

SamkhyaYoga & Pragmatism

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for MSA session: Metaphysical Implications for Ethical Philosophy: Pragmatism & Asia

I have practiced meditative yoga and studied yoga-related texts for more than 40 years. Scientific studies verify the psychological and physical benefits of yoga, and my personal experience corroborates these results. The techniques can be applied without attachment to the various Indic schools of thought that traditionally include yoga practices as their experiential counterpart. This interaction of thought or view, including a teaching and textual lineage, with personal practice or independent experiential verification is a distinctive characteristic of Indic philosophies. It is a constant vital check on the practical viability of an idea or concept, whether it produces negative or positive results in personal and communal life.

The discipline of yoga involves awareness in the moment. Patterns of incremental awareness accumulate over time. The perception of time is slowed, allowing space to examine a range of internal responses—mental, physical, emotional—to both internal and external stimuli. It is a discipline for living with clear attention in a full range of situations.

Samkhya is Yoga's theoretical counterpart. Within the 6 schools of the Vedic tradition, these 2 form a pair. Their classic texts are Patanjali's *Yogasutras* and Ishvarakrishna's *Samkhyakarika*. Samkhya (meaning "analytical accounting"), together with the practical discipline of Yoga (deriving from the root word *yuj*, to yoke or join), integrates 2 uncaused first principles, Nature (Prakriti) and Consciousness (Purusha). Nature is the causative creative force, literally "making forth" all that is, the energetic sequences of subsequent principles or evolutes, of which 23 are enumerated, beginning with mind (buddhi or citta). According to SamkhyaYoga, Nature is in inseparable union, samyoga, with Pure Consciousness, Purusha, the Seer. When a

yogi, turning inward, restrains and quiets down the energetic stimuli of his/her mind waves, the inner Seer experiences Itself directly as clarity of consciousness, a clarity that illuminates, is blissful and does not create further causal sequencing, it just is, uncaused and uncausing, uniquely free of the vicissitudes and intermixings among the natural qualities of clarity, passion and darkness.

In non-Vedic, non-Samkhya Buddhist traditions of yoga, the basic yoga meditation for restraining and purifying the mind waves is called calm-abiding or serenity meditation (samatha). Buddha used it and then taught it as a way of settling the mind down to look with deeper insight (vipasyana) into the mind and its momentary patterns, and to observe their emptiness of any kind of permanent inherent reality. Thus every idea—including my ideas of myself and my responses of attachment or aversion toward any notions of permanence about myself, or toward any other aspect of myself and my relationships—every kind of notion becomes dissolved, allowed to pass from my mind, empty of abiding reality. Without this deeper vipasyana meditation practice, Buddha taught, we cannot go beyond the ignorant mental patterns from which suffering and obscurations arise.

The principle differences between Buddha's teachings and the Vedic yoga traditions involve the ultimate reality of the self (atman) and the ultimate reality of an eternal uncaused creative principle, both of which Buddha denies. Samkhya Yoga, as is characteristic of views within the Vedic tradition, asserts an ultimate higher Self, Atman or Purusha, differentiated from the ordinary ego-based self of transient experience. According to *Yogasutras*, mind (*citta*) is a natural principle, a unified evolute of Nature, that differentiates itself into multiple causal waves. (YS 4.5) These waves leave impressions (samskaras) that variously go dormant and ripen in the

mind. This impressionability has been going on since beginningless time, and generates patterns of desire, aversion and ignorance. (YS 2.3) The higher Self, the Seer, the Purusha, mistakenly identifies with these natural patterns. “When the distinction between [Nature and Pure Consciousness] is seen, ideas of the self as subject to change cease to undulate.” (YS 4.25) Then the Seer, the Purusha, sees Its own form. Otherwise It sees the waves’ form. (YS 1.3-4)

In most all Indic traditions, including Buddhism, ignorance is the root cause of suffering within Nature. According to Yogasutras, “Ignorance asserts a constant, pure and pleasing Self in that which is inconstant, impure, painful and without a Self.” (YS 2.5) “The waves agitated by ignorance are diminished through meditation.” (YS 2.11) When the continuities of these wavelike interdependent causal relationships are broken through restraint of the mind in meditation, the mind draws itself back toward oneness, experiencing the union of its nature, “the seen,” and its awareness, “the seer”—a union of Prakriti and Purusha.

Samkhya’s analytical accounting is accomplished through knowledge discriminating the manifest and unmanifest. Root Nature, Mulaprakriti, is uncaused, unmanifest. In Kabbalah’s *Zohar* a rabbi says of Torah that, like a heavily veiled woman who opens her veil ever so slightly for the briefest moment, Torah entices a person who sees ever so slight a glimpse of her beneath the veils of language and articulate thought, and then he falls in love with her for life. Similarly a yogi’s individual Purusha-consciousness glimpses its bond with Nature in Her unmanifest form, beneath Her manifest waves, and is drawn inward from the outer manifest forms that usually engage and entice it.

The Samkhya view of Nature as an uncaused cause is critiqued by monist Vedanta (another of the 6 schools of the Vedic tradition) and by Buddhist philosophers. Non-dual

Vedanta only accepts one reality, which is Brahman, Universal Spirit. Buddhism in its basic teachings doesn't accept any uncaused principles. As the Dalai Lama points out in his teaching on Shantideva's *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, "Buddhism teaches that everything arises from causes and conditions and that therefore there is no such thing as an uncaused cause....If we believe that the cause of samsara, the primal substance, is permanent, how can we explain liberation?" (p. 60-61) Despite their theoretical differences, however, Samkhya Yoga and Buddhist yoga practice disciplines are quite similar.

Yogasutras offer an 8-limbed discipline that focuses on ethical and meditative practices. It parallels Buddha's 8-fold path for alleviating suffering, which includes ethics, meditation and insight into the way things are (i.e. the wisdom of emptiness), but without the distinctly Buddhist wisdom of insight into emptiness. The 8 limbs of Yoga include moral restraints, observances, meditation postures, breath control, sense restraint, concentration, meditation and meditative union. The first limb, the 5 moral restraints, includes non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness, not stealing, continence and non-massing of possessions. Similarly Buddhist practice involves 5 Mindfulness Trainings: not to kill, steal, engage in unwholesome sexual activity, use false speech, or consume intoxicants. The second limb of Yoga, the 5 observances, includes cleanliness, contentment, ardent effort, textual study and turning toward the Lord. (YS 2.28-32)

The root ethical practice, in both classical Yoga and Buddhism, is non-violence, not engaging in actions, thoughts or words that harm oneself or others. This root ethical principle, integrated with meditative awareness and modeled in modern times by Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, can be applied to developing insight into and active response to any contemporary issue.

Practitioners generally concern themselves with environmental, education, health and/or social justice issues, as well as interfaith and peace work. From a meditative view, the argument against violence, falseness and other unrestrained behavior patterns is that they darkly disturb the mind and obscure its natural potential for clarity, peace and serenity. Negative mental impressions are generated by harmful and unwholesome actions that cause suffering and unhappiness for oneself and/or others, and then repeat their patterns over and over again. As *Dhammapada*'s twin verses put it, "Hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by non-hatred—this is *sanatana dharma*, eternal truth." (1.5) *Yogasutras* says, "For clarity and peace of mind, consciously regard the happy with friendliness (*maitri*), the unhappy with compassion (*karuna*), virtue with altruistic joy (*mudita*), and vice with indifference (*upeksha*)." (YS 1.33) These qualities are the same as the 4 divine abodes (*brahmavihara*) of Buddhist teaching, antidotes to ill will, harmfulness, discontent and partiality.

SamkhyaYoga expresses great appreciation for the generosity and selflessness of Nature in helping our inner Seer realize Its own nature. Nature, in Samkhya teaching, is an eternal uncaused causing principle that, though generative of a principle of ego differentiation, is in itself empty of self-concern. Nature is entirely concerned with helping the Purusha know Its true freedom from Her vicissitudes. "A Purusha, conscious, meets suffering caused by decay and death; the pain of the subtle or mental body's return towards freedom is inherent in its nature. Thus everything made by Nature, inclusively from the mind to the gross elements, is undertaken by Her for the sake of the freedom of each purusha, for the sake of another, as if for herself. The efficacy of Nature has as its cause the liberation of consciousness.... As a dancer, having been seen by the audience, desists from her dance, so Prakriti, herself thus manifest for consciousness, desists (from action)....In my opinion there is nothing more delicate than Prakriti. Saying, 'I am

seen,' She comes not again into Purusha's view.'" (SK 55-61) One could argue that this selflessness of Nature is a Samkhya parallel to the Buddhist Madhyamaka school's view of the inherent interdependence and emptiness of self in all samsaric and nirvanic phenomena.

According to Samkhya Yoga, the mind is a caused and causing principle, the first to manifest from unmanifest Nature. It has 4 clear and bright qualities—dharma (virtue), jnana (knowledge), non-attachment and power—and 4 dark heavy qualities—adharma (nonvirtue), ajnana (ignorance), attachment and impotence. These are the 8 fundamental dispositions (bhavas) residing in the mind. (SK 23) From citta evolves ahamkar, individuated consciousness, which "fancies a self possessed by self-consciousness. Then a dualized creation emerges" (SK24), i.e., out of ignorance, ego-based consciousness solidifies into subject-object experience. "By studying this process of the mind's manifestation, there arises pure knowledge, not dependent on individuated existence. By this knowledge, a purusha, self-abiding, stationed like a spectator, beholds Nature, Her creative impulse subdued from the fulfillment of Her purpose. The indifferent one says, 'She is seen by me.' 'I am seen,' the other says and rests quiescent." (SK64-66)

Mahayana Buddhism critiqued Theravada for focusing on individual liberation from samsara, and Samkhya Yoga may be seen as vulnerable to the same ethical criticism. i.e. focusing on the liberative experience of the individual purusha. Mahayana's teaching of Buddha mind (bodhicitta), bodhisattva motivation and the altruistic ethic of compassion strongly corrects this apparent flaw. Similarly, in the Vedic tradition, the *Bhagavad Gita* adds an ethic of karma yoga, enlightened engagement in life on a path of selfless service. The *Gita* was the principle text that sustained Gandhi in his non-violent yoga of action.

The *Gita* developed a theistic version of SamkhyaYoga with the Lord Krishna manifesting divine Purusha-consciousness. Krishna explains a yoga of engagement in the world: “When consciousness is unified, all vain anxiety is left behind.... Therefore devote yourself to the disciplines of yoga, for yoga is skill in action.” (BG 2.50) “Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work one attains the supreme goal of life. Do your work with the welfare of others always in mind.” (BG 3.19-20)

In the chapter that most specifically articulates Samkhya philosophy, Krishna says, “The body is called a field; he who knows the body is called the Knower of the field. I am the Knower of the field in everyone. Knowledge of the field and its Knower is true knowledge.” (BG 13.1-2) “Know that Prakriti and Purusha are both without beginning, and that from Prakriti come the qualities and all the changes. Prakriti is the agent, cause, and effect of every action, but it is Purusha that seems to experience pleasure and pain. Purusha, resting in Prakriti, witnesses the play of the qualities born of Prakriti. But attachment to the qualities leads a person to be born for good or ill. Within the body the supreme Purusha is called the witness, approver, supporter, enjoyer, the supreme Lord, the highest Self.” (BG 13.19-22).

A root verse of the Vedic traditions is “ekam sat, vipra bahudha vadanti--truth is one, sages speak of it in many ways.” (RV 1.166.46) Similarly within Buddhism there is a sense that people are various and a variety of approaches are valid. James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience* carries this Indic wisdom into a pragmatic and pluralistic philosophy of religion. In the context of James’ *Varieties*, I would like to testify that, for me personally, the SamkhyaYoga “Over-beliefs” in Nature and in Purusha, expanded to include the compassionate energies of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, have been a corrective to views and ways of life that demote and

exploit Nature, and diminish our confidence in a human potential for acting and living in a more enlightened way. There is also a gender component for me, in that the body, women, and the natural world are typically linked, as inferior to intellect, reason and a transcendent creative cause, in traditions where Nature is devalued and where reason is the highest human potential. When the intellect and reason are elevated, less conscious forces, both positive and negative, that manifest in the mind continue to generate thoughts and actions that are hard to examine and discriminate without a more living view of the mind explored through practical disciplines of introspective awareness.

One could argue that, for most Indic philosophies, the word metaphysical should be replaced with the word metapsychological. The yogic search for Truth (satya or dharma) is internal, in the womb-space of the heart, the center of the mind as it interacts with the organic body and its range of sensory, emotional, conceptual and residual impressions. One observes these impressions in their range from the grossest to the subtlest, and aims to go beyond the subtle to pure direct experience, beyond the differentiation of an I-making subject and its objects of attention. Thus realized yogis claim to go beyond the psyche, the soul, mind or jivatman that, in Indic traditions, transmigrates from one body to the next, carrying its karmic residues. They are also able to compassionately see the full range of these residues in all living beings. Such a realized yogi, a Mahapurusha or a Buddha, is not a Creator God, not a creative force, but an internal knower, immanent within the field of Nature, showing the way to freedom from, or to positive transformations of, our various internal entrapments and fixations. This process of realization is the ultimate destiny of all sentient beings, according to the yoga view, both in its SamkhyaYoga and Buddhist forms.

There are yogic practices, such as the *Gita*'s devotional yoga and Vajrayana Buddhist deity yoga, that intensely picture and project symbolic metaphysical images, produce them in art works, and honor them. For example, the Tibetan deity yoga practices for Chenrezig, bodhisattva of compassion, have the pragmatic benefit of supporting the ethical practice of compassion in daily life. This is, for example, the Dalai Lama's principle deity yoga practice, and he embodies and manifests it constantly in his daily life. Similarly there are practices relating, for example, to the bodhisattvas of wisdom and of power. In these practices, symbolic bodhisattva images are psychologically projected and their luminous energy is then imaginatively re-projected into the inner centers of body speech and mind. Virtuous mental tendencies such as compassion are seen as emerging from natural tendencies in the mind. These are the positive tendencies that yoga practices cultivate, nurture and support, as transformative antidotes to the natural negative tendencies. Among 50 kinds of consciousness formations listed in Buddhist Abhidharma, 13 are neutral, 25 are beautiful and profitable, and 14 are unprofitable. Thus, for example, mindfulness, compassion, gladness and non-delusion are natural profitable antidotes to such unprofitable mental factors as wrong view, hate, agitation and delusion. In Mahayana, samsara and nirvana are two ways the mind experiences itself and the world. Vajrayana deity yoga techniques are said to be particularly speedy in transforming samsaric experience, in activating the positive and transforming the negative energies to good use.

In his recent book, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*, the Dalai Lama argues for the benefits of mental cultivation practice for alleviating afflictive attitudes and emotions and nurturing compassion, equanimity and loving-kindness. These universal ethical values, he says, are aspects of "our basic human spirituality. We all have an underlying human disposition toward love, kindness, and affection." We have a challenge, he says, in our age of science and of

a plurality of religions and philosophies, to “find a way of grounding ethics and supporting the cultivation of inner values.” (pp. 17-18)

The Vedic and Buddhist yoga traditions clearly assert the natural presence of inner ethical values. The testimonies from yoga meditative experiencers are the basis for this assertion. If someone were skeptical about the assertion, he would have to investigate it through his own personal meditative experience, not merely through theoretical argument. The Dalai Lama argues that ethics and the yoga of mental cultivation can be separated from the Over-beliefs of religious and philosophical cultures. He supports and encourages scientific studies that investigate the benefits of meditation in a secular context.

My intention in this paper is to introduce contemplative practice and contemplative philosophies into the conversation around our session’s theme, Metaphysical Implications for Ethical Philosophy: Pragmatism & Asia. The practice of Yoga and Buddhist meditation is rapidly growing in America. It appears to be consistent with our American philosophical heritage, with James’ pragmatic pluralistic emphasis and his psychological and experiential focus. In the activist forms of the *Gita*’s karmayoga and the Dalai Lama’s engaged Buddhism, it is also consistent with James’ ethic of “a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done.” (p. 130)

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ABSTRACT

Among the six orthodox schools of ancient Indian philosophy, Yoga presents a practical approach “to reduce suffering and bring about meditative union (*Yogasutras* II.2), while Samkhya provides a theoretical counterpart “to know the purpose of suffering” (*Samkhya Verses* 1). These schools have pre-Buddhist roots and are represented in their classic texts as well as in the *Bhagavad Gita* (particularly chapters 13-18). Their ethical psychology, with its purpose of alleviating suffering, has parallels with and shares terms with Buddhism. They differ from Buddhist philosophy in their metaphysical assumption of an uncaused and uncausing principle of pure Consciousness, Purusha, co-eternal and in union with the dynamic uncaused cause of the whole spectrum of mental and physical Nature, Prakriti. This paper will explore Samkhya’s distinctive two-in-one metaphysics in its relationship with Yoga’s ethical discipline. It will also examine the pragmatic benefits of such a nature-aware metaphysics and ethics for developing an ecologically conscious philosophy.

Bio:

Suzanne Ironbiter has a doctorate in Religion from Columbia University and teaches at SUNY Purchase College and Hunter College. Her specialty is mystical philosophy, particularly the philosophies of India. She is a long-time student and practitioner of Yoga and, more recently, of Buddhism, and an environmental activist. Her book *Devi: Mother of my Mind* is a poetic engagement with India’s goddess traditions.