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# NO-SELF IN SĀṂKHYA: A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT CLASSICAL SĀṂKHYA AND THERAVĀDA BUDDHISM



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## *Introduction*

In a number of standard introductory textbooks on Indian philosophy, classical Sāṁkhya is described as a Hindu philosophical school based on a fundamental dualism between a plurality of selves, or spirits (*puruṣas*) and the material, or phenomenal world (*prakṛti*), whereas Buddhism, on the other hand, is most often described as a system based on the radically different position of “no-self” or selflessness (Sanskrit: *anātman*; Pali: *anattā*).<sup>1</sup> However, such depictions, although not entirely inaccurate, often obscure strong structural homologies between the two systems, which highlight the fundamental duality at the heart of both systems’ ontologies and their inherent pessimism toward conventional reality. Building on some recent innovative studies, this comparison begins with an analysis and reinterpretation of some of the main ideas found in the *Sāṁkhyakārikā*, the foundational text of classical Sāṁkhya composed by Īśvarakṛṣṇa. Next it demonstrates how these new interpretations illuminate new points of contact between classical Sāṁkhya and Theravāda Buddhism as primarily represented by the fifth-century C.E. Pali commentator Buddhaghosa in his classic meditation manual *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*). By comparing these two texts, I aim to illustrate the internal coherence of the Sāṁkhya system, which has all too often functioned as a “straw man” in accounts of Indian philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Also, this comparison sheds some light on the important issue of method within Sāṁkhya by arguing that both systems attempt to restructure experience based on “no-self.” Finally, this comparison helps to locate Theravāda Buddhism firmly within the renouncer ethos and to highlight certain core features of the system, such as its radical denial of worldly life and its ontological dualism, which in recent decades have often (intentionally or unintentionally) been overlooked.<sup>3</sup>

## *Classical Sāṁkhya*

The historical development of Sāṁkhyan philosophy has been discussed in detail in a number of contemporary studies.<sup>4</sup> It is generally accepted in the field that the *Sāṁkhyakārikā* (hereafter *SK*), composed by Īśvarakṛṣṇa sometime before the sixth century C.E., is our sole witness to Sāṁkhya in what has been designated its “classical” phase. K. C. Bhattacharya has made a crucial observation about classical Sāṁkhya in relation to the Sāṁkhya School and its modern interpretations:

Much of Sāṃkhya literature appears to have been lost, and there seems to be no continuity from ancient times up to the age of commentators. . . . The interpretation of all ancient systems requires a constructive effort; but while in the case of some systems where we have a large volume of literature and a continuity of tradition[,] . . . here in Sāṃkhya the construction at many places involves supplying of missing links from one's imagination. It is risky work, but unless one does it one cannot be said to understand Sāṃkhya as a philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

Bhattacharya's view that Sāṃkhya requires imaginative reconstruction inspired Gerald Larson's interpretive attempts to grasp "Sāṃkhya philosophy as a systemic, synchronic, and paradigmatic network of notions in which the various transactions within the larger system come to be exhibited in a more coherent intrasystemic way" (Larson 1987, p. 47). Larson's efforts have produced important insights into this system and are to be commended. In this regard, Īśvarakṛṣṇa's text offers a particular challenge to the interpreter given its terse outline of classical Sāṃkhya in seventy-two verses. Particularly irksome is the fact that some verses appear to contradict each other. However, it is too easy to assume that Īśvarakṛṣṇa contradicts himself and has simply produced an incoherent text. I maintain that any reconstruction of classical Sāṃkhya requires the application of a methodology that adheres to the principle of charity and attempts to provide the most coherent and rationally consistent presentation of the classical system as possible (without overlooking possible irresolvable issues—see below). In the pages that follow, I attempt to further clarify classical Sāṃkhya as presented in the *SK*, with the particular aim of avoiding the common contemporary attribution of "self" to the technical term *puruṣa* as it is used by Īśvarakṛṣṇa. Having done this, I then will be able to illuminate new points of contact between classical Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Buddhism.

First let us investigate what the *SK* has to say about the fundamental Sāṃkhyan duality between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. According to the *SK* (verses 2–3),<sup>6</sup> reality is reducible to two ontological principles: *puruṣa* and *prakṛti*. The word *puruṣa* in Sanskrit literally means "man" or "person," and is the term used in the Vedic myth of the "cosmic person" who was ritually dismembered resulting in the four main Hindu classes (*varṇa*) emerging from his body parts (Monier-Williams 1899, s.v.). However, in the *SK*, *puruṣa* has a specific technical and philosophical meaning. *SK* 3 states that "*puruṣa* is neither a producer nor produced" (*na prakṛtir na vikṛtiḥ puruṣaḥ*). *SK* 11 states that although the *puruṣa* is not manifest (*vyakta*) in experience, it is conscious (*cetana*). *SK* 17 gives the reasons why *puruṣa* must exist:

*Puruṣa* exists due to the multitude of manifest things existing for the sake of another, because there is a power (*adhiṣṭhāna*) that is opposite from the three qualities (*guṇa*), etc., because there exists an enjoyer (*bhoktr*) of experience, and because the manifest world exists for the sake of isolation (*saṃghātāparāthatvāt triguṇādiviparyayād adhiṣṭhānāt / puruṣo' sti bhoktr̥bhāvāt kaivalyārthaṃ pravṛtteś ca //*).<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, *SK* 18 explains why there is a plurality of *puruṣas*: because of the diversity of births, deaths, and faculties; because actions or functions take place at different times; and because of differences in the proportions of the three *guṇas* (see below).

SK 19 asserts that *puruṣa* exists in the condition of being a witness (*sākṣitva*), as isolated (*kaivalya*), as indifferent (*mādhyasthya*), as a spectator (*draṣṭṛtva*), and in a state of inactivity (*akartṛbhāva*).

Contemporary scholars continue to interpret or translate *puruṣa* as “self,” “soul” or “spirit.”<sup>8</sup> However, our understanding of the specific and technical Sāṃkhyan sense of *puruṣa* becomes distorted when contemporary scholars use such terms. Larson (1979, p. 243) provides a more nuanced definition of *puruṣa*:

The self or soul but more precisely the principle, of consciousness, since Sāṃkhya interprets most of the usual functions of the self or soul in terms of the *antaḥkaraṇa* (or “internal organ” made up of intellect, ego and mind) which is a manifestation of *prakṛti*.

A similar understanding of *puruṣa* has led David Burke (1988, p. 24) to claim that “no one term in Sāṃkhya can be adequately translated as ‘soul’.” He states: “The *antaḥkaraṇa* consists of a person’s psychic functions while the *puruṣa* is consciousness” (ibid.), and that “In Sāṃkhya, the *ātman* has been discarded for a pure, unblemished *puruṣa*, which is constantly immobile and passive and which is incapable of transformation and transmigration” (p. 24). Likewise, Holly Grether (2007, p. 230) writes:

The individual self, as a separate unitary entity is not spoken of as such in the *Sāṃkhyakārika*. . . . So does *Puruṣa* translate well as “self” or “spirit”? No, *Puruṣa* cannot be reduced, can’t be “settled.” Any knowledge of *Puruṣa* is a *tanmatra* (evolute) of *prakṛti*. To come to a definitive conclusion and, hence, a translation, of *Puruṣa* is to violate the dualism that is explicit and repeatedly expressed in the text.

Since the *puruṣa* concept is very different from the *ātman* concept as it appears, for instance, in Advaita Vedānta philosophy, I would agree with Burke and Grether that translating the classical conception of *puruṣa* as “soul” or “self” is at best misleading.

Instead of using “self,” Larson often refers to *puruṣa* as “pure consciousness” or “contentless consciousness” (1987, pp. 79–81). In his comparison of Sāṃkhya with Sartre’s existentialism, Larson calls *puruṣa* “simply the fact of individual, impersonal consciousness” (1969, p. 48; also in 1979). In other words, the fact that every individual sentient being (from “Brahma down to a blade of grass” [SK 54]) has conscious experience at all is due to the association (*saṃyoga*) of a *puruṣa* with *prakṛti*. Note that this association, although the result of ignorance (*ajñāna*), is not illusory, but a real connection (see below). Larson (1987, p. 81) summarizes Sāṃkhya’s view of *puruṣa* as follows:

- (a) pure passive presence (*sākṣitva*);
- (b) distinct from the tripartite process (*kaivalya*);
- (c) uninvolved in the transactions of the three *guṇas* except for its passive presence (*mādhyasthya*);
- (d) the foundation for subjectivity or pure consciousness (*draṣṭṛtva*); and
- (e) incapable of activity (*akartṛbhāva*) (SK 19).

This account of *puruṣa* has led Matthew Dasti (2014, p. 124) to refer to Sāṃkhya’s *puruṣa* as “frictionless.” He writes: “Sāṃkhya thinkers thus walk a very fine line, citing the existence of a *puruṣa* or self in order to account for conscious experience, while simultaneously holding that strictly speaking, the self has nothing to do with

the vicissitudes of life as experienced" (ibid.). If we put aside Dasti's use of the term "self" for *puruṣa* here, we can extract the importance of his main point: *puruṣa* lies completely beyond the realm of conditioning and causality. Although its existence is a necessary condition for conscious experience, it lies totally outside the realm of phenomenal reality.

Thus, *puruṣa* may be understood as a metaphysical principle functioning as a "transcendental subject," the necessary condition for conscious experience, which cannot itself be experienced, but nevertheless can be known through inference.<sup>9</sup> Certain terms such as *sākṣitva* and *draṣṭṛtva* suggest this. The Sanskrit suffix *-tva* literally translates as the English suffix "-ness," implying an abstract quality or state. In *SK* 19 it is appended to the words *sākṣin*, meaning a "witness," and *draṣṭṛ*, meaning a "viewer" or "seer." Thus the words *sākṣitva* and *draṣṭṛtva* mean something like "the state or condition of being a witness or seer." This is why Larson uses terms like "the fact of consciousness," "pure presence," or "contentless consciousness." Fundamentally, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* are necessary conditions for subjective experience; *puruṣa* acts as the metaphysical source of consciousness, although it lacks both content and intentionality. *Prakṛti* lies hidden and unmanifested unless in association with a *puruṣa* for which it supplies the content and intentionality to consciousness in the form of intellect (*buddhi*) and the rest of the "existents" (*tattva*) (see below). I think in this regard "transcendental subject" captures the conceptual role that *puruṣa* plays in the *SK*.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as "frictionless" it lies completely beyond the saṃsāric cycle of decay, death, rebirth, and suffering. Thus *puruṣa* also functions as the necessary ontological ground and possibility for ultimate spiritual freedom (*vimokṣa*). Let us now turn our attention to the other side of Sāṃkhya's ontological dyad.

*Prakṛti* literally means "making or placing before or at first" (Monier-Williams 1899, s.v.). It is a term used to indicate the original or natural form or condition of anything, its original or primary substance. According to the *SK*, *prakṛti* is the first principle, the root cause, out of which the world of our experience evolves (*SK* 2–3). It is composed of the *guṇas*: *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. These are not qualities of *prakṛti*, but its constituents. The *guṇas* have different characteristics: *sattva* (being, existence, reality, purity) is luminous; *rajas* (passion, energy) is active; *tamas* (darkness, dullness) is solid. *Prakṛti* has two basic forms: unmanifested (*avyakta*), and manifested (*vyakta*) (*SK* 2, 10). Unmanifested *prakṛti* is uncaused, infinite, pervasive, inactive, singular, and unconscious (*SK* 10). Its imperceptibility is due to its subtle nature, but it exists and may be inferred from the objects around us (*SK* 8). Within unmanifest *prakṛti* the *guṇas* are in a perfect state of equilibrium. *Prakṛti* becomes manifest when it is associated with a particular *puruṣa*. This causes the *guṇas* to fall out of equilibrium and *prakṛti* to become manifested. Manifest *prakṛti* is constituted of the three *guṇas* in various arrangements. Note that unlike the Advaita system, manifest *prakṛti* in Sāṃkhya is real, and its association with a *puruṣa*, although due to ignorance, is a real connection (*saṃyoga*).

Manifest *prakṛti* is caused, finite, non-pervasive, active, plural, composite, and dependent (*SK* 10). When *prakṛti* becomes manifested, it takes the form of twenty-three different *tattvas* or "existents." The first to evolve is the intellect or will (*buddhi*).

From the “evolute” of intellect emerges the ego (*ahaṃkāra*), and then from the ego emerge “the sixteen”: the mind (*manas*), the five sensory capacities (*buddhīndriya*), the five action capacities (*karmēndriya*), and the five “subtle elements” (Larson) or “modes of sensory content” (Burley) (*tanmātras*). From these last five emerge the five “gross elements” (Larson) or “forms of perceptual objects” (Burley) (*bhūta*) (see *SK* 22; Larson 1979, p. 236; Burley 2007, p. 180). These plus *puruṣa* and unmanifested *prakṛti* make up the twenty-five-*tattva* system of classical Sāṃkhya.

Common definitions of *prakṛti* by contemporary exegetes are “matter,” “materiality,” and “nature.” However, Burley (2007) argues that unless these terms are used in a very special way, these definitions are misleading. According to him, *prakṛti* “is the source of both form and matter in the Kantian sense of the terms; that is, it is the source of the raw sensory material and formal categories that give perceptual shape to that material including the form of space” (p. 100). Likewise he defines the *guṇas* as “necessary conditions of manifestation in general” (p. 107). Thus, Burley maintains (2014, p. 55):

On the experience-oriented interpretation that I am proposing, *prakṛti*’s manifestation or “creative emergence” is not the evolution of a series of material entities, from more refined to more coarse or dense; rather, it is the emergence of experience itself, in all its manifold variety, with the categories being more or less abstract principles derived from an analysis of that manifold variety.

Most contemporary scholars have viewed the evolution of the *tattvas* as somehow happening diachronically within time. However, Burley points out that since there was never a time when *puruṣas* or *prakṛti* did not exist (both are said to be eternal), this interpretation makes little sense. Instead, he suggests that the *tattva* schema is best understood as a synchronic analysis of experience representing relations of dependence between the various elements, which together make experience possible (Burley 2007, pp. 108–132). Some traditional and contemporary commentators have tried to understand the evolution of the *tattvas* out of primordial *prakṛti* (often referred to in the *SK* as *pradhāna*, or “the originator”) both in cosmological terms (as an explanation for the origin of the universe) and in individual terms. However, Larson (1979, p. 178) maintains that the *SK* is only concerned with the evolution of the world from the standpoint of an individual consciousness. Burley (2007, pp. 109–111) agrees with Larson that the *SK* is concerned with psychology, not cosmology. On this interpretation, *prakṛti* resides beyond the world of phenomena as their ontological ground or source generating the content that appears to each particular *puruṣa*. In this sense *prakṛti* functions as “transcendental objectivity,” the font or matrix of each individual manifest world, which does not appear in experience, but can be known through inference as a necessary condition for experience to occur (see Burley 2014, p. 52). Thus Sāṃkhya outlines what I call a “radical perspectivism”: experience is uniquely tailored to appear as it does for each particular trans-empirical subject (*puruṣa*). In this way, every sentient being resides in its own world (manifest *prakṛti*); however, the experiential contents of all these countless worlds share the same ontological source (unmanifested *prakṛti*).

Let us now turn to classical Sāṃkhya's view of liberation. *SK 44* clearly states that the means to attain freedom is spiritual knowledge or gnosis (*jñānena cāpavargo*). Gnosis (*jñāna*) is said to be one of the eight dispositions (*bhāva*)<sup>11</sup> of the "subtle body" (*liṅga*) (*SK 40*). In Sāṃkhya the subtle body is called "the thirteenfold instrument" because it consists of thirteen *tattvas* (intellect-will, ego, mind, the five sense capacities, and the five action capacities) (Larson 1979, pp. 189–190). It is thought to transmigrate carrying a being's karma from one lifetime to the next through the force of the dispositions. Specifically, the dispositions reside in the *buddhi* (intellect-will), and gnosis is the power that is able to distinguish the difference between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (*SK 37*). Contrariwise, it is the disposition of ignorance (*ajñāna*) that keeps the subtle body bound. Thus, the connection (*saṃyoga*) between a *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* is ontologically real, but the subsequent emergence of manifest *prakṛti* that then occurs is the result of an epistemological mistake. Here we encounter a difficulty with Sāṃkhyan dualism. Since all of *prakṛti* is unconscious, and *buddhi* is part of *prakṛti*, how does it attain gnosis? However, since *puruṣas* are completely passive witnesses to the phenomenal world, how can they acquire gnosis, since they don't do anything at all? *SK 62* provides a clue to a possible solution to this quandary:

No one therefore, is bound; no one is released, likewise no one transmigrates. (Only) *prakṛti* in her various forms transmigrates, is bound and is released (*tasmān na badhyate 'ddhā na mucyate nā'pi saṃsarati kaścit / saṃsarati badhyate mucyate ca nānāśrayā prakṛtiḥ //*).<sup>12</sup>

This verse implies that *puruṣas* are not really bound. However, *SK 55* states:

There the conscious *puruṣa* acquires the suffering of decay and death. Because of the non-cessation of the subtle body (*liṅga*) there is suffering through its own nature (*tatra jarāmaraṇakṛtaṃ duḥkham prāpnoti cetanaḥ puruṣaḥ / liṅgasyā'vinivṛttes tasmād duḥkham svabhāvena //*).

Why *puruṣa* is modified here with the adjective "conscious" I will address below.<sup>13</sup> Based on this verse, a number of commentators such as Daya Krishna (Burke 1988, p. 21) see *puruṣas* as somehow mistaken, or deluded into thinking that they are bound, when in fact they are not. However, mental activities such as ignorance all belong to the subtle body and therefore *prakṛti*. This is clearly stated in the following two verses:

There is not a subtle body (*liṅga*) without the dispositions (*bhāva*); there are not the dispositions without a subtle body. Thus there arises the twofold creation named "subtle body" and "dispositions" (*na vinā bhāvair liṅgaṃ na vinā liṅgena bhāvanir vṛttiḥ / liṅgākhyo bhāvākhyas tasmād dvividhaḥ pravartate sargaḥ //*). (*SK 52*)

But *prakṛti* alone binds herself<sup>14</sup> by herself with seven forms (*rūpa*); and she alone is released through one form for the sake of *puruṣa* (*rūpaiḥ saptabhir eva tu badhnāty ātmānam ātmanā prakṛtiḥ / sai'va ca puruṣārthaṃ prati vimocayaty ekarūpeṇa //*). (*SK 63*)

Here the obvious interpretation of the “seven forms” and “one form” is that they refer to the eight dispositions (*bhāva*).<sup>15</sup> Gnosis (*jñāna*) would then be the form that releases *prakṛti*, while the other seven (ignorance, passion, dispassion, virtue, vice, power, and impotence) keep her bound.

So what is the content of this gnosis that allows *prakṛti* to release herself? The answer comes in one of the most intriguing and enigmatic verses in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*:

In this way, through the study of the *tattvas*, complete knowledge arises that “I am not; (this) is not mine; I am not (this).” Due to its freedom from error, this gnosis is pure and singular (*evaṃ tattvābhyāsān nā’smi na me nā’ham ity aparīśeṣam / aviparyayād viśud-dhaṃ kevalam utpadyate jñānam //*). (SK 64)

This verse characterizes gnosis as the realization that there is no “I” or “self” to be found anywhere in experience (see below for more on this). But who does this realization belong to? Opinions differ. Perrett (2001, p. 9) claims that it is *puruṣa*: “Liberation, the highest good, occurs when the *puruṣa* recognises its real nature as absolutely distinct from *prakṛti*.” Burley (2004, p. 235) also maintains that it belongs to *puruṣa*:

The soteriological goal of Sāṃkhya and Yoga is achieved when the being that they call the “seer” (*draṣṭṛ*) or “self” (*puruṣa*), which is defined as, among other things, “witnessing” (*sākṣitva*) and “consciousness” (*cetana*), awakens to its non-identity with all phenomena.

In a later publication, Burley (2007, no. 131) reiterates his assertion that *puruṣa* is the possessor of this special knowledge. He states that while this interpretation involves a paradox in that it claims that pure subjectivity can somehow “know” apart from the categories that allow for knowing, the alternative view that it is *buddhi* who attains this gnosis involves the paradox that something unconscious becomes conscious of the fact that it is not conscious! Counter to this claim, Larson (1987, p. 81) writes:

Sāṃkhya philosophy strips consciousness of most of the usual attributes of a mutable subject. Even the discrimination (*viveka*) of its very presence is delegated to the intellect as the negative apprehension that intellect is not contentless consciousness (*nāsmi, na me, nāham ity aparīśeṣam*, SK 64).

Likewise, Burke (1988, p. 20) argues that it is *buddhi* that realizes this knowledge: “It is the *buddhi* (*mahat*) that, through the actions of *ahaṃkāra* and the other twenty-three evolutes, comes to realize that *puruṣa* is entirely separate from *prakṛti*.”<sup>16</sup>

The assertion of Larson and Burke that it is *buddhi* that realizes gnosis appears more consistent with the general philosophical outlook of Sāṃkhya; however, it does not completely resolve the paradox pointed out by Burley that this would mean that an unconscious agent realizes that it is not conscious. The ancient commentators were also aware of this apparent contradiction and attempted to resolve it with the doctrine of reflection (*pratibimba*). Larson (1987, p. 82) writes:



Whether this double negation is construed with a simple theory of reflection (*pratibimba*), whereby consciousness becomes reflected in intellect (thereby occasioning experience)—as in Vācaspati Miśra—or with a double theory of reflection (*anyonyapratibimba*), whereby consciousness becomes reflected in intellect and intellect in turn is reflected back on consciousness—as in Vijñānabhikṣu—makes little difference in terms of the basic epistemological distortion at the root of experience. . . . In either case, however, the crucial point is that intellect is only a surrogate for contentless consciousness, and only proper discrimination (*viveka*) by the intellect is sufficient finally to eliminate the beginningless distortion (*aviveka*).

Burke (1988, p. 22) also points out what he sees as a fundamental distinction in Sāṃkhya between consciousness and awareness:

Consciousness is passive, inert, *sākṣin* (witness), agentless (*puruṣa*). Awareness is active questioning of an agent (*prakṛti*). *Puruṣa* is pure consciousness; and, by its proximity to *buddhi*, *buddhi* appears as though it has consciousness when, in fact, it has only awareness and intelligence.

In defense of this assertion, Burke (*ibid.*) cites the commentary to *Sūtra* 99 of the *Sāṃkhyapraśāngasūtra*, which states: “For the illumination of the *antaḥkaraṇa* [the inner organ] consists merely in the particular conjunction with Consciousness which is eternally shining, that is, in nothing but the reflection of Consciousness produced through a particular conjunction” (*ibid.*; my brackets).

In my mind, it must be *buddhi* that realizes gnosis and disassociates from the phenomenal world. If we are going to assume, as the *SK* states, that *puruṣa* is inactive and always free, then liberation must take place on the side of *prakṛti*. As *prakṛti*’s first “evolute,” *buddhi* is the discriminating faculty of the “inner organ” (*antaḥkaraṇa*) of the subtle body (*liṅga*), and is the possessor of the dispositions (*bhāva*) of gnosis and ignorance. Thus, the only interpretation that makes sense to me is that *SK* 64 presents *buddhi*’s realization that the *tattva* immediately dependent on it—the *ahaṃkāra*, or ego—generates the rest of the phenomenal world. If this is so, it implies that *buddhi*, through a process of radically dissociating from every phenomenon as an “I” or “mine,” is able to redirect its attention away from phenomena and realize that its very existence is dependent on *puruṣa* as source of consciousness. As supporting evidence for this view, the *Sāṃkhyasūtra* (III.75) states: “The attainment of the discrimination (of *puruṣa*) occurs as a result of the meditative analysis (*abhyāsa*) of the fundamental principles through which one progressively abandons (*tyāga*) all contents, saying ‘It is not this,’ ‘It is not that’” (as cited in Larson 1987, p. 81). In this way, *buddhi* reflects back the light of pure consciousness toward its source.

What happens then? *SK* 65 tells us that *puruṣa* sees *prakṛti* (i.e., witnesses all phenomena as emanating from a single unmanifested source, *pradhāna*), who, because her purpose has been completed, returns to inactivity (i.e., becomes unmanifest). *SK* 66 then states that “Even though conjunction (*saṃyoga*) of the two [*puruṣa* and *prakṛti*] still exists, there is not the occasion for creation” (*sati saṃyoge’ pi tayoh prayojanaṃ nāsti sargasya*). This is because the gnosis attained by *buddhi* prevents the other dispositions from exerting any causal force; yet the body of the sage contin-

ues “due to the force of past impressions (*saṃskāras*), like a potter’s wheel” (*tiṣṭhati saṃskāraśāc cakrabhravad dhṛtaśarīraḥ //*) (SK 67).<sup>17</sup> Finally,

With the attainment of the body’s dissolution and the cessation of *pradhāna* due to the fulfillment of her purpose, she attains isolation that is both absolute and endless (*prāpte śarīrabhede caritārthatvāt pradhānavinivṛttau / aikāntikam ātyantikam ubhayaṃ kaivalyam āpnoti //*). (SK 68)<sup>18</sup>

In other words, the *buddhi*’s knowledge of no-self (“not I” and “not mine”) means the game is up: the true and ultimate distinction between *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* has been realized. The Sāṃkhyan sage is now *jīvanmukti*, liberated while living. Upon the death of the body, the entire phenomenal world dissolves into a state of perfect equilibrium in total isolation (*kaivalya*), while *puruṣa* remains alone, eternally free and no longer conscious (*cetana*) of a phenomenal (*vyakta*) world.

### *Sāṃkhya’s Ontological Homology with Theravāda Buddhism*

Although recent scholarship has demonstrated that “Theravāda Buddhism” as a designation for the predominant religion of Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia is a distinctively modern term,<sup>19</sup> Steven Collins (2010, p. 9) continues to employ “Theravāda” to refer to “a collection of social phenomena that have shared and still do share an orientation to the Pali imaginaire as a rhetorical and/or actual standard of orthodoxy.” Collins (p. 4) defines “Pali imaginaire” as “any and every text written (or translated into) Pali.” Moreover, he states (pp. 4–5) that “I think it is a matter of empirical fact that, as far as the grand issues of life, death, suffering, and nirvana are concerned, all texts in Pali show a remarkable consistency, and can be treated as a single whole.” I employ the term “Theravāda” with a similar sense here. However, in order to add precision to the current comparison, I will make particular reference to the views of the fifth-century C.E. Pali commentator Buddhaghosa as found in his classic manual on the Buddhist path, the *Visuddhimagga*, which has been maintained as the standard of Theravāda orthodoxy since its conception.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, because the text was composed roughly around the time of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, using the *Visuddhimagga* allows us also to make comparisons between two roughly contemporaneous South Asian religio-philosophical systems.

In the *Visuddhimagga*, Buddhaghosa presents the Buddhist path as the progressive development of three successive stages consisting first of *sīla* (morality), then *samādhi* (concentration), and concluding with *paññā* (wisdom). For our current comparison the final stage of *paññā* is the most relevant. At *Visuddhimagga* 422, Buddhaghosa states there are many types of *paññā*, but the kind he is particularly interested in is “wisdom that is knowledge (*ñāṇa*) attained through insight associated with a skillful mind” (*kusalacittasampayuttaṃ vipassanāñāṇaṃ paññā*). In other words, Buddhaghosa is concerned with soteriological knowledge or gnosis (*ñāṇa*). Note here that the Pali *ñāṇa* is cognate to the Sanskrit *jñāna* and possesses the same sense of gnosis as it does in the Sāṃkhya system and the other Indian renouncer

traditions in general. Namely, *jñāna* (*ñāṇa*) is liberative knowledge through which release from the painful cycle of rebirth is attained.

Following his discussion of the different types of *paññā*, Buddhaghosa outlines central Theravādin classificatory schemes such as the five aggregates (*khandha*), twelve sense bases (*āyatana*), eighteen elements (*dhātu*), twenty-two faculties (*indriya*), four truths (*sacca*), and dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). Here we see an obvious parallel with the twenty-five-*tattva* scheme found in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. Both Īśvarakṛṣṇa and Buddhaghosa are attempting to provide an exhaustive account of the basic categories of experience (see below for more on this).

For Buddhaghosa (and the Theravāda more generally), the sets of various Buddhist classificatory schemes are meant to point out the fundamental causal and contingent nature of samsāric experience. Fundamental to this analysis of experience are the ideas that all conditioned states are impermanent (*anicca*), no-self (*anattā*), and suffering (*dukkha*). The direct insight (*vipassanā*) into the true nature of conditioned phenomena as characterized by these three “marks” (*lakkaṇa*) leads to the gnosis (*ñāṇa*) that Buddhaghosa calls wisdom (*paññā*). As Bradley S. Clough (2012, p. 62) states:

The type of meditational awareness that produces *paññā* is *vipassanā*, or insight meditation. This is the meditative application of the central Buddhist insight that all phenomenal life and conscious experience are impermanent (*anicca*), empty of substantiality or essence (*anattā*), and intrinsically permeated by dissatisfaction, even suffering (*dukkha*).

Particularly important in the Theravāda system is the realization of no-self (*anattā*). For example, at the conclusion of his discussion of the person as consisting merely of the five aggregates (*khandha*),<sup>21</sup> Buddhaghosa states that there is no person, only materiality (*rūpa*) and mentality (*nāma*).<sup>22</sup> He then makes a number of comparisons first using the traditional example of a chariot as only consisting of its parts, and then stating that likewise “house,” “fist,” “city,” and “tree” are all only conventional designations for a collection of parts. He then concludes:

In just this way, with regard to the aggregates of grasping, “a being, a person,” is only a conventional designation. When each phenomenon is examined in its ultimate sense, there does not exist a being as a real object to grasp as “I am” or as “I.” In the ultimate sense, there is only mere mentality and materiality. From viewing things in this way, seeing (*dassana*) becomes viewing reality as it is.<sup>23</sup>

The soteriological result of this correct view of reality is the ultimate goal of all the renouncer traditions: gnosis leading to final release (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirth or, as Theravāda Buddhists refer to it, *nibbāna* (Sanskrit: *nirvāṇa*).

Rubert Gethin (1998, p. 75) distinguishes three senses of nirvana in Buddhism: (1) nirvana as a particular event (what happens at the moment of enlightenment), (2) nirvana as the content of an experience (what the mind knows at enlightenment), and (3) nirvana as the state or condition enjoyed by buddhas and arhats after death. The attainment of nirvana during life is often said to result from extinguishing the “three fires” of greed, aversion, and delusion. The person who realizes this attainment is

considered a “worthy” (Sanskrit: *arhat*; Pali: *arahant*) or an “awakened one” (*buddha*) and continues to act after this experience but is motivated only by generosity, friendliness, and wisdom (ibid.). When one has attained this state it is called “nirvana with substrate.” In other words, the person is still alive, but free from all human suffering, and assured that the process of rebirth has ended. At death, the enlightened person attains “nirvana without substrate,” and is not reborn in *saṃsāra*. This is often called “final nirvāṇa” or *parinirvāṇa*.

Probably the most exhaustive and authoritative treatment of the Theravāda view of nirvana has been carried out by Steven Collins in two separate monographs on the topic (1998, 2010). In summarizing his central argument in both studies, Collins (2010, p. 16) asserts that nirvana provides a sense of closure in both the systematic and narrative thought of the Theravāda. In systematic thought nirvana makes Buddhist cosmology “a *universe*, in the etymological sense of the term, a single whole” (Collins 2010, p. 16; italics his), and in narrative thought nirvana “provides a sense of ending, both in the Buddhist master-text and in countless actual texts and ritual sequences” (2010, p. 16). For our current comparison, Collins’ treatment of nirvana within the context of Theravāda systematic thought bears further consideration. About it he writes (2010, pp. 16–17):

Systematic thought unifies a field, organizes it into a system, by means of a matrix of categories. In the Buddhist case this matrix centres around the concepts of *saṃkhārā*, conditioned things or events, or *saṃkhata*, (the) conditioned; these are cognitive constructs that include, as their logical contradictory, the idea of *asaṃkhata*, the unconditioned, or nirvana. This complementary opposition is what lies behind the Buddhist claim that life is suffering. But the implicit positing of nirvana as final salvation in this way is not merely an issue of logic; it is essential to the Buddhist project of theodicy.

Although often overlooked by modern proponents of the system, this opposition of the conditioned (*saṃkhata*) and the unconditioned (*asaṃkhata*) in Theravāda is essential for an accurate understanding of the system’s ontology. All the previously mentioned schemes concerning the aggregates, elements, bases, and faculties are means of analyzing the conditioned nature of *saṃsāra*. Because *saṃsāra* is the conditioned realm of process, change, causality, time, and space, it is characterized by impermanence, no-self, and suffering. In order for there to be the possibility of escape from this realm, there must be something unconditioned. Thus, nirvana is what allows for the possibility of release from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. This is what Collins means when he states that “it is essential for the Buddhist project of theodicy.”

In Collins’ analysis (2010, p. 75) he points out two fundamental aporias related to final nirvana: that it is “without the aggregate of consciousness and without any *feeling* of happiness, but to attain it is not to become non-existent, and to accede to the highest bliss.” However, despite these poetic and evocative contradictions, the tradition is adamant that nirvana “exists.” In other words, the Theravāda tradition asserts that nirvana has ontological status as a “real existent” (*atthi-dhamma*) (p. 47). Collins (p. 54) points out three main arguments used in Pali sources to defend the real existence of nirvana: (1) nirvana exists as the one and only unconditioned “Existent”

in opposition to all conditioned “Existents”; (2) nirvana is not merely the absence of the aggregates or the passions (hatred, greed, and illusion)—it is not mere absence, but exists separately; and (3) nirvana can be an object of knowledge on the path<sup>24</sup> as an actual reality with “individual nature” (*sabhāva*), and is not merely a concept, or object of the mind.

Buddhaghosa’s discussion of nirvana in the *Visuddhimagga* (*Visuddhimagga* 557–561; Ñāṇamoli 1991, pp. 514–517) supports Collins’ assertions about the importance of nirvana’s ontological status for the Theravāda tradition. Here Buddhaghosa’s text takes the form of questions and answers about *nibbāna*. Ñāṇamoli summarizes as follows (Ñāṇamoli 1991, p. 825 n. 18):

This discussion falls under three headings: questions 1 to 4 refute the assertion that nibbana is mythical and non-existent; questions 5 to 7 refute the assertion that nibbana is “mere destruction”. . . ; the remaining questions deal with the proof that only nibbana . . . is permanent and uncreated.

Buddhaghosa concludes his discussion with the following:

Because it can be arrived at by distinction of knowledge that succeeds through untiring perseverance, and because it is the word of the Omniscient One, nibbana is not non-existent as regards individual essence in the ultimate sense; for it said, “Bhikkhus, there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, and unformed” (Iti. 37; Ud. 80). (Ñāṇamoli 1991, p. 517)

Here Buddhaghosa cites as scriptural evidence a passage found twice in the Pali Canon: in the *Itivuttaka* (37) and the *Udāna* (80). In the *Udāna* (80–81) this is the third of four famous “Spirited Utterances” made by the Buddha in relation to nirvana. Steven Collins translates it as follows:

There exists, monks, that [no substantive is used] in which there is no birth, where nothing has come into existence, where nothing has been made, where there is nothing conditioned. If that in which there is no birth [etc.] did not exist, no escape here from what is [or: for one who is] born, become, made, conditioned would be known (Collins 1998, p. 167; brackets his).

This passage clearly asserts that the unconditioned nirvana “exists” and that its existence is required to allow for the possibility of escape from the conditioned realm of *saṃsāra*.

We are now in a position to summarize important ontological homologies between the Sāṃkhya and Theravāda systems. Once we discard the term “self” as a misleading translation of *puruṣa*, we see that *puruṣas* play an analogous role in Sāṃkhya to *nibbāna* (nirvana) in the Theravāda system. Both systems are fundamentally dualistic and assert an unconditioned reality (*puruṣa*, *nibbāna*) beyond the realm of conditionality (*prakṛti*, *saṃsāra*). Moreover, in both systems the unconditioned is “frictionless,” eternal, unchanging, beyond space, time, and causality, and allows for the possibility of escape from the conditioned realm. Although contemporary commentators and practitioners of Theravāda tend to psychologize Buddhism

and downplay or ignore this radical dualism, by comparing Buddhaghosa's Theravādin orthodoxy to classical Sāṃkhya, we see the central role played by this ontological dualism in Theravāda's soteriological project.

Both systems also employ numeric schemas—the twenty-five existents (*tattva*) of Sāṃkhya, and the Theravāda classification of phenomena (*dhamma*) into five aggregates (*khandha*), twelve sense bases (*āyatana*), eighteen elements (*dhātu*), et cetera—in order to provide an exhaustive list of the conditions necessary for any experience to occur. By providing exhaustive “maps” (Potter 1991, p. 53) of experience, both systems delimit the conditioned realm, and detail its basic characteristics including the mechanisms responsible for karma, rebirth, suffering, and gnosis.<sup>25</sup> Crucial to the soteriological projects of both Īśvarakṛṣṇa and Buddhaghosa is the demonstration that nowhere in the realm of conditionality is a “self” found that one can identify with as “I,” “me,” or “mine.” By comparing Sāṃkhya and Theravāda this way we avoid the simplistic dichotomy of the systems as one of “self” (*puruṣa*) versus “no-self” (*anattā*), and clearly see the ontological dualism at the heart of both systems. Moreover, this ontological homology implies a methodological homology: dissociation from the conditioned realm of phenomena as “me” or “mine.” Let us now take a closer look at this approach to liberation as found in these religious philosophies.

### *Methodological Homology: The Philosophical Perception of No-Self*

A much debated issue in the secondary literature concerning Sāṃkhya is its relationship to the Classical Yoga of Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*.<sup>26</sup> One common view is that both systems share the same metaphysics, but use different methods in order to attain liberation. While a straightforward dichotomy between Sāṃkhyan “rationalism” versus Yoga's “mysticism” is facile, classical Yoga does appear to emphasize meditative concentration, while Sāṃkhya stresses analytical investigation. However, this approach goes beyond mere rationalism. In this regard, a comparison of Sāṃkhya's use of “no-self” with Theravāda Buddhism is useful in clarifying Sāṃkhya's method as a form of trained “philosophical perception.”

Both classical Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Buddhism maintain that liberation is attained through recognizing all aspects of phenomenal reality as lacking a “self.” We may understand this recognition as a type of philosophical perception. In an innovative study, Eviatar Shulman makes the provocative claim that “philosophical analysis was used by them [early Buddhists] very differently than the way it most commonly functions today” (Shulman 2014, p. 1; my brackets). He continues (*ibid.*):

For them, philosophical analysis was meant to change the very structure of perception; the most meaningful and valued moments of meditation, those in which liberation took place, were composed of direct perceptions of embodied philosophical understandings. These were, in fact, philosophical perceptions, not philosophical understandings.

Shulman argues based on Pali sources that early Buddhist philosophy was primarily focused on explaining human subjectivity in relation to conscious experience and mental events, and much less concerned about the external world or abstract notions

of existence. However, this is not to say that early Buddhists were not concerned with metaphysics. Shulman points out that liberation from the cycle of rebirth, the primary goal of Buddhism, is a profoundly metaphysical notion. Thus, early Buddhism seeks “to remedy a metaphysical illness by psychological means” (p. 62). In relation to these observations, Shulman (p. 77) maintains that the Buddhist notion of no-self (*anattā*) was “essentially an approach to human experience, which is implemented in the mind in real time as part of the path of liberation. The theoretical aspect of this doctrine is secondary and derives from the primary practical significance.”

Shulman’s approach to early Buddhism highlights an important aspect of Indian philosophy in general. Indian philosophy was always meant to be a *lived philosophy* or a praxis leading to liberation from suffering. Thus, the various Indian renouncer traditions are called “views” (*darśana*, cognate to the Pali *dassana* mentioned above), and each to some extent attempts to internalize their philosophical understandings in order to “see” the truths propounded by their particular system. Otherwise, such philosophy would remain speculation and be unable to transform the person into a liberated being.

I maintain that this understanding of philosophical perception continued to be important for both Theravāda Buddhists and adherents of Sāṃkhya, particularly with reference to a “direct seeing” of the truth of no-self. That philosophical perception (in Shulman’s sense) may also have been central to classical Sāṃkhya is strongly suggested by Burley’s (2014, p. 57) interpretation of Sāṃkhya’s system of categories:

[T]hey can be understood as the result of a method that involves both rigorous attention to the structure of experience and a form of philosophising analogous to Kantian transcendental reflection. When understood in this way, the relevance of Sāṃkhya’s system of categories to its soteriological aspiration is able to emerge.

Recall Īśvarakṛṣṇa’s statement, “through the study of the *tattvas*, complete knowledge arises that ‘I am not; (this) is not mine; I am not (this).’ Due to its freedom from error, this gnosis is pure and singular” (SK 64). We may now juxtapose this statement with Buddhaghosa’s cited above: “When each phenomenon is examined in its ultimate sense, there does not exist a being as a real object to grasp as ‘I am’ or as ‘I.’ . . . From viewing things in this way, seeing (*dassana*) becomes viewing reality as it is” (*Visud-dhimagga* 673).

Here we witness the core message of both systems: the realization of no-self leads to liberation. In Sāṃkhya, *buddhi* realizes no-self, and therefore liberation takes place as the result of changes within the conditioned realm of *prakṛti*. In Theravāda Buddhism, the mind is able to perceive nirvana as an object of perception. Quoting *Milinda-pañha* 270, Collins writes: “‘Nirvana exists. . . . [I]t can be known by the mind’ (that is, it can be the object of the mental sense-base)” (1998, p. 164; his parentheses). It seems likely that this ability of the mind would be due to its faculty of “will” (*cetanā*). About this term Heim (2013, p. 80) writes: “*cetanā* is usually linked to *saṅkhāra*, our constructive activity in the world through which our minds generate our experience. As such, *cetanā* works with and arranges our psychological factors, motivations, and feelings to create all of our experience in *saṃsāra*.” It seems

that *cetanā* in Theravāda Buddhism plays an analogous role to *buddhi* in classical Sāṃkhya. Both are faculties that need to be appropriately developed in order to perceive no-self, realize gnosis, and attain liberation. Thus the Sāṃkhyan system is only rationalistic in part; the cultivation of philosophical perception, however, appears to exceed the limits of rationality to become a form of direct intuitive perception.

### *Some Conceptual Differences*

While I argue here that there are striking ontological and methodological homologies between classical Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Buddhism, I should also mention that the two are, nevertheless, distinct systems with important differences. For example, Theravāda Buddhists maintain that there is no consciousness (*viññāṇa*) in final nirvana, while Sāṃkhya asserts that *puruṣa* is pure consciousness. However, let us consider this difference in more detail. Recall how *puruṣa* has been understood by some modern commentators as “pure” or “contentless” consciousness. I think this makes sense with regard to it being a passive witness to *prakṛti*, but once *prakṛti* has returned to an unmanifest state, how much sense does it make to speak of *puruṣa* as conscious when it is not conscious of anything? I think this is why *SK* 55 qualifies the *puruṣa* that is said to “suffer decay and death” as the “conscious” (*cetanā*) *puruṣa*. *Puruṣa* is “conscious” as long as *prakṛti* remains manifest through the subtle body, and the *buddhi* reflects back the pure light of this consciousness. However, once *prakṛti* becomes inactive and unmanifested, it becomes meaningless to call *puruṣa* “conscious,” because it is not conscious of any content. In keeping with Sāṃkhya’s use of light imagery, we may say that pure consciousness without any content is like a self-luminous void. Larson (1979, p. 199) makes this point when he states, “the *puruṣa* is nothing, or the presence of nothingness in the world. It is a kind of emptiness at the heart of the world and man, but it is a nothingness or emptiness which reveals being or the world.” Thus, this distinction between the conscious *puruṣa* and the non-conscious nirvana does not significantly dilute the functional homology between *puruṣa* and nirvana. Both are said to “exist” as unconditioned states beyond time, space, and causality, while neither possess any phenomenological content.

Another important difference is the singularity of nirvana in Theravāda Buddhism and the multiplicity of *puruṣas* in Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya asserts the reality of multiple *puruṣas* in order to account for both the ontological possibility of liberation and the individual differences among beings (such as different kinds of karma, transmigration, subjective perspective, and individual liberation). Thus, for example, Sāṃkhya argues that if there were only one *puruṣa*, then the liberation of one would lead to the liberation of all (Mahalingam 1997, p. 163). In this way, the system attempts to ground personal identity in a metaphysical and transcendent reality beyond the phenomenal or egoic “self” (*ahaṃkāra*). Buddhists, on the other hand, possess no such ontological ground for individuality, and claim that the empirical self is merely an aggregation of mental and physical forces. Any notion of individuality outside this aggregation is maintained to be a delusion.<sup>27</sup> This Buddhist stance, however, is vulnerable to the problem of accounting for individual differences within *saṃsāra*. Thus,



for example, if there are no individuals, only causal streams of associated aggregates, how do Theravādins distinguish between one stream and another?<sup>28</sup>

Theravādins resort to process metaphors such as the relationship between a tree and its fruit or a lamp and its flame to account for personal continuity within one lifetime and among past and future lives.<sup>29</sup> However, one could ask: if the whole world is on fire,<sup>30</sup> how would Buddhists distinguish where one flame begins and another one ends? For example, a Sāṃkhyan could ask the Buddhist, “If there are no individuals in *saṃsāra*, at Gautama Buddha’s final nirvana, why weren’t all sentient beings nirvanized?” I don’t think this is an easy question for the Buddhist to answer without begging the question—in other words, without assuming some underlying individual identity (required to account for different spiritual attainments) before going on to deny it. Even if persons are mere causal nexuses, certainly some criterion is needed to distinguish one nexus from the next. The strong Buddhist argument stated by Buddhaghosa is that from the standpoint of ultimate truth there are no persons, only mentality (*nāma*) and materiality (*rūpa*).

Materiality in its most basic form is defined by Buddhaghosa as the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind, which are characterized by solidity, fluidity, heat, and motion.<sup>31</sup> Thus matter here (consistent with Shulman’s study of early Buddhism) is primarily about the subjective experience of these characteristics and not about an objective reality. In this sense, matter as subjectively experienced by a conscious being cannot function on its own as an external criterion for establishing the boundaries between discrete bundles of aggregates. In the same way that currents and ocean are, ontologically speaking, both “water” and can only be distinguished from each other on the conceptual level, individuals and *saṃsāra* both are “the conditioned realm,” and therefore, in the Buddhist case, where one sentient being ends and another sentient being begins must also only be conceptual (i.e., a “conventional truth”) and not a true ontological distinction. This means, paradoxically, that no person experiences nirvana, because there are no persons; likewise, no person suffers, since persons are ultimately not real.

As further criticism, a Sāṃkhyan could argue that since only individuals in Buddhism escape *saṃsāra*, there must be as many nirvanas as there are individual sentient beings. Conversely, since all *puruṣas* have exactly the same qualities and function exactly the same way, a Buddhist could argue that there is no real difference to distinguish them. Therefore, the unconditioned must be singular, that is, like nirvana. Here we see that the conceptions of the unconditioned in both systems differ, but play similar soteriological roles—they provide an ontological ground for escape from the world of suffering. However, the systems differ with regard to their accounts of individual identity and the singularity or plurality of the unconditioned. To my mind, neither system appears *a priori* more logically coherent than the other; nevertheless, when pressed, both systems reveal certain unresolvable contradictions.

### Conclusions

In summary, building on some recent innovative scholarship, I argue here that the conceptual and soteriological universes of classical Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Bud-

dhism may be much closer together than previously realized. Both systems tell a story about an eternal cycle of repeated birth and death that is characterized by suffering. While not denying the phenomenal world's reality, both maintain another reality beyond time, space, causality, and change—an unconditioned state. Thus, both systems possess dualistic ontologies. Functionally, we may view the concepts of *puruṣa* and nirvana as the “full stops” or “periods” at the end of an individual's saṃsāric story.<sup>32</sup> They are arrows pointing beyond the world of experience.<sup>33</sup> Through a radical process of disassociating from every phenomenon as “I,” “me,” or “mine,” both systems deny the ultimate value of the world, and seek complete detachment from all things worldly.

By comparing classical Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Buddhism in this manner we highlight the ontological and methodological homologies between the two systems. This approach allows us to get past the simplistic “self” versus “no-self” oppositional model often employed in standard introductions, and provides insight into the methodological deployment of “no-self” in classical Sāṃkhya. Additionally, comparing Sāṃkhya to Theravāda Buddhism helps clarify the internal coherence and soteriological method of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*. This comparison also demonstrates the centrality of Buddhaghosa's ontological dualism for Theravādin orthodoxy, a fact that tends to be overlooked by some modernist practitioners and apologists who wish to emphasize the “this worldly” benefits of Buddhism.

From a philosophical standpoint, one might question the rationality of asserting the existence of a reality beyond all experience. Since such a state could not be predicated by anything in experience, one may be tempted to refer to it as Larson characterizes *puruṣa*—as nothingness. Such an attribution may suggest that these systems are nihilistic. This was certainly Nietzsche's assessment when he disparagingly summed up the ascetic impulse as “man would sooner have the void for his purpose than be void of purpose” (Nietzsche 1956, p. 299). This statement highlights the fact that the validity of the renouncer traditions hinges on the belief that a trans-empirical reality lies beyond the saṃsāric realm. The pessimism toward worldly life at the heart of Sāṃkhya and Theravāda Buddhism requires the unconditioned in order to avoid complete despair in the face of worldly suffering. It is this unconditioned realm that allows for the possibility of escape; without it, the systems are, as Nietzsche claimed, nihilistic. Empirically minded moderns might find such ontological dualism disagreeable. However, to ignore, overlook, or downplay these systems' pessimistic assessment of conditioned existence and their assertion of the soteriological necessity of the unconditioned is to do violence to the fundamental tenets of both religious philosophies.

## Notes

1 – E.g., see Hirianna 1995, King 1999, Hamilton 2001, and Koller 2012.

2 – E.g., see Larson 1979, pp. 209–239, where Larson reconstructs a possible Sāṃkhyan response to Śaṅkara's critique of the system and points out (pp. 209–210) that a number of “modern critical scholars” use Śaṅkara's critique to

criticize Sāṃkhya. Part of the problem is doubtlessly historical: there are no records that preserve a detailed Sāṃkhyan response to Śaṅkara's monism. Another likely reason for this attack on Sāṃkhya is that dualism has fallen out of favor among many modern philosophers and proponents of neo-Hinduism, which is predominantly monistic in orientation.

- 3 – Modern Buddhists often emphasize the “this worldly” benefits of Buddhism and downplay the tradition's original radical dualism and pessimism toward conventional reality. For a good account of Buddhist modernism and how it has reimagined the Buddhist tradition, see McMahan 2008. For a specific example of how the American Insight Meditation movement, which grew out of the Theravāda tradition, has completely moved away from the world-renouncing aspects of the tradition, see Gleig 2013. This worldly orientation of modern Buddhism tends to “psychologize” Buddhist thought and ignore the essential opposition and duality between nirvana as unconditioned and *saṃsāra* as conditioned.
- 4 – For a useful summary, see Larson 1979.
- 5 – As cited in Larson 1979, p. 67; see also, Larson 1987, p. 44.
- 6 – Hereafter references to the *SK* are by verse number.
- 7 – Following Larson's text, I have corrected “*adiṣṭhānāt*” in Burley's text, which seems an obvious mistake.
- 8 – For example, see Bryant 2014, and Dasti 2014.
- 9 – Here I am indebted to Burley's (2014, pp. 56–71) discussion of Kant in relation to Sāṃkhya and Yoga. I am using the term “transcendental” here to mean something that is trans-empirical, but nevertheless can be inferred from experience as a necessary condition for experience to occur. Since in Sāṃkhya *puruṣa* as pure subject can never be experienced as an object, but nevertheless can be known through inference, the term seems appropriate. This may be contrasted with Kant's use of the term “transcendent,” which refers to something beyond experience or knowledge. Likewise, *prakṛti* may be viewed as the transcendental source of objects (see below; see also, Burley 2014, pp. 70–71).
- 10 – See Burley (2014, p. 52). See also Marzenna Jakubczak (2008, p. 241), who refers to *puruṣa* as the “transcendental aspect of subjectivity.”
- 11 – According to the *SK*, the eight dispositions are four sets of binary opposites: (1) virtue (*dharma*) and vice (*adharma*), (2) knowledge (*jñāna*) and ignorance (*ajñāna*), (3) dispassion (*virāga*) and passion (*rāga*), (4) power (*aiśvarya*) and impotence (*anaiśvarya*).
- 12 – Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine. The text of the *SK* is taken from Burley 2007.
- 13 – See *SK* 55, where *puruṣa* is called *cetanā*, “conscious.” Larson and Burley both interpret *cetanā* as “consciousness.” But I think that here the more likely (and

common) reading is adjectival—“the conscious *puruṣa* obtains suffering created by death and decay”—that is, the *puruṣa* in association with a *liṅga*.

- 14 – In its metaphorical language, Sāṃkhya conceives of *puruṣa* as male and *prakṛti* as female; hence the use of masculine and feminine pronouns when referring to them.
- 15 – In an endnote (2007, p. 204 n. 25) Burley notes that the forms (*rūpa*) mentioned here are often thought of as the *bhāvas*. However, he suggests that they may refer to the *tattvas* divided into seven categories (unmanifest *prakṛti*, *buddhi*, *ahaṃkāra*, *buddhīndriyas*, *karmendriyas*, *tanmātras*, *bhūtas*). Given the context, I find the *bhāvas* interpretation more convincing.
- 16 – See also the *Sāṃkhyavṛtti* (Larson and Bhattacharya 1987, p. 189).
- 17 – Here I am using Larson’s edition (1979, p. 275). Burley (2007, p. 178) prints “*tiṣṭati*,” which is likely a misprint for *tiṣṭhati*. Thus, similar to Theravāda Buddhism there are two stages of liberation: while living, and after death. Compare the Theravāda notions “nirvana with substrate” and “without substrate.” See also Collins’ (1982, p. 207) interpretation of *abhisamkhāra-viññāṇa* as either constructive consciousness or constructed consciousness.
- 18 – Both Larson and Burley add a bracketed “[*puruṣa*]” to this verse. I follow Burke (1988, p. 27) here, who maintains that this insertion is unwarranted. Following Burke, I believe the verse refers to *prakṛti* attaining isolation from *puruṣa* by returning to her unmanifested (*avyakta*) state.
- 19 – See, e.g., Rupert Gethin 2012.
- 20 – See, e.g., Clough 2012, pp. 55–56:
- {A} great exegete from the fifth century c.e., Buddhaghosa, was able to impose a commentarial and interpretive structure on the tradition that has rarely been diverged from or questioned. Taking the many strands of the Buddhist teachings and traditions of his time, both written and oral, Buddhaghosa, through patient and methodical scholarship, was able to weave them all together to produce a uniform system of thought and practice that became the standard Theravāda orientation for interpreting the Buddha’s teachings. He accomplished this by coordinating, collating, translating, and editing the vast, imposing body of the Theravāda canon.
- 21 – These are materiality (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception-cognition (*saññā*), karmic formations (*saṅkhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*).
- 22 – *Nāma* here is used to represent the other four mental aggregates.
- 23 – *evam evaṃ pañcasu upādānakkhandhesu sati “satto, puggalo” ti vohāramattam hoti, paramatthato ekekasmim dhamme upaparikkhiyamāne “asmīti vā ahanti vā” ti gāhassa vatthubhūto satto nāma natthi. Paramatthato pana nāmarūpamatameva atthīti. Evaṃ passato hi dassanaṃ yathābhūtaḍassanaṃ nāma hoti (Visuddhimagga 673; see also Ñāṇamoli 1991, p. 613).*
- 24 – E.g., *Milinda-pañha* 270 states, “Nirvana exists. . . . [I]t can be known by the mind” (Collins 1998, p. 164).

25 – That both Buddhist and Sāṃkhyan schemas are primarily about experience is suggested by Burley’s (2014, p. 55) statement:

On the experience-oriented interpretation that I am proposing, *prakṛti*’s manifestation or “creative emergence” . . . is the emergence of experience itself, in all its manifold variety, with the categories being more or less abstract principles derived from an analysis of that manifold variety. . . . [S]uch an interpretation gains credibility from its close affinity with how the *bhūtas*, or *mahābhūtas*, are commonly understood by interpreters of certain other traditions, such as Abhidharma Buddhism.

26 – For a useful summary, see Burley 2007, pp. 36–55.

27 – Collins (1982, p. 102), in contrasting Sāṃkhya and Buddhism, states: “Buddhism, contrastingly, sees any use of the concept of individuality beyond the ‘self-expression’ of *asmi-māna* and *ahaṃkāra* as [a] pointlessly speculative view, which is a product of the mundane conditioning factors of craving and ignorance.” This statement echoes the sentiment expressed by Buddhaghosa (see note 23, above) that such terms as “being” (*satto*) and “person” (*puggalo*) are merely conventional designations.

28 – This criticism echoes Kant’s critique of Hume, who asserts a view very similar to the Buddhist position. According to Hume, we are merely bundles of perception with no underlying core identity. Kant, however, maintained that in order to distinguish one bundle of perception from another, some form of identity must be presupposed (see Azeri 2010, p. 271). For some comparative studies of Hume and Buddhism, see Giles 1993 and Long 2012.

29 – These process models are meant to account for personal continuity in this life and karmic continuity between lives. A standard claim in this regard is that the person is “neither the same nor different” (*na ca so na ca añño*) as a person from a previous life (Collins 1982, p. 186).

30 – See Collins 1982, p. 187.

31 – For a translation, see Ñāṇamoli 1991, XI, par. 87. For more on the Buddhist analysis of matter, see Karunadasa 1967.

32 – Collins uses this analogy for nirvana. See, e.g., Collins 2010, p. 20.

33 – Collins (1982, p. 83) uses the term “direction arrow” to refer to the notion of nirvana.

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