



The Metaphysical Logic of the *Siddhis*, Mystic Powers, in Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*

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Abstract

Recent work has clearly established the fundamental place of the *siddhis* in almost all Indic *mokṣa* traditions. This paper seeks to excavate a fundamental metaphysical dimension to this phenomenon, by excavating the philosophical logic of these claims from within the contours of *Sāṃkhya* metaphysics as expressed in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali. It will set out to provide a coherent explanation of how these *siddhis* are not only an inherent ingredient of *yogic* discourse, but a logical and perhaps inevitable corollary of the parameters of this metaphysics. It will thus take the issue further than a mere recognition of the centrality of the *siddhis* to yogic practice and discourse by laying out the sequential metaphysics underpinning them, and hence arguing that *siddhis* are not only fundamental and intrinsic to the *Sāṃkhya/Yoga* tradition, but an essential by-product of its metaphysical presuppositions.

Keywords *Siddhis* · *Yoga Sūtras* · *ātman* · *Sāṃkhya* · *Samādhi* · *buddhi* · *citta* · *prakṛti* · *guṇas* · *saṃyama* · *tanmātra* · *kleśas*

Perhaps a quarter of the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali consists of claims pertaining to supernatural powers that can be attained through intense states of mind control. Thus, from four chapters, we find the third one, *vibhūti pāda*, featuring supernatural powers, but such powers are already encountered previously in chapter two, in the section on the boons accrued from following the *yamas* and *niyamas*, moral and ethical precepts (II.35–45), and surface in a variety of verses scattered elsewhere throughout the text. Elsewhere, such supernatural claims culminate in the accomplished *yogi's* potential omniscience and omnipotence (e.g. I.40; III.44, 48–49 & 54; IV.31).

Some of the material for this paper has its roots in my recent translation and commentary of the *Yoga Sūtras* (New York: North Point Press, 2009).

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This aspect of the tradition has long caused discomfort to many scholars engaging with the text, even those who otherwise find much merit in the overall Yoga system and is typically bypassed or dealt with in a dismissive, cursory or reductionistic manner. Not surprisingly, during the colonial period, the *siddhi* aspect of the tradition provoked a number of scathing caricatures of *Yoga*:

The Yogin . . . is much deceived in the magical powers he ascribes himself. His self- deception, the corresponding self- deception of the user of drugs, constitutes one of the most pathetic chapters of human history. To aim so high, and to fall so low, is in truth both deep tragedy and high comedy. Yet the stupefied Yogin is one of the blundering heroes and martyrs who mark the slow progress of humanity (Leuba 1919, 195).

Indophiles, too, such as the famed Max Müller opined laconically and somewhat aridly: “Here we are able to watch the transition from rational beginning to irrational exaggerations...it is certainly noteworthy, from a philosophical point of view, that we find such vague and incredible statements side by side with specimens of the most exact reasoning and careful observations” (Müller 1912, 349–352).

Even more sympathetic analyses from this period which attempted to accommodate at least some of the *siddhis* within the contours of the knowledge systems of the time, did so in the hope, one suspects, of salvaging a ‘rational’ Yoga tradition from a more pre-rational mythological maitrix. Thus, Lanman attempted to separate “these powers which have some basis in scientifically established fact from those which have none” (Lanman 1971, 134). For example, the *yogic* claims of being able to enter another’s body (III.38) was, to Lanman, “indubitably a case of hypnosis” (149), and he was comfortable reporting “reliable” accounts of *yogīs* being buried alive (such well-intended attempts at rational accommodation are, understandably, still extant e.g. Chapple, 2012¹; Sarbacker, 2012²).³ Overall, as Pensa notes, “the question of ‘powers’ in Yoga and Buddhism in particular has not infrequently been taken into consideration in a biased, over-simple or at any rate excessively summary fashion: the prejudice was thus such as to silence the texts, so to speak” (Pensa 1969, 197).

More recent work on the *sūtras*, is about the fundamental place of the *siddhis* in the system (e.g., Whitcher 1998,⁴ Feuerstein 1980⁵; Peterson 2011). As Feuerstein notes:

[In] the consensus of scholarly opinion . . . the supernatural attainments are discordant with Patañjali’s rational approach and his philosophical objectives. How can we account for this obvious pre- eminence given to the “magical” side of the *yogic* path? Was Patañjali, after all, not such a staunch rationalist as contemporary interpreters have made him out to be? Has he perhaps unwittingly

¹ “Siddhis in the Yoga Sūtras” in Jacobsen, Knut. *Yoga Powers: Extraordinary Capacities Attained Through Meditation and Concentration*. Brill’s Indological Library vol 23, 2011 (henceforth, *ibid*), 223–239

² “Power and meaning in the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali.” *Ibid*, 195–222.

³ Lanman reports that these accounts originated “from the pen of Sir Claude Martin Wade, who was an actual eye- witness” to one such event.

⁴ *The Integrity of the Yoga Darśana*. New York: SUNY press, 1998.

⁵ *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga* New York: St. Martin’s press, 1980.

succumbed to the magical trend in Yoga, betraying its putative shamanistic origins? These questions can all be instantly disposed of by the simple observation that the powers form an integral part of all *yogic* endeavor (*Ibid.*, 101–102).

Indeed, narratives of mystical phenomena pervade the entire Indic textual and scholastic traditions from their earliest recorded origins to their modern transplanted forms, and recent work has finally documented their ubiquitousness in Indic textual traditions (Jacobsen 2011). They pervade not only the more martial Epic and Purāṇic literary genres (Malinar, 2012⁶), as with other similar and cognate Indo-European traditions, but philosophical as well – e.g. *Vedānta Sūtras* IV.4.17; *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* IX.1.11 ff, and respective commentaries. The landscapes of the Jain and Buddhist traditions are replete with narratives pertaining to super-normal phenomena (e.g., Buddhaghōṣa’s *Visuddhimagga* XII and XIII, and the Buddha’s hagiography itself (for further references, see Clough, 2012,⁷ Fiordalis, 2012,⁸ Overbey, 2012⁹).

This pervasive belief in super-normal skills on the Indic religious landscape has its earliest literary precedents in general terms in the power of the Vedic sacrifice to manipulate external realities (the *mantras* acknowledged in *Yoga Sūtra* IV.1).¹⁰ More specifically, perhaps, with regards to the methods or practices that trigger these powers according to the *Yoga Sūtras*, one can find Vedic parallels in the *dhīḥ* of the Vedic *ṛṣis*, seers, in the very earliest Vedic texts. Following Gonda (1984, 68), Pensa translates *dhīḥ* as “exceptional and supra-normal faculty, proper to ‘seers,’ of ‘seeing’ in the mind things, causes, connections, as they really are, the faculty of acquiring a sudden knowledge of the truth, of the functions and influence of diving powers” (196). We can note, too the long-haired (*keśin*) ascetic of the Ṛg-veda who flies through the sky (RV 10, 136) as an early forerunner. And, to realize the ongoing longevity and continuity of these claims to supernormal phenomena, one has only to glance at some of the hagiographical classics of *yogis* of our own times, on the modern western alternative religious landscape (e.g. *Autobiography of a Yogi* by Yogananda Paramahansa¹¹; *Play of Consciousness* by Swami Muktananda,¹² *The Himalayan Masters* by Swami Rama¹³).

One can certainly understand the motives behind attempts to rationalize and minimize the centrality of the *siddhis*, since so much else in the *Yoga Sūtras* has much to offer modern discussions on the psychology and philosophy of mind, but, like it or not, *siddhis* are integral to the entirety of Hindu beliefs from their earliest Vedic beginnings -

⁶ “Yoga Powers in the Mahābhārata” *Ibid.*, 33–60.

⁷ “The Cultivation of yogic Powers in the Pāli Path Manuals of Theravāda Buddhism.” *Ibid.*, 77–95.

⁸ “The Wondrous Display of Superhuman Power in the Vimalakīrtinīrdeśa: Miracle or Marvel?” *Ibid.*, 97–122–144.

⁹ “On the Appearance of Siddhis in Chinese Buddhist Texts” *Ibid.*, 127–144.

¹⁰ Like other old world cultures, the dominant religious expression in the early Vedic period within which Yoga emerges is that of the sacrificial cult wherein animals and other items are offered to various gods through the medium of fire for the purposes of obtaining worldly boons. The Vedic hymns often express a lusty desire for very earthly boons such as cows, offspring, victory over enemies, etc., which the sacrificer in the earlier Vedic period attempted to obtain by cajoling the gods who controlled such things (and, in the middle Vedic period, by mastering the technology of *mantra* and ritual such that the gods were constrained to bestow these boons - implied in *Yoga Sūtras* IV.1).

¹¹ Los Angeles: Self Realization Fellowship, 1997.

¹² South Fallsburg: SYDA, 2000.

¹³ Hoesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute, 2000.

right up to the ongoing claims of modern Hindu mystics. Indeed, accumulating *siddhi* motifs from throughout the gamut of Sanskrit literature, White has gone so far as to propose that the most appropriate definition of *yoga* is precisely that of attainment of mystical powers, a definition he argues “respects both the spirit and the letter of Hindu sources on the uses of the term *yoga*, in ways that have remained remarkably unchanged from the time of the *Upaniṣads* down through the *Tantras*” (2004, 627; see also White, 2009).

However uncomfortable to our modern, post-enlightenment sensibilities, we have no grounds to suppose that Patañjali or the commentators considered the *siddhis* to be anything other than literally factual (any more than to suppose that they take the Hindu cosmography of III.26 to be anything other than literal or factual). Nor do we have any grounds - other than our own rational dissonances reflective of our own temporal and cultural locations - to wonder whether Patañjali has conceded this section simply out of deference to the popular cultural expectations of the day concerning magic and supernatural powers. The technicality and succinctness of the *sūtras* (as with the *sūtra* genre in general for that matter) indicate they are aimed at scholastically oriented practitioners (actual or vicarious), not illiterate *sadhus*. In sum, it seems untenable to suggest that Patañjali has dedicated a quarter of this text just to cater to the silly beliefs of uneducated simpletons.

Having said that, however, one must also note that the commentators do not really try to explain the mechanics behind the *siddhis* (unlike their extensive technical analysis of e.g. the meditative states) and that their commentaries on the *siddhis* are some of the shortest in the text, which suggests that they, at least, are writing on these *siddhis* from a position of scholasticism, *āgama* (I.7), rather than presenting themselves as authorities describing their supernatural experiences, *para-pratyakṣa pramāṇa*. But there are no grounds to suppose they do not accept them as anything other than factual. In fact, I am aware of no traditional text or commentary in the entire pre-modern history of the Indic philosophical and literary traditions, whether folk, classical or scholastic, Buddhist, Hindu, or Jain, that has taken the *siddhis* to be anything other than factual. Even in III.37, where Patañjali speaks disparagingly about the *siddhis*, this is not because they are puerile, fanciful or imaginary but, on the contrary, it is precisely because they are considered actually to arise, that Patañjali is alerting the *yogi* that they are real dangers to the path, not imaginary ones.

I used to think that the reason for Patañjali’s inclusion of the *siddhis* only to then spurn them in III.37 was because they were perhaps considered to be inadvertent byproducts that might unexpectedly manifest in intense meditative states of *samādhi*, and so he was alerting the practitioner not to be confused or side-tracked by them - like warning labels on medicine prescriptions pointing to possible unintended physiological symptoms. But then it occurred to me that the Epic and Purāṇic traditions are full of narratives of characters in the forests of ancient India who were performing intense meditational practices that externally looked exactly like that of the *yogis* being addressed by Patañjali - viz., bona fide *yogis* seeking a *svaruṇe* ‘*vasthanam*’ experience (I.3), that of intention-less, objectless, unfiltered consciousness aware of nothing other than its own nature of awareness (*citi-śakti*’, IV.34). But such look-alike characters had no interest in the *ātman*: they sought powers; indeed, some had extraordinarily malevolent ambitions. One need only consider how the great *āsuras* of Hindu lore attained their powers such that Viṣṇu himself has to incarnate to curtail them – Rāvaṇa,

comes to mind, or Hiranyakaśipu who stood in *eka-pāda-hasta-āsana* for a thousand years (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* VII.3.1ff).

The point is that powers could be attained from *tapas*, as Patañjali explicitly states in IV.1 - and powers could be sought and attained for nefarious intent. And even if the seeker of power had no harmful intentions, numerous traditions themselves speak of the distinction between powers that arise unsought that are to be ignored (or occasionally utilized for pedagogical intent), and those that are sought for personal enjoyment (see e.g. Malinson, 2012, for discussion of this binary possibility in *haṭha-yoga* expressions¹⁴). Hence right into the modern period, the *yogi* could more often than not be perceived as a scary character in village India, even before the British lavished their disdain on “those dirty yogi blokes” (Singleton, 40).¹⁵

I am suggesting, then, that Patañjali may have included the *siddhis* to draw attention to the fact that many characters in the forests and wilderness of ancient India were engaging in *citta-vṛtti-nirodhaḥ* type practices (I.2), but in their case, exclusively in order to attain powers. They had no interest in the *svarūpa* experience of the *ātman*, since their minds were *vyutthāna*, “swerving from the right course” (III.37). But, in contrast, for the type of *yogi* Patañjali is addressing, these powers are of no interest; in fact, any such *siddhis* are *upasargāḥ*, obstacles (*ibid*). But the larger point here is that this warning, along with the prolonged attention directed to them, itself indicates that while Patañjali does not accept their usefulness or desirability for the *yoga* he was promoting, he very much accepted the reality of the *siddhis*. In short, the *siddhis* are taken as unquestionably factual by almost the entire massive textual tradition of ancient India for over two a half, perhaps three, millennia (of academically accepted time frames).

With all this said, my argument is not about establishing popular consensus, but seeks to excavate a fundamental metaphysical dimension to all this. I will attempt to provide a coherent explanation of how these *siddhis* are not only an inherent ingredient of *yogic* discourse, but a logical corollary of the parameters of *Sāṃkhya/Yoga* metaphysics. I will thus take the issue further than a mere recognition of the centrality of the *siddhis* to *yogic* practice and discourse by arguing that *siddhis* are not only fundamental and intrinsic to the *Sāṃkhya Yoga* tradition, but an inevitable by-product of its metaphysical presuppositions, and that these presuppositions are laid out in chapter three immediately prior to the discussion of the *siddhis*. In other words, I will attempt to excavate the philosophical logic of these claims from within the contours of *Sāṃkhya* metaphysics and argue for a structural coherence to the sequencing of verses in chapter III.

We should note that some schematized version of *Sāṃkhya* metaphysics pervades the Purāṇic, Epic, Vedānta and even Ayurveda traditions, and hence dominates late Vedic traditions (even as Nyāya Vaiśeṣika categories were appropriated and absorbed into the *satkārya* metaphysics of the *Sāṃkhya* traditions). My approach will be partly phenomenological, by which I intend that this study will not concern itself with the veracity or falsity of *siddhi* truth claims, but rather with acknowledging them in their own terms as they are represented in the text and probing as to *how* they fit seamlessly into the very metaphysics of the *Sāṃkhya* system in which they are accommodated. They are thus coherent and rational elements of the presuppositions of that system.

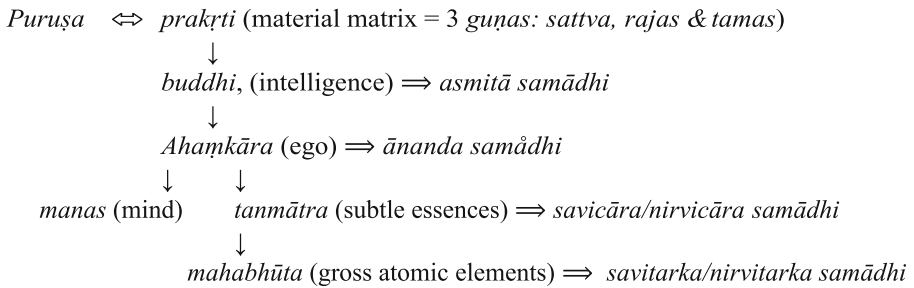
¹⁴ “Siddhi and Mahāsiddhi in Early Haṭhayoga.” in *Ibid*, 327–344.

¹⁵ *Yoga Body* New York, 2010.

²² *Aṇu*, literally ‘minute,’ (in the quantitative

I intend to propose that in the *sūtras* preceding the presentation of the *siddhis* in chapter III – in the very placement and sequencing of these verses, particularly III.13–15 – Patañjali precisely has provided the preparatory infrastructure for a rational, that is, metaphysical explanation of the mechanics underpinning the *siddhis*. The actual description of the *siddhis* in the chapter dedicated to them does not begin until III.16, almost a third of the way through this chapter: what relationship do the preceding verses have with this central theme? Why does this third chapter begin with the last three of the eight limbs of *yoga* and why are these not placed at the end of the previous chapter dedicated to these limbs and the practice of *yoga*? It is these questions that this paper will seek to address.

That metaphysical system and its corresponding *samādhi* states can be schematized as follows:



The ingredients from Patañjali's own *sūtras* (and the primary commentaries) in chapter III that provide the metaphysical framework and explanatory coherence to the phenomenon of the *siddhis* are as follows:

- (1) In *Sāṃkhya*, any gross physical object perceivable to the senses consists of *aṇus* (atoms¹⁶). *Aṇus*, are irreducible monadic entities - irreducible until they dissolve into *tanmātras* - they are essentially a transformation of the *tanmātras*, subtle energies. These, in turn, are ultimately a transformation of the *guṇas*, each successive evolute corresponding to an increase in the *tamas* or the previous evolute – a sort of densification of *prakṛti*. The first evolves from the *guṇas* are *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra* in the *Sāṃkhya* schema (*Sāṃkhya Kārikā* XXIV– XXV). This schema is implicitly accepted by Patañjali (II. 45; III.44 & 47) and explicitly accepted by the *Yoga* commentaries throughout (e.g. I.17 & 42–45). Thus *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra*, which in *Yoga* are considered functions of the one *citta*, rather than separate psychic layers, are the immediate substratum of the *tanmātras*.

¹⁶ *Aṇu*, literally 'minute,' (in the quantitative sense of tiny), a term typically translated by Indologists of the nineteenth century and subsequently retained as 'atom,' is the smallest individualized particle of matter in existence. In point of fact, an *aṇu* is an irreducible entity in the sense that it cannot be further broken down into smaller parts whereas atoms are particles reducible into smaller entities (such as electrons and protons, etc.), so 'atom' is not an accurate translation, hence I have sometimes referred to it, somewhat unsatisfactorily, as 'sub-atomic particles'. Of course, In *Sāṃkhya*, *aṇus* themselves are ultimately composed of the *guṇas*; they are simply the smallest entities into which the *guṇas* can exist in the distinct forms of the *mahābhūtas*, gross elements of earth, water, etc., without reverting back to subtler energies such as the *tanmātras* or *ahaṃkāra*, etc.

- (2) In the *samādhi* state, specifically in the *nirvicāra* state of *samādhi*, by intense power of concentration, *samāpatti* (*saṃyama*), the *yogī's citta* can penetrate the subtle substructure of any material object of meditation, experiencing the object as raw *tanmātra* qualities that transcend the limitations of Time and Space (I.44). In other words, the *yogī* attains an experience of external reality that is unbounded and unlimited, viz., cosmic in scope. This is an actual experience of the object, not merely a conception or even perception, as all distinctions of subject, object, and process of knowing dissolve, and the object alone stands forth (I.43; III.3).
- (3) The *yogī* can penetrate even this *tanmātra* substratum and experience subtler constitutional dimensions of the object, that is, experience its even more *sāttvic* nature of *ahaṃkāra*, then of *buddhi*, and finally of its ultimate nature as unmodified pure *prakṛti* (I.45).
- (4) The *yogī* can penetrate and experience the subtlest level of not just an object of meditation but, when all cognitive limitations dissolve, also the entirety of *prakṛti* (I.40, 44; III.33; 49 & 54).
- (5) These types of meditative practices culminate in omniscience (III.49 & 54; IV.31) and omni-potency (I.40; iii.49). To be metaphysically specific, omniscience means that, since the mind is potentially omnipresent in Yoga, when it regains the ability to manifest this nature in the higher states of *samādhi* and consequently pervade the entirety of *prakṛti*, it can, as a consequence, be aware of every atomic detail within *prakṛti* (I.40; III.44 & 53), since atoms are the grossest, or final, emanations from *prakṛti*. To know something is for awareness to contact it and pervade it. Due to *karma*, our conditioned knowledge is limited by the range of our instruments of perception (*darśana-śakti* of the ego, II. In the higher stages of *samādhi* the *yogī's buddhi* bypasses these limitations and becomes unrestrained, viz., regains its infinite potential and can thus pervade, and hence know, everything, *sarvajña*. Along the same lines - and important for where we are heading with all this - omnipotence means that since the mind can not only permeate the entirety of *prakṛti* but in fact constitutes its causal substructure, it can manipulate its effects, as will be discussed further below.
- (6) The *sūtras* in chapter III immediately prior to the section on *siddhis* have prepared the explanatory metaphysical groundwork for understanding *siddhis* by indicating that the change in an object's visible characteristics - the *dharma*, *lakṣaṇa*, and *avasthā* of III.13ff¹⁷ - are nothing other than surface- level transformations of the substratum of *prakṛti*, the *dharmin* (III.14), which, as noted above, the *yogī* can permeate entirely with his or her own *citta* (I.40).
- (7) This is preceded in the chapter by the establishment of *saṃyama*, the technique by which *citta* can pervade its object. Much of this technique is presented in Chapter I (I.41–43; 46–48), where the term *samāpatti* is used to refer to the mind's complete absorption on the object of meditation (the commentators use the term *samāpatti* synonymously with *saṃyama*).

Structurally, then, chapter III is composed sequentially as: the technique by which *siddhis* are attained; the metaphysical mechanisms underpinning the *siddhis*; and the *siddhis* themselves, in chronological order.

¹⁷ The commentators take *dharma* to refer to an object's characteristics; *lakṣaṇa* to its situation in time (i.e. past, present or future); and *avasthā* to its condition - new or old, etc.).

Let us put all this together into a coherent deductive hermeneutical principle: In essence external gross perceivable matter in *Sāṃkhya* is a ‘densification’ of subtler matter, and this of subtler matter still, etc., all of which is ultimately nothing other than a combination of three *guṇas*. To put it in Patañjali’s terms: the “characteristics, state, and condition” of objects in external reality of III.13ff are nothing other than temporary permutations of the *dharmin*, the substratum, which is ultimately *prakṛti*. While also a *dharma*, *Buddhi* is the most subtle *dharmin* substructure after the raw *guṇas* of *prakṛti* themselves.¹⁸ According to Yoga, the *yogī’s buddhi* is potentially all-pervading in the higher *samādhi* states and can thus permeate all *prakṛti* (I.40). This can only mean that it merges with the existing *buddhi* substructure underpinning all reality. In other words, the *yogī* is held to be able to transcend the limitations of the *kleśas* and the *asmitā*-the *ahaṃkāra* of Vedānta (*abhimāna* of *Sāṃkhya*), which have restricted or localized or, better, individualized a portion of the universal *buddhi* into the personal *buddhi* of the adept, and thereby merge into the cosmic *buddhi*. This means it is now in a position to manipulate the external effects emanating from causal universal *buddhi*, that is to say, by manipulating this (penultimate) substructure of all manifest reality, the *yogī’s buddhi* can change the nature of all derivative physical products made of that substructure.

I find myself envisioning the relationship of the individual *buddhi* with the cosmic *buddhi* to be like that of someone’s fingers poking into a blown up balloon, but without popping it. The fingers are individually tightly covered with the balloon rubber, yet this rubber remains connected with the greater source of rubber of the rest of the balloon. Similarly, when the *puruṣas* in *prakṛti* are under the influence of the *kleśas*, etc. (ignorance, ego, etc.), they are enveloped in individualized layers of *prakṛti* such as *buddhi*, etc., even though these layers remain somehow potentially or latently connected to the cosmic *buddhi*. When the *puruṣas* transcend these *kleśas* (ignorance, ego, attachment, aversion, clinging to life¹⁹) through the practice of *yoga*, they cast off the limitations of ego. As the verses above indicate, their *buddhi* can now merge into its cosmic source, the universal *buddhi*.

The situating of the metaphysical verses prior to the listing of the actual *siddhis* can now be read in this light: Patañjali is providing the technical preparatory metaphysical specifics explaining the phenomenon of *siddhi* abilities, and these, in turn, are preceded by the epistemological means by which they can be acquired, viz, *saṃyama*, the first topic of the chapter. Let us take a moment to recall that the phenomenological task we have set for ourselves, here, is not one of veracity from the perspective of post-enlightenment scientific principles, but to consider how these *siddhis* might be accounted for, and even inevitable corollaries of *Sāṃkhya* metaphysical principles.

To illustrate these principles, let us take a somewhat simplistic example that is sometimes encountered, but works well enough in my view: let us imagine encountering an alien planet, whose inhabitants, due to the planet’s climate or whatever, have never seen water but only ice. We take a chunk of ice with which the alien is familiar, and rearrange (what we earthlings know as) its atomic substructure by applying intense heat to it (pervading it with this subtle energy of heat) such that it (to the alien)

¹⁸ See II.19 for how something can be *viśeṣa* and *aviśeṣa*, viz. a *dharma* and *dharmin*.

¹⁹ The *kleśas* are the psychic ‘afflictions’ that cause *puruṣa* to misidentify with what it is not (the mind and body), and hence remain trapped in the cycle of birth and death by dint of the law of karma, action and reaction (II.5ff).

mysteriously completely changes its form and becomes water - a flowing nonsolid entity completely different to sense perception than the hard, dense physical ice entity known to the alien. We then apply more heat, and the water then vanishes in turn into a completely different form, appearing as cloudy, vaporous, non-tangible steam – magically, for those unfamiliar with the underlying principles involved. But there is nothing magical about this from the perspective of our laws of physics; all we have done is to rearrange the imperceptible substructure of the ice, the relationship between its hydrogen and oxygen atoms, such that the external forms produced from them appear transformed. It is a parallel ‘manipulation-of-substructure’ principle - in our case psychic - that is to be kept in mind if we are to seek a coherent explanation of the *siddhis* from the paradigm of *Sāṃkhya* physics.

With this preparatory metaphysical preamble in place, we can now turn our attention to illustrating this hermeneutical principle in a few of the *siddhis* mentioned by Patañjali, bolstered by a few observations from the commentators. As we have noted, the essential method in this process is called *saṃyama*, which essentially means applying intense concentration on any object²⁰ with the *citta* mind. In III.21 we find the following verse:

By performing *saṃyama* on the outer form of the body, invisibility [is attained].
This occurs when perceptibility is obstructed by blocking contact between light and the eyes.

The commentator Vācaspati Mīśra explains that a body can be seen because it has colour, and so when rays of light strike the body, it becomes visible to the eyes of others. By *saṃyama*, the *yogī* can obstruct this process such that he or she is no longer visible to others, even in broad daylight (the Buddha is reputed to have used this *siddhi* to vanish after giving discourses in various assemblies of nobles²¹).

Now, according to Yoga, the body is visible due to the *tanmātra* or subtle quality of color or form, *rūpa*, which densifies into light (fire) gross element. According to the evolution of the *tattvas* in *Sāṃkhya*, we know that *rūpa* emanates from the *tanmātra* of touch, when the *tamas* component is increased. The *modus operandus* of this *siddhi* is that through the power of sheer concentration the *yogī* can reverse this, that is, minimize the *tāmas* element that allows sight (or, put differently, maximize the translucent *sāttva* element), such that light rays do not have a sufficiently dense (*tāmasic*) surface from which to bounce back to an observing eye (in the same way that air and ether cannot be perceived by the gross eye due to their relatively higher proportion of *sattva*). And, indeed, in III.45, the primary commentator of the *Yoga Sūtras*, Vyāsa (whose commentary has, to all intents and purposes, attained a status as canonical as, and certainly as inseparable from, Patañjali’s source text), speaks of invisibility being attained by the *yogī* “covering himself in the element of ether.” As always, *buddhi*, the *yogī*’s intensely focused mind, now potentially cosmic in extension as outlined previously, is the substratum of grosser energy that evolves from it, so it can

²⁰ Technically, *saṃyama* is defined in III.4 as *dhāraṇā*, concentration; *dhyāna*, meditation; and *saṃādhi*, absorption, performed together. One might presume that the *yogī* (at least most *yogīs*) cannot just snap into a state of *saṃādhi* instantaneously. The mind has to be gradually eased away from external awareness and progressively stilled through the stages of *dhāraṇā* and *dhyāna* first.

²¹ *Dīgha Mahavagga* III.12.42

tinker with the density of the elements emerging from it. In other words, an increase in the *sattva* component of the body dissolves or transforms its previous composition prioritizing *tamas* - the ‘etherealization’ of Vyāsa (it can, of course, continue this inverse re-revolution, to create a *mānasic* or *ahaṃkāric* body, etc.).

The same principle holds good for a number of verses. For example, III.42 states that: “By performing *saṃyama* on the relationship between the body and ether, and by performing *samāpatti* on the lightness of cotton, one acquires the ability to travel through the sky.” *Samāpatti*, introduced in I.41ff, involves concentrating intensely on an object such that the meditator becomes as if one with the object of meditation, a process that appears to be synonymous with *saṃyama*. (In the commentaries of the *Vedānta Sūtras* IV.2.16, *samāpatti* denotes merging, which, in the context of Yoga, points to the *citta*’s merger with the *citta* substructure of any object of meditation as a result of its intense focus).

Now, according to the commentaries, the body moves in ether, or space, and by performing *saṃyama* on this relationship, as well as by total absorption on light entities such as cotton or atoms, one can become so light that one can walk on water, spider-webs, or rays of light. The metaphysical principle operating here seems to be the same: By manipulating the substratum, one can transform the nature of its effects. The gross elements are all transformations of ether, which means they are in origin and thus potentially in essence ether. By *saṃyama* on this relationship, it seems that the *yogī* can potentially increase the *sattva* component of the body - reverse the densification process by correspondingly minimizing the *tamas* component - and thus manifest the inherent ethereal nature or quality constituting the body such that it takes on the qualities of ether. Ether takes on the form of the body, says Viṣṇūabhikṣu- the body is pervaded by ether (after all, it is essentially ether potentially, from the perspective of the evolution of the material elements). This results in unimpeded freedom of movement, since ether is all- pervading. The *yogī* can thus move freely through the air, and some of the earliest records of Vedic literature preserve references to ascetics who had various powers, such as the ability to fly through the air and appear at will (a *siddhi* that is perhaps the most commonly encountered in subsequent literature over the centuries).²²

Picking a few more verses at random from chapter III to further illustrate this ‘mental-manipulation-of-substratum’ principle, In III.24 we are informed that “by practicing *saṃyama* on strengths, [the *yogī*] attains the strength of an elephant, etc.” The commentators state that by *saṃyama* on Garuḍa, Viṣṇu’s mythical enormous eagle carrier, one gets the power of Garuḍa; by *saṃyama* on the power of the wind, one gets such powers, and so on. The same principle holds here that by the *yogī*’s intense concentration on any power, such as the strength of an elephant, his mind can manifest that same power in his body - perhaps, in this case, by increasing the *tamas* component. Once again, everything is potential in the mind, *citta*, and mind is the substratum of all *prakṛtic* evolutes, including strength. It can therefore potentially manifest anything at all, since everything inherently exists in latent form within its own nature.

The verses pertaining to omniscience or omnipotence are simply extensions of a similar principle. For example, in III.25, we find that “by directing the light of cognition, one obtains knowledge of subtle, concealed, and remote things.”

²² *Āpastamba-sūtra* II.9.23.6–8; *Sāma-vidhāna* III.9.1.

Vijñānabhikṣu states that the *yogī's* mind becomes so powerful that just by directing his or her mind toward an object, even if it is subtle, concealed, or far away, it becomes revealed - just as one has immediate perception of a nearby pot merely by directing one's eyes to it. This, say the commentators, is because when all traces of *rajas* and *tamas* have been eradicated, the natural luminosity inherent in the *sattva* of the *citta* becomes manifest without hindrance. This light can then be directed toward revealing things beyond normal cognition - the subtle, concealed, and remote things of this *sūtra*. *Citta* in Yoga metaphysics is potentially all- pervading when its delimiting *rajas* and *tamas* potentials are suppressed, and when the limitations of its *asmitā* and *darśana śaktis* (the *indrīyas* of Sāṃkhya) are bypassed due to the dissolving of the ground of *asmitā*, *avidyā* (II.4). Thus, when its *sattva* potential is at its maximum and focused - which is another way of saying that the *kleśas* of ignorance and ego, which keep it misidentified and consequently contained within the boundaries of a particular body with a limited range of senses, are transcended - it can bypass the body's senses and contact objects beyond the normal reaches of sense perception.

This expansive and contractive nature of the *citta* can be simply illustrated from the perspective of Sāṃkhyan metaphysics: Let us say a *puruṣa* enveloped in its *citta* as all *saṃsāric puruṣas* are, due to its specific karmic exigencies, takes birth as an ant. The awareness of the *puruṣa* or, more precisely, the *ṛttis* of the *puruṣa's citta*, is now limited to the contours of the ant's body and sensual range. This, as we know, is due to the specifics of its *kleśas* - the *avidyā*, ignorance of the true *puruṣa* self, and ego, *asmitā*, misidentification with the temporary *prakṛtic* bodily covering with its sensual apparatus, caused by previous *karma*, in this case, that of an ant. Now, suppose the ant dies and, due to its particular *karmic* requirements, next takes birth as an elephant. Its *asmitā* now identifies with a new instrument, such that the *ṛttis* produced by it pervade a much larger surface - the body and sensual range of an elephant. This indicates that the range of *citta* can expand and contract. What, then, from the perspective of Sāṃkhya is to prevent it expanding farther still? The gross and even subtle elements are too coarse to obstruct *citta*, indeed *buddhi* and *ahaṃkāra* comprise the very substructure of gross and subtle matter. It is only the *kleśas* within the *citta* itself which can contain and delimit it, specifically, their grounding of *avidyā* noted above.

Like the light of a small bulb, which could, in principle, continue to emanate out throughout the entire universe were there no atmospheric or other obstacles to obstruct it, *citta* is potentially all- pervading (as is the source awareness of *puruṣa* underpinning it, *citi- śakti*), were there no *kleśas* to obstruct it. Let us keep in mind that there are two distinct meta-entities in Yoga- the *puruṣa* itself and the completely distinct *citta* - but they are both nonetheless potentially infinite in their range. Normally, due to the root *kleśa* of *avidyā* which is further refracted through the second *kleśa* of *āsmiṭā*, like concave lenses, consciousness is misidentified with the mind, and hence the range of consciousness is delimited by the restrictions of the mind. It is then further restricted by the senses of the body with which it subsequently misidentifies, and hence its scope is delimited by and channeled through those very senses. Once the *kleśas* are eliminated, that is, when intentional consciousness ceases to be identified with the body and its sensual apparatus and consequently transcends those *kleśas*, then one can see how the internal logic of Sāṃkhyan metaphysics requires the *citta* to be all- pervading - and thus able to be aware of anything within *prakṛti* (which is another way of expressing omniscience). Just as in the rainy season, says the commentator Vacaspati Miśra, the

sun, no longer obstructed by the monsoon clouds, shines everywhere with intense light, so does consciousness, when freed from its misidentification with matter, pervade all things.

In short, Patañjali's claims to omnipotence and omniscience are simply coherent and even inherent corollaries of Sāṃkhya metaphysics. Thus the logic of expressions in the *Sūtras* of such as: "upon the cessation of the *kleśas* and *karma*, that which remains to be known is little, because of the unlimited nature of knowledge when all its impurities have been removed" (IV.30-31); and "as a result of the performance of *saṃyama* there are no limitations on account of the body's natural abilities, mystic powers such as *añīma*²³ manifest, and the body attains perfection (III.45); and again "only for one who discerns the difference between the *puruṣa* and the *citta* do omniscience and omnipotence ensue" (III.49).

The *Siddha* traditions (e.g. *Hāṭhayogapradīpikā*) as well as the Jains have interesting counterparts to these ideas, indeed they are more-or-less pan-Indic. In e.g. Śaivite strains of the *Siddha* traditions, one has only to realize one's own inherent Śiva nature, to regain and enjoy once more one's constitutional omniscience and omnipotence as Śiva, the Supreme God, and a similar principle underpins all *Siddha* traditions such as the Goddess strains. In Jain metaphysics, the soul's inherent omniscience and omnipresence is covered by the obstructing limitations of (a more physically conceived) *karma*. When these *karmic* obstacles are partly destroyed, the *yogī* develops supernormal sensory abilities (*avadhijñānam*); when psychological obstacles such as hatred and envy have been overcome, the *yogī* can know the minds of others (*manah - paryāyajñānam*); and when all *karmic* obstructions have been completely removed, omniscience ensues (*kevala-jñānam*, see Wiley, 2012, for further references²⁴). In the Jain *Kalpa-sūtra* (120.1), Mahāvīra, the contemporary of the Buddha who is the primary figurehead in the Jain tradition, attains liberation, at which point he becomes omniscient: "Comprehending all objects; he knew and saw all conditions of the world, of gods, men and demons: whence they come, whither they go, whether they are born as men or animals or become gods or hell-beings, the ideas, the thoughts of their minds, the food, doings, desires, the open and secret deeds of all living beings in the whole world."²⁵ The Jains maintain that all souls must necessarily attain omniscience upon liberation. The Buddha, too, makes similar claims about himself: "Whatever . . . in this world with its *devas* and *Māras* and *Brahmas* [celestial beings] is by the folk thereof, gods or men, recluses or Brahmins, seen, heard, felt, discerned, accomplished, striven for, or devised in mind - all is understood by the *Tathāgata* [Buddha]."²⁶ And such claims do not represent a marginal element in non-mainstream Indic traditions, nor only in folk genres: the cluster of Vedānta traditions all declare omnipotence as a feature of the liberated state.²⁷ Even other classical Sūtra traditions such as *Vaiśeṣika* which do not subscribe to the *Sāṃkhya satkārya* schema accept omnipotence.²⁸

²³ *Añīma*, the ability to become minute, as first on the list, refers to the standard eight mystic powers.

²⁴ "Supernatural Powers and Their Attainment in Jainism." Ibid, 145–194.

²⁵ Quoted in Jaini (1974, 73).

²⁶ *Pāsādika Suttanta* 29 (Rhys Davis 1927, part III, 127).

²⁷ See e.g. *Praśna Upaniṣad* IV.10–11; *Vedānta Sūtras* IV.4.17 and commentaries. (In Vedānta, this omnipotency

stops short of being able to create the universe, however, which only *Īśvara* can do).

²⁸ *Vaiśeṣika Sūtras* IX.1.1ff.

In conclusion, then, while grandiose claims of omniscience and omnipotence are hardly likely to appeal to the rational spirit of post-Enlightenment thought or to modern scientific principles, from a phenomenological approach, such claims are inevitable corollaries of the *satārya Sāṃkhya* metaphysical schema. In summary, this schema holds that all material and psychic phenomena are evolutes of *buddhi*. Only the *kleśas* keep one's *buddhi* localized and separate from the universal *buddhi*, the first evolute from *prakṛti*, so once these are transcended, these individualizing limitations are surpassed, and *buddhi* re-attains, or reconnects with, its cosmic origins. Consequently, once one has access to and can exert mastery, *saṃyāma/samāpatti*, in extreme concentrative states, over the universality of *buddhi*, and one has full knowledge of and absolute control over all its evolutes, namely, the entirety of material and psychic phenomena- the phenomenal world. The claim to omniscience is thus internally consistent with the metaphysical logic of the *Sāṃkhya* system. It is this system (and not the *asatkārya* metaphysics of Vaiśeṣika or Mīmāṃsā²⁹) which is absorbed (under varying taxonomies and schemas) into the Epic, *Purāṇic*, *Siddha* and *Vedāntic* traditions, and it is in these traditions in which almost all the cluster of mainstream traditions that go under the rubric of Hinduism till the present day have their roots. Hence the persistence of accounts of *siddhi* phenomena in Hindu textual sources from the earliest Vedic records, to the ongoing claims of modern *yogīs*.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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²⁹ However the *padārtha* categories of Vaiśeṣika and Nyāya, such as *dharma/dharmin*, *samavāya*, *samānya*, *viśeṣa*, etc., are adopted by Vedāntins (e.g. Rāmānuja in his *Gītā bhāṣya*, whose naming of his own *siddhānta*, *viśiṣṭādvaita* reflects such influence), but they are subsumed into a Sāṃkhya *satkārya* substratum.