

The Low-Down on Reincarnation and Creation

Ram (James Swartz)

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Shanti: Dear James, I am really enjoying the book. I am one-third through and it is wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. And you are right, the chart is better. Who would have thought???

Question: After I left the *ashram*, I had a ton of “spiritual experiences.” They seemed to pull together particular readings or *satsangs* with my misapprehensions. This process was often painful but unbelievably rewarding, as I couldn’t seem to figure my way out of a paper bag while I was at the *ashram*. I seem to need to get away in order to process what I had taken in. One of the experiences I had during that time was that I projected the subtle body (I guess that is what is called “astral projection”) out of my gross body. One day while I was lying on my bed meditating and my subtle body left through the heart *chakra*. It was somewhat uncomfortable, in fact I thought I was having a heart attack, but was not afraid. In the “experience” I saw from the vantage point of the subtle body, which was free from the laws of the gross body, and I was clear who it was that was witnessing the experience as well.

Okay, so in your book you say that the causal body is responsible for projecting the subtle body from the gross body at the time of death. I was under the impression that it WAS the causal body that transmigrates at the time of death, taking with it unresolved *samskaras* and *vasanas* to new beginnings. At this point I don’t believe that I “see” the causal body the same way I “see” the subtle body. I experience it after the ego reappears as the doer, which it does when I see chaos, injustice and pain (my unresolved *vasanas*). I know I have still have too many ideas, but strangely enough, I seem to have no particular fear of death at this time, only chaos, injustice and pain. My *sadhana* has been to embrace the chaos, or renounce it. The extent and speed by which I remember to do this determines the quality of my mind. In my mind I hear you saying that the world is perfect the way it is and that I need further detachment from it, but any further advice would be welcome.

So... the short version: What happens to the causal body at the time of death? Does the fact that it interfaces with the self allow it to merge back or does it go along for the ride to the new beginning? I can’t see it!!!

~ In light and love, Shanti

James: Hi, Shanti. I am glad you are enjoying the book. It is having quite an impact. Let me see if I can clear this up. You can’t “see” the causal body, actually, if by “see” you mean experience. It is not an object of perception. It is too subtle for that. It is not so much an “it” as it is tendencies born of *karma*. You can experience its existence in this sense: when you feel an urge, an unnamed desire or an unnamed dread, the causal body is about to generate a recognizable desire or a fear. Because the causal body is subtler than the subtle body, the instrument of experience, it cannot be known directly. The means of knowledge for the causal body is inference. You observe some kind of subtle-body phenomenon and you know that it has a cause because you do not have an effect without a cause. Inference is a valid means of knowledge.

The causal body belongs to *Isvara*, the macrocosmic *vasanas*. It does not transmigrate, although it seems to, but it withdraws the subtle body from the physical body at the time of death using a power called *udana*. If the time is not right for the subtle body to take up residence in the appropriate fertilized egg implanted in the uterine wall, the subtle body remains merged in the causal body until the right time. “Appropriate” means an egg that comes from parents whose physical DNA and whose *vasanas* (psychic DNA) are conducive to the working out of the *karma* of the subtle body about to be born. Then the *karma*, the momentum of the subtle body’s past action in the form of the *vasanas*, propel the subtle body into the new physical body some weeks after fertilization, giving it a point in the material world from which to act out its unfulfilled destiny, i.e. *vasanas/samskaras*.

Because the causal body belongs to *Isvara*, it does not merge into the self until *pralaya*, the end of the cosmic cycle, which is astronomically long.

However, you can say that the causal body transmigrates if you see yourself as an individual because only *vasanas* specific to you go with you. But all “your” *vasanas* are not “your” *vasanas* at all. They were all picked up from *Isvara*, the field of existence. And the whole idea that the individual transmigrates is moot too because *Isvara* sees fit to wipe out the memory of your previous life to give you a more or less clean slate in this one. The *jiva*, the individual, therefore is different from what it was in the previous birth because the remaining unexhausted *vasanas* work out at a different time in a different environment, thus giving rise to a new personality, although there are similarities to the personality in the last birth. It is a gradual transformation, not a radical one. After several incarnations there is virtually no connection with the original “you.” So in a sense, only the *vasanas* transmigrate, although there is no actual travel. It seems like there is travel, however, because of the illusion that time is linear. In fact there is just the self, awareness, illumining the causal body, which controls the subtle body and the *karma/vasanas* through the agency of *maya*. The whole creation is just a timeless projection on the luminous screen of awareness – like a hologram. When self-knowledge happens, it collapses as a reality and remains as mirage, apparently changing.

This whole question hinges on the notion that the individual and the total are actually different. *Isvara*, the macrocosmic *vasanas* responsible for creating, maintaining and destroying the whole creation, creates a generic individual, not an individual individual. There is only one gross, subtle and causal body. We all have the same structure. So in that sense, even on the relative transactional level, we are all one. The “Son of God” is the Christian formulation. But because the field of existence, *maya*, is *anitya*, impermanent, and the *vasanas* are time-sensitive (that is, they fructify at different times and therefore in different locations insofar as time and space are just different indices for measuring events in the apparent reality), we can say that there is a microcosmic causal body, i.e. *vasanas*, specific to the apparent person existing at a particular time and place. So in that sense “your” *vasanas* transmigrate and “you” are reborn.

But when you look into time, you cannot find that it exists. When you think of the past or the future, you think of them now. You cannot think of the past or the future in the past or the future. The reality of time is now-ness. When you analyze now-ness, or “the now,” if you prefer, does it stretch into the future or protrude back into the past? No, because any unit of time is subject to further divisions. If you keep dividing, time disappears. So what is time? Time is simply a thought appearing in consciousness, which for want of a better word is often called “the now.” If this is true, then there is no reincarnation, no transmigration in a temporal sense.

The idea that there is a static, solid, touchable person does not stand up under inquiry. The apparent reality, where this supposed person exists, is never the same from one minute to the next. Even the body, which has a sort of physical, temporal integrity, is in a state of constant flux, not to speak of the mind, which is much more essentially “me.” So if I am in a state of constant flux, am I anything at all? Every moment I gain something new and lose something I have. The very fact that I did not exist before the body was born (except as consciousness) and that I will not exist once the body dies gives lie to the reality of a substantial entity. If I did not exist at the start and do not exist at the end, did I exist in between? At best I am only the *vasana* working itself out at the moment – which is to say that I am nothing at all. If there is any seeker, it is the self under the spell of ignorance seeking the freedom that it already enjoys. So personhood is just an idea, not a fact. Yet the person exists in a way, but only as a concept. The more carefully you inquire the more one sees that there nobody to own anything. There is only “personing” – meaning the person itself is just a part of the whole process of existence and inseparable from it. Being a person is more or less like being a clay pot. Everything that the pot enjoys is inherent in the nature of the clay, meaning the field of existence. You cannot say that “I am not a person,” but you can’t say that “I am a person” either. As people, transmigrating entities, we have a very peculiar ontological status.

Here is a more technical discussion:

Macrocosmic Ignorance

Ignorance is not “bad,” although it may have unpleasant consequences. In fact it is actually a positive force that is responsible for the creation of the universe. As mentioned above, it is made of three qualities that are found in everything: *sattva*, light, *tamas*, darkness, or matter, and *rajas*, activity. Two of these three qualities, *tamas* and *rajas*, are inimical to self-knowledge. The third, *sattva*, is an aid. Its existence is established by common sense. People say, “I am ignorant.”

Macrocosmic ignorance is the aggregate of the ignorance of all individuals, just as a forest is nothing but many individual trees. Because of its association with awareness, it has a preponderance of pure *sattva*. Awareness associated with macrocosmic ignorance is endowed with omniscience and omnipotence and is the creator of the universe. It is the inner guide or ruler when considered from the standpoint of an individual.

Macrocosmic ignorance is known as the causal body because it is the cause of everything. The causal body is known as the “bliss sheath” because it is full of bliss and hides the self from the individual. It is also known as the sleep state because all gross and subtle phenomena are resolved into it at the end of the cycle of creation. At the beginning of the next cosmic cycle it projects the subtle and gross bodies and all the objects of experience.

Microcosmic, or individual, ignorance is called impure *sattva* because it is mixed with *rajas* and *tamas*. Awareness associated with the individual is only capable of limited knowledge, power and action. It causes the sense of individuality, the “I” notion. It is dreamless sleep. The subtle body is resolved into it at night, so it is the cause of the dissolution of gross and subtle phenomena. In the sleep state it enjoys bliss. This accounts for the universal appreciation of sleep.

Except for the differences noted above, macrocosmic and microcosmic ignorance are identical and share a common substratum, limitless awareness. Macrocosmic ignorance has two powers:

concealment (*tamas*) and projection (*rajas*). It conceals the self from the intellect by casting a cloud over it. Because the individual intellect is covered, it believes that it is limited in many ways. It thinks it is born and will die. It takes *samsara* to be real and believes that it needs objects, gross and subtle, to be happy even though it is nothing but limitless immortal awareness. It takes itself to be a doer and does actions for the results which it believes will make it happy.

Just as the traveler's rope (ignorance caused the rope to appear as a snake), the projecting power of the macrocosmic causal body creates the material elements and all living entities. Awareness in association with macrocosmic ignorance is the substance of which the universe is made and the intelligence that shapes the material, just as a spider is both the substance of its web and the intelligence that shapes it.

From consciousness associated with the projecting power of ignorance – which has a preponderance of the quality of darkness – space evolves, from space air evolves, from air fire, from fire water, and from water earth.

Next, the qualities of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* evolve out of space. Because space has a preponderance of the dark energy, the qualities that evolve from them have a preponderance of the dark energy. They are called subtle matter (*tanmatras*) and uncompounded elements. The gross elements and the subtle bodies evolve from the subtle elements. The subtle bodies have seventeen parts: five organs of perception, the intellect, the mind, the five organs of action and the five vital forces. The five organs of perception are the ears, the skin, the eyes, the tongue and the nose, and are produced separately in consecutive order from the *sattva* particles of space. That modification of the subtle body (the *antakarana*, or internal instrument) that makes determinations is called the intellect (*buddhi*). The mind (*manas*) is that modification of the internal instrument which considers the pros and cons of a subject (*sankalpa* and *vikalpa*). The mind-substance (*chitta*) and I-notion (*ahamkara*) are included in the intellect and the mind respectively. Memory (*chitta*) is that modification of the inner organ which remembers. The I-notion is that modification of the inner organ which is characterized by self-consciousness. All these modifications of the subtle body are produced from the *sattva* particles of space because they are luminous. The intellect and the organs of perception constitute the intelligence sheath (*vignanamayakosa*). Because it is intelligent it is called the *jiva*, or individual self. It thinks of itself as a doer and enjoyer. It thinks it is a traveler, subject to transmigration.

The mind with the organs of perception constitute the mental sheath (*manomayakosa*).

The five vital forces and the organs of action constitute the vital air sheath (*pranamayakosa*). Its dynamism shows that it is the product of the *rajas* particles in space. The organs of action are the organs of speech, the hands, the feet, the organs of evacuation and generation. The five vital forces are the *prana*, *apana*, *vyana*, *udana* and *samana*. *Prana* is that vital force which goes upward and has its seat at the tip of the nose. *Apana* is that vital force which goes downward and has its seat in the organs of excretion. *Vyana* is that vital force which moves in all directions and pervades the entire body. *Udana* is the ascending vital force which helps the subtle body leave the gross body at the time of death and has its seat in the throat. *Samana* is that vital force which assimilates food and drink and has its seat in the middle of the body. Assimilation means digestion of food and its conversion into blood and other materials of the body.

Of these sheaths, the intelligence sheath which is endowed with the power of knowledge is the agent; the mental sheath which is endowed with will power is the instrument, and the vital sheath which is endowed with activity is the product. This division has been made according to their

respective functions. These three sheaths together constitute the subtle body.

The sum total of all subtle bodies is called *samasti*, the aggregate. An individual subtle body is called *vyasti* and has the same relationship to the total as a tree has to a forest.

Consciousness associated with this totality is called *sutratma*, *hiranyagarbha* and *prana* because it is immanent everywhere and because it identifies itself with the five great uncompounded elements endowed with the powers of knowledge, will and activity.

The macrocosmic subtle body (*hiranyagarbha*) is the aggregate of all subtle bodies. It is also called the dream state because it consists of the impressions of the waking state and therefore is known as the resolving place for the gross universe.

Awareness associated with an individual subtle body is known as *tajasa* (full of light) on account of its being associated with the effulgent inner organ. It experiences subtle objects.

The microcosmic subtle body is made up of the three sheaths, is finer than the gross body and consists of the impressions of the waking state. For that reason it is called the resolving place of the gross body.

The aggregate and individual subtle bodies are identical like a forest and its trees. Thus do the subtle bodies originate.

But the gross elements are all compounded.

The compounding takes place in this manner: each of the five elements is divided into two equal parts; of the ten parts thus produced, the first five halves of each element are each subdivided into four equal parts. Then one-half of each of the five is combined to one-quarter of each of the other four, making each element five in one. Though the five gross elements are alike insofar as each of them contains all five elements, they have different names owing to the preponderance of a particular element in each. At the time of compounding, space manifests sound; air manifests sound and touch; fire sound, touch and form; water sound, touch, form and taste; and earth manifests sound, touch, form, taste and smell.

From these compounded elements have evolved the seven upper planes, i.e. *Bhur*, *Bhuvar*, *Svar*, *Mahar*, *Jana*, *Tapas* and *Satyam*; and the seven lower planes: *Atala*, *Vitala*, *Sutala*, *Rasatala*, *Talatala*, *Mahatala* and *Patala*, in addition to the world, the four kinds of gross bodies contained in it together with the food and drink appropriate to them.

The four kinds of gross bodies are those that are born of the womb, the egg, moisture and the soil. Those born of the womb are humans, animals, etc. Those born out of the eggs are the birds, reptiles, etc. Those born of moisture are the lice, mosquitoes, etc. Those that spring from the soil are the trees, vines, etc.

The gross bodies in their fourfold variety may be collectively or individually.

Awareness associated with the aggregate gross bodies is called *vaisvanara* and *virat*. The aggregate gross body of this is called the food sheath (*annamayakosa*) because it is a modification of food and is the enjoyer of the waking state because it is the means for enjoyment of gross objects. Consciousness associated with the individual gross body is called *viswa* because it enters the gross body without letting go of its identification with the subtle body. The

individual's gross body is also called the food sheath on account of its being a modification of food and is said to be in the waking state.

Both *visva* and *vaisvanara* at the time of compounding perceive gross objects, viz. sound, touch, color, taste and smell respectively through the five perceptive sense organs which are controlled respectively by the presiding deities of the elements from which they arise. They also perform the functions of speech, acceptance, walking, excretion and enjoyment respectively through the five organs of action, such as the tongue, etc. controlled respectively by the presiding deities of the elements from which they arise. They experience uncertainty, determination, personality and remembrance, respectively through the four inner organs, viz. mind, intellect, egoism and memory (*chitta*) controlled respectively by their presiding deities.

The individual and collective gross bodies are identical and so are *viswa* and *vaisvanara* who are associated with the bodies. Thus has the gross phenomenal universe evolved from the five compounded elements.

The total of the gross, subtle and causal worlds makes a vast universe.

Thus has been shown in general the process of superimposition, which is responsible for the confusion of the apparent reality with awareness.