

The Psychic Instruments and Their Evolution

Remember, in yoga philosophy, the subtle is prior to the gross. So the gunas, moving endlessly within Prakriti, create the universe by first giving rise to instruments for experiencing it. These instruments are intended to allow Purusha to experience a world.

The first of these instruments is buddhi, the reflective screen of individual awareness, which is the real perceiver behind all sensory experience.

From buddhi emerges ahamkara, the I sense, which gives the organism the sense of being a particular individual. It does this by identifying with the body and nervous system it has incarnated in. In a cow's body, the ahamkara thinks it's a cow and experiences life through that body and brain. In a human, it thinks it is a human. Ahamkara is incredibly significant in spiritual life because when it is directed outward through the manas and senses, it understands the self to be the body and personality, which is the essence of the individual misunderstanding of itself. But if ahamkara can be directed inward to identify with the soul or the higher mind, we identify ourselves with our higher intelligence or even with the divine. So the Ahamkara can identify with the mantra Shivo'ham, I am Shiva, and then it becomes a spiritual ego and helps the process of consciousness moving back from its source.

From ahamkara arises manas, the seeking or sense mind, which liaises between the data transmitted by the senses and the ahamkara and intellect. Buddhi, ahamkara, and manas are the inner world. Taken together, they comprise the chitta, the inner field of what we call the mind. They are the coverings that filter the experience of purusha, the pure awareness that we can call the soul or the individual consciousness.

When ego is churned by tamas guna, it evolves the buddhindriyas (senses of perception--hearing, tasting, touching, seeing, smelling), the karmindriyas (inner senses of action--speaking, grasping, locomotion, excretion, generation), and the tanmatras, the subtle inner elements which are the energies that underpin sound, sight, touch, taste, and smell, taste and touch. These are the essence of all that we experience through the senses, which is why we can experience the senses operating in dreams and meditation. (In the same way, the other psychic instruments operate in dreams: we have a dream ego and a dream body, which we identify with as 'me' when we are dreaming. And the Buddhi, when sufficiently purified, can actually wake up in a dream or allow us to experience what we call lucid dreaming.)

The tanmatras produce the five gross elements (mahabhutas), space, air, fire, water, and earth, with their corresponding physical senses and organs of action: our eyes, ears, nose, hands, etcetera. And the neurological wiring that connects them. The gross elements together make up the world we experience through the senses.

And all this is purposeful—these instruments are what allows the Atman, the inner Self, to experience a world.

Contemporary neurophysiologists tell us that there are processes in the brain and nervous system that project shape, color, smell, and taste onto the energetic soup, which is the physical world's underlying reality. In the words of physicist Donald Hoffman, what we see as a physical object is actually an icon of the energy that is swirling and morphing, entering into form and moving out of form. It's our own perceptive apparatus that gives them the perceptible form. The ancient yogis didn't know about the physical nervous system, but they understood that the shapes and forms of the world are not actually fixed but are projections of the tanmatras, the inner subtle senses which are the real powers behind our sensory experience.