

## Indian Philosophy including Patanjali's Yoga Sutras

The following notes were prepared for a friend in the Autumn of 2000.

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Following our discussion, I have been exploring some of the philosophical constructs that lie behind Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. In case they are of any interest, I thought I would share them with you.

### ***Tigunait's Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy***<sup>1</sup>

In this book, Tigunait makes the point that the Sanskrit word for philosophy means 'direct vision' in contrast to the Western meaning of the word which predominantly relies on intellectual pursuit. Furthermore, he suggests that Indian philosophy is much more comprehensive than Western philosophies and sciences that tend to "compartmentalize the various aspects of life into distinctly separate disciplines".

And here is his distinction between religion and philosophy:

In the West, the answers to ultimate questions are usually provided by religion, but this is not the case in India. That which is known in the West as religion is in India merely a set of social laws including ethics, custom, and ritual. India has always held a holistic approach toward life, which is seen as being composed of two inseparable aspects. Life related to the outer world (family, society,, nation, humanity) is regulated by religion, and life related to the inner world is studied and guided by philosophy.<sup>2</sup>

It is also the case that in India philosophy is seen as being made up of both the theoretical and the practical. But "no wall stands between philosophy and religion because both are inextricably interwoven".

Listing the seven systems of Indian philosophy as:

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<sup>1</sup> Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, *Seven Systems of Indian Philosophy*, The Himalayan Institute of Yoga, Science and Philosophy, 1983

<sup>2</sup> Tigunait, p.6

- *Buddhism*: Transcendence through suffering
- *Nyaya*: Valid knowledge through logical criticism
- *Vaisesika*: Analysis of the aspects of reality
- *Samkhya*: A dualistic theory
- *Yoga*: Disciplines for knowing the Self
- *Mimamsa*: Freedom through the performance of duty
- *Vedanta*: The philosophy of monism

Tigunait describes the most important common characteristics as:

- Direct experience
- Practicality
- Acceptance of authority and of moral and ethical teachings
- Openmindedness and thoroughness
- Support of logic and reasoning
- The law of karma
- Acknowledgement of suffering
- Belief in eternity
- Holistic approach

He also says that each school had its own techniques for practice, or yoga, here using the word yoga in its generalized form and not in terms of the system promulgated by the sage Patanjali.

He suggests that this body of philosophy relies upon the unbroken flow and stability of tradition and that the different schools developed in parallel with, and in cooperation with, each other.

Confirming your diagram, Tigunait refers to Sankhya (he uses the spelling Samkhya) as “a dualistic philosophy that believes in two coexistent and interdependent realities: conscious *Purusa* and unconscious *Prakrti*”, and he claims that Yoga and Sankhya are “allied systems”.

### **Feuernstein’s *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga*<sup>3</sup>**

On the other hand, in this book Feuernstein refers to the three major foci of Classical Yoga, by adding to the concepts of *purusa* (the aspatial and atemporal Self) and *prakrti* (the structure of the world) the concept of God – *isvara*. Nevertheless, it is clear from Feuernstein that scholars differ as to

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<sup>3</sup> Georg Feuerstein, *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga*, Inner Traditions International, 1996

whether either one or both of the Yogic and Sankhyan Schools are theistic or atheistic.

Also reflecting the dualism that you referred to in your talk, Feuerstein suggests that in Patanjali there is an insistence on the absolute separateness of *purusa* and *isvara*, albeit that the former is 'eclipsed' by latter: "...the relation between *isvara* and *purusa* is one of 'enclosure' by coalescence; the Self is eclipsed by the being of *isvara*."<sup>4</sup> By contrast, again as you have suggested, *brahman* and *atman* can perhaps be seen as different manifestations of one and the same.<sup>5</sup> And Tignait captures this as follows:

Brahman and Atman are identical, exactly as the forest and the trees are identical.<sup>6</sup>

### **How does one proceed?**

However all of this might be, it seems to me that so much of this attempt to describe the mystery of creation, of ourselves and of the nature of matter, is a somewhat vain attempt to express the inexpressible and, of course, the Buddha's response when questioned in this way was to urge us to not worry about such speculations but to focus on 'the close at hand' – are we each day generous, patient, mindful, compassionate, and so on.

Unless one were to devote a great deal of time and effort to the study of the ancient texts and to their various interpretations, I do not see, on the basis of the argument alone, how one can decide to adopt one view rather than another. Indeed, it seems to me that, in line with the traditional teaching of yoga, one might well leave such scholarly dispute aside and come to the practice of yoga and meditation with an open heart and an open mind and see where it leads.

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I hope that this is of some interest and I look forward to our next discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> Feuerstein, p.12

<sup>5</sup> In his book, Feuerstein suggests that *brahman* gave rise to *prakrti* and *atman* gave rise to *purusa*.

<sup>6</sup> Tignait, p.221

[Later]

I dipped into a volume of Patanjali yoga sutras<sup>7</sup> and thought you might like to share some of the things that I found in the opening chapters. You probably know all about this, in which case I can only say that I am being rather selfish as it is useful for me to try to set this down for you – it at least helps to clarify my thoughts!

## **The Foreword and Prologue**

These opening sentences of the Prologue give a real emphasis to the importance of the *Yoga-sutras*:

If all the vast traditions of India's philosophies and literatures were to vanish and the *Yoga-sutras* of Patanjali alone were to be saved, each of those philosophies and literatures could in time be created again...because these sutras form the manual of the yoga practice, the culmination of which is that process of intuitive knowledge which alone constituted the source of almost all of India's philosophies and literatures.

The following definition of *sutra* is perhaps helpful, although, again, I'm sure that you know it:

The word *sutra* is often translated as “aphorism.” However, an aphorism can be read and understood on its own. A *sutra* is often unintelligible by itself. It is always...in need of an exposition. It is an extremely succinct statement of a truth which has been realized by a *rishi* in the state of samadhi.<sup>8</sup>

The word *sutra* actually means “string”, and every aphorism is like a single flower on a garland.<sup>9</sup>

## **Overview of Sankhya-yoga**

In this overview, Pandit Usharbudh Arya firstly discusses the “suitable approach” to Indian philosophy. He contrasts the approach of the “pedant” who “refutes the views of all others and challenges them to prove theirs

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<sup>7</sup> Pandit Usharbudh Arya, *Yoga-Sutras of Patanjali, Vol 1: Samadhi-pada*, The Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy, 1986

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p.p.5-6

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. xi

right and his wrong” and the “savant” who focuses narrowly on the logic of argument with the way of the “wise man”, a person of “intuitive vision and inspiration, the yogi”.

He also describes how the different schools relate to each other and develop a philosophy which in its entirety “fit(s) into a single, universal system”. This universal system, he says, is often referred to as “the Epic philosophy” because it is expounded in that vast texts of the *Mahabharata* and the eighteen Puranas and the numerous sub-Puranas. In this form it served as a vehicle:

for simplified statements of truth regarding reality for the benefit of millions of non-pedantic aspirants, to whom these are still read, sung or chanted by pandits in the village temples, royal palaces and suburban homes alike.<sup>10</sup>

Between the particular teachings of each school there is a bridge linking one level of reality to the next. In simple terms it would seem to be as follows:

- In the **Vedanta** school there is a single Transcendental Reality (Brahman) whose nature is, Consciousness (*chit*) Existence (*sat*), and Bliss (*ananda*). This is the Self of all that is. But then, in the syncretic philosophy of the Epics and the Puranas, *maya*, the inherent potency of the One, eclipses the Bliss principle and divides into two – Consciousness and Existence.
- These two principles are taken up by the **Sankhya** school:
  - The conscious spiritual-energy principle becomes *purusha*
  - The unconscious material-energy principle becomes *prakrti*

The *purusha* principle is ever-pure, ever-wise and ever-free. Coming into contact with the rays of *purusha*, *prakrti* is the unmanifest, subtlest origin of what later becomes tangible matter, consisting of three attributes or *gunas*:

- *Sattva* – luminosity, purity, lightness and harmony producing pleasure.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.p. 26-7

- *Rajas* – activity, energy and movement producing pain.
- *Tamas* – dullness, inertia, darkness and stasis producing stupor.

And then, as you know, from all of this, from the interaction of the gunas, evolves a progression from the most sattvic or luminous to the most tamasic or dull, through:

- *mahat* the Great

and

- *ahamkara* the ego

to, on the one hand, mind and the senses and, on the other, the subtle and gross elements earth, water, fire, air and space.

- At the point where Sankhya leaves off, the **Nyaya** and the **Vaisheshika** schools pick up. Whilst the Vaisheshikas experimented with physical properties of matter (forming the foundation for the physical sciences), the Nyaya philosophers established the principles of logic.
- From this basis, the **Mimamsa** school concerned itself with ethics, laws and rules of social interaction, and with the doctrine of karma.
- Finally, the **Sankhya-yoga** school, whilst taking all of this into account, through Patanjali, asked the question: So what?

What are the practical implications of all the experimenting (Vaisheshika), reasoning (Nyaya), categorizing (Sankhya) or studying of inspired scriptures (Mimamsa)? How can one finally *see* and *experience* that self and non-self are indeed ever-separate and that the self is ever-pure, ever-wise and ever-free?<sup>11</sup>

Incidentally, the Chronology provided by Feuerstein at the back of his *Yoga: The Technology of Ecstasy* (my next adventure!) supports this sequential analysis of the development of Indian philosophy – the Vedas leading to Sankhya and then later to Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and thence to Patanjali and the Yoga-sutras.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p38.

Is it then, I wonder, the practice of yoga and, of course, the practice of meditation to which it leads, that enables us to retrace the path from separation to unity, from our gross form to the transcendental reality of the One?

David Cadman, 2000

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