



Expressions of Light

Final Project for the Yoga Teacher Training Course



JOANA MENDES

Devon School of Yoga

Teacher Training Course Graduate 2017-2019

PLEASE NOTE: This piece is not academic. Rather it is a personal reflection.

Contents

Samkalpa	2
Knowledge	5
Language	7
Scriptures	9
Darśana	12
The self	14
Perception	16
Prakṛti and puruṣa	19
Citta vṛtti nirodah	20
Reality	22
Physics	23
Levels of reality	25
Impermanence	28
Surrender	30
Bibliography	31

Samkalpa

Fearless intention, no desire
Dissolved form in timeless rhythm
Infinitely nothing

I am not I am
Wise of no verb, resting in truth
Sound of silence, within without

I am not I am
Pause in space, brief eternal
Connecting dancer, alone in all

I am not I am
Empty and whole

What is this burning desire, this unintentional intention that appears from within? Often hard to grasp, muffled by the noise of other goals chosen to be put into place. Such aspirations may be misaligned with true intention, or śiva saṃkalpa.

Quite honestly, I've always struggled with the question 'what's your saṃkalpa, your intention?'. 'I don't know', I'd silently repeat to myself. It felt like navigating an abyss in my own mind. 'I don't know, and not knowing makes me feel uncomfortable', I'd notice after a while. And then 'I don't know, and I'm at ease with not knowing'. I'm only beginning to tap into what saṃkalpa means to me, beyond the intention put forward at the start of each Yoga practice.

Saṃkalpa derives from the saṃskṛt root *kr̥/p*, which is the only root in the language with the letter *ṛ*. This letter is known as 'the mother of the Gods' and it is associated with the element earth. Saṃkalpa can be resembled to a seed planted into the earth, with a capacity to grow from the depths of our resolution. And yet this growth can be boundless, morphing again from a perceived goal (from a perceived sense of self) onto an ungraspable motivation.

The answer to our deepest questions may not be materialised as an observable achievement, but rather as a subtle revelation. This seems to conflict with the expectation to articulate our intentions and measure the success in fulfilling them. The exercise of justifying motivation from a place of no desire and quantifying the effects of allowing that to unfold is binding. And that which binds is not free to simply be. Openness is an invitation to the unknown, letting go of conjectured ideas, projections, fears and desires.

Moments of stillness and silence are boundless, a humbling surrendering that enables śiva saṃkalpa to freely express and be revealed to us. When we become still and silent, we allow ourselves to gently release into the natural flow of life, listening to our true intentions and seeing where they stem from. The essence lies in just being present effortlessly, without trying to escape or negate the current experience, without pulling onto hypothetical futures nor striving to become a different or improved version of ourselves. This means to truly let go of judgments, expectations and the need to validate subjective experience in terms of material gain.

Despite the paradox, doing nothing certainly is harder than not. Or at least it is so to me. But perhaps the reason why I was drawn to Yoga in the first place was precisely to allow myself to be still and experience a sense of space and freedom. Then what do I expect find? My true self? Happiness? And is that the truth, or an expression of it? Again, 'I don't know and I'm at ease with not knowing', as I feel more able to navigate through the uncertainties, attachments and aversions.

This is an ongoing journey that has barely begun, one where Indian philosophical traditions have shed some light onto my own disquiet. This project is an attempt to articulate the experience of existence, unambitiously exploring the meaning of life and death. It is a myriad of expressions out of darkness, verbalising an understanding of language, knowledge, perception, consciousness, reality and truth, in the context of Yoga.

Knowledge

Nothing

I am nothing

Vast emptiness of enquiry

Act of knowing

Dark in ignorance

Sound words of wisdom

Rest and remember

To be pure light

I tend to set myself challenges and goals that are often unrealistic. As a child, I remember thinking 'I want to know everything about everything'. Innocently, I wanted to answer the most fundamental question: 'What is the nature of reality and the being?'

What began as awe and wonder, developed onto an insatiable drive to learn and understand, eventually leading to a path of knowledge exploration. In other words, this yearning to understand the secrets of the Universe, how reality is fundamentally constituted and what is the nature of the self have, in one way or another, defined my life choices. After all, this desire to fill the void of ignorance is a way to deal with my own vulnerabilities and mortality. To me, knowledge isn't just accruing information, it requires processing and assimilation by the mind, yet it can also be pure awareness transcending intellect. Jñāna (wisdom) yoga provides a soteriological system to achieve liberation through deep understanding of the truth about ontology, that is existence, reality and the self.

Despite taking a road of many detours, enquiry has been the underlying pavement for me. What we know, what there is to be known and what we cannot know entails an infinite journey of questioning. It is important not only to distinguish between unknowns and unknowables, but also between known unknowns and unknown unknowns. What we cannot know may transcend canonical human understanding, however the limits of knowledge cannot disprove metaphysics and self-realisation. It would be naïve to believe that all that is knowable can only be understood rationally. Enquiry requires openness to what might happen outside our field of awareness, acknowledging that cognition may be limiting. Although science has given us insight into some of the big questions challenging humanity, aiming to understand reality purely through the lenses of logic, reasoning and inference constrains knowledge itself. Therefore, a broader approach to wisdom and insight is required.

In Indian philosophy, vidyā (from the root *vid*, to reason upon) means true or correct knowledge and it encompasses both cognitive knowledge (*apara vidyā*, or lower knowledge), as well as higher knowledge (*para vidyā*) of the true self. Pramāna includes not only epistemology but also knowing beyond intellect. It refers to the nature, origin and limits of knowledge, means of knowing, and the embodiment of knowledge through direct experience and transcendence of body-mind. The following paragraphs elaborate a holistic view on epistemology and ontology, with particular attention to the knowledge of the self.

Language

Knowledge and communication are inseparable, as language is an integral part of knowledge dissemination. Language is a form of communication to convey a message, an interactive tool that enables us to share and assimilate knowledge. In a broad sense, it is a sophisticated system by all beings.

Spoken language (or tongue) consists in the structured codification of words or objects into speech, gestures, or writing. However, communication is not restricted to that. Non-verbal languages, such as music, mathematics, dance and painting are also forms of expression for exchanging ideas, feelings and experiences through sound, signs/symbols, movement or images.

Understanding is determined by the subjective relationship between form, meaning and interpretation. In this sense, knowledge acquisition requires a living action, yet it can also have an illuminating stasis. Saṃskṛt is a language that embodies those qualities, whereby the meaning of a word is found in its sound or resonance. Saṃskṛt derives from the roots *saṃs* and *kr*, meaning well-formed karma, or perfectly action. Herewith, the correct sounding of Saṃskṛt words correlate with the manifest reality to which they refer. It is a language with the capacity to transcend the normal framework of the mind, leading knowledge to wider dimensions of revelation.

Pāṇini (c. 600-400 BCE) was a scholar who wrote one of the most comprehensive and sophisticated grammars of the Saṃskṛt language, the Aṣṭadhyāyī Sūtras (eight meditations). Although this was not the first Saṃskṛt grammar, it is the earliest that has survived in full to these days, and conventionally marks the transition between Vedic and Classical Saṃskṛt. Pāṇini describes the subtle realms of sound, illuminating its qualities, the functions of relationships in sound and the realm of invisible letters. Broadly speaking, vowels are linked with consciousness or awareness (*puruṣa*) and have an illuminating nature (non-action), whereas consonants relate with inner matter or nature (*prakṛti*).

The Māheśvara Sūtras are part of the mythology connected to the story of the creation of Saṃskṛt:

“Four sages went to see Māheśvara to ask for help (...) Māheśvara then assumed the form of Naṭarāja and began to dance the cosmic dance of creation on top of the demon Apasmāra (...) Then there was a moment of silence. In this timeless transcendence, Māheśvara banged his drum 14 times, producing 42 sounds of the Saṃskṛt alphabet.”

Within the Hindu deity trinity (trimurti – Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva), Śiva is known as ‘The Destroyer’. Not in a negative sense, but rather as the enabler of creation, from which all creation emanates and to which all creation dissolves. Śiva can manifest in 25 different forms named the māheśvara murthams. One of those forms is Naṭarāja, the king of dancers. In fact, every form has a unique sound associated with it, expressing its true essence. Each of these sounds corresponds to a letter in the Saṃskṛt alphabet, relating to an expression of a unique creative force, the 25 tattvas. The tattvas are presented in the Sāṃkhya darśana and they are key to (self) awareness practices, such as meditation.

Śiva danced the cosmic dance of creation through sound, and from that he created Saṃskṛt. What this teaches us is that the very essence of the Saṃskṛt language is connected to the awakening of the Self (i.e. the ultimate essence of the being, ātman or Brahman). By sounding the letters of the Saṃskṛt alphabet, we can transcend the illusion of separate forms and its true meaning is revealed through own direct experience. Whilst the illusion of separateness is created, by understanding how we came into being, we can then destroy the ‘demon’ of forgetting and cease all individual differentiation, thus remembering who we truly are.

Beyond communication, the Saṃskṛt language is a creative instrument, and the sound is a vehicle of change. This is a language that is ritually pure speech, whereby the sound effects all elements in our body-mind, ultimately providing access to the reality of Brahman. In the Yoga Sūtras (YS), mantraḥ is presented as a direct path to a deep and full realisation of true reality (turīya) [YS 1:27-28]. The meaning of the mantraḥ is in fact a journey back to the Self. The Ṛg Veda states the four stages of speech, and each stage (or pada) is the way through which the mantraḥ and its effects work, leading to an understanding of the sounds. From the physical (vaiśvānara), through to the subtle (taijasa) and causal (prājñā); then, turīya (the fourth) is revealed. Equally, when chanting the mantraḥ Ōṃ: from the ‘A’ (waking state of consciousness), to the ‘U’ (sleeping state of consciousness) to the ‘M’ (deep sleep state of consciousness) – then silence (parā, beyond).

Scriptures

Throughout pre-historic times, the transmission of knowledge was done orally. But even centuries after writing had been established, teaching traditions still privileged knowledge passed on by word of mouth. Regardless of the format by which the word is spread, testimony (śabdapramāṇa) is indubitably a prime means of wisdom heritage.

The Ṛg Veda is one of the four canonical Hindu sacred scriptures that collectively constitute the Vedas. It is written in Vedic Saṃskṛt, one of the earliest ancient documented languages, dating back c. 1500-500 BCE. This makes the Ṛg Veda one of the oldest extant texts in any of the Indo-European languages, and a paramount exemplar of the śruti tradition (that which is heard, in counterpoint to that which is remembered - smṛti).

The Vedas, as well as other ancient philosophical and canonical scriptures of the Indian sub-continent, favour oral aspects whereby the meaning is brought forward through ritual recitations and traditional methods of education. In fact, both Jaimini's Mīmāṃsā Sūtra (on the nature of language), and Bādarāyaṇā's Vedānta Sūtra (on the subject matter of the sūtra), consider whether the nature and 'reality status' of the self (in relation to knowing) and the 'reality status' of the world (in relation to what is known and/or acted upon) are related to, or could be determined by the use of language.

The relationship between Saṃskṛt grammatical rules and the way the language was used in practice was expanded by Patañjali and Kātyāyana, followers of Pānini. Usage came to be a means of knowledge, in the sense that sentences seemingly incomplete or imperfectly formed could be understood by means of usage conventions. Patañjali and Kātyāyana also extended the criteria by which the Saṃskṛt language was operated. Passages could be interpreted non-literally, both etymologically and grammatically, thus ensuring the overall validity and coherence of the texts.

Ancient scriptures are often codified in mysticism and symbolism, conveying messages wrapped in metaphor, hyperbole, sometimes contradictory and obscure. Although teachings tend to favour testimony as the primary epistemological criteria, understanding the texts is more than the translation or interpretation of someone else's word; even transcending perception, inference, logical argument or reasoning. In order to fully penetrate the wisdom

of the scriptures, we must practice deep into the resonance of the words to evoke their sacred knowledge.

The word Veda derives from the Saṃskṛt *vedaḥ*, which can be translated as knowledge or wisdom. The purpose of the Vedas is to inform our expression of reality, which means that there is an infinite number of expressions of wisdom. The canonical division of the Vedic texts is fourfold (catvari pada, from the physical to turīya). Each Veda has an associated realm, sphere and mahāvākya (great saying), and can be further sub-classified into four types: Samhitas, Āraṇyakas, Brahmanas and the Upaniṣads. Samhitas focus on mantraḥ and benedictions. Āraṇyakas and Brāhmaṇas contain texts on rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices, with commentaries on their nature and how to internalise by means of concentration and visualisation techniques. The Upaniṣads correspond to the final part of the Vedic canon. Although gathered in the same brahmanical lineages as the ritual texts, the Upaniṣads mark a shift from ritual actions onto esoteric knowledge (of the self) [Ṛg Veda 10:129].

In Saṃskṛt Upaniṣad derives from *upa* and *ni-ṣad*, translating as sitting down near. This means secret knowledge or doctrine, as well as connection or equivalence. In fact, the knowledge in the Upaniṣads reveals hidden connections binding three spheres: ritual, cosmic and human, focusing mainly on the latter. Each Upaniṣadic teaching provides a wider view of the whole, connecting between the separate elements of the world and human experience. They enable us to see the totality of reality as a hierarchically connected and organised Universe. Within this scheme, Brahman (formulation of truth) stands at the top, or at the bottom of the ultimate foundation of all things: “that from which these things are born; on which once born they live; and into which they pass upon death – seek to perceive that! That is Brahman.” [Taittirīya Upaniṣad 3:1].

My understanding is that all is Brahman and Brahman is in all; knowing Brahman brings forth the absolute reality which is the unifying web of the cosmos. This interpretation is associated with advaita vedānta, where the effect pre-exists the cause (satkāravāda) and does not involve any actual transformation of the material cause. It means that nothing can come from nothing – creation *ex nihilo* is impossible. Consequently, all change is only apparent and there is nothing that is not unchanging Brahman; all manifestation of plurality is an appearance rather than a change in substance (vivartavāda).

Advaita vedānta refers to non-dual monism, which is ontologically primarily expressed in the Upaniṣads. The doctrine was consolidated by Ṣaṅkara's exegetical comments on the triple foundation of the Vedic canon, the Prasthanatrayi: Bādarāyaṇa's Brahma Sūtra, the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gīta. As means of revealed truth, Ṣaṅkara argues the unity of ātman and nirguna (without qualities) Brahman, i.e. the true Self and the universal essence are one: *tat tvam asi* (that art thou) [Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8].

Amongst the Prasthanatrayi, the Gīta arguably provides the most accessible parable of the reality of human condition, featuring Kṛṣṇa (dark) and Arjuna (light) delivering different perspectives of our own inner battles. One of the notable aspects of the Gīta is its form in 4 lines of 8 mātrīca, each reflecting a stage of speech on the dichotomy of existence. Essentially, it is a discourse on the misperception of separate selves binding one to cycles of rebirth (saṃsāra). This ignorance (avidyā) of the true Self (paramātman) is the principal cause of dukkha, often translated as unsatisfactoriness, suffering, pain, or unhappiness.

For Rāmānuja, on the other hand, Brahman manifests by the way of transformation into plurality (pariṇāmavāda). This means that reality (and the objects of all means of knowledge) is differentiated and has qualities. According to viśiṣṭādvaita vedānta (qualified non-dualism), there exists within the oneness a relationship between Brahman and the self, whereby the nature of Brahman to exist is qualified and Brahman cannot exist without selves. The empirical world is a real transformation of Brahman with manifesting qualities and pluralities that are all ontologically of the same substance, i.e. Brahman is the material cause of the empirical world (vivartavāda).

Darśana

Philosophy refers to the study of the fundamental nature of wisdom, reality and existence. It also concerns with the limits of knowledge and insight, seeking to establish criteria validating knowledge itself. In late 18th century, Kant established a separation between philosophical and religious thought, although both seek to know the nature of reality. Western philosophical traditions have since been essentially academic pursuits focused purely on rational and logical argument disassociated from inner quest and belief. This means that systems of salvation and leaps of faith do not equate into modern Western philosophy.

However, this leads to huge flaws in human understanding, namely causation and knowledge that cannot be attained through reasoning, disregarding epistemological methods such as individual perception, testimony and revelation. Darśana, often translated as Indian philosophy is, on the other hand, intimately related to one's destiny, whereby the act of philosophising (ānvīkṣikī) is concerned with how ātman vidyā (i.e. the knowledge of self) is conducted. Seeking to understand the nature of reality and the self is a spiritual undertaking with profound effects which can be soteriological.

Darśana derives from the saṃskṛt root *drś*, which means in seeing. Its purpose is to illuminate, allowing us to 'see' a knowing of wisdom or school of thought. Darśana puts us into direct contact with the Vedas, which is the expression of reality through sound – the 'seer' (*ṛṣi*) is the one who sights the truth about the nature of reality. In this sense, the aim of philosophising is to understand the truth through direct experience. Whilst intellectual debate, reason and logical argument are relevant, mental exercises such as meditation enable transcending one's perception to gain metaphysical insight beyond 'normal' cognitive capabilities.

There are six darśana in the Indian traditions: Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta share an exegetical approach to different parts of the Vedas, whereby the former is based on vedic ritual (karmakāṇḍa) and the latter on the Upaniṣads (jñānakāṇḍa); Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika darśanas share the same ontology; Yoga is a darśana that is very closely linked with Sāṃkhya darśana.

Although ontologically distinct, many traditions elaborate on the subject of dukkha. Gaining insight into the truth about ātman is a means of liberation, or mokṣa, which can equate to a

soteriological purpose. For example, the Sāṃkhya Kārikā is ontologically dualistic (dvaita vedānta), referring to the Sāṃkhya darśana, whereby reality is comprised of puruṣas (Self or higher consciousness) and prakṛti (matter or 'lower' self). According to Sāṃkhya, the manifest prakṛti pre-existed in the unmanifest prakṛti, yet a plurality of puruṣas also existed separated from this. Truth is known through enumeration, in the sense of discrimination or ability to discern the manifest, the unmanifest and the known. Although no detailed methodology is given in the Sāṃkhya Kārikā for achieving discrimination, it provides a structure compatible with meditation practices of classical Yoga.

Yoga is one of six darśana all written in sūtra format, which complement each other for the purpose of putting us into direct contact with the Vedas. The word Yoga derives from the saṃskṛt root *yuj*, which means to yoke, merge, unite, but it can also mean control, harmony, order. We can interpret this as the union of ātman and Brahman, as well as the integrity of insight to attain control over disturbances of the mind (*citta vṛtti*) that hinder discrimination. The aim of Yoga is to gain kaivalya, that is realisation of total aloneness as the true reality of one's essential puruṣa.

The Yoga Sūtras is a manual of practice comprised of condensed aphorisms, incorporating a comprehensive yoga methodology for attaining liberating insight. It contains four stages (or padas): Samādhi Pada (blissful state of consciousness), Sadhara Pada (practice), Bhuti Pada (meditation to bring into reality everything we see), Kaivalya Pada (in total service of oneness). Philosophical abstractions are of less interest than the insights of meditation, and efficacy in the practice is more important than convincing others. In fact, the YS provide the mechanism through which we come to know reality ourselves, rather than the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality and experience. By sounding the sūtras, we are able to evoke the wisdom that already exists within.

The self

Ātman vidyā is the knowledge of the Self, aiming to address a fundamental question: ko'ham (what I?); or kaḥ aham (who/what am I?). Practice in stillness, then turīya is revealed: so'ham (I am that); saḥ aham (I am that I am); Śivah aham (that in which everything lies). This may sound cryptic, but my interpretation is that practicing with saṃkalpa can reveal the true nature of the self.

Like Saṃskṛt, karma (or *kṛma*) derives from the root *kṛ*, meaning action or law of action. Primarily in the Vedic canon, karma is seen as ritual action, a mechanism whereby consequences are purely associated with performing prescribed duties (or sacrificial rituals) correctly; it is not linked with morality. It was only by the 5th century BCE, that karma came to be associated with rebirth, meaning that consequences of how one performs their duties might impact future lives. This perspective entails that knowledge of the nature of the self and its ontological context effects mokṣa from saṃsāra. In other words, ātma vidyā is directly linked with release from bondage and dukkha, leading to eternal 'happiness'. Indeed, I have come to realise that my yearning for knowledge stems from this very same association: to gain wisdom about the self, the nature of the Universe and existence are intimately connected with the truth – and the truth is eternal, where the dichotomy of life and death ceases to exist.

This is, of course, one way to view it. In addition to the classical Indian darśanas, many philosophical traditions elaborate on the nature of the self. For example, materialists argue that the physicality of beings is constrained to a world limited in space and time, so it only makes sense to focus on here and now; annihilationists, on the other hand, consider that the immaterial self is associated with one's physical body during its lifetime, ceasing to exist at death; for eternalists, the self is permanent and unchanging; the law of karma, as mentioned above, states that actions have consequences in future lives; and ritualists believe that performing ritual or sacrifice is directly associated with maintaining the order of the Universe. The valuable teachings of darśanas and other schools of thought are undeniable, providing multiple perspectives on the nature of existence, reality and the self. Although learning, reading and translating the texts have their place, it only constitutes the first step towards a deeper understanding of their meaning.

One of the most impactful lessons I have gathered from the scriptures is that true knowledge transcends the academic exercise of assimilating the variety of expressions of reality they convey. For instance, the revelation of advaita vedānta through sounding saṃskṛt mantras and meditation has struck me with incredible strength multiple times. Perhaps the most powerful one was the first time, shifting how I began to understand (my)self, other beings and how we are universally connected. Transcending the illusion of separateness, even if momentarily, has given me perspective. In a practical sense, I have taken these experiences as a constant reminder of true Self, that all beings are bound to dukkha and that we ought to overcome the distractions of the mind in order to 'see clearly'.

Beyond testimony (śruti or smṛti), inference or perception, most importantly, true wisdom is achieved through own enquiry and direct experience. Yoga provides a system for jñāna embodiment, allowing access to the truth by pure awareness. It has given me the tools essential to navigate the enquiry about existence and the self, how the two are related, and how they relate with reality and mortality. Although I have experienced the nature of the self being non-dual, I have no definite answers; in fact, only more questions. Regardless of the expression of reality that seems to benefit our transcendental experiences, labelling the experience itself is again an act of bondage. True wisdom, on the other hand, is boundless.

Perception

Listen.

Soundless universe

Echoes interior

See.

Beams of darkness

Shading light

Feel.

Fearless shapes

Without direction

Taste.

Infinite flavours

Separating us

Smell.

The air inert

Remembrance of truth

By definition, perception is the ability to ‘see’ through the senses. Sensorial identification of stimuli through the organs and nervous system, and further interpretation by the brain, allow us to understand sensory information in context. The process of transforming the inputs into organised concepts and knowledge depends on the individual’s attention, memory, learning capabilities and expectations. This means that our experience of reality is highly subjective. The way each one of us understands oneself, the surrounding world, our relationship within it and (with) other beings is not only shaped by our ability to sense passively, but also by how we actively interpret those signals.

Individual experience of reality has multiple layers. To different extents, we are able to navigate these coverings of perception through the interplay between awareness, withdrawal and transcendence. Perception of reality is biased not only relative to a ‘normal’ state of consciousness, but also against changes of contraction (or deprivation) and expansion (or over-stimulation) of the senses and thus the mind. This can be achieved with substances or ritualistic/trance practices, such as mantraḥ repetition (e.g. jāpa) or meditation (e.g. nīdra), enabling the transition from the physical (gross level) to the subtle (energetic level), onto the causal (to bring about the effect of), ‘opening the door’ to true reality.

According to the śarīratraya (doctrine of the three bodies) in Yoga, different aspects of the human being resulting from avidyā (ignorance) of the self are three-fold: sthūla-śarīra (gross body); sukṣma-śarīra (subtle body); karana-śarīra (causal body). Although none of these are considered to be the true Self, the former is the only one that ceases to exist upon death. As implied above, for paramātmān to be revealed, one must disidentify the self with each of the śarīras.

A further multi-layered approach is given by the pañcakōśa doctrine, whereby five sheaths (as in external to a sword) overlay the ātman. As each of the five gross elements (wind, fire, earth, water, space) have a subtle correspondence with the senses (touch, sight, smell, taste, hearing), so does the mind become aware of the ever more subtle interplay of cause and effect in each of the sheaths: annamaya-kōśa (physical sheath composed of ‘food’, which can be equated to the sthūla-śarīra); pranāmaya-kōśa (vital energetic life-force sheath composed of prāna); manomaya-kōśa (mind-formed sheath, processing thoughts and emotions); vijñānamaya-kōśa (sheath of wisdom, *buddhi*, or refined intellect); ānandamaya-kōśa (sheath of bliss). Pranāmaya, manomaya and vijñānamaya kōśas collectively constitute the sukṣma-

śarīra; anamaya-kośa equates to the karana-śarīra. Although the latter two sheaths represent higher states of consciousness (samādhi, or bliss), they are not identical to pure bliss of the true Self – all layers must be ‘peeled’ for paramātman to be realised.

In addition to these layers, we assume space-time as the matrix where, or in which, we navigate our bodies, constraining existence to this frame of reference. However, ‘reality is not what it seems’: what we perceive as the ‘outer’ world and the ‘inner’ self is greatly partial. As modern physics has shown, not only is space-time a relative mathematical construct, but its curvature also means that what we perceive as the sequence of ‘past, ‘present’ and ‘future’ is not linear. Although the philosophical implications may be challenging to grasp empirically, the association with lifetime is diluted in terms of boundaries of beginning and end – birth and death are not necessarily single static points in time. More broadly, reality is not conscribed to one’s gross field of awareness; discerning what is real from what is not, what exists from what no longer does, become ambiguous in this framework.

To realise true reality (Brahman) and true Self (paramātman), one must transcend the physical senses, any pre-conceptions and projected ideas, directing awareness onto the subtle depths of being. In fact, the Sāṃkhya Kārikā (SK) states that not all ordinary perception is valid: “Direct observation is the selective ascertainment of senses to their particular objects / Inference is said to be of three kinds: that which is inferred from a cause (prior); that which is drawn after the effect of a cause (posterior); that which is drawn from analogy / Authentic revelation is testimony” [SK v.5]. What I gather from this verse is that perception may not only be misguided or misapprehended, but the object of perception may itself be misleading – hence trusted teachings and the correct use of perception are essential.

The ‘selves’ perceived at the physical, subtle and causal levels are mutable and impermanent. Paramātman, on the other hand, is unchanged and cannot be perceived in this way; instead, the true Self is realised upon transcending perception – it is timeless and unchanged. The following paragraphs elaborate on the disidentification of the self, as exposed in the Yoga Sūtras, referring to the remedies for removing misconceptions.

Prakṛti and puruṣa

Prakṛti and puruṣa are central to Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras (YS), relating to dvaita vedānta of the Sāṃkhya darśana. They refer to aspects of the self that are ontologically distinct. The Sūtras provide an eight-limbed system (aṣṭāṅga yoga), which ultimate goal is to achieve *kaivalya* (discrimination, separateness, isolation). This means to discern that puruṣa is separate from prakṛti and that one's puruṣa stands totally 'alone' as a witness. In realising this disassociation, mokṣa (liberation) of the self is revealed, isolating the true Self from cycles of rebirth (saṃsara).

According to the Sāṃkhya Kārikā (SK), "nothing really is bound, no-one is reborn and no-one is released" [SK v.62]. It is only prakṛti that is involved in cyclical experience. In fact, 'selves' perceived of prakṛti are a misconception and the rebirth of such 'individuals' does not constitute rebirth of real selves. Ontologically, prakṛti does exist. It refers to *matter*, both the manifest and unmanifest, albeit numerically single. Prakṛti is associated with unconscious action (*kr*) and the consonants in Saṃskṛt, exhibiting three qualities (*guṇas*): sattva (goodness, harmony), rajas (movement, passion) and tamas (stability, inertia). For liberating discrimination to take place, there must be no imbalance of the guṇas. In fact, the manifestation of prakṛti is structured in such a way that the conflict of its attributes is the cause of dukkha (unsatisfactoriness).

Discernment is required to overcome the bondage between puruṣa and prakṛti (saṃyoga), disassociating the former with the latter. Although the relationship between the two is indefinable, it is the buddhi mind within prakṛti that acts as the discriminating faculty, selectively ascertaining the objects of perception from the perceiver. When 'quiet', the buddhi can perceive that what ahamkāra (the 'I-maker') creates is merely a false or inferior self – the true Self is then realised as puruṣa. This is pure awareness, eternal and inactive, with an illuminating nature associated with the vowels in Saṃskṛt. Unlike prakṛti, there are multiple puruṣas, without qualities (nirguṇa).

Citta vṛtti nirodah

The Yoga Sūtras provide the definition of classical Yoga: the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind (citta vṛtti nirodah) [YS 1:2]. This is followed by the exposition of five modes of mental activity which distract from the true Self and distort perception of reality [YS 1:6]. Pramāṇa refers to proof, whereby the means of knowledge for valid cognition are sense-perception, inference and testimony of traditions. Viparyāya are misconceptions, or invalid perception/cognitions not based on any actual reality. Vikalpa corresponds to imagination or conceptualisations based merely on abstract mental activities. Nidrā is sleep, which also involves mental activity. Smṛti is that which is remembered, or memory, including past experiences.

The kleśas are afflictions of the mind (destroyers of consciousness) and the cause of saṃyoga. They occur only at the manifest level, and it is at the manifest level that discrimination takes place. “When [the kleśas] become manifest, they strengthen the sway of the guṇas, bring about change, set in motion the flow of cause and effect, and in conjunction with one another, bring about the fructification of action” [YS 2:3]. In fact, when out of balance, the guṇas may lead to all kinds of misconceptions, i.e. kleśas, namely: ignorance (avidyā), attachment (ragaḥ), aversion (dveśa), egotism (asmita) and fear of death or clinging to life (abhiniveśa).

According to the Yoga Sūtras, the kleśas can be transformed and overcome by repeated practice (abhyāsa) without attachment to the outcomes (vairāgya). Patañjali adds that “when kriya yoga is properly performed, it conduces to the state of samādhi and considerably attenuates all the kleśas” [YS 2:2]. This means they can be remedied through tapas (discipline), svadhyāyā (continual learning) and Īśvara praṇidhana (surrender to higher source). The latter may be interpreted as devotion or surrender to a ‘special’ Puruṣa; this does not necessarily mean worship of an actual theistic/deity (or abstract archetype), but single-mindedness upon the sublime consciousness unaffected by karmic activities and delusions about the self.

“The identification of the seer and the seen is the cause of all suffering” [YS 2.17]. However, when the mind is still, obstacles to correct perception are removed, enabling the discrimination of the ‘seer’ (dr̥ṣṭi, puruṣa) from the ‘seen’ (prakṛti) and, hence, the realisation of kaivalya (the aim of classical Yoga).

To me, meditating upon the mantraḥ *aham Brahma asmi* illuminates on the question of the self: “what am I – Brahman I am”. From the point of view of advaita vedānta, this can be interpreted as the true Self and Brahman being one. Yet this mantraḥ encapsulates further subtleties: sounding *aham* demonstrates the feeling of a separate ‘I’, how it arises and how one identifies with it. It encompasses the *a* to the *ha*, which are the first and last letters of the Māheśvara Sūtras, thus holding all sounds of Saṃskṛt and all actions within it. This is a journey from the causal to the physical realms, transforming formless reality into a sensation of distinct form: *a* has an open expansive quality connected with space (the Self); *h* creates heat and is associated with the element fire (sense of sight); *m* creates a sensation of touch in the mouth (establishing that misleading identification). On the other hand, by making the sound journey in reverse, i.e. *maha* (vast, great), one is led from the physical *m* (sensation of touch) back to the formless *a* – as the expansive puruṣa or Īśvara.

Reality

*I have no time
Continue control*

*There is no space
Illusion denial*

*Desires of more
(Un) conscious aware*

*Body over mind
over body
over death*

*Wake up!
Let go
let go
let go*

Physics

Physics aims to objectively describe the universe and everything in it. It may come as no surprise that I chose to study the subject and pursue a career in science. Whilst this has given me the tools to better understand the interactions in nature, I had no illusions to find answers about the self there. Exact sciences, as they are widely accepted and taught today, disregard our subjective experience, not only of our inner world but also how that relates with everything else. Then what can science tell us about reality and the connection with consciousness? Why doesn't the objectiveness of physics allow for subjective interpretations of the world?

The idea that matter is separate from mind stems back to Galileo Galilei, a postulate on which classical physics was founded. Over the following 400 years, Isaac Newton and followers focused on describing how matter behaves with 'universal' mathematical laws. However, Galileo's view was shaken in the early 20th century with modern theories of quantum mechanics and Albert Einstein's general relativity. The former says that subatomic particles manifest as probabilities of multiple states, not as definite states that we can know for sure; the latter states that gravity is the result of matter's mass warping space-time.

Fundamentally, the significance of these challenge our experience of the material world, how reality emerges from quanta and the meaning of time as we perceive it. Consequently, empirical perception may not only be incomplete but also misleading. Quantum mechanics and general relativity have different definitions of 'observers', i.e. us as conscious 'seeing' agents. Over the last few decades, scientists have been trying to bring together general relativity and quantum theories to provide a unified 'theory of everything'.

There isn't yet a consensus regarding the nature of the observer. For example, some advocate that the observer's intervention leads to a definite perception out of quantum uncertainty, which implies that consciousness brings reality into being; others argue instead that there is no observer and that uncertainty of what there is can be explained by multiple parallel universes of alternative realities; or even that we as 'seers' are merely static points in space-time in which past, present and future all exist at the same time, which means that our perception of time is an illusion. Any of these interpretations can be strange or counter-intuitive, because that is not what we experience; but that doesn't mean they are not

plausible. Assuming reality is exclusively objective, neglecting the role of a potentially subjective observer is, at the very least, naïve. Equally, we might have to reconsider whether objects are fundamental in understanding reality.

In order to make sense of our subjective experience, or *qualia*, one might think that consciousness is a property of matter. This is known as panpsychism, an ‘inside-out’ approach at odds with what we already know about the universe. To assume that, for example, consciousness is made out of mini-consciousnesses, may lead to fallacious conclusions of well-understood aspects of the universe based on less understood ones. In response to the mind-matter question, an alternative may be to use qualia as complementary information to physics. This would enable accounting for complex emergence phenomena, i.e. that reality can be more than the sum of the parts (something inviable according to panpsychism).

A new interesting idea is to accept that qualia and conscious awareness are intertwined with time, in the sense that things only exist in the present moment. This leads to a reality without past or future, where quantum mechanics and general relativity are no longer fundamental. Instead, all there is are present events and the relationships between them, rather than objects sitting in space-time. In this causal web of events, each event ‘knows’ how it fits with the rest, how it came to be and how it turns unknown possible outcomes into the definite present. But what is so ground-breaking about this view of a time-created reality is that physical laws evolve, unlike what Galileo and Newton presumed, they are impermanent. In fact, there are two types of events: those which can be predicted (based on precedent and what we already know), and those which cannot be forecasted (as the laws change and the universe ‘decides’ the future, free from precedent). This causal theory of views implies a degree of ‘creative freedom’, whereby unprecedented events come into being, therefore pondering a connection between qualia and physics, mind and matter, or more fundamentally between consciousness and the universe.

Further still, Carlo Rovelli argues that qualia or our experience of time don’t have to be fundamental parts of physics; most importantly everything is both a subject and an object, as things only manifest themselves to one another – reality alone does not make sense. A significant implication of this is that our brain’s states of mind are not solely states of matter; consciousness is woven in the fabric of a relational universe.

Levels of reality

Metaphysics concerns with the nature of reality as a whole, how it is fundamentally constituted and the relationships between its constituents, namely causation. As schools of thought emerge reconciling physics and metaphysics, new questions also arise about the relationship between mind, matter, consciousness and reality. However, reality does not converge with what is real. As Nāgārjuna (from the Madhyamaka school of Mahāyāna Buddhism) put it, there are two levels of reality or truth (sātya): saṃvṛti, that which is impermanent, relative to senses and perception, bound by the conventions of symbolism and language; and paramārtha, that which is absolute, unchanging essence, forever real and true. For Nāgārjuna, the two are epistemological truths, which means the phenomenal world is neither real nor unreal, but indeterminable. Ultimately, phenomena are empty (śūnyatā) of an inherent self but exist in relation to other phenomena. This is referred to as 'Buddha's middle way', where no metaphysical system is absolutely valid, rejecting even the teaching of the Upaniṣads. What Buddha advocates is that, in order to achieve liberation from dukkha (i.e. the vicissitudes of our existence), one must gain insight through own individual experiential understanding, rather than accepting the authority of a third party without question.

Taking over from Madhyamaka's idea of sātya, Advaita Vedānta establishes that conventional reality is one where Brahman has qualities (saguṇa, i.e. conventional level theism), whereas in absolute reality, Brahman has no qualities (nirguṇa, i.e. ultimate absolute monism). This does not mean that the plurality of the empirical world is absolutely unreal or non-existent, but instead that it is only a conventional reality derived from false perception, illusory layers (māyā) concealing the ultimate reality. Additionally, Śāṅkara postulated an ontological hierarchy of three levels of reality: Pāramārthika (absolute reality), which cannot be sublated by the other reality levels; Vyāvahārika (empirical reality) that is our experience of the phenomenal world when awake, where both the empirical (jīva) and absolute (īśvara) are true; Prātibhāsika (apparent reality) is based on imagination alone (e.g. illusion or dream).

The quest for knowledge or truth unites science and mysticism, but what distinguishes the two is purpose (or the lack of it). We tend to think of knowledge purely as an empirical or intellectual process to explore what is known or unknown; however it is unable to reveal non-'knowables'. In a canonical sense of knowledge, the Self is not knowable because a knowing

subject cannot objectify itself in order to be known by itself. In other words, if we focus on understanding the nature of knowing as opposed to the nature of things, regardless of our subjective cognitive process, then nothing one knows can be one's self.

The inability to 'see' stems from ignorance (avidyā) about the nature of the Self, the misidentification of ātman with what is impermanent (e.g. concepts about our body, ego or mind). Although understanding the world in which we live in is important to navigate everyday life, the acquisition of knowledge alone leads to a false (or short) sense of contentment. Equally, while building and recognising an identity is indeed essential for survival, identifying the self with the transient is inevitably unsatisfactory. To realise the true Self is to realise absolute reality: ātman is Brahman; by lifting the veils of māyā, the unconditional truth is illuminated.

The inner practice of meditation allows one to sit in the resonance of one's being; in the stillness of a quiet mind (citta vṛtti nirodaḥ [YS 1:2]), our vision is illuminated. Meditation allows letting go of thoughts which anchor us away from the flow of life or reality. Different practices can help surrender back into impermanence. Mantraḥ, for example, may be used as a direct path to the realisation of true reality, as the sound guides us from saṃvṛti sātya onto paramārtha sātya. Pada is a vehicle through which an understanding of the wisdom in the mantraḥ can be found. Step by step, one is led on a journey back to the Self: from the physical realm of the senses (vaiśvānara) to the subtle realm of an active mind (taijasa) and the causal realm of a quiet mind (prājñā); through these states and beyond, the fourth (turīya) arises. The pada express a capacity of illumination; by ultimately letting go of empirical reality, one can 'see' the Self: "That which is not conscious (...) That is the Self; and That is to be known." [Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣads]; "The expression of Īśvara is Om" / "The purpose of repeating Om is to recognise and acknowledge it to be the expression of one's true Self" [Yoga Sutras 1:27- 28] – 'A' the waking state; 'U' sleeping state; 'M' deep sleep state of consciousness; then silence, space (turīya, not a state).

There is a connection between each of the pada and the pādaḥ in the Yoga Sutras. Samādhi pādaḥ - vaiśvānara [1:1]: starts with the premise that one has experienced samādhi in the physical form; and now (atha) is ready to acknowledge the yoga (union) that is already in place; anuśāsanam reveals that which has been ignored and one has now chosen to seek.

Sadhana pādaḥ - taijasa [2:1] is about kriya yoga, the conduct and measures of action in creating and enabling the maintenance of samādhi: through discipline and commitment for removing old habits (tapaḥ), continual learning towards the Self (svādhyāya), hence surrendering in full alignment with the Self (īśvara pranidhana). Vibhūti pādaḥ - prājña [3:1] looks at the act of perception, questioning by which light one sees: the light of the self (citta) is always connected (bandhaḥ) to that place (deśa, the Self) and this is dhāraṇā; the insight gained from this single-pointed concentration (ekagrata) helps stabilise the connection with the light of awareness. Kaivalya pādaḥ - turīya [4:1] examines the understanding of unitary awareness, i.e. realisation of the Self: from this vision (samādhijāḥ), perfection (siddhayaḥ) in the following elements arises: janma (earth); śadhi (water); mantra (fire); tapaḥ (wind); samādhi (space).

Impermanence

If we could sum up existence in one word, it would be impermanence. The nature of empirical reality is ceaseless change, and change is what pervades our lives. Yet we are conditioned to resist it. Ignoring the natural flow as an infinite cycle of creation (Brahma), preservation (Viṣṇu) and destruction (Śiva), leads to unrelentless discontentment. Seeking another moment, whether in the past or future, to contain what the present moment does not is an interplay between attachment (ragaḥ) and aversion (dveśa). We feel attracted to things that bring satisfaction, however we can't always attain what we desire. Equally, we avert unpleasant experiences, even though it is impossible to always avoid them. As much as we would like to believe otherwise, most of our experience is beyond our control. Indeed, we may have opportunities to choose and make decisions, but most often than not, life throws us in unexpected directions; the key lies in how we respond to it.

Our experience of reality can be enriched by embracing impermanence, deeply understanding the brevity and preciousness of existence: this very moment. The past is no more and the future imagination; only the 'here and now' exist in this empirical reality. Anything one holds on to, including one's body and each other, will inevitably be lost. The invitation is to open up to the nature of reality, to the symbiosis of the trimurti. Life goes hand in hand with this world that passes away; accepting that all things will cease to exist enables one to live fully and unconditionally.

But if impermanence is an infinite dance of change, then what's really here? We may perceive impermanence as restlessness, as a sense of 'not enough', 'wanting to be different'. Ultimately, we avoid loss out of fear of the unknown. Not paying attention to the reality of loss and the brevity of life, deprives us from accessing a deeper wisdom. Indeed, change and loss, the dichotomy of existence itself, may be painful. We are imprisoned in a trance pursuing this and avoiding that, clinging to life whilst averting death. Although it is in our evolutionary nature to perceive that we are separate in order to survive, when our whole identity (self) relies in protecting its existence, we are unable to see the true Self.

To be honest, my relationship with mortality has been one of resistance, yet fascinating and transformative at times. It has been an ongoing endeavour of acknowledging the gift that is already here, trying to identify ragaḥ and dveśa, aiming to accept transient reality. This has

unleashed self-enquiry, a profound exploration of dukkha and remaining kleśas (avidyā, asmita, abhiniveśa), bringing forth compassion and gratitude. However, it sometimes triggers denial, struggle and confoundment.

In order to grasp impermanence, one has to go beyond the thought level and immerse oneself in the fleeing moment. But how does one unbind from a pattern of resisting impermanence? We can start by bringing our attention back to the present moment, turning inwards. The practice consists in recognising what's here, stop resisting and accepting things as they are. It is an ongoing effort to remember what is true and let oneself go to the mystery. Through Yoga, one can cease the citta vṛttis, opening up to the clarity of who one truly is. As stated in the Yoga Sūtras [2:2-3], through an unattached (vairāgya) consistent practice (abhyāsa) to quiet the mind, its afflictions (kleśas) can be removed. According to the wisdom of Patañjali, this requires discipline (tapas), ongoing self-learning (svadhyāyā) and ultimate surrender (īśvara praṇidhana).

Surrender

The Self cannot manifest in a conditional reality, its full expression is revealed when the field of impermanence is transcended, where space and time, life and death dissolve. One has to completely drop the effort and trust one's parā, so that sātya is illuminated. As symbolised in yoga nīdra, there is poetry in death, in its boundless emptiness and silence, in the opportunity to rest completely.

Then why does it feel easier to live a life of discontentment than to surrender to the unknown, as if death was always worse than holding on to an occasionally cruel existence? One may have glimpses of awakening but quickly falls back to 'sleep'. To rest in the remembrance that this moment is enough requires self-practice and discipline without attachment. This is possible by surrendering to what is larger than oneself, the formless and timeless pure awareness that holds everything. The true Self is 'seen' through the fleeing moment. We are all this unfolding stream of living change; the forms change yet the essence remains the same – that is the core, that is Brahman.

We are of the nature to change; this body, as all things of the world, will vanish. However, I do not find it easy, I do feel a lingering restlessness; it comes and goes, it is here. My practice is of awareness, acceptance, and embracement of impermanence. To remember this, always, and open to this living presence – that is my saṁkalpa. As I navigate through expressions of light – knowledge, discrimination, illumination – I find refuge in the Sūtras [2:46-48]: “to ease in the seat of one's being, to forever surrender into infinity, and realise that true reality is equanimous”. What was once bound will be liberated. May all beings be enlightened and free.

Oṃ asato mā sadgamaya

Tamaso mā jyotirgamaya

Mṛtyormā'mṛtam gamaya

Oṃ śānti śānti śāntiḥ

Bibliography

Aśvagoṣa, “The Awakening of Faith: The Classic Exposition of Mahayana Buddhism”, Dover Publications, 2003

S. G. Aurobindo, “The Synthesis of Yoga”, Lotus Light Publications, 1996

B. D. Akers, “The Hatha Yoga Pradipika”, YogaVidya, 2002

M. Burley, “Hatha Yoga: Its Context, Theory and Practice”, Flamingo, 2000

F. Capra, “The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism”, Shambhala, 1975

S. Hamilton, “Indian Philosophy – A Very Short Introduction”, Oxford, 2001

W. Heisenberg, “Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science”, Penguin Modern Classics, 2000

P. Olivell, “Upaniṣads”, Oxford World's Classics, 2008

Patañjali, “Patañjali’s Yogasūtra”, Krishnamacharya Healong & Yoga Foundation, 2017

C. Rovelli, “Reality is not what it seems: The journey of Quantum Gravity”, Allen Lane, 2016

L. Tzu, “Tao Te Ching”, Penguin Classics, 2000

S. S. Satcitananda, “The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali”, Integral Yoga Publications, 2014

S. Viśnudevananda, “Meditation and Mantras”, Penguin, 1995

P. Yogananda, “Autobiography of a Yogi”, The Philosophical Library, 1946