

## Elements of Yogic Epistemology

It is not always easy for one to determine one's individual needs. So many artificial needs obscure one's vision from perceiving one's real needs! While a person's actual requirements may vary based upon particular circumstances, there are three categories of basic necessities and essentials which are common to all: nutrition, personal protection and sexual needs. These three aspects are crucial to the individual's survival and the spread of the human species.

From a biological standpoint, these needs are inherent within the nature of human and other forms of organic life. They are fundamental drives, which stand above thinking, reasoning or judgment. Any other need is but an extension of these three vital factors, and each one of the three has two operational principles: 1) the principle of activation, which elicits an action; and 2) the principle of inhibition, which is a controlling factor operating at the earlier stages. It is the combination of these principles of activation and inhibition (addition and subtraction), which causes the type of future work ahead.

The above three basic requirements, upon which lies one's very existence, are self-operational. However, they may be affected by the principle of inhibition. Life is a juxtaposition of multiple needs, constantly seeking the correct application of activation and inhibition, but the process requires our consent in principle. This is where the application of the intellect is crucial, even though the above-noted needs and principles do not absolutely depend upon it.

The principle of activation generally brings about good results to a certain extent, but beyond a certain limit and when not properly backed by the principle of inhibition, it may also be dangerous for one's physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. It is therefore important to first correctly understand the nature of our needs and then intelligently apply the double principle of activation-inhibition. Neglecting this is to sacrifice a rich mental life to a superficial and unwise lifestyle.

One must also dispose of philosophy in order to achieve a successful life, which acknowledges the need of these three important aspects. However, it is necessary to rethink the meaning of philosophy as it is usually presented. It is all too often the case that philosophy is confined to mere word gymnastics, devoid of a deep sense of reality, lacking in-depth knowledge and an empirical experience to carry personal commitments. The deeper meaning of existence does not flourish through the application of such a pusillanimous philosophy. The deeper meaning of life is that of an integral life, which develops the physical, the mental and the spiritual in a balanced and harmonious fashion.

A reconsideration of philosophy may be undertaken from two aspects—a strictly physical standpoint (representing a “lower level”) or a supra-sensorial vision (standing beyond and above the physical standpoint). As one's personal experience is usually limited to the realm of action, it would be unrealistic to envisage a quest commencing from above the sense-objects. This, however, does not prevent one from acquiring knowledge via the testimonials of those who are able to cross the boundaries of the senses, where the goal is supposed to rest. In the epistemology of Yoga, this type of knowledge is called *agama (apta)*.

Yoga has extensively mapped out the human mental processes and the various types of knowledge, which may be acquired through them. Any thoughts about subject matter amenable to philosophy can be considered as pertaining to the realm of the *vrittis* (mental fluctuations by which

consciousness takes the form of an object). Yoga cannot be achieved without the control of the *vrittis*, but that does not necessarily exclude the need for philosophical thought at the sensory level.

According to Patanjali, *vrittis* are subdivided into five categories:

- *Pramâna*
- *Vikalpa*
- *Viparyaya*
- *Nidra*
- *Smriti*

***Pramâna*** is the means to acquire accurate knowledge. Its three underlying elements are *pratyaksha*, *anumâna* and *âgama*.

***Pratyaksha*** or faculty of perception, manifests through the five senses of smell, taste, touch (temperature) sight (shape and colors) and hearing. What we perceive through our five senses of our perception may seem like a real image of the world around us.

***Anumâna*** or induction is what is not directly perceived by the senses but whose basic perception allows us to deduce certain conclusions, erroneous or correct - in which case they lead to an accurate knowledge.

***Âgama***\* is the cognitive acquisition that rests on the knowledge of those who have had real experiences in a specific domain, where neither perception nor induction can pretend to acquire such knowledge.

***Vikalpa*** is philosophical thinking. The prefix "vi-" denotes specialization, while "-kalpa" stands for knowledge. Being non-sensory, its cognitive object is normally unverifiable, yet still subject to analysis.

***Viparyaya*** is the misconception causing the limitation of our sensory faculties.

***Nidra*** is the mental process that takes place during sleep.

***Smriti*** is the memory of previous perceptions.

Strictly speaking, the plethora of artificial needs is exclusively promoted by

desire. The source of desires lies in *vasana*, whence come the latent subliminal impressions (*samskâras*), which tend to manifest. The term *vasana* corresponds to a point of pre-manifestation, which possesses no mental cognitive pattern and is devoid of any trace of conscience. *Vasana* stores all subliminal impressions resulting from actions, thoughts or emotions, from all the experiences in the physical, mental and emotional fields, respectively. From the point of view of consciousness, these subliminal impressions seem then to reside in an unconscious area within a vast mental field called *antahkarana* (from *antah*, within + *karana*, instrument, which is to say the mind).

When an action is completed, it immediately leaves the objective consciousness, although it may later be recalled via *smriti* (memory). This is possible because every experience leaves behind it a general impression that is stored in the *hridaya*\*\* (a part of the mind outside of both consciousness and unconsciousness). Thus, stripped of any trace of conscience, these experiences accumulate in the field of *hridaya*. One may at least partially retrieve stored experiences from *hridaya* into the mind's objective field (in the form of thought or feeling) via the memory (*smriti*).

Some experiences may be deliberately and volitionally brought back to consciousness in thinking, while others arise automatically without any instrumentation. In ordinary thinking, most thoughts remain unexposed to consciousness. However, they may be imposed to the "I" when certain groups of *samskâras* are about to manifest. These subliminal impressions then proceed—indistinct of *vasana*—towards the final stage of *iccha* (will). As a conscious expression of the will, desire may either be utilized as cognition or diverted to volition (thus reaching its final destination through conation and the ultimate result in muscular movements, representing the grossest physical action initiated at the original state of *vasana*).

All subliminal impressions (*samskâras*) result from past experiences. New experiences lead to fresh deposits in this part of the unconscious mind where

most of our experiments are stored.

In terms of philosophy, reasoning and observation in daily life are undoubtedly important, as they help toward right evaluation and wise decisions. Achieving the desired outcome for most projects involves deliberate calculations, although such calculations may prove quite inadequate in certain cases. Emotions can cause the destabilization of one's forecasts, efforts, thoughts, actions and behaviors. All this can be controlled by the right application of the principle of inhibition.

Philosophical thinking can help one to choose what is rationally predictable or what is not. Philosophy teaches one to escape speculative evaluations and to search for more than just material welfare, a search that ultimately may prove most valuable. It also teaches the need to sacrifice one's selfish interests—in extreme cases, perhaps even to sacrifice one's very life!—for a cause of high order. This type of philosophy refuses to allow one to remain within the safe but sterile confines of idle speculation, as remaining in the realm of speculation denies the existence of higher values.

\* There is also the option of *apta*, different from *âgama* insofar as it concerns para-sensory knowledge and as such the knowledge that cannot be perceived.

\*\* The Yogic concept of *hridaya* is different from the modern concept used in psychiatry. Editor's note.