

Themes of Yoga Philosophy

6. Mind and its prompters

Prof. K. S. Arjunwadkar

The Mind

In Saankhya-Yoga philosophy, the mind is viewed as the principal instrument of receiving, interpreting and responding to the experiences of worldly events. It receives signals from the outer world through the sense organs, interprets them under the influence of attachment and hatred, the motivational forces forming part of the 'five sufferings', and responds through the organs of actions. Underlying its activities are the basic factors of *a-vidyaa* (mistaken cognition), *asmitaa* (the apparent union of the mind and the soul), and *abhinivesha*, the urge to live. Its activities are guided by *vaasanaa*-s, latent impressions or instincts, which accumulate through a series of lives and lie dormant till appropriate occasions prompt them. The instincts of a cat are aroused when the soul is born as a cat (Vyaasa, IV.9). Latent impressions make the mind a net formed of innumerable knots like the fishing net (Vyaasa, II.13). This aspect of the mind enables a Yoga practitioner to strengthen his Yogic propensities (Vyaasa, I.50).

The operation of the mind

Mind accesses objects through sense organs; this process is known as cognition. What constitutes cognition? It is the mind 'coloured' or characterised by the attributes of an object as the object is perceived through a sense organ. This explains why some objects in the purview of the sense organs remain unknown (Vyaasa IV.17). The mind is like a crystal; it reflects the object it faces (Vyaasa, IV.23). As it already reflects the subject, the soul, it combines all the three factors of the process of knowledge when an object is perceived. In this combination the soul is involved in the perception in the capacity of navigator. All the five states of the mind (including memory) are capable of causing memory through latent impressions. The content of memory can be equal to or less than the experience which causes it (I.11).

Action stock

The dormant impressions (*vaasanaa*-s) as well as the *a-vidyaa* team prompt actions which accumulate through a single life. The form of life (*jaati*), the extent of life (*aayus*) and the nature of experiences (*bhoga*) are decided by past actions. This means that a human being in the present life may not be so in past or future lives. Actions are admitted to the general stock unless they are too strong, in which case they yield instant results. Barring this exception, they are all said to consolidate at the time of death when their strength and priority are determined, and they produce a single effect in one shot in the form of the next life (Vyaasa, II.13). The extent of that life as well as experiences during it are determined by the dominant action causing that life.

Other actions either (i) lapse, or (ii) yield fruit in subordination to the dominant one, (iii) lie ineffective indefinitely until they get an opportunity of fruition in collaboration with a strong matching action, or (iv) are destroyed by counter-acts (e.g. meritorious deeds destroy sinful ones). Vyaasa thinks this hypothesis most reasonable in comparison to other alternatives. He enumerates and discusses the merits and demerits of these before coming to the conclusive view.

Actions of the enlightened

What happens to the action stock of the enlightened? – It is rendered impotent like roasted seeds which cannot yield a crop. It is only the action stock of souls trapped in the *a-vidyaa* team that has the potential to cause life and consequent suffering. While Vyaasa thinks that the actions of the enlightened soul exist, albeit in a roasted form, the Bhagavad-giitaa hints at their total annihilation: ‘the fire of knowledge reduces all actions to ashes’ (IV.37). It further proclaims: ‘There is nothing in the whole world that is as purifying as knowledge.’

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