BLOOMSBURY INTRODUCTIONS TO WORLD PHILOSOPHIES

# THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE YOGASUTRA

## An Introduction

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state of knowledge that is understood as existential freedom and as a disembodied mode of being.

The treatise opens with the maxim 'Yoga is the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind' (*yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ*) (YS 1.2), identifying the mind (*citta*) as the problem (its activity must be stopped) and not the body (which has a more subsidiary role to play). As mentioned, the text proffers practice (*abhyāsa*) and dispassion (*vairāgya*) as the two means to achieve mental cessation (YS 1.12). As discussed in 'Chapter 1: Introduction', Pātañjala yoga delineates not just one but several pathways of practice, knitted together. None of these schemes focuses on the body – it is only ever a gateway or preliminary point of attention.

The goal of Pātañjala yoga is to reside in a state of isolated consciousness, free of the body and mind, and one of the key means to reach the ideal state is discriminating discernment (*vivekakhyāti*), specifically to distinguish the true self from the false self. Erroneous cognition produces

> the perception of self in non-self – through external instruments, be they animate or inanimate, or in the body, which is the basis of enjoyment, or in the mind, which is an object for consciousness (*puruṣa*) – these are all perception of self in non-self.
>
> (PYŚ 2.5)

Discriminating discernment, on the other hand, refers to the ability to know the difference between the principles of consciousness and materiality, and ultimately to disembody that very difference: when one realizes that one's true nature is consciousness (*puruṣa*), rather than the material mind or body, then one attains philosophical and spiritual liberation. In this radically dualist ontology, then, true knowledge is always about the disembodiment of the self.

## The nature of consciousness

If liberated consciousness is not in some way attached to a material subjectivity (a body), then how are we to understand such a disembodied reality? What does this mean for subjectivity? These are

complex questions that scholars continue to pore over. The text does not prescribe that the body should perish, i.e. die for liberation to occur; but one's adoption of the witnessing state of consciousness is permanent (i.e. there is no reverting to nescience). Therefore, one's consciousness remains associated with a corporeal existence (as long as it continues), but is supremely detached from it. This is a radical, permanent ontological transformation and shift from awareness (*buddhi*) to consciousness (*puruṣa*), which undergoes no future mutation. Awareness, because it is associated with the mind and materiality, is restricted or limited in knowledge and perspective, even in its purest state. Consciousness, on the other hand, has no such restriction and therefore facilitates self-consciousness.

How are contemporary audiences to relate to such an ideal? In everyday terms, Patañjali's freedom indicates a life that is permanently informed by a watchful consciousness that understands its own perfect detachment from the ups and downs of life's events, emotions and vagaries – and even from death itself. This is a significant variation of the detachment-in-action proposed by another key philosophical text of the period, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, which also draws on Sāṃkhya metaphysics.[4] But unlike the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s theistic presentation of a supreme consciousness, the *Yogasūtra* asserts that consciousness has no ultimate or absolute locus. It is plural and countless in number: the term *puruṣa-bahutva* (lit. 'the many-ness of consciousness') (PYŚ 2.22) indicates that consciousness exists in plural forms. This is a different presentation of consciousness than that of the nondual Vedānta ontology with which the *Gītā* becomes associated.

What else are we told about the nature of pure consciousness? It is transcendent, being eternal, unchanging and outside of space and time. And yet, consciousness is not a singular event; as noted, it is plural and infinite in number. Hence, there are as many individual consciousnesses as people who have ever lived and ever will live. The principle of reincarnation means that a consciousness is assigned to multiple human beings successively until the liberated state is reached,

which brings incarnation to a halt. If these countless *puruṣa*s are not part of a singular unitary (universal) consciousness, how then are these multiple consciousnesses differentiated from each other and where do they reside (if not in space)? Multiple consciousnesses exist in the unseen dimension of reality that is non-material, but in their uniqueness and distinctiveness each consciousness is simply a witnessing presence or potential perspective within reality.

Such claims for a plurality of consciousnesses are in accord with Sāṃkhya ontology. The *Sāṃkhyakārikā* argues that consciousness is plural because if that were not the case, then everything that happened in the world would affect every individual consciousness at once. Such coincidence and simultaneity is clearly counter-rational to the sensory perception of individuated and separate human experiences of birth and death (SK 15). While in agreement with Sāṃkhya, the Pātañjala understandings of both consciousness and mind are counterposed to Buddhist ideas. One passage in the *Yogasūtra* refutes the Buddhist notion of *vijñāna*,[5] which for Buddhists can signify consciousness or thought.[6] At the close of PYŚ 3.14, in a defence of why *dharmin* (individuated substance) must be accepted as the permanent and underlying substance behind any entity (*dharma*),[7] Patañjali refutes the Buddhist arguments on this point. If, as the Buddhists maintain, each entity (*dharma*) is separate, distinct and momentary, then this too would apply to the mind, and how could experiential interaction between minds and beings be accounted for, or how could memory and recognition operate in a person if there were not an underlying mental substrate? (PYŚ 3.14) This argument underlines that although consciousness is plural in instantiation, mind is, in fact, a singular phenomenon, pertaining as it does to the substratum of *prakṛti* and evidenced by collective mental recognition and experience. The basic point here is that although there is a shared and social aspect to the mind (such as common concepts or language itself), there is a dimension of self (i.e. consciousness) which is utterly unique to the individual and almost

impossible to reach through our standard cognitive apparatus. Only special forms of structured rational reflection (such as the Sāṃkhya method) can lead us there.

## Freedom, disembodiment and death

For scholars (both historical and contemporary) the degree of dispassionate relation between consciousness and the material self is a topic of dispute. What exactly does disengagement with the material self mean? How can one look upon one's own mind from a detached witnessing standpoint? Interpretations of ontological disengagement range widely: periods of profound trance-like states in which cognition appears to stop, altered states of consciousness that access rare types of cognitive perception, a permanent affective shift in everyday awareness and mental operation, or the death of the physical body.

A practical interpretation of the radically liberated state of self veers away from the reading of physical death. Firstly, we have a clear indication in the commentary to YS 1.2 as to how to interpret the key maxim that mental activity should stop in yoga (*yogaś cittavṛttinirodhaḥ*):

> Because [the *sūtra*] does not say 'all' [the fluctuations stop], cognitive (*saṃprajñata*)[concentration] is also perceived to be yoga.
>
> (PYŚ 1.2)

Here, the mind does not cease functioning entirely and certainly does not cease to exist; rather, what is indicated is that particular, even most, mental processes are inhibited during profound concentration. And yet the argument that spiritual liberation is equivalent to physical death is not without foundation. In the archaic Vedic Hindu worldview and in Jainism as a whole, the notion of physical death as liberation was a common understanding. For early Vedic adepts, death with sufficient merit led to a time-limited residence in heaven.[8] For Jains, all forms of action were morally dubious and so only the end of action – strictly speaking, death – could bring about spiritual liberation. For Jains,