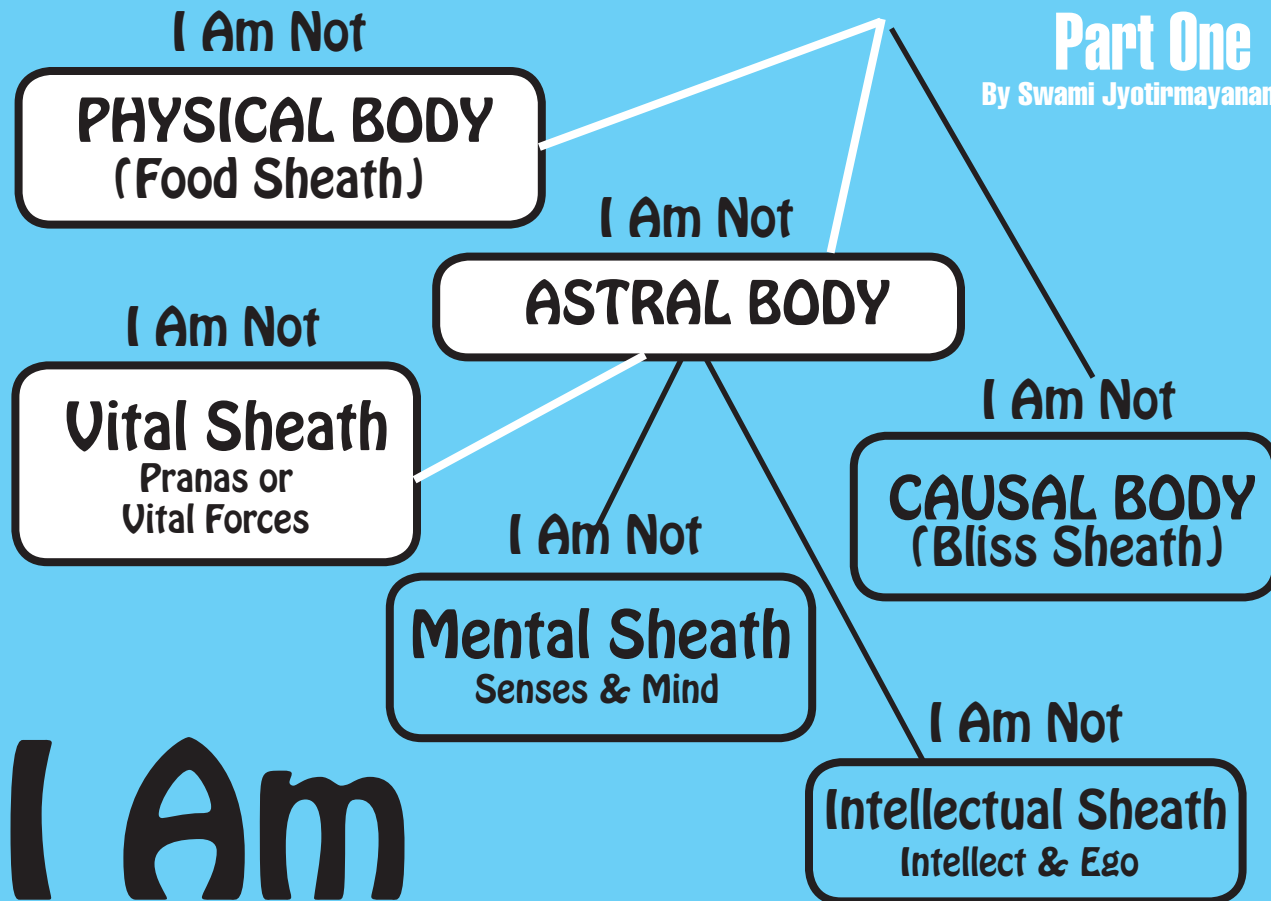


# Who Am I?

## Part One

By Swami Jyotirmayananda



# I Am The Self!

**A**midst all the diverse activities of man, the question of “Who am I?” seems to be drowned and forgotten. But in actuality it is the basis of all questions that life presents, and the source of all desires, feelings and activities. With the understanding of this central question, all of your activities become significant and purposeful; without such understanding, life is merely a dreary waste, a ship

placed on the howling waves of a chartless ocean, without any purpose or goal in view.

As your mind is purified by meditation, your intellect begins to shine brighter and brighter, allowing you to enquire into “Who am I?” In this practice of *vichar* or reflection you allow your mind to flow towards the Self, towards *Brahman*. It is a process of understanding and enlightenment, a profound reflective process that is a highly

intellectual exercise in Vedanta. However, the term “intellectual” in this case does not refer to academic intellectualism, but to an intellect that is becoming subtle, pure and intuitive as it begins to reflect upon “Who am I?”

The Upanishads have given various techniques of *vichar*. One such technique is known as *Neti Neti*, literally meaning “not this, not this.” *Neti Neti* implies a process of negation. By reflection, you negate the idea that you are the body, the vital forces, the senses, the mind, the intellect, or the ego. You negate what Vedantic philosophers refer to as the three bodies (physical, astral and causal) and the five sheaths (physical or food, vital, mental, intellectual, and bliss).

The term “sheath” has a special mystic implication. It implies that just as a sword is kept in a sheath, so too, the knowledge of the Self is hidden through identification with the layers of matter that encase the spirit. Through the practice of enquiry, that knowledge is “unsheathed.”

### Negation of the

## PHYSICAL BODY

You begin your practice of *vichar* or enquiry by focusing your attention on the negation of the physical body or “food” sheath. You try to lead the mind away from the simple idea that “I am this body and limited personality” to an increasingly more profound answer to the question of “Who am I?”

Negation of the body implies freeing your mind of the deep-rooted concept that you are the body. In this process, you try to reflect upon the nature of the physical body and all that is implied by your identification with it.

The amount of mental energy wasted over the body is inconceivable—and it begins from the very childhood. From birth, suggestions that “you are the body” are poured into the mind of the child from all sides. Day by day he is told he was born at a particular time on a particular day; he looks like his father or his mother; he is handsome and very strong; he belongs to a very aristocratic family, etc.

So from the very beginning of each embodiment people are hypnotized to believe that they are bodies. This erroneous identification with what they are not is the product of mass hypnosis.

Although it seems that it should be easy to understand that “I” cannot be the physical body that is perishable and inert, yet it is extremely difficult to give up the identification with the physical body and the various forms of mental bias developed on the basis of the physical body. Most of our activities are centered around the idea of the comfort and well-being of the physical body and those who are related to it.

### Body Is a Possession That Is Constantly Changing

Made up of five gross elements, the body grows as it consumes food, and undergoes a variety of changes as one passes from childhood to old age and death. In spite of this constant change, the real Self in you, the “I Am,” does not change. If there had been any change in that essential “I Am” through all the superficial changes that occur, then you would not have any experience of the continuity of your existence.

You speak of your body as if it were your possession, referring always to “your feet, your eyes, your muscles, your lungs, etc.” When there is any disease in one of those parts of your body, and that part no longer serves your purposes, that diseased part is removed, and yet there is no diminution of your essential “I Am.”

The body has a beginning and it has an end. Simple logic tells us that whatever has a beginning and an end is the not Self. It is changing matter, it is untruth. The truth—the Self—is that which does not change.

### Body Is a Disposable Tool for the Soul

Your soul uses the body as an instrument for the sake of its evolution. The body is a blessing if you use it for attaining Enlightenment. On the

other hand, if the physical body is not properly used, it promotes bondage.

Your physical body is a product of karma (actions of the past), and when the *prarabdha* karma (fructifying karma) is over, you discard this body. In the process of evolution, millions of bodies have been adopted and discarded by every soul.

In Yoga Vasistha there is a story of two brothers, *Punya* and *Pavana*. When they lost their parents, *Pavana*, the younger brother, became grief stricken. The older brother, *Punya*, who was enlightened, told his younger brother that each one of us has had millions of parents in our past embodiments. We do not weep for them anymore, so why should we weep for these parents? In the state of ignorance one moves on from one personality to another, but the Absolute Self is beyond the limitations of body and personality.

### **Should the Body Be Worshipped for Its Beauty?**

The beauty of the body is a concept in your mind. What people consider beauty is skin deep—literally so. If a beautiful face were skinned off it would be ghastly! You, as a physical body, are a walking skeleton, covered over with a mask and costume of skin. If you were to look through the cage of the bones at the internal organs, you would be quite horrified by the sight of the various functions going on within you: how the heart pumps constantly and sends blood shooting through your arteries; how the food you eat fights with various acids and other chemicals until it is digested!

Therefore, your mind should not be so preoccupied with the beauty of the physical body. Rather, direct your mind towards a healthy form of living. When there is vitality in your body, energy in your mind, and clarity in your thinking, you become more and more beautiful. Beauty is the Self and that Self expresses more beautifully through a healthy body and mind.

Many great Sages were not physically beautiful from the socially accepted point of view. *Ashtavakra*, who was born deformed, with eight bends

in his body, was such a Sage. One day he walked into a religious conference in King *Janaka*'s hall and all the philosophers and guests gathered there laughed at him. *Ashtavakra* said to *Janaka*, "Oh King, I thought you had invited philosophers to your court; but much to my surprise, I see that they are just cobblers." "Why do you say that?" responded the king. "Because they are only looking at my outsides—my skin!"

The body is only a shoe for the soul. In order to appreciate the soul, you must look more deeply into a person, observing how he thinks, how he feels, how he understands. These constitute a greater beauty than physical beauty. This inner beauty should never be ignored or sacrificed for the sake of the physical body.

It is, therefore, foolish to waste all your mental energy on your looks, and to spend time from morning to evening gazing in the mirror, decorating your body. That type of mental obsession that arises due to identification with the body is a great obstacle to spiritual advancement and an aspirant must strive to overcome it.

You must attend to the body to a certain extent because your body is your tool for evolution and you must render it healthy; but to become obsessed by the body is foolish. You must accept the fact that you cannot maintain your body all the time. It is bound to age, decay and die no matter how much you attend to it, no matter what clever techniques you adopt to preserve it. There are stories of people who lived for thousands of years, yet they ultimately passed away. Prolonging your life is not the goal. The goal is to realize that you are not the body.

### **The Benefits of Breaking Body Identity**

Think of what would happen if you truly understood that you are not the body. The frown of misfortune would lose its bitterness; the noose of death would lose its grip. You would breathe in an atmosphere of peace and serenity. You would be fearless.

If you understand that you are the soul, you are not afraid to take up any project, even if you die before completing it, because you are not depending on the body. And if you attain Enlightenment, you attain the end of all projects.

Understanding that you are not the body, you would be less narrow-minded. You would not cling to the idea that you belong to a particular race or religion or nationality, because it is the body that has these relationships, not the soul. You would not be preoccupied with sexual identity, because it is the body that is either male or female, not the spirit. The moment you negate your identification with the body, you unburden your mind of all these prejudiced notions about race, society, and personal relationships.

### Who Are Your Relatives?

As you understand that you are soul not body, you become aware that you are related to Sages and Saints more than you are related to mortal personalities. Therefore, you are not the inheritor of perishable wealth, but you are the inheritor of the imperishable wealth of the Sages.

According to one story, after Buddha attained Enlightenment, he went back to his birthplace and began to beg for food. His father, Shudhodana, came to him and said, “Oh son, in our family line no one practiced begging; it is a shameful act.” Buddha replied, “I do not belong to your line. I am a *sanyasi* (a monk) and I belong to the line of Saints and Sages. In that line everyone lives a life of utter simplicity.”

This story gives insight into how you would feel if your mind were to negate the body idea and free itself of the prejudiced notions about the body’s relationships. You would then understand that the soul within you belongs to Sages and Saints. It is potentially Divine and must attain Enlightenment.

From an advanced point of view, you are related to the entire universe. Everything that you see around you is yourself. The entire universe is one body, and you are that.

There is tremendous illusion involved in the idea, “I am this individual body.” Your individual body is inseparably related to the material universe. From the universe, material elements are drawn into your body and assimilated, and then, through the metabolic process, the elements are diffused back into the universe. The body is like a lagoon that draws from the ocean and then diffuses itself back into the ocean. How then can you separate your body from the rest of the universe? Even for a moment you cannot.

According to science, within nine years all molecules and substances within the body are thrown out and replaced by new ones. You have a completely renewed, different body. And if that is so, your body is inseparably related to the entire universe. So even if you say, “I am the body,” you should as well say, “I am the entire universe.”

Therefore, on the first level of the practice of *vichar* or enquiry, an aspirant must develop intense dispassion towards the body. One must rise above body identity and realize, “I am not this physical body that is subject to death and destruction, but I am the possessor of the physical body.” This understanding gives rise to sincere aspiration for Self-realization. When you become enlightened, the body ceases to be a prison; rather, it becomes truly a Divine temple for your soul.

### Negation of the

## ASTRAL BODY

If your understanding that you are not the physical body or food sheath becomes profound enough, it changes all your values and your life becomes highly elevated. Then you move one step forward in your reflection, and focus your attention on the subtle body.

The subtle body consists of the astral body and causal body. The astral body has three layers or sheaths — vital (*pranamaya kosha*), mental (*manomaya kosha*) and intellectual (*vijnanamaya kosha*). The causal body has only one sheath, known as the bliss sheath (*anandamaya kosha*).



## Negation of the

## Vital Sheath

*Prana* is the vital force that sustains the life of man by performing various vital functions and keeping the body alive. Breath is a prominent manifestation of *prana*.

Though *prana* is one, it is known by different names due to its different functions in the body. There are five main *pranas*: Prana, Apana, Samana, Vyana, and Udana. Of these, Prana and Apana are the main vital currents, because the control of these two renders the functions of all other *pranas* harmonious.

Is the “I Am,” the Self within you, the same as the *pranas* or vital forces? Your enquiry must enable you to understand that you are not the *pranas* or vital forces. During your life, the vitality that comes from the *pranas* makes your body alive, but the vitality in itself is not your reality.

The vital forces that sustain your body are an inert stream of energy. When you sleep, the vital forces remain awake within you; your breath and metabolism continue. However, if your friend comes to visit at that time, the vital forces within you cannot greet the friend and ask him to come sit down! Your *pranas* are simply inert, without awareness.

Further, we speak of controlling the *pranas* as if they were your possession. Unless you are different from the *pranas* you could not control them.

Also, as you experience your body, you realize that the *pranas* fluctuate. There is rise and fall of the *pranic* energy; sometimes you have more *prana*, sometimes you have less.

Mental states influence the *pranas*. Whenever the mind is upset due to passion, greed, fear, anger, etc. the *pranic* energy is depleted. Whenever the mind is calm and filled with Divine thoughts, the *pranic* flow is smooth and harmonious.

The *pranas* also have their beginning and end. At the time of death, the *pranas* leave the

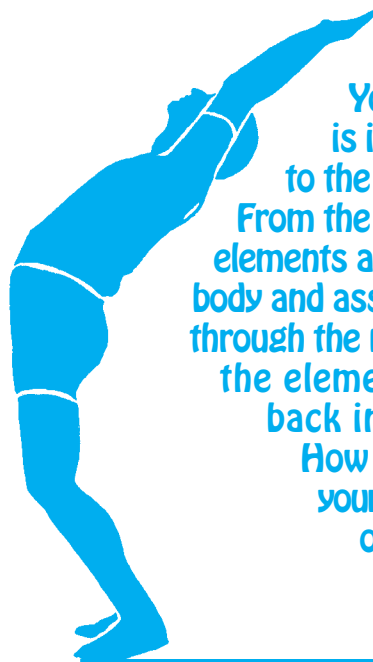
body and YOU are separated from them. Just as with the physical body, that which has beginning and end cannot be the Truth, cannot be the Self.

Because the *pranas* fluctuate and you witness these fluctuations, because you control your *prana* as if it was your possession, and because the *pranas* have their beginning and end within your embodiment, you are therefore different from *prana*.

As you conclude your reflection on your identity with the *pranas* or vital forces, try to understand how the *prana* within you is related to universal *prana*. Just as there is an inseparable link between the physical body and universal matter, so too there is an inseparable link between the vital force that sustains the life in your individual body and the cosmic vitality. So identifying yourself in any way with the *pranas* automatically links you with the entire universe!

As all these understandings deepen, you become more and more independent of the *pranic* or vital sheath. You become fearless; you are not afraid of death. Death robs you of your *pranas*, but not of your Self—because you are different from the *pranas*.

*(To be continued next month)*



**Your individual body is inseparably related to the material universe. From the universe, material elements are drawn into your body and assimilated, and then through the metabolic process, the elements are diffused back into the universe. How can you separate your body from the rest of the universe for even a moment?**