

UNITED WISDOM

Samkhya and Yoga: Consciousness, Nature, and Liberation

World and Consciousness

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Imagine a hypothetical scene. Someone sits in front of a letter they have long intended to send. They have rewritten the first sentence several times. Different voices arise within: answer sharply, say nothing, explain everything. A few minutes later, they notice not only what the thoughts contain but the fact that they keep changing. A question appears: if I can observe this change, am I identical with what is happening in my mind now?

Many people recognize this observation, but answers to it differ. Classical Samkhya and Yoga offer a particular distinction between consciousness and nature. To understand them, it is not enough to call every pause meditation and every moment of inner calm liberation.

What this article explores. We will examine purusha, prakriti, and liberation in classical Samkhya and Patanjali's Yoga. In these systems, the mind belongs to nature; consciousness is not identical with thoughts; and the plurality of purushas cannot be reduced to Advaita's single atman. We will then consider what a contemporary reader might cautiously draw from this distinction and where application ceases to correspond to the historical teaching. This is a philosophical article, not instruction in postures, breathing, or treatment. Its hypothetical scenes explain questions and do not establish psychological regularities.

1. Why Saying “Yoga” Is Not Enough

The word “yoga” names many historical practices and systems. Here it is used in a limited sense: we are discussing Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and their classical philosophical context. Edwin Bryant emphasizes the diversity of early yogic paths and this tradition's connection with Samkhya. Shared metaphysical grounds do not make all yoga one unchanging school. Bryant, “The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali,” §§1–2.

This qualification helps us avoid a familiar mistake: recognizing ancient thought through the modern name of an activity. Someone may regularly attend a studio where “yoga” means movement practice and know almost nothing about purusha. That does not make them a bad practitioner. Their activity and the subject of our reading simply require different descriptions.

Imagine a library in which the same word labels a sports class, a religious commentary, and a philosophical treatise. If we transfer promises from one shelf to another, we produce a claim that none of the sources made. A comfortable posture does not prove liberation; familiarity with metaphysics does not prove the benefit of a particular movement; and an experience of concentration does not itself settle the nature of consciousness.

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Readers need not abandon their familiar use of the word. It is enough to ask each time which tradition and goal are being discussed. This article does not establish that modern practice is wrong. It restores one meaning that disappears when ancient philosophy is read as a preface to a studio timetable.

There is a broader lesson here about approaching an inheritance. A familiar name does not yet mean a familiar subject. The more easily a word enters ordinary speech, the more carefully we should check its meaning in a particular text.

2. Nature Includes the Inner World

In classical Samkhya, prakriti is nature, from which the psychophysical world unfolds. Not only bodies but also the functions of mind belong to it. Purusha, by contrast, is understood as a conscious witness distinct from prakriti. Ferenc Ruzsa emphasizes this division and the irreducible plurality of purushas. Ruzsa, “Sāṅkhya,” §§4b–c.

For a contemporary reader, the mind's placement on nature's side is particularly surprising. In ordinary speech, the table, phone, and body are “material,” while thoughts, feelings, and ideas are “spiritual.” But this system draws its boundary elsewhere. Even a subtle reflection and an elevated image may remain changing phenomena that become objects of awareness.

An imagined person thinks about their own independence. Their thought concerns liberation, but they also notice a wish to be praised for the depth of their understanding. We can distinguish the thought's subject from the way it arose. The content “I am reflecting on freedom” does not itself make the process free of familiar interests. This is a contemporary example of distinguishing, rather than a test of the historical metaphysics.

In another scene, someone tries to refute an unpleasant feeling with the right thought. “I have understood everything, so there should be no anxiety.” But the feeling remains, and an argument with oneself now joins it. It may be useful here to refrain from making one inner process the final judge of all the others, and first to see their sequence: a feeling appeared, an explanatory thought arose, and then came a demand to change immediately.

Such a description cannot establish the existence of purusha. It helps us understand the question the school answers: everything we can observe as changing is not necessarily the observing consciousness itself. Accepting a question does not yet mean accepting its answer, but without the question the answer becomes an empty word.

3. The Witness Does Not Own Everyone Else's Experience

Samkhya's purusha is not a single consciousness to which all individual lives belong. The system recognizes many irreducible conscious subjects. Similarities between the words “witness,” “consciousness,” and “true Self” and the language of Advaita therefore do not prove an identical teaching. Ruzsa, “Sāṅkhya,” §4c.

This matters beyond classification. Imagine someone telling another person, “I know your experience, because consciousness is one at depth.” Even if they hold such a metaphysics, the phrase supplies no particular knowledge of the other person. Understanding another's experience still requires hearing their account, checking its meaning, and allowing that one's first understanding may be mistaken.

In contemporary life, metaphysical closeness cannot replace information. I can share someone's values while knowing little of their circumstances. I can be deeply sympathetic while misunderstanding the help they need. I can find a similar feeling in myself without knowing what the other person associates with it. These limitations do not disappear after accepting a teaching about consciousness.

We should be especially cautious with “You are the pure witness.” In a conversation, it sometimes opens a space between a state and a definition of oneself. Sometimes it interrupts the account instead: the person is no longer permitted to speak about fatigue, hurt, or a particular difficulty, because someone has already explained who they “really” are.

A more considerate contemporary question sounds different: “Would you like to look at what is happening as a sequence of states now, or is discussing the event itself more important first?” It leaves the choice with the person and requires no agreement with metaphysics. A philosophical idea thus becomes an invitation to inquiry, rather than an outsider's right to assign another's inner experience.

4. The Three Gunas Are Not Three Types of People

Samkhya describes prakriti through the interaction of sattva, rajas, and tamas. In the briefest explanation these mean clarity, activity, and heaviness or inertia; yet they are not three independent substances or three definitive human characters. The gunas operate together. Ruzsa, “Sāṅkhya,” §4b.

Why resist turning this account into a personality test? Because doing so changes its function. A description of interaction becomes a label for a person: “He is tamasic, so talking to him is pointless.” We stop finding out what happened, which conditions matter, and what could change. An ancient term begins serving a contemporary purpose of exclusion.

An imagined manager sees that an employee responds slowly. They may call this inertia and mistake an explanation for an observation. Yet they do not know whether the person is overloaded, whether the request is clear, or whether the necessary information is available. Even if the manager uses the gunas metaphorically, circumstances still need checking.

There is also a gentler risk. Someone sorts their days: today I am in sattva, yesterday I was in rajas, tomorrow I must get rid of tamas. The scheme helps them discuss changes while it remains open. It obstructs them when it becomes a demand to earn a spiritually correct assessment in every state. Ordinary fatigue begins to feel like a moral failure.

For nonreligious reflection, we can limit ourselves to questions without labels: what is clearer now, what prompts action, and what holds it back? This is not a modern “scientific version” of the gunas. It is a separate language of observation inspired by attention to a process's diversity. We do not confirm an ancient ontology simply by finding three familiar words in our day.

There is an additional difficulty: the language of observation can quietly become a language of control. An imagined person starts keeping a list of states so that none can arise without their permission. They check themselves in the morning, after every conversation, and before bed. If the list shows irritation, irritation about irritation appears. The observation meant to clarify events becomes another participant in the inner dispute. It does not follow that self-observation is always harmful; only that its actual effects cannot be assessed by a beautiful name.

A particular criterion helps here, without claiming to be spiritual: has the description become more accurate, and has an available choice emerged? If recording “I am angry” helps clarify which promise was broken and what needs discussing, it has fulfilled a limited task. If the record merely makes someone ashamed of any anger, the task needs reconsideration. A contemporary exercise can be changed or stopped. A traditional concept should not be used to prohibit checking the consequences of one's own application.

Moreover, familiar distinctions between “clear,” “active,” and “inert” do not entitle us to assign another person's inner state from their behavior. Silence may accompany attentive thought, fatigue, disagreement, or a lack of words. High activity may support the work or prevent the completion of a single task. In an imagined group, it is more useful to ask what someone needs for their work than to declare their state already understood through an ancient scheme. Respect for the tradition can thus meet respect for what remains unknown in a particular case.

5. Liberation Is More Than Pleasant Quiet

In Yoga Sutras I.2–4, the cessation or restraint of modifications of chitta is connected with the seer's abiding in its own nature; in II.25–26, liberation is connected with removing ignorance and sustained discernment. This is a goal within a particular picture of reality, not a synonym for a good rest. Patanjali, Yoga Sutras, I.2–4; II.25–26, available translation by BonGiovanni.

We can mentally compare two imagined evenings. In the first, someone turns off notifications and finally feels calm. In the second, they notice that even their wish to preserve calm has become an object of strong attachment. Both observations may matter. But calling either “kaivalya” on the basis of a few minutes would measure a great goal by a small episode far too quickly.

This distinction does not devalue rest. Sleep, a pause, and a reduced workload can matter on their own grounds. They do not need the title of liberation to be meaningful. The problem begins when the promise of an ultimate spiritual goal is used to judge an ordinary result: if I became upset again, the whole practice must have failed.

A question of scale is useful here. What result was available today? Someone might notice the moment when they read a neutral letter as an accusation and decide to clarify its meaning. This is a particular outcome. It does not prove the disappearance of ignorance in the school's sense. But it can be checked through actions and the next conversation.

We retain two strands: the historical tradition has its own radical goal, while a contemporary reader can examine a limited episode of life. Reducing the first to the second impoverishes the tradition. Presenting the second as the first creates a false promise. Distinguishing them allows us to avoid both distortions.

6. Practice and Nonattachment Need Not Fight Each Other

Yoga Sutras I.12–14 connect work with the modifications of mind to practice and nonattachment; stability in practice involves duration. This is not a promise of an instant result from one attempt. Patanjali, I.12–14.

An interesting tension appears in contemporary application. Someone wants to practice regularly but begins to treat every missed attempt as proof of inadequacy. The desire to learn a practice becomes a constant inner examination. It then helps to ask what actually sustains regularity and what only generates new pressure.

An imagined reader decides to spend a few minutes observing thoughts. Yesterday they managed it, today they forgot, and tomorrow they remember the omission and want to compensate with greater effort. We can examine this movement without judging it “right” or

“wrong”: a goal appeared, there was an attempt, then a lapse, then a demand for compensation. Returning to a small action may be more accessible than turning the return into punishment. This is our everyday reasoning, not Patanjali's instruction about a timetable.

In this reading, nonattachment cannot be equated with indifference. Someone can take a chosen undertaking seriously while recognizing that a particular result is not entirely within their control. But neither can every abandonment of responsibility be called nonattachment. If a promise has not been kept, its consequences need discussing even when someone tries not to identify with success.

A double check therefore matters: the action really supports the chosen goal, and the attitude toward results does not require self-destruction when expectations are unmet. Neither check guarantees spiritual liberation. They simply help us see more precisely what happens in contemporary experience around the word “practice.”

7. The Ethical Dimension and Ishvara's Place

The eightfold scheme in II.29 begins with yama and niyama, rather than a physical accomplishment. II.30 lists nonviolence, truthfulness, nonpossessiveness, and other restraints. I.23–24 introduces devotion to Ishvara, a special purusha untouched by afflictions and karmic consequences. This place for Ishvara distinguishes Yoga from classical Samkhya, usually considered without the need for a creator God. Patanjali, I.23–24; II.29–32; Bryant, §7, “Theism”.

Contemporary readers should avoid turning these positions into a list of technical requirements for calm. An ethical problem does not disappear because someone can concentrate. An imagined manager may speak quietly while suppressing an employee. An imagined interlocutor may calmly ignore another's objection. Outward composure is not sufficient evidence of respectful action.

The religious component also requires honesty. If we remove Ishvara and retain only useful attention exercises, the result is a contemporary reinterpretation. It may be voluntary and meaningful, but it cannot be declared an exact reproduction of the entire system. Translating a tradition into accessible language should not retroactively make it nonreligious.

An objection arises: can we not use part of a tradition without accepting everything? We can. Our question concerns accuracy of description, rather than prohibition. Someone may read a religious work outside a faith, notice powerful questions, and leave metaphysics open. They should still say which part has been taken and what has changed. Such honesty makes the encounter more fruitful than claiming that the ancient author really meant only contemporary skills.

8. What Remains Disputed

Distinguishing an observed state from observing consciousness does not yet resolve every difficulty. Why should the observer be a separate, unchanging reality? Could observation be explained by one process becoming the object of another? How are two ontologically different sides related if purusha does not act? These questions should not be concealed by the word “obvious.”

An imagined reader notices their thoughts and concludes, “So the existence of an unchanging witness has been proved.” But the original observation established less: they can notice a thought as a thought. Moving from that possibility to a metaphysical explanation requires further arguments. Contemporary theories of consciousness and ancient Samkhya may understand the same described episode differently.

The opposite hasty conclusion is also weak: “If a modern experiment has not proved it, there is nothing to read.” A philosophical argument is not assessed only as a measurement report. It helps clarify questions, distinguish assumptions, and reveal what explanation one's own answer would require. We can reject its conclusion and still understand the task better.

This article does not attempt to resolve the problem of consciousness. It proposes an honest distinction between three levels: the school's historical assertion, a description of personal experience, and a contemporary explanation of that experience. When these levels are joined without argument, the tradition receives an undeserved scientific stamp, and personal experience an excessive metaphysical status.

The reader retains the right to uncertainty. It is possible to say, “I understand the distinction Samkhya makes, but do not yet accept its ontology.” That is a substantive position. Understanding is not a contract of faith, and disagreement need not be an inattentive dismissal.

One of the strongest objections to our contemporary examples is that they seem to make Samkhya a convenient everyday metaphor. Indeed, if all that remains after reading is a habit of describing a letter more accurately, the historical system has not yet been understood in full. It discusses reality, karma, and liberation on a scale our example does not encompass. We should therefore name the example's purpose: it opens a door to the question without replacing the room into which the door leads.

There are two honest paths for further reading. The first studies the system as philosophy: its arguments, differences among commentators, and rivals' objections. The second takes a limited distinction for one's own life and acknowledges that it has been reinterpreted. The dishonest middle path begins when we use only a convenient fragment but invoke the

authority of the whole tradition, as though it had confirmed our contemporary exercise and guaranteed its result.

An imagined participant in a conversation might say, “Seeing a thought as an event helps me, but I do not know what that proves about ultimate consciousness.” Such a statement contains both experience and a limit to knowledge. It leaves room for further inquiry. “This experience proves everything, and those who disagree simply have not tried it” closes that room. The difference concerns not a person's religiosity but the authority they grant their experience in conversation with others.

The question of liberating an unchanging purusha is particularly difficult. If it is different from prakriti by nature and does not become something else, what changes in liberation? “It simply improves its state” is not enough. Such an answer would reintroduce change on the side defined as exempt from ordinary changes. We need to examine the difference between changing a being and removing mistaken confusion.

For a limited analogy, imagine a spectator so absorbed in a play that they experience events on stage as directly happening to them. When they remember that they are in the audience, the character does not disappear, and the spectator's place is not created anew. The understanding of the relationship changes. Yet the analogy does not resolve the metaphysics: an ordinary spectator changes, has a memory, and possesses a body. It merely shows why liberation need not be conceived as producing a new consciousness.

An objection also becomes clearer. Remembering, distinguishing, and learning occur in the mind, while the mind belongs to prakriti. How, then, does a natural process end confusion with what is not natural? Answering that consciousness makes an effort violates its inactivity. Answering that nature does everything leaves its orientation toward liberating a conscious subject to be explained. This is a serious task for the system, rather than a mistake that a successful metaphor can remove.

Among the grounds for recognizing purusha, Ruzsa's account discusses the idea that a composite arrangement serves something distinct from its parts. Ruzsa, §4c. Our question about this argument is whether the existence of a function necessarily requires a recipient separate from the system. A possible opponent would offer a different answer; a defender of Samkhya would need to justify the transition. Such a dispute shows that the school constructs an explanation of consciousness and the world, rather than simply advising a calmer attitude toward thoughts.

9. What This Means in Practice

For voluntary reflection, choose a calm, limited episode: a letter, a short wait, or an unpleasant remark. Then describe three things separately: what happened externally, which thoughts or images arose, and which action seems available. There is no need to seek “pure consciousness” or force yourself into silence. The aim is to notice whether a single inner remark is being treated as the whole situation.

For example, an imagined letter says, “We will return to this tomorrow.” The person reads, “My question does not matter.” They can acknowledge the reality of their reaction while checking whether it matches the sender's intention. Clarification is one possible next step. If the question really has been postponed for a substantial reason, a different decision will be needed. Distinguishing does not promise a pleasant outcome; it makes that outcome more specific.

You can ask yourself, “Which thought is particularly eager to acquire the status of final knowledge now?” Sometimes it is “I ruined everything,” sometimes “The other person always does this,” and sometimes “I am already above these conflicts.” The last formulation is not necessarily more accurate than the first two. A spiritual vocabulary can also close inquiry.

This exercise is not an abridged system of Patanjali. We are not proposing breath retention, intensive meditation, fasting, or overcoming physical limitations. If observation is unpleasant or inappropriate now, you can stop and return to a more direct task: rest, clarify information, or discuss an agreement. Voluntary participation matters more than a display of philosophical discipline.

The result is modest: someone may see an additional choice between thought and action. Whether that choice exists can be checked through what they subsequently choose. Promising a change in the nature of consciousness or liberation on this basis would exceed what the exercise actually showed.

10. Looking More Closely Without Disappearing from Your Own Life

Samkhya and classical Yoga propose a radical distinction between consciousness and nature. Careful reading reveals something more complex than the popular phrase “You are not your thoughts.” Mind belongs to nature, purushas are many, and liberation involves particular knowledge and discipline. A contemporary state of peace is not this goal.

The person in our opening scene may eventually send the letter, change it, or decide not to send it. Philosophical reading does not choose for them. It helps raise a previously invisible

question: which part of what is happening is an event, which an interpretation, and which a habitual demand upon oneself?

The person need not disappear from relationships under the name of the witness. If the letter requires a reply, a reply is still needed. If someone else has been harmed, responsibility is not canceled. If the person is tired, clear distinction can include acknowledging fatigue, rather than fighting it to attain a spiritually correct state.

We can leave metaphysics open and retain attention to what we actually noticed. Sometimes this is the honest result of reading: not a new, solemn self-description, but the ability to speak a little more accurately about one's experience, without appropriating someone else's or promising oneself final freedom after a single peaceful evening.

Sources Used

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3. Patañjali. Yoga Sūtras. Translated by BonGiovanni, Internet Sacred Text Archive. I.2–4, I.12–14, I.23–24, II.25–32: brief primary positions checked against academic exposition. The free features of the English rendering are not treated as the sole meaning of the Sanskrit.