Sapta-jnana-bhumikas -
Seven Stages of
Spiritual Unfoldment

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction

Spiritual unfoldment is attained by sustained effort and it is
the gradual flowering of the inner personality. Seekers often
wonder how far they have progressed and when they will
finally reach the culmination of their search. For the benefit of
spiritual seekers, Vedāntic texts such as Yogavāsiṣṭha\(^1\) describe
the 'sapta-jñāna-bhūmikās' or the 'seven stages of spiritual
unfoldment'.

Sapta-jñāna-bhūmikās

The term 'bhūmikā' means 'plane' or 'stage'. 'Jñāna' (know-
ledge) is indicative of 'spiritual pursuit' and 'sapta' means
'seven'. Thus the term 'sapta-jñāna-bhūmikā' means the 'seven
planes (or stages) of spiritual unfoldment'. The following verses
(Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha 13.113 & 114) list these seven stages:

\[
\text{ज्ञानभूमि: शुचिच्छालया प्रथमा समुदाहता ।}
\text{विचारणा हितीया स्वात्‍तज्ज्वलता तनुमानसा ॥}
\text{सत्त्वापतिपत्रुर्क्रिया स्वात्तेतोदसंसकिनिमािका ।}
\text{पदार्थभाविनी पदी तस्मी तुर्गां स्मृताः ॥}
\]

\(^1\) 'Yogavāsiṣṭha' or 'Jñānavāsiṣṭha' is a composition of Sage Vālmiki and is a voluminous
book of 32,000 verses. This text has been condensed as Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha with 6,000
verses. A further shortened text called Laghitara Yogavāsiṣṭha with 1,000 verses is
available. Pujya Guruji Swami Tejomayananda has given the essence of the text in 86
verses in his compilation – 'Yogavāsiṣṭhasūrasaṅgraha'.

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jñanabhūmiḥ śubheccākhya prathamaḥ samudāhyā,
vicāraṇā dvitiyaḥ syat tṛtiyaḥ tanumānasā.
sattvāppattīcaturthiḥ syattato’samsaktināmikā,
padartha-abhāvaniḥ śaṣṭhiḥ septamī turyagāḥ sūryāḥ.

The 'seven stages of spiritual unfoldment' (sapta-jñāna-
bhūmiḥ) are listed below:

1. Śubheccā – auspicious resolve
2. Vicāraṇā - reflection
3. Tanumānasā - attenuation (thinness) of mind
4. Sattvāppatti - attainment of the Real
5. Asamsakti - desirelessness (or non-union)
6. Padartha-abhāvanā - objectlessness
7. Turyagā - transcendence

The following is an explanation of the same.

First Stage – Śubheccā – Auspicious Wish

The following verse from Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha (13.116) explains ‘śubheccā’:

स्थिति: किं मुद्द एवासिम प्रेक्षेऽहं शास्रसाजने:
वैराग्यपूर्वविच्छिन्ति शुभे-छेतुन्यथे बुधे: ।

sthitih kim madha evaśmi prekṣe'ham śāstrasajjanaṁ, ।
vairāgyapūrvavimocheti śubheccetyucyante budhāṁ. ॥

Why do I live like a deluded being? Let me understand it with the help of the Scriptures and virtuous people. This type of desire preceded by dispassion is termed ‘śubheccā’ or ‘auspicious resolve’.

There comes a stage in an individual’s life when he or she feels an overwhelming sense of purposelessness in a mere worldly life of sense pursuit and material advancement. Such an individual raises basic questions about life and seeks answers to them: "Why am I doing this?", "What am I going to gain by running after wealth?", "Why am I attached to these things and beings?", "Why am I so restless?", "What is it that I want
in life?” and so on. Such an individual seeks a method to get out of the ignorant way of life and desires intensely, ‘I want to get out of all these things, master my mind and reach the state of Perfection envisioned by the Scriptures and saints’. In short, he becomes a mumukṣu, the one endowed with a burning desire for Liberation. This is the first stage of spiritual unfoldment and is indicated by the term ‘śubhecchā’ (śubha = auspicious + icchā = desire).

This ‘śubhecchā’ is not a sudden overnight change in thinking. It indicates a prior life marked by nobility and the practise of karma-yoga and the cultivation of values such as viveka (differentiation between the real and the unreal), vairāgya (detachment from the unreal), śama (mind control), dama (sense control), titikṣā (forbearance) and so on.

Second Stage - Vicāraṇā - Reflection

This first state of ‘śubhecchā’ (auspicious resolve) leads to the next higher plane of spiritual unfoldment, an introspective state, that is termed ‘vicāraṇā’ or ‘reflection’. This stage is explained as follows (Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha 13.117):

शास्त्रसन्तातपकैवारायण्यस्मपुरवकम्।
सद्विचारप्रवृत्तियां प्रोच्यते सा विचारणा॥

śāstrasajaśansamparkavairāgyābhyāśapūrvakam,
sadvicārapraavṛtiryā procyate sā vicāraṇā.

The enquiry into Reality arising from the study of the Scriptures, association with the virtuous and the practice of dispassion is termed ‘vicāraṇā’ or ‘reflection’.

The ‘auspicious resolve’ (śubhecchā) propels the individual to change his ways of thinking and his life undergoes a ‘U-turn’. If the earlier state of ‘śubhecchā’ is auspicious because of making the right resolve, this state involves implementing such an auspicious resolve. The seeker seeks guidance from the wise and starts the devoted study of the Scriptures (svādhya). He
becomes reflective and spends time enquiring into the words of the Scriptures and the Teachings of the Wise. This state of spiritual enquiry - of study (śravaṇa) and reflection (manana) - is the second plane of spiritual unfoldment and is termed 'vicāraṇā' or 'reflection'.

A note on the term 'dispassion' mentioned here would be appropriate in this context. The measuring rod of spiritual progress is dispassion. Initially, when dispassion is forced on the mind, there may be even a sense of regret at having given up something. But as one gradually begins to understand truly the finite and pain-ridden nature of worldly happiness and additionally starts enjoying the various spiritual practices and begins to gain glimpses of the Bliss of the Self in moments of serene meditation, desires fade away into oblivion. The power of the mind to enamour and entice the seeker with false visions of joy is put to rest. Thereafter one even wonders how in the past, one was so attached to the finite. One reaches a stage wherein the presence or absence of sense objects that would have been a source of disturbance or worry earlier evokes no response from him/her at all. Even if the mind occasionally generates such thought-ripples because of the pull of past experiences and tendencies (vāsanās), the seeker learns to quell them by exercising his/her intellectual knowledge of the unreality of the world gained by the study of the Scriptures and the Teachings of the Guru.

Third Stage - Tanumānasā - Attenuation of Mind

The Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha (13.118) describes the next plane of 'tanumānasā' or 'attenuation (thinness) of mind' as follows:

विचारणायैश्च चाम्ब्रामिनिदयार्थऽवस्थिताः
यत्र सा तनुमानसितः प्रोच्चते तनुमानसा॥

vicāraṇāśubhecchābhhyāmindriyārtheṣvāsaṁtata,
yatra sā tanulāmeta procyate tanumānasā.
‘Attenuation (or thinness) of mind’ is that state wherein the mind has attained ‘thinness’ (or subtlety) owing to the dispassion arising from the strength of the earlier states of vicāraṇā and subheccā.

The sign of having advanced to this third stage of spiritual unfoldment, ‘tanumānasā’ or ‘attenuation (thinness that is indicative of subtlety) of mind’, is this: the mind no more gurgles up unwanted distractions on the spiritual path and one remains ever established in the quiet contemplation of the Self. This stage is equated with nididhyāsana and savikalpa-samādhi.

Such an advanced seeker spends many hours in quiet contemplation of the Self and remains undistracted by external happenings. This stage is the direct result of the advancement one has made in dispassion (vairāgya) through the strength of the first two stages of ‘auspicious resolve’ (subheccā) and ‘discrimination’ (vicāraṇā).

The three states (subheccā, vicāraṇā and vairāgya) described so far are the stages of ‘seekers who are striving for Knowledge’ (numukṣu). They have not yet gained the Direct Experience of the Self and thus destroyed ignorance, notwithstanding their intellectual knowledge of ‘brahma satyaṁ jagammithyā – Brahman alone is real while the world is false’. These three stages are therefore not included in Knowledge-proper. Since there is perception of the world of plurality and reality given to it in these stages (similar to the waking stage), the Yogavāśiṣṭha collectively calls these three stages ‘jāgrat’ (waking).

“Sapiabhūmiṣu jīvanmuktāscatvāraḥ – Of the seven stages the (next) four pertain to Jīvanmuktas, those liberated even while living.” We will examine these four stages below.

2 Swami Vidyaranya in his Jīvanmuktiviveka prefers to group the fifth, sixth and seventh stages alone as pertaining to Jīvanmuktas. Here, the author has preferred to follow the thought flow presented in Varāhapaniṣad which classifies the fourth stage of satkāpati also as pertaining to that of Jīvanmuktas. The quotation from Varāhapaniṣad (vide Chapter 4) has been cited to validate this point. The classification presented in this essay has been accepted and elaborated by other Acāryas of Advaita Vedānta. For example one may refer to Vicāracandradaya in this regard.
Fourth Stage – Sattvāpatti - Attainment of the Real

When one diligently abides in the state of ‘tanumānasā’ or ‘attenuation (thinness) of mind’ (nīdiśhyāsana and savikalpa-samādhi) he reaches the next stage - ‘sattvāpatti’, literally ‘attainment (āpatti) of the Real (sattva)’. This stage is equated to the state of nirvikalpa-samādhi wherein the mind is utterly still. This mental-stillness of ‘sattvāpatti’ is not to be mistaken as some type of sleep or coma which are products of tamas (dullness). In this state of nirvikalpa-samādhi there is a firm abidance in Brahman and the absence of the arrogation of the ego – ‘I am the meditator and Brahman is the object of meditation’. There is a total dissolution of the subject-object duality (tripūti).

This stage is explained by Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha (13.118) as follows:

bhūmi-kātritayābhyāsāt citte rthamacitra-vāsāt,
sattvātmanī sthitih sūdhhe sattvāpattirudāhītā
dūḥ.

When, by the practice of the above-mentioned three stages, the mind has withdrawn from all objects, and abides in the Self which is of the nature of Pure Existence, such a stage is termed ‘sattvāpatti’ or ‘attainment of the Real’.

The Jñānī (Wise one) who has reached this state is termed ‘Brahnavit’ (knower of Brahman). He is ever engaged in the welfare of the society. He serves as a veritable light-house to earnest seekers of Truth. To the saint who has experienced the Self the world appears as a mere dream. Hence Yogavāsiṣṭha also terms this fourth state ‘soapna’ (dream). Even while being engaged in such ‘lokasaṅgraha-activities’ (works that guide and protect the society) the Brahnavit remains untouched and unaffected by desire because of his Self-Knowledge. He knows that both the desire to serve and the world that he serves are false and illusory.
If he knows that the very world that he is serving is illusory, why does he serve at all? He does so because of his prārabdha (destiny) and the will of the Lord. If there were no one to teach us the adhyātma-vidyā (Self-Knowledge), such as the Brahma-vi through his lokasaṅgkara activities, what would be our fate? The compassion of the Brahma-vi is verily the expression of the Lord’s grace.

Fifth Stage - Asaṁsakti - Desirelessness

The next stage, ‘asaṁsakti’, is attained by the repeated and sustained practice of nirvikalpa-samādhi. The Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha (13.120) describes this fifth stage as follows:

दशाचतुष्ठायाः सत्त्वसस्तरस्तरस्तरस्तराः
रूढसत्त्वप्रत्यक्षाय श्रोत्कसस्तरस्तरिन्यामिकाः

dasācatuṣṭāyābhivyāsadasaṁsargaphalā tu ya,
rūḍhasatvatvacamatkārā proktasamāsaktināmikā.

The increased awareness of the ‘splendid Reality’, the fruit of ‘non-union’, is termed ‘asaṁsakti’ (‘desirelessness’). This state is attained by the continued practice of the the four previous stages.

The term ‘asaṁsakti’ means ‘desirelessness’ (‘saṁsakti’ means ‘priya i.e., ‘affection’ or ‘desire’ and the negative participle-prefix ‘a’ denies its presence). By the repeated practice of nirvikalpa-saṁādhi all ‘I-ness’ in the body, mind, intellect etc., as well as ‘my-ness’ with respect to the things and beings associated with the body, mind and intellect (like house, relatives, authorship of ideas, and so on) disappears thoroughly. Hence the description of this state as asaṁsargaphalā - the ‘fruit
of non-union’ (with the body, mind and other upādhis). It is only natural that Jīvanmuktas (those liberated while living), who are ever established in nirvikalpa-samādhi go beyond likes and dislikes and become free of desires. Hence the justification of the appellation ‘asaṁsakti’ or ‘desirelessness’ for this state. The Jīvanmukta who has reached this state is called ‘Brahmavīdvara’, literally, ‘the superior knower of Brahman’. In this state of abidance in Brahman, owing to the strength of the mind’s dispassion, he is ever established in nirvikalpa-samādhi, though he wakes up on his own accord. The Yogavāsiṣṭha describes the mind of the person established in this state as “having dissolved in pure Existence, like a cloudlet that dissolves in the autumn sky – cīttaṁ tu ṣaḍabhrāṁśavilayaṁ pravilīyate.”

The term ‘Brahmavīdvara’ i.e., ‘the superior knower of Brahman’ is not to be construed to mean that this Jñānti or Jīvanmukta has a better knowledge of Brahman than the Brahmacit or ‘knower of Brahman’ described earlier. What is meant is that the Brahmacit’s mind is generally merged in Brahman, without even a perception of the external world. The Brahmacit, even while perceiving the world of plurality, knows Brahman as the only Reality and is ever established in it, he knows all the while that the world of names and forms that he perceives is a mere illusion. An example clarifies the difference between the two: the Brahmacit is like an individual who, even while seeing the mirage, does not give reality to it, while the Brahmacit is like one who does not see the mirage at all. Both of them are equally established in the Knowledge of Brahman, the difference is only with respect to how much their
minds are engaged in nirvikalpa-samādhi. While the Brahmaidvāra is mostly submerged in the bliss of nirvikalpa-
samādhi, the Brahmavit is perceived to be participating in the
activities of this world.

While the fourth stage of the Brahmavit was compared to
‘dream’ (svapna), the fifth stage of ‘asamśakti’, is compared in
Yogavāsiśṭha to ‘sleep’ (sūṣupti), for the Jīvanmukta has reached
the state where all differences cease to be perceived and he
abides in absolute Unity.

The Jīvanmuktas (the Brahmavit or Brahmaidvāra or those
belonging to the next two planes) do not feel any difference
among themselves, since the presence or absence of the mind
is inconsequential to them; when it exists, it is false, when it
ceases to exist or operate, it does not matter. Even when the
mind exists, they are firm in the Knowledge ‘I am Brahmā’.

Sixth Stage – Padārtha-abhāvanā – Objectlessness

Now the description of the sixth stage of ‘padārtha-abhāvanā’
(Laghu Yogavāsiśṭha 13.121,122):

भूमिकापूर्वक प्रज्ञासात् स्वात्मारामतया भूषम्।
आयानन्तराणां बाह्यार्था पदार्थानामभावनात्।
पराप्रयुक्तेन चिरं प्रयत्नेनवबोधनम्।
पदार्थाभावस्ते नाम षष्ठि भवति भूमिका॥

bhūmikāpaścakābhīyasāt svātmāraḥmatayā bhṛṣam,
ābhyanantarāṇāṁ bahyāraṁ padārthānāmabhāvanāt.
praprayuktena cīrāṁ prayatnena vabodhanam,
padārthābhāvanī naṁ sāṣṭi bhavati bhūmikā.

By the practice of the earlier five stages and the absence of all objects
– internal and external – abiding delight in one’s own Self is attained. He
can be aroused from his meditation only by the persistent effort of others.
This stage is termed ‘padārtha-abhāvanā’.

While in the fifth stage of ‘asamśakti’ or ‘desirelessness’ the
Jñānī (the Wise One) wakes of his own accord, in this sixth
stage of ‘padārtha-abhāvanā’ he can be woken up from his samādhi
only by the persistent efforts of others. The term ‘padārtha-

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abhāvanā' means that there is the absence (abhāvanā) of all objects (padārthaka). In this state of dissolution of the mind, wherein there is a cessation of all mental activities, there is no perception of either internal thoughts or external sense experiences. Such a Mahatma (Great Soul), when he is forced by others to get up from his meditation, being indrawn, looks as though tired or under the effect of intoxication. This jīvanmuktta is called ‘Brahmavidvāriyān’ i.e., ‘one who is higher than the Brahmavidvāra’ of the asamsakti-stage. This state is designated as ‘deep-sleep’ (gāḍha-suṣuptī) as compared to the fifth stage ‘asamsakti’, which was called ‘sleep’ (suṣuptī).

**Seventh Stage - Turyagā - Transcendence**

This seventh stage is the stage of no-return to the awareness of the world. Such a Realised Soul remains in the state of samādhi or absorption and does not come out of it even when woken by others. The body of such a Realised One remains as though dead and continues to exist by the force of destiny (prarabdha). Once destiny has exhausted itself, the body perishes. The Laghu Yogavāsiṣṭha (13.1213) describes this stage as ‘turyagā’ or ‘transcendence’:

\[ \text{bhūmikaśatkacirabhyyāsād bhedasyānupalambhanāt,} \\
\text{yatsvabhāvaikaniṣṭhatvam sā jñeyā turyagā sthitah.} \]

By the sustained practice of the previous six stages and because of the absence of plurality, one gets established in one’s own nature. This stage is known as ‘turyagā’ (transcendence).

The word ‘turyagā’ literally means the ‘attaining (gā) the fourth (turya)’. As compared to the three states of the waking,

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3 It has already been explained how the term ‘high’ or ‘low’ is not indicative of their Knowledge of Brahman. There is no question of knowing Brahman less or more. You either know or don't! These terms only indicate the state of their minds being lost in samādhi, abidance in the Self.

4 Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa states that the body of such a Mahapurusa can remain in this state alive for a maximum of 21 days after which it perishes (Vide Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna).
dream and deep sleep that we experience, the Self is called the ‘fourth’ (turya) in the Upaniṣads. This term ‘turyaṅga’ only indicates that it is the state that transcends the waking, dream and deep-sleep. The one who has reached this pinnacle of samādhi is called ‘Brahmavidvariṣṭha’ or ‘the best among the knowers of Brahman’.

**Overview**

With the tabular column below you can have an overview of the jñāna-sapta-bhūmikās:

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**Conclusion**

Knowledge is the direct means to Liberation. The practice of samādhi helps one to be established in this Knowledge. It is not
to be thought that samādhi gives Knowledge. The Knowledge of the Self's identity with Brahman is attained through the Guru's teaching of the Mahāvākyas; this becomes the direct cause for Liberation. The seed is the direct cause of the sprout. But the seed will not sprout in the absence of conducive environs like right soil and moisture and the required amount of light. In the same way the Knowledge of the Mahāvākyas bestows Mukti (Liberation) in the right environs of samādhi. The purpose of the Scriptures going into the jñāna-sapta-bhāmikās and classifying even those who have attained Knowledge is not for us to see differences in those who have risen above all differences, but rather to impress upon us seekers not to rest content with mere intellectual Knowledge of the Self, but to persist in putting efforts in the seat of meditation to actualise it.

One who has attained this right understanding of the Self as 'I am the Self of all and am all' is a Jivanmukta – the one liberated even while living. The world is blessed by the mere presence of these saints, regardless of whether they act or not.

Form IV (See Rule 8)

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