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Yoga and our Epistemic Predicament

In this paper I would like to consider the question, Is yogic experience possible? It may seem odd, even inappropriate, that such a question would be asked at a conference on yogic perception, meditation, and altered states of consciousness. Surely, one would think, one ought to be able to assume the existence of the topic of the conference! I raise this question, however, in order to draw attention to the somewhat awkward methodological predicament in which the participants of this conference must find themselves. I suspect that most of us set ourselves apart from our colleagues in our respective disciplines – and a wide range of fields are represented here – by our interest in yoga, yogic perception, and altered states of consciousness. I know that philosophers, at least, tend to steer clear of these topics, which they lump together with paranormal phenomena, just as they avoid the topic of mysticism. The reason is that the status of these states of consciousness, in the modern world, is very much in doubt. By that I mean whether what people who have such experiences report experiencing when they have them, really occurs: whether a yogin or yoginī really *sees* past lives (where someone's "seeing" a certain state of affairs implies the existence of that state of affairs in same the way in which it visually appears to that person); whether he or she really *sees* events that will take place in the future, or really *sees* everything at once; and even whether he or she ever really sinks into a completely thoughtless state, a state of "pure consciousness" (i.e., *samādhi* or *nirodhasamāpatti*). In short, are these states of consciousness more than mere hallucinations? If not, why should they merit our attention?

Many, I believe, would respond that, regardless whether they are hallucinations or not, they merit our attention because the *belief* in them has played an important role in various societies and cultures. The belief in the supernormal cognition, even omniscience of the Buddha, for instance, played a central role in Buddhist apologetics in India in the first millennium C.E., as the basis for maintaining the authority of the Buddhist scriptures against the skepticism of outsiders. Altered states of

consciousness, whether they are authentic encounters with a transcendent reality, a spirit world, or just hallucinatory experiences, are assigned a value and serve a variety of social functions in many other societies. Perhaps in our research we can focus on these aspects of these phenomena, which can be observed empirically or documented textually, and suspend judgement about their nature as experiences, i.e., whether they belong to the category of veracious cognitions or to something else?

This, however, will not do. Surely it is of the utmost significance if a particular society or culture attributes value to, and invests considerable cultural energy and resources in, something that is, at basis, an illusion – just as it would be if a particular person were to build his life around a belief that is patently false, say, a belief in the existence of some imaginary being. We would immediately suspect that some pathology is at work, distorting that society's collective perception of reality; and that would be a notable characteristic of that society, which a complete social-scientific or historical account of it could not very well leave out. Indeed, this is precisely what Freud suggested is the case for European society – a certain collective pathology supports our belief in a Supreme Being and sustains all the practices of religion which accompany it, which of course from a purely sociological or anthropological perspective serve many useful social and cultural functions.[1]

Therefore, I raise at the outset of this conference the question that no one really wants to answer, and that is whether it is possible for us to accept reports of yogic experience and altered states of consciousness at face value, as veracious supernormal cognitive acts, e.g., actual perceptions of things which normally lie beyond the range of our sense faculties (states of affairs in the past or the future, for instance), or, in the case of *samādhi* in particular, as the removal of all objects altogether from consciousness, without the extinguishing of consciousness itself.[2] What conditions, specifically, would have to be met in order for us to take such claims seriously? I shall approach the question by examining a debate that actually took place in classical Indian philosophy, between certain highly orthodox representatives of the Brahmanical tradition on

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[1] See Freud 1961.

[2] Even in India in classical times doubts were raised about the possibility of *samādhi*. See, e.g., *Nyāyasūtra* and *Bhāṣya* 4.2.38-40 (NBh 1090, 5 – 1092, 3).

the one hand, and defenders of the so-called heterodox traditions of Buddhism and Jainism on the other, about the possibility of yogic perception.[3] In this way we will not only become aware that we are not the first to consider this problem; we will also get a sense of how one school of thinkers, at least, went about solving it – by presuming to be able to prove that yogic perception is possible! An examination of their proposed solution to this problem, I believe, will at least indicate, by its strengths and weaknesses, the basic elements that any affirmative answer to the question of whether yogic experience is possible should possess.

Other scholars at this conference will also be referencing this debate, but my purpose will be rather different. They, for the most part, will be concerned with assessing it as historians, to determine the meaning and importance of the doctrine of yogic perception in classical Indian thought. I, on the other hand, shall be assessing it as a philosopher, to determine *who wins*. For since we ourselves are interested, or should be interested, in the question of whether yogic experience is possible, it is of particular interest to us to see whether a particular school of philosophers who thought they could *prove* that it is possible actually succeeded in doing so.

In order to orient ourselves toward the problem of yogic perception in Indian philosophy I shall rely on Eli Franco's important study, *Dharmakīrti on Compassion and Rebirth*.[4] One of Franco's most significant achievements in that book was to work out a convincing account of the "proof strategy" of the first chapter of Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇavārttika*, a much discussed problem in Dharmakīrti scholarship. Dharmakīrti, who probably lived in the first half of the seventh century, was, together with his predecessor Dignāga (early to mid-sixth century), co-founder of the important logico-epistemological school of Buddhist philosophy. One of the principal concerns of that school was to place the authority of the Buddhist scriptures on a firm footing, which in Dignāga's and Dharmakīrti's period was being increasingly effectively challenged by Brahmanical thinkers. Franco shows that Dharmakīrti attempts to do this by actually employing a strategy originally devised, perhaps, by one of the Brahmanical schools of philoso-

3 A remarkably similar debate took place in fourth-century China between Confucians and Taoists about the existence of the Taoist immortal (*hsien*). See Ware 1967.

4 See Franco 1997.

phy, the Nyāya, in establishing the validity of their own scripture, the Veda.[5] Nyāya philosophers believed the Veda to be true because it is a valid form of "testimony" (*śabda*), that is to say, it has an author or authors who are *āpta*, "reliable witnesses."[6] This was in marked contrast to the approach of another leading Brahmanical philosophical school of the classical period, the Mīmāṃsā, which held that the Veda should be considered true precisely because it is eternal and authorless – the Mīmāṃsakas denied that the Veda was composed by human beings, or even by God – for error in a statement or text can only derive from an author. According to the *Nyāyabhāṣya*, the earliest commentary on the *Nyāyasūtra* to have come down to us, someone is an *āpta* if he or she possesses the qualities of having (1) direct knowledge of things, (2) compassion toward living beings, and (3) a desire to teach things as they are. Thus, one is able to determine that someone is an *āpta*, in general, by confirming his or her statements in regard to things one is able to verify for oneself. One is able to determine that the "seers and teachers" of the Veda are *āpta*, in particular, by verifying the truth of the prescriptions of the Āyur and Atharva Vedas, which contain medical remedies and magical formulas for curing diseases and averting other evils. One assumes that all portions of the Veda have the same seers and teachers. By confirming the truth of certain parts of the Veda one can be confident that the seers and teachers of the Veda are trustworthy in general, i.e., have the qualities required of those who are *āpta*, therefore, that all parts of the Veda are true.

Dharmakīrti appears to follow this strategy, Franco argues, by attempting to demonstrate in the *Pramāṇasiddhi* chapter of his *magnum opus*, the *Pramāṇavārttika*, the validity of the Four Noble Truths, the central part of the Buddha's teaching! Having confirmed for ourselves, through reasoning (with Dharmakīrti's help), this, the most important and profound doctrine expounded by the Buddha, we may be confident that the Buddha is an *āpta* (for Dharmakīrti the term *āptavacana* is equivalent for *āgama*, scripture), that he possesses all the qualities expressed by the epithets of the famous dedicatory verse of Dignāga's *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, which Franco convincingly shows parallel the

[5] Franco 1997, chap. 1, pp. 28 ff.

[6] The *Nyāyabhāṣya* refers to "the seers and teachers" (*draṣṭāraḥ prayoktāraś ca*) of the Veda (NBh 568, 3-5), who were probably considered its composers. By the time of Vācaspatimiśra the Veda is believed to have a single, divine author.

qualities of an *āpta* as presented in the *Nyāyabhāṣya*. Thus, one may be confident that all the Buddha's teachings are true, including in particular his statements about the results of good and bad actions, which imply recommendations about how one should live – what should be done and not done. In other words, we may be confident that the way of life the Buddha prescribed for his disciples – his "Dharma," which deviates in significant respects from the Dharma of the Brahmins as well as the way of life of the Jainas – will indeed lead to salvation, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, if not also well-being and prosperity on earth and in heaven.

Criticisms of the Buddhist attempt to demonstrate the authority of the Buddha by other schools, in particular, the Mīmāṃsā, indicate that they understood the Buddhist argument along these same lines. The Mīmāṃsā philosopher Kumārila (also first half of the 7th c. C.E.) points out that expertise in one area does not necessarily transfer to another; just because someone is smart in grammar doesn't means he knows astronomy; and certainly, the fact that one knows a lot about the sorts of things we can know through perception and reasoning hardly implies that he is able to know anything about transcendent matters.[7] Besides, if we have to *verify* the Four Noble Truths in order to be confident of them, it makes sense for us to verify other statements of the Buddha. Why, indeed, accept anyone's word about anything?[8] But the debate quickly came to focus on one particular implication of the claim that the Buddha had knowledge of Dharma, and that is that he was possessed of some kind of supernormal cognitive ability. Dharma pertains to the good and bad results of actions. One ought to do X because doing X will yield a good result – pleasure or happiness; one ought to avoid Y

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[7] See TS, 3163-66, which cites Kumārila's lost work the *Bṛhaṭṭīkā*.

[8] I am rather freely paraphrasing some of Kumārila's points. See ŚV, *Codanā* 121 ff.; for a more detailed account of Kumārila's position see the contribution by Lawrence McCrea in this volume. It should be kept in mind that in the first chapter of the *Pramāṇavārttika* Dharmakīrti indicates that the reliability of someone's statements in regard to things we are able to confirm does not strictly establish the truth of his statements regarding other, supersensible things; for there is always the possibility of a "deviation" (PVSV 167,23-168,3). Dignāga stated that the notion of the reliability of the statements of an *āpta* is an "inference" only "because there is no other way" of being guided in acting in regard to supersensible matters, according to Dharmakīrti (PV 1.216; PVSV 108, 1-6; 109, 19-22). Strictly speaking, Dharmakīrti says, scripture is not a *pramāṇa* (PVSV 168, 2-3)!

because doing Y will yield a bad result – pain or suffering. But one is able to know such things only insofar as one is able to see that a certain action committed in the past yielded a certain result and a certain action committed in the present will yield a certain result. Knowledge of Dharma entails the ability to perceive states of affairs in the past and the future, which ability is beyond the scope of ordinary human beings – or so, at least, the Mīmāṃsaka insists. Or else, Dharma is simply "that which ought to be done and avoided." But that, too, most Indian philosophers believed, is something ordinary mortals are unable to know independently of scripture.[9] The truth of the Buddha's recommendations about how one should live, about what should and should not be done, believed to have originated from *him* and not some other scriptural source, are thus called into question. In short, his statements about such matters cannot be trusted, *because he had no way of knowing them*.

Thus the debate about the possibility of supernormal cognition, synonymous in most texts with yogic perception, *yogipratyakṣa*, begins in earnest across a broad range of texts in Indian philosophy. I do not intend to survey the history of this debate here. Rather, I will be concerned with what came to be the main Buddhist argument for the possibility of the Buddha's omniscience, including especially his ability to know the results of good and bad actions, which presupposes the power to see the past and the future.[10] I shall ask, what are we, in this day and age, to make of this argument? Is it at all persuasive? Does it really establish that the perception of the past and the future, of things far away, very small (atoms), or concealed (beneath the earth), is possible? I shall consider this argument in its mature form, as presented by Ratnakīrti in his *Sarvajñasiddhi*, "Proof of an Omniscient Person." This text, which represents the culmination of a long development, was translated into German by Gudrun Bühnemann in her doctoral dissertation, written

[9] See Taber 2005: 51-56.

[10] The Buddhist argument under consideration here is actually presented as proving only that the Buddha knew all things relevant to salvation, that is, as Dharmakīrti puts it, "the reality of what is to be accepted and rejected and the means [thereto]" (PV 2.34), not absolutely every thing in every way. See SS 1, 9-19. Dharmakīrti suggests that proving omniscience in the latter sense would be otiose, though some Buddhists clearly accepted it (see Jaini 1974); and it is not clear that the argument for the omniscience of the Buddha just in regard to all things relevant to Dharma doesn't actually imply total omniscience.

under the supervision of Prof. Ernst Steinkellner and published in 1980.[11]

Before I turn to Ratnakīrti's argument, however, I would like to draw attention to certain considerations that have shaped the attitude toward the supernatural among philosophers in our culture and therefore define the context in which we think about it today. The category of supernatural or supernormal phenomena with which Western philosophers have traditionally been concerned has been, not yogic experience, of course, nor even extrasensory perception, but miracles, especially biblical miracles, which have been frequently cited by Christians as proof of the divinity of Jesus and of the authenticity of the Bible. The classic statement on this matter is that of David Hume in his *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. It has provoked an extensive literature, which continues to grow to this day.[12]

Hume's concern was whether there can ever be a valid reason to believe that a miracle has occurred. He assumes that few of us ever witness miracles ourselves, therefore the question becomes whether the testimony of others can ever suffice to establish the occurrence of a miracle. Now trust in testimony, Hume observes, is founded on experience. Normally, we notice, the statements of people conform to the facts. Humans generally have decent memories, an inclination to tell the truth, and a sense of probity accompanied by a sense of shame when detected in a falsehood.[13] Thus, we are inclined to believe what they say. Yet, Hume says, "a wise man proportions his belief to the evidence,"[14] and we should take all the evidence into account. What speaks in favor of the credibility of testimony must be balanced against what speaks against it. We become suspicious of testimony, for example, when witnesses contradict each other; when they are few, or of doubtful character; when they have an interest in what they affirm, and so on. In particular, we become suspicious of testimony when it reports something highly unusual. The improbability of the event testified to can indeed neutralize the authority of the person or persons testifying to it. Here Hume cites the Roman saying, "I would not believe such a story

[11] See Bühnemann 1980.
[12] For a recent bibliography see Levine 1996. One of the most important recent contributions is Coady 1992.
[13] Hume 1955: 119.
[14] Ibid., p. 118.

were it told to me by Cato."[15] Transposing this into Indian terms, the *āptatva* of a witness, based on considerations about the witness's character, his compassion and so forth, and even a solid track-record of correct statements in the past, is not sufficient by itself to guarantee the truth of what he says. *It must still be weighed against the improbability of the fact to which he testifies.*

From this Hume concludes that no testimony can ever be sufficient to establish a miracle, which by definition is a violation of the laws of nature, hence contrary to all experience. Or else,

> no testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony can be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish; and even in that case there is a mutual destruction of arguments, so that the superior gives us an assurance suitable to that degree of force which remains ... When anyone tells me that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.[16]

One might think that while this analysis of testimony might pose a problem for Christians, it doesn't for Buddhists, since the Buddha was not given to reporting miracles. But he did make statements about the consequences of actions, which have implications about right and wrong, about how one should conduct one's life. For Indians in classical times, as discussed above, that suggests that he had an ability to know things that ordinary mortals are unable to know, specifically, the past and the future. Such an ability is *prima facie* miraculous by Hume's definition: it is contrary to common experience. Therefore, the Buddha's statements, despite his authority established on the basis of our alleged confirmation of the most important and profound part of his teachings, the Four Noble Truths, are called into question by the miracle or miracles that would have had to occur in order for them to be expressions of a valid state of knowledge on his part.

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[15] Ibid., p. 121.

[16] Ibid., pp. 123-4.

One can see from Hume's discussion that the key to affirming the Buddha's authority is to show how yogic experience *is possible*, and that would seem to entail showing *how it is not a violation of the laws of nature*, i.e., not really a miracle at all. In other words, one must suggest a plausible natural mechanism that can explain it. That is precisely what Ratnakīrti tries to do in his *Sarvajñasiddhi*.

Ratnakīrti's central argument – unfortunately I do not have space to treat his views comprehensively – goes roughly like this. If one thinks long enough and intensely enough about something, then the object of one's reflection will eventually present itself *in propria persona*: one will have a vivid, intuitive experience of the object as if it were actually present. A lovesick man, obsessed with a beautiful maiden, for example, and constantly thinking of her, will eventually experience a vivid apparition of her, as if she were bodily present. Now the Buddha reflected on the Four Noble Truths uninterruptedly over a long period of time; we may expect that this reflection eventually culminated in a vivid intuitive experience of the Four Noble Truths. Since the Four Noble Truths are universal in scope – they state that *everything* is *duḥkha*, the cause of *all duḥkha* is desire, and so forth – his intuition of those truths encompassed everything in the past, present, and future. And so, when the Four Noble Truths became vividly evident to him, the properties of all things past, present, and future became evident to him as well.

I have of course taken liberties in paraphrasing the argument. Ratnakīrti's own formulation is closer to the following.

> Any property or quality of the mind (*cetoguṇa*) which is accompanied by attentive, continuous, and sustained practice (*abhyāsa*) is capable of becoming vivid (*sphuṭībhāvayogya*), like the mental representation (*ākāra*) of a maiden of a lovesick man. The mental representations of the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha are like that – they are mental qualities that were cultivated by attentive, continuous, and sustained practice. Hence they were capable of becoming vivid (SS 1, 20-25).

Ratnakīrti is aware of course that this does not directly prove the omniscience of the Buddha but just the possibility of a mental state achieving, through continuous repetition, a kind of intuitive quality (SS 4, 24 ff.). Vividness is the hallmark of perception for Ratnakīrti, as we shall see; hence, for any vivid, intuitive awareness there is a presumption in favor of its truth. It is only by further implication that the person who has achieved a vivid intuition of *the Four Noble Truths* through this kind of

practice can have a vivid intuition of all things in the past, present, and future, which comprise the subject of the propositions which are the Four Noble Truths (except perhaps the fourth) (SS 10, 18-21).[17] It is sufficient to establish merely this possibility, says Ratnakīrti, in order to refute those who deny there could be any cause of omniscience (i.e., the Mīmāṃsakas and Cārvākas [materialist philosophers]) (SS 5, 12-13). In fact, if one maintained that a vivid intuition *will* arise from the constant repetition of a particular mental state, then one would be inferring an effect from its cause, which is illegitimate (SS 5, 4-5). That specifically the Buddha had such a (veracious) intuition is then indicated by the correctness of his teachings of the momentariness and selflessness of all entities, which are established by other *pramāṇas* but which other sages alleged to be omniscient reject (SS 6, 10-21) – that is to say, in effect, by his *āptatva*, his compassion and wisdom as established by our own confirmation of the truth of his main teachings. It would be impossible to prove directly that a particular person such as the Buddha is omniscient, because there is no class of omniscient persons with which to compare him and in which he would be included if he possessed a certain characteristic mark.

Thus, the crux of Ratnakīrti's proof is the attempt to establish the possibility of bringing a cognition to complete vividness, in effect raising it to the status of a perception, through constant and intense repetition.

The first thing that strikes the modern reader about the proof is the example, which is supposed to ground the generalization that mental states that are practiced attentively, constantly, and over a long period of time indeed yield vivid intuitions. What is Ratnakīrti talking about when he says that the lovesick man, obsessed with the maiden, eventually sees her (as if) before his very eyes? This is not the sort of thing that is often reported in our culture. Nor, for that matter, does it seem to

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[17] This, however, is from the Buddhist *pūrvapakṣa* of Vācaspatimiśra's *Nyāyakaṇikā* which Ratnakīrti quotes (see below) – and the point is made in regard to knowledge of the selflessnessness of all entities, not the Four Noble Truths. Ratnakīrti does not make the point explicitly himself. Cf., however, TS 3440-42. McClintock 2000 offers an analysis of how Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla thought a cognition of all things could follow from the cognition of one general object, such as emptiness or selflessness. It should be noted, however, that the notion of omniscience as the ability to know all objects at once is rejected in the Pali Canon. See Jaini 1974, 80-82.

have been a staple of Indian literature. Kuntidevī in the *Mahābhārata* is able to call into her presence the various gods, but she was given a mantra to do that. Visualization practices are known throughout Tantric and sectarian Hindu literature, and of course *bhāvanā* has a lengthy history in Buddhism prior to Ratnakīrti, but those are precisely the sorts of techniques the efficacy of which is in question here. To cite them as examples for establishing the connection of the logical reason of this inference with the property-to-be-proved would be an obvious *petitio principii*. I shall return to this point presently. Vācaspatimiśra, however, the Brahmanical writer, in his discussion of this argument in his *Nyāyakaṇikā*, has the Buddhist maintaining that this is something we can actually observe, if only indirectly. We know from the speech and gestures of a lovesick man that he finds himself in the presence of the woman he is obsessed with, for he says, "Come, you enchanting creature with the jug-like breasts, eyes of a deer, and slender, golden body – embrace me like the vine of the Kandalī plant. I fall down at your feet!"[18] But if this is what Ratnakīrti is talking about, his example, at the same time that it establishes the possibility of a very vivid intuitive cognition arising from constant and sustained reflection, also suggests its falsehood. The lovesick man may indeed be seeing a beautiful woman, but if we can't see her, too, then she is not real!

Vācaspati raises essentially this objection in his discussion of an earlier version of the Buddhist argument in his *Nyāyakaṇikā*, which Ratnakīrti quotes at length in the *Sarvajñasiddhi* and attempts to refute (SS 10, 15 – 11, 25).[19] (Vācaspati, by the way, is a somewhat puzzling figure in that he wrote, besides the *Nyāyakaṇikā*, in which he attacks the very possibility of yogic perception, also a commentary on the *Yogasūtrabhāṣya*, in which he takes all kinds of yogic experience very seriously.) We will grant, Vācaspati says, that someone might produce a vivid intuitive cognition of an object through constant reflection or contemplation (*bhāvanā*) on it, but that cognition will not be a *pramāṇa*, a valid means of knowledge; for, neither identical with nor arising from that object, it can deviate from it, that is, it can turn out that the object is quite different from how it is represented in the cognition. The Bud-

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[18] Adapted from *Vidhivivekaḥ*, 1218,10-1220,3. Dharmakīrti also suggests that the fact that a person is experiencing the object as if it is bodily present can be inferred from his behavior; see the contribution by Vincent Eltschinger in this volume.

[19] In the *Nyāyakaṇikā* the discussion extends from 1214,8-1224,9.

dha's vivid intuitive cognition of all entities as *duḥkha* and so forth, as a result of his meditation on the Four Noble Truths, which are propositional in nature and which he arrived at presumably through some process of reasoning, did not actually arise from all the entities in the universe, the ultimately real particulars themselves, but from his *thought* about them. The Four Noble Truths refer to "everything" only in a general way; they do not specifically mention that entity A is *duḥkha*, entity B is *duḥkha*, and so forth. If one were to maintain that the Buddha's intuitive cognition of all entities nevertheless arose *indirectly* from all ultimately real particulars (*svalakṣaṇas*), in the same way that an inferential cognition of fire from the observation of smoke arises indirectly from the *svalakṣaṇa* of fire that produces the *svalakṣaṇa* of smoke that one observes, and in the same way that a vivid intuitive cognition of fire resulting from continuous and sustained contemplation on that inferred fire might be said to arise *indirectly* from the *particular* fire and thus be caused by its object – if one were to take this view, one must still acknowledge that the intuitive cognition of fire resulting from the meditation on the fire we inferred to exist from the heavy smoke rising from, say, the top of the ridge, is usually quite different from the searing blaze we are confronted with when we finally get to the top of the ridge! In general, says Vācaspati, the intuitive cognition resulting from *bhāvanā* is produced not by its object *but by the bhāvanā* – as if to say, it is a state of subjective effervescence or intensity engendered just by the mental activity of contemplation. It can have an unreal object just as easily as a real one, as we see indeed in the case of the lovesick man. If we were ever to encounter such a person in our day we would tend to dismiss him, saying something like, "He's really worked himself into a *state*!"[20]

[20] Dharmakīrti tries to escape this problem by stipulating that yogic perception must be reliable, *saṃvādin* (PV 3.286) – or else "consistent with a *pramāṇa*" (*pramāṇa-saṃvādin*), if one reads the verse according to Franco's recommendation (see Franco forthcoming). He recognizes that some of the meditational exercises that form part of the preliminary path for the Buddhist adept achieve vivid, non-conceptual cognitions of *unreal* (*abhūta*), imagined objects, such as a corpse in various stages of decay (PV 3.284). For a yogic cognition to count as an instance of the *pramāṇa* perception its object must be established by other *pramāṇas*, in particular, reasoning. Thus, the chief, if not indeed the sole, object of (valid) yogic perception for Dharmakīrti is the Four Noble Truths, which he establishes by means of reasoning in the second chapter of his *Pramāṇavārttika*. See, again, the contribution by

Ratnakīrti's response to this, which I take to be the main criticism of his argument as I have reconstructed it, is not unsophisticated; in the end, however, it does not seem completely satisfactory. He stresses at the outset, partially in reply to objections raised by other authors, that the essence of perception does not consist in its being produced by an external sense faculty, but in its involving the immediate presentation of its object (*sākṣātkāra*) (SS 16, 32-33). The vivid intuitive cognition of all things produced by *bhāvanā* on the Four Noble Truths is a mental cognition that immediately reveals its object and therefore qualifies as a perception. "Just as the visual sense, without violating its [normal] capacity, functions to produce its specific [visual] cognition dependent on an object located in an appropriate place, so the mind, which is also a sense faculty, joined with *bhāvanā* on an existing object, which opposes all ignorance, and reaching (*prāpya*!) an object located in an appropriate place, will function to produce its specific cognition (*svavijñānajanana*)" (SS 17, 2-4). Just as visual perception is possible without coming directly in contact with its object, so is mental cognition – of objects in the past and the future – possible – *but not for everyone*! The key here is the practice of a kind of *bhāvanā* that destroys the defilements that normally restrict the capacity of perception to objects proximate in time and space, in particular, *bhāvanā* on the Four Noble Truths or on the momentariness and selflessness of all entities (SS 17, 4-14). Once one fully comprehends these things, ignorance is destroyed, which uproots the other defilements (*kleśas*). This kind of *bhāvanā*, which reveals the object as it truly is even though the mind is not in immediate contact with it – in the same way, for the Buddhist, the senses of vision and hearing apprehend their objects without being directly in contact with them – must be said to arise from the object itself, and not just from the *bhāvanā*, and so it is a *pramāṇa*.

Vācaspati's example of an intuitive cognition produced from contemplation on an inferred fire, which is seen not always to correspond to its object, is therefore a sheer fantasy and cannot be taken as challenging the generalization the Buddhist really wants to establish, namely, that *bhāvanā* on an object yields a *veracious* intuitive cogni-

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Vincent Eltschinger in this volume. The unfortunate consequence of this kind of approach, as we shall see, is that it leaves no other example of yogic perception to point to in proving the possibility of the Buddha's perception of the Four Noble Truths.

tion. No one would practice *bhāvanā* on a fire (SS 19, 21-25)![21] And it would seem that the main point Ratnakīrti is emphasizing, that the kind of *bhāvanā* he is talking about is the kind that destroys ignorance, desire, and other defilements, thereby releasing perception from its usual constraints (of proximity to its object in time and space, and so forth), could be used to turn aside the objection Vācaspati (and I) raised earlier against the example of the lovesick man, namely, that this is a case of hallucination, not a valid cognition; for Ratnakīrti could say that in this case, too, we are not dealing with the right kind of *bhāvanā*, the kind that really destroys the defilements and has the power immediately to present its object as it really is. In fact, if there ever were a case of the *wrong* kind of *bhāvanā*, the type that would reinforce *avidyā* and the other defilements, not remove them, surely this is it!

Now, however, Ratnakīrti – the Buddhist – is faced with a new and equally serious problem, which in the end seems fatal to me. He has, in effect, in responding to Vacaspati's objections, revised his inference so that it might be stated as follows:

> The proper kind of *bhāvanā* focused on the right kind of object will yield a veracious, intuitive experience of that object. The Buddha's contemplation of the Four Noble Truths was precisely that – the proper kind of *bhāvanā* focused on the right kind of object. Therefore, the Buddha achieved a veracious, intuitive experience of the Four Noble Truths.

His problem now is that *he is still in need of an example for his inference*, one that will support the generalization that the right kind of *bhāvanā* on the right kind of object will lead to a veracious, intuitive experience of the object. He needs an example, moreover, *that is drawn from everyday experience*; for the positive example of an inference must be *siddha*, not taken from the class of things to be proved but already accepted by both opponent and proponent. Obviously, Ratnakīrti cannot, in grounding the generalization on which his inference is based, appeal to the alleged fact that *yogis* have veracious, intuitive experiences as a result of the destruction of defilements by means of *bhāvanā* all the time! No such example from *everyday* experience, however, appears to be forthcoming. This is hardly surprising; for it is of the essence of ordinary perception that it is restricted to objects that exist here

[21] Someone who is cold will simply move toward a fire he has inferred, not contemplate it.

and now, are of a certain magnitude, and directly affect the sense faculties. It's beginning to look as if "you can't get there from here," you can't base an argument for the possibility of *supernomal* perception on observations about everyday experience. Everyday experience speaks against the possibility of supernormal experience at every turn.

Ratnakīrti is also faced with a problem concerning the *vyatireka* of his inference. The logical reason or *hetu* of an inference has to satisfy not only the requirement of *anvaya*, being found together with the property-to-be-proved, which is documented by the positive example, but also the requirement of *vyatireka*, not being found to occur in the absence of the property-to-be-proved, which is documented by a negative example. Is it the case, however, that no mental state that is practiced assiduously over a long period of time ever *fails* to yield a veracious, vivid intuitive cognition? Well, we certainly hear plenty of reports from disappointed meditators practicing all kinds of techniques, including visualization techniques, to the effect that the promised result never comes about: the object of meditation does not materialize even after sustained and arduous practice. The only question is how long and hard does one have to keep practicing without results before one deems that the generalization that such practice will eventually yield a vivid, veracious intuition is disconfirmed? In short, the relation between logical reason and property-to-be-proved in this inference seems rather tenuous.

I think we can begin to see from this very brief treatment of Ratnakīrti's main argument that, when it comes to the attempt to prove the possibility of supernormal, yogic experience by means of some kind of inference, *anumāna*, the skeptic – the Humean or the Mīmāṃsaka – will always have the advantage. The Mīmāṃsakas understood this very well. For every proof, *sādhana*, of the omniscience of the Buddha that the Buddhist puts forward, they said, there will be a counterproof, a *pratisādhana*. Whatever characteristics the Buddha might have that speak in favor of his possession of supernormal abilities – his long meditation on momentariness and selflessness, which would seem to destroy ignorance along with all the other *kleśas*, his compassion and accuracy concerning things we are able to verify for ourselves – will be offset by all his other ordinary human characteristics, which indicate he really wasn't any different from the rest of us. (As a modern skeptic might put it: he had to put his pants on one leg at a time, just like us!) The Mīmāṃsaka lists among these mundane characteristics: his being

an object of cognition, being an object of a valid means of knowledge, being a living being, a human being, a speaker, and possessed of sense faculties.[22]

It seems, then, that the Buddhist cannot win at the *anumāna* (inference) game when it comes to debating about the existence of supernormal powers or beings with supernormal abilities. He cannot *prove* the possibility of supernormal perception by means of some inference. Inference, by its very nature, appeals to experience. It is therefore difficult to see how it can ever reveal to us anything, even the possibility of anything, beyond experience. This is what two of the greatest Indian thinkers outside the epistemological tradition, Bhartṛhari and Śaṅkara, pointed out. Reasoning cannot tell us about what lies beyond the senses, only scripture can. But this is hardly a satisfactory solution to the problem of evidence for yoga and yogic experience that confronts the modern yoga researcher!

It would seem that the Buddhist failure to prove the possibility of yogic perception has implications for the question of whether yogic experience is possible in general. The Buddhist case suggests that *any* attempt to *prove* that yogic experience is possible is bound to fail. For any proof – unless of course it is an *a priori* proof, which seems hardly to come into question here – must somehow extrapolate from common experience; and our common experience of human cognition is that it is opposite in nature to yogic experience: it is characterized by intentionality (directedness toward objects) [23] and dependent on the stimulation of the nervous system by internal and external stimuli. More specifically, in order to show that yogic experience is possible, one must be able to suggest a causal mechanism that could account for it. Any such mechanism, however, would have to be consistent with our scientific understanding of nature, to which humans of course also belong – which understanding must ultimately be based on common experience, including observations we make about normal human perception and other cognitive processes. Thus, it seems one could never prove yogic experience to be possible. Indeed, the whole enterprise of attempting to devise

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[22] See SS p. 23, 11-14: *sugato 'sarvajñaḥ jñeyatvāt prameyatvāt sattvāt puruṣatvād vaktṛtvād indriyādimattvād ityādi rathyāpuruṣavat*; cf. *ŚV*, *Codanā* 132; *TS,* 3156.

[23] *Samādhi*, on the other hand, is depicted as a state of pure consciousness, awareness without an object.

some kind of proof of the possibility of yogic experience seems fundamentally misguided.

At the same time, however, it becomes apparent that one cannot prove that yogic experience is *impossible*, either. The fact that something "violates the laws of nature" – i.e., the principles that underly our scientific understanding of nature – does not establish its impossibility, as Hume seems to think, unless we are confident that those "laws" capture the way things really are.[24] We are sophisticated enough nowadays – we have obtained sufficient distance from the great discoveries that revolutionized Hume's world – to know that that is unlikely. We know that the foundations of our scientific picture of the world are periodically called into question and revised, and that we can, at any moment in the history of science, only be confident that we are progressing closer toward a correct, comprehensive understanding of nature, but never that we have finally arrived there. Moreover, we have become aware that science advances only by posing questions to which precise and definite answers can be provided, which restricts its focus to a certain range of phenomena; we are painfully aware that, for all the amazing progress of the physical and social sciences, there is still much we do not know. Under these circumstances, to consider compatibility with "the laws of nature" as science currently understands them the criterion of possibility would be rather arbitrary.

Nevertheless, this offers little if any succor to those who would like to believe in yogic experiences. That something is not impossible of course implies that it is possible, but mere theoretic possibility is hardly the same as plausibility. The fact that something is incompatible with our scientific understanding of nature makes it, if not impossible, then certainly extremely unlikely. Indeed, that may have been all that Hume meant when he referred to something as a "miracle."

Let us now return to the situation of the yoga researcher and see if these considerations somehow give us a new purchase on the problem of whether yogic experience is possible. The yoga researcher is faced

[24] See Hume 1955: 122: "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established those laws, the proof against a miracle, from the very nature of the fact, is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined." This passage suggests that "the laws of nature" Hume has in mind are ones to which we have epistemic access, hence the laws of nature as defined by contemporary science.

with the following predicament: Over against the "impossibility" of yogic experiences and altered states of consciousness stands *the fact that they are widely, even cross-culturally, reported*. Committed to a scientific view of the world, convinced that everything will eventually yield itself to a scientific – and that means a physical – explanation, one may be inclined to adopt the position that there simply are no valid clairvoyant or clairaudient experiences – no one ever really sees things in the past or the future, let alone all things at once – or genuine states of objectless trance, and that reports of such experiences and the preoccupation with them in certain cultures or traditions have to be understood in terms of the role the *idea* of such experiences plays in them. Yet I believe that a yoga researcher may also reasonably resist this conclusion, *because it just presents us with another disturbing incongruity*, namely, that certain cultures and traditions should attach so much importance to experiences that are essentially erroneous or hallucinatory.

Yet the latter researcher must also have a response to the Humean challenge: Shouldn't reports of yogic experiences simply be dismissed on the grounds that they are violations of the so-called laws of nature and therefore *ipso facto* undermine the credibility of anyone who would report them? For, otherwise, on what basis could one ever believe that such experiences actually occur? Here it must be noted, however, that Hume's attitude – quite reminiscent, in fact, of the Mīmāṃsā attitude that people and the world have always been, and presumably will continue to be, more or less as they are today[25] – when taken to an extreme, becomes unreasonable and unscientific. If "the laws of nature," determined just by what we have experienced thus far, rigidly dictated what counts as valid experience, we would never learn anything really new. Columbus's "discovery" of the New World would never have been taken seriously – the "miracle of the fact" would have cancelled out the credibility of the witnesses – nor any other major geographical, archaeological, and astronomical discovery of history. We would have dismissed out of hand reports of magnetism produced by an electric current, x-rays, black holes, static electricity, vacuums, cloud chambers, and many, many other phenomena. In general, the Humean principle that science immediately overrules reports of experiences inconsistent with it is insensitive to the fact that science and experience

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[25] Cf. ŚV, *Codanā* 113; cf. also McCrea's paper in this volume.

exist in a kind of tension with each other. Our current scientific picture of reality may tell us what is "possible," but experience can call scientific theory into question and sometimes even overrule *it* – indeed, if it couldn't, science would not be *empirical*. Of course, that happens only in certain circumstances, which modern history of science has helped us to understand; in particular, it happens when the resources are available to construct a new theory that not only accounts for the problematic phenomenon but also has greater overall predictive power and fecundity than the old one. Moreover, the kind of experience to which science is attuned is, ideally, repeatable and intersubjectively verifiable, and yogic experience is typically not like that. Nevertheless, in light of our modern understanding of the dynamic relationship between scientific theory and empirical observation, Hume's attitude that an established scientific theory should automatically overrule reports of experiences of phenomena that are inconsistent with it (because the "miracle of the fact" will always be greater than the "miracle" that the testimony is false) seems too strong and even dogmatic.[26]

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[26] I have not attempted here to do justice to all of the subtleties of Hume's position, let alone consider all the interpretations, revisions, and refinements of it that have emerged in two-and-a-half centuries of discussion of it. Suffice it here to point out that while Hume may have thought that testimony about the occurrence of a miracle, which by definition is a violation of the laws of nature, is *a priori* incredible, testimony about other extraordinary events, which are "analogous" to other events known from experience, may be acceptable under certain circumstances. He considers the case of "all authors, in all languages" agreeing that on January 1, 1600, the entire earth was plunged into darkness for eight days. "... Suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people: that all travelers, who return from foreign countries, bring us accounts of the same tradition, without the least variation or contradiction: it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought search for causes whence it might be derived" (Hume 1955: 137-8). One could argue that yogic experience is more like this; it is less of a prodigy than an outright miracle – think of Moses turning the Nile into blood (Exodus 7:14-24), for example – and bears certain analogies to common experience. (Another Buddhist author, Śāntarakṣita, suggested, in attempting to prove the possibility of yogic perception, that it is analogous to the ability of certain animals to see in the dark or see great distances [see TS, 3404-6]. Moreover, he argued, directly contradicting the Mīmāṃsaka, that just as one might increase one's capacity to jump through constant practice, so one can increase, proportionately to one's practice, one's mental powers [TS, 3424-30]. For that matter, the argument for the possibility of yogic perception from the observation that one may bring about a vivid, "intuitive" experience of an

In summary, unable to prove either that yogic experience is possible or that it is impossible, it would seem that one ought to suspend judgement about the matter. But of course that leaves open the possibility that yogic experience is possible, and that means, by application of a well-known rule of modal logic, that it *is* possible. But the mere theoretic possibility of yogic experience is too thin a basis for taking reports of yogic experience seriously, i.e., at face value. Those historians and social scientists who are inclined to do so require an additional, fairly powerful reason. Such a reason, I believe, would be the conviction that the societies and traditions they study are inherently healthy and rational. That they would attribute great value and importance to certain experiences – even to the point of considering them the most important experiences one can have – that misrepresent reality and are rarely, if ever, confirmed, simply does not make sense. The urge simply to overrule reports of experiences that are incompatible with our current scientific picture of reality, to which Hume has forcefully given expression, can reasonably be resisted by noting that, in the end – even taking into account all the considerations brought to bear on this matter by proponents of scientific holism – our scientific picture of reality is built up from and justified by experience, not *vice versa*. Until we are confident that we have worked out a complete theory of nature, including human nature, we must continue to collect data with open minds, and that means, we must willing to consider it at face value. Nevertheless, as long as yogic experience remains incompatible with the picture of nature presented to us by the physical and biological sciences, it will continue to be deeply problematic. The only thing that could eventually

object by constant meditation can be seen as pursuing this same strategy; it renders it less incongruous by showing it to be continuous with other known phenomena.) In light of this, one might well argue that testimony about yogic experience should be accepted because it actually meets Hume's standard for acceptability, namely, its falsehood would be more improbable than the phenomenon it reports; for, as I have suggested, given the importance vested in yogic experience and altered states of consciousness in so many cultures, the imaginary or illusory status of these experiences would be would be highly problematic. That, however, is ultimately a complex methodological question in the social sciences which also cannot be adequately dealt with here. For a trenchant presentation of the dominant attitude toward religious experience within the academic discipline of religious studies in North America – with which this paper is of course completely at odds – one may consult McCutcheon 2001.

dispel the air of mystery around yoga and yogic experience would be a (radically) revised theory of nature that can accommodate it – which, however, at this time is not on the horizon.

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