God, Soul & the World
Hindu Views on the Nature of Existence

The images here, capturing moments of wonder, introspection, bliss and communion, are windows on the eternal human quest to know the Self, realize God and understand our purpose in the world.
In a very real sense, we are like the spaceman in the photo above, totally dependent on our body, mind, emotions and personal identity to persist in life, just as he depends on his space suit and its supply of oxygen to enable him to exist in space. Take away our body, remove our emotions, erase our identity and what is left? Do we cease to exist? What are we really? Rishis assure us that we are immortal souls on a journey of spiritual evolution. We will take on many bodies, many lives, many different identities through the repetitive cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Each advent into a new birth is like an astronaut’s voyage into the great unknown. The soul’s underlying joy throughout this adventure is to commune with and realize God, learning of its true nature in the great classroom of experience, known as the world, or maya. The three realities of existence, God, soul and world, constitute the fundamentals of Hindu theology, known as tattva-trayi in Sanskrit, describing a view in which Divinity, self and cosmos are a profound, integrated unity. Each and every soul is on the same journey, spanning many lifetimes. The path has been made clear by those who have gone before. The answers to life’s ultimate questions have been given time and time again, but still must be asked and answered by each soul in its own time: “Who am I?” “Where did I come from?” “Where am I going?”

Subtlest of the subtle, greatest of the great, the atman is hidden in the cave of the heart of all beings. He who, free from all urges, beholds Him overcomes sorrow, seeing by grace of the Creator, the Lord and His glory. Krishna Yajur Veda, Shvetashvatara Upanishad 3.20
Who Am I? Where Did I Come From?

Rishis proclaim that we are not our body, mind or emotions. We are divine souls on a wondrous journey. We came from God, live in God and are evolving into oneness with God. We are, in truth, the Truth we seek. We are immortal souls living and growing in the great school of earthly experience in which we have lived many lives. Vedic rishis have given us courage by uttering the simple truth, “God is the Life of our life.” A great sage carried it further by saying there is one thing God cannot do: God cannot separate Himself from us. This is because God is our life. God is the life in the birds. God is the life in the fish. God is the life in the animals. Becoming aware of this Life energy in all that lives is becoming aware of God’s loving presence within us. We are the energy-consciousness and energy flowing through all things. Deep inside we are perfect this very moment, and we have only to discover and live up to this perfection to be whole. Our energy and God’s energy are the same, ever coming out of the void. We are all beautiful children of God. Each day we should try to see the life energy in trees, birds, animals and people. When we do, we are seeing God in action. The Vedas affirm, “He who knows God as the Life of life, the Eye of the eye, the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind—he indeed comprehends fully the Cause of all causes.”

Where Am I Going? What Is My Path?

We are all growing toward God, and experience is the path. Through experience we mature out of fear into fearlessness, out of anger into love, out of conflict into peace, out of darkness into light and union in God. We have taken birth in a physical body to grow and evolve into our divine potential. We are inwardly already one with God. Our religion contains the knowledge of how to realize this oneness and not create unwanted experiences along the way. The peerless path is following the way of our spiritual forefathers, discovering the mystical meaning of the scriptures. The peerless path is commitment, study, discipline, practice and the maturing of yoga into wisdom. In the beginning stages, we suffer until we learn. Learning leads us to service, and selfless service is the beginning of spiritual striving. Service leads us to understanding. Understanding leads us to meditate deeply and without distractions. Finally, meditation leads us to surrender in God. This is the straight and certain path, the San Marga, leading to Self Realization—the inmost purpose of life—and subsequently to moksha, freedom from rebirth. The Vedas wisely affirm, “By austerity, goodness is obtained. From goodness, understanding is reached. From understanding, the Self is obtained, and he who obtains the Self is freed from the cycle of birth and death.”

Different Views of God, Soul & World… from Hinduism’s Four Denominations

There is a wide spectrum of religious belief within Hinduism’s four major sects or denominations: Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. While they share far more similarities than differences, they naturally hold unique perspectives on God, soul and the world. In Saivism, the personal God and primary temple Deity is Siva. He is pure love and compassion, both immanent and transcendent, pleased by devotees’ purity and striving. Philosophically, God Siva is one with the soul, a mystic truth that is ultimately realized through His grace. In Shaktism the personal Goddess is Shri Devi or Shakti, the Divine Mother, worshiped as Kali, Durga, Raja-rajeshwari and Her other aspects. Both compassionate and terrifying, pleasing and wrathful, She is assuaged by sacrifice and submission. Emphasis is on bhakti and tantra to achieve advaitic union. For Vaishnavism the personal God and temple Deity is Vishnu, or Venkateshwara, a loving and beautiful Lord pleased by service and surrender, and His incarnations, especially Rama and Krishna. Among the foremost means of communion is chanting His holy names. In most schools of Vaishnavism, God and soul are eternally distinct, with the soul’s destiny being to revel in God’s loving presence. In Smartism, the Deity is Ishvara. Devotees choose their Deity from among six Gods, yet worship the other five as well: Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Ganesh, Surya and Skanda. Ishvara appears as a human-like Deity according to devotees’ loving worship. Both God and man are, in reality, the Absolute, Brahman; though under the spell of maya, they appear as two. Jnana, enlightened wisdom, dispels the illusion. In this Insight, along the lower section of the next four pages, you will find verses from the writings of seers of these four denominations that offer a glimpse of their perspectives on the nature of things ultimate.
What Is the Nature of God?

God is all and in all. One without a second, the Supreme Being and only Absolute Reality. God, the great Lord hailed in the Upanishads and adored by all denominations of Hinduism, is a one being, worshiped in many forms and understood in three perfections, with each denomination having its unique perspectives: Absolute Reality, Pure Consciousness and Primal Soul. As Absolute Reality, God is unmanifest, unchanging and transcendent, the Self God, timeless, formless and spaceless. As Pure Consciousness, God is the manifest primal substance, pure love and light flowing through all form, existing everywhere in time and space as infinite intelligence and power. As Primal Soul, God is our personal Lord, source of all three worlds. Extolling God’s first Perfection, the Vedas explain, “Self-resplendent, formless, unoriginated and pure, that all-pervading being is both within and without. He transcends even the transcendent, unmanifest, causal state of the universe” (Manduka Upanishad 2.1.2).

Describing the second Perfection, the Vedas reveal, “He is God, hidden in all beings, their inmost soul who is in all. He watches the works of creation, lives in all things, watches all things. He is pure consciousness, beyond the three conditions of nature” (Svetasvatara Upanishad 6.11). Praising the third Perfection, the Vedas recount, “He is the one God, the Creator. He enters into all wombs. The One Absolute, impersonal Existence, together with His inconceivable maya, appears as the Divine Lord, endowed with manifold glories. With His Divine Power He holds dominion over all the worlds” (Svetasvatara Upanishad 3.1). In summary, we know God in His three perfections, two of form and one formless. We worship His manifest form as Pure Love and Consciousness. We worship Him as our Personal Lord, the Primal Soul who tenderly loves and cares for His devotees—a being whose resplendent body may be seen in mystic vision. And we worship and ultimately realize Him as the formless Absolute, which is beyond qualities and description.

How Do We Worship the Supreme Being?

As a family of faiths, Hinduism upholds a wide array of perspectives on the Divine, yet all worship the one Supreme Being, adoring that Divinity as our Father-Mother God who protects, nurtures and guides us. We beseech God’s grace in our lives while also knowing that He/She is the essence of our soul, the life of our life, closer to us than our breath, nearer than hands and feet. We commune with the Divine through silent prayer, meditation, exaltation through singing and chanting, traditional music and dance. We invoke blessings and grace through puja—ritual offering of lights, water and flowers to a sacred image of the Lord—and through homa, or fire ceremony. At least once a year we make a pilgrimage to a distant temple or holy site, devoting heart and mind fully to God. Annual festivals are joyous observances. The four major denominations worship God in their own way. To the Saivite, God is Siva. To the Shaktia, Devi, the Goddess, is the Supreme One. The Vaishnava Hindu adores God as Vishnu and His incarnations, and the Smarta worships His chosen Deity as the Supreme. Each denomination also venerates its own pantheon of Divinities, Mahadevas, or “great angels,” who were created by the Supreme Lord and who serve and adore Him. The elephant-faced Lord Ganesha, worshiped by Hindus of all denominations, is the most popular Mahadeva. Other Deities include Gods and Goddesses of strength, yoga, learning, art, music, wealth and culture.

Verses from Sages of Diverse Traditions

I bow to Govinda, whose nature is bliss supreme, who is the satguru, who can be known only from the import of all Vedanta, and who is beyond the reach of speech and mind. Let people quote the scriptures and sacrifice to the Gods, let them perform rituals and worship the Deities, but there is no liberation without the realization of one’s identity with the atman; no, not even in the lifetime of a hundred Brahmans put together. It is verily through the touch of ignorance that thou who art the Supreme Self findest thyself under the bondage of the non-Self, whence alone proceeds the round of births and deaths. The fire of knowledge, kindled by the discrimination between these two, burns up the effects of ignorance together with their root. A treasure hidden underground requires [for its extraction] competent instruction, excavation, the removal of stones and other such things, lying above it and finally grasping, but never comes out by being [merely] called out by name, so the transparent Truth of the Self, which is hidden by maya and its effects, is to be attained through the instructions of a knower of Brahman, followed by reflection, meditation and so forth, but not through perverted arguments.

Adi Shankaracharya, Vivekachudamani, verses 1.1, 6, 47 & 65, translated by Swami Madhavananda

Smarta Hinduism

Sri Nimbarka, Dashashloki, 2, 4, 5, 8, translated by Geeta Khurana, Ph.D.

Vaishnava Hinduism

The intrinsic form of the individual soul consists of intuitive knowledge; it is dependent on God, capable of union with and separation from the body; it is subtle and infinitesimal; it is different and distinct in each body. There are various types of individual souls, such as liberated, devoted and bound. The intrinsic form of the individual self is covered by the mirific power of Krishna. This covering can only be removed by Krishna’s grace. Krishna is the Absolute, the Brahman, whose nature excludes all imperfection and is one mass of all noble qualities. He embodies the Theophanies and is identical with Vishnu himself. Radha, Krishna’s consort, is all radiant with joy, and is endowed with a loveliness that reflects His nature. She is always surrounded by thousands of attendant maids, symbolizing finite souls. She also grants every desire. Krishna is to be worshiped by all who seek salvation, so that the influx of the darkness of ignorance may cease. This is the teachings of the Four Youths to Narada, witness to all truth.
Is the World Also Divine?

Yes, the world is divine. God created the world and all things in it. He creates and sustains from moment to moment every atom of the seen physical and unseen spiritual universe. Everything is within Him. He is within everything. God created us. He created the Earth and all things upon it, animate and inanimate. He created time and gravity, the vast spaces and the uncounted stars. He created night and day, joy and sorrow, love and hate, birth and death. He created the gross and the subtle, this world and the other worlds.

There are three worlds of existence: the physical, subtle and causal, termed Bhuloka, Antarloka and Brahmaloka. The Creator of all, God Himself, is uncreated. He wills into manifestation all souls of the spiritual universe. Everything is within Him. He is within every vast space and the uncounted stars. He created night and day, joy and sorrow, love and hate, birth and death. He created the waves from an ocean. Rishis describe this perpetual process termed Bhuloka, Antarloka and Brahmaloka. The Creator of all, God Himself, is uncreated. He wills into manifestation all souls and all form, issuing them from Himself like light from a fire or waves from an ocean. Rishis describe this perpetual process of the unfoldment of thirty-six tattvas, stages of manifestation, from the Siva tattva—Parashakti and hada—to the five elements. Creation is not the making of a separate thing, but an emanation of Himself. God creates, constantly sustains the form of His creations and absorbs them back into Himself. The Vedas elucidate, “As a spider spins and withdraws its web, as herbs grow on the earth, as hair grows on the head and body of a person; so also from the Imperishable arises this universe.”

The Lord created the world, the dwelling place of man. How shall I sing His majesty? He is as mighty as Mount Meru, whence He holds sway over the three worlds; and He is the four paths of Saivam here below. ¶Those who tread the path of Shuddha Saivam stand aloft, their hearts intent on Eternal Para, transcending worlds of pure and impure maya, where pure intelligence consorts not with base ignorance and the lines that divide Real, unreal and real-unreal are sharply discerned.

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Should Worldly Involvement Be Avoided?

The world is the bountiful creation of a benevolent God, who means for us to live positively in it, facing karma and fulfilling dharma. We must not despise or fear the world. Life is meant to be lived joyously. The world is the place where our destiny is shaped, our desires fulfilled and our soul matured. In the world, we grow from ignorance into wisdom, from darkness into light and from a consciousness of death to immortality. The whole world is an ashrama in which all are doing sannyasin. We must love the world, which is God’s creation. Those who despise, hate and fear the world do not understand the intrinsic goodness of all. The world is a glorious place, not to be feared. It is a gracious gift from God Himself, a playground for His children in which to interrelate young souls with the old—the young experiencing their karma while the old hold firmly to their dharma. The young grow; the old know. Not fearing the world does not give us permission to become immersed in worldliness. To the contrary, it means remaining affectionately detached, like a drop of water on a lotus leaf, being in the world but not of it, walking in the rain without getting wet. The Vedas warn, “Behold the universe in the glory of God: and all that lives and moves on Earth. Leaving the transient, find joy in the Eternal. Set not your heart on another’s possession.”

Siva, having freely taken limitations of body upon Himself, is the soul. As He frees Himself from these, He is Paramasiva (supreme consciousness). Self realization is the aim of human life. Through the realization of unity of guru, mantra, Self, and powers of kundalini, inwardly manifested as faculties of consciousness and outwardly as women, (supreme consciousness). Self realization is the aim of human life. Through the realization of unity of guru, mantra, Self, and powers of kundalini, inwardly manifested as faculties of consciousness and outwardly as women, the knowledge of the subjective Self is acquired. Bliss is the form of the absolute consciousness manifested in body. The five mokaras reveal that Bliss. By the power of bhavana [intention, resolve] everything is achieved.

The real nature is realized by dwelling in the great spontaneity. A firm stay in the universal consciousness is brought about by the absorption of duality. The great union arises from the unification of male and female [principles], and the perceiver with the perceived. Upon the enjoyment of the triple bliss, the unfettered supreme consciousness involuntarily and suddenly [reveals itself]. With the immersion into the great wisdom comes freedom from merit and demerit.

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What Is Liberation?

The dawn of freedom from the cycle of reincarnation is called moksha (liberation), and one who has attained the state of liberation is called a jivanmukta (liberated soul). While some schools of Hinduism teach that liberation comes only upon death, others recognize the condition of jivanmukti, a state of liberation in which the spiritually advanced being continues to unfold its inherent perfection while in the embodied state. It is said of such a great one that “he died before he died,” indicating the totally real, not merely symbolic, demise of the ego, or limited self-sense. Some schools hold the view that liberated beings may voluntarily return to the physical universe in order to help those who are yet unliberated.

The Sanskrit word moksha derives from the root mukh, which has many connotations: to loosen, to free, release, let loose, let go and thus also to spare, to let live, to allow to depart, to dispach, to dismiss and even to relax, to spend, bestow, give away and to open. Philosophically, it derives from worldly existence or transmigration; final or eternal emancipation.” But moksha is not a state of extinction of the conscious being. Nor is it mere unconsciousness. Rather it is perfect freedom, an inscrutable state of nondifferentiation, a proximity to, or a oneness with, the Divine. Moksha may manifest in many ways, but it may also be understood as a beginning, not unlike graduation from university.

In Hinduism is a pluralistic tradition. On any given subject it offers a variety of views that reflect different human temperaments and different levels of emotional, intellectual, moral and spiritual development. So, too, on the subject of liberation, various learned opinions exist. Since liberation involves transcending time and space, and yet the state of freedom it defines precede definition. For this reason, some have argued that different views of liberation simply reflect the built-in limitations of language and reason.

Many Paths

The Vedas themselves present a number of approaches to liberation. Some of these are agnostic; others involve various monistic and theistic views. The main classical text on Self Realization within the Vedantic tradition, the Brahma Sutra of Badarayana mentions a number of them current views: that upon liberation the soul (jiva) attains nondifference from Brahm (‘Iv4:4:9), that it gains the attributes of Brahm (‘Iv4:5:7) that it exists only as pure consciousness (‘Iv4:6:8), that even though it is pure consciousness from the perspective of the relata, a being remains free of the relatum. This happens, the being reincarnates in the physical world after death and in his new body it has the opportunity to build upon past virtues and realizations until finally becoming a jivanmukt in that or a future birth.

Bliss. Left, in a mountain cave, a worshiper of God as the inner light, the soul, where the mind and completely realizes his oneness with all of creation. His samadhi is so deep that his outer identity dissolves, shown by the starry sky pervading his body.

Summary

All schools are agreed that liberation is the ultimate fulfillment of human existence. All traditions hold that the means through which one may attain this enjoyment (bhoga). Having lived many lives and having learned many lessons, each conscious being seeks release from mortality, which then leads to glimpses of our divine origin and finally Self Realization. This consists in discovering our true nature, beyond body and mind, our identity in the incomprehensibly vast ultimate Being. Upon this discovery, we are released from the round of births and deaths and realize eternal freedom, untold bliss and supreme consciousness.

Views on the Nature of Soul and God

The concept of moksha for every Hindu school of thought is informed and modified by its understanding of the individual and its relation to God. Hindus believe that after release from birth and death the innermost being will exist in the higher regions of the subtle worlds, where the Detties and spiritually mature beings reside. Some schools contend that the soul continues to evolve in these realms until it attains perfect union and merger with God. Other traditions believe that the soul evolves directly and separately in God’s glorious presence. Four distinct views, reflected in the primary Hindu denominations, are explored below.

Smarta Hinduism: All is Brahman

Smartism (the teaching following smriti, or tradition) is an ancient brahmanical tradition reformed by Adi Shankara in the ninth century. This liberal Hindu path, which revolves around the worship of six fundamental forms of the Divine, is monistic, non sectarian, meditative and philosophical. Iskcon and the human being are in reality the singular absolute Brahman. Within maya, the soul and speaking body appear as two. Jnana, spiritual wisdom, dispels that illusion. Most Smartas believe that moksha is achieved through jnana yoga alone. This path is defined as an introspective, non-theistic path, but non-kulinadi yoga path. Yet, many Advaitins also recognize the kundalini as the power of consciousness. Ramana Maharshi and Swami Shivananda of Rishikesh did, and Shankara wrote on tantra and kundalini as in the Smartas. Thus, the power of consciousness and his wisdom (jnana), revealed in spontaneity and effort.

Even after attaining perfect liberation, a being may, after passing into the inner worlds, consciously choose to be reborn to help others on the path. Such a one is called an upadhye—enlightened by the benedict sage—described as a sannyasi, or silent ascetic who abides at the pinnacle of consciousness, whether in this world or the next, teaching all worldly involvement.

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Vishnu, who manifests through the temple Deity, or icon. The primary goal of Vaishnavites is virtue of perfect devotion, recovers divine qualities suppressed by his grace and liberation. It does not come from recitation of hymns, sacrificial worship or yoga. through total self-surrender, called prapatti, or “likeness” to God; and sarupya, or “nearness” to God; and jnana, or “knowledge.” There is one school of Vaishnavism, founded by Vallabhacharya, which takes an entirely different view of moksha. It teaches that the liberated soul retains its identity beyond all change or diversity. Simultaneously it is the realization attained the Omnipresent on all sides—enter into the all it-ness of maya, and merge with Satchit-ananda, the Ultimate reality.

Shakta Hinduism: Refuge in the Mother

The primary goal of Vaishnavism is deiva-karma, disembodied liberation, attainable only after death when the “small self” realizes union with the Big Self, and is thus freed from the bondage of samsara. saivism values both bhakti and yoga, devotional and contemplative sadhanas, to whom wood and gold, life and death and the same. The liberated soul enters the abode of the Cosmic Deity, where it merges with Siva.

Saiva Hinduism: Soul and Siva Are One

The state of jivanmukti in Shaktism is called jivanmukti, or “liberation during life,” which is attained through sahasdra and grace. The liberated soul is known as a kumuda-siddha, to whom wood and gold, life and death and the same. The liberated soul enters the abode of the Cosmic Deity, where it merges with Siva.

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Shakta Hinduism: Refuge in the Mother

The primary goal of Vaishnavism is deiva-karma, disembodied liberation, attainable only after death when the “small self” realizes union with the Big Self, and is thus freed from the bondage of samsara. saivism values both bhakti and yoga, devotional and contemplative sadhanas, to whom wood and gold, life and death and the same. The liberated soul enters the abode of the Cosmic Deity, where it merges with Siva.
Chart of Hindu Cosmology:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 Worlds</th>
<th>5 Planes (Lokas)</th>
<th>5 Spheres (Kalas)</th>
<th>Inner and Outer Universe</th>
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<td>THIRD WORLD</td>
<td>Sîvaloka, “plane of God” and the Gods, also called Kâranaloka, the “causal plane”</td>
<td>Sîvachakra — plane of reality, also called Brahma-loka, region of sahasrâra chakra</td>
<td>Suddha Maya: Pure Spiritual Energy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 Planes (Lokas)</td>
<td>5 Spheres (Kalas)</td>
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<td>THIRD WORLD</td>
<td>7. Sâtayâtanâka, “plane of aura”, also called Brahma-loka, region of sahasrâra chakra</td>
<td>Suddha Maya: Pure Spiritual Energy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Sântyaatikaäla, Svânaam, superconsciousness expanded into endless inner space</td>
<td>1) Siva sattva: Parâkshita-nîlå, Satchindânâna, pure consciousness</td>
<td>2) Sakti sattva: Paramâyavâ-Jûsâ, Personal God</td>
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<td>5. Sântyaatikaäla, Svânaam, superconsciousness expanded into endless inner space</td>
<td>3) Sadhist-tattva: power of revelation</td>
<td>3) Suddhâvâlîkâta sattva: dharmam, pure knowing, the powers of dissolution, preservation and creation—Rudra, Vishnu and Brahmá</td>
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<td>4. Sântikâla, kârma chakra, superconscious forms made of inner sounds and colors</td>
<td>4) Jñâna-tattva: buddhi chitta and manas chitta, organs of action</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Pratishthâkâla, buddhi chitta and manas chitta, realm of intellect and instinct</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chart of Hindu Cosmology: the Inner and Outer Universe

Parasûra (attraute, “beyond existence”)

- 2 ½ Names 16 Evolute (Tattva)

- Vishvagrâta: final merger of the golden dhuanamaya koša (svarûpa-sadhana) in Parmatvxra

- Kâraṇa Sârîra, “causal body” or Anandamaya Kośa, “sheath of bliss”—the body of the soul, also called the ajñatâ or pranaic causal body

- Sûkhîma Sârîra, the “subtle body,” also called the astral body

- Viñâyama Kośa the “shatt of cognition,” the mental or actinic causal sheath

- Manomaya Kośa the intellectual (odic-causal) and instinctive (odic-astral) sheath

- Prânamaya Kośa the “shatt of vitality” which envelops the physical body

- Sthûla Sârîra, “gross body,” or Anûnâksha Kośa, “food-made sheath”—the physical body or odic body

The chart above depicts the various planes of existence and consciousness; the natures; the chakras; and the bodies of man, all of which is organized with the highest consciousness, or subtlest level of manifestation, at the top, and the lowest, or grossest, at the bottom. In studying the chart, it is important to remember that each level includes within itself all the levels above it. Thus, the element earth, the grossest of all manifestation, contains all the planes above it on the chart. They are its inner structure. Similarly, the soul encased in a physical body also has all the sheaths named above—pranic, instinctive-intellectual, cognitive and causal.

The three columns on the left side of the chart depict the inner and outer universe. Column one shows the three worlds: the causal, superconscousness realm of the Gods, the astral realm of dreams, abode of non-embodied souls; and the physical world of the five senses. Column two gives a more detailed division in 14 planes and correlates these to the chakras, the force centers of consciousness resident within each soul. It shows three levels in the third world, corresponding to the sahasrâra, ajña and visuddha chakras, and three levels of the second world, or astral plane, corresponding to the anûbhuta, manas-prâna and saumishthâya chakras. Note that the grossest of these planes, the Bhûva-loka or Prêta-loka, has a secondary realm, called the Preta-loka, where abide earth-bound astral entities. The first world, or Bhûloka,