

The Subtle Worlds

Beyond the Visible, Toward the Witness

A contemplative text on the gross, subtle and causal bodies, worlds, death, and the
witnessing Self

Nirvan Dham Series

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Preface: Reverence for the Invisible, But With Discernment

Human beings are not merely bodies. This is not a new idea. It is as old as the first silence of humanity, the first fear, the first dream, and the first question: what happens after death? Yet to say, "I am the Self," is also only a sentence until one has directly observed the layers of body, life-force, mind, intellect, impressions and witness within oneself.

The subject of the subtle worlds arises in this middle ground. The physical body is visible, so the debate around it is limited. The Self is formless, so without direct realization it often remains a concept. But between the visible body and the formless Self there is an immense field: mind, life-force, impressions, dreams, memory, the subtle body, movement after death, realms, devas, ancestors, restless beings, heaven, hell, the causal body, and the tendencies carried across births. This entire field may be called the subtle world.

This book is not written to frighten anyone. It is not written to tempt a seeker into tourism of invisible realms. Its purpose is to understand what may truly be subtle, to recognize what may be the imagination of the mind, and to keep the seeker steady in the direction of the ultimate truth. Even if the subtle worlds are real, they are not the final truth. And even if an imagination is false, the mind that believes it to be true can remain lost for years.

The vision of Nirvan Dham is simple: neither blind rejection nor blind belief. No commerce of fear, no performance of miracles. Respect for experience, but also examination of experience. Reverence for scripture, but not as a weapon for ego. Discussion of realms, but always with remembrance of the realm-transcending witness.

Part 1: The Doorway to the Subtle World - Truth, Imagination and Discernment

The Gross, the Subtle and the Causal

Indian spiritual thought does not see a human being as a mere bundle of flesh, blood, bones and skin. Vedanta and Yoga understand the human being through layers. The outermost layer is the gross body, formed from food, sustained by food and returned to the earth after death. Within it is the subtle body, made of life-force, mind, the subtle powers of the senses, ego, intellect and impressions. Deeper still is the causal body, the seed-state in which ignorance, tendencies and the possibilities of future birth lie dormant.

The Taittiriya Upanishad speaks of five sheaths: the food sheath, the vital sheath, the mental sheath, the wisdom sheath and the bliss sheath. This map teaches the seeker that the journey begins with the assumption, “I am the body,” but gradually moves through life-force, mind, intellect and subtle bliss. Even these must be seen through, until the Self is recognized.

The Bhagavad Gita also speaks of subtle continuity at the time of death. The body changes, but the subtle powers of the mind and senses, along with the stream of impressions, do not simply vanish. Just as the wind carries fragrance, the living principle carries tendencies onward. This does not mean that a permanent personal ego has become immortal. It means that as long as ignorance and desire remain, movement remains possible.

This is the first understanding of the subtle world: what is unseen is not automatically unreal, and what is visible is not the whole truth. But here, caution is essential. As soon as a person hears that there is a subtle body, the mind begins to imagine: I visited such-and-such realm, I saw such-and-such deity, in my past birth I was a great sage. This is where the path becomes delicate. Scriptures speak of the possibility of subtle worlds, but the mind can also create countless worlds.

Mind: Doorway and Factory

The greatest difficulty with the subtle world is that the first doorway to it is the mind. And the mind is not stable. It makes pictures out of memory, gods out of fear, realms out of desire, and

spiritual powers out of ego. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras distinguish the movements of mind: valid knowledge, error, imagination, sleep and memory. Imagination is the movement in which words and ideas may exist even when there is no actual object corresponding to them. This is where the seeker must remain awake.

Someone hears that there is a heaven-world. In meditation a light appears. The mind says, "This is the gate of heaven." A figure appears. The mind says, "A deity has come." The body trembles. The mind says, "Kundalini has awakened." The experience may have been small, but the story becomes large. More dangerous than experience is the meaning the mind attaches to it.

A subtle experience may indeed occur. But to name it immediately, announce it, and build an identity around it is delusion. The seeker must ask: what was seen - was it permanent? Did ego decrease or increase? Did compassion grow, or did the hunger to be special grow? Did practice become steady, or did the mind begin to chase a repetition of the experience?

If after an experience the inner voice says, "I have arrived, I am special, I am a traveler of worlds," then it is not necessarily the subtle world that has opened. It may be the world of ego.

Scriptural Ground and Its Right Use

Indian scriptures speak of the subtle world on many levels. The Upanishads speak of paths after death, of the path of light and the path of ancestors. The Gita mentions worship directed toward devas, ancestors and lower beings. The Puranas describe fourteen worlds, devas, sages, asuras, nagas and many subtle powers. The Garuda Purana is traditionally associated with death, the state after death, the journey of the departed, karmic consequences and rites of transition.

But scriptures can be read in many ways. Some read realms as literal geography. Some dismiss them as mere symbolism. Some turn them into instruments of fear. Some create a spiritual marketplace out of them. The balanced view is that scripture speaks on many levels: ritual, moral, psychological, yogic and non-dual.

The same heaven can be, for a childlike mind, the reward of virtue; for a ritualist, a realm to be attained; for a yogi, a state of consciousness; and for the sage, still a seen object that must be transcended.

First Understanding of the World of Death, Heaven and Restless States

While living in a human body, we are in the mortal world. Mortal world does not only mean planet Earth. It means the condition where birth, change, death, fear, desire, action and choice are present. There is suffering here, but there is also the doorway to liberation.

Heaven is described as a state of enjoyment born of merit. Through noble actions, discipline, charity, sacrifice, service and righteous living, the being may become eligible for higher fields of experience. Yet the central message of the Gita and the Upanishads is not that heaven is the final goal. Heaven is also a field of experience. There is pleasure there, but not permanence.

When the force of merit is exhausted, movement changes. Running away from suffering is not liberation. Being trapped in pleasure is not liberation either.

The scriptures also speak of hell and lower realms. Behind these descriptions lies a deep psychological and spiritual teaching. Excessive violence, deceit, uncontrolled desire, greed, cruelty and unrighteousness create such fire in the subtle body that even after death consciousness does not easily rest. Hell is not merely a burning place somewhere below; hell is also the condition in which one's own desire becomes one's punishment.

The state of a preta, or restless being, is not merely a frightening form. It refers to a consciousness that has left the body but has not become settled, because of attachment, incompleteness, desire, anger, delusion or confusion. The lesson for the seeker is clear: the less you cling in life, the lighter you move through death.

The Causal Body and the Direction of the Witness

The subtle body is the moving stream of mind, life-force and impressions. The causal body is subtler still. It is the seed-state in which ignorance, tendencies and the possibilities of karma lie dormant. In deep sleep, the mind becomes quiet, the world disappears, knowledge of the body is absent, and there is a trace of peace - but there is no knowledge. Upon waking, one says, "I slept well; I did not know anything." This is a glimpse of the causal body. There was no suffering there, but there was no realization either.

Therefore, the causal body must not be mistaken for the Self. The causal body feels like peace, but ignorance is hidden within it. The Self is not ignorance. The Self is that which later knows even the ignorance of deep sleep.

The gross body is seen - not I. The movement of life-force is seen - not I. Thoughts in the mind are seen - not I. Decisions in the intellect are seen - not I. Even the blissful silence of the deeper sheath is experienced - therefore it too is seen. Then who am I?

This question breaks the limit of the subtle world also.

A Glimpse of the Great Family

While understanding the subtle world, the idea of the great family is useful. The living being is not isolated. It is not merely the private story of the present body. Behind it there is a stream of ancestors, a stream of impressions, the consciousness of sages, divine tendencies, the life of the earth, and ultimately the vastness of one consciousness.

The idea of the ancestral realm gives a glimpse of this great family. We do not receive only blood from our ancestors; we also receive impressions. A family is not merely a group of living people. It is also a subtle stream of memory, karma, blessing, incompleteness and inherited tendencies.

Deities too can be understood not only as external forms, but also as divine powers within. Fire is the flame of consciousness. Air is the movement of life-force. The sun is a symbol of witnessing

light. The great family means: I am not an isolated body. I arise within the vast arrangement of nature, ancestors, divine forces, the current of teachers, and Brahman-consciousness.

But caution remains. If the experience of the great family brings humility, it is helpful. If it produces a claim - "Such-and-such deity stands behind me; I am chosen" - then it is merely a new robe for ego.

Summary of Part 1

The subtle world may exist, but it is not the final truth. The mind creates visions, so do not trust every vision. Scriptures speak of realms, but liberation is not the attainment of a realm; it is the recognition of the Self. Death may not be the end, but the greater question is: while alive, who am I? The causal body is deep, but the Self is beyond it. The great family is vast, but its center is one consciousness. The seeker is protected not by miracles, but by discernment.

One who is lost in the subtle world has moved a little beyond the gross. One who continues to witness even the subtle comes to the doorway of the witness. One who rests in the witness discovers that all realms arise and dissolve in that alone.

Part 2: The Door of Death - Subtle Body, Restless State and Ancestral Stream

Death: Not an End, But a Transformation

Death is the greatest mystery of human life. At birth, the child cries; at death, those standing around cry. Between these two events, much of life is silently ruled by the fear: I will end.

The fear of death is not only the fear of losing the body. It is the fear of losing one's story. It is the fear of losing relationships, name, memory, identity and control. Throughout life, a person keeps adding "mine": my body, my family, my house, my wealth, my name, my achievement, my practice. Death comes and first challenges this very "mine."

From the physical point of view, death is the end of bodily function. Breath stops, the heart stops, the body grows cold, the senses cease to work. The family says, "He has gone," or "She has gone." This sentence is mysterious. If the body itself was the person, why say that someone has gone? The body is lying there. Who has gone?

Vedanta says that the gross body is formed of the five elements. At death, it returns to nature. But the subtle stream of the being - mind, life-force, impressions, tendencies and karmic movement - does not necessarily end at once. The subtle body becomes the basis for further movement.

Death is a change. Whether that change is gentle or painful, clear or confused, depends on how awake and how attached one was in life. For one who lived as the body, the dropping of the body can be a great shock. For one who clung to relationships, separation can be pain. For one who practiced witnessing while alive, death too can become an event that is seen.

The Subtle Body: The Traveler's Bundle

Without understanding the subtle body, the movement after death cannot be understood. The gross body is visible. The subtle body is not visible in the same way, yet its effects are experienced constantly. The body sits here, but the mind runs elsewhere - this is the movement of the subtle body. An old memory suddenly awakens grief - this is the activation of subtle impressions. A name is heard and love or hatred arises - this is the reaction of the subtle mind.

The subtle body is generally understood to include life-force, mind, intellect, ego, the subtle powers of the senses and impressions. It carries the journey. The gross body is the vehicle; the subtle body is the traveler's bundle. In this bundle may be attachment, fear, desire, incompleteness, merit, demerit, love, compassion, memory, tendency and ego. At death the vehicle is left behind; the bundle is not instantly emptied.

This is the mystery of karma. Karma is not merely outward action. Karma is also inner direction. Two people give charity. One gives with ego - "See how noble I am." Another gives with compassion - "Let this flow where it is needed." Outwardly the action may look similar; inwardly the subtle imprint will differ.

Two people pray. One prays out of fear - "May God not be displeased." Another prays out of love - "I bow to the light within." The mantra may be the same; the inner movement is different. The subtle body carries this inner movement.

Withdrawal of Life-Force and Separation From the Body

In yogic understanding, death is also described as the gradual withdrawal and departure of life-force. When the life-current begins to withdraw from the body, the senses become dim. Sight weakens, hearing grows distant, touch becomes faint, speech becomes difficult. The mind may be clear at one moment and confused at another. Some see loved ones near the end, some see scenes from the past, some experience light, sound or presence.

Such experiences should not be declared ultimate truth immediately. Some may be biological, some may arise from memory, some from impressions, and some may truly be signs of a subtle threshold. The seeker's vision must remain balanced.

The state of consciousness at the end may influence further movement. Yet the final state is shaped by the direction of an entire life. A life spent in unconsciousness is not transformed merely by a sentence uttered at the last moment. The final remembrance becomes powerful when it has been ripened through life.

Therefore, preparation for death does not begin on the deathbed. It begins every day: in every letting go, every forgiveness, every seeing of truth, every meditation, every time the seeker says: this too is changing; I am its witness.

Restless State: The Language of Unfinished Clinging

The word *preta* often creates a frightening image. But in the scriptural vision, the restless state after death should not be reduced to fear. It refers to a condition in which the being has left the body but has not settled into its proper movement. It remains in-between.

There can be many causes: intense attachment, sudden death, unfulfilled desires, a violent mind, deep anger, greed, strong clinging to a place or person, or inability to accept death. Even as a symbol, the meaning is clear: if a person has become so bound to one desire that without it their identity collapses, that same bondage may continue to hold the consciousness after death.

The central formula of the restless state is: the body is gone, but the grip remains. This is less a horror story and more a teaching of dispassion. One who learns to let go in life finds it easier to let go in death. One who clings to everything in life has the hand opened by death - and that may be painful.

The seeker should ask: what in me has the potential to become a restless grip? Which desire would not let me be peaceful even after death? Which relationship has become bondage rather than love? Which anger is eating me from within? This is the real science of restlessness.

The Ancestral Stream: Ancestors Are Not Only the Past

The Indian tradition gives great importance to ancestors. Ancestors are not merely dead relatives. They symbolize the subtle stream through which our body, mind, impressions and family tendencies are formed.

We think we are alone. Yet many generations speak within us. The body carries lineage. Habits carry the mark of family. Fear carries the shadow of parents, grandparents, clan, society and culture. Much of our guilt, ambition, fear of poverty, hunger for respect, ways of relating and style of loving is not entirely personal; it has come through generations.

The deeper meaning of ancestral remembrance, offering and gratitude is release. It says: I am not alone. I exist because of those who came before me. Whatever is incomplete in me, I will bring it into awareness. Whatever pain came through the stream, I will not unconsciously pass it forward.

In a family where anger has flowed for generations, one awakened person can interrupt the stream. In a house dominated by fear, one seeker can witness and break the inheritance of fear. In a lineage of greed, violence or ignorance, one awakened heart can give the stream a new direction. We do not awaken only for ourselves. When we awaken, our stream is purified.

The Mortal World: Not a Curse, But an Opportunity

Many call the mortal world a realm of suffering. Here there is disease, aging, loss, insult and death. Here love brings the fear of losing. The body brings fear of illness. Family brings the pain of separation. Yet scripture calls human birth rare. Why? Because the mortal world is not only the field of pain; it is the field of awakening.

In heaven there may be more pleasure, but less dispassion. In lower realms there may be more pain or dullness, but discernment becomes difficult. In the human realm, pleasure and pain are mixed. That mixture becomes the fire of sadhana. Suffering wakes a person. Fear of death awakens questions. Separation asks what love truly is. Illness teaches disidentification from the body. Insult reveals the root of ego.

A tree is beautiful, but it cannot ask, "Who am I?" Devas may dwell in subtle pleasure, but the intense thirst for liberation found in human life is rare. Animals are natural, but their reflective

discernment is limited. The human being is entangled, but only the human being can ask: who am I?

The Desire for Heaven and the Direction of Liberation

Human imagination often turns after death toward heaven: pleasure, light, beauty, honor, music, meeting loved ones, and the end of pain. The scriptures do not deny heaven. But from the viewpoint of Vedanta and the Gita, heaven is not the final goal. Heaven is also an experience. Where there is experience, there is an experiencer. Where there is an experiencer, there is a subtle "I." Where there is "I," there is separation. Where there is separation, there is time.

Heaven may be delightful, but it is not eternal. Liberation is greater than heaven. Many people in spirituality merely want a better world: less pain, more pleasure, more light, more beautiful experiences. They do not leave the world; they search for a subtle version of it. Earlier they wanted gross pleasure; now they want subtle pleasure. The desire remains the same.

Liberation is not the refinement of desire. Liberation is seeing the root of desire. Let the seeker bow even to heaven, but not remain there. If heaven comes through merit, it is still a seen field. If light appears in meditation, it is seen. If bliss arises within, it is seen. Where is the seer? This question carries the practice beyond heaven.

Preparation for Death

Preparation for death begins now. Let go a little every day. What you cannot release will pull you at death. This does not mean abandoning family; it means dropping inner clinging. Love, but do not possess.

Lighten unfinished relationships. Where forgiveness is possible, forgive. Where dialogue is possible, speak. Where distance is necessary, do not keep poison within. Often the heaviest burden after death is not wealth, but the knots of incomplete relationships.

See your truth. Do not cover your tendencies with spiritual language. Greed is greed. Fear is fear. Ego is ego. Once darkness is seen, it slowly loses power. Remember death, but do not cultivate fear. Sit quietly and see: this body will not remain. This name will go. This house, these people, this story - all will change. What remains?

Practice witnessing. If you learn to see thoughts in life, change can be seen in death. If you learn to see pain in life, the pain of death can also become an event. If you see ego in life, the breaking of identity at death becomes less terrifying.

Summary of Part 2

Death is not merely an end; it is transformation. The gross body is left behind, but subtle impressions may continue. The restless state is not merely a tale of fear; it is a warning about unfinished attachment. The ancestral stream shows that the human being is part of a long river of lineage

and impressions. The mortal world is not only a realm of suffering; it is an opportunity for liberation. Heaven can be pleasant, but it is not liberation. True preparation for death takes place while living, through dispassion, forgiveness, truth-seeing and witnessing.

One who runs from death also runs from life. One who sees death begins to see life truly. One who recognizes the witness of death discovers birth and death as waves in consciousness.

Part 3: The Order of Realms - Heaven, Hell and Many Fields of Consciousness

What Is a Realm?

When a human being looks at the sky, they do not see only stars. They also see the possibility hidden within existence. They wonder: is life only this - birth, work, family, struggle, illness, aging and death? Or is there a larger order beyond this visible world?

Scripture says existence is not limited to the material world that appears to the senses. There are many levels of consciousness, many fields of karmic consequence, many states of enjoyment, and many dimensions of spiritual maturation. These are expressed through the language of lokas, or realms.

A realm is a world, a field, an experiential domain in which the being undergoes certain types of experience according to consciousness and karma. A realm is not merely a location. It can also be a state. It can be a subtle field, a quality of consciousness, a karmic atmosphere. Even while living on the same Earth, two people may inhabit different inner realms. One lives in love and contentment; another in fear and envy. Outwardly they are in the same city; inwardly their worlds are different.

After death, when the limits of the gross body loosen, consciousness is drawn toward fields that correspond to its tendencies. As a seed sprouts according to its nature, the being moves toward an experiential field according to impressions.

The Tradition of Fourteen Realms

The Puranic tradition speaks of fourteen realms: seven higher and seven lower. The higher are commonly named Bhu, Bhuvar, Svarga, Mahar, Jana, Tapa and Satya. The lower are Atala, Vitala, Sutala, Talatala, Mahatala, Rasatala and Patala. These are described in many texts with varying detail - sometimes as cosmic structure, sometimes as fields of devas, sages, asuras, nagas and other subtle powers.

For the seeker, the most important meaning is the diversity of consciousness and karma. “Above” does not merely mean upward in space. It also means subtlety, light, purity and expansion. “Below” does not merely mean under the earth. It can also mean density, delusion, tamas, craving

and ignorance.

But high and low must not be interpreted through ego. If someone says, “I belong to a higher realm; you belong to a lower one,” this is not knowledge of realms. It is pride. True understanding of realms brings humility, not superiority.

Realms are many. Consciousness is one. Scenes are many. The seer is one. This is the foundation of this chapter.

Bhu Loka: The Laboratory of Practice

Bhu Loka, the earthly realm, is where the human being acts through a physical body. It is also the mortal world, because everything here changes. Yet this realm is special because choice is present here. The being does not merely enjoy or suffer; it acts, learns and turns. Here one can fall into ignorance, and here one can awaken.

A person loves, then breaks through separation. A person earns wealth, then becomes filled with fear. A person decorates the body, then is shaken by illness. A person builds a name, then burns in insult. A person seeks pleasure, then sees that every pleasure is temporary. From this breaking, discernment is born.

Do not consider the earthly realm small. It is not merely a place of struggle; it is a doorway to liberation. A householder, monk, trader, farmer, artist, mother or father - anyone in whom the inner question begins to burn - can turn toward Self-realization. This is the greatness of human birth.

Bhuvar Loka: Life-Force and the Middle Field

Bhuvar Loka is often understood as a subtle field between Earth and heaven. It is associated with life-force, air, subtle beings, yakshas, restless spirits and transitional states. For the seeker, it signifies a field where grossness becomes lighter, but full illumination has not yet dawned. It is the middle region.

Many meditators pass through experiences belonging to this zone: lightness of body, trembling, rising energy, subtle sound, glimpses of light, forms, a sense of presence. These can occur in practice, but they are not Self-realization.

The teaching of this realm is: understand prana, but do not get lost in prana. Life-force is powerful. It can influence health, emotion and meditation. Yet life-force too can be observed. The one who observes the movement of prana is deeper than prana. The rising of energy may be auspicious, but without discernment it can also create imbalance. Without humility, subtle experience can polish the ego.

Svarga Loka: The Peak of Pleasure, But Not Liberation

Svarga, or heaven, is described as a higher field of enjoyment attained through merit. It is associated with light, beauty, music, divine joy and subtle pleasures. Heaven attracts human imagination because earthly life contains much suffering and the mind wants a place where pain does not exist.

Vedanta, however, warns the seeker: heaven is pleasant, but not eternal. It is the fruit of merit. As long as merit supports enjoyment, heavenly experience remains; then movement changes. Heaven is a holiday from suffering, not liberation.

The suffering mind desires heaven. The inquiring mind desires truth. The devotee desires God. The sage seeks to know the Self. There may be joy in heaven, but even there the experiencer remains. Where the experiencer remains, a subtle "I" remains. Where "I" remains, separation remains. Therefore, do not reject heaven, but see through the attachment to it.

The seeker must ask: do I want truth or pleasure? Liberation or beautiful experiences? God, or the comfort of God's realm? The question is sharp, but necessary.

Mahar, Jana, Tapa and Satya

Above heaven, the traditions speak of Mahar Loka, Jana Loka, Tapa Loka and Satya Loka. They are considered subtler, more luminous and linked with higher sage-consciousness. Mahar is associated with great seers; Jana with higher creative intelligence; Tapa with austerity and spiritual fire; Satya with the highest creative level linked to Brahma.

These realms may be read literally or as inner states of spiritual refinement. The message is that consciousness is not confined to gross pleasure and pain. Through tapas, knowledge, meditation and truth, the being may rise toward subtler fields.

Yet higher realms are still realms. A realm is a field. Where there is a field, there is limitation. Where there is limitation, there is not the fullness of Brahman. The Brahman of Advaita is the ground before creation, within creation and after creation. Therefore, greater than reaching higher realms is becoming realm-transcending.

Realm-transcending does not mean escaping somewhere else. It means seeing all realms arise in consciousness.

Lower Realms and Hell

The lower realms - Atala, Vitala, Sutala, Talatala, Mahatala, Rasatala and Patala - are associated in the Puranic imagination with various asuric, naga and subtle forces. For the seeker, they symbolize the downward direction of consciousness when it becomes dense with tamas, delusion, craving, power-ego, indulgence and ignorance.

"Below" is a direction of consciousness. Where light is weak, there is below. Where discernment is weak, there is below. Where there is indulgence without awareness, there is below. Where

there is power without compassion, there is below. Not every glitter is height. Not every power is purity. Not every pleasure brings joy. Not every mystery is spiritual.

Hell too is described extensively in scripture. It can be understood in two ways: as a subtle field where karma is experienced, and as a state of mind in which one's own desire, anger, guilt, hatred and ignorance burn the being. Hell is visible even in life. The angry person burns within. The jealous suffer from others' happiness. The greedy are never satisfied.

Do not merely fear hell. See the hell within. Wherever there is anger, there is the seed of hell. Wherever there is deceit, there is the seed of hell. Wherever compassion has died, the door of hell is near. Hell is not only a distant possibility; it is a direction of consciousness. Liberation too is a direction of consciousness.

Devas, Asuras and Subtle Powers

The struggle between devas and asuras is not merely a war in heaven. It is also the struggle of two directions within the human being. Devas are powers of light: truth, balance, generosity, discipline, compassion, faith, intelligence and purity. Asuras are powers of darkness: ego, hunger for control, excess indulgence, misuse of power, violence, deceit and falsehood.

Every human being contains both. When one speaks truth, the devas are strengthened. When one deceives, the asuric force rises. When one gives, the divine current appears. When one seeks to dominate others, the asuric current appears.

Scriptures also mention yakshas, gandharvas, kinnaras, apsaras, nagas, siddhas and vidyadhara. One may see them as actual subtle beings, symbolic energies or special states of consciousness. The seeker's task is to understand how seductive the subtle can be. Not only fear misleads; beauty misleads too. Not only hell binds; heaven can bind. Not only darkness, but subtle light can polish ego.

Realm-Vision and Mental Confusion

Is a vision of a realm genuine, or is it imagination? This cannot always be decided from outside. But the seeker can keep a test. After the experience, did peace arise or excitement? Did life become more righteous, or did the story become larger? Did dispassion grow, or attraction? Did ego decrease or increase? Can the experience stand before scriptural and teacher-guided discernment?

A true experience also says, "This too is seen." Delusion says, "This is final; lose yourself in it." True experience brings humility. Delusion brings claims. True experience deepens practice. Delusion lengthens stories.

Practice That Goes Beyond Realms

To know about realms is fine. To get lost in realms is not. The seeker's goal is not to collect realms, but to realize the Self. The first requirement is dharma: purify life. Falsehood, deceit, violence, greed, excess desire and cruelty pull consciousness downward. Dharma makes consciousness lighter.

Second is dispassion. The desire for heaven is also desire. The desire for powers is also desire. The desire to travel through realms is also desire. Dispassion is not hatred; it is non-clinging. Third is devotion: "I do not want experiences; I want You." This cuts subtle greed. Fourth is Self-inquiry: to whom does this appear? Light - to whom? Sound - to whom? Deity - to whom? Emptiness - to whom? Bliss - to whom? Fear - to whom?

This question turns the seeker from the seen to the seer. All realms are experiences. The witness is the light of experience. When the seeker rests in the witness, fascination with realms diminishes. One understands: I am not a traveler moving from realm to realm; I am the consciousness in which the possibility of realms arises.

Summary of Part 3

Realms are fields of experience. The earthly realm is the laboratory of practice. Bhuvan signifies life-force and transitional states. Heaven is a high field of pleasure, but not liberation. Higher realms indicate subtlety, tapas and sage-consciousness, yet they are still realms. Lower realms signify dense states of tamas, indulgence, delusion and ignorance. Hell is also a burning state of consciousness. Devas and asuras may exist outside, but they must first be recognized within. The goal of the seeker is not realm-travel, but steadiness in the witness beyond all realms.

If heaven is found, it is seen. If hell is found, it is seen. If deities appear, they are seen. If emptiness appears, it is seen. The one who knows all of this is beyond realms.

Part 4: The Causal Body, Impressions and the Great Family

The Hidden Root of Births

As the seeker understands the subtle world, one eventually reaches a place where visions become fewer and seeds begin to appear. First the gross body is seen. Then life-force, mind, emotion and subtle experiences are observed. Then realms, ancestors, devas, restless beings, heaven and hell are considered. But one question remains: from where do these patterns rise again and again?

Why do the same desires return in life? Why does the same fear follow again and again? Why do the same relationship patterns repeat? Why is one person drawn from birth toward music, meditation, battle, trade, renunciation or knowledge? Why does someone feel an unexplainable connection with a place, person, tradition or path?

This is where the causal body must be understood. The causal body is not visible like the physical body. It is not an active stream of thoughts and emotions like the subtle body. It is the seed-state. Here karmic impressions, tendencies, deep inclinations and fundamental ignorance remain in seed form. As a tree is hidden in a seed, the possibilities of life are hidden in the causal body.

What Is the Causal Body?

The gross body is what we see in the mirror. The subtle body is what we feel within: thoughts, emotions, life-force, memory, desire, ego and intellect. The causal body is the seed from which these arise.

Deep sleep gives a simple doorway to understanding it. In deep sleep there is no knowledge of the body. There are no active thoughts. The story of pleasure and pain disappears. The world vanishes. Yet upon waking one says, "I slept well; I knew nothing." This "I knew nothing" is a profound indication. There was peace, but no knowledge. The world was absent, but ignorance was present. There was no suffering, but there was no Self-realization either.

In the causal body, the mind is quiet but not dissolved. Ego is not active, but it remains in seed form. Desire is not awake, but it is asleep. Karma is not manifest, but it exists as possibility.

Ignorance is quiet, but not ended. The Self is beyond the causal body. The Self is that which knows the waking state, the dream state, and even the ignorance of deep sleep.

Impressions: The Invisible Writing

A samskara is an imprint left upon the mind and subtle body. Every experience, action, emotion, desire and deep reaction leaves a mark within. This mark becomes tendency. Tendency becomes habit. Habit begins to feel like nature. And nature begins to look like destiny.

A person says, "This is how I am." In truth, one is not necessarily that; one is acting under the force of impressions. Some become angry quickly. Some become afraid quickly. Some feel greed when they see money. Some burn when insulted. Some cannot bear loneliness. Some cling as soon as they receive affection. Some love worship. Some feel at home in silence. These are languages of impression.

Some impressions are formed in childhood. Some come through family. Some through society. Some are so deep that they appear innate. The scriptures relate these deep impressions to the continuity of many births.

Practice is not merely changing thoughts. Thought is the surface wave. Impression is the underlying current. If the current remains the same, life will remain the same even if thoughts change. A person says, "I am peaceful," but anger erupts at the slightest hurt. The peace was in thought, not in the impression. A person says, "I am detached," but swells at praise and collapses at criticism. Detachment was in language; it had not entered the causal depth.

Desire: The Power That Draws Birth

Vasana does not mean only sexual desire. In the classical sense, it is any deep desire, any unfinished impulse, any inner grip that pushes the being toward experience again. Desire for wealth, honor, pleasure, knowledge, power, relationship, revenge, survival, specialness - even desire for spiritual experiences.

Desire pulls birth. Where there is desire, there is movement. Where there is movement, there is action. Where there is action, there is result. Where there is result, there is experience. Where there is experience, there is reaction. Thus the cycle continues.

Birth is not only punishment; it is also an opportunity for unfinished desire. Consciousness returns because something is incomplete, something must ripen, something must be seen, something must be released, something must be known. But if the same desires return in new forms in every birth, the cycle continues.

Merely leaving an object does not end desire. One may leave a palace and live in a hut, yet still hunger for respect. Desire remains. One may leave family and become a monk, yet still hunger for control. Desire remains. One may leave wealth and live in an ashram, yet feel proud, "I am a renunciate." Desire remains. Desire is not the outer object; it is the inner grip.

Karma and the Causal Body

Karma is not merely outward action. It operates on three levels: thought, emotion and action. A small outward action may carry deep inner meaning. A large outward action may be empty within. One builds a temple, but wants fame. Another quietly feeds the hungry out of compassion. The first looks larger outwardly, but the subtle imprint depends on inner motive.

The seeds of karma remain in the causal body. Some ripen quickly, some later. Some in the present life, some beyond. Some through family patterns, some as tendencies of mind, some as circumstances. To understand karma is not fatalism; it is responsibility. The fatalist says, "What will happen will happen." The seeker says, "What was sown will bear fruit, but now I can sow consciously."

The fire of knowledge can burn karmic seeds. Dispassion can dry out desire. Devotion can melt ego. Witnessing can cause impressions to lose their grip.

Births: More Direction Than Story

When rebirth is mentioned, the mind quickly asks, "Who was I in a past life?" This question is attractive, but not always useful. Many become lost in imaginations of past lives. One sees oneself as a king, another as a warrior, another as a sage, another as a great soul. Some experiences may be true; some may be stories of mind. But the seeker's important question is not, "Who was I?" It is, "Which impression is active in me now?"

If someone feels they were a king in a past life, but in this life still carries ego and hunger for control, what has the memory given? If someone feels they were a seeker in another birth, but is lazy in practice now, what use is the memory? If an experience increases dispassion, compassion and awareness, it may help.

Do not turn rebirth into entertainment. It is not a certificate of specialness. It is a way to understand the continuity of impressions.

The Great Family: I Am Not Alone

In understanding the causal body, the seeker begins to see that the living being is not alone. One does not carry only a private story. One is linked with ancestors, society, nature, realms, divine powers, the stream of teachers and the vast order of consciousness. This wider relationship may be called the great family.

The great family is not an organization. It is the felt understanding of existence. My life is not an isolated island; it is a wave of an ocean. Within me is the stream of my parents, the memory of ancestors, the food of the earth, the elements, the words of sages, the language of society, the possibility of divinity, the shadow of asuric tendency, the animal instinct, the human capacity for discernment, and the light of the Self.

When I awaken, light enters my stream. When I see my desires, I do not transform only myself; I also transform blind tendencies carried by lineage. When I forgive, hardness of many generations may soften. When I stand in truth, a new seed is sown for those who come after.

Ancestors, Teacher-Stream and Divine Current

Ancestors should not be understood only as dead relatives. The ancestral stream is the subtle current through which body, impressions, tendencies and family karma enter us. Every family has a subtle climate: in one there is fear, in another anger; in one the fear of poverty, in another the hunger for respect; in one religion without love, in another love without discernment. These are writings of the ancestral current.

The deeper meaning of ancestral offering is gratitude, acceptance and release. What came from you, I bow to. What remained incomplete, I bring into light. What darkness came through the stream, I will not pass on unconsciously. What love was present, I carry forward as blessing.

The great family also includes the teacher-stream. The seeker has a subtle family of sages, saints, realized ones, devotees, scriptures and all who have opened a path toward truth. Feeling at home in a mantra, trembling at a sentence of the Upanishads, tears arising before a saint - these may not be mere emotions; they may be recognition of impression. But the true teacher-stream makes one humble, not boastful.

The divine current is also part of the great family. Deities are symbols of subtle powers of consciousness, and in many traditions actual subtle beings as well. Fire is inner flame, air is the movement of life-force, the sun is light, the moon is coolness, Saraswati is knowledge, Lakshmi is balanced abundance, Kali is the power that destroys ego, Shiva is silence, Vishnu is sustaining balance. Worship is not merely asking for objects; it is purifying an inner power.

The Asuric Stream and the Delusion of Power

Where there is a divine stream, there is also an asuric stream. Asuric consciousness has power without surrender, knowledge without humility, tapas without love, desire without dharma. If practice produces power and that power becomes control instead of service, it is asuric. If knowledge produces contempt instead of compassion, it is asuric. If renunciation becomes hardness instead of simplicity, it is asuric. If subtle experiences make the seeker feel chosen, it is asuric.

Power without love is dangerous. Knowledge without humility is dry. Practice without surrender can become a laboratory of ego. The seeker need not hate the asura within; it must be seen. Seen darkness can be transformed.

Purification of the Causal Body

The causal body is deep, so its purification is not superficial. Changing thoughts alone does not purify it. Taking on a religious identity does not purify it. The main means are truth-seeing,

dispassion, devotion, meditation, Self-inquiry and desireless action.

Truth-seeing means seeing what is within without decoration. If there is anger, see anger. If fear, see fear. If jealousy, see jealousy. If desire, see desire. If spiritual ego, see spiritual ego. What is not seen remains as a seed in the causal depth.

Dispassion means ceasing to cling to experiences. Pleasure came - seen. Pain came - seen. Praise came - seen. Insult came - seen. A subtle experience came - seen. When the grip loosens, seeds dry.

In devotion the seeker releases control. Meditation quiets the mind so deeper shadows can be seen. Self-inquiry - "Who am I?" - reaches toward the very root of the causal body. Desireless action burns old seeds and prevents new bondage.

The Witness Beyond the Causal

The causal body is very subtle, but the witness is subtler still, or rather beyond subtlety. A seeker may enter a deep silence: no thought, no emotion, no weight of body, a profound peace. But if this peace is an experience, it is not final. Blissful silence can be seen. Emptiness can be seen. The darkness of the seed-state can be known. Then who is the knower?

This is the Self. This is the witness. This is the light that knows the gross, the subtle and the causal. Advaita says: you are not the body, not the mind, not the intellect, not the life-force, not the impressions, not even the causal body. You are that in which all of this appears.

The causal body is the seed of birth. The witness is unborn. The causal body is a covering of ignorance. The witness is self-luminous. The causal body changes. The witness does not. Liberation is not the decoration of the causal body; it is freedom from identification with it.

Summary of Part 4

The causal body is the seed-state of life. Deep sleep gives a glimpse of it, but it is not Self-realization. Impressions are the invisible writing of mind and life. Desire draws birth. Karma is more about inner direction than outer action. Rebirth should not be entertainment; it should become discernment regarding impressions. The great family shows that the being is connected with lineage, devas, teachers, nature and the vast stream of consciousness.

The gross body is a garment. The subtle body is the traveler's bundle. The causal body is the seed of birth. But you are not the garment, the bundle or the seed. You are the consciousness in which all arise, remain and dissolve.

Part 5: From Confusion to Discernment - The Final Secret of the Subtle World

The Attraction of Subtle Experiences

The subtle world is as attractive as it is dangerous. It is attractive because humans have a natural curiosity about the invisible. It is dangerous because the mind plays its greatest games in the invisible. What is gross can be examined more easily. But the subtle is known through mind, experience, signs, dreams, meditation and intuition. Here the possibility of error is highest.

One seeker may truly pass through a subtle experience. Another may imagine the same experience. A third may take a dream as divine command. A fourth may take a mental image as proof of a past life. A fifth may mistake energy movement for complete awakening. Therefore the first requirement in subtle matters is discernment. Without discernment, the subtle world becomes not a field of practice, but a forest of confusion.

Experiences arise in practice. Some belong to mind, some to life-force, some to impressions, some to purification, and some may indeed be subtle contacts. But the arising of experience is not Self-realization. Experience means something came. What comes will go. What came and went cannot be your eternal nature. Light came and went. Trembling came and went. A divine form came and went. Emptiness came and went. A sound came and went. But who knows all this?

Do not hate subtle experiences. Do not suppress them. Do not dismiss them carelessly. But do not wear them as a crown. If an experience comes, observe it calmly. Learn from it. Do not make identity out of it.

Distinguishing Imagination From Subtle Perception

It is not always easy to distinguish imagination from genuine subtle perception. Both happen inwardly. Both may appear as image, sound, sensation or message. Both may feel real. How then does one discern?

The first sign is the nature of the experience. In imagination, the mind's desire is often hidden.

One who wants recognition may see deities making them special. One who wants power may receive subtle orders. One who wants love may see a divine relationship. One who wants importance may make the past life extraordinary.

In genuine subtle experience, the smell of desire is weaker. There is a certain neutrality. The experience happens, but the seeker does not run to sell it. One remains inwardly quiet, humble and careful.

The second sign is the fruit. Imagination often produces excitement, claims, publicity, specialness and comparison. True experience produces humility, silence, dispassion, compassion and seriousness in practice.

The third sign is the desire to repeat. Imagination wants the experience again. The mind tries to call the same vision. Practice becomes experience-hunting. A true seeker does not cling. They say: what came, came; what went, went; I seek truth.

The fourth sign is scriptural and teacher-guided discernment. Any experience that moves the seeker away from dharma, compassion, truth and humility is not reliable guidance. The fifth sign is the presence of witnessing. In true experience, the seeker remains aware. In delusion, the seeker is carried away.

Dream, Meditation and Subtle Travel

In dream, the mind creates an entire world. There is sky, people, fear, pleasure, death, love, even gods. As long as the dream continues, everything feels real. Upon waking, we say, "It was a dream." In meditation too the mind can create subtle scenes. The difference is that meditation may contain more awareness. But if awareness is absent, meditation can become a refined form of dreaming.

Many who claim subtle travel may actually be moving through deep states of dream and imagination. Some may also have genuine subtle experiences. But the seeker should not immediately announce every experience. The test of subtle travel is not where you went; it is who you became upon returning.

Did ego decrease? Did fear lessen? Did understanding of death deepen? Did compassion arise? Did truth increase in relationships? Did inner peace grow? If not, the travel was merely a scene - whether of dream, mind or subtle realm. The journey that takes you away from yourself is wandering. The journey that brings you to the seer is sadhana.

Powers: Ornament or Obstacle?

Through yoga, mantra, austerity, life-force practices, devotion, meditation or intense concentration, special abilities may appear. Sometimes there may be a sign of the future, sometimes an intuition of another's state, sometimes a dream that comes true, sometimes an extraordinary movement of energy. Scriptures do not simply deny such things. But they warn that powers can stop the seeker.

Why? Because as soon as power appears, ego wears a subtle robe. Earlier it said, "I am beautiful." Now it says, "I am divine." Earlier it said, "I have wealth." Now it says, "I have power." Earlier it said, "People respect me." Now it says, "Devas recognize me."

Power itself is not the problem. The "I" attached to power is the problem. Knowledge itself is not bondage. "I know" is bondage. If a subtle capacity appears, the seeker should become more humble. They should say: this too is a movement of nature. This too is not mine. This too is not final truth. I must be steady in the witness.

One who can hide a power is greater than the power. One who wants to display it is still smaller than it.

The Commerce of Fear and Superstition

The discussion of subtle worlds is often misused in the commerce of fear. Spirit trouble, ancestral defect, planetary curse, negative energy, fear of hell - all of these can be used to frighten people. Subtle influences may be possible. Places, families, mental fields and impressions may carry heaviness. But to put every problem on ghosts, ancestors or invisible powers is ignorance.

Sometimes the problem is psychological. Sometimes bodily. Sometimes relational. Sometimes it is lifestyle. Sometimes guilt. Sometimes unprocessed grief. Sometimes suppressed desire. Sometimes excessive imagination. If everything is called a subtle obstruction, the person will flee from responsibility.

A true guide does not frighten the seeker. A true guide steadies them. First bring life into order. Speak truth. Care for the body. Understand the mind. Bring clarity to relationships. Pray. Meditate. If a subtle process is truly needed, let it be done with dharma, peace and without exploitation. Subtle knowledge must give discernment, not fear.

Ancestors, Restless States and Ritual Balance

Ancestral remembrance, offerings, prayer, charity, mantra and peace-invocation belong to the tradition. They should not be rejected as mere superstition. They give gratitude, acceptance and understanding of the lineage-stream. But it is equally wrong to turn them into fear.

If someone says, "Every problem in your life is ancestral defect; pay for these rituals or disaster will happen," be careful. If someone says, "Do only this ritual and life will change," the statement is incomplete. Ritual may help, but it is not a substitute for transformation.

What kind of ancestral honor is it to perform rites while being cruel to living parents? What purification is it to give charity while greed increases within? What practice is it to chant mantras while deceit remains in the mind? What liberation is it to offer water to ancestors while unconsciously passing on the darkness of the lineage?

True ancestral work is gratitude, forgiveness, transformation of inherited darkness, dharma toward the living, peace for the departed, and turning toward the Self.

The Subtle World and Mental Health

This point is very important. On the spiritual path, seekers sometimes mistake psychological imbalance for spiritual experience. Not every voice is divine command. Not every vision is deity-vision. Not every fear is a spirit. Not every restlessness is energy-awakening. Not every unusual experience is a spiritual power.

The human mind is complex. Suppressed memories, stress, lack of sleep, emotional wounds, loneliness, guilt, intoxication, extreme fasting, wrong breathing practices and uncontrolled spiritual effort can produce unusual experiences. If experiences are making life unstable, disturbing sleep, increasing fear, weakening judgment, damaging relationships, or producing inner voices that command behavior, do not remain trapped in a purely spiritual interpretation. Help from a competent guide, doctor or mental health professional may be wise.

Spirituality is not escape from life. True dharma accepts truth. If the mind needs support, seeking help is not weakness. Knowledge of the subtle world should bring balance. If it brings imbalance, discernment has been lost.

Seven Protective Vows for the Seeker

First vow: I will not treat every experience as final truth. An experience will come; I will observe it and not rush.

Second vow: I will not build identity out of experience. I will not nourish identities such as world-seer, siddha, chosen one or special being.

Third vow: I will not spread fear. Even if I understand something subtle, I will speak with compassion and balance.

Fourth vow: I will not abandon the dharma of life. Truth, compassion, responsibility, clarity in relationships and respect for the body are foundations of sadhana.

Fifth vow: I will keep the test of teacher, scripture and discernment. I will neither believe blindly nor reject blindly.

Sixth vow: I will care for mental health. I will not call imbalance divinity.

Seventh vow: I will return from every seen thing to the seer. Realms, deities, light, energy, emptiness - after seeing all, I will return to the witness.

The Final View of Advaita

Now the heart of this whole book. Whether the subtle world exists is an important question. But a more important question is: who knows it?

If subtle realms exist, in what do they appear? If heaven exists, who knows it? If hell exists, who knows its pain? If a restless state exists, who knows the fear? If there is an ancestral stream,

who knows the memory? If there is a causal body, who knows its ignorance? If there is a stream of births, who knows birth and death?

Advaita does not arrive to deny the subtle world. It says: whatever is, see it clearly. But finally understand that everything that can be seen changes. Only the knower remains unchanged. The body changed. Childhood passed. Youth passed. Thoughts changed. Emotions changed. Relationships changed. Dreams changed. Meditation experiences changed. Impressions can change. Realms can change. But before the basic sense "I am," what is there?

When the seeker rests in this "I am," name, form, story, body, mind, realms and experiences move into the background. What remains is not an object, not an experience, not a realm, not even a visible light. It is self-luminous. Call it Self, Brahman, witness, consciousness, nirvana - names change, truth does not.

The Right Use of Subtle Knowledge

Why learn about the subtle world? So that body-ego may loosen. Life is not merely the story of the body. So that the seriousness of karma may be understood. Every feeling, thought and action leaves an imprint. So that fear of death may soften. Death may be transformation, not annihilation. So that attachment may decrease. Restless states, ancestral stream and desire reveal that clinging is bondage. So that dharma may grow. The essence of heaven and hell is not fear but karmic discernment. So that the seeker is not trapped in experiences. And finally, so that the witness may be recognized.

If discussion of the subtle world increases curiosity but not practice, the benefit is incomplete. If fear increases, harm has occurred. If ego increases, there is downfall. If discernment, dispassion, compassion and Self-inquiry increase, the knowledge has served its purpose.

Final Conclusion

The human being begins with the body and says, "I am this body." Life brings pain. The question arises, "Am I only the body?" Then one observes the mind and says, "I am thought and emotion." Meditation reveals that thoughts too come and go. Then one enters life-force, energy and subtle experiences and is amazed: existence is vast. Then one hears of realms - heaven, hell, ancestors, devas, restless beings, causal body and birth. The amazement grows. But if one stops here, the journey remains incomplete.

The subtle world is greater than the gross, but smaller than truth. To say the physical body is maya is easy. To see that subtle experiences are also maya is harder. To see that the causal body is also maya is harder still. To awaken as the one who knows all three - that is liberation.

Know the subtle world, but do not get lost in it. Understand realms, but do not forget the realm-transcending. Look at death, but recognize the unborn witness. Let experiences come and go. You are that which never came; therefore you never go.

The body passed - you remained. Thoughts passed - you remained. Dreams passed - you remained. Realms appeared - you remained. Realms disappeared - you remained. Ignorance appeared - you remained. Knowledge appeared - you remained. That which has always remained is what you are.

This is the final secret of the subtle world. This is life beyond death. This is peace beyond realms. This is the essential message of Nirvan Dham.