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Virtue, Self-Transcendence, and Liberation in Yoga and Buddhism

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1. Introduction

This chapter will discuss the important connections between virtues, self-transcendence, and spiritual liberation in the Indian traditions of Pātañjala Yoga and (early and Abhidharma) Buddhism. Both Yoga and Buddhism are philosophical systems (*darśana*) as well as carefully articulated paths (*marga*) for the cultivation of virtue and, ultimately, spiritual liberation (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*). Furthermore, in both traditions, self-transcendence in the form of the progressive overcoming of egoism is thought to be a necessary condition of virtue and liberation. For the Yogic and Buddhist schools, hypo-egoic forms of psychological functioning are reciprocally linked to the development of central virtues, such as non-violence (*ahiṃsa*), contentment (*saṃtoṣa*), compassion (*karuṇā*), and equanimity (*upekṣa*). With regard to spiritual liberation, both schools hold that liberation (at least in part) consists in the irreversible transcendence of egoic modes of psychological functioning. However, despite these similarities, the two schools profoundly disagree on the metaphysical status of the self (*ātman*, *puruṣa*). Whereas in Yoga, the ego is transcended in order to realize the true spiritual self, Buddhists deny the existence of the self as such. The chapter will begin (section 2) with a discussion of the basic philosophical commitments of each school as well as their respective eight-fold paths of spiritual development. Section 3 will discuss in more detail the central virtues of each school as well as virtue and vice in their connections with hyper- and hypo-egoic modes of psychological functioning. Section 4, will discuss the theories of self and ego in each tradition, as well the differing accounts of

spiritual liberation. Finally, section 5 will conclude with a discussion of Yogic and Buddhist accounts of post-egoic or liberated modes of living.¹

2. Yoga and Buddhism as Views and Paths

In the classical Indian tradition, both Yoga and Buddhism are considered comprehensive philosophical systems (*darśana*, ‘view’) involving rigorously articulated and defended metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, and phenomenological dimensions. Yoga is one of the six orthodox (*astika*) Hindu schools of philosophy and its primary text is Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* (c. 200 CE), which consists of 196 aphorisms (*sūtra*) on the view and path of Yoga.² This text is not the origin of the Yoga school, but rather draws on earlier traditions and sources. The tradition takes the text as an authoritative presentation of the Yoga philosophy. The term *yoga* has a broad application in the context of Indian spiritual traditions. For instance, in the *Bhagavad Gītā* (Schweig 2010), *yoga* refers to a number of distinct paths to spiritual liberation, such as *karma-yoga* (the path of action) or *bhakti-yoga* (the path of devotion). More commonly, however, the term *yoga* refers to contemplative meditative techniques deployed in service of attaining a soteriological goal, such as liberation or union with divinity. It is yoga in this sense that is the primary concern of the Yoga school of philosophy. Indeed, Patañjali famously defines yoga as the “stilling of the modifications of mind” (*citta vṛtti nirodha*), a state which is a precondition of spiritual liberation (*kaivalya*). Thus, Yoga, like Buddhism, is not just a systematic philosophical view, it is also a soteriological philosophy and practice.

Drawing on the metaphysics of the older Sāṅkhya school, Yoga philosophy is based on the fundamental ontological distinction between *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*. *Prakṛti* here refers to material

reality in all its variegated forms. *Puruṣa* here refers to the most essential conscious, spiritual self—what most other Hindu schools refer to as *ātman*. On this view, there is only one dynamic material reality, while there are many individual selves. *Puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are equally real, mutually distinct, and irreducible. They are, therefore, the two ultimate principles of the metaphysically dualistic systems of Sāṅkhya and Yoga. It is important to note, however, that the dualism of the Sāṅkhya and Yoga schools is in certain respects quite different from forms of mind-matter dualism in the West. In the most familiar Western forms of dualism the ontological dualism is between body and matter, on one hand, and the mind, on the other. In contrast, according to the Sāṅkhya and Yoga view, mind (*citta*) is a subtle form of *prakṛti* and therefore material. What we call the mind is constituted by the integrated functioning of intelligence (*buddhi*), ego (*ahankāra*), and other forms of mentation (*manas*). These are capacities and functions of a living sentient being, conceived as a complex material system. Thus, perhaps surprisingly, Yoga has a non-reductive materialist theory of mind. *Puruṣa*, as pure awareness,³ is ontologically independent from *prakṛti*, including the mind. Hence, the fundamental dualism here is between mind and body, on one hand, and pure consciousness, on the other.

The soteriological goal of Yoga is the liberatory recognition of *puruṣa* in its pristine and eternal independence (*kaivalya*) from *prakṛti*. The bound individual is embroiled in the world and falsely identifies with the body-mind as her true nature. The practice of yoga, then, involves techniques allowing for direct recognition of one's true nature as *puruṣa* and subsequent liberation from bondage to the world. As Patañjali puts it in the first chapter of the *Yoga Sūtras*:

I.2 Yoga is the stilling of the modifications of mind.

I.3 When that is accomplished, the seer abides in its own nature.

I.3 Otherwise, there is identification with the modifications [of mind].⁴

As will be discussed more extensively in section 4, liberation in Yoga necessarily involves a transcendence of the ego or false sense of self and recognition of one's true nature or self as pure awareness.

The path to this soteriological goal consists of the well-known eight limbs (*aṣṭāṅga*) of yoga. The eight limbs are: moral restraint (*yama*), moral observance (*niyama*), posture (*āsana*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), sensory withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*), concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and contemplative absorption (*samādhi*). There is no need here to go into great detail concerning each limb. However, two points are worth noting. First, yoga is an explicitly holistic and integrated path of development or self-cultivation. Careful attention to the body, breath, senses, and mind is thought to be required to achieve liberation from spiritual bondage. In this way, rigorous cultivation of body and mind can serve as the vehicle for the recognition of oneself as pure consciousness. Second, moral restraint (*yama*) and moral observance (*niyama*)—that is ethical self-cultivation—is at the foundation of the path. Thus, the cultivation of virtue is a necessary condition of self-realization.

Turning now to the Buddhist tradition, the first thing to note is the tradition's great diversity. Over the course of its development in India, Buddhism encompasses several distinct religious and philosophical sub-traditions. However, despite this diversity, Buddhism is grounded in a few shared ideas and commitments. The foundation of the Buddhist tradition as both a philosophical system and a spiritual path is the four noble truths, which serve as a diagnosis of and prescription for the human condition of spiritual bondage (*saṃsāra*). First is the noble truth of *duḥkha*,

suffering or dissatisfaction. On the Buddhist analysis, human life as normally experienced and lived is pervaded by suffering. This ranges from the obvious suffering of mental and physical pain, to the subtler forms of suffering that arise from the impermanence of all things and our maladaptive habitual tendencies. Recognition of the pervasiveness of *duḥkha* is the first step to its transcendence. Second is the noble truth of the cause of suffering. There are more and less elaborated analyses of the causes of suffering that arise in the tradition. One of the most common analyses focuses on the three unwholesome roots (*akuśala-mūla*) of suffering: greed (*rāga*), aversion (*dveṣa*), and delusion (*moha*). On this view, the vicious cycle of suffering and spiritual bondage is driven by these deeply engrained maladaptive tendencies toward greed, aversion, and delusion. Third is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering. The Buddhist tradition is based on the proposition that it is possible to be liberated from suffering and spiritual bondage—that is, to achieve *nirvāṇa*. This is to be accomplished by uprooting the three unwholesome roots and cultivating their opposites, the three wholesome roots of generosity (*dāna*), kindness (*maitri*), and wisdom (*prajñā*). Fourth is the noble truth of the eightfold path to liberation.

The Buddhist eightfold path is typically organized into the three domains of wisdom, ethics, and meditation. The domain of wisdom is comprised of the first two aspects of the path, right (*samyak*) view and right intention. Right view involves an understanding of the three marks of conditioned existence, namely impermanence (*anitya*), suffering (*duḥkha*), and no-self (*anātman*). Right intention involves a commitment to act harmlessly, without ill will, and in light of right view. The domain of ethics or moral discipline (*śīla*) is comprised of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. One is to refrain from false and divisive speech, observe the five moral precepts, and maintain a lifestyle consistent with and conducive to Buddhist practice. The

domain of meditation (*samādhi*) is comprised of right mindfulness and right concentration. Here one practices a variety of meditative techniques to develop a clear, stable, and pliable mind. Furthermore, the meditatively cultivated mind is considered indispensable for the cultivation of wisdom and the development of virtue. Thus, as with the eight limbs of Yoga, the Buddhist eightfold path is considered an integrated method of spiritual development.

Whereas Yoga philosophy is based on a fundamental distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*, Buddhist thought is grounded in an analysis of the dependent origination (*pratītyasamutpāda*) and basic marks or traits of phenomena (*dharma*). On the Buddhist view, the internal and external phenomena we encounter in experience arise on the basis of a complex network of causes and conditions. For instance, the phenomenon of a fire might arise on the basis of appropriate fuel, sufficient oxygen, and a spark. Likewise, a feeling of anger might arise on the basis of a short temper, a frustrating situation, and a perceived slight. From a Buddhist perspective, it is by coming to understand the dependent arising and continuation of phenomena that we may effectively intervene in these processes. Indeed, as we have seen in the formulation of the four noble truths, it is by understanding that suffering arises from our own maladaptive tendencies to greed, aversion, and delusion that we may begin to develop the skillful means to mitigate that suffering and foster genuine happiness (*sukha*) and freedom (*mokṣa*).

The three marks of conditioned existence are thought to be a direct consequence of the fact of dependent origination. Phenomena are impermanent (*anitya*) in that they arise and persist only on the basis of other phenomena, which themselves are dependent, and so on. Thus, on this view, anything that arises will also cease. Furthermore, phenomena are also changing every moment.

Phenomena are unsatisfactory (*duḥkha*) because they are conditioned and impermanent. Yet, this is not so much a judgment of their inherent worth or lack thereof. Buddhist thinkers do not claim that all phenomena are inherently bad or painful. Rather, phenomena are unsatisfactory in the sense that they cannot provide us with the permanent satisfaction we unrealistically expect from them. I may implicitly desire that a job, or health, or a partner will provide me with permanent satisfaction, but this is inconsistent with the impermanence of all phenomena. Thus, phenomena are unsatisfactory because there is a fundamental mismatch between the nature of phenomena and what I desire from them. Finally, phenomena are without self (*anātman*) in two related senses. First, because they are dependent and impermanent, Buddhist thinkers argue that phenomena lack a fixed or permanent nature or substantial core. Thus, the analysis of phenomena in terms of dependent origination yields a generally non-substantialist and non-essentialist ontology. And this view very much applies to ourselves as persons. In sharp contrast to the Yoga view affirming an eternal spiritual self, Buddhists deny that we are such selves. Instead, (as will be discussed further below) on the Buddhist view we are a complex network of dependently originated mental and physical events and processes. Second, all phenomena are no-self in that, as part of the cultivation of meditative insight and wisdom, practitioners are to relinquish identification with phenomena as ‘I, me, and mine’.

On the Buddhist account, we must come to truly see that all conditioned phenomena, including ourselves, are impermanent, selfless, and that craving or grasping after them will not lead to the lasting peace and satisfaction we desire. Therefore, an intellectual, experiential, and practical grasp of the three marks of conditioned existence is at the root of right view and wisdom. Yet if phenomena are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless, how is liberation possible? On the

early Buddhist view, reality is not exhausted by conditioned phenomena, but also includes the unconditioned reality of *nirvāṇa* itself. As we find in the Udāna:

There is, monks, an unborn —unbecome—unmade—unfabricated. If there were not that unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, there would not be the case that escape from the born—become—made—fabricated would be discerned. But precisely because there is an unborn—unbecome—unmade—unfabricated, escape from the born—become—made—fabricated is discerned. (Thānissaro, 2012, p. 113)

As an unfabricated or unconditioned reality, *nirvāṇa* is said to be beyond birth and death, and beyond the fluctuating happiness and suffering of our *samsāric* experience. Whereas conditioned phenomena are impermanent, the unconditioned is deathless. Whereas conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory, the unconditioned is great happiness (*mahāsukha*). By parity of reasoning, then, one might expect that whereas conditioned phenomena are selfless, the unconditioned would be the true self (*ātman*). However, the Buddhist tradition is adamant that the unconditioned too is selfless. As the Buddha advises, an awakened person (*arhat*):

directly knows *nibbāna* (Skt: *nirvāṇa*) as *nibbāna*. Having directly known *nibbāna* as *nibbāna*, he should not conceive [himself as] *nibbāna*, he should not conceive [himself] in *nibbāna*, he should not conceive [himself apart] from *nibbāna*, he should not conceive *nibbāna* to be ‘mine’, he should not delight in *nibbāna*. (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 1995, p. 87)

On their view, all notions of ‘I, me, and mine’ are conditioned and constructed. The unconditioned is therefore beyond all such forms of identification.

3. Yama, Niyama, and the Four Immeasurables

Despite their important differences, Yoga and Buddhism share a commitment to the centrality of moral discipline and development to the spiritual path to liberation. For both traditions, the cultivation of virtues and the progressive transformation of character are essential elements in the overall system of thought and practice. In Pātañjala Yoga the first five of the eight limbs—moral restraint (*yama*), moral observance (*niyama*), posture (*āsana*), breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), and

sensory withdrawal (*pratyāhāra*)—are called the outer limbs (*bahirāṅga*) because they concern a practitioner’s basic orientation to the social world and to the senses. And among these outer limbs, *yama* and *niyama* provide the moral foundation of all practice and development. Furthermore, *yama* concerns primarily moral restraint with regard to others, while *niyama* concerns primarily observances with regard to a practitioner’s own person and spiritual life. Thus, on my interpretation, these two limbs constitute Yoga’s framework for developing both other-regarding and self-regarding virtues and virtuous modes of living.

The *yama* limb is subdivided into the restraints of non-harming (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), sexual restraint (*brahmacarya*), and non-greed (*aparigraha*). The integrated practice of *yama* is called the great vow (*mahāvratam*). *Ahiṃsā* or non-harming is the foundational restraint in Yoga. The practitioner is to refrain from harming sentient beings, and in some interpretations, all living beings. And yet it is recognized that, as an embodied being, the practitioner will inevitably cause some harm. *Prakṛti*, the natural world, is a dynamic interwoven fabric of cause and effect in which it is impossible to avoid all harm. However, the restraint of *ahiṃsā* places the ideal of peaceful co-existence at the center of the moral and spiritual life. Truthfulness involves not lying, of course, but also includes a commitment to honesty guided by non-harming. Hence the practitioner is to avoid dishonesty, harsh speech, slander, and self-deception. Non-stealing involves refraining from taking what is not freely given. Sexual restraint in Patañjali’s historical context would primarily refer to the practice of celibacy. However, it can also include concerns of fidelity and avoiding harm caused by sexual activity. Non-greed involves refraining from taking more than one needs, practicing material simplicity, as well as cultivating generosity. Practicing *yama*, then, involves a fundamental commitment to living in

the world in a way that avoids the harms caused by the human tendencies to violence, greed, and dishonesty.

The *niyama* limb is subdivided into the observances of purity or cleanliness (*śauca*), contentment (*samtoṣa*), self-discipline (*tapas*), self-study (*svādhyāya*), and devotion to the divine (*īśvarapraṇidhāna*). *Śauca* literally means “cleanliness,” but has a quite broad scope in the context of Yoga. The observance includes bodily cleanliness as well as considerations of, for example, ritual and dietary purity. The practice of contentment involves overcoming greed and practicing gratitude toward one’s life and circumstances. Self-discipline here includes the commitment to the rigors of regular and comprehensive spiritual practice. However, the term *tapas* here means “heat” and, in the broader Indian context, can refer to various, sometimes severe forms of asceticism and the power that is thought to arise from them. So, while Pātañjala Yoga is not based on harsh austerities, the notion of self-discipline carries a sense of vigorous and disciplined practice. Self-study traditionally involves the practitioner’s commitment to studying and internalizing the teachings of the tradition. For example, one might memorize, recite, and contemplate passages from important texts such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* or the *Yoga Sūtras*. Finally, *īśvarapraṇidhāna* involves loving dedication to the divine or the Lord (*īśvara*). *Īśvara* here is conceived as a pure consciousness (*puruṣa*) that has never been bound by false identification with *prakṛti*, and thereby fully manifests the divine qualities of awakened consciousness. The Lord serves as both an object of devotion as well as an ideal to which the practitioner aspires. Practice of *niyama*, then, involves the primarily self-directed cultivation of traits and habits conducive to traveling the spiritual path.

We can see that ethical self-cultivation is at the root of the spiritual path of yoga. The *yamas* and *niyamas* serve both as forms of moral restraint or observance as well as dimensions of moral experience to which the practitioner is to become progressively more attuned. In addition to the more fine-grained detail of these limbs of the path, Patañjali also remarks (I.20-21) that “faith (*śraddhā*), energy (*vīrya*), mindfulness (*smṛti*), contemplation (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) form the path to realization. For those who seek liberation wholeheartedly, realization is near.” Hence, these core virtues provide the requisite foundation for the detailed and rigorous practices of the eight limbs.

With regard to the Buddhist eightfold path, we have seen that moral discipline is of central importance. Furthermore, liberation from suffering is often conceptualized as a process of uprooting the unwholesome traits of greed, aversion, and delusion, while cultivating the wholesome roots of generosity, kindness, and wisdom. More specifically, in the early Buddhist tradition, moral cultivation is centered on the four immeasurable (*apramāṇa*) virtues of loving-kindness (*maitrī*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekṣā*). The immeasurables may refer to occurrent feelings or attitudes, domains of moral training, or stable character traits. They are constitutive of the character of an awakened being (*arhat*) and are articulated within a moral psychology that includes an analysis of the “near” and “far” enemies of each state, as well as the use of the immeasurables as “antidotes” to negative states.⁵

The term *maitrī* (Pāli: *mettā*), often translated as “loving-kindness,” is related to *mitra*, “friend,” and connotes an attitude of friendliness or good will toward all sentient beings. In particular, it involves the wish for the happiness and well-being of others. In its ideal form, loving-kindness is

universal in scope and includes the wish that all beings achieve both worldly happiness and awakening. Its opposite or far enemy is hatred or ill-will (*dveṣa*). Its counterfeit or near enemy is selfish attachment (*upādāna*). In general, attachment refers the mistaken desire to cling to what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and insubstantial (“selfless”) as if it were permanent, satisfactory, and substantial. As the near enemy of true *maitrī*, it has the connotation of a self-centered, possessive, compulsive, or anxious way of relating to those one cares about. It is considered a near enemy because our love and concern for others is so often mixed with (or conflated with) these maladaptive ways of relating. On the Buddhist view, loving-kindness can be cultivated through specific forms of meditation. For instance, in the form of meditation known as *maitrī-bhāvanā* (“loving-kindness cultivation”) the meditator evokes a feeling of kindness first toward herself, then toward a friend, a neutral person, a difficult person, and finally all sentient beings. The meditation technique involves both affective self-priming and stabilizing—that is, evoking and maintaining the feeling of kindness or love in oneself—as well as imaginative extension. Finally, it can serve as an antidote to both acute and chronic forms of ill-will. When one notices the arising of ill-will, one can evoke the feeling of loving-kindness toward the object of one’s ill-will. This is thought to counteract the arising of ill-will. Moreover, repeated practice of *maitrī-bhāvanā* is thought to reduce the tendency to hatred or ill-will over time, as well as make it easier to counteract specific instances of these negative states.

Compassion (*karuṇā*) involves the concern for others’ suffering. It includes both sympathy for the plight of others and the active wish to alleviate their suffering. Like *maitrī*, it is ideally universal in scope. In terms of strength, the compassionate person is said to care for the suffering of others as much as she cares for her own suffering. Its far enemy is cruelty, while its near

enemy is pity. Pity is considered a near enemy because it involves a sense of condescension or superiority toward its object based on a sense of fundamental difference between oneself and the other. In contrast, true compassion is based on a deep sense of our shared plight as sentient beings who do not want to suffer.

Sympathetic joy (*muditā*) involves taking joy in the happiness and welfare of others. Its far enemy is envy or resentment. Its near enemies are biased joy in others' good fortune, such as joy only when one's own child does well, or vicarious enjoyment based in states such as craving, as in celebrity worship. Techniques to cultivate sympathetic joy include attending to or contemplating the good qualities of others, especially those one may envy or resent.

Equanimity (*upekṣā*) involves both mental stability or tranquility and a lack of bias or undue partiality in one's perceptions and interactions with others (and oneself). The far enemies of equanimity are disturbing emotions such as craving and anxiety. These emotions are problematic both because they disturb one's inner peace or emotional equilibrium and because they tend to bias one's assessment of moral situations. Someone in the grip of craving, for instance, may not have the clear unbiased understanding of her situation required to act virtuously. The near enemies of *upekṣā* are cold indifference and apathy. Attempting to maintain one's inner peace by ignoring or being unconcerned with the happiness and suffering of others is not virtuous, nor is attempting to be impartial by being equally uncaring toward all.

While the four immeasurables are conceptually distinct and each has its own techniques of cultivation, these virtues are considered mutually supporting. Loving-kindness and compassion

are, of course, complementary. Cultivating sympathetic joy can facilitate cultivating loving-kindness or compassion, and *vice versa*. Equanimity serves to ensure that other virtues are universal in scope and free of prejudice, while the other three virtues serve to ensure that equanimity does not fall into mere indifference. Finally, it is important to note the guiding roles of attention—in the forms of mindfulness and attentional stability—and wisdom in cultivating and expressing the virtues. Stable attention is important in so far as an agitated and unfocused mind is an impediment both to acting virtuously and to the meditative techniques required to cultivate the virtues. Mindfulness is important in that it is said to increase awareness of both one's internal states and processes, and morally salient features of one's situation. For instance, the mindful individual may notice the subtle feelings of anger just as it is starting to arise and thereby more easily address it. Most important, wisdom—a deep insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and insubstantial nature of reality—guides and constrains the four immeasurables. An action motivated by compassion, but not guided by wisdom, risks missing its target or worse, being counter-productive or harmful. On the Buddhist view, appropriate action must be well-motivated *and* wise.⁶

4. Self, Ego, and Transcendence

As mentioned above, on my interpretation Buddhism and Yoga share a commitment to two central ideas. First, that the cultivation of virtue is at the foundation of the spiritual path. Second, that spiritual liberation involves a form of self-transcendence—that is, a fundamental transformation beyond one's normal sense of self. Further, as a corollary of these two ideas, on my view Yoga and Buddhism are committed to the idea that moral development involves self-

transcendence. In other words, both virtue and spiritual freedom require transcending the ego. And yet, as discussed in this section, the traditions are diametrically opposed on the ultimate ontological status of the self.

In the second chapter of the *Yoga Sūtras*, Patañjali discusses the nature of spiritual practice, including the most fundamental obstacles to spiritual liberation. These are called *kleśas*, meaning “afflictions” or “poisons.” He writes:

II.3 The impediments [*kleśas*] are ignorance, egoity, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life.

II.4 Ignorance is the field [of the other *kleśas*] . . . whether they are in a dormant, weak, attenuated, or active state.

II.5 Ignorance is the notion which mistakes the eternal, pure, joyful self for the impermanent, impure, painful non-self.

II.6 Egoity (*asmitā*) is to confuse the seer and the power of seeing as one self.

Patañjali, then, is very clear that *asmitā*—literally “I-am-ness,” but here having the sense of egoity or egotism—arises from ignorance and is an impediment to spiritual development.

Ignorance (*avidyā*) is the primordial confusion that conflates self and non-self, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. This ignorance might take gross form in the false identification with external forms, such as one’s social status, power, or bodily form. However, egoity is thought to be a much subtler form of ignorance at the very root of one’s normal sense of self.

Recall that, in the Sāṅkhya and Yoga schools of thought mind and mental processes are considered subtle forms of *prakṛti*. Therefore, the psychological sense of self—(*ahaṁkāra*, “I-maker”) the cognitive, affective, and conative modes of self-awareness and self-identification—

is a function of what is ultimately the non-self. Now, on the Yoga view, egoity plays a central role in the psychological economy of embodied sentient beings such as ourselves. For instance, we experience our bodies as our own in both feeling and action. We identify various mental contents and events (*vyrttis*), such as thoughts, feeling, images, or memories as parts of our ongoing mental lives. Out of these and other elements we build a self-image, which shapes our way of being in the world. Each of these is an aspect of *asmitā* as our egoic sense of self. Yet, most fundamentally *asmitā* refers to basic “I-am-ness,” the persistent sense of subjectivity or minimal selfhood at the core of our experience. In this sense, the Yoga concept of egoity is similar to views of the minimal self found in the phenomenological tradition, as well as Antonio Damasio’s notion of the core self. For proponents of the minimal self, an experiential sense of the *I* or a basic *for-me-ness* is a necessary structural feature of phenomenal consciousness. This yields an *egological* theory of consciousness. “An *egological* theory,” as Dan Zahavi (2005) explains, “would claim that when I watch a movie by Bergman, I am not only intentionally directed at the *movie*, nor merely aware of the movie being *watched*, I am also aware that it is being watched by *me*, that is, that *I* am *watching* the *movie*. . . . Thus, an *egological* theory would typically claim that it is a conceptual and experiential truth that any episode of experiencing necessarily includes a subject of experience” (p. 99). In a similar vein, Damasio (2003) holds that a core sense of self is a necessary feature of conscious experience and the complex integrated functioning of sentient beings. For him, the basic sense of self arises from the unconscious integration of information about the environment, the organism’s internal milieu, and the dynamic relations between them. This unconscious integration gives rise to a conscious sense of self. Indeed, on Damasio’s view, “without a sense of self and without the feelings that integrate it, such large-scale integration of

information would not be oriented to the problems of life, namely survival and the achievement of well-being” (p. 208).

On my interpretation of the Yoga view, egoity both plays an important psychological role and constitutes an impediment to spiritual liberation. Egoity serves the integrated functioning and survival of the body-mind complex within the larger natural world of *prakṛti*. As Damasio argues, the core self provides *orientation* and *concern*. He writes,

The sense of self introduces, within the mental level of processing, the notion that all the current activities represented in brain and mind pertain to a single organism whose auto-preservation needs are the basic cause of most events currently represented. The sense of self orients the mental planning process toward the satisfaction of those needs. That orientation is only possible because feelings are integral to the cluster of operations that constitutes the sense of self, and because feelings are continuously generating, within the mind, a concern for the organism. (Damasio, 2003, p.208)

Now, of course, classical Indian thinkers such as Patañjali did not base their views of the ego on evolutionary biology or neuroscience. However, Damasio’s reflections on the function of the ego or core self are, I think, congruent with the Yoga and Sāṅkhya views. In his discussion of the *kleśas*, after defining ignorance and egoity, Patañjali goes on to say,

II.7 Attachment stems from [experiences of] happiness.

II.8 Aversion stems from [experiences of] pain.

II.9 Clinging to life affects even the wise; it is an inherent tendency.

II.10 These *kleśas* are subtle; they are destroyed when [the mind] dissolves back into its original matrix.

Primordial ignorance is the field (*kṣetra*) within which the subsequent *kleśas* take root and grow. Ignorance gives rise to egoity, the (ultimately false) identification of the body-mind as self, as the I-am. The emergent ego-self then plays a central role in the psychological economy of the individual. That is, egoity *orients* the individual toward the pursuit of its (felt or perceived) interests. It is within this egoic framework that the individual is motivated to pursue pleasure, avoid pain, and survive. Within the framework of egoity, these are the primary forms of *concern*. In this sense, the ego is a normal psychological function. However, note that in the above passage, the pursuit and experience of pleasure gives rise to *attachment* (*rāga*), while the avoidance or experience of pain gives rise to *aversion* (*dveṣa*). Yet, these are considered maladaptive modes of psychological response. *Rāga* is a form of craving and unhealthy attachment to the object of craving. *Dveṣa* involves dysfunctional forms of fear, anger, or hatred. Clinging to life (*abhivineśā*) involves not just a survival instinct or auto-preservation in Damasio's terms, but also a deeply rooted fear of mortality. Attachment, aversion, and clinging to life, then, are the psychological patterns that characterize our egoic mode of being. And, according to Yoga, these patterns inevitably lead to suffering and spiritual bondage. That is, insofar as we are driven by ignorance, egotism, attachment, aversion, and clinging to life, we are not free.

As mentioned, according to Patañjali, primordial ignorance consists in conflating self and non-self. Egoity, then, is the more particular form of ignorance in which the seer is conflated with the instrumental faculty or power of seeing. He further elaborates:

II.17 The conjunction between the seer and the seen is the cause [of suffering] to be avoided.

II.20 The seer is merely the power of seeing; [however] although pure, he witnesses the images of mind.

II.24 The cause of conjunction is ignorance.

II.25 By the removal of ignorance, conjunction is removed. This is the absolute freedom of the seer.

The seer (*dr̥k*) here refers to *puruṣa*, pure consciousness. This pure light of consciousness is, we might say, refracted through the prism of the body-mind. The source of confusion arises because there is a misidentification between pure consciousness and *buddhi* or intelligence. *Buddhi* refers to the various cognitive capacities of the mind, including the capacity for perception of the world (the “instrumental power of seeing” (*darśana*) mentioned in II.6). In effect, the mind takes itself to be the self when it is in fact the non-self. The true self is the eternal, pure light of consciousness. And yet, in II.20 Patañjali somewhat confusingly calls the seer “merely the power of seeing” (*dr̥ṣi-mātra*). I think the idea here is that, while the mind provides the instrumental capacity to cognitively engage with the natural world, it is pure consciousness that is the true power of seeing because only it allows for *conscious* perception. Without the light of pure witnessing consciousness, all cognitive operations would go on ‘in the dark’—that is, without being phenomenally conscious at all. Mental activity without pure consciousness would be akin to global blindsight. The body-mind might be informationally sensitive to its environment, but there would be nothing it is like for it to cognitively engage the world.

On this view, *puruṣa* as pure consciousness is a form of transcendental subjectivity. It is the condition of the possibility of any phenomenal experience—that is, experience of the various objects of the phenomenal world. Indeed, the Yoga tradition draws a sharp distinction between transcendental consciousness or subjectivity and any actual or possible empirical objects of

consciousness. Consciousness is the pure witnessing or illumination (*prakāśatā*) of experiential objects or contents and is therefore distinct from any such objects. That is, on the Yoga view, pure consciousness, as that which reveals all objects, can never itself be an object. This view of consciousness is in certain respects similar to Jean-Paul Sartre's. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1956) states, "All consciousness, Husserl has shown, is consciousness of something. This means that there is no consciousness that is not a positing of a transcendent object, or if you prefer, that consciousness has no 'content'" (p. 11). Consciousness has no content for Sartre in the sense that any intentional object of consciousness is not itself a part of consciousness. In this sense, in both Yoga and Sartre's phenomenology, consciousness is radically transparent and therefore radically distinct from the world of objects.⁷ And crucially, this claim extends to both external physical objects as well as to internal mental contents. Since thoughts, feelings, images, and so on are actual or possible objects of awareness—they are in this sense empirical phenomena—they too are distinct from consciousness itself. Given this account of pure consciousness, Yoga is committed to the radical elusiveness of the true self. The true self can never be an object of consciousness. Therefore, any mental or physical phenomena one might come to identify as the self is *ipso facto* not the self. Phenomenologically, primordial ignorance is the experiential confusion of transcendental subjectivity (the seer) with its various empirical objects (seen), including the various states and processes of the empirical psyche. And, as Patañjali states, eliminating this confusion yields the "the absolute freedom of the seer."

As discussed in section 2, in contrast with Hindu thinkers like Patañjali, classical Buddhist thinkers were proponents of *anātmavāda*, "the view of no-self." That is, they denied (and vigorously argued against) the existence of the self. While there are complex psychophysical

systems with a *sense* of self, there is not—and never has been—any such *entity* as a self. There are three paradigmatic features of Buddhist anti-realism about the self. First is the rejection of the existence of the self as a substance or enduring entity. There are causally and functionally integrated psychological processes, but there is no self at the center. Second is the denial that the *sense* of self is a necessary and invariant feature of experience. The sense of self is rather a variable construct. Third is the view that the sense of self, no matter how natural it seems, necessarily involves some kind of error, illusion, or distortion. That is, the sense of self leads to mistaking the ontologically selfless flow of experience for the existence of a self. Hence, the anti-realist about the self must develop an ontology and phenomenology of experience—including self-experience⁸—that does not rely on the existence of the self.

Rejecting the existence of the substantial self, the Buddhists argue the existence of a person (*puḍgala*) consists in the existence of the five *skandhas* (bundles or aggregates) organized in the right way. The five *skandhas* are: material form (*rūpa*), affect (*vedanā*), perception and cognition (*saṃjñā*), conditioning and volition (*saṃskāra*), and consciousness (*viññāna*). The *skandhas* are not to be taken as independent things, but instead are seen as interdependent aspects of a causally and functionally integrated psycho-physical (*nāma-rūpa*) system or process (*skandhasantāna*, an “aggregate-stream” or “bundle-continuum”). The dynamic system of the *skandhas* has no enduring self at its center, and the system itself is not an enduring substance. Rather it is a complex process ultimately composed of ephemeral physical and mental events.

On this kind of Buddhist analysis, the existence of the individual person just consists in the existence the right kind of system of sub-personal events. Persons are conventionally real

(*saṃvṛtisat*), but not ultimately, irreducibly real (*paramārthasat*). Mainstream Buddhist views of personal identity are thus reductionist in Derek Parfit's (1984) sense, in that they reject a separately existing self and explain diachronic personal identity in terms of the weaker relation psychological continuity. Moreover, given Buddhist views on rebirth, they are arguably committed to the idea that identity is not what matters in survival. The sense of being a stable self arises from and is sustained by a complex set of impersonal causes and conditions, which are not transparent to the system itself. This sense of self can be useful—though it is ultimately maladaptive according to Buddhist thought—but it functions as a kind of user illusion. The system comes to represent and experience itself as if there were a homuncular, enduring self that is an owner, subject, and agent. Yet, this representation of a self obscures the complex psycho-physical processes that actually drive experience and action.

Now, while Buddhist philosophers argue deftly against the existence of the self on ontological and epistemological grounds, the fundamental motivation for anti-realism about the self is deeper. As discussed above, on the Buddhist analysis, our innate tendencies toward affective and conative distortions such as craving and attachment drive the vicious *samsāric* cycle of frustration, suffering, and alienation. The root cause of these distortions is the innate tendency to reify self (*ātmadr̥ṣṭi*) and world. This deep-seated self-grasping (*ātmagraha*) is thus parallel to Yogic idea of *asmitā* as egoity. Self-grasping anchors a mode of psychological functioning wherein our attempts to attain happiness and avoid suffering are self-defeating. The three poisons of craving, aversion, and delusion are dysfunctional forms of our basic impulses of attraction, aversion, and indifference, on the basis of which we respond to changing circumstances, seeking happiness and avoiding suffering. Because these basic forms of reaction are distorted or

dysfunctional, as long as we are bound to them, our attempts to secure the lasting happiness we desire are doomed to fail.

On the Buddhist account, then, the most fundamental form of cognitive distortion is the sense that one is a fixed, enduring self and the self-centeredness and self-cherishing that goes along with this sense. The path to liberation must involve deconstructing and overcoming the view of the self that is the lynchpin of *samsāra*. The deconstruction of the reified sense of self involves first-, second-, and third-person methods. Third-person methods include contemplating and internalizing philosophical arguments against the existence of the self, recognition of the impermanent and conditioned nature of phenomena, and the analysis of the sentient being into the five *skandhas*. On my interpretation, the function of these third-person methods is to gain insight into the nature of phenomena. One comes to see sentient beings, not as enduring mental subjects, owners, and agents, but as complex conditioned networks of mental and physical processes. Second-person methods of deconstructing the self include cultivating the four immeasurables and using them as antidotes to afflicted or unskillful states. For instance, as discussed in section 3, loving-kindness meditation is used to cultivate interpersonal kindness and as an antidote to feelings or attitudes of aversion or hatred. However, when coupled with the internalized wisdom of selflessness, the meditation can serve as a way to deconstruct any sense of ontological separation between “self” and “other.” First-person methods for overcoming self-grasping include, for example, contemplative methods associated with classical mindfulness.

On the classical Abhidharma view, the cultivation of mindfulness is closely linked to ethical vigilance (*apramāda*), and insight (*vipasyana*) (Dunne 2011). The basis of the first-person

method of mindfulness is the development of attention regulation through the cultivation of *smṛti* (focus or attentional stability) and *samprajanya* (meta-awareness or introspective vigilance). *Smṛti* is the capacity to hold one's attention on an object, such as the breath or bodily sensations. *Samprajanya* is the capacity to monitor the quality of one's focus on the object of attention. Thus, noticing that one's attention has wandered from the object, or that one's attention is dull rather than clear are instances of *samprajanya*. In cultivating the joint operation of *smṛti* and *samprajanya*, the practitioner is supposed to develop a calm, focused mind and the increased level of attention to her mental life is supposed to bring a clearer comprehension of her own mental processes. This leads to the cultivation of *apramāda* (ethical vigilance or heedfulness). Here the increased awareness of one's intentions and positive and negative mental states allows one better to keep her actions of body, speech, and mind in accord with her ethical commitments and spiritual goals. Lastly, one develops penetrating insight (*vipaśyana*) into the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless nature of the phenomena constituting one's mind-body complex (*nāma-rūpa*). That is, one realizes directly that the mental and bodily events that constitute this very stream of experience are i) constantly changing; ii) that grasping after them cannot lead to true happiness and satisfaction; and iii) that the phenomena are not related to a fixed, enduring self. Thus, according to the classical Abhidharma, the cultivation of mindfulness and the related qualities of heedfulness and insight, yield a profound transformation in self-experience, from a sense of being a fixed self to a selfless flow of experience. In this way, the cultivation of mindfulness, virtue, and self-transcendence are deeply intertwined in the Buddhist path.

5. Conclusion

Yoga and Buddhism, as complex integrated philosophical and spiritual systems, are committed to a deep connection between the cultivation of virtue, transcendence of the ego-self, and spiritual liberation. Both traditions place moral discipline and the cultivation of virtues such as non-violence, compassion, and contentment at the foundation of their respective paths. A key aspect of moral cultivation in these schools is the attempt to diminish selfish motivations and the often harmful actions that arise from them. Thus, the moral life involves a move to transcend the narrow interests and concerns of the ego, in favor of a mode of being based on kindness, compassion, and non-attachment. Furthermore, in both traditions, the *samsāric* predicament of humanity is rooted in a fundamentally egoic mode of psychological functioning. This mode of functioning involves maladaptive states such as greed, hatred, and excessive self-concern. This leads to endless cycles of frustration and dissatisfaction (*duḥkha*) wherein our restless craving to meet the needs of the ego-self are fundamentally self-defeating. As the 8th century Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva puts it, “Hoping to escape suffering, it is to suffering that they run. In the desire for happiness, out of delusion, they destroy their own happiness, like an enemy.”

In this view, our only hope to escape this vicious cycle is to radically transcend our false sense of self. Indeed, this idea reflects a core theme in Indian philosophical and spiritual traditions: that human beings suffer a deep-rooted case of mistaken identity and the key to our spiritual freedom is to understand our true nature. In the case of the Hindu traditions such as Yoga and Vedānta, this involves transcending the false ego-self and experientially recognizing the true spiritual self (*ātman* or *puruṣa*). More specifically, in Yoga the practitioner overcomes the false identification of the self with the body-mind, and realizes the primordial purity, joy, and freedom of the self as pure consciousness. The self here is pure transcendental subjectivity, and thus can never truly be

bound by the world of objects. In the case of Buddhism, overcoming mistaken identity involves a recognition that all notions of self are ultimately false constructions. Thus, one transcends the false sense of self and realizes a truly selfless mode being. The great joy and peace of *nirvāṇa* is said to be utterly beyond all constructions of self.

The ultimate forms of spiritual freedom in these traditions seem to be quite remote from our everyday experience. The yogic state of *kaivalya* (independence, aloneness) is often thought to involve the complete separation of *puruṣa* from *prakṛti*.⁹ Likewise final liberation (*parinirvāṇa*) in the Buddhist tradition occurs only after the final death of the body and is generally thought to transcend conceptual understanding. However, both traditions affirm the possibility of spiritual liberation in the midst of embodied existence and life. And the key to these liberated modes of living, I take it, is the transformation from an egoic to a post-egoic mode of psychological functioning. In Yoga, this form of embodied or living liberation is called *jīvanmukti*. The living liberated individual (*jīvanmukta*), through yogic practice, has purified and transformed her body-mind to such an extent that it is no longer an obstacle to her spiritual freedom. Indeed, the properly transformed body-mind is *yoked* to the higher consciousness of the true self and serves as a vehicle for the expression of the qualities of awakening innate to *puruṣa*. In particular, the liberated person manifests the qualities of virtue (*dharma*), knowledge (*jñāna*), dispassion (*vairāgya*), and autonomy (*aiśvarya*) (Whicher 1998).

In early Buddhism, the awakened person, other than the Buddha himself, is called the *arhat* or worthy one. The awakened person has uprooted the unwholesome roots of greed, aversion, and delusion. She therefore is said to experience the great joy that comes from release from these

negative states. The *arhat* is also said to have perfected the four immeasurable virtues, to have achieved penetrating insight into the nature of reality, and to have gained the freedom that comes from mental self-control. The awakened being, then, is characterized by joy (*sukha*), virtue (*śīla*), insight (*prajñā*), and freedom (*vimukti*).

Despite their important philosophical differences, then, the traditions of Yoga and Buddhism share an account of human life as rooted in egoism and prone to suffering, yet through integrated moral, philosophical, and meditative training, capable of transcending all false notions of self and achieving extraordinary levels of happiness, virtue, and freedom.

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² Dating of the *Yoga Sūtras* is uncertain and contested. Proposed dates of composition range from as early as the 3rd century BCE, to as late as the 5th century CE.

³ Unless otherwise specified, I will use consciousness and awareness interchangeably.

⁴ All translations are my own. See Bryant (2009) for the full Sanskrit text, translation, and commentary.

⁵ The following discussion of the four immeasurables draws on the more extensive account of Buddhist virtues in MacKenzie (2018).

⁶ It is interesting to note that Patañjali mentions the four immeasurables as part of yoga. He writes (I.33), "The mind calms as one radiates friendliness toward the pleasant, compassion toward the distressed, sympathetic joy toward the meritorious, and equanimity toward the unmeritorious."

⁷ It is important to note, however, that the Yoga tradition explicitly denies that *all* consciousness involves being directed toward an object. This is because they affirm states of pure consciousness, wherein objectless awareness discloses its own nature. On the Yoga view, when the modifications of mind are stilled, pure awareness abides in its true nature.

⁸ By 'self-experience' here I mean both the various forms of self-consciousness and the sense of self.

⁹ Though see Whicher (2002) for a different and I think more plausible view.