Dharmamegha Samadhi and the Two Sides of Kaivalya: Toward a Yogic Theory of Culture

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This essay will explore a liminal region lying between aspects of life that two orthodox Hindu schools of thought, Sāṃkhya and Yoga, appear to keep apart, namely existence in the world of flux and suffering and the experience of release from entanglement in psychophysical reality. I will use the rubric duḥkha for the realm of suffering, and also refer to it as “World One;” and kaivalya for the experience of release that I will also call “World Two.” My aim will be to show how a paradoxical third realm, a “World Three” of culture, is opened between suffering and release (or between frustration and joy) through insight (buddhi or jñāna) that brings the worlds together precisely by sharply distinguishing them. Implicit in Yoga is a view of culture as being in essence the practice of living out enlightenment within the ordinary world, and so of transforming the everyday world of duḥkha into a realm of joy.

The opposition between duḥkha and kaivalya parallels the fundamental opposition in Sāṃkhya and Yoga between prakṛti (psychomaterial Nature) and puruṣa (consciousness or the conscious Spirit). Thus kaivalya, the aloneness or freedom sought at the end of the psychophysical process of Nature (guna-parināma-pravṛtti), often seems to be a possibility only for the conscious spirit (puruṣa). Texts that suggest this interpretation include Sāṃkhya Kārikā (SK) XIX, siddham sākṣitvam ... puruṣasya ... kaivalyam ...., “It is established that puruṣa [as opposed to Nature or prakṛti] is a witness, possessed of aloneness,” etc.; and Yoga Sūtra (YS) II. 25, taddṛśeḥ kaivalyam, “freedom of the seer from [the seen].”

Even though kaivalya in essence belongs to puruṣa, it cannot be achieved through the action of puruṣa for the simple reason that puruṣa does not act. Only prakṛti can act “for puruṣa’s sake” (puruṣārtha). This is why both the Sāṃkhya Kārikā and Yoga Sūtras tell us in other places that kaivalya or its essential attributes are not limited to puruṣa but are possibilities for the highest evolute of Nature, namely the mind whose faculty of discernment

(buddhi) is purified (sattvikā, SK 23). For instance, at SK 64 the insight of a buddhi that discriminates the mind from the conscious spirit is called kevala, “solitary” or “free.” YS IV.26 (tadā viveka-nimnam kaivalya-prāgbhāram cittam) states “Then, deep in discrimination, thought tends toward kaivalya” (or “gravitates toward” kaivalya as rendered by Barbara Stoler Miller). Most explicitly, the last verse of the YS (IV.34) gives two definitions of kaivalya, one from the point of view of purusa, the other from the perspective of prakṛti when her psychomaterial constituents or aspects have “flowed backwards” (pratiprasava) and ceased their endless efforts to give puruṣa pleasure (bhoga) and release (kaivalya). Interpretation of this verse, and especially the phrase puruṣārtha-śūnya will be a central concern of my paper.

Barbara Stoler Miller’s translation of the verse clearly shows that it names two distinct meanings of kaivalya, although I think she misconstrues the first sense:

Freedom [kaivalya] is a reversal of the evolutionary course of material things, which are empty of meaning for the spirit; it is also the power of consciousness in a state of true identity.1

The first words of the verse, a phrase in apposition to the word guṇas (the constituents of psychophysical materiality) are puruṣārtha-śūnya, which Miller translates as “empty of meaning for the spirit.” The problem with this rendering is that it hides the significance of the crucial word puruṣārtha, “for puruṣa’s sake,” which the last substantive verse of the Sāmkhya Kārikā (69) names guhya- jñāna (“secret wisdom”). I suggest that the idea of puruṣārtha, the assertion that Nature (prakṛti) acts to give enjoyment and release to the conscious spirit, is the central thought in both the SK and the Yoga Sūtra. The idea, simply, is that everything that happens—or more precisely everything that acts or behaves in our essentially “personal” psychophysical world—does so in order to give enjoyment and release to the conscious spirit which is the only real self in each person and indeed in all living things, “from Brahmā to a blade of grass” (SK 54). Thus YS II.18:

bhoga-apavarga-artham drśyam

The aims of the phenomenal world are the enjoyment and release (of puruṣa). There is, however, a second self founded on ignorance, called asmītā in the YS and ahamkāra in the SK, that lives within World One, the realm of duḥkha. Evidently there is a contradiction: the relationship of these two selves, puruṣa and ahamkāra, must be, following the principle of puruṣārtha, that ahamkāra acts to give puruṣa enjoyment and liberation, yet the second verse of the SK and other places in both texts attest that life is essentially suffering. Apparently this world of psyche and matter that lives to unfold a little story told for puruṣa’s enjoyment and edification has gotten stuck in a complex, evolving Scheherazade tale of many thousand nights about the adventures of a creature made in puruṣa’s image but of a wholly different nature. Ahamkāra, as its synonym abhimāna suggests, lives for its own sake rather than puruṣa’s—or at least it thinks it does, and that is enough to keep the story going. Paradoxically, the denouement of our tale requires that the ahamkāra turn back the on-rolling history that it is part of—indeed, of which it is both the protagonist and the antagonist—and do its duty, its dharma, of serving puruṣa.

Thankfully, the ahamkāra—or rather the subtle body or liṅga-śarīra into which it evolves, can be seen through and overcome by the intellect (buddhi), which lies above it in the hierarchical emanation-structure of the world. The texts make clear that there are two kinds of buddhi, one that is afflicted (klīṣṭa) and flows forward, and another, smaller category that flows backwards and is not afflicted (akliṣṭa). The afflicted process of living in the world, though it works for puruṣa’s enjoyment and liberation as much as does the non-afflicted, leads to entanglements in the ahamkāra. Turning the process back (nivṛttī, pratiprasava) leads out of life’s mess and towards kaivalya. Afflicted buddhi constitutes ordinary life, the realm of suffering, while non-afflicted buddhi forms the basis for enlightenment and culture. In turning back the clock of prakṛti’s evolution, culture—and Yoga and philosophy are central parts of culture—moves towards the early state (imagine the pre-“big bang” universe) when the evolutionary flow had not yet evolved into goal-seeking manifestation. This state, called avyakta, the “unmanifest” or “indeterminate,” was in the beginning just a condition of the three guṇas balanced in equilibrium. Approached through the insight (buddhi) that lies at the heart of culture, this “indeterminate” stage can be regained, and develops into a golden age of culture, a Vrindivan (the blessed city). Culture is innately conservative because it involves this turning back the clock of parināma, yet the new world that arises, though it reprises the oldest world, has a different flavor, exactly as the turiya state described in the Māṇḍukya Upaniṣad (the “fourth” state of consciousness that lies beyond the three ordinary realms of waking, dream,
and dreamless sleep), paradoxically reinterprets deep sleep. Culture lives on the edge of enlightenment, always oriented toward it but equally always aware that, as part of the psychomaterial world, it is “not” that.

Let us follow the process of life as the SK and YS lay it out for us, in its two possibilities of ignorance and insight. In the beginning, or in illo tempore as Mircea Eliade put it, there was puruṣa and an indefinite, balanced state of the three constituents of materiality: intelligibility, passionate activity, and lethargy (sattva, rajas, tamas). In order to give puruṣa enjoyment and release, prakṛti began the long process of unfolding herself (pariṇāma). Early in this process, her insight into her purpose (which always is puruṣārtha) became afflicted or deluded. This delusion concretized into the principle of egoity, termed ahamkāra or asmitā. Subsequently, most actions have been motivated (or seem to be motivated) by self-interest. This is World One, the realm of duḥkha.

Bhukti and mokṣa are identical goals, or at least their essence is the same. The situation is parallel to the root identity of Freud’s drive reduction and death instinct. Drive reduction, like the state of a person quenching a desire in the YS/ SK, focuses on the dying down of the parināma (this can be momentary or permanent), whereas the death instinct and mokṣa (nirvāṇa) look at the goal as it is in itself and not from the viewpoint of the suffering individual. This is why kaivalya has two sides. One side is the dying down of the deluded process of pariṇāma into a state of quietness and insight, the other is the consciousness principle (puruṣa) that buddhi intuits just beyond its horizon, in the form or figure of its own non-being (nāsmi, SK 64).

The essence of this ultimate intuition of the buddhi, which is the nature of buddhi in kaivalya, is stated most clearly in SK 64 and YS IV.34, at the ends of the two texts. It is also expressed through a series of metaphors and—as I hope to show—more generally in the form of genuine culture. Yoga’s theory of culture is critical, in a way like that of Theodor Adorno and other forms of Marxism. Some forms of culture are true and lead towards freedom and enlightenment; other forms, which I would characterize as false culture (or false consciousness), lead to bondage and suffering. Let us first look at the two verses, then at the metaphors, and finally at several examples of Western culture and culture critique that may embody World Three’s simultaneous affirmation and denial of self.

† I have addressed the question of the Freudian death instinct as a transcendental principle at greater length in a later paper (Collins, 2008).

YS 4.34

puruṣārtha-śunyānāṁ guṇānāṁ pratiprasavaḥ kaivalyam
svarupa-pratiṣṭhā vā citiśaktit iti

Freedom (kaivalya) is the flowing backwards of the guṇas whose work for the sake of puruṣa has become (their own) emptiness. Kaivalya is also (vā) the power of consciousness in its own reality.

SK 64

evaṁ tattvābhīṣyānāṁ nā ‘smi
na me nā ‘ham ity aparīṣeṣam
aviparyayād viśuddham
kevalam upadyate jñānam

From practice [of the stopping or reversing of the flow of prakṛti’s parināma] there arises the insight that ‘I am not,’ ‘I possess nothing,’ and ‘there is no I [in me].’ This insight is complete, pure and solitary because there is no illusion in it.
found at SK 67 (cakra-bhrami). The circularity of aum is evident elsewhere in its representation of the beginning, middle, and end of the world (a-u-m), as in the Māṇḍukhya Upaniṣad. The YS identifies the Lord of Yoga with the sound aum, and tells us that this Lord is the guru of the ancient seers (YS I.26) and the source of universal wisdom (sarva-jñā). Most interesting is that this Lord of Yoga is identified as a “sort of puruṣa” (puruṣa-viśeṣa), YS I.24. Clearly the categories are being brought together here, as it is ordinarily the distinction between puruṣa and buddhi, even the most jñāna-infused buddhi, that leads to kaivalya—and yet here the special puruṣa called Lord of Yoga directly communicates the jñāna, as a guru to a disciple. The point, I think, is that here the aim (artha) of prakṛti is not separate from its nature. There is no projection of puruṣa’s release or enjoyment into the future but rather a here-and-now experience (bhāvana) of it. Hence the repetition of the syllable aum leads to the experience of the aim which lies within it. Thus YS I.28

$taj\text{-}japas~tad\text{-}artha\text{-}bhāvanam$

“Chanting the syllable aum is the experience (bhāvana) of its meaning.”

There is no separation between the word and meaning, no seeking after something unattained, a puruṣārtha located in the future. Puruṣārtha is still the central idea, but it is now something timelessly found rather than something to be sough. There is a sense here of finality or fulfillment, no longer of going somewhere or seeking a state not yet attained, but also not a dead or rigid stasis. As the sculptor Anish Kapoor says of his own cultural productions when they are “well made,” this is a “condition that seems to be abidingly static and at the same time dynamic. It’s hard to name but it’s a something to be burned is imagined as a wedding between a principle of consciousness and one of materiality.

To recognize consciousness, puruṣa, is to be burned thoroughly, to say and fully realize that one’s essence is nāsmī, na me, nāham. Similar to Leonard Cohen’s song, sexual union between puruṣa and prakṛti is implied in the SK when prakṛti dances before puruṣa. Already a goddess at the time the text was written, prakṛti’s femininity is clearly implicit throughout the SK. Similarly, puruṣa evokes the Cosmic Man he formerly was, and he is called puṃs in the SK, which underlines his maleness). The resonances of the puruṣa/prakṛti relationship in later Tantra and Bhakti also reflect the sexual hieros gamos of their tie. Joan recognizes in her death the fire’s love and light; and while the singer suffers the burning heat and blinding light involved in surrender to the consciousness principle, we are also shown Joan’s epiphany of understanding that “he was fire” and “she must be wood.” Not quite wood, even, for in the moment Joan’s body is burned away she is identified as “ash.” This ashen Joan is quite parallel to the nāsmī-singing prakṛti of the Sāṃkhya Kārikā whose ahamkāra-based personality likewise dissolves in jñāna.
Other illustrations of the Third World of culture are suggested in the work of the Indian-British sculptor Anish Kapoor and the Indian culture critic Homi Bhabha, who was mentioned a moment ago. Kapoor’s recent mirrored pieces could almost be considered reflective analogues of a refractive metaphor central in Sāṃkhya, that of a piece of rock crystal within which the image of a flower (actually placed nearby) seems to float. The sense of this image is that the flower appears to be enmeshed in the crystal but really is outside it, just as experience (prakṛti) seems to be encased in consciousness (puruṣa) but really does not touch it. Kapoor’s work, in which the cityscape of the Chicago Loop seems to float like a “world of dreams” is described by Bhabha as “making emptiness.” It could equally be characterized as “emptying the made.” It is about the edge between the object and awareness of it, and it carries us from one world to the other—from World One to World Two—while itself being part of a third realm of culture not reducible to either of the others.

Homi Bhabha, from a postmodern and postcolonialist stance on the Mumbai—Harvard axis, speaks of a third world in his concept of “splitting” between a colonialist realm of lies and an underlying reality that the colonial regime denies or hides. The third world of splitting involves a particular kind of strategy for moving from authoritarian deceits to the suppressed reality. Briefly, Bhabha finds his third world, that of liberating culture, in “an enunciatory space, where the work of signification voids the act of meaning....” Notice how similar this is to Sāṃkhya where the prakṛti’s work of signifying puruṣa voids that act in the very saying of “not I.” The situation Bhabha is studying occurs within discourse—not only colonial discourse—when “the resistance to authority, the subversion of hegemony” operates with a strategy of “disarticulating the voice of authority at that point of splitting,” when the subaltern colonized or social underclass uses the language of oppression against that very oppression. This move is formally identical to the strategy employed by Sāṃkhya/Yoga when it teaches the use of prakṛti against prakṛti, or “non-afflicted” buddhi against “afflicted” buddhi. The proportion is: ahamkāra-buddhi (in Sāṃkhya) is to Bhabha’s “voice of authority” as kaivalya-buddhi is to “competing discourses of emancipation or equality” and the forms of “identity and agency” (i.e., forms of true culture) that arise from them. Ahaṃkāra and the voice of authority are based on ego motivations; kaivalya and the discourse of emancipation touch a state beyond ego. The experience of puruṣārtha takes emancipation to depths that Bhabha may not recognize but which his thought approaches.

In a highly interesting critical essay by Homi Bhabha about the work of Anish Kapoor, Bhabha again arrives at a position that is quite near that of Sāṃkhya and Yoga, and in he fact uses terms taken by Kapoor from classical Indian thought that are related to the ideas of our texts, namely rūpa and svayambhū (“man made”/”self made” in Kapoor’s terms). Clearly these words are related to prakṛti (rūpa) and puruṣa (svayambhū), and name the human- (or ahaṃkāra-) shaped quality of the world on one hand, and its self-existence on the other. The central argument of this essay, and I think the center of Sāṃkhya-Yoga, is that neither puruṣa nor prakṛti can really exist “in itself” without the other, or rather that prakṛti always exists for puruṣa and puruṣa exists in itself only through prakṛti. There is always puruṣārtha to direct prakṛti’s action, and prakṛti for puruṣa to see. Bhabha and Kapoor understand something similar, and find a back-and-forth movement between rūpa and svayambhū that establishes a third thing, an ambiguous and flickering reality that Kapoor names “Ghost” in one of his works. Kapoor proposes the useful term “truly made” to name the products of genuine culture, which occur “only when the material and the non-material tangentially touch.” As Kapoor says, a “thing exists in the world because it has mythological, psychological,
Yogic culture, then, which I believe we may fairly identify with the true culture and culture theory of India, consists of those “truly made” objects and ideas that inhabit their own śūnya, (emptiness), their own nāsmī (saying “not-I”), and in this circular dynamism of being/nonbeing point us in the direction—ironically, the direction we were already headed without knowing it—of puruṣārtha. And this is true not only for Indian culture. Contemporary Western art, music, and criticism suggest the same thing, though perhaps without the full experience, earned through dhāranā, dhyāna, and samādhi, of the puruṣa that shines where we are not. This culture theory is a gift that India’s ancient thought still offers the world, one that, as we will see, can hold ecological significance.

Notes

1. Miller, 1995, p. 83
2. Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 102
4. Klostermaier, 1986
5. Sri Adwayananda, 1986
6. van Buitenen, 1957
7. Mitchell, 1995
9. Bhabha, p. 18
10. Bhabha, 18