

# From *Karma* to *Dharma*: Finding our Way through Indian Philosophy

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## 1) Karma and its fruits

## 2) Framing: Schools & traditions of Indian philosophy

- Traditionally, six schools of Hindu philosophy, in pairs:
  - Sāṃkhya & Yoga (*Enumeration & Discipline*)
  - Mīmāṃsā & Vedānta (*Exegesis & The End of the Veda*)
  - Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika (*Logic & Individuation/Particularity*)
- Buddhist traditions:
  - “Hīnayāna”/“Basic Buddhism” (*The Lesser Vehicle*)
    - Modern: Theravāda (*The Doctrine of the Elders*)
  - Mahāyāna: (*The Greater Vehicle*)
    - Yogācāra (*The Practice of Yoga – not at all a useful description!*)
    - Madhyamaka (*The Middle Way*)
- All of these schools need to explain/address:
  - The basic structure of the world
    - *How is the world put together? What are its basic parts?*
    - *What really (ultimately) exists, and what things are derivative, or even illusory?*
  - Human thought and experience
    - *How does our mental life work?*
    - *How, if at all, does our mental experience relate to anything external?*
  - Where suffering, or the unsatisfactoriness of life, comes from
  - How best, or most effectively, to respond to all of this
    - *How can we escape from suffering?*
    - *How can we act effectively in the world as it really is?*
- Key approaches and components:
  - Looking for permanence or stability, in a constantly shifting world of appearances
  - Agencies that are other than, or greater than, humans: the Gods
    - *At what level(s), if any, do They play a role?*

### 3) Sāṃkhya & Yoga

- Two basic principles (dualism)
  - *Puruṣa* – person
    - (Bryant: self/soul; Miller: spirit)
    - pure awareness
  - *Prakṛti* – matter, stuff
    - (Bryant: primordial matter; Miller: matter)
    - all objects of awareness
- Within matter, three strands (*guṇa*)
  - Lucidity, energy, inertia
  - From the subtle to the gross
- *Yoga Sūtra* I.2: “Yoga is the cessation of the turnings of the mind.”

### 4) Mīmāṃsā & Vedānta

- Many sub-schools of each; less well-connected than the other two pairs.
- Non-dual (Advaita) Vedānta: monism
  - The self (*ātman*) is identical with the ultimate reality (*brahman*)
  - Suffering comes from ignorance.
    - Superimposing qualities (*guṇa* again!) where they do not really exist.
    - Ultimately, *brahman* is devoid of all qualities whatsoever!
- **Key principle: My essential nature cannot change.** If it changed, it would be accidental, not essential.
- *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.7–12 (trans. Olivelle, pp. 171–175)
  - Indra and Virocana, as students of Prajāpati
  - “That is the self; that is the immortal; that is the one free from fear; that is *brahman*.”
    - The body?
      - No. It becomes blind, lame, crippled, and eventually killed.
    - “The one who goes about happily in a dream”?
      - No. It is free from the faults of the body, but “people do in a way kill it and chase after it; it does in a way experience unpleasant things; and in a way it even cries.”
    - “When one is fast asleep, totally collected and serene, and sees no dreams”?
      - No. This looks like complete annihilation; such a self does not even perceive itself as it is.
    - “The one who is aware: ‘Let me smell this’ ... ‘Let me say this’ ... ‘Let me listen to this’ ... ‘Let me think about this’”?
      - Yes. “This very self rejoices as it perceives with his mind, with that divine sight, these objects of desire found in the world of *brahman*.”
- Is *brahman* (a) God?

## 5) Nyāya and Vaiśeṣika

- Basic goal: Save the appearances.
  - Tidy up our ordinary beliefs about the world, while changing as little as possible.
- The structure of the world:
  - Layered/hierarchical
    - Substances and qualities (*guṇa* again!)
    - Among substances, wholes and parts.
    - The self (*ātman*) as one among many kinds of substance.
- Arguments for wholes (over and above their parts):
  - Heaps and wholes; pushing and pulling.
  - Different causal capacities → different things (e.g., thread and cloth)
- Arguments for a real external world:
  - From dreams
  - From perceptual error
- Arguments for a real, substantial self:
  - “Desire, aversion, effort, pleasure, pain, and knowledge” (*Nyāya Sūtra* 1.1.10 and commentaries)
    - Newborn children: special evidence for reincarnation?
  - Recognition
  - Cross-modality: “I touch what I saw.”
- Arguments for Īśvara as an omniscient creator

## 6) Buddhism

- From “no self” to universal impermanence.
- Reductionism:
  - No wholes, only parts
  - No substances, only qualities
  - Nothing extended in time, only moments
- Dependent origination: the fundamental interconnectedness of all phenomena
- Comparisons with the Hindu schools

## 7) Concluding Reflections

- Why do we suffer?
- Who am I, and what happens when I die?
- What about the Gods?
- Ethics and duties (*dharma*)?

## Suggestions for Further Reading

This reading guide is also available on my website, where it may be updated from time to time:  
<https://davidnowakowski.net/indian-philosophy>

### Sāṃkhya & Yoga

- *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom: The Yoga Sutra Attributed to Patanjali*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (Bantam, 1998).
  - There are many, many translations of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*. This one is very accessible, offering a short explanation by the translator after each group of sūtras.
- *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary, with Insights from the Traditional Commentators*, by Edwin F. Bryant (North Point Press, 2009).
  - Where Miller's translation of Patañjali (above) was a nice short introduction, this edition goes deep in depth. Bryant offers many pages of commentary on each and every sūtra, drawing upon the insights of centuries of traditional Sanskrit commentaries (which are frequently quoted). The introduction also provides a very solid overview of the basic philosophical views of Sāṃkhya and Yoga.
- Chapter 8 of Richard King's *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought* (see below) provides another excellent summary of the basic systematic thought of these two schools.

### Nyāya & Vaiśeṣika

- *The Nyāya-sūtra: Selections with Early Commentaries*, translated by Matthew Dasti and Stephen Phillips (Hackett, 2017).
  - The translators do an excellent job of arranging the sūtras according to nine basic philosophical topics. They include extensive passages from three of the most important classical commentaries, along with the sūtras themselves.
- A solid overview for a motivated general reader, written by a master of these philosophical systems, is found in Karl Potter's *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (see below).

### Buddhism

- *The Foundations of Buddhism*, by Rupert Gethin (Oxford, 1998).
  - This is a very solid survey of the development of Buddhist thought in India (and a few references beyond), which balances accessibility with depth and subtlety.
- *In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon*, edited and translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom Publications, 2005).
  - The volume collects important selections from the Pali Canon, the earliest layer of stories and narratives of the historical Buddha's teachings, arranged by topic.
- Śāntideva, *The Bodhicaryāvatāra*, translated by Kate Crosby and Andrew Skilton (Oxford World's Classics, 1995).
  - This is a classic guide to ethics in the Madhyamaka tradition of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, by an 8<sup>th</sup> century scholar-monk. After passionately laying out the Madhyamaka view of suffering, Śāntideva shows how to cultivate the six perfections

(virtues) of the supremely enlightened person. This translation, made directly from the Sanskrit text, is my personal favorite.

- Shantideva, *The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, (Shambhala Classics, 2006).
  - This is an alternative translation of the same text by Śāntideva, made from the classical Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit original. It has the advantage of lining up cleanly with the Dalai Lama's commentary (below).
- Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, *For the Benefit of All Beings: A Commentary on The Way of the Bodhisattva*, translated by the Padmakara Translation Group, (Shambhala Classics, 2009).
  - Not strictly an Indian text, this is a commentary by the current Dalai Lama on Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (cited in two versions above). It's the transcript of teachings given by the Dalai Lama to an American audience, explaining Śāntideva's text chapter by chapter, and doing a wonderful job of showing the relevance of the text for a contemporary audience. Whenever a numbered verse appears, the Dalai Lama is quoting that verse from Śāntideva (although the translation may differ, and in some chapters, the numbering gets off by one place). This is best read alongside Śāntideva's text: one chapter from both books, then the next chapter from both, etc.

### General Overviews

- *Indian Philosophy: An Introduction to Hindu and Buddhist Thought*, by Richard King (Georgetown University Press, 1999).
  - This is hands-down the best introductory textbook to Indian philosophy available in English. **Skip chapters 1 and 2** (which are focused on showing the relevance of Indian philosophy to western academics), and go straight to the meat of the book. Chapters 3 and 4 give basic summaries of the different schools of Hindu and Buddhist philosophy in India. Chapters 5–9 are organized by topic, showing the major contributions of several different schools to each subject.
- *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies*, by Karl H. Potter (Prentice Hall, 1963; variously reprinted).
  - Now long out of print, but available through Montana's academic libraries or on the used book market. Far more than most other American scholars before or since, Potter understood the systematic nature of the Indian philosophical systems, and displays that here in a way that is still unsurpassed. If you want to know what it means to adopt each of these worldviews, and why someone might be motivated to do so, this is the place to look.

### Literary Sources

- *Upaniṣads*, translated by Patrick Olivelle (Oxford World's Classics, 1996).
  - The final portion of the Vedas, dealing in literary form with a wide range of topics, including creation and cosmology, human psychology, and yoga and spiritual practice. They are foundational for the Vedānta school in particular, but a variety of Sāṃkhya and other perspectives appear as well.

- *The Bhagavad-Gita*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (Bantam, 1986).
  - The most well-known of Indian religious and philosophical writings, Sāṃkhya and Vedānta ideas are both on full display for those who are ready to look. While there are literally hundreds of translations, Miller's is particularly clear, balancing accuracy with a poetic touch.
- *The Bhagavad Gītā*, translated by Winthrop Sargeant (SUNY Press, 1993; Excelsior Editions, 2009).
  - For those who want to dive closely into the text, Winthrop Sargeant takes you carefully word by word. Each verse gets its own page. After quoting the text in the original Sanskrit, Sargeant glosses each individual word, before giving a fluid English translation, giving access to the original text even to readers who don't know the language. Clearly a labor of love.
- Ashvaghosha, *Life of the Buddha*, translated by Patrick Olivelle (Clay Sanskrit Library, 2008).
  - A famous Indian poem, telling the life story of the Buddha. Olivelle gives a masterful translation of the first half of the poem (from the Buddha's birth and early life, through his temptation on the night of his enlightenment) based on the surviving Sanskrit text, followed by a summary of the second half, which now survives only in Chinese translation.
- Jayanta Bhatta, *Much Ado About Religion*, translated by Csaba Dezső (Clay Sanskrit Library, 2005).
  - This is a play in four acts, written by a Nyāya philosopher of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. We see a young brahmin scholar debating with members of various other philosophical schools, as the young man himself tries to work out the scope and limits for when we should (or should not) tolerate differences of philosophical doctrine and religious practice.