Panchakosha Model (pañcakośa)

In the second chapter of the Taittiriya Upanishad, a primary Vedic era Sanskrit text likely composed around the 6th century BCE, the pancakosa theory is introduced to describe five layers of existence of a human experience. The 5 layers are: annamayakośa - the physical body, pranamayakośa - the energy body, manomayakośa - the psycho-emotional body, vijnanamayakośa - the wisdom body and anandamayakośa - the bliss body.

Each layer includes the Sanskrit words “kośa” and “maya.” Kośa is loosely translated as sheath, or layer. Maya is complex, but illusion or appearance, will suffice as a translation; maya is as if something appears to be one way, but is really another. All of the kośas, or sheaths of our experiential reality are only appearance or maya, while also very real in the sense of dealing with the external and material world. Underneath all of those layers, is pure light, divinity, eternal consciousness, unity source or whatever name you prefer to call what lies beyond. Even the bliss body, the most subtle of all the sheaths is considered an illusion because it appears separate from eternal consciousness, unity source or pure consciousness – ultimately we are all one.

To learn how to view human existence through the lens of the pañcakośa (five sheaths) model opens one’s eyes to many subtleties that drive our actions and reactions in life. This view helps us to analyze, and modify ways of thinking and perceiving that previously may have led to suffering in one form or another. The model presents humans as multi-layered being, incorporating the interconnection between the mind, body and spirit, not as separate layers, but rather a layer that is interwoven with other layers, creating the tapestry of our being.
PHYSICAL - ANNAMAYAKOŚA

Anna means food. It is our physical form, hair, skin, nails, bones, flesh, organs, body fluids and connective tissue. All of the physical aspects of life are transient, and are consumed by another aspect of external reality. Thus, the outermost of the koşas is called the sheath of food. This sheath is in the Sthula sharira, the gross body, therefore the most tangible and the one we can most easily experience through the senses. We train this aspect of ourselves, take care of it, and nurture it, so that we can both enjoy our external lives and go inward without it being an obstacle during meditation time.

ENERGY - PRĀṆAMAYAKOŚA

Next we enter the sukshma sharira, the subtle body of our existence. The Prāṇamayakośa is our energy body. Prana is energy, but energy is not the sum total of Prana. It is the vital force that produces the subtle vibrations related to breath, but is not one and the same as the breath. The breath is a vital part of this layer; prana rides the breath to enter the physical body. The energy body includes the chakras, nadis and prana vayus, all of which take in, store and distribute prana, the source of energy, throughout our being. Prana is the driving force behind the physical aspect of the senses and the operation of the physical body. It is the cellular intelligence and that which animates. It allows the invisible indweller, our True Self to be able to move through and live in the external world. For both a healthy life and the practice of meditation, it is essential that this level of our being be trained, regulated, and directed, so that it flows smoothly; pranayama is a profound tool in this endeavor.

PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL - MANOMAYAKOŚA

Another kośa in the sukshma sharira is the Manomayakośa. Manas is the thinking mind. It is the level of processing sensory input, thoughts, feelings, emotions, core believes and limiting beliefs reside; it is the key component of our personality. This sheath houses our established patterns of behavior in response to emotions and reactions that are based on past experiences. It is When this layer receives clear instructions from the deeper level, it functions quite well; however, when it is clouded over by its illusions, attachment and ego the deeper wisdom cannot be accessed. This level is deeply affected by past experiences and memory.
WISDOM - VIJÑĀNAMAYAKOŚA

The last kośa in the sukshma sharira is the Vijñānamaya Kośa. Vijñāna means consciousness, the part of the mind that is responsible for discernment. It is the sheath of wisdom that is underneath the processing, thinking aspect of mind. It knows, decides, judges, and discriminates between this and that, between useful and not useful. It is also the level of ego consciousness, the I-am-ness. The ego itself is a positive influence, it is the part of the mind that expresses individuality, but when it gets mixed with the memories, and is clouded over by the Manomayakośa, it may lose its positive nature. A major part of sadhana (spiritual practice) is gaining ever-increasing access to this level of our being. It is the level that has the higher wisdom to seek Truth, to go within, to search for the eternal center of consciousness.

BLISS - ANĀNDAMAYAYAKOŚA

Anandamaya kosha is the most concealed of the koshas. It is the only kosa in the Kāraṇa Śarīra-the causal body. Ananda means bliss, however, it is not bliss as an emotion experienced at the level of the Manomayakośa. Ananda is a different order of reality from that of the mind. It is peace, joy, and love that is underneath, beyond the mind, independent of any reason or stimulus to cause a happy mental reaction; it is not an externally derived bliss (a promotion, a compliment, a kind gesture are all external sources). It is simply being, resting in bliss called ananda. It is the subtle most of the five koshas. In the silence of deep meditation, this too is let go of to experience the center of Universal consciousness.

This is the pancakośa model that is the cornerstone of Yoga Therapy as set by the new standards of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) iayt.org

(panca = 5; kośa = layers of human existence)