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## Mysticism and rationality in India: the case of Vaiśeṣika

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The word 'mysticism' is used in connection with various phenomena which do not necessarily have much in common. Among the explanations of this term given by the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary we find, for example: "sometimes applied to philosophical or scientific theories which assume occult qualities or mysterious agencies of which no rational account can be given". Understood in this way, mysticism and rationality are, by definition, opposed to each other. This kind of mysticism I shall call 'mystical thought'.

This same word 'mysticism' is also used in connection with certain so-called 'altered states of consciousness', usually ecstatic experiences given a religious interpretation by those who had them. I shall use the expression 'mystical experience' to refer to this second kind of mysticism. Intrinsicly there is no reason to assume that mystical experience is necessarily opposed to rationality, yet this opinion is widely held in the West.

This opinion — that mystical experience and rationality are opposed to each other — is, to my knowledge, not found in ancient India.<sup>1</sup> I will have more to say about this in a while. First, however, we must briefly consider another question: was there mystical *thought* in early India? In other words: were there groups or individuals in ancient India who held that there is a higher reality which is beyond the realm of rational enquiry? The answer must be yes. Perhaps the clearest example is constituted by the ancient Indian Brāhmaṇas, texts which form part of the corpus of Vedic literature, and which purport to reveal the deeper meanings attached to the different parts and aspects of the Vedic ritual. These texts obviously search for a deeper reality, one that is not accessible through rational discourse. Indeed, these texts remind us on several occasions that "the gods love what is occult" (*parokṣakāmā devāḥ*), that what is clear to human beings is mysterious to the gods, whereas what is mysterious to human beings is clear to the gods.<sup>2</sup> Mystical — or should one say: magical? — speculations fill

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Staal, 1975: 28: "It would be no exaggeration to say that, in the realm of religion, the situation is the exact opposite of what the common bias suggests: in general, the East is rational, the West, irrational."

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Malamoud, 1989: 243 f.

these texts. Yet there is no evidence that their authors had, or tried to obtain, the altered states of consciousness which we call mystical experience.

This last observation is important. It shows that there is no intrinsic connection between mystical *thought* and mystical *experience*. The Brāhmaṇas show that there can be mystical thought without mystical experience. The cases which I am going to discuss presently will show that there can be mystical experience without mystical thought.

But again we must first address another question. How do we know in what cases we have to do with mystical experience? Unlike the situation in the West, ancient Indian literature contains virtually no personal accounts of such experiences. We are normally confronted with impersonal, generalized descriptions, which leave it open to doubt whether anyone had any special experience at all. The old Upaniṣads are a good example. People have talked a lot about the mysticism of these texts, but the persons who figure in them are all of them legendary. And the spiritual discoveries of which they talk — primarily, of course, the identity of the self with the supreme Brahma — continue so clearly the magical identifications of the Brāhmaṇas (of which the early Upaniṣads are in a way appendices), that one can rightfully wonder whether any mystical experience was required to bring these discoveries about.

It is necessary to be aware of these difficulties. They should, at the same time, not be exaggerated. Many, perhaps most, religious currents of ancient India emphasize the importance of withdrawing from society, in order to reach the religious goal by private effort. A large number of those who actually withdrew from society dedicated themselves to introspection in order to obtain an insight into their true nature. Add to this that, especially under the influence of Buddhism as it would seem, techniques were introduced which facilitate access to altered states of consciousness, and it should be clear that we are justified in assuming that in India, too, mystical experiences were sought and took place. The interpretation of mystical experience, I don't need to remind you, is rarely independent of the cultural and religious background of the mystic. A Christian mystic, for example, is likely to experience the presence of God, where a Buddhist mystic, for whom there is no highest God, will have a different experience, or perhaps, will give a different interpretation to the same experience. I must therefore say a few words about the general world-view within which most Indian mystics interpreted their experiences.

The principal aim of the Indian mystic is to escape from the never ending cycle of rebirths. These rebirths are the results of the actions he has performed in preceding lives. Every action evokes some form of retribution: pleasant in the case of a good action, unpleasant in the case of a bad one. Not all actions find retribution in the life in which they are performed. The effects of not yet retributed actions bring about that one will be reborn. Escape from this sequence of rebirths requires the cessation of activity.

Certain ascetics took this literally. Others found an easier solution: in their opinion it is sufficient to realize that one's real self is quite independent of all physical and mental activities. Man's soul is, essentially, free from activity. Once this is fully realized, the link with one's actions is broken, and one will not be born again.

This description of the world-view of the Hindu mystic, or yogi, though short, provides some essential information concerning what mystical experience he is looking for, and is likely to get. What he needs, is a mystical insight into the true nature of his self, i.e., of his soul. This soul should be experienced as being free from activity, without link to the actions of body and mind.

If we now ask how Indian rational thought reacted to this mystical aim, and to these mystical experiences, we make an interesting discovery. Rational thought was quick to incorporate the experiences concerned, and to develop systems intended to explain how a soul of the type described fits into the world at large. Indeed, all the orthodox Hindu systems of philosophy deal with this question, and offer one solution or another. They all add that the study of their particular system is a prerequisite for attaining release. There is no doubt an element of easy propaganda in this, yet it would be incorrect to claim that these schools of thought pay only lip-service to the ideal of final liberation.

The current of thought which is historically most intimately linked to Yoga, which includes the search for mystical experience, is Sāṃkhya. Yoga and Sāṃkhya are frequently mentioned together from an early date onward. And even if the exact meanings of the terms Yoga and Sāṃkhya have no doubt somewhat changed in the course of time, Sāṃkhya represents right from the beginning the theoretical side of at least one form of Yoga. Sāṃkhya, probably in all its forms, is an elaboration of the fundamental idea that the soul is opposed to, essentially different from the material world. Since the soul is free from all activity, including mental activity, the latter, too, is believed to be part of the material world.

I am not going to say more about the Sāṃkhya philosophy. The link between this system and practical Yoga is obvious, and has often been described. I prefer to turn to a different system of Hindu philosophy, called Vaiśeṣika, one whose link with religious practice is not immediately obvious, and one which is often rather looked upon as a system of natural philosophy. Vaiśeṣika is certainly one of the most rational expressions of Indian thought, and it is no coincidence that it came to join forces with Nyāya, the orthodox school of argumentation, which includes formal logic.

The Vaiśeṣika philosophy claims to present a complete inventory of all there is. It distinguishes a number of categories (normally six), not all of which are equally important for our present discussion. Three of them are, viz., substance, quality, and action. It has repeatedly been noted that these three categories correspond to nouns,

adjectives, and verbs respectively, but this, too, does not affect our exposition. Vaiśeṣika subdivides its categories, and enumerates exactly how many substances, how many qualities, and how many actions there are. Qualities and actions inhere in substances. In the case of a red cloth, for example, the quality red inheres in the substance cloth. The relationship which connects the quality and the substance, inherence, is itself one of the six categories. It has the peculiar characteristic that the things it connects cannot be separated. That is to say, a quality cannot exist without a substance, and the same is true of an action. The reverse is not true: a substance *can* exist without quality or action.

It is not possible to discuss in further detail the way in which the Vaiśeṣika philosophy accounts for the details of the *physical* world. For our present purposes it is of special interest to note that it tries to explain the *spiritual* world with the help of the same categories which do service in the physical world. All our experiences and spiritual goals are subsumed under the two categories substance and quality. The substance primarily involved is the soul, conceived of as omnipresent and eternal. This substance, like other substances, can have qualities. But the qualities that can inhere in the soul are not all the same as those that inhere in other substances. In fact, a number of qualities can only inhere in the soul, and nowhere else. These are: knowledge, happiness, pain, desire, repulsion, effort, virtue, sin, and subliminal impressions. These qualities constitute together a kind of psychology, if perhaps a rather primitive one. For knowledge of an object produces either happiness or pain, these in their turn cause desire and repulsion respectively, these then bring about effort, which is the quality of the soul that instigates the body to act. Bodily activity produces further qualities of the soul, viz., virtue or sin (depending on the nature of the activity) and subliminal impressions. These last three qualities are responsible for a new birth of the soul into another body.

This same scheme explains how liberation can be obtained. I cite the following passage from the Padārthadharmasaṅgraha, a text from about the sixth century C.E. which present Vaiśeṣika doctrine in its classical form:

When someone — as a consequence of knowledge and of the activity resulting therefrom, viz., [activity] without intended fruit — is born in a virtuous family and desires to know means to get rid of suffering, goes to a teacher and acquires true knowledge about the six categories [of Vaiśeṣika], then he becomes free from passion because his wrong knowledge ceases. Because there is then no passion nor repulsion, virtue and sin which are born from those do not come into existence; and [the virtue and sin] which have been accumulated before disappear after producing experiences. When he has thus brought about contentment and happiness, as well as separation from the body, and passion etc. have ceased, only virtue characterized by inactivity remains. [This too,] after producing the happiness born from insight in the highest truth, ceases. Then the body etc. disappear of [this] soul which is free from seeds [for rebirth]. The

tranquillity [which arises] since no body etc. come again into existence, and which resemble a fire whose fuel has been burnt, is liberation.<sup>3</sup>

This description is laconic, and schematic. But the main idea is clear. Liberation has come about once the substance soul has managed to get rid of all its qualities — including knowledge (= consciousness) and happiness — and has broken all its links to its body and to the world at large. The passage further suggests that liberation is guaranteed for anyone who studies Vaiśeṣika, no doubt an alluring idea. Yet it is clear from this and other passages<sup>4</sup> that the study of Vaiśeṣika has to go hand in hand with other forms of religious activity. Consider the following passage from the same text:

As for persons unlike ourselves — i.e., yogis engaged in yogic meditation — there appear precisely true cognitions of the real forms of such things as their own self as well as the selves of others, ether, space, time atoms, wind, mind, the qualities, actions, generalities and individualities inhering in these, and inherence; and the cognition of these is brought about by the mind as aided by faculties born of yoga. As for yogis who are not [at that moment] engaged in yogic meditation, direct sensuous knowledge appears with regard to subtle, hidden and distant objects, by means of the mind through fourfold contact, by the force of faculties born of yoga.<sup>5</sup>

This passage calls for some comment. It speaks of people *unlike ourselves*, viz., practising yogis. Yet only these yogis obtain a direct experience of the correctness of the doctrines of Vaiśeṣika. If we combine this information with our earlier passage, it will become clear that the way of liberation described there applies primarily to the yogi. It also shows that the high claim that the study of Vaiśeṣika is sufficient to guarantee liberation, has to be taken with a grain of salt.

There is something else we learn from this passage. It accepts that mystical experience gives access to objects beyond our senses, but does not use this as an excuse to introduce a reality supposedly beyond reason. Quite on the contrary, these experiences are claimed to justify the rational view of the world which is the Vaiśeṣika system.<sup>6</sup>

You may object that this way of using the mystical experiences of others for one's own purposes merely shows that no one had ever bothered to take these experiences seriously, and study them in their own right. Let me, however, remind you that mystical experiences are always very malleable, and that mystics themselves tend to interpret them along the lines of their cultural and religious beliefs and

<sup>3</sup> Pdhs p. 281 l. 19 - p. 282 l. 5. The translation follows Bronkhorst, 1986: 56-57.

<sup>4</sup> See Pdhs p. 273 l. 10 f., which speaks of the person in the fourth *āśrama* who brings about (or perfects) yoga by meditating on the six categories (*ṣaṭpadārthaprasaṃkhyānād yogaprasāadhanam*).

<sup>5</sup> Pdhs p. 187 l. 7-13. For the translation, cp. Jhā, 1915: 392.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the corresponding sūtras in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra (9.13 f.) do not fail to explain these experiences in terms of the system.

presuppositions. To give an example from India, practising yogis are known to have written texts on Sāṃkhya which do not, for that matter, deviate from standard Sāṃkhya doctrine.

Until now I have spoken of Vaiśeṣika in its classical form, as we find it in the Padārthadharmasaṅgraha. Vaiśeṣika had already a long history behind it when this text was composed. Unfortunately we have very little information about this earlier period. Our most important source for this period is the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, a collection of aphoristic statements. This text is no unitary whole. Additions as well as omissions were made over a long period of time, so that it is difficult to draw certain conclusions on the basis of this text.

Scholars widely believe that the idea of liberation is a late addition to the Vaiśeṣika system. Originally, it is claimed, this system had no interest in liberation, and aimed exclusively at an understanding of the natural world. The references to liberation which we find in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra, as well as the references to yoga, are later additions to the text.<sup>7</sup>

Time does not permit me to review the different arguments that have been presented to substantiate these claims, nor is it as yet possible to offer any final solution. What I propose to do, is briefly discuss one small problem which, though at first sight unrelated to the issue under consideration, has none-the-less much to do with it. I speak about the size of the soul. We have seen that the soul is of infinite size in classical Vaiśeṣika. The claim has been made that it was of finite size in early Vaiśeṣika.<sup>8</sup> The relevance of this problem is as follows: Liberation is brought about with the help of the realization that one's real self, i.e., one's soul, does not act. This we have seen. Action, in Vaiśeṣika and elsewhere, means primarily motion, movement. An infinite soul is motionless. A finite soul, on the other hand, moves along with the body.

The only real evidence that has been adduced to support the view that the size of the soul in early Vaiśeṣika was finite, are two sūtras in the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra. One of these, VS 5.1.6, speaks of "activity of the soul as a result of its contact with the hand" in the case of an activity like grinding with a pestle.<sup>9</sup> The other one, VS 5.2.18, states that "the activity of the soul is explained by the activity of the body."<sup>10</sup> Both sūtras seem to indicate that the soul moves along with the body, and therefore has a size roughly equal

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Frauwallner, 1956: 28, etc.; Wezler, 1982: 655; 664.

<sup>8</sup> Faddegon, 1918: 273; Frauwallner, 1956: 62; Wezler, 1982: 654-55; Preisendanz, 1989: 153-54; see also Ruben, 1928: 166 n. 32.

<sup>9</sup> VS 5.1.6: *tathātmakarma hastasamyogāc ca*.

<sup>10</sup> *kāyakarmaṇātmakarma vyākhyātam*. This is VS 5.2.18, in Candrānanda's version. The sūtra has a different form in the anonymous Vyākhyā edited by Thakur: *kāyakarmaṇātmakarmadharmayor anupapattiḥ* (5.2.16); Wezler (1982: 659) observes quite rightly that it is difficult to make satisfactory sense of this reading. Nothing corresponding to the sūtra is found in the version known to Śaṅkara Miśra. For arguments that Candrānanda's reading is the original one, see Wezler, 1982: 653.

to that of the body. A closer inspection of the second sūtra, however, casts doubt upon this interpretation.

This second sūtra (5.2.18) is followed by two other sūtras that appear to be related to it. Read together, the three can be translated as follows:

The activity of the soul is explained by the activity of the body.  
Retreating, approaching, contact with what is eaten and drunk, contacts with other effects, [these functions of the soul] are caused by the unseen.  
When there is no [activity of the soul], there is no contact [with objects that belong to it], no manifestation [of the soul in a body]; that is liberation.<sup>11</sup>

If we assume that these sūtras formed a group right from the beginning — and I know of no reason to doubt this — we notice first that this group contains both a sūtra which supposedly speaks of the activity, and therefore motion, of the soul, and one that speaks of liberation. One might be tempted to consider this evidence that the sūtra about liberation is a later addition to the text. I propose, however, to proceed more cautiously. We may first wonder whether we have interpreted the first two sūtras correctly. Recall, to begin with, that also an omnipresent soul has a privileged link with one particular body, viz., the body to which it belongs, or that belongs to it. Being omnipresent, it may be in contact with many things, but it has contacts of the type ‘owner and owned’ with only a limited number of objects, viz., with those objects which constitute its body. This collection of special contacts (of the type ‘owner-owned’) is there where the body is, and in that sense moves as much or as little as the body. One might therefore think that the ‘activity of the soul’ in our sūtras does not concern a movement of the soul itself, but of the part of it which carries the contacts of the type ‘owner-owned’. This would also explain the mention of the unseen in the second sūtra of the set (19). The unseen is invoked in early Vaiśeṣika to make sense of phenomena that resist explanation in terms of the system. But there is nothing mysterious about the movement of a soul along with the body with which it is contact. The special contact between an omnipresent soul and just one body, on the other hand, is far more difficult to explain, and it is understandable that recourse was taken to ‘the unseen’.

The interpretation which I have just now proposed, appears to be exactly the one which Bhartṛhari, an author of the beginning of the 5th century, gave to these same sūtras. After a long discussion about the nature of relations in Vaiśeṣika, he gives the following example:

<sup>11</sup> VS 5.2.18-20: *kāyakarmanātmakarma vyākhyātam//18// apasarpaṇam upasarpaṇam aśitapītasamyogaḥ kāryāntarasamyogāś cety adṛṣṭakāritāni//19// tadabhāve samyogābhāvo ‘prādurbhāvaḥ sa mokṣaḥ//20//*

Just as the contact of the soul is [only] called ‘connection of owner and owned’ with regard to certain objects, because the unseen operates [in these cases], even though there is no difference [between this special kind of contact and contact in general], just so is the situation [in the case of other relations].<sup>12</sup>

The mention of the unseen confirms that Bhartṛhari refers here indeed to our set of sūtras. This set of sūtras, in Bhartṛhari’s opinion, did not speak about a finite soul, but about an omnipresent soul which none-the-less has special contacts with but one body. There seems, then, no reason to doubt that the three sūtras which we have been talking about (VS 5.2.18-20) formed a set right from the time of their composition, and that their author believed in an omnipresent soul, and was also concerned with final liberation. The sūtras immediately preceding this set form another set which is in several respects not unlike it.<sup>13</sup> This other set speak about the activity — or motion — of the mind, and defines yoga as the withdrawal of the mind from the senses. There is no time now to explain the mechanistic notion of mind current in the Vaiśeṣika philosophy. All I wish to point out at this moment is that yoga and liberation are defined in two parallel sets of sūtras, and that there are no reasons that I know of to regard these two sets as later additions to the text of the Vaiśeṣika Sūtra.

To conclude my talk, I like to draw your attention to a paper ("Yogic perception (*yogipratyakṣa*) in early Vaiśeṣika") read last August at the VIIIth World Sanskrit Conference in Vienna, by a young Dutch scholar, H. Isaacson. Isaacson is able to show that some form of yogic perception was accepted in Vaiśeṣika at a relatively early date. This, of course, weakens further the position according to which yoga and liberation are late additions to the Vaiśeṣika philosophy.

I am painfully aware that I have not been able to do more than sketch a few arguments pertaining to the role of mysticism in early Vaiśeṣika. A more detailed presentation of some of these arguments must be reserved for another occasion. But even these few brief remarks, I hope, have made clear that the possibility cannot be excluded that mysticism played a role in the Vaiśeṣika philosophy, and influenced its shape, right from the beginning.

<sup>12</sup> VP 3.146: *adṛṣṭavṛttilābhena yathā saṃyoga ātmanaḥ/ kvacit svasvāmiyogākhyo ‘bhede ‘nyatrāpi sa kramaḥ//*

<sup>13</sup> VS 5.2.15-17. Sūtras 16-17 have to be read and translated as in Wezler’s (1982: 663) reconstitution. This yields, for the whole set: *hastakarmanā manasaḥ karma vyākhyātam/ indriyamano ‘rthasannikarṣāt sukhaduḥkhe/ tadanārambha ātmasthe manasi/ saśarīrasya sukhaduḥkhābhāvaḥ/ sa yogaḥ/*"The activity of the mind is explained by the activity of the hand. Pleasure and pain [arise] out of the drawing near to each other of sense(s), internal organ, and object [of cognition]; this (i.e. the drawing near to each other...) does not arise when the internal organ is in the soul. [Then] there is neither pleasure nor pain for the embodied [soul]. This is yoga."



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