

Cosmic categories: Samkhya and the tattvas

Samkhya... permeated almost all subsequent Hindu traditions: Vedanta, Puranic, Vaishnava, Shaivite, Tantric, and even the medicinal traditions such as ayurveda.

-- Edwin Bryant, western scholar/practitioner

Buddhist philosophy and terminology, Yoga philosophy, early Vedanta speculation, and the great regional theologies of Shaivism and Vaishnavism are all, in an important sense, footnotes and/or reactions to a living 'tradition text' of Samkhya.

-- Gerald Larson, western scholar/practitioner

IN THIS CLASS we will be studying the ancient Indian philosophical tradition of Samkhya. The teachings of Samkhya (which means “enumeration”) are primarily focused on a theoretical understanding of the nature of the cosmos. According to the teachings of this school, all reality is composed of two basic principles: contentless consciousness (*purusha*) and materiality (*prakriti*). The material universe unfolds through the interaction of three basic constituents, *sattva* (lucidity), *rajas* (activity) and *tamas* (inertia) into twenty-three principles or *tattvas*. These teachings were incorporated into virtually all later Hindu traditions. Although this worldview is at odds with our contemporary scientific description of the world, there are strong resonances with traditional western descriptions of the split between “spirit” and “matter”.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENT

READ this excerpt from *Poser: My Life in Twenty-Three Yoga Poses*, by Claire Dederer: A contemporary American yoga student writes about her first encounter with Indian philosophy.

READ this excerpt from the *Katha Upanishad*.

CONTEMPLATE what you have learned so far in this class. Has your understanding of yoga changed? Are there ideas or teachings that you would like to explore further?

OPTIONAL

READ this description of Samkhya by Edwin Bryant, a contemporary scholar/practitioner.