

Lucidity in Inebriety, or Sāṃkhya as a Spiritual Practice

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Abstract. We have sought here, if not to rectify, at least to identify, on the basis of contemporary observations, a particular widespread prejudice, according to which classical Sāṃkhya would not constitute a spiritual practice in its own right, but presents a theoretical basis for the various Indian yogas, beginning with Patañjali's system, up to Indian contemporary teachings. This paper refers to an inconspicuous but genuine Sāṃkhya soteriological practice, which may still be traced in today's India. The author tries to interpret this practice in a contemporary philosophical and psychological language as an experience of cultivating lucidity even in the state of complete intoxication and total absence of self-awareness and self-control. The method of spiritual detachment developed by the Sāṃkhya ascetics consists in gaining in every state of consciousness, inebriety included, the position of a pure witness (Puruṣa) not connected neither cognitively, nor emotionally with the content of his experience, governed by Prakṛti (Nature).

Keywords: Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Indian philosophy, soteriology, spiritual practice, Puruṣa, Prakṛti, inebriety, lucidity, Spirit, Nature, witness

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It has become a habit with historians of Indian philosophy to consider Kapila's Sāṃkhya and Patañjali's Yoga, respectively as the theoretical and the practical parts of one and the same soteriology: Kapila's Sāṃkhya would have produced the main concepts: *puruṣa* (Spirit), *prakṛti* (Nature), *guṇa* (quality), *ahaṃkāra* (ego), etc.¹ on the basis of which Patañjali's Yoga would have developed a number of physical and intellectual disciplinary practices: *citta-vritti-nirodha* (cessation of the mind functioning) leading to interior freedom (*kaivalya*) and, ultimately, to final liberation (*mokṣa*).² In fact, the doctrinal framework of the two systems is the same, with the exception of a few minor details, to the effect that in India they have been always regarded as two complementary "points of view" (*darśana*). But, even apart from this complementarity, the Sāṃkhya – to the extent, modest indeed, in which it has remained alive until our days – has preserved at least some elements of its own soteriological practice.

It is proposed here to suggest that classical Sāṃkhya is not necessarily – or at least not strictly – connected with classical Yoga, inasmuch as it can already function by itself, up to a certain extent, as a full-fledged soteriological practice. And, actually, it seems that even nowadays, especially in northern India, small communities of ascetics are still to be found that – while being comparatively conversant with Patañjali's yogic tradition – do still elaborate their soteriology and their spiritual practice around key Sāṃkhya concepts, just somehow reinterpreted.³ How is this possible?

It is first of all necessary to recall that Sāṃkhya starts from an ultra-negativist conception of the *Puruṣa* or of the Spirit, which in fact denies it any kind of activity, any memory, any imagination,

¹ For more details on Sāṃkhya philosophy, see: Larson, G.-J., Bhattacharya, R.Sh. *Sāṃkhya, A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987.

² For the most inspiring philosophical interpretation ever, see: Eliade, M. *Le Yoga, immortalité et liberté*. Paris: Payot, 2ème éd. revue et augmentée, 1964; for the latest translations and research on the Classical Yoga, see: Angot, M. *Yoga-sūtra et Yoga-bhāṣya* (ed.-trad.). Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2008.

³ The Sāṃkhya meditative and yogic experience in contemporary Hinduism is described and analysed by Knut Jacobson in: Jacobson, K.A. *Yoga in Modern Hinduism. Hariharānanda Āraṇya and Sāṃkhyayoga*. London: Routledge, 2018.

any will, and any sensitivity – be it only perceptual or mental. Every psychological and mental function is being transferred to Nature (Prakṛti) so that the Spirit is being reduced to the role of a simple witness (*sākṣin*) of the Prakṛti's manifestation. We cannot even conceive of it as a pure “cognizing subject” but only as an uncategorizable X, an entity which is not of this world but whose presence in the world must be postulated so that the whole of the manifestation does not sink into the night of unconsciousness. Correlatively, the Sāṃkhya seems to defend a truly materialist, or crypto-materialist, conception of psychic and mental life. The mental organs themselves – that is to say, the sense faculties or *indriya*, the “common sense” or *manas*, the principle of the ego or *ahaṃkāra*, the intellect or *buddhi* – all present themselves as derivative products of primordial Nature (*prakṛti*) in the course of its evolution. Their functioning (*vṛtti*) – including apparently purely intellectual operations and even the most abstract type of reasoning, is being reduced to a chain of subtle material processes, in themselves automatic and blind, which are only made aware in a secondary way, through their insertion into the spiritual “light beam” which arises in the presence of the Puruṣa. The “crux” of the Sāṃkhya doctrine can surely be located here, in this supposed collision between two realities which do not have any common dimension: on the one hand, a pure transcendental Subject, not individualized, not situated in time and space, and on the other, a kind of biological computer, housed in the human organism, manufactured by Nature and supplied by Her with energy. Much more than in the case of Cartesian dualism, one would be justified here to speak, with G. Ryle and the whole Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, of “ghost in the machine”!

Now, taking such elements into account could make it possible – we believe – to put some of the difficulties mentioned above into perspective. We will focus here more particularly on one of these themes of meditation which – it would seem – are still cultivated today by some practitioners, that of “lucidity in inebriety”.

Now, by “inebriety”, “intoxication” or “drunkenness” (*mada*), we mean any momentary or lasting disturbance of consciousness, violent enough to upset the usual course of our thoughts and take away every kind of control over it. In addition to inebriety itself, this definition covers the various forms of intoxication by euphoric

or psychedelic drugs, as well as violent emotions, dementia attacks, and so on. The common denominator of all these experiences is the presence in them of a “mental vertigo” where ideas and images appear, disappear, dissociate or transform in such a way that we have no hold on their whirling, even though it occurs “in us”. However, the Sāṃkhya doctrine does suggest that, even in the deepest intoxication, there must necessarily remain what they call “the onlooker’s position”, an intact zone of consciousness, unaffected – and that it is important above all, for the sake of liberation, to be settled in this position as a pure observer of oneself.

The Sāṃkhya lets this postulate emerge through a regressive approach that can be formulated in the following way: all reality, inner as well as outer, exists and acquires a meaning for us only insofar as we become aware of it. However, whatever the complexity or the intrinsic confusion of the state experienced by us, the look we have on it persists to be the same, that is, simple and uniform. Just as a mirror reflects with unselfish fidelity the azure of the sky, a fire, or a bloody struggle, so does the light of consciousness illuminate without difference the pacified course of thoughts in meditation and their tumultuous flow in anxiety, fever, and delirium. In the very depths of inebriety, the subject is still conscious of his being drunk, and this awareness remains “pure”, it is not itself contaminated by drunkenness. The light of consciousness continues to be motionless while everything that is being picked up by it trembles and convulses. In the vertigo of drunkenness, I can lose all spatial and temporal landmarks, undergo various distortions of my body pattern, forget my name, my social identity, everything that constitutes my person... Nevertheless, as anonymous and helpless as I am, I still remain there, present, in the center of the maelstrom, as the one around whom all things are swirling. And at this moment – without, alas, realizing it in any way whatsoever – I am close to coinciding with my deepest inner reality, the pure witness, the eye of the cyclone of manifestation, the Puruṣa or the Spirit. What then am I missing in terms of cognitive abilities and skills, to achieve this state, and under what conditions may inebriety itself be reshaped into a spiritual exercise?

First of all, one might contest the idea that self-consciousness always maintains itself in inebriety, since it is quite obvious,

on the contrary, that once having reached a certain degree of mental disorganization in drunkenness, etc., the subject loses the very awareness of his or her state, or even denies it and gets easily offended by the reaction of other people. In other circumstances, one would speak quite simply of stupor, of deep torpor, or inability to formulate the slightest judgment. Now, for the Sāṃkhya, this is a pure misunderstanding. Actually, when the doctrine evokes a persisting lucidity, it does not have in view the ability to judge soundly, to express oneself with clarity and precision, but only the steadiness of a simple, indecomposable look, permanently directed towards the mental scene. In fact, the misunderstanding comes from our spontaneous tendency to closely associate consciousness with language, intellectual activity, and efficiency in interpersonal relationships. We gladly disdain, holding it for null and void, any form of consciousness that seems to be reduced to itself, unable to express itself, to reflect, to direct a coordinated and finalized behavior. And this is, of course, the case with inebriety. Nevertheless, when the same doctrine mentions a necessarily subsisting lucidity, it does not necessarily have in view the maintenance of a capacity to communicate adequately, as well as the ability to express oneself with clarity and precision in any situation whatsoever – for instance in drunkenness – but only the inalterability of a mental glance.

Now, it would be a pure misunderstanding of the Sāṃkhya point of view to practically assimilate that “minimal” consciousness to a sort of stupor, inasmuch as this paralysis and existential deprivation of the subject once plagued by drunkenness does not necessarily have only a negative meaning. In fact, it may even represent a chance for spiritual realization. Of course, in order to understand such a paradoxical appreciation, it is necessary to dwell for a moment on the notion of nescience (*avidyā*) or, as they say, “metaphysical ignorance” which plays a vital role in Sāṃkhya, as in practically all soteriological doctrines of classical India.⁴ Basically, nescience is a misunderstanding of oneself. The presupposition common to all the conceptions that have been proposed in ancient India can be stated in this way: man is already all that he is striving

⁴ On the notion of metaphysical nescience see: Hulin, M. *Qu'est-ce que l'ignorance métaphysique (dans la pensée hindoue)? Śāṅkara*. Paris: Vrin, 1994.

to become: free, pure, self-sufficient, immortal, etc., except that he is not aware of that. This fact makes one's perfection only virtual, suspended up to a possible realization, that may never come. Philosophy, then, has the aim of providing the intelligible structure of this situation, leaving to spiritual practice (yoga, asceticism, meditation, etc.) the task of bridging concretely, once and for all, the gap between ideal and reality.

Now, in ordinary experience, such a coincidence of ideal and reality never or almost never occurs. It is rendered virtually impossible by the proliferation of desires, worries, projects, in short, by the multiplicity of intentional threads that connect us to our environment. In the natural attitude, we are anything but witnesses or spectators. Always engaged, always concerned, although, to varying degrees, we are passionately strained towards the outside and towards the future, which is for us that very place where our fate would be decided. However, in intoxication and other forms of experience akin to it, we come to be cut off from the outside, from both physical nature and society. Against our will, we are confined for a time in the insularity of our personal existence because any grip on the world becomes elusive: the senses bring unreliable information on external reality, memory fails, the attempts at reasoning dissolve into anarchic associations of ideas, while motor coordination, necessary for action, is being disturbed.

Nevertheless, the subject overpowered by inebriety can be considered as simultaneously both simplified and purified by it. Stripped of his powers and disconnected from his enterprises, reduced more or less to the essential core of his being – that is to the *Puruṣa* – he is close to coinciding with it/him⁵ and at the same time he is still very far, because the rapprochement was brought about without his knowledge and, in a way, despite himself. It is only the Sāṃkhya philosopher who, thinking about such an experience

⁵ The word “*Puruṣa*” primarily means “man”, “male” not only in ordinary, but also in cosmological sense when *Puruṣa* is considered as male (spiritual) cosmic principle, a being who becomes a sacrificial victim of gods, and whose sacrifice creates all life forms including human being. That's why, even in its most abstract cosmological sense *puruṣa* keeps its underlying sense of masculinity and so would more appropriately be referred to by a masculine pronoun.

afterwards, may claim that very little would have been still required: a step further in the realization and the threshold of the decisive metaphysical discrimination (*viveka*) would have been crossed. The problem is that this very last state is by far the most difficult to accomplish. Inebriety, in fact, while disconnecting us from the world, by depriving us of all reliable means of expression and action, does not rid us at the same time of nescience or metaphysical illusion. Actually, it means that the person, caught up in the inner turmoil of drunkenness and momentarily incapable of intervening in the world, remains nonetheless inwardly turned towards the outer world as towards what he or she still implicitly considers as his or her true homeland.

In other words, he or she clings to his or her old extraversion at the very moment when he or she lacks any possibility to translate it into action. From then on, it is inevitable that such a dramatic self-abandonment will be lived through in the mode of anguish. The phenomenon is particularly clear in certain cases of intoxication by drugs such as mescaline or L.S.D. where the person is but a helpless witness to the dislocation of his or her own mental functions. Emancipation can then be “at your fingertips”, but one is far away from even thinking of it, being submerged by a terror which is contrary to it. To achieve this state, it would be necessary to be able to stop in oneself any resistance, instead of vainly trying to retain what is escaping us anyway...

To this another situation is added, perhaps still more redoubted because of the very nature of it. What would be required to avoid, in fact, is an evoking of the basic principles of Sāṃkhya, namely the purely spiritual essence of Puruṣa and its/his lack of real contact with Prakṛti (Nature). And this evoking should operate “hot”, in a hurry, so that we may be able to verify these principles experimentally, in the very context of mental vertigo. But this presupposes a coordinated mental process, an extremely intense intellectual effort, a very particular focusing of attention – all things the subject, engulfed as he or she is by drunkenness, seems to be by definition utterly incapable of!

Ultimately, the reference to inebriety is conceived as a way for a person to spark a better intuitive understanding of the metaphysical principles of the Sāṃkhya doctrine. It is certain at least, that at

this level of experience, when we suddenly realize that its coherence is collapsing, the original meaning of the concepts of Puruṣa and Prakṛti is dawning up. The latter, in particular, will encompass all kinds of representative contents and mental activities that we usually attribute to the Self. It is because in drunkenness these contents and functions more or less resume their autonomy and appear as objective external processes, “in the third person”, not directly controllable. That’s why the conclusion of the Sāṃkhya thinkers is that intellection itself – and even more so feeling and action – do not really belong to the Puruṣa. From there proceeds their interpretation, so paradoxical at first sight, of mental faculties (manas, buddhi, indriya) as products of Nature’s evolution: products, that are certainly hypercomplex but, in the final analysis, foreign to consciousness, because of their automatic and blind mode of operating. In this, however, there is no trace of “materialism”, inasmuch the Puruṣa – far from being reduced to some epiphenomenon of the neuro-physiological processes – remains indispensable. If he does absolutely nothing – not even “thinking” – he remains nonetheless that silent and invisible witness, without the presence of which all these mental processes would sink into total unconsciousness. And if this Puruṣa, overriding his function of a witness, intends to mingle with concrete life and play therein an active role, it is because Nature (*Prakṛti*), due to metaphysical ignorance, makes him believe that all these processes do belong to him, while, in reality, they remain fundamentally foreign to him. Then, Puruṣa appears as some particular person who acts, who feels, who enjoys, and who suffers. Reciprocally, Nature appears then to him coated with positive or negative qualities: here threatening and there serene, in short, like an imaginary landscape, structured by affective and aesthetic values wherein his or her own desires and fears are being reflected.

It is not excluded, however, that the model of inebriety still plays a role at another level in the spiritual practice of Sāṃkhya. It would seem, indeed, that a certain strategy of metaphysical discrimination, of which we now understand why it was impracticable in the case of intoxication, may regain some efficiency in a neighboring field, that of emotions and passions. For Sāṃkhya, emotions are a privileged manifestation of nescience insofar as they allow us to grasp “in action” this original dissatisfaction by which the subject

leaves himself and gets emotionally invested in seeking for external goods or experiencing love and hatred towards other beings. The emotion then functions as a signal revealing the presence of these emotional investments and their intensity. It springs from abrupt changes in concrete situations: positive or joyful emotions when circumstances make it appear that one will be able to better ensure one's personal integrity through a more effective taking on events and wills of other people; negative emotions of anxiety or sadness otherwise. The resemblance to drunkenness is due to the presence, on both sides, of a certain inner turmoil, but the difference is that here the mechanisms of attention and reflection are only slightly disturbed and remain unaltered in their very functioning. It follows that the method of "self-remembering", impracticable in the case of inebriety itself, can be in some way applied here.

To fully understand the spirit of Sāṃkhya's own strategy, it is important first to clarify what lies behind it in our modern psychological perspective. Our emotions – especially the negative ones, those which most directly remind us of the misery of our condition – are never lived by us through to the end and thus remain fundamentally unknown to us. The reason is that once barely triggered – from a word heard, a simple association of ideas, and so on – they are immediately hindered in their growth by a certain psychic resistance that tends to reduce them to neutrality by lowering their emotional load.

Let us consider, for example, the anxiety caused by the perception of a more or less imminent danger. As soon as this anxiety has arisen, various kinds of mechanisms come into action in order to emphasize those elements of the situation that may appear soothing or reassuring: for instance, a search for possible ways out of the situation, an anticipation in our imagination of a better future, or, last but not least, an act of faith in Divine Providence. All this interferes with anxiety itself, producing a confused and tense experience where the emotion is being experienced while at the same time being internally denied. In a radical break with this attitude, the Sāṃkhya proposes to let emotion be unleashed unhindered, to see how far it can go and thus to determine what, eventually, would remain if once and for all we are out of its reach. From its point of view, it is not only anger that is a "*furor brevis*" but all lively

emotions: negative ones, of course – such as fear, shame, disgust, etc. – but positive ones as well, like pride, enthusiasm, etc. Like an animal that happens to get caught in a trap, the subject struggles against his or her own emotions because he or she unconsciously fears to be carried away without return, never to be able to recover, to regain control of the experience. But these defense mechanisms – even as effective as they are in the short term – keep us in a certain blind normality and consolidate our natural vulnerability.

The path of Sāṃkhya will be reduced here, paradoxically, to a way of abstaining from any defense: not to cling to the “reassuring” but to allow the tide of anxiety to swell and swell to finally realize that it does not have the power to carry us away but comes to die gently on the edge of that beach of pure consciousness where the Puruṣa stands. Then anxiety itself subsides while a certain lucid capacity for intervention is given to us in addition. In the end, it is an experimental verification of the existence and essence of Puruṣa that the Sāṃkhya invites us to do, but this verification necessarily first takes the form of a dive into the unknown of the emotion. In the natural attitude, on the contrary, we always seek to secure our rear bases, and it is this very cautiousness that drives us into daily servitude by sealing our dependence on the course of the world.

Such is – broadly summed up and considered in a somewhat peculiar way – the method of spiritual detachment proposed by the Sāṃkhya philosophers. A decidedly intellectualist way, not subservient to any religious practice. A steep way, too, because entirely dedicated to the discrimination of Nature and Spirit, which appears to obey a “law of all or nothing”. A concrete way, however, and even a progressive one insofar as that training of Sāṃkhya ascetics in gaining in every emotion the position of a witness can be assimilated to a distant preparation to the great and decisive step of metaphysical discrimination (*viveka*).

Lastly, we should not deny its extreme austerity: one proceeds, through a kind of “negative psychology”, towards an entity, the Puruṣa, which at first appears to belong to another dimension as compared to us, ordinary social beings. The impression of a total alienation from the human condition cannot, at least initially, be avoided. Here is the reason why, despite or rather because of its greatness, the Sāṃkhya never attracted more than a minority of followers. This has to do, we believe, with equanimity (*samata*), that total affective

neutrality of the Puruṣa, as the doctrine conceives it in the state of emancipation or absolute ontological solitude (*kaivalya*). It is then, for sure, “beyond suffering”, but we are hardly in a position to imagine this state concretely. Can we then all the time be sincerely longing for it?

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Осознанность в опьянении, или Санкхья как духовная практика

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Аннотация. Автор этой статьи стремился, если не исправить, то хотя бы зафиксировать с учетом современных наблюдений определенное широко распространенное предубеждение, согласно которому классическая санкхья не могла бы составить духовную практику сама по себе, но представляла собой лишь теоретическую основу для различных форм индийской йоги, начиная с системы Патанджали и заканчивая современными индийскими учениями. Статья обращается к неприметной, но подлинной сотериологической практике санкхьи, которая все еще может быть обнаружена в современной Индии. Автор пытается интерпретировать эту практику на современном философско-психологическом языке как опыт культивирования ясности сознания

даже в состоянии полного опьянения и полного отсутствия самосознания и самоконтроля. Метод духовной непривязанности, разработанный аскетами санкхьи, заключается в обретении в каждом эпизоде внутреннего опыта, включая опьянение, состояния чистого свидетеля (Пуруши), не связанного ни когнитивно, ни эмоционально с содержанием его опыта, управляемого Пракрити (Природой).

Ключевые слова: санкхья, йога, индийская философия, сотериология, духовная практика, пуруша, пракрити, опьянение, осознанность, дух, природа, сознание-свидетель

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