

Introduction to Yoga Philosophy

3: Yoga and *Sankhya*

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The names *Sankhya* and Yoga as a pair are as old as the *Shvetashvatara Upanishads* (6, 13), probably used in the sense of the theory and practice of spiritual knowledge, and not in the later sense of specific, rigid philosophical systems/schools. The same can be said of the employment of these terms by the *Bhagavad Gita* at several places.

Etymologically, *Sankhya* comes from *sankhyaa*, meaning intellect or reason, and denotes a scholar. (Cp. *prajna* < *prajnaa*.) Alternatively, the word can be related to *Sankhya*, meaning number and pointing to the enumeration of principles at various levels of evolution, *Sankhya* finally meaning one who counts and determines these principles which are 25: *prakriti* and its products make 24; *purusha* is the 25th. Traditionally, the word signifies a system of philosophy relying on reason/logic as the main tool of search for the Reality. Kapila, a mythological (mentioned in the *Shvetashvatara* 5.2), rather than historical, personality, is said to be the first exponent of this system. The earliest extant work on *Sankhya* is Ishvara Krishna's *Sankhya Karika* (about the first c. A.D.)

Indian philosophical schools can be broadly divided into three types: (1) Monistic (2) Dualistic, and (3) Pluralistic. To the first belong the *Vedantins*; to the second, the *Sankhyas*; to the third, the *Vasheshikas*. *Sankhyas* maintain that there are two ultimate principles of the world: the insentient, called *prakriti*, nature; the sentient, called *purusha*, consciousness. *Prakriti* is constituted of three qualities - - *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, which, by the law of inherence, percolate into the product of *prakriti* viz. the world. The three qualities signify three basic trends existing in everything in the world which are manifested in the reactions of the sentient principle towards it. To illustrate these reactions: a woman produces the feeling of pleasure in her husband, pain in her co-wives, despondency in a person who longs for, but does not get, her. Pleasure, pain and despondency -- these are broadly the types of reactions which justify the presumption of the existence of three elements (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*) in the woman.

Sankhyas, however, maintain that, though observed in responses of sentient beings i. e. *purushas*, the qualities do not in fact belong to them, nor to the woman (also *purusha* in the philosophical sense) who elicits such multiple responses. The qualities seem to belong to them because of their mistaken identity with the intellect which is a product of *prakriti* and hence constituted of the qualities. As long as this mistaken identity prevails, *purusha* is subjected to worldly pleasure and pain which is broadly suffering. He is liberated/isolated from this suffering as soon as he discovers that he is distinct from the *prakriti*.

What is the way to discover the true nature of *purusha*? Mere verbal knowledge of reality is not enough for liberation; one must experience the core of that knowledge. With an outward bound mind, such an experience is not possible. How to turn it inward? It is at this point that Yoga steps in. It analyses the phenomenon we call mind with a view to finding out the ways and means to block/stop its normal operations. Yoga is in fact defined in *Yogasutra* as the holding/blocking of the operations of the mind. The contribution of Yoga to Indian philosophy lies in this search, not in its metaphysics which it borrows mostly from *Sankhya*. The only change Yoga has made in this metaphysics is the addition of the 26th principle, viz. God. This makes Yoga theistic. How this addition is justified is a question worth discussing; but we have to leave it to a later stage when we come to the details of Yoga.

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NOTES

The problem of the significance of the names *Sankhya* and Yoga in the *Upanishadic* literature is discussed by Shankara in *Brahmasutra Bhashya* 2.3.

The scheme of evolution as detailed by *Sankhyas* is:
Prakriti (1) > *mahat* (1) > *ahankara* (1) > organs (11) + subtle elements (5) > gross elements (5).

There does exist a work named *Sankhya sutra* ascribed to Kapila, but is considered to be a later product.

The *Bhagavata Purana* makes Kapila an incarnation of Vishnu. This Kapila has accommodated God in his philosophy.

Vaisheshikas are the first in Indian tradition to speak of atoms as the ultimate cause of the material world.

The *Sankhya* claim that all things in the world are constituted of pleasure, pain and despondency is criticised by Shankara in his *Brahmasutra Bhashya* 2.2. His main argument is that these responses are subjective and hence cannot be the part of the objective world.