

Vivekananda's Translation of the *Yogasūtra*

In a series of seven lectures delivered in New York in 1897, in a parlor to a small group one of whom transcribed the talks by shorthand, Swami Vivekananda spelled out three differences he saw between Vedānta and the philosophy of Kapila, the legendary founder of Sāṃkhya. The Sāṃkhya psychology and cosmology, he says, are otherwise acceptable to the Vedantist. Now both the affinities and disaffinities Vivekananda finds between Vedānta and Sāṃkhya should prove to be significant in the context of Vivekananda's translation and reading of the *Yogasūtra* (*YS*), for two reasons. First, Vedānta, specifically Advaita Vedānta or a version thereof, is pretty consistently espoused by Vivekananda, and second, in his comments on individual sūtras of the *YS* he often says, "The system of Yoga is built entirely on the philosophy of the Sāṃkhyas."¹ Both the affinities and disaffinities between the two *darśana* are important to Vivekananda's reading of the *YS*; however, by the end I will have shown that it is the affinities that carry far the greater weight with our Advaitin.

The three differences Vivekananda finds are abstract and philosophical, matters of explanation that are rather removed from matters of religious or mystical practice. First, whereas Sāṃkhya, according to Vivekananda, conceives of the *puruṣa* as "a mere qualityless, colourless, inactive something," Vedānta sees this, which it calls *ātman*, as "the essence of all Existence, Knowledge and

1. *Rajayoga*, p. 190.

Bliss.’’² These three—divine Existence, Knowledge, and Bliss (*sac-chid-ānanda*)—are said to be reflected in all that we know as actual, intelligent, and loving or attractive. Second, the Sāṃkhya view denies the Vedāntic *īśvara*, who in Vivekananda’s conception is the governor of the cosmos responsible for the order and design that are everywhere evident. Elaborating the contrast, Vivekananda says that Sāṃkhya erroneously finds the unity of *prakṛti* sufficient to the explanatory task. Third, whereas the *puruṣa*-s of Sāṃkhya are many, Vedānta, or more properly Advaita, sees the “Self” or *ātman* as one: there is “only,” as he says, “one *puruṣa*, and He is called God, and when God and man are analysed, they are one.’’³

In the case of each difference, Vivekananda presents several considerations that favor the Vedāntic conception. Nevertheless, he also finds a complementarity between the two systems, and it is this complementarity that, as I have said, seems to me the more vital element in understanding his reading of the *YS*, for, as I shall explain, what seems most key is his endorsement of the practices and the psychological system he finds there.

Vivekananda makes a general statement regarding this complementarity.

From the same set of New York parlor lectures:

[Kapila] succeeded in giving India a psychology that is accepted to the present day by all the diverse and seemingly opposing philosophical systems His masterly analysis and his comprehensive statement of

2. *Science and Philosophy of Religion*, p. 50.

3. *ibid.*, p. 53.

the processes of the human mind have not yet been surpassed by any later philosopher and he undoubtedly laid the foundation for the Advaita philosophy, which accepted his conclusions as far as they went and then pushed them a step further, thus reaching a final unity beyond the duality that was the last word of the Sāṃkhyas.⁴

Admittedly, when in the course of his explanation of individual sūtras of the *YS* the great Vedantist reminds us that the “system of Yoga is built entirely on the philosophy of the Sāṃkhyas,” he seems to have in mind one of the system’s inadequacies from his preferred Advaita perspective. When he fully endorses a practice delineated or a psychological conception, we hear nothing about Sāṃkhyas; Vivekananda’s commentary is enthusiastic and his approval unqualified.

Now such a two-handed approach to the *YS* is not unusual. The *YS* presents two faces, and one or the other can be, if not ignored, less accentuated by an individual reader. On the one hand, the *YS* is the root or definitive text of a classical *darśana*; it presents a distinct metaphysics or world view, a world view that is a variation—as Vivekananda is well aware—on the Sāṃkhyas traditionally attributed to the ancient *muṇi*, Kapila.⁵ On the other hand, the *YS* is a how-to book for yogic practice, a manual of yoga comparable to a *nāṭyaśāstra* on dramatic dance. In the classical context, there are Purāṇas and other works where a significantly distinct metaphysics is embraced while practices delineated in the *YS* are nonetheless accepted as leading to a *summum bonum*, a

4. *ibid.*, p. 98.

5. *Rajayoga*, p. 138-39.

paramapurusaârtha—though, in accordance with the distinct world view, not the *kaivalya* proposed by Patañjali. And there are various recent spiritual preceptors—in addition to Vivekananda—who have viewed the *YS* as authoritative regarding yogic practice and certain psychological concepts underpinning the practices while championing a significantly distinct philosophy. To change figures, we may call this approach the “bottom-up” reading as opposed to the “top-down” that would see all as shaped by the *YS*’s specific metaphysical picture.

Vivekananda’s own reading is decidedly “bottom-up.”⁶ [READ FN] His interest in the *YS* grew out of the text’s functional reputation and its practical side (I hypothesize, not having on the question any conclusive biographical statement). Vivekananda’s life was foremost that of a mystic; he saw himself as a spiritual preceptor. Although he studied philosophy at Presidency College before he became Ramakrishna’s disciple, it was after his whole-hearted embrace of Ramakrishna as his spiritual master and the dedication of his life to a spiritual path—with all the renunciation that that entailed—that his characteristic approach to philosophy became fully formed. Often echoing the anti-intellectualism in Indian mysticism that is as old as the *Bṛhadâraṇyaka*, *Īśā*, and *Kena Upaniṣads* and certain parables of the Buddha, Vivekananda had foremost

6. [READ] Vivekananda puts forth the usual justification for the bottom-up reading: the *YS* is *âpta-vacana*, the word of experts—in this case, of yogins who speak with authority about yogic practices and the mystic states to which the practices lead (*Rājayoga*, pp. 121-24, Vivekananda’s commentary on sūtra 1.7).

the model of Ramakrishna in his mind, the mystic who had given up the opportunity for an education in order to pursue God. Vivekananda saw the purpose of his philosophic engagement as representing the life and experience of Shri Ramakrishna. Philosophy pursued for its own sake he saw as vain. Nevertheless, he does espouse Advaita Vedānta, and unfailingly sees philosophic issues through Advaitin eyes. How then are we to view Vivekananda's commitment to Advaita in relation to his deeper commitment to a particular kind of religious life? Vivekananda's reading of the *YS* provides, I think, important evidence in this regard, which is, it seems to me, the premier interpretive question with respect to the entire corpus of the great man.

Given that it is imaginable that Vivekananda would have an Advaita axe to grind or that he would ignore all the more theory-oriented sūtras in outlining a meditative discipline and other mystic practices, I have been surprised to find, in reviewing his translation of the *YS*, that he rarely departs from the interpretation of Vyāsa, the oldest commentator, including Vyāsa's Sāṃkhya, which is arguably more pronounced with him than in the sūtras themselves.⁷ Now this is particularly surprising in that Vivekananda does not translate the classical commentaries, not even Vyāsa's; thus he gives himself a very wide interpretive

7. Georg Feuerstein has championed this thesis. *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1980).

Feuerstein also, by the way, in his recently published *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Yoga* (New York: Paragon, 1990), says that Vivekananda "interpreted Yoga strictly from the viewpoint of the nondualist philosophy of Vedānta" (p. 400).

space. But often he relays information found only in Vyāsa's *bhāṣya*, though there is one instance where he refers to what "the commentator says" and the remarks made are not in Vyāsa's gloss but only in the *Maṇiprabhā* of Rāmānanda Sarasvatī, of seven commentaries I have been able to check.⁸ This is however rather insignificant news, I must say, since Rāmānanda, although commenting directly on the sūtras, refers to Vyāsa regularly (as in his gloss to the first sūtra, *tad āha bhāṣya-kāraḥ*⁹). The main point is that Vivekananda's reading is in line with the classical commentaries, particularly concerning obscure terms in the sūtras. Unlike some modern scholars, he does not quarrel with the commentators in trying to reconstruct an original meaning of Patañjali's, but seems on the whole content with the traditional reading of the classical commentators beginning with Vyāsa, including Vyāsa's Sāṃkhya.

Of course, he leaves out a lot; he does not, for example, follow Vyāsa and enumerate the various *pātāla*-s or the mountain ranges where the *deva*-s have their abodes, and he uses modern examples with respect to various psychological concerns. He also more than occasionally indulges in a long homily, exhorting his audience to greater effort of self-control, to frequent holy places (made holy by the visits of sattvic people), to refrain from bad company, et cetera, in a style

8. *Rājayoga*, p. 120.

9. Chowkhambha edition (with six commentaries), p. 2.

I would bet that the edition of the *YS* that Vivekananda read was published in Arunodaya, 1890: see the reference in Karl Potter's *Bibliography* (Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophies, Vol. I), 2nd rev. ed., listing number 1081, p. 59.

all his own. But such digressions do not amount to an Advaitic or to an unsystematic reading of the text. No, Vivekananda consistently brings out the Sāṃkhya theory that unifies the work conceptually, i.e. he does so when he glosses those sūtras that are expressly devoted to the more abstract concepts of the world view. I repeat that my sense is that his interest is principally in the *YS*'s practical side, but I must admit that he does move from explaining practices and related psychological concepts very easily to elucidating the highly abstract ideas of *puruṣa* in relation to *prakṛti*.

So what about the tension between my insistence that Vivekananda is foremost a mystic and a spiritual preceptor with little use for philosophy except as a spiritual tool, on the one hand, and now two opposed considerations on the other, the opposed considerations, namely, that (1) with regard to the *YS*, Vivekananda does not resist the traditional integration of the practices and yogic psychology into Patañjali's variation of Sāṃkhya metaphysics, and (2) with regard to his corpus as a whole, Vivekananda espouses a version of Advaita Vedānta? Recall that it is my claim that Vivekananda's *YS* reading shows us much about how to understand his Advaitism in relation to his mystic life, and indeed to a strand of anti-intellectualism. Now it seems I am saying that in not resisting the unitary readings of the classical commentators Vivekananda has to be counted as himself approaching the *YS* from the "top down," and as absorbed, as apparently they were, in a particular intellectual picture, and indeed in a Sāṃkhya picture that is at odds with Advaita.

The resolution of this quandary is not difficult, however, since Vivekananda

himself is pretty clear both about how he sees the relation of Sāṃkhya to Vedānta and about Advaita as grounded in mysticism and spiritual experience.

We come now around to the three differences Vivekananda finds between Vedānta and Sāṃkhya, which were mentioned at the beginning. First, the difference between the Sāṃkhya *puruṣa* and the Vedāntic *ātman*, which concerns qualities postulated of the self in its native state, is insignificant in the light of the transcendence of consciousness and the possibility of self-absorbed mystic trance that both views uphold, according to Vivekananda's understanding. Moreover, from a psychological perspective in both cases the self underlies the mind-stuff, *citta*, and only falsely identifies with any psychological movement or fluctuation, *vṛtti*. The *YS*'s talk of fluctuations of mind-stuff can be understood under either light. Second, although the Sāṃkhya view denies the Vedāntic *īśvara*, Patañjali's *Yoga darśana* captures much of the concept's spiritual value—in contrast to its explanatory value in accounting for cosmic order—in that in the *YS* various mystic practices involving concentration on God or relying on God as the model of one's own higher self are expressly laid forth, according to Vivekananda's reading. Furthermore, the Sāṃkhya *prakṛti* as in reality divorced from the conscious being is not so different from the Advaitic *māyā* as divorced from the reality of *ātman* or *brahman*, especially when the separation is considered not merely intellectually but as an intellectual prop for a mystic ascesis. Vivekananda sees the Sāṃkhya *prakṛti* as a conflation of God and the world, a conflation, however, that is not entirely off the mark in that, as taught in Advaita, the concept of God makes sense only within the province of *māyā*.

Finally, the claim of Sāṃkhya that the *puruṣa*-s are many is not so important from the perspective of mystic practice, since the point is to discover one's own true self, not to worry whether it is the self of others as well. Furthermore, like Leibniz's monads or Whitehead's actual entities, the Sāṃkhya *puruṣa*-s are all alike in kind, and so it is easy for Vivekananda to assimilate them all as the one conscious being, *ātman*. In the set of New York parlor lectures previously cited, Vivekananda spells out another argument in justification of the Advaitic subsumption of the many into the One. The self has to be considered unlimited on the presuppositions of Sāṃkhya itself. If there were more than one reality in the universe, the two would limit each other and neither would be unlimited. This is a reason, Vivekananda says, not only to believe there is only one self, *ātman*, but also only one entity absolutely, *brahman*. There can be only one Absolute, he concludes.¹⁰

These reasons, and corrections of Sāṃkhya, are important from the perspective of philosophy, Vivekananda implies, but they are not so important for practice, and practice is, he says, "the real work."¹¹ At the end of the parlor lectures, the Vedantist reveals his bias forthrightly,

All people cannot take up the Advaita philosophy; it is too hard. First of all, it is very difficult to understand it intellectually. . . . Secondly, it does not suit the vast majority of people. It is better to begin . . .

and he goes on to endorse a dualist Vedānta, embracing God and a multiplicity of

10. *Science and Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 51-54.

11. *ibid.*, p. 69.

souls, as the best philosophy, the most practical philosophy, for most people in taking the first steps on a spiritual path. Presumably, Vivekananda has the same attitude concerning the philosophy of the *YS* for those rarer types capable of practicing rāja-yoga. Philosophic niceties do not matter in the end, for Vivekananda is supremely confident that in the heights of mystical experience what ones knows, while it may best be expressed as Advaita, makes all philosophic conceptions seem pale.

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