradam gurum

mumukṣūṇāṃ hitārthāya, tattvabodhobhidhīyate

We are looking at the various technical terms that are used in our scriptures that are comprehensively presented in this small text called *Tattva Bodha*. It gives the essence of *vedāntic* teachings and it systematically introduces the technical terms. In the last session I introduced the term *sādhana catuṣṭayam*, the four-fold qualifications. We saw what they are and how to acquire them. These qualifications are meant for gaining Self-knowledge that leads to one's liberation. Today we will take up another technical term used in the *śāstra*, *śarīra trayam*, the three-fold body of an individual. We will take each one of the three bodies and analyze. The three bodies are *sthūla*, *sūkṣma* and *kāraṇa śarīra*, gross, subtle and causal body respectively. We will use four factors to analyze each body. One is the material with which the body is made, what has gone into making the body. Second factor that we will study is the components or the parts of the body. Then we will see the functions of the body. Finally we will look at the nature of each body.

Let us first see *sthūla śarīra*. The *sthūla śarīra*, gross body is made up of gross matter that are in the form of *pañca sthūla bhūtāni*, five gross elements. These are not the elements of the periodic table that we study in chemistry. They are *ākāśa*, *vāyu*, *agni*, *jala* and *prthivī*, space, air, fire, water and earth respectively. Our physical body has plenty of earth, lots of water that gives body the shape, fire as the body temperature, air as the life breath, and space in the stomach. Since the body is made up of these *sthūla bhūtāni*, it is called *bhautika śarīra*, physical body. The next factor with regard to the body is its

components. Of course the body has innumerable components when we study anatomy. In scriptures the body is divided into the head, the central body, the hands and the legs. This is a broad classification. In *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, you will see them mentioned as *śīra*, *ātmā*, *pakṣa* and *pucca*. Do not worry about the *saṁskṛta* words, just remember the English equivalents. These are the four components of the gross body. The third factor we need to look at is the functions of the body. The function of the body is said to be a temporary residence used by the individual according to the scriptures. The body is a rented house. What is the rent payment. It is your *punya*, *pāpā karma*. As long as the payment is there, the tenement is available. As long as the *karma* is there, the body will be there. Once the payment is stopped, the body ceases to exist. *Tattva Bodha* uses the word *āyatanam* for residence or house. Residing in the body alone we do all the transactions of the world.

The fourth factor with regard to the body is the nature. The body is of a changing nature. In fact the etymology of the word *śarīra* is, *śīryamāṇa svabhāvam śarīra*, that which is subject to change and decay. The body goes through *ṣaḍ vikārā*, six modifications. The first stage is *asti*, the existence in the womb of the mother. Then it is *jāyate*, born. Once born, the body, *vartate*, grows. The fourth stage is *vipariṇamate*, the transition to adulthood. As an adult, the body undergoes many changes and starts *apakṣīyate*, to decay. Finally, *vināśyati*, perishes. So one specific nature of the body is that it is subject to change. Another nature or feature of the body is that it is visible to oneself and to others. It is an object for perception like any other object. That is why it is called gross. The body lasts only for a certain duration. The life span is increasing with medical advances, but still it is limited only. These are the four factors as it relates to the gross body.

Now we will go to the second body, *sūkṣma śarīra*, the subtle body. The first factor as it relates to the subtle body, the raw material, the scriptures point out, is the subtle matter. It consists of the five subtle elements. The gross

elements that we discussed under gross body, in a subtle form make up the subtle matter that forms the material for the subtle body. The subtle elements are called *sūkṣma bhūtāni*. So the subtle body is also *bhautika śarīra*. It is material body only. Secondly the components of the subtle body. Scriptures point out 19 components of the subtle body, each one being an instrument of transaction. The gross body is only a house or a hut or tenement, the outer shell. We need several instruments to transact business. If we just lease office space we will not be able to run a business there. We need to furnish it, have phone, computers, internet access, so many gadgets are needed. We also have 19 such instruments with us. They are, *pañca jñāna indriyāni*, five organs of perception, *pañca karma indriyāni*, five organs of action, *pañca prāṇa*-s, five *prāṇa*-s, and four *antaḥkaraṇāni*, inner instruments.

We need the instruments of perception to receive inputs from the outside world. These five sense organs are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and the skin. Eyes see form and color. Ears gather the knowledge of sound. Nose gathers the knowledge of smell. Tongue tastes. Skin feels the touch. A note of caution here. When we say sense organs, we do not mean the physical, the gross instruments, not the fleshy eyes and ears, but the subtle faculty, the power of reception behind those *golaka*-s, apertures. Eyeball belongs to the physical body, but the ability to see belongs to the subtle body. Similarly the ear lobe belongs to the gross body, the faculty of hearing belongs to the subtle body.

Then the five organs of action. The organs of perception are meant for inputs from the outside world and the organs of action is meant for outputs that go out to the world. One set of organs is meant for receiving the stimuli from the world and the second set is for responses to those stimuli. The first organ of action is *vāg indriyam*, speech. First reaction that is visible outside is always the verbal response. Then *pāṇi*, the hand with which we do varieties of action, we shake hands, we slap, we clap, we grasp, play the violin, flute

and various other musical instruments, so many things we do with the hands. Next is *pāda*, the organ of motion, the leg or the feet. Then *pāyuh*, the organ of evacuation or excretion of waste products from the body. Then *upasthaḥ*, the organ of procreation. These are the five organs or action. So we have five plus five ten components so far.

Then *pañca prāṇa*-s, the five-fold *prāṇa*-s, is the energy generating system, vital force. *Prāṇa*-s, are five-fold, *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, *udāna* and *samāna*. *Prāṇa* is the respiratory system, the inhalation and exhalation, taking in the oxygen and getting rid of carbon dioxide. *Apāna* is the evacuation system, waste removal. Then the third is *vyāna*, the circulatory system. Oxygen that is taken in, is absorbed by the blood and the blood circulates that oxygen to the various organs in the body. The food that we eat is digested and the nutrition is also circulated throughout the body. The force behind all this is the *vyāna vāyu*. *Samāna* is the digestive system that converts the food eaten to nutrition. Finally *udāna*, the ejection system. This operation is more pronounced at the time of death, when the subtle body leaves the gross body. Other common expressions of *udāna vāyu* are sneezing, hiccups, vomiting and so on. These are the five *prāṇa*-s. They function behind the organs of action providing them the energy to function.

Then we have four *antaḥkaraṇāni*, internal organs. They are *manaḥ*, the mind, *buddhi*, intellect, *citta*, memory and *ahaṅkāra*, ego. The mind stands for all kinds of emotional faculty, feelings. Another function of the mind is doubting, *saṅkalpa vikalpātmakam manaḥ*. Should I do this, or should I do that, such vacillation, oscillation, is the functioning of the mind. *Buddhi* is the rational faculty, the judging faculty, the discriminating faculty. It is firm, *niścayātmikā buddhiḥ*. *Citta* is the faculty of memory, the ability to recall or remember our prior experiences in the mind. While memory of experiences in the present life is common, in rare instances people do recall memories from previous births. The musical prodigies, the spiritual prodigies are all

examples of this memory from prior births. The last one is *ahaṅkāra*, the ego, the faculty of self-reference, the reflective faculty well-developed in humans. Animals do not have that. The dog is not proud of its pedigree, the owner may be. *Aham kāraṇam ahaṅkāraḥ*, I am the reason for all this, this is the manifestation of ego. *Aham iti bhāvaḥ ahambhāvaḥ*, again 'I' notion, I am this, I am that, that kind of identification is *ahambhāva*. These four aspects of the mind are together called *catvāri antaḥkaraṇāni*, internal instruments. Totally we have 19 components.

The function of the *antaḥkaraṇāna*-s is transactions. All forms of transactions are done by the subtle body with the help of the 19 instruments. Some of them are meant for inputs, some for output and some for internal processing. Organs of perception are for taking in inputs, organs of action for output, the rest are inputs processing before generating the output. The fourth factor is the nature of the subtle body. The subtle body is also susceptible to changes. They strengthen, they weaken. Many of the diseases are because of the weakening of the organs. Physiological functions go bad, breathing becomes difficult, constipation sets in, digestion gets upset, blood circulation is blocked, memory fails, so many things happen. So change is one feature of the subtle body just like the gross body. Subtle body, however, has a longer life compared to gross body. Gross body may live for a maximum period of 120 years. The subtle body survives the death of the gross body and continues in the next birth. *Yathā vāsāṁsi jīrṇāni vihāya*, we see in *Gītā*, just as one discards worn out clothes, gross body is dropped and *navāni gṛṇāti naraḥ*, then the man puts on a new set of clothes, the subtle body will get a new gross body. The mind and the intellect continue. The subtle body is evident, recognizable, only for oneself, but not for others. What is in my mind, only I know. That is why it is called subtle. This is the nature of the subtle body.

We now go to the third body, *kāraṇa śarīra*, causal body. The causal body is made up of causal matter, the subtlest form of matter. Technically it is called

avidhyā, ignorance. Although it is translated as ignorance, it is much more than the literal meaning of ignorance. Some time the word used is *prakṛti* or *māyā*. Each one of these terms have several connotations and so we have to understand in which contexts these words are used. We will just say *avidhyā* is the material with which causal body is made. The components of causal body is only the subtle and gross body when they are in potential form before they came. *Kāraṇa śarīra* consists of *sthūla śarīra* and *sūkma śarīra* in seed form, not now, but before. Before the origination of the world, before the origination of creation, *pralaya kāle*, *sthūla śarīra* was not there, *sūkma śarīra* was not there as it is available now, but they existed in a seed form, in an unmanifest form. The potential form is called *kāraṇa śarīra*.

The function of the *kāraṇa śarīra* is to serve as a receptacle or a ground or a source from which the two bodies *sthūla śarīra* and *sūkma śarīra* arise and into which the two bodies also resolve. Things manifest from an unmanifest form and then when they are destroyed, they go back into the unmanifest condition. Matter can never be destroyed. Whenever you seemingly destroy something, it goes back to an unmanifest condition. In *Bhagavad Gītā* (8.18), *Śrī Kṛṣṇa* says, *avyaktāt vyaktyaḥ sarvāḥ, prabhavantyāharāgame, rātryāgame pralīyante, tatraiva avyaktasamjake*, from causal matter, everything, subtle and gross arise, and then again the subtle and gross go back to the causal matter. So the function of *kāraṇa śarīra* is to serve as a store house.

The fourth factor is the nature of *kāraṇa śarīra* is that it has the longest life compared to even *sūkma śarīra*. *Sūkma śarīra* gets dismantled at the time of *pralaya*. *Pralaya* is the resolution of the whole universe. *Kāraṇa śarīra* does not get destroyed even in *pralaya*. More technical aspects of this we will not discuss now. Just keep in mind that *kāraṇa śarīra* has the longest life among the three bodies. Further we said that *sthūla śarīra* is available or evident for us and for others and *sūkma śarīra* is available to oneself, but *kāraṇa śarīra* is not even evident to oneself. So it is called *nirvikalpa svarūpaḥ*. If you ask

scientists what was there before big bang, they will say, do not ask, it is indecipherable. *Kāraṇa śarīra* is like that. This is the nature of *kāraṇa śarīra*. Every individual has *sthūla*, *sūkma* and *kāraṇa śarīra*. This is the *śarīra trayam*.