



WHAT IS YOGIC GNOSTICISM? DEMARCATING AN ELITE RITUAL IDENTITY WORTH RECONSIDERING

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Abstract

In this paper I gather core definitional components of yogic Gnosticism (aka *jñāna-yoga*/ the yoga of knowledge), which I produced for a forthcoming monograph (*Metaphysics as Therapy*, Springer, April 2025) on the use of taxonomy in the spiritual exercises of gnostic yogas. I highlight the historical significance of this elite form of yogic cultivation and its general neglect within the emerging field of Yoga Studies. I explore the reasons for this neglect and suggest that, since we have not yet come close to any thorough understanding of the variform manifestations of gnostic yogas, it leaves a serious gap in the field to disregard this rather contemplative, intellectual, and scholastic form of yoga in favour of the more spectacular ones in fashion today. I present textual evidence for the usage of the term *jñāna-yoga* and the development of its meaning. I propose a minimal list of ten features, which I argue are shared among the various gnostic currents of yoga. In a fourth step, I briefly discuss the doctrinal antagonism of the ritual-oriented forms of yoga (*karma-yoga*) and the knowledge-oriented *jñāna-yoga*, to highlight how Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Gnostics have variously insisted on the cultivation of knowledge as the sole means of liberation. I then critically engage with Vivekananda's perception of *jñāna-yoga* to highlight some elements of his thought that correspond with my research findings on yogic Gnosticism, before concluding with remarks on the challenging elitism of this trans-sectarian South Asian current.

KEYWORDS

jñāna-yoga, *yoga*, *karma-yoga*, Vivekananda, Gnosticism



Introduction: *Jñāna-Yoga* in the Context of Contemporary Yoga Studies

The field of Yoga Studies has witnessed a significant boom in the last decade, with new research centres emerging worldwide and numerous high-quality publications resulting from these. A driving factor behind this growing popularity is undeniably the multibillion-dollar lifestyle industry that fuels the consumption and production of contemporary physical practices that appropriate the name 'yoga' as a trademark. Taking advantage of the appeal of the 'yoga' brand, it is not uncommon nowadays to hear about concepts such as 'yoga technique' and 'yoga philosophy' applied onto all kinds of practices and speculations. In most urban yoga studios worldwide, in addition to bending gymnastics, one may learn about an ancient Sanskrit literature associated with one form or another of 'yoga,' a very selective literature generally ranging from Patañjali's *Yogasūtra*,¹ the *Bhagavadgītā*, and perhaps extending to the *Haṭha[yoga]-pradīpikā*. More often than not, unfortunately, the said literature is paraded in popular discourse for its ancient, authoritative appeal but is partially subverted, if not altogether forfeited, under the guises of making it more palatable to 'consumers' through a commentarial prose far removed from its Sanskrit meaning. In this new interpretative paradigm, fostered by globalization, modern spirituality, and the wellness industry, the intellectual dimensions of ancient, yoga-related literature, and consequently of yogic practices, tend to be left aside, to give way to more emotional and pragmatic accounts of physical performances and their expected health benefits. Pursuing parallel research interests, the emerging field of Yoga Studies prioritises what is perceived as the 'practical' or 'embodied' dimensions of 'yoga,' the historical, textual and social developments of postures, breathing techniques, and other codified ritual movements, for example, to investigate the meanings and assumptions behind such practices.² In other words, Yoga Studies tend to insist on physical performances or, more broadly, on 'practice' understood as some kind of 'activity.'

This theoretical focus, though meaningful and necessary, betrays an implicit assumption towards which I am critical, namely the idea that, when it comes to 'yoga,' there is a clear distinction between theory and practice.³ For my interest, the implications of that assumption have one serious setback. It means that 'philosophy,' generally conceived as the theoretical and intellectual domain of the scholarly few, is

¹ For a study of the problematic reception of the YS in Germany, for example, see Ostrowski 2022.

² See O'Brien-Kop and Newcombe 2021: 3.

³ For a critic of the assumed distinction between theory and practice in yoga, see Bouthillette 2017.

rarely or barely considered and examined as a form of practice in its own right, with its own psychosomatic techniques and embodied lifestyles. The immediate consequence of this state of affairs is that gnostic forms of yogic practices remain largely marginal to Yoga Studies. For example, while ancient Middle Eastern Gnosticism and its new offshoots in Western esoteric currents are discussed within the *Routledge Handbook of Yoga and Meditation Studies*,⁴ therein one finds no mention of ‘gnostic yogas’ while ‘jñāna-yoga’ is only mentioned twice, both times in relation to the Jaina yoga context and without definition besides its translation as ‘the yoga of knowledge.’⁵ In the field-setting study *Roots of Yoga* we also detect no mention of ‘yogic Gnosticism.’ However, some words are said about *jñāna-yoga* (the expression appears three times within the entire book) in the context of the *Bhagavadgītā*, something that I will come back to shortly. The pursuit of knowledge as a yogic *topos* is nonetheless listed (lastly) within the introductory sections among a variety of distinct yogic methods mentioned by different texts on yoga.

Some texts teach a variety of distinct types of yoga method. Our categorization here is by no means exclusive or exhaustive, but rather a presentation of some of yoga’s taxonomical variations. Included here is the ‘yoga of action’ (*kriyāyoga*) of the *Pātañjalayogaśāstra* (an alternative practice for those who have distracted minds) (1.2.2); the ‘cosmic yoga’ (*prakriyāyoga*) of the *Niśvāsātattvasaṃhitā*, in which one meditates on matter, time, illusion (*māyā*) and other cosmic levels (1.2.3); the twofold yoga of the *Īśvaraḡītā* where meditation on emptiness (‘Non-Being Yoga’) leads to a vision of the self as pure and blissful (the ‘Great Yoga’) (1.2.4); and the yoga of devotion (*bhaktiyoga*) of the *Bhāḡavatapurāṇa* (1.2.5). Also of importance here are texts which consider the relationship between yoga and knowledge (*jñāna*), such as the *Bhagavadgītā* (1.2.1), the *Pāḡmasaṃhitā* (1.2.6), the *Yogabīja* (1.2.7) and the *Jīvanmuktiviveka* (1.2.12).⁶

If we remember that no list is ever random, the final position of those texts that consider the relationship between yoga and knowledge (*jñāna*) within this list of yogic paths suggests their marginal interest in the eyes of the list-makers. Or, at the opposite end, it may reflect the fact that gnosis is often the goal or ultimate state of all these

⁴ See Strube 2021.

⁵ See Pragma 2021.

⁶ Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 6.





yogas. If the first option would happen to be the valid one, it would not be a mere coincidence. On the contrary, there are historical factors to be considered here. As is generally the case in research, theoretical and methodological trends must be reasoned within the sociohistorical context in which they unfold. Recent developments in Yoga Studies, theorizing physical performances and their expected benefits seem to respond to at least two combined factors: 1. the lack of credible scientific resources theorizing the sociohistory of psychosomatic practices in the context of South Asian religions, which is largely due to 2. the overwhelming emphasis of early Indological scholarship and of more popular forms of Orientalism (Theosophy, Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, etc.) on the textual and doctrinal expressions of South Asian traditional elites, including gnostic yogas. If classical Indology has paid little attention to the development of physical cultures and their related ritual speculation in South Asia, one could argue that it is because they appeared relatively late in literature, and thus fall beyond the scope of ‘classical studies.’ However, I believe that there is another, subtler reason. As men and women of their times, early Indologists, like William Jones (1746–1794), Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), or Paul Jakob Deussen (1845–1919),⁷ shared with the Orientalists (late 18th–early 20th centuries) a common interest in comparing and categorizing systems of thought they took as representative of major civilizational achievements.⁸ For this purpose, they sought to determine the ‘higher forms’ (*Gestalten*) of culture, which they

⁷ One may observe that the list of names I provide here is solely constituted of men. It is so because early Indology was essentially a discipline at the service of colonial interests where the key positions allowing one to conduct meaningful research in South Asia were generally political offices entirely distributed among male officials. At the time, university positions were also the preserve of men. The first women Indologists appeared much later. For example, one may cite Betty Heimann (1888–1961) as the first woman Indologist to habilitate in Germany. Yet, it would be disingenuous to deny that many influent women of the period significantly contributed to the promotion of various Indian philosophies and orientalist ideals, or at least flirted with orientalism in a way or another. For example, one may mention the Russian Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), co-founder of the Theosophical Society; the former British suffragette Annie Besant (1847–1933); the American Sarah Jane Farmer (1847–1916), founder of Green Acre Bahá’í School; or, again, the Belgian-French explorer, spiritualist, Buddhist, and anarchist, Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969).

⁸ Raf Gelders and S. N. Balagangadhara (2011: 101) explain that postcolonial scholarship has advanced two important claims: “(a) Orientalism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries systematized Europe’s knowledge about the Indian traditions into rigid, homogenous categories, and (b) these categories played a crucial role in the functioning of the colonial state.” The authors criticize the “the ‘textual attitude’ of the British.” They argue that: “[g]uiding the ‘textualization of tradition’ are specific presuppositions of the Orientalists or what Richard King also calls ‘the dominant Anglo-Protestant conception of religion.’ The emphasis upon scriptures as the locus of religion channeled the interest of many scholars into the textual aspects of Indian culture” (2011: 102). For further readings on related issues, see Inden 1986; Joukhi 2006; Trivedi 2007.

naturally identified with the elite representatives of the societies they studied, focusing especially on what they perceived as their monotheistic expressions, leaving out supposed ‘lower’ forms. Therefore, all scholarly attention was paid to ‘classics’ in order to showcase a somewhat vague ‘Eastern Canon’⁹ that could conveniently be compared to the Christian one.

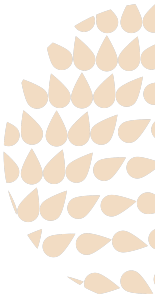
Among these ‘higher forms’ of philosophy, *jñāna-yoga* was conveniently introduced early on to Orientalists and scholars of Asian religions by the iconic and politically influential Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), in a format that they could more easily digest, since it reproduced their own orientalizing tendencies. The latter had no qualms in presenting *jñāna-yoga* as the crown jewel of Indian philosophy. In fact, according to the Bengali Vedāntin monk, who was set to become a key figure of Neo-Hindu theology and contemporary Indian politics, *jñāna-yoga* is not only the highest speculative achievement of India, but the very summit of human knowledge and contemplation.¹⁰ In a lecture originally recorded in America (1896) by Vivekananda’s disciple S. E. Waldo (Swami Saradananda), now catalogued in a series of discourses on *jñāna-yoga*, we are told, that,

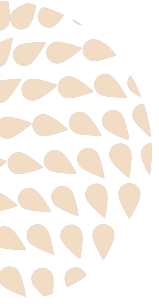
[j]nāna (knowledge) is “creedlessness”; but that does not mean that it despises creeds. It only means that a stage above and beyond creeds has been gained. The Jnāni (true philosopher) strives to destroy nothing but to help all. All rivers roll their waters into the sea and become one. So all creeds should lead to Jnāna and become one. [...]

Jnāna teaches that the world should be given up, but not on that account to be abandoned. To be in the world, but not of it, is the true test of the Sannyāsin. This idea of renunciation has been in some form common to

⁹ A paradigmatic example of the Orientalist’s canonization of ‘Eastern’ literature is the *Sacred Books of the East* series, edited by Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) and published by the Oxford University Press between 1879 and 1910.

¹⁰ Jeffery D. Long insists, however, that Vivekananda’s proud advocacy of Hinduism is nonetheless characterized by openness towards other creeds, which Long identifies as ‘pluralism.’ He argues that “Vivekananda has been appropriated by the Hindu nationalist movement, which emphasizes his statements about Hindu pride to the neglect of his statements affirming universal acceptance (Sarkar 2018). A robust affirmation of his pluralism is vital to establishing that, yes, Vivekananda was most definitely a proud Hindu, but that part of this pride lay precisely in what he saw as the inherent openness and pluralism of the Hindu tradition” (Long 2022). It would be interesting to pursue this reflection further by comparing the stances of Gnostics coming from other traditions. My feeling is that in such instances the typology of ‘exclusivism,’ ‘inclusivism,’ and ‘pluralism’ do not capture well the stance of gnostic people who believe reality to altogether lie beyond the scope of ‘views.’





nearly all religions. Jñāna demands that we look upon all alike, that we see only “sameness”. Praise and blame, good and bad, even heat and cold, must be equally acceptable to us.¹¹

The idealization of *jñāna-yoga* by Vivekananda, used as a rhetorical device to promote the universal superiority of Hindu gnostic practices, is problematic, at best. I will return to this in a moment. However, my own exploration of the matter indicates that Vivekananda is not off-target when it comes to delimiting what gnostic yoga is all about. However, what I want to point out is that the popularity of gnostic types of literature and their related traditions of philosophical discourses, in the last two centuries of Indology, has tended to obscure the importance and diversity of other forms of yogic practices and speculations, especially of those associated with physical performances and ritual manipulations, too often taken as ‘lower’ by those fascinated with texts and knowledge pursuits. This tendency, unsurprisingly, reproduced the same elitist discourse promoted by South Asian Gnostics themselves. Hence, in my view, as a kind of counterbalance movement, scholars of Yoga Studies now focus on forms of practices and speculation previously neglected in research, in response to previous Orientalism, but also because it is a distinguishing political feature of our times that scholarship in the humanities aims at being inclusive. In itself, the enterprise is both praiseworthy and necessary. Unfortunately, I do not believe that it is beneficial to the field to marginalize in return the more elitist ‘knowledge-focused’ forms of yoga. For one thing, I believe that we have not yet come close to a clear and cohesive understanding of what the cultivation of *gnosis* (*jñāna*) entails as an embodied practice, a way of life, or as a gnostic institution, nor do we have any clear picture of the evolution of this elitist speculative and ritual trend that spans the sectarian spectrum of South Asia through the centuries.

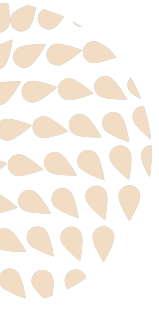
Within this article, ‘Yogic Gnosticism’ is the generic term—and thus a theoretical category, rather than an actual independent school of thought or *darśana*—which I use to subsume the varied manifestations of *jñāna-yoga*, what I render as the ‘yoga of knowledge.’ As an etic theoretical category borrowing from emic sectarian classifications, I argue that ‘yogas of knowledge,’ in the plural, represent a genre of philosophical expression, which concurrently developed within Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina circles. I contend that the predicted spiritual transformation of South Asian Gnosticism culminates in complete ‘renunciation,’ both from outer and inner objects, a ritually-induced quieting of one’s taxonomical, cognitive habitus reflected in one’s behaviour through generosity, detachment, and so on. It is ‘self-sacrifice’ actualized as

¹¹ Vivekananda 1896.

the abandonment of all false identification and interested actions, and especially of their conceptual bindings: representations. I propose that yogic ‘trans-formation,’ in gnostic speculative circles, is ritually induced through a sustained study and dialectical negation of precise doctrinal content. This taxonomically guided spiritual exercise is therapeutically intended to lead to a decisive ‘state of dispassion’ or ‘non-attachment’ to the world as represented within the defective conceptual matrixes of habitual cognition, a taxonomical habitus commonly referred to as ‘conventional reality.’ Contemplating doctrinal lists in the optics of their ‘determinate negation,’ following a sectarian dialectic discriminating between a conventional and an ultimate perspective, is a core component of the self-sacrificial exercise of philosophy found in South Asian Gnosticism. It is a rational *and* sacrificial attempt at self-transformation, via the medium of philosophical inquiry. Though highly cryptic and esoteric in its scholastic forms, yogic Gnosticism was and continues to be an influential (under)current in the philosophical and ritual landscape of the region and beyond. Unfortunately, its study as a particularly philosophical form of ‘yoga’ tends to be left out of the current trends in academic Yoga Studies, which rather focus on more spectacular displays of physical performances.

Even for those more interested in the later forms of performative yogas, or for those invested in strenuous physical disciplines, such as depicted in the fifteenth-century CE *Haṭha[yoga]pradīpikā*, for example, in order to understand the rhetoric of the literature and its positioning towards other kinds of yogic practices and to fathom in contradistinction what the term *haṭha* stands for, for example, it is fundamental to distinguish what stands in place of the ‘yoga of knowledge.’ Within the expression ‘yoga of knowledge’ I understand ‘yoga’ as a ‘means to’ or a ‘method of’ knowledge, a ‘medium’ for it. However, the expression in English is somewhat of a riddle, since, if one were to ask what is that method (*yoga*) of knowledge, it is knowledge (*jñāna*) only (*eva*), as pointed out by the Advaita Vedānta philosopher Śaṅkara in his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* (BhGŚBhā 3.3: *tatra jñānayogena jñānam eva*). That is to say, for Gnostics, knowledge is both the means and the end. In that way only is the gnostic ‘method’ (*yoga*) a ‘means to an end’ (*yoga*). But, concretely, in gnostic contexts, knowledge is cultivated via philosophy and especially dialectics. While I could decide to talk only in terms of ‘gnostic yoga’ or ‘yogic Gnosticism,’ to avoid the confusion of equating *jñāna-yoga* solely with the Advaita Vedānta, with which it is most commonly associated, largely due to the popularity of Vivekananda (1863–1902), I think that it is also appropriate to use a term that is native to the Sanskrit episteme to designate a genre of literature and a form of contemplative practice, which includes Advaita Vedānta and also other very similar traditions, especially as we know that these other





traditional forms of Gnosticism preceded Advaita Vedānta (and thus inspired/influenced it), like the Upaniṣads, Sāṃkhya philosophy, *Prajñāpāramitā*/Madhyamaka Buddhism, and Kundakunda Jainism. Moreover, the term *jñāna-yoga* has become part of the common language of contemporary Hindu India, precisely to denote a knowledge-oriented practice of religion, in contradistinction to a practice revolving around ritual (*karma*) or faith/devotion (*bhakti*), while the recondite term ‘gnostic’ has little currency outside of arcane academic circles. Given that some precision has been provided on its usage, I do not see compelling reasons not to adopt it, besides some rigid and, let's admit it, pedantic philological puritanism. Thus, unless indicated otherwise, the reader should know that, within these pages, *jñāna-yoga* and the ‘yoga of knowledge’ are convenient synonyms for the cumbersome neologism ‘yogic Gnosticism,’ and not a reference to a specific sect. I am using these terms interchangeably.

Among the few recent scholars of Yoga Studies to adopt the terminology of ‘gnosis,’ Jason Birch hints at the need to do so in order to fathom the polemics at play behind the sectarian identities of Haṭha and Rāja yogas, to better understand the practices and discourses which secured the lasting influence of South Asian Gnosticism (notably within Rājayoga).¹²

Discussing the label ‘Rājayoga,’ Birch observes, that,

[t]he history of the term reveals that it outlived the traditions which carried it to prominence in earlier centuries. Its survival points to the continuing importance of *samādhi* in Indian Yoga traditions as well as the constant competition between these traditions which have vied with one another in claiming to teach the “best Yoga.” As a foil for Haṭhayoga, it [Rājayoga] represents the mental, meditative, advanced, and purely soteriological Yoga techniques as opposed to the physical, preparatory, and Siddhi-orientated ones. The fault-line between Haṭhayoga and Rājayoga is an offshoot of the more ancient tension between ritual and gnosis in Indian religions. The efficacy and effortlessness of Rājayoga as opposed to the gradual progress and effort required for Haṭhayoga is still advocated today for the same reasons.¹³

¹² In some philosophical traditions, notably that of Vijñānabhikṣu (16th century), the gnostic yoga of the *Vāsiṣṭha* (often referred to as *Yogavāsiṣṭha*) was called *rājayoga*. See Birch 2013: 412–13.

¹³ Brackets are mine. Birch 2013: 419.

That the rhetoric of Rājayoga continues to reverberate today stresses the need for a better understanding of its gnostic tendencies. To what extent are gnostic yogas really different from ritual practices, for example? Is the antinomy anything more than sectarian apologetics, the negation of a lower state of affairs identified with outsiders for the promotion of an allegedly higher one, one's own practice, which is a recurring pattern within the South Asian dialogical world? I do not think so. Theoretically speaking, how is the practice of philosophy different from that of ritual practices and speculation? None of this seems obvious to me. At the outset, I argue that South Asian Gnosticism is eminently ritualistic, invested as it is in self-sacrifice and renunciation. Hence, in my view, to fathom the pedagogy and psychagogy¹⁴ of their discourses and of the practices they support, it does not suffice simply to buy in the doxographical rhetoric of ancient texts, be it that promoting *jñāna* or *haṭha* forms of pursuit. One must step back from ready invitations to reify doctrinal identities and rather ponder the dialectics at play behind such designations of the true and false, of the high and low.

It is not my purpose here to propose a general definition of what 'yoga' is. With so many competing claims suited to different goals through the centuries, I don't think there ever was a single meaning of the term. Nonetheless, there is a tentative definition presented in *Roots of Yoga*, which I find relevant to mention. Looking at a broad selection of literature that discusses 'yoga,' it categorizes three main understandings of what yoga came to mean for different communities of practitioners: 1. yoga as a goal; 2. yoga as a means; 3. yoga as both a means and a goal.

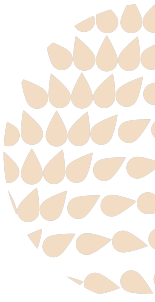
Doctrinal variation notwithstanding, all of these definitions point to an understanding of yoga as a state, the attainment of which is the goal of the practices associated with it. This meaning of yoga as a goal is by far the more common, although we do find references to 'the practice of yoga' (*yogabhyāsa*) and injunctions to 'practise yoga,' in which 'yoga' must indicate the means rather than the end. [...]

An exceptional definition of yoga as a means is found in the c. second-century CE Buddhist *Yogācārabhūmi* 1.1.4. [...]

In some texts the two senses (yoga-as-means and yoga-as-goal) exist side by side.¹⁵

¹⁴ The term 'psychagogy' literally refers to the 'guidance of the soul' or of the 'psyche,' from the Greek ψυχή (soul/psyche/spirit) and ἄγω (to lead).

¹⁵ Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 5.





Within the conceptual framework of gnostic yogas, as a general rule on which gnostic authors like Nāgārjuna, Kundakunda, or Śaṅkara agree, whatever is mediated, caused by some means, is conventional, relative, and ultimately non-real. This includes not only the entire realm of causal-based activity, like ritual, but also scriptures. If emphasis is placed on the practice itself as ‘yoga,’ since it is instrumental to some purpose, then yoga is a conventional exercise with no direct access to ultimate reality. Yogic practice may then be seen as a palliative to stabilize the mind, a necessary medium for certain unstable people, but it cannot be said to be the immediate cause of liberation, since the latter is uncaused.¹⁶ On the other hand, if yoga is taken as the goal itself, the ultimate reality, then it is no practice at all, but the very end of ritual thinking and exertion. However, nothing prevents both assumptions from being mutually adopted for the sake of distinguishing the perspective from which one is arguing: the conventional or the absolute, for example. As a token of illustration, it would not be contradictory to state that, from a relative perspective, yoga is a conventional exercise with no direct relation to reality, while, from an ultimate perspective, it is reality itself. After all, according to Nāgārjuna, in his *Mūlamādhymikakārikā* (*The Root Verses of the Middle Way/MMK* 25.19–20), there is no distinction whatsoever between *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, the limits of one are the limits of the other.

In the following pages, I propose to first look at textual evidence for the usage of the term *jñāna-yoga* and the development of its meaning, before examining the historical development of gnostic ideology in South Asia as a movement from outer to inner sacrifice, that is, from the sacrifice of external substances to the sacrifice of oneself. I then present a list of generic characteristics that I believe are useful to delimit a gnostic identity, which cuts across the usual sectarian boundaries that too often fracture the field of Indian philosophy. In a third step, I briefly discuss the antagonism of *karma-yoga* and *jñāna-yoga* to highlight how Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina Gnostics have variously insisted on the cultivation of knowledge as the sole means of liberation, in contrast to the mere ‘business’ of ritual performance. I finally return to doctrinal observations, assessing Vivekananda’s portrayal of *jñāna-yoga* in the passage quoted above, before concluding with remarks on the challenging elitism of this trans-sectarian South Asian current.

¹⁶ The expression of this perspective in Śaṅkara’s thought is discussed in Halbfass 1991: 226–7.

1. Textual Evidence for the Usage of the Term *Jñāna-Yoga* and the Development of its Meaning

In my previous book on Indian philosophical doxography¹⁷ I explained my use of the expression *jñāna-yoga* within the chapter on Jainism (2.1.2.3 ‘The Yoga of Knowledge: Reasoning on *Anekānta-Vāda*’). Therein, I refer to Olle Qvarnström’s¹⁸ translation of the terms *jñānayoga* and *saṃjñānayoga* found in Haribhadra’s *Śāstravārtāsamuccaya* (1.1.20; 1.1.21; 1.1.26; 2.1.156; 9.1.573; 9.1.574; 9.1.575; 9.1.579 + *jñānakriyāyoge* 11.2.682), which dates to the 8th century CE. In brief, I posit that Haribhadra’s understanding of *jñāna-yoga*, as a form of ‘intellectual asceticism’ necessary to free oneself from the bondage of *saṃsāra*, was a conception of spiritual practice similarly shared by the Madhyamaka philosopher Bhāviveka and the Vedāntin Śāṅkara. Otherwise, the expression *jñāna-yoga* is most notoriously known from Śāṅkara’s work (8th century CE), particularly used within his commentary on the *Bhagavadgītā* (2.55; 3.4; 6.47; 14.27; 16.1). It is thus possible to posit that the explicit use of the term *jñāna-yoga* to emically qualify one’s form of practice, as the cultivation of gnosis, had currency already around the turn of the 8th century CE, even though the term occurs earlier in the *Bhagavadgītā*, where it does not explicitly designate a specific ‘type’ of yoga, but rather knowledge as a ‘means’ (yoga)—BhG 3.3, *jñānayogena* (by means of knowledge—where *yogena* is an idiomatic expression of instrumentality) in contrast to ritual (*karma*) performance.

That being said, the BhG associates a kind of Sāṃkhya (arguably different from that found in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (SK)) with that gnostic method (BhG 3.3: *jñānayogena sām̐khyānām*). This *Sāṃkhya* is understood as conveying a knowledge involving the removal of one’s attention from the ‘non-self.’¹⁹ At least, this is how Śāṅkara glossed *sām̐khyānām* in BhG 3.3: *tena sām̐khyānām ātmānātmaviṣayavivekavijñānavatām*. Similarly, according to Rāmānuja (1017-1137) on BhG 16.1: *jñānayogavyavasthitiḥ prakṛtivyuktātmasvarūpavivekaniṣṭhā* (Steadfast adherence to the discrimination between the pure self and the realm of non-self is the quality named ‘stabilization in Jñāna-yoga.’²⁰). The contemplative, apophatic practice of discriminating the self from the non-self is essentially what I argue that yogic Gnosticism in general is all about. It is found articulated in the Upaniṣads already, as in the *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (2.3.6), one of the oldest Upaniṣads, where it is particularly evident in the passages applying the

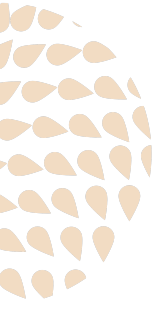
¹⁷ Bouthillette 2020.

¹⁸ Qvarnström 1999: 170–1.

¹⁹ Minor 1980.

²⁰ Translation from Raghavachar 2017: 176 (in PDF unpaginated version).





determinate negation *neti neti* (neither this nor that), ultimately suggesting that “there is nothing else beyond the not” (BU 2.3.6 *na ity anyat param asti*). The determinate negation of precise lists of doctrinal contents, in order to isolate ‘truth,’ is, I argue, the gnostic ‘means’ of knowledge par excellence, something which I suggest developed out of ancient sacrificial practices. In this sense, this ‘method’ (*yoga*) is *jñāna-yoga*, and as a spiritual exercise it can be found beyond the Upaniṣads and the BhG, in Sāṃkhya philosophy and Advaita Vedānta, but also beyond the Brahmanical world, particularly explicit in *Prajñāpāramitā*/Madhyamaka Buddhism and the Kundakunda interpretative framework of Jainism. There have, however, been various ways of interpreting the meaning of Sāṃkhya in the BhG, many suggesting that it boils down to the ‘knowledge of the pure self’ (*śuddhātmatattvavijñānam*).²¹ But this does not contradict my understanding of the generic apophatic methodology of Sāṃkhya, which is attested in the SK. In fact, it only specifies the goal or target of the Sāṃkhyan ‘knowledge’ and ‘path’ (*mārga*).

It is noteworthy that even for the ‘dualist’ (Dvaita) commentator Madhvācārya (1199–1278), though he rejects the association of the systems of Kapila (Sāṃkhya) and Patañjali (Classical Yoga) with the Sāṃkhya and Yoga mentioned in the BhG, for reasons similar to those of Śaṅkara (no God, etc.), he understands the references to Sāṃkhya in the BhG as a kind of knowledge that more or less matches with what we know of the Sāṃkhya system (i.e. in the SK), and the term ‘yoga’ as the actual ‘means’ to achieving precisely that knowledge. Bhavani explains Madhva’s reasoning as follows: “If ‘Sāṃkhya’ is true knowledge of the Para and the Apra tattvas comprising the Supreme Reality, the Jīvas and Prakṛti and its modifications, ‘Yoga’ is the means of acquiring this true knowledge.”²² Indeed, in his commentary on BhG 3.3, Madhva explicitly describes *yoga* as an *upāya* (*yoginām upāyinām*), that is a ‘means’ or *sādhana* thereof.²³ For Madhva, *yoga* is the method for obtaining the knowledge of Sāṃkhya, and it includes *karmayoga*, according to the peculiarities of his Dvaita system, which does not reject the outer performances of ritual sacrifice like the Advaita system does. For us, here, what matters is to acknowledge that, for Madhva, there is an actual ‘method’ or ‘yoga’ of knowledge (*jñāna-yoga*). It is a distinct way of going about attaining liberation. In fact, this is made even more explicit in his *Tātparyā Nirṇaya*, Madhva’s second commentarial work on the BhG. Therein, on BhG 3.3 again, Madhva writes *jñānapracuro yogo jñānayogaḥ*, which I translate as: “The yoga which is ‘concentrated on’/‘filled with’ (*pracura*) knowledge is

²¹ See Bhavani 1995: 54.

²² Bhavani 1995: 67.

²³ Bhavani 1995: 81.

jñāna-yoga.” Nagesh D. Sonde proposes: “The knowledge which promotes wisdom is *jñānayogaḥ*.”²⁴ Here, *jñāna-yoga* is explicitly identified as a distinct ‘instrument’ (*upāya/sādhana*), a *yoga* dedicated to the cultivation of knowledge.

Concerning the Sāṃkhya philosophical system, Ashok Aklujkar observes that, due to the explicitly asserted and continuously maintained importance of ‘correct knowing’ in the long history of the school, “the Sāṃkhya path came to be known as the path of knowledge.”²⁵ This was already the case within the BhG (5.4). The famous Indologist Richard Garbe (1857–1927 CE) contentiously believed that the BhG was originally a Sāṃkhya-Yoga treatise but that it was later reworked into its present form by some follower of the Vedānta.²⁶ In any case, *jñāna-mārga* (the path of knowledge) is a known variant of *jñāna-yoga* and it is possible that its earliest manifestation in Brahmanical literature was one form or another of Sāṃkhya, if only initially as an enumerative (*sāṃkhya* refers to numerals) list of *bandhus* (bonds or connections) to be known by the sacrificial knower (*jñānin*) said to be *yá evāṃ véda (/evāṃ vidān)* “(one) who knows thus.”

To sum up my points here, what I am saying is that: 1. as a term, *jñāna-yoga* appears at least as early as the BhG itself (dates debated between 400 BCE to 200 CE). 2. By the 8th century CE, commentators already identify it with their own path to liberation. 3. By the 13th century CE at the latest, it is already explicitly used by commentators of the BhG to denote a specific form of ‘yoga’ which constitutes a distinct ‘ethical’ approach to liberation that entails being a ‘renunciant’ (for reasons not discussed here but which can be verified against the commentaries I have mentioned) and to exercise an apophatic ‘epistemological’ approach to distinguishing (dialectically) what is the true ‘self’ (*ātman*) from what it is not.

2. Key Historical Markers in the Development of Yogic Gnosticism

Though the origins of yogic Gnosticism may forever be lost to history, there are episodic moments, attested in literature, when this form of knowledge-seeking speculation strengthens and comes to the fore. Traces of the trend can already be found

²⁴ Sonde 2011: 63.

²⁵ Aklujkar 2017: 19.

²⁶ See Dickstein 2015; Garbe 1905; Majumdar 1966: 65.





in the ancient ritual literature of the Hindus known as the *Brāhmaṇa*-s.²⁷ Yet, perhaps the most powerful early expressions of gnostic values in Hindu thought comes from the Upaniṣads. Signe Cohen is explicit about it.

Central to all Upaniṣads is the idea that all humans are bound to an unsatisfying existence by our ignorance, and that true knowledge is the path to liberation. *Jñāna*, or knowledge, is a profound understanding of the reality underlying all appearance. The Upaniṣads differentiate between two forms of knowledge. The lower (*aparā*) knowledge is merely knowledge for its own sake, such as traditional learning and familiarity with sacred scriptures. The higher (*parā*) knowledge, on the other hand, is the intuitive knowledge “by which one grasps the imperishable.” This soteriological knowledge of *brahman* is often imparted by a teacher, although one theistic Upaniṣad suggests that one can also gain knowledge “through the grace of God.” Ignorance (*avidyā*), on the other hand, is that which holds a person back from enlightenment and must be avoided at all costs. Ignorance is often compared to a tangled knot, or to fetters that bind a person to an unsatisfying existence. Upaniṣadic characters who realize their own ignorance often immediately set out on a quest for a knowledgeable teacher. Knowledge leads to liberation (*mokṣa*) from death and rebirth, which is often compared to being released from chains or fetters.²⁸

Early Upaniṣads are particularly known for their gnostic discourses. Aligned with the *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyaṇa and the *Bhagavadgītā*, they come to form the canonical basis known as *Prasthānatrayī* (*The Three Sources*) of the hermeneutics of Vedānta, among which dwells the gnostic Advaita of Śaṅkara.

²⁷ For example, the famous Indian philosopher and second President of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, relates how, in *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, it is said that “by knowledge (*vidyayā*) they ascend to where desires have migrated (*parāgatāḥ*); it is not by offerings (*dakṣinābhiḥ*) nor by ignorant ardour (*avidvāṃsaḥ tapasvinaḥ*)... but only to knowers that that world belongs” *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* X. 5. 4. 16. “We must set up the sacrificial fire within our self. [...] The distinction between external conformity and inward purity is ultimately resolved when the whole of life is interpreted and lived sacrificially” (Radhakrishnan 1953: 675). Early on, already in Vedic times, it was posited that the cultivation of ritual knowledge (*jñāna*), in itself, is a sacrificial act, a ritual accomplishment. Brian K. Smith (1989: 203–8) offers one of the most compelling discussions on the matter.

²⁸ Cohen 2018: 1–2.

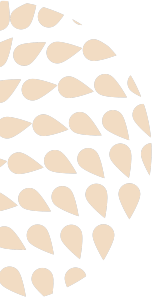
To give an approximate date for the beginnings of the rise to fame of yogic Gnosticism, beyond its early appearance in the Upaniṣads, I take the *Prajñāpāramitā* (*Perfection of Wisdom*) literature²⁹ of Mahāyāna Buddhism and especially its systematic enunciation credited to Nāgārjuna (1st–2nd cents. CE), further developing under the banner of the Madhyamaka school,³⁰ to be an historical marker, followed by the theories attributed to the Jaina Kundakunda (2nd–5th cents. CE)³¹ and the Vedāntin Gauḍapāda (5th–

²⁹ Westerhoff explains that “[t]he composition (or at least the scripturalization) of the *Perfection of Wisdom* texts is characterized by a process of textual expansion followed by textual abbreviation. We can divide the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts into four broad sections: the early phase, the phase of expansion, the phase of contraction (each lasting about two centuries), and a final, tantric phase. The earliest phase (about 100 BCE to 100 CE) sees the appearance of the earliest layer of the *Prajñāpāramitā* texts, a section of the *Perfection of Wisdom* in 8,000 verses (*Aṣṭasahasrikaprajñāpāramitā*), which may go back as far as 100 BCE, though the process of composition of the text is likely to have extended over two centuries. This would date the writing down of the first Mahāyāna texts to the same time as (or possibly earlier than) the scripturalization of the Pāli canon (2018: 93).”

³⁰ Though one may be tempted to identify some degree or another of gnostic ideology within competing schools of Buddhism (i.e. Sautrāntika, Vaibhāṣika, Yogācāra), I argue that the Madhyamaka is the most clearly and prevalently gnostic of them all, standing at the antipode of the Vaibhāṣika Sarvāstivādins, with its staunch negation of *svabhāva*, the ‘inherent characteristic’ or ‘intrinsic nature’ of phenomena. This peculiar determinate negation, axiomatic to its understanding of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), negating the ultimate reality of the ‘world,’ along with the Madhyamika’s theory of two truths and its systematic rejection of views as mere *prapañca* (linguistic and conceptual proliferation), makes it the closest Buddhist cousin of the other gnostic traditions I discuss within these pages, and particularly of the Advaita Vedānta. Advaitins themselves have often observed the distinction between the Madhyamaka and other schools of Buddhism, singularizing the former as entertaining a worldview relatively close to the Advaita and, for this reason, as requiring a separate refutation of its own. One instance of interest comes from the late commentator Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (1540–1640), in his *Siddhāntabindu* on Śaṅkara’s *Daśasloki*. Therein, the Advaitin separates his refutation of the Buddhists into two groups. Those who believe in the ‘momentariness of consciousness’ (*kṣaṇikavijñāna*), which he labels as the ‘Saugatas’ and refutes in one go, and those who endorse the view of the ‘void’ (*śūnya*), which he distinguishes as the Mādhyamikas and refutes separately. Commenting on the *Siddhāntabindu* in his *Saṭika*, K. V. Abhyankar explains that the denomination of ‘Saugata-s’ regroups only the Sautrāntika, Vaibhāṣika, and Yogācāra schools, leaving the Mādhyamikas aside: “*saugatāḥ | sautrāntikavaibhāṣikayogācāramādhyamikabhedena caturvidheṣu bauddheṣv ādyās trayah |* (Abhyankar 1928: 11, shloka 1)” I believe that this distinction between the Buddhists who entertain the view of the ‘momentariness of consciousness’ and the Madhyamaka insistence on emptiness as the absence of *svabhāva*, predicating among other things the determinate negation of the arising and cessation (thus the momentariness) of phenomena, skilfully distinguishes the Madhyamaka as properly ‘gnostic,’ as an ideological stance ‘against the world’ (*contra mundum*), in contradistinction to other schools of Buddhism more ready to accept some or all aspects of phenomena (*dharmas*) as real.

³¹ Concerning the dates of Kundakunda, Johnson (1995: 91–7) explains that the matter is complicated, as usual, with suggestions ranging from the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE up to the early 5th century.





7th cents. CE).³² These thinkers, or rather their textual corpora, brought to the fore and ‘radicalized’ a latent tendency in South Asian ritual speculation in order to insist on the soteriological primacy and superiority of knowledge (*jñāna/prajñā*).³³ Their work reflects the importance of knowledge transmission within the developing institutional frameworks of the times. The period effectively saw a flourishing of monastic establishments.³⁴ In this ‘radical’ and yet institutional Gnosticism, which equally includes the kind of Sāṃkhya philosophy formulated in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (350 to 450 CE), knowledge becomes both the means of sacrifice and its purpose. In brief, it is the knowledge of both *how* the conventional (*saṃvṛti/aparā/prakṛti*) order of the world holds together, and, in contrast, the knowledge as to *why* this order is illusory from an ultimate (*paramārtha/parā/puruṣa*) standpoint, from the perspective of an ideal healthy consciousness, which finally brings therapeutic success from a gnostic point of view.

Though I believe that one could identify other forms of Gnosticism present in South Asia, within these pages I apply the denomination to these ones alone, since they either explicitly acknowledged their path to proceed by means of knowledge alone, using the term *jñāna-yoga*—i.e., Kundakunda Jainism (through Haribhadra Sūri) and Advaita Vedānta (through Śaṅkara)—or they adopted a form of wisdom-oriented therapeutics and hermeneutics in tune with those who did so at a relatively similar period, as did Sāṃkhya, focusing on *vivekajñāna/tattvajñāna* (discriminative knowledge/knowledge of reality) and the Buddhists in the *Prajñāpāramitā* literature (focusing on *prajñā/jñāna* (wisdom/knowledge)). Within these traditions competed a variety of opinions that often conflicted in their understanding of root texts; but my purpose here is not to elucidate every sectarian interpretation of core doctrines. Rather, I present a broad scope of shared assumptions and practices, which allows for a general understanding of yogic Gnosticism and its spiritual exercises. Though highly cryptic and esoteric in its

³² Locating Gauḍapāda is also a complicated issue. The present earliest dating (5th cent. CE) is given by Victor A. Van Bijert (2017: 29), who discusses the competing theories in his note (2). The latest (7th cent. CE) is given by Westerhoff (2018: 212).

³³ For a rich discussion of the notion of *jñāna*, differentiating the various types of ‘knowledge’ to which the term may refer, according to the competing epistemological theories of the Advaita and Nyāya schools, see Bilimoria 1985.

³⁴ For discussions on Buddhist monastic establishments, see Kieffer-Pülz (2000); for Jaina establishments, see Deo (1956). In the Buddhist context, one may suggest that the *Prajñāpāramitā* is a rejection of a well-established institution, which occurred around the turn of the Common Era (from what we know based on archaeological remains). The development of this pre-*Prajñāpāramitā* institution saw a proliferations of lists, such as rules in law and philosophy meant to govern the behaviours and ideologies of the community. As such, these rules were reified in ritual (monastic conduct) and in their essence (*dharma*). It is to this ‘reification’ that the *Prajñāpāramitā* responds.

scholastic forms, this Gnosticism was and continues to be an influential (under)current in the philosophical and ritual landscape of the region and beyond.

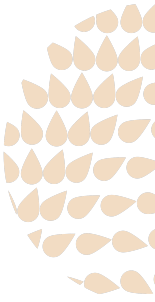
There appears to have been a subtle semiotic shift from the ‘renunciation’ of the early wandering ascetics (the *śramaṇas*) of the second half of the first millennium BCE, for whom the early teachings of archetypal figures like the Jina and the Buddha were formulated, to that of the later monastic institutions, which were already well established and prosperous by the fifth century CE. At least in later gnostic literature, which interests me in this article, renunciation comes to mean not only the abandonment of outer-worldly objects and their related desires—along with the outer sacrificial performances meant to fulfil such desires—but also the cleansing of *karma*, the taming of the senses, and especially the determinate negation³⁵ of inner objects, the realm of beliefs, opinions and the psyche. Gnostic renunciation, in this radical ritual context, can be said to culminate in the relinquishing of ‘views.’³⁶ In this philosophical context, ritual success amounts to complete renunciation, the total abandonment of inner and outer objects of identification. It is here, I argue, where philosophical practice plays a therapeutic function. It is this philosophical ‘practice’ of renunciates which constitutes *jñāna-yoga*.

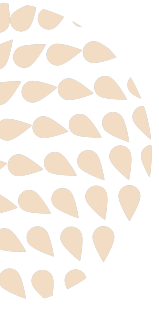
Concerning the *Bhagavadgītā*, it has often been assumed that it teaches a triad of three yogas, including *jñāna-yoga*, but, upon closer inspection, it is not exactly the case. As James Mallinson and Mark Singleton explain,

[c]ontrary to widespread popular and even scholarly belief, the *Bhagavadgītā* does not teach a triad of *karmayoga*, *jñānayoga* and *bhaktiyoga*. While there are five instances in the text of *karmayoga*, the compound word *jñānayoga* appears only twice, and *bhaktiyoga* only once. Moreover, the three never appear together. Many other kinds of—or

³⁵ Borrowing from Georg W. F. Hegel’s notion of ‘determinate negation’ (*Aufheben*), I read the philosophical rituals of gnostic contemplatives as embodied therapeutic practices that aim to establish a ‘determinate negation’ of the world (*contra mundum*) of suffering as symbolically represented in scriptures, where the negated problematic cosmos is not only sacrificed in the flames of reasoning but (symbolically) rescued in the process. *Jñāna-yoga*, as a discipline, is the practice of a taxonomically guided, determinate negation of oneself, renouncing all forms of identifications and (self-)representation via the analytical and dialectical negation of memorized doctrinal taxonomies. Determinate negation becomes particularly poignant in the radical gnostic effort at interrupting the flow of conceptual projections upon the outer and inner senses.

³⁶ On the notion of ‘view’ (*darśana*) and ‘right-view’ (*samyag-darśana*), and the practice of analyzing and relinquishing views in South Asian Gnostic philosophies (promoters of *jñāna-yoga*), see Bouthillette 2020: 14–17.





means to—yoga are also named in the text, as our selections show. Killingley suggests that the notion of the *Bhagavadgītā*'s triad of yogas, which was popularized in the modern period by Swami Vivekananda, may originate with the sixteenth-century commentator Madhusūdana Sarasvatī, who divides the text into six chapters on *karma*, six on *bhakti* and six on *jñāna* (Killingley 2013: 37, n.22).³⁷

While some argue that the triad appears to be a late construct, and this remains debatable,³⁸ *jñāna-yoga* is nonetheless a term found in the *Gītā*.³⁹ Therein, it is associated with the followers of Sāṃkhya⁴⁰ and distinguished from *karma-yoga* (BhG 3.3). Though, later on (BhG 5.4), the two (Sāṃkhya and *karma-yoga*) are said to be leading to the same goal, and thus to be one, separated only by fools. I am tempted to read the union of

³⁷ Mallinson and Singleton 2017: 473–4, n. 7.

³⁸ The triad already appears in the (6th–9th cents. CE) *Bhāgavata Purāna* (11.20.6–8). For a criticism of the theory that the triad of yoga is a late idea, see also Theodor 2021: chs. 2–3.

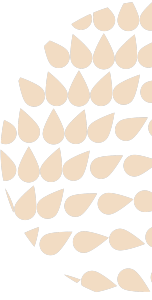
³⁹ While some may argue that the compound *jñānayoga* appears only a couple of times (3.3 and 16.1) in the BhG, if we align the commentaries of four relatively recent commentators, that of Madhusūdana Sarasvatī (1540–1640), Śrīla Viśvanātha Cakravartī Ṭhākura (1626–1708), Śrīla Baladeva Vidyābhūṣaṇa (1700–1793), and Śrīdhara Svāmī (1908–1973), the compound is found within the commentaries on 26 verses, out of the 700 of the entire BhG, for a total 3.71% of the whole. The distribution per verse is as follow: Baladeva; 2.39 Śrīdhara, Baladeva; 2.48 Madhusūdana; 3.1 Viśvanātha; 3.3 Śrīdhara, Viśvanātha; 4.1 Madhusūdana, Viśvanātha, Baladeva; 4.18 Śrīdhara; 5.1 Baladeva; 5.2 Baladeva; 5.4 Baladeva; 5.6 Baladeva; 5.27–28 Viśvanātha; 6.1 Baladeva; 6.3 Śrīdhara; 7.1 Viśvanātha; 7.16 Viśvanātha; 9.1 Viśvanātha; 14.26 Viśvanātha; 15.18 Viśvanātha; 16.1 Śrīdhara, Madhusūdana; 16.5 Madhusūdana; 18.55 Viśvanātha; 18.63 Viśvanātha; 18.66 Viśvanātha; 18.73 Viśvanātha; 18.75 Baladeva. But, to my knowledge, the champion among the old commentators of the BhG who repeatedly uses the term *jñāna-yoga* is Rāmānuja (1017–1137), the chief proponent of the Viśiṣṭādvaita (non-duality with distinctions) school of Vedānta, a form of qualified monism and rival of the Advaita of Śaṅkara. On his own, he uses the compound *jñāna-yoga* while discussing 36 verses of the BhG (over seven times more often than Śaṅkara): 2.10; 2.72; 3.3; 3.5; 3.8; 3.16; 3.18; 3.19; 3.20ab; 3.21; 3.26; 3.29; 3.32; 3.34; 3.35; 3.36; 3.37; 3.41; 3.43; 4.42; 5.1; 5.2; 5.3; 5.4; 5.6; 6.1; 6.2; 12.20; 13.24; 16.1; 16.6; 18.46; 18.47; 18.48; 18.49; 18.63. That is to say, commentators used the compound beyond the two textual passages where it originally appeared in the BhG, going beyond both its textual and semantic contexts.

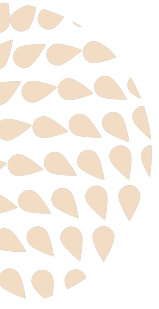
⁴⁰ Knowing the issue to be contentious, though the Sāṃkhya mentioned in the BhG may vary in some way from that formulated in the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, the fact that the *Gītā* already associates Sāṃkhya with *jñāna-yoga*, understood as conveying a knowledge involving the removal of one's attention from the nonself (see Minor 1980), supports my opinion to the effect that the Sāṃkhya philosophical system, as presented in the *Kārikā*, represents a systematic reformulation of earlier gnostic ideas. I believe that the text, as handed down to us, stands as an exemplary enunciation of gnostic yoga, that is, a therapeutic discipline to isolate pure consciousness from what it is not through a systematic analysis of false loci of identification, meant to result in utter dispassionment and renunciation.

these two distinct modes of practice as yet another illustration of the two movements of internalization, which I theorize as effectively sequencing the pedagogy and psychagogy of gnostic yogas: first abandoning the outer world of sensory objects before subsequently abandoning the inner world of mental objects and their associated bondage.

To theorize the development of yogic Gnosticism,⁴¹ I identify two related taxa of sacrificial speculation in South Asia: 1. sacrificial speculation as a main thought species, and 2. self-sacrificial speculation as a specialist subspecies. This should not be taken to mean that there are no other possible taxa: simply, for my purpose, I need only these two. I propose that the taxonomy of South Asian *thought*, which is not to be confused with that of South Asian *people*, is one where, out of a ‘generalist species’ (sacrificial speculation), develops a ‘specialist subspecies’ (self-sacrificial speculation), which should be taken as a sub-category within the broad family of the ‘generalist species.’ The terminology of ‘generalist’ and ‘specialist’ I use here is borrowed from biology. As for species, it plainly refers to families of objects, families of thought, etc. In this context, a generalist species is one which feeds on a wide variety of food and thrives in various environments, whereas the specialist has a limited diet and occupies a much narrower niche. In the present context, that of South Asian thought, the generalist species is that of ‘sacrificial thought’ in general, which feeds on a wide variety of sacrificial rituals able to adapt to various sociocultural ecosystems, Vedic and otherwise. There were not only Brahmins on the vast land of ancient South Asia, and most if not all communities nonetheless had their own sacrificial systems. The self-sacrifice specialist species, for their part, are subspecies of thought encompassing worldviews which narrow their sacrificial scope to that of ‘self-sacrifice,’ adapted to thrive in more restrictive sectarian environments, but with allegedly greater outcomes.

⁴¹ The terms ‘gnostic’ and ‘Gnosticism,’ which I use, respectively, as a qualifier and a noun, are historically and semantically loaded. But this should not prevent one from using them to define some well-known, knowledge-oriented South Asian speculative currents which promoted a certain ‘gnosis’ (a term that is linguistically cognate with the Sanskrit *jñāna*) as their ultimate means of spiritual realization. At the very least, the designation is helpful when contrasting these speculative communities involved in inner/mental forms of ‘ritual’ practices with other competing ones, rather emphasizing one form or another of external/physical ritual performances (ritual sacrifice, penance, and similar enacted performances) in the pursuit of their religious goals. Historically, however, the terms ‘gnostic’ and ‘Gnosticism’ are generally attributed to the Mediterranean sects of the first centuries CE, which were competing with the early Christian Church. Due to their diversity, the exact ritual and doctrinal identities of these heterodox groups remain somewhat of a puzzle. For more scholarly papers discussing gnostic movements from the distant past until today, see Trompf, Mikkelsen, and Johnston 2019. See, also, Bailey 2019; Raschke 2013: 947, Stead 1998.





In sum, to situate the growth of yogic Gnosticism in relation to the development of South Asian philosophy, I propose to taxonomically classify it as a subspecies of the main sacrificial species. I call its taxon ‘self-sacrificial speculation.’ I suggest that it evolved through three successive and overlapping stages of doctrinal formulation.

1. Firstly, there is what philosophers like to call a ‘pre-systematic’ or ‘pre-philosophical period,’ which I prefer to call the ‘canonical period,’ marked by the composition and the selection of foundational literature, such as the major *Upaniṣads* and the *sūtra* literature of the *śramaṇa* movements.
2. Secondly, more or less ‘systematic’ philosophical thought emerges from canonical literature with the progressive enunciation of rigorous epistemologies, formulated in scholastic, commentarial treatises based on the canons. This is what I refer to as the ‘post-canonical period.’ The earlier segment of this period is also marked by the composition of *sūtras* establishing the main tenets of the various Brahmanical *darśana* (philosophical) systems of thought, like the Sāṃkhya, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika schools, which somewhat retained their allegiance to the Vedic canon of the main sacrificial taxon.
3. Eventually, a third movement gained in popularity, which I identify with the broader dissemination of yogic Gnosticism, namely the internalization *qua* determinate negation of philosophical doctrines through the formulation of a twofold scheme of reality, positing a taxonomical distinction between the conventional (*saṃvṛti*) and the absolute (*paramārtha*) truths (*satyas*). Though such ideas can already be found germinating in the previous literature, if only as early hermeneutical schemes,⁴² in a later period they develop further and lead to concrete changes in religious practices and literature. These changes are hypothetically related to social changes – the relations between the laity and the monastic orders or the progressive institutionalization of the same orders, for example –, though the precise description of those social changes and the way they affected

⁴² For a history of the development of the two truths doctrine in Buddhism, from its early hermeneutical use to its later philosophical formulation, see Buescher 2005.

philosophy is no easy task, if not often outright impossible, due to the scarcity of data on the matter at this point.⁴³

The idea that knowledge is twofold, with a lower (*aparā*) and higher (*parā*) kind, the highest of which alone has genuine soteriological competence, finds its most potent, early expression in the Upaniṣads. In the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.1.1–6), for example, it is intimately related to the idea that the path of knowledge is superior to that of ritual performance, the former standing as higher knowledge while the latter designates the lower one, the path of ‘fools’ who ritually strive for temporary heavens (1.2.8–9).

1. Brahmā arose as the first among gods, as the creator of all, as the guardian of the world. To Atharvan, his firstborn son, he disclosed the knowledge of *brahman*, of all knowledge the root.
2. The knowledge of *brahman*, which Brahmā taught him—both the higher and the lower—Atharvan of old disclosed to Aṅgir, Aṅgir to Bhāradvāja Satyavāha, Bhāradvāja to Aṅgiras.
3. Śaunaka, a wealthy householder, once went up to Aṅgiras in the prescribed manner and asked: ‘What is it, my lord, by knowing which a man comes to know this whole world?’
4. This is what Aṅgiras told him. Two types of knowledge a man should learn—those who know *brahman* tell us—the higher and the lower.
5. The lower of the two consists of the Ṛgveda, the Yajurveda, the Sāmaveda, the Atharvaveda, phonetics, the ritual science, grammar, etymology, metrics, and astronomy; whereas the higher is that by which one grasps the imperishable.
6. What cannot be seen, what cannot be grasped, without colour, without sight or hearing, without hands or feet: what is eternal and all-pervading, extremely minute, present everywhere—That is the immutable, which the wise fully perceive.⁴⁴

⁴³ For a discussion on the difficulty of reflecting on the social, economic, and political events that might have affected the development of the Buddhist religion in general, among other traditions, see Westerhoff 2018: 5–6.

⁴⁴ MU 1.1.1–6. As translated in Olivelle 1998: 437.





Such early expressions in the Upaniṣads of the two truths suggests that, already in remote times, the gnostic practice of philosophical contemplation on ‘higher truth’ was understood as rooted in, and coming out of, sacrificial practice and ritual speculation. Here, the ‘lower truth,’ besides its derogatory connotation, also carries the meaning of being prior, as a preparatory foothold, to the ascent to a higher stage of sacrificial practice for Brahmins. In my view, the dismissal of ‘lower knowledge’ recalls the attitude of an insecure teenager who, upon looking back at his or her childhood toys, feels, out of shame, the impulsive need to dismiss the ‘superficiality’ of their earlier, tender imagination. The rhetorical shaming of ‘lower’ ritualism is meant to impel those who perform outer sacrifice to now engage in its ‘mature’ inner form, self-sacrifice. In Brahmanical context, it is a rhetorical injunction to move from *dharmajijñāsā* (the desire to know *dharma*) to *brahmajijñāsā* (the desire to know Brahman),⁴⁵ in other words to complete the study of sacrificial hermeneutics with the ‘desire to know Brahman,’ to realize the ultimate reality and adopt renunciation. The esoteric Upaniṣads, along with the knowledge they promote, are meant for no one else than actual sacrifice performers, aka Brahmins. Those who were trained in cooking the world (*lokapati*) are now invited to proceed with cooking themselves.⁴⁶ Hence, I believe this epistemic diachrony represents both 1. a historical development process, where sacrifice and its associated ritual speculation were being internalized—and not merely rejected, as often

⁴⁵ I am referring to the ‘desire to know *dharma*’ (*dharmajijñāsā*) of Jaimini’s *Mīmāṃsāsūtra*, devoted to the study of the external sacrifice commented upon in the *Brāhmaṇas*, followed by the ‘desire to know Brahman’ (*brahmajijñāsā*), articulated in Bādarāyaṇa’s *Brahmasūtra*, devoted to the study of the internal sacrifice promoted by the Upaniṣads. Aleksandar Uskokov (2022: 13) argues that it is obvious that the latter (*Brahmasūtra*) modelled itself on the former (*Mīmāṃsāsūtra*). On similar grounds, with further evidence which I discuss in my monograph, I believe that this Vedic sacrificial paradigm, borrowed from the *Brāhmaṇas*, carries on within the gnostic *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (SK). The technical terminology of *jijñāsā* is one proof of this, as attested in the first verse of the *Kārikā*: “From the intense turmoil (*abhighātāt*) occasioned by the triad of distresses (*duḥkhatraya*), [arises] a desire for inquiring (*jijñāsā*) into the means (*hetau*) to warding (*apaghātake*) that (*tad*) off (SK 1.a. *duḥkhatrayābhighātaj jījñāsā tad apaghātake hetau* | Translation is mine).”

⁴⁶ The cooking analogy has rich traditional precedents in South Asia. For example, reading into the Vedas and their *Brāhmaṇas*, Malamoud highlights the expression *lokapati* (to cook the world) and the idea that man ‘cooks’ the world and himself by performing the rites (Malamoud 1989). It is also known that, before leaving the world to become a renunciate, the Hindu *saṃnyāsīn* performs his own death rituals. He is then said to internalize the sacrificial fire. As Marcelle Saindon explained in her doctoral study, the death ritual, as a last *saṃskāra*, is meant to ‘cook’ and perfect the deceased body, which is then turned into an offering, purified for the sake of the last journey (Saindon 1997, 2000). By analogy, the renunciate who internalizes the sacrificial fire, who performs his own death rituals, is signaling that he is now being cooked through self-sacrifice. His ‘self’ becomes the offering to be prepared and purified in anticipation of liberation. In that sense, metaphorically speaking, one can say that the scriptures guiding the renunciate’s self-sacrifice act as cookbooks, and that their students are the materials being ‘cooked.’

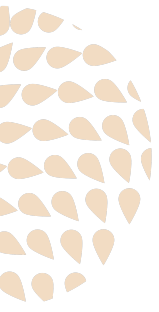
assumed —, giving way to self-sacrifice as a higher value;⁴⁷ and 2. a pedagogic and psychagogic progressive sacrificial path towards an ever-deeper internalization of ritual knowledge.

Based on consensual dates produced by previous scholars, I propose the following progression of sacrificial speculation leading to gnostic philosophy:

1. The sacrificial speculation generalist species (1500? BCE onwards)
 - a. Canonical – Vedic corpus (1500? BCE onwards)
 - b. Post-canonical – commentaries and *sūtras* on Vedic corpus (8th–7th cents. BCE onwards)
 - c. Internalization and renunciation – *Upaniṣads* and non-literary *śramaṇa* thought (7th cent. BCE onwards)

⁴⁷ This means that, contrary to some hypotheses (notably Bronkhorst 2007), I am suggesting that even non-Brahmanical traditions, like Buddhism and Jainism, had a certain working knowledge of the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads*. Though they may have enjoyed separate developments, they retained their own version of the (self-) sacrificial system. Besides the numerous points of correspondence I am highlighting within these pages, my reasoning follows that of John Gall's (1975) law, a rule of thumb in system design, to the effect that "a complex system that works is invariably found to have evolved from a simple system that works." The history of South Asian thought systems, taking sacrifice as a paradigmatic datum structuring a common knowledge and experience from which different social groups departed to either internalize sacrifice further—as in gnostic streams of thought—or to denounce the belief in the supernatural realm associated with it, as with the pragmatic and sceptical *Cārvākas*, illustrates this pattern. Even if a new system of knowledge does not actually reproduce the same schemes of thought found in the earlier one from which it departed, by adopting novel means of systematization and argumentation, for example, it continues to share an underlying foundation of knowledge. Jürgen Renn (2020: 82) explains a similar development pattern in the general context of scientific knowledge. "Typically, scientific controversies are not resolved by victory, but rather by the development and subsequent transformation of a system of knowledge into something new—something in which the original question has changed or even lost its meaning. But even when no party clearly prevails, one of the opposing positions may have a greater impact on the emergence of a novel system. In any case, both antagonistic positions can be recognized, in hindsight, as alternative interpretations of the same underlying foundation of shared knowledge. As I have emphasized before, this is precisely the hallmark of a more developed system of knowledge: it allows for a reconstruction of earlier positions while it cannot itself be expressed in terms of the previous framework." Renn insists that, regarding the historical development of knowledge systems, we are not looking at a situation where winners take all. Old knowledge systems are not completely eradicated with the arrival of new and better-performing ones. Whatever was sound and useful in them—the analogical principles of ancient sacrifice for example—is preserved in one way or another, perhaps reconceptualized in novel terms by new systems, and continues to exist through them, as I argue is the case with the continuity of ancient sacrificial thought found within *śramaṇa* speculations on self-sacrifice (renunciation). The specialization and institutionalization of sacrificial renunciation eventually lead to various streams of South Asian Gnosticism.





2. The self-sacrificial speculation specialist subspecies (7th–5th cents. BCE onwards)
 - a. Canonical – *Upaniṣads* and *śramaṇa sūtra* literature (7th–5th cents. BCE onwards)
 - b. Post-canonical – scholastic *sūtras*, commentaries, and *śāstra* literature (1st cent. CE onwards)
 - c. Internalization and renunciation – gnostic literature (1st–2nd cents. CE onwards)

One can immediately notice that the generalist main species and the specialist subspecies overlap. The ‘interiorization and renunciation’ accident of the first intersects with the ‘canonical’ accident of the second. This intersection may be seen as a period of gestation during which ideas about ‘self-sacrifice’ were germinating within various communities who were experimenting with them, under the guidance of various sect leaders, of Brahmanical origins or not, like the Buddha and the Jina, before the teachings of these leaders are eventually systematically recorded in structured corpora: the *sūtras* and so on.

I insist again that though these periods are given an approximate beginning, they are open-ended. This means that their literary production does not end when a new taxon emerges. It should also be noted that the Buddhist and Jaina canons were collected and written down much later than the initial teachings of their archetypal founders, and that various canons were formed over time, supporting various ritual taxonomies.⁴⁸

The fact that I ended my list with the literature promoting Gnosticism in no way means that this literature is some kind of logical *conclusion*, or the *apex* of South Asian

⁴⁸ For the Jaina canon, Johnson explains that “Jaini suggests some time prior to the second council at Mathura in the fourth century CE. But the final redaction was not made and committed to writing until the end of the fifth or beginning of the sixth century (1995: 5).” As for the Buddhist canon, the *Online Oxford Bibliographies* remind us that “[t]he earliest extant complete canon is the Pāli *Tipiṭaka* of the Theravada school, which tradition holds was compiled during a series of councils held by learned monks after the death of the Buddha. This canon was originally transmitted orally and probably written down in the mid-1st century BCE in Sri Lanka, achieving its current state by the time Buddhaghosa wrote his commentaries in the 5th century (Viedlinger 2014).” However, Richard Salomon (2018: ch. 2, ‘Buddhist Texts and Canons’) reminds us that “[t]he three independent Buddhist canons that have come down to us in complete form are preserved in Pali, Tibetan, and Chinese. Taken together, these three canons are fundamental to most of the Buddhist traditions of today, but they by no means represent the entirety of Buddhist traditions, and neither are their contents the same. In fact, these canons differ not only in their contents but also in their overall structure and even in some fundamental conceptions.”

thought.⁴⁹ This would imply falling into an emic kind of rhetoric. It certainly does not mean, either, that South Asian philosophy ends there, with *jñāna-yoga*/gnostic yogas, and that no other subspecies of thought developed afterwards. This is simply not the case. My periodization concludes at this point because Gnosticism is the kind of thought that interests me in this study. Moreover, my point is to highlight two consecutive movements of internalization dealing with different sets of literature which have come to determine the identity of yogic Gnosticism. My periodization suggests that, historically, as far as the literature allows us to see, at least two paradigmatic shifts can be identified in the development of gnostic yogas. These are likely taking place for reasons including but going beyond the realm of sacrificial speculation and philosophy: social changes for example. Yet, what I find fascinating is that these two shifts in perspective actually define the sacrificial ethos of yogic Gnosticism. I would list them as follows:

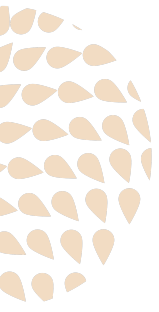
1. Moving away from the desire-driven external sacrifice and the realm of the senses, like the renunciates of old, by internalizing the truth of scriptures.
2. Abandoning the inner world taxonomically discovered through scriptures, the sacrificial truth initially internalized, to totally dissolve the inner and outer world dichotomy, as in the later non-dual gnostic paths.⁵⁰

I believe that these two ‘shifts’ represent two cumulative attitudes to renunciation, a progressive deepening of the semiotic of self-sacrifice, supported by two respective sets of scriptures (i.e. Abhidharma Buddhism and Prajñāpāramitā literature, the *karmakāṇḍa* and *jñānakāṇḍa* parts of the Vedas, the unconventional (*niścaya*) perspective (*naya*) and the traditional/conventional (*parampara/vyavahāra*) doctrinal interpretation of Jaina scriptures in Kundakunda’s hermeneutics, or, again, the superior (*śreyān*) therapeutic

⁴⁹ I am wary of orthogenetic readings of history, like the one made influential within Indology by Johannes Cornelis Heesterman, in his *Brahmin, Ritual and Renouncer* (1964). Though thought species invariably evolve out of prior ones, I see no solid justification to posit a singular and linear development of thought within cultures, progressively culminating in some ‘higher’ forms or *Gestalten*.

⁵⁰ Though it is tempting to associate these two consecutive movements of internalization with the two types of meditation developed in tandem in Buddhist practice, calm meditation (*śamatha*) and insight meditation (*vipaśyanā*), since there are obvious similarities, I do not explore this avenue further in these pages. At the moment, my approach is confined to making more general observations able to cut across the usual sectarian boundaries of the region. However, one may observe that, in the context of the two sequences of Buddhist meditation, the process of cultivating *vipaśyanā* (super-seeing/clear-seeing) is of particular interest to Gnostics and cannot but be sustained by a taxonomical practice akin to the Abhidharmic ‘discrimination of dharmas’ (*dharmapracicaya*) resulting in insight (*prajñā/paññā*) into reality. As for *śamatha*, the absence of passion resulting from basic renunciation, it is a prerequisite for the former.





means of Sāṃkhya compared to the other ‘conspicuous’ (*dr̥ṣṭavat*) means available (at SK 1.b, 2)), and that they are concretely identifiable within the various spiritual exercises of gnostic yogas.

Concerning the systematic esoteric and ritualistic speculations of Tantra, consensually said to develop in Buddhist circles around the 3rd century CE,⁵¹ particularly under the influence of Yogācāra Buddhism⁵² and Śaivism (devoted to the Hindu god Śiva), which itself evolved from ascetic pre-tantric Śaiva sects such as the Pāśupātas,⁵³ it can well be said to emerge both in reaction to and in continuity with the speculations of Gnostics. Hence my periodization might also be of some significance for scholars in the field. The same structure may perhaps be pertinent for colleagues working on Haṭhayoga, Rājayoga and related Brahminical forms of yoga. Like *jñāna-yoga*, none of these methods suddenly came out of nowhere to exist in isolation.

The example of Tantra also suggests that the two periods of ‘internalization,’ which I located at each end of my two taxa, are not the only ‘internalizing’ episodes to occur in South Asian sacrificial practices. Rather, both seem to partake of an ongoing dialogical exchange, with back-and-forth movements, and, thus, offer instances of *continuity* and *correspondence* within an otherwise highly fragmented sectarian landscape, promoting either internal or external forms of rituals. The pattern was highlighted already by Manuel Lopez in the context of the Buddhist Buddhaguhya’s doxographical classifications found in two commentaries on the *Mahāvairocanaḥhisambodhi Tantra* (8th cent. CE). Lopez explains:

Buddhaguhya classifies the new tantras around a dichotomy that will become very important in later tantric thought: external vs. internal tantras. This dichotomy, in which “exterior” practices are inferior to “interior” ones, will help organize new tantras in a hierarchical way.⁵⁴

This later Tantra-related doxographical classification of external rituals as ‘lower’ forms of practice, in contradistinction to internal ones, perpetuates a long, critical and dialectical tradition, predating the formulation of Tantras. It was undeniably influenced

⁵¹ See Westerhoff 2018: 11.

⁵² Pursuing a soteriological methodology different from that of the Madhyamaka, Yogācāra thought seeks to transmute signs (*dharma*s), along with the semantic and causal relations, which ostensibly exist between them, rather than negating them in its pursuit of liberation.

⁵³ See Sanderson 2009.

⁵⁴ Lopez 2018: 7–8.

by gnostic currents of thought, which invariably favoured the internal forms of sacrifice.

Discussing the development of tantric esoteric rituals from Vedic India to Buddhist Japan, Richard K. Payne observes:

[t]he transition from Vedic ritualism to tantric yoga is often equated with the interiorization of ritual (Payne 2002). This process began in India very early; references to it are found in the *Upaniṣads*. According to Yael Bentor, the Vedic fire ritual already had an internalized form by the time *homa* was adapted into a tantric Buddhist context (Bentor 2000: 595). Ritual practices may be interiorized in a variety of ways (Bentor identifies five, p. 596), including homologies between human physiology (such as bodily heat or *gtum mo*, and the digestive processes) and the votive fire, and a mentally visualized performance of a ritual. While in some Indic interpretations this internalized ritual became not only an acceptable substitute but was even more highly valorized than a physical performance of a ritual, in at least Yixing's understanding the physical performance was preferable (Strickmann 1983: 443).⁵⁵

Before Vedic ritualism could produce tantric yogas, quite a lot happened in the realm of South Asian sacrificial speculation. One such crucial development is *jñāna-yoga*.

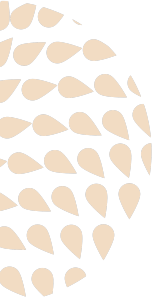
Payne's remarks about the fact that in some doctrinal *milieux* the internalized version (the substitute or negation) of the previous external ritual order is considered as a 'higher' form of practice is a *topos* constantly accompanying the various manifestations of 'internalization' occurring on the subcontinent and beyond.⁵⁶ It is a recurrent object of debate in the ancient literature. It was certainly the case for *jñāna-yogins*, who had no doubt about their elevated position, just as it was earlier for the *śramaṇa* renunciates who rejected householders' ritual models.

In turn, these debates between the proponents of internal and external ritual forms fostered a perpetual back and forth movement in South Asian religious *praxis*, where various communities crystallized their respective identity in response to one another's stance, promoting one form or another of externalization or internalization of ritual norms; all claiming to be the highest, or rather the *only* vehicle of (spi)ritual success.

⁵⁵ Reference to Bentor 2000, in Payne 2011: 1046.

⁵⁶ Bhikkhu Anālayo 2021, for example, explores and criticizes four examples of what he terms "superiority conceit" in Buddhism.





For example, from the *Brhadāraṇyakabhāṣyavārtika* of the Vedāntin Sureśvara (8th cent. CE), we learn, that,

[t]hat which has ultimately to be known, which is initially unknown and which transcends the individual knower and his knowledge and its objects – that can be known in this world from the Veda and from no other source. (BBV 1.4.339)⁵⁷

Similarly, by negating a prior list of ‘lower’ means, as is usually the case for most claims of superiority, the Brahmanical *Anuḡītā* asserts the superiority of *gnosis*.

Not *buddhi*, nor sense organs, nor gods, nor Vedas, nor sacrifice, nor (holy) men, nor asceticism, nor heroism can lead to that place, which the owners of knowledge reach... (MBh 14, 46.48a–c).⁵⁸

It is precisely this elitist Gnostic discourse which interests me within this study.

3. Generic Characteristics of Yogic Gnosticism

I would now like to present a minimal list of ten features which, I argue, are general characteristics broadly delimiting the identity of South Asian Gnostics. By stating them here, I want to highlight the main lines of inquiry I am pursuing within my wider research on South Asian Gnostics. For the sake of brevity, I only provide some basic examples for each point.

In general, I propose that a gnostic yogi:

1. Is preoccupied with knowledge (*jñāna/prajñā*).

- The ‘gnosis’ which preoccupies Gnostics can be given different names, depending on the tradition and sectarian context. Along with *jñāna* (knowledge) and *prajñā* (intelligence/wisdom), we may list *vivekakhyāti* (right knowledge), *saṃvit* (transcendental knowledge/cognitive consciousness), or *bodhi* (supreme knowledge/enlightenment), for example. The latter term, in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is particularly poignant in the designation of certain advanced practitioners, as *bodhisattvas*. The expression is often translated as an ‘awakened being,’ but it could also metaphorically be interpreted as a ‘being of wisdom,’ a ‘being on the path of wisdom,’ or a ‘learned being’ which is the

⁵⁷ Translation from Saraswati and Alston 1997: 325.

⁵⁸ AG 48. As translated by Vassilkov 2002: 243.

- common meaning of being a ‘Gnostic.’ The term *gnostikos*, a common adjective in Classical Greek, originally denoted a person of higher intelligence or talent, a learned person possessing a rare knowledge. As for the term *jñāna*, it is also sometimes given additional qualification, as in *tattvajñāna* (the categorical/metaphysical ‘knowledge of reality’), *vivekajñāna* (the ‘discriminative knowledge’ of metaphysical reality), and so on.
2. Posits a dual mode of knowledge (*dve vidye*): lower and higher (conventional and ultimate).
 - The idea of a lower (*aparā*) and higher (*parā*) knowledge or truth already appears in the Upaniṣads, as in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.1.1–6), for example, where it is intimately related to the idea that the path of knowledge is superior to that of conventional sacrifice. Yet, the notion of ‘two truths’ comes to serve as a crucial hermeneutic strategy within other non-Vedic gnostic traditions competing with the Vedānta, most famously in Nāgārjuna’s *Madhyamaka* and Kundakunda’s Jainism, which notoriously influenced Gauḍapāda and Śaṅkara’s Advaita. I suspect that a comparable twofold division of knowledge can be detected in Sāṃkhya as well (*prakṛti/puruṣa*).
 3. Posits that freedom (*mokṣa*) is related to higher (*parā*) knowledge.
 - Somewhat esoteric in nature, as it is generally resting on the determinate negation of the conventional knowledge conveyed by the traditional doctrine, the higher knowledge or gnosis sought after by Gnostics is considered the only antidote to ignorance, the root cause of bondage to the desire-driven wheel of transmigration.
 4. Posits that bondage (*bandha*) is an illusion/ignorance (*ajñāna/avidyā*) stemming from a lower (*aparā*) misconceived knowledge.
 - Bondage is commonly considered as one form or another of all-encompassing ignorance projected onto reality, leading one to grasp at properties which are actually not really present within the perceived object of desire. One can here think of ignorance as the result of one’s *karma*. But, more accurately, it acts as a self-imposed and inhibitory taxonomy, a certain reified worldview, which is taken for reality itself and reinforced every time it is repeated through customary analytical choices, through ‘conventional thinking’ and its corollaries: ‘ritual thinking’ and ‘ritual action.’
 5. Posits a correct (*samyak*) form of lower knowledge found in scriptures (*āgama*).
 - Every gnostic tradition builds its particular gnostic hermeneutics out of the foundational texts of their own traditional affiliation, the Abhidharma for the





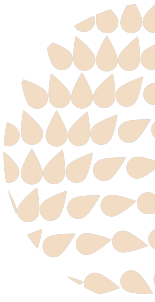
- Madhyamaka, the Jaina canon for Kundakunda, the Vedas for Śaṅkara, and so on. They all consider their own foundational literature as the best of all conventional or non-ultimate views.
6. Posits that higher knowledge stems from a determinate negation (*neti neti*) of this correct form of lower knowledge.
 - Every gnostic tradition applies a particular kind of dialectical hermeneutics onto their own traditional teachings to establish, or at least point to, higher knowledge. For example, one can here think of the famous repetitive negations formulated in the Buddhist *Heart Sūtra* where, along with the five aggregates constitutive of the self, according to Abhidharma doctrine, each and every *dharma* is said to be without the determining characteristics allowing one to distinguish it from others. A similar pattern of repeated negation, directed towards objects of grasping, inner and outer, associated with a lower knowledge, is also found in Śaṅkara's *Daśaślokī*. Engaging in this particular dialectical contemplation of the categories established in canonical literature amounts to actual yogic practice in a gnostic context. It is conceived as a threefold process.
 7. Embeds the transmission and assimilation of knowledge in a threefold scheme of cumulative wisdom amounting to 1. hearing (*śruta*) the scriptures, 2. reflecting (*cintā*) on their meaning, and 3. contemplating (*bhāvana*) the insight gained from their determinate negation.
 - Śaṅkara cites from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU 2.4.5/ 4.4.21) what is probably the first recorded instance of the famous sequence of three activities South Asian Gnostics have commonly used to refer to the gradual process of acquiring knowledge: hearing/*śravaṇa*; thinking/*manana*; and meditating/*dhyāna*). Kengo Harimoto suggests that Śaṅkara understands this threefold process of knowledge acquisition as 'yoga' proper.⁵⁹ I have already discussed elsewhere how the threefold scheme variously recurs in Buddhism, Jainism, and Vedānta.⁶⁰
 8. Ritually performs self-sacrifice (*ātmaparityāga*) as the means (*yoga*) and result (*yoga*) of knowledge, through an institutionally codified and supervised renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*), within a lineage (*parampara*).

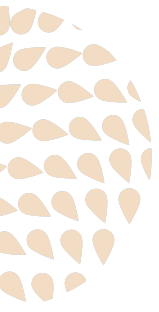
⁵⁹ The passage quoted by Śaṅkara is: "[Ātman] has to be heard, contemplated, and realized" (*śrotavyo mantavyo nididhyāsitavyaḥ*, BĀU 2.4.5/ 4.4.21). See Harimoto 2021: 67.

⁶⁰ See Bouthillette 2020: 34, 123. For further discussions on how conceptual practices like learning, reasoning, and meditation could generate non-conceptual knowledge or knowledge of the non-conceptual, insisting on the difficulty of separating 'philosophical' problems of truth from those related to self-transformation or 'spirituality,' see Fiordalis 2021.

- Just as in ritual sacrifice one must know exactly what is to be sacrificed and when, lest the whole rite be spoiled, gnostic yogas establish the correct means of self-sacrifice, the determinate negation without which one's renunciation is misguided. Self-sacrifice, the ultimate result of gnostic renunciation, requires a determinate perception of the world and of the self. In a certain way, one may say that Gnostics professionalized and institutionalized the contemplative practice of renunciation through philosophical inquiry, giving way to scholasticism and variform theologies, politics, and self-cultures.⁶¹
9. Internalizes renunciation at two cognitive levels: sensory (*indriya*) and intellectual (*buddhi*).
- In conformity with their 'two-truths' hermeneutics, gnostic yogas distinguish between a 'lower' and 'higher' kind of renunciation, where a prior, basic level is concerned with the external or coarse world of objects and worldly conventions—the world as described in foundational literature—which is eventually perfected, purified, and internalized deeper through a second level of renunciation, directed at subtler inner mental representations, like views, the world of concepts and

⁶¹ The knowledge of both the means and results of renunciation are laid out in scriptures through various taxonomies. The task of traditional institutions is to preserve and transmit the insight and lived experience of these scriptures through a legitimate process involving trustworthy (*āpta*) teachers and fit (*adhikārin*) students. The insight of the scriptures is revealed through a careful exegetical study of doctrinal taxonomies. Within Buddhism, this knowledge is generally referred to as the wisdom gained from 'hearing' (*śruta*). A related semantic is reflected in other traditions (e.g. in Advaita the threefold process is generally listed as: *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana*). This doctrinal taxonomy is meant to be reflected upon in a critical and generally dialectical manner. For example, the insight of the Buddhist *Prajñāpāramitā* corpus is revealed through a carefully guided, determinate negation of Abhidharma categories. In this context, the emptiness of *dharma*s (phenomena) does not signify that nothing exists at all, as in some extreme nihilism, but simply that *dharma*s have no inherent nature (*svabhāva*) of their own. The knowledge gained from this rational engagement with scriptures is referred to by Buddhists as the wisdom gained from 'thinking' (*cintā*). Finally, the transformative consequence of this insight in one's life depends on one's level of understanding, and one's degree of insight is reflected in one's daily performance of renunciation. The fruition of meditative insight in one's life is generally referred to by Buddhists as the wisdom gained from 'cultivation/meditation' (*bhāvana*). The ideal teacher, as with the prototypical example set by the Buddha himself in the early *sūtras*, 1. adapts the teachings (the means of *jñāna-yoga*) to the capacity of the students, to adequately stimulate growth; 2. evaluates the student's progression in understanding (the result of *jñāna-yoga*: renunciation) through philosophical questioning and behavioural criticism; and 3. progressively reveals evermore refined teachings as the student progresses along the path of renunciation. This means that, as a norm, *jñāna-yoga* is a gradual path of insight cultivation. A similar pedagogical and psychagogical approach is articulated in the famous end-story of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (8.7.1–8.12.6), where Indra and Virocana approach their guru, Prajāpati, for instructions about the elusive 'self' (*ātman*). Śaṅkara commented upon this progressive teaching method on several occasions and adopted it himself (see Bouthillette 2020: 160–3).





psychology. These two domains of renunciation, outer and inner, represent the two levels of doctrinal internalization generally promoted by all forms of South Asian Gnosticism.

10. Practices philosophy (*tattvābhyāsa*) in order to internalize both levels of renunciation.

- Gnostic philosophical practice supports these two dimensions of ritual renunciation, with a particular focus on the latter. It is not uncommon for both domains to be distinguished along a typology of ‘lower’ and ‘higher.’ In this precise context, my feeling is that the hierarchy indicates cumulative stages, wherein the higher requires the lower to rise above itself, rather than a simplistic rhetoric of better or worse, of true or false. In this context, knowledge, or *gnosis* (*jñāna/prajñā*), which is the aim of gnostic philosophical practice, comes to those who apply themselves to harnessing their volitional and analytical processes, to become ‘disarmed’ and freed from the distorting cognitive bonds superimposed daily upon the variegated objects of reality by habitual tendencies (*saṃskāras*). To sustain renunciation, gnostic philosophical practices reform perception and behaviour, something they achieve through analogical and dialectical schemes built on a given taxonomy. In gnostic philosophical practice, one trains to recognize how conventional cognition, like most complex systems, ultimately comes to oppose its own basic function.⁶² Left unchecked, unexamined, basic cognition becomes ignorance.

One could reduce this list of ten to two main demarcating characteristics: 1. the practice of knowledge, and 2. the practice of renunciation. Both can be said to represent the epistemological and ethical dimensions of one essential operation that sets yogic Gnosticism apart from other forms of yoga: ‘negation’ as a way of knowing and living under which both determinate negation and self-abnegation are subsumed. Gnostic philosophy provides both the parameters for doctrinal contemplation and for ethical living, the two aspects of the gnostic practice that are meant to mirror one another. In other words, I argue that the gnostic practice of philosophy sustains both the seeker’s quest for knowledge and ritual self-sacrifice within a given institution or lineage. Consequently, the more a Gnostic trains in philosophy, the more knowledgeable and self-detached the Gnostic is supposed to become. In the same way, knowledge and self-detachment are here understood as two sides of the same coin. Whatever does not promote self-sacrifice, such as egoism, self-promotion, self-grasping, and so on, is taken

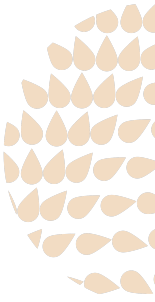
⁶² See John Gall’s (1975) rule of general systemantics number four: “Complex systems tend to oppose their own proper function.”

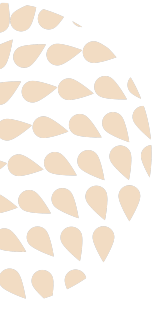
as plain ignorance. Knowledge is the antidote to such fetters. To gain knowledge thus means to deepen renunciation, and *vice versa*. To become proud and boastful of one's knowledge and learning is to turn medicine into poison. It is the proof of one's ignorance and is the downfall of the Gnostic. Just as the Buddhist *Heart Sūtra* points out that there is no ignorance, there is no knowledge to cling to.

In the context of gnostic yogas, the practice of philosophy represents a 'liminal' state, to borrow from the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner (1920–1983). As a method or a means of acquiring a new status, through knowledge, for example, gnostic philosophy represents a transitional stage in the formation of the disciple, as opposed to a permanent status or final destination. The cultivation of philosophy in South Asian gnostic yogas is carefully schematized by competing sects into somewhat coherent contemplative 'paths,' referred to as *mārgas* in Sanskrit, which are meant to permanently transform the status of the initiate in a codified manner, conveying along the way hierarchical ranks of insights recognizable by the community through stereotypical behavioral manifestations (generosity, calmness, gentleness, etc.). Their end goal, the destination of the contemplative and philosophical journey, I argue, lies not in philosophizing itself, but rather in the quieting of arguments and disputes, the very collapsing and dissolution of outer and inner dialectics; in other words, the end of philosophy.⁶³

In a narrative context, the transition offered by the practice of gnostic philosophy may be represented as a move away from the daily temptations of (social) conventions, which are emically depicted as motivated by desire, ignorance, aversion, and the economy of conventional worldly rituals. One is then said to have abandoned home, the comfort of family, or the wealth deriving from having a princely status. The liminality of contemplative life is then to be found in the potentiality of an existential movement from a 'lower' state of consciousness (bound by desires fuelled by duality) to a 'higher' one (freed of desire and dualism); a conversion movement motivated and facilitated by the practice of philosophical inquiry: determining the cause of suffering, for example. The ideal renunciate is commonly said to avoid the trappings of mundane life by seeking refuge in solitude, to favour an allegedly 'higher' mode of life which, although reclusive, is usually embedded in a monastic institutional framework. Within this highly regulated institutional context, gnostic philosophical studies teach one how to

⁶³ In a similar fashion, but for diverging reasons, Wittgenstein suggests that one to whom everything becomes clear, being freed of confusion through the practice of philosophical therapy, may quit doing philosophy: "The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to – the one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question." (*Philosophical Investigations*, 133). See Wittgenstein 2009: 57.





discriminate between lower and higher knowledge, how to pass from one to the other, so as to both symbolically and experientially move across the threshold of conventional and ultimate reality. One may assume, at least temporally speaking, that the ‘higher’ knowledge of Gnostics socially confers upon them an elite position within a hierarchic institution. As antinomian as gnostic teachings may appear to be at times, one should never forget that they are meant to resonate within an establishment that is highly conscious of its privileged status within society. The knowledge of Gnostics empowers them to teach, to debate, and to compose authoritative treatises meant to secure the livelihood and prestige of their community. Gnostics especially thrive in prosperous milieux, allowing them access to resources, if only to a precious library, a roof, and a meal. For such reasons, Gnosticism is often associated with trade routes and urban environments.⁶⁴ Although reclusive, Gnosticism paradoxically favours commerce and transactionality. It blossoms in the syncretic and ‘trans-formative.’

According to the commentator Vijñāna Bhikṣu (15th–16th cents. CE), in his *Yogavārtika* (1,18) on Vyāsa’s commentary on the *Yogasūtra*, the highest renunciation (*paravairāgya*) of the ascetic is the one that rejects all matrixes of self-identification bound to mental activities (*vṛttis*). This stage of renunciation coincides with a contemplative state designated as *asaṃprajñātasamādhi* (the ‘unknowable enstasis’ of the mind/the seedless *samādhi*), a trans-cognitive state which initially coincides with a temporary insight into pure consciousness (*puruṣa*). Although devoid of mental constructs (*saṃskāras*) itself, its cultivation presupposes an intensive course of contemplative taxonomical practice (*tattvābhyāsa*). In other words, for Vijñāna Bhikṣu, the dialectical contemplation of gnostic yogis, performed within taxonomically designed spiritual exercises, through analyzing and negating the mental mechanisms of misidentification at play within one’s mind, brings about the intellectual liminality necessary to allow one to therapeutically shift one’s outlook from one station to another, from the gross to the subtle, from the lowest to the highest realm, until nothing remains but pure consciousness, in which one has totally isolated oneself from the lower realms of *prakṛti*, the realm of ever-shifting (self-)representations. As Whicher stresses,

Asaṃprajñāta-samādhi, which initially coincides with a temporary stage of *puruṣa*-realization, presupposes a total turnabout or *metanoia* of consciousness, a complete shift in identity and transformation of understanding.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See Verardi 2011: 78-9.

⁶⁵ Whicher 2005: 620.

What is presupposed here, foremost, as the instrument of *metanoia* (a change in one's way of life resulting from penitence or spiritual conversion), is the therapeutic exercise of dialectical metaphysics, ritually sustained by a taxonomically defined self-sacrifice.

4. The Antagonism of *Karma-Yoga* and *Jñāna-Yoga*

There is a deeply-rooted anti-householder rhetoric inherited from the early *śramaṇa* movements which seems to have crystalized in the gnostic literature around a new label, that of *karma-yoga*, the 'yoga of action,' variously defined by different authors, but which could be summarized as the performative discipline of a specific kind of activity (*karma*) which, though initially related to the performance of householders' sacrifices, came to subsume under its designation every kind of ritual path, including various forms of yoga, where it is a specific sequence of ritual 'activity' (*karma*) and not a specific sort of 'knowledge' (*jñāna*) which secures spiritual success. In the context of the *Anuḡītā* (AG, 1st-6th CE), for example, which Yaroslav Vassilkov associates with gnostic Sāṃkhya circles, every kind of action, without proper knowledge, is unavoidably linked to karmic retribution, and hence to bondage.

We read there that,

[p]eople devoid of *jñāna*, by way of action only add to their delusion. In this world of the embodied beings, no *naiṣkarmya* is possible, as is well known. (*MBh* 14, 20.7)⁶⁶

Vassilkov explains that *naiṣkarmya*, here, as in the *Bhagavadgītā*, has a double meaning: 1. the absence of action itself, and 2. the absence of karmic retribution. In other words, the AG argues that inaction is simply impossible while the path of action (*karma-yoga*) unavoidably binds ones to *samsāra* via karmic retribution, whereas, we are to understand, the gnostic path of knowledge (*jñāna*) does not. How this is so goes beyond the present discussion.⁶⁷

Towards the later end of the time period theorized for the AG, in the 6th century CE, the Buddhist Bhāviveka doxographically included those who could be referred to as *karma-yogins* within a broad range of what he categorized as proponents of the Mīmāṃsā

⁶⁶ AG 7. As translated by Vassilkov 2002: 240.

⁶⁷ For a lengthier discussion on the rejection of *karma-yoga* by proponents of *jñāna-yoga*, see Bouthillette 2020.



ritualist system. In the ninth chapter of his *Madhyamakahrdayakārikā* (MHK/ *Verses on the Essence of the Middle Way*), he introduces the school with an openly caustic verse:

Shameless (*anapatrapāḥ*) are those who revile knowledge and meditation as the true path to liberation, having taught the attainment of [liberation] through rites alone (*kriyāmātreṇa*).⁶⁸

Clearly, the gnostic Bhāviveka, like many before and after him, had little taste for the ‘path of action,’ be it for the householder’s obligations towards sacrificial performances or for any other belief in the soteriological efficiency of causal means. For Bhāviveka, knowledge is the sole door to release: “It should be granted that, since it is the antidote to that [ignorance], therefore liberation comes from knowledge.”⁶⁹ This gnostic position stands at the opposite end of any system relying on causal means of salvation, be they sacrificial rituals or performative yogas. The following verse from the ninth chapter (*Mīmāṃsātattvanirṇayāvatāra*/ *Entry into the assessment of reality within the Mīmāṃsā*) of Bhāviveka’s MHK unambiguously states his opinion on the path of activity:

A desired activity, like ploughing, does not lead to the attainment of liberation because it is [merely] an activity. Being devoid of intelligence, [it does not lead to liberation] because it is verbal or because it only has a limited time.⁷⁰

Mere activity cannot lead to liberation because it does not cultivate knowledge, like merely cultivating the land. And because it is an impermanent cause, it produces impermanent fruits. *Nirvāṇa*, on the other hand, is said to be permanent and uncaused, not the product of anything,⁷¹ as in the result of some practice or yoga. Within the broader context of chapter nine of the MHK, one is to understand activity (*kriyā*) beyond the classical Mīmāṃsā references to sacrificial activity. Any kind of performance or means to an end are rejected as unsound (*asiddhānta*). In fact, the

⁶⁸ MHK 9.1. Translation is mine: *eke’pavargasanmārgadhyānajñānāpavādinaḥ | kriyāmātreṇa tatprāptim pratipādyānapatrapāḥ ||*

⁶⁹ MHK 9, 21a: *tatra tatpratīpakṣatvāj jñānān muktir iti iśyatām |*

⁷⁰ MHK 9, 22: *kriyātvān na kriyābhīṣṭā kṛṣivan muktyavāptaye | adhīve sati vācyatvān mitakālatvato’pi vā ||* Ham’s reading of 22b is more polite: “Or, it is because they, being non-cognitive acts, are verbally expressible. Or, it is because they last [only for] a limited time.” He admits finding the translation difficult, and notes that the Tibetan reading differs from the Sanskrit: “It is because they are non-cognitive acts and because they are verbally expressible” (*blo ma yin phyir brjod bya’i phyir*). The TJ provides no explanation on this part of the verse. See Ham 2016: 203.

⁷¹ For example, see *Milindapañha* 4.7, 14–16.

refutation of the Mīmāṃsā rather seems to serve as a pretext to refute ritualism and the belief in performative means of salvation *en bloc*. For example, Bhāviveka explains:

Why not accept that sound is impermanent, just as with [any ritual] activity? Since it produces thoughts, just like a gesture of the body, it is perishable.⁷²

Body gestures, like sounds, are produced and hence impermanent. Their results must be the same. Thus, they can't lead to permanent peace. Moreover, they contribute to mental activity, which are further disturbances taking one away from peace. If one clings onto such means for whatever motive, since clinging itself is the opposite of *dharma*, being the very engine of *saṃsāra*, and since the method clung onto is essentially devoid of any soteriological value, one is as far away from peace as anyone else clinging onto passions and desires. Hitting the nail on the head, Bhāviveka concludes:

An established rite, such as drinking soma and so on, does not lead to liberation, because it consists in activity. Similarly, a [ritual] act motivated by desire is not acceptable. Therefore, one who has resorted to this path does not conquer death. It is frequented by those who are submissive to others, and whose mental faculty is unable to think critically.⁷³

Bhāviveka, who explicitly advocated gnosis, is adamant. Activity is soteriologically useless, even more so when it is done with the desire to obtain something, even if it be peace, since it fuels the wheel of desires, the very engine of *saṃsāra*.

Bhāviveka's critique of paths involving activity and causal means—which explicitly includes the Mīmāṃsā path and also the *siddhiyoga* of the Śaivite Tantras (MHK 9, 62), the yoga in which one withdraws the sense organs away from the sense objects, like the limbs of a turtle,⁷⁴ and the yogas focusing on the visualization of Hari,⁷⁵ along with all kinds of ritual practices like bathing in holy waters, jumping into fire, fasting to death, vegetarianism, and worshipping trees and other inanimate objects—precedes that of

⁷² MHK 9, 45: *sattvād anityaḥ śabdo'yaṃ kriyāvat kiṃ na gr̥hyate | athavā dehaceṣṭāvad dhīhetutvād vināśy ayam ||*

⁷³ MHK 9, 57–5: *na mokṣaprāpikā yuktā somapānādiki kriyā | kriyātvāt tadyathā na iṣṭā kāmānaimittiki kriyā || na jayaty antakaṃ tasmād enaṃ panthānam āśritaḥ | paraprāṇeyair juṣṭo'yaṃ vicārākṣamabuddhibhiḥ ||*

⁷⁴ MHK 9, 84: *indriyāṇi indriyārthebhyaḥ kūrmo'ṅgāni iva saṃharan |*

⁷⁵ MHK 9, 85: *haridarśana.*





Śaṅkara, who explicitly advocated *jñāna-yoga*, by at least three centuries.⁷⁶ Both Gnostics, though belonging to competing traditions, share very similar concerns about the path of activity. Indeed, Wilhelm Halbfass highlights how:

Śaṅkara's treatment of Yoga practice is not so much an extension of his critique of Sāṃkhya, but an expression and application of his general attitude towards "works" (*karman*), and more specifically, of his rejection of the "work orientation" of the Pūrva-Mīmāṃsā. The "mental acts" (*mānasī kriyā*) that constitute yogic meditation are not physical activities motivated by personal desires, and they are not rituals in a literal sense. They are nevertheless "works," and they are oriented towards results. They are a part of that network of means and ends which keeps us in *saṃsāra*. Bondage itself is of the nature of means and ends: *sādhyasādhanalakṣaṇo bandhaḥ*.⁷⁷

In sum, *karma*, be it in the form of *yajña* (sacrifice), *āsana* (ritual posture), or whatever causal means (*yoga*), partakes of the very nature of *saṃsāra*. All these media can surely act as facilitators or supports of the religious life. For example, through them, one can be made ready (*adhikārin*) to receive the liberating knowledge (*jñāna*), which alone facilitates the escape from the binding chains of causality (*karaṇatva*). Immediate knowledge (*anubhava*), however, is not caused by any such means. Rather, it is the disappearance of an ignorance (*avidyā*) which was never really there to begin with, but which appears as a mere 'illusion' (*māyā*), like a mental projection superimposed over one's perception. Śaṅkara, like most Gnostics, does not negate any validity whatsoever to rituals or to yogic practices, but he subordinates such activities to a higher end, by assigning them an indirect supportive function meant for people of lower (intellectual) capacities.

The gnostic abandonment of even the notion of a training ground, of yoga as 'practice,' is particularly well illustrated in the context of the Advaita Vedānta of Svāmī Satchidanandendra Saraswati, author of the towering *The Method of Vedānta*, in a discussion woven around Śaṅkara's commentary on the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (3.5.1), about why the learning and other virtues to be pursued by renunciates while seeking liberation falls within the purview of ignorance.

⁷⁶ For further discussions on the ritual activities criticized by Bhāviveka, see Bouthillette 2020: 54–71.

⁷⁷ Halbfass 1991: 226–7.

And the Vedic doctrine is that he should acquire total contempt for all ideas other than that of the Self, and should become utterly absorbed in the vision of the Absolute, and then he will be a Brahmin in the true sense.

Even this discipline is carried out, like rituals and prescribed meditations, on the basis of the erroneous idea that one is an individual capable of action. Hence it belongs emphatically to that realm of Ignorance. In the same way, the notions that the individual soul is an individual soul, that it has attained dispassion, that it desires liberation and that it has obtained liberation are all appearances that hold good from the standpoint of practical experience only. The final truth is that the Self alone exists, and that it is the Absolute, unborn and without a second.⁷⁸

Abandoning any practice and view other than that of being ‘one-self,’ the accomplished Advaitin ‘sees’ no basis for the performance of rituals and meditations, as in performative yogas,⁷⁹ because just like with ordinary ritual sacrifice there is no yoga performed by any yogi wherever desires have vanished. This being said, until such a pacified ‘viewing’ dawns upon the contemplative, the standpoint of practical experience, the practice of yoga, that of hearing (*śruta*) the scriptures, analyzing (*cintā*) them, and becoming saturated (*bhāvana*) with their meditative insight, remains the only path accessible. The threefold scheme, which Harimoto argues to be how Śaṅkara understands ‘yoga’ proper,⁸⁰ variously recurs in Buddhism, Jainism, and Vedānta.⁸¹

In the Jaina context, the cultivation of self-knowledge is traditionally rooted in a rigid life regimen of painful self-sacrifice and disciplined abnegation, a strenuous and ritualistic lifestyle, which doctrinal taxonomy supports by categorizing good and bad

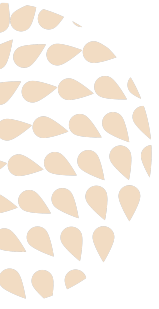
⁷⁸ Saraswati and Alston 1997: 150–1.

⁷⁹ As another token textual example of ‘renouncing yoga’ in a gnostic context, this time taken from the second verse of Śaṅkara’s *Daśaśloki*, one can read the following (translated by myself): “Neither are the social divisions for me, nor the *dharma* and conduct of the social divisions and stages of life. I am also not concentration (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), or yoga. Having abandoned the superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of ‘mine,’ of ‘me,’ of ‘dependence,’ and of [whatever is] ‘not self,’ the remaining, the one, Śiva, the alone, I am that. (*na varṇa na varṇāśramācārādharmā na me dhāraṇādhyānayogādayo’pi | anātmāśrayaḥmamādhyaśahānāt tadeko’vaśiṣṭaḥ śivaḥ kevalo’ham*).” Accordingly, the accomplished Advaitin gnostic identifies neither with yogic practice nor with social categories, all of which are not the self (*anātman*). The realized ascetic is the highest reality alone, pure and simple, here designated as Śiva, the ‘auspicious.’

⁸⁰ See Harimoto 2021: 67.

⁸¹ See Bouthillette 2020.





seeds of *karma* to be cultivated, or not, by separating the sentient from the insentient, or by identifying the six types of substances contributing, or not, to the binding activities of body, speech, and mind, for example. With the gnostic Kundakunda, this ascetic self-understanding transforms in favour of a ‘higher’ and unconventional (*nīścaya*) perspective (*naya*) that criticizes the ritualistic focus of traditional (*paraṃpara*) or conventional (*vyavahāra*) Jaina renunciation. Of course, as with Śaṅkara’s view on the *karma* section (*kāṇḍa*) of the Veda, this gnostic ‘subversion’ of tradition rather favours an internal and noetic form of ascetic practice.⁸² A telling example of the hermeneutical approach of Kundakunda can be found in his famous *Samayasāra* (*The Essence of the Self*). Mari-Hélène Gorisse explains that in this text:

Kundakunda develops a position in which Jain religious practices are reassessed to culminate in the knowledge of the Self (*jīva*, *appā*, *samaya*). In such a conception in which inward experience is central, the characterisation of the Self becomes important in order to shape the path of liberation. It is especially decisive to be able to know whether the Self is a permanent unity or an entity prone to be determined by alien conditions; whether it is active or inactive; whether it is actually bound to *kamma* or whether karmic bondage is an illusion. Furthermore, in order to ensure the coherence of his characterisation of the Self, Kundakunda develops a doctrine of two perspectives, namely the ultimate (*ñicchaya*, *suddha*) and the conventional (*vavahāra*), which can be interpreted in two opposite ways.⁸³

According to Kundakunda, the self encompasses the cognitive faculties and cognition.⁸⁴ It is the ‘knower.’ Everything else is not the self and is not to be cultivated or clung onto. The practice of philosophy thus trains one in determinate negation (*neti neti*), via dialectics and metaphysical inquiry, to discriminate what is to be renounced, that is the entire range of representations that appear to consciousness, but which are not it, like *prakṛti* in Sāṃkhya. It is this internal cultivation of knowledge or ‘intellectual exertion’ which, centuries later, the famous Jaina scholar Haribhadra Sūri (8th century CE) will identify as *jñāna-yoga*.⁸⁵ In essence, it is philosophical practice.

⁸² See Gorisse 2019: 82.

⁸³ Gorisse 2019: 80.

⁸⁴ Balcerowicz 2015: 4.

⁸⁵ See Qvarnström 1999: 170–1 and Bouthillette 2020: 101–3.

What is ultimately relevant to *jñāna-yogins* is that knowledge which actualizes utter dispassion and renunciation towards anything that is not part of one's true nature, including outer and inner phenomena. One may argue that it amounts to understanding the entire realm of manifestation, the world (*loka*) as it conventionally appears, as not being one's true identity, as in the famous “*na asmi, na me, na aham iti*” of the *Sāṃkhyakārikā* (64). But the exact kind of renunciation one needs to cultivate must be well defined. In practice, this particular form of ‘negation’ defines sectarian identities. It depends on a given ‘taxonomy’ (e.g. constituted of *tattvas*, *padārthas*, or *dharmas*) and a ‘determinate negation’ of the same. In that way, one must know exactly what to renounce, though the source (*prasthāna*) of that knowledge is less than obvious. Here begins contemplative taxonomical practice, the work of philosophy as a spiritual exercise in yogic, gnostic context.

5. Vivekananda's Vision of *Jñāna-Yoga*

To conclude this brief exposition on gnostic yogas, let us now return to Vivekananda's vision of *jñāna-yoga*, as mentioned earlier. I propose to look at it sentence by sentence, so as to decode the metaphorical riddles of the famous guru and see if and how it reflects some of my own findings on this matter.

[j]nāna (knowledge) is “creedlessness”; but that does not mean that it despises creeds. It only means that a stage above and beyond creeds has been gained.⁸⁶

What Vivekananda refers to as ‘creedlessness’ corresponds to what I present as the ‘relinquishment of all views,’ the outcome of the gnostic philosophical practice of determinate negation (*neti neti*). The stage above creed is the state of ‘no-view,’ the ‘perfect sight’ (*samyagdarśana*) beyond conceptual proliferation (*prapañca*). It is likely that Vivekananda's stance on views stems at least as much from the radical pluralism of his spiritual mentor, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, as it does from classical Advaita.⁸⁷ This being said, within the gnostic literature, it is not uncommon to find denigratory comments on the creeds (views) of others, not the least within Advaita writings. In fact, it is more the norm than the exception. Hence, being without a view or cultivating the ‘non-view’ does not seem to imply avoiding criticism of the views of others so as not to offend or hurt their feelings, as one may perhaps assume and as some have suggested

⁸⁶ All the following quotations from Vivekananda in this section are a breaking down of the previously quoted passage from Vivekananda 1896.

⁸⁷ See Long 2020.





through simplistic readings of *ahimsā* (i.e. the contemporary concept of ‘intellectual non-violence’ celebrated in Jaina Studies).⁸⁸ On the contrary, pointing out defects and qualities in the views of others, through debates and apologetics, for example, as witnessed in literature, seems to be valued as a form of generosity, if not as an efficient therapeutic. I have argued elsewhere that one can be said to be compassionate for pointing out flaws in conducts and views which, if left unexamined, are seriously detrimental to one’s development, at least from the standpoint of the debater.⁸⁹ This valuation of the culture of (self-)criticism derives all its sense when one recalls that purifying one’s own view is a chief pillar of gnostic yogas. One may say that yogic Gnosticism trains one to philosophically negate one’s ‘views’ in order to ‘see’ the ultimate, allegedly beyond (*parā*) sight, beyond lists, and above taxonomies. Gnostic yoga is thus a sequential therapeutic training in seeing and unseeing.

The Jnāni (true philosopher) strives to destroy nothing but to help all.

Not to harm but rather to seek to help others, as in teaching the doctrine and debating it, reflects the ethos of non-violence (*ahimsā*) and generosity (*dāna*) generally promoted by Gnostics, a direct consequence of self-sacrifice. At the social level, these qualities symbolize one’s level of achievement on the path. To help others, in gnostic narratives, involves teaching others about ‘viewing’ and ‘unviewing.’

All rivers roll their waters into the sea and become one. So all creeds
should lead to Jnāna and become one. [...]

The metaphor of the waters flowing back into the sea captures the cosmic reabsorption process symbolically taking place along the gnostic path. To dissolve conventional reality, the renunciate must become the consumer of the cosmos, the burning sacrificial altar of world-taxonomy. I argue that, symbolically speaking, the dialectical practice of ‘determinate negation’ is the sacrificial fire through which Gnostics train to burn away the objects of misidentification appearing to the mind. It consumes all but one’s true identity, as poetically captured in the suggestive verses of the *Daśaslokī* (*DŚ/The Ten Verses*) traditionally attributed to Śaṅkara. In the guise of an example, let me align here three out of the ten verses of the text.

1. Neither the earth, nor water, nor fire, nor the wind, nor the sky, nor
the sense organs, nor the sum of these. Out of (all this) unsteadiness

⁸⁸ John Cort (2000: 341) criticized as ‘inadequate’ the rendering of *anekāntavāda* as intellectual nonviolence. See, also, Barbato 2019.

⁸⁹ See Bouthillette 2023: 74–5.

(*anaikāntikatva*), that realized by one in deep sleep (*suṣupti*), that one which remains, Śiva, alone am I.

8. Neither waking, nor dreaming, nor deep sleep is for me, no intellectual principle (*viśva*) [knowing the waking state], nothing consisting of light (*taijasa*) [knowing the dream state], nor knower (*prājñaka*) [of the deep sleep]. Out of the ignorant nature (*avidyā-ātmakatva*) of the three, the fourth (*turiya*), that one which remains, Śiva, alone am I.
9. Out of the vastness (*vyāpakatva*) [emanating] from the contemplation of reality (*tattvaprayoga*), out of self-realized existence (*svatasiddhabhāva*), and out of dependence on no other (*ananya-āśrayatva*), this insignificant (*tuccha*) compounded (*samasta*) universe (*jagat*) being other than that (*tad-anya*), that one which remains, Śiva, alone am I.⁹⁰

The insignificant (*tuccha*) universe (*jagat*) rejected by Śaṅkara is the illusory world reabsorbed every night in deep, dreamless sleep. It is that (*tat*) which, in *nirvāṇa*, totally dissolves into the ‘fourth’ (*turiya*), the self (*ātman*), as with the silent, sonic component of the *Om* syllable into which are reabsorbed the *A-U-M* phonemes, leading to *samādhi* (absorption), in a process detailed within the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* and commented upon in Gauḍapāda’s *Āgamaśāstra*. A similar reabsorption process, somewhat recalling the inflow and outflow of the breath (*prāṇa*), is made particularly poignant within the *Sāṃkhyakārikā*, wherein is detailed the entire process of world production (*utpatti*), sustenance (*sthiti*), and dissolution (*pralaya*) which the practitioner is called upon to recognise as the secret (*guhya*) knowledge of *puruṣa*’s goal (*puruṣārthajñāna*).⁹¹ The purpose of acquiring this esoteric knowledge, I argue, is not merely to obtain factual details about the objective creation of the cosmos, as some positivists would have us believe, but, more importantly, it teaches one how to reverse this process (*pratiprasava/prakṛtilaya*) within oneself through renunciation,⁹² to immobilise (*nivṛtti*) *prakṛti* in her

⁹⁰ Translation is my own. DŚ: 1. *na bhūmir na toyam na tejo na vāyur na kham na indriyam vā na teṣāṃ samuhaḥ | anaikāntikatvāt suṣuptyekasiddhas tadeko’vaśiṣṭaḥ śivaḥ kevalo’ham || 1 || na jāgran na me svapnako vā suṣuptir na viśvo na vā taijasaḥ prājñako vā | avidyātmakatvātrayāṇāṃ turiyas tadeko’vaśiṣṭaḥ śivaḥ kevalo’ham ||8|| api vyāpakatvādd hi tattvaprayogāt svatasiddhabhāvād ananyāśrayatvāt | jagat tuccham etat samastam tadanyat tadeko’vaśiṣṭaḥ śivaḥ kevalo’ham ||9||*

⁹¹ SK 69: *puruṣārthajñānam idaṃ guhyam paramarṣiṇā samākhyātam | sthityutpattipralayās cintyante yatra bhūtānām ||*

⁹² At verse 45, the SK makes it clear that *prakṛti*’s dissolution is the result of dispassion (*vairagyāt-prakṛtilayaḥ*).





state of *pradhāna*, through absorption (*samādhi*), so as to finally and for ever isolate consciousness (*puruṣa*) from what it is not (*prakṛti*). Beyond Sāṃkhya, Gnostics generally assert that concepts and their bindings fade in the peaceful gaze of the accomplished ascetic established in non-dual reality. In *nirvāṇa*, *kaivalya*, or *mokṣa*, concepts, along with lists and their complex taxonomies, are reabsorbed and silenced within the consciousness out of which they arose.

The second part of this quotation, however, is most problematic. While I agree that all views are said by Gnostics to dissolve in knowledge through the practice of *jñāna-yoga*, it is another story altogether to claim that all human creeds are becoming merged within that same gnostic knowledge, which is what Vivekananda seems to be hinting at here. This suggestion rather captures the self-aggrandizing ethos common among Advaitins, frequently expounded in their doxographical taxonomies, wherein Advaita crowns and rules the plural realm of views. As I have explained elsewhere,⁹³ within Advaita doxographies, each competing view is usually classified according to a progressive teleological scheme leading to the metaperspective of Advaita. It has been pointed out that Vivekananda often presented a hierarchical progression within Vedānta, moving from Dvaita to Viśiṣṭādvaita and culminating in Advaita, somewhat reviving Appaya Dikṣita's (1520–1593) *Caturmatasārasaṃgraha*.⁹⁴

The consequences of this self-proclaimed superiority, on the sociopolitical level for example, are far from benign. Though, like Vedāntins, most Gnostics assume the conventional superiority of their own traditional methods—why else would they promote it?—they do not usually posit such a thing as an ultimate ‘view,’ at least on the conceptual level. This is because it would be contradictory to their understanding of what is relative and what is ultimate. A view always pertains to the domain of the relative. As I highlighted at point five of my list of ten features, Gnostics do posit a ‘correct’ (*samyak*) form of lower knowledge, obviously found in their own scriptures (*āgama*). This is in fact one of the most important rhetorical tasks of their hermeneutics, determining the soteriological superiority of their method. But Gnostics seem to agree that, in themselves, scriptures belong to the realm of conventions, of lower (*aparā*) truth, exactly because their mediating knowledge is conceptual and may only be understood through the mediation of a given set of symbols or representations, of conventions. It is thus an effect dependent on a cause. To grasp at one's knowledge as the universal truth to which all other knowledge is leading would actually be

⁹³ See Bouthillette 2020.

⁹⁴ See Maharaj 2020b: 16; Barua 2020.

considered by most Gnostics as a serious cognitive dissonance, a harmful and karmically binding defect (*doṣa*). For example, discussing the notion of ‘wrong views’ within the three kinds of mental *karma* classified in Buddhist Abhidharma, the famous Tibetan scholar Jamgön Kongtrül Lodrö Thayé (1813–1899) straightforwardly stated, “[t]he worst kind of wrong view is to hold a view to be supreme.”⁹⁵ If all views become one in knowledge, according to South Asian Gnostics, it could only mean that all views are equally negated from the perspective of ultimate analysis. Technically, then, they do not become one and the same, but they individually stand as nothing at all, like the fictional cities of *gandhārvas*, in the face of reality. In Advaita discourse, there are several examples where one can observe the insistence on ‘renouncing views,’ in order to remain solely within the pure knowledge of *brahman*. One example can be found in the *Daśasloki* (v.4)

Neither the Sāṃkhyan, nor the Śaiva, the Pañcarātra among them, nor the Jain, nor the opinion of the Mīmāṃsāka and the likes. Out of a special knowledge (*viśiṣṭānubhūti*) from the pure essence (*viśuddhātmakatva*), that one which remains, Śiva, alone am I.⁹⁶

The accomplished Advaitin is said to no longer entertain the kind of views found among common philosophers and ascetics, but to rather rest in a special form of pure knowledge, here equated with Śiva, the ‘auspicious,’ the self.

Jñāna teaches that the world should be given up, but not on that account to be abandoned. To be in the world, but not of it, is the true test of the Sannyāsin.

This is an important observation by Vivekananda. It justifies my use of the notion of ‘determinate negation’ (from Hegel’s *Aufheben*) to qualify the types of dialectics configuring the practice of gnostic renunciation. South Asian gnostic sectarian identities demarcate themselves by their varying applications of determinate negation. None of these groups is outright nihilistic, negating the entire world. They only negate some aspects of the world, which is to be identified through philosophical analysis. Moreover, they do so for the salvation of the whole. Tirupattur Ramaseshayyer Venkatachala Murti has formulated a skilful typology of the kinds of ‘illusions’ negated by the preeminent non-dualistic schools of Indian philosophy.

⁹⁵ Tayé 2007: 105.

⁹⁶ My translation of DŚ 4: *na sāmkyam na śaivam na tatpañcarātram na jainam na mīmāṃsakader matam vā | viśiṣṭānubhūtyā viśuddhātmakatvāt tadekho’viśiṣṭaḥ śivaḥ kevalo’ham ||*





What is rejected as illusory differs in these systems: the Madhyamika negates the conceptualist tendency (*vikalpa* or *dr̥ṣṭi*); for this is what falsifies reality which is intuition (*prajñā*); the Vijñānavāda negates objectivity; for this makes *vijñāna* appear infected with the duality of subject and object; the Vedānta negates difference (*bheda*); the real is universal and identical.⁹⁷

As Murti points out, the non-dualism promoted by each system means that they do not, in fact, directly establish absolute reality through positive reasoning, “otherwise, *that* on the strength of which the absolute is posited will stand out as another reality,”⁹⁸ another phenomenon of the mind distorting immediate perception. Rather, in this context, dialectics is used to determine and negate what is illusory, dualistic, and unreal, leaving aside reality. The forms of determinate negation promoted by different traditions also comes to determine their practice of renunciation and, *de facto*, their sectarian identity.

In classical yoga, for example, which incorporates much of Sāṃkhya’s metaphysics and which Vivekananda viewed as the foundation of Rājayoga, the science of concentration,⁹⁹ Whicher insightfully argues that the contemplative process of dialectical negation which the training involves, in order to bring an end to all modes of self-misidentification, is not meant to completely dissolve all and everything there is, including the identity of the yogi. Rather, according to Whicher, one’s ‘misidentifying mind’ is in fact purified through the negating flames of yogic, taxonomical analysis. In sum, Whicher suggests that:

the power of identification is not lost, rather it is purified. [...] The yogin’s mind has been transformed and purified, not negated, abandoned or dissolved into oblivion. [...]

The former and habitually impure mind or selfish/immoral mentality rooted in misperception/misconception (*viparyaya*) and its *saṃskāras* (and habit patterns or *vāsanās*) is transformed into a purified mind rooted in knowledge and goodness.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Murti 1973: 9.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ See Maharaj 2020a: 206.

¹⁰⁰ Whicher 2005: 626–7.

Whicher and I agree that the purpose of dialectical negation in such yogas is not the mere negation of oneself and of the entire world along with it, as in a kind of anti-human nihilistic suicide. Even the most extreme apophatic discourses of gnostic yogas do not advocate absolute negation, the indiscriminated sacrificing of all and everything, but, rather, a form or another of determinate negation, the basis of which stands crucial in determining sectarian identities and ritual conventions. Institutionally, by analogy, *higher* renunciation also means a higher status within the community. This too should not be forgotten, as it contributes to the elitist ethos of *jñāna-yoga*.

This idea of renunciation has been in some form common to nearly all religions. Jñāna demands that we look upon all alike, that we see only “sameness”. Praise and blame, good and bad, even heat and cold, must be equally acceptable to us.

That renunciation, or self-sacrifice, is a common feature of most religions is arguable. Ironically, it is this ‘sodomasochistic’ and ‘unnatural asceticism’ which drove Nietzsche to condemn Christianity and all forms of religious mortification, while praising the Hindu ethos found in the *Arthasāstra* for its *joie de vivre*. It is not uncommon today, in Religious Studies circles, to classify religions around the binary typology of ‘this-worldly’ and ‘other-worldly,’¹⁰¹ pointing to the fact that not all religions espouse the ideal of world renunciation. Yet, to be fair to Vivekananda, indeed, it appears that, in order to deepen their renunciation, Gnostics dialectically engage with categories of worldly objects towards which one would normally develop attachment, aversion, and ignorance, three poisons which, according to them, need be remedied. This is where the doctrinal ‘lists’ of topics and taxonomies found in canonical literature become central to the practice of *jñāna-yoga*, taken as a philosophical expression of renunciation. The ritual knowledge (*jñāna*) cultivated in *jñāna-yoga* is that of self-sacrifice (*tyāga*). In this context, whatever disturbs renunciation is ignorance (*avidyā*). Whatever it is, Gnostics agree that “This is not me. This is not mine. I am not that.” (SK 64: *na asmi, na me, na aham iti*).

Conclusion: Why an Elite?

I have already mentioned several reasons as to why *jñāna-yoga* can be said to be elitist. In the guise of a conclusion, I would like to reflect further on this challenging dimension of Gnosticism. In the context of *jñāna-yoga*, I believe that the prime doctrinal

¹⁰¹ E.g., Hamrin-Dahl 2010; McRoberts 2003; Sharma 1981.





factor for this pathos of superiority, what Nietzsche would rather refer to as the ‘pathos of distance,’¹⁰² lies in the gnostic promotion of a higher form of renunciation. This posturing is made possible precisely because Gnostics, as a standard rule, doctrinally renounce both the ‘means’ and the ‘results’ of yoga. That is, ultimately, Gnostics renounce yoga as a whole. For the sake of clarity, let us remember that the category of ‘means’ incorporates every kind of causal action (*karma*), any instrumental means or expedient (*sādhana/upāya*), along with effortful practice (*yoga/abhyāsa*). As discussed previously, the gnosis (*jñāna*) sought after by Gnostics is not something gained or obtained, neither is it a destination to arrive at, some trophy won after a remarkable performance. It is also no mere accumulation of intelligence about some topic, as gained through study, for example, even if the object of that learning is the self. The higher knowledge sought after by Gnostics, like their higher renunciation, is the total negation of any form of identification whatsoever with anything other than one’s true nature. In other words, this special knowledge (*viśiṣṭānubhūti*) is nothing new, but the dissolution of a delusion which was never really there in the first place, as in the recovery of sanity following a period of disorder. And because there is nothing added to anything once sanity is recovered and peace (*śānti*) has settled, nor was there really anyone practising *jñāna-yoga*, one ought to abandon the idea of following this path with the expectation of some ‘result.’ In perfect coherence, within the gnostic worldview there is no fruit (*phala*) resulting from action, no attainment or establishment (*siddhi*) of anything, not even any knower (*prājñaka*) of knowledge (*jñāna*), for these are but the division (*bheda*) and duality (*dvaita*) born of misidentification, the self-absorbed reflection of metaphysical ignorance in one’s mental continuum. Logically, by renouncing yoga as a ‘means,’ Gnostics must equally let go of the idea of yoga as a ‘fruit’ (*phala*), that being a staple teaching of the *Bhagavadgītā*. For, how could there be one without the other? This causal logic of fruition is the very mechanism of *samsāra*, the realm of transmigration which Gnostics dissolve along with their own self-cherishing desires and worldly aspirations. *Jñāna-yoga* is the (non-)path of those who have (un)seen the binding logic of desire-driven pursuits, tied at its core to existential misery (*duḥkha*). Having no beginning, the reality ‘dis-covered’ by Gnostics has no end. It is because of this ‘permanence,’ transcending the conventional logic of ‘becoming,’ that *knowledge* is considered higher than any other ‘means’ of liberation. From this ‘absolute’ perspective, yogic Gnosticism establishes perfect (*samyak*) (self)abnegation (*nyāsa*), the unwavering (re)absorption (*samādhi*) of undisturbed (*śānta*) consciousness.

¹⁰² The pathos of distance is discussed in *Beyond Good and Evil* (257). See Nietzsche 1966: 201; also, Beals 2013.

From a conventional perspective, however, Gnosticism amounts to a gradual process of insight cultivation theorized as threefold: hearing (*śruta*) the scriptures, analyzing (*cintā*) them, and becoming saturated (*bhāvana*) with their meditative insight.¹⁰³ By engaging in methodical taxonomical practices, through doctrinal contemplation,¹⁰⁴ the (spi)ritual exercises found in gnostic yogas are carefully designed to alter one's cognition and behaviour, in favour of renunciation. This implies that the production, memorisation, and transmission of taxonomical lists (e.g. constituted of *tattvas*, *padārthas*, or *dharmas*), along with a continuous reflection upon them in philosophical analysis, is part and parcel of the ritual economy of gnostic yogas. For gnostic thinkers, to be liberated from ignorance one must memorize, analyze, and meditate upon systematically designated objects and lists of topics before philosophically negating them. In brief, one must study critically. Shulman reminds us, that,

[w]e must realize that when a monk or nun studies Buddhist doctrine for most of his or her lifetime, the structure of their experience is transformed accordingly; study transforms the mind. Once experience has been affected by study—indeed, a prescriptive religious function—students of religious doctrine can then experience the internalized meanings of their study more fully if they ever make an attempt to practice meditation. But their “experience” is deeply affected even if they do not.¹⁰⁵

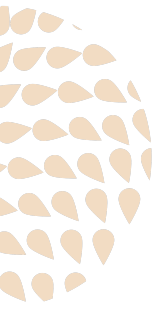
As rituals performed in groups or alone, for the transmission and assimilation of knowledge, I see little need to distinguish study from meditation. At the very least, study (what in Sanskrit may be rendered as *svādhyāya*) can be said to be a form of meditation of its own. Theory and practice are here united in one and the same dialectical and repetitive engagement with experience, through a focused mindset on what one is doing and experiencing. Etymologically, what we call ‘study’—from the

¹⁰³ For further discussions on how conceptual practices like learning, reasoning, and meditation could generate nonconceptual knowledge or knowledge of the nonconceptual, insisting on the difficulty of separating ‘philosophical’ problems of truth from those related to self-transformation or ‘spirituality,’ see Fiordalis 2021.

¹⁰⁴ For a thorough discussion on the relation between scriptural study and meditation in Advaita, particularly discussing how, in Śaṅkara’s system, meditation (*parisaṅkhyāna*) is an intellectual or analytic process of reduction or dissociation from all possible points of identification for the Self, arguing that Śaṅkara replaced Yogic meditation with characteristically Sāṃkhyan reflection (*parisaṅkhyāna*), that is, not a direct meditation on Brahman but rather a removal of everything that is not the self, see Uskokov 2018: 52.

¹⁰⁵ Shulman 2014: 47.





Latin *studium* (study, application), but also from *studere* (eagerness, to be diligent)—cultivates a focused meditative mindset. In the context of early Buddhist practice, Shulman agrees, “[m]editation corresponds in this case to what we would normally consider as intense study.”¹⁰⁶ Need we be reminded that ‘study,’ as a sustained long-term activity, has unfortunately remained the preserve of a privileged few throughout human history? The resources (mental, institutional, and pecuniary), the dispositions (wanting to learn something at the expense of something else), and the leisure (being able to commit in time and effort) required to study are generally accessible only to an elite section of society, and often involve sacrificing other pursuits meanwhile. Institutionally, gnostic establishments are essentially places of study providing the resources and leisure time necessary to sustain the formation of the very few who are endowed with the right set of dispositions, those fit for office (*adhikārins*). This is why Gnosticism tends to flourish around monastic institutions and similar places of higher learning.

In a social context, both the higher renunciation of Gnostics and their pursuit of extensive studies become equated with a higher knowledge of scriptures and, correspondingly, with a higher socioreligious status. Thus, the elevated self-perception of Gnostics amongst other kinds of yoga practitioners, as assertively articulated within gnostic scriptures, comes to be reflected within the institutional hierarchies envisioned and enforced by the same Gnostics. The situation is not very different from the pattern observed by Brian K. Smith, while examining the ancient *varṇa* system and the origins of caste, wherein Brahmins, through their literature and rituals, projected their superiority in every meaningful aspect of the socio-cosmic order.¹⁰⁷ As Pierre Bourdieu reminds us, the principles of division are inextricably logical and sociological. That is, they function within and for the purposes of the struggle between social groups.

And indeed, the system of classificatory schemes is constituted as an objectified, institutionalized system of classification only when it has ceased to function as a sense of limits so that the guardians of the established order must enunciate, systematize and codify the principles of production of that order, both real and represented, so as to defend them against heresy; in short, they must constitute the *doxa* as orthodoxy.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Shulman 2014: 105.

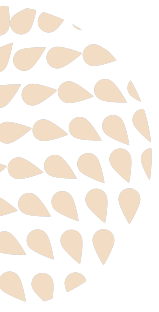
¹⁰⁷ Smith 1994: 82.

¹⁰⁸ Bourdieu 1984: 479.

In a damning paradox afflicting most world religions, the same knowledgeable ascetics who claim to completely abandon the affairs of the world generally position themselves at the very heart and head of those social institutions which are actively engaged in the most common of all mundane enterprises, that of self-preservation. This paradoxical social elitism appears to affect gnostic movements beyond the boundaries of South Asia.

Another way to look at the elitism of *jñāna-yoga* is by focusing on its hierarchical self-understanding. As I mentioned already, yogic Gnosticism posits a dual mode of knowledge (*dve vidye*), a lower and a higher one, often distinguished as the conventional and the ultimate. In fact, it is the cultivation of the ‘ultimate’ which particularly distinguishes *jñāna-yoga* from non-gnostic methods. Practically speaking, this does not mean that Gnostics have no use for the ‘lower’ realm of knowledge at all. On the contrary, just as Nāgārjuna posits that *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are one, it is the full mastery of the lower knowledge which stands for the highest one. For example, in a Buddhist context, the ultimate view of emptiness can only be realized through a careful study of the ‘lower’ Abhidharma, realizing the absence of inherent nature (*svabhāva*) at the heart of every *dharma*. In other words, from a Gnostic perspective, Nāgārjuna is an accomplished Ābhidharmika, just like Śāṅkara teaches the true sacrifice of the Vedas, and the Jaina Kundakunda promotes the purest form of *tapas* (austerity). In this context, the gnostic method is that of an elite kind of practitioner who has already internalized and accomplished the lower realms of renunciation, which is usually associated with leaving home, abandoning worldly pursuits, learning scriptures, taming the senses, and stabilizing the mind. The second internalization stage I theorize, paramount in gnostic yogas, involves sacrificing, with the blade of determinate negation, the very fabric of the previously scripturally-established canonical order. To the initiate now well-trained in upholding the view of scriptures (i.e. *athāto dharmajijñāsā*), gnostic teachings set out to train one further in transforming that very conceptual view into immediate perception, channelled through ever more abstract and paradoxical noetic hermeneutics (i.e. *athāto brahmajijñāsā*). By engaging with scriptures (*āgamas*) in such dialectics and determinate negation, Gnostics push their disciples to distance themselves from even the most authoritative and compelling forms of self-identifications, which had earlier served to pattern their sectarian identity and ritual discipline. In this way, by seemingly subverting the canon for therapeutic reasons, they train their students to let go of their walking sticks, to position their view upon no foundation whatsoever but onto reality itself, to experience it without recourse to any medium at all, and thus to finally ‘see the seer of seeing,’ to paraphrase the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. From this hierarchical perspective, the ‘higher’ renunciation of





Gnostics is correlated with their adoption of a ‘higher’ view, that of a non-conceptual understanding/experiencing of reality.

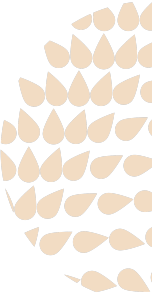
Finally, one may conclude that the dry path of scholasticism, involving the critical study and assimilation of scriptural knowledge, the ability to systematically reason upon the contents of teachings and to progressively meditate upon their ever more abstract meaning with a resolute and focused mindset, is not given to everyone. An ironclad motivation to abandon everything one knows and cherishes, including one’s family and identity, to emancipate oneself from one’s own delusional self-representation and to teach others how to do the same, is also nothing obvious. If mass religions generally rely on devotional emotionality, performative ritual displays, and outright submission to paternalistic authorities, it is because people naturally identify with tangible experiences, charismatic figures, and graspable answers. It is much easier to adopt fixed and readymade models that can easily be copied and repeated with the expectation of concrete desirable outcomes than to engage oneself in a risky and demanding quest for an abstract freedom necessitating an introspective dispossession of the self and a discomfiting *mise en abyme* of the conventional representations of reality. Religions, like cookbooks, tend to propose convenient recipes to be followed to the letter by those seeking their own benefits in this life and the hereafter. How comforting are the alchemical-like formulas that promise one’s immortality in one’s very own body, in this life or upon judgement day, the ritual sacraments and cleansing that wash sins away, or, again, the final rites that take our beloved ones to heavenly regions! After all, it is as natural for anyone in distress to seek accessible remedies as it is for anyone (or any gene) to serve one’s own selfish interest. The courage to endure pain and discomfort in the pursuit of truth and freedom, in disregard of one’s immediate welfare but for the benefit of others, is properly heroic, the stuff of legends. If anything, such a disposition of the heart is the mark of a true elite, the outcome of genuine spirituality.

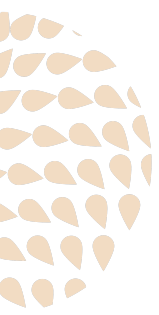
The previous examination of yogic Gnosticism leads me to conclude with a contentious way of distinguishing between the concept of ‘religion’ and that of ‘spirituality,’ which might prove challenging in contemporary yoga circles. Problematizing Vivekananda’s idea that ‘renunciation’ is a common feature of most religions, I rather contend that, being counterintuitive and generally asocial, it belongs to the domain of spirituality alone, and that it is cultivated through carefully designed exercises, generally articulated in the language of philosophy. Basically, in addition to the common idea that ‘religion’ is a specific set of organised beliefs and practices, usually shared by a community or group, whereas ‘spirituality’ is, rather, the domain of individual practice, I propose that religion is essentially concerned with fulfilling individual and/or communal aspirations and desires (wealth, health, longevity, posterity, fame, security,

peace, etc.), worldly and otherworldly, whereas spirituality is solely the domain of self-sacrifice, the introspective abandonment of desire, and the cultivation of renunciation, at one degree or another. Spirituality, I believe, sprouts whenever one becomes able to distance oneself from one's usual self-serving ways of thinking and behaving. It blooms in generosity, ultimately fructifying with the gift of oneself. At least in the context of those dharmic traditions that minister final emancipation (*mokṣa/nirvāṇa*), whatever does not cultivate self-sacrifice but instead egoism, self-promotion, self-grasping and so on, is understood as plain ignorance (*avidyā*) and immoral (*adharmā*). Of course, both religion and spirituality may come together in the same tradition, institution, or individual, in different contexts and intervals. At the outset, one cannot really claim to have abandoned what one never actually possessed nor desired in the first place. In regard to yogic Gnosticism, one may argue that it is doctrinally promoted via religion, by religious elites, but that it is philosophically internalized as a spirituality only by the elite among the elites.

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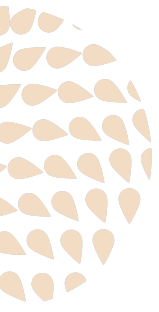
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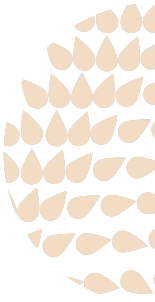
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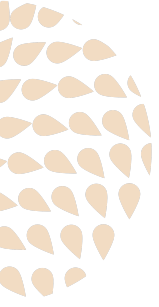




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