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Seeing Reality: The Darshanas

by
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“There must be no barriers for freedom of inquiry. There is no place for dogma in science. The scientist is free, and must be free to ask any question, to doubt any assertion, to seek for any evidence, to correct any errors”

J. Robert Oppenheimer

Darshana simply means seeing. In fact Hindus often say they are on their way for a darshan (or darshana) when they are visiting a temple. The implication is to “see” god in the deity they are about to worship. This word is also commonly used when they go see a holy person, or a village elder – meaning respectful visit. But Darshana as a philosophy is also “seeing” but at a deeper level. This is seeing with a capital S. Seeing what? Seeing reality. Six different approaches to “see” were in vogue and were expressed as crisp and concise aphorisms called sutras.

The six schools of Darshana and the associated sages are:

- Nyaya Sutras of Gautama
- Viasheshika Sutras of Kanada
- Samkhya Sutras of Kapila
- Yoga Sutras of Patanjali
- Mimasa Sutras of Jaimini
- Vedanta Sutras of Badarayana

These sages were not scientists and yet their studies fulfilled the rigor stipulated above by Oppenheimer centuries later.

Sutras means strings. They represent, in context, pearls of wisdom on a string. Ancient Hindus defined two levels of reality. One reality is what you can sense, for example, see or touch. The book you are reading is real in the sense it is a physical reality. But a higher level of this is absolute reality which is defined as that which is not subject to change. Thus the book is not real in that context. Also in that context Hindus declare that this world is not real. Then what IS real? TRUTH is real. Truth does not change, decay or die. It was there before, it is there now and it will always be there. Thus seeing reality is the equivalent of seeing truth.

So the aim of the six schools of Hindu philosophy is to define the search for reality as the goal of life and to determine ways to reach that goal. They seek to know fundamental truths, truths of a metaphysical nature, and insist that these truths be realized by direct experience. The result is not just theory but a no-holds-barred approach to realization

based on understanding the external world and our relationship with it, distinguishing between appearance and reality. The goal is freedom or moksha: freedom from the burden of births and rebirths so that the individual soul can merge with the supreme soul once and for all.

Is there a rational basis?

The inquiry begins with doubting apparently evident beliefs. The Darshana philosophers refused to accept rituals, sacrifices and worship as prescribed in the Vedas unless such rituals were supported by a theoretical foundation which answered fundamental questions of life.

Clearly those who were bent upon exploring a rational basis for the philosophy of Hindus wanted debate and discussion. They were playing and playing hard at the boundary between faith and theology on the one hand and critical thinking and metaphysics on the other. And Vedas were no exception.

The darshana texts state the approaches to reality with some sophisticated and cryptic aphorisms (sūtraas). Normally it took additional commentaries to unravel and expand them to more intelligible messages. Nevertheless the darshanas remain beyond the grasp of most and are inherently complex requiring guidance from scholars.

By posing questions about the source of unhappiness, pain and misery of man in this world, and doubting “obvious” answers, the darshana sages focused on defining the root cause/s. They found the answer. According their findings, the root cause of all human suffering is ignorance or false notions. Ignorance is, in their view, at the very source of our miseries. They insisted that acquisition of knowledge is the only weapon and powerful antidote against suffering.

Darshanas being post-Vedic and post-Upanishadic attempts, every conceivable variables relevant to Hindu thought was thrown into the mix in an attempt to develop theories that could provide a firm reason-based basis of Hinduism: dharma, moksha, karma, prakriti, purusha, logic, truth, mind, matter, body, soul, self, death, atomic based material world and its composition, Vedic dictums, ...

The approaches seem to demand the impossible to attain the ultimate! If the ultimate goal is to attain salvation and freedom from cycles of births and deaths, then the vigor and the rigor of the efforts needed to match the anticipated result. And they seem to.

The inquiry indicates a high level of intellectual curiosity and debate regarding life’s persistent questions. The message appears to be: Don’t accept anything on its face value. Question it, doubt it, debate it, argue about it, and challenge it. And find the answer entirely by yourself. Do not depend on anyone else. Use logic, develop an understanding of the most basic elements of the material world and distinguish between matter and spirit. Gain knowledge and be free.

A brief description of each school follows.

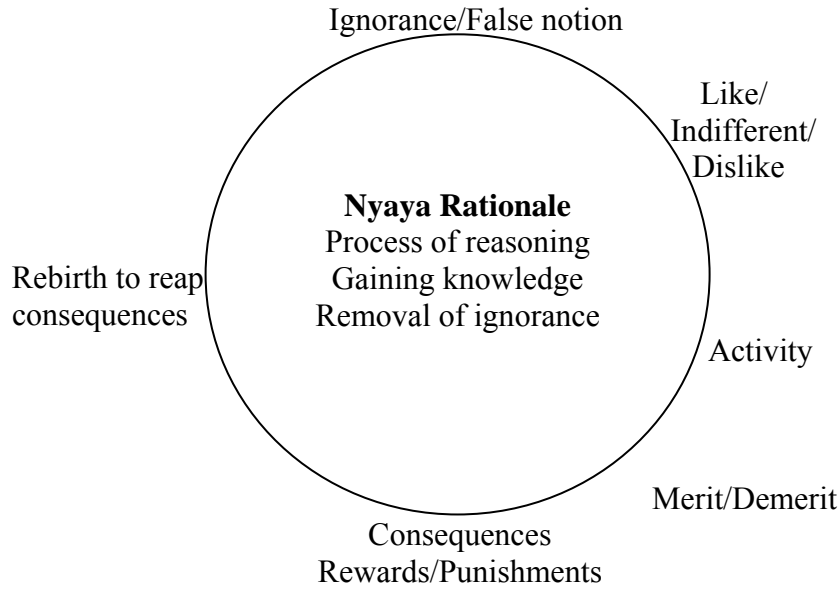
Nyaya

Nyaya is the science of logic and reasoning. Its goal is to obtain valid knowledge of the external world and its relationship with the mind and self. Nyaya claims that one may rid oneself of all suffering by understanding and applying its technique to validate any proposition. It offers a set of tools to validate knowledge.

Nyaya provides a rational basis for the analysis of fundamental questions leading to attainment of moksha. The principal aphorism states

दुःख जन्म प्रवृत्ति दोष मिथ्याज्ञानानाम् उत्तरोत्तरापाये तदनंतरापायादपवर्गः

Pain, birth, activity, faults and misapprehension – on the successive annihilation of these in the reverse order, there follows release. (Madan Mohan Agrawal, Six Systems of Indian Philosophy, Chaukhamba Sanskrit Pratishthan, Delhi; 2001, pp 3, Chapter 1). Short of this annihilation, man's sufferings in this world continue. This unending cycle may be illustrated as follows beginning with a false notion (about anything) arising out of ignorance and proceeding clockwise through the developments.



The very first topic in the very first Nyaya sutra addresses the methodology or the means (pramana) for obtaining what it calls the right measure (prama) of knowledge about a subject. How does one determine knowledge to be true and accurate? Nyaya recommends four steps for this assessment. They are (a) perception by the senses (what do you see or hear etc.), (b) inference (what do you make of it?), (c) comparison (is there anything

comparable in your experience?), and (d) verbal authority (are you aware of any testimony or trustworthy reference to support the perception?)

Among the above four, inference is further divided into five systematic logical steps and they are (a) hypothetical statement or proposition, (b) reason for the statement, (c) example that supports the observation, (d) application of the reason and (e) conclusion.

A simple example may be stated to illustrate the approach to inference.

- (1) A house on the street is on fire
- (2) Because smoke is visible in different parts at the roof level
- (3) Where there is smoke there is fire as during barbequing
- (4) This house is smoking
- (5) And therefore this house must be on fire.

The core message is that one trains the mind to think logically to resolve an issue and draw rational conclusions; a rigorous alternative to mere believing – a scientific approach.

Other “topics” deal with a series of stages proposed by Nyaya for establishing or denying a proposition or dealing with a controversial issue and are listed below.

- संशय (*samshaya*) Express doubt about a proposition
- प्रयोजन (*prayōjana*) Define the purpose or motive for discussing it
- दृष्टान्त - सिद्धान्त (*drishtānta leading to siddhānta*) Present an illustrative example leading to established conclusion
- Consider objectors' argument
- तर्क – निर्णय (*tarka - nirṇaya*) Consider a hypothetical argument or refutation of objection and ascertainment of the case
- वाद (*vāda*) Discussion
- जल्प (*jalpa*) Mere wrangling or disputation
- वितंड (*vitanda*) Caviling or refutation
- हेत्व आभास (*hētvā-ābhāsa*) Fallacy in the cause or fallacious reasoning
- छाल (*Chhala*) Quibbling or guile
- जाति (*jāti*) Futile replies
- निग्रह स्थान (*nigraha-sthāna*) Putting an end to all discussion by demonstrating the objector's incompetence and noting the vulnerable point in the opponent's argument.

If some of these steps sound harsh and too overbearing, it appears they were meant to be.

The subjects of study recommended by the all encompassing Nyaya are the following:

- आत्मन् Soul (*ātman*)
- शरीर Body (*sharīra*)
- इंद्रिय Senses (*indriya*)
- अर्थ Objects of sense (*artha*)
- बुद्धि Intelligence (*buddhi*)
- मनः Mind (*manas*)
- प्रवृत्ति Activity (*pravritti*)
- दोष Faults (*dōśa*)
- प्रेत्य - भाव Transmigration (*pretya-bhāva*)
- फल Consequences or fruits (*phala*)
- दुःख Pain (*duhkha*)

The development of this system is attributed to Sage Gautama (not the Buddha). The basis of this approach is to recognize that human minds are vulnerable to illusion and therefore to insist on logic to help distinguish truth from its opposite. So it teaches us how to think logically and such training, if successful, should lead one to examine fundamental propositions and determine their validity. Conclusions in regard to any proposition, according to this school, are to be reached only through doubting, questioning, reasoning and arguments. With doubt as the driving force, it appears to suggest that one begins to sort out the illusions and reject them- logically.

Vaisheshika

If Nyaya provided a tool to establish the validity of any proposition pertaining to reality, Vaisheshika focused on the reality of the physical world. According to this school, the most basic element of all material objects is the atom परमाणु (*paramāṇu*) which was considered to be indivisible, eternal (neither created nor destroyed) and extremely tiny (and therefore not visible to the naked eye and totally imperceptible to the senses). It is the combination of atoms that lead to substances which in turn lead to the physical world as we know it. The formation of the world through a series of integration of atoms, and the subsequent disintegration of the world through an equally vast disintegration of the atoms are believed to take place by the power of an unseen but extraordinary force known as अदृष्ट (*adrishta*). Monier (HINDUISM by Professor Monier Williams, London, 1906, p 192) posits that “this force becomes in Hindu philosophy a kind of god, if not the only god.” The essentially scientific reasoning used by Vaisheshika scholars to describe the physical world ties neatly to the presence of an unseen force that is critical to initiate the process of formation of that physical world.

The proponent of this school is known as sage कणाड *kaṇāda*. According to *kaṇāda*, atoms always existed, have no particular cause and are therefore eternal. Note the similarity between this and the concept of soul in Hindu thought. Another similarity worthy of note

is that each atom has a uniqueness of its own and it is this uniqueness known as VisheSha that lends the school its name.

The more recent knowledge that the atom is indeed divisible and is itself made of even tinier components consisting of (1) a dense central nucleus of protons and neutrons which is around 20,000 times smaller than the invisible size of the atom itself and (2) surrounded by a cloud of electrons does not negate the main thesis of the school. What holds the “indivisible” atom together is now known to be an extraordinary electromagnetic force which is released when the atom is split leading to the current nightmare of nuclear bombs which plagues the world.

Samkhya

Unlike Nyaya and Vaisheshika which attempt to provide an analytical basis for what is, Samkhya, developed by sage Kapila, focuses on understanding the basics of how it all came about. The Sanskrit word संख्या (*samkhya*) comes about as सम्यग् अख्यते (*samyag akhyate*) meaning an attempt to explain the whole. The claim is to consider the entire universe and our connections with it. An understanding of Samkhya approach to reality begins with Prakriti, defined as the great producer. Sometimes the word nature is used to describe Prakriti but it is only one of the many meanings of the Sanskrit word. Another word commonly associated with Prakriti is matter. Nature and matter are however useful in developing an understanding of the concepts inherent in Samkhya as long as one is aware that Prakriti is much more than that. The root word is *prakaroti* meaning something that evolves or produces. It is sort of a primal essence.

Prakriti is non-conscious, not intelligent and is made of three materials known as Sattva , Rajas and Tamas. We may define the qualities of the material Sattva to comprise a host of highly desirable properties (qualities): awareness, happiness, gentleness, illumination, a certain lightness etc. The qualities that govern a Tamas material are the opposite comprising sloth, sorrow, roughness, obstruction, darkness etc. And Rajas material possesses qualities that make it vibrant full of activity, anxiety and pain. If you think that these qualities *in total* define life, you are on to Samkhya’s view of life. When these materials are in balance nothing happens and nothing is produced. But any unbalance is enough to motivate Prakriti to produce. Different entities (a clod of clay, a worm or a monk) are produced based on the magnitude and proportions of the three materials much the same way an alloy is produced depending upon the quality and quantity of components of each contributing base metal.

What is the source of any imbalance that sets a course for Prakriti to begin to produce? It is Purusha!

Purusha is pure spirit, pure consciousness, passive with no qualities attributed to it. Purusha is an absolutely neutral but extraordinarily powerful presence. It is simply there with no feelings, no attachment, totally immune to pleasures and pains, and is inactive. Its mere presence causes excitation in Prakriti leading to an imbalance in the three materials

which in turn leads to production of a great variety of entities. The level of induced imbalance depends on any experience present in the particular purusha.

Prakriti produces without any apparent *direct* aid from Purusha. The radiance of Purusha is all that is required. But the results are extraordinary leading to production of intelligence (buddhi), the “I” ness (ahamkara), faculties of action, thought, sense, subtle atoms and the gross elements (ether, air, fire, water, earth).

There is an infinite number of individual purushās unlike the one prakriti. This is also unlike the concept of a single Supreme Soul and leads to the well-known concept called Dualism or Dwaita. If we look upon purusha as soul which has a subtle connection with a living body, *the living* comes about because of that connection. Devoid of the soul I and you are no different from a clod of clay!

Prakriti evolves and Purusha manifests. Science tells us that such evolution took thousands of centuries beginning probably with a single cell and reaching an age where humans as we know evolved.

The soul is everywhere like air. You are breathing essentially the same air whether you are here or in another country except for differences inherent based on previous experiences of that soul with other beings. Therefore, the soul in you is the same as the soul in me except for the experiences of the two souls during our life time.

Notice the word God never appears in the Samkhya thesis!

The soul is not born, but always exists. It is the consciousness of life, and dwells in every heart; it is the master of all, the lord of all.

The soul is not made greater by good actions, nor diminished by bad actions. It is the supreme sovereign, and the protector of all living beings. It is the bridge between this world and the world beyond; and it is also the dike which separates them.

Those who love God, seek the soul through studying the sacred texts, through worship, through acts of charity, and through abstaining from pleasures. Those who find the soul, become sages. They demand nothing for themselves, because those who know the soul possess the whole world. They do not desire offspring, and nor do they desire wealth; they regard all desire as empty.

The soul cannot be defined; it is not this or this. The soul cannot be comprehended, because it is beyond comprehension. The soul cannot pass away, because it is imperishable. The soul is free, because it has no bonds of attachment. The soul is serene, because it cannot suffer or fear suffering.

Those who know the soul feel no grief at the evil they do, nor elation at the good they do; they are beyond good and evil. They are indifferent to what is done and left undone. They are masters of themselves, and they are utterly calm and tranquil. They see the soul within themselves, and they see the soul in all beings.

Yoga

The approach in this darshana, attributed to sage Patanjali, is based on the acknowledgement of a supreme being, a supreme soul as the only reality. The goal is to train the body and the mind to reach a level of perfection that helps the merging (union) of the individual soul with the supreme soul.

The approach is to maintain a healthy body and a healthy mind. A series of body postures (asanas) were developed to keep the body supple and this branch of yoga known as Hatha yoga is now popular in the west. In the United States it is not uncommon to find, even in small towns, a yoga teacher with a few adherents practicing yoga exercises. Many of these have trained under Indian gurus and masters of the science of yoga and are certified to offer yoga classes. Main stream health clubs now offer classes in yoga on a regular basis. The general recommendation is to be gentle in assuming the body postures and not strain the body unduly even though there are many examples of extreme contortions of the body practiced by a few that appear to get the attention of the press and the public leading to some severe misinterpretations of the science.

Clearly there is no religious component to the yoga classes that focus on physical exercises. The most common connection with Hinduism, if any, comes about when the students may, at the end of the class, chant the familiar monosyllable Om!

Where Hinduism may come into play is in training the mind through meditation if Hindu prayers are offered silently or a focus is maintained on a chosen deity. Otherwise millions of non-Hindus who practice meditation choose to do so with a different focus. When Hindus meditate their goal is to train the mind to develop what is known as vairagya i.e. suppression of all passions. The emphasis is on concentration on a chosen image or sound or on nothing. The goal is to empty the mind of all thoughts and help the mind to be at peace but still alert. This concentration is to be accomplished through restraint (Yama), rituals (Niyama), body postures (Asana), breathing techniques (Pranāyāma), control of senses (Pratyādhara), control of mind (Dharaṇa), contemplation (Dhyāna), reaching a state of trance (Samādhi). The message is that what we seek outside is already within us. So the focus is inward to both our body and our mind.

Mimamsa

Sage Jaimini insisted that the path to seeing reality is already clearly laid out in the Vedas. Rationalism and theism had no appeal for him. He claimed that neither reason nor a god was needed to see reality and therefore, in essence, Vedas served that role entirely. A supreme being, according to Jaimini, may exist but not needed for the purpose! Some have defined Hindus as those who accept the authority of the Vedas and this belief is rooted in Jaimini's assertion that Vedas contain all that is necessary to know and practice Dharma through rituals prescribed in the Vedas. Dharma is the focus in this system as the very first aphorism in his sutras clearly states: अथतो धर्म जिग्नासा (*athatō dharma jignāsā*;

Next therefore is the inquiry into dharma). He emphasizes the power of the mantras (words as well as sounds in chanting) and lends credence to a Chinese proverb: “The echoes of a word once uttered vibrate in space to all eternity” (HINDUISM by Professor Monier Williams, London, 1906, p 203). How true and how critical it is for us to think before we utter!

Vedanta

Attributed to sage Badarayana, Vedanta darshana appears to bring it all together. It means the end (culmination) of knowledge. It is based on the pantheistic creed so eloquently stated in the Chandogya Upanishad: ऐकमेव अद्वितीयं (*ekamēva adwīṭīyam*; one and only essence without a second). This fundamental belief is at play always and without this knowledge westerners are bound to misinterpret the true spirit and meaning implied in the Hindu worship of many gods (polytheism).

Vedanta’s allegiance is to the One i.e. the Brahman. The great sayings (Mahavakyas) serve as the foundation of Vedanta: ब्रह्म सत्यं जगन् मिथ्य (*brahma satyam jagan mithya*) (Brahman is the reality, the world is false), सर्वं खलविदं ब्रह्म (*sarvam khalavidam brahma* i.e. All this is Brahman). That is why Swami Vivekananda declared “The living god is within you.” In this school there is no distinction between individual soul and the universal soul. They are one and the same leading to another great saying तत्त्वमसि (*tattvamasi*; Thou art That). This then is the basis for the philosophy of non-dualism (Advaita). The “That” represents at once sat-chit- and ananda or sacchidaananda (Existence, Knowledge and Joy) “but at the same time, without parts, unbound by qualities, without action, without emotion, having no consciousness such as is denoted by “I” and “Thou”, apprehending no person or thing, nor apprehended by any, having neither beginning nor end, immutable, the only real entity.” (See HINDUISM by Professor Monier Williams, London, 1906, pp204). Monier quotes a Mr. Robson who noted a correspondence with the Christian belief observing “This is the Vedantist’s trinity, corresponding very remarkably with the Author of Existence (the Father), the Source of Wisdom (Christ, the word), and the Source of Joy (the Holy Spirit); ...”

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